

## WILD HORSES

Out in the round corral, under a punishing high desert sun, Hector is doing what he does best, getting acquainted with a cantankerous young colt, building mutual respect with calm, persuasive commands, aligning himself with the animal's unique temperament. His simple philosophy: never instill fear by yelling, cursing or exerting force. The whip he holds is a mere point of reference.

Hector performs his work intuitively, his mind adrift in ribald fantasy. Cindy Cochran. The petite blonde reporter here last week to write about him, all dimples and sparkling teeth, big brown eyes bright with adulation, tight little ass filling out those jeans. That shy smile when she invited him to lunch, wanting to thank him and record a few additional details. Just in case. Eating chile rellenos and drinking Dos Equis together. Him and Cindy. Like they were on a date. Leaving Hector her cell phone number. Just in case. Going the extra mile.

But Hector's no fool. Hector knows nothing can come of it. He's too damned old for one thing. And he's married. Cindy Carson is something to ponder. That's all she is.

In a firm yet gentle tone Hector commands, “Whoa,” and the colt stops with a snort. Hector makes a clucking sound and the colt sidles over. This tough guy was once a wannabe outlaw and the sense of accomplishment Hector feels is large.

“Good boy,” he coos. “Good boy.”

As he stands rubbing the colt’s velvety neck, movement on his left alerts him to a stranger scuttling along the side of the barn like he might pitch forward onto his face at every step. With a last staggering lurch the man makes it to the corral and rests both arms on the splintery top rail, breathing like he’s just reached the peak of a mountain.

“Hello,” he says, offering Hector a grim smile. “Wasn’t sure I’d recognize you, Heck, but there you are.”

Hector steps around the colt and strides over to the man. Peers down into a pale face, dull blue watery eyes behind thick silver-rimmed glasses. Scaly purplish lips. Stooped and thin to the point of gauntness, forehead under a white straw city hat sheeny with sweat.

“Should I know you, amigo?”

“Knew me once, Heck. Knew me over forty years ago.”

*Forty years.* That rules out the joint. But even though Hector’s memory can now leapfrog over his life’s detritus, it still comes up blank. “That’s a heap of time. Can you spare me another clue?”

“Delaware,” the man says. “Sears Roebuck. Department twenty.”

An icicle spears Hector’s gut and he straightens up. “Damn. Must be talking to Millard Diamond. Damn, Millard. Damn. That’s about all I know to say.”

Beaming, the man lowers his arms, keeping one trembling, blue-veined hand on the top rail for support. He wears a light blue blazer, dark blue tie, cream-colored slacks, shiny black loafers. No wonder he's sweating.

"Understandable, Heck. Understandable."

"Well ..." Hector hesitates, thoughts zigging and zagging, "I have to suppose you got something on your mind."

"I do, Heck, I surely do."

Hector gives the ensuing silence time to gather, before he says, "Care to get on with it?"

"I'm trying to arrange the words just right in my head first. Don't care to spook you, Heck."

"And I don't mean to be pushy."

Millard clears his throat. "I live over in Arizona now. Retired there years ago. For the climate. Saw your picture in the paper last week. Mostly hat, but I figured not too many New Mexico cowboys could be called Hector Craghead. Nice story that gal wrote about you."

"That story, huh. Didn't want to at first. She had to warm me up to the idea. Always was a sucker for a pretty face."

"So I recall."

Hector looks down at a sun-cured horse dumpling resting between his dusty boots, embarrassed by his blunder.

"It's okay," Diamond says. "I got over it. Took me awhile, that's for sure. For years I hated you, hated you both. Hated your guts. But I'm finally over it now. It's important for you

to believe that ...”

“Important?”

“Truth is, I’m here requesting a favor. What goes around comes around, Heck. Coming to grips with my hate brought me full circle to loving her again. That’s it right there.”

Hector lifts the whip to scratch his ear.

“I can see that surprises you.”

“Well, yes, I reckon it does. You wantin’ her back now, this late date?”

Diamond shakes his head. “She’s yours, know that as well as you. Knew it then, know it now. But I have this craving ... craving to see her. Before I die. Won’t be much longer they say. I mean this is one God-awful powerful craving.”

“Craving, is it.”

“That’s it. This craving has taken possession of me like nothing I’ve ever known. I have to satisfy it, just have to.”

“And just how would you go about doing that?”

“Well ... if I could only look into her eyes once more and ask her forgiveness ...”

