

FLY ON THE WALL

Det. Annie Avants Series #5

By

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INTRODUCTION

The Sinaloa Cartel is the fiercest, most active, and richest Cartel in Mexico. Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman Loera and a partner, Ismael "El Mayo" Lambada-Garcia, have successfully led the Cartel for many years.

During the time frame for this story, "El Chapo" is in Altiplano Maximum Security Prison, in Almoloya de Juárez, west of Mexico City, and has been there since February 2014. He was originally arrested and imprisoned in 1993, and escaped on January 19, 2001, remaining free for 13 years until being recaptured in Feb 2014.

Update:

If you have kept up-to-date on "El Chapo" you will know that he escaped yet again on Sunday, July 12, 2015, from a tunnel dug under his cell at Altiplano Prison.

However, this freedom was short-lived. On January 8, 2016, he was recaptured in Los Mochis, Sinaloa, and returned to Altiplano Prison.

Last update: July 22, 2016

CHAPTER ONE

*Old Farmhouse
One Mile from Old River Road
Sunday 2:30 a.m.
April 13, 2014*

Seven men gathered in the vacant parlor of the abandoned 100-year old farmhouse. The tension in the air was thick, and the odor of nervous sweat was overwhelming. Alejandro Foncesco, the leader of the men, had called a meeting.

The group stood in a semi-circle off to the side of the room and shuffled their feet as they waited for Alejandro to appear. Recent events made the men suspect that change was coming, and they feared what it might be.

This farmhouse, like several others in Kern County, served as a distribution point for illegal drugs brought into America by the Sinaloa Cartel.

The latest shipment of drugs, due to arrive from Mexico this past Friday, never arrived.

The men didn't know where the shipment was or why it hadn't arrived to be distributed, as usual, this coming Monday.

During the past several days, the men had moved everything in the farmhouse to another location and scrubbed the farmhouse and outbuildings. Alejandro didn't explain why.

The men tensed up when Alejandro stepped into the middle of the semi-circle and faced them. He wasn't a big man. He stood just 5'7" and weighed 190 pounds. He was born in the State of Sinaloa in 1957 and his whole life revolved around the Sinaloa Cartel. His loyalties were to the leaders, El Chapo and El Mayo, among others.

Alejandro slowly looked each man in the eye, and then said, "It saddens me when I find out that someone I trusted and loved like a brother has betrayed me and the Cartel. But, it happens. When it does, the Cartel is unyielding on what we are to do with the traitor."

The men snuck peeks at each other and wondered which one of them betrayed the Cartel.

Alejandro continued, "Is there anything any of you would like to tell me?"

No one said a word.

After a brief pause, he regarded each man again, and then looked over at Enrique and Ernesto, who were standing at the side of the group. "Enrique, Ernesto, please escort Juan Osorio to the center of the room."

Juan Osorio began to tremble, and sweat broke out on his brow. He could barely walk as the two men hauled him to the center of the room. He was sniveling and mucus ran out of his nose and dripped onto his shirt. To make matters worse, he wet himself. Ernesto and Enrique used plastic zip ties to bind his wrists behind his back, then forced him to his knees and bound his ankles together.

Alejandro walked over and stood in front of Juan, but Juan kept his head bowed.

"Look at me Juan Osorio and answer just one question. Why did you betray the Cartel and El Chapo? I have known you all your life and I want to understand."

Juan didn't answer. Alejandro kicked him in the ribs, and Juan fell over. Enrique lifted him back onto his knees.

In a voice so soft the other men had to strain to hear what he was saying, Alejandro said, "You don't have to tell me because I already know. You've been talking to Lt. Nevada Llamas of the Narcotics Division at the Sheriff's Office. Haven't you?" he shouted at Juan, who continued to cringe before him.

"You disgust me, Juan Osorio. You may think this is the end, but your family will suffer for your betrayal. You know the rules and you chose to flaunt them in our faces!

"I am sorry this has come to pass. I hope it will be a lesson to all of you." Alejandro nodded to Enrique and waved for the rest of the men to stay where they were. They would witness the consequences of breaking the rules of the Cartel. Then, he walked to the front door and turned around to face the room.

Enrique walked up behind Juan. He could smell the fear rolling off Juan in waves. Juan begged Enrique not to hurt his family but, in his heart, he knew it was too late. He bowed his head and accepted his punishment. He would see his family in Heaven.

Enrique surprised everyone and walked around to face Juan. "Look at me, you *pinche idiota, eres tan estúpido como un perro*. Look at me!"

Finally, Juan slowly lifted his head. He looked into the hate-filled eyes of Enrique. Nothing but death waited there.

"I want to see your eyes when I send you to hell," Enrique said, as he pressed the barrel of the gun against Juan's left forehead. "*Pudrete en el infierno.*" Then, he pulled the trigger as the other men, with stoic faces, watched.

Alejandro turned and walked out the door.

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The six remaining men followed Alejandro out of the farmhouse and piled into two silver SUVs. They left Juan Osorio's body where it fell, as a message to the SWAT team and Narcs, who would arrive within minutes, their well-planned raid ruined. When Alejandro's snitch tipped him off about the raid, it gave him pleasure to plan this little surprise for the Narcs and SWAT team, and leave an almost empty farmhouse for them to raid.

When the vehicles passed through the wrought-iron gates onto Old River Road, they stopped. One of the men jumped from the back of the second SUV. He walked over and pulled the gate shut, then locked it. As he stooped down to throw the bottom bolt into a bracket in the ground, his back was to the SUVs. He pulled a cheap cell phone out of his pocket, dialed 911 and said '998,' the code for 'Officer Needs Assistance. After he hung up, he changed his mind and dialed again. This time he said '999', the code for 'Officer or Agent Down.' He tossed the phone into the weeds around the fence, returned to the SUV, and left with the other men.

Alejandro knew the raid was scheduled to take place within the next twenty minutes. What he didn't know was that the 998/999 call triggered every law enforcement unit on active duty to head for the farmhouse. Nevertheless, his intuition told him to have one SUV turn right and the other turn left as they exited the gravel road that led from the farmhouse. If someone noticed the tire tracks, they wouldn't know which way the vehicles were headed. The men would meet up at a secondary location within an hour.

The man who made the 911 call relaxed into the plush seat of the second SUV. It turned to the right and, within minutes, they could hear sirens approaching their location on Old River Road. This surprised the two men in the front seat. They quickly turned onto a side road and parked behind some bushes and trees. After the SWAT team and Narc Division vehicles passed their location, they pulled back on Old River Road and took the next exit that offered an alternate route to their destination.

The man in the back frowned. What would Alejandro think was the reason the raid went live before the teams arrived at the farmhouse? Would he suspect that someone had alerted the teams? He could only hope that Alejandro would assume the teams were eager to start their raid and planned to kill their sirens when they got closer to the farmhouse.

CHAPTER TWO

*Kern County Sheriff's Office
Dispatch Center
Sunday 2:45 a.m.
April 13, 2014*

The Dispatch Center of the Kern County Sheriff's Office was busy. The bars and clubs were closed down for Saturday night and alcohol ran through the veins of many of the people piloting vehicles to their homes. The weather was cold and damp, and the streets were slick due to the patchy rain.

Patsy Laporte frowned at her dispatch screen, which showed a 998 call, followed by a 999 call - Officer Down - all units respond. She turned and called her Supervisor over to her terminal and showed her the screen.

"This is the address where the SWAT/Narc Division raid is planned for 3:00 a.m.," Patsy said. "Everyone on duty will head to that location now."

Mrs. Hampton, the supervisor, frowned. "Let me call Lt. Llamas and see if he knows what's going on."

Mrs. Hampton returned to her station. "N-12, 1022 (call me) immediately," she radioed to the Narc leader, Lieutenant Nevada Llamas.

Lt. Llamas heard the original calls and was startled that the address was the site of his impending raid. When he received the message to call Mrs. Hampton, he dialed her immediately.

"What's going on?" he said.

"We're not sure," Mrs. Hampton said. "I was hoping you could enlighten me. After the calls came in, there was no further contact with the caller. The address came up on the screen, but no cell phone number. Are you rolling Code?"

"Yes, of course. And I'm sure every other law enforcement unit in the County is also en route Code 3. Our ETA is 10 minutes."

Mrs. Hampton could hear the sound of his siren in the background. "Contact dispatch as soon as you've evaluated the situation," she said.

"Will do."

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The SWAT team vehicle arrived first at the locked wrought iron gate on Old River Road. They didn't mess with the lock. The vehicle, with the heavy grill in front, rammed the gate and sprung it open. Both groups entered.

Right behind them were two deputies from the Taft Subdivision. Lt. Llamas stopped his vehicle and spoke with Deputies Darla Baker and Christine Nielson.

"Set up the barricades here at the main gate. Don't let anyone enter the property unless you clear it with me first. I want to check out what's going on before we have half the County trampling any evidence. We'll tape off the farmhouse, and whatever else is appropriate, when we get down

there and see what we've got. I'll have one of my guys mark off a pathway to the body, if there is one, to protect any evidence. I think the two of you will have your hands full here."

They could hear sirens approaching and the two deputies gave Lt. Llamas weak smiles. "We can handle it," Deputy Nielson said.

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From their previous reconnaissance, Lt. Llamas' men were familiar with the property.

The farmhouse was old and hadn't been farmed for many years. It sat in the middle of twenty acres of land that was once resplendent with growing corn. The front porch sagged, the paint was peeling, and the metal roof was in need of repair. The screen door on the porch was only connected to the frame by one hinge, and the screening was torn in several places.

An old barn and corn crib were to the left of the farmhouse, set back about 100 feet. Next to the barn was an abandoned chicken coop and several rabbit cages. There were two garden plots - a large one for vegetables, and a smaller plot closer to the kitchen that still had some herbs that popped up each spring.

A door in the kitchen, and a recessed door on the outside of the farmhouse, gave access to the basement and root cellar. The shelves held moldy and empty mason jars that some ambitious farm wife used to can the produce from the garden. Dry herbs, full of cobwebs, hung from the walls. Dust and cobwebs decorated the small windows in the basement. A single light bulb dangled from a cord in the center of the ceiling.

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Lt. Llamas proceeded to the scene. The SWAT and Narc teams waited outside the farmhouse for Lt. Llamas to enter. His first responsibility was to determine if there was a victim, if the victim was deceased, or alive and in need of medical attention.

"Check the outbuildings to make sure no one is in them. Walk around the edges as much as possible to preserve any physical evidence."

The SWAT team, and the members of the Narc Division, disbursed to search the other buildings on the property and soon determined that no one else was there.

Lt. Llamas put on booties and gloves and carefully walked up the 10 rickety steps, crossed the front porch, and pushed aside the dilapidated screen door. He turned the old-fashioned brass doorknob and found the main door unlocked. He pushed it open and stepped inside. The scene that greeted him was not what he expected.

Slumped on the floor, in the middle of the living room, was a man whose hands and feet were bound with plastic zip ties. He appeared to have been shot in the head, and then fell to his right. Lt. Llamas waved everyone to stay outside as he checked for a pulse in the man's neck. There was no pulse.

There was nothing else Lt. Llamas could do. He radioed dispatch that there was a homicide victim, but the man appeared to be a Mexican farm worker and wasn't a member of any law enforcement agency. He had dispatch send the Robbery/Homicide Detectives, the Deputy Coroner, and the Technical Investigations team.

When he exited the farmhouse, he talked with the men and was told they found no other persons at the scene. He told the SWAT team to go home and radioed the deputies at the gate to tell

everyone not necessary to the scene to go on about their business. There was no need for additional personnel at this point.

All he could do now was stand down and wait for the detectives and other personnel to arrive. As the first responder, he would remain at the scene as long as necessary, but the rest of the Narc Division team would be released in due course.

CHAPTER THREE

*Annie's Home
Sunday Morning
April 13, 2014*

Annie almost fell off her couch when she rolled over to answer her cell phone.

"What the heck?" she said, as she felt Jesse's leg draped over her thigh. She untangled herself, got to her feet, and ran to the kitchen where her leather messenger bag rested on the counter. Her cell phone continued to ring from inside the bag. She dumped the bag's contents on her counter top and grabbed her phone. She didn't even bother to look at the caller ID. Any call in the middle of the night, on a Sunday, was bound to be bad news.

"Detective Avants," she said, as she slumped down on a kitchen chair and tried to catch her breath.

"Annie, this is Sgt. Collins. We've got a real puzzler on our hands. I need you and Tom to respond immediately."

Detective Tom Weston was Annie Avants' partner. As lead investigator of their team, one of three in the Robbery/Homicide Unit of the Kern County Sheriff's Office, it was her responsibility to contact Tom and get him rolling to the scene.

Annie reached over and flicked the switch to start the coffee pot she set up the evening before. She knew she would need at least one cup of coffee to get her mind functioning, and so would Tom.

"What can you tell me?" Annie said, as she grabbed her notepad and pen from the counter top where the contents of her bag lay scattered. She turned towards the couch when she heard Jesse's cell phone beep.

"SWAT and the Narc Division had a joint raid planned for this morning at 3:00 a.m. They were raiding a farmhouse about a mile from Old River Road, not far from where it crosses Interstate 5. They received information that a drug shipment from Mexico would be there. The plan of the men at the farmhouse was to distribute the shipment, mostly heroin and methamphetamine, throughout Kern County on Monday."

Annie reached over and poured herself a cup of coffee as she jotted down notes in her notebook.

"I take it something went wrong," Annie said.

"Yes. Less than half an hour before the raid was scheduled, and while the teams were en route, dispatch received two 911 calls. On the first call, the caller said '998' and then the connection was broken. A second later, he called back and said '999.' The address that popped up on the dispatcher's screen was the address of the farmhouse where the raid was to take place.

"Everyone, including the raiding teams, headed to the location Code 3. When they got there, they broke through the gate on Old River Road. Inside the living room of the farmhouse, they found a dead Mexican male adult who appeared to have been executed gang style and left behind. There was no trace of the other seven men who supposedly lived there."

"Geez," Annie said, fully awake now, "and I assume there were no signs of the drug shipment?"

"The house and all of the outbuildings were empty," Sgt. Collins said.

"Okay, I'll call Tom and we'll head right out. Give me the address."

Annie jotted down the address and gathered what she needed. She returned to the living room, just as Jesse finished his phone call. She handed him a cup of coffee.

"You're gonna need this," she said.

She smiled when she looked at Jesse sprawled on her couch as he put his cell phone away. They had a 'date' that night to watch a couple of movies at Annie's home, after they cooked a pot of spaghetti, and the evening was enjoyable. Jesse was wearing a pair of chino slacks and a brown button-down shirt that fit his frame perfectly. On the floor, next to the couch, were his Dockers, which he wore without socks, no matter the season.

Part way through the movie, they both fell asleep.

"Was that call about the raid gone bad?" Annie sat on the edge of the couch to slip on her boots. She was dressed casually in a cashmere turtleneck sweater and a pair of heavy linen trousers. She pulled her long, wavy auburn hair to the back of her neck and fastened it with a Cloisonné barrette that Jesse's mom had given her. She grabbed a scarf and her London Fog raincoat.

"Yes. Are you heading out there?"

"Yep, but first I'm gonna call Tom and have him meet me there. That'll be faster than if I pick him up. Do you have the address? The farmhouse sits about a mile down a gravel road from Old River Road. There's a mile marker on the side of the road right before the gate."

"Right. I have the GPS coordinates. You want to follow me?"

"Okay, but give me the coordinates so I can give them to Tom."

Annie got Tom on the phone and brought him up to date. "If it's as described, it will be a real mess. Even though dispatch called off the 999 call after Lt. Llamas reported what he'd found, we'll still have people showing up from all over the County."

When Annie finished talking to Tom, she poured a travel mug of coffee for him, and she and Jesse headed out.

CHAPTER FOUR

*Farmhouse
One Mile from Old River Road
Sunday Morning
April 13, 2014*

Deputy Coroner James Schilling wove the Coroner's van around the myriad of vehicles that blocked the main gate - his access to the crime scene. He finally got close enough to Deputy Baker so she recognized him and waved him to the front of the line.

"Didn't I hear dispatch cancel the '999' call?" he said, as he took her clipboard and signed in.

"Yes," said Deputy Baker. "When Lt. Llamas arrived and inspected the body, he realized the deceased wasn't law enforcement. He immediately radioed me and Deputy Nielson to start turning away anyone not necessary to the scene. All these vehicles either haven't heard the cancellation or hope to get in anyway. We'll send them back to their jobs. The media are being kept across Old River Road."

DC Schillings handed the clipboard back to Deputy Baker. "That's good. We don't need a zoo. I'm sure the SWAT Team and Narc Division traffic have compromised some of the forensic evidence, but it won't be as bad as it could have been."

He drove down the gravel road and found a spot to park close to the edge of the yard surrounding the farmhouse. It wasn't much of a yard. Dead grass with a broken-down walkway led up to the porch.

DC Schillings spotted Lt. Llamas and headed in his direction. "Hi Nevada," he said, as the two men shook hands. They'd worked together many times. "Can you give me a quick overview of what I'll find inside? All I know is the call went out as a '999'. Dispatch then changed it to a 187 (murder)."

"Sure thing, James," Lt. Llamas said and he brought DC Schillings up-to-date. "I went inside to check the victim for vital signs. Once I knew he was dead, I didn't do anything else. He looks like a Mexican farm worker and it appears someone executed him.

"I was covertly in contact with one of the men from this house, but never met him face to face. It's my guess that this was my contact. If so, he was obviously exposed. He told me his name was Juan Osorio. If he has identification, and it is Juan Osorio, can you let me know? I also suspect that someone warned the men about the raid and that's why there were no signs of the drug delivery."

"I'll let you know if I find any ID," James said. "When the homicide detectives arrive, they can come inside, but no one else for the moment. Will you be here for a while? I'm sure the detectives will want to talk to you."

"Yeah, I'll stay as long as necessary. I've already released the SWAT team and I'll send the rest of the Narc Division team back to the station. They're no longer needed. They can write-up their individual reports at their desks."

DC Schillings headed up the rickety steps. He was careful where he stepped, even though he knew Lt. Llamas had already entered the house.

He stopped inside the doorway and took in the scene. After suiting up, he approached the body and took several photographs from different angles. He pulled a clean sheet out of his duffel bag and laid it to the side, being careful not to disturb any blood stains. After being shot, Juan Osorio had fallen to his right.

He next took several pictures of the blood stains and blood spatter around the body, using a ruler in the photos to put the bloodstains in perspective.

After taking close-up pictures of the plastic zip ties tied around the victim's wrists and ankles, he cut the ties and placed them in a paper evidence bag. He marked the bag and put it into a larger paper bag. His next step was to bag the hands of the victim to preserve any trace evidence.

DC Schillings carefully lifted the man's shirt and used a thermometer inserted into the victim's liver to take his internal temperature. He noted the ambient temperature and the body's temperature and entered them into his notebook. This would help decide the time of death.

It didn't surprise him that there were no signs of blowflies. The body had only been dead for a short time and was in a closed-in room.

He also noted that no rigor had set in.

Without moving the body, he continued to take close-up photographs of the entry and exit wounds on his head. After he lifted the victim's shirt to take the body temperature, DC Schillings noticed a large bruise on the left side of the man's ribcage.

He was able to reach into the back pocket of the victim's blue jeans and remove his wallet. In the wallet, he found a green card, driver's license, and employee identification card issued to Juan Osorio. The employee ID card stated he worked for Greenriver Farms.

DC Schillings stood up and walked back outside onto the porch. He looked around until he spotted Lt. Llamas and then called him over.

"I did find his identification. He is, as you supposed, Juan Osorio. He has a driver's license, green card, and employee identification card from Greenriver Farms. Does that match up with the man who was your contact?"

A look of sadness passed over the face of Lt. Llamas. "Yes, he was my informant. Look, I have to make some fast calls. If the Cartel knows Juan Osorio was talking to me, they may harm his family to show others what happens when you betray the Cartel. I need to get an extraction team into Mexico and get them moved out."

DC Schillings looked alarmed. "By all means, take care of it. I'll let the detectives know you're still here."

Lt. Llamas hurried off to his vehicle and DC Schillings could see him talking urgently on his phone.

"I hope he gets to them in time," he said, in a whisper, as he stood on the porch looking up at the night sky.

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Jesse, Annie, and her partner, Detective Tom Weston, arrived at the gate at the same time. They signed in with Deputy Nielson and moved on through the gate. Media was parked along Old River Road, but other law enforcement personnel who weren't needed were being turned around and sent back to their respective areas.

When they arrived at the farmhouse, Annie hopped down from her Jeep Wrangler and nodded to Lt. Llamas. She could see he was busy on his phone so she would talk to him later.

Annie hugged her lined London Fog raincoat around her slim body and pulled up the hood to cover her hair. It was early Spring and the weather was cold and blustery.

Annie, Tom, and Jesse walked up to one of the few Narc Division team members who remained at the scene, Sgt. Ryn Prothero.

"Hi, Sgt. Prothero. Can you bring us up to speed?" Annie said.

Sgt. Prothero just shook his head. He had been in law enforcement for many years and was one of the most experienced members of the Narc Division. He and Det. Weston had worked together when Det. Weston was also with the Narcs.

Sgt. Prothero explained the sequence of events since the raid teams arrived. When he finished, he said, "One of the men who lived here had been working with Lt. Llamas. When we arrived, Lt. Llamas found the body of a Mexican male, who was later identified as Lt. Llamas' informant, bound with his hands behind his back and at the ankles. He had a single gunshot wound to his forehead. All the other men were gone and we didn't find the two containers of heroin and meth that were scheduled to be delivered to the site last Friday. That's about all the information I have. Once the body was located and determined to be deceased, we backed off and waited for you guys and a Deputy Coroner."

Annie scribbled the information down in her notebook.

"Thanks, Sergeant," Annie said as she, Tom, and Jesse ducked under the yellow crime scene tape to enter the farmhouse.

"Has the Deputy Coroner arrived yet?" Annie said, as she turned back to Sgt. Prothero.

"Yes," he said. "Deputy Coroner James Schillings arrived twenty minutes ago. He's not letting anyone near the body except your team until he's finished with his preliminary exam. Chief Laine DelMonte and her TI team are here, also."

"Good," Annie said.

"Do we have a name for the victim?" Tom said.

Jesse pulled out his notebook and flipped through a few pages. "I asked Lt. Llamas about that while you were talking with Sgt. Prothero. He said the deceased is a Mexican national who they suspect has worked for the Sinaloa Cartel for many years. His name was Juan Osorio. Lt. Llamas has a file on him, and each of the other men. He'll share them with us when we're ready for more information. The victim was Lt. Llamas' informant."

"Thanks," Annie said, as she, Jesse, and Tom carefully made their way up the rickety stairs to the front porch.

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Jesse opened the door and they walked into the main room where the victim was located. DC Schillings was bent over the body in the middle of the room. Annie just stood there and took in as many details of the scene as she could.

DC Schillings looked up when he heard the door open, and motioned them to come to his location.

"There probably won't be much trace evidence in this room, so it's okay for you to come in now. I'll show you what I've discovered, which isn't much. Just be careful where you walk so you don't disturb the blood spatter. It's hard to see it on this dark wood floor, but it tells an interesting story.

"The victim's wrists and ankles were bound with common plastic zip ties. It looks like they had him kneel and then shot him in the forehead, just left of the midline. He fell to his right. He wasn't moved after he fell."

"How long do you estimate he's been dead?" Annie said.

"No more than two hours. His body temperature was 96.8 degrees F and there is no rigor. That puts the time of death within two hours at the most.

"The Medical Examiner will determine the mechanism of death. The cause of death is a point-blank gunshot wound to his left forehead, and method of death is, obviously, homicide. I pronounced him at 3:50 a.m."

DC Schillings went over what his examination had discovered so far.

"I already bagged his hands, as you can see. I also removed his wallet from a rear pocket of his blue jeans. I've bagged and tagged the wallet. Laine can take samples of blood, but I doubt if any of the blood is from anyone other than the victim."

DC Schillings looked up and saw that Annie was studying the bloodstains around the victim's head, where he had landed on the floor. She was also sketching the blood spatter. "What does the blood spatter tell you, Annie?" DC Schillings said.

Annie thought for a moment. "It's not just the blood spatter. The wound, as would be expected in an execution shooting, appears to have been point blank. There is scorching around the entry hole as well as gunshot residue.

"There is also a 'void' in the blood spatter that came from the entry wound - small spatters, almost mist-like. This indicates that the shooter must have been sprayed as the bullet exploded in the victim's head. Therefore, he'll have blood spatter on his clothing and on the weapon."

Annie continued, "The blood spatter from the exit wound is larger. It's high-velocity gun spatter."

"Good observations," Annie.

"I still need to take more photos", James said. "Can you ask Olivia to come in and do a video of the scene, starting at the front door and then moving in towards the body? I'll have her do the right side, the left side, and the relation of the bloodstain and blood spatter to where the body fell. I've already cut the plastic ties, but I haven't moved the body. When Olivia is finished, we can straighten him out and get full body views, both in video and still camera."

Annie walked back to the door to tell Laine to have Olivia come in with her video recorder.

"You still like to take your own pictures, Tom?" DC Schillings said with a smile. "If so, now's the time."

Tom pulled his camera from his bag and proceeded to take pictures. He always felt better when he had his own set and all the Deputy Coroners were used to this habit of his.

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When the videotaping and still photos were taken, DC Schillings said, "Okay, let's straighten him out and see what we have. Tom, lend me a hand. Olivia, keep videotaping."

DC Schillings lifted the left side of the victim's shirt. "Be sure to get pictures of this bruise. It looks like someone gave him a kick, probably before he was shot. This could mean that he tumbled over and was set on his knees again, and then tumbled again after he was shot."

When he had finished his observation of the front and back of the body, DC Schillings said, "There's not much more I can do here." He handed the zip ties and the wallet he had placed in paper

evidence bags to Annie. "I'm ready to transport him to the morgue so the Medical Examiner can do a proper autopsy. Tom, can you help me put him into the body bag?"

"Sure," Tom said.

"I'll be right back, then," DC Schillings said, as he went to his vehicle to get a body bag and light-weight gurney to move the body.

After the body was taken outside the farmhouse, and loaded into the Coroner's van, DC Schillings left.

Lt. Llamas came onto the porch to speak with Annie and Tom. "Do you need me for anything else? I've released my men to go back to the office and write their reports. I'll write mine also, and get them all to you ASAP."

"No," Annie said. "We're fine."

Lt. Llamas turned to leave, and then turned back to Tom and Annie. "There's something weird going on here. I thought I was the only person who knew the name of my informant, Juan Osorio. Obviously, I was wrong. Who gave the leader here the information about Juan Osorio? Who compromised our raid? And, more importantly, who called in the 911 call? That's a question that intrigues me. Do we have a snitch in our ranks? Does the Cartel have another snitch in this bunch of men that we don't know about? If so, who? And from what agency?" He turned back around and walked off, shaking his head.

CHAPTER FIVE

*Farmhouse
One Mile from Old River Road
Sunday Morning
April 13, 2014*

Laine DelMonte walked up to DC Schillings as he escorted the body out to the waiting Coroner's van. Laine had been the Chief of the Technical Investigations team for four years. She hailed from Houston and looked like a typical Texas woman - tall, blond, outspoken. She wasn't afraid to speak her mind and follow her own path.

While still working in Houston, she found herself pregnant by a man she decided she didn't want to spend the rest of her life with. For her, the best solution was to search for another job and move away from Houston without telling anyone where she was going. She didn't want any problems with her soon-to-be ex-boyfriend.

She was offered a job at Technical Investigations in Kern County and jumped at the chance to move to California. In 2007 she gave birth to her daughter, Noelle, and life was good.

In 2012 her ex found out where she was and visited Laine and Noelle in Bakersfield. He and Laine were able to establish a routine where Wyatt became a part of Noelle's life.

"It's only fair," she said to her good friend Annie. "She's his daughter, too. And it doesn't appear that he wants to cause any problems. He hasn't made any demands that are unacceptable."

"But, what about you and Tom?" Annie said. Laine and Annie's partner, Tom, had just started spending time together with Noelle. Annie didn't want to see him get hurt.

"Well, he was skeptical at first, but now everything is fine. We even double-date. Wyatt is seeing the receptionist from the Morgue, Nicole Tunnicliff."

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DC Schillings slowed his pace and waited for Laine to catch up with him. "Hi, James," she said, as she shook his hand. "What do I need to look for before my team begins in the house?"

James thought for a moment before answering. "The area of the house I saw looks like it was cleaned recently, but it's easy for a cleaner to miss stuff. The homicide is pretty cut-and-dried, but you might find something that ties the house to heroin or meth. I doubt it, but you never know."

"Okay, James. I'll talk to Lt. Llamas before we begin and get more of a feel for what the raid was about. That will help me decide my strategy for this investigation. I'll talk to you later."

Laine turned back towards the farmhouse and smiled as she saw Tom and Annie headed for the front porch. Tom walked over to her, gave her a quick hug, and said, "It's your turn. You won't find much, but do your usual perimeter grid search as well as any of the outbuildings. The old chicken coop should be fun," he said, as he grinned and walked away to join Annie and Jesse.

While Tom, Jesse, and Annie were talking, Annie's cell phone rang.

"Detective Avants, this is Deputy Baker at the main gate. I just found a cell phone in the bushes right inside the gate. I didn't touch it. What should I do?"

"Don't do anything, Darla. I'll have Detective Weston come there right now and document where you found it and then bag and tag it. I'll take it into the lab when I leave. Good work, Deputy."

Annie told Tom and Jesse what Deputy Baker had found and Tom headed for the main gate. When he returned, he held up the bag the phone was in and showed it to Annie and Jesse.

"It looks clean. It hasn't been there very long. It could be the phone used for the 911 call. I'll take it in right now and see what I can find out," Tom said. "That way you and Jesse can proceed with your walk-through of the crime scene. I'll return later."

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After Tom left, Laine gathered her group around her. The briefing by Lt. Llamas led her to believe the house itself was relatively clean - at least to the naked eye. Two of her investigators would concentrate on the outbuildings where drugs may have been stored.

"Okay, guys and gals, suit up. You'll only need a hair covering, booties, and gloves for this one, but still be careful where you walk."

She watched her team as they pulled their equipment out of the TI van and began to get ready. Laine glanced down at her clipboard. She had been making notes while she talked to Deputy Baker, Lt. Llamas, DC Schillings, the detectives, and Jesse.

"Merilee and Michael, process the insides of the outbuildings. Olivia, make an overall video of the buildings and the farmhouse before we begin. Whichever one of you processes the chicken coop might want to suit up fully before going inside," she said, as she tried to stifle a grin. "George, as we tag items, take the pictures you need and you can keep the log sheet of the evidence as we go."

Olivia, Annie, and Laine entered the front door of the farmhouse and Olivia again videotaped the front room where the body had been found. Then, as Laine began a grid search for anything that looked out of place, Olivia videotaped the rest of the room before she returned outside to tape the outbuildings so the other investigators could get started.

When Laine went to the place where the body had been found, she looked up at Annie and said, "What does the blood spatter tell us?"

Annie looked down at the different areas of spatter and at her notes, and said, "Here are the conclusions I reached when I talked to James. The blood flow that pooled on the floor under the victim's head tells us he fell to the side after he was shot. However, the initial blood spatter indicates he was standing or kneeling when he was shot straight on and the blood spatter went behind him, not to the sides like the other blood that pooled after he fell.

"The blood spatter from the exit wound was high velocity spatter and it converges back to where the victim was kneeling when the bullet entered his brain.

"The blood spatter from the entry wound is low velocity spatter, practically a mist, and you can see that there is a blank area in the middle of the spatter - a void. This tells me that the shooter will have spatter on his weapon and clothes. If you look carefully at the entry wound spatter, you can barely see a partial shoe print. When the shooter turned to leave, he stepped in the entry-wound spatter.

"When the victim fell, there was some low and medium spatter that projected beyond his head. As he lay there, the blood from his wounds pooled under his head. What do you think, Laine?"

"I agree with your assessment. I'll take samples from each area, but I highly doubt that we will find blood from anyone other than the victim. We'll see what information the lab can get from the shoe print, also."

Annie stood up and looked around the room. "I doubt if you will find any fingerprints, but even if you do, we already know who lived here and their prints are on file. It'll be interesting to see if you find prints from anyone else."

Laine stood and looked at Annie. "They may have been more careless in the outbuildings. We'll start inside each building with lights and then continue after the sun rises. Who knows, we may get lucky and find something to connect this place with the drugs."

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Jesse and Annie went outside and stood next to Annie's Jeep. Tom hadn't returned yet and they planned to meet him at the SO. "Well, it's pretty clear why Juan Osorio was shot if someone busted him to the leader. It's also clear that someone told them about the raid. What's running through your mind, Jesse?"

Jesse thought for a moment. "I have a lot of questions. When did they move? Why did they move? Where are they now? Who told them about Juan and the raid?"

Annie looked up from scribbling in her notebook. "Yeah, but when we find where they are now, we don't even have probable cause to get a search warrant to look for the gun or shoes and clothes with Juan's blood. Patrol officers will scour this neighborhood and see if anyone saw or heard anything, but there's really no one close enough to notice anything."

"The only thing in our favor is that we didn't have to get a Mincey Warrant to search the house and outbuildings since a warrant to search was already included in the raid," Jesse said.

This brought chuckles from Annie. "I'm glad someone can see a positive side to this," Annie said, as she climbed into her Jeep to return to the Sheriff's Office.

CHAPTER SIX

*Annie's Jeep Wrangler
Sunday Morning
April 13, 2014*

Annie was glad she, Jesse, Tom, arrived at the crime scene in separate vehicles. As she drove back towards Bakersfield, she wasn't in the mood to talk about the horrific scene they had just witnessed.

Something was off about this crime scene and there were too many unanswered questions vying for attention in her brain. What she needed to do was go someplace quiet and let her intuition give her some clues about the best place to start the investigation.

I wonder what went wrong with the raid, she thought. The logical conclusion is that someone warned the leader of the men at the farmhouse about the raid and tipped him off that Juan Osorio was an informant. Was his execution a message to us?

Where were the drugs scheduled to arrive two days before the raid? There was no sign at the farmhouse that a shipment had arrived. The logical place to stash the goods was the barn, but nothing indicated that a person or vehicle had entered or exited the barn recently.

Okay, so the leader must have been tipped off about the raid at least a day before the shipment was due and had it taken someplace else. With all the traffic going up and down I5 and Hwy. 99, no one in law enforcement would notice that the shipment meant for this farmhouse had exited before or after the regular turnoff.

With the advance notice, the men had time to wipe down every trace of their occupancy before they moved on. Not that it was a secret who lived there. They were just like other green card holders and students who came from Mexico, and other countries, to work and send money home, or get a better education. So their identities were known and they were all legit.

Yet, he waited to execute Juan Osorio until just minutes before the raid.

She hoped Laine would find some trace of heroin or meth to show drugs had been at the farmhouse. Most likely, though, the stuff was already packaged for the individual distributors and was never opened at the farmhouse.

Without a connection to the drugs, they had nothing on the men. The only thing Annie could do at this point was to interview each of the remaining seven men and find out what they knew about the death of Juan Osorio. *Or at least as much as they'll tell me, which probably won't be much, she thought.*

Lt. Llamas doesn't know where the men moved to, so I'll interview each man where he works or goes to school. I'm going to interview the two students and Alejandro Foncesco, who works the night shift at Greenriver Farms. That's the same place the victim worked. Tom can tackle Francisco Piñeda, who works as a janitor at night at the Bank of America building, the two self-employed gardeners, Ernesto Quintero and Paco Cifuentes, and the bouncer at La Tuna, Enrique Murillo.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Robbery/Homicide Unit
Sunday morning
April 13, 2014

When Tom and Annie returned to their office, Annie plopped her messenger bag on the floor next to her desk and then collapsed in her chair. Tom headed for the kitchen to talk to Sunnie, their Administrative Assistant, to ask her if the first pot of coffee was ready yet.

"Not only is the coffee almost finished, I brought some oatmeal-chocolate chip cookies I baked last night," Sunnie said, as she handed a plate to Tom. "I've already put plates of cookies on the other detective's desks. I'll bring out your coffee in a minute. It's almost ready."

Tom took a deep breath of the aroma from the cookies. "You're too good to us, Sunnie," he said.

"Yeah, don't I know it," Sunnie said with a laugh.

Tom and Annie's desks butted up against each other and were surrounded by a five-foot-high divider. It was just one of four such work stations in the Robbery/Homicide Unit. There were three other partner teams.

Sgt. Collins had an office with windows that looked out onto the floor of the Unit.

While Tom was in the kitchen, Annie called ahead to Bakersfield College and explained what she needed to do. She asked the clerk to fax the class schedules, and any other information she was free to send her, on the two men who were enrolled at Bakersfield College.

Almost immediately, Annie was at her desk reading the information she had received on Miguel Peña and Carlos Ortiz.

A few minutes later, Tom returned and sat down at his desk. He stuck the plate of cookies under Annie's nose to get her attention just as Sunnie put a hot cup of coffee next to the plate.

The smell of the coffee did the trick, and Annie looked up at Tom and Sunnie. When she saw what they had brought her, she smiled, and said, "You two are such sweeties. Thank you so much." She took a bite of a cookie and closed her eyes as she savored the taste. "I bet you made these yourself, Sunnie," she said.

"Yep, I sure did. I like to keep my detectives happy," Sunnie said with a laugh, as she turned to go back into the kitchen.

"What are you reading with such intensity?" Tom said.

Annie looked up from the papers on her desk, took another big bite of her cookie, and tried not to grin as she chewed. After she swallowed and took a tentative sip of her hot coffee, she said, "I have the class schedules of two of the men who lived at the farmhouse. Interesting choice of majors. Miguel Peña is twenty-four years old and is studying for an Associate in Arts in Plant Sciences, with a Crop Emphasis. Interesting, huh?"

Annie laughed when Tom practically choked on his coffee.

"Gee, I thought one of them would be taking something like how to turn hemp into rope, or basket weaving. What's the other guy taking?"

Annie shuffled her papers around and said, "Carlos Ortiz, age twenty-six, is going for an Associate in Science in Chemistry."

Tom scrunched up his forehead and sat in thought for a moment. "So, one is going to learn how to grow a better opium poppy crop and the other is going to perfect the manufacture of methamphetamine. Good choices.

"So, what are you going to do?" he said.

Annie tamped the stack of papers on her desk, put them back into the folder, and shoved the folder into her Messenger bag. "I'm gonna be hanging around outside of Miguel's class that gets out at 2:45 p.m. and take him to a quiet table in one of the conference rooms to have a talk. Carlos' class ends at 3:00 pm, so I'm hopin' someone from the school can waylay him and bring him to the conference room. At least, that's my best-case scenario. You're tracking down the two self-employed gardeners?"

"Yeah, that's my plan. Lt. Llamas had a list of some of the homeowners that they work for. I'll keep watch and see when one or the other shows up. Hopefully, we'll find out soon where they moved to. The students shouldn't have a problem giving up their new address since we're just talking to them about Juan Osorio's death. When are you going to the college?"

"Tomorrow. The sooner the better. I'm guessin' they'll keep their schedules as routine as possible so they don't draw attention to themselves."

Annie finished eating her cookie, inelegantly licking her fingers so she wouldn't miss a single crumb, and then tossed the napkin into her trash can. She chugged down the rest of her now-cooled coffee and stood to leave.

"I'm gonna go talk to the troops who are visiting the neighbors and see if they learned anything. Then, I'll check in with Laine.

"If you talk to anyone tonight, such as the bouncer, give me a call and tell me what he said. That way I can compare their stories. I'm gonna go out to Greenriver Farms and talk to Alejandro Foncesco tomorrow night. I called out there, but he doesn't work tonight. How soon will Lt. Llamas send up the DVD and photos of the men? It would be nice to set up a 'war room' with their mugs plastered all over the walls."

Tom laughed, and said, "He said he'll get them to us right away.

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Tom walked into the Narcotics Division and headed towards the private office of Lt. Nevada Llamas. He had worked with Lt. Llamas before, so they were comfortable together. Tom had been a member of the Narcotics Division team from January 2007 to December 2009.

The door was propped open, but Tom rapped on the frame anyway. He didn't want to startle Lt. Llamas, who was deep in thought as he studied the sheets of paper in front of him.

Lt. Llamas looked up when he heard Tom's knock. "Hi, Tom," he said. "Come on in. Have a seat. We have a fresh pot of coffee and four large pizzas in the break room. What's your pleasure?"

Tom's stomach growled at the mention of pizza. Lt. Llamas laughed. "I'll be right back with some instant relief," he said.

When Lt. Llamas returned, they both tackled their pizza and didn't do much talking. Each of them knew why Tom was there.

"Okay, Nevada," Tom said, as he washed down the last bite of pizza. "Bring me up-to-date on this whole scenario." Tom pulled out his notebook and pen and prepared to take notes.

"As you no doubt know, the drug scene has changed tremendously since you worked narcotics. How long has it been?"

"I left the Drug Enforcement Unit in December of 2009. It's been a while."

Lt. Llamas took a sip of his coffee. "One thing that has changed in drug trafficking is the content of what they bring into the US. Before, it was shrink-wrapped bundles of marijuana, usually fifty pounds, which took up a lot of space and had to be transported in larger vehicles or containers. Now, however, they have switched to heroin and meth. The packaging is smaller and easier to conceal and they can stash it in smaller places in regular vehicles, for instance.

"Marijuana trafficking has almost slowed to a halt and the big market is for heroin and meth. Also, the customer base has drastically changed. You can find heroin being sold in all neighborhoods and to all age and ethnic groups. The largest abusers of heroin are affluent women who have become addicted to opiates such as Oxycodone and Vicodin. When their prescriptions run out, and their doctors won't give them any more, they switch to heroin. To make matters worse, the heroin brought into the US is superior quality and, at one point, one equivalent 'hit' of heroin costs \$10, while one pill of Oxycodone can cost as much as \$80."

Tom shook his head in disbelief. "No wonder the number of heroin users has increased so much in recent years."

