Journey Through an Arid Land

Part 1

Crossing Over

*Water in the desert is an ocean of tears.*

– Tina Moyer

Day 1

Gordo fondled his puffy jowls and sucked his big square teeth as he peeked through the slats of the Venetian blinds at the woman and her children waiting to cross the boulevard. As the owner of the Hotel Las Palomitas, a concrete block building catering to those who wanted to try their luck on the other side, he had an investment in all his pilgrims, but women crossing without their husbands, brothers, or boyfriends were always of special interest.

Although she was trying to disguise it, the woman was clearly pregnant. At first he thought it unfortunate, but as he watched her now, he could see how it might work in his favor. Smiling, he plucked his cell phone from his pants pocket and made a call.

Belen Verales motioned to her children to hurry across the wide, pocked street. Nine-year old Edgar grabbed his sister’s hand. They ran ahead of the woman who toted food and a few carefully chosen belongings in a large woven plastic bag. Adriana, a slender 12-year old, turned to check on her mother’s progress. Belen was small but stout, and the large hooded sweatshirt she wore nearly concealed her pregnancy. Still her daughter knew exactly how big her mother’s belly was, and the girl’s face showed concern.

“Andale, mija.” Belen waved to hurry her daughter on.

Although it was barely dawn, the streets of Rio Seco were already smoky with exhaust. These streets were so different from the quiet, muddy lanes of her village in the mountains of Vera Cruz. There the family had a small farm where they once grew coffee. Now that the beans were worth less than a peso a kilo, they could no longer afford to grow them. She missed her village and the green fields that surrounded it, but in the weeks since leaving their home, Belen had become almost accustomed to the noise and rush of big cities. She’d negotiated her way through sprawling Mexico City. Rio Seco did not daunt her.

“Run, run!” she cried to her children, and they raced to the curb.

Once on the other side of the street, Belen tucked a whip of black hair back under a baseball cap emblazoned with a rattlesnake, the logo of the Arizona Diamondbacks. Her husband, Jacabo, had sent one to each of them months ago. She wore hers for luck now. With luck and the grace of the Virgin of Guadalupe, they would soon be reunited in a city called Phoenix. And in a month or so, there would be the new one. Si Dios deseo, her son——she was certain it was a boy——would be born en los Estados Unidos. At the thought, which was also a prayer, she made the sign of the cross with her right thumb and index finger, touched it to her shoulders and then her lips.

Jacabo had advised her how best to cross, and everything was ready. They had three backpacks, purchased specially for the trip. Inside each pack were six liters of water, a bag of oranges, packages of crackers and tortillas, extra cotton socks. Mornings and evenings had been unexpectedly chilly for so late in the spring, so yesterday she had rummaged through a pile of used clothing spread out on a table in the parish hall of La Catedral de Santa Margarita. Under the stern gaze of the sisters, she chose three hooded sweatshirts, all the same faded, rusty black, and hoped they would not tell her she was being too greedy.

The owner of the hotel stood in the doorway, banda music careening from a boom box on his desk.

“Buenos dias, Señora.” He stepped into the dark hallway, and placed one arm against the wall. “And how are the children.”

“Fine. We’re all fine.” she mumbled, pushing Edgar and Adriana ahead.

“Why are you in such a hurry, little mother? It’s early and you have hours to wait.” Smiling, he took Adriana’s face between his two thick palms. “Qué linda*.* And you, little man, take good care of your pretty sister and your dear mamá.” Laughing like a good uncle, he patted the boy on the shoulder and waved them past. “Andenles, pues.”

Once back in their room, a cubicle with a single barred window and no toilet or sink, Belen spread her rebozo on the narrow bed. The shawl was dark blue with long, knotted fringes, a reminder of her mother, grandmother, and the village in the green mountains. The rebozo, her jet-and-silver rosary, and a few changes of underwear were the only personal possessions she would carry to the other side. All else, the extra clothing, the hairbrush, their old shoes, would be left in this room.

She arranged packages of crackers, hard white cheese, and corn tortillas on the rebozo, then divided them among the three backpacks already containing the oranges and water.

“Now try them on,” she ordered, then watched as they practiced walking with the fully loaded packs on their backs.

“Mamá, they’re too heavy,” Edgar complained.

Belen patted her belly. “Your burden is nothing compared to mine, mijito. Besides, once we get started, it will get lighter with each passing hour. When your pack is finally weightless, we will be with your father.”

And she was confident this was the truth because she was well prepared. On their feet they wore running shoes, also newly purchased. The shoes would serve them well, she’d been told, on the long walk north.

She opened her bolsa and spread tortillas, avocados, bananas, and a half-dozen little empanadas de calabasas on a sheet ofnewspaper. The package of saliditos——the salty, sweet, dried plums that every child loved——she would save for later when the children would most need encouragement.

“Eat,” she commanded. Belen would make her children stuff themselves. A little later, although the children would resist, she’d give each the herbal suppository. The curandera from their village had promised it would give them stamina and prevent them from falling behind due to the call of nature. Then all they’d have to do is wait for their guía,a muscular young man, muy indio, darker even than Jacabo, with a droopy left eye. Known only as El Camaleón, she’d heard that he had been a boxer until a blow to the head had nearly blinded him.

At dusk, El Camaleón would come for them and the others resting in the hotel, and they would begin the final, most dangerous part of their journey. Two nights it would take. Two nights until they would all be together again at last. Together, she and Jacabo, would begin to build their children’s future.

Emma Rutherford’s head dropped, and she fell into a doze as Wiona refilled her own coffee cup.

“You want a warm up, Mother?”

The woman’s head shot up. “Umm? I guess I do.” Emma, a plump woman with short, steely gray hair, smiled at her daughter politely, then with lightning speed, dumped three heaping teaspoons of sugar to her coffee.

