



WENDY'S WAR

The Average All-American Killer Girl: Book 3



Chapter One

An old GMC box truck ran across the desert with its lights off despite it being One am. The engine was running hot, and the cargo hold was boiling. Wendy watched the truck as it made its way from Mexico to the United States. She looked through an infrared camera seeing the engine, driver, and passenger and what must be six to nine people in the box. She said to George, *“those guys are going to burn that engine up.”* George asked, *“are they coyotes or mules?”* Wendy looked back to the truck box. In the center was a dark pile of something. She replied, *“I don’t know for sure, maybe both.”* She tapped George on the head and pointed to his ears as she put on her headphones. She said, *“range three hundred yards with a ten mile an hour wind from the southwest.”* George took aim as he thumbed the safety off. He asked, *“what if I miss or the shot passes through to the box?”* Wendy said, *“range two eighty and don’t miss. As for the box. Collateral damage. Now fire.”* George fired two rounds from his fifty-caliber Barrett rifle. The first round hit center mass in the chest of the driver giving the passenger just a second to scream just before his head was struck by a supersonic round.

The truck came to a stop up against a boulder. George shot another round into the engine just to make sure it was dead. The rest of the team moved in to find a cab covered in blood and gore. All George saw was the hole that went from the cab to the box. Jack knocked on the back of the truck and said in Spanish, *“hey in there we are heavily armed and have no trouble in shooting into this truck.”* They could hear crying inside. Then someone inside said in Spanish, *“we are locked inside here, please open the door.”* Jack said, *“stand in the back with your arms up or die.”* Wendy watched them using the infrared camera as they stood up and raised their hands. Many of the forms inside were small. She said, *“oh god, open the doors now.”* When the doors opened a heat wave nearly knocked everyone over. An old hunched over man came forward. He looked like he was about eighty with a scruffy, unkempt beard and a Mariners baseball cap on. Behind him were two women and seven children ranging from fourteen to five. The final person was a woman carrying the body of a young boy of maybe four with a piece of shrapnel buried deep in his chest. A chunk of the cab when the round passed through ended his life in a second. Wendy looked at the face of this boy and thought about a boy named Peter way back in the day.

On April 25th, 1981 Peter Wendel James was born in a small town in Arizona named Hope. His parents were April and Jesse James. His father liked to tell people he was named for the outlaw despite being named for his maternal grandmother. Peter's mother worked in the town's re-creation of the old west, and his father was an auto mechanic. April played the character of Joleen Warren in her later days as the sheriff. The job was crap and as far from real acting as someone standing on a street corner reading lines from a script hidden in flowers could be, but she loved it. Peter liked watching her perform. He also liked how a simple change in clothing could turn one person into a completely different person. When he was old enough, he tried out for a part in the reenactment as one of the Warren Brothers John or Edward, but despite being the actual son of the woman playing the mother, he wasn't chosen. The night he was told his father Jesse said, "*good, just maybe you will wake up and find something a boy should want to do.*"

What his father said to him was nothing new. Peter always felt like he just didn't fit in. While the other boys were playing football or basketball, he wanted to read or hang around a girl named Tracy his best friend in the whole world. From an early age, Tracy was known for her long blonde hair. By the age of ten, it was past her ass on the way to her knees. It became so long that the school told her parents they would expel her if it weren't cut to at least her lower back. Her mother cut it just a little lower than what was required then braided it to the required length. The principle was happy as all the female teachers snickered knowing the truth but not caring. Tracy and Peter were side-by-side from the age of eight on. They would play board games, talk about television and sometimes just sit and watch the road as cars passed by.

By thirteen they both started to see each other in a different light. From the age of ten, Peter was constantly reinventing himself. He changed his look like people changed their everyday clothes. At thirteen he was in a preppy look with polo shirts, chino slacks, and dockers boat shoes. Tracy liked this look and told him every chance she got so he wouldn't change. The night before their first day back to school she leaned in and kissed him. It was on the cheek but

not sisterly. Tracy thought about Peter's middle name Wendel and how much she liked it. She wished she could have been named Wendy and he was just Wendel. Peter was having a hard time seeing her like he did before the kiss. Tracy was his best friend, but now what he saw was a girl. He thought about how she looked in her favorite pink dress, her overalls with the tight red shirt underneath. He liked her smell, the touch of her lips and the way she closed her eyes when she kissed him. That night he had his first of what would be many dreams about her doing things not very childlike.

Time moved on, and their relationship went back to a sort of normality. Tracy waited for Peter to make a move, but he didn't know how. Over that time Tracy began to think that she just moved too soon. Thirteen became fourteen then fifteen. Tracy became to see and feel what other boys were like. The school hallways became a nasty groping nightmare. Either the boys said things that would embarrass a sailor, or they would just play grab ass. All the boys except for Peter. They were both about to turn sixteen, and neither had a boy or girlfriend. Tracy decided Peter would be her boyfriend now all she had to do was tell him. That night as they studied together Tracy asked, "*hey Peter would you like to do something other than study? How about me?*" She winced when she realized she didn't say "*with me or go out.*" Peter was always trying to hide his bulge in his pants. As she tried to find a way to correct herself, she finally noticed. Tracy slid over and kissed him again. As she did her hand went down to the bulge. She thought about all the guys that touched her ass or went to touch her chest. She wondered if this was how the boys felt when they did something so invasive.

That night started a routine of studying the books then each other. The quick kiss on the cheek became long open-mouthed kisses. For once she didn't mind a boy touching her as she didn't mind touching him. They kept it above the clothes for the first few months. One night in a heavy session of kissing and petting Tracy said, "*I want to see it.*" She said it with her hand on his groin. Peter stood up and started to unbuckle his belt, but then he slowed down. Tracy decided to take matters into her own hands and unbuttoned then unzipped his jeans and let them fall to the floor. Peter said, "*Tracy I just don't know.*" Tracy interrupted him by pulling his boxers down saying, "*I do know.*" She saw them in the movies, and in the magazines her mother

keeps out in the open for anyone to see, but seeing his penis in person made it real. That night she did something she saw in one of those movies her father had hidden in his closet. She didn't understand why the women in those movies liked it so much she felt it was borderline gross and when he nearly came inside her mouth she decided to maybe not try that again. When she told her mother about it, her mother said, "*well, that is something you do for him, not for you.*" Her mother never told her not to do it or anything else as long as she was safe.

A few days later and Peter was face first in her lap taking directions helping Tracy feel something she never felt before. As she lay there trying not to knock her knees together or arch her back, she remembered what her mother said and understood the meaning. She thought about that boy she first met all those years ago and how they got to this moment right now with his tongue going to places only her sponge and gynecologist went. Peter, unlike Tracy, loved what he was doing. How she reacted to his touch, her taste, and smell. Most of all her smell. She used a body powder and spray that was something between a rose and honeysuckle. She reached a point where she didn't care anymore about taking it slow. She fought to get a condom from the hiding spot in the head of her bed and threw it at Peter. That night they had what most would call their first time. It wouldn't be their last.

Their senior year was rapidly approaching with every sign on it being their best year together. Peter's mother April finished her usual performance on the steps of what was the old courthouse when a stranger came up to her and told her she would be perfect for a movie she was making about the events in Hope. April had seen this person in the audience and recognized the award-winning independent director Janet High from the many interviews she gave. Janet said, "*I think this story with someone like yourself who embodies this strong independent woman would make for a hell of a film.*" A few days later and April was on her way to Vancouver, Canada to meet with producers. Peter wasn't all that surprised to see just how easy his parents separated. To anyone who knew them, they were more like two people rather than a couple. They had a routine rather than a relationship. On Wednesday's they went to the same restaurant, on Friday's they ordered the same pizza and on Saturday they had the same missionary position sex. After the meeting, April was offered a job as both an actress in the movie and as a

consultant. To consult she would have to move to California for the next six months to help with the script.

Peter thought that he would miss his mom until he was told he was going with her. April didn't want to be alone in a city the size of Los Angeles and his father Jesse wasn't going with her. He said he couldn't take time off, but really, he didn't want to leave the woman he saw on the side. Peter didn't want to leave Tracy. They were together for nine years and were a couple for nearly two, but he didn't want to disappoint his mother and her dreams of becoming a movie actor. The day April and Peter left he and Tracy kissed and said how they would call every day and how no state border could separate them. About a week after April left Jesse moved in with Jennifer, the woman he was sleeping with when he was supposed to be bowling or playing golf. A month after that April was served with divorce papers. She wasn't that surprised.

School started, and Peter found himself in a strange environment. He went from a class of ninety-one to a class size of nearly a thousand. To fit in he dropped the preppy look for jeans, a series of tee-shirts with old company logos and a pair of converse all-stars. The first couple of months were rough, but he soon found a rhythm to the madness as well as a few friends. He and Tracy went from talking every day on the phone to every other day to weeks without hearing from her. Peter found a job after school, so he could buy a car and drive back to Hope. He even contemplated leaving his mother alone and moving back permanently. April's script on Joleen Warren died a slow death, but it was replaced with a drama about bad relationships in a small town. After some tweaks, the script was greenlit, and April found herself in front of a camera for the first time. She hired Peter to act as an assistant, and he was happy to leave the world of fast food behind.

Back in Hope, Tracy had made some girlfriends, and they all wanted her to date someone new. The more they worked on her, the more she thought about how she never dated anyone other than Peter. She wasn't sure if she missed him or the familiarity of having someone she could count on and be with. She started to question if she even loved him or not. With prom

coming around Tracy decided to take the chance and accept the first offer she would receive. That offer came that very day. Derik Green was a power forward for the team. He also was well liked by all Tracy's new friends. Derik was a foot taller, and to Tracy he was handsome. He was the star on a team that was one and six with no real prospects for anything, but to the school, he was a god walking among mortals so when he asked Tracy out her friends nearly answered for her. The night of the prom she was in a pink strapless dress staring at the phone wondering if this was a mistake, was she betraying Peter. The night went off without a hitch. He picked her up, they danced, and at the end of the night, he kissed her at the door. She was amazed at how good his kiss felt and just how easily she forgot about Peter.

Tracy and Derik's next date was dinner and *The Matrix*. As Tracy watched the movie, she felt just a little off. The movie would go in and out of focus. At some point, she passed out. When she came around, she was in the back of Derik's truck. Her jeans were on the bed next to her, and he was on top of her pumping hard. She still felt drugged, and she didn't know how she got back to the truck or why this asshole thought that this was all right. Tracy tried to fight him off but whatever he gave her was making her sluggish. Derik was able to fend her off while never breaking his rhythm. Tracy felt around for something until her hand hit something cold and hard. She grabbed the tire iron and swung it as hard as she could in an action that would change her life forever.

The tire iron struck him across the head cracking his skull. A jet of blood sprayed the top of the truck bed cover as his eyes rolled back into his head. Tracy got out of the truck bed and walked home leaving her purse, shoes, and pants behind. She walked the five miles to her home and climbed into the hottest shower she could make. As she showered, the police moved in from the crime scene to her home. With evidence and a warrant, the police arrested Tracy pulling her right out of the shower. They handcuffed her and started to take her out naked when her mother intervened trying to put a blanket over her. The police relented and let her put on a long coat. Handcuffed in the back in a coat that was open in the front the police put her in a car and off to the station. There she was tested for evidence then locked in a room after they took her coat. She

sat in the cold room completely naked with more than a few police officers watching her through a window. After that two hours, she was formally charged and given something to put on.

Peter watched what was happening to Tracy in the local paper his father would send him. The paper downplayed her treatment or the events of that night and spent pages on who Derik was and why his death was her fault. When the trial started, Tracy was painted as loose and a predator on young men. Her new friends were on the stand saying how Tracy wanted to date Derik. How she worked hard to fit in with them and get her way to Derik. She watched as her mother while trying to defend her was forced into talking about her early sexual experiences with Peter. When he read that, Peter got in his mother's car and drove back to Hope where he was arrested at the town line and locked away until the end of the day and the court case. Three hours later and Tracy was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter, and a month later she was sentenced to fifteen to twenty-five years in prison.

Wendy turned to George and told him to take the people to a local person they knew that would help them get settled and find a way to stay in the country. George couldn't take his eyes off the boy and the wound. The boy was dead, and he was alive. The mother started to take the body out into the desert away from the truck. Jack asked, "*where are you going?*" The woman replied, "*I want to take my son back to Mexico where he was safe.*" Jack looked at Wendy who nodded then gave him the keys to her jeep. Jack went over and took the body from the woman, and soon they were off in the jeep on the way to the border. Wendy watched the jeep drive away when a shot went off. She turned to see George on the ground twitching with a hole in his lower jaw and the top of his head gone. They carried him off and buried him in the place they had for their fallen brethren. There were more people there than Wendy was comfortable with.

Chapter Two

Wendy and Scott approached what to a passerby would be considered an old abandoned warehouse. Scott was nineteen years old with curly blonde hair and a face scarred with acne. As they drove Wendy had her hand in his lap slowly rubbing his inner thigh. Scott took his hand off the wheel and went to her left breast, but Wendy took hold of his hand and put it back on the wheel. Wendy said, *“come to our room tonight, and we will see if this goes anywhere.”* Scott put his foot down as the jeep sped up. Wendy said, *“I said tonight.”* She pointed to an abandoned school bus and said, *“pull in next to that.”* He did as he was told, and she told him to follow her. The bus was nearly gutted with just a few seats in the front. She pushed him to the back then turned him around working on his pants. He finished the job dropping his pants and boxers as Wendy pulled her slacks and panties off. She pushed him down and got on top. Even now it was an unusual feeling for her. She rode him hard, and he came quickly. She said, *“as far as you are concerned that didn't happen.”*

Scott looked down at Wendy's shirt and saw drops of blood from George. When he came to the warehouse, it was George that showed him around and helped him find his place. He was now dead, and Scott was underneath the woman that started it all. He then realized he didn't have a condom on. He started to panic when Wendy said, *“there is no way you could get me pregnant.”* Wendy got up and put her panties on then she put on his boxers. She said, *“make sure to come tonight if you want them back.”* Scott wasn't happy with the idea of going commando, but the idea of two hot bisexual women sounded great. As he put his pants on, he found a picture of a woman with short blonde hair. On the back of the photo was a name and date. Wendy, free from the big house in June 2002.

On her first day in prison, Tracy was brought into a room, stripped, searched then given her clothes, a blanket, and toiletries. Unlike every movie she had ever seen she could dress and was treated like a person. Because of the nature of her trial, she was put into protective custody. She would find out later that the person put in charge of her wing knew about the trial and thought she got a raw deal. She also found out that protective custody was solitary confinement.

Twenty-three hours a day in a small room with nothing but her thoughts and a book. The first book was John Grissom's *The Client*, then Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*. As time passed, she found herself just staring at the walls wondering if this was all that was left of her life. She started to write about her thoughts in a diary. In that diary, she used the name Wendy in a nod to her younger self and her desire to have Peter's middle name. She spelled out everything she could remember from that night and the trial.

A month later the guards were doing their usual search of her cell. When she came back, she found her books and notes were gone. The next day Tracy was transferred to the general population. She was put in a cell with two other women. That night was the first night of many she spent being beaten and abused. One of the women put her hand down on her chest then whispered into her ear, "*when we are done you'll wish you let him finish.*" The next day Tracy was in the shower when her new cellmates met up with her with bars of soap in socks. They broke a couple of ribs and violated her with a plunger so violently she required a total hysterectomy. Tracy lay in her bed thinking about how she could never have her own children because she defended herself. She thought about Peter and how she had told him not to come and see her. She said to herself, "*Tracy is dead.*"

Several months later and she was moved back to protective custody. She slept in silence for the first time since she was taken into that hell. A month later and she was brought to the warden who told her she read the notes and asked around. She said, "*I am so sorry about what happened to you. His family somehow paid some inmates and a guard to take care of you.*" A month after that and she met with a Lawyer named George Franks. He was with a group that was seeking justice for wrongfully jail women. George told her that he had evidence that would exonerate her. The police department of her small town was caught hiding evidence and intimidating witnesses. In her case, she should have been saved from jail by vomit. A man tired of all the drunks from a local bar started to videotape his front yard and collecting samples for testing. One sample was caught as well as the video was on a pantsless Tracy vomiting in his yard. In that vomit was traces of the date rape drug Rophenol. George said, "*the man came to the court and told them, but he was told you confessed to the crime and he was turned away.*" He

then produced a thick file of papers saying, *"I have other complaints and victims of Derik. All of them are willing to testify on how he drugged and raped them. They will also talk about how his family threatened them into submission."* George closed his files and told her that the hardest part of all this was just the amount of cases being brought out because of the criminal activity. He said, *"Tracy, there are so many cases that getting heard might be hard."* She looked him in the face and said, *"Tracy is dead. Call me Wendy or nothing, and as for being heard."* She tapped on his camera and said, *"pictures are worth a thousand words."* She did her best to show him the scars from the hysterectomy saying, *"he raped me, but they killed me."*

Two years after being jailed she was freed. Her lawyer was talking about suing and seeking true justice, but to Tracy, it was all just words. The money wouldn't give her back what they took. A week later she settled with the city and with two-hundred thousand dollars she left Hope, Arizona for someplace that wouldn't remember her or what they did to her. She found a small gas station in need of a new owner in a dusty part of nowhere near El Paso on the New Mexico side. There was a nearby town of maybe three hundred people, and her property had a bunch of old buildings from when this place was a connecting point between Mexico and The United States. Before he left George took her picture and later wrote on the back, *"Wendy, free from the big house June 2002."*

Wendy took the photo and put it back in her jacket pocket. She and Scott got back in the Jeep and drove to the yard near the warehouse. Wendy looked at the sky as the sun was starting to come up in the east. They passed through an inner chamber and into what has become their home. The warehouse was subdivided into several rooms around an open chamber. In that central hall was a community gathering place with couches, tables and chairs and a pass-through to a kitchen. Cathy came up to Wendy and kissed her. Wendy hugged her just a little too tight. Cathy said, *"so things went that well."* She then smelled Wendy and said, *"smells like someone is coming to see us tonight."* Wendy said, *"let's go back to our room and see if you can guess."* Cathy kissed her again and said, *"as long as it isn't George. Something about getting screwed by a lawyer just doesn't sound good."*

Wendy and Cathy lay naked in bed together while Scott slept on a couch nearby. Cathy said, *"I'm sorry about George. He was a good man."* Wendy said, *"he didn't belong here. I can see that now. He just didn't have it in him to do what we are doing."* Wendy had her hand on Cathy's stomach rubbing it slowly in circles. Cathy asked, *"are you trying to make me purr?"* Wendy brought her hand up to Cathy's face and said, *"if I wanted you to purr I wouldn't rub you there."* Cathy gestured her head to Scott asking, *"he was fun, but just maybe a little young for us?"* Wendy looked at Scott on the couch. He was naked and looking way too young for what the three just did with only his aggressive pubic hair betraying his age. Wendy said, *"there aren't that many of us that would join us in our fun, and you have to have your fun when the opportunity arises."*

"yes, but can we continue to trust this information? They didn't tell us about the people being sent with the drugs," Jack said as he thumped a paper on the table. The meeting was on both a high from the win and a low with the death of the boy and George. Jose said, *"we are here for this kind of crap, and we also helped those people who were being used by those assholes."* Wendy said, *"I gave the green light on firing after seeing the heat signatures of the people in the box, and I would do it again. We are at war and in war people die, children die. It wasn't planned nor was this kid a target, but those drugs would have killed many more than just one."* A tall African-American woman with slightly graying temples stood up and asked, *"how many children are necessary for it to matter?"* The room went silent. Cathy said, *"Sally that's not fair. We planned out this raid as well as most others away from populated areas."* Sally said, *"not all of them were clean."* Wendy stood up and said, *"if you don't think you could do it any more than walk away, but with any risk, there will be casualties."*

Wendy broke down one of her Wilson Combat 1911 and started to clean it. As she did it, Sally watched her. She finally said to Wendy, *"it's not like I was saying you don't care I was just saying we need to do better to protect the people caught in the crossfire."* Wendy kept cleaning her gun with Sally just standing there waiting for her to respond. She finally looked up at her and

said, *“we don't target the innocent, and we do everything to mitigate collateral damage. If you can see a better way, then say something don't just stand by and complain about the outcome.”* Sally looked at the gun on the table saying, *“I don't want to end up like George.”* Wendy said, *“I didn't see that coming. I let what I saw stopped me from seeing just how much he was affected by the shot.”* Sally looked over at Gina and her two children playing a board game. She said, *“I wonder what that woman did when she got to the border.”* Wendy looked back at the woman and her two children and didn't say a thing even though she knew what happened.

The building sat by itself out in the desert with no real purpose. A truck pulled up, and six men got out and went inside. Sally said, *“the B.O. must be terrible in there.”* Jack pointed to a spinning vent on top of the building. A small dark-haired man standing next to Sally named Gary said, *“that is way too big for such a small building. It must be how they are ventilating the tunnel.”* Wendy knew that if they were using ventilation, then they must have people in the tunnel. Wendy looked through the infrared camera at the heat signatures as they faded into the ground. She said, *“the hole must be bigger than we thought. I think they are using this as a way across the border, not just a way to smuggle drugs.”* She looked to Jack who then nodded. She said, *“we need to take the tunnel and close it from the middle not just on our end. It's the only way we can be sure we don't kill any innocents.”*

With George dead, Gary became the best sniper, so Wendy left him with the truck. He would get on top along with a woman named Zoey to watch for any movement. The men had left someone in their truck to stand guard, but he was asleep in the front passenger seat. Wendy thought about just how stupid that was when she put a round through the window and his head using her suppressed AR 15. The gun was illegally too short without the tax stamp but so was what they were doing. She then set a bomb on the truck just in case any of them got out. Sally and Juan walked around the building looking for traps and security, but they found nothing. The building was little more than a large portable shed made from tin. The last tunnel they found was just big enough for a toddler size train to go through to bring drugs in. Zoey gave the all clear. Sally pulled the door and Wendy went to the right while Juan went to the left. They both nearly fell into the hole. It was nearly the entire floor of the shed.

Where the shed was cheap and rickety, the tunnel was well built. The sides of the opening were cinder block with a rot iron spiral staircase going down at least twenty feet. The stairs were lined with led lights with what had to be the best-lit tunnel Wendy had ever seen. They knew that this must be a focal point for the cartel. In a way, they are not only smuggling drugs but a way they are controlling them. Juan said, “*shit.*” The sound echoed down the opening as they backed away. A man came out of the tunnel and looked up. He then went back to what must be his position. Wendy figured that the tunnel must be set up so any sound would channel down it as a warning. With such a setup, even a suppressed rifle would sound an alarm. This first guy would have to die as quietly as possible. Sally put her rifle down and pulled her blade. She carried a karambit claw knife that when held correctly, curves from the hand down creating a talon-like hook. Sally was deadly with the blade and could do it without a sound. She took her shoes off and went down the stairs in her socks, so she wouldn't make a sound. At the bottom, she froze when the man came back into the opening. He went right past her, looked up then went back to the opening. He stopped within a foot of her finally seeing her. She didn't wait. With an upwards thrust she slit him from gut to throat. As he went to grab his stomach, she buried the blade in his throat. Instead of a noise, he gurgled blood. His hands pulled back from his gut and up to his throat. As he did his guts came pouring out. Sally pulled his head back and nearly decapitated him with the blade letting his body down to the ground as easy as possible.

The tunnel was concrete with lights on top and along the side at the bottom. The whole thing was painted white with a gray floor. Wendy thought that it must have taken them months to build this. She pulled Jack over to her and whispered, “*get black betty.*” Jack went back up then came back with a backpack. Inside the pack was ten pounds of plastic explosives, a pound of steel balls, a fuse, and timer. They planned to line the ceiling of the tunnel with explosives then roll the steel balls down the tunnel. With luck, the balls would act as shrapnel or as shot down a very large shotgun barrel. With Jack and Wendy walking point, Sally used a portable ultrasound to find the weakest points in the tunnel. When they found one, they placed a charge. Sally would later say how the tunnel was all show. She said, “*it was a fresh coat of whitewash on a rotten fence.*”

A mile in and all the charges were set. They quietly made their way up and out into the night. Wendy called to see if the coast was clear, but she got no response. She called again, and Gary finally answered, "*saying no movement or nothing.*" Sally pulled her binoculars out then started to laugh. She said, "*I think I know why he didn't answer.*" They made their way back to the truck. At first, nothing seemed wrong then Wendy saw it. Zoey was wearing a tee-shirt with "I'm with Stupid" on the front only now it was inside out. Wendy said, "*so let me get this right. You two were out here playing grab ass instead of watching.*" She held up the remote and triggered the explosives. The tin shack shot straight up into the air and came down in pieces. At first, nothing else happened, then a line formed along where the tunnel would be as it broke apart and collapsed. Wendy told Gary and Zoey that she didn't care what or who they did on their own time but when on a mission they had to act professionally. On the way back to the warehouse, Wendy called a man they had in the local law and told him about the tunnel. The next day the FBI, DEA, ICE and almost every other lettered law enforcement agency were there talking to the press and taking credit for the find.

Chapter Three

Cathy was waiting with a bottle of sparkling wine and glasses. She decided to take a chance that everything went as planned and they would all come home safe. She watched as they parked the truck and slowly made their way to the warehouse. Everyone was there, but their mood didn't seem well. At the door, she came eye to eye with Wendy who smiled and said, "*you won't believe what we found.*" The others started to laugh. Wendy leaned in and kissed Cathy. The others partied the rest of the night as Cathy and Wendy went to their room and celebrated in their own way. Sally went looking for some more wine when she found Gary and Zoey in the storage room going at it like two high schoolers after prom. Sally said, "*Jesus Christ you two have rooms you could be doing this in, but we have only one pantry.*" She reached over the two and grabbed a bottle of Sky-Blue Vodka.

Cathy and Wendy sat in a large tub filled with water and bubbles. Wendy poured two glasses of a top-shelf tequila called Casamigos Blanco. Cathy asked, "*are you trying to get me drunk so you can have your way with me?*" Wendy smiled and handed her a glass. She then said, "*I would rather have you the way you want to be had.*" Cathy moved over to Wendy after downing the tequila in one go. Wendy said, "*keep drinking like that, and we won't be having anything anyway.*" Cathy turned around and leaned into Wendy's lap, leaned back and brought her arms around her. She said, "*tell me a story.*" Wendy asked, "*what, are you five?*" Cathy stroked Wendy's arms then said, "*I am a little drunk, and I want to hear about Peter.*" Wendy lost her smile and said, "*are you sure? It's not a happy story.*" Cathy said, "*the best ones are rarely happy.*"

Tracy sat in her shop watching the people go back and forth wondering where they are going and why she is just standing still. About a month after she took ownership of the gas station she was robbed at gunpoint. The man had a nickel plated 32 and a shake that had to be from withdrawal. He ended up costing her over four hundred dollars with twenty-seven going to the robber and the rest going to the gun she bought. She didn't know anything about guns so when she bought a Hi-Point 380 semi-automatic, she thought a gun was just a gun. She practiced

with the gun in the large warehouse on her property. After three magazines the gun started to not feed. Then the trigger locked back and wouldn't reset. She took the gun back to the dealer where he said that Hi-Point had the best warranty for a reason. She left the store with a Smith and Wesson model-66 chambered in 357-magnum. It wasn't her first gun, nor would it be her last. As she worked on her draw and aim, she started to wonder about Peter.

She hadn't seen him since he left for California. So much had happened that she didn't see herself as the same girl he knew when they were a thing. He tried to see her when she was on trial, but when she went to prison, her priorities changed. Now she finds herself out in the desert alone and wondering if she made a mistake. One night after a long day of nothing, Tracy found herself watching April James in a television series where she played a Doctor in a crumbling hospital in Hawaii called Island Malpractice. The show was crap, but it hit all the usual clichés that would make it something people would watch. In the credits, she saw Peter's name listed as an extra. After making sure that someone would be there to operate her station, she gassed up her car and left for California.

After some calls to people she knew and to Peter's father Jesse, she found where Peter was living. She pulled into a parking spot near Peter's apartment and watched for him. What she saw was a man that was nothing like the boy she knew. He was impossibly skinny and seemed like he was sick. Tracy sat in her car and wondered if she should stay and talk to him or just go. As she sat not knowing what to do Peter saw her. His face lit up then went dark in a matter of seconds. Then the next shock as Peter turned and kissed a guy standing next to him then he started to walk to her. With every step the words, "*this was a mistake echoed in her ears.*" When he got to the bumper, she got out so he wouldn't get in. With a tee-shirt on that said, "*Drugs Kill*" she could see the track marks on his arms. He leaned in and hugged her. She could feel all his ribs and a smell that was one-part body odor and one-part feces.

They went to a diner near his apartment where he told her about him and his mother. After he returned from trying to go to the court to help Tracy, his mother had him arrested for

grand theft auto then fired him from his job as her assistant. He spent three months in lockup awaiting trial when his mother dropped the charges, and he was released. While in jail he was assaulted by a guy who broke every bone in his hands. It was in jail that he first found addiction to pain medication. His mother hired him back after his hands healed and he was working in an industry that made anything possible. He told Tracy how they even made it possible for people to think of his mother as a doctor while she snorted Heroin. Peter went from being her assistant to her supplier. From there he started to sell on the streets. Peter said, *“they say don’t sell your own poison but with all mom was buying it was just too easy to use and sell.”* Peter had racked up a large debt with a local dealer, and he found himself needing to pay this man back without letting his mother know.

“That was when it first started. This dealer called Yicki-Tang said I could pay off my debt with a little work on the street. It started by blowing him, and soon I found myself working on my knees,” Peter said this without looking at her. Tracy asked, *“that man back there, the one you kissed, was that him?”* Peter looked down and said, *“no that’s mom’s new dealer. You could say I am how she is paying for her fix now.”* Tracy looked at her purse and the gun she illegally brought with her. She asked Peter, *“would you like to leave this behind?”* Peter took in a breath and said, *“I don’t see how I can. I still owe a lot, and then there is mom and well.”* She stared at the tracks on his arms. Tracy said, *“come with me. I live in the middle of nowhere where they couldn’t possibly find you.”* Peter told her he would think about it. She said, *“change isn’t easy, but anything has to be better than the hell you are in now.”*

At the hotel, Tracy laid out what she had on her. That was when she realized her gun was gone. Peter stole her gun. Tracy called the dealer that sold her the gun. He told her that he sold her the gun illegally because of the robbery and there was nothing that could be traced to her. He also said, *“go back to what you know about him. Trace what he told you and you will find him, but if it was me, I would just leave him to whatever he has planned.”* Tracy broke into Peter’s apartment and found a note his mother wrote about going to Napa for a movie shoot, and he should send her vitamins there. The address was ripped off but using a pencil she was able to bring out the address by shading in the page underneath the one he took. It became clear to her

that Peter meant to kill his mother. She drove from there straight to Napa. With a fifty-dollar door pass, she found her way on the set. April looked bad. In the four years, she aged twenty. Somehow the people around her didn't seem to notice, or they didn't care. Just for a second April and Tracy made eye contact. Then the people parted, and Peter came up to his mother with the gun. He said to her, "*sorry mom but you'll need to pay for your fix yourself.*" Peter put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger. He managed to get three rounds off before he dropped leaving April covered in her son's blood.

Tracy slipped away from the mayhem and found herself in a bar. She ordered a shot of tequila and said, "*just keep them coming.*" The bartender gave her a strange look, but he did as she asked. In the mirror, she could see that she had blood on her. She vaguely remembered going to Peter and seeing the grin on his lifeless face and the look on April's face. Not for the loss of her son but the embarrassment of what happened and the loss of her drug connection. A voice on her left said, "*it looks like you had a hell of a day.*" Tracy looked to her left and saw a man that looked like a lawyer or preacher. Tracy said, "*there has to be a way to kill every dealer on the planet.*" She took a shot and looked at the man expecting him to seem shocked. Instead, he said, "*I hear you just don't look to the police.*" Tracy told this man her story about how she was jailed and what she thought about the law and justice. He put out his hand and said, "*my name is David Warren, and I have a little group I am putting together to deal with this problem. If you are interested, then give me a call.*" He gave her a card. Cathy asked, "*is that the same David?*" Wendy said, "*not tonight, one mistake at a time.*"

Sam stared out his door at the black van that has been parked across the street from his shop for the last two days. He thought that they should just stencil FBI or ATF on the side. He thought how they couldn't tie him to the ranch or any of the militias working the border so now they will just sit on his shop and watch until either he does something illegal or they find a new target. The gun shop in town was the legal side with a separate place for his less than legal activity. Sam once told a man that, "*the second amendment says we have the right to bear arms not we have the right to bare what the government allows us to. Rights with limits are not rights, they are privileges, and they can be taken away. I provide people with freedom and the ability to*

express that freedom with firepower.” That man turned out to be a narcissistic serial killer who used those guns to kill drug dealers then his own people, but in Sam’s view, all he did was provide the hammer not pull the trigger.

