

SOUTH

A NEAR-FUTURE THRILLER

BY **LANCE CHARNES**



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author’s imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

No animals were harmed in the writing of this novel.

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SATURDAY, 25 MAY

Luis Ojeda scanned his binoculars along the rusty sixteen-foot fence to the dirt road's visible ends. Nothing. A dead floodlight at the curve over the arroyo left a patch of twilight in the line of artificial day. The lights on either side leached all color from the night.

The patrol was late. He'd been out here face-down in the dirt for over an hour, waiting for the right time. These desert mountains turned cold after sunset, even this late in a nasty-hot May. He was prepared for it. Army field jackets and winter-weight ACU trousers like he wore now got him through January in the 'Stan all those years ago. He could wait all night. Usually, the travelers couldn't.

He glanced downslope over his shoulder. Five brown faces stared back at him, their eyes glowing orange in the floodlights' glare. This run's travelers. Each wore a backpack holding everything they could bring with them from their old life to their new one.

The young mother lay at the group's left edge. Her dark anime eyes stared at him from under a road-weary hoodie. Her little girl—four, maybe five tops—pressed her face into her mom's shoulder, the woman's hand winding through her tangled black hair. Luis usually tried not to bring kids this young, but they had nobody else anymore. When Luis looked into the girl's eyes, he saw his daughter at that age: scared, sad, and trusting. So here they were.

Back to the binoculars. Dust shimmered in the floods to the west, then a whip antenna, then a tan cinder block on wheels crawled up the rise. The BRV-O's six-cylinder diesel clattered off the rocks around them. It swung around the dogleg over the arroyo, chunked along at around fifteen, then trundled east.

It stopped.

Two men heaved out. Tan utilities, helmets with no covers, desert boots: contractors. *Mierda*. They strolled back the way they'd come, M4s slung across their chests, hands resting on the grips. One lit a cigarette. They stopped at the edge of the pool of dark to look up the

pole.

The one not smoking leaned into the radio handset on his shoulder. Then he turned to look straight at Luis.

Luis became a rock. The guard was probably half-blind from the light; Luis doubted the guy could see him in the semi-dark, even if he knew someone was out here. Chances were the *gringo* was going to take a leak. Then the guard's hand went for the tactical goggles hanging around his neck.

¡Chingado!

As the guard seated the goggles over his face, Luis went flat. As long as he didn't move, his infrared-suppressing long johns and balaclava would defeat the goggles' thermal vision and make him fade into the petrified sand dune under him.

The travelers didn't have that gear. Luis peered back into the dark. All five travelers should be shielded by the ridge, but "should" didn't mean shit if the guard caught the bright-green return of a warm human body on his scope. If he did, they'd all find out at 2900 feet per second.

The area around them hushed, letting the little sounds fade forward. The breeze rattled the creosote and pushed pebbles around. Luis could hear the contractors' voices—an off note in the wind—the shush of rubber boot soles on gravel, his heart going crazy, his sweat plopping on the sand.

Fucking contractors. Border Patrol agents had a code; they were civilized, they had to be nice and usually were. These contractor assholes shot people for fun, the way he had in the 'Stan before Bel reformed his sorry, angry ass. A month ago, these *idiotas* were probably losing hearts and minds in the Sudan with every full magazine. Now they were doing the same thing here.

A whimper. Luis cranked his head back to check the kid. She squirmed, a little dark bundle rocking against a dark background. The mom forced her daughter's face tighter against her shoulder. Her big, terrified eyes found Luis.

Chill, he told himself. *Be the rock*. The travelers could smell fear. If he was calm, they'd be calm; if he stressed, they'd scatter like sheep. He tried to smile back at the mom, hard as it was to do with crosshairs on them all.

Boots scuffed gravel at his ten o'clock, then at nine. Voices mumbled a few yards off. Somewhere out there, the sound of a huge mosquito buzzed the border. Had they called in a drone? If they had,

game over. Dirt lodged in Luis' nose and mouth; ants crawled on his right hand; something sharp dug into his hip. Twenty-plus years after Afghanistan and here he was in the same shit, just with different players. *Be the rock.*

A laugh. Then the night exploded.

The first bursts were recon-by-fire, looking for what came bouncing out of the dark. Disciplined soldiers know to hunker down and wait it out, but the travelers weren't soldiers and they weren't disciplined. Two of the men broke and ran the instant bullets sprayed off the ridge top. Luis yelled "Get down!" but it was too late. He jerked his face back into the sand at the next burst, but not before he saw a runner throw up his hands and fall face-first.

The little girl started screaming. Her mother's eyes went all white and she tried to stuff her sleeve into the kid's mouth, but the girl wouldn't stop shrieking. Bullets churned the dirt in front of them.

¡Mierda! ¡Chingado! "Don't do it!" Luis hissed to her. "Stay there!" His voice sounded like he'd huffed helium. He didn't care if he drew fire as long as that pretty young mom with that sweet little girl kept her head down—

The woman bolted.

He screamed "No!" and before he could think, he was charging toward her. More shots. Dirt kicked up around his feet. A line of bullets tore across the woman's back, each one marked by a splat of blood. She let out a little "Ah!" and went down hard.

A burning-hot something slammed into his back, knocked him ass-over-heels down the slope. *Hijo de perra*, it hurt. He spit out the sand he'd eaten and rolled onto his back. A bloody hole in his chest on his right side, a weird noise when he breathed, pain when he did anything.

Luis tried to catch the breath running away from him, but it was hard and it hurt and he wanted to just lie there. Little sharp spikes of fear stabbed at him. The gunshot echoes faded away into the breeze. Those animals up there would come out to see what they'd shot. If they found him, they'd arrest him, or maybe just shoot him again. Or they'd call in a gunship drone and kill anything bright green. Any way this went down, he'd never see his wife or son or home again. That thought hurt worse than being shot.

He wrenched his head to his right. The mother and her child lay roughly twenty feet away, two dark, still shapes against the sand. *You cabrones*, he fumed. *You killed a baby.*

Or had he killed her by bringing her here? *Get away. Think later.*

The oldest traveler—slight, late fifties, his hair mostly gone to silver—took Luis' hand in both of his. He had dark smears on his face and upper arm. "Mister? We go."

