

Vamonos! by Bill Stephens

87,000 words

# **¡Vámonos!**

**A Novel**

**By**

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**PART ONE**

***“CAMINANTES DEL MAYAB”***

**“Travelers in the Desert”**

## Chapter 1

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

Singing in the bar of Rancho-O-Rita Bar & Grill, Home of the Flaming Chicken Fried Steak, was a humbling experience for Skeets. Every evening for months he'd made his way to the Bee Cave Road address just outside Austin, Texas, and wiggled his way onto the tiny stage that barely held a stool, his guitar, the microphone and himself, and sang to an unappreciative audience. He knew the bar's ambience of faded photos from happier times, low-hung, roof-leak-stained ceiling tiles, and flickering beer neons could jar the sensibilities even of a bubba whose doublewide was decorated with nudes on black velvet. But Austin expatriate smokers escaping the city's ban on their vice flocked through Ranch-O-Rita's doors. Add lousy pay, patrons hungry but not for music, and the smell of chicken fried steaks bubbling in burned grease mingled with a pall of cigarette smoke, and Skeets had himself a disagreeable venue. "But a gig is a gig," he kept repeating.

The blonde's amorous interest proved he held his thirty-five years well. Lean and tanned from Harley riding, Skeets noticed that women got real interested when he wore his over-length stovepipe jeans rumples on his boots, the big belt buckle, the pearl-snap buttoned western shirt, and

his big hat.

It was close to midnight and he'd just finished the song written by a friend to celebrate Skeets' divorce, "Darlin', If You Really Loved Me, You'da Married Somebody Else." Skeets had included the song on his only CD, and the single release made it to the top forty of C&W, resting at number thirty-nine for one week. That was his closest brush with fame. The dealership held his Harley hostage for an unpaid \$50 repair bill, and he now relied on Gena and friends for rides. With one song left in the final set, he had to find a new friend real quick or he'd be thumbing it back to town. The blonde and her two lady friends were more interested in drinking than chicken fried, and they listened to his music with some interest. The blonde – who looked to be in her mid-twenties – had maintained predatory eye contact with him most of the evening. He launched into his final song, "Baby, If You've Had Too Much, I Can Pop Your Clutch," singing to the blonde. She smiled with recognition at the song that had made Skeets semi-famous around Austin. He put his soul into the song, and, for once, those muddy chord progressions that always cramped his fret fingers came so easily he felt truly gratified.

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

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

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

A snicker circled the table as the three looked at each other to see if they could pass for UT

undergrads. Unconvinced, the blonde shook her head. “Nice try, but college is a distant memory.”

“You coulda fooled me. Oh, by the way I’m Skeets Hollaran.” He doffed his big hat as he introduced himself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She unfolded from her seat, and Skeets was even more impressed with her slender figure and her height. She stood eye to eye with him and carried her body with the grace of a super model. “Ladies, I’d give you a ride ‘cept I’m expecting my friend who brought me to swing back by, but if I’m not here, he’ll know where to find me.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No kids. No babysitter.”

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

“Yeah, something like that.”

Skeets gestured toward her friends, now absorbed in relationship building with the musicians. “Your friends seem to be enjoying themselves enough they wouldn’t mind us splitting?”

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

“You mind giving me a ride?”

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

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

The Beamer hummed over Loop 1 west of Austin and slowed to enter a gated community of expensive homes perched on the slopes of the Texas Hill Country. Sue cut the headlights a block before turning into the driveway of a two-story Georgian home with manicured landscaping. The garage door rose, and the car moved inside before the door closed again.

“It’s not much, but you call it home, right?” Skeets gestured around the designer decorated downstairs living area.

“My husband got in on the ground floor at Dell Technology. And the rest, as they say, is history.” In the study, she poured another scotch for Skeets.

“I don’t suppose your husband is prone to coming home early from fishing trips.”

“I wouldn’t be that lucky.” She handed Skeets the drink.

“Sounds like the bloom is off the rose.”

She answered by pulling him into an embrace and kiss.

“I’ve always said Austin’s a friendly town.” He tried to smile, but she kissed him again. Her breath had the sweet scent of alcohol, and pleasant perfume fragrances lingered on her neck. He ran his fingers lightly over her body, and she quivered when he caressed the sensitive parts. No question, this could be life-altering, he thought, as she pushed him onto a large overstuffed leather couch.

