

Drop House, a novel by David Baker

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Contact: me@bakerdavid.com, 385-229-9318, www.bakerdavid.com

Chapter 1

Sabel Anguiano stared at the fence, not certain what to think. This exact moment had hung so heavy on her shoulders for so many months, and the weight of its culmination seemed to evaporate like beads of sweat in the warm desert air. Already world-weary from seventeen years of struggling on the margins of life, Sabel generally took letdowns in stride. But this wasn't a regular, everyday disappointment. It also wasn't much of a fence.

In her dark fantasies Sabel had constructed a massive riveted iron wall topped with machine guns and high-tech cameras, stretching thousands of miles in either direction. The reality was pitiful by comparison: four skinny pairs of twisted wire, almost comical but for the double barbs spaced every 25 centimeters along the galvanized steel strands. Green-painted steel posts supported the sun-blackened lines, driven every three meters into the hard desert clay.

To the east and west, the string of wires and posts dipped and rose countless times, cresting low mesas and plunging back out of sight into the extreme reaches of forbidding, prickly nothingness. Their trail had led them to two posts in particular; between them, the top two strands had been snipped and coiled back, leaving a gap a child could hop over without a scratch.

"That's it?" asked a young man near the front of the group. His voice betrayed the same disbelief Sabel had been guarding.

"*Si*, that's it," the guide named Albert replied. "Now get over it before I push you through."

Albert watched with his hands on his hips as five or six walkers stepped over the wire. Then he slipped into the line and crossed with the other *pollos*. When Sabel's turn came, she flexed her shoulders beneath the ropes of her makeshift pack. Just one step of her long legs and she would be in *El Norte. Los Estados Unidos ... The Yunaites Estaites*. It was all she'd been dreaming about, everything her family had sacrificed so much for. Conscious of the impatient walkers behind her, she crossed herself and then crossed the border.

The trail on the other side of *la frontera* wasn't any different from the trail on the Mexico side. It certainly wasn't paved with gold. While the fence might have represented freedom to Sabel and her fellow immigrants, it actually marked the beginning of the chase. The two *guias*, Albert and Memo, had been pushing them hard since they left the border town of Sàsabe. They were anxious to put as many miles as possible between the group and the border fence. They only got paid if they got their *pollos* safely onto the truck near Tucson.

As the more experienced guide, Albert was the clear leader. He was incongruently outfitted in a faded Arizona Diamondbacks baseball shirt and a New York Yankees ball cap. Albert had smuggled hundreds of illegal immigrants into the United States over the past several years, making the trip at least once a week. He liked to play the big shot in the Sonoran border towns, wearing flashy clothes and flashy jewelry and flashing thick wads of cash. He liked flashy girls, too—the younger the better—but on smuggling runs Albert made an effort to blend in with the walkers he led. In his frayed clothes and cheap shoes, carrying a second-hand backpack and a battered milk jug filled with water, he looked like just another *pollo* trying to make it to a dish room or landscaping crew in *El Norte*. He'd actually been caught four or five times, but was always kicked back to Mexico within a few hours.

Bringing up the rear was the new guy. Memo was short and tubby around the middle, though the other *pollero* had assured him that his belly fat would cook off after a few more trips

across the border. He had a way of smiling that made women uncomfortable, as if he were enjoying private thoughts about their most intimate parts and functions. And perhaps he was.

Taking the lead again, Albert led the group a short distance to a road. The experienced *guia* wrangled his 25 *pollos* into a line on the southern margin of the wide, sandy track. They all watched as Albert demonstrated how to cross the road in large strides, like hopping stones across a river. On the other side he turned and grinned.

“Step in my footprints,” he said. “One at a time, and quickly now.”

An older woman behind Sabel cleared her throat. “Is it safe?” She had raised her hand as if she were in school. One of the other walkers—a lanky kid with a floppy blue hat—murmured something about bombs hidden beneath the sand, but the young man in the Yankees cap shook his head.

“You see how smooth the road is? *La Migra* drives these roads in special trucks with something like a broom on the back. They watch ahead for sign, and sweep the road behind them as they go.”

