

Archeology and Big Business don't mix --
Especially when someone is willing to kill for the land!

RUINS

Adventure and Mystery
In The
American Southwest

Lazette Gifford

**Archeology and business
don't mix....**

Leander Consantinos had his life ripped apart when he went to prison for a series of murders he didn't commit. Now, free again -- but with his wife remarried and his son renamed -- he has no choice but to rebuild his life on the ruins of the other. After taking a job at a museum in New Mexico, Lee is caught up in a new drama as a local landowner fights to hold on to his land and protect the archeology

sites it harbors, while an unscrupulous land developer does everything in his power to get what he wants.

Lee is willing to take up the fight. After all, he has nothing left to lose.

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Chapter One

Release from prison didn't end the nightmare.

The bus hit another small snowdrift snaking its way across Interstate 95, despite the snow plows Leander had seen traversing the road. The huge bus gave a shuddering little bounce, while the wind caught at the side and tried to push it toward the edge of the road. Snow fell like a sheer, white curtain, obscuring much of the world around him.

Leander Constantinos, born and raised in Florida, had never seen so much snow in his life.

He sat in the back of the bus, his coat hood pulled up over his head, hoping for anonymity. Lee looked out the back window and watched the last white van -- some TV station emblem on the side -- take an off ramp a few miles short of Baltimore. No

one else had followed him this far north into this horrible weather.

Free... finally, truly free.

He sat back against the hard seat and shivered, not so much at the cold, as at the uncertainty of his future. Freedom hadn't been a word in his vocabulary for more than five years. It had slipped away the day the police rushed into his apartment and dragged him from bed, with his wife crying and his baby son screaming...

He closed his eyes and tried to block the moment away. But it had been the start of a long, long nightmare, and not so easily forgotten.

He watched as the world passed, white and gray, outside. He had gone, he thought, about as far North as he cared to.

Less than two hours later Lee found himself in the downtown Baltimore bus terminal, a building filled with restless people worried about the upcoming holidays. He left as quickly as he could and wandered down a street until he found a haven from the cold at a hotel. He hoped the weather kept people from trying to find him.

He spent a restless night, mostly sitting by the window watching it snow. He skipped food, afraid to leave the room and draw attention. A hot shower proved both heaven and unnerving -- no one standing over him, no one telling him to get moving. The next morning he went down to the lobby and checked out again, and then crossed to the phone bank in the corner. He had to make the one call before he could go on with life -- and he feared what he would hear on the other end. But without the call he could only live in limbo, rather than heaven or hell. He didn't trust the desk clerk, who might listen in, so he used the phone card he'd picked up at shop by the bus terminal. Right now he didn't trust anyone, having been hounded for three days...

Lee pulled his hood up and probably looked sinister, but he didn't care. A single piece of battered luggage sat at his feet. He kicked at it while his fingers dialed a number by memory, and he listened to the other end ring and ring again. His throat had gone dry.

Another ring.

A click.

"Hey-lo," a woman's voice said -- a familiar, friendly voice, but not Debra's.

"Hello M-Mrs. Martin," he said. He bit at his lip, silently cursing the stutter. A grown man shouldn't --

"We thought you would call." The friendliness disappeared from the voice and cut like the icy winter wind. "Debra is here. She wants to talk to you."

His heart pounded and his hands grew damp. He held the phone tighter, fearing he would drop it. He stopped kicking the poor luggage. He almost stopped breathing.

"Lee."

"Debra." It was all he could say. He hadn't ever expected to hear her voice again, not after the trial and the divorce papers.

"Lee, I'm remarried," she said. Calmly, like she hadn't just driven a knife right into his heart. "I came to my mom's house as soon as I saw the news, because I don't want you hunting me down at my home. We have two little girls --"

"My son," he said, panicked, remembering a two month old he had hardly known, and loved with all his heart. "Gavrial --"

"We renamed him Gary. He thinks Andy is his father, Lee. It's

better this way. You don't want to ruin his life, do you?"

"Ruin?" What the hell was she talking about? "They found the guy who killed Missy Reed, D-Debra. They proved it wasn't me. I'm out of prison. I didn't d-do it. How can I ruin his life by being innocent?"

"You bring disaster, Lee." She stopped and took a ragged breath. He heard more emotion in her gasp than in her words.

"You always bring disaster, don't you? Is that what you want for Gary?"

He heard neither regret nor anger in her voice. She didn't feel anything for him. The realization came as a mind-numbing revelation and a final end to a dream which had kept him -- *mostly* -- sane in prison for the last five years. He had held to her memory, even without letters, a whisper of any compassion or of any *belief* in him. They had been married and happy. He always thought it would count for something if she learned the truth.

Silence had stretched for too long while he held the phone. He blinked, decisions made.

"I'm sorry I b-bothered you," he said. He meant it, too. "I won't

call again."

"Lee --"

He hung up. She knew he wouldn't call back. He had always, no matter what, been good to his word.

Leander picked up his suitcase and walked out of the building, waving away the doorman who wanted to call a taxi for him. He headed into the snowy December morning, wandering past festive displays, and avoiding the rush of shoppers dashing from one shop to the next. He heard snippets of Christmas Carols, and watched through one window as young mothers stood in line with their children, waiting for a few moments and a picture with Santa.

Did Debra take Gavrial -- Gary -- and the two girls to see Santa today? He turned away, wondering what he had done to God to deserve this. Prior to the arrest, he'd never even had a speeding ticket. He had done everything people had expected of him -- gone to college to be an architect like his father wanted, married and had a child like his mother wanted, worked hard at a night job so Debra had what she wanted...

It kept snowing. He walked farther.

His parents had gone back to Greece soon after the trial ended. He had no idea where his older brother had gone, but the fact he'd never written to Lee in prison seemed enough of an indication of what to expect there. Debra had remarried. Five years of lies had torn his world apart, and he found nothing left he could hold on to, and no way to repair the damage. They found the man who had really murdered Missy Stern. They'd found his basement trophy room with the knives he'd used, the locks of hair he'd saved, the pictures he'd taken of Missy and the others. The state set Leander Constantinos free with some money, his few belongings, and an apology. He had thought the nightmare ended. Everyone knew he was innocent.

Leander looked down at his left hand and the gold band he had so carefully slipped on his finger when they gave it back to him. It had felt loose, and he'd feared it would slip off. Now he unclenched his fingers and shook the ring into his right hand. He looked at it a moment -- plain, simple gold. He didn't look at the inscription on the inside of the band: *Leander and Debra Constantinos. Forever.*

Lee tossed the ring out into the snowy street and walked on.

Fate brought him to the Greyhound Bus Depot again. He went inside, checked all the boards, and found one bus leaving within the next two hours and heading west, away from the snow, the lost dreams and the lies. He had never been to the west, though he'd loved to study the history back -- back in college, before the nightmare began.

He bought a ticket to Santa Fe, New Mexico.

And he wondered if this feeling of emptiness was what it really meant to be free.

Chapter Two

Cheveyo Rey found the phone under a pile of paper on the table and grabbed it on the third ring, grateful he didn't have to maneuver the wheelchair clear across the room to the wall unit. These days he was grateful for a number of little things.

He punched the button and put it to his ear. "Hello."

"'Ello Dr. Rey, sir," a startlingly happy British accented man said from the other end. "And 'ow are you today, sir?"

"I'm doing fine, Smithers. How can you be so ungodly happy at whatever hour of the day it is there?"

"Five in the morning, sir. And I'm being paid well to be happy. Are you ready for the call?"

"Oh yes, let's get it over with," Rey said. He pushed away the scattered papers, and pulled out the last fax from the esteemed London law firm of Wall, Smithers and Doyle, once again reading the counter offer Catha Incorporated had made.

Damn impressive counter offer, really... but he had decided, since the *accident*, that he didn't want to sell. Maybe he had become reactionary, but every time he thought about the feel of hands on his back, shoving him out in front of the lorry on a busy London street...

"Call is going through, sir," Smithers said. "Computer program is running and synced."

"Good." His London law firm went to a lot of work to make certain people still thought he still resided in London. However, once he'd been well enough to travel, Chev had decided to go home to New Mexico -- if not to the reservation where he grew up, at least close to it. He liked this area. He couldn't say he

felt safer here, but he did feel calmer.

"And how is life in the Wild West these days?" Smithers asked, still cheerful.

"Snowy here at Taos. Pretty, though."

"Snowing in March? There's no call for that sort of behavior.

Your man Jeeves is making sure you take care of yourself, is he?"

"Morton, yes." He grinned despite himself. "And Patrice has finally let me sneak in the back of the museum and play with pieces of broken pottery again."

"Ah, good on her, then," Smithers said. "And your wife, Sandra?"

"Apparently having a wonderful time on the French Riviera."

"I thought she would be in New Mexico by now."

"I'll let you in on a secret -- she hates it here. The month we spent in New Mexico after we married... well, let's just say it wasn't the most pleasant time in our marriage. I should probably be in France with her now --"

"You needed to be where you felt comfortable," Smithers said, his voice losing much of the infectious joy he had held a

moment before. But it came back in the next moment. "And what is there not to love about New Mexico? Fresh air, wide open spaces, horses and cowboys."

