

Border Field Blues

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Dedication

To my mother, Danah.

A far better influence on me than one might guess
from this book.

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any
resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely
coincidental

El Muchacho

(The Boy)

The men departed as the last of the sun dipped into the ocean, but the boy waited until the darkness was complete, when the great bullring was a dark purple shadow above the roaring ocean. He did not fear darkness. He did not fear anyone. He had a knife. A rattlesnake head hung from his belt. That was enough for a man to protect himself.

The guitar on his back shifted as he slipped under the wire fence. A knot in the strap caught on the cut wire. He dropped his shoulder and slipped off the strap, let it go slack, pulled away from the fence and got free, then pulled the guitar through after him. One of the coyotes had offered to take him across in exchange for the vihuela, but he refused the man's bargain. His mother gave the little guitar to him, when he turned eight. It was his father's guitar. Or so she claimed. He could not always believe what his mother had told him. Many times she had lied.

She wished for him to become a guitarrista one day, that he would learn musical skills from the men who worked in that place. He did not wish to be like them. Guitar players drank too much tequila. They were drug addicts and degenerates, little better than the whores. He would not be surprised if one of them was his father, but he did not care which man it was. They were all whoremongers. He had seen what they did to his mother,

what all the men who came to her did. When she died, it was nothing for him to leave that place. He hated the smell of it.

He slipped the guitar onto his back and climbed to his feet, stared into the dark land between the two cities. Behind him the lights of Tijuana glowed closely, a sickening yellow haze. Ahead of him, many miles, a cold blue line floated above the dark land. San Diego, the first American city he would come to. The sidewalks were scrubbed clean there. Every house had a toilet. And glass walls. A man could live there, free from the sulfurous stench of sewage and whores.

The night folded in on him as he moved down the canyon, feeling his way along the worn dirt path. He listened for voices, but the land was silent. He had only his breathing and footsteps for companionship. A tentative breeze filtered up through the canyon, bringing a pleasant perfume. He had travelled only a quarter mile into the new land, but already it smelled fresher, an ambrosia that lifted his spirits. The air smelled of mandarinas, the little orange fruit his mother gave him each Christmas, the one without seeds. The air was a promise, wrapped in its skin.

Soon the land leveled out under his feet. The canyon widened. The shadows of trees rose up around him, aligned in perfect order, laid out in a grid. The trees gave off the perfume. He walked up to one of them, searched its branches, found the dark little globes hanging there. He reached for one of the globes, tugged on it. The fruit fell loose and dropped to the ground. He grabbed another, removed it more carefully, held it up to his nostrils, gorging on the aroma. He tore off the skin and devoured its sweetness. He picked three more and ate all of them. He felt rich.

He continued down the canyon, snatching the outermost fruit from the trees as he passed, stashing them in his pockets until they were full. A glimmering azure light beckoned from the end of the orchard. He stepped out from the trees, in behind a group of boulders that stood above a large house. The house was dark inside. The light came from the pool of water behind it. He'd never seen a real swimming pool, only the ones on TV, in the telenovelas the whores watched, in the daytime when business was slow.

There was a girl in the pool, paddling from one side to the other. She was naked. He'd seen women naked before, many of

them, but they were all whores. They had scars, and bad teeth. Even the young ones had sagging breasts. This girl did not. She climbed out of the pool and sat on the edge, splashing her feet in the water. There was a roundness to her belly, like the Madonna. The girl looked up at him. He stepped further into the shadows, against the rock. He did not know if she had seen him or only looked up at the place where he stood. He continued to watch her through a gap in the rock. A feeling came over him, unlike any before. The girl was his destiny. She was a vision, like Coatlxopeuh, she who gave the roses to Juan Diego in the desert. The girl's hair glowed orange, like the mandarina skins; even the hair of her concha had the same color. Her skin seemed translucent, glowing with soft light.

"You like what you see?" came a voice from inside the rocks. The boy jumped.

"¿Quién está allí?" he called to the darkness.

"She is temptation," the voice continued. "She has married the serpent."

"Muéstrese," the boy said, demanding to see the man's face.

"Will you renounce the serpent?"

"No le entiendo," the boy said. He reached for the knife in his pocket. "No sabe."

Something moved from the darkness into the half-light. He saw a man's face, a glint of metal. Two barrels of cold steel jammed into his neck. It was a shotgun. He'd felt one before. The Chulo who ran the house kept one behind the bar.

"¡Renuncie la serpiente!" the man whispered. "Or I'll blow your head off."

"¡Lo renuncio!" the boy said. It was nothing for him to renounce the devil. He'd made no contract with Satan, or the Cristo. They were both for the foolish and weak. His only contract was with himself, with his knife and his rattlesnake head. He had cut the old Chulo. He would cut this man too.