"Another reason the Mexican farmers switched to growing opium poppies instead of marijuana is because marijuana has been legalized or semi-legalized in so many states here in the US. The marijuana from Mexico was cheap, seedy marijuana harvested by the bushel and shrink wrapped. Marijuana available legally in the US is from greenhouse grown genetically improved strains. Our addicts are being spoiled. And the greed of our pharmaceutical companies, with their high insurance-driven prices, is fueling the market for Mexican heroin. We are our own worst enemies. How do we fight something like that?"

"What about meth?" Tom said.

"Ha! You'd be hard-pressed to find any high-level meth labs in the US now. Even the backwoods labs have all but disappeared."

Tom was puzzled. "But, why?"

"The Mexicans have taken over the production and distribution and what they produce is superior, purer, and cheaper than the stuff that we used to see made in the US. The truth of the matter is that most of the meth found on the streets of America was 'cooked' in Mexico. It's much easier for them to find the chemicals needed to produce high-quality meth."

Tom paused and looked up at the Lieutenant, who had stopped talking and had a wary look on his face. Tom knew he was ready to talk about what had gone wrong with the raid.

"There's a couple of strange things that happened." He rubbed his hand over the back of his head and neck as if he were trying to decide exactly how to explain what he wanted to say.

"What are they?" Tom prompted. He basically knew the whole story by now, but wanted to hear it from Lt. Llamas.

"About ten minutes before the raid was scheduled, Dispatch received two 911 calls. The male caller said 998, hung up, called back, and said 999. Then the call was cut off. The address that came up on the dispatcher's screen was the address where the raid was to take place. She couldn't get a call back to the phone the caller had used, so she immediately went Code 33 to keep the lines clear.

She had the presence of mind to use a private channel because the call was so strange. This also kept the media from hearing any further transmissions, although they had heard the original 998/999 calls.

"Fortunately, I also heard the call and quickly switched channels. The Dispatch Supervisor called me and told me what was going on. We immediately put the raid into full motion. You know what we found, just the body of the Mexican male who had been executed. He wasn't in law enforcement and he didn't have a phone. But, he was recently dead.

"Deputy Baker found a cell phone next to the gate and, when you turned it in to be checked, it was determined that it had only two calls on it, both to 911. There is no way of knowing who had the phone or who made the calls. There were no prints on the phone."

Tom sat there and thought about what he had just heard. He held his coffee cup up to take a sip, but just sat there in silence.

"You already have the identities of the eight men who lived in the house, don't you?" Tom said.

"Yes, and the man who was executed tipped us off that a shipment of heroin and meth would arrive on the 11th. They planned to start distributing it on Monday. But, we found nothing. They move the goods so many ways - by private vehicle, luggage in Greyhound buses, eighteen wheelers, and commercial movers like SeaLand, just to mention a few."

"So the man who made the call, since the phone was found there, and the address on the dispatcher's screen matched the raid location, had to be there just minutes before the raid was due to begin. I wonder what he was doing there? Did he go back, or had he not left yet? Was he one of the seven remaining men?"

"I couldn't tell you. It's just a puzzlement. I'm glad the media didn't get that piece of information. They would have a field day with their speculation."

"What would you think, if you were to speculate?" Tom said.

"I don't know. Maybe a friend or relative of the executed man?"

"But why would he use the code '999'?"

Both men sat silent for a few moments while they tried to come up with a hypothesis.

"After DC Schillings did a cursory examination of the body, he made a guess that the man had been dead between one and two hours," Tom said. "It makes me wonder if our caller was the shooter."

"Who knows," the Lieutenant said. "None of it makes any sense."

CHAPTER EIGHT

*Annie's Home
Sunday Evening
April 13, 2014*

It had been a stressful day. Annie wasn't familiar with the day-to-day workings of the Narcotics Division, but she was a quick study. When Tom shared Lt. Llamas' explanation of the current drug scenario in Kern County, and how it had changed so drastically in the last few years, she was stunned.

Since the man who was executed wasn't law enforcement, the case fell into Annie's lap as a homicide. The Narc Division would give her and Tom copies of any information on the men who lived at the farmhouse. Plans were already in motion to locate Juan Osorio's family and remove them from Mexico. Lt. Llamas feared for their safety, as reprisals by the Sinaloa Drug Cartel were swift and unrelenting.

There was nothing Annie or Jesse could do this evening. After they wrote their reports, Jesse returned to his home. They both needed a good night's sleep to tackle this murder in the morning. Annie wasn't sure where to start, but the first thing she and Tom would do would be to go over all the files that Lt. Llamas left with them and review Lt. Llamas' report on what the alleged purpose of that farmhouse was and what the Narc Division hoped to find in the raid.

The fact that the raid was compromised, and Juan Osorio was identified as an informant, disturbed everyone. Who tipped off the men at the farmhouse? Was there a leak somewhere? Were the men warned by someone in law enforcement?

No answers were forthcoming. Annie sighed and turned her thinking to her relationship with Jesse.

Annie had always been reluctant - and scared - to open herself up to a romantic relationship after the failure of her marriage. Her passion, her main goal in life, was her work. She feared that if she had commitments to a husband and family, they would hamper her ability to do her job properly. And she knew, deep in her heart, that she would resent that fact.

Jesse had pursued her for a couple of years, but she always put him off. A few times she had come close to 'weakening', but a guilt-trip phone call from her mom in Mena, Arkansas, pressuring her to settle down and have kids, always woke her up to the realities of the situation. And, she would back off.

Jesse, however, loved Annie and understood her reluctance to commit to a relationship. He always gave her the space she needed.

After their last case, together, Annie realized how fragile life and love could be. She decided to let down her fences and make a serious attempt to have a relationship with Jesse. Jesse was skeptical, but when he realized that Annie was sincere, he made her make one promise.

"Don't talk to your mom about this until we've been married five years and have two kids," he said, with a smile.

Annie laughed. "I gotcha, Jesse. And I think you're right. She always brings out my demons. I know sometimes I've dumped my resentment of her pressuring me onto you when it wasn't warranted. I'll try to be more realistic and not let her negativity affect how I feel."

And, so it began. Now, Annie wasn't a prude. She believed everybody should live by their own beliefs and conscious. But, one thing she insisted on was they forgo having sex unless they were married. She was raised in a strict Southern Baptist environment and truly believed that physical intimacy should be saved for marriage. This did cause some friction in their relationship, but Jesse respected her wishes.

They hadn't seriously discussed marriage, but Annie could tell it was on Jesse's mind and she wondered how she would react when he asked her.

Maybe I should ask him, she thought, with a chuckle.

Annie poured herself another half-glass of Merlot and snuggled back into her favorite chair with the quilt her grandma had made for her when Annie was in her teens.

I miss my family, she thought. *The thing that drove me away was their refusal to let me live my life. I didn't want to be like my sister, Jen, and marry a local man and settle down and be a housewife with a passel of kids. It's worked out for Jen, but I wanted more. Can I have both? A family and my career?*

She knew there would be compromises and that she wouldn't always like them. *I can do it*, she thought. I love Jesse's family and I've always wanted to meet his grandmother in Cherokee, North Carolina.

She finished her wine and shut down the lamps in the living room. After she settled into bed, she gave the idea of proposing to Jesse one final thought. *I'll do it!* And, when Annie made up her mind, there was no stopping her.

CHAPTER NINE

*Pumpkin Center
Cerro Drive
Sunday 6:00 p.m.
April 13, 2014*

The old farmhouse wasn't the only location owned by the Sinaloa Cartel in Kern County. Over the years, they had purchased several properties, both residential and commercial, under a variety of names and companies.

Alejandro Foncesco had a modest residence in his name as befitted a night supervisor for Greenriver Farms. Lt. Llamas knew about the property, but his team hadn't observed any activity there for some time. This is where the seven men regrouped and their cover story would be that they stayed at the farmhouse until some needed repairs could be done on the Cerro Drive property. The house was in Pumpkin Center, not far from Hwy. 99, south of Bakersfield just before 99 merged with I5 south of Mettler and headed over the Grapevine towards the Los Angeles area.

The house was on a dead-end street, and was surrounded by empty fields and apathetic neighbors. Pumpkin Center was in Kern County's jurisdiction and serviced by the Sheriff's Office. The people who lived there tended to mind their own business. The majority of the population and business owners were Hispanic.

The men sat around the large table that was set up in the combination dining/living room. Sliding glass doors led out into a weed infested backyard. They ate their dinner of *Tortas Ahogadas* with avocados and a sour cream sauce. One of the men, Carlos Ortiz, had worked in his family's restaurant in Lagos de Moreno in Jalisco State and did most of the cooking for the group.

When Alejandro Foncesco finished his meal, he stood up at the head of the table and the men fell silent.

"This has been a sad day, as you all know. I loved Juan Osorio like a brother and it breaks my heart to think that he betrayed us. We will continue this discussion later. Right now, we have more pressing business to discuss.

"We are going to be under scrutiny by the local law enforcement officials and we need to have our stories straight." Alejandro picked up several pieces of paper, looked them over carefully, and said, "I've written out a plausible outline of what our story should be. Pay attention. Here's what we'll say."

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*Monday Morning
April 14, 2014*

Even though Alejandro Foncesco wasn't a big man, he exuded authority from every pore in his body. Born in Sinaloa State in 1957, he became involved with the Sinaloa Cartel before his tenth birthday.

His intense dark brown eyes could drill a hole right through you if he suspected you of lying to him. However, if you saw him walking down a street in Los Angeles, he wouldn't look any different than hundreds of Mexican men. He kept his dark hair cut short. He had the requisite mustache and double chin. If you put a sombrero on his head, a big bow tie around his neck, and gave him a guitar, he could easily be mistaken for a local mariachi singer. Until you looked into his eyes.

Each man was in the US legally and had a job or attended school. All of them regularly sent Western Union money to someone in Mexico. There was no reason to suspect them.

The only red flag for this group was that their farmhouse was close to the I5 corridor. So the NARC Division checked them out. However, it wasn't until Juan Osorio wanted out of the Cartel, and contacted Lt. Llamas, that any connection to the Sinaloa Cartel was confirmed.

The men planned to continue to live their uneventful life in the house on Cerro Drive, but their real place of business was now in a rundown warehouse. The warehouse was an old Quonset hut that had been abandoned many years ago. It was located down a dusty dirt lane south of Taft Highway and wasn't visible from the road. Few people remembered its existence.

Alejandro walked to the double doors on the backside of the Quonset hut and slid the left hand door open. He stood just inside, out of the glaring sun, and took in the scene

Enrique, Ernesto, and Francisco sat in rusting metal folding chairs around an equally decrepit folding table. Carlos and Miguel were in school and Paco was on a job. At the back of the Quonset hut sat the container that held the drugs targeted for distribution in the Kern County area. The drugs were scheduled to be delivered a day late to the clamoring public who couldn't live without their heroin and meth fixes.

The men smoked and talked quietly, still in shock over the execution of Juan Osorio and his betrayal of the Cartel.

Alejandro looked at each man closely. *I wonder if we have any other traitors in our midst?* he thought. *What would make Juan betray the Cartel and forfeit the lives of his family members?* He had known Juan for many years, and his family as well, and just couldn't believe Juan would be so foolish.

Juan Osorio's family would pay the ultimate price with their lives for Juan's betrayal, but Alejandro felt no guilt, only sadness. Everyone knew that the Cartel took care of their own, but if you betrayed the Cartel, the cost was high.

"Listen up," he said as he walked in and took a seat at the head of the table. He glanced fiercely around, as he looked each man in the eye.

"It's business as usual. We got rid of the scum in our midst and we can't let it slow down our schedule any more than it already has. The Cartel, and the weak Americans, depend on us. If you missed work today, for whatever reason, don't miss another day. The detectives may want to talk to us because we lived in the same house as Juan Osorio. Remember, our official story is that we moved here a week ago and didn't realize that Juan still visited the farmhouse. We left the farmhouse because the repairs on the house on Cerro Drive were finished.

"They'll probably talk to me first because I was Juan's supervisor at Greenriver Farms. If they don't know where else to start, these smart detectives talk to co-workers of the deceased. They may or may not want to talk to each of you. If they do, be polite and know nothing about why Juan was out there or who might have wanted to kill him.

"Unfortunately, it will be necessary to make an example of Juan's family to remind everyone what happens when someone betrays the Cartel. Light a candle for the innocent ones who will pay the price for Juan's perfidy."

He stopped and sipped from the can of soda that sat on the table in front of him. He relaxed in his chair and pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. Once the cigarette lit to his satisfaction, he took a deep puff and exhaled.

"Does anyone have anything they want to tell me? Anything you think I should know? Did Juan give any hint that he was talking to the narcs?"

The three men looked down at the table top and shook their heads.

Alejandro slammed his hands down on the table. "That's not good enough!" he said, as he stood up and his face turned a flaming red. "We are responsible for a very important link in the delivery chain up I5. Each of you should know what the other men are doing and thinking. I shouldn't have to find out I have a traitor in my midst from an outsider. Did he drop any clues, or was there a change in his behavior? Did he come home later than usual from work? Was he more quiet than normal? Did he act shifty and nervous? Why didn't someone notice something? We all live here together. It's not that easy to keep secrets from each other."

He sat back down in his chair so abruptly it almost flipped backward. "I'm to blame, also. I now find it necessary to keep closer tabs on each of you."

When Alejandro's message was passed on to the three men who hadn't been present at the Quonset hut, a knot of fear formed in the chest of one of them as he pondered Alejandro's last words. He would be extra careful in the future. But the question that haunted him was who tipped off Alejandro about the raid? Who betrayed Juan Osorio? Was he being watched? He could almost feel the cold steel of a gun pressed against his temple and the pungent odor of gun oil. He imagined the helpless terror that Juan Osorio must have felt in his last minutes.

CHAPTER TEN

Morgue
Monday 10 a.m.
April 14, 2014

This is probably a waste of time, Annie thought, as she parked her Jeep in front of the Morgue. I could figure out the cause of death, the manner of death, and the mechanism of death with a good degree of accuracy.

DC Schillings pulled up and parked next to Annie. He walked over to Annie and gave her a hug, one of the few men in Kern County she had enough respect for to let them be that familiar with her.

"Hey, James," she said, as she hugged him back. "How are things goin' for you today?"

He laughed. "I can think of other things I'd rather do than watch Doc cut someone open." He looked around at the other cars parked nearby. "Are you the only one attending? Tom and Jesse won't be here?"

"What you see is what you get," Annie said, with a big grin on her face. "They have other things to do."

Annie leaned back against the fender of her Jeep before she spoke again. "I was just thinkin' that this autopsy is a waste of taxpayer's money. I know it's necessary, but do you really think that cuttin' him open and weighin' his organs will tell us anything we don't already know?"

James chuckled. "Protocol is protocol, Annie. I'm sure Doc will only order the toxicology tests he feels are necessary."

Annie and James walked up the steps to the main doors. "I know, you're right. I just have a feelin' that this case will go 'cold' fast. Laine didn't find anything significant. The cell phone by the main gate that Deputy Baker spotted was the biggest clue. There wasn't even enough dust on the floor to tell how many people had been there recently."

"Well, Annie, that's a clue in itself. It means that the place was thoroughly cleaned recently, so they couldn't have moved out too long ago."

"Yeah, that's true. I'll see what the men say when I interview them. I'm sure they've had time to get their story straight."

They walked across the lobby and greeted the receptionist, Nicole Tunnicliff, before they headed to the autopsy suite.

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Kern County's contract Forensic Pathologist, Dr. Preston Richards, was in the autopsy room getting ready to perform the autopsy when Annie and James arrived.

"Where's Joseph?" Annie said, when she entered the autopsy suite and didn't see her favorite autopsy assistant (*diener*) who was usually hopping around the room putting everything into place.

"He's on vacation, believe it or not," Doc said. "I practically had to fire him to get him to take some time off. I finally told him Buster needed a change of scenery and suggested he take him to Valley Springs to see what the local tarantula population was doing."

Annie laughed. Buster was one of Joseph Al-Fassi's pet tarantulas. Annie had a morbid fear of spiders and one of their cases had featured Black Widow spiders as the murder weapon. At one point, she and Tom had reason to visit Joseph's home and she was introduced to Buster. It took her about two seconds to decide to wait outside when Joseph took Buster out of his terrarium and let the hairy tarantula walk up his arm.

Joseph had a full darkroom in his basement and a good sense of humor. He decided to make a gift for Annie - a photograph of Buster. The picture was a close-up of Buster with one of his front legs lifted so it looked like he was waving at the camera. A hand-written note at the bottom of the picture said, 'Annie, I wuv U. Will you be my friend? - Buster'.

Annie laughed when she received this gift and hung it on a prominent wall of her home.

Since that time, she and Joseph had become friends, but Annie still wouldn't come near Buster or the other two tarantulas that Joseph kept as pets.

Annie looked up from her reminiscing and realized Doc was speaking to her. "I'm sorry, Doc. I was just thinking about the first time I met Buster."

"I said, maybe he'll bring back a baby tarantula for you," Doc said, and started laughing.

Annie shivered. "Let's hope not. That's the last thing I need."

Just then a young female walked into the autopsy suite. Annie had seen her around the morgue, but they had never been introduced.

"Everyone, I'd like you to meet Manjeet Kaur. She's filling in for Joseph while he's on vacation. She's a medical doctor in her own right in her country, India, and is working on the credentials she needs in America to become a Forensic Pathologist.

Just as the introductions were finished, the autopsy assistant in charge of x-rays arrived. The four of them made room for the technician to take his pictures and then stepped back around the autopsy table when he left the suite to have the x-rays processed.

Before they suited up for the autopsy, DC Schillings verified that the body was that of the man he had brought in from the farmhouse. After he checked his toe tag, he and Annie went to suit up.

Annie and James returned to the autopsy suite just as Manny Espinoza, the autopsy photographer, finished taking pictures of the front side of the body. Joelle Marchand, the autopsy videographer, stood to the side while she waited to videotape the autopsy. Annie put the case folder on an empty gurney and pulled out the reports she had and the crime scene photos taken by Tom and James. She was prepared for any questions that Doc might have.

"Okay, if everyone is ready, I'll begin," Doc said. He turned on his mic and began his narrative.

The body was brought to the morgue in a black body bag. The decedent was wearing a pair of steel-toed work boots, two pairs of white socks, blue jeans, a leather belt, a white V-neck t-shirt, boxer shorts, and a multi-colored plaid flannel shirt.

The shoes, pants, belt, and shirt were all buttoned and zipped and in their normal position. Bloodstains were noted on the clothes, especially on the upper portion of the flannel shirt.

He also wore a plain gold wedding band and a crucifix on a gold chain.

All of the above-mentioned items will be given to Detective Annie Avants to be forwarded to the forensics lab for further analysis.

When Manny and Joelle finished taking their pictures and videos of the front side of the body, Manjeet and Doc carefully washed the front of the body.

The body is that of an unembalmed, well-developed, well-nourished, Hispanic male between the ages of 40 years and 45 years. His weight is 160 pounds and he is 66 inches in length. The scalp is covered with dark brown hair. The eyes are dark brown.

The Deputy Coroner's report states he was found slumped over on his right side and that his wrists were bound behind his back and his ankles were bound. The location was in the living room of an old farmhouse, and the time was approximately 3:30 a.m. yesterday morning, 13 April 2014.

DC Schillings removed a wallet from the victim's back pocket at the scene in order to establish identification. It was bagged and tagged and given to Det. Annie Avants to place into evidence. It was determined that the deceased's name was Juan Osorio and that he was a legal resident - though not a naturalized citizen - of the United States.

He was pronounced by Deputy Coroner Schillings at 3:50 a.m.

The ambient temperature was approximately 67 degrees F. DC Schillings took the body temperature of the victim and it was 96.8 degrees F. With this information, and due to the lack of rigor or any insect infestation, it's fair to establish that the victim had been dead for less than two hours when his body was found.

He paused for a moment before he continued his visual examination of the front side of the body.

The cause of death was a single 9mm bullet fired at close range to the victim's left forehead. I can see bruising on the left side of his body, near the ribcage, but palpitation of the ribs doesn't show any broken or dislocated bones.

He asked Manjeet to remove the bags that were tied around each of the victim's hands. He picked up the victim's right hand and examined it carefully.

There is a little dirt under his fingernails, but nothing unusual.

He scraped under each fingernail and gave the scrapings to Manjeet to put in a bag and tag for evaluation. He repeated this procedure with the left hand.

There are minor abrasions on his wrists from the plastic zip ties someone used to bind him. There are no abrasions on his ankles which may have been protected by the two pairs of socks he was wearing.

Doc proceeded to inspect the torso of the victim

He has several scars on his body, which we will document with photographs, but they all appear to be old.

The group looked up as the x-ray technician entered the autopsy suite. He walked over to the light board against the wall and posted the x-rays. Doc walked over and studied the x-rays after he thanked the technician for being so quick.

X-rays of the head show a gunshot wound on the central portion of the forehead just to the left of midline and show large caliber missile fragments in the central head region with other fragments in the forehead region and smaller fragments dispersed through the midcranial region.

There is nothing remarkable about the rest of his x-rays. Sometime in his life, he broke his right upper arm and his left lower leg. Neither of the breaks appears recent and both healed correctly.

"Manjeet, let's turn his over and see what we can find on his back side," Doc said.

When that was done, he continued with his visual inspection.

There are some scars on his lower back indicative of being 'caned', probably as punishment when he was a child. They appear old. I find nothing else unusual.

Doc clicked off his microphone and stood back.

"Joelle, Manny take your videos and photos of the back side of the body. Manny, get close-ups of the head area."

When they had finished, Manjeet hosed off the back of the body and helped Doc turn the victim back over so he was lying face up. She put a wooden block under his head and again hosed off the front side of the body and the table. Now, they were ready to begin to open the thoracic and abdominal cavities for inspection.

With a large scalpel, Manjeet made a Y incision beginning at the front of each shoulder down to the bottom of the breastbone. She then cut straight down to the pubic area. This cut, which was deep, extended to the rib cage on the chest and then cut through the abdominal wall below the rib cage.

Her next step was to peel the skin, soft tissue, and muscle away from the chest wall, using her scalpel to help loosen everything. The front of the rib cage and the strap muscles from the front of the neck were exposed as she pulled the chest flap up.

Using a bone cutter, Manjeet opened the rib cage. This exposed the upper interior organs when the chest plate was loosened and removed.

Doc cut open the pericardial sac along with the pulmonary artery where it left the heart. He tied off the artery after he examined it for blood clots, but found none.

To expose the abdominal organs, Manjeet next opened the abdomen further. She did this by dissecting the abdominal muscle away from the bottom of the rib cage and diaphragm.

She carefully removed the organs and weighed them. Next, she put them on the dissection table and Doc made his slices from each organ. She mounted these samples on slides so they could be examined later.

Their next task was to take samples of vitreous humor, urine, blood, bile, and stomach contents. Manjeet labeled these and set them aside.

Doc and Manjeet then turned their attention to the head of the victim. The cranial incision started behind one ear, continued across the top of the scalp, and ended at the opposite ear. Manjeet then pulled the front portion of the scalp down over the victim's face. Manjeet pulled the rear portion of his scalp down over the back of his neck. This left the top of the skull exposed.

Doc continued:

The skin of the scalp is reflected in the usual manner. Three-fourths of an inch to the left of the anterior midline, there is a gunshot entry wound. The wound consists of a 3/4-inch circular hole with circumferential abrasion and slight marginal radial laceration. There is gunshot residue on the forehead and charring of the wound.

When Doc finished detailing the gunshot wound and the damage it caused, Manjeet cut through the skull with a Stryker saw. This was always Annie's least favorite part of the autopsy. She hated the sound the saw made as it bit into the bone of the skull.

Manjeet reached in and cut the brain loose, then gently removed it for Doc's examination.

When Doc finished his examination of the brain, Manjeet put it in a jar of formalin. This would make the brain firmer and easier to examine when Doc had more time.

Before Doc concluded his examination of the body, he turned to Manjeet and said, "Thank you, Manjeet for your help today. You did an excellent job."

"Thank you, Doc, for giving me this opportunity," Manjeet said, as she began to put the organs back in the body and closed up the Y incision.

Annie and DC Schillings gathered up the bagged and tagged evidence that would go to various labs and the evidence locker. Doc had decided he would send the fluid samples to the toxicology lab.

"Thanks, Doc," Annie said. "Let us know when a prelim report is ready."

Annie and DC Schillings stood outside the morgue next to Annie's car. "Well, there were no surprises here, were there?" Annie said.

"Nope," he said. "Doc's description of the wound matches what we observed from the blood stains and blood spatter at the scene. The weapon and, presumably, the clothes of the shooter will have blood spatter from the entry wound. Find those, and you've got your shooter."

"We'd never get probable cause to search the house where the men now live. This is not going to be easy," Annie said. "I don't even know where to start."

James put his arm around Annie's shoulder and said, "C'mon, Annie. I'll buy you lunch. If you feel like eating, that is."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*24th Street Cafe
Bakersfield
Monday Noon
April 14, 2014*

"So, where do you want to eat?" James asked Annie as they headed for their vehicles.

"I've been cravin' a hot meatloaf sandwich with potato salad and the best place in Bakersfield is the 24th Street Cafe. Have you eaten there?"

James laughed. "Yes, I eat there on average once a week. My wife, Marge, is from the Midwest and she loves their food. It's like comfort food for her."

"How's she doin'?" Annie said. "I haven't seen her in ages."

James opened the door of his car before he turned around to Annie with a big grin on his face. "Then you probably haven't heard our news," he said. "We're expecting our first baby in August."

Annie ran over and gave James a big hug. "I'm so happy for you. I bet Marge can hardly wait."

"She's counting the minutes, that's for sure. We talked about it a lot and decided that she'll be a stay-at-home mom. It's what she's always dreamed of doing. Now, we can't decide if we want a house in a cozy neighborhood with a white picket fence or a small farm. She was raised on a farm and is always itchin' to have a huge garden and to can and freeze what she grows for us to eat during the winter. She says it's the only way she can be sure the food is organic and pure."

"That's so wonderful. I'm a country girl at heart, too, and I still find myself cooking enough for a small army and then putting the extra in the freezer for later. I try to eat what's in season and do most of my shopping at farmer's markets."

Annie hopped into her Jeep and followed James into town.

After the waitress seated them and brought their menus, Annie and James sat in silence for a few moments.

"I already know what I want," Annie said. "What about you?"

"I'm leaning towards the chicken pot pie. I'll probably want to take a nap at my desk, but it sounds perfect."

They placed their orders and sipped on tall, frosty glasses of Southern Sweet Tea.

Annie finally shared her thoughts about the Juan Osorio murder. "I'm afraid we'll never find the shooter. It's too 'clean' of a kill. I doubt the other men will tell us anything useful and I'm sure they'll deny being at the farm when Juan was killed."

James took a sip of his tea before he answered. "Well, we know they lived there because Lt. Llamas has satellite surveillance of their presence. However, it's a week or so old. So, we don't know when they moved. At the moment, we don't even know where."

The waitress brought their orders so Annie waited until she left before she answered James.

"If they're gonna play innocent, they'll tell me their new residence when I do the interviews this afternoon. There's no reason for them to hide where they live."

"I'm goin' to Bakersfield College after we eat to meet with the two who are students. I'm probably deludin' myself, but I hope they'll be less sophisticated and hardened than the older men. Tom's gonna try to make contact with the two gardeners, the janitor, and the bouncer. I'll interview the man who works nights at Greenriver Farms this evening."

"How's the crime scene investigation going?" James said, as he crumbled up the top crust of his pot pie to let the steam escape so he could dig in.

"Laine was still there right before I left for the autopsy. She's havin' her team go over the outbuildings with a fine-toothed comb lookin' for any sign of drugs. No luck so far. Laine and Merilee are tacklin' the house, but she says it's clean. Just a little dusty. The men hadn't moved out very long ago.

"However, she notes that the floor of the front room, where the body was found, was dusty, but the dust had been disturbed recently. She said it looked like several people had been in that room at the same time, but she couldn't pinpoint the time. The dust layer around the victim was the same as the dust layer in the immediate area of the front room."

Annie took another bite of her sandwich and potato salad.

"That gives me the creepy feeling that maybe all the other men were in the room when Juan Osorio was executed."

"Did Laine get any usable footprints?" James said.

"No. Everything was scuffed up. Nothing around the body was disturbed after the victim was shot. Well, there was a void in the blood spatter and a very faint partial boot print from where the shooter appears to have backed up into the spatter from the entry wound. Laine wasn't sure she could do much with the print itself, but if we find the shoe with the victim's blood, that'll give us a head start," Annie said, as she covered her mouth with her napkin so she could laugh.

James thought for a moment. "And, we don't have any probable cause to get a warrant to search their clothes."

"Nope."

They finished up their lunch and James insisted on paying the tab.

"Thank you, James. That was the best meal I've had in a long time. I always forget this place is here."

The waitress was walking by when Annie said this and she stopped for a moment and said, "Sweetie, why don't you take one of our menus and keep it on your 'fridge or somewhere where you can be reminded of us?"

Annie took the proffered menu and said, "Thank you. That's a good idea. I'll keep it at my desk and half the Sheriff's Department will be droolin' to come here."

The waitress laughed as she walked off and Annie and James returned to their cars.

"Good luck with your interviews," James said as Annie buckled herself into her Jeep.

"Yep, it should be interestin'. I haven't decided whether I should let them know I understand Spanish, or not. If they think I don't, they may speak among themselves and say something they shouldn't."

"Just be your sweet Southern Belle self. They may let their guard down. Are you going to talk to them together, or separately?"

"I was gonna keep them separated, but they've had enough time to coordinate their stories, so why waste the time? I'll talk to the students together. That might also lead to them speakin' to each

other in Spanish. I'll let you know if I get anything interesting," Annie said as she started the engine of her Jeep and drove off with a wave.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Bakersfield College
Monday 2:30 p.m.
April 14, 2014

When Annie arrived at Bakersfield College, her first stop was to the office to let administration know she was there. The college had faxed the schedules for Miguel Peña and Carlos Ortiz to Annie earlier. After Annie studied the schedules, she decided to wait outside the classroom for Miguel Peña. His class finished at 2:45 p.m. Carlos' class ended at 3:00 p.m. Annie asked a school counselor to meet Carlos when he exited his class and bring him to the conference room the school had set aside for Annie's interviews.

She leaned against the wall opposite the classroom door and waited. The bell rang and the students started pouring out. This was the last class of the day for some of them, including Miguel Peña.

She studied his photograph while she waited for the final bell. He was a good looking man from Lagos de Moreno in Jalisco State. He was a little pudgy, carrying 170 pounds on his 5'-7" frame. Miguel was twenty-four years old and the youngest of the group. His course of study was through the Agriculture Department for Plant Science-Crops Emphasis. Annie theorized that he would be more involved in improving the crops back in Mexico than in the distribution of drugs in Kern County. Unlike a lot of Mexican men, he didn't have a mustache and kept his dark brown hair cut short, in a fashionable 'American' style. When he stepped out of the classroom, two cute young female students hung off his arms, and he was sporting aviator sunglasses.

Annie approached him and flashed her badge. "Miguel Peña? I'm Detective Annie Avants from the Kern County Sheriff's Office. I'm investigating the death of Juan Osorio and was hoping you could tell me something about him."

He stopped and looked Annie up and down. The two girls with him made themselves scarce.

He leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. Annie was tempted to smack the smirk off his face, but she restrained herself.

"Sure, *chica*, I'd be glad to help a cutie like you. What do you want to know?"

"I have a conference room set aside so we can talk in private. Please come with me," Annie said, as she started walking down the hall.

The counselor was already seated inside with Carlos Ortiz when Annie and Miguel entered the conference room. Even though twenty-six-year-old Carlos Ortiz was older than Miguel, he looked much younger. He stood 5'5" and weighed around 155 pounds. He kept his dark brown hair shoulder length and had a faint mustache. His eyes surprised Annie. They were a bright emerald green.

Annie wasn't going to let his innocent looks detract her. He was studying Chemistry through the Physical Sciences Department and the front office told her that he was one of the top students in the Chemistry program. Annie figured the Cartel was grooming him for the meth market. He was also from Lagos de Moreno in Jalisco State.

"Thanks, counselor. I can take it from here," Annie said, and the counselor left the room and closed the door behind him.

The two men greeted each other in Spanish. Annie had decided that she wasn't going to let any of the men she interviewed know that she spoke fluent Spanish. She hoped they would be fooled by her innocent looks and assume she was an air-head with a badge. It wouldn't be the first time this strategy worked to her advantage.

The two men continued speaking in Spanish and watched Annie to see if she acted like she understood what they said. When she didn't react, they started speculating what she might want, but they didn't say anything helpful.

"I'm going to talk to both of you together because you've had plenty of time to sync your stories, so there's no reason to waste my time talking to you separately.

"As I said, I'm Detective Annie Avants from the Robbery/Homicide Unit of the Kern County Sheriff's Office. I'm the lead investigator into the death of Juan Osorio who, as I understand it, was a roommate of yours at the farmhouse off Old River Road.

"Since the farmhouse has been abandoned, I'll begin by getting your present address and when you moved out of the farmhouse."

Miguel pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. "We moved on the 10th of the month, a Thursday." He handed Annie the paper and continued, "Here's the address. It's on Cerro Drive in the little village called Pumpkin Center. Are you familiar with Pumpkin Center?"

Annie took the paper and copied the address and date they moved into her notebook.

"Oh, yes, I know Pumpkin Center. The Mexican restaurant there is a favorite of mine. There's a lot of crime in Pumpkin Center so I know most of the people who live there."

She then turned her attention to Carlos and said, "Why did the eight of you move out of the farmhouse? Isn't the farmhouse larger than the house in Pumpkin Center? I'm familiar with Cerro Drive, and the homes there are just regular ranch style homes - usually with three bedrooms and two bathrooms. Isn't that a little crowded for eight men?"

Carlos fidgeted in his seat while he thought of his answer. "Well, there's a room like a den, which we use as a bedroom. So it's only two men per room. Now, with poor Juan dead, one of the rooms has one man. The house is more modern, it just needed some repairs. We're closer to transportation and shopping. I do most of the cooking and I like the Mexican grocery store just on the other side of Taft Highway."

"And who would be the lucky man to bunk by himself? Your leader?" Annie said.

Miguel stiffened his spine and appeared defensive before he leaned across the table towards Annie.

"We don't have a leader. We're just friends who bunk together to save money to send home to our families or, like me and Carlos, to get a better education."

"Well, don't get in a snit. I was just askin'. Who do you think will get his own room?"

Carlos answered. "I don't know. Alejandro, Enrique, and Ernesto are the oldest and have been here the longest. I think Alejandro bought the house, but I'm not sure."

Annie wrote in her notebook for a couple of minutes while the men talked softly in Spanish. They were nervous and worried that they were telling Annie too much that was none of her business.

Annie looked up and said, "Tell me the last time you saw Juan Osorio. Why do you think he was out at the farmhouse alone?"

As she said this, she pulled the crime scene photos out of her folder and pushed them across the table so the men could see them. They paled a little and didn't move to touch the photos.

"Everybody helped move and clean up the farmhouse. Me and Carlos couldn't help until school was out for the day, but we were all there at the finish, including Juan. I didn't have a class on Saturday, and he was in the kitchen of the new house when I got up and ate breakfast," Miguel said. "We had finished moving by then. Everything was moved Thursday. We started sleeping in Pumpkin Center Thursday night, and went back to the farmhouse to clean Friday and Saturday morning."

"That's the last time I saw him also," Carlos said. "Miguel and I took off for the day and went straight to the new house that evening. Juan wasn't there."

"Had he acted strange lately?" Annie said. "Did you notice anything unusual about his actions or behavior in the days before his murder?"

Both men shook their heads.

"Juan was older than us and worked nights. We didn't see him that often. Everybody went about their own business. A few times a week we would eat together, but that was about the extent of our contact with each other," Miguel said.

"When was the last time you were at the farmhouse?"

"When we left the farmhouse on Saturday morning, neither of us had a reason to go back. We had finished moving out and cleaning up," Carlos said. "There was nothing there."

"Only two of the men who live there have vehicles. How do you get around?"

"Alejandro and Enrique have SUVs," Carlos said. "Alejandro works nights and Juan usually rode with him. When Alejandro and Enrique sleep during the day, anyone that needs to can use their SUVs. The gardeners usually drive Alejandro's SUV to their jobs because they have tools and stuff to haul. We sometimes take Enrique's SUV or use one of the two motor scooters we keep. Francisco and Enrique ride together. Francisco drops Enrique off at the bar where he works and then goes to the Bank of America building and does his cleaning. When he's finished, he goes to the bar and waits for Enrique to finish up."

"What's the name of the bar?"

"La Tuna," Miguel said.

Annie stood up and said, "Will you excuse me for a moment? Don't go anywhere. I have to make a quick phone call. I'll be right back."

Annie didn't need to make a phone call, she just wanted to give them a few minutes to sit and wonder what she was doing. Who was she calling? She stood outside the door and listened. *I wish we were downtown in a regular interrogation room with a mirror*, she thought. Their conversation didn't shed any light on what she wanted to know, so she returned to the room.

"Sorry about that. I only have a few more questions and then you can go. You're both from Lagos de Moreno. Why did you choose to come to Bakersfield to study? There are nice colleges in Mexico."

"Other men we know attended school at Bakersfield College and were impressed with the level of education they received and the professors. We decided to come here and see for ourselves," Miguel said.

"Also, there's a large Hispanic community in Bakersfield so we don't feel out of place," Carlos added.

Annie decided to ask some more pointed questions.

"What do you know about the Sinaloa Cartel?"

She saw the surprise on their faces, and then a hint of a smirk on Carlos' face that he tried to hide.

"It's the most badass Cartel in Mexico," Carlos said.

"What do you mean, 'badass'?" Annie said.

They took over from all the other Cartels and now have billions of dollars. The peasants sing their praises," Miguel said.

"But what about the drugs they bring into America and the people who suffer and die because of the Cartels?" Annie said.

Carlos scooted down in his chair and looked at Annie like she was retarded. "It's their own fault," he said. "Don't you read the newspapers? Rich, white folks love heroin and meth. Or they get addicted because their doctors quit giving them prescriptions for painkillers."

"So you think what the Cartels do here in America is justified?" Annie said.

"I didn't say that. I'm just telling you the reality of the situation. I don't do drugs, and neither does Carlos, but you can find drugs all over the campus and Bakersfield."

"Uh huh," Annie said. "Do you know anyone in Kern County who works for the Sinaloa Cartel?"

The two men looked at each other and shook their heads. "Do you think they go around advertising that they work for the Sinaloa Cartel? They didn't get as powerful as they are by being stupid," Miguel said.

"You didn't answer my question. Do you personally know of anyone in Kern County who works for the Sinaloa Cartel?"

"No," both men said in unison.

"Have you ever been questioned by anyone in law enforcement about drug trafficking in Kern County?"

Again, the two students answered in the negative.

"Okay, that's all I have for today. I may want to talk to you again," Annie said, as she returned the photos to her folder and stood. The two men pushed their chairs away from the table and stood to leave. Annie handed each of them one of her cards and said, "Call me if you think of anything that might help me in my investigation into the brutal murder of Juan Osorio. I'm sure you'd like to see the person caught who is responsible for his death."

"Either my partner, Detective Thomas Weston, or I will be talkin' to the other men who lived in the farmhouse. We'll discover who committed this horrific crime."

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Annie called Tom from her Jeep after she left the two men. "They're lyin'. Their body language spoke more than they did. They either know or saw something. and they're not talkin'. It'll be interestin' to see what kind of story you get when you do your interviews. Pay more attention to what they don't say than to what they say. And refresh your knowledge of body language."

Tom laughed, as he leaned back in his chair and took a sip of coffee. "I don't speak Spanish, Annie. How would I understand their body language?"

"Don't be a dope, Tom," Annie said. "Body language is universal. I told you to go to that seminar, but you scoffed. Now you probably wish you'd listened to me."

"No, not really. I'm good at picking up people's unspoken signals. I'll watch these guys and see what I can find out. I'll be talking to them first thing in the morning. We can compare notes when I get into the office."

"Yeah, I'll do my interview with Alejandro Foncesco tonight. I got a feelin' we'll be filing all their statements in a very slim file. They probably won't even make a dent in the murder book."

Tom looked over at the murder book which sat on Annie's desk. He pulled it to him and leafed through it. "Hell, Annie, the whole case so far isn't making a dent in the murder book. Unless something happens soon, we're going cold case with this one."

Annie thought about Juan's slumped over body at the crime scene. She knew Juan was aware of the consequences of talking to the narcs, but he still took the chance to make a difference. "No, Tom, I won't let it go cold. I'll think about Juan's sacrifice to make a better life for himself and that'll keep me on track."

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Annie sat down in the break room at Greenriver Farms and waited for Alejandro to arrive. It was a stark room that wouldn't encourage the employees to linger there during their breaks. The floors were cement and the walls were cement blocks that had been plastered over and painted a murky green color.

The furniture looked like it had been there for years. The tables were wooden folding tables and the chairs were metal folding chairs like you'd use in a card game. Some were green, some blue, and some brown. All of them were worn and scratched.

Various vending machines lined the walls and looked half-stocked. *I wouldn't want to check the expiration dates on those sandwiches*, Annie thought.

On each table were several bottles of Tapitío Salsa Picante Hot Sauce, one of Annie's favorites. *Maybe the hot sauce kills the bacteria from the food*, she thought.

Annie looked up from her notebook when she heard footsteps approach. She could tell by the way he held his body that Alejandro was not a happy camper. *I wonder if he was a mariachi singer in a previous life? All he needs is a sombrero and a guitar*, she thought, as she checked him out.

He jerked out a chair and sat across from Annie.

"I hope this won't take too long because I have work to do. I'm short one man in my crew now, with Juan dead, and I still have to get everything finished on time."

Annie looked straight at him and said, "A man is dead. That's more important than getting X number of carrots boxed up, don't you think?"

Annie introduced herself and pulled the crime scene photos from her folder.

"My job is to find the person responsible for Juan Osorio's death. This is not an interrogation, but an investigative interview. When I get enough of the puzzle pieces together, the whole crime will fall into place. I'm very good at what I do. I appreciate your cooperation. I'm sure you want the responsible person brought to justice just as much as I do."