"And Indians," Chev added, brushing at his own dark braid. Smithers laughed in agreement and then sobered with a little cough. "The CEO of Catha Inc is on the line, sir."

Things clicked. He heard the computer simulation created to convince the Catha people he was still in London.

"Mr. Rey?" a thin, older voice asked. Petulant -- not a good way to start. Chev had heard the tone before, and knew this would not go well.

"Dr. Rey," Chev corrected him, and then leapt right into the heart of the matter. "I'm afraid, Mr. Kinmore, that I'm going to turn down your offer."

"It is a very reasonable offer!" the man said, his voice rising in anger.

"It is more than a reasonable offer. But I am reevaluating what I want out of life, Mr. Kinmore."

"This isn't about personal enjoyment --"

"This is very much about personal enjoyment. I love importing

and exporting art almost as much as I love archeology. If I sold my company to you now, what would I be doing tomorrow?" His hand brushed against the wheelchair. He could not go out to the dig. If he could, he might have sold, and been done with it. But he needed something still --

"I don't see that's the point at all. I can make you a lot of money --"

"I have a lot of money," Chev said.

"Well, fine then." And he hung up.

"You know, Smithers, some people just don't take no for an answer very well."

Smithers gave a little half laugh, muttered something, and then laughed again. "Well, it can't have been much of a surprise. I'm already getting a fax from their corporate headquarters threatening to sue for ... bloody hell, I'm not sure what they intend to sue for. Don't worry. We'll settle it."

"Good." Aches eased in his shoulders. He looked around the room and stopped at the wall of Hopi-Tewa pottery he had bought both from galleries and from the potters themselves.

Some brown with black images and others white with black and

brown images lined carefully lit glass shelves. On the third shelf stood a piece out of place with the others -- ancient, black and white Anasazi ware. He had found it himself, out on the land he inherited from his grandfather.

"Sir?"

"Sorry," Chev said, pulling himself back. "Glad to have the business over with. Now I can get back to work."

"But you will be careful," Smithers said.

"Oh yes. Very careful."

"Good. I think you did the right thing, sir. Money isn't everything, as they say. I'll call you in a few days with the final report."

"And the bill for this ungodly hour."

"Yes sir, that too." He laughed. "One last item. I have a report here from the detectives who say they've not had any progress in the attack against you."

"Tell them to keep investigating until the end of April. If nothing has turned up by then, I'll consider it closed."

"I'll pass your instructions along, sir. I believe this takes care of all our business this morning. I'll talk to you soon."

The phone clicked as Smithers hung up. Chev was almost sorry. He wouldn't have minded a little more company tonight. He thought about calling his wife, or maybe Patrice -- but he put the phone aside instead, and shifted papers on the table. He pulled out the employment form Patrice had brought him yesterday. The applicant would be into the museum for an interview tomorrow, but some missing time, not covered in the paperwork, left Chev uneasy. He didn't think they'd be hiring this one.

And that reminded him of yet another battle to be fought. A stack of papers on the right side of the table came from Red Sun Associates, a company offering to buy his land down near Santa Fe for development. He'd already told them it wasn't going to happen... so the bastards had gone to the state to try and get title to the 'undeveloped and under utilized' area.

It wasn't going to happen. He sat down with the papers and began jotting down notes on his Palm to send off to his Santa Fe lawyers. Lately, he'd spent far too much time with lawyers, and not enough with the land.

He shifted in the chair and tried not to think about what kept him

hidden here in his home.

Morton showed up a few minutes later with a sandwich, milk, and several pills -- as good as any Jeeves could be. He sat them on the table, eyeing the mess as though he wanted to tidy things right now.

"Don't even think it," Chev said.

Morton barely hid his smile. "Your physical therapist will be here in half an hour, Dr. Rey."

Good reminder. He lost track of the days. "Thank you."

Morton nodded and slipped away, heading toward the front of the house, to be ready for the therapist's arrival. Very proper. Sandra would approve. He'd take Morton with him to France when he went.

He found himself staring at the wall of pottery again. He had inherited land and money enough to move from the Pueblo when he turned twenty-one. Ten years later, he'd built up a nice little trading empire, selling local Pueblo made pottery, jewelry and carvings overseas. None of those pieces on the wall would have sold for less than \$5000 dollars. The Anasazi bowl, virtually unchipped, would have gone for at least twice as much,

if not a lot more.

He made money, the potters made money, and he didn't cheat anyone. All in all, it wasn't a bad way to live.

Except when he remembered the hands on his back, shoving him out into the street....

Chapter Three

With his last fifty dollars in his pocket, Lee walked down the long row of the adobe storefronts on Paseo del Pueblo Norte.

Tourists wandered in and out, jackets pulled tight against the cool March air. Patches of snow still lay in the shadows, but most of last night's storm had melted away.

Lee wanted it warmer, or to live in a warmer place. The clapboard apartment building he called home was more than he could actually afford, but he had found nothing cheaper. He needed a real job. People said jobs would be more plentiful when the summer tourist seasons kicked in. The snows had melted, the ski resorts closed down early this year. Jobs had become scarce. People suggested he go back to Santa Fe, but

he had felt uncomfortable there -- and for reasons he couldn't name. Maybe there had been too much bustle, and too many ways to get into trouble. He wanted quieter places, but he didn't want to leave the southwest, filled with symbols and glimpses of things he'd only been able to study in school.

Taos appealed to him; the blatant attempt to draw tourists was at least honest. He'd wandered through four jobs in the last two months -- all temp positions, barely enough to keep a roof over his head, never mind food. He wanted --

He wanted the job he had applied for last week, the one that led him to Desert Street, and the wide domed building sitting slightly back from the corner. The Desert Traditions Museum had opened two months before his arrival. He had scraped together a few dollars to go in and wander around, caught up in the wonder of walking through the model of a partial pueblo, Chacoan style, complete with Kiva and T-shaped doors. Walls of the museum held displays of pottery, carvings, beads, clothing -- there hadn't been enough time to look at it all, and he'd not had spare money to come back.

Now he stood outside the door and tried not to feel like a fraud.

Why should they hire him? He had no credentials -- and while those hadn't been required, according to the listing he read, they'd still required some knowledge of local archeology. He had been good in school, but --

Lee stopped the train of thought and shook his head. He forced himself to step in through the door, and paused long enough to orientate himself. He headed right toward the door with Museum Office etched in the glass.

A woman looked up from her desk and observed him from behind thin, wire-framed glasses framed by dark hair hinting at gray along the top. At least she had a neutral stare, which he preferred to some he had gotten in the last few months. He didn't know why so many people glared. He didn't have this life story written across his forehead, after all.

"I've come for the job interview," he said, softly and slowly. No stutter this time. He hoped the suit jacket didn't hang too badly to him. He'd lost more weight in the last few months, and his hair had started to grow longer -- he thought he ought to cut it. Despite knowing this was a fool's errand, he still wanted to make a good impression.

"Ah. You're Mr. Constantinos," she said and stood, offering a hand. "I'm Patrice Barnowl, Museum Curator, Mr. Constantinos."

"Lee," he said.

She smiled as she drew a paper from the piles on her desk, and then went past him and locked the office door. "This way, Lee."

They went out another door and into a hall way lined with old world adobe walls. The place smelled of mesquite and sage, and they passed by dozens of southwestern designs; the ubiquitous Kokopelli with his flute, which Lee had gotten quite used to, but also some unusual ones, like a Hohokam Sun Priest symbol and the upside down tripod he remembered meant Hawk Clan. Others he didn't recognize at all. He hadn't seen many of them since he left school.

Browns and blues gave the area a feeling of patience and peace, and he felt calmer, which surprised him. Whoever had designed the building had done an excellent job.

The hall opened on the left side for a few yards, showing the museum below. People wandered through the ruin as a guide explained different facets of what they saw. He hadn't taken the

guided tour, but it might be fun.

The full hall closed back in around them again, and they passed by a dozen doors. The Desert Traditions Museum, although privately funded apparently was not without resources. Besides the building, the artifacts and exhibits, he saw computers still in boxes in one office, and crates of supplies in another. They finally reached the far end of the hall, passing a man who looked suspiciously like a guard sitting on a bench outside a long, wide room filled with tables.

Pieces of broken pottery covered the tables; the real stuff, Lee realized, his heart pounding a little harder. He had to force himself not to reach out and touch something, just to feel it once. A dark skinned man looked up from one of those tables and nodded a greeting as they neared. It wasn't until Lee stood opposite him that he saw the wheelchair.

"This is Leander Constantinos, Dr. Rey," Patrice Barnowl said.

"Oh yes! I'm Cheveyo Rey," the stranger said, reached across the table. He had a good strong handshake, and one of those blended Hispanic and Native American accents Lee had gotten used to hearing around here. The name seemed familiar, too,

though he didn't exactly know why. "I read your resume. I have a couple questions we need to clear up. Let's go to my office."

