

Finding Catarina

Friday was cash payday in the fields, so the cantina was packed. Case heard the juke box long before he saw the building. There was no room to park close to the shack; he had to park alongside the road. From the higher vantage point of the wrecker, he could see over the cars to the tables sprawled over the grass and even through the open door to the inside. He decided to wait, to see what he could see.

This was not spying. This was a public place. He had the right to go in and have a beer just like anyone else, a small comfort considering his state of mind. What played out before him next was surreal. He felt completely detached. It was like he was watching a screen play unfold before him.

Catarina appeared in the doorway. She was wearing a white sundress that bared her shoulders. Her hair was arranged on top of her head so that tendrils fell down to kiss the skin of her neck, just as he longed to kiss it.

The light behind her glowed yellow and Case was so immersed in her beauty that he forgot to wonder why she might be here. As she entered the yard, a man followed her, the same man who paid so much attention to Catarina at Abuelita's Cinco de Mayo celebration.

Smooth and pressed again in all white casual clothing, he looked far too elegant to be among the riffraff of Cantina Los Indios. Case scanned the parking lot for the entourage of black cars and found it waiting in the tree shadows next to the river.

The man chose a rickety table for two. The owner of the bar followed them out of the door and set two drinks before them. *Catarina has a date!* The man in white reached for his wallet, but the owner held up the palm of his hand indicating that the drinks were on the house. This stranger with Catarina was being treated with the same deference Case had seen at Abuelita's house. *Who is this guy?*

One piece of music ended after another, as Case watched the man openly appraise Catarina and flirt with her relentlessly. His every motion communicated confidence in his intent. Case felt an escalation of a strange feeling he had no name for. Seeing Catarina with Logan had not made him feel like this, and he even believed that Catarina had been with Logan in a most intimate way. But, in this unknown man, this cool, important, dangerous man, Case sensed a true threat.

Catarina did not touch her drink. Her date had another. The man reached to take Catarina's hand in both of his and lifted it to his lips. At that moment, when the man's lips touched Catarina's skin, Case identified his unknown emotion. For the first time in his life he was jealous.

Catarina did not shrink away from the kiss although she did lean back in her chair when it seemed the man asked her a question. Without a pause, she shook her head no. The man let go of her hand but not her eyes. He leaned back to relax in his chair; he smiled. A few minutes later, he rose and bowed slightly as he softly blew her a kiss farewell. He is not done, Case thought. But, the man did leave. Case watched him walk to where a driver waited in a dark sedan. Catarina went back into the bar.

Minutes later she returned to the yard with a tray full of drinks. She started serving customers and taking cash. Catarina was working! She didn't look like a barmaid. The white sundress she wore made her look like an angel. The message she sent with every glance was, "You can look, but not touch." She served with grace and

returned the smiles of the hapless, beauty struck, common men.

Case's emotional chemistry cooled as he watched. Catarina should not be here even if she did need money for school. What was he going to do about it? He had an hour until the bar would shut down to figure it out. He wasn't hopeful. So far, he had not been able to get Catarina to accept anything from him, even a ride home.

Closing time came and the owner left Catarina to clean up. How could the man do that? There were three customers still drinking. They were from The Upper Valley and by the mortarboards and tassels they wore, they were at the cantina celebrating their recent graduation from college. Cars their daddies bought them waited in the parking lot while they had been tanking up on cube libres all night.

Case recognized one, a lineman from the University of Texas Longhorns who had just been named an All American. His father owned an automobile dealership and was a customer of Becker Rescue Services. All three men were big, full of disrespect, booze and testosterone. One made his move on Catarina.

"Hey, pretty baby, I haven't seen you here before."

Catarina pretended she did not understand. "No Inglés."

"No English doesn't mean you don't understand. You know what I need. I know you do. I'll be nice, pretty please?" He patted his knee.