Go? Luis could hardly breathe. He waved toward the lights and fence. "You go. Keep heading south. Mexico's that way, you can still make it. Go down the arroyo, through the culvert. Understand?"

The old man nodded. The floodlights glimmered in his eyes as he looked toward the two dark shapes just upslope. He'd protected and comforted them even though they weren't blood.

"I'm sorry," Luis said.

The old man nodded again, then shook Luis' hand hard. "*As-salaam alaykum.*"

"*Alaykumu as-salaam.*"

Then he was gone.

Luis managed to get two magnesium flares out of his pack. They might blind the guards long enough for him to get over the next rise and for the old Arab to make it down the arroyo to safety. Just before he popped the first flare, his eyes snagged on the mom and her daughter. So small, so dark, so still. Another bad picture to add to his collection.

This used to make sense. This used to feel worthwhile. He used to be able to tell himself it was worth the risk to stand up to the *locos* who'd wrecked his country and caused all this—risk to himself, to his family, to the travelers. But the camps filled and spread. It was all so futile, not worth that little girl's death or his own.

If you let me live, he told the sky, I'll stop. I'm done.

The U.S. ranks 103rd in the 2032 Corruption Perception Index, one below Madagascar and far below all its OECD peers. Gross underfunding of government at all levels, elimination of public-sector pensions, and widespread contracting of public services to unscrupulous private firms, has led to an epidemic of corruption reminiscent of Russia under the late Vladimir Putin.

— “Release of the 2032 CPI,” *Transparency International*

FRIDAY, 30 APRIL

TWO YEARS LATER

Luis opened Coast Conversions’ front office at six-thirty to give the techs time to set up for the day’s work. One of them—Tyler—already waited outside, as usual. He was one of two who lived in a former self-storage place three blocks away. “Where’s Earnes?” Luis asked.

“Angels Stadium. The free clinic.” Tyler limped through the door, stowed his pistol behind the counter, then passed into the shop and started turning on lights and compressors. Fluorescents glinted off the shiny SUVs and luxury sedans waiting at each station for their armor and ballistic glass.

Luis began to ready the front office for what he hoped would be the morning rush. A full shop and one man down. *Great*. Earnes could be waiting in line all day to get into that Doctors Without Borders clinic. Luis would have to ding him a day’s pay, too, something he hated to do.

That was the downside of managing this place: having to knock heads without being able to hand out rewards. The upside? Routine. Safety. Some thought “same shit, different day” was a curse. For Luis, it meant not having to cross deserts or climb mountains. Not being chased or shot at. Not having people’s lives in his hands—and fumbling them.

He leaned against the doorway, watching Tyler make his rounds through the workstations. “How’re you doing? Leg okay?”

“Okay, sir.”

Tyler left half a leg in Yemen. All five of Luis’ techs were vets; they had good work habits, and it was the only way to get guys with mechanical and metalworking skills now that most community colleges were closed and the unions were long gone. Luis made it a point to hire guys out of flops or Ryantowns. A down payment on karma? He hoped he’d never find out.

The strip lights cast shadows on Tyler’s hollow eyes and cheeks. He worked full-time and still didn’t eat enough. Like everywhere else, the pay here was shit even for Luis, and he was the manager. Xiao, the owner, wouldn’t cough up a cent more.

The door chime’s synthetic *bing-bong* broke Luis out of his thoughts. He called out “Not open yet” before he looked back over his shoulder. A cop swaggered to the counter. *Mierda*.

The cop—Schertzer, unfortunately a monthly regular—leaned an elbow on the blue laminate countertop, chewing his gum. “How’s it hanging, Ojeda?”

“You’re two days early,” Luis growled as he stalked to the counter.

Schertzer shrugged. “So call a fucking cop. You got it?”

It wasn’t like this steroid-square *cucaracha* was a real policeman. He was just one of the contractors the city pretended was a police force. Dark-blue utilities, black tac vest, jump boots: all Luis saw was a school-crossing guard with a gun.

“Yeah.” Luis opened the lockbox with his key, pulled out a white envelope, and slapped it into Schertzer’s outstretched hand. *La mordida*, *El Norte* style. “Now get out.”

The cop wagged the envelope to get the feel of it. Apparently satisfied, he shoved it into the patch pocket on his right thigh. “The widows and orphans appreciate your money, Ojeda.” He smirked, then turned toward the doors and waved over his shoulder. “*A-dios*.” He stopped with his hand on the push bar, looked back. “By the way, a road crew’s coming through in a couple days. They’ll want their cut, too.”

“They’re finally going to pave the street?”

The cop shook his head, bottling up a laugh. “Shit, no. They’ll get their taste; you know how it goes. That’s why I’m early—make sure we get what’s coming to us. See you soon.”

Luis watched Schertzer ooze off to the right, no doubt to collect his bite from the other garages and workshops along this light-industrial strip off Newport Boulevard. He'd bled money into these *pendejos* for years. He'd run across people like Schertzer in Mexico and the 'Stan, but it burned his gut to see them in this county. It was easier for the kids; they weren't old enough to remember when cops and fire marshals and road crews weren't all on the take.

He sighed. That was old-timer talk. "There goes the lowest bidder," he said to himself.

Luis glanced up from taking a customer's payment to catch Ray's face outside the window. Ray raised his hand; Luis nodded to him.

The customer—a big-busted Newport Beach trophy blonde in tiny clothes—paid up and wiggled off with her bodyguard to claim her husband's newly up-armored Range Rover.

Ray turned to watch her go, then let out a long breath through pursed lips as he ambled through the front doors. He was a big, square outline against the morning sun. His thumbs hooked in the pockets of fashionably tight, white *churidar* slacks, their calves stacked just so over expensive new designer boots. Just like he'd stepped out of a vidboard ad, if those models had faces that looked more Aztec than conquistador. A long way from his old *caballero* style.

Ray gave Luis his crooked smile. "Hey, *hermano*. All your customers look like that?"

"Enough do." He shook Ray's hand, which felt like a brake drum. "Oye, *compa*. Long time. How's it going?"

Ray rocked his hand side-to-side. "About normal. How's Bel?"

Luis shrugged. "Fine. The usual."

"Nacho hanging in?"

Nacho—Luis' son Ignacio—was a Marine on his first deployment to Sudan. "Yeah, he's okay. The stories he tells me, it's like what we did in the 'Stan."

