

SON OF A GUN



AM RILEY

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“One must think like a hero to behave like a merely decent human being.”

May Sarton

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Chapter One

“It’s really not necessary.” Agnes sounded bored. Through the phone, Stefan heard the click of a cigarette lighter, a long inhale, and could evoke from memory the cloud of smoke around nicotine stained fingers as Agnes studied her shiny pink acrylics. “I’m sure they won’t care.”

“I’d care,” said Stefan.

“Where were you going to stay?”

Well, that took care of the first purpose of his call, he supposed. He’d thought he might stay in his old bedroom, though the suspicious male voice that had answered the phone had Stefan rethinking that idea already.

“Jane will put me up.”

A silence. Belatedly, Stefan realized that Agnes might take this as criticism. That another woman would do for Stefan what she would not. “She already asked me to stay with them. I didn’t want to say ‘no.’ Under the circumstances,” he lied freely, not sure why he always had to mollify Agnes, but always finding himself doing so.

“Oh, I suppose you had no choice,” she said, sulkily.

“I’ll call when I get in.”

“Sure, honey.”

Stefan could think of absolutely nothing else to say. So he merely said, “Goodbye mother.”

She hung up without replying.

* * *

“Texas?” Ron said, exactly as he might have said “*Mars?*” “What the hell is in Texas?”

“I grew up there.” Stefan shifted the cell phone to the other ear so that he could grab the door handle as his cab swerved wildly through traffic. Stefan had offered the driver a small stipend if he made it to LAX on time.

“You’re kidding me.” These days it seemed that Ron’s voice always reflected a mounting hysteria. “I thought that was just a story your publicist

made up. Why, in Christ, go back though? And why now? You're already months past due on that manuscript."

"There was a death in the family."

The requisite polite pause. "I'm so sorry." Another pause. "Not to be crass, Stefan, but how long do you think...?"

"I have my final draft here. Don't worry, I'll get it to you within the week."

"Of course you will." The tiny cell phone receiver was not able to deliver an appropriate level of sarcasm. Stefan was the most lucrative client in Ron Roche's fledgling literary agency, and this lengthy dry spell had probably hit Ron's pocketbook as hard as it had hit Stefan's. It was ridiculous, really. Hemingways and Mailers had dry spells. Minor writers of adolescent crime fiction were supposed to spit the stuff out like hamburger meat from a grinder. Grind. Grind. Presto, another Adventure of the Backtree Boys.

"I've worked out the kinks. There's nothing left but the crying." The cab rocked hard to the left, and Stefan had to grab the door handle to avoid sliding across the seat again.

"Still think you should have taken my advice." Ron's solution to everything was usually young, hungry, and willing.

"Doesn't work for me." Stefan saw that they were pulling up to the curb outside the terminal. "My flight leaves in half an hour, Ron. I've got to go."

"You'll stay in touch?" It wasn't really a request.

"I will." Stefan shut the phone off, wallet out and ready to pay the driver as he leapt from the cab. He'd only brought his laptop and the small overnight bag, which he flung over his shoulder as he ran through the terminal doors. He still had half an hour, but the last time he'd been here it had taken nearly that long for LAX security to pass him through.

A few minutes later, standing in a line watching his shoes, watch, laptop and belt trundling down a conveyor in plastic trays, he shut his phone down completely before dropping it into the tray. After living for seven years in Los Angeles, there was nobody else to call.

* * *

In San Antonio, Stefan emerged from the airport hangar, crisp air conditioning giving way immediately to deep, humid Texas heat. His sparse

luggage and light clothing all seemed to gain twenty pounds of wet, his hair sticking to the nape of his neck, and he remembered one of the dozens of reasons he'd had to leave Texas.

"The weather is reason enough."

"Nope. Reason number one. Snakes."

"When was the last time you saw a snake, Tommy?"

"It's the fact that they could show up ANYWHERE. Did you see that blurb in the paper about the assemblyman who found one in his mailbox?"

"I think someone put that there."

"And your point is?"

Stefan gambled on his credit card company's continued leniency and rented a car at the airport. Despite what he'd said to his mother, he had absolutely no idea how his unannounced appearance after such a long absence would be received. He might need a car for a quick getaway. Or maybe even a place to sleep.

He followed the stark clean highways until the rolling hills and genteel old buildings of historical Boerne appeared. Boerne must have been quite a victory for Jane, thought Stefan. Patrick, Sr. would more probably have preferred the state capital.

"Count the Suburbans, Stef. Hey, there's another one."

"That joke was only funny the first hundred times, Tommy."

"Seriously, you'd think oil just bubbled up out of the ground around here. Hey, there's another one."

Tommy's voice, which at times was subtle or even silent, but which always lived in Stefan's head. His muse, he supposed, if there were such a thing. The deeper Stefan drove into the heart of Texas, the louder Tommy's voice became.

"You know, no one ever explained to me adequately, why a nice German would want to settle in Texas."

"A nice German?"

"Imagine some plump German housewife looking out the window of her immaculate kitchen and seeing a SNAKE, Stef."

"Again with the snakes, Tommy?"

“Ach, Herman, ich war nicht kenne das SNAKEs ven ich...” Tommy’s talent for mimicry was amazing, his face transforming so that suddenly, Stefan could almost see a middle-aged turn of the century hausfrau, plump arms folded over her white apron.

“Stop. God, Tommy, you’re killing me.”

Stefan followed the instructions he’d received from the O’Connor’s legal secretary and parked his rental car across the street from Boerne’s only Catholic church, its single-story moss-covered limestone walls with the old double oak doors, now sentried by Secret Service types. The gravel circular drive was choked with limos and Benz’s with government plates.

“Security?” Tommy’s soft snort. “A little late, don’t you think?”

Stefan showed his identification to one of the men who stood at the door. The men were dressed almost identically, in nondescript black suits, a twisted wire descending into their stiff white shirt collars from earpieces. Wraparound black sunglasses. Tommy would have something to say about them, too.

“Who do they think they are, Will Smith?”

“I think the movie emulated reality, Tommy. Not the other way around.”

“Sure. Sure. Hey—” a nod toward one of the agents who stood near the front aisle, next to what was probably the family pew “—that one checked you out, Stef. He your type?”

“Christ, Tommy! He’ll hear you!”

The man at the door studied Stefan’s ID. Checked it against an extensive printed list. Nodded at the other man, and they let Stefan enter the church and take his place at the end of the line of people making their way past a mountain of flowers and candles surrounding a burnished mahogany casket at the front of the small chapel.

All the way up the aisle, Stefan could hear Tommy in his head. Hear his commentary, sarcastic and amused. So, accompanied by Tommy’s presence, he finally stood before the casket, and the shock hit him all at once.

My God, they’d put Tommy into a box.

A moment later, Stefan wondered what he might have said aloud. He’d gone to his knees there. Not that unusual at an open casket Catholic funeral,

but he didn't remember having done it and thought it likely that he'd more stumbled and fallen than knelt.

Tommy didn't look peaceful. *Aren't the dead supposed to look peaceful?*

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Chapter Two

“Thank you so much for coming.”

Directly after the eulogy, Stefan had bolted from the church and now half hovered, half cowered beneath the shadow of a towering white pine, chain smoking and watching mourners offer their condolences to Tommy’s clan.

Stefan hadn’t quite gotten up the nerve to do so himself.

“Thank you so much...”

Reason number three for leaving Texas, Stefan enumerated to himself. Patrick O’Connor, senior. The paternal head of the O’Connor clan, and the current Attorney General of the State of Texas. Stefan lit a second cigarette off his first and considered that even though Patrick looked like hell, he managed to look somehow royal in his grief.

Jane, Tommy’s mother, pale and tiny in Patrick’s shadow, stood as if held aloft by sheer strength of will. The rest of the siblings—Sean, Colin, Megan—were stoic and silent beside her. Sean’s estranged wife had chosen not to stand with the family. Stefan had heard that the divorce was acrimonious to an extreme, so he wasn’t surprised. Megan had never married and looked more like a nun than ever, standing in her pristine knit navy suit at her mother’s right elbow.

Notably missing was Samantha, Tommy’s wife. And that was odd. Stefan stepped from the shelter of the pine, crushing his cigarette out in the gravel with a booted toe. Sammy and Tommy might have despised the invasive, meddling, and controlling O’Connor clan, but an Irish funeral was not attendance-optional for family members, no matter how devastated by grief they might be. Even the tiny cousins and nephews who now ran across the chapel lawns playing tag were expected to file past the open casket, watch the box lowering into the ground.

Stefan crossed to the family, unsure what to expect. He’d left Boerne in the night without a word or even a note, and minimized his contact ever since. So when Jane looked up at him and her drawn and sorrowful face lit up just a little, her thin arms lifted and wrapped around him and she breathed, “Welcome home.” into his ear, he was immobilized by surprise.

“Stefan, thank you so much for coming,” said Patrick Sr., big dry hand capturing and enclosing Stefan’s. “Where are you staying?”

“I only just got in from the airport.”

“You’ll stay with us,” declared Patrick. And that was that; the head of the O’Connor clan had spoken. Patrick turned to the next mourner. “Thank you so much for coming.”

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Chapter Three

The historic homes of Boerne, Texas were named, like race horses, to display their lineage. Stefan drove up the gentle incline of Pecan Street, past Stendebach-Frey-Carter House and Eibensberger-Fowler House to the stone wall and wide circular drive of Sharberg-Hoyte-McDenny House, the O'Connor clan ancestral home.

The house had been in Jane's family for several generations. Tommy's mother, Jane O'Connor née McDenny, had been so completely absorbed into the clan both as Patrick's wife and as the mother of his five children, that the house was now known by the locals as the McDenny House, McDenny being the name under which the entire family had lived and grown up since Patrick O'Connor, former DA and now Attorney General for Texas, had declared himself at war with the drug cartels who invaded his state. The death threats had been coming in a steady stream for decades.

Stefan had heard colleagues report their childhood homes as seeming smaller when they returned for family holidays and alumni events. Sharber-Hoyte-McDenny House loomed every bit as large and forbidding as it had in memory.

Of course it was only the emotional weight that loomed. The building itself was modest and tasteful, a lovingly maintained Queen Anne, with Boerne limestone hand-laid walls and flowerbeds surrounding.

The same swarm of government vehicles clogged the circular drive and Stefan handed his keys to a young woman in a sheriff's uniform.

"I'm a guest of the family," he explained, when she eyed his duffel bag.

"Yes, sir." She was probably in her mid twenties. Odds were good she didn't know Stefan, so he could assume her caution was endemic. All visitors to McDenny house were probably rigorously screened.

At the door, another agent checked his clipboard and Stefan's ID before enunciating some code into his mouthpiece and checking a box on the sheet there.

"Welcome to McDenny House," said the man, opening the door for Stefan with as much ceremony as a velvet-suited courtier at the doors to a

palace. His hand landed on Stefan's duffel as he proceeded through, however. "We'll have your bags taken to your room."

"Hold on, Peterson." From the mass of dark suits and dresses clogging the foyer, Sean O'Connor emerged and grasped the handle of Stefan's bag. "Mr. Sanchez is family, you don't have to X-ray his underwear. C'mon, Stef."

Because the entire family had grown up under the cartels' death threats, the plaques and trophies, even the graduation certificates that decorated the walls of the guest room to which Sean led him all bore the names of Patrick and Jane's five children with the patronymic McDenny.

"How's LA?" said Sean, now, slinging Stefan's duffel into the closet.

"Smoggy," said Stefan. "Congested. It's becoming New York on the beach."

Sean had the O'Connor blue eyes and white-blond hair, but his skin was a darker shade and he'd been lucky enough to inherit Jane's aquiline nose instead of the O'Connor schnoz. "You see a lot of movie stars?"

His eyelids were red and he looked dazed.

"I'm sorry," said Stefan. "Sean, I'm so sorry."

Sean nodded, jaw clenched. "Mom's glad to see you, Stef. Thanks for coming." He sounded like a miniature version of Patrick.

"I would have visited sooner, but..."

"Believe me, I understand. You don't have to explain."

"I'll just clean up and come down, okay?" said Stefan.

* * *

Stefan took a shower and changed into his jeans and ropers, descending to the first floor and passing through a crowd in the living room that was subdued with post-funereal respect. Stefan noted priestly vestments amongst the dark suits and dresses. The O'Connor clan still had the odd son or daughter that found vocation. The door to Patrick O'Connor's office was closed and the pater noticeably absent, so Stefan found his way, instead, to the brightly lit kitchen.

"Jane, I'll come over tomorrow and clean up." Stefan heard, as he hesitated in the doorway. That was Sean's wife, Ginny. Ginny spooned some sort of mush into the face of the most recent addition to her and

Sean's brood. Stefan wasn't sure which of the many white-haired children underfoot belonged to whom, but he thought the little boy in front of Ginny must be number four.

"Thank you, Ginny," said Jane and then noticed Stefan, and immediately crossed the floor to enclose him in her arms again.

"I'm sorry, Jane," said Stefan into her shoulder. Meaning it on several levels.

She patted his back as if he were the one in need of comfort. "Sit down, Stefan."

The same agent whom Stefan had seen in the church by the family pew stood in the corner by the wide kitchen table like a guard dog, arms folded across his white cotton shirt. He watched Stefan pull out a chair and straddle it.

"There's food in the dining room. Do you want me to fix you a plate?" Jane asked Stefan.

"I'm fine, Jane. Really," said Stefan, wishing he'd donned baggier jeans. Lean and rangy seemed to be the default for Stefan's body, and Jane, probably because she was accustomed to the beefy O'Connor men, had always been anxious about it.

"Have you spoken with your mother?" she asked.

"Yes."

Jane's eyes read him. She'd been more of a mother to Stefan than Agnes most of his life. When he'd actually been moved into McDenny House, she'd absorbed him under her wing with a grace he would never forget and for which he would always feel grateful. "Be sure to call her tonight," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. I think I should pay my condolences to Sammy, too."

Jane had turned back to the counter to chop apples. The movement of her chopping arm stilled and she said, "Of course," without turning around.

Megan appeared in the doorway then. "Uncle Danny is asking for you, Mother." And Jane set down her knife, brushed off her hands, and followed her daughter out.

"I didn't see Sammy in the living room," Stefan said to Ginny.

“Samantha isn’t here,” said Ginny coolly, wiping mush from her baby’s face. She seemed preoccupied with the child, and Stefan, who didn’t particularly enjoy children despite writing books for them, turned his attention to the starched, quiet agent standing in the corner.

Tommy would have teased him endlessly, of course, because the agent *was* Stefan’s type. Big and built, with dark hair, hazel eyes and big hands with closely trimmed nails. His broad shoulders stretched the cotton of his starched white shirt. He stared back. Stefan figured they taught them how not to blink at Special Agent school.

“You DEA or FBI?” asked Stefan conversationally.

“Agent Evans, sir,” said the man.

Stefan proffered a hand, half expecting it to be shunned. “Stefan Sanchez,” he said. The agent had the decency to clasp Stefan’s hand briefly, almost simultaneously dropping it and resuming his watchful position.

“Yes, I know, sir.”

Well, of course they knew who he was. Probably had an entire dossier on every person who had been on the funeral attendance list. And, of course, Stefan’s dossier undoubtedly included the footnote about his father.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I think I’ll step outside for a cigarette.”

He imagined he felt Agent Evans’ eyes on him all the way to the door.

* * *

As the shadows outside lengthened and the oppressive heat lifted, most of the mourners had drifted out to the long back porch to smoke and talk.

Patrick O’Connor had emerged from his office and presided over a group of men in one corner. The group quieted and heads turned curiously as Stefan approached.

“Stefan.” Patrick grabbed Stefan’s hand and reeled him in, embracing him fiercely.

“Gentlemen, this is my son’s friend from Los Angeles,” said Patrick. The faces that murmured condolences or nodded politely were not particularly familiar to Stefan. Business and government men had been drifting about Patrick O’Connor wherever he went for as long as Stefan could remember.

“How is Los Angeles?” asked Patrick.

“Smoggy and congested. It’s becoming New York on the beach,” said Stefan.

The faces around him looked bored.

“We’ll talk later.” Patrick dismissed him with a fatherly pat between his shoulder blades, and Stefan went around the corner of the wraparound porch, somewhat relieved, to smoke a cigarette.

Around the corner he found Colin.

The youngest, Colin, was the artist in the clan, a bit of a goofy n’er-do-well who’d turned an interest in skateboards into a fairly lucrative Internet business. He’d not even gone to law school which, in this family, implied a mental handicap of some sort. But he had, incredibly, amassed a larger fortune than any of his siblings. He owned one of the largest, most ostentatious homes in Boerne and had married a pretty New York socialite and subsequently shocked his family by also divorcing her.

Colin sat back on a teak deck chair, long legs encased in black suit pants, white dress shirt open to show his tanned chest under which a leather necklace sported the rattlesnake tail he’d worn since he was sixteen. His curling blond hair was too long in the back and he grinned crookedly at Stefan as he exhaled smoke, the odor of which did not resemble cigarette smoke at all.

“Hey, man, welcome back. You want some?”

“There are at least four off-duty policemen around the corner, Secret Service at the front door, and I saw one agent of undetermined origin in the kitchen, Colin.”

Colin shook his head, laughing. “You were always so uptight, Stefan. Didn’t Los Angeles loosen you up?”

“For Christ sake, Colin. Get rid of it.”

Colin sighed, stubbed out the doobie and, much to Stefan’s dismay, merely flicked it towards the lawn. “I quit, you know. It’s just...”

“I’m sorry, Colin.”

“Me, too. Hell, you were closer to Tommy than I was, man. How are you holding up?”

“Shock,” said Stefan. The image of Tommy’s corpse seemed adhered to his mind’s eye, flashing at him every time he blinked.

Colin winced as if he saw it too. “Yeah. It’s been a bad month. I’m not up to the mob just yet, man. Go around the corner and get me a beer?”

Stefan did so, bringing back several and a bottle opener.

They sat in silence for some time, drinking. The familiarity of it all settling over Stefan like an oppressively warm blanket.

“So how’s Los Angeles?” asked Colin.

“Smoggy. Crowded. It’s becoming New York on the beach.”

Colin shot him a red-eyed look. “You practiced that, didn’t you?”

“What do you want me to say, Colin?” said Stefan. “I miss all of you, you know that, but...”

“Preaching to the choir,” said Colin, raising both hands in surrender. “I think about moving to Los Angeles once in a while.”

“Why don’t you?”

Colin produced an incredulous grin. “You’re kidding, right? The old man would burst a vein.”

“I’m sure your father just wants what’s best for you, Colin,” said Stefan calmly.

Colin shook his head. “Not these days. Not *now*.”

“He’s grieving.”

Colin’s jaw clenched, and he looked toward the distant hedges for a moment. Then he said. “Yeah, well, it’s not stopped the campaign.”

“What campaign?” said Stefan. “What are you talking about?”

A wise look. “The old man seems to think he’d make a great senator for the state of Texas.”

“I hadn’t heard anything of the sort.”

“Of course not,” said Colin. “It’s not official. By the time it’s official, it’ll be a done deal, won’t it?”

With the skateboarding philosophy, Colin had acquired a certain conspiracy theorist attitude toward government. It was like him though, to be the first to know what was going on in the complex web of his family. People talked around Colin, perhaps thinking he was too slow to understand. Those serious faces crowded around Patrick came to mind and Stefan reflected that a few had looked vaguely familiar.

“He’d make a great senator,” said Stefan. “I’d vote for him.”

“Of course you would,” snorted Colin. “You’ve always thought he walked on water.”

No, he hadn’t, but Stefan had never felt he deserved to judge. “He’s always treated me well.”

Colin merely gave him another wise look and lifted his beer bottle again.

“I was looking for Sammy,” said Stefan. “Have you seen her?”

Colin shrugged and shook his head. “I’m just staying out of everybody’s way.”

The humidity, the alcohol and the aftermath of the shock were making Stefan suddenly weary. “I think I need to lie down,” he said, standing.

Colin nodded philosophically, withdrawing another fat doobie from the pocket of his shirt. “Do what you need to do, man.”

* * *

It seemed most of the guests had left and now the house felt eerily vacant. Stefan kept anticipating Tommy’s appearance, seeming to catch him at the corner of his eye whenever he blinked. It was just so wrong that he wouldn’t come pounding down the stairs or jogging in from the kitchen.

“Looks like the old man brought out the good stuff for the occasion. Fancy a shot of the Irish, Stefan?”

“Bring the bourbon over here, would you?”

Stefan jumped out of his skin and spun midair, only to see Sean sprawled across the big living room sectional.

“Hey,” said Sean, waving a hand. “Grab a clean glass and have a seat.”

Sean and Stefan had never been close the way he and Tommy had been. Sean had been the odd bird in the O’Connor family. He didn’t look like an O’Connor and he hadn’t the clan sensibility. He was the second son who always seemed to come in second place. Unlike Tommy who was always first.

Stefan picked up the bottle and brought it over to the coffee table where Sean’s highball glass sat amidst a debris of half finished drinks. Stefan poured and asked, “How have you been, Sean?”

Sean's reddened eyes regarded him. "Great, well you know except for now my big brother's dead."

"I'm sorry."

Sean rubbed his mouth with his hand and squinted at some undefined location in the wide living room. "Don't know what the old man will do now. He had such plans."

It was an odd thing to say. But Sean had always been the one to say the odd thing—the inappropriate comment, the out of place observation.

"Are you and Ginny still living here in Boerne?"

"Of course. Where else would we live?"

"And are you still working at the same firm?"

A look flashed at him and away. "Still at the same old law firm."

Most of the O'Connors went into politics or government agencies. There were uncles and cousins working for the FBI and serving as cabinet members for various public officials. Tommy had been an attorney for his district, like Patrick before him. Once again Sean had deviated from the family by choosing to practice privately. After having passed the bar in second place.

The previous year Tommy had passed in first.

"Yep, I'm just a lazy ol' Southern lawyer. Ought to be putting on ten inches at the waist and growing mutton chops any day now."

Sean was tall and lean and fast. He'd run track and field in high school, Stefan remembered. Patrick and Jane had never made much of his sports activities. Sean seldom came in first.

Tommy won first place on the debate team three years in a row, was the winning pitcher on the baseball team, had graduated valedictorian.

Sean's fingers passed briefly over his eyes, and he sighed.

"I didn't see Sammy at the funeral," said Stefan. "Is she at the house?" Sammy's parents had died in an accident about a decade earlier and, as far as Stefan knew, she had no other close family. It was remarkably strange that she should be alone somewhere.

Oddly, Sean laughed. "Oh, Samantha..." shaking his head.

"Where is she, Sean?"

Sean poured more bourbon and set the bottle down with the excessive care of deep inebriation before saying, “Don’t blame her for leaving town. The O’Connor clan’ll suck the air out of you in...in the best of circumstances. The pater said she bolted to the ol’ family townhouse in Manhattan.”

Stefan had called the New York number but only gotten a mechanical answering message.

“I don’t feel right leaving condolences on voicemail.” And he was worried about her.

“Tommy’s wife kept her distance. I only saw her at weddings and...and funerals.” Sean leaned over, unsteadily, to set down his nearly empty glass. “Did you ask Mom?”

“Jane seems preoccupied.” And she and Sammy had never gotten along.

“You and she were always close. I’m surprised she didn’t call you... about...” He waved his hand, swallowing against something, as if he couldn’t pronounce the words *Tommy’s death*.

“Your father’s office called me,” said Stefan.

Sean nodded, rubbing his reddened eyes.

Stefan was more and more puzzled by Samantha’s absence, but also able to see that Sean was not in any condition to discuss it. He stood. “I’ve got an editor breathing down my neck, and I’m months behind so I should try to get some work done before supper.”

“You know, we have all your books,” said Sean as Stefan was about to turn away.

“How...kind of you to tell me,” said Stefan, surprised.

“Sure. I mean, Ginny buys them for the kids, but I read them, too.” Sean’s mouth bent in a pained smile. “Tell you a secret. I like ’em a lot. Wish it could have really been like that.”

“It?”

“Being a kid back then. It’s nice to remember in’nit? Before it all went to hell.”

Before your dad tried to kill my dad and got shot for it, Stefan imagined Sean meant to say.

“I suppose I do,” said Stefan stiffly. “Excuse me.” And he climbed the stairs past the framed medals and black and white images of war heroes and generals and presidents saluting blond Irishmen with bulbous noses.

* * *

In the guest room, Stefan called all of the numbers he had for Sammy one more time. He still reached only voicemail. Then he brought out his laptop and booted it up. There was a desk in the room, with a computer already humming and online, but Stefan pushed it carefully to the side and set his laptop down, hands hovering over the keyboard.

THE BACKTREE BOYS --- VOLUME TWENTY, NEVER A CLUE
BY
STEFAN SANCHEZ

Charlie and Billy had been riding their bikes on the horse trail above Backtree when Charlie’s tire suddenly picked up a nail. In minutes, his tire was loose and coming off the rim.

“Oh no!” said Billy, chuckling. “Guess you’ll be walking back.”

“No, I have a patch kit in my saddlebag,” said Charlie, giving his buddy a wink. “All I need is a little water.” He looked around.

“There’s old MacGregor’s pond down that way,” said Billy, pointing down the embankment and to an area beyond the stand of trees.

So the boys locked up their bikes and went to find the pond.

* * *

Stefan paged laboriously through the draft, using the notes function to address each and every comment and editorial suggestion Ronnie had made. The notes were actually extensive on these things. The standards the publisher demanded on adventure books for adolescents were rigidly defined, and Stefan was always having to rewrite key passages that seemed “too adult,” “too violent.” Or to address notes like “We don’t want young people to get the idea that it’s okay to pick locks. Isn’t there some other way that Charlie and Billy can get into the old house?”

It amused Ronnie endlessly that their publisher censored so rigidly and yet seemed to be utterly blind to what Ronnie thought was an obvious homoerotic subtext between the two adolescent male characters.

“Innocent boy-love,” he’d grin. “Warms the cockles of my heart.”

“Pervert.”

“C’mon, you going to tell me you aren’t writing it?”

Of course, Stefan wasn’t writing anything of the sort. At least not intentionally. If the subtext were there, it was purely accidental. He’d never harbored those feelings toward Tommy. Because Charlie and Billy *were* him and Tommy. The books often followed their very own make-believe adventures in the environs of Boerne, back in the days of innocence when fathers were heroes and boys could share a sleeping bag without raising eyebrows.

Dusk had completely settled and the sound of cars pulling out of the circular parking space before McDenny House had ceased when a loop of light flashed across Stefan’s guestroom window, and minutes later the front doorbell’s chime sounded in the rooms below.

A soft knock on his bedroom door and one of the multitudes of towheaded children peaked in. “Mr. Sanchez? A policeman wants to see you.”

“What?”

Stefan made his way to the seldom used front door. A tall, uniformed silhouette stood there. Recognition barely warned Stefan before the figure turned.

“Hi, Stef. Welcome home.”

Reason number one to leave Texas. “Chet.” Stefan remembered to extend his hand.

“You should have told me you were coming in. I would have met you at the airport,” said Chet, removing his cap and running a hand over his red hair, a mannerism Stefan had been seeing since childhood.

“I wasn’t thinking very clearly, Chet.”

“Sure. Of course. I’m so sorry, Stefan. I...saw you at...at the church, but I didn’t think I should...” He was still in the dress black he’d worn for the funeral. Stefan carried Chet in his memory as an adolescent in an old T-shirt and worn pale blue Levi’s. Too long hair in his eyes and usually a Band-Aid on one elbow or the other. The man who stood before him had settled into himself. His hair was shorter and his mouth was tighter and more serious, but those dark blue eyes were the same.

Stefan reminded himself to breath. “None of it seems real,” he said.

Chet looked uncomfortable. “Can we take a walk?”

It was like being surprised by an undertow. Before Stefan had a chance to brace himself, he was stepping outside and pulling the door shut behind him. “Sure.”

At the bottom of the steps, Chet veered left, down the long stone-lined pathway that encircled the McDenny property. Stefan found that his body followed automatically. He didn’t even have to think.

“How’ve you been, Chet?”

“I’ve been doing good. I’m a senior deputy now.” With his red hair shorn short, the back of Chet’s neck seemed oddly naked to Stefan. He’d always been used to seeing it covered with curls.

“Congratulations. How is your mother?”

“Oh, you know, the same.” Chet lifted a drooping jasmine branch so Stefan could pass under it. “How have you been?” he asked.

“My publicist thinks we’ll do well this year. Feeling a little pressure with all of these contractual obligations, but that’s the nature of the work.”

“It suits you. You look good.”

“Thanks.”

Now Chet led him under a hanging clump of the ubiquitous trumpet vine, finally stopping by a bench, hand hewn from an old log, way beyond the end of the neighborhood property lines and just above the sight and smell of the thick ribbon of dark water that cut through the middle of Boerne.

The place hadn’t changed at all. It smelled strongly of jasmine and grass, tufts of cottonwood floating in the moonlight. And it might have been the memories, or it might have been that famous reaction of the male libido to death, or maybe it was the habit of self-hatred that the place engendered, but Stefan found himself walking closer to Chet, their hands and shoulders now occasionally bumping until, when Chet turned toward Stefan, his eyes quickly scanning the clearing in which they stood, Stefan just stepped into Chet’s arms as if they hadn’t been separated for seven years.

“I can’t believe how long it’s been,” said Chet, when they parted for air.

Instead of answering, Stefan lifted his head and found Chet’s mouth again.

Soft short hairs under his fingers, Chet's lips firm and knowing, hands solid on Stefan's hips while he waited for Stefan to break and make the first move.

For seven years, Stefan Sanchez had worked the West Hollywood social scene with a cool cynicism, negotiating every encounter so coldly that he'd acquired a sort of reputation as a prick tease and a player.

Stefan Sanchez broke for no man.

Now, hands shaking and sweaty, Stefan unbuckled Chet's belt, opening his slacks, fingers eager and sure with memory as Chet murmured a tongue-filled approval and his stiffening cock slid into Stefan's hand.

"Missed the feel of your hand," Chet said, roughly.

Stefan's habit of bending his knee was stronger than his will to resist it.

Chet tasted exactly as he always had. The feel of his belly under Stefan's tongue inextricably intertwined with the memory of smoky barbecues and fireworks. Salty damp painted Stefan's cheek as he nuzzled clean, practically hairless sacs and then, aware that he resented the hand gently urging him—but not fighting it—he tilted his face sideways and took Chet's cock into his mouth.

Stefan let the pleasure override his mind and only pulled off when he heard a condom wrapper being opened. Chet was breathing hard, white belly flushed pink above his opened boxers. He rolled the condom over his prick then threaded his fingers, again, into Stefan's hair.

"God. Your mouth," Stefan heard him whisper.

When he'd finished, Chet urged Stefan up, cradling him with one arm, as he pulled at Stefan's cock.

"Look at me."

No, thought Stefan, eyelids lifting so his gaze was locked with Chet's.

"Christ, the way you look," breathed Chet and his mouth covered Stefan's again, so he had to feel the little groan Stefan issued as his come pumped obediently out onto the ground.

* * *

They sat side by side on the hand-hewn bench, almost, but not quite, touching. "I missed you," said Chet. Which somehow made it worse.

Stefan didn't answer.

"Hear that Hollywood gets pretty wild," said Chet. "Figured you didn't even remember your old friends anymore."

"How could I forget you?" said Stefan, and he heard the bitterness in his own voice.

Chet heard it too. And that's all it took. He stood immediately and walked to the edge of the clearing, dusting off his hands as if symbolically dusting off Stefan. "I'd better get back. Mother will be wondering where I am." Chet looked over his shoulder. "You ready?"

"Sure." Stefan thought that he might be wobbling a bit, but he could walk. God knew he'd left this clearing many times in worse condition than this. More drunk. Angrier. More humiliated.

Chet sketched a salute at the door. "Good to have you back, Stef," he said.

Stefan shut the door and leaned against it. He felt defeated, weak and angry. He could hear voices deep in the bowels of the house, but he was no mood for conversation.

Stefan tiptoed up to his room and opened up his laptop.

"Ho ho, Billy," chortled Charlie.

"I didn't know how deep it was!" exclaimed Billy, squeezing the water out of his cap. "I thought I could walk in there past the cattails."

"Well, never mind, buddy. We have enough water for the patch kit."

"Sure, but hold on Charlie. I thought I saw something in the weeds out there."

Charlie frowned and rubbed his chin, considering. "Well, how can we get out there again without getting dunked?"

"Maybe Mr. Mac will lend us his boat."

Charlie snapped his fingers. "Great idea! C'mon!"

Stefan sighed and hit the space bar rhythmically. The Backtree boys could never just hop into a rowboat without asking the owner's permission, having a polite conversation with said owner, and donning safety gear. All of which would have to be written in detail. It was part of the goal of these books, to act as illustrations of correct conduct, but it could be tedious to

write. He skipped to the meeting between the MacGregors and his protagonists.

Mrs. MacGregor lifted the beekeeper's hat from her head. "Hello, boys."

Next to this section was a rather lengthy comment by Ronnie. "Beekeeping? I understand that it is difficult to find a new quirky hobby for Mrs. MacGregor to pursue in every book, but isn't beekeeping just a little extreme? Why can't Mrs. Mac grow orchids or tomatoes or something? Please change her hobby."

Stefan considered for a few delightful minutes changing Mrs. Mac's hobby to big game hunting with a crossbow, or perhaps sharpshooting.

Mrs. MacGregor jacked the barrel of the gun and a hot shell popped out onto the ground. She toed the bleeding carcass at her feet. "Hello, boys. Sorry you're too late to talk to Mr. Mac."

Stefan allowed himself the pleasure for a few minutes before he backspaced the new passage off the page.

* * *

He worked for another hour, his laptop's keys clicking away in the silent house. Jane had effectively drugged her grandchildren with Benadryl and the adults had drunk themselves to unconsciousness.

When Stefan came to a section that required some creativity, he stopped. His inner voice had been muted for months, but Tommy's death seemed to have utterly shut him down. When Stefan tried to conjure anything, he just kept seeing Tommy in the coffin. When he looked up from the monitor, Tommy's face beamed out from the photographs mounted on the walls around him. His name seeming to bounce out at Stefan from plaques and trophies.

Stefan gave up writing when the effort started to nauseate him, turned the laptop off, slipped on a robe and pair of slippers and padded downstairs to smoke a cigarette.

At the bottom of the stairs, a white shape came suddenly from a dark corner and Stefan almost fell, recoiling.

“Agent Evans?” he gasped, getting his breath back as he clung to the banister.

The agent leaned over to pick up Stefan’s dropped pack of cigarettes and lighter. “Yes, sir.”

“Geez, you startled me,” said Stefan, embarrassed at the tremor in his hand as he accepted the package.

“Were you looking for something, sir?”

There was something about Evans’ manner or his voice. Stefan couldn’t place it and hoped it was only paranoia. But a lifetime under the shadow of the name Sanchez had taught him that paranoia is sometimes valid.

Most DEA agents had some knowledge of the history of their kind. Most had heard of George Sanchez, dirty agent, drug runner, and general traitor, gunned down while trying to betray his partner. So, if Evans’ was DEA, he probably already had quite an opinion of Stefan.

The doors to Patrick’s home office were near the bottom of the stairs where they stood. It was possible, thought Stefan, that Evans was afraid Stefan was going to break into the locked room in the night.

“Thanks. I was needing a smoke,” said Stefan coldly. He wasn’t the least bit surprised when Evans followed him out to the porch. Stefan threw himself into a teak porch swing and Evans half leaned, half perched that tight ass on the porch railing across from him. Crossing big arms across his chest, he looked down upon Stefan.

Stefan lit his cigarette, pretending to ignore him.

Stefan had grown up surrounded by men like Evans, the agents and government men who had worked with his father. Strong, brave and true. Upon whom Democracy and the Free World relied. Small boys playing games in the woods dreamed of becoming such men. At least, Stefan had.

Of course, now he knew better.

“So how many of you are in the house?” Stefan asked, flicking ash onto the teak deck. “In case I need to get up in the night again.”

“You think that’s likely?” Evans picked up a glass ashtray from a nearby table and set it next to Stefan.

Stefan looked at the ashtray, glanced at Evans, flicked ash on the deck. “Who knows? I’m a writer. We’re a nocturnal breed.”

“Yes, sir.”

Stefan knew that his rare smiles could startle people, so he threw one at the stiff agent. “You don’t have to *sir* me. We must be close to the same age. Call me Stefan.”

Stefan was satisfied to see Evans shift his big frame in apparent discomfort. “Yes, sir.” Adjusting his earpiece and saying something low enough that only he and his Bluetooth could hear him.

“Who’re you whispering to, Evans?”

“I was informing my partner of my location,” said Evans calmly. “He expected to find me near the front door.”

“I distracted you,” said Stefan. He blew a plume of smoke at Evans’ head. “Score one for me.”

Evans moved out of the way of Stefan’s smoke and said, “Actually, I wanted to speak with you. I’m responsible for everyone staying at McDenny House.”

Stefan gave him a sympathetic grimace. “Don’t envy you that job.”

“I understand you went for a walk earlier this evening?”

The hand holding Stefan’s cigarette paused in its journey to his mouth. “Was I being watched?”

“I’d appreciate it if you’d tell me if you plan to do something like that again.”

Stefan couldn’t help grinning. “You’ll be the first to know.”

Evans didn’t appear to get the joke which, among other things, meant that he probably didn’t know what Stefan and Chet had been up to. Not that Stefan cared what agent Evans thought of him. Chet was the one who was closeted, and Stefan had been done a long time ago with closeted men. He hoped.

The heat had lessened with the setting sun, but the air was still oppressively muggy. And, though the cigarette smoke effectively drove the gigantic mosquitoes away from Stefan, he could see them lighting on Evans, who kept brushing them away.

“They’re attracted to your white shirt,” he told him when Evans slapped one on his hand. “There’s a lesson in there somewhere, but I’m not sure what it is.”

Evans stirred restlessly, touched his earpiece and looked toward the door to the porch. A shadow in the glass came and went, just a reflection, but for half a second, Stefan thought Tommy had found them there on the porch.

“You hitting on the help, Stef?”

“Is everything alright, sir?”

Stefan shook his head, in denial and to clear it. “Did you ever meet Tommy?”

“I never had the honor.”

Stefan studied the glowing tip of his cigarette. “He was one of those men who make the world a better place. You don’t expect men like that to die, for no reason, in hunting accidents.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Stefan watched his cigarette smoke dissipate into the muggy dark yard. “I’ve never seen so many Secret Service at McDenny House.”

“How long has it been since you were here, sir?” He had a nice voice. The rich timber of a man with a big frame, soft, distinct enunciation with only a trace of Texas in his vowels. A gentleman’s voice. The question had been put conversationally, but Stefan felt the weight of guilt again. “Awhile. It’s easy to get caught up in work, you know?”

“Yes, I know.” Evans was gazing at him with a certain sympathy. Like if Stefan wanted to talk about it, Evans would be willing to listen. It made Stefan feel unaccountably twitchy.

“You from around here?”

“My mother lives in Austin,” said Evans, checking the luminous dial on his watch and glancing at the door again. “But I was raised in Georgia.”

“That would explain that plantation drawl of yours.”

Evans produced a surprised smile. “Haven’t heard it described like that before.”

“Is your presence related to Tommy’s death? Because I’d heard that was an accident. At least that’s what the telegram said,” said Stefan, studying Evans. “Tommy was shot while out hunting.”