Alejandro leaned back in his chair and thought for a moment before he spoke. "I don't know what I can tell you that the other guys you interviewed haven't already said. He kept to himself most of the time. I saw him more than anyone else because we drove to work together. It pissed me off that he hadn't shown up for work since the day we moved. Maybe he liked it better at the farmhouse and was staying out there. I wouldn't know."

Annie pulled her notebook out of her messenger bag and set it on the table between her and Alejandro. "So, you started sleeping at the Cerro Drive house on Thursday night? And Juan Osorio didn't show up for work or at the new house, as far as you know, on Thursday or Friday nights?"

"That's right."

Annie opened her notebook and read for a moment. "That's funny. One of the other men saw him Saturday morning at the new house. He was in the kitchen."

"When was the last time you were at the farmhouse?"

Alejandro thought for a couple of minutes. "I didn't return to the farm after we moved the last load of stuff on Thursday night. I work on Thursday and Friday nights. I slept most of Friday and ran some errands."

Annie looked at him carefully as he rattled on. *He's nervous, and he can't stop talkin', she thought. I'll rattle him a little more.*

"Do you think he had connections with the Sinaloa Cartel and that's where they met?"

Alejandro looked up, startled. "What on earth makes you think that?"

"Just askin'", Annie said. "You know by now the Narcs and SWAT Team had a raid scheduled for Sunday mornin' at 3:00 a.m. You conveniently moved out a couple of days before. Someone could have tipped you off about the raid."

Alejandro leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "We have nothing to hide so your raid would have been a waste of time."

"I'm just sayin' that maybe Juan had a delivery set up with the Cartel that you didn't know about. That's a big property and they could have met away from the farmhouse. If he got tipped off about the raid and didn't warn the Cartel, maybe that's why he was killed. Someone could have thought he ratted them out. What do you think, Senor Foncesco?"

Alejandro laughed. He laughed so loud and strong that tears ran down his chubby cheeks. "You're giving Juan credit for being a lot smarter than he was. The Cartel doesn't mess around with lower intelligent men. They can't take the chance."

"Oh, so you know people from the Cartel and how they work?" Annie said.

Alejandro plunked his chair back down on the floor with a bang and leaned across the table towards Annie. "That's not what I said. The Cartel is powerful and huge. They wouldn't be that way if they relied on people like Juan Osorio."

Annie held his gaze and said, "So, okay, why do you think Juan was out there alone and what was he doin' that got him executed."

"I have no idea, ma'am, and you're just wasting my time sitting here speculating about what could have happened. I wasn't there. I don't know what happened. I don't know what Juan was up to when he wasn't at work or asleep at the farmhouse. Good luck with your investigation. Now, I have a job to do and I'm shorthanded, so if you'll excuse me."

Alejandro stood up to leave.

"I just have one more question. How many people do you know personally who work for the Sinaloa Cartel?"

Alejandro smirked. "I don't know a single man stupid enough to tell anyone that he works for the Sinaloa Cartel. Again, if someone works for the Cartel, they keep it private. Wouldn't you?"

Annie sat at the old table and watched Alejandro Foncesco walk out of the break room. *He's lyin' about a lot of things, Annie thought, and I'm gonna find out what he's afraid of.*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Cerro Drive

Tuesday 7 a.m. before the gardeners left for the day

April 15, 2014

Tom pulled up across the street from the house on Cerro Drive. From what the students had told Annie, the gardeners left the house as soon as Alejandro Foncesco arrived home from his night shift at Greenriver Farms. They used his SUV to go to wherever their jobs were that day. Annie told him that one of the gardeners was out of town, but she didn't know his name. Lt. Llamas had provided Tom a photo of each man except for the missing gardener.

His goal today was to speak with the other gardener, Ernesto Quintero, and the bouncer at LaTuna, Enrique Murillo, who usually got home around 8:00 a.m.

That would leave just the janitor, Francisco Piñeda, and the absent Paco Cifuentes to interview. If the janitor was at the house, Tom hoped to talk with him as well. That would just about wrap it up until the other gardener returned.

Ten minutes after Tom arrived, he saw the SUV pull into the driveway. He and Annie had decided that she wouldn't tell Alejandro about Tom's pending visit to their house during her interview with him the evening before.

Tom waited a few minutes and then walked across the street and knocked on the door. He heard a shuffling inside the house and then a gruff voice said, "Who is it?"

Tom stood to the side of the door and said, "This is Detective Thomas Weston from the Kern County Sheriff's Office. I'm here to talk with Ernesto Quintero, Enrique Murillo, and Francisco Piñeda."

There was no response for a moment and then the man said, "Whadda you want to talk to them about?"

"I'm investigating the death of Juan Osorio and I believe they can help me find some answers I need to put this matter to rest. Please open the door. I can either talk to the men here or have some deputies come and escort them to the Sheriff's Office and talk to them there."

Tom heard several locks being released and then the door swung open. Standing before him was the man he knew as Alejandro Foncesco, who had already been interviewed by Annie.

Alejandro didn't say anything, just motioned for Tom to follow him inside. The entry led straight ahead into the living room, with a kitchen and dining area off to the right. A hallway led to the left, which Tom assumed went to the bedrooms. The rooms were large and, from what Tom could see, the house was clean and well-kept.

Tom followed Alejandro into the living room. There was a comfortable looking couch, love seat, and several easy chairs spread around the room, as well as a large dining room table. The dining room was open to the living room, so the feel was more like a great room than two separate rooms. An island, with bar stools, separated the dining room from the well-appointed kitchen.

"Have a seat," Foncesco said to Tom. "I'll go see who's awake."

Tom took a seat at the table. At the far side of the room, two sliding doors looked out onto a patio and a large backyard that looked like it hadn't been tended to for quite some time. A rototiller and other garden equipment sat on the patio and it appeared to Tom that the gardeners intended to fix up the yard in the near future.

A few minutes later, Ernesto came into the room, dressed for his gardening job. Enrique followed him, looking like he had been sleeping and was disturbed. Foncesco entered and said, "Francisco will be up in a minute. Would you like some coffee?"

Tom nodded to the two men who took places at the table and said, "Yes, that would be very kind of you. I apologize for intruding on you so early, but I thought it would be easier to talk to as many of you as I could at the same time.

"The lead investigator, Det. Annie Avants, already talked to the two students yesterday. Last night, she talked to Senor Foncesco. The only person we will still need to talk to is Paco Cifuentes. Do you know when he will be returning from Mexico?"

Both of the men guffawed at this question. Just then Francisco walked into the room, his long hair wet and slicked back like he'd just taken a quick shower. He heard the tail-end of Tom's question and laughed. "Paco left right after we ate on one of the motor scooters. He's got a pretty seniorita that he can't stay away from. He takes off from time to time and we never know for sure how long he'll be gone. He doesn't tell us her name or where she lives, because he's afraid we'll show up and tease him. We suspect she lives somewhere in the Los Angeles area."

"That's okay," Tom said. "I may not need to bother him. I just have some general questions about your former roommate, Juan Osorio, and what he was doing the last few days of his life."

Just then Foncesco entered the room with a tray that held several coffee cups, sugar, and a small carton of fresh cream. He returned to the kitchen and brought out the coffee pot and put it on a heat resistant pad next to the cups. He poured a cup for each of them and they helped themselves to whatever they fancied for their coffee.

When Tom finished doctoring up his coffee, he took a sip and then said, "This is very good coffee. Thank you."

"You're welcome. We buy these beans from El Salvador from the Los Planes farm. It's not the most expensive coffee you can buy, but we don't drink much. When we do, we want a good cup."

Tom took another sip, then started his questions. "I don't want to keep you. I know three of you need to get some sleep, so I'll be brief.

"I would like each of you to tell me the last time you saw Juan Osorio, and why do you think he was at the farmhouse? Also, did he have any enemies that may have wanted him killed?"

Tom knew he was walking a thin line with these men. He was sure they knew what had happened to Juan Osorio, and why. Tom was interested in their reaction when he treated them like friends of the victim, not suspects in Juan Osorio's murder and drug traffickers in Kern County.

Enrique said, "Juan was a loner. He liked to spend time alone. We all moved together and he seemed to like this new house. I don't know why he would have gone back out to the farmhouse. Do you think maybe he was killed somewhere else and then dumped there?"

Tom paused for a moment seeming to consider this option. "From the evidence we found at the scene, it would appear he was killed there. I can't go into much more detail than that since it's an ongoing investigation.

"When did you last see him?" Tom said again.

"After we moved all the stuff and cleaned up the old farmhouse, I slept for a while and then went to work. I didn't see him again," Enrique said.

"What about you?" Tom said, as he looked at Ernesto.

"Paco and I didn't work Thursday, Friday, and Saturday because we were busy with the move and the cleaning. It was late when we got back to the house Saturday afternoon, and we were tired. I think we ate some food Carlos had cooked ahead of time. Then I went to my room. I don't know what anyone else did, but I don't remember seeing Juan again after that."

Tom looked over at Francisco, who squirmed in his seat before he answered. He was the quiet type and didn't like being in the spotlight.

"I had to get to work at my cleaning job. Enrique and I drove into town in his SUV. I dropped him off at La Tuna and went to the bank to get my work done. They're very picky. When I finished, I went to La Tuna and waited for Enrique to finish up. We went home and went to bed. I don't remember seeing Juan Friday or Saturday."

Tom wrote in his notebook for a couple of minutes while the men fidgeted in their seats.

"And none of you have any knowledge of anyone who might have wanted to harm Juan? Any enemies or problems he had with other folks?"

All the men shook their heads and mumbled 'no.'

Tom stood up and put his notebook and pen back in his pocket. "Okay, that'll do it for today. I may have more questions later as the investigation progresses. Thank you for your time."

Tom walked back out to his Jeep Cherokee and sat for a moment. He noticed someone peeking out of the curtains from the kitchen window. A few minutes later, Ernesto came out of the house and loaded his gardening equipment into the back of Alejandro's SUV. When Tom glanced into the open garage, something nagged at him. Something someone had said wasn't right. He just couldn't think of what it was.

While Ernesto was in the garage, Tom made a U-turn on the dead-end street and left Pumpkin Center without much more information than he had when he arrived. *Except they're lying*, he thought. *Their recollections of where Juan was last don't match the information the students gave Annie.*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Small Village south of Culiacán
Sinaloa State, Mexico
Tuesday Afternoon
April 15, 2014*

The old man shambled down the dusty road, pushing his donkey cart ahead of him. Even though the weather had warmed up, he still wore the traditional serape and sombrero. His age was indeterminate, but he had been a picture in this village for many years. No one paid any attention to him. He lived in a run-down lean-to shanty south of town with his chickens, ancient dog, and a couple of goats. From time to time, he'd come to town, like today, to fill his jugs with water and pick up what few supplies he needed, like flour, salt, and oil. No one wondered where he got the money to buy things. For all they knew, he could be a rich eccentric who had a stash of money hidden under his shanty. More realistically, they figured he sold a little of the goat milk and eggs when he came into town. No one thought much about him. He was all but invisible and there were many men in the hills and desert just like him. In fact, they didn't even know his name and couldn't tell you which of the men just like him was now walking among them in the village.

He was headed, in a round-about route, for the church in the center of the small square in this little village. As he got closer to where he planned to turn on a side road and enter the main route to the church, he started hearing voices and wailing. It sounded like a lot of people. *I wonder who died*, he thought. *It must have been someone important.*

When he got closer to the main street, he was amazed at the large number of people in the procession. It seemed as though the whole village had turned out. He needed to get past the church to reach his destination to the north, just outside of town, and he knew the crowds would slow him down. In fact, it even occurred to him that the people he sought might be in the procession.

When he reached the end of the dusty street, he stopped a young man, who was obviously grieving, and asked him what was going on.

The young man could barely speak. In fact, he seemed reluctant to speak to this man he didn't know, but had seen around for most of his life. Maybe he was a spy for the Cartel that wanted to know what people were saying.

Finally, with a little persuasion, the young man spoke. "Juan Osorio was a good, good man. He loved his family and took good care of them. The Cartel took care of Juan Osorio. He worked for them, as many people here do, for many years. The Cartel has saved this village from dying out, you know?"

The old man nodded. He was familiar with how the Cartel improved the local economies and helped the people of the villages to survive. Anyone with a problem could go to someone in the Cartel and their problem would disappear. Even in the Cantinas, at night, the troubadours sang '*narcocorridos*', ballads praising the Cartel. The men of the Cartel were viewed as the modern-day Robin Hoods.

But, there was a price to pay for this help and protection. And that price had been paid in the early hours before dawn. Juan Osoria, while working for the Cartel in California, had betrayed the Cartel. He had snitched about an incoming heroin and meth shipment.

The Cartel had their sources among law enforcement in Kern County. Alejandro Foncesco, the leader of the men who lived at the farmhouse where Juan Osorio lived, was warned by his contact of an upcoming raid to be conducted by the Kern County Sheriff's Office Narcotics Division and SWAT team. The farmhouse was a major distribution point along Interstate 5 in Kern County. Foncesco had kept the information from the informant to himself, but had re-routed the drug shipment to another location that only he knew about. The law enforcement informant had also told him that Juan Osorio had been working with the leader of the Narcotics Division, Lt. Llamas, and Juan had told Lt. Llamas about the shipment. The informant gave Foncesco the date and time of the raid.

Juan Osorio had been executed less than an hour before the raid. What the old man pushing the donkey cart was hearing about was the revenge of the Cartel. Early that morning, the family of Juan Osorio had been murdered - his wife, Maria; who was pregnant, and his two children, Jorge and Leya. His parents, who lived in the family home, were also murdered. The procession was to the funerals of these innocent people.

The townspeople were stunned. They knew the rules and that these murders were meant as a warning to others of what would happen if they betrayed the Cartel. They felt grief for the deaths, but were careful what they said. They didn't want to bring the wrath of their beloved Cartel down on their heads.

The young man rejoined the procession when he finished telling his story.

The old man watched the procession pass by, and then slowly turned around and shambled back the way he came. There was no need for him to visit the Osorio home now to warn them and see them to safety. The vehicles hidden in the desert to take the family away were no longer needed.

As soon as he could, the undercover agent radioed to the vehicles to quickly, and discretely, leave the area. There was nothing they could do for the Osorio family now. He knew the Sinaloa Cartel was responsible for the deaths of these innocents. In his heart, he wanted to find the exact men who had pulled the triggers but, more urgently, he wanted to know who had ordered the killings, but this was not his mission.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Robbery/Homicide Unit
Wednesday afternoon
April 16, 2014*

Sunnie Moreno turned the largest conference room into a 'war room' for this case. She placed pictures of some of the men who had lived at the farmhouse on the walls. Underneath their pictures were their histories and the alleged reasons they came to America.

Lt. Llamas, Tom, Annie, Laine DelMonte and the local Special Agent in Charge (SAC) from the FBI were present, as well as the Drug Division leader from Bakersfield PD and other independent police departments throughout Kern County, including the University Police. There was an aerial view of the home where the men were now living in Pumpkin Center.

This group comprised a mini-task force to pull as much information together on the drug trafficking in Kern County, but to help Annie and Tom solve the murder of Juan Osorio.

Annie passed out copies of all the information from their interviews and the previous surveillance from Lt. Llamas' NARC Division.

"We don't have pictures of all the men, but we have their physical descriptions. You'll also find their histories detailing when they arrived in the United States, their status, and where they work or go to school. All of them are here legally.

"Lt. Llamas has also included a list of other 'homes' in Kern County that he suspects are drop-off points for drug shipments into Kern County. Most of them come in from Mexico along the I5 corridor, which isn't a big surprise.

"I included the information from Laine DelMonte's group. As you'll see, they didn't find much. Doc told me at the autopsy that the cause of death was a gunshot wound to the left forehead area, the manner of death was homicide, and the mechanism of death was blood loss due to traumatic hypovolemic shock, immediate results, plus damage to surrounding tissues. I'll get a copy of the autopsy report to you as soon as Doc sends it to me.

"We have no evidence against these men. The goal of this task force is to continue to watch them, and other groups like them, until we can gather enough evidence for an arrest. We suspect they're all members of the Sinaloa Cartel."

Lt. Llamas spoke up at this point and addressed the group. "There is information in the packets that explains the changing drug scene in Kern County. In the whole country, as a matter of fact. Study this information carefully. You'll see why our job will now be harder.

"When you go back to your respective offices, I'd like each of you to think about the benefits of forming a permanent Task Force to concentrate on these 'houses' that are the distribution points for drugs in Kern County. With the switch from big shipments of marijuana to the smaller shipments of heroin and meth, it's made it harder to identify their means of transport. This, of course, is in addition to the investigation into the death of Juan Osorio."

Annie went over all the information in the packets and then asked if there were any questions.

Special Agent Shay Hannagan, from the FBI, stood and addressed the group. He was second generation Irish and still had a trace of an accent because Gaelic is what his parents spoke in their home as he was growing up. Annie had known him for a while and never tired of listening to him talk. "What about the fact that your raid was compromised? This indicates that someone who knew about the raid tipped off the men at the house. How do we know if we share any information with you, it won't go straight to the members of the Sinaloa Cartel? You can be damned sure that any information leaked will spread throughout Kern County, not just to one little house. Will other informants be safe? If a future shipment is confiscated, the Cartel will know for sure they have another leak in their organization. This could get messy."

"You're right, of course," Annie said. "Lt. Llamas has considered every person who knew about the raid. There were many individuals and departments involved, not only in the Sheriff's Office, but the Judges who issued the warrants, and their staffs who prepared the documents. We obviously have to keep the names of our informants close to the vest and not share them with any other agencies. I hate to say that, but it's a fact of life. There are no guarantees. If you have sensitive information that might compromise someone, you should keep it confidential."

"Any other questions?"

"Okay, then, that's all we have for the moment. Please take the information we've given you and read it over carefully. I've included my card and the cards of Det. Weston and Lt. Llamas so you can call us at any time if you have questions. Let's put these guys behind bars," Annie said.

Everyone rose to leave. Jesse walked over to Annie and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "Gotta go," he said. "The DA wants to talk to me about another case." He slipped out the back door and was gone.

Just then, Sgt. Prothero, Lt. Llamas' second in command, came rushing into the room. From the look on his face, Annie and Lt. Llamas knew that his news wasn't good.

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"Lt. Llamas," Sgt. Prothero said, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I have an urgent message for you. May I speak to you in private?"

"If everyone will excuse me?" Lt. Llamas said. He turned to Annie and Tom, "I'll catch up with the two of you shortly."

A few minutes later, Lt. Llamas returned to the Robbery/Homicide conference room. Something in his look, and how he carried himself, gave Annie pause. She knew Sgt. Prothero's message was bad news.

Lt. Llamas took a seat in the chair at the side of Annie's desk. *Well*, she thought, *I guess this is gonna take a while*. She leaned back in her chair and put her leather messenger bag on the floor. She steepled her fingers under her chin and waited.

"Is Tom here?" Lt. Llamas said, as he looked around the room.

"He just snuck out the back way to get us something to eat so we can work a while longer," Annie said.

Lt. Llamas crossed his arms over his chest and looked at her with sad eyes. "I'm glad I caught you before you left. There is a media storm outside that you haven't seen the likes of for a long time. And they're all wanting a statement from you."

Annie leaned forward and frowned. "Why me?"

Lt. Llamas looked her in the eye. "You're not going to like what I'm about to say, but I'll say it anyway. Females tend to have a more emotional response to situations. The media play on people's emotions to sell papers and get viewers. And, you're the lead detective on the Juan Osorio homicide."

Annie still wasn't sure what point Lt. Llamas wanted to make. "Just tell me what's goin' on, Denver, and quit playin' psychological word games with me," Annie said, as she leaned forward.

Lt. Llamas frowned before he spoke. "As you know, Juan Osorio was an informant we were using to help stop the flow of illegal drugs into Kern County. When his body was found, I knew he had been compromised.

"He betrayed the Sinaloa Cartel and I knew what that meant. The Cartel has rules, and one of the main rules is you don't betray the Cartel or your whole family will pay."

Annie gasped at the implications of what Lt. Llamas was saying. She had a bad feeling this story wasn't going to have a happy ending.

"We immediately contacted an 'obscure government agency' with assets in Juan's village to get his family to a new location - just to be on the safe side.

"The undercover agent set up an evacuation for the family and then went into town to locate them. What he found was the whole town turned out for the funerals of Juan Osorio's wife, two children, and parents. Someone murdered all of them while they slept."

Annie gasped in horror. "I can't believe it," she said. "Those poor people. And the media is waiting for my comments?"

Lt. Llamas nodded his head slowly. "I think they're hoping to catch you before you hear about it from someone else."

"Yeah, well, they're gonna hear my reaction alright, and right now."

Before Lt. Llamas could stop her, Annie jumped from her chair, sprinted across the room, and headed for the media horde outside.

Annie crashed through the front doors and was immediately overwhelmed by voices.

"Annie, did you hear about Juan Osorio's family?"

"Det. Avants, what's your opinion of what happened?"

"Do you condone what they did? It's their code and Juan Osorio would have known that."

When Annie heard that comment, she stopped and looked directly into the lens of the camera that was focused tight on her face. The crowd went silent.

"There is no excuse for the slaughter of innocents just to make a point. I swear on those children's heads that I'll find and bring to justice the persons responsible." Her voice rose, "I'll take their *cojones* and stuff them down their throats and watch them choke to death."

The crowd gasped at Annie's language. But, she wasn't through yet.

She stared fiercely into the camera's lens, deadly intent in her eyes. "Hear me, you *pinche puto pendejo babosa* who take out your revenge on innocent children. Look at me and remember my face because it'll be the last thing you see before I send you straight to hell."

Annie stood still, her lungs heaving in her chest and she struggled to get some air. You could hear a pin drop in the crowd. Finally, as a tear silently slid down Annie's cheek, someone had the decency to say, "That's a wrap." Just then both Lt. Llamas and Tom, who had just returned, reached Annie and quickly drew her away. Everyone was too stunned to say another word to Annie.

All the media vans were leaving to get back to their stations so this footage, and Annie's comments, would make the evening news. With her fierce words and the picture of her face as the tear slid down her cheek, Annie was now the Sinaloa Cartel poster girl for the entire County.

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"Jesus, Annie, what were you thinking?" Tom said, as he held her shaking body tight. Lt. Llamas was driving and Tom had shoved Annie into the back seat. She finally collapsed as her emotions overwhelmed her.

"What were the children's ages?" she asked Tom in a shaky voice.

"The boy was eight and the little girl was six. What the media doesn't know is that Juan Osorio's wife was five months pregnant."

"I'm almost afraid to ask how the villagers reacted," Annie said, through sobs.

"Yeah, you probably don't want to know, Annie," Lt. Llamas said. "They all live in fear of the Cartel, but they are also beholden to the Cartel and they sing ballads that praise the leaders. If it wasn't for the Cartel, these small villages would be living in abject poverty, without enough food, clothes, or medical attention. The only rule is not to betray the Cartel."

Annie leaned back and stared out the window as they raced through the streets of Bakersfield. She turned to face Lt. Llamas and waited for his answer to her question.

"The villagers have mixed feelings about what happened," Lt. Llamas said. "They detest Juan Osorio for breaking the rules and drawing the Cartel's attention to their village. At the same time, they grieve for his family. But, they also realize no other outcome was possible. The Cartel leadership couldn't turn their heads for one man. It would set a bad example."

"I just wish the extraction team had arrived sooner, but they got there as fast as they could," Lt. Llamas said.

"What scares me, Annie," Tom said, "there's no telling what the Sheriff will do about you. You could be suspended. You weren't authorized to make your own statement to the media. And, unfortunately, no matter what the Sheriff does, that last shot of you glaring into the camera with a tear rolling down your cheek will make you the icon for the war on drugs."

Annie buried her head in her hands. "I meant every word I said. If the Sheriff suspends me, I'll quit and take care of things myself."

"You can't do that, Annie. You would be tampering with an official investigation. You'd end up in jail. You've gotta get your head on straight."

Just then Annie's cell phone rang. She looked at the caller ID and saw it was Jesse. She handed the phone to Tom and said, "Here, you take it. I can't talk to him right now."

"Hey Jesse," Tom said. "Yeah, she's right here but she's not in the mood for chit chat."

Tom listened for a moment and then said, "Okay, I'll tell her. I don't know what she'll do, but I'll pass on the message."

Annie stared at Tom with a puzzled look on her face as she took her cell phone and put it back in her bag. "What message?"

"Jesse's one step ahead of us, Annie. He saw the 'Breaking News' feed on television. He says the Sheriff may be the least of your worries. You've just waved a red flag in front of the Sinaloa Cartel. Jesse suggests you go to his place and he'll meet you there in an hour. He said it's the safest place for you at the moment."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Jesse's Home
Bakersfield
Wednesday Evening
April 16, 2014*

Before Jesse returned to his home to face Annie, he stopped by her house and packed a bag with some clothes and toiletries she might need if she stayed at his house for a few days. He also put her cat, CeCe, in his carrier and scooped up several cans of cat food and a bag of Whiskas.

If she needs anything else, I can pick stuff up at the mall, he thought.

It was early Spring and CeCe was shedding her Winter coat. Jesse wasn't thrilled about having cat hair all over his home, but he didn't want Annie to be concerned about CeCe. He didn't think it would be wise for her to return each day to take care of her cat.

He found Annie slumped on his sofa looking like she'd lost her best friend. She perked up when she saw CeCe, but wasn't thrilled that Jesse had brought enough of her belongings for a short stay at his house. Tom and Lt. Llamas had already left after they made sure Annie was safe inside.

"What are you doin', Jesse?" she said, as she looked through the bag he had packed for her. "I can't stay here. I can take care of myself. What're they gonna do, gun me down in the street because I called them names? I probably didn't even pronounce the words right. There's no telling what I said. Maybe I called them 'pussy cats' or something."

Jesse laughed at Annie's outburst. He went into his kitchen and poured two glasses of Merlot and then returned to the main room. He put the glasses on the coffee table, sat down next to Annie, and took her hands in his. "No, Annie, your pronunciation was perfect and I'm sure the Cartel, and every Spanish speaker within the range of your voice, got the message. In fact, I suspect the clip will go viral and be heard around the world."

Annie grimaced. "Well, I meant every word I said and I'm not gonna apologize. I'll quit first."

Jesse's cell phone rang and he smiled when he read the caller ID. "Well, here goes nothing, Annie. It's the Sheriff and I'm sure he's looking for you."

He pushed the button to connect with the Sheriff. "Howdy, Sheriff," he said. "I bet you're hoping to find Annie here, cowering under the quilts, hiding as the reality of what she said on camera sinks into her consciousness."

Annie could hear the Sheriff's hearty laugh and she threw a pillow at Jesse.

Jesse listened for a moment, then said. "Yes, she's here, throwing things at me. Would you like to talk to her? What? Oh, yeah," Jesse said as he broke up laughing. "I remember that song by Lorrie Morgan and Sammy Kershaw - 'He drinks tequila and she talks dirty in Spanish.' I'll have to see if Annie's heard it."

After a few more minutes of listening to the Sheriff, Jesse said, "Okay, I'll tell her. We'll see you when you get here."

Annie scowled at Jesse. "He's comin' over here?"

Jesse sat back down beside Annie. "Yes. He didn't want to discuss anything over the phone. He did say for you to stay put."

Annie took a sip of the Merlot Jesse had placed on the coffee table in front of her. "Did you get a sense of how he's feelin' about the whole situation? The stuff I said?"

Jesse took a sip of his wine. "No, Annie, I sure didn't. But he said he'd bring the pizza." And, he started laughing again. This set Annie off and she laughed so hard she slobbered some of her wine on her slacks.

"You're kidding?" Annie said as she squirmed on the couch. "And what was that comment about talking dirty in 'Spanish?' I know that song, by the way."

Jesse laughed some more. "The Sheriff said that song was the first thing that entered his mind when he heard what you were saying on-air. He got a kick out of your outburst. It was so unlike our sweet little Southern Belle, Annie. And no, I'm not kidding. Like me, Tom, and Nevada, he's proud of what you said and your fervor. On a personal level. Officially, you might get your butt kicked. It's hard to say."

Jesse sat there deep in thought for a couple of minutes. "I'm curious about something, Annie. I don't know the finer points of 'street' Spanish. What does *pinche puto pendejo babosa* mean, anyway?"

Just then, the doorbell rang. Annie grinned at Jesse and said, "Saved by the bell."

Jesse opened the door and there stood the Sheriff. Jesse looked at the box he was holding and said, "I don't think I've ever seen a bigger pizza take-out box. There's only the three of us. Are you planning on spending the night and having cold pizza for breakfast?" Jesse said, as he led the Sheriff into the kitchen so he could put the pizza on the counter.

Sheriff Mick Quinn chuckled. "I was hungry. My wife told me once she never shops when she's hungry or she'll spend twice as much money on impulse purchases. I guess what she said is true. I didn't know what kind of pizza you two liked, so I got the largest one I could find and had them make each quarter different. One quarter is ham and pineapple, one is straight pepperoni, one is mushrooms, onions, and olives, and one is their "big meat" toppings."

He looked over at Annie, who was sitting on the couch, and said, "Hello Detective Avants. How're you doin'? I went through your personnel file and didn't read that you had a proficiency in another language. That was Spanish you were speaking, wasn't it?" He walked over and sat down next to Annie and gave her a fatherly hug.

"You're not mad at me, are you?" Annie said. "Do I have to do a retraction and apologize to those filthy scumbags?"

Sheriff Quinn laughed. "No, Annie, you don't have to apologize. We'll get flack from some people and praise from others. The Undersheriff even suggested we have a poster made of that shot of you with the tear, that says something like *'I'm gonna get you scumbags'* and put it up all over the County."

Annie cringed at the thought, but then brightened. "Yeah, we could have it made in English and Spanish. That would upset the apple cart, as my daddy always says."

Jesse came back to the coffee table with three glasses of ice, a large bottle of orange juice, plates, and napkins. Everyone took a piece of pizza and it was silent in the room as they savored their meal.

Annie looked at the Sheriff and said, "Sheriff, there are so many unanswered questions about this case. The most puzzlin' thing is the lack of evidence. The fact that those men moved right

before the raid and everything was so cleaned up, just makes them look guilty as hell. But, we can't prove a thing. Could we have a mole? I don't like thinkin' like that, but we have to consider everything."

"Well, Annie," the Sheriff said, "the only way they could have known to redirect the shipment is if someone told them about the raid. Did the same person tell them that Juan was working with the Narc Division? That's your job to find out."

The Sheriff wiped his mouth and brushed the crumbs out of his mustache. "I'd better be going. You stay here with Jesse for a few days while we keep an eye on your house. We don't want to take any chances. I don't know what kind of flack we'll get tomorrow, but it won't be boring."

After the Sheriff left, Annie snuggled with Jesse on the couch. "I'm not scared, Jesse. I could stay at my own place, but it's nice being here with you."

Jesse gave Annie a hug. "I wouldn't get any sleep tonight if you were alone at your place. These are dangerous men we're dealing with. But even worse, they have macho egos to protect. You smeared their view of themselves when you called them names. And, to make matters worse for their fragile egos, you're a woman." Jesse laughed, but his eyes reflected the fear he felt for Annie's safety.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Cerro Drive
Wednesday Evening
April 16, 2014*

Alejandro switched off the television after watching the repeat of Annie's statement three times and threw the remote across the room. He was furious. He couldn't believe the woman who had interviewed him at Greenriver Farms was the same one who was calling him names on International TV.

His macho male ego couldn't handle it. If he let this stand, he would lose all respect in front of his men, and the men back in Mexico who also worked for the Cartel. Women didn't talk like that about men. It was unheard of.

He thought about what to do. He couldn't talk to El Chapo because he was in prison. Well, he could, but it wouldn't be a private conversation. *I can call El Mayo*, he thought. *He has a good head on his shoulders and would know what I should do about this thorn in my side.*

Alejandro was raised in a typical Mexican environment, where the women knew their place and the men were the ultimate last word. Someone like Annie offended his sense of what behavior was acceptable in a female and what wasn't. She had to be punished. She had to be shown her place.

The two students should be back with his SUV by 5:00 PM or 6:00 PM. He'd wait and call El Mayo around 7:00 PM. The time in Mexico was two hours ahead of the time in California, so El Mayo should be at his villa.

When the students returned, Alejandro hopped in and headed back out towards the Bakersfield Speedway. He would use a disposable cell phone and, even if someone did track it, no one would know who was talking and the location wasn't anywhere near where he would normally hang out.

El Mayo answered on the second ring. "I've seen the broadcast by the female detective. I assume that's why you are calling me."

"Yes. I'm not sure how to handle the situation. I can't let it go and I can't dispute with her. They have no evidence that we are involved with the Cartel. But, something must be done to send a message. What do you suggest?"

"Call me back in ten minutes. I might have a suggestion, but I need to make a couple of phone calls first. Are you in a safe place to call again?"

"Yes, no one can track me that fast to this location. I'll wait here."

Alejandro leaned up against the front of his SUV and sipped on the cup of coffee he'd picked up at a convenience store on his way.

After waiting ten minutes, Alejandro called El Mayo again. "What should I do?" Alejandro said.

"The best response is to do nothing. Other than that, I have no suggestions," El Mayo said.

Alejandro seethed with anger. He couldn't just let it go.

El Mayo continued. "Of course, you are there and have to make your own decisions. Just don't do anything that will reflect back on our operations in Kern County."

"Fine," Alejandro said, and ended the call.

He got in his SUV and thought, *I'll take care of her my way.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Robbery/Homicide Unit
Thursday 9:00 a.m.
April 17, 2014*

Oh my God," Tom said. Annie and Jesse both looked at him with deep concern and surprise. He was as white as a sheet.

"Tom, what is it?" Annie said.

Tom couldn't speak. He just sat there staring at his computer screen.

"Lt. Llamas brought me copies of the DVDs that were taken during the surveillance on the men from the farmhouse. He wasn't able to get an actual photo of one of the gardeners. He's on this DVD, but it's not a very good shot. But I have no doubt that it's a friend of mine, Angel Moreno, who went to work for the Drug Enforcement Administration the same time I went to the Police Academy."

Annie and Jesse got up and came over to Tom's computer to look at the image.

"Which one is he?" Annie said.

"The one loading the wheelbarrow into the back of the SUV."

"It's a very brief, bad-angle shot," Jesse said. "Are you sure it's him?"

I've known Angel Moreno since kindergarten. We were best friends all through school and college. When I went to the Police Academy, he went to DEA training in Quantico, Virginia. Yeah, I'm sure it's him.

"I can't believe this. I was best man at his wedding in June of 1999 and godfather to his twins, Andy and Alex. We kept in touch for a long time, even after he was transferred to Phoenix. At least, I thought that's where he went. Eventually, we lost touch," Tom said.

"I didn't know he was still here, but working undercover. I've got to find him and warn him that he might be exposed. I wonder where Analeigh and the twins are?"

"When was the last time you heard from him?" Annie said. She could hear the panic in Tom's voice.

"I don't know. Now that I think about it, I couldn't find him when Mary died, and I was such a mess after that I completely forgot about him."

Jesse stared at the image for a minute, then said, "I think the first thing you should do is take the DVD to the lab and see if they can enhance it."

Tom rushed over and pulled the DVD out of the drive.

"Yeah, you're right. I'll go over there right now. If we have someone in law enforcement feeding information to the Cartel, they could find out about Angel and he'd be as dead as Juan Osorio."

Tom put the DVD in an evidence bag, stuck it in his pocket, and headed out the door.

"This is a strange turn of events," Annie said. "First we have Juan Osorio snitching to Lt. Llamas, then we suspect someone in law enforcement tipped the men in the farmhouse about the

raid so they could deliver the goods somewhere else, and now we might have an undercover DEA agent working as a Cartel member."

"And don't forget, Annie, someone snitched on Juan Osorio. It could be a different person than the one who told the men at the farmhouse about the pending raid." Jesse said.

Annie sat back down at her desk and shook her head. Jesse came up behind her and massaged her shoulders. "We won't know anything until Tom verifies that it's his friend. Then, we'll decide what should be done. In the meantime, we have to keep you safe."

"I've been thinkin' about that, Jesse. As much as I enjoy your company, I want to return to my own home after work tomorrow. Can you go get CeCe and my stuff from your place and then bring everything to me tomorrow night? I'll cook dinner."

Jesse frowned as he sat down in Tom's chair. "I don't like the idea of you being there alone, Annie."

"Look, Jesse, I now have a state-of-the-art security system, weapons, and CeCe to protect me. No one's gettin' into my house. Besides, I doubt they know where I live. Why would they? I've never come to their attention before."

Jesse snorted. "You're being naive, Annie. I bet the Cartel has a dossier on every law enforcement person in Kern County. They certainly have the resources to accumulate information like that and it would be to their benefit to do so."

Annie laughed. "Yeah, and then they could figure out which cops or deputies they could put the squeeze on to be their conduits of information."

Jesse got up from Tom's chair and started pacing around the desks. "You think this is funny, Annie. You're not taking it seriously. Go on YouTube and Google the Sinaloa Cartel. See some of the things they've done to innocent people. Hell, Annie, you're upset because of what they did to Juan Osorio's family. That should be a clue about how relentless they are and how violent. Don't be so blind or think you're invincible, because you're not."

Annie hugged her arms across her chest and leaned forward. "I'm not blind and I'm not stupid and just because I'm a woman doesn't mean I need to be taken care of. I'm a detective first, a woman second, and don't forget it. You wouldn't be mollycoddlin' Tom if he was the one who made those comments, now would you?"

Jesse looked at Annie, frustration etched all over his face. "You're right, Annie. I apologize. But I still don't like it. At least you'll stay here tonight."

"Well, good. That's settled. Now, I have a lot to do and I'm sure you have work pilin' up on your desk at the DA's office. I'll work until 5:00 p.m. and come to your place. If I hear anything from Tom in the meantime, I'll give you a call."

Jesse walked over to Annie and gave her a kiss on the cheek, then walked out of her office without another word.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Crime Lab
Thursday 10:00 am
April 17, April 2014

Tom entered the crime lab and headed straight for the video section. Beryl Johns, a large African-American woman wearing an orange turban wrapped around her kinky hair and a bright teal caftan, saw him coming and met him at the counter.

"Hey, Tom, long time no see," she said, as she flashed him a big smile and jangled her large, silver hoop earrings.

"BJ, you're looking splendid, as usual," Tom said with a wink. "I should stop by every day and let you add a little cheer and brightness to my life."

BJ laughed, a deep belly laugh that shook her whole frame. She outweighed Tom by a good thirty pounds, and when she laughed, her whole body joined in.

"You can come by anytime, Tom. I'm always glad to see your smilin' face. You got some work for me today?"

Tom pulled the DVD from the inside pocket of his jacket and took it out of the evidence bag to show it to her. "This is surveillance from the NARC Division. They made it in anticipation of doing a raid on an old farmhouse that they suspect is a drop off point for drug shipments from the Sinaloa Cartel meant for Kern County."

"Oh, those are some nasty guys, Tom. You don't wanna go messin' with them," BJ said.

Tom laughed. "BJ, that's my job and you can help me with a small problem I have. I marked a place where a man is outside, but it's not a very good image. I'm hoping you can enhance the image so I can get a better look at him. I'm unsure about who he is at the moment."

Tom slipped the DVD back into the evidence bag and handed it to BJ. She signed a receipt for the DVD and walked over and put it by her work station.

"I'll do what I can, Tom. Call me in a couple of hours and I'll probably have somethin' for you."

Tom reached into his other pocket and pulled out a Lindt Swiss Dark Chocolate bar and watched BJ's face light up.

"You remembered," she said as a sigh escaped her lips. "Tom, you're such a sweetheart," she said as Tom handed her the 90% Cocoa chocolate bar.

"Thank you so much. I'll get right on your DVD as soon as I savor a little bit of this chocolate heaven."

Tom laughed as BJ scuttled back to her desk, already opening the wrapper.

"You're more than welcome, BJ. Enjoy."

Tom returned to his car and sat behind the steering wheel for a moment. When Mary was killed, BJ was a constant presence at his home. She kept everyone organized and made sure there was always something nutritious for him to eat. He didn't remember much of his life then, as he was numb, but the one thing that stood out in his memories was BJ and her smile trying to bring him comfort in an impossible situation.

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Two hours later, Tom was back at the Crime Lab. BJ handed him the enhanced photos and said, "Is this the man you thought?"

Tom looked at the images with a heavy heart. He now had no doubt that the man in the photo was his long-time friend, Angel Moreno.

"Yes, BJ, that's who I thought it was. I was hoping I was wrong. Thanks for your help."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Bakersfield DEA Resident Office
Thursday 1:00 p.m.
April 17, 2014

Tom entered the small office of the resident DEA agent for Bakersfield and greeted the middle-aged Hispanic man who was pecking at the keyboard of a computer that sat on the lone desk in the room. Tom had worked with the resident office when he was in the Narcotics Division, but it had been a few years. Agent Felix Magallanes was not the same resident agent Tom had worked with before.

The two men shook hands and introduced themselves.

"Detective Weston, it's a pleasure to meet you. How can I help you today?" Agent Magallanes said.

Tom smiled. "First, please call me Tom. It's a pleasure to meet you, too. Have you been at this station for long, Agent Magallanes? I haven't worked with the DEA for a while and there was someone else here at the time."

"I've been here just over two years. Please, call me Felix. Agent Magallanes makes me feel old."

Tom regarded the agent and liked what he saw. Felix was upbeat and had a twinkle in his eyes.

"Please, sit down and tell me why you're here," Felix said.

Tom sat in the chair across from Felix's desk and took the pictures and DVD out of his pocket. He put them on the desk, but didn't move them over to the Agent.

"I'm sure you heard about the Narc Division raid that went bad Sunday morning and the executed Mexican male adult we found at the scene. I'm on the investigation team now trying to put the pieces together to figure out who killed the man. My partner, and lead detective, is Detective Annie Avants.

"I had quite a shock this morning as I reviewed this DVD Lt. Llamas, the head of the NARC Division, gave me. It has surveillance footage of the eight men, one of whom was the victim, who lived at the farmhouse where the raid was to take place. I recognized one of the men. He's a childhood friend, but we lost touch several years ago. When I left to attend the Police Academy, he went to Quantico and trained to be a DEA Agent. His real name is Angel Moreno. His name with this group is Paco Cifuentes.