"Never ends, does it?" Ray's dark dataspecs scanned the office's lights and corners. The gray that used to be in his hair was gone. "Have any bug problems in here lately?"

"Stopped getting it swept two years ago." They weren't talking about the six- or eight-legged kind. Luis used to have to worry about those things; no more, thank God. He peered closer at the corners of

Ray's nose and mouth. "Are you taking tighteners?"

"A couple months now, yeah. Like it?" Ray turned his face to let the strip lights flash off his shiny, smoother skin. "You could do with some too, *hermano*."

First he'd lost his tattoos, now this. "Can't afford them. Besides, I like looking like a grownup."

Ray shrugged. "Look, the boss wanted me to talk to you. He's got a job for you."

Luis put up his hands. "Save it. I'm out, remember?"

"I know, I know. He told me to ask, so I'm asking." Ray leaned in to lay a hand on Luis' shoulder. "This job, it's a special one, you know? Some good coin. Check it out." He tapped the phone pod on his left ear.

A few moments later, the store slate peeped. Luis brought up the email, then the attached picture. A studio portrait: a dark-haired man and woman, two cute kids, nice clothes, healthy-looking. The guy could almost pass for Latino, but the woman had the sharp features of a high-caste Arab. After fifteen seconds, the picture dissolved into empty black, literally blown to bits.

"Which one?" Luis asked. "The guy or gal?"

"All four. Told you it was special."

That was strange. Back when he was in that business, Luis moved a lot of older people and young women. The young men were usually dead or in a camp. Still, not even the money got his interest. "No way. Besides, I thought you guys had some new kid doing that."

"Federico? Yeah." Ray planted his hands on the counter. "We did until he got dead a couple nights ago." He leaned forward and dropped his volume. "The boss is pretty hot to move these people. He'll make it worth your—"

"I said no." Luis heard the heat in his own voice, backed off. "Even if I survive it, Bel will kill me."

Ray smiled and straightened up. "Yeah, and probably me too right after." He scratched the back of his neck. "Look, this puts me in a bind, you know? He asked for you specifically. Tavo trusts you. You maybe have some bargaining room here. At least say you'll think about it."

"Bargain? With a cartel sub-boss? Are you crazy?"

Luis noticed a gray Ford Santana parked across the street, screaming "surveillance." Cops following Ray? Or were they after Luis because of Ray? Either way, he wasn't going through all that

again. He needed to care for his parents and help provide for his family. He'd already sacrificed enough for a lost cause.

"I'm not thinking about this. No. Do I need to spell that?"

Ray sighed, shook his head. "Tavo's gonna be pissed." He stuck out his hand. "Come down to the bar sometime. I never see you anymore. Salma misses you, too."

And Luis missed them. But every time he went to visit Ray and his long-time girlfriend, Bel's temperature dropped thirty degrees and Luis got frostbite. "Sure, *compa*." He shook Ray's hand. "Soon."

Excerpt

Since the 10/19/19 terrorist attack, approximately 430,000 people have been imprisoned in over 220 known facilities associated with the Terrorist Detention Program (TDP)... an estimated 90% identify with one of the Islamic sects and approximately 75% are U.S. citizens... Only 27 are known to have faced charges in a court of law, and three have been convicted of any crime.

-- Introduction, Held Without Hope, Human Rights Watch

FRIDAY, 30 APRIL

McGinley lounged in his rain cloud-gray government sedan across the street from Coast Conversions, a gray, flat-roofed, cinderblock of a building with a faded green awning and half-dead flowers in a planter out front. Two Mercedes SUVs and a big Merc sedan sat outside with grease pencil on the windshields, next to a Maserati SUV, a Range Rover, and one of those new Cadillac Olympias, big as a tank. All of them waiting to get armored up. Must be a lot of scared rich folk in these parts.

Two weeks away from his home turf and McGinley was still doing basic legwork for the local law, the useless sacks of shit. This Luis Ojeda character would be the sixth ex-coyote he'd corralled in the past four days. The other five were tired old duffers who hadn't crossed the border since gas was only five bucks a gallon.

But this Ojeda was in his forties; not much older than McGinley according to his file, though McGinley couldn't say he was real impressed with that file. And that big Mex who'd come out twenty minutes back was Ramiro Esquivel, what they used to call a plaza boss back in the day before the cartels got all corporate and started using titles like "area manager." Maybe Ojeda was still in the game. Worth a look-see, at least.

How to play this? McGinley didn't expect much this first meeting; this was rattling the cage to see what the animal would do. A badge most likely wouldn't ruffle Ojeda's feathers. He was probably

used to the local ICE crew, and McGinley reckoned most of them went native a long time back. Hell, if they'd been doing their jobs, the Joint Task Force boys wouldn't have dragged him all the way out here to look into why they couldn't keep their rags in the camps where they belonged.

Something alien to Ojeda might rile him up. Back home in Texas, McGinley could dress up nice and lose most of his accent and go talk sense into some peckerhead CEO who's busing in illegals instead of just paying good Americans the same shit wages. But here, in California? The big asshole redneck seemed to shake up everyone. That was easy; all McGinley had to do was be like his dad.

McGinley ambled across the cracked asphalt and through the shop's glass doors. Streaming news about the Presidential primaries scratched away in the empty front office. He skirted the counter, peered through the window set in the back wall, then pushed past the half-opened door into the workshop. Five service bays full of expensive cars being taken apart or put back together, loud music, louder tools. He felt eyes on him, none of them friendly, not that he gave a shit. McGinley strolled toward a familiar face next to a bronze Lincoln Discovery SUV in the second bay, its glass and doors all gone.

He flashed his badge once he'd closed in. "Luis Ojeda? Jack McGinley, ICE."

"Yeah?" Ojeda looked up from the slate perched on his forearm. He'd aged since the file photo; his short, wiry black hair had a fair sprinkling of gray around the ears now. Five-ten or so, fit, decent-looking enough squarish face, respectable blue button-down shirt and chinos. The pistol on his belt hinted at something harder under the surface. He said, "I was born here," then waved toward the young bucks working on the cars. "So were they."

McGinley shrugged like it didn't matter, which it didn't anymore. "Why, congratulations, *amigo*."

