

The Bourbon Cowboy

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The American man sat quietly, hands on his knees, back to the wall, and tremendously drunk. His face was the color of bourbon whisky. Atop his head was a matted and dusty Stetson that once was ebony black, but, after years of sun and sweaty toil, was an off-gray, like the color of a corpse. His fingers were stained black from tobacco and labor, and his hair was like a pile of feed hay. The glass in front of him was half-full, and with a seemingly effortless gesture, he downed the rest with a whispered gulp. He threw several pesos on the table, stood up and left the small, Mexican cantina. He was celebrating. The loose gravel crunched underneath his worn boots, and the sun above was hot, but did not affect the man at all.

He had been in the most southern part of Baja for over seven years now. He had initially come to work the land his father owned. He was a skilled welder, and his services around the compound were greatly needed. He had built his own home on an isolated strip of earth that jutted out high above the Pacific Ocean. The design was completely unique; something of a cross between a Bradbury dream and a frontiersman's necessity. There was no loose furniture. All of the fixtures and furniture were built into the walls and floors of the domicile. Form efficiently followed function in his world, and his home was no different. He did not have any need for luxury. He did, however, have a need for an automobile. He used his full-sized diesel engine truck for sporadic errands into town, usually for food, drink and an occasional feature film.

He was not in town today for any of those things. He was here to have a drink, or several drinks of alcohol and to celebrate. He had not sold one of his welded pieces to a wealthy collector. He had not found any precious metals in the hills north of his father's land. He had not won *la loteria* or any other financial windfall. He was here to celebrate because he was not dead.

Seven years ago Ryan Stevens had come to Mexico for an escape. What he needed was a place that he could start over, and there was no better place to do that than in Southern Baja. The roads here were wild and the people rough. It seemed that he had already assumed this outcome before it was entirely necessary. In the States, he had maintained several odd jobs after completing his degree, but had the inability to plant roots, settle in and make a name for himself. It was not a lack of motivation—no, in fact it was more that he was motivated more to avoid things that he did not want to do. He refused to see himself established, inoculated by a BMW society of fashion ads and perfume samples. He did not own a suit, and had vowed that he never would. It was this brave, self-serving stoicism that had brought him to this point.

He was green when he arrived. He spoke no Spanish. He had no money and was easily taken advantage of. He met several women that would eventually, after a night of hard drinking, rob him of his money, passport and several welding tools. He was beaten several times, including an evening in a small *bodega* where he was pistol whipped by a swarthy Mexican, knocking out two of his teeth. He was resigned, however, and promised himself that he would somehow make it. He could not possibly return. He learned

hard lessons that hardened him. He learned mistrust, self-sacrifice, and eventually survival.

He was strangely at home in the hot, dusty land. He chose to build his home near the Sierra de Laguna Mountains. These mountains were just above the small, quiet town of Todos Santos, and old sugarcane producing villa. Todos Santos was a welcomed change to the hustle of Cabo or La Paz, and it pleased Ryan that the cool winds blew around the mountains, keeping his place much cooler than the desert-like Cabo San Lucas. He was not far from town, just a few miles from Highway 19, but enjoyed a quiet seclusion that allowed him to concentrate on his work as a metal artist and welder.

His father's land was stretch of several acres, neatly folded beneath the mountains. The elder Stevens had begun to gradually develop the land around 1977, but had ceased, seeking other investments. Now, some 20 years later, Ryan Stevens had arrived to make his mark upon the land, and take over where his father had left several unbuilt homes, a barn for horses, and a central house not unlike the *haciendas* of the 19th Century. He had a dream of what this place could become, and set off with an unrelentless vigor to prove to himself and his father, that he could indeed finish what his father had started.

There were already two families living and working on the property. They were *mestizos*, directly descended from the 17th Century, who had stayed in the area even after the river had dried up. Ryan worked closely with both the Morelos and Segovia families, repairing small buildings, installing rudimentary plumbing, and planting small amounts of cash crops, mostly cane. They were simple and humble families, infused with tradition and dignity, and were

always pleasant to local people as well as visitors. It was no different when Ryan had come to stay.

"You stay with us. Your father was a good, honest man," Jaime Morales had told him upon his arrival at Villa Stevens. He was a short, dark *mestizo* with a thin mustache and pleasant eyes. He was a father of three; two daughters and a son. The eldest daughter, Gabriella, was near Ryan's age, and had not failed to catch the American's eye not long after his arrival. "I hope you like work," he had said, with a genuine, toothless smile.

Ryan did enjoy the hard work, but he would not accept the offer of lodging. Instead, he chose to sleep outdoors, underneath the canopy of pearls, where his dreams were not confined by the four walls of a house. Eventually, he would build his own, but until then, he would not accept the hospitality. It just did not seem right.