"Don't move!" the man called. The boy paused. He touched the knife handle under the bulging tangerines. He waited.

"Show your penitence," the man said. The boy didn't move.

"On your knees," said the man, kicking the boy's feet out from under him. The boy fell to the ground, tasted dirt in his mouth. He pulled the knife from his pocket. He would not let this man make him unclean.

“To renounce the devil, you must deny the serpent,” the man said. “Only those who have shown penitence may pass through his kingdom.”

The boy did not understand.

“¡Su dinero!” the man said. The boy understood. The man was a thief, a common bandit, like the other insects who scuttled these hills. The boy had six hundred pesos, but he would not give the man any of it. The man pressed the gun barrel hard against the boy’s cheek.

“Your money or your immortal soul,” he said.

The boy twitched, grabbed the barrel of the gun and pushed it away. The shot blasted against the hard ground, a bright explosion that lit up the rocks with a split-second flash. Hot pebbles burned the side of his face. He swung his knife, caught the man full in the groin. The man screamed. The boy pulled the knife out and stabbed him again. The man fell on top of him, flailing his arms. The boy grabbed the man’s shirt, twisted the cloth in his grip. He slashed his knife across the man’s throat. The warm smell of blood engulfed him as it sprayed across his face. The man gurgled and twisted in a great spasm, like a chicken, an alley dog. He grabbed the boy’s shoulders. And then he was still.

The boy pushed the man’s body away and climbed to his feet. It was the first time he’d killed a man. Others had turned away at the sight of his blade or run away with the first cut. He felt the side of his face. There were little holes where it burned. He felt dizzy.

“Daddy?” a voice called. He looked through the hole in the rock. It was the girl, the Madonna. She stood near the fence, looking up at the hill.

“Daddy?” she called again. “Is that you?”

The boy stepped out of the rocks and walked down to the fence where she stood. He did not care what she thought of him, if her father was dead. She watched him come down to her. She looked unafraid. He walked to the edge of the thick metal fence, reached a hand through the iron railing and beckoned her. She stepped towards him.

“Is he dead?” she asked. The boy nodded.

“I knew you would come for me,” she said. She took his bloody hand and placed it on the cool skin of her belly.

“You are the serpent,” she said. “And I am your concubine.”

“Game Over” flashed in yellow letters on the television screen. The computerized characters froze in place.

“Who won?” said the fat man on the sofa.

“Nobody won,” said the boy. “We have to play again.”

“Sure. I guess. I got nothing better to do.”

The fat man pulled a cell phone out of his pocket.

“I’m gonna order some Mexican,” he said. “You want anything?”

The boy punched a button on his controller, rebooting the game. He didn’t say anything.

“How do you win this game, anyway?” said the fat man.

“Somebody kills The Ancestor. That’s how you win.”

“That’s the shadow thingy?”

“Yes.”

The fat man found the number he wanted and tapped on his phone.

“Sure is a weird freakin’ game,” he muttered to himself as he waited for someone to answer his call.

El Parque

(The Park)

Two men stood on the hill above Border Field Park, surveying the terrain that led out to the beach. A low ceiling of gray clouds hung over them like smudged cotton.

“Whattya think?” said Max Gemeinhardt, scratching his beard.

“What am I supposed to be looking at?” said Rolly Waters.

“There. That’s the preserve,” said Max, pointing to the area just below them, a boundary of short wooden posts connected by low-hung steel chains. “You see those tire tracks?”

“Yeah. I see ‘em,” Rolly replied. Beyond the posts and chains, ground-hugging plants scabbled across low mounds of damp sand. Tread marks crisscrossed the area, making it look like a large, sandy doodle pad. In the history of environmental crimes, it probably didn’t count for much, but that hardly mattered to Max. For Max this was personal.

“The least terns lay their eggs down there,” he said. “I want to nail this bastard.”

Rolly had no idea what a least tern was, or what made it least, but he’d seen the signs posted by the park service, warning visitors to stay clear of their nesting area under penalty of fines.

“You sure those tracks are new?” he asked.

“They weren’t there yesterday. I’ve been down here the last three mornings. Audubon Society’s doing a census this week.”

“Oh.”

“I thought maybe you could get an imprint or something, before the wind covers them up, use Plaster of Paris or something like that?”

“I guess that might work,” replied Rolly. He didn’t know how to make imprints of tire tracks, or what to do with them if he did. That was advanced stuff, for specialists, for TV detectives with their high-tech laboratories. He was a private investigator, and a part-time one at that. His resources were limited. Even that was an understatement.

“What about the border patrol?” he asked.

“I talked to a guy up here earlier,” said Max. “He said it wasn’t their jurisdiction. Hell, one of them probably did it. They drive around here like they own the place.”

