



INFIDELS OF OIL

RAY PALLA

Foreword: Tweed Scott

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By

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FOREWORD: TWEED SCOTT



H: Infidels of Oil is pure escapism that conceivably could be ripped from the headlines of any of the nation's newspapers. In today's increasingly dangerous world, Ray Palla's epic is totally believable and possible. The world is a complex place full of governments, people, and various entities operating under their own agendas. There are the major high-profile players and there are the everyday trying-to-make-a-living folks who get caught up in the events around them. Ray Palla has managed to pull those separate entities into one believable storyline with enough twists and turns to keep you guessing.

You are about to meet a whole array of characters who find themselves, through no real fault of their own, being drawn into a titan-sized conflict that will not only put their lives in direct jeopardy but could light the fuse on World War III. The terrorists are dark, mysterious, and threatening. As the plot develops throughout this relentless saga, their agenda becomes more and more clear and sinister. These are truly bad guys. They are evil to the bone but are true believers in what they are trying to do. They are determined.

The Comanche drillers are a mixed bunch of characters. Essentially, they could be described as rednecks, good ole boys, or roughnecks. They are just everyday people who work hard, play hard, and cheerfully take on life on life's terms. They suddenly find

themselves in a situation they don't totally understand because they don't have all the facts. In a blink, their world gets turned upside down and becomes very violent. They find themselves in the eye of a storm, not of their choosing. Their reaction is likely going to surprise you.

If you like thrill-a-minute stories with all manner of twists and turns that will keep you engaged and breathless, dive into Ray Palla's *H: Infidels of Oil*. Ray has given this whole geopolitical powder keg a great deal of thought. That is obvious. He shares that knowledge with you. He recognizes the seriousness of situations the world faces. If you are at all familiar with the West Texas landscape, you will recognize it on these pages. You can feel the grit of the land in these characters. It all comes through with a realism that is totally believable.

This book could create a bit of controversy. There are two very powerful mindsets at conflict on these pages, each side believing they are right. No doubt the politics of oil is on display here, but this is the reality of the world we live in. Enjoy your time climbing into this saga. Thank you, Ray Palla, for this roller coaster ride of tension, excitement, and action. Don't be surprised, dear reader, if you have to wash the sand, grit, and oil off of your hands as you close the book.

Tweed Scott
Austin, TX

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INFIDELS OF OIL

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Approximately 66991 Words

CHAPTER 1: THE SCENT OF HATE



“Foot, help me; this pipe is heavy.”

“Heavy! I could lift that pipe with my little toe!”

“Yes, you’re very much a great man, Foot. We should begin to call you ‘Muscle Toe’!”

“Pad, I like you,” Foot snorts, “but don’t push your luck. If I let go now, you’ll need to go home for a new pair of little-boy underpants.”

Pad is twisting his right arm awkwardly around the chains, and the grease on the fittings causes his grip to slip. “Oh please, Allah, I am sliding on my backside.”

“Pad, let go, I’ve got it, man.” Foot barks.

But when Pad releases his grip the hoist swings left and snaps Foot in the right temple with a sharp ‘ping’ knocking his hard hat to the ground.

“Damn it, Pad, didn’t they teach you anything in South Texas about roughnecking?”

“I am very much apologizing, Foot. You said to let go. I am unable to give you any assistance when my hands are no longer touching the pipe.” Pad winces in empathy for Foot’s pain. “I am a highly-trained professional in my field, Foot, but I must be touching

the pipe to maintain a proper leverage. You know, bro?”

Foot, for the moment, is not amused by Pad’s idiosyncratic usage of the vernacular for the word *friend*. “I’m not your bro. You know?”

When Pad leans forward to again help with the pipe, his nose almost touches Foot’s right armpit. “We are becoming very fast friends, I am sure of it, Mr. Foot. I already have closeness to your shirt.”

“I’m warning you, Pad. If you want to keep your nose on your face, you’ll keep it away from my pecs.”

“You smell like vanilla ice cream.” Pad grins. “Yummy.”

“Sicko. I’m sweating like a pig out here and you, sir, are very close to my last nerve.”

“And a strong and handsome nerve it is, Mr. Muscle Toe.”

“Just call me Foot. And keep your hands in the grease, weirdo.”

Arthur Dan shouts down from the upper deck, “Do you two mind? I’d like to get this hole dug today! It’s almost beer-thirty. Let’s get this done, and you two can have your cutesy little lover’s quarrel at the bar. What do you say?”

The West Texas sun is already touching the Davis Mountain tops as the foreman hollers out, “Shut her down, she’s suckin’ air. Put a cap on that string and let’s call it a day, men. When you get down from there, I’ll meet you all at Mule Skinner’s. I’ve got some info from corporate about the new production process. You’re gonna want to hear this from me first.”

Foreman Wichita cranks his diesel crew cab and churns out a cloud of dust as he’s leaving the parking lot.



In mere minutes, Wichita wheels-in, parks his truck and enters an enervated sports bar that’s showing as much age as Wichita himself.

The tender greets him, “Bud Light?”

“You’ve got my number, Waterboy. I’ll be right back; this prostate is killing me. I need to bleed the lizard. Hey, set up a round for the crew, they’ll be right behind me. Six shots of Patrón, too. Oh, wait, Pad doesn’t do tequila... five shots, and a ginger ale with lime. Beer all around.”

While the bartender sets up a table near the pool cues, the boys of Comanche Drilling Company, “Crew 614 H,” begin to swagger into the bar.

Swiveling on her barstool, a pretty blond announces the crew’s arrival, “Weasel, where you been all week, buddy?”

Weasel’s real name is Dick Werner, but the desilter tech doesn’t like to be called “Dick,” so everyone calls him Weasel.

“Hello, Sue. Girl, I’ve missed you, too. We’ve been beaver busy down at the hole. New production schedules are cramping my style, baby.” Werner reaches for Sue’s outstretched hand and kisses her on the cheek.

“Take me dancin’ in a few, baby Sue.” Weasel tips his Comanche Drilling ball cap to the lady and saunters with the others to their waiting table.

“I’ve already got the song picked out, cowboy. I’ll be right here ... and you be right there, where I can keep an eye on you, ‘ite?”

Weasel says, “Feel free to watch me watch you all night, Bae.”

Foot asks, “Did you just call her a brown horse, like old *bay mare*? Isn’t that a lot like calling a lady a cow?”

Pad says, “Even I know that ‘*Bae*,’ not B-A-Y, but B-A-E is text speak for ‘Before Anyone Else.’ You know, Mr. Foot, it is very much like ‘*LOL*.’ It is shorthand for the *interwebs* and texting.”

Foot scoffs, “My hands are way too big to text. I’d need shorthand for my hands. Besides, don’t you mean *sexting* instead of *texting*?”



Half-way across the planet, in the Middle East, the moonless summer night is unsettled by shuffling and muttering in the normally quiet desert.

“Keep the light down.” The words are spoken in a Persian dialect.

“I’m trying to see this fitting. Have you got the right wrench?”

“I have it. Let’s get this done and gone. Hurry, please.”

In the dancing of the flashlight, soiled gloved hands wrestle the cap from a wellhead and begin to force-feed several foil-wrapped cylinders into the hole. Each of the more than a dozen cylinders is about six inches in diameter and slightly over a foot long, strung end-to-end to the next, and connected with a slender cable. Although they are lowered gingerly, the cautious process is somewhat hastened by a winch attached to the front bumper of a ‘70s model, military-style Jeep with bald tires. Despite the aid of the winch, the process takes several minutes because the length of the overall cable is about ten-thousand feet, fed by a spool attached to the rear of the Jeep.

“How do we know this will work?” The youngest member of the group asks.

“We don’t. It hasn’t ever been tried. I suppose it’s okay now to tell you guys a little more about the operation, now that this phase is done. You’ve been intentionally kept in the dark some, you know, on a need to know basis, but now, this is the last hole.

“There are now about fifteen of these columns placed around the entire field. The placement is strategic. Each well has been carefully selected, based on its location. If even just one of them works, the entire underground reservoir will be poisoned with a massive dose of radiation. All of the oil in this field will be contaminated and made unusable for decades, maybe even centuries.

“We’ll know soon if any of these holes actually blow. All of the timers are set for noon. By the time we say our Dhuhr prayer, we’ll

either be national heroes, or we'll know our research was misinformed. In which case, we'll try something else, again. In the name of Allah, we will keep trying."

As the cable slackens and the cylinders reach the bottom, the leader of the group removes his gloves. The youngest worker notices a jagged tattoo on the foreman's dark brown right hand. The symbol between his thumb and forefinger is a red scorpion. The foreman discards his gloves on the ground near the protruding capped well.

"It's loaded. Let's get out of here."

A second set of gloved hands quickly detaches the cable from the Jeep which bounces with the weight of three passengers, and jumps to life, pulling away with darkened headlights toward the horizon. Nearby, a black scorpion, disturbed by the engine, scuttles into a hole in the sand.

A look around the oil field shows the dark shapes of a hundred or more pump jacks in the glimmering starlight, drawing endless gallons of oil from the parched ground. As the night envelops the Jeep and its passengers, the desert silence is gradually replaced with the mundane sucking sounds of a single pump jack. It switches off suddenly, by means of a timer mounted on the side of an electrical box bolted to its dirty, rugged main frame.



Weasel breaks the balls on the pool table.

"Foot, you got a problem with that?" Wichita asks.

"No, I just think corporate is in its own little world and has no concept of what it takes to drill for oil." Foot rises from the table and chalks a pool cue before rounding the scattered balls to take aim on one. "Seven in the side," he says to Weasel.

"Look, here's the deal." Wichita continues, "If we meet these numbers, we'll all get a hefty Christmas bonus."

Pausing, “Pad, I’m sorry, does your family observe Christmas?”

“Oh, yes sir, we celebrate in a number of ways very similar to how Americans do. We have many gifts for the children, but we do not celebrate the birth of the Christ child.” Pad replies.

“So, I didn’t want to offend you; it’s just a big deal around here to get a bonus at Christmas, especially these days when gas prices are as low as they are, and considering a lot of the industry is cutting back.”

“I am not offended, Mr. Wichita. I too, admire a hefty Christmas bonus. Please continue.”

A young woman approaches the group. “You boys need something to think about other than holes in the desert?”

“Snooky, give us a little break here; we’re working with danger and ruthlessness . . . and you, my dear, are distracting us from managing the crude world’s energy resources.” The boys all chuckle. “Can you please excuse us for about half an hour?”

Wichita is in administrative mode. “So look, hours are getting longer, days are getting shorter, math is getting more complicated, but if we don’t meet muster we’re looking at someone, maybe all of us, losing a paycheck December first. Bonuses are reserved for those who survive.” Wichita doesn’t slow down. “We have to muster. We need to look like we’re on the corporate team.”

Foot comments, “I’m not too concerned about how I look in the corporate mirror, but I do need to keep my job. What do we need to do, Wichita?”

“We’ve been averaging sixteen days for every hole we’ve punched this summer. We need to get that down to twelve. If we reach twelve, our cost per hole will be cut by two-hundred-eighty-thousand dollars. That’s a sizable chunk of change to go around.”

“So what? We go from twelve to sixteen hour days?” Weasel is fully engaged in the conversation and playing his game of pool with a minimal mechanical level of participation. He misses his shot and

the cue ball bounces off of the table and rolls across the floor near to Arthur Dan's boot.

Arthur lifts his toe to stop the ball in its tracks. Reaching down to pass the ball to Foot, Arthur says, "For how long, boss? It's three months until December. Do we need to put in eighty hours per week for the next three months? What are we supposed to tell our families? An extra twenty hours every week is a sizable chunk of time to not go around for the family."

"Well, you're right about that, too, Arthur Dan, but twenty hours times overtime pay is just about seven-hundred dollars per week. If you do the math, over twelve weeks that's an eight-thousand-dollar-or-better pay raise. Mamma ought to like a little more time away from you for that kind of kicker. Plus, I say we each stand to get a five-grand bonus on top of it if we can pull it off." Wichita polls his crew member's eyes with a hopeful glance. "What do you say, men? We can do almost anything for three short months, right?"

Pad guzzles his beer and is the first to commit. "I'm in. I can be bought. I know I'm a whore, but a well-paid whore is much more admirable than a cheap run-of-the-mill street-walking sleaze bucket. Am I making good sense, men, or am I?"

Arthur Dan chimes in, "The price of gas dropped at the Wal-Mart this week to two-twenty-eight a gallon. What makes you think corporate is going to continue drilling if the price keeps going down?"

"They have to. They're not in the business of selling gas; they're in the hole-drilling business. It's the only thing we do. We have a waiting list right now, even if the price per barrel hits a ten-year low. Besides, our holes cost a lot less to punch than offshore rigs. The offshore crews may see a slowdown, but there's not one on *our* horizon, at least for some time, as far as I can see.

"Foot, are you in? Can we count on you for a little more action this fall? I don't want to have to hire more crewmen to take up the slack. I'd rather keep this opportunity close to the vest and in our own

pockets.”

“Opportunity? Or adversity? I’m not sure it’s worth it, Wichita. I’ve got chickens to raise and dogs to feed. Why can’t we just hire another man or two to fill in some gaps? Two men could take up the slack and at regular pay, not overtime, corporate can still save a bundle on costs per well.”

“Well, the pencil pushers in Houston think otherwise, Foot. They’ve crunched the numbers and set the bar for us. We really don’t have much of a choice in the matter, unless we want to try muscling our way into another outfit. I hear Pre-Eminent Drilling is hiring.”

“Pre-Eminent? I left Pre-Eminent to work here. I’m not going back with my tail between my legs.”

“So, you’re in for this?”

“I don’t like it much, but I guess so.” Foot takes a pool shot and merely scatters the balls on the table.

“Marlboro, you’ve been awfully quiet. What’s your take on this?” Wichita queries the far-end-table corner where the smallest guy in the group is puffing his cigarette.

“I’ve got nothing to say. I’m just a little cog in this whole big wheel. I’ll do what I’ve got to do to get by. I don’t have to like it. Besides, all my family is back home in Humble. All I do around here is kill time anyway.”

A crew from Pre-Eminent Drilling, all wearing the same uniforms and hardhats enters the bar. As the eight-man team takes two booths a few tables down the wall from the Comanche team, one of the big guys yells out, “Hey, Comanche, You guys still hiring Muslims for your dirty work? I hear they make good assassins.”

The gathering group laughs mockingly, and Pad turns away so as not to look at them.

Foot interrupts the laughter with a sharp smack of his cue stick on the edge of the pool table. “Two in the corner—Bailey, you better

keep your crew in line or someone might do it for you.” Foot eyeballs his shot and makes it.

“Hey, hey, Foot. No harm done! Your choice of who you work with is none of our concern. We’re not prejudiced. We’re just picky about the company we keep and who we call friends.” Bailey, the eldest of the Pre-Eminent crew circles his head with a forefinger and orders for the entire team, “Frosty mugs all around, barkeep.”

“I’m not going to warn you again, boss man. I just hope your trucks all still run when you want to go home later.” Foot stares across the bow of his pool stick directly into Bailey’s furrowed brow. “I’m still a hell of a mechanic you know. It might take your guys two or three days to figure out just what’s wrong with your rides.”

“Don’t threaten me, *Big Foot*.” The Pre-Eminent crew laughs in unison at Bailey’s reference to Foot’s nickname.

“Hey, Foot ... When are you and your cute ‘Paddy-Cake’ going to get married? I hear it was love at first sight!” The voice comes from the back of the Pre-Eminent crew corner.

“Knock it off, Baxter.” Bailey is quick to stifle his team.

“How ‘bout we step outside and take a look at your ignorant attitude, Baxter? That could be quite an insight for you.”

“Take it easy, Foot. These guys just want to have a little fun. It ain’t nothing personal. How ‘bout we have a beer and later we can step outside for a little ring toss contest? What do you say? Pitchin’ Frisbees in the wind is much more entertaining than mechanic-ing or messing with someone’s ignorance quotient.” Bailey points a finger in Baxter’s direction, although Baxter is seated behind some of the other Pre-Eminent crew members and apparently hiding somewhat from Foot.

“I’ve kicked your ass more than a few times before, Baxter. Don’t push your luck. I’ve got no patience for your yammering.”

“Give us a few more minutes, Bailey. We’re just in a conversation here. Ring Toss sounds like a deal. I’ve got twenty bucks

on Foot and Weasel if you think your guys can come up with a matching twenty and two better men?”

“I’ll take that bet,” Bailey barks.

“Drink up. You’re gonna need it to ease your pain, smart guy.”

“You, too, Mr. high-stakes gambling man.”

One of the Pre-Eminent crewmen, lagging behind at the bar pushes a couple of buttons on the juke box and a country song fills the room with a lighter mood. Foot and Weasel return their focus to their game and both crews go about having a normal work week happy hour. The bar clock above the juke box shows the time to be near 6:30 p.m.



The clock on the dash of that old, bald-tired Jeep, now in a small Middle East desert town, displays a time of 3:30 a.m. Three bearded men in traditional Muslim garb and headdress bound from the vehicle and into a local hookah lounge. A flashing, lighted sign over the door flickers the single word, “Shisha.”

A belly dancer under the dim glow of a small stage light wiggles circles in the worn floor as a three-stemmed water pipe is placed in the center of a round Persian rug and the men are welcomed into the room by an attendant. Kneeling to sit cross-legged around the hookah they seem to avoid speaking.

“Limoncello, please.” The apparent team leader almost whispers.

“I’m very sad to say we are temporarily out of that flavor, my good man. Might I suggest, Lemon Mint, as a fresh ‘delight’ alternative?”

An antique-looking poster on the wall, a menu of sorts, demonstrates that ‘delights’ are a type of flavored tobacco. There are many ‘types’ including: fruits, mints, berries, and tropics. Essentially there are dozens and dozens of flavors and possible combinations of

types.

“With the most recent Saudi Fatwas and Grand Ayatollah declarations about smoking, it is becoming more and more difficult to get certain items in this part of the desert. Limoncello is very popular, but I know you’ll enjoy the Lemon Mint, as well.”

“Just Lemon ... no mint, Ok?”

“At your pleasure, sir.” The attendant excuses himself, but not before he is paused by a gesture from the leader.

Clasping his left fingers together and touching them with his right forefinger the gesture is the western world equivalent to flipping the bird or shooting the finger. As he makes the gesture it becomes clear that this is the guy with the red scorpion tattoo. He then touches his right finger to his nose, an indication that he understands what the attendant is talking about. His fingers are all red and blistered like the digits of an overworked ax hand.

“They run our lives. They tell us what habits we can have and how we should behave. I will say a morning prayer for the survival of your business and your family’s livelihood, my friend.”

As is common for left-handed people, the leader has his wrist watch on his right arm. As time lapses, the hands on his watch fast forward to 4:30.



Now outside the bar and with the Mule Skinner neon sign sparking to life behind them in the evening dusk, Foot and Weasel approach a disc golf tee pad. They face a single disc basket in a field just outside and west of the tavern. The simplistic disc golf range is overlooking the oil field deserts of the Texas Permian Basin toward Odessa, as well as a fast-approaching old-fashioned west-Texas sandstorm. Disc Golf in high wind has become a regular pastime for most area roughnecks.

“That’s about a thirty-mile-an-hour wind, I’d say.” Weasel licks a finger and holds it up into the persistent, swift breeze.

Foot agrees, “Yup. Combination ‘Tomahawk/Hyzer’ shot; hard right and let the wind boomerang her right back in there. You make the first ‘go for,’ Weasel. I’ll close out this bet for us. We have definitely got this, partner.”

“Who’s first for you, Pre-Eminent boys?” Weasel asks of Bailey, who jockeys for position around the tee, holding cash in his hand.

“Baxter? You and Sam ready?”

“We were born ready. If you’re waitin’ on us, you’re backin’ up.” Baxter and Sam step forward with a bag full of distance-driver discs.

“Doinks and spit-outs don’t count! You have to make the basket to score.” Bailey addresses the group but directs his focus toward Wichita. “Got your wampum, Comanche Chief?”

Wichita nods, “No warmup shots either, we’ve got just a few minutes before that sand storm shuts us down.”

“House rules. Two shots for each man. Best team score wins the pot. If there’s a tie, our team picks one man from your team and you pick one from ours for the tiebreaker, sudden death. I’ll toss the coin for who goes first and who retrieves the discs. Wichita, you call it in the air.” Bailey tosses a quarter into the sky and it catches wind, falling ten feet away from a direct angle to the ground.

“Heads.” Wichita catches his ball cap just before it gets snatched from his scalp in the gust.

“Heads it is.” Bailey laughs. “That fifty-yard shot is going to be more like a hundred in this shit. Good luck boys—Comanche, you start.”

Weasel takes his place on the tee pad, lifts his finger to the wind and then immediately takes aim. He whips his fluorescent orange “Old School” model into the wind and clearly tries to overthrow the fifty-yard distance by heaving the disc forty degrees to the right of the

basket. The wind gusts again and the disc is brutalized to the ground, taking a tournament roll to within ten feet of the basket. A tumble weed rolls past the hole pole as Weasel dusts his jeans with both hands. “Damn. I could have had that.”

“Wus!” Baxter is again mouthy.

“Shut up and wait for your shot, Baxter.” Foot is not enjoying Baxter’s presence. “Put your money where your mouth is, wise guy.”

“I’ll go after you, Foot,” Baxter says. “Sam, it’s your shot, my man! Slam-dunk it, Boudreaux.”

As Sam steps forward, a short lull in the wind causes him to return to his bag for a different disc than the one he’s been holding. He tries for a “floater.” As he makes his running shot, it initially looks like it will be a perfect hole-out, but at the last second his expensive Pro-Line disc catches air which forces it to doink the chains and spit out the other side of the basket.

Baxter exclaims, “She-ite! Man, that was a beauty, right to the end!”

Sam takes off running toward the hole pole, shouting back into the wind, “We’ve still got another shot left, Baxter. Don’t sweat the small stuff.

“People who only play disc golf on calm days have no balls.” Sam retrieves the two thrown discs and returns to the tee while a small duster, looking like a miniature tornado, spins up dirt and a couple of discarded paper cups from the flat land between the two drill teams and the basket.

In the distance, a growing cloud from the approaching sandstorm looms higher in the pre-sunset, early-evening sky. Although sandstorms are common in West Texas in the late summer, people never really get used to getting all that grit in their craw. Generally speaking, almost everyone, including the bravest souls tries to avoid breathing it for long, and usually quickly takes shelter inside a nice air-conditioned, closed building.

The usual egging of the two teams, Comanches and Pre-Eminents, is somewhat muted by the eerie churning in the red backlit sky. Their normal boisterous smack talk and goading is limited to a few short quips, like, “bite the dust, bitch” and “fly, you whore.” As the subsequent succession of pitches and retrievals lacks little more luster than a horseshoe pitch-off.

The men obviously rush through their exercise in humility in order to beat the impending barrage of silt and sting in the air. Foot, then Baxter, each takes a shot, but neither is successful. Baxter retrieves the discs.

“The wind is the only thing winning this contest,” Bailey remarks.

After his final toss, Baxter once again runs out to the basket to retrieve the spent discs. But just before returning to the tee and with his back to the teams, he reaches into his pocket to produce a small object about the size of a matchbox. He conceals the object from view and wedges it into the basket just at the top of the chains. As he returns in a trot he announces, “We pick Pad for our tie breaker! Let’s see if those Iranians know anything about pitching and pissin’ in the wind!

“Come on, Pad, let’s see what you’ve got.”

“I have no Frisbee with me. I have never played this game in my hometown which is in south Texas, not Iran, young man.” Pad is indignant ... as much as a gentle soul can be.

“No problem, Pad.” Here, use my Black Bullet. It’s a ringer.” Foot takes a brand-new disc from his ice chest. Foot uses an ice chest for his disc bag. In addition to disc golf paraphernalia, he always carries beer with him, as well. He cracks open a fresh can of Bud Light and hands the black disc to Pad. “Nothing to it, Pad. Just let go—this ringer does all the work for you.

“We pick Larry. We know he throws like a girl.”

Both teams laugh.

“Hey, even a girl can shoot as good as you just did.” Larry joins

Pad on the tee. “Pad? Tee pad? You sure you never played this game back home?”

“Not before today, Mr. girly man.” Pad smiles, “But like you Americans always say... There’s a first time for everything.”

“Stand aside; I may need a large amount of room to wind up.”

The edge of the approaching sandstorm is now reaching the playing field. You can actually hear particles of sand beginning to pelt the cars and trucks between the field and the Mule Skinner Bar as the whipping of the wind increases dramatically.

Bailey again takes charge. “One shot each, and if nobody scores, we’ll call it a draw and wait for another day to settle this bet, boys. This weather is about to get nasty.”

“Okay, Pad, my man. Shoot for the North Star and whip it like an ugly hooker.” Weasel pats Pad on the back and then nudges the shooter, to position him for a good angle off the tee.

“I have never had a hooker to whip, Mr. Weasel, but I will do my best to break some chains with this oversized black diaphragm.”

“Oversized? My wife needs one twice that size.” Marlboro is a half Mexican, half black man. It’s always his M.O. to talk up the size of his man parts and so he gestures to his crotch as he invokes the diaphragm reference. “Know what I mean, brother?”

The tension from the coming storm fails to entirely kill the group’s appetite for humor. They all get a good laugh as Pad begins to spin like a shot-put Olympian.

Both teams know that normally a shot can easily reach sixty to seventy miles per hour in a stiff wind. However, today, as Pad winds up and releases his disc into what seems to be the “much too far right” of the pole, a sudden downburst snatches the Black Bullet in mid-flight. The disc is accelerated in jolting insistence to a speed that may be closer to something over a hundred miles per hour. It jumps like a jack rabbit and powers into the basket as if it were shot from a cannon.

Just before it hits Baxter hollers, “It’s a blow-through!”

Then instantly, just as the disc sticks in the chains like glue, the small match box Baxter hid in the basket explodes. The blast is almost as powerful as a full stick of dynamite. “Hot damn, that’s a hell of a blow-through!” Baxter laughs sadistically.

“What the hell was that, Baxter?” Foot shouts at Baxter just a split second before a section of one of the basket chains helicopters through the air and smacks sharply into the windshield of one of the pick-up trucks in the parking lot. The windshield glass shatters, sending shards thirty feet past the truck into the blowing sand and wind.

The top of the basket is destroyed, along with the Black Bullet.

“Are you frickin’ crazy? You could have killed somebody with that stunt. What in the name of sanity was that supposed to be, you jackass?” Weasel shields his eyes even though the glass is blown in the opposite direction.

Baxter is beside himself with laughter and bent over. “It’s just a little ole’ blasting cap and tiny, tiny bit of surplus C-4 from the job site.”

“Idiot. Somebody needs to fix your head. If we weren’t out here in public, I’d break your face open and rearrange some of your ignorant brains—if I could find some. And after that, I might just insert my big toe into your lower intestine by going ‘in’ the ‘exit’ hole, butt face.” Foot gets red with rage.

“Back off, Foot.” Wichita steps forward to block Foot’s bullish, head-lowered advance toward Baxter.

“Definitely, Foot has a very strong muscle toe, Mr. Bastard—I mean Baxter!” Pad attempts levity.

“That was a forty-dollar disc, Wichita. I want my money out of that jackassed son of a bitch!”

“Whose truck is that?” Everyone looks. “Bailey, does that thing

belong to someone on your crew?” Wichita is outraged.

Bailey is in shock and stares at the broken windshield with his jaw dropped, motionless. “Uh, Baxter ... ain’t that your Dodge?”

Baxter looks up from holding his stomach in laughter to focus in on the now central point of everyone’s attention. “God dammit, man—that’s MY truck!”

As Baxter suddenly stops laughing, all the remaining men from both crews begin to roll with guffaws and scoffs, heckling Baxter. Even the Pre-Eminent team makes fun of him.

“What a dumb shit thing to do, Baxter. Have you got any kind of common sense at all?” Wichita is first back inside as the storm smothers the parking lot. “Looks like you’re gonna get a little sand in your bucket seats tonight, young man.”

The others follow Wichita closely, chattering loudly and continuing to rib Baxter.

Lingering at the entry Sam reaches for his cell phone and mumbles to Baxter, “Better call a windshield guy, if you think you can get one to come out in this sandblaster weather.”

“What’s the point, there’s no way anyone could get a good seal around it, in all this crap. I’ll just tarp it for now. Have you got any extra bungee cords?”

Baxter and Sam remain outside as the others enter the bar.

Wichita removes his cap and shakes the dust from his thin, gray hair. “Looks like we’re going to be here for a while.” He directs his attention to the barkeeper. “Hey, Waterboy Mike, you still got one of those twelve-ounce sirloins in the fridge?”

“Yes, sir, sure do. Want fries with it?”

“And a salad with Ranch dressing.”

“How do you want it? Medium? Rare?” Waterboy Mike asks.

“Just knock off the horns and hair, and toss it on the coals for about thirty seconds on each side. I like mine still kicking and

quivering!”

“Ha, ha ... I heard dat.”

The clock above the jukebox advances to ten p.m.



On the dance floor, Sue and Weasel embrace in a slow, close dance.

“I have an uncle in Van Nuys, California near L.A. who just signed up to lease a new Hyundai Tucson hydrogen fuel-cell car. He says the oil industry is going to lose a lot of business in the coming years. He’s pretty sure hydrogen is the next big thing. Do you think that’s true? What do you think that would do to the Midland economy?”

Weasel shrugs. “Well, if he’s right, and I think he probably is, we better learn how to make hydrogen, don’t you think? We’ve got plenty of oil and gas to do it with.”

“Isn’t that stuff dangerous? What about the Hindenburg and the Space Shuttle Challenger? Didn’t hydrogen cause both of those big catastrophes?” Sue asks.

“I don’t think so. Those both used hydrogen, but I don’t think the hydrogen was the big fire problem in either of those designs. Everything I hear these days is that hydrogen’s safer than gasoline in the same quantities. Your uncle is probably on the right track.”

“It’s expensive. He told Daddy that he’s going to be paying \$500 a month for a lease and it’s not a luxury car... it’s just a basic Hyundai.”

“Yeah. But they’re going to get much cheaper in the long haul.” Weasel gently squeezes Sue closer and she nestles into his neck as they dance.

After a few moments he continues, “The thing that’s going to get attention is the price per mile on those cars. I heard that the average gas car costs about nine or ten cents a mile for fuel. Hydrogen will,

more than likely, be half of that.”

“That’s good.” Sue is losing interest in the conversation for the moment and enjoying the smell of Weasel’s right ear. She bites his earlobe playfully and cranes her neck backward just enough so as not to lose a firm grip on his narrow butt, but to also allow her the ability to glare into his eyes with submissive affection. “You’re so smart.”

“And I thought you preferred men with a sense of humor.” Weasel grins like a Cheshire cat.

“That’s true. But you ain’t funny.” Sue yanks Weasel’s hand and hastens him off the dance floor toward the bar.

“I’m previously engaged.”

“What?”

“I’m thinking about going into work an hour earlier and leaving three hours later tomorrow. Ten o’clock at night is going to be my happy hour for the next few weeks.” Weasel gives Sue the news of his new schedule.

“Huh?”

“We’re taking on more hours to get faster throughput.”

“When? Tomorrow?”

“Yup ... through November.”

“Crap, Weasel ... Are you in for that? You already hate twelve-hour schedules.”

“I can go over to Pre-Eminent.”

“Damn. Boy, you sure know how to pick ‘em,” Sue exclaims as she stirs her near-finished bourbon and diet coke.

“Let’s pay it forward a little tonight. What do you say we head on out to the ranch? The storm is blowing out!”

“Check, please!” Sue grabs her purse from the girl seated next to her and tells Waterboy Mike goodnight. “Mike. Clock us out, Big Boy! The check is in the mail!”

“Hey, who’s gonna pay for my golf hole?” Mike shouts from the other end of the bar.

“Comanche had nothing to do with that. Talk to Pre-Eminent. Talk to Baxter.” Weasel salutes Mike with a middle finger circling his ear.

Sue yanks Weasel’s arm toward the door, so he tips his Comanche ball cap to his friends and the girl who had held the purses.

“Marsha, I guess we’ll see you soon. Thanks.” He struggles to take a last sip from his drink as Sue wrangles his other arm.

“Ah, another woman already.” Sue eggs Weasel.

“I simply told her thank you.”

“For what? What does she do for you that I can’t, Mr. manly man?”

“I can’t win.”



They’re out the door, and it is essentially 2:30 in the morning at Sue’s edge of town, modest ranch-style house before Weasel comes to his senses. He stirs enough to think about heading for home for a 4:00 a.m. rise and shine. While he rolls his eyes from a placid slumber, naked and on top of the covers, he nudges Sue who has become intertwined with him. “Honey, I need to go.”

He kisses her sleeping forehead, unwinds himself from her limber body, and stepping from bed, begins dressing to leave—pretty much all in one motion.

Hastily clambering out the door and sliding into his truck he turns down the radio, which is still blaring from a previously entertained evening. He swipes his hand across the vinyl leather bench seat. A thick layer of dust leaves his finger tracks imprinted on the seat cover.

“It’s gonna be silty on the site today.”

THE SCENT OF HATE

CHAPTER 2: ARMAGEDDON HILL



At 11:45 a.m. Mecca time, the old Jeep, with its three occupants led by the red-scorpion-tattooed foreman, tops a large sand dune in The Arabian Desert. The vehicle comes to rest overlooking a large swath of desolation that is about seventy-five miles across. In the far distance, some fifty miles east of where the Jeep sits is a vast field of oil-well pump jacks. Some are pumping while others appear to wait their turn, as if on cue for a show. Hundreds of them flash in the sun as they crank up and down in concert. Through a pair of binoculars, the Jeep driver focuses his lenses on a central section of the field.

The wind is buffing at the beard and keffiyeh of the man in the passenger seat. “There doesn’t seem to be a lot of rhyme or reason for where, in the oil field that those canisters were placed. What do you think the chances are that anything is going to happen, that can actually be seen from this far away?”

“Oh, something will happen. I’m sure of it. And whether it is big or small, it will be something we will remember for the rest of our lives. This moment is historic. Inshallah, God willing.”

From their vantage point, the men can’t see it, but in the broad field, at the base of one of the capped wells, a black scorpion peers out from inside the pair of gloves that was discarded on the desert

floor the night before. A timer on one of the nearby pump jacks indicates that it will soon turn on. Meanwhile, another timer on another pump jack frame indicates that it will soon turn off. Notches in the clock faces are predominantly marked “On” and “Off” respectively while the dial incrementally jumps counter-clockwise. With each jump, the dial approaches a stationary arrow which demarks the next function time as 12 noon.

“Praise Allah. Insha’Allah” The three men step from the Jeep and each man raises a pair of binoculars to his eyes. The dashboard clock’s sweep second-hand counts down the final five seconds before noon.

The small one says, “I hope that at least the one we loaded goes off. Maybe it will have a little puff of smoke or something so we can tell for sure that it fired.”

“It will fire. Insha’Allah. It will fire.”

Just above where the pump’s shaft enters the ground, a foot-long strand of twine is wrapped around the frame. It seems to inhale and exhale with the motion of the pump. Suddenly, the timer that is approaching “Off” snaps into position and the pump shuts down immediately. The twine discontinues its appearance of breathing and transitions to flapping, flagging in the wind, as the pump shudders to a full stop.

The Jeep clock strikes noon.

The second saboteur says, “Poof.”

For a moment the desert is still, except for the wind and the flapping of the twine, but then the timer with the “On switch” enabled clicks and that pump jack begins to churn, as do dozens of others in the oil field.

Almost simultaneously the black scorpion scampers from the shade of the glove beside the capped wellhead and sprints across the hot desert sand into his hole in the ground. The earth tremors.

“Is she gonna blow or not?”

From where the Jeep is parked, so many miles away from the oil wells themselves, it is not possible to immediately hear any sound in the oil field. But even with the naked eye, the three Jeep occupants are frozen by what they can see.

The ring leader drops his binoculars, allowing them to dangle from the strap around his neck.

The motion of the twine flapping in the wind is suddenly halted and the entire one-foot length of the twine is sucked into a tiny air vent hole at the top of the well casing. Then like a bullet the capped well next to the glove begins to violently shake and rumble. It takes less than a few milliseconds, but it feels like the action is in slow motion ... It's jarring. The entire well casing "string," all of the underground well casing pipes strung together as a single unit, erupts from the ground and gyrates. The near ten-thousand-foot-long steel shaft bellows straight up into the sky directly above the wellhead. Seemingly instantly, the almost two miles of casing wriggles like an earthworm after being yanked from soft soil, fully above ground, writhing skyward.

The men who placed the bomb are awestricken, as all across the oil field all of the fifteen previously planted explosives produce the very same chain reaction. Like an orchestrated pipe organ sounding off in sequence, capped wells across the twenty-mile swath of oil field, pop up out of the ground in succession. Visually, they just pop up from the desert floor like silent fireworks, and it takes about four or five seconds before the eruptions begin producing a low rumble through the ground and air. Upon finally reaching the Jeep the soundwave is so forceful that it rattles the vehicle's parts like dozens of nuts and bolts being tossed about in a skillet.

"Wow." The small one drops his jaw.

The rumbling gets increasingly louder.

"We better get going." The leader jumps aboard and cranks the Jeep.

Before the driver can put the Jeep into gear the three men are halted by a bulging in the desert floor beneath the oil field. None of them are prepared for what they are about to see happen next. Between each of the blown wellheads, cracks begin to develop in the earth. Fissures, like what would occur in the ground during an earthquake begin to rip open jagged cavernous gaps in the desert sand. And then with a powerful whoosh and wind that pounds each man's chest like a boxer punch, the entire oil field itself, along with the entire desert floor, explodes into the air and into an enormous mushroom cloud. It takes another full four seconds to completely emerge.

The driver gasses on the Jeep and roars down the backside of the sand dune where they've been perched, quickly reaching top speed in the opposite direction of, and upwind from, the blast.

"Holy Moly, what was that? Was that something we were supposed to be expecting?" The small man asks.

"I don't think so." The driver replies. "We were supposed to just poison the oil field, not destroy it.

"I think the whole underground reservoir must have caught fire. The canisters must have allowed enough oxygen into the reservoir for it to blow itself up. I didn't think ... I don't think anyone expected that."

"They're gonna hear that blast in Damascus!"

The second man is more insistent now than in any of his previous conversation. "Ok sir, now you must tell us—what in the world was in those canisters?"

"They were tiny portable hydrogen fusion devices with a large payload of radioactive nuclear waste. They're supposed to just produce low-grade, underground explosions."

"Everyone everywhere is going to hear about this." The small man says.

"And people think regular fracking is a bad thing! This makes fracking look like fricking 'fun and games.'" The second man is

becoming angry.

“Nuclear weapons? Where, in the name of Allah, did we get ‘tiny portable hydrogen fusion devices?’ Is there really such a thing as a tiny nuclear weapon?”

“Yemen. They got them from a purchase of old Soviet Union surplus; no one really expected them to work well at all. This is going to make it harder to get back into Texas.”

The second man looks back at the oil field as the Jeep tops another sand dune. “Oh, my ... That’s fifty-thousand feet in the air, and still rising!

“Sir ... This could put you in Texas alone. I want out. I don’t think I want any part of this.”

“Very well, as you wish.” The driver pulls a Russian-made Makarov pistol from his vest and shoots the second man in the head. Immediately the driver swivels to the rear seat and asks of the small man, “What about you? Are you ‘in’ or ‘out’?”

Abruptly, the second man’s body bounces from the passenger front seat and out of the vehicle, tumbling violently over the ground.

The windblown arid landscape continues rapidly whizzing past the faces of the two remaining Jeep passengers as the small man slides into the front passenger seat without saying anything other than, “Inshallah.”

The midday heat is palpable on the duo and even more so to the back of their heads. Although the ambient temperature is likely 96 or 97 degrees, and with the compass on the dash bouncing west, north-westward, it is not difficult to distinguish an even warmer radiant heat surging down on them from behind. In the open desert, roads are non-existent, and so the pace at which the two travel is hampered by the sandy ripples in the terrain. Top speed for the Jeep is barely sixty kilometers per hour or about thirty-seven miles an hour.

Even though the large spool of cable that had been attached to the rear of the vehicle the night before has since been removed, the

going is edgy and slow compared to the urgency on the faces of the two men. They remain silent for what seems like a miserable amount of time while the wind whips at their beards. Occasionally, one of them wipes the grit from his eyes.