"Is there any way you can contact him and warn him that he might be compromised?" Tom said, as he handed Felix the pictures of Angel Moreno.

Tom saw a subtle shift in the demeanor of the Agent. "You know I can't give any information to you. The only thing I can do is contact the San Francisco Field Office and pass on your suspicions to them. I have no contact with this person and there is nothing else I can do."

Tom frowned. "It's important, Felix. He could be in extreme danger. Lt. Llamas had information that a drug shipment was to be dropped off at the farmhouse for distribution. The distribution was to be last Monday. When Lt. Llamas arrived at the farmhouse with his team and

the SWAT team early Sunday morning, it was vacant and there was no sign of the shipment. Only the body of the victim, which was still warm. Someone warned them about the raid. We're afraid someone will tell them that Angel Moreno is undercover DEA and they will kill him."

Felix could tell that Tom was upset. "I'll call San Francisco immediately and speak to my boss. In fact, I think it would be better if I spoke to him in person. I planned to drive to San Francisco in the morning on some other business, but I can call him and tell him I'm coming today and I have some urgent information for him. You know that the handling of undercover agents is very compartmentalized. As soon as I know something, I'll get in touch with you. That's the best I can do."

Tom pulled out a business card, wrote his cell phone number on the back, and handed it to Felix.

"I'll be waiting to hear from you. Call me at any time, it doesn't matter how late." Tom didn't tell Felix how disappointed he was and he kept his plans to find Angel Moreno's family to himself.

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It wasn't until 6 :00 p.m. that Felix called Tom to tell him about the meeting with the DEA people in San Francisco.

"I'm sorry, Tom, I drew a blank. No one 'fesses up to knowing either an Angel Moreno or Paco Cifuentes. They could be lying. I have no way of telling. Or, your friend could be handled by another DEA unit or even a special project where secrecy is enhanced."

Tom rubbed the back of his head in frustration. Finding Angel seemed like an impossible task, but Tom was determined to do his best.

"Thanks, Felix. If you do hear anything, please let me know."

"Sure thing, Tom. I wish I could have been more help."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Annie's Home
Friday 7:00 p.m.
April 18, 2014

When Jesse arrived at Annie's house Friday evening to return her personal belongings and CeCe, he was surprised to find Tom sitting at the kitchen table deep in conversation with Annie.

Annie took CeCe out of his pet carrier and set him loose. Then she poured Jesse a glass of sweet iced tea as he joined Tom at the table.

"What's up?" he said. He could tell Tom was upset about something.

Tom explained about his meeting with Felix Magallanes at the Bakersfield Regional Office of the DEA, and how worried he was for his friend.

Jesse rubbed the back of his neck and thought for a moment. "Tom, are you thinking it was someone in law enforcement that tipped off the residents of the farmhouse about the raid?"

"I don't want to think that, Jesse, but it's a strong possibility," Tom said.

"Another thing I noticed. The DEA agent I talked to didn't seem happy when I showed him Angel's picture."

"Well, you know we're working with the DEA, FBI, the Sheriff's Office, and the Bakersfield Police Department through the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force and they probably don't like us to do anything on our own without involving them," Jesse said.

Tom sighed. "I know. This raid was based on sources Lt. Llamas has been cultivating for a while. He didn't want to have to ID his source to the other agencies. There have been leaks and he thought he could pull this raid off without a problem. Obviously, he was wrong."

"Do you suppose the leak is from the Sheriff's Office?" Annie said.

"I don't want to think that," Tom said, "but I'm not going to tell anyone else but the two of you that a DEA Agent might be undercover with the Sinaloa Cartel. I won't put my friend's life on the line like that."

Jesse pulled a chair up to the table and put his tea down. "What do you plan to do?" Jesse asked, "and how can we help?"

Annie stood and said, "Why don't you two go into the other room where the whiteboard is set up and start brainstorming. I've got to tend to dinner. After we eat, we can try to make sense of it all and come up with a plan."

After dinner, the three friends returned to the front room. There wasn't much written on the white board. Without the help of the DEA, Tom didn't know where to start looking for Angel.

"What I think I'll do, though," Tom said, "is try to find Analeigh, his wife. She's a well-known artist and they have twins. She shouldn't be too hard to track down."

Annie walked up to the whiteboard and wrote down 'find Analeigh'.

"Where's a good place to start?" she said.

"Analeigh loved to paint the scenery up north, practically to the Oregon border. If she had to make herself scarce so Angel could go undercover, I think she might be up in that area. She loved Humboldt and Del Norte counties. They went camping in the Redwoods for their honeymoon."

"My mother and my sister, Chianna, both own art galleries," Jesse said. "I can contact them and tell them what you're looking for. Maybe they'll be able to help."

Annie thought for a moment, and then wrote Jesse's mom and sister; Del Norte and Humboldt County art galleries on the white board.

Tom sat deep in thought for a moment. Then he looked up at the white board and said, "I have a small painting Analeigh did for me many years ago. I'll photograph it and then make prints and we can start sending it out to art galleries. In the meantime, can you come up with a list of art galleries in those two counties, Annie?"

"Sure," Annie said. "That should only take a few minutes. I'll have the list by the time you come back with the picture. Email the picture to my email and I'll send a copy to Jesse. That way, we'll be ready to go. Jesse, you're elected to draft a letter to the galleries for Tom to approve when he gets back. You can call Chianna and your mom from here. It's not too late. As soon as Tom sends me the photo, you can send it on to your mom and Chianna."

Tom paused before he left the room, and said, "We need to be careful not to mention Angel's or Analeigh's name. I'll make sure her name doesn't show on the photograph of the painting. We just want to tell them that we're looking for an artist that paints in this style."

Annie listed all these steps on the white board and put a check-off box next to each one.

"Okay," she said when she had finished writing. "We each have something to do right now, so let's get busy. The sooner we find Analeigh, the better."

Annie sat down at her computer to begin her search. "Well, what're you guys waitin' for? Get busy. And, Tom," she said, as she looked at him with a sly look in her eyes, "bring back some ice cream."

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Thirty minutes later, Tom returned carrying a small painting and a carton of Ben & Jerry's Vanilla Ice Cream. He had already sent Annie a copy to her email, but he wanted them to see the original. Jesse had a draft of an email composed and Annie had a list of art galleries in the two counties.

"Who do we want the emails to come from?" Annie said, after Tom had approved the draft with only a few minor changes.

"If you don't mind, Jesse, it could come from you. You can say you're looking for similar paintings for your mom's and sister's galleries. I don't think we want it to come from a law enforcement perspective, do you?"

"No," Jesse said. "We don't want any official connections at this point."

Jesse rewrote some of the draft and then pulled up his personal email account on Annie's computer. Annie gave him the list of all the galleries and he started sending off the emails.

As Annie went into the kitchen to dish up the ice cream, she said to Jesse, "When you're finished, don't forget to send a copy of the painting to your mom and Chianna. They seemed eager to help when you called them."

"Tom, would you be a dear and carry my printer out here to the table? We can print a copy of each email Jesse sends out and then staple them to any responses we get. I'll get a new file folder and set it up just for the emails."

As the email responses started trickling in, Annie checked off the boxes of the gallery next to their name on the white board. One email that particularly intrigued Tom was from a gallery in Crescent City. It said they had some similar paintings on display and they were having an art show the following Sunday. If someone wanted to see the paintings and meet the female artist, they were more than welcome to come.

"I'll check out the gallery further when I get back to my computer," Tom said.

When they'd done all they could for the evening, Annie printed out a list of the galleries for Tom and gave him what email responses they had received.

"I'll send you any more responses we get as they arrive," Annie said, as she walked Tom to the door. "Let me know what you find out about that gallery in Crescent City."

When Annie entered the living room, she found Jesse studying the painting Tom had left behind. "It's a beautiful painting," he said. "You can almost feel the roughness of the bark and the softness of the ferns. Have you ever been up north?"

Annie bent over and looked at the painting as Jesse put his arm around her waist and pulled her next to him on the couch.

"Not yet," Annie said. "But I'd like to go. I'm used to the Ouachita Forest and it's a lot different than this. This seems so primitive and awesome."

"Well, maybe you'll get lucky and someone will take you there for your honeymoon," Jesse said, as he laughed as Annie slapped him in the ribs with her pillow.

Jesse propped the painting against the side of the couch and pulled Annie onto his lap.

"What do you think you're doin' Jesse Greyeyes?" Annie said, as she swatted at his hands which were sneaking under her sweater to tickle her stomach. "We're right in the middle of something and you want to stop and play handy-andy."

Jesse stopped and withdrew his hands. "That's the problem, Annie. You're all work and no play. You need to learn to lighten up."

Annie hopped off Jesse's lap and sat at the opposite end of the couch.

"Well, Jesse, you can't say I didn't warn you. I told you I take my work serious and I'm not gonna let horseplay interfere with a murder investigation."

Jesse stood and reached for his jacket and headed for the door. Annie didn't try to stop him.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Detective," he said, as he slammed the door shut and headed towards his car.

"Geez," Annie said, as she plopped down in her favorite recliner. "I have my doubts that this relationship will ever work. I shouldn't have let myself be talked into tryin' something against my intuition. Now, I could lose Jesse as a friend, which was what I was tryin' to avoid in the first place."

Annie locked up the house, turned out the lights, and went to bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*Tom's Home
Friday Evening
April 18, 2014*

Tom stared at his computer screen. He was looking at a painting that he knew was in the style of Analeigh Moreno. Tom had spent the last several hours searching art galleries in Del Norte and Humboldt Counties, the area he knew Analeigh favored. When he didn't find anything useful, he decided to check out the paintings in the gallery in Crescent City that Annie had mentioned.

Tom got up from his kitchen table and got a beer out of the refrigerator. He wanted to take a 'time out' before he returned to look at the paintings one more time. His eyes were going blurry from scrolling through the websites of art galleries up north. Analeigh loved to paint the Pacific Northwest and he faintly remembered that she once mentioned Crescent City. He couldn't remember in what context, but it was the only clue available.

When he first scrolled through the paintings from the small Crescent City gallery, he had stopped and gone back to a painting he'd just passed by. This was the gallery that mentioned they had paintings similar to Analeigh's. *I'm getting tired*, he thought, *and I'm not paying attention to what I'm seeing.*

When he originally saw the painting, he noticed that the artist's name was just 'Alyce'. *Well, if that's her, at least she kept her first initial*, Tom thought.

After he returned to the table with his beer, he studied the painting again. It looked familiar to him. Analeigh shared many of her sketches while they were in college and after she married Angel. This painting was definitely her style.

Tom clicked on the painting to view the author's information. It said she was in her thirties and had lived in the Pacific Northwest for seven years. It didn't say which town.

Tom's gut feeling was that this was Analeigh.

Since this was the gallery that was going to have an Open House on Sunday so potential buyers could meet the artists, he knew he had to go if there was even the slightest chance that this was Analeigh.

Ignoring the time, he dialed Annie's number. She didn't sound too happy when she picked up her phone. "What can possibly be so important, Tom, that you have to wake me up out of a sound sleep?"

"Good day to you, too, Annie," Tom said. "I think I've found Analeigh Moreno and I'm leaving town immediately."

"What?" Annie was awake and alert now. "Where did you find her?"

Tom held his cordless phone between his ear and his shoulder as he put on a pot of coffee.

"I was looking at paintings in art galleries up north and I found one that I'm sure is Analeigh's work. She signs herself as Alyce, first name only. There's an open house on Sunday. I'll fly up and attend and see if she comes to the open house. If she doesn't, I'll try to find out what I can about her. Her bio doesn't give any clues about where she lives or if she married or single, has kids or not."

"Are you sure?" Annie said, as she sat up on the edge of her bed and slipped on her slippers. "Do you want me to go with you?"

Tom grinned. "No, Annie, you have your hands full here. I'll fly up to Crescent City, rent a car, and see what I can find out. While I'm in the area, I'll visit the other galleries and see if they're familiar with her. I get the feeling that when Angel went undercover, Analeigh all but disappeared herself. Makes sense, if he wants to keep her and the twins safe."

Annie scuffed into her kitchen and put on her own pot of coffee. "So, you're hopin' that Analeigh - if this is her - has a way to contact Angel and can warn him that he's in danger of being identified as a DEA agent?"

Tom poured himself a cup of coffee, then blew on it to cool it down.

"That's the plan. I'll leave within the hour. I've already found a flight out of Meadows Field that will get me there, but it's kind of a roundabout flight. It goes to Portland and then I catch a flight back to Crescent City. Kind of dumb, but this is short notice and it's all they had."

"Are you gonna buy a round-trip ticket?"

Tom laughed. "Yes, Annie, and I'm paying for this myself. I doubt if Sgt. Collins would approve. It's the weekend and I should be back for work by Monday morning."

"Okay, Tom," Annie said. "But keep me in the loop. Let me know what you find out as soon as you know something."

"That goes without saying, Annie. I'll call you as soon as I make contact. You take care, also. We're dealing with a dangerous bunch of people."

When Annie and Tom ended their call, Tom went to his bedroom and packed a bag sufficient for a couple of days.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*Cerro Drive
Friday Early Evening
April 18, 2014*

"I wanted to talk to all of you before I left for work," Alejandro said to the six men who were gathered around the table in their living/dining room.

"I had a brief conversation with El Mayo about the female detective who made such rude comments about the Cartel on television the other night. He says that we cannot harm the detective because that would cause problems we don't need and tie us into the Cartel."

He paused, and the men looked at him to continue. Finally, Francisco said, "What can we do? They have their suspicions about what we do, but no proof. At the moment, we're secure if we just do nothing."

Alejandro turned red in the face and shouted, "I cannot let that female insult us like she did. She needs to learn a lesson. All of you will go about your normal routines as usual. I will take care of the situation with Detective Annie Avants."

Paco Cifuentes frowned. "We have to be careful not to draw attention to ourselves. So soon after the death of Juan Osorio and the botched raid, any action on our part towards Detective Avants may focus attention on us. They don't believe in coincidences, and that would be a coincidence they couldn't ignore. I think we should leave well enough alone and just go about our business."

Alejandro was so steeped in the traditional Mexican male mindset that he couldn't let the matter just drop. Just the thought of Annie's actions made him furious. He had to make his point.

"You can think what you like, Paco, but she will be dealt with before she can cause any more problems for us. Let her get on with her investigation of Juan's death. She will get nowhere and eventually it will become one of their 'cold cases.' Nothing Juan told Lt. Llamas will stand up in their Courts. I'm surprised they were able to get a warrant for the raid."

"How did we know about the raid?" Paco said.

"That's my business," Alejandro said as he stormed out of the room.

The men disbursed, some going to work, others getting ready to retire for the evening. Paco walked towards the door and Miguel said, "Where are you going, Paco?"

"I'm going over to the grocery store to get some more cigarettes. I don't like to run out in the middle of the night," Paco said.

Carlos's eyes lit up. "Okay, bro, pick up some of that chocolate chip ice cream while you're there. I have a craving for it."

Paco laughed as he headed out the door. His first stop was a phone booth not far from the market. He dialed a number he hadn't used in years, but Tom didn't answer his cell and Paco didn't leave a message. *I'll get ahold of someone in the morning and warn them to keep an eye on Annie Avants*, he thought, as he hung up the phone and headed for the store.

He didn't notice that Miguel had followed him and was watching his every move.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

*Crescent City, CA
Saturday
April 19, 2015*

It was late morning when Tom finally arrived in Crescent City. He headed into town, where he had a reservation at a Bed and Breakfast. He made a few stops at local galleries from Annie's list, but found nothing similar to Analeigh's style. He stopped by the gallery that was having the art show on Sunday and picked up a pamphlet. He planned to review the pictures of the paintings that would be on display and see if he found anything else that resembled Analeigh's style. If he did, he would find out more about the location of the artist.

Tom had a spacious room with comfortable furniture. There was a nice desk in front of the window, which would be a pleasant place to work during the daylight hours.

Tom grabbed a beer from the mini-refrigerator in his room and spread open the thick pamphlet featuring the art and artists to be showcased at the art show on Sunday. Two minutes after he started, one of the paintings jumped off the page.

It showed a young girl, maybe six years old, who was wearing a pink sundress and sitting cross-legged on a massive redwood tree stump, easily twenty feet across. She had a book open in her lap that she appeared to be reading. What made the image so incredible was the sunlight striking a grove of light green-leaved trees behind the girl. It gave the image an ethereal quality that was almost magical. To the side of the mammoth stump where the girl reposed, were smaller redwood trees and ferns. Tom almost expected a fairy to flutter down and land on the stump next to the young girl.

This is Analeigh's work, he thought. I feel it. He looked down at the signature in the corner, but there was only one initial "A". The artist information on the facing page didn't give Tom much information. It said the artist's name was Alyce and she resided in Del Norte County part of the year and San Diego County the rest of the time. It didn't mention if she was married or had children.

"Well," Tom said, "I'll just have to attend the art show and see what I can find out." The pamphlet said the artists planned to attend, so he was hopeful that this would be the case.

After Tom had settled into his room, he decided to visit the gallery again so he could see the original painting. He was certain that it was the work of Analeigh Moreno. Tom asked the lone clerk if he knew anything about the artist, but he said that he was new and had never met her.

Tom walked around for a while, looking at the other paintings and pieces of art, and then decided to spend the rest of the day exploring this corner of California. He went to a restaurant and got a lunch he could pack with him, a six pack of iced tea that he put in a small cooler with some ice, and headed off with his camera. There wasn't much else he could do.

When he had finished exploring, he went to a local Casino and enjoyed a great dinner. He played with the slots for about five minutes, won \$35.00, and went back to his room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

*Annie's Home
Saturday Morning
April 19, 2014*

Annie was happy to wake up in her own bed Saturday morning. The sun streaked through the curtains and brightened her room. It was one of those early spring days that drove people outdoors. Even though there were still 'April Showers' to get through, before 'May Flowers', Annie had taken the top off her Jeep the night before in anticipation of this gorgeous day.

I love Jesse, she thought, but he's pushing me too fast. He needs to back off and give me more space.

She hopped out of bed and took several deep breaths. After ten minutes of her morning yoga routine, she was ready to face the day.

She ambled into the kitchen, ground some coffee beans, and put on a pot of coffee. She leaned her elbows on the counter and sipped her coffee while she reviewed her grocery list. Today was for shopping, not for worrying about murders and drug cartels, her potty-mouth Spanish, or even the wisdom of a romantic relationship with Jesse.

After she had eaten her breakfast of French Toast, she showered and prepared to go out and relish her day of freedom. *I'm gonna enjoy myself today and, before I return home, I'm gonna stop at that little hole-in-the-wall taqueria on South H Street and buy a whole sack of carne asada tacos. That should set me up for the rest of the day.*

She threw her messenger bag onto the passenger seat of her Jeep, while she hummed 'On the Road Again', revved up the engine, and then briefly reviewed her list. *I think I'll go to Trader Joe's first. They have such neat stuff and there's always something new to try.* She rubbed her hands together in anticipation, buckled her seat belt, and backed out of her driveway.

When she finished her shopping, the back of her jeep was loaded with bags. The *carne asada* tacos sat on the passenger seat, tantalizing her with their aroma. Her stomach growled as she pulled into the driveway of her home.

She carried most of the sacks into the kitchen and put the perishables in the refrigerator. *I gotta eat before I finish unloading my car.* On a tray, she set out a plate with some pasta salad from Trader Joe's, two of the carne asada tacos with little tubs of several different salsas, and a glass of sweet tea to carry out to her patio area.

She hadn't noticed any red flags when she arrived home. The high-tech security system was activated and nothing appeared disturbed in her kitchen. The last thing she expected when she walked back over to her refrigerator to return the jug of tea was a hand that held a foul-smelling cloth wrapping itself around her nose and mouth. She dropped the tea and struggled to get free, but the fumes from the cloth began to overwhelm her. The prick of a hypodermic needle into the side of her neck was the last thing she remembered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

*Jesse's Home; San Francisco
Saturday a.m. to Sunday p.m.
April 19 - 20, 2014*

When Jesse woke up Saturday morning, before he even opened his eyes, he felt the sun shining on his body through his windows. He lay there for a moment savoring the warmth and the peaceful feelings and memories it brought to him. He remembered camping out with his friends in Cherokee, North Carolina and waking in a flower-filled meadow with the sun shining brightly on his face and the sounds of bees buzzing in the flowers nearby. The bliss, the joy, the purity of it all brought back such a profound sense of peace and well-being to him. He made a conscious decision right then and there that nothing, and nobody, was going to take this feeling away from him.

He started his coffee pot, savoring the aroma of the fresh-ground beans, and then walked out onto his deck. He stretched and did the Sun Salute, like he did every morning. He took several deep pranayama breaths and drank a liter of pure water with the juice of a fresh Meyer lemon from the tree in his backyard. He bought pure spring water in five-gallon glass bottles and then transferred the water into blue bottles and left them in the sun for a day before he drank the water. This solar purified the water and, to Jesse, made it taste much better.

Jesse intended to accomplish many things this Saturday. He headed out towards San Francisco and relished the feeling that hitting the open road washed over him. He planned to pay a long-delayed visit to his parents.

His dad, Rodney, worked as an attorney at the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He dreamed that Jesse would join him at the BIA one day; however, their Cherokee culture taught everyone to let each person follow his or her own path, so he didn't pressure Jesse. His mom, Joyce, owned an art gallery that featured Native American art. Jesse didn't expect to find anything that resembled Analeigh's work, but he always found something - a pillow, a sculpture, a piece of pottery, a rug, or a painting - that he fell in love with and bought for his own home. It gave him a lot of pleasure when something caught his eye that he knew Annie would love and purchased it for her as a surprise.

A couple of times that evening, after he and his parents had returned from an enjoyable dinner at Fisherman's Wharf, he considered calling Annie. It seemed odd to him that his normally reliable intuition kept urging him to call Annie and, at the same time, his ego told him to hold off and give her a taste of what it was like when he wasn't at her beck and call. He struggled with this for an hour or so, letting his intuition - his higher self - duke it out with his ego. Finally, he settled down with his parents to watch a movie until bedtime rolled around.

"So how long must we wait for another visit from you?" his mom said as she placed a huge Belgian waffle in front of him the next morning. Jesse laughed and looked up into his mom's eyes. They were filled with love. As he grew older he came to appreciate his parents and embrace their differences. "I promise I'll visit more often," he said. "Sometimes I get so caught up in my work that it's hard to stop and come here to visit. I just want to get on with what I'm doing."

His dad looked up from the morning paper and smiled warmly at Jesse. "That's when you need to shift focus for a while, son, even if only for a couple of hours."

Jesse and his parents enjoyed a leisurely breakfast, and Jesse took his time driving back to Bakersfield. It gave him time to consider his mixed emotions about his turbulent relationship with Annie.

His thoughts went in circles and he decided that he and Annie should give a loving relationship a serious try and see how it worked out. Annie was afraid, and he understood why. She didn't want to jeopardize their friendship because of a failed romantic interlude. Jesse, however, felt confident they could take it day-by-day and solve any problems that came up.

When Jesse walked into his home late Sunday afternoon, fatigue overtook him. *I didn't realize that 'thinking' uses up as much energy as physical exertion, he thought. I let my true feelings simmer on the back burner of my mind for too long. I need to pay more attention to my intuition and less attention to my ego.*

He took a quick shower and collapsed on his bed for a much-needed nap. *I'll go over to Annie's this evening, he thought. I'm sure our domestic squabbles can wait a few more hours.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

*Art Gallery
Crescent City, CA
Sunday Early Evening
April 20, 2014*

Tom bounded up the steps of the gallery and pushed through the double-glass doors. He knew in his gut that Analeigh hid behind the pseudonym "Alyce", at least in the art world.

He arrived early. Only a handful of patrons milled around the gallery, as they sipped champagne and studied the different pieces of art.

Tom strolled through the gallery as he regarded the different art objects. He settled on a bench in front of Analeigh's painting and waited.

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Analeigh came in a back door to the gallery and stood in the shadows as she surveyed the scene in front of her. *Why am I being so cautious*, she thought. *This is ridiculous*. But she refused to ignore the feeling of disquiet roiling around in her stomach. So, she stood in the shadows and watched.

Her spirits rose when she saw several people in animated discussion gathered around her painting. *They either hate it or love it*, she thought, as she continued to watch them. Their words were muffled, but their body language seemed favorable.

When the group split apart and moved off in different directions, Analeigh gasped and pushed herself further into the shadows. Tom Weston sat on the bench in front of her painting. He looked off to the side and his profile was unmistakable.

Analeigh's first reaction was to go up to Tom and give him a big hug. Their friendship went back many years. However, she couldn't ignore the dread she felt and Angel's warnings to her were explicit. Don't tell anyone who she was. Don't contact anyone from their past. Angel's life depended on her remaining invisible. Angel had discussed his undercover role with her in depth and they went over the rules when he managed to visit her and the twins three or four times a year.

When Angel accepted the undercover assignment with the DEA, he told Tom they were moving to Phoenix. Angel stayed in touch with Tom for a while, but slowly let the contact dwindle down to nothing. It broke Angel's heart when he heard about Mary's murder, but by then he was deep undercover and couldn't contact Tom.

Analeigh moved up to the redwood forests she loved. She had a small cabin on ten acres surrounded by government land. You couldn't see her residence from any roads and she kept the turn-off unkempt so it wouldn't attract any stray visitors. She home-schooled the boys and painted in a studio Angel had built for her at the back of the cabin. Life was almost perfect, except for the

absence of Angel. *Someday we'll be together again and then we'll have a perfect life.* In the meantime, she worked on her art and established a reputation under the name 'Alyce'.

If Tom found me, she thought, *others could find me also. I need to contact Angel and see what's up and why Tom is here.* She backed out of the gallery and headed for her SUV. She called the gallery owner and said she was having car problems and couldn't come to town for the art show.

She returned to her cabin and made plans to call Angel when she was certain he would be alone on one of his gardening job sites.

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Tom approached the gallery owner and said, "I'm interested in the painting by Alyce. Has she arrived yet? I'd like to find out more about her and her art."

"Ah, Alyce," the owner said. "She called earlier to tell me she couldn't come in today. Something unexpected came up. I'm sorry."

Disappointment showed plainly on Tom's face. "Is there any way I can contact her?"

The owner hesitated. "I can take your name and phone number and give them to her the next time she comes into the gallery. We don't give out personal information about our artists. I'm sure you can understand our caution. We're in a rather isolated location and most people up here value their privacy."

Tom pulled his notebook from his pocket and wrote down his name a cell phone number. He handed the paper to the gallery owner and said, "I can respect that. Please tell her that it's very important that I speak with her. I have a friend whose mother and sister own art galleries in San Francisco and Calistoga and I think Alyce's art would fit in with the type of art they showcase."

Disappointed, Tom returned to his room, to pack his clothes, and prepare to leave early in the morning. Just as he finished dinner at a nearby restaurant, his cell phone rang. He looked at the readout and thought, *I wonder why Jesse is calling me at this time of night?*

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Annie's Home
Sunday Evening
April 20, 2014

The sun was disappearing in the west when Jesse pulled up to Annie's house. Annie's car was sitting in the driveway and nothing appeared out of order. He didn't get close enough to the Jeep to notice a few sacks of groceries that still sat on the floor of the backseat.

Jesse walked up to the front door and rang the bell. It surprised him that there were no lights on in the house, but maybe Annie was out back or in the kitchen and hadn't turned any lamps on. When Annie didn't answer after several tries, Jesse walked around the side of her house and headed towards the kitchen door.

The first thing that alarmed him was the fact that the kitchen door stood partially open. As he got closer, he could see half-empty bags of groceries scattered around the floor, Annie's cell phone under one of the kitchen chairs, and a broken pitcher that had held iced tea on the floor. The faint odor of chloroform was present. He quickly ran through the house to see if she was there, but only found CeCe hiding under Annie's bed.

Jesse called Bakersfield Police Department because Annie lived in their jurisdiction. While he was waiting, he pulled on a pair of latex gloves he always had in his pocket and started looking at the receipts from Annie's groceries. He hoped to get an idea of what time she got home because it didn't look like she had been there very long before she was kidnapped. When he went outside to wait for BPD, he also took a picture of the receipts in the bags still in her Jeep. Then he went out front to wait for BPD to show up. He didn't want to contaminate their crime scene if that's what this turned out to be.

While he waited, he called Tom. Jesse knew Tom was in Crescent City, but he also knew that Tom would never forgive him if he didn't let Tom know what was going on.

Tom's phone rang three times before he picked up.

"Hey, Jesse, what's up? I just finished packing up and I'm eating dinner. I'm flying back in the morning."

Jesse hesitated and then just blurted out his news. "Tom, I'm at Annie's house. It looks like she's been kidnapped. There are groceries all over the floor and the kitchen door was open. Her cell phone is on the floor, but I don't see her messenger bag."

Tom waved to the waiter for his check and leaned forward in his chair, his face as white as the knuckles that gripped his cell phone.

"Whoa, hold on a minute, Jesse," Tom said. "When was the last time you spoke to Annie?"

"We had a minor dispute after you left on Friday night. I spent Saturday in San Francisco with my parents and drove home late this afternoon. I didn't try to call her before coming over a few minutes ago. I found the kitchen door open and Annie missing."

"Did you call the police?" Tom said.

"Of course I called the police. They're on their way here now. I'm standing out front waiting for them."

Jesse heard Tom settling his bill and leaving the restaurant. "I'm headed to the car rental place to turn in my car, Jesse. I left my car at Meadows Field, so I'll be there as soon as I can. I'll call you when I land. If you hear anything else, you can send me a text."

Tom could hear the approaching sirens, so he said his goodbyes to Jesse and headed out for the airport.

Tom called the airport and explained the urgency of his need to return to Bakersfield. The clerk told him if he drove to Arcata, 55 miles south of Crescent City, he could get a non-stop flight which would get him into Bakersfield in just under three hours. Tom booked the flight and headed for Arcata. With luck, he would arrive in Bakersfield by 1:00 a.m.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Meadows Field/Annie's Home
Monday 2:00 am
April 21, 2014

Tom's plane landed at Meadows Field shortly before 2:00 a.m. He collected his car and then called Jesse. During the flight, he tried to think who would want to kidnap Annie. He feared that the comments she made at the press conference about the Cartels may have upset a lot of dangerous people.

"Where are you now?" he said to Jesse when he fired up his cell phone as he left the airport.

"I'm at Annie's house. The crime scene techs have finished and didn't find anything. There was no forced entry. Annie never goes out without setting her alarm, so we can assume that her abductors either figured out her system or grabbed her when she went back out to her car to get more of her grocery bags. There are bags still in her Jeep."

Tom sped through the streets hoping a BPD unit wouldn't stop him. Annie's home was in the East Bakersfield area, so Tom didn't have far to go. When he pulled up to Annie's house, Crime Scene techs were just pulling out. Tom waved at them and skidded to a halt in the spot their van had vacated. Jesse's car and Annie's Jeep were the only cars left.

Tom hurried into the dining room and found Jesse seated at the table, going over paperwork. "Anything new?" Tom said, as Jesse rose and shook his hand.

"BPD sent uniforms out to scout the neighborhood earlier, with no results. Her receipts show she went shopping early in the day and the fact that all her groceries weren't put away indicates that the abduction happened soon after she returned. The time-stamp of the last receipt was 1:10 p.m. From what I can tell, she put away all the perishables then fixed her lunch. My guess is she was going to eat before returning to the Jeep to bring in the rest of the bags. This would put her abduction between 2:30 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. There's no telling where she is now."

Tom sidestepped the broken glass on the floor from the jug that had once held iced tea and started a pot of coffee. He noted that the coffee pot still held the remains of the coffee Annie had made that morning.

"What's BPD gonna do?" Tom said, when he returned to the table with two steaming mugs of coffee.

"They took the report, took pictures of the kitchen and the Jeep. They also took the receipts from where she shopped, but not before I got the timestamps from them. They said that after the crime scene techs left, we could go inside. They didn't mark it off as a crime scene. That tells you how serious they are taking this. Lazy bastards.

"I called Sgt. Collins and brought her up-to-date. She wants to meet with us at her office as soon as we're through here."

"This early?" Tom said. He looked at his watch. It was just a few minutes past 3:00 a.m.

Jesse looked at Tom and Tom could see the fear in his eyes. "I would be more worried if the Sheriff wanted to meet with us. Sgt. Collins hopes that someone will contact the Sheriff's Office and tell us what they want."

Tom looked around Annie's kitchen. "Well, can we at least clean up in here and bring in her other groceries? Everyone's finished, right? I didn't see any crime scene tape on the door, and they didn't kick you out, so they must not be worried about missing any evidence."

"You're right. We can't leave this mess for Annie to come back to. I'll get the stuff from the Jeep and secure it, then we'll finish in here and leave."

While Jesse was outside, Tom let his own worst fears overwhelm him. He loved Annie like a sister. If anything happened to her, it would be almost as traumatic as when he lost his wife. He would find Annie and bring her home safe and sound.

Thirty minutes later, the two men secured Annie's home and headed for the Sheriff's Office to meet with Sgt. Collins. They both hoped that some word from the abductors had come in. If it hadn't, that was even more terrifying. The longer Annie was missing, the colder the trail became.

CHAPTER THIRTY

*Robbery/Homicide Unit
Monday, Very Early Morning
April 21, 2014*

"What do we know so far?" Sgt. Collins said, as she stormed through the doors into the Robbery/Homicide squad room when she saw Jesse and Tom arrive. "Who's in charge at BPD?"

"You won't like this," Jesse said. "Since it was obvious someone broke into Annie's house, they gave it to their Robbery/Homicide Unit. Annie's two favorite detectives, Grant Guthrie and Travis Finley are in charge."

"Ah shit," Sgt. Collins said. "That's just what we need. Stumble-dee and Stumble-dum."

Tom covered his mouth to hide his smile. Sgt. Collins was a rough-and-tumble lady, but she rarely resorted to cursing.

Sgt. Collins plunked herself down in Annie's chair. "Do either of you know how to work that new fancy coffee machine Sunnie bought for the break room? I haven't a clue."

Jesse headed for the break room. He knew Sgt. Collins wouldn't be thrilled to know both he and Tom were out of town all weekend.

"So, Tom, where were you when Annie was kidnapped? I thought the two of you were gonna keep an eye on her over the weekend."

Tom squirmed in his chair. He hadn't cleared his trip to Crescent City with Sgt. Collins since it was a weekend. He also thought Jesse would be with Annie.

"I went to Crescent City to follow up on a lead on our murder investigation. It didn't pan out and Jesse called me just as I was getting ready to return to Bakersfield." Tom didn't explain any further, and Sgt. Collins frowned.

"Well you sure picked a helluva time to run off, didn't you?" Sgt. Collins said. "I think there's more to this than you're tellin' me and I'll expect a full explanation later. Right now, finding Annie is our top priority."

Tom didn't say any more about his trip while Jesse finished brewing the coffee. He felt the tension in his stomach relax a little as the aroma of the coffee filled the room. When Jesse returned, he carried a tray with three mugs of coffee, a bowl of sugar cubes, and a small carton of cream he found in the refrigerator.

"Sorry, no donuts," he said, in an effort to lighten Sgt. Collins mood.

She looked at him over the tops of her glasses and said, "This is not the time for levity, Attorney Greyeyes. Now, let's go over everything that's happened recently and see if we can make some sense of this. By the way, where's Annie's cat?"

Jesse took a sip of his coffee before answering. "I took him back over to my house. I still had some food and stuff there for him from when Annie stayed with me after her unfortunate comments about the Cartels."

"Aw, I bet that's what's behind this. Heaven help us if the Cartels got ahold of her. Aw, geez. Call duffus over at BPD and tell him to fax over any reports he has. There's been time for his guys to talk to the neighbors and the forensic team to look over any evidence they found."

Jesse pulled out his cell phone and made the call. He wasn't surprised to find that both detectives were out of the office. He asked the desk sergeant to call one of them and ask for the reports. Ten minutes later, the desk sergeant called Jesse and said he would fax over what they had, but it wasn't much.

Jesse made copies of the official report and supporting documents and they sat there for several minutes as they read them over.

"There were signs of a struggle, but nothing to indicate what time it happened except for the receipts from Annie's groceries. I took pictures of them while I could. The latest receipt was stamped at 1:10 p.m. So I would say she arrived home no later than 2:00 p.m., unloaded some of her groceries, set up her lunch tray, and then was surprised by her kidnappers. I would estimate she was abducted between 2:30 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. at the latest."

"Where were you all weekend? I thought you and Annie were spending more time together now."

Remorse churned in Jesse's stomach. "We had a disagreement on Friday evening. I went to San Francisco for the weekend to visit my parents. I didn't get back into Bakersfield until late Sunday afternoon. I should have gone over to see her when I first got back, but I was being stubborn. So, I took a shower and a nap. It still was after she was taken, but maybe it would have made a difference. If anything happens to her, I'll regret that our last words were not pleasant."

Sgt. Collins looked at Jesse. She could see the guilt etched on his face. "Well, it may not have made a difference, Jesse, so don't beat yourself up about it. What we need to do is figure out how we can work with BPD and get her back. It's just after 4:00 a.m. now. Are you two hungry? Tom, would you mind going out and bringing back some Egg McMuffins, or something, so we have something to munch on? I have a feeling it's gonna be a long day."

Tom was surprised, but he didn't let it show. "Sure, I'll go pick up some stuff. It'll give me something to do besides sit here and worry about Annie."

Sgt. Collins watched Tom leave and shook her head. She took another sip of her coffee and said to Jesse, "What are we gonna do now? Where is this whole mess headed?"

Jesse could tell both Sgt. Collins and Tom were upset with him because he didn't check on Annie sooner. He, of all people, knew the danger she put herself in by spouting off about the Cartels. But he couldn't do anything about it now.

Sgt. Collins left another message at BPD for Detective Guthrie to call her as soon as he came in and then all they could do was wait.

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At 2:30 p.m., Detective Guthrie put down his donut and coffee cup and picked up the few new reports on the disappearance of Annie Avants that his men had turned in during the day. He faxed them over to the KCSO with a note that there was no reason to meet at this time as nothing new was known.

"The balls of that man," Sgt. Collins yelled when she read the fax. "If it was one of his detectives and our jurisdiction, he would be all over us to get the case solved immediately. Now, he's dragging his feet and being the normal pompous ass he always is."

She slammed the papers down on her desk and called Tom into her office when he returned with the food. He still looked like he needed a decent meal and a good night's sleep.

"You've never fully explained to me, Tom, why both you and Jesse left town and left Annie alone? It doesn't make any sense considering the fact that everyone was so concerned after her *faux pas* in front of the press. Explain yourself, and it better be good."

Tom explained in more detail about Angel, how his contact with the DEA hadn't helped, and his trip to Crescent City. He saw anger still smoldering in her eyes. He hadn't told her the whole truth, only that he suspected it was Angel - not that he was certain. And the link to Analeigh hadn't panned out, so it wouldn't be unusual to just drop it as a dead end.

"And why was this important piece of information kept just between you and Jesse and Annie? Why wasn't I kept up to date on what was going on?" Sgt. Collins said, as she unwrapped her Egg McMuffin.

Tom dreaded telling her that they thought someone in law enforcement might be talking to the Cartel because it put her right in the pool of everyone they suspected. So, he lied. "We wanted to make sure there was a connection before we threw this information on the table. I went up there on my own time to check out the gallery to see if I could find Analeigh. The whole situation was a dead end."

Sgt. Collins sat there and regarded Tom for a couple of minutes. "So, in your opinion, this Paco Cifuentes isn't an undercover DEA agent?"

"I have no proof that he and Angel Moreno are one and the same," Tom said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

*Small Hamlet high in the mountains above Badiraguato
Villa of Senora Salvatora Arreola de Juárez
Sinaloa State, Mexico
Tuesday morning
April 22, 2014*

When Annie tried to open her eyes, they were heavy. Her whole body felt weak and sluggish. *Something's happened*, she thought. She knew instinctively that she wasn't in her own bedroom in Bakersfield.

She lay there with her eyes closed and tried to remember. Suddenly it all came back to her. Someone had come up behind her in her kitchen. Before she could do anything, they subdued her and knocked her out with a cloth laced with something sweet smelling and an injection into her neck.

Without moving her aching head too much, Annie looked around the room. The ambient light suggested that it was mid-morning and sunshine filtered into the room through sheer curtains that hung in front of the many windows.

There were three evenly spaced windows, with arched tops, on the wall to her right. The windows started just above the floor board and ended about a foot short of the ceiling. The windows were framed in black wood. They didn't look like they could be opened.

Annie arched her head backward on the comfortable pillow and noticed that the wall behind the bed had the same window pattern. Sheer curtains on rods were pulled in front of the windows, but the mosquito net that hung around her bed was drawn back. Her bed amazed her. She couldn't remember sleeping in a more comfortable bed. The sheets, comforter, and pillow cases were of soft, beautiful cotton with intricate embroidery around the edges. She breathed in the clean, fresh scent of the bedding. *This is not bedding I could afford on my detective salary*, she thought.

In front of the windows on her right was a comfortable looking chair upholstered in a creamy linen fabric. In front of the chair was a small coffee table with a beautiful flower arrangement.

The floor was laid with ivory-colored tiles. Scattered around the floor were beautiful Mexican rugs in vibrant colors.

On the left-hand side of her bed was a side table with a lamp. There were no drawers in the table, but a brightly embroidered cloth was placed under the lamp.

The left wall was hung with beautiful tapestries and had one door, which was open. She could see a lushly appointed bathroom beyond the open door.

"Which I need to use," she said, as she sat up on the left side of the bed and put her feet on the cool tiles of the floor.

This is when she noticed that she wasn't wearing her clothes. She was dressed in a white cotton nightgown with embroidery around the hem, neck, and ends of the sleeves. She looked towards the foot of the bed and saw a matching peignoir. A pair of slippers sat on the floor.

Annie ignored the robe and slippers for the moment and made her way into the bathroom. It was twice the size of her bathroom at home. It contained a two-person spa, a large glass-enclosed shower, an American style toilet, a urinal, and a double sink with a mirror running the full length of the countertop. In baskets on the counter were more toiletries than she could ever use. She picked up a bottle of lavender shampoo, opened the lid, and took a deep breath.

