

LOVERS CROSSING

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CHAPTER ONE

Silent Night, crackling from a loudspeaker across the border, drifted north through the cold, brittle air. Al Avila and I stood on the edge of Nogales Wash, looking along the tunnel toward Mexico. It was our second Christmas Eve on the Border Patrol. *Noche de paz*.

“Flak jackets would be good,” I said.

Crime was so bad in the tunnels that the Santa Cruz County sheriff sometimes sent his SWAT team down there. Guys in body armor, packing high-powered rifles and night scopes, chasing eleven-year-olds through a sewer.

Al and I, low seniority agents, drew the holiday duty. It made a double shift. Most of the agents worked one tour for free on that Christmas Eve, volunteering to canvass neighborhoods and businesses, collecting clothing and toys for poor children on both sides of the border.

Just an hour before the long tour ended, we were checking out a report that young gangs had robbed other kids on the Arizona side, then run toward Mexico through the sewer tunnel.

Al said, “Let’s get this over with, Brink.” We scrambled down the side of the wash and walked south to the tunnel entrance.

Untreated Mexican waste flowed into the United States through the tunnel. Gangs congregated and homeless kids slept there. They sniffed spray paint, giggled with their friends, and fell upon anyone unwise or unfortunate enough to come by. Usually, that was some other homeless child who sought shelter underground.

The stench hit us fifty yards north of the tunnel opening. Human waste and decayed food, dead animals, and God knows what kind of chemicals seeping in from Mexico. Sometimes we carried little jars of pungent Vicks ointment, like coroners and homicide cops use at death scenes, to rub under our noses. We didn’t have any that night, so we caught the full sensory assault.

“You hear that?” Al said.

We stopped to listen. The sound was familiar to anyone who works the border. Scrambling, scuffle, body blows, cries of pain. The underground echo chamber effect amplified the noise. It wasn’t far away and was likely on our side of the border. We ran into the tunnel.

About twenty yards down, a cluster of small figures gathered around someone. Hands rising and falling fast, howls coming from the victim. The muggers heard Al and me sloshing through the muck. They stopped the attack and ran toward Mexico.

The object of their attention was a boy, maybe twelve years old. When he saw us running toward him, he pulled himself up and ran, too, following his tormentors into the gloom.

“Glad to help!” Al yelled after him.

I heard a cough from the other side of the tunnel. A tiny figure sat just above the shallow, fetid stream, propped against the graffiti-covered concrete wall. Her black hair was long and dirty. She wore jeans, ripped at the knee, and a filthy T-shirt with a Hard Rock Café logo barely showing through. No shoes, just socks of unknown color. There was dried blood on her upper lip, below her nose. Big, dark eyes watched us warily.

Al knelt, not getting too close. He said in Spanish, “Don’t be afraid of us. We won’t hurt you.”

This must have sounded absurd to a Mexican child: don’t be afraid of two big strangers wearing the green uniform of *la migra*. She drew herself closer to the wall.

“¿Cómo te llamas?” I asked.

“Alicia,” she said. Her voice was little louder than a whisper, with no inflection.

“Where do you live, Alicia?”

“Aquí.” Here.

“Jesus,” Al said.

“Where are your parents?” I asked her.

She looked down and said, “No sé.” I don’t know.

“Do they live in Nogales?” Al asked.

Again, without looking up, “No sé.”

“What happened to your shoes?” I asked. “Your coat?”

She pointed down the tunnel toward Mexico. “*Ladrones*,” she said. Thieves.

“Can you stand?” I asked.

She said nothing, but stood slowly. She kept her back against the wall, arms at her sides, as if awaiting execution.

There is a word in Spanish that described her: *desesperada*. To the English speaker’s ear, it sounds like “desperate.” But the native tongue carries a meaning far more powerful, a poignancy that tears the heart. A *niña desesperada* is a girl beyond mere desperation; she is utterly without hope, without a chance, without anything.

“How old are you, Alicia?” Al asked.

“Seis,” she said. Six years old.

“We’ll help you,” I said. “We’ll get you home.”

She did not resist when I picked her up. She was almost weightless and smelled terrible. I felt a skinny, shivering frame through her thin shirt. She put an arm around my neck and tentatively rested her cheek on the wool collar of my uniform jacket.

“What do we do?” I asked Al.

“Which side are we on here?” he said.

“Ours, I’m pretty sure,” I said. “The line is halfway through the tunnel. We’re probably fifty, sixty feet inside the States.”

“Only one thing to do, then,” he said. “She’s on the U.S. side. Procedure says we take her to the station, call Mexico child services, hand her over to them at the Port of Entry.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That sounds right.”

“Right,” he said.

“Christmas Eve, this late, we’ll probably get the *policia* instead of child services.”

“Probably,” Al said. He took off his jacket and draped it over the girl’s back. I tucked the lapels between her belly and my chest. She clung a little tighter to hold the jacket fast.

“Let’s get out of this toilet,” I said.

The child’s shivering eased a bit as we walked north, toward the wash and the fresh air on the American side. We scrambled up the bank of the wash to

our Bronco. When the engine warmed up and the heater kicked in, I poured some drinking water from a plastic bottle onto my handkerchief and washed the girl's face and hands. We used Al's handkerchief to dry her. She took it without complaint, her expression unchanging. Her eyes seemed too big for her gaunt face.

"Kid could use a couple of Big Macs," I said.

The little girl smiled.

"They're closed," Al said. "Nobody stays open this late on Christmas Eve."

"I think I got her hopes up, though," I said. "This kid *habla* Big Mac."

She smiled again.