“Whose jurisdiction is it then?”

“He said it was Parks and Rec. California State Parks.”

“Maybe we should talk to them.”

“You see any rangers around?”

“It’s still kinda early.”

“Say the ranger shows up today, which is unlikely as I haven’t seen a single one here in six months. Maybe he files a report. Whattya’ think happens after that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, in case you haven’t heard, the late great State of California is broke. Cutting back hours, putting workers on furlough. They gotta prioritize.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Best scenario, they get around to dealing with this in six months, maybe a year. Probably never.”

“How about the police?”

“The cops won’t come out here unless someone’s dead. That’s why I need you to look into this.”

Rolly checked his watch. It was six-forty-five in the morning, too early to look into anything but the back of his eyelids. He turned away from the scene, looked across the parking lot at the border fence.

“That’s the new fence, huh?”

“There’s two of ‘em now,” Max said. “Ninety feet in between. No man’s land, like we’re in a war zone or something. You see that little stone obelisk there in the middle?”

Rolly nodded.

“Nineteen-seventy-one,” Max continued. “I came to the ceremony. Pat Nixon was here. She dedicated that monument. Now you can’t even get close enough to read the damn thing.”

“What’s it say?”

“Commemorates the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Eighteen-forty-eight. End of the Mexican-American war. That’s where they set the border. She made ‘em cut a hole in the fence so she could go over there.”

“Who?”

“Pat Nixon. There was a big crowd on the Mexican side of the border. She made the border patrol cut a hole so she could go through and talk to them, made a nice little speech about taking the fence down someday. Seven presidents later, we got two fences.”

“I remember you bringing mom and me down here once, after the accident. There were all those families over there, having picnics, trading stuff through the fence.”

“Yeah, this place used to give me hope for humanity. Might as well be Berlin now. Except this wall’s going to last even longer.”

“That’s why they call it Monument Road, huh?” said Rolly, recalling the road signs on the way in.

“The excuse now is Homeland Security,” Max continued. “We went to court, tried to stop it.”

“Who’s we?”

“SOCK. Save Our Coastal Kingdom. I’m their counsel. We got an injunction, on environmental grounds, but the judge threw it out.”

“Oh.”

“You see those tractors back at the entrance?”

“Yeah. I thought maybe they were fixing the road.”

Max snorted.

“Nah. That would actually be useful. Did you know more species of birds pass through this spot than any other place in North America?”

“No. I did not know that.”

“First it’s new fences, then a new road, a couple federal trailers, the next thing you know they’ve paved over the whole thing, put in housing developments, shopping centers. Pretty soon there won’t be any birds out here, just another set of suburbs and cul-de-sacs with bird names on the street signs.”

Rolly grinned. Retirement hadn't slowed Max down. It had only given him more time to hack at the gorgon-heads of government bureaucracy.

"Well, it's your dime," Rolly said. "I'll take a look around if you want me to."

"You need any help?"

"Nah, I'm okay."

"I'm heading home, then," said Max. "I've been here since sunrise."

"How's your census going?"

"Pretty good. I saw a spotted grackle and a pair of western tanagers this morning."

"Can I go in there?" Rolly asked, indicating the area inside the posted boundary.

"I guess you might have to," said Max. "Keep an eye out for the eggs, though. The nests are just these little divots in the sand."

"You're sure there's no rangers around?"

"I'll pay any fines, if that's what you're worried about."

"The thought crossed my mind."

"I'll cover any and all expenses. Just don't make things any worse."

"I'll be careful."

"Your mom doing OK?" Max said, patting his pockets.

"She's fine."

"You want to go to the game tonight?"

"Got a gig tonight," Rolly replied. "At Patrick's. You should come over and hear us after the game."

"I'm too old for that shit. How about tomorrow?"

"You mean the game?"

"Yeah."

"Sure."

"Starts at one," Max said, still searching through his pockets. "Maybe you'll have something for me by then."

"Maybe. What're you looking for?"

"My keys. Here they are. Meet in the lobby? Twelve-thirty tomorrow?"

"I'll be there," said Rolly.

"I bet it's one of those AFA assholes," said Max.

"Who's that?"

“I’d love to nail them.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Those tracks, in the park. These AFA guys think they’re allowed to do the border patrol’s job. We sued them too.”

“Did you win?”

“Not exactly. At least we got ‘em to give up their guns.”

“Should I worry about these guys?”