David Warren sat just outside in his car near a dive bar in a small town in Nevada. He had twenty-five thousand dollars in a bag. He watched as the ATF raided the bar where he was supposed to buy some guns for a project he was putting together. David was a grief counselor in the Napa area of California where most of his clientele have in some way been afflicted by the drug trade. The one takeaway from all his work was just how much money these dealers were making as well as their ability to kill at will. Something about taking a life just made David hard. He thought that it was the strongest form of power. But to do that he would need firepower that couldn’t be traced to him. A few nights before contacting the people the ATF were arresting, he had a client kill his dealer using a 22-automatic. David acted as his alibi for the shooting for the price of the gun. He sat there thinking about is options when he remembered this woman, he met about a month ago. She had said how she bought a gun illegally and just maybe this Wendy could help him.

The police car was just outside of Wendy’s gas station. David could see one of them holding what looked to be an AK-47. He figured that Wendy was going down, but then they gave it back to her and left. When they were long gone, David went inside to the counter. Tracy was going by Wendy full time, and she recognized him at once. David asked, *“the cops are letting you keep an AK-47 for protection?”* Wendy pulled out the rifle and said, *“well this is actually an AK-74, and yes one of them sold it to me for next to nothing. They took it off a migrant worker crossing the desert. They have been selling me the guns they take from the people they don’t want to be jammed up by a weapons charge.”* David told her about the façade plan he had for dealing justice to dealers and how he needed a style of gun. One that would be easily concealed, as silent as possible and quickly dropped when required. He didn’t tell her that his plan was a way to make money while getting others to kill for him making his clients his weapons. Wendy gave him every 22-automatic she had as well as a couple of 308 rifles.

Wendy had David stay with her that night so that in the morning they could go over and talk to Sam. David told her that he had one client named Allen that had a ranch that would work well for his project. It was going to be a camp for wayward children, but no one wanted to send their kids to a camp run by a tech guy. He also said how this Allen was bankrolling the operation. That night in Wendy's one-bedroom house David slept on a pullout couch. About one in the morning Wendy came out of her room wearing nothing but a nearly see-through robe and climbed on top of David. Wendy was alone for much of her time and David was handsome in his own way. Much of that was in his charisma. Wendy felt this magnetic pull right from the start. She opened her robe as she straddled him. David looked up at her and said, "*I don't want you to feel used.*" Wendy said, "*I don't think you see just who is using who.*" She sat back and started to slide up and down in his lap. She came back down and kissed him. David said, "*I don't think this is a good idea.*" Wendy reached down and pulled his boxers off. She said, "*then just stop thinking.*" She slid down onto him and soon whatever reservations he had were gone, and all that was left was a primal connection between two people.

The next day they met up with Sam at his gun shop. Sam liked to dress in desert khakis that gave him the look of a military man with just a little too much padding. When he first met David, he ran a search to make sure he wasn't with the government. Sam knew a few people with the feds who would tell him if someone was undercover or not even if that was top secret. David told him his plan to deal justice to the dealers and Sam was on board. Sam suggested that they shift their focus to the border and stopping the drugs before they get to the streets. David said, "*one step at a time, first I want to clean our streets.*" Sam said he would track down the guns he wanted as well as the suppressors and ammunition. Finally, he gave David the number of a former marine named Greg who was looking for a cause to fight for. Sam said, "*think soldier of conscience rather than fortune.*" David asked, "*so this ex-marine would help us?*" Sam said, "*first its former marine there are no ex-marines. Remember that when you meet him, or you will get your ass kicked by a sixty-year-old and yes as long as you give him a mission, he will fulfill it.*"

That night David slept in Wendy's bed. They lay entwined with each other staring up at the wide-open skylight in her bedroom. Wendy said, "*I could come with you and help sell this project to the former marine.*" When she said former, she put an emphasis on the word former. David said, "*I think I need to do this on my own, but I have this kid that I watch over named Colin. His parents brutalized him for their business. His scars sell the project.*" David didn't want to tell her that she was older than what he liked and not blonde enough. Wendy didn't like the idea that this man wanted to use this boy as a prop, but she also understood how the world works and that you do what you must to win. She leaned in and kissed him saying, "*well how about one for the road.*" She ran her hand down to him and worked on him until he was ready for another go. They spent the rest of the night with each other on and off until it was time for David to go. As soon as he was gone Wendy realized that what she felt was loneliness rather than any kind of attraction. She decided to find someone to spend her life with or at the very least more than one night.

Time was coming close to the meeting with Wendy and the delivery. Somehow Sam had to ditch the feds and make it to the meeting place, but first, he would have to go and get the merchandise. He had a new 50-caliber armor piercing tracing incendiary round that was built for the desert. He also had some mines and a rocket launcher. Wendy didn't care about the fireworks, but she did like the fancy rounds. A rusted out 1986 Ford Escort pulled up to the shop, and two stereotypical bikers got out and walked in. One of them came up to the counter and said, "*Wendy sent us to distract the pigs outside.*" The biker that spoke was named Jimmy, and he was not a biker, in fact, he was an accountant, and his tattoos were just painted on. The other guy was Henry James, and like Jimmy, he was not a biker just a lawyer for the city. They had a script, and they wanted to follow it.

"*Hey Sam, you got what we need*" Jimmy read out loud, so the feds could hear. Sam said, "*yeah these will make a mess out of anyone you go after.*" Henry made a jerking motion with his hand then said, "*are they full auto with a high capacity.*" This went back and forth until they laid enough innuendo to make the agents think they were about to have the bust of a lifetime. The two fake bikers came out with six rifle size cases and duffle bags big enough to carry out world

war three. Just for a second, the driver thought about staying or going after what would be the biggest bust in their careers. On the way down the road, they called in backup saying they were on the chase of a heavily armed biker gang with machine guns. Jimmy looked back at the van that was just a little too close for someone trying to secretly follow them. The Escort pulled in to what looked like a set from a Mad Max movie with some expensive cars parked outside. An hour later and the FBI raided the Southwest Paintball Society arresting a Judge, chief of police and a state senator. They also confiscated fifteen fully automatic paintball guns. All of them fully legal.

Wendy fired a round down range. The 50-caliber was easy to trace as it shot through the armor and set a bale of hay on fire. Wendy said, "*Sam you don't disappoint.*" Sam smiled and said, "*I'm pleased to aim.*" For a moment Wendy thought about the boy and his mother. She thought about what a round like this would have done in the box of that truck. As if he could read her mind Sam said, "*I wouldn't use this on a soft target. Maybe something like a truck engine.*" Wendy found her smile again and said, "*I wonder how the FBI took to the arresting of a Federal judge or state senator.*" They packed the truck and Wendy was on her way to a place they kept some of the more illegal items while Sam drove by the big bust. The agent driving the van saw him as he passed, and he just knew that he was up to something.

Wendy went to a storage room in the main building behind the only lock in the complex. Inside was all the stuff she had from the ranch as well as her life as Tracy. She opened a box and found her AK-74 a cop sold her back in the day. She sat down and stripped the rifle down to clean and oil it. The weapon was all kinds of illegal, from the length of the barrel to the fact that it was full-auto she wasn't supposed to have the gun. But there was a lot of things she wasn't supposed to have or do. She put the rifle in a hard side case along with four magazines and left the storage room. The rifle was a reminder of past mistakes and new beginnings. She took the case to her office in the warehouse and mounted it on the wall. Underneath it, she put a picture from the ranch of herself, Cathy, Cindy, Scott, Bill, Nancy, April, June, Ruth, Allen, Alice, and Max.

Wendy sat down and called Sam, but he said, “*don't call right now*” then he hung up. She knew that the ATF was watching him, and they didn't like the little trick with the paintballs. Sam had said that when the press found out about the raid on a paintball facility, they would force them to stand down and look for a new target out of sight of the press. This should mean that they should step down from operations until the heat is off, but their last raid gave them a lead on a stash house for the drugs being sent through the tunnel. If they wait, it could be cleared out, so there was no option. As George was fond of saying, “*time to drop some bodies.*” Scott was outside with Sally loading a van for a quick assault. The van was padded with Kevlar and equipped with run-flat tires and a reinforced front end to work as a battering ram.

When they first made plans for this type of raid, they investigated armor such as flak jackets or the standard body armor with ballistic plates. In the trials, they found that the more armor they wore, the slower they were. A lightning strike would need speed, and that speed would act as a sort of protection by striking without warning. The first time they used this idea was on a barn being used as a staging ground for distribution of a drug commonly called bath salts. They put the van through the barn from one side to the other, and they followed it. The van managed to strike a table filled with the drug clouding the air and finding the men left on their feet. They were in and out in fifteen minutes with a burning barn in their wake. They found that they needed to have a second chase vehicle for a second team to strike behind and keep the fight going on two fronts. Sally was fond of saying they, “*divided and conquered.*”

Five men stood outside the building with an assortment of weapons from AK-47s to a lever-action Henry. Soldados del Diablo was on the alert after they lost their livelihood with the tunnel. It made them a force in the drug trade and its loss would make them a target. Their leadership was convinced that it was a rival gang with their own plans for a tunnel or worse. One of the guards saw what looked like an old Toyota minivan with a ram of a sort on the front. It was the last thing he ever saw. A round went through his hat into his head and back out. He didn't see the flash nor did the other four men outside as they got their very own matching head wounds. Sally was behind the wheel with Wendy on the infrared camera trying to read what was

on the other side. Wendy said, "*aim for the side wall.*" The door is reinforced steel, but the walls were a thin wood.

The van plowed through the wall striking then tossing two people across the room. The side doors opened, and they struck at the men taking them in just a few seconds. The team checked for information and anything useful. As they checked the floor shifted. Wendy said, "*clear the building and evac to the staging area.*" Wendy got behind the wheel of the van and put it into gear. The floor shifted again, and the van slipped halfway into what must be a basement. Wendy saw she had no chance to retrieve the van, so she pulled the pin on the long shot. An explosive package made just for such an occasion. The bomb was laced with thermite to make the fire as hot as possible. She walked through the newly made hole to see her crew left without her. Part of their protocols was that their cell phones are kept in the chase car so no one can lose one on the job. Off to one side, Wendy saw a motorcycle. One of the head-shot guards was next to it. She took his keys, a colt-1911 and his customized hog.

About two miles away from the hit Wendy saw a blinking light on the motorcycle. She quickly stopped and ran from the bike just before it exploded. She figured that the bike must have some sort of proximity sensor that if he ever got two miles away without deactivating it, the bike would explode killing the rider. Wendy said out loud, "*what a shame, that was a nice bike.*" She looked to the rising sun knowing that it would be very hot very soon and she had a long walk without any water. She made it about five miles down the road when she recognized where she was and that they had a stash nearby. On the side of a road that no one drives anymore was an old gas station. Inside it was a bunker with armaments and other supplies including a beacon and air conditioning assuming the solar cells kept the batteries charged. Inside the service station, she went for the car lift. Raising it opened the door to the bunker. Inside she found water, MREs, and enough ammo to restart a good war. She also found a bottle of Tequila. The bottle made her think about Maria.

Wendy ordered another shot of Tequila from the bar. It had been about a month since David left with Sam and their plans to buy guns. She had been going from bar to bar looking for love in all the wrong places. She decided that this would be her last bar for a while. Her search for a hole filler was turning up lots of guys but no men. She wanted a real man, not a dude. This bar seemed like every other bar in the area with a mix of Texas and Mexico that didn't seem to jive. Most of the patrons were militia fresh from the border with a few locals who seemed to be hoping they could just get their poison and go. Behind the bar was a raven-haired beauty with an olive complexion. Her looks were upsetting the militiamen, so they spent their social time taunting her. None of this was new for Maria, she had to deal with this crap ever since she and her parents came from Warez Mexico when she was five. They came legally and became citizens the legal way, but to these guys, none of that mattered.

As if something was released in the air the locals all left leaving just the militia and Wendy in the bar. One of the men, a particularly loud one came over to Maria. She had stepped away from the bar to clean a table when he cornered her up against a wall. He whispered into her ear, *"so you think you can come to my country and just take. I think I should be able to take from you."* He then bashed her head against the wall as he pulled her shirt open revealing her chest. The bartender was her father. He went for a gun but was stopped by two men who started to beat him. The man said, *"first me then my crew. Welcome to America."* From his left side, he heard a racking slide of a gun. He turned to see Wendy with a Glock 19 in her hand. He turned back to Maria and said, *"you don't have the balls to shoot me, bitch."* Wendy said, *"I don't have balls at all asshole."* She let off a round that just kissed the bridge of his nose and struck the wall near the guys beating on Maria's father. He let go of her and went for his face as his eyes started to water from the injury. The man turned to his buddies and started to say get her when he realized he was all alone with his friends running away. Maria kned him in the crotch as her father brought down a bat on the back of his head.

The next morning, Wendy was in this woman's bed. She wanted to tell her she wasn't gay it was just all that happened that made that night what it was. She wanted to tell her that, but she somehow felt at peace with this woman. She still liked men, and she didn't think that would

ever change, but now she found she liked whatever that was last night. Maria stirred in bed. There was something Wendy liked in just how unguarded this woman was. She was nearly gang-raped by people who hated her for her looks, but it didn't seem to faze her. Maria rolled over and kissed her. She was somehow even more beautiful in the morning than that night. Wendy got up and told Maria she had to go. Maria asked, "*so was that your first time with a woman?*" Wendy didn't answer, but her silence screamed "*yes.*" Maria said, "*you know where I work and if this is something you would like to explore then come back.*"

Wendy put the bottle of tequila down. Her thoughts of Maria opened an old wound that had somehow healed with time. She knew that some wounds didn't really heal they just closed and waited for the right time to burst. It was too early to start drinking, and she wasn't hungry enough to eat an MRE. About noon the beacon turned from red to green signaling that someone was waiting for her. Wendy looked out and saw one of their jeeps with Cathy behind the wheel. She had her Sara Conner look from the last scene of the first Terminator with the aviator sunglasses and bandana around her head. All that was missing was the dog and bun in the oven. Wendy shut the bunker down and went for the Jeep. Inside Cathy said, "*we need to work that exit better.*" Wendy said, "*no, that worked. Next time, I just need to let the van go.*"

Chapter Four

Scott drove a van he bought from a salvage yard into the shop. It was an old Toyota Previa that Scott and Darrel planned on stripping down and turning into the next breaching van with a reinforced frontend and Kevlar side panels. The van had only one side that opened so they will retrofit the other side to open. Both sides will have hydraulic arms that will force the doors open quickly. Darrel grumbled as he worked on the new van. He spent a lot of time on the first one only to watch its aftermath on the news. The local news was calling it a gang war. They were interviewing people from outside of the community who would say how terrified they were with all the fighting and guns. They had interviewed a few locals who were happy to see the drug house go. Sally said how the locals didn't meet the media's narrative. Scott said, *"yeah, it's hard to do an anti-gun interview with a grandmother while she is holding her AR15 on her hip with a Colt 1911 on the other."*

Wendy called it a day earlier than her usual with all the nonsense with the news and Darrel's bitching pushing her near her breaking point. About an hour later Cathy joined her with her phone. Wendy hated having a cell phone in the bedroom, but she could see something was going on with Cathy and the phone. Cathy slipped out of her jeans and top then put on a sheer slip she liked to sleep in and joined Wendy in bed. With a flick and a swish, she brought up a picture on her phone of a newborn infant. Cathy said, *"guess who just had another baby?"* Wendy asked, *"Alice?"* Cathy nodded and said, *"a little boy they are naming Edward Allen for a guy that worked for them and well Allen."* Wendy stared at the picture of this wrinkled little mess wondering how they all survived the ranch and made it to this point. Wendy asked, *"did you ever wonder what it would have been like if what happened didn't happen?"* Cathy said, *"you can say miscarriage I'm not some frail little butterfly or something."* Wendy said, *"no but you didn't answer me either."* Cathy turned back to the picture and the road not taken.

Cathy was a practicing nurse and friend of a friend of David. She was a much-needed necessity on the ranch with so many people building with so little experience in construction. Like so many of the women on the ranch, she had slept with David. The first few nights on the

ranch she had shared a small popup trailer with David, and after the third night, they were together. Cathy didn't want a relationship with David, she wasn't even sure if she liked him. The idea of being tied down to one person just didn't sound like anything she would ever want. David eventually brought this younger woman named Cindy to the ranch, and David and Cindy moved into the completed main compound together. The idea of David with the tween made Cathy sick to her stomach. She knew that Cindy wasn't a tween, but she still didn't like the visual. Her sick feeling would return each day, and as a nurse, Cathy started to understand what it meant. She had one friend she could tell about it named Wendy.

Wendy asked, *“so what does this mean for you and the father?”* Cathy stared at the blue test and said, *“I’m not sure how to tell him or how he’ll react. I don’t even know if I want him to be the father.”* Wendy first squinted at Cathy’s response then she realized just who the father was. She said, *“there are options.”* Cathy said, *“not for me. I wasn’t supposed to be able to have a baby. Giving it up now would be like giving up my one and only chance to be a mother.”* Wendy nodded then said, *“when I was in prison I was assaulted, and that assault cost me my ability to have children. I can understand how you feel, but if you keep it, you will need to tell him or leave.”* Cathy knew about Wendy going to prison, but she hadn’t heard about the rest. As if she could read her mind Wendy said, *“that was another life a long time ago.”* Cathy came up behind Wendy and put her arms around her. The feeling was warm and somehow right to Wendy. Like this was something she was looking for ever since she lost her old life as Tracy in that cell.

A week later and nothing was said to anyone about the baby. Cathy was having a hard day with the numerous cuts, scrapes and hammers to the thumb people were suffering. She was feeling rundown and on edge. She looked out at the newest project to see David with his shirt off digging a firepit. She said to herself, *“he should be told.”* Next to him was this woman named Wendy. There was this rumor that she and David had something for a little bit before he took up with her. Cathy didn't know that it was while they were together. As she stared out the landscape seemed to shift than she went to her knees. She tried to get back up, but her legs felt like they were weighed down. Then she saw the blood. Wendy came in to see what was going on. Two

hours later, Cathy was in a paper gown in a hospital being told that she lost the baby and would most likely never have another one. They didn't tell her at the time that someone gave her a drug that caused the miscarriage. David stayed back at the ranch, but Wendy stayed with her, holding her hand helping her through those tough few weeks. It wouldn't be for months before they were a couple and even longer before they would have the relationship they share now. It would take both women coming to an understanding of who they were and what they wanted out of life. After the events at the ranch, Cathy found a note written by David to Cindy asking her to buy the drug used to cause her miscarriage when she was in Mexico.

The next day Darrel and Scott had the van stripped down and had new plans for the project. Darrel's attitude seemed to change as they looked through their plans. Wendy thought about asking if they had slept at all. She eventually said, "*don't forget this needs to be expendable.*" Darrel said, "*when we are done you won't have to abandon it.*" Wendy just rolled her eyes at him and said, "*just make sure not to leave any evidence inside.*" She left the two boys to play with their new toy and went to the armory. Inside she found Sally and a new girl named Jill as they went over the basic weapons used on the job. Jill ran away from a mother and stepfather who abused her from the age of ten until she left at sixteen. From there she went street to street finding as much harm as good. She found a trucker who would take care of her as long as she did things for him. When she finally had enough, he kicked her out at a gas station in the middle of nowhere owned by a woman named Wendy.

The round flew past the target and down the range eventually burying itself in a mound. Sally just stared at the untouched target wondering how Jill could have missed with every shot while Jill was just happy, she didn't hit herself in the face with the recoil again. Wendy said, "*just maybe we should have you train with a different caliber for now. Maybe a 9mm or a 380?*" Jill looked down at the colt 1911 in her hand and asked, "*you mean there are different kinds?*" Cathy pulled her nickel plated Chiappa Rhino 20DS chambered in 357-magnum. She showed Jill how to hold it and work the hammer so she could shoot it in a single action. By the end of the day, they had her with a Smith & Wesson model 360 running 38+p rounds. She also was

working with an FN Five-seven pistol, but they told her that they were having a hard time getting the ammunition.

The next day Jill was on the top of a van with an air rifle. An Airforce Texan SS chambered in .458-caliber with a suppressor and a secondary air tank with a compressor built into the van. The van was built for hunting wild pigs in Texas with a removable top panel revealing two shooter's perches with air hookups for the rifles. The longer Jill worked on her groupings from one-hundred to four-hundred yards the closer her groupings came. At a hundred yards she was stacking the shots on top of each other. Sally said to her, *"yes, but hitting a flat target isn't the same as hitting a living breathing thing."* Jill stopped smiling then asked, *"so you don't think I can do it? Then why are we doing any of this? Why am I here?"* From outside the van Wendy said, *"you don't know what you can do until you try. We are taking this van out for a hunt in Texas, and you are going. The best way to know if you can do it is to try, either way, you are always welcome in our home."*

Jill took aim at her target. She adjusted for wind and the light coming from the setting sun. He shifted but did not see her and the van. With a final breath out, she fired hitting him in the head just above the eye. Jill quickly worked the bolt and fired at the second target next to the first. The round struck dead center in the left eye and as he and the other fell the remaining hogs ran for cover. Jill worked the bolt again and fired hitting a third in the back of the head. The three women with permission of a local rancher were on their hunt for most of the day when they found a spot that seemed the best for their trial. With the final shot, Wendy drove the van over to the hogs. They had little time between being able to use their kills or let them rot. Sally showed Jill how to field dress an animal as Wendy called the rancher. He said that he would finish butchering any hogs under one-hundred and ninety pounds. They would split the meat between him and a homeless shelter near the station. Sally dipped her hand in the blood and smeared it down Jill's face.

Two men in a hunting blind watched as the women killed and dressed the hogs. One of them said, *"that was our kill. That bitch shot our hogs."* He looked at the other guy who watched as the blood dripped from Jill's face onto her white tank top. The first man said, *"Jimmy, I think we need to go over there and take what's ours."* Jimmy looked back at the small girl size woman with blood dripping down onto her chest and said, *"Lenny, what I want I know I'll have to take and it isn't no dead pig."* The two smiled as they slipped into their Jeep and made their way to the van and what they wanted. Wendy saw them first as they drove over without their lights on. She did a check on her 1911 on her hip and a 12-gauge mounted on the inside of the van. Wendy said, *"head's up, someone is coming without any lights on."* Sally asked, *"maybe it's Hardy coming out for the hogs?"* Wendy said, *"no it's a jeep, and he would know better than to come out here with no lights."*

The Jeep came to a stop, and the man named Jimmy got out. He had a lever action 45/70 on his shoulder and a 50-caliber desert eagle on his hip. He reminded Jill of the David Spade character Joe Dirt if he had gained about forty pounds in a beer gut. Lenny turned on the Jeep's lights flooding the three women and the fresh kills. Lenny looked like a tourist would if he thought you would need to dress like a cowboy to hunt in Texas. A plaid shirt with a star and the words Lone Star underneath, chemically faded jeans with a Texas-shaped belt buckle, bright red boots and a bright orange Stetson with a star on the side. Jimmy asked, *"what the fuck do you think you are doing hunting on our land bitches?"* Lenny just said, *"yeah bitches."* Sally turned to Wendy then back to Jimmy and said, *"this isn't your land motherfucker, and we have the permission of the real owner to be here."* Jimmy said, *"shut the fuck up coon, we aren't talking to you so shut your welfare black ass mouth up."* Sally dropped her cool and started to walk over to Jimmy saying, *"just who the fuck do you think you are you inbred redneck sister-fucker."* Jill slipped back away from the action as Wendy stepped forward with her hand on her holstered gun. Lenny stepped forward with a 308 deer rifle up but not pointing at anyone. Lenny said, *"now let's just take a step back, this doesn't need to go any further we just want what is ours."* Jimmy said, *"fuck that you heard. Now this nigger."* Lenny interrupted him saying, *"drop it dipshit."* Sally said, *"say it again boy, I dare you."*

Lenny took aim at Sally as a shot rang out. The round struck Lenny in the face in a downward motion busting his head showering the Jeep and Jimmy in blood and teeth. Jimmy pulled a comically large Colt Python as he looked up in just enough time to see Jill with a shotgun firing a deer slug into his left eye bursting his head like a melon. Sally looked at Wendy then they both looked up at Jill who was just standing there out of the opening on the top of the van with the shotgun barrel still smoking. About ten minutes later the rancher pulled up. After they told him what happened, he told them to take the Jeep to the edge of the property. He said, *“there have been more than a few people killed by illegals crossing the border. Set it on fire just to sell the bit.”* Sally wanted to leave the bodies for the pigs, but Wendy and Jill wanted them buried and gone. Sally turned to Jill and said, *“I think you might just be ready.”*

Back at the ranch Jill found Scott and nearly tackled him. She kissed him, and he kissed back. She did this in front of everyone in the common room. Cathy looked to Wendy who shrugged her shoulders in a *“whatever”* gesture that meant they would need a new boy toy from now on. About the time Jill started to unbutton Scott's pants Wendy suggested they move into one of their rooms. Jill pulled Scott into her room and moved her hand down to his inner thigh then back up to the belt. Scott knew her past, so he knew not to try and force himself on her, or she just might push away and something about this new attitude in her he didn't want to lose. In the morning he woke up and went back to work on the van but all he could think about was her.

Wendy looked through her reports. A couple of years ago Wendy came into some money from an old friend, and she used some of that money as well as contacts from a man named Ivan to hire a network of private investigators and police to track the drug trade. Over the last four years, she learned that many in local governments wanted results rather than interference. There is a real sense of mistrust of the federal government so allowing them to dictate the war on drugs didn't sit well and gave her an in with them. Her agreement with them all started with the locals and their willingness to sell her guns they took off people crossing the border. Wendy pulled the reports from the last week then she laid them next to the new ones as Sally walked in. Sally asked, *“so anything new?”* Wendy pointed at the five thick folders from last week then the new folder about half as thick. She said, *“either the feds are cutting back on paperwork, or they might*

just be freezing the locals out.” Wendy pulled a file out of last weeks reports and said, “I think that Sam is in more trouble than we thought.”

Sam looked out at what was now three black vans. Sam said on the phone, *“they aren’t even trying to hide. All that is missing is FBI surveillance on the side.”* His lawyer said, *“what do you expect you made them look like fools in the public eye and with all this Russia crap they need a win.”* The FBI was investigating a Russian connection between the election of the current president and the illegal hacking of a rival. With an attack on the presidency, many were looking for a case they could make a name for themselves to protect their jobs. In the southwest, this meant either border defense, the war on drugs or guns. Sam had a surveillance team follow a fake biker gang to what was a trap filled with important people and paintball guns. That team was now in Ohio guarding an empty building just in case the FBI might need it someday. Sam knew that this new team wouldn’t let that happen again. He also knew why his background checks and internet was slowed to the point of being like the speed of the old dial-up he used back when he first opened.

His nineteen-year-old nephew Owen was working for a rancher mending fences as a day job, but at night he worked for him. He was a high school football star, and with the ranch work, he still had that lean muscular body and the auburn hair Sam claimed he had once. Sam had to leave the illegal side to Owen so he could let the feds watch him. Owen was picking up a new shipment of what Sam called freedom fries at a local ranch. The fully-automatic AR-15s came from a source in South America where the Government was selling them to nations that would turn around and sell them for a profit. Some of the guns they bought over the years even came from the ATF and Homeland Security. To protect his investment as well as his kin, Sam asked Wendy to help. For his part, Owen had a hard time working with Wendy without staring at her. When she first came to town, he would watch her from afar. Owen was driving his truck with Wendy in the back and Jill in the front. Wendy said, *“you can either stare at my tits or at the road, but if you choose the former then let me drive.”* Owen sat up and turned back to the road. Wendy unbuttoned a button on her shirt then smiled as Jill just shook her head.

Owen pulled into a driveway out in the middle of nowhere then stopped. Jill asked, *“what do you think?”* Owen said, *“something’s wrong. There should have been someone at the gate.”* Wendy took out her night vision goggles and checked out the ranch. She said, *“I see eight men in what looks like tactical gear with M4s and.”* She stopped talking when Owen said, *“let me guess FBI patches.”* Wendy said, *“no ATF.”* Owen backed away slowly without turning on the lights. He took the night vision goggles and drove for about three miles using them before turning the lights back on. Wendy came up behind him putting her arms around his seat saying, *“dam, you have some good instincts boy.”* Owen said, *“I am not a boy.”* Jill looked down at Wendy’s ever creeping hand as it made its way to Owen’s crotch. She asked, *“maybe I should drive?”* Owen pulled over and got in the back. He called a prepaid cell phone his uncle owned telling him that the buy was a bust in many ways. As he spoke, Wendy was going down on him as Jill drove back to the compound trying not to look back. A few hours later Owen found himself in bed with Wendy and a woman he barely knew named Cathy. The night was something out of one of the pornos he watched online.

Jill told Scott about the bust then how Wendy went down on this boy in the back of the truck. The two lay in bed together staring at the ceiling. She knew about Scott and Wendy but was still surprised when he told her about his first time with Wendy in the school bus then the nights with both Wendy and Cathy. Scott told her how the new van would be the best work he and Darrel ever did with enough features that they will be able to do anything. Jill just said, *“the others don’t care about things they care about people so don’t be disappointed if they don’t see it the way you and he does.”* Scott said, *“I only care what you think.”* Jill moved in closer than said, *“I think about you, and that’s what was important to me.”* Scott asked, *“have you ever thought about just going, I mean leaving all this behind and making life away from the violence?”* Jill replied, *“here I feel like I am more than just that abused little girl left on the side of the road. Here I matter.”* Scott said, *“you matter to me no matter where you are or what you are doing and that won’t ever change.”*

Wendy looked over at Cathy and said, *“we might need to stop our operations for a little bit.”* Cathy was laying with one leg across Owen while she played with his pubic hair. Owen just laid there with a smile on his face that seemed like it was carved in. Cathy asked, *“what about Sam?”* Owen said, *“Uncle Sam said that if this pickup failed that he would take a break from his calling and let the feds run their course.”* Owen laughed then said, *“Uncle Sam.”* Wendy asked, *“run their course?”* Owen replied, *“yes, he left nothing for them to find or trace back to him, so he thinks that in a few months with nothing new they would have to leave or face hurting their records.”* Cathy said, *“they are spending a lot of money for little return.”* Owen said, *“just to be safe. He told me to tell you to stay away just in case they’re following his customers.”*

Chapter Five

“Darrel, I just don’t see where the work went,” Wendy said as she looked over the van he spent a week on tearing down and building back up. Darrel smiled and said, *“damn right you don’t see it. You don’t see all the carbon fiber replacing the steel or the steel reinforced front end. You can’t see how I added the side door or all the secret storage pockets for guns and ammo.”* He demonstrated the Kevlar and carbon fiber pullup window armor and the hydraulic doors. From behind the van, Sally asked, *“what’s with the stick figure family?”* Owen said, *“well that helps it fit in with the other soccer moms.”* Wendy walked around to see a stick figure with a bow in its head spinning on a pole in a sort of dance while other stick figures tossed dollar signs at the dancer. Sally asked, *“Pole dancing?”* Darrel sighed and said, *“just like mom.”* Sally shook her head saying, *“there is just something wrong with you Darrel.”*

Wendy, Scott, Jill, and Owen drove the van over to Sam’s shop parking it about a block away. Sam owned the block and the buildings around his shop. He had secret passages going between the buildings and a claustrophobic tunnel that no one liked. They met up at an old convenient store that closed after the owner died defending twenty-three dollars from a robber with a nickel plated 32. Sam gave them the keys to a storage locker as well as the locations of a few other places where he hid some ordinance. He said, *“I’m taking some time off to go to Mexico and meet with some of my suppliers. It will take some time, and I won’t be able to help with your project.”* He turned to Owen and said, *“you might want to move your trailer or find somewhere to stay for a while.”* Wendy said, *“if he wants he could stay with us for as long as he needs.”* Jill mumbled, *“or until he dies of exhaustion.”*

Wendy sat at her desk looking over what they knew and what they thought was happening. She looked out the window that overlooked the common room at her friends both old and knew and wondered if they were all done with the project. The dealers were changing their habits, the feds were moving in, and she was losing friends. It made her think about the ranch and her crew back then. They had just finished the compound and were stringing lights from trailer to trailer when David had asked Wendy if she wanted to join them. He said, *“I think you*

would make a good leader for one of the groups.” They had set up for four teams with one dealing with only those that sell to schools. Something about the type of people that would sell hard drugs to children helped Wendy decide to join. She looked over the sites and being the first person on the ranch she chose her site and trailer. Next to her was a woman going by the name of Cathy. She took the name from a comic strip, but she was nothing like that Cathy. She was thin with long blonde slightly curly hair that reminded Wendy of Sara Conner from the movie *The Terminator*. Wendy didn't know what she felt about this woman and her attraction to her.

