

A vibrant desert landscape featuring several tall saguaro cacti in the foreground and middle ground. The terrain is rocky and arid, with a clear blue sky and a few wispy clouds. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

¡VÁMONOS!

**A NOVEL
BY
BILL STEPHENS**

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The humorous adventures of two underachieving Texan C&W musicians who, in the tradition of Don Quixote & Sancho Panza, strap on their guitars and ride their Harleys into the Mexican Desert on a journey of redemption for sins of the flesh.

A Novel by Bill Stephens

87,000 words



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by

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PART ONE
“CAMINANTES DEL MAYAB”

Chapter 1

Skeets Hollaran knew the woman's gaze had all the makings of a life-altering event. The pretty blonde at the table of three ladies stared at him like a coyote circling a fawn. He'd been on good behavior going on three months since Gena threatened to throw him out of the small duplex they shared for doing what he knew he was about to do again.

Singing at Rancho Rita Bar & Grill, Home of the Flaming Chicken Fried Steak just outside Austin, Texas, was a humbling experience for Skeets. He'd wiggled his way onto the tiny stage that barely held a stool, his guitar, the microphone, and himself, and sang to an unappreciative audience for months. Add lousy pay, patrons hungry but not for music, and the smell of chicken fried steaks bubbling in burned grease mingled with a pall of cigarette smoke and Skeets had himself a disagreeable venue. "But a gig is a gig," he kept repeating.

The blonde's amorous interest proved to him once again that he held his thirty-five years well. He was lean and tanned from Harley riding, and wore over-length stovepipe jeans rumped on his boots, a big belt buckle, pearl-snap buttoned western shirt, and a big hat. Gena had interrupted fifteen years of uncomplicated one-night stands with women like the blonde in bars just like the Rancho-O-Rita. She was the best thing that ever entered his life. He glanced again at the blonde and shook his head involuntarily, thinking, *a man who would consider dawdling with that woman is not good enough for Gena. But that's the problem isn't it? Gena deserves better than me.*

It was close to midnight and he'd just finished the song written by a friend to celebrate his divorce, "Darlin', If You Really Loved Me, You'da Married Somebody Else." Skeets had included the song on his only CD, and the single release made it to the Top 40 of C&W, resting at number thirty-nine for one week. That was his closest brush with fame. The dealership held his Harley hostage for an unpaid \$50 repair bill, and he now relied on friends for rides. With one song left in the final set, he had to find a new friend real quick or he'd be thumbing it back to town.

The blonde and her two lady friends were more interested in drinking than chicken fried, and they listened to his music with some interest. The blonde – who looked to be in her mid-twenties – had maintained predatory eye contact with him most of the evening. He launched into his final song, "Baby, If You've Had Too Much, I Can Pop Your Clutch," singing to the blonde. She smiled with recognition at the song that had made Skeets semi-famous around Austin. He put his soul into the song, and, for once, those muddy chord progressions that always cramped his fret fingers came so easily he felt truly gratified.

He put his guitar into the case, stepped from the stage, and settled up with the bartender. For the first time since he could remember, his bar tab was less than his entertainment fee. An event of this magnitude could not go uncelebrated, so he moved to the ladies' table. "You ladies put up with my singing all evening, least I can do is buy you a drink."

The blonde pulled back the empty chair next to her and patted the seat. "Best offer we've had all night. Sit down and rest yourself."

He turned to the bartender, made the universal circular motion for another round, slid the chair closer to the blonde, and sat. "You ladies university students?"

A snicker circled the table as the three looked at each other to see if they could pass for UT undergrads. Unconvinced, the blonde shook her head. "Nice try, but college is a distant memory."

The drinks arrived, and Skeets passed them around and paid the bartender. He held his glass, saluting the women; “You coulda fooled me about the college thing. Oh, by the way I’m Skeets Hollaran.” He doffed his big hat as he introduced himself.

The blonde smiled in appreciation of his gentlemanly gesture. “I’m Sue. This is Janet and that’s Fran.” The other two nodded at the introduction. The three sipped their cocktails and studied him.

His practiced eye had already picked up on the wedding bands the three wore. “Girls night out?” He smiled at the three and took a pull from his scotch and water.

They chortled whisky giggles, and Sue explained, “Our husbands went fishing at the coast.”

Janet and Fran spoke almost in unison. “So we decided to do a little fishin’ our own selves.” They broke up in uncontrollable laughter.

Skeets looked around the bar shaking his head. “You’ve got one nibbling around the bait now, but I don’t see many other fish in this pond.”

“What are three gals and a guy to do?” Sue feigned perplexed irony.

“I was going down to the Dillo Doe and do a little picking and singing with my buddies. Why don’t you gals join me? There’s usually a pretty good group there right about now.”

The three looked at each other and nodded. “You’re a smooth-talking dude, Skeets Hollaran. We’d follow you anywhere.” Sue tossed her hair and started to get up.

She unfolded from her seat, and Skeets was even more impressed with her slender figure and her height. She stood eye to eye with him and carried her body with the grace of a super model.

“Ladies, I’d give you a ride ‘cept I’m expecting my friend who brought me to swing back by, but if I’m not here, he’ll know where to find me.”

“Not to worry, we’ve got room for one more!” They laughed again and Sue grabbed Skeets’

hand and jerked him toward the door so hard that he barely grabbed his guitar.

The pink script “Dillo Doe” neon sign with its armadillo and antler-less deer, an Austin icon for decades, always gave Skeets a warm feeling. The classic honky-tonk dated back to when Willie, Waylon, and the boys were happy to get any kind of gig. The size of the room gave the place a comfortable air, and the large stage accommodated as many musicians as wanted to sit in for the late night jam sessions. Musicians without gigs and those finished with their paying jobs gathered about midnight after the dancers were tired. The music lovers pulled up their chairs and enjoyed what Austin’s picker-singer-songwriters had to offer. Skeets and every other musician knew for this crowd, showing up and singing someone else’s songs was a mortal sin.

He hoped his buddy, Jesse Suarez, piano man for the Royal Flush, would show up so Skeets could show him some largesse at the bar with the night’s net receipts from the Ranch-O-Rita. Jesse’s Harley was still operational and could be counted on for a second-seat ride to Gena’s place. As luck would have it, Jesse didn’t show, so Skeets paid more and more attention to Sue, who had driven him to the Dillo Doe in a brand new BMW. Between songs, he returned to the table until it was his turn to sing again.

When Skeets finished singing his newest song, “Darlin’, I Really Don’t Think So” and returned to the table, the two musicians he’d enlisted as wingmen sat next to Janet and Fran ready to cut them out of the herd as instructed. Now he could focus his charm on Sue and a ride home.

“You guys go ahead and make yourself comfy here.” Skeets grinned as he pulled up another chair and slipped it in between Sue and the closest interloper. He leaned forward and gestured toward the other two ladies. “Have you two met Janet and Fran?”

There was a general murmur of agreement as the four nodded and smiled at each other. Skeets

turned to Sue. “So when does the babysitter have to get home?”

“No kids. No babysitter.”

“You’re all alone and waiting patiently by the window watching for your man to return from his big adventure.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

Skeets gestured toward her friends, now absorbed in relationship building with the musicians.

“Your friends seem to be enjoying themselves enough they wouldn’t mind us splitting?”

“They’re big girls. They can take care of themselves.” Sue was already getting up.

“You mind giving me a ride?”

“I’ve been thinking all evening about giving you a ride.” Sue reached for his hand and pulled him up.

Skeets turned to the other four. “Listen, Sue has offered to give me a ride home. Great to meet you. Have an enjoyable evening.” With that he doffed his hat, collected his guitar, and trailed behind the tall blonde towing him out the door.

The Beamer hummed over Loop 1 west of Austin. During a lull in the conversation, Skeets adjusted the radio to a C&W station. Sue turned to Skeets and with a wry smile asked, “You mind if we make a small detour?”

“Ma’m, it’d be plum rude of me to deny a sweet person like yourself anything she desires.”