"This would cost about \$50 if I could even find it in Bakersfield," she said. The other toiletries were also of exceptionally high quality. Even the cosmetics surprised her. She normally didn't wear much make-up, but the cosmetics she found were all color matches for her skin tone.

A silver comb and brush set were placed on a small dressing table, along with several perfume choices. "No Eau de Toilette or Eau de Parfum here," she said. "This is the real deal Chanel No. 5." She frowned. "None of this makes any sense."

After she brushed her teeth and took a shower, she walked back into the bedroom, wrapped in a luxurious cotton towel.

Just then, a young woman entered the bedroom from the door directly opposite the wall where Annie's bed was. She put a tray down on a table that was set up in the left-hand corner of the room.

"I hope you found everything you needed," the woman smiled and said in flawless English. "And I'm sure you have a million questions. But, before we talk, I think you should eat something and then I will be happy to answer as many of your questions as I can."

Annie ignored what the woman said and asked, "Where am I?" Why am I here?"

"You are a guest at my small villa just northeast of Badiraguato, in the Mexican State of Sinaloa. Are you familiar with it?"

Annie shook her head.

"My name is Sonora Salvatora Arreola de Juárez. My friends call me Sally, like the American name. I'll answer your questions after you eat. You don't want your coffee to become cold. We only brew Blue Mountain Coffee from Jamaica that we bring in special for El Chapo."

Mexico, Annie thought. What the heck am I doing in Mexico?

Annie frowned and looked at the young woman. "El Chapo? Isn't he in prison in Jalisco State?"

"Yes, yes he is. But everybody goes about their business as usual. You'll understand more later." She turned to leave the room and then turned back towards Annie. "For now, *Senorita Avants*, eat your breakfast. I hope you like *huevos rancheros*? In the wardrobe, over by the door, you will find a selection of clothes. I guessed your size, so if anything doesn't fit, just let me know. I'll return in about an hour."

During her career, Annie learned the wisdom of silence. She knew if she didn't start asking a lot of questions, the young woman might feel uncomfortable with the silence and volunteer more information. Annie now knew a little more about where she was, and under whose control, and would ask more intelligent questions when Sally returned.

"But, for now, I'm starved and that food smells delicious." She uncovered her plate and the aroma of the egg dish and fresh corn tortillas almost overwhelmed her. Her stomach growled in anticipation. She took a sip from a glass of juice and then poured herself a cup of coffee. She knew Jamaican Blue Mountain Coffee was excellent and very expensive, but the reality of her first sip was more than she imagined. She sighed and leaned back in her chair. *If this is the equivalent of a last meal, I couldn't have asked for anything better*, she thought, as she dug into the eggs and nibbled on a plate of fruit.

Annie wasn't scared. When she was abducted before, she managed to get free. Being in Mexico was a stretch, but she figured if they wanted her dead - as a statement - she would already be dead.

I wonder where Sally fits into all of this, she thought. The woman appeared to be in her early twenties. She had long, luxurious dark brown hair that hung to her waist in soft waves. Her skin was flawless and her large eyes were almost black. She stood about 5'7" tall and had a slim, if somewhat voluptuous, figure. She bore herself with self-confidence and a certain pride and poise, which made Annie think her self-esteem was high.

The clothes Sally wore surprised Annie. Her multi-colored, flounced skirt fell mid-calf. Her blouse was a ruffled, off-the-shoulder blouse with elaborate embroidery. Her attire reminded Annie of the kind of clothes peasants wore. But the main difference was that the fabrics of Sally's clothes were expensive. There was no coarse woven cotton in sight, just cotton of the softest and most lustrous weave. The embroidery was beautiful and the workmanship was flawless. On her feet were hand-decorated leather sandals which showcased her painted toenails.

Annie knew she wasn't in the villa of just anyone, but of someone of importance. This concerned Annie. What did they want with her and who ordered her brought here?

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Sally surprised Annie when she picked up their coffees, opened the door from Annie's room, and stepped outside.

"Oh my," Annie said, as she stopped and looked around in awe. They were in a lovely, open-air internal courtyard, with a small pond and fountain in the center. Several small tables and chairs bordered the pond. Annie smelled the sweet scent of the fragrant flowers in lovely ceramic pots scattered around the courtyard. Hummingbird feeders hung from small trees and hummingbirds and butterflies flew here and there.

"This is lovely and not what I expected."

Sally laughed as she led Annie to one of the tables and they sat down. "Most villas have inner-courtyards for privacy and protection when it's windy."

Annie looked around and noticed three other closed doors leading off from the patio, as well as a highly-carved set of double doors. "Are these other rooms bedrooms also?"

"Yes," Sally said. "There are four bedrooms total off this courtyard. The double doors to our right lead to a hallway that connects with the private family salon, kitchen, and library. If you keep going straight through the double doors, across the hallway, another set of huge doors leads outdoors to the terrace and swimming pool. The main entrance to the villa is down the hallway to the left as you go through the double doors. Anyone who comes in the main entrance enters a foyer with sitting rooms off to each side. Of course, there are other rooms here and there, as well as the whole second level."

Annie took a sip of her coffee, set her cup down, and frowned.

"It's beautiful here," she said. "I wish I knew what I was doing here so I could enjoy myself."

"Yes, of course," Sally said. "I realize you must be very concerned with this situation. I'm not privy to much of what goes on in the men's world. I can make some guesses, but they would be just that - guesses. In any event, it wouldn't be prudent of me to discuss the situation with you, now would it? I was told that someone will be here tomorrow to talk with you."

Annie took a deep breath and sagged a little in her chair. She felt disappointed. Annie sensed compassion from Sally and hoped Sally would tell her more.

"So, someone brought me here, unconscious, and dumped me on you to guard? I've never been to Mexico. I don't even know for sure what day it is or how I got here."

Sally looked down at the table, lifted her cup, and took a sip of her coffee. "I can help you with the day. It's Tuesday. You were brought here early Sunday morning. You slept all day Sunday and Monday and woke up this morning. All I was told was that you would be a guest here for a while. They asked me to find some clothes and other necessities for you so you would be comfortable. And that's what I did. I really don't know anything else."

"Where exactly are we? I'm not at all familiar with Mexico."

Sally looked Annie full in the face and said, "I'll tell you what I can. We're in a small hamlet high in the mountains northeast of the town of Badiraguato in Sinaloa State. This is a rural area populated by a few villages and hamlets. Not many people come up here and the hamlet is very small and hard to find. In fact, the roads, such as they are, are impassable many months of the year. You may have noticed that none of the doors are locked. They told me it wouldn't be necessary because there's really no place for you to go. Anyone who sees you try to leave would just bring you back here. I'm so sorry, but that's the reality of it."

Annie didn't say anything for a few minutes, as she sat there slowly sipping her coffee. "This coffee is wonderful," she finally said.

"Well, there's nothing I can do until I talk to someone who knows what's going on. I'm sorry they put you in this position because it makes you an accessory to kidnapping and, since I've been taken to another country, it's in the jurisdiction of the Feds."

Sally set down her coffee cup, stood up and pushed in her chair. "Let's make the most of this difficult situation. It will be several hours before anyone shows up here. I can take you to explore the village and visit the farmer's market if you feel up to it. You also have free access to any room in the villa and we do have an excellent library. Your choice."

Annie couldn't help but like Sally and respected her honesty. "I could use some exercise," she finally said, as she, too, rose from her chair. "Let me just find some good walking shoes and we can go."

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Annie and Sally walked the cobbled streets of the village, looking at the street vendors and the wares on display. Since the hamlet wasn't a tourist destination, most of the exchanges between the residents were by barter. When the roads were passable, many of the vendors loaded their goods into donkey carts and took them down to Badiraguato to sell.

"This hamlet wasn't always this prosperous," Sally said. "Before the Cartel came, it was a poor, isolated village. Many of the people didn't have work and couldn't grow or raise enough food for their families. A lot of babies, small children, and the elderly died. Then, some of the men started to work for El Chapo and El Mayo.

"Many of the farmers already grew marijuana, and others switched over. When the destination market became more interested in heroin, the farmers began to grow the opium poppy. Please, understand. My people don't use these drugs. Most of them don't even know what happens to their

harvests. And, they don't care. The lives of the poor have improved. The Cartel helps take care of the people in the villages and hamlets. What the Cartel does with the harvests doesn't concern them when they see that their children have shoes and plenty of food to eat and they can buy a colorful shawl for their wives from time to time."

Annie walked over to a vendor with a display of beautiful, colorful hand-woven triangular shawls. "These are beautiful," she said to Sally, as she picked up a shawl she admired, then set it back down.

Sally nodded to the woman, who leaned under her counter and brought out a sack. She put the shawl in the sack and handed it to Annie. Sally gave the woman some money.

"Oh, no, I couldn't", said Annie. "I don't even have any money here to buy things."

"Don't worry about it," Sally said. "When we go back to my villa, your bag, and other belongings, should be there. You can give me \$5 American dollars to pay for it, if you feel it's necessary."

Annie laughed at the absurdity of her situation. Here she was, kidnapped and taken to a foreign country by a violent drug cartel and she was worried about paying \$5 for a Mexican shawl. Sally joined in her laughter and the two women headed on down the street.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Sally's Villa
Wednesday Afternoon
April 23, 2014

Annie and Sally took seats at one of the tables in the interior courtyard to await whoever was coming to talk to Annie. It was a mild, sunny day and the women sat in silence for a few minutes enjoying the ambiance.

"I hope I find out today the reason I'm here and what the Cartel wants from me," Annie said. I know the higher-ups are probably upset with me for some of the things I said about the Cartels on television. Did you see that broadcast? It went global, I'm afraid, and I pretty much spoke my mind. I also insulted them in my potty-mouth Spanish. I almost got myself fired from my job."

Sally looked at Annie, puzzled. "I don't have a television here, as you may have noticed," she said. "I don't know anything about why you're here or what you were working on in California. I assumed it had to do with the Cartel, but they haven't harmed you, so I just did as I was asked to do - keep you company."

Annie closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. The crime scene vivid in her mind's eye. But what brought a rush of rage to her was the thought of Juan Osorio's family being murdered. *Should I tell Sally, or not?* she thought. Finally, she leaned forward, her decision made.

"I'm gonna tell you what happened. Maybe if I talk it out, it'll make more sense to me.

"I was assigned as lead investigator to a crime scene. A Mexican male adult had been tied up and executed, with a single gunshot to his head. Typical execution style."

Annie continued to tell her the story about the raid gone bad, the men who had moved out before the murder, her interviews with the men, the autopsy, and the frustrating lack of evidence.

Sally steepled her fingers under her chin. "Let me see if I have the whole picture," she said. "Your department thinks the men who lived at the farmhouse were working for the Sinaloa Cartel distributing drugs in your area. The murder victim had contacted someone at your Sheriff's Office and told them about a pending delivery. The raid was set up to take place while the drugs were still there. But the farmhouse was empty except for the dead man."

Annie stood up and paced back and forth at the side of the table. "Yes," she said. "However, the men in the farmhouse must have been tipped off about the raid, and the identity of the informant."

"So you really have no proof that the men who moved from the farmhouse were responsible for the man's death?"

Annie stopped her pacing and gripped the back of her chair. "I know they are responsible," she said as the rage rekindled in her eyes. "Why else would they kill Juan Osorio's family down here in Mexico as a 'lesson' to other people who work for the Cartel? When I heard that their deaths were confirmed, I ran out to the media fest outside my office and said some vengeful things in down-to-earth Spanish. My partner had to pull me away, but it was all caught on camera."

Annie didn't notice that Sally had turned pale at the mention of Juan Osorio's name. When she looked up at Sally, Annie saw tears running down her face.

"Sally, what's wrong?"

"Did you say Juan Osorio? His family has been slaughtered? He's a relative of mine. I can't believe this," Sally said, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Oh, shit," Annie said. "I'm so sorry Sally. Me and my big mouth." She went over and put her arms around the inconsolable young woman.

Just then, footsteps could be heard approaching the courtyard. Sally jumped to her feet and quickly left so she wouldn't be seen in this state. Annie sat back down at the table and focused on getting her emotions under control.

Just then, the door to the hallway opened. A man entered and approached the table where Annie was sitting.

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Annie couldn't decide if she was angry or afraid. Anger won out and, by the time El Mayo sat down in the chair facing her, she was ready for him.

The man who approached Annie's table was 5'10" and looked like he weighed about 150 pounds. He was trim and in good shape. He was dressed in a lightweight summer suit that Annie guessed cost more than she made in six months.

He held out his hand and said, "I'm known as El Mayo and I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

Annie took his hand, and shook it briefly, but didn't say anything.

Just then, Lupe, the housekeeper who ushered El Mayo into the room, returned with a tray of refreshments and juice. Then she left, but not before she turned briefly and smiled at Annie behind El Mayo's back.

Annie looked El Mayo straight in the eyes and her first words were, "What exactly do you want from me? What's the point of this abduction? I'm a homicide investigator, not a NARC."

El Mayo frowned as he looked carefully at Annie. He took a sip of his juice before he spoke.

"That attitude is why you are here. Senorita. You said some disrespectful things about the Sinaloa Cartel and we don't suffer that kind of behavior from anyone, especially a woman. What do you know of us? What have we done to you personally that would make you attack us like you did on international television?"

Annie couldn't believe what she was hearing. This grown man was whining like a little kid. Had she hurt his feelings? The whole situation was ludicrous.

"I'm not gonna justify your questions with answers. I'm sure you are more than aware of the harm your narcotics have done in my country."

El Mayo started to say something, but Annie held up her hand to stop him. "I know the spiel - people choose to take drugs and you're just filling a need and the income from the plants your local farmers produce allows them and their families to subsist. I know all of this. What I don't know is what you hope to accomplish by keeping me here. Please, enlighten me."

Annie leaned back into the cushions of her chair and waited. She crossed her legs and swung her foot back and forth to signal her impatience.

"Our leaders were incensed with what you said. They are sending a message to America and American women that you stepped over the line and your behavior will not be tolerated. When I am ready, I will send you back to your people. When you have learned to keep your mouth shut and mind your own business."

Annie leaned forward before she replied. "Drug trafficking in Kern County is my business. Drugs lead to murder and my job is to bring the criminals to justice. How dare you say it's not my business. I'm not one of those cowardly law enforcement clowns who bury their heads in the sand and pocket your tainted drug money. My mama raised me better'n that."

The older man stood with sorrow in his eyes. "You leave us no choice but to keep you here for now. At least until you have a more realistic picture of what's going on in the world and who the real criminals are - mainly your politicians and pharmaceutical companies. Think about it and enjoy your stay in sunny Mexico. Please say hello to the lovely Senora Sally and thank her for her hospitality."

Annie sat fuming as the man left the room. She grabbed a cookie from the tray of refreshments left on the table and bit into it so hard it crumbled in her hand and spread crumbs all over the floor. She chewed so hard her jaw ached. *The audacity of that man, she thought. I'm sure all the women in America and all women in law enforcement are going to roll over and play subservient to men just because the Sinaloa Cartel kidnapped me? Get real.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Cerro Drive
Wednesday Evening
April 23, 2014

Alejandro leaned back in his chair and smiled as he listened to El Mayo tell him what Annie had to say when they met.

"Did she specifically bring up the death of Juan Osorio?" Alejandro said.

"No, and it surprised me. Why do you think this is so? Isn't that her primary responsibility right now - to solve his murder?"

"Exactly," Alejandro said. "and my source says they're not having much luck finding out anything. The kidnapping of Detective Avants will turn their attention away from their dead-end investigation to finding her. That will take precedence over everything else. It's an ego thing."

El Mayo chuckled. "And they don't know for certain where she is or who took her. They must be frantic. I wish I could be a fly on the wall at their meetings. They probably don't even mention Juan Osorio. So, what are your plans for Detective Avants?"

Alejandro thought for a moment before he replied. "Nothing different. She can just sit there and keep Senora Juárez company. It upsets her to wonder what's going to happen next. We'll let her keep wondering and increase her curiosity and uneasiness about what our agenda is. She doesn't tie any of this to me, at least not directly."

El Mayo frowned but didn't change his tone of voice. "I'm going to send another man to replace Juan Osorio in your organization. He should arrive in a day or two."

Alejandro was pleased. To him, this meant that El Mayo had confidence in what he was doing and the steps he had taken to ferret out Juan Osorio.

"Thank you," Alejandro said, "I will inform the others. We'll welcome him among us."

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El Mayo remained deep in thought for several minutes after he hung up his phone. He wasn't sure this kidnapping of Detective Avants was a wise move. It seemed to him it was more of a jerk reaction by Alejandro because she had bruised his ego.

He called one of his soldiers into the room. "Here's what I want you to do. Go to Bakersfield and keep an eye on Alejandro Foncesco. He may be going off the deep end when he resorts to kidnapping American female detectives just to prove a point. I'm not sure I like it. I will send you to replace Juan Osorio and he won't suspect a thing."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

*Pumpkin Center
Wednesday Afternoon
April 23, 2014*

When he wasn't worrying about Annie, Tom was stressing about Angel getting busted as an undercover DEA agent. The best solution he could think of was to find him out somewhere when he wasn't around the other men from the house. Every time he tried to find him while Angel was at one of his work sites, Angel always had another one of the men with him.

Tom pulled beside Elizabeth's small house in Pumpkin Center. He and Annie had become friends with Elizabeth during previous cases in the Pumpkin Center area. Elizabeth's house was small, and situated behind a row of dilapidated apartments that were surrounded by bushes and trees. If you didn't know the house was there, it was easy to miss.

Tom walked up onto her small porch. The front door was open, but the screen was latched. He rapped on the screen and heard someone moving around towards the kitchen area. In a moment, Elizabeth appeared at the door.

"Well, hello Detective Weston," she said, with a big grin. "How nice to see you. How's everything going? Where's Annie?" Elizabeth opened the screen door and motioned for Tom to enter. Her home was small, but it was well kept and had a homey feel that made Tom comfortable. He just wished it was located somewhere other than in Pumpkin Center.

"Hi, Elizabeth. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"No, not at all. Have a seat. Can I get you a cup of coffee? I just made a fresh pot."

Tom sat down on one end of her comfortable sofa and said, "That would be great. I can always use a nice, fresh cup of coffee."

A minute later, Elizabeth returned with a couple of cups of steaming coffee and a plate of brownies she had just baked. She set the tray on the coffee table and suppressed a grin when she saw Tom's brow furrow when he noticed the brownies.

Tom looked suspiciously at the brownies. Elizabeth had been in and out of trouble with drugs, but had assured he and Annie that she was no longer involved with that crowd.

Elizabeth laughed when she saw the look on Tom's face as he picked up one of the brownies. "It's okay, Tom, I make them from my grandmother's recipe and she didn't use any 'enhancements' in her brownies. They're safe for you to eat."

Tom grinned a sheepish grin and picked up his coffee cup. He took a big bite of the brownie in his hand and rolled back his eyes as he savored the rich chocolate flavor.

"These really are very good, Elizabeth. Makes me wonder why people would want to mess them up with some dirty old weed."

Elizabeth laughed. "It would take too long to explain, Detective Weston."

Tom took a sip of his coffee and got a serious look on his face. "I'm here because there's a problem with Annie. Did you see her on television when she spouted off to the Cartels about their drug dealing?"

Elizabeth laughed. "Yeah, I saw it. I know it's not a funny, but she made me laugh. I was proud of her. I need to work with her on her Spanish slang, though. I wondered if she knew exactly what she was saying. Tell her I have some internet websites she can refer to the next time she wants to get creative with her Spanish. Where is she, anyway?"

Tom frowned. "That's why I'm here, Elizabeth. This is confidential, but it appears she's been kidnapped."

"What?" Elizabeth said. "When did this happen? I haven't seen anything on the news."

"Apparently last Saturday morning. Jesse Greyeyes went by her place Sunday night and found that she'd been taken. He called BPD, but they're not doing much about it except to agree to keep it out of the media for the moment."

Elizabeth leaned forward in her chair and put her cup down on the coffee table. "And you think it has something to do with what she said on television?"

"That's the only thing that makes any sense," Tom said. "If you can, I could use your help."

"Sure, whatever I can do, I'd be glad to help."

Tom reached for another brownie before he continued. "Sorry, these are just too good to pass up."

"A group of men just moved into the house at the end of Cerro Drive. I'm interested in having a chat with one of them who goes by the name Paco Cifuentes." Tom reached into the folder he carried and handed Elizabeth a picture of Angel. "I know it's a long shot, but if you see him out and about in Pumpkin Center, could you give me a call? I just might be close enough to come and try to pin him down. I don't want to talk to him when he's around the other men who live with him. There are seven men total."

Elizabeth studied the photograph for a moment. "Sure, I'll do what I can. Pumpkin Center isn't very large and I tend to wander around a lot. If I see him, I'll be sure to give you a call."

"Thanks, Elizabeth. Don't contact him yourself. I don't want to get you mixed up in this because we're dealing with some dangerous men, but I really do need to talk with Paco Cifuentes."

Tom got up and gathered together his folder. Elizabeth went into the kitchen and came back with a paper sack into which she'd placed three more brownies. "For the road," she laughed. "Be sure to let me know how the search for Annie goes. I'll be worrying about her."

"As soon as I hear anything, I'll let you know. I know the two of you bonded when we had that terrible car fire in the alley next to the grocery store."

"Yeah, she's a great lady. Just give me a call if there is anything else I can do, okay?"

"Sure thing. Thanks for the brownies," Tom said, as he stepped out the door. "I'll see you later."

Tom got into his car and headed back to the office. He knew the odds of Elizabeth seeing Angel out when Tom was in the area were slim to none, but he had to do everything he could think of to alert Angel and, perhaps, save Annie at the same time.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Pumpkin Center
Thursday p.m.
April 24, 2014

Late Thursday afternoon, as Elizabeth walked back to her home from the post office, she saw Paco going into the grocery store, still dressed in his gardening clothes.

She immediately called Tom to tell him that Paco apparently just got home from his gardening gig and was at the grocery store. She stepped behind a large bush so no one from the grocery store or its parking lot would see her watching while she talked to Tom.

"Detective Weston, this is Elizabeth in Pumpkin Center. The man you're interested in just went into the grocery store."

"Okay, Elizabeth, thanks. I'm about five minutes away. Did he see you looking at him?"

"No," Elizabeth said. "I was walking home from the post office and he didn't look my way."

Tom turned his car around and headed for Pumpkin Center.

"Just go on home for now. If I get a chance, I'll come by later, but I think it'll be better if no one there sees you talking to me."

"Right. I'm just walking towards my front door now. If there's anything else I can do, I'll be home the rest of the day."

"Will do. Thanks. Actually, before you go inside, if you could just watch and see if he leaves, and call me back if he does. I'd appreciate it," Tom said, as he disconnected the call.

A few minutes later, Tom pulled into the parking lot of the grocery store. He didn't see Paco outside so figured he was in the store.

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Paco put the items he was buying down on the counter and glanced out the front door of the market just in time to see Tom pull into the parking lot.

Paco thrust his purchases at the clerk. "Here, keep the change," he said, as he grabbed his plastic sack and headed out the back door, which was located behind the meat counter. It wasn't a customer exit and the clerk called after him, shaking his head when Paco didn't stop.

Once Paco was outside and around the back of the store, he could see Elizabeth talking on her cell phone as she glanced towards the store. He figured she was talking to Tom and realized that she had spotted him as he left through the back door. As fast as he could, he headed south into a maze of trailer parks and run-down homes.

Elizabeth, who had hidden again behind her bush, saw Paco leave just before Tom went inside the store.

Elizabeth entered the store and approached Tom like she hadn't seen him in weeks. "Hey, Tom," she said. "What're you doin' in downtown Pumpkin Center?"

Tom looked at her and, when the clerk turned his back, she whispered to Tom that Paco had already left through the back entrance. They acted like old friends and Tom bought a soda as his reason for being in the store and then walked outside with Elizabeth after she bought a pack of cigarettes.

Once outside, Elizabeth quickly walked back towards her house and Tom got in his car. Paco had disappeared and Tom was frustrated. His only hope was that no one from the house saw what just occurred. The last thing he needed was to put suspicion on Paco or draw the men's attention to Elizabeth.

He pulled away from the store and went over to Gabr's drive-in to get a pastrami sandwich. While he waited, he dialed Elizabeth's number. "Hi Elizabeth, that was quick thinking. I didn't need to run into the store like gangbusters and cause a scene. Paco must have seen me and ran."

"That's what I thought. I couldn't see into the store, so I don't know where he was, but he had a sack with him so he may have been at the check-out counter with a view of the parking lot."

Tom sat down at a small table in the back of the drive-in and took a deep sniff of his sandwich and fries. "If you can just keep your eyes open, but not endanger yourself or approach Paco, or any of the other men who have just moved to Pumpkin Center, that would be helpful. These men are suspected of working for the Sinaloa Cartel, and are dangerous." He didn't tell her that Angel was undercover DEA.

What Tom, Elizabeth, and Paco failed to notice was that Miguel was across the street taking note of everything that went on.

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For reasons he couldn't explain, Miguel had been suspicious of Paco since they first met. He didn't know why, but Paco just didn't seem like a gardener. It wasn't his place to question the people the Cartel hired, he just did what he was told, but he decided early on to keep an eye on Paco.

It raised a red flag when he watched Paco go into the grocery store and then flee out the back when a man Miguel didn't know pulled up in a Jeep. Miguel noticed that Paco glanced over at Elizabeth as he entered the store. However, no signs of recognition passed between Paco and Elizabeth.

As soon as the man in the Jeep parked and entered the store, Elizabeth hurried over and had an animated conversation with him.

This whole scene made Miguel curious. Who was the man Paco seemed to be avoiding? Why would Paco run from him? Where does Elizabeth fit in?

Miguel noticed Tom and Elizabeth talking as they left the store. Miguel had a weird feeling there was more going on here than was apparent. He needed to find out who this man was and his connection to Paco.

After the man drove off, and Elizabeth returned to her house, Miguel went back home to talk to Alejandro. Unfortunately, Alejandro was asleep. Miguel decided to head the same way as Paco and see what he could learn.

He needed to find out where this man fit into the puzzle and what Elizabeth was up to. He took a few minutes to write down in his notebook what he had already observed. Then he headed east on Taft Highway to see if he could find out where Paco had gone.

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Angel worked his way down to the Hwy 99 intersection and watched from behind a fast food joint until he saw Tom's car pass by and get on the 99 highway, headed north towards Bakersfield.

He went to the closest phone booth and called Analeigh on a throw-away cell phone she kept just for his calls.

He explained to Analeigh what had been happening and that he was already concerned that Tom had spotted him.

"Angel, I just saw Tom here in Crescent City on Sunday night. He was at the gallery the night they had the show for local artists."

"Did he see you?" Angel said.

"No," Analeigh said. "I saw him from the back door as I was going in. I backed out and left. What do you think I should do? I planned to call you as soon as I could. My thought is to pack up the twins and go to our home in Corrales."

"New Mexico?" Angel was surprised at her suggestion, but they had set up an alternate residence in Corrales to keep Analeigh and the kids safe if Angel was ever busted in his undercover role as Paco Cifuentes.

"Yes, silly. Where else? Tom is obviously looking for you and if he found me here, he can certainly find you there. And other people can find me, also. So, I think it's time I took the twins and left this area."

Angel thought about it for a moment before he spoke. "Maybe you're right. Tom's getting too close to this group I'm with. He may have seen a picture of me in connection with this group and now is trying to contact me. I don't know what to think."

Analeigh didn't say anything for a moment. "Are you worried he might do something stupid and out you to the Cartel? Maybe you should take a chance and call him. You could find out why he tried to find me and warn him off. He should know better, anyway."

"Yeah, but maybe he knows something I should know. Somebody tipped off Alejandro about the raid. If it was someone in law enforcement, they might be high enough up the ladder to find out about me. It's a very slim possibility."

"That's a good idea, Angel. But, I'm still going to pack up the kids and move to Corrales. I won't contact you again until we get there and get settled in."

Angel took a deep breath. He was resigned to the fact that troubles were starting and he had to take measures to protect his family. He leaned against the wall next to the phone and glanced up to see Miguel watching him from across the street.

"Okay, I agree. I don't want what's going on now to lead anyone to you. I gotta go. I just saw one of the men, Miguel, across Taft Highway looking my way. Call me when you get moved."

Angel hung up the phone and went into the fast-food restaurant next to the pay phone and bought a hamburger. Then he went outside and sat at a table like eating was what he was there for. A few minutes later, Miguel sauntered over and plopped down in the chair across from Angel.

"Hey, Paco. Didn't get enough to eat at dinner, bro?" Miguel said, as he stuck a cigarette in the corner of his mouth and lit it. The 'chef' did a primo job on those *Enchiladas Tapatías*, dontcha think?"

Angel took a bite of his hamburger. "Yeah, it was a good meal, but sometimes I get a hankerin' for a hamburger. Carlos thinks he's still cookin' for that fancy restaurant his family owns in Lagos de Moreno."

"Yeah, that's for sure. Whatcha doin' all the way down here?"

"Nothing in particular. I just wanted to take a walk. There's no place here to just wander around outside like there was at the farmhouse."

Angel finished his hamburger and got up to leave.

"You needed to use the phone down here? Your cell or the phone at the house doesn't work?" Miguel said, as he stood and laid a hand on Angel's shoulder.

"No, my cell works fine. The phone started to ring and I couldn't resist picking it up. It sounded like a teen-aged girl and she kept yammerin' on about some concert. I don't think she even realized she wasn't talking to a friend. So, I just humored her for a couple of minutes, then I hung up. The kids here are kinda flaky, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, well, maybe she's one of our customers," Miguel said, and then broke out laughing. "C'mon, I'll walk back to the house with you. I won't tell Carlos you had a hamburger for dessert after eating his gourmet meal."

Angel's hamburger sat like a brick in his stomach as the two men headed west up Taft Highway towards their Cerro Drive house. A chilling thought entered Angel's mind, *I wonder what Miguel was doing down here?*

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

*Cerro Drive
Friday Morning, Early
April 25, 2014*

A taxi pulled up in front of the house on Cerro Drive. The man in the rear paid the driver and then slowly stepped out of the cab. He looked dangerous. He was slim and wiry, but appeared strong. He stood 5'10" tall and didn't look like he weighed more than 140 pounds. His dark brown hair was collar length and he didn't sport a mustache like most Mexican men. His dark brown eyes - almost black - were hidden behind costly reflective sunglasses. His clothes appeared to be expensive - custom fit jeans, expensive cowboy-type boots, and a fitted t-shirt under a light blue linen summer jacket. He definitely wasn't the polo shirt type. The only thing he changed about his appearance was that sometimes he wore a leather vest with long-sleeved t-shirts. His name was Flavio Raya. El Mayo had sent him to Pumpkin Center to replace Juan Osorio and to observe the actions of Alejandro Foncesco.

He unloaded his two pieces of expensive luggage from the trunk of the taxi and glanced up at the kitchen window. He saw the curtain flutter as someone watched him. A moment later, the front door opened and a young man stood there regarding him with suspicion. El Mayo hadn't told Alejandro Foncesco when the 'new man' would arrive.

Paco met the man half-way down the front walkway that went from the street to the front door. "Can I help you with something?" Paco said, as he blocked the path.

The man put down his bags and looked at Paco. He peered over the top of his sunglasses at Paco and said, "I was sent here by El Mayo. I need to speak with Alejandro Foncesco."

Paco stepped out of the way and motioned for the man to proceed him into the house. When they got inside, and the door was closed, Paco said, "Alejandro should be here any minute. His shift at Greenriver Farms ended a while ago and he usually comes straight home so someone else can use his car. Please, have a seat in the front room. Can I get you a cup of coffee? I just made a fresh pot. Oh, by the way, I'm Paco Cifuentes."

The two men shook hands and Paco led the way into the front room. Flavio put his bags down before taking a seat in the recliner. He took his sunglasses off and placed them in the inside pocket of his jacket, and leaned back to raise the foot rest of the recliner before he answered. "Sure, a cup of coffee - black - would be most welcome. I'm Flavio Raya," he said. Paco nodded, as he turned and headed for the kitchen.

Before Paco could return to the front room with the coffee, Alejandro came in the front door. Paco motioned him into the kitchen and told him the new man had arrived. Paco gave Alejandro

one of the cups of coffee and followed him into the front room where he placed the second cup at the side table next to the recliner where the man was sitting.

Alejandro nodded to the man and sat down on the couch. "I'm Alejandro Foncesco. I don't believe we've met," he said, as he leaned forward to get a closer look at the man.

"You're right, we've never met. I am Flavio Raya. El Mayo sent me here to replace Juan Osorio. I believe he worked with you at Greenriver Farms. You can make arrangements for me to be hired in his place?"

Alejandro leaned back and took a sip of his coffee. Both men had forgotten about Paco, who had returned to the kitchen to get himself a cup of coffee. He leaned casually against the counter and listened to the conversation between the two men.

"There will be no problem with work. You can go with me one evening and we will do the required paperwork."

Flavio put down his coffee cup and all friendliness left his face. "El Mayo is concerned as to why you jeopardized the Cartel by kidnapping the American detective and bringing her to Mexico. How do you intend to resolve this situation? Surely you don't plan to kill her?"

Alejandro turned pale. He hadn't realized El Mayo questioned his motives or decisions. "I will show you a clip from the television of comments she made when she found out Juan Osorio's family was dead. You will then understand why she needed to be taught a lesson. I have no intention of harming her. In fact, there's no reason for her to link me personally with her kidnapping."

"Maybe not, but El Mayo is sure the people here suspect the Cartel is behind it. What will you do next? Render her unconscious and drop her off at the border? El Mayo believes it was a foolish thing to do and will just draw more unwanted attention to the Cartel's operations in this County."

At that point, the front door to the house opened and Miguel walked into the entry way. The first thing he saw was Paco standing in the kitchen listening to the conversation between Flavio and Alejandro. He went into the kitchen instead of the front room.

"What's going on here?" Miguel said.

Paco looked flustered. "Um, I was just getting a cup of coffee," he said. "Our new man has arrived from Mexico to take Juan Osorio's place. He's in the front room talking with Alejandro. Would you like a cup of coffee? It's fresh."

Miguel squinted his eyes and looked at Paco with dislike and suspicion. He didn't believe Paco was just there for coffee. Miguel didn't say anything further to Paco as he reached over and poured himself a cup of coffee and then headed to the front room.

Paco knew this was the cue to make himself scarce. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable around Miguel. Angel wondered how much longer it would be safe to play the role of Paco.

After Alejandro introduced Miguel to Flavio and Flavio left the front room to take his belongings to his room, Miguel said to Alejandro, "I caught Paco in the kitchen listening to your conversation with Flavio. I don't trust him. He's been acting weird lately."

Alejandro shook his head. "I think we should keep a closer watch on Paco. I don't want to be surprised by another snitch. I'll talk to my contact at the Sheriff's Office and see if they know anything about him."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

*Angel's Worksite
Friday Afternoon
April 25, 2014*

Analeigh knew that Angel worked by himself on Friday afternoons and that was the best time to call him. He picked up the phone on the second ring.

"Hey, Ana, how are you?"

Ana smiled when she heard his cheerful voice. He was the light of her life and she would be happy when someday they could be together.

"I'm fine, Angel. I just wanted to let you know that the boys and I have resettled and are now secure. Have you contacted Tom yet?"

Angel sat down on the edge of the porch of the house where he was working.

"Not yet, I was waiting to hear that you were relocated and safe before I called him. I do need to call him, though. I've information for him and I want him to stop being so obvious in his search for me."

"Well, when you find him, give him a kiss from me. I miss him and all the good times we had together."

Angel laughed. "If I'm being watched by the Cartel, they might wonder why I'm giving a Detective a big kiss."

Ana visualized the scene and gave out a hearty laugh.

"Okay, just hello will do. I've gotta go. I don't like it when we talk too long. I just wanted to let you know we're safe. I love you, Angel, and your little boys miss and love you, too."

Angel could hear the tears in her voice. "I love all of you, too. We'll be back together soon. Bye for now, my love."

Angel hung up the phone and went back to his weeding. *As soon as I'm finished here, I'll try to contact Tom, he thought. I hope he still has the same cell phone number.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Cerro Drive
Friday Evening
April 25, 2014

"Can everyone come into the front room for a few minutes?" Alejandro said.

Most of the other men were aware of who Flavio Raya was by now, but Alejandro wanted to do formal introductions. It's the way it was done.

After everyone had been seated, Alejandro stood up next to the recliner where Flavio sat. "El Mayo has been gracious enough to send us a replacement for Juan Osorio. As most of you already know, this is Flavio Raya. He has been with the Cartel most of his life and works closely with El Maya. Please, each of you tell Flavio your name, where you're from, and what you do here in America." Alejandro turned to Enrique and said, "You can start, Enrique."

Enrique stood up. "My name is Enrique Murillo. I'm from Sinaloa State. Here in America, I work as a bouncer at a bar called La Tuna."

Everyone chuckled. La Tuna was the name of the estate in Mexico where El Chapo's mother lived.

Ernesto stood up next. "I'm Ernesto Quintero from Jalisco State. I work as a self-employed gardener.

"I'm Francisco Piñeda from Sinaloa State. I work nights as a janitor at the Bank of America building downtown."

"My name is Paco Cifuentes and I work as a self-employed gardener with Ernesto. I'm from Sonora."

"I'm Carlos Ortiz from Lagos de Moreno in Jalisco State. I'm a student at Bakersfield College studying Chemistry."

"My name is Miguel Peña, also from Lagos de Moreno. I'm studying Plant Science at Bakersfield College."

When the introductions were finished, Miguel and Carlos went to their room to study, Francisco went to work, and Enrique left to get ready for his shift at La Tuna. That left Paco, Ernesto, Alejandro, and Flavio in the front room. Paco stood up and excused himself to go to his room. On his way out of the room, he headed for the kitchen to get a beer. He wanted to hear what they would say when they were alone.

"It looks like a good group," Flavio said. "Are you sure there are no more snitches among these men?"

"I don't know. Never in my life would I have suspected Juan Osorio. I've known him and his family most of my life. It was a total shock."

"But you handled it well," Flavio said.

Alejandro shook his head in sorrow. "Yes, but it broke my heart to do so. However, I would not hesitate to do so again."

Flavio sat silent for a moment. Then he looked Alejandro directly in the eyes and said, "What El Mayo doesn't understand is your obsession with the female Detective. What are your plans for her?"

Alejandro was again surprised that El Mayo would question his decisions, but he didn't show the surprise on his face. He thought a few seconds and then answered, "I despise females like her. I sent her to the Villa of Senora Juárez to teach her a lesson in respect."

Flavio took a sip of his beer and said, "The Villa in the mountains above Badiraguato?"

"Yes. Senora Juárez knows very little about the workings of the Cartel and is isolated. It seemed like a good place. I instructed her, anonymously, to slip the proper behavior of a female into her conversations with the Detective. I doubt it will do any good, but I couldn't just ignore what she did."

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Paco stood in the kitchen, listening to their discussion about Detective Annie Avants. He knew he had to get that information to Tom immediately. Just then, he turned and saw Miguel standing in the doorway staring at him.

"Eavesdropping again, bro? Don't you think that's a little rude?" Miguel said.

Paco picked his beer up from the counter, took a swig, and pushed past Miguel. As he headed for his room, he thought, *I wonder how long Miguel was standing there watching me? I need to be more careful.*

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Later that evening, Paco, Miguel, and Carlos returned to the front room to watch the evening news with Alejandro, Ernesto, and Flavio. There was finally a press conference about the disappearance of Annie. Tom and Sgt. Collins were on the stage with the Sheriff, and Miguel instantly recognized Tom as the man he'd seen at the grocery store.

Miguel turned to Paco, "Gee, that looks like the guy I saw pull into the grocery store the other day, and you ran out the back. What was that all about, bro?"

Paco squirmed in his seat and felt everyone's eyes focus on him.

"I knew who he was and I didn't feel like gettin' into a conversation with a cop."

Miguel smirked. "So you think he was lookin' for you?"

Paco leaned back against the cushions of the couch and gave Miguel the blandest expression he could.

"No, not at all. He hangs around Pumpkin Center a lot. It's kind of his favorite area to patrol. He's had some explosive cases here."

Alejandro leaned forward and stared hard at Paco. He, too, had recognized Tom as the detective who had interviewed Francisco, Enrique, and Ernesto, but hadn't realized that this was the man Miguel had been telling him about.

"How do you know all this, Paco?" he said.

Paco took a sip of his beer before he answered.

"I read the papers. My clients always have papers laying around and I read them when I take a break."

Paco stood up and left the room. Soon, Carlos, Ernesto, and Flavio also returned to their rooms.

Miguel told Alejandro that he was positive that Tom was the man he saw in the parking lot of the grocery store who seemed to be searching for Paco. Then, he reminded Alejandro that he caught Paco listening to two of Alejandro's earlier conversations with Flavio. He pulled out his notebook and read what he had written about Paco's movements to Alejandro and Paco's possible connection with Elizabeth.

Alejandro was not happy to hear this news. "Let's just keep this between me and you for the moment. Miguel. When I called my contact at the Sheriff's Office, they didn't have any information on Paco. He seems legit, but then, so did Juan."

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Paco sat on the edge of his bed with his head in his hands. He rubbed his hands through his hair and let out a big sigh. He felt like a brick was sitting in his stomach. He didn't want to end up like Juan. He knew Miguel was suspicious of him and was probably telling Alejandro everything he saw Paco do.

I've got to stick it out and find out as much about the Detective Alejandro has kidnapped and let Tom know. Then I can decide what to do about my own safety, he thought.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

*Outside the Kern County Sheriff's Office
Saturday Afternoon
April 26, 2014*

Tom was heading for his car when his cell phone rang. He looked at the ID screen, but didn't recognize the number.

"Detective Tom Weston," he said. He heard a big sigh of relief from the other phone.

"Tom, it's me, Angel. I know you've been trying to find me, but I had reasons to elude you. Is there someplace we can meet that's secure?"

Tom leaned against his car and was at a loss for words for a moment.

"Where are you now, Angel?" Tom said.

"I'm still on the job. The property I'm working on isn't far from where you live, but I don't have a car. When I finish up here, I'm supposed to call the other gardener to pick me up, but he won't be finished for another two hours."