Before she could add a fourth, Wiona took the spoon from her hand. “That’s plenty.”

Emma arched a brow. “If you say so.”

Wiona’s teeth clenched. She worked her jaw to ease the ache there. She didn’t know when clenching her teeth had become a habit. “Mother, I’m not your keeper, I’m your daughter.”

“If you say so,” Emma huffed, then studied Wiona for a moment. “When did you change your hair?”

“My hair?”

“Your bangs, you cut them.”

“Mother I haven’t worn bangs in, I don’t know, five years.”

Emma’s face collapsed in uncertainty. “That can’t be.”

“At least five years.” She started to clear the table.

Emma’s face reddened a bit. “Of course. Sometimes…it’s feels like I’m just waking up.”

“You do sleep a lot.”

“Well, bless your heart. It seems to me I’m awake most of the night.” Emma busied herself scraping at the dried egg yolk on her plate. “You got a good do on the eggs.”

These, the highest of compliments, were words Wiona’s father had often said. He might say, *You got a good do on that pie*, or *you got a good do on those reins you braided*. The mother she’d grown up with had rarely taken the time to bestow a compliment.

“Thanks, Mother,” she said, feeling absurdly grateful.

“Mother? That makes me feel like a relic. When did I stop being Mom?”

A thousand years ago, Wiona thought.

In her head, she now referred to her mother as Emma. It seemed easier that way, so different from her old mother she’d become. Wiona smiled at the soft round woman who had once been sharp, efficient, hard. She piled the dishes into the sink, then ran a sponge over the worn flowered oil cloth protecting the prized mahogany table that once belonged to her grandmother. She couldn’t recall the last time she’d actually seen the worn wooden surface of that table. The round clock that hung above the stove was stuck on 7, but from the degree of blue in the canyon, she knew it was closer to 6. It would be another hour at least before Gabby would arrive to watch after Emma.

Wiona grabbed a frozen chicken from the freezer and plunked it on the counter.

“Your programs start pretty soon, Mother. Let’s get you settled and comfy in the living room.”

Once installed in front of the TV, Emma would doze off and on through “Fellowship,” “The Coral Ridge Hour,” and “The Word,” which would take her up to noon dinner. In the meantime, Wiona could attend to chores. This morning she had to check on the stock. It was the middle of April, and most of the cows had calved. She needed to check on the few who hadn’t.

She settled Emma into theLa-Z-Boy, tucking the old afghan around her mother’s legs. “Gabby will be here pretty soon if you need anything.”

“Where are you going?”

“Chores, Mother.”

“Where’s the remote?”

“In the pocket of the chair, remember?”

“Pocket?’ She patted her hands along the sides of the chair. “Oh. Okay. I found it.”

“See you later then.”

Wiona slipped on her father’s old cord jacket. Though a little long in the sleeves, it fit her well. From the hat tree by the front door, she grabbed a canvas pouch and a John Deere cap. The cap, she slapped over her light brown hair, which was yet uncombed. The pouch she slipped over her shoulder in much the same manner a woman would carry a fine leather purse. A messy braid flopped between her shoulder blades as she strode towards the barn, trying to avoid looking at the sagging corral gate, the busted squeeze chute, and the three rotten posts, all of which needed to be shimmied or shored-up, jury-rigged, salvaged, anything but replaced, by time she brought in the calves for branding and castration.

Like her father, she was angular except for the pronounced flair of her hips——a product of years on horseback. Her hooded eyes were the color of strong tea. Fine lines radiated from the corner of each, and her skin stretched brown, shiny, over bladed cheekbones. People once thought her a fine-looking girl, not a beauty, but nice-looking enough, with those broad shoulders and long legs, and strong——a good quality in a ranch wife.

Even in the desert, April mornings at 4,500 feet were still cold. The canyon itself was a giant bellows, sucking air in during the day, blowing it out at night, and the steady breeze added to the chill. She took a pair of worn leather, work gloves from the pocket of her jacket and tugged them on.

A runty Aussie shepherd, mostly black with a bib of white on its chest, and russet paws and brows bounded up, wagging her tailless rump. She whined until Wiona bent to scratch her scruffy ears. No matter how cold it was, the pup refused to come in the house for more than a few minutes at a time, preferring to keep her eye on things from under the front porch.

“Hey, Osa. You ready to count cows?” The dog’s ears perked like two black flags, and she raced ahead.

Wiona detoured into the corral. With her gloved fist, she punched through the ice that had formed on the horse trough overnight. Link nosed the gate chain, reminding her that it was time to feel him.

“In a minute, boy.” She smoothed her hand over the sorrel flank. The gelding craned his neck and nibbled at her braid. She pushed his nose away.

Thunder, the farty old jack burro her father had once used to breed mules, stuck his head out of the shed and brayed. He was ancient, placid, and a good companion for Link.

Wiona unlatched the feed shed door, pulled off a flake of hay and tossed it to the jack. She pulled off another for Link, tossed it into his feed trough, and headed for the barn.

At the back of the barn was the ranch office, a cubby with an old metal desk and swivel chair, a narrow bed and a small wood stove. As a child she had spent many nights napping on the bed under a horse blanket while waiting for something to give birth, a ewe or nanny, usually. Once they’d had a mare who gave breech birth to a mule. Her father had assisted with that one.

Now the current barn cat, a stringy orange, black and white affair, was curled in the office chair. Wiona had broken the long-established rule governing barn cats and had given the animal a name, Punkin. She ran her hand over Punkin’s slim shank but didn’t urge her off the chair. Wiona should be sitting in that chair right now finishing up the accounts, not only her own, but those of a half-dozen small businesses in Cochise City. Her accounting jobs, not the ranch, paid most of the bills these days. But that could wait——would wait forever if she had a choice, she thought, taking the cell phone from its charger and dropping it in the pocket of her jacket.

