

CHAPTER 1

Jess Galvan walked past at least five of the seven deadly sins before he even reached the bar.

But hey, who was counting?

In the dirt yard fronting the low-slung stucco building, factory workers leaned over a cockfighting pit waving fistfuls of payday pesos, throats hoarse, shirts spattered with fine sprays of rooster blood. Just inside the bar's front door was the pat-down and gun-check station, manned by a pair of bouncers with automatic rifles who frisked so thoroughly it was almost sexual assault. You were supposed to tip them, strapped or not.

Not being the exception.

In the long main room, a ceiling fan sliced slowly through air heavy with sweat and lust. Busted-out card players trounced from the back-room games commiserated over cheap cigarettes at the rickety tables. Drunks slumped in the booths, glassy eyes level with their tequila glasses. On the tiny raised stage, a stripper with rawhide skin and a razor blade under her tongue traipsed back and forth like a caged lion, cigarette in hand, eyes harder than her lurid silicone enhancements.

Galvan eased onto a stool and watched the bartender polish a dirty glass with a dirtier rag. The guy was short and stocky, forearms crisscrossed with raised scars, a hairnet stretched tight over his thick black mane.

Talk about closing the barn door after the horse takes off, Galvan thought, lifting his gallon jug of water to his lips. A few loose human hairs sure as hell weren't going to make this dive any less sanitary. Maybe they'd thrown a dart at the health code, decided to enforce whichever rule it hit.

The barman turned away to grab another glass. "You Jess?" he asked over his shoulder.

"I am," said Galvan, clocking the dude's hands in the mirror behind the liquor bottles. "Got something for me?" He slid his backpack off his shoulder, fingered the zipper.

“Change of plans.”

The bartender turned back and fixed his good eye on Galvan. The bad one kept on looking at the glass. “The boss, he decide he want to meet you. He say sit tight, he’ll be here soon as he can. Meantime, drinks are on him. Much as you want.”

“Like I’m gonna cross the fucking desert drunk, with a bagful of bearer’s bonds? If that’s the kind of service he wants, he can spend a lot less than I charge.”

Galvan looked at his watch, even though he knew exactly what it said. “Look, if I don’t get going in the next half hour, I won’t have enough dark to make it over. You call him and tell him that.”

“No can do, jefe. He don’t believe in phones.”

Galvan dropped his elbows onto the bar. “Great.”

“How ’bout a soda or something?”

Galvan shook his jug so that the water sloshed against the sides. “All set.”

A high, trilled laugh bounced off the walls, and Galvan turned toward it just like everybody else. A girl in a tube top and spike heels was stepping through the door, on the arms of two Mexicans dressed in vaquero shirts and gaudy boots.

You didn’t have to be a toxicologist to see that she was lit off her ass; if she’d ever known how to walk in those shoes without wobbling, she’d certainly forgotten now. And you didn’t have to be the father of a teenage girl to know that this one had no business being here and wouldn’t for another four or five years.

But maybe you had to be to care.

Galvan planted a sneaker on the sawdusted ground, his body tensing as he watched the men lead their jailbait to a table where three others waited with beers raised in salutation.

That could be my little girl.

It was no abstract observation, everybody’s-someone’s-kid, but a future terrible in its plausibility.

Either I get custody, or her crazy-ass mother will ruin her life.

He’d tried twice before in the six years since the divorce, and the only place he’d gotten was further in debt. But Galvan hadn’t understood the game then, hadn’t played to win. To wrest a kid away from her mother in fucking kill-’em-all-let-God-sort-’em-out Texas, you needed big-league legal firepower. Not some jackass-of-all-trades attorney with a strip-mall office and a Men’s Warehouse suit.

You needed Baxter Shanley, two-time State Bar Association Family Lawyer of the Year. He of the skyscrapered office in downtown Houston, the custom-tailored Savile Row ensembles he wore everywhere except the courtroom, where he dressed off the rack so as to avoid judicial jealousy.

And Baxter Shanley needed fifty large.

Tomorrow morning, some scumbag in El Paso would get a backpack full of bearer's bonds, and Baxter Shanley would get his money. Galvan, his day in court.

But only if some scumbag in Juárez showed up to fill that backpack with those bearer's bonds.

He looked at his watch again.

The girl and her five buddies were hoisting shot glasses now. Throwing back tequila. *Ta-kill-ya*, Galvan and his baseball-team buddies had called it, back in high school. Back in L.A.

Goddamn, he was old.

A high squeal from the girl, and Galvan's head snapped over. One of the vaqueros she'd come in with was throwing her over his shoulder, caveman style, and she was laughing and playing along, a prehistoric damsel in distress. He jiggled her ass cheek—*qué firme!*—and she retaliated by slapping at his back, mock-indignant.

He carried her right past Galvan's stool—close enough to smell mescal and lime, perfume and musk. Then past the bar, the stage. He opened the door to one of the rear rooms, shifting her weight to manage the doorknob. A high heel fell off, clunked to the ground.

Fuckin' Cinderella shit.

The door clicked shut, and she was gone. The room felt suddenly still.