Guillermo Segovia was in charge of the horses. He was a stout, light skinned Mexican who always wore a suit of seriousness, never allowing for anyone to read his emotions. He had a love for horses, and this passion carried over to his family. He was a father of three sons, all several years older than Ryan. Only one remained on the villa, Aldo, and he spent his days near his father's side, attending to the equine beast with much the same fervor as his father. Their mother had died six years earlier, and Jaime Morales' wife, Minerva, cooked and cleaned for both families. The two daughters, Yadira and Gabriella, assisted their mother in the daily chores of the villa, cooking, cleaning, and often going into town for supplies. The two families were inseparable, and formed the small community that had inhabited Villa Stevens for the last 26 years.

Ryan met the eldest Segovia the second day.

"These *caballos* are your father's. He has entrusted them to me, so long as I am here." His face did not allow insight.

"What are there names?" Ryan tried to read the emotions in the man's face. Was he angry that he was here, an American, intruding on the sanctity of this place?

"The white one is Azucar. The roan is Fermin. The gray foal is Chato. What do you know about horses?" The man's question was genuine.

"Not much. Only that my father has had horses since I was very young. I know by the looks of her that Azucar may be pregnant."

"Very good, *gringo*. I am impressed." A thin smile passed over the man's face. This emotional outpouring was a good omen to Ryan. He knew that he would befriend this man.

Ryan did not waste any time getting to work. He was eager to dip his elbows into the soil. He relished the long, hard days with the sun on his back, toiling endlessly in the Mexican sun. Each morning, the aches in his body renewed him, as if the pain was a baptismal offering from some demiurge. He repaired the propane tank and gas lines. He finished the plumbing in the main *hacienda*. He even had time to repair an old motorbike left from around WWII. His hands became like the barren, rocky land themselves. His face became tanned golden, like bourbon whiskey. His shoulders grew broader by the day, and ultimately, he emerged as a healthy, vibrant laborer, the type that he had always admired as a small child. He could feel himself awakening within this world. All of his problems, financial, legal and personal, that he had faced in the

States slowly evaporated in the hot Mexican sun. He was becoming a new man, and he relished in this.

"Would you like a *cerveza* Mr. Stevens?" It was Gabriella.

"That would be fine. No lime, please."

Her tigress eyes glistened in the white sunlight. She was superb. He could see the silhouette of her hips underneath her white dress. Her hair was long and not black like her siblings', but a golden brown as if from another time. He sensed a hint of lilac.

"How is your father?"

"Did you know him?"

"Yes. He was always very good to my family. He used to read to us stories from America and Africa." Ryan knew the stories, too.

"He is back in the States now. He is going to remarry."

"Do you remember your mother?"

"Somewhat. It was a long time ago."

"She visited *la villa* once, when I was very young. Do you know that we share the same *cumpleanos*?"

"March 21st."

"Yes. I remember her being very beautiful." Ryan noticed her elegantly thin wrists and shoulders.

"Call me Ryan."

The next day Ryan woke to the early light of a clear dawn sky. He went to the *hacienda* for *café con leche* and a sweet rice pudding. He rolled a cigarette, lit it, and exhaled slowly. He was becoming accustomed to the early mornings, something that he had not seen much of prior to his exodus to Mexico. He was a morning person now,

sometimes waking before the girls, before the dogs and before the sun. The dawn, he felt, was like a distant gift. He enjoyed unwrapping its contents whenever he could.

"Good morning, patron." Jaime was also a morning person.

"Jaime, you know as well as I do that you are the boss of Villa Stevens. I am here as a helper." He was embarrassed by Jaime's effusive comment.

"Oh, but *senor*, you will come to see, this place is destined to become yours. I can work this land for only so long. My son has dreams of the United States. My two daughters will soon marry and leave *la villa*."

Ryan imagined the day that he would run and control Villa Stevens. He would make a good patron one day. Honest, caring and strong.

"We'll see, Jaime. We'll see."

The day brought heavy work. Guillermo would be busy re-shoeing the horses and repairing the stable door. Ryan and Jaime had the task of putting a new roof on the *hacienda*. It would be hurricane season soon, and the roof was terribly penetrable. The day was hot, and the fumes from the tar began to make Ryan feel very sick. He retched several times and climbed down from the roof.