Evans folded his big arms across his shirt and frowned at his feet.

Out there in the dark, the flick of houselights and the occasional latent firefly, the air dense with humidity and darkness. Stefan saw two lights glowing at either side of the property and realized that they were the glow of handheld torches, not stationary or insect. So there were guards patrolling the outer borders as well.

The niggling feeling of unfinished business now made itself fully conscious. Tommy's unhappy corpse in the church, the agents at every door and window, Sammy's disappearance, the hushed strained faces of the family. Stefan knew that the Secret Service might guard a nominee for a senate seat, but it was extremely unusual for a state attorney general to receive such protection. Suddenly, it all clicked together in Stefan's mind.

"You think it was a cartel hit, don't you?" said Stefan.

Patrick had been receiving death threats for so long it had almost become a joke. And drug cartels were renowned for hitting one's family before oneself. It seemed to encourage more immediate obedience.

Of course Evans didn't answer.

"Is his wife in danger?"

"Why would you think that?"

"Nobody seems to know where she is. And she isn't answering her cell phone."

"Would you expect her to? Under the circumstances?"

Stefan stubbed out his smoke on the railing. "Do you always answer questions with questions?"

"I think they'd prefer you use an ashtray." Evans stood and pushed open the sliding door. He seemed to have decided it was time for Stefan to walk back into the house. Whether he wanted to or not.

For a bare second, Stefan considered forcing the issue. The urge to needle Evans was stronger than the need to do so. "I asked you to call me Stefan," he said, rising from the swing.

"Yes, you did."

"How about trying Mr. Sanchez, then," said Stefan. He stopped at the door, inches from the agent's face. Lifting his chin so they were eye to eye. "If the other seems too intimate."

In the dim light those hazel eyes were dark. “We’re letting in the mosquitoes, Mr. Sanchez.”

“See? Isn’t that better?” Stefan stepped through the door quickly, wondering at himself. He wasn’t usually one to taunt dragons. Maybe it was just Boerne and all it brought back, maybe the encounter with Chet and the anger it left crawling just under his skin. Maybe the entire horrible day.

Evans trailed him as he strolled back toward the stairs. Stefan noted a light under the doors to Patrick’s study. According to the grandfather clock standing near the stairs, it was two a.m.

Evans appeared distracted by the signs of life in Patrick’s office as well. He stopped following Stefan and looked behind himself, whispering code words into his Bluetooth.

On the narrow table by the door where mail and the cards of visitors were still collected in the Southern tradition Stefan spotted the daily news. Still wrapped in plastic. He took it with him to his room.

He perused the *Boerne Times* for a while. The paper hadn’t changed much in seven years, but newspapers have a traditional look and feel to them, he reflected. The past seven years, Stefan acquired most of his news from the Internet CNN feed and the glamour-hungry Channel 4.

Patrick’s photo was on the second page with a blurb about Tommy, the photograph of his friend, obviously a studio picture, further down the column. It contained the standard info. Encapsulating a life in five lines or less.

“...*he is survived by his wife, Samantha O’Connor, mother and father, Jane and Patrick O’Connor, brothers Sean and Colin...*” followed by an impressive list of the various groups Tommy had belonged to, including an award from the city of San Antonio for some public works project Tommy had apparently spearheaded, some sort of pro bono legal aid for the underprivileged. Typical of Tommy.

Of course there was no mention of Stefan because he hadn’t *actually* been family. He turned the page and found an article about the recent closing of another San Antonio bank which the Feds claimed had been accepting a suspicious number of large cash deposits. Large deposits of small bills were almost always some sort of money laundering, for the sale of either illegal drugs or guns. The criminals were savvy enough to keep

their deposits low and only the vigilance of the federal auditors and the banks themselves kept the illegal activities at bay. In response to the closing, the paper reported a statement issued from Patrick's offices.

"...another small victory in the continuing war against drugs, said the District Attorney's office. We cannot be intimidated..."

No mention of Tommy's death, though Stefan was sure the blood-hungry reporters had asked if there were a connection. It was well within the realm of Patrick's influence and power to keep stories like that out of the papers.

Further down, there was a blurb about the impending visit of the President of the United States to his home in Dallas. Stefan turned the page and found that the Republican incumbent to one of the state congress seats had been indicted for bribery. The reporter who wrote the article seemed hardly surprised. Corruption had become so common that it barely made one blink. When Stefan's father had been discovered to be corrupt, the people of the United States were still mortified by such behavior. Treason was a step above murder. Now, he observed sourly, corruption was almost expected. The representative's indictment barely made page three. A beauty contest, with photo showing a row of tiny blonde girls in skimpy swimsuits, took up most of page two. Business as usual in the state of Texas.

After a while, Stefan closed the paper and opened his laptop.

He stared at it for a long time and then shut it down without touching the keyboard.

With lights off and lying down, Stefan discovered that sleeplessness in a bed in Boerne, Texas was very like sleeplessness in a bed in Los Angeles. His mind wandered like an old man, encountering Tommy at every turn.

The news stations had been talking about his father for days. The boys at school, who didn't know better or just needed someone to hate, teased, calling names. And Stefan couldn't fight it, felt almost he deserved it. Then one day, there'd been Tommy, fists balled and sleeves rolled up, standing between Stefan and one of the bullies.

"Say that again."

"You know it's true. His old man was a traitor. He's probably a traitor, too. Dirty spic."

Then a scream, the sound of cracking twigs that turned out to be the sound of a nose breaking. Blood everywhere. Tommy's pale face red, eyes wild, pounding and pounding despite several large boys trying to haul him off.

And then later, in the vice principal's office, Stefan tried to take the blame while Tommy sat stubbornly, arms folded tight across his chest, glaring straight ahead. "I'm not sorry," he'd said again and again.

And later still, "Promise me, Stefan. You'll never let anybody call you that again."

"Tommy it's just names."

"Promise me."

They'd both been suspended for two days and grounded by Jane. Now they sat in a tent they'd built of blankets and quilts in Tommy's room. Tommy, with his bruised cheek and those eyes bright as flames, curly blond hair sticking out in peaks. "Tommy..."

"You're my best friend, Stef. I..I love you, man. Promise me."

Stefan, practically breathless, had gasped, "I promise."

Stefan sat up and flicked on the bedside light again. He picked up his Blackberry and switched it on. There were about ten messages from Ronnie and one, remarkably, from his mother.

He flicked to his contact list and paged down past all of the O'Connors until he got to Samantha's cell phone number. His thumb hovered over the Call button.

Even if she saw his caller ID, Stefan wasn't sure she'd pick up.

Actually, he realized, flicking through his contact list, most of the names there were people whose numbers he'd retained so that he'd know they were calling and *not* pick up. Stefan never gave his number to his occasional tricks; he had no friends except Ronnie. And the only other person he ever spoke to was his mother.

It was four a.m. in Boerne and two in Los Angeles. His mother would be asleep and Ronnie would be otherwise occupied. Stefan shut out the light then lay for a very long time staring at the ceiling, chasing demons in his head, until he fell asleep.

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Chapter Four

He woke a few hours later.

The sun perched above the horizon and found Boerne still hot and muggy, the birds and cicadas barely able to muster a low, weary buzz.

The heat woke everyone, and the house had risen early. Stefan could hear children's voices in the kitchen as he tiptoed down the stairs and slid out the front door. He stopped at a Krispy Kreme for coffee and a traditional glazed, noting the sheriff's department vehicle parked out front contained two younger men he didn't know.

Tommy and Sammy had lived in a modest three bedroom in the newer section of Boerne. The house was so unremarkable that it took Stefan a couple of cruises around neighboring blocks before he recognized the ceramic frog squatting under the pines at the front.

He'd been standing at the door, pressing the bell, for several minutes when a neighbor called out from across the lawn.

"Nobody's home, mister. There was a death in the family."

"Do you know where Mrs. O'Connor has gone?" asked Stefan, trotting across the lawn toward a man about fifty and wearing classic golfing togs. The man pushed a checkered cap back, revealing white gray hair and shook his head.

"Missy left some time in the night. I went over there to tell her her cat was out again and she was gone."

Stefan looked back at the house, frowning. "In the night?"

The man's eyes glinted with neighborly curiosity "Didn't hear nobody drive up, neither. Just her and her car was gone when I went to tell her about the cat."

Stefan thought the man had probably been more curious than concerned about Sammy's cat, but he said, "Where is the cat now?"

"My wife let it in and fed it. She says she'll watch it for the gal 'til she comes back. It's a shame what happened."

"Yes it was. Thank you for watching the cat."

Stefan went back to his car, where he sat thinking and smoking for about ten minutes, when his rearview mirror reflected one of the local sheriff's black and whites pulling up behind him.

Stefan watched the patrol officer walk up to his window.

Of course the curious neighbor had become concerned at the stranger parked outside the O'Connor house and called the police, and of course, it being Boerne, one of the sheriff's deputies had been sent out to take a look.

"Hi, buddy." Chet rested his arm on the hood of the car.

"Hey." From where he sat, Stefan could see the lower two buttons of Chet's shirt, flat over his tight stomach and tucked into his equipment-laden service belt. That belt had been a particularly strong fetish of Stefan's for a while. The sight of it still sent an embarrassing tingle to his groin. "I came over to see Sammy," he said.

Chet's thumb touched the driver's side mirror and tilted it so Stefan could see his amused smile, sunglasses reflecting a white blaze in the sky. "You're scaring the neighbors."

"Sometimes I scare *myself*," said Stefan. "I wonder where she is."

"Isn't she in New York?" asked Chet.

"The neighbor said she left in the middle of the night."

"Maybe she had to catch a red-eye."

Stefan drummed his fingers lightly on the steering wheel. He didn't want to accept that he and Sammy had become so estranged that she wouldn't have called him.

"Thought I'd go out for some target practice after my shift," said Chet. "You want me to pick you up?"

Just like the old days.

"I have a lot of work to catch up on," said Stefan. He stuck the key into the ignition and put the car into gear.

"Call me if you change your mind," Chet shouted over the engine's roar. Terrific.

* * *

Stefan didn't drive back to McDenny House.

Truthfully, his instinct was to press the accelerator to the floor, stay on the main road and keep going until he reached the San Antonio airport, where he could take the next plane back to Los Angeles.

But somehow he managed to stop at the edge of town, where he pulled into a bare-earth parking lot. He drew out his cigarettes and lit up.

He'd parked just beside a limestone bridge that stretched over the road. Two cigarettes later, Stefan got out of the car, climbed the steep grade so that he stood on a ridge where the old railroad tracks had once been. The same one he had used in several books as the boys' bike trail. It was actually not suitable for bikes, the loose dirt and gravel turning under his feet and tumbling down the steep embankment.

If he squinted he could almost see the silhouette of two boys walking in the haze before him, swinging sticks at weeds, their voices blending with the rising buzz of cicadas.

"Stefan!" Ronnie must have been waiting for Stefan's call. He picked up on the first ring. "I've left a dozen messages. I wasn't sure they'd gone through."

"This is Texas, not China," said Stefan. "I turned off my phone. Don't worry, Ronnie. I'm working on the manuscript."

"Of course," said Ronnie. "That's not the only reason I called, Stefan."

Like hell. But he said, "Of course not."

"How are you holding up?"

"I don't know. I don't think it's really hit me yet."

"I'm so sorry, guy," said Ronnie. "If there's anything I can do. If you want me to come down there, even."

Ronnie always looked like he'd just stepped out of an Italian men's leisure ad. Stefan briefly imagined Ronnie in Boerne, and the image made him smile. "Thanks. I just need a few more days." He turned off the track on which he walked and climbed down the few feet to an opening in the hedge that bordered the old train tracks. He and Tommy—and probably a whole new generation of kids—had trod in and out through the low opening so often that there was a groove of sorts worn there and the massive growth never gained any headway.

He stooped so his shoulders could fit through. He'd grown taller and wider since he and Tommy had had their fort here, but the area looked remarkably the same to his jaded adult eyes: an enormous old oak tree at the center, its branches spreading wide to shade the entire circle of trampled earth, the grayed fire pits where hunters and teenagers had their fires, the nails in the trunk and hanging scraps of wood where one group of boys after another had built forts. He and Tommy were probably only part of a line going back to a time before the Civil War.

"Stefan?" Ronnie's voice cut through, and, startled, Stefan looked down at the phone that he'd forgotten he held.

"I'll call you back, Ronnie," he said. He pocketed the phone.

They'd had a platform right up on that branch. Stefan could reach it easily now, though he'd had to install a step back when he was twelve. He grabbed hold of a branch and swung his foot up so he stood now on the branch that had held the main joist.

"Okay, this is high enough."

"Anybody can get up here, Tommy. High enough for what?"

"High enough to keep out snakes."

Stefan grinned, shaking his head. Tommy, who feared very little, had a true deep fear of snakes.

"Seriously. I couldn't sleep if I thought one might be crawling around me."

Well, it was a consideration. Every year they heard of someone waking up in his tent to find himself sharing his bedroll with a snake.

"You'll never see a snake up here," said Tommy, standing, satisfied on the platform, knuckles on his hips with the gleam of pride in his eyes as he surveyed their wobbly platform. "And if you do, you'll know something's wrong."

"Really." Stefan was working on a pulley system so they could bring boxes of food and their BB guns up here with ease.

"Really. That can be one of our signals, okay?" Tommy was a great lover of secret codes. He'd invented an entire private system of code words and symbols that only he and Stefan could read. Stefan frequently found secret

messages in his bike bag, his mail box, folded into sharp squares in a jacket pocket.

“Sure.”

“A snake will mean there’s a traitor,” said Tommy. “Like snake-in-the-grass. Get it?”

“Got it,” said Stefan. He pulled on the pulley and the nail he’d used to fasten it came out of the tree and the whole contraption fell to the ground five feet below. “Damn.”

Tommy howled with laughter.

The branch was older and broader, just like Stefan. He bounced on it once to test its fragility and stepped out further, looking up the massive trunk toward the higher branches. There, still deeply etched and black in the bark, was the scar of where Tommy and he had carved their initials.

TM & SS. The tears that had evaded him at the funeral blurred Stefan’s vision, and a pressing ache filled his chest. He touched the bark, the softened, aged mark that had become almost part of the tree, comforting and painful simultaneously. Then his fingers encountered a ragged spot that seemed larger than the pattern of the bark, just above the initials and behind a natural burl in the wood.

Above the worn initials, somebody had carved something else. Recently, thought Stefan, frowning as he grabbed a branch and stepped a little higher and closer to the mark.

There, carved in the bark—the cut so new that the sap still bled from it—was a detailed, forked-tongued, rattle-tailed snake.

Stefan fell out of the tree.

Chapter Five

First he called Chet.

“I’m on duty,” Chet said, clipped and efficient. “You want me to pick you up later?”

“No, it’s Tommy.”

A pause. “Tommy?”

“His death wasn’t an accident, was it, Chet?”

Through the cell phone Stefan could hear the white sound of freeway traffic and someone speaking to Chet. There was a pause, the blare of a truck horn and Chet’s voice came back on line. “Stefan, where are you?”

“Out by the old club house.”

“You aren’t at a bar?”

“This isn’t a joke,” said Stefan.

“I wasn’t joking, Stefan. I’m working. Call me later.” He disconnected.

* * *

Evans’ eyes asked questions but Jane was the one who said something. “What happened to the knees of your slacks, Stefan?”

“I fell,” he said. “Where’s Patrick?”

Stefan had searched the seemingly empty house until he’d found Jane, two of the grandchildren, old Uncle Danny in his wheelchair and agent Evans all sitting at the long table in the kitchen.

“He has a meeting,” said Jane. “Your hand is cut, too. You should have that seen to.”

“I washed it. It’s fine.”

It was a measure of her exhaustion that Jane only gave him a look and didn’t march him off right then and there to properly dress his wound. Instead, she rose to wheel Uncle Danny back to his room.

Evans watched his charges exit through the kitchen doorway, but waylaid Stefan with a hand on his chest. “Can I talk to you, Mr. Sanchez?”

“Sorry I didn’t get a pink slip before I left this morning,” said Stefan, irritably. Evans’ hand on his chest was warm. He stepped back and folded his arms over the warm spot.

“You think this is funny.”

“You’re the second person today to accuse me of farting around, Evans, and I have to say it’s pissing me off just a little. I’m not an idiot, and I’m reasonably sure that Tommy’s death was not an accident.”

Evans’ steady hazel eyes looked just slightly amused. “Really?”

“He and I had a system when we were kids,” Stefan explained. “Bunch of code signals. Kid stuff, of course.”

“Of course.”

“Damn it, I’m serious.”

Evans managed to pull off a credibly serious expression. He set himself on the edge of the table, folding his arms across a blue and white striped cotton shirt. Stefan noted that the radio transmitter earpiece that Evans had worn the day before was missing.

“You’re not on duty today, are you?”

Evans raised an eyebrow. “Suppose you tell me about these code signals.”

“That’s not important. What is important is that Tommy had a signal that meant *traitor*, and I saw it today. In a spot only he and I knew about.”

Evans’ eyes shifted from their slightly wary focus on Stefan toward the empty kitchen doorway.

“There was an entirely different code for *danger*, Evans. Tommy was warning me that there is a traitor. And now he’s dead.”

Evans nodded. “I see.”

“And what about Samantha O’Connor?”

Evans had a way of rubbing his jaw that looked like he was feeling to see if he needed a shave. “What about her?”

“I went by the house today and there was nobody there.”

“Did you?” Evans squinted at him.

“Is she really in New York?”

“I’m sure I don’t know, Mr. Sanchez.” Evans dug his earpiece out of his pocket and reattached it to his ear. “You’ve been out of town for some time. Perhaps you’re just feeling out of sorts because so much has changed.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Excuse me, sir.” Evans stepped away so he could whisper his secret code words to his fellow agents. He turned his head halfway through the conversation, his gaze appraising Stefan, head to toe, as if checking him for a weapon. “Yes, Mr. Sanchez was out this morning,” he said.

“Never mind,” said Stefan, irritably. “I don’t know why I said anything.” And he didn’t. He was annoyed to realize that he’d fallen for that stalwart and brave façade that men like Evans projected. He’d actually expected the man to give a damn. “I need a smoke,” said Stefan. And left Evans standing there talking to himself.

* * *

From the back porch, Stefan could see at least two men at the far end of the property, their white shirts standing out against the gray furze of brush that marked the property line. Colin sat in the swing, smoking. Stefan was relieved to see that the object between Colin’s fingers was a simple tobacco cigarette.

He nodded at Stefan, who sat beside him, a little embarrassed to realize he’d caught Colin crying.

“I miss him,” said Colin, simply, wiping the wet from beneath his eyes. “Never realized how much I relied on my big brother.” He flicked ash over the railing and Stefan noticed his hand was shaking.

Tommy had stood between Colin and the rest of the clan since the younger man had learned to walk. Colin shook his head. “Took him for granted. So wrapped up in my own problems...”

“You have any idea what he’d been working on?”

Colin shrugged. “Hey, I’m the village idiot. Nobody talks business with me.”

This had always been a sore point for Colin, who was by no means stupid, despite being treated as if he were. “So what do you know about Samantha, Colin?” asked Stefan.

Colin seemed at first not to hear the question. He drew a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, shook one out and offered it to Stefan. “The women in this family are crazy.” He lit his cigarette. His hand was definitely shaking.

“You know all the O’Connor women, they *love* the Peachtree spa. You remember it? Out there by the old Grisholm place?”

Stefan nodded.

“My ex-wife started out once a week getting manicures. Harmless enough. Next thing I know, she is out there all the time. Spent a fortune. Paid some tanned Latino ’bout a hundred bucks an hour to paint her with seaweed or something. Guess she liked his brushwork, ’cuz next thing I know they’ve both disappeared. That was Suzie for ya, never content with what she had.”

Stefan always felt awkward talking about women with other men. “I’m sorry to hear that,” was all he could think to say.

“Church gave me an annulment just like that.” Colin snapped his fingers.

“Ah,” said Stefan, uncomfortably.

“Hell, she did me a favor. She was a nagging bitch is what she was. Tried to stage an intervention once, can you believe that? Got some born again out of Narcotics Anonymous to come up to the house. Son of bitch standing in *my* living room pointing his finger in my face.”

“Colin, I thought you said you quit.”

“I did, man. What’re you talking about?” Colin ran his hand through his long curling hair. “But I bet Suzie is in touch with Sam. They were thick, weren’t they?” Colin looked irritated. “Hey, man, what if I came out to Los Angeles with you this time? Get the hell out of Boerne.”

“I’d like that,” said Stefan, uncomfortably imagining the intersect of all the emotional baggage of Boerne and his carefully sterile life in Los Angeles.

“Have at least one well-meaning neighbor a week telling me they’ve seen Suzie out by the Peachtree Spa. Or whooping it up down in San Antone.” said Colin. “I’m getting pretty damned sick of it. And now with Tommy...” He shook his head. “It’s too fucking much.”

Stefan could only imagine. “Let me give you my cell number,” he said, picking Colin’s iPhone up from the table and tapping the keys. “You call me when you know your flight date.”

“Seriously?”

Stefan bet that Colin would never set foot outside Boerne, but he nodded. “You’re welcome to my fold-out couch.”

“Thanks, man.” Colin looked cheerier than he had just moments before. Stefan stood and they clasped hands in a grip that Tommy had invented and that caused another twinge in Stefan’s chest as their fingers separated.

“I’m going to take a drive,” he said. “I’ll see you at dinnertime.”

“I’ll still be here,” said Colin, drawing what was definitely *not* a tobacco cigarette from his shirt pocket.

Stefan fetched his keys and, checking first for lurking agents, hopped into his rental car, released the parking brake, letting it roll down the driveway and into the street before he started the engine up and drove off.

* * *

Driving away from McDenny House, Stefan contemplated the missing widow.

Normally, considering the intrusive nature of the O’Connor clan, Stefan would chalk it up to Sammy’s need for privacy and aversion to the meddlesome clan ways.

But he couldn’t get the sight of that snake out of his mind’s eye.

Somebody close to the family, maybe. Somebody whose loyalty would be unquestioned.

“They called him a traitor...” Agnes usually tried to hide her inebriation from her son. But this night she seemed not to care about anything anymore. “...that man on the television called him the lowest of men...”

Stefan stared at the broken mess that had been their television picture tube. “I was going to watch ‘Dragnet,’” he said.

At the end of a long two lane highway, past two expansive cattle pastures, barbed wire and beaten down brown grass stretching out from either side of

the dusty dirt road, Stefan drove the car up onto a paved surface again and after twenty yards turned into the immaculately maintained black asphalt parking lot in front of the concrete and glass anomaly known as the Peachtree Spa.

Stefan could remember, as a very young boy, sitting in the lobby of this place, waiting for his mother to emerge with her standard stiff bouffant hairdo. The smell of burning acrylic, hairspray and ladies' perfume dense and ripe.

And later, driving her here every Sunday morning. "It's easier to get an appointment then," she would explain, though he suspected she did it because she knew the O'Connors would not be there. The O'Connors went to church on Sunday. Every Sunday, rain or shine, they filled the front pew from corner to corner.

The parking lot was three-quarters full. Being the only spa in a Texan town could be quite lucrative. The rumored side businesses that also took place here probably only embellished an already thriving business. Stefan pushed through the glass door into a lobby that could have been airlifted from a trendy shop on Melrose Avenue. Lush foliage and burbling fountains surrounded white cotton upholstered love seats and chairs. An enormous monitor hung on the wall, running a loop of last year's Paris runway show. A long, marble countertop shielded the receptionist from immediate view.

"May I help you?"

Stefan's heart sank. She'd been the receptionist here in high school, one of those jobs a teenage girl would kill to have. Seemed she'd never left, because there sat his high school nemesis, Barbara Parks. Perfect white skin, rich red lips stretched in a phony smile, perfect teeth, bright blue eyes with heavily mascaraed eyelashes and black hair done up in a bubble hairstyle that would have looked completely out-of-date anywhere but Texas.

"Hi, Barbara."

"Stefan!" That scary wide smile, and then, immediately her sad pout. "I'm so sorry about Tommy..."

She stood, showcasing her still voluptuous curves, her hands doing a little shimmy down the swell of her hips. Barbara had been performing that gesture for Stefan since they were both in fourth grade. It had the same

effect now as it always had. Gut-clenching fear and an overwhelming desire to bolt. He'd succumbed to that impulse until he was fourteen, with Barbara chasing him gleefully across the playground. Around fourteen, apparently, a certain self-respect had settled into Barbara. Her overt pursuit had evolved into a barely disguised malevolence, making cracks about Stefan at every opportunity.

Hell hath no fury.

"I'm so pleased you decided to come by and say hello." There was an enormous diamond on her finger, Stefan was relieved to see.

"Actually, I'd heard Suzie was staying here."

"Oh!" she said brightly, that hard smile back on her face. "Of course." She reseated herself and punched a button on a screen. Stefan could hear a phone ringing.

"She rented one of our cabins. But I haven't seen her for days," she said. "Probably ashamed to show her face. The O'Connors are a first family, and she had the poor taste to be leveling a suit."

The Peachtree Spa had a dozen small cabins on its property, ostensibly for the so-called out of town clients, of which they'd had few to his knowledge. Mostly the cabins were used for liaisons between wealthy men and their mistresses.

"Suzie was suing them? I hadn't heard that."

The phone continued to ring. Barbara made a face, eyebrows raised, and pressed another button. The ringing stopped. "She wasn't content with what I heard was a very generous divorce settlement." She pronounced the word *divorce* as if it were a curse word. Lowered voice, distastefully.

"Can I leave a message for her?"

"Of course," said Barbara, making no move to type or write anything down. She probably planned on delivering the message in person, where she'd have the opportunity to see Suzie's face as she did so.

Stefan dug his notebook out of his pocket. He'd scribble notes on it periodically. At the bottom of a page in which he'd written a detailed description of Evans, for his own amusement really, he had a scrap of blank paper that he tore off and on which he wrote his name and his cell phone number.

“Hi, Suzie, it’s Stef. I’m trying to get hold of Sammy.” He printed his cell phone number and signed it.

Barbara took the folded paper from him with an expression so prim Stefan was sure she’d open the note and read it the minute he departed.

“Okay, well then...” Stefan edged toward the door. It was ridiculous to be planning an escape route from a middle-aged woman, but he’d spent his entire adolescence evading her and couldn’t seem to help it.

At his car, though, he veered right and dashed across the asphalt and around the corner of the two-story concrete obelisk of the main building. Behind it, the row of small cabins settled amidst oak trees and magnolias.

Stefan checked each cabin for signs of long-term occupancy, but saw nothing. There were no cars parked nearby, and no one else seemed to be using the cabins. As kids, they’d all preferred the last cabin, which was a good fifty yards from the front building and the most secluded, so he hoped that Suzie would have chosen that one, and he spent about ten minutes on his knees at its back door remembering how to work a lock.

“This is definitely not in the boy scout code.”

“One of these days we may need to break into a house to rescue somebody, Tommy.”

“Sure, Stefan.” But Tommy was the one who had found the locksmith tools in his father’s office and slipped out with them. “Hurry up and let me try.”

Moments later, Stefan eased open the screen door and entered a small kitchen. He could see immediately that the place was occupied. Or had been very recently. Two plates and a few utensils in the dish drainer. A dishtowel tossed haphazardly across the counter. Using the towel as a glove, he opened the refrigerator and found a quart of skim milk and a small bottle of orange juice. Several containers of yogurt. There were only two other rooms. An empty living area, furnished with Peachtree Spa matching sofa and love seat and glass-topped coffee table, and a bedroom that appeared to have been vacated in something of a hurry: bedclothes strewn about, closet hanging open, hangers scattered across its floor.

And suddenly, just over his left shoulder, he felt a presence.

“Tommy?” Stefan spun around, goose bumps all up his back and a chill on his neck.

But of course that was ridiculous. Still, every hair on Stefan’s arms was standing up. Next to the bed, he spotted the phone. Like a hotel phone, it had a red flashing light that indicated a message had been left. Following the instructions adhered to the face of the phone, Stefan called in and was told by an electronic voice messaging system that there were “one new messages, eighteen old messages.” He dialed the code instructed and immediately heard Colin’s voice, shouting and distorted with anger. “Suzie, what the *hell*? You sick bitch! What the fuck is *wrong* with you?” Then, abruptly, a dial tone. The electronic voice announced the date of the call to be the day before Tommy had been shot. The old messages were just hang ups.

Stefan sat down on the bed, pondering the phone for a few minutes. He could only presume that Suzie had vacated the cabin before Colin had left his angry message. Without checking out, too, because he didn’t believe Barbara Parks had been lying. She had seemed too pleased with herself. So, that meant two O’Connor women were missing. And nobody seemed to find their absence remarkable.

Stefan searched the cabin again, as thoroughly as he could, but still found nothing. He was carefully relocking the screen door when a big hand grabbed him by the shoulder.

He ducked and punched. Another big hand grabbed his fist and held his arm. He tried to swing his elbow into his assailant and found that arm twisted behind his back. He kicked and a big knee pushed him hard against the side of the cabin.

“If you don’t settle down, Mr. Sanchez,” said agent Evans into his ear, “I’ll have to tie you up.”

* * *

“Just answer me this,” Stefan brushed paint dust from the front of his dark cotton shirt. “Do you plan on following me everywhere?”

“I overheard a report that someone was sneaking around back here and somehow I knew it was you,” said Evans.

“*Sneaking*? I knocked. There wasn’t an answer. I was about to go home when you jumped me.”

Evans looked Stefan up and down. “You fall down again?”

Stefan followed Evans’ gaze to his muddled knees. “Guess I’m a little clumsy. What do you mean *overheard*?”

“On my police scanner,” said Evans, as if everyone had a police scanner and it was only natural that they be listening to it.

“Oh, right, your police scanner. Well, I just came out here to talk to Suzie and now I’m going home. You wouldn’t happen to know where she is?”

“I wasn’t even aware that you knew Suzie O’Connor,” said Evans. “Didn’t she marry Colin after you’d left?” He didn’t wait for Stefan to answer. “I suppose you weren’t aware that the Peachtree Spa now employs trained security guards on this property twenty-four/seven. I am familiar with some of their legal histories and I think you’re lucky I caught you first. Have you had lunch?”

“Lunch?”

Evans’ gaze went over Stefan’s head to the parking lot and road beyond. “I think I saw a place out by the main highway.”

“That tourist trap? All they serve are salads at twenty bucks a pop.”

“Better than a bullet in your back,” said Evans cheerily. He had his hand in the middle of said back, and Stefan was annoyed to discover that he’d been pushed halfway to his rental car before he dug in his heels.

“Thanks, but I’m not hungry.” He planted his feet and crossed his arms, fully aware that he probably resembled a four-year-old refusing to go to bed.

Evans looked a little surprised. Stefan imagined the agent wasn’t used to people pushing back.

“I’ll meet you at the house, okay?” said Stefan. “I’ll drive straight back there.”

Evans grinned incredulously. “Do you get away with this in Los Angeles?”

“Get away with what?” Stefan took out his cigarettes and lit up. “Sure. Why not? In LA people mind their own business. Makes life simpler, you know.” He dug his car keys out of his pocket. “So I’ll see you there.”

For some reason, Evans seemed inclined to believe him. Stefan climbed into his car and drove off. He could see the agent watching him in his

rearview mirror all the way to the end of the street.

* * *

Maybe Evans had simply understood that Stefan had no place to go but McDenny house. Stefan entered and found the main rooms apparently empty. Jane must be prostrate again in her own room. Jane's presence had always so dominated McDenny house, her weakness made the place feel almost deserted. Stefan fetched bottled water from the refrigerator and wandered out to the porch. It, too, was abandoned and immaculate. Not a trace remained of the beverage glasses, cigar and cigarette ash, or paper plates that had littered it. He wondered if Colin's crushed roach still nestled amongst the grass blades around the corner.

"There's one in every family."

Stefan brought out his cell phone and tried calling Samantha again. The call went directly to voicemail. He'd never been adept with the tiny buttons on his BlackBerry, but he laboriously typed a message to Sammy and sent that as well.

Then he lit a cigarette and tried not to feel anything. It was a technique he'd grown quite expert at in Los Angeles, but he found Boerne irresistible. Feelings kept sneaking through the cracks. When his phone buzzed and he saw Chet's caller ID on the screen, he forwarded the call to voicemail. Then he sat down on the swing and buried his head in his hands.

"Okay, without telling me the details," Tommy held up a hand, palm out, as if to ward off those details and the mental picture they might induce. "What is the problem between you and Chet?"

"I promised not to tell anybody."

"Promised who?"

"Chet."

"Okay, if you won't tell me, I'll ask him."

"NO! No, Tommy, don't. It'd kill him. He's...it's his mother. She's fragile. She couldn't take it if...if people found out." Fragile being what they had used to say about the mentally ill.

Tommy's face serious and concerned. "I hear you at night. Walking around. It's not fair of him to ask you to keep whatever it is to yourself."

“I love him,” said Stefan before he could stop himself. But God it was a relief to say it out loud. “Tommy, I..I..”

An arm around him, Tommy whispering into his hair. “I know, buddy. It’s okay.”

The sliding glass door opened and Agent Evans stepped out. “Mr. Sanchez.”

Stefan waved his cigarette at the agent in greeting.

Evans approached and perched on the railing opposite the one Stefan occupied. He had a look of purpose to him.

Stefan exhaled smoke. “How was your salad?”

“Delicious, thank you.” Evans folded his arms.

“Hey, I was thinking of going out tonight, if you’re interested? We could cruise the Riverwalk.”

Evans’ mouth tightened. Anyone who had any knowledge of this area knew the Riverwalk boasted a number of gay bars. “I’d rather you waited.”

“For what? I’m not getting any younger,” said Stefan.

“Wait until you’ve gone back to LA, you horny old goat,” said Colin’s amused voice. He came around the corner. His eyes were bright red, his walk was loose and sloppy, hands in pockets and the look he gave Evans was insolent. “Leave our special agents alone, why don’t you?”

He poked at Stefan’s shoulder gently with his knuckles. “Just kidding.”

Stefan could smell the pot clinging to Colin’s clothing, and Evans was giving Colin a measuring look that made Stefan nervous. “Hey, old man, why don’t you and me take a walk?” he said, rising.

“Sure,” said Colin.

* * *

“Just like old times, Stefan?” asked Colin. They were sitting on the curb in front of the house. Tommy, Stefan, Sean, and Colin had sat out here all in a row spitting watermelon seeds, eating Popsicles, watching girls, for as far back as Stefan could recall. The poured cement pavers that led from the main sidewalk to the curb bore their initials and child-sized handprints.

Colin had been watching Stefan call Chet with a squinty-eyed knowing expression.

“I hope not.” Stefan had always assumed that Colin, the tag-a-long sibling, knew about him and Chet. Though he’d never said anything about it to him directly.

Colin nodded his head as if he understood. “Yeah, time to let it go.”

Speaking of letting it go, thought Stefan. “Colin, I hate to bring it up, but have you spoken to Susie?”

“Nope.” said Colin, creasing and folding, creasing and folding the knee of his khaki pants; his foot jittering.

“What are you on?” asked Stefan. “Just for the record.”

“Nothing.”

“You get busted for possession, Colin, it’s going to be all over the papers. Do you really think your mother needs that right now?”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” said Colin. He flipped the dark lenses down over his glasses as if he were shutting a door.

They sat in uncomfortable silence for a few minutes. Finally, Colin flipped up his lenses again and said, “The past couple of years, you have no idea, Stefan. It’s been cops up my ass everywhere I go,” said Colin. “Hey, speak of the devil. Here comes the fuzz.”

“The fuzz?” At the end of the block, a yellow Corvette could be seen turning the corner. Built when US Steel was the market leader and gas was less than fifty cents a gallon. The paint job was perfect, the chrome and rims gleamed. There’d been a time when the roar of that turbo engine coming up a road had had the power to make Stefan hard instantly.

Billy and Charlie pulled the package into the boat.

“What do you think it is?”

“I don’t know, Charlie. I think we should take it to your father.”

The boys were startled then by loud splashing and a shout.

“Hey!” cried a voice. “Hey, get off me!”

“Oh boy, it’s Georgie,” chuckled Charlie.

Sure enough, their chubby friend was hip deep in the water, duck weed and cattails all around him as he thrashed and splashed.

Laughing, the boys paddled over to help him.

“Gee, you don’t have to laugh at me,” said Georgie, who had a large soggy green lily pad draped over his red hair.

Billy reached over and lifted it off. "What are you doing here, Georgie?"

Georgie looked indignant, though it wasn't easy to look indignant while soaking wet. "I came to help you," he declared.

"You going to tell me Georgie hasn't got a crush on Billy?" Ron had chided Stefan once.

"He might have," Stefan had said. "But he'll never admit it."

* * *

Chet looked so happy, Stefan almost felt guilty.

"I'm glad you changed your mind," Chet said, climbing out of the Corvette. "Oh. Hey, Colin."

Chet looked younger out of uniform and in better shape, in faded jeans and an old blue and white baseball jersey, the exact same color as the blue in his eyes. Sleeves pushed up on beefy forearms that Stefan still remembered waking up from dreams of with a wet spot on the sheets.

"Colin, you want to join us?" asked Chet, blithely.

"Where you goin'?"

"Out to the shooting club."

Chet spoke around the cigarette dangling from between his lips. "You don't get enough of guns at work, Chester Blain? You gotta go shoot in the air *after* work too?"

Chet set his hand on the hood of the car. His other hand went, as if unconsciously, to the spot on his belt where his service revolver would be. "Something like that. You coming, Stefan?"

Colin watched them get into the car. "The men with bad ties want us to stay in McDenny House," he called to Stefan.

"Will you cover for me, Colin?"

Colin took the cigarette from his mouth and grinned. "Sure, bro. Leave it to me."

* * *

The Corvette's mufflers belched powerfully at the corner as they peeled out. Stefan watched Colin in the car's side mirror, his image receding, and asked, "What's happening with Colin?"

Chet drove like a professional. Both hands on the wheel, ten and two o'clock, eyes front and watchful. He cast a quick glance at Stefan and said, "We've cut Colin a lot of slack for his father's sake."

Stefan recalled Colin's shaking hands, his hostile pronouncements about his ex-wife. It wasn't like the mellow pot-head he'd known a decade ago. "What drugs is he into now?"

"I hate to think. Some asshole reporter from out of town once told me he thought Colin and his buddies were meth heads. I set him straight, believe you me. You don't go around smearing the family of the attorney general of Texas in Boerne."

"Was it true?" asked Stefan.

Chet's glance flashed toward Stefan and away. "According to Suzie O'Connor. Rumor has it the family had to pay that woman a lot of money to shut her yap."

"So where is Suzie now?"

Chet's jaw muscle worked. "I saw a red Toyota like hers parked out by the Peachtree Spa for a few weeks, but you know how the local gossips can be. Suzie probably couldn't go to the corner store without hearing every busybody's considered opinion. I'm pretty sure she moved back to San Antonio, with her parents. You hungry?" He shifted into gear and pulled into the fast lane of the expressway. The rumble of the Corvette's V8 smoothed out as the car's acceleration approached a hundred miles per hour.

For years, Stefan had sat, terrified and silent, on the passenger side of this car while Chet tested the maximum velocity he could reach. He shut his lips together, gripped the door handle, and saved his questions for later.