Out in the barn, she heaved two 50-pound molasses licks into the little trailer her father had rigged to hook on the back of the ATV, then a box of sturdy trash bags, before climbing on.

“Okay, girl.” The dog jumped in and settled between her knees, front paws braced on the handlebars. With any luck, she’d be back to the house before Emma even noticed she was gone.

The first rays of sunlight bounced off the coiled razor wire capping the chain link fence, as Theodore “Stokey” Stokelund, pulled his red Dodge Ram, Semper Fi etched across the back window, into the Cochise City Station. He was lucky to find a spot beneath a spindly mesquite. Its sparse leaves, young and still acid green, provided the only shade in the lot. Now that the sun was up, the morning would warm up fast. On the other side of the yard, rows of white and green Chevy Suburbans, the Border Patrol seal on each door, were parked in six perfect rows of twelve.

As he listened to Bruce Springsteen sing the last strains of “Born in the USA,” he considered the mountains slumping to the east and all those struggling souls who weren’t so lucky. Low-slung and arid, the Peloncillos stretched alongside Highway 80, just north of the Mexican boarder. At 40, he’d already spent nearly half his life ranging up and down that highway, glassing those mountains and the vast, skimpy grasslands that flanked them on both sides. In a good spring, the landscape would now be bright with poppies, lupine, verbena, but this was not a good spring. There was only sparse, tawny stubble and rusty creosote to rest his eyes on.

The sky, a huge unmitigated blue, promised the drought would continue. Around these parts, the word “drought” was a stoic euphemism for dryer than the dust on a dead lizard in June, dryer than the tit of an Egyptian mummy, dryer than fucking a box of Quaker Oats. That dry. Hell of a place, he thought, though he couldn’t imagine a life elsewhere. Cities, even pine forests, made him feel cornered, claustrophobic.

He stepped out of the cab, head gleaming like a polished apple. He shaved it daily, partly for the sake of neatness and partly to disguise the fact that his receding hairline would soon merge with his bald spot. Tucking in the tail of the dark green shirt he’d washed and ironed the night before, along with four other identical shirts, he ambled towards the main building with its half-dozen dung-brown satellites——portable buildings plopped down to handle overflow. Since California had secured its borders, and his job, the illegals had been crossing through Arizona instead, its border being slightly holier than the Pope in Rome. As a consequence, staff and paper work at the Cochise City Station had quadrupled.

Stokey made his way to the coffee. No matter how early he got in, Florence, God bless her, always had a pot of coffee ready——no Starbucks in Cochise City. She poked her head around the corner now.

“Buenos días, Stokey. Como estas?”

“Muy bien, Señorita,” he smiled. Florence, who was pushing 70, loved it when he called her señorita. “Y usted?”

“Bien, gracias a Dios, pero, mis chamacos!They’re driving me crazy, Stokey.” She craned her neck up so she could look into his eyes. Tolerant and gray-green, there were little pouches of fluid lingering beneath each——all that remained of the six-pack he’d purchased the night before to help him with that ironing.

“My daughter Silvia, you know the one,” Florence continued. “Well, she came over last night. To stay! Husband No. 3 out the door. And my son’s no better. Forty years old and wants to borrow 10 dollars. For what?” She made a gesture then, head tilted back, thumb towards open mouth. I told him, ‘No way, m’hijo. Estas chichis son secas.’*”* She crossed her hands over her breasts. “You know what I mean?”

Unfortunately Stokey understood too well. His own daughter, who’d graduated near the top of her class almost two years ago, was still unweaned, living at home, working at this or that half-assed job, while attending Cochise College instead of the U of A. And his son was limping through his senior year with plans to join the Marines. He was smart enough to go to college too but suffered from an ailment common to local youth: a serious lack of imagination compounded by an impatience to be elsewhere. Stokeywas quite familiar with the symptoms.

“Bad time to be in the military,” was his only comment to his son. Stokey was in the reserves and only recently back from his second tour of Iraq. What more could he say?

He added two Creamoras to his coffee and a packet of Sweet ‘n Low, stirring it in with his index finger. When he looked up, Florence offered a platter of empanadas. He looked over the assortment of Mexican turnovers. “Which one’s the apple?” he asked.

“Three little holes on top.”

He helped himself to two. “Gracias, Señorita.”

He took his empanadasand coffee and ducked into his cubicle to avoid further conversation. Florence loved to complain about her children. He’d gone to school with both of them and knew they were actually doing pretty well by Cochise City standards.

From the top drawer, he took a terrycloth rag and began to sweep yesterday’s dust from his glass-topped desk, his computer, radio, and the framed picture of his wife, a redhead with a lovely, white-toothed smile. On her lap she cuddled his children, 2-year old Jackson and 5-year old Katie. The picture was 15 years old, but he had no desire to replace it with something more recent. Finally he squared a slim stack of policy memos and intelligence bulletins that needed reading, fished out two pens from a jelly jar, and turned on his computer.

It was still early. He planned to drink his coffee and enjoy the empanadas in peace before checking the call chart. He turned on his radio to hear what was going on in the field, a mistake. A group of so-called Minutemen were holding 20 wets over on the Hartford place. Minutemen. Just a bunch of middle-aged dickheads playing army, in his opinion. For one thing, they figured they had a patent on the American flag. For another, they figured they could do his job better than he could. It irked him, is what. Worse was all the damn camouflage. He could barely stand to look at them, potbellies hanging over web belts. He considered his own belly and the empanada. Both were relatively small.

He was supposed to go through training on sexual harassment in the workplace, then take a test. He’d been procrastinating, though. Now he loaded the program. Like all online training, it was just bullshit tossed together to satisfy the minimum requirements of a law dreamed up by the Washington idiofuckingocracy. Stokey figured he could skip the training and go directly to the test, which no idiot, he was certain, could fail to pass. He picked up an empanada. Just as he was about to take a bite, Rudy Garza, the station’s agent in charge, leaned into the doorframe of his cubicle.

