

# Sacrifice

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

## SACRIFICE

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**"Quiet and sneaky is fine if you're thinking like a thief. Thieves find entrances, but grifters? Uh-uh. We make them." - Leverage**

The faint smell of rotten eggs hung in the air. It was the smell of money coming from the El Paso natural gas refinery towering above the horizon. Roberta wrinkled her nose at the aroma. "Three years and I still don't have enough." She touched the button to roll up the windows against the smell. Instead she opened her mouth and breathed in the pleasant, dry air. May was the last month before the desert became a furnace blasting air hotter than the surface of the sun.

Run-down neighborhoods of the lower valley flashed by Roberta's open window. She jerked the steering wheel and made a quick right into the Carolina Senior Residential Home. A worn-brick wall separated the parking lot from two rows of one-room apartments facing the driveway leading into the Home. Roberta slowed her car and crawled past the building marked "Office" on her left. She gave a hand signal to the elderly man staring at her from behind a large picture window. The old man, his face swallowed up by dark-rimmed glasses, dismissed her with a wave.

It was lunchtime at the Home. The elderly—in various stages of infirmity—hobbled across the driveway with the help of walkers, canes, or the arm of a loved one. Roberta tapped the steering wheel. "I never, ever want to get that old." The elderly parading past her, resigned to their fate, never looked up from the all-consuming task of getting from point A to point B.

At the end of the driveway, a man leaned out of the last apartment and lifted his hand. A full head of dull, black hair

made him stand out from the crowd. Roberta knew Chewy wasn't excited to see her. It might have something to do with her being the boss's daughter. Or maybe he didn't care. There was no sparkle in his features. He never mentioned family or dreams or plans.

"Come on." Roberta willed the last old woman to hurry across the driveway. Time is money and her life, her real life, couldn't begin until she had enough. Roberta hoped Chewy would give her the job she needed. The job that would solidify the plan bouncing around in her head. The job that would set her free.

When she entered the bedroom-slash-living room, Chewy handed her a cell phone, his voice animated. "There's a big shipment coming across and we need new stash houses. The plan is to work with a car dealership. Details are on the phone."

She'd worked with him for three years, and this was the first time he seemed on edge. "Something special about this job?"

Chewy moved between her and the door. "Not for you."

Roberta cringed. He wouldn't dare touch her because of who she was, but losing a pound of flesh would be better than what was coming next.

Roberta tapped her fingers against her thigh. Her restless fingers the only sign the bars of her private cage were closing in on her. She should have known. Should have planned. Roberta balled up her fists so hard her knuckles cracked. How the hell could she have planned for a double-crossing, back-stabbing, dull-witted, stinking maintenance man to have a clue to what she pulled off—correction—almost pulled off two years ago?

"Relax," she chanted to herself. There's nothing to do but move forward. There was no way Chewy was getting a cut of this action. She knocked a second time, and the door flew open.

A man with a slight build and boyish face posed in front of her. "You must be Roberta! Let me look at you."

Roberta smiled and turned side to side. Her plan was going to require a lot of acting. Good thing she minored in theater at the University. An actor is basically a professional liar, and with her line of work, it was more useful than her major in accounting.

She held up the phone and wiggled it back and forth. "And you're Jesus?"

"The one and only." Jesus shepherded Roberta into his tiny apartment. "This job is going to be easy peasy. It might even be fun." While Jesus droned on about the details, Roberta noticed his eyes. They were shiny, alert and expressive like her father's eyes.

For two years, Roberta skimmed money off the top of her father's business. Matteo Guerra was a high-level leader of the Juarez Cartel. She was proud, like only a child can be, of getting one over on a parent, until her father asked to meet at an abandoned house on the outskirts of Juarez, Mexico. Roberta watched in horror as her father broke random bones of a man tied to a chair. Her father's shiny, expressive eyes letting Roberta know this was the only time he would let another person pay for his daughter's mistakes. The broken man's screams of innocence still echoed in her ears.

"Are you okay?" Jesus asked.

Roberta blinked the memory away. "Fine." Everything would work out; she just had to keep moving forward.

"Here's the list of dealerships. You've got to pick a mark."

"There isn't someone already on the inside?"

"Not this time, honey. People are jumpy lately with all the trouble in Juarez. They want new faces."

With the list of dealerships safely in her purse, Roberta noticed the apartment for the first time. It was immaculate. The place smelled good, like fresh-cut limes. "You have a nice place here."

"Thanks. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Sure. Tea would be great."

The apartment was so small Jesus crossed to the kitchen in a handful of steps. The refrigerator opened and closed. Ice clinked into glasses while he spoke, "This is our first time working together. You're the boss man's daughter so do I need to handle you with care, *las burlas se vuelven veras?*"

Roberta's eyebrows rose. Straight-forward talk was refreshing to hear. "You're not going to offend me. I'm sure my father thinks I can handle myself. Have you worked with Chewy before?"

"Eh! He's a bit dull, isn't he? I just know him from shuffling contacts back and forth. How did he get that job?"

"No idea." And she had no idea how someone so outwardly dull found out about her skimming money from the Guerro family business.

Jesus returned with two glasses and set them down on the ornate coffee table. It gleamed like it was dusted several times a day. "Father? Not daddy, *papa, papi*. You two aren't that close?"

The cold sweet tea clung to the back of her throat. "*Cada gallo canta en su muladar.*"

Jesus perched like a bird on the other side of the couch and let out a peal of laughter. He fixed her with those glittering eyes. "Right, to each his own. I can only guess what he must be like to deal with on a daily basis. My family wasn't very supportive. It does free you up to do whatever you damn well please. Takes the pressure off, really."

Roberta's face puckered unsure how to respond. She felt plenty of pressure and not at all free.

"So what's your plan?"

"Mande?" Roberta swallowed hard. "What?"

"Oh, come on: no one does this for a living. There's always an escape plan."

Tension froze Roberta for a second.

"Relax," Jesus giggled like a teenager. "I have a plan. I work at the fancy cafe downtown. All these suits—lawyers, government types—eat, drink and tip well. Then I have a night job working at the club downtown. Pull down a couple more of these jobs and then . . ." He swooped his arm out in front of him. "Brazil. Live and let live."

Roberta's eyes clouded over. Her father had forced her into this particularly crappy corner, but that didn't mean she couldn't change. A world was out there that had nothing to do with drugs. "I'd go to Argentina. Learn to tango."

Jesus gave a slight squeal. "That sounds good too. If I had more time, I'd fix you a caipirinha. Heaven in a glass. We're going to get along I can tell. I hate to rush you off, but I have to get ready for my day job."

"No problem." Roberta's face warmed with a determined smile. She didn't need to wait for the right job to come along. She needed to make this job the right one.

Jesus showed Roberta to the door and winked. "I hope the salesman's handsome."

Roberta assured Jesus, "He'll be perfect."

**"The speed of the leader is the speed of the gang." -  
Mary Kay Ash**

Live for God. Live for your mother. Die for your gang. In that order.

Duke eyed the group in front of him through dark-tinted sunglasses. A bandanna hid the rest of his face from view. With a slight nod, the circle of men closed in on a twelve-year-old boy in the middle of the circle. A moment later the Chaneco gang sprang forward, and a flurry of punches and kicks rained down.

The boy warded off the first few blows and even tried to throw a couple of punches, but the volley coming at him from all sides sent him to the ground. The boy's thin arms wrapped around his head as the men drew back and kicked him or knelt down to drive a punch into the boy's side.

As Duke watched the thirteen-second "jump in," he paraphrased a quote from one of his favorite movies: Grab a hot pan, second can seem like an hour. Grab a hot woman, an hour can seem like a second.

Rooster, his second-in-command, sprang into the middle of the group laughing. He dragged the crying twelve-year-old to his feet. The circle of men loosened up, and one by one, they came forward to clap the boy on the back and give him light punches on the chin.

The twelve-year-old tried to smile as Rooster angled the boy in front of Duke. Duke let his eyes trail up and down the boy, sizing him up. He gave a final nod and turned away. The group broke up cheering. Once inside the gang's hangout someone would hand him ice for his face and a shot of tequila to erase the pain from the beating.

Live for God. Live for your mother. Die for your gang.

Duke knew this phrase would be repeated by the other gang members until it became the answer to all the recruit's questions. They would reassure the boy, telling him how much money he'd make, how much respect he would command, how great his life would be now as part of the Chaneco gang.

Duke pulled the bandanna down to his neck. His hand-picked inner circle surrounded him: Rooster, bald except for a thin ribbon of hair down the middle. Scooby, bouncing along to a rhythm all his own. Nectar, who loved oranges and always had one in his hand, tossing it up and down like a baseball.

"Duke?" Scooby hopped in front of him.

Duke lifted his chin to indicate Scooby could continue. Even with his inner circle, Duke rarely spoke. He preferred to communicate through facial expressions, head motions and hand signals unique to the gang. He felt it added to his aura of power and control over the group. When he did speak, the normal chaotic sounds of the street fell silent to listen.

"It's your abuelita. She's in the hospital."

Still silent, Duke continued forward. His entourage jogged past him to a black SUV. Rooster opened the door for him. Nectar climbed in behind the wheel, and they squealed away from the curb.

Fluorescent lights burned down from above and illuminated every corner of the room. Duke leaned over and kissed his abuela's soft forehead. Her eyelids fluttered the way moth wings danced under a light. Her mouth folded in on itself with deep wrinkles.

"Who took out her dentures?" Duke asked. He knew his great-grandmother never let anyone see her without them.

No one answered. Duke leveled a stare at Rooster when a fluttering hand landed on his arm. "It's okay, mijo. They hurt," Maria said. His great-grandmother was awake.

Duke faced Maria, his great-grandmother on his father's side, and smoothed the white hair back from her face. "Why didn't you tell me, Mama? I would have gotten them fixed."

Maria nodded and patted Duke's hand. Her eyes closed. Duke waited until she took several deep breaths, and then left the room. Fluorescent lights illuminated the hard-tiled floors, and sturdy walls framed the hallway. No windows let in the outdoors. They could very well be six feet under.

Several hours later Duke sat in a huddle with Rooster and Scooby, watching over his great-grandmother. They had pushed the other bed against the far wall to make more room. Nectar was in charge of Chaneco until Duke returned.

Duke kept his voice low so as not to wake his great-grandmother. "You've all done well getting our numbers up and now it's time to make our move. The Sinaloa Cartel is making a move to control the border towns. This means the Juarez Cartel is going down."

Rooster nodded in agreement.

"Exactamente, and I need the Juarez Cartel's runners gone too. We clean house first. Then the heads of La Familia, El Barrio, and La Linea in El Paso have to come through Chaneco to run their product."

Scooby looked back and forth between Rooster and Duke. "Are you sure this is a good idea? What makes you so certain the Juarez Cartel is done? They blew up a Federale vehicle in Juarez just a couple of weeks ago."

"They're desperate. Sinaloa has been dumping bags of severed heads in the Juarez-controlled plazas for months now. Juarez had to do something big to save face, but it's too late." Duke leaned toward Scooby, pinning him with his eyes. "We show Sinaloa we mean business by grabbing power on this side now. When we

succeed, not only does the El Paso side have to run their product through us but so does Mexico."

Scooby's knee bobbed up and down. "This is big. What do we do?"

"All we have to do is hunt down some runners. Grab just enough territory to become the biggest, baddest gang this side of the border." Duke leaned back, satisfied.

Duke's great-grandmother moaned behind him. Duke stood up. "Get it done and quickly. Send me Flaco and Gordo while you're gone. My family will be here soon."

**"Like you're in the showroom, about to either buy that car or walk out, and there's the salesman saying, 'What do I have to say to get you in this car?'" - Bill Maher**

"Having this much power over people is scary." Luis stood at the top of the stairs, the glass wall of the car dealership at his back surveying his territory. The dealership was small but he grossed more than any other salesman on the lot and one month more than anyone in three lots combined. Luis was always in control and always held the power and always closed the deal. On his right, the other salesmen stood around getting themselves revved up for the day with jokes and pranks. Luis listened while he scanned the lot for customers.

"Rick, we're going to start calling you Boomerang."

"Why?"

"Because last month, every time you sold a car, it came right back."

Rick hung his head. "Yeah. That happened a couple of times."

"Who sent Jose for the key stretcher last week?" Melvin asked.

Rick chuckled. "That would be me. I made him open the box from the other dealership, and they'd filled it full of trash."

Laughter rang out.

"Jose asked me the other day if there were four quarters in a year. I told him if you do the math right, there's three thirds too," Melvin said.

"Hey, Jose got me back though," said Rick. "He said one hundred and sixty was a significant number for him and me. I asked why and he said it's your weight and my IQ."

"Aye way!" said Melvin.

Rick nudged Melvin. "Watch this," he said. "Hey Luis!"

Luis turned toward the group. "Yeah."

"I need your help."

"With what?" Luis's voice was cautious.

Rick held up a black, rectangular cube. "You sell a crap ton of these cars. How do you work the key?"

Luis walked toward Rick with his hand held out. "Let me see." It looked like the new car keys where the key part was tucked inside the black cube. It slid out with the push of a button. He took the key from Rick and indicated the button with his thumb. "It's this button here—" Luis depressed it and then opened his hand with a jerk. "Fu-cker!"

Hearty laughter rang out. Several people gave Rick high-fives. "Damn, Luis. I didn't think I was going to catch you with that one!"

Luis chuckled. "What the hell?" He bent over and scooped up the "key."

"It's an updated version of the hand-buzzer. I had to grab it because it looks just like the new keys for the 2010 models."

"No shit." Luis turned it end over end. It did look just like the new keys.

Rick held out his hand. Luis slipped the hand-buzzer into his pocket. "It's mine now, bitch." Laughter followed as Luis walked back to his spot.

The rookie car salesman Luis was supposed to be training, Jorge, approached his face sagging in disappointment. "He won't test-drive the car."

Luis frowned. "Why?"

"It doesn't have a car seat."

"How did they get their kid here?"

"He doesn't want to move the car seat."

Luis fought the urge to slap Jorge in the back of the head. "Move it for him."

"That won't work, bro."

"You want me to do it?"

"I already asked."

Luis brushed passed him. "You never ask. You tell." Smoothing his face into a pleasurable mask, Luis walked toward the family still standing around their car.

Rookies. They burned through ups. It was hard to find people cut out for this kind of work. The hours for one. Second, this was straight commission. If you weren't on the lot to sell, you didn't make any money. For every three they hired, two quit within the first couple of weeks and the third a couple of months later.

Luis's sales manager, Arturo, had given him the best advice: just focus on selling cars; the rest will come. It became his mantra during his first year, and now Luis was top dog and known for being a grosser. Luis didn't sell many cars, but he made money on the ones he did sell. The trick was to never lose control of the customer.

The couple eyed him as he approached. Luis introduced himself, leaned into the car and unsnapped the seat belt holding the child seat in place. "Let's take that test-drive."

When Luis entered the dealership, he told Jorge, "Fill out the folder."

"You closed them?"

Luis shot him an exasperated look as he walked toward Arturo at the center counter. God, how he hated rookies. Especially ones who wouldn't or couldn't learn.

Arturo grinned. "You know when's the best time to sell a car?"

Luis parroted back the answer Arturo had trained him to say. "Right after you've sold one."

Arturo pointed to a woman standing at the maintenance desk. Her back was to them. Long, luxurious, black hair hung down past her shoulders. Jeans framed her hips and a juicy backside.

"But I like my car," the woman said after Luis approached her. "I just came here to get an oil change."

"What do you like about your car?" Luis said, noting with satisfaction that the front view looked as good as the back.

"The power. I'm an adrenaline junkie. I like being noticed."

A bell went off in Luis's head. Got cha. "My name's Luis."

"Roberta. My friends call me Berta."

"Ever seen a Mopar?"

"No, I haven't."

"While you're waiting, come take a look at this car." Luis led her inside to the showroom floor. "This is a Mopar edition. It's badged." To answer her quizzical look, he continued, "That means it has a number. Only so many are made and sold in the U.S." He pointed inside at the gearshift. "See here. This is number thirty-one."

"Wow."

"Go ahead. Have a seat. Check it out."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'll be right back." Luis took his time grabbing the keys to the Mopar. He leaned in the driver's side window. "It's nice, huh?"

"Oh yeah."

Luis held out the keys. "Take it for a drive."

Roberta's laugh made her eyes twinkle. "I can't afford this."

"Just enjoy it. This beauty got in here yesterday. I'd love to sell it though . . ." Luis pretended to admire the car for a few seconds.

"How much do you owe on your car?"

"I'm not sure."

"Tell you what. Let's take this for a spin—see if you like it, and when we get back, I'll find out what I can do for you."

She pursed her lips. "I appreciate it, but I'm supposed to pick up my friend."

"I understand. Give me an hour to run some numbers. With your car as a trade, I could make you a great deal on this."

Roberta rubbed her hands over the steering wheel. "You've got one hour."

Three hours later, Roberta sat across from Luis in his office, her feet tucked underneath the chair.

Luis used a pen to indicate the different amounts on the paper. "This is for yours. This is for ours. This is your initial investment. This is your monthly contribution." Luis placed the pen next to the paper, sat back in his chair and waited.

This next part Luis loved the best. Whoever spoke first lost, and Luis never spoke first. It was all about control. When customers stood up yelling and threatening to leave, he just sat and waited. Nine times out of ten, the customer sat back down. Then Luis would lean in and finish them off.

Roberta studied the numbers. A manicured fingernail ran down the figures on the paper and stopped at the down payment. "I don't think I can come up with this much."

Luis leaned in and flipped the paper over. With a compassionate tone, he said, "What did you have in mind?"

Roberta laid her hand on his arm, touching him for the first time. Luis felt a tug from his groin all the way to his chest. He caught himself staring into her dark-brown eyes for a moment too long. Control, Luis. Stay in control. He knew he was making money on this deal.

Luis scrawled a figure on the paper keeping his head down as he asked, "If I can do this, you'll buy the car right now?" He dreaded getting caught up in her eyes again.

"Yes."

"Is seventy-two months okay?" Luis looked up.

"Sure." Roberta's smile felt like a sunbeam directed at him.

Luis paused a beat too long. "Great! Just sign here." He watched as she signed her name, Roberta Munoz, in full curvy letters like her figure. Damn it. Get this done and get her out of here. He snatched the paper off the desk and said over his shoulder, "Be right back."

At the main counter, Arturo exclaimed, "Aye way."

"Arturo, you know I'd full-pop my own mother. Work the numbers, bro."

Arturo's fingers flew over his computer keyboard.

Several minutes later, Luis asked, "Well, is it doable?"

"Yeah, it's doable." Arturo winked at Luis. "She's doable."

Luis rolled his eyes and returned to his office. "Great news—" Luis stopped. Roberta was gone. "Where'd she go?" he called out to no one in particular.

This is bullshit. In the last three days, Luis having a customer walk out on him had been the material for most of the jokes in the morning among the salesmen. Customers never walked out on him. Where had he gone wrong? He was intense but he worked hard at tuning his energy to match the customers'. Make them feel comfortable. Make them feel understood. He sold cars because he listened and responded. Gave his customers what they wanted. He groaned, letting his head fall back.

"Well, that's what they said." A short woman with a muffin top hanging over her jeans pouted.

He hadn't been paying attention to this customer. Well, she would be a customer if she wasn't being ridiculous. When the news droned on about the US being behind other countries in math and science, Luis believed it.

The woman in front of him insisted the other dealership could sell her the same car on Luis's lot for \$20,000 at \$200 month. Luis was tired of her. "Ma'am, it's impossible."

"I don't see why you can't do it if they can."

"I'm sure the dealership told you that to get you over there, but I'm not going to lie to you. It is mathematically impossible." Luis pulled out his phone and opened the calculator app. "200 times seventy-two is . . . \$14,400. That's before tax, title and

license or interest is figured in." Luis looked into her eyes as they glazed over. "Are you going to put \$6000 down?"

"But they told me they could do it."

"Sounds like a great deal then." Luis ignored her. The woman stood there for a moment, perplexed. He wasn't going to waste any more time on her. "Have a nice day."

Arturo, his manager, stopped him as soon as he got close enough to the counter. "Why'd you walk her?" The rule was management never let you walk a customer. Luis earned some slack from being a senior sales rep, but on a slow day, he'd still get grilled.

"She had some crazy numbers. She wanted to pay \$20,000 total for that car."

"What?" Arturo shook his head. "Pero, but, where did she get the numbers?"

Luis reached his long arm out and grabbed a handful of air. Arturo shook his head as he tried not to laugh.

"The other dealership was just lying to get her in there," Luis said. "Let her drive the car for a couple of weeks and then they'll re-contract her with the real payment of \$400. You know how it is: by that time she'll have fallen in love with the car and be willing to pay anything to keep it."

"That sounds like a good plan."

"We don't do that shit and you know it. Causes more problems than sales."

"Heard from your hottie?" Arturo asked.

Luis threw up his hands. "Really? I have one customer walk out the whole time I've worked here and you guys give me hell."

Arturo slid a card across the counter. "Apparently she got over the fact you have a tiny dick."

"Fuck you." Prickly heat shot past Luis's collar. He picked up the card with a phone number on it and walked away before the blush burned his cheeks.

"I copied that number, so if you don't tap that, I will."

Luis flicked the card with his finger. "Again, fuck you. It's personal now."

Arturo laughed. "That's my boy."

**"If you're a gifted flirt, talking about the price of eggs will do as well as any other subject." Mignon McLaughlin**

Luis sat across from Berta at Smokey's BBQ. He had called Berta with every intention of stringing her along until he worked this fling out of his system.

"I couldn't afford the car," she explained.

"You could have just told me," Luis said.

"Really? I could tell the best salesman on the lot I just don't feel like buying a car today."

"Hell no. The only thing—and I mean the only thing—that stops me from making a sale is whether a person can buy or not. If you come on my lot, you're buying a car. I sold a car to a lady who just came in to use the bathroom once," Luis said.

"Why would anyone stop at a dealership to use the bathroom?"

"I know, right?" He took a swig of his drink. "Wait, how do you know I'm the best salesman?"

Roberta rolled her eyes. "There's like ten plaques on the wall of your office."

As the night progressed Luise found out, they both liked BBQ, James Bond movies, drove too fast and had the speeding tickets to prove it. Luis's resolve to just string Roberta along softened under her gaze, which was the color and warmth of hot chocolate. Roberta laughed at his stories. She even seemed interested in his job. He took a sip of his beer and said, "I like women just fine, but I don't want to marry one."

Berta shrugged and replied, "Marriage is overrated."

Luis was hooked.

Control.

A month and a half of dating Berta and that was all but gone. The frying-pan desert heat of the summer had its upside. Berta in spaghetti-strap dresses and tops. Berta in a bathing suit at the water slide amusement park. She kept her feet covered—no sandals or flip-flops—and one sweaty night, he'd found out why. The toes on her right foot were stunted with tiny, baby-sized toenails. When Berta noticed him looking, she slipped on ankle socks and dismissed it with the statement, "My mother liked to drink."

The slight deformity endeared Roberta even more to Luis. He went out of his way to tickle and massage her feet. She fought and one night spit out, "Leave it alone. It's a constant reminder of how screwed up my family is."

Tonight, the swamp cooler rattled as they lay on Luis's couch, a sitcom playing in the background. Berta had spent the last two days trying to talk him into his first vacation in years. "I don't want to argue with you. I argue with people all day," Luis said.

"Awww." Berta stroked the side of his face and rubbed the flat of her thumb over his lips. There was a sigh of cloth rubbing together as she nestled next to him. "It would be a nice trip. We would stay at a hotel with the hot springs and the Rio Grande right there. I looked it up on the Internet. I've always wanted to go, and it would be relaxing. You need to relax."

Luis reached down and tugged on her leg until she was straddling him. He pushed Berta's long, black hair from her face. "Are you trying to sell me?"

"You mean like you tried to sell me?" Berta finished the gesture by flipping all of her hair to one side.

Luis grinned as she settled across his lap. Why did she have to be a damn near perfect woman? Why hadn't he walked away already?

"Hey, mi amor." Berta flattened herself on top of him, resting her chin on his chest.

"Sure. I can ask for the time off." Luis drew Berta in and kissed her, his hands entangled in her thick, silky, black hair. It felt so good to be out of control.

Luis threw clothes in a suitcase.

This was the weekend he would decide whether he was going to take a chance on Berta or not. There was no one to discuss it with. He was the youngest in his family with three older siblings. His parents may have loved each other once, but by the time Luis was born, they floated around each other like soap bubbles that would burst if touched. The older siblings moved out of the house, married, had children, divorced, remarried. Luis thought that as soon as he left, his parents would fly apart. They surprised him by staying together—maybe out of habit.

At sixteen, he'd craved sex but also a real relationship. A possessive touch. Luis met and stayed with his high-school sweetheart until she told him she was transferring to a college on the east coast. He drove her to the airport and watched her board the plane. They agreed they'd keep in touch.

They didn't.

Luis had hinted to Berta several times since the first date at Smoky's BBQ that marriage was not for him. He didn't see the same reactions from Berta that other women had given him. Berta didn't flinch. Berta didn't get a look in her eye as if he'd just laid down a challenge. Berta didn't pout, feign being hurt.

Instead, Berta laughed. The warmth reflected in her eyes, her lips. She cared about him. Luis knew she did, and he would test that theory. After this weekend, they would return together or go their separate ways.

It was either now or start over. Chewy had been pushing Berta for two weeks to get on with it. Hinting he would take a bigger cut of her portion of the money if she waited longer. Idiot. What did he think—throwing herself at a man was all it took? Berta had talked with Jesus, leaving out the part about Chewy blackmailing her, and decided she was going to get a nice weekend out of it, no matter what Luis chose to do. And if it did work, Chewy would be dead before he squeezed one penny from her.