The Beamer slowed to a stop early the next morning in front of Clyde Volmer’s house a half block from Gena’s duplex, a ploy both to disguise the location of his real digs and to avoid an encounter with Gena. As the Beamer roared away, he stood on the curb and took inventory. His guitar case leaned against his leg, and he had some recollection of putting his guitar in it. His shirt smelled of

beer, scotch, expensive perfume, tobacco, and body odor. Sixty-three bucks still languished in his pockets as near as he could make it. Before Gena he'd have called it a pretty successful night. But now remorse settled over him like a morning fog. *Why do I keep pushing Gena away? Keep trying to save her from me?*

His reverie was interrupted by the sound of something heavy hitting the ground at Gena's duplex. He looked around to see a garbage sack sail across the lawn and explode onto her front yard; contents spilling everywhere. Before he could react, a second sack flew through the air, slamming onto the yard with similar devastation. Except this time he saw his motorcycle helmet tumbling across the yard and heard the shout, "You miserable turd!"

"Christ almighty, what's going on?" He grabbed his guitar and trotted toward the duplex as fast as his weariness allowed. He slid to a stop in the driveway, breathing hard, in full view of his digs. The front yard looked like the scene of a natural disaster. Everything he owned lay before him.

Gena was nailing something to the front door with her back to him. She turned, saw him standing in the driveway, and threw the hammer at him shouting, "You miserable pick!" By the time he dodged the hammer and recovered, she was in the driver's seat of her black Pontiac LeMans parked in the driveway, cranking the engine.

Skeets threw down his guitar case, ran to the car's window, and banged on it until she rolled it down. "What's happening? Why are you doing this?"

"Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this, miserable bastard? You stay out all night screwing God knows who, and you ask me 'Why am I doing this!'" Some of her anger dissolved into one tear hanging in the corner of her eye. "You promised this wouldn't happen again. That you had changed. Get away from my car, you lying bastard."

"Whoa! Where did you get the idea that I was screwing somebody? I was playing down at the

Dillo Doe until two o'clock. Jesse never showed up, so I had to walk home." He half-squatted and leaned against the car to get down to her eye level.

"Walk home my ass! It takes five hours to walk three miles?" Her engine caught and roared over her voice.

"Clyde's light was on, so I stopped in for a cup of coffee. Honest! Call him and check it out." He squirmed a little hoping Clyde would cover for him.

"God, Skeets, you are so pathetic. I mean you are clueless. You stand here reeking of perfume and sex, lying through your teeth. You're worse than pathetic. You're hopeless!" With that, she dropped the gear shift into reverse and spun the tires backing out of the driveway.

Skeets jumped back to keep from getting impaled on the radio aerial. "Christ, Gena" The Le Mans burned rubber as it roared away with her hand protruding through the window displaying an unfriendly sign.

He watched until the car was out of sight. He turned and surveyed the front yard. It was sobering, to be sure, the thought that his thirty-plus years of breathing had produced fewer hard goods than could cover a patch of grass the size of a parking space. If he'd been the spiritual kind, eschewing materialism might be redeemable in heaven, but Skeets was anything but spiritual, and redemption for him seemed out of reach.

A few Merle Haggard LP's, some Willie Nelson tapes, one George Strait CD, one Garth Brooks CD, and a book called *Guitar Chords Made Easy* had satisfied his cultural cravings. He managed to keep his wardrobe uncomplicated: two pairs of cowboy boots (one needing new soles), five pairs of jeans (knees out of two and three dirty), three pairs of socks with holes, six western fake mother-of-pearl, snap-button shirts, five Harley-Davidson tee shirts, a motorcycle rain suit, a scuffed up pair of motorcycle leathers, a helmet, a fringed leather jacket, and a pair of black leather gloves –

that was it. In staples and hard goods, his inventory listed a few toiletry items, a broken down suitcase, a bedroll, and the 1990 Harley-Davidson Soft Tail Springer currently still at the dealership .for repairs since he lacked the \$50 to ransom it.

PK, Gena's tomcat, moved through Skeets' belongings sniffing each, then staring into infinity before moving to the next item.

Skeets sagged to a cowboy squat beside his meager net worth and contemplated his failure. His life to that point had never demanded an inventory or reckoning of this type, certainly not in the heat of an August morning, hung over, crotch itching, and sleepless. If he was given to emotion, he could have cried over his condition. Not for the lack of worldly goods, but over what was apparently his last will and testament where Gena Koster was concerned.

Gena Koster was the only thing in his life with validity. Beautiful, talented, intelligent, charming, and long suffering, hers was a compelling love so warm that it made him feel ashamed and undeserving enough to spend almost full-time trying to save her from himself. Now that he'd succeeded, the thought left such a void that he fell forward on all fours, desperate. All he had to do in the past when he felt lonely or out of sorts was think of Gena's big smile. When they made love, he marveled at her compact, beautifully proportioned body and her soul-stirring tenderness and warmth that transcended physical desire. He could never bring himself to believe he was worthy of her. Now it seemed she agreed.

He began picking up his belongings, opened the George Strait CD, and found the ten twenty-dollar bills he had folded and placed there for a rainy day. This day qualified. He put the bills in his pocket, just as PK, short for Pussy Kat, after an extended olfactory examination, backed up to Skeets' motorcycle helmet, and laid down a line of piss. Skeets, never a cat lover, even less a PK lover, and already stressed by current events, leaped over his things and guided a sharp toed cowboy boot right

into PK's tenders. PK rolled end-over-end, yowling, and came to a crouch under the lone shrub at the side of the house to contemplate life's disappointments. Skeets cursed as he hopped around, trying to rub PK's piss from his boot onto the grass.

Completing his first full rotation, PK's privates snapped back to their anatomically correct position like the rubber-banded ball on a Fly Back Paddle. As a rule, tomcats do not consider it wise to dally about, analyzing the source of a significant blast to their most sacred parts. PK, no exception, moved away quickly to a secure location thereby reducing chances of a second shot to the already offended area, and to ruminate on the condition of cats in general.

Skeets gave up on trying to clean his boot and stood surrounded by his life history wondering if things could get any worse. He looked at the duplex door, and things got worse. A note was nailed to the door in the fashion of another famous reformer. From where he stood, he could read the title, but he had to move closer to read the rest.

NINETY-FIVE FECES

1. *You are a slob.*
2. *You are devoid of respect for your fellow man.*
3. *You care nothing about the feelings of others.*
4. *You are self-absorbed.*
5. *You are ungrateful to me for paying all the bills.*
6. *You are a slug.*
7. *You wouldn't know a good thing if it bit you in the ass.*
8. *You couldn't write a hit song if your nuts were in a vise.*
9. *You have the morals of a goat.*
10. *You hate cats*

From here on it began to get personal. But around the end there was a little promise

94. *You make me ashamed that I ever loved anyone like you.*

95. The fact that I still love you cannot compensate for the burden of your being a complete zero.

GET FUCKED (AGAIN) - Gena Koster

Skeets stared blankly for a long time after reading his life's litany. Then he looked around like he was leaving a whorehouse, wondering who was watching, and moved to the steps, lowering himself to the porch floor. Head resting face down, cradled in the notch formed by his hands, he considered his plight. This was a defining moment; even he knew it. Knew it from his groin to his soul. Everything ached at the thought of his loss, a loss explained only by his delinquencies. He knew from their first kiss he was undeserving – a scurrilous love thief with no conspicuous redeeming qualities. Now the thought of his dereliction left him so miserable, escape seemed the only possible comfort. To run fast and far. To redefine himself. To atone for sins committed against one of God's most perfect gifts. His life was a cesspool, and regeneration was nowhere about.

A rumbling in the back of his consciousness forced him into the present. Jesse Suarez's Harley was unmistakable if you were within a five-block radius. Within seconds, Jesse roared up the street. When the Harley turned into the driveway, Skeets saw an unusual collection of baggage and a bedroll strapped to the machine. He made no visible movement as he watched Jesse dismount. Jesse showcased his Hispanic heritage well, tall, brown skinned, with black hair combed straight back, and piercing black eyes. He was the son of a high school teacher who insisted on complete literacy and perfect pronunciation of both English and Spanish. He'd had to spend hours each day practicing the piano and studying for spelling bee competitions in two languages. Mrs. Suarez insisted on college, but he chose freedom at high school graduation and refused higher education. His natural musical ability and his practiced piano technique landed him a job with a band, and ever since, he had been in demand by a succession of more talented bands.

Jesse gestured toward the debris on the lawn as he pivoted off his bike and pointed skyward.

"A good day for airing out your things, good buddy?" When there was no answer, he tried again,

"Having a bad hair day? I mean you're looking semi-homeless."

"Where the hell were you last night?"

"Whoa! A bit testy aren't we? Why do you ask?"

"If you'd been at the Dillo Doe, this wouldn't have happened." Skeets gestured around at his things.

"Why do I doubt that my presence in a dingy bar would be healthy for your connubial relations?"