Tom thought for a moment. "Give me the address and I'll pick you up. Will that be safe? Is anyone watching you?"

"Not that I've noticed," Angel said. "Do you know where John's Burgers is, next to the Circle K on Oak Street?"

"Yeah, I do. I'll meet you there. That's a good idea. I don't think anyone either of us knows will be there. I should be there in twenty minutes."

Angel started gathering together his tools and stashed them under the porch. "See you in twenty," he said, as he hung up.

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Fifteen minutes later, Tom pulled in around the back of John's Burgers, where he could view both Oak and Sunset. Angel was leaning against the side of the building and ran over and hopped into the passenger side of Tom's Jeep.

"Still driving the Jeep, huh?" Angel said, with a laugh.

Tom grinned. "Yeah, I can't seem to get rid of it. I just keep getting it repaired. One of these days, I'll have to buy something else, but I think I'll still keep this one. It's good to see you again, Angel. I didn't realize how long it's been since we lost touch. How are Analeigh and the boys? I tried to find her, but I think I missed her in Crescent City. I really need to talk to you."

Angel leaned back, rolled down his window, and lit a cigarette. "She's fine. She saw you in Crescent City, but was afraid to contact you. She couldn't be sure you weren't followed. She and the boys have moved somewhere else now.

"Why were you trying to find me?"

Tom stared out the window at the traffic going by on Oak Street.

"My partner and I are investigating the murder of Juan Osorio. When the Narc Division leader gave me a DVD with pictures of all the men who lived in the house where Juan Osorio was murdered, I caught a brief glimpse of a man I thought was you. I had the Crime Lab enhance the image to be sure.

"I won't go into all the details, but we think someone in law enforcement is in contact with the apparent leader, Alejandro Foncesco. I wanted to find you and warn you so you didn't end up dead.

"And then, when I thought I'd located Analeigh, I got a call that my partner had been kidnapped."

"Detective Annie Avants?" Angel said. "I've heard Alejandro talk about her, but I didn't know her connection to you. Alejandro became very incensed when she lambasted the Cartel on television and decided to teach her a lesson 'in proper feminine behavior' towards men."

That brought a hearty laugh from Tom. "Obviously, he doesn't know Annie."

"From what I've overheard, El Mayo isn't happy with Alejandro's actions because it draws more attention to the Cartel. He sent a replacement for Juan Osorio, a man I've never met before, named Flavio Raya. He gave Alejandro grief from El Mayo for his actions."

Tom briefly closed his eyes as he felt foreboding wash over him. "Do you know where she is?"

"Yes. She's being held in a Villa in a small hamlet above Badiraguato. The lady who lives there is a Senora Juárez. I did learn that Alejandro doesn't mean to harm her. I don't know what the status is now that El Mayo is involved. I get the impression that Flavio was sent here to keep an eye on Alejandro.

Just then Angel caught a glimpse out of the corner of his eye of someone who was ducking around the trash bins.

Angel slouched down in his seat and pulled his cap low over his face. "Tom, start the car and slowly leave the parking lot. Go down Sunset towards Elm Street, away from Oak Street, and then we can get away from California Avenue. You can drop me off at the house where I was working."

Tom was puzzled, but did as Angel asked. Once he got on the road, he said, "What's going on, Angel. You look like you saw a ghost."

Angel sat up in his seat and looked around. "Worse than that. I'm sure I saw Miguel watching us from behind the dumpsters. He's been acting suspicious of me and has caught me eavesdropping on Alejandro a couple of times. He even brought up seeing you at the grocery store and 'hinted' that you were there looking for me."

"This isn't good. I think it's time for you to cut yourself off from that group. Can you contact your handler? I can take you somewhere safe in the meantime. We can pick up your stuff from your job site. When I interviewed the men at the Cerro Drive house, they told me you were in Los Angeles visiting a woman and that you went on one of the motor scooters. When I was leaving, one of the men opened the garage and I saw both scooters inside. So I knew they were lying. I think they were starting to get suspicious of you then.

Angel thought about it for a minute. "Yeah, I think you're right. I don't want to end up like Juan. If Miguel recognized you, which I'm sure he would as your car kinda gives you away, he'll put two and two together and tell Alejandro."

They drove on in silence until they arrived at the house where Angel had been working. After looking around to make sure no one had followed them, Angel ran to the porch and retrieved his tools.

When he hopped back in the Jeep, Tom said, "Do you have anything at the house you need?"

"No. I always carry all my important papers with me, and I have my real identity papers in a safe-deposit box in a bank in Wasco."

"I'm going to call Jesse and switch to his car. I really need to get a more anonymous ride," Tom said.

When Jesse answered his phone, the men decided that it would be safe for the moment for Angel to stay with Jesse. Tom agreed, but the thought ran through his mind, *Could the Cartel have put Jesse on their radar because of his relationship with Annie?*

CHAPTER FORTY

Jesse's Home
Saturday late afternoon
April 26, 2014

Angel's worksite wasn't far from Tom's house. When they arrived, Tom parked his jeep on a cement slab he poured just for that purpose. The slab was behind the house and couldn't be seen from the road.

A few minutes later, Jesse pulled into the driveway and Tom and Angel got into his car. Tom climbed into the front passenger seat and Angel slouched down in the back seat.

Jesse turned around and extended his hand to Angel. "Hi, Angel. It's nice to see you safe and sound. I guess Tom told you who I am."

Angel shook Jesse's hand and smiled, "Yes, he's trying to bring me up-to-date in small doses. I guess I've blown my cover with this group of men. They're brutal and won't be happy. I don't want to drag you and Tom into a dangerous situation, but I can see we're working on the same goal - shut these bastards down and rescue Detective Avants."

"That's about it," Tom said, "we'll see what we can put together once we're at Jesse's house. The two men buckled up and Jesse pulled out of Tom's driveway.

When they arrived at Jesse's home, he parked in his attached garage and they entered the house from the door in the garage that led into the kitchen.

"Make yourselves at home, guys," Jesse said, as he headed for the refrigerator and pulled out a pitcher of orange juice.

Jesse's kitchen had a bar that separated the kitchen from the dining room and Tom and Angel climbed up on the stools at the bar. Jesse poured them each a glass of juice and then sat down.

"Okay, tell me what's going on," Jesse said.

Tom explained further who Angel was and the current situation.

"Well, you obviously need to go into hiding. You say your family is safe?"

Angel nodded, "Yes, they moved to another place out of state that we had ready for just such an emergency. We never wanted to be in a position where we had to go into Witness Protection. The undercover assignments I've had were always with another name and impeccable background papers."

Jesse rubbed the back of his neck and shook his head. "Yeah, but if I understand correctly from what you've told me, someone in law enforcement has been feeding information to the men at the farmhouse and probably the other distribution houses in Kern County. If they found out your real name and organization, you could be a target.

"Also, you are a witness to the murder of Juan Osorio, so the first thing we need to do is take your statement before anything else happens. Now, tell me again what they said about Annie."

Angel took a sip of his juice, closed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose before he said anything. He finally sat up straight, opened his eyes, and said, "From what I understand, Alejandro

doesn't intend to harm her, he's just 'teaching her a lesson'. I don't know how to find out more information, but for the moment, it appears she's safe."

He told them the approximate region where Annie was being held.

"I'll crank up my computer later and research the area. I know it's right in the middle of the Sinaloa Cartel's territory, but if Annie is only being 'guarded' by another woman, we might stand a good chance to free her and get her out of Mexico."

Jesse stood up. It was apparent he had made a decision. "Let's get Angel's statement taken. We can use it to arrest Enrique Murillo for the murder of Juan Osorio."

Jesse went back into the kitchen and pulled a homemade pizza out of the freezer. He stuck it in the microwave on low to defrost and then went back to his chair.

Angel looked up from his thoughts when Jesse sat down. "I witnessed more things that I can testify about. I suspected Alejandro was being fed information from someone in law enforcement, but I'm not in the 'inner circle', so I wasn't able to find out who it was, or even what agency the person was from."

Tom thought for a moment. "I would think it must be someone from the Sheriff's Office. They knew about the raid and no other agencies were involved. We keep things in-house to avoid leaks like this one. I wouldn't know where to start looking for the snitch.

"Dispatch knew, of course, and the SWAT team and Narc Division. But anyone, even though it's against procedure, could have mentioned it to family or friends."

Jesse got up and moved the pizza into the preheated oven and set it to bake for twenty minutes.

"A rule of thumb is to 'follow the money.' We should look for someone who is having financial problems. That's where I'd start."

"Who can we trust to investigate discreetly without tipping this person off?" Jesse said.

"The only person I would trust at this point is Lt. Llamas, the head of the Narc Division. He can decide if there are other people in his group that he trusts. That's where we should begin, anyway. If we can find this person, there is a good chance we may find more information on Annie's precise whereabouts."

"In the meantime," Jesse said, "I don't think they've made any connection between me and Annie, so you should be safe to stay here until we finish your statement and you've contacted your handler. That's probably the first thing you should do because your agency won't know what happened to you."

"I'll call them right away. When do you want to do the statement? Should we video record it?"

"First thing in the morning," Jesse said. "The sooner, the better. We don't know for sure who the snitch is, so we can't take any chances on something happening to you. I know that sounds cold, but we also have to think about Annie. I've got video equipment, so we're all set.

"I understand, and I'm not offended. I'm anxious to get everything I know finalized."

Jesse went back to the kitchen and returned with a huge vegetable pizza which the men ate with gusto, along with a couple of beers each.

When they finished, they leaned back in their chairs and groaned.

"Now," Tom said, "how do we find Annie?"

The next morning, Sunday, Jesse set up the video equipment. Angel had already spent several hours preparing a written statement, after talking to his superior and explaining what was going on.

They decided to limit this taped statement to the murder of Juan Osorio, descriptions of each of the men and what they did, and the arrival of Flavia Raya. More in-depth debriefings would be at the hands of the DEA and, hopefully, would be shared with appropriate agencies.

For three hours, Angel talked, referring to his written statement when necessary. When he finished, everyone who witnessed the statement made their statements.

Jesse made a copy of the video for the DEA and gave it to Angel. He also made copies of Angel's handwritten statement.

When they finished, they were tired and hungry. Since they couldn't go out in public, Tom drove to a local deli and brought back a selection of sandwiches, salads, and desserts.

When the men finished eating, they went outside and sat on Jesse's patio.

Jesse spoke up first. "We have enough, obviously, to file charges and go before a judge to get felony arrest warrants for Enrique as the hit man, Ernesto as his accomplice to secure Juan Osorio, and Alejandro for sanctioning the execution. I've already talked to the District Attorney and she says it's my call. I say we go for it because they know what Angel can tell us and they might decide to leave the country."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

*Cerro Drive
Saturday Evening
April 26, 2014*

Alejandro sat drumming his fingers furiously on the kitchen table. He suspected there was another traitor in their midst, and he knew Miguel was suspicious of Paco. He liked Paco and he couldn't believe that he was working with Detective Tom Weston. When Miguel told him he had watched Paco meet with Detective Weston, Alejandro was stunned. It made him physically ill to think of the things that Paco could tell the Detective. He needed to be eliminated immediately.

"Enrique, come here," Alejandro called down the hall to the bedroom where Enrique was resting.

Enrique entered the kitchen and sat down at the table. He could tell Alejandro was furious.

"We have a big problem," Alejandro said. "It turns out that Paco has been talking to that Detective we saw on television at the press conference. Miguel saw them together in Bakersfield and when Paco spotted Miguel, they ran. Now, I can't reach Paco and he isn't at his job. I doubt if we'll see him again. I'm worried about what he knows. I'm going to call El Mayo and see what he suggests, but what I'd like you and Ernesto to do is search for Paco. if you find him, bring him to me so I can question him. If he gives you any trouble, just get rid of him."

Enrique looked at Alejandro and didn't speak for a moment. Then, he said, "Do you think it's necessary to call El Mayo? That's two traitors in our house. The Cartel might begin to question our ability to do our job. What do you think?"

Alejandro looked up at Enrique in surprise. "Do you really think we could keep something like this a secret? Besides, I suspect El Mayo sent Flavio here to keep an eye on us. He will wonder what happened to Paco if Paco doesn't come back. We've both been with the Cartel for a long, long time and know how they feel about the rank and file keeping secrets from them."

"Yes, I guess you're right," Enrique said.

"The best thing I can do is call El Mayo and tell him the truth. Maybe he can talk to the female detective again and see if she knows anything about Paco."

"Okay, you're the boss," Enrique said, as he stood up from the table to begin his search for Paco.

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Alejandro picked up the secure phone sitting on the table and dialed El Mayo. He wasn't looking forward to this conversation. El Mayo picked up after the second ring

"Alejandro, I hadn't expected to hear from you so soon. You have news for me?"

Alejandro paused for a second before replying.

"Yes, and I'm afraid it isn't good news. We just found out that another one of our men is in contact with the Sheriff's Office and. . ."

"What?" El Mayo screamed into the phone. "Two traitors? Have you lost control of your group, Alejandro? Should I send someone to replace you? El Chapo will be very displeased with you when he hears this news. What're you gonna do about it? Have you talked with your contact at the Sheriff's Office to see if they know anything about him? Which one was it, by the way?"

"Paco Cifuentes. His background checked out. We had no reason to suspect him. I was thinking perhaps you could have another chat with the detective and see if she knows anything about him."

"I'll think about it, but first I need to get a message to El Chapo and see what he suggests. This is beyond belief. I'll get back to you later."

El Mayo hung up the phone and so did Alejandro. Alejandro just sat there with all the color drained from his face. He knew he could be in big trouble. The best thing to do was find Paco and interrogate him on what he knew and who he had contacted.

Could his men find Paco before more damage was done?

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Cerro Drive
Saturday Evening
April 26, 2014

Later that evening, El Mayo called Alejandro to tell him that El Chapo wanted all the men to leave America and return to Mexico immediately.

Everyone was home except Ernesto, who was at his bouncer job at La Tuna. When Alejandro called the men into the front room, he told them to get their belongings packed because they were leaving as soon as Ernesto arrived.

"Miguel, pack up Ernesto's things so we can leave immediately. Listen up, everyone. We have two SUVs so only bring your most important stuff. We have luggage racks on the roofs and can mount the two bicycles onto the back doors. Three of us can ride in one of the SUVs and the other four of you in the second SUV. We'll take as much luggage as we can."

Miguel looked up at Alejandro. "Does this mean we won't be coming back to America?"

Alejandro paused for a moment. "Yes, it does. El Chapo ordered us back to Mexico immediately. Bring all your important papers and any relevant books from the college that you want to keep. After we've loaded everything in the SUVs, if there is still more room we can consider taking other items.

"I hate to leave the motorbikes, but we're looking at no less than twenty-two hours on the road. I wouldn't wish that on any of you."

The men turned to go to their rooms to start packing. Flavio turned to Alejandro at the doorway and said, "I haven't had a chance to completely unpack. Is there something else I can help with?"

Alejandro thought for a moment. "You can pack Ernesto's stuff instead of Miguel. I'll call La Tuna and tell Ernesto to tell his boss he's not feeling well and to come home right away. If we can leave here by 1:00 a.m., we should arrive there around midnight. That will be 1:00 a.m. in Badiraguato since they're one hour ahead of us.

Flavio left to take over the packing of Ernesto's belongings and Alejandro called Ernesto and told him what was going on and to get home right away.

When Ernesto arrived, the first SUV was packed and everyone got busy packing the SUV Ernesto had been driving.

"Okay, that's all we can take," Alejandro said when they had crammed everything they could into the two SUVs.

"Carlos, make sure anything perishable is put in a trash can and set out for the next pick up. Then, shut down the refrigerator. In fact, go to the circuit breaker and shut down the power to the house. The Americans can do what they want with anything we leave behind."

At ten minutes after 1:00 a.m., the men loaded into the two SUVs and headed east toward Hwy 99, which would intersect with I5 and take them home.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Sally's Villa
Sunday Morning
April 27, 2014

El Mayo arrived at Sally's villa unannounced. Lupe ushered him into one of the sitting rooms off the foyer and went to find Sally.

"Senora Juárez., Senor El Mayo is here to talk to Senorita Avants. I put him in the left sitting room. Do you want me to prepare some refreshments?"

Sally scrunched her forehead up in a frustrated scowl. *What could he want now*, she wondered.

"*Si*, Lupe, *gracias*. I'll tell Senorita Avants he's here. I'll not join them in the sitting room, so just prepare enough for two."

Lupe left and Sally rose from her desk to search for Annie. She found her in her room trying to read a book in Spanish with the help of a Spanish-English dictionary.

Annie smiled when Sally knocked on her door and entered.

"I do speak fluent Spanish, Sally. but I'm a beginner. I studied it in high school and in college. The dictionary helps when I run into a word I don't recognize."

Sally walked over and sat across from Annie at the small table in her room.

"El Mayo is out in the left sitting room asking to speak with you. Lupe didn't dare ask him what it's about, and he didn't say. She's preparing some refreshments and you can talk to him in there, if you wish, or have Lupe bring him to the courtyard. I don't want to see him at all, if that's possible."

El Mayo's unexpected arrival surprised Annie, but she didn't feel any fear.

"I'll go to the sitting room and see what he wants," Annie said. "He doesn't have any big Cartel thugs with him, does he?"

Sally chuckled.

"Lupe didn't mention whether he was alone or not, but I got the impression no one else is with him."

Sally and Annie headed towards the door when Sally paused with a grin on her face.

"What are you smirking about?" Annie said.

"If you could meet my husband, Efrain, and his brothers, I'm sure your perception of 'Cartel thugs' would change. They are beautiful, well-educated, and perfectly charming. However, I suspect they have a deadly side they keep hidden from me. I'm lucky I never fell in love with him."

Sally headed right towards the kitchen and Annie went left towards the main entrance where the sitting rooms were located.

The drapes in the room were open and the room was flooded with light. Annie had to pause for a moment to let her eyes adjust to the brightness.

El Mayo rose at her entrance and gave her a moment. Then he spoke.

"My dear Senorita Avants, it's good to see you again. Please, come over here and have a seat. This room is very elegant and suitable for such a lovely lady as yourself."

Annie smirked inwardly. She wasn't buying his attempt at flattery. She was sure this wasn't a social call.

Annie walked over to where he stood and they seated themselves.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Senor El Mayo?" Annie said.

At that moment, Lupe entered the room and set down a tray with a pitcher of fruit juice, two glasses, and some pastries. El Mayo eyed the tray and said, "I take it Senora Juárez won't be joining us?"

Annie poured juice into the two glasses and said, "No, she's busy in the kitchen and can't leave what she's doing. These lovely pastries are the results of her labors this morning," Annie said, as she picked up a *buñelo* and crunched on it. It was still warm.

"Unfortunately," El Mayo began, after taking a sip of his juice, "there's a situation in Bakersfield that perhaps you can help me with. I would appreciate your cooperation in this matter."

"If I can help you, I will," Annie said, "but don't expect me to give you confidential information."

El Mayo continued. "Several men lived in the house with Juan Osorio. As you no doubt know, Juan Osorio was in contact with your Narc leader for reasons that went to the grave with him. We don't know what all he told your Narc leader, but it's safe to assume the men's usefulness in Kern County is at an end. Not just because of Juan Osorio. We've discovered that another one of the men has been talking with Detective Tom Weston. There is absolutely no reason for this man to be meeting with Detective Weston. His name is Paco Cifuentes. What can you tell me about him and his connection to the Sheriff's Office?"

Annie didn't speak for a moment while she gathered her thoughts.

"You know, Senor, that each detective works on many cases. I have no idea under what circumstances Detective Weston would need to talk to Senor Cifuentes. I did interview three men from the farmhouse, but that name wasn't on my list."

A look of sadness passed over El Mayo's face.

"It saddens me that you would lie to me, Senorita. It is too much of a coincidence that Paco Cifuentes was one of the men who lived in the same house as Juan Osorio."

"I'm not lying. I've never heard the name Paco Cifuentes before," Annie said, with complete honesty. She suspected El Mayo was referring to Angel Romero but Annie didn't know the name he used undercover. Tom hadn't mentioned which one Angel was supposed to be.

"I'm disappointed in you, Senorita. I believe you know more than you're telling me. However, my instructions from El Chapo were just to ask you what you could tell us. I won't take up any more of your time."

Annie sat in her chair for several minutes after El Mayo was shown out by Lupe and thought about this new information. Apparently, Tom had contacted Angel. Did Angel have information about her whereabouts?

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Jesse's Home
Sunday 5 p.m.
April 27, 2014

"I know the on-call Judge, so I'll take my statement and the video and go see him right now. I'm sure we won't have a problem getting arrest warrants for the three men. The DA is behind us also. She said she could foresee no problems."

Jesse picked up what he needed and put it in his backpack. "Can you line up some deputies to accompany us when we go to make the arrests?" Jesse said, as he looked back at Tom.

"Of course," Tom said. "I was just calling to make arrangements for backup. Everybody should be waiting for us at the SO by the time you get the warrant. We'll leave now and meet you there."

Jesse looked over at Angel with a frown. "Angel, I think it would be better if you waited here. We don't need those men to see you with us."

Jesse met up with the gathered men half an hour later. They rendezvoused in the parking lot between a house and Los Arcos Restaurant. The restaurant and other businesses hid the men and their vehicles from Taft Highway.

"Okay, one of you park just past Cerro Drive in the parking lot of Galvan Tire Service and walk to where you can cover the back of the house. It's the last house on the block and the backyard faces Wible Road.

"The rest of us will park a couple of houses away from the target and surround the house."

He looked at another deputy and said, "Use your vehicle to block the exit from Cerro Drive and then come back down here."

When all the men were in place, Tom stood at the side of the front door, gun drawn, and pounded on the door. "This is the Sheriff's Office. We have a warrant to search this residence. Open up now."

He tried one more time, with no response. He reached down and turned the knob and was surprised to find the door unlocked. The men rushed in, also finding the patio doors unlocked. They searched the house thoroughly and found no one.

"I'm going to call Laine DelMonte's team and have them do a thorough inspection of the house. It looks as if a lot of their belongings are still here, but I get a feeling that they're gone.

"Someone go check the circuit breaker and see if that's where the power was turned off."

A minute later, the lights were back on and the refrigerator was humming. Tom let the deputies leave the scene and just he and Jesse waited for Laine. When she arrived with her team, he went over what had occurred and left her to do her work.

Three hours later, Laine called Tom and said, "Tom, I found some slips of paper that refer to another building in this area. I went over to take a look and found an old Quonset hut. It appears abandoned. I made sure of that before I got too close. I took some exterior photos, but that's all. I think, due to the fact the papers were found in this house, we can get a probable cause warrant to search the Quonset hut."

Tom felt a spark of hope. Maybe the connection between these men and the drugs coming into Kern County would be found in this new building. "I'll bring Lt. Llamas up to date and we'll get a warrant. I'll call you when the warrant is in place and we can meet at the Quonset hut."

Laine took pictures of the papers she'd found and sent them, along with the picture of the building, to Tom so he had the data to get the warrant.

Forty-five minutes later Tom, Jesse, and Lt. Llamas met with Laine and her crew at the decrepit Quonset hut. It was padlocked, but the men made quick work of entering the structure.

Disappointment overwhelmed the men again. There didn't seem to be anything in the Quonset hut except old folding tables and chairs.

Laine walked up to Tom and said, "Don't despair, Tom. If this was a distribution location, we'll probably find traces of the drugs. It looks like someone was here recently, but it doesn't have that scrubbed look that the farmhouse and the outbuildings at the other property had. I'll get back to you as soon as I find something. We're still working on the house. Put up crime scene tape here and we'll get down her just as soon as we can."

Tom turned to his men, the disappointment plain on his face. "Okay, guys, let's call it a day and let Laine and her group do their thing.

After the men disbursed, Tom and Jesse returned to Jesse's home to bring Angel up-to-date on the negative results of their search and to ask him about the Quonset hut.

Angel was sitting at the table when they arrived. Tom poured he and Jesse a cup of coffee and joined Angel.

"The men appear to have left the house for parts unknown. However, Laine did find some papers referencing a Quonset hut in Pumpkin Center. We got a warrant for it but it, too, was empty except for some old furniture.

"What can you tell us about the Quonset hut, Angel. You didn't mention it before."

"I was never told about the new arrangements for the disbursement of the drugs. I didn't know about a Quonset hut. I'm usually at work when Cartel business takes place. I did know that the shipment that was supposed to be at the farmhouse when the raid took place had been taken somewhere else, and eventually disbursed, but I didn't know from where.

"Remember, they were already getting suspicious of me. Especially since Miguel caught me eavesdropping on Alejandro's conversations."

Tom thought about what Angel said and weighed the odds that Angel was telling him the truth. Based on what he'd observed, Tom decided that it was feasible that what Angel said was true.

"Okay, we'll see what we get back from Laine. She's gonna dust for fingerprints to see who all was there and search for traces of powder. If there are any footprints or tire tracks visible, she'll cast them also. That's where we stand."

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Sally's Villa
Monday Morning
April 28, 2014

"Senora Sally," Lupe said softly as she entered the courtyard where Sally sat sipping fruit juice with Annie, "Senor El Mayo is here again, but he doesn't want to see you or Senorita Avants. He says he has a meeting with someone and would like to use the left parlor for his meeting."

Sally glanced up with a perplexed look on her face. "That's rather unusual, Lupe. Did he say why he wants to hold his meeting here?"

Lupe shook her head. "No, Senora, he just asked me to ask you if it's okay. He said it's Cartel business and since your husband is part of the Cartel, he didn't think it would be an inconvenience for you. He wants someplace private to talk with this man."

"Okay, Lupe. Please tell Senor El Mayo I will be honored to have him use my humble villa as a meeting place between him and another esteemed Cartel member. Try not to laugh when you say all that."

Lupe clamped her lips tightly together to keep from laughing. "I will try, Senora. I will offer them refreshments, also."

"Yes, of course, Lupe. I baked some small strawberry tarts yesterday afternoon. I think those would be fitting for our guests."

"By the way, do we know who the guest is?"

"No, Senora. Senor El Mayo didn't say. If I hear anything useful, I will tell you."

"No, Lupe. I don't want you to get in trouble for spying on El Mayo. Just serve the refreshments and quickly leave the room."

"Yes, Senora."

After Lupe left the courtyard, Sally grinned at Annie and said. "I don't want Lupe to catch us spying on El Mayo."

"Come. There's a place on the second floor where we can peek down to the left parlor. Children made the peepholes so they could watch the adults when they had a small party in the parlor. I don't think my husband even knows about them."

Annie and Sally quietly went up the back stairs from the kitchen until Sally found the secret niche where they could see part of the parlor below and hear what was being said.

"Why did you want to meet here?" Alejandro said. Annie gasped when she recognized the voice of Alejandro Foncesco.

El Mayo shook his head. "For reasons of my own, Alejandro. It's not your place to question the decisions or orders of the Cartel. Do I make myself clear?"

Alejandro kept quiet as Lupe placed a tray of refreshments on the table between the two men.

"Yes, of course, I understand. Please accept my apologies."

El Mayo bit into a tart and smacked his lips. "Senora Juárez is a good cook. Her husband is a lucky man. He's moving up the ranks in the Cartel and will soon be in the top hierarchy. He does what he's told and does a good job. He doesn't improvise or let his emotions control his thinking.

"Unlike other, lesser members of the Cartel, who think they can do what they want and that they know what's best. Like you, Alejandro."

"I'm sorry, El Mayo, it's just that . . ."

El Mayo held up a hand to stop Alejandro from speaking. "I've already heard your lame excuses, Alejandro. What you've done doesn't benefit the Cartel. Now, we have a problem. What do we do with the lovely Senorita Avants? Is it possible the second traitor in your midst overheard you talking about your 'revenge' on the Senorita and where she is being held? Hmmm?"

Alejandro paled and shuffled in his chair. He didn't have an answer for El Mayo.

"The execution of Juan Osorio would have faded from the news in a few days. The arrogant Americans would view it as just 'house cleaning' on our part. Lt. Llamas isn't going to go around admitting Juan Osorio was his snitch because he was caught and killed. No other Cartel member would be inclined to become a pawn in the hands of the Narc Division after what happened to Juan and his family. Life would then go on as always."

El Mayo poured himself a glass of juice, took a sip, and ate another tart.

"But now, because of your stupid actions, all of law enforcement in Kern County, and beyond, is focusing on the kidnap of Detective Avants. Attention on the Cartel is higher than it's ever been in a long while. Because of what? Because you thought with your *cojones* instead of your head."

Alejandro sat with his clasped hands dangling between his knees. He was shamed by being called to task by El Mayo but, deep in his heart, he felt justified by what he'd done.

"So what are we going to do to rectify this situation, Alejandro? I'm sure the Senorita knows where she is by now. If you send her back to California, she will share anything she's learned here with the Sheriff, and all law enforcement in Kern County will renew their efforts to eliminate the Cartel from their County.

"Not that they will be successful. We have too many of our own informants in their government and local businesses. But it will still bring unwanted attention to us and could lead to problems."

Alejandro sat there in silence. He knew El Mayo was right and he wouldn't be going back to California. "I don't know what to say, El Mayo."

El Mayo put down his glass and eyed the tarts, but shook his head. "I'll give you two days to come up with a plan. Then, we'll meet at Rico's Restaurant in the hamlet at 2:00 p.m. to discuss your thoughts and options."

El Mayo rose from his chair and turned towards the exit doors. Alejandro followed his lead and the two men departed. As they stepped out the door, El Mayo hesitated. "You can go ahead and leave. I must go thank Lupe for the lovely refreshments prepared by the hands of the lovely Senora Sally. Even my sainted mother couldn't make strawberry tarts as good as the Senora."

With a heavy heart full of fear for his future, Alejandro headed back to Badiraguato to try to figure out a way to save himself.

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After El Mayo had talked to Lupe, and Sally and Annie heard the heavy front doors close behind him, they snuck back down to the courtyard. Sally called out to Lupe to bring them some

juice and tarts and Annie pulled out her notebook from her messenger bag to start taking notes and jotting down ideas.

When Lupe left them alone, Sally sat opposite Annie and said, "I have something important to tell you that will help with this situation.

"I need to tell you a story. Annie. But first, you must understand that this is a deep secret and only I and one other person knows about it. You have to swear you will not tell anyone else unless you and I agree to do so. Can you guarantee me that privacy?"

Annie, as she studied Sally, thought for a minute.

"You know, Sally, I'm a cop and I'm sworn to uphold the law. I know this is a country where I've no jurisdiction, but what if you tell me something that is important to my case? You know I would have to pass it on."

Sally poured them both a glass of juice. After she took a sip, she said, "It's not something that will impact what you're working on now, Annie. But it could have a lot to do with getting you out of here safely."

"Okay, I'll promise not to share your secret as long as it doesn't interfere with my investigation. What did you have to say?"

Sally smiled a little smile, took a deep breath, and began. "When my mom, Rosa, was fourteen, she would often go into the hamlet and walk around. Sometimes with her friends, sometimes by herself. She liked to go to the park and just sit and think about life in general.

"She was a dreamer and a romantic. I loved her very much. I was heartbroken when she died a year after my marriage."

Annie put down her glass and reached over to squeeze Sally's hand. "I'm sorry, Sally. I didn't know."

"That's all right, Annie. Thank you for your kindness.

"One day when she was sitting in the park, a young man, walked past her and took a seat on another bench down from where she was sitting. She'd seen him around and knew he had taken over the ownership of a small restaurant when his father, the owner, died. He was wearing his white apron. Mom figured he was taking a break from his work.

"We have a lot of squirrels in our park and Mom wasn't paying attention. She had a sack of bread scraps in her lap that she brought with her to feed to the birds. A squirrel saw the open bag and jumped in her lap, startling her. She jumped up, screamed, and dumped the whole bag on the ground.

"The young man ran over to help her. He shooed off the squirrels and picked up her now empty bag.

"He led her over to his bench and sat her down to make sure she was okay. It didn't take her long to recover from her fright, and then she felt foolish.

"He went back to her bench and gathered up her things and brought them to her. She told me she felt bashful and like a foolish girl, but he was very polite and just wanted to be sure that she was all right.

"They introduced themselves and talked for a long time. His name was Rico. After that, they met frequently in the park where they could visit and no one would be the wiser. After a few months, my Mom told me she fell in love with him.

"My Mom's family was well-to-do and my father was a key figure in El Chapo's Sinaloa Cartel. We are a very traditional Mexican family. One day in April 1990 my *abuelo* came home and told

my *abuela* and my Mom that he had arranged a wonderful marriage for her to the son of one of the other men high up in the cartel. My Mom was stunned, but couldn't say anything.

"As soon as she could, my Mom left the villa and went to the park hoping that Rico would be there. She was crying when he arrived and, when she told him, he took her in his arms and told her he loved her. They ended up making love on a cot in the back of his restaurant.

"Later, a friend of her father's saw her out talking with Rico and told her father. He questioned her and she admitted that she had been meeting Rico for a while and was in love with him. That was the wrong thing to say. He forbade her to leave the villa and the wedding took place in May.

"In December, I was born and my Mom had no doubt that I was Rico's daughter.

"She didn't get a chance to speak with Rico for a long time, but one day, when she was with me and some friends at the park, he came along. When he saw her with me, he knew I was his daughter. He managed to get a message to her and she was able to sneak out one night and meet with him. And what he told her that night changed her life forever.

"He told her he was an undercover agent for an American covert ops agency and had been keeping an eye on the Sinaloa Cartel for years. He said he was telling her for her own safety and, if anything ever happened to him, she needed to know. Also, if she ever found herself in any danger from the Cartel, she was to let him know.

"Needless to say, she was shocked, but she kept his secret. They had very few opportunities to speak privately over the years, but she told me that he kept an eye on me and enjoyed watching me grow up.

"When I was eighteen, I got the same shock as my Mom. My father came home one day and told me that I had caught the eye of the son of one of El Chapo's men and that they had arranged a marriage between the two families. Of course, I didn't have much choice, either, but at least I didn't have the conflict of loving someone else. He is a good husband and a kind man. Our life together is fine. The only problem is we have no children, but that's my doing. I'm afraid if I have a child with him it might look more like my bio father than my husband. So, I stay childless."

"When did you get married, Sally?"

"In June of 2009. One of the last long conversations my mom and I had was about my bio father. She wanted me to know the truth. We were able to meet with him one day when most of the men were out and he reassured me that if I ever needed his help, he would be there for me."

Annie was stunned that there was an undercover agent who worked so close to where she was being held.

"Can he help me get out of here without jeopardizing his cover?" Annie said. But even before the words left her mouth, she realized she would be putting Sally in danger.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Badiraguato
Monday Evening.
April 28, 2014

Late in the afternoon, Alejandro knew his contact in Kern County could take a call from him.

His contact had news. "A rescue party has been formed and should arrive in Mexico soon. The team also knows the approximate location of where Detective Avants is being held."

Alejandro was pleased with this information. "That is good to know. I can set up an intercept and eliminate the rescue team before they get to their Detective."

Alejandro hung up the phone and started making plans. He would tell El Mayo his plans when they met on Wednesday at Rico's Restaurant.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Rico's Restaurant
Wednesday 2:00 p.m.
April 30, 2014

Rico's Restaurant wasn't fancy. In the small hamlet where it was located, his main business came from single men who worked for the Cartel and needed a nourishing meal and a beer or two. He didn't have a bar in the restaurant, just a counter with stools and five small tables with chairs that lined the brick wall opposite the counter. The kitchen was in the room behind the counter and had a large, open pass-thru for the finished dishes. Rico rarely had any help, but his food was good and plentiful and the dim-lit atmosphere was comfortable for the diners.

Unfortunately, it wasn't set up for confidential conversations and, when the old jukebox was silent, it was possible to hear bits and pieces of the private conversations between customers.

Rico had come to the hamlet above Badiraguato as the son of a family from Baja California who had lost a son. No one had reason to question the genealogy of the family. His dad opened a small restaurant and, when he died, Rico took it over. His mother moved back to Baja California to be closer to her family and died a few years after his dad.

Rico was not surprised to see El Mayo come into his restaurant and take a table in the far corner. El Mayo had eaten at Rico's Restaurant many times. He was surprised, however, to see El Mayo joined by two men he barely knew. Enrique Murillo and Alejandro Foncesco. A few years had gone by since Rico had last seen the two men.

The restaurant was empty at this time of day except for the three men. Rico took their orders and returned to the kitchen to prepare the food. He had a feeling that this meeting wasn't casual and he did his best to hear as much of their conversation as he could.

What Rico overheard disturbed him even if he didn't understand the context.

"You have the female Detective stashed up at Senora Juárez's villa. Now you tell me that the men in California have learned her whereabouts and are coming to rescue her?"

The older man, Alejandro, answered El Mayo. "That's what my informant in their Sheriff's Office told me."

"This has gone too far," El Mayo said. "We must eliminate the rescue team and deny that they were ever in this area. Here's what we'll do."

El Mayo outlined a plan where they could cut the rescue team off before it reached the Villa where Annie was held. After some discussion, the plan was finalized.

"What about Detective Avants?" Enrique said. "What will we do with her?"

"If we manage to successfully hide the fact that we intercepted the rescue team and eliminated them, and profess our innocence as to their whereabouts, we will then decide what to do with the Detective. It would be best to find an alternative to killing her. Are you certain she doesn't connect her abduction to you and the men in California?"

Alejandro thought for a moment. "No, I'm not certain at all. The second traitor in our group wasn't in on any discussions about the Detective, but Miguel caught him eavesdropping on my

conversations a couple of times. There's a chance he might have overheard something and passed it on. He might even be part of the rescue team."

El Mayo sat deep in thought for several minutes while he sipped his beer. Rico brought their food and then went back to his post behind the counter where he could hear better.

Finally, El Mayo said, "We'll wait and see what happens with the rescue team and then we'll decide the fate of the lovely Senorita."

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Sally's Villa
Thursday Early Morning
May 1, 2014

The small anonymous cellular phone, hidden in a deep pocket in Rico's jacket, vibrated. The only person who had that number was Sally. And she wasn't supposed to use it unless there was a severe emergency.

Rico was surprised when he felt the phone vibrate. Fortunately, he was alone and quickly answered the call.

As soon as he said 'alo', Sally began to talk in rapid Spanish.

"I need your help," she said. "The Cartel brought to me an American Detective and I have held her here for some time. I've heard the men talking and they say some other men from California are coming to rescue the Detective. They are setting a trap for them. One of the men in the rescue team has been working with the Cartel in Bakersfield, but they recently found out he was an undercover agent. They plan to make sure he is killed."

Rico interrupted Sally. "I overheard a conversation between El Mayo and two men I haven't seen in several years. I didn't know the specifics, just that someone was being held at your Villa. Do you remember the old tunnels under your Villa that lead up into the mountains? They have been there many, many years."

Sally thought for a moment. "Yes, they are accessed through the root cellar. What do you want me to do?"

"Take Annie and go to the end of the main tunnel. I will meet you where it comes out and take you to a hideout for the moment. Then, I'll contact the men in California and give them the GPS coordinates and set a time for them to meet us there. Can you do that?"

"Yes. I don't feel safe here anymore. Try to get a message to Detective Thomas Weston from the Kern County Sheriff's Office. He's Annie's partner. Tell him about the trap. Annie gave me his cell phone number." Sally gave the number to Rico.

"Get going, girl. I'll call him right now and help them as much as I can," Rico said, as he quickly got off the phone with Sally. He went to a secure place outside where his satellite phone worked well and made the call to Tom's cell phone.

For over an hour, Rico placed calls to Tom from his satellite phone. The call kept going to voice mail. Rico left a detailed message the first time he called, but none after that. He tried to call Sally back, but her phone didn't work. He had told her to destroy the cell phone after their conversation and assumed that's what she had done.

Rico didn't know what to do or where to start. He didn't know what route the rescue team would take to approach the villa. All he could do was keep his ears open and try to find out more information.

Sally went to Annie's room and knocked on her door.

Annie had just finished dressing and was combing her hair. "I was just about ready to come to the kitchen and look for you," Annie said, with a smile on her face.

"Good morning, Annie," Sally said. "We have a serious problem on our hands. I've been in touch with Rico, my bio-dad, to get help. Let's go into the kitchen and get some breakfast and eat in the Courtyard. Then I can explain what's going on."

After they ate most of their breakfast, Sally began to explain.

"Rico overheard El Mayo talking with two of the men who had lived in the house in Bakersfield. One of the other men who lived there is, in truth, an undercover agent from the US. Your partner, Detective Weston, knows him well and IDd him. They connected and now, of course, he's busted and the Cartel is out to kill him. But, he and your partner and another man put together a plan to come here and rescue you. The US agent overheard the Cartel men talking and figured out where you were.

"The problem is, the men here know about the rescue attempt and are setting a trap for your rescue team. I called my dad and told him to intercept the rescue team somehow."

Sally then told Annie the plan Rico had come up with for the two women to escape. "We don't have any time to lose. I don't know when the rescue team is coming to Mexico or even if they're already here.

"Hurry and put together some warm clothes and a few other supplies and let's get going."

"What about Lupe?" Annie said.

"I told her we were going to Culiacán to visit some friends of mine."

The two women quickly gathered a few belongings and stuffed them in duffle bags, picked up Annie's messenger bag and tiptoed down the stairs. They climbed in and out of windows around the courtyard until they made it to the kitchen, where Sally led Annie down the rickety stairs to the cellar. There, Sally triggered a latch that opened a hidden door to the tunnels and they headed out.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

*Robbery/Homicide Unit
Jesse's Home
Thursday afternoon
May 1, 2014*

Tom and Jesse went to work as usual the next morning and left Angel at Jesse's home. They were waiting for the results from Laine's investigation of the house and Quonset hut. It was their last lead and that evening they were determined to put together some sort of plan to go to Mexico to find Annie.

When Tom sat down at his desk, he looked at his cell phone and saw he had a message. *How did I miss that?* he wondered. *It must have come in while I was in the shower.*

The message was from an unknown number. At first, he hesitated to open it, but when he checked his 'Missed Calls', he saw that he had several from the same unknown caller.

He opened the message and sat there, stunned, as he read all the information from Rico. Rico was in contact with Annie and she had given him Tom's special number.

Now he knew for sure where Annie was and that the men who had lived in Bakersfield were responsible for her kidnapping. He immediately called Jesse.

