

Chapter 1: Western Nebraska

The moment fourteen-year-old Hilde first realized her family was falling apart was at a Denny's on I-80 between North Platte and Ogallala. Later she would remember that moment as something akin to passing through an invisible curtain, a barrier that separated her life in Kenosha from everything that came after, in Pescadero, on the rural coast of California.

It wasn't one of her father's chilly silences, the kind that drove the family deep into their private recesses like fish in a frozen pond. And it wasn't one of her mother's fiery eruptions, though her white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel made it seem like she was exploding from home like shrapnel.

It was just a small thing, really, not much more than a gesture. It was Ethan, her older brother, her rock. It was Ethan who made her understand that the ground beneath her was liquefying, slipping away.

THEY HAD STOPPED MIDAFTERNOON for a *quick bite*, her mother's code for *We will not be dawdling here*. When Ethan opened the car door, the first thing Hilde noticed was the wind—hot and rife with the odors of west Nebraska feedlots. These were nothing like the sweet, fecund smells of Wisconsin dairy farms.

“Lock the car, Ethan,” her mother said, throwing the keys in his direction. They clattered on the gravel at Ethan's feet. “You drive the next leg.” She headed for the restaurant without looking back.

Hilde struggled over the boxes in the back seat, climbed out of the car, and stood up straight for the first time in four hours. She peered across the landscape, shielding her eyes against the hot sun. A low, concrete church sat across the highway between a tire store and a 7-Eleven. Power of the Blood Evangelical Church. Below it, in press-on letters: *Heaven has strict immigration laws. Hell has open borders.*

“Where *are* we, anyway?” Hilde said, hiking up the cutoffs around her skinny frame. Her straw-blond hair riffled in the wind.

Ethan scooped up the keys, put them in his pocket, and headed toward the restaurant without comment. Hilde watched him go, his tall lanky body hunched over the way it was when his wrestling coach sent him onto the mat. He was such a star back home.

She turned and took another look at the dry, flat land. “Cripes, it’s hot!” she said to no one in particular. A gust of wind blew grit in her eye.

She followed her brother into the restaurant and slid into the booth opposite him. The table was sticky, and the ketchup bottle needed wiping. A couple of bills left by a previous customer lay in a small metal tray near the sugar. Her mother was nowhere to be seen.

“We gotta be halfway there by now, right?” she said, taking off her round, wire-rimmed glasses and rubbing her eye. She’d hated her old glasses, the powder-blue ones she’d worn since third grade. But these, they made her feel smart.

Ethan picked up the menu and studied it in silence.

The air-conditioning kicked on, and Hilde felt arctic air hit her sweaty neck. “Ethan,” she said, tracing the edge of the table anxiously with her fingers. “You think things’ll be better in California?”

“Dunno,” he said sullenly. His wheat-colored hair stood up in spikes, a result of his habit of running his hand through it when he was irritated.

“Once we get there—and get the farm going? Better?”

“I know *squat* about goats,” he said, almost to himself.

“That’s not true. You know how to milk cows. You did it all last summer at Schroeder’s farm.” She needed a response from him—anything, really.

Ethan shrugged and looked away.

THIS WAS THE WAY IT HAD BEEN—Ethan surly, withdrawn—ever since the big announcement at supper on that hot, sticky evening a month ago.

“Guess what!” her mother had said in that singsong voice that never delivered good news. They were sitting around the supper table midway through a takeout bucket of chicken. “I have something special to tell you. Want to know?”

Hilde noticed her father rise abruptly and pick up his plate.

“Just tell ’em, Janine,” he muttered and disappeared into the kitchen.

“I want to know,” Hilde asked, sensing the need to support her mother.

Janine turned toward her daughter. “Next month this time,” she said, widening her eyes for effect, “we’ll all be in California!” Her smile seemed pasted on.

Ethan’s steel-colored eyes jumped from his plate to his mother’s face. “What?” he croaked.

“We’re gonna clean out Uncle Carl’s place. Get some goats. And start making cheese. You won’t *believe* what those fancy restaurants in San Francisco will pay for goat cheese!”

She glanced at the kitchen. “Dad’s coming later. After he sells the house.”

“Sells the *house*?” Hilde said, incredulous. “We’re *moving*?” She scanned the surroundings. Dad was nowhere to be seen.