The *pollos* looked at one another, frowning. There was obviously more to crossing the border than many of them had guessed. One by one they hopped across the sand bed. Then Albert crossed and re-crossed again, using a scrap of cardboard to rake the sand smooth. He scavenged an old burlap sack and dusted away the tracks leading from the road. No point in making the chase any easier for *La Migra*.

#

Sometime after mid-morning Albert squinted and pointed ahead. Away to the northwest they could see a blue plastic flag—like you’d see on a child’s bicycle—rising from the brush. They waded through thick clumps of creosote and bursage to a pair of light blue barrels lying on steel racks.

“Water station,” Albert explained, unscrewing the lid from his jug. But when he rapped his knuckles against the barrels, the sound wasn’t good news. Both were empty.

“*Pinches gringos,*” cursed Memo. “Look at this—”

Albert squatted to examine the barrels. Several bullet holes perforated the back. Running his fingers underneath, he could feel jagged exit marks. Here in southern Arizona, there was a constant struggle between the “open borders” people, who had probably set up the water station, and the “law and order” people, the mostly likely saboteurs. Albert stood and shrugged, then glowered at a *pollo* who was picking his way through the bushes.

“Where are you going?”

The walker stopped in his tracks, looking back. “I have to piss.”

“Not without that, you don’t,” said Albert. His finger was pointing to the package the man had left leaning against the water racks. It was rectangular with rounded corners, and consisted of several smaller bundles wrapped together in black plastic and then spray-painted desert tan. All told, the package contained about 35 pounds of marijuana.

Shame-faced, the drug mule returned to the package and shouldered his burden. Everyone in the group looked from him to the *guia*, who was clearly unhappy.

One by one, Albert met the gaze of the five members of the group who were carrying similar cargo. “You’d better listen carefully. If *La Migra* finds us, you’d better run like rabbits. If they catch you with those bundles, you’ll spend a long time in jail. If you get away *without* those bundles, you’d better keep running because I’ll shoot you myself.”

Sabel felt her face flush. Her family was poor, and her father hadn’t been able to borrow nearly enough to cover the full smuggler’s fee. The price was cut in half for those who agreed to haul contraband across the desert, so Sabel was lugging her own bundle of *la verde*. The packages were bound up with crisscrosses of rope, and Sabel had rearranged the cords to go

around her shoulders like a backpack. It left her hands free to hold her water jug, which was nearly empty.

“What about the water?” asked Memo.

“It’s no problem,” Albert told him. “There’s water over that hill a few kilometers more.”

It was actually over ten kilometers over several hills, across another section of cut barbed wire and through a dry wash filled with garbage and tumbleweeds. Eventually they came to a rusty windmill next to a low concrete basin. The water was greenish, but it was water. Albert showed the *pollos* how to cover the mouths of their jugs with a tee-shirt to filter the water into their bottles.

While the walkers vied for a spot at the trough, Albert shimmied up the windmill derrick and turned the fan blades by hand. The bearings whined softly and there was a gurgling sound. Sabel happened to be standing next to the rusty pipe as water began trickling out. She held up her jug to catch the precious liquid.

“It’s good when it’s fresh,” Memo said, reaching a chubby arm across her shoulders. Sabel nodded and suppressed a shudder, trying unsuccessfully to shrug off the man’s arm as she watched the level in her jug rise.

“Keep it quiet,” whispered Albert from the top of the ladder. “This is rancher land.”

As Albert continued to turn the windmill, Memo gathered the girl closer. “It will be hot soon,” he told her quietly. “If you don’t want to fry, just splash a little water to cool down.” He sprinkled a few drops inside his wide-brimmed straw hat, and then sloshed a full liter down the front of Sabel’s shirt. She jumped back in shock, spilling some from her own jug in the process.

Albert snickered from the top of the ladder, and Memo flashed him that filthy grin.

As they backtracked to the main trail, the *guias* walked side by side and enjoyed the view of the girl’s hips swaying as she struggled under her burden. Memo had had his eye on her since

they'd first set off, and was privately irritated that Albert was now showing an interest. Of just six women in the group (three of them still in their teens), this one was clearly the best looking. Her figure wasn't quite as curvy as the actresses in the *telenovelas* on TV, but she had long legs and a heart-shaped backside, and her wet shirt clung nicely to her ripe *pechitos*.

"I saw her first," said Memo. He tried to make it sound like a joke, but his voice betrayed his petulance.