"Hey, Jesse, can you meet me at your house ASAP? It's important." Tom said when Jesse picked up.

"I've got a court appearance in a couple of hours, but I'm clear right now. What's up?"

Tom briefly told him about his message from Rico and the fact that Annie and the lady she was with had some kind of escape plan already in the works.

"Okay, I'll be there in twenty minutes," Jesse said. "We'll run it by Angel and maybe the three of us can come up with some kind of plan."

When Tom and Jesse arrived at Jesse's home, Angel was surprised to see them. They sat down at the kitchen table and went over Rico's message several times.

Rico's Message:

This message is for Detective Tom Weston. I got this number from Detective Annie Avants who is being held in Mexico by the Sinaloa Cartel. My name is Rico and I've been undercover here for many, many years, so I must be careful not to blow my cover.

Detective Avants is being held in a Villa above the town of Badiraguato. There are many small hamlets in the mountains that are barely accessible, and this villa is close to one of them. The woman's name who lives there, and is keeping Det. Avants company, is Senora Sally Juárez. Her husband is active in the Cartel, but she doesn't have anything to do with them. She was just instructed to see to Detective Avants comfort.

I recently overheard some men, one of them El Mayo, talking in my restaurant about someone who had been kidnapped and was taken to Sally's Villa. They mentioned that she was a Detective

from California. Two of the men at this meeting had just recently arrived back in Mexico from California.

One of the new men said he had an informant in the Sheriff's Office and that a rescue team was going to be formed. El Mayo suggested they ambush the rescue team and then decide what to do about Detective Avants. Up to that point, there was no plan to harm her. I don't know what they will decide now.

That's all I heard from their meeting.

Before I continue, I should tell you something that is a very important secret. Sally Juárez is my biological daughter, a story for another day. We barely know each other, but she knows she can contact me if she has an emergency.

She called me Thursday morning and told me the whole story of Detective Avants abduction. She was getting worried about the Cartel's intentions towards the Detective.

We came up with a plan so the two women could escape to a remote cabin in the mountains. I will take them there and make sure they're safe and then find a way to get them out of Mexico.

What I'm hoping you will do is stand by until I get this plan in place. Don't come down here because it could be dangerous for you and the women.

I don't have a number you can use to call me, but I will get in touch with you again as soon as possible. Please, don't do anything rash until we talk.

"What do you two think?" Tom said, when they had all read the message several times.

Angel shook his head. "I know these Cartel men. They are deadly and dangerous. I wouldn't trust them to return Detective Avants unharmed. What would be the benefit? If they already killed the rescue team - us - there would be no reason not to kill her. They could hide her body so that no one would ever be able to prove she was even in Mexico."

Jesse got up from the table and poured each of them a cup of coffee. "I wish there was some way to find out who this Rico guy is and what agency, if any, he works for. I don't feel comfortable just sitting here waiting to hear from someone who could be a phony."

Tom thought for a moment. "If the information this Rico gave us is accurate, we can go to Badiraguato and try to figure out what hamlet he's talking about. Maybe the name 'Senora Sally Juárez' is enough information to find the villa."

Angel spoke up. "I know we're not black ops or anything, but I suggest we put together a covert plan to go to Mexico and try to find where Detective Avants is being held and then formulate a plan to rescue her. The reason I say covert is because this Rico mentions that the Sinaloa Cartel has a contact at the Sheriff's Office. It's safe to assume that they also have contacts in other places. We really don't know who to trust at this point."

"I agree with Angel," Jesse said. "Here's my suggestion. We go to the hamlet and try to make discrete contact with this Rico. It doesn't sound like it would be hard to find his restaurant in a small village. That would be the first step. The problem is not being noticed by anyone in the Cartel. I'm sure strangers in such a small place stand out. Also, he says the hamlet is hard to find, so maybe we should go to Badiraguato and one of us, probably Angel since he can pass as a local, can go into the hamlet and snoop around."

The men thought about Jesse's plan for a moment. "One glaring problem I see is that it sounds like some of the men from the farmhouse here are now there. What if they spot Angel?" Tom said.

"And how are we even going to get into Mexico without everyone knowing about it?" Jesse said. "I don't think we want to fly into Sinaloa State. I think it would be wiser to fly into somewhere big, like Mazatlán, and pretend to be tourists. Maybe even be part of a tourist group. Or we could take separate flights and not be so obvious as three Americans traveling together. Anyway, once we get there we can drive to Badiraguato and decide what to do next. We just need to be quick."

CHAPTER FIFTY

The Tunnel
Thursday Afternoon
May 1, 2014

As soon as Annie stepped into the tunnel, she knew it was ancient. The height of the roof was just barely six feet and the width of the tunnel, at least at this point, was about five feet. Sally led the way and Annie followed behind her.

"Are you sure no one remembers that this tunnel is here?" Annie said, as she hurried to catch up with Sally.

Sally turned around briefly and looked at Annie. "My husband never mentioned it and different members of his family have lived in this Villa for decades. If someone did once know of the tunnel, those memories have long since been forgotten. At least, I hope so.

"Lupe has been with this family for at least forty years. She took me aside one day and told me about the tunnel. She thinks she is the only one still alive that remembers it's here. She made me promise not to tell anyone because she was afraid she would be in trouble for not mentioning it to others over the years."

"So, basically, just you and Lupe know the tunnel is here?"

"Yes," Sally said, "and obviously, Rico. Lupe apparently told my mom and she told Rico."

After walking for just over an hour, Sally turned a corner and stopped suddenly. "Uh oh, we have a problem. It looks like part of the wall on the right side has collapsed, but the ceiling still is supported by the beams. We may have to dig our way through all the dirt. At least, down here, the dirt is moist enough to make it easy to work."

"Yeah," Annie said. "And easy to collapse."

The women used their flashlights to look over the collapsed pile of dirt. "What do you think?" Sally said.

"It looks like the best place to dig is on the left side of the tunnel towards where the dirt flowed. It doesn't look as high there, or as compacted. We should have brought a small camping shovel with us, but it would be a big waste of time to go all the way back and try to find one. Are you ready to ruin your manicure?"

Sally laughed. "At least we're wearing boots and jeans. Let's see what we can do."

The two women put down their packs and began to carefully scoop dirt away from the left side of the pile so they wouldn't start another landslide. Slowly, they were able to lower the top of the landslide on the left side just enough so they could scoot to the other side with their backpacks pulled behind them.

"Should we collapse the pile so the passage is blocked again?" Sally said.

"No, we don't know what's up ahead and we may need to come back this way. Then we'd have to dig ourselves out again."

Sally laughed. "Good thinking, Annie."

After another hour and a half of trudging through the tunnel, sometimes on their hands and knees when it was smaller, Sally felt a slight breath of fresh air on her cheek.

"I think we're almost there, Annie. Do you feel the fresh air?"

Annie stopped for a moment. "Yes, I do, and if you look ahead you can barely see an opening with stars. Let's be careful, now, and not make any noise. I would hate to be surprised by the wrong people."

"Rico said he would meet us at the opening. He has the coordinates. I doubt he would have been followed. There's no reason for anyone to connect him to me or to this situation."

"Still, let me go out first and check the area. If I get caught, you can go back to the Villa and no one will know we were together. Then you can call for help. You still have Tom's cell phone number?"

"Yes, but I hope we don't need it. I destroyed my cell phone. I would have to send Lupe into the village to contact Rico, and I don't want to do that.

"Get going so we can get out of here. I hate tunnels."

The hole Annie had spotted was in the ceiling, but stacks of old rocks were in front of it so it was an easy matter for Annie to climb up the slight slope and stick her head out of the opening. She stayed still for about five minutes, listening for any unusual sounds.

A twig broke off to her left and she ducked her head back down in the tunnel. Then a voice whispered, "I'm Rico, Sally's dad. It's safe to come out now. No one followed me."

Annie heaved a sigh of relief and whispered down to Sally. "It's okay, Sally. Your dad is here."

The two women climbed out of the tunnel and Sally and Rico embraced. Then Sally introduced Annie to Rico and they explained why it had taken them so long because of the collapsed section.

"I was getting worried, especially since Sally and I didn't have any way to communicate. I'm glad you made it. Let's get going. It will be almost dusk before we get to the cabin and we must not make any noise. I don't know if anyone patrols up here or not, but we don't want to take a chance of being heard."

For the next forty-five minutes, the three people quietly made their way through the forest. Annie saw nothing that looked like a trail and wondered how Rico knew where he was going, but he never hesitated.

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A dilapidated cabin appeared out of the twilight and surprised Annie. It was very old and looked like no one had been there in years. It was made from logs and she could only see one hole that served as a window on the left side of the door.

Rico walked up to the door and pulled it open. The hinges were silent. "I came by here to check it out before I went down to where the tunnel comes out. I didn't want any surprises, but no one has been here in quite a while. I did take a minute to oil the hinges, though."

They entered the cabin and Rico lit a kerosene lantern and turned it down low. Annie could see a table, a couple of chairs, and a curtained area she assumed contained a bed. An old sink sat off to one side with a hand pump next to it. Rico went over to the pump and pumped it for a good five minutes before a thin trickle of rusty water dripped out. He kept it up until the water ran clear.

"There used to be an outhouse out back. I don't know if the building is still there, but I'm sure the hole is, so be careful. If you need to use the 'facilities', and there isn't enough light to see where you're going, go off to the side of the cabin where it's safer.

"I brought up enough miscellaneous supplies to get you through a few days at least. I'll come back if necessary with more supplies if we don't get out of this mess in a day or two. I don't know what's going on with your rescue team. I sent Detective Weston a text message but haven't heard anything from him. In any event, we'll figure out our own plan."

Rico went through the pack he had placed in the cabin before and showed Annie and Sally what he brought. Everyone laughed when he pulled out a 4-pack of toilet paper.

"Well, that was good thinkin'," Annie said, as she laughed. "I once read about a woman who peed in the forest and used leaves for toilet paper. What she didn't know is the leaves were poison ivy. She was miserable for a long time."

Rico left and the girls settled in. They were glad to see that most of the food Rico had brought didn't need to be cooked. The only way they would be able to cook anything is if they built a fire outside, and the smoke would give their position away. Cold tortillas and beans and rice would be their staples and Rico had even put in a bottle of Tapitío Salsa Picante Hot Sauce.

While they ate, they sat outside on the broken-down porch and watched as night settled in. It was peaceful.

"You know, Sally," Annie said, "in a better world this would be a nice place to come for some peace and quiet. I think I could even live in a remote place like this."

Sally looked over at her new friend. "Well, I hope you'd clean up the place first."

There was nothing for them to do now but wait and see what developed. Would the rescue team arrive? Would Rico find a way to get them to safety without blowing his cover? There was no way to know.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

*Rico's Restaurant
Friday Evening
May 2, 2014*

As soon as Rico arrived back at his restaurant, he grabbed his satellite phone, went outside, and tried to contact Tom again. He still had no luck.

He finally called the main KCSO number and asked to speak to Tom Weston's supervisor. After a short wait, he was connected to Sgt. Collins on her secure line.

"Sgt. Collins, I'm calling from Mexico. I go by the name of Rico here and I have an urgent message for Detective Weston concerning Detective Avants. I haven't been able to connect with Detective Weston."

Sgt. Collins was surprised. "You can give me the message and I'll relay it to Detective Weston," she said.

"Part of my message is that there is an informant at the SO, so I really need Detective Weston to call me from somewhere other than there. I need to know where he is."

"I'm sorry," Sgt. Collins said. "I can't just give you that information. Do you have some way you can verify who you are?"

Rico sighed in exasperation. "No, not over these lines. I'm on a satellite phone, but I don't trust your lines. Please transfer me to the Sheriff."

"The Sheriff is out of the office. I'm sorry, but I can't help you."

Rico hung up. He didn't want to keep the connection open too long and he was getting nowhere. As much as he hated to, he contacted his Control person in Washington D.C. and explained the problem.

"Hmmm," his boss said. "Local law enforcement agencies have their own rules. I'll call Sheriff Quinn and see what I can do."

Ten minutes later, Rico's boss called him back. "I was able to talk to the Sheriff on his secure line. He spoke with Sgt. Collins. She informed the Sheriff that Detective Weston and two other men were going to Mexico, but she didn't know where. Will that information help you find them?"

Rico sat for a moment in thought. "Yes, but it's not what I wanted to hear. I left them a message to stay in Bakersfield until I had more info. I guess they didn't follow my advice. I've already moved the women from the Villa where the men will go to try to rescue them, and the Cartel has set an ambush. I need to find and stop them before they get themselves killed."

"Try not to blow your cover," his boss said. "You're a valuable asset for us in the middle of the Sinaloa Cartel and we don't want to lose you."

"Yeah, I know," Rico said. "I'll be careful."

Rico disconnected and stood there in silence. *What do I do now?* he thought.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Badiraguato, Mexico
Friday
May 2, 2014

Jesse, Tom, and Angel's flight left the next morning from LAX just after 9 a.m. and arrived in Mazatlán at 5:30 p.m. local time.

They had decided to fly on the same flight, but to sit separately. When they landed in Mazatlán, Jesse rented an SUV and they drove up to Badiraguato, passing through Culiacán. The trip was uneventful and took just under four hours.

After they each checked into a different hotel, they met in an out-of-the-way park.

Tom pulled out his GPS and they located the coordinates Rico had given them in a later message for the hamlet where his restaurant was located. "Okay, guys, this hamlet doesn't look big and it's in mountainous terrain. Any suggestions?"

Angel spoke up first. "If I dress like a local, with a hat and grubby clothes, I can go into town at night and not be noticed. I'll look like a laborer heading for the restaurant for dinner or a beer."

"Let's leave our SUV here and rent an old clunker so we won't attract attention," Tom said. "We can park somewhere secluded while Angel checks out the restaurant. It's too late to do anything tonight, but we can put our plan together better in the morning."

Even though they were anxious to rescue Annie, the men agreed that waiting one more day was the way to go. Angel would try to contact Rico at the restaurant on Saturday night.

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May 3, Saturday

After brainstorming different plans most of the next day, the three friends finally left for the hamlet just before sunset. They all dressed up like local laborers just in case someone noticed them, but their trip to the hamlet was uneventful. The road was difficult and sometimes just two unpaved tracks through the forest was all they had. At times, they lost the road and one of them had to get out of the vehicle with a flashlight and try to find the tracks again.

Eventually, they came to the outskirts of the small hamlet. As they got closer to the town, they could see local men walking around, sitting on benches talking, and just relaxing at the end of their day. They decided to park the car in a secluded spot and walk around. Jesse and Tom had to be careful not to catch anyone's eye because they couldn't speak Spanish, so they stayed in the shadows as much as possible.

Angel wandered around freely, watching for any familiar faces from Bakersfield, but didn't see anyone he knew. Down one anonymous side alley, he came across a small restaurant - Rico's Restaurant. He went back to where Tom and Jesse stood and told them he was going inside.

When Angel entered the restaurant, there were only three other men there. Two were sitting together at the counter, and one had a table off in one corner and was busy putting money in the old jukebox. Angel sat as far down the counter from the other men as he could. He ordered a beer, but hesitated to identify himself to Rico. They chatted a little until Angel was satisfied that the man was, indeed, Rico, and then he got up and left the restaurant.

"He's in there so we can assume that what he told us is true. I didn't identify myself. I think we should just try to find the Villa where Annie is being held and try to get her out. I still don't know who we can trust. The information Rico gave us could have come from Annie."

Tom was sitting on a low concrete block wall deep in thought. "I agree with Angel. It would be a shame to be here and find out that Rico's information was a setup."

"Did either of you see anything that resembled a hotel?" Jesse said.

Both men shook their heads. "We're going to have to move the car somewhere more hidden and sleep in it somehow. Not the best situation, but we don't seem to have much choice. In the morning, maybe we can ask a local where the Juárez Villa is located."

"That's probably not a good idea," Angel said. "It will make them suspicious. If we pretended we had business at the Villa, we would know where it's located. And what if they ask us the name of the owner? All we know is the name 'Sally Juárez'."

Tom dug around in his pack for a few moments. "Using the coordinates Rico gave us, I was able to get satellite pictures of the area. Some Villas are obvious. It seems they clear the area around the Villas as protection from fires."

Tom handed the images over to Jesse and Angel. "We can look at each Villa in the images and see which one looks like it would be owned by a high member of the Sinaloa Cartel. It would probably have the best access roads so the men could come and go as needed."

They pulled a blanket out of the car and spread it on the forest floor. Then they laid out the images and started studying the Villas close to the hamlet.

"There aren't very many, are there?" Tom said. "I got the impression from Rico that Annie and Sally walked into the hamlet from the Villa so Sally could show her around. That puts the Villa close to the hamlet."

Angel pointed to a large Villa within walking distance of the hamlet. "This one seems the most likely. The road from the hamlet to the Villa is paved and the Villa is enclosed in a tall wall with a solid gate. That's fitting for a member of the Cartel who wants to protect both his privacy and his family."

"I suggest we go up there and scout things out at first light," (May 4) Tom said. Jesse and Angel agreed so the three men settled down on the blankets and tried to get as much sleep as they could.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Sally's Villa
Sunday early morning
May 4, 2014

Just before sunrise, the three men packed up the old car and moved it to a more secluded place. They would use the GPS to guide them as close to the villa as possible.

Visibility through the forest wasn't good and Tom didn't want to use flashlights. They did have night vision goggles, which made it easier to find their way until the morning light was adequate to see.

What they weren't expecting was trip wires between the trees and, as soon as Angel tripped over one, all hell broke loose.

Jesse and Tom dropped to the ground beside Angel and pulled their weapons

The forest and brush were dense enough that they could spread out and wait until whoever was shooting at them fired again.

They didn't have to wait long. A burst of machine gun fire sprayed the area where they had been when Jesse tripped the wire. Fortunately, Jesse beamed in on the muzzle fire of the gun and fired back. A scream and a thud followed. Jesse quickly rolled to another position and another burst hit the spot where he fired from. Angel shot towards the shooter, but didn't hear anything to indicate he had hit someone.

Tom crawled around on his belly to see if he could get behind their position and get an idea of how many men they were dealing with. When he was in position, he could hear the men quietly shuffling around. He waited. It didn't take long for a head to pop up out of the brush and scan the area. Tom aimed carefully and blew the man's head open.

Angel went the opposite way from Tom to try to flank them on their other side. He came across a man laying on his belly and aiming towards the area where Jesse had been when he fired. Angel snuck up behind the man and knocked him cold with the butt of his gun. Then, he pulled him through the brush to where Tom and Jesse were now waiting.

Angel secured him with zip ties and put duct tape over his mouth until he regained consciousness. Then he dumped a bottle of water on his head.

When he sputtered and opened his eyes, Angel was stunned to see it was Enrique Murillo from the farmhouse.

Angel put his knife to Enrique's throat and dug it in a little. "This is the scum that pulled the trigger on Juan Osorio," he said to Tom and Jesse. He could see and smell the fear on the Mexican. "I'm gonna take off the tape and you're gonna answer my questions quietly. If you try to escape or shout, it will be my pleasure to slit your throat."

Jesse removed the tape so Angel could keep his knife in place. Tom walked a little distance from the men so he could listen for anyone else, so he was shocked when he heard someone say, "Detective Avants? Don't shoot, it's Rico."

Tom turned around slowly and saw a man standing a few yards away from him behind a tree. "Don't say anything about me. I don't want the man you're holding captive to see me."

Tom nodded. "Wait here," he said to Rico. Tom walked over to where Jesse and Angel were questioning Enrique with no success. He whispered to them to tie Enrique up, blindfold him, and knock him unconscious. When that was done, they walked over to Rico, who recognized Angel as a customer in his restaurant the night before.

"We need to get out of here," Rico said. "Sally and Annie have already escaped and I hid them in a cabin in the mountains. They're no longer at the Villa. Follow me. I have a produce cart at the edge of the forest and can smuggle you to my restaurant. Then, we can regroup."

"What should we do with this creep?" Angel said, and then told Rico quickly about the execution of Juan Osorio.

"Leave him here," Tom said. "The others will find him soon enough."

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Rico had the habit of rising around dawn so he could clean up the restaurant from the night before. Then, he would start his prep work to be ready when his first customers arrived, usually around Noon. Around 11:00 a.m., he made himself a coffee and walked across the street to set on the stone wall and watch the sky begin to lighten. What he wasn't expecting that morning was the sound of gunshots coming from close to the location of Sally's Villa.

He knew intuitively that the rescue team had arrived and walked right into the ambush. He ran back into his restaurant, put down his coffee, and grabbed his gun. He had to try to intercept them. He had already hitched up his old produce wagon to make his rounds of the local farms for supplies. He jumped into the seat and his mule trotted off in the direction of the Villa.

He parked his cart in a secluded spot and jumped from the seat. More gunshots rang out as he quietly ran through the forest towards the Villa. He didn't know how many men were involved in the ambush and he didn't want anyone to recognize him.

He stumbled across two bodies and could hear talking not far away from his position. He quietly climbed up a tree so he had a better vantage point and could see what was taking place. He saw two men, one he recognized as a customer at his restaurant the night before, and a man gagged and bound.

But, what also caught his eye was another man standing apart and keeping guard. This man he assumed was Detective Weston.

He climbed down out of the tree and made his way close to where Tom was standing.

With a shocked look on his face, Tom turned around when Rico called out his name. He regained his composure and listened to what Rico had to say. Then, Tom walked over to where Jesse and Angel were holding Enrique.

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The three men followed Rico through the forest, heading back towards the hamlet. When they reached the edge of the forest, they saw an old wagon with a tarp that Rico used when he visited the local farmers to buy their produce, eggs, chickens, and other supplies for his restaurant. It was still barely light and no one was on the road. The men quickly hid in the back of the wagon and Rico fastened down the tarp. It didn't take them long to get to his restaurant.

Rico hitched the mule to the back of the restaurant and, again making sure no one was watching, loosened the tarp and quickly led the men inside. The back door opened into the storeroom, which was locked on the restaurant side. Rico left them there and went around to the front of the restaurant, let himself in, relocked the door, and walked down a short hallway to the storeroom and unlocked the door.

"Okay, you can come into the restaurant now. No one's here and I don't open until Noon. So we have some privacy to discuss what to do next.

"I'll rustle up some food and make some coffee. Get comfortable. I'm sure you've had an interesting morning."

When Rico brought out the coffee and four plates heaped with eggs, rice, beans, and fresh tortillas, the men settled down to eat. While they were eating, Rico told them about the girl's escape and that he had them hidden in a cabin. He would take them to the cabin, but not until after his restaurant closed this evening. In the meantime, they could go upstairs where he had some folding cots and get some rest.

"That sounds like a plan, to me," Jesse said. "As long as they're safe, it won't hurt to wait until dark when it's safer to wander in the forest."

Business was slow, so Rico kicked the last stragglers out at 10:00 p.m. and put up the closed sign. He took a plate of tacos, some bowls of pozole, and a pitcher of juice upstairs and found the men were just beginning to stir. They gladly accepted the food and ate with gusto. They hadn't eaten anything since breakfast.

When they had finished eating, Jesse, Tom, and Angel packed up their stuff and followed Rico downstairs.

They settled down at a table and waited for Rico to explain his plan. "Here's what we should do. I'll lead you to the cabin. The next big problem will be getting all of you out of Mexico. The terrain isn't friendly and any type of aircraft would be spotted by the Cartel. Any suggestions?"

Angel fidgeted in his seat and finally spoke. "I can contact my agency. I've already brought them up-to-date and they know I'm in Mexico. They have low-flying helicopters that should be able to skim in here without setting off the radar."

"Okay, then let's go get the girls and bring them into a low-lying area where a helicopter can land and airlift you all out. Then you can give your agency the coordinates to pick you up."

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

At the Cabin in the Mountains
Sunday Morning
May 4, 2014

After sleeping fitfully for a few hours, Sally and Annie again sat on the porch and ate their breakfast. This was the beginning of their third day at the cabin and they were beginning to get bored.

"What do you think's gonna happen next?" Annie said, as she sipped on a carton of apple juice.

"I don't know, but it's . . . Shhh, did you hear voices?"

Both women sat silently and listened. In the distance, they could hear voices, speaking in Spanish, echoing through the forest.

"I think we need to move, fast," Sally said.

They quickly went inside, gathered up their packs, and fled out the back door.

"Follow me," Sally said. She headed for a huge rock that was covered with brush. She moved aside some of the brush and lifted a smaller rock that was covering a small opening, just big enough for the women to squeeze through.

"What is this?" Annie said.

"We like caves. I doubt if the men know about this one because it doesn't connect to the cabin. I'm going to erase our tracks from the cabin and then try to put the rock and some of the brush back into place. Anyway, they wouldn't be able to fit in the hole."

Annie slithered down the hole which went for several feet before opening into a small chamber. She still couldn't stand, but it was better than the tunnel opening. A few minutes later, Sally joined her.

"I was able to put the opening rock back into place so even if they moved the brush, they wouldn't see the hole. I brushed out our tracks all the way from the cabin. They're getting closer, but they couldn't hear me. I also grabbed a little food and packets of juice.

"This is not a long tunnel. It was just meant to get someone away from the cabin quickly, without leaving anything to track. C'mon, let's go. When we get to the end, there's just forest. We'll have to find someplace to hide fast. There are a lot of caves up here, so we shouldn't have any problems."

"How did you know about this tunnel?" Annie said.

Sally looked around at Annie and smiled. "While we were heading for the cabin, Rico told me how to find the entrance to this tunnel and that it just led to the forest."

"Well, I'm glad he did or we would be scramblin' through the brush leaving a trail a mile wide."

Sally moved forward in the tunnel and Annie followed along behind her. The tunnel off the small chamber was bigger than the opening tunnel, but they still had to stoop to get through.

"What will we do after we get out of the tunnel and find a place to hide? No one will know where we are."

"I have relatives on my mom's side that live up in these mountains. They don't work for the Cartel, they're just simple farmers. If I can find one of them, they will help us get to the hamlet. Hopefully, Rico will be at his restaurant and we can hide there until we figure out what to do next."

Twenty minutes later, they came to the exit hole, which was covered with brush and a rock from the outside. Sally pushed the rock and brush away, and they climbed out into dense forest.

"Oh my," Annie said. "This is really scary. I wish we had a cell phone with GPS so at least we could find our way back to this tunnel if we get lost. Does anything look familiar?"

Annie had to laugh at her own question. They were surrounded by thousands of trees that all looked the same. There was no trail.

"We obviously need to go downhill," Sally said. "I wish I'd paid more attention when Rico was leading us to the cabin."

They walked carefully downhill for about half an hour before Annie called a halt.

"Let's think this through, Sally," she said, as she picked up a stick and started to draw in the dirt. "We started at the Villa." Annie drew a rectangle that represented the Villa. "Did you feel like we were climbing as we went through the tunnel?"

"No," Sally said. "It was flat and the only problem was the landslide."

"Okay, then it's unlikely we were going east, and unlikely we were going south, away from Badiraguato. We were probably going north. Then, we came out of the tunnel and Rico led us east, because we started climbing. However, we didn't go very far. This last, small tunnel climbed gradually, but was short, also - just long enough to get someone away from the cabin."

"Well," Sally said, "if you're right, and it sounds good to me, we could be directly above Badiraguato. So, if we make our way downhill, I should recognize something sooner or later."

They hiked for a long time, and it was getting late. They came to a steeper slope and Sally said, "Watch out Annie, this is slippery." But before Annie could catch herself, she slid down the steep slope with her right ankle bent at an odd angle.

"Shit," Annie said. "This hurts. I don't think it's broken, but it's definitely sprained. Look, it's already swelling."

Sally kneeled down and gently probed Annie's ankle. "Yep, I think we're done for the day. I saw a small cave about ten minutes back. Do you think you can make it?"

"I can't sit here indefinitely," Annie said. "Find a thick stick to help me walk, and then help me up. I'll have to lean on you, also. We don't have very much daylight left, so we need to find this cave and hope nothing else is in residence."

Sally went in search of a stick and then helped Annie to her feet. When she returned, Annie put her arm around Sally's waist, leaned on the stick, and they began heading back in the direction Sally had seen the cave.

"It's not far, and it should be easy to conceal. I don't know why it caught my eye. You can't see the opening. It just had a 'feel' about it that drew me to go take a closer look. I didn't go inside, so there's no telling what we'll find."

They slowly made their way for another few minutes when Sally stopped. "It's over to our left. Lean against this tree and let me go check it out."

Annie leaned against the trunk of the closest tree and Sally walked a few yards upslope to where a big rock sat, with brush around it. Annie watched as Sally moved the brush and went around to the back side of the rock. A few minutes later, Sally returned.

"It's perfect," she said. "The opening is in the face of the mountain and the rock sits in front of the opening. I piled more brush off to the side so I can pull it over the opening once we're inside. I hope we brought a flashlight because it's dark inside. I squeezed in the opening and it opens up nicely. I didn't smell any rotten smells or animal smells. It just smells old and dry."

Slowly, Sally helped Annie up the small slope and behind the large rock. Annie slithered into the opening and sat down in a good-sized rock room. A few minutes later, Sally joined her after brushing out their tracks as far back as she dared to go, and camouflaging the opening with a lot of brush.

The natural cavern was close enough to the opening so a little light was available. Sally helped Annie make a seat with her backpack after emptying out the contents. Then Sally examined Annie's ankle.

She pulled a t-shirt out of her pack and wrapped Annie's ankle. "This is when I would really appreciate the automatic ice dispenser on the outside of my refrigerator," Sally said.

"I have some aspirin in my stuff," Annie said. Sally gave Annie two aspirins and one of their bottles of water. "Conserve the water as much as you can. I don't know if there are any water sources around here and I don't want to go poking around outside today."

Annie took the aspirins and handed the bottle of water back to Sally. "I think we should eat something, at least some protein bars, to keep our strength up. We don't know what will happen next."

The two women sat there eating their protein bars and wondering how they were going to get out of this mess.

Then, all hell broke loose not far from their location.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

In the Mountains
Sunday Evening
May 4, 2014

By late afternoon, the streets were almost empty. Jesse, Tom, and Angel followed Rico out of the hamlet by a back route that Rico knew. They headed northeast and worked their way to where the tunnel from Sally's Villa came out of the ground. "We arrived here around dusk on the 1st, so the girls have been biding their time for three days now," Rico said to the other men.

"However, it's not too far from here," Rico said. "We just go due east and we'll run right into the cabin. I doubt that the Cartel has given up finding you and the girls, so we need to be very alert and quiet."

When they reached the small clearing where the cabin was located, Jesse's heart fell. The whole area outside the cabin was rife with footprints, which were too large to be from Sally or Annie.

"Someone got here before us," Tom said. "Looks like four men. They didn't take any precautions on masking their tracks so either they're stupid or they don't expect us to track them. Let's check out the tracks and see if we can find any for the girls. There's no way to know if the men found them and took them away, or if the girls heard them coming and escaped another way."

After a thorough inspection of the footprints, they found nothing to indicate where the girls were.

"The only thing I can suggest," Angel said, "is to follow the tracks and see if we can catch up with them. The tracks are fresh. If the girls are with them, we can rescue them. If not, we'll take care of these men and then search for the girls. They can't have gone far."

Rico came out of the cabin. "I checked inside and their backpacks are gone. It looks like they were eating breakfast and didn't get a chance to finish. The question is, did they have enough warning to leave before the men arrived, or not? And, if they did, what direction did they go? I see no tracks leading away from the cabin in a direction other than the one the men took. And what bothers me is I told Sally about another tunnel upslope from this cabin, but not connected to it. It's not a long tunnel and it leads into the forest. They might have made it to that tunnel and then covered their tracks. The problem is, the men's tracks lead in the same direction, but they didn't go into the tunnel. They seem to be heading towards the general area where the tunnel emerges. If the girls get to the end of the tunnel and think they're safe and crawl out, they could be sitting ducks."

"Another thing to consider," Jesse said. "If the girls left tracks and the men are following those tracks, we wouldn't be able to see the original tracks. think we'd better get a move on it. We don't want these men catching the girls if they did escape."

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It wasn't hard following the tracks of the men. They just seemed to blunder through the forest and didn't even try to hide where they were headed.

After following the men for quite some time, Rico raised his hand for silence. "I hear voices just ahead. Let's fan out and see what we can find. If you see someone, come back immediately. Let's make this quick, so don't stay gone too long."

Jesse and Tom went off to the right of the tracks they were following and Angel and Rico went to the left.

As Jesse and Tom circled around on the right, the voices became louder. They were on a slight rise above the location of the men and they could see them taking a break and sitting around on fallen logs and rocks. There were four men. "Pretty even odds, don't you think?" Tom said. "But I don't see Annie and Sally. My guess is that they are trying to figure out where the women would have gone. Let's go back and tell Angel and Rico what we found."

When Tom and Jesse met up with Angel and Rico, they talked over the best thing to do. "We could follow them and hope they know where they're going, or we could hog-tie them and leave them for later and keep searching for Annie and Sally."

No one said anything for a moment as they considered their options.

"I like the second option. I don't feel comfortable leaving them roaming around looking for the girls. They just might find them before we do. Let's surprise and disarm them and then tie them up. Maybe they can tell us something about where they think the girls are, but I wouldn't hold my breath."

Everyone followed Tom as they circled around to the right until they came to the rise where they could look down on the men. Just then, Angel stepped on a twig which cracked like a rifle shot. The men down below immediately pulled their guns, ducked for cover, and fired up to where they thought the noise came from.

Angel, Tom, Jesse, and Rico had the advantage because of their higher elevation and could see where each man had taken cover. They fired back at the men and it didn't take long to bring them all down.

They went down to where the bodies lay. "I guess we won't get any information from them," Tom said. "It really doesn't look like they knew where they were going next, anyway. Let's pull the bodies over into the bushes. Note the GPS coordinates, we'll have to do something with them later"

Rico spoke up. "The best thing we can do is leave them and let the locals draw the conclusion it was a drug related incident. I can't get involved and you three probably don't want to explain what you're doing in Mexico with guns."

"Rico's right," Jesse said. "We just need to get as far away from these men as possible. Angel, do you recognize any of them?"

Angel looked at the men. "Yeah," he pointed his foot at one of the men. "This is Enrique Murillo. He was the man we let go free after their attempted ambush. He's the man who pulled the trigger on Juan Osorio. Nasty piece of work. This other fat slob is Ernesto Quintero. He helped Enrique bring Juan to the middle of the room and helped secure him with zip ties. I don't recognize the other two. They must be locals."

Rico glanced at the two men Angel didn't know. "The younger one is Sally's husband, Efrain. When they realized Sally was with Annie, they must have made him come with the team. I don't know the name of the other man, but I've seen him in my restaurant a few times. He's just a low-life Cartel groupie that'll do whatever he's told in order to curry favor with the higher-ups. Scum."

They quickly hid the men in the brush and retraced their steps back towards the cabin. Rico led them to where the tunnel came out. None of the men were expert trackers, and they didn't recognize any signs that the girls had come out of the tunnel.

Since no one else seemed to be in the area, they called out softly to Sally and Annie, hoping, if they were nearby, they would hear the calls. Where were they?

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

In the Mountains
Sunday
May 4, 2014

The gunshots startled both the women. With the echoes in the forest, it was hard to tell how far away the shots were, but they knew it was close to their cave.

"It could be anyone," Sally said. "The people in these forests fight each other all the time. We need to stay very still and quiet and hope no one finds us."

They quickly put everything back into their packs and crept closer to where the tunnel joined the chamber so they could hear what was happening outside.

The battle didn't last long and then there was silence.

They waited, barely daring to breathe when Annie heard a sound that brought joy to her heart - Jesse calling her name.

Sally rushed from the cave and called out, and Annie limped painfully behind her. It wasn't five minutes later that the four men walked out of the forest to the welcome hugs of the women.

"You're safe now. I don't think they'll send anyone else to track you. It'll take a while for them to even find the men we killed," Rico said.

Rico untangled himself from Sally's hug and said, "Sally, can I speak to you privately for a moment?"

"Of course," Sally said and followed Rico away from the others.

Annie watched as Rico spoke softly to Sally and was dismayed when Sally clapped her hand over her mouth and let out a soft moan. Then Rico took her in his arms, hugged her closely, and let her cry.

Rico looked over Sally's head towards Annie and nodded for her to come over. She limped over as fast as she could and, when she got to Rico, he said, "I just told my daughter that one of the men who was tracking her, and who we killed, was her husband, Efrain. She wasn't madly in love with him, but she did care about him. He treated her kindly and with respect."

Annie put her arms around Sally and Sally turned into her embrace. Rico disengaged himself and returned to the other men and told them what he had said to Sally and Annie.

Rico checked the coordinates of their location. "We're not very far from the cabin. If we head south, we should come out right above it. Sally used the tunnel that wasn't connected to the cabin. It brought them out into the forest and then they found the cave. Unfortunately, Annie slipped and has a nasty sprained ankle. My suggestion is we make our way back to the cabin, spend the night, and then decide what to do in the morning. No one will give it any thought if I don't open the restaurant on Sunday, but I do need to get down to the hamlet and open it sometime tomorrow. I don't want anyone connecting the disappearance of the four men to the restaurant not being open."

Jesse and Tom supported Annie and they made their way slowly south. When they reached the cabin, everyone went inside and collapsed.

"Most of the food and a lot of other supplies are still here," Sally said. "When we left, we only took a few things to get us through. Do you think it would be safe to make a small fire pit outside so I can cook a warm meal?"

Rico thought about it for a minute. It was already starting to get dark, so a small amount of smoke shouldn't be seen. The problem might be the smell of the fire.

"Get everything ready, Sally, and then I'll build a very small fire. We'll smother it as quickly as we can."

There wasn't much variety. Sally had beans and rice that Rico had packed in resealable plastic bags, fresh eggs that had made the trip without cracking, and corn tortillas. Sally set up the coffee pot and, as soon as the food was heated through, she perked the coffee and then the men smothered the fire.

When they were finished eating, everyone found a comfortable place to bed down. Sally and her dad talked softly most of the night. They had so much to catch up on and they didn't know what the future would hold.

Annie and Jesse snuggled in one of the corners on old blankets that were left in the cabin by others.

"I've had a lot of time to think while we were hidin' out," Annie whispered to Jesse

"Yeah, what about?"

"Mainly where my bad attitude about relationships comes from. I think I've been transferring my resistance to all the pressure I got from my parents onto you. I doubt if most of it is warranted."

Jesse snuggled a little closer to Annie and stroked her head as it rested on his chest.

"Well, I kinda figured that much out, Annie. "The question is, what are you gonna do about it?"

Annie took a deep breath. "I'm still thinkin', Jesse. I guess I need to learn that life has risks and we can't always just take the path of least resistance. But, I'm workin' on it, Jesse. Just be patient with me for a little longer."

Jesse kissed the top of Annie's head. "I can wait."

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Monday, May 5. The next morning everyone was up bright and early, ready for whatever the day would bring.

"I can't take you all to town with me. There are too many of you," Rico said. "If we head down towards the hamlet, but not too close, there's a nice meadow where a helicopter could land. I'll take you there and then go open the restaurant. I'll take Angel with me as he can pass as a local. I don't think anyone from the Bakersfield area will see him. We pretty much wiped them all out.

"Angel can call his contact with my satellite phone and give them the GPS coordinates of the meadow. In the meantime, he'll return with some fresh food and three small tents so you can have some shelter. There's no tellin' when the helicopter will arrive.

"I'll come back up as soon as I close the restaurant. We'll give the DEA my satellite phone number in case they want to contact me before I leave.

"How's your ankle today, Annie?"

Annie reached down and massaged her ankle. The swelling was down, but when she stood up, it was still painful and weak.

"It's a little better, but I still couldn't walk on my own," she said.

"I'll bring some pain medication and some bandages to wrap it tighter. That should help. I think I have a real crutch in the back room. I'll check and bring it, also."

Just then Sally said that the morning's food was ready and the coffee was perking, so everyone gathered around and ate quickly so they could smother the fire as soon as the coffee was ready.

As Tom sipped his coffee, he said, "I know Rico has to get down and open his restaurant before someone starts asking questions, but there's no rush today. No one is chasing us or shooting at us. How long do you think it will take to get to this meadow, Rico?"

"It's not that far. Actually, we're not that far from the hamlet. I'd say we can be there, taking Annie's ankle into consideration, in under two hours."

Half-an-hour later, the group was ready to go. The terrain they had to traverse wasn't too bad, or too heavily forested, so the walk wasn't difficult. It still took time and it was just under two hours when they arrived at the meadow Rico had told them about.

It was a perfectly round meadow filled with the first spring wildflowers. It was surrounded by forest with no obvious trails or paths leading into the meadow.

"It's beautiful," Annie said. "I can just about picture a small log cabin nestled towards the back of the meadow."

"Or a witch's cottage, like in Hansel and Gretel," Tom said.

Everyone laughed at that.

"Why is it here?" Annie said. "It doesn't look natural."

Rico smiled and turned to Tom. "Tom might not be far off," he said. "It was probably used for rituals by *brujos* many years ago and the 'magick' marked the earth so it wouldn't grow trees."

"*Brujos* are male witches," Sally said. "I've never heard of any being in this area."

"That's right," Rico said. "They probably left the area at least a hundred years ago. But there were many at one time."

The group walked across the meadow and found a shady spot on the other side that had several fallen logs someone had placed in a circle. with a smaller circle of rocks in the middle that must have been a fire pit at one time. They settled there and ate the rest of the food that Sally had prepared and packed and even shared a water bottle that Sally had filled with the rest of the morning's coffee.

Rico and Angel stood up and Rico hoisted his pack onto his shoulder. Angel would leave his pack at the meadow.

"Enjoy traveling light now," Jesse teased. "When you come back you'll be haulin' three pup tents and food."

Everyone laughed as the men left the meadow and headed for the hamlet.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

*At the Hamlet
Monday Morning
May 5, 2014*

Rico and Angel didn't waste any time hiking down to the hamlet. The leaves on the ground that had fallen during winter crunched under their feet as they hurried downhill.

Half-way down the mountain, Rico stopped at a small round clearing that was open to the sky, but surrounded by trees on all sides. It appeared to be in the middle of nowhere.