“You got a California driver’s license?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you don’t need to worry. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Rolly watched Max walk down the hill to the lower parking lot and drive away, then turned back to survey the upper parking lot. On the ridge of hills across the border stood middle class suburbs of Tijuana, well-kept houses and apartments, a motley architecture painted in bright shades of yellow and blue, pastel greens. The Tijuana suburbs ran out to the bullring. It sat on a promontory overlooking the ocean, directly across the border fence. The Coronado Islands slumbered offshore, shapely female figures half-immersed in a bed of liquid blue. He wished he were in bed, with a woman, or without. It was too damn early to be out in a place like this. It was too early to be out anywhere. He turned back to the bird preserve, looked at the trash and tire tracks.

His private investigator training had taught him a lot about looking up names, searching through public records. It provided lots of information on legalities, how to cover your ass. It even taught him how to set up a stakeout, but he couldn’t remember any lessons covering tire treads. He’d have to figure those out on his own.

A cloud of dust swirled across the least tern preserve. It blew up into his nostrils, arid and warm, a reminder of the approaching dry season, the hot Santa Ana winds that came in from the desert. He sighed, anticipating a morning of parched defeat.

A twinkling reflection caught his eye, a sparkle of light winking out at him from inside a tangle of low-growing plants. He walked to the bottom of the hill, stopped to check for any potential witnesses to his intended trespass. No one appeared. He stepped over the low-slung chain links and into the least tern breeding grounds, walked towards the blinking reflection.

Something screamed, flurried up from below him. A scrambling brush of feathers whirled up in front of his eyes. He raised his hands to protect his face. The feathers twisted away from him, catching an updraft. A gray and white bird floated above him, screaming, calling him names. He looked down at his feet, saw two brown-speckled eggs nestled inside a shallow depression of sand. He stepped around the nest, and moved on, keeping a careful eye as he followed the tire tracks. Pieces of eggshells and their dried-up contents littered the tread marks. He leaned down, looked closer. The screaming bird flew away. Embedded in the edge of one tread mark was a mashed chunk of crushed feathers, a tiny yellow beak. At least one tern chick had been lost to the driver's recklessness.

He pulled out his cell phone, switched to camera mode, snapped some photographs of the treads and crushed feathers. Slipping the phone back into his pocket, he saw the blinking light again, inside a patch of ice plant. He walked closer, spotted what looked like a CD case clutched in the plant's tentacles. The square plastic case quivered in the wind as if trying to escape. He leaned down, picked it up. On the front cover of the album, an alluring young woman stared out at him. She was naked except for the strategic cover of a few jungle vines across her breasts. A large snake, a cobra, curled around her upper leg and spread across her hips, covering her womanhood. *Jungle Love* was the title of the album, by a band called Serpent. Rolly flipped the case over, tried to read the back credits, but the type was too small for his aging pupils. He opened the case, found a blank CD inside, sans label.

"Attention, Attention," a distorted voice blared across the morning air.

Rolly jolted, turned his head in the direction of the voice. A black pickup truck sat next to the ranger's booth, just inside the park entrance.

"Attention. You are in a restricted zone," a voice blared from the truck. "You must return to the trail. Attention. Return to the trail."

Rolly waved in acknowledgement.

"Attention," called the voice. "Return to the trail or you will be placed under arrest."

Rolly waved again, slipped the CD case into his jacket pocket and walked back towards the trail.

El Cazador

(The Hunter)

Rolly walked along the road towards the truck. As he drew close, the driver's side window slid down, revealing a man wearing a camouflage shirt, baseball cap, and reflective sunglasses.

"You can't read signs or something?" the man said.

"Just picking up some trash," Rolly said, tapping his pockets. "I hate litterbugs."

"I guess that makes it okay to break the law?"

"Are you a ranger?" asked Rolly. The truck was fully rigged for off-roading, with jacked-up shocks and big tires, a crossbeam of raked headlights over the cabin, and some sort of winch or tow structure in back. No government seal adorned the exterior.

"No, I ain't the ranger," the man said. "I'm a private citizen, trying to make a difference down here."

"You're an avian enthusiast?"

"An A-V what?"

"A birdwatcher."

The man laughed.

"I don't know shit about any birds. I'm hunting for Mexicans."

"You're with the border patrol?"

"Do I look like BP?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I'm not."

"I'm not Mexican, either."

“No. I guess you’re not. There’s a fine, you know, for being out there, in the bird area.”

“You’re not the ranger.”

“No.”

“I guess we’re done then,” said Rolly, turning to leave.

“If that’s your Volvo station wagon in the parking lot, I got the license plate,” the man said. “I can call the parks people, tell ‘em you was out there.”

Rolly sighed and turned back to the driver.

“What do you want?”

“I wanna know what you’re up to. And don’t give me that litterbug shit. Nobody crosses the chains just to pick up trash.”

“A friend of mine called me this morning. He asked me to come down here.”

“What for?”

“I’m an investigator.”

“What kind of investigator?”

“Here, I’ve got a card,” Rolly sighed. He pulled a business card out of his wallet, handed it over.