Ojeda frowned. *The accent? Good.*

"What I'm looking for here is five rags. In your 'hood four-five days ago, now they're gone." The runners hadn't been seen anywhere since they broke out. "Y'all know anything about this?"

Ojeda glared at him, working his jaw. "Why would I?"

"Because you're a coyote, Ojeda." McGinley swayed in another pace, trying to crowd Ojeda, push him out of his comfort zone. No reaction. Harder with the Latinos than with whites; they didn't have the

same personal-space issues. “Just like your daddy was. If anyone ‘round here knows how to get them rags over the border, it’s you.”

Dark spots began to bloom under Ojeda’s armpits. Just what McGinley wanted to see. “Your intel’s shit if that’s what you’re hearing. I’m just a guy trying to make a living. Besides, it’s illegal to leave the country now? I thought you people wanted them out.”

The air wrench behind McGinley had stopped screaming. He glanced back to catch a shaggy-headed wrench monkey staring at him over the hood of some fancy-ass four-door McGinley didn’t recognize. McGinley showed him how a stare was really done. After a minute, the kid stalked to the workbench behind him.

“It’s illegal to skip on a camp,” McGinley told Ojeda. “These five came out of Barstow, two weeks or so ago? Got told these boys were headed this way. Sound familiar?”

“Heard about it on the news. More people must’ve got out than they said.”

“Well, don’t believe anything you hear on the news.” The engine was ticking over behind Ojeda’s eyes, but he was still way too cool; time to rile him up. McGinley half-turned and waved across the cars. “I reckon it’s way too loud in here for you to think right. How ‘bout I just shut this place down a spell, so me and you can talk private-like.”

Ojeda’s neck flushed red. “That’s money out of my pocket, *cabrón*. This a shakedown?”

Score. “Should it be?” McGinley read the sudden heat coming off Ojeda and dropped back a couple steps, resting his right wrist on the pistol butt in his belt holster. Casual; just a reminder. The file said Ojeda had been Army in Afghanistan back in the day. He’d probably been carrying as long as McGinley and knew how to use that weapon of his—what was it, a Sig Sauer? Serious piece, nothing cheap. Ojeda looped a thumb over the belt in front of his holster. Casual; just a reminder.

For a few long seconds, McGinley stared at Ojeda, waiting for a twitch. Well, the man had some balls. Would he really draw down on a Fed? Hard telling. These days, people did what they had to to protect their turf or their lives, and a badge didn’t carry the same weight it used to.

Finally, McGinley smirked and dropped his hand. He’d rattled the cage enough. “Well, then, Ojeda. Y’all keep your eyes and ears open. If you hear anything about these Muslim former Americans, you let me know right quick.” He stepped forward and flipped a business

card out of his shirt pocket up into Ojeda's face. "Meantime, I reckon I'll find out where you've been the past few nights. Just curious, you know. Your daddy smuggled a lot of people into this country back in the day, and, well, like father, like son, right?"

The red crept into Ojeda's hairline. He might look respectable, but hit the secret button and he spun up right nice. "That business is *over*. Nobody wants to come to this country anymore. People like you saw to that."

"That so? Say, your son's a Marine, ain't he? Damn good training for the family business. All them long marches—"

"Leave my son out of this," Ojeda snapped. "Yeah, Dad was a coyote. That's long done. Nacho's got nothing to do with this, and he never will." He snatched the card out of McGinley's fingers. "Watch the door on your way out."

McGinley snorted, shook his head, looked around. "Some place you got here. It yours?"

"No. I'm the manager. A Chinese guy up in Sierra Madre owns the chain."

"You don't say." He had to poke one last time. "Just wondering. If we ran an ID check on your boys yonder, how many do y'all think you'd lose?"

Ojeda's eyes had turned black and ice-cold. "Have a shitty day, McGinley."

"I often do, *amigo*." He slapped Ojeda's shoulder, turned and strolled outside.

This one might be worth watching.

United States: Citizens traveling to or in the United States should be aware that U.S. security forces and many citizens are suspicious of anyone they believe to be of the Islamic faith... Boarding trains, undergrounds or commercial aircraft may be a lengthy, difficult, or possibly unpleasant experience and should be avoided whenever possible.

-- "Traveler's Advisory," Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs

FRIDAY, 30 APRIL

"All right, now, get your clothes off," the TSA agent drawled. A black woman: hard-faced, mouth downturned, "Lebow" according to her ID. "All of 'em. Put 'em on the table."

Nora Khaled's sense of humiliation scorched her cheeks. She'd been furious when she and her husband Paul and the kids got pulled out of the Dulles Airport security line and dragged back here. Now her brain space filled with embarrassment that was only going to get worse.

"Look," she said as calmly as she could, "I know you have procedures; I get that. But I'm an FBI agent." She held up her ID folder for the zillionth time this morning, hoping the badge would finally do some good. "A Federal officer, like you. Can't we—"

"Don't care who you are, lady." Lebow folded her wiry arms across her chest. "System says you're a threat, so we gonna check you out. Now get your clothes off. The girl, too."

Nora glanced at Hope. Her daughter clung to her jeans pocket, staring wide-eyed at the woman. "You're going to strip-search a four-year-old? Is that really necessary?" She nearly choked on her tongue, trying to fight down her rising anger.

"Gotta see what's under her clothes, so there's no bomb or nothing."

"She's just a baby!" Nora stopped, gulped down a breath when Lebow slid her hand toward her sidearm. "Do you have kids?"

“Yeah. And they ain’t gonna get blown up by no terrorists, not if I can help it.” Lebow slipped her telescoping metal baton off her belt and extended it with a flick of her wrist. Hope whimpered. “Now you get yourself naked or I’ll get a coupla guys out there to come help, understand?”

If only she could’ve worked out getting into Canada. They could have driven, avoiding all this. But everyone wanted to go to Canada and the Canucks were really cracking down, so getting a guide across the border would have cost more than her family had. Mexico wasn’t so choosy. Unfortunately, driving from D.C. all the way to Paul’s parents in Southern California—the cover reason for this trip—wasn’t an option.

Nora had expected to be stopped at the airport, questioned, scanned multiple times, maybe frisked. She hadn’t counted on ending up in a frigid, overlit, windowless room with the most obnoxious TSA agent ever, on the verge of having the last of her and her daughter’s dignity ripped away.