Time creeps forward on the dashboard clock to near 3:00 p.m. when a highway finally comes into sight, at the point where the two men approach the outskirts of Ar-Rutbah, an Iraqi town in western Al Anbar province. The population here is approximately twenty-two thousand people. Also known as Rutba Wells or just Rutba, the community occupies a strategic location on the Amman-Baghdad road, and the Mosul–Haifa oil pipeline. It’s located on a high plateau and receives an annual rainfall of about four and a half inches, so Rutba is considered a “wet spot.”

"We have about six-and-a-half hours to go, so we’ll get fuel and water here. I’ll pump the fuel; you get something for us to eat and two more water jugs. Keep a low profile when you get inside. We don’t need any unwanted attention." The Jeep driver is focused only on the tasks at hand and never looks to his passenger for confirmation.

“See if you can gather any information from the news if Al Jazeera is on the television.”

As the Jeep rumbles into the outpost parking lot, very little activity is notable outside of the building or around the fuel-pumping area. In itself, that is not especially abnormal during the heat of the day, but once inside the truck stop it is apparent that almost everyone is crowded around the driver’s lounge TV, which is broadcasting continuous news, interrupting normal programming.

Several angles of cell-phone videos and photos are flashing across the small television screen, giving the viewers a visual description of a dramatic explosion in the desert and depicting a towering mushroom cloud. The broadcast is in Arabic and the men surrounding the television are silently transfixed on the developing story.

Translated, it is apparent that much of the story detail is based on speculation. “Government officials are hesitant to confirm that a large hydrogen bomb has been exploded in the north Arabian Desert oil fields of southwestern Iraq.”

Our Jeep passenger inquires of one of the viewers in the crowd, “What’s going on?”

The conversation, also in Arabic, is short and to the point. “They’ve dropped an H-bomb on us. It’s the beginning of the end. Armageddon is upon us.”

“Who? Where? Who dropped a bomb?”

“It’s one-hundred-fifty or more kilometers to the southeast. We don’t know if it was ISIS, Russia, or the United States.”

The broadcast continues, “So far, no planes have been tracked and no ground assault has been declared.”

The Arabic viewer continues his observation, “Whoever it is ... it seems apparent that they have fired the first shot to begin World War III, and all the nations of the world have stopped to listen.”

The passenger hastens to his shopping and quietly gathers four pre-made, warmed falafel sandwiches and two jugs of drinking water. He pays the vendor in cash and before returning to the Jeep detours to the restroom, brushing shoulders with his driver upon entering. The two men do not speak to each other in passing but continue about their business as if strangers in a strange town.

Upon returning to the Jeep, the driver says, “Crossing into Syria may be challenging. We’ll need to pass through the check-station very soon. All borders are being shut down.”

They exit the fuel depot toward the north as the clock on the dash approaches 4:00 p.m. “We need to make some time. Our envoy will only wait until 7:00 o’clock for our return.”



In Midland, it's 7:00 in the morning. Wichita steps out from the portable office building shielding his eyes from the early morning sun. With his walkie-talkie, Wichita squelches out an order to Arthur Dan, who is atop his oil derrick perch.

"Artie, shut her down. Corporate is pulling the plug on this hole. It's a money pit. They want us on another site come Monday morning."

"Do what?" Artie squelches back.

"We're tapped out. This hole is getting nothing but natural gas. They want us in Orla, come Monday. Get your rig out of the ground and put a cap on this one."

"Orla? Oh God, we hate that place. You know we probably only need another two-hundred feet to hit pay dirt here. I can smell oil in this one."

"Let it go ... and when you get down from there, call the boys in and meet me in the office. There's something on the news we may want to talk about." Wichita is not yet forthcoming with the news from Iraq.

"Oh, great—another mandate for more hours from the top brass?" Artie inquires.

Wichita ignores the squawk back and returns to the interior of the field shack.

The telephone receiver lies on the desk awaiting Wichita's return.

"Tell Donna that I want her out here before lunch. I want to see all the topology for both locations before we clear this current site and rip up camp. This is going to piss off some of the men. They're already unhappy with the crunch on hours, and now you want to put them in the middle of nowhere for a month. I'm going to have a hard time selling this move.

"Alright, I'll call you after we have time to visit with Donna." Wichita hangs up the phone and rubs his forehead. He peers out the

window toward the sunrise as if he hopes to see a better future, but the glare only further enhances his headache. Solemnly, he reaches into his desk drawer for a bottle of aspirin and a half-roll of antacid mints. “It’s too early in the day for this shit.”

Donna Bellman is the head field-geologist for about ten of the Comanche Drilling Company crews. A shared resource, she percolates from one rig to another across a more than one-hundred-mile swath of the Permian Basin from just west of Midland to the New Mexico state line. Trim, lean, and pretty, Donna arrives at the “614 H” crew site at about 10:30 sporting an armload of maps and charts.

“Hello, boys.” She waves at the men who are already breaking down the portable drilling rig. “What’s for lunch?”

“Weasel, Foot, you guys got a spare chicken leg for me?” Donna is making a joke. Chicken bones are customarily not allowed on an oil rig. Superstition dictates that the bones are bad luck.

“Yeah, right—why is it that every time we see you, you insist on getting a bone—is that some kind of Freudian thing or something?” Foot is as uncultured and bold as he is brawn.

“Watch your step, mister. I know where you live, and I have connections with your water-meter reader. I can have your water turned off in two seconds flat. You may want to take a shower and cool down some before that happens. And to think, I brought a bottle of buffalo wing sauce that’s just spicy enough for you, Foot. I get no appreciation around here, at all.”

Donna is always cheerful and funny with the men and never takes any of the often-crass ribbing or banter personally. Besides, if she did get offended, showing it would only land her in some other job almost immediately, and she likes her job. From the company’s perspective, keeping the majority of roughnecks happy is much more important than any one individual’s personal point of view. So, it’s good that she is brazen in the face of any blatant “politically incorrect”

statement. Besides, the men love her, and any joking from them is intended purely in fun. And it doesn't hurt that she's easy on the eyes.

Weasel responds to her saying, "I'll take that sauce. I can use it to wash my hands after we cap this empty well. Aren't you the one who told us to drill here?"

"Yeah, well I've got a better gold mine in mind, just for you, Weasel."

"Black gold, Texas Tea—every woman I know is looking for the same thing."

"Love you, too, Weasel."

Donna enters the shack and greets Wichita. "How's stuff, strong man?"

"Hi, Donna. What the hell is going on? We're right on top of this gusher you found for us out here. How in damnation can Orla be a better bet?"

"Easy, it's a fracker's dream. We're gonna get rich in Orla. There's plenty of water this season in the Red Bluff Reservoir and downstream on the Pecos River ... It's a timing thing of natural beauty, Wichita. Besides, you're gonna love this site. You can go fishing every day."

"Fishing? Hey, no talk about fishing on the drill site, you know I'm superstitious. Last time the crew caught bass in that reservoir, we all got sick for two days. And then after that, we spent four days fishing a bit out of a dry well."

Laughing, "I know. I hear about it every time I mention Orla. You can't blame the men for everyone getting stomach cramps, though—none of them knew there was a golden algae bloom on the north end of the lake and that all the fish were tainted. Someday, someone is going to make biodiesel and hydrogen from all that algae and they'll likely get richer than all the oil companies combined."

"That's probably true, but I'm not laughing with you, missy."

Wichita pokes himself in the gut.

“And really, you don’t actually believe any of those fish tales about oil-well superstitions, do you? Really? Come on, Wichita, you’re a big boy. Get with the twenty-first century.”

“All I know is that every time I see you, I get indigestion.” Wichita takes two more antacids from his pocket and eats them.

“You know they have better medicine than those chalk pills these days?”

“Sweet Thang, I still like the old ways. Life was more predictable in my heyday. Hell, twenty years ago the word ‘fracking’ didn’t even exist. If you went into a bar and said ‘fracking’ to someone, you’d probably have ended up with some redneck cracking your melon with a beer bottle.”

Donna laughs.

“All I know is that in three-and-a-half years, I get my pension and a nice retirement. I’ve already got my sights set on a brand-new Gulfstream rig. I’m gonna RV myself right out of oil country and into the real world for a change. If I’m lucky, all my needs for medicine will just magically fade away, along with the entire view of Texas, in my shiny new self-heated, wide-angle side mirrors.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. I’m jealous. If I can break away in ten times that amount of time ... in thirty-five years, I’ll be right behind you on a bicycle, peddling just as fast as I can to catch up.”

“Yeah, buddy!” Wichita chuckles. “Show me your diagrams, girlie. I got a rig to break down thanks to you following me everywhere I go.” He smiles to assure Donna of his levity.

She spreads her charts and maps on the drawing-board table in the center of the room and they both begin to peer into the ink.

Pointing to a spot near Orla on the map she says, “I’ll meet you guys here on Monday. We can choose from these two locations that I’ve taken good geology from. One is here, and the other is about half

a mile down the riverbank. Both of them are less than a mile from the reservoir spillway. Your guys like camping there. You plan to take an RV and stay on the lake yourself?”

“Not me. That desert is made for much younger men than I am. I’ll probably stay in the Pecos Motel Six. Lots of air conditioning and fresh water for showering in. I wouldn’t take an enemy camping on Red Bluff. That place is nothing but a desolate, barren mud hole in the sand.”

“Same here. Except for oil, that land out there is good for nothing but skeet shooting and snake hunting.”

Glancing out the window, Wichita notes, “The boys are coming in. I haven’t said much to anyone other than Arthur Dan about where we’re moving. Let me break it to them. They may just swallow you entirely in one bite if you try to tell them.”

“Roger that, buffalo herder.” Donna gestures a zip across her mouth.

Foot is first to enter the shack. “Orla? I say we strangle her now while there are no witnesses around. Donna, you have no idea what it takes to make friends, do you?”

The usually mild-mannered Arthur Dan interrupts Foot. “Donna, Foot’s just joking, but I’m not. I’m inclined to put sand in your gas tank and hope you die in the sun waiting for a tow truck driver who cares a damn about fracking land.”

“I thought you hadn’t told them, Wichita. What is this, an ambush?” Donna is calm and smiling as the men gather in.

“You can’t keep a secret in this clan. You know that, princess.”

Weasel injects his two bits into the conversation. “So, what is it with you and Orla, disco Donna? You’re fully aware that there is not a man in the desert who wants to spend any more time in Orla than it takes to drive from end to end at ninety miles an hour.

“You go out of your way to put us there every chance you can.”

“Well, I heard you were having trouble at the bars in Midland with exploding disc-golf baskets, so I figured you’d rather be in a place with a lot more wind and a whole lot less population.”

“How’d you hear about that? We had nothing to do with that, ma’am. That was all on Pre-Eminent’s men. Damn, word gets out around these sticks quick.”

“You just had to play ball with Bailey’s men. You should find a better group of loser friends.”

“I’m afraid that bet was entirely my fault,” Wichita confesses. “Who knew Baxter was such a jackass.”

“I did,” Foot chimes in.

“Me too, we all did.” Pad is the last to enter the room.

“Pretty funny he took out his own windshield, though, huh?” says Arthur Dan.

“Yeah, but corporate hit the fan this morning when the bar called wanting a thousand clams for the reconstruction of that armpit of a golf hole.”

Wichita snaps, “You’re kidding. That thing was built with bailing wire and hair pins. Corporate knows we weren’t the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski men, don’t they?”

“Yeah, nobody’s blaming you guys, but corporate didn’t have any problem making the call to put the 614 H team a little farther from town, for the time being, at least ‘till things settle down some.”

“Crap, Pad.” Foot barks, “Why did you have to turn out to be such a damn good Frisbee tosser, man?”

The whole crew laughs. “Pad, you kicked their ass.” Weasel says, “We’ll have to start calling you ‘sling blade,’ my friend.”

“I hope Baxter gets sand crabs in his truck seat covers.”

“That’s funny. Serves him right, the arrogant prick.” Donna reassures the team, “Don’t let it bother you, men ... Corporate got a good laugh out of it, too. It had nothing to do with the plan to move

to Orla. I was just yanking your chain. Get it? Disc-golf basket ‘chain’?”

“Hardy har, missy. I get more laughs from a single can of refried bean gas than you manage to hand out all week.”

“I’m sure you do, Weasel.”

The group’s chuckling and cackling slowly calms and then Donna takes a much more serious tone.

“There is something that corporate wanted for me to mention to this team—especially since you’re going to be isolated out on the Delaware Basin for a bit of time. Has anybody here heard the news from early this morning?”

“News? You mean like corporate news or TV news?” asks Arty.

“TV news. It’s not a good thing.”

“Why, what’s going on?”

“Iraq? You guys haven’t heard anything about what happened in Iraq this morning?”

“Hell no, we’re out here on the Texas desert, not the middle of the Mideast sand.” Arthur prods, “You think we have time for television? What could be going on in Iraq that needs our attention?”

“Well, there was an explosion in a large oil field there and some of the Iraqi government officials are saying it was a hydrogen bomb. U.S. news reports are saying it’s terrorist sabotage, but there’s speculation that if it’s not ISIS, some fingers are pointing to the U.S. and Russia as possible suspects. Estimates put it at something the size of a ten-megaton bomb ... that’s like five thousand times the size of the Nagasaki Fat Man bomb. Iraq is evacuating everything from fifty miles west to one hundred miles east of the site in anticipation of heavy fallout.

“U.S. and Russian authorities are denying any involvement, but they’re both saying there needs to be a tighter security net on all oil fields worldwide. That’s going to affect us some. Come Monday,

when we're due in Orla, the company expects to put some new measures in place, including who can come and go from the platform at any given time. You may want to pack extra heavy on your supplies of food and water before you go out there this time. And any of you who plan to RV on the lake, you may want to carry extra ammunition for your guns."

"Holy moly. You're making this up, right? You're yanking our chain again?"

"I'm afraid not. Something really big went down north of the Iraqi border to Saudi Arabia. The news is saying it appears to be designed to poison the oil fields with radiation more than it was intended to kill anyone. It's pretty serious crapola in a can, though, men."

"Turn the TV on, Wichita," Pad's facial expression is dramatically and suddenly stern. "I have relatives in Iran. How far is this from Iran?"

"It looks to be pretty far on the maps I've seen. Maybe five, six hundred kilometers. That would be around three hundred to four hundred miles from the most western border to Iran. How far to the south would be the question? They're saying the fallout cloud will likely dissipate in the mountains over Afghanistan. Kuwait and Dubai are expected to be on safer ground, much farther south than the prevailing wind."

When the TV flickers on, the President of the United States is pictured live, addressing the nation. Maps and pictures of a large smoke plume dominate the left half of the screen.

"Homeland Security is implementing a threat level orange action plan for all American oil interests: including, all refineries, oil rigs, pipelines, and personnel. Specific measures under this plan will be forthcoming shortly and should be taken seriously and immediately.

"The explosion occurred around noon Baghdad time, which is 4:00 a.m. Eastern Time. Initial detection of the blast by American

forces pinpoints a remote location in southern Iraq within an area that is not openly accessible to U.S. intelligence. Since we have not, as yet, been allowed into the region, much of the information coming from inside Iraq is being considered speculative, and may later be determined to be unfounded. However, we and our allies, and including the Russian President and his officials are taking these immediate reports as a grave concern requiring a dynamic response and united action. An emergency meeting of the United Nations in Geneva is being convened as we speak and our Secretary of State will be flying to Switzerland within the hour.”

“You waited to tell us about this after all the other small talk, Donna?” Wichita is grim.

“When I last heard the news this morning, it was just something that seemed like a typical Middle East everyday flash in the pan.”

“Ten megatons is no flash in the pan, young’un. That’s a full-fledged fire on the stove top. Only a handful of countries in the world has that kind of power. I can’t imagine a terror cell getting their mitts on something anywhere near that big. This is serious. This could shut us down—for an extended amount of time.

“Y’all get out of my office. I’ve got some critical calls to make. Arty, you guys shut down that rig as if we’re all going home for a very, very long vacation. I’ll let you know what I find out, by lunch, men.”

“Wichita, I’m sorry, I had no idea this was such a big concern.”

“No worries, honey, just leave me alone for a little while. You’re welcome to stay and watch the news if you want, but keep it down, and try not to give me any more heartburn, if you can.”

CHAPTER 3: THE ROAD WEST



When dusk approaches in Iraq, near the Syrian border, Scorpio and his protégé park about two hundred yards inside Iraq and leap from their Jeep. They sprint toward Syria, leaving the keys in the ignition and taking only one jug of water with them. They leave everything else with the Jeep.

“I hope our envoy is still here. If we lose our ride, it’s going to be a long walk into Tartus.”

The small one says, “I think I see a car.”

“It will probably be a Mercedes. We’re being greeted by the mullah, Sheik Abdul-Jabaar Waheed. He has enough money to buy all of Syria, but he doesn’t need to, he already has a great deal of power.”

At the border, the divided highway is separated by about one hundred meters of median. The Syrian entrance side of the border, with the exception of the waiting vehicle, is unmanned, while the eastbound side is lined with cars and trucks attempting to gain entry into Iraq. Although the Iraqi side is heavily guarded with military and civilian patrols, there seems to be no regard for who enters into Syria.

Once they’re within earshot of the lone Syrian-side vehicle, the duo slows to a jog and Scorpio shouts out, “Mullah? Is that you?”

As the lone car idles in place, three men bound from the vehicle and race toward Scorpio and the small one. The two teams pass each other without any greeting and the fresh crew of three men from Syria climbs into the Jeep, loading their three duffle bags, u-turning, and speeding back into the heart of Iraq. The activity is seemingly unnoticed by the Iraqi border guards.

Approaching the car, it becomes evident that it is not a Mercedes. It's an old, Italian-made Fiat. A rear door swings open, and the driver says, "You're late. Where is your third man?"

"He's dead," Scorpio responds. "He fell out of the Jeep when we hit a bump in the desert. His head got cracked open. We had to leave him."

The Fiat already pointed toward the west, is put into gear by the driver as soon as the workers begin to climb into the cramped space inside. The vehicle quickly pulls away from the border and toward the Mediterranean coast even before the rear door is closed behind the two newest passengers.

As the Fiat speeds away, the small one says, "We thought that we would be meeting the mullah."

"You didn't really expect to see him, out here in the open, at our point of contact, did you?" The driver laughs.

"You will briefly meet with him shortly. Your ship is presently loading and you are scheduled to board in Tartus tonight. You'll be working as a food prep/fry cook and a dishwasher on a freighter to Palma. You should begin to change your clothing now. You will find an electric shaver in each of those two bags. Use the trimmer only. You should not look clean shaven when you embark. You must appear as Spanish working-class citizens.

"I will give you all of the new identification documents you will need, as well as Euro currency you can use for passage from Palma to Honduras. In just over two weeks, you will both arrive in Central America. Your orders will detail more about exactly where and when,

in your paperwork. Once you've crossed the Atlantic and arrived in Honduras, you will again be given new identities."

The driver offers his haggard passengers a jug of water. As they begin to strip and change clothing, they both shake their heads and decline the drink. Without further conversation, the car approaches top speed.

By the time the passengers complete dressing and trimming their beards the Fiat exits the highway and turns onto a secluded dirt road. Within a half mile of rough terrain, the car rounds to the back of a dilapidated stone farm house with a flat tin roof. The roof is covered with large stones to prevent high winds from blowing it away. All of the windows and doors to the structure are boarded up and the place appears to be abandoned; however, an antiquated, French-built Citroën and a new, black Mercedes are parked in the rear. Two armed guards stand on either side of the rear entrance and when the Fiat approaches, one of them steps forward to address the driver.

"State your business," the guard says.

"I am a servant of Allah. I pray for mankind's redemption."

The guard opens the Fiat's rear door and motions the passengers toward the farm house. "Leave your things; you will not remain here for much time."

Upon entering the dimly-lit, two-room shamble of a house, both men are frisked by another armed guard, just inside the main room. The Makarov pistol is taken from Scorpio and placed on a rustic table which is adorned with a red silk cloth, and a gold tray holding a large bowl of water. A copy of the Quran lies next to the tray, opened to Sura Nineteen, Mary (Maryam), bookmarked with a royal-blue ribbon.

The guard gives the men a single order, "You must perform your ablution."

Without speaking and while still standing, the pair removes their western style sneakers, which have just minutes before, in the car,

replaced their discarded, torn sandals. The sneakers appear to be already well worn. Neither man is wearing socks. Then after becoming barefoot, and in a manner that conveys routinely-practiced habit, each man splashes water from the bowl onto his own face. In addition to their faces, they wash their hands, arms, and feet.

Upon completion of the purification ritual, the guard approaches the door to the second room and knocks gently. Momentarily, a richly-robed mullah emerges from the doorway with an air of prestige and seniority. His stride is not one of superiority, but rather one of responsibility and humble wisdom. He solemnly enters into the glaringly dissimilar, unadorned room of the skeletal, gaunt frame of a house. His strong appearance of omniscience here stands in stark contrast to such an uninhabitable and long-forsaken space. He pauses for an instant, and it seems the dismal surroundings do little to dissuade his faith or his emanation of righteous intention. He smiles graciously, breathing in the presence of his waiting admirers. His eyes twinkle in the lamp light in a way that might be compared, by Christians, to Jesus Christ entering a sacred prayer garden to greet a long-lost throng of judicious disciples.

In silence, the mullah crosses the room and lifts the Quran to read aloud.

"Eat and drink, and be happy. When you see anyone, say, 'I have made a vow of silence; I am not talking today to anyone.'"

The mullah skips some of the verses and then continues reading, "I am a servant of God. He has given me the Scripture and has appointed me a prophet. He made me blessed wherever I go, and enjoined me to observe the Contact Prayers, Salat, and the obligatory charity, Zakat, for as long as I live. I am to honor my mother; He did not make me a disobedient rebel. And peace be upon me the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I get resurrected."

The mullah lifts his eyes from the book, closes it, and addresses the two men directly. The men look entranced as if they have just met

an especially sovereign, holy deity.

“The two of you have served your challenge well, but your job has only just begun. Allah’s work is becoming your truth and Allah embodies your eternal destiny. Your history is being written in the annals of all that is sacred.

“I am especially honored to extend my congratulations to the both of you on an excellent job thus far. Your efforts have gained world attention and well-deserved approbation in God’s eyes.

“Let us pray that we are shown divine guidance so that we may be led to walk in the way of God and the Prophet Muhammad.”

As the men drop to their knees, kneeling toward Mecca, the room is still, in silent prayer, for several moments.

After the prayers have ended, still several more silent seconds go past and then the small one says, “I’ve been studying my Spanish in every free moment of our time, Sheik Abdul-Jabaar Waheed.”

The mullah chuckles, “You will be richly rewarded, my son.” And with only those few words, he then returns to his inner chamber.

Immediately the guard motions the men to gather their shoes and exit the house.

Scorpio reaches for the Makarov.

“Leave it,” the guard says. “It will only get in your way. You will have all you need when the proper time comes.”



Wichita’s tentatively-scheduled noon-team briefing is delayed until quitting time, and even then, the meeting is slow to begin. After a full day’s work, the once sixty-foot tall oil rig is fully dismantled and properly lowered into its transport position, lying on the back of the large semi-truck it was built to ride on.

The conversation among the crew members is reminiscent when

they enter the job shack and gather around Wichita and Donna's maps. Unusually, Donna has remained on site throughout the day. Also oddly, Arthur Dan does not enter the office with the team, but instead climbs into his pickup and casually drives away from the job site.

"Hot coffee in a can seems nuts to me. Can you believe anyone buys that crap?" Wichita is silent while Weasel reflects.

"Arthur Dan told me that he has a friend who visited Japan last summer. While he was there, Arty's friend claims he drank 'hot coffee in a can' from a convenience store and he swears, 'it's good for forty days' on a store shelf. Arty thinks that's the greatest idea since meat and potatoes.

"How could you do better than that? Arty thinks no one could be any smarter than that ... he asked me, 'who could make a better living than a coffee jockey?' Arty wants to retire, selling coffee in a can, so he'll be able to live large with very little effort otherwise. That's where I want to be when I grow up. Thinking about what's next."

Foot joins in, "Arthur Dan is an intellectual compared to most of the guys on the average job site."

"A lot of people call him, 'Arty, Art, or Arthur,' but he corrects all of them, 'that's not the name momma gave me,' and he lets 'em all know that his given name is 'Arthur Dan' ... I've heard him say it more than once, 'Consider it one word; ArthurDan'" Weasel is noticeably mournful in speaking about his long-time work buddy.

Pad adds, "Arty is humorous, too. He has the gift of comedy. I didn't know until lately that he is musically inclined, also. Apparently, he plays both guitar and cornet. I wouldn't know which one to strum or which end to blow on. He is a multi-talented and good-hearted man."

Wichita finally remarks, "He's been with us for a while. No matter where we were drilling, from hole to hole, for the past ten years, Arthur Dan has always been on top of that rig. On any given

day, Arty had the ‘crow’s nest’ view of what was happening for miles around the worksite.

“I think we can all understand why he went over to Pre-Eminent, though. If he had to work sixteen hour days in Orla he wouldn’t really have enough time to commute home to Odessa to be with his wife and kids every night. That’s almost a two-hour drive and he just doesn’t want to camp out during the week anymore and go home only on Sundays. He’s committed to those kids—and you can’t really blame him for that.”

“Have we got anybody who can take his place?” Marlboro asks.

“Corporate is sending us someone from The Eagle Ford Shale in South Texas. He’ll be here Tuesday, in time to start drilling. We just need to get the rig up Monday.”

Weasel snarks, “Whoever it is, he better be the *tits on the mule*. If he’s gonna take Arty’s place. And since we’re going to punch a hole every twelve days, any new guy better bring his piss and vinegar.”

Wichita finishes the conversation. “We’ll see, won’t we? No matter how good the new steeplejack is, we’re moving forward and we will be starting work Monday, in Orla.”

“Did corporate say anything about how they’re going to deal with the news from Iraq? What about that oil field bombing thing? Does anybody in Houston give a damn if we all die out in Orla, in the middle of hell?”

Donna injects, “No one is going to die. There is a plan.”

“Donna, let me handle this.” Wichita again takes charge.

“The news is being downplayed. Corporate believes the explosion was not a hydrogen bomb. World news seems to confirm that. Right now, the consensus is that ISIS rebels initiated a small explosion that somehow got down into the reservoir and lit up the entire underground oil reserve. Iraq is a world away. Our company management, Cherokee Drilling believes it’s an isolated, regional

thing, and that homeland security in the U.S is on top of the situation enough to keep us in good shape.”

“Security is being tightened.” Donna rejoins the discussion.

“How?” “How so?” Weasel and Foot almost simultaneously question the authority.

“What does that supposed to mean?” Pad asks.

Firmly, the boss again takes control. “Well, Donna, you can tell them about the holes, or you can tell them about the living arrangements. You choose.”

“Sorry, boss. You tell them. I’ll just hold my tongue like a backed-up prostate.”

All the men take pause.

“Huh? That’s not funny. What?”

“I didn’t say that, Wichita.” Donna freezes.

“I, I don’t know what I’m saying, Mr. Breeding. Forgive me, I, sometimes I make light of things when I’m nervous or stressed.”

“Donna quit digging your own hole.”

James Breeding, Wichita proceeds as if nothing has happened, “Men, they want us to stay on company property.

“They like that we usually show up with RVs, but they don’t want us to park our rigs at Red Bluff Lake.”

“Where do they have hook-ups on company property?” Marlboro is the first to ask.

“They don’t. They want to put electric, water, temporary septic and even free propane on the drill site, for the duration of each well dig. Then, they want to move us to the next hole, RVs and all. They’re gonna fence us in for a week to two weeks at a time.

“... And, they want us to hit five holes by December.”

Pad, Foot, and Marlboro gulp, “Huh?”

Weasel is more direct. “You must have Superman coming to the

crow's nest job, and Donna here must be sprouting angel wings about where to drill next."

"It's not about where to drill, Werner. It's not about that at all." Wichita is tentative, but not vague for long.

"It's not about us hitting oil. We WILL hit gas, and we'll go past it. We're not going to be drilling for oil or gas ... We're going to be drilling prep holes for fracking. We'll be going seven to ten thousand feet down and then moving along. It could be our only way to survive. Corporate is closing Midland/Odessa production, for now."

"Boss, can I say one word?" Donna is persistent.

"Sure Donna, hang us all you can."

"There is an upside."

All the guys respond, "What?"

Donna hups, "We get the weekend off ... Two full days!"

In cadence, Weasel chimes, "Do you hear what you're really saying, Donna? You know, it takes almost one full, entire day to move an RV, don't you? Whether it's one mile or a hundred twenty miles, it takes time to button it up, move it, and then unzip it, and get all the hookups connected and livable. Your concept of time may be of the essence ... our time is the reality ... pretty girl."

Donna is left speechless.

"Donna, you may know the best place to dig. We know what it takes to do a dig. Don't get in the way of the digging." Weasel buttons his statement with a gesture to his genitals.

Wichita is still quick to the draw, "Werner, don't forget your place. Don't forget why you don't yet work up on the windmill."

"Yes sir, boss." Weasel looks toward the ground and apologetically tips his cap to Donna.

"Donna, organize a party or something. We don't need cheerleading at this point in time when the whole damned game has changed."

“Sorry Wichita ... and sure, I can do that. How about the Sandhills on Sunday afternoon?”

“Seriously, you guys think I’m kidding. I’m not. Bring your wife, your girlfriend, your better half. Corporate suggested it ... and cheerleading aside, they’re paying for the barbecue and beer.”

“How generous of them ... and considerate of our time and many efforts,” Pad says.

“Horse shit.” Marlboro tips his cap and turns to the door.

“Can we just drop by on our way to the new drill camp? Maybe we can grab a case of beer or two for the road? Hell, why don’t they just give us a couple of briskets and some venison sausage, raw? We’ve got all weekend to smoke it ourselves. After all, we have no real lives, we’re just machines that run on meat and beer and dig holes.” Weasel dusts his jeans.



“...and we thought West Texas was hot already. I’ve got a feeling things are just beginning to stew.” Donna is spreading a picnic on a table outside the Visitor Center of the Sandhills state park.

“I’m not sure what you mean exactly?” Sue asks.

“Metaphorically, I mean. Comanche Drilling is being closely watched by the top brass in Houston. I’m not sure how long before the market closes and we get put on the auction block.” Donna pauses in mid-stride. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t talk shop today. That was inconsiderate of me.”

“Well, when I see things like that blowout this morning, I begin to wonder how long the boys can continue anyhow. That thing really puts the fear of God in you. I worry all the time about Weasel not coming home one night.”

“Oh, are you two living together now?”

“No, not yet, but you know what I mean. I miss him when he’s

not there.”

Weasel is dutifully tending meat on a hot charcoal grill. “Hey, you two... Get that table set. These burgers and chicken wings are nearly done.”

“Yeah, they’re gonna blow that fire out over the hill in about an hour. Let’s hurry up and eat. I want to climb to the top of the dunes to get a front-row seat.”

“I heard they brought in a crew from Red Adair’s old team in Houston to do the blast. I want to see that, too.” Pad is tossing a golf disc high into the breeze and catching it occasionally as it blows back in his direction. He is a complete amateur, the way he handles the disc like an underhanded softball might get tossed in a little league team practice session.

“Foot... Grab another case of beer from the camper for the cooler. It’s getting warm out here.” Weasel is beginning to perspire in the late summer, noon sun.

“When I saw that blowout on the TV this morning, I got an eerie, weird feeling that some impending doom is hovering over the oil industry as a whole.” Sue continues her conversation with Donna. “When you see all those guys scattering like ants under that fireball, it makes me edgy.”

“You and me, both. It makes me think about changing career paths, entirely. I keep thinking hydrogen power is the next big thing.”

“You, too? Weasel and I were talking about that same thing the other night. My uncle just leased a new car that runs on nothing else. He lives in the San Francisco area. Apparently, they’ve got something going on out there. He’s a state senator and I think he has some insider information. He thinks Weasel should get out of the oil business and open a hydrogen gas station where I-10 and I-20 merge.”

Sue’s friendly banter is interrupted by a black Dodge pickup careening into the parking lot. Hooting, “Let’s go watch her blow!” Baxter and Sam burst from the vehicle with two girls wearing bikinis

and beach hats.

Baxter rustles through some gear in the pickup bed. “I’ve got two boards and two sleds. You get a sled, Sam.”

“Hey, you got the board last time. I thought you were going to run the helicopter?”

“I am, but I’m going to need the board to follow Marcia down the hill on her board. I’ve got to get some cool pics of her on the slopes. She looks so fine. Instagram is gonna love that tight little ass in the sand, for sure.” Baxter nods toward the two girls who have leaped from the truck with beach towels and are already marking a spot on the nearest slope for a quick tan.

“Hey, Marcia,” he yells, “They’re gonna blow that well in about an hour. You want a margarita while you wait?”

“Yes sir, we do. What makes you think we will be able to see it from here?”

“Not here. It’s just over that rise. Let me get my gear and we’ll go up. Hey, where’s that canteen you brought?”

“Under the seat. Better put lots of extra ice in it, I bet it’s already a hundred and five out here.”

“Francis... You want an umbrella?” Sam is boyish with his inquiry.

“I probably will when we get up on the hill. Not right now, though. I want to ski.”

“Cool.” Sam looks toward Baxter and winks. “She’s *game on*, man.”

“Somebody’s got to carry this stuff up there, you know,” Sam yells out as a hot duster-wind whips across the parking lot.

“I’ll carry the canteen!”

“Figures. Baxman, she is a whole party in a package. You cannot believe.”

“I’ll mix the drinks... you go ahead.”

“AHHHHHHH, EXPLOSIONS and FIERY WOMEN!” Baxter shouts into a face-full of wind-blown dust. “GOD BLESS TEXAS!”

“Damned Yankee.” Pad stops his disc tossing and ambles toward the grill. “How can I be of service, Mr. Weasel?”

“He’s not a Yankee, Pad. He’s from Kansas. He’s probably got a pecker about the size of a grain of Great Plains wheat. All he knows is how to blow hard. That’s probably why he thought we’d put up with him in Texas—figured we’re used to hot air blowing around. Clearly, Kansas kicked his ass out. Too bad the wind was in our direction.

“Ignore him. Don’t let him under your skin, Pad. Guys like Baxter always cut their fuse too short and eventually get a fast cap in the ass. He’ll fill his own hole, my friend. Mark my word.

Weasel changes the topic. “Yeah, check that smoker and rub some sauce on top of those spare ribs and steer necks. Don’t flip ‘em... Don’t turn ‘em... Just keep ‘em wet.”

“I never knew brisket was the hangy-down part under the cow’s chin until I met you guys. There is little wonder as to why you have to smoke it so long. You must cook out all the fat slowly, or end up with a tough cut of meat. My mother would understand, but she would boil it all day. This way is excellently better tasting. You are very much a master baster, Mr. Weasel. You, and Arthur Dan, and Foot have taught me very much about things since I came here. I am certainly going to miss mister Arty.”

“Tell me about it. And never call me *master baster* ever again.” Weasel walks away from the conversation and pops the top on a fresh beer. “Foot, you coming?”

Yelling from inside the first of six campers parked in a row, Foot emerges swatting his neck. “There’s a pissed-off spider in there.” Foot dances in a circle, smacking his shirt.

“Nobody likes to move. Leave that poor creature alone and get some beer on ice, you big baby.” Donna snorts her response as she

spews beer on the ground.

“That’s a big spider ... big as a hairy-legged javelina hog, girl. You go in there.”

Donna marches past Foot and straight into the camper, laughing continuously. “I damned near sucked beer up my nose, you whiney-boy.” She stomps back toward the six-foot-long cooler with a case of Bud Light slung over her shoulder, losing a flip-flop on her way. “There.” she says, “Use that shoe to save yourself, Foot.” She keeps walking, flipping her hair in the wind as she begins to quick-step across the hot sand.

Pad lifts the hood on a Texas-sized, trailer-mounted, cast-iron smoker, allowing sweet-smelling white puffy smoke to tower into the slightly overcast sky. In stark contrast to the smoke from the meat, a black column of dense, heavy smoke, soot, and ash emerges from just behind the nearby sand dunes. Two corporate helicopters fly by and begin to settle onto the desert floor behind the sand hills. Before they kick up a huge cloud of dust, they pivot to display the insignia, “Texas Firefighters” on their tail fins.

From the peak of the dunes, Marcia and Baxter begin sand-boarding down their first slope in a graceful slow-motion descent. Above the sound of the helicopters and whipping wind, Marcia can be heard cackling, “Last one down has to carry the boards back up.”

“So how long have these been on?” Pad asks.

“I started smoking them at about ten last night. This morning I got them wrapped in foil at about six o’clock. So, in another hour or so they should be good to go. I think we have enough meat to make leftovers for a week.” Weasel smirks, “That is if we can keep Foot and the rest of the crew appeased with burgers and beer for most of today.”

“Is this oak?”

“Yup, mostly, white oak and post oak—with a couple o’ sticks of hickory, and some pecan shells. The grocery store was out of apple

wood, so I put some cherry chips in there, too. I like a little sweet in my smoke.”

“Oh man, me, too. This blend of aroma makes water in my mouth.”

“Aromatics. That’s the point. The aromatics are designed to make your mouth water. Then you drink a beer and eat a cow. It’s the Texan way, my friend.”

“You have a laughable way of speaking, Mr. Weasel.”

“Now isn’t that the pot calling the kettle black, Mr. Pad?”

“Weasel, let’s take a break ... Let’s walk up there and take a look, what do you say?” Foot begins to trek up the hill. “Pad, come on ... let’s get a preview before they get too much of a handle on that blaze out. I want to see how much is left of that old rig before they blow it up entirely.”

“I want to go.” Sue jumps to join the men, and with little more said by anyone else the entire group of Comanche crewmen and their guests begin marching up the hill into the glare of the sun.

“Damn.” As the entourage slips and slides up the shifting sand Donna remarks, “That darn dune is awful-mighty hot.”

A fiery glow crests the hill as they climb and a churning blackness billows miles along the horizon, occasionally dimming the sun to a mere penlight.

“Hotter than hell,” Foot adds.

“I’ve never seen one of these in real life.” Sue maneuvers to clench Weasel by the elbow. “Have you?”

“Nothing ever this big, in person.” Even Weasel is taken aback by the fire.

“What do you think started it?”

“Could have been any one of a hundred things.”

“That’s comforting to know.”

“Wells are just plain dangerous. They may have hit a pocket of dense natural gas ... the drill bit could have sparked off some flint rock ... some of the pipes could have rubbed the concrete casing the wrong way ... it could have been anything. Whatever it was, three guys on top aren't going home again.”

“That's not true. The news said no one has been hurt out here.” Sue yanks on Weasel's arm to let him know that she's not buying his pity story; to which Weasel chuckles at having been caught stretching the truth.

“My God.” Reaching the top of the hill, Arthur Dan and his wife pause to wrap their arms around each other's back. They stand muted, silhouetted against the boiling glare and shrill hissing of the inferno before them.

“Whoa, it's bigger than I expected.” Wichita wipes his brow on his sleeve. “You ever see one like that, Arty?”

“No, sir. That has got to be a record-breaker for the books, boss.”

“Must be two-hundred feet of flames, don't you think?”

“Two, two-fifty, maybe. Some of these sand hills pile up to ninety feet high. That plume is clearly more than twice that tall.”

“Wichita, Sue is right; we don't need to hear those kinds of things.” Jan jolts Arty's waist. “We already worry about you guys enough.”

“Sorry Jan, Miss Sue. We're just pulling your legs a little.” Wichita is grinning. “This sort of thing doesn't really ever happen by accident anymore. Modern technology, the science of the business—these days you don't hear about this sort of thing in the news much, do you? And you know you would. This blowout is not by accident.

Weasel continues. “This is a voluntary ignition. Instrumentation detected a problem and rather than chance an unexpected explosion, the crew lit this candle on purpose. It's a countermeasure to prevent a much more catastrophic disaster. It's safer to fix a problem if it's already on fire than it is to work in an area that has the potential of

accidentally, unpredictably blowing up.”

Artie squeezes Jan. “Someone would almost have to be trying to set one of these on fire these days. Accidents are very rare.”

“Is that what happened this week in Iraq?”