* * *

"You want the rest of your shake?" asked Chet. He'd stopped at the Frostee Freeze just down Shooting Club Road. His hand rested on Stefan's on the seat between them. Warm and full of intent. If a carhop or an acquaintance walked up to the car, of course, Chet would move his hand.

Just like the old days.

Stefan had mowed quite a row through West Hollywood when he'd moved there from Texas. Still, he'd never, in all those encounters,

experienced any sensation quite as erotic as the feel of Chet's hand covering his own on the old Corvette's leather seat.

Stefan passed the shake to Chet. "So, were you there when they...found Tommy?"

A look of pain. "I answered the call."

"Christ I'm sorry, Chet."

Chet squinted out of the windshield and nodded once. "Yeah, it was tough."

"How did it happen?"

Chet seemed lost in the memories. "I had to tell Patrick."

"Man, I'm sorry."

"I..." Chet shook his head, bit his lip.

"They told me he was out hunting?" prodded Stefan gently.

"Up on the ridge." The *ridge* was a spine of forested land, bordering the river, densely populated by deer during the hunting season.

"Tommy went hunting off the path. Wasn't even wearing safety colors. Can you believe that, Stef?"

No, quite frankly, Stefan couldn't believe it. "What kind of gun?"

"Twenty-two rifle. It was a freak thing. God. Horrible."

"Who called it in?"

"Coupla kids. I drove up and for just a minute—you know?—they looked just like us, there, Stefan, sitting on their bikes with their fishing poles and bait buckets and I thought, 'damn, what happens to childhood?' and then I saw him..." Chet covered his eyes.

Stefan wished he could give Chet more comfort than squeezing his hand.

"Nobody's stepped forward?"

"Not a soul. People," said Chet, in disgust. "What's happened to the world, Stefan?"

Stefan figured the world had always been evil, but knew better than to voice this opinion around Chet.

"Worst day of my life," said Chet. He swiped at his eyes a couple of times.

"You should have called me."

“I told myself I’d be damned if I did.” Chet glared out the window, lip thrust out in a pout. His thumb moved absently over Stefan’s. It sent little chills up Stefan’s arm that seemed destined to end in his cock. *Seven years.* And the man could still arouse him just by stroking his thumb. He drew his hand away.

Chet gave him a look and then ran his rejected hand over his close-cropped head. “Los Angeles has changed you Stefan.”

“I hope so.”

Chet’s bright eyes narrowed. Stefan and Chet had known each other so long and so intimately that every word spoke to issues upon issues. Stefan didn’t have to say *I’m angry* for Chet to get the message.

“Well, good for you,” said Chet. “Some of us can’t just pack up and run away from our obligations.” Everybody knew about his mother. Everyone knew he couldn’t leave her behind.

“What obligations did I have here?” asked Stefan. Because Chet wouldn’t admit they had a relationship, he had no right to make demands.

Chet, of course, didn’t have an answer to this.

“I’ve been trying all day to get hold of Samantha,” Stefan said. “I’d forgotten how hard it is to get a straight answer out of anybody around here.”

“Look who’s talking about straight answers,” said Chet, but there was something about the way he said it. Something guilty.

“What aren’t you telling me?” asked Stefan.

“God, Stef, you always think people are lying to you.” Chet managed to hold out for another minute and then he blew out a frustrated breath and said, “You hadn’t better tell anyone I told you.”

“Who would I tell, Chet?”

Chet shook his head. “You were right. There has been some talk, Stef. About whether or not Tommy’s death was an accident.”

“I knew it,” said Stefan. “You know that code Tommy invented? I saw a warning he’d carved recently, out in that old tree in the woods.”

Chet frowned, blond eyebrows furrowed. “That kiddie code you and he wrote notes in? Are you serious?”

“Believe it or not. But I blew it. I told one of those Secret Service agents at the house about it.”

“Which one?”

“He calls himself Evans.”

Chet rubbed at his upper lip. Stefan remembered a year when Chet had tried to grow a mustache there. He’d only been able to produce a soft peach fuzz. But when he’d given up and shaved it off, Stefan had missed the whispery tickle of that hair above Chet’s upper lip. “Those Secret Service men just showed up. None of us even know who they are. I heard the sheriff talking to Patrick the other day about it, trying to find out who made the call to bring them in. It sure as hell wasn’t us.”

“Did you find drugs?”

Chet’s mouth bent in a rueful smile. “How’d you guess there was a drug connection?”

“Woman’s intuition.” and at Chet’s look, “Or I should say gay man’s intuition.”

Chet scowled. “Why do you talk about yourself like that?”

“Sorry. You were saying?”

Chet shrugged it off. “Anyway, in the trunk of Tommy’s car we found a suitcase full of cash. Small bills, bundled in stacks of five hundred.”

“Tommy wasn’t laundering for dealers.”

“Of course not. But...you know when it was his family, Tommy could be overprotective.”

Stefan studied Chet’s carefully neutral face. “You think Colin got in over his head and Tommy was trying to help him out.”

“Maybe.” Chet was an honest man, and honest men are easy to read.

“There’s more isn’t there?”

“More? Stefan, can’t we talk about something else?” He reached over and re-captured Stefan’s hand, turning it playfully. “I missed this hand. I can’t tell you how much.”

Stefan pulled his hand away again.

Chet flushed bright red. “Now what’s wrong?”

“Christ, Chet, do you really want to go there?”

Stefan noted two teenage girls walking in front of Chet's car. They were gazing at Chet and Stefan through the windshield, and their faces had identical expressions of embarrassment. Stefan figured both he and Chet were probably red-faced and teary-eyed. God knew what kind of show they'd been putting on for the myriad teenagers lounging on the hoods of cars or strolling by.

Stefan gritted his teeth. "Let's get the hell out of here and go shoot something."

Chet laughed. It was weak and wet, but it was a laugh. "That's my man."

* * *

The Boerne Schuetzen Verein, the Boerne Shooting Club, was over a century old and had been the center of the Boerne community since its establishment in 1864.

All of the O'Connors were members. Chet's family had been amongst the founders and his father had been president of the club for many years. The boys had grown up learning to shoot in the old tradition. Twenty-twos from elevated steps, at hundred-yard targets.

The club was still busy and prosperous. Chet pulled into the wide parking lot. Behind the lot, a smaller road led up a steep, tree-covered hill, to an area that served as a kind of lovers' lane in Boerne.

Not just couples hung out there, though. Most of the adolescent boys and girls of Boerne congregated in the trampled clearing at the top of the hill. It was an opportunity to socialize and hang out. Smoke, drink, get into fights without adult intervention. If a couple of guys went off into the brush together, others would probably think they were only going to smoke a little weed.

Every weekend, Chet would drive himself and Stefan to the Frostee Freeze and then either to the Shooting Club or just drive straight up that hill to park. Get out of the car and march through the brush, Stefan running behind him.

An hour later, they'd come out separately. Stefan, angry and sullen, biting off Tommy's head when he tried to engage him in conversation. Chet, troubled and quiet, casting nervous looks at Stefan as they stood at opposite ends of the clearing full of teenagers.

The next weekend, they'd be back again.

Just like old times, Chet parked in the club parking lot and went round to the trunk to bring out the rifles. He and Stefan signed in at the front desk, then went back to the shooting range to set up.

“Stefan Sanchez?” A small burly man with black hair, wearing a blue and white striped polo shirt and holding a rifle. It took Stefan a minute to remember the name but then he was only surprised by how little the man had changed since high school.

“Brent Willis. How are you?”

“In shock. Betty and I were devastated,” said Brent, shaking Stefan’s hand and clasp his shoulder with that pained sympathy on his face that was one part sorrow and one part curiosity. He straightened when Chet walked up. “Hey, Chet.”

“Evenin’, Brent. How’s the family?”

“Good. They’ll be competing in their age group this year.”

The two dark-haired girls barely came up to Brent’s waist, but they both held the rifles on the railing and aimed them with practiced ease.

Stefan’s memory was coughing up details now. Brent and Betty had moved to Austin directly out of high school.

“Have you moved back to Boerne for good?” Stefan asked.

“Yes.” Brent glanced at the tiny dark heads standing at either hand and said in a lowered voice, “The complexion of Austin had changed, if you catch my drift.” And at Stefan’s blank expression, “Too many Mexicans, I mean. No offense.”

Stefan had lived far from this kind of overt prejudice for some time. “None taken,” he said. Chet’s hand landed on his shoulder then. “We should let you get back to your family,” he said to Brent.

“You should give us a call, Chet,” Brent giped good-naturedly. “We can always throw a steak on the grill for our local law enforcement.”

* * *

“Boerne isn’t Los Angeles, Stefan,” said Chet as they loaded their rifles.

“I didn’t say anything,” Stefan said.

“You’ve got that mad dog grin you get.”

“Mad dog grin?”

“Yeah. The one you get just before you say something smart-ass and then I’m standing shoulder to shoulder with you facing down a parking lot full of pissed-off people.”

Oh, *that* grin.

“I’m just happy.”

Chet snorted. “Well, try to keep a lid on it, okay? Boerne isn’t used to your version of happiness.”

Stefan had almost forgotten the feel of a rifle in his hands.

“You’re out of practice,” said Chet after the first round.

“We don’t use rifles in Los Angeles,” said Stefan. “It’s a handgun kind of town.”

Chet deftly slid a cartridge into the chamber. “I’ve heard that.” He settled the rifle up against his shoulder, peered through the sight. “I was worried about you.”

Stefan had saved Chet’s last letter. “*Just tell me that you’re safe and happy...*”

They fired off a few rounds, and then Stefan set the rifle carefully against the railing. He waited until Chet had taken his shot. From where he stood, he could see the slowly widening hole at the center of the target. Tommy and Chet had always been good, but Chet’s skill seemed to have reached a whole new level.

“Another round?” asked Chet.

“This isn’t why I called you, Chet.”

Chet lowered his rifle and dispelled the spent cartridge. “I should have known.”

“Why are there agents all over McDenny House?”

Chet extracted another round from the box by the railing. “That’s the norm these days.”

“I asked a couple questions around town, and that agent Evans hunted me down and told me to mind my own business.”

“I know it’s not the first time someone’s told you *that...*”

“I’ve been put practically under house arrest.”

Chet seemed unable to look directly at him. “Really?”

A chill of knowing ran up Stefan's spine. "Chet, you know something you're not telling me."

Chet glanced quickly around the shooting range. He and Stefan were alone except for Brent and his girls. Stefan could see him warring with himself.

"Don't bullshit me, Chet. I deserve to know what's going on."

Chet swallowed and nodded. One brief jerk of his head. "Yeah. Okay, let's finish here and we'll...we'll go take a walk."

They signed out, Chet's target and score dutifully recorded. A forty-five out of fifty. The woman at the desk made appreciative noises but Chet just grimaced. "I've done better."

* * *

They left the Corvette in the club lot and walked slowly along the road's shoulder, feet crunching soft gravel, toward the old lovers' lane. The air was densely humid and filled with the rising and falling whine of cicadas. Stefan's lightweight cotton shirt felt heavy and it stuck to his arms and belly. Chet labored beside him, a sheen of sweat on his neck and lower arms. Chet had never been fat but he'd always been bulky and he suffered from the heat. Stefan remembered how his own T-shirts had retained Chet's odor days after they'd tussled out here in the woods.

"I wanted to tell you," said Chet. "As soon as you showed up I said to the chief, 'We should tell Stefan what's going on. He knew Tommy and Samantha better than anybody.'"

"Why didn't you, then?"

"I knew how you'd react."

They rounded a bend in the road. From years of experience, Stefan and Chet both knew that rounding that bend essentially hid them from anyone on the main road or at the clubhouse. They both walked closer together now. Strides matching, hands occasionally bumping.

"You'd see it yourself if you weren't so close to her, Stefan."

Stefan stopped walking. "Close to who?"

"C'mon, Stefan. The spouse takes a runner the day after an accidental death?"

"You've got to be joking..."

“Hey, I don’t like it any more than you do, but there it is.”

“Sammy didn’t kill Tommy.”

“Samantha O’Connor is a crack shot with a twenty-two. And there were rumors about Tommy and Suzie O’Connor.”

Stefan’s world had been permanently turned on end since his father’s death. He didn’t expect much of any man. But this was a shock. “Tommy cheating on Samantha?” He shook his head, “No way. Never.”

“Things have changed since we were kids, Stefan. Tommy was out at the Peachtree Spa several times a week. And it wasn’t just gossip. Bunch of people saw him there with Suzie O’Connor.”

“That’s ridiculous. Tommy wasn’t the type.”

“People change, Stef.”

Stefan recalled, uncomfortably, the message Colin had left for his ex-wife.

“She might be in New York, you know,” he pointed out.

Chet shook his head. “We already looked there. We even got a warrant and searched the townhouse. She hadn’t been there.”

“A *warrant*?”

“You know it’s almost always family, Stefan. Statistically speaking.”

“Statistics have nothing to do with it. You *know* Samantha. You *know* she couldn’t have done it. Has anyone considered that she could be in danger? That she could have been kidnapped?”

“There’s been no call from kidnappers. No notes. No demands. We *are* looking, Stefan. We tried tracking the GPS on both Samantha’s and Tommy’s phones. The accounts have been discontinued. Nobody could have done that but Samantha. Now why would she do that unless she doesn’t want us to know where she is?”

Stefan *tsked* irritably. “I’ve been calling Sammie’s cell phone number. It goes through to voicemail, so it’s still in service.”

Chet gave him a strange look. “Really?”

“None of this makes sense. Give me a couple of days, Chet, and I’ll get to the bottom of it.”

Chet's eyes widened, eyebrows rising almost comically. If his hair could have stood on end, it probably would have. "What? No! I told you this in confidence, Stef. Don't go snooping around. Please."

"Why else did you tell me?"

"Because I knew you wouldn't let it go until I did. But this is not something you need to stick your nose in, Stefan."

Stefan laughed, a mirthless exhalation, and gave Chet a look.

Chet ran his hand over his crew cut. "Christ, I'd forgotten what it was like to have you around."

"You make that sound like a bad thing." Stefan considered his words carefully. "You know, if there is a drug connection, Colin may know more than he's saying."

Chet rolled his eyes towards Stefan. "Maybe. We haven't found a damned thing tying him to the whole mess, and he claims he knows nothing about any of it. The chief wanted to bring him in, believe you me, but Patrick intervened."

"He should at least be in a safe house."

"He's not cooperating," said Chet. "Patrick is keeping an eye on him at McDenny House, but law enforcement's hands are tied until we get more evidence that he was involved, or catch him doing something."

In his mind's eye Stefan saw Agent Evans' assessing gaze resting on Colin.

"The whole family should be in a safe house."

Chet huffed a bitter laugh. "Tell old man O'Connor that. You know, Megan's going to Mexico again next month?"

"Megan?"

"Yes." Chet had stopped at the foot of the track that led up the hill to the lovers' lane. His eyes traveled over Stefan's face, his neck, then dipped lower. "She goes down there to give vaccines to the Indians every year."

"Just like Jane used to."

"That family..." said Chet, shaking his head. "Seem to all want to be martyrs."

Call it a premonition. A chill slid up Stefan's back and he glanced behind himself.

“What?” said Chet.

Stefan shook his head. He couldn't tell Chet that he kept imagining Tommy just behind him.

“Just, do me a favor, Stef. Tell me if you decide to do anything...you know...”

“Stupid?”

“I didn't say that. Just...the sort of thing you always end up doing. Okay?”

“I won't make a move without you,” Stefan lied.

They'd reached that point where the track climbed into the furze and trees at the top of the hill. Rutted and rock strewn, well worn by the feet and tires of the adolescent population of Boerne. Just the sight of that track started Stefan's libido pulsing.

Chet looked up the track and back at Stefan. “Brings back memories, doesn't it, Stef?”

Yeah. Painful, humiliating memories. And yet Stefan was achingly hard. Just the smell of the dry, rutted dirt, the heavy humid air soaking his shirt, Chet's skin around his eyes pale from wearing sunglasses on the job all the time, little lines at the corner. Stefan wanted to touch them.

Chet's hand started on Stefan's shoulder and slid down his arm, ended with his fingers looped through Stefan's. Something tightened in Stefan's belly.

“I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since you landed,” said Chet. He stepped a little closer, his gaze dropped from Stefan's eyes to his mouth. “Christ, you smell good.”

“This isn't why I called you, Chet. Don't get ideas.” His breathing sounded ragged in his own ears.

“I'm not the one who gets ideas,” said Chet and pulled Stefan against him. He was a solid wall of muscle from chest to abdomen to promising bulge pushing into Stefan's thigh.

Stefan's heart began slugging large quantities of blood through his body. It didn't matter that he knew how badly it would end. He still didn't want to stop it.

“I'm only here for a few days.”

Chet's hand cupped the back of Stefan's skull. "So let's make the best of it."

"I can't," said Stefan just before Chet's mouth closed over his. He pushed back when Chet tried to manhandle him up against a tree, but the truth was he did it because he liked to feel Chet overpower him.

With a knowing expression on his face, Chet dropped his hand to Stefan's groin and fondled in a way guaranteed to make Stefan groan and push into his hand. He chuckled against Stefan's mouth. "You keep resisting me, Sanchez, I might need to cuff you."

Stefan moaned and let himself just feel Chet's hands on him.

"Let's go somewhere private," said Chet after a while.

Stefan battled himself for all of ten seconds. He lost. "Yeah."

Chet took the lead, climbing the deeply rain-rutted track up the hill, then skirting the clearing at the top to push through the trees and bracken.

As Stefan worked his way through the brush, following the sound of Chet pushing ahead of him, he glanced at his watch. He'd left McDenny House three hours ago.

Agent Evans was going to ground him for sure.

Stefan broke through to a clearing and saw Chet already there, leaning against a tree, sleeves pushed up and arms folded across his chest. He was frowning at his feet when Stefan emerged. He raised his head and the expression on his face made Stefan's heart turn over and his libido surge.

Stefan didn't even feel his feet cross the six feet between them.

When Chet abandoned himself to passion, it was a heady thing. Half-opened dark blue eyes gazing down at Stefan, lips red as Stefan practically climbed his body, pressing their hips together.

He felt the warning groan, the thick fingers tightening on him, the buck and shove of one big thigh, and Stefan was the one pressed against the tree. Chet's mouth hungrily biting and sucking at his throat, pushing aside his collar, his mouth fastened on the soft indentation on Stefan's neck. His hand slid down and gripped a secret spot on the inside of Stefan's thigh.

Stefan heard a whimper escape his own throat, and then he was being pushed onto the ground.

Tongues hungry, mouths wide open, hands going from holding each other's heads to squeezing each other's asses. Chet pushing down Stefan's opened jeans, pushing down his own, exposing their cocks and balls. Shirts rucked up, sweaty bellies and chests sliding together, and they lay in the pine needles as Chet rutted on top of Stefan.

Their cocks slid and bumped. Both men grunting out directions and appreciation until Chet came in long, full-body shudders and Stefan felt that strong grip wresting an orgasm from him as well.

After a few minutes of wheezing, Chet chuckled. "Whoeee, what died back here?"

"I think that's us," said Stefan.

Chet pushed up on his elbows and looked down at him. His eyes were warm and happy. "Nah, not you, Stef. You always smell good."

The sun floated above the branches of trees, motes of light dancing with dust around them. A halo of reddish gold glowed around Chet's close-cropped skull. His gaze wandered over Stefan's face as his thumb felt the bone of Stefan's jaw.

He'd been the first boy Stefan had ever kissed. The only man he'd ever loved. Stefan had spent hours of his adolescence dreaming of those dark blue eyes looking into his, that hand touching his face, that mouth on his throat.

Hours imagining the exact moment when Chet would acknowledge their relationship in public. Acknowledge that what they had even *was* a relationship. Hours and long painful hours forcing himself to face the fact that neither of those scenarios would ever happen.

"I love you Chet."

"God, don't say that. Man. I mean, that's not normal, Stefan."

He was lying in the dirt behind a rock quarry in Buttfuck, Texas. Seven years and twenty published works later and he was right back where he'd started.

Stefan rolled Chet off him and struggled to sit up. There were drying semen and dirt and sweat stains on his shirt and jeans. He patted his pockets and found a rather crushed pack of cigarettes.

Chet didn't seem to mind being tumbled off Stefan. He straightened himself out as well. Found a pack of matches and lit Stefan's cigarette.

"Those things'll kill you."

Stefan exhaled. "God willing."

They drove back in relative silence. Really, what was there to say?

"Hey, you. Remember what I said. Stay out of trouble," Chet said sternly as he dropped Stefan at the front door of McDenny House.

"Sure, Chet," said Stefan.

Colin was lounging across the living room sofa channel surfing when Stefan passed through. He pushed a button and the sound on the set went mute. "That Agent Evans is a dick, you know. He wouldn't leave me alone until I told him where you'd gone. He said you're to go talk to him when you get back."

"Great."

Colin grinned knowingly. "Shit, you look like you rolled in the dirt, dude."
“

Stefan looked down at himself. "I had to change a tire," he said.

"Looks like the tire came all over your pants leg," replied Colin blandly. "You'd better not let Jane see you like that."

Stefan climbed the stairs to the guest room, stripped off his shirt, pants, underwear. Threw his balled socks at the wall. Stood in the shower until the hot water ran out. Then he sat on the toilet seat, damp head buried in his hands.

He re-dressed and went downstairs.

* * *

"Mr. Sanchez, do you have a moment?"

Stefan stood in the kitchen, applying peanut butter to white bread with a knife. He'd dug about half a cup of peanut butter out of the jar and was still slathering more on the bread. To hell with his cholesterol count. "Evans, I'm not really in a talking mood."

"Your date go badly?"

Stefan let the knife drop into the nearly empty jar with a loud clatter. "Fuck you."

Evans looked honestly shocked.

Stefan washed his face with one hand. “Damn. I’m sorry. You know they say you can’t go home again.”

“Is this your home, then? What about your mother?”

“Evans, are you naturally awkward and rude, or did you have to be taught?” Stefan picked up the sandwich and slapped it onto a plate. “Fine. No, this is not my home. Officially. Jane and Patrick were decent enough to let my mother retain custody, though she very rarely required my presence, unless it was to drive her to the liquor store for more vodka.”

He pushed past Evans and dropped the plate onto the table. “But, in answer to the questions you haven’t asked; no, I don’t remember much about my father. No, my mother never, and I mean *never*, talks about him. No, I don’t *blame* Patrick O’Connor. I feel nothing but respect and gratitude for...” Stefan’s throat closed over the words. He took a deep breath and said, “You want something to eat?”

Evans shook his head. His eyebrows were still up to his hairline. Okay, Stefan supposed that anybody was a little surprised the first time they encountered Stefan Sanchez in a high snit.

“Actually, I wanted to ask you about something else.”

“I told you, I’m not in a talking mood,” said Stefan, pulling out a chair and sitting.

Evans also pulled out a chair and sat. “That code you mentioned before.”

“Code?” Stefan had made the sandwich but now it seemed grotesque to him. He felt less like eating it and more like throwing it at the immaculate glass picture window bordering the dining table. “What code?”

“You said you and Tommy O’Connor had worked out a code.”

“Tommy was my best friend. We had secret hiding places, secret hand signals, secret codes. You know how boys are.” Stefan shoved the plate away from himself. “You want a peanut butter sandwich, Evans?”

“Do you have any copies of this code?”

“Why would I? It was kid stuff. And besides, the whole point of a secret code is to keep it a secret,” said Stefan. “Tommy and I knew it. Sammy knew a little.”

“Nobody else?”

Maybe it went back to his ancestral Indian roots. Or maybe it was all those years of feeling eyes on his back. But Stefan had a certain preternatural sixth sense. "I can't recall," he said, suddenly cautious. "Tommy had a lot of friends."

Agent Evans wasn't completely stupid. Wooden and stodgy, perhaps. But not stupid. He read Stefan's face for a moment, but, "I see," was all he said. "I really would appreciate you keeping me apprised of your movements, Mr. Sanchez."

"You want to vet my dates, Evans? Or maybe you'd rather come along. We could double-date. I'll see what I can set up. What's your type? Oh. Wait, let me guess..." Stefan could feel the hostility on his own face, his fists on the table, clenched tight.

Evans rose and said merely, "I'm sorry if this feels like an invasion of privacy, sir."

Sir again.

Stefan *tsked*. "Forget it. I won't be here much longer anyway."

"Oh?"

"I'm going to try to get a flight out tomorrow."

Evans seemed thoughtful when Stefan glanced up at him. Rubbing at his jaw with his thumb and studying Stefan.

"I know you're just doing your job," said Stefan.

"Thank you for understanding." And Evans left the room. Stefan got up and threw the sandwich away.

Then he called his mother. What the hell. His mood couldn't get *worse*.

"Oh," she said. "Are you in town now?"

Stefan's ear hairs curled at the heat of her sarcasm. "Yes," he said. "Are you free?"

He imagined Agnes' ear hairs curling as well. He heard the click of the cigarette lighter in the pause before she said. "Stefan, honey. We should have dinner, at least."

Stefan sighed. "I know."

"Tell me when you'll be over. I have somebody I want you to meet."

That suspicious male presence on the phone? Stefan cringed inwardly. “Of course, mother. I’m heading back soon, so we may as well...” He stopped. He had been going to say *get it over with*. “We may as well make it tonight.”

“I’ll talk to him and call you back.”

Agnes would make a big production out of this. Stefan dreaded the ensuing drama but knew he could only acquiesce to it. Anything else would escalate and soon involve Jane. “I’ll be waiting for your call,” he said.

They rang off. *My people will call your people*. Stefan thought Ronnie could take a few lessons from his mother.

* * *

Stefan fetched his laptop from the bedroom and took it to the back porch, where he could chain smoke and stew while working. He paused to call the airport and change his flight to the next day. Then he went to work.

“Gosh, Billy, what if nobody thinks to look for us here?”

Georgie shone the flashlight’s beam across the ceiling of the cave. Hundreds of small furry bodies moved restlessly there. The bats that inhabited the cave were nocturnal and only a few blinked angry eyes at the light.

“I’m sorry, Georgie. I knew better than to crawl into an unexplored cave.”

This last had to be added per Ron’s note: “For heaven’s sake, we’ll have every child in America falling into mine shafts after this. You have to put a warning in.”

The light on Georgie’s flash dimmed a little. “B-Billy? I don’t know how much longer my battery is going to last.”

“You should turn it off then, save it for when we need to signal someone.”

“You want us to sit here in the dark?” Georgie’s voice quavered. Billy knew his friend hated the dark. He scuffed sideways on the seat of his dungarees until he sat next to Georgie, arm flung around his chum’s shoulders.

“Just close your eyes and pretend we’re camping. I’ll tell you a story.”

At this point, Ron had inserted a request for a new campfire story. Stefan had to admit that the one he had written was pretty boring, so he contemplated for a bit, typing random story lines, intending to edit later.

“You know the Greek mythology class I took last year?” said Billy, squeezing Georgie’s fingers. “We heard a story about this boy called Hyakinthos, who was beloved by Apollo...”

Not gonna happen, of course. Stefan tapped at his spacebar meditatively, casting through his memory for the sort of stories boys Billy and Georgie’s age would tell each other.

“No way,” said Chet.

“It’s true,” said Stefan. “The old lady was screaming and still hanging onto the leash for a while and finally she gave up and let go. That stupid poodle was yapping and yapping. You could still hear it when the hawk was just a speck in the sky.”

“Stefan Sanchez, you made that whole story up.”

“Who me? You calling me a liar, Chet?”

Chet pushed him and Stefan fell over. “Admit you made it up.”

Stefan held up his fingers in the Boy Scouts pledge. “I swear.”

Chet howled with indignation and pounced on him, fingers digging into his ribs. “Admit it!” he demanded while Stefan protested breathlessly.

“No, it’s—” gasping “—it’s all true...”

More tickling. Chet’s hands moved downward. The breathing of both boys changed. “Stef...”

Stefan stared up at him, his hand closed over Chet’s, “It’s okay...”

Chet moaned. “I can’t stop.”

“Then, don’t. Please don’t stop.”

And later...

“That was wrong.” Chet sat at the opposite end of the log. He wouldn’t even look at Stefan.

Stefan’s emotions were incomprehensible to him. He felt much like the poodle of his story, carried high above the real world, wild, joyful, yet in danger of imminent death. “How do you know that?”

“I read about this in a book. It’s abnormal.”

“It didn’t feel abnormal,” said Stefan.

“You look like you could use this.” A fat joint appeared six inches from Stefan’s nose. He dragged his mind from the dark space in which it crouched and focused on Colin, leaning against the wall next to him, holding out a smoking spliff.

“No thanks,” said Stefan.

Colin shrugged and inhaled from the doobie himself. “What’d you say to our Agent Evans? He came stomping out of the kitchen like somebody had cancelled his NRA membership.”

“I don’t know.” Stefan rubbed his eyes. The humidity had grown dense, the air almost green with combined pollen and moisture. His eyes were burning. Funny, LA smog never bothered him but the air of Boerne always had. “I probably mouthed off.”

“Good old Stefan,” said Colin, smoke escaping from the sides of his mouth as he spoke.

“I’ve got to leave tomorrow morning, as it happens. Maybe he’s going to miss me.”

Colin grinned and exhaled a great fragrant cloud. “Maybe. And I thought he only had a hard-on for me.”

“All they need is an excuse to lock you up, Colin.”

With an expression of chagrin, Colin ground the joint out on the teak railing. There were lines etched into the corners of his mouth, Stefan noticed. They seemed incongruous in the boyish face. “The pater would like that. Shut me up. Keep me from blabbing what I know.”

“What do you know, Colin?” asked Stefan, mostly to be polite. He doubted that Colin actually knew much. He was just a habitual conspiracy theorist. Always had been. From the mysterious second gunman in the

Kennedy assassination to the supposed NASA moonwalk hoax, Colin could be depended upon to find a trail leading eventually back to his clan.

“It takes a lot of money to run a campaign,” he said wisely, touching his nose and nodding. And, Stefan considered, Colin’s conspiracy theories were always enhanced by marijuana consumption. Stefan shut down his laptop. “I need a drink,” he said. “You want one?”

Colin waved him off.

* * *

When he went into the kitchen, Stefan found the youngest sibling, Megan, sitting at the kitchen table with a girlfriend, playing cards. They had bottles of beer in front of them. When Stefan had left Texas seven years ago, Megan had been way too young to drink, so it was a little bit of a shock to see her doing so.

Megan had been the first female to be born directly into the clan in over three generations. She had spent her entire childhood in frilly sleeved blouses, dresses, high heels. Jane had even entered her in one or two of the ubiquitous Texas beauty pageants. She’d been a debutante, with a steady stream of socially prominent escorts. She was a narrow-hipped, square-shouldered young woman, with fine blonde hair clipped short.

Stefan was most accustomed to seeing Megan in tasteful, modest suits, standing by Jane’s side at charitable and political functions. The dutiful, devout daughter of a Catholic woman.

Now, seeing the secretive looks exchanged between her and the young woman sitting across the table from her, Stefan suddenly realized that Megan was probably a lesbian.

“How’ve you been holding up, Megan?”

Megan and the woman exchanged looks laden with Meaning. “I’m okay, Steffie.”

“I’m terribly sorry.”

Megan frowned down at the cards in her hands. “Mother’s very happy to have you home.”

It occurred to Stefan that everyone kept assuring him of this, but Jane always seemed to leave the room when he entered. “So, what are you doing now that you’re out of college, Megan?”

She raised a bored eyebrow and drew a card from the stack in front of her. "I'm Colin's accountant."

"Really?" Stefan had had no idea Megan was interested in business. She'd been buffed, polished, dressed up and propped next to Jane like an expensive doll for years. The expectation was that she'd marry and produce more O'Connors, not have a career in something as concrete as business.

Megan made a face. "Of course. Colin can't add two plus two, Steffie. He's international now, with the Internet sales and the branches in Phoenix and Chicago." She spread her cards face up in front of her and smirked at her companion, who threw her cards down in good-natured defeat.

"I saw his site," said Stefan. He withdrew a bottle of water from the refrigerator. "He needs a new webmaster. Don't kids these days want more animation and music?"

"Colin's doing very well," said Megan, gathering the cards up.

"Of course, I didn't mean to criticize," said Stefan.

"Daddy was looking for you," said Megan, shuffling the cards with practiced hands. "He's in his office."

* * *

Stefan rapped on the heavy oak double doors and entered when Patrick's voice called him in.

"Megan said you were looking for me?"

"Ah, Stefan," called Patrick. And beckoned.

He'd apparently been having a stern conversation with Colin, whom Stefan now spotted in one of the big leather chairs near the bay window. Slouched down, arms folded across his chest, petulant expression. In the doghouse again. *Some things never change.*

Stefan wasn't surprised to see another man in the room as well. Patrick's office always had been peopled, day and night, with serious-looking men in suits and uniforms.

"Hello, sir."

Patrick looked tired, the skin sagging around his eyes and mouth as if lifting it in the weak smile was too much effort. "Stefan, I'm sorry we haven't had time to chat." Patrick proffered a cigar.

"No thank you," said Stefan, drawing out his cigarettes. "Do you mind?"

“Of course not. Stefan Sanchez, this is David Clark. David and I worked together when I was a district attorney.” Stefan shook the man’s hand, slightly puzzled. Patrick seldom introduced Stefan to his business associates.

“My children are great fans of your books,” said Clark. “When Patrick told me he knew you I had to insist that I meet you. I hope you don’t mind.”

Stefan recovered from his surprise quickly. “Of course not. What a great compliment, Mr. Clark. If you’ll give me your address and your children’s names, I’ll have signed copies of the next book sent to them.”

“Would you?” Clark looked as happy as a kid. He scribbled the information on a business card, which Stefan pocketed, promising to mention something about Billy in each book. “He’s my boys’ favorite,” Clark explained.

“Yes, sir. He’s mine, too,” said Stefan.

“David, I haven’t had an opportunity to visit with Stefan since he arrived. Would you excuse us?”

“Of course, Patrick,” said Clark cheerfully. He went to the door. “I’ll just help myself at the bar, shall I?”

“If you search you might find a bottle of Bushmills hiding at the back of the cabinet,” said Patrick.

Clark saluted cheerfully with one finger and departed.

“Colin?”

Colin’s head came up, his gaze resentful. “Yes, sir.” He followed Clark out of the room, closing the door behind himself.

Patrick sat back and seemed to physically drop his charming, sophisticated manner like a heavy cape. “God, Stefan.”

“Yes.”

“There is nothing more painful.”

Stefan nodded. The uncomfortable image of Tommy, which he believed he’d never fully erase, rose in his mind’s eye again.

“Thank you so much for coming home, Stefan. It...eases me. To see you here.”

The grief Stefan held firmly at arm's length struggled to overwhelm him. He swallowed and nodded.

"I've been very proud of you, son," said Patrick.

Praise from Patrick was rare and precious. Stefan felt guilty at the thrill that washed through him. "I wish I could do something, sir," he said hoarsely.

Patrick closed a file on his desk and removed his reading glasses. "So do I. But I don't want to give them the acknowledgment they crave. So my hands are tied to a degree."

"So, it was a hit?"

"We think it might have been." Patrick's luxurious leather office chair creaked as he sat back, gazing across his laden oak desk at Stefan. "My son was reticent and stubborn at times. I'm afraid he may have become involved in something without my knowledge."

"Tommy would never have done anything illegal, sir."

"Of course not. But if he found evidence of corruption, let's say, and felt he hadn't a strong enough case, he was the type of man who would have kept it to himself until he felt sure of his accusations."

This was true. Tommy was scrupulously just. "Corruption?" asked Stefan. "You mean someone on the right side of the law?"

"Right side? One wishes the world were that black and white," said Patrick. "But there are millions of dollars involved, and human beings are, as a species, weak."

Stefan rubbed his lower lip with his finger. Talk of corruption made him feel unaccountably embarrassed. Made him think of his father.

"Sean told me Samantha is in New York, but I haven't been able to get hold of her."

"She is devastated. I'm sure you understand. She'll undoubtedly call you soon."

"But you knew the police consider her a suspect?"

Patrick looked grim and exhausted. "I imagine you've been speaking with Chester Blain. We've had to leave most of our local constabulary in the dark, I'm afraid. It's hard to know who to trust these days."

“I don’t mind telling you I’ve been worried sick about her,” said Stefan. “I started asking around and I’m afraid I made your Secret Service nervous.”

“You probably surprised them.” Patrick studied him from across the desk. “You’ve always had a knack for sniffing out the truth.”

“I think most people called me nosy.”

Patrick managed a tired smile. “You were a curious boy.”

“And curiosity killed the cat.” Stefan heard his words and bit his lip. “When you say it’s difficult to know who to trust, does that include the agents in your house?”

Patrick’s brow creased. “Samantha is very vulnerable at the moment, as I’m sure you can imagine. I’d hate for her to have to deal with strange men at every door, suspicious questions...do you understand?”

“Of course. I’m sorry if I stirred things up,” said Stefan.

Patrick heaved a sigh. “Thank you.” He looked down at his hands, “I wanted to discuss something else, son. We’re very proud of Chet. He’s done well...considering.”

“Chet?”

“I’m a man of the world, Stefan. To each his own, I say. But this is a small town.”

It was so completely unexpected, Stefan felt his ears warming. “Yes, it is.”

“But when all is said and done, Stefan, you will go back to Los Angeles. Chet’s home is *here*. His life is *here*.”

A surge of anger surprised him. Stefan took a deep breath. “Yes, sir.”

Patrick bent his head. He looked grimly exhausted, and now Stefan felt guilty for the anger racing through him.

“Good man,” said Patrick.

“I’m going to have to leave town soon anyway, sir,” Stefan couldn’t help the clipped cool sound of his words. “My flight is scheduled for first thing in the morning.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.” Patrick looked like he was indeed sincerely sorry. “I didn’t mean that you should leave, son.”

Stefan's ears were still burning with embarrassment and anger. The guilt over those emotions only complicated them. "I know. It's business. My editor wants me to come back to Los Angeles."

Patrick looked stricken. "I was counting on more time..." He wiped his eyes briefly with his fingers and said softly. "I suppose one always expects more time."

* * *

In the guest bedroom, Stefan dug rolled socks from his duffel and hurled them at the wall for several minutes before he calmed down. A silent tantrum. Patrick might otherwise hear him and be concerned.

Stefan had been in fifth grade when he'd come home one day and found reporters and police outside his home.

Over the next several days, the media and officials kept coming. His father's face appeared on the television screen repeatedly. A hurried, quiet funeral to which he was not invited and then rows of empty vodka bottles lined the counters of a kitchen otherwise devoid of food.

Kids at school called him names and started fights.

Someone spray-painted obscene words across their lawn.

About two weeks later a man and woman came and told Stefan that he had to go with them, and Stefan had let himself be led away to what he assumed would be jail. It wasn't. It was worse. The social services system sent the little Hispanic boy to a nice Hispanic family who spoke very little English. Unfortunately, Agnes had never let Stefan learn Spanish.

A month in foster care and Patrick O'Connor had suddenly appeared like a white knight.

The very man who should hate you. The only one who has cause to hate you, rescues you. Sits you down and tells you that he's going to take care of you and your mother. He's a hero. He's everything you always thought your father was. The gratitude and guilt and fear and envy grow and nest inside you until they are as much a part of you as your bones.