Garza nodded at the empanada that was half-way to Stokey’s mouth “Glad to see that you’re still able to take nourishment.”

“Just enough to keep a little meat on the bones.”

Stokey liked Garza well enough. Liked his adherence to the rules of engagement, as it were. Like Stokey, Garza was a native son, but his parents had been illegals. During the last amnesty, he’d overseen their citizenship applications himself. Now they were all free to complain about the wetbacks stealing jobs and taking up tax dollars and hospital beds. Stokey didn’t get it; not that it bothered him over much.

“Well, you’re going to need to be fortified. The Rambos have a bunch of bodies covered over at the Hartford place.”

Stokey nodded at the radio. “So I heard.”

“I dispatched Ford, but he’s going to need backup, and by virtue of your sterling habit of beginning your shift early…”

“I’m it.” Stokey took a huge bite, dripping apple on his shirt. “Damn it.” He took the dust rag and attacked the spot.

“Better hurry. The Rambos are a nervous lot.”

Stokey took a last sip of coffee to wash down the hasty empanada and headed for whichever truck was his for the day. It didn’t matter, they all came with the same equipment: a radio, a water jug, topos neatly curled in a cardboard tube, and most important, good air conditioning. On his belt he carried a GPS unit and another radio. Absently he patted the .40 caliber weapon in the holster at his hip. Before leaving the station, he picked up the M4 semi-automatic rife assigned to him, a 30-round clip to go with it, and he was ready to start his day.

As the sun breached the canyon wall, the cliffs flared red, then did a slow fade—rose to gold, gold to bleached, lichen-patched rhyolite. It was a sight Wiona never tired of. She tied her jacket around her waist and paused to listen to the hubbub of Gamble’s quail and White-wing doves bouncing between the canyon walls.

One garbage bag was already full of discarded clothing, plastic water jugs, a blanket, a half-spent tube of toothpaste. She spotted a pile of trash under an oak, shoved the ATV in neutral, and left it idling. Among the orange peels was a half-loaf of Bimbo bread still in its plastic wrap and an empty wheel of birth control pills. She’d heard that many women who cross go on the pill temporarily to prevent a rape-engendered pregnancy.

Shaking her head, she stuffed the trash in the bag. Later she’d sort out the good from the bad and add them to the growing pile that would go to Our Lady of Lourdes in Cochise City. The church folks hauled a ton of used clothing and blankets over to Rio Seco every month. She wondered how many times she had picked up the same recycled sweatshirt, the same blanket.

The illegals. Part of her was sympathetic—her father used to hire Mexicans who’d simply walk up to the house needing food and pocket money. They were always good workers. But a bigger part of her was resentful as hell. When it was cold, they lit fires, tempting wildfire. When it was hot, they died. Not yet on her ranch, thank God, since it was so close to the border, less than 15 miles. She didn’t know who to blame for the mess and damage, the Mexicans or the damn Washington bureaucrats. But somebody was responsible and it wasn’t her.

She noticed the cowboy gate sprawled in the dust. That was another thing. Those bastards never closed the damn gate! Wiona drove through. The dog jumped down to sniff at a stubby juniper as she pulled the barbed wire gate to, eased the post in the wire loop at the bottom, levered it up, and tugged the other loop of wire over the top. “What’s so hard about that!”

Osa trotted behind as Wiona headed for the first stock tank. The gate, the trash, the accounts waiting in the barn, and this morning’s conversation with Emma had left her with that too-familiar ground-down feeling. Was this really the life she’d been put on earth for? Mornings like this in the canyon were a balm. But with Emma’s increased dependency, she had to hire Gabby to help, which meant she had to take on more accounts, which meant most days she was stuck at her desk. Not the life she wanted.

After Frankie was killed during Desert Storm, she’d had no choice but to stay on the ranch and do the job intended for her brother as well as the other job intended to make ends meet. Friendly fire, it had been. What a grotesque thing to call an error of that magnitude! The paired words, friendly and fire sounded like boys away at summer camp roasting marshmallows and singing “She’ll Be Coming ‘Round the Mountain.”

So he’d become one of the extinguished few. Even after all these years, she was uncertain how she felt about that, not sure how to mourn or whether she should.

Funny how things work out, she thought. It was Emma who’d insisted she learn accounting in the first place because the ranch was going to her brother, and she would need to go… where? Elsewhere. Because… A ranch can only support, and just barely, so many people: Mother and Dad, Frankie and Frankie’s future wife, who would be expected to have a day job, and their children, not the old maid aunt. Did Emma suspect even way back then that she’d remain alone?

And that was exactly the problem. She was alone in this grand enterprise, ranching, which was supposed to be a team effort. Where was her team?

She gazed down canyon where it widened out to the valley, scraped and clobbered by drought. No welcoming blades of green, no standing water in the creek, not one petal of orange, blue, or yellow. Even the prickly pears were puckered and wizened, oaks and hackberry trees, nearly leafless. If they didn’t get an early monsoon and a good one, she’d have to think about selling some of her cows along with the steers. The monsoon was fickle; sometimes it came early, sometimes late, sometimes never.

Her cattle, some Black Angus, some Brangus, were certified organic, range-fed beef. She’d made that move—one her brother and father would have scoffed at—figuring if she got a better price per pound, she could run fewer head. If she ran fewer head, the graze would improve. Given the drought and the condition of the range, it had been a good decision, although few of the neighboring ranchers, hide-bound in tradition, would admit it.

Burl Fletcher, the rancher whose cattle lease bordered hers to the west was one of those. He and her father went back many years, but they’d never been friends. For one thing, Burl ran too many cattle. Nowadays, with the illegals leaving gates open and cutting fences, his cattle often strayed onto her lease.