“Sue, I’d swear you’re trying to seduce me.” He set his drink on the coffee table and was about to rise when she pushed him back down, turned and put each leg between her knees and removed his boots and socks. She unbuckled his belt, slid his jeans from under him, and pulled them off. She almost tore his shirt off. “You know, it’s hard to get this kind of service anymore,” he added.

“Hold that thought,” she said as she unbuttoned her top button and ripped her blouse off over her head. Blue jeans, bra and panties followed the blouse to the floor, and she stood before him in all her bloneness.

“I think you *should* get more comfortable.” Skeets showed real appreciation for her efforts.

Her legs were long enough to straddle him with a knee buried in the leather on each side. His eyes rolled with gratification when she lowered herself. “Lord, child, you do know how to get a guy’s attention.”

She leaned forward, kissed him, and said, “I hope you’re not in a hurry, cowboy.”

The Beamer slowed to a stop early the next morning in front of a house a block from Gena's duplex, a ploy both to disguise the location of his real digs and to avoid an encounter with Gena. As the Beamer roared away, he stood on the curb and took inventory. His guitar case leaned against his leg, and he had some recollection of putting his guitar in it. His shirt smelled of beer, scotch, expensive perfume, tobacco, and body odor. Sixty-three bucks still languished in his pockets as near as he could make it. Altogether, a pretty successful night.

"Morning, Skeets." Clyde Volmer picked up the *Austin Statesman*, "Breakfast Edition" from his yard.

"Morning, Clyde." No need to look around, Skeets knew the voice.

A little paunchy at age sixty with gray hair accelerating into extinction, his neighbor nevertheless still presented himself well. "Must'a been a good night. She's a bit classier than usual, what with that Beamer and all."

"Way better'n usual, I'd say."

"I've seen better looking train wrecks than you. Maybe you best come in for a cup and freshen up before you present yourself at home."

"Thought you'd never ask." He grabbed his guitar and followed Clyde into the house.

The two settled around the breakfast table, and Clyde poured the ritual coffee. "It's a hard life, but I guess somebody has to do it."

"The people of this country need entertainment, Clyde. I'm just doing my part."

"And maybe part of somebody else's, I'd say."

Both jerked their heads around at the sound of squalling tires and watched through the living room window as a car accelerated at warp speed. Gena's black Pontiac LeMans flashed by with an unfriendly gesture extending through the lowered driver-side window.

"Skeets, I'd say there's a storm brewing up at your place."

Skeets leaped from the table, grabbed his guitar case and rushed out the door. He trotted toward the duplex as fast as his weariness allowed. He slowed and pulled up to a walk when in full view of his digs. The front yard was awash with stuff. His stuff. Everything he owned. He picked up speed and slid to a stop, breathing hard, standing before his life, what there was of it, arrayed on the lawn.

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

A few Merle Haggard LP's, some Willie Nelson tapes, one George Strait CD, one Garth Brooks CD, and a book called *Guitar Chords Made Easy* had satisfied his cultural cravings. He managed to keep his life uncomplicated wardrobe-wise with two pairs of cowboy boots (one needing new soles), five pairs of jeans (knees out of two and three dirty), three pairs of socks with holes, six western fake mother-of-pearl, snap-button shirts, five Harley-Davidson tee shirts, a motorcycle rain-suit, a scuffed up pair of motorcycle leathers, a helmet, a fringed leather jacket, and a pair of black leather gloves. In staples and hard goods, his inventory listed a few toiletry items, a broken down suitcase, a bedroll, and the 1990 Harley-Davidson Soft Tail Springer currently still ransomed at the dealership for repairs.

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

Skeets sagged to a cowboy squat beside his meager net worth and contemplated his failure. His life to that point had never demanded an inventory or reckoning of this type, certainly not in the

heat of an August morning, hung over, crotch itching, and sleepless. If he was given to emotion, he could have cried over his condition. Not for the lack of worldly goods, but over what was apparently his last will and testament where Gena Koster was concerned.

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

He began picking up his belongings, opened the George Strait CD, and found the ten twenty-dollar bills he had folded and placed there for a rainy day. This day qualified. He put the bills in his pocket, just as PK, short for Pussy Kat, after an extended olfactory examination, backed up to Skeets' motorcycle helmet, and laid down a line of piss. Skeets, never a cat lover, even less a PK lover, and already stressed by current events, leaped over his things and guided a sharp toed cowboy boot right into PK's tenders. PK rolled end-over-end, yowling, and came to a crouch under the lone shrub at the side of the house to contemplate life's disappointments. Skeets cursed as he hopped around, trying to rub PK's piss from his boot onto the grass.