As if she never existed, Galvan thought, without quite knowing why.

“What kind of maricón says no to a free drink?”

He tore his eyes away, turned toward the voice and found a squat, thickly mustached man grinning at him from behind oversized aviators.

“Ah, I'm just busting your huevos.” The guy extended a hand, wrist dripping with loose gold bracelets. “They call me Pescador. Sorry to keep you waiting. I hear you're the best.”

“I'm good enough,” said Galvan. He glanced again at the door the girl had vanished through. Two of the vaquero's friends were sauntering toward it now, beer bottles in hand, sloppy grins plastered across their mugs.

“Good *enough*? Shit, look at you. I need to keep my shades on, that T-shirt is so bright. Mira, you got the sleeves creased all perfect and everything. Look like a pinche marine. Here you go, cabrón, be all you can be.” He extracted a thick envelope from his battered attaché case, slid it across the bar with his fingertips.

Galvan backpacked it, quick.

The guys were through the door now. It shuddered on its hinges, and Galvan heard the metal-on-metal grind of a lock.

“Be all you can be’s the army,” he said. “We done here?”

Pescador dropped his palm onto Galvan’s forearm, pinning it to the bar. With his other hand, he whipped off the sunglasses. “Not so fast, gringo. You seem a little distracted. Why don’t you tell me what’s so interesting over *there*, when I’m paying you good fucking dinero to look *here*?”

Out the corner of his eye, Galvan saw the bartender’s hand snake underneath the liquor caddy. Sure. Made perfect sense. Boss gets agitated, any employee who wants to keep his job is gonna reach for the only pistola in the place, just to be on the safe side. Might be a little hard to aim with just one eye, but from this distance, all he’d have to do was press muzzle to forehead. No depth perception required.

“You’re right,” said Galvan. “Sorry.” He leaned in close to Pescador, dropped his voice to a conspiratorial rumble, and jerked a thumb at the door. “Couple minutes ago, some guys carried a real drunk, real young girl back there. I haven’t been able to get her out of my mind since, you know what I mean?”

Pescador furrowed his brow. “That’s understandable. How young?”

Galvan shook his head. “I don’t know. Sixteen, maybe.”

Pescador stood up so fast his stool tipped over, raising a sawdust cloud. “Well, fuck it. Are we men or are we mice? Let’s have a look.” And off he strode, bowlegged as an old-time sheriff.

Galvan shrugged his backpack on and followed.

Pescador was barely five-three standing on tiptoe, but he banged on the door like he was leading a SWAT team, shouting his own name like the word moved boulders, parted seas.

The knob turned and the door creaked open a few degrees, enough for Galvan to see the conquering caveman himself blocking the threshold, clad in nothing but a wife-beater and a grin. His cowboy shirt was bunched up in one hand, fig-leaving his dick.

Galvan didn’t think—didn’t need to. He kicked the door as hard as he could, sending the guy staggering back into the room, and charged in after.

That was somebody’s little girl in there.

He found her spread-eagled on a billiards table, bathed in greenish lamplight, her eyes closed and her top gone and her skirt hiked up above her waist, that one high heel still dangling pitifully from her foot. The stink of sex was thick, and there were five or six men in there—one standing by each of her arms, ready to hold her down if need be, and a few others playing the walls, watching.

Waiting their turns.

Galvan didn’t have time to take a head count. The second he came through the door, they rushed him. He ducked a haymaker, the guy’s breath reaching Galvan long before his fist, laid the dude out

with a pair of short jabs to the gut. The vaquero from the door tried to yoke him from behind, forearm to windpipe, but Galvan reared forward, slammed the back of his skull into the guy's cheekbone, then grabbed the yoking arm and yanked until he heard the bone snap and the rapist howl, thud against the wall, collapse.

A sunburst of pain dropped Galvan to his knees. Only the sound of shattering glass told him what he'd been hit with. He turned, caught the attacker's wrist inches before the jagged remains of the beer bottle would have found Galvan's jugular, then swept his leg and floored the bastard. Chop to the windpipe, roll, back into a ready crouch.

Just like riding a bike.

Two more were running at him now, from opposite sides of the table. Galvan's eyes raced, scouring the room for a weapon. And where the fuck was Pescador? What happened to *are we men or are we mice?*

The goons were closing fast. Galvan saw the girl's shoe just in time, snatched it off her foot and swung the four-inch heel across his body, backhand.

A wet squelching sound, and then a thump. When Galvan pulled back his arm, the heel was covered in blood, and a man lay at his feet, howling in pain, blood gushing from his eye socket.

Something metallic glinted from his waist, and Galvan dove for it, headlong, thinking gun.

That would have been better.

It was a badge.

Galvan's eyes widened, then went woozy as a blackjack connected with the back of his head.

"Look who turns out to be a fuckin' Boy Scout."

Dimly, as if through a rapidly closing fog, Galvan looked up and saw Pescador, shaking his head as he sauntered over to the girl.

"You just blinded my best detective," he said, unbuckling his belt. "I hope this little piece of gash is worth rotting in prison for."

The last thing Galvan saw before losing consciousness was the police chief's pants falling to the ground.