And that was another reason why she had no use for illegals, not that she had much use for Burl who could be mean and hateful. She knew that firsthand. He liked to brag about hunting wetbacks, a term her father never used. Just like deer, he’d hunt them down, then hold them—not at gunpoint, which would have been illegal, but with his rifle pointing at the ground and ready—until the Border Patrol came to take them away. It was sport for him, more than anything, and what did it accomplish? The illegals still came.

The dust rose up behind the ATV 20 feet. If this drought continued, not just this year but into the next, she’d have to supplement graze with hay on a regular basis. No way could she afford that. She’d have no choice but to sell her stock, cows and bulls included. She’d probably lose the ranch to taxes; then what would they do? More accounting, maybe move into Cochise City or, God forbid, Tucson? No. She was ranch to the bone, like it or not. She’d find some way to hang on.

At the first tank, a handsome Angus bull had haremed up his cows. There were eight she could see. Each cow, save one, had a calf. One of the calves looked to have been born in the past 24 hours.

She turned her attention to the calf-less cow, a rusty old Brangus she called Nana. Maybe she didn’t calve this year—or maybe she’d lost it to a mountain lion.

For this and other reasons, Wiona always carried her father’s old Colt on her hip, though she’d never had occasion to take it out of its holster. She saw mountain lions from time to time but wouldn’t shoot one except to save a calf.

And from time to time, there were reports of jaguars in these mountains. Would she trade a calf for one glimpse of a jaguar? Yes. Yes she would.

She drove through a little gully, and her mind jogged back to the here and now. The grass was so sparse around the tank the cows had little to eat but the sorry prickly pear. She came to a stop some 20 feet from the group. When she blew her plastic whistle, they began to move in her direction. The whistle was another thing her brother and father would have laughed at. Before giving the stock molasses, or hay, or even a salt block, she’d blow the whistle. Now every time they heard it, they came willingly. Made rounding them up a lot less painful all around.

She hauled out a molasses lick, the windmill clanking and huffing like a heart with a leaky valve. As Osa trotted deliriously among the cow pies, Wiona settled back for a moment to watch the mamas and babes stroll to the lick. One cow waited calmly while her week-old calf butted furiously at her teat.

Lots of people thought cows were stupid, but those folks hadn’t spent a lifetime observing them. Cows were attentive, patient mothers. Above all else, they were vigilant. Her own mother might have learned a thing or two if she’d spent a little more time watching cows. Might have learned to keep a closer eye on her offspring, for one.

She took out her birth book from the canvas pouch. It had belonged to her father. An old, stained leather jacket protected a small blue-lined tablet. She entered the new mama’s number, yesterday’s date, heifer, then remounted the ATV, Osa once again perched between her knees.

As Wiona approached the second tank, she got a familiar nervous flutter. Smiling, she remembered the two of them skinny-dipping in that tank. Slick and sleek as otters, they’d been, and giddy. It all started with Lamb Chop, the name her father insisted she call her 4-H project—his attempt to keep the lamb’s fate first and foremost in her mind. That year he would not buy her entry so she could keep it no matter how hard she cried. “At 16,” he’d said, “You’re old enough to learn the facts of life.” By that, of course, he was referring to the unassailable fact that “animals—sheep, pigs, cows and the like—were put on Earth so that man could eat them, by God.”

He didn’t know that her boyfriend, Stokey, was trying to teach her another set of facts. But all that changed the last night of the county fair. She and her best friend, Lucy Altamirano, were bedded down in the straw alongside Lamb Chop and Snowball, saying their last good-byes to the lambs they’d bottle-fed and currycombed since birth. Then in a fit of tears and remorse, she and Lucy fell into each other’s arms. Tears led to kisses, and later kisses led to skinny-dipping in the warm, slightly slimy water of the second tank, and that had lead to all the other things, each achieved with painstaking, heart-bending slowness.

All this time she was still going steady with Stokey. Finally, Wiona could no longer abide the weight of his class ring on her finger or his body upon hers as he dry-banged the bejesus out of her, so she broke up with him.

The following year Lucy went to Arizona State to become a doctor. After that, she went to practice in a little village down in Mexico someplace. Was there for years, then suddenly she was back in Cochise City, God knows why, to begin work in the new family clinic.

By then, everything in Wiona’s life was turned around, soured by Frankie’s death, followed by her dad’s. They said it was an aneurysm that killed her father, but Wiona thought the real cause was rage, pure and simple, over the circumstances of her brother’s death. Now she was left alone to care for the ranch and a mother who was losing it, one button at a time.

Wiona had seen Lucy in town once. She’d been friendly enough in an impersonal way, sort of like when you run into the woman who works at the bank in line at the grocery store. It was like the summer at the second tank never happened. Still she’d heard Lucy was single.

Gossip was that she belonged to the Samaritans, outsiders from places like Tucson and Los Angeles who provided illegals with food, water, medical attention—humanitarian aid they called it. Wiona called it encouragement. Certainly nobody wanted an illegal to die of thirst, but what the Samaritans were doing didn’t seem right to her either.

Wiona sighed and turned her attention back to the cows. Now there were 10, and she took a good look at each. Three carried Burls brand, she noted with irritation. Two of them had calves, but the third, still slick and looking forlorn, had apparently lost hers, and recently, from the looks of her udders. She wasn’t concerned; they’d sort those out at branding. What did concern her was that the brindle who’d been among the others just last week was missing. If she’d gone off to calve, she should be back by now. Wiona studied the cows once more.

“Damn homely old brindle.” If it weren’t for the fact that she had given her a calf every spring for the past 12 years, she’d be hamburger. She looked at the sky, then at her watch. Both told her it was too late in the morning to hunt down the cow and her calf. Emma and the taxes needed attention.