Stefan went into the little attached bathroom and threw water over his face, pushing back his black hair and staring at the reflection in the mirror that had grown to look so much like the old photographs of his father.

"Stop that. Where did you learn to look like that?"

Stefan looked up, surprised. He was lying on the couch, reading a book. "Like what?"

Agnes blew smoke, clicking her nails in annoyance. "You looked just like him." Turning away as if the sight sickened her.

How long had it taken him to learn not to hate the sight of his own face?

* * *

When Stefan pulled himself together and went downstairs, he was told by one of the children that Grandma Jane still had a headache and was sleeping. Ginny presided over a meal of the various casseroles brought by the neighbors.

"What do you want to eat, Stefan?"

"I'll just have coffee. I'm having dinner with my mother tonight," said Stefan.

On the one hand, he couldn't wait to get out of Boerne, out from under the oppressive humidity and even more oppressive memories. On the other hand, he felt guilty for escaping, and Stefan hated feeling guilty.

"You should let the Secret Service agent know you are going out," said Ginny, wiping down the counter. "John, ask don't reach," she snapped at a child.

* * *

Instead of Evans, Stefan found a burly, dark-skinned man with long sideburns and a carefully trimmed goatee standing guard in the entryway.

"I have an evening planned at my mother's," said Stefan. "I wanted to let Agent Evans know."

"Evans has the night off. I'll take note of your location," said the agent, touching an earpiece.

"Do you need her address?"

"No, sir." He gazed stolidly back at Stefan. Stefan wondered briefly if all of these men bought their shirts and ties at the same store. "Is there anything else, Mr. Sanchez?"

"No. Have a good night."

"Yes, sir."

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Chapter Six

When he drove away from McDenny House, Stefan had every intention of going straight to his mother's. He figured he'd meet the man she was eager to introduce, sup and perform perhaps an hour or two of stiff formalities. Sitting across from his mother in their twin armchairs with the floral upholstery, both chain smoking while trying to make small talk, the whole time reminding himself that, by this time tomorrow, he'd be safely back in Los Angeles. There was no point in procrastinating. This dinner was simply something he'd have to endure.

He took the I-10, the quickest route to his mother's house. But ten minutes down the expressway, he spotted the dirty orange arches of the old A&W thrusting through a stand of pines and, on an impulse, swerved onto the off-ramp, descending to the old main highway.

Since the construction of the I-10, the highway was seldom used. Stefan had to slow considerably, potholes and asphalt ribbons of patches making the drive bumpy. There was a huge rut where the cement gave way to the A&W gravel parking lot, and, on another whim, he turned into it. Parking his car and shutting off his engine in the exact same place he would have years ago. Opening his window next to a metal post which showed a gaping electrically wired wound where the speakers had once hung.

The building was dirty and tagged in a half-hearted way. Windows and doors boarded shut, though Stefan could see a hole big enough to crawl through that some vagrant had torn loose.

Some vagrant or maybe some kids who could find no better place for a rendezvous.

"In here, Stef."

Pushing his way past soft rotting wood that smelled of mold and felt of cobwebs. "Why are we in here, Chet?" His words cut off when Chet grabbed his face and kissed him.

"Shh. They'll hear us. Over here, I made a place where we can lie down."

The A&W brought back memories so potent they stunned Stefan; he could almost hear the piped music, see the girls and boys in their polyester brown and white uniforms running back and forth. Chet and he in the front seat of the Corvette. Chet's hand resting on Stefan's in the front seat.

"I'm tired of sneaking around. I'm tired of being your dirty little secret."

"What else can I do, Stefan? It would kill my mother."

Stefan sitting in silence next to him, then. Because Chet's mother was the trump card.

"I can't do it to her."

Tommy and Stefan watching the girls.

"Yeah, she's pretty enough. But she's not my type," Tommy would say when Stefan would mention a girl who was flirting with him.

"Type?" Stefan would grin. "You have a type?"

"Samantha. She's my type."

Tommy and Sammy necking in the back seat of Tommy's Trans Am.

Sammy. The only girl Stefan had ever kissed.

"Have you ever kissed a girl?" asked Sammy.

Stefan had been watching Chet wander at the edge of the A&W parking lot. They'd just had another fight and already Stefan was regretting some of the things he'd said. "What?" he asked, turning toward where Sammy sat next to him on the front seat.

She looked up at him, eyes mischievous, a green baseball cap overlarge above her pixie face. Stefan ran the question through his head again.

"No," he said. "Well, I mean..."

"Wait a minute." Sammy's fingers were strong around the back of Stefan's neck and they dragged his face down. Her lips were dry and her breath smelled of bubble gum. "There," she said, looking pleased with herself. "Now you can say you have."

It had been their private joke that Sammy had ruined Stefan for other women.

Sitting on the curb, trying to get Chet to talk to him. Or leaning against the building, chatting with the girls who worked there, waiting, every nerve

in his body listening for the sound of those turbo charged mufflers out on Highway 1.

“Whenever I drive up, you’ve always got all the pretty girls around you.”

“They’re my friends!”

“It’s just kind of funny. The girls always like you best.”

“Yeah, it’s funny Chet.”

* * *

The memories were so vivid it was a moment before Stefan realized that the sound of a car was in the present.

It was a sheriff’s department vehicle. When it slowed and turned into the lot, Stefan could see that Chet was the driver. Chet parked behind him, cherries rotating slowly on the roof of his car, headlights illuminating the entire interior of Stefan’s car.

Stefan rolled down his window. “Evening, officer!” he said, as Chet walked up. He hadn’t planned on seeing Chet again before he left Boerne, and it occurred to him, oddly, that Chet might have found this out and come to berate him. He had that kind of grim expression he would get when Stefan was pushing something too far.

“Stefan, do you have a gun on you?” Chet asked.

“What?”

“You heard me.” Chet had stopped just a few feet away, eyes steady and serious, hand on his gun holster.

“Why would I have a gun?”

“If you do you should surrender it to me, now.”

“Frisk me. I’m clean,” said Stefan, grinning.

Chet seemed to find no humor in this. “Please get out of the car, slowly, hands where I can see them.”

“Sure, man.” Stefan climbed out of the car, hands still raised.

Chet guided him toward the front of the patrol vehicle, where he instructed Stefan to stand with his hands on the hood. It was so surreal, Stefan began to entertain the wild idea that Chet was playing a kinky version of their childhood cops and robbers game. He wiggled his ass and spread his legs.

“Aren’t you going to search me, Chet?”

But Chet had gone back to Stefan’s rental and popped the trunk. After several minutes, he came back and said, “Straighten up, Stefan, I’m going to have to cuff you.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Officer, sir,” said Stefan, obediently placing his wrists together behind his back. It was very like a game they had used to play. Of course, Chet would only pretend to put on the cuffs. They both knew how violently Stefan feared restraint.

There was something about Chet’s expression, though, that warned him and when his friend brought Stefan’s hands behind him and really did enclose one wrist in metal, Stefan jerked as if to pull away.

“Don’t. Please, Stef. This is hard enough.”

“What the hell is going on, Chet?”

Chet led Stefan toward the patrol car.

“You’re under arrest, Stefan Sanchez, for possession of drugs with intent to sell.”

“What? Are you kidding?”

“Please, Stef. They let me come out here on my own. Please don’t fight me.”

“Well then tell me what the hell is going on.”

Chet put his hand on Stefan’s head and eased him into the back seat. “We had an anonymous tip. About your rental car.”

“Hey, I paid my credit card bill, they are always messing up the…”

“There’s what looks like over a kilo of pot in the trunk, Stefan,” said Chet.

Stefan actually couldn’t find words for a second.

“You have the right to remain silent,” said Chet.

Stefan rallied. “This is insane, Chet. You’ve got to know that. Those drugs were planted there.”

“All I know is I have to take you in and…”

“No you don’t.” Stefan jerked at the cuffs.

“You have the right to an attorney,” said Chet. “I really think you shouldn’t say anything else without one. I called Sean on my way out here.

I could get in a lot of trouble for that, Stefan.”

Chet looked more shaken than Stefan felt.

“Okay, okay, I’m cooperating. But, man can you take off the cuffs? You know how I am about being restrained.” And he was. Already shaking, sweaty, breathing fast.

Chet seemed torn, but in the end he removed the handcuffs.

“Thanks, buddy,” breathed Stefan.

“I *am* your buddy, Stef. Don’t you forget that.”

Stefan actually took Chet’s advice and remained silent during the ten minute drive to the station.

* * *

“He’ll be processed like everybody else.” Sheriff Doub Pratchet looked, unfortunately, exactly like a stereotyped Texan sheriff. His graying hair was shorn on the sides of his meaty head and clipped into a flat-topped perfect circle around the crown. He was perhaps thirty pounds heavier and the pouches under his eyes were browner, the lines deeper, than they had been a decade ago, but he otherwise looked exactly as he had when he’d chased Tommy and Stefan and the gang down the highways, broken up their fights and called in their parents for a variety of adolescent misdemeanors.

His spacious desk chair squawked as he rocked back in it, legs spread to accommodate his belly. “We treat all suspects the same here, Chester.”

“Yes, sir.” Looking grim, Chet jerked a thumb toward a room with a heavy door and a window. “We’ll take your prints first, Stefan.”

“Why hasn’t this prisoner been handcuffed, deputy?” said Sheriff Pratchet.

“Stefan isn’t going to try to escape, chief.”

“Chester, I remember when Mr. Sanchez here and Tommy O’Connor and you climbed that water tower out by Peachtree Ranch and kicked the ladder down by mistake. I remember when we had to send the fire department to fish you three out of the Boerne River. Jane and I went to school together, for Christ’s sake. But you know we are going to have a slew of drug enforcement and FBI on this thing. We can’t afford to let anything slip.”

“Sheriff, you can’t believe those drugs are mine,” protested Stefan.

Doub Pratchet's black eyes were like bottomless pits. "Son, I've seen a lot of men I'd never have believed it of do crazy things in desperation."

I trusted your father. I'll not be fooled again, Stefan heard. He closed his mouth and allowed Chet to guide him to the fingerprint room.

* * *

The cell Chet led him to afterward was small, with one narrow bed and a wall that looked like it had been clawed by a thousand tiny fingernails. Stefan looked up and saw toilet paper balls sticking to the ceiling.

"This is not even a little sexy," said Stefan.

"Christ, how can you joke?" said Chet, fitting the key into the lock, his face showing a great deal more misery than Stefan was feeling. The tumblers had fallen into place when they both heard Sean's voice in the front office addressing Doub Pratchet.

Chet looked infinitely relieved as he swung the cell door back open so that Stefan could emerge.

"Damn," Stefan couldn't resist saying, "I was really looking forward to that cavity search."

* * *

It was a quick thing, considering. Megan arranged bail and Sean shoved paperwork under Stefan's hand for about ten minutes. He sat with Stefan in an interview room advising silence and then they were driving home in Megan's car.

"I have to call my mother."

"I called her," said Sean. "I didn't tell her you'd been arrested. Just that you had car trouble."

"Thank God." His mother didn't need that nightmare. "It wasn't mine," he said again.

"I believe you," said Sean. He and Megan exchanged looks in the rearview mirror.

"Seriously, man. You know how I feel about drugs." My God, his father had been *killed* selling drugs. How could Stefan ever even think of touching the stuff?

That same exchange of looks between Megan and Sean. "We'll talk when we get back to McDenny House," said Sean.

* * *

“I believe you,” said Sean again. He and Stefan sat in Patrick’s study. No one had explained Patrick’s absence to Stefan, and he hadn’t asked. He wasn’t looking forward to the moment when he’d have to look Patrick in the eye.

“It was a plant,” said Stefan. “I just know it.”

Sean’s brow wrinkled. “Say you’re right. Who would have planted drugs in your car?”

Stefan figured there was no point in mentioning Colin. Sean was probably already thinking it. “*Not* my car, Sean. It was a rental, remember? And why would I be carrying drugs around Boerne?”

“We’ve had a few incidences of people from out of town,” said Sean. “Drug dealers using rental agencies as drop zones. Out of towners pick up the cars and take the drugs to pre-chosen locations.”

“I was going to my mother’s house.”

“You were seen sitting in the A&W parking lot, Stefan. Who were you waiting for?”

Myself, thought Stefan. He couldn’t think of how to explain that, though.

Sean absently straightened the Texas state seal paperweight that was positioned in the middle of Patrick’s desk. “You know, I really do believe you’re innocent here. I’ve known you most of my life. You are a consummate bullshit artist. If you were going to sell drugs under the nose of a host of DEA and FBI agents, I imagine you’d have been more clever about it.”

“Thank you. I think.”

“As for the charges, I’ve been through this with Colin. It wasn’t your car. You weren’t in possession of the vehicle at the time the drugs were found. It’s not fun, but it all works itself out. You’ll be stuck in Texas for a while, though. Is that going to be a problem?”

“My publisher will have a small stroke, but I can deal with him.”

“It helps that you have family in the area.”

Stefan wondered to which family Sean was referring. “Yes. Where’s Patrick, by the way?” Facing Patrick with this news would be just as miserable as facing his mother with it.

Sean's white blond eyebrows lowered. "He had business in Austin, apparently." Sean's voice was neutral but he obviously did not approve.

"I can't help but think this has something to do with Tommy."

Sean took off the reading glasses he'd had perched on the end of his nose. Wearing a white button down business shirt with a thin black tie he really did look like a southern lawyer. "Why do you think that?"

Stefan didn't know why. He shook his head. "Intuition."

"Anybody else said that I'd laugh," said Sean, thoughtfully. "What do you propose doing about it?"

"I don't know. Do you still have a key to Tommy's place?"

Sean frowned. "I do."

"Can I borrow it?"

Sean folded his hands in front of him on top of the desk. "Why would you want to do that?"

"I've got a hunch about things."

Sean turned his head and gazed out the window. His eyes were less red than they had been in the past few days, though the lines around them seemed more prominent. "As your attorney, I advise you to let this go, Stefan."

"And as Tommy's brother?" asked Stefan.

There was a knock on the door and Evans' dark head poked in.

"Evans," said Sean. "I apologize for all of this. Mr. Sanchez will be staying with us a little longer than planned."

"I'd heard," said Evans.

* * *

"Are you going to follow me everywhere?" asked Stefan when he came out of the bathroom and found Evans leaning against a wall there, reading the paper.

"Possibly," said Evans, folding the paper.

When he followed Stefan up the stairs and into the guest room, however, Stefan turned on him. "You know, it might be easier if you put one of those ankle bracelets on me."

"You aren't under arrest, Mr. Sanchez."

“That is exactly my point, Evans. Stop crawling up my ass. Unless—” and Stefan gave the agent a mean smile and a suggestive lift of his eyebrows “—you *want* to crawl up my ass.”

He’d scored a hit. The man’s cheeks went pink.

Stefan lifted his laptop out of its case. Evans stood watching and Stefan glared at him. “I have work to do. I can’t work with someone standing there watching me!”

“No?”

“Of course not! It’s unnerving.”

Evans sidled up to the bedroom window and checked outside exactly the way Stefan imagined every spy was taught to do. Finger lifting the curtain, head glancing at an angle around the corner revealed.

“I’ll be waiting in the hall, then,” said Evans.

“What a comfort,” said Stefan. He opened his laptop, flexed his fingers and glared at Evans until he’d retreated from the room, closing the door behind him.

For half an hour Stefan typed almost mindlessly.

Charlie’s father had to meet with the chief detective, but he took the boys down to the crime scene investigative lab and introduced them to the head man, Ryan Proctor.

“This is the team studying the package you men found,” he said. The room was immaculate chrome and white porcelain.

The note from Ronnie read: “Let’s have a cool description of the lab here. Kids will expect it to look like a scene from CSI.”

Stefan grimaced and beat rhythmically on the space bar. His mind was so full of the events of the day, he couldn’t come up with anything to fulfill Ronnie’s request. He could hear, every few minutes or so, the squeak of floorboards just outside his bedroom door.

“Boy, I expected this place to look a little more high tech,” said Billy, frowning at the bespectacled man sitting on a footstool and

picking through the package with what looked like eyebrow tweezers.

“That’s for those rich city police departments,” said Proctor, sadly. “We’re lucky if we can get a read on fingerprints returned to us within a month.”

“How do you catch the crooks, then?” asked Billy, in surprise.

“Mostly we don’t,” admitted Proctor. “Life isn’t fair, boys. It’s about time you realized that.”

There was a knock at the door.

“I’m not decent, Evans!” shouted Stefan.

The door opened a crack, and Megan’s elfish head poked in. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Oh, man, sorry Megan. Come on in.”

She sat primly on the corner of the bed and watched him type for a while. “If it helps any, I know you had nothing to do with those drugs, Stefan.”

“Thank you. It does help.”

Megan glanced toward the door and then leaned a little closer to Stefan. “I parked a rental truck at the end of the block for you.”

Stefan was surprised. He somehow still thought of Megan as the good little Catholic girl who reliably tattled on her brothers. Not as someone who would knowingly flaunt the Secret Service, or whatever agency Evans represented. “Thank you, Meggie,” he said.

“Sean has to be careful what he talks about, because he’s a lawyer and an officer of the court, you know. But they found things in Tommy’s car that the police won’t tell us about.”

“I heard about the cash they found, Megan.”

“No, not that. We know that was planted, don’t we?”

Megan glanced at the door that shielded them from Evans’ prying eyes. “Tommy told me that he’d found out something pretty horrible. He told me he had all the proof in his files at home, but when we looked in the files, there were bits missing. We think the police, or even the DEA, have those bits.”

“Who exactly is we, Meggie?”

Evans seemed to materialize in the doorway. “Excuse me, Miss O’Connor? Your mother wants you.”

“Oh, thank you. Stefan, if you can help me find my bracelet, I’d really be grateful,” said Megan. She reached for Stefan’s hand and clasped it between her own.

“I’ll keep my eyes open for you,” he said. Megan had pressed something small and cold into his hand. He palmed it and dropped it into his lap before placing his hands back on the keyboard.

Megan cast a nervous glance at Evans as she left the room, but the agent’s gaze rested on Stefan as he slowly shut the door behind her.

“What?” said Stefan. “I’m *working* Evans.”

Evans gave him a narrow eyed, suspicious look, but he retreated again, closing the door.

Stefan looked down into his lap. The objects Megan had passed him were two keys—one tagged with the name of a local car rental company. He sat looking at them for a minute and then he stood, lifted his laptop and placed it on the desk, next to the computer Sean had shown him the previous evening.

He opened the movie software that came installed in the Macintosh, turned on the Record function, and started typing on his laptop again.

“What do you mean, life isn’t fair, cried Billy. “What about justice?”

The tech snorted derisively. “Only in movies, kid. Life is tough and then you die.”

Billy glanced at Charlie, who was staring at the man with his mouth open.

“You know, Charlie,” Billy said. “If this is true, maybe we should rethink trying that marijuana that Ralph Schumaker keeps offering us.”

“I was thinking about Rhonda Schwerwinkle,” said Charlie. “And what *she* keeps offering.”

“Go for it, kid,” advised Mr. Proctor. “You’ll thank me later.”

The door opened and Charlie’s father came in. “There you are, men! I hope you’ve learned something today.”

“Yes, sir!” said Billy.

Smiling a bit, Stefan stopped the recording. He opened the MP3 player software, imported the recording of himself typing, and cranked it up as high as possible.

It sounded just like he was still working.

Stefan set the recording to play on a loop. Then he stuffed his laptop into its padded over-the-shoulder case. He stuffed his cell phone into one pocket, the keys Megan had slipped him into another and padded over to the window. Taking great care that the old wood not creak as he did so, he eased the window open, climbed out, scrabbling with his toes in the bricks until he hung from the sill. He and Tommy had mastered escape from this room over the years. The drop to the ground was a couple feet shorter now than it had been when Stefan was ten, but his bones were considerably more fragile. And he didn't want to fall on his laptop case. He hung there, considering this, and then let go and fell the six remaining feet into the soft wet dirt of the flower bed next to the front porch.

At the end of the block, wheezing from running with smoke-congested lungs, he slowed to a walk. A few minutes later, he spotted the truck.

A Ford Super Duty pickup with bulging headlights and a grill that reminded him of a laughing publicist at a Hollywood party. It was the exact opposite of unobtrusive. Megan had always had a macabre sense of humor.

The engine filled the quiet block with sound and Stefan took off for the end of town where Tommy had lived.

Chapter Seven

Stefan parked in the alley, waited until he was sure the helpful neighbor wasn't watching, and then he let himself into Tommy's empty house.

The front rooms looked exactly as he remembered them. Clean, simple, with a dearth of furnishings and a lot of books, a brick-faced fireplace flanked by built-in bookshelves, the shelves and mantel covered with family photos.

He went straight through to Tommy's office. Alphabetized file cabinets holding cases from Tommy's firm lined an entire wall. Stefan bypassed these for the time being and headed for the desk. He found the key on a nail below the right hand register—where Tommy always left it—and using the edge of his shirt as a glove he opened the drawer of private files that Tommy kept there.

The files were what one would expect. Household and business expenses filed by year. A row of case files all labeled obviously by Tommy's district attorney's offices. Stefan rifled through them quickly, relying on a kind of weird instinct he'd had all his life for patterns and things that didn't fit.

He sensed immediately what Tommy's siblings had sensed. Tommy's meticulous filing order was askew, as if an entire middle section had been removed.

Stefan sat back on his heels and thought about this.

Carefully closing the desk drawer, Stefan walked through to the master bedroom and saw all as he would have expected, except for a feeling of disarray that was unusual in any place occupied by Sammy. The king bed was rumpled and had only one pillow on it. Receipts and trash were scattered across the dresser. He threw open the sliding closet door.

The scent of Tommy overwhelmed him.

All of his suit jackets hanging there. His shoes. *Who knew men left signature scent in their clothing?* Heart slamming with repressed emotions, Stefan rifled blindly through the closet.

He found the shoe boxes at the back and caught his fingers on a heavy metal box stashed there.

Tommy's handguns. Tommy had kept his guns and ammunition locked up most of the time. But the box was unlocked, and Stefan found a Glock and a box of ammunition. One set of shells was for a .45. But there was no .45 in the box.

He went to the office where he found Tommy's gun case. Also unlocked. And one of his rifles notably missing.

Stefan stood still in the middle of the office, feeling the small hairs rising on his neck, his arms, his heartbeat slowly increasing.

"Something's funny about this," said Billy.

Charlie raised the magnifying glass from where he'd been burning his initials into the stump. "What is it, Billy?"

"Woho!" said Georgie, "Billy's whiskers are twitching."

"Just like a cat," chuckled Charlie. "Smelling a rat."

"No, not a rat," said Billy, frowning and rubbing his chin. He crouched down by the stump and tipped his head sideways, studying it closely. "Somebody else has been here, recently," he told them.

Seventh sense pulsing, Stefan frowned at Tommy's desk. There were no high tech devices there. Tommy even used an old-fashioned desk blotter.

Samantha had been the computer geek, so Tommy's desktop system was crammed into a corner and dusty. When Stefan booted it up, it wheezed and ground for a few minutes before the screen flickered on.

Tommy had had very few software applications installed. Stefan found only a couple of letters in the documents folder. He went to Tommy's e-mail account and sat for only a few minutes before typing Sammy's name into the password box and gaining access to Tommy's e-mails.

For seven years Stefan had been receiving handwritten letters from Tommy. The e-mail box seemed full of nothing but spam. Stefan checked the bookmarks and found a handful, one of them for info about Hang Ten, Colin's skateboarding franchise.

Stefan opened the gateway to Colin's site. It was very low tech, though the products advertised had hefty price tags.

Just below the Hang Ten bookmark was one for Peachtree Spa

Stefan frowned and shut down the unit.

* * *

He went back to the living room, drawn to the mantel and a large silver frame holding a photo of Tommy, Sammy and him. He couldn't stop himself from picking it up. They'd been in the backyard of McDenny House. He recognized the line of the bushes behind them. Tommy was cherubic and pink from sun exposure, his thick yellow hair askew, his crooked grin wide. Stefan was always surprised to see himself in photos. Dark, devilish, his hair shorn for the summer, wearing an oversized rugby shirt. Sammy stood between them, arms hanging off both their shoulders, leaning toward the photographer, laughing. In cutoffs and a striped red and white T-shirt. Freckles across a Saxon face, snub-nosed and blonde, she would have looked at home on a tennis court or on the arm of a congressman.

"Gee," said Billy. "You can throw pretty well for a girl."

The girl took off her baseball cap, letting her blond hair fall to her shoulders. "I throw pretty well for a boy or a girl."

Charlie grinned. "I'll say."

She held out the hand that wasn't covered by a mitt and introduced herself, "I'm Melanie Greene. But my friends call me Mel."

"Well, how do you do, Mel," said Charlie, shaking her hand. "We haven't seen you around, have we? Are you new in town?"

"Yes, my parents moved here last month from New York."

"Wow. New York," said Billy, in wonder.

"Where are you boys headed?"

"We thought we'd go fishing," said Charlie.

"Can I come with you?"

"Aw, a New York girl wouldn't like it," said Billy. "It's just a muddy ol' creek down by Mac's farm."

"Sounds wonderful!" said Mel.

"Great," said Charlie. "You can borrow my pole."

Sammy had been the model for the Backtree boys' sometime sidekick, the tomboyish Mel. In the book, she was only one of the many chums, caught in the same eternal innocent preadolescence as Stefan's other

characters. But in real life, boys grow up and pretty girls became pretty young women.

Sam and Tommy had been high school sweethearts and college fiancées. She was charming and bright and had loved Tommy with her whole heart. They'd been the four musketeers: Tommy, Sam, Stefan, and Chet.

“Don't worry, old man. Sammy says she'll never stand between friends.”

It was the memory of Tommy's voice, not his wry presence. The whole house seemed to swell with memory. Another picture on the mantel of Tommy, Stefan, and Chet in a beaten gray-green canoe. Sammy must have taken this one. Tommy was smiling at the camera, Chet and Stefan were smiling at each other.

Sammy had been the one to notice it at first, when Chet and Stefan had become *complicated*. In retrospect, Stefan could remember the hundreds of small ways she'd tried to give them time alone, tried to give them privacy.

When Chet and Stefan's so-called relationship had devolved into a painful ritual of breaking away and coming desperately back together, only to split again, Sammy had been scrupulously careful to include Stefan in everything she and Tommy did together.

“Don't take it the wrong way, old man, but I need some time alone with her, you know? Can't you stay home tonight?”

“Sure, Tommy.”

And then later, Tommy's pained expression, Sammy's stubborn one, Stefan sitting between them on the car seat.

So Stefan had left Texas. Finally. Not that there hadn't been the other reasons already.

“Where are you?” he asked her photograph.

Stefan was about to place the frame back on the mantel when he noticed a piece of paper stuck to the back. He pulled it out and, with a sense of the surreal slowly settling over him, unfolded the thing and found four figures of the weird code that Tommy had worked out over the years.

Sam, Tom, Stef. Caverns. So said the paper. Frowning, Stefan studied the photograph again. It wasn't of the three of them at the Caverns. It was of the three of them at the Riverwalk. And why identify the photograph in code?

Stefan began lifting each framed photo that sat on the mantle. A piece of paper identical to the one he had found was taped to the back of each and every photo. Each piece of paper with the same coded word: *caverns*.

Moving quickly, Stefan went back into the bedroom. He stuffed the Glock into the back of his jeans, the ammunition into a pocket. Tommy had an old Smith & Wesson in a box that also proved to have bullets and a holster. Stefan slid this on under his jacket. He checked the rifles, but decided they were too large to conceal.

Stefan was a Texan. When in doubt, arm yourself.

* * *

Stefan had once heard the Cascade Caverns described as “one of the tackiest roadside attractions in Texas.” Quite a distinction in a state that included the Toilet Seat Museum and the Pink Cadillac Ranch. From the I-10, Stefan bumped down a dirt road, getting Megan’s money’s worth out of the rental truck’s shocks, and wove around an amusement park graveyard until he spotted the twenty-foot garishly green dinosaur at the entrance to the caverns.

The tour guides to these caverns were culled from the local adolescent population. Tommy, Stefan, and Sammy had all served enough time in them so he could peel his thirteen dollars off for his guided tour, and then easily slip away from the group after the first ‘room.’

Using only his small penlight and the memory of the place, Stefan slid his feet across the damp gritty floors, his hand following the equally damp stone wall, until he came to an area only dimly lit and unremarkable, so off the regular tours. He got down on his hands and knees and crawled through what he knew was a small opening into a still smaller cave room. A rush of cool air and the distant sound of water. This room was a well-kept secret amongst the local youth. Quite a few young men and women had lost their virginity on its cold stone floor.

The room was currently empty. Stefan shone his penlight across it and saw signs of human occupation here and there. He shone the light up and around the cavern ceiling, and that’s when he saw the squiggly pinkish symbol above the narrow entrance.

He crouched beneath it, shining his tiny light on it fully. The substance had a waxy look, like pink lipstick, and it was a hurriedly scrawled lopsided

drawing of a devil. Below it was the coded symbol that Tommy had created to represent Samantha.

Heart hammering, Stefan crawled back out of the small room, shining his light on all of the ceiling, walls, and floor as he went.

Another scribbled devil, in the same pink, was smudged but definite in the entrance he'd come through. His own feet must have smeared it.

Stefan searched the ceilings, walls, and floor, finding Samantha's coded name scratched into the stone. He ran his fingers over it. The cavern stone was hard as granite and the etching was badly done. The artist must have given up trying to carve and gone for the lipstick.

Stefan crouched on his haunches there in the muggy dark and switched off his flashlight while he tried to think what it all meant. He could hear the steady drip and echo that seemed to come from every corner. The smell of wet stone, an odor like nothing else. A faint sweet smell, like bubblegum.

Sammy always smelled like bubble gum. Stefan didn't know if he really caught that odor or if it was memory and wishful thinking playing with his head.

When he emerged from the caverns, he headed toward the truck at a trot.

The devil must be Sammy's way of telling him that she was headed to the Devil's Backbone, the ridge that ran through the Texas hill country.

* * *

He was on the I-10, headed toward the 1, when he saw the bright yellow Corvette just behind him, riding his bumper at ninety miles an hour. Taking his time, Stefan moved to the far right lane and exited the highway, only slowing when he'd gotten to the two-lane road at the edge of a wide field.

He pulled onto the soft mud, watching as the Corvette pulled over and parked behind him. Chet strolled up to his car and leaned in, big arms resting on the door.

"You look like you're running from the law, Stefan Sanchez," Chet drawled in his best Texan accent.

"You gonna take me in again, sheriff?"

Chet looked pained. "Stef, I had to."

"It's okay."

"But I thought you were going to cool your heels in McDenny House."

“Needed some air,” said Stefan.

“Air?” grinned Chet. “I’ll give you air.”

He had that look on his face. His hand lay on the door and he moved his finger enough to brush Stefan’s hand. “We’re just up the road from a turnout, Stef. How ‘bout we go for a walk?”

Stefan moved his hand away. “Maybe later.” He looked away from the expression on Chet’s face, pretending to search for cigarettes. “I meant to ask you. Have you seen the evidence collected from Tommy’s car?”

Chet’s face got that wary look. “You talking about the money they found? I saw it when they popped the trunk. Damnit, Stefan. I shouldn’t be talking to you about this. We’re still pursuing the case, and when these things go to trial...”

Stefan nodded, impatiently. “What about the other things?”

“Other things? Like what kind of other things?”

“Well, his briefcase? Were there any papers?”

Chet’s eyes narrowed. “Who’ve you been talking to?”

“So there *were* papers?”

“There was an empty briefcase. Empty glove box. Somebody’d already been there. And you know I shouldn’t have told you that. What are you up to now?”

“Nothing.”

“Christ, this is me, Stef,” said Chet, and he laid his hand on Stefan’s again.

Stefan regarded that hand. Square wide fingers, flat trim fingernails. A frosting of red hairs above the knuckles. A tiny white scar where Chet had cut himself on barbed wire getting Stefan and Tommy out of a scrape. The flattened knuckle where he’d broken his hand in a fight. Five boys against the three of them. It was true. Even when things had gotten ugly and they could barely look at each other, Chet had always come when he was called.

“I’ve got your back, buddy,” he said, now.

Stefan nodded. “I think I might know where Sammy has gone.”

“Holy cow, Stefan.”

“I just figured it out today.” Stefan frowned, squinting at the clump of trees behind the A&W. “You knew a little of that code Tommy invented, right?”

“I never was into it like you two were. And you guys *lived* together. You practically had a secret language. What did you find, Stefan?”

Stefan ground out his cigarette. “I’ve got to go, Chet.”

Chet studied him for a full minute and then said, “You can’t afford anymore trouble, Stefan.”

“Who said anything about getting into trouble?”

“I know you, Stefan Sanchez. You’ve got that look in your eye.”

“I wouldn’t do anything to embarrass the O’Connors,” said Stefan.

“You’re still out on bail. That means you can’t cross the county line. You know that, right?”

“If I decide to make a run for the border, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Don’t joke,” said Chet worriedly. He glanced up and down the road and then reached up and touched Stefan’s face. The gesture surprised Stefan to stillness so he was unprepared when Chet leaned through the window and kissed him as well.

“Be careful,” breathed Chet, eyes dark and serious.

Stefan swallowed and nodded.

He heard Chet slap the rear fender of his truck as he threw it into gear and trundled back out onto the highway, saw Chet’s figure dwindling in the rearview mirror, watching, as Stefan hung a left, toward downtown Boerne.

He waited in the underpass for ten minutes, then reversed, hung a quick U-turn and headed back toward the expressway.

Ten minutes later, Stefan’s truck, going eighty on the old I-1, passed the Boerne county line, headed north toward Blanco and old Route 52, known as the Devil’s Backbone.

Chapter Eight

The Devil's Backbone is a Texas legend, a narrow spine winding two thousand feet above the cave-riddled limestone Texas hill country. From the two-lane highway along its ridge, one can see for miles to either side, and it is a popular touring route, especially in the spring when the bluebells, daisies and bluebonnets erupt across the landscape. A number of springs trickle down the slopes to carve many caves and deep ravines into the thin top soil and limestone beneath.

It is purportedly haunted by Indians, Civil War soldiers, and old Spanish monks. It is also prime hunting, camping, and hiking territory, and the home of many artists, musicians and old coots of the Texas tradition.

The last year that Stefan had lived in Boerne, Tommy bought a rundown hunter's cabin just twenty yards south of the ridge, about a half hour from Blanco if one drove pedal to the metal. The two-room shack had been drafty and only had an outhouse, but even then Tommy had boasted what he'd do to the place after he and Samantha were married.

The Ford Super Duty pickup that Megan had rented for him might have had impressive musculature, but it got about five miles to the gallon. Stefan had to pull off the highway twice before he even got to Blanco. Both times he tried Sammy again on his cell, but didn't get through. Perhaps Chet was right, and she'd turned off her phones. Just out of Blanco, Stefan pulled off the main highway, trundled along a dirt road and noted that the gas needle was tipping into the red again. He'd been delaying a necessary call to Ronnie ever since he'd been arrested. So he pulled into a tiny two-pump Texaco station that consisted of a garage full of tires, a four-by-four-foot shop with one shelf of snacks and a cooler full of Nehis, an attendant relaxing in a tipped back wooden chair and an old dog whose foot-long tongue drooled happy saliva over Stefan's ropers while the truck fed greedily from the pump.

Scratching the dog's ears, Stefan strolled to the empty grassy lot behind the station, so he could smoke a cigarette and call Ronnie.

"How's my favorite writer?" Ronnie answered the call. His voice had a lazy, self-assured quality, and Stefan could hear the buzz of voices in the

background. Stefan knew from experience, that Ronnie was probably standing at a bar smiling in that urbane way of his at some young someone or another as he answered the call.

“Listen, Ronnie, it looks like I’m staying here a little longer.”

A pause while Ron undoubtedly schooled himself to patience. “If you aren’t coming back until Sunday, I’ll need you to e-mail me that draft after all.”

“Uh, sure. But, look, something’s come up and I might be stuck here a little longer than next Sunday.”

“We have a meeting with the market rep on Monday, Stef.”

“Yeah, about that. Can’t we have the meeting in San Antonio?”

“*Why?*” Ronnie’s smooth, easy tone gave way to the anxious agent Stefan knew and loved.

“Hmmm, I might have a problem leaving Texas.”

“And again I ask why?”

“There might have been an arrest,” said Stefan.

“An *arrest*? An arrest for what?” Ronnie’s voice rose in decibels with every word.

“Just some pot.”

“Hang on a moment,” Stefan heard Ron say to whomever undoubtedly stood beside him. There was a change in the tone of the background noise that Stefan imagined meant Ron had moved to a part of the club where he could scream at Stefan without raising eyebrows. “Stefan, you don’t smoke pot,” he pronounced loudly.

“I wasn’t smoking it. They arrested me for intent to sell...”

“*You were dealing drugs?*” Ronnie was going to have a sore throat after this phone conversation, Stefan guessed.

“No big deal, Ronnie.”

“*No big deal?* Stefan, you write *children’s* books.”

“Adolescent action adventure, actually, but—”

“There is a morals stipulation with this publisher, Stefan!”

“Yeah yeah. It’s going to be fine. I’ll explain everything later. Listen...”

Stefan could hear Ronnie huffing through his nose like an angry bull. “Just send me those pages—”

“About that. I’ve been busy with this thing and...”

“Stefan Sanchez, have you ever heard the term *breach of contract*?” Ron shouted.

“I’m working on it.”

“You’ve been working on it for four months!”

“I know, I know. You’ll have something tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” Ron repeated, flatly. He’d fallen for Stefan’s Little Orphan Annie tune more than once.

“I swear,” said Stefan.

And then he hung up before Ronnie could say anything else.

* * *

“You busy much?” asked Stefan, buying cigarettes and wet towelettes while paying for his gas.

The attendant pushed back his ancient blue-striped Texaco gimme cap and grinned. “Nope.”

Cause for celebration, apparently.

“Bet there’s a lot of tourists up here in the spring.”

“Yep. But this week they’s been just you and the lady and her brother. If it weren’t for y’all I could have just stayed closed.”

All the hairs stood up on Stefan’s arms. “Pretty blonde lady, about yay high?” Stefan’s hand hovered a little more than five feet from the ground.

A knowing expression on the man’s face. “She told me there’d be someone lookin’ for her.”

“What?”

“The way she was cryin’ and carryin’ on, poor little thing. I told her, you should just call him. But she says ‘no, it’s too complicated.’ I told her, I says, ‘you can’t listen to all’s a man says when he’s been drinkin’ honey,’ but she said it wasn’t like that.”

“Oh, right, you know it was all a misunderstanding,” said Stefan, thinking fast. “How long ago did you see her?”

“Coupla days. She bought out all my snacks and drinks.” He waved toward the window where Stefan could see one shelf filled with everything from motor oil to mini-cereal boxes. “She said the cabin probably didn’t have food on account of y’all hadn’t been up this way for a while. Said she couldn’t get enough of those little chocolate donuts.” He chuckled. “Cryin’ and eatin’ chocolate. My wife was the same way when she was expecting.”

Stefan felt his heart beat hard. Twice. “Was she?”

“Sure it’s those hormones. You’ll see, she’ll be all kinds of sorry when you catch up ta her. Y’all got ta just be patient. I told her brother he oughta leave it alone, it’s between youse two, but...”