"If we'd been picking and drinking, I wouldn't a gone home with young Mrs. Beamer, and I'd be indoors right now."

"Somehow I feel this apocryphal event was inevitable." Jesse sat on the opposite side of the stoop. "What with your propensity to crap in your nest and all." After a long pause he continued, "Besides, I am somewhat inconvenienced myself."

"How so?"

"It seems my last three rent checks bounced, and when I got home from my gig last night the landlord had changed the lock."

"You had a gig?"

"Yeah, the keyboard man for The Clearwater Boys was puking his head off. They asked me to sit in."

"Good bucks?"

"Four hundred. They were desperate."

"Free drinks?"

"Desperate!"

"So where'd you crash?"

"I slipped the lock, and went to bed. So this morning when the prick came to clean out my things -- there I was!"

"Was it ugly?" Skeets squinted against the morning sun.

"Physical even. Ended up with him calling the cops and admitting to me he had already turned the checks over to the D. A. two weeks ago. I was just coming by to explain my impending absence." Jesse kicked the step and looked off to the south.

"You're hitting the road?" Skeets attempted to rise but settled back instead.

"No choice this side of criminal prosecution."

"Mexico?"

"Where else, *compadre*?"

Skeets' mind went into hyper-drive. *Mexico! Redemptive opportunity at every turn in the road. A pilgrimage of atonement. A cleansing catharsis of the soul the purification of which would make him worthy of Gena's clemency. A pivotal spiritual event. Sin seared from the soul by Mexican desert sun. And finally, absolution!* "Mind if I ride along?"

"My soul soars like the eagle." Jesse's arm extended in a gliding movement.

"I won't be much fun."

"The Skeets I grew up with never let a little thing like heartbreak keep him down too long."

"It will be a religious pilgrimage . . . for me."

"No shit!" Jesse looked doubtful.

Chapter 2

Gena Koster down-shifted and powered around the corner onto Airport Boulevard heading toward IH 35. Both upper and lower levels of the Interstate were jammed. “Shit!” she shouted aloud, accelerated through a yellow light, and continued until she swerved left, bounced over the train tracks, and blasted her way onto 45th heading west toward Guadalupe.

Trees and small, refurbished homes blurred past her window, still lowered from shooting the finger at Skeets. She knew Skeets loved her, but she also knew Skeets. Knowing him brought the sure understanding that he had trouble understanding monogamy. She’d met him when she took a job as a cocktail waitress at the Dillo Doe three years ago when still a sophomore at The University of Texas. Few of the entertainers at the Dillo Doe interested her, but the attractive singer whose face was softened by over three decades of disappointments, and who seldom missed the late night jam sessions intrigued her. She loved his parody songs spoofing C&W. But when he sang his serious songs, almost with apology, the lyrics opened a hole in the center of her soul through which he crept word by word.

She was an avid reader since childhood and could rhapsodize over poetry before high school. This love for poetry pushed her toward Country and Western music, the only music left in which lyrics played any meaningful part. Of course C&W had plenty of "My heart's a breakin' and

my balls is achin'," songs, but to her, a Jerry Jeff Walker/Jimmy Buffet lyric like "Railroad Lady" should be studied in school. Skeets' lyrics held the same magic. They were only friends for about a year, as women requiring no commitment seemed his only interest then.

At Guadalupe Street Gena squeezed through the light and swerved south heading toward the UT campus where she was late for a meeting with Professor Higdens, for whom she worked as an assistant. Her agitation grew at each red light until she screamed and pounded the steering wheel in frustration.

Parking was its usual problem, so she wheeled right on 24th and spun her wheels as she turned one block onto San Antonio Street behind the University Co-op. She slid to a stop in the apartment parking place of a car-less friend who worked at the Dillo Doe.

Gena looked up and saw Lizzie Ortega step onto the apartment balcony, curlers in her black hair and a cup of coffee in her hand. "Why do I think there's trouble in paradise?" she called down as Gena opened the car.

"I threw the no good son-of-a-bitch out this morning!" Gena accented her remark with a door slam that rattled the windows of the apartments.

"I wondered if there might be repercussions from last night." Lizzie took a swig of coffee from her mug.

"Last night? What about last night?"

"Skeets spent most of last night at the Dillo Doe with a tall skinny blonde. I was busy, so I don't know if they left together, but they were both gone about the same time." Lizzie took another pull on the coffee. "Come on up and cool down a little before you face the world."

"Cool down! I'm not gonna cool down. I'm gonna get my rifle and hunt that bastard down.

Tall skinny blonde, my ass! I'll show him tall and skinny!" She had to breathe, and some reason filtered in with the air. After a pause she added, "Besides, I'm late for an appointment with Higdens."

"Doctor 'Lovelorn'?" Lizzie laughed. "You both might be better off if you postponed."

"You're right. Looking into those needy eyes while he tries to hold my hand and counsel me about graduate school won't be easy today." Gena took her cell phone from her purse and pressed a speed dial number. "Dr. Higdens? Right, Charles. OK, Hig, listen, I've got a personal problem, and I need to reschedule. Right. I'll call you tomorrow, okay? No, I'm fine. I just need to get a few things done today. OK, talk to you tomorrow."

Lizzie waved her friend up. "See how easy that was?"

"Got anything to drink up there?" Gena started up the stairs without an answer.

Lizzie pulled two beers from her fridge, popped the tops, and handed one to Gena, who had slumped onto the apartment couch. "So, what's the latest chapter in the unending saga of Skeets Hollaran?"

"I woke up about four o'clock this morning, and he wasn't home. The longer I sat there, the madder I got, so I gathered all his stuff, which didn't take long, stuffed it into garbage bags, and threw it into the front yard. I admit I got a little sappy when I saw how pathetic it was, but I didn't weaken. Just before leaving home I wrote out "95 Feces," nailed it to the door, and broke off my key in the lock so the bastard couldn't get in."

"95 Feces?" Lizzie raised her eyebrows.

"Yeah, Martin Luther's theses, remember? I listed ninety-five of Skeet's major shortcomings and nailed those suckers to the front door."

"Give me an example."

Gena began the litany and continued as Lizzie howled with pleasure. When Gena finally wound down, Lizzie said, “Hell hath no fury like an English major scorned!”

“I’d rather use the hammer on *him*, though.”

“So what’s next for you two love birds?” Lizzie chuckled.

“No next! This is it for Skeets Hollaran and his mister friendly. How dumb can I be to hang around this long?”

“You had two years training, watching him do what he does best. You should’ve known better than to get involved.” Lizzie held her finger perpendicular to the beer bottle’s neck and held up the cross as if warding off Skeets. The phone rang. “It’s probably my lover boy. He’s got some big plan for us tonight after work.” She went to the kitchen to take the call.

Gena listened to Lizzie’s love talk to her boyfriend. She remembered the early days together with Skeets. The imprint of that love still clouded her thoughts even after all of his transgressions. She had quit the Dillo Doe toward the end of her junior year and taken a job grading papers for Dr. Higdens and tutoring. Her friendly encounters with Skeets slowed to those times she went to the Dillo Doe to see him. She was walking home from class that summer, when Skeets roared up behind her on his recently purchased Harley. He coasted to a stop that racked his pipes and leered. “Want a piece of candy, little girl?”

“I never talk to strangers.” She continued on her way.

“I bet your mother told you never to get into strange vehicles, right?” He eased the clutch out to move at her speed.

“Right!”

“What did she say about gettin’ *onto* strange vehicles?”

“It’s pretty strange.”

"A Harley?"

"No, that she never mentioned that particular peril." She stopped as if pondering the consequences. "So . . . I guess you got me!" She squealed and leaped on the cycle, her skirt almost to her waist. Traffic slowed considerably and began to fall in line following the only Austin rush-hour traffic thrill in recent history.

The trip to Barton Springs Park was the first time she ever put her arms around him, and it sold her on two-wheeling.

They lay in the grass within sight of the topless sunbathers, but neither was interested. They talked, soothed by a breeze that rustled the grass and rattled the live oak leaves overhead as they lay on their backs listening to the cicadas sing. She was the one who kissed first. She rolled over, suspending her head above his and slowly lowered it until her lips touched his. She lingered, then moved on exploring his face and settled again at her starting place. Her tongue darted over the surface of his lips, and then she pulled back to admire her work

He seemed confused. Even a little agitated. "I'm gonna have to report this to your mother, little girl." He laughed nervously.