Nora over-carefully set her ID folder on the table—once again, the badge had failed her—and struggled to put her game face on. More than anything, she couldn’t let Hope be hurt by this. “Get undressed, Cupcake,” she whispered to Hope. “Put your things on the table.”

“But why? Are we in trouble?”

“No, no. We haven’t done anything wrong. It’s just... the rules. Be a good girl, okay?”

Nora stripped quickly, ignoring Lebow, relying on sheer momentum to get her through. Paul and Peter were going through the same thing somewhere beyond that closed door. Paul never got used to institutional dehumanization the way Nora did in the Army; this would be so humiliating for him. She remembered how devastated her father—a born-again American patriot if there ever was one—had been the first time this had happened to him.

At least these idiots were playing it by the book. Some women at the mosque had told her of being searched by male TSA agents.

Laminate-and-metal tables lined three of the room’s dingy off-white walls, leaving plenty of space for more victims. Nora shuddered, not just because the scratched linoleum floor was cold under her bare feet. She took off her Panama hat last, set it carefully on her clothes pile behind her. Only her chunky silver pendant was left; they’d need those male guards if they wanted to take it. She didn’t

bother to cover herself. Even though her face was on fire, she wouldn't give this cockroach the satisfaction of seeing her as weak.

Hope hunched against the cold next to her, arms folded tight across her bare chest, shuffling her feet. She'd removed everything except her tiny white cotton panties. Nora hugged her to her side and hoped almost naked was good enough for this woman.

"Get the girl's drawers off," Lebow ordered. She pointed her baton at Hope, who shrank back against the table's rim.

Nora felt an explosion inside her. *If I had my weapon...* She was about to pin the woman's ears back but saw the void in her eyes and clamped her mouth shut. All this was normal to this pig: just two more half-humans to put in their places. *I have to succeed*, Nora told herself, *so this never happens to us or anybody else ever again.* She knelt before her daughter and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry, Cupcake." Then she took away Hope's last bit of modesty.

Nora's hands trembled with rage as she dropped the panties on the rest of Hope's clothes. "Satisfied?" She didn't bother to hide the snarl in her voice.

Lebow collapsed her baton, clipped it to her belt, then pulled a pair of latex gloves from her back pocket. She pawed through their clothes, probed every pocket and seam.

"Put your hands on your head, fingers interlaced." Her bored voice recited rather than spoke the instructions. "Open your mouth." A bony, latex-coated finger rummaged through Nora's mouth. "Squat and spread your knees."

Nora followed each command without protest, choking back tears of shame and anger. She coughed on cue, stood, turned, bent over the table.

Lebow shoved her finger inside Nora, poked and prodded. Nora gasped at the pain. She tried to hold back her tears, her curses, her feelings, but couldn't. She'd been born here, just a few miles away. She'd fought for this country, risked her life for it. She was a federal officer. How could this happen? How did she become a criminal?

"Spread your cheeks."

The woman switched orifices.

Nora slammed shut her eyes and clenched her teeth so hard her jaw ached. Her *daughter* was watching this, her four-year-old *daughter*, seeing her mother violated. Nora could hear Hope's soft sobs next to her. She wanted to kill this woman, beat her down with her own baton, then empty her own pistol into her. She could do it; it was

there, inside her. They thought she was a terrorist? She'd show them a terrorist.

"Right. Stand up, turn around."

Nora smeared the tear tracks off her face before she turned to glare into Lebow's bulging eyes. She pulled Hope against her again, felt her daughter's tears burn down her bare hip. "It's okay," she murmured to Hope, never taking her eyes off Lebow. "I'm okay. She didn't hurt me. And she's not going to hurt you."

She was giving up everything: her home, her career, her friends, her country, maybe her life if things went wrong. But she was also giving up the slights and insults, the suspicion, the graffiti on the front door, her children beaten up by bullies, her tires slashed. All to bring the truth to vermin like this. To show them what they'd become, what they'd done to the nation they supposedly loved so much. She would *not* let them see her break down.

Lebow broke off the staring contest and shifted her narrowed eyes toward Hope.

No. Way. Nora pushed Hope behind her. "If you touch my daughter..."

The woman switched her attention back to Nora. "You threatening me?"

"What would you do," Nora growled, "if I was about to rape your kids?"

Lebow's eyes settled back into round two of the staring contest. Nora had lots of practice at this from facing down suspects during interrogation. After a few moments, the woman scanned Nora up and down once, then slowly met her eyes again.

Then Nora saw it: fear. Just a flash, but it was there and unmistakable. Lebow had seen Nora's hard abs, the sinews quivering in her neck and arms and thighs, the furnace burning behind her eyes. Probably nothing like any Muslim woman this dog had ever seen before. One who wasn't afraid. One who'd fight back.

"Get your clothes on," Lebow sputtered. "You're done."

Nora gave her the hardest smile she could manage.

No. You and everybody like you... you're done.

This boom in gene-based therapies has caused average life expectancy to surge to above 90 among those Americans earning the top 10% of incomes... However, for those in the bottom 60% who find health insurance entirely unaffordable — and for those with pre-existing conditions, the elderly, and pregnant women, who are considered uninsurable — life expectancy has plunged below 70 for the first time since 1964.

-- "Study: Longevity Linked to Income," LATimes.com

FRIDAY, 30 APRIL

Mirabel Ojeda stared out at the Pit and felt her heart break for the first time that morning.

A hundred people packed into the Emergency Department waiting room designed for forty-five, piled on the faded plastic chairs, sitting on the floor or each other, leaning, standing, whatever they could do. Another sixty or so clotted outside around the entry door. The racket and stench slammed into Bel as soon as she pushed through the automatic double doors from the treatment area. She could tune out the noise, and after all these years she was used to the funk—she was never away from this place long enough to get the stink out of her sinuses—but she couldn't avoid the faces, the pain and pleading and fear in their eyes. She felt both utterly helpless and so angry she wanted to turn the Taser strapped to her waist on the first hospital administrator stupid enough to wander into this cesspool.

Bel tugged the surgical mask back up her nose, squared her goggles and started her first hunt of the day. Only the bleeding or unconscious would get treatment anytime soon.