“Rolly Waters,” the man said, reading the card. “Private Investigator.”

“That’s me.”

“The Rock ‘n’ Roll Dick. What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s a joke,” Rolly said. “I play guitar in a band.” He regretted letting Moogus talk him into adding the tagline to his card. There were four hundred more cards in a box at home, so he’d have to live with it for a while.

“Real cute,” said the truck driver. “So what’re you investigay-tun, Mr. Dick?”

“Somebody drove through the least tern nesting area last night. That’s why I was out there. There’s some tire tracks, big ruts all over the place. Looks like some birds got killed.”

“This friend, he’s your client or something?”

“Yes.”

“What’s his name?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“You gotta protect his confidentials, huh?”

“Confidentiality.”

“Yeah. This friend of yours, he’s paying you to investigate?”

“He was very upset.”

“About the birds?”

“He likes birds.”

“Sounds kinda gay.”

“Can I go now?”

“Depends. Can you tell me anything about the tire tracks?”

“Like what?”

“What kind of treads? Cross-country or street?”

“I don’t know much about tires. I took some pictures.”

“Can I see ‘em?”

“Why?”

“Well, Mr. Rock ‘n’ Roll Dick, you said you didn’t know anything about tires. I do. Maybe I can help you out.”

Rolly pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, scrolled through his photos until he found one of the tire tracks, flipped the phone around to show it to his interrogator.

“Regular treads,” said the driver, studying the photo. “Pretty skinny, too, two-hundreds I’d guess.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means they weren’t driving some jacked-up sand-crawler like mine. Some underpowered putt-putt, or maybe a sedan. That’s what I’d guess.”

He handed the phone back to Rolly.

“That help?”

“It might. Thanks.”

A radio squawked from inside the truck cab.

“Breaker three-ninety. Checking in. Smuggler’s Canyon.”

“Roger three-ninety,” came the reply. The truck driver punched a button on the radio. It went silent.

“Who’s that?” Rolly asked.

“Border Patrol.”

“You can listen to them?”

“Sure, if you got short-wave.”

“Don’t the bad guys listen in, too?”

“The frequency’s scrambled. You gotta have the code.”

“So how’d you get it?”

“I got friends.”

“Doesn’t exactly sound legal.”

“He said it was cool.”

“He’s with the Border Patrol?”

“Nobody’s gonna give me a hard time for just listening in. I’m not making calls on the thing. It just lets me know how they’re situated so I can fill in the dead spots, stay out of their way.”

“You weren’t out here last night, by any chance, were you?”

“Those aren’t my tire tracks, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Yeah, that’s what you told me,” said Rolly. “What’d you say your name was?”

“I’m pretty sure I didn’t tell you before.”

“No. You didn’t.”

“People call me Nuge.”

“You mean The Nuge, like Ted Nugent?”

“No, it’s just Nuge.”

“Cat Scratch Fever? The Motor City Madman?”

“Hey, you’re the rock ‘n’ roll dick. I’m Nuge. You got a problem with it?”

“What are you doing out here?”

“Just hanging out.”

“You said something about hunting Mexicans.”

“Did I?”

“You meant illegals, right?”

The man nodded.

“That’s right,” he said.

“Isn’t that the border patrol’s job?”

“We’re here to help.”

“Who’s we?”

“A - F - A,” the man said. He pointed at the cap on his head, with the letters embroidered in red, white and blue over a black silhouette of the lower forty-eight.

“What’s that stand for?”

“Americans for America,” the man said. He grinned. “Mom, Guns, and Apple Pie.”

“Do you carry a gun?”

Nuge stared Rolly in the eye.

“You tell me first.”

“What?”

“Are you carrying?”

“I might be.”

“What kind of gun?”

“It’s a Glock.”

“What caliber?”

“Um, forty-four.”

“Glock only sells forty-fives.”

“That’s what I meant.”

“You’re one lame-ass liar,” said Nuge.

“Yeah, I used to be a lot better,” Rolly said. He smiled, trying to defuse the situation. Nuge chuckled.

“You ain’t much of a detective, if you ask me.”

Rolly shrugged.

“Yeah, well, I don’t have my gun either,” said Nuge. “Not with me. Some fag-ass judge said we couldn’t have ‘em if we wanted to be down here.”

“I think I heard something about that,” said Rolly, recalling Max’s lawsuit.

“Said it created a toxic situation. Typical liberal bullshit. We only had ‘em with us for defense. Anyway, that’s how I got the paintball idea.”

“What’s that?”

“Got my gear in the back,” Nuge said, nodding his head towards the back of the truck. Rolly looked in the truck bed. Two paintball guns lay in the back of the truck, along with a visored helmet and two cardboard boxes marked ‘Paintballs - 1000ct.’