“Wait a minute,” Ethan said, placing his fork down carefully. “What about school?”

“What about it?” Janine replied innocently.

“What about school? What about four weeks from now when practice starts?”

“Hang on a minute, Ethan,” Janine said, her hands held up against his words. “Hear me out. I’ve already talked to the school out there. They have a terrific sports program—wrestling, basketball, track. It’s smaller than Tremper. But that’ll be nice because it’ll be easy for you to make your mark.”

“Make my *mark*?” He looked like he’d just regurgitated bile.

“I know, hon. The wrestling thing. But California is *such* an opportunity, and you being a senior, it’ll be a piece of cake to make the team out there. The walk-on who turns out to be a star! A great story!”

Hilde watched her brother’s face turn to stone as her mother continued to pitch, laying out the charms of the move—the sunny climate, the ocean surf, the golden hills. Mom clearly thought a good dose of romance, entangled with a little logic, would bring him around.

He stood up, threw his crumpled napkin on the table, and stalked off.

Hilde sat motionless, waiting for her mother to react—maybe to ask her what *she* thought, how *she* felt—but Mom did not. She just started clearing the dishes.

Just before bed, Hilde crept downstairs to the rec room where Ethan holed up most of the time. He was stretched out on the sofa, arms cradling his neck, eyes closed, earbuds in ears. She sank down on the steps and waited for him to notice. She wanted to talk. She needed to talk. *The giants have gone crazy*, she wanted to say, *and we have lost control. Do you see it, too?* A terrible pressure between her temples made her feel like her head was about to explode. She

needed to hear from him because his voice always calmed her. Anchored her. With him to talk to, she knew she would be able to make it through.

She waited for several long minutes, but he didn't open his eyes. He had gone dark.

THE STOPLIGHT IN FRONT OF DENNY'S turned red, green, and red again without a single car passing beneath.

Ethan stared at it and then shoved the menu to the edge of the table. "Asinine," he muttered.

"What?" Was this an opening?

He turned and looked at her, and for a moment, she saw him soften. "Scout," he said, using the nickname he'd made up for her when she was nine and he was eleven, "if you were driving on a deserted road, and you came to a crossroads—like that one, with a stoplight—and there was no one else around, would you stop?"

She looked at her brother. She wanted to say whatever he wanted to hear, but she wasn't sure what he was looking for. "I guess so," she offered.

Her response clearly disgusted him. He turned back to the window.

She looked away. She had failed the test, though she didn't know how. Her eyes stung. She picked up the menu and held it close to her face.

DENNY'S WAS EMPTYING OUT, though they had yet to order. Hilde put down the menu and looked around for her mother. When she turned back, she noticed the dollar bills that had been sitting in the little tray near the sugar were gone. She looked up at Ethan, down at the tray, and up at Ethan again.

"Ethan?"

His earbuds were in, and he was tapping his finger on the counter to a beat only he could hear.

"Ethan," she said again, reaching across and stopping his finger with her palm.

He pulled out one earbud. "What?"

"You can't do that."

"Do what?"

"You can't take that money."

Ethan replaced the earbud.

“Really, Ethan,” she said, grabbing his wrist to get his attention. “You can’t.” This was not like Ethan—trustworthy, dependable, the one who got the summer job because everyone in town knew he was so solid.

“Shut up, Hilde.”

She drew her hand back as if she’d been burned. He so rarely used her real name.

Janine slid into the booth, holding up damp, limp hands. “Of course,” she said, vexed. “No paper towels in the john.” Forcing a smile, she picked up the menu. “Now, what’s everybody gonna have?”

Hilde glowered at Ethan. She would never rat him out, but she wanted him to know that she knew what he had done. She needed him to be reliable. Especially now.

A waitress appeared with an order pad in one hand, a pencil in the other.

“Ethan?” her mother said, studying the menu.

“Not hungry,” Ethan said.

There was a pause. The waitress, pencil perched on pad, looked over at two men eating burgers at the counter. One of them was pulling a wallet from his pocket.

“We’re not stopping again till the motel, Ethan, so choose something.”

“Not hungry,” Ethan said again in exactly the same tone.

“He’ll have a burger,” Janine said to the waitress. “She’ll have a grilled cheese. And I’ll have a BLT.”