"She warned me about nasty old men." She smiled

"You shoulda listened. Us old guys are the very worst kind."

"Yeah? I've heard you biker guys are harmless."

"Now that might be an exaggeration."

"If that's the case, you might as well tell her about this!" She again lowered herself over his lips pressing a little harder and sending her tongue deep into his mouth searching for a response.

The response came like flash-flood water. He rolled her onto her back holding her close and returned the kiss, firm and hard. He explored with his hands. She writhed and bit her lips and

then convulsed to lie, eyes closed, dreaming.

The next day he called, apologizing. “Listen. I sort of got out of line yesterday. I guess it was the mood of the moment.”

“Maybe I brought out the worst in you.” She grinned into the phone feeling his tone and demeanor melting his attempt to regain poise.

“I hope I didn’t do anything that would, you know . . . mess up our friendship.” His unease poured through the phone.

“Maybe we should get together and sort this thing out?”

After a pause he said, “You know . . . I think . . . I have an out-of-town gig for the next couple of weeks. Maybe I’ll call you when I get back.” He hung up without further explanation.

She set the receiver on the phone and shouted, “Gotcha!”

The next year his graduation presents to her were the duplex on which he’d paid the first month’s rent and a song he wrote for her.

Gena drained the beer bottle and looked at Lizzie, who had returned from the kitchen. “It was the song that did it. I’m a sucker for a good lyric.”

“That’s right! ‘The song!’ I forgot about that.” Lizzie rolled her eyes back in recollection and began beating out time:

*Can there be anything more precious
Than a moment of your time,
To read your eyes and feel your smile
And know your love is mine*

Gena joined in on the verse:

*A hundred loves behind me
And an empty life ahead
You took me in and loved me*

*With nothing asked or said
You took me in and showed me
My cheating days are gone
Now time with you is all I want
My whole life long*

*Can there be anything more precious
Than a moment of your time,
To read your eyes and feel your smile
And know your love is mine*

Gena slammed the beer bottle on the coffee table. “The no good lying bastard!”

Lizzie sat on the couch next to her. “Some men drink. Some men gamble. Some men cheat with other women. And then there’s Skeets.”

“Skeets doesn’t gamble!” Gena shot back defensively.

Lizzie tried not to laugh out loud, but the convulsions erupted. “Maybe we should say a little prayer of thanks.”

Gena’s face clouded over then opened in a flickering smile. “It’s not funny! I’m very disturbed here.” A chuckle bubbled up. “I’m serious. He did me wrong.”

“I think there’s a C&W song somewhere in all this.” Lizzie no longer tried to control her laughter.

Gena’s laughter was more subdued. “How can I be sitting here laughing when the bastard screwed another woman last night?”

“You don’t know that.” Lizzie’s laughter died as she thought about other possibilities.

“What do you mean, I don’t know that? He didn’t come home last night. I doubt he spent the night in church.”

“Yeah, but don’t you think you should at least give him a chance to explain?”

“Well, maybe.”

“Come on, Gena, if the phone rang right now and someone said Skeets was injured in a motorcycle accident, you’d be out the door in a flash, and you know it. – Right!”

Gena looked away and shrugged agreement, but her cell phone rang before she could answer.

Chapter 3

After Jesse Suarez's Harley roar died in the distance, Skeets stuffed clothes into two pairs of blue jeans with their legs tied, and the rest he put into the sad looking suitcase. Hefting these and his motorcycle gear, he trudged up the street to Clyde Vollmer's home.

Clyde, his neighbor, a little paunchy at age sixty with gray hair accelerating into extinction, nevertheless still presented himself well. He opened the door to a bedraggled Skeets holding all of his worldly possessions. He leaned on the doorframe and looked Skeets over. "Son, you look low enough to sit on a cigarette paper and swing your legs."

"It's not been a good morning, Clyde." Skeets came in and set his belongings on the floor. "I reckon I'm as welcome up at Gena's as a fart at a party."

"Moving days are never pleasant." Clyde nodded toward Skeet's stuff. "I saw you offloading from a BMW out front this morning, so I reckon last night's little peccadillo didn't go over so well with Gena."

"You have a marvelous gift for understatement, Clyde." Skeets looked down as he scuffed something imagined with his boot.

"I heard Jesse's scoot coming and going. What's up?"

"Jesse's gone to pick up my bike." Skeets pointed in the general direction of the Harley

dealership.

“Is he going to ride them both back Roman style?” Clyde pantomimed a two-horse rider.

“Very funny, Clyde. He didn’t want to unload his bike to give me a second seat, so he’s picking mine up, and then we’re riding back to get his. We’re blasting off to Mexico, seeing as how I’m now unencumbered and without an abode. I was wondering if you’d stash some of my stuff while I’m gone.” Skeets motioned to his belongings.

“You’re hitting the road? Not staying to fight another day?”

“Don’t think there’s a choice this time.”

Clyde reached down, picked up the suitcase, and they moved toward the kitchen where Clyde poured two cups of coffee. They settled at the table, and Skeets handed the “Ninety-five Feces” to Clyde. Clyde read the bill-of-particulars howling at each new insult posted against Skeets. “I don’t think she missed much.”

“I’m afraid I’ve torn the rag right off the bush this time.” Skeets covered his anguished look with his hands.

Clyde stared at his friend for a moment and all the mirth left his face. “Skeets, let me tell it to you straight. Gena Koster’s the only real thing you’ve ever had. I’ve known you and your folks since you were a pup and Gena for more’n a year. If you run off without trying to get her back, you deserve every bad thing that’s gonna happen to you. I mean, think about it, son, this is not something to take lightly.”

Skeets continued holding his head in his hands. “I truly don’t think there’s much hope right now. Maybe when I get back I can try again, but I doubt it.”

“For God’s sake, son, lie to her. Tell her you spent the night here. Tell her anything. Get on your knees and beg. And if she’ll take you back, then see if you can grow up enough to show her the

respect she deserves. Here's a phone, call Gena and forget this Mexico crap." Clyde picked up the phone from the table and thrust it toward Skeets.

"I tried all that lying stuff, and it didn't work." Skeets moaned in reply. "I truly don't deserve Gena. I've known that all along, but I hung around anyway hoping I'd change. Try to get it together and be the man she wanted me to be. It's hopeless. When I get back . . . maybe . . ."

"That may be too late. Trust me, she won't have any trouble finding somebody to take your sorry ass's place." Clyde sat the phone in front of Skeets.

Skeets reflected on life without Gena. The thought was so sobering and painful he closed his eyes hoping it would go away. When he opened them again, Clyde was still staring at him, pointing at the phone. The pain persisted. "You think I should call her? I'll bet she won't even answer."

"Try it!" Clyde pointed again at the phone.

Skeet slowly picked up the phone and dialed Gena's cell number. Seconds before voice mail clicked in, he heard her voice. "Clyde, is that you?"

After a pause Skeets answered. "No, it's me. I'm calling from Clyde's."

"Oh, if I'd known that, I wouldn't have answered."

"Listen, I guess we've got a situation here." Skeets summoned all of his creativity and people skills, but before he could continue, Gena interrupted.

"No Skeets, *we* don't have a situation. *You* have a situation. You can't keep your dick in your pants." There was a long silence.

"Now, Gena, don't jump to conclusions. I know I didn't get home last night, but I can explain."

"Explain? You can explain my ass! What lie are you going to trot out this time?"

"No, really, I've been here at Clyde's. Jesse didn't come by the Dillo Doe, so I had to walk

home. It was late, but I saw a light on in Clyde's, so I stopped in and passed out on his couch. I overslept this morning." He waited to see how this story played out.

"Funny thing, Skeets, Lizzie was bartending at the Dillo Doe last night . . ."

"Lizzie was bartending last night? I didn't see her." Skeets's shocked expression caused Clyde to shrug a question?

"There's no way you could've seen her since you only looked at the skinny blonde you were pouring drinks down."

"You've talked to Lizzie?" Skeet slapped his forehead with his empty hand.

Clyde shook his head asking, "What? What's she saying?"

"Actually, I'm in her apartment right now." Gena's voice trailed off but left the power of retribution in its wake. After a long silence, she asked, "You still there?"

Skeets brow knotted as his mind whirred. "She said something about a skinny blonde?"

"Yes, Skeets, the skinny blonde you left with."

"She saw me leave with a skinny blonde?" Skeet again pounded the palm of his hand to his forehead in disbelief as his shoulders sagged.