By the end of the day she had five people in her group counting herself. A man going by Fred with a pencil-thin mustache and a bad combover, an over tanned, ripped woman calling herself Arnie, Cathy and a man from Vietnam calling himself Duke. Unlike the other teams, Wendy's team was going to remain small and focus on just those that sell near schools and to children. That night they planned a bonfire to introduce everyone. David had said how they need to see each other as a family for this project to work. Wendy watched as David spoke while trying not to look at Cathy. She had miscarried his child a few months earlier. He had moved on to another woman and hadn't spoken to her about anything. He even sent someone to speak to her about what the nurse's station needed. It was the loss of the baby and how David handled it that led Cathy to want to take part in a team rather than spend any time on the ranch near David.

Duke was born in Vietnam and fled the country in 1975 with his family when the southern government collapsed. His real name was Bao. They moved to California and opened a Vietnam, French and Polynesian fusion restaurant. It was ahead of the fusion trend and was popular with the locals. Bao worked in the restaurant while his brother Wayne took up with a local gang. Bao got married to a woman named Daisy, and they had a child they named Duke to honor Bao's father and his love of John Wayne. When Duke was fifteen his uncle Wayne told him, he had to work for him or die. A month later and Duke was in Jail for the first but not last time. He would go back a few times until a fight in jail cost him his life. The night of the funeral, Bao went to his brother and told him he was responsible for Duke and he would pay. For his trouble, Wayne beat Bao nearly to death than while he lay there Wayne went to Bao's house and

raped Daisey. The death of her son along with the subsequent attack led to her suicide. While Wayne got five years for the attack and no time for his part in his nephew's death.

Fred was born Thaddeus Stevens, but most people called him Thad. From an early age, Thad was into statistics and numbers. He was fond of saying that his preschool class voted him future accountant of the year. After four years of college, he was a certified public accountant working for a firm in Los Angeles. He worked sixteen hours a day, six days a week with no time for a life or something like it. One of their clients ran a business that didn't seem to make sense to Thad. He soon came to understand that his firm was laundering money for a dealer. A week later and he had the FBI investigating his firm, a month after that a fire burned the firm down killing everyone Thad knew or cared about. With the guilty smoldering, Thad found himself facing charges of money laundering from the evidence he provided.

Most people would have said Arnie took the name for the actor and bodybuilder. Angie grew up on Venice Beach watching the surfers and weightlifters. Her favorite thing was to watch the bodybuilders work out. She dreamed of a day she could work on a look that would turn heads and open doors. Her mother was a well-known nutritionist, and her father was known as the surfing doc. Arnold Davis worked as an emergency room doctor at night and a surfer by day. Arnie would say he was a surfer that worked as a doctor to pay the bills. He helped people on the beach with medical needs even though it could have hurt his license. Angie's mother Samantha was tone and fit. Sam became a nutritionist to help with her workout. Both she and Arnie practically lived on the beach, so it only made sense that their daughter would be there. Angie worked out and ate right. She soon found she was garnering attention from all the right people and building a physique that will win awards. Arnie was helping someone on the beach when he was stabbed to death for the drugs in his bag. Sam said she could never go back to the place that her husband died, so she and Angie moved to Napa where Angie met a man named David. She took the name of her father to honor a person that did something good even though it might have been against the law.

Thad stared into the fire then back to his identification. Before anyone could say anything, he tossed it into the fire saying, *“Thad is dead, call me Fred.”* The others looked at his burning past then they did the same. Without warning, Arnie took off her shirt and tossed it in. She then did the same with her Shorts. Wendy looked down at her clothes and did the same at first except she didn't stop with her outerwear. She took off her bra then panties letting them burn. From across the fire, she could see Cathy staring at her. Cathy got up and did the same, and soon the rest of the group was naked and dancing around the fire. Cathy and Wendy met as they danced. Wendy didn't know she was going to do it until she pulled in Cathy and kissed her. They found their way into Wendy's trailer. They kissed each other, and they did things that they didn't know they were going to do. Cathy looked out and saw Duke and Arnie making love out in the open by the fire while Thad now calling himself Fred lay staring up at the night's sky. Cathy said, *“I'm going to do something that might seem different, please just go with it.”*

Fred lay there naked staring up at the sky thinking about his life and just how much he didn't miss any of it. The fire was dying, and he could see Duke and Arnie as they continued to have sex. He thought about how he would have bet big that Arnie would have gone with the two women rather than Duke. He also thought about how easy it was to call him Duke. The naked Cathy came over and laid down next to him staring at the stars. She said, *“now this is a nice view.”* Fred said, *“yeah, it makes me wonder why I stayed so long in that city.”* Cathy rolled over onto her side and put her hand on his chest. She whispered into his ear, *“this view is nice, but I can show you something better if you are open to the possibilities.”* Her hand slid down his chest, across his surprisingly defined abs and down to his groin. She kissed him then took hold of his taught erection, then she got to her feet and said as quietly as possible, *“come and see.”* About five minutes after Cathy came back to the trailer, Fred was at the door. He was still naked and erect. Wendy looked at Fred then at Cathy. He slid into the bed between the two women. Cathy leaned over him and took Wendy by the chin. She gently pulled Wendy over until they met in the middle between the two and over Fred. Cathy looked down at him. Fred said, *“this is the best day of my life.”*

Jack Hester didn't understand he was an addict. It started when he broke his arm playing football. The doctors gave him painkillers that made him feel good until they took them away. Jack's arm healed, but he found himself daydreaming about the feeling the pills gave him. That was when he met Darren. Outside of the practice field, Darren met with his clients selling whatever they needed. His clients were like Jack, all of them were under the age of fourteen. While Darren liked selling to kids like Jack, he preferred his female clients. A thirteen-year-old with an Adderall addiction will do anything for a fix. Jack was fourteen and desperate for his fix. He had some money just not enough for what Darren wanted. One day he had watched as Darren had a girl in his class take off her clothes then Darren had his way with her for the drug she eventually overdosed on.

"yeah Darren, how's it going," Jack said as he approached him. Darren looked back at Jack and said, *"now that depends on if you want something and can pay for it."* Jack looked over at a van standing on a corner with heavily tinted windows. Darren shook his head then said, *"no lettuce no cabbage."* Jack asked, *"aw come on man, there has to be something I can do."* Darren said, *"I have this guy that likes a certain kind of fun, and if you gave him a little attention then I can see giving you what you want."* Darren took Jack to his car, and the two left the school grounds not seeing the van follow them. Two court-ordered miles away Darren drove into the driveway of a man named Dennis who was on court-ordered house arrest. He paid Darren for his kind of vice. Darren whispered to Jack, *"just let this guy do what he going to do, and you will find yourself with as much product as you will ever need."* Darren knew that when this guy was done, he wouldn't need to give the boy any drugs, just a shallow grave.

Wendy waited for them to go inside when she ordered Fred and Arnie to go around to the back. Cathy placed some spikes underneath Darren's car just in case he got out, then she joined the rest at the door. Darren came out the door as they approached. He had a small bag and a smirk on his face. That smirk faded as he saw the gun in Wendy's hand. She had what was their standard 22-automatic with a suppressor. Cathy and Duke had baseball bats. The gun froze him in place, and the baseball bats knocked him down. Cathy struck him in the gut then Duke struck him over the head. They quickly duct taped him from head to toe then they put him in the van.

The bag had rolls of cash and a few flash drives with addresses attached to them. Wendy called out on the radio to the others asking, *“are you ready to go, over.”* Arnie called back, *“Arnie angry want kick ass, over.”* Wendy thought her Hulk impression was just too good. Wendy called back, *“Arnie smash, over and out.”*

Instead of smashing, Arnie just opened the door to what was the kitchen. Inside she and Fred found enough child size snacks to feed several soccer teams. This included a refrigerator packed with pizza rolls, juice boxes and bottles of wine coolers and vodka. Arnie found a hidden door ajar. She sent Fred around to open the front door as she went inside where she found the man's closed-circuit surveillance system as well as enough child porn to keep a pervert happy for many years. She shut the system off and erased them entering his house. She then pulled the hard drives to make sure someone couldn't retrieve their images. Before setting the bomb, she saw a man in a bedroom. He was naked from the waist down with a whip in his hand and his prick in the other. Another camera was on the boy. He was completely naked and showing signs of lash marks on his back.

Darren woke up taped to a chair. He was naked and taped with his legs spread apart. A light came on overhead, and soon he realized he wasn't alone. The light was on a string and swinging back and forth. As the arc of the light swung away, he could see three women of varying degrees of hotness going from soccer mom to tan goddess. Despite his predicament, he started to grow hard. The soccer mom came over and put her foot on his genitals pushing down slightly then pushing harder. Wendy said, *“scream all you want, no one will hear you.”* Arnie said, *“I expected something bigger from a guy who would do what you do.”* Darren asked, *“what is this?”* Wendy said, *“you have one chance and two choices. One, give us the names of the children you sold to that guy or two.”* Wendy showed him her gun. Darren said, *“I can give you whatever you want on him. I could help you take care of him and.”* Wendy put her finger up to her lips in a shushing fashion. She pulled out a jar with something in it. She said, *“don't worry about him.”* Darren looked at the jar and saw a man's genitals floating in some sort of liquid.

Arnie carried Darren into the house as Cathy saw to Jack's wounds. Wendy told him, *"you didn't see us, and you don't know what happened here."* He nodded. Cathy said, *"you need help. That man was going to kill you, and you just walked right into it."* Jack just nodded. Wendy said, *"we have friends everywhere, and we will know if you say anything. If I ever see you again, I will kill you."* Jack looked up and asked, *"what should I say about my back?"* Cathy said, *"you escaped from the house and got away before it happened."* Jack asked, *"what happened?"* Fred said, *"don't worry about it, just tell your family about your drug habit and get better."*

Arnie pulled out a small box and pushed a button setting off the bombs they placed in the house. As per their training, they placed the explosives to mirror a gas leak. Arnie made sure that there was enough evidence to show what the man was doing. She looked at the remote and said, *"that should have felt better."* Fred said, *"yeah I know what you mean. I don't see how we are any better than that man or the dealer."* Duke said, *"I don't know what you two are talking about. That was one of the best days of my life."* Wendy watched the road listening to them talk thinking about Peter and what she thought he might have thought about what she did. Cathy whispered into her ear, *"I think we did more good today than we could have ever done within the system."* Wendy said, *"I just wish we could have helped more than we killed."*

It was two days after their first strike, and the group was having a difficult time finding a target they could all agree on. Wendy went to the training grounds and watched another team train. This team had two children on it. A boy named Colin that was going by the name Max and a blonde-haired girl named Alice. She looked like Julia Stiles from the movie *10 Things I Hate About You* with the long straight blonde hair and stern expression. Wendy knew that Alice lost both her parents to drugs with her father dying on the day she came to the ranch, but there was just something off when it came to this girl. Alice was going through the handgun training and was doing it with no expression on her face. A woman named Ruth was watching Alice saying, *"she's good at hiding her feelings, but I know she will need someone to watch over her."* Ruth looked like a stereotypical librarian with her hair tied tight against her head, but she was a good shot and exceptional hand-to-hand fighter. The type of woman David liked to send out into the field, the kind people looked past.

Wendy came back to their campsite to find the others arguing about a new target. Duke went to David, and they came up with a plan to go after the man that killed his son. He was a dealer and a gang member, he was also Duke's brother. Cathy asked, "*and what if someone recognizes you?*" Duke said, "*the only one that should be able to recognize me will be dead and for the rest who gives a fuck.*" Wendy asked, "*I know what he took from you, but do you really think you can kill your own brother?*" Duke said, "*I've wanted to do that ever since I lost my boy.*" Wendy looked at Cathy then nodded. Cathy looked at the others as if she was hoping someone would speak up, and when she found herself alone in the argument, she just put her hands up and gave in. The five sat down and worked on the plan with Duke taking the lead. Wendy said, "*because this is your call you will have to pull the trigger.*"

His name was Gia, but to his followers, he was áo dài because of the traditional white suit he wore. He was the right hand of Wayne who was going by the name trùm which meant boss. Together they ran their unnamed little gang with a style that was their own and little tolerance for outsiders. Wayne had a routine that was easy to follow. He would tour each of his business fronts every day for the money count and deal with anyone not making enough to pay their fee for membership. That morning he found out that one of his fronts was making a profit. A nail salon ran by his current girlfriend was in the black and making the kind of money that could bring unwanted attention to his operation. After leaving the shop, he sent Gia back to burn the place down. Gia took one of their most ruthless killers with him, a man known as bóng which meant shadow.

Wayne watched for the flames and the sounds of fire trucks, but by midnight nothing was happening. He knew it wasn't like Gia to disappoint. He looked down at the young white girl going down on him and told her, "*do better or no fix.*" He spoke English with no accent but chose to use a broken English pattern to give the illusion he was from the old country. The door opened, and Duke walked in with a trash bag over his shoulder. Wayne said, "*this is no place for your.*" He stopped when he recognized his brother. Duke said, "*I thought you should have this*

back brother.” Wayne opened the bag to see the blood-soaked white suit that belonged to Gia and the hands of the one called *bóng*. Wayne looked back to his brother to see the gun in his hand. As he sat there staring at the gun, a younger man was forced in by Fred and Wendy. Fred said, *“this guy was watching from the outside.”* The man looked at Wayne then back to Duke and said, *“father.”* Without a word, Duke raised and leveled his gun firing at this man hitting him in the head. Wayne started to laugh when Duke turned the gun on him and fired. Wayne fell over choking on his own blood dying laughing. Fred looked at Duke and asked, *“father?”*

On the way back to the ranch no one spoke after Duke explained what they saw. He said how that was what was left of his son after his brother turned him. He said, *“my boy died in jail. That cold-blooded child killer was no son of mine.”* They had done their best to make it look like one killed the other but then died from sustained wounds. In a small town near the ranch, Duke said he wasn’t going back. He had finished what he set out to do. The others pulled their money together and gave him around twelve hundred dollars and a bus ticket to New Orleans where he had some family. It was left unsaid, but he knew not to try and come back. He used them to seek revenge on his own brother and son turning their mission into an act of revenge. When they got back, David pitched a fit on them letting him just go. Wendy made a mental note on how he kept saying, *“he got away.”* It was always if not said out loud that anyone could leave at any time.

Later that day both Arnie and Fred said they couldn’t go on with the mission. Arnie didn’t like what she was becoming with every kill and Fred thought that he was just being used. After some back and forth talking, David talked them into going to the part of the ranch where the missions were planned out. The older people as well as the ones that couldn’t fight lived separate from the active groups, so they could plan without knowing the people they would send into harm’s way. David had said that to keep the groups separate they would have no contact, *“so if you go over there you don’t come back.”* That night Fred joined Wendy and Cathy one last time. It was something he never thought he would ever experience, two women at the same time both focused on him and each other. He had said it was both pleasurable and uncomfortable at the same time. Cathy asked Arnie if she wanted to join them, but she said, *“I just don’t go that way.”*

Wendy pulled a picture from a drawer and looked at it. She didn't think about them that much anymore but now looking at the picture she was missing her friends. It was a group picture of her, Cathy, Duke, Fred, and Arnie took just before their first mission. Cathy came into the office and saw what Wendy was looking at. She said, "*babe, some memories don't deserve your time.*" Wendy said, "*yes, but some people do.*" Cathy looked at Arnie and remembered the tone blonde woman then she remembered seeing her nailed to a cross covered in dry blood and burned from the sun. She remembered finding Fred in a cabin. He had just died making him the last living thing on this side of the ranch. He had recorded what happened and how it was David and his bodyguards that did it. How David had stopped talking to the group until one day he came back and killed everyone in his path. Cathy dropped a tear into the glass frame. She tried to wipe it away until she realized that in the distance in the picture she could see David. Cathy put the picture down and walked out of the office.

Wendy picked up a landline phone and dialed a number she knew by heart. The phone rang for three rings then, "*Hello?*" Wendy didn't say anything back. The voice on the other side said, "*Hello Wendy, it's been a while since you called I was starting to think you stopped.*" Wendy took in a breath then said, "*I don't think we are there, yet I just thought that just maybe you could use some time away from my drama.*" The voice said, "*so you are thinking about it then or is it just because its that time of year?*" Wendy looked at the calendar on the wall. It said it was March except it was April and not 2015. Wendy said, "*I had one of the members kill a woman and bury her in the desert. Her son was killed in a ricochet when we used a 50-cal to stop a truck.*" The voice asked, "*why did you do that?*" Wendy said, "*because she was going to talk about what and who she saw. One of my friends killed himself when he saw what he had done, what I ordered him to do.*" The voice asked, "*when you went after Darren did you question what you did?*" Wendy said, "*Jack I didn't know what to think. Also, just like before.*" The voice interrupted her saying, "*yes I know you'll kill me.*"

Wendy walked out of her office and went to find Darrel. She told him to get a van ready for a quick trip. She said, *“we need to keep an eye on the feds and not stop taking the fight to the dealers.”* Darrel asked, *“just how do we do that?”* She said, *“we’re going to work for the cable company.”* Out in the yard, they had a truck they bought from a local cable television supplier when they dropped their in-house service and went all independent contractors for their service. In the truck, they could be unseen in plain sight with the prominent logos on the sides and the fact that most people didn’t know that the cable company did away with their service techs. Wendy planned to place cameras on the places where the feds were working as well as well know areas for drugs. Darrel said, *“we can trace the movements of the feds and plan our raids to happen when they are miles away as well as keep track on where their investigation is.”* Wendy said, *“yes I know that was my plan. You really don’t need to explain it to me.”*

Darrel went out to get the van which hadn’t been used for about a month only to find Jill and Scott inside in the back. Jill was on top in the reverse cowgirl position. Jill jumped when the door opened kneeing Scott in the genitals. Darrel didn’t react to the two in the back. He popped the hood and attached a jump starter to the battery. He then said into the open door, *“I am taking this into the shop as soon as I can get it started so you will need to do whatever you are doing and finish now.”* Jill leaned out as she fought with her bra asking, *“what’s the plan?”* Darrel said, *“your plan should include maybe some pants, or I don’t know underwear.”* Darrel slipped behind the wheel and checked the mirror. The two were just about dressed. He turned the key, and the van started. He got out and detached the jump starter and got back into the van moving it into the shop without any warning. On the way in he said, *“these vehicles are not here for you two to fuck in, they are here for our missions. Both of you have private rooms so use them.”*

A ladder went up a pole just outside of the police station where the ATF and FBI were encamped. The local law knew about the defunct van, but with their connections to what Wendy and her team did, they just kept it to themselves. By the end of the night, they had twenty cameras up and around town as well as a connection to the police station’s surveillance cameras courtesy of their local sheriff. Percy Macintosh was elected to clean up the streets, and after a few years of things getting worse, he came across Wendy and her operation. Like Wendy, Percy

was from the ranch, and he knew that as he would put it, “*sometimes you have to break the law to bring about justice.*” He stopped short of helping them, but he did sway investigations away from the group. He did make sure that the camera in his office was disabled just in case he needed to do something about the group in the future.

Scott tied in the camera feeds into the computer system set up at the compound. He then ran the feeds to the televisions in the common room. At first, people watched the feds with a feeling that they would be caught at any moment, but soon they started to speculate on just what they were seeing. That speculation became a drinking game. Every time a fed poured a cup of coffee was a shot, every time someone said the name Sam or unsub as in unknown subject was a shot. Three hours into the feed and almost everyone was drunk with Wendy being the only sober person. She didn't like that feeling of being out of control that drinking gave her. On in a corner, Jill and Scott seemed to forget they weren't alone and started to make out. Gary and Zoey were back from their time away. They came back from Las Vegas with matching wedding bands and a story on how they went to be alone and came back married. They were also acting like they were alone. Darrel had long since passed out with a bottle of Wild Turkey in his lap. Cathy was asleep next to Wendy on a couch with Owen's head on Cathy's lap. Wendy watched as one of the feds unrolled blueprints to what looked like a gas station with a large warehouse. She looked at the others then back to the screen wondering if the feds knew about them and were they planning on coming after them soon.

Chapter Six

Cathy stepped out onto the beach into a warm sunny day. The villa they were renting on the gulf side of Mexico was on the beach and away from most of the tourists. She passed Owen asleep on a lounge chair next to a girl he picked up on the beach the night before. He came down with Wendy and her not knowing what to expect, but he did expect for more of their together time from the compound. What he found was that the two ladies wanted to sleep and argue the entire trip. Owen got tired of watching them fight, so he went out looking for some fun. This latest piece of fun looked like she might be legal but just barely. She was topless with her leg draped across him just covering his manhood with an empty bottle of tequila nearby. Cathy covered the two in the largest beach towel she could find. Their villa was out of view from most on a beach that while not officially clothing optional it was lacks in enforcing any law, but Cathy didn't want to take any chances. She was tired of taking chances, and she was sick, but it was morning.

The drive down to the coast was uneventful with Cathy sleeping most of the way. They were in Sam's 1970 gold Cadillac Deville convertible with the top down. The villa they were going to rent was on the beach with a hot tub and a small pool. Owen took some time off and came with them. He sat in the front with Wendy with the two touching each other when times permitted. Wendy had his shorts down with her hand on him as a car came up next to them with four teenage girls on their way to a spring break type trip. Cathy was awake and saw the reaction of the first girl in the back of the Jeep Liberty. The first reaction to the car then to the naked man being stroked by a woman who was nearly topless. The jeep nearly swerved into them as the passengers erupted in an awe that only teenagers could do at the sight of all of him. Wendy put her foot down, and after a few choice maneuvers she lost the gawking girls and was back to driving and stroking.

That night Wendy and Cathy went to bed early so Wendy could recover from the drive. They lay in bed watching a Spanish language version of *The Princess Bride*. Out of what seemed like the blue, Cathy asked, "*are we doing what's right or are we just as wrong as the dealers?*"

Wendy cocked her head saying, *"I don't remember that line from this movie?"* Cathy replied, *"you know what I mean."* Wendy sighed knowing this question won't end well. She said, *"we don't kill the innocent."* Cathy said, *"I don't know about that. We hurt a lot of innocent people along the way."* Wendy sighed again and said, *"we helped far more than are inadvertently hurt."* Cathy pulled away from Wendy and said, *"I was thinking about George. He walked away from a partnership in a large firm to help innocent people get out of jail. He was doing something worthwhile, but we made him a killer, and that led to his death. I was thinking about all the good he could have done."* Wendy said, *"George was no saint."* Cathy turned back to her and asked, *"how could you say that? He was the only reason you are free."*

Wendy got out of bed and poured a shot of vodka from a bottle in a small refrigerator in the room. She came back and drank the shot. She said, *"George didn't quit he was asked to leave and paid well. Think about it. all of his clients were women from a fifty-three-year-old to that seventeen-year-old sent to jail for defending herself during a rape."* Cathy asked, *"so what does that matter?"* Wendy took in a breath and said, *"he slept with all of them."* Cathy growled, *"how could you know that?"* Wendy replied, *"I know because he told me."*

Tracy, back before she took the name Wendy was in a knee-length tan skirt with a white blouse and dark brown short heels. She felt like it had been years since she dressed like a woman and the clothes felt like a costume. None of the guards would look her in the eyes. They knew what she lost in their prison under their watch. At the entrance to the prison, she found a man holding a sign with her name. She followed him to a limousine out in the parking lot. George was in the back with a bottle of champagne and two glasses. Tracy slipped into the back across from George and made sure the partition between the front and back was closed. George asked, *"so Tracy, now what are you going to do with your freedom?"* She slipped out of her skirt and over into his lap facing him and said, *"Tracy? No, Tracy died in that cell. Call me Wendy."* She took the bottle from him and drank straight from it letting the champagne run down her front turning her shirt translucent. She took another drink then kissed George letting the bubbly go from her mouth into his. George asked, *"maybe we should slow down a little?"* Wendy pulled his pants down and said, *"maybe you should just shut the fuck up."*

"We went back and forth for a while until we both saw we weren't compatible," Wendy said looking down at the glass in her hand. Wendy said, "he told me about the others including the teenager. He said how he didn't ask for any quid pro quo, but it still happened, and it cost him his business partnership." Cathy said, "he didn't do anything wrong." Wendy quickly replied, "she was seventeen and just out of jail. For my part, I wasn't sure if I could feel anything anymore. After they tried to gut me, I thought I might have lost all feeling, so I was afraid to touch myself, so I didn't. He smelled so good, and I was just ready for something..... well anything good, and he was good." Cathy looked at the open bottle of vodka on the dresser near the refrigerator and said, "it started with a bottle of that mead he made. You were gone out in the desert for that three-day training, and I didn't know if I wanted to stay. He talked about all the good he thought we were doing, and I just watched him. Whether it was the mead or the talk I ended up with him and." Wendy interrupted her saying, "yeah, you and about a hundred other women." Cathy asked, "how many of them did he knock up?"

Owen could hear most of their conversation from the room he was in next to theirs. He replayed their interactions think about how he never actually went all the way with Cathy, how she was more of a supporting character rather than a featured player. The screaming intensified until one of them stomped out of the room and slammed the door. From their room, he heard, *"Owen I know you're awake and you heard what was said."* Owen got up and walked over to their room. Cathy was sitting up in bed. She patted the bed calling him over. Owen climbed into bed with her. He turned over and said, *"wow."* Cathy replied, *"yes, wow indeed. I was told I had a better chance to get hit by lightning than get pregnant."* Owen replied, *"so maybe you should stay out of the rain."* After he replayed his words he stammered and try to talk, but Cathy said, *"don't worry. I know what you meant, and I know not to read too much into your words."* When the movie ended, he left Cathy in the room and stepped out into the living room and found a blanket and pillow on the couch with his door closed.

The next day Owen found the two ladies in the kitchen like nothing was ever wrong. The couch was softer than the foam cot he slept on in his trailer, so he had no problem sleeping there. Wendy was making scrambled eggs with a mix of peppers both hot and mild along with sausage. He couldn't tell if there was tension in the room or was that just the smell of the peppers. The eggs were a fiery inferno that stayed with him for the rest of the day. Wendy went into the room she was supposed to be sharing with Cathy to take a shower. Cathy joined her, and soon the fighting was back on. About ten minutes into the screaming the screaming stopped. Owen peaked in and saw the two holding each other in the shower. His only hope was that all that was over, and they could go back to enjoying the vacation. He went back and cleaned the kitchen hoping to take some of that hot pepper smell out of the air. The two ladies stepped out in sundresses that were the reverse of the other. Wendy was in a yellow dress with white flowers and Cathy in a white dress with yellow flowers. Cathy said, "*we are going to be gone most of the day so.... I don't know, go to the beach, have fun.*" Owen changed into a pair of board shorts and a tank top. He headed out to the beach.

Wendy and Cathy got in the car and headed to a small beach resort further south. They didn't tell Owen that this part was why they came to Mexico in the first place. They came to see where an old friend was buried. The ride out was filled with silent tension. They passed a large, lavish hotel with a large swimming pool. Wendy said, "*yeah, that's where it happened.*" Cathy stared at the place trying to picture Ruth in a swimming suit standing over David with a gun. Wendy said, "*it should have been you.*" Cathy just stared. Wendy replied to herself, "*I mean you should have been the one to kill that bastard.*" Cathy smiled and said, "*I know.*" From the hotel, they turned west into the country. Out in the middle of nowhere, they found a stone marker that to a passerby would appear to be a property marker and not the tombstone of a serial killer. Cathy walked over to the stone and stared. She said, "*it still doesn't seem real. I wanted this for so long and now..... it just doesn't feel real.*" Wendy said, "*we have a shovel.*" Cathy said, "no, let's let the past stay buried." She pulled her panties down and off. She then squatted over where the body should be and let a stream of urine go. Wendy said, "*the sad thing is he might have liked that when he was alive.*"

Owen walked around the beach until he found a spot and sat down. Growing up in the desert, so much water didn't seem real. Nearby a group of girls was laying in the sun drinking some sort of beer with lime wedges. One of the girls came over with a bottle and sat down next to him. She handed him the bottle and leaned in whispering into his ear, "*my friends bet me I couldn't get you to kiss me.*" Without thinking about it, Owen moved in and kissed her on the lips. He heard her friends gasp. He said in Spanish, "*I hope that counts.*" She looked at her friends then back to Owen and kissed him again knocking him over onto the sand. She left him there laying in the sand a pool of spilled beer from the bottle he was holding. A few hours later and the same girl came over to him. She said, "*my name is Ana Maria, but most of my friends call me AM.*" She sat on his lap. Owen asked, "*can I call you AM?*" Ana put her hands on his shoulders and said, "*it depends on just how friendly we become, but for now how about Ana.*" Owen said, "*we seem to already be getting friendly.*" Ana smiled and kissed him again. She leaned back and said, "*it would help if I knew your name.*"

On the long drive back, neither Wendy or Cathy spoke after leaving David's grave. Cathy sat in the front with Wendy, but she was as far as she could get from her. They pulled into the driveway and Cathy got out. She turned to Wendy and said, "*I need some time to think about all this so could you sleep in the other room tonight.*" It wasn't really a question, and Wendy just nodded her head. Neither of them had anything to eat. Cathy took a long bath then climbed into bed while Wendy took a bottle of vodka to bed with her. On her way to her room, Wendy told Owen, "*this trip might be ending soon so just be ready.*" Owen stepped out onto the patio wondering if this was his last night here in Mexico or maybe he should stay. He heard some splashing and the motors of the hot tub. He found Ana inside the tub. She was topless with her right nipple pierced and an infinity tattoo on the side of her left breast. She had a glass of something clear in her hand. Ana said, "*I was wondering if you were ever coming out.*" Owen took off his shirt and went to get in when Ana stopped him and pointed to his shorts saying, "*take it all off gringo.*"

Owen looked down at his shorts then he untied them and let them fall. He slipped into the water and sat across from her. Ana brought him a glass of the same clear liquid. She got into his

lap again and smiled. Owen could feel she was wearing shorts underneath the water. Owen took a sip and nearly spit it out. The liquid was stronger than the typical tequila. Ana said, *“this is something my papa makes. I guess you would call it moonshine or tequila shine or something like that.”* She took a little into her mouth and kissed Owen letting the shine into his mouth. Owen looked at the piercing and the tattoo. Ana took the glasses and put them aside. She leaned in and whispered, *“this isn’t like me at all, but there is just something about you.”* She got up and pulled her shorts off and got back into his lap. She whispered, *“I want you, but not in the water.”* Owen said, *“it’s hard to explain, but I don’t have my room anymore, so it’s either here or on the couch.”* Ana got up and out of the tub. She pulled a large towel off a bench and spread it across a lounge chair and sat down. She patted the lounge then she waved him over. Owen got out of the water and over to her. Ana sat back in the lounge and spread her legs. She said, *“this is all new to me, so please be gentle.”* Owen said, *“we don’t have to do anything you don’t feel ready for.”* Ana pulled him closer and said, *“but I want you.”*

After Cathy covered the two with a towel, she smelled the bottle and pulled it away. She never thought about these boys Wendy would bring to their bed. Most of them didn’t last long, but what did last was their relationship. They had been together ever since the ranch. In many ways, they were the old married couple of the group even though they weren’t married. Neither women liked labels, but now she was about to get a big one, that of mother. She walked out to a bench that overlooked the beach and the gulf. Wendy passed the two on the lounge and walked over to Cathy. She sat down next to her and put her arm around Cathy saying, *“I’m sorry about what I said. It was easier to put what happened away by thinking about him like that rather than the man he was. It’s hard not to think it was my fault, he wasn’t built for this kind of work, and I pushed him because he was a good shot.”* Cathy patted Wendy’s knee saying, *“he was where he wanted to be. He chose to do what he did not you.”* Wendy kissed her then her stomach. She asked, *“maybe we should step away from our project and focus on our family.”*

Wendy was in the kitchen cooking scrambled eggs with bacon and hot peppers. Cathy was sitting at the counter watching her cook. Owen walked in with his shorts and shirt in his hand. He passed the two and went into the second bedroom. They heard the water start in the

shower. Cathy got up and walked over to the door to the patio. She turned and shook her head indicating the girl was gone. Cathy went into the bedroom than the bathroom where Owen was showering. She asked, *“so what’s up with the girl? Did we troll a high school looking for a little strange?”* Owen said, *“its nothing like that. Ana is eighteen, and we met on the beach where she and a few of her friends were out enjoying the sun.”* Cathy said, *“she’s cute, but are you sure she’s eighteen?”* Owen said, *“I watched her buy beer and from what I have been told they are strict about that whole drinking age here.”* Cathy smiled thinking just how naive he was being. She asked, *“so where did she go? Off to school?”* Owen said, *“I can hear your sarcasm, and no she had to work this morning. She works in that small hotel up the beach her father owns.”* Owen turned off the water and opened the curtain. He asked, *“how long are we here for because Wendy seems to think we were on our way back soon?”* Cathy said, *“we are here for the week no matter what but then we go home, and I do mean us.”*

Owen joined the two for another plate of eggs and heartburn. Afterward, he cleaned up. He was in his board shorts, but he left the shirt back in the shower. Wendy said, *“Owen, I think if you and your jailbait are going to keep doing it then you should take your room back.”* Owen said, *“I don’t know if she is even coming back. She never gave me her number.”* Wendy smiled and showed him a permanent marker she found on the porch. She said, *“yeah it’s a good thing you couldn’t reach your back.”* Owen went into the bathroom and checked his back in the mirror. On his upper shoulder was a phone number surrounded by hearts. Wendy came in with a bottle of acetone and said, *“this should take that off.”* Owen turned around blocking the number on his back. Wendy smiled and said, *“you just met this girl.”* Owen sat on the counter with his back to the mirror. She put her hands on his shorts. She looked at where his manhood is, and for the first time, she didn’t see him as a walking sex toy. She found she didn’t want to be here with him. She pulled the marker from a pocket and wrote the number down on a piece of paper from a bag. She gave him the paper then she kissed him on the lips and left him in the bathroom.