It was a two-hour drive up to the resort. The Franklin mountains rose up on their right for most of the way then flat brown desert opened up before them. Occasionally ribbons of green peeked through where the Rio Grande's water transformed the dead-looking land. There wasn't much else to do in the car but talk.

Berta took a deep breath. "You're not just a really good salesman Luis, you're a good businessman."

"Yeah, why do you say that?"

"No one earns that many plaques on their wall from being honest especially in the car business. If you're in business for yourself you need to know all the angles of how to get things done and make the most money with your product. You've nailed that."

Luis chuckled. "People look at me and say they trust me and I think to myself, 'You are a very poor judge of character.'"

"So if I haven't been completely honest with you it's just business, nothing personal."

Luis's eyebrows crinkled up in a knot as he shot her a sideways glance. "Okay."

"I make good money in my business."

"Jesus, you're not a prostitute. Are you a stripper?"

"No, they don't make this much money, pendejo, asshole."

Luis swallowed hard and his head lolled to look at her. "Drugas. Drugs."

Berta smiled. "It is a multi-million dollar business on the El Paso side. In the Juarez area alone it could be worth as much as \$60 billion. No one really knows since it's illegal."

"What do you do? Do you smuggle it across?"

"No, I work for La Linea on this side. You figure, one million dollars weighs a little over a hundred pounds and in twenty-dollar bills it would fill a bathroom. Now La Linea handles the largest amount of money and drugs coming into El Paso but that still puts means we need several bathrooms in use to hide just the money. But you can't just leave it there. It's not like the police aren't looking for it so it has to be moved, not only to keep from being caught but also it's paid out and changes hands. The only way to handle it is to split it up into runners like me. And hopefully you."

"In my bathroom?"

It was Berta's turn to chuckle. "No, we're always looking for new places to hold the drugs and money and you have access to one of the most popular ways."

"Yeah, the cars. I saw a news report where the border patrol said it was shorter to list the places they didn't hide drugs in a car then where they do."

"That's no lie. A good retrofitted drug car costs more than that Mopar you were trying to sell me."

Luis stayed quiet for a long time.

"So you weren't really interested in me, you just wanted my dealership?" he asked.

"I am interested in you—" Berta touched his arm. "And your dealership."

Luis flinched under her fingertips. "Why my dealership?"

"I looked at a lot of places. You've got the perfect setup. Your junk cars go to a back lot, and all your sales counters are

separated. Even from service." Berta touched his thigh. "I couldn't believe my luck."

"I don't believe in luck."

Berta laughed in appreciation. "Neither do I. You told me you're not looking to settle down or anything. We would be partners." Parroting Jesus, she said, "This could be fun."

Not taking his eyes off the road, Luis said, "I make enough money now to do what I want."

Berta knew Luis didn't need the money, and he didn't mind working. But he did want to be in control; most of all, he wanted to be a success.

"Luis." Berta drew close, her hand still stroking his thigh. "You want to retire when you're seventy by working six days a week, twelve hours a day? With the money I'm talking about, you could own a dealership. Be your own boss. I'm thinking within a year or two."

Berta let the matter drop, leaned back in the car seat and made herself comfortable. Now it was a waiting game to see what his answer would be. Once at the resort, they went out to dinner. They went dancing. They made love.

While soaking in the hot mineral springs, Berta pretended she was free from her father's business and living at the resort, cavorting with her new lover. Luis sat across from her, water dripping from the end of his nose. The water rippled as he scooped her up until her legs and arms encircled him.

"No."

Luis's answer startled Berta from her daydreams. "What?"

"When I was in high school, a friend of mine—he'd just gotten his driver's license—had the brilliant idea to make some quick money smuggling steroids from Juarez to El Paso. He had the perfect hiding spot, up under the dash of the car. We got to the border, the dogs took one whiff and went crazy. They pulled us over, handcuffed us to a table while Border Patrol tore apart the car."

"Of course you got caught. You didn't know what you were doing."

"They congratulated us for finding a good hiding spot and then threatened to take a blowtorch to it if we didn't tell them where the drugs were. My friend told the officers, figuring we were minors and they'd let us still drive away. They called our parents, impounded the car. He couldn't drive again until he turned eighteen and bought his own vehicle."

"You're not going to do the smuggling across the border. I told you La Linea has a system: those things come through on trucks and cars with special, hidden compartments. We manage it on this side. Much safer and easier."

Luis lowered his voice as another couple splashed into the hot springs pool next to them. "I don't see myself as a smuggler."

Berta stroked the back of his head with a forlorn smile. "I don't see you that way either." She pushed away from him. "I guess it's time for us to head back then."

**"ey ya ima a 18 yrresmen ive been ina gang i noe yall may thynk dat ima jus playin but i wat yall tah noe lyfe a a gangsta is not da lyfe i wanted . . . ." - Mariah**

Duke's grandfather, Armando de Salvo: his usual cheerful face filled with laugh lines around his mouth and eyes was smooth and somber as he opened the hospital room door. Duke left his great-grandmother's bedside to shake his hand.

"How is she?" Armando Senior asked.

"Resting," Duke said.

Armando Senior's eyes glanced sideways at the two, burly men standing guard. Flaco wasn't skinny and had earned his nickname because he rarely ate. Gordo wasn't fat but had earned his nickname because he never stopped eating.

"Who are they, Papi?" Armando Senior asked.

"Friends."

"Why do your friends always look like someone's holding a turd under their nose?"

Duke flashed a smile. "Because I smell, Abuelito." He knew the family wondered how he earned his money or why the DeSalvo's Auto Shop did so well. Everyone hinted, but no one came right out and confronted Duke.

A soft voice grunted in derision behind Armando Senior.

"Papa." Duke nodded at his father, Armando de Salvo Junior. Everyone called him Junior. Duke was Armando de Salvo the Third, but he used his gang nickname.

"Duke." His father was the exact opposite of his grandfather. Junior's face was quiet and somber. He wore thick glasses, and his dark, coffee bean eyes held Duke's for a moment before he relented.

They approached the bed. Maria de Salvo was the last woman holding these three men together. Duke's grandmother died of cancer when she was fifty. Duke's mother had disappeared one night coming home from work cleaning houses. She simply vanished after getting off the downtown bus.

Armando Senior and Junior stood near one side of the bed, dressed in identical, dark-blue mechanic uniforms. Armando patted Maria's shoulder as if she would shatter into pieces at the slightest touch, while Junior stuffed his hands deep in his front pockets.

"Mama," Armando Senior whispered.

There was a pause, and then Maria took a deep shuddering breath as if stepping back from the brink of a cliff. Her eyes shot open, startled.

Duke stepped forward. "Esta bien. Tu familia estan aqui. It's okay, your family is here." In the short time he'd been with her, Maria had reverted to speaking only Spanish.

Armando Senior took the cue and leaned closer. "Si, esta bien. No te mortifiques. Descansa y te vas a poder ir a la casa. Yes, don't worry. Rest and soon you'll be back home."

Maria's eyes barely registered her son and grandson. It was her great-grandson, Duke, that she responded to. Duke took pride in the fact that he was the one she counted on.

"Mira," Duke said. "Todo tu familia estan aqui. Look, your family is here."

Junior edged closer to the bed, hands still stuffed in his pockets.

Why couldn't he at least smile to comfort her? Duke walked over to the opposite side of the bed and leaned close. "Descansa, mi amor." He reached out and adjusted the oxygen tubes up against her nose and around her ears. "Te sientes mejor? Better?"

Maria gave a wistful smile, nodded and closed her eyes.

When Duke backed away from the bed, Armando Senior and Junior followed him to the door.

"What's wrong with her?" Armando Senior asked. Junior glanced back to where Maria lay.

"I don't know. The doctor should be here any minute."

At that moment a man clad in blue scrubs tried to breeze in through the doorway, and almost knocked all three men over. The guards took several steps forward to intercept the doctor. Duke signaled them back.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize all of you were here." The man in blue scrubs regained his composure and took a step back. "I'm Doctor Hernandez. Excuse me." He pushed past and went directly to Maria's bedside, his voice booming. "Hello, Maria! How are you feeling today?"

From across the room came low mumbling. The doctor switched to Spanish and continued asking questions about her general health while he pressed a stethoscope to her chest. Armando Senior and Junior took the opportunity to slip out of the room. Duke flicked his head to the guards, and they filed out of the room as well.

The doctor gave a final pat on her shoulder and said, "I'll see you again soon!" He hurried back to the door, saying, "There shouldn't be this many people—" He glanced from side to side. "Oh."

Duke stood in the doorway, blocking his exit. "What's wrong with her?"

"Let's step outside."

Duke stepped to the side to let the doctor pass and met up with everyone right around the corner.

Everything about this doctor was brisk, from his clipped tone of voice to the constant, small movements of his feet and hands. He had places to go, patients to attend to. "Are you all her family?" Everyone nodded, including the guards. The doctor hesitated at their bulk, and then turned to appeal to Armando Senior.

Duke stepped in, forcing his grandfather and father to step back. "What's wrong with her and how are you going to fix it?"

The doctor looked less than pleased about having to deal with Duke. "We found spots on her lungs."

"What are they?"

"We don't know yet; that will require more tests. At her age, I have to be honest: there isn't much we can do."

"Do you think it's cancer?"

"We won't know for a couple of days. Meanwhile, we'll keep treating her for the pneumonia. I'll be checking in on her between now and then." The doctor nodded in their general direction and then turned down the hall.

Duke walked back to his family and said, "Go back to the shop. I'll let you know what the doctor says."

Armando Senior drew him into a one-arm hug and patted him on the back. "You're a good boy. Thank you for looking after her." He paused as if he were going to say more; instead he lowered his head and shuffled down the hall.

His father moved into his line of sight. "Mijo. Son," he said, holding out his hand.

Duke's face became rigid as he shook his father's hand and watched him walk away.

Duke sat by his great-grandmother's bed and waited. He helped the nurses move and change her. He ate in the hospital cafeteria. On the second day, Maria sat up and asked for a hamburger and fries. Duke sent Flaco, one of his guards, to bring it.

Although he kept them informed of her progress, Duke's father and grandfather didn't return to the hospital. Duke understood after watching his grandmother turn into a bloated toad. No one would want their last memory of a loved one to be as a freak of disease and medication.

The brisk, always-in-a-hurry doctor returned to give Duke the results of the tests. The doctor's face took on a practiced expression of compassion. "I'm afraid it's not good. The cancer isn't just in her lungs—we've found signs that it has spread to her pancreas and possibly other internal organs. We could do exploratory surgery, but I'm not sure putting her through that stress at her age would help. Rather, it would confirm what we already know."

Duke searched his backbone for strength. He tightened the muscles in his thighs until they ached. He knew this was coming, but hearing the diagnosis of death made it real.

Doctor Hernandez did an almost imperceptible dance in front of him. He was already on to the next patient. One he would possibly help.

"How long?" Duke's voice sounded far away to his own ears.

"It's hard to say. A month. Maybe three. I'm going to put in a transfer to Trans-Mountain General. It's a hospital that specializes in assisted nursing. We will make her comfortable. I've already ordered a morphine drip."

Duke's arms and hands flexed. He wanted to beat the messenger.

The doctor's face grew puzzled at the sudden tension, and he took a step back. "We need to tell her."

"Not tonight." Duke spun around, his gait stiff and measured as he returned to his great-grandmother's bedside.

The following day, when Duke, along with the doctor, explained the diagnosis to Maria de Salvo, she covered her face with her hands. Tears ran through the valleys of her cheeks and dripped off her chin and rolled along her neck, forming a small puddle at the base.

Maria's shoulders shuddered now and then, but she was silent. She refused to uncover her face, mumbling repeatedly through her fingers that she wanted a priest.

Father Eugenio entered the room, wearing solid-black clothing with a small patch of white showing in the front of his collar. "I'm Father Eugenio, the chaplain for this hospital."

Duke gave him a hard stare and sat in silence.

Maria whispered to Father Eugenio, and he approached Duke. "Please, excuse us. She would like to have confession."

What could she possibly have to confess? Duke lowered his eyelids to keep from rolling his eyes.

When Duke didn't move, Father Eugenio took hold of his arm, and completely unfazed by the hulking masses of Flaco and Gordo, ushered them all outside. He closed the hospital door in Duke's face.

An hour later Father Eugenio emerged from the room with an implacable look of satisfaction. "She's resting now. How are you doing?"

Duke didn't answer and forced his way back into his great-grandmother's room. He hated anyone he couldn't intimidate. When Duke entered, Maria was sitting up. Calm but tired from crying. She managed a couple of sips of water from the cup Duke held to her lips, and then lay down. Her breathing became slow and deep. Duke stood up to leave when she spoke. "Armando, tomorrow I need to talk with you." She hadn't called him by his first name in years. He wanted to ask her why, but she turned her head away and closed her eyes.

**"The salesman knows nothing of what he is selling  
save that he is charging a great deal too much for it."  
- Oscar Wilde**

The drive back from the resort had been quiet with unspoken disappointment. Luis told himself over and over that he'd prepared himself to break this off. He hadn't been prepared for Berta being a drug smuggler. Didn't see that coming. As soon as he'd dropped her off, the thrill of feeling alive again that had coursed through him these past few months with her turned to sludge in his veins.

Luis returned to the dealership. Dealing with strokers and roaches. Strokers apparently made a hobby of visiting car lots and wasting hours of his time test-driving cars, but never buying. Roaches couldn't afford to pay attention, let alone buy a car.

A couple hours after working with his current customer, he approached Arturo with the news. "He doesn't want to pay more than \$25,000."

Arturo's brows drew together in a frown. He returned to his computer. "You tell him to go out in a field . . ."

Luis cocked his head to one side.

". . . walk up to the biggest cow he can find . . ."

Luis frowned in confusion.

". . . and fuck the shit out of it."

Luis blinked several times before he found his voice. "Arturo, I can't tell him that."

"And I can't sell him the car for \$25,000. What is he—crazy? That's a \$32,000 car. The most we can discount it is \$4,000 if we were offering rebates on the car, which we're not." Arturo shook his head. "Some people."

"He's convinced we're trying to get rid of them since it's close to the end of the year."

"We are, and I'll sell it to him for the bargain price of \$32,000. Why are you bringing this to me? You come back from a nice weekend off and you look like shit. Not like you just screwed a hot piece of ass for forty-eight hours straight." Arturo looked up. "Or did you? Is that why look tired?"

Luis shook his head in amazement and strolled back to his office without another word. He held out his hand to the middle-aged man sitting in the chair across from his desk. "I'm sorry we couldn't make a deal."

The man looked at Luis's hand for several seconds, and then rose and shook it. "They're selling them in Colorado for that price, so I don't see why you can't."

Luis pictured himself yanking the man in, telling him to go there and buy one and punching him square in the nose. Instead, he planted a smile firmly on his face and walked him out of the building.

"What happened?" Arturo said from behind.

"I told him we couldn't help him."

"Not that cabron, asshole. This weekend. Did she dump you?"

"No." Luis shoved his hands in his pockets and thought up a half-truth to tell him. "You know how it is. I don't want anything serious like marriage."

"Of for. . . Why can't you just be like any other dick out there and lie? You tell women only what they want to hear. Although as hot as she is, I would get her pregnant on purpose. Start Arturoville."

Luis changed the subject. "How far away am I from becoming management?"

Arturo snorted in derision.

Luis's frustration bubbled over. "What the hell? I've never been late, missed maybe two days of work for being sick."

"It's not that. You're our most reliable salesman. That's the problem: you sell too many damn cars. You're one of the best in the whole company. You're still young. They're going to milk you for years before they make you a manager."

"Good enough to follow but not good enough to lead."

"You make a lot of money and practically set your own hours. Why, does she think you don't make enough?" Arturo called after Luis, who started to walk away. "Hey, where you going?"

"I'm outta here."

"You just got back. Luis! Luis, don't let any woman screw with the wrong head."

Berta wasn't surprised when Luis rang her doorbell. She'd avoided talking to Chewy or Jesus when Luis dropped her off. Her gut said he would be back.

"Mi amor," she said when Luis sat as far away from her as he could on the couch.

"Playing by the rules isn't getting me any closer to what I want. You're offering something different and drastic. How long have you been doing this?"

"Most of my life."

"And you're good at it." Luis eyed her apartment and furnishings with new appreciation.

"Very good. I'll teach you everything I know."

"You once said your family was screwed up. Are they involved?"

Berta knew she needed to confide in him, even though her family was a taboo subject. The idea of her family, her father, only spurred her attempts to get away. The life he'd set for her was not the one she'd chosen. "Yes. That's not a bad thing," she lied. "If you can't trust family, who can you trust?"

"So what do you want?" Luis asked.

"Like?"

"I want my own dealership. Be my own boss. What do you want?"

My freedom. "A good, long vacation," Berta lied again.

**"There are worse things in life than death. Have you ever spent an evening with a . . . salesman?" -  
Woody Allen**

Cars that went straight to auction were old. Luis wondered how some made it onto the lot. The hood of one car looked like a giant had used a can opener on it. Berta would keep track of what stash was in what cars since product moved every three to six weeks. Luis was most likely to run into problems trying to get the spare keys to the junk cars. It helped that the used-car sales manager worked half days at another dealership.

Luis snuck in through the service entrance, his heart thudding against his chest so hard he broke out in a light sweat. His eyes darted back and forth. Just like he thought, no one was around. "You can do this." Luis popped into the office and picked only the cars with spare keys. Salesmen got a nice bonus if they snagged an extra key when a used car came in for trade.

He rapped the counter and told Arturo he was taking lunch. "That's a first," Arturo called after him. He drove straight to the closest mail center and made copies. When Luis returned, he repeated the process: sneaking the originals back in the box. Once the keys were safely hidden in his car, Luis realized he'd been holding his breath. He sucked in air until the lightheaded feeling passed.

Salesmen were expected to be outside looking for ups, customers, and if they entered the building, even for a drink, it wasn't long before they were shooed back outside. Luis knew one salesman who took afternoon naps or slept off a hangover in the trunk of a car. Not for long since the others would find out

which car, hop in and take it for a joyride around the parking lot, making sure to accelerate over the speed bumps.

Sneaking the keys in and out ended up being the only part that made Luis anxious. Darkness drifted across the wide open sky. Luis walked to the back lot and transferred the tightly wrapped packages from his car to the junk ones. A small notebook held the make/model and stash in a secret code that Luis and Berta had developed. The hiding places were good for ninety days. Luis sent a half-hearted prayer to Malverde, the patron saint of drug smugglers, for seeing him through this first run.

**"Getting out of a gang is hard you might be beaten or killed. You think being in a gang is kool your wrong all its going to bring is problems to your vida (life)." - Anonymous**

"Those two men." Maria de Salvo's hand wavered toward the door. "I need you to tell them to leave."

Duke settled himself in the chair next to her bed. "Abuelita, they are close friends of mine. Don't worry about them."

Maria, his frail great-grandmother just a moment before, pushed herself upright. Her lips disappeared into a disapproving line. "Armando, I need to talk to you, solo, alone."

The strength of her voice surprised him. Duke thought she wanted to talk about funeral arrangements. He frowned and stroked his mustache and goatee with his thumb and finger. What the hell? "Flaco, Gordo, step outside, por favor."

The door made a soft click as they left.

Duke put his palms together in front of him. "Okay, Abuelita."

His great-grandmother dissolved into the bed. Her torso stood out in sharp detail from the bedsheets. Her legs so thin it looked as if she didn't have any. Only the occasional twitch of her foot let Duke know they were there, still attached. Her eyes grew vacant. "Oh, mijo, my son." She breathed and then fell silent.

A minute ticked by. Duke closed his eyes and willed himself to be patient. When he opened them, Maria's face trembled on the verge of tears.

Duke scooted forward and laid his hand on top of hers. "Calmate, todo bien. Calm down, everything will be fine. Just let me know what you want to happen and I will make sure of it."

Her eyes brightened. "Yes, *mijo*, you will. You are the only one I can trust to make things right."

Duke hid his puzzlement.

"I thought I would be strong enough to let this die with me." The corners of her mouth fell, and her eyes filled with tears. "But I can't. I can't be buried with this." Maria's head shook so hard Duke was afraid she would hurt herself.

Duke tried to dismiss the drama with a laugh. "Mama," he said as he stroked her hand. "Everything will be fine. When my mother left, you and Grandma took care of me. Everything I've done, I've done for you, for this family."

Maria's face folded in on itself. A strangled keening sound escaped her lips.

"Are you worried about Grandpa and Dad?" Now Duke felt on the verge of tears. "I promise to take care of them. I won't abandon them."

"Lies," Maria hissed through her tears.

"I have never lied to you and I wouldn't lie about this."

"I lied," Maria spit out the words. "All these years. I thought I did it to protect you. If I wanted to protect you, I'd just take this to my grave. I never had the courage to fight. But *mijo*, you have fight in you." Maria's bony grip clenched Duke's hand. "Your great-grandfather did not die after your grandfather was born. He's still alive."

Duke itched to pry her fingers off his hand. "What are you talking about? Great-grandfather died of a heart attack. You told us."

"I lied." Maria slumped back in the bed, an old, white-haired rag doll. "When I was young, my father took us one weekend to visit a friend and shoot rabbits. They lived in an adobe house with a small farm. There were horses. I loved horses, but they

were so big I was afraid of them too." She placed her palms on the white bedsheets and pushed herself up. Tried to, at least. Duke didn't notice any difference, but she seemed satisfied with a new position. Maria leaned back, her face blank and slack. She continued on in a monotone, "He tsked at me and took my hand. He held it as he rubbed it down the tail and over the back of the horse. The neck and the nose were so soft it tickled." Maria held up her hand and rubbed her thumb over the tips of her fingers.

Duke relaxed. She's just reminiscing. "Esta bien. It's alright." He half stood to pull up the white sheet and blanket. A strong grip captured both his wrists. A whiff of spoiled food hit him in the face. A fierce glare, one he recognized, held him in place.

"Armando Gallego took me right there on the ground." The air vibrated around Duke's head, the pressure squeezing at his temples. He blinked, and his great-grandmother's blank stare and monotone returned. Duke rocked unsteadily on his feet, and then plunked back down in the chair. The white covers in disarray.

Maria continued. "Armando Gallego straightened up my clothes and hair. Helped me to my feet and pushed me in the direction of the house with a pat on my pompis, rear end. We returned home; I gave birth to Armando de Salvo nine months later."

The pressure at Duke's temples continued to grow and spread. "You gave us the same name. You said he died of a heart attack, so we all have his name in honor of him. Why?"

"No one believed me. I was sent to live with an aunt in disgrace." Her worn hands ran down the rumpled blankets. "I couldn't . . . . If he ever saw the name, I wanted him to remember."

Duke's ears were ringing. The emptiness of the hospital room amplified the ringing. His body jerked to stand up or sit down or move. Duke placed his hands on the railing and gripped them to focus his indecision.

"Armando Gallego is still alive?"

When she didn't answer right away, Duke used his grip on the railing to haul himself up and lean over his great-grandmother. Her head rolled back against the bed, exhaustion with her life etched into every wrinkle.

"Is he still alive?"

"Si, yes. Armando Gallego had a family. He was successful in construction. He's lived in the same house all this time."

"Where?"

Moments later the door to Maria de Salvo's room clicked shut. Duke's hand gripped the handle. He leaned forward until his forehead touched the cool metal frame. He had been merciful. His great-grandmother didn't need to continue with this burden. Why prolong the inevitable? The priest had taken her last confession, cleansed her soul. Now it was up to Duke to take revenge.

Duke shoved away from the frame, walked down the hall and met Flaco and Gordo. With a nod they fell in step behind him. There was an entire family out there, oblivious of what was coming. The corners of Duke's mouth turned up in a smile.

When the nurse's aid entered an hour later to check her vitals, Maria looked as if she'd passed away in her sleep.

Duke's head stayed in the empty, white hospital room for days. The ringing in his ears came and went. Alcohol kept the pressure on his temples at bay.

The black SUV slid to a stop in front of the Chapel Funeral Home. Duke could feel them exchanging nervous glances around him. "Stay here." He could feel their relief follow him out of the SUV.

Neutral tones greeted Duke when he opened the door. The funeral personnel, who stood in neutral-colored suits, displayed

neutral faces and positions. The whole place appeared timeless. Duke stood between his grandfather and father as they discussed how the ceremony would be handled, and what extras would be purchased. When the funeral director answered their questions about price, they turned to Duke who nodded "yes" to everything. Spare no expense. It was the least he could do.

"Now . . ." The funeral director leaned forward in his sand-colored suit and ecru tie. "I want you to take a moment to prepare yourself. Often this is the hardest part of the process. Take as much time as you need." The funeral director stood and walked to the left of his chair. He opened a door that Duke hadn't even noticed was there. The room contained a large display of coffins. The urns were enclosed in a vertical hutch on the immediate right.

"We've decided against cremation?" the funeral director asked them and paused to brace for a last-minute change. Duke and his relatives nodded. The whole building was silent. Thick carpet muffled their footsteps. Even the doors had heavy-duty springs at the top, so Duke doubted he could even slam one closed.

This was a new experience. Duke had been too young to participate in his grandmother's funeral preparations. The only thing he remembered was his father holding his grandfather by the elbow. His grandfather's knees buckled so low when they entered the viewing room that Duke thought Armando Senior was going to crawl down the aisle on his knees.

Duke held back as his grandfather and father wandered between the coffins. They conferred over the aspects of several and narrowed it down to two before approaching Duke.

"I think she would want you to make the final choice." His grandfather's voice was barely above a whisper. Duke let himself be led between the two. He stood before a dark-mauve casket. The inside lined in snow-white fabric. The same white as Maria's bedsheets in the hospital.