Clyde was standing, pacing. "Skeets, what's she saying? I think you're messing this up here."

"Give it up, Skeets. Did you screw the skinny blonde or not?"

Skeets thought of all the lies over the past two years. All the stories to cover up his failures. All the times he wanted to tell the truth. The truth that she deserved someone better. That he disappointed her to prove to both of them that he was unworthy of her. That she should send him packing.

Her voice sputtered over the phone again. "I'm waiting."

He held the phone away from his ear. "Yes! Yes, I did the skinny blonde."

Clyde stopped in his tracks and spun on his heel. “Good God, man, I can’t believe you just said that!”

“What?” Gena’s voice was loud enough for Clyde to hear. “You’re admitting it! You don’t have enough respect for my feelings to lie about it? God, Skeets, that really hurts. It’s one thing to cheat on me, but it’s something else completely to brag about.”

“I’m not bragging about it. I’m *confessing*. I made a very big mistake. I thought for once I would own up to it and hope you would forgive me.” Skeets jumped up and started pacing until the phone cord jerked him back.

“*For once?* How many other times were there?” She sounded like a siren. Skeets still could not bring the phone back close to his ear.

“I’m just saying that I love you, and I want you to forgive me. I want to be a different person in the future.”

There was a long silence on the phone. And Skeets brought it back to his ear.

“Skeets, you don’t deserve me.”

The level of hurt in her voice caused him to slump back into his chair. “I know that. I know I need to be a different person.” He heard Jesse pull into the driveway and rack up the motorcycle’s pipes.

“Is that Jesse’s bike I hear?”

“No, he picked up my bike for me.” He waved his arm back and forth trying to wipe away this interloping subject.

“What brought that on?” She had gained control of her voice again.

“We’re riding to Mexico.” He gestured toward the south.

“Mexico? What are you going to do in Mexico?”

“I need to get away and think some things through.” He rubbed his forehead and gestured futilely. Clyde sat back at the table and now held his head in his hands.

“Yeah, well I’ve already thought some things through. I think we should not see each other again.” There was a pause and Skeets heard the phone click off.

There was knock at the kitchen door. “Come on in, Jesse,” Clyde hollered without getting up.

Jesse stood in the door for a moment looking back and forth between the two dejected figures.

“Am I interrupting a funeral or something? What’s up?”

“Lover boy just made an unimaginable mess running damage control on the phone with Gena.” Clyde got up and poured a cup of coffee for Jesse.

“Hey, good buddy, you’re holding that phone like it smells bad.” Jesse took the coffee from Clyde and sat in the vacant seat.

Skeets looked at the phone held away from his ear, then lowered it into its cradle. “Well, Clyde, that went *really* well.”

“Qué pasó?” Jesse shrugged the question.

“Let’s just say that Gena didn’t beg me not to go to Mexico.”

Clyde shook his head in disbelief. “He told her the truth.”

“That’s right, I told her the truth.”

“You told her the truth?” Jesse’s eyebrows arched at the idea.

“Nobody tells them the truth, Skeets. They don’t want the truth. They can’t handle the truth.”

Clyde shook his head at Skeets’ apparent naiveté

“Well, Mr. Veracity, we better start loading your gear, ’cause you just became homeless for good.” Jesse pointed toward Skeets’ stuff in the front room.

“What! Can’t a guy do the right thing? Tell the truth? Try to be a better person?”

“You can never tell women the truth about infidelity, if you want to hang around, that is.”

Clyde ran his hands through his hair as if removing something repugnant, like the truth.

Jesse shook his head. “That’s right, good buddy, it’s the worst possible thing you could have done.”

The three sipped their coffee considering the events of the day. Finally, they stood, moved into the living room, and considered the pile of stuff. Skeets moved around it like a rock climber looking for a handhold. “Clyde, you have a box I could put some stuff in?” When the box arrived, Skeets dumped everything from the suitcase into the box, picking out a few toiletries, and starting, not too carefully, to fold the clothes he’d stuffed into the blue jeans.

“That’s the ugliest suitcase I’ve ever seen. Ugly! Uggggly!” Jesse kicked the scuffed vintage cloth-covered suitcase. “We better buy you a Harley duffel when we pick up my bike, ’cause we’re at grave risk of grossing out the entire population of Mexico with that thing.”

“Actually, they won’t even let him in unless he leaves it at the border.” Clyde nodded agreement.

“We’re talking serious loss of style points when we show up at the Harley place with that thing.” Jesse nudged the offending suitcase again.

“Ok! Ok! God forbid my mom’s old suitcase will get me arrested by the Harley Davidson style-police.”

Bike loaded and extra stuff box stored in the garage, they returned to the kitchen table. “So, you guys have a plan for this great expedition?” Clyde asked.

Jesse nodded. “I thought we’d ride south.”

“Oh, now that’s a plan,” Clyde said with excited irony. “I mean, do they give you the big

bienvenidos at the border, or do they want to see a little paperwork before the *abrazo*.”

“What paperwork?” Skeets looked uneasy that his travel résumé extended no further than San Antonio, Dallas, Houston, and a couple of trips to Boys Town in Laredo.

“You know, maybe a passport, title to your bikes, and maybe even some insurance.” Clyde’s voice had an edge to it.

“They never wanted any papers when we rode to Boy’s Town.” Jesse leaned back and lifted his coffee cup.

“Somehow I think the Mexicans might be a little more interested when you ride further south than the nearest whorehouse.” Clyde hesitated. “You guys seem a little light on preparation for your great adventure.”

“Maybe they can tell us what we need at the dealership when we pick up Jesse’s scooter. Besides, they must still have the title to my bike, ‘cause I sure don’t have it.” Skeets grinned.

Jesse got up. “I guess we’ll find out when we get there.”

With all Skeet’s stuff stowed on his bike there was no room for Jesse to second-seat without slinging Skeets’ guitar case on his back. The two voyagers mounted up, and Clyde stepped back, examined the overloaded motorcycle, and shook his head. With the bedroll strapped to the front fender and the ugly suitcase on the back fender sissy-bar, the bike looked horribly diseased. The two riders and the guitar rounded out a truly sad visage. “You know, as ridiculous as you guys look, and as much as I think this whole trip is a mistake, I wish I was going with you.”

Chapter 4

The South Texas sky was a fierce blue pocked by indifferent, fair-weather cumulus floating above. The heat stifled anything stationary, but at eighty-five miles per hour Skeets had the illusion of comfort. He settled, almost contented with his plight, for their long ride ahead. They rode staggered, impersonating seasoned road hogs. Skeets' style deficit healed after ditching his mom's suitcase in favor of a genuine Harley duffel now strapped along with his guitar case to his bike's second seat and sissy-bar. He felt every bit the troubadour.

He was gratified by light traffic in San Antonio, and they cleared the Alamo City in record time, heading south on IH 35, Laredo in their sights. The shape-shifting landscape kept Skeets' interest. Austin's live oak-studded limestone hills sighed and lay down on the coastal plain of San Antonio, where oaks and elms metamorphosed into mesquite diminishing from thirst under the torturous sun until all that remained was the endless expanse of scrub brush that was Southwest Texas.

Skeets, a newcomer to long distance motorcycling, felt alive but somewhat mesmerized by the subliminal stimuli of "Harleying." Those random occasions when Harleys, like horses galloping in unison, began firing in sync as they picked up the load of a hill climb, sent a thrill pulsing through his groin into his soul. He looked around the landscape blurring past, drew in the smell of sage goaded into bloom by a recent rain shower, and nodded satisfaction as the

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problematic day faded from memory like smoke signals. By God, riding was a purgative for the soul.

Mid-afternoon, Skeets gave the hand signal to pull off into the Burros Locos Cantina just south of Encinal. The sign offered essentials -- beer, food, gas. Two gas pumps stood like sentinels in front. The exterior was awash with the multicolored beer signs of any cantina south of the border. Add the clay tile roof, the concrete burros wearing sombreros and smoking cigarettes beside the entrance, and they could squint their eyes and already be in Mexico.

The two gassed their bikes and moved them to a parking place near the front door. They strapped their helmets to the handlebars, put on their Harley bill caps, and Skeets grabbed his guitar. Several bobtail trucks and pickups were parked in the lot dominated by an eighteen-wheeler whose Peterbilt 379X tractor and semi-body shimmered in iridescent, clear-coated black. Someone had crafted the rearview mirrors with great skill and effort into the pointy ears of a wolf, and the front grill was a cavernous, toothed, growling wolf's mouth extending by means of paint over the sides of the truck's hood. The headlights were fire-breathing nostrils. A translucent material appliquéd around the edges of the windshield transformed it into a mean-eyed predator's stare. "El Lobo" painted in gold adorned the tractor's door. Even at rest, engine idling, the truck emitted the low growl of a malcontent carnivore.