“Her brother?”

“Yes, sir.” The attendant scratched at his jaw, eyes narrowing and brow furrowing painfully, as if exerting the unfamiliar effort to think. “That was her brother, wasn’t it?”

Stefan thought back to what sort of car Evans drove. “Big guy driving a blue Buick?”

The attendant’s face cleared with relief. “That’s him. He was here just an hour ago. I’m surprised you and him weren’t together.”

“You know how family can be,” said Stefan. “He thinks he knows better than her own husband. But I wonder how he’s going to find his way to the cabin. He’s never been there before.”

“Funny thing, he said something like that himself. But I tole him there’s not many cabins with someone in them. You can jest drive along and watch for the lights.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I see your point. I guess I’ll meet him up at the cabin.” He was an idiot. Hadn’t been careful enough. He might have led a tail right to Sammy. He jumped in the truck and peeled out of the station, jabbing a series of numbers out on his phone.

“Chet? Looks like I need your help, bud.”

“Stefan? Damn it, I knew I shouldn’t have let you drive off on your own.” Chet sounded aggravated. “Where are you?”

“On a dirt road headed out of Willoughby toward RR52,” said Stefan.

A pause. “What are you doing out there, Stefan?”

“You know any law enforcement who work the Devil’s Backbone?”

“The hill country?” said Chet. “I have a buddy in the Rangers.”

“Well, I might need their help.”

“What you need is to turn around and get your ass back to Boerne before anybody knows you’ve jumped bail.”

“Listen, Chet. Tommy’s files have been ransacked, and I think one of those agents that moved into McDenny house is involved. That agent’s been right on my heels since I got here and I think he’s after Sammy now.”

“Tommy’s files? Were you the one who broke into Tommy’s house last night?”

“I had a key, Chet. And I found clues that Sammy left...”

“Clues? What are you *talking* about Stefan?”

“...but I played the damned fool and led that agent right to her.”

“Agent? What Agent?”

“Evans.”

“Stefan Sanchez, what the hell do you think...?”

The road had a series of ruts and Stefan had to hold onto the wheel with both hands, so he missed whatever Chet said next.

“Hey. I didn’t hear that,” he informed Chet when he could get the phone back up to his ear.

“I said why RR 52?” said Chet. “What’s up there?”

“Tommy had a cabin up there,” said Stefan. “Didn’t he ever take you to it? Chet?” He looked down and saw the signal on his phone had dropped off. He pressed the redial, but nothing went through. With the hills all around him, he must have entered a dead zone. Well, all he could hope was that he’d gotten enough information to Chet before the call had dropped.

Ten minutes later, he gunned the truck up a curved steep track and pulled onto the Devil’s Backbone.

Despite having spent his youth traipsing these hills, Stefan had to cruise slowly along the ridge, a narrow two-lane road with a dizzying view off either side. A full moon lit the valleys below, North and South Texas a waking dream of blues and blacks. Stefan watched for lighted cabin windows, turnoffs and the painted boards with lot numbers on them, but he didn’t see anything. He was just starting to panic when he was startled by a

reflection on the road. Too small for a deer, maybe a rabbit. He slammed on his brakes and the truck veered toward the edge of the road. Slammed hard against something there and stopped dead, throwing him hard into the embrace of his seat belt.

It took a minute for Stefan to check himself and catch his breath. He wasn't hurt and when he threw it into park and turned the key, the truck started up again with no problems. He looked around. Whatever he'd nearly hit was nowhere to be seen. Stefan rubbed his eyes and thought he was might be hallucinating from lack of sleep and worry and then he noticed the sign, half bent over behind an overgrown clump of prairie grass. The truck had practically run over it.

Professionally carved with light-reflective numbers. Beneath, bright red and seeming almost to move in the shadows blown about him, a devil carved into the wood. And Stefan recognized the steep, rutted road that led to Tommy and Samantha's cabin.

Megan's rental proved its worth again as he descended the track, its headlights bouncing and flashing over rocks, trees, and startled squirrels until he reached a spot about twenty feet above the cabin itself. Before him, a deep, narrow creek cut across the property, spanned by a three-foot wide wooden bridge. From this point, only foot traffic could pass.

The small building shone a light from one window. Stefan killed his engine and climbed out. The wind above was eerie, ruffling leaves and bending trees and blowing through the etched limestone rocks with a high-pitched sound like someone blowing through a clay whistle.

As he stepped out of the truck, he saw the light go out. The wind died a little and he distinctly heard a *creak*, as if a rusted door hinge was being cautiously opened. He crouched down next to the truck. Sammy was a hell of a shot, and she had no way of knowing it was him.

Silence.

Wind rose and creaked in the branches overhead. Or was it the door to the cabin that creaked, a shadow stooping there? Stefan thought he saw moonlight on blonde hair, then a shadow billowing, like long hair tossed by the wind. A light flickered, a handheld flashlight that illuminated an arm, a cheek, like a forest banshee or one of the legendary ghosts. Then the flashlight's beam turned, scanned the clearing, catching on Stefan's truck.

“Sammy?” called Stefan.

“Who is that?” yelled a voice too gruff and male to be Sammy.

The shadow moved under the yellow porch light and revealed itself to be a man. Stefan had time to puzzle over what appeared to be a gun in the man’s hand when the air left his lungs and a big body landed on top of him in the soft pine needles all over the ground. “What the...”

Two loud gunshots and the definite whistle of bullets very close by.

“Shut up,” said Evans from on top of him.

“What the hell?” squeaked Stefan.

A bullet ricocheted off a tree just a few feet above their heads.

“Why can’t you... Shut. Up?” asked Evans, his mouth *on* Stefan’s ear.

Stefan got his arm up under himself and shoved his elbow into Evans’ ribs. When the agent reacted, he bucked and rolled, kicking.

Evans cursed and grabbed at him, but Stefan kept rolling, going to his back and sliding down the hill toward the gully beside the cabin, pine needles and dirt crawling up his shirt as he slid. He felt the Glock slipping out of his belt as he went and clamped one elbow over the butt of it. He heard another bullet overhead.

Stefan rolled under a bush. Chin on the dirt, he peered uphill through the bushes’ branches. He could clearly see two men now, their silhouettes outlined by the glow of light from the cabin. Those silhouettes blended and reappeared from between the slender outlines of trees as they crisscrossed, spreading out and searching the trees where he had been lying just moments ago.

One gruff male voice shouted something and then there were more gunshots. Somebody cried out.

Stefan brought out the revolver still tucked safely in its holster under his arm, checked the safety, and trained it on the bodies above him. Unfortunately, he didn’t know who was shooting whom or why, so he wasn’t feeling good about disengaging the safety on the gun.

A soft sound near him that could have been a squirrel or small fuzzy rodent scurrying deeper into his lair was all that announced Evans’ appearance. Rolling from behind a clump of sage, eyes flashing at Stefan as he grabbed the back of Stefan’s head with one hand, his gun hand with the

other, immobilizing him and shoving his face into the earth before Stefan could react.

Evans' mouth on Stefan's ear. "I could see your thick skull from twenty paces," he whispered. "Keep down."

"Whath going on?" said Stefan, half his mouth pressed into the rich mulch on the ground.

"Shut it," hissed Evans against his ear again.

Stefan decided for the moment to go with the devil he knew. He and Evans lay there, the big body pressing Stefan's into the earth, his heart beating hard against Stefan's back, hand heavy and hot on his neck. Distantly, Stefan could hear men moving in the brush. He couldn't tell if they were getting closer.

Uphill and to the left, a man's voice. "I'm shot."

"Shut up," said another male voice. And then the woods went deathly quiet again except for the persistent wind. Uphill and to the right, brushy sounds that could have been animals, the wind, or another man with a gun. It was disturbingly hard to tell.

"When I tell you, slide backward," said Evans at his ear. Stefan felt his weight slide off, the sound it seemed of Evans slithering backward. A big hand on Stefan's ass, his calf, his foot. A pause. Evans yanked Stefan's foot and Stefan pushed himself so that—gravity and the soft leafy mold helping him—he slithered and slid and followed Evans on his belly another ten yards down the slope.

They came to a flat spot and Evans rolled and sat up in one fluid motion, pressing his back to a wide, heavy oak trunk. Stefan crawled on elbows and knees next to him, so that his body was also hidden by the trunk.

He could see Evans' mouth open, lashes moving, as his silhouetted face peered around the tree trunk, up the hill from which they'd come, the silhouette of a gun muzzle in his hand.

Stefan peeked out and could clearly see the dark outline of a person moving around in the clearing above them. A second man's feet crashed in the bushes to their left. After another minute of listening, he was almost certain that the two men were getting closer to where he and Evans lay.

Evans rolled to a crouch, slapping Stefan on the back and indicating with two fingers the direction in which they were to go next. Downhill and

slightly east of the lighted cabin above.

Evans maneuvered soundlessly through the bushes, and Stefan followed, running hunched over for another ten yards or so. Evans hopped down into a dark area and Stefan followed blindly, surprised not to feel the ground immediately under his feet and, instead, falling into darkness.

A big arm caught him around his chest, jerked him sideways and, instead of the ground, he landed on a big male body with Evans' hand over his mouth.

“Shh,” spoken against Stefan's ear again. “Don't move.”

As if he could. Evans' arm was so tight around Stefan's rib cage he could barely inhale. Evans had pulled Stefan almost into his lap and Stefan tried not to think about how it felt to be held so tightly against the big man. Not when death by bullet was still imminent. He could hear the men above, still searching the brush they had come through.

Barely daring to move his head, Stefan glanced around their tiny hiding place. Evans had led them to one of the ravines that laced the hillside of the Devil's Backbone. The high rock wall they huddled against masked them from the hillside above. Five feet away was another, lower wall. They were almost in a cave.

An interminable period of held breath and the sound of feet crashing in the brush. It was hard to hear with the wind howling around them, but from the occasional sound of tumbling gravel and crackle of dry brush, Stefan suspected that the men with guns were working their way back and forth, methodically, down the slope. After what seemed like hours but had probably only been a couple of minutes, Evans released Stefan and edged over to the entrance to the “cave,” to watch the hillside above them, his gun drawn.

“Wait here,” was all he said, and he was gone. Slipping into the darkness with that creepy silence of his.

All Stefan could hear was the wind and the occasional rattle of leaves. All he could see were shadows and flashes of moonlight through moving branches. His paranoia mounted rapidly until he couldn't stand it anymore. No way he was going to sit here and wait for a random armed man to capture him. He eased himself out of the rock-lined space and crept in the

general direction he believed Evans had gone, sliding and slipping instinctively downhill.

Once again, an arm reached out and grabbed him.

“*Oof*,” said Stefan. He couldn’t say much else because Evans hand was across his mouth again.

“I told you to wait,” Evans whispered.

Stefan just rolled his eyes. He didn’t know what he expected, but he certainly didn’t expect Evans to laugh. Silently. Shaking his head and producing that wide smile again. “Fine then, stay here,” whispered Evans. “I’ll lead them west. Count to five hundred and then go east, back toward the ravine. Twenty yards beyond the bend, you’ll find my car under loose branches and leaves. It has a secure radio that you can use to call for help. Under no circumstances try to use your cell phone. Do you understand?”

“What? No.”

“The GPS on your phone has been engaged since you arrived in Boerne,” hissed Evans urgently. “Do *not* turn it on for any reason.”

“Who are those men, Evans?”

“I was going to ask you that. Obviously they aren’t friends of yours.”

“I thought they were friends of *yours*. What are you doing up here?”

“I was following you,” hissed Evans. “I hoped you would lead me to Samantha O’Connor.” His hand clapped over Stefan’s mouth again. “Shhh.”

The men crisscrossing through the brush were probably scaring every rabbit, possum and squirrel. There was a crash and scurry nearby, and Evans pushed himself up onto one elbow, gun raised.

“I’m going to lead them away from the car,” said Evans. “Remember what I told you.” He eased up as if he would slither into the darkness again, but Stefan grabbed at him.

“They might have Samantha in that cabin,” he said.

“In that case, you should let me go to her aid...” Evans worked to pry Stefan’s fingers lose, but Stefan wrapped a leg around Evans and prevented him from standing.

“Why should I trust you?” said Stefan. “Who are you?”

“I’m the man who just saved your life,” said Evans through gritted teeth. He planted one big hand on Stefan’s upper thigh, trying to get Stefan’s leg

off him, but Stefan locked his ankles together and hung on.

“You mean that flying tackle earlier? I thought you just couldn’t resist me.”

There was a definite crash nearby. Too big to be a rabbit. Maybe a deer. More likely an armed man.

Evans gritted his teeth and pushed and pulled at Stefan, who had made himself as sticky as possible, clinging so that in order to stand Evans would have to bring Stefan with him. “Oh, I can’t Mr. Sanchez,” he panted, fiercely, “But at the moment I would just like to avoid getting shot.”

They struggled almost silently, faces inches away from each other. Evans’ chest heaving against his, Stefan could smell his musk and a clean scent of Old Spice. Evans’ breath warm on Stefan’s face as he whispered, “Remember, go east toward the car and...”

Later, Stefan would puzzle over why he had done what he did next. Maybe it was just Evans continuous physical proximity, maybe some kind of death wish. But Stefan raised his head and pressed his mouth to Evans’.

Evans froze in shock. His lips moved. Almost involuntarily, Stefan’s own lips opened. Warm. Soft. Through his lashes he saw Evans’ eyes close.

Two heartbeats while the stars reeled in the heavens, and then Stefan was alone on his back in the dirt and Evans was running down the hill. Moving with that silent grace that was almost eerie for such a big man, Evans dashed from shadow to shadow, disappearing into the dense pool of darkness that surrounded the cabin.

“No way,” whispered Stefan to himself and followed him again.

At the edge of the clearing, Stefan watched from behind a pine as Evans ran across the small opening and plastered himself to the shadows along the wall of the cabin. His eyes had adjusted to the meager moonlight and Stefan thought he saw a shadow at the back of the cabin move around the corner and begin approaching Evans from the rear.

Stefan sprinted across the clearing and surprised the shadow. A raccoon—which spun about and cleared the area via two metal trash cans that fell, crashing and echoing as they went.

Evans spun around. A silhouette appeared and a man’s voice shouted from just right of the clearing. Stefan was almost back behind the pine when shots rang out and he hit the dirt.

From where he lay, he saw Evans duck behind a clump of trees, but then two figures emerged from behind the same trees and Stefan watched in dismay as a man led Evans, whose hands had obviously been secured behind him, across the clearing, up the stairs and into the cabin.

Damn it.

Stefan crawled on elbows and knees back up the pine needle-covered hillside, around the back of the cabin. He could hear a man crashing through the bushes, probably still looking for him. He lay there in the dark, willing himself to not even breathe until finally he heard the creak of feet on steps and saw the second man ascending to the porch and reentering the cabin where his partner held Evans. And, possibly, Samantha.

Both of whom were, hopefully, still alive.

Stefan crouched against a tree behind the cabin, listening with every cell of his body for any sounds that might come from the cabin. A yellow bug light showed the spilled trash containers behind the cabin. That same raccoon's eyes flashed red at him as it reconnoitered the cabin, then it jumped and skittered off as a crash and raised voices came from the cabin.

"I told you..." Another crash. The front light went on, its glow showing the row of oaks that edged its clearing. Another crash and a door slammed.

Footsteps creaked. "I tol' you, it's just a damned 'coon," Stefan heard a man say clearly. More creaking steps and the door slammed again.

Long minutes of silence. Stefan was so anxious that he had to count to himself to be sure he was waiting a reasonable time.

Then, as quietly as he could, Stefan tiptoed around to the window at the back, which he knew was the sole bedroom, and peaked in. Evans lay on the bed, hands and feet bound and tape over his mouth. His eyes were closed, face relaxed. He looked unconscious. Or dead.

Voices clearly carried through the closed bedroom door. Loud arguing. Stefan strained to listen, but could only hear two distinct voices.

The window was open. Stefan had always been a little bit of a monkey. He slid his foot and then leg up and in, then hiked his ass up and slithered down onto the floor on the other side.

The loud argument still going on in the other room masked the *thud* of his landing on the wooden floor. Then he crouched there, waiting for the

sound of feet or voices. After what seemed a very long time, he tiptoed to the bed and, heart hammering, touched Evans' throat, looking for a pulse.

Evans stirred. His lids fluttered, and in the dark room his eyes flashed white as they rolled up and saw Stefan. His brows lowered. For a moment, Stefan considered leaving the tape across Evans' mouth, but he didn't.

"Why didn't you do as I told you?" whispered Evans, the minute the tape was removed.

"You're welcome," whispered Stefan, checking the ties that had been cinched around Evans' wrists and ankles. "Where do you get off telling me what to do? Is Sammy in the other room?" The ties were the plastic type frequently used to secure electronics in shipment.

"Keep your voice down for Christ's sake. I didn't see Mrs. O'Connor outside. And from what I've heard she had left before our friends arrived at the cabin. Get the knife from my boot heel," Evans said to Stefan, who was having no luck breaking the plastic bands.

"Sammy escaped? Good for her." Following the direction of Evans' nod, Stefan found the mechanism in Evans' boot heel, twisted it open and discovered a blade, very much like an old fashioned razor, folded there. Very cool.

Evans seemed irritable when Stefan finally sawed through the plastic. He pushed himself off the bed without even a thank you and immediately began searching the room.

"They took my gun."

"I'm shocked," Stefan whispered back.

Evans snapped his fingers impatiently, palm out. "Give me yours."

"No way," said Stefan, but Evans grabbed hold of him and short of another wrestling match, there wasn't much Stefan could do.

"Is it loaded?" Evans checked the Glock's clip with a neatly quiet *click* and *snap* that spoke of an intimate familiarity with guns.

"Of course."

From behind the door, they heard the voices rising again.

"I can take them now," said Evans. "Get out of here."

Jaw set grimly, hands on Stefan's shoulders, Evans pushed Stefan toward the small window in the room. Stefan stuck his leg through and eased his

butt onto the sill, but the old wood, unfortunately, squawked.

“Go!” commanded Evans, pushing Stefan as if he would cram his entire body through the little square.

Footsteps and voices directly outside the door.

“Evans I’m not a rag doll,” protested Stefan, fighting Evans off. But the bigger man got Stefan’s butt wedged in the opening and then shoved. Stefan fell onto the grass below. He could hear voices yelling in the room behind Evans.

He’d barely regained his feet when Evans’ big body landed in the turf next to him.

Voices shouted from the cabin. It sounded like one man’s feet thundering out to the porch. Stefan didn’t need be urged to run then. He made it across the clearing and behind a tree before he turned and saw Evans behind him. Big and dark and bulky and a perfect target for the man on the porch with a rifle.

“Hey!” yelled Stefan, stepping out from behind a tree and waving his arms. The rifle swung his way. Evans leapt, grabbed Stefan and threw them both behind a tree just as Stefan heard the *ping ping* of bullets ricocheting off rocks.

A stinging pain warmed the seat of his pants as Evans pushed him onto rocks.

“Run for the road,” Evans instructed. Stefan rolled, slithered and ran-fell downhill, Evans close behind them. Another shot rang out, but he didn’t hear pursuit this time.

They stopped behind a big pine, both breathing hard, and Stefan surreptitiously checked that he still had his revolver. For the first time since Stefan had heard those bullets whizzing over his head, Stefan looked behind himself and saw the tear in his pants. The pain in his ass and thigh was becoming a problem. It was more and more difficult to walk.

Evans seemed to notice Stefan’s limp. “You okay?” he whispered. He was crouched half over, peering up through the trees. “I didn’t mean to throw you down so hard back there.”

“I’ve had bigger guys than you jump me,” Stefan whispered back.

Evans grinned like one of those crazy guys who gets off on running away from men with high-powered guns. "I'll bet." He seemed to see something that satisfied him, because he clapped Stefan lightly on the shoulder and said. "Okay, we'll go down this way."

Just then, the sound of an engine started up. Evans and Stefan watched in dismay as a truck's taillights disappeared up the track, bouncing as they went over the ridge. They could hear the truck engine roaring as the men took off on Route 52.

"Damn it," said Evans. He turned a stern look on Stefan.

How was this his fault?

* * *

Out in front, the green truck Stefan had seen was gone.

"My car is down below. It has a walkie-talkie in it."

Sure enough, as Stefan stumbled blindly around the next clump of bushes, he saw moonlight glinting off the partially covered roof of a car. "Nice car," said Stefan. "Standard FBI issue?"

"It's my personal vehicle, as it happens," said Evans, head up and eyes worried. And then he emitted the first curse word Stefan had ever heard from him and ran down the slope toward the car.

Following more slowly, Stefan could see the smashed windows, the way the vehicle listed to one side. Could see Evans sitting in the front seat, hands all over the dash, the glove box. "Damn," he threw himself back in the driver's seat. "They stripped the radio."

Stefan walked around the car giving it a judicious eye. "All the tires are flat."

Evans found a key hidden in the undercarriage. It was no use, though. The car had been disabled.

Both men listened for a minute to the dead *click* and Stefan said, "Bet they've taken the starter."

Evans sat tight-lipped and furious. There was definite lump on his skull and he rubbed at it. He looked, to Stefan, like he was finally rattled by everything that had taken place.

"Never mind." Stefan brought out his cell phone. "The service is spotty out here, but you're welcome to..."

“Shut that damned thing off,” snapped Evans. “You may as well shoot a flare into the air telling everyone where you’re located.”

Stefan looked down at his phone, as if at a loyal dog that had betrayed him. He switched it off.

“That’s how I’ve been tracking you,” Evans admitted.

“You’re kidding me?” Stefan’s voice rose.

“When I don’t call in, my associates will come up here, but it might be a couple of hours,” said Evans. “We should go back up to the cabin.”

“This doesn’t look good for you, does it, Agent Evans?” asked Stefan. “Getting tied up. Having to be rescued by a faggot from Los Angeles.”

“I rescued *you*, as I recall.”

“You mean when you pushed me into that pile of rocks? I figured you were trying to kill me there.”

“The thought may have crossed my mind. But I don’t feel like explaining your corpse to my superiors.”

“I’m flattered that you care.”

“I *do* care. You are my responsibility. Mrs. O’Connor is my responsibility as well. I was sent here to safeguard her but by the time I arrived, she’d run away.”

“Sent here by whom?”

“Does it matter? It’s going to get cold, soon, Mr. Sanchez. We’d better get back up to the cabin while we wait.”

Stefan’s leg was starting to throb, and he hadn’t slept in ages. Evans could definitely outrun and outmaneuver him at this point. “Sure,” he said.

Grim and dour, Evans got out of the car and went to the trunk, where he rifled for something.

“What now?” snarled Stefan. His ass hurt and he’d been shot at. He was freezing. And, worst of all, his best friend’s wife was lost in the Texas hills. He could be forgiven for a little tone, right?

Evans shot him a look. “Now we search the cabin. Maybe we can find something in there.”

While Evans pulled things out of his trunk, Stefan jogged over to his rental truck and climbed in. The keys were still in the ignition, and he had

listened to the dead *click click* for several minutes before he popped the hood and confirmed that the battery had been removed.

Under the seat, though, he found his laptop secured in its case. Thank God for small favors.

Evans caught up to him. He took in the state of Stefan's truck with one glance and waved him toward the cabin.

* * *

"What the hell is going on Evans?" Stefan kicked the door to the cabin shut behind him.

"They wanted to make sure we didn't follow them," said Evans calmly. He apparently kept a spare semiautomatic in the trunk of his car along with the spare tire. He frowned as he ejected the clip, checked it, reloaded. "You should have run for the road like I told you to. Maybe you'd know which way they'd gone."

For one completely insane moment, Stefan considered raising his revolver and aiming it at that handsome head.

See, that's the trouble with guns.

He stuffed it back into his belt instead. "Sorry I didn't leave you tied up and unconscious Evans. I really am."

Evans was obviously becoming accustomed to Stefan's sarcasm. "Never mind. Let me have your cell phone."

"Why?"

"Just for a minute. I'm going to climb up to the ridge and make a quick call. Those men have probably ditched their vehicle by now, but it can't hurt to try to intercept them. And maybe that will expedite a vehicle being sent to us."

Feeling like he was handing over his lifeline, Stefan entrusted his cell phone to Evans. Then, while the agent trotted up to the ridge, a feat he seemed able to perform effortlessly, Stefan stood on the porch, smoking.

Evans returned and began a methodical search of the cabin, Stefan trailing close behind him. The mysterious men with guns had been very tidy. There was blood on the floor and on a worn sofa. A few soda cans in the sink. But nothing else to tell them who the men were.

In the trash they found wrappers from chocolate mini doughnuts and soda crackers. Stefan remembered the man at the filling station, but kept this information to himself.

Evans gave him a look. "You look like you need to lie down."

"My ass hurts," Stefan admitted. "But I don't need to lie down."

"You don't sleep," Evans observed. He had now gathered up the tin cans and a handful of rope from the pantry.

"Chronic insomnia. I've had it all my life." And, before Evans could say anything, "And, no, I'm not going to take anything for it. I hate drugs. And I'm not going to see a shrink either."

"I wouldn't presume to suggest it," said Evans. His arms full of cans, he nodded at the door. "Could you open that for me?"

"Sure."

Stefan followed him out to the porch. A few minutes later, Evans came out of the dark, brushing leaves from his arms and legs. "They probably won't come back, but that'll make enough noise if anyone comes within twenty feet."

"I can't believe they teach the old cans-on-a-wire trick in Special Agent School," said Stefan, stubbing out his cigarette and depositing the butt in one of the aluminum soda cans they'd found in the trash. Stefan had noticed that the can had pink lipstick on the rim.

"Special Agent School," repeated Evans, shaking his head. He climbed the stairs to the cabin. "Where do you get this stuff?"

"I have a vivid imagination," said Stefan. He followed Evans through the cabin door, his vivid imagination doing something with the agent's rear end. "Makes up for the lack of a real life." Stefan was definitely limping, now, the pain shooting from his ass to the back of his knee.

"You still haven't told me what you want with Samantha."

Evans checked a window and drew the shade. Moved to the next one. "You were right. Your friend's death was probably not an accident. We believe that a person or persons killed him to keep something secret which we also believe his wife may have been privy to."

"You don't think she did it."

“No. You gave me a scare,” said Evans. “Strolling around McDenny House loudly declaring your suspicions. Telling everyone who would listen that you’d seen something in Thomas O’Connor’s secret code.”

“Hold on, what are you saying? You suspect someone at McDenny House?”

“We suspect everybody at the moment. It would appear that Mrs. O’Connor is running because she suspects everyone too.”

“You have any idea what this information was?”

“No. But, given his family, we are naturally very concerned. He’d been in touch with us recently. An envelope he mailed to us was mysteriously lifted from the front desk at one of our smaller agency offices. It was in a complex code and had a note in it that indicated there was another document that would complete the one he had sent us. We hadn’t had an opportunity to investigate it before he vanished and the next thing we heard he had been found dead.”

“Someone broke into a Secret Service office? Pretty mean feat.”

Evans nodded, chagrined. “Embarrassing.”

“And Tommy was shot with a twenty-two,” said Stefan. “Not what a drug dealer would normally use.”

“No.” Evans shook his head.

“I knew it.”

“Yes, you did. This would all have been so much easier if you would have trusted me, though.”

“Trust doesn’t come that easily.”

“I get that. I’m one of the good guys, Mr. Sanchez.”

“Now there’s a popular myth.” Stefan limped to the sink. “There’s no such thing as good guys. There’s only varying degrees of self-interested egotists. I’d be more inclined to trust you if you’d just ’fess up and tell me what you want.” He found an empty glass and filled it with water.

“My job is to...”

“Yeah yeah yeah. Dudley Do-Right. If you crave my ass you should just say so.”

Evans laughed then. “Do you ever quit?”

“I don’t know,” said Stefan honestly. “I don’t even know why I start.”

“Funny guy.”

Stefan felt another shooting pain in his behind, and Evans gave him a narrow look. “Let’s check that out?” he said nodding at the tear in Stefan’s jeans.

It hurt enough that Stefan didn’t feel like producing a witty retort. He limped into the tiny bathroom and leaned with both hands on the pedestal sink while Evans separated the torn material and whistled.

“All the men say that,” said Stefan.

“Drop your pants,” said Evans, standing and opening the mirrored medicine cabinet.

“They say that too,” said Stefan weakly.

Evans took down a box of gauze and said, “You going to faint?”

Stefan leaned on the sink, shaking his head. Truthfully, the waves of pain were evening out now. “Why does it hurt so much?”

“You’ve been shot, Mr. Sanchez,” said Evans. “It looks like just a graze, but we’d better clean it if you don’t want an infection.”

Stefan stood stoically while Evans did just that. Then the agent helped Stefan pull up his jeans again, slapped a strip of shiny gray electrical tape across the rip in the denim and left him to his privacy while Stefan waited for the aspirin to kick in.

When he limped out, Evans was searching the cupboards over the kitchenette sink and counters. There were cans of soup and beans there that he started taking down by twos. “Seems like you have a real knack for finding trouble, Mr. Sanchez,” he said.

“That in my file?” asked Stefan.

Evans glanced at him. “You hungry?”

“You go ahead.” Scanning the cabin Stefan hadn’t seen any kind of note or sign from Samantha. He wandered the room, picked up pictures, perused the old bookcase, opened drawers in the end tables and examined the sparse contents of the one closet in the hallway.

Evans found a hand can opener, and applied it methodically to a row of cans he’d lined up on the counter. “Looking for something?”

“You were right,” said Stefan. “It’s getting cold.” He’d found a heavy woman’s sweater hanging in the closet. It smelled like bubble gum. He slid it on.

Evans regarded him with a raised eyebrow then turned to dump the contents of the cans into a large soup pot. In the pockets of the coat, Stefan’s fingers encountered a small, pointed, folded piece of paper. “Mr. Sanchez,” said Evans, as he prepared something from various cans, “I think you should know that I now consider you to be in my custody. For jumping bail, and possibly in connection with the murder of Thomas O’Connor.”

“You think I had something to do with Tommy’s death?” asked Stefan incredulously.

“Honestly? No. But your knowledge of certain things puts you in jeopardy. This so-called code of yours, for instance...”

“Sammy knows the code, too.”

“Which is why you should have been helping me, instead of impeding my investigation.”

“Fine, then let’s get going.”

“You know that’s not possible at the moment,” said Evans.

Stefan’s finger played with the sharp corner of the note in the pocket of the sweater. “Gotta use the john again,” he said, and stepped behind the door there to withdraw the paper from his pocket. He unfolded it and saw that it was indeed a note. It was in code again and short.

“Canyon Lake. Billy and Charlie gone fishing. Tag you’re it.”

He read it, tore it into little pieces and flushed it. When he stepped out, wiping his hands, Evans was sitting at the table shoveling beans into his mouth. “There’s more if you’re hungry,” he said.

“No thanks.”

“You don’t eat,” said Evans. “And you smoke too much.”

“You aren’t my mother,” said Stefan. He pulled up a chair and sat down across the table from Evans, positioning his injured ass cheek so that it stayed off the hard wood.

“Thank God,” said Evans. A tea kettle began to whistle, and he rose to bring it to the table along with a cup and instant coffee. “Since you obviously have issues with authority.”

“That in my file?” Stefan peered into a sugar container and found, remarkably, sugar there. He began dumping huge teaspoons full of it into his coffee. Caffeine, nicotine, and sugar. God knew if they checked his blood, that’s all they’d find. “How personal is the stuff in my dossier, anyway?”

Evans studiously speared the contents of his plate with his fork.

“Does it list personal preferences? Are there photos?”

“No, Mr. Sanchez,” said Evans. Did Stefan imagine it or were the tips of Evans ears just a little pink?

“But you knew I was queer, right?”

“Your personal life isn’t a national security issue.”

“So this *is* a national security gig? You’re FBI then, right?” And at Evans’ stony expression, “Never mind. So what did you say your first name was?”

“I didn’t.”

“C’mon, man. You have an entire file on me and I don’t even know your name. First initials?” wheedled Stefan.

“DP,” said Evans.

“Hell of a job, DP. All these long hours, watching over faggots and housewives and snot-nosed kids.”

A flash of something in Evans hazel eyes. “I’m not complaining.”

Stefan stirred cream into his coffee. “So am I under arrest?”

“I don’t have that authority,” said Evans. He spread honey on a cracker. “In theory. Though I’m tempted.”

“How about we just go on back to Boerne and pretend I didn’t jump? And then we can talk about this code you’re so obsessed with.”

“Interesting idea,” said Evans. He ate the cracker. “Unfortunately, there’s the problem of not having a working vehicle.”

“I bet we could hike down to Canyon Lake in a couple of hours.”

“You can barely walk. You want to hike five miles in the dark?”

“The main road has a fair amount of traffic. We could hitch a ride from someone.”

“Maybe the gentleman who shot you would oblige?” said Evans dryly.

“I can’t just sit here doing nothing!”

Evans set down his fork. “Mr. Sanchez, it’s possible that you are in as much danger as Mrs. O’Connor. I can’t allow you to just wander off.”

“How could I be in danger?”

“You were just shot at. How can you ask that?”

“They probably thought I was you,” said Stefan.

“Why would anyone shoot at me?”

Stefan opened his mouth but Evans produced a look that compelled him to shut it again. Stefan watched the agent eat the entire can of beans and another tuna type entrée. That body obviously had serious fueling needs.

“What do you know about the drugs planted in my car?”

“That came as a surprise,” said Evans. “What do *you* think?”

“I think somebody just made sure I don’t leave Texas soon.”

Evans gave Stefan a look. “Good point.”

“I’m more than a pretty face, Evans,” said Stefan. “I also think somebody is working really hard to keep me away from Samantha O’Connor.” And he gave Evans a hard look obviously trying to convey who that someone might be.

“There is no government conspiracy to keep you away from your friend, Mr. Sanchez. I simply am afraid you’ll get into some kind of scrape, and I’ll have to explain to my superiors why it happened.”

“You could just LoJack my ass,” drawled Stefan. “Or my cell phone, as the case may be. There’s got to be some rights violation hiding in there somewhere. I’ll be sure to ask Sean when we get back to Boerne...”

Evans narrowed his eyes and shoveled food into his mouth.

Stefan played absently with a salt and pepper set in the middle of the table.

“So, Evans, are you assigned to Patrick because of his potential senate run?”

Evans set down his fork. “*What?*”

Stefan couldn’t help the victorious smirk at having scored a surprise on the unflappable agent. “It’s just a rumor.”

Evans shook his head. “Rumors are for old women.”

“And faggots,” said Stefan. “We love to gossip.” He pronounced the word with a lisp.

Evans tore open a second package of crackers. “You seem to be very insecure about that, Mr. Sanchez.”

“What?”

“It’s understandable,” said Evans calmly, stuffing crackers into his mouth. He didn’t elucidate, and Stefan managed to hold his tongue for all of two minutes before he snapped. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, a man like you.” The drawl was honey sweet. “Good looking. One could even say, pretty...” Evans seemed oblivious to the glare Stefan gave him as he stood and placed his dishes in the sink. “I’m going to check around the perimeter one more time. And then maybe we can take turns getting a little sleep before my backup arrives.”

“Sleep?”

“I haven’t slept since you were arrested for drug possession,” said Evans. “And I’m going to be up filling out reports for hours when we get back. Not to mention a possibly embarrassing debriefing. So, yes, I’d like a nap.”

“How can you sleep?”

“You sleep when you can. That’s one of those things they teach in Special Agent School.” He hesitated, hand on the doorknob to outside. “Can I trust you to be here when I return?”

“As you so aptly pointed out, I can barely walk.”

“Somehow, I don’t think that would stop you if you were determined.”

“Go,” said Stefan, waving a hand in a shooing gesture. “Go do your little spy thing. I have a book to work on.”

“Whenever I’m not sure what to do, I always ask my father,” said Charlie.

“I don’t know, Charlie,” said Georgie, worriedly. “That criminal said he’d know if we talked to the police.”

“You always tell your parents,” said Charlie. “That’s what they are there for.”

Billy always looked a little sad and lost when Charlie talked about family. Charlie clapped him on the shoulder and said. “Don’t worry,

chum, my father will tell us what to do.”

“I hope so.”

“You can always trust family,” said Charlie, wisely.

“Good,” Ronnie had written. “I love it when you remind the kids of this.”

Stefan glumly censored through the following dialogue. Charlie’s dad gave the boys sage advice about honesty and integrity.

“Besides, you never know when you might run for public office,” said Mr. Backtree. “And then it will all come out and boy won’t you be sorry.”

The next section bore a comment from Ronnie so enormous it took up the entire page. Stefan had described the finding of a body by the boys. Per usual, Ronnie didn’t want anything too grim or realistic in the books. This time he indulged in a rather long lecture about that.

On a whim, Stefan cut and pasted the comment and then typed below it:

The body was perfectly preserved and when the boys drew near they noticed the scent of roses.

“What does it mean?” asked Billy.

“He must have been a saint,” said Charlie.

Georgie removed his baseball cap and knelt beside the body. Every one of its multiple stab wounds sprouted violets and daffodils. He pressed his hands together in an expression of prayer. “Hail Mary...” he intoned.

Charlie and Billy joined him. Later, Charlie said, “Jeepers, I almost forgot. We should call the police.”

“Or the bishop,” suggested Georgie.

It was hopeless. Stefan shut down his computer and rested one hand on its warm case thoughtfully.

The dirtied Glock sat on the table where he’d left it. If Stefan knew Tommy and Sam, there’d be the equipment he needed to clean it sequestered somewhere in the cabin.

* * *

Evans came in, bolting the door and cracking open the wooden shutter to peer out the window before he turned to see what Stefan was doing at the table. “Is that *your* gun?” he asked.

“No,” said Stefan, disengaging the Glock’s barrel from its handset and setting it on the T-shirt he’d spread there. “I stole it from Tommy’s house. You going to arrest me?”

Evans crossed the room, obviously avoiding the direction in which Stefan was pointing the weapon as he checked its barrel. “You sure it’s not loaded?”

“I know how to clean a gun,” said Stefan.

That mocking half-grin. “Really.”

Stefan inspected the barrel carefully. Tommy had always taken great care of his guns and the Glock was as clean as Stefan had expected. He inserted the brush and slid it carefully all the way through, turned it and pulled it carefully all the way back.

“Respect your weapon,” said Stefan. “Keep it clean; keep it lubed.” He gave Evans a look through the sight as he checked the trigger mechanism for any buildup. He grinned. “Lube is important. You don’t want too much or too little.”

Evans snorted and sat on the arm of a chair watching as Stefan carefully pushed the cleaning brush through the barrel. “Gently,” said Stefan. “Don’t want to tear—oh, excuse me, I mean *scratch*, anything.” He worked the brush through a couple times to make sure he’d dislodged any buildup from the firing earlier in the day then laid the brush down on the table and picked up a cleaning rod, wrapped a swab around it and pushed the lube-soaked rod through the barrel. “Correct rod gauge, of course,” said Stefan. “Size matters. And take your time.” He pushed the rod through again, slowly. “Keep stroking until you’re sure you’ve gotten everything.” He repeated the motion several times, until the cloth came back clean.

Stefan wiped all of the parts meticulously, taking care to thoroughly clean up any residual lubricant near the trigger mechanism. Then he reassembled it with practiced hands, finally rising to fetch the ammunition clip from where he’d left it on the rough plank mantelpiece and sliding it with a loud *click* back into its housing.