Duke stared at the white, lace-lined pillow inside the casket. The same white as the pillow he'd pressed down over his great-grandmother's face.

When Duke had slid Maria's hospital pillow out from under her head and placed it over her face, her hands had twitched around his forearms as if to stroke them. As if she knew this had to be done. When Duke was sure she was dead, he had replaced the pillow and arranged her lifeless form.

A light squeeze on his arm brought him back. His grandfather held a stained handkerchief in front of his face. Duke stood confused until he involuntarily sniffled. He had been standing there crying.

Duke turned and left the room managing not to stumble into one of the caskets. He grabbed the assistant funeral director's arm and spoke into his startled face. "Give them whatever they decide on. Send the final bill here." He dropped a paper on the desk and continued out of the funeral home.

When Duke jumped back in the SUV, there was a silent pause as Flaco and Gordo waited to see his disposition. "Get Nectar, Scooby and Rooster," Duke said. "We start taking territory tonight."

**"A thing is not necessarily true because a man dies  
for it." - Oscar Wilde**

Frankie had to admit: dying face down so the world could kiss your ass was a hell of a last statement to make. A pair of white, fuzzy bunny slipper clad feet hung over the edge of the tub. It would have been better without the slippers.

The bathroom was tiny. Frankie bent over and flashed a light underneath the old claw-foot tub. The hardwood floors were clean, even here. Still on his hands and knees, he played his light back and forth, starting at the top left corner. A deep scuff on the floor drew his attention. The mark was rough under his fingertip. He examined the rest of the floor and then moved up the walls, looking for something, anything that would help him play out a scenario of what happened to the man, dead, face down in the tub.

His partner, Drew Miller, paced back and forth, looking for clues and making the wooden floorboards creak. Frankie leaned his head out of the bathroom doorway. "Are we sure this guy killed himself?"

"Pretty sure. Why? Did you find anything?"

"Not really. Just doesn't feel right."

Drew paused in front of the bathroom doorway. "You have feelings?"

Frankie shined his flashlight in Drew's eyes.

"Hey." Drew turned away. Frankie heard papers shuffling.

"Diaz, the first officer on the scene, found a bottle of sleeping pills, Ambien, in the sink. He might have fallen asleep in the water just to make sure," said Drew.

"Face down? Wearing only bunny slippers?" Frankie turned back to the deceased. "Was there a note?"

"Nope. No one heard anything. Neighbors were shocked, said he was just a—" Drew broke into a warbled falsetto, "—sweet transvestite, transsexual, from Transylvania."

Frankie paused, and then snapped his fingers. "Rocky Horror Picture Show."

Drew chuckled.

"What makes you think he was a cross-dresser?"

"The bunny slippers didn't give it away?"

Frankie glanced down at his scuffed, black, leather shoes. "Alicia bought me Garfield slippers for Christmas once."

Drew angled his broad shoulders away from the front door of the apartment. "Are you serious?"

Frankie leaned back out the doorway and gave Drew an exasperated look.

"All right. All right." Drew motioned toward the bedroom. "We found a closet full of tasteful women's clothing with matching shoes and a vanity full of make up."

Frankie exited the tiny bathroom into the slightly larger living/dining room. Frankie could see a bedroom down a short hall to his left. An alcove with a galley kitchen was behind him on his right. The apartment was small, even for a one bedroom. Wooden floors gleamed underneath pristine-white walls decorated with framed artwork. "Anything in the kitchen?"

"Nothing. Despite your feelings, this just might be a boring suicide."

Frankie sucked the inside of one of his cheeks. "Make a note to double-check that Ambien prescription."

"Sure thing." Drew passed Frankie and entered the bathroom.

"Are EMTs on the way?" Frankie asked.

"Yep, be here any minute. I'm pretty sure cause of death is drowning. He could have popped a few pills, slipped and fell into the tub . . . ."

"There's a deep scuff mark in front of the tub, but who knows how long it's been there." Frankie spun in a slow circle. "This place is so clean, it's scary."

"Huh," Drew grunted. "The bedroom closet was open, couple of outfits on the bed." Drew returned to the living room and stopped in front of Frankie.

"All right," Frankie said. "Let's get pictures of the bedroom and bathroom. Dust for fingerprints in the bathroom just in case. We've bagged the pills as evidence. I don't see signs of a struggle."

Drew rocked back and forth on his heels, playing a tune with the creaky floorboards. "Me either. No forced entry. Doesn't look like any valuables were taken."

Officer Diaz exited the bedroom and handed Drew a Texas driver's license. Frankie moved closer, squinted and read. "Jesus Munoz. Maybe he was a performer at one of the downtown clubs?"

"The apartment manager lives on the first floor," Officer Diaz said as he stepped aside to make room for the EMTs clanging up the stairs.

"I'll go," Frankie said to Drew. "You can take measurements, sketch the scene. Oh and look for a phone, answering machine."

Drew winced. "It's my turn, isn't it?"

Frankie slapped Drew on the arm and winked. "Why yes, yes it is." Then he called out to Officer Diaz. "What's her name?"

"Gloria Sanchez."

Gloria Sanchez's apartment, which also served as the rental office, was on the first floor. A wooden table with matching chairs and a small filing cabinet took up one corner of the room. A thin, steel box with a lock hung on the wall above the filing cabinet.

Frankie sat on Ms. Sanchez's eye-popping floral patterned couch in an identical apartment to the deceased. No, it's Jesus Munoz. The deceased has a name now.

Ms. Sanchez was in her forties with brightly colored burgundy hair. She wore a light-blue robe and house slippers. "He was such a good tenant. Paid on time. Very quiet. Jesus—" Ms. Sanchez's voice quavered, "If I needed help, I only had to ask."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Sanchez. I just want to ask you a few questions. It shouldn't take long."

"I already talked to a police officer."

"I understand, but I'd like to ask you again, just in case you remember something new."

Ms. Sanchez shifted in her seat on the couch. "When the restaurant called, I went to go check on him . . ." Her eyes filled up with tears.

"Was he acting strangely? Maybe he wasn't sleeping well."

"No. I just saw him two days ago, and he was fine." Ms. Sanchez laid a hand on her chest.

"Did you see him with anyone new? Did he mention how he was feeling?"

"He seemed fine." Ms. Sanchez shuddered. "Although I haven't seen Luis for a while."

"Luis?"

"I never talked to him. Jesus mentioned his name when I asked. Nice-looking young man. I always saw him with a shirt and tie like he'd just got off of work."

"Do you know what Luis does for a living?"

"No, Jesus didn't talk about himself. He always wanted to know how I was doing, if I needed anything . . ." Ms. Sanchez's voice drifted off as she lifted her hand from her chest to cover her mouth.

"Where did Jesus work?"

"A fancy restaurant downtown, Plaza Bistro."

"Did you ever see him wearing women's clothing?"

Ms. Sanchez uncovered her mouth, her eyes wide. "Dios mio, Oh my God, no. Why?"

"Did he have a girlfriend?"

"Not that I know of. I only saw him with Luis."

Frankie met Drew outside Jesus's apartment.

"Any leads?" Drew asked.

"We've got a name of someone who visited him regularly, first name Luis, no last name. Let's pound on doors here and ask around. We'll need to talk to people at the Plaza Bistro, pass his picture around the downtown clubs. Any luck finding his next of kin?"

"Not yet."

Several hours later, Frankie stood outside the apartment building. Tan brick with three massive, white columns in front. The El Paso downtown lights flickered just blocks away from the apartment. Frankie stretched and popped his back. Murder or suicide. Suicide or murder. The layer underneath his skin itched and when that happened, no matter what the outside appearances might be, it was murder.

The power window made a soft whir as Frankie lowered it to stick his head out and wake himself up. The adrenaline rush that always perked him up when called out on a new case had worn off hours ago. Police officers said they joined the force to help people, and Frankie had no doubt some did. With fifteen years on the force, Frankie did his job for the rush, for the high, because boredom was the one thing in his life he would not tolerate.

Alicia, his wife, would be asleep when he got home. No doubt exhausted from her day teaching first grade at Washington Elementary School. They lived close to the school so she could sleep in until six a.m.

At this time of night, traffic was light, and Frankie arrived home in no time. He unlocked the metal screen door and heard a soft whoosh as he opened the front door. Alicia always left the porch and foyer light on for him. The rest of the two-bedroom bungalow was dark. Frankie loosened his tie and started undressing as he walked to the bedroom.

There were no kids, so there was no reason to sneak into another room and plant a kiss on a little one's forehead or tuck a child's blanket in that had fallen on the floor. They'd met and married in their thirties and delayed having children because of their jobs. When they found out it was unlikely Alicia would ever get pregnant, Frankie treated the subject like a piece of grit an oyster had turned into a pearl. Now in their mid-forties, he loved his wife and his job.

And Alicia's two dogs. That was enough.

Frankie slipped in between the sheets and moved the two small doggy mounds until they hugged the foot of the bed. He hadn't said anything when the calls and texts came for baby-making sex stopped. He hadn't said anything when Alicia gave away the few things they'd bought in anticipation of starting a family. He hadn't said anything when she brought home those two dogs and gave them ridiculous names nor when Alicia picked fights, just to see if Frankie would leave her over the fact they wouldn't have kids. He spooned Alicia all warm, soft and comforting. How many times had he crawled into bed like tonight to bury his work in the nape of her neck? He drifted off to sleep at the thought.

**"We will have a border that is open for business, open for tourism, open for legitimate travelers; but closed to terrorists and drug pushers and smugglers and others who seek to break the law." - Paul Celluci**

Luis was happy and back in control. He took over, despite Berta's protests, and was now the go-between for Jesus and Chewy. The operation was a success, and Luis was beginning to understand the dilemma facing every good drug smuggler: where to stash all the money. It was the first of November, and the temperature hovered in the eighties. The heat of summer reluctant to give way to winter. Of course, winter in the desert meant fifty degrees. People either walked around in T-shirts and flip-flops, daring the cold, or bundled up as if they'd freeze to death from exposure.

Only a few months in and Luis knew that Berta's estimate of two years at the most was correct. He would have his own dealership soon. The day-to-day business of selling cars was dull now. One stroker had been playing with Luis for three days. Arturo even let him take the car home overnight. As they left, Luis told Arturo, "I am not passing them on to you to close. When they come back, they either take the car or I walk them."

Right on time, Luis watched his customer pull up and park the car. "Evening, Mr. Morales," Luis said. "Are we ready to work some numbers?"

They sat down in Luis's office, and Mr. Morales made the same request he'd made yesterday. "I need the payment lowered by forty dollars."

"Sir, I can't do that."

Mr. Morales leaned back in his chair. "Yes, you can. You need the sale."

Luis bristled. He leaned forward, his voice low. "No, I don't." He watched shock pass over Mr. Morales's face. "Let me explain something to you. The average salesman sells nine cars a month." Luis threw a thumb over his shoulder at the plaques decorating his wall. "I've already sold that many." Now it was Luis's turn to lean back in his chair, his face blank. Don't come into my house and expect to win at my game.

Mr. Morales eyed the plaques and Luis saw from his expression that he didn't want to play anymore.

"Mr. Morales, we're arguing over forty bucks? Don't eat out once a month and you've got that covered."

Mr. Morales smiled like a condemned man. "Can you at least throw in a tank of gas?"

An hour later, Luis waved as Mr. Morales drove off in his new car. He lifted his gaze to the night sky and groaned. He still needed to see Jesus tonight and switch out a package. He reached into his pocket for his cell phone and hit speed dial. A deep, smoke-rough voice, not Jesus's, answered, "Bueno. Hello."

"Lo siento. I'm sorry, wrong number." Luis took the phone from his ear and ended the call. He dialed again. This time, someone picked up, but didn't respond. "Jesus?" Luis asked.

"Who you looking for?"

"No one, sorry."

"Is this Luis?"

"Who is this?" Luis said, his voice cautious. Things had been running smoothly; he hoped there wasn't a problem now.

The line went dead. He checked the number three times. Who in the hell was that?

Berta's cell went straight to voice mail, and when Luis pulled up to their apartment, it was dark. Luis started to panic, acid burning a hole in his stomach. What if Berta had gone to see Jesus? She'd fought being taken out of the loop, and it would be

just like her to go straighten things out without waiting for him. Tires squealed as he backed out and accelerated toward the freeway.

Luis parked in front of Jesus's apartment building. He slammed the car door shut. A couple of steps from the car, three men stepped out from the shadows in the parking lot and stood in front of him. All three were dressed in khaki pants and white, button-down shirts.

Luis raised his hands at his waist, showing his palms. "Que paso? What's going on?"

The man in the middle moved his arm in front of him. Blood pounded in Luis's ears as he watched a baseball bat slide into view.

Luis raised his hands higher. "My wallet's in my back pocket."

The man tapped the baseball bat lightly in his palm. "You no longer deal here. Chaneco runs this block."

Luis's eyes widened, his fears realized. "Bro, I'm just a runner." He flashed a nervous smile. "You can do whatever you want."

"We know." The man showed white teeth as his mouth slid into a cunning smile.

The two men on either side of the one with the baseball bat leaped forward. Luis turned and ran. His arms pinwheeled as a powerful yank on his jacket jerked him backwards. Luis hung in the air for a second, and then the trunk of his car raced to meet his face. He lay there stunned until pain shot through his legs a moment later. The man must have started swinging the bat.

The red-and-yellow tie around his neck was yanked to the side and loosened. The cloth made a zipping sound as it was pulled from the collar of his dress shirt. The men didn't even try to cover his mouth as Luis screamed. The bat landed repeatedly on the backs of his legs. Luis slid down the trunk of the car as his captors released him.

Luis sputtered, "I get it. I'm done. I won't be back." The expensive silk of his own tie tightened into a knot around his

wrists. "Jesus Christ! You don't have to—" His words choked off as the baseball bat tightened across his throat.

There was a low pop, and the trunk of his car swung open. The dark void scared Luis into action. Whatever happened, he would not let himself be put in the trunk of his own car.

He gained his feet with help from the man with the baseball bat. Hands gripped his arms. As they moved him toward the trunk, Luis grunted, "No!" He drew his knees high, slammed his feet against the bumper of the car and shoved backwards with all his might. Which wasn't much, considering his legs were aching from the beating. But it was enough to throw the baseball-bat man off guard. They tumbled backwards; the pressure around his throat eased.

The grip on his arms did not. The two men yanked Luis to his feet.

"You better stop! I've called the police." A woman's voice sailed over the parking lot. "Leave him alone!"

With one swift tug, Luis's hands were free. He spun around, guided by the three men. Across the parking lot, he saw the silhouette of a woman standing on the balcony of her downstairs apartment.

A heavy arm draped over Luis's shoulder. "We're just playing around, senora, ma'am. No harm done." Luis winced as the man dug his fingers into his shoulder. "Isn't that right, bro?"

Luis shook his head "yes," his throat sore from the bat stretched across it a second ago. Hot breath grazed his ear as the man said, "She can't hear you."

"Yeah, just playing around," croaked Luis.

"Luis? Luis, is that you?"

Luis saw his chance and shrugged off the man's grip on his shoulder. "Yes. Ms. Sanchez?"

"You need to come inside." Her voice, defiant, called out to the others, "I did call the police. They're on their way."

The end of the bat met the small of Luis's back, and he stumbled forward. "We'll catch you later, maricon, faggot."

His legs shaking, Luis tried not to run to the lighted front entry of the apartment building.

Once inside, Ms. Sanchez met him in the hallway in front of her apartment. "Luis, the police need to talk to you. You've heard about Jesus? Lo siento. I'm sorry"

Luis rubbed his throat thinking about the near-death experience outside. "What happened to Jesus? Is he in the hospital?"

"Oh mijo, no. He's dead. He killed himself, day before yesterday."

Luis slumped against the door frame. "Has a woman been here?"

"No. The police want to talk to you. They can explain everything. Come in and sit down." Ms. Sanchez turned around. She looked over her shoulder. "What did those men—?"

The hallway was empty.

**"Success is a lousy teacher. It seduces smart people into thinking they can't lose." - Bill Gates**

Alicia lay awake. She felt the bed shift as Frankie crept into bed. He always pushed Pancho and Lefty off the bed when he got home. Hated the fact that she let them sleep in the bed but understood her reason why. So many little things left unspoken between them over the years. Alicia listened to his breath become deep and even.

Asleep already?

Lately, sleep hovered around the edges but never settled on her until the wee hours of the morning. Random thoughts tumbled through her mind. Frankie's cases were coming back-to-back and right before the holidays started. She felt sorry for the families. She ticked through the items needed for a new activity she'd found to help her first-grade students still behind in phonics. She needed to call the parents about another child who couldn't sit still in class after several interventions. Possible ADD. Should she talk to the school counselor about it? It was always so hard to tell. She needed to get her lesson plans up-to-date, and there was an assembly today and an after-school meeting this week. Did she remember to put the leftovers away? Thanksgiving was coming; at least she'd have a couple of days to get caught up. She had to see her grandfather this weekend. Where would they spend Thanksgiving? She couldn't see leaving her grandfather alone, but getting him in and out of a car was a chore, and he tired so easily.

The phone rang at three in the morning. Frankie shifted but didn't wake up. His ringtone for work was set as a siren—anything else he ignored. Never having fallen asleep, she reached

for her phone on the second ring. Her grandfather had checked himself into the hospital.

Alicia shook Frankie. "Frankie?"

Frankie snapped awake. "What? What's wrong?"

"It's Abuelito. He's in the hospital. I've already called for a substitute at school."

"What time is it?"

"It's early. I think you've only been asleep an hour or two. Abuelito called for an ambulance because he couldn't breathe." Alicia felt him fumble in the dark until his lips brushed her forehead.

"Give me one minute, honey. I'll get up and go with you."

"No, don't. Get some sleep and call me when you wake up."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, get some sleep."

"Be careful," Frankie mumbled as he rolled over and drifted off. Pancho and Lefty climbed back up on the bed. Their dark eyes followed her out of the room.

Eastside Memorial, a newer neighborhood hospital, appeared comfortable and homey. The carpeted halls muffled footsteps. The waiting room held overstuffed chairs and plants. It wasn't until Alicia encountered the nurse's station that Eastside Memorial started to look like a hospital. Alicia nodded at the nurse behind the counter and followed a hall to room 104.

She slipped into the hospital room that looked like a one-bedroom apartment. On her right was a mini-living room with an overstuffed couch, T.V., sink and mini-fridge.

Straight ahead was a short hall and a bathroom on her right.

Alicia caught a glimpse of herself in the bathroom mirror. Black hair with grey showing at the roots pulled back in a ponytail. Carrying an extra ten pounds kept the wrinkles at bay,

but her face was still pinched with lack of sleep. Just past the bathroom lay her grandfather, Armando. The room had a large cabinet, another overstuffed chair and another flat-screen TV. Armando's toothless mouth hung open. A pole covered with I.V. bags stood watch next to him.

"How is he?" Alicia asked the doctor when he entered.

"He has a lot of things wrong with him: a bladder infection, pneumonia, his blood pressure is low, he's dehydrated. Does he have someone taking care of him?"

"Yes, I talked to Chavela, his caretaker, and she said he was going to the bathroom a lot, but he wasn't in any pain. To her, he seemed fine. He couldn't breathe and called 911. He smoked on and off for twenty years. I've already called in and taken the rest of the week off." Alicia's voice stammered in embarrassment. "My mother is getting a flight here tomorrow. We'll make changes so he won't get this bad again."

The doctor nodded, not unsympathetically. "He'll start respiratory treatments soon and a social worker will schedule a nurse to stop by weekly after he's discharged."

"Do you know when?"

"At least a week or two. We're still keeping an eye on his blood pressure." The doctor gave a tight smile and left.

Alicia rolled her head from side to side, her neck popping several times. Her grandfather was on Medicare, and they had learned from previous hospital visits he was admitted for a certain number of days. Some paperwork requirement so the hospital would be reimbursed. At his age pneumonia was not something to take lightly.

Chavela was the new caretaker, but there was no excuse to not let Alicia know about her grandfather's deteriorating condition. For the fiftieth time, she wished the last caretaker hadn't quit. She sighed at the inevitable and sat down. Death was nothing new to her family. Alicia lost an uncle in a car accident when she was young, and her aunt and grandmother to cancer right after

she married Frankie. They'd found out having children would be nearly impossible a couple of years later. Frankie had been an only child and wanted children. They'd joked about having a litter. Alicia couldn't give him that and she wondered why he stayed married to her. Now it was down to Mother, Uncle and Grandfather, and Alicia's two brothers who lived in different states. Her family was dwindling away and there was nothing she could do.

She stood and walked to his bedside and placed a light kiss on her grandfather's deeply wrinkled forehead. His skin felt like warm paper, and his color was grey. Her stomach lurched when she sat down in the chair next to his bed. She closed her eyes until the feeling passed. The spells had been regular for the last couple of weeks—her abdomen tight like a rope being knotted over and over again. Her fancy wavy uterus, as she liked to think of it, was too complicated for normal conception. It would be poetic if it could hold cancer but not a child.

They'd buried themselves in their work. Alicia with her twenty-five first graders. She joked with teachers and got involved in school. At first she'd told them she didn't want children. They laughed and answered, "Well of course you wouldn't want twenty-five seven-year olds all at one time." As the other teachers married and had children, she had to admit having her own wasn't going to happen.

The cell phone jarred her from sleep. "How is he?" Frankie said.

"He has a lot wrong with him. I'm going to have to visit a couple of times a week from now on."

"Hopefully, my current case is a suicide and I can ask for some time off."

Alicia was puzzled. "Hopefully, it's a suicide?"

"That didn't sound right. Don't worry. How long are you going to be there?"

"For a while."

Frankie promised to drop by and bring dinner after work. A nurse came in and took vitals, and Alicia wandered back to the overstuffed couch and lay down. She couldn't fall asleep because it was now eight in the morning, and her family started calling for updates while nurses checked his progress.

For the umpteenth time since Alicia turned forty, she wondered how women got it all done. If she had a child, she would have quit teaching and stayed home. What was the point of helping everyone else's children if you didn't have time for your own? Teaching just kept getting harder, not easier, with more paperwork, testing, hoops to jump through. At least they were financially stable, but there was no time to do anything together and now she would have to add her grandfather to her list of things to do. Her stomach lurched again. Alicia decided to see the doctor while her grandfather was still in the hospital.

**"Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth." - Author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sr.**

"Drew, please tell me we have a suicide, case closed," Frankie said as he approached his desk piled high with loose papers, folders and used coffee cups.

Drew flipped through the file he was holding and grimaced. "They are still having trouble deciding which killed Mr. Munoz first. I mean, we have the Ambien, but the medical examiner is still checking for water in the lungs, bruising, and any other drugs, like . . ." Drew squinted at a note in the file and continued, ". . . an-tie-me-tics. Apparently killing yourself with sleeping pills isn't as easy as it seems because you're likely to throw it all up unless you also take an an-tie-me-tic." Drew let the file plop down on top of his desk and leaned back in his chair with a metallic squeal. "Why? What's up?"

"Alicia's grandfather is in the hospital. He's almost ninety, so everything—even a cold—is serious."

"Oh, man, I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thanks. Where are we now? Did you find a cell phone or answering machine in Munoz's apartment?"

"No land lines. Everyone has cell phones these days." Drew flipped through the file again. "Nope. No cell phone. I thought we'd go ahead and start pounding the pavement."

"He had to have a cell phone." Frankie ran his hand over his chin. He'd forgotten to shave. "The manager, Ms. Sanchez, should have a phone number for him in her records. If we can find this Luis, it might help answer a lot of questions."

Several hours later Frankie Rodriguez drew back from his desk as a folder slapped down on top of it.

"Sorry, bro. Looks like murder," Drew said.

"They found antiemetics?" Frankie asked.

"No—water in his lungs along with bruising on the forearms, chest and chin. Suggests he was held under water while he was still trying to breathe. It would also explain why no one heard anything strange." Drew tapped a finger on top of the folder. "It's all right here."

Frankie leaned back and rubbed his eyes. "What did you find out from Plaza Bistro?"

"That Mr. Munoz was an excellent waiter. Covered other people's shifts, always on time, which is why they called his apartment looking for him when he didn't show up for work. No outstanding warrants, no tickets. Jesus Munoz was a regular, all-around good guy."

"Except good guys usually aren't murdered." Frankie pointed the phone on his desk. "Ms. Sanchez isn't answering her phone."

Drew perched on the far corner of Frankie's desk, making the metal creak. "Munoz had to have worked in one of the clubs downtown. There are only two that I know of upscale enough for those evening gowns."

"Unless he crossed the downtown bridge into Juarez and worked someplace off the strip or did private . . . errr . . . functions." Frankie stared at Drew in mock seriousness. "Hey, how do you know there are only two clubs?"

Drew slapped his knee. "Oh yeah, hilarious." He pointed to Frankie's computer. "That's a computer and you can use this thing called the Internet to look up all kinds of stuff. I know you're older than me, but you should turn that on once in a while."

Frankie stood up. He stuck his arms out, as if to stretch, and pushed Drew off his desk. "Whatever."

Drew backed up, grinning. He grabbed Mr. Munoz's picture from the folder. "I'm driving."

The two clubs were The Reign and Old Plantation. The Reign wouldn't open for another hour, so they parked a couple of blocks away and walked up to the Old Plantation. As soon as they entered, a voice called out from the bar, "We're closed."

Drew showed the bartender his ID. "El Paso police. Is your manager around?"

"No. He won't be in for a couple of hours."

"Mind if we ask you a few questions?"

The bartender eyed both of them but said nothing.

Drew took out Mr. Munoz's photograph while Frankie studied the bartender's face. "Do you know this individual?"