Locally, he was known as El Camaleón, a name acquired during a short boxing career that had left him nearly blind in his left eye. But in the small town of San Martin Tilcajete in the state of Oaxaca, he was still Moises Angeles. He came from a family of carvers, but had no patience for the work. He wondered now, as he thought of tonight’s crossing, if he was ready to learn patience, as his father had suggested a lifetime ago.

Bandy-legged and stocky as a pit bull, he stepped squinting into the glare of midday, his head bad from too much rum. Yes, soon he’d have enough money socked away and he could go home, build a house, start a little business in the city selling…what? Maybe the woodcarvings of his brothers and father. He’d have a shop, the upscale kind where rich gringos like to go. What would his father say then? Necesitas paciencia? What had patience bought his father? A place on a bench in someone else’s yard earning pennies while el jefe made dollars. Whatever he would do upon his return to Oaxaca, he was going to be boss.

Guiding pollo*s* was better, steadier money than boxing. Every trip brought in $500, $600, sometimes $1,000 dollars, depending on how many souls Gordo rounded up for him. Of course he had expenses. He thought of the delicate, pale woman he left still asleep in his bed, and smiled. And there were the cockfights. He was thinking of buying some cocks of his own. Good investment there.

From the breast pocket of his black silk shirt he took a roll of antacids, threw four into his mouth, crunched. The job was eating away his stomach.

He’d already crossed the border more than two dozen times. In the ring he’d been capable of great, unsustainable bursts of speed and power, but on the trail he maintained a steady push towards his goal, impatience tempered by his sense of accountability. For he was accountable to God, qué no, for the safety of those who put their lives in his hands. Most of them were poor indios from the south. Indios were donkeys, he should know, and the family was the wagon they had to pull.

He planned to quit by the end of May. Leading a bunch of pobres pendejos through the summer desert heat? Ni madre! Let someone else take them through hell.

Before beginning this trip to the other side, he had two important purchases to make: one, a new cell phone, the other a $100 money order to send to his mother so she could keep his brothers in school. Unlike his father, she never lectured him on the virtue of patience.

They were the first to be herded into the oxidized-blue van. El Camaleón’s hand was at Belen’s elbow, urging her in. She and the children settled on one of several makeshift wooden benches screwed into the floor, but quickly found themselves wedged against the side of the van as the other passengers squeezed in. It didn’t matter. This part of the trip wouldn’t take long they had been assured.

El Camaleón took his place beside the nameless driver and immediately fell asleep. Belen closed her eyes too, but it was airless in the van and she was too tense to doze. Instead, to calm herself she reached for Adriana’s warm, brown hand. The girl squeezed her mother’s hand, then rested her head against her shoulder.

The food they’d eaten earlier, lay in her belly like a hot stone. Absently, she patted her chest to calm her heart as she had so often done over the course of their long journey. She thought of the green hills surrounding Los Janos. She missed the easy familiarity of her village, the laughter shared with her sisters, cousins and neighbors, even missed the smell of the chickens when she invaded the coop to collect their eggs. And how she missed her mother, felt her absence like a clot of earth lodged in her chest.

Thanks to Jacabo, they’d had corn and beans and meat and milk. Her children had shoes and could attend school. But to stay in her village was to live like a widow, and as Jacabo had argued, there was no success, no joy without sacrifice. How sad and afraid she had been when she hustled the children up the steps of that first bus. And now they were about to begin the last, most dangerous part of the journey. She closed her eyes. Ayudanos, Madre, she prayed silently.

After perhaps 30 minutes, the van veered off the paved road onto a rocky path. By the time they came to a stop, it was nearly dark. El Camaleón and the driver hustled them off the van. Behind them were the cordilleras of Mexico, ahead, in silhouette, the mountains of Arizona.

The truck left them in a swirl of dust, dazed by the magnitude of the task before them. Belen watched as each man ducked through the gap in the fence. When it was her turn, she hesitated. This was against the law, she knew. She’d never done anything against the law in her life. She motioned for the children to go ahead of her. Now she had no choice but to follow. Stepping through that fence felt like stepping off the edge of a deep ravine. When she straightened her back, she noted with disappointment that the mountains on both sides of the border and everything in between looked the exactly the same. She had expected the other side to look different—smoother, greener, less hostile. She hefted on her own pack, then helped her children into theirs. Like penitentes, they trudged single file behind El Camaleón as he lead them north across the rock-strewn desert towards the mountains.

For hours the three walked in the middle of the straggling line, El Camaleón in the lead. As they picked their way through the sandy arroyos, up muscle-burning rises, and along dark mountain contours, they clung to each other’s packs. Often they stumbled, and when Belen’s calf was punctured by a spiny shindagger, Adriana and Edgar suffered the same experience. Better that than risk separation.

During the few brief periods of rest, Belen always used the water from Edgar’s pack to lighten his load. Adriana and she were women, and women, like donkeys, were accustomed to heavy loads.

At last, El Camaleón announced, “Estamos a la mitad.”

They were at the half-way point and would stop here. When daylight came, the scrub oaks and junipers would provide shade and protection from La Migra’s helicopters.

Belen piled leaves beneath an oak to cushion their sleep. She took four oranges from Edgar’s pack, two from Adriana’s, and, from her own, this morning’s tortillas. They were brittle, fit only for chickens, but that didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was to fill their stomachs and to sleep.

Before settling down she pulled her old blue rebozo from her pack and spread it across their legs. Only then did she allow her thoughts to turn to Jacabo. How proud of her, of all of them, he would be. She imagined his arms enfolding them, his cheek wet with tears of gratitude for their safe arrival. Of course they would arrive safely. Never did she permit any other thought to enter her mind. Still, she did not look forward to this new life that lay ahead, a life in a place so unlike her home, inhabited by strangers speaking a tongue that was harsh to her ear and beyond comprehension. But these thoughts were not permissible either. She tried too turn away from them, force a blankness upon her mind so she could rest.