"Man, that is one bad ass looking truck." Jesse pointed in the El Lobo direction.

Skeets gestured toward the truck. "That thing adds new meaning to 'eat where the truckers eat', right?"

"Right now I'm hungry enough to eat the trucks."

Skeets heard billiard balls click, and the aroma of masa tortillas and fajitas and onions

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sizzling on a flat grill made his knees weak when he pushed through the door. He knew Jesse was salivating. “I think you’re gonna enjoy this, good buddy.”

Their eyes adjusted to the dim lighting and they saw several vagrant types lounging around tables, playing cards or pool. A tall, slender Anglo sat at the bar nursing a beer. His rangy handsome face was festooned with a toilet-brush mustache covering most of his upper lip. A grimy, straw cowboy hat with the brim curled almost to the crown sat atop his head. A tank top showcased a wolf head tattoo on his arm at the shoulder. Faded black jeans over black cowboy boots completed his fashion statement. He saw them looking him over in the bar mirror and lifted his beer bottle in a salute. They nodded in his direction, and Jesse said under his breath, “El Lobo, ya think?”

The proprietor returned from the back with a plate of food for the bar-sitter. He turned his attention to Skeets and Jesse, smiling. “*Buenas tardes, amigos.*”

Skeets pointed toward the cash register. “We’re eatin’ . . . pay for the gas now or with the food?”

The proprietor pointed toward the tables still smiling. “Take a seat. *Un momentito.*” He held up his thumb and forefinger pressed together, sign language for “just a minute.”

They dragged chairs from a table some distance from two groups of card players and sat facing the bar. The guitar stood guard in the third seat. The proprietor was tableside before their chair seats warmed. “What can I get you, *hombres?*”

“Two beers and a bunch of whatever we smelled coming through the door.” Skeets pointed in the direction of the food still steaming on the counter.

“We’re double hungry, *amigo*, so don’t be shy with the *comida.*” Jesse rubbed his stomach for emphasis.

“Fajitas and a beer. You got it!” The proprietor returned to the bar and brought them two longneck Coronas wrapped in deli paper with a lime in the mouth of each.

“You think they charge extra for the lime?” Skeets held the lime wedge up for the question.

“My dad always used lime. Mexican tradition. The germs growing in ice bins in old times didn’t even have scientific names, so folks sanitized the mouth of beer bottles with lime and salt. I guess they got used to the taste of lime in their beer.” Jesse demonstrated with his lime before downing half the bottle.

Skeets tugged with his thumbnail at the deli paper now sogging up from condensation on the bottle. “You think we’ll get into Mexico? The guys at Harley seemed pretty firm on us needing a bunch of papers and stuff.”

“It’d have taken us another two days to get all that stuff together. We’ll just put the old *mordida* on them. They’ll let us in.”

“Yeah, but we’re not flush with *mordida* either.” Skeets rubbed his fingers together in the traditional request for a bribe. “I didn’t understand about giving them a credit card receipt for vehicle duty either.”

“If we had a credit card, we might give a damn. Anyway, we’re about forty miles north of “*Mordidaville*.” Jesse gestured somewhere south of Antarctica. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

A stocky Mexican pushed his way through the front door and looked around the room like his wife’s car was parked out front. A black Stetson sat atop a square, mustached face and dark eyes squinted into the dimness. He was short, with a Santa Claus transplant hanging over his big western belt buckle, but his arms and legs seemed firm and strong. Large gold rings spread across his fingers; a heavy gold chain and coin hung from his neck and flashed a

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semaphore through the dimness. When he smiled recognition at Skeet and Jesse, three gold crowns glistened like the headlights on an Edsel.

“You know ol’ goldie over there?” Skeets pointed without raising his hand.

“No, but I think we’re gonna have the pleasure.”

As the man moved in their direction, he caught sight of El Lobo at the bar and nodded. Lobo watched with interest in the bar mirror but ignored the salutation. Approaching the table, the newcomer held his arms up as if preparing for a giant *abrazo*. “*Son ustedes los puercos?*”

Jesse sat up. “Hey! Easy with the pig talk, dude.”

“What did he say?” Skeets asked.

“He called us pigs.”

The man waved his hands and spoke in broken English. “No! No, amigos! The Harleys. The Harley Hogs. You the Harley guys?” He pointed out the front door.

“Oh! Yeah, those are our bikes.” Jesse settled back in his chair.

Uninvited, the man pulled back the fourth chair and sat. “Man, I’ve always wanted a Harley, you know guys, *una motocicleta chingona*. ¿*Sabe?* You guys going to Mexico?”

“We’re headed that direction,” Jesse replied.

“*Me llamo Redondo*.” The stranger tapped his chest and repeated, “Redondo.” He held out his hand to Jesse, who pointed to his partner.

“That’s Skeets, and I’m Jesse. You travel in Mexico?”

“I’m Mexican. *Vivo en Monterrey*.” His gesture was intended to indicate the size of the city. “Where you going in Mexico?”

“We don’t know.” Skeets shrugged.

“We’re not sure we can even get into Mexico.” Jesse pulled on his beer.

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“You don’t know if you can get into Mexico, and you don’t know where you’re going if you do?” Redondo shook his head in disbelief. “That’s *loco*, guys.”

“We left in a hurry.” Skeets was a little defensive.

“Why you can’t get over the border?”

“Some people told us we need paperwork to get in with our bikes. We’re hoping we can pass out some *mordida* and get it handled.” Jesse gestured like he was peeling off dollar bills.

Redondo leaned back in his chair, and his loud laugh caused bar patrons to check out the disturbance. “Man, you gringos are *locos*. You think you can bribe your way into Mexico?”

“It’s been done before”

“Forget it, *hombre!* Those days are gone.” He continued chuckling as he took a swig from the beer that was delivered to him without ordering. He quit laughing, rocked forward in his chair, and looked at the two with a conspiratorial eye. “Unless you know the right people.”

“We don’t know any people -- right or wrong,” Skeets blurted out their collective lack of border-crossing savvy.

“You’re fucked, man.” Redondo’s irritation at their stupidity glowed from his face. “It takes years learning who to deal with at the border.”

The proprietor brought heaping plates of steaming fajitas and tortillas to their table and went back to the bar for more beers. Redondo stood up “You *hombres* enjoy your *comida*. *Hasta pronto*.” He turned and walked to the back of the room and sat with a table of card players who greeted him as a friend.

Skeets and Jesse hoisted their third fajita taco before either spoke. “Man, this is some good stuff.” Skeets came up for air and a slug on his beer.

“Totally righteous, I’d say.” Jesse hefted his fourth taco.

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El Lobo stood at the bar and shook hands with the proprietor after paying his tab. He nodded in their direction as he walked toward the door. A moment later a roar from his diesel rattled their beer bottles across the table.

The meal wound down and Jesse and Skeets called for their check. Before it arrived, Redondo appeared at their table again. This time Jesse motioned him to sit, and Redondo called for another round of beers.

“I been thinking about you guys getting into Mexico.” Redondo read their eyes for a response before continuing. “You’re going to Laredo, right?” The two nodded. “That’s impossible. No way, man.”

“You already told us that.” Skeets wondered why this guy was interested.

Redondo leaned forward and lowered his voice. “There’s another way, about the same distance, and the border people are *más simpáticos*. The bridge goes into Nuevo Leon at Columbia. You take the Camino Columbia Toll Way west about twenty miles south at Callahan.”

Skeets asked, “You think we can cross there?”

“*No solos*. But I can help you.” He leaned back, took a draught on his beer, and waited to see if the hook set.

“A kind offer, but how can you help us?” There was something about this guy that Skeets didn’t like. Maybe it was the glare from all that gold.

“Yeah, it’s hard to imagine why you’d help us.” Jesse rocked back in his chair.

“I like Harley guys, man. Help out a couple a biker dudes.” He opened his arms in a gesture of embrace big enough for them both. “And maybe you guys could help me out, and buy some gas for my truck.”

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“We buy you some gas, and you get us into Mexico?” Skeets’ skepticism registered about six degrees above bullshit.

