

Dancing at Padre

Memorial Day was the beginning of summer at the beach. In The Rio Grande Valley, summer wasn't marked by the arrival of heat. It was marked by this specific date and anticipation of hotter heat. Case loved it. Summer. The steaks tasted better; the water temperature was perfect for swimming. Even the fish were easier to catch. Sunsets were more brilliant and island breezes more precious.

What would a date with Catarina on a summer night like this bring? Even though she made the first move, Case clearly let her know he would be paying for dinner. He wanted to take her to one of his favorite places, a dilapidated shack on the bay side of the island that had been converted into a restaurant. He wasn't trying to impress her with nice things; he wanted her to have a good time.

A groaning, dripping air conditioner spit ice from its perch in the window when it froze up. If a piece landed in a customer's plate, dessert was free. There were only eight scratched wooden tables, and each was always occupied. The restaurant didn't have a name or a liquor license; but it did serve the best steak on South Padre Island.

Fare was simple.....steak, potato, salad, bread, lots of butter. After a day playing in the sun, nothing tasted better. Attire was "come as you are." Neckties cut off of overdressed customers hung from the ceiling. Case was so tall the low hanging ties brushed his hair as he crossed the room. A group of fishermen talked of their day on the jetties and smelled of their fresh catch.

The warmth of the afternoon sun glowed on Catarina's skin. Case knew the feeling, something just short of a sunburn that made cool hands irresistible.

"Hey man!" Case heard a hearty laugh and looked beyond Catarina to see Bob, one of the men he pulled out of the sand the night of Cinco de Mayo. Tonight Bob sported a Speedo and a Hawaiian shirt of clashing orange and blue. He was clearly over fifty and so was his bikini-clad date.

Case shook the hand extended in friendship. "Case Becker. I see you made it safely home."

"I knew you were lying about her being your sister." Bob turned to Catarina. "You, my dear, look precious.....this is Mavis. Would you like to join us?"

Catarina glanced at Case; she was willing. Without consulting her, he replied, "No, we are going to sit as far away from you as possible.....no offense."

Bob pretended a tragic face and placed his hand over his heart. "I'm crushed. It's good to see you though. Thanks again for your help the other night."

"You're welcome." Case waved and said, "Goodbye, Bob." Good natured Bob returned his attention to Mavis.

Catarina smiled across the table at Case as if she liked him. They had never been so relaxed with each other. It was strange and wonderful. She didn't tense with every brush of his body. She reached out to touch his shoulder once and she let him sit close enough to rest his bare knee next to hers. His initial thrill settled into nice. It felt right.

Case watched her intently perusing the menu. He wondered what made the difference in her attitude about him. What was going on in that willful mind of hers? Was it the money she found? He was certain they would not be here together if she knew

what he'd done. Case caressed her with his eyes and renewed his vow to make certain she never found out.

She was everything that intrigued him. Unaffected by superficiality, brave and smart. She managed to melt both his self-doubt and his heart. Yes, melt was the right word; she was hot in so many ways. There was something happening between them. He liked it; he liked it a lot.

Dinner did not disappoint. The moment their plates arrived, the air conditioner belched and tossed a chunk of ice into the sour cream topping of Catarina's baked potato. Her startled squeal alerted the waiter.

"Free dessert!" Case retrieved the ice and held it up for the waiter to see. The prize acknowledged, Case couldn't find a suitable place to put it on the table, so he popped it in his mouth to melt and swallow. Catarina rewarded him with musical laughter.

Laughter came easy tonight. It bubbled up over the least little things. Case picked up the naked T-bone from his steak and sucked the tender pieces left clinging; Catarina did the same. These morsels were the best part. When it came time for their free dessert, they ordered an apple pie a la mode. The crust was flaky hot; the filling was tart with hints of lemon and the melting iced cream swirled in the plate with cinnamon and butter. How could hovering over shared food be so intimate?

They lingered over extra glasses of iced tea until the lone waiter came by. He pointed to the check waiting on their table and asked if they wouldn't like to pay now, then he glanced toward the people waiting in line for a table.

"I don't guess they are going to let us stay any longer." Case reached for his wallet.

"This was really nice, Case, thank you."

It was the first time! She said his name as though she had called him Case forever. It rolled off her tongue as naturally as the more distant El Gringo. The sound induced a quick intake of shallow breath and Case felt another shift of energy between them; a barrier collapsed. He was uncertain if he should acknowledge it, so he rose and held her chair for her to get up.

Case opened the door. It was easy for Catarina to walk under his raised arm to exit the shack. They stood in a moment of indecision in the parking lot for they had no specific plans for the evening. Sounds of a band drifted from behind the dunes. The annual Memorial Day dance was starting at the open air pavilion.

"What's next?" Case figured this question had worked this afternoon, so why not try it again? The answer was better than he expected.

"Could I have a kiss?"

His reaction was immediate. He pulled her to the side of the building away from the light. He pinned her against the unpainted boards. His hands pressed against the wood on both sides of her; his chest crushed her body. His own urgency surprised him. He moved on her mouth, entering her body in search of answers. He found the edge of what he was looking for and she had to put her arms around him. She arched the length of her body into his. The intensity grew into rhythmic movement that Case sensed began to make her uncomfortable. He retreated to gentle brushes of his lips that allowed them to talk.

Catarina's eyes were still closed. "We're in public."

“I want more.”

“I’m scared!”

“Of me?”

“Of you.....and me.”

Case squeezed her as tightly as he dared. He growled an utterance of self-control and rocked her side to side in his arms. Someone turned up the speakers and music from the pavilion got louder.

“Let’s go dance. You want to?”

Catarina nodded yes. He touched her hair; her lips and then gently tapped her nose with his forefinger.

“Then, tonight, we dance.”