As a rule, tomcats do not consider it wise to dally about analyzing the source of a significant blast to their most sacred parts. PK, no exception, moved away quickly to a secure location thereby reducing chances of a second shot to the already offended area. Completing his first full

rotation, his privates snapped back to their anatomically correct position like the rubber-banded ball on a Fly Back Paddle. He had a pretty good idea whence the attack originated. After careful investigation among the new arrivals on the grass, he'd located the main source of the smell he hated most and had initiated corrective measures to obliterate the stench. He was viciously attacked at that very moment.

It was the Tall Evil Smelling One that had reduced PK's former luxurious life, lazing in the personal care and attention of the Sweet Smelling One, to a living hell. It all started when, without notice and for no logical reason, he was whisked away by the Sweet Smelling One from the house near the alley where lived three lovely pussycats. The ladies with whom he'd spent many evenings basking in Eros' ecstasy. From that Nirvana he'd landed in a huge box into which had come the Tall Evil Smelling One. But worst of all, even though PK had spent many hours, both day and night searching, this new box seemed not to be within hailing distance of even one pussycat.

No living cat, including PK, had any recollection of that brief period when cats were held in the exalted position of deities, before descending to their current status way down religion's celestial totem pole. Historically, he couldn't give a yawn about religion, but recently he ruminated (at least between naps) on what had gone wrong in his life. Now, as he lay under the bush licking his traumatized area, he knew that somewhere up there among the stars, someone with a sick sense of humor was definitely jerking him around.

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

the title, but he had to move closer to read the rest

*NINETY-FIVE FECES*

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

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

94. *You make me ashamed that I ever loved anyone like you.*
95. *The fact that I still love you cannot compensate for the burden of your being a complete zero.*

*GET FUCKED (AGAIN) - Gena Koster*

Skeets stared blankly for a long time after reading his life's litany. Then he looked around like he was leaving a whorehouse, wondering who was watching, and moved to the steps, lowering himself to the porch floor. Head resting face down, cradled in the notch formed by his hands, he considered his plight. This was a defining moment; even he knew it. Knew it from his groin to his soul.

Everything ached at the thought of his loss, a loss explained only by his delinquencies. He knew from their first kiss he was undeserving -- a scurrilous love thief with no conspicuous redeeming qualities. Now the thought of his dereliction left him so miserable, escape seemed the only possible comfort. To run fast and far. To redefine himself. To atone for sins committed against one of God's most perfect gifts. His life was a cesspool, and regeneration was nowhere about.

A rumbling in the back of his consciousness forced him into the present. It was unmistakable. Jesse Suarez's Harley was unmistakable if you were within a five-block radius.

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

Jesse gestured toward the debris on the lawn as he pivoted off his bike and pointed skyward. "It's a good day for airing out your things." When there was no answer, he tried again, "Having a bad hair day, good buddy? You're looking semi-homeless."

"Where the hell were you last night?"

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

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

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

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

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

"How so?"

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

"You had a gig?"

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

"Good bucks?"

"Four hundred. They were desperate."

"Free drinks?"

"Desperate!"

"So where'd you crash?"

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

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

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

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

"No choice this side of criminal prosecution."

"Mexico?"

"Where else, *compadre*?"

Skeets' mind went into hyper-drive. Mexico! Redemptive opportunity at every turn in the road. A pilgrimage of atonement. A cleansing catharsis of the soul the purification of which would

make him worthy of the clemency of Gena. A pivotal spiritual event. Sin seared from the soul by Mexican desert sun. And finally, absolution! "Mind if I ride along?"

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

"I won't be much fun."

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

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

"No shit!" Jesse's expression was doubtful.

## Chapter 2

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

Trees and small, refurbished homes blurred past her window, still lowered from shooting the finger at Clyde Volmer’s house where Skeets was probably hiding out after yet another night of sexual indiscretion.

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

She was an avid reader since childhood and could rhapsodize over poetry before high school. This love for poetry pushed her toward Country and Western music, the only music left

in which lyrics played any meaningful part. Of course C&W had plenty of "My heart's a breakin' and my balls is achin'," songs, but to her, a Jerry Jeff Walker/Jimmy Buffet lyric like "Railroad Lady" should be studied in school. Skeets' lyrics held the same magic.