Worn-out faces turned up to her as she pushed down each aisle. Fingers plucked at her scrub pants. She had to pretend she couldn't hear the soft calls of "Nurse!" and "Please!" that followed her. In the Army, she'd never pass a patient who asked for help; here, it seemed

to be all she did. Nostalgic for Bagram? She'd have laughed at that idea twenty years ago.

She found a little boy with a raging case of measles; he'd have to wait. She stepped over the legs of a ragged, dirty guy with sores on his face, asleep against a concrete pillar. Hard telling what he wanted; he was breathing, so he'd get to wait, too. Bel paused briefly in front of a lost-looking white couple in clean clothes, good gym shoes, and nice haircuts trying to hush a red-faced, screaming infant. Poor little thing; probably an infection. Wait.

Bel stopped again to squat beside an elderly man at the end of the row. His shoulders huddled under a frayed cardigan (with the room temp at egg-poaching level thanks to the half-broken A/C), his breath whistling in and out. Old folks were over a third of the ED's patients now. Bel pictured Luis' dad Alvaro, how his Medicare had become vouchers that could almost pay for insurance that didn't cover anything, and how his big heart was slowly coming apart like a junker car. He'd respond to proteomic therapy if they had any way to pay for it. She reached out to squeeze the old man's hand; the man peeked up enough to give her back a trembly, bashful smile. There: Bel's heart broke a second time in ten minutes.

Bel turned toward a ruckus at the door. Two dirty men in filthy blue overalls dragged a boy between them, their taped hands under his arms. The scrap-metal plant's daily casualty. She shoved her way through the crowd and reached them just before they got to Reception. "What happened?" she demanded.

"Saw got away from him." The shorter man dug in his breast pocket. "Got the fingers right here."

That's when she noticed the bloody cloth wrapped around the boy's left hand. She tried not to show the catch in her throat. "Hold onto them, give them to the doctor. How old is he?"

"Twelve, thirteen maybe."

Oh, God. "Follow me."

She marched into the ED's treatment area. All the cubicles were full—she'd helped fill them—but maybe she could find someplace to put this boy. She risked a glance back. He was as dirty as the grownups, swimming in his overalls, his head wobbling as if there were no bones in his neck. His hair had been mowed down to an eighth-inch brush. He reminded Bel of Nacho when they'd shaved his head after he'd managed to pour paint over himself and let it dry. He'd been bright blue. She and Lucho took turns with the clippers

while the other sneaked off to laugh until their sides burned.

She'd love to laugh like that again. It'd been so long.

Bel grabbed an orderly, growled, "Get me a gurney, stat!" then found a stray chair outside an exam cube. The men dropped the boy into it with a grunt. "We gotta get back," the taller one said. "They clocked us out."

"Wait!" Bel already had the boy's overalls open, exposing a stained undershirt over a shrunken chest. "What's his name?"

"Cullen," the shorter man said. He looked up at the other man. "Know his last name?" The other man shook his head. "Sorry, miss. They took his badge when we was going out. Look, we gotta go."

Bel accepted the wad of bloody paper towels holding the boy's fingers and waved the men away. They'd fired him on his way to the hospital. They wouldn't even spring for an ambulance. *Bastards*. Where were his parents? Did they send him to the plant? Did he have a home, or just some nasty little tent someplace?

She peeled off her left glove, reached out, hesitated, then stroked the fuzz on his scalp. Soft, like a puppy's. Cullen rolled his head back and peered at her through grayish eyes sloshing with tears and pain. *I'm so sorry*, she wanted to say. *About everything. You'll be okay, really. We'll make it better.* But she couldn't shove the words out of her mouth; she couldn't lie to him. So she simply caressed what was left of his hair and tried to not let her tears out.

The orderly—a doctor from Myanmar who couldn't practice here—arrived with the gurney. Bel helped him ease the boy onto it. "Clean him up and re-wrap the hand," she told him. "Take his vitals, type him, and give him a tetanus booster. See if you can find a doctor. Thanks." She took one last look at Cullen, stuffed down a sigh, then trudged back to the Pit. The hospital could help the boy. She'd seen too many patients turned out the moment they could stand, though, to believe this time would be different.



The screaming in the Pit drilled through the double doors into the treatment area.

Bel, scurrying to the lab cart with samples of what she hoped wasn't typhus, stopped and stared toward the doors. It wasn't the normal screaming. Ros—one of the older nurses, Bel's age maybe—caught her eye from the exam cube across from her. Bel passed the

samples to an orderly and hit the doors running.

A swarm of Pit inmates heaved in the open area in front of Reception. Next to a nearby concrete pillar, a frail, hairless woman wailed over the still body of a man. Taser leads trailed from his back across the floor. Three Pit creatures pointed guns at the man while a security guard threaded plasticuffs around his wrists.

Bel followed the path Ros cleared into the center of the scrum. There she found Dortmund kneeling next to a bundle of blond hair and blue scrubs curled into a ball on the blood-spattered linoleum. She gasped. "Oh, God."

The bundle was Pippa, a way-too-young nurse's aide from someplace in the Midwest. Blood and snot poured out of her battered nose, one eye was already swelling shut, and she squealed every time either Dortmund or Bel touched her. Pippa whimpered "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry" between hacking coughs.

"What happened?" Bel demanded of Dortmund. He was about the same size as her husband, but he seemed huge compared to the rest of the nurses.

"I dunno. He was yelling about waiting three days for a doctor before I put him down." He leaned close to Pippa, crooned, "Hey, Pips, it's okay, you're safe."

For once, the ED staff worked like the machine it was supposed to be. A gurney crashed into the Pit, Bel and Ros gently rolled Pippa onto a backboard, and the girl soon disappeared into the treatment area, surrounded by nurses and orderlies.

Bel stood rooted next to Pippa's puddle, waiting for an orderly to come clean up. She sucked air through her cupped hand, trying to calm her stomach. That could've been her. Coming into the Pit unarmed was like wearing a meat dress in a kennel, but the hospital wouldn't buy enough Tasers for all the nurses.

Ros pressed her arm into Bel's. "Does one of us gotta get killed before we do something?"

Not this again. Ros had been carrying water for a union organizer for the past eight months. Every day, Bel expected her to disappear and wind up in a landfill. "You want us all to end up like that?"