“Locked and loaded,” he said. “You want me to clean yours while I’m at it?”

“You’re a funny guy,” said Evans. He stood and walked toward the door to the second room. “So, you ready?”

“For what?”

Evans stopped, hand on the door. “What do you think?”

* * *

Evans set his gun on the bedside table, stripped the shirt off over his head, folded it, pulled his jeans off, one leg at a time, and checked behind the wooden shutter over the bedroom window before he turned back to Stefan, who was still standing at the door quite frankly slack-jawed. “You need anything?”

A mat of curling fur on thick upper thighs, a scar that Stefan longed to follow with his fingers rising from the waistband of boxers that seemed filled with promise. “No,” he said. He had to clear his throat.

“I’ll take the first shift, if you don’t mind. I haven’t had much opportunity in the last few days.”

“Sorry I complicated your life,” said Stefan, a flush of blood running from his head to his toes and back again. He felt his mouth twist in a slightly crazed grin. “You wouldn’t believe what I was thinking just now, Evans.”

“No?” Evans rubbed at his jaw contemplatively. He turned to a small Swiss Army type of backpack he’d deposited on a chair and rifled through it, seeming to search at the bottom of it. “Ah,” he said. He drew out whatever it was and threw it on the bed.

“You were wrong about one thing,” he said to Stefan who was staring at the object. His mouth, once more, agape.

“I was?”

“Yeah,” said Evans, sitting down on the bed, thighs spread, big hands gripping his knees. “You can never have too much lube. So, you coming?”

“Sure,” said Stefan because what else could he say? He pulled his shirt off over his head and saw Evans giving his crotch a considering look. “Uh, Evans...”

“You sleep with that?” asked Evans, nodding at the revolver stuffed into the belt of his jeans.

Oh.

Stefan knew there was a great joke in there somewhere, but he couldn't for the life of him think what it was. He set the revolver on the nightstand and dropped his jeans. Evans, lounging on his side, watched in an impartial kind of way.

Were they about to have sex? The tube of lubricant Evans had just tossed onto the bed would seem to indicate that they were.

“If this is about that kiss earlier? I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me.”

“Too late for that,” said Evans. “Lie down.”

“I'm not that tired,” said Stefan.

Evans made a face. “Lie down, Sanchez.”

Well, that clarified absolutely nothing. Stefan sat down, then lay down. Evans half lying beside him, big and furry and giving his...gun...an appreciative look.

“Looks like service issue,” said Evans.

“It was Tommy's. He had a collection. He was an expert marksman,” said Stefan. “He and I were on the riflery team at high school, and he won first at state every year.” Evans was looking down at him as he spoke. The light in the room was limited to the small ochre shaded lamp in the corner, a yellow glow lighting half his face.

“Tough losing a friend. I'm sorry.”

Evans' skin was brown from the biceps down and up his neck, but the skin of his chest was white under curling brown hair. A set of dog tags clinked when he shifted closer to Stefan.

Stefan managed to unglue his tongue from the roof of his mouth. “You military?”

“These are my father's.” Evans touched the dog tags. “He died in action when I was still a kid.”

Mine too, thought Stefan. But of course his father hadn't died a hero.

“I took it hard,” said Evans. “Used to pretend he was still out there undercover, you know? Maybe that's one of the reasons I went into the

service myself.”

Stefan didn't actually see Evans stir, but he felt fingers caress his neck, trace his shoulder, Evans frowning with concentration, like he was learning something.

“This okay?”

Stefan nodded, mutely.

It should have been awkward. Sex with strangers never worked well for Stefan. It was usually an embarrassing ritual of elbows and knees and the occasional badly placed toothy kiss. He just over-thought things.

Evans pressed against him, his hand worming its way between Stefan's thighs, and did something magical with Stefan's cock before Stefan had time to think anything.

“That feels good, huh?” murmured Evans, and then his mouth closed over Stefan's. Tongue warm, possessive, and all at once bringing the reality of what was happening home to Stefan. He'd been lying there, unresisting, but now wrapped both arms around the man, feeling muscle move under his hands.

It felt much better than it ought to have.

Evans smiled against Stefan's lips. “Looks like you need this weapon cleaned real bad.”

Twisting his hips and opening his legs to give him better access, Stefan groped inside Evans' boxers, until he, too, had hold of a weapon.

Murmuring approval, Evans buried his head in Stefan's neck, hips moving as Stefan worked his cock. After a few more moments, he pushed back, getting his shorts out of the way and helping Stefan to push his down.

Then Evans rolled onto him, rocking, his cock nudging at Stefan's belly, his mouth taking little nips and kisses at Stefan's face. Eyes seeming to smile down at Stefan as they both rocked in rhythm. It felt good, the pleasure mounting at a slow pace. Then Evans head buried in Stefan's neck again.

“Roll over,” he said into his ear.

“No,” said Stefan. “I don't do that.”

Evans gave Stefan a kiss that soon became a whispery, slippery, tongue-and-lips magic trick starting at the back of Stefan's ear and ending

somewhere below his right nipple. He found that magic spot on the inside of Stefan's thigh and squeezed.

Stefan moaned again.

"Roll over," Evans' voice at his ear was just a growl.

Stefan found himself doing so automatically. A big hand spread his legs, thick fingers pushing lubricant in. Evans had done this before, obviously. Frequently, thought Stefan, arching into the touch and gasping when Evans found that spot and rubbed.

"That what you need?"

"No," said Stefan's mouth, his whole body saying yes.

Evans chuckled. He kissed Stefan's spine, gentle precise kisses that ended just above that zone. He rubbed a little more and said. "You like it, don't you?"

Stefan groaned. "Obviously. But not...not with some man I just..."

"I get it." Evans' finger seduced Stefan's prostate. "You're not that kind of guy."

Stefan whimpered against the mattress, which heaved and gave as Evans changed position. Big knees between Stefan's thighs, pushing his legs open just a little further.

"Just this once," said Evans. "Seeing as I saved your life, earlier."

"I thought I saved yours," said Stefan, but his body was in no mood to quibble and expressed its opinion readily.

"Yeah. I thought so." A crinkle of a condom wrapper. Stefan had time to wonder if all secret service carried condoms and lube while on assignment, before his back was covered by the heat of a big body. A little pressure and then Evans' cock slid into Stefan like it had been manufactured to fit there. All Stefan could do was moan.

"You're noisy," whispered Evans. "Wouldn't do in the wild. Might attract bears."

"You. Do this. In the wild?" gasped Stefan.

"Yeah," said Evans. His forehead fell against the back of Stefan's neck, his body finding a rhythm. "Oh yeah..."

Stefan found he couldn't laugh. He couldn't respond at all. His whole body pushed toward the thick presence that thrust to meet him, the urgency

growing until he was rocking up and back, heels of his hands dug into the mattress for leverage, Evans' hand covering one of Stefan's, a grip on Stefan's cock that was so much exactly what he needed that all he could do was arch and gasp. Blinking Vegas lights were glittering across the top of his skull and Evans was just spitting the word *yeah* into his ear.

It wasn't even a little awkward.

"It's okay, it's okay." Stefan wondered why Evans kept assuring him of that, and then realized it was because he was begging.

Their combined bodies were slick with sweat, Evans starting to lose his rhythm, finally pressing into Stefan, hard little shoves, his body trembling.

Then loud breathing in Stefan's ear. After a second, Evans said, "I got you, bud, roll over."

"I don't need..."

"Like hell," Evans slithered down Stefan's body, slid the condom on and proved that alpha males can give head as well as anybody.

* * *

Afterward should have been even more awkward.

Evans cradled Stefan against him. He seemed loathe to release him, so Stefan let himself be held.

"So, I guess this means you're queer?" asked Stefan.

Evans chuckled. His fingers played with Stefan's hair. "I prefer the word *homosexual*."

"You out?"

"Out? I don't wear a rainbow T-shirt if that's what you mean. My friends and family know enough. Any other questions?"

"Tons."

Evans had a nice laugh. Husky and intimate. "I thought so."

"You never told me. DEA or FBI?" asked Stefan.

"Covert Ops," said Evans. His thumb seemed fascinated by Stefan's chin. "Until about a month ago when I transferred to Austin."

"Why?"

"Treasury Department gig."

"Patrick said you were Secret Service."

“He was given to believe we were. It’s okay,” at Stefan’s raised eyebrow. “We all work for the same people.”

“What’s the Treasury Department got to do with all of this?”

“Can’t tell you that.”

Stefan pouted and Evans laughed again and kissed him. “You’re a dangerous man.”

“I’m dangerous?”

“That mouth,” said Evans, touching it lightly. “Those dark Mata Hari eyes.”

“Mata Hari? My God...”

Evans covered Stefan’s mouth with his own again. When they separated, he had a somber expression on his face. “So, your policeman,” he said.

“He’s not my policeman.”

Serious hazel eyes studied him. “Bet there’s a story there.”

Stefan looked away from him. “Listen, Evans, I’m not too good at pillow talk, you know?”

“Sure,” said Evans. “Time to get a little sleep anyway. Wake me in thirty and I’ll let you take your turn.” And he released Stefan, rolled away onto his side and, in less than a minute it seemed, he was snoring.

* * *

By the time Stefan was fully dressed, a flashlight in addition to the revolver tucked into his jeans, Evans had rolled to his back and was sleeping, mouth open, hands and legs spread. The scar was about twelve inches long. Whatever had caused it had narrowly missed removing a rather talented part of Evans’ anatomy.

There was something so dear about a big man looking exposed and vulnerable, Stefan almost felt a twinge of guilt. He did bother to pull a blanket over the agent so he wouldn’t be embarrassed if any of his colleagues sneaked up before he woke. Then he lifted his laptop carrying case over his shoulder, eased open the front door, and hopped to the dirt, avoiding the squeaking steps.

He scanned Evans’ booby traps with his flashlight, shaking his head at their simplicity. Then he hopped over the wire, using his flashlight only sporadically, until he’d worked his way down to the road.

There were wolves up here and the occasional big cat, so he stayed near the asphalt, jogging by starlight and scanning the trees and long grass near the road for the reflection of eyes, his hand half on his belt in case he needed his revolver.

It was very much like the wilderness training he and Tommy and Chet had had as Eagle Scouts, except when Stefan was an Eagle Scout he hadn't been a smoker. And he usually didn't attempt long distance runs shortly after having been shot in the ass. Within a few minutes he was limping down the road, hand pressed to the stitch in his side.

Miraculously, his cell phone, which he had been checking constantly since he and Evans had found themselves marooned, showed a signal and his call went through.

“Hello, Chet?”

Chapter Nine

Chet must have driven all the way at one hundred forty miles an hour, thought Stefan, when he finally heard the roar of the Corvette's engine and saw the lights coming over a far rise. It'd only taken him an hour and fifteen minutes, according to Stefan's digital watch, to make the Devil's Backbone.

Stefan had climbed a pine and lounged in the crook of its lowest branches, the pain in his ass adequately keeping him alert as he waited. He'd turned off his phone, so he was reasonably sure Evans wouldn't be able to find him, but the wolves and mountain lions in the area might smell his wounded behind. Hence the elevated resting spot. He laid his head against his arm, recognizing the warm, spicy odor there, like baking ginger cookies. A remnant of Evans. He buried his nose in his shirt against the cold and waited.

The moon set and the noises of the forest quieted, so he first heard the Corvette while it was still many miles away. He had enough time to slither down the tree and walk out onto the road.

He waved his flashlight dramatically over his head until he was sure Chet had seen him and then waited until the Corvette slid onto the road's soft shoulder.

The door popped open and the dome light went on. Chet sat there looking like a man who'd been wakened by a phone call at an obscene hour of the night. "There's a warrant out for your arrest," he said.

Stefan slid onto the passenger seat, favoring his sore butt. He saw Chet noting that, taking in Stefan's filthy shirt, jeans, generally unkempt appearance.

"I lied," said Stefan. "I'm sorry."

"I've been worried sick since I let you drive off. Can you give me one good reason why I shouldn't just turn you in to the nearest sheriff's station?"

Stefan sunk a little lower in the seat, which aggravated his wound, and he grimaced.

“What’s wrong with your ass?”

Stefan didn’t attempt humor. “I was shot.”

“Someone shot you in the ass?”

“Just a graze, really. It hurts like the devil, though.”

He didn’t expect Chet to laugh, let alone throw back his head and do so. It was the kind of laughter that renders a man helpless, and it took many minutes for Chet to gain control of himself, wheezing for breath. “Christ, Stef,” Chet said, swiping apparent moisture from the corners of his eyes. “I’d forgotten what it was like to have you around.”

Stefan glowered a bit. “I’m happy to entertain you, but this is serious, Chet.”

“Oh, I know it’s serious, Stefan Sanchez. Believe me. I drove up here fully intending to kick your ass when I found you.” Chet started laughing again. “But it looks like somebody did it for me.”

Stefan crossed his arms across his chest and frowned out at the dark forest while Chet indulged himself in another fit of giggles. “Are you finished?”

“Yeah,” wheezed Chet, “So, do we have to take you to the hospital?”

“No, it’s been dressed. I found another clue from Sammy, and we need to follow it.”

“A clue? What is this, some sort of game? Sammy needs to come in and talk to the sheriff, Stefan, not run around the devil’s country leaving clues in the trees.”

“That reminds me,” said Stefan. He brought out his phone, switched it on, and texted a message to Sammy. His keyboard didn’t contain the code symbols, of course, but he wrote: *Snake? Found devil note. Which fish?*

He hit Send and shut the phone off again. He wasn’t even sure Samantha still had her cell phone or who might be reading her messages, but he hoped some sort of reply would come soon.

“Who are you calling?” asked Chet.

“Sammy’s cell. I’ve been trying to call her, but I just keep getting voicemail.”

“We have the cell company records. Neither phone had calls from you.”

“Samantha had a personal cell phone. I had the number, and a few of her other friends. The O’Connors didn’t have it. You know how she felt about Jane.”

“Right,” said Chet. “Who shot at you, by the way?”

“Some goons using Tommy and Sammy’s cabin as a hideout. We scared them off.”

“We?”

“I told you, Chet. That agent has been on my tail since I landed in Texas. He followed me to the cabin, hoping I’d lead him to Samantha. Ever since I found that coded note in Tommy’s desk...”

“I can’t believe you broke into Tommy’s house. If the sheriff finds out, there won’t be enough bail...”

“Sean gave me the key,” said Stefan.

“Sean,” said Chet. He thumped the steering wheel with his thumb. “Huh.”

“She’s in trouble and she doesn’t know who to trust. Why didn’t you tell me she was pregnant?”

“She is? I...I didn’t know.” Chet looked worried.

Stefan rapped on the dash with his knuckles. “She’s running because she’s scared. Who could blame her? Somebody killed Tommy and they think she has information about it. But she left a trail so that I’d know where she’s gone. We’ve got to beat the bad guys to her Chet.”

Chet started the engine up again. “Where to?”

“I think she went by that old bait shop in Canyon Lake.”

* * *

Every shop, gas station and bodega in Canyon Lake was closed. To Stefan, who had spent seven years in the perpetual wakefulness of a big city, it was eerie.

Chet parked in the lot behind the combination grocery store and bait shop, leaving his engine running so he could switch over to a country station.

Garth Brooks complained about something in harmony with a steel guitar and Stefan switched his cell phone back on, hoping for a response from Samantha. There were ten messages from Ronnie.

Oh, hell.

“Those calls from Sammy?” asked Chet.

“No, it’s business. I should return the calls.” But instead, Stefan switched off his phone, stuffed it in his pocket, and booted up his laptop. He’d rather call Ron to tell him he was sending the finished manuscript than try to think of more excuses.

Chet fiddled with the radio. The Dixie Chicks wailed and Stefan typed.

“Good work boys,” said Mr. Strong.

Charlie’s father had invited the boys to watch the bomb squad open the package they’d found in the pond. Inside, they’d found not a bomb, but a large square of solidly packed white powder wrapped in water-tight plastic and sealed.

“That location must be a drop point for drug smugglers,” said Mr. Strong. “We’ll have agents waiting the next time and we’ll catch them.”

“Drug runners?” squeaked Georgie, wide-eyed. “Jeepers!”

“Gosh, Mr. Strong,” breathed Billy. “Mr. and Mrs. Mac could have been in danger.”

“They aren’t in any danger, now,” Mr. Strong assured him. He led them to the parking lot where a police cruiser had deposited their bikes. Billy regarded his still-flat front tire ruefully.

“I forgot all about the patch,” he said.

Charlie and Georgie laughed.

“I guess you will be walking home after all,” said Charlie.

“Nah, you can ride on the back of my scooter,” said Georgie. “My brother will drive back and help you with your bike.”

Billy brightened. “Thanks, Georgie!”

Stefan labored through the bit demanded by Ron’s notes wherein motorcycle safety was discussed and the proper safety equipment donned. “It’s a scooter, Ron,” Stefan had protested once. “Georgie rides a nerdy, bright yellow, motorized scooter that isn’t even street legal.”

“Kids will think of it as a motorcycle,” Ron had insisted.

Georgie slid the black helmet over his head. His eyes shone from above the visor. "Here, Billy, let me help you with that chin strap," he said, tightening the buckle carefully. He slid his finger under the strap. "It should give you enough room to swallow," he said, his finger caressing Billy's neck. Chills ran down Billy's chest.

Georgie's eyes read his. "Billy, you know what I think?"

Billy shook his head. His throat felt dry and he had to swallow before he said, "No, Georgie, what do you think?"

"I think I want to kiss you."

Goddammit. Stefan backspaced furiously.

Chet's finger painted a circle on the back of Stefan's neck. "Are you really working on your book?"

"I have a deadline," said Stefan.

Chet traced a spot below Stefan's ear. "There's a love bite on your neck."

Stefan's fingers stilled on the keyboard.

Chet removed his hand. "Sorry, guess it's hard to concentrate."

"It's not that. I haven't slept in days." And his ass hurt in a burning way and he couldn't seem to find a comfortable way to sit on it. He felt almost feverish. And he kept flashing back to Evans. The feeling of Evans behind him. His warmth and weight and scent. Those steady, serious eyes reading Stefan.

"There's nobody around," said Chet casually. "Bet nobody would see us if we fooled around a little."

A shiver ran up Stefan's neck and he closed his eyes. "No, Chet."

Chet withdrew his hand, looking sulky. Stefan searched his mind for a change of subject.

"How deep into drugs has Colin gotten?" he asked.

Chet looked uncomfortable. "I couldn't say."

"Tommy thought there was a traitor. But maybe it was something more complicated. Could Colin owe someone money or be living with a threat?"

Chet seemed to have to think it over for a minute before he answered. "I pulled Colin over for speeding once, and he had a bag of pills sitting right there on the front seat. Large as life, Stefan. I had to arrest him."

“He was dealing.”

“It looked like intent. Yeah.” Chet shook his head. “There’s always one in every family. Poor Patrick.”

“What did he do?”

Chet shrugged. “Well, you know, the lawyer got him probation with rehab, and Patrick made damn sure that boy did his time there.”

“I don’t think it took.”

“No, Stefan, I don’t think so either.”

They were both silent, probably thinking the same thing, because then Chet said. “I remember that time down the Red River, when we built that raft. Remember? And Tommy made Colin wear that safety jacket and he was so mad at us for treating him like a baby?”

“I remember.”

“So when we were stuck on that sandbar, Colin drifted downstream and called out to those fishermen and...”

Chet went on while Stefan’s mind followed and then shot ahead. Wet boys under tents. Chet and he huddled together against the cold.

“Oh man, I think I’ve got a woody, Stefan.”

“Me, too, man.”

Much giggling. “Mine’s bigger.”

“Is not.”

“Let’s see.”

“Chet!”

“...and Tommy said, ‘next time we take out a raft I’m wearing a safety jacket!’ Remember?”

“I remember, Chet.” Stefan shivered. He felt confused. Empty. Alone, in a bone-deep way that, now he thought about it, seemed to have been there forever.

“You cold?”

“Tired. I...don’t sleep much anymore.”

“Well lie down on the back seat. I’ll wake you as soon as this place turns its lights on.”

Stefan shook his head. “No, I have to finish this and send it or my editor will have my ass.”

Chet snorted. “What’s left of it.”

“Ha ha, funny guy.”

“So, Dad, what will happen when the drug smugglers don’t find their package?” asked Charlie as he passed the gravy.

“They will find their package, sons. We’ve planted a phony package there for them.”

“Boy will they be surprised!”

“Now, now, you know I don’t approve of you men talking about such things at the table,” said Charlie’s mother, primly.

“Sorry, ma’am,” said Charlie, contritely.

After dinner he excused himself and met Billy in the clubhouse. “My father said the drug smugglers will be fooled when they pick up a phony package,” he told him. “Then the dragnet will swoop in and nab them!”

There was a knock at the clubhouse door.

“Oh, that must be Georgie,” said Billy, rising to open the trap door.

“Wait a minute,” said Charlie. “We can’t be sure. What’s the password?” he called out to the person on the other side of the door.

“Snake,” they heard Georgie’s muffled voice proclaim.

“I like your books,” said Chet. “I’ve got every one of them at home. My friend, Betsy? She asked if I could get you to sign them.”

“I’d be happy to.” Stefan had come to a chapter that needed to be entirely rewritten. He’d placed the boys in a truck in a field, staking out an old oil derrick. The conversation they had while waiting was singularly dull, even for the Backtree Boys. “I know you can do better than this,” was Ronnie’s comment.

Bastard.

Stefan set his fingers on the keyboard with a small smile.

The weight set Georgie received for Christmas had done his pudgy friend a world of good. The old blue T-shirt really brought out Georgie's newly sculpted shoulders and chest. He looked up and flushed. "You sure are looking at me funny, Billy," Georgie blurted, and then flushed even darker and looked down at his hands.

Billy remembered the last time they had been there. He saw Georgie's hands tighten on the wheel, his whole demeanor stiffen, and thought Georgie had just remembered as well.

"I...do you want to go somewhere else?" asked Georgie.

"No. We promised Charlie," said Billy. He rested his chin on his fist and gazed out the window.

The area was unlit, the surrounding shrubbery mere lumps of shadow, but the boys had been here so many times in their lives, they knew every rock and tree by heart. If anything moved out there, if anything seemed amiss, they'd notice it.

Georgie slowly removed the keys from the ignition and set them down in the little well between the front seats. Billy found himself suddenly very aware of the proximity of Georgie's muscular freckled forearm in the darkened car.

Georgie sighed. "Looks just like it always has."

Billy shook his head. "No, see..." he pointed. "There's that new carwash where the Frostee Freeze used to be. And the freeway overpass that was put in year before last."

"Yeah, you're right, I guess," said Georgie. "I guess everything is bound to change."

There was another long silence.

"I'm sorry," said Billy, as if it followed naturally in the conversation. "That I haven't been around much."

Georgie looked troubled. He had an unusually long thinking spell, looking at his hands. "I thought you were mad at me."

"No. I just...I didn't know you thought about me like that."

"I don't! I mean...just...you're my best friend, Billy. That's how I think of you."

"You're my best friend too."

Georgie looked at him with those eyes that people thought were sometimes a little dense. Perhaps a little slow. Billy knew better. When Georgie looked at you like that he was letting you see what

was inside him. "I guess it's kind of dumb to think things won't change, but sometimes I wish I could change stuff back."

"Things happen," said Billy. "You can't turn back time."

Georgie rapped lightly on the steering wheel with a frustrated fist. "I'm sorry, Billy. I said I was sorry."

Billy shook his head. He touched his lips, where Georgie had tried to kiss him the time before. Did he imagine it, or were they still tingling?

"Gosh, I don't know what I was thinking. Billy." Georgie punched the steering wheel again. "I'm such a jerk."

Billy rubbed the back of his hand against his mouth, looking sideways at Georgie, who was now staring away from Billy out of his own window. "I just don't want to lose your friendship," Georgie said softly. "I just wish..."

"You haven't lost my friendship, Georgie."

Georgie laughed. "Sure. Right."

"I mean it, Georgie, I've just been busy." Busy trying to understand what it all meant. Busy looking up words on the computer and thinking. Thinking a *lot*.

The flush on Georgie's bowed head went right up to his hairline. "This was a bad idea," he said, and his voice sounded angry and upset. "We should go back."

Billy surprised himself by reaching across the space between them and wrapping his fingers around Georgie's wrist. "No, I don't want to go back."

Both young men looked at Billy's hand on Georgie's wrist. Billy could hear them both breathing hard and thought it wouldn't be long before the windows started to steam. Like some of the cars they saw up here on Mill Road sometimes. Filled with young lovers making out.

Georgie looked up at him. There were questions in his eyes that Billy wasn't sure he even knew the words for, let alone the answers to. For the first time in his life, Billy Backtree hadn't a clue.

But then, as if by an unspoken agreement, Georgie and Billy leaned towards each other. Both of them with lips parted, as if about to taste something of which they were unsure.

Then Georgie closed the few inches left between them. And his mouth, soft in the middle and hard at the edges, with the brush of bristle above the top lip, closed over Billy's, working gently, warm wet tongue urging patiently until Billy got used to this new idea. And could let him in.

Georgie pulled back from the kiss and let Billy recover. He didn't ask questions or try to kiss him again. He watched Billy sink against the door, elbow on the rest, chin propped on the back of his bent hand. Mouth still slightly open, as if in surprise, staring out into the darkness through the mist forming on his window.

"You want to go back to my place?"

"Yes," said Billy quietly, still watching the night. "Yes, please."

Stefan clicked the spacebar meditatively. His eyes were burning and he closed them for just a minute.

* * *

When he opened them, his laptop was turned off and he was lying on the seat, a corduroy jacket thrown over him and Chet's hand resting protectively on his shoulder.

And then that same hand was gripping his shoulder and shaking him. "Stefan. Wake up."

"How long was I asleep?"

"Only about half an hour. I saw an old man open the back door of the bait shop," said Chet.

"Let's talk to him."

They strolled in. A man with a few strands of white hair pasted across his scalp looked up when Stefan approached him.

"*Hola*," said Stefan.

"*No hablo español*," drawled the man distastefully.

"Me neither, man. It's just a saying."

The man grinned, showing bad dental work. "I get you."

"How've they been biting?" asked Chet, checking out the fiberglass poles displayed against one wall.

“Bass are biting good. Woman last week caught a twenty pound bass with them night crawlers,” said the man, indicating with a calloused thumb a grubby white freezer that contained a beefy smelling squirming mass of thick earthworms.

“I’m a rainbow trout man, myself,” said Chet.

“Well, you want to go down river for that,” said the old man. “I got a good guide for you if you want.”

“Thank you, sir, we don’t need a guide. We’re local,” said Stefan. “I’m Stefan Sanchez, this is Chet Blain.” He proffered a hand.

The old man’s grip was soft and a little damp. “Charlie Dupas. Folks call me Buck. Ain’t seen you two around, have I? Bet your fishing licenses have expired.”

Chet cast a quick look at Stefan. “Yes, sir. I believe mine has expired. Can you help us out?”

“Sure,” said Buck. He brought out a well-thumbed pad with the forms on it and a stub pencil.

“Our friend probably renewed her license within the past week, too,” said Stefan. “Did she?”

“Can’t say as I remember everybody what comes in here,” said Buck thoughtfully.

“She would have left a message for me,” said Stefan. “She probably mentioned Billy and Charlie?” The names on Sammy’s note.

Buck frowned. “Pretty blonde lady?” he said, slowly tearing off the form.

“That’s her.”

The old man kept his eye on Stefan, but didn’t answer him. He took the form Chet had filled out and made change in an old cash register. “You want to be sure you don’t use that attractant in our lake,” he said. “Game warden’ll catch you, and it’s a fat fine.”

“Yes, sir, I know the law,” said Chet. He took out his wallet to pay for the license and let the old man see his shield as he did so.

“Oh,” said the man. “She told me you might bring a policeman,” he said to Stefan.

“She did!” Stefan had to restrain himself to keep from leaping over the counter and grabbing the poor old man by the lapels of his plaid cotton

shirt. “What else did she say? Was she alone? Did she seem frightened?”

“Well, now hold on...” The man leaned over and brought out a beaten up shoebox held closed with a rubber band. “She left a card for you. Said you was playing some kind of treasure hunt? Damned fool thing for grown people to do, you ask me. But she was a nice lady and it seemed...” He rifled amongst the debris in the box and brought out a postcard. “Here.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Chet, taking it.

Stefan snatched the card deftly from Chet’s fingers. It was glossy photo of Canyon Lake. On the back, Sammy had written in code. “Colin not safe, call the old number. Glacier Falls.” She’d finished it with the sign of the snake. Stefan pocketed the card.

“Thank you, sir,” said Chet, urging Stefan out of the shop and turning on him as soon as they’d emerged onto the parking lot. “What’d she say?”

“Colin’s not safe.”

“We’re doing what we can about Colin, Stefan. Where *is* she?”

That unease prickled at the back of Stefan’s neck again. The snake was always a sign of secrecy and caution. *Snake in the grass*. “I’m not sure.”

“More lies, Stefan?” said Chet. They had crossed the parking lot. He opened the door of his car, but Stefan didn’t climb in.

“I’m not lying to you, Chet.”

“Stef, there’s no traitor. Tommy’s death was an accident. A horrible, stupid, meaningless accident. Samantha is in danger, for sure. But from *herself*. We have to find her before something happens to her and the baby.”

It was so reasonable, of course. A hysterical, recently bereaved Sammy. Stefan had heard women could become unbalanced when they were pregnant. The paranoia that permeated the O’Connor home. Just reasonable enough to be plausible. And of course government agents were always seeing plots within plots. Maybe it really was that simple.

Maybe he was too tired, the insomnia eating away at the logical part of his brain. Or maybe it was the intersect of memories and the vague sense of spirits that followed him through these purportedly haunted hills. The feel of Tommy just there, as if he could turn around and see him.

“I don’t know, Chet. I wish I could think straight.”

He took out his cell phone and turned it on again. It found a signal and then a series of tones told him that it was acknowledging the receipt of messages received while he had had it turned off.

There were two new messages from Ronnie.

“STEFAN. HAHAHA,” Ronnie had screamed at the voice mail. “VERY FUNNY. I OPENED IT THINKING I HAD SOMETHING TO SEND THE PUBLISHER. YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE.” The message ended.

Stefan frowned at his cell phone. *What was Ronnie talking about?*

In the next message, Ronnie’s voice had acquired a pleading tone. “Stefan, please, if you sent the damned thing to me in code for a REASON, just have the decency to call and explain yourself.”

“Hang on a second, will you, Chet?” said Stefan. He strolled a few feet past the post fence that encircled the parking lot and toward the small fleet of fishing boats, their engines lifted from the water as they awaited the morning.

Ronnie sounded drunk. “Christ, Sanchez, you ever hear of sleep?”

“I’ve heard of it; we’ve yet to meet,” said Stefan. “Listen Ronnie, you said you’d received something from me?”

“What kind of game is this?”

“Um, I’m not sure.” Glancing behind him, Stefan could see Chet standing by the car, watching him. “Something’s going on down here and then you left a message you’d received an envelope from me.”

Ronnie breathed a curse word and Stefan heard a rattle and clink. Probably Ronnie searching for his glasses. “Didn’t you send me a manila envelope with a script in it?”

“Ronnie when was the last time I mailed *anything* via snail?”

“So, you’re telling me you haven’t sent me the manuscript?”

“I’m a little worried about that envelope floating around,” said Stefan.

“All I’m interested in is that completed manuscript, Stefan.”

“Do you think you could find it right now? Just tell me what it says...”

“No, I cannot. It’s fucking five a.m. What’s in it anyway?”

“Don’t know.” Stefan brought a lighter out and lit a cigarette. “But it could be dangerous.”

“Dangerous? You’re kidding me.”

“Just lock it up somewhere, will you Ronnie? And, um, you might want to watch out for somebody following you in the next few days.”

“Oh, for God’s sake Sanchez, don’t give me any more of your bullshit tall tales...”

“Or maybe it would be better if you left town. Just for a few days. And be careful about whom you bring home too, come to think of it. And maybe...do you have a gun, Ronnie? Because...”

But Ronnie had hung up on him.

* * *

“Who was that?” asked Chet. He sounded peeved.

“Business call.” Stefan scratched the top of his head, thinking. “You know, maybe it’s time we called in the feds.”

“What?”

“Tommy sent a package to me before he died. Well, actually, he sent it to me care of my...friend...who just chewed my ear off. Pages and pages of something in our code.”

Chet studied him. “What did it say?”

Stefan shook his head. “How should I know? My...friend...can’t translate it... Oh crap, Chet.” And he dove down, grabbing Chet and dragging him with him, so that they were huddled behind the car.

“I just saw Evans,” he said. “That blue Buick.”

Chet hunched beside him, peering over the hood of his car in the direction Stefan had just indicated. They could see only the taillights of a car that had just passed an intersection a block away. “Did he see you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does he know my car?”

“Possibly,” said Stefan, opening the car door without straightening up. “Let’s not stick around to find out.”

“Gotchya,” said Chet. He ran around, climbed inside, and got the Corvette into gear and onto the main road without his usual squealing of rubber.

“He back there?” he asked.

Stefan turned around from watching their back window. "I don't think so."

"What about Sammy?"

"Her note said she's near Glacier Falls."

Chet nodded. "That place we used to go for summer camp?"

"The same."

Once they were on the main highway, Stefan sat up and fastened his seatbelt. Chet was already accelerating.

"So what's Evans got to do with this, Stefan?"

"He's been on me like white on rice since I landed at McDenny House," said Stefan. "He's really curious about Tommy's code and he says I'm in danger."

"You? Why you?"

"I don't know. I think he was trying to scare me."

"Scare you? Why?"

"He thinks I'm too nosy."

"You *are* too nosy."

"Well, you have to wonder what a former covert ops man is doing sneaking around a cabin on the Devil's Backbone."

"The cabin? Wait a minute, was he up there with you last night?"

"Yes," said Stefan. "Last night, when I went up to the cabin to find Sammy, Evans followed me." As Stefan watched the side mirror. Sunlight flashed through the silhouettes of oak trees behind them, but no blue Buicks were there.

"I can't get a straight answer from him. He says he's with the Treasury Department, but won't tell me what their interest is. His people presented themselves to Patrick as Secret Service, but he's pretty vague about why the subterfuge was necessary."

Chet shifted into fifth. "How do you know so much about this guy?"

"I asked last night."

"He's the one that dressed your ass, I guess," said Chet. His eyes were focused wholly on the road, which was wise, since he was going pretty fast for a country highway.

“He seemed determined to wait in the cabin. It all seemed hinky to me. He’s no idiot and I think he intuited that I had a lead on Sammy,” said Stefan. “So I had to get out of there before his cronies showed up.”

“Cronies?”

“I wonder who he’s really working for?”

“So, how did you get away without his knowing?”

“I waited until he’d gone to sleep,” said Stefan. He opened his laptop. Half of what he’d written the night before was completely foreign to him. There was a wholly unacceptable incident between Georgie and Billy which was mostly a combination of memories and wishful thinking on Stefan’s part. And a good portion had nothing to do with the Backtree Boys. It was a long wandering diatribe about life in general.

He’d finished responding to the edit notes on the manuscript, however. All he needed to do was get an Internet connection, and he could send it.

Chet had shifted into sixth gear. His knuckles, on the steering wheel, were white with holding the car on the road.

“So let me get this straight. This agent went to sleep with you there?”

“He thought I’d become agreeable,” said Stefan. He paged down through the diatribe. It wasn’t half bad. Amusing, really, with an intense description of sex with a man who was a thinly veiled counterpart of Agent Evans.

“That have anything to do with that hickey on your neck?” asked Chet. And the Corvette bumped hard as it crested a rise, going too fast.

Chet never marked him. It was one of those ingrained habits that came of two men who didn’t date girls and were seen too much together in a small town.

Stefan considered and immediately discarded the idea of lying. He considered explaining. Then discarded that as well.

“Well, I guess he’s your type,” said Chet. His voice held no emotion whatsoever.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing.”

“You jealous?” said Stefan before he could stop himself.

Chet’s lip curled just slightly. “You lost your self-respect?”

“Didn’t know I had any.”

“You weren’t a slut before,” said Chet. Cool. Uncaring.

“Sure I was,” snapped Stefan. “You were just the only gay man I knew!”

Well, if he’d hoped to get a rise out of Chet, he should be satisfied. Chet’s face flamed red. His foot jammed the accelerator and the car surged forward. Despite their speed, he turned toward Stefan and his mouth was bared as if he’d bite him.

“Is that why you left, Stefan? So you could sleep around?”

The car tires squealed, trying to stay on the road. Stefan grabbed hold of the door arm and clamped his lips together by a severe effort of will. There was no way this conversation could end well, and they were currently edging above a hundred miles an hour, the Corvette catching air on every rise.

“I left so I could be honest with myself.”

“What we were doing was nobody’s business but ours.”

“Everybody knew about it anyway.” Stefan bit his tongue, but it was too late.

“*What?*” Chet hit the brakes and the Corvette squealed, pitched sideways off the road and then stopped so hard that the seatbelt was the only thing that kept Stefan from hitting the windshield.

“Well, not everybody,” Stefan amended, because Chet looked like he might have a stroke right there in the front seat. “I might have been exaggerating.”

“Stefan Sanchez, you punch every damned button I have. You make me crazy, angry, stupid...” Chet declared. He was breathing as if he’d been running down the road instead of driving.

“Me, too,” said Stefan, sadly. “Can we talk about this later?”

Chet shook his head. He jerked the keys out of the ignition and laid them on the dashboard. “No. We’re going to have this out here and now.”

For an instant Stefan imagined he and Chet marching twenty paces and turning on each other with drawn weapons, but instead they just sat there and stared at each other.

“You—” Chet pointed a fat index finger so that it almost touched Stefan’s nose “—have been blaming everything on me and I’m sick of it.”

“I’m not.”

“You expect too much, Stefan Sanchez. You always have.”

The wind over the Route 52 shook the car. It howled and whistled and shrieked like an old Irish banshee, like the souls of the dead. “Chet, I’m sorry, I...”

“No. No more sorrys. I’m tired of you blaming me for your own bad decisions.”

“My bad decisions? You were the one who decided everything, Chet. I never *had* a choice.”

“See? You’re still mad at me.”

“I’m not mad.”

“People don’t pack up and move two thousand miles away in the dead of night for nothing, Stefan.”

“I had to.”

He’d had to. Those last nights, driving home, crying like a teenage girl, half running his car off the road. Or in bed all day, unable to get up. Living on a roller coaster of rage and despair.

“I had to leave before one of us killed the other,” he said.

“You always overdramatize everything.” Chet’s face was still bright red. His hands gripped the steering wheel again, knuckles white. Stefan had a feeling he kept them there so he wouldn’t wrap them around Stefan’s neck. “God, I’d forgotten what a nightmare it was with you.”

“Thanks.”

“You always want more, Stefan. It’s like you’re testing me. I’ve risked my job, my reputation, and it’s still not enough. What would be enough? I’m only a man...”

Stefan had forgotten to turn off his cell phone. It played a jaunty tune and showed Ronnie’s caller ID.

“I’ve got to get this, Chet,” he said.

Chet shook his head in disgust and turned to glare out the window.

“Hi, Ronnie.”

Ronnie was either too angry to speak or choosing his words very carefully. It gave Stefan time to worry about things like financial survival.