Lee knew what the questions would involve: Explain the missing five years from the time Lee, twenty-two and getting top marks in college disappeared and suddenly turned up here, looking for a job in a field which had not been his major.

He had spent five years and two months in prison, and another three months since they set him free. He'd worked half a dozen jobs, from fast food cook to bricklayer's apprentice, but none of them had allowed him the escape from the lingering shadows of the past. Five days ago he saw the ad in the paper and spent the afternoon at the library filing out a resume he had downloaded from the museum's website. It had been a whim. He never expected the letter inviting him this far in.

Dr. Rey's office turned out to be the one filled with boxed computers. He wheeled himself in and looked around with a start. "Going to have to get these set up sooner or later. Find Mr. Constantinos a chair, Pat -- and one for yourself."

"Sure," she said.

"Let me help." Lee quickly followed her out, past the guard who

had followed them -- Lee hadn't noticed -- and into the next office. He wished it had taken them longer. He wanted to delay the inevitable, but they were back in Dr. Rey's office in a couple minutes. He and the museum curator sat down. Cheveyo Rey looked from the resume, his head tilted.

"The missing five years," Lee said before the man asked.

"Yes."

"Prison, for a crime I didn't commit." Rey's eyebrows rose as he frowned. Patrice Barnowl shifted in her chair as he reached in his jacket and pulled out an envelope. "I know how it sounds." He handed the envelope to Dr. Rey who at least looked curious, and watched as the man pulled out the first of the clippings -- the oldest, yellowed and much read. Dr. Rey read it quickly and handed it on to Patrice Barnowl with a frown before he pulled out the next one. The later, newer clippings got progressively whiter. Rey had pulled out the last one and read it once, then again.

"Damn!" Rey said.

Odd reaction, and not what he expected. Rey handed the last article to Patrice, and then stared back at him. They waited for

her to finish it. She did and sat there with all the papers in her hand before she looked at him.

"My God, this is awful, Lee," she said.

He shrugged, but it was nice to hear from someone, *finally*.

"The article said you were married," Rey said, waving a hand toward the clippings.

"I was. We divorced right after the trial. She's remarried and took my son with her."

"Relatives?"

"My parents went back to Greece." He wondered why Rey asked, but he didn't mind saying it. "They never contacted me again, and I don't know if they've heard the news. I have no idea where my brother went."

"Hell," Rey said, shaking his head.

"Yes," Lee answered. "Yes, it was."

"And still is?" Rey asked, looking into his face.

"Y-Yes."

Rey still held his look. "What is it you're looking for here, Leander Constantinos?"

"Work," Lee said. But then he found himself amending the far

too simple of an answer with a shake of his head. "No, that's not entirely true. I want work that means something. I want out of the nightmare. I want to believe I still have a future."

Rey reached into a pocket on the side of the wheelchair and pulled out a shard and held it out. "What is this?"

He'd never actually held a piece like this before -- not a real one. Goose bumps rose on his arms as he carefully took the piece, his fingers tracing the long curve up to a lip belling outward at the top, and then back down over the zigzag design in black and white. He smiled as he looked back at Dr. Rey. The visit had been worth it for this moment and the chance to touch a real piece of history. "I'd say from the shape it's an olla of some sort. The design looks like maybe San Juan Pueblo one or two phase, I think."

"*Damn*. That's *very* good. I've never met anyone able to do that without looking at reference books. Why wasn't Southwestern Studies your major?"

"My father wanted me to be an architect. I slipped in what archeology studies I could, because I liked them, and I could say I was studying the building styles, which have been kind of

popular." He reluctantly handed the shard back.

Dr. Rey noted the reluctance as well and smiled. "The pay isn't good, Lee --"

"I don't give a damn." He leaned forward, his hands on his knees. "Let me sleep on the floor and grub for food in the trashcans. I don't care about the money. This is the first thing --"

He stopped, appalled by the outburst.

"It's all right. I want this to be more than a *job* for someone, Lee. I want a person with passion for the work, because I will trust him with a hell of a lot. And I need someone who can take care of himself and go places I can't get back to yet, like digs out on my land. No, the wheelchair is not permanent. I have business dealings overseas and I learned a London branch of my export business had started shipping drugs with the pottery. I was the one who called the officials in and went there to help clean up the mess. They said they had rounded up the entire group, and it had been a relatively small time operation. But a week later I was... hit by a lorry in London, and it was not an accident."

"Your own nightmare," Lee said, feeling an unexpected kinship. He tried to shove the emotion aside, although Dr. Rey nodded agreement.

"I own some land, Lee, and it has ruins on it. The land has been in my family since... well, since before Cortes in one sense -- except those ancestors wouldn't have understood how you could own Mother Earth. My great-great grandfather came to New Mexico. He'd been a Don in Spain, but he was probably part Moor and left before the family went into disgrace. He traveled in the Yucatan for a while, looking for gold, and took a Mayan wife. They settled here, and by the grace of God he survived the Pueblo Rebellion in 1680. Their son married a woman from the San Juan Pueblo, and his sister married a man from Acoma. The family had a habit of marrying outside the tribe, and bringing new blood and new traditions to the lands my great-great grandfather had left to his family."

"Which brings us down to now," Patrice said, with a shake of her head. "And the current trouble."

"It's good land, wild and free," Chev said. For a moment Lee could see longing in his eyes, and in the way his hand brushed

against his leg. "But now a developer wants to build on it and a lot of rich people want to buy the houses he will build. I don't intend for them to live on my land, and it's already making me unpopular. You are going to be a face associated with me. So I'm hiring someone to stand out there in front of all the animosity for *my* dreams. This may not be, all things considered, the position you really want."

He started to speak, stopped himself, and began again. "I want something I can be passionate about. I didn't know it until I held the shard. And really, I may be better suited to the work than anyone else. I already believe in the battle for what's right, Dr. Rey."

"When can you start?"

"Yesterday. Now. Immediately."

Patrice laughed first, and then Cheveyo Rey. "Good. Excellent. Wouldn't you like to know all I'm going to want from you for your \$11.50 an hour?"

"The ad said \$10.75."

"The ad was wrong. What I'll want is for you to go places I can't. I'm not sure how far Red Sun will go in this battle, and I'm

trying to be careful. You saw Tomas out in the hall? He's a former State Patrol officer I've hired as a private guard. We have guards on the museum and guards out on the land.

However, sometimes you're going to have to go places without backup, if for no other reason than we don't want to draw attention. And sometimes you'll sit in the back room with me and stare at piles of shards, trying to put together puzzles with most of the pieces missing. All that for \$14.00 an hour."

Lee laughed. It was unexpected. "I'll take the job. Can I start now?"

"Oh yes. Come on back to the tables. Patrice, it's nearly five. Can you have something whipped up at La Luna for us? Do you like Italian, Lee?"

"Yes, but you don't have to --"

"I'm hungry. I have promised my wife, who is still in Europe, that I will stay out of sight, which means having dinner brought in."

"I don't want you to feel sorry for me."

"Well, that's something we both feel, isn't it?"

He nodded. "Yes, I suppose so."

"Good. Patrice --"

She stood. "I'll have them make up several dishes and I'll go pick them up when they call." She held the clippings out to Lee.

"I don't want them. I don't need them."

"Good," she said and smiled. She took the papers with her. He felt a little twinge at the thought of his past disappearing down the hall, but he let it go and gladly followed Cheveyo Rey back to the room filled with broken pottery.

Chapter Four

"Good evening Ms. Barnowl," Morton said as he opened the side door and let them both in. "Will you be staying for a drink?"

"Not tonight, thank you. It looks like a storm blowing in, and I want to get back to my apartment." She reached down and squeezed Chev's shoulder. He looked up at her, surprised.

"You did a good thing, hiring Lee tonight."

"Damn right. Did you see how well he did with the San Juan Pueblo III dipper? He'd have worked on it all night, if we'd let him."

"You know what I mean," she said. Her hand lingered for a moment. He wanted to reach up and touch the fingers, but he didn't. She pulled away. "Good night, Chev."

"Goodnight, Patrice." She walked back out into the windy night. A splatter of rain hit the walkway as he looked back.

"Drive carefully!"

"I will!"

Morton waited by the wheelchair until they heard the van start and pull away. Tomas had pulled in to the side of the van, and rushed up the stairs to his apartment over the four-car garage. He never put his car away -- said he might need to get to it too quickly. Tomas gave a wave as he disappeared inside.

Morton closed the door and extricated Chev's jacket from his arms. Cheveyo realized, suddenly, how tired he really felt. It had to be nearly one in the morning, but it had been a good day.

"Your wife called, sir, and would like you to call her back. I put the number on the table by the phone."

A good day right up until that moment. He grimaced at the thought because it was unfair to Sandra. Lately, though their phone conversations had not gone well, and he didn't want to

end the day badly.

"Thank you, Morton. I'll call her, take a quick shower, and head for bed."

"Yes sir."