"You're the new guy," said Albert. "You'll have to wait your turn."

#

Sabel had grown up in the tiny village of Ziracuaretiro in the Mexican state of Michoacan, west of Mexico City. The desert landscape they were trekking through was completely foreign to her. On the bus, as they'd motored further and further into Sonora, she'd looked out the window and marveled at the parched, broken desert. "This is *Mexico*?" she'd thought to herself in wonder. When they stepped across the rusty barbed wire into the United States, she'd wondered, "*This* is America?"

Her parents had three daughters. Wanting a better life for his girls, her father worked harder than any man she knew, laboring all day in a brickyard and then renting out pirated videotapes and DVDs from a makeshift shop in their tiny front room in the evenings.

In spite of his hard work and frugal habits, he had no prayer of raising the \$2,000 it was going to cost to get Sabel into the United States. In much of Michoacan, the sum was incomprehensible—more than most men earned in a year. Desperate to get his daughter into *El Norte*, Sabel's father had borrowed nearly \$1,000 from a loan shark in Uruapan, signing a contract he could barely read, let alone understand. After handing over the money, the shady lender had stated his terms in bald language. If Sabel was unable to send enough money home to pay off the loan, the *usurero* would send men to break her father's fingers or kneecaps, or worse.

Cracking his knuckles dramatically, the man dropped not-so-subtle hints that he would be willing to take one of Sabel's younger sisters as payment in full. Sabel knew her father would kill or die before he let that happen. It was yet another incentive for her to succeed in *El Norte*.

The worries about work, money and the future were an almost welcome distraction from the endless trudging and the leers from the two *guias*. Sabel had almost stopped seeing the trail in front of her when Albert finally called a halt in another garbage-strewn layup. The sun was directly overhead and the front of Sabel's shirt was dry and stiff.

"Find some shade and eat whatever food you brought," the guide told his *pollos*. "Try to get some sleep. We'll start again in about four hours. If you hear an airplane or helicopter, hide under a bush and try to look like a pile of trash."

"That won't be difficult for this bunch," Memo snorted.

Using the drugs as a pillow, Sabel curled herself under the resinous-smelling limbs of an elephant tree. Not coincidentally, the two *guias* ended up nearby. Sabel forced her eyes to shut and tried desperately to fall asleep. It was difficult not to listen as Albert and Memo discussed their liberally-embellished sexual exploits with the whores—professional and amateur—in the border towns. The acts they described were completely foreign to the girl from Ziracuaretiro, but she was canny enough to realize they were having the discussion for her benefit.

She must have eventually drifted off, because the next thing she realized, Memo was stroking her arm and muttering, "Wake up, *muñequita*, it's time to walk some more." She sat up with a start, instinctively moving away from the *pollero*'s pungent breath, but her hair became tangled in the low brambles of the elephant tree. As she tugged herself free, the guide laughed like a jackass braying. "You're lucky we didn't leave you there, Sleeping Beauty." Most of the walkers had already set off northward up the trail.

The sun was much lower in the sky, and Sabel slipped her slender arms through the ropes and hurried away, passing half a dozen walkers in an attempt to put some bodies between herself and the chubby guide.

#

They had been going gradually uphill since crossing the border. For a while, the going got even tougher. Albert kept his relentless pace and the walkers spread out along the trail, with Memo lagging in the back. After a grueling two-hour climb, they came to the top of a mountain pass. Albert was already sitting on a cluster of rocks just below the ridgeline, fanning himself with his Yankees cap while he smoked impatiently. The sky was just beginning to fade, and it took almost ten minutes for the last of the stragglers to arrive.

“The slower you walk, the shorter you rest,” he said as they squatted, panting, on the ground. Memo was gasping for air with the rest of them. Hitching up his pants, he shuffled over and peered down into the valley on the other side.

“Don’t stand there on the ridge, *tontopollas*,” said Albert, pointing with puckered lips down toward the valley floor. “*La Migra* will see you for sure.” Far away to the northeast, they could see truck lights sweeping slowly towards the west. “Five minutes, then we go down the hill.”

