

OUR LADY OF THE NORTH

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Back then, when I thought of Carla Baca, I remembered a teenage woman. She had a Mexican beauty's cinnamon skin and luminous black hair and dark, knowing eyes. She dressed well, never too fancy for high school, never immodestly like many of the girls. Carla was friendly but often alone. Her quiet confidence signaled unattainability. Got the world on a string, string around her finger, but she never showed her hand. Carla's going places, we all said, and we were right.

Now that I know where she went, I remember her differently.

Chapter 1 — The North

Six exhausted travelers stole into Phoenix at a few minutes after eleven on a summer night. The child slept. The five adults stared out the van windows, hoping no *policía* looked in. They kept silent, afraid and awed. None had ever seen a place like this, except on the fantasy world of television.

The sprawling desert city pulsed with life and promise. The people in the van saw an automobile racetrack, its floodlights still blazing as crowds departed. Then came a shopping mall with twenty-four movie theatres, the sign said, and dozens of stores. Here was a grand hotel built into a hillside. Up ahead, enormous airplanes descended to land, one after another.

A sparkling cluster of tall buildings lay to the west. *Rascacielos*, they were called in Spanish: scraping the sky. In their midst, the great baseball stadium, where boys from Mexico became dollar millionaires. Gleaming expensive cars flashed by. Young passengers in sleek convertibles laughed and waved as they sped to new pleasures in the warm desert night.

And this was only Phoenix. Imagine what Los Angeles must be like!

Then, with just a few turns, they came to another part of the city. Scary dark. No moon. The street looked abandoned

and passed by. Not a light glowed in the small stucco houses. These places would be luxurious in Mexico, but the travelers sensed that this was a poor neighborhood—perhaps even dangerous—by the standards of el norte.

The driver turned off the van headlights and eased down the last block to a house at the end of the street. The other coyote jumped out and pushed up the garage door. He pulled it closed when the van had crept inside. They sat there, waiting until the guides led them into the house.

All six people were ordered into one room. There was a single bed. They agreed without discussion that Lourdes would take it. She had an eighteen-month-old daughter, Irma, with her and another child due soon. Her husband Pablo took the narrow space between the bedside and the wall, beneath a window painted black, nailed shut, and barred outside. The sounds of cars and trucks on the big highway seeped in all night. Every few minutes, jet engines rumbled overhead, not far away. Irma, undisturbed, still slept in her mother's arms.

The other three Mexicans took up positions around the room. They were two men and a woman, all unrelated. They curled into corners or kept a respectful distance on what little floor remained. Anyone who needed the toilet had to knock, be let out by a guard and escorted to the bathroom, then brought back and locked back in again.

They were hungry. They smelled bad and ached from their long journeys and the crowding. These were modest people, uncomfortable in the forced intimacy. Still, they were lucky and they knew it. Enforcement along the border was tougher than ever. Sheriffs in Phoenix were ignoring other crimes so they could catch people who came illegally from Mexico. Many friends had been caught and sent home. Others died in the desert. But they had come this far, alive and free.

Their journeys brought them from all over Mexico to Nogales. They sneaked across the border east of town, led by the coyotes, cutting through simple barbed wire that began where the tall iron fence ended. Then two new guides took over. They traveled almost two hundred miles from there, all six illegal immigrants in the back of an old van that rode low and wobbly, practically screaming at the Border Patrol to stop them.

But no migra showed that night. Milagro, no la migra, they

joked, a little play on words to celebrate the miracle of escaping capture. Arizona State Patrol cars just rolled on by them in the desert darkness. The solo troopers inside seemed oblivious to a rickety van driving carefully under the speed limit. No traffic stops. No immigration checkpoints this night on the fast interstate highways. No delays all the way to Phoenix.

In the morning, one of the coyotes brought bags of food. There was a greasy breakfast sandwich for each person, cups of coffee for the adults, and a little carton of milk for the child. The small helping of cheap food tasted like a banquet. They had not eaten since yesterday afternoon. It was well known that many people coming north like this got nothing to eat for the entire journey.

No one gave them progress reports. They had paid in advance for passage to California. The van driver warned them that a day or two in Phoenix might be necessary while the drivers sized up enforcement on the roads. That was all they were told. So they waited.

At midday, they heard voices somewhere in the house. Then came footsteps. The door opened. Two coyotes stood there, flanking a short, muscular man. The travelers had not seen him before, but they knew instantly that he was *el jefe*. The boss. He did not smile. He showed no expression at all. He wore a shirt with images of tropical plants and parrots on it, and sharply pressed khaki slacks, and brown loafers so highly polished that they reflected the one weak light on the ceiling. Chicano, Pablo thought. Mexican ancestry, but an American. An American with money. Pablo sold fake Rolexes in Nogales for a while. He recognized the gold watch on this man's wrist as the real thing.

The boss looked at Pablo for only a moment. His attention moved quickly to Lourdes and her child. He nodded slightly, and Lourdes feared that she may have been singled out for grief. Her child or her pregnancy, perhaps, made her too much trouble.

The two young men stood in a corner near Pablo. The man's gaze did not even settle on them. The young woman had backed into the other far corner, as if pinned there by the gaze of the man in the doorway. She was tall, dark skinned, with the mature face and figure that come early to some Mexican girls. On the ride north, she had sat with Lourdes and played with

Irma, but said little. The coyotes had noticed her, laughed and made half-hearted passes, but she had batted them away and nothing happened.

The boss raised his hand to beckon her.

"*Vente,*" he said, using the familiar verb form, as bosses do, in a soft voice that was a command. It was a Mexican accent, Pablo guessed from the one word. This American had learned his Spanish along the border, somewhere from San Diego to Brownsville.