Morton pushed him to the dining room and then headed up stairs to prepare the shower and to turn down the bed.

Sometimes the man amazed him. Granted, Chev paid him a lot of money to do this work, but it still seemed odd and wondrous.

He went into the dining room and picked up the phone, looking at the number. Interesting -- a Paris exchange. He wondered why she had moved away from the coast. Probably following the other birds, fluttering around Europe.

He dialed. The phone rang and rang.

"Yes?"

"Hi Sandra!" he put some bright, cheery emotion into his voice, and a little joy. "I'm glad you called!"

"It is late there, Chev. What are you doing out so late? You know --"

"I stayed at the museum, love," he answered, cutting her short.

"Some nice little pieces of pottery came in the other day. It was

a quiet, relaxing night while I worked with a new employee and Patrice did paperwork."

"Oh." The mention of Patrice always brought a little bit of ice in her voice. He wondered if he had subconsciously done it on purpose, in hopes she'd cut the conversation short. He wanted to shower and sleep.

"Did you call for a reason?" he prodded.

"I thought you might be interested in joining me in Paris," she said. "But I suppose I'm no match for broken pottery."

"I'd be tempted," he lied, "but I have this trouble with Red Sun coming up with the state. I really can't go before it's settled."

"Oh give them the damn land. It's not worth the trouble."

He looked over at the wall of pottery and counted to ten before he spoke. "The land has been in my family forever, Sandra. I'm not going to suddenly let it get bulldozed --"

"I don't know why everyone wants your damn land," she said, still sounding cross. "But never mind. What's the word from Catha?"

This conversation wasn't going to get better. He felt his shoulders tighten before he spoke. "I turned down their offer."

Her breath caught. "You *what?*"

"I turned them down. I don't want to sell the export business, Sandra. I like doing the work I do. And what would I do otherwise? I thought you'd be happy, to be honest. With the export business, I would still be traveling elsewhere. Without it, I'd tend to stay here with the Museum."

"You have become obsessed with things since the accident Chev. It's not natural --"

"It was no accident."

Silence. They'd gone over this part a few too many times as well. She saw no one push him into the street. It had been a dark night, and the driver couldn't be certain if anyone else had been around. Chev had the distinct feeling she really didn't believe him, and she thought it some mental imbalance. He suspected she'd started putting herself at distances from him for a reason.

It cut, sometimes, in the long lonely nights.

"I need to go get ready. I have a lunch meeting with friends," she said suddenly. Her voice softened a little. "Stay safe, Chev. Promise me you will still stay out of sight, you won't let

anyone know you're there."

He suddenly realized how odd a request sounded from a woman who didn't believe him about being pushed -- but maybe she really did believe him. Maybe she couldn't admit it to herself.

"Chev?"

"That's why I hired the new guy, Lee," he said. He tried to sound cheery again. "He's going to do all the running around. I'm staying careful."

"Good. I have to run. I'll talk to you soon."

"Bye!"

The phone clicked. He couldn't be certain she heard his last word. He put the phone down and stared at the table for a while. He would not sell his land to Red Sun. He might still sell the export business -- Sandra might be right in part. He'd ask Patrice what she thought --

Oh, now there was another subversive thought; that he would turn to Patrice for answers, rather than his wife.

"Sir?"

Shower, bed. He turned the wheelchair around and headed

toward the chairlift to take him up along the stairs to the second floor. A person had to love modern technology, he thought. Otherwise he'd have had to find some first floor apartment in town. He loved this house. It made him feel better -- calmer -- to be here.

Patrice, at least, understood his feelings, even if his wife didn't....

Chapter Five

Lee had been working at the museum for three days, and he already felt as though he had started putting on weight. Dinner with Chev, Patrice and Tomas turned out to be a regular occurrence, and the fact anyone still working joined in alleviated some of his embarrassment. And God, the food was great. Italian, Mandarin, Indian...

But on the third night, since they closed up before eight, he insisted on walking home this time. It had already embarrassed him to have Patrice and Chev drop him off at the corner by his apartment in a run down area of town.

After a couple pay checks he would change his housing.

Apartments were damned expensive here in town, but he could find something better than his current place.

The night felt wonderful. Some shops hadn't yet closed, and he looked in the windows and doors, imagining things he would buy once he had money again. Lee even wandered into a bookstore, first searching through the mystery section, and then moving on to the local history shelves. He wanted to read up on some of the ancient cultures, knowing he really didn't remember as much as he should.

They had several good books, including a few by H.M.

Wormington -- he wondered how many people realized H.M. stood for Hannah Marie. Her book *Prehistoric Indians of the Southwest* had been one of the first, and best, he had read.

Other people passed by in the narrow aisles, but after a few minutes he became aware of a woman lingering close by.

When he turned, he saw her staring at the shelf and shaking her head in dismay.

He smiled. "Need help?"

"I would like something... readable?" she said, sounding entirely

uncertain. She had a heart shaped face and short brown hair streaked with a little gold -- looked naturally sun-lightened, but he couldn't be certain. She shook her head as she ran a hand over the spines of books. "I moved to the area about a month ago. There's so much to learn!"

"Yes, there is. It's wonderful."

"You don't sound like a local either," she said and looked him over once. "Vacationing?"

"No. I moved here a few months ago, too." The question made Lee nervous, reminding him of his past, and things he didn't want to discuss. He rushed on before she could ask more.

"You'd like something basic, right? Here is one covering local tribes, past and present. I glanced over it a few minutes ago, and it looks good."

She took the book, her fingers brushing slightly against his.

"Thanks!"

She walked away. His hands had started to tremble, and he stood in front of the books for a long time, taking short breaths and trying to get control of himself again. It had been a stupid reaction. He finally picked up one of the books by Wormington

and headed for the cash register, parting with a few dollars of his hoarded money. He'd have more in a few days -- and he hadn't had to pay for food for a while, anyway.

Some of the glow of the evening had disappeared with the encounter. He felt stupid, reactionary, and childish. And he hoped to hell it wouldn't be his reaction to every woman he chanced to meet at bookstores.

He had met Debra at the college bookstore, and in the same sort of section. Remembering Debra and his earlier life put the strange reaction to this encounter in a better light. He knew he wasn't ready for those reminders yet.

He walked slowly the rest of the way home to the rundown apartment building. People congregated in the driveway again, the music loud, and beer cans tossed on the gravel that took the place of a yard. He went past them with a pretended good-natured greeting, thinking again about moving out, and headed around the corner of the building to his first floor rooms.

Roaches scattered as soon as he turned on the overhead light. He grabbed the can of spray he kept by the door and laid down a thick fog while he stood at the doorway. The scent of the stuff

made him half ill, but it gave him at least a feeling of protection. He took a shower, slipped on a pair of cutoffs and sandals, came out and swept up dead bugs. He taken to wearing the cutoffs to bed since there had been three police calls at the apartment building in the few weeks he'd lived here.

Lee brought a bare-bulb lamp over beside the bed, wound up the alarm clock and set it down. He propped the single pillow up against the wall and began to read. It proved to be a better distraction than listening to the people shouting out in the driveway, or counting the bugs on the floor.

He saw the same woman three days later at the museum. He had looked down over the open area back by the offices and found her wandering through the lower floor, the book in her hand, and leafing through it at each display. He watched, amused by her interest, and the way she bent closer to look at items in the lower displays. He caught glimpses of her face, intent and interested. She never looked up.

It's late, he thought. I'm done with my work for the day. I could go down there and walk with her. We could talk about the

exhibits. I'm done with work for the day...

And then what? Dinner? Walk her home?

Deb had walked with him through a dozen museums, her hand in his. They'd talk about their favorite displays and pieces for days afterwards, and they'd go back as often as time and money allowed.

His hands tightened on the railing, and he froze, petrified by the idea of even the slightest social contact with this woman. This *stranger*. How could he *trust* her?

No, that wasn't the problem. It had nothing to do with trusting her. It had everything to do with how he now viewed the world, how ephemeral moments of happiness could be, and how much they could cost. He wasn't ready to pay the price again. So he made excuses as he watched her: He hadn't been paid yet, so dinner was out; he didn't have a car, and he'd be embarrassed if they had to take hers; the weather looked like rain, so it wasn't a good night for a walk; he had more work to do.

The last was an outright lie, but a good excuse to get away before she saw him. Lee pulled his hands from the railing and slowly back up, half afraid he would either be ill or he would run.

Stupid reactions... stupid --

Chev was at the end of the hall, watching him. Lee froze again, a quick glance at the area below. The woman had moved on, finally, but his heart still pounded at the thought of her.

"Lee?"

"I... I forgot to do something," he said, and started to toward the offices. He immediately regretted the lie and stopped by Chev's wheelchair. "No, I didn't forget anything. I just -- I --"

"Are you all right?"

Lee took several deep breaths, leaning against the cool wall.

"I'm sorry. I panicked. I'm not entirely certain why. I -- I'm sorry."

Chev looked up at him, craning his neck, and shook his head.

"Come to my office."