“Well, in that case, I don’t think they know.” Wichita tries to reassure the ladies. “News from that part of the world is sketchy. You never know what to believe from over there. Somebody probably just screwed the pooch big time, and now they’re looking to lay blame elsewhere.”

“What if it was a terrorist group or sabotage?” Sue asks.

“What if it was? That kind of thing doesn’t happen here. Not in the U.S. Not here in Texas.”

“Well, I’m not so sure anymore. You said yourself that these kinds of things don’t just happen every day, but here we stand. This blast furnace ain’t our imagination.”

The dust whips up again and the group stands together looking at the spectacle.

Having migrated to the next taller dune, Sam now notices and gestures with a wave of his hand to Baxter that he has spotted the Comanche 614 H team.

Baxter motions him over to where he is wiping down a sand board. “Hey, nobody is watching their cooler. What do you say we raid the ice box, Sam?”

“Oh, yeah! I can tolerate cheap beer if it’s free.”

“You stand guard ... I’ll make a beer run.”

“Ha, ha, ha—I’ve got you covered, mad man.”

Baxter mounts his board and gently slides downhill toward the pavilion, keeping his back to the Comanche group, to avoid being recognized.

“Jeez, it stinks like rotten eggs.” Sue covers her nose as she and Weasel gape open-mouthed at the awesome sight in the desert below

their vantage point.

“That’s the gas and Sulphur. Smells like raw sewage, don’t it?”

“Worse. It burns my eyes.”

“It’s mostly methane and ammonia.” Donna is panning her cell phone from north to south, capturing the event on video and pausing on each face of her team to get their reaction.

Sue grimaces. “Noxious ... that can’t be good to breathe.”

Weasel echoes, “Thank goodness the wind is to our backs, can you imagine if that stuff was blowing toward us?”

“Amazing—I wish Teresa could be here,” Foot speaks to himself, but Pad overhears his comment.

“Yeah, where is she, Mr. Foot?”

“She had to work the night shift at the hospital. She’s probably sound asleep right now.”

“She works a lot of hours, doesn’t she?”

“Twelve on, twelve off; it’s an endless cycle. Frankly, I don’t know how she puts up with it.”

“Well, you have to admit, our hours aren’t much different. As a matter of fact, they are actually getting much worse.”

“Donna, get a shot of that bulldozer.” Wichita points toward a D-9 Cat that is maneuvering into position. “They’re going to use that boom to poof out the fire.”

The Caterpillar has a crane boom reaching out in front of it that is about eighty feet long. Between the cab and the boom is a massive steel shield designed to protect the driver from heat and flame, but the driver is not leaving anything to chance. He is covered head to toe in a thick fire suit, while two pumper trucks position to flank either side of him where they can drench the driver and his entire rig in a continuous deluge of water.

While everyone is preoccupied with the spectacle of the fire, Baxter hustles two cases of Bud Light beer from beside the cooler

under the pavilion into the cab of his pickup truck. Grinning from ear to ear he re-emerges from the truck with a drone helicopter and remote-control unit. He races back to his friends with his sand-board under one arm and his hands full of drone gear.

Unnoticed by the Comanche crew, Baxter reaches Sam and comments, “I got two cases in the back seat. I’ll put them on ice in the morning. When we get back to work tomorrow, we can tell the guys that Comanche bought us a beer party. It’s not Heineken or Guinness, but it’s free. The boys are gonna love it, right?”

“Cool, man. You were slicker than owl shit, Baxter. You’ve got more balls than me, dude.”

“Hi, YiiiEeeeeee!” He howls into the wind.

Over on the next knoll, the sound of Baxter’s celebration can barely be heard above the belches and blasts of the blowout, but it gets the attention of Pad. “That’s Baxter. Jackass! I hope he falls on his face and burns his shifty eyeballs on the sand.”

Foot laughs. “Yes sir, if anyone deserves a catastrophic failure in his day, that guy does. What he really needs is a good sobering kick in the throat.”

Pad notices, “Oh look, he brought his toy helicopter.”

“Oooo, I wish I had some of those pics. My Twitter feed would look really cool with that.” Donna pauses her photography long enough to admire the drone rising up toward the smoke.

“I hope he gets it close enough to melt,” Pad says.

“Forget him, Pad. He’s a loser. I’m going to get back out of this heat and grab a burger.” Wichita turns away from the action and cusses under his breath, “Plus, I gotta find a place to pee.”

A rumbling from underground suddenly puts everyone in stop motion. With a gush of dirt and red molten steel, the mouth of the blaze below erupts violently with a blue flame. Racing skyward, the torch-like furnace screeches out a shrill and haunting report like a

boiling kettle. The explosion is so forceful that it likely rattles windows in town, some twenty or thirty miles away. It echoes from hilltop to hilltop and the concussion hits the Comanche group in the face with another stronger blast of heat. The men on the desert floor all hit the ground like soldiers in a mortar attack.

Usually unseen during daylight hours, a pack of nine coyotes canters from a cluster of sagebrush to a large cactus mound, retreating from the heat. Incrementally they maneuver themselves across the desert, tongues wagging to their knees, as they run in short bursts from scrub brush to scraggly lone mesquite tree, to tumbleweed, toward the dunes.

Jan comments, “It must be *real* hot down there.”

“At the core, that flame is well over three thousand degrees—enough to liquefy solid steel. The sand around that hole is molten. It will become smooth glass when it cools back down.” Arty points in the direction of the coyotes. “Where those dogs are creeping across the desert like smugglers, four or five hundred yards away, the air temperature is probably around a hundred thirty to a hundred fifty degrees. It’s like a hot black car in full sun with the windows up.”

“There, where the shell of that old water tank is, about two hundred feet from the flame, the air is probably well over four-hundred-fifty degrees.”

“That’s enough for me, for a while.” Sue steps behind Weasel to shield herself from the furnace and tugs at him to return to the pavilion. “Let’s go back and check on the meats, Weasel. This thing isn’t going away anytime soon.”

“Yeah, I’m getting sand in my shorts anyway. Damn, Arthur Dan, ever see one that strong?”

“They hit a gold mine there. That well is worth a fortune, son. Too bad, it had to get pissy with them this morning. They must have a six- or seven-hundred-barrel-a-day hole there—not to mention the natural gas they found.”

“Sue, I’m with you.” Arty’s wife separates herself from Art’s embrace and stoops to empty sand from her sandal. “This is more than I need to see, Arthur Dan. I’m going back.” She stamps off yelping, “Crap this sand is hot. I’m glad we didn’t bring the kids.”

Arty grumbles, “Aw, they would have loved the fireworks, Jan.

“I’ve got twenty bucks says Baxter’s helicopter doesn’t make it home with him. Any takers?”

“Arthur Dan, that’s a sucker bet.” Weasel does a head-over-heels pinwheel in the shifty, silky sand. Stumbling and losing his hat he lands on his hip and immediately jumps to his feet. “Damn, that stuff is hot, man—much hotter than on any regular, sunny summer day.

“How much is a well like that worth?” Sue questions Arthur Dan as she snaps a few shots with her cell phone camera.

“A butt load.” Arty is full of statistics. “Figure just five hundred barrels a day—use a conservative sixty bucks a barrel, that’s thirty thousand—at fifteen percent, the landowner stands to net about forty-five hundred dollars a day, and that’s not the only well on his property.”

A WFAA News helicopter from Dallas rapidly circles the scene kicking up air from between the spectators and the blowout.

“Feels like turkeys spinning on a spit-roast out here,” Weasel says.

“You would know, grill man. How’s that brisket coming?”

CHAPTER 4: BREAKDOWN



In the bowels of a sea vessel, somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea, a red scorpion-tattooed hand emerges from a freighter kitchen oven. Using a potholder, the tattooed baker is holding a large tray of smoking, burnt muffins.

Tattoo speaks to his younger comrade. “There’s been a change of plans. You’re not getting off the boat in Honduras. They’re sending you on to Caracas, Venezuela. I got embedded email this morning, from the sheik’s envoy. You should have received the same ‘jpg,’ yes?”

Jose nods.

“After a stop in La Ceiba, you are to port in Puerto de La Guairá. That’s where you’ll disembark and then move overland to The Orinoco River.”

“What’s the target?”

“Ultimately, they want us to hit the Paraguaná Refinery Complex, but initially we are expected to create multiple diversions along the Orinoco Oil Belt.”

“Is that something big?”

“*Centro de Refinación de Paraguaná* is the third largest oil refinery in the world. The Orinoco Belt holds the world’s largest

petroleum reserve.

“Sanjeev, quick, back to work, the Chief Officer is coming.”

“I’m José. Remember? Speak to me in Spanish.”

“Sí, muchas gracias, José. Hasta mañana—ha, ha, you are one funny hombre.

“Tengo más fe en el equipo de Madrid. Voy a tomar su apuesta.”

As Scorpio defers to a regional soccer match, he lowers his chin as if to tell his partner that all is fine and they will meet later to talk more.

“*El super rata va a comer mapache hoy.*” José is quick to walk away while referring to the “Bats” eating the “Raccoons” in the Spain Football Club today. When the chief mate passes, José flags his dirty apron and continues scrubbing the large pot he’s been cleaning.

Scorpio bumps his elbow on the kitchen equipment behind him and accidentally tosses two of the muffins on the floor. He grabs his gut in apparent pain.

The Chief Officer stops, and bellows, “*Sin tonterías*, No nonsense. *Buque-forma*, OK ship-shape?”

“Sí, muchas gracias.”

José looks back at Scorpio with an expression of, “What?” and mutters under his breath. “*¿Estas borracho*, Are you drunk?”

“No, but I may vomit anyway. Hey, didn’t you study to be in Texas, not South America?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s going to help a lot at *Centro de Refinación.*”

“Tell me. I’m a little confused.”

“Don’t worry about it right now. Get back to work. We’ll talk tomorrow. I’ll send back a response that we’ve received the message.” Scorpio rubs his gut and flicks the light switch to peer blankly into his oven.



Through binoculars, Marlboro scans the massive blue and orange flame from the oil well fire. He and Pad have remained atop the sand dunes to continue observing the spectacle.

“That’s at least a half mile away, maybe a thousand yards or more. It’s pretty amazing that you can feel the heat from here.”

Pad speculates, “Do you think they will use foam to put it out?”

“I doubt it. Chemicals are too expensive. They already have a vertical flame. From the color, I don’t think there’s too much methane in it. My guess is that they will blow it. That far bulldozer looks like it’s all ready to go with the well head.”

“How is it that explosives would be cheaper?”

“Well, it only takes about five hundred pounds of 80% nitroglycerin grade dynamite to do the job. That’s only about two thousand dollars’ worth of materials. One shot of chemicals would cost at least that much—and they would probably need several shots.

“I studied a lot about well fires during the Kuwaiti war.”

“You were in Kuwait?”

“Seven months.

“On the end of that boom there, they’ll mount a small lube-oil drum packed with explosives, wrapped in heat-insulating silicon cloth. The drum is connected to a trigger on the dozer using ‘detonating cord’ that’s run through the center of the atthey wagon boom. While they position it, they’ll keep the entire rig drenched in water to help keep it cool.”

“How do they keep it from exploding much too early, you know, prematurely?” Pad asks.

“There’s really little risk of that because any hot spots in the connection or barrel would only cause a ‘non-detonation’ and the explosives would just burn up in the fire.”

“I don’t understand how you can kill a fire with fire.”

“It’s simple physics. I’ve seen it before in slow-speed photography from Kuwait. The explosion acts to temporarily drive fuel away from the point where the flame develops, and it also deprives the immediate area of oxygen, which could otherwise support instant re-ignition. It’s a lot like blowing out a birthday cake candle. It’s really pretty safe and predictable.

“Here, take a look for yourself.” Marlboro hands the field glasses to Pad and as Pad lifts them to his eyes and adjusts the focus, Baxter’s drone helicopter rises into the viewfinder.

“We should be smiling. Baxter is taking our photograph.”

Marlboro shows all of his teeth in a fake grin and lifts his hands skyward to shoot two middle fingers toward the drone. “Take that, jackass.”

“Holy moly, look at the size of that motorcade!” Pad lowers the binoculars and asks Marlboro, “What do you think that is all about?”

Approaching the fire and circling the field like pioneering wagons on the westward-ho trail, forty to fifty black cars parade onto the site. Marlboro takes the lenses to zoom in on one of the license plates, which reads, “Government Vehicle.”

“It looks like Homeland Security or the FBI, or something. I wonder what they’re here for.”

“Maybe they think this gas leak was caused by terrorists, or sabotage, or something.”

“Maybe terrorists. Corporate sabotage wouldn’t get this much attention.”

As the two observers watch, the seemingly endless gathering caravan includes a handful of SWAT vehicles. A dozen or more men in navy-blue t-shirts labeled with large yellow letters across their backs exit their vehicles and gather to greet each other. They group some two hundred yards from the fire. Some of the shirts are printed

with “FBI,” some with “ATF,” and others with “Homeland Security.”

“Geeze, Louise! I wonder what they know, that we do not know. Is this ordinary?” Pad shields his eyes from a wisp of blowing sand.

Marlboro says, “I don’t think so. Apparently, there’s more to this fire than just some common oil field accident.”

Baxter’s drone pivots and speeds down the sand hill for a closer vantage point. That maneuver garners the attention of a few of the agents below.

One of the ATF men lifts a walkie-talkie to his mouth and points in the direction of Marlboro and Pad, causing the entire larger group to all turn and stare.

“Uh oh, that cannot be a good.” Pad remarks.

No sooner than the words leave Pad’s lips than a second convoy of black cars races into the entrance of the Monahans Sandhills State Park. They spread rapidly throughout the parking lot, agents urgently dispersing in every direction. Two agents head directly toward Pad and Marlboro, two more toward Baxter and his friends. All other agents hastily spread through the park and pavilions, in pairs. Two of the ATF men march toward the Comanche crew barbecue pit.

Another SWAT vehicle enters the park and begins broadcasting from a set of large speakers on top. “The park is now being closed. Please gather your belongings and exit the park immediately. This is a mandatory evacuation. This park is closed.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Weasel asks of the approaching ATF officers.

“The park is closed. Extinguish your fires and leave the premises immediately, sir.”

“We’ve got food on the grill. This is just a company barbecue.” Weasel protests.

One of the agents places his hand on his gun holster and barks, “We’re not going to tell you twice, sir. The park is closed! You need

to move your picnic somewhere else. Right now! Pack it up, unless you prefer to spend your afternoon in custody.”

The agents move from pavilion to pavilion and picnic table to picnic table with the same report. The SWAT truck circles the lot again, “The Park is closed. Gather your things and leave the park calmly and immediately.”

From the south, six Fort Hood Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk Army utility helicopters and four Boeing CH-47 Chinook dual rotor troop transports do a fly-by and circle a two-mile radius in the sky.

“This looks serious folks.” Wichita moves into action, “We should pack our gear and get out of here. Everybody, get your stuff. Let’s just go, we don’t want any trouble with these guys.”

The two agents, pacing uphill toward Pad and Marlboro draw their weapons and shout out, “Put your hands in the air.”

A megaphone is directed toward Baxter. “Bring your bird dog down. Bring your drone home. This is a no-fly zone.”

Pad and Marlboro are immediately placed into handcuffs and told, “Let’s go boys. You’re under arrest.”

“For what?” Marlboro is resistant.

“We are here to have a Sunday picnic, officer sirs.” Pad is apologetic. “What have we done that is illegal?”

“You’re being detained under suspicion of international spy allegiance. Do you have any weapons on you?”

“No sirs, we are only oil field roughnecks. We do not even know any international spies.”

“That’s yet to be determined, isn’t it? What is your nationality? State your name.”

Pad looks shell shocked. “I am Pad Hussein. I’m Iranian, but I was born in Beeville, Texas. I’m an American, officer, sir.”

“We’re FBI, and you’re under arrest for questioning, Pad Hussein.”

“What about you?” The agent confiscates Marlboro’s binoculars.

“I’m Mario Sanchez. I’m a legal U.S. citizen. I’m from Eagle Pass, Texas.”

“Are you a coyote? Do you smuggle people into Texas?”

“Coyote! Hell no. I’m a Texan. We’re both American citizens. I’m a U.S. Army veteran.”

“Do you both have identification? Do you have passports?”

Marlboro is getting upset. “Passports, we’re not going anywhere. We have Texas driver’s license IDs. We’re oil field workers, man. It’s our day off.”

“Well, if that’s true, you two are in for a short stay in our field house this afternoon, while we check out your history. If it’s not true, we are going to find out for sure who you are. Now march!”

The agent shoves the back of Marlboro’s head toward the parking lot, causing a stumble in their downhill quick-step through the sifting sand.

Pad notices that Baxter has grounded his drone. Baxter and his friends are under arrest, as well. The drone has been confiscated, too.

“Are you arresting everyone who is out here?”

“That wouldn’t be any of your business, Mr. Hussein. You just worry about yourself, sir, and let’s hope your story has no big holes in it.”

“I think perhaps we have just been racially profiled, Mr. Marlboro.”

The agent snaps, “Shut up, Mr. Iran. You’ll be better off if you just keep your big trap shut and only answer the questions. You have the right to remain silent.”

Three of the Chinooks nestle into a flat area at the oil field perimeter adjacent to the highway, near the railroad line. The fourth settles to the ground just outside the entrance to the park. Thirty armed troops rapidly exit the craft and spread out through the park. They

appear single-minded and especially well-rehearsed for managing any crowd, belligerent or otherwise.

People in the park are quick to comply with orders from the encroaching authorities and begin racing to their cars to leave. As each vehicle approaches the exit, they are flagged to the shoulder of the road for inspection. No one is allowed to head for the hills or simply head for home, as they may be expecting. Soldiers surround each automobile with mirrors for peering underneath and with apparent orders to open all the doors, hoods, and trunks. Every person in the gathering exodus is thoroughly patted down, and metal-detecting wands are passed over them and all the contents of their cars. Inconspicuously, each person is also scanned with a radiation detector.

Before the Comanche crew can leave, they have a lot to do. Hustling aluminum foil around smoked meats and loading coolers, Weasel comments, "This is crazy." He notices the impromptu inspections backing up at the gate. "Oh man, they're going to want to go through all of our RVs. That's gonna take all day."

Foot begins dragging the large beer cooler to his camper, "Shit, I've got guns in my place. That's my house. I have ammo, too.

"Hey, are we missing a couple of cases of beer? I thought we'd just put two more on the side."

"Load it up, Foot. Beer is the least of our worries right now. Get a move on, big man."

Wichita takes charge of the group, "Everybody, empty your alcoholic drinks, open some water or a soda.

"Donna, let's meet in Pecos, at Maxey Park, near the old zoo. Our guys with RVs can catch up with us there before they go on to the job camp location. If you go on ahead, maybe you can find us a good spot out of the sun."

Announcing loudly, "Nobody worry, we can finish our barbecue and have a few more drinks in Pecos. Everyone meet at the Maxey

Park Zoo on I-20, just past Highway 285. It's right around mile marker forty."

"I brought my gasifier. Those army dudes are gonna go nuts with that thing." Weasel speaks to Sue, "I hope you don't hate me in a few minutes. I wish now that you had picked another weekend to go with me to the job site. You could be going home fast if you were in my pickup. I knew I should have had you drive my truck up here."

"Hey, I'm on vacation. I have all the time in the world."

"Unfortunately, I think we're going to need it—time and *luck*."

"Hey, where are they taking Pad and Marlboro?"

As the two arrested crewmembers are loaded into a car marked "Homeland Security," Baxter and his group get escorted across the parking lot to another similar car.

"Hey Comanche, *got beer?*" Baxter's sarcastic holler grabs Foot's attention.

"I knew it, boss—that bastard stole some of our beer!"

Wichita snorts under his breath, "That little shit."

"Foot, contain yourself. This ain't no family picnic, no more. Keep your cool, my friend. Things are already hot enough out here."

One pavilion over from the Comanche table, an affluent looking family of mom, dad, and three kids climb aboard their half-million-dollar class A Prevost Motor Coach with California plates. Momentarily, their engine revs and they pull past the tattered, sun-aged RVs being loaded by Foot and Weasel. Sue warily watches as the high-end Prevost circles the lot and takes a place in the quick-to-expand exit line.

"We're just going on home, y'all." Arty says, "We're not going to make the trip over to Pecos. I have to work in the morning and we have the kids at home, so we'll see you when we do."

"Thanks for everything, Wichita. I'll catch up with you at the Muleskinner when you're back in Midland. Give me a call."

Wichita waves goodbye to Arthur Dan, “Glad you made it out Jan. Love to the family. See you soon.”

While bidding adieu to his long-time worker and friend, Wichita has the thought that “soon” may have a much longer meaning than he imagines. He chokes slightly on his final words and then resets. “Hey, if things go bad at Pre-Eminent, you know you’ve always got a job with me, my friend.”

“Thanks, Wichita. You know I won’t forget it. We think the world of you, man.” He and Jan wave bye and maneuver their Trailblazer into the stream of cars leaving the park. Arthur Dan yells back to the crew when he passes the car holding Pad and Marlboro, “I hope you get the rest of your crew back before work tomorrow.”

Wichita is clearly disturbed, confused, and dismantled. He just shakes his head, winces from an aching to pee, and carries on. He turns his attention to assisting Sue with the final cleanup of the campsite. “You OK, Sue?”

“Me? I’m fine—I think Weasel is about to crap himself, though. You got any Valium?” She’s attempting to make a joke, “or even better, heroin?”

“If you find any, I’ll take a double-dose myself.”

Uncomfortably, they both chuckle.

“I heard that!” Weasel says, “I’m standing right here!”

Reassuringly Wichita states, “We’ll all be just fine. Just do what they ask and we’ll all be back to sitting down to chow on some brisket before we know it. We’ve got nothing to hide. We’re as legal as eagles.”

Weasel whispers to Sue, “He don’t know I have a stash of dynamite, C4, and blasting caps in the cupboard. Do you think I should tell him?”

“Hell no. He’s got enough to think about. Let’s get in line and keep our prayers to ourselves.”

Weasel opens the door to his eight-year-old class C Winnebago motorhome shouting, “Common Smiley, take a pee, we’ve got to go for another ride, boy.”

Smiley, Weasel’s comfortably air-conditioned German Sheppard lazily pauses at the open doorway, blinking his eyes, as if to say, “I was just having a good doggy sex dream. Why would you want to disturb that?” Yawning, “Bitch, lick my balls.” In Weasel’s mind, Smiley talks.

Weasel speaks back to Smiley, “No, you lick *my* balls, bitch.

Smiley pauses to look up at Weasel with a look of, “Seriously?”

“Oh, I’m sorry—come on, buddy. Get a move on, we’ve got to go!”

Seemingly, Smiley clearly understands the conversation but doesn’t like it at all that he has to dance tip-toe across the scalding pavement to relieve himself on a partially shaded rear tire.

Weasel mutters to himself, “I’m just going to leave this grill going. Most of the wood is already burned up, so I don’t think it’s going to flare up on the highway.” Weasel is referring to the smoker pit mounted to the trailer attached to the rear of his camper, where the briskets had been gently resting just minutes before. “I’ve put all the meats into four Yeti coolers. That should keep dinner warm for days if we have to stay awhile—God forbid. Let’s hit it, Smiley. Let’s go, boy. Juicy brisket awaits, my man.”

Smiley grins as dogs often can, and wags his entire rear end, more than grateful to return to the cool RV AC.

“What about Pad’s van and Marlboro’s camper?” Sue is concerned for their arrested team members who are now out the gate on the road to who knows where.

“I’ll make sure they’re both locked, and then I’ll follow you and Foot to the inspection point.” Gesturing to go, Wichita points to Foot. “Get in line, Foot. Keep your cool, and let’s get on down the road a piece before you decide to throw any fits. Put your CB on channel 27,

but keep the chatter down. We can talk more when we get to Pecos. I'll leave a note for the boys to let them know where we've gone."

In short, the parking lot is empty with the exception of one camper, one van, and one Black Dodge pickup. "I'd like to stuff a Bud Light into that Dodge tail-pipe before we go," Weasel complains to Sue who has joined him in the cab of the Winnebago. Foot files in behind them with his pickup and camper trailer and Wichita forms the end of the line.

"Break two-seven." Wichita keys the mic on his CB.

"Go ahead, breaker," Weasel responds.

"They're letting that Prevost right on through the line. Maybe we can get back to thinking about lunch in a short few minutes."

"Roger that."

To Sue, "I suppose if you look like a million bucks, you're good to go."

"Hey, we resemble that remark."

"No, we don't, fair maiden. We look like road trash compared to that Prevost."

Just ahead, Arthur Dan's Trailblazer is flagged to the side. Arty and Jan are instructed to exit the vehicle and told to show ID.

"I'm Army Reserve." Arty, opens his wallet and shows his military ID and Comanche credentials to the guard. "What's up, guys? We were trying to hold a company picnic out here."

"It's just a precaution, sir. We have orders to check out everyone near that blowout and clear the site for a possible explosion."

"We thought that rig was well under control?" Arty asks.

"It is. This is just a precautionary measure, Mister, uh Sergeant—Hastings."

"Those guys behind me are all with Comanche Drilling, too. The crew is moving to a new worksite near Orla. This park is on the way from Midland, and the company gave us the day off for a little R&R."

Arty points to each of the remaining crew vehicles at the rear of the line.

“Thank you for your patience and understanding, Mrs. Hastings—and thank you both for your service. Drive five miles and you can camp anywhere you like.” The soldier casually salutes Jan, smiles, and flippantly waves off Arty’s inquiry, and says, “You can go ahead now, sir.”

Without further conversation, Arty and Jan return to their car and are gone.

Three cars and two more RVs belonging to other park visitors are stalled roadside and being basically strip-searched from top to bottom as their occupants stand nearby, under guard. One RV contains a family of Mexican-Americans and the mom is holding an infant, shrouded from the sun, swaddled in a blanket. The other RV is full of much younger adult kids.

In their late teens or early twenties, the kids line the shoulder, looking too drunk to drive. Belongings from both rec-vehicles are strewn well into the dry drainage ditch. Heavily armed Army personnel swarm about and encapsulate the three cars and their occupants who all appear to be in for an arduous, long-lived search.

“Foot is next.” Weasel looks toward Sue with a dribble of sweat running from his hairline.

She reaches to wipe it away, “Think about what they ask. Don’t offer them anything more.” She inhales deeply, “But, be nice—don’t ask too many questions.” She brushes his hair back and kills the music on the radio.

“Smiley, behave!”

⚡

“Damn, doesn’t that air conditioner work any better than that?”

A temporary command post is being established near the well fire

and several people are rustled into the hot shack. They are Marlboro, Pad, Baxter, and company. The man in charge, with the name tag, “Captain Jeeter,” is quick to ask, “Are these nationals?”

“Seems so, sir? We’ve checked ID’s and they are registered voters. No warrants, no serious priors. They are local roughnecks, except for the girls.”

“Well, take them back and send them home after you check out their cars. We’re expanding the area. We’re moving. We’re going to twenty miles out.”

“We just got *here*.”

“That’s right, and now we’re moving. Now, clear the park. We’re shutting down the interstate highway—precautionary.”

No sooner than they’ve arrived, the prisoners are u-turned and redirected to the cars they arrived in, where their handcuffs are finally removed.

Jeeter continues speaking to his three lieutenants and several sergeants, “Let’s get as many people as possible on searching every single oil well in the immediate vicinity. Everything within a mile.

“How much radiation are we talking about?”

“Captain,” one Lieutenant speaks up, “It appears to be low level, possibly from a biohazard or medical waste, dirty bomb. We think that that limited contamination was released in the initial explosion that created the natural gas leak.”

“Is there any possibility that the initial explosion was only partial? Could there be more to it?”

“We don’t know, sir.”

“What kind of problems do the guys working around that candle have?”

Another lieutenant says, “Radiation is at a low enough level right now that they can work with the suits they are wearing for fire protection. They are all on Scott’s hazmat rebreathers. We do suggest

that everyone who comes out of the strike zone be thoroughly scrubbed and their gear be quarantined. Someone else should take their place if necessary and no one should be allowed to go *back* in.

“People outside a five-hundred-yard radius are in no danger.

“Our men, who are two hundred yards from the fire, need to move back, though. They are too close for comfort.

“However, if, like you seem to be thinking, there is a possibility of more radiation to come, it is extremely difficult to predict where we need to move them.

“In that event, we may need to consider the evacuation of a much wider radius than twenty miles; which could then include up to a quarter million people, in Midland and Odessa.

“If the wind shifts and starts coming from the west, we could have even more to think about, but we don’t expect that to happen right now.”

“Shutting down a forty-mile stretch of an Interstate highway is already going to cause a media frenzy. It’s not like no one is going to notice that almost four-thousand square miles of Texas are closed for business. Jordon, make sure you make it very clear to the media that this is simply a temporary, precautionary measure that should be able to be lifted soon after the fire is extinguished. Give them a good description of roads to use for a detour around the closed zone.

“Also, make sure all news helicopters are very clear that we now have a twenty-mile no-fly zone around us. Do not mention anything about radiation or fallout. We’ll let higher authorities make that call, if and when that needs to happen.

The lieutenant sums up with, “It’s my understanding that the President is watching this and us closely. A top Army Commander from the Pentagon is to arrive in Midland in about three hours. In the meantime, we’re going to keep that well fire burning.”

Jeeter concludes, “Barker, we’re going to need more troops. Will you make the call?”

“We’re already on it, sir.”



“IDs please.”

Back at the park gate, Weasel reaches for his wallet. Sue already has her ID in hand.

“What’s going on, sir?”

“Do you have any other passengers?”

“No sir, just my dog.”

“Do you have any weapons?”

“I’ve got a pocket knife. Do you want to see it?”

A second trooper interrupts the questioning, “We’re repositioning. Prepare to move out.”

“What’s that smoke coming from your back-end? Do you still have a fire in there?”

“Just coals, sir.”

“Pull over here and put it out. You can’t put it on the side of the road, so douse it!” Looking over Weasel’s ID the soldier notes, “Use your beer if you have to. I can smell your breath, Mister, Werner.

“... and is it Mrs. or Miss, Whiter?”

“Miss,” Sue replies.

“Can you drive this thing?”

“Yes sir, I sure can.”

“Where are you going?”

“Pecos.”

“You drive. Let the roughneck take a nap.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We’re suggesting that you tune your radio to a local news station before you consider returning back to this area.”

“Thank you, we will, sir.”

“As soon as you stop that pit from smoking, move on out. But, no speeding, OK?”

“OK. Thank you, sir.”

After dousing the grill, Weasel takes the passenger seat and pretends to read a newspaper.



“Captain Jeeter?”

“Go ahead, Washington.”

“I know it looks like a random thing, one low-level bomb in a poorly planned place. However, from what we’ve learned about the Iraqi explosion this past week, the area immediately around *you* is probably either a diversion or a test run. We have reason to believe that your location is part of a much larger strategic plan.”



EXCERPT: Houston Chronicle – Lifestyle Section

“A Port of Houston incoming freighter from South Korea is often docked near Deer Park, with a load of steel pipe. It’s a common occurrence. Every day, Houston and Corpus Christi receive thousands of tons of pipe from China, Korea, and other countries. Lately, steel from China has not been so prevalently seen in Texas ports because of quality issues but continues to hold a sizable market. On the other hand, South Korean steel is on an upswing, economically. Something that can be directly attributed to U.S. government interests.”

“I don’t care much for how the government does things,” Weasel says to Sue.

“Well, they did let us heathens go. I would say that’s a mark in their favor.” Driving, Sue questions, “Do we take east or west?”

“Damn, girl, you told the government you could drive!

“Just keep going till you see mile marker 40.

“Break two-seven.”

“Go break.”

“Wichita, are you and Foot through the gate yet?”

“Roll on. We’re on your donkey.” The response from Wichita is crisp, the signal is nearby.

“Are you staying in Pecos tonight?”

“Yeah, at the Big 6.”

“Look, I want to go on to the job site and get my camp set. It’ll be dark in a couple of hours. What’s your agenda at the zoo?”

“Roger that. You guys just go on. I’ll meet you at the job in the morning. I just thought the zoo would be a good, well known central place to meet and pee.” Wichita is clearly suffering now.

“Don’t you want some dinner? I’ve got four coolers—turkey legs and half chickens; pork ribs, beef brisket, and mule deer sausage. I can’t keep this stuff forever. I meant to give Arty and Jan a couple of chickens and a slab of ribs. Getting rushed out of the park took me by surprise.”

“It surprised all of us. Something else is going on besides just a gas leak in an oil pipe. I don’t think they were telling us everything.”

One of the Chinooks sweeps overhead, swiftly at first, and then settles to the freeway median about five miles ahead, where two State Trooper cars are awaiting its arrival.

“They’re shutting down the freeway, this far out? Something else has to be going on. This is a terrorist attack.” Weasel squelches his CB microphone.

“Let’s meet at the Flying-J truck stop. We can swap ideas there. I’m gonna top off on gas and we want to get some fresh eggs and milk before heading up 285. Roger?”

“Four,” Wichita agrees.

“Foot, you got your ears on?”

“Got a copy, Weasel, The Flying-J is perfect. I want to get some of their *west of the Pecos green chili* to go. That’s some great stuff on scrambled eggs in the morning.”

Sue says, “Ugh, sounds terrible.”

“Actually, he’s right. New Mexico Hatch Chile this time of year is incredibly delicious. Fresh Green Chili absolutely puts Texas-Red-in-a-can to shame.”

Sue laughs. “That sounds like Foot. The whole world could be at war and all Foot thinks about is something hot to eat.”



“This town is going to get real busy, real quick since they’re closing the freeway at Pyote.” Wichita rounds the Flying-J fuel pump where Sue has parked and gone inside the store. Weasel is gassing up his RV.

“Got that right.” Foot is fueling one pump over. “Let’s gas and go before the crowd gets here and the prices go up.” Foot acknowledges Wichita’s approach. “Were you able to make it to the restroom?”

“Yeah—so how many miles to the gallon are you getting on this old rig now, Weasel?” Wichita asks.

“Before I installed the generator, I would get nine to twelve if I were fully loaded like I am now. Since I added hydrogen to the mix, the gas gauge hasn’t even moved off of full, all the way from Midland. I have it figured at about twenty-three miles to the gallon on the highway.” Weasel returns the gas nozzle and opens his hood to check the oil.

“Damn, that’s almost double the normal mileage.” Wichita scratches his five o’clock shadow while fishing in his pocket.

“Yes, sir. That little water bottle there,” pointing to a homemade electrodes gizmo on the firewall, “is a hell of an invention. Hook that up to your air intake and magic happens. A little hydrogen goes a long way. The one on my pickup gets even better than double the mileage. It’s the way to the future, Wichita, my man.”

“If one of your engines doesn’t blow up sometime soon, I’m going to talk to you about building one for me.”

“I haven’t had a problem yet. Of course, if we were in Chicago, the water bottle wouldn’t like the sub-freezing weather, but down here it’s an awesome thing-a-ma-jig.”

“So here are the keys to the gate. The company had all the RV hookups installed last week, propane got trucked in yesterday. It should be obvious where to park and get electricity, water, and septic.

“I’ll be out there first light, in the morning.

“Be sure to lock the gate when you get inside. Corporate is going be checking us for security.” Wichita winks at Sue who is returning from the truck stop store with an armload of supplies.”

“I got your green chile, Foot. Although, ‘*chili*’ with an ‘*E*’ instead of an ‘*I*’ on the end just don’t seem right. I wonder why they spell it that way.”

“You’ll see, it just works like that. It’s pronounced ‘chil-ley,’ it’s Mexican.” Foot finishes pumping fuel and turns to step inside to pay.

“You’re not driving this last leg to the job site, are you, Sue?”

“No, I think Weasel knows this road better than me.”

“Good enough. You know Highway 285 is known as one of the state’s illegal alien super highways? They run truckloads of wetbacks from Del Rio to Roswell, through there. Don’t stop for any hitchhikers.”

“Oh you—we ain’t afraid of no aliens: illegal aliens, Roswell outer-space aliens, or otherwise. You know damned well, I’m always packin’.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m just kidding. I wouldn’t want to tangle with you in a dark alley, myself.”

Changing the subject, Weasel asks, “What do you think is up with this highway closure, Wichita?”

“Beats me. But I’m guessing it ain’t being run by local authorities. I’m definitely going to be watching the news tonight.”

“Yup. The first thing I’m going to do is set up the satellite dish, just as soon as we have power and air.”

“I’ll go to Maxey Park to wait for Marlboro and Pad, to let them know we’ve had a change of plan.”

“Here, take some brisket for your hotel mini fridge, Wichita.” Weasel reaches into his camper and produces a foil wrapped wedge of meat.”

“Is it done?” Wichita asks.

“Ten hours. I usually go twelve, but eight is enough for most Northerners and Kansas boys. It’s tender. I already had a small sample.”

“Kansas *boys*? Kiss my ass. You kids stay safe—I’ll see you in the morning. Try to get some good rest. We’re gonna need it.” Waving, Wichita puts his truck in gear and leaves.

“Let’s ride.” Weasel takes his driver’s seat and keys his CB mic. “Foot, you want to go on ahead. I don’t think we can make any better than sixty miles an hour, pulling this tail-wagging pit trailer and all that firewood.”

“Naw, I’ll just ride your donkey and follow along to make sure your coals don’t spin up into a fire again.”

CHAPTER 5: WHAT FIRE?



Entering the driver's cab from the kitchen, Sue begins to tune the FM radio band.

"We get everything we need?"

"I think so unless you want to pull through the drive-up liquor store window here in town?" Sue settles into the passenger seat.

"No, we have enough for a week or two. Besides, Marlboro and I will be taking you back to Midland next weekend. I'll get more when I'm in my pickup."

"There won't be much on the FM for long. You might be better off scanning the AM radio for something to listen to."

"I'd rather listen to a CD than all that jibber-jabber, but I was hoping there might be something on the news."

"Go for it. I'm curious myself about what they're saying to the general public. I can't imagine why they want a twenty-mile interstate shut down around Monahans."

"It's probably just like they say, precautionary."

"No, I've never heard of an oil-well fire needing that kind of safety zone."

"It does seem excessive."

“The only reason I can imagine is that there is something about that fire, like a radioactive cloud or something.”

“You’re not serious?” Sue shows concern.

“Well, yes I am. What do you think it is?”

Sue shrugs, “Maybe an ammonia cloud or something.”

“Ammonia would disperse in a few hundred yards.”

“Well, now that you mention it, you said earlier that you thought it was terrorism. I thought you might be kidding, but it would make sense.”

Sue continues thinking aloud, “But if you were a terrorist with some kind of nuclear weapon, why would you put it in the middle of nowhere? Wouldn’t you want a more populated place like Midland or Odessa?”

“I’ve been thinking about that, too. What if the target is not the populace in the immediate area?” Weasel asks.

“I don’t understand.”

“Suppose you wanted to shut down interstate commerce. Wouldn’t you want to incapacitate the freeway system?”

Weasel continues to speculate. “That would mean you would need to close I-10 and I-40, and quite a few more northern east-to-west routes, as well. There are plenty of isolated oil wells along ten and forty, too. Hand me a Coke, Bae?”

Until now, Sue has found little more than Latino music on the radio and reaches behind her seat into the cooler.

Weasel adds, “I’m just saying, winter is coming. It won’t be but about a month or so until the weather in the north forces most California-to-New York truckers to primarily run the southern routes. Hypothetically, if we had to close just the three big east-west roads in Texas, the entire country would suffer the cost. Hypothetically, I mean.”

Dismissively, Sue says, “Oh, I don’t want to even think about

that.”

“I know.”

“Break, two seven.” Foot’s voice belches from the CB.

“Yes, sir, Foot.”

“There’s a semi with a hair up his ass on my donkey. He’s in a hurry to get around us.”

“OK, I’ll edge the shoulder. Let him through.”

“Watch him, Weasel. I think this guy’s drunk or sleepy. He’s all over the road.”

“Ten-four.” Weasel checks his side view mirrors and sees headlights tipping a ‘pass signal’ from behind Foot’s RV. “Ease back some and let him in between us. We’ve got oncoming traffic about two miles ahead.”

Foot squelches, “‘Ite.”

“Hypothetically, that wouldn’t put the entire nation into a standstill.” Sue continues.

“No, but it would run up expenses and send a lot of cash flow in terms of fuel money to locals along I-70 and I-80. That alone would alter the winter economy some.”