Wendy found Cathy in the bedroom watching a Telemundo morning show. She slipped into the bed with her and snuggled close. She said, *“I just made a move on Owen and then stopped. I found I didn’t want him I wanted you.”* Cathy stroked her head and said, *“maybe we*

are ready for something more than just some cheap sex.” Wendy said, “but I don’t want to grow up if it means leaving the sex behind.” Cathy replied, “we can still have fun but just not with him. I think just maybe you.... well we are just too fond of him to see him like that anymore.” Wendy said, “marry me.” Cathy stopped stroking Wendy’s hair and said, “don’t play with me.” Wendy got up and said, “I want this child to be as much mine as yours, and I want to be with you forever even if it means a label.”

Cathy said, “I want all that too, but I also don’t want to give up our lives. I want to be a part of the fight; a part of our extended family, and I also want to have our fun.” Wendy got up and went over to a bag on a dresser. She said, “there are some people, our family that are right now thinking that we are breaking up the band, but maybe we can show them something different.” Wendy came back to the bed with a ring in her hand. She said, “I bought this in a pawn shop when I was twelve. I didn’t understand why but just maybe I do now.”

“Hello white boy,” Ana said as she answered her phone. Owen asked, “how did you know it was me?” Ana laughed and said, “only you and my grandma call me.” Owen thought about that when he said, “are you doing anything tonight?” Ana giggled asking, “that depends on whether you consider yourself a thing or not?” After a long silence, Owen asked, “what are we?” Ana asked, “why do we have to be anything?” Owen looked over at the door to the two ladies’ room and said, “I like you, but I know we didn’t start off well and trying to make something of what could have been a one-night-stand could be difficult, but I want to try, and I think you do as well.” Ana sighed saying, “you are leaving in a couple of days, and I can’t see having that long-distance thing with someone I just met.” Owen asked, “well, what if I don’t have to leave?” Ana asked, “maybe we should talk about that together?” Owen asked, “do I meet you or the other way around?” Ana said, “I get off tonight at eight, so I’ll be over afterward.” Owen said, “and then you’ll get off again.” Ana snickered saying, “not with lines like that.”

“If it’s a boy then George for his father,” Wendy said while stroking Cathy’s naked stomach, long before she was showing. Cathy smiled and said, “boy George.” Wendy went on

saying, *“if it’s a girl then Tiffany or Amber.”* Cathy started to belly laugh saying, *“yeah right then we’ll buy her baby’s first stripper’s poll. No, there is plenty of time to think about names.”* Cathy looked at the ring in the light of the television. They spent all day in bed making love and talking about what was next. Cathy asked, *“do you think Owen’s coming with us?”* Wendy quickly replied, *“oh yes he is, or Sam might not work with us again.”* Cathy replied, *“I don’t think we should stop him if he wants to stay. I don’t think Sam would mind either.”* Wendy said, *“I don’t want to fight about this, but he just met her a day ago, and we know nothing about her.”* Cathy pushed her hand away and wrapped herself around Wendy who closed her eyes and said, *“we won’t interfere with whatever he wants. We will just make sure he has an out in case this thing goes south on him.”* Cathy kissed her neck and whispered, *“that’s all we should do, and I think little Prudence would agree.”* Wendy said, *“just for that I’ll make sure her name is Prudence.”*

Owen sat on a bench near the hot tub waiting for Ana. He had a bottle of wine and a plan. Ana came out of the dark in a short white dress with thin yellow straps. The dress was cut low and meant to be worn with a shirt underneath, but Ana didn’t wear the shirt. The result was that it looked like she was just wearing an apron. Ana took the bottle away from Owen and took a long drink. The wine was dry and dark with a chocolate and berry overtone. She untied the strap around her waist and got into his lap. She untied the straps around her neck and pulled the apron off. Without taking his eyes off her body, Owen asked, *“you’re trying to change the subject, aren’t you?”* Ana kissed him again and said, *“you are leaving in a day or two, so I don’t see what there is to talk about.”* Owen turned her over, so he was on top. As he did, he took off his shirt and worked on taking his shorts off. Ana finished the job. Owen said, *“I have no real reason to go back, but I can see one to stay.”*

Cathy made a fist then made a jerking motion back and forth. She said, *“you don’t get pregnant doing this Scott.”* The rest of the group snickered as Scott gave her a confused look asking, *“but we?”* He made a penetration gesture with his hands. Cathy smiled and said, *“think about what we did. We never connected the P to the V. Lots of other things but not what Clinton would have called sex.”* Sally put up her right hand saying, *“I think we’re off topic here and just*

maybe we should leave the private talk private.” She stood up and walked over to Cathy going to one knee. She took her by the hands and asked, “are we still on mission?” She saw the ring in her left hand and smiled. Cathy leaned in and whispered, “more on that later.” Wendy said, “our situation hasn’t changed with the FBI. With all the heat working out in the open will be difficult. Also, Owen decided to stay in Mexico for a while to see if he can make something work.” Sally said, “that doesn’t answer the question.” Wendy looked to Cathy who smiled and said, “while we need to be careful we won’t stop the missions.” Scott asked, “and there’s no possible way the kid could be mine?”

Owen opened the windows to let in some fresh air and sun. After filling out the paperwork, he rented a house closer to town and the hotel where Ana worked. The house was a one bedroom with a small courtyard in the back. The place was smaller than the villa on the beach, and it didn’t have a pool or hot tub. He would also have to buy his drinking water in bulk. After calling a friend back home and having him sell his car, he would have enough money to live on without needing a job for at least a year. Ana was coming over to help him buy some furniture and decorate. He decided not to buy a television. He had good cellular reception, and the local cable company offered a good deal in an internet connection. He felt kind of racist to think he would be thrown back into the dark ages outside of the country. The first thing he ordered was a portable hot tub. A knock at the door and Ana came in wearing a long rose-colored skirt with a white top and matching vest. Her nameplate was gone. She came over to him and said, *“I have good and bad news. My father found out about you and fired me and kicked me out of the house.”* Owen asked, *“so what’s the bad news?”*

Chapter Seven

The sun was setting across the desert with the light fading from an orange glow to a dusky purple. A small door opened out of the desert floor, and five men stepped out. They spent the day waiting for the sun to fall so they could travel the rest of the way in the cover of night and the cool air. Four of the men carried in total nearly one-hundred pounds in uncut heroin, while the fifth had his own burden. They would have to walk for about sixty miles to meet with the truck that would take them the rest of the way, or that was what the four mules were told. Twenty miles in and the five men came to a large hole dug out of the earth. Next to the hole was a four-wheel all-terrain vehicle with a box in the back big enough for the drugs. The first man could smell the lye lining the hole. He dropped his pack and made it six steps before a round penetrated the back of his head and out his left eye. In quick succession, two of the remaining three were shot. The fifth man packed the drugs in the bag while the last man put the bodies in the hole and covered them in more lye and then soil. The two men kissed then they got on the back of the ATV.

Darrel pushed a car into the garage while Scott steered. Sally watched them push the car in and waited for them to stop. She asked, *“what’s with the wreck?”* Slightly out of breath Scott said, *“this is no wreck. It’s a 1969 Mustang Fastback Boss 429.”* Sally put her hands on her hips and asked, *“and that’s supposed to mean something?”* Scott said, *“well, yeah that means this car is worth a lot.”* Darrel said, *“that depends on how much work is done, how authentic and the buyer. Some people would pay through the nose for it as is.”* Scott said, *“we are going to see if it will run and let Wendy decide if we restore, rebuild or sell.”* Sally walked over to the car and ran her hand along the body to the back. She said, *“I love this car.”* Scott gave her a confused look asking, *“you just.... What?”* Scott just started to sing, *“mustang sally you better slow that mustang down.”* Wendy leaned out of her office and said, *“stop butchering the classics.”* Wendy walked out of her office and said, *“fix the car up to a point. Make it a sort of rat rod but not that crappy on purpose shit.”* Sally said, *“make it run and look used.”* Wendy nodded and pointed at Sally.

Gary and Zoey pulled into the driveway in a tan Ford F150 after a night of watching a warehouse about ten miles out of town. Wendy mats them at the door, *"I sent you to watch them not fuck in front of them."* Gary put his arms up in an exacerbated gesture saying, *"we did our job."* Wendy held up an iPad with video from a camera on the truck. At first, the video was steady then the image started to bounce slowly. After a few minutes, the bouncing became rougher. Gary turned red in the face while Zoey smirked trying to hold in a laugh, but then her laugh died when she saw someone from the warehouse looking at them. Wendy said, *"this went on for what fifteen minutes? I don't know whether to be impressed or angry."* From across the room, Sally yelled, *"angry, always go for angry."* Gary took the iPad and started the video up watching for the people coming out. He said, *"I see five, no six guys with guns."* He handed the pad back to Wendy. Wendy said, *"yeah this might not be what we thought. If six men came out, then there must be twice that much."* Zoey said, *"or there are just six guys that wanted to see my tits and ass."*

Three ghostly red images moved from the door to a back room. Another two people joined them. Wendy turned to her notebook and made a note count out eleven people. She also made a note about the back room and how it seemed they were sitting around a table. The infrared camera helped clear the mystery over how many people were in the house. Two of those people were in a room at the top, and they stayed in place. Their heat images were small indicating they may be children. Wendy pointed at the monitor saying, *"five guys with AK's on the ground floor near an SUV, four guys outside the door from where the last two with what I assume are also AK's."* she opened the window of the small van they were sitting in and stared at the building in the dark. On a roof nearby, two men were watching the van and the house. *"Hey, Luis, who are the two in the van?"* Luis asked, *"how would I know?"* Luis turned back to the building. He said, *"Jorge, we'll wait until tomorrow night. I want to follow that van and see who that is and if they need to die."* Jorge turned back to Luis and asked, *"Luis, I thought you said we shouldn't use our names?"*

Wendy turned down another alley cutting across between two streets going away from the highway and the warehouse. Zoey asked, *"where are we going?"* Wendy checked the mirror

and said, *"I think we have a tail?"* Zoey checked her back. Wendy turned onto another street then into a parking lot and out the other side. Wendy said, *"no dumbass, I mean someone was following us."* Luis and Jorge sat in a car off the side of the highway overlooking the city. Luis shook his head watching the car's headlights as Wendy tried to lose the car not following them. Luis asked, *"what the fuck are they doing?"* Jorge lifted his head out of Luis's lap and asked, *"are you talking to me?"* Luis tucked himself back into his pants and said, *"you can get back to that later I think we need to be ready to go."* Wendy made another turn onto an entrance to the highway. They passed a car parked along the way that came to life and started to follow them.

A mile away from the warehouse Wendy saw a car following them. Zoey saw her staring out the rear mirror and said, *"oh god not again. I'm never getting back."* Wendy handed her a phone and told her to call the warehouse, *"Tell him to send some backup to the Delta site."* Wendy turned off the road and down a dirt path to a one-time coyote rest stop, a place where they could hold their human cargo before releasing them or selling them. *"Scott someone is following us. They turned onto the dirt and are continuing. We need help fast,"* Zoey said as she held the phone up hoping to keep the signal. Wendy said, *"as soon as we hit the door go for the back I'll take the front."* Zoey turned to her and asked, *"hit the door?"* Wendy sped up and aimed for the front double door. Zoey put her arms across her face and screamed, *"oh shit."* The truck struck the doors and through into the building sputtering to a stop. In one quick fluid motion, Wendy got out, pulled her gun and went to the door. Zoey stumbled out and went for the shotgun in the rack. She checked the action and went for the back.

Jorge leaned over and asked, *"so do you think they know we were following them?"* Luis stopped their car and turned the lights off. Jorge said, *"whoever she is she does know how to make an entrance."* Luis turned to Jorge and just stared until Jorge put his hand up in a whatever gesture. He turned back to the building and stared. After a couple of minutes, Luis said, *"this would be too much work for not enough payoff."* Ten minutes later and a van and a large truck came down another side road and what Luis counted as six people came out armed and ready. One of them had a long rifle with a scope. Luis pulled away not turning the lights back on until they got back to the highway. Luis said, *"I don't know what that was about, but I don't think they*

are dealers. I don't know." Jorge asked, *"maybe we should go back and get some sleep?"* Luis sped up saying, *"I think we can have a little fun before we call it a night."* Jorge said, *"that's what I was thinking."* Luis turned the car back to the city speeding up. Jorge opened a bag and checked the contents. He said, *"yeah, I think we have what we need. Let's go find a dealer."*

Jacob Franks was having a slow night. He was sitting in a folding chair between a coin laundry and a closed pizza place. It was two weeks before most of his clients would get their welfare payments cutting his traffic down to the new customers and the ones that can find the funds wherever. He was waiting for this one client that would come around every Wednesday and pay for her fix with something more than just money, but she never showed. Jacob never saw himself as a player or a pedophile, but he did like how this teenager looked and how she felt. What he paid for the Adderall she was addicted to was cheaper than he would pay her for sex. He found a man to grind, mix and reform the pills so he could add a little cocaine to the mix adding even more of an addiction. He wasn't sure if it did anything to them, but he felt he had better retention of customers since the change. A man started to walk across the street to him. He was scratching at his arms in the stereotypical junkie shake. He got about fifteen feet away when Jacob said, *"I don't take checks, and I'm not a fence so don't bring shit to trade."*

Jorge saw what had to be the whitest man he saw since coming to America. He was tall, with an almost orange afro and his skin kind of glowed in the lights coming from the laundry nearby. Jorge knew all too well how to act like an addict from the twitchy jerky motions to the scratching. He said to Jorge, *"I don't take checks, and I'm not a fence so don't bring shit to trade."* Jorge showed him a hundred-dollar-bill, and the dealer seemed to perk up. Jorge walked up closer to the dealer who sat up in his chair and looked him up and down. He asked, *"so you speak the English or are we going to just gesture?"*

Jorge said, *"I speak enough to get by."* Jacob smiled and asked, *"legal?"* Jorge showed him the cash again and asked, *"hey man can we cut to the chase I don't want to be out here like this?"* Jacob lost his smile and said, *"I'm no bank, and I don't do change."* Jorge said, *"I don't*

want change I want what I want.” Jacob looked around trying to see if they were alone. He said, *“this is how it works. You pay me, and I give you a code to a locker in the bus station on the other block.”* Jorge said, *“so your nowhere near the drugs. Good thinking.”* Before Jacob could answer, Jorge pulled a stun gun and shot Jacob. Within minutes, he was duct taped and in the trunk of the car. Luis said, *“time for some fun.”*

Jacob woke up naked taped to a chair with his feet in something wet, but he didn't think it was water. The smell was of some chemical like bleach. He looked down and saw someone had removed all his body hair, but some of the hair on the ground was too long to be just from his balls. He shook his head back and forth, but he couldn't feel or see any hair. From behind him, he heard, *“I hope you don't mind. I felt you could use a new look, and nothing says new as hairless.”* Jacob asked, *“who are you? What the fuck do you want? Why did you shave me?”* Jorge walked around so Jacob could see him. He said, *“because I wanted to.”* Jacob growled out, *“you fucking wetback, I'm going to fucking cut your fucking nuts off.”* Jorge said, *“what a good idea.”* He pulled out a knife and went to Jacob grabbing him by the genitals. Another voice said, *“hold.”* Jorge said, *“yeah that's what I'm doing.”*

Luis walked over with a small white bag. He asked, *“Jacob, where do you get your supply?”* Hearing his name threw him off, but he recovered and said, *“all you can do is kill me those guys would do so much more.”* Luis tossed the powder into his face saying, *“I want them to know all about you and your drug.”* The Heroin went into his eyes, his nose, and mouth. Jacob tried to hold his breath when Jorge cut. The swipe was quick but not very clean taking the scrotum and the penis in one cut shooting blood across the floor. Jacob screamed taking in the heroin. Jorge said, *“if you are lucky, you'll bleed out.”*

Darrel hooked the tow truck to the back of the truck so he could pull it out of the building. As he pulled the truck out, a tire caught a nail from a wall stud and went flat. He shifted the truck away from the street so he could disconnect and reconnect in the front. He popped the hood and looked in. He said, *“it could be worse.”* Wendy said, *“like being caught here worse?”*

Darrel looked over at Wendy saying, “*good point lets get moving and check the damage back home.*” He hooked the truck and set the lights on the back as the others got into the van and drove away. Wendy said, “*when we get home, we need a meeting.*” Scott asked, “*what was all that about?*” After a long moment of silence, Wendy said, “*I don't know.*” Darrel pulled into the drive and parked the truck in the yard. He put a couple of the other cars around the truck hoping to hide it just in case someone came around looking for answers. Next to the truck was an old ice-cream truck and memories of a simpler time long before he picked up a gun.

“*Hey mister I want ice-cream,*” the small girl chirped out while attempting to toss a five-dollar-bill on the high counter of Dan's ice-cream truck. Dan smiled and asked, “*hey little missy, just what kind will it be today?*” The girl smiled and said, “*Mickey.*” Dan pulled out a Mickey Mouse shaped ice-cream bar and handed it to the girl then went for the change when she said, “*keep the change, please.*” Dan smiled at the nearly one-hundred percent tip and said, “*thank you, my dear.*” The little girl cocked her head and said, “*I'm not a deer I'm a lady.*” Dan watched as she walked back to her waiting smiling mother. He wondered if he was making a mistake. This ice-cream truck was doing well while his other job was going nowhere. Dan Polanski was a private detective and part-time auto mechanic. Neither job paid the bills by themselves, but together he was doing well. His current job had him watching a park known for drug dealers. His first day all he saw were the families, but eventually, he saw the undercurrent of illegality as well as the seedy reality of the unseen world.

A man named David Warren hired him as well as more than a few others to watch the parks, schools, and streets for the dealers. He never said why but when a few of the people Dan watched turned up dead he figured it out, but he didn't care. Dan watched these kids in the park next to hardcore junkies and armed dealers and didn't care what happened to those pushers, not at all. Dan had footage of parents buying and using while their diapered children totted around on uncertain legs not knowing that their parent wouldn't be there if they fell because they were on a slow trip to the bottom. But then there were the ones like little Missy. He didn't know her name and her mother never came over. She had said, “*I'm a big girl, and I know what I want.*” A big girl in a pastel pink coat with a magenta colored knit cap with a white band and flower. Her

shoes were another shade of pink. She and her mother came every day to buy a Mickey every day. Dan wondered what his children would have looked like. He was once married, and they talked about children, but time slipped by, and one day he found himself in a small studio apartment with divorce papers. She was remarried with three children. He never thought about her as Karen, she was just she. Dan didn't know then he would leave there and change his name to Darrel, but no one in the park saw what was about to happen.

A pencil-thin man with a nervous twitch walked over to the truck and up to the counter. Dan said, "*hey Bean, what do you know? What have you seen?*" The man that most call Bean because of just how thin he was as in a string bean was also a usual at the truck. Bean was a junkie. A police officer told Dan, "*you can tell by the shake and the smell.*" Unlike the little girl, Bean ordered something different every time he comes around. Bean put down a ten-dollar-bill and said, "*give me the Globe.*" The Globe is a waffle bowl made to look like a half of a globe with a mix of ice-creams from vanilla to tropical passion fruit sorbet with a hard-white-chocolate coating. An order usually shared between two or more people. Bean told Dan to keep the change which amounted to two-dollars; a high amount for someone living on the street. He took two plastic spoons but no napkins and walked over to his on again off again girlfriend another junkie most people call Candy for her rotten teeth. The two sat underneath a tree and started to eat the ice-cream.

About twenty minutes later, the two were at the bottom and covered in cream and various sauces. One of Dan's cameras beeped needing a fresh battery. He checked the connections and changed the battery where he saw something on the screen. Three men were in the parking lot standing next to an old crew-cab pickup truck. Dan zoomed one of the cameras in on the three men. They were all armed with what looked like Glock-17s and at least one Tec-9. Dan picked up his phone to call the police. In another screen, Dan saw Bean and Candy kiss then pull a pair of small automatics from a bag. "*911 how may I assist you,*" the operator said on the other side of the call. "*My name is Dan Polanski. I have an ice-cream truck in Reagan Park, and there are five people with guns.*" Bean and Candy walked over to the three men with their guns out. The operator asked, "*Sir, are they carrying or threatening?*" Dan hesitated then he said, "*two of them*

are pointing their guns at.” Candy shot one of the men as he went for his own gun. Bean fired and missed. Candy’s round struck the man in his arm above the elbow. The three men ducked behind their truck and returned fire while Bean and Candy went over the hill away from them and toward the stunned park goers. Dan heard the operator, *“Sir is that gunfire? There are police on the way stay hidden.”* A round struck the side of the truck. Dan looked out and saw everyone scattering. The mother and Little Missy were huddled by a trash can in the path of the running gunfight. Dan heard the operator say, *“stay where you are.”*

Dan sprinted to the two ladies as Bean and Candy ran in their direction. Candy was bleeding from a couple of wounds and Bean was bleeding from his nose. The man with the Tec-9 fired going full-auto shooting wildly. Dan felt something hot and hard striking his left arm. Dan kicked over the trash can and tossed it at the man with the machine gun. The can struck the man sending his still firing gun arm to the left. Before the gun emptied, he struck one of the other men from the truck. The three men stopped. Dan picked up the girl and ran for the truck with her mother in tow. They made it around the truck just as the gunfire started back. The sounds of tap, tap, tap as rounds bounced off the side of the truck. The mother said, *“thank you.”* She took her daughter, and they ran away from the truck. This was the last time Dan saw them. Little Missy waved as she was bounced in her mother’s arms. The gunfire stopped, and Dan checked to see what was happening. Bean was face-down with a large hole in the back of his head. Candy was on her last breath looking more like swiss cheese than a person. The man with the Tec-9 and the man who was shot by the Tec-9 was lying on the ground. Dan couldn’t see if they were alive or dead and he didn’t care.

Dan pulled onto the little road that led to the ranch with everything he owned in the back of the ice cream truck. He sold almost everything he owned settling all his debts including the hospital from the bullet in the shoulder. The police confiscated the footage from the park and questioned him for a full twenty-four hours over why he was recording. The hospital took most of the money, but he kept enough to buy twenty gold eagles and hid them just in case. Even then he questioned the ranch and what they were doing. He pulled into the driveway finding something more like a campground than a heavily armed compound. The only thing that gave

away the truth was the sounds of gunfire. He pulled up to what had to be the main building and parked. Just outside he saw what had to be the most stereotypical school teacher or librarian ever put on film. She had on a grin that took away from her spinster apparel like there was something more going on underneath her bookish façade. Ruth said, *"wow the route that takes you all the way out here must suck."* Dan asked, *"what?"* Ruth smiled and said, *"never mind, you must be Dan. I'm Ruth. David wanted me to show you around. But first, we need to park that in the lot."* Ruth pointed to a plot of land with cars. Dan said, *"yes, I pulled up so we could unload the ice cream."* Ruth asked, *"you mean you're a real ice cream man?"* Dan looked through the door of the truck at the bullet holes and said, *"I'm whatever I have to be."*

Ruth and Dan ran into Cathy as they walked around. Ruth told Dan, *"this is Cathy. She will be a part of the team you're joining."* Cathy put up her hand and said, *"that is if Wendy approves."* Ruth said, *"Cathy you're down to just two people with more than a few jobs waiting."* Dan gave Ruth a surprised look. Ruth seeing what he was thinking in his eyes said, *"one quit while two left the active side for the planning side of the ranch."* Ruth pointed to some smoke in the distance. Dan asked, *"can I see that part of the operation?"* Cathy countered, *"not if you want to stay. David doesn't want his planners and doers to know each other."* The three walked closer to the trailers when Dan stopped saying, *"That doesn't make any sense. You already know more than a few of them."* Ruth and Cathy stopped and looked at him. Dan asked, *"what's going on over there?"* Ruth said, *"the best way to find out would be to ask David."* Dan looked over at the smoke and said, *"maybe later."* None of them knew that while they walked around, David and his bodyguards were over on the other side killing.

They approached a group of trailers and found a woman standing near a firepit. They walked over to her and Dan met Wendy. Cathy looked Dan over and then she looked at Wendy. Dan asked, *"what?"* Cathy smirked. Wendy said, *"David sent you to us because of our or my pension for sleeping with anyone younger than me."* Ruth shook her head saying, *"OK whatever, I have to go and check on Sue."* Ruth walked away while Dan watched her. He turned and asked, *"who's Sue?"* Wendy touched Dan's shoulder and said, *"we'll cover all that later. First, we need to find you a trailer and get you settled in."* Wendy pointed at an old Jay Hawk and said, *"that*

one is ours. You can take one of the other three but leave the popup for this kid coming later."

Dan spent most of his time living in the back of an ice cream truck so living in a trailer would be an upgrade. He asked, *"how about that one?"* He pointed at a trailer used by the departed Duke. Cathy said, *"that's fine. Duke left some stuff inside, but I don't think he'll be back."* Dan asked, *"Duke?"* Wendy said, *"later, first get settled and ready for tonight."* Dan asked, *"what's tonight?"* Wendy smiled and said, *"if everyone arrives then tonight you die."*

Duke kept the trailer clean, but without any power, it was a solar oven in the desert kind of hot. The Winnebago trailer was one open room with a small kitchen, bathroom, dinette, and bed. Dan hooked the power back up and opened the windows and ceiling vent so he could run the fan. About ten minutes into his work he was sweating. Outside he heard a commotion. A tall, lanky blonde man in a pair of faded jeans, a sleeveless flannel shirt, cowboy hat, and boots was in the middle of a long deep kiss with Wendy. She pointed to his trailer then to the closed popup.

Dan came outside and over to the two. Cathy came over from the other side and kissed the stranger on the lips. Dan stopped walking. Wendy said, *"Dan come over here. This is Kip. He's a part of our new team."* Dan said to himself, *"what's his position?"* Kip took Dan's hand and said, *"nice to meet you, sir?"* Dan shook his hand and said, *"you too kid, but don't call me sir.....boy."* Kip's smile faded. Dan smiled and said, *"just messing with you. You can call me whatever you want as long as it isn't late for dinner."* Cathy rolled her eyes and said, *"Dan you are going to regret that. Wendy is going to call you Late for Dinner from now on."*

As Dan helped Kip setup the popup trailer, Kip explained what was happening that night. He said, *"first of all you take another name to protect your real identity."* Dan asked, *"so Kip isn't your real name?"* Kip smiled and said, *"no, I took that from the frontiersman Kip Carson."* Dan asked, *"do you mean Kit Carson?"* Dan stopped working the crank and said, *"no not the television show about that talking car I mean the old west guy."* Dan said, *"I hate to tell you this, but his name was Christopher Carson, but most people called him Kit not Kip."* Kip thought about it for a second then he went back to cranking the top. He said, *"it's already on my new*

license and bank accounts, so I guess I have to live with it." The top locked in place and the two went inside and pushed the bedsides out. Dan asked, *"there's no bathroom?"* Kip smiled and said, *"don't worry about it."* Dan asked, *"this thing as an air conditioner. Do you want it on?"* Kip opened the side walls and said, *"don't worry about it."* Kip pointed to the firepit and said, *"tonight we'll have a fire, and you will burn any sort of identification connecting you to your old life, so think about a new name."* Dan hooked up the power as Kip tied the popup into the water. Another couple was moving into a trailer. He was surprised to see a couple joining the fight.

A truck pulled into the circle filled with firewood backing up to the firepit. Ruth got out and opened the tailgate. Dan and Kip joined her, and together they started to stack the longs in a way to help the fire burn evenly. Ruth asked, *"have you a name yet?"* Dan looked at Kip then back to Ruth saying, *"I'm thinking Darrel after my grandfather and Fitz for my grandmother."* Ruth said, *"Darrel Fitz OK, I can see that working."* Ruth looked Dan over and asked, *"do you know what's happening tonight?"* Dan half asked half said, *"I think? We are burning anything connected to my old life."* Ruth smiled and said, *"yes that is a part of this, but you will also burn everything else including your clothes."* Dan stopped and looked at Ruth who smiled and said, *"it's partly a trust exercise, and partly a way to shed your old life."* Dan asked, *"naked?"* Wendy asked from behind him, *"if you can't trust us when you're naked then how can we trust you?"* Dan went back to stacking wood. Cathy leaned in and said, *"don't worry, we all end up drunk and naked by the end."*

Dan held up his license with his name and old address. A piece of plastic signifying his old life and everything he thought was important. He stared into the fire and tossed the license. His credit cards and social security card followed. Someone was playing a song he knew, but he couldn't remember the name. Just as soon as the song ended, he remembered the name, but the next song was easy. Boston's More than a Feeling is recognizable from his childhood. To his right were these two women with a bottle of tequila and some tabs of rice paper with what had to be acid. June and April found each other here and together they found their calling. He wanted to ask how they could be against drugs so much that they are killing people while taking drugs. He thought about how people play these weird mind games to justify doing whatever they want. To

his left were a little girl and her silent brother. Both saw the worst of humanity with the boy repeatably raped with his legal guardian grandparents breaking his jaw to cut his tongue out, while his sister slowly went blind living in a room where meth was being cooked without any ventilation. April took her top off causing Jeff to turn his head away. He got up and took his sister Susan by the hand and led her back to their camp. On her way out, Sue started to sing her own version of the song Escape, *“if you like Pina colitis, getting caught in the drain if you’re not into yogurt if you have half a train.”*

Once Sue and Jeff were gone, Dan took off his shirt and tossed it into the fire. In this melancholy state, he had forgotten to take the pack of cigarettes out of the front pocket only remembering when the scent of melting plastic and burning tobacco came from the fire. A younger woman or what he thought of as being younger came over to him and asked, *“did you mean to do that?”* Dan smiled then replied, *“well, no not really but just maybe..... well yes.”* She replied, *“OK, my name is Talia, and I guess we are on the same team.”* Dan put out his hand and almost said he was Dan and not his new name of Darrel. He then noticed she was nearly naked with just a pair of thin white cotton panties on. Talia was thin but too thin with enough on her for curves in all the places Dan liked them to be curvy. He also thought how pervy he felt checking this girl out when she asked, *“are you going to do is stare at my chest all night?”* Dan looked away and said, *“sorry.....I.....I mean.... I..... I’m sorry.”* Talia smiled and slid off her panties tossing them into the fire. She said, *“don’t be sorry. I came over here to let you see me, and so I can see you.”*

Darrel woke the next morning next to Talia, wondering what her real name was. He had somehow transitioned from thinking of himself as Dan and into the new name of Darrel. That night he had stood and stripped off his jeans and tossed them into the fire. He looked into Talia’s eyes as she cocked her head in an almost, *“well I’m waiting”* gesture. He pulled off his boxers and handed them to her rather than the fire. Talia looked at the boxers then at what the boxers were containing. She stood and leaned in whispering, *“welcome to the family.”* She pressed close to him taking him into her hand stroking until he was hard. Off in the distance, they could hear the party ramping up as the drugs and alcohol kicked in. Darrel kissed her as he ran his hand

from her shoulder down her back. He said, "*I'm Darrel.*" Talia leaned back in and whispered, "*I don't want to do this out here. Let's go back to your trailer.*" For a second, he thought about asking her age, but after watching her walk to his trailer, the thought ran from his mind. He walked in, and Talia jumped into his arms. She said, "*for a second I thought you might not follow.*" Instead of answering he carried her to the bed kissing her along the way. They made love into the wee hours of the morning.

Talia was from the town of Backlash Oregon where she was known as Anna Kesh. She had a sister named Talia who was everything she wanted to be as well as nothing she wanted to be. Talia was a working model and loved by all, but she also suffered from an eating disorder that eventually cost her that career. As she descended into that hole, Talia found heroin. The drug kept her thin and strung out in debt to her dealer. In turn for his assistance, she eventually was pimped out for her fix until she met the wrong John and was found in an alley with her throat cut. Anna and Talia's parents did their best to remove the memory of their eldest daughter by treating Anna as if she was the one addicted. Part of that was sending her to a therapist named David Warren. He became like the father she always wanted then the lover she didn't need. Their therapy sessions became less about her coping with her sister's death and more about his needs. David eventually talked her into running away to his compound in the desert and joining the cause. Anna was fifteen when her sister died and sixteen when she took her sister's name.

