

Miguel de la Cruz

The Rancher

AS MIGUEL DE LA CRUZ PULLED UP to the Arkham General Store, he saw an old lady struggling to lift a heavy sack into the open trunk of her sedan. Frowning, he whipped his truck into a parking spot and hurried over to help her.

“Ma’am, please, allow me,” he said, speaking with slow deliberation. He’d found that it helped the good folk of Arkham understand him despite his accent.

She released the bag with a grateful sigh, allowing the weight to settle into his arms. Twenty pounds of potting soil was no problem for the likes of him, but he couldn’t believe she’d tried to lift it herself. The woman was gray-haired and bird-boned. It was a wonder she hadn’t fallen over.

“Thank you, my boy,” she said, pushing her cat-eye glasses up onto her nose.

“Don’t mention it.”

He set the sack in the trunk and made quick work of the other two on the trolley. It only took a few seconds. Once it was done, he pulled a bandana from his back pocket, wiping off his hands.

“Bless you,” said the old lady, thrusting her hand out with a determined expression. “Ethel Strawbridge, at your service.”

“Miguel de la Cruz.” They shook. “My pleasure. What happened to the shop boy? He should have loaded this for you.”

She snorted. “Normally he would have, but the oaf knocked over an entire stack of birdseed. If I had to wait until he cleaned that mess up, I’d probably be dead. Good thing you came along, or I would have had to scoop my garden soil into the car one handful at a time.”

“Happy to help. You have a good day, ma’am,” he said, doffing his hat.

“Wait just a tick, now,” she said, grabbing his arm. “Are you the fellow who took over the old Wilbur place?”

“Yes, señora,” he said cautiously.

Her mouth stretched in a wide smile.

“Why, then, we’re neighbors!” she exclaimed. “I’m just up the hill from you in the yellow house. We used

to keep horses, back when my Floyd was alive. It does my heart good to see yours out to pasture every day, although I can’t imagine how you run such a big place by yourself. A rancher needs a family to help share that load. Lord only knows that Floyd would have burned the place down if he hadn’t had me to keep him on the straight and narrow. That man would have lost his head if I hadn’t pointed out it was still on his shoulders.”

Miguel chuckled, but Ethel didn’t even pause. She seemed like quite a talker.

“We can set you up with a nice Arkham girl,” she said. “I’ve got a granddaughter you might like. She’s got a real way with animals, and she bakes a mean apple pie.”

“That’s kind of you,” he replied, “but I’m married. My husband and daughter will join me here as soon as they can. They’re back home in Argentina, winding things up there.”

“Oh!” She beamed. “Well, I look forward to meeting them. I’ll have to have you all over for dinner when they arrive.”

“That’s kind of you, but—”

“I don’t have much company, you know. Not since Floyd died. But I’m used to cooking for crowds. When our ranch was running, we had a full table during the warm months. We used to hire out our horses, you see. And we had stable hands every year...”

She kept prattling on, and Miguel began to wonder if he was ever going to make his escape. Then a few wet drops pattered down onto his hat. He tilted his head back, peering skeptically at the sky. When he’d left the ranch, the sky had been blue and clear, but now heavy clouds blotted out the sun. How long had she been chattering at him?

“Miss Ethel,” he said, cutting off a long exploration of the best types of pie to feed a crowd, “I’d better hustle. My horses are still out to pasture, and it looks like we’ve got a real good storm blowing in. I’d better get back home and put them inside just in case there’s lightning.”



"A storm?" she blinked, squinting up at the sky. "Well, would you look at that?"

Another burst of fitful rain pattered the ground.

"I didn't realize it was supposed to rain today or I wouldn't have left them out," he observed. "I've never seen a storm move in so fast."

She pursed her lips.

"My boy, this is Arkham. The usual rules don't apply here," she said. He opened his mouth to inquire what on earth she meant, but she waved him down before he could speak. "You get on home and see to your animals. We'll continue our chat later."



WHEN MIGUEL DROVE DOWN THE HILL toward his ranch, he often found a few of his horses standing at the stone wall that bordered the property. Maravilla and Perla, his two most personable mares, would wait there for hours until he returned, and they were usually joined by assorted pigs, chickens, and other livestock. He'd always taken it as a sign that he was doing something right. After all, his animals wouldn't miss him if he treated them poorly.

But nothing prepared him for the sight that awaited him as he crested the hill past Miss Ethel's house.

All twenty of his horses waited along the stone fence. Normally, he

could just see their heads poking up above the four-foot barrier, but not today. The entire herd had their front hooves up on the wall like eager dogs awaiting their owner's return. He'd never seen such odd equine behavior. It shifted most of their considerable weight onto their back hooves; it couldn't have been comfortable. They wouldn't stand like that without good reason, but they couldn't miss him *that* much. Perhaps they sensed the oncoming storm. Animals were much more sensitive about such things; he'd been right to rush home.

He parked the truck as another burst of rain spattered the windshield, zipping up his coat as he slid out of the passenger seat. The wind whipped at his face, almost tearing his hat off his head before he clapped a hand down atop it.