Ryan went inside the hacienda to look for a cold beer. His shirt was sticking to his back like lacquer, and his jeans were dark and sticky. The alcove near the service kitchen was cool and shaded. He could feel the cool breeze blowing slightly in the dimly lit hall. The smell of flour, meats and peppers filled his nose, and he heard a faint whimpering. It was not the whimpering of an animal, but of a young woman. He could see the slight silhouette

of Gabriella at the service table. Her head was in her arms and she was crying. He thought better of approaching, perhaps wanting to leave the woman in peace, to exorcise her sorrows without interruption. That is what he would have preferred. He wouldn't be crying, he thought, at least not where anyone could possibly see him. She was clasping to a small piece of paper. He casually dragged his feet when about fifty feet away. The woman startled, quickly composed herself, and hid the small piece of paper in her bosom.

"Good morning, *senorita*. I just came for a beer." He could feel the tar sticky on his hands. It was like the residue of cotton candy, or blood.

"I will get one for you, *senor Stevens*. Please sit down." She moved gracefully to the ice chest containing beer for the workers. The exposed portion of her chest was glistening. She had obviously been sobbing for some time, with some force. She tried to hide her eyes. She placed the icy beer in front of Ryan, on the worn, wooden table. The bottle left a dark ring on the faded wood as Ryan brought the drink to his lips. He took a powerful pull from the glass container, and set the beer down forcefully. The liquid refreshed him. "You are a very good worker," she said, "Not many *gringos* work like you do. I am impressed."

"Not many *gringos* have so much to work for. Who else will repair the roof before the rains?" She stared heavily into his eyes. It was not a look of helplessness or desperation. It was a fierce look nonetheless, like an animal, one that was not going to lie down.

"You have been sent to us, *senor Stevens*, I know this. You can help us."

Help you how? He thought. "Call me Ryan" As she neared him, he grabbed her by the wrists, somewhat forcibly, and turned her face to his. Her eyes were stricken, sad, but the fierceness lay hidden in the back. Her lip pursed slightly, and he put his mouth on hers and slowly kissed the woman, and she sighed soothingly.

The next morning, Ryan woke with a slight throb in the left temple. He recalled the events of the previous evening. His lip was puffy and red where Gabrielle had walloped him. He knew it had been a mistake to be so forward. He was an American, and Gabrielle had not been bred to join with an American. She had hit him square in the mouth, and with a closed fist. He had tried to apologize, but she was off before he could speak. He got stupidly drunk with some of the boys.

Now he needed coffee and fast. He stumbled from his bed, still clothed in last night's attire. His fingers were stained a bilious yellow from the tobacco. He was an aficionado of tobacco. He would take it in any form. He most enjoyed the short, dark, *robusto* cigars from Cuba and the Dominican. The smoke from them was hot, and it reminded him of the jungle in Africa from where he was born. The jungle had an iron smell that was encapsulated in the spicy cigar smoke. He also smoked hand-rolled cigarettes. He only smoked shag from Holland. He did not care much for smoking American tobacco. He felt that it was laced with far too many chemicals and additives for his discriminating palette. As far as loose-leaf or chewing tobacco was concerned, American was the epitome. He

carried at least three forms of tobacco on his person at a time. He never smoked a pipe.

Last night had been no different. Once inebriated, he was a tobacco consumer. You could not get close to the man without becoming enveloped in a hazy cloud of cigar smoke, or slushing through pools of dark, staining spittle. His teeth were nearly black.

Guillermo and his son Aldo had gathered Ryan at about five o'clock pm, minutes after the Gabriella incident, and decided for him that he needed a drink.

"You need tequila, *senor Stevens*," Guillermo had said. You have been smitten by *la diablita*. She is controlled by fire." Ryan lit a cigar, and offered the worn, leather pouch to both Guillermo and his son. Both declined.

"I've had worse." The first shot of the agave elixir was harsh and stung his throat. No need for lime.

Now it was early morning and he needed coffee. He tried and wanted to believe that the incident with Gabrielle had not affected him, that he was a man beyond emotion. But, he could not lie to himself. He was sorry for what he had done. Gabriella was in the kitchen when he finally arrived downstairs. She seemed composed enough, more so than Ryan at least, and worked hurriedly around a kitchen that was already hot from the morning sunlight. Ryan did not dare speak.

"Are you going to eat, or are you going to sit there like a baby that has lost his little toy?" She was defiant and haughty. Her accent drove him crazy though, and he could see her nostrils flare as her Latin blood coursed hot through her veins. Ryan cowered beneath the brim of his hat. He did not care that it was customary to remove his

hat while at the eating area, let alone the house, especially now. She was in control.

"Just coffee. Nothing more." He laid his hands palms down on the table, as if making some sort of offer at a pagan altar. The kitchen of the *hacienda* was atop a small hill at the southern end of the building. He could see the Pacific, and thought of the hurricane season that would be upon him soon. He thought of the violent waves that would crash upon the urchin-covered rocks.

"If you touch me like that again, I kill you." She slammed the ewer on Ryan's outstretched left hand.