The next day they started to train with Wendy as their lead. Their goal was to work together as quietly as possible and unnoticed. Their team was focused on dealing with dealers on or near school grounds. The kind of people that could sell poison to children. Talia moved in with Darrel. Two weeks into their training they had their first target. Gregory Farewell was a simple man on the surface. Looking at him he appeared to be just the average everyday mailman walking his route. He was in his mid-fifties with a bald spot on the back of his head that was revealed when he would tip his hat to the people that passed him in the street. He also picked up payments and delivered some of the purest heroin sold on the streets. Most paid with cash but some of his younger customers paid on their knees or bent over. Gregory had a taste for teenage girls. On his usual route, he passed a young girl in a short skirt and a tank top that barely covered

her. The reconnaissance team told Talia how to hold the cash so she could let him know she was interested. Gregory whispered into her ear, *“for a little something extra you could keep the cash and have the fix.”* She nodded, and he told her to walk around the block and get into the back of his van on the corner. He said, *“if you make me feel good, and I’ll make you feel good.”*

At the end of his walking route, Gregory walked back to his van and the girl. He opened the back and was struck with the barbs of a Taser gun. He awoke to find himself naked and duct taped to a chair. His legs were spread, and his genitals were out and exposed. His glasses were off taking with them his ability to see past four feet in front of him. A blurry form walked over to him. Talia was topless with a folded knife in one hand and a bottle of vodka in the other. She said, *“we need to know where your drugs are coming from.”* Gregory laughed out, *“why don’t you come over here and sit in my lap. I’ll tell you a long story.”* Talia tilted his head and tried to pour some of the vodka down his throat. Gregory turned his head spitting out the vodka choking out, *“I’m sober you fucking bitch.”* The others stood behind just out of Gregory’s sight watching Talia work. Talia put his glasses on his face. She took hold of his penis saying, *“I bet you can get hard even now and when you do, I’ll cut it off unless you tell us your supplier’s name.”*

Darrel put the newspaper down. A story about a known dealer missing his genitals made him think about that night. The night when he met the real Talia and saw just how far she would go. On the wall in the common room where a series of pictures of people, they lost along the way. Those people from the ranch to the people who died in the war along the border as well as others such as Susan who died from prolonged exposure to the meth-making process. Near the middle was a picture of Talia. Taped to her picture frame was a diamond engagement ring with the engraved message, *“Forever and a Day.”* He went back to work on the car thinking about her and how she reacted trying to forget how she died. The look on her face as she bled out in his arms. After her death, he made sure to build cars that can withstand the drive-by that killed most of his team including her. In a few days, the final parts for the Mustang will be in, and he will be able to finish the rebuild and Wendy can give the car to Sally. Darrel turned to Scott saying how the block will be back soon, so they should get the body ready for paint. Scott asked, *“color?”* Darrel nodded saying, *“yes there will be some sort of color.... I just don’t know what color yet.”*

Chapter Eight

Darrel pulled out into the yard in the 1969 Mustang Fastback Boss 429 in metallic copper with black metallic flake rally stripes. The flake shined in the sun. Wendy walked over to the car and leaned in asking, *“and you think this is subtle?”* Darrel ran his hand over the wood steering wheel and said, *“subtle is overrated. Painting this car in anything else would have made it stand out even more like a hot pink Ferrari or a neon green Jaguar.”* Darrel got out of the car and held the door open for Wendy. When she was behind the wheel, he said, *“we have many cars for the job. A car like this is something you enjoy. Something more than just a car.”* Wendy ran her hand along the steering wheel and down to the clutch. She said, *“you do know that the next car is going to be hot pink or neon green.”* Darrel smiled and said, *“yeah I kind of regret saying those colors.”* Sally was standing in the doorway. Darrel looked over at her then he asked, *“does she know?”* Wendy smiled saying, *“not yet but I think it’s time.”*

Sally found a long open stretch of road with the car running hot near ninety-five miles an hour. Wendy held on tight trying not to scream. She asked, *“didn’t Darrel say to not do this?”* Sally said, *“yeah you are supposed to break the motor in but..... I mean how can I take it slow? There’s nothing slow about this car.”* Wendy smiled saying, *“this car could be worth somewhere around one-hundred thousand dollars but not if you kill the original motor..... but ‘it’s your car so whatever.”* Sally slowed the car down to a stop and looked over at Wendy saying, *“don’t play with me.”* Wendy said, *“you are well worth this and so much more.”* Sally spun the tail around and laid some rubber on the blacktop. Sally asked, *“so that’s why all the questions about color?”* Wendy said while trying not to scream, *“no, I told him to do a basic paint, not this show job..... what you chose this color?”*

“Luis, I know you are having trouble understanding who you are, and your father and I aren’t helping, but I hope that one day you can understand and maybe forgive us.” Luis played the recording again. The recording was the last words of his mother just days before her and his father’s death at the hands of the cartel that took over their small border town so they could build a tunnel to smuggle drugs into the states. Jorge slipped behind the wheel of the truck and started

the motor. Luis played the recording again. Jorge gently put his hand on Luis's hand and pulled it away from the play button saying, "*we are making this right.*" Luis turned the phone off and put it away. He said, "*I want to do something to remember their anniversary tonight.*" Jorge replied, "*I think we need to find a source of information.*" He pulled out onto the highway heading to the small town of Dent, New Mexico. After about an hour of driving, Jorge asked, "*do you think we'll find someone.*" Luis smiled as he replied, "*the one thing you can always count on is finding an addict in America.*"

Dent, New Mexico had a population of fourteen hundred people most of which are either trying to hide or just lost. The town was once a stopping point for the trains to add water or sand, but that was long ago, now the town is a stopping point for illegals to find water and racists to track the illegals. Much like any town, you can find what you want in Dent. Alicia Gram knew what she wanted and how to get it. She spent her nights at the large truck stop just outside of town working on her knees servicing truckers and her days smoking pot laced with Phencyclidine also known as angel dust. That night her shift was coming to an end with more than enough to buy her fix and just maybe some food. A tall, handsome Hispanic man approached Alicia. He showed her two hundred-dollar bills but didn't say a word. Alicia thought how she would almost do this guy for free, well almost. She followed him around a corner where she found another man holding something yellow in a gun-like shape. A flash of light and an intense sting across her chest was the last thing she remembered.

Alicia awoke to find herself stripped down to her bra and panties and duct taped to a chair. She was in a dark room with one bare lightbulb overhead nearly blinding her. A dark form came into her view with something in its hands. It was a plastic bottle with a wand sprayer. The form sprayed her down with what seemed like saline. The salt water hit her eyes and into her mouth. She started to panic asking, "*what's going on? Who are you? Why are you doing this? Who the fuck are you?*" Luis said, "*so many questions. You ask and demand as if you were in a place to demand anything.*" Jorge replied, "*we have a few questions, and I think we are in that right place for a few answers.*" Alicia tried to shift in the seat but with her forearms fully taped down all she could do is wiggle. Luis came into the light. She could see it was the man from the

alley and a sort of relief came over her as she thought this was just some sort of twisted roll play. She said, *“no, I normally don't do this bondage thing but as long as you pay.”* Luis slapped her across the face hard enough to draw blood. The saline went into the open wound in her mouth, and the pain doubled. Then there was an underlining feeling like there was something else in the water. A drug of some kind. Luis grabbed her by her face just below her chin and said, *“no, this isn't about sex or even about you. We want answers, and we will do whatever we need to do to get them.”* A metallic taste filled her mouth as she spat out a glob of blood. Alicia asked, *“I'll tell you whatever as long as you let me go.”* She hesitated then asked, *“what do you want to know?”*

The overhead light went out sending Alicia back into darkness. She started to scream catching herself turning it into a silent plea. A bank of fluorescent lights came on revealing the room. It was windowless with the scent of decay like an abandoned building. Jorge stuck a probe to Alicia's upper chest then another a little lower. A monitor started to beep as it showed her heart levels going past a safe amount. The tears in her eyes from the hit across her face made it difficult to see what was happening. Luis prepared a needle with what would be some of the stolen heroin they used as cover to gain access to the country. The amount was more than enough to kill her. He showed her the needle and said, *“tell us where we can find your dealer, or you go flying.”* The monitor sounded an alarm. Luis turned the sound down. Over the next twenty minutes, Alicia cried, spat blood and told the two men everything she knew about the drugs going in and out of the truck stop. The more she spoke, the lighter she felt. Whatever they had laced the saline with was starting to take her pain away. Luis turned to Jorge and nodded. Jorge said, *“you were a good little doggie, and now it's time for your reward.”* It would be a few days before Alicia's body would be found in an alley. In her quick autopsy, the coroner noted the small caliber wound to her forehead as he thought about the strange smile on her face. The coroner was busy that night after the events at the truck stop.

Finding what they needed was easy on a road laden with trucks going back and forth from the US and Mexico. Diesel, an ammonia-based fertilizer and other supplies turning the hijacked truck into a weapon. The truck belonged to a company in Dallas driven by Grant Hester a part-time trucker and part-time dealer. He was Alicia's dealer as well as a dealer to many other

women along his route. He would be blamed for what happened. A disgruntled overworked driver turned suicide bomber. His death would force his suppliers to find another driver slowing down their operations. Jorge followed in a van they stole from a house near the highway while Luis drove the truck into the truck stop and up to a pump near the middle of the complex. The Middle of Nowhere Truck Stop was in the middle of nowhere along a busy highway going to and from Mexico. A place for cheap diesel and rest for the long-haul truckers. It also served as a place for cheap sex and drugs. Luis got out and ran Hester's fleet card for the fuel. Next to him was a truck with hazardous waste signs and next to that was a truck showing possible radiological warnings. In the back of his mind, he saw this place being closed off for many years with contamination spreading across the desert.

Wendy got out of bed and did her usual five am yoga stretches as the coffee brewed. She loved these early mornings where she could have a few minutes to herself to do nothing but meditate on the past while preparing for the future. She slipped on a long jersey over her sports bra and yoga pants and went into the common room to watch the news. A fire truck raced by the compound then another along with several police cars and what looked like national guard vehicles. She turned on the news to see a smoking crater that once was one of the largest fuel stations in the state. The small town of Dent, New Mexico was calling out for help from every city nearby for what had to be the worst disaster in the history of the region. By eight the news was calling it a terrorist attack with footage of the truck exploding taking the station with the blast. The news then talked about possible radiation until a spokesperson for the National Transportation Agency dispelled the rumor saying how there was a truck in the stop but it was empty with little chance of contamination. By Noon the news had Hester's name and tied it to the truck at the center of the explosion. By twelve-thirty they were harassing his wife and children about his motivations for his terrorism. None of them knew the truth.

Luis and Jorge drove for about an hour before they found a motel room. They had paid for a room near the truck stop only to find the explosion shattered all the windows in the building forcing the place to close. In their room, Luis turned on Fox News, and the two made love as they listened to the pundit nearly break down over a terrorist attack on American soil. When they

were finished, they channel surfed between CNN, MSNBC and Fox News as the networks fought to be the first to come to the wrong conclusions. The motel filled with cars and people trying to get rooms. Luis watched as people argued over parking spots. They had ditched the van in an alley and parked their truck in a nearby lot. Their guns were in a storage locker away from the truck just in case they were stopped. Luis found a man who could supply them with papers that would make them appear legal including real New Mexico driver's licenses from a well-paid state employee. They would hide out and wait for the documents, and now they would have to wait among the people searching for answers.

Sally loaded her car with supplies including the portable ultrasound while Jill and Gina packed for what could be a stay. Sally was once a trauma certified nurse in an emergency room, and the city of Dent was asking for any kind of medical assistance. With Jill and Gina in tow, she would drive over and help as much as she could while trying to find out who did this act of terror. Scott and Darrel were staying behind to work on a new van and Wendy, and Cathy would stay and watch Gina's children. Gina had left taking her children with her only to come back the night before the truck stop bombing asking if they could move back. Gary and Zoey were in Flagstaff, Arizona seeing his family. Sally found a place to park her car after dropping Jill and Gina off with the Red Cross where they were put to work right away. It was hard not to notice all the guys staring at her car. She got out, grabbed her bags and made her way into what looked like a war zone. Seven hours later, the scene was finished, and anyone that could be helped was helped. Sally found Jill and Gina sitting on the ground back to back. They both saw her then the blood on her shirt. The three walked back to her car to find it surrounded by firefighters and the police. They past them and got in. Starting the car the radio came on, and in some sort of irony the song Mustang Sally started. Jill leaned over and asked, "*you planned that didn't you?*"

Luis watched a copper, and black Mustang sounded by men driven by a black woman drive away. He thought about taking the car but soon realized it would stand out too much for a stolen car. Jorge walked over to Luis and looked out the window at all the activity. He asked, "*I wonder what they would do if they knew it was us?*" Luis smiled and said, "*up in America they call it lynching. The land of the free and the home of the angry racist mob.*" Luis walked away

from the window and sat on the bed grabbing and putting on his boxers then pants. He asked, “*I wonder what the cartels are thinking back home?*” Jorge said, “*giving what the news up here are saying they most likely are thinking terrorists and if we are lucky then they are thinking about how an attack will increase security on the border.*” Luis replied, “*as long as it shifts the cartels away from the border then I don't care.*”

Wendy sat back in her chair and said, “*I hate to say it but whoever did the bombing did us a favor.*” Cathy looked over at her saying, “*you don't really mean that. A lot of innocent people died including several children.*” Wendy turned the television off. Cathy asked, “*I want an answer, do you really agree with operating like that? Just how far would you go?*” Wendy looked at her hands saying, “*I don't know how far I would go but..... I don't think I could ever intentionally harm innocent people..... not intentionally.*” Zoey rolled over from Gary nearly falling off the couch. Wendy asked, “*should we wake them?*” Cathy looked over at the two naked on the couch and said, “*maybe we should cover them before the kids wake?*” Wendy went to the sink and ran some water into a glass. She took the glass over to the couch and before Cathy could say anything, Wendy dumped the water over Gary and Zoey. Gary jumped up then covered himself with a pillow while Zoey acted as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Wendy said, “*there are children here so keep your private parts private, or the next time it will be hot wax.*” Zoey replied, “*promises, promises.*”

A few hours later and the daily commotion was in full swing with people eating breakfast while Gina got her children ready for school. Three televisions were on covering the three cable news networks of MSNBC, CNN and Fox News. All three were putting on a spin from tragedy to terror. Fox News was talking about the President's latest attempts to get funding for a border wall. None of them were talking about the drug and prostitution problem at the truck stop. Within a few hours, most of them were off on their daily tasks from the management of the gas station to work on the new truck. Wendy sat at her desk working on the books while listening to the chatter in the station as well as the television and the police scanner. The drastic difference between what the police were saying and what the news was saying made her rethink their plans of ramping up their attacks. They planned to get together that night and lay out a strategy. Pick

targets and layout a roadmap to closing as many dealers as they can. Wendy started to think about what an end would be. They never talked about how all this would end, but after George killed himself, she found herself questioning why they were doing any of this.

Cathy walked over to Wendy and sat beside her on the couch as the cable news cacophony blared on over the explosion. She put her arm around Wendy and said, *"I can tell what you are thinking, and I have just one answer."* Wendy looked over at her with a, *"OK and that answer is"* gesture. Cathy smiled and said, *"this is bigger than you and me. What we are doing is for all of us and those we help. I think we spend too much time killing and not enough time helping but even with all the death we do good."* Wendy turned to the others as they sat and talked. She said, *"yes, I think we should do more to help. I think about all those that died..... All the people I killed, and I can't help but think how many of them could have been innocent or deserved a second chance like the one I had."* Cathy leaned over and said, *"babe I hate to say this, but you had more than one second chance. I think I lost count on your second chances and none of that matters. What matters is who are you are right now and what you are doing right now."* Wendy leaned over and kissed Cathy.

An hour later Wendy parked next to Sam's gun shop. The closed sign was still on the door, but the lights were on. The ATF and FBI vans were gone as well as any visible signs of governmental surveillance. The door opened, and a hand waved her inside. She knew she would have to explain why she left his nephew Owen in Mexico and that this might not end well. Sam let her in and hugged her. His wild over the top comber was gone, replaced with a near bald top with just a little hair on the sides and a deep tan. He looked like he lost twenty years with his time away from the shop. Sam said, *"it's good to see you my dear, and I hope you and everyone else are doing well."* As he said this, he had his hand up to his mouth in a shushing manner while pointing to a sign saying, *"infested by the Feds."* Wendy nodded and said, *"everything's great Sam. I was wondering if that ball ammo came today for my black powder rifle?"* Sam replied, *"yes I have them in the back."* He led her into the back room. Inside he asked, *"I took the bugs out of this room and placed them in the bathroom. How are things really going?"* Wendy replied, *"quiet. We stopped all activities and now with this thing down in Dent I think our active*

operations will be on hold for a while.” Sam cocked his head in that dog with a question posed and asked, “that wasn’t you?” Wendy just shook her head saying, “no.” Something felt off about how Sam was acting. She said, “that’s something we would never do.” Sam smiled and said, “I wanted to hear that from you in person..... I think there’s another crew doing what you and your or our family is doing but in a scorched earth sort of way.”

Wendy left with a fifty-caliber St. Louis Hawken rifle, a kit for another rifle, rounds, black powder, and primers. Hidden in the stock was a micro flash card with all the information Sam could find on the new people working in the area including video of two men abducting an addict and the same men breaking into a gun shop near Albuquerque NM. They stole ammo and survival gear but nothing easily traceable like a gun. Both men moved with precision taking as little time as they could take what they needed going to those items as if they knew where everything was. Sam said how he watched the day footage but hadn’t seen anyone that matched their body types in the video. They wore gloves and used hand signals instead of speaking, but their signals seemed unusual. Sam couldn’t pin it down, but he felt the men weren’t from the States. Possibly military but not American.

A teenage girl walked down the aisle of the Prepper’s Paradise military surplus and gun shop dedicated to people that like to be prepared for the end of the world. Gia was sixteen and dressed in a mix of black camouflage and leather with a spiked dog collar and near thigh high black boots. She was in the new age goth that shopped in this store every day. The owner of the store watched her while smiling about all the money such people spent in his store. Up until the show bearing his name came around most people had called Dexter Diego by the name Dex but after he was known as Mister Dexter and he liked the change. He went from his usual green camouflage to a white lab coat with dots of red paint acting as blood. He liked playing the part. He also liked it when the pretty little girls dressed in his gear. He didn’t see the camera hiding in her jet-black teased hair. Jorge watched the live footage and grew angry watching the fifty-something old man watch the ass of the teenage girl. Luis made notes on the store marking where the supplies they needed were as well as any problems. They paid Gia three thousand dollars to

shop in the store as well as a small bag of cocaine. She passed on the cocaine meaning she would live when she was done. The ones that took the drugs died that night when the job was done.

That night both men went down the isles with the map and plans in their heads taking what they needed. Both men in black from their boots to the balaclavas over their faces. Jorge had a battle flag of Virginia also known as the Confederate flag while Luis had an American flag in shades of gray with a blue band in the middle. Their goal was to make people think they were white supremacists sending the authorities in the wrong direction. They took what they needed leaving traceable items. Their time in the Mexican military came in handy with timing and execution. The next morning, they met with an expat from their hometown who would supply them with a new truck and a place to operate from. To protect their operation, they killed the man and buried the body in the desert. According to contacts back in Mexico, the explosion had shifted the operations but not away from their part of the border. Another large attack might just force the smuggling further west or east away from what was left of the small village of Jaluco on the border. The village was little more than a drug warehouse built over a mass grave.

Wendy turned the video screen off after showing the footage of the break-in to the others. Sally asked, *“what do we know about them? Where they from....? You know?”* Cathy replied, *“No. we don’t know much if anything about them but what we see on the video and their actions at the gas station.”* Darrel said, *“I have known more than a few military people, and they carry themselves as military.”* Sally replied, *“military training can be faked.”* Wendy asked the room, *“does any of it matter?”* Jill looked over and asked, *“so now what do we do?”* Wendy said, *“I want to find a way to cover what we are doing with another project. A place away from the operation where we can help people with problems not just kill them.”* Zoey asked, *“some sort of halfway house or I don’t know a camp?”* Sally smirked and shook her head, but Wendy replied, *“yes. I want us to do more good than evil. Help not just kill.”* Zoey mouthed the words, *“more good.”* Gina said, *“there is the old Adobe Motel on the other side of town.”* Everyone turned to Gina who went on saying, *“we own the property and it just sits there falling apart. We could turn that into a sort of halfway house for people looking to get clean and sober.”* The room went silent until Scott asked, *“we own that crap hole out in the middle of nowhere?”*

Luis parked the truck behind the building so it wouldn't draw any unwanted attention. The old motel was long abandoned and just far enough away from the road to give them some privacy so they can plan and work. Most of all the old Adobe Motel and Spa offered them a place to sleep. Jorge wanted to knock a wall down in the back so they could pull the truck inside away from view. Luis could see running a place like this back home then he remembered their home was gone and everyone that mattered was dead. They planned on staying in this place for as long as they could or until they were finished. Jorge had two MRE meals ready to eat opened and ready to eat. The American combat rations were made to eat without any kind of cooking source with special packs that heat when water is added. They took as much of this food as they could so they could stay in the field without any unnecessary human contact. Luis pulled Jorge's head back and kissed him while he slipped the pizza MRE away from Jorge leaving him the chicken and rice. Jorge said, "*ass hole.*"

They finished eating and sat near a radio listening to a local station while drinking from a bottle of cheap tequila and making love. Luis wondered how much longer they could keep doing this. How long until they were caught or killed. Jorge thought about what they would do or are going to do when the cartel left the border. They talked about going home and dealing with what was left of their town and maybe find their families remains. He could see a future that was nothing but an unrealistic dream to Luis. Jorge's family never knew about how he felt or anything about his life after he left to join the army. When he was discharged, he and Luis were friends but not much more. It would be over two years before the two became more than just friends and it was a first for the both. Neither of them planned on ever going home until there was no longer a home to go back to. They fell asleep and, in the morning, they packed the truck and moved on.

The motel felt wrong. They wanted fewer walls and more ways to escape. If they were caught squatting in the old motel, their fake papers could be questioned while two men camping would draw less attention. Jorge went to set a fire to destroy any evidence of their stay, but Luis

stopped him saying, *“that will draw just as much attention.”* Jorge lit the bottle of diesel and tossed it into the open doorway. The two drove away and went for about an hour before Jorge said, *“fuck them all. If they could keep their problems on their side of the border, then none of it would have happened. If I could, I would burn this country down to the ground.”*

“Yes, I do..... what? I don't know..... No, it's empty,” Wendy hung up the phone. She turned to Cathy and said, *“the Adobe is burning.”* Cathy put her cup of coffee down and asked, *“what?”* Wendy grabbed her coat and said, *“that was the fire department on the phone, the motel is on fire.”* She grabbed the keys to one of the trucks and said, *“I'm going over to see what the fuck is going on. I'll call you from there let everyone know what's going on.”* Wendy didn't wait for a response she just went out the door as Cathy watched. There was no local television news, but the radio news was talking about the loss of a landmark with the fire. By the time the call-in show was speculating on arson, everyone was awake and listening. Wendy called the show saying how she didn't have the insurance the other callers were claiming, and the police and fire departments said there were signs of squatters and arson. The callers turned from blaming Wendy without saying her name to blaming illegals and the war on the border. About the time someone asked if they found a Quran in the motel Cathy turned the radio off saying, *“what a bunch of fucking idiots.”*

Darrel got behind the wheel of the 1986 Chevy cargo van he and Scott were rebuilding and drove to the shop that does all their paint jobs. Hector Estrus know in the painting community as Steady E for his flawless freehand pinstriping met Darrel at the door to his shop. He said, *“it's gonna be hard to beat that last job Big D.”* Darrel smiled and said, *“you are going to hate this one. I mean gouge out your eyes, offer to pay me to hide it kind of hate.”* Hector looked the van over and said, *“this needs something like a penguin riding a unicorn across a rainbow or some sort of shit.”* Darrel said, *“hot pink with lots of bright neon green pinstriping.”* Hector smiled then started to laugh. Darren smiled and said, *“no really that's the paint.”* Hector said, *“let me do what I do, and just maybe we can do something.”* Over the next four weeks, Hector painted the body of the van the hot pink with the roof a pearl white. Along the top and the skirt, he added neon green pinstripes. Along the sides of the van, he added a two-foot strip

bordered by a pearl pinstripe with an elaborate series of vines and roses all in the pearl. He painted the rims white with neon green pinstriping, and a pearl rose on the hood surrounded by the neon green pinstripe. He left it unsigned hoping no one would know the work was his even as his efforts made him smile with just a little pride.

Chapter Nine

Three years ago,

Samuel Fernandez sat at his kitchen table staring at an egg white omelet with gluten-free toast wondering if it was worth eating. The cancer was spreading from his lungs, and the doctors wanted him to go north to see a specialist, but Sami made it clear he would never go into that country. He told his son Jorge that the American's war on drugs was fought to let the white men kill the brown men and keep them in their place. He was proud when his son Jorge joined the army to defend the country from the outsiders even if it meant having to work with the Americans. But right there and then he had this egg-white glob staring at him and an appetite that didn't want anything to do with it. He could feel the angry and sad stare of his wife Maria as she cooked for their fifteen-year-old daughter Maria and their nine-year-old son Titus. Samuel thought about his children and started to eat wanting to be there for them. He even thought about going to America and seeing those doctors.

Little Maria as she was known came out of her bedroom and into the kitchen wearing only her purple nightgown. The gown came to her knees but was just a little too revealing for her father's taste. He had told his wife that she just looked too much like a woman in the gown when Momma, as she was known said, "*she looks like a woman in everything she wears.*" Little Maria sat at the table, and her mother gave her a plate with sausages and eggs that made Samuel's stomach lurch. He fought the urge to vomit and went back to his paper. Little Maria watched her father's hand shaking as he held the paper. They could hear Titus in the bathroom rapping along with some song he was playing on the radio. His voice broke with the words making the act more comical than he knew causing the others to fight not to laugh. Little Maria stopped laughing when she saw her father's shaking grow worse.

When most people in American think about a small village in Mexico if they think about one at all picture rustic adobe buildings and cobblestone lined streets with more mules than cars. The small village of Jaluco was a place that could easily be confused with a small town in New Mexico, Arizona or even Spain. The village was built around an old mission that was long

abandoned then built back up to support a tire plant built after the North American Free Trade act or NAFTA help made in Mexico become a plausible thing. Eventually, the tire plant moved north to Alabama, but the town with the small subdivided subdivisions remained. Smaller manufacturers moved in giving this place along the border a reason to exist even if the locals didn't like being used. Samuel was a third-generation auto mechanic running the shop his grandfather opened in the 1920s. He was one of the few in the area with experience working on Toyotas and other Japanese cars. He preferred working on the non-American cars. The village was near the highway and the border but not much else. This remoteness along with the access to the highway made it a place where people could cross the border for work or with drugs. It also made the village a target for something worse.

Samuel put his paper down and saw his daughter staring at her phone. She was never without the thing as he called it and hated both it and the bill. Samuel said, *"put it away or lose it."* Little Maria just looked at him. Samuel said, *"no phone at the table. How many times do I have to say, no phone at the table?"* She looked over at her mother who said, *"do as your father said or so help me."* Before a threat could be said, Little Maria put the phone in a pocket in the front of her nightgown. Samuel said, *"get dressed, or you'll be late for school."* Little Maria hated the uniform for the Catholic school she attended, but Samuel liked seeing his daughter dress in clothing that made her blend into the crowd. For a few hours a day, she was that young girl on her way to her first day of school and not the woman that turned the heads of way too many older men. Little Maria got up with a bounce and went into her bedroom. Momma Maria said, *"I can't believe we have to buy her yet another new cup size."* Samuel said, *"I don't want to know that."*

There were a thump and a crack in the bathroom that on any other day would signal the boy had broken yet another thing. This time the music had stopped. Samuel thought, *"thank God."* Momma Maria asked, *"Titus is everything OK?"* There was no answer. Samuel yelled, *"answer your mother."* A strange whoomph sound came from his room then the smell of something foul and strange. Samuel watched as his wife went into the back. She made a gasping sound followed by the same strange sound then the sound of something falling and hitting the

floor. Samuel got up and started for the back when he heard Little Maria scream. He came around the corner to find his wife on the floor with blood pouring out of a hole in her head. Little Maria was there with a man behind her one arm around her the other with a gun pointed at him. The man was wearing all black from his boots to the mask over his face. The front of Little Maria's dress was ripped open as she tried to fight the man and hold the dress closed. Samuel could see his son's foot just inside the bathroom doorway along with a large amount of blood along the door jam. The man pushed his hand into the ripped opening of Little Maria's dress until he had exposed one of her young breasts. Maria pleaded, "*papa.*" The man pointed and fired the gun. Samuel didn't feel the round strike him in the head. He saw blood as the room went black. The man pulled his mask off and said to Little Maria, "*I'm your daddy now bitch.*" He forced her back into her room and did things to her that was worse than death.

Across the village, the individual houses were cleared out and anyone found was killed. That is almost everyone. The cartel had connections in human trafficking, and they knew that girls ranging from seven to nineteen could bring about a good payday. They drew the line at selling boys, so any boy found was just killed on site. Any child, boy or girl under seven was also killed, but they didn't waste a bullet knowing a knife or boot works just as well and is cheaper. The remaining girls including Maria were brought to a warehouse on the border side of town. Most of them were beaten and bruised or worse. When the unnamed man was finished, he had let Maria put her nightgown back on and clean up a little. Maria found the little eight-year-old Jessica Martin among the group of girls. Maria would babysit Jessica on some nights, so their parents could go out. Jessica had a crush on Titus. The Two embraced as Jessica asked where Titus was along with all the other boys. The man took her phone, but he left a marker she had in her pocket. Maria wrote a number on Jessica's arm and told her to call when she was free. She figured that the men didn't count the girls, so she helped Jessica out a hidden vent in the back. Jessica made it out of town and to the border where she found a family crossing. They had a cell phone.

Jorge sat on a beach on the gulf side of Mexico near a resort. He was wearing a pair of bright blue speedos and orange flipflops. It was mid-day, and neither he nor Luis had done

anything but sit by the pool. Luis was in a matching pair of speedos. It had been about two years after he left the army and about six months after they became more than friends. Luis always knew he was gay. His father would call him queer or something foul if he knew so Luis kept his life his and away from his family back home. Both Luis Martin and Jorge Fernandez were from the same town, and their parents were longtime friends, but he and Jorge didn't know each other until the army. Jorge never had a girlfriend. He had girls that were friends but never a girlfriend. Luis would drive across the border and look for people that felt the way he did finding a couple of clubs that didn't ask questions. Both men were proud to be from Mexico and never wanted to leave. They became friends in the army and rented an apartment together afterward. One night over a bottle of cheap whiskey they became more than friends and Jorge started to understand himself a little better. They both worked in security using their specialized training to help protect rich people's stuff. Jorge's phone rang. The number was one he didn't recognize, but he answered it anyway. The girl on the phone was frantic, but he knew her voice as one of Luis's sisters.

Jessica, her six-year-old sister Jessie, twelve-year-old sister Sara and fifteen-year-old brother Jacob were waiting for the bus when a van pulled up, and four men came out with guns. The men force Jessica and Sara into the van. One of them asked Jessie her age. She said, "*six.*" Before the door closed, Jessica saw the men stab her brother and little sister to death. She and Sara screamed until one of the men struck her in the face. One of the men held her licking her face as two other men ripped at Sara's dress until she was naked. Sara said, "*Jessica turn your head.*" The man holding Jessica whispered, "*do that, and we do the same to you.*" Jessica watched as the men took turns with her sister. When they were done, Sara curled into a ball in Jessica's arms. Sara cried but didn't make a sound. One of the men came over to Jessica and whispered, "*I think I'll keep the two of you for myself.*" He put his hand up her dress and squeezed her between her legs breaking something causing her to bleed. Sara looked at her sister then at the men. She got up and started to attack them causing the van to swerve. One of the men pulled a knife and buried it in Sara's chest.