Redondo leaned forward and motioned for them to do the same. He talked in a hushed tone. “I have friends at the border. I cross the border a lot. And I do business with the border guys on both sides. They know I don’t haul drugs, so they never check my truck. We’ll load your bikes in the truck, and when we’re past the 30 kilo checkpoint inside Mexico, we unload ‘em, and *vamonos*.”

“You just smuggle us and the bikes into Mexico. Right?” Jesse shook his head in astonishment.

“Easy, man, I don’t like that word ‘smuggle.’ That’s against the law, man.” Redondo’s voice was almost a hiss. He called to the barkeep for another round with tequila shots.

Skeets asked, “What do *you* call it?”

“I’m making their paperwork easier. They appreciate it, *amigo*.” The shots arrived and he motioned for the other two to join him as he shot the tequila in one gulp, bit the lime and chased it with beer. He stood and held his beer out for a toast. “I gotta go soon. I cross right after the night shift comes on. You guys think it over. I’ll stop by on the way out.” He turned and went back to the table of card players.

Three rounds of tequila and beer warmed their insides, and warmed them to the idea of taking up Redondo’s offer. “I mean, what can happen? They catch us, they’ll just throw us out, right?” Jesse slurred a little as he spoke.

“Yeah, either that or throw us in the *hoosegow*.” Skeets still was not sold, but hated the idea of turning tail and running back to Austin. Another round of tequila arrived, and Skeets shot his with lime and salt.

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“Sounds like our only way in, man. Remember, spontaneity is the soul of joy. We’re looking for joy and adventure, right?” Jesse emptied his beer bottle. “This’ll damn sure be an adventure, okay?”

Redondo stood at the table again. “What’s the verdict, *amigos*?”

Skeets stood and staggered a little heading for the door. “Let’s go pump some gas.”

The two Harleys followed Redondo’s truck, a nondescript white, twenty-foot GMC bobtail with no markings and a Texas license tag covered with mud. They turned onto a dirt side road about eight miles south, and Redondo stopped and got out. He unlatched the rear door and raised it to reveal an empty cargo bay with a row of benches down each side of the truck bed. The unmistakable stench of stale urine assaulted them.

“*Hombre*, your truck smells like a bouquet of assholes.” Skeets held his nose.

“Yeah, I hauled some goats yesterday.” Redondo pulled out a cargo ramp attached under the truck body and motioned for them to load their bikes. They roared up the ramp one after the other. Redondo brought some rope from the cab, and they started tying the bikes to the side of the truck.

Jesse threw a loop around the handlebar and one on the sissy-bar and lashed these to a cargo rail running along the truck body. He shook the bike for a test and then jumped from the truck. Skeets still toiled over his bike, spinning a web of security rope. Jesse watched for a while, then pointed at Skeets bike “Hey, good buddy, I think you’re getting’ a bit extreme. Your bike looks like a cocoon.”

“A beautiful machine like this falling over and getin’ all scunt up would bum me out.”

Skeets started to put another rope on the bike.

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“*Vámonos, hombres.* We gotta go.” Redondo made a threatening gesture and stomped back to the truck cab.

Skeets stepped back from his Harley and admired his work. He handed Jesse his guitar and jumped from the truck clutching the rear door pull down strap. Jesse swung the door latch into place. “Let’s go have an adventure, amigo.” He handed the guitar to Skeets, and the two walked to the truck cab and crawled in just as it lurched forward.

Redondo stopped just before the town of Callaghan and told them to get out. They followed him to the rear of the truck. He opened the door “Get in and be quiet. They hear something back here when we cross the border, and they’ll be all over you guys *como olor mierda.*”

“Stink on manure is what your truck smells like, hombre. We didn’t sign on to ride back here.” Jesse showed no interest in climbing into the truck

“How you think I can get somebody in without papers.” Redondo motioned to them to get in the back of the truck and mumbled under his breath, “*Idiotas.*”

They looked at each other, shrugged, and crawled into the back of the truck. Skeets turned back to Redondo. “How long will we be back here?”

“Not long, amigos. We’ll be turnin’ onto the toll road soon.” His gilded smile glistened as he pulled the truck door down.

They heard the latch swing into place, and the rattle of a lock going into place. Redondo shook the door testing it. “I’d swear that asshole locked us in here. Hope you’re not afraid of the dark.” Jesse gave a nervous chuckle.

“You feel semi-stupid right now?” After about thirty minutes Skeets’ voice came across the dark

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void of the truck at a volume necessary to reach Jesse over the din of the truck rattling over something other than a toll road. The bikes slammed against the truck body oblivious to the spaghetti strung around them.

Jesse, sitting on the opposite bench, held his hand in front of his face. “It’s blacker’n ol’ Coalie’s ass back here. The bastard shoulda told us we’d be riding steerage back here in the piss soaked black hole of Coahuila.”

The truck lurched through what had to be the pothole of the century, and Skeets slid off the bench landing on his butt with an audible thud. “Goddammit that’s it. I’m outta here.” He grabbed the bench, pulled himself up, and worked his way back to the rollup door. He tried the handle. It wouldn’t budge. “The bastard did lock us in.”

“This sucks, man.” Jesse moved to the front of the truck and pounded on the wall behind the cab. “Hey, asshole! Stop the truck and let us out!” The truck lurched on, interrupted by major potholes and sharp turns. He balanced himself as best he could and tried to shove his boot heel into the truck cab with no success. Moving to the back of the truck, he said, “Let me see if I can open it.” The truck stopped before he could try, and he heard Redondo open the cab door.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m in favor of feeding this asshole some serious boot leather.” Skeets groped in the darkness trying to find Jesse. Redondo rattled the latch handle as he unlocked the door, and the door flew up flooding light into the cavity. The late afternoon light blinded them like the dawning of man. When they focused, Redondo stood away from the truck brandishing an XXL-sized pistol

Chapter 5

“*Bienvenidos, amigos!*” Redondo pushed back the brim of his hat with the pistol and adjusted a coil of rope on his shoulder. “Welcome to Mexico.”

“If I wasn’t feeling stupid before, I can report dumb-ass creeping over me like psoriasis right now.” Jesse motioned in the direction of Redondo “We stopped for a little target practice?”

Skeets looked around for any signs of civilization. The truck stood in a clearing, and mesquite and scrub brush stretched into tomorrow. The mud-rutted road ended right at the edge of the world. “Why do I think we’re not in Mexico?”

“Trust me, *amigos*, Mexico is just the same except more flies. Now get down *con mucho cuidado*. ¡*Ándale!* I don’t want to shoot you.”

They stood motionless considering all the reasons Redondo might need to shoot them. They all came down to one -- the Harleys. “Easy with the pistol, dude. We don’t want you to shoot us either.” Their hands went up in unison like charismatic churchgoers.

“*Ahora*, gringo assholes. I got no time to fuck with you.” The pistol that had drifted from side to side came erect, pointing at their crotches. “I’m gonna shoot you *pinche pendejos* right now.” He cocked the hammer on the pistol.

“Whoa! Whoa! Easy does it! We’re getting down.” They hopped flatfooted from the

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truck without lowering their hands.

Jesse's foot twisted, and he tumbled on the ground. He sat up, rubbing his ankle. "Right now I'm wishing I'd watched more of those Kung Fu movies."

Redondo motioned with his pistol for Jesse to get up "*Arriba! Arriba! Quítense las botas y los pantalones.*"

"What's he want?" Skeets reached down to help Jesse up.

"You'll be dismayed to learn he wants our boots and blue jeans off." Jesse looked down and kicked at the dirt.

"What?" Skeets couldn't comprehend "I mean, is this son-of-a-bitch gay or something?"

Jesse tried to put double-bass in his voice, as much as was possible with a gun pointed at his groin. "Hey, man, look, if you want our bikes, just take them. You don't have to go through all this pistol waving, *machoñ 'Quítense las botas y los pantalones'* bullshit."

"I can shoot you in the legs, or you can take off your pants. *Es igual.*" Redondo pointed the pistol from leg to leg.

"You didn't happen to bring a boot jack did you?" Skeets glanced at Jesse already falling to the ground and grabbing his boots. Boots off, they dropped their jeans and presented their honky-tonk musician's pasty pallor in the late afternoon sun.

"*Y los calcetines!*" Redondo again motioned with the pistol barrel toward their Fruit of the Looms.

"He wants the underwear too." Jesse looked helpless.

Skeets almost pleaded with the *pistolero*. "Come on, man, you don't want our Jockeys. We've been riding all day in these skivvies. They've got skid marks, man."