No one moved. Every one of the travelers looked at the young woman. Her name was Dulce. She came from a town near Hermosillo. They knew nothing else about her.

"*Ahora,*" the man said. Now. "*Vengas conmigo.*" Come with me. The voice was still quiet, but more demanding. Dulce stood a little taller, proud, but having no doubt that she would walk through the door or be dragged. She looked straight ahead and strode past the jefe without acknowledging him. The man turned to follow her. The coyotes closed and locked the door.

The footsteps faded and the house fell quiet. In the tiny room, Pablo went to Lourdes and held her. Their child slept on. The other two men stared at the floor, helpless and ashamed.

Somewhere in the building, a woman shouted angrily. Then they heard nothing from her. The house was silent again.

It was perhaps ten minutes until they heard sharp popping sounds outside. Many, in rapid succession. They came so quickly that no one could be sure if the sounds were shots or something else. They could hear men running, muffled shouting, sounds of confusion. Then, after minutes that felt like hours, footsteps came toward their door. The lock clicked and the door opened. The jefe was nowhere to be seen. But two new men stood there, one with a pistol, the other raising a shotgun.

Chapter 2 — Brinker

Some headline writer called it Immigration's Endless Summer. We thought it felt like most summers in Tucson. Too long, too hot, too many dead.

"I heard the coroner has ninety bodies in the morgue," I said.

"More by now," Al Avila said. He ran smoothly, breathed easily, and spoke as though he were standing still. "Almost all from the border. He had to rent refrigerated trailers for the overflow."

Al and I moved up our Saturday run to six a.m. The sun had barely risen and already blistered our backs. Al's neighbors would awaken soon, feel the heat, and wonder if they could gun the SUV to San Diego by lunchtime.

"That's just Pima County," I said. "It'll get worse. They can't keep up with the autopsies"

Thousands of people risked the illegal border crossing that year, hoping to make the Promised Land before the rumored new fences went up. The great recession had not yet pushed the economy close to collapse, so even newcomers without papers could find jobs. That year, the national angst industry discovered our long-running southwestern debate. Commentators raved. Politicians postured. No matter which side you took, somebody said you hate America. All the talk soon turned to white noise. The desert dust settled and the problems were still there.

The president flew in for photo ops. He ate Mexican food in Tucson and proclaimed Mi Nidito's chile relleno to be excellent. On the illegal immigration controversies, he promised something for everybody. Nobody was happy.

The National Guard built observation posts along the border. New recruits beefed up the Border Patrol. Self-styled civilian watchdogs reported for duty with lawn chairs, binoculars, and beer.

Still the people poured across. Many got through. Many got caught. Hundreds would die beneath a desert sun that punished us all that summer.

For me, born in the USA, Anglo, and not very political, life went on. So I thought, anyway, as Al and I ran on a cloudless mid-July morning. The blocks in his subdivision were five-hundred feet long, two-thousand feet around a square block. We figured that three times around made a little more than a mile. I was sweating and my hip still ached where a bullet hit it years earlier. Al glided along and seemed to gain energy with every block. He was a captain now, a senior desk job, but he kept the physique of a twenty-two-year-old patrolman.

"The whole immigration thing" he said. "God, aren't you

glad we're out of that?"

Al and I had been Border Patrol agents together.

"We're never completely out of it, living here," I said.

"That reminds me," Al said. "You remember Carla Baca?"

It took a moment, but then I remembered Carla very well.

"Sure," I said. "I had some great teenage fantasies about her." I was breathing better and the hip pain eased as we slowed to a walk. "Unfulfilled, though. She didn't want to settle for any of us local yokels from Tucson High."

"Dreams of her own," Al said. "She went back east to Harvard."

"Everybody said she got straight A's."

"She's a big time immigration lawyer in L.A. now."

Yes, I remembered the striking girl from New Mexico who showed up one day in my sophomore English class. When Carla glided down the hall, long black hair gleaming, dark eyes looking straight ahead, you could almost hear the boys' knees buckling. Nobody had any illusions. Even the student body president and the quarterback didn't have a chance, let alone guys like us. Guys the vice principal called the Future Car Wash Employees of America Club.

"One of my regrets from high school," I said. "I never had the guts to say hello, let alone ask her out."

"I was in love with Anna already," Al said. "Got to admit, though, Carla got my attention whenever she walked by."

We reached Al's front door. I smelled fresh coffee and Anna's *sopaipillas*, just out of the pan.

"C'mon in," Al said. "If I'm left alone, I'll eat them all. Then I'll have to run another mile."

We headed for the kitchen. I said, "We're older and wiser now. We can understand that Carla was probably pining away, wanting us to call."

Al said, "That's what I meant to tell you. She called me yesterday. The poor thing has suffered long enough. She wants to see you. She said, 'Send Brinker over here.'"

"What?" I stopped at the kitchen door and waited for a punch line.

"It gets better," Al said. "She wants to pay you."

I called Gabriela Corona to tell her that I would be in Los Angeles on Monday.

"Perfect timing," she said. "I just got back from Mexico."

"Doing a border story?" I asked.

"It's unbelievable," she said. "They have airlines for illegal immigrants."

"You're kidding."

"Swear to God," she said. "They fly from Mexico City to Mexicali or Hermosillo for a hundred dollars. They have vans at the airport to take passengers right to the coyotes' pickup points. It costs the same as the bus. It takes three hours instead of three days. You know what they call the airlines? *Aeromigrante*."

"That's a new one on me," I said. "Anyway, I'll see you at dinnertime Monday."

"You're buying," she said.

"Sure," I said. "In fact, I'll probably have a wealthy new client, so you can pick someplace expensive and decadent."

"Expensive and decadent," she said. "Much like myself. I'll make a reservation. *Hasta luego, sweetie*."