They were friends for about a year, as women requiring no commitment seemed his only interest then.

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

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

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

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

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

"Last night? What about last night?" Gena craned her neck to read Lizzie's expression.

"Skeets spent most of last night at the Dillo Doe with a tall skinny blonde. I was busy, so I don't know if they left together, but they were both gone about the same time." Lizzie took

another pull on the coffee. “Come on up and cool down a little before you face the world.”

“Cool down! I’m not gonna cool down. I’m gonna get my rifle and hunt the bastard down. Tall skinny blonde, my ass! I’ll show him tall and skinny!” She had to breathe, and some reason filtered in with the air. After a pause she added, “Besides, I’m late for an appointment with Higdens.”

“Doctor ‘Lovelorn’?” Lizzie laughed. “You both might be better off if you postponed.”

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

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

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

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

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

“95 Feces?” Lizzie raised her eyebrows.

“Yeah, Martin Luther’s theses, remember? I listed ninety-five of Skeet’s major

shortcomings and nailed those suckers to the front door.” Gena made a hammering motion.

“Give me an example.”

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

“I’d rather use the hammer on *him*, though.” Gena made the pounding motion again.

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

“No next! This is it for Skeets Hollaran and his mister friendly. How dumb can I be to hang around this long?” She knew the answer to her own question, and that awareness forced a grimace.

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

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

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

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

"Right!"

"What did she say about gettin' *onto* strange vehicles?"

"It's pretty strange."

"A Harley?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Now that might be an exaggeration."

"If that's the case, you might as well tell her about this!" She again lowered herself over

his lips pressing a little harder and sending her tongue deep into his mouth searching for a response.

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

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

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

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

"Maybe we should get together and sort this thing out?"

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

She set the receiver on the phone and shouted, "Gotcha!"

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

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

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

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

Gena joined in on the verse:

*A hundred loves behind me  
And an empty life ahead  
You took me in and loved me.  
With nothing asked or said  
You took me in and showed me  
My cheating days are gone  
Now time with you is all I want  
My whole life long*

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

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

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

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

Lizzie tried not to laugh out loud, but the convulsions erupted. “Maybe we should say a

little prayer of thanks.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, maybe.”

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

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

### Chapter 3

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

Clyde opened the door to a bedraggled Skeets holding all of his worldly possessions. He leaned on the doorframe and looked Skeets over. "Son, you look low enough to sit on a cigarette paper and swing your legs."

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

"Moving days are never pleasant." Clyde nodded toward Skeet's stuff and motioned him toward the breakfast table. "I heard Jesse's scoot coming and going. What's up?"

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

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

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

while I'm gone." Skeets motioned to his belongings in the living room.

"You're hitting the road? Not staying to fight another day?"

"Don't think there's a choice this time." Skeet handed the "Ninty-five Feces" to Clyde.

Clyde read the bill-of-particulars laughing at each new insult posted against Skeets. "I don't think she left much out."

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

"Skeets, let me tell it to you straight. Gena Koster's the only real thing you've ever had. I've known you and your folks since you were a pup and Gena for more'n a year. If you run off without trying to get her back, you deserve every bad thing that's gonna happen to you." Clyde's voice had an ominous tone.

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

"For God's sake, son, lie to her. Tell her you spent the night here. Tell her anything. Get on your knees and beg. And if she'll take you back, then see if you can grow up enough to show her the respect she deserves. There's a phone in the kitchen. Get in there, call Gena, and forget this Mexico thing."

But Skeets only moaned in reply: "I truly don't deserve Gena. I've known that all along, but I hung around anyway hoping I'd change. Try to get it together and be the man she wanted me to be. It's hopeless. When I get back . . . maybe." His voice trailed off.

"That may be too late. She won't have any trouble finding somebody to take your place."

Skeets sat for a moment reflecting on life without Gena. The thought was so sobering and painful he closed his eyes hoping it would go away. When he opened them again, Clyde was still

staring at him and the pain still persisted. “You think I should call her? I’ll bet she won’t even answer.”

“Try it!” Clyde pointed in the direction of the phone.

Skeet moved into the kitchen and dialed Gena’s cell number. Seconds before voice mail clicked in he heard her voice. “Clyde, is that you?”

After a pause Skeets answered. “No, it’s me. I’m calling from Clyde’s.”

“Oh, if I’d known that, I wouldn’t have answered.” Her voice was brittle.

“Listen, I guess we’ve got a situation here.”