“Forgiveness?” Hector laughs. “Damn, Millard, dammit to hell. You gotta know that don’t make much sense. It was us did you wrong.”

“Beg to differ, Heck.”

“I’m waitin’.”

“I did bad things to her. If she never told you, I’m surprised. Failed her in other ways too. She could take being knocked around some, but not benign neglect. If I’d given her what

she needed she never would've left me. Not even for you. That's my belief. Though for years I couldn't see it, too busy stewing in the broth of my own hatred. But let me tell you, living with that brand of hate is a miserable existence."

Hector slaps his thigh with the whip, annoyed by the cloying pity he feels for Diamond.

"So what exactly do you want from me?"

"Just need to see her, Heck. Talk to her. Just for a minute. That's it. Have this need."

"A craving you called it."

"That's it exactly. Purely a craving. Hope you'll at least try to understand. Always were an understanding man, one of the things she liked about you. Me too. What makes you so good, I suspect, with those unruly horses. That reporter said as much. No force, gentle persuasion. Same reason you were so good with her. She was wild—oh my, but she was wild—but you tamed her. Same thing that made you a tiger on the sales floor. You understand horses and you understood people."

Hector grunts. "Still a talker, huh?"

Diamond smiles.

"Turned out I wasn't much of a tiger."

"The hell you say."

"See where I am, don't you? Tried selling bigger stuff than vacs, it didn't work out."

Diamond shakes his head.

"I was always just a cowboy. Not no kind of tiger."

Hector recognizes the sly emergence of Diamond's closer look now, that expression of

sincere empathy that he could make soften his whole face just before he asked for the order.

The same look Hector once labored in vain to emulate.

“Being a cowboy was part of your pitch,” Diamond says. “It worked. How it did work. Folks just naturally like cowboys. When they heard you talk they knew they were hearing the real deal.”

“Nothing special about my talk.”

“Yeah there is. Take my word for it. I pictured you moving up to Porsches, yachts, beach condos. Real money. Pictured you rolling in fat commissions.”

“You pictured wrong. Selling vacs was my high point. Tried bigger tickets and it didn’t work out. What about you, though?”

Diamond sighs through too-white teeth. “You’d probably think I did okay for myself. Store manager, regional manager, right on up the ladder. Long hours, big bonuses, bleeding ulcers, high blood pressure. Married three more times. Couple kids. We’re not close. Not close at all. Wives all divorced me, Heck. Once they got to know me they stopped loving me. I stopped loving them too—all except for her. Might say my life’s been a successful mess.”

“That truly surprises me,” Hector says. “You were my role model back then. I looked up to you, wanted to be like you. The way you dressed, that big Lincoln you drove. Livin’ high on the hog. You had class.”

Diamond seems to savor the compliment. “You were such a youngster. Can’t recall why you showed up in Delaware in the first place. Why you left home.”

Hector snorts. “Never had a home. ‘Less you count all them welfare families. The one

had the ranch taught me how to cowboy. Worked my ass down to bone, that sorry bastard did. Day I turned eighteen I broke free. Thought I'd hitch-hike to the Big Apple, gettin' odd jobs along the way, make my fortune. Dumber than dirt. When I got to Wilmington and spotted that new Sears store about to open, I popped in and filled out an ap."

"Hired you on the spot, didn't I? Knew a born salesman when I saw one."

"I lied to you that day."

"About what?"

"About me having sales experience. Figured you'd find out soon enough. Never meant to stay too long."

"Wish you hadn't showed up at all, my friend."

Hector looks away momentarily, thumbing back through the years, seeking some event that Diamond might recollect more favorably. When he looks back again, he asks, "Remember that game you took me to in Baltimore?"

Diamond grins. "Colts and Packers. Know what's coming next."

"Memorial Stadium. Johnny U and Bart Starr. First pro game I ever watched in the flesh."

"Lou Michaels booted that PAT and that goddamn football landed right in my lap."

"That was a day. Broke some drunk's finger saving that pigskin for you. Under the pile in those end zone bleachers, bent it straight back. Heard it snap. Man, did that sucker yowl."

Rocking from side to side, Diamond giggles now, a cackling sound like a cartoon witch. "Thought I'd get crushed before you dragged me out from under that drunken mob of heathens.

They wanted that football bad, didn't they? But I hung onto it for dear life. Got it displayed in my den right this minute."

Hector smiles, starting to feel drawn to Diamond, like in the old days.