“Ok, but thinking like a terrorist, as you sometimes do, wouldn’t you want to close them all at the same time? How is doing just one closure on I-20 going to do you any good?”

“Suppose it was a premature blowout? What if this oil well went off early, or out of sequence? That might explain why the military is so involved in our little Sandhills State Park bonfire.”

Again, Foot interrupts the conversation, “He’s got a flat tire on the inside dual on that trailer. The logo on the side says ‘Oil Field Logistics, *OFL*’ but the driver looks like he’s from Mexico.”

US 285 is a good stretch of almost straight, flat road. Although it is only two lanes, north and south, it has plenty of shoulder on either side and is very well maintained in Texas. With the exception of

power lines bordering the west and ditches with dilapidated barbed wire fences along either side, the road is one continuous span of nothing but oil wells, scrub brush, beach-like sand, jack rabbits, and rattlesnakes.

There is unobstructed visibility up and down the road as far as the eye can see. Often locals travel this stretch of highway at over ninety to a hundred miles per hour. The route is heavily traveled by truckers, and in the vacation months, tourists visiting Carlsbad Caverns National Park.

The semi wig-wags into position between Foot and Weasel and again begins to tip its headlights on and off.

Weasel taps his CB mic. "This prick is in a real hurry, ain't he?"

"Yup. Watch him. He ain't right, I'm telling you." Foot is stern.

As soon as the two cars of southbound traffic pass, the semi driver weaves into the oncoming lane and gasses on his diesel engine, puffing a large cloud of smoke behind him.

"His truck is maintained like a vehicle from Mexico, for sure." Weasel cracks the mic sarcastically.

"Of course, he could be hauling supplies for our rig, you know." Foot chatters back. "*OFL* is our transporter most of the time."

"He's probably just running out of time on his log books and wants to beat the clock across the scales in New Mexico. We're only about fifty miles from Carlsbad, right now. If he'd wait just five more minutes, we'll be pulling off this road, and he can have all of it."

Foot remark, "That, or he wants to get past the weigh station before dark. He's missing a couple of side markers and a tail light when he flashes those lights."

"Go nineteen," Weasel says, reaching to switch his CB channel.

"Break, nineteen. *OFL*, you got a rush load?" Weasel's tone is friendly. "Do you know you have a couple of lights out? There are chicken coops just forty miles ahead?"

There's no reply.

"OFL, you got a copy?"

Without any response, the semi passes, gaining speed as it overcomes the slow moving 2-RV caravan.

"Go, two-seven, Foot." Switching his radio back, Weasel remarks, "You've got that guy pegged, Foot. He ain't from around here."

Just as the semi driver puts a comfortable distance between himself and Weasel, a second rear tire on the trailer shreds and explodes into a cloud of rubber and road grime across Weasel's windshield. "Brake check! He's backin' down, Foot. Hold your horses."

"Oh God!" Sue lets out a shriek and shields her face with both arms as the debris hits and the AC ventilation is filled with the smell of burning rubber.

When the semi-driver taps his brakes, the truck is erratically yanked onto the shoulder, at Sand Bend Draw. The tractor's driver tires lose their grip and lock up, skiing in the sand. The trailer, seemingly with a mind of its own, then jack-knives aimlessly directly in front of Weasel and Sue. Instantly, the OFL rig is out of control, bouncing from one side of the road to another. The sideways motion and forward speed conspire to catapult the cab of the truck into the dry roadside drainage ditch. It's all she can take and the rig rolls, flipping the trailer on its side, and causing it to bounce violently across the desert in an angry dust cloud.

Slamming to the ground, twisting the frame, the trailer's rear doors swing open. At first, there doesn't appear to be anything inside.

Weasel keys his CB, "Foot, you got a signal on your cell phone? Call 911, this guy is down for the count.

Weasel slides his Winnebago to a halt just behind the overturned semi. "What the fuck?"

From out of the darkness inside the overturned, bent trailer, the dust settles on four or five men who stagger from the wreckage, bleeding and broken.

“Oh, this ain’t good.” Sue reaches for her purse and produces a pistol in anticipation of something even more unexpected.

The number of emerging victims multiplies as Foot pulls to the roadside behind Weasel. The trailer occupants slowly gather their senses and without speaking to each other run, scattering in every direction, away from the crash.

Sue shrills in shock, “Those guys are illegal Mexicans!”

“Foot, stay in your truck. These may not be friendlies. Sue, have we got all the doors locked?”

The Mexicans all appear to have no desire to make contact with anyone. They head for the bushes on both sides of the road as fast as they can move.

“My cell phone is all swole up like a pregnant mama toad. The battery must be too hot. I think I need to shut her down. Have you got any bars?”

Weasel glances toward Sue. She’s already on it. She snaps two photos on her iPhone and begins to rapidly navigate her screen. “Send.”

“DPS, text?”

“Yup, they already have a geo-location and a picture of the license plate.”

“OK, stay inside. I’m gonna see if there is anyone who needs an ambulance.”

“Damn it, Dick Werner, don’t you leave me here alone.”

“Stay here and protect Smiley and the truck. Don’t shoot anybody, OK?”

“Foot, stay put. Give me a minute to check this out, Roger?”

“Roger, that. I don’t want to see any of this, anyway. Can’t we

just go around and ease on up the road?”

“Stay put. I’ll be right back.”

“OK, but you better not get any of *my* blood on *your* hands.”

“Roger, that.”

Most people would look into the trailer first. Weasel is not most Texans or most people. There is a bad smell coming from the trailer and the cab is electrically sparking so Weasel paces to the front of the downed truck.

From the passenger seat of the Winnebago, Sue watches the rippling dust cloud settle away from the dark opening of the bent trailer doors. A five-gallon plastic paint bucket flies from the opening onto the highway shoulder, followed by another and another. Each bucket bounces onto the ground and rolls to a stop, oozing a brownish solution, contrasting boldly against the sun-bleached white soil. Sue’s first thought is that the paint cans must have been filled with some type of oil based product which has been spilled inside the transport van.

Dazed and confused, three very young teenaged girls stumble from the wreckage and emerge into the waning daylight. Clutching each other loosely in despair and desperation the trio is stunned into submission by the sun’s glare from the Winnebago windshield. That glare prevents the teenagers from seeing Sue, much the same way a two-way mirror prevents observation from one side, but not the other. It quickly becomes obvious to Sue that these three girls are part of a larger group of women when two of them turn back to shout names into the darkness, “Anna—Maria—Esmerelda?”

The third girl crumples, collapsing into the bar ditch on the east side of the roadway. Her right temple is bleeding and her hair is saturated in the same dark brown ooze from the paint cans.

A constant series of groans and coughs are the only sounds from inside the trailer.

Weasel reaches the front and sees the cab of the truck is missing

its windshield. Glass is strewn all over the highway and southbound traffic is beginning to shoulder around the wreck. Weasel motions one of the oncoming drivers to the shoulder, but the pickup with three occupants swerves to skirt him and proceeds to hastily continue southbound on 285. Four or five other vehicles, including one FedEx truck, take the same evasive action to go around the accident and do not stop. Fuel from the overturned diesel tanks is gurgling onto the roadway and Weasel sidesteps, careful so as not to get any on him or his work boots.

The truck is totaled. Nothing inside the vehicle is left in its right place. A shredded Styrofoam cooler of homemade tamales is scattered across the roadway along with a broken bottle of tequila and a half dozen empty cans of Dos Equis beer. The two occupants inside the cab are lifeless and mangled beyond recognition. One of the bodies is hanging from the windshield opening like a discarded rag doll. The other, apparently the driver, is missing a left arm and one side of his face and head. The gruesome discovery is overshadowed only by the impending danger of a continued series of sparks discharging from the contorted dashboard.

Weasel becomes keenly aware of the danger of explosion and fire. He hustles to the battery side-box and snaps the bungee cords to reveal the electrical power source. His instincts ignore the constant dripping of fuel onto the ground and he blindly reaches his bare hand in between the truck frame and body to snatch the positive cable connection from the first poll in the series of four batteries. Adrenaline has given him a surge of power that allows him to remove the loosely anchored cable without the benefit of any other tools. The sparking ceases inside the cab and for a moment the desert is silent; only to be sharply interrupted by a persistent banging sound coming from inside the trailer.

Just as one immediate danger seems averted, gunshots begin popping from the rear of the truck. “Bap, bap, bap!”

With his heart pounding in his chest, Weasel darts toward the

direction of Sue and the Winnebago. A scent of gunpowder fills his nostrils and then fades into the breeze to only be replaced with the stench of raw sewage.

“Oh, God, what’s that horrid smell?” Sue is holding a marksman stance outside the RV, gun drawn, with her face buried in her shoulder sleeve.

The three girls who had been gathering alongside the wreck are now straddling the roadside wire fence, screaming, and heading full-steam into the desert. In the ditch where they had been settling, a headless eight-foot rattlesnake writhes in a death roll, rattles singing wildly in the early dusk and dust.

“Get back in the truck, Sue! I said don’t shoot anybody!”

“They were about to be snake bit. I just killed that big-assed snake, you moron.”

“Oh, God, that smell is awful,” Weasel says. “Please, get back in the truck and lock the doors, Bae.”

Weasel again peers into the darkness of the trailer, attempting to see what is making the banging sound inside. As his eyes squint, he instinctively retreats to the RV in a knee-jerk response to something he sees emerging from the transport interior.

Slamming his door and locking it in one motion, Weasel orders Sue, “Down!” He grabs the CB microphone. “They’ve got guns, Foot! Let’s get the hell out of here!”

Engines still running, simultaneously Weasel and Foot shift their transmissions to drive and spin out into rubbernecking oncoming traffic. Wheel’s rig sprays gravel and sand as both RVs gather speed slowly.

The blowing dust shadows the faces of four men who step one-by-one from the wreckage wearing desert camouflage fatigues. They are brandishing handguns and carrying assault rifles strapped to their backpacks. The lead man kicks dirt into Weasel’s windshield with his army surplus boot and shouts, “Bastard! Alto—Stop!”

Seemingly, many seconds pass while the Weasel's RV gains enough momentum to merge onto the roadway and maneuver around the downed semi. While passing the gunmen, Sue maintains aim on the dark-skinned foursome with her own gun.

As Weasel powers on the gas Sue takes notice of one man's broken arm, a second man's bloodied forehead, and a small tattoo on the third man's right hand between the forefinger and thumb. The falling sun glints from her side-view mirror, reflecting on the man's hand, giving her a clear view of the unmistakable outline of the tattoo. The ink depicts a menacing blue scorpion.

"These guys aren't here for hunting season," Sue says.

Weasel radios, "Foot, don't stop, come on around these guys, man."

"Don't give it another thought, Weasel. I'm sticking to your mud flaps like stink on skunk."

Shaking road grime and sand from their hair and wiping brown ooze from their faces, the four armed gunmen jump the fence and begin to sprint eastward toward the Pecos River.

For several moments, none in the Comanche crew speaks. Absorbing the scene that they've just witnessed takes a human a measurable amount of mental processing time. The rapid, tragic events are mind boggling.

"That's not a truckload of oil field supplies." Foot is the first to break the silence on the CB.

"No, sir. And that stuff in those paint cans was not oil."

"What the hell was that?"

"Looked to me like 'human trafficking,'" Weasel responds.

"Breaker, two-seven." It's a distant radio call.

Weasel squawks back, "Marlboro, is that you, son?"

"Yup, they let me and Pad go. We're about five miles behind you. Where's our cut-off?"

“Marlboro, you and Pad are about to run up on a truck wreck. Don’t stop, it’s a coyote wagon. There are people in the back with guns. We’ve called the DPS—just watch for other traffic and try to get around it as fast as you can. Or stop and stay where you are and wait for the highway to get cleared.”

“I see it. We’re on top of it. We’re coming around. Pad, heads up, my friend. We can pass on the left; let’s do it.”

No sooner than Pad responds, “Roger that,” A fifth armed gunman emerges from the rear of the wreck and steps into the middle of the available roadway to take aim at Marlboro’s approaching truck with an AR-15 semi-automatic weapon.

Puzzled, Marlboro squawks, “There’s a guy who wants us to stop. He looks like military.”

“He’s not military, Marlboro. I’m telling you to go around.”

Marlboro squawks to Pad’s van, “He doesn’t have any markings on his uniform, Pad. I’m not stopping.”

Having slowed to about thirty-five miles per hour, Marlboro gasses on his accelerator, ducks behind his dash, and veers left, away from the gunman. The sun flashes across his windshield and doing so, blinds the rifleman with a spray of light causing him to sidestep the oncoming caravan and stumble. Catching himself with the butt of his gun, his knee hits the ground as his head is lurched forward, directly into Marlboro’s right-side, wrap-around bumper grille guard. The result is instant death for the man, who tumbles four times, and crumples into a puddle of the glistening dark brown ooze that continues to drain from the truck onto the road.

“Damn it, man, you hit him,” Pad squelches.

“Don’t stop, he had an assault rifle, Pad. He wanted to stop us. He ain’t getting into my truck, buddy.”

“I don’t think he’ll be getting into anybody’s truck. That guy is hamburger meat, Mr. Marlboro.”

“He fucked with the wrong desert rat, my friend. What was I supposed to do, let him shoot us? I didn’t mean to hit him, I swear. I just meant to go around. He tripped on his own shoelaces, Pad. Don’t take any chances. Don’t slow down.”

“I’m with you guys. I am not seeing anything.”

“Marlboro, our right turn is just ahead, about two miles. I’ve got a gate key. I’ll pull in and let you guys through. Go to the back of the property, Foot. It’s about five miles up in there to the river. Just stay on the main dirt road. You’ll see the RV pads just in front of the water tank.”

Foot responds, “I’m beginning to think this job is going to be much crappier than we’ve planned for.”

“You got that right; in more ways than one. That’s what was in those paint cans. They were using those buckets as latrines. There must have been fifty to sixty human beings in that van.”

Sue shudders, “Oh, God, help them.”

“I’m turning in, Foot. You guys make a right, here, and shoot on in.”

Marlboro squelches, “Two wrongs don’t make a right.”

Pad replies, “Three lefts make a right. Go past the turn and then make three lefts.”

Marlboro barks, “Now’s not the time to be funny, man.”



The mundane process of setting up work camp is unusually silent tonight. The crew has done this ritual time and time again; but, on this flickering, incandescent sunset evening, the chores of leveling, ‘un-zipping’ RV slides, making plumbing hook-ups, and turning on the lights is overshadowed by the events of the day. The guys help each other with their respective camper idiosyncrasies, but their usual incessant chatter is replaced with little more between them other than,

“I got that” or “Here, let me help.” Most notably, there is a complete lack of jabbing, joking, and laughter. They appear to operate independently, yet in-sync, on autopilot. They’ve set camp dozens of times before, however, tonight is distinctly different.

Foot does comment, “This place looks familiar.”

“We were here last year.” Marlboro points, “They capped that hole over there after we dug it at the end of last summer. Remember, we camped on Red Bluff Reservoir that time.”

This camp borders the Pecos River about five miles east of the main road. To call the Pecos a river is a bit of a misnomer. The Pecos, most of the time, is little more than a glorified drainage ditch that you can easily step across unless there’s a flood in the Guadalupe Mountains or upstream. Of course, the land here is flat. The mountains are over fifty miles to the northwest. With little grade in the terrain on this section of the Trans-Pecos River-Basin plain, the river switches back against itself countless times, zig-zagging drunkenly toward the Rio Grande and the Mexican border. From the town of Pecos to Orla, via US 285, the relatively straight route is about forty miles, but by river, it’s well over fifty miles.

There have been times of historic flooding on the Pecos, but they’re rare. When they do occur, like when a tropical storm comes up from the Gulf Coast, the river only gets a few feet deep, but it can easily become a mile or more wide, and its natural meandering across the land becomes more like a buzzing beeline south. The rest of the time, for decades at a time, the only wide spot in the river’s trickle to Del Rio is the Red Bluff Reservoir. The dam is just minutes south of the New Mexico state line and upstream about five miles from this new Comanche Drilling Company camp.

The mostly earthen reservoir dam creates a shallow, murky little lake, so fishing the stocked stripers isn’t very palatable. People still fish it, but most Red Bluff Lake visits are from short-stay tourists between Carlsbad Caverns and El Paso or Dallas.

The Comanche grouping of living quarters on the company's properties is traditional. From above it looks like the trailers are set out in a chevron or palm leaf positioning. Trailers on the right of the common area are headed in toward the middle, while trailers on the left side are driven out from the middle. This puts everyone's RV "passenger-side" front door facing a central gathering area. This common middle area is a bit of an open-air communal activity center for cooking, entertaining, and hanging out. It's not quite a circling of the wagons like in the old west, but it's reminiscent of the same practice.

At dinner, quickly made from a re-warmed, barely-touched lunch, Sue, who has never been part of the campsite ritual before tonight, finally speaks openly to the group. "So—what just happened today?"

"What 'what?'" Foot is munching a white bread and mustard sausage wrap while kicking sand around a small camp fire he has been stoking.

In denim shorts, a t-shirt, and wearing a backward snapback Comanche Drilling ball cap, Sue uneasily presses forward with her probing thought. "I'm not naive; I know that truck wasn't full of oil field workers."

The group members ponder the question, but none of them seems to want to address the topic.

"What if some of those guys with guns follow the river to where we are now?" Sue is more direct. "What if they find our camp?"

After another long pause, Weasel makes the point. "They probably don't want to have anything to do with us. They wouldn't want anyone to know where they are."

Marlboro continues the discussion, "I think most of those people were wetbacks, just wanting to get well into the U.S. from Mexico. I would imagine that those guys would want to get to a town as quickly as possible, so they can try to blend in with the general population."

Sue is not convinced. “But what about the guys with guns? Those were not your standard illegal immigrants. What about them? Who do you think they were?”

“I’m no expert, by any means, but if I were a foreign terrorist wanting to get into the states, I can’t imagine a better method for entry than with a human smuggling outfit from Mexico.”

Pad injects a thought that the group finds hard to swallow. “I have heard that if you have five thousand dollars, there is always a coyote in Mexico who will help you cross the Rio Grande.”

“That’s not a very comforting thought, Pad.” Sue pokes a stick at the fire. “Who would be wearing camo gear and packing weapons, on a northbound truck, other than a group of militants or terrorists?”

Weasel takes the question, “That was my first thought. Nobody outfits themselves that way. Most illegals dress like Texans or New Mexico farm workers and initially operate from a half-way house in a sizable town. Think about it, if you bring seventy or eighty people into a small town or isolated area, it’s kind of hard to hide them from ICE. After all, ICE is the US Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement division, and not playin’ around.”

Foot notes, “Obviously, they didn’t plan to be scattered out here, across the desert. More than likely they were headed for Roswell or Clovis. It’s still late hatch-pepper-harvest time. They would be looking for work.”

Sue raises another question. “Those guys with guns may have planned to get off the truck in another place—but, what about those girls? They didn’t look like farm workers either.”

“I’m betting the girls were headed to Las Vegas,” Weasel says. “Just about the right age to make a hustler a long-term load of cash.”

Marlboro adds, “Yeah, but out here in the middle of nowhere, all of them are exposed. The border patrol has forward-looking infrared thermal imaging, FLIR cameras on all their helicopters. People

moving across the desert, even in the dark of night, can be seen a mile away. Grouped up or individually, they are doomed to get spotted out here. I'll bet most of them don't make it to the morning, without getting caught."

"I don't know, Marlboro. They scattered in every direction, like rats from a sinking ship." Weasel thinks aloud, "The border patrol or the Immigration and Naturalization Service will have a lot of territory to cover. In just a couple of hours, they could have dispersed across several miles. Plus, there is no telling how long it will take for authorities to get to the wreck site. We haven't seen any helicopters yet."

Pad speculates. "I think Miss Sue may have a very good point. We are only eight to ten miles from where the wreck is. Those people, who headed east, would have come to the river by now. They are probably moving north or south along the river bank."

Foot remarks, "Those guys with the automatic weapons seemed better prepared than the others. They might have adequate supplies in their backpacks to live out here for days if they don't get caught."

"So, yeah! What if we just happen to be on their path to freedom and they perceive us to be a threat?" Sue directs her question to Weasel.

"That's a lot of 'ifs,' don't you think?"

"Not really. Not to my mind." Sue takes her cell phone from her pocket. "I tried to get a signal about an hour ago, but haven't had any bars since we left the main road. Do any of you guys have cell service?"

Foot says, "I've got zero bars, too. Of course, those 'terrorists,' if that's what they are, won't know if we have any communication or not."

"That's why they won't want to confront us. They won't have any desire to be seen by us." Weasel is insistent.

In the distant southwest, a spotlight appears in the sky, just a few

hundred feet above the horizon. The circular, hovering motion of the craft is centered over where the transport truck went off the road.

Foot comments, “Looks like ICE is already on the job. Our worries may be unfounded, but nevertheless, I say, let’s keep a good fire going and a lot of lights on all night. That will discourage any visitors, including snakes and packs of wild dogs.

“Maybe one of us should stand guard. We could take shifts. I’ve got a gun of my own.”

Marlboro laughs uncomfortably. “Unfortunately sir, your little ole’ pea shooter, twenty-two caliber, single-shot rifle is no match for an AR-15 semi-automatic with a night scope.”

Pad agrees, “Mr. Foot, you may scare away a few hungry dogs with your looks alone, but you have to admit that it is not a comfort for Miss Sue.”

“I’ve got a thirty-ought-six,” Marlboro says.

“I’ve got a twelve-gauge, without a plug. I can hold six shells at a time. Sue has her forty-five.” Weasel rises from his cooler seat and peers into the night sky to get a better view of the helicopter.

The chopper is soon joined by a second spotlight. Both helicopters make tight circles above the crash site.

“This is crazy talk, guys,” Marlboro says. “Even if we had military grade weapons, we probably don’t want to have to use them. After all, we’re out here in plain sight. That small militia has the advantage of cover and the ability to move around.”

Everyone in the Comanche crew has now risen from their crouched seats to visually follow the choppers. The circles in the sky gradually, systematically, ever slowly widen.

Weasel’s dog, Smiley is invigorated by the night air and the fresh scents of the new camp site. He noses around the RVs and expresses a renewed excitement in his behavior, a contrast to his lethargy of earlier in the heat of the day. Seeming to understand the disturbing

situation, Smiley nuzzles Sue's leg with a wet snout.

"Smiley won't let anyone get near us. Will you, Smiler?" Weasel pats Smiley's hip and the dog's entire hind-end wags.

Weasel tells Pad, "Smiley was a service dog for years at Houston Hobby Airport. I rescued him from a doomed retirement in a shelter when he got hip dysplasia. He can smell gunpowder in a tin can, wrapped in cellophane, dipped in wax, and boxed in coffee. He'll let us know if someone is coming."

Smiley knows Weasel is talking about him and lowers his nose to the soles of Weasel's boots.

"Smiley is a good guard dog. Ain't you boy?"

"I'd feel a lot better if Smiley had an RPG grenade launcher on his hip, instead of dysplasia and a wet nose." Sue wipes dog snot from her leg with a paper napkin and tosses it, along with her dinnerware into the fire. "I've got a bad feeling they're out there somewhere nearby—probably getting hungry and thirsty."



The rising of a new moon casts a faint glimmer on the trickling Pecos River between the Comanche drill-site and the coyote truck wreck. Three young female illegals stoop to cup the almost stagnant water into their hands for a long drink. They are the same three teenaged girls who ran from the overturned trailer earlier in the evening. Parched, they gasp loudly as they slurp the murky primordial desert soup.

"It stinks," says one of the girls.

"It smells a lot better than those damned truck drivers," the second girl comments.

"Truck drivers?" The third adds, "You mean those idiot asses that almost killed us?"

"They massacred over half the people in that truck back there. If

you can call that rattle-trap a truck—they were clearly not drivers. They knew less about a truck than I do. That one who raped me had no clue the diesel on his pants was causing the rash on his junk.”

“Rash? You better hope that was a diesel rash,” snarks the first young woman.

“You girls talk too much.”

The teenagers are surprised by the sudden approach of the four militia-clad gunmen from the truck.

The first girl shines a pin-light from a keychain in the direction of the men.

“Put that light out, you fool,” one guy says. “Those helicopters can see a flashlight across ten miles.”

“You scared me.” The girl douses the light.

“When those choppers get closer, and they will, you’re gonna get real scared, cutie. Do any of you have blankets or something you can hide under?”

“No, everything we brought with us is in these three bags; mostly snacks and toilet tissue. We were supposed to be given new clothes and other necessities when we got to Boulder City, Nevada, tomorrow night.”

“Well, we better not hang around here, out in the open for long. We need to find something we can hide under when that search party arrives. We’ve got Mylar thermal blankets for us, but they’re barely big enough to cover one man each. Even in the dark, the border patrol can see our body heat, especially if we’re on the move along the river or in the open desert.”

The man doing the talking steps forward to offer his hand to one of the girls, kneeling beside the stream. His blue scorpion tattoo is outlined in the faint moonlight. “Isn’t your name Marla? Aren’t you from Honduras?”

“Yes, that’s me.” She stands, without taking his extended reach.

Having spotted something or someone below, one of the helicopters settles to the desert floor about two miles away.

“You kids stick with us. I’m Hector,” he says, forcing a smile. “If I say run, run. Don’t ask any questions. If I say take cover, get your butts under a cactus. *Comprende?*”

Marla nods.

“I’ve got GPS. From what I can tell, when we crashed we were about ten miles south of where the truck was planned to stop and let us out, just before entering New Mexico. If we can make that hike without being discovered, there are two jeeps there that have been stashed for us to use on our mission. After that, we should be able to get you *señoritas* into town where you can blend in some.”

Marla asks, “Just what is your mission, Mr. Hector?”

“You don’t need to know that information, Miss Marla.”

“So, are you helping us, or taking us as hostages?”

“Remember, no questions—unless you want to be left behind as bait for those choppers, or desert rats and vultures. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes sir, very clear.”



“One thing seems pretty clear to me.” With a glum, despondent expression Marlboro puffs his cigarette and then makes a statement that silences the entire Comanche crew.

“We’re at war. They haven’t let us know yet; the government ain’t telling us anything, but the war on terrorism has come here, to Texas. I may have just killed the first guy. The first enemy to die on our own soil in the war on ISIS is my kill. And we thought all those extremist bastards were a world away in the Mideast. How ironic, I fought and never fired a shot in Kuwait. Here at home is where I end up with blood on my hands.”

“Marlboro, you don’t know if you killed that guy. You may have just knocked him down.”

Pad picks up where Sue has stopped speaking. “That’s right, Marlboro. Besides he fell into the path of your truck, you did not set out to run over him.”

“You know as well as I do, Pad; those army guys back at Sandhills Park weren’t there for a picnic or just some average oil well fire. They were there, ready for war. There’s something going on, and the government isn’t telling us that we’re in the middle of it.”

“Marlboro, settle down. You’re stressed out and exaggerating just a little—don’t you think, man?” Weasel stretches his back and legs. “We’re all a little on edge, man. Don’t take it wrong.”

Pad says, “Mr. Marlboro is right about one thing, Weasel. He said the army isn’t in Monahans for just some average oil well fire.

“When we were arrested, we could hear all of their radio conversations. I can say for sure that they were organizing themselves for something more than a well blowout. It sounded to me like they were preparing to address an enemy on multiple fronts. Not just in Monahans State Park.”

“Not you too, Pad. I expect a trained soldier like Marlboro to think and maybe talk in war terms, but you don’t have any reason to.”

“I’m just saying, I heard what I heard. Those guys in helicopters and all those government cars were serious about something other than a natural gas fire, and they were spreading out in every direction.”

“So, devil’s advocate,” Foot speaks up, “what if we are being attacked from several angles? What the heck can we do about it, other than turn and run? We know for sure that there are several guys with guns between us and that truck wreck. If they decide to visit this camp and draw down on someone, I won’t have any problem firing the first shot, but it might be smarter to just go back into town for the evening. Since we don’t have cell phones and the TV isn’t saying anything, we

could just come back in the morning when we can talk to someone at the company and find out what they think we should be doing.”

“You’ve got a good point, Foot,” Weasel takes a plate of ribs from the grill he’s been tending. “There is something odd about that fire and this whole situation.

“This morning the news said that oil-well fire would be blown out at noon. From that orange glow over the horizon, it looks to me like it’s still burning. Maybe we should think about adjusting our plans, too. Of course, there probably isn’t a hotel room for miles around, since they shut down the freeway.”

“What if we just go back toward the highway and call someone as soon as we get a cell phone signal?” Sue asks.

Weasel interrupts, “Who are we going to call? We could call Wichita, but he knows less about all that’s been going on than we do. The company probably knows less than he does. Besides, it’s Sunday night, there’s nobody at the company to call unless you know someone’s home phone.”

Marlboro loads a plate of his own. “These ribs look good, Weasel. They haven’t dried out as much as you thought they would.”

“Everyone, grab some,” Weasel says. “It’s all self-service tonight. Fight for your own right. Sue?”

The group’s conversation is disturbed by the approaching whir of an airplane drone. With markings of the U.S. Army, the six-foot wingspan passes overhead, close enough to be hit with a rock if the crew had half-a-mind to throw one.

“Recon,” Marlboro says.

“Yeah, they’re looking for those illegal immigrants from the truck,” Foot comments. “But, U.S. Army—not border patrol or ICE? Why the hell is the Army all over the place out here?”

Before any further speculation can be made by any more of the group members, headlights appear on the road into the camp.

Rounding the final turn toward the crew are two four-wheel all-terrain vehicles from Immigration. Like deer in the headlights, the team stands frozen as the ATVs approach and belt out a caution.

“Put your hands above your heads.” The voice comes from a bullhorn behind the lights. “This is the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Remain where you are and keep your hands in the air.”

Marlboro jokes, “Damn, twice in the same day. I’m on a roll for getting arrested today, men.”

“Keep quiet, Marlboro. Let’s hear what they’ve got to say.” By the tone of his voice, Marlboro knows Weasel isn’t kidding.

“We’re not armed. We’re American citizens. We’re from Comanche Drilling, out of Midland.”

“It’s beginning to sound like a broken record,” Marlboro smirks.

“Marlboro, shut up, man.”

Four men step into the light. Two are Army. Two are ICE.

“Do you all have identification? We need to see them all.”

“Yes sir, we’re here for a drilling operation for the next two weeks. I’m Dick Werner and we are all approved to be here on company property. What’s the problem, officers?”

“We have reason to believe there may be armed illegal aliens in this area, and we’re checking out everyone. Have you seen or heard anything out of the ordinary this evening?”

“Other than that drone that just blew by, the only thing moving out here is the wind, men.”

“We’re asking everyone to shelter-in-place and remain inside for the time being. Do you have provisions to comply with that recommendation, Mr. Werner?”

“Yes sir, we do. As a matter of fact, we’ve got food enough for you and your men, if you’re so inclined. Are you hungry?”

“That won’t be necessary, but it is important that you take the

appropriate precautions to maintain your own security and well-being.”

“Should we prepare to leave?”

“Again, we ask that you go inside and stay there, for the time being.”

“What if we do see something, sir? We won’t have a company land line out here until tomorrow and all our cell phones are out of range.”

“We will be flying in this area for the remainder of the night. If anything bigger than a jackrabbit tries to hop around in this desert, we’ll see it. We’ve got six night-vision drones, two helicopters with infrared imaging, and more than two-dozen men on ATVs and horseback all along this river. Do you have any road flares?”

“Yes, sir. We’ve got some, and a flare gun.”

“Perfect. If you see or hear something, shoot up a flare or just throw one next to your campfire, here. That will get our attention.”

“What if we see someone with a gun?”

“Have you got guns yourselves?”

“Nothing more than a snake or coyote popper.”

“Use a flare. We’ll be watching. Chances are our illegals are lost and headed in some other direction, but we’re not going anywhere, we’ll be watching until they’re all brought in.”

Sue says, “No offense, sir, but that’s it? We’re stuck out here with possible gunmen and all you have to offer is ‘light a flare, we’ll be watching?’”

“At least your company has plenty of perimeter lighting. Illegals don’t usually want to be seen, so chances of them coming close to here are slim. Do you guys consider these RVs to be your homes?”

Weasel answers, “Well, for the time being, yes sir, that’s pretty much what we call them, home away from home.”

“Well, I can’t tell you to shoot anyone, but you have every right

in Texas to defend yourselves and protect your homes from threat.”

The officers re-mount their ATVs and rev the engines to move along. “Really though, fire off a flare. Don’t get into anything yourself, if you can avoid it. We are all over this area, all the way to the horizon. Pop off a flare and we’ll be here fast enough to handle anything before it happens.”

The Army drone does another fly-by, in the opposite direction.

“We’ll be watching.”

Marlboro asks, “By the way, how did you guys get inside the gate?”

“We have a master key; it’s called a bolt cutter with federal authority, son. If you don’t want your locks cut, I suggest you wait for an ‘all clear announcement’ from us before you replace them.”

“Jackasses,” Foot mutters. “Give little people a little power, and it goes straight to their ugly, little heads.”

CHAPTER 6: LONG DAY BEFORE DAWN



Weasel shrugs, “Okay boys, this party’s over, once again. Call in Willie Nelson to sing his song.

“Sue, let Smiley out for a pee, I’m going to arrange these briskets to the side for a low, slow smoke. They never did get a full twelve hours cooking time today.

“I want to get inside to watch the late news anyway.”

Weasel starts singing, “Turn out the lights, the party’s over.

“You guys need anything? Get all those ribs and the rest of the burgers and sausage. I’m tired of reheating them. We can choose from brisket or chicken for lunch and dinner, the rest of the week.”

Pad questions, “I thought we were planning to eat all of that chicken in Monahans before we got out here to the drill site? Mr. Wichita would not be happy that we have brought chicken bones with us.”

“I’m not superstitious like Wichita.” Weasel snaps back, “Besides, we’re not going to take any chicken up onto the drilling rig itself when it gets out here tomorrow, so don’t worry about it, Pad. That’s just plain silliness anyway.”

“The way things have been going from the start today, we are seeming to be needing all of the good luck we can get on this job.”

Pad smiles.

Thirty yards from where the crew has circled-the-wagons a flat-bed trailer is parked with a load of pipe. It's the kind of trailer with dual axles that could be pulled behind any standard pick-up truck or SUV. The pipe is bundled as it would be when shipped from overseas in a container. One hundred pipes, ten rows of ten, thirty feet long, steel strapped, with cribbing between each row to keep them from shifting in transit. Each pipe is capped on both ends with a plastic cover to prevent road grime from getting inside during ground transportation. Each pipe is stamped as, "Six-and-one-half inches, Made in South Korea" and the entire bundle is spray painted with a large "H" symbol on all sides.

When Sue allows Smiley to roam outside, he immediately lifts his snout to the wind and takes in a good whiff of Pecos River night air. He pauses for a long moment and then circles the Winnebago with his nose to the ground, meticulously surveying his new surroundings.

"Thanks, Sue, I'll take care of getting the coolers inside. Do you mind helping with this other small stuff?"

"No, it's what I came out here for. I wanted to get a good look at how you guys survive in the desert when you're on these drilling jobs. I'd go nuts out here if there wasn't something for me to do other than reading a book."

"Usually, the guys all pitch in and clean up after ourselves. Normally, we'll sit around for a while afterward and shoot the bull or watch a ball game. Sorry, this trip is turning into something way out of the norm."

"No problem, it's not your fault."

Without gathering the attention of Weasel and Sue, Smiley has taken a leak in several spots and then drawn a bee-line to the load of pipe on the trailer. Sniffing around the rear of the load, Smiley parks his hind-end as if he had been ordered to sit at attention.

The dog goes unnoticed by anyone, but Smiley patiently waits in

his seated position as if expecting someone to give him further instruction.

“Why didn’t you mention to those ICE people that we had seen the men with guns that they are looking for when we saw that truck crash?” Sue asks.

“It seemed to me that they already had as much information as we could give them. I didn’t want to put us into a long, drawn out inquisition.”

“Good idea. We’d probably have ended up answering questions for the rest of the evening. It’s definitely way better that they are out there searching for those guys, rather than getting into our heads all night, for little more info.”

“True dat. We really don’t have anything else we could have offered them.

“Are things cooling down inside?”

“Yup, the AC is working fine.”

“Good, I’ll come inside in a few seconds. I’m ready to stretch out on the couch some.”

“Do you guys need to get “up-and-at-em” before the crack of dawn in the morning?”

“Not tomorrow. The rig won’t get here until around ten. Most of the morning is going to be occupied with receiving equipment. We’ll take in a full load of pipe and other materials and supplies. That should all start around seven or eight a.m.; there will probably be three or four trucks in here before noon.

“We’ll have plenty of time for a good breakfast. Foot greases up a killer batch of ham and eggs and hash browns. You can sleep in all you want.”

“I’ve got a feeling sleep may come at a premium price this evening. After all that’s happened today, I’m going to have a hard time gearing down.”

“That makes five of us. I’ve never seen the whole crew so wound-up. We may get buzzed by helicopters all night, too. I’ll bet that by tomorrow afternoon we’ll all have a hard time keeping our eyes open. Go ahead and get ready for bed. I’ll be in right behind you.”

Weasel continues stoking his fire pit and stares out across the southern sky. Over fifty miles to the southeast, the orange glow from today’s oil-well fire shimmers just below the horizon. At the same time, a helicopter spotlight probes the banks of the river about two miles downstream from his position.

Unaware that he’s being watched, Weasel scans the terrain. Meanwhile, some two hundred yards outside the camp perimeter lighting, the lenses on a pair of binoculars reflect the hidden agenda of a much more sinister stare. The entourage of armed illegals is much closer than Weasel has imagined. He fails to notice the glint from the lens’ reflection, breathes in deeply, and retreats to the camper.

“Smiley, where are you? Come on, boy. Let’s go in.”

From behind the binoculars, Hector motions to his group of gunmen to move forward. The group has become widespread, having placed a distance of twenty to thirty yards between themselves. Three of the men each escort a single female companion. The fourth man scouts alone ahead of them.

While the helicopter moves slowly northward along the river, the gunmen trot rapidly from scrub brush to tumbleweed, to scrub brush, advancing—closing in on a neighboring oil field storage building. The building is nothing more than a shipping container on the ground with a metal halide light nearby for security. But the light is not to be long-lived. The group’s scout tosses a rock and puts an end to the bulb as soon as he is within throwing distance.

Hector says to Marla, “Come on, if we can get inside that can, it probably has enough heat stored from today’s sun to hide our body temperature signatures. Let’s go; double time.”

Stepping inside his RV with Smiley wagging right behind him,

Weasel also fails to notice the security light being broken. He consciously locks the door behind them, something he usually doesn't bother with on work-camp excursions. Subconsciously, Weasel is unusually detached, distracted.

Methodically, he switches on the television and wedges himself into the RV driver's seat. He keys his CB microphone and says, "Radio check. Foot, Pad, Marlboro, you guys got your ears on?"

The answers are delayed and sequential.

"Yup."

"Four."

"Roger."

"Let's keep the channel open tonight, guys. If any of you see or hear something odd, put a shout out."

"This grub is darn good, Weasel man." Foot is smacking his lips as he speaks.

Pad reports, "I am watching the Dallas Fox television news on satellite channel 1582. They say that the Sandhills fire has not yet been extinguished because of lingering natural gas seepage from the ground around the wellhead."

Marlboro sullenly asks, "Anything about the truck wreck?"

"If so, I must have missed it." Pad squelches.

"I'll check out Houston's Channel 13 News at the top of the hour. Their ten o'clock report is usually pretty much up-to-date." Weasel asks the crew, "Everybody got power and water?"

"Four."

"That's a ten, Mr. Weasel."

"I got water and electricity; everything a man could want." Marlboro is audibly low-spirited.

Foot asks, "You still sulking over that jackass on the road, Marlboro?"

“I expect the late news to put out an all-points bulletin for me for killing that guy.”

Pad shows his concern, “Give it no more thought, Mr. Marlboro. You don’t have anything to be worrying about. That man was clearly up to no good, and what happened to him was obviously an accident. You should be feeling no fault in what you have done. He had a gun pointed at you, remember?”

Foot says, “Yeah, Pad is right, Marlboro. Besides, what if that guy actually was a terrorist? That would make you a modern-day hero, big boy.”

“That doesn’t change how it feels. I can’t help thinking I did something way wrong.”

“It’s the age-old question...” Foot continues, “If you could go back in time and the opportunity presented itself, would you kill baby Hitler?”