Luis turned white as he nearly smashed the phone in his hand. Jorge had handed him the phone when he recognized the voice. As Jessica told him what happened, he could see his family as they were on that last day before he left for the army. There was a thump, then another thump and Jessica screamed. A voice came over the phone saying, “*stay out of our business if you know what’s best for you.*” Luis figured the men found his sister and killed the family that helped her. When the sunset, the two men made their way into their hometown. Most of the lights were off, but there were trucks and various all-terrain vehicles patrolling the streets with armed men in the back. A large flatbed truck piled with bodies slowly went down the street as men added to the pile. They were cleaning out the dead from the homes. They watched as trucks hauling boxes of something into the empty homes. Luis’s house was empty, but there was a light on in Jorge’s family home. They looked inside and saw three men in the living room watching football (soccer). Another three in the kitchen and a sound coming from a bedroom. Jorge looked inside and saw his sister Maria. Her clothes were ripped away, and she was underneath a man as he went at her raping her. Her face was bloody and bruised, but she didn’t make a sound. Jorge went to make a move when Maria shook her head and mouthed the words, “*just go and let me die.*”

Over the next few days, Luis and Jorge watched as an army of men reworked the town until the invasion was complete. The unknown cartel moved in their families to help make the village seem normal. About every third house was empty and filled with boxes of what had to be drugs and guns. About a week into the take over the tunnel was started. It became clear that they had no chance to win against the army the cartel planted in the village. They never found Jessica or any of the other girls. They did find one of the mass graves filled with the bodies of children. They also never found out the name of the cartel. Luis did some research finding out that the larger cartels acted like small nations within the country with their own armies. In his research, he found a place on the California border that forced the gangs out by cutting off their ability to smuggle into America while fighting addiction on the American side. Luis realized while they could never win a war against the cartel, they could use such a tactic to make occupying their village undesirable. Force them out by starvation or do enough harm to bring in the Americans. From there a plan was formed.

The Adobe Motel and Spa was a two-story U-shaped motel built around a courtyard and a place for a pool that was never added. The Motel was built just after NAFTA was signed into law with the idea that a motel would service the trucking community going back and forth between the US and Mexico. When the main route never materialized the motel was rebuilt into what was going to be a spa in the desert. A price friendly option for people that wanted to get away from it all, but the new owner never finished the renovation, and the motel was eventually left abandoned and sold along with a gas station and warehouse complex. Wendy didn't even know she owned the Motel until she was asked if she would ever reopen it. The motel was a physical landmark as well as a reminder of a policy most people would have liked to forget. The Motel had thirty single rooms and ten staterooms with more than one bedroom. The remodel was to add a spa complex with a restaurant and rooms for saunas and massage treatments, but only the shell was ever finished on the spa with most of the work left to rot. The fire destroyed most of the center of the U taking with it most of the value in the motel.

Wendy walked around with a fire inspector as he talked about the fire and the damage. He gave her a card for a structural engineer, but he added, *"I can tell you that he or any competent engineer will say that this place is a loss and should come down."* He added, *"the wife and I stayed here once, and the place was nice. Not great but nice."* All Wendy could do was think about how much this place would cost to take down and where would she get the money. Cathy took the card and called for an appointment. The man on the other side of the phone said he could be around in a week. Darrel and Scott pulled into the parking lot with a truck loaded with plywood and chain-link fencing. Wendy asked, *"so where's the van?"* Darrel smiled and replied, *"it's coming just give him some time."* The rest of the day the four of them boarded up the motel then wrapped fencing around the whole building hoping to keep people out. That night the police showed up and put crime scene tape across every opening and put a halt to any work.

The next day a black Range Rover with a heavy tint to the windows pulled into the gas station. A young woman wearing darkly tinted glasses, khaki shorts, a man's button-down blue shirt over a gray tank top stepped out of the driver's side and into the station. Another older woman with short hair in a pair of jeans and a white blouse got out and went to the pump. In the

back was a teenage boy who could be mistaken as the doppelganger for a young Brad Pitt with a stern look on his face. The younger woman walked over to the counter. At first, she seemed like any other to come and go on the road. She seemed like nothing that special to Gina. She was pretty but pretty forgettable. That was unless you looked into her eyes. Alice always had those killer's eyes that could turn a brave man yellow. Alice asked, "*could you call Wendy I need to speak to her.*" Gina put her left hand on the panic button and her right over the place in the counter where her 32-automatic was hidden. Gina asked, "*may I help you?*" Alice leaned in and said, "*you can call Wendy or push that button, but if you go for the gun, I'll have to make you eat it.*" Gina looked into Alice's eyes and realized she wasn't someone you mess with.

Darrel looked out of the shop door and saw the woman at the pump. He walked out and over to her saying, "*hot dam Ruth you don't look much like that school teacher I knew.*" Ruth turned around with a smile and said, "*and yet you still look the same.*" The two came together and embraced. Ruth said, "*I heard about George, but I couldn't get away from school.*" Darrel replied, "*its good to see you but what brings you out to the middle of nowhere?*" Ruth nodded to the station and said, "*Cathy called and said what's going on. We came to offer some help.*" Darrel looked at the door to the station then he said, "*its always good to see you but I wish you would have called to say she was coming.*" Ruth's smile faded a little. She said, "*Alice isn't the same girl. I think having children changed her.*" Darrel walked into the station and saw Alice with her back to the door staring at Gina who had a look of fear in her eyes. Darrel said, "*Gina call Wendy and tell her Ruth and Alice are here with Jeff.*" Gina mouthed the name Alice as she picked up the landline and dialed. Alice turned around and did something that shocked Darrel. She smiled.

A few hours later Cathy, Ruth, Alice, and Darrel were sitting around a table talking about old times as Gina listened in from the front. Spread across the table were pictures of a man with curly black hair, a diner, and three young children. Jeff sat in the living room watching television as Jill sat near him staring. Cathy pointed at the slack-jawed Jill and said, "*I see Jeff still has that effect.*" Ruth shook her head saying, "*everywhere we go he somehow attracts every pretty girl. The other day I caught him in bed with a freshman as in a college freshman.*" Cathy asked,

“how’s Ying?” Alice smiled as she replied, “*she’s attending Berkley after being granted early entrance.*” Alice showed her a picture of a smiling young Chinese girl with her arms wrapped around another girl in what looked like some sort of parade with a rainbow flag in the distance. Wendy walked in first seeing Jeff on the couch with Jill slowly moving closer. Then she saw the people around the table. She smiled when she saw Ruth then she lost the smile seeing Alice. Both Ruth and Alice got up and went over to Wendy. To her surprise, Alice was smiling and embraced her saying, “*its good to see you again.*” Wendy didn’t know what to say. Ruth said, “*we don’t have long so let’s get down to business. Cathy told us about your plans for your motel and how you need a little capital.*”

Wendy, Ruth, and Alice left to see what was left of the hotel. Ruth said to Jeff, “*oh no there is no way you are staying here.*” Jeff signed, “*come on.*” Ruth signed back, “*get the fuck in the car.*” Jeff smiled at Jill turning his handsome, stern look into something like a movie star smile. When they were gone, Jill asked, “*he doesn’t say much does he?*” Cathy lost her smile. She looked at the door then a picture on the wall. She pulled the picture off the wall and handed it to Jill. She said, “*this is Jeff and his sister Susan back on the ranch. When Ruth and her team found him and his sister they were living with their grandparents in their meth lab.*” The girl was smiling, but it was clear there was something wrong with Jeff’s face. His jaw didn’t seem right. Cathy said, “*Susan was nearly blind from exposure to chemicals and the cook, but Jeff was.*” Cathy stopped talking. After she took in a long breath trying to fight the urge to cry. She said, “*you need certain chemicals to cook meth. Their grandparents found a pharmacist that would sell it to them for a price. He repeatedly raped Jeff for years. They kept him locked in the basement. When he talked back, they broke his jaw to cut his tongue out. Jeff can’t talk.*”

Jill wiped back her tears. Cathy smiled and said, “*when I need to find strength I think about Jeff. Here was someone who could have let despair own him but somehow, he is the most hopeful person I know. He taught himself how to read in a dark hell hole. He fiercely protected his sister, and when she died, he didn’t let that take him down. He had so many operations to rebuild what was done to him, but here he is on the other side.*” Jill asked, “*what’s with Alice and Wendy?*” Cathy said, “*Wendy blamed Alice for David escaping then when he came back*

Alice didn't let us know he was in Mexico. Instead, Ruth went down and killed him, but I think most of all she was mad about Ying." Jill asked, "what kind of name is Ying?" Cathy sat down next to Jill and said, "on a raid of a drug house they found a young Chinese girl being used as a sex worker. Her owner named her Ying and dressed her in a red kimono. A few years after the ranch both Ying and Alice went back to killing dealers and those people that abused Ying." Jill asked, "so they did what we're doing. I don't see why Wendy would be upset?" Cathy said, "Ying was still very young, and as Wendy saw it, Alice was just too reckless with Ying's life. All that ended with Alice getting pregnant and Ying getting shot." Cathy got up and said, "don't ask Wendy about any of this. Too much of this story is tied to David."

One month ago,

Luis striped and cleaned an AK47 at a table in what was the local police station. As he worked, he inspected the parts making sure it would work when needed. When he was finished, he moved on to the next one. As he worked on the guns, Jorge taught basic stratagem to the men assigned to guard duty. Both Luis and Jorge join the cartel using their experience with the military and as private security to gain access. Their final payment would be an entrance into America guarding a shipment using their training to cross the desert. A large man with tattoos running up his arms and a thirteen tattooed on his face walked into the room. Tony always looked like he was about to either kill or fall asleep. In most cases, he never had to say a word his presence intimidated people into doing what he wanted. Unlike the others, Tony was neither Mexican or a part of the cartel. He was born in Spain and moved to America where he joined a gang at the age of fourteen. He was there to buy guns and drugs.

Luis watched Tony out of the corner of his eye while never stopping his work on the guns. Tony picked up one of the Russian built rifles and held it in his arms. He said, "*dam that's heavy.*" Without taking his eyes off his work, Luis said, "*yes, that is an original milled receiver which tends to be heavy and stronger than the cheap stamped AKs.*" Tony put the gun to his shoulder. Luis said, "*the weight helps with the recoil making it easier to keep on target.*" Tony dropped the rifle on the table causing it to shake. He then picked up a small automatic Mac-10

with a suppressor. He held it out like he was spraying a crowd saying, *“now this is more my style.”* Luis whispered, *“cheap, inaccurate and small.”* Tony held out the gun miming firing at people as they walked by the window. Wanting this man to go, Luis said, *“that Mac-10 uses 9mm making it easier to get the ammunition, and without the suppressor, it’s easy to conceal.”* Tony put the gun back on the table gently. He said, *“I’ll tell your bosses we want as many of the Mac-10s as he will sell us.”* Luis nodded as he stripped an old Beretta 92 down. He watched Tony leave thinking about how easy it would be to bury a knife in his back.

An hour later, Jorge walked into the room with two rifles. He put them on the table and sat down across from Luis and stared. After a few minutes of this Luis looked over at him and angrily said, *“what?”* Jorge leaned back and said, *“that asshole Tony came into the office and complained about how you acted to him and the lack of respect.”* Luis replied, *“I have no respect for crap on my shoe.”* Jorge turned to the window and said, *“we are almost out of here. All we need to do is keep our cool, and soon we can be over the border and going to work.”* Luis stopped working and asked, *“you found her didn’t you.”* Jorge turned back to Luis then to the door. He said, *“Maria is back in my parent’s house with that man... .. and their child.”* It had been nearly three years since they left her in that room as she was being raped. In that time her rapist decided to keep her and play house. After joining the cartel, Jorge did his best to find out what happened to his sister Maria and Luis’s sister Sara. The closest he ever got to Sara was a picture with the amount of nine-hundred dollars printed on the back. A few days ago, he saw a pregnant Maria as she walked around what passed as a market. He followed her back to the hose where she saw another child around the age of two. Maria never saw him.

The cartel was starting to talk about the chances that the American President could get his wall. An order came in from Mexico City that the shipments needed to speed up. The next few nights were going to be clear and moonless. A kind of dark that is almost unbelievable. Five men started across the desert toward a place where there is little to go fencing or guards. Ten minutes from the border the men came to a dark form standing in front of them. Without a word, the form opened fire cutting all five men down. From there the form took the drugs buried it in the sand. Two days later and they were watching how Mexican and American authorities found a mass

grave near the border but nothing about the drugs. Jorge had cleaned the Mac-10 he had used and put it back in with the shipment for Tony. He also placed something else in the shipment. The next morning a tanker truck backed up to the makeshift warehouse that was once someone's home. A secret compartment ran down the center hidden under the oil was used for smuggling. Jorge and another two men packed the compartment with the drugs and guns Tony bought. Jorge made sure the box with the something special was packed close to the cab.

An hour across the border, Tony sat in the back of the cab with a girl he picked up back in Mexico. She wanted across the border and was willing to do anything to get there. As she went down on him, Tony laughed on how easy it was to get across with his cargo. The border inspectors didn't even look in the back of the cab. He told the cartel that his truck was the new way and any fixed tunnel was just a hole waiting to be filled. A thump then another thump woke Tony up then the back of the truck exploded separating from the cab. The cab rolled as the woman in Tony's lap was struck biting down taking Tony's penis with her. Tony had just seconds to realize what just happened before he went out a window and was consumed by the oil fire. The driver went through the windshield leaving the choking bloody woman as the only survivor. By the end of the day, both sides of the border were told what to look for when it came to this kind of smuggling and the cartel focused on the tunnel and overland smuggling.

Cathy walked into the dark common room with the only light coming from the television which was shining a dim light onto someone on the couch. Jill looked over while trying to stay low on the couch and covered with a blanket. The back of the couch faces out, and Jill was turned around facing Cathy and the kitchen. Trying not to raise her shoulders above the back of the couch she asked, "*wow that was a short night. I thought the four of you were going to be out for a while?*" Cathy cocked her head at Jill. She said, "*Ruth doesn't drink much, and Alice is still breastfeeding so going out all night doesn't seem like a good idea.*" Cathy took a step closer as Jill ducked down a little. Cathy asked, "*are you wearing a shirt?..... are you naked?*" Cathy's eyes went a little wide and asked, "*Jeff?*" A hand came up from the other side of the couch underneath Jill. Cathy put her hands up and said, "*Jill what the fuck?*" Jill started to get up stopping and going back down. She said, "*it just happened. He was teaching me how to sign, and*

I was teaching him.” Cathy put up her hand interrupting her saying, *“yeah I can see that you're teaching him.”* Jill started bouncing up and down as Jeff laughed. As she bounced, she started to laugh. Cathy looked to the door then back to the couch and said, *“alright, I guess I don't have any place to judge but unless you want Ruth to kick your ass you two should take this into your room.”* Jill got up off the couch holding their clothing in front of her. She turned to Jeff and said, *“come in me if you want to live.”*

Just as they went into her room Ruth, Alice and Wendy walked inside. Ruth looked around and asked, *“where's Jeff?”* Cathy looked at her then to Wendy then back to Ruth without saying a word. Ruth walked over to the couch and picked up a red lacy bra. She shook her head and said, *“I just don't know what to do.”* Alice replied, *“well if you do nothing you might just wind up being called grandma.”* Ruth sighed then she went to Jill's door and put her hand up to knock, but then she stopped. Wendy said, *“make a fist then connect that fist with the door going back and forth much like Jeff is probably doing right now with Jill.”* Cathy said, *“I have never seen him laugh before.”* Ruth put her hand down and walked over to the homemade bar where she poured herself three fingers of Irish whiskey and down it all in one shot. Cathy asked, *“I thought you didn't drink?”* Just as soon as she asked, Ruth nearly spat the booze out. She said, *“it's still hard to discipline him. I look at him and see that boy in the basement and Sue.”* On the other side of the door, they could hear a slight moaning and the rocking of a bed.

The four women sat in the living room and restarted the movie only to see that Jill and Jeff were watching Showgirls. They had paused it at the sex in a pool scene. Alice said, *“OK, with your permission we will stay here tonight and get back in the morning where I will call every contractor I know and get this started.”* Wendy shook her head over just how fast this all came together. Alice saw her look of dismay and said, *“when I divested from my grandmother's company after it went public, I earned around four billion dollars, and even with the taxes I still have more than we will ever need. As long as you keep up your end of this, then I'm happy to help make this happen.”* Cathy said, *“as long as it isn't the same people that built those homes that nearly collapsed.”* Ruth looked over at Alice as she watched the door to Jill's bedroom. Ruth said, *“go on and check in.”* Alice pulled out her phone and called her husband, Max. His image

showed on her screen holding a small baby. In the background, she could hear another baby screaming. Max said, *"house of perpetual screams."* Alice didn't say anything. She just stared at the baby in his arms. Wendy couldn't help seeing how the scowling to blank stare Alice usually wore was gone, and she looked like a mother away from her baby for the first time. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Wendy fought the urge to hate Alice even more.

Ruth went to sleep in a large lounge chair while Alice took the couch. Cathy and Wendy offered their bed, but neither woman wanted to put them out. After the two made love, they lay on their bed staring at the ceiling. Wendy whispered, *"is it wrong to feel so jealous?"* Cathy kissed Wendy on her forehead and replied, *"it's only human to want something you can't have and to see someone close to you having that thing you wanted so much."* Wendy put her hand over Cathy's mouth and said, *"I don't think I ever really wanted it until it was no longer a possibility."* Cathy replied, *"and yet here you are saying it instead of baby."* Wendy asked, *"could you send your daughter away like that. I mean Ying is sixteen, and this girl is what seventeen?"* Cathy replied, *"we don't actually know how old Ying is. Those people didn't keep records or celebrate birthdays. She graduated early and passed an entrance exam that got her into one of the best schools in the country. She is also happy."* Off in the distance, they could hear Jill and Jeff. Then like a blast of thunder, Ruth screamed, *"oh for the love of god will you two finish already!"*

The Tunnel,

A truck slowly backs up to the back of a warehouse. The doors open, and four men start to unload some small boxes from the back. The men load the boxes into specially built crates with hooks built into the sides and wheels on the bottom. Two more men push the wheeled boxes to the hole where they are hooked into an overhead crane which picks up the box and puts it over a large hole. The box slowly goes down the hole passing by a ladder and manual elevator. Forty feet down the box came to rest on the ground. Four men unhook the box and push it to a table where they opened it and unloaded the boxes. Inside some of the boxes were vacuum-sealed bricks of white powder and the other boxes had the small automatic Mac-10s. The guns were

inspected, and the bags were packed into specialty made vests and small duffle bags. Both were then loaded onto a wheeled cart and pushed to the mouth of a tunnel.

Luis went down the ladder to the bottom to look around. He was on guard duty, and this was a part of his route, but he had never been in the tunnel before. Only a few people were permitted to go into the tunnel. A few guards, the supervisors, and the people who break down the shipments and pack them for the final shipment. Most of the people working in the tunnel were children. The tunnel was a mix of cinderblock and concrete painted white to reflect any light used, but it was perpetually damp and dark even with the white paint and lights. They worked the children to control the parents. Most of them hadn't left the tunnel since it was built. In the corner of the loading zone, Luis saw someone he knew. His sister Jessica was sewing a vest closed. The vests were little more than smocks with slots for the drugs, so the mules can put them on underneath their clothing or in some cases wear multiple vests. He saw her, but she didn't see him. Jessica had lost nearly half her weight and was looking far too old for someone near fifteen.

The tunnel was something out of a science fiction story looking more like a city project than something built for human and drug trafficking. A few of the men that walked the miles of the tunnel said how the construction became more of a facade the further you go into it. They didn't want to do any more than necessary on the American side so much of the tunnel was just a thin shell of concrete and cinderblock. On the wall near the ladder was a diagram for the tunnel as well as the planned expansions. The other guards talked about how the cartel was selling trips to people with questionable motives. Luis thought they meant terrorists. As he stood there a voice came from behind him, "*would you like some water, sir?*" It had been more than three years, but he knew his sister's voice. Luis thought about their plan, and how much work went into it, then he thought about her as well as Jorge's sister and her children. He didn't know if he could face her. Part of him knew that if he looked into her eyes, he wouldn't be able to stop until they were on the other side of the tunnel. Jessica turned away and started to walk back to her sewing table when Luis said, "*stop.*" She turned around but kept her head down. He walked over to her and put his hands on her shoulders. At first, she tried to shrug them off until she saw the

ring their father gave him just before Luis left for the army. Jessica lifted her head and stared at her long-lost brother and asked, "*Luis?*"

Twenty minutes later Luis found Jorge in one of the many homes turned into bars. Luis said, "*I found her.*" Jorge started to give him a blank stare until he saw Luis's face and knew who she was. Jorge asked, "*how does she look?*" Luis replied, "*like someone that needs us more than we need our plan.*" Jorge turned to the warehouse where the tunnel was then to his house. He said, "*we put a lot of time into our plan including a lot of money.*" Luis leaned in and said, "*fuck the plan. I don't care.*" Jorge tried to keep his calm, "*do you think I didn't want to take my sister and her child out of that place as soon as I saw her? This is bigger than you or me or even them. This is important for Mexico.*" Luis walked away not wanting to look back. He made it to his room in one of the homes near his family's house. After thinking it over Luis started to pack a bag. He would tell Jorge he was leaving with his sister and if he wanted to come then he would help him get Maria and her child but with him or without he was taking his sister and going to America.

The ground started to shake then a loud thunderous sound came from the warehouse. Luis was on his way back when he saw a large plume of dust force the doors to the warehouse open. Off in the distance, he could see the ground shift. Luis dropped his bags and ran for the tunnel. Inside he found the complex covered in sand and white powder. Knowing what the powder was Luis grabbed a respirator and made his way inside. The power was out, and the tunnel's opening was clogged with dust. Jorge met up with Luis, and they started to break and drop chemical lights into the hole. Luis grabbed a repelling rope and tossed it over after tying it down. He and Jorge would repel down just in case people were trying to use the ladder. The power came back on, and the fans started to clear the dust sending heroin across the city. The first person they found was the lead foreman. He was shaking while gasping for breath. Jorge went to the tunnel while Luis went to where he found his sister, but she wasn't there. Down in the tunnel, Jorge found the tunnel's ceiling had ripped open. About forty feet in the tunnel was closed. Underneath the rubble was a blotch of blood. Jorge started to move the rock yelling, "*Luis get in here.*" Near the bottom of the pile, they found Jessica and three other girls. The lead foreman was able to

speak telling them he sent the girls into the tunnel to get as much of the product as they could. Luis picked up a rock and struck the man across the head then he caved the man's head in. When he was dead, they carried the body into the tunnel and covered him with the ruins.

A week later and word came down to abandon the tunnel and go back to human deliveries. With that message came the word that Luis and Jorge could go on the next trip as guards. Not for the people but to guard the drugs. The night before they were to leave, Luis and Jorge met in an abandoned house where they made love for the first time in nearly three years. Luis told Jorge that the house they were in was the house where the first boy he fell for lived in. He had loved him from a distance not wanting anyone to know about who he was saving that for his trips across the border. Luis said, *"no matter what when we are finished, we are coming back for Maria."* Jorge didn't say what he was thinking, but he didn't think they were ever coming back. Jorge said, *"we will be in the States by tonight then we stay the day in hiding. Everything is ready, so when we get across, we can start the mission."*

Chapter Ten

Sam spent the morning cleaning the shop and getting ready for both his reopening and the second of the month sale. He was a supporter of Every Second Matters movement that encourages people to open-carry on the second of every month to remind people that gun ownership is a right and not a privilege provided by the government. Sam had a stainless-steel Wilson Combat 1911 on his hip. The gun had Every 2nd Matters engraved along the slide with burlled maple grips. Like everything else in the store, the gun was for sale. As he polished the glass counter, there was a knock at the door, *“sorry folks but we don’t open for another hour.”* The person knocked again. Sam wanted to say fuck off, but a sale is a sale. He opened the door to find his nephew Owen and a beautiful young girl. Owen asked, *“we saw you were reopening and wondered if you could use some help?”* Sam hugged Owen then he said, *“I can use family more than help.”* After a second of thinking about what he said, Sam said, *“wait that doesn’t sound right.”*

Sam gave them two mugs of coffee and went on saying, *“I made it to Vegas and was there for about a day when I won a motorcycle. I decided to take that as a sign and take a long trip along the California coast.”* Owen replied, *“the trip did you some good.... I mean you look like a different man.”* Sam smiled saying, *“I don’t know if it was the sun or the ride, but I feel like a different man and one that’s ready for something new.”* Sam slid his keys over to Owen who asked, *“do you want me to open?”* Sam looked at the keys and said, *“well yes, but I also want you to have the keys.”* Owen held up the Ford key up asking, *“do you want your truck key?”* Sam replied, *“I don’t want an employee I want you to be my partner.”* Sam took the keys and showed Owen a key with a red cap on it. He said, *“the apartment above is empty, and if you two want it then it’s yours.”* Sam looked at the keys again and said, *“oh.... I need that third key.”* Ana put her hand on Owen’s shoulder and whispered into his ear, *“say thank you, uncle.”* Sam tried not to laugh as Owen apologized saying, *“yes..... I want to do that..... that whole partnership thing.... yes.”*

Owen handed Ana an apron with a name tag that had Alfred printed on it. Ana asked, “*so do I look like an Alfred to you?*” Owen said, “*it’s the only one we have…… it was my fathers.*” Owen walked over to the counter and came back with some tape and a sharpie. He took the tag off and helped her put on the apron. He then put a piece of tape over her heart and wrote on the tape, Ana. She smiled as she slid her hand down the front of his shirt to his pants. From the counter, Sam said, “*the store isn’t going to open its self.*” The two seemed to wake up as Ana walked over to the door with the keys and Owen turned to Sam and said, “*yeah but wouldn’t that be cool.*” Owen had a 357-magnum Chiappa White Rhino 30DS with the special finish and black and white grips while Ana had a pink Glock 19. Owen was worried about her wearing the gun, but Ana was adamant that she wanted to wear one. she said, “*my mom was born in Texas, and she made sure to have me in the states so I could have that citizenship if I wanted it, so don’t worry.*”

The first four or five customers came and went without any problem, then three men came in wearing desert camo with AR-15s on their backs and a strange logo on their shoulders. The logo was the Minuteman, the original logo for the New England Patriots a man in a red white and blue uniform bent over a football. Owen wondered if the team knew that these guys were using their logo. One of the men walked over to the counter to Ana and asked, “*do you have any 223 Remington?*” Ana pointed to a shelf in an aisle with a sign saying, “*Everything AR.*” One of the other men turned to her and said, “*hey bitch didn’t you hear him or should he ask in Mexican.*” The man walked over showing his over six-foot-tall stature over the shorter Ana. The other man at the counter said, “*back off Jed, she was helping me.*” Jed replied, “*if she wanted to help, she should get her wetback taco munching ass back to Mexico.*” Owen put his hand on the grip of his revolver as he slowly made his way around and behind the men. The third man walked out of the store. Without any hint of an accent Ana said, “*I’m from Flagstaff asshole.*” Owen said, “*I think you can find somewhere else to buy your ammo, so get the fuck out of our store.*”

An hour later and Wendy, Scott, Darrel, and Cathy showed up with a truck loaded with furniture. They met and hugged. Wendy said, “*Sam told us about his plan and the apartment. He*

also said there was no furniture so be brought you something to use until you are able to buy new.” Owen hugged Wendy while whispering into her ear, *“we didn’t do anything on any of that did we?”* Wendy whispered back, *“maybe.”* Scott, Darrel, and Owen carried the furniture up while the others talked about what was on sale. Most of the furniture was mid-century modern with clean lines and plenty of wood. Along with all the furniture was a new foam mattress in a box. When placed on the bed the mattress springs back into place making what Cathy called, *“a pillow of wonderful dreams.”* Cathy held the nickel-plated P7M13 in her hand. She had asked Sam to find one for her. She liked the look of the gun from Die Hard. He had paid nearly four-thousand dollars for the gun then another three hundred to have it refurbished. Wendy shook her head at what she called her overpriced toy as she checked the action of the Desert Tech SRS A1 chambered in 308 Winchester. The barrel was suppressor ready, but she would have to wait until she got permission to use one on the rifle.

The shop was closed with a good day in sales. Ana went out back to put some trash in a dumpster when something struck her from behind. The lights went dim as pain exploded in her head. She could see flashes of light and what could have been people. She could feel someone taping her hands behind her and carrying her over what had to be a man’s shoulder. As the world came back into focus, she could see desert camo. The third man from that morning said, *“hold on she’s starting to wake.”* He struck her across the face putting her lights out. At first, all she could do was take in the scent of body odor, chewing tobacco, beer and some sort of rot. There was also an unbelievable pain. Her hands were taped to some sort of rail. Her face throbbed, and she felt cold as she was raped by the man called Jeb. He whispered into her ear, *“who’s the asshole now spick.”* His breath was worse than the foulest nastiest vomit covered bathrooms from when she was a maid in her father’s hotel. Jeb spasmed then came inside her. One of the others said, *“we’ll need to bury her deep so no one will find her and all that DNA.”* Ana’s vision slowly returned, and she saw she was naked and covered in something whitish and sticky. Off in the distance, she could hear someone digging in the sand and packed earth. The third man said, *“my turn then we plant her.”* Jeb asked her, *“I wonder what will grow when we plant you?”*

When the third man was finished, Jeb cut the tape and struck Ana across the face again. She felt something break. He picked her up and put her in a hole about three feet deep. The second man said, *“no asshole I said deep.”* Jeb turned with an angry look on his face and said, *“then you dig the whole motherfucker.”* Jeb unhooked his fly and pissed into the makeshift grave onto Ana. He pulled out her pink Glock and fired the gun dry into the hole. At first, she didn't feel a thing but almost all at once she felt like she had been punched all over. The third man started to dump dirt into the hole. Ana tried to cover her mouth to keep the sand and soil out. The men took turns with the shovel until the hole was a human-shaped mound. Jed turned to the second man and said, *“we should back the truck over her to level the dirt.”* The second man replied, *“no we need to get the fuck out of here.”* The third man packed the shovel saying, *“we planted a lot of these illegal wetbacks in the last couple of months. Why does this one bother you?”* Jed replied, *“I didn't like the way she spoke to me. Bitch needed to learn her place.”*

When Ana didn't come back in from the trash, Owen went out and saw she was gone. He found some blood and the empty cardboard roll from a roll of duct tape. Within the hour everyone was out looking for her as well as three men in desert camo in a pickup truck. They soon found out that looking for the men was like looking for a needle in a haystack or an individual redneck at a NASCAR event. The only thing they had to go on was the fact that the guys they were looking for had made their own logos and were unaffiliated with the large Minuteman group. One man in something akin to a Russian desert uniform said, *“yeah those guys don't get why we are here. They think it's about keeping out darkies but what we want is safety for our children.”* Later Cathy sarcastically whispered to Wendy, *“no that guy wasn't racist at all. Nope, that was one upstanding American hero.”* Wendy didn't answer, she turned up the police scanner and drove on. About 9am a call went across the scanner for an ambulance along the highway. Someone found a woman near death.

Ana didn't know how long it had been since the three left. It could have been four hours or four days. She started to lose all the feeling of pain. She also knew that this was a bad sign. When Jeb tossed her clothing at her, he hit her in the chest with her jeans not knowing she had a small folding knife in her pocket. Using the knife and her hands she dug her way out of her

shallow grave. As she dug, she could feel the pain returning. Her jeans had been cut away along with her shirt. She did her best to cover herself with the ripped and cut clothing. The sun was coming up, and Ana knew she had to find help, so she tried to stand when the world spun and nearly faded. The pain went from unbearable to the worse pain she had ever felt. Looking herself over she found a hole in her lower left leg and possibly a broken leg. She had another hole in her pelvis and another in her upper left thigh. She tried to laugh about how he emptied her gun at her only hitting her three times. She rolled over and saw the road. As she did a flash about what happened that night and what they did to her. The view of the road changed as she went back down to the ground. Lying on her side, she saw something coming and thought they were coming back. On the top of the oncoming vehicle were red and blue flashing lights.

Three days later after another surgery to rebuild her lower left leg, Ana sat in her hospital room half high on pain medication wondering if she could make her way through all that was to come. In the chair next to her bed was Owen who had not left her side since she was found in the desert. Between moments of clarity, Ana described her assailants and using footage from the store the police were able to set out an arrest warrant for the men. The sheriff told his men in person away from the feds and any reporters that, *"I don't want to see these guys walk into a courtroom as much as carried into the morgue."* Sheriff Harrold James wasn't just the county sheriff he was Sam's brother and Owen's uncle. All the deputy sheriffs knew Owen and wanted to bring more than justice for Ana. While the sheriff's department ran their search, Wendy and the others did their own.