"Had to be one of the best days of my life. After the game you took me to that spiffy restaurant ... Golden Ring? Ordered an old fashioned, I did the same. Ordered shrimp cocktail, I did the same. Ordered salad with blue cheese dressing. Filet mignon, baked potato, sour cream, I did the same. Still remember it all. Figured we were dining on French cuisine. God almighty, I thought, this hombre does know how to live."

"When friends ask me about that football, you know, I always leave you out of the story." Diamond's eyes mist over. "Wasn't that the very night it started?"

Hector looks over at the colt waiting patiently, then out across sparse buffalo grass, preening yuccas and grazing cattle to the haze of roughhewn ginger mountains. He prefers not to talk about what happened at Diamond's house later that night. But he can't help picturing how she smiled when she shook his hand, saying she'd heard all about her husband's star salesman. How her warm fingers clung to his. And every time Diamond got up to mix fresh drinks in the kitchen she grew more intense, mostly her eyes, sizing him up like he was prey, lowering her voice to almost a whisper, letting her hand slide over to touch his thigh. You smell so good, she told him more than once. She smelled good too and she felt good. Awfully good. And he wanted her so bad he could taste her. That long black hair and smooth olive skin, the pink hickey-like birthmark on her neck, those legs snaking out of that mini-skirt. Mercy, how he wanted to devour her. Turned out the first time they were alone together, she devoured him.



“Reckon that was the night,” he says.

“Wasn’t your fault, Heck. Truly.”

“Sure it was. It was every bit my fault and that’s a fact. You’re just tryin’ to write me up, Millard. Wanting to satisfy this craving you got.”

“Where is she now? Over in that trailer?”

Hector drifts his gaze the same direction Diamond is looking. To a long, faded brown trailer, swamp cooler on the roof, dent in the side next to the front door, settled like something windblown in the midst of bear grass, desert oak and cholla. His dusty green pickup sits in the gravel drive, behind it Maria Esparza’s white Ford.

“She won’t know you,” he says. “Like you, she’s sick. Real sick. Woman comes in that Ford to help out with her.”

Diamond’s gaze remains fixed on the trailer. “What’s wrong with her, Heck?”

“Too much to list. She don’t talk any more for one thing, just lies there. Might be best if you don’t see her at all. Only make you feel worse. Lots worse. She ain’t beautiful no more, Millard. She’s all wore out. She was beautiful once, for sure, but not no more.”

“She’ll always be beautiful to me, Heck. And that’s another fact.”

“She can’t forgive you for nothing, man. Ain’t nothing to forgive you for. Won’t even know what the hell you’re talking about. Won’t even know who she’s talking to. You’ll be better off remembering her like you do. Let me give you an old picture of her, back when she was beautiful. Could you do with that?”

“I got pictures, Heck. About wore *them* out. I need to see her. Real bad. All I want,

all I ask. It's a serious craving and I need to satisfy it. Won't disturb anything, won't cause a fuss. I swear. Just need to see her, say a few words. I'm begging you, Heck. Begging. Want me to fall down on my knees right here? Will that do it?"

"Christ no, don't do nothin' like that, Millard. Jesus."

Hector lifts his ratty Stetson off his sweaty head and sets it back down, tugging on the brim. High in the ocean of pristine sky two big ebony ravens dive and swoop in silent unison, putting on a show for those earthly bound. Hector knows he's done wrong things before that have left him with regrets. Maybe this time he won't. Maybe this time he can do something right.

"Promise you can keep from going all mushy with her?" He hangs the whip on the top rail. "She won't like it if you do. I won't like it either."

"My solemn vow, Heck."

"Well ... don't say I didn't warn you."

Hector lets himself out of the corral gate to join Millard, towering over him as they walk beside a barbwire fence across a stretch of hardscrabble pasture to intersect the gravel drive. The air is still, the sun at its zenith. Hearing Diamond's raspy breathing, Hector shortens his naturally long stride.

"Nice place you got here," Diamond manages between wheezes.

"Comes rent free. Folks who own the ranch are good to us. I try to give 'em my best. It's peaceful. We like it. But I reckon it ain't all that nice—not by your standards."

"I'd take it in a heartbeat ... if she came with it."

Hector opens the trailer door to the moist coolness of the living room. Maria steps out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a paper towel. Diamond doffs his hat, exposing a shiny bald head. Hector introduces them and Maria's ruby lips compress as she takes the stranger in.