Marlboro replies, “I don’t think the analogy applies, but no, I wouldn’t do it. I’d rather keep my soul, Foot. I’m Catholic, *thou shalt not kill.*”

“Hell, I sure would. If I had the chance, I’d hold that baby Hitler on the ground with my boot and whittle his head off with a spoon, if that’s all I could find.”

“You have an odd way of trying to make a guy feel better, Footster.” Marlboro makes a sort of short mock yelping sound. “Your legacy will always be under the name of Monster Foot, big man.”

“Got that right, holler back?”

Pad squawks, “Muscle Toe.”

“Shut it, Pad.”

“I am offended by your extended, unnecessary radio chatter, Mr. Senior Colleague,” Pad replies.

Weasel attempts to take control, “All right, you guys, let’s take a break. Tomorrow’s another day.”

Foot is on a roll. “I’m sleeping in my camo underwear tonight. I’ve got one gun under my pillow and a deer rifle by the door.”

“I will put you in my prayers, Mr. Muscle Toe.

“Pad, *you yourself* are someone who is becoming greatly in need of some divine guidance.”

“I’d kill baby Hitler if he pulled a gun on me or a friend,” Weasel remarks.

From the rear of the Winnebago, Sue screeches, “Oh!” as the radio abruptly goes dead and the lights dim out.

“Damn it, man.” Weasel clears the arm of his captain’s chair driver’s seat and hops blindly toward the kitchen’s central breaker box. “It’s just a power outage, dear. It happens out here all the time. I’ll switch on the generator.”

Within seconds power is restored to the RV, but exterior perimeter lighting and the bulk of the desert is left in pitch darkness.

Smiley rises from lazily lounging on the sofa to poke his nose into the crack around the front door. Smiley, aged, is near deaf, but he growls under his breath and whiffs the slight amount of air coming from outside.

“Smell a rat, boy?”

While on generator power, some of the RV’s amenities are limited. For example, you can’t run the microwave oven and the TV and satellite, all three, at the same time. You can run the CB and TV together because the CB, like the inside lighting, uses twelve-volt battery electricity; but you’ll blow a breaker if you try to use a 110-volt hair dryer.

Sue is completing a quick shower, and still naked complains, “I’ll have to go to bed with wet hair! I hate bed head.”

“The power could be back on any minute. Out here electricity wig-wags on the desert. It’s just a temporary surge, I’m sure. Hang tight, I’ll check the meats on the smoker one more time, and take a

look around. Keep your pants off.” He grins in the dim generator lighting.

Weasel opens the door to step outside.

Smiley is now tactically alert and squeezes outside before the door is fully ajar. “Woof.” He makes a beeline to the fence on the south side of the camp.

“Got a coyote, Smiley? Get him, boy.”

With a persistent growling, Smiley stands at hammer-cocked attention on the perimeter.

Weasel casually makes his way to the barbecue pit trailer and as he raises the hinged smoker lid to check his meats, a steady stream of white smoke trickles from the riser stack on top. “What do you see, Smiley?”

Taking a look around, it’s routine for each of the other RVs to begin generating their own power and dimly lighting each of the interiors. The generators are all different. Most use diesel, one uses gasoline, and Pad’s uses propane, but they are all loud. Night-air sounds of frogs on the river and whispers of wind are instantly shrouded in a calamity of machinery, engines, and internal combustion exhaust. Weasel stares into the pitch beyond the fence where Smiley is soldiering.

“C’mon, boy, leave it alone. That coyote is long gone already.” Straining to focus over the perimeter, Weasel catches a glimpse of light glinting from the dimly moonlit razor wire on top of the fence line. Then he sees the electric power line from the road into the camp lying on the ground alongside the fencing about ten yards from where the pipe trailer is parked. Both the fence and the electric line have been cut.

“God damn it!” Finally gazing into the pit to rotate his meats, Weasel is shocked. “Where’s my meat? God damn it, I’m missing a twelve-pound brisket! Smiley, get in here! Someone’s out here!”

Banging down the pit top, Weasel and the dog take the three steps

back into the RV in a single bound and Weasel slams the door behind them.

“Sue, get dressed. Someone’s outside.”

“Did you see them?”

Not initially wanting to tell her everything, Weasel snaps, “No, they took some of our meat, though.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure I had two fully-cooked cow necks on the grill half an hour ago, and now there’s only one.”

“Don’t you think an animal or something could have taken it?”

“There’s no coyote, dog, or rattlesnake in the world that can get up on its hind legs on that trailer and lift the smoker lid long enough to scarf up a twelve-pound brisket. We’ve got a prowler, I’m sure of it. Smiley saw something.”

“What if it’s one of those two-legged coyotes?”

“That may be.” He knows the expression on his face shows more fear than the loss of meat would invoke so Weasel confesses, “The fence and the power line have been cut. Hand me my gun from out of the bedroom closet, honey. Shells are in the bottom drawer.

“Break two-seven. We’ve got a prowler on the site, men.”

There’s no immediate response.

“Check your circuit breakers, boys. Come back?”

Still, there’s radio silence.

“Foot, Marlboro, Pad?”

Nothing.

Loading his shotgun, Weasel spills a box of twelve-gauge shells on the floor. “I’m going to knock on their doors. They need to know.

“Smiley, you come with me!

“Sue, lock this door behind me and don’t open it unless it’s me.”

Grabbing a flashlight from a kitchen drawer, Weasel dashes

through the door with Smiley right on his heel. Beaming the light ahead of them, left and right, left and right, like a storm trooper Weasel pounds first on Foot's 5th-wheel entry.

"Weasel, we've got company. Get your gun!"

Next, he's on to Marlboro and Pad's campers parked on the opposite side of his own and shouting, "Guy's get up." Weasel reiterates, "Wake up fools; we've got a visitor out here."

Above the noise of the four RV generators, a border patrol helicopter whips by southbound overhead. The high-powered spotlight on the chopper's undercarriage swivels to zero in on the storage container in the field a few hundred yards across the fence.



Inside the container, the blue-scorpion-tattooed team leader, Hector addresses his captive audience.

"They're out there. Cover yourselves with thermal blankets and stand perfectly still. *Señoras*, stand next to one of the guys. Stand, don't squat!" He's authoritative, but just loudly whispering, "Stand perfectly still."

The helicopter can be heard loudly above them. Its spotlight scans the exterior of the shipping container, but in the rapid sequence of events to follow, fails to focus directly in on the swaying, universal cam-door lock handle, still swinging from Hector's abrupt entry.

Inside the helicopter, a monitor for the FLIR camera flickers in rhythm with the sounds of the powerful engine and rotor chops above. The image on the screen is in full color, but not natural colors. The ground is black, the cactus and scrub brush appear in yellow, and the container, itself a monolithic elongated cube, appears as bright orange.

Throughout the FLIR image of the cube, the color is orange, with one exception. Near the right-rear container door, a bright-red object

about the size of a twelve-pound brisket glows like hot meat, fresh from the grill. The glow remains static, unmoving.

“What do you think that is?” A voice is heard over the choppers intercom headphones.

“Probably a five-gallon can of water or fuel that got hot in the daytime sun.”

“Roger.”

The patrol swivels and finally spotlights the rear doors of the transport container. The right door handle has stopped moving, but dangles oddly in the opened position, below its locking assembly.

“Those roughnecks should remember to lock their shit up.”

“Probably, there’s nothing other than a half-full water bottle in that box. That whole field seems to be idle. They may be planning to drill there sometime soon, but it’s empty for now.”

“Alright, ease to the south; stay close to the river.”

The chopper spotlight swivels to scan the water’s edge, pivoting from the Comanche campsite on the north, toward the southern horizon. From the pilot’s perspective, a five-hundred-foot elevation above ground, in the southeast, the large plume of fire at the edge of the Sandhills looms ominously. As it did earlier in the day, the flame shoots skyward dramatically with a sudden belch of natural gas. The sky for miles glows a quick blue and then back to orange.

“Wow, did you see that?”

“Cool, huh?”

“I don’t see anything here, though. Let’s take it back to base. We’re done in this quad. I need a coffee.”

“Roger that.”

Inside the container, as the outside whirring and wind-whipping fade away, Hector flicks on a flashlight and lowers the Mylar cover from above his head.

“I have something to eat. Comida—is anyone hungry? I hope you

eat meat. This smells really good.”

At the floor, Hector’s blue-scorpioned hand reaches to gather a backpack, and from it produces Comanche’s still simmering brisket.

“That field next to us is where the trailer is parked with our payload. The pipes with the “H” on them are there. It does not appear that the explosives inside the pipes have been tampered with. Considering the seals have not been broken since being transported from South Korea to the Port of Houston, it seems safe to say that our smuggling operation has been a great success. We are here now and the payload is here now.

“Our jeeps are supposed to be just to the north of where those pipes are, approximately two miles north, along the river, just below the Red Bluff Reservoir. We will wait until morning to move to the east side of the river and then on up to our transportation. Once we have a ride, we won’t be so conspicuous out here. Only two of us will move out. One driver will go north first, and then an hour later, one more will move out.

“That means you girls and two guards will remain here in this container through much of the heat of the day tomorrow. It won’t be comfortable, but certainly not as bad as the ride we had today in the back of that crap truck. All of our supplies appear to be in here, so there should be plenty of water for everyone and even some Gatorade. Also, there are two compost toilets in the corner that should make things more tolerable and much less smelly.”

Hector continues, “This is all good information. We are almost in complete alignment with our destiny with history. Praise Allah, for this refuge, for this sustenance—and for tomorrow. Praise Allah. Eat. Restore your strength.”

“Marla, come sit with me.” Hector’s blue-scorpioned hand pulls Marla by the hair forcing her to twist and stumble backward into his grope. In an obscene gesture, he grinds his groin on her lean buttocks as his right arm restrains her head and neck against his chest. When

she struggles to free herself, he laughs a vulgar laugh and with his left hand fondles her small, firm breasts. She's helpless against his grip.



“You're not very funny. Can you even cook?” In the Mediterranean, the ship's First Mate argues with the mess cook.

In English, the Cook defends himself, “I only meant that children are easily misunderstood.”

The First Mate says, “You said that *my children are daemons.*”

In a broken dialect, the cook, Red Scorpion responds, “I'm sorry, I apologize, sir. My English is bad, at its best.

Returning to Spanish, “I can cook sir, you will see. Tomorrow morning you will enjoy smoked German breakfast sausage, gravy with buttermilk biscuits, and cheese-scrambled eggs smothered in spicy chipotle salsa. You will rise and shine like the sun on Spain in summer.”

“I prefer Italian breakfast sausage. So, I'll wait to be impressed.”

“Yes, sir. Por favor, please forgive my error for how I speak.”

The chef salutes, his red scorpion tattoo fully exposed.

“What's that bandage on your hands?”

“I burned my fingers.” The chef covers his mouth to cough.

“We're watching you, Scorpio.”

The Shipman does not salute but leaves hastily.



“Foot do you have your gas leak detector?”

“I'll get it.”

“Pad, fire off that flare gun. We need to let the authorities know we've had a visitor.”

“Yes, sir.”

Pad pops a flare skyward; however, the helicopter that had circled nearby just minutes ago is now a distant blinking light that is rapidly moving away from camp.

“Do you think they’ll see it?” Marlboro is in his underwear, holding a deer rifle with a scope attached.

“All we can do is try.”

Weasel has diverted his attention to the fence line when Foot returns with the detector. “Foot, use your camera on that downed electrical line. Is it still hot?”

In the oil field, a specialized FLIR infrared camera is a preventative maintenance tool that is used to spot leaks in piping, flanges and other connections. The camera can scan large areas and pinpoint leaks safely, in real time. Dangerous leaks can be monitored from several meters away.

Foot scans the fence line where the electrical wire has fallen. “I can’t tell for sure, but it looks like the line is dead. There’s no excess heat coming from it. It must have blown a transformer upstream when the line was cut.

“Oh, damn, there’s someone out there; two people!”

“Let me see.”

Weasel leans in over Foot’s shoulder to observe two yellow and red figures scampering from right to left on the monitor.

“You’re right, that’s not a pair of wild dogs.”

“Where?” Marlboro aims his gun blindly into the night. “I can’t see a thing.”

“One o’clock, Marlboro, they’re headed our direction.”

Sue opens the Winnebago door a crack and peers out to where the men have gathered under Weasel’s camper canopy. With the door only slightly ajar the barrel of her forty-five is the only thing emerging from inside. “What’s happening?”

“Bae, please stay in the house. We have this under control.”

In the light of the flare above, once again an airplane drone does a fly-over. It veers to the south to scan the field where the two figures are still visible on Foot’s camera. The apparent illegals crouch to the ground as the near-silent Drone whirs over them.

“Light ‘em up, Pad. Put another flare right on top of them.”

Pad is already reloaded and puts a second shot directly above where Foot is searching.

The waning flashing light from the distant helicopter turns abruptly and makes a straightaway toward the crew.

“Oh yeah, they see us.” Marlboro takes a box of Reds and a Bic from the waistband of his shorts and lights a cigarette. “We’ve got ‘em boys! Bastard thieves, eat some ICE shit for your dinner.”

Barely seventeen years old, but street smart, Marla suddenly bursts from inside the storage container, slamming the trailer door on the arm of her captor. For a moment the door reopens, but when the rapidly returning helicopter can be seen from the entrance, the door quickly shuts again.

Marla breaks for the river and makes a mad dash toward the warm stream some fifty yards to the east. She’s small but fast. She dives face-first into the mud and sludge and completely covers herself in the slimy, smelly water.

By a stroke of dumb luck, and for the moment, Marla goes undetected by both Foot and the drone. Gasping for air, only her nose and mouth occasionally surface from the murky algae pool. When the helicopter spotlight finally flashes across the desert darkness and along the irregular river edge it shines within arm’s reach of her hiding place.

Briefly, the helicopter circles between the storage container, the river, and the Comanche work camp. But then abruptly the spotlight turns to where the two warm bodies are producing the red-orange glow on Foot’s FLIR monitor.

The helicopter intercom becomes active, “There they are sir.”

“Roger. Air Command Two to Ground Patrol Six.”

“Ground Six. Go ahead.”

“Six, we have two individuals on foot in quadrant three, sector nine. Are you in proximity? Come back.”

One of the two ATVs that visited the Comanche camp earlier responds, “Affirmative. We have a visual on your location and can be under you in four minutes.”

“Proceed with caution.”

A shrill belch from the helicopter’s undercarriage loudspeaker barks out the announcement, “This is the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement. You are surrounded. Stand and show your hands above your heads.”

The two less-than-stealthy figures rise from the ground slowly and show their hands in the glaring spotlight and fading glow of Pad’s flares.

The Comanche crew huddles around Foot and his camera to leer into the monitor, compelled to closely follow the images and occasionally look skyward toward the ICE helicopter.

“Show your weapons.”

Hands raised, the two men wave their arms, indicating they are unarmed.

“Six, it looks like we have two male illegals. They appear to be unarmed, but use extreme caution when approaching.”

“Will do, Command Two.”

The chopper continues to hover for half an hour over the field between the camp and container, while the arrests are made by the ground team.

Finally, as the ATVs turn toward the road to begin their trek to base, one of the ATV operators radios back to the helicopter crew, “Give the Comanche Drilling team next door our regards. Tell those

guys thanks for helping spot these two strays.”

To his ATV passenger, the driver changes the subject, “I hope they still have coffee back at base.”

Whipping up a cloud of sand the chopper loudspeaker squawks, “Thanks, Comanche, we have our men. Good job. Stay sharp.”

Without further communication, the ICE officials disappear into the night.

Foot says, “Jackasses.”

Marlboro stomps his third cigarette butt with his sandal.

Pad asks, “Is that it? They are not going to search for anyone else in our vicinity?”

“Guess not,” Weasel replies.

Sue emerges from the camper. “Did they get them?”

“Guess so. They could have at least returned our brisket.” Weasel is indignant.

“I guess ICE enjoys a good breakfast taco, too,” Sue remarks.

“Jackasses.” Foot is peeved, “They could have at least circled the perimeter to be sure no one is still inside our fence.”

“I guess we’ll have to do that for ourselves.” Weasel points a finger pistol to his head pretending to blow out his own brains.

“What can you do?” Marlboro snarks, “You pay your taxes and then they take the food right out of your mouth. I’ll get my pants on.”

“Please do! Nobody wants to see those legs,” Sue jests.

“Hey, the girls always come back for more.”

“I’m sure that’s true; especially if they smoke; the Reds in your boxer shorts are so very impressive, Marlboro man.”

CHAPTER 7: DIFFERENT STRIDES



A top Army Commander from the Pentagon has arrived at the Midland airport and after the thirty-minute drive to the Sandhills is anxious to begin his briefing. Captain Jeeter offers the new arrival a cup of coffee and wipes his own tiring eyes. “We lit a candle just for your visit Commander Fitzhugh. Welcome to West Texas.”

“Lovely, but my birthday is in May.”

“I heard you’re from Georgia? I’m hoping you’re a straight shooter. My gut tells me there is more to this smoke stack than meets the eye. I’d like to think that I can believe what you’ve got to say about it, sir.”

Thinking, Fitzhugh twirls his coffee cup around in circles on the table, as steam from the brew rises up much like the inferno outside the window. The sound of the well blowout can be heard through the walls as easily as a nearby freight train in a dense fog. The incessant noise resembles spray from a high-pressure fire hose, giving an ominous edge to the atmosphere in the command shack and adding a weird musical soundtrack to the clouds rising from the strangely revolving mug.

“I will be up front with you about one thing, Jeeter. This ain’t the only burning bush Washington expects to see out here in the desert if

you know what I mean.

“Look, what I have to say and do while I’m here may come as a shock to you. If you don’t believe in the power of politics you’re about to learn a lesson in devotion and assurance.”

“No offense, Fitzhugh, but you just enforced what I expect from Washington—nothing but talking in circles and beating around the proverbial bush.”

“So here it is—Washington is in no hurry to put this thing to bed. The end of the world as we know it is coming fast enough, already. Besides, what’s *your* hurry, you’re on government time and pay. I’ll *shoot straight* with you, but you owe me something in return.”

“Yeah, what’s that, my first born? Should I rush out to put my baby Moses on a straw boat down the Nile?” Captain Jeeter is cynical and the fact that it’s already been a long day misguides his lack of official protocol with impatience.

Jeeter collects himself gradually, “Sir, I’m no dummy. I’ve already gathered from the gesture and implication coming from D.C. that there is more to this situation than what is at the surface. So, be honest with me, how much of our problem here has something to do with what happened yesterday in the Iranian desert?”

“There it is! Now, you’ve put two and two together and come up with an answer to your own question. Frankly, I’d say you just summed up the mathematics of an entire generation of infidels and oil wells.” Fitzhugh laughs with a mechanical gurgling noise pitted low in his throat. “You just broke the clues to the mystery of why that candle outside hasn’t already been blown out. I always knew southern boys are much smarter than they look.”

“So why did Washington send you here? We can watch a fire burn without much help at all—just as much as ripe Georgia peaches can fall from a tree without any nudging from the picker if you get *my* drift.”

“I do, I do get your drift, but I’m not here to help cheerlead a high

school bonfire, Captain. I'm sort of here to prevent the whole damned school from being torched to a pile of ash, and that's the reality."

"That's what I was afraid you were going to say. So where do we stand, Commander? What's the Intel on all this? We're becoming a public spectacle. People from Midland to Austin are starting to raise a few eyebrows over our interstate highway being shut down and all. We're beginning to affect commerce and generate curiosity."

"That's going to be our toughest job, Jeeter. We have to convince the media and the public of our intention in keeping this furnace lit. *Plausible deniability*—our job is plausible deniability. We have to make it make sense to let this thing burn."

"But why—why don't we just blow it out and cap it?"

"Because that's what the *enemy* expects us to do. On the other hand, if we let it burn for a while, we can keep a large military and police presence around it for miles, without garnering too much suspicion while we investigate. It gives us time to patrol the region for what is potentially a bigger crop of terroristic threats to the oil industry than one single well fire."

"The *enemy*? You make it sound like we're at war."

"We are. But, that's the part we have to deny. We can't let the public know the truth or there will be mass chaos in every town in oil country. Put your boots, back on, let's take a little walk, these walls have ears." Fitzhugh nods his head toward several agents working desks in the next room.

"Damn it, man, I just took my boots off. I haven't had a break all day."

"Better get used to it, Jeeter. We're in for a long miserable wait until the next blowout occurs, which seems inevitable to Washington. We don't know when or where, but we believe it *is* coming."

Before Jeeter can get his socks straight, the lights dim and die. Not just the lights to the command shack. Not even just the lights in the immediate area around the well fire. Lights from east to west,

north to south, as far as anyone can see, flicker to black.

“That’s great.” Jeeter raises his voice to his staff in the next room, “Can someone crank a generator, please?”

Fitzhugh asks, “I don’t suppose there are many big hydroelectric dams in the desert—where do you guys get most of your power from, windmills, solar?”



TIEGM, Texas and Interstate Electric Grid Management is a giant footprint on a tiny municipal airstrip, on the outskirts of an inconsequential central Texas town. TIEGM, pronounced, “Team” is not a public utility, but rather a for-profit corporation that manages the Texas power grid, in its entirety. When you consider that TIEGM is a key path for electric energy movement from the highly populated west coast to the densely industrialized eastern corridor, TIEGM is a strategic link in the primary power management system for the United States, as a whole.

Usually, sedate, calm, and reverent; the TIEGM Operation’s Center is, at once, a frenzied, dizzied, and problematic turmoil. Eight-by-twelve-foot TV monitors, all ten of them, along the western wall begin flashing text alerts and RED audible beeping signals. The room, organized with three rows of computer workstations in a three-thousand-square-foot pit with a sixty-foot-long windowed viewer’s gallery balcony, surges to life with activity. The urge to cuss in a prestigious work environment in Texas awakens abruptly.

“Mother-dog, we’ve been hacked. We’re going down—all over.”

“I got seven outages on the Permian, three near El Paso, and fourteen alerts saying all of East Texas, including Houston, is going brown. Code brown! Code brown!”

“We’ve got a flip in place, ladies, and gentlemen. Let it go! Remain calm. Failover to South Texas, people! They can’t hack both

of us. Initiate all failover procedures to South Texas now, please.”

“Failover is commencing—sixty seconds, boss—processing.”

“Can someone get me South Texas on the horn, please?”

“Already on it, sir—pick up line seven for the Network Operations Center night manager, Winston Wall.”

Over the speakerphone, the voice of Wall seems to be somber, “This is Winston.”

“Mr. Wall, this is Central Texas NOC manager, Jeff McClatchy. We have a failover coming your way in less than one minute. Have you received the notification?”

“Yes sir, Jeff, but I’m afraid you aren’t going to like our response. We’ve been hacked and both our primary and secondary systems are off-line. We’re working to isolate the offending IP address, but it appears the connection has already been terminated. If you continue the failover process, neither one of us will have any system control.”

“Roger that, Jeff; I’m interrupting the control transfer protocol as we speak. Notify me as soon as you get back online, please.”

“Will do, we’re doing everything we can, right now.”

Hooking the call, the Central Texas manager holds his hands over his head with a timeout gesture. “Abort the failover, ladies, and gentlemen. It is imperative that we retain system ownership, at this time. South Texas has been compromised and is fully offline.

The TIEGM skeletal night shift consists of only half a dozen members who are frantically punching keyboards and answering countless phone calls.

Manager Jeff spouts out a grocery list of orders. “John, get me two more Sys. Admins in here, ASAP. Rachael, I need twelve more technicians, please—notify the stand-by list.” Jeff inhales and continues, “Larry, put me in touch with the Security Manager, right now, sir. We’re retaining control, everybody heads up—I need everyone’s undivided attention.”

Jeff's voice transitions from calm to stern, "There is a possible danger of overloading the entire grid with the surge from the shutdown of West Texas. Reduce power production from Dallas and Houston, immediately. This is not a drill. We are under deliberate cyber-attack and South Texas has been rendered inoperative. This is not a drill, folks. Initiate failsafe Plan B. Go *Plan B*, now. We've practiced for this, people—I need everyone to focus on what you've been trained to do."

Again, Jeff breathes deeply, swallows hard, and returns to a calmer tone. "Does anyone have a lead on where the unauthorized network connection has come from? Is there a Trojan malware code on our system? Wesley, run a full systems virus scan—put it up on the big screen—monitor three. And get me a list of all network connections for the past ninety days.

Mike reports, "Boss, we appear to have a rogue connection into the mainframe. It looks like it's coming from our own India intranet tech support, but the IP is being spoofed. I just ran a traceroute that shows the actual last hop endpoint is in Syria."

"Kill that bitch and block it! Good catch, Mike. Run a history report on what they touched, my friend." Jeff punches several control keys on his own PC.

Again, Mike speaks, "Done, but I'm afraid they left a worm in the kernel. I've tried to delete it, but it keeps recreating itself. I'm looking at the code now and it appears to be some sort of time bomb, set for twenty-four hours."

"What is it programmed to do?"

"Delete the OS, sir. That's probably what put down South Texas."

"Find us a clean backup, right now, Mike." Jeff swivels in his chair, "John, how do we overwrite a wicked worm?"

John replies, "Introduce it to a *good-guy virus*—a malware that prevents the worm's ability to replicate. You know, like *fight fire with*

fire?—Kill a virus with a virus. Give it the flu! Just be careful not to kill your host while you’re in there tinkering around inside its guts.”

Jeff ponders John’s thought. “As weird as that sounds, it actually makes a lot of sense. Anybody here have worm flu in their lunch box?”

John continues, “The Security Chief has a big collection full of some pretty scary code snippets he’s accumulated over the years—but I doubt if our antivirus system would let you upload any of it to the server. It’s all pretty well-known malware to definitions databases as potentially damaging.”

Jeff asks, “Larry, where’s my Security Manager?”



Isolated, as the Comanche crewmembers are, Pad has become aware of the regional power outage across West Texas. Although the desert is sparsely populated, it is very odd that no lights are glowing across the horizon. After more than an hour of walking the perimeter and working inward toward camp, the junior crewman, returning to his starting point near the break in the fence, pauses to breathe. He lowers his handgun and flashlight, focusing on the burning oil well in the distance. The day’s events and the feeling of being so utterly alone have Pad tense, uneasy. Peering into the darkest of memorable nights, he rests himself against a fencepost and squints to try to see any reflection on the murky water of the river. The river bank is black, adding to his unrest when the quick breathing of someone moving rapidly toward him breaks the still of the night.

Snapping to attention Pad shouts, “Halt, alto. Stay where you are!”

Marla stumbles to the ground just feet from Pad when his beam shines onto her face. She’s panting, covered in mud, and barely visible in the dense darkness. Only her eyes and teeth reflect the illumination

of Pad's dying flashlight.

Marla gasps, "Please, help me. *Por favor, ayúdame.*"

Stunned, Pad is slow to respond, but then shouts, "Weasel? Foot? Marlboro? Guys, I have found someone here by the fence."

"Please don't shoot me. I'm alone. Please help me." Marla begs.

"Guys, there is a woman here!" Pad's voice is broken and he seems to be as afraid of Marla as she is of him.

After moments of no response from the team, and with stern intent, training on Marla's eyes, Pad motions with his gun for her to move with him to the campsite. She is slow to get up. Hesitating only briefly, Pad can see that Marla is exhausted and weak. Instinctively, benevolently, he bends to offer her his shoulder, assisting her into the perimeter of the camp. To anyone else, it would be strange that the thought never crosses Pad's mind that Marla quite possibly could be a diversion for a potentially threatening situation; or herself, bent on robbing and/or damaging his own personal interests and the interests of his crew. Friend-like, kindly, he asks, "Are you American?"

Marla responds between bated breaths, "No sir, I am Honduran."

"You speak English."

"*Si*, yes, I speak some English. *Hablo un poco de Inglés.*"

"What are you doing out here?"

"I was kidnapped. I escaped. There are others in the shed."

Together, staggering, the two enter the flickering campfire light at the center of the RV camp. The glow reveals Marla's torn clothing, bruised face, arms and legs; and reflects the slime from the river that covers her entire body.

Even with the matting of her hair and the stench of the stagnant river dripping from her ragged dress, Pad can only seem to see her pleading eyes. Beyond all the obvious aversion of her appearance, Pad is blind to precaution and only sees her as a desperate, despairing, rare beauty in dire need of tender care. He is right away smitten with her

and his compassionate nature prompts him to remove his t-shirt to wipe her face. He is awkwardly fast with his sudden movement.

Marla recoils, and Pad realizes the forward nature of his gesture. He wipes his own brow with the shirt and then extends it to her. When she takes it, she smiles briefly, and then hides her face in the cotton cloth, self-conscious about how she must look to him. With a relieved, short burst of exhaust, she exhales an “a-hah” timid laugh.

Pad, too, is relieved and lowers his weapon.

Filtered by the surrounding darkness, slowly fading in, the remaining crew begins to enter the central camp area from different directions, one member at a time. Marlboro is first to return. “Pad, what have you found?”

Before any explanation can be offered, Marlboro points his rifle from his hip in Marla’s direction.

At that point, Foot enters the firelight and at the same time, Sue emerges from Weasel’s RV.

“What’s this, Marlboro,” Sue asks?

“It looks like Pad found a stray animal.” Marlboro asks, “Is she friend or foe, Pad?”

“I do not actually know. I did not, at first, ask. I believe her to be an escaped prisoner.”

Arriving into the group, Weasel asks, “Prisoner of who; the correctional system, the immigration system, who?” As Marlboro has, Weasel trains his gun on Marla.

“No, I was kidnapped. My family was killed and I was taken to be sold in Las Vegas. There are others. We were on a truck that wrecked on the highway. There are some bad men who were also on the same truck.” Marla points across the field, “We, the women and I have been held hostage by the men in that building by the river. I saw your light. I’m afraid for my life. We need your help. Please.”

“My God, what is that awful smell?” Foot is repelled by the river

stench.

“I was afraid I would be raped tonight. I escaped. I hid in the river.”

“Sue, can you get her something to wear,” Pad asks?

“She’s not bringing that stink into my shower.” Sue is dismissive.

“She can hose off with my outdoor shower.” Marlboro is the first to relax his stance.

“Will you help her, Miss Sue? Do you have an old shirt or pair of pants you can spare? You are similar in size. She is wet and hurt, can’t you see?” Pad has already postured himself as Marla’s protector.

Sue, with a puzzled expression, looks to Weasel for approval, and when he nods, she retreats to the RV interior. Moments later she re-emerges with an arm-load of what appears to be painter’s clothing.

“What’s that, your Sunday best?” Marlboro jests.

“I don’t know her. I’m not letting her wear my good stuff. I brought only the things I’m going to need out here for myself.” Sue is absolutely serious.

“Overalls? Are you from *Green Acres*?” Marlboro laughs.

“I painted the dining room wall. I’m done with painting. She can have those, but she’s not getting any of my underwear. I’m taking that off the table right now.”

“I’m not asking why your underwear is on the table, in the first place!” Marlboro jests.

The group gets a good chuckle. Even Marla finds humor in the way the conversation has changed.

Weasel takes a politically correct posture. “I suppose we can doctor her up and hose her down, but we have to let ICE and the Army know we found her. Pad, do you want to fire the flare, or would you rather I do it?”

“I am very able to send up a flare, Mr. Weasel.” Pad’s concession reveals how, “I have been, I guess, unwise to not show more

precaution in regard to this woman's presence. I may have been foolish with my choice to help her without knowing her full reason for being out here."

"You're pretty liberal with your use of the term woman, too," Foot injects, "She's just a kid. How old are you, little girl?"

"I'm not a little girl. I'm seventeen, and I am Marla. *Mi nombre*, my name *es Marla*." Even in a desperate situation, Marla is feistier than one would expect from her diminutive size. "We have to help the other girls. They are even younger than me. We must help them."

Foot kicks sand into the fire and mock chuckles, "She's a load of laughs. I don't trust her. I wouldn't mind holding a gun on her while she showers, though."

"Foot!" Pad bristles.

"Just kidding, little buddy. I'm not going to get between you and your new little girlfriend. At least, not yet."

Weasel interrupts, "Look Marla, or whoever you are, we aren't going anywhere. We don't know if you are telling us any truth. You could be a decoy for a pack of thieves. We've already been robbed of some of our food tonight. Besides, we're not here to rescue anyone—and we sure don't want to get into anything that's none of our business."

Weasel is totally serious. "You're welcome to clean yourself, patch your wounds, and have a cool drink, or eat something warm, but you and anyone else out here are none of our concern. We're going to let the authorities deal with you and your friends if they actually are over there. That shipping container looks abandoned to me. Not to mention it was already checked out by government's helicopters."

Sternly, Weasel continues, "Is that enough information for you to grasp where I'm coming from, Miss Marla, whoever you are? Even if you are what you say, you are in this country illegally, and that's enough for me to keep your wishes at arm's length."

Marla concedes, “Yes sir, I understand. God bless you for what you are doing.”

Pad is loading his flare gun. “Mr. Weasel, did anyone else notice that all the lights went out on the desert?”

“I saw that about an hour ago,” says Foot.

“I’ve been inside,” says Sue, “I didn’t see that. What do you think that’s all about?”

“Clearly, the power is off in every direction as far as we can see. Maybe those Army guys can give us some clue when they arrive.” Weasel turns to Marlboro, “Any thoughts, Marlboro.”

“All I can say is that I don’t believe in coincidence. There seems to be a lot of weird stuff happening all at the same time today.” Marlboro spits into the fire.

One shower, two and a half beers, and three flares into the sky later, there is still no response from ICE or the Army. No fly-by, no drone, no ATV. Nothing.

“Dark as it is out here, it’s like the rest of the world has just disappeared. It feels like it’s just us and that fire on the horizon.” Marlboro is ominous in his appraisal of the obvious. “I feel like I’m back in Kuwait. I keep waiting for the next big explosion.”

Marla speaks, as she adjusts her overalls and pushes her shiny, black hair from her bruised cheekbone. “They said they were planning something big. They said they were here to meet with their destiny.”

“Who said that?” Marlboro and Sue ask the question in unison.

“The men in the shed—they are very bad men with very big guns. They said that they are part of a much bigger group that is bringing something terrible to the United States. They pray for death to Americans. They said there is a plan—God’s plan.”

“Those must be the same men with guns that we saw on the highway.” Pad asks, “Who are these men; where do they come from? You were *not* with them? You were in the same truck with them.”

Marla takes one question at a time. “They’re not Mexican, or Latino of any kind. They speak Spanish and English, but they don’t sound like they are either one. I was put on that truck with several other women in Monterrey after being brought to Mexico by three Honduran black men. The bad men with guns got on the truck at Piedras Negras, just before we crossed the border at Eagle Pass. They told us that they have supplies and two Jeeps hidden in the desert and a job to get done in the oil fields of Texas. I believe they are very bad men, but they would not say what they have planned. The leader told me the entire world will remember them. He said it in a way that made me think he plans to be killed while he’s here on his mission.”

“What else did they say?” Marla has Weasel’s attention.

“Not anything much. They were careful not to let anyone know their plan. They did say that their purpose was right on-time and that all of their supplies were already in place. I got the idea that they expect to complete their mission very soon. They plan to find their two Jeeps tomorrow and begin whatever they came to do. I think that they believe they are at war with your country.”

Marla sums up, “I’m very afraid of them. They are evil, I’m sure of it. They pray like men of God, but I do not believe any God has come here with them.”

Pad is more interested in Marla than the perhaps more urgent issues at hand. “Why were you taken from Honduras?”

Marla distantly gazes into the campfire as Foot rises to grab another beer and put another two sticks of wood on the flame. Her long pause seems to add intensity to Pad’s need to know more about her. The others seem much less interested in Marla’s story. They mill around for another drink or snack, but Pad waits patiently for Marla to reveal more about herself.

“My father was a simple farmer. My family had fifty acres of corn and coffee; two cows and one mule. We had no running water or plumbing. We lived simple lives and kept to ourselves.”

Marla appears to be hesitant to reveal much about her history.

After a long pause, she continues. “Two years ago, the drug lords in Honduras, came for our land. They shot my two brothers in the fields. Then when he stood his ground, they killed my father. Two months ago, my mother, *mi Madre*, still refused to leave the farm. They tied her to a post in front of our house. My sister was in a wheelchair from polio. They tied her to the post, as well. Then they made me watch as they burned the house. They told me I would get the same if I did not comply with their demands. Two weeks ago they sold me on the internet, and I was put on the truck that brought me here today.”

Pad is silent. He’s consumed by the incredible story. For a moment, he finds it all hard to believe and almost says so, but he sees the pain and real grief in Marla’s eyes and knows she has, in the most literal sense of the term, been undone. “Well, at least now you will be able to go back home.”

“I no longer have a home. There is nothing to go back to. No matter where I am, for a very long time, I will be alone.”

“Won’t your government help you?” Pad asks?

“The drug cartel is in control. The government is owned by them.” Marla, refusing to cry, is hardened by her past and expresses curbed hope for her future. “I was actually looking forward to Las Vegas. Not the men that I would be forced to be with there—but a new place, the lights of a big city, a warm sun. I have been looking forward to Las Vegas becoming my new home.”

Marla stiffens. “I cannot expect you to understand. No one can understand, except the two other girls in that shed over there. I have much in common with them. We are all running for our lives with no intention of ever going home. Even if we were to go back, the cartel would just capture us and sell us again.”

Pad, still silent, ponders what the U.S. government may force on the forgotten girls. He finally speaks, trying to keep a positive tone.

“Well, now you are free. Maybe there is a way you can remain free.”

Marla looks toward the ground. “*Free?* Free to me is a wasted dream. Even in this country, is anyone really *free*? Can you do as you please? Aren’t you always under a thumb? Do you ever really feel like you are completely out of harm’s way, even in your own home?”

Pad allows the questions to fade as rhetorical in nature. He can’t help but feel empathy for Marla. It would be inhumane not to—and he’s much too nice a guy to let her know, on this weird night, just how right she is in his own experience of life. He certainly understands her sense of hopelessness in the face of harassment and discrimination.

By now, Marlboro and Foot have broken off from the group to have their own conversation near the barbecue trailer. Weasel and Sue have stepped into their RV for a more private discussion.

“I think we should drive out to the main road to get some attention.” Sue’s worrisome expression tells the story of her restlessness, although she makes every effort to remain stoic and in self-control. “At least out on the road, we can get a cell phone signal. We could call someone and let them know we’ve found another illegal. It’s been a couple of hours since we started sending up flares.”

Weasel agrees. “I think you’re probably right. Air support may have already pulled out of this area.” Thinking aloud, “What’s the worst that can happen? They may cuss us for not staying put here in the camp, but other than that, what are they going to do, arrest us? We can always say we were trying to do the right thing. They did ask us to report anything unusual.”

The sound on the television has been turned down, but the satellite signal is still broadcasting a signal.

Sue steps to the rear bedroom of the camper, “I’ll get my boots on. Do you think we need to take anything?”

“No, I don’t want to be gone long enough to even need a drink of water. I’d rather be around here, keeping an eye out, in case there really are some armed gunmen hiding out in that storage container.”

As Sue returns to the living room, the television behind Weasel flashes a “Bulletin” graphic across the screen. Sue points to the TV and says, “Hey, maybe there’s some news now.”

Weasel grabs the remote and cranks the volume.

“This just into our news desk at NBC in New York... One-third of western Texas, including El Paso and Midland, has been in an electric blackout for the past hour. Sources with the public information office of TIEGM, the electric grid management operations center for the region, say problems may persist for an unspecified extended amount of time. A word of caution has also been extended to the cities of Dallas and Houston that there is the potential for more black and brownouts before the morning rush hour. Electric engineers report that the issue with the grid appears to be due to a computer systems failure. Before the problem can be corrected, our contact at TIEGM tells us that they must first isolate an apparent hack into their main computer control system.

“All indications are that most of Texas west of a line from Del Rio to San Angelo, to Sweetwater, is now in the dark and that includes most public utilities like water and sewage plants, along with telephone and other communications services, including local radio and television stations that do not have an electric generator backup system. Generally speaking, few utilities within the sparsely-populated affected areas have sophisticated back-ups. Residents are being asked to conserve water and fuel and are instructed to remain in their homes until further notice.