"I --"

"Come on."

Chev backed the chair up, turned around, and headed toward his office again. Lee followed, feeling worse than a whipped dog. He had been an idiot to do something to make Dr. Rey look again at the man he had hired and reconsider --

"Sit down." Chev waved to a chair. "I get tired of looking up at people."

He dropped into the chair. Chev had not rolled back behind the desk. He sat in front of Lee, his hands in his lap, fingers rubbing a scar across the back of his right hand -- a relatively new scar, from the color of it. When he looked up, and Lee saw the bleakness in his face, he resigned himself to going somewhere else --

"I had to leave London," Chev said. "I couldn't, even after they let me out of the hospital, consider going back on those streets, especially in this damned chair and feeling so helpless. I hadn't been helpless when it happened -- how could I trust my safety now? I remember seeing the big damn truck coming at me, and the sound of the brakes squealing. And that's the last thing I remember until I woke up in the hospital, twelve days later."

"I'm sorry," Lee said.

"I think you really are. I think you're sorry because you know too damn well how I feel. You were hit and left for dead, and by some miracle you got your life back. You have reason to panic. You and me -- we know how fast it can all be taken away. But

Lee... I'm not the one who is going to do it to you."

"Shit." Lee leaned back, feeling tense muscles in his shoulders relax for the first time in...too damn long. "I feel like I'm walking on eggshells, and I don't even know why. I've been out for months. I'm not going to do something stupid and get sent back to prison -- but I hadn't done anything before. How can I know? How can I be sure?" The words came, unstoppable, despite a part of him trying to damp down the emotions and get control again. "And you know the worst part? The people who prosecuted me didn't do it maliciously. They thought I'd killed the girl, and a few others. So I can't even have a real enemy to face. All I can do is... walk on eggshells, and trying to figure out what I've done wrong."

"You did nothing wrong," Chev said, frowning.

"You think so?" Something dark welled up inside this time.

Bitterness flooded through with memories of the last five years.

"You don't know what I did while in prison."

"What choices were you given?"

"You don't know what it was like." His hand started to tremble.

He looked at it, appalled, as if the hand belonged to someone

else. He could see a set of scars where someone had shoved a piece of plastic, sharpened on the cement wall while the others held him --

But it had not been his choice. None of it. The choices he made now -- those where the ones that counted.

"Lee."

He looked up. His vision had narrowed the colors sharp, his head pounding. He swallowed, his mouth dry. The moment of prison memory had been far too real. But he took deep breaths and forced calm and it seemed to come easier this time.

"Leander?"

He almost smiled at the name. People seldom called him by it, and no one in prison had.

"Sorry. Better." He pushed both hands through his hair. "In fact, I think it helped. I think something finally broke lose."

Chev looked surprised and then smiled. Lee thought he must look better. He felt a hell of a lot better from one breath to the next. The nightmare hadn't disappeared, but it wouldn't walk like a malignant shadow with him through every moment of the day. No. He'd grown tired of panic and distrust. Time to move

on.

"I'm going home. Walking. Free."

Chev had started to protest. He stopped and nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Lee walked back out to the overlook, but the woman had gone already. Just as well. One step at a time.

Chapter Six

The intercom buzzed. He wondered how long he'd sat there, thinking about Lee and hoping he'd done the right thing, forcing the confrontation. He rolled back and hit the button, wondering what Patrice could want --

"Yeah?" he said.

"Sandra is on the phone and wants to talk to you," Patrice said, her voice entirely too neutral.

His wife had never called the museum before. In fact, he'd had the feeling she denied it existed, having told him he shouldn't waste his money to build it. He'd gone ahead anyway. She'd said nothing more. And never called... until now.

Maybe something had gone wrong! She was in Europe. He

had enemies in England --

He grabbed the phone up and hit the blinking button. "Sandra? Are you there? Is everything all right?"

"Yes, of course," she answered. Her voice sounded prim -- annoyed he'd asked.

"You called the museum. You've never done that before," he said, wondering why he felt like he had to apologize for being worried about her. "Never mind. Why did you call?"

"To tell you I've made a decision. I've talked with my friends and they agree... Chev, you are no longer the poor little Indian Boy who grew up on the reservation without a father. You are a rich man who needs to break ties with the past instead of letting it suck you back in and drain your money. So either you sell the land and the museum and move away from New Mexico, or I am going to divorce you."

His heart thumped. Once. And then steadied.

"Sandra --"

"No, don't say anything Cheveyo. I'll call back in a week."

She hung up.

He looked at the phone with a half dozen things ready to say.

He could call her back and say them, but right now the last person he wanted to talk to was his wife.

This wasn't the first time she'd made an odd ultimatum only to *forget* it when it was obvious he wasn't going to comply. When she remembered the prenuptial agreements they both signed, she would doubtless *forget* this one as well. Her friends pushed her toward things like this --

And why did he keep making excuses for her, as though she had no mind of her own? He'd married her because she was intelligent, not some bubble-headed bleached blonde. But four years later -- with her half way around the world making demands --

Patrice came to the doorway and looked in.

"You really need to hang the phone up, Chev," she said.

"You're tying up the line."

He looked at it still in his hand and carefully sat it down on the cradle. Then he looked back at Patrice. "She says to sell the land and the museum or lose her. She's given me a week."

Patrice winced, and then lifted her hand. "Sorry."

"Oh, I did more than wince. I'm tempted to call Smithers and

have him start separating our accounts and limiting her access to funds. I won't. Not while I'm angry. But you know I'm not going to sell, right?"

"I never doubted it," Patrice said, frowning a little.

"I wonder why she doesn't understand me as well."

Patrice looked at him. She sighed. "We have a long history, Cheveyo Rey. If she spent time with you --" But she stopped the rest of her words and shook her head again. "I have some work to do in the office. I came back to tell you I got an email saying we're going to get part of the traveling Earl Morris Collection next spring, if we can get all the paperwork in on time."

"Damn!" he said, excited again. "How many pieces?"

"They're going to drive up and look the museum over. It depends on how much security, how well built the exhibit hall is, and such. Nothing we have to worry about. Oh, and Professor Ballinato says to arrange for the pick up of the 'damn olla' as she calls it. She'll be in Santa Fe on Monday."

"You could -- or maybe we should send Lee," Chev said. He leaned back. "It wouldn't hurt to let him have some time out of

the building doing some work. Don't you think?"

"I think it's a very good idea," she said, and leaned against the doorframe. "You're going to want him to drive out to the site, too, and pick up anything they have to be shipped back here. I think Lee would really enjoy meeting them."

"Yes." He looked at her and tilted his head. "You do that very well, don't you?"

"Distract you from your anger? I have a lot of practice." She gave him a quick grin. "Give Sandra her week. And think long and hard about what you want, Chev, and how you'll deal with whatever decision you finally make."

"I'm not giving up the land to a group of tight assed rich white men to bulldoze ruins and build another island of affluence on the outskirts of one of the poorest reservations in the state --"

She lifted her hands and laughed. "You are preaching to the choir. Don't you have some pottery to put together or something? Go be useful for a while."

She turned and walked away. He grinned, and then rolled out and down the hall to the tables. It would help calm him to do the work he so loved. Damn, he wanted to get out to the dig

again! How much longer...

He pushed the longing away with a little prayer of thanks to Spider Old Woman and her medicines -- because the doctors in London said something extraordinary had saved him not from death and from permanent damage and paralysis. He remembered dreaming about the cacique societies, and hearing them chanting words he had almost forgotten -- Tewa language. There, on the verge of death, and half way around the world, he had felt closer to his people than he had in the years since he left the reservation to go to college. Closer, in fact, than he had visiting the Pueblo and his mother.

When he came out of the coma, he'd asked Sandra to get him some feathers-- turkey, magpie, eagle, oriel, summer warbler, duck. She had patted his hand and ignored the request, as she had anything else connected to his native culture. Smithers had gotten the feathers for him -- no small feat, really, when he thought about it. Sandra had not been happy.

He was not selling his land, his culture, his museum, or his dreams. Sandra -- he tried not to remember being in bed with her, or naked in the surf along their private beach in Mexico.

God, he had been in love with her...

Been in love with her?

He chased the thoughts away and picked up pieces of pottery.

Lee was waiting for them at the back door the next morning, despite the pouring rain. Chev shook his head and grinned while Patrice, lecturing Lee on what an idiot he was for standing around in the storm and at least not going next door to the coffee shop, left Chev sitting out in the rain.

Tomas finally pushed him in and Patrice looked back, startled... and started laughing as she slid out of her raincoat and hung it up.

"Well, you did always tell me I have a one track mind," she said.

Any day that started out where he could make fun of Patrice had to be a good day. She went up front and got the checks and handed them out to everyone. Lee started to put his in his soggy pocket and changed his mind, pulling out a slightly less wet -- and very thin -- billfold.

Chev stayed with Patrice to do paperwork for the Morris collection, thinking about all those lovely pieces of pottery.