The bartender took the photograph without looking at it. "No."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't know him." The bartender handed the photograph back to Drew.

Drew held the picture directly in front of the bartender's face. "It might help if you pictured him with makeup on, dressed in women's clothing. We think he was a performer."

"No. Sorry I can't help you."

Drew withdrew the picture. "What other clubs in El Paso have performers? I know this place does and . . ."

"Just The Reign. I don't think there's enough performers for more than two clubs in El Paso."

"What about across the bridge?"

"Juarez?" The bartender turned and started putting away glasses. "No, they got their own people. I don't know of anyone who crosses over to perform."

"Here's my card." Drew set his card down on the bar. "Call me if you remember anything."

The bartender grunted in reply.

In the sunlight, Drew asked Frankie, "Well?"

"Let's go to The Reign."

"Okay, old man."

"That's wise old man to you."

The scenario went about the same way at Old Plantation—only this time, the bartender was a woman. Drew left his card again. Once outside, Drew asked Frankie, "Well?"

"Old Plantation."

"Why? Both of them said almost exactly the same thing."

"Yeah, but the bartender at Old Plantation looked surprised when you handed him the picture, and this bartender didn't have any reaction at all."

Drew stepped into Frankie's shadow to shield his eyes from the sun. "How did he look surprised? He didn't even look at the picture."

"He looked at the picture. It was really quick, but then his eyes opened wide for just a second and his brows went up. The Reign bartender, nothing. No change in her expression. She doesn't know Mr. Munoz."

"Twenty bucks says you're wrong."

Frankie gave Drew a satisfied grin. "Oh, you have so much to learn, my young friend."

"Twenty bucks."

"You're on."

Frankie threw open the door to Old Plantation. "I know you're closed," he answered before the bartender could say anything.

Frankie held out his hand. The bartender stopped wiping the table in front of him and shook the offered hand. "You know me and my partner. What's your name?"

"Lars."

"Hi, Lars. So I wanted to ask how you know Jesus Munoz."

Lars shifted his feet. "I already told you I don't know him."

Frankie smiled. "It's just that when my partner showed you the picture, you looked surprised. Like you didn't expect to see

him. Maybe it's because you're not used to seeing him without all the makeup and glitter."

"I don't know what to tell you. I don't know him."

"And you said your manager will be back in a couple of hours."

Lars swiped the table with a washcloth and then moved to the next one. "Yeah, he should be."

"Lars?"

Lars paused over the table he was cleaning.

"You know Mr. Munoz is dead." Frankie watched Lars as his inner eyebrows rose and his eyes clouded over. "Now why would you be sad about that if you don't know him?"

"What? No one wants to hear about people dying."

"Well, he didn't just die—we think he was murdered." Frankie saw Lars's eyes widen as well. "And now you're alarmed."

Lars dropped his washcloth. "What the fuck?"

Frankie leaned forward and lowered his voice. "We've talked to his friends already. We know he was a good guy. We're just trying to find out who did this."

"He performed here on occasion. But I don't know him."

"Didn't."

Lars picked up his washcloth and moved to the next table.

"Okay." Frankie half turned away, and then looked back. "How about Luis?"

The look of fear intensified on Lars's face. "You'll have to talk to the manager."

"Do you . . . ?"

"You're going to have to come back and talk to the manager."

Lars turned and dove into the backstage area.

Drew whispered, "Son of a . . ."

Frankie steered Drew by the shoulder to the door. "You owe me twenty bucks."

Outside, the sun kept on shining, no matter who died or who lived. It mattered to Frankie. The few cases he hadn't been able to solve still spun in the back of his mind. The most important

thing to remember about a homicide is the victim. If you didn't care about the victim no one else would either. That also meant not hanging on to predispositions about the victim's character one way or the other.

Frankie had no religious assumptions about homosexuality. The simple fact was he didn't want to expend the energy to judge others based on what they did in their own bedroom. As a homicide detective he had enough on his plate. Frankie and Drew didn't openly discuss the issue except to comment that between hetero- and homosexual prostitutes, the latter seemed to keep a much cleaner house.

Who could have wanted Jesus dead? He seemed outwardly to be a nice, respected, hard-working guy albeit leading a double life because either he was homosexual or a cross-dresser. Was the case a date gone wrong? If they could find out who Jesus hung around with, who he dated, who his friends were, it would help fill in the details.

Frustration and waiting for a break was a natural part of the job. Frankie took a deep breath, a detective couldn't rush an investigation but that familiar itch below the surface set his mind thinking. He hopped in the driver's seat, confident this lead was not a dead-end.

**"Love is a better teacher than duty." - Albert  
Einstein**

The overstuffed couch enveloped Alicia as she sat down. Techs were back, taking his vitals. Alicia didn't know how her grandfather got any rest. Armando had bounced back, embarrassing Alicia by brushing a nurse's bottom. He bragged about the nurses wanting to marry him or at least take him home. The nurses laughed and winked at Alicia, who was mortified.

Alicia heard the tech laugh; Armando must have told a good joke. She had forgotten her grandfather had a keen sense of humor. Her cell phone started ringing. It was Frankie. He never was able to stop by since her grandfather was admitted, but he called several times a day.

"So what did the doctor say?"

"They're still working on stabilizing his blood pressure. He started his breathing treatments today."

"He is eighty-nine, Alicia."

Alicia rose and leaned against the counter so the conversation wouldn't carry. "I know—that's what the doctor said."

"When does your mother get here?"

"Tomorrow morning. Can you pick her up?"

Frankie paused. "The case has gotten more complicated."

"Frankie, I need some help here."

"I know; let me talk to Drew. I'll work something out. Do I drop her off at the hospital or take her home first?"

"She wants to come here first." Alicia's voice softened. "How was your day?"

"Same old. Same old. So your mom is going to take over when she gets here so you can come home for a couple of days, right?"

"For now. I'll still come after school, but I need to get back to work. I have a lot of sick days, but my kiddos need me. A substitute teacher just isn't the same."

"That's because you're a great teacher." Frankie lowered his voice. "You know I don't sleep well without you. I love you."

Alicia smiled, touched. Frankie was there for her. Maybe not physically right now, but he was there and always would be. "Love you too."

The Doctor's office was blindingly white. Alicia knew it was to project the sense of sanitary cleanliness. It was also cold and clinical and creepy. She swung her feet back and forth to comfort herself while she waited.

There was a quick rap on the door and her doctor breezed in, all smiles. "I have good news."

"It's not cancer?"

"Nope. You are going to be a mother."

Alicia nearly slid off the table. Numbness spread throughout her body as if a bucket of ice-cold water had been dumped on her head. "You said it was impossible."

"No, I said 'highly improbable.' Anything is possible."

"How far along am I? I'm so irregular I can't tell."

"We'll have to do an ultrasound then." The doctor made notes in her file and filled out prescriptions, his face morphing from pleasant surprise to concern. "Alicia, I do have to say with your medical history, this is not going to be easy."

"I understand. Good thing I believe in miracles." Alicia listened with one ear to all the doctors and nurses shoving papers in her hands and making appointments. Her mind whispered to the life growing inside of her. "Stay. Stay with me. I promise I'll be a good mother."

During the drive home, Alicia was on automatic pilot.

She sat on the couch and cried for a good twenty minutes. A profound feeling of helplessness washed over her. For the first time in years, she got down on her knees and prayed, remembering her aunt telling her, "We don't kneel because we're weak. We kneel because it gives us strength."

One thing Alicia did know with all her heart: she wouldn't tell Frankie until she was certain the baby would make it to term.

Alicia's mom, Marta, entered the hospital room, followed by Frankie. Alicia hugged him first. He wouldn't let go of her hand, even when she turned to greet her mother. Frankie rubbed circles in her palm with his thumb.

"Good news," Alicia said told them both. "They figured out what the problem was with his blood pressure. He's still going to be here for a while until they get the pneumonia under control."

She smiled, her pregnancy secret ready to leak from her lips. Instead, she gave Frankie's hand a final squeeze and then led her mother to Armando's bedside. Alicia's smile faded into shock at how much her mother had aged. Marta's head and hands trembled, and if she wasn't looking directly at her mom, Alicia had to repeat everything twice. She left her grandfather and mother to yell their conversation at each other. A sinking feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. Her mother wasn't going to be much help taking care of her grandfather.

**"There are four kinds of Homicide: felonious,  
excusable, justifiable, and praiseworthy." - Ambrose  
Bierce**

Frankie returned to the station to meet up with Drew after seeing Alicia for a few minutes at the hospital. Long hours at his job was nothing new compared to Alicia's, but after adding on caring for her aging grandfather, spending so much time apart was getting crazy. After they finished talking with Ms. Sanchez and the manager at Old Plantation, Frankie was going back to the hospital; he would sleep there if he had to so he could spend some time with his wife.

After a short drive, they were back at the large, brick apartment building. Drew and Frankie stepped out of their car. The sun shone as it did three hundred and forty days out of the year in a bright-blue sky. The winds kept the pollution at bay most of the time. On those rare calm days, a brown haze blanketed El Paso, Juarez and the outlying small towns into New Mexico.

Frankie's gaze settled on Ms. Sanchez's apartment. "Drew?"

"Yeah."

"It looks like all her windows are open."

November was cool enough to have the furnace on. Not leave windows open.

Drew and Frankie trotted up the front steps and entered the apartment building. They knocked on Ms. Sanchez's door for some time until an older woman poked her head out a couple of doors down. "She's not answering."

"She hasn't been answering her phone. Did she go out?" Frankie asked.

"No." The woman's eyes darted up and down the hall. She looked skittish. "I haven't seen her for at least a day. Not since all that commotion the other night."

Frankie exchanged a look with Drew and moved down the hall toward the woman who looked to be in her late sixties. Frankie smiled easily to calm the elderly woman. "What commotion, senora, ma'am?"

"There were men fighting outside the other night, and Ms. Sanchez yelled at them. I think she knew one of them because a little while later, I could hear her talking."

"Was she talking to a man or a woman?"

"A man. Then, after that, I heard some more noises, but finally it quieted down."

Drew cleared his throat behind him. "The door's open."

"Thank you," Frankie said to the woman. "Please go back inside. Someone might be by to talk to you later."

Frankie returned to Ms. Sanchez's door and stood back as Drew turned the knob and pushed. A sliver of light shone through. Frankie moved to the opposite side of Drew. A frown fixed on Drew's face as he put his shoulder against the door and pushed harder. "I think there's something blocking the door."

Frankie spoke up, "Ms. Sanchez, are you in there? It's Mr. Rodriguez, the police officer from the other night."

Silence ticked by.

"Help me," Drew said.

Frankie moved behind Drew, and they both started shoving at the door. After three hard pushes, Drew was able to look around the corner of the door.

"She's dead."

"Can you see her?"

"Yeah. She's what's blocking the door."

For the second time that week, the police and medical examiner traipsed around the Villa apartments. Ms. Sanchez was beaten to death with a blunt object. The murderer had opened all

the windows. The fresh air was enough to keep the smell at bay, even though she was killed right by the front door.

Frankie talked to the neighbors, no one heard anything; no one saw anything. Even when he asked about the fight outside,—if Ms. Sanchez heard it, surely someone else had—amazingly, everyone had slept like a log.

"Think they're related?" Drew asked Frankie.

"No doubt in my mind. We've got to find this Luis. He just became the number-one suspect in both murders."

## **"Buyers are liars!" - car salesmen**

Luis sat on a barstool at the Mango club, his head in his hands. After a minute, he looked up, grabbed the neck of one of his empty beer bottles and swung it between his thumb and forefinger above his head. The bartender dropped another bottle in front of him and whisked away the empties.

The cell phone on the bar remained silent, even though he'd been willing it to ring for an hour now. No one was answering. Not Chewy. Not Jesus—he was dead. More importantly, not Berta. Luis threw back his head and downed half of the beer in one gulp. He wanted his mind to be a blank as soon as possible just in case anything had happened to her too.

A purse with metal decorations clanked on the bar beside him. "Luis, what the hell is going on?"

"Berta," Luis choked out while pulling her into a rib-crushing hug. He drew back far enough to cradle her head in his hands. "You're all right?"

"Of course I'm all right! Are you drunk?"

"Come on." Luis put his arm around her and pointed to a booth. He poured himself into one side, and Berta slid in across from him. He took her warm hands in his. "I don't know what's going on. Jesus is dead." He watched Berta struggle with the information. Luis drew himself up—he needed to take charge. "I think we need to lay low."

"How did he die?"

"The police think he killed himself."

Berta straightened. "And Chewy?"

"No one else is answering the phone."

"What do you mean?"

"I tried Chewy and the couple of names he gave me, Berta. No one is answering."

Berta's mouth worked, but the words seemed stuck in her throat.

Luis pulled her across the table. "Berta, it's been in the news. The cartels moved into Juarez, Nuevo Laredo, and Tijuana, and they're fighting. Killing eight, twelve people a day. What if the gangs here decided to go to war?"

"It's never happened before. Not on the US side. We're just runners, Luis. We go with whoever is in charge. We're not worth fighting over."

"Something is very wrong then." Luis leaned forward and pulled his collar away from his neck. "They jumped me tonight when I tried to see Jesus." He saw Berta's eyes widen. "The men said they were from Chaneco."

"Let's go back to the apartment—"

"No!" Luis yelled. Nearby conversations paused at his outburst. He lowered his voice. "I left a message to bring all the money you have. Tell me you did it."

Berta tapped her fingers on the table, not meeting his eyes.

"It's okay. We can get the money tomorrow. We've got to stay in a hotel until we figure out what to do next." Luis dropped his keys on the table. "You're driving."

**"Do you want to stick to that story, or do you want to keep your teeth?" - Grifters**

Berta slammed the car door shut, her mind whizzing through the last dozen hours. She knew exactly what was going on in Juarez. Her family was allied with the Juarez Cartel. When Sinaloa started lopping off heads and tossing them into bars in Juarez, Berta's father had ordered her to stay on the US side. "It's going to get harder to know who to trust." Oh, was it ever, Father.

There were grumblings that Chaneco was looking to make a territory grab. That's when Berta decided to make her move. Just a phone call, and Chewy was targeted. She knew Chewy would talk in hopes of saving his life, and a gang was usually satisfied with some blood. They never killed all the runners. Her heart lunged at the waste of Jesus.

Berta's hands gripped the steering wheel, her head resting on it.

Luis shook her shoulder. "I promise it'll be all right. I'll take care of you."

Berta had cleaned out all the hiding places she knew about. It wasn't enough. She still needed the last bunch of stash that was on Luis's car lot.

The bright neon lights of the Mango bar blurred as her eyes filled with tears. Luis babbled on beside her about going to a hotel. She put the car into gear, still wondering if she would give up Luis for her freedom.

Luis woke, letting his eyes play over the room to remember where he was. His mouth felt rough and sticky like the inside of a dirty sock. He sat up to a still room with only the fan of the heater purring.

Berta was gone.

Luis jumped when his cell phone rang. "Berta, where are you?"

A low chuckle answered him. "You can run, but you can't hide."

"Wait! Listen to me. I was a good runner for La Linea. I have never been caught—I'm careful. I can do the same for you."

There was no confirmation on the other end.

Luis sighed in frustration. "Then cut me out. I'll walk away. I don't know anything."

"You know plenty, cabron. The police are going to be looking for you."

"The police? Why?"

Only silence answered him.

**"Murder, like talent, seems occasionally to run in families." - George Henry Lewes**

The investigation at Ms. Sanchez's apartment took the rest of the day. The sunset painted bright streaks of purple, red and orange across the sky. We still need to stop by the Old Plantation. Damn, I really wanted to see my wife sometime tonight. Frankie slumped against the car. The adrenaline crash was not pretty. He was beginning to feel worn out all the time.

This case was turning into a multiple homicide and even though it was still early there would be pressure coming soon. Close the case and get whoever responsible off the street. Along with everything going on in his personal life, Frankie couldn't let fatigue slow him down now.

Drew approached, putting his cell phone back in its case on his belt. "A Narcotics Detective just called. They think our murder cases may be related to current gang activity."

"Why?"

"Nothing concrete, but it seems the Chaneco gang is making a territory grab. The other gangs are spooked and ratting them out."

"So it's a rumor from an informant?"

"Apparently. The murders did happen in a large chunk of downtown territory for La Linea. They're saying Chaneco took it over. They even said the blunt object we're looking for is a baseball bat."

"We can check that with the results of the autopsy when it gets in. So what does Chaneco mean? It's not Spanish like the others."

"They're named after an Aztec god who called for the sacrifice of children. The name fits. They're the youngest gang, and they like to recruit boys."

"Wow, you sounded almost smart there."

Drew scrunched up his eyes in mock scrutiny. "No, I'm just smarter than you. Remember how to get to Old Plantation? Memory's first thing to go."

"Yeah, yeah." Frankie grinned. They often used humor to get through a tough case. There was nothing to indicate Ms. Sanchez was involved in drugs or money. She was an innocent swept up in a gang turf war. It wasn't right. Frankie willed another surge of energy to get him through this last leg. Maybe he was getting too old for the job. Living is a young man's game.

Old Plantation was nothing to talk about during the daytime; at night it glowed neon pink, purple and blue on the outside. Inside, a disco ball hung from the ceiling and tinkled multicolored lights across the floor and walls. Orange lights accented the bar.

Frankie and Drew arrived early enough only a couple of people milled around preparing for the evening's festivities. Lars, the bartender, raised his hand and pointed to the left side of the stage as soon as they walked in.

Frankie nodded, and Drew tipped an imaginary hat to Lars as they wound their way through the tables to a black, unmarked door.

Behind the door was a narrow hallway. To the right it led backstage, and to the left it ended in a cramped office. A man in a suit stood, talking on the phone.

Frankie took the lead and rapped on the open door. The man held up one finger and turned his back to them.

Frankie looked back at Drew and raised an eyebrow. Drew handed him the picture of Jesus Munoz.

The manager turned around and pocketed his cell phone. "Lars said you were here earlier. Que paso? What's up?"

Frankie held out the picture. "Did Jesus Munoz perform here?"

The manager rested his forearm on the door frame. "Used the name Stephanie. One of the best. He's been missing for a couple of nights now."

"Mr. Munoz was murdered last Friday. We're also looking for another man named Luis. Have you heard of him?"

"Murdered?" The manager's face hardened in anger. "No, and I never heard of a Luis."

"Are you sure?"

Giving Frankie a smile that meant everything but friendship, the manager said, "'Yeah. I'm sure. Es todo? Is that all? Porque, because, I got a club to run."

Frankie and Drew exchanged a glance. "Know why anyone would want to hurt Mr. Munoz?" Frankie asked.

The manager shook his head. "No. He was a good performer. Brought in a crowd." He punched the door frame. "Going to be a bitch to replace him."

The walls vibrated as the club came to life with the blare of techno music. Frankie had to shout, "Call me if you remember anything." He handed the manager his card.

They made their way back to the front of the club. Along the way, Frankie held up Jesus Munoz's picture to people. They reached the last small group of people who shook their heads "no." He turned to Drew and shrugged. "Let's call it a night."

Frankie reached the door when he felt a tug on his arm. A short man with spiky hair in front yelled, "Lars said you were looking for a Luis?" Frankie took hold of the man's arm so he wouldn't lose him as the crowds shifted.

"Yes. Do you know him?"

Spiky Hair held up a business card and yelled again, "If you mean this guy: Luis Ramirez? He sold me a car."

The cool, night air revived Frankie. Finally, a break. He slapped Drew on the back and tossed him the keys. "We find this Luis and we'll probably find a connection to the murders and the Chaneco gang."

**"I have seen women like you before, baby. You're double-tough and you are sharp as a razor, and you get what you want or else . . ." - Grifters**

Berta had to give up Luis—but not for dead like Jesus. She breezed into the hotel room, balancing her purse, coffee and pan dulce a cake-like sweet bread. Luis almost upended everything, barreling into her from the bathroom.

"Damn it, why didn't you leave me a note?"

"Luis!" Berta slammed everything down on the tiny table next to the bed. "Why can't you calm down?" Frustrated noises erupted from her as she wiped coffee off her shirt and hands.

"I'm sorry," Luis whispered as he tried to pull her against his chest.

"No. No."

Luis pulled her in tighter. "I'm in trouble."

"I know." Berta wasn't lying. "I've got a plan. Now get dressed; you're going to work."

"Work? No way. We need to get out of here."

Berta shoved the coffee and a piece of pan dulce at Luis. He made no motion to take it, so she placed them back on the table. "Look: either do what I say or we're as good as dead."

Luis leaned against the door frame and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Why? Where's your family? How did Chaneco find out about us?"

Maybe he was catching on. Berta took her own coffee and a piece of pan dulce and sat down. "Chaneco has aligned themselves with a gang out of El Salvador. It is the biggest international gang in the world. They're like mercenaries—owned by the highest bidder—and right now the highest bidder

is the Sinaloa Cartel." Berta motioned for Luis to sit. "Sinaloa tried twenty years ago to take over all of the drug trafficking in Mexico but killed some kids and a Cardinal. You can kill a lot of people and your own kind but not children and not anyone from the Catholic Church. The outrage was severe and it's the only time the leader of Sinaloa was arrested. He walked out of maximum-security prison a year later, but the point was made."

"What do you he mean walked out?"

"He just walked out. No one saw him. No security cameras recorded his leaving. He just disappeared."

Luis banged the back of his head against the bathroom door. "What did I get myself into?"

"I never said there wouldn't be risks."

"This was supposed to be easy money. A year or two and then we both got what we wanted and moved on. We're not even on the right side of this gang war, are we?"

"No, we're part of the Juarez Cartel. They've decided to kill us, not recruit us, and take over the majority—if not all—the drug trafficking on the El Paso side."

Luis uncrossed his arms and dropped his eyes. "We're screwed."

Berta was the exact opposite of screwed. She hadn't been completely honest. Luis still didn't know her father was one of the top leaders of the Juarez Cartel. Berta could see the door of her family's cage cracking open. "No, we're not, because we know exactly where the stash is and they don't . . . but they'll find out soon enough. That's why I need you to go into work now."

Luis didn't move.

"Luis! I'm not fucking around. We need the drugs and cash at your lot. It's real simple, you go into work, grab the stuff first chance you get and then we leave."

"Don't we have enough already? We could just leave now."

"No, we don't. Even with the fighting they're going to notice and we have to make a clean start. Any slip up and they will find

us and kill us. Quickly, if we're lucky." Berta forced herself to add a soothing tone to her voice. "This is our one chance. While everything is still crazy, we move now, make a grab for the rest and then we're gone before they can put someone in place to stop us." Berta grabbed Luis's shirt and pants and handed them to him.

Luis took the clothes and said, "If anything looks or feels wrong, we leave now, so pack everything and get it in the car."

**"So this is to all you lil vato locos out there who think gangs are something special. If your in it already. You already sold your soul. Your think you know wats up. Til you got a bullet hole." -  
Southsider**

Duke slipped into Armando's room dressed in a dress shirt and slacks. No one had given him a second look as he walked through the hospital.

Light snoring came from the bed past the bathroom. Duke took in the plush furnishings in different colors. As he approached the hospital bed, wooden shutters covering the window filtered in the sunlight.

An old man lay in the bed. A light-blue blanket hid his body. The bones of the old man's face protruded. Sparse, white hair stuck up at odd angles from his head. The white stubble on his chin and cheeks made him look like a prickly cactus. Small sores and larger brown splotches covered the visible skin on his arms.

A white dry-erase board hung on the wall at the foot of the bed. The names of the nurses were there but no patient name. Duke moved to the side across from the pole holding several different colored bags of fluids. He slid the hospital bracelet until the information faced him.

Armando Gallego had been so easy to find.

Duke flicked a row of shutters up to let in more light. He leaned over the old man and searched his face for some resemblance. This was his relative. This was the man who had made bastards of his entire family.

With a small tug at the pillow behind Armando's head, Duke could smother him too. In life Armando and Maria had led vastly different lives, but in death, they would be the same.

Two quick snorts and a sloppy chop-chop of the old man's toothless jaws signaled he was waking up. The heavy folds around his eyes moved.

Duke stared until the old man focused on his face.

"Enfermero? Nurse?" Armando's voice rasped like two wooden boards rubbing against each other.

Duke shook his head "no."

"Doctor?" Armando was like his great-grandmother. He'd reverted to speaking only Spanish with age.

"No," Duke answered and continued in Spanish, "I am not here to help you." He tightened his grip on the bed rails. "Maria de Salvo."

Armando's wrinkled face hid any change of expression.

Duke drew out each word. "Maria de Salvo."

Armando's eyes blinked once, twice. Then, he turned his face to the wall. There was a shhp shhp of the sheets as he moved aimlessly.

Duke grabbed Armando's prickly jaw and turned it until their eyes met. The look of shock and surprise registered through the wizened face. "You raped Maria de Salvo in a field next to a horse. I'm her great-grandson. Your bastard."

Armando's lips flopped in and out with every breath he took. "No. No!"

"Look at me. I don't look like my grandfather or father. I look just like you."

Whatever surge of energy that had roused Armando now seeped away. His jaw went slack until it slipped from Duke's grip.

"Where is she?"

Duke backed away. "Dead." He watched the old man's face transform as a range of emotions flowed through him. He finally settled on resignation.

Armando held up his hand, thumb cocked and pointer finger extended. Tremors shook his whole arm as he pointed at himself and bent his thumb. When Duke didn't respond, he laid his other hand on his chest and pointed at himself and bent his thumb again.

He wants me to kill him. Duke choked out a laugh. Figures.

The door creaked open. "Grandpa?" A female's cheerful voice carried down the short hall.

Duke dug in his pocket for his sunglasses. "You son of a whore. I think I'll let you live and make your family suffer instead." He put the sunglasses on and faced the woman coming down the hall.