“According to our White House correspondent, Jay Levine, the military and all law enforcement branches have been put on stand-by alert and instructed to, and we quote, *prepare for any eventuality*. Here at NBC, we are organizing a team of reporters in Austin, Dallas, and Houston. WFAA in Dallas has a satellite remote vehicle near Midland. We will be talking with them and others, as we go live with continued team coverage on this breaking news in just a few moments. This is George Nordstrom, NBC News in New York. Stay

with us.”

“I say we try to get a cell phone out of here, anyway. Let’s get to the road and at least *try* to make a call.” Sue’s verbal urgency is duplicated in Weasel’s stunned expression. “Let’s go, now, Weasel.”

“Guys!” Weasel bursts outside with Sue and Smiley at his heels. “We’re going to the road to call someone. Marlboro, you unhooked your trailer?”

“Yeah.”

“I need to borrow your truck. You keep an eye on Pad while he keeps an eye on our guest. Don’t let her go anywhere.”

Without hesitation, Marlboro tosses his keys to Weasel.

“Foot, keep your leak tester pointed at that field. If you see anyone come out of that container and head this way with a gun, shoot ‘em.”

Weasel continues, “We may have more problems than we’re aware of, boys. Check out the satellite while we’re gone. The news is getting crazy. We’ll be back as soon as we can. Ten or fifteen minutes at the most.”

Marlboro asks, “What’s up, Weasel? What the hell is going on?”

“That’s a good question. Open my side box—turn that outside TV on. Sue and I will be right back.”

Weasel turns to Sue. “You’ve got both our cell phones, Bae?”

“Yup.” Sue is already pushing buttons on her iPhone when she slides into the middle of the truck seat allowing Smiley to ride shotgun.

Driving as fast as the dirt road will allow and only about two-hundred yards away from their campsite, a Mexican man and a woman with a child freeze in the headlights. Weasel snatches up his shotgun, “What the hell else is going to happen?” He slides to a halt and jumps from the vehicle with the gun.

Sue pleads, “Don’t hurt them, Weasel.”

“Alto—Halt! If you run, you better be faster than my gun.”

The couple is dazed and silent as they raise their hands in surrender.

“Get in the back. We’re going for a little ride.” At this point, Weasel isn’t taking any guff.

Sue comments, “Maybe they live around here, hon.”

“It’s three in the morning, bae. I don’t think they’re out here for a stroll under the moon. There ain’t no moon. It’s dark as pitch. No local would be out here without a flashlight and snake boots on.”

By their attire, even Sue can tell that they are probably not from anywhere in Texas.

As the couple struggles to rapidly climb over the tailgate into the truck bed, they mumble to each other in heavy Spanish dialects.

“Hey, for right now, no talking. I’m not in the mood for any more fun.” Weasel jumps aboard and has the truck moving again before any of them can fully sit down.

“What are you going to do with them?” Sue asks.

“I don’t know. It just seemed like I couldn’t just ignore them.”

“And you said you didn’t want any more fun.”

“I know, dear.” Weasel attempts levity, “So, how are you enjoying your vacation so far, my dear?”

CHAPTER 8: INDIFFERENCE TO STRIDE



Half an hour after leaving camp, the headlights of Marlboro's pickup announce the return of Weasel and Sue. A short flash of the high beams on the faces of each of the remaining team members gives Weasel a measured view of the morale of the team. No sleep and a generous amount of troublesome news has everyone stressed, beaten, and drawn.

"You're kidding me." Foot approaches Weasel's driver side door and points an accusing finger at the truck bed. "Where'd you find these ones?"

"On the road to nowhere." Weasel is short and cryptic.

"Did you get a phone connect?"

"Nope, the cell lines are all down. We tried calling the DPS, the Sheriff's Office, and we tried to get in touch with Wichita. Nothing works. The phones are dead."

Sue picks up where Weasel has left off, "We drove into Orla, where we know there are two cell towers, but neither of our phones is getting a signal."

"Great. That's just great!" Marlboro, in disgust, mocks the two new arrivals who are exiting the truck bed, "And what are we supposed to do with these guys? Are we turning into a detentionment

outpost for ICE?”

“It sort of looks that way, don’t it?” Weasel answers the question with a question. “Anything more on the news?”

“Yeah, it just keeps coming. TIEGM is reporting that four sections of the grid have been destroyed by explosives.”

“What?” Sue is listening intently as she helps the Mexican woman with her child.

“CREZ lines between Amarillo and Dallas, Lubbock and Abilene, Midland and Fort Worth; and between Midland, Waco, and Austin have been taken down. They say near fourteen-hundred kilovolts of West Texas wind-turbine power have been interrupted and that the transmission lines are so heavily damaged that any repair could take months. They’re asking everyone in East Texas to conserve electricity and are predicting mandatory rationing.”

“What are CREZ lines?” Sue asks.

Marlboro answers, “Competitive Renewable Energy Zones. They’re part of the newest infrastructure for the Texas electric grid. High-powered CREZ lines transmit wind power from West Texas to consumers in the eastern half of the state. Sounds like some of those lines may be down for the count. NBC is saying TIEGM is still adding up the number of locations that have been damaged by TNT explosives at the base of those giant electric towers running across the state. Apparently, the instant shut-down of the lines is damaging the power collection points with blown transformers and a cascade of switching problems.”

Foot adds, “Any extended period of no electricity will pretty much dismantle the Texas economy. The news is already saying to be prepared for food, water, and fuel shortages, statewide.”

Weasel mutters, “I had a feeling earlier today that something has gone very wrong. No wonder the Army is so active.”

“And so now, you bring us three more mouths to feed?” Marlboro is unashamed of his dislike for the newest additions to the group. “I

say turn ‘em loose in the desert and let them fend for themselves. It’s not our job to round up ICE detainees.”

“How long can we keep our generators running on the fuel we brought with us?” Weasel is thinking ahead.

“I have about enough diesel for two days, three max.” Foot answers.

Pad confides, “I only brought enough propane to run a Coleman stove if I decided to do some cooking. I didn’t expect to not have electricity for my microwave.”

“We’re all in about the same shape. Screwed, blued, and tattooed.” Marlboro snips, “My dad once said that if the grid ever goes down, people at the gas station won’t even be able to count change without a computer. Of course, without electricity, they won’t even be able to pump the gas in the first place.”

Foot covers his mouth to make the snide remark, “Thanks for the insight, pal.”

Weasel says, “Marlboro, your pessimism is about to twitch my last nerve in a bad direction. Can you put a gate on it and corral some of that for a while? We may have to do a day’s worth of paperwork and take a tongue lashing, but we’ll just use the company fuel if we have to. All those tanks over there were filled last week.” Weasel points to the north side of the camp site.

Sue interrupts, “Hey, the last thing we need to do is to start infighting. We’re going to need to stick together out here and keep the peace amongst ourselves, don’t you think?” She serves water to the new arrivals and offers the mother a clean towel to wrap the infant in. “The last thing we need is to wet our pants like a bunch of little babies.”

News from the RV’s outside TV continues, “TIEGM power lines in many places run along the same easements as highways and rail lines. Authorities in nine Texas counties are now reporting electric towers have fallen across several of those corridors in multiple places,

prompting the emergency shut-down of traffic and cargo movement in many directions. Interstate 40, Interstate 20, and many of the U.S. highways are being re-routed across the state. Additionally, Amtrak passenger train arrivals are delayed into Amarillo and Dallas, as a result of the situation.”

The news report continues, “Two people were killed north of Canyon, Texas, between Amarillo and Lubbock when transmission lines fell across part of Interstate-27, causing a semi-truck to cross the median into oncoming traffic. Humanitarian efforts are already being deployed from Houston and San Antonio by the Red Cross and other organizations. Also, electric power-line teams are prepping statewide for what appears to be a massive effort to restore power to normal for as much of the system as possible, as soon as possible. We go now to the public information office of the Department of Defense in Washington D.C.”

The camera shot switches to a podium and a four-star Army General. “I’m not going to try to candy-coat what has transpired in the past twenty-four hours in our country. On the other hand, it is not our intention to promote hysteria or panic. We all need to maintain our sense of morality and decency during this time of crisis, which is equally shared by all of the citizens of the United States, in its entirety. It is imperative that we all remain calm, and give the authorities an appropriate amount of time to react to the imminent needs of our people and our integrity as a nation.”

Reading from a prepared script the general continues, “It has become evident that Texas is under attack from a broad-based terrorist organization that extends beyond our borders to multiple other countries. Efforts are underway now to determine where and how we should react first, and in what capacity. It is the estimation of this office that fourteen U.S. highways, three rail lines, and countless electric consumers have been rendered disabled. We further expect forthcoming curfews, curtailments, and other rations on a number of essential provisions and necessities; including, but notwithstanding,

we expect those announcements to be made shortly in the areas of public water supplies, fuel allotments, and restricted travel impositions.”

“We’re at war!” Marlboro blurts, “I told you so. I said it earlier today. We’ve been under attack, and the government is just now admitting it because they can’t hide it any longer. We are being assaulted from every angle.”

“Much as I hate to say it, I believe you’re right, Marlboro man.” Weasel wipes the sand from his face onto his sweat-saturated shirt. “What do you propose we do, Mr. Kuwaiti veteran?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, brother. I have no idea who or where the enemy is. I’d say let’s fight back, but I don’t have any reasonable idea of where to aim a gun. Besides, what makes you think there’s anything we can do at all? We’re stranded in a desert with little ammo and little power. We could be in this place for days with no contact to the outside world, except for emergency broadcast television—and that may only last till our generators all overheat and break down. I’d say we’re all kind of like little Miss Marla here—up shit creek without a paddle.”

The flickering of the campfire begins to die down once again and Foot attempts a feeble effort to convey some levity as he stirs the coals with another few sticks of mesquite. “We do have plenty of scrub brush to burn around here. We can always kill snakes and rabbits to eat. Anybody opposed to rattlesnake cakes and stanky river water?” Foot points to the large water tank next to their campsite with two emphatic words painted on the side, ‘Not Potable.’

“I’ve got an idea.” Sue is compelled to inject a thought. “We could drive back into Pecos and be first in line at Walmart this morning. Maybe we can buy more supplies with cash before the rush. We could take Marla and these three with us. If we see the police or a constable or something, we can turn them over to the authorities. If not, we can let them go in the Walmart parking lot, where they will at

least have an opportunity to take their own chances. We don't have to be responsible for them."

"I don't want to go. I want to stay." Marla is insistent. "I have nowhere to go. I want to stay here with Pad. I don't have anyone else. I don't want to be alone."

Marlboro shakes his head. "We can't all fit in my truck and expect to carry much else back with us."

Weasel agrees, "Marlboro has a point, Sue. Besides, someone needs to be here to protect our stuff. How much cash does everyone have? I've got about sixty dollars."

"That's more than me, I've got about twenty-five dollars." Pad empties his pockets and produces a few bills and some change.

Foot admits, "I'm out here on plastic. I didn't figure we'd be needing much for the first few days. I brought an ATM card for dinner if we had decided to go into Yellow Brix Steakhouse in Carlsbad."

Pad says, "Maybe we should go to Carlsbad, now. They're Walmart is twenty-four hours. Maybe New Mexico has electricity."

"We sure don't want to get stopped transporting illegals across state lines, Pad." Weasel is reluctant to offer other suggestions. "I think that would be a big mistake."

Everyone agrees.

"So, Pecos it is. I don't have any better ideas. Anybody else have a plan?" Weasel looks to Marlboro.

"I'll drive," Marlboro notes, "I can milk the most mileage out of my old wagon. Foot, do you want to go or stay?"

Foot becomes assertive, "I'm with you Marlboro. Weasel can stay here with Sue and Pad. If any deliveries get here in the morning, Weasel can start receiving our equipment shipments. I'll leave my rifle, Weasel."

Sue asks, "What about Marla?"

"Take her with you, Marlboro. We don't need any extra

headache.” Foot has had enough new information to think about.

Marla exclaims, “No, I won’t go! You can’t make me go. Please, I’m begging you to let me stay.”

“Pad, she wants to stay with you.” Weasel scratches his head. “Are you in for *a long ride* with a big chance of getting *put up wet*?”

Marla pleadingly looks to Pad.

“I would be ashamed for a very long time if I force her to do something that she is unwilling to do.” Pad stiffens.

“I won’t eat or drink anything. I won’t get in the way. I have been made to come here and now you are asking me to go away. Please, don’t you have any of mercy in your heart?” Marla nearly gets tears in her eyes.

“What about the others?” Marlboro asks.

The migrant man speaks for the first time, in broken English, “We will go. We want to go to Pecos. We will find help at Walmart, si?”

“I don’t know about that, but your chances are good that a Mexican church or some other outreach might take you in until Immigration gets your names. ICE will, more than likely, give you an all-expense-paid bus ride home,” Marlboro adds, “Hell, the way things are looking right now, you may be better off in Mexico than here, anyway.”

The immigrant says, “We go. We go to Walmart. Si, yes, Ok.”

Weasel asks, “Ok. Marlboro, what do you say? Can Marla stay? We sure don’t want her creating a scene in town.”

Marlboro nods his agreement.

“...Ok, Marla, you can stay, but only until the authorities come back around. Pad, she’s your responsibility. No bullshit or we’ll put her back out on the highway. Are we clear?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Weasel. You are very clear. It is her choice to stay, so I am sure she will not get in the way.” Pad pleads with Marla, “Do

you give your word, Miss Marla?”

“I give you my word. I promise to do as you say.”

Marlboro turns to Foot. “You should stay here, Foot. You have the night vision camera, and Weasel has the most cash.”

“You are not leaving me here by myself, Weasel!” Sue adamantly stamps her foot.

Weasel says, “Hey, Smiley is here.”

“Weasel, I will break your barbecue pit. I’ll ride in the back on the way there. The mother and baby should ride in the front.”

After they get loaded, Weasel talks to his dog, “Smiley, you stay here with Foot. But, don’t get under foot.” He laughs and points a finger to Foot as they drive away. “See you shortly, big guts.”

Foot looks as if he’s just been verbally burned and shouts, “Is that a fat joke? It’s not funny you know. I have big bones.”



Driving into Pecos proves to be more of a task than first expected. It’s a morbid reminder of their strange situation when Marlboro edges onto the shoulder to pass the wrecked Mexican smuggling truck that is still on the roadside. All cops and authorities have come and gone. Even the roadside flares in front of and behind the wreck have burned out and blown away, leaving just a powder stain on the pavement. Lying on its side in the dark, the silhouette of the bent semi resembles a sunken shipwreck whose crew perished at sea.

By the time Walmart prepares to open at 6:00 AM, the streets around the store are congested and problematic. All of the traffic lights in Pecos are dark and most of the vehicles on the street are out-of-towners re-routed from the closed interstate. Every vehicle seems to be lost.

Marlboro shouts, “Go Jackass, I won’t wait for you forever. Hey, look out for me, I’m the guy who runs people over and leaves them

for dead.”

Marlboro is irritated with all the other drivers and attempts to correct his demeanor by changing the subject. “In my experience, you can tell a lot about a town by going into the local Walmart. When I first got back stateside, when I left Kuwait, I visited a lot of towns, big and small.

“When I was in a West Virginia, Appalachian Valley Walmart, most of the people in there, including the employees, had very few teeth, and I’m pretty sure they were all in a jug band.

“In a Seattle Walmart, the locals were all well-dressed, affluent, and white enough to star in Walmart TV commercials.

“The Pecos Walmart reminds me of a border town with barely adequate plumbing. The prices are right, but the back room still smells bad.”

Sue laughs from the passenger seat. “My God, where did all these people come from? Pecos has quadrupled in size.”

Weasel is in the truck bed and peering into the cab through the sliding rear window. “Man, I know now why it’s not legal to have kids in the back of a pickup. It’s really dangerous back here. I sure hope your road rage doesn’t get us all shot, Marlboro.”

Weasel points to the curb. “There’s a pay phone in the drive-thru liquor store parking lot. Whip in there and I’ll see if the landlines are working.”

“I don’t get road rage. I get *road revenge!*” Marlboro laughs.

Weasel jumps from the truck bed and to the phone. After the first call, it becomes clear that he is actually talking to someone. However, the others can’t hear the conversation above the noise of the traffic.

In the disjointed tension, the Mexican baby begins to cry so the mother, in the middle of the truck bench seat, adjusts herself to nurse the infant.

Marlboro is made even more uncomfortable, but tries to act

nonchalant by asking the mother, “What is the baby’s name, *el nombre del niño?*”

The mother says, “Ariana.”

“Oh, it’s a girl. *Lo siento, la niña ... Ariana is a bonito nombre,* pretty name.”

Sue asks, “Do you have formula—Similac?”

The Mexican woman shakes her head no.

Sue speaks to Marlboro, “We should probably buy a few things for the first aid kit. I noticed when we doctored up Marla that we are low on alcohol and bandages.”

“Huh. Considering the kind of guns that are out in the fields near us, we might want to consider antibiotics and morphine, but I don’t think the pharmacy opens until nine.” Marlboro is becoming increasingly cynical.

Sue expands the thought. “Since we don’t have prescriptions for that stuff, we could just get some meds from the pet department. You know, just in case Smiley or Foot gets hurt? I hear dog penicillin is good for what ails you, man or vermin.”

Marlboro grins and lights a cigarette. “Actually, that’s not a bad idea.”

Sue points to the baby and snaps, “Marlboro, the baby!”

He grumbles, “Bitch, it’s my truck,” but he does thump the cigarette to the curb.

Weasel jumps back into the truck bed. “I’ve got good news and bad news. The good news is that the telephone land-lines are still working. The bad news is that there is no available cop in the entire state of Texas that can meet-and-greet our illegal compadres, neither here nor at the Walmart, and especially not out near Orla.

“Also, I tried to call Wichita’s hotel room, but there was no answer. I called Comanche in Midland, but only got voice mail. I left a message saying we would check in once we have a land-line at the

well site. Wichita probably woke up early and went on out to the job. We should probably go by the Motel-6 anyway, after we hit the Walmart, just to make sure he's not oversleeping."

Sue is distracted with the baby and asks, "Do you think Walmart will take a check on a Midland bank?"

"We can ask, but I doubt it." Marlboro says, "Walmart uses that credit card machine on a check now, to have you sign an electronic transfer, like a debit card instant withdrawal. I doubt if any of that system is working, but it sure wouldn't hurt to ask. If we can write checks, we can buy a lot more canned goods and coffee."

Sue continues thinking aloud, "I'd like to get the baby a case of formula. The way they ate back at camp, I don't think these people have had an actual meal in days. The baby probably needs more than mom's milk to be healthy."

"Are you getting maternal on me?" Weasel asks with a smirk of fake concern.

"Maybe—After all, I'm dealing with you and your child-like friends a lot lately. You have no idea how much that is like having a house full of kids to watch over."

"Hey, I resemble that remark." Weasel blows Sue an air kiss.

Marlboro grins, "Me too, do you think you could give us all a nice bubble bath later?"

Weasel reaches through the window and thumps Marlboro's head. "Watch it, bubble head. That's my girl, not your mamma."

Finally, as they approach the Walmart parking lot, Sue drops her jaw and gapes at the massive crowd that has already gathered there.

Marlboro pumps the brakes to get behind a line of traffic, trying to find parking. Some vehicles have already been parked on the side of the highway and left abandoned. "Oh, crap. The entire world is here! It ain't even six o'clock yet. This is insane. Look at that line of people at the door, already around the side of the building."

Often, in cases of a natural disaster like hurricane or tornado, some stores are open for emergency supplies, on a cash-only basis. The Pecos Walmart has its own emergency generator for such an event, however, it has limited power—and so most of the frozen food section and some of the store’s other amenities are not online. Even overhead lighting is limited. Since power is down region-wide, cash registers do not connect to external services like credit card companies for purchases.

The auto shop and the garden center entrances are blocked by rows of National Guard jeeps. The remaining two main entrances to the store itself are flanked by armed soldiers, at attention, in full riot gear.

Weasel comments, “There must be a hundred guardsmen here. You’d think they’re expecting a full-blown riot.”

“Maybe they are,” Marlboro adds. “This could get a little touch-and-go. Maybe you two should run and get in line. I can circle the block to see if there is some other place to park. If so, I’ll meet you at the door, otherwise, I’ll try to get near the front door or just come back here.”

Weasel has already bounded from the truck bed and opens Sue’s passenger-side door. “Let’s go, Bae. We’ve got some full-contact shopping to do.”

Marlboro asks, “What about our guests?”

Sue is quick to answer, “Don’t let them out here, Marlboro. It’s too frickin’ crazy. Maybe they’d be better off over on Fourth Street at the little Catholic Church there.”

“Hey, that’s a good idea. I can take them there now.”

“No, wait till we get back, I want to see if I can get some things for the baby. These poor people don’t have anything, but the clothes on their back and that one trash bag full of rags.”

“Ok, you better get going if you want anything at all from inside. I’ll meet you guys back here. Be careful. Weasel, you got your

pistol?”

“I’ve got mine.” Sue is already several paces away from the truck and headed to the door.

Weasel holds the door open long enough to say, “Don’t get lost, Marlboro. Hopefully, we’re going to have our hands full when we get back out of there. We could use you to push a shopping cart, but I really think you should stay with the truck. This crowd could become antsy. I wouldn’t park anywhere around the block or on the street. Your truck could just get a mind-of-its-own and head straight for the border if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do. Okay. Be careful, Weasel.”

The Mexican man in the truck bed leaps to the ground and takes Weasel’s place at the passenger door. “*Vamos, Mamá.*”

Marlboro speaks fluent Spanish, “*No, no, quédate aquí. Iremos a la iglesia.* Stay here, take a seat; we’ll take you to the church.”

“*Oh, gracias, Señor.*” The man takes a seat next to his wife and child. “*Texas está muy loco.*”

“*Sí, Señor, es hoy.* It sure is today.”

Marlboro pulls back into the snail-paced traffic on U.S. 285 and decides to continue south the two blocks to the Motel-6. When he finally wedges in between northbound traffic to make a left, he wheels into the parking lot and immediately sees Wichita’s crew cab truck. It’s straight-up six o’clock and Wichita is apparently still there. That seems odd, knowing that Wichita is early to rise and usually first on the job site when a new drill job begins.

Not wanting to leave the Mexican family alone with his truck, Marlboro idles slowly between the full parking area and then back out onto the highway. The time it takes to return to Walmart, even though he can see it from the motel, takes full twenty-five minutes in the slow-crawling traffic jam.

There’s no chance he can get into the Walmart parking lot, so

Marlboro curbs his pickup across the street from the store, on the northbound side of the four-lane highway. He straddles the sidewalk and takes a mental note that his fuel gauge is just below three-quarters full when he kills the ignition.

He mutters to himself, “I hope we can wait here long enough for Weasel and Sue, without getting a parking ticket.”

In just the time it took to drive two blocks and back, Marlboro can see that the cages on the side of the garden center where the propane bottles are stored are now empty. All the full bottles of propane are already gone. People are even beginning to steal the empty cans, four or more at a time. One guy scrambles to put a half dozen of the barbecue-sized tanks in his truck when guardsmen force him face-down on the ground.

The Mexican couple next to him looks to be completely confused and uneasy, so Marlboro spends the next few minutes explaining to them in Spanish that the power is out and gives them a few details about what the TV news has been broadcasting. However, the distressing information doesn't settle the couple's concern. If anything, the news just seems to worsen their tension.

By seven o'clock Marlboro fears his guests are about to bolt so he starts asking questions about them and how they got here. As they open up to him, Marlboro becomes captivated by their story and learns from them that back home in Mexico they have no work or food to eat. They have come to Texas for migrant farm work and to give their baby a better birthplace and future.

Marlboro is shocked to learn that the infant was born just the night before, right after the coyote truck had crossed over into Texas. In the back of that dark truck, the couple, along with sixty-nine other people, witnessed the child's birth. “That's amazing. Baby Ariana is actually an American Citizen. She was born in Texas?”

“*Sí, ella es Texican!*” The father jokes. “Ariana Tejas Hernandez.”

Suddenly, urgently, Sue and Weasel appear between the rows of traffic on the highway, pushing two full buggies of water and other supplies. Marlboro steps onto the roadway to give them a hand with loading their cargo.

A car with Nevada license plates, barely creeping along, unnecessarily jolts to a halt and honks its horn. Startled by Marlboro suddenly stepping into the road, the driver yells, “Hey you ignorant Mexican, this ain’t no crosswalk.”

Marlboro takes the cart from Sue and alludes to ramming it into the car, but pulls up short of actually smashing it squarely in the Nevada plate. He shouts back to the driver, “Your mouth is gambling with more cards than you can possibly have in your hand, poker player.”

Testy from the traffic and recent turn of events, the Nevada driver jumps from the car with a baseball bat and comes out swinging.

Marlboro reacts swiftly, but in his mind, the world shifts into slow motion. The bat swings close enough for a wisp of air to fluff his hair. Mentally, Marlboro has time to think a silly thought about how quickly he can move. *Like a dog on a computer keyboard making one quick click and deleting your day’s work*, Marlboro snatches the bat from the driver, bangs a dent into the fender of the car, and shouts, “Bitch, you ain’t in Nevada no more!”

It’s so fast Marlboro even impresses himself. “Dog-click quick, huh, bitch?”

Sue stops him from waving the bat by touching his shoulder and directing what she says to the stunned driver. “Sorry for the mistake, sir. He was just trying to help me across the highway. No harm done.”

“No harm. What about my fender?” The driver backs into his seat and grabs a cell phone. He realizes the phone is useless so then he honks his horn once again.

“Unless you want to eat that horn sir, I suggest you take it somewhere else.” Marlboro tosses the bat aside and shoots the guy

the finger. “Your fender must have been hit when you flung your bat around, dick-head. We have a way of dealing with dick-heads here in Texas that you may not be familiar with. It involves your face and your ass meeting in the middle for a close-up discussion about regards for other human beings.”

Then Marlboro speaks to the wife and kids in the car. “By the way kids, your Dad taught you wrong. This ain’t Mexico, and I’m not a Mexican. You should learn to have more respect for people than he has.”

Anticipating further escalation, Sue opens her purse just enough to show her pistol. The woman in the front seat and the two children in the back seat hastily roll up their windows and plead with the driver to continue moving on. He does so without further interaction.

Also standing down, Marlboro asks Weasel, “Can you believe that guy?”

“Dog-click quick?” Sue laughs. “Is that even a thing?”

“Yeah, you know if it were ‘in dog years?’ Very quick. Fast, man!” Marlboro laughs at himself.

Weasel laughs, “I thought you were going to *dog-chew* that guy to the bone.”

The laughter releases some of their tension. Weasel answers, “I hate to say it, but we actually can believe it. You should have been inside the store. We saw two knives and a street fight over D-cell batteries and the last empty gas can. There won’t be anything left of that store in another half hour, my friend. Let’s get this stuff in the truck and get the hell out of here before any gunfire breaks out.”

Marlboro changes the subject back to the business at hand, “It will take another hour to go back two blocks to the motel. I saw Wichita’s truck is still there, but I didn’t go in. He hasn’t gone by, so I guess he’s still in his room. Do you want to hoof it down the sidewalk to check on him or would you rather try to call him again?”

Weasel loads the final case of water and he and the Mexican man

jump back into the truck bed. “Let’s go to the church. It’s just a few blocks. We may be able to use a phone there.”

Thinking ahead, Weasel adds, “I don’t know if any of our delivery trucks are going to make it out to Orla today, but I have a feeling we need to get back to the site as soon as we can.”

Marlboro agrees, “I heard that, my man. I’m sick of this *No Parking Zone* anyway. We gone!”

Sue has managed to obtain four 8-packs of formula and begins to query the mom, “Have you used this stuff before.”

Marlboro helps with the translation.

The woman is overcome with the generosity and tears well up in her smile as Sue explains, “This stuff doesn’t have to be refrigerated and you don’t need to warm it. There is one nipple and an O-ring in each box that you’ll want to rinse after each bottle feeding, but that should last you for a few days. I also got a box of Huggies. They’re in the back. I wish I could have been able to get more, but it was all the cash I had.”

“No checks, I’m guessing?”

“I don’t blame them. They would have to be crazy to take checks from those cretins in there. Sam Walton would turn over in his grave if he knew what was going on in his store today. If it were my place, I never would have opened the doors to that mob. There were hundreds of them on every isle, and not one single brain among them.”

Sue catches her breath, “I thought Weasel was going to lose it when a guy tried to take the formula from my basket when my back was turned to get some of the last chocolate-covered cherries.” She offers a box of candy to the Mexican woman.

“Eso es maravilloso. Gracias, Señora. Oro para que Dios los bendiga. Eres muy amable.”

“She says you are kind and she prays for God to bless you.”

“Yeah, I got it. I hope God listens to her prayers more than he does mine—for all our sakes.”

The church is several blocks from the highway’s beaten path but is heavily swamped with its own traffic jam. The doors are open, however, so many people have crammed inside that it’s useless to attempt entering to find a phone. So, with few words, the Mexican family takes their belongings and fades into the unscheduled mass that is assembling.

Sue waves goodbye to the mother and child and with the crossing of the Mexican woman’s heart, the family is gone.

“I think we did the right thing. They will be able to get some help in the church, much easier than back at that Walmart circus, I’m sure. I would feel bad if we had to leave them there, or alone.”

“Yeah, you are quite the humanitarian.” Marlboro is cynical. “They are illegals, you know? We could be arrested and prosecuted for helping them.”

“I don’t know why our government doesn’t do something to help educate more Mexicans on how to legally enter the States.” Sue is serious. “We spend millions keeping them out or sending them home, but we don’t do anything to teach them how to follow the rules to legitimately have a home here. Sometimes I think our government is just wrong.”

Weasel is engaged in his own conversation. “Stop at the liquor store again. I’ll try to call the office and Wichita one more time.”

The eastern half of Pecos is impoverished and sparsely populated. There are blocks of empty lots. Between the rows of potholed streets, and looking four blocks ahead toward the highway, Marlboro can see smoke rising and reacts, “You may want to change that plan, son. It looks like the liquor store is on fire.”

They all see the smoke. Marlboro’s tone becomes more sarcastic “...And hey, it’s eight o’clock already, what do you say we just get the hell out of town while we still can?” Without waiting for

any response, Marlboro signals a right turn three blocks before the main highway. “I’m gonna use some of these little side streets to get north of downtown.”

As his tired eyes roll and blink, Marlboro shakes his head when two more Chinook troop transports settle into the sand-swept vacant lots across the highway from Walmart. “I’m glad I’m not still parked over there. It looks like the Army has recruited a new batch of very serious traffic cops.”

Clearly irritated, Marlboro insists, “Can I have a smoke now?”

“Please do. Smoke a dozen, old pal.” Weasel is sympathetic to the cause. “Any more of this place and I may have to help you with the carton, and you know I don’t smoke—except for medical pot, of course. Oh, what I’d give for a big fat hooter, right about now.”

Sue is quick, “I’d second-hand smoke any or all of that. Please, go for it, Marlboro. I would have never said a word about your smoking, except for the baby.”

“I would have never said a word about *you* being here, either—because I’m a gentleman—I’m a smoker, but a gentleman first.”

Weasel is indignant, “You don’t like having Sue around?”

“No, that’s not what I mean. I just think she would rather be anywhere else. This trip isn’t really turning into anything similar to a vacation like she planned, now is it?”

Sue says, “I wouldn’t be any more comfortable at home. No electricity, no one to talk to. I’d be miserable at home! At least here, I’m not getting bored.”

“Actually, I’m glad you’re here. I’d probably have hog-tied and dragged Nevada behind my truck, otherwise.” Marlboro gives that signature laugh of his. Sort of like the sound of an old Mexican man coughing and slapping an old cat at the same time.

Sue is super sweet. “You would have ripped off his arm and beat him with it, Marlboro man.”

Again, Weasel changes the subject. “You think Wichita is on the road?”

“Why, you want to get out and go with him?” Sue is on her game.

“Not yet, but I’m getting really close. The two of you don’t seem to feel the same gravity of the situation that I do.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right. Now I’m feeling it. I’m getting heavy. We are having gravity, *Debbie Downer*.” Sue is partly joking and partly pointed, “If we’re going into a war I’d rather laugh than cry in the face of pain. Laughter makes strong people appear to be impervious to pain. I’ve always wanted to be impervious to something.”

“That’s true, me, too. I’m on Suzy-Qs team, *Miss Debbie*.” Marlboro jerks the steering wheel and chuckles.

“Think about it, where else would Wichita go? He has no life. He lives for his job. As soon as he can eat a donut and make his way through town, he’ll show up at home in beautiful Orla.”

Again, Marlboro’s demeanor changes from light-hearted to cynical. “...But, I’ll bet you two-to-one, we have no equipment show up on the site today. I’ll bet trucks aren’t running west of Midland, at least for now. Hell, they may not be running east of Midland, either.”

Weasel responds, “Even with your odds, that’s a sucker bet. I’m with you, after seeing this mess in town, and with power down across such a wide area, I’ll bet the company stops all trucks west of San Angelo. Where could they buy fuel? If they didn’t come into town last night and are already here, I’d say they ain’t gonna make it out here today, too.”

Marlboro continues ranting, “And I’ll go you one more. I doubt if the phone company makes a hookup for us for several days. They’ve probably got every man on emergency overtime. The land lines are working now, but if the power is down for several days, the battery backups will die out and the generators they use will run out of fuel. They are only set up to last a little more than a week. I’d bet

we see no phone man until the power is back on. Heck, I'd even bet that *all phones* go down, long before we get one."

Marlboro stops. "I'm noticing the gas lines at all the service stations. How much fuel do you think we have in the tanks back at camp?"

Weasel is feeling the strain and becoming pessimistic. "Usually there is enough to keep us drilling for two to three weeks, but that doesn't normally include running RV generators. I'd say between all of us we probably have no more than ten days. As soon as we get back, if there's not a truck to unload, I'm pulling out my gasifier and building a fire. We can run on hydrogen until we run out of wood. That thing will provide enough gas for two RV generators."

Marlboro slightly softens his attitude, "At least we have a thousand gallons of diesel and gasoline each. Thank goodness, the god-damned company got those tanks fuel filled last week. Even if the welder propane runs out, we'll have something to run our trucks on. That shit's going to get expensive around here, quick. Gas is going to get in very short demand."

Even the seemingly always up and chipper Sue is beginning to get testy. "You two are wearing me down. Can we just go home, please?"



"I was actually looking forward to coming to the United States." Marla is in a deep conversation with her new friend, Pad. "I've spent hours-and-hours on my English lessons; I've memorized the Pledge of Allegiance and even The Gettysburg Address. I especially like the part, '—we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—.'

Marla is somber and slow to continue, "I was thinking that after I got to Nevada, I would scrub floors or something to get enough

money to escape from my owners. I was hoping I could apply for some type of amnesty or asylum to get citizenship or at least legal status here in this country. I'm young and not very smart, but I believe your government will help me if they know the reason why I am here. I have more faith in America's new-found war zone than I have in any time in Honduras. Las Vegas would have given me a place to be hidden, a place to be here in your country to learn my behavior, a place to build a plan."

Pad responds, "I don't know much about the law or the government. I hate politics. I sure don't know The Gettysburg Address, but I do know there's nothing dumb about following your dream.

"Do not think you are not smart. You sound a lot smarter than many of my friends in South Texas. Heck, some of my friends probably don't even know what the Pledge of Allegiance is for. Politics took that out of the schools here in America years ago."

Pad adds, "I sympathize with your story completely. You do confuse me in some ways, though."

Marla looks puzzled. "How?"

"You said, 'there is no real freedom,' yet you believe you can make a home in this country that will be better for you than where you were born. Is that not a contradiction in thinking?"

Marla is firm. "I cannot expect that I will ever find freedom, no matter where I live—but I do know, after the things I've seen and done, I am strong and brave. This is the home of the *brave*, isn't it? I want to feel like I have a home again. I no longer have passage into Las Vegas, but I am beginning to learn what freedom means. Perhaps that is more important."

She elaborates, "Last night when I escaped from those bad men with guns, I felt closer to home than I have felt in a very long time. And for the first time since I can remember, since ever really, when I hid in that nasty river, I felt free, for just a moment-in-time.

“Time seemed to stand still when that helicopter hovered above me, shining its light on my hurried breath. It was really only for a short minute, but I got a glimpse of how it must really be to live my life as if I have freedom. I was all alone, I was in danger, but I was free.”

Marla pauses briefly and inhales sharply. “Now that I have met you and your friends, I no longer feel free, but I still feel brave. You and your friends will turn me over to your government soon. I can only hope to be able to stay here in the United States, but I will fight for it, and I will continue to bravely pray. I am strong—and I am brave. Just a little taste of freedom was all I needed to know that I want to stay here if I can. I want to have a home, a new home. It is my only dream—to feel both free and brave.”

Pad is silent at first but then declares that he is “torn. I can’t put myself in your shoes. I have another completely different point of view. Your version of life in the U.S. is not at all how I see it.”

Pad digresses into his own memory. “I was raised here in Texas. I’ve paid taxes all my life, and sometimes I feel like the government just takes and never gives back. I don’t have much faith in the system. I don’t see much justice or freedom for anyone, even for those who are brave and true.”

As he looks into Marla’s eyes, Pad remembers, “My father was born in southern Iran, near Pakistan. For a while, he lived on the Pakistani/India border. My mother is from India. They came here with my older sister to also find a better life. Like you, they dreamed of, ‘the land of the free and the home of the brave.’ I’m the first generation of our family to be born here. Mâmân was pregnant with me when they got off the boat with only seven-hundred dollars between them.

“At first my parents settled in Rockport, near Corpus Christi and my bâbâ worked for a Vietnamese fisherman. Bâbâ was openly ridiculed in public. At the grocery store, in the laundromat, at the

school—people referred to us as ‘sand niggers.’ Local fishermen robbed Bâbâ’s crab traps, cut his shrimp nets, and sabotaged the Vietnamese boats. My sister was beaten by a gang of Anglo children in the schoolyard when she fought back ridicule of her old, ugly shoes—and the school did nothing to help her.

“After that, we moved to Beeville, and my bâbâ learned to raise cattle. He became a ranch hand for a slum-of-a-place to live in and a small monthly salary. Even though he raised beef, we rarely ate steak or even hamburger. More often than not we had crispy Persian rice and tabouli salad with the vegetables that mâmân grew in her small garden. She hand-baked our sangak bread and made yogurt on a propane camp stove from cow’s milk.”

Pad hopelessly shrugs. “I believe it is always that way. When people move to a new land in search of a dream, they are most often greeted with rejection and hate. It’s been that way forever. The American Indians fought back against the pilgrims, the new generation of Americans fought back against a British invasion, and today the natives fight back against all other immigrants, especially those of us who do not look like them. Even today, I am treated poorly by many co-workers and peers because of my appearance, and I am fully as much as any of them, 100 percent American. This team, the Comanche crew is the only group of people who have treated me with any respect. I am thankful for that, but...

I just don’t think someone can see the world the way it truly is when they view it through the eyes of a dream. Your story is one of terrible hate and cruelty, but your hope is one from a rose-colored dream. That is just not the way things really are in my view of the world.

I wish I had a better perspective from which to give you faith in your dream, but it’s hard for me to see beyond the blinding light of truth. I would like to be a better man who gives someone like you strength and confidence. I would love to be able to help someone work toward a meaningful life, but I know all too well what it means

to be continually beaten down. I know how hard it is to just be able to take care of my own self and keep a stiff top lip.”

“You have a kind heart, Pad. What is your dream?”

“Maybe that’s my problem; I don’t think I really have a dream.”

“You will find your way to one. I believe you will. And, I’m sure that when you do, you will see the world through a new imagination. Perhaps it will not be rose-colored, but maybe it will not be so blue.”

Marla moves close to caress Pad. It catches him off guard and makes him flinch. She pauses to calmly gaze into his black eyes.

Helpless under her scrutiny, Pad succumbs to her natural beauty and leans in for a passionate kiss. In the moment, the two of them briefly allow the rest of the world to disappear. Their mutual smiles say all that there is left to say between them.

Annoyed with world news, Pad continues kissing Marla while he also reaches for and clicks the remote. He switches to a music channel and in rhythm with his and Marla’s alternating breaths, the Bebe Rexha video “I Got You” begins to play on the outdoor TV.

“I love this song.” Continuing to gently embrace Pad, Marla begins to move her body and purses her lips in time with the music.

Her pulsing lips touch his.

Pad draws her close.

And just like that, with a dazed and confused world around them, Pad and Marla find themselves grinning and sexy dancing.