"This is usually where I come if I have to make a lot of calls from my satellite phone, or if they're going to be lengthy. I must be outside and have a clear line of sight to the satellite network. This place works well. If I can't come here, I can walk a block or so from my restaurant. I found an alley that only has a small opening and none of the walls have doors or windows. There's just enough opening to the sky to get a decent signal."

Angel took Rico's phone and sat on a fallen log in the middle of the clearing. Rico waited over by the edge of the clearing, just inside the trees. After twenty minutes, Angel connected once more to the man who controlled his undercover job.

"This is PC," he said, "have you heard what's happening in Kern County?"

His control was familiar with some of the story, but was surprised when Angel told him he was in Mexico to help rescue Detective Avants.

"So, I guess your cover is blown now," Control said. "That's okay. From what I heard, all of the men from your group have left America and returned to Mexico."

Angel wondered how much to tell him, but decided quickly to be forthright. "Yes, and two of them were killed when they tried to ambush us, along with a total of five other men."

Angel explained how the ambush and rescue of Annie and Sally had played out.

"I need a covert helicopter that can take five people out of Mexico without showing up on their radar. I figure it can fly in from El Paso, over the State of Chihuahua, and get here with no problem."

Angel could hear Control furiously scribbling notes.

"What are the GPS coordinates of the meadow?"

Angel gave him the information for the meadow where they had left the others and then terminated the call. He walked over to where Rico was waiting. "They'll be here within twenty-four hours. They won't try to contact us again, so we need to stay near the meadow."

Rico and Angel returned to his restaurant and packed up some fresh food and supplies for a couple of days. It was springtime, but it still got cold in the mountains after the sun set.

With all the gear they were packing, the hike up the hill took Rico and Angel an hour longer than the hike down. It wasn't a far distance between the meadow and the hamlet, but access to the hamlet was difficult, and filled with obstacles.

When they reached the meadow, there was no sign that anyone had ever been there.

At first, Rico was surprised, and then he snickered softly. "They're good, aren't they. No one would ever know four people are hiding out in the forest around this meadow."

"Let's see if we can find their hiding places," Angel said. He and Rico were still on the inside of the tree line and doubted if anyone had spotted them.

They put their loads down behind a rock and then took stock of their situation. Rico took a pair of binoculars out of his vest and scanned the perimeter of the meadow.

"I think we're looking for two groups of two people each. Probably, Sally and Tom are together and Annie and Jesse. From what I could see, Jesse wasn't about to let Annie out of his sight for the next century," Rico said.

Angel took the binoculars from Rico and looked around. "Yeah, I got that impression, too. Jesse talked about her a lot while we were coming here and it wasn't hard to figure out they were together."

"What does Jesse do?" Rico asked.

"He's a Deputy District Attorney with the Kern County DAs office. He's worked a lot of cases with Tom and Annie and apparently their 'romance' is on-again, off-again. I think this adventure might help them decide whether to get serious or just forget the whole thing."

Angel kept scanning and then scanned back over an area he'd just covered. "Look over there. You can see where the bushes have been parted and there are a lot of big rocks behind them. Let's work our way around to the back of the bushes and see who we find."

The two men circled around until they were right behind the area they had spotted from the other side of the meadow. They crept forward until they had a view of the rocks that stood behind the bushes that had been somewhat flattened. Sitting with their backs to the rocks, facing into the forest instead of watching the meadow, were Jesse and Annie. They weren't talking. They were just sitting there with their arms around each other resting. When Jesse let out a little snore, they realized they were both asleep.

Rico and Angel looked at each other. "What should we do?" Angel said.

"Let's just leave them be, but see if you can snag one of their packs so we can prove we were here."

Angel found a strong twig and silently lifted Annie's pack, which was off the side, and the two men took off. They returned to their starting place and added Annie's pack to their stash then scanned the meadow again.

"I thought I heard a creek close by when we first arrived. Why don't we check that out?" Angel said.

"That's right, it's not very far. I can hear it now."

They snuck towards the creek sounds until they found a place where they had a good view of a small sandy beach surrounded by rocks. They looked down and, sitting on their packs, was Tom and Sally. They were having an animated discussion and laughing from time to time. They didn't hear Angel and Rico approach.

"What should we do?" Rico said.

"Jump out and say 'boo' and hope Tom doesn't have his gun handy," Angel said.

A couple of steps later, the two men jumped from their hiding place and said 'boo'.

Sally screamed and Tom fell over backward trying to get his gun out of his shoulder holster. Rico and Angel collapsed laughing. Before Tom could shoot anyone, he realized who it was, and so did Sally.

Just then, Jesse and Annie came bounding onto the beach, ready to attack. When they saw who it was, they burst out laughing.

"So, they found you?" Annie said. "You didn't hide very well."

Rico looked at Annie with a smirk. "Yeah, we found them. But we found you two first. Where's your pack, Annie? I think you'll find that we liberated it from your side, while you and Jesse slept, and put it with our supplies.

"You'd all be dead if we were the bad guys," Angel said.

The six people trooped back to the meadow and set up a camp for the night.

"The DEA helicopter should arrive sometime tomorrow," Rico said. "Whatever you don't take with you, just stash behind some rocks and I'll come back and take the stuff back down the mountain. I don't want to leave anything here that could be linked back to me."

Rico had packed a lot of fresh food and the friends had a great meal. Just before sunset, Rico said, "Well, my friends, I hate to go, but I must. I have a restaurant to run and I don't want to be here when the helicopter arrives. The fewer people who know about me, the better. Remind anyone you've talked to forget I exist."

He shook hands all around and wished everyone well. He gave Annie a big hug and whispered in her ear, "Take good care of her for me." Annie looked up and nodded, tears in her eyes, "I will."

When Rico reached Sally, he said, "Walk with me a little, Sally."

She stood up, on the verge of crying her eyes out, and linked her arm with his as they walked to the edge of the meadow. They sat on a fallen tree with their backs to the meadow and he put his arms around Sally's shoulder as she started to sob.

"Shhh, baby girl, it's all for the best. You can't stay here now and I have an important job to do. But maybe someday we'll meet again. Stranger things have happened."

He hugged her tighter and in his heart he knew that if she went into the Witness Protection Program he'd never see her again.

He handed her a leather pouch that was sealed shut with wax. It was in a diplomatic pouch so wouldn't be scrutinized by Customs.

"Don't open this until you are out of Customs and safely in the United States, okay?"

"But, what is it?" Sally said.

"My legacy to you, my daughter. I knew someday I would be able to help you in some way and I wanted to be able to ensure your future. Now, whatever your future holds, you will be independent financially. But, this is just between you and me, okay? I don't know what their rules are."

Sally hugged him and sobbed into his shirt. "Thank you. The only thing I can give you is the assurance that my mom loved you very much. She instilled that in me when she told me about you. I just wish we had more time together."

"Me, too, baby girl," Rico said as he brushed her hair back from her face. "But I'm so proud of you. You've turned out to be a wonderful young woman. Rosa did a good job raising you and I will always keep you in my heart"

Sally gave Rico a tremulous smile as he kissed her forehead.

"Now, it's time for me to go. I have hungry men waiting for the restaurant to open," he said, as his eyes filled with tears.

He stood up, still holding Sally's hand as she remained seated on the log. He slowly backed up until he had to drop her hand, gave her one last smile, and faded into the forest.

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Tuesday, May 6: The three men cleared a small space for a camp behind some rocks and bushes. They could see the meadow, but no one could spot them from the air. They slept fitfully and were up and about early Tuesday morning.

The mood was somber. They didn't know when the helicopter would arrive or what would happen after they returned to America.

Sally sat deep in thought about Rico. Annie came over and put her arms around her.

"I know you're gonna miss him. He's a good man and you can be proud that he's your dad. Always remember that your mom loved him very much and he loved both of you."

Tears rolled down Sally's face.

"I know, Annie. But I feel like I've just found him and now I've lost him again. Sometimes life just isn't fair."

"Life is also full of surprises," Annie said. "You never know what's gonna happen in the future. Look at you and I. A month ago I couldn't even imagine meeting you, being in Mexico, or owning a lovely handmade shawl from your hamlet."

This got a wan smile from Sally.

"The day we went into the hamlet was an interesting day for both of us. I'm glad you found a shawl you liked and will have something to remember me by."

Around noon, Angel dug through the pack he'd brought back from Rico's restaurant and passed out some food that Rico had cooked before they returned to the meadow.

After they ate, they cleaned up the area and packed up their belongings so they would be ready to go when the helicopter arrived.

Three hours later, without any sound to warn them, a small black helicopter flew to the middle of the meadow and landed. The copilot jumped out as the five people ran towards him.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

In the Air
Tuesday
May 6, 2014

"Get in, quick," he said. "We don't want to hang around any longer than necessary."

They quickly ducked under the blades and climbed into the back section of the helicopter. There was just enough room for the five people and their belongings.

The copilot slammed the door shut and climbed back up by the pilot.

"Everybody put on your headsets," he said. "If we need to communicate, it'll be over the comm system."

When everyone was hooked up and strapped in, the copilot gave a thumbs up to the pilot.

Within seconds, they were airborne and skimming over the treetops, heading out of Sinaloa State into Chihuahua State, the best route back to El Paso.

"I'm copilot Chris Daniels and your pilot is Seth Borders. "I don't know how y'all got into this situation because we're on a 'need to know' basis, but we'll do our best to get you out of here in one piece and back to the good ol' USA."

"Well, at least we can introduce ourselves. I'm Detective Thomas Weston from the Kern County Sheriff's Office in California."

He paused, and Jesse continued, "I'm Jesse Greyeyes, a Deputy District Attorney with the Kern County District Attorney's Office."

"I'm Angel Moreno. I'm with the DEA and I'm the one that called and requested this evacuation. I'm very happy to see you and appreciate what you're doing."

"I'm Detective Annie Avants, also from the Kern County Sheriff's Office. It's a pleasure meeting you both. You can't know how happy I was to see you arrive."

Sally snickered. "Well, I guess I'm about to become an illegal alien in America. That should be interesting."

Everyone laughed good-naturedly. They all knew Sally wasn't in danger of being sent back to Mexico.

Annie reached into the seat in front of her where Jesse was sitting and massaged his shoulders. He looked at her, his eyes full of surprise.

"Jesse," she said softly, even though she knew everyone could hear her. "I've done a lot of thinking since I've been here and I, well, I just want to say I'm sorry for all the confusion I caused you. Ummm. . . Jesse, I love you. Will you marry me?"

The whole group, even the pilot and copilot, cheered, practically rupturing each other's eardrums.

"Well, man, aren't you gonna answer the little lady?" the pilot said.

Jesse turned around as much as he could and looked Annie in the eyes, "Yes, Annie, it would be an honor to have you as my wife."

They sort of kissed - it wasn't easy with their seat belts on, and then Annie relaxed back into her seat.

"Whew," she said. "That was the hardest and easiest thing I've ever done."

Again, everyone chuckled and they all settled down for the ride home.

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Just outside El Paso

The five passengers were exhausted and, eventually, drifted off to sleep.

A sudden 'ping' 'ping' jolted Tom awake as the pilot began yelling, "We're under fire." He immediately radioed in a Mayday as the shots continued.

The helicopter started listing and the rotors were erratic. Everyone in the back was braced and screaming as the helicopter plummeted out of control. It didn't have far to go since they were flying so low.

The pilot and copilot struggled with the controls to no avail. The helicopter plunged into the dense forest, nose first.

The sounds of the crash ceased and calm returned to the forest.

Tom was the first person to regain consciousness.

He immediately assessed the situation, smelled fuel, and got Annie, Sally, and Angel out and away from the helicopter. He ran up to Jesse, but realized that he was dead so he moved his body away from the wreckage but not where everyone would instantly see him. Most of their supplies had also been ejected with Jesse, so Tom gathered them up and moved them away.

He quickly found a blanket and covered Jesse. It broke his heart to think how this was going to crush Annie.

He had already determined that the pilot and copilot hadn't survived the crash, but he did remember hearing the pilot call in a Mayday. "I hope it got through," he said. "I don't think we're far from the border."

He had managed to pull everyone and their supplies far away from the crash site and behind huge rocks. He suspected it wouldn't be long before the helicopter burst into flames. And just five minutes later, that's exactly what it did.

Angel was stirring and Tom began to assess the wounds of Annie, Sally, and Angel. Tom had a broken arm and Angel helped bind it to his chest. The two men then determined that Sally's injuries were the worst. She was still unconscious and had a bad head wound. Her left shoulder appeared to be dislocated.

As Angel cleaned up Sally as best he could, Tom checked out Annie's injuries. She, too, was still unconscious, but was beginning to stir.

"Angel," Tom said, "Annie's leg is broken. Can you help me get it splinted and set before she comes to? She's starting to wake up."

Angel came over to Annie. "How's Sally?" Tom said.

"I think her shoulder is dislocated, but we should be able to fix that while she's out. My main concern is the wound to her head. The bleeding has stopped, but it looks bad. We need to get her head stabilized before she comes to."

They both bent over Annie and gently straightened out her leg. They then placed a stout limb against her leg and bound it so she couldn't move it. That's all they could do for the moment.

"I checked her over and I don't see any other wounds," Tom said. "She may have bumped her head. I found a small lump on the left side. Let's get Sally taken care of, then we can regroup. I think Annie will be conscious before long, and I'm not looking forward to telling her about Jesse."

Working together, the two men popped Sally's shoulder back into place while she was still unconscious. With the first aid supplies they had, they finished cleaning Sally's head wound. Then, they fixed a comfortable place for her to rest under the trees on a bed of leaves with one of their survival blankets under her and another over her. It was getting late in the day, and it would soon be dark and cold.

"I hope the Mayday got through and they have our location. I don't relish spending a night here in the forest. There's also the possibility that whoever shot at us saw the fire from the helicopter and will come to check it out. I don't know how far we traveled after they fired on us," Angel said.

"Who do you think it was?" Tom said.

"In these forests? There's no telling who it could be," Angel said. "We could have been flying over someone's hidden marijuana plants and they thought we were spying on them. Anything's possible."

They went over to Annie to see how she was doing and were surprised to see her eyes open. "Hey, girl, don't move. We've been in a crash and you have a broken leg. Just lay still, okay?" Tom said.

Annie closed her eyes and moaned. "It hurts."

Tom looked up at Angel. "Can you go check the supplies and see if we have any pain pills? Rico said he was going to bring some up for her ankle. They should be in the first-aid kit."

When Angel returned with the pills, Tom gently lifted Annie's head and held a bottle of water to her lips so she could swallow the pills one by one. When he laid her head back down on a folded blanket, she looked at him and said, "Where's Jesse?"

Annie could see the truth in Tom's eyes. She closed her eyes as tears began to stream down her cheeks. "He didn't make it, did he?"

Tom caressed Annie's hair and wiped her tears. "I'm so sorry, Annie. He and the pilots were killed."

"What happened to Jesse?" she said.

"He was thrown from the 'copter on impact. It went nose down. I couldn't get the pilots out before it caught fire. I did move Jesse. He isn't far from here, but you don't need to see him now. Wait until the rescuers arrive. For now, just rest."

Annie didn't say anything and didn't open her eyes. She just lay still in a state of shock. "How are Sally and Angel?"

"Sally seems to have the worst injuries. She hasn't gained consciousness yet. She has a bad head wound which we've dressed as best we could. She also had a dislocated shoulder. but we managed to pop it back into place.

"Angel has bumps, bruises, and scratches, but no broken bones or open wounds."

"And you, Tom? What are your injuries?"

Tom turned so she could see his bound arm. "I seem to have a broken arm and a cut on my head. I'll be fine.

"Just rest, now, Annie. That's the best thing you can do. If Sally regains consciousness, you can talk to her and comfort each other."

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An hour later, they saw a helicopter hovering overhead and three men parachuted to their position.

"Boy, are we glad to see you," Tom said, as he rushed up to the men and introduced himself.

"What have you got?" the man who appeared to be the leader said.

"One unconscious woman with a head wound; another woman with a broken leg; I have a broken arm and head gash; the other man who survived has various minor injuries.

"The pilot and copilot were killed and one of our team was also killed. Jesse Greyeyes, a Deputy District Attorney from Kern County, California. Can you get us out of here?"

"There's a clearing not far from here. The helicopter can land there. We can carry the women out on stretchers. Do you think you and the other man can walk? It isn't far."

Angel and Tom nodded. "I can help transport one of the stretchers," Angel said. "What about Jesse and the wreckage with the pilots inside?"

"We'll get someone else down here with a body bag for Jesse and another team will be dropped in to assess and decide how to handle the wreckage. That's about all we can do. You're less than an hour from El Paso so we'd better get moving so we can be out of here before dark."

The leader walked over to Annie and they introduced themselves. "We'll have you out of here in a jiffy, ma'am," he said.

Two more men dropped in, carrying portable stretchers and a body bag. They gently loaded Annie and Sally on the stretchers and then went to retrieve Jesse's body. Tom was surprised that Annie hadn't said anything further about Jesse. He knew her well enough to realize that she was in shock and hadn't been able to process what happened yet.

It only took forty-five minutes to hike to where the helicopter was waiting and load the two stretchers and Jesse into the cargo area and Tom and Angel in jump seats behind the pilot and copilot. The other men headed back to the crash site to begin the long work of processing what happened.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

El Paso/Kern County
Wednesday
May 7, 2014

Annie woke up slowly. She glanced around and realized she was in a hospital. She heard a snore and looked over and saw Tom dozing in an uncomfortable plastic chair next to her bed.

Then, reality hit and she remembered what had happened. And that Jesse was gone from her forever. She started to sob and a nurse came rushing into the room when there were changes on her monitor readings. Tom woke up as the nurse entered.

He followed the nurse to Annie's side as the nurse tried to calm Annie down. Tom leaned around the nurse and said, "Shhh, Annie. Take a deep breath and relax."

"Tom, Jesse's dead. What will I do?" Annie said as she sobbed.

The nurse stepped aside and let Tom comfort Annie.

He brushed the hair from her forehead with the hand on his uninjured arm, and bent and gave her a kiss on her cheek.

"Mourn, Annie, but don't look back. Jesse would have wanted you to move forward with your life. I know you probably don't want to hear this, but I believe all things happen for a reason - as part of a master plan. I had trouble believing this when Mary died, but, in time, I came to accept that someone or something above us is in control and seems to know what they're doing."

Annie looked at Tom with the realization that he, too, had suffered an extreme loss in his life. Not only was Mary murdered, so was their unborn child.

She would draw her strength from Tom to get through this tragedy.

Annie took a deep breath. "Where's Sally? Is she okay?" She knew there were other people to think about besides herself.

"She's in the next room. She regained consciousness and there was no concussion. They x-rayed her shoulder that was dislocated and said it was aligned just fine. As soon as the two of you are stabilized, we'll be flown back to Kern County."

"And Angel?"

"The DEA flew Angel to San Francisco to meet with his people there. Analeigh and the twins will join him. When we get back to Kern County, they will join us there. The Sheriff and Sgt. Collins will want to debrief all of us."

Annie sighed and leaned back, tears pooling in her eyes. "Can I see Sally?"

Tom looked at the nurse who shook her head in the affirmative. "I'll get a wheelchair and we can take her next door for a short visit."

When she returned, she unhooked Annie from her monitors, which were no longer necessary and removed the IV. Tom lifted Annie and put her in the wheelchair and then took her over to Sally's room.

Sally's eyes were closed when they entered her room, but when she heard the door open, she opened her eyes. Her vision was hazy, but she recognized Annie and Tom.

"Annie," she said. "How are you feeling?"

"I've felt better," Annie said. "How about you?"

"Yeah, I've had better days. Where are we?"

"We're in a hospital in El Paso. We'll be flying to Kern County soon. You had a head wound, but no concussion, so you'll be okay. I broke my leg, and Tom has a broken arm. Angel had minor injuries."

"Annie," Sally said, "earlier when I was conscious briefly, Tom told me about Jesse. I'm so sorry, Annie. I don't know how to express how I feel."

Annie had Tom roll her wheelchair up close to Sally's bed.

"Thank you, Sally. You just lost your husband and you may never see Rico again. We all must find our own ways to move forward. It certainly won't be easy."

The doctor entered with Annie's chart in his hands. He picked up Sally's chart and read them both.

"It looks like you ladies and Tom can be released to go back to Kern County. I suggest you go to a hospital there to get checked out, but it may not be necessary for you to be admitted. I'll get the paperwork started to release you. The DEA has offered a small plane to fly you back, thanks to Angel Moreno. We've already transported the body of Jesse Greyeyes to Bakersfield and he's in the hands of the coroner. As I understand it, his parents have already arrived in Bakersfield to make arrangements when his body is released."

Two hours later, all three were wheeled out of the hospital and loaded into a waiting SUV from the DEA. The driver took them to a private airfield where they entered a small plane, which took off immediately for Meadows Field in Bakersfield. It was a short flight and they barely got settled in, had a small snack, and they were home.

Two Sheriff's Office SUVs pulled up to the plane as the attendant put down the steps. Tom was surprised to see Sheriff Quinn and Sgt. Collins step out of the first SUV and four hefty deputies alight from the second SUV.

Tom hurried down the stairs and shook hands with the Sheriff and Sgt. Collins. The four deputies went on board and brought down Annie and Sally. After tearful greetings all around, Annie and Sally were loaded into the Sheriff's SUV and the four deputies left.

Tom had talked with both the Sheriff and Sgt. Collins while they were still in the hospital in El Paso, so there was no need to go over what had happened again. The short ride to Kern County Memorial was a short, quiet one.

The Sheriff turned to Sally, and said, "I appreciate more than I can express the care and protection you gave Annie while she was at your home. I also offer my condolences at the death of your husband. We will see that you are taken care of now that you're in America."

Sally smiled at the Sheriff. "Thank you for your kind words, Sheriff. Annie and I became friends almost immediately. Do you think I must enter your Witness Protection Program? I would really like to stay a part of Annie's life if it's at all possible."

Sgt. Collins turned around and smiled at Sally. "We'll look at all the possible options and see which one will keep you safe. You, of course, will be able to decide for yourself what you want to do."

"Maybe a new identity is all that's necessary," Tom said. "However, there are a lot of Sinaloa Cartel people in Kern County. It would not be good for you to meet up accidentally with one of them."

Annie had to laugh at that. "If Sally stays here, I doubt that she will be in the same circle as Cartel thugs."

"There you go again with the 'thugs' thing," Sally said, and explained about Annie's comment about Sally's husband. "Nevertheless, I really didn't know that many members of the Cartel. I was isolated in my Villa and Efrain rarely brought men to our house. When he did, he preferred I stay in other chambers and Lupe would serve their refreshments."

As the Sheriff pulled into the parking lot for Kern County Memorial, he said, "Whatever you decide, we'll see that you have a good life."

It was obvious that no one had told them about Rico, which was what Rico wanted. So, Sally didn't mention him, either, or the \$100,000 in cash he had given her, which was secure in her backpack. She would discuss with Annie what to say about the money if the question came up.

After being checked out by the doctors in the emergency room, Tom, Sally, and Annie were told they could go to their homes. The Sheriff said it was okay for Sally to stay with Annie until they could have a meeting the next morning. He scheduled the meeting for 10:00 a.m. at Annie's home. Angel and his family would arrive in Bakersfield this evening and would also attend. It would be their debriefing and parts of it would be recorded.

CHAPTER SIXTY

Annie's Home
Thursday
May 8, 2016

The meeting the next morning took five hours and everyone was exhausted by the time they finished. They ordered several pizzas and Annie asked Tom to go to her favorite Taqueria and get a sack of Carne Asada Tacos and a lot of sauces. Nothing could compare with Sally's and Lupe's cooking, but Annie wanted to share one of her favorite foods with Sally.

Annie made a big pitcher of Southern Sweet Tea and everyone ate until they were groaning. Sally liked the tacos but said fresh made sauce was always better - but it was good. Annie said she would take Sally to eat at Chipotle, where they made their sauces fresh each day.

Sally whispered to Annie when they were in the kitchen so no one else could hear, "Maybe we should bring Lupe here and have Rico come and design a simple authentic restaurant and steal all his recipes."

Annie furrowed her brow in thought. "That's a good idea. Do you think he could get a vacation or something and come here? I don't think we want to go back to Mexico to meet with him."

Sally laughed. "No, I don't think so. If I can stay out of Witness Protection, I could still contact him. At least to keep in touch."

Annie gave Sally a hug. What would happen to her? Annie wondered.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

San Francisco, California
Saturday
May 10, 2014

Jesse's funeral was a simple, private affair. Afterward, his body would be sent to Cherokee, North Carolina to be buried with his family and ancestors.

Tom drove his Jeep Cherokee with Sally and Annie. Analeigh and the twins rode up in Angel's rental car.

This was to be a simple Christian service, per Jesse's wishes. A more traditional Cherokee ritual would take place once he was back in Cherokee. His grandmother would arrange everything and his parents would fly out.

As Annie limped up the steps of the small church, Jesse's mother, and his sister, Chianna, rushed down to meet her. They met in a tearful embrace and hugged and cried.

Jesse's mom, Joyce, looked at Tom and said, "We would like Annie to sit with us in the family pew. Jesse loved her so much and we already thought of her as family. Do you mind?"

Tom looked at Annie's tear-streaked face, her lips compressed together to keep from sobbing, and nodded. "I'll help her walk with you," he said.

Once Annie was settled in with Jesse's family, Tom, Sally, and the others found seats midway through the church.

It was a closed coffin funeral, again per Jesse's instructions. No one had let Annie see Jesse's body before it was whisked off to San Francisco. Tom thought it was for the best, but Sally felt she would suffer later. Annie would have to say goodbye when she went to his coffin after the ceremony.

The District Attorney and some of her senior staff were there. She gave a touching eulogy. Tom spoke briefly, but Annie was unable to go to the podium and say anything. She sat like a stone in the pew with Jesse's mom next to her - her arms wrapped around Annie.

When Annie had arrived at the family pew, Jesse's grandmother was already seated, but when the ceremony was over, she went up to Annie and gave her a big hug and let Annie cry against her shoulder.

"Little one," she said to Annie. "I know what's in your heart. It's full of regrets. But don't despair. The Great Spirit has a master plan, and this is part of it. Grieve, for sure, but don't regret."

The wise words of Jesse's grandmother hit Annie hard. Perhaps she could keep herself from feeling regret, but she thought there would be many nights of 'what if...?' in her future.

Jesse's family and Annie walked out of the church and she rejoined Tom and the others. She bid a sad farewell to Jesse's family and left with Tom and Sally for the long drive back to Bakersfield.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

*Annie's Home
After Jesse's funeral
Saturday
May 10, 2014*

Annie was surprised when she and Sally entered her house after returning from Jesse's funeral and saw a letter stuck between her screen door and kitchen door. Most of her mail went to her post office box, not her physical address.

Annie picked up the letter and placed it on the kitchen counter. The letter was from Mexico and had no return address. She put on a kettle of water for tea for her and Sally. *Whatever it is, it can wait until I make some tea*, she thought.

Apprehension formed in the pit of Annie's stomach. The only person left in Mexico was Rico, Sally's father. She was afraid the letter contained bad news.

Sally had gone to her room to rest after the tiring day so, when the tea was done, Annie sat down at the table and examined the letter. The post office stamp showed that it was mailed from Badiraguato, in Sinaloa State.

Finally, she pulled a steak knife from the knife block that sat on her counter and slit the envelope open. She was even more puzzled as she began to read the letter:

My dear Senorita Avants,

I am sure you didn't expect to hear from me. My name is El Mayo and I am one of the men you talked with when you were our guest in Mexico at the villa of the lovely Senora Salvatora Arreola de Juárez.

First, I would like to offer my sincere condolences on the death of your close friend, Jesse Greyeyes. I would not have ordered something like that. I'm afraid I don't have any control over the men in Chihuahua State and, when they spotted your helicopter, it was normal procedure for them to shoot it down.

I was sorry to see that the lovely Senora Sally has chosen to leave our country for America. She is a lovely woman and will be missed by her friends here but, with the death of her husband, perhaps she needs a fresh start somewhere else.

That is not the reason for my letter to you, lovely lady. You can be assured that no one in my country or organization will attempt to discover the new identity and location of Senora Juárez.

I know you are the lead detective for the investigation into the death of Juan Osorio. I also know that you are not making much progress and the case is, as you call them, now a cold case. I am writing to offer you information that will allow you, if you chose, to close this case.

The man who ordered the death of Juan Osorio and his family in Mexico is dead. You knew him as Alejandro Foncesco. He was following rules set down by the Cartel many, many years ago. Unfortunately, I began noticing instability in him, and his decisions, so he is no longer with us.

If you check your news reports, you will see that an Administrative Assistant who worked for Lt. Nevada Llamas had a tragic boating accident recently. This person was the informant who worked with Alejandro Foncesco. While we were cleaning house and eliminating loose ends, we decided it was prudent to eliminate this person also.

The man who pulled the trigger on Juan Osorio is also one of the men killed when you were rescued. If you need his name for your report, he was the man who called himself Enrique Murillo. Another man who lived in the same house, Ernesto Quintero, was also killed. I'm sure your undercover agent, Paco, told you about Juan's execution.

The two students, Carlos and Miguel, and the janitor, Francisco, have all returned to Mexico and will never again visit America.

We now know that the man we knew as Paco Cifuentes is a traitor to us and a hero to you. That is the way of the world. Please pass my greetings to his lovely wife and twin sons. Yes, we know who they are and where they are. Do not worry. It won't be necessary to place them into one of your Witness Protection Programs. Mrs. Moreno can return to her family and friends and get on with her life. We will never disclose her location or try to seek retribution on her and her sons for the actions of her husband. Enough people have died and their deaths would serve no purpose. Who would learn from an action like that?

I realize, Seniorita Avants, that you act solely for the benefit of your countrymen, which is as it should be. Believe it or not, we do the same. Many areas of our country are poor. The only way the farmers can make a living is by growing marijuana and the opium poppy.

You are aware of what happened in Afghanistan when your government switched the tribes over from growing the opium poppy to growing other crops. They could not survive. Eventually, they returned to growing the opium poppy. It is the same in our country.

And who's to blame? Your government gives people legal access to opiates for a limited time, at an outrageous price, and then cuts them off. It didn't take these 'users' long to discover that heroin was just as effective and much cheaper. We're looking at a supply and demand scenario here, Seniorita Avants, and I see no solution. Our people cannot be expected to starve any more than your addicts can be expected to go 'cold turkey.'

You and I cannot change the ways of the world, but I am sure we will both continue to strive to do what we think is best.

I doubt if we will meet again in this lifetime, Seniorita Avants, but I want you to know that I enjoyed our brief meetings. Maybe, in another lifetime, we will be friends.

I remain, your humble servant,

El Mayo

Annie laid the letter back down on the table. She sat there and stared at it as her tea grew cold. Could she believe him? Would he and the Cartel leave Sally and Angel and Analeigh alone to get on with their lives? How would this impact Sally's decision about her future?

)O(

When Sally woke up from her nap, she joined Annie in the living room. She saw the letter lying on the coffee table and said, "What's this?"

Annie handed the letter to Sally and let her read it through. When Sally was finished, Annie said, "We have to show this to the Sheriff and Tom. It 'solves' our case and may give us enough assurances that you can avoid the Witness Protection Program."

Sally looked down at the letter and reread the parts that mentioned her. "I think I would like that. You know, Rico gave me enough money to live on for quite some time. I still like the idea of having a little hole-in-the-wall restaurant," she said, with a laugh.

"The problem with that idea is that it would attract Hispanic males," Annie said.

"That's true, but I think the odds of anyone recognizing me as Senora Juárez from Sinaloa State are slim to none. Who would expect to find me here unless the Cartel put out the word? And, as far as they know, you've already put me in the Witness Protection Program."

Annie thought for a moment. "Let's come up with the pros and cons before we talk to anyone. That will help you make a decision and explain it easier to the Sheriff and others.

"You wouldn't have to stay in Kern County, Sally. You could easily get lost in Los Angeles and it's not that far away. However, I wouldn't wish living in Los Angeles on anyone," Annie said, with a laugh.

"I'm sure there's something in Kern County for me," Sally said. "Let's talk to the others and see what they have to say."

"I'll set up a meeting at the Sheriff's Office for tomorrow at 10:00 a.m. That way you have time to think about what you really want to do."

Sally agreed to Annie's plan and Annie called Tom to set up a meeting in the morning. He would contact everyone and have Sunnie prepare the conference room. Annie could bring the donuts.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

*Robbery/Homicide Unit Conference Room
Monday 10:00 a.m.
May 12, 2014*

By 10:00 a.m. Monday morning, the Conference Room was full. Annie, Sally, Tom, Angel, Analeigh, Sheriff Quinn, and Sgt. Collins all sat around the conference table.

Annie handed out copies of El Mayo's letter to each person. As they read the letter, Sunnie brought in a tray with coffee, iced tea, a tub of ice, glasses, cups, sugar and cream. She put Annie's donuts on two trays and put one tray on each end of the conference table, along with a stack of napkins.

Before anyone arrived, Sunnie had placed a legal pad and pen at each place in case someone wanted to jot down something.

When the Sheriff saw the layout, he quipped, "What are you doing being wasted down here, Sunnie. I think you should work in my office."

Everyone laughed. They knew the Sheriff's Personal Assistant was very personable and efficient and she had been with the Sheriff for a long time.

"Why, thank you, Sheriff," Sunnie said, "but these people would fall apart if it wasn't for me."

"And Sunnie's coffee is the best in the department," Sgt. Collins said.

Each person finished reading the letter, then served themselves with whatever treat they desired.

"Before we get into a long discussion about what is best for Sally," Annie said, "I think you should hear what she would like to do."

All eyes went to Sally, who blushed. She wasn't used to being the center of attention.

"After reading El Mayo's letter," she said, "I don't think it's necessary for me to go into your Witness Protection Program. If nothing else, the Cartel leadership, from what I observed, are men of their word. My husband is dead, so there's no one to avenge me. It would serve the Cartel no purpose to have me killed. Unlike Juan Osorio, my husband didn't betray the Cartel so they have no reason to execute me like they did Juan Osorio's family.

"I don't want to leave Kern County. Annie is like family to me now, and we would like to stay close."

The Sheriff looked closely at Sally before he spoke. "There would still be risks, but I can see your reasoning. It would be an easy matter to change your name and get you paperwork saying you were born in Los Angeles and have lived in America all your life. Do you have any idea of what you would like to do, or do you want to think about it for a while? We could find you a job as an interpreter in Kern County if that would interest you."

"Thank you, Sheriff. That's something I'll consider. However, what I would like to do is open a small Mexican restaurant that is completely authentic. Annie's gotten used to my cooking and I wouldn't want to deprive her." This caused chuckles all around the table as Annie blushed.

"Another favor, if it's possible. I would like my housekeeper, Lupe, to be brought here. She's been

with my family for years and has no one now. She and I could live together and manage the restaurant. She would have to be discrete, of course, about our origins, but she doesn't talk much anyway."

"That could be arranged, of course," Sheriff Quinn said. "The only downside I see if Lupe comes here is that she is more apt to be recognized."

Annie spoke up then. "We thought about that. Lupe wouldn't be dealing with the customers, but would spend most of her time in the kitchen. Also, not that many people from the Cartel visited Sally's villa. El Mayo, of course, would recognize her, but we couldn't think of anyone else who would. The type of men the Cartel sent to places like Kern County to distribute drugs weren't in the same class as Sally's husband and wouldn't have had any reason to go to Sally's villa. We decided it's worth the risk."

The Sheriff stood up and said, "Could you excuse Sgt. Collins and I for a few minutes. I would like to have a private chat with her in her office."

Sgt. Collins stood up and followed Sheriff Quinn out of the conference room.

A few minutes later, they returned.

"Okay," Sheriff Quinn said. "We'll give it a try. Sally, you can stay with Annie for the time being and we will bring Lupe here. It shouldn't be a problem getting her out of Mexico. I'm sure she goes on shopping trips and she will go on one and not return. I'll have you write a letter to her for our contact to give her so she knows it's okay to come with him. He will watch her movements and won't contact her until she's well away from the villa. She shops in Badiraguato?"

"Yes, every Thursday morning she rides down with some farmers to the farmer's market, does her shopping, visits with some friends, and then rides back in the evenings. She's been following that routine for years and no one would think anything about it."

"Okay, we'll have someone who looks like a farmer contact her and she can ride out of town with him at the end of the day. And then, disappear."

Sally and Annie stood up and hugged each other. The future was looking better all the time.

After the meeting was dismissed, everyone except the Sheriff and Sgt. Collins went to Ruben's Mexican Restaurant on Calloway Drive for an early lunch.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

*Marriott's Hotel
Bakersfield, CA
Tuesday Morning
May 13, 2014*

The next morning, Tom met Angel and his family at the DoubleTree Hilton for their Sunday Morning brunch. Angel, Analeigh, and the twins were headed for New Mexico later in the day to begin their move back to Del Norte County in California.

Angel had been assigned a job in Northern California and would be able to live, once again, with his family.

Analeigh was happy she could continue her painting in the Pacific Northwest and exhibit her paintings in Crescent City and other galleries in the area.

The twins were delighted to know they would be moving back to Del Norte County where they had friends, even though Analeigh home-schooled them.

Tom was sad that they had lost so many years, but he was glad they wouldn't be too far away and, when he took a vacation - which would be soon - he planned to head up to their cabin in the woods and spend some quality time with the family he'd once known so well.

When they finished eating, Analeigh gave Tom a good-bye kiss and headed back to their suite with the twins to finish packing. Angel walked Tom out to the parking lot to Tom's Jeep.

"Well," Angel said, as he pulled Tom into a bear hug. "This was quite an adventure. The upside is, we've connected again and I can live with my family. How much trust do you put in that letter Annie got from El Mayo?"

Tom thought for a moment.

"I don't doubt that they have ways of knowing where your family lived and where you will be living and working in the future. And, it's obvious that they know your real name. The snitch in the Sheriff's Office was probably their source of information and somehow intercepted the emails between me and Annie when I went to Crescent City. Who knows? That person is no longer a threat."

Tom pulled his keys from his pocket and unlocked his door. He turned to Angel one last time and the two men shook hands and then embraced. Tom smiled sadly as he climbed into his Jeep and Angel turned to walk back into the hotel.

Life would move forward for everyone.

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DEDICATION

In Memory of
John C. "Jack" Junkin
1919 – 2016
R.I.P.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Renee Benzaim was born in Wenatchee, Washington, but grew up in Northern California. She wrote her first short story when she was in the third grade and discovered her love of putting words on paper.

Her novels include the popular Detective Annie Avants crime fiction series, which is set in Kern County, California. Annie has become very popular with readers and some call her the next "Nancy Drew". This is the fifth novel in this series.

Her other books include Coyote's Song, the story of a five-year-old Miwok Indian girl who disappears. Ten years later, a renowned writer sets out to solve the mystery of Evangeline's disappearance.

In addition, Renee has written three non-fiction books: How to Make Compost; Salsa!; and Can Men Get Yeast Infections?

She lives with her husband in a home and gardens surrounded by a stone wall. This small piece of paradise is the home for an ever-growing family of cats and one shaggy dog.

For more information, visit her official website at:
<http://ReneeBenzaim.com>

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MEN AT FARMHOUSE

Foncesco, Alejandro

Murillo, Enrique

Quintero, Ernesto

Ortiz, Carlos

Peña, Miguel

Piñeda, Francisco

Cifuentes, Paco (Angel Moreno)

Osorio, Juan

Raya, Flavio

DISPATCH CENTER KCSO

LaPorte, Patsy, Dispatcher

Hampton, Lilya, Supervisor

SWAT TEAM

Llamas, Lt. Nevada

Prothero, Sgt. Ryn

TAFT SUBSTATION KCSO

Baker, Deputy Darla

Nielson, Deputy Christine

ROBBERY/HOMICIDE - KCSO

Collins, Sgt. Yvonne Samantha

Sgt., head of KCSO Robbery/Homicide Unit

Avants, Annie Elizabeth

Detective - KCSO, Robbery/Homicide Unit

Weston, Thomas McKay

Detective - KCSO, Robbery/Homicide Unit

MORGUE:

Al-Fassi, Joseph Benjamin

Autopsy Assistant (*Diener*)

Kaur, Manjeet

Autopsy Assistant (*Diener*)

Espinosa, Manny

Forensic Photographer at the Morgue

Richards, Preston, M.D.

Contract Forensic Pathologist

Tunncliffe, Nicole

Receptionist

TECHNICAL INVESTIGATIONS - Kern County

DelMonte, Laine Alicia, Chief

Everett, Michael, Investigator

Xanthopoulos, Olivia, Investigator/Videographer

Neasham, George, Investigator/Photographer

Travino, Merilee, Investigator

KERN COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Quinn, Mick, Sheriff

Schillings, James, Deputy Coroner

Moreno, Sunnie, Admin Assistant

Robbery/Homicide Unit

CRIME LAB

Johns, Beryl Video Section

DEA RESIDENT OFFICE - BAKERSFIELD

Magallanes, Felix Resident Agent

DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE - Kern County

Greyeyes, Jesse, Deputy District Attorney

Criminal Division, Special Prosecutions Department

BAKERSFIELD POLICE DEPARTMENT

Guthrie, Grant Detective

Finley, Travis Detective

SINALOA CARTEL MEMBERS IN MEXICO

El Mayo

Juárez, Efrain

OTHER PEOPLE IN MEXICO

Salbatora Arreola de Juárez (Sally)

Rico – Sally's father

Rosa - Sally's mother

Lupe - Sally's maid

PILOTS FROM EL PASO

Daniels, Chris Copilot

Borders, Seth Pilot

MISCELLANEOUS

Ferrell, Wyatt

Noelle's Father

Greyeyes, Joyce and Rodney

Jesse's parents

GREYEVES, Agnes Tooni

Jesse's Paternal Grandmother

Cherokee, North Carolina

Gueye, Chianna

Jesse's sister

Hannagan, Shay FBI SAC Bakersfield

Weston, Mary (dec.)

Tom's wife who was murdered in July 2006

Moreno, Analeigh - Angel's Wife

Elizabeth - Tom and Annie's friend in Pumpkin Center

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DAMAGE CONTROL

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HOW TO MAKE COMPOST – a Mini-Guide

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THANK YOU!

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