She closed her eyes. When she opened them once more, a slim crescent moon was rising above the canyon, back-lighting its torn edges like paper lace. To Belen, the moon was the embodiment of La Virgencita. Her light, and the warmth radiating from the children pressed to her sides, brought her comfort and allowed sleep to come at last.

Day 2

By the time she awoke, the sun filtering through the oak leaves warmed her aching bones. The children, still deep in sleep, had rolled away from her side. Around them fellow pilgrims sprawled. Loosened by sleep they looked like so many piles of rags. Only El Camaleón, his back against a boulder, was alert like the coyote he was. He glanced at her, then quickly turned away. It struck her as delicate, a consideration of her modesty. She rose quietly, straightened her twisted clothing. Normally, she would greet him. Buenos dias, she would say. But under the circumstances, such niceties struck her as intrusive, ridiculous. Instead, she went in search of a little privacy, for she felt a sudden pressure, a foot or an elbow, perhaps, pressing against her bladder.

On the way back to their makeshift encampment, Belen noticed a strange arrangement of rocks, forming a small grotto of sorts. She peered inside. Amid pools of sooty candle wax, were worn prayer cards, one of Santo Niño de Atocha, another of the Virgin of Guadalupe, several silver pesos, a plastic rosary, a child’s hairclip. Someone had made a cross of twigs and grass. Mentally, she went over her own meager belongings. What could she spare that had any value at all?

Belen pulled up her pant leg and felt for the cloth coin purse secured just behind her knee. She unpinned it now and removed a small crucifix on a delicate sliver chain.

“Ayudanos, Madre,” she whispered, digging a small hole towards the back of the shrine where it would go unnoticed. She placed the crucifix in the hole, then smoothed the dirt over it. With the Virgin’s help her family would be reunited.

When she got back to the camp the rag piles were beginning to shake themselves alive. Her children were rummaging through the packs, setting out all their food on a flat rock to determine how best to ration it. Edgar, so serious now, no running, no laughing, no teasing. He seemed to have grown from child to man overnight. It made her proud, but it made her sad as well.

She sat against a large rock next to her children, belly resting on her thighs. The warm rock eased the ache that was beginning low in her back. Throughout the day, they would rest, drink and eat to prepare for another long walk through the night.

She’d been told it would not be more that 30, 35 kilometers total. That would leave perhaps only 15 kilometers or so to go. If they left at dusk, they might be in Phoenix by tomorrow night, the following morning at the latest. Fifteen kilometers. They could do that. She closed her eyes. For a moment she could almost feel Jacabo’s arms around her.

In the early afternoon they went into the bush to take their second suppository. Belen quickly relieved herself. Almost immediately, she felt a different kind of pressure, and, for the first time since leaving the village, she was deeply afraid, and worse, she felt humiliated, a failure. For a few minutes, she simply walked around in a tight circle, hands pressed against the small of her back as she tried to gauge the depth of her trouble. If they failed, all the money and hard work would be wasted. Could they start again? How long would it take Jacabo to save up another 6,000 American dollars? Would he be angry? He had wanted her to wait until after the baby was born, but then there would have been the heat, and a baby to carry and nurse. She’d heard stories of women, children dying in the heat. No. They must succeed.

She took a deep breath and began to calculate. Adriana, the sun rose and set and rose again before she was born. Edgar took some 18 hours. Last night they had only walked eight, maybe 10 hours at most. How long could she continue to walk while in labor? Perhaps if they got started right away rather than waiting until dark, she might make it. There was a chance she might make it still.

El Camaleón was resting beneath a juniper. Uncertain how to proceed, she approached, then waited until her steady gaze penetrated his consciousness. He opened his eyes. “Qué necesita?”

“I need to talk with you.”

He rose, and the two distanced themselves from the rest.

“Can we start early?” Belen asked.

“No señora, es imposible. Travel in daylight is too risky.” He started to return to his place under the juniper.

Belen put her arm on his to stay him.

He pulled his arm away. Reconsidered. “What is it?”

Gazing down at her shoes, she whispered, “My labor has begun early, but if we start now, I think I can make it.”

His lips paled. He turned his head and spit in the sand, looked at the sun, then his watch. He should just tell the woman to go to hell; any other coyote would do just that. It was her mistake, not his, to make this trip in such a condition. And what about the others? He had a responsibility to them too, qué no? He glared at her, hating her face. The color of polished madrone, it was plump, pleasant, a face like so many women from his village. She could have been his aunt, cousin, neighbor.

He looked at the sky again. The sun had just begun its western descent. “Okay, pues.”

In another hour it would be dark and they would be safe. She had divided most of the contents of her pack between Adriana and Edgar. Some things she decided could be left behind. A bag of oranges they could do without, two liters of water. The contractions were still far apart, not so bad, and Belen could clearly see the last of the men only eight or ten meters ahead.

They were descending now along the steep slope of yet another canyon. Below was a canopy of bright, spring green where a little stream might be running. How nice to wash her face in cold water, Belen was thinking.

Suddenly she felt rush between her legs, and halted. “Ay!”

“Mamá?” Adriana, turned, saw the wet ground at her mother’s feet.

“Hush.” Belen, said and kept walking. How stupid she had been. She would not make it, that was clear, but her children…

“Adriana,” she whispered. “Repeat your father’s telephone number.” She had made both of them memorize it.

Adriana repeated the number.

“Muy bien, mijita.” Belen continued down the slope, praying that her feet would not slip out from beneath her. She would not stop until they reached the bottom of the canyon, not until she reached the slender ribbon of green.

It hadn’t been easy to convince El Camaleón to take the children without her. She’d had to take an extra hundred out of the little purse pinned inside her pant leg to persuade him. But the children had been worse, especially Adriana.