Ros crossed her arms hard. "They can't afford to do that. We have skills. It's not like they can just drag random people out of a Ryantown and put 'em to work here."

"You're sure?" She swiveled on Ros, dropped into a whisper. "I was in the union at Regional. I did what you're doing. Remember how

they broke our last strike? I lost two friends. So no, I'm not going to help you get the nurses fired or murdered. I know how you feel, Ros, but I just can't fight anymore."

"Bullshit. You're still in this dump. You're fighting every day." Ros' narrow jaw went hard. "We need you, *qin*. The younger nurses, they respect you, they'll follow you."

"They'll have to follow someone else." Bel broke away and stalked toward the doors. A union, these days? That was a fantasy. Bel couldn't see risking her family and life for a fantasy. "I'm sorry."



"Nurse Ojeda to Reception, please."

Oh, hell. Bel shoved her frustration back into its cave and trudged through the double doors into the Pit. To her left, a broad-shouldered man with a red-blond crew cut stood near the bulletproof glass window stretching across the three reception stations. He stood out from the others because he looked healthy and wore a vaguely disgusted expression.

The reception clerk must have pointed in her direction, because the man paced straight for her. He flashed a badge a couple steps away. "Mirabel Ojeda?"

A cop? Was Lucho in trouble again? "Yes?"

"Jack McGinley, ICE." He had some kind of Southern accent. "I just jawed some with your husband a while back."

Not in uniform, she noticed: newish jeans, tan combat boots, a white, short-sleeved snap-front shirt with blue pinstripes. A gun peeked out from behind his right hip. Bel was glad she still wore her surgical mask so this McGinley couldn't see her worry. She fumbled a moment for something to say. "What... what do you want?"

"Well..." McGinley ran his gaze around the Pit. His mouth screwed up into a knot. "Could we step out somewhere that ain't the Black Hole of Calcutta? You reckon that's possible?"

This wasn't the first time she'd faced questions from ICE or the Border Patrol or DEA. They didn't make her nervous anymore, just resentful. At least this time—for the first time in ages—she wouldn't have to lie. As she led the cop outside, though, a single thought stomped up and down her brain: *Lucho, what have you gotten yourself into now?*

The economic activities of Mexico's three corporatized narco supercartels have completely displaced the rump federal government in the 28 Mexican states under their control. Legitimate and illicit business activities in the United States, Latin America and Asia support the cartels' generation-long funding of local infrastructure development and maintenance, law enforcement, and education, as well as the regional military forces that prosecute Mexico's ongoing civil war.

-- "Unclassified Key Judgments (from October 2030 NIE)," *National Intelligence Council*

FRIDAY, 30 APRIL

La Paloma—Ray's biggest bar in Orange County—occupied a hundred-plus-year-old brick building on the southern edge of downtown Santa Ana. Luis figured every cop in Southern California knew that like all the other businesses Ray managed, it was also a Cartel money laundry. As he entered through the brick courtyard, Luis could see his name being typed on some watch list. Not that he had any choice.

When the *patrón* calls for you, you come.

Ray met him at the weapons check. Luis traded his Sig for a claim ticket, then Ray ushered him into the main bar.

Inside he found brick, dark woodwork and the normal early-Friday-night crowd: twenty or so people drinking, a half-dozen couples dancing *bachata*—slower and sexier than salsa—to a DJ. They wore their best shabby clothes and their much-repaired good shoes. The women had done what they could with home perms and cheap makeup or had just hacked their hair short like Bel and half the actresses on the web. The drinkers, the dancers, even the DJ were various kinds of lean, some hard, some sick; low pay and expensive food made for a great weight-loss plan. A couple hookers—not obvious, but dressed better than the normals—worked the room. Luis knew the local zip and kronk dealers were in the second bar

across the breezeway. One-stop shopping.

Luis checked the place Tavo used as a meeting room, sticking into the bar floor off to his right. Venetian blinds blocked the big windows. “Is this one of those talks where Tavo brings out the sledgehammer?” He tried not to sound like a school kid waiting to see the principal.

“No, no.” Ray waved away the idea. “He just wants to talk face-to-face, you know? Tell you his side of things. Be chill.”

“A cartel sub-boss calls me in for a lecture, and you want me to be chill? Seriously?”

“Just...” Ray spread out his hands, palms down. *Even it out.*

They stood off to the side of the room, watching the action swirl around them. Ray paid a lot of attention to the waitresses—tall, dark, full of attitude, short black skirts and blood-red shirts—and they returned it, smiling and flashing eyes his way. Luis would’ve enjoyed the show more if his attention hadn’t been nailed to Tavo’s door, imagining what would happen when he went through it. “What kind of mood is Tavo in? Is he pissed?”

“He’s... been happier. Things are fucked up down south. You know someone took out *El Tiburón* a couple days ago, right?”

That was Nestor, Tavo’s brother and the Pacifico Norte *capo*. For a few moments, Luis forgot about Tavo’s dragon’s den. “Who did it? Who’s running the Cartel?”

“Nobody knows who did it yet,” Ray said. An especially pretty waitress sauntered by, lots of hip sway, and winked at Ray. “Who’s running the Cartel? Don’t know yet, but maybe...” He nodded toward Tavo’s door.

Great, Luis thought. The new capo wants to yell at me.

The door swung open. Ray nudged Luis. “Looks like it’s time.”

The blond *gabacho* coming out was a hand shorter than Luis, wearing a white polo with the triangle-in-a-triangle logo of the company that owned the contract cops that passed for Santa Ana PD. He nodded to them as he headed for the bar.

“That time of the month,” Ray said under his breath.

That morning’s McGinley visitation replayed in Luis’ head. Had that cracker been trying to shake him down? The Feds were paid more than the average rent-a-cop—which wasn’t saying much—but like everyone else, they got no retirement.

Tavo’s office had been a private dining room back when La Paloma was a restaurant. A big wood slab of a table still filled the

middle, circled by twelve wooden ladder-back chairs. Tavo sat at the far end with his slate. "Gentlemen," he said in Spanish. "Please come in."

Luis first met Octavio Villalobos almost twelve years before, when Tavo had recruited him to coyote for the Cartel. He'd expected the man who ran the Cartel's business in the Southwest to be a cliché *narco* boss from the music vids—lots of gangsta bling, a shiny suit and \$4000 cowboy boots. What he found instead was a guy who looked and dressed like a successful accountant, with conservative hair and quiet office clothes and a high-end Chinese smartwatch.