“I have it ready. I just haven’t been close to an Internet connection.”

“There is nowhere in the United States of America,” said Ron very calmly, “that does not have an Internet connection. Where are you?”

“Devil’s Backbone,” said Stefan honestly. “Unreliable cell service up here, also. So, um, don’t be worried if the call suddenly drops.”

“Worried?” said Ronnie, his voice starting to rise in pitch. “*Worried?*”

“It’s actually an interesting area,” said Stefan, chattily. He’d slouched a little lower in his seat and watched the side mirror for any approaching blue Buicks. “Purportedly haunted by Spanish monks and Civil War soldiers.”

“I don’t care about ghost stories, Stefan,” said Ronnie. “Unless they figure in the next Backtree Boys.”

“I understand,” said Stefan. “Um, like I said. I was going to send it as soon as I have a hookup. I’m doing it now.” He had out his laptop and gestured at it as if Ronnie could see it through the face of the cell phone.

Ronnie didn’t respond, and Stefan removed the phone from his ear, frowning at the face that reported he still held the connection.

“Ronnie?”

“I’ve been patient, Stefan.”

“Yes, you have. I appreciate it.”

“We wrote a substantial royalty check and gave you two extensions.”

“You are the best, Ron.”

“You promised to send those chapters this morning.”

Stefan could think of nothing to say and when he finally opened his mouth he realized that the call had dropped off.

“That your boss?” asked Chet. “Is he the one Tommy sent the papers to?”

“Maybe,” said Stefan, sliding the phone shut.

“Your life is going to hell, isn’t it Stefan?”

“It might be.”

Chet started the engine up again. Stefan noticed that the hand that turned the key was shaking. “You planning on taking me with you?”

“I hope not,” said Stefan, honestly.

Chet pulled slowly back out onto the highway. “You know, I never did get that code that you and Tommy made up.”

Stefan rubbed his lip, thoughtfully. He couldn't pinpoint the sense of unease he felt. "Tommy made it up. I just went along with it because he was always writing notes in it. Same as Sammy."

Chet slowed and Stefan could see one of the wooden state park signs that pointed toward Glacier Falls. "How did you remember it? Was there some kind of trick to it?"

"God, no. Tommy read all the books on cryptography, and he purposely invented a code that didn't have any discernible pattern. Like Chinese lettering." Stefan's broadband device found a signal and he pressed Send, watching in satisfaction as the much anticipated manuscript went to Ronnie.

The car rounded a curve and a dirt parking lot showed on the left, dark beneath heavy oak trees. Chet turned into it, the Corvette bumping over ruts and through puddles. "Don't see a car," he said.

"Maybe she hid it." Stefan frowned at his laptop. It looked like he'd sent the other manuscript—the one in which he'd babbled endlessly. Fuck. He thought he might have even expressed an opinion or two about Ronnie. He hurriedly tried to send the correct manuscript, but his Internet connection had dropped off again. He checked his phone. No service.

Chet parked the car and shut off the engine. "Now what?"

"Now I grovel and beg."

Chet rubbed his eyes. "I meant, how do we find Samantha?"

"Oh. Listen, Chet, I think you should wait here. Sammy is obviously unstable and she doesn't seem to trust anyone but me. Do you have a flashlight? I'll just go through the run down there and look around the falls."

"I have a torch in the trunk, but I can't let you down there on your own. There's still wolves out here, especially near the water. And look at you, you've been shot, for Christ's sake. And you're dead on your feet, Stefan. Jumping at every shadow and talking to nobody."

"Was I?" Okay, he had been getting pretty wiggy.

"Sammy will just have to trust me, too."

* * *

As it happened, Samantha wasn't anywhere near the falls. They accessed them via a deep ravine cut into the rock just uphill from the oaks. Deer,

rabbits, and other prey used it as a natural roadway to the water, and predators, animal and human, followed them there. The foot traffic had dug the curving path even deeper into the limestone and Stefan stumbled several times over the rutted rock ground.

Chet was nimbler on his feet and had been standing under the great overhanging rock, shining his light across its gaping arch, when Stefan finally worked his way up the natural steps to the cave. The sound of the water pouring down, effectively creating a water wall, drowned out Chet's words as he approached.

"What?"

"I said—" Chet's jaw clenched "—I can't believe I still fall for your bullshit."

"What?"

The water from the falls filled the air with moisture. Chet dropped his arm, the flash beam becoming a four-inch circle of light on the stone floor. His face illuminated by moonlight glowed with moisture. He gazed at Stefan as if he were adding up the sum of what he saw there and getting a number he had suspected all along.

Then he just spun on his heel and marched back to the car, Stefan limping along behind him.

The gears ground as Chet pulled back out onto the road and Stefan sensed that anything he said would cause another eruption, so he was silent for several minutes until Chet said, "Okay, bro. I understand why you don't trust me."

"I'm not lying to you."

"Where is Samantha, Stefan?"

"I don't *know*, Chet. Seriously, I'm worried sick." Stefan brought out his cell phone and turned it on. But before he could compulsively dial Sammy's number again, Chet surprised him by snatching it out of his hand.

"That's it," he said. Turning it off and pocketing it. "I'm taking you back to Boerne."

Stefan slouched in his seat. "Okay."

"I'll be lucky if this doesn't get me fired."

"I'm sorry, Chet."

“No. No, I get you. You bullshit me because I’ve always bullshitted you.” Chet slid the car into a left turn and began descending down Route 302, heading to the main highway toward San Antonio. “I haven’t been honest, either.”

Chet’s face was still rosy with emotion.

“I wouldn’t admit it all those years. I wouldn’t even call you my boyfriend, Stef. You begged me to say it. It wouldn’t have killed me.”

For some reason, Stefan couldn’t hear this now. It was too late. Too much and all wrong.

“Chet—”

“No, let me finish.” Chet wet his lips. “I... it broke my heart when you left, Stef.”

God, why did this make Stefan feel so wrong? “Chet you don’t have to say this.”

“Yes, I do...” Chet looked miserable. “Maybe if we’d never done what we did, none of this would have had to happen.” Chet slowed and the Corvette’s big body swayed slightly as he turned onto a gravel road off the main highway. “Just tell me this. Did Evans’ know you were calling me?”

“Are you kidding? I trust that man as far as I can spit.”

“And yet you chose to have sex with him,” stated Chet flatly.

Stefan opened his mouth to protest but Chet cut him off. “Don’t bother, Stef. I know you, remember? I know that look.”

“I needed to put him at ease so I could get out of there. I’m sorry, Chet.”

“Hey, don’t apologize. If anything it’s a relief of sorts.” The road they were following led toward a line of pines. It was the entrance to some large horse or farm property and Stefan frowned.

“Where are we going?”

“Shortcut,” said Chet.

“We aren’t any more than three miles from the freeway,” protested Stefan.

Chet frowned with concentration and drove.

Stefan watched the sleek grassland pass by. They drove between the stand of pines, and the road now appeared to be heading toward a large

farmhouse.

“Whose place is this?” said Stefan. Then he saw the big black car with government plates.

“Hey,” said Stefan. “I thought Patrick was in Austin.”

Chet didn’t answer. He pulled in next to a familiar blue Buick with the telltale antennae jutting from its trunk. Two big guys in nondescript black suits were coming across the gravel parking lot toward them. From where he sat, Stefan could see one of the guys reaching up under his jacket as if for a gun.

“I’m sorry,” said Chet.

Stefan only got halfway across the lot before the two big guys took him down.

Chapter Ten

“I’m disappointed in you, son.” Patrick O’Connor sat down just across from where Stefan had been handcuffed to a chair.

Stefan had been dragged across a wide gravel drive into an old three-story clapboard farmhouse. It seemed, from the rooms Stefan saw as the big men half pushed and half carried him to this small room, to have been converted into some sort of office building.

Stefan’s problem with restraint wasn’t just a running joke between him and Chet. He was already panting, sweat popping out all over his body.

“You’ve got to take these things off me, Patrick,” he said. “You know I can’t...” Couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think clearly.

“Yes, I’m sorry about this, Stefan, but it appears you can’t be trusted. Bruce here says you socked him in the jaw.” Behind Patrick the aforementioned Bruce stood with his arms folded, glaring. He had a large, dark, boot-shaped mark rising on his face.

“Actually, I think I kicked him,” said Stefan. “Sorry about that.” A bead of sweat trickled down his back. “Let me go. Please.”

Patrick ignored the request. “I don’t understand what’s gotten into you. Chet, here, tells me you’ve hidden my daughter-in-law away somewhere.”

Behind him, Chet fretted, looking more uncomfortable than Stefan.

“I haven’t, Patrick. I swear.”

“We acted as surety on your bail, Stefan.”

“I wasn’t jumping bail. Tell him, Chet.”

“Where have you hidden my daughter-in-law?”

Stefan’s fear of restraint was working on him hard. Panting, nauseous, jerking uselessly but uncontrollably at the handcuffs. Like his body couldn’t accept the message that his brain kept trying to tell it. *Calm down. Speak reasonably. They’ll let you go in a minute.*

“Chet tells me you have documents that belonged to my son.” Patrick drew a cigar from his pocket.

Stefan’s arms jerked against the restraints again. “Chet’s a bastard.”

“That’s not fair, Stef...” Chet protested.

“Don’t talk to me about fair. As it happens, Chet is wrong.”

Patrick eyed Stefan wisely. “You were always a liar.”

It stung, to hear that from Patrick. But Stefan’s panic overrode his hurt. “Right. But this is the truth. Somebody took something from Tommy’s office, but it wasn’t me, sir. I was there, sure, but afterward. And then I guess Tommy mailed something to me. But he sent them to a business address instead of my home. The man who got them didn’t even know what they were.”

Patrick looked back at Chet and then narrowly studied Stefan for another minute. “You have a lot of explaining to do, Stefan Sanchez.”

“Yes, sir.”

A few more long, thoughtful minutes, and then Patrick nodded at the one of his men. “You can release him, Paolo.”

Stefan almost fell off the chair when the cuffs were released, holding his wrist and gasping for the oxygen that had seemed to elude him just moments before. “Thank you.”

* * *

After they’d removed the handcuffs, Patrick instructed Paolo and Bruce to leave them alone. Chet left as well, carefully avoiding Stefan’s eyes.

Now that he could see straight, Stefan bothered to look around the room in which he and Patrick sat. He’d thought it was a farmhouse, but the shape and size reminded him more of a classroom of some sort.

“Where are we?” he asked Patrick, who had moved to a wide desk and seated himself, opening drawers and bringing out sheets of official-looking documents.

“I’ve found it convenient to maintain a discreet location,” said Patrick. “Far from the continuous stream of lobbyists and reporters. It’s been my lifeline of late.” He placed a pen on the papers in front of him. “Pull up a chair, Stefan.”

“I’d appreciate the name and address of the gentleman who my son sent the papers to,” said Patrick, donning a pair of reading glasses and perusing a thick sheaf of forms.

“*My son. Like he’s got only one,*” said Tommy’s voice in Stefan’s ear.

Stefan picked up the pen. “Yes, sir.” All of Tommy’s life he had been the chosen one. Firstborn, first in class, first in his father’s esteem. It was odd that Tommy had worked on something at the last moment without his father’s approval. Stefan set down the pen and Patrick looked up from the brief he was reading.

“Is there something else, Stefan?”

“Didn’t Tommy tell you about it?” asked Stefan. “About the traitor?”

Patrick frowned and removed his reading glasses. “I beg your pardon?”

“You see that? That look in his eye? The old man is a real predator, Stefan. Don’t let his mild country boy manners fool you. He can give as good as he gets with all those big city attorneys.”

“I wouldn’t say predator,” said Stefan.

Now Patrick folded his hands on the desk in front of him and leveled a serious gaze on Stefan. “Is there a problem?” he said.

Goosebumps ran up Stefan’s neck. “I’ve forgotten his address.”

“You what?”

“My friend. The one Tommy sent the papers to. I’ve forgotten his address. I’m not much of a snail mail person.”

Patrick’s eyes were steely blue and they fastened on Stefan for a breath before he said, smoothly. “Then give us his name.”

“I don’t know if I should. He likes to keep it private. Actually, I gave it to another writer once and he yelled at me for days...”

“Stop it,” snapped Patrick. “I’ve had enough, Stefan.”

“He always gets what he wants in the end. Sometimes you don’t even know he wanted it until he’s got it in his fist.”

Stefan wondered what Patrick wanted.

“It costs a fortune to run a campaign...”

“No,” he said. “No, I don’t think so.”

Chapter Eleven

What followed had the eerie feeling of being something he had known all along but not fully acknowledged. Patrick called out and Paolo and Bruce reentered the room, like they had been waiting just outside.

Patrick didn't even look back as he left Stefan held between the two thugs. Bruce stepped up and turned the lock. "Here." He pulled a roll of electrical tape from his pocket and tossed it to Paolo.

"Better tape his legs, too."

Sheer panic gripped Stefan and he fought hard while both men held him down, taping his other arm and both legs to the chair.

He was panting, hyperventilating really, rocking the chair as he jerked at his restraints, the men looking down at him. "Now," said Bruce. "Where is Samantha O'Connor?"

"I don't know," Stefan panted. He wasn't even surprised when knuckles rapped across his mouth.

"I'll try that question again..." said the man.

* * *

Patrick came back about half an hour later. He seated himself in the same chair as before. Seeming to ignore the sweat, spit, and blood on Stefan he said, "A little gratitude, Stefan? Where is my daughter-in-law?"

"When did Tommy find out you were in the cartel's pocket?"

Patrick lit the cigar. "That's paranoid nonsense. Where did you get that idea?"

"Um, when that thug of yours knocked my tooth loose I started piecing it together."

"I'm sorry about that. I explained that restraint was all that was necessary, but Paolo is overly enthusiastic sometimes."

"'Bout the fifth time he asked who the papers had been sent to, it hit me, why wouldn't you already have a copy? Tommy would have shown them to you, as soon as he knew. Why keep his concerns to himself? Unless, he thought—"

“My son was an idealist. He had trouble with ambiguities,” said Patrick.

“He called you on it, didn’t he? That was his mistake. What did he do? Berate you? Threaten to turn you in? I wouldn’t have bothered. I would have just called the feds.”

Patrick exhaled cigar smoke. “You were always a pragmatic boy. Almost cold. Of course, that was to be expected.”

“You and my father were in it together, weren’t you?”

Patrick removed his cigar and set it carefully in a dish placed there for that purpose. “You don’t understand, Stefan. It’s simple economics. The United States is the richest democracy in the world, but not all countries are democratic, and we have to exert control over their influence.”

“What’s to understand? Over two hundred million US dollars disappear south of the border every year. What’s a few million off the top in the grand scheme of things, right?”

“You’re oversimplifying the situation,” said Patrick. “International politics are a complex intricate web.”

“If this is mere patriotism, why am I tied up?”

“You’re a suspected felon,” said Patrick as if surprised. “And I have reason to believe you have kidnapped my daughter-in-law. Happily, we’ve got her cell phone traced. The poor distraught woman has unknowingly engaged her GPS locator.”

With a feeling of deepening sorrow, Stefan realized that Chet must have lifted his cell phone while he slept and obtained Sammy’s phone number from it.

“If Sammy’s smart, she’s switched phones and you’re tracking a fishing boat.”

A flare of anger deep in Patrick’s cool blue eyes. He stood. “Well, obviously you’re determined to make this difficult.”

Stefan’s tormentors followed Patrick out of the room. He heard a lock engage and then there was silence.

He didn’t sleep, of course, but he nodded off over the next few hours, his mind throwing crazy images and sounds at him and waking him repeatedly as he saw a fist coming at his face.

The sun that leaked through a high window in the corner had paled when he heard noises in the hallway. The sound of the locks again and Paolo reentered. Stefan was surprised to see Chet follow him through the door.

“You fucking coward,” lisped Stefan around his cut lip. “I can’t belief you haf the nerve...”

“Shut up,” said Chet. He ran both hands over his head as if in distress. “What happened to him?” he asked Paolo.

“He tried to escape again.”

“Yeah, with my hands and legs tied. Do you understand what’s happening here, Chet?”

“Patrick’s worried sick about Samantha, Stefan. And those papers Tommy sent to your friend. They could be really embarrassing to the family. Don’t you get it? Tommy was jealous of Patrick.”

“Tommy had his old man figured out from the get-go,” said Stefan, with bitterness.

“Just tell him what he wants to know, Stef!”

“Samantha O’Connor is your friend. She’s pregnant, you bastard. And you led these monsters right to her.”

“Samantha is vulnerable and confused, and we think you took advantage of that.”

“You don’t think any such thing. You *know* what’s happening, and you’re helping them!”

“I’m sorry,” said Chet, looking at the wall above Stefan’s head. “But we can’t trust you not to escape. We’ll hand you over to the FBI today and then —”

“The FBI? Why?”

Chet shook his head. “Patrick called them in. It’s getting late, and those FBI men might not get here until after dark. Patrick wants you to take him to the storage closet,” he said to Bruce. “You can handcuff him to the bed in there.”

He stood with his head turned away as Bruce released Stefan’s arms and legs and jerked him to his feet. Then he followed as Bruce led Stefan out of the room and down the hallway.

“And what’s with this Evans dude? You don’t even know him. He could have killed you up there and nobody would have known.”

“He rescued me from your flunkies. I kind of trust a guy when he does something like that.”

“My flunkies? What are you talking about?”

“Those men you sent to the cabin.”

“I never sent anybody to the cabin.” Chet looked honestly puzzled.

Then Paolo opened a door into a dark room, pushed Stefan onto a bed.

The feel of metal on his ankle and the sense of his foot being secured to something. And the uncontrollable hyperventilation started again. Stefan could hear a telltale rushing in his ears. He thought he was going to suffer the indignity of passing out.

“C’mon, Stefan. Breathe,” said Chet.

Stefan took a couple of deep breaths and half sat up. In weak light coming from a tiny window in the upper corner he could see around himself. The room did, indeed, look like it had once been a storage closet. Shelves still lined one wall. A twin bed, with metal legs, had been squeezed against the opposite wall and that is what Paolo had fastened him to.

Chet was breathing through his mouth, seeming fascinated by a spot somewhere above Stefan’s head.

“You think I should gag him?” asked Paolo.

Chet glanced at Paolo. “Can you leave us alone?”

“I don’t think so, Mr. Blain. He’s tricky.”

Chet’s skin flushed. “None of his tricks work on me, anymore. Besides, he’s helpless with his hands cuffed.”

It infuriated Stefan that Chet was right. The feeling of panic was overwhelming. He could barely see straight. Chet locked the door when Paolo exited.

“You need privacy?” said Stefan. “Oh, I get it. You want to fuck.”

“Stop it, Stefan.”

“Well, sure, why the hell not. Ol’ Stef’s always good for a quick blowjob, right?”

“I’m here to talk reason into you. Why do you have to make everything so hard?”

“Why do I have to make *you* hard, you mean.” Stefan rolled and pressed his forehead against the wool blanket that covered the cot, trying to focus.

“Stop it. This is serious. Why don’t you just tell Patrick what he wants to know?”

“There are still a few people out there I care about,” said Stefan. The room seemed suffocatingly warm.

“You brought this on yourself,” said Chet.

“Patrick is playing you,” panted Stefan. “See that’s your one big flaw, Chet. You’d rather lie to yourself than see the ugly truth.”

Chet shifted his feet uneasily. “Los Angeles changed you, Stefan. You weren’t always this bitter and angry.”

“Sure I was, Chet. I was just afraid to show it. My father was a traitor, my mother abandoned me to the vodka bottle. My lover was ashamed of me...”

Chet instinctively glanced around himself. “This isn’t the place to talk about it.”

“Well, this is all we’ve got, Chet. Because you and I both know those supposed FBI agents coming for me will be the last anyone sees of me alive.”

“Ridiculous.”

“He’s going to have me killed. Deny it.”

Chet’s face was flushed. He looked to be in as much distress as Stefan. Stefan swallowed against the nausea and said. “This is all we’ve got. I loved you, Chester Blain. At least I had that.”

“Oh, for God’s sake...”

“It’s not your fault that you didn’t love me back. I see that now. Just so you know, Chet. I forgive you.”

“Fuck you, Sanchez,” said Chet. “Don’t play me like that.”

Stefan could barely lift his head. He felt dizzy. “You were right. I asked too much. I was always testing you, pushing you. And I went too far.”

“Stop it, Stefan. Stop with the dramatics. I know what you’re trying to do.” Chet looked truly rattled.

“Listen to me. I might not get another chance to say this. And...and I’m sorry, Chet. It wasn’t fair to do that to you.”

“Stop it.” Chet whispered desperately. “You’re just going to jail, Stefan. You’ll be out as soon as Sean gets there and signs the papers. You’re trying to scare me and...”

“This is how it ends, Chet. But it’s okay. I understand now.”

“Congratulations.” Stefan touched beer bottles with Chet. “To the newest recruit.”

They sat on the lowest platform of the tree house, cross-legged, knees touching. A six-pack of beer between them. They’d come up here to celebrate Chet’s imminent enrollment in the police academy, but his friend was oddly subdued, thought Stefan. Pensive, even.

“Relax,” he said. “You’re going to be great.”

Chet toyed with the twist top to his beer, “Stef, we have to talk...”

An overlong pause. “It’s not like you’re going to the Persian Gulf or something,” said Stefan, worried. “But I’d wait for you if you were, you know.” He grinned. “My hero.”

“Don’t, Stefan. I mean. Just... don’t. Don’t talk like that. You have to stop talking like that.”

This conversation was heading to a place they’d been before. Out of habit, Stefan closed his mouth and became still. Watchful.

“We can’t go on like this.”

It had been so long since Chet had had one of these fits of remorse, Stefan had almost thought they were done with that. “No big deal, Chet. I won’t say stupid ass things like that anymore, okay?”

“It’s not just that. It’s... Stefan we aren’t kids anymore. It’s time to grow up. This job, this is a big deal, okay? I don’t want to screw it up.”

Quite still, careful. Stefan said quietly, “Okay, Chet, nobody will know.”

“I’ll know. And, I don’t want to do it anymore.”

There was something about the way he said it. Something much more sure and final and almost dead about the words as they fell between them. Stefan felt a deep massive shock starting somewhere in his psyche. Or maybe, it

was later when he remembered what came next, that he'd imagined he felt it. His world exploding.

"You always say that, Chet, and then you change your mind."

"I'm not going to change my mind this time."

"You..." Stefan couldn't take it in. He shook his head and grinned. "C'mon, Chet, whatever I did, I'm sorry, okay? I won't do it again."

But Chet's face was that of someone who was having to put down his favorite dog. "I'm sorry, Stefan."

"No..." Stefan said reasonably. "No, just tell me what you want me to do."

"I don't want you to do anything. I mean, we can still be friends..."

Stefan was furious to hear his own voice shaking. "Whatever you want, Chet. I mean, it's okay."

"I just want it to be over."

"Anything," Stefan pleaded. "Whatever it takes."

Chet's head bowed, teeth biting his lip. He shook his head.

"I love you, Chet." What could be more important than that?

"God, don't you see, Stefan? That's the problem."

There'd been the usual shouting, the bitter recriminations. Both men knew how best to hurt the other and they used every weapon they had. But it wasn't until two days later that Stefan really understood that this time Chet meant it.

"You fucking coward!" They were standing in front of the Frostee Freeze, all of Boerne witness. Kids looked at each other and grinned and parents covered their children's ears.

"Bastard!" Stefan hit Chet in the back because the son of a bitch didn't have the balls to face him.

Somebody had gone for the manager. A pimply-faced guy who'd been just a year ahead of Stefan and Chet in high school. Paulie said, "Hey Stefan, maybe you'd better leave."

"Shut up, Paulie. Don't you turn away from me, Chester Blain."

"I mean," Paulie dared put his hand on Stefan's shoulder. "This is a family res—"

“Shut up!” and Stefan swung on Paulie. Then Chet had both arms around him and was dragging him off. Paulie yelling and in his face, Stefan beside himself with grief and anger, struggling against Chet, furious that he would only touch him now to hurt him.

Later, after apologizing to Jane and going to his room, he’d stood in the bathroom staring in the mirror at the face of a man he hated. And then he’d packed.

Chet’s hand on his head, stroking his hair. “Stefan, why do you have to be like this?”

“Don’t know any other way to be,” Stefan said, gasping. “I am what I am.”

“Yeah, buddy, I know.”

Every breath seemed to contain less oxygen. Stefan turned his face into the mattress and willed himself to pass out.

* * *

His first sensation, on gaining consciousness, was that his wrist was still restrained. Stefan jerked against it and cried out and felt a hand across his mouth at the same time as he felt his freed hands flail out against the mattress.

“Shh, calm down. Let me get this one off.”

In the dark, Chet’s bulk moved against Stefan as he worked the cuff around Stefan’s ankle free.

“What are you doing?” asked Stefan.

“Shhh.” A paper cup of water against his lips, Chet’s hand wrapping Stefan’s fingers around it. “Drink this. You’ve been out for hours and you’re sweating like a pig.”

Stefan sipped gratefully at the water.

“We haven’t got a lot of time,” said Chet. “I cold-cocked that guy at the end of the hall. His shift is over in ten minutes and then somebody comes to relieve him.” He brought a gun out and checked it. “Can you walk?”

“I think so.” Stefan stood, almost dizzy with relief at not being restrained.

“Good. I’m getting you out of here.”

“What changed your mind?”

“You did, of course. Just like you always do.” Chet checked his gun again. “Okay, I’ve never had to shoot a man, Stefan Sanchez, and I hope I never have to. So try to keep your big mouth shut for once.”

“You got it.”

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Chapter Twelve

There was only one man near the cars, but Chet didn't feel comfortable with trying to take him by surprise. "These guys are from Colombia," he whispered to Stefan. "I heard them talking to Patrick. They'd kill a man without a thought, Stefan."

"What did they say to Patrick?"

"Enough. I pieced it together with what you'd told me and finally got it."

"Patrick's taking bribes isn't he, Chet?"

"I didn't really get it before. Patrick killed Tommy, Stefan," said Chet. And, at Stefan's look, "You okay, buddy? Hey. Hey, don't fall apart on me yet."

"I'm okay," lied Stefan, who felt like his head might explode.

He felt Chet's car keys pressed into his hand. He looked the question at the man who crouched next to him. "I'm going to distract him. You drive by with the passenger door open and I'll jump in."

"What? Are you crazy? You'll get killed."

"No, I won't. You can't do it with a bullet wound and whatever else they did to you."

"Chet!"

"We don't have much time. Patrick's got men heading up to Crystal Falls looking for Sammy."

Stefan shook his head stubbornly.

"We just have to get to a phone, Stef. A few miles to the highway. They believe Tommy told Sammy everything. What do you think they'll do to her if they find her?"

Stefan took a breath, his fist tightening on the keys. "Okay."

* * *

There was only the sound of gravel crunching under the guard's feet. Stefan eased the car door open. Chet kept the Corvette in immaculate condition, and the heavy door swung without a squawk.

He heard the aluminum can tumbling across the concrete steps of the house at the same time the guard did, but the guard went to investigate while Stefan jumped into the car, pressing the accelerator with one hand while turning the key.

Gears ground and the Corvette surged across the parking lot. He heard voices, shots, barely sitting up enough to see over the dash. Steering and pushing the clutch with a hand and a knee while reaching across to throw the door open.

He saw the guard just before he felt the car impact the man's body. Then Chet was throwing himself onto the passenger seat and Stefan threw the car through every gear, pedal thrust to the floor. The car made a hideous noise, bucked, surged and careened out of the lot, gravel and dirt flying.

Chet looked pale and hung onto the seat with his eyes closed.

"Get in!" yelled Stefan, steering wildly. Chet pulled his other leg in and Stefan steered hard to the left, which swung the door almost closed. Chet grabbed it and shut it. There were quantities of dark stain on his leg.

"You've been shot!"

"Yeah," said Chet, breathing hard. "Keep going..." He swayed, eyes closed.

"Jesus Christ, Chet, you've been shot!"

Chet was silent, holding his leg, eyes squeezed shut.

Stefan drove faster than he had ever. Straight down 302, the car tires squealing as he pulled into the first shop parking lot, jumping from the car with the engine still running and going round to the passenger side.

"C'mon, Chet."

Chet seemed almost unconscious but he was able to bear a little of his own weight when Stefan lifted him and helped him, limping through the back door of the shop.

"Help!" yelled Stefan. "Can someone..." he looked around. A llama stared back.

It chewed.

Chet made a sound and his entire weight sagged against Stefan. Stefan eased him to the floor. The blood seeping from his thigh seemed excessive,

and all Stefan could think was that there was a main vein in the leg. That a man could bleed to death in a few minutes.

“HELP!” he yelled. He left Chet leaning against the wall and ran past the llama, around the corner and found an old man who seemed frozen, half-risen from his lawn chair.

“What’s the trouble?”

“My friends been shot!” shouted Stefan. “Call the police!”

“Settle down now.” The man seemed, to Stefan’s eyes, to be moving in slow motion.

“Where’s a phone?” yelled Stefan, wildly, looking around. Weirdly, he was surrounded by aquariums full of snakes. “Where am I?”

“Why the Boerne snake farm,” said the man. He had a good old-fashioned land line in his hand, and he handed it to Stefan who dialed 911 and shouted his location into the phone. “We need an ambulance. A man’s been shot.”

The old man had ambled over and now squatted beside Chet, who rallied enough to blink up at him and say, “Bertie?”

“Why, it’s Chester Blain,” said Bertie, sitting back on his haunches comfortably. “What have you got yourself into now, son?”

The unmistakable sound of squealing tires in the back lot. Stefan ran to Chet and leveraged him up. “Do you have a car, Bertie?”

“I do,” said Bertie. “A 1986 Buick Skylark. She burns a lot of oil, but...”

Stefan heard footsteps and voices. “Never mind. Where can we hide?”

Bertie’s affable face became wary. “Hide?”

Stefan half pushed, half dragged Chet along a hall lined with musky smelling aquariums, past a tall glass case and through a door that warned Employees Only. He was thrilled to find a lock on the other side.

“No,” Chet protested, weakly, when Stefan lowered him behind a desk covered with a debris of paperwork and leveraged the gun from his hand. Stefan pulled his T-shirt off over his head, wadded it and pressed it hard to Chet’s wound. “Hold this here. I’m going to lock you in,” Stefan told him. “The ambulance will be here soon.”

“Stefan...” Chet inhaled in great ragged gasps. His skin looked like bread dough.

“Yeah, man?”

His hand wrapped around Stefan’s. “I’m sorry.”

Stefan could hear men’s voices speaking to Bertie. The old man’s surprised, slow, reply. He leaned over, kissed Chet’s clammy forehead. “I forgive you,” he whispered. Then he rose, checking the gun for bullets and left the room, sliding the lock closed as he went.

“I don’t know what y’all mean,” he heard Bertie’s voice quavering in the other room. “There’s all kinds of folks leave their cars in my parking lot. Plenty of room out there. I don’t bother them and they don’t bother...”

“What spilled here on the floor,” said a gruff voice.

Chet’s blood, thought Stefan, in a panic.

“Why I believe I spilled the llama’s feed there. What a mess.” Bertie chuckled lazily at his own idiocy.

Following the hall in the opposite direction of the voices, Stefan was able to move with relative silence. The floors were a soft ancient linoleum, on either side, four layers high, dimly lit aquariums. He paused at a corner, looking around and found himself six inches from a small cobra, its gemlike eye staring fixedly back at him.

Never mind that it coiled behind a layer of glass, Stefan’s heart seized up for half a second.

He could hear Patrick’s men now, moving closer to his location, Bertie’s voice rising and falling as he followed them. Clever old guy nattering on was letting Stefan know exactly where the thugs were at all times. He’d have to find a way to distract them from where Chet lay, thought Stefan.

Now that his eyes had fully adjusted to the dim lights, Stefan was aware of all the snakes, writhing, twisting and slithering around him. This was Tommy’s nightmare, not his, but it was still disturbing. He could hear their subtle movement in the glass enclosures. Despite his swollen sinuses, he could smell the meaty odor of their food. He considered, very briefly, breaking one of the aquariums and creating a distraction in this way, but the thought of freeing one of the creatures was too disturbing. He could see a couple of highly lethal king snakes from where he stood, for instance.

So he kept moving toward the side of the building.

Perhaps because of Tommy's fear, Stefan and he had rarely visited this particular landmark. Still, the building was laid out like so many of these old tourist haunts and sure enough he found a latched screened door wedged open behind a stack of crates. Stefan tried to squeeze through, but the door emitted a cacophony of squawks and rattles as he did so.

Now several footsteps, like they were running, coming toward his location. Stefan gave up quiet and ran along the back of the shop, coming through the door of another room and finding himself in a wide open space. Windowless walls, a skylight showering the entire room with bright light, a catwalk along one wall, with a thick metal railing. Heavy footsteps and two men ran through a door at the opposite end of the walkway. Stefan backed again toward the door from which he'd emerged and heard a man there pushing the door open.

He backpedaled and found himself in the center of the walkway, light beaming down on him. Armed men to either side.

Behind him a rustling sound and he looked back and over the railing and saw what looked like a heap of rattle snakes one floor below.

"Over here!" shouted one of the men. Stefan saw about four gun barrels pointed at him. He raised his hands.

The guy whom Chet had punched stepped forward. His grin was marred by a bright bruise, and he held a Berretta. "Don't think we'll have ta shoot him," he said.

"No, I'll come quietly," said Stefan.

But the guy was looking at his friend, and then they both leaned over and looked down at the rattlesnake pit.

"Be a shame if someone fell in there."

"Save us a hell of a lot of trouble," agreed the other.

The pit was protected by a thick wire mesh cover. While the other three men held guns on him, one of the men leaned over and pulled at the mesh. "Pretty well fastened. I'll have to get a wire cutter," he said.

"Listen, this is crazy. I made a mistake. Let's just go back to your headquarters and..."

"Where's Blain?" asked the thug with the Berretta.

Stefan shook his head. "He ran off."

Where were the ambulance and police? His perception of time was undoubtedly distorted, but Stefan figured it had been at least fifteen minutes since he'd made the 911 call.

And then he realized. The ambulance had probably arrived already. Patrick was probably outside, or one of his officious looking county agents, explaining and apologizing for the mistake. Stefan's heart sank.

A couple of men came up and muscled him around so that they could tie his hands. The minute the restraints closed around his wrists, Stefan started to pant, but the thug with the gun said. "No, if he's tied up they'll know it wasn't an accident."

The guy holding Stefan laughed and sliced the bindings loose again. The minute his hands were free, Stefan made a run for it. Two guys brought him down easily, another standing over him, the butt of his gun raised in warning. "Get up," he said. They dragged Stefan over to the railing.

"This'll be fun to watch," said the guy with the bruised mouth.

"Where's John gone off to?" said another.

"Go find him. If he can't find wire cutters, toss one of those big crates against the wire."

Stefan struggled against the two men who held him and said, "I mean it, you guys. Call Patrick and tell him I'm willing to talk."

"We don't need you to talk anymore," said the thug.

"What do you mean?"

"Shut up, Harry," said another man.

Harry grinned. "Don't matter, he's not telling anyone. Looks like we know where your girlfriend is hiding."

"You assholes."

Harry laughed. "Where the fuck is Chip, now?" he asked his buddy.

"Listen, maybe this guy's weight will break the wire if we throw him hard enough," said the other man.

Harry considered Stefan's slight build. "I don't know, Kyle."

"It's worth a try."

Stefan protested and fought them but the two larger men still were able to lift him and push him onto the railing. Stefan grabbed the metal bar with

one hand and Harry wrenched his wrist free while Kyle got a hand on his butt and kept pushing. Stefan wrapped his leg around the railing and locked his ankles. Kyle prized his feet apart. Stefan could feel the balance tipping perilously over the ledge.

“Hold it right there. Don’t move,” said a voice from the doorway. Simultaneously Stefan heard the rattle, like falling dominoes, of rifles and guns being engaged.

The struggling tableau of Harry, Kyle, and Stefan froze. Stefan was half on the railing, head pushed down so he could only see the pit full of snakes. There were so many they seemed like reptilian spaghetti.

He heard Evans’ voice again. “There are ten men outside this door with automatic rifles and an armed helicopter outside, gentlemen. Lower Mr. Sanchez gently onto the floor and drop your guns.”

They did so. Stefan slid to the right side of the railing, noting that his palms where they gripped it were slimy with sweat.

A crowd of men in SWAT gear descended on them and dragged off Kyle and Harry while Evans appeared at his shoulder.

“You okay?”

Small gray dots were blinking in Stefan’s eyes. A sound of rushing water in his ears. “How’d you know where I was?” he gasped, sinking.

He felt one big hand grab him under the armpit; another slapped his bandaged butt. “I LoJacked your ass,” he heard Evans say. And then Stefan passed out.

Chapter Thirteen

Stefan opened his eyes in the back of an EMT van. He sat up and a medic immediately pushed him back down. "I've got an IV in your arm, sir. Don't move."

Her broad brown face glared down at him and that, more than the pressure of her hand on his chest, intimidated Stefan into compliance. "My friend?" he rasped.

"We've sent him ahead, sir. He was conscious and, quite honestly, cursing you, when they left."

Stefan closed his eyes in relief. The ambulance rocked and rolled beneath him, the sirens the best music he'd heard in years. "Thank God."

* * *

He waited an interminable time for someone to pronounce him fit to leave. An ER nurse seemed determined to ply Stefan with painkillers, which he steadfastly refused. He was eager to see Samantha, who, a nurse had told him, was safely ensconced in another ward of the same hospital. Evans' men had traced the cell phone as well and, happily, beat Patrick's men to her. Then it had just been a matter of waiting until they showed up.

Shoulder-length golden hair hung lank around her face, her skin very pale. The fluorescents really brought out the brown circles under her puffy eyes. She was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen. Stefan crossed the room and gathered her up like a little boy would a favorite lost stuffed toy. "Sammy..."

For several minutes, they indulged in a clinging embrace. "Thank God you're safe."

She was shaking all over. "They...they killed my poor Tommy..."

"Sammy, I'm so sorry." With her strung around his neck, all Stefan could do was ineffectually pat at her prominent ribs. His hand found the bump where Sammy's tummy had always been flat and smooth. "Sammy, how far along are you?"

She sobbed a little more and then gasped, "Three months."

“You scared the crap out of me,” he told her.

“I knew you’d find me. Did they... I...I missed the funeral.”

He had to hold her for a while again. “I left clues all over the house before I ran,” she sniffled against his shirt.

“You were very thorough,” he said. He stroked her hair.

“T-Tommy always said if anything ever happens, call Stefan.”

“What happened Sammy?”

“Tommy found out that Patrick was using Colin’s skateboard business as a foil to launder money from the cartel. The night he found out...” Sammy’s pretty brow creased painfully. “He locked himself in his office and drank so much. I could hear him talking to himself, yelling, arguing. It scared me. But then he came out and went to bed and the next morning he was hung over and quiet—but purposeful. He said he was going to right some wrongs and that I shouldn’t worry.”

“Right some wrongs?”

“You know how Tommy could be.”

He sure did. “I think he went to Patrick to give him the opportunity to make it right.”

“He believed in people,” said Samantha. “I refuse to blame him for that. It was one of the things I loved about him. He didn’t tell me anything. It wasn’t until I overheard Patrick talking to another man. I don’t know, everything just clicked and suddenly I knew. I waited until Megan was asleep and then I ran.”