BEFORE THE MOVE, THERE HAD BEEN ARGUMENTS between her parents, some worse than others, but then things would fade to a chilly normal, and Hilde never could quite tell whether her parents had forged a truce or were waiting for the next round. The not-knowing kept her perpetually on edge.

“Did you fix the truck yesterday?” she heard her mother say one Sunday morning at the breakfast table as she was coming down the stairs.

Her father grunted and kept reading the paper.

Her mother picked up a fork, reached across the table, and tapped his water glass lightly.

“Darrell?” she said, annoyed now. “The battery? Did you fix it? I’ve got work tomorrow.”

Hilde stopped in the shadows at the foot of the stairs. Her mother's back was turned away, but she could see her father over her mother's shoulder.

"I'm aware, Janine," he replied coolly, turning the page and straightening the paper with the palm of his hand. "I didn't have time."

Her mother cocked her head. "You didn't have time?"

"No." After a long silence: "I'll see what I can do."

"Today?"

"Yes."

"Today," she said with disdain. "Really?"

"Yes, Janine. *Today*."

"Well, that's not a great plan, Darrell. Because if it needs a new battery *today*, you can't buy one. It's Sunday. Nothing's open. In case you've forgotten."

He stiffened, took off his glasses, and looked at her. "I'm sorry, Janine, but that's not in my control."

She sat back. "What's not in your control?"

"When the stores open."

"Oh," she said. "But if you'd worked on the truck *yesterday*, you would've been able to buy a new battery if you needed one. Right, Darrell?" She sounded like a professor teaching logic to a recalcitrant student.

"Look," he said, unaffected. "If the truck craps out, call Jeanette. She'll take you."

"If the truck craps out and I call Jeanette, I'll be late. And if I'm late, they'll hire somebody who isn't late. You get that, Darrell? They don't like it when you're late."

Hilde could feel the muscles in her neck tighten.

Her father gave her mother a long, cold stare. "You know, Janine, your little bookkeeping gig—it's not a career. It's just a job."

"Really?" She rocked back in her chair, her hands clutching the edge of the table.

"Yeah, really." He was revving up now, something he rarely did. "In fact, why don't you just quit. Stay home and clean up this place. Look at it! The kitchen's a mess. The laundry's piled high. And there's so much clutter in the hall, I'm surprised somebody hasn't broken a leg."

She jutted out her jaw and crossed her arms over her chest. "A fabulous idea, Darrell. I'll stay home and we'll all just live off your salary."

“Yeah. That’s a good idea,” he said acidly. “You should think about it.”

“Let me give *you* something to think about, Darrell.” She rose now and leaned over the table, her fingers braced wide against the Formica. “*I* pay the bills. And despite your *precious* position at that Podunk college—despite all those little twenty-somethings scurrying around, scraping and bowing whenever you need a cup of coffee—*you* don’t bring home enough money to cover the bills. *Surprised?*”

His shoulders went rigid. He folded the paper carefully, stood up, tucked it under his arm, grabbed his jacket, and headed toward the back door. Then he turned and growled, “You know, Janine, you’re a real *ballbuster*.”

“Really?” she spat, her voice dripping with fury. “If I’m such a *ballbuster*, Darrell, why do you stay? Why don’t you just get the hell out! Think about it, Darrell. Because I can’t *stand* the sight of you!”

A wave of nausea overcame Hilde.

It was only when Ethan laid a hand on her shoulder that she found some mooring. “C’mon, Scout,” he said gently, pushing her toward the rec room. “Let’s go play video games.”

DENNY’S WAS NOW VIRTUALLY EMPTY, and still no food. Hilde kept glancing at the door to the kitchen. She knew how testy her mother could become when she was made to wait.

Janine took a map from her bag, unfolded it clumsily, and stared at it.

“You know, Mom,” Ethan said, breaking his silence for the first time that afternoon, “there’s an app for that.”

“I know,” she said irritably.

Ethan rolled his eyes.

Hilde wished she were back in the hot car. “So how many goats are we getting again?” she asked, hoping to distract her mother.

It worked, for once. Her mother turned toward her and breathed out slowly. She focused on something in the middle distance for a long moment.

“Fourteen,” she said finally, managing a small smile. “And next season, we’ll have more. Ethan’ll do the milking, and you and I’ll make the cheese. We’ve gotta get the machines working again. Not sure how long they’ve been out of commission—probably since Uncle Carl died. But we’ll figure it out.” She blinked and looked around. “Where’s our food, anyway?”