"Alicia," Al said. "*¿Quieres una hamburguesa?*"

"Sí," she said in the tiny voice. And after a pause, "*Por favor.*"

"Now you've done it," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "Where do we find a hamburger on the night before Christmas?"

I put the Bronco in gear but kept my foot on the brake. Al felt me watching the two of them.

"What's on your mind?" he said.

I have never thought much about destiny or karma or the inexplicable luck that lets a petty crook win the lottery while a hard-working farmer goes broke. Al and I once went to a Kurosawa festival at the Loft Theatre. One of the films began with a samurai, out of work in his increasingly irrelevant trade, wandering the countryside. At a fork in the road, he picked up a long stick and tossed it into the air. When it landed, he grunted and walked in the direction it pointed. Down the other road, I suppose, was a very different movie.

Once or twice in a lifetime, we come to a crossroads that could change everything for us and for people we love. We may not recognize the moment; we may be forced to choose too quickly. If we are lucky, some personal compass—implanted years ago and calibrated over time—will point out the right path.

"You know," I said, "there's a pay phone at the Texaco over on Morley. It was working this afternoon."

Al broke his gaze from the child and looked at me. I could see the wheels

turning. If we have to make a call, why not make it for free back at the Border Patrol station?

“Anna waiting up for you?” I asked.

He kept his eyes on mine and said, “Sure. We’re Santa’s helpers when Anita falls asleep.”

“I heard them talking a couple of weeks ago,” I said. “Anna was saying something about a little brother or sister for Anita, maybe.”

Al looked down for an instant.

“We must have read the instructions wrong,” he said. “Not having much luck with that.”

“Well, then,” I said.

He thought for a while. I knew him as well as anyone alive knew him, except Anna, and even I couldn’t always tell what he was thinking. I sometimes wonder if it’s a deeply recessed Indian gene that drops a mask of serene mystery over his face, revealing nothing.

Al used a dry corner of his handkerchief to wipe the girl’s runny nose.

“We’d have to stop at the office,” he said at last. “Sign out. Can’t leave her in the vehicle alone.”

“You stay with her,” I said. “I’ll sign out for you, too. The brass won’t be too particular tonight.”

Al nodded. He took the girl in his lap. A clump of Alicia’s matted hair had fallen over her eyes. Al brushed the hair away, then flicked some dirt from his fingers.

I eased the Bronco off the wash bank and drove to the gas station on Morley. The phone booth in the parking lot was empty.

“Good time for you to bail out, Brink.” Al was looking out the window on his side. “No need to make it a conspiracy, too.”

“Hell, we’ve been co-conspirators since we were six years old,” I said. “Wouldn’t feel right to quit now.”

Al thought for another moment, then went to call. It was an actual booth, the old kind with a light that went on when he closed the door. He and Anna did not talk for long. He came back to the Bronco, walking fast, with a small smile on his face.

“The phone works,” he said. “*Milagro.*”

“No argument, then?” I said.

“None,” he said. “Anna’s a little worried about later. Immigration papers, custody, all that. But she said yes.”

We headed back to the Port of Entry. The town lay deserted, dark except for the twinkle of Christmas lights in windows by the roadside. The Border Patrol radio frequency was dead quiet.

“I heard about a guy,” I said. “A lawyer in Tucson. He does criminal defense, but the cops there like him because he handles personal stuff for them free. Wills and things. He makes friends and gets a lot of inside information that way. He’s supposed to be pretty sharp.”

“We’ll see,” Al said. “For sure, we have to check on missing kid reports from both sides. If she does have parents anywhere, we have to take her home.”

I shook my head. “We’ll check, but she doesn’t,” I said. “This is an abandoned child.”

The Border Patrol station loomed on the right. Little Alicia looked up and saw the ugly steel fence, the customs kiosks, and Mexican cops looking across the line at our solitary headlights. She held tighter to Al, as if trying to keep his arm away from the door handle.

“Alejandro,” I said. “That was the guy’s name. The lawyer.”

“Okay, good,” Al said.

I went inside, signed us out, and made a note on the vehicle board that we had the Bronco, going to Tucson. I checked for missing child reports from Arizona and Sonora. Nothing matched our little girl. When I went out to the Bronco and slid behind the wheel, Al was speaking in Spanish to Alicia.

“If you want to,” he said, “we’ll go to my family’s house. My wife Anna is there. We have a little girl named Anita. She’s asleep now. You can meet her tomorrow morning. Tonight we’ll have some food and Anna will give you a bath, and then you can sleep in a warm bed. And I’ll bet you can share Anita’s Christmas presents tomorrow. Is that okay?”

Alicia said, “*Sí, señor.*” Her tiny voice was tentative, accustomed to betrayal. But she put her head back on Al’s shoulder. Her face had begun to soften with fatigue and the first signs of letting go.

“You can choose, though,” Al said. “If you want, we can take you safely back to Mexico. People will help you there.”

The child said nothing, but pursed her lips and shook her head, no.

“I don’t think you sold that last choice quite as sincerely as the first one,” I said.

“She was living in a sewer,” he said. “Let’s go.”

I made a U-turn and eased through the lonely city streets. “O Holy Night” played on the radio.

“*Feliz Navidad*,” I said.

And Al said, “*Feliz Navidad* to you, *hermano*.”

The little girl labored to keep her big eyes open as we hit the freeway and drove parallel to the border fence. When the road curved north and over the first rolling hills, Alicia watched the fence fall away from view behind us. Then her eyelids fluttered and her breathing relaxed. Her blank expression gave way to something almost like a smile. She was asleep before we left the city limits. She still slept an hour later, when Al delivered her into Anna’s arms.