"Oh, hello. Are you—?"

Duke approached the slight, black-haired woman. He slipped a foot behind hers and slammed his forearm into her chest. Her mouth opened into a surprised "O," eyes wide. She landed on the floor with a loud Ophf. Duke skipped over her and exited the room.

**"If your neighbors think you're a detective because a cop always brings you home, you might be redneck."  
- Jeff Foxworthy**

Frankie paced back and forth in their galley kitchen. "What did he want? Did he take anything?"

Alicia leaned against the kitchen counter, rubbing her arms. "Nothing was taken. I have no idea who it was."

"I know the investigating officer. He's good. I'll talk to him personally tomorrow." Frankie stopped pacing and drew Alicia to his chest. "Are you hurt?"

"No." Not hurt, but she had visited the bathroom every half hour to check if she'd started bleeding. Now she definitely wasn't going to tell Frankie she was pregnant until a couple more months had passed.

"I'm sorry. I wish I had been there."

"I know."

"What about your grandfather?"

Frankie felt her chest expand and contract before her muffled voice answered, "Technically he's on the mend. The spots on his lungs were blood clots, not cancer, and the doctor also thinks that was causing the low blood pressure. The bladder infection is gone. The pneumonia has really left him weak since he can't move, but the biggest problem now is he's stopped eating."

"Have they mentioned hospice?" Frankie tried to keep hold of her as he leaned back against the kitchen counter.

Alicia pushed away and paced back and forth, keeping her voice low—Frankie assumed—so her mother, Marta, wouldn't hear this conversation. She rubbed her forehead as if a headache was in her future.

"If Grandpa goes to hospice, he'll die." Alicia stopped in front of Frankie, arms crossed.

Frankie couldn't meet her gaze. "I can't believe force-feeding him is the answer. If the doctor said that was an option, then he thinks it's probably that time. They do things to extend life for people who are going to get better, not for people who are terminal."

"I am not going to let him starve to death," Marta stated clearly from the other end of the galley kitchen.

"Mom—"

"No, it is not an option. If there is still something that can be done to save him, then that's what will be done." Marta turned on her heel and left Frankie and Alicia. They heard the second bedroom door slam shut.

Frankie couldn't hide his frustration. "How else will this end? Isn't this making him suffer?"

"It's not our choice," Alicia said.

Frankie softened his expression; it wasn't Alicia he should be arguing with. "You're right. It's not our choice. It's his. Let your grandfather decide."

Alicia gave a humorless snort. "I don't think he's going to choose to starve to death, and the doctor has to give him all the options even though he's talked to us first."

"Okay, so who's going to take care of him? Is your mom going to move back to El Paso?" Frankie threw up his hands. "Even if she did, it's not like she'd be much help."

"You're right about that. I love her, but she's no use. My uncle has three young kids to go along with his young wife."

Frankie started to protest.

Alicia cut him off. "I'm not starting that fight again, but the point is my uncle can't just pick up and move back. My aunt and grandmother are gone. I guess that leaves me and—" She aimed a fierce look at Frankie. "I'm not sure I'm willing to let Abuelito starve to death either."

"Don't say it like that."

"No, let's be blunt. Death is how it all ends, right?" In a casual tone, Alicia said, "I'll have to resign and take care of him."

"Resign? Quit your job in the middle of the year?" Frankie's voice rose a notch before he could stop himself.

"Yes. It's an emergency. Besides, I've been teaching for twenty years. The district wants us to retire. New teachers start out being paid thousands less."

"Is that what you want?"

"If you're worried about money, I can pull from my retirement now. We'll have to be careful. And there's Grandfather's retirement. We would be fine."

Frankie's eyes roamed around the kitchen in uncertainty, settling on anything but her.

"This will work. I'll get the paperwork started tomorrow. Mom can come and go as she needs to." Alicia looked at her small galley kitchen. "We'll move into Grandpa's house. With four bedrooms, he has more than enough room." Alicia turned to walk away. "I would do the same for you. I wouldn't just let you die." Without waiting for a reply, Alicia left the kitchen.

**"I'm my own salesman. I can't let anybody do anything for me." - Fred Durst**

Luis arrived late to work for the first time in two years. He thought over what Berta had told him. The stash at the dealership was big. It was cash and drugs. It was a risk. They had get-out-of-town money but not start-your-life-over money. Berta had insisted they could pocket the cash, and that Chaneco didn't know the exact amount anyway, and they could trade the drugs to buy them time to leave El Paso forever.

So here he was limping back and forth out front, his legs still sore from the beating with the bat, getting funny looks from his co-workers and manager, waiting for a lull in the action to send Berta the text it was okay to move the stash to his car. She was waiting up the street from the dealership at Smokey's BBQ, where they had their first date. A jacket and the scant heat from the November day kept him warm. The reflection in the glass showed a tense man pulled tight as a bow.

Jorge approached him. The guy had to be an idiot not to know to stay away from him today of all days.

"I need some help."

"What now?" Luis's clipped tone didn't deter Jorge.

"A customer brought his trade-in, and while the used-car manager was out looking over the car, he laughed. The guy is pissed. He thinks he's laughing at his car. It is a piece of shit, but I need this deal. I'm begging, man: please, help me close it."

Luis's first instinct was to walk away, but a little action might keep his mind off the fact that sundown was hours away from now.

"Give me the details," Luis said.

Luis approached the customer and talked with him briefly. As he grabbed the paper from Jorge, he said, "Watch this."

Arturo was tapping away on his computer when Luis marched up and whispered, "Play along."

"What?" Arturo cocked his head back.

"Just play along."

Arturo kept the puzzled look on his face as Luis started his tirade. "He's just looking for an honest deal on his trade and you guys are out there laughing at it? You look at those numbers and I dare you to tell me it can't be done!" Luis threw the paper on the counter as his finale.

"I'm doing the best I can here!" Arturo yelled and snatched up the paper.

Luis returned to the customer. "Give my manager a minute to look over the deal. I'm sure he'll see it's a fair one." The customer shook his hand with vigor, thanking him for his time.

When Luis passed Jorge, his face was slack with disbelief. "What the hell just happened?" he whispered.

"All part of the show," Luis said as he headed back outside. Jorge followed him. "When you gave me the details, I knew Arturo could get that approved. The customer just wanted to see someone put up a fight for him. Take his side."

"Thanks, man. I got my bonus with that deal."

"No sweat. Concentrate on selling cars; the rest will come."

The PA system crackled to life. "Luis Ramirez to the tower. Luis to the tower."

"What now?" Luis muttered and turned around to head into the dealership again.

There were three entrances to the showroom floor. Brand new cars glittered as Luis entered, using the center door. Behind the counter Arturo pointed to the left door and mouthed the word "customer." Luis looked and saw a guy shifting back and forth, his hands randomly touching his pockets and buttons on

his shirt, as if moving to some internal rhythm. Luis squinted as he approached, not recognizing him. "Can I help you?"

"Luis Ramirez?"

"Yeah." Luis's pulse snapped up a notch.

"Cool. Cool. Friends call me Scooby." The man danced in place, his arms moving in time to his speech. "I'm looking for a car, and a friend recommended this dealership."

"Great. What's his name?"

"What's his name?"

Flashes of red went off in Luis's head. He swallowed down a pint of fear and said, "If I sold him or her a car, they get a bird dog. That's a hundred bucks for a referral."

"Oh, right. Lars."

Luis made a sucking noise through clenched teeth and shook his head. "That name doesn't sound familiar."

"Pero, but, it doesn't matter, right?" Scooby's hands paused their movement.

"Nope." There was no way Luis was getting into a car with this guy. Luis tossed the hand-buzzer that looked like a key to Scooby. "I just got done showing this car." He held the door open and motioned him to go first. "Aim it at that car right there."

Scooby walked past him out the door, his face teeming with concentration at the key. "How does this work?"

"Just press that button . . . ."

Scooby did, dropped the hand-buzzer and yelled, "Chingada—Son of a—"

Luis hiked his sore leg up as far as it could go and kicked Scooby from behind, sending him flying across the concrete. He slammed the door shut and started running for the back as Arturo roared behind him, "What are you doing?"

"Here he is." Jorge and a man in a suit entered from the right of the showroom.

When Luis turned to look to his right, the guy called Luis's name with the hard note of authority. He heard the left entrance

door open with a stream of curses. Luis turned around and ran out the center entrance. Shouts of alarm trailed after him until the door cut them off. Luis took the steps two at a time until his bruised legs gave out and he tumbled the rest of the way down.

A big, blond-haired man hauled him to his feet, as if picking a flower. "Luis Ramirez?"

"That's him, Drew!" A shout from the man with Jorge came from the top of the stairs.

"Luis Ramirez, you're wanted for questioning in the deaths of Jesus Munoz and Gloria Sanchez."

**"You have to grow from the inside out. None can teach you . . . ." - Swami Vivekananda**

Alicia clicked the lid closed on the last clear, plastic tub. It would make it easier for her to remember what was in it. As if she would be returning to work. She looked around the classroom devoid of any personal touches.

The doctor called her into his office, sat her down and talked. There would be complications. He would be watching the development of the baby closely. There would be tests, possibly bed rest. Alicia nodded her understanding; she was older, her uterus wasn't normal. Alicia left the doctor's office giddy. At least the baby was growing. Today, everything was okay and she would take each day as it came. She vowed to 'live in the now' and adopt other slogans optimistic people used.

Her grandfather was home and recovering but feeble. He walked with the help of a walker. Guardrails were installed in the bathroom and a special seat with handrails around the toilet. With the doctor's prescription, she'd ordered a new bed with rails that stood higher up so it would be easier for him to get in and out.

Alicia hesitated a moment longer then opened the lid and fished around for a black, permanent marker. She began writing "FREE" on all the tubs, which were neatly packed and ready to go. In her condition she shouldn't be lugging tubs around.

Alicia thought part of this new 'live in the now' shouldn't include waiting to tell Frankie after all. Then he wouldn't think she was crazy, trying to stay home and take care of her grandfather. She was pregnant, and the pregnancy would be difficult. Her mind made up, she would ask Frankie to meet her

for dinner at a strip mall near her grandfather's house. The day was warm enough they might be able to sit outside.

Alicia snapped the cap back on the marker and tossed it in the tub closest to her. There. Time to just let it all go. As you got older, there were so many things you didn't need. Maybe she would write. Students always needed good literature. Who better to create a good, teachable story than a teacher?

She felt guilty telling a couple of her teacher friends before Frankie that she was expecting. They were supportive and teased her about how taking care of her grandfather was like taking care of big baby. Alicia couldn't disagree. Her grandfather wore adult diapers that needed to be changed. Plus mats placed on sitting surfaces in case of accidents. He had to be dressed and bathed. His feeding tube cleaned. At least he'd gained some weight.

Alicia's footsteps clicked on the tiled floor of the school hallway. Right now a state health-care provider came every day to stay with them and help her clean and cook. It left her a little time to get out of the house when she needed to sneak off to the doctor's office and get the car its regular oil change. So many things on her to-do list.

The double doors in front of her glowed with the midday sunlight. She'd already said her goodbyes. A metallic bang echoed behind her as she left the school building.

**"Every city in the world always has a gang, a street gang, or the so-called outcasts." - Jimi Hendrix**

Duke stifled a yawn as he watched the few people mill around the garage owned by his father and grandfather. When they suggested holding the reception after the service at the garage and not the house, Duke realized they expected him to pay someone to clean great-grandmother's house. He'd already settled the bills for the hospital and funeral and was now in debt to Chaneco. He wasn't about to add any more. Only Rooster, Scooby and Nectar knew this, but that didn't make it any easier. The bill needed to be settled—and quickly—before word spread.

The few who did show up were men and looking for free drinks, which flowed from a keg in the back. Folding lawn chairs were strewn out over the compact, concrete parking lot. Some men were already getting too loud.

A car pulled up to the open gate and parked halfway inside. Duke straightened as a petite, black-haired woman got out, shielded her eyes from the sun and scanned the area. Duke's grandfather shambled forward, doing a little side-step to keep his balance.

They talked, and the woman's face dropped and her mouth formed an "O." Duke could read her lips saying, "I'm sorry," as she placed a hand on his grandfather's arm. His grandfather ate up the attention from the nice-looking woman, and then she drove off. Something familiar about her tugged at Duke.

"Who was that?" Duke said as his grandfather approached.

"Regular customer. Her family's been bringing their cars here forever."

"What's her name?"

"Rodriguez." Armando leaned at a dangerous angle before righting himself again. "No, wait. That's her married name. Her husband is a cop." He pointed a shaky finger at Duke. "Don't mess with cops. Her grandfather was the first one to bring his car to me. Said he didn't trust no one but me to work on his car." Armando let out a high-pitched laugh. "I charged that viejo, that old man, out the ass, but he was always happy. The ones that pay are always happy. The ones that ask for discounts are never happy."

Duke's ears rang. The white noise looming at the edges. The woman was the one he had knocked down while leaving Armando Gallego's hospital room. "What's his name?"

His grandfather let out another high-pitched laugh. "Armando. Just like me. Only he's Armando Gallego. That viejo brought his whole family here to get their cars serviced. They never complained about the charges. I tell you: the ones that pay are always happy."

Duke waited until everyone who stayed for the reception was good and drunk before entering his grandfather's office. Everything was still done by paper. A smudged 10-key calculator sat on the desk. The numbers had been rubbed off from wear and grime.

His grandfather never threw anything away. Duke thumbed through the thick file of receipts from the Gallego's family. Armando Gallego brought his vehicles to the DeSalvo's Auto Shop starting in 1979. The whole family used the auto shop at one time or another. Duke even knew about the time the women in the family married because their last name would change.

Only two names appeared since five years ago: Alicia Rodriguez and Armando Gallego. One year ago even Armando Gallego's name dropped off. That piece of shit knew. He'd

known all along. Duke pocketed a couple of receipts with addresses on them.

"What're you doing in here?"

Duke clicked the file cabinet shut and stood up to face his father. Might of known he would be the only pendejo, asshole, not drinking.

"Nothing," Duke said.

"I keep all the records for the store to do the taxes. You're not supposed to be in here."

He's nothing but a bastardo, common bastard, and all he's worried about are papers. Papers that mean nothing. Duke's face drew inward, his lips curling in hatred. His forearm slammed into his father's throat and pinned him against the wall. "We're bastards. Nothing. Worse than nothing." Spit landed on his father's nose and cheeks.

"Mando!" His father's choked voice brought Duke around. He loosened his hold. His father's rough and calloused hands grabbed his forearm and shoved Duke across the small office. Duke's back hit the desk. The metal legs screeched across the concrete floor.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Duke's father rubbed his throat. His fingers tattooed black from years of working with grease and oil. "This is our shop. We work here. We tried to get you into a legitimate business, but what did you do? Ran off and joined a gang."

A stream of spit landed inches from Duke's boot. "You've brought nothing but shame on this family. Your mother ran off because of you."

Duke's fist flew through the air, but his father dodged it at the last second. Pain flowed up Duke's arm to his shoulder as his fist smashed into the cinder block wall. Rough hands grabbed him by his shirt collar and a shove to his backside sent him out into the parking lot.

Laughter, shouts and talk died on beer-tainted breath. Duke spun around and fixed his father with murderous eyes.

"You think you're something because you're in a gang? You had a real family. Now you are less than nothing." His father faced Duke with shoulder's squared for a fight.

A high-pitched laugh carried across the small parking lot. "What's a family without a little fighting?" His grandfather struggled to rise from the lawn chair but fell back. "Ya! Parate! Hey, stop! I know you're upset. No more fighting, mijos, my sons."

"This isn't a family." Duke cracked his neck. "Maybe you didn't hear me. We're bastards." He pointed to his grandfather sitting in the lawn chair, his face slack from drink. "His mother, your grandmother, my great-grandmother, was raped, and the fucker that did it has been bringing his cars here to be serviced, to pay to watch his bastards grow up."

His father's shoulders slumped in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"Maria was right. She was going to die with that stain on her forever because you two spineless bastards would have never stood up to him." Duke pointed at his grandfather. "You were just happy to eat the scraps under the table. And you." His gaze swiveled back to his father. "If mother left it was because you were a cold piece of shit."

Duke strode up and slammed his fingers in Armando's chest. "I have a family. I'm the leader of the Chaneco gang. The largest gang in El Paso. And this." He waved his hand over the DeSalvo's Auto Shop. "You can kiss all this goodbye."

Flaco and Gordo pulled Duke away from his father and inside the SUV. The big men were twitchy the way horses are before an earthquake. Gordo even snorted.

The address on the receipt was faded but legible. Alicia, his granddaughter, lived two neighborhoods down.

Duke crumpled the paper in his hand and tossed it on the floor. "Who's called in?"

"Scooby did, and he missed Luis Ramirez." Flaco cringed. "The cops have him."

The white noise dimmed in Duke's head. A plan formed in its place. "You tell Scooby, Rooster and Nectar to stop what they're doing and meet me now."

The heads of the Chaneco gang stood outside a shabby house with flaking and faded stucco. Scooby's feet kicked up sand and dust nervous from failing to catch Luis. Nectar looked nervous and Rooster looked excited.

"Can you do it, Rooster?" Duke asked.

"Si, yes, sure. I mean it's just the woman right?"

"Yes, but I want her alive. Hurt her if you have to but do not kill her."

Rooster's head bowed in like a predator's as he walked off.

"I don't know, Duke." Nectar leaned a shoulder against the house.

"Not now Nectar, you take Scooby and get that stash. Scooby don't fuck up again."

Scooby took off like a shot. Nectar pushed away from the house and ambled by and gave a lingering look at Duke. "I hope this works out."

"Relax Nectar, what could go wrong?"

**" . . . every man at the bottom of his heart believes that he is a born detective." - John Buchan**

Frankie and Drew stood shoulder to shoulder, heads bowed. "Well?"

Frankie glanced over Drew's shoulder at Luis flipping through a mug-shot book. "I think he's telling the truth. He even came clean about being a runner. Even if he isn't telling the truth, the fact that he can and more importantly, will, ID members of the Chaneco gang means Luis Ramirez is our new best friend."

Frankie placed a hand on Drew's shoulder and moved him over an inch. Luis had just slumped down and dug his palms into his eyes. "Hold on." Frankie walked over and rapped on the desk in front of Luis. "Need a break?" he asked.

Luis shook his head no.

"You sure? How about some coffee?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Frankie, come here a sec," Drew called out behind him.

"Yeah," Frankie answered, and then leaned over Luis. "The sooner you identify someone, the sooner we can make sure you and Roberta are safe." Frankie lifted his eyebrows and gave a nod. Luis squared his jaw, and then went back to looking at mug shots. What Frankie wasn't telling Luis is that the patrol officer had already called in. Roberta had checked out earlier that morning.

Drew tapped a notepad against his finger, waiting for Frankie to draw out of Luis's earshot. "DeSalvo's Auto Shop." He paused. "Don't you use that place?"

"Yeah. Alicia's family swears by them. I always thought they were way overpriced."

"Maybe that's why it was set on fire."

Luis watched the detectives talk together. He was not going to give Berta up. Soon after he was handcuffed and dumped in the back seat, police cars filed into the dealership—red and blue lights refracted in the glass walls. He'd glanced around, but there were no signs of Berta. The cops would find the drugs and money. It was over.

Even though Berta'd never said it out loud, Luis was fairly certain that getting the money and leaving El Paso was more important to her than him. So important, her life might depend on it. The least he could do was try to identify Chaneco. The sooner the pressure was on the gang responsible for this, the better for everyone.

**"A really good detective never gets married." -  
Raymond Chandler**

Luis slid the photo toward Frankie. "This is him."

Frankie sat up straight. "How sure are you?"

"110%. This is one of the men that jumped me that night."

"Did you hear a name?"

"No. They never used names. But this is him. He hasn't changed his haircut. It's a Mohawk."

Frankie's phone rang, startling him. "Just a second, Luis." It was Alicia. "Alicia, honey. I'm sorry. I got tied up here and forgot about dinner."

"Frankie, you are not canceling on me." He could hear the edginess in her voice.

"Honey, I can't leave now." Frankie swung his head left and right, looking for Drew. "I'll make it up to you."

"Frankie Rodriguez, detectives have to eat too. You're only thirty-minutes away. I can wait."

"Alicia—"

"If you don't make arrangements to meet me, I'll call Drew myself."

Frankie rubbed his forehead, exasperated. "Alicia."

"Frankie."

"I'll see what I can do and call you right back. Even if I get away, I'll only be able to stay for fifteen—thirty minutes tops."

"I'll see you in a little bit then," Alicia said. The line went dead. Drew rounded the corner of the hall. Frankie snapped his fingers. "Drew!"

"Yeah. What's up?"

"Luis identified one of the attackers."

"Right on. Do we have a name?" Frankie handed Drew the picture.

"Manuel Ortega aka Rooster," Drew read. "Catchy."

"Look, is there any way you can cover me for about an hour? Alicia needs to talk to me, and I haven't been home much except to shower."

Drew flicked the mug shot against his palm.

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

"I know. Go. Call me when you're done, and I'll figure out a safe place to stash our witness."

"Thanks. I owe you."

"I won't let you forget," Drew said. Frankie felt a slap on his shoulder as he turned and trotted down the hall toward the exit.

Frankie entered the strip mall. Alicia had picked a bakery that served a casual dinner—sandwiches and soup. When she waved him over, he saw his usual sitting on a plate across from her. At least he wouldn't have to wait for service. Frankie glanced up and blinked rapidly. A young man with a Mohawk had just done an about-face behind Alicia.

He passed right by Alicia's table and heard her ask, "Frankie?" His eyes locked on the white T-shirt in front of him. It can't be him. Manuel Ortega aka Rooster glanced over his shoulder in Frankie's direction.

How could he know they had Luis? As soon as he thought it, Rooster took off at a run. Frankie felt a tug on his arm. "Frankie, what's going on?"

He shrugged off Alicia and barked, "Stay here!" Frankie ran after the disappearing white T-shirt and tried to dodge people in the strip mall, but a young woman stepped in front of him. Frankie sent them both skidding across the tiled floor.

"What the hell?" the young woman yelled at Frankie as she sat up.

Frankie held up his badge. "Police!" Scrambled to his feet and took off. He skidded to a stop at the intersection in front of him. A distant bang to his right caught his attention. He saw a tan, metal door swinging shut with a bright-red EXIT sign above it. Frankie sprinted down the short hallway, slammed through the door and found himself on the sidewalk outside the strip mall facing a large parking lot. He swung himself right and left, trying to determine which way Rooster had fled.

Movement on his left. He glimpsed a Mohawk disappearing into the night. Frankie ran after him, confident he could gain enough ground before Rooster got into his car. A figure slid over the top of a two-door sedan with a slight thud. The figure crouched on the driver's side.

Frankie drew his gun, holding it out in front. "Police! Rooster, stop right there." He almost reached the car when the door cracked open, allowing Frankie to see Rooster climb into the car. The car door slammed shut. "Rooster! Stop!" Frankie came running up to the passenger-side door as the car roared to life.

Rooster rolled down the passenger-side window, leaned over and yelled, "Fuck you, pendejo, asshole!"

Frankie didn't hesitate. He dove through the open window as the car backed out of the parking spot. He braced his hands on the inside of the door, trying to bring his gun up. The window tightened around his waist, pinning him.

"Rooster, stop, or I'll shoot!"

A grin slid over Rooster's face as he finished backing out and accelerated forward.

Frankie's feet skipped along the pavement as the car sped up. Losing his balance, he saw Rooster lean forward to reach behind his back. Screams flowed past as people dodged out-of-the-way of the oncoming car. Frankie braced his right arm with the gun

against the dash to right himself in the window while the tips of shoes dragged behind him.

When Frankie looked back, Rooster had a gun leveled at him. Time slowed as Frankie watched Rooster cock the gun. Frankie braced himself for the pain that would shortly follow. There was no way Frankie could swing his gun around in time.

The car hit something large with a heavy thunk, and it hurtled upward as both guns went off. When the car landed, the air from Frankie's lungs left him in a whoosh, but he kept pulling the trigger in the general direction of the driver's seat.

Frankie was thrown forward as the car veered to the right and crashed into several more parked cars, nearly pinning him between them. Click, click, click. Wet, gurgling noises were coming from the driver's side. Frankie's body strained for air.

He slammed his palm down on the window button. Lights did a jig in front of his eyes. Frankie slumped to the ground and took two, long lungfuls of air before he could stand. Using the car for support, he made his way around and yanked the driver's side door open.

Rooster's eyes were wide, and his breath was coming in fast, shallow gasps. Blood was blossoming out from several places on his white shirt. Rooster's right hand swept along the car seat next to him. His gun was just out of reach.

Frankie pushed it to the passenger-side floorboard, grabbed Rooster by the front of his shirt until he was only a breath away from his face and said, "Don't you die on me, you son of a bitch!"

## **"I think like a detective." - Laurell K. Hamilton**

Frankie felt numb, as if his real self hovered about six inches above him. Officers passed back and forth, sometimes stopping to ask questions. Alicia had been there for a fleeting moment, her usually serene face twisted by worry and fear, before being whisked away.

Fear lingered at the edges of Frankie's consciousness. Not for himself—in fact, at no point during the chase and shootout with Rooster did he feel afraid. The sounds of the car accelerating, of bystanders screaming around him. Frankie's fear was aimed at what might have happened to others, not to himself.

Time ceased to exist, and he now floated in limbo, waiting to be moved from one location to the next. He knew from his training that both guns used in the altercation were being examined; bullets were even being counted. Officers had been dispatched to his house, Alicia's grandfather's, and his parents' house. Rooster had a long and distinguished rap sheet, most of it gang related. The threat of more violence before the night was over hung unspoken in the air around him.