“Be brave, mijita,” she’d told her. “You can do this for me and your brother. She gave her daughter the little package of saliditos she’d been saving for an emergency. “Tienes cuidado, mijita. I love you. And don’t worry about me. I’ll join you in a few days, you’ll see.”

And it might still be true, she thought, watching them walk away. El Camaleón had promised to send someone for her. Quien sabe, maybe he would. And if he didn’t? Well, she couldn’t think of it now. Now her baby was coming.

It was so dark beneath the tree, and there was no mother, no midwife but herself. For comfort, she took out her rosary and her rebozo from her pack. “Please, holy mother of God, not before daylight,” she prayed and tried not to bear down as the next contraction pounded her like a crushing wave. She wanted to scream into the black night, but held back out of fear of what it might hide.

They’d reached the pickup spot hours early. El Camaleón had called his ride, and soon they would be on their way.

The cocaine he’d been periodically snorting to stay awake was gone, and he was suddenly spent. He closed his eyes, hoping sleep would wipe out the image of the woman beneath the oak and the cries of her children as he dragged them away. It was what she wanted, qué no? Paid him extra to do just that, drag them away. Hell, in a few hours he’d be rid of them all. The kids would be with their father. And the mother? She could go to the devil.

The night was cool. To the west the mountains, rimed with light from the rising moon, stood in contrast to the pools of black beneath the yuccas, creosotes, and mesquites. In each of a dozen dark pools, huddled a man too tired to care about comfort.

The kids sat with him. He tossed them a plastic bag with two slices of Bimbo bread inside. The girl shook her head, but the boy accepted the offer.

El Camaleón pulled up the hood of his sweatshirt then, wrapped his arms across his chest and closed his eyes. He was a professional. He’d done his job well, and deserved his rest.

Within the hour he heard the sound of a vehicle on blacktop. “Stay where you are,” he whispered to the bushes. Crouching, he hurried to the edge of the asphalt, and peered towards the oncoming lights. They blinked once, twice. “Okay, amigos. This is it.” Rubbing his gut, he opened a fresh package of antacids and tossed half a dozen into his mouth.

Everyone stood at the edge of the road. The ride, an old utility truck with a flaking sign advertising termite control, pulled up and, within less than a minute, he had the men loaded. He motioned to the children. “Hurry up.”

El Camaleón tossed his cell phone into the brush before climbing into the back with the others. If La Migra stopped them, he would blend in with the pollos like the

Chameleón that he was.

The driver, a squat, paunchy guy called Tito, started to slide the door closed.

“Wait!” El Camaleón jumped out of the truck.

“Qué pasa?”

“Give me a minute.” He located the cell phone with his foot. “I have to make a call.”

“You have to make a call? Ay pinche indio! Where do you think you are? Fucking Macdonald’s?” The driver looked up and down the dark road. “Make it quick, pues.”

El Camaleón suppressed a fierce urge to punch the fat son of a whore in the face. Stepping behind the van, he dialed 911. Let la pinche Migra deal with the stupid bitch.

Back inside the truck, he motioned to one of the pollos to move over so he could see out the front window. The road, a darker ribbon in the dark, unspooled east to Interstate 10. I-10 would take them to Phoenix. In four or five hours it would be over once again. With a deep sigh, he settled his back against the seat.

He awoke shortly to bright lights shining in the back window. “Chingado,” he hissed. “La Migra.”

Tito sped up, the worst thing he could do. Every coyote knew somebody who’d been killed in a rollover trying to escape La Migra. “Pull over, buey! Pull over, you dumb fuck!”

The white lights were blinding, then three rapid explosions.

“Hijo de puta! Pull over before they blow out the tires.”

Tito slammed on the brakes and the truck rocked to a stop in the middle of the road.

The car, not the Chevy Suburban of *La Migra*, but a white Chrysler 300 pulled in front. They were going to be robbed, or worse! He’d heard about loads being jacked, all the pollos trucked down to Florida or someplace where they were guarded by men with AK-47s, and never paid. He didn’t want to spend the next 10 years of his life cutting cane or picking oranges. Trying not to panic, he rubbed at the knowing pain in his belly. At least he had very little money on him. Cooperation, if seemed, was what was his best option. He slid the door open and motioned everyone out of the truck, including the children, who were hugging their backpacks to their chests.

Two men got out of the Chrysler. Guns in hand, they entered the rectangle of light cast through the open doors of the truck. Though both were Mexicans, one was a güero, light-skinned, freckled, slender. The other, in new jeans and white ostrich skin boots, was barrel-chested, with sleepy green eyes, startling in a face so dark.

With the muzzle of a Glock 9mm semiautomatic, Boots motioned for everyone to line up along the pavement. El Camaleón took his place at the end of the line, hoping for a chance to slip away into the desert.

“Donde esta la embarasad?” he demanded of the driver.

Tito shuffled and shrugged.

Boots struck him with his gun. “Where is the pregnant woman?”

Hand on bleeding cheek, Tito whined, “Believe me, jefe, no woman, pregnant or otherwise, got into this truck.”

El Güero entered the van, flashed a light around. Shrugging his shoulders, he jumped out. Each man grabbed a child by the upper arm and hustled them into the back of the Chrysler. The rest, they left standing on the side of the road, unmolested.

As they drove off, El Camaleón noticed a magnetic yellow ribbon stuck on the trunk of the car with the command “God Bless Our Troops.”

The car sped down the blacktop. In the back, Adriana and Edgar were still and stiff as rods. They could see nothing through the smoked window glass. When Edgar began to whimper, Adriana put her arm around him and pulled him to her.

The man with the green eyes turned around then. “Don’t worry mijitos. We’re friends of your father’s.” He popped the lids on two Pepsis. “Here.” He handed each an icy cold soda. “Bienvenidos. Welcome to the other side.”