Insurance questions were not a problem. He'd pay extra if he had to, although he already had the museum highly-insured to make it look reasonable for groups like this. If they were lucky, they might get a semi-permanent selection...

Damn, he loved this work.

At noon he headed back toward his office, wondering what Lee had been up to all morning. Probably down in the museum setting up the new flyers at each display --

He looked over the edge and found something totally unexpected. He saw Lee talking to the woman who had sent him running the day before. Not only talking, but laughing. He could hear the sound all the way up in the hall.

Well damn. Good. He saw Lee check his watch, nod, and walk away with her. Lunch, no doubt.

It looked like a good day. He still thought about the call from Sandra the day before, but it had stopped triggering an emotional response. He'd spent a long night -- alone -- in bed thinking about the situation. He could sell everything. He could move to Europe and take up archeology and trading somewhere else...

And would she like it any better? She liked the bright life and fancy clubs where they'd met. He'd told her everything about himself the first week, including his love of his native land. She hadn't understood what it meant.

He cared for Sandra. He didn't love her enough to give up his land for her. They'd had a few good years. He'd pay her off and move on. Harsh way to think, but she'd chosen the terms with her own demands.

Chev thought about going and telling Patrice his decision, but then he decided telling Sandra first might be the more proper move, and right now he wanted this done properly.

He could wait a few days before he made the news public. Wait for Sandra to call back, rather than having one of the law firms hunt her down. He didn't want to embarrass her. He didn't want to end this badly... but he did want to end it.

The intercom beeped, surprising him again. He'd been sitting behind his desk for more than ten minutes, staring at the blank screen of his monitor.

"Yes?" he said.

"You have a call from Red Sun," Patrice said, her voice very

sharp with anger. "They said your wife called them and told them to get in touch with you here."

"Damn," he said. He'd done his best to make sure the Red Sun people didn't know he had come back to New Mexico, because he found them incredibly annoying to deal with. And what the hell was this with Sandra? She'd been the one who insisted no one know he had returned to New Mexico -- and then she gives the information out to a competitor with the ethics of a buzzard watching for a road kill?

"I could hang up on the bastards," Patrice suggested.

"I'll talk to them."

"Sure, ruin my fun," she said, but a moment later the light on his phone pulsed. He picked it up. "Good afternoon," he said in his best, neutral voice.

"Am I speaking to Mr. Rey?" the man on the other end asked -- a young sounding voice with a clipped Eastern accent -- probably Boston.

"You are speaking to *Doctor* Rey," he answered. "And you are wasting your time. I am not going to sell the land."

"That's not what your wife implied," the man answered,

sounding annoyed.

"My wife is in Europe. She obviously misunderstood the situation, Mr...?"

"Stillman. Edward James Stillman, CEO of Red Sun Enterprises. I need your land, Mr. Rey. And I intend to have it, even if it means going to the state to take possession. I already have lawyers looking into what it would take to have the state exercise eminent domain. The land is under utilized, and I can show just cause --"

"You are doing your best to piss me off, aren't you?" The words finally stopped Mr. Edward James Stillman for a moment. "Did you think telling me you would get the government involved was going to frighten me into instantly selling? Well, screw you. I'm Hopi; we've dealt with the government longer than your people have been in this area. *I am not going to sell the land. Go find somewhere else to build your little rich man's paradise.*"

And he hung up. It felt good, too. He tapped the intercom button, wondering if Patrice had seen the call end.

"Yes?"

"If Mr. Edward James Stillman -- or any other member of Red

Sun -- calls again, tell them to go fuck themselves," he said cheerily. "Oh, and if my wife calls, you can tell her the same thing."

Patrice coughed, gasped, sputtered. He laughed.

Chapter Seven

Lunch with a woman he barely knew turned out to be both froth with worries and a surprisingly fun hour. They went to the Coffee House, a small café around the corner from the museum, and where Lee had grabbed coffee a few times over the last week. The choice saved the question of cars and money, since he could afford eating here, even before cashing his first real check from the museum.

The afternoon had turned cloudy and cold. He thought he could feel a little ice in the air, and he lifted his face into the breeze, breathing in the cold air and the scent of the pines trees lining the walk.

Mary, though, huddled into her jacket and walked with her head bent and her hands shoved into her pockets. Obviously not a cold weather person.

People crowded along the sidewalk. Tomas had said the weather could turn hotter at any moment, and those trying to avoid the rush were already gathering. Lee wondered if he'd like it as well around here with so many strangers around. Right now it felt cozy -- David from security held the café door open for the two of them, and Tomas waved as he left with what looked like lunch for Chev and Patrice.

"Do you like working at the museum?" Mary asked as they stood in line forming up behind food counter and register.

"Yes, I do." He smiled. "It's a great group to work with. I'm considering going back to college to pick up a degree in the field. I always liked it, but now... well, I can't really think I'd enjoy doing much else."

"You think you'll still feel the same way in ten years?" she asked. They moved a couple steps forward.

He thought about it for a moment. "Yes, I do. I hope so, anyway. You can never guarantee the future, of course, but based on my life now, I couldn't think of anything else I'd like to do."

She peered over someone's shoulder and into the case. "Is the

chicken salad good here?"

"My favorite. I don't know if you'll like it, but I do."

"Good enough." She gave a little shrug and finally loosened the jacket. They still had two people ahead of them. "I'm taking the spring and summer off from work. I'll probably go back to being office staff somewhere afterwards. It's not bad work, and the pay is good. You have to be careful of where you hire on. You get in a place with a bad attitude, and they're likely to be pissy about references, too."

"Sounds unpleasant. Oh -- only one chicken sandwich left? You know I lied about it being my favorite. The roast beef is really my favorite. Really."

"Good, cause I'm taking the chicken," she said with a bright smile. And she did.

They finally found their way to a small table in the corner, bringing back sandwiches, coffee and chips to share. They talked about living in this area, where both of them had arrived lately, and from entirely different coasts.

"I don't know if I'll stick around through the winter," Mary admitted. She carefully nibbled on a chip and looked out the

window. "It's too cold for me now! Winter... Nah."

"Where will you go?" he asked.

"I'll go back to San Diego, probably." She shrugged, sipped her coffee, and shrugged again. "I needed to get away from home and family for a while. Test out my new found wings after the divorce and fly to some place different. I like it here, but it's not home."

"I like it here because it's not home," he said, and looked down at the sandwich for a long moment.

"You get quiet, Lee," she said, shaking her head. "I never know what to do when men get quiet on me."

"It happen often?" he asked, hoping to steer things away from him again.

"Sometimes," she said. "I don't have lunch with men very often these days."

"Me either. With women, I mean," he hurriedly said, and then laughed at how silly he sounded. Movie dialogue.

"Divorced, too?" she said.

"Yes." He could have gone on, but he didn't. "There were good reasons."

"There always are, really," she said. "And I'm not trying to pry. I think it's nice to know someone here. It's odd... I chose this place because I wanted to get away from everyone I knew. Now I don't think it's what I really wanted at all."

"It's good you had the opportunity to find out, though," he said. And he knew it applied to himself as well.

And he wondered at what moment he had started feeling relaxed as he talked to Mary Powers. He had a nice lunch, and they parted at the café door, laughing. He hoped they had lunch again soon. Walking back to the museum he lifted his head again, breathing in the pine scent and the cold air. He'd be staying....

Chapter Eight

Chev happened to be heading for Patrice's office when he saw Lee came back early from lunch, and alone. He looked happy though, and Chev didn't press him for details when he called him up to a meeting. He did fill in both Lee and Tomas on the situation with Red Sun, but he didn't include the rest of the workers in the discussion since they really didn't have anything

to do with the outside problems. He did not add his own feelings about Sandra yet. He would talk to Smithers in person later tonight to get his advice on the matter. And talk to his firm in Santa Fe later this afternoon or tomorrow to have them primed and ready for Red Sun -- which reminded him of something else.

"Lee, before you go -- I'm going to need you to drive down to Santa Fe on Monday and pick up something from the college for me. Is it going to be a problem?"

"None at all, as long as I can use a company car," he said with a surprising laugh.

"You don't have a car, do you?" Chev asked.

"I have something that calls itself a car, but I leave it parked at the apartment to save us both a lot of grief and embarrassment."

Lee was getting a sense of humor -- or maybe getting one back. Chev laughed. "It's not a problem. You'd take a company car anyway. I have a piece of pottery for you to pick up, and our insurance people insist we ship things like this in cars they have fully insured."

"Oh, good. Sure, I'd love to go."

"Great. Damn, this has been a surprisingly good day."

"Yes it has," Lee agreed and grinned.

"Let's order in Mexican," Chev said. Then he stopped and waved his hand toward Patrice before she started away. "No. Let's go *out* for Mexican. Sandra blew everything by calling Red Sun and telling them I'm here. I don't see any reason to hide any more."

Patrice had stopped by the door, looked worried for a moment, and then smiled. "Yes, you're right. But Tomas comes with us."

"Of course he does. It wouldn't be a proper dinner without him."