“What do you do with those?” Rolly asked.

“Shoot Mexicans. To mark ‘em.”

“You sure that’s legal?”

“The judge said we couldn’t carry real guns. So we use paint guns. Until he says otherwise. It’s not lethal force. I checked with our lawyer.”

“Doesn’t it hurt, when you shoot somebody?”

“Kinda stings, if you hit ‘em right, but there’s no permanent damage. Mostly, it makes them easy to pick up. We only shoot the ones that try to get away.”

“Oh.”

“I mean it’s kinda hard not to be noticed when you’re walking around with big splats of red, white and blue paint all over you. It most definitely leaves a stain.”

“Yeah, I guess it would,” said Rolly. “What about drug smugglers?”

“What about ‘em?”

“I figure there must be some down here.”

“You looking to score some dope, Mr. Rock ‘n’ Roll?”

“No,” Rolly said, rolling his eyes. “I was just wondering how you’d deal with someone like that. Last I heard, those guys carry real guns.”

“We could take ‘em,” the man said. “There’s ways to do it. The drug guys don’t mess around here much, anyway, not anymore. They just bribe people, put stuff on a plane or a boat, hide it inside a big rig. They like to bring the stuff in at peak hours, hide out in a crowd and hope it gets missed.”

“Low signal to noise.”

“Hmm?”

“Nothing. It’s not important.”

Rolly looked over the items in the truck bed again, noticed a child’s lunchbox with the words “Family Act” written in cursive pink letters, with sparkling gold stars around them.

“You got kids?” he asked Nuge.

“Huh?”

“I thought that might be your kid’s lunchbox back there, with the guns.”

Nuge gave Rolly a funny look.

“What’s it to you?”

“Nothing. Just making conversation.”

“Fuck you. What else did you find out there?”

“In the bird preserve?”

“Yeah, in the bird preserve, butthead.”

“I just took some pictures. Like I showed you. The tire tracks. And some dead birds.”

“I saw you pick something up.”

“Just some trash. Like I said earlier.”

“Don’t fuck with me. It was some kind of evidence.”

“Maybe.”

“So what was it?”

“I just had a thought.”

“Pretty exciting for you, huh?”

“Maybe one of your AFA buddies was out here last night.”

“Oh yeah?”

“That’s why you’re giving me a hard time. Maybe it wasn’t you, but maybe you want to protect your buddies, make sure that judge doesn’t find out about this.”

“Why would I help you out with those tread marks if I thought that?”

“Were any of your buddies out here last night?”

“No.”

“How do you know? Is there a schedule or something?”

“No.”

“People just show up when they feel like it?”

“No. I mean, sure, there’s a schedule. But I only know about my own hours, man.”

“Who keeps track of the schedule?”

“It’s on a website.”

“How do I get to this website?”

“You gotta have a password to get in.”

“How about a phone number? Is there somebody I can call?”

“None of our guys is gonna be out here with treads like that.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t have to talk to you. You aren’t a cop.”

“No. Neither are you.”

“Fuck off.”

“That’s helpful.”

“I’m out of here. Good luck with your freaking birds.”

Nuge put his truck into gear, hit the gas and took off. Rolly caught the spray of damp sand kicked up by the slipping rear tires.

“Good luck hunting Mexicans, shithead,” he muttered, wiping himself off as the truck pulled away. He turned and walked back to his car, half-expecting Nuge to spin a U-turn and try to run him down. He made it to the parking lot, and his old Volvo wagon, without incident. He opened the door of the Volvo and climbed in, pulled the CD out of his pocket, looked at the woman on the cover again. She had long red hair, like a billowing fire. A trace of desert wind, the Santa Ana, drifted over his face like hot dog’s breath. He licked his lips. They felt dry and ready to crack.

El Vaquero

(The Cowboy)

A rattling noise caught Rolly's attention. He looked up from the red-haired temptress on the CD cover to see a dilapidated green Chevy pull into the parking lot, hauling a long horse trailer behind it. A man in a cowboy hat climbed out of the truck, walked to the back of the trailer, guided a horse out and saddled it. The man's easy demeanor suggested he'd done this before, his hands as sure with a saddle and halter as Rolly's stringing an electric guitar. The cowboy retrieved two more horses from inside the trailer and prepared them for riding as well.

Rolly climbed out of his car, trudged towards the trailer. The three horses stared at him as he approached, looking less than thrilled their morning had started this way. A crashing sound came from inside the trailer. A voice cursed in Spanish. The rear end of another horse appeared, kicking its hooves at the hardscrabble ground. The front half of the horse exited the trailer, along with the cowboy, clinging to its reins. As the horse reared back and pawed at the air, the cowboy slipped to one side, narrowly escaping its sharp hooves. The horse dropped back to the ground. The cowboy shortened its reins, looped them twice around a hook on the back of the trailer and pulled them tight. The horse tried to rear up again, but the reins held. The horse shook its head, snorted twice, and settled into a pose of resignation like its trailer mates. The cowboy tied off the reins, ducked down between the horse and the trailer.