They stopped two chairs back from the table's end, Luis on one side, Ray on the other. Luis said, "*Hola, patrón.*"

"*Buenas noches*, Luis. You look well. Mirabel is well too, I expect?"

"Her job's hard, but she's okay."

"And Ignacio? Your son is still in your Marine Corps?"

That first time here, Luis had also expected a lot of swearing and macho bullshit. Tavo never swore, and he hated nicknames.

"Yeah. He's deployed, but he's doing good."

Tavo nodded. "Excellent." He motioned toward Ray. "Ramiro tells me you won't escort this *Moro* family to the south. Is that so?"

Just what Luis was afraid of. A bead of sweat trickled down the back of his neck. "Yes, *patrón.*"

Tavo gave him a slow scan. While most of him resembled a bureaucrat, his eyes were hard and always a little distant. "You've recovered from your incident?"

"Mostly. I still feel it sometimes." The dreams were still there, in the shadows.

"Of course." Tavo leaned forward, steepled his fingers and put them to his lips. "I appreciate that your experience has made you... reluctant. But this is a special situation, and I can pay you well for your efforts. Would \$50,000 ease your concerns at all?"

Fifty grand? He'd never had that big a payoff before. "What's so special about these people?"

"The woman's an agent in your FBI. She wishes to defect."

That took a moment to sink in. When it did, every alarm in Luis' head started blasting. "What? That's crazy! How do you know this isn't a trap? I—"

"We've verified her story," Tavo said. His voice had turned a few degrees frostier. He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands on the table. "Please give me the courtesy of believing we aren't fools. I

respect your experience and discretion, Luis. That's why of all the men I have available, I ask you to do this."

Luis glanced to Ray, who arched an eyebrow as if to say, *well?*

Fifty grand. Not nearly enough to get their heads above water, but damn good. He could pay a couple debts, maybe clean off one of the credit cards. He might even be able to get his parents in to see doctors for the first time in a few years, the way a good son should.

Or he might get himself killed.

Or Bel might kill him for breaking the promise he'd made to her after his last run. He heard her words at his hospital bedside: *I don't want that money. I want you alive, with me.*

"I'm retired," he finally said. "I'm too old and slow to be running around out there anymore. My family depends on me. If anything happens to me, it's over for them, too."

Tavo's eyes became completely opaque, like the black glass on the cars in Luis' shop. "I don't remember giving you permission to retire."

Permission? "I was a contractor." He picked his words carefully. "That was our deal. I take only the work I want."

"That changed when we provided your medical care after your incident, and the support while you recovered." Tavo swept his slate screen with the edge of his hand. "Do you know how much we invested in you?" He poked at the slate. "Three hundred ninety thousand dollars. I have an account here if you'd like to review it. Hospitals are so expensive in this country."

Luis squashed the anger trying to climb up his throat. "I was working for you when I was shot," he said as evenly as his heart would let him. "I thought the deal was, if I was hurt or arrested, the Cartel would take care of me." He stared into Tavo's stony eyes and remembered the nickname the Nortés had for (but never used around) him: *La Almádena*. Sledgehammer. Ray told him it was Tavo's favorite weapon.

"And so we did." Tavo leaned forward, touching his steepled fingers to his lips. "We made this investment in good faith with the understanding you'd rejoin us once you recovered. You've been on extended leave as far as we're concerned. And now you say you've recovered. It delights me to hear this. So now it's time to come back to work."

Bel would want Luis to tell him to go to hell. She'd tell him herself, damn the blowback. But Bel wasn't here, just the

Sledgehammer. "How do I retire?"

"Ah." Tavo nodded sadly. "Luis, if you truly wish to retire, of course you can. All you have to do is repay what you owe to us."

Almost four hundred grand. More money than he'd get for running the shop over the next twelve years. *Dios mío.*

"This debt is now two years old, you understand. We expect all our loans to be repaid promptly. Interest will be involved as well, it always is." Tavo narrowed his eyes a fraction, just enough to squeeze the last warmth out of them. "Do I need to continue?"

Sweat soaked the back of Luis' shirt while Tavo stared at him for what seemed like an hour. Go back to dragging strays over the border or pay off an impossible debt. What kind of choice was this?

Could he escape with Bel? Go over the border, disappear someplace the Cartel would never find them? Was there such a place?

Tavo asked, "Do you remember Hernando Vega? I believe he used to be your logistics contact, yes? Well, he won't be your contact anymore. This is why." He held up his slate.

The screen filled with a picture of a man sprawled on bloody asphalt, naked and riddled with more bullet holes than Luis could ever count. Luis cringed, turned his head away.

"He owed money to us—less than you do—and thought he could run away from his obligation. We found him in Manila. This picture was taken there. Would you like to see what we did to his wife?"

Luis shook his head, nauseated.

Tavo switched off the slate and laid it carefully on the table. "It isn't the money, you understand. It's the principle. A debt is a matter of honor. Everyone must pay their debts. One way or another."

It was like Tavo had read Luis' mind. His life and Bel's life had just become worthless. Ray was no help; he stood staring at the floor, as if he was trying to drill through it and disappear.

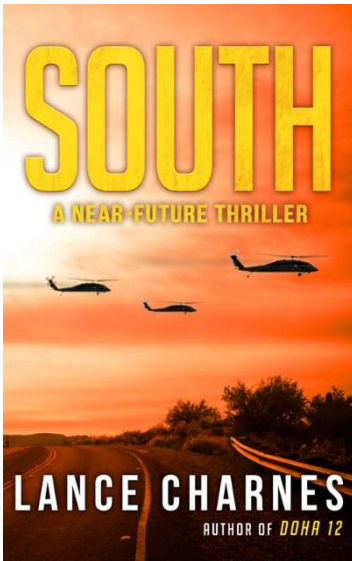
"I need to talk to Bel. I can't just ignore her." *Brave man, hiding behind your wife.*

Tavo pursed his lips. "No, that would be wrong." He leaned back. "Talk to your wife. Tonight. Tell Ramiro of your decision tomorrow morning. Make the right decision, Luis."

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