CHAPTER 9: UNDENIABLE



Marla twirls in Pad’s hand and mid-pivot suddenly stops dancing. She pulls Pad to a squat on the ground. “Pad, look there are two men outside the shed.”

It quickly becomes patently clear to Pad that he and Marla shouldn’t come to the attention of the armed gunmen, but in his fancifully-stupefied state of mind, he does something that Marla finds rather odd at first. He duckwalks Marla back to her hammock chair, “Stay down.” He then stands to run several paces to shake Foot from a situationally-compelled powernap. Reaching Foot’s side, Pad again squats.

Marla’s expression says it all. She finds Pad to be both silly and charming at the same time. Barring his embarrassment, she keeps that to herself.

“Foot!—Foot, wake up, man,” Pad whispers as if he will be heard by the gunmen who are at least a hundred yards away.

Foot’s hammock chair rocks in the dawn breeze as he stirs from what has turned from a ‘pretending to doze off to give Marla and Pad some privacy’ catnap into a profoundly deep sleep. He growls at being disturbed from the labored rest.

Smiley lifts his head from the ground at Foot’s side.

“They are coming out, Foot. Stay down, but get up quickly Mr. Foot.”

As Foot stirs, Marla sits up as tall as she can to see one of the gunmen point a finger in the direction of the Comanche camp. “He’s pointing to that trailer with the pipe on it. He thinks it is his.”

“How could it be his?” Pad asks.

“How could what be whose?” Foot asks.

Marla remembers, “Last night, the leader who tried to rape me told his men that those pipes were for their mission. They plan to get their Jeeps today, and they want the pipes on that trailer.”

Foot yawns broadly, “No one in his right mind would want those pipes for anything other than maybe water drainage. Those pipes are six and a half inches. Nobody uses them out here. I can’t even imagine why they are out here. We sure won’t use them.”

One man re-enters the storage container and the second sets out on foot in a swift path to cross the river. Pad and the others watch him until he vanishes into the scrubs on the opposite river bank.

“He said their Jeeps were staged about two miles up-river, near a reservoir.” Marla continues to remember. “He said he had GPS and could find them in a matter of hours.”

“Well, as far as I’m concerned, if he wants to hook that entire load of pipe to his Jeep and leave with it, I’m not going to get in the way of those automatic weapons. He can have as much junk pipe as he wants.” Foot pats Smiley on the head and says, “Right Smiley—big guns, little pipes, no problems from us, hey boy? The company must have made a mistake when they ordered that load of crap. They have enough money they can afford to lose one bad load.”

Pad says, “Speaking of loads, it sounds like a truck is coming, maybe it’s our rig or a load of supplies for us.” He stands to get a better look. “Never mind, it’s just Marlboro’s truck.

A cloud of dust engulfs the camp as Marlboro rolls to a stop.

“We got a few things, guys.” Weasel is on the ground and unloading cases of bottled water immediately on arrival. “Any sign of our equipment?”

“Not yet.” Assisting with the unload Pad comments, “No Wichita either.”

“That’s odd. He’s usually the first one here. He must have found a phone line into the main office and they are having a big pow-wow.” Marlboro speculates.

Pad is distracted, “Hey, what is this tiny bicycle pump for?”

Weasel smiles, “That’s a water purifier. There was a limit of four cases of water, so I found that purification filter in the sporting goods department. It’ll filter up to five-hundred gallons. We have plenty of river water in that twenty-five-hundred-gallon tank. Three minutes of pumping gets you a liter of clean drinking water. If we need it, we can always make coffee. We have a month’s supply of coffee, a bunch of SPAM, and a case of canned beans. At least if the power is out for a week or more, we won’t starve. We can live on bean gas and caffeine.”

“Three minutes? Who gets to do all the pumping?” Foot yaps.

“You—if you want the coffee, big man.” Weasel throws Foot a bag of candy. “Here, don’t lose your teeth.”

“Yea, Twizzlers, I love these things. Thanks, Weasel.”

“Don’t eat ‘em all in one bite, whack-o-loon.”

“Marla, this is for you.” Sue removes a bag from the truck cab and gives it to Marla. “It’s a peace offering.”

Timidly Marla approaches, “For me? What is it?”

“I felt bad for making you wear those horrible coveralls.” Sue reaches into the bag and produces a pale-blue cotton sundress. “I hope it fits, I could only find this one size. It’s not much, but we only had so much cash.”

Marla grins with pride and holds the dress in front of her breasts.

“It’s beautiful, I love it.”

“It was hard to see you running around out here in front of all these men with your side boobs showing from behind that little bib. Coveralls don’t really seem to be the right term for that garb on your figure.” Sue sounds snarky. “Don’t take me wrong, I’m just trying to be friendly and make fun of the situation. We may have to spend a few days out here together. From the way things look in town, we could be here a while before things get back to normal. I just wanted you to feel more welcome.”

“Pad, can I change in your van?”

“Sure.”

Marla happily dances in a circle. “Thank you, Sue. It will fit perfectly. You make my day.” As she spins, her gaze falls on the neighboring camp causing her smile to drop so quickly that it almost makes a collapsing sound.

A second gunman exits the container across the field and can be seen scampering north on the river bank fully armed. He moves fast and in his fatigues looks to be focused for potential combat. If he notices the Comanche crew, he doesn’t show it. He crosses the river and treks north, just as his partner did an hour earlier.

Marlboro comments, “They’re up to no good. Nobody wears a helmet out here for rabbit hunting.”

“They want our pipe.” Pad remarks.

“They recognized the ‘H’ that is painted on all sides. The leader said that those pipes were shipped here for their mission.” Marla adds.

“What mission?” Sue questions.

“I don’t know, but I heard them discussing that no one was expected to be on this oil lease for weeks. They were not planning for you guys to be here.”

Weasel scratches his head, thinking, “That’s true, we were put here early to help the company meet a quota. What the heck could

they possibly do with that little load of small pipe? There are only about three thousand feet of it. You couldn't put a dent in the sand with that stuff."

Now Marlboro gets interested. "You don't think they smuggled something inside that load, do you?"

Weasel is on it. "That's just where I was going. Come on Smiley, let's take a look."

It doesn't take long for Weasel and Marlboro to recognize Smiley's immediate alert when they approach the pipe trailer. As if on auto-pilot, Smiley swiftly circles the trailer, whiffs the ends of the capped and neatly-stacked pipes and abruptly sits at attention on the front end. Smiley looks to Weasel for a command.

"He smells something, Weasel." Marlboro pops off several of the plastic end caps.

"Try those in the middle on the bottom." Weasel orders Smiley to his side with a smack of his lips and a finger gesture.

"Bingo," is all Marlboro says as he finds the first pipe filled end-to-end with six-inch cylinders wrapped in aluminum foil. He reaches inside and removes one of the foot-long canisters.

Weasel is at first confused, "What the hell? What do you suppose those are used for?"

Marlboro is already unwrapping the object and suddenly stops. "They're nuclear weapons. This marking, the 'X'—these are hydrogen bombs. The "X" is the Soviet equivalent to 'H.' There is no letter 'H' in the Russian alphabet. I've seen these in Kuwait. They're Soviet bottle rockets. These things can blow up an entire outpost and kill everything within a fifty-mile radius. They can be shot from a shoulder rocket like an RPG. Rocket-propelled grenade."

"I know what an RPG is—but, what the hell are these for?"

"Dude, these things were built in the '50s and were tested, but never used. If you shoot one, it will go about two-and-a-half miles,

obliterate its target, and then almost immediately kill you, too, with radioactive fallout. They are basically the USSR equivalent to Kamikaze suicide bombs. We can't let those bastards next door get their hands on any of these things. There are at least twenty of them here. I have no idea what they are planning, but it can't be a Christmas fireworks party for friends and family."

Pad has noticed the discovery and overhearing the conversation, now quickly walks up to the trailer, "I think I know what they are for."

"What?"

"Marla. She said that shed is full of supplies. Two big rolls of cable, dozens of car batteries, ammunition, guns, electrical wiring, and fuel cans... She also remembered that the leader of the group gave prayers to God for a successful outcome in 'Texas, Venezuela, and Iraqi' oil fields."

Weasel asks, "You think we're the next Iraq?"

"I think we may be on the list. I also think that if those really are nuclear bombs—well, I think we are in deep roughneck shit right now, Mr. Weasel."

"Oh great, Pad, stop thinking—we already have enough crap to deal with."

By now Foot has sauntered over to the pipe trailer. "Why? Pad can think as good as any of us. He has a right to speak his mind."

"It's not that his mind is full of deep crap. It's that he makes good sense." Weasel sternly cautions, "Guys, let's not tell the girls what we've found out here. For now, it's best that they don't get more upset than they already are. We need to make a plan. We need to get in touch with someone, and we need to think of a way to get as far away from here as possible, without leaving this stuff behind, where our neighbors next door can find it."

"Ok, what did I miss," Foot asks?

"We're under nuclear attack." Marlboro mutters, "We're at war."

“Weasel, can you hear me?” Sue yells from the camp center and points toward the Winnebago’s exterior television set. “Weasel, you may want to hear this.”

Weasel reiterates, “Guys, let’s talk before we tell the girls.”

He turns to face Sue, “What is it, Bae?”

Sue repeats, “The freeway has been closed east of Amarillo. It’s an oil rig blowout like the one in Monahans State Park. Interstate-40 is now closed, too.”

“Damn. I wrote that book!” Weasel drags his feet in the grit, showing his lack of love for the desert.

Sue sees his disdain. “Ok, *BAE*, what’s up? I know you. What did you find out there?”

“Just some spiders. No worry, I’m coming.” As he walks away from the trailer, Weasel says, “Put that stuff back—close up those tubes. We need to make a plan before our *apparently terrorist* dirtbags come back to stake a claim.

“Pad, maybe you should top off our trucks with the gravity hose from the company fuel tanks. Gas up every can you can.

“Marlboro, you want something to do while we think about all of this?” Weasel is at his wit’s end.

“Me? No Weasel, I’ll take inventory. We’re going to need guns, ammo; and a rapid growth in the size of our balls. Just on my left hand alone, I can count how many reasons we should quit our job and head for the hills. I need some time to inventory my right hand, because, as of now, I don’t see a single reason to stay or fight. You need to understand that we can get severely fucked-up either way.”

Again, Weasel kicks the dirt. “We need to get ready to move. Foot, give me a hand zipping up the campers—I’ll give you a Tic-Tac.”

Foot comments as he follows, “I prefer Life Savers or Juicy-Fruit gum over Tic-Tacs—Tic-Tacs just stick to my dentures. I don’t

suppose you brought any good old-fashioned, real chewing gum?”

“I’ll buy some for you at the first stop, Foot. Just don’t tell Sue what we’re doing.”

“What are we doing?”

Weasel shrugs and shakes his head. “We’re going to either stop this foreign invasion or whatever it is, or we’re going to get ourselves killed trying. *Or* we’re going to find a right-handed reason to ignore everything we know to cover our bare-naked asses and get the hell out of here. Just tell the girls that we are probably headed for home and that we need to be ready when the order comes in.”

“Is that a metaphor? —‘*Headed for home*’—or do you want them to believe it?”

“Yeah—both, Foot.”

“Yes, sir. Until Wichita gets here, you’re the boss.”

“I’m beginning to think that neither Wichita nor anyone else is coming out here,” Weasel confides. “Tell me something, do you think we could take on and screw up those guys next door if we have to?”

“*Mono-e-mono*, we have a bulldozer; they have wicked guns. No sir, eventually, the bulldozer driver gets shot in that movie.”

“Can you use the dozer to close that hole in the fence?”

“Easy. In fifteen minutes.”

“Can you put a mote around the camp?”

“Not in your lifetime, bro. We’re in a god-damned desert.”

“I suppose alligators are out of the question?”

“You need some sleep, pal. You’re getting drunk on insomnia.”

“Would you mind closing that hole for now?”

“There are acres of sand out here. I’ll be more than happy to pile some of it up. Do you want it to be pretty or fast?”

“Ugly and effective should be good enough.”

“Ugly is my specialty.” Foot lumbers toward the dozer which has

been strategically parked next to the diesel, gasoline, and propane tanks on the far north side of the drill site.

Weasel hollers after him, “Just make sure a Jeep can’t climb over it, Foot.”

To the west, a dust cloud rises above the sage brush where a vehicle rapidly approaches from the main road. It’s Donna and judging by the way she is bouncing around inside her four-by-four Toyota, she is in a much bigger hurry than the road was built for.

“Weasel,” she shouts from her open window, even before she gets close enough to slide to a full stop.

“Weasel, we’ve got some bad news.” Donna is almost in a panic.

“Bad news seems to be the only news out here. You’re not going to like what I have to say either.” Weasel lowers his head and steps toward her, “You go first because what I have to tell you may take a little bit of explaining.”

“It’s Wichita. I was to meet him for coffee this morning, but when he didn’t show, I went to his hotel room.

“I don’t know how to put this except to just say it, Weasel. Wichita is dead. He apparently had a heart attack and died with his cell phone in his hand, trying to call 9-1-1. All the phones went out last night and he couldn’t get through to anyone for help.”

“No, that’s not true. I don’t think those kinds of jokes are funny at all, Donna.”

“It’s not a joke, Weasel. He was gone before I ever got there. The coroner said he died around three o’clock this morning. I tried to call the corporate office and his wife, but so far, I’ve not been able to get through to anyone, either.

“Everything in town is in utter chaos with a major power outage and resulting communication gaps. Half the population in Pecos is arguing or fist-fighting. There must be more than twice as many tourists and travelers from the highway than there are local people.

Resources are already getting scarce.”

“We know,” Weasel reveals the early trip into town. “Things out here aren’t any better, Donna.”

Pad and Marlboro realize Donna has arrived and they both scramble to gather around and then hear the news that puts a somber shock on their faces.

Amid all else that is on their minds, this new information about Wichita has the guys completely stunned.

Pad is visibly shaken and wipes his upper lip with his shirt sleeve.

Marlboro stares off into the distance and mumbles, “A heart attack? Damn, Wichita always thought prostate cancer would be the thing to take him down.

“He was planning to go to Houston in two weeks for a month of treatment. This Orla hole was going to be Wichita’s last one for a while. He was making Houston like a vacation. He and his wife were planning to tour NASA and Moody Gardens in Galveston.”

Sue and Marla in her new dress perceive something is wrong and walk up to listen in on the conversation. Their presence now complicates what Weasel needs to tell Donna about the discovery of the hidden terrorist weapons. He deliberately avoids mentioning it, not wanting to make things more worrisome for the girls.

Then just like on queue in a scene from “Deliverance,” another cloud of dust stirs beyond the sagebrush toward the road. But this time it’s on the south side of the fence where Foot is beginning to push his first blade of sand into a pile. Two military-style sand-colored Jeeps emerge abruptly on the rise beside the storage container next door. Placards on the vehicles read, ‘OFL,’ Oil Field Logistics.

Marla is the first to react. “It is Hector and Diego.”

“Oh shit.” Marlboro blurts, “We need to come up with a plan, pretty soon, boys.”

Hector eyeballs the work Foot is starting and raises his binoculars

to get a better view of things in the Comanche camp. He scans from the pipe trailer to the RVs and then to the group assembled next to Donna's car.

"I can feel his seedy eyes on me." Marla shields herself behind Pad.

Donna has taken until now to perceive Marla's presence. Knowing Marla is not part of the usual group, Donna asks. "Who is this sweet thing?"

No quick answer is forthcoming while the crew ogles the Jeep passengers.

Hector and Diego leer back at the group for a long stare before hurrying into the container, leaving the door ajar just enough to see outside.

Weasel motions, "Donna, everybody, let's get inside the Winnebago, we can talk in there."

Foot continues to build his border wall.

As he works, both of the container doors swing wide and three of the gunmen roll out a six-foot spool of cable aboard a small dolly trailer. They spend considerable time attaching the spool to the rear of one of the Jeeps. The fourth man proceeds to load both Jeeps with several twelve-volt auto batteries, one at a time. All the while it is obvious that much of their attention is focused on the Comanche camp. Intermittently, they point and gesture in Foot's direction.

Foot watches intently from the corner of his goggles as he moves forward and back repeatedly, stirring up a dust bowl, trying to make his sand pile as tall as the fence. The more he works, the bigger the billowing cloud of dust becomes, pervading the area between him and the storage container, ultimately blocking his view of it and the activities around it. The smoke screen works both ways and Foot sneers knowing that the illegals can't see him either and that the prevailing wind has them in the brunt of the dust.

Catching up on how everyone came to be here, the girls, entering

the RV, become engaged in their own tight-knit conversation. So, Weasel, Marlboro, and Pad seize the opportunity and gather just outside in a private discussion about what might be next for them.

Weasel attempts to make some sense of things. "I think we should just zip up our rigs and slide on out of here."

"I agree. That seems to be the very smart thing to do." Pad adds, "I think we should go to Carlsbad. They probably have phones and less highway traffic."

Marlboro is seriously in deep thought. He doesn't act like he even hears Weasel and Pad, but then, while staring at the cloud of dust stirred up by the dozer he says, "We can't leave those bombs here."

"We can't take them, can we?" Pad is almost pleading, "It is probably illegal for us to move them. If those really are weapons of war, we have no business even touching them at all."

"Pad may have a point, besides if the guys in that shed don't kill us, the army probably will if they stop us with a load of H-bombs." Weasel takes a breath.

Marlboro thinks for a moment and then says, "If the bombs stay here, then so do I."

"That's nuts, Marlboro." Weasel raises his voice and then shields what he is saying from the women just inside. "There is no way in hell that we're going to leave you here alone, Mario."

"Well, I can hook my truck to the trailer and be ready to go if and when our neighbors decide to pay a visit to their cargo. In the meantime, you and the girls can get into Pecos to let the Army know what we think is going on. I don't think those guys next door will do much more until dark. They can't freely move around on the highways in broad daylight.

"If they see us leaving, they'll think their load is fine. They have to perform their ablution, and say their prayers, and eat, and get ready for whatever they plan to do. I'm betting they make their move after dark." Marlboro is reassuring himself as much as he is trying to

convince his buds that he has a viable idea. He checks his watch. “It’s almost noon now. They’ll break for their Dhuhr prayer soon.”

“Let’s get our gear ready. We can tell Foot when he gets down off that tractor.” Weasel begins to hand-crank the Winnebago awning.

“Shouldn’t we shoot off a few more flares,” Pad asks?

“I don’t think we want our neighbors to think we have anything to be concerned with.” Marlboro squats to draw in the dirt.

“Look—ayah. We know Pecos is swamped in stupid. Idiots were all over the streets this morning. But, we know the Army is there. We also know that if we want to go home, we will need to use a northerly route because I-20 is closed. We don’t need to be taking all of our vehicles into Pecos. What if just one of us goes?”

“You’re right; we ultimately want to go home to check our traps and shit,” Weasel says.

“What if the girls and the RVs head northeast, go around all the bullshit, and you and Foot ride into Pecos?” Weasel is in sync with what Marlboro is saying.

“You white Texan-looking dudes can do much better with the Army than me or Pad can.” Marlboro is totally serious. “Why don’t *you* and Foot go into Pecos?”

“Hell, I don’t have a truck and Foot has his 5th wheel.” We’d have to steal Donna’s wagon.”

The girls begin exiting the RV and only hear the last words of what the guys are talking about.

Donna says, “You’re not stealing my truck, men. I have nine other crews to see today. All, guys like you; all still wondering what the hell is going on and what our blankity-blank company plans to do about it. It wouldn’t surprise me if the company wants us all off the clock until the world starts turning again. I gots to go, boys. You kids are on your own.”

Donna pauses to become more serious. “Listen, men, you know

more about what is happening than I know. I didn't have any satellite TV at the Holiday Inn. From what I can tell, you need to pack your bags and leave. If those guys next door want this girl, they may come over here looking for her. It sounds like they have automatic weapons. Let's just go home and wait for Comanche Corp to make the call about where we should be and when.

"The girl, Marla wants asylum. Take her to the federal court building in Midland and just drop her off at the front door if you don't want to get involved. Let the system deal with her. You need to get home to check to see if your refrigerator/freezer is still running."

High-tailing it toward her Toyota, Donna repeats the refrain. "I gots to go, kids. You need to be on your own for now. I wouldn't stay here if I were you. If the company sends any equipment or a rig out here, they don't need you here to unload it. We ain't drilling today, that's for sure. Like I say, if I were you, I'd go home. Don't take it wrong, but I have to hit nine more camps before sundown. I've got six hours to make a three-hundred-fifty-mile circle."

Donna is not taking no for an answer. She enters her truck and cranks the engine.

"Donna, you may want to know one more thing before you go." Marlboro is too late.

Donna spins the tires and pivots her car to begin her exit when a silhouette appears atop the mound that Foot is building. The shadow demarks a man with a shoulder launcher aimed at the bulldozer that Foot is riding like a bull. Taking note of Donna's departure, the silhouette pivots and fires at the Toyota. Donna's truck and she are instantly set ablaze with a shriek and a massive explosion.

"Oh. No." Together Sue and Marla shriek like the shrill RPG before them.

"Take cover, he probably has back-up." Marlboro instinctively shouts orders, simultaneously drawing his gun from his belt and ducking behind the barbecue pit.

“Shoot anybody who comes over that fence,” Weasel shouts.

Foot jams the bulldozer out of gear and swan dives to the ground behind it, leaving the engine running.

The rocket launching silhouette drops below the horizon.

“He might reload and come back.” It would be redundant to say Marlboro, Mario is wary. Mario in English literally means “Warring.” Marlboro, Mario Sanchez was trained that way, too. He is, after all, an American Armed Forces Kuwaiti service veteran. “This is getting way too real, boys.”

The moments after Donna’s immediate demise are in stop motion for the team.

“Pad, you got your gun?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Weasel, you see anybody else?”

“Right now, all I can see is a cloud of dust.”

Marlboro yells out, “Foot, you still got your socks on?”

Foot yells back, “That bastard was aiming at me!”

The front right tire on Donna’s blazing vehicle suddenly blows out in an ammunitions-like report.

Everyone jumps.

A black noxious smoke rises from the sizzling, crackling, pinging, popping belly of the fire. Bang, another tire blows.

Sue crouches with Smiley behind Weasel. “Maybe the army can hear all this noise in Pecos.”

“I doubt it, that’s almost fifty miles. They might be able to see the smoke, though.”

Marla, in her new sundress, runs from Pad’s van to stand defiantly by Pad’s side. “Give me a gun. I know how to use a gun, too.”

The flaming truck and compounded awareness of Donna’s

instant death is on one side of the group and the fence-line where the rocket came from on the other. Stunned, the group is torn between where to look in defense and where to gape in shock. All of them vacillate from one direction to the other. Each and every stare is saturated with disbelief for what has just been done and terror in the face of what now can and cannot be undone. Clearly, what can be done is on a limited chain, and what has been done cannot be changed. It's a hard pill to swallow. First the boss Wichita and now Donna, both are all too quick, all too gone.

The group moves to huddle behind Weasel's RV and finally, Foot trots to join them. "What the fuck, men?"

Marlboro looks to Weasel, "We may as well let the girls in on the gravity of this situation. We're going to need their full participation in deciding what we need to get done next."

"What gravity? What situation are we being kept in the dark about, Bae?" Sue kicks dirt on Weasel's boot.

"We found something in that trailer load of pipe."

"What could be so shocking that you think you can't tell us?"

While he explains, Weasel keeps a constant watch on the fence line.

"Nuclear weapons?" Sue girlishly squeals as another tire blows on the burning car.

Marlboro finishes Weasel's excuse for him. "We think we are in line to be the next Iraqi-styled oil well blowout. We think we need to get the 'F' out of here and take those weapons with us. We don't want them in the hands of those dirtbags next door."

Marla borrows Marlboro's colloquialism, but adds her own vernacular, spitting in the direction of the neighbors, "Bags-o-dirt!"

Sue ramps up, "We can't take those things with us. If those guys next door get the idea that we are leaving, they will blow us to kingdom come."

She becomes indignant. “Even if we get out of the gate, they will chase us down. Weasel, either one of those Jeeps can outrun any of our RVs, or for that matter, Mario’s truck wagging a thirty-foot trailer behind it. They’ll kill us all before we ever get to town.”

Weasel responds, “It’s pretty obvious, they don’t want to take any chance on word getting around about them. They must have thought Donna presented a risk that would get them turned in.”

“Yeah, and now it’s pretty clear that we know way too much for them to take any chance on.” Sue debates the options.

“We should just toss a little C-4 over on them. I’ve got some.” Foot is not joking. “Problem solved.”

Pad holds up a finger, “One of us could sneak over there and when they all go inside, just lock the door from the outside.”

“No, the other girls are in there with them. They’ll bake in the sun.” Marla tugs on Pad’s shoulder. “Tell them, Pad.”

Pad lowers his hand, “She is right, there are two other women being held hostage by those guys.”

“They’re all illegals!” Foot barks.

“We can’t kill them, Foot. They are not even here by their own choice. They were sold and made to come here.” Pad stands firm. “You can’t just kill them; they are innocent victims.”

“I wouldn’t have any problem killing one or more of those gunmen,” Foot says.

“The only thing on our side is that they don’t know we found the weapons.” Weasel is thinking. “If we take the trailer, they will know that we are on to them. What if we just take the canisters and leave the trailer for them to find? They may not chase us down if we appear to be leaving their payload alone. How many bombs do you think are in there, Marlboro?”

“Those pipes are thirty feet long. There could be two dozen or more in just that one we found. Besides, I don’t think we want to be

driving around with those things inside our trucks. There's no telling how much contamination could be leaking from them. They're old. They're Russian made. Can you say, 'Chernobyl?' Driving that stuff around for a few hours and dying from radiation sickness is not something on my bucket-list of things to do.

"Besides, where would you take them?" Marlboro puffs his fourth cigarette in fifteen minutes.

Pad injects, "The White Sands Missile Range is only about six hours past the New Mexico state line. They would know what to do with those bombs there."

"There is no chance in hell that we are taking those bombs to White Sands, New Mexico," Marlboro says.

"The Army guys in Pecos would know what to do with them." Sue begins but is cut off by Marlboro.

"Do you want to drive into Pecos, into that, by now, blood hungry bunch of civilians fighting over every can of beans, and burn up all your gas crawling your way to where the Army is positioned? Not me. I'd rather walk across the desert in a sandstorm with no water and fifty pounds of lead weight on each leg."

"I have an idea," Weasel speaks up again. "It will take some group coordination, but I think it's a better plan."



"You blundering fool. You were supposed to scare that bulldozer driver to make him stop. No one said you should blow up a car and a woman." Hector is pacing the floor and ranting.

The fourth gunman says, "I'm sorry, I know. I saw her leaving and I was afraid she would tell the authorities where we are hiding."

"What is done is done. We need to get those weapons and move our position very soon. We cannot let any one of those remaining rednecks leave now. We will have to kill all of them.

“Diego, you take the two girls. Keep guard on them. If they try to escape, shoot them. Tow that spool of cable to our rendezvous point. I and the others will meet you there when our recovery operation is done.”

“Yes sir, but aren’t you afraid the Americans will try to prevent you from getting the trailer? Perhaps they will fight back or try to run in many directions.” Diego questions his orders.

“They won’t be any problem. They do not have our guns, and besides, they aren’t that smart. They are Americans.

“It is insane to me how dumb those rednecks really are. Just like it is absurd that the American government believes they can stop trafficking and immigration by building a wall. Thousands of trucks cross the Texas/Mexico border daily. On a regular basis, hundreds of people are brought into the U.S. aboard one of those trucks. A wall is not going to stop that from happening. For a price, someone will always help smuggle you in. Even if they have to paddle a canoe across the Gulf of Mexico.

The American government is bloated with mindless bureaucrats because mindless people vote them into office. Americans have too many dollars and not enough sense—countless billions of dollars and no common sense. It's a very wasteful combination.

“Someone has to show them that building a wall is a big waste of time. We will just go in through the front gate.”

CHAPTER 10: SECURITY BREACH



“It must be contagious.”

Across the sea, Jose/Sanjeev is becoming ill. “I am getting your stomach flu, as well.”

Red Scorpio, the chef wipes his sweating, fevered brow with a kitchen towel. “It is not the flu, Sanjeev.”

“The bombs—they must have been leaking. The flesh on my fingers is boiling and melting.”

Scorpio coughs up a mix of mucus and blood into a napkin in his other hand. “My lungs are swelling and heavy fluid is building inside them. The cells are ionizing.

“It is radiation sickness, Sanjeev. The symptoms can begin within twenty-four hours of exposure. We have been poisoned. I am dying. You may be dying, too. We will not be reaching Honduras or Venezuela, and we will not be going home in good condition.”

“What if we can get to a hospital in Palma?”

“There would be little they can do, but I don’t think I will last that long. The sickness is spreading rapidly. My mind is beginning to spasm. It’s neurovascular. Palma is still more than two days away. I do not think I’m going to make it to Palma.

“You did not handle all of the bombs like me. Your illness may

not be so severe. Perhaps you can be given antibiotics and a blood transfusion, or potassium iodide tablets. But the authorities are going to be asking a lot of questions about where and how you were exposed. Depending on what you tell them, they may not wish to help you.

“If I lose consciousness, tell no one on this ship what we have done. They will kill us both and bury us at sea. Swear to Allah that you will keep the secret. I do not want to be buried at sea with Osama bin Laden. He is a great martyr, as are we, but I want my body to be sent home. I want my family to see me and know me for what I have become.

Even in death, we have become great men. You and I have become great men. We will be received by Allah’s own hand. But please, don’t let them bury me at sea.”



Activity continues to bustle at Monahans Sandhills State Park. The Army and local oil-well firemen are deep in debate over whether or not to put out the inferno there.

One local fireman argues, “The owner is pissed. He claims he’s losing half-a-million dollars a day while that well burns. Eventually, he’s going to tell someone in the media that the Army is not allowing that fire to be extinguished. Public speculation will hit the fan if that happens.”

Captain Jeeter begins to agree, “Now that there is a very similar fire on I-10 near Amarillo, we’re not going to be able to bluff the media for much longer, Commander Fitzhugh. Texans can put two and two together, you know.”

Fitzhugh rests his eyes, briefly lowering his lids, propping his feet on the table. “Something about all the chatter and activity from ISIS just isn’t adding up. We’re missing something. This Sandhills

fire; the one in Amarillo—two more like them in Venezuela this morning—it just doesn't make good sense to be so spread out. Something else is afoot. I can smell it.”

A voice squawks from the speaker phone in the center of the table, “We know you’re right, Commander. The White House agrees this is a diversionary tactic designed to take our attention away from the ultimate mission.”

“What’s the real radiation hazard here?” Fitzhugh rubs his still closed eyes with the back side of his forefingers. “The interstate is half a mile away from this furnace. We’ve been camping on top of it for twenty-four hours now and the radiation is not getting worse, in fact, it is dissipating some.”

Fitzhugh continues, “This is just too convenient for the enemy. We close our major highways, while they are doing who knows what, a hundred miles away.”

Jeeter leans into the speaker phone, “It would make sense to me sirs, for us to put this fire out, and open the interstate. We can keep the park closed, but there is little point to keeping this charade going for much longer. Having the freeway closed is putting undue headache on Pecos and Midland/Odessa. People become animals when you put them in a cage.”

“How long till those power lines across I-20 are cleaned up?” Washington asks.

Jeeter responds, “TIEGM says Permian Electric Company will have the road east of Midland cleared in six to eight hours. They’re already on it. Power won’t be back on, but the road will be passable late this afternoon.”

Fitzhugh rises to his feet and stretches, “I say we plan to give the media a six o’clock news story that the road is reopening. We can kill this fire by then and it will give the impression that we have control of everything.”

“Give us an hour, Fitzhugh. We’ll run that idea up the flagpole

here in Washington and let you know what the President and heads of state have to say. We'll let you know when to make your move. The President may want to make any announcement himself."

"Ok, we got it. We'll talk to you in about an hour." Fitzhugh hits the off switch on the speaker phone. "I swear if Washington moved any slower, we could be at war and it would all be over before they could even lift their sluggish, naked, dead asses off of their comfortable heated seat toilets."



Weasel has filled two five-gallon cans with diesel from the company tank. He crouches but moves quickly to spread the fuel along the fence line.

Sue and Marla are busy in the Winnebago kitchen preparing to wrap coffee cans and oatmeal containers in aluminum foil. Both girls are now wearing snapback "Comanche Drilling Company" ball caps. Brim to the back, the caps serve to hold their hair back and signify their membership on the team.

Marla says, "We should use a magazine around each one to get them more to the right diameter."

"Nobody reads magazines anymore." Sue hesitates. "No wait, Weasel has a collection of old comic books. Those should work well."

Having agreed to Weasel's plan, Marlboro is on his belly at the rear of the pipe trailer, while Foot is again kicking up dust in the wind with the bulldozer. The cloud and the pile of dirt Foot has built along the fence prevent the terrorists from seeing any of the team's present activity.

Pad is at the front end of the trailer, on his knees, duct-taping scrub brush sticks into a bundle and then poking them into the pipe containing the weapons.

Briefly, Foot leaves his driver's seat to run to Weasel's side.

“We’re almost done.” Weasel places a foil wrapped cube the size of a brick directly into the stream of diesel fuel. “Say hello to my little pet alligator!” Weasel winks and laughs. “Can you hit that with a rifle from your RV?”

Foot says, “Pop!—hell, yeah. I can hit a dove from the hip at fifty yards with a scatter gun. I’m sure you wouldn’t know, but a good shooter can line up his targets in flight. I’ve hit three birds with one shell. I think my twelve-gauge can do the trick on this cute little ‘gator, all right.”

“I’ll get the payload from the girls.” Weasel turns to leave. “Let’s put a lid on this place. Have you got your bags packed?”

Foot laughs as he returns to the bulldozer, “Bitch, I never unpacked. I’m always ready to go.”

Foot’s words hang in the air around Weasel like a dreaded premonition. He jogs to meet Sue and Marla who have now hustled halfway across the common area, arms loaded with six aluminum wrapped cylinders.

Sue rushes to point out, “We ran out of coffee and oats. We had to use paint containers for two of them. If it makes any difference, they’re Comanche burnt orange.”

“They’re not metal cans, are they? I don’t think Marlboro wants any major shrapnel.”

Marla offers, “They are plastic quarts, like coffee containers.”

Beautiful, ladies—finish up, start the engine, and shut off the generators. Sue, let Smiley pee and then Y’all get inside.” Weasel stacks the cylinders against his chest and runs to Marlboro hollering back. “Marla, wait for Pad inside the van. We’ll be out of here in less than five minutes.”

Weasel’s timeline is right on. Marlboro is ready to load and rapidly stuffs three of Weasel’s cylinders into the pipe. He caps the pipe and the men hurry to the front of the trailer.

Pad says to Weasel, “We checked all the pipes. This was the only one with anything in it.”

Marlboro kneels and inserts into the open pipe a bundle of blasting caps with a wire attached. He inserts the remaining three canisters and then duct-tapes the wire to the last one. The sun shimmers along the foil wrapping. “Cap it up. We’re done here.”

Foot kills the bulldozer a few yards away, but only after he has swathed a level, smooth grade of sand over the entire area around the trailer. No one would ever know that anyone had been there just minutes before.

“Nice driving, Footster.” Marlboro chuckles, “... although, I thought you were going to run me over back there a couple of times.”

The men high-five each other and break toward their respective vehicles.

“Will you all be ready in five minutes, guys?” Weasel asks.

Marlboro hups, “Let’s rock.”

Singling out Pad, Weasel asks, “You going into Midland, Pad? I guess we’ll see you there?”

Pad avoids a direct answer. “We are all ready, Mr. Weasel.”

“I’m born ready.” Foot ads, “You say when; I’ll set the mote on fire.”

Sue is already in the Winnebago driver’s seat.

Weasel runs up to the window. “Hang a right on 652. Once you cross the river take the backroads into Kermit. Don’t slow down until you get at least fifty miles away from here. If you hear a big bang, turn left and don’t look back.” Weasel is genuine. “I love you, Sue.” He kisses her. “Go home. I’ll meet you there.”

“You stay safe, roughneck. If anything or anyone has to do it, I want to be the one to fuck you up, alright?” Sue mouths the words, “I love you.”

Weasel mockingly frowns and then devilishly grins just before

all hell breaks loose.

Guns blazing, the Jeep from next door, dune-bugging across the sand, abruptly roars up a cloud of dust on the main road coming into camp.

Simultaneously, a lone gunman's head appears above the mound of dirt built by Foot. One shoulder bolsters an AR-15, "Bap, bap, bap." The sniper battle cries, "Infidels! Praise to Allah!"

Foot stumbles and falls forward toward his fifth wheel.

Smiley, two hind legs together like a jack rabbit, charges up the mound as fast as his hips will take him. Bap, bap, bap! "Yelp."

"Foot!—Smiley!" Sue screams.

Marla snatches up a rifle that has been propped against Pad's van. "Bag-o-dirt!" POW! In one single shot, she takes down the sniper.

Weasel takes aim at his home-made mote alligator and fires at it. "Damn it." It's a miss.

Wounded by Marla, but rising again, the sniper on the mound takes direct aim at Weasel.

Marlboro takes a shot and squarely pings the alligator. Whoosh! The C-4 pack ignites a line of diesel fire all along the fence line.

The fire effectively blocks the sniper from advancing and singes his scruffy facial hair. His shrill shriek is heard even above the sound of all else.

Engine roaring, the Jeep makes a donut maneuver spraying sand and gravel, as well as automatic weapon fire in all directions. Stray bullets ricochet from every vehicle and solid object on the yard. Several holes are punched in the side of the large diesel storage tank. Diesel begins to pour out a river of fuel in all directions around both the diesel and the gasoline tanks.

One lone stray slug strikes the company propane tank. A thousand gallons of propane erupt with a deafening thunder. The resulting concussion noticeably moves the ground.

The Jeep driver shields his eyes from the flash. Instinctively, he jerks the wheel to avoid hitting the Winnebago and Sue. The sharp motion lurches the Jeep. A third man who is crouched against the roll bar behind the driver is abruptly ejected from the vehicle.

Weasel shouts, “Go, Bae, GO!”

Sue punches her running motor and the Winnebago lumbers into motion. Pad, with Marla in his van, rolls directly toward the Jeep.

Both the Jeep driver and the ejected passenger are momentarily stunned and Pad has a couple of seconds before his van gathers enough speed to consider ramming the Jeep. At the last second, he doesn't. Pad veers left and slides in behind Sue, headed for the exit to the highway.

Somehow, Foot, who is bleeding profusely from his left side, manages to climb into his truck. He revs his motor and his fifth-wheel lurches forward. Marlboro sprints to open and jump into Foot's passenger cab door. Just where the mouth of the dirt road into camp narrows, Foot idles back and comes to a waiting stop. “Come on Weasel.”

Weasel is driving Marlboro's pickup. Foot motions him in behind Pad and then takes the rear position. The caravan retreats toward Highway 285, leaving Marlboro's camper parked alone, in place.

Beginning to regain focus, the Jeep driver's eyes zero in on the pipe trailer. “Check the pipe.” He shouts to the ejected gunman and then gasses on the Jeep to follow the caravan of RVs.

Foot leans out of his driver-side window with a shotgun. Bloody left hand on the wheel, right arm in aim, shotgun barrel resting on the window frame, he fires and hits a second Weasel mote gator. “Bam! I told him I could hit those things.” Foot leans on his accelerator.

The mote ignites and the attacking Jeep is halted by a line of diesel fire across the road. The driver stands in his front seat to take aim at the retreating caravan, firing a dozen rounds, but only hitting the thick cloud of dust left in the crew's wake.

At the highway, Sue and Pad turn right, heading north. Weasel, in Marlboro's truck, turns left toward Pecos. Foot blocks the gate for a moment, while Marlboro jumps from the cab to position a brick-sized package on either side of the cattle guard. When he returns to the cab, Foot makes a right turn and enters the highway behind Sue and Pad.

Sixty seconds and about a half mile down the road, they all see the flash in their side-view mirrors. The cattle guard silently rises up on one end and does a pirouette across the ground like a finely-tuned ballerina. The short-lived dance effectively permits the cattle guard to distribute Marlboro's well positioned C-4 discharge and allows the heavy steel grate to gently prop itself against the fence, blocking the gate.

A full second later, the sound of the blast reaches the escaping vehicles.