“What were you going to do though, Samantha?”

“All I could do was pray that you’d find me. I didn’t know who to trust, Stef.”

“I’m sorry I almost led them to you.”

“But how?”

“Damned cell phone. Chet gave your number to Patrick.” Happily, Evans had also lifted the number from Stefan’s phone, calling it in when he and Stefan had waited at the cabin. His men had been the ones to find her at Glacier Falls.

“Chet?” Samantha looked stricken. “Oh, God, Stefan. I’m so glad Tommy didn’t know...”

“No, no. I don’t think Chet was involved with Patrick. He just believed the worst of me and who could blame him? He rescued me, you know?”

A tremulous smile and she lay her slim white cool hand on his. “You’re the only one who believes the worst of you, Stefan.”

“You are an amazing woman, Samantha O’Connor,” he said. And he kissed the top of her head reverently. “Tommy would be proud.”

He sat with her like that in silence for a while and when she looked tired he went to look for Chet.

* * *

Chet’s eyes looked pink. Every one of his freckles stood out on his pastry-dough white skin. One arm had an ugly mess of white tape holding a clear plastic tube against it. But otherwise he looked great. At least to Stefan’s eyes, whose last memory was of Chet apparently unconscious, bleeding.

“How you feeling?”

“Like hell,” said Chet, voice raspy. “I knew you’d get me shot one day, Sanchez.”

Stefan pulled the chair over and sat nearer the bed. “Me too. It’s just I always thought it’d be me that did the shooting.”

Chet managed a short painful laugh. “Maybe next time.”

Stefan put his hand just over Chet’s where it lay on the sheets and his friend gave him a crooked smile, his eyes warm. “I know you don’t believe me. But I meant what I said, Stefan.”

“Yeah. It’s okay, Chet.” And it was.

“Chet?” a woman’s voice and Stefan turned.

Small, round and very fair, a pretty girl came into the room and almost flung herself across Chet’s body.

“Betsy,” said Chet, that crooked smile widening. “Honey, don’t cry, I’m all right now.”

The girl looked up at Stefan. “How do you do?” she said. “I’m Betsy, Chet’s girlfriend.” Tears stood out on her round pink cheeks, and she held a

small hand across Chet. A tiny silver bell hung from the bracelet on her wrist. She was feminine and pink and pretty.

Stefan shook her hand. He thought he managed a decent enough smile. The hit was scoring deep inside of him, he was fairly certain. But at the moment he felt, surprisingly, nothing. “How do you do. I’m a...childhood friend of Chet’s. Stefan Sanchez.”

“Stefan?” she said, delighted. “Oh, Chet talks about you all the time.”

“Really?” said Stefan.

“We love your books.”

Stefan looked at Chet who, he wasn’t at all surprised to see, did not look guilty, caught out or evasive. He just looked like a tired man, who had recently been shot. Stefan stood. “Excuse me.”

He had to go to the open-air visitor’s lounge to smoke a cigarette and even there he received a few narrow-eyed evil looks when he lit up.

His cell phone trilled and he made a disgusted face as he opened it. “Hi, Ronnie.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

He was fired under breach of contract. Probably about to be sued. Definitely screwed. “Probably not, Ron. What can I say?”

“How long have you been hiding this away, Stefan?”

“Hiding?”

“This manuscript is fantastic. Oh, and the publisher is fine with the chapters you sent. I cleaned them up, of course. Your additions were pretty funny, Stefan, but you know they haven’t much sense of humor there.”

Stefan exhaled smoke and had to admit that he was relieved. He’d grown accustomed to money and the luxuries it could buy. Like food and shelter. “Ron, I owe you.”

“No problem. Now, Stef. What are we going to do with this? This is pretty racy stuff for an author of children’s books. Do you want to publish under a pseudonym?”

Feeling definitely surreal, Stefan put out his cigarette and sat back in a lounge chair. “It needs editing.”

“That’s what I do, man. Listen, I want to fast track this baby. What do you say? End of September?”

Stefan forced himself to speak. “Maybe. Um. Yes. I think it’s time for me to get out of Texas, anyway.”

“Great. Great. Call when you get in and we’ll have lunch.”

Stefan slid his cell phone shut thoughtfully.

* * *

“You thinking of checking in?”

Stefan looked up, startled. There was a heap of cigarette butts in the standing sand ashtray next to the plastic lounge chair. The sun had almost set behind the green verge of trees on the horizon. All the other visitors had left the patio and Agent Evans stood in the doorway, that sardonic little half smile on his face. “I hear they have a large psychiatric wing,” he said. “I’m sure they could find a bed for you.”

“I think I’m cured.” Stefan stood up, joints creaking noticeably.

“Really? What precipitated that?”

Stefan shrugged and Agent Evans walked up, regarding him with head aslant and a quizzical expression. Then, much to Stefan’s surprise he touched Stefan’s face. Right there in public. “You okay?”

“Sure.”

Evans looked like he didn’t believe him, but he nodded. “Good. Let me get you dinner.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Yes, it is. You don’t eat. You don’t sleep. You’re shaking in your boots there, and I’m going to buy you a good old fashioned steak and watch you eat it.”

“Do I salute now?” asked Stefan.

“If it makes you feel better,” said Evans. He slung his arm around Stefan’s shoulders. “Come on, Mr. Sanchez.”

* * *

The steak house was a Boerne landmark. Every respectable Texas town has at least one decent steak house.

“If you don’t slaughter a heap of those longhorns now and then, they’ll overrun the whole state like rabbits.”

“You going to turn vegetarian on me, Tommy?”

Tommy laughing. It filled a man's heart to the brim, that laughter. "No way."

A waitress in a pink gingham uniform with a skirt so short it could have made a denizen of the Playboy Mansion blush, came up with her pad and pencil and then recognized Stefan.

"Why Stefan Sanchez, our very own hero! I heard what you did for Chester Blain out there on the Devil's Ridge."

Stefan had forgotten with what speed news could spread in a town with only six thousand residents. Stefan searched his memory for a name. "Trixie? How've you been?"

"Why I've been fine, Mr. Sanchez, thank you very much."

She took their order and then loitered, spending too long fluttering her apron at Evans and inquiring in a pretty Texan drawl about his plans for the rest of his life. Stefan watched Trixie walk off. She'd dated Colin for a short time, he remembered. In high school, her nickname had been Yenta for her meddling and matchmaking.

"You don't watch out, Evans, Trixie there won't let you leave Boerne a single man."

"Fine with me," said Evans, rubbing a spot out of his knife with a napkin.

Okay, the steak was fantastic and afterward Evans ordered bourbon. Stefan just melted into a puddle there on the red leatherette and moaned with happiness.

Evans looked too fucking pleased with himself. "So," said Stefan. "What have you found out?"

"Mr. Sanchez," said Evans. "You're a civilian and we are now involved in a security related investigation with the DA and the DEA. I can't discuss any of that with you."

"Is my foster father under arrest?"

"The attorney general is a person of interest," said Evans. "We are not sure of his location at the moment, but we have been in touch with his people and his lawyer is involved."

"I need to be there," said Stefan. "At McDenny House. They may hate me for this, but they're still my family." And at Evans expression. "What? Now what?"

“Some information about your father has come to light.”

It was a completely unexpected hit from a completely unexpected direction. Stefan could feel it like a depth charge going off somewhere low and unfair and shaking everything loose.

“Goddammit,” he said. He covered his eyes with his hand. “What is it now?”

“We think he might not have been guilty,” said Evans.

The words made no sense to Stefan. He dropped his hand and stared across the table at Evans. “What?”

Evans repeated himself.

Stefan’s mind parsed the words. He could see Evans patiently waiting for him to understand. “Okay,” he said. “What do you mean?”

“There is evidence that a party might have set your father up and then had him killed.”

A party. “Patrick,” said Stefan, dully. The room seemed to suddenly throb and then tip sideways.

“Hey.” Evans rose and came around the table. “You okay?”

“Hell of a day,” said Stefan weakly. He had to shake off Evans’ arm.

“I’m sorry,” said Evans. “It must be a lot to take in.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Stefan. His mind felt weirdly vacant. Shut down. “Listen, can we get out of here?”

“Of course.” It was stupid, but he was glad of Evans helping him out of the booth, making sure he walked upright. Past Trixie who fluttered and cooed a goodbye. Glad of the big body to lean against instead of staggering around there in public like the town drunk. “Get in,” said Evans, opening the door of his car. “I’ll drive you home.”

Stefan slid into the car and Evans fastened his seatbelt like he was just a kid. “Okay,” he said listlessly. Home. Wherever that was.

* * *

Evans had a room at a hotel just outside of Boerne. One of those new ones that the Internet mogul frenzy had spawned and as quickly denuded.

“I have friend in Boerne I can stay with,” he explained. “But she has family in town presently, and I didn’t want to intrude.”

He looked down at Stefan, who'd melted in a heap into the nearest chair the minute they'd walked through the door. "You want a beer?"

"Sure."

While Evans went to the refrigerator, Stefan stared at the blank television screen. His mind felt like it was falling through space.

Evans set the beer down on a table. "You like football?"

Stefan stared at him. Evans took that as a yes and switched on the television. "Cowboys are looking better this season," he said, sitting down next to Stefan.

"They need a good wide receiver," said Stefan by rote.

"Sure they do." Evans touched Stefan's beer bottle with his own. "To the pursuit of justice."

"Fuck," said Stefan. His hand moved wildly, knocking over his beer. And sitting in a hotel in Boerne Texas, with the cable delivering a low-res staticky football game and a beer bottle tipped and dribbling across a Formica-topped table, Stefan covered his face with his hands and lost it.

After a while he became aware that Evans was patting him and muttering something like *there there* and he pulled himself out from under his arm.

"Stop that."

"Sorry."

"I'm okay. Just. I'm okay."

"I know that."

"I've hated him my whole life."

Evans had the sense not to respond.

Stefan knew he was still crying. He figured it was just the final humiliation and didn't even try to hide it.

"I mean, I don't know what to do..."

Evans waited awhile as Stefan sniffed and struggled and then he said, "You could call your mother."

* * *

"Hello, Agnes?" Stefan lay on the hotel bed, the phone clutched to his ear. Evans had rolled him onto his belly and redressed the wound,

pronouncing it almost healed. Then he handed the phone to Stefan and commanded him to call his mother.

She sounded surprised. “Stefan? You aren’t in jail, are you?”

Stefan almost laughed. “No, mother.”

“I’d heard some things.” The cigarette lighter flicked. “I was worried,” she said and Stefan was a little surprised that her voice really did sound worried. Weak. A little old.

“I’m fine. Chet’s in the hospital, but he’ll be fine.”

“Oh.” Another one of those long uncomfortable pauses at which he and Agnes excelled. “You’re still coming to dinner tomorrow night, aren’t you? I promised Dale.”

Stefan sighed. It was almost comforting, the familiar irritation. “Yes, Mother. I’ll be there.”

“Good then. Goodbye.” She disconnected.

Evans took the phone from Stefan’s hand. “There now, don’t you feel better?”

“Better than what?”

Evans laughed. “Lie down.”

“Why?” Stefan stretched himself across the bed. He saw Evans gaze rake up and down his prone body once before the big man turned away.

“You’ll see.”

“Evans, if you want to screw, just say so.”

Evans shook his head. “You’re not that kind of guy.”

* * *

The oil was warm and Evans hands were big and strong. Stefan felt so many years of tightly wound anger and pain untangling and flowing out through his veins to the ends of his hands and feet and he just lay there, feeling it all.

After a very long time, Evans stopped. He covered Stefan with a towel and left the room, turning the lights down. When he came back in, he was dressed in his boxers and a clean T-shirt. He sat on the bed next to Stefan, who hadn’t moved.

“Better?” he asked.

“Yeah, man. Thanks.”

Evans’ hands had been all over Stefan, but when he set his hand on the towel covered small of Stefan’s back now, a coil of erotic energy wriggled into Stefan’s cock, surprising him.

Evans sat, casually enough, legs spread to accommodate what he seemed unashamed to show was happening between his own legs. He stroked Stefan’s back in small circles.

“You’re a pretty sexy guy,” said Evans.

“Thanks. So are you.” It was a weird position for a seduction. Face down, legs and arms spread and relaxed. Cock growing hard against the sheets.

“You think so?” Evans sounded honestly pleased to hear it.

Stefan chuckled. “You’re a walking wet dream, Evans.”

“So are you,” Evans’ hand kept moving. Now it circled the sensitive skin on Stefan’s butt cheeks. “Been dreaming about you since you first walked through the doors of McDenny House.”

“You’re kidding?”

Evans shook his head, ruefully. “Nope. Even came in on my day off. The other men probably thought I was just overzealous, you know?”

Stefan felt an unaccustomed pleasure flooding him. “Yeah?”

“Just wanted to see you. Sassing me and making me want to grab you and throw you against the wall.”

Stefan wriggled a little. His cock was starting to feel uncomfortably constrained. “Not very professional.”

“You’re not kidding. I was worried.”

“Seriously?”

“Afraid someone would notice.”

Stefan chuckled. “Well, I didn’t notice.”

“Yeah, I get that now. At the time I thought you’d read me and were playing with my head.” Evans hand pulled the towel off Stefan’s rump. “Want you,” he said simply.

Stefan rolled to his side and caught Evans as he moved into his arms. “You got me,” he said to the question still on Evans’ face.

There was hunger in Evans' kiss, in the way his hands moved over Stefan, but there was something else. A kind of wondrous care that Stefan wasn't accustomed to.

Evans' thumb working the head of Stefan's cock, his grip sliding fast and sure up and down the shaft. Stefan's eyes flickered open for a moment and saw, in the glitter of orgasm, Evans watching him come.

Evans' cock, damp and urgent against Stefan's belly, his mouth on Stefan's ear, that helpless sound as the warmth spread between them. Then seemed to wrap around them. Holding them while Stefan's heart slowed.

"You're a cuddler," he observed from the depth of Evans' big arms.

"Don't want to let go of you," said Evans, simply.

Jeez. Stefan could feel the flush all over his body.

"I've embarrassed you," said Evans.

"I'm not used to this," said Stefan. "It's strange."

Evans pushed the hair back from Stefan's forehead in a gentle, rhythmic way. Like one might pet a dog. It made Stefan's eyelids feel heavy and his body limp. "I understand," whispered Evans. And Stefan felt the firm gentle press of a kiss on his forehead as he fell asleep.

* * *

"Hey, sleepy head." God, Evans looked good, thought Stefan. Damp hair ruffled and eyes turned up at the corners. Lips red. He'd changed into a clean T-shirt and another pair of jeans.

"How long was I out?"

"Most of the day. You snore like an old man. Those cigarettes are really bad for you."

"Most of the *day*?" Stefan sat up and stared around wildly.

"Relax. Your mother called. You have enough time for a shower before you head over there for dinner."

"My mother called *you*?"

Evans shrugged. "There's clean towels on the toilet seat. I washed and ironed your shirt."

"You what?" Stefan swung his legs over the side of the bed.

“Relax, Sanchez. It’s all going to be fine.” Evans slapped Stefan gently on the back in a comradely way that devolved into a caress. “Now, get up and get ready before I make you late.”

* * *

Evans insisted on driving Stefan straight over to Agnes’ place instead of taking him back to pick up his battered rental truck. They pulled up to the familiar white clapboard house. Something small and shabby and yet dear about the white cement dog with the white cement basket full of white cement flowers. The mailbox with the faded whirly-gig jutting up. The ’60s-style screen door and white wrought iron railings around the tiny front porch. A thin old woman sat on the porch smoking a cigarette. When the car drove up she stood, wiping her hands on the front of a loose flowered dress, and Stefan realized that that frail old woman was his mother.

She clung a bit when he hugged her and then she really surprised him. “Oh,” she said. “Stefan, you’ve already met Dale.”

“Dale?” he said, looking toward the open front door for the man he had been taken there to meet—but Agnes was looking behind him at Evans.

“Yes. My friend’s son, Dale, down from Austin.”

And Stefan stared down at the broad hand thrust toward him. Evans little half-smile, hazel eyes dancing. “Dale Evans? Are you kidding?”

“Stefan!” breathed his mother, but Evans just grinned.

“My mother was a big Roy Rogers fan,” he said. “How do you do, Stefan.”

They shook hands. Really, it was strange.

Agnes led them into the house. “I hope you still like chicken fried steak and grits, Stefan honey.”

“After you,” Evans gestured.

“You’re going to pay for this,” said Stefan, as he passed him. “I’m not sure how, but I promise you will.”

“Looking forward to it,” said Evans.

Stefan had more of an appetite than he had had in weeks it seemed. Evans helped him clear the table so that Agnes, who seemed four inches shorter and thirty pounds thinner than Stefan remembered, could rest in front of the television.

“So.” Stefan opened cabinet doors, looking for the vodka bottles. “You going to explain yourself?”

“You didn’t remember me, and then I felt awkward bringing it up,” said Evans, rinsing off plates. “Not to mention the hostility which, now I’ve gotten to know you, I understand wasn’t personal. But...”

There were no bottles above the counter. Stefan looked under the sink. “Remember you?”

“We met when we were just kids. You won’t find anything there either,” he said as Stefan was about to open the cupboards over the stove. “Agnes has been sober for over a year,” said Evans when Stefan looked a question. “We celebrated her twelfth month this last summer.”

“Oh.” Stefan had received a card from his mother saying something about a party, but he hadn’t paid much attention. *Party* and *Agnes* always associated in his mind with *embarrassment*.

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember you.”

“It doesn’t matter. Let me finish this. You go in and talk to your mother.”

“I don’t think...”

“Go,” said Evans in that stolid way of his that would brook no argument. And Stefan went.

“So,” he said when he walked into the room.

Agnes turned down the volume on the television set. She smoothed her skirt over her knees with both hands. She looked anxious, and Stefan felt a twinge of guilt that an old woman’s own son should make her nervous.

“I always knew he didn’t do it,” she said.

“Did you?” Stefan had always thought his mother felt even more betrayed by his father than he had.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Evans, coming into the room, drying his hands on a towel. “My mother said so.” He grinned at Stefan. “Agnes offered me your room when I first came down here. You had quite a comic book collection.”

Stefan cast him a startled look. He’d hid a quantity of porn in his comic book collection. The way Evans was grinning at him, he hadn’t had the sense to throw it out. He rose and excused himself from Agnes. No time like the present.

Evans followed Stefan into his bedroom, looking around. “You know you haven’t changed at all,” he said, lifting a photograph from the bookcase.

One of those school photos. Blue background, black bangs in dark eyes. Teeth too big, two of them missing.

“Can’t believe she saved that,” said Stefan.

He’d found the boxes in the closet, labeled, “Stefan’s books” and was amazed to find his “Spin and Marty” collection complete and stacked in numerical order.

“You were adorable,” said Evans. Stefan didn’t like the way he was smiling at the picture and stood up to snatch it from his hand. Placing it firmly back on the bookcase.

“I was an incorrigible liar and smart-ass,” he said.

“So nothing’s changed.” Evans picked up a trophy, studied it. Picked up another framed photograph. “Baseball? Bet you were the shortstop.”

“How did you know?” asked Stefan, taken by the photo despite himself. There they all were. Tommy, Chet, and him, in their blue and white striped little league uniforms.

“Quick to see what’s going down. Quick to react. You’d be a natural shortstop. Bet you took a ball or two in the face in your day.”

It was a disturbingly accurate assessment. “Tommy was the star pitcher.” Stefan took the photograph from Evans hands, aware that the man stood too close to him, but, oddly, liking the warmth of it. “And Chet was our cleanup man.”

“The one who saved the day,” said Evans. “Hell of a responsibility.”

“Yeah.” Stefan set the picture down. “I guess we did expect a lot of him.” Evans had put his hand on the center of Stefan’s back, and it felt good. Warm and steady and good. “My mother must be wondering what we’re doing in here.”

Agnes had a photograph in her hands as well. “I hoped you would want this,” she said, handing Stefan an ancient picture of a man younger than himself. There he was, same wicked smile, same dark eyes. Stefan felt a lump in his throat and could only nod.

Evans’ hand rested at the center of his back again. Stefan couldn’t find it in himself to shake it off. “I should go, Agnes,” he said. “Stefan, you’ll be

staying here tonight?”

With a start, Stefan realized that he couldn't very well go back to McDenny House. "I guess so."

"Have a good evening, then." Evans leaned over and surprised Stefan for the hundredth time by kissing his mother on the cheek. "Thank you for dinner, Agnes." He held out his hand and he and Stefan shook.

"He's a nice boy," said Agnes after he had left. "He had such a hard time when his father died and Shirley had to go live with her parents. His grandfather is an intolerant old bastard, may God forgive me, but he made that boy's life a misery. You met Dale once, do you remember?"

Stefan shook his head.

"Well, you were just boys. He came down with Shirley, and you and Chester Blain and he went out to the creek. He came back with a shiner and never would tell us what happened."

"*That* kid?" The boy that Chet had taken such a strong dislike to and had actually picked a fight with for no apparent reason? "He was just a fat little rich kid..."

Agnes gave him a look. She slipped a pack of cigarettes from her pocket and offered him one. "I might have some of your old clothes here, Stefan, honey. But I don't know what you'll sleep in."

"I'll have to go pick up my suitcase from McDenny House."

A silence. "Oh, Stefan."

Chapter Fourteen

Stefan realized he had expected McDenny House to look smaller now. Diminished. He rang the bell at the front door, and announced himself to one of the tow-headed children who answered.

“I came to pick up my bag,” he said to the child.

Wise, round blue eyes. The O’Connor schnoz. A mop of hair that Stefan knew would never really respond to combs, scissors or pomades in a reasonable manner.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Sanchez.” The boy left and came back a moment later with Stefan’s duffle. So, they’d prepared for this request in a manner to expedite his leaving.

Still, it was hard to let go.

“Which one are you?” he asked the boy. “I mean...”

“Yes, sir. I’m Thomas. Sean’s my daddy.” The boy looked about twelve. His gaze traveled to Stefan’s boots and up to his face again and a secretive mischievous smile that was so remarkably like Tommy it startled him spread into a full-out grin. “Heard you kicked butt up there on the Devil’s Backbone, Mr. Sanchez. Those drug dealers that kidnapped my aunt and my granddaddy.”

“No, the Justice Department agents rescued me,” said Stefan.

“Yes, sir, when I grow up I’m fixin’ to be an agent, too,” said Thomas. “My daddy says I hafta go to law school first.” He made a face, those white eyebrows raised, eyes rolling.

“You’ll be glad of it later, I’m sure.”

“Yes, sir,” said the boy. And then he held out a hand. Square and white and with a handshake firm and sure. Stefan had to blink away whatever disturbed his vision for a minute.

He was still wiping his eyes as he walked away from McDenny House.

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Chapter Fifteen

Agnes had baked.

A dozen uneven cupcakes with frosting a blue color that had never been seen in nature. They sat in the middle of the counter in a kitchen that looked the worse for the baking process.

Agnes seemed worried. "I don't know how they taste," she said, lighting a cigarette and waving it around.

Stefan gingerly removed one from the tin. "You have any coffee?"

"Stefan! It's ten o'clock at night! You'll never sleep."

"I'm on LA time," he told her illogically.

She *tsked*. "You can have a glass of milk," she said.

Stefan hated milk. But, he figured if his mother could abstain from vodka, he could do without caffeine for an evening.

So they sat across from each other in the chintz chairs, with lopsided cupcakes perched on their knees, drinking milk and watching the news.

"We can step outside if you want to smoke, Stefan," said Agnes. "I just had the chairs cleaned and want to keep the smell out of the house."

"No thanks. I'm trying to quit."

"Really?" Agnes raised her eyebrows.

"Well, we'll see."

"That Barbara Parks called," Agnes chirped brightly. "The one you were friends with in school remember? She said you saved Chester Blain's life out there on Route 52."

"Evans. I mean, Dale, saved our lives, Mother."

Her eyes were shining, though. "If they put an article in the paper about it, I'll cut it out and send it to you."

"Thank you, Mother."

"I save all of your articles, you know."

"My articles?" Stefan was amazed when his mother went off to her bedroom and came back with a scrapbook filled with tiny little articles from

various papers, all reporting on his books. He turned the pages slowly. “Ronnie would be blown away by this,” he told her.

“Ronnie?”

“My agent.”

“Oh.” She smoothed her skirt, primly. “I thought he might be your boyfriend.”

It was a good thing he had the milk. It saved him from choking on cupcake.

Chapter Sixteen

Thomas Patrick Daniel O'Connor. Loving son and father.

Stefan looked down at the marble headstone. The man who had undoubtedly been responsible for the speed with which it had been finished and placed, as well as its expense, was probably Patrick.

“Hell. Is this what it comes down to, Stef? A rock in the ground?”

“I’ll never forget you,” Stefan told him. He’d gone out to their tree and found bluebells growing beside the track on the way back. They’d wither within the hour, he supposed, but he laid them on the heap of earth anyway.

“Ginnie said she’s going to plant a bed of those this spring,” said a voice from behind him.

Stefan rubbed the damp from his cheeks before he turned to face Sean. “He was the only man I knew who had a favorite flower.”

“Thomas told me you came by. What were you doing ringing the bell like a stranger? You should have come in.” Sean looked thinner, older, but somehow cheerier than Stefan had seen him in some time.

“I wasn’t sure...”

“Nonsense.” Sean walked up to stand next to Stefan. He looked down at the grave. “You’re family, Stef.”

They stood there lost each in his own thoughts for a while.

“How’s Jane,” asked Stefan, finally.

“Poor old mater. She’s having a hard time of it with Patrick out of the country.”

“Out of the country” being, apparently, Sean’s way of referring to his father’s disappearance. As far as anyone knew, he had found refuge in Guatemala, Mexico, Ecuador... if he were still alive.

“How’s Megan, Sean?”

The lines around Sean’s mouth deepened. “It’s not going well, Stef.”

Megan had really been the only one caught, her books damning evidence of her money laundering for one of the more vicious cartels. She was

refusing to turn state's evidence as yet.

"Brutal," said Sean. Stefan wasn't sure if he meant the situation or Megan's apparent willingness to not only protect her brother's murderer but also collude to murder his wife and unborn child. "Lawyer says her only hope is to enter witness protection," said Sean. "Good riddance, I say."

"You don't mean that."

Sean's jaw clenched. "I don't know how mother will take it."

"I'm sorry, Sean."

"Not your fault, old man. Really, I mean that."

Some part of Stefan felt relief as he realized he had worried that they'd blame him.

Now Colin appeared. Strolling out from behind a tree, hands in his pockets, curling hair in his eyes, the smell of marijuana preceding him like an aura. "Hey, Stef."

"Colin, how are you?"

A resentful glare at Sean from beneath angry brows. "Ask my jailor."

Sean gave Colin an uneasy look. "We've finally heard from Suzie," he told Stefan. "Thank God she's safe."

"Did they let you talk to her?"

"Yes, they'll relocate her but it was good to speak with her, see her well."

Suzie had, it turned out, been the one who had tipped Tommy to the entire game. Suspicious of Colin's business, after her divorce attorney and she had begun investigating his finances, she had contacted Tommy. Poor Colin, it turned out, hadn't had a clue that his business was a front.

"Mother called and wants to know if we are going to church tomorrow morning," he said to Sean.

"Of course we are," said Sean. "Tell Mother that Ginnie will come over early to help her with Uncle Danny."

It seemed Sean had assumed the mantle of authority in the house. He turned to Stefan. "Will you join us at church?"

"I have a flight first thing in the morning, but thank you."

"I suppose everyone thought I was jealous of him," said Sean, looking down at the gravestone. "But he took all the pressure. I rather liked being

overlooked.”

Stefan had never really thought about it, but Tommy had cast a mighty shadow. It had been easy to stand quietly in its protection.

“Sorry about your old man,” said Sean. He turned his head, and for a moment Stefan saw something familiar in the clench of his jaw, the tension at the corner of his mouth.

“They were only men,” he said.

Sean gave him a grateful little smile. “Yes, of course.”

Before he left, he brought a package out of the car. “Ginnie said you should have this. Tommy always said it was the quintessential Backtree Boys.”

Stefan tore open the package and found a framed photograph. It was so old the colors were flat and lacking in depth. A pudgy blond boy and a slim dark-haired Hispanic boy stood in front of a tree. Their faces were begrimed with the dirt and sweat of boys who played hard. They each held a BB gun and one could see from the look on the blond’s face that the other boy had just said something inappropriate.

“Thank you,” said Stefan.

“You’ll be back to visit, old man?”

“Say yes,” said Tommy.

Stefan touched the young face in the photograph. “Yes. Of course,” he said.

* * *

Room 22 of the Holiday Inn bled the sound of a football game through the door. Stefan wrapped on it, hoping no one else would be inside with Evans.

Dale.

“Hello,” said Stefan and he frowned at a spot in space.

Evans, wordlessly, held the door open for him and closed it again without comment.

Stefan stood watching the game.

“Do you want something to drink?”

“Do you have water?”

Evans went to the small hotel bar and handed Stefan a bottle of water. “Thanks.” Stefan twisted the cap off the water. “Aren’t you going to ask why I’m here?”

“No.”

“I’m not sure myself,” said Stefan.

“Sit down,” said Evans. And Stefan sat on the hotel bed.

Evans didn’t sit. He stood, arms folded, and regarded Stefan.

“You aren’t at McDenny House,” said Stefan. “Is your job done, then?”

“We’re debriefing,” said Evans. “How about you? I heard they cleared the drug charges. Are you going back to Los Angeles?”

“I have a meeting with the marketing reps next week. Ronnie expects me tomorrow,” said Stefan. “My flight leaves in the morning.”

Now Evans sat down. The mattress gave and Stefan found himself leaning against the big warm body.

Evans’ arm around him, his lips on Stefan’s head. “Stay the night?”

Stefan nodded. He turned his head up but instead of kissing him, Evans studied him, running a finger along his chin. He followed that finger down Stefan’s neck and undid his top button.

Those intelligent hazel eyes scrutinized Stefan.

“What’s wrong?” asked Evans.

“Who are you, Oprah?” said Stefan. “Do you always have to talk?”

“I do with you,” said Evans. His fingers nimbly unbuttoned the second button.

“Why?” said Stefan. He felt Evans’ hands on his shoulders, pushing him back to the mattress.

“You know why,” said Evans.

* * *

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Stefan figured he’d been a fool more than his share of times in his life. He didn’t recommend it to anyone.

Every light in the tiny hotel room was on. Evans’ hair was damp, his skin flushed, his eyes dark and fierce. He kissed Stefan and pulled away, looking

down at him with an expression that Stefan knew. He knew it because he'd lived it.

"I'm not the man you think I am."

"Aren't you?" Evans busily unbuttoned Stefan's jeans. "Who are you then?"

"You think I'm pretending to be a cynic, to hide my heart of gold. I don't have a heart of gold. I don't even know if I have a heart."

"You do," Evans had gotten them both naked very efficiently, now his warm body wrapped around Stefan, nose and mouth nuzzling below Stefan's ear in a spot that sent tingles down his body and met the tingles that Evans hand was creating around his cock.

"Like that?" whispered Evans.

"You're not listening to me." Evans hair was silky and thick in Stefan's hand. He let his palm cup Evans face, whose eyes closed and whose head pressed into the touch just like a faithful dog might push into his master's caress.

Stefan pulled Evans down to kiss him. Their limbs entwined as the kiss deepened. Stefan felt the moment when Evans began to lose control, rolling onto Stefan, holding him tighter, thrusting himself against Stefan, cock heavy and damp and sliding between them.

"No," said Stefan.

Evans opened dazed eyes. "No?" he said, plaintively.

"Not like this. I want to feel you again. Fuck me."

"You sure?"

"God, Evans, before I change my mind."

Evans leaned back on one elbow so Stefan could roll over. Then he rolled on top of him. Heavy and warm against Stefan's backside, making wordless little grateful sounds. His mouth on Stefan's hair and neck, his hands gentle and sure.

The magic spell Evan's touch seemed able to engender shut down Stefan's usual racing thoughts. His whole focus on the sensations of his body. Evan's fingers pressing into him. Slick thick cock pushing in. Seeking and finding Stefan's body responded instinctively. Arms stretched

over his head to grasp the head board, timing his breathing to match Evan's thrusts, feeling them both tipping over the edge.

"Oh my God," whispered Evans against Stefan's ear. "So..good.." Stefan arched his back and felt himself coming into Evans' fist.

Then Evans held him close, petting his hair. Stefan felt charmed, safe, inclined to sleep.

"We're good at this," said Evans. "Don't you think?"

"You're a love machine, Evans. I'll bet you're good with everybody."

"There's no everybody," said Evans. His fingers traced a design along Stefan's jawbone. Slipped to Stefan's throat. Traced a design down to his nipple that made some spring deep inside of Stefan tighten again. "How about you? Did you work things out with your policeman?"

Stefan opened his mouth to automatically deflect the question. But then it just didn't seem worth the effort. "I talked to him this afternoon. He's got a lot going on. He's still on leave from the department pending the investigation. And that wasn't some surface wound, he'll be in recovery for a while."

"I spoke to my friend in the FBI about him. He should come out alright."

"That was nice of you."

"It was the right thing to do. That isn't what I was asking about, though."

"I know." Stefan was silent for a while. Evans didn't press or even seem to be waiting for him to say anything and that lack of pressure is what finally let Stefan say it out loud. "I went through a kind of hell. I carried it around with me for so long. And now the place where I carried all that anger, all that unrequited passion, is just empty. It's disorienting."

Evans' hand slid down to that spot on Stefan's thigh that made him vibrate. "Mmm. Let's replace it with a little requited passion."

"God, Evans, are you always such a sap?"

Evans laughed, then bent over him and pressed his smiling lips to Stefan's. After a minute, Stefan opened his mouth and let Evans kiss him deeply. After another minute he kissed him back. He wrapped his arms around him and they rolled on the bed.

It was slow this time, sweet and slow. Evans touches feather light, kisses scattered across Stefan's body, reacting to Stefan's every touch with a kind

of shuddering deep pleasure that awed Stefan. He'd never had anyone respond to him like that.

When it was over, they lay cocooned again. Evans' lips on his forehead, a blessing and a promise.

"No," said Stefan.

"A little late for no," said Evans, a smile in his voice.

"I can't do this," said Stefan. And he sat up on the bed. Started looking for his clothes. "I have to go."

Evans didn't try to stop him. He didn't ask why. He handed Stefan one of his shoes when he couldn't find it, and it wasn't until Stefan was standing at the sink, splashing water over his face that Evans said, "I'm sorry."

"Christ, for what?"

"I'm not good at pulling my punches, Stefan. I want you. I don't mind telling you that. I guess it can be a lot to take in."

Stefan stilled. "Don't," he said.

"I can wait," said Evans.

"No, don't." said Stefan. He dried his hands on a towel, concentrating on that small task. "I have to go."

"Of course. Whatever you need," said Evans, "is fine with me."

Stefan shook his head. "Stop, Evans."

And Evans did stop. He handed Stefan his wallet and watch.

"So..." Stefan wavered in the doorway.

Evans looked down at him. He exuded something foreign. Something peaceful and sure. And then, right there on the balcony of the Holiday Inn, for the world and the whole of Boerne to see him, he gathered Stefan up and kissed him thoroughly. Stefan didn't resist.

Evans released him gently. Stefan felt the concrete beneath his feet a little like he was coming back to earth.

"Call me and I'll be there," Evans said. "Anytime, anyplace."

Stefan was having trouble breathing. He slapped his pockets looking for the cigarettes that weren't there.

"It's okay, Stefan. Go back to Los Angeles. Think about it. I can wait."

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Chapter Seventeen

With the distinct sense of releasing a twenty-pound burden, Stefan stepped into the dry, air-conditioned hangar of the Los Angeles airport and walked to the terminal entrance where he'd told Ronnie he would be waiting.

The plane had landed on time and Ronnie ran on Los Angeles time; thirty minutes late for anything.

Stefan set his valise down, reached for his nonexistent cigarettes, his hands wandering homeless from pocket to pocket until he drew out his cell phone instead and stared at its face, trying to find someone to call.

"Hello?" said Evans. "Stefan, are you all right?"

"Oh," said Stefan. "Is this your number? I'm sorry, I must have hit callback."

"How was your flight?"

"It always seems to take longer to get here than it does to go back to Texas."

"I know you mean that metaphorically, but it actually is due to the wind resistance."

"Oh."

"It's good to hear your voice."

"Oh," said Stefan again.

Silence.

"Well, I see my ride," Stefan lied. "Sorry to bother you."

"No bother. Call anytime."

Stefan disconnected. He slipped his phone into his pocket and then after a minute, drew it back out, found the number and carefully typed DALE EVANS into the contacts list.

Not that he was ever going to call him.

About the Author

AM RILEY is a film editor, and sometime poet, living in Los Angeles. Riley writes primarily LGBT paranormal and murder mysteries, and has been published with Torquere Press and Loose ID.

You can visit AM on the internet at:

<http://www.amriley.net/>

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the trevor project

The Trevor Project operates the only nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. Every day, The Trevor Project saves lives through its free and confidential helpline, its website and its educational services. If you or a friend are feeling lost or alone call The Trevor Helpline. If you or a friend are feeling lost, alone, confused or in crisis, please call The Trevor Helpline. You'll be able to speak confidentially with a trained counselor 24/7.

The Trevor Helpline: 866-488-7386

On the Web: <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

the gay men's domestic violence project

Founded in 1994, The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project is a grassroots, non-profit organization founded by a gay male survivor of domestic violence and developed through the strength, contributions and participation of the community. The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project supports victims and survivors through education, advocacy and direct services. Understanding that the serious public health issue of domestic violence is not gender specific, we serve men in relationships with men, regardless of how they identify, and stand ready to assist them in navigating through abusive relationships.

GMDVP Helpline: 800.832.1901

On the Web: <http://gmdvp.org/>

the gay & lesbian alliance against defamation/glaad en español

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (glaad) is dedicated to promoting and ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a means of eliminating homophobia and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

On the Web: <http://www.glaad.org/>

National **Youth Talkline 1-800-246-PRIDE (1-800-246-7743)**

On the Web: <http://www.glnh.org/>

e-mail: info@glbtnationalhelpcenter.org

If you're a GLBT and questioning student heading off to university, should know that there are resources on campus for you. Here's just a sample:

US Local GLBT college campus organizations

<http://dv-8.com/resources/us/local/campus.html>

GLBT Scholarship Resources

<http://tinyurl.com/6fx9v6>

Syracuse University

<http://lgbt.syr.edu/>

Texas A&M

<http://glbt.tamu.edu/>

Tulane University

<http://www.oma.tulane.edu/LGBT/Default.htm>

University of Alaska

<http://www.uaf.edu/agla/>

University of California, Davis

<http://lgbtrc.ucdavis.edu/>

University of California, San Francisco

<http://lgbt.ucsf.edu/>

University of Colorado

<http://www.colorado.edu/glbtrc/>

University of Florida

<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/multicultural/lgbt/>

University of Hawai'i, Mnoa

<http://manoa.hawaii.edu/lgbt/>

University of Utah

<http://www.sa.utah.edu/lgbt/>

University of Virginia

<http://www.virginia.edu/deanofstudents/lgbt/>

Vanderbilt University
<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/>

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