The waitress backed through the swinging door with a rolling cart of clean dishes. When the cook put three plates of food on the serving counter, she parked the cart, picked up the plates, and delivered them to the table.

“Finally,” her mother said, loud enough to embarrass Hilde.

“Anything else?” the waitress asked, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Yes. The check, hon. We need the check.”

HILDE TOOK A FINAL BITE OF SANDWICH and watched while her mother pulled out a bright pink jar of lip gloss and a hand mirror from her straw bag. She was making more of an effort these days. She’d let her hair grow, and just before they left, she’d streaked it—a first. She’d done it herself in the bathroom with a box from the drugstore. And she’d bought a few new things—hoop earrings, a halter top, even an ankle bracelet. But the lip gloss seemed—somehow—over the top. Like something the girls Ethan dated would wear.

“You know,” Mom said thoughtfully, using her pinky finger to apply the gloss. “This is a new chapter in our lives. And a new chapter deserves a new beginning.” She dropped the lip gloss back into her bag, pulled out a Kleenex, and dabbed the corners of her mouth. “I’ve been thinking about going by a different name. Jasmine. I like that name.”

“What’s wrong with your name?” Hilde asked, surprised at how unbalanced the suggestion made her feel.

“Oh, I don’t know. Janine feels like the name somebody would give to a Wisconsin milkmaid.”

“You are a Wisconsin milkmaid, Mom,” Ethan said. “You grew up on a farm with thirty Holstein.”

Janine stiffened but said nothing. Finally, her eyes landed on Hilde. “Sit up straight, honey. You look like a camel.”

She snapped the mirror shut and slipped it back into her purse. “No more stopping till we get to the motel,” she said, standing up and gathering her belongings, “so if you need to go, go now.”

Hilde slid out of the booth and headed to the restroom. Janine rose, picked up the check, and turned toward the cashier. Ethan sat a minute longer, eyes down, cleaning up the fries on Hilde’s plate.

As Hilde came out of the restroom, she spotted her mother through the plate glass window. She was standing in the sun beside the car, searching for her keys.

Ethan had gotten to his feet and was heading toward the door, wiping his hands on his jeans. As he passed the counter where the two men had sat, his hand darted out and scooped up the bills next to the empty plates. He slipped the bills into his pocket and strolled out into the sunshine.

Chapter 22: Giving Up

“La Migra!” a voice hissed.

Joaquín bolted upright. For an instant, he didn’t remember where he was—but grit pelting his face brought him to his senses.

Everyone was scattering in different directions. A white van was barreling toward them across the desert floor, kicking up clouds of sand and dust.

“*¡Aquí!*” Over here! Fernando called hoarsely over his shoulder.

Joaquín grabbed his pack and took off after him.

The two of them ran like they had from the bar the night they’d first met, feet pounding, boots kicking up pebbles.

Joaquín didn’t look back. He didn’t want to see how close they were. He didn’t care what happened to the others. He just wanted to be gone. His heart raced, and his head pounded. Beads of sweat trickled into his eyes. He blinked to clear his vision, but it only made the stinging worse. He stumbled, and his calf brushed the spines of a cholla, which caused a painful zing in his leg. Still he ran, keeping Fernando’s back in his eyesight.

Then it was Fernando who stumbled. He fell forward, hitting the ground hard, and scrambled up again. The terrain was rockier here, and the shadows longer. Fernando disappeared into a deep wash.

Joaquín dove down beside him, breathing heavily. Several minutes passed. When his breath was even again, Joaquín asked quietly, “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Fernando croaked. He put his hand to his throat and coughed dryly.

They lay there for several minutes more, listening. Joaquín’s calf throbbed. He twisted toward the pain and pulled a sharp barb from the fleshy part of his leg. Another zing raced through his body, making his hair stand on end. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, Fernando was lying flat on his stomach, peeking over the edge of the wash. “They got ’em,” he said.

“Who?”

“*Migra.*”

“All of them?”

“The boys. The onion guy. And his two buddies. But that goddam coyote. Where the hell is he?” He ducked his head and lay immobile. “Shit.”

“What?”

“Looked this way.”

“Did they see you?”

“Dunno.” He flattened himself against the wall of the wash.