Drew came and went. Bringing him tidbits of news and asking if he was okay. The first thing everyone said when they approached him was, "Are you okay?" Frankie wanted to burst out laughing. Of course I'm okay! Remember what they taught us in the police academy? Whatever happens, you'll survive. You'll always survive.

The EMT had taken care of Frankie's injuries. They were minor compared to Rooster's, who sat covered with a white sheet. He had died while Frankie sat next to him waiting on help to arrive. Wheezing and rattling accompanied every breath like

an Indian rain stick being turned end over end. Then, one time it didn't, and there was silence.

Death was a complete and utter cessation of life. The totality of it sent Frankie's mind reeling.

Frankie pitched forward, as if to touch his toes. Drew's voice—with a note of panic—called out, "Frankie?"

The tunnel vision that aided Frankie during the fight had left and Drew's face swam and blurred in front of him as he stood up. "Why was he here?"

"Who?"

"Rooster, I could swear he was waiting behind Alicia. What would scum like that want with her? How would he even know about her?"

"I honestly don't know, Frankie, but we'll find out. If Rooster's fingerprints show up at the crime scenes at the Villa apartments, you're a hero. I'm going to see how much longer. Then I'll take you home so you can call your family, let them know you're safe. This is going to make the evening news for sure."

Hours later, when Drew dropped Frankie off at his house, the world had finally started its normal rotation around the sun. Frankie felt fine now except he was so exhausted that his body ached. He sat on the couch, fielding calls from family and friends about the shooting.

Alicia reminded him of the hummingbirds that migrated here every year on their way to Mexico. She would hover next to him for a few moments, then dart off to her grandfather who always needed something adjusted, then return to Frankie's side.

He waved off her repeated offers of food and drink. When Frankie called his mother he was surprised by her reaction to the shooting. "How could you have killed that man? You've put your whole career in jeopardy."

She was interrupted when Frankie's father took the phone away. "Don't pay any attention to her. She's just scared."

"I know, Dad," Frankie said.

Alicia stood over him after he hung up. "What would she rather have happened? You dead instead of a criminal? Don't think I won't tell your mother that when I talk to her."

"There are police outside my parents' house. It's upsetting to her because she's afraid I'm the one in trouble."

Alicia looked determined. "You did what you had to do."

Frankie tried to take comfort in her certainty. "Alicia, has anything else happened?"

The change of topic made her frown. "You mean since that goon ran me over at the hospital?"

"If I showed you a picture, would you recognize him?"

"Honey, I told you I can't. The hallway doesn't have a light, and he had sunglasses on. Why? What does that have to do with this?"

"I don't know, Alicia that's what I'm trying to figure out. Did he have a Mohawk?"

"No, I'd have noticed something different like that. I want to say he was completely bald."

"Auxilio!" Her grandfather called from his bedroom down the hall. "Help me!"

"Abuelito? Grandpa?" Alicia said in exasperation. "He just wants me to sit by his side the whole time."

"Go see what he wants. We'll talk later." Frankie leaned back in the sofa. I'll just rest my eyes."

Frankie couldn't breathe. He pinwheeled his arms, trying to stop the falling sensation. He threw his elbows back and landed a blow. It felt good to make contact with something solid, so he jabbed behind him again. Where the hell am I?

"Frankie! Frankie, wake up!"

Hands grabbed his arm. He reached to his side and clung to the familiar body next to him. His eyes focused in the dim light.

"It's just a bad dream, baby. It's okay now. Everything's going to be okay," Alicia crooned, pulling him close.

Frankie's chest heaved as if he'd just broken the record on a hundred-yard dash. He didn't remember going to bed. What he did remember was the shiny, smooth steel of the gun pointed at his face. The creases in the knuckle of Rooster's finger on the trigger. The finger squeezing the trigger.

Frankie's chest heaved again in relief. The police determined that when the accelerating car hit a speed bump, Rooster's shot had gone through the windshield. Rooster had missed. Rooster was lying dead in the morgue. Frankie had survived.

**"She's a grifter, shamus. I'm a grifter. We're all grifters. So we sell each other out for a nickel." -  
Raymond Chandler - The Big Sleep**

The Coral Motel had been a staple of Montana Street for as long as Roberta could remember. It was a throwback to the 1950s with a Spanish-tile roof. The rooms formed an open square with the office on the left. Roberta's room was in the middle of the back row.

Roberta cursed as she threw her personal belongings into a suitcase. It was over. First Luis didn't text her, and then police cars started pouring into the car dealership's parking lot. One more day and she would have gotten away with everything. Roberta tugged the zippers closed on the suitcase and plunked down next to it on the bed. She'd left quick just in case Luis decided to tell the cops about her. She wouldn't blame him. Right now he was a suspect in two murders, and the drug dogs would eventually find the stash at the dealership. She'd ruined his life.

Now what? Keep moving forward? She had enough money to at least do that.

El Paso and Juarez were an island in an ocean of sand. The main roads out of town were all blocked by mandatory Immigration checkpoints. If Luis talked to the police, then her picture was being circulated at the bus stations, train stations, and airports. Juarez was even worse. There was no problem getting in. It was getting out. You couldn't travel any road in Mexico safely, let alone out of Juarez. The bus was safer at short distances but uncomfortable as hell. It might be easier to get a plane out except she would have to explain away a suitcase full of money. She could hide it with enough time.

There was also the small fact that Roberta was a US citizen. Her mother had wanted a better life for her child. She'd rented an apartment for the last three months of her pregnancy to make sure Roberta was born in the US and would have full citizenship. With the proper documents in hand, she'd returned to Juarez to live. She'd made sure to get Roberta a US passport and take her over as often as she could to visit relatives.

Roberta shoved her suitcase off the bed.

First thing: get out of here. Keep moving forward. If she gave up, she would be dead. La Linea or her father would know about the deception and kill her. Chaneco would kill her just because they could.

A lifetime ago she sat in her Economics class. The professor, in the middle of his lecture, said something that struck her as profound. Success requires giving up: giving up things, time and money in order to be where you want to be in life. Roberta was willing to give up everything but her life.

Next stop: Juarez, Mexico. Home.

**"Drug prohibition has caused gang warfare and other violent crimes by raising the prices of drugs so much that vicious criminals enter the market to make astronomical profits, and addicts rob and steal to get money to pay the inflated prices for their drugs." - Michael Badnarik**

Patience. These past few weeks grated on Duke's nerves. What started out as a plan for revenge became a necessity for survival. The money and drugs were with the cops. Scooby had stuck around long enough to see them arrive.

Duke raged at his gang. His cool demeanor stripped away to a seething fury. He knocked heads together or threw whatever was closest when they brought him bad news. The heads rolling in the streets of Juarez would soon be their own.

Flaco and Gordo's grim faces met his. "Find the maricon, faggot." Duke seethed. "I don't care where the police have him hidden. Find him. Find out what he knows, then kill him."

Duke, Scooby and Nectar locked themselves in a windowless back room with only one entrance. Duke sat with his hands clenched in front of him. The veins in his arms standing out from the pressure. "I shouldn't have sent Rooster alone."

Scooby paced a few steps, and then gave a little hop and paced again. Duke hated it when he did this, but if he asked him to stop, he'd only fidget or do something else just as annoying. Nectar leaned against the far wall. The bulge of an orange in his front pocket. "Sinaloa doesn't like loose ends, Duke. I know you want revenge, but we should have gotten rid of the runner first.

"They're not going to let you take over until they're sure things are secure here."

A muscle in Duke's jaw pulsed. "How do they know about the runner?"

"The news. They busted the dealership and found the drugs. Rooster was like a brother to me, but he slacked off. He should have taken that runner out when he had him and not screwed around with that woman at the apartments. She wasn't involved." Nectar fingered the orange in his pocket but didn't take it out. "We lost the drugs, the money, and we don't know how much Ramirez has told the cops. Now all the stash houses for La Linea are no good. We gotta save face and quick."

"Are we moving the stash?"

"I've got everyone working, but it's going to take time so we don't draw attention. If the other gangs think we're weak and hit us now . . ."

"What about the cop and my," Duke hissed the word, "cousin?"

There was a pause as Scooby and Nectar exchanged a look.

"The cops have finally left both houses." Nectar pushed himself off the wall. "Pero, but, you need to get back to what's important. We can take care of this personal vendetta later. As it is we gotta make up the money that went to pay for your great-grandmother. Burning down your family's garage . . ."

The air grew still; even Scooby stopped his perpetual motion, and silence ticked by. Duke took his time rising from the chair. "Do you have a problem with my orders?"

Nectar reached for his orange, drew it out and gave it a few tosses up and down. "You'll always be the leader." He leaned back against the wall. "This was supposed to be a simple takeover. I know losing your abuelita, great-grandmother was hard, but you've always taken care of us. Done right by us."

Duke sat down and dropped his arms by his side. "This is my fault. I let Rooster handle it, and I should have taken care of it

myself. I involved all of you in my personal business." Duke motioned to the other chairs. Scooby and Nectar both sat. "Mis hermanos, my brothers, the cartels want to be paid in blood, and that's what we're going to do."

## **"A detective sees death in all the various forms at least five times a week." - Evan Hunter**

Three weeks later Frankie sat in front of the large, flat-screen TV, shooting different players online. A repetitive rat-a-tat-tat of gunfire with occasional booms echoed in the living room. In the background derelict buildings shook for added effect to the explosions. The sounds coming from the TV didn't fully mask the conversation being played out in the kitchen between Drew and Alicia.

He knew they were discussing his lack of sleep, his endless hours of sitting in front of the TV playing video games, his non-responsiveness in therapy. The white-out, floaty-numb feeling Frankie had experienced right after the shooting had calmed him. He wanted that feeling back. In that state, whatever he'd done or not done didn't matter. Alicia should be thankful I'm not drowning in alcohol. But no, she wanted everything back to normal as soon as possible. Frankie snorted. Normal is not a word we can use anymore.

Therapy was no good. The doctor wanted Frankie to explain what was going on inside, and Frankie didn't have the words. His life would have been over in a second. Nothing left, nothing passed on. A black maw of nothingness would have snapped its jaws shut on his life. What came after that? What if he wasn't as good a man as he thought? At first, he tried to reconcile it by telling himself that Rooster was scum. Practically asked to be taken out. Probably saved lives by killing him. Doubts lingered. The slightest bit of life's outside pressure made him freeze. Better to be numb. Better to be oblivious.

On the TV screen, his avatar hitched up, arms flung back as pretend bullets riddled the body. The scene became fuzzy around the edges and splotches of red appeared. Tag, you're dead. He didn't have a microphone set up so he couldn't hear the inane chatter of the thirteen-year olds he was probably playing against.

The couch creaked as Drew sat down next to him. Frankie nodded his head dutifully at Drew's advice so he would leave. The numb buzz he'd worked so hard to build up was wearing off.

Alicia didn't buy it. Frankie could tell by the way she leaned against the corner of the room with her arms and ankles crossed. When Drew finally left after playing a couple of rounds of the shooter game, Alicia huffed, shook her head and left him alone.

Dawn gave the room an early morning glow. Frankie opened his eyes. When he realized what had woken him up, he paused to decide if he was really feeling frisky after weeks of nothingness or just had to pee. Nope, frisky. It's been a while. Frankie traced the outline of Alicia's body with his eyes. And if it's been a while for me . . . .

His movements were slow and sure from practice. Rub and nibble her back. She loved that. Cupping a breast from behind, he used his arm to turn her. His knee slid between hers and parted them. His arm slid down to raise her hips to his as he entered her from behind. He started slow. Felt her body tense once. Then he thrust rapidly to his finish. Frankie rested for a moment before sliding down to her side again. A few moments later, he did have to go to the bathroom. He rose slowly and closed the door to the bathroom behind him. He never noticed Alicia's tears.

Frankie sat warming his usual seat in front of the TV, playing a fighting game. The special moves were graphic with bones shattering, virtual clothes tearing and blood splattering at every hit. He couldn't lie: this was his favorite video game series, and he'd played it since he was a kid.

He heard a light, metallic click on the tiled floor at the end of the sofa on his right. Probably laundry. Frankie didn't look away from his game. Alicia had left him to himself all morning, and the repetitive moves from a couple of hours of playing had him floating in that calm, white nothingness.

"Frankie. Frankie."

An object soared right past Frankie's line of vision. He jerked back and heard the shattering of glass in the stone fireplace. The controller dangled from his hand as he gaped at the mess on the floor. The fight continued until the letters "K.O." filled the screen.

"Frankie!" Sound flooded back into his awareness. Alicia stood on the other side of the room. Her eyes were hard with anger. "Can you hear me now?"

"Alicia, what the hell? I just wanted to finish the fight." Frankie tried to sound convincing, even though he knew damn well there was a pause button.

"Don't lie to me, Frankie." Alicia was spitting nails now. "You didn't hear me. You don't hear or notice anything. Just like you didn't notice me this morning."

This morning? What did I miss this morning? "If I forgot to do something, you can just remind me." He motioned to the broken glass on the floor. "Not start throwing things. Jesus, Alicia. What's wrong with you?"

Alicia barked out a laugh. "What's wrong with me? Take a good look at yourself, Frankie. The problem is what's wrong with you."

A moment of complete focus came to Frankie. He didn't care. Holding the controller in both hands, he clicked "Try again!" on the screen.

A suitcase slid into Frankie's peripheral vision. "I feel it would be better if you stayed at the other house. At least until your therapy is done."

He hated the mandatory police therapy. "What the hell, Alicia? I'm doing the best I can. Sorry I'm not bouncing back to my happy old self as quickly as you'd like." Frankie flung the controller on the couch and stood up. "In case you hadn't noticed, Alicia, something happened to me."

Alicia's face crumpled. "And now you're taking it out on me!"

Frankie's eyes and arms flew wide in incomprehension. "How?"

"You didn't notice me this morning, Frankie. You didn't care if I was awake or not. I was just another thing to do. Another thing to take your mind off the fact you killed someone." Alicia's voice hitched as tears slid down her cheeks. "You have no right to treat me this way. You have no right to shut me out this completely."

The realization of what Alicia was referring to thudded into Frankie as if she'd chucked a brick at his head. She'd been awake, hadn't she? He paced back and forth. So what? "I've shut you out? What the hell do you think you've done to me for the past fifteen years?"

"That's not fair."

"Not fair? Exactly what has been fair about this marriage? You couldn't have kids and I stayed. The one time I feel a little out of sorts because I shot and killed a man and maybe treated you less than the queen that you are and you get pissed at me? Throw things at me?"

Alicia burst into tears. "But Frankie, I'm—"

"No! That's what you want and that's what you're going to get because I don't care anymore." Frankie stormed up to Alicia, picked up the suitcase and left.

Alicia called after her husband through her tears as he stormed out of the house. She wiped her fingers across her damp cheeks. It was just all too much, the pregnancy and whether she'd be able to keep it, her grandfather, Frankie's emotional state.

Armando called out from his room with an unintelligible request. Alicia's shoulder's hitched as she started crying again knowing by the time she got to his room he would have forgotten why he called her in the first place.

After the attack at the strip mall Alicia never found the right moment to tell Frankie she was pregnant. Then to be used this morning as if she wasn't even there. She was pregnant. She deserved to be handled with some care, some concern. But Frankie couldn't do that if he didn't know so it was her fault. She hiccuped twice then called down the hall, "One moment grandpa." Frankie would be back. They both needed to cool off and then she would not let anything or anyone get in the way of telling the Frankie the good news.

Being pregnant was good news.

**"We need to send a clear message to gang members  
that violent crime will not be tolerated." - Tim  
Bishop**

It was time. Duke headed around to the side of the house and hopped over the low, metal gate leading to the backyard. Tall and straight cypress pines and rock walls separated the sides and backyards of every house in El Paso. It was, literally, a city of walls and ornate, metal bars on every window and door.

Nectar was parked one house down, waiting.

The sliding back door was gated and locked. He could see the key hanging from a hook that said "keys" from the side of the kitchen cupboard. Duke tested the sliding-glass door. The door glided open silently. He reached his hand in between the bars, listening for any sound inside the house.

The refrigerator ticked in the darkness. The clock on the microwave oven glowed "one a.m." in green. His fingers brushed the keys. A slight fumble and they almost slipped through his fingers, but he caught them tight. The jingle the keys made echoed in the empty kitchen.

Duke paused and waited to hear footsteps. Nothing. He drew his arm back through the metal gate and slipped the key into the lock. The tumbler clicked open. Duke started to open the gate, which threatened to screech in protest. He stopped and closed the sliding-glass door and then opened the gate.

The size of the house was clear, even in the dark. There was a formal dining room, living room and den. Not to mention the kitchen with a separate breakfast nook. So much room to Duke, who had been raised in a cramped, two-bedroom house with windows that leaked sand when the wind blew.

A hall in front of him led to another hall with doors to the bedrooms. In the dim light, he counted four. He heard the faint hiss of a pump working in the bedroom directly in front of him. A light shown from the open door. He looked to his left and saw that the door at the end of the hall was also ajar.

The old man in the bed looked only slightly better than when he'd seen him in the hospital. His mouth slack from where his dentures had been removed for the night. An oxygen tube looped around his ears and rested on his upper lip under his nose.

Duke entered the bedroom and slid the door closed behind him.

**"In the practice of tolerance, one's enemy is the best teacher." - Dalai Lama**

The dogs stirred under the blankets, and Lefty gave a low growl. Alicia stirred in bed. She couldn't remember the last time they'd fought. Their arguments had lasted ten minutes tops. Twenty minutes, if it was really serious. Frankie might storm off, but then he would eventually appear. Circling her as she dropped dishes into the dishwasher, slopped clothes from the washing machine to the dryer or whisked the broom along the floor. Alicia cleaned when she was upset. Frankie would draw near, pull her into his arms and stroke her hair. Then they'd talk it out and all would be well. He'd left but what did she expect? She'd packed his suitcase, for Pete's sake. It would be fine. Tomorrow she would track Frankie down while the nurse was taking care of her grandfather and tell him he was going to be a father. Even if carrying the baby to term was a big question mark Frankie deserved to know and go through this with her.

Alicia tossed and turned and sniffled. I overreacted. What if he never came back? What if this was how it ended? Frankie was right: he'd stood by her through everything. When she couldn't conceive, retiring early, taking care of her grandfather. The sum of their marriage had been tallied and it was too much.

Years of marriage down the drain. Damn it, he needed to snap out of it. If Frankie was going to have to shoot someone for a good reason, this was about as good as it got. The guy was bad and did bad things. Why obsess over a shooting that clearly had to happen? Alicia had always been on good terms with his parents, but his mother had been so far out of line. Had her

comments really gotten to him? If he would just open up to her, to the counselor, to Drew, to anyone.

Frankie was going to be a father, and that's what would snap him out of it. She'd let him cool down, apologize, explain what was happening to her and life would get back to normal. Better than normal.

Alicia flipped over again, and then flung the covers off of her. She wasn't going to sleep tonight. She slipped on warm-ups and a tank top. In the bathroom, she splashed water on her face.

Might as well check on Grandpa. Pancho and Lefty stayed under the covers, whining. She locked them in the room. Abuelito, grandpa, was quiet tonight. He never indicated he heard the fight between Alicia and Frankie that evening, even though they'd made so much noise. Alicia grimaced at the memory of cleaning up the broken glass. She hadn't smashed something since the first year of their marriage.

Bare feet padded down the hallway toward her grandfather's door. She stopped, seeing a light seeping across the hallway carpet. Alicia knew his sleeping habits were all out of whack, but he'd never been up this late before. She froze at the sound of muffled voices. Was he talking to himself? The doctor had mentioned dementia.

The door was flung wide open as Alicia reached for its handle. A high-pitched sound, not loud enough for a scream, escaped through her lips just before a hand cinched around her arm and another squeezed her cheeks, painfully covering her mouth. She started to hyperventilate.

"Shhhh. It's okay, cuz. We were just talking." The man steered her toward the chair next to the bed and sat her down. "I mean it." The man's face filled her vision. "Do not make a sound."

He uncovered her mouth but kept the painful grip on her arm. She tried not to make a sound, but her breathing whistled in and out. Her heart thudding against her chest made her whole

body quake. Alicia's eyes roamed over her grandfather to see if he'd been injured. His face was drawn down in sorrow.

"My purse is in—"

"Uh-uh." The man brushed his thumb along her chin. "That's not why I'm here."

Alicia tried to breathe to calm herself. What could she do? She didn't know how to fight. Frankie had always wanted her to take self-defense classes, but she put it off. Now it was too late.

"My husband's a cop."

"I know, cuz."

"We're not related—" Alicia's face changed from scrunched up puzzlement to horror. Oh God. Oh God. Oh God. The gang. Whatever the hell the name was. He's with the gang. Oh God. She fought to swallow.

The man chuckled. "That's not the only reason I'm here." He leaned forward. "Abuelito, you have something to tell mi prima, my cousin, don't you?"

Indignation welled up in Alicia. "I'm not your cousin, and he's not your grandfather. We wouldn't be related to you."

The man didn't acknowledge her outburst. "Abuelito, if you don't tell her, I will."

Alicia watched her grandfather's face dissolve into tears. Without his dentures, his speech was slurred. As he mumbled, Alicia caught the words: "rape, pregnant, bastard, perdoname, forgive me."

"Who are you asking for forgiveness?" the man gave a fierce whisper. "Her? You should be asking forgiveness from me!"

Alicia tensed at his sudden anger but wasn't prepared when he bent his leg across her lap, pinning her to the chair. He leaned over her and started to stuff one of her grandfather's incontinence pads into her mouth. When she tried to hold her mouth closed, he bit down on her nose. Her scream was instantly cut off by the obstacle in her mouth. Her elbows were forced behind her and fastened. And her legs. Her eyes watered from the

gagging and pain. The man picked her up by the hair on the back of her head until she fell forward, her face inches from her grandfather.

"You see this family. This family you love so much." The man shook Alicia's head for emphasis. "I will take it from you." The man pulled Alicia's head back. Her scalp ached where she thought her hair would pull free from her scalp. "You will die as you deserve: alone."

When the man straightened, still holding Alicia up by her hair, Alicia screamed around the wadding in her mouth.

A red stain was spreading across the sheets, and her grandfather's face was folded in on itself crying, mouthing the words, "Perdoname, forgive me."

Alicia twisted so the blow he aimed at her stomach hit her hip instead. Something sticky like tape was placed over her eyes. The man grunted as she was lifted into the air, carried through the house, and out into the night.

**"What the detective story is about is not murder but the restoration of order." - P.D. James**

Frankie shouldered the front door open, keys in one hand and suitcase in the other. He dropped them both and kicked the front door shut behind him. Silence echoed through the house. They hadn't lived here in weeks. They debated putting it up for sale and buying her grandfather's house, but there was a reverse mortgage that would pay off his hospital debts when he did pass away. Frankie and Alicia decided they would just move back to their smaller home.

Alicia needed to calm the hell down. He was on leave. The force didn't even want him back on duty and when they did, he would be at a desk until his therapy was over; since that wasn't going well, the future tottered before him like a rickety, old, wooden bridge. Even Rooster's family was threatening to sue, citing police brutality.

I just need time. Frankie leaned back and shut the door. With a flick of his hand, he turned the front-door lock. Frankie decided he wasn't going to make it to the bedroom, and staggered to the couch. Then, he heard pop-pop-pop. Gunfire burst through the front of the house, sending shreds of material flying through the air.

Frankie dove for the floor, groping for his shoulder holster. Nothing. He was unarmed and had been for weeks. When the dust settled, Frankie was unhurt. His first thought was of Alicia. He cared. He cared now more than ever.

Frankie was back where he was several weeks ago. Police passed back and forth—only this time, Drew hovered by his side instead of Alicia. She was gone, her grandfather dead.

Chaneco had gotten their revenge.

Frankie grabbed Drew by the arm and pulled him down to the couch. "They found anything yet?"

"Some prints. They're going to rush through the results. Don't worry: we'll find who did this."

"That's it. Drew, pull them all in—every one of them—and grill them until someone talks."

"We're working on it." Drew tugged at Frankie's arm, which was still firmly gripping his.

"I need to talk to Luis myself."

"They're picking him up now. Our people are also talking to everyone at the dealership again. We'll get a lead."

"It's Luis—he's the one we need to lean on."

Drew finally dislodged his arm from Frankie's grip. "Get some things together. You're staying with me."

"Not until I talk to Luis first."

Frankie knew he was pushing Drew's loyalty, but he had to talk to Luis face-to-face. Drew was standing guard outside the interrogation-room door.

By Luis's expression, Frankie knew he must look bad. Good; he needed to scare the truth out of him.

"I'm not supposed to be here, Luis," Frankie started. "And my friend is watching the door to make sure we have plenty of time."

"I've told you everything I know."

Frankie sidled up to the table across from Luis and slammed his hands down. "My wife is gone. Probably dead. If you'd come clean earlier, my wife would still be alive."

Luis stood. "Come clean about what?"

Frankie grabbed Luis by the throat and dragged him across the table. Drew poked his head in through the door, and then withdrew. "There is no way you did this on your own. You don't go from speeding tickets to drug smuggling. Who were you working with?"

Luis laughed like a man standing before a firing squad.

Frankie flung him back in his chair. "You're as good as dead. You were brought in as fresh meat, nothing more. You're not aligned with anyone, which makes you highly expendable. You go to jail, you're dead. You end up back on the streets. We find you a week or two later, dead."

A minute later Frankie pulled the door open. Drew raised his eyebrows. "That was fast." Frankie stumbled past him. "What'd you get?"

"Nothing. Not a damn thing." Frankie mumbled.