“No Skeets, *we* don’t have a situation. *You* have a situation. You can’t keep your dick in your pants.”

“Now, Gena, don’t jump to conclusions. I know I didn’t get home last night, but I can explain.”

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

“No, really, I’ve been here at Clyde’s. Jesse didn’t come by the Dillo Doe, so I had to hitch a ride home. It was late, but I saw a light on in Clyde’s, so I stopped in and passed out on his couch. I overslept this morning.” He waited to see how this story played out.

“Funny thing, Skeets, Lizzie was bartending last night . . .”

“Lizzie was bartending last night? I didn’t see her.”

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

“You’ve talked to Lizzie?”

“I’m in her apartment right now.”

Skeets thought for a moment. “She said something about a skinny blonde?”

“Yes, Skeets, the skinny blonde you left with.”

“She saw me leave with her?” Skeet pounded the palm of his hand to his forehead in disbelief.

“Give it up, Skeets. Did you fuck the skinny blonde or not?” Her voice crackled with anger.

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

Her voice sputtered over the phone again. “I’m waiting!”

He held the phone away from his ear. “Yes. Yes, I fucked the skinny blonde.”

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

“I’m not bragging about it. I’m *confessing*. I made a very big mistake. I thought for once I would own up to it and hope you would forgive me.”

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

“I’m not saying that,” he shouted down the length of his arm toward the mouthpiece. “I’m just saying that I love you, and I want you to forgive me. I want to be a different person in the future.”

There was a long silence on the phone.

“Skeets, you don’t deserve me.”

“I know that. I know I need to be a different person.” He heard Jesse pull into the driveway and rack up the motorcycle’s pipes.

“Is that Jesse I hear?”

“Yeah, he picked up my bike for me.”

“What brought that on?”

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

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

“I need to get away and think some things through.” He rubbed his forehead.

“Yeah, well I’ve already thought some things through. I think we should not see each other again.” Skeets heard the phone click off before he could answer.

Clyde opened the front door. “Come on in, Jesse.”

“Skeets here?” he asked before he saw all of Skeets’ stuff on the living room floor.

“Lover boy is on the kitchen phone running damage control with Gena.” Clyde pointed toward the kitchen.

“Having any luck?”

Skeets came into the room before Clyde could answer. “That worked *really* well.”

“Qué pasó?” Jesse shrugged the question.

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

“Did you tell her you spent the night here?” Clyde pointed to the living room floor.

“I told her the truth.” Skeets pursed his lips and nodded for emphasis.

“You told her the truth?” Clyde and Jesse spoke in unison.

“Nobody tells them the truth! They don’t want the truth!” Clyde shook his head in disbelief.

“Well, Mr. Veracity, we better start loading your gear, cause you just became homeless for good.” Jesse moved toward Skeets stuff on the floor.

“What! Can’t a guy do the right thing? Tell the truth? Try to be a better person?” Skeets’ voice rose an octave realizing they were right. You can never tell women the truth about infidelity if you want to hang around.

Jesse shook his head. “It’s the worst possible thing you could have done.”

“So, Jesse, do you have a plan for this trip?” Clyde glanced around the breakfast table at his guests.

Jesse paused before replying. “I thought we’d ride south.”

“Oh, now that’s a plan.” Clyde frowned at the concept. “I mean, do they give you the big *bienvenidos* at the border, or do they want to see a little paperwork before the *abrazo*.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

The three stood, considering the pile of stuff in the living room. Then Skeets moved around it

like a rock climber looking for a handhold. “Clyde, you have a box I could put some stuff in?” When the box arrived, Skeets dumped everything from the suitcase into the box, picking out a few toiletries, and starting, not too carefully, to fold the clothes he’d stuffed into the blue jeans.

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

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

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

“Ok! Ok! God forbid my Mom’s old suitcase fails the style test.”

The packing complete, Skeets grabbed the suitcase and the bedroll, Jesse hoisted all the Harley stuff to go in the saddlebags, and Clyde carried Skeets’ guitar. With everything stowed there was no room for Jesse to second-seat without slinging the guitar case on his back.

Clyde stepped back, examined the overloaded motorcycle, and shook his head. The bedroll strapped to the front fender and the ugly suitcase on the back fender sissy-bar made the bike look like it had acquired a horrible disease. The two riders and the guitar rounded out a truly sad visage. “You know, as ridiculous as you guys look, and as much as I think this whole trip is a mistake, I wish I was going with you.”