Joaquín slithered up the wash. Through a patch of scrub that lined its edge, he could see a man approaching, mirrored aviator glasses glinting in the sun. A yellow shield on the breast of his drab green shirt, a gun, a nightstick, a walkie-talkie—this was Border Patrol. As he sauntered forward, Joaquín could hear his boots crush the desert floor. He stopped just short of the wash, shielded his eyes, and looked out over the barren land beyond. Joaquín held his breath. Fernando, still on his stomach, rested his forehead on his hands and closed his eyes, as if the gesture would make him disappear.

After a long moment, the man turned. He walked along the wash for a few yards, then headed back toward the van.

Joaquín exhaled quietly through pursed lips. They waited, motionless, until they heard the van start up and move toward the road.

“*Gracias a Dios*,” Fernando whispered. “Let’s get outta here. Which way is north?”

Joaquín oriented himself to the low sun. “That way,” he replied.

They gathered their backpacks and started through the wash.

They had not gone more than a hundred meters when Fernando pitched forward, landing hard on his forearms.

“Shit!” He flipped over and pulled one boot up close to his thigh. Joaquín crouched beside him and peered at the boot. The sole had pulled away from the toe and was bent back at a crazy angle. Sticky strings of glue stretched from the sole to the body of the boot. “Motherfuckers. They told me these were Timberlands. No wonder they were so cheap.”

“That boot . . .” Joaquín’s mind started to race. You could run out of food. You could blister in the sun. But you needed your boots to keep going.

Fernando kept pushing the sole back into place, and it kept curling outward, obstinately.

“You can’t walk with that boot like that.”

“Buddy, you’re such a worrier,” Fernando replied. “I got this.” He pulled a tattered gray hoodie and a knife from his backpack. He fished for the drawstring at the neck of the hoodie, cut the end with one quick gesture, and pulled it out of its channel. Then he pushed the sole of the boot into place and tied the drawstring around the toe. “There. See?”

He grinned, but Joaquín saw a flicker of fear cross his face.

At just that moment, several small pebbles from the edge of the wash above them rolled lazily down the dry earth, landing just short of Fernando’s foot. They froze.

Joaquín looked up through the scrub. “*Jesucristo*,” he whispered.

Peering down from the top of the wash was the face of a child. It was the girl who had crossed with them. She stood there, dumb. Then another face appeared over the edge. The young mother.

“Get down here,” Joaquín hissed. The girl scrambled into the wash on her butt. The young mother followed.

“They didn’t see you?”

“We hid,” the young mother said in a small voice. “We ran, and then we hid.” She was breathing heavily. “We didn’t know what to do. We had no guide. We were lost.” She looked at the jug poking out of Joaquín’s backpack. “You have water?”

Joaquín pulled the jug from his backpack. It was frighteningly light. He twisted off the cap and offered it to her.

She took it and passed it to her daughter who took a small sip. Then she did the same, holding the liquid in her mouth for a long moment before swallowing. It seemed to calm her, that little sip.

“When we spotted you, we followed, and I prayed we’d be able to catch up. But you were going so fast, we lost you. Two times we lost you. I told Aricela we had to keep going. She was so tired, but she did it.” She stroked her daughter’s hair.

“So you’re Aricela,” Joaquín said to the child. She offered a shy smile.

“And I’m Isobel,” her mother said.

WHEN IT WAS FULLY DARK, THEY STARTED AGAIN. The air, which had been so searingly hot during the day, turned cold, penetrating their bodies and stiffened their joints. They moved clumsily in a line across the desert floor, one after the other, Fernando first, his gait hampered by his boot, then the girl and her mother, and Joaquín at the rear, scanning the vast expanse of land every few minutes. Sometimes they could hear vehicles—motorbikes, vans—on a road to the east. How far east, they weren’t sure.

They were all exhausted. Joaquín could tell from the way they moved. His calf throbbed and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. When he swallowed, he felt his throat close—and for an agonizing instant he wasn’t sure it would open again. The feeling made him claustrophobic, despite the vast expanse of desert around him.

For hours, they pressed forward, silent in the desert.

As the sun rose, they found themselves among rocky outcroppings with boulders as big as a man and acacia that produced enough foliage to hide them for a few hours. They needed rest and nourishment. There wasn’t much water left, but they still carried canned fruit and beans, and Joaquín knew there’d be liquid in those cans.

“Hold up,” he called to Fernando. “We gotta rest.”