Drew walked up behind Frankie and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Forensic results should be back soon. Narcotics, DEA, FBI are hitting their sources for information. We'll find something."

Frankie's heart pounded irregularly. Helplessness faced him at every turn. The only thought keeping him moving forward was finding Alicia and showing her just how much he cared. He'd gotten the information he needed from Luis. There was someone else, someone on the inside that knew a hell of a lot more than Luis and had maneuvered this whole situation. Her name was Roberta.

Frankie shrugged off Drew saying he was just going to stop by his desk for a minute. He made it past the other detectives with brief greetings or a nod of his head. At his desk, he flipped on his computer and started searching.

By the time Frankie finished he knew Roberta was neck-deep in the Juarez Cartel and that several agencies had eyes on her. If what Luis was saying was true, and Frankie had no reason to

believe otherwise, then Roberta dropped off their radar about the same time she started working with Luis.

Frankie's mouth was set in a grim line of determination. With all the resources at his department's disposal they were of little use to someone being held in another country. He straightened up his desk and left the precinct wondering if he would ever make it back.

**"Gang violence in America is not a sudden problem. It has been a part of urban life for years, offering an aggressive definition and identity to those seeking a place to belong in the chaos of large metropolitan areas." - Dave Reichert**

The car idled as Duke slowed it down to ten miles an hour. If he'd tried to cross just a couple of months ago, things would have been complicated. As the violence escalated in Juarez, the Mexican government called on the US to stop the flow of guns and ammunition across the border. The US ran the Operation, Fast and Furious, allowing illegal purchases by fake buyers hoping to track the guns to higher-level cartel leaders. Instead the Mexican government claimed the guns were lost by the US and used to kill over one hundred and fifty Mexican civilians, including one US Border Patrol agent.

In response, Border Patrol set up an obstacle course on the bridges leading to Juarez. They stopped every car to check insurance and registration. Shots rang out across the border. The first shooting hit the El Paso municipal building downtown. The second shooting was from the US side. A Border Patrol officer stopped and detained a couple who swam across the dirty-brown water of the Rio Grande. Rocks started raining down on him from the Mexican side. According to the officer, he shot back in self-defense, killing a fifteen-year-old boy. The US claimed the boy was a gang member; his family claimed he was an upstanding schoolboy.

Duke wasn't sure exactly which incident led to the breakdown between Mexico/US relations, but US Border Patrol no longer

felt an obligation to check vehicles entering Mexico. The obstacle course remained, and there was even a Border Patrol officer sitting in a camouflage tent, but he never ventured out to stop a car. If Mexico wanted the trafficking into their country stopped, let them enforce it from their side.

The car jarred slightly as it passed over the low speed bumps set along the bridge. Once over the arch, Duke officially entered Mexico. Mexican immigration officers in spotless uniforms stood by, facing every direction but toward the cars crossing over. Two stood at each gate, waving a hand in Duke's general direction. He continued driving. The next obstacle was the Federales standing on the street corner in their green uniforms with AK-47 rifles at the ready, sandbags stacked in front of them. A yellow dog lay on its side in front of the sandbags, soaking up the November sun. The Federales looked only slightly more interested at the cars crossing the border than the immigration officials.

No one official noticed Duke's passing or stop him to question the contents in his trunk. He drove farther down the road, past beggars missing limbs or with large protrusions on their faces. Some women clutched dozing children to their chests. Street vendors sold snacks, drinks, pirated DVDs and sunglasses to people waiting to cross back to the US side. The shops right along this strip looked new and shiny. They aimed to invite US citizens to get their eyes checked, teeth fixed and even buy drugs at the pharmacy.

Then the streets gave way to the real Juarez. Crumbling facades, cracked concrete, abandoned storefronts. Since the cartels had started fighting, businesses had closed all over the city. Some because they didn't want to pay "protectio" money to stay open, others because they were killed for not paying the "protection" money.

This was the city that never slept. People walked the streets at every time of the day and night. Driving here was just like playing a video game. Cars weaved, honked and careened around corners,

and an endless trickle of people walked, shuffled and danced their way through it all.

Duke drove on, ignoring the speed limits. Paved roads and brief stretches of highway finally gave way to dirt and gravel roads in the furthest reaches of the city. Estimates ranged anywhere from one to two million. Duke winced at the potholes and small hills he crawled over at five to ten miles an hour. Alicia, still in the trunk, had to be feeling each one of them.

Women disappeared here all the time. He drove past a park that had stretches of pink crosses set in the ground to honor the tortured, dismembered remains found scattered around the outskirts of Juarez. Police had yet to find the murderer or murderers responsible for the killings. Duke guessed that members of the cartels were directly involved in at least some of the carnage.

Children kicking a soccer ball rubbed raw by sand and feet scattered in his slow-moving wake. He tossed coins and candy out of the window. Their cheers followed him and told the next group of kids he was headed their way. This went on until he was so far out that no one could be seen walking or playing in the street. Houses dotted the road, cobbled together from cinder block and wood.

The sun sank below the mountains. In this part of town, no streetlights flickered on. Duke brought the car to a stop in front of a nondescript, unmarked house. His shoes crunched on the grit and sand as he walked to the back of the car. He opened the trunk to show his cousin where she would be spending the last days of her life.

**"Experience is the teacher of all things." - Julius  
Caesar**

Tears had mixed in with the rivulets of sweat running down her face, pooling in the creases of her neck. Crying made her suck in the air and dust until her stomach hurt from trying to cough it all back up. Screaming proved useless. Alicia had finally given in to exhaustion. What Alicia couldn't figure out, even after hours of bouncing around in the trunk with nothing but her thirst—why? Why was she in this situation? Why did this man, this thug, insist that they were related? Why had he murdered her grandfather in cold blood?

The car rocked to a stop, and the engine died. The trunk creaked open, making Alicia squint in the fading light. Sand and grit filled the air from the car's trip down the dirt road. Alicia's mouth ached from being stretched by the gag. The man reached down and undid the ties around her ankles. His fingers reached behind her head to untie the gag.

Fatigue made her sag as she was half-carried, half-dragged from the trunk. She knew she was in Juarez, Mexico now. The names of several of her relatives sprang to mind, but who memorized phone numbers anymore? If she was able to drive around, she would eventually find some landmarks and the house of a distant uncle or cousin. If she got the chance.

Her hands still tied in front of her, Alicia was dumped into a rickety chair just inside the front door. By now Frankie knew what had happened but probably had no clue where she was. At least not yet. Trips to see her relatives stopped. No one blamed her after the violence in Juarez started. Her family knew the danger. Frankie had warned Alicia that under no uncertain terms

was she to go across the border after he started working at the police department. Kidnapping a cop's wife would make great leverage for criminals operating in Mexico.

That had to be what this was all about. The gang was taking revenge for the man Frankie killed. Weeks had gone by with no retaliation. Her husband—in one of his more lucid moments—assured her that no matter how much they threatened to go after a cop or his family, the threats rarely turned into action. The gangs had too much to lose. This was different. This gang member had a personal vendetta on top of everything else.

An open water bottle was placed into her hands. "Drink," her bald-headed captor said. "Sorry about the rough ride."

Alicia brought the cool water bottle to her lips and didn't stop drinking until the plastic bottle crackled, empty.

The water started a little energy flowing through her body and mind. "Sorry for killing my grandfather?"

The man's lips, framed by a goatee, parted in a chuckle. He seemed to be in a fine mood. "No, cuz. That revenge was a long time coming."

The small burst of energy ebbed away. Alicia was too tired to respond.

"Come on." The man took her by the ties around her wrists and led her to the back room. With deft movements Alicia's hands were untied and a handcuff clipped around one wrist. The other end snapped closed with a metallic clink around a metal ring in the wall. The man pushed her down onto the bed underneath it. "You still should be able to get some rest."

"Can I clean up?"

"Tomorrow."

"What about the bathroom?"

The toe of his leather shoe nudged something plastic underneath the bed. Eventually a bucket appeared. "Why?" Alicia almost sobbed, searching his eyes for some warmth or understanding.

The man who claimed to be part of her family leaned down. "I owe you a nice long talk, but not now. Tomorrow."

**"The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes." - Arthur Conan Doyle**

Frankie stood ringed by detectives, a representative from DEA and FBI.

"Here's what we got so far." Stephanie, the homicide detective, leaned forward. "No murder weapon left at the scene. No forced entry. We're collecting prints, but you've got a gardener, maid, therapists. If we get anything, it's going to take a while to sort through."

Frankie tried to muster some anger or emotion or even plain old concern. Anything. He felt adrift. Alicia's grandfather dead. Alicia gone. He didn't trust saying more about Roberta to anyone. That was his lead and his alone to follow wherever it took him.

"That's not all." Stephanie turned to Greg from the Gang Division.

Greg crossed his arms. "Like I told Drew the other day, La Linea and La Familia were going at it with Chaneco. Chaneco is kicking their ass making a territory grab. We think one of your murders at the apartment may have been connected to La Linea. It's hard to confirm because the top brass in those two gangs are dropping like flies, and the rest are in hiding."

"We didn't put the pieces together fast enough," Frankie said, exasperated. He could handle exasperation. Blame someone else but himself for bringing this down on Alicia and her family.

Greg had the decency to look uncomfortable. "No, by the time La Linea and La Familia figured out they couldn't win this turf war and came to us, the hit on your family had already happened."

"What do you mean they came to you?"

"We got members from both gangs tipping us off to possible hits. They knew a big hit was coming down but not where. No one thought they'd be dumb enough to go after a cop."

Frankie knew he looked slack-jawed and glassy-eyed, out of focus. Drew leaned over and asked, "You want to sit down?"

All the men shifted in place, uncomfortable.

Frankie shrugged off Drew, not bothering to face him. He addressed the group the first hint of anger tinged his voice. "So where does this leave us? I killed one of Chaneco's top brass. We know it was their gang. Round them up."

Greg glanced at the DEA and FBI agents before continuing, "Word is they're across the border. Rumor is so is your wife."

"A rumor?" Frankie took a long look at each face across from him.

The FBI agent, Charles, cleared his throat. "We've contacted the Mexican side to confirm and look for your wife. We're distributing a description with the recent photo you gave us."

"I need to sit down now," Frankie said to no one in particular. With his head bowed, he didn't see the looks being exchanged. He heard the footsteps of men walking away, and Drew squatted in front of him. "This is bullshit," Frankie blurted out.

"We've got everyone working on this. They are putting pressure on Chaneco on this side. You need to get yourself together."

"It's my fault. We had a fight, I left. I should never have left."

"You had no way of knowing what would happen. We all thought it was over."

"But it's not. If I need to do something, can I count on you?"

"As long as it's stupid, dangerous and illegal."

Frankie couldn't bring himself to chuckle. He needed to think. He needed to sort this out and decide what he was going to do next. Involving the authorities took time, and if Alicia was still alive, time was running out.

**"You had a choice—you either joined or formed a gang or you let others bully you." - Jack Bowman**

Duke entered the windowless building. He was patted down business-like by two guards, guns visible. They escorted him into a back room, which was really a large parking garage. There was only one car. A large SUV similar to what Duke drove on the US side.

Duke stopped himself from asking what was going on when two more armed men exited the SUV. He allowed himself to be shepherded into the car. Duke sat in the middle of the back seat flanked by four well-armed men. This must be the big time.

Double doors opened at the other end of the building, and the SUV backed out into the daylight. Once on the street, cars and pedestrians moved out of the way so the SUV barely had to change speed. Duke had no idea as to what part of town they were going. The drive continued until houses became sparse and the desert stretched out before them.

Duke kept a stony silence. He'd been invited to meet a chief of the Sinaloa Cartel and he needed to show these Juniors he was in their league. As the trip droned on, no one spoke. No music. The thrum of the heater the only sound.

The SUV veered off the main road onto an unmarked loose-gravel path. Duke rocked back and forth along with his escorts. Drugs were a \$60 billion business and Sinaloa owned maybe 60%, and one day back in the 80s, the gang decided to own 100%. The cartel tried to take over the border towns starting with Tijuana. They would have succeeded if a stray bullet hadn't struck down a Cardinal. Accidental or not, the killing would not be tolerated, and the fledgling takeover ended. Just when the

sand kicking up from the bumpy ride made it hard to breathe, even in the car, the tires gripped a paved road in the middle of nowhere. Duke didn't notice any markers. He had no idea how the driver found the road.

Another hour and the lone road in the middle of nowhere stopped at an oasis in the desert. Duke had kept his cool this whole time, but now his heart danced in his chest. This was the moment he'd waited for his whole life. He wouldn't get a second chance to prove himself.

**"A teacher is a person who never says anything  
once." - Howard Nemerov**

The front door rattled. Alicia sat up in bed, her handcuff jangling. She wrapped her free hand around it to silence it—not that it mattered. She sat upright and tucked her feet underneath her. The front door shut. Alicia's eyes followed the shuffling sounds as they traveled back and forth beyond her closed bedroom door.

Licking her lips to build up courage, she called out, "Hola?" Her voice cracked halfway through so she tried again louder. "Hola!"

Metallic sounds followed. Smells of cooking rice and meat wafted under her door. A while later more clinking of plates and glasses. Then the door to her room opened. An older woman, her long hair pulled back in a ponytail, entered carrying a tray. Steam rose from the plate.

Alicia let out a rush of Spanish, "Help me, please." She jangled her handcuffed arm. The woman hesitated.

"No, I won't hurt you. I know you can't let me go."

The woman didn't acknowledge Alicia. She kept her eyes down as she set the tray on the floor and nudged it toward Alicia with her foot and backed away.

"Wait. Wait! I have family here; just get them a message. I'll write it down." Alicia started to cry as the woman backed out and closed the door. "Please, please!"

Alicia's crying made the flimsy bed shake. The smell of fresh food made her mouth water. She needed her strength and then she needed to think and plan an escape.

**"However, don't let these statistics mislead you, gang violence is not limited to California and or big urban areas—that might have been true a while ago but it is no longer the case today." - Bob Filner**

Palm trees lined the horizon and as the SUV drew closer, a sand-colored wall with a large front gate came into view. A radio in the front seat crackled to life. The guard in the passenger seat gave a quick response. At about twenty feet, the massive gate slid open. Once across the barrier, a different world opened up. A bright-green lawn stretched out, broken by flowering shrubs. A large hacienda with wraparound balconies stood in the center.

Men with guns and earpieces dotted every surface. On the back corner of the lot, the front of a helicopter jutted out, sitting on a concrete pad. Duke adjusted his sunglasses as he took in his surroundings.

The SUV stopped a good fifty-feet away from the front of the mansion. Everyone exited, and all four guards escorted Duke up the walkway. The front door opened. A comfortable gust of warm air greeted him. The smartly dressed butler motioned to the large, center room. The house was shaped like a square with rooms on the first and second floors facing an open atrium.

Duke sat on a comfortable couch with the guards standing behind him, and waited. Drinks were brought in on a tray and placed before him. Duke took a few sips of the tamarindo-flavored drink.

"Would you like something stronger?"

Duke stood and faced one of the most powerful drug lords in Mexico—Carlos "Chappy" Gallego. He was the same height as

Duke with close-cropped hair. His faced relaxed into a polite grin.

"I'm fine. Thank you," Duke answered in what he hoped was a smooth voice.

"Please, sit down."

Duke sat, uneasy and uncomfortable, surrounded by the trappings of the rich.

Carlos pulled up his linen pants and relaxed into the sofa across from Duke. "I hope the drive wasn't too long."

"No."

"I've heard good . . . and bad . . . things about you."

Duke tensed. Had he just blundered into a trap?

"Relax," Carlos said softly. "We're friends here. I'm impressed you acted so quickly when you saw the opportunity to take over territory in El Paso."

Duke nodded, not trusting his voice this time.

"You know this business is like any other business. It's based on trust. Our customers trust that we'll deliver our product. We trust that our people will handle the product and money responsibly. Everyone gets compensated for their time. If there's no trust, the whole thing starts to fall apart. Things go missing. Consequences have to be enforced."

Tension tightened Duke's throat; it hurt to swallow.

"I want you to know how much I value people I can trust." Carlos leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "I need you to show me that you're ready for this promotion. I need you to do something big."

Clear, cold relief washed over Duke. He took a deep breath and leaned forward to meet Carlos's gaze. "Name it."

"This will require a trip but all the arrangements have been made. As I said I need people I can trust and when a person or persons fail to meet their obligations or even worse, they decide to make a drastic change, It simply cannot be allowed."

Duke nodded in agreement.

"Fortunately this is a small, family matter, situated in a small town."

"How many?"

"All of them."

Duke shrugged his shoulders a fraction and opened up his hands.

"The exact number doesn't matter." Chappy lifted his head and nodded. One of the guards dropped a piece of paper in front of Duke. Chappy continued, "That family, everyone who worked for them, everyone who knew them, everyone who did business with them."

"That's a lot of people by myself."

Chappy smiled, "There will be a group there to help and provide supplies."

"What kind of supplies? Does this need to happen in a certain way to send a message?"

"You're going to burn the town down to the ground. I hear you have some experience with that?"

Duke held his face rigid like a mask. He hadn't processed what he'd done to his own father or grandfather. The details of that night replaced by a red fog. After killing Armando, his great-grandfather, there was a hollowed out feeling of nothingness. He told himself this feeling would change after he completed his revenge by killing Alicia. His whole family would disappear and become the past. The only family he needed was his gang. He would die for his gang. Duke squared his shoulders and said, "Consider it done."

**"Failure should be our teacher, not our undertaker."  
- Denis Waitley**

There were no utensils. Just a heap of warm, corn tortillas. Alicia maneuvered the plates one-handed up to the bed. Tore the tortillas in half and folded them to scoop up the asada, rice, and beans on the plate. She ate half before she realized there was lime and pico de gallo to add to the mix. She ate it all, and then put the dirty dishes back on the tray.

Alicia relaxed against the wall with a bottle of water. She kept moving her arm to try to relieve the numbness from it hanging above her. She strained to hear signs that the senora was still in the house. She hadn't heard the front door or a TV.

She did not want to use the bucket under the bed again.

"Senora!" She called for the woman sporadically for at least a half hour. Telling her she was done with the tray. Thanking her for the food. Asking for the bathroom. Alicia was about to give up when the door swung open.

The woman approached and waited. Alicia plastered a smile on her face that she did not feel. When the woman didn't move, Alicia gathered the dishes, still babbling pleasantries to try to get a reaction. The woman still wouldn't draw near until Alicia pushed the tray away from her with her foot. Well out of kicking range, Alicia realized. Did she really think Alicia was going to attack her? Alicia changed her tone and tried to show how defenseless she was, handcuffed to an iron ring above a bed.

The woman stood with the tray at her feet. Maybe she was handicapped in some way; Alicia despaired. Seconds ticked by. Alicia gave up and laid down on the bed and closed her eyes. She

felt a small depression on the bed next to her. Alicia moved slowly so as not to startle her.

A piece of paper and the nub of a pencil lay on her stomach. The woman's fear-ridden eyes met hers. "Andale." She motioned. "Hurry."

**"It often seems to me that's all detective work is,  
wiping out your false starts and beginning again." -  
Agatha Christie, Death on the Nile**

Frankie dressed in jeans, running shoes. He pulled on a polo top, and then pulled it off. A long-sleeve shirt, yanked that off. Decided on a T-shirt with a jacket against the cold. He checked his handgun for the twentieth time and placed it in his ankle holster.

The cell phone rang. He had a second one tucked into his back pocket. A disposable one programmed for calls in Mexico. Frankie's cell phone stopped and then immediately started ringing again. He knew who it was, and he had to get out of the house before Drew arrived.

Giving the house one last glance, he headed outside and jumped in the clunker he'd bought for two-thousand dollars.

Winding his way through side streets, he answered the phone when Drew called.

"Frankie? I know what you're doing, and I am telling you to stop."

"Drew, you know nothing and I want to keep it that way." Frankie rolled down the window.

"I said I would help you and I will."

"I was wrong to ask you to get involved. It's all on me and I want to keep it that way."

"Don't hang up—just listen. La Linea is going to work a deal to try and shut down Chaneco. Part of that deal is getting Alicia back or at least finding out where she is so they can do the rest. It's going to happen. We've done this before when that cartel guy

was killed on this side. Remember that case? It all worked out and this will too."

"Yeah, the guy was already dead and we got the killer extradited. Not the same thing, Drew. They're going to get her killed." Frankie clicked the phone shut as Drew started in again. Frankie turned the corner to enter the main road and chucked the phone out the window.

The valet downtown motioned Frankie into a parking space. He talked to him briefly and stuffed enough money in his hand to keep him quiet about the car for a month. This close to the border, the streets teemed with humanity, the air stale with exhaust fumes, sweat and urine. Frankie kept his pace brisk as he walked to the US/Mexico downtown bridge, ignoring the street vendors who called out to him.

Few were on the bridge in the afternoon. When he was close to the midway point, he noticed a handful of people pausing to look over the side on the right. Frankie glanced over, slowed and finally stopped. He'd never seen this before. A handful of people, who swam across the Rio Grande from the Mexican side, were crisscrossing back and forth, trying to outmaneuver two Border Patrol, green-and-white SUVs. Several patrol officers were on foot. The group would surge one way, dodging the railroad tracks and the vehicles and officers in hot pursuit. Then the group splintered. For a second the officers paused, taking stock. Then four more green-and-white SUVs closed in from either side.

The people watching on the bridge shrugged and continued walking. This episode of the ongoing spectator sport of illegals crossing the Rio Grande over, for now. Frankie moved on as well. He pulled out a Diablos baseball cap and slapped it on top of his head. His hair—cut a little too short—would easily give him away as military or police. He slouched and continued forward. The gate just ahead.

Frankie remembered his early adventures in Juarez. Every weekend was a mini vacation. His whole family would cross over

to enjoy all that Mexico had to offer for pennies on the dollar. His father would gas and maintain the car. His mother would spend the day at a salon. Frankie and his brothers could eat candy, drink cola and buy trinkets until they were tired—not before their allowance ran out. The poor surrounded them, offering to do any little chore for pesos. Frankie guessed he wasn't the only one in his family to pretend he was rich on their weekend outings.

During high school Frankie made rare trips to the downtown-Juarez strip to drink three watered-down rum and cokes for a dollar and look cool with his buddies standing around the dance floor. His trips ended when he joined the police academy a couple of years after graduation. His family stopped their outings after NAFTA was passed and Mexico's prices rose to match the US. Wages in Mexico didn't increase; recently the government tried to lower them. Last Frankie heard Mexico had a poverty rate of forty percent.

Frankie realized he looked too shiny, too new, too United States of America. Yet, no one looked in his direction. The guard waved Frankie on while cars crossed in front of him unmolested. He dodged the sandbag barriers on every street corner for the next couple of blocks. Federales armed with AK-47s at the ready. Frankie kept his eyes down. When he reached the last corner of the main strip, he gave one last look at the border before heading into the heart of Juarez.

**"Me, myself, I was a part of gang bangin', you know  
what I'm sayin'?" - Tone Loc**

Duke practically skipped into the house. Slamming the door behind him. "Alicia? Hey, cuz. I'm back."

He heard faint movement from the bedroom. Duke peeked in the kitchen, but Maria had already left. He threw open the door so hard that it banged against the wall and bounced back. "Sorry!" He told Alicia, her eyes wide with fear, "I didn't mean to do that. I'm just . . . ." His eyes took in her greasy, disheveled hair and unwashed odor.

"I'm sorry. Maria, the senora that fed you. She did feed you, right? Good. Well, she's a little slow. She takes things very literally. Here." With a couple of clicks, he released Alicia's wrists from the wall and escorted her at arm's length to the bathroom right off of the small living room.

"Take a good look, cuz. There's no way out." The bathroom was sparse. No mirror, a showerhead jutting out of the wall; a postcard-sized window let in a patch of light. The bathroom was a faded and splotched turquoise. "I've had . . . guests . . . here before. Get cleaned up. I'll bring some new clothes." Duke pointed to the folded towel on the floor under the sink.

Duke secured the lock on the outside of the door and went back to the bedroom to rummage for some clothes from the family he'd kicked out. A skirt, T-shirt,—heck, even underwear. When he returned to the bathroom, the shower was running. He unlocked the door and dropped the clothes in the sink.

Then he locked the door and leaned against it. Duke realized he was ravenous. He went to the kitchen and pulled out the

leftovers that Maria had prepared. She was a damn good cook. It was the main reason he hired her besides the fact she was mute.

He was setting out two steaming plates of food when the shower stopped. Duke shoveled a few bites into his mouth before walking back to the bathroom door. He waited another five minutes, and then knocked on the door. There was no immediate answer.

"Prima, I have no desire to see you, but if you don't answer, I will open this door."

"Just a minute."

"You have thirty seconds." Duke didn't want to give her any time to put into action some crazy plan she worked out while sitting around the last two days. He'd have to kill Alicia, and he didn't want to do that. Not yet.

Forty seconds ticked by. He reached out and unlocked the door. It opened out so he stepped back in case she decided to slam the door into him. Instead, Duke faced his cousin. Tears streamed down her face. The clothes were at least a size too big, but they would do.

"No llores. Don't cry." He motioned for her to come forward. "Come on. There's food on the table."

Alicia flailed at him, nails bared, screaming. "Mendigo, desgraciado! You killed my grandfather! I hate you. I don't care what you think we are." She spit in his face. "We are not family."

Duke crushed her wrists in his grip until Alicia wore herself out. Then he turned her as if they were dancing with her arms crossed in front, and held her tight.

"You should thank me," Duke said. "I ordered a hit on your husband and they missed."

Alicia sagged in his arms, crying.

He pushed her back far enough to clench her face in his hand. "I don't want to kill you yet. By my choice you're the only family I have left." Pain replaced the burning anger in her eyes. He let go

and rubbed the spit from his face on the sleeve of his shirt. "Sit down and eat."