And they had a damn good meal, too. It felt like a celebration, but he didn't know what exactly they celebrated. Maybe just of life. Sometimes he didn't celebrate life enough.

Chapter Nine

A week of working at Desert Traditions had not dulled the joy of coming in each morning. Even so, despite his luck with the first shards, he had come to realize how much he didn't know, and he'd started to become a familiar face at the library and

bookstores after work and during lunch. He didn't mind coming in on Saturday and Sunday -- no more than Chev and Patrice appeared to mind. It gave him something to do -- something he *wanted* to do.

He'd run into Mary twice more since they had lunch again. They seemed to run in the same circles -- bookstores, libraries and museums. She made him nervous, but he liked her company. Friends.

He had forgotten Chev wanted him to go to Santa Fe until Chev tossed him the car keys on Monday afternoon and they went out to the parking area behind the museum.

"You're taking the Jeep -- the white Rubicon," he said waving toward the car sitting by the fence. "Paul took it out and filled it up, but the gas card is in the case attached to the back of the passenger seat in case you need it."

"Hell, with one of those I should be able to get to California and back on one tank, right?" Lee said. "Santa Fe is less than 100 miles away!"

Chev laughed. "Good point. Once you pass Cuyamungue on Highway 84, about three miles farther there's a little dirt road

flanked by two pinion pines with a chain strung between them and a hawk symbol on a wooden sign. That's my land. Make sure no one has plowed down the chain while I wasn't looking, will you?"

"I will." He crossed to the car and patted the Desert Tradition's symbol on the side, The D and T surrounded by various petroglyph symbols.

"I don't know how long Professor Belinato will take to get the pottery to you. She said she'll be holding class but she also has digs to cover, and I've never had much luck pinning her down. We should have gotten you a cell phone --"

"Chev, calm," Lee said. He unlocked the car and let the door stand open, heat escaping like a breeze off the desert. "I'll go down, I'll find her, I'll get the pottery and come back."

"Yeah," Chev said. He rolled back a little. "There's a briefcase in there for some paperwork she'll give you. You'll have to sign for the item she has. You've got plenty of time to look around. Have a good trip. Stop for lunch and be sure you get receipts. You're on company business, Lee. Don't give me that look. We need the expenses, you know."

He laughed a little, thinking how much difference a couple tacos would make on the spreadsheets. But he'd do it to keep Chev and Patrice happy. And maybe they'd let him go off on trips like this again.

Freedom... an odd feeling as he climbed in the car and started it up. Damn nice car, in fact. He looked at the speedometer and found it registered less than five thousand miles. He'd never driven anything so new in his life.

"Go," Chev ordered with a smile.

He pulled away, then looked back, worried -- but Tomas stood at the doorway, watching. Tomas had become a shadow he sometimes failed to see unless he looked. The man obviously took his work very seriously, too. Lee would hate to be a person stupid enough to cause Chev trouble.

Tomas waved as he went past. Lee grinned and returned it, then pulled out of the museum's private back lot, around the long outer wall, and finally down to Paseo del Pueblo Norte. The bright sun beat down on the car, making sharp shadows everywhere he passed. He passed through the flat, open land near Taos with mountains rising nearby, bereft of snow. It

proved to be an excellent day for a drive, without many people on the road. He went past the turn off to Los Alamos, thinking he'd like to go back. He'd driven up right after he first bought his car, but the feel of security around the place had frightened him in ways he hadn't expected. Tall, windowless buildings behind fences had signs that said things like cryogenics -- alien, science fiction terms. Now he'd put the memory of prison farther behind him, he thought he might like to see the the town again. He wanted to know more about the place's odd history. But not today. Maybe not for a long time if he kept working seven days a week for Dr. Rey. Not that he minded.

From the Espanola turnoff all the way to Santa Fe he passed increasingly urban development. He almost missed the turn off to Chev's land. He slowed down, grateful for the light traffic so the semis could go past him without trouble.

And there it was -- the dirt road and the chain across the drive. He pulled over to take a look, parking in the drive and getting out to stretch his legs, as though a drive of about sixty miles had been so horrible. Off in the distance stood a small adobe house, and he saw horses in a corral. The road went past it

and off toward some hills.

Pretty land. Mesquite plants, grayish green, stood in clumps while a small, spiked-leaf plant with tiny purple flowers grew up around the pinion pine gate posts. He saw a stand of cactus cushion, and some of the ubiquitous prickly pear --

And he realized a state patrol car had slowed down and pulled up beside him.

It was all right, it was all right. The man got out of the car, started forward, and then looked at the Jeep and grinned.

"Didn't see the DT symbol! Sorry! I try to keep an eye on the road for Chev. I'm his cousin, Popovi Da."

"I'm Lee Constantinos," Lee said, holding out his hand and hoping the palm didn't feel damp and clammy. They shook, and the man still grinned. "I wanted to get a look at the place."

"Have Chev give you a tour," he said, and then the smile faded a little. "When he's ready to. Damn people. Told him he should stick near home. If you talk to him --well let him know I'm still watching for him."

"I'll do that," Lee said, realizing the man didn't know Chev was in the area. He wanted to tell him... but no. No, he had no way to

know if what this man said was true. "I have something to pick up in Santa Fe."

"Don't speed," Popovi said with a laugh as he went back to his own car.

A few minutes later Lee drove into the true outskirts of Santa Fe. It felt as strange this time as it had the first time, as the desert suddenly gave way to an oasis of green. Trees lined the ridges all along the highway and red-tiled roofs peeked out from beneath the canopy now and then. Gradually the Old Town came into view. This city already had such lovely buildings as the Palace of the Governors more than a decade before the Mayflower found Plymouth Rock. Until collage, Lee hadn't realized how old the European settlements were in this area of the country, compared to the East Coast. It had been one of the first things to draw his attention.

Driving into the Old Town meant driving into history: La Villa Real De La Santa Fe De San Francisco de Asis. Despite the short a time he'd lived in New Mexico, he'd come to love the area. He found Taos a little less imposing, but he loved it all. A quick drive through Old Town reminded him he had money

this time. He found a café on the edge of the small streets, ate lunch -- barely remembered to get the receipt -- and then walked past the small shops and toward the St. Francis Cathedral.

He'd read Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as soon as he learned it was about Jean Baptiste Lamy, the man who had built this church. He had not gone inside it the week he'd spent in Santa Fe. Now he hurried across the road and up the steps.

His parents had been devout Greek Orthodox Christians. He had stopped being devout anything five years ago... but walking into the St. Francis Cathedral brought a startling surge of emotion. He wandered around for a few minutes, found the Lady Chapel with *La Conquistadora* -- the oldest venerated statue of the Virgin Mary in the United States. She didn't look *old*, but knowing her history drew him to her.

History. He found the history of his strange corner of the world so fascinating he couldn't imagine walking away now. However, a glance at his watch showed it was getting close to three, and he did not want to miss the professor. He'd be back. He knew

it without a doubt.

He had not trouble finding the Santa Fe Community Collage, but it gave him a very strange feeling to see all those kids wandering everywhere. Before prison, he'd been one of them. How could he feel so much older -- so different -- after just five years? His hands trembled at the thought, and he sat in the car for a few minutes, watching as the school security car circled twice. They did no more than glance at the Jeep. The emblem on the side made him official.

He finally got out of the car and brushed at his clothing before he pulled out the briefcase, feeling silly and ostentatious carrying it. He locked the car and headed for the administration building. In a few minutes he was jogging across campus to where the professor was holding her current class.

By the time he finally found the right place, students streamed out of the building and he feared he'd missed her and messed up the first assignment Rey had sent him on. Panic eased, though, as an older woman came from the building, and another student addressed her as professor. She was a small woman, dressed in jeans and a nice shirt, with short hair going grey. He

didn't want to intrude on the conversation about the two types of Yuma stone arrows, so he walked along with the small group. One by one the students began to break away. When they finally reached the administration building two still walked with her, and she stopped and looked at him, brown eyes narrowed in a look that could probably quell students.

Lee smiled. "I'm Lee Constantinos," he said before she could ask. "Dr. Rey sent me --"

"Oh!" She gave him a bright smile and her face colored. "Of course. I had expected Patrice, but I remember Chev's email said he might send the new guy. Come up to my office.

Dorothy, Mark -- put your questions to me in a paper and I'll see what I need to answer."

The two nodded, neither looking happy as they turned away.

Lee felt sorry to have taken their time and started to volunteer to wait -- but Dr. Belinato caught his arm and shook her head, pulling him into the building before she spoke.

"They want me to give them easy answers Mr. Constan...?"

"Lee."

"Lee," she said and started along the hall. "They want easy

answers so they don't have to go look of them. I don't want it to be easy. I want them to *want* to look. I want them to love the work."

"Oh yes. I understand."

She pushed open a door to an office and looked back at him, nodding. "You love the work, do you? Learning answers?"

"I did when I was in school. I had to... drop out."

"Damn shame," she said, and waved him inside the crowded room. "How's Chev doing?"