The little party stopped and looked around. Isobel slung her backpack to the ground, put her hand to her neck and groaned.

“*Gracias a Dios*,” she said. Looking toward the expanse of desert beyond Joaquín, she added, “Is it safe?”

Joaquín knew they were on a human-made trail, crude as it was, and it was probably not wise to rest nearby. He glanced around. The nearest boulders were about fifteen meters away. “Check over there,” he said to Fernando. “See if there’s a place we can sleep for a few hours.”

Isobel sank down in the spotty shade of a mesquite. “Oh, my head,” she said, rubbing her temples.

Aricela knelt down next to her mother and pawed through her backpack. She pulled out a small fruit cup.

“Here, Mama,” she said.

“No, you take it, baby,” Isobel said, her voice weak with fatigue. She pushed it away.

Aricela sat back. Joaquín thought he saw a shadow of fear cross her face.

“Here,” he said, pulling a can from his backpack and offering it to Isobel. “You take this one. Aricela can have that one.”

Isobel did not move. She looked like she was going to cry.

“Take it, Mama,” Aricela said. When her mother still did not move, Aricela took the can from Joaquín, pulled open the pop-top, and gave it to her mother. Isobel took it with trembling hands. Aricela opened the other can, and as if they had sat down at a feast, they consumed the sweet syrup together, being careful to avoid the rough metal edges of the cans. Then they dug the fruit out with their fingers. When they were finished, Aricela sank down and rested her head on her mother’s thigh.

Joaquín stood and glanced toward the outcropping. Fernando was standing next to a large boulder, staring back at him. He did not move. Puzzled, Joaquín put his hand to the brim of his cap, shaded his eyes, and looked harder at his friend’s face, but Fernando continued to stand like a statue. Finally, in a gesture that was hardly noticeable, Fernando turned one hand outward toward the boulder.

Joaquín knew something was wrong.

“You stay here,” he said. “I’m going to help Fernando.”

Fernando watched as he approached. When Joaquín stepped into the shadow of the boulder, Fernando moved aside. “Not here,” he said quietly.

The first thing Joaquín noticed were the sneakers, weather beaten and clearly unfit for such an arduous trek. They were splayed outward in opposite directions. The legs were twisted at obscene angles, pants still covering them. The T-shirt, once red, was tattered and coated with desert dust. Beneath it, the rib cage was still covered with desiccated skin. And the arms were nothing more than bleached bones,

flung upward in what looked like a gesture of surprise, or perhaps great joy. One of the hands had been gnawed off, leaving a splintered stump.

“*Dios mío*,” Joaquín whispered.

“I almost tripped over him,” Fernando said, staring at the corpse. “The shadows—I didn’t see him.”

Joaquín moved around to the skull. It had been picked clean, leaving only the eye sockets and hair. But the parts that Joaquín would never be able to forget—in their perfection—were the teeth—a full set, fully exposed and white as porcelain. “This guy was young,” he said quietly.

“There’s a jug over there. Empty. And a ballcap.”

“No backpack?”

“No.”

Joaquín squatted down. Gingerly, he slipped his fingers into the corpse’s pants pockets and turned them inside out. Nothing.

Fernando picked up the cap and slipped his finger along the sweatband. He glanced up and shrugged.

“Shoes?” Joaquín asked.

“There’s only one. Over there.”

Joaquín stepped between two rocks and picked up the tattered sneaker. He pulled up the insole. Nothing. “You want this?” he said, holding out the sneaker.

Fernando shook his head. “Wrong foot.”

“You sure? It’s better than what you got.”

Fernando stood there, looking forlorn. Finally, he took the sneaker. He sat on a rock and swapped it out for the boot tied together with laces. When he stood, he looked like he had two left feet.

“Fit?” Joaquín asked.

Fernando shrugged again.

“I wish we had some way to mark this place,” Joaquín said, scanning the landscape. But the sameness of the desert was the only thing remarkable. He turned back to Fernando. “Leave the cap. It might help whoever picks him up.”

Fernando tucked the cap gently under the torso.

As they returned to the trail, Joaquín said, “No mention of this.”

But in fact, both Isobel and Aricela were fast asleep under the mesquite. Fernando collapsed at the base of a nearby acacia, and Joaquín gave up the idea of finding a safer place and lay down himself, exhausted in both body and spirit.