"That will slow them down for a little while." Laughing, Marlboro slaps Foot on the shoulder. "Did you see that thing do a Texas two-step twirl?"

"Damn it, man. That was a full-on road show—literally." Foot is seriously hurt and winces in pain.

"We have to get you to a hospital. There is nothing in this direction, other than Carlsbad. There is no way you can wait six or more hours to get to Midland. Midland may not have electricity, anyway. Pull over. Let me drive, Foot. You need to lie down."

Still driving, Foot slumps forward and passes out.

Marlboro is half Foot's size, but with one hand he grabs the wheel and with his other hand Marlboro muscles Foot to the passenger side. Adrenaline pumping, he wrestles Foot across the bench-seat leather. The struggle leaves a generous pool of blood to drip between the upholstery seams and onto the carpet.

"Break two-seven." Marlboro finally centers the truck and fifth-wheel between the ditches. "Sue—Pad. Foot is hurt really bad. He

can't make it to Midland. Change of plan—we're taking a detour to Carlsbad Medical."

Sue squawks, "That's way on the other side of town. What if Carlsbad is as crazy as Pecos is?"

"You got any better idea?"

Sue just keys her mic. She is approaching her turn in Orla to head east.

"I'm going with you." Pad pauses. "My van can make better time than that big camper. "Shall I pull over? We can put you and Foot in here with us."

"And leave his truck and trailer out here alone?" Marlboro asks.

"I can get up to near a hundred miles an hour. Can you?" Pad insists.

"You have a point. Pull over at the old grocery store."

"I'm going, too!" Reaching the deserted corner store, Sue skids the Winnebago to a stop next to the dilapidated fuel pump awning and jumps out.

Pad slides into the parking lot beside her and alongside a toppled-over stone marker. Denoting the historical significance of Orla, the marker lies weathered and on its side, showing as much age as the old relic of a store itself.

As she clicks her remote door lock, Sue races to Foot's truck just as Marlboro wheels in behind her. Pad quickly reverses and backs his van's rear doors to where Marlboro jumps from the cab.

When Marlboro begins to drag Foot from the truck, it is clear to the others that Foot's lifeless body is dead weight. Together, they all scramble to load the large man into Pad's van, leaving both the Winnebago and Foot's rig in a spray of spinning tires.



Hector yells, “You checked the load?”

His partner answers, “Yes, the cylinders are inside.”

The two terrorists work rapidly to hook the pipe trailer to the Jeep hitch.

Although both of the mote fires built by Weasel are almost dead, diesel fuel is steadily pouring onto the ground around the company fuel tanks. A large pool of diesel accumulates around the base of the capped oil well where the Comanche crew had drilled last year.

“Isn’t that where we were supposed to load our first column of bombs?”

Hector answers, “Yes, I’m afraid it is. We will just have an extra cylinder to put into each of our next four wells.”

The screech of a low-flying F-16 rapidly pitches from high to low directly overhead.

“That is U.S. Air Force reconnaissance. They must have seen the smoke from the car fire. Army choppers won’t be far behind. We have to get out of here immediately.”

With the trailer hook-up made, the two men strap themselves into the front seats. All four Jeep wheels, loosely gripping the ground, strain to coax the pipe trailer from the bed of sand it has managed to sink into since being stashed there.

Crossing the stream of diesel that is flooding the camp from the bullet-riddled diesel tank, the Jeep tires begin to slip and slide from side to side. The motion splatters the fuel onto both sides of the Jeep and the lethargic pipe trailer.

Ten yards past the fuel stream, and without slowing down, Hector reaches into a box behind his seat and produces a road flare. “Cover your ears.”

He doesn’t wait long enough to allow the splattered fuel on his

vehicle to disperse or dry. He lights and tosses the flare into the flowing diesel stream behind them.

“Whoosh.” The pool of black fuel ignites into a blistering black and orange wall of fire and dense smoke. “Whoosh.” The flame, in a back-draft, flashes back onto the trailer and then up the sides of the Jeep itself. Both men inside are instantly singed and Hector screams in a death chant, “Praise be to Allah!”

In another whoosh, the riddled diesel tank itself erupts. Shards from the tank pierce the gasoline tank beside it. The resulting explosion, one thousand gallons of diesel, plus one thousand gallons of gasoline, is ferocious. The blast rocks the desert and reverberates for thirty or more miles.

To the astonishment of the Jeep passengers, the concussion sucks all the oxygen out of the air for almost three hundred feet around the immediate inferno. The vacuum kills the flames on their vehicle and pipe trailer almost as fast as they had ignited. Continuing to speed away, the two men look back just in time to see the old capped oil well ignite. That final eruption creates a well-head fire that rises more than two hundred feet into the air.



Racing toward Pecos at top speed, Weasel can see the candle light up in his rear view. A mushroom black cloud rises toward the ionosphere above the blast. The thought crosses Weasel’s mind that a hydrogen bomb would be much bigger. Weasel has already made twenty-five of the forty miles to Pecos.

Although he is alone in the truck, he speaks as if Smiley is right by his side listening, “They must have blown the fuel tanks Maybe they blew themselves up.

“It’s a good thing that there isn’t much traffic out here on the highway. Let’s hope the roads in town are in better condition than

they were this morning, huh, boy?” Weasel glances into the passenger seat and realizes he is alone. His mounting despair is further compressed into the lines on his forehead as it begins to sink in that Smiley is no longer with him.

Although Weasel prides on never showing much emotion, here and now, in this private place alone; his eyes dampen and gradually a lone tear rolls down his dusty face. He checks his speed. He’s running at nearly one-hundred-twenty miles per hour, barreling into Pecos like Paul Revere into Lexington, as fast as the horse will run.

Saddened and alone he hopes his friend Foot is in better condition than his companion Smiley. Weasel smacks the steering wheel with both hands as he asks himself, “What the hell kind of people are we becoming?”



Initially, a corporal guarding the Chinook helicopter across the road from Walmart doesn’t give much credence to Weasel.

Filthy, smelling of diesel and burned rubber, Weasel makes his first impression on the Army with a random statement. “They may have nuclear weapons!”

His appearance and the odd comment present Weasel to the corporal as a desert-crazed scavenger. Weasel blinks his eyes to clear his road vision and is puzzled by the corporal’s expression of patronizing reassurance. It’s certainly not the Paul Revere reception that Weasel may have imagined in his own personal reality.

“We’re under attack. We found nuclear weapons in an oil field north of here. I’m a Comanche roughneck.” The fact that Weasel is indignant, further off-puts the corporal who sees the rushed Weasel as a peculiar individual who is probably indigent or at least a local whacko. The corporal has no idea that Comanche is the name of a drilling company and thinks Weasel is an American Indian.

“Oh, hey, I’m Irish.” He dismisses Weasel with a condescending remark, “They do have nuclear weapons! We are here to stop them! I’m an American Navy Seal. They don’t have a chance against us. There’s no need to worry, chief.”

Weasel snaps, “You pompous jackass, have you always been a jackass or is that something you’ve just recently acquired at the ‘I Want to be a Junior Jackass’ store?”

Now, Weasel takes control. “My name is Richard Werner. Dick. You can call me Dick. I’m a desilter for a Comanche Drilling Company contract about fifty miles north of here. My team and I discovered a weapons cache on our drill site that appears to be an array of Soviet nuclear bombs—twenty of them. We also found a group of AR-15 armed men who appear to be intent on turning our little part of the desert here into the next southern Iraq.”

Weasel mockingly salutes, “Sir—do you have a radio or some way to communicate with anyone smarter than you or are you here just for the fucking show?”



Before being allowed to cross the border into New Mexico, Pad’s van is merged into a single-lane row of vehicles.

With the recent wreck of the human smuggling truck, the same truck Marla and dozens of others were trafficked in, U.S. Border Patrol agents are still actively searching the miles around for scattered aliens. The waiting line to cross the state border is ten to twelve cars long. ICE vehicles and barricades block the road into a narrow stream and each vehicle is vetted through the roadblock, one at a time. The line is painfully slow.

“We’re going to lose a lot of valuable time if we have to explain ourselves.” Pad contemplates, “What if they want to see Marla’s I.D.?”

Sue is calm. “We’ll say Marla is your wife and that she doesn’t

drive. She speaks English well enough.

“They may ask you a question or two, Marla. Just say your papers are at home.” Sue grimaces as she watches Marlboro hover over Foot.

Foot is breathing, just barely. Laboriously he struggles to exhale but otherwise is not coherent or lucid. He does, however, unconsciously grumble as he coughs, “Aargh—baster—oids.”

Marla, thinking that Foot’s unconscious words are a common Texan phrase, repeats his nonsense, “Basteroids.”

Sue redirects to Pad, “Lead with, we have an emergency. Tell the officer that Foot was shot by illegals and that if we don’t get him to the hospital ASAP, he will die. That should get some attention. Then if the agent wants to detain us, he can make a radio call for an ambulance.”

Marlboro raises his voice sternly, “Don’t wait, Pad. Flash your headlights. Honk your horn. Try to weave out of line. Get their attention now.”

Fear strains Pad’s eyes. He looks over his shoulder at Marlboro and Foot. Then he pauses, hoping to somehow disappear into Marla’s stare.

Marla shows less fear on her face than Pad does. She nods her head and in a brief glance, a weak smile curls the corners of her lips. “You can’t be afraid, Pad. Be strong. You have to think of Mr. Foot. His life is at stake. We have to do it, Pad.” She purses her lips.

Pad switches on his emergency flashers and edges forward and to the left. Continually tipping his lights from low to high beam and persistently honking his horn produces some rapid movement at the front of the line.

Armed guards immediately flank both sides of the road and two state trooper vehicles roar into place to skirt both sides of Pad’s van. Officers erupt from the cars, guns drawn and spouting orders. “Hands where we can see them, people! Stop! Alto!”



The Walmart army detail in Pecos is abruptly a flurry of action. Wind-blown sand sprays Weasel and the corporal. One U.S. Airforce helicopter soft-lands in the field next to where they lean into the wind and shield their faces with their sleeves. Another Chinook flies north, up U.S. 285. Two more ICE helicopters double-time it to spring ahead of the Chinook.

Weasel remarks to the corporal, “The wheels of government are slow to get moving, but when they do deploy, they get down to serious business.”

The chopper passenger door swings open. “Werner?” It’s Fitzhugh, shouting above the engine noise. “Climb aboard, son. We were hoping to hear something from someone like you. You’re right on time. Can you show us where your camp is?”

Ducking the rotor, Weasel runs forward, but not before turning back to the corporal. Weasel sincerely salutes. “Thank you, sir.”

“Wish I were going with you,” the corporal says. “Kick their bastard asses! Good luck, Dick!”

Weasel grins. “First time in my life, I’m proud to be a Dick.”



Not more than ten miles south of the Comanche Drilling site, just down the Pecos River, along the same bank, the band of three remaining terrorists feverishly work into a pitch. The two Jeeps, with their respective trailers, are backed up around a capped oil well. Both engines running, one Jeep driver, Diego is focused on preparing to unroll his spool of cable. His hostages, the two females hunker down and huddle together, lashed to the Jeep’s roll bar.

Hector crams the other slightly-singed Jeep into park, positioning it one-hundred-eighty degrees opposite Diego’s load.

When Diego crouches down and begins to uncap the well, the rear of Hector's torrid thirty-foot trailer-load of pipe is less than three paces from Diego's head and shoulders.

"We must move quickly." Hector is running to the rear of his load. "We were not able to put any containers in the first well, so we will use five in each of the remaining four holes."

Diego shows concern on his forehead. "Do you think we will have time to load all of the bombs before the helicopters come?"

Hector's reply is ominous, "We have to try. If it comes to be that we are interrupted, we will blow up the entire load, wherever we are at that time."

The captive girls wrestle against the roll bar. They perceive enough of the conversation to realize that they may be about to die at any time. But, neither the men nor women are aware that the pipe load has been tampered with by the Comanche crew.

One of the women rapidly rubs her bindings against a jagged metal flange where the roll bar is welded to the Jeep frame. She screens her action from view with her torn shirt tail.

Hector removes a pair of leather gloves from his hip pocket and wedges his hands inside. His blue scorpion tattoo, on his right hand, just between the thumb and forefinger seemingly flexes its stinger when he wiggles his fingers into the gloves.

Hector's passenger joins Diego at the well cap. "Do you need anything?"

Diego responds, "No, just make sure that spool spins at the same speed as the winch when I begin to lower the containers. Don't let the cable unravel faster than the bombs go down. If it gets tangled, we'll lose precious time."

"I understand. I'll man the brake."

Fifteen to twenty yards from where the men ready themselves, three jackrabbits have scampered into hiding in the thickest spot they

can find among a grouping of brittle sage bushes. They would probably go unnoticed by the men, but their sixth sense of impending danger provokes one of them to rustle their sage-fragrant enclave. Jumping six feet at first, another rabbit shoots out in a zig-zag sprint for another hiding place.

The rabbits startle Diego. He jumps about six feet himself, draws his pistol, and fires four shots in rapid succession.

Rabbits scatter in every direction, but none of them are hit. It happens so fast that Hector is literally pitched into laughter.

Stepping backward, catching his balance Hector bellows like a Brahma bull calf. "You should see your face."

"I would have hit them, but I have grit in my eyes."

Hector continues to laugh. He bends at the waist to remove the end cap from the center pipe on the bottom row of the trailer. Twisting the cap slowly counter-clockwise, he places it on the ground. He further stoops to look into the cavity. The fake canisters that Marlboro has placed inside look so similar to the real bomb canisters that Hector is not at all alerted to anything having been re-rigged in his load. It looks exactly as it did when it was first smuggled to the desert.

"This hole is only about six thousand feet deep. We should be able to load it in fifteen minutes. The timers and batteries are ready?" Hector asks.

Diego taps his nose with his right forefinger. "We are all set."

Hector reaches into the pipe cavity to remove the first canister from its hiding place. Believing the canister will have considerable weight he tugs at it generously. The wire that was duct-taped to Marlboro's explosive switch stretches taut and detonates on cue.

In a flash of oatmeal powder, fine-grind coffee, and burnt-orange Rust-Oleum paint, the rear end of the pipe erupts. A millisecond later, in sympathetic combustion, the other end of the chamber also blows up.

More like a giant confetti cannon than a bomb, the double explosion deafens all three men and both women. Instantly, none of them hear anything more than a shrill, high-pitched ringing in their heads.

In addition to being deaf the three men, who had been standing between the women and the blast, are so blinded by the ensuing discharge of bright orange grit that they stumble to their knees. They immediately and aimlessly flail, frantically wiping their eyes and faces, shrieking in burning pain from the oil-based chemicals in the paint. The mixture from the fake canisters shrouds the men and both vehicles, but the girls do not get sprayed, having been shielded by their captors.

One girl, Isabel breaks free and silently proceeds to untie the other.

Hector is at first confused at being still alive. “We’ve been sabotaged. Why did our nuclear weapons not explode?” He’s furious, but as he shouts obscenities he realizes that he cannot even hear his own voice. “Allah! What has happened?”

The girls climb into the front seat, and with the Jeep still running, Isabel takes the wheel and shifts into gear.

Blindly, Diego discharges his pistol in the girl’s direction. “Ping, Ping.”

The girl in the passenger seat rolls from the Jeep and onto the ground at Hector’s feet. Through a blistering glaze over his eyes, Hector unholsters his Makarov pistol and puts four slugs into the girl. Isabel speeds away with the spool of cable unraveling behind her.

Panicked, Isabel doesn’t know that the cable has wrapped itself around the still loosely-capped oil well. She swerves to miss a cluster of sage.

Gas pedal to the floor, Isabel’s Jeep bounces across a rut, snapping the trailer hitch free and catapulting the trailer, cable spool and all into the air. Hector sees the cable snag, snapping the wellhead

from the ground casing, sparking, and exploding into a Roman Candle of natural gas. Isabel continues on, but the three Islamic terrorists drop to the ground.

Hector dives and rolls alongside his own singed Jeep, avoiding the direct blast, but not avoiding the searing heat. His gloved hands grip the steering wheel and it bends with his weight as he swings into position to maneuver the Jeep away from the blaze.

Hector is expressionless as his Jeep inches forward. Without emotion, he leaves two of his men helpless, to writhe in flames, screaming for their lives, and to never move again.

CHAPTER 11: HELL TO PAY



Almost exactly halfway between Pecos and Carlsbad, this newest of oil-well fires, with its distinctive thick black cloud can be seen in both towns. From the Air Force helicopter, Weasel is the first aboard to see the flame. “That must be them. They’ve lit up another one.”

“*They’ve lit up?*” Fitzhugh mocks Weasel’s prominent Texas accent. “You really are Texan, *ain’t ya?*” He chuckles, “Do you also say ‘*fyer*’ and ‘*pyee*’ with two syllables for the words *fire* and *pie*?”

“Yup, *shore* do!” Weasel, not at all intimidated, strikes a quick, proud, childish pose. “Hey, don’t knock it. When it comes to getting things done, it really doesn’t matter how you sound. It matters what you do.”

“Well, don’t look too cute, smart guy. Unfortunately, some of the things you’ve already told us that you’ve done may be construed as manslaughter, obstruction of justice, tampering with evidence, aiding-and-abetting illegal aliens—and I’m sure there are people in Washington who can imagine even more colorful crimes—including your sounding like a backward, naive redneck.” Fitzhugh’s brow furrows. “I’m not being funny right now. You and your friends may be thrown in federal jail for a long time before any one of you gets a TV interview or writes a book about becoming a Texas national hero.”

Weasel's pose transforms into a 'deer-in-the-headlights' stare. It begins to dawn on him that he and his friends may not be seen as helpful allies by the authorities at Homeland Security. "No good deed goes unpunished?"

"Something like that, but more like, never stick your nose in the government's business." Fitzhugh buttons his statement.

The Air Force helicopter pilot vectors left to intercept Isabel's rapidly-escaping Jeep. Coming from behind and traveling fast enough to make it appear like Weasel and Fitzhugh are standing still two F-16s scream past. The jets are followed by two Boeing AH-64 Apache Longbow helicopters. Some of the most formidable weapons platforms in the Army, the two choppers veer right to target Hector. The Apaches are fully armed with a 30 mm Chain Gun; several 70mm air-to-ground rockets; and both Hellfire and Stinger missiles.

Flying in at over two-hundred-miles-per-hour, the two Longbows slow to circle Hector's smoking Jeep, keeping a quarter mile radius between them. Hector has retreated some two-hundred yards from the oil well blowout, but his Jeep is still hot enough that the seats stick to his clothing when he rises to step into the back. Eyebrows and hair singed off, Hector is barely recognizable under a slathering of day-glow orange. He appears to have been tarred-and-feathered with orange tar and oatmeal feathers.

Fitzhugh's helicopter maneuvers to shadow Isabel's Jeep, now headed north onto U.S. 285, at near one hundred miles an hour. Flying some five hundred feet above and just behind Isabel, Weasel fingers her for Fitzhugh. "Commander, that girl is one of the hostages. She was one of the illegals aboard the wrecked semi transport."

Over his headset, Fitzhugh responds to an inquiry from the lead Apache pilot, "Maintain your position."

The pilot asks, "Are we sure there is no nuclear danger if we fire on this guy?"

Fitzhugh replies "Hold your fire. Lock on, but do not fire unless

they shoot at you first.”

Oatmeal slime dripping from his gloves, Hector finds the RPG launcher in his Jeep bed. He rises to stand, shouldering the grenade launcher, and shouting, “Infidels.” He shoots at the Apache that is closest to him.

Alert signals immediately begin to sound off in the targeted Longbow, indicating that it has just been fired upon. In rapid succession, the helicopter gunman fires two Stingers.

Simultaneously the helicopter and Hector’s Jeep fatally detonate. No more than twenty-five feet above the ground, the last thing Hector sees are crewmen jumping from the chopper just as it explodes into a fireball.

“Fall back,” Fitzhugh orders the remaining Apache to put some distance between them.

The wounded helicopter roars to the ground in another massive explosion.

“Rescue, respond ASAP. Friendlies on the ground—coordinates, 31.7250° North, 103.8085° West. Aircraft down! Do you copy?”

“Ten-four, we’re in pursuit.”

“Do we have any sign of radioactive fallout?” Fitzhugh asks.

“All indicators are normal, sir. We are watching closely.”

Fitzhugh’s pilot finally overtakes Isabel’s Jeep and settles onto the highway directly in front of her. Isabel skids to a stop on the shoulder and shows her hands in surrender. At gunpoint, she is rapidly handcuffed and roughly ushered into the chopper.

Weasel asks her, “Are you okay?”

A tear streaming down her face, Isabel hides her eyes.

“We rescued Marla. Marla is okay. Are you okay?”

When she looks up, it is evident that Isabel is no more than a child. At most, she appears to be fifteen years old. She responds between sobs, wrestling with her cuffs, “*Sí, estoy*, okay.”

“Do we really need those?” With his eyes, Weasel directs Fitzhugh toward Isabel’s handcuff restraints.

Fitzhugh shows little empathy, but nods to the arresting soldier, telling Isabel, “You’re going to be safe now. We’re here to help you.” His gesture does not erase the fear in Isabel’s terrified, mousy expression.

Fitzhugh barks again into his headset microphone, “Status?”

His chopper rises again from the pavement, sharply taking a wide-berth west, away from the blast zone.

“We still have no indication of fallout, sir. The enemy is confirmed destroyed.”

“Roger, Apache,” Fitzhugh adds, “Maintain your position. We are going to try to find those bombs before anyone else does.”

Arching across the sky, Weasel can now see three oil-well fires. The towering flame at Sandhills National Park continues to light up the horizon to the southeast. Directly out the window is the blowout where Hector has just been killed and now coming into view to the northeast, the blowout burning at the Comanche job site. The sky is black with smoke and sooty debris, producing cloud swirls in the wake of the helicopter blades above Weasel’s seat. The air is as thick as cake batter in the throes of an electric mixer’s beaters.

With the exception of being on a drilling rig crow’s nest from time-to-time at a job site, Weasel has never had a view of the desert from this perspective. Every time he has ever looked out across such a wide swath of West Texas before, the land has seemed endless, silent, and practically lifeless. In this flight, his perception is very different. A wall of red-orange fire and black smoke blocks any ability to see beyond five miles east, giving the backdrop a definitive barrier. Animal wildlife is hustling everywhere. Mule deer, jack rabbits, bands of coyotes that would normally be shaded from the sun on a hot day like today, are all darting out in frantic random directions. The roar of jet helicopters, sizzling fires and even the almost-audible

pounding of his own heart combine so loudly that they effectively interfere with Weasel's internal mental thought processes. Weasel's expression is blankly confounded.

Swinging wide to the north, the chopper passes over Orla and from his vantage point Weasel spots his Winnebago and Foot's truck and fifth-wheel at the old store historical landmark. A sense of urgency is thrown over his brow. He sees that the vehicles have been left abandoned. It crosses his mind that his friends may have been chased down, arrested, or that they are otherwise still in danger. When he focuses in on the overturned stone marker that identifies the historical significance of the site, his second thought is that after today, Orla will forever have a new meaning in the history books.

"We have to find my crew." Weasel snaps out of his momentary lapse in cognition.

Fitzhugh shows no emotion. "We have to secure those bombs. Where did you put them—in the RVs?"

Weasel hesitates to answer. His brain scatters between concern for his team and Fitzhugh's warning that they may be in deep trouble. "They were supposed to be going home to Midland. My girl was driving the Winnebago. My buds were in the pickup."

Fitzhugh persists, "Where are the nukes?"

"We buried them. They are right where we found them. Marlboro put them in a trench that Foot made with our bulldozer."

"Did they handle those canisters directly?"

Weasel answers, "Marlboro did. Foot just buried them with the dozer blade."

Fitzhugh adjusts his microphone. "Homeland Base, Jeeter, have you got a copy?"

Captain Jeeter's voice penetrates the intercom. "Affirmative, Commander."

"We need an all-points bulletin for one white Chevy van,

possibly headed north on 285, in the direction of Carlsbad, New Mexico.” Fitzhugh leans into Weasel. “Anything else?”

Weasel almost doesn’t say, “Texas plates, that’s a 2014 white Chevy pop-up van.”

Jeeter responds, “We have detained that vehicle just south of the New Mexico state line. Five suspects have been apprehended at the border checkpoint, sir.”

“One occupant of that vehicle, by the name of Marlboro and one Mario Sanchez should be immediately quarantined for possible radiation exposure. Another passenger, Foot, Randall Tomean needs to be fully isolated and monitored as well. These two individuals may have come in direct contact with high-level radioactive materials.”

“Ten-four, sir.”

Fitzhugh continues, “Does the Carlsbad Medical Center have electric power?”

“Yes, sir, that’s another grid. The entire city has power.”

“Give that van a military escort to the Medical Center. I want to interview everyone in that van, individually. Is there a heliport at the Med Center?”

“Yes, sir, there is one on the southwest corner of the complex. I will make sure it’s cleared and prepared for your arrival, sir.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Fitzhugh changes the subject, “I want two Chinook deployments at both of those new oil-well fires. We’re going to need some men with hazmat suits and shovels at the first one. We’re also going to need a full report on casualties at both wells. Can you cover all of that for me, Jeeter?”

“Will do, sir.”

“It’s possible that Soviet nuclear weapons are buried at the primary location. But, I don’t want anyone digging for those bombs without my order. Am I clear?”

“Very clear. We have resources in route as we speak, sir.”

Jeeter reports back to Fitzhugh, “I have the Pentagon on the line, sir. Is there any message you wish to relay to Washington?”

“Tell them that if we’re right, we’re going to need to make preparation to raise some hell with Syria, or Russia, or somebody. Having nuclear weapons get this far inside our national borders is not something to take lightly. Homeland Security is going to have a lot of questions to answer. Let the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Advisor know that I will be on the horn to them by six o’clock. I’ll leave it to those guys to brief the White House.”

“Thank you, sir.” Jeeter signs off, “Base out.”



In stark contrast with what is occurring sociologically and uncommonly in Pecos, Texas, a sense of norm is in place in Carlsbad, New Mexico. The towns are only slightly over eighty-five miles apart, but an entire world away from each other today. While hellish chaos is dominant in electrically-blacked-out Pecos, near average, everyday life is in place in Carlsbad.

Seven-hundred feet in elevation above Pecos, Carlsbad has also burgeoned along the Pecos River, but in the somewhat naturally greener flats along the foothills of the Guadalupe Mountains. Here at the base of the mountains, with summer rains and winter snows, the river is dammed into several reservoirs, running through the center of the town.

Those dams retain enough water to alter the Carlsbad climate. It is noticeably cooler and more humid in the resultant bubble or dome created over the city by its lakes. Carlsbad not only feels less like a desert than Pecos but even in the arid west, more like an oasis. The atmosphere, the air, the plants here are different; and the reduced amount of dust in the air gives a wisp of relief and fresher smells to one’s nostrils.

Weasel breathes in deeply, opening his sinuses and hedging his numbing headache. Elbows on his knees, he rubs his temples with his head in his hands when the helicopter begins to descend.

Weasel has had only fifteen to twenty minutes to stare out the window and consider the statements Fitzhugh made regarding possible troubles on the horizon for the Comanche team. Until now, the thought has just never crossed his mind that actions he and the group have taken may have only *even traded* their physical imminent-death danger for the equally damning legal hell of judicially-imposed mandates.

He contemplates going to jail, envisions months of legislative committee interrogations in Washington, and grits his jaw to think how he may be facing many years of trials. It melts his hope of finding Sue at the hospital to think that he and she may, even for decades, be forced to encounter unending legal expenses and total loss of control over their own lives. Mentally, he is now one-hundred-eighty degrees from how he felt an hour or so ago, Weasel shudders at his new prospectus on reality.

Even so, Weasel's hopes *are* spurred when he sees Pad's van being escorted into the hospital ER parking area. The Army helicopter has managed to hit the heliport pad even before the remaining Comanche team unloads and Foot is extracted from the van.

Positioned fifty yards across the parking lot, Weasel cannot see if Sue exits the van with the others. Avoiding attention, he checks his phone for bars and finding four, he tries to text her as soon as Fitzhugh focuses attention on getting out of the chopper. "Don't say anything. We need to talk to a lawyer. Pass the word. We may be in a little trouble. I'll try to call our Houston office."

Just as Weasel hits send on his text message he finally sees Sue in the crowd around the gurney that carries a limp Foot. She and all the others, with the exception of Foot, are strung together and restrained with zip-tie handcuffs. Obviously, Sue will not be receiving

any text messages anytime soon.

Weasel moves to exit the craft behind Fitzhugh. “You stay. This won’t take long.” Fitzhugh is stern. “You and I still need to take a little ride.”

“I want to see my friends. I need to know if they’re all alright.” Under Fitzhugh’s thumb to his chest, Weasel plops back down.

Exiting, Fitzhugh remarks, “I’ll give you all the gruesome details. Just sit tight for right now. I’m going to need your full cooperation, son.”

Weasel whispers to Isabel, not knowing if she understands much English or not. “First, we’re victims of foreign attack and assault; then the murder of our friends and the fear of our own deaths. We try to help the best we can, and now we’re victims of the system we tried to help in the first place. How ironic is that?”

Isabel replies with nothing more than, “Marla?” She notices Marla finally being led through the sliding doors of the ER by armed ICE agents. When the doors close Isabel asks, “*¿Marla va a casa?*”

Weasel feels Isabel’s pain. “I don’t know if Marla is going home, but I do know how you feel. My friends are being treated like criminals, too.”

Isabel wrings her hands and shakes her head. Silently, she lowers her eyes, letting her hair cover her face to hide her bitter fear.

“It’s a hell of a pill to have to take.” Weasel begins trying to make a call, but the line gets dropped repeatedly. He begins typing another text. This one to Comanche Drilling Company headquarters in Houston. His message is short. “Detained by federal officials. Some of us are still alive. We need medical and legal help at Carlsbad ER. Contact ASAP.”



Inside the ER activity around Foot is rapidly intensifying.

The head nurse addresses the staff, “We don’t have enough O-negative to take him into surgery.”

“What does that mean?” Marla asks Sue.

“Foot has the blood type, ‘O-negative.’” He can only be given O-negative blood in a transfusion. He’s lost a lot of blood. They’re worried surgery will make things worse for him.”

Shyly Marla offers, “I’m O-negative. I have that type of blood. I’m the universal donor. I gave blood once before—to my sister in Tegucigalpa.”

Sue speaks up over the crowd. “Can we all be tested? Marla says she’s O-negative.”

“I’ll give blood, too. But I’m type ‘A.’ Pad is still leashed to Sue and Marla, but Marlboro has now been isolated in another room.

Sue sees an opportunity to get some outside communication. “If you let us have our phones, we may be able to contract some of the other field crews for Comanche Drilling. We may be able to find more blood. There are other teams just across the Texas line.” Sue is bluffing, but hoping to get herself and the others freed and perhaps a Wi-Fi connection or a working outside telephone line.

Fitzhugh and three federal ICE agents have gathered in pow-wow near the ER entrance. The opening and closing of the automatic doors, along with rushing wind and hospital patrons in the room, muffles the private conversation. Though unheard, the outcome of the briefing clearly leaves Fitzhugh in charge as the agents all acquiesce with a handshake, directing him to the nurse’s station.

Fitzhugh removes a walkie-talkie from his belt and when he speaks into it, he can be heard overhead on the intercom inside the helicopter where Weasel and Isabel are being held. “I’m going to need a detail of seven men, two who speak Spanish, on twenty-four-hour guard duty at Carlsbad Medical.”

“Copy.”

While rapid-fire communications continue breaking across the radio, Weasel continues thinking aloud. “They are going to separate all of us.”

Isabel just stares back and forth between him and the sun going down in the distance over the Guadalupe Mountain range. The orange sky and the purple foothills reflect in Weasel’s pupils. It’s beautiful to her. Even when the sky is darkened by a cloud of millions of Mexican free-tailed bats leaving the caverns and caves from the west for their nightly feeding time, Isabel glows with delight.

Together on this helicopter, Isabel with her childlike expression of hope for a new and better life, and Weasel with a face of disdain and drain could not be more juxtapositioned. Seated side-by-side, the reality of who they are and where they are in life is evidenced by how they posture themselves so differently. Weasel slumped and Isabel wide-eyed, they are both *from* and *still on* opposite sides of the world.



In the days and weeks following the Orla oil-well fires, news reports and drugstore gossip around Midland begin to wane. For some time, every conversation in town included something about the government ‘Sandhills Coverup.’ Eventually, all the talk idled back into urban myth and local legend.

Marlboro was transferred to San Antonio’s Brook Army Medical Center burn unit. His hands were hot. Radiation exposure has destroyed multiple skin grafts forcing Marlboro to remain in critical condition in intensive care for more than two months. They are still trying to save his right hand.

Foot has endured two surgeries himself. One for his gut bullet wound and one for a 12 mm kidney stone they found on his CT-scan. He has since declared that “by having some of Marla’s blood in him,” he “can now stop a bullet and catch a train.”

And yes, Fitzhugh was correct, over the past several months, there have been countless interviews with government officials. Every person on the Comanche team has had to cope with endless hours of interrogation and ultimately incessant debriefings. It all came to a swift end, though, when Sue's uncle, the Senator from California got involved.

Sue had kept a daily ledger on her laptop and taken dozens of pictures with her cell phone, some complete with video and sound. Even though she had no internet or cell connection throughout her ordeal, she kept notes—a running diary chronicling her vacation—and while it turned out to be the world's worst vacation, when her devices were powered up by authorities, her auto-sync mechanisms grabbed the first available internet connection and everything was uploaded to the cloud.

Sue's uncle got the first email with attachments. Sue laid out the whole story for her uncle to be able to take public in the eventuality of any government difficulty for her or her friends. It turned out to be the smartest move any of the 'wild Indians,' as the Comanche team is now dubbed, ever made.

The government was intent on not letting details out to the media about any 'perceived' hydrogen-bomb risk. As secret as if it were the Roswell, NM UFO crash from the 1940s, the government hid from the public that Soviet weapons had made it inside U.S. borders. It was published in the news that, "an attempt to smuggle low-grade nuclear dirty bombs into the U.S. was intercepted by the TSA at the Port of Houston." To explain the electric power outages, the official report was, "They were non-related and coincidental." The grid-hacking incident was, "merely an internal TIEGM security system's blind test."

So, when Fitzhugh and the Pentagon wanted to put all of the Comanche team into the witness protection program and keep them out of circulation, Sue's uncle intervened. He threatened to release Sue's ledger files to a TV station in San Francisco. That gave the team

the leverage to cut a deal. For their freedom, and for not being charged with any crime, the team had to agree to remain quiet. So they did.

Sue and Pad took it one step further and demanded that Isabel and Marla be given asylum—and Sue and Marlboro both insisted that Ariana Tejas Hernandez and her parents be granted full citizenship.

To everyone's surprise, it worked. The federal government met all of the demands.

Now, some six months after the radical West Texas invasion, Marla finally takes a brief break to complete a letter she has been writing to her deceased mother. It nicely sums up her life's adventure so far...



...Madre, you would be so proud of all of us.

In lieu of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, we all got a big tax-free government check and Weasel has been promised a federal grant to build a hydrogen gas station on the freeway. Construction is scheduled to begin next month. Weasel also just learned that Sue is now pregnant. They are both very much in love. I hope they name me as their baby's godmother. Sue is due in June.

When we all finally got back together there was a lot of political and hypothetical discussion between us, but we kept our word and never spoke to the newscasters. We talked privately quite a lot when we saw each other at the funerals for Wichita and Donna.

Foot thinks, "Building walls is the answer" to all of America's problems. He says, "Good fences make good neighbors." He also says that "the Russians and the Syrians should both be sanctioned by the UN Security Council—Especially Russia for letting those bombs travel outside of their country."

Weasel says, "There will never be anyone who can hold countries accountable for their war crimes." He thinks, "Sanctions don't work,

restitution and fines don't work, and walls are just temporary detours for people who will ultimately do what they please.”

Marlboro believes, “the only deterrent for terrorists or nuclear war mongers is the fear that your enemy may have a bigger, or faster, or smarter bomb than you do.”

Sue made a good analogy. She said, “If a father has a gun and his child kills someone—even if the gun is stolen, the father is at fault because he has failed to properly secure the weapon.”

I'm content that all of it is now behind us. Today is my wedding day. I finally made it to the bright lights and big city, Madre. Pad and I are getting married in an all-American way. The entire crew is here. Sue is my bridesmaid and Foot is Pad's best man. We are in beautiful Las Vegas and Elvis Presley is officiating and singing at our marriage ceremony in about an hour.

It's amazing here. And best of all, Fitzhugh has paid the entire bill.

If, but for nothing else, I'm happy that I have a newfound family. I have a good and safe home, and we, the ‘wild Indians’ still have our integrity. None of us will ever be able to get rich by making a movie about our lives, but we have that one thing that you always taught me was so very important. We have our word. And we are brave. And we are free.

Mom, I love you and miss you and Papa, and the goats. I know you are in heaven watching over me every day. Just wish you were here.

Your loving daughter, always;

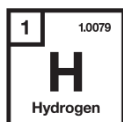
Marla.

**If you enjoyed this book, please leave a brief review on Amazon.
Thanks.**

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Appendix A: Interesting Stuff to Know

Facts about Hydrogen



Hydrogen is the first chemical element on the periodic table, chemical symbol H and atomic number 1. With a standard atomic weight of about 1.008, hydrogen is the lightest element, lighter than helium. Its monatomic form (H) is the most abundant chemical substance in the Universe, constituting roughly 75% of all baryonic mass. Non-remnant stars are mainly composed of hydrogen in the plasma state. The most common isotope of hydrogen, termed protium (name rarely used, symbol ^1H), has one proton and no neutrons. — <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hydrogen>

Fuel Costs — Gasoline vs. Hydrogen

*Based on US new cars and trucks getting average MPG
and average fuel price per gallon*

Gasoline Vehicle Fuel Costs

24.1 miles per gallon

\$ 2.26 cost per gallon

\$ 0.09 cents per mile

12,000 miles per year = \$ 1,125.31

Hydrogen Fuel Cell Vehicle Fuel Costs

70 miles per gallon

\$ 10 cost per kilogram (2.64172051242 gallons) \$ 3.785411799993673 per gallon

\$ 0.05 cents per mile

12,000 miles per year = \$ 648.92

About Disc Golf (AKA: Frisbee Golf)

Recreational Rules — DiscGolf.com — Terminology — DiscGolf.com

Buy a Comanche Crew 614 H ultimate Frisbee — FlyDiscs.com/disc/37596

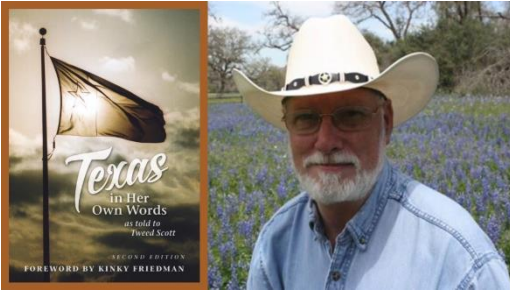
Buy Printed H Gear (totes, shirts, & more) — CafePress.com/iaan/14602741

The Russian Letter 'H'

There is a lack of the h sound in the Russian language; there is no letter to represent this sound in the Cyrillic (Russian) alphabet. Foreign words (such as Jewish names) containing the h sound were spelled using either the hard g sound or guttural kh sound instead.

Thus names like "Hirsh" and "Hinda" became "Girsh" and "Ginda," or "Khersh" and "Khinda." In some Lithuanian and Ukrainian regions, the initial h sound tended to be dropped entirely, so "Hirsh" became "Irsh," and "Hinda" might appear as "Inda." <http://www.jewishgen.org/InfoFiles/GivenNames/slide46.html>

Foreword — Tweed Scott



Tweed Scott is a laugh-out-loud funny motivational speaker & corporate entertainer. He retired from broadcasting after 31 years. Tweed is an award-winning speaker and the author of the 3-time national award-winning book, *Texas in Her Own Words*. He is a former president

(2008/2009) of the board of the Writers' League of Texas. Tweed loves spreading what he calls the 'Gospel of Texas.'

TweedScott.com

[Order: Texas in Her Own Words](#)

Cover Artist — Dennis Ray

Dennis Ray is a graphics designer and book cover artist at INSONA Author Alliance Network. INSONA.com

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