"Well, I think. Patrice says he has a private nurse for physical therapy several times a week to get him back on his feet. He seems -- I haven't known him for long -- but he seems like a man who wouldn't cling to false hopes."

She stopped and looked at him. "Yes, you're right. Thank you. Chev was a student of mine several years ago, and one of the few with real fire, although he did have an agenda he wanted to push. He wanted to find -- to prove -- certain answers, and it's a bad way to go into the field. I think he outgrew it, though. He started asking questions rather than looking for answers to suit him."

Lee wanted to ask more, but he refrained. He wanted to understand Chev, who gave him a chance to work in his favorite field... but understanding would likely come better from working with him rather than from an outside source.

Professor Belinato unlocked a cabinet and pulled out a large wooden crate with a hinged top and a padlock. She took a key from around her neck and unlocked the top, pulled up some packing material and then pulled out a lovely olla -- black on white, geometric design, hardly chipped at all. She turned it around and smiled...

And his heart stopped.

Writing? Writing in a neat cursive hand; Spanish, Lee suspected.

"Ah -- it's not as old as I first..."

It took him a moment to translate the words... Christmas Day, in the year of our Lord, 1527. Alejandro de Seville.

"This isn't possible," Lee said. He looked at her, frowning. "I assume you were given it to prove it's a hoax?"

"Basically, yes. And I can't prove it's a hoax, but I can't entirely prove it's authentic, either. However, considering where it was

found -- in a ruin on Chev's land and by a group of young, but legitimate archeologists -- I'm tending more and more to think it's real."

"It can't be. The Franciscan friar was the first Spaniard to make it this far north, and he didn't arrive until 1539, right?"

"That's always been the belief," she said. Her hand brushed over the olla. "Fray Marcos de Niza went North at the behest of the viceroy of New Spain, Antonio de Mendoza. He brought back tales of the seven cities of gold. Lies all of it, but it brought Coronado running in 1540 and started the Spanish push north. Now do you want to see what really makes this olla odd?"

"This doesn't?" Lee said, shaking his head.

She turned the pot again.

It was not writing this time, not in the European sense, at least. The drawings were rather fine considering the medium. He recognized one glyph but not the other.

"All right the feathered snake is Quetzalcóatl, which means this is Aztec?"

"Right. These two appear to be the symbols for deer and house - - we think it might be an Aztec name, Mazatlcalli."

Spanish and Aztec together... it didn't have a good connotation in most places. But here they were, obviously in the same place at the same time... a thousand miles from where they should have been, and at best a decade too early.

"If this is legitimate --"

"I've found a reference to an Alejandro de Seville with Cortez. He was among the two hundred and seventy men left behind by Cortez when he escaped from the Aztecs. They were a garrison in another part of the city, and Cortez obviously didn't think any of them were worth risking his life to try and save when he ran."

"And one may have survived? And came here with an Aztec?"

"Who knows for certain? It could be a hoax. But I did all the checking I could for Chev over the last few months, and I have all the data I could find. The pottery matches other material from the time, and we got lucky... I found a partial thumb print on this one and on another dated pieces from the same kiln." He felt his heart do a double beat.

"This is incredible," he said. He let his fingers brush over the olla. "It doesn't really change history, but it does give it a

strange new depth, doesn't it?"

"It gives us a riddle to work out," she said and began, obviously with some reluctance, to pack the olla up again. "Historians and archeologists both love riddles, you know. This has been shown to very few people so far. We're trying to keep it a secret until something else is found to corroborate the find."

"This has to be priceless if it's real."

"Exactly. There has never been another piece like it. And now I'm going to give it to you to take back to Desert Traditions."

"I'm not sure I'm as happy about having it in my hands as I should be," he said.

"Oh, believe me, I know the feeling," she said with a laugh as she locked the lid down and handed him the key. "I've had this in my care for three months now. The first day it seemed wondrous with the possibilities it represented. Then I thought about Chev's enemies, and how they might enjoy destroying something so important to him."

"Yes, exactly. Thank you for reinforcing my paranoia."

She laughed again, and patted him on the arm. "I have all the paperwork in triplicate -- one set for me, one set in a safe

deposit box, and the last set to go with you."

He put the paperwork in his briefcase and then gathered the box up by the handle. Professor Belinato walked him back to the Jeep and looked far too pleased to see him -- and the box -- leaving.

There would be no sightseeing on the way home. He put the box on the floor in the back and laid the passenger side seat down over it to make certain it didn't go flying. Then he drove carefully out of the college lot and headed straight toward the freeway.

An automatic glance at the fuel gauge won a little grimace of frustration. The needle hovered around a quarter of a tank or less. He started to turn toward a gas station sign...

That couldn't be right. The tank had been more than half full when he pulled into the college's parking lot. A glance at the rearview mirror showed a large white pickup -- two men -- following close behind him, and preparing to turn in the gas station as well.

He turned in, eyeing the possibilities -- but he'd never get to the olla out and get to the building in time, and he didn't want to give

it up so easily. Heading back to the college seemed a far wiser move.

Ease in, around to a gas pump, *pretend you don't notice the big white pickup...*

He waited until they had practically stopped, and then Lee hit the gas and shot forward, over the curb and back out into the street, nearly colliding with a battered van. The driver unfortunately swerved and blocked the way back toward the college. Lee went up over the opposite curb, swung to the right, and hit the gas again, heading for the next block.

The pickup wasn't right behind him. But they would know where he intended to go, running for the closest safety.

Lee turned down a street -- purposely turned away from the college. Down an alley, across another street -- no sign of the truck. He picked up speed, praying the cops spotted him, but after five blocks he gave up any hope.

He had to dump the box somewhere and get away from this area, and back toward the college, as fast as he could so they didn't know he'd been this far out. Seven blocks -- it was the best he could do. He found an alley behind a row of small

businesses and saw junk piled up behind a store -- pallets, boxes, and other packing debris. It didn't look as though it had disturbed in some time. He prayed to God no one took it into his head to clean it up before he got back!

Lee hit the brakes, leapt out, yanking the box with him. He shoved it down behind a trash bin and threw a couple cardboard boxes and some bundles of paper over the top.

He ran back, jumped in the car hitting the gas almost before he got the door closed, and headed back toward the college. He couldn't let them know he had gone this way, so he raced back almost an equal distance in the opposite direction, and then slowed to a slightly more leisurely speed as he came closer to the college...

Spotted. Damn. He had almost believed it had been some kind of mistake, a faulty gauge, his rampant paranoia springing full force -- but the moment he saw the truck the driver saw him as well, spun in his direction and hit the gas so fast the tire's squealed.

He wasn't going to make it to the college and help. He barely had time to turn before they rammed him from behind. He tried

for a store parking lot, but they shoved up against his bumper and pushed him past. People stared in amazement. Someone grabbed a cell phone. Good.

They weren't going to let him stop in any place with a crowd. Maybe just as well. He didn't want to drag anyone else into this trouble with him. Lee hit the gas, pulled away from the truck, dashing for the freeway.

The Jeep coughed and nearly died going up the on ramp, but it caught again on the curve as the last of the fuel sloshed across the tank. He put his foot down on the gas and shot out into the traffic, startling more people, but making some distance.

The pickup followed. Hell, where were the damned cops now that he really wanted to see one for the first time in a lot of years?

The Jeep coughed again, sputtered... and he knew it had only a few yards left in it. He wanted to pull out into the middle of traffic and let it die there, but traffic cut him off and as the car slowed, the truck came up behind and quite easily pushed him off onto the shoulder.

Hell. Try running? No way off the Interstate. He briefly

considered charging across the traffic, but even as slow as it was, he didn't think it was a good idea.

He got out of the car and into the open where the people passing by could clearly see him. He wanted witnesses. The two men came from the pickup, one up on the driver's side where he stood, and the other circling around the Jeep. Tall, bulky men with Stetsons and Raybans, almost identical western style shirts and jeans...

The man coming up beside him caught his arm in a visor-like grip and snarled, while he looked over the top of the Jeep. "Is it there, then?" he said with a surprisingly thick British accent and sounding almost comical from this cowboy.

The other man had yanked the door open, and spent far more time looking through the Jeep than it deserved. Except for the briefcase, there was nothing else in it.

"Not fucking here," he said. Texas drawl there. Odd pair...

"Wipe that smirk off your face, you stupid bastard, and tell us what you did with the bloody box. We saw you put it in the car."

"What makes you think I'd tell you?" Lee asked, leaning back against the car. He felt remarkably calm. It was very strange,

as though he had gone far beyond the fears that had plagued him before he actually faced danger. And this was danger, beyond a doubt.

"I could punt you out into the traffic, couldn't I?"

"Yes. Of course, you'd have a hard time getting away. And you still wouldn't have the box."

"Let's get him in the truck," Texas said. "We've already drawn way more attention than the boss will like."

Brit, his large hand still tight around Lee's arm, dragged him to the back of the Jeep and around to the passenger side of the truck. He did not want to climb in, but as he balked something hit him across the back of the head...

Want to read the rest of the story? It's [Available here!](#)