Alicia shuffled in front of him, sat down and moved the food around her plate. She finished the plastic cup of soda and asked for more. Between mouthfuls of food, Duke refilled her glass.

"What did you mean by your choice?" Alicia said.

"Your grandfather, my great-grandfather, had this whole other family that you knew nothing about. My great-grandmother told me that he raped her."

"Why would she say something like that?"

"She didn't want to take the shame of my family to the grave with her. I didn't want her to suffer, so I killed her." Horror flashed across Alicia's eyes. Duke added, "Quick. She didn't suffer."

"How many people have you killed?"

Duke's eyes drifted toward the ceiling, thinking. "Not that many. My mother disappeared when I was young. I killed my father and grandfather. They don't have to live with the shame either. It's my burden now."

"You're crazy. You murdered your own family and for what? What's changed?"

"I haven't killed all of my family," Duke said casually.

Alicia made a panicked sound.

"And I don't plan to. I wouldn't have taken you. I wanted to kill him slow, and because you walked in, I had to kill him quick. He didn't deserve that."

Anger trickled back into Alicia's voice. "None of them deserved to be murdered for your perverted sense of honor."

"You knew who we were this whole time."

Alicia threw up her hands. "I swear I've never seen you before."

"You took your cars to be serviced by mi padre y abuelito."

"The DeSalvo's downtown?" Alicia's eyes widened. "And you killed them? They were nice and kind—"

"And pendejos! Stupid cows that took whatever scraps your grandfather decided to hand them." Duke shook a toothpick out of a small jar on the table and bit down on it. "My great-grandmother told everyone her husband died years ago. Right after my grandfather was born."

Alicia cackled in amazement. "You don't even know if any of it is true. You went on a rampage because of the word of some vieja?"

Duke's jaw muscles chewed through the gristle of his life.

Alicia laughed, slapping her thigh at her absurd situation. "She lied about your great-grandfather. There's no telling what really happened."

Duke slammed his fists on the table. "No one makes that shit up on their deathbed. I'm the last of my bastard family, and I wanted to make sure you knew. Living your pampered life." Duke yanked her from the table and dragged her to the bed.

"Pampered? You have no idea who I am!" Alicia protested, but Duke heard only the blood pounding in his ears. He had to get out before he did hurt her. Maybe he should have killed her right then with the old man. But she was here, and Duke would put her to good use. He even had the cartel's blessing. Once he offered his "blood in" to Sinaloa, no one could stop his rise to the top.

**"You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep . . . ."  
- Raymond Chandler, The Big Sleep**

Roberta lounged by the hotel pool. It was an older building built in an open square. All the hotel rooms faced the center. A decent restaurant at one end of the square and the office at the other. It was too cold to swim. A perpetual, bright-blue square of sky shown above as she fiddled with numbers on a paper.

It had taken time to gather identities and the necessary paperwork. The money was scattered in various places and institutions. All that remained was ten thousand in traveling cash and deciding where to go from here.

She had overstayed at the hotel by almost two weeks, so it was time to go. Argentina. Buy some *Comme il Faut* shoes, brush up on her tango and dance the night away. She pointed and flexed her feet as she thought about it. Her mind made up, she tapped her pen on the small pad and strolled to the restaurant for tacos and avocado salad.

The waitress smiled at her familiar face and sat her by the window facing the street. Not two bites into her tacos, two large SUVs skidded to a stop, blocking the entrance and exit. Roberta dropped her food and sprinted past the startled waitress into the kitchen. She hit the back door at full speed, which knocked out one man, but the other clothes hanged her and sent her flying back-first into the dirty pavement. The smell of rotten garbage kept her aware a few more seconds as a man hovered over her.

"Aye, Mami. You've been a very bad chica. Your papi's been looking all over for you."

Roberta's vision narrowed to the size of a pinhead and then went black.

**"In 2002, 32% of cities with a population of 25-50 thousand reported a gang-related homicide. - Bob Filner**

Duke called Chaneco to tell them the good news. No one answered. He rested his elbows on his thighs and let his eyes roam over the chipped, cinder block walls of the shack. They were testing him. He'd fucked up. Brought too much of his personal shit into the gang.

Live for God. Live for your mother. Die for your gang.

Duke had no God. The rosaries and crosses painted across his body were empty promises. He had no mother, no family to live for. Never had one. All of that was a dream. He would die for his gang, for Chaneco. He would prove his loyalty with blood. It was all he had left.

## **"The case called for plain, old-fashioned police leg work!" - Donald J. Sobol, Encyclopedia Brown, Boy Detective**

Frankie approached what would have been a cul-de-sac neighborhood in the states. In Mexico, the homes were too close together. The yards too dusty or covered over with concrete. Big, iron gates blocked the driveways, making each small one-story house a fortress.

Eyes followed him as he came to a stop in front of the corner house's gate and pushed a button. Dogs barked. A small gang of kids ran by screaming, kicking a soccer ball along the road. The front door of the house opened, and a short man in jeans walked toward the gate, his button-down shirt flapping at his sides.

"Frankie?"

"Hola, Pablo."

"Frankie! Balgame Dios. Come in."

A small, metal doorway embedded in the bigger gate that covered the driveway squeaked open to let Frankie through. Pablo opened the front door, and Frankie stepped into a small living/dining room. The kitchen to his right wasn't even big enough to be called a galley kitchen. Alicia's aunt stood cooking at the stove. She stopped and dried her hands before tossing the dish towel and hurrying to hug Frankie.

"Frankie. Y Alicia?"

"Hola, Rosa. No se. I don't know. I was hoping you had heard something."

Pablo motioned for Rosa to return to the kitchen and pulled out a chair from the dining-room table. "Sit down so we can talk."

Frankie sat down and Rosa appeared with a glass of horchata. A sweet, rice drink Frankie had never really liked. "Thank you," he told Rosa anyway.

"Tell me everything."

After Frankie finished, Pablo sat back and nodded. "We have at least eight murders a day here since this started. You can hire someone for two-hundred dollars on a street corner to kill someone. Hanging corpses from overpasses. Tossing heads into clubs. My little nephew died because he went to the wrong birthday party. These amateurs just walk in and mow down everyone, hoping they hit the right person." Pablo stared out the front window.

"And did they?"

"What?"

"Get the right person."

"Pinches pendejos. No. All of this so America can get its fix. Now we have the police in their ski masks, federal troops. Supposedly they're here to stop the terror, but it's just gotten worse."

Frankie sighed in understanding. "Even if you have good policemen, the gangs will kill you if you don't take their bribes."

"The new mayor fired half the police force. The police chief is leaving the country because there is no safe place for him in Mexico. There are days the police are sequestered because the gangs find out where they live and kill them in their beds." Pablo drummed his fingers on the table. He continued, his voice soft, "We were glad you kept Alicia away. I hoped something like this would never happen."

"Have you heard anything?"

"Not yet. Be patient. Stay here as long as you need to while I see what I can find. If you have any money, that opens mouths. No one can keep a secret in this town for long if there's money involved."

## "You sacrifice the things you love." - Jimi Hendrix

The November sunlight reflected through the window, warming Roberta's face. She took a deep, comfortable breath and felt the cocoon of soft fabric against her skin. She stretched. The first tendrils of pain reached her consciousness. Her eyes flew open. Shit, I'm home.

"Good morning, mi amor."

The man who sat on the edge of her bed was still handsome in his late forties. He smiled. Roberta wasn't comforted. She knew her father's face crinkled in all the right places, even when he has torturing someone. Silence was better and sometimes safer.

Matteo Guerra patted Roberta's hand and then squeezed it almost to the point of pain. "Did you really think I wouldn't find you? We are still your family, aren't we, mija?" He chuckled to himself. Roberta tried not to cringe. "Of course we are. We didn't find all the money and drugs. Seems you were careless, and they fell into the wrong hands." Her father stood up and dropped her hand. "No preocupada. Don't worry. You can make amends." He strolled to the foot of her bed. "You remember how to kill, mija? Because there is someone I want . . . out of the way. He's tough. You may fail, but you owe me for your mistakes."

Roberta didn't trust herself to answer.

"Or I could kill you now."

"Who?" Roberta asked.

"Always practical, mija. That's why you're my favorite daughter." Matteo pinned her with glittering, sharp eyes the way a praying mantis spies its prey. "I have to ask: why? I gave you a good education. A good job with plenty of money to live. Job security. Promotion if you prove yourself. Yet, you steal from me.

Your blood, your familia." Matteo grimaced, his face radiating a pain that Roberta felt like a fist squeezing her lungs.

"I wasn't free," Roberta whispered, pulling herself up to a sitting position. "I wasn't ever consulted about the life that I wanted."

"Who's free?" Matteo stood, his body awash with exhaustion. "You are never free. There is always someone you owe: family, government, smugglers, bribes to the other traffickers for safe passage, mules, runners. I have to watch where I am at all times. Pay for protection. You think I never knew every step you were taking? I had to. If one of my enemies got a hold of you . . . ." Matteo waved his hand in dismissal. "Well, since we're being truthful, mija, I wouldn't have paid your ransom but probably killed you first so you couldn't share our secrets. That doesn't mean I don't love you. I wanted you to feel the rush of power, the respect money . . ." Matteo spread his hands as if he was carrying a dead body. " . . . a lot of money . . . brings. So much that you don't know how to launder it all." Matteo dropped his hands. "But it doesn't buy you freedom. In this business you are never free."

Roberta saw true compassion on her father's face for the first time. "You were born into this business, mija, and just like me, one day, you'll die in it."

**"It only stands to reason that where there's sacrifice,  
there's someone collecting the sacrificial offerings." -  
Ayn Rand**

Duke and Alicia sat across from each other. A cell phone lay in the middle of the table between them.

"I'm going to let you know exactly what is going to happen to you and yours," Duke said with eyes as unreachable as a predator's. Alicia despaired as she heard him drone on. "This is my chance at a promotion. I will be a chief and own one of the plazas in Juarez. Plus," Duke said and held up a finger triumphantly, "I will still have Chaneco on the US side. It will save the cartel in bribes to other cartels and gangs on both sides. I will have power, prestige and money beyond even what I can imagine.

"Do you know that Garcia never leaves his fortress in the heart of Mexico and yet he's number forty-one on Forbes' list of the most powerful and richest men in the world?" Duke brought his index finger down to rest on the top of the table. "I met one of his chiefs right outside of Juarez, and I am going to be one of them soon. Sin familia, without family to hold me back, make me weak, vulnerable."

Duke sat back and crossed his arms. "But it comes at a price. I'm afraid a very steep price for you. To rise so high, I need a 'blood in.' Chapa demanded a head from anyone in law enforcement in the US. Since your husband killed Rooster while he was out trying to get at you, he's the logical choice. With your husband I can take care of both debts."

Alicia cringed at the note she'd written and sent with Maria. Had Duke known?

As if he'd read her mind, Duke leaned forward to rest his elbows on the table. "Don't worry: your note is on its way. He's already in Juarez and passing his cell number around for any information about you. I'm going to call him and invite him to a trade. His life for yours."

Useless words tumbled from Alicia's lips. "I'm pregnant."

An expression of authentic curiosity crossed Duke's face for a brief moment. Then he continued on as if Alicia hadn't spoken, "Our business is built on sacrifice—to God, family, brothers in the gang. It is what it is. I'm going to kill your husband and chop off his head to take to Carlos. We're going to staple hundred-dollar bills to his body and dump it at the border. It will make it look like he's been on the take all along."

Alicia's knuckles turned white as she gripped the edge of the chair to keep from falling to the floor. This couldn't be happening. She was a first-grade teacher. A cop's wife. A good person. Even if her grandfather had done all that was accused of him, how did all this death change anything?

"I know you feel like un palo de gallina, the pole that all the hens shit on. Like a hen, you won't suffer. I'm going to kill you, quickly. Then I'm going to give you to someone we call the Stewmaker. He will take your body and place it in a barrel and fill it with acid. In a day you'll look like a gelatina. He'll dig a grave and pour you in. I've seen his work. Impressive. Invaluable, really."

Duke studied her face for a reaction. His eyes opened wide in amusement and grabbed the cell phone as Alicia leaned forward and splattered the table with every last particle of food she'd eaten.

**"We humans do, when the cause is sufficient, spend  
our lives . . ." - Orson Scott Card**

Pablo had left a map spread out on the dining-room table while he went out to answer a visitor at the gate. Frankie had poured over it for days—so far clueless as to where they were hiding Alicia. Panic and fear had long ago worn away at him until he was just a bundle of twitching nerves. He had to find her. He had to make up for . . . for everything.

The front door slammed shut. Frankie jumped, startled, but Pablo was grinning. "I think we have something. This note was dropped off."

"By who?"

"No idea. But that's not important. He said it was from someone who saw Alicia. She's alive."

Frankie snatched the note out of his hand. He rose from the chair, energized for the first time in days. "This is her handwriting." His eyes scanned the note. He gripped the table in frustration. "She doesn't know where she is—just that she's on the far outskirts of Juarez. She could be anywhere."

"Calm down."

"We need to talk to the person who delivered this note. Did you let them leave?"

Pablo guided Frankie back down into his chair. "I got the information we needed. Here." He traced his finger along the outer southeast corner of Juarez. "She's somewhere here. In one of these houses."

"It's still a huge area." Frankie's head fell in his hands. "We have to find her now—not weeks from now."

Rosa called from the bedroom. "Frankie? Tu cell!"

Frankie patted his pocket. "Shit." He jogged to the bedroom and grabbed the phone by the nightstand. "Hola?"

"Frankie." An unrecognized voice answered.

"Yeah."

"Good. I have what you want."

Frankie's head jerked up as a bolt of awareness surged through him. "I want to hear that she's all right."

"Of course."

It took a moment for Frankie to realize that the terrified shrieking on the line was Alicia. He strained to understand her words. "Alicia, calm down. It's going to be okay."

"No! Do not come. Leave now. Leave Juarez now." The words came in between hiccups and choking sounds.

"What did you do to her?" Frankie yelled.

Alicia's sobs retreated to the background.

"I'm sorry. She's a little upset, but I swear I haven't touched her."

"Understand me, you piece of shit." Frankie's words came out slow and calculated. "I am not here as an officer, so there is no law between us."

"Good. You know where to find me?"

"I have an idea."

"I'll be waiting."

Juarez development wasn't known for being methodical or making sense in a logical way. Squatters built a lean-to out of whatever material was available. When enough of these "houses" existed, then the roads were paved. Then utilities were scheduled to be installed. The paved roads would have to be torn up to accommodate the installation and then replaced. Not all utilities went in at the same time, of course, so it was a cycle of tearing down to rebuild.

Roberta studied the area leading up to the unassuming shack at the end of the dirt lane. She couldn't just drive up the main road. It wasn't paved, so the cloud of dust any car kicked up would be seen for miles. As soon as a vehicle was spotted, the kids who roamed the streets would immediately alert the bosses of this neighborhood. Plus, Roberta was under no delusions about her assignment. If what her father said was true, the man was a killer. The only way she would have any chance at all was to attack from behind. Leave the men to do the honorable thing face-to-face. Roberta was all about the sucker punch.

Desert stretched in an endless expanse behind the shack. Her boots kicked up small clumps of rock and dried brush. Living things, which were not used to such a big predator moving among them, scurried all around her.

Temperatures had taken a sudden dip into the upper fifties. Roberta shivered, despite being bundled up in black coat, pants and boots. Lights were on in the house. Somebody was home.

The map fluttered on the hood of the car in the constant, desert breeze. Frankie pointed. "There's no use trying to sneak up on him. He knows full well I'm coming, and he didn't even tell me not to come armed."

Pablo drew in the side of his lower lip and chewed on it before meeting Frankie's gaze.

"I'm sorry. I know whether I make it out or not, this could cause problems for you and yours," Frankie said. "Hang back and keep an eye on the exits—front and back. I am going to get Alicia out even if I have to toss her through a window." Frankie gripped Alicia's uncle by the shoulder. "If I don't kill him, promise me you'll get Alicia back to the US as fast as you can."

Pablo let go of his lower lip and took on the resigned look of most Mexicans living through this undeclared war. "No te

mortifiques. We can take care of ourselves. Lines have been drawn and we know where our neighborhood stands."

Frankie rapped the hood of the car with his knuckles and wadded the map with his other hand. "Let's go."

The shack was surrounded by a high, cinder block fence. It was slightly lower in the front with added wrought-iron fencing. The fence was newer and better kept than the dwelling. Roberta was surprised the top was not ringed in barbwire or crushed glass. There wasn't any extra security. During the couple of days that Roberta watched the place, there was only one old woman who came and went. She saw one male figure by the windows; she could only guess he was her target. No one knew his name yet, as he'd just made an appearance from the US. Who in their right mind would come from the US to Juarez to make a name for themselves? Roberta guessed someone very crazy or very ambitious.

Nothing but the wind betrayed Roberta's movements as she crept up to the back of the house. She scurried around until she came to the corner where the cinder block gave way to wrought iron. She paused as the hook and cable she'd carried with her made a soft, metallic clink as it caught the rail. Roberta drew the cable taut. Her boots scraped and she grunted softly as she made her way to the top. All she could do was drop. She froze on her hands and knees and watched for lights flicking on inside or some other indication anyone heard her.

It was calm in the backyard with the wall to block the perpetual sand and grit blowing across the land. Short, cylindrical shapes littered the ground. Roberta reached out and touched the one nearest to her out of curiosity. It was plastic. Plastic barrels? She shuddered at what might lie inside, having already heard the ruthless way that people were dispatched like any other hunk of

processed meat. She approached the window she'd picked out through her binoculars. No activity.

Roberta picked her way to the side of the house and reached up to test the window when light streamed all around her. She crouched and raced back to the corner of the house. She crawled out to the field of barrels and crouched behind a couple set close together. Dry rasps filled her ears. She realized it was her own breathing and clamped a hand over her mouth.

Her eyes flicked back and forth. The house was ablaze outside. A huge beacon in the surrounding darkness. Roberta could clearly see that the back door stood wide open. She heard the zip of a window being opened. What the hell? Was he expecting her?

Minutes clicked by. Her breathing and heart rate slowed to a steady hum. She checked her pistols. No movement at the back of the house. Unlike those movies where the heroine hesitated, either conflicted about killing the bad guy or only getting in one good hit before running off, Roberta had every intention of going in guns blazing.

When Alicia recovered and helped Maria clean up her mess, Duke set a chair in the middle of the room and handcuffed her to it. Alicia had been left to sit and stew. Duke ignored her pleas to use the bathroom, eat or drink. She was an object, a doll, reflected in his dead eyes.

Nighttime dropped its dark shade over the house by 6 p.m. She watched Duke methodically open all the shades and switch on every light in the house.

Then he switched on the outside lights for the first time and waited. Frankie must be getting close.

Roberta scooted around the corner of the back door without a sound. She was in a back room with miscellaneous pots and shelves with bottles. The labels looked like they contained chemicals.

Every light in the house was on; there were no dark corners to hide in. She felt her throat throb and pull tight as her heart tried to share the space. Air whistled through her nose. The one doorway to her right led to what looked like a kitchen. She allowed herself one gasp through her mouth to ease the pressure in her throat.

Roberta dashed through the room to the door, crouched and peeked around the corner. It was an empty kitchen with another doorway. Only this one was a wide arch with a stove on one side and a fridge on the other. She could see the open front door.

Damn it. What was going on? He had to have been tipped off.

Roberta heard movement in the living room. The sounds of someone trying to find a comfortable position in a chair.

Roberta gulped another lungful of air, took a long look at her guns—the only thing between life and death—and rushed the archway.

Frankie coughed at the cloud of dust the car's tires were churning out as they barreled down the road. People stood like sentinels in the crooked and paint-chipped doorways marking their passage.

"He's going to see us coming a mile away!" Pablo yelled from the back.

"Just stay down. Don't leave until you see Alicia!" Frankie knew exactly where the house was. The warm, orange lights made it look inviting. Flashes popped across the open, front doorway and front window. It took a second for the sound of gunfire to reach his ears.

No! Frankie's body seized for a moment in pure panic. Why gunfire? He wasn't there yet! Pablo's breath rasped in his ear.

"What happened?"

"I don't know!" Frankie said as he mashed on the accelerator.

Roberta pulled her gun up just in time. A woman was sitting in a chair with her back facing Roberta in the living room. She twisted her head from side to side, screaming, "It's a trap! Frankie, get out!" Her chair tumbled backwards, and the woman screamed this time in pain.

With no time to figure out who Frankie was, Roberta moved toward the front door. Did she have the wrong house? A male shadow emerged from the only room devoid of light from the left-hand side of the living room.

Roberta couldn't help but pause as a handsome man, bald with a coal-black goatee and mustache, smiled at her in pleasure.

"Quien es? Who are you?"

Roberta didn't think he deserved an answer, and opened fire.

Frankie leaned over the steering wheel to peer through the windshield, the features of the house blurred by dust. Gunfire meant something was very, very wrong. The car jumped and bounced over the pockmarked road and never slowed down as Frankie cranked the wheel to slam through the gate. The car lurched to a stop, and Frankie jumped out. He barreled through the front door, gun raised, and blood pounding through his limbs.

To the right Alicia lay on her side crying. To the left a young woman lay propped up against the far wall, clutching her middle. Blood pooled around her sides. On the other side of the room lay

a man Frankie could only assume was Duke. Death rattles echoed off the concrete walls. Frankie recognized the sound. He kicked Duke's weapon out of reach and found the handcuff keys. Alicia cried out as he undid the cuffs and disentangled her from the chair. Her arm broke when she fell.

"Are you hit?"

Alicia hiccupped and shook her head "No."

"Who is that?" Frankie said, pointing to the woman.

"I don't know."

Frankie called for Pablo. Alicia whimpered in pain as he maneuvered her into the passenger seat. He drew Pablo into a one-armed hug and gave an urgent whisper, "Get out of here, now!"

Pablo nodded, leaned in to give Alicia a quick kiss and disappeared into the desert.

The night swallowed the gunfight into its darkness. Frankie returned to the house and knelt beside the other woman. She groaned. "What's your name?"

"Berta."

Frankie recognized the name. "You were working with Luis."

"Please get me out of here." She moaned as she tried to rise. "Put me in the Witness Protection Program. I can give you information, names, dates, amounts—" Her voice trailed off.

"It's okay. I'm going to pick you up now. Just relax."

Roberta paled but otherwise had no strength to tense up in pain as Frankie carried her to the backseat. The car made alarming grinding noises as Frankie backed out and drove toward the bright-orange city lights in the far distance. Alicia held her arm out in front of her to try to absorb the bumps. When they reached paved roads, she turned and reached back to check on the woman.

Frankie heard sobs. "What's wrong?"

"She's gone."

Frankie arrived at the hospital with a dead woman in the backseat and his injured wife in the front. He heard his wife say, "I'm pregnant," as he helped her out of the car. The words didn't sink in until he got her into the hospital. Exhaustion, excitement and exasperation swirled around him. The hospital staff couldn't move fast enough or careful enough.

When the police pulled him away, all Frankie could do was reassure Alicia, "I'll be back. Everything will be fine." He cooperated with the police: statements were taken; the shack was investigated. A macabre crime scene developed in the backyard—with plastic barrels filled with liquefied remains so decomposed that they couldn't be identified. Families who had lost relatives to kidnapping by the cartels filled the front yard with crosses, flowers and prayers. The shack turned into a mass grave site.

It took weeks to straighten everything out.

Frankie stayed with the force to see Luis Ramirez sentenced to five years for trafficking, and made it known he would not be staying a day past his retirement. He could find another job with better hours. Alicia started taking writing classes, sold her grandfather's house and whatever belongings the rest of the family didn't want.

Their small house was repaired and bursting at the corners with activity. At first Frankie was worried about more retaliation from Chaneco until Alicia explained what she knew about Duke's vendetta. One afternoon, sitting across from her mother, Alicia asked if there could be any truth to the allegations.

"Your grandfather was an incurable flirt. He loved women. One night your grandmother walked me to a bar where she thought your grandfather was with another woman and made me stand outside and call for him, begging him to come home. He came out alone." After a long pause, Marta's verdict was, "I can't imagine he would have done something like that."

Alicia thought of the woman who'd saved her by accident. Frankie said her name was Roberta and she worked for one of the

cartels. When Alicia rubbed her growing belly, she sent up a prayer of thanks to her for giving Alicia's family a new life.

**"The really important kind of freedom involves . . .  
being able truly to care for other people and to  
sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad little  
unsexy ways, every day." - David Foster Wallace,  
This is Water**

Frankie's masked face leaned over Alicia's. "So far, so good. She should be here any minute now."

A light-blue curtain hung in front of Alicia's chest. Doctors and nurses busied themselves on the other side while the anesthesiologist hovered above her. Frankie disappeared from view. When he returned, a nurse held a bundle on her right. A squished face peeped out from the cloth. "Here she is," the nurse declared cheerfully.

Then she was whisked away. Frankie reappeared. "She's having problems breathing."

"Follow her. Don't let her out of your sight," Alicia whispered.

It was two weeks before Alicia held her baby and sang her a lullaby for the first time. Esperanza, Hope, opened her eyes wide in wonder at the sound.

## Notes:

From 2006 to 2012 an estimated 70,000 people have been killed due to fighting between the Mexican cartels.

90% of the guns used in Mexico come from the United States. The US program Fast and the Furious has so far been a failure resulting in the deaths of hundreds of Mexican civilians and a US Border Patrol Officer.

90% of the drugs used in America come from Mexico.

The Stewmaker is a real person who was captured in Mexico. He disposed of bodies by dissolving them in acid.



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