They picked their way down from the ridge in the waning light of the evening. The western horizon was deep indigo when they reached the desert floor. Albert clicked on a pen light and flashed it around, keeping the beam low. From the quantity of discarded water containers and plastic sacks, this was obviously another popular stopping place. He called a rest, encouraging the walkers to drink and eat and sleep if they could. “The moon will be up in three or four hours,” he said to the other *guia*. “Wake me in two.”

The sky was clear and the temperature had dropped almost 20 degrees since sunset. Memo picked a vantage point affording a view of Sabel as she settled in to sleep. She studiously avoided his gaze as she emptied filthy children's clothes out of a black leaf bag and wrapped the plastic around herself for warmth. It took all of Memo's willpower to let the entire 120 minutes tick by before waking Albert up. By that time Memo had put on his extra flannel shirt and was stamping and pacing to keep his feet warm.

When he nudged the other *guia*, Albert cursed and got up, looking around. Memo pointed to the young woman shivering under the trash bag. "I think our little *chica* needs someone to keep her warm."

Memo left Albert grumbling and hugging himself as he picked his way over to the young woman curled up in the darkness. He lowered himself carefully to the ground beside her, inching his belly against her back until he felt her start awake. "You were shivering, *muñequita*. I'm here to warm you up."

She whispered something he couldn't hear.

"¿*Que?*"

Sabel paused, then repeated herself a little louder. "I don't want your warmth," she said.

"I didn't ask your permission," he told her.

She didn't say anything else to him. She was all alone in the darkness of the North American desert with more than two dozen strangers. What could she say? What could she do?

#

The second day passed much like the first, filled with mind-numbing trudging: down a wash, up out of a wash, quickly across the flat, over a low ridge. Carefully dash across a well-groomed road. Again and again. Though it was warm and dry, the landscape showed the effects of recent rain. The trees had greened up and there were even a few late-spring wildflowers.

At around noon they hunkered under a grove of palo verde trees and slept, waking later than Albert had intended. They would have to make up time. After crossing a paved road at about twilight, the trail began to veer to the east. Albert and Memo drove their *pollos* long past dark, navigating by starlight. It was only when Memo's own ample butt was dragging that he puffed and wheezed to the front of the line and suggested that they take a break.

Albert shook his head. "We should have reached that other stock tank by now."

"You're sure we didn't pass it in the dark?"

Albert spit in the dirt as he walked. "Of course I'm sure. I think it's up here a little ways."

"You *think*?"

The lead guide's eyes flashed in the darkness. "Do you know the trails?" he hissed. "Do you know where to find water? You're the new guy. Shut your mouth and pay attention and you'll learn something."

It took them another 20 minutes, but they found the stock tank. It was a corrugated, galvanized affair sitting in a treeless patch of gravel at the end of a rutted road. They waited quietly to make sure nobody was around. Then a few at a time, the walkers went out to draw out precious water. It smelled strongly of cattle, but nobody complained about the odor.

They moved about a hundred yards away and layed up in a hollow. The group had made up some time, but at the cost of almost complete exhaustion. Albert knew they only had an hour or so before moonrise.

"We'll take three hours to sleep," Albert said, just loud enough so everyone could hear. Most of the walkers had already collapsed in their tracks. Albert sensed, more than saw, the new guy moving over toward the girl. "*Memo!*"

The young man froze in his tracks. "What?"

"Leave the girl alone. You both need some rest."

Memo stalked sullenly into the darkness, and Albert trampled down some weeds and settled in. He briefly toyed with the idea of posting a watch, but that meant only half as much sleep for the *guias*, and for God's sake, who was in charge here?

#

When he jerked awake, Albert pushed his Yankees cap back on his head and looked around. The moon was already a hand's span above the horizon, so they had been sleeping for several hours. Harsh muttering off to Albert's left explained what had awakened him in the first place.

Creeping among bodies in the moonlight, he found the girl, Sabel, kneeling beside her bundle of marijuana, quiet tears shining on her cheeks. Memo stood above her, his arms crossed angrily.

Albert blew out an exasperated sigh. "What the hell is going on here?"

Neither Memo nor the girl said anything.

"*Señorita*, what's the problem?" The girl just shook her head and cried quietly.

"*Señorita*?"

Sabel looked from one *guia* to the other, her lips trembling.