As he hurried toward the gate, the horses stared at him, motionless like statues. Their tails were still, ears flat back against their heads. He didn't understand it, and he definitely didn't like it. He threw open the gate and reached out to Maravilla, who stood the closest to him.

As soon as his hand touched her warm flank, she unfroze, screaming in equine panic. He'd heard such sounds before – when he was a boy, his first horse had been bitten by a snake. Cuco had screamed just like that. For a long time, the sound had haunted his dreams.

She pushed off the wall, landing on the ground with a thump. One by one, the others joined her, crying out in agitation. Something had frightened them badly. Had one of the herd been hurt – or worse yet, killed?

He tried to take a head count, but they were circling him frantically, and he kept coming up with one more horse than he owned – twenty-one instead of twenty – and that made no sense at all. After the third try, he gave up. The rain was growing steady now, and the sky had turned a sickly yellow. Green skies meant funnel clouds. He didn't want to know what the yellow ones meant.

He led the frantic animals toward the stables, but they shied away from the



door. No matter how much he begged, they refused to enter until he fetched Cortez, his herding dog. His frantic barks finally got the herd inside and the door barred behind them.

The whole situation had been very odd, but there was no time to dwell on it. Miguel rushed across the field to the chicken coop as the yellow sky began to spit out hail.



THE STORM RAGED ALL NIGHT, AND Miguel rose bright and early the next day to survey the damage. He opened the front door to see a large branch down off the maple in his front yard. It had just missed his truck. That was a lucky break.

Normally, he started his mornings with the chickens, but the horses had been acting so oddly that he decided to see to them first. He plodded across the field, muck boots sinking into the soft earth. Debris littered the ground: twigs, a broken shingle, a torn feed bag. Was the weather here always this awful? Between this squall and the giant storm that had hit shortly before he'd moved in, he was beginning to worry. Perhaps Ethel had been right. The usual rules did not apply here in Arkham. He did not like that one bit.

But that was nothing compared to how he felt when he saw the stable door hanging wide open. The heavy bar sat discarded nearby, the soft ground around it churned by hoof prints.

He stuck his head inside to see if any of the herd remained and recoiled. The metallic scent of blood hit him with a slap. The stable walls were coated with drying streaks, and in the corner was a sizable puddle that glistened in the light. His throat went dry. He'd cleaned up after a few coyote attacks, but none of them had been remotely this violent. What on earth had happened here?

"Madre de dios," he muttered, crossing himself.

He took a single step inside before freezing, eyes locked on the ground. This mystery predator must have left tracks. Once he identified it, he would know what to do. Over years of chasing down stray animals, he'd become quite a good tracker. But he couldn't find anything. Between the panicked

stomping of his horses and all of that blood, any clues had been obliterated.

Heart thumping, he grabbed his rifle and set off to find the herd with Cortez at his heels. The dog was normally excitable in the mornings, but today he was all business: nose and tail down as he weaved back and forth over the scent trail. It led them up and over the slope behind the stables and through the stand of trees beyond. Miguel followed, weapon clutched in sweating hands, jumping at every sound. The butchery in the stables had shaken him more than he wanted to admit. His horses might be hurt – or worse – and he could not rest until he'd found them and offered whatever aid he could. They were more than just his livelihood; they were family.

They found the herd on the far end of the north pasture, crammed into a defensive circle. Normally, they



would come running toward him, nosing at his pockets for apples or sugar cubes. But they didn't even budge.

Cortez let out a sharp warning bark and took off, circling the herd and calling out a warning. Miguel lifted his rifle, eyes scanning the area for predators. But he saw nothing.

As he approached, he kept glancing down at the ground, hoping to spot something helpful. When he finally spotted the tracks, they stopped him cold. He'd never seen anything like them. The creature had four footpads laid out in equal quadrants, heavy gouges suggesting thick claws. Based on the pattern of the tracks, the creature appeared to be bipedal. He tried to imagine what sort of animal would have such odd feet but came up empty.

Where had it gone? The tracks led into the churned ground around the frightened horses. He followed the trail as it emerged on the far side of the field. But just before it plunged into the trees, the odd prints were replaced by a set of hoof prints. It was like some heavenly hand had plucked up the strange predator and plopped down a horse in its place.

He stared at the prints for a long moment, trying to make sense of them. But nothing about this situation made sense. Reluctantly, he turned back to the herd, counting their heads. Twenty this time. A frightened voice in the back of his mind whispered ridiculous fears – that he hadn't counted poorly last night, that some strange shape-changing thing had been right in front of him, and he hadn't realized it. When he was a kid, his cousins had told him stories of the Hombre Gato, which was sometimes a cat and sometimes something else. Something hungry and vicious. Could that malevolent beast be here now, so far from his home? But none of his horses were missing. What had died?

He didn't know. But Maravilla nosed at his pocket for sugar cubes, and hopefully that meant his precious animals would be okay. He led them back to the farm to keep an eye on them while he cleaned out the stables. But he kept a firm grip on his rifle the entire time.

Something told him he would be carrying it with him for a while, just in case. Perhaps he would take it with him to Ethel's house, to see what she knew.