HE AWOKE TO FRIGID AIR. It was dusk, and Fernando was sitting up, a water jug on his knee. His eyes looked sunken.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” Fernando replied. “Dizzy.”

“You have water left?”

Fernando turned his jug upside down. Two drops fell onto his pant leg.

“Okay, we gotta move. Wake Isobel. Let’s get going.”

“I’m awake,” Isobel said, pushing herself up to a seated position. She touched her daughter’s hair lightly. “*Hija*, wake up.”

They moved through the night along the trail strewn with detritus from those who had made it this far, and somehow that gave Joaquín comfort. When the moon was high, they came up out of the wash and found themselves staring at a cattle trough, filled to the brim with water. So pristine did the water look, shimmering in the pale light, that Joaquín wondered whether the devil himself had placed it there. When Fernando saw it, he walked to the trough slowly, as if in a trance, and drew his finger over the surface, rippling it.

“Let’s go,” Joaquín said, coming up fast behind his friend.

“No, wait,” Fernando said. He seemed mesmerized. He knelt down, drew the empty plastic jug from his backpack, and submerged it in the water.

Isobel pulled Aricela closer and stared at Fernando.

“Hey, *hermano*,” Joaquín said, putting a hand on Fernando’s shoulder and shaking it. “You don’t want that.”

Fernando kept his hand in the water, waiting for the jug to fill.

“You *know* that water will kill you.” Joaquín’s tone was insistent now.

Fernando continued to ignore him.

Joaquín grabbed Fernando’s arm and tugged. The half-filled jug came loose from Fernando’s grip and bobbed in the water.

Fernando whirled around and yanked his arm away.

“Leave me alone!” His face was contorted.

“Fernando—”

“No, no! Don’t touch me!”

“But think what you’re doing. Think! That water is unclean. If you drink it—”

“I won’t drink it! I won’t! I just wanna . . . touch it.”

“You want to *touch* it?”

“Yeah. Take a little with me. In my backpack. I just want to . . . hear it slosh when I walk.”

Joaquín was dumbfounded. He looked squarely into Fernando's face—and could see no light in his eyes. Nothing but a flat, dumb, spiritless look. It frightened him. He paused for a long moment, considering. Then he reached into the trough and retrieved the floating jug.

“Okay, man. Okay. Let's do this. Let's put in some water. Just a little. That way you'll be able to hear it, and it won't be too heavy.” He filled the jug with just enough water to cover the bottom. “Give me the top.”

Fernando complied.

Joaquín stuffed the jug back into Fernando's backpack and helped him on with it. “You're still leading. Go. That way,” he said, and he turned Fernando by the shoulders until he was facing north again.

JUST BEFORE DAWN, A SMALL YELLOW FLAG appeared on the horizon. It was waving in the breeze, a tattered cloth at the end of a thin metal pole arcing high against a pearl-gray sky.

Joaquín's heart jumped. He remembered. There *was* water in the desert, put there by volunteers, church people, Americans.

“There,” he called to the others. “Water. Go that way.”

They quickened their pace, but the enormous effort made them breathless. Isobel had begun to limp, and Fernando's mismatched shoes kept causing him to stumble. Nonetheless, they could see the drum, nestled on its side in a metal cradle like a keg of beer. *Fifty-five gallons of pure, sweet water.* And someone had even taken the time to write on it: *¡Buena suerte, compañeros!*

Fernando let out a whoop when he got to the drum.

“Is it full?” Joaquín called, as he approached.

“*Sí, sí, sí,*” Fernando exclaimed, banging on the metal.

Joaquín knew there were people who emptied these drums with a few well-placed rifle shots. They were Americans too. But this one was full, heavy.

Fernando dropped his backpack and rooted through its contents. He pulled out a plastic jug, unscrewed the top, placed it under the spigot, and turned the flange. Clear liquid poured into the jug.

“Water, water,” Aricela cried, dancing toward the drum.

Isobel fell to her knees and buried her face in her daughter's T-shirt. “*Santa Maria, Madre de Dios.*”

Suddenly, they all fell silent.

Then Fernando said, “What's that smell?”

Aricela looked at her mother, who was sniffing the air, a quizzical expression on her face.

Joaquín put his nose close to the jug. He sniffed once. Then again. His upper lip curled. “Gasoline,” he said quietly. “Somebody put gasoline in the water.”