"Extra plate for lunch?"

"No, no," Diamond says. "I won't be staying, but thank you, Mam. Won't be staying long at all."

Maria turns dark eyes to Hector and he frowns and jerks his head. The sooner Diamond leaves, the better. "Millard's an old friend. Wants to visit some with my wife."

"I am just about to feed her."

"Not right now." Hector immediately regrets the sharpness in his tone, knowing Maria will give him an earful later. But he'll deal with that when it comes.

Maria's black hair is woven into a long pigtail. Her white T-shirt sags with pendulous breasts. Her loose black slacks end in brown feet and thong sandals. She's much younger than Hector but she treats him like her son. If Hector could remember his mother he'd want to picture a woman like Maria.

He leads Diamond down the hall to the back bedroom, pausing at the door with his hand on the knob. Then decides the hell with it. The disheartening sickroom smell is all too familiar to Hector; he knows it must be a shock to Diamond, but his old boss doesn't hesitate, edging over to the bed with his hat in both hands, gazing down at the woman lying there, her body long and angular, her face as gaunt as Diamond's. Maria has bathed her and dressed her in a fresh baby blue gown, her favorite, with a silky blue ribbon at the throat. Her long white hair gleams

from a recent shampoo. Her eyes are shut, wrinkled lips parted slightly.

“Good Lord,” Diamond whispers and Hector feels a wrenching in his hidebound heart.

“You’re still lovely, Lorena. Still so lovely, my dear.”

Hector draws a sharp breath as his wife opens her eyes. With a creak of ancient joints Diamond eases to his knees on the carpeted floor, drops his hat beside his leg, takes one arthritic hand in both of his.

“Forgive me. Please, Lorena. Please forgive me. That’s all I ask. Forgive me and this ornery old bastard can go to his rest in peace.”

She gazes back at him for a long moment, until her parched lips shape a curious smile. A heartbreaking smile. Diamond tugs a monogrammed handkerchief from his hip pocket and tenderly wipes away a gob of drool. A question seems to flicker in those bovine eyes and Hector tenses when Diamond can’t hold back a sob.

“Thank you, my dear. Oh, thank you so much for that, Lorena.”

Hector is relieved to see her eyes close again.

Diamond remains there a full minute longer. At last he gives her frail hand a final squeeze and places it carefully by her side. Picking up his hat, he grunts to his feet and shuffles to the door. Hector follows him into the living room.

“Nice meeting you,” Diamond says to Maria, touching his hat to his chest.

Outside, Diamond turns and sets his hat on his head. “You’re a good man, Heck. Always were. A good man. Guess you’d rather I didn’t drop in on you again this way.”

“Went better than I expected,” Hector says. “Reckon we’d best leave well enough

alone, though. Dredging up old pain is just hard on everyone concerned, don't you think?"

Diamond removes his glasses and wipes one eye with his thumb, then the other.

"Your car within walking distance? I can drive you."

"Main house. Went there first. They told me where to find you." Diamond replaces his glasses and flutters a little wave. "Thanks again, my friend. Thanks again."

Hector watches him toddle off down the driveway. When he turns back to the trailer, Maria is standing on the stoop, arms crossed over her breasts, eyeing him warily.

"How could you do that to that old man?"

Hector brushes past her on his way to the kitchen. Grabs a glass from the cabinet and fills it with well water from the tap.

"Lying is a sin."

"There are worse sins, Maria."

"You should know."

"Not now, please." He drains the glass with greedy gulps.

"He called her Lorena. Not Carol. You said nothing. The woman you killed—that was Lorena? Yes? How could you deceive him that way?"

Hector sets the empty glass down and turns to face her. "You expect me to tell him the truth? How me and Lorena brought out the worst in each other? How she did me the same as she did him? How one night I beat the woman he loved to death in a jealous drunken rage? With my bare fists? How I paid for it with ten years of my life? You honestly expect me to tell him that?"

With a shake of her head, Maria lowers her eyes.

“Anyway,” Hector says, “he knew.”

She looks up quickly. “*Que quieres decir?*”

“He knew it wasn’t her. Just didn’t want me to know he knew. Didn’t want me to know he knew I was conning him. The lie you want to believe is better than the truth you can’t bear to know.”

“I do not understand,” Maria says.

“You can’t bullshit a bullshitter, Maria.”

Crossing herself, Maria says, “I will feed her now.”

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