"*Apúrense!*" Redondo squeezed off a shot just to the right of Jesse's feet.

The pistol report packed such motivation, the two leaped from their briefs. They stood devoid of all poise, one hand up, the other down, shielding their southern regions, and endured an anxious pause while Redondo reveled in their distress. Jesse whispered to Skeets, “I feel a draft, man!” Redondo pulled the coil of rope from his shoulder and threw it at their feet.

“This bastard’s got more ropes than a circus tent.” Skeets growled more to himself than Jesse. They stood awaiting further marching orders, masculinity at parade rest.

“Two choices, *cabrones*. I can kill you right now, or you can tie yourselves to that tree.” He pointed his pistol toward a large mesquite standing out into the clearing several feet. “*Me da igual*.” He wagged his free hand, palm down indicating he didn’t care which.

“How do we tie *ourselves* up?” Skeets looked back and forth from the tree to Jesse.

“*Pendejos!* You tie up that guy, then I tie you up.” Redondo fired another motivational shot next to Skeets’ toes sending him to his knees grappling for the rope. He bounced up, spun Jesse around, and threw a loop over one of his hands.

“Easy, man, I need a little circulation here.” Jesse wiggled his hands trying to loosen the rope. Skeets stretched the knot to make more room.

“OK, *amigos*, get over to that tree.” They spaced themselves with their backs on opposite sides of the tree. Redondo wound the rope still tied to Jesse around them and the tree. He began at their crotch, progressing upward until the last coil was under their chins with little room for breathing, and cinched it off. Stepping back to admire his work, animal-howl laughter echoed out into the scrub. “Like I said, assholes, I always wanted a Harley. Now I got two!” He turned, rolled the rear door down, picked up their clothes, threw them into the truck cab, and leaped in after them. His laughter soared above the truck noise as he bounced down the dirt road and into the distance.

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The truck faded into the silence that cloaked the mesquite tree and its captives. After a time, Skeets turned his head from side to side to ease the rope and squeaked out a raspy, “Is it time to be joyful yet?”

“It might be time for introspection, review of past transgressions, and overall personal evaluation.”

“I don’t think I can handle that twice in one day.” Skeets’ voice trailed off remembering that morning’s revelations. God, what a difference a day makes. I could be sliding under sheets, waking Gena with a snuggle, and feeling the pure joy of her complete acquiescence, he thought.

Jesse tugged at the ropes, testing them. “Man, I forgot this all started today. It seems a lifetime ago. This morning we were two underachieving Austin C&W musicians with Harleys and our lives in front of us. Twelve hours later we’re strapped to a mesquite tree, airing out our private parts, watching our bikes disappear over the horizon God knows where in South Texas. It doesn’t seem fair.”

Skeets took his turn straining at the ropes. “The first cat turd I found in my sand box taught me life’d be difficult and often unfair. As other turds followed, I became distrustful of the world and its inhabitants, a negative trait I’ve tried hard to overcome.”

“Considering our current condition, we’ve both strayed into semi-lethal gullibility.” Jesse looked at the ground in the fading light. “What’s bothering me right now are those mutant red ants walkin’ around our feet, licking their chops, looking up at our balls like they’re super-sized Mexican *piñatas*.” He did his best rendition of the South Texas Shuffle trying to redirect the ants’ attention.

“If the pesky little devils decide to come on up for a scrotum sandwich, we might be moved to rip this mesquite out by its roots.” Skeets stared down at the crowd forming at his feet

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and tried a little footwork of his own. The interlopers fell back to safety. “In the excitement I forgot about all that the beer we drank. I’ve been needing to piss for hours.”

“Likewise.” Jesse agreed

“I remember Gulliver put out a fire for the Lilliputians, but was under-appreciated for his efforts.”

Jesse’s voice had a hopeful lilt in it. “You think those red-faced Lilliputians down there would be as put off by a fusillade?”

“On the count of three.”

“They’ll never know what hit ‘em.”

In the subterranean vaults where red ants dwell, and from which they sally forth each day ranging over vast areas in hope of finding a seed or miserable scrap of plant to return to the nest for daily sustenance, urban legends persisted. Each time someone complained how hard and unfair life was in this barren land, someone else trotted out the old myths.

The most persistent was the story of how God had, on one occasion and without any understandable reason, dropped a heaping load of meat almost on their doorstep. Gone were the days of foraging all day for a dry, tasteless bit of grass. With almost no effort, one had only to stroll a short distance and have all the meat he wanted, then just tear off a huge chunk to carry back to the wife and kids.

Pure renaissance reigned in the nest. A time of plenty and all were happy. At least until some started demanding the best parts of the meat, staking out claims and forcing others onto parts where only small shards of meat still hung on the bones. An angry God sent huge, evil beasts descending from the sky on wings large enough to blot out the sun. They devoured the

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meat with their rapacious beaks and claws. *Their meat*. Thousands came out to defend their meat, but it was hopeless. When the evil beasts had stripped the bones of all but the most meager amount of meat, they flew off never to be seen again. Hundreds swarmed over the bones looking for even tiny bits of meat, when a furry evil beast appeared and dragged the bones and those on it away to an unknown place.

In the town meetings that followed, and on all the twenty-four hour cable news channels they prattled on endlessly about what went wrong. Some felt the greed of a few caused God to punish all. Others felt they were not thankful enough for God sending them the meat. And so the argument raged on for as long as any remembered.

When the report ricocheted through the nest that God had sent back the meat, most were nonbelievers. Others rushed out and came back astounded by the two mountains of meat (one white meat – the other dark meat) right on their doorstep. They were determined not to mess up again, so they approached with great caution trying to know what best to do. Hundreds, maybe even thousands, ringed the meat wanting someone to tell them what was right, but they agreed on one point. They needed a world-class blessing before they crawled onto the banquet table.

No one knows how it happened, but right in the middle of the blessing, the heavens opened, and a torrential flood of the most vile, distasteful water rained down on them. Caught by surprise, most were washed away, others clinging to some bits of grass were grossed out, and they too floated away trying to keep their heads above the foul flood.

The nonbelievers remaining in the nest were put off by the evil smelling survivors of the flood and insisted they remain outside until they dried off and quit stinking. The survivors milled around the entrance to the nest, each wondering why God made life so difficult and unfair.

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Skeets and Jesse discovered they could rotate their waists, redirecting their streams with pinpoint accuracy. When their ammunition ran low and went dry, the area below showed Middle Eastern devastation. “Score: Gringos 675 – Ants 0.” Hollowness rang in Jesse’s laughter. “I guess we have a bigger problem though.”

“I’d say so. Unless Redondo caters this event, our quality of life will go down pretty quick.” Skeets tried the ropes again before settling back.

“Any suggestions?”

“I’m a little short on ideas since my knife is still in my pants. And by the way our wallets, money, and, most important of all, my guitar are all with Redondo at this moment.” Skeets angrily tugged at the ropes again.

“Step One is get loose. Then we worry about Redondo and those things.” Jesse joined in the escape attempt.

“Maybe we can rub the rope against the tree bark and wear it in two.” Jesse moved his hands as far as possible to one side, grabbed a circle of the rope, and began rubbing it against the tree. “This is not real easy. See if you can find the same rope I’m rubbing. Then we can take turns.”

The full moon descended and Skeets’ rubbing still ground into the silence of the night. “Hey, man, wake up. I’m toast here. Time to rubba-dub-dub. Jesse! Come to, bro, we’ve gotta keep rubbing.”

Jesse’s sleepy voice came from the other side of the tree. “Sorry, man, I guess I dozed off. Been a trying day. Get some sleep yourself.” He grabbed the rope and began scraping.

“Thanks to Ms. Beamer last night, I’m going on twenty-four hours without shut-eye.”

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Skeets listened to the rubbing. The sound was aboriginal – eerie as it spread into the night. Several curious animals were drawn near the clearing by the moan it produced. Skeets heard them scurrying around in the brush just out of sight. But the rhythmic sound soon put him to sleep.

About an hour into his watch, Jesse thought he heard voices. He stopped scraping, antennae up.

Two crouching figures crept into the clearing. They gasped when they saw Skeets hanging limp on the ropes, genitals arrayed. They grabbed each other and dropped to their knees, whispering prayers. Then they rose to a half crouch, reached into the mesh *bolsas* they carried and drew out *machetes* that glistened in the moonlight. Still crouching they moved toward the dead man on the mesquite tree.