Jacob "Jeb" Wilkens sat in the bed of his truck watching out into the desert waiting for a new thing to play with. His brother Andrew was behind the wheel sleep and his cousin Ricky Davie was near a tree pissing. Together they had killed and buried nearly twenty people out in the open land between the border and civilization. Jeb pulled a beer out of a cooler sitting next to him. He checked the cooler and saw they were nearly out of ice and worst of all beer. He tapped on the glass in the back of the cab and waited for Andrew to answer. When he didn't, Jeb opened the sliding window, and with a red plastic cup he scooped up some of the cold ice water from the cooler and dumped it on Andrew who jumped hitting the horn. Ricky leaned into the truck and

said, “*keep it down asshole, or you’ll tell every wetback in Mexico we are here.*” Andrew glowered at Jeb who just smiled saying, “*we need to make an ice and beer run.*” Andrew while trying to see into the cooler from the cab asked, “*any left?*” Ricky opened the cooler and pulled a beer. He closed the cooler saying, “*nope.*” He opened the beer and downed it in one go. Andrew flipped off Ricky. Jed watched the desert while drinking his beer. He slowly put the empty can down and said, “*I think we need to do another run.*” Ricky asked, “*knocking on doors?*”

Cathy left the hospital determined not to cry. She wanted to drive to Mexico and kill, but she wasn’t going to break down. Before she could start the car, she was in tears. She had spent the morning trying to help Ana connect with her father back in Mexico only to have him tell her he didn’t care and as far as he was concerned, she was dead to him. This call came just after she was told they would have to amputate her left leg below the knee. The damage done to Ana’s face along with the surgeries kept her from crying, but it couldn’t keep her from feeling the loss of her family. Cathy checked her phone and found ten messages from Wendy detailing the search for what she was calling, “*grave fillers.*” She thought about joining Wendy, but another part of her just wanted to crawl into bed and let the world spin around without her for a while.

Nancy Cassio sat in her kitchen reading her daughter Jessica’s paper on Brexit wondering if they should reduce the amount of computer time, they give her or just maybe increase it. Five years ago, Jessica’s fourth-grade teacher suggested she needed to be medicated for attention deficit disorder or ADHD and despite the lack of evidence she was told by the school she could either take the drug or take her out of school. Nancy and her husband Juan decided to homeschool not just Jessica but their younger son Logan who was in the first grade and their youngest Dana who wasn’t in preschool yet. Five years later and Jessica was running her own blog and writing at a college level making it difficult for Nancy to understand her daughter’s work. Juan bought Jessica a special camera, so she could turn her blog into a video blog and post it on YouTube, but Nancy didn’t like the idea that anyone could follow her. Juan had said, “*you know she will just find a way to do this with us or without us, and when it’s with us we can control the content.*” She knew that this was just his way to give in to whatever she wanted and that someday it would bite them in the ass.

Juan had the day off and wanted to take the kids to the zoo, but Jessica wanted to work on her first YouTube video, so Nancy stayed home. Nancy used this time to grade papers and just maybe send a few of Jessica's articles to a friend she had in the admissions department for the University of New Mexico. If she were accepted, then they would move the family but that was the future, and she liked to say she lived in the now. Nancy could hear Jessica talking to her camera. She could also hear something just outside. The near silence was broken with a thundering knock. As she went for the door, she thought she saw something move around the house. She opened the door and saw a large dark shape just before a sharp pain and black. She woke to see two white men in her house with the sound of Jessica screaming. She felt something strange as a shape bounced on her. She saw a strange man on her saying something, but she couldn't make it out. The whole world seemed just out of tune. Soon it became clear that a third man was raping her in front of her daughter. The man holding Jessica had his arms around her with his right hand on her chest and his left down her jeans.

Andrew pulled onto a different part of the desert away from most of the people. They had just raided a house and took two women to have fun with along with all the booze they could find. Jeb and Ricky were happy to find what they called their Dos Equis door knock, but Andrew didn't like what he found. The newspaper had their description from the last girl they thought they had killed. He knew that she was covered in DNA. They scouted this place out finding an abandoned mobile home that would work nicely as a place to party with the women. Jeb had forced a couple of Valiums into the younger woman's mouth and held her until she stopped fighting while Ricky worked on what had to be the mother. After finishing another beer, Ricky was using the bottle to sodomize Nancy. For her part, Nancy had stopped screaming. Her face felt like it was on fire and deathly cold after repeated beatings. Jeb sat with Jessica in his lap fondling her whispering into her ear, "*when I'm done you will thank me for making you a woman.*"

Nancy woke to find she was outside. It was night, and she could see a million stars out. In the distance she could hear a strange thump sound. She turned her head and saw two of the white men digging a hole. The men worked quietly as they dug deep. When they were finished the one called Jeb got out and picked her up. He tossed her in the hole with her arms taped behind her. The force of the fall broke her left forearm. The pain radiated up her arm. Then the smell of something both strange and sort of familiar. She realized it was gasoline. The man named Andrew said, "*no DNA.*" He tossed a lit match into the hole, and it did nothing. He tossed another with the same result. The man named Jeb came into view with a bottle that had a rag shoved into the opening. He said, "*a party like this should start off with a cocktail.*" He lit the rag and tossed the bottle into the hole. Nancy felt the flames immediately as she caught fire. She would eventually suffocate from the flames consuming all the oxygen before she burned to death. In those last seconds, she saw the beginning of time and everything that came after.

Jessica could smell the smoke as her mother's body smoldered as Andrew and Ricky filled the hole with dirt. She was in Jeb's lap as he stroked her hair and naked chest. He had done almost everything short of penetration, but Jessica knew that was coming. Her mother died not knowing she was screaming as the flames consumed her, but the sound rang in Jessica's ears. Ricky walked in staring at Jessica asked, "*well are you going to go or what..... I want to get my taste.*" Jeb slowly lifted his head trying to look menacing. He said, "*ain't no way you're getting any of this. This little peach is all mine.*" Ricky looked at Jessica's naked chest then back to the stern determined angry Jeb and asked, "*what the fuck? What the fuck? Since when do we not share in the strange?*" Jeb licked Jessica's neck causing her to shiver. He said, "*this here is my crew, and you do who and what I say. If you don't like it, then we can talk outside.*" Jeb leaned in and whispered to Jessica, "*you are my little underripe peach, and I am going to eat you whole.*"

The local news talked about the kidnapping and how the FBI was taking over the search for what they were calling unknown subjects, and the press was calling the Alt-Right Guard. What all this really meant was with the FBI involved the call for blood would end as well as any search for the three by Wendy and the others. In a call from Sam, he said, "*I don't know just how much my brother knows about your operation, but he called me and said how the feds were*

asking around about all the deaths in the desert and about you.” Wendy stared at the phone and said, “I never had any kind of conversation with him, but he did sell and give me a few guns that were a little less than legal.” Wendy spun around and stared at the AK47 on her office wall. Sam replied, “get rid of them, but do it without being seen.” He hung up before Wendy could say a word. Before putting the ancient desk phone’s receiver down, she said, “I hope they do come.”

Cathy rolled over in bed to check the time. She had to be up and at the construction site by 9am to meet with the contractor and have him start the demolition. It was midnight and Wendy wasn't in bed. Cathy slipped out of bed and went into the common room then Wendy's office where she found her with a glass of something that gave off a strong odor of alcohol. Wendy looked at Cathy and said in a drunken slur, *“I let three motherfucking redneck ass fucks hurt our family, and now I can't do anything about it.”* Cathy took the unlabeled bottle away from the desk and Wendy. She said, *“this wasn't your fault. This wasn't Sam's fault or Owen or Ana's fault. This is the fault of those motherfucking redneck ass fucks and no one else.....well maybe Trump.”* Wendy opened a drawer and pulled out a bottle of Skyy Blue vodka pouring some into a glass. Cathy put her hand over the glass while taking the bottle off the desk. She took the glass and drank the vodka choking after she down the booze saying, *“that tastes like soap.”*

Cathy led Wendy out of the office and into their bedroom and through to their bathroom. She undressed Wendy while starting a hot shower. When she was done, Cathy undressed and joined her. Cathy took a dab of soap and made a lather rubbing it down Wendy's back as the hot water sprayed down Wendy's chest. Wendy stepped forward letting the water hit her face. She shivered then bolted to the toilet losing the contents of her stomach across the closed lid. Cathy said, *“maybe we should keep the seat up.”* Wendy lifted the lid and continued to vomit. When she was done, she crawled back into the shower and stayed on the floor letting the water hit her legs. Cathy sat down next to Wendy putting her arm around her. She said, *“so I guess I'm cleaning that up.”* Wendy started to cry, *“what are we doing?”* Cathy replied, *“well I was trying to get you sober and maybe in the mood. I think you were trying to see just how nasty drinking can be.”* Wendy put her head on Cathy's shoulder and said, *“I'll try and clean that up. It's my mess.”* Cathy said, *“you still don't get it. This is all our mess.... except for that out there all*

over the toilet..... That is your mess, but I will clean it up, just go to bed and sleep this off.”
Wendy went to kiss Cathy, but she stopped her saying, *“hell no, I can smell your breath, and it isn't anywhere near fresh.”*

With the American FBI searching the desert, Luis and Jorge decided to find a place to lay low until they could strike again. In their search, they saw what looked like an old maybe abandoned mobile home trailer. All around the trailer was a strange smell of something like pork. A truck was inside a closed garage. In what had to be the living room they saw one man cleaning an AR-15 with two other rifles next to him as well as an absurdly large revolver on his hip. A second man was in the kitchen counting beer bottles. There was a room in the back, but the windows were covered. They could hear someone crying and another sound like a clapping motion. A man's voice said, *“stop crying, this is for your own good.”* The sound picked up as the man started to say, *“oh fuck..... you are so tight..... my little peach..... you are going to be mine forever.”* The thumping stopped, and the man said, *“now you see that wasn't nearly as bad. I'm usually not into ass-play, but your butt is worth the time.”* They heard the man leaving the room and a gentle crying broken by a plea, *“mommy.”*

Jessica heard something to her left near a hole that was closed with duct tape and cardboard. In that hole was one of the most handsome Hispanic men she had ever seen. He said something in Spanish, but she didn't know the language. Using her knees and elbows, Jessica fought her way to the hole. The man said something else in Spanish putting his hand through the hole and cupping her cheek. He saw she didn't understand so he said in English, *“if things were different then we would help, but we are here to kill Americans.”* He pulled his hand back and placed a rapid-release folding knife and a Ruger 22/45 semiautomatic handgun into the hole and said, *“show them who you are.”* Jessica's father had this same gun, and he showed her how to shoot. She checked the gun finding ten rounds of copper plated hollow point 22s. She got to her feet despite the pain in her head and the pain from what he was doing to her. Her shirt was gone, and her pants and underwear were stained with blood. She put the gun at her side and the knife in her left hand and waited for them to come to her.

Ricky watched Jeb walk out of the room then the trailer. They had always shared in the women and girls they took or what they call the strange. Now, this girl was getting in the way. Jeb went to the truck giving Ricky his chance to take what he saw as his right. He said, *"it's better to say sorry than ask for permission."* He unhooked his belt and went to the door. He found the girl standing near a table. Her shirt was gone. Ricky stared at her young breasts with the bruises and bite marks from Jeb as well as something in her hand. Jessica brought up her hand and fired twice. The first round struck Ricky in the cheek then the second went through his eye. He smiled then fell to the floor twitching. Jeb heard the rounds but just stopped and waited to hear if there were any other sounds. Andrew ran into the room and two rounds right to his forehead. He fell back onto the door jamb as his bowels let go giving off a foul smell. He fell away as Jeb came back into the trailer. Jessica dropped the 22 and picked up Andrew's 9mm High Point. Jeb went for his gun on the table when Jessica said, *"stop."*

Wendy sat in her office drinking a cup of detox tea while reading the news feeds trying to find out what happened last night. She could remember opening the bottle of agave moonshine then something about a shower, but the rest was a blur. The news talked about the search as well as a new presence on the border. Her phone rang with a picture from the front was of a police car and a black SUV. Wendy turned to the AK47 on her wall and smiled. A knock at the door was the sheriff and two men in dark suits. Wendy opened the door. She was wearing an open robe with a pair of short pajama bottoms and no top with the robe just covering her breasts. The sheriff smiled as the FBI agents backed away a little. *"Wendy, these agents want to see that AK I sold you,"* the sheriff said while trying to fight the urge to laugh. One of the agents said, *"yes but if you need to get dressed, we can wait."* Wendy put her hand on her hip showing a little more of her left breast and said, *"gentlemen I don't have all day so lets just cut to the chase and show you the gun."*

On the walk to her office, the sheriff asked, *"so when was the last time you fired the gun?"* Wendy fought back a smile and said, *"I never fired the gun."* One of the agents said, *"we*

need to take it for testing." The sheriff shook his head and said, *"they don't have a warrant but."* Wendy put up her hand interrupting him and said, *"not an issue. I just think any ballistic testing will be difficult."* On her wall was a replica of the join or die flag made from wood with the eight parts of the snake represented by the AK47 chopped into eight pieces of the gun with the stock as the tail and the first three inches of barrel as the head. Wendy said, *"I chopped up every gun I came across..... well almost. I did keep this little 38 as well as a few I bought."* One other agent stepped out of the office and looked around finding more artwork made from gun parts. The first agent said, *"we won't take any more of your chest."* The other agent said, *"time.... He meant time."* The sheriff turned to Wendy, smiled and said, *"it's always a delight."* At the door a call went out on the sheriff's radio, *"sheriff they found her."*

"Just stop," Jessica said while she held the gun on Jeb and tried to back into the bedroom. Jeb saw the gun then his brother's body. He smiled and said, *"my brother didn't trust the gun, so he never kept a round chambered."* Jeb turned and went for his Colt Python revolver on the table. He heard Jessica rack the slide then fire the gun. Blood sprayed across the table and his prize pistol. His left arm went numb. The gun had bucked in Jessica's hand, and she almost dropped it. Jeb picked up the revolver as Jessica ran the High Point until it was empty. She dropped the gun and picked up the 22/45. Jeb turned around dropping his gun. She wasn't sure if she hit him six or seven times, but he was still standing. He said, *"no fucking High Point is going to fucking kill me, peach."* He saw the look in her eyes change and knew he said the wrong thing. Jessica emptied the Ruger into his face. Jeb fell to the floor. Jessica dropped her gun and locked the knife open stabbing him until he was a ruin of blood and flesh.

Jessica searched the trailer until she found some clothing that wasn't covered in body odor and what smelled like piss and shit. She got dressed trying to take care with all her sore spots. She took Jeb's keys, but she couldn't get the truck started. Jeb had a kill switch that acted as a security device. Barefoot, she stepped out of the truck and went down the road. As she walked, the sun started to rise. Soon it would be too hot to be out in her condition. A horn honked, and a voice came out of a dark purple Dodge Caravan asking, *"are you alright?"* Jessica turned to see a woman in her mid to late thirties with two small children in the back and a

teenager in the front. The woman saw Jessica was barefoot. The teenager in the front said, *“mom that’s the girl the police are looking for.”* Her first thought was the police found the dead men, and she was going to jail then she thought about her mother and father. She wondered if her father would be ashamed of her. The woman helped her into the back of the van. She put down a blanket to as she said, *“keep the blood off my seats.”* The two smaller children, as well as the teenager, stared at Jessica, the entire trip to the sheriff’s office.

Wendy went into the bedroom and carefully took the robe off peeling the double-stick tape she used to hold the robe open while keeping it from showing too much. She hoped her near nakedness would throw the feds off their intimidation game. She heard Cathy in the bathroom showering, and for a second, she thought about joining her than the thought of last night came and the need to vomit came back. She suppressed the vomit and went back to getting dressed. The news was talking about the three dead men in the trailer and the found girl. By noon the news was talking about charging the girl with murder. The national media was talking about gun control and the deaths of three men trying to protect the border. Around six in the evening, the FBI released a report linking the three men to multiple deaths across the border. By seven the national media was vilifying the Minutemen, ICE, the border patrol and the feds. Wendy knew that what this meant was the feds were leaving.

Ana sat in her room waiting for the doctor to come back and tell her how the latest surgery went. She sent Owen home to shower and sleep, but now she wished he was there. Her door opened, and a teenage girl walked in. Her face was battered and bruised with the look of something that put up a fight and just maybe lost. Jessica said, *“I know you don’t know me. My name is Jessica Cassio, and I think we have something in common and just maybe I could help you.”* Ana looked at the place where her left foot was and back to Jessica without saying a word. Jessica said, *“I was taken by the same men, and they wanted to bury me in the desert. They killed my mother.”* Ana stared at Jessica who went on saying, *“I got a hold of a gun and I..... I..... I killed all three of them.”* Ana just stared as Jessica came closer to the bed. Jessica tried to fight back the tears saying, *“the tall one when I ran out of bullets I.”* She mimed a stabbing motion. Ana grabbed Jessica and pulled her close. Soon the two women were hugging and crying. Ana

whispered, "*I'm sorry about your mother.*" Jessica whispered back, "*I'm sorry they didn't suffer more.*"

An hour after Jessica killed Jeb and made her way out to the highway, Andrew woke and opened his eyes. He couldn't see much, and he couldn't move his head. Something felt wrong with his head feeling like broken glass and something wet on his crotch. A thick brown foul-smelling liquid was running across the floor and hitting his face. He tried to move, but the shattered pieces of his skull made that movement torturous. He wasn't sure why he was there and what they were doing. He could see someone else on the floor, and he knew he knew this person, but he couldn't remember his name. The room started to go dark. He started to feel cold, and his breath became shallow. A small voice in the back of his head said, "*your dying and you need help.*" Andrew tried to stand, but he couldn't get up. He passed out, and when he woke again, he felt like he was floating in a pool of stagnant water. He rolled over and felt the last pain of his life as a shard of bone cut into his brain. A voice said to him, "*sucks to be you.*"

Chapter Eleven

The day came when Ana could go home. She would make a trip back to the hospital three times a week for a while for rehabilitation and her new prosthetic leg. It would be another week before her doctor, and the prosthetist was ready to help her with the task of walking again. Like so many other places in the country, the hospital had experience with this process because of the wars in the middle east. Hospital policy forced Ana into a wheelchair for her ride out pushed by an orderly with Owen walking next to her. They wheeled out to find a hot pink van with a pearl-white roof and pearl accents down the sides. Owen said, "*Wendy thought you might like it.*" Ana asked, "*for what?*" Owen smiled while he helped her into the van saying, "*she wants you to use the van until you're ready for something else or just may be ready to keep it.*" Ana smiled saying, "*I can see some girly girl type seeing this rolling bottle of Pepto-Bismol and going all crazy and while I appreciate the thought, I just don't know how long I could drive it..... you know out in public looking like this.*"

Owen pulled into the parking lot of the gun shop and around to the back were a new manufactured home sometimes referred to as a trailer, or mobile home was set up with a ramp and large covered deck. Owen said, "*this was a gift from Uncle Sam. That is my uncle.... Sam and not the government.*" Ana made her way up the ramp to the porch with tiny misting sprays and a couple of ceiling fans turning what would be a heat sink into a cool place away from the sun. They had brought the furniture from that apartment down into the trailer, but it still had a feel of a place that no one lived in like a model home. Owen said, "*I didn't want to live here without you, so I waited until you were ready.*" She had known Owen for just a few months, but it felt like it had been years even on that first day down in Mexico. She kissed him and said, "*I love you.*" Owen got this lost look on his face and said, "*I love you too.*" Ana looked at the door and said, "*show me the house..... Start in the bedroom.*" Owen asked, "*feeling tired?*" Ana responded by putting her hand down the front of his shorts and saying, "*I'm feeling something, just not tired.*"

The construction site was in full build mode with the old motel gone and a new almost out of place building going up. Alice said the place would be something akin to a prairie-style ala Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House with long low flat roofs to keep the sun out of the windows and plenty of brick. Alice and her contractor took a simple rebuild and made it into one of the largest projects built in the area since the highway. Alice stayed back in Arizona leaving the daily work to a contractor named Gregg Wright. He wasn't related to the famed architect. When he went into the business, he legally changed his name hoping he could find work in projects designed with Wright's aesthetic. He was also an architect and had planned out many of the homes he built for Alice in the small planned communities across Arizona, Nevada, and California. Gregg saw this place as his masterpiece and wanted everything to be right or as he would say Wright by emphasizing the W making it almost sound like white. As the building went up, Wendy started to understand she couldn't run this place like it was a side job or cover for their other operation, so she made it her job to find someone else to do the job of running the place.

A shot rang out across the desert. *"low and to the left..... I don't see what's wrong with that floral print guy.... You know.... what's his name?"* Cathy lowered the binoculars and looked at Wendy laying in a firing position with her new rifle. Wendy worked the bolt and said, *"the fact that you can't remember Smith's name is a sign on just how good of a candidate he was for the job."* Wendy fire the rifle. She asked, *"or was his name, Jones?"* A metallic ping rang back to them as Cathy said, *"up and on the left but you did hit it this time, and it was Smyth with a Y."* Wendy quickly said, *"as in why hire this guy."* Wendy worked the slide and fired. Cathy said, *"hit"* just as the metallic ping came back. Wendy said, *"the new scope is making it easier to hit at two-thousand, but I think we can do better if we use our own loads so we can tailor the rounds to the job."* Cathy replied, *"well no shit and stop changing the subject we need to find someone soon."* Wendy worked the bolt and fired again.

Wendy let the next applicant into her office. She had spent the last two interviews tapping on his application wondering if thinking about him was more about his daughter than his ability to run such a program. Juan Cassio came in wearing a slightly wrinkled suit that seemed too

small on the big man's frame. Juan worked as a carpenter going from job to job never knowing when he was going to be home, but with his wife's death, he had to be home every night for the children making his living that much harder. He was working as a framer on the job site when he heard about them looking for someone to run the business side. As an independent contractor, he ran himself as a business something akin to a subcontractor working with other contractors making sure as he put it, "*shit got done.*" Wendy liked the idea of hiring someone that knew how to make things happen and not just rely on others to do the work while they sat in an office. Juan sat down and said, "*I know I'm a little out of the box when it comes to such a project, but I know how to work people, and I think that's what matters.*" Wendy handed him a set of files and said, "*I'm going to take a chance, but that chance I'm giving you comes with a caveat..... Fail, and that failure will follow you forever.*" She tapped the top file and said, "*this is your contract, and the other files are potential employees as well as nannies.*" Juan looked up from the files and asked, "*nannies?*" Wendy replied, "*this isn't a 9 to 5 gig, and we'll need to send you to a school to learn basic medical information so you can understand the business.*"

Noah "Skuzzy Depp" Franko sat on his corner around 4am in El Paso Texas waiting for his supplier. He was called Skuzzy Depp or Skuzzy D because he looked like a dirtier meth addicted version of the actor Johnny Depp. His supplier was a mule that came up from Mexico with above grade heroin. He sold other drugs, but the China White was what he was known for, but the drug was harder to come by with all the violence along the border. His clientele went from the party going college somethings to people of almost every age and description with only the connection of drug addiction. Many people found themselves addicted to opioids with a medical profession both giving them out like candy and cutting them off when addicted. Noah thought the whole thing was just a ploy to get people addicted and make money on rehab turning doctors into the cause and cure. He liked the new clients with their clean money and perks. More than a few of the soccer-moms would go to their knees for a hit.

A young woman approached Noah but stopped when he put up his hand and said, "*I'm not holding. Come back in an hour.*" Jill did her best to play the part of the junkie with an exaggerated twitch while scratching at her arms. She looked to the van where Wendy, Scott, and

Gina were wondering what she was doing. Wendy said, “*yeah, just tell him we’re watching.*” Scott wondered, “*is she trying out for the Walking Dead?*” Noah said, “*get the fuck away bitch.*” Jill walked around the block to the back of the van. Gina asked, “*what the fuck were you doing? I mean what the fuck was that? Were you trying to give our position away?*” Wendy asked Gina, “*are you?*” Jill said, “*I think he’s waiting for a delivery.*” Everyone turned to the thin dirty little man as he stood there waiting.

Wendy said, “*he’s probably not holding any cash or drugs. Most of them use bitcoin or some other way to pay for deliveries.*” Gina said, “*if we wait, we can follow them and get every dealer they sell to, or we can take them out cutting off the supply.*” Wendy added, “*if we split-up one team could follow the supplier and tag the dealers while the other team takes them out.*” Wendy knew she was the only one that could follow the suppliers without being seen, but she was also the only one that could kill that many people in one night. Gina said, “*I’ll drive the follow car with Jill behind the gun.*” Jill looked at Scott then back to Gina who said, “*if something goes wrong Wendy will need help, and well, Scott is a better high-speed driver.*”

A box truck pulled up to the curb where Noah was waiting and tossed a couple of tied newspaper stacks onto the sidewalk. One of the stacks had a blue plastic ribbon around it. Noah took the one with the blue ribbon. The truck pulled away as Wendy gave it a six-count then followed in an old Honda, they brought with them to blend in just in case they needed to make a getaway. They followed the truck to another stop where a man doing his best impersonation of a stereotypical movie pimp from the 1970s took the papers. Scott took his picture, marked the location with GPS and sent it to the others. Gina waited for the Honda to slip away then they drove up to Noah who had a “get the fuck away” look on his face and shot him in the head spreading his brains across the wall of the building nearby. They left him and the drugs on the corner and went to the next stop. Wendy and Scott came to the next stop and saw something they didn’t expect. The papers were taken by a small boy of maybe nine or ten. He opened the package and folded the papers placing them into plastic sleeves along with packets of a white powder. Wendy took a picture that got to the others just as they shot the seventies pimp. Gina sent a message, “*no.*”

The four left El Paso and drove back home. About ten miles away from home the Honda broke down. With everyone in the van, the mood turned from quiet calm to a tense-filled quiet. Gina said, *"I can't kill a child, nor could I work with anyone that could or would ask me to do it."* Wendy said, *"I would never ask, and anyone that could leave should leave."* Jill said, *"now that we know how they send out the drugs we can find them again and."* She stopped talking when she realized anyone with an ounce of brains would see the death and how it followed their route. They would change how they deliver the drugs making this chance a one-off. Back home, Wendy and the others went to bed while Jill Skyped with Jeff. He was both teaching her how to sign while they worked on their Skype-sex. Cathy looked out into the common room and saw more of Jeff than she ever wanted to see. Cathy turned to Wendy who was topless in bed and said, *"I think we should put one of those smart-TVs in Jill's room."* Wendy got up and went to the door seeing a naked Jeff signing something to a naked Jill as she fingered herself. She turned back to Jeff and whispered to Cathy, *"Jeff isn't so little anymore?"*

In the morning, Owen drove Ana back to the hospital for a fitting and more therapy. A specialist was going to come and start the build for a leg and foot that would mimic the real thing as close as they could. Owen dropped her off and waited in the van. He called Darrel, *"tell me the Jeep is ready."* Darrel stepped away from the open hood of the Jeep he was rebuilding for Ana and asked, *"something wrong with the van?"* Owen looked at the pink and white leather with neon-green edging and said, *"this color is making me sick, and Ana said she would rather walk to the hospital then go in the Pepto Abysmal."* Ana didn't say she would rather walk, but she did say Pepto Abysmal. The Jeep was a 1995 Jeep CJ7 painted in desert camo with large tires and every bell and whistle they could attach. Ana had said she wanted one as a child and Owen was happy when Darrel said he had one he was rebuilding. For his part, Owen volunteered to do the work for free, and Wendy paid for the parts.

Cathy asked, *"there using children?"* Jill shook her head while Gina just sat and stared at the video of the young boy packing the papers and drugs. Wendy said, *"they are using children,*

but they are not. We can do what is necessary to protect people including the children they are using.” Cathy wanted to break the tension and just maybe end this meeting. She said to Jill, *“I want to buy you a Smart-TV with a camera for your room.”* Jill gave her the dog tilted head look. Cathy wanted that look. She said, *“while it’s nice you and Jeff are having a good relationship, I saw more of him than I ever want to see again.”* Wendy chimed in saying, *“no one wants to walk into the common room and find you and him Skype sexing.”* Jill tried to sink into her seat while the two on the couch moved away from the center part that faces the TV and camera. Gina said, *“I don’t have a problem with it as long as I can see him from my room.”* Everyone looked at Gina. Jill said, *“let’s go now.”* Cathy and Jill left in one of the trucks while Wendy went to her office to read her email. The day started off as usual until Jack walked back into the common room. Jack James had vanished after the tunnel without a word, and now he was here, but he did say something to someone before he left. Wendy saw him and looked at the others. Wendy had told the others she had sent him to kill the mother of a child that was killed while crossing the desert in a truck loaded with people and heroin. This caused a rift between him and the others.

Gina walked over to Jack and said, *“I can’t believe you came back.”* For a hot second, they were on their way to becoming something, but then what he had done changed how she saw Jack. He hated seeing the hate in her eyes, but he knew Wendy wanted them to think the woman was dead and not in a place along the coast of Texas settling in and making peace with the death of her son. Wendy saw the look in Gina’s eyes and knew this was about to get ugly. She stepped out and said to Gina, *“do you remember that night? How people were acting after the death of the boy and George? Most of them were worried about the mother and what she knew so I told Jack to act like he killed her. He set her up in a house in Texas and has been there helping her with papers and a job.”* Gina didn’t say anything, but her hate for Jack started to vanish as an angry look appeared for Wendy. Jack said, *“my work in Texas is done. I think, no I know she will be alright so I’m back, and I want back in.”*

Jorge sat in a car watching a house waiting to see her. A few weeks ago, he gave a teenage girl a gun. She was in trouble and needed help, but instead of helping her directly he gave her the gun and a chance to help herself, but now he wondered if he should have done the

job himself. The media named her and talked about her and her family with one national news network suggesting they brought the home invasion on themselves because they homeschooled their children. Luis was scoping out their new target, and he was supposed to be finding a dealer to question, but instead, he found himself here watching Jessica and wondering if they should blame all Americans. Jessica was about the same age as his sister Maria when the cartel took over their village, and she became someone's property. This next job was something they could never take back and could never be forgiven. Their goal was to bring in the American military making it too difficult for the cartel to use this place along the border. They knew the cartel would move their operations away from their village and the border to escape the military. They tried to link the gas station attack to the cartel, but the American news media wouldn't drop the terrorist theories. Luis had said, "*nothing says America like their schools, malls, and churches.*"

The Trinity Church was established in 1994 to serve the people who came to work along the border. The congregation was growing in an age where many faiths were diminishing. The return to faith after September 11 had slowed to a stop and started to reverse. People gathered on what was a nice sunny Sunday. By 11am the church would have over three-hundred people inside, but at 9:30 people were just starting to arrive while the choir practiced, and a guest speaker stood at the pulpit looking out wondering if he should think about the audience naked or was that a sin. A woman dressed in what most would call her Sunday best was followed by three young children. She was showing them the church letting them see there was nothing to fear. One of the children was just a toddler. She saw something shiny and blinking up by the stage near the man that looked like he was about to vomit. No one would ever know it, but young Annie Franks saved many lives. She walked over to the shiny light and tried to pull it out by grabbing it by the wires setting off the bomb. People on the outside said how there was a flash of light then all the windows exploded out. Inside, the building was hollowed out with just the outside walls and the roof still standing with no one left alive inside.

"Please explain to me who thought that was a good idea," Wendy said as she put a Glock-19 with a suppressor on the table. Jill turned to Gina and asked, "*what?*" Gina looked at Jill then back at Wendy trying not to stare at the gun. After a moment of silence, Gina said, "*it*

all started with a girl." Jill asked, "what?" Gina fought the urge to smile knowing it wouldn't end well.

Four hours earlier, Gina and Jill sat in a car on a corner watching a man as he stood there waiting for something. He was in black-leather pants with a black button-down shirt, black tie under a black leather jacket and a black pork pie hat with a quail feather. Gina said, "*he looks like the kind of guy that if he isn't trying to touch your ass is singing about how he wants to touch your ass.*" Jill was behind the wheel with Gina riding shotgun. They found this guy the day before giving off this, "I sell drugs" vibe, and they decided to wait and watch. Some time passed with nothing happening when Gina asked, "*I saw you are taking a few days off, are you going away?*" Jill didn't answer for about a minute. She finally said, "*I try and take my mother's birthday off so I can go see her.....That is my real mother than those people from the car.*" Gina could see this was a topic Jill just wanted to let go, so she asked, "*you want some company? maybe making the trip would be easier with two?*" Jill wiped back a tear and said, "*yes that would be nice, and maybe I could show mom I'm not alone.*" Gina nodded to the man and said, "*OK here we go.*"

A group of teenage girls approached the man. They were in school uniforms with knee-length tan skirts, white polo shirts underneath dark blue blazers. The man did little to hide his glare as they passed. One of the girls turned and walked back to him. She was tall with long straight ash-brown hair with just a few freckles across her face to add character. She was maybe sixteen or seventeen. Like all the other girls, she had her phone out in her hand. They couldn't tell what they were saying to each other, but it must have been something. She blushed as he smiled and ran his hand across the stubble on his face. The girl moved in closer as she showed him her phone. The guy put his right hand into her jacket around to the back and whispered something into her ear that made her smile.

