Chapter 2

Let’s Make a Deal

As the sound of Len’s siren echoed through the stone house at the rancheria which bordered the “Little Rez” on Los Reales Road, Linda Bluenight and her son, Matty, were locked in a minor battle of wills.

Linda was bent over her roll-top desk in the front corner of the living room, extracting student papers from a battered leather brief case. Mouser, the family’s calico cat who had never met a rodent he didn’t like, was sleeping soundly underneath. As she sorted through the hand-written essays with one hand, she brushed her shoulder-length mahogany-brown hair with the other. The light blue
denim jumpsuit she wore was loosely belted and comfortable even after a long day spent teaching her fourth grade students at San Xavier Mission School.

If she had turned to face the boy-come-man who was standing behind her, she could also have stolen a glance at San Xavier Mission Church and the village that surrounded it through the picture window that fronted the old house, but hoping to mask her frustration, she did not look up as she argued with him. “Look, Matthew, we’ve already had this conversation. I’d rather not see my only child spinning the roulette wheel at the tender age of seventeen, thanks anyway. Father Flynn offered you a job doing maintenance work for the parish. Why not take him up on it instead?”

“Because Father Flynn can only pay me minimum wage. I can do the same job at the casino and make three dollars an hour more, which is important since you won’t let me
put in as many hours as I want. You know as well as I do
I’ll be sweeping floors and carrying trash, not working the
tables. Don’t be so over-protective. I’m too old for that.”
There was an edge of anger in her son’s voice that made
Linda straighten up to face him. Over the last few weeks
he had become increasingly impatient and a bit moody
which was out of character for him. At first she had
attributed the changes to a growth spurt. Now she knew
better. Still, at five foot eight, she had become the
decidedly short member of the family.

“Sorry about that,” she apologized, looking up at
him with a small smile. “How did you get so tall anyway?
I’m just concerned that this is your senior year. I want you
to have time to enjoy it, and, remember, your grades need
to be upstairs if you want to get admitted to the
university.”

“Exactly, Mom! I need to save money if I’m going to live
in the dorms next year.” He started to add, “Or in an apartment with Peg.” Instead he blurted out, “I don’t intend to spend my college career in my room, no offense.” Then he continued his defense quickly before she could rebut. “Besides that, if you’d take a ride on my pony out there, you’d realize how much it needs an overhaul. The poor thing lurches and bucks like it has a burr in its blanket.” He pointed to the ancient pickup truck in the driveway. “And, you know, with Peg gone, I need to stay busy,” he concluded with a slight gag in his voice.

The boy’s obvious pain sent his mother to his side. Standing on her toes, she threw an arm around his shoulder. “Have you heard from her? Has she suffered any repercussions from the, ah, fall she took on Frog Mountain?” Linda shivered a bit, remembering how close they had come to losing her, and perhaps each other, last May.
“Oh, yeah, we e-mail each other every day. She’s completely recovered, thank God. That’s another reason I need to earn some cash, your phone bill’s gonna need some tweaking.”

His first serious girlfriend, Peg Grazia, had moved to California with her parents and her two younger sisters just last month. Peg’s dad had reluctantly accepted a job offer as a skilled mechanic in one of San Diego’s shipyards. His take home pay there would be far more than he could earn on the Rez or in the low wage work force of Tucson, even taking into account the California cost of living. Peg’s mother had insisted that she make the move with them rather than stay at San Xavier with her grandmother as Peg had begged to do. The family’s current plan was for her to complete her senior year there, and then come back for college at University of Arizona.

For the Grazia family it was a fine opportunity. For
the couple, it meant at least a year’s worth of long-distance relationship. Peg had left Matty and the only home she had ever known grim-faced and tearful. Matt had been devastated, but had vowed to wait. Linda had wondered.

At the moment though, she was preoccupied with her own family, and she steeled herself not to relent. She was convinced that a job at Sonoran Slots would distract Matty from the attention he would need to devote to the physics, advanced computer science, and Native Studies courses he’d chosen as senior electives, in addition to the standard requirements. Besides, her own mixed feelings about the tribe’s wholehearted plunge into gaming made her distinctly uncomfortable about any direct involvement by her little household.

For his part, Matty was equally determined not to give up on the idea. Looking into his face, she noticed again that his almond-colored eyes were mirrors of her own, and
that his hair was the same color. She did not often regret being a single parent, as if there had been any choice. Her fiancé’s death before Matty’s birth had made the decision for her. There was an occasional moment though, just now and then, when she felt she could have used a backup. This was one of them.

“All rightie, then, let’s talk compromise,” she relented with a sigh. “Ten hours a week, early mornings and weekends, no week nights.”

“Twelve hours, and no nagging about homework.”

“Done!” Linda gave him a big “SWAK” to close the deal that made him grimace and grin at the same time.

“Now, let me grade these papers before you make me give myself a demerit. Weren’t you going to put that shutter back up for me?”

A wind storm the week before had blown off one of the old wooden shutters outside her bedroom window. It had
come down with a crash that sent Mouser flying from his nest at the foot of her bed, but somehow it had survived the fall undamaged as had the rest of the house for nearly a hundred years.

“I’m on it,” said Matty, heading for the shed behind the kitchen to fetch the step-ladder.

Linda went to the kitchen, opened the ancient refrigerator, and poured herself a glass of sun tea from the giant jug decorated with butterflies. Then she retreated once again to the roll-top.

Picking up a green pen rather than the standard red ink most teachers used for correcting papers, she started through the stack. Green was the color of hope, she had told her students. The topic she had assigned for these short essays was the tried and true, “What I Did On My Summer Vacation,” but these students’ stories of their summer exploits were anything but routine.
Little Lillian had taken a new name, “One Star.” Her essay described the night she slept outside in the family hammock with her little sister. She had fallen asleep looking at the constellations and awakened the next morning with a new understanding of the “Sky People.”

Dominic Valentino had gone javelina-hunting with his older brothers. The wild pigs of the desert roamed the reservation at night in small packs and had become a nuisance in Dominic’s area where they were turning over trash cans and digging up the precious gardens so carefully tended by families like his. Carlos and Bobby used buckshot to bring down most of the animals in the group that had been plaguing their parents. In the wild, the adults seldom weighed more than twenty pounds, so they had carried the carcasses back home where their father butchered them for a barbecue feast the next day.

Linda smiled and looked up and out over the broad
fields toward the village. A rosy-throated hummingbird hovered over the feeder she had placed in the fast-maturing orange tree she had planted in the front yard several years ago. She picked up the remaining papers and went to sit on the porch swing to watch it.

She had hardly noticed the now faded blaring of the police siren. Had she known what was causing Lieutenant Rodriguez’ sound equipment to scream like the girl in the movie, Matty’s victory would have been short-lived.