Isobel let go of her daughter and sank onto the desert floor. Aricela stood ramrod straight next to the blue drum, color moving up her neck and into her pale face, turning it beet red. She began to cry, without tears. And then she retched.

TOO ENFEEBLED TO CONTINUE, they lay in what shade they could find near the water drum. As the sun rose, it parted the gray clouds and began its work of bleaching the bones of the creatures that had died in the night. Exhaustion overcame the mother and her daughter.

When Joaquín was sure that Isobel and Aricela were asleep, he said to Fernando, “Walk with me. We need to talk.”

He pulled Fernando to his feet and led him a few meters beyond the others. A breeze had kicked up, and the fresh morning air gave Joaquín courage.

“We can’t go on much longer. We need help,” he began, watching Fernando’s expression carefully. “For all we know, we could be going in circles. Isobel is limping, and your shoes . . .”

Fernando looked at him, his eyes dull.

“We need to find a road,” Joaquín said. “We need to get help.”

Fernando’s eyes flicked to the ground.

Joaquín ducked his head and tried to look Fernando in the eye, but Fernando would not meet his gaze. “You heard me, right?” Joaquín continued. “It’s not what we want, but it’s better than wandering out here until we drop.”

Fernando squatted down, picked up a stick, and began to jab it into the sand.

Joaquín crouched next to him. “Without water, we could last—what? Maybe another day? Two?”

Fernando looked up. “No,” he growled.

“But—”

“No, no, no, no, no! You hear me? No!” Fernando said ferociously.

The vehemence of the words stunned Joaquín. His mind raced.

“You go!” Fernando spat. “Take them with you. I don’t care.”

“Look, they’ll pick us up. We can get some water, rest. A shower maybe. And some food. And after that, we’ll figure out what to do. We’ll call Gabe in California. He’ll help.” He kept watching for a flicker of rationality in Fernando’s face. “And if they send us back, we’ll try again. We’ll *keep* trying.”

“If I give up,” Fernando whispered, the veins at his temples pulsing, “you know what’ll happen? I’ll be packed on a plane and sent back to that *hellhole country*—before the sun sets!” His eyes were ablaze now. “And then you know what’ll happen then? Do you? They don’t forget! They *will* come for me. They *will* hunt me down. And they will butcher me like a hog.”

“No, no,” Joaquín said, gripping Fernando’s forearm. “This is America. Tell them your story. Explain it. They’ll understand.”

Fernando looked up, incredulous. “Americans? They have *no* idea. They think everything in my country is just like America. They say, go to the police. Get protection there. Ha! They have *no idea* what it’s like to live with no place to hide. To live where the police lie down with the politicians, and where both lick the boots of their narco bosses! Americans? They’ll never understand why I can’t go back. *Never.*”

They sat together, exhausted, for several more minutes while the sun rose over the saguaro.

“Okay,” Joaquín said finally. “We’ll go. You keep on.”

“Okay,” Fernando said hoarsely.

ONCE ISOBEL WOKE, Joaquín told her the plan.

She looked relieved, though when she glanced at Fernando, there was deep sorrow in her eyes. She staggered to her feet and approached Fernando who was squatting on the ground. “*Gracias,*” she said quietly, leaning over and touching his hand lightly. “For everything.”

Fernando opened his hand and held hers lightly for a moment. But he did not look up.

Then Joaquín helped Aricela with her backpack, and the three scrambled up the gentle slope of the wash. Once they reached the top, Joaquín turned back toward his friend.

Fernando, still squatting on the ground, was watching them go. When Joaquín turned, an odd smile spread across Fernando’s face. After a beat, he scooped up a handful of dry earth and held it up. “I made it,” he said, letting the dirt sift through his fist. “To America. I made it.”

Joaquín gave him a thumbs-up. Then he turned and followed the other two eastward.

THEY WALKED TOWARD THE SUN, cursing it for blinding their eyes and welcoming it for warming their skin. After an hour, they came to a dirt road that looked newly worn and settled in the shade of a mesquite tree. Joaquín pulled out his map of the southern half of America—the one he’d brought from Mexico City—and the matchbook he’d squirreled away in the pocket of his backpack. He tore the map into small pieces, added some tumbleweed, and lit the pile on fire. Smoke drifted up in a lazy, gray plume. He sat down in the dust next to Isobel and waited.