Jill turned her head away from the two until Gina said, "*and there it is.*" Jill looked up and saw the girl walking away with a fearful look. Jill asked, "*there what is?*" Gina asked, "*what,*

you didn't see it?" Gina turned on her iPad and replayed the video. She pointed out, *"first she shows her payment to his account on her phone, then he slips his hand behind her and drops the drug into a pocket on her skirt or sown into the lining."* He kissed her neck then stroked her breast through her shirt with his left hand almost holding her in place. The girl's look changed from slightly flirty to wanting to get out of there. Gina said, *"she knows that once her cash runs out, he will get more than a quick kiss or touch."*

Jill asked, *"what?"* Wendy picked up the gun and pulled the slide back and unscrewed the suppressor. She eased the slide back and put the gun down while holding the suppressor up. She asked, *"what's this?"* Gina said, *"yes I know it was stupid, but I didn't want to give this ass hat any more of our time, and I thought it would be ok."* Jill asked, *"what?"* Both Gina and Wendy stared at Jill. Wendy said, *"this suppresses not silences, and you need to use subsonic ammunition for it to work."* Jill said, *"I don't know what you two are saying. All I can hear is my heart and that fucking gun, but if you are saying don't shoot a gun inside a car then don't worry, that shit isn't happening again."* Wendy sarcastically asked, *"what?"* Gina lost her battle as she started to laugh. Wendy said, *"Darren is replacing the windshield from where the brass chipped the inside, as well as the powder-burned liner. I also think you two should apologize to him, or you might end up in one of the crap cars from now on."* Gina made a jerking motion with her hand. Wendy said, *"a simple sorry would work but..... You know, do whatever comes naturally to you."*

Jill pointed to the television in the common room and said loudly, *"what the fuck is that?"* They turned to see a news broadcast just outside a church. The windows were blown out, and smoke poured out. The broadcaster was talking about a blast and terrorists. The blurry images of bodies being carried out filled the screen with some of the shapes being child size. The three women joined Gina's children in the common room as they watched the news. Gina's eight-year-old daughter Maria Rose made a jerking motion and asked, *"what does this mean?"* Gina responded, *"it means your grounded if I ever see you do that again."* Maria Rose put her hand down into her lap then she looked at her younger brother's lap and made a disgusted realization. The news talked about the church and how many people were inside as well as how many it

could have been if the bomb had waited. Wendy said, *“just listen to them, it’s like they wanted a bigger body count.”* The church shifted then caved into itself. Maria Rose asked, *“is this like the gas station?”* The broadcaster’s face changed from an almost hungry look to one of sorrow as they confirmed the presence of a daycare in the basement of the church and the many young bodies.

Jorge said, *“we’re going to hell..... We’re going to hell..... we’re going to hell.”* Luis turned to him and asked, *“you don’t believe in hell, do you?”* Jorge opened a book with his family’s picture inside and stared at them. He said, *“I don’t know what I believe in, but what I do know is that we need to make this right.”* Luis replied, *“nothing we’re doing is going to make anything right. You don’t kill your way to right, but..... I just don’t care. I want them all dead.”* The broadcaster reported over thirty children ranging from the age of three months to seven-years-old died in the church. Jorge turned the television off. Luis stopped cleaning his gun and said, *“where’s the outrage for our people? Where’s the outrage for all the children dying in the drug war and crossing the border? They only care about little white children.”* Jorge got up and went to the window looking out. He said, *“can we really do this?”* Luis got up from the table and walked over to Jorge. He rubbed Jorge’s shoulder working his way down his bare back to his loose-fit boxers. He put his head on his shoulder and whispered, *“this act will win us the war so how can’t we do this?”*

The national news covered the church all that day and into the next. Gina took her children out to a park to get away from the news. After some talk, Gina decided to take the kids with her and Jill on their trip to California to see Jill’s mother. With some talk, Jack was able to talk his way onto the trip. In what had become their usual morning, Cathy was left to clean up the morning dishes. She fought the urge to scream or yawn. She was entering what had to be the third month of her pregnancy and like the one before she was feeling rundown to the point of exhaustion. When she lost her last baby, she felt the same way, but that was because of David poisoning her and not another problem. Her doctor told her she was fine, but nothing felt fine. Worst of all she couldn’t tell Wendy because she could see how her condition reminded her of something she could never have. Wendy said she wanted this to be their baby, but since then

they did nothing. It wouldn't be too much longer until their baby was there, and they had to address their lifestyle. Cathy turned around and saw Wendy behind her washing dishes. She hadn't said a word she just joined her, and together they cleaned the kitchen then the common room. By the time they were done, Cathy felt better.

As Cathy and Wendy cleaned the kitchen, Darrel and Scott drove the Jeep to the hospital to exchange it with Owen for the Van. The digital-desert-camo paint had a mix of flat, gloss and metallic paint causing places to shine in the sun. On their way there they stopped at Owen and Ana's home and took the removable top off and replaced the doors with the smaller doors so she could experience the full open top effect while still having doors. The van was going on a trip to California with Jill, Jack, Gina, and her children. They met up with Owen who couldn't get over the look of the jeep with the paint job and all the extra touches that were a part of her wish list right down to the LED light bars on top and two winches. Ana came out looking for the van and for a second, she looked worried like they had left her, but then she saw the Jeep, and everything was good. She was wearing a specialized prosthetic leg to help her learn how to walk with one until her final leg was finished. She was on what was a very long list of people waiting for a prosthetic. Darrel whispered to himself, "*I think we can do better.*"

That night Owen and Ana slept in the same bed for the first time since she was attacked. She still couldn't stand him touching her other than a simple hug or kiss, but she was able to sleep with him in the room. Her therapist said this was a journey and not a race and getting back to a place where she felt comfortable again would take time. For his part, Owen made sure to hide the ring, so she didn't feel pressured to get better. The first couple of nights after she came home, she slept with the door locked and a chair underneath the knob. When Owen was working in the shop, Zoey would come over and stay with Ana, but that didn't last long with Zoey and Gary taking another trip out of the state. For a while, Ana thought about going home and seeing if her father would take her back, but with enough time, she soon came to see her place with Owen as being her home and Mexico her past.

Gina dropped off Maria-Rose at her elementary school then left to take Francis to pre-school. Gina started them in public school, so they could have social interactions with people their age and just maybe away from all the talk of killing. Maria-Rose tested at a sixth-grade level, but they decided to keep her with her age group so she wouldn't feel alienated while they provided special classes on the side. Her school offered an open curriculum like how Gina was teaching her which gave each student a specialized course of study to meet their needs. The school gave Gina Maria-Rose's course work, so she could study on the trip as well as receive class work online. On her way out of the school's parking lot she passed a van with two men inside and the sign, "Two Juans Can Make it Right Handymen Services." She passed Jorge and Luis not giving them a second thought. Jorge thought the truck looked familiar, but many people drove pickup trucks. A utilitarian vehicle used like a minivan and not a work truck. Luis said, "*OK its time.*"

Every day for the past thirty years Principle Edward Antonio Dyas stood in front of his school and met with the children as they walked in. He knew many of the parents as they dropped off their children as former students and they liked seeing him. Part of this daily greeting was to make sure every student was in the school mandated uniform, but he thought of it as showing a warm and friendly presence of authority. The school had a U-shaped driveway so that the parents that dropped off their children could without blocking traffic, and in theory, it should have worked, but in practice, it wasn't big enough for all the parents, so the road became snared with cars every morning. It was Principle Dyas that saw them first. A van pulled into a place where there was usually a police car and an officer to direct traffic. Parents knew that this was not allowed. The side door opened and a flash of light as something streaked overhead then gunfire. People dropped to the ground as cars bashed into each other with people trying to get away from the gunfire. Principle Dyas turned and saw a hole where the doors should be and bodies. The gunfire seemed to be aimed at the building, so Dyas directed students away from the van and the building. Thirty-seconds after the van opened fire they were gone only leaving an AK47 with a few magazines on the side of the road along with the bodies of forty children, six teachers and Principle Dyas who died while shielding three children.

Gina sat in her car paralyzed with doubt and sorrow. Sitting next to her in the passenger seat was a Glock-19 and next to it were several magazines loaded with hollow-point rounds. She sat about a block away from the school watching the police and ambulances come and go. From behind her, Francis was crying. Maria-Rose leaned forward and said, “*mom let’s just go home.*” Maria-Rose was covered in blotches of blood from two of her friends and a teacher that was trying to guide them to the school, but Maria-Rose went away from the school and the gunfire. She saw as the unknown teacher was hit in the back of the head with her face exploding outward. A local talk-radio station was located across from the school with windows that overlooked the parking lot where they saw the assault. Gina was listening and turned around passing Luis and Jorge as they left. Gina found Maria-Rose in the chaos. Seeing the blood on her daughter as well as the panicked look on her face Gina drove away. Ten minutes later they were home to find everyone there waiting for news.

Owen stayed up watching the news talking about the school, church and gas station remarking on all the recent violence along the border while simultaneously saying how there was no discernable connection to the border or the growing illegal immigration. Ana went to bed trying to put the sight of little Maria-Rose covered in blood out of her mind. She went to sleep and found herself in a school uniform in front of her old elementary school waiting for the doors to open. As she stood there someone ran by then another. Both had blood on them. She turned and saw Jeb, Andrew, and Ricky walking up the sidewalk with AK47s firing into the crowd. She turned and tripped falling onto a wood floor. She was spun around by Jeb finding she was in the trailer again. He was on top of her with that wicked grin and nasty breath. He said, “*you will always be my peach.*” Ana grabbed him by the genitals forcing him off. She spun around and out of bed grabbing her gun and shooting Owen as he came into the bedroom.

Chapter Twelve

The funeral was larger than most people expected. Sam spoke for an hour about his times with him and the past. This was one of many funerals happening around the city, but most felt they had to come to this one, all except for Ana. She sat in her room with her gun afraid to see anyone. She missed several appointments with her doctor and the prosthetist. The blood had dried on the doorjamb and the floor staining the wood. Wendy and Cathy tried to talk her out of the room, but nothing could talk her down. The funeral was coming to an end. Sam was one of the pallbearers with the mayor, chief of police, the principal of the high school, the new elementary school principal and Owen. The town laid Principle Edward Antonio Dyas to rest with all the honors the city could provide.

Three days earlier, Owen heard something from the bedroom. He remembered how Ana was having night terrors when she slept alone, so he picked up a vest he had hanging near the door and went to the room. He opened the door to a flash of light and a pain in his shoulder and chest as the vest pulled out of his hand and back as Ana emptied her gun at him. He backed away with a round in his shoulder and what felt like broken ribs and a broken wrist. Sam heard the gunfire and came running with his Glock 19 and a shotgun on his shoulder finding Owen on the floor waving him off. Owen said, *“she has ten magazines.”* Sam asked, *“what the fuck is going on?”* They could hear Ana drop the empty magazine and load another. Sam pulled out his phone and called Wendy. After a few rings, Wendy answered, *“make this quick Sam.”* Ana fired into the door near the sound of the phone. Wendy screamed into the phone asking, *“is that gunfire?”* Sam said, *“I don’t know what’s going on. Owen said that Ana was having bad dreams and well, maybe we should have taken her gun..... Oh yeah, she shot Owen, and we need some help.”*

Jorge sat naked in their room watching the news and all the coverage of the school then the funerals. He was halfway through a bottle of whiskey while smoking a cigar laced with marijuana commonly known as a blunt. Sitting next to him was a Glock29. A day after the shooting, Luis drove to the border to find out what was happening on the other side. He came back a few hours later saying how the border was closed. That night Luis packed a bag and

planned on taking a trip across the desert hoping to contact a friend back in Mexico and see if the government is moving in. His departure left Jorge alone with time and his thoughts. He watched the news, drank, smoked and stared at the gun wondering what his first day in hell was going to be like. In his dreams, he could see the kids falling and blood flying while on that day all he could see was smoke and targets. Soon he came to see that he couldn't shoot himself while his sister was still a prisoner back home. He got dressed and went out looking for something to do. A few hours later he saw a rail-thin man walking along a sidewalk scratching at his arms showing all the signs of an addict needing a fix. Jorge followed this man thinking if he finds the dealer just maybe he could do some good.

Wendy, Jill, Jack, and Zoey sat in a car watching a dealer as he sold his wares to his clientele seeming oblivious to them watching him. The man was an affront to good taste. He sat up against a wall with a sign saying, "will work for food." He was a special kind of dirty that unless you didn't know what to look for you wouldn't know it was all makeup and props. To add to the effect, he wore a filthy poncho. The customer gives him the cash, and he takes their hand slipping the drugs into their palms in a sleight of hand worthy of a street performer. He was a small-time operator dealing in pills and small amounts of the heroin being brought across the border and would have slipped by their watch, but Cathy wanted to see what happened to the ash-brown haired girl once her dealer was dead. She followed her around until she saw this dealer. A man straight off the central casting for a zombie movie walked down the street to the dealer. Behind him was a strikingly handsome Hispanic man. Wendy thought he seemed familiar, but she wasn't sure. The man pushed the addict out of the way while pulling a gun and pointing it at the dealer.

Jorge decided to shoot the addict and the dealer, but the dealer would be first, so he pushed the addict out of the way and drew on the dealer. He pointed the gun, and the man became a small child covered in blood. Jorge hesitated. The dealer stared at the strange man wondering if this was from a rival gang or just maybe the cartel was tired of waiting for his payment. The addict stayed on the ground with his face down saying, "*I didn't see nothing.*" The mix of booze and pot was changing what Jorge saw into what he saw in his mind. The dealer

slowly moved to his right trying to pull the Walther PPK he had hid under the poncho. Jorge lowered his gun and wondered what would happen if he just walked away when the dealer pulled out his gun, and a shot rang out. Jorge pointed the gun back at the dealer and fired three times stopping when he saw the dealer was already dead with the back of his head spread across the brick wall. A van pulled up behind him, and a woman stepped out. Wendy said, *"come with us if you want to live."* Behind her, he saw a younger woman with a scoped rifle. The addict started to scream, *"I didn't see nothing, I didn't see nothing."* Jorge handed the woman his gun and got into the van.

Cathy gave Jorge a cup of coffee and placed a plate of shortbread cookies on the table in front of him. Wendy asked, *"what do you know about these men that have your sister?"* Jorge remembered Wendy from a month or two ago from a truck he and Luis followed. She had purposely crashed into a barn. He remembered thinking she was crazy. He said in broken English he used to make himself seem less prepared than he was for his mission, *"I know too much. We worked for them to try and see if anyone still live."* Cathy asked, *"and Lewis went back to see what was happening?"* Jorge shook his head then he nodded saying, *"Luis and we were both in the army, but he has more friends still in than I do so he went across."* He looked around seeing a bigger operation than either he or Luis had expected. He said, *"we came here to America hoping to find help, but this country is just so violent that we just didn't see any way we could get help."* Wendy turned to Cathy who nodded and left the room. She turned to Jorge and said, *"we have a friend who knows this guy that runs a specialty security service that well, specializes in such operations and I think he would help as long as we aren't already too late."*

Wendy and Cathy sat in bed watching the news as the police moved into the ranch. The local news station was showing unedited coverage including bodies and blood. Two days earlier, they were in a van following a dealer on what was going to be their first drive by hit, but something felt off to Wendy, so she aborted what was going to be a trap with the dealer's gang waiting for them around the corner. As they pulled away, Cathy got a call from Alice talking about several ambushes and how they lost contact with April, June, and Ivan. April and June were a couple that seemed to belong to every group. Two adult women that found each other on

the ranch. Ivan was a hacker from Russia with a messy background. Wendy turned around and sped to where April and June were going to be only to find the police and a burning panel-truck. Lying on the side of the street where the bodies of April and June along with another person that was too mangled to be recognizable. About the time the news feed went to the other side of the ranch and found the people that were crucified Cathy had enough and turned the sound down. She whispered to Wendy, *“should we try and find any of the others?”* Wendy pulled her close and said, *“no, we should let all that go like it never happened.”*

Wendy awoke to find Cathy was gone. Her dream about that night the ranch felt real enough to make her question whether this was now or just a part of the dream. Only when she saw the parts to the unassembled crib in the corner did she know the truth. She got out of bed and put on a robe. Thinking about the strange houseguest she also took a subcompact from her small safe and checked it to make sure it was loaded and ready. The voice of Greg the firearms instructor from the ranch always went through her head when she would pick up a gun, *“a gun without one in the chamber might as well just be unloaded because when seconds count you don't want to have to waste them racking the slide.”* Like so many on that day, Greg was murdered by David. He was in his sixties but built like a man in his twenties with a grey crewcut and always in desert camo. They spent a few nights together as he told her about his days in the Marines and she tested the limits of his age in bed. She never found those limits.

She found Cathy in the common room sitting in a loveseat across from this strange man that somehow seemed familiar. He had showered and slept on the couch that night after calling his friend in Mexico and finding out the news about his village. Luis told him that his friend working with the American DEA said they were searching along the border and were closing in on their village. Jorge said, *“we have maybe a week before they closed in and from what Luis said they were planning on taking no prisoners or survivors.”* Cathy said, *“Ruth called, Jack and a few of his friends were on their way and would be here as soon as possible.”* Wendy looked at Cathy giving her a, “is this a good idea” look. She didn't know Jack, but she did know about his business and their work relocating women and children out of dangerous circumstances. They moved and hid women from everywhere including the middle-east and even the heart of

America. This part of the business was just a part of what was a mercenary for hire company. Jack was a Jewish man from Ohio married to a Muslim Woman from Iraq living in Hawaii. Wendy sat next to Cathy feeling something hard just underneath Cathy's leg. Jorge got up and went for a cup of coffee. He was in a thin t-shirt and boxers that didn't cover much. Wendy watched him walk into the kitchen then she checked what was underneath Cathy. She saw it was Cathy's Chiappa White-Rhino. Cathy whispered, "*I don't trust him. I think he's hanging out near naked hoping to distract us.*" Cathy saw Wendy was staring at his ass. She whispered, "*you know he's gay right?*" Wendy asked, "*when has that stopped us?*"

A Gulfstream G650 flew over the Pacific Ocean on its way to California then a small one-strip airport somewhere in New Mexico. Jack Pressler sat looking over reports while watching his tablet with footage from a satellite showing a small village in Mexico. He left his wife and five children behind with their youngest teething and their oldest refusing to go back to elementary school. Jack was what could be called an ethical mercenary. He only works for good causes, and after many years behind the gun, he knows his days in this lifestyle are coming to an end. Most of their current jobs were guard work, but it pays the bills. In the next row was a tall, beautiful ebony-skin woman with long platinum-blond Senegalese Twist hair flowing down past her shoulders. Her name was Tima Cocks, but she insisted people call her TC. She was reviewing a final draft of a book she wrote about her late parents and their work with the World Health Organization or WHO. She left out their charity work as a sort of underground railroad for abused women and children because she was still doing the work. Next to her was a former LA SWAT officer named Janet who spent the entire trip staring out the window. Rounding out the flight was three men in desert camo were Dan, Ted, and Jimmy. This would be the first time they all worked together on one job in years.

Luis walked into a warehouse near the border where he ran into a guard who gave him a smartphone and a message from Jorge, "call me." Jorge spoke to Luis that night about being picked up by the woman in the truck and how they were willing to help them save Maria and how they didn't know about their mission. Luis spent the last two days trying to find help getting Maria and her children out of the village, but no one was willing to go into a warzone for

a woman without a significant amount of money. Luis found a quiet place out of the sun and called Jorge using the new phone. The call consisted of a split screen between Jorge and a strange slightly dark-skinned stranger. The stranger said his name was Jack and he and his friends were on the way. Jack said, *“just stay where you are, and we will meet you there in about six hours.”* Luis asked, *“wouldn't it be better if I come to you?”* The image on the phone changed to an aerial picture of the village showing a military buildup to the southwest. Jack said, *“we don't have the time. In the morning they are moving in, and all hell is going to break loose.”* A voice said, *“Sir, we are about to land.”* Jack said, *“we are on the way.”* The call ended, and Luis turned the phone off not wanting the American to be able to track him.

Wendy watched the Gulfstream land on what was little more than a smoothed-out patch of dirt in the desert. She had met Jack before, but he seemed to have aged thirty years since she last saw him. A man that had to be the pilot followed him with an angry tone saying, *“this isn't an airport. We need fuel or this plane isn't going anywhere.”* Behind him was a tall supermodel of a woman with long blonde braided hair and a rifle case over her shoulder. A woman with a prosthetic hand and three other men got out and started to unload the plane into the truck Wendy brought for them. Jack walked over to Wendy and said, *“we need to go now.”* Wendy looked over at her pink van. Only Jorge, Scott and Jill came with her thinking they were going back to the station. Jack said, *“if we leave now, we can make it to the village by midnight, but every minute wasted brings us closer to the military moving in.”* Wendy said, *“OK, I'm sending the van back. There is a place along the way we can get another truck, but I don't want to take anyone that isn't willing to go.”* Jack looked over at the hot-pink van and said, *“yeah, that might stand out.”*

Two hours later, they were closing in on the border with Scott behind the wheel of a Toyota Forerunner with Jill at his side. Wendy told Jill to drive the van back to the station, but she said, *“there is no way I'm not going on this.”* They ended up leaving the van with the plane's pilot to drive to the station and arrange for some fuel. Luis told them he would have weapons for them across the border and using the smartphone he, Jack and Wendy planned out the operation. Wendy didn't like bringing a teenager, but it wouldn't be the first time she did. Jack was on the

phone with his daughter saying, *“yes I do understand, but you can't kick him there.”* After some silence, he said, *“he won't know you like him if you kick him between the legs.”* He ended the call and said to no one in particular, *“my daughter thinks the way to tell a boy she likes him is to kick him in the nuts.”* Jill said, *“it could be worse, I had my first time with a boy in an elementary school bathroom when I was in the fifth grade.”* Jorge looked at the clock than to the phone then back to the clock wondering just how long he would have to be around these people.

Luis watched as three vehicles approached from the east. He opened the garage door, and they pulled inside. Luis pulled Jorge aside and asked, *“can we trust them?”* Jorge replied with a question, *“do we have a choice?”* Luis turned to the others, and without introducing himself, he showed them to the guns. He had several old rifles spread across a table. Most of them were bolt actions that looked old enough to have been used in World War One. Wendy shook her head saying, *“you have to be kidding me.”* Luis replied, *“this was all I could manage in such a short time.”* Jack nodded to the woman calling herself TC. She went to one of the trucks and pulled out three bags. Inside were nine FN P90s with suppressors. Jack said, *“we have some contacts with the Israeli Army as well as a few Russian friends who can get us almost anything we need.”* Another bag had two m40 sniper rifle suppressors. Wendy handed the rifles to Scott and Jill saying, *“this is the only way you two are going to be a part of this.”* They knew not to bother arguing after she gave an order.

Jack rolled out a map of the village of Jaluco. He looked to Luis and said, *“mark where she should be as well as any security you know.”* Jack handed Luis a bag filled with little green army men as well as a red queen from a chess set. Jack said, *“I'm going to need to get those back, or my son will kill me.”* Luis put the queen on the house near the outskirts of the village. He then placed a series of the machinegun men around the village with four of the spotters around showing where the sentries are placed also showing an opening where they could move in. Jack placed two diecast cars on the map near the blind spot. He then placed a diecast tank on the west side of the village saying, *“this is the direction the army is coming.”* He placed another tank on the east then another on the southern side and said, *“also here and here.”* He added a small diecast replica of Santa Clause and his sly. Pushing Santa between the two cars and into

the village, Jack said, *“with Scott and Jill acting as overwatch, we move in and take the girl as quietly as possible.”* Jorge put a soldier on a building near the center. He said, *“they use this warehouse as an armory. I take it out while you get my sister.”* Luis said, *“we take it out before you strike leading them away from the house while helping in the army invade the village.”*

Luis checked the time seeing they had five minutes to go. He and Jorge made their way into the village and the building. Luis leaned over to Jorge saying, *“when this is all over, we take your sister and the kids southwest to the coast..... We do this, kill the Americans and leave this all behind.”* Jorge asked, *“are we going to kill them? I mean they’re helping us?”* Luis pointed to the side of the warehouse facing the street saying, *“it might sound strange, but we need to enter on that side. The back and other side have an alarm.”* Jorge looked back at him saying nothing. Luis shook his head, *“they know too much. If we let them live, then we..... Your sister will never be safe.”* Jorge turned to the west and where his sister was. He asked, *“then how can we trust them to save her?”* Luis said, *“their plan was shit and would have had the village ready for the army while this plan takes the drug away from the cartel.”* Luis grabbed Jorge by the shirt and pulled him in close saying, *“remember where your loyalties lie.”*

Jack hit the throat microphone and said, *“the house is dark, but the infrared shows four people inside.”* Wendy, Jack Pressler, TC and Tina watched the house where Maria was from an abandoned home nearby with the other Jack and the rest positioned along the way set up to cover their escape. She asked, *“any movement?”* Jack didn’t say a word. TC hit him on the back and said, *“go on and say whatever you aren’t saying, whitey.”* Instead of saying it he handed Wendy the scope and pointed to the far side of the house. She counted two smaller blooms of heat than a larger third. Then the third and fourth became one then two again until it became clear the man was raping her again. Wendy checked her watch saying, *“two minutes.”* The large heat signature pulled away from the smaller one then it walked out into what had to be a hallway then out the door. The smaller heat signature walked into a room with the larger of the two other blooms and seemed to merge. Wendy’s watch beeped. She said, *“time to go.”* TC waited in the abandoned house while Wendy, Jack, and Tina went to the house. Over the radio, TC said, *“the girl is on the move heading to the front door.”* Tina dropped her gun at the back door. Jack picked it up and

handed it to her with a look that seemed to say something, but Wendy didn't know what it meant. TC said, *"Tina so help me if I have to, I'll hot glue that gun to your hand."* Tina attempted to flip her the bird and, in the process, dropped her gun again. Wendy checked her watch saying, *"the guys are moving.....now."*

Luis tucked the P90 under his arm inside his jacket. He said to Jorge, *"walk upright like you belong here and just follow me."* Jorge did the same with his gun, and the two walked over to the warehouse. Luis stopped just as they approached the corner of the building and looked around. He said, *"something's wrong."* Jorge asked, *"guards?"* Luis said, *"there should be two to three guards by the door, but there's no one."* Keeping his gun in place, Luis went to the door with Jorge following. The door was unlocked. He opened it, and the two slipped inside. In the center of what was a mostly empty room was a rack of unloaded AK47s and a table with a couple of bricks of C4. Jorge whistled saying, *"wow here comes world war three."* Luis called out on the radio, *"overwatch.... Do any of you have night vision or something?"* Jill answered back, *"yeah."* Luis said, *"look to the east and south. Look for people."* After a couple of seconds, Jill said, *"what the fuck? Is this some sort of party? It looks like the entire village is standing on the southwest."* After another couple of seconds, Jill said, *"move it's starting."* A second later they could hear the gunfire.

Maria stood by the door as she did every night thinking about what would happen if she locked the door. She knew he would beat her again or worse, but a part of her didn't care. She heard a sound at the back. She turned and saw a man and two women. All of them were armed, and one of the women had an artificial hand. Wendy handed her a note. She opened it and read, *"Little Maria, if you are reading this then I need you to take your children and go with them. Its hard to explain but I needed to be somewhere else but know it was me, I came for you, and I will never leave you again."* Maria looked at Wendy and asked, *"how do I know I can trust you?"* The gunfire grew louder. Jill said over the radio, *"the army is pushing past the people on the southwest as they scatter. There shooting everyone in sight."* A second later she said, *"I don't think these guys are army."* Wendy turned to Maria and in her best broken-Spanish said, *"your brother sent us to save you and."* Maria said in English, *"this will take forever if you keep trying*

to talk Spanish. Just say what you have to say.” Jack smirked. Wendy said, “you can stay here and be shot or come with us and live.”

Luis said, *“we don’t have enough here to do this job, but we could attach it to the large gas tanks on the other side. They connect to several businesses and would make a large noise.”* Two men came into the warehouse wearing all black carrying AK74s. Luis and Jorge shot them both before they could make a move. Luis checked the men opening one of their shirts revealing a collection of gang tattoos. Jorge said, *“oh shit, this isn’t what we thought at all.”* Luis called out over the radio, *“those men taking the town aren’t army there something else, just get Maria out..... We’ll do what we can to slow them down.”* Luis went to the table and cut the blocks of C4 into small chunks placing them in cans then filling those cans with assorted nails he found around the warehouse. He stuck a wireless trigger in each piece of C4. Luis put the cans into a bag saying, *“I don’t know if these will work.”* Jorge replied, *“does it matter?”* Luis checked his gun and said, *“I’m still planning on going to the beach next week.”*

A Jeep turned a corner firing into the houses with a pair of mounted 50caliber machineguns. TC fired a round from a 50caliber Berrett rifle striking the driver. The Jeep swerved left into the front of one of the homes. *“hey whitey, there goes the neighborhood.”* Jack called out on the radio, *“we’re on the move, fall in as we pass. Overwatch shoot anything that follows us.”* A few seconds later a shot rang out then another as people dropped in the street. Jack said to Wendy, *“get them out.”* Jack switched to semi-auto and went to a window as Wendy and Tina led Maria and her children out the back. Jack called out, *“I’m coming out.”* TC answered, *“I got your back Jack just get out and go.”* Jack said, *“are you telling me to hit the road?”* TC smiled saying, *“shut up whitey.”* Jill called out, *“more on the way.”* Wendy and the others past TC who joined them and together they made their way to the next stopping point picking up the others as they passed. Jack went out to find Jorge and Luis. A man came running out of the house where the Jeep hit firing wildly into the air. Jack put two rounds into his head and kept going. Around a corner, he heard a suppressed round. Down the street, he saw Jorge pull someone into a house. Jack put his back to a wall and using the shadows made his way to them

as quickly as possible. He put his ear to a back door and tried to find out if they were alone or not.

Jorge and Luis ducked into a house as a large group of men came down the street shooting back at another group. Among them was a man Jorge knew. The man that spent the last three years raping his sister was on the run with what looked like blood on his shirt. Jorge pulled out a pair of brass knuckles and called the man over striking him across the face. The man went down, and Jorge pulled him into the house. The man rolled over and saw Luis. He said, "*I thought you two died in the desert.*" Jorge went to his knees next to the man and said, "*how could I leave without my sister Maria and your bastards.*" The man lost his smile looking at Jorge then at Luis. He said, "*she loves me.*" Jorge replied, "*she'll get over you.*" Luis leaned in and said, "*we did an awful lot to bring this about. Jorge and I thought or knew that if we brought enough heat to the border, then the army or someone would move in and cleanse the village of your filth.*" Jorge pulled a knife and jammed it into the man's chest. Luis smiled and said, "*we killed so many Americans to make this moment possible, and it was all worth the cost.*"

Jorge and Luis left the house and took control of a Jeep with two dead men behind the wheel. Jack followed them. Three blocks away Luis triggered the bombs. Seven explosions cut across the village taking twenty people with them as shrapnel cut people to ribbons. Jack cut away from them and made his way back to the house and a Jeep he passed. Jorge turned the Jeep down an alley where they found four men all in black. They waved for them to stop. One of the men yelled, "*we got them on the run.*" Luis whispered, "*speed up.*" Jorge sped up striking two of the men pushing the other two out of the way. The remaining two opened fire as Jorge turned the corner. Luis slipped to one side then nearly fell out of the moving Jeep. Jorge grabbed him as he came to a stop. He helped Luis down to the ground. The right side of his head was misshapen with his right eye swollen shut. Luis whispered, "*beach.....home.....love you.*" Jorge checked for a pulse and found nothing. He picked up the body and put him in the back of the Jeep and drove to the meeting point.

An hour later they found themselves all together on the road heading to the border. Before leaving, they dropped all the guns and other weapons that could tie them to last night. They were stopped several times with police looking them over and talking about the village. Jack watched Jorge who spent the trip holding his sister. He also noticed the not so pleased look on her face. Wendy watched Jack as he watched Jorge wondering what happened out there. They made their way to the warehouse where everyone stretched and took a break before the long trip back to the station. Jack pulled Wendy aside telling her they need to talk. Outside the warehouse, Jack pulled out his phone and played a recording from the house and the confession from Luis about killing Americans. Jack said, *“if I wanted to make some noise and I didn’t care who I killed then shooting at a school or blowing up a church would make a big noise.”* Wendy turned and looked at Maria and her children. Jack said, *“the man holding her killed one of the kids when she tried to leave him.”* Jack turned to the door seeing Maria and her children. Wendy made sure she was in the truck with Maria without Jorge for the final trip so they could talk.

Six hours later they pulled onto the strip of sand acting like an airstrip. Jack Pressler and his people started to pack the jet. The pilot came over to Jack telling him they are fueled and ready. Maria picked up one of her children and led the other by the hand to the plane. Jorge asked, *“where are you going?”* Maria turned and said, *“I know what you did, and I don’t want you around my children.”* Jorge turned around to see Wendy with a gun at her side pointing down. She said, *“I can’t prove it was you at the truck stop the church or the school, but I do know what was said in that house and that you aren’t welcome here.”* Wendy nodded to the plane saying, *“she’s going with them to Hawaii where they will help her make a new life for her and her children. Just maybe put all this past her, but she says she never wants to see you again.”* She dropped a set of keys at his feet, *“take the dark gray truck and go.”*