“Buenos Dias, Señor,” he said, doffing his hat when he spotted Rolly. He took a seat on the trailer’s rear bumper and pulled a red handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped his brow.

“Buenos Dias,” said Rolly.

“You like a ride?” the cowboy asked, nodding in the direction of the saddled horses.

“No, thank you.” Rolly replied.

“I give you good price.”

“It looks too dangerous for me.”

The man laughed.

“They are good horses,” he said. “But they no like the trailer. Every day, it is like they never see it before.”

“Are you out here often?”

“Sí, everyday, in the summer. I am here, with the horses.”

“You rent them out?”

“Yes. The people, they like to ride on the beach.”

Rolly nodded, stepped towards the trailer. The horse on his right shook its mane, stomped the ground. Rolly stopped.

“Do not worry, my friend,” the man said. “She will be fine now. You know what is the difference between horses and women?”

“No,” Rolly replied, shaking his head.

“Women they only break your balls after you ride them.”

The cowboy laughed, put his hat back on, and tied the handkerchief around his neck. He pulled a bottle from his back pocket, took a shot and offered the bottle to Rolly.

“No thanks,” Rolly said. He recognized the green label – Herdurra Reposado. Tequila. “Were you here yesterday?”

“Sí.”

“How late did you stay?”

“After the sun was gone. My people stay out late.”

“Seven, seven-thirty?”

The cowboy shrugged.

“I do not know the time,” he said. “There was still light, over the ocean, but the sun was below. Why do you want to know this?”

“Someone broke into the park last night, drove through the bird reserve, ran over some nests. I’m trying to find out who did it.”

“You work for the government, no?”

"I'm a private investigator," Rolly said, pulling a business card out of his wallet. He handed it to the cowboy.

"You no look like you work for the government," the cowboy said. He glanced down at the card.

"You are Roy-ee?" he said.

"Rol-lee," said Rolly, offering a handshake. "Rolly Waters."

"I am Jaime," said the cowboy, grasping Rolly's hand in his leathered brown grip. He looked older than Rolly first thought, at least sixty, his face dark and wrinkled from a lifetime in the sun.

"This is your work?" Jaime said. "To ask questions?"

"Yes," Rolly replied.

"What will you do if you find these men, the ones who drive over the birds?"

"Someone hired me. He'll decide what to do with 'em."

"He is with the government, no?"

"No," Rolly said, shaking his head. "He's a private citizen. Was there anyone here when you left last night? In the parking lot? Any cars?"

"No. I was the last."

"The gate was closed then?"

"It is closed all the time now."

"Did you see anyone up near the bullring?"

"I do not think so. Except for La Migra. I do not look for anyone, though."

"And you left after sunset?"

"Yes, it was dark by the time I get home. After I put the horses away."

"Where do you live?"

"Near the river. Across from the canyon. That is my home."

"Did you pass anyone on the road? Anyone headed into the park?"

"No. I did not see anyone."

Rolly pursed his lips. He had a nine-hour window to work with, sometime between eight last night and five this morning, when Max arrived.

The growl of an approaching engine came to his ears. He looked back towards the park entrance, saw Nuge's accessorized pickup squeeze around one side of the entry gate and pull onto Monument Road. The truck honked, picking up speed as it went

by, kicking up a hazy cloud of dust, though the air remained clear enough for Rolly to note the middle finger salute offered by Nuge as he passed.

“That was for me,” he said, turning back to Jaime. “I talked to him earlier.”

“He did not like you asking questions.”

“No. I guess not.”

“I would like to have a truck such as that one. Mine is old now. I must work on it always.”

“Have you seen that truck before?”

“There is a truck that is like that one, in the canyon sometimes.”

“What canyon is this?”

“The one across from my land. Smuggler’s Canyon it is called.”

“Sounds like a place he’d hang out. Do illegals come through there a lot? Border crossers?”

“In the past, yes. Not so many now,” Jaime said. He pointed at the tractors in the parking lot. “There are machines there, like these. They make the new fence.”

“Smuggler’s Canyon,” Rolly said, repeating the name.

“I do not call it that,” said Jaime. “It is just the canyon, to me.”

“I found something while I was out there,” Rolly said. “In the park.”

“What is it you find?”

Rolly pulled the CD case out of his pocket, handed it to Jaime.

“For the music, yes?” said Jaime. He opened the cover, inspected the disk.

“Yes. It plays music.”

Jaime closed the case, stared at the picture on the cover for a moment, then handed the case back to Rolly. He took the tequila bottle out of his pocket, unscrewed the top, offered the bottle to Rolly. Rolly shook his head.

“You no like the tequila?” said Jaime.

“I like it too much,” Rolly replied.

Jaime nodded, took a drink.

“The tequila is good for you,” he said. “But not too much.”

He put the bottle back in his pocket, stared at the ground. The sun broke free of the morning’s haze, a delirious light bending over the eastern mountains that warmed Rolly’s skin. A choir of birds sang in the fields. Their calls danced on the air in

a lazy, pulsating rhythm. Rolly listened to the sound of their natural counterpoint, no note out of tune, all connected. He rested his own voice, a full measure, then two.

“Me atormentará,” Jaime said.

“What’s that?”

“It is X’Tabay,” said Jaime. “The woman, there, with the music. She is X’Tabay, the seducer of men.”

Rolly looked at the CD cover again, saw no reason to disagree with Jaime’s assessment.

“In Yucatán,” Jaime continued. “That is where I was born, the old men tell of X’Tabay, the woman who lives in the jungle. She will show herself to the young men, the ones who go into the jungle alone. They will desire her. She will lead them far into the jungle, give them pleasure. The young men will die. They will not find their way back.”

“It’s a story, a myth?”

“I think yes. That is what you call it. I too, think this as a young man.”

“You don’t think so now?”

“She has been here, with me. She came to me last night, in a dream.”

“X’Tabay?”

“Yes, I surrender this time, in my dream. I take pleasure in her. I think now I will die soon.”

“It was only a dream.”

“I find something, too,” said Jaime. “When I wake up from my dream. Anoche.”

“What did you find?”

“I will give them to you.”

Jaime pulled something from his front pocket, handed it to Rolly. It was a pair of pink satin panties, with the word ‘Serpent’ on one side and ‘Jungle Love’ on the back.

“Where did you find these?” asked Rolly.

“En mi casa. My house.”

“You found these in your house?”

“Sí. When I awake this morning.”

Jaime took another hit from the tequila bottle. If the morning’s intake was any indication, he would make it through the whole bottle by noon. His memory, and his dreams, would be drowning in it. Rolly thought about the dreams he used to

have, the drunken nightmares. They had seemed real then, his pickled brain transmuted unconscious thoughts into winged furies and soul-stealing spirits, the vivid manifestations of an uneasy mind drowned in alcohol. The dream-furies disappeared two months after he became sober.

A blue minivan appeared on the road, headed in towards the park. It slowed, came to a stop across from the two men. The driver's window slid down. A round-faced woman with a tall blond hairdo poked her head out.

"Do you rent those horses?" she asked.

"Sí. Yes," replied Jaime.

"Can we ride on the beach?"

"Oh yes, that is fine. They like the water very much."

"How much will it cost?"

"How many horses?"

"Three. Just for a couple of hours."

"Muy bueno. Three is good. I give you good price."

The woman looked doubtful, turned back to talk to someone in the car before returning to Jaime.

"All right," the woman said. She turned the car into the lot, parked between Jaime's trailer and Rolly's Volvo.

Jaime stashed the tequila inside a small cabinet on the side of the trailer.

"I have customers now," he said. "I must go with them. For the insurance."

"Wait," Rolly said. "You said something, earlier, when you looked at the picture. May tormenta?"

"Me atormentará."

"Yes. What does that mean?"

"She is a curse."

"The woman in the picture? She's the one in your dream?"

"It was not a dream. She is X'Tapay."

"She looks like X'Tapay, the picture, that's what you mean?"

"I have seen her, that one."

"Who is she?"

"She is a ghost."

The doors of the van opened, disgorging the chubby woman driver and two pre-teen females.

"C'mon girls," the woman said. "This will be fun."

The girls didn't look convinced. Jaime collected his horses, helped the woman and her daughters mount up, led his own horse over to Rolly.

"You want these back?" Rolly said, indicating the panties.

"Take them to her," Jaime said. "Then I will be free."

"I don't understand."

"You stop drinking the tequila, sí?"

"Yes."

"You have great strength, muy fuerte. She will not seduce you."

Jaime mounted his horse.

"Where do I take them?" asked Rolly.

"It is an old house. Back down the road, where the white earth spreads out from the canyon. Smuggler's Canyon. That is the house. You will see the machines there for moving the earth. They are next to the house. On the other side of the road, there is land that opens out to the river. That is my house, down by the river. No le atormentan."

"This woman lives there?" Rolly said. "X'Tapay? Is that what you mean?"

"No me atormentará más," said Jaime, again. He clicked at his horse, waved to the woman and her girls. They followed him out towards the beach, where California ended and ran into the Pacific.