Albert took the girl by the wrist and grasped a handful of Memo's shirt sleeve. He yanked them both up the trail, away from the sleeping *pollos*. Ignoring Memo's protests, he towed the two of them into the clearing. When they got to the water tank Albert spun the girl around to face him. The other *guia* sulked to one side.

"Tell me what happened."

Sabel hesitated, then said, "He slapped my face."

"She bit me!" Memo protested.

"Lower your voice, you *imbécil*!" Albert whispered angrily. "Where did she bite you?"

Memo clammed up, refusing to say more. Albert relaxed his hold on the girl and softened his voice. “Come on, now. You can tell me this. Where did you bite him?”

“His tongue,” she finally said.

Albert thought for a moment about what he should do. He had fooled around with *pollos* more than once, of course, but it had generally been more or less consensual. But Memo’s obsession with this girl—she was taller than both of them, but she was still essentially a girl—was only going to cause more problems.

The *guia* took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Almost reluctantly, he pulled his short-barreled revolver out of his pocket and pointed it at the young woman. Her eyes seemed to double in size as she looked at the hole at the end of the barrel.

“Take off your clothes, *Señorita*.”

Albert watched the girl’s eyes go from anger to disbelief—and then to dull acceptance. Trembling, Sabel removed her shirt, then her tank-top undershirt. She glanced at the man with the gun and got a circular “keep going” gesture in response. Covering her breasts with one hand, she undid her trousers with the other. She removed her shoes by stepping on the heels and kicking them off, then shimmied out of her worn gray pants. She couldn’t help wincing as they dropped onto the dusty ground. “Your panties too,” Albert prompted, gesturing with the gun. The two men watched appreciatively as she leaned over to remove her underwear. She stood up tall and naked and shivering in dirty socks.

“You’re very beautiful.” Albert said to her. He turned to Memo. “She’s beautiful, isn’t she?”

“Yes, very beautiful,” Memo croaked.

Albert stepped forward and, using his left hand, hooked a long lock of hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear. “How many years old?” he asked the girl casually.

“Seventeen,” she replied, her teeth chattering.

“Give your panties to Memo. He’ll hold them for you.”

The young woman reluctantly handed the white cotton undergarment to the *pollero*.

Albert gave Memo a meaningful look. “You have to understand how things work, Memo. You’ll get to be in charge when you have more experience, but for now, it’s important to follow directions without question. Hold on to the rim, honey,” he said to the girl.

Sabel bent to grab the metal edge of the tank, and he unzipped himself and raped her. She endured it as the reflection of the moon shimmered on the surface of the water below her. Refusing to cry out, she concentrated on the smell of livestock in her nostrils. Memo watched avidly, fingering the girl’s panties as if they were rosary beads.

A few minutes later Albert was done. He wiped the blood on the girl’s undershirt and tucked himself back in. Grinning at the other *guia*, Albert smacked the girl’s backside. “You go next. Just remember who the boss is.”

“I’ll remember.”

“We have to get going in about a quarter of an hour,” he said. “Hang the panties on that tree when you’re done. It’s kind of a tradition.”

As Albert walked back down the trail, Memo’s gaze moved from Sabel—still crying, still bent over the edge of the tank—to the tree. Six or seven pairs of women’s underwear and a few brassieres fluttered like streamers from a black-barked acacia tree at the edge of the clearing. Memo had been hoping to keep the panties as a kind of souvenir, but now he was reconsidering. *After all, tradition is tradition.*

#

Sabel didn’t remember any more from that night. She couldn’t recall whether she slept or not. She had no memory of waking or walking or being thirsty. When one of the older ladies

gave her a package of cream wafer cookies, she held them in one hand as she stumbled along, unseeing and unthinking, until she forgot she was holding them. They ended up lying on the side of the trail along with the tons of other refuse discarded by thousands upon thousands of immigrants making their way toward whatever life was they would make in the North.

She finally found herself in a garbage-strewn wash southwest of Tucson, squatting with the two dozen other *pollos* among sedimentary layers of empty water jugs, food wrappers, cast-off clothing and backpacks, dirty diapers and desiccated human feces. It was mid-afternoon on the hottest day yet. The relentless dry wind slaked all moisture from her skin. Sabel felt faint-headed and sick to her stomach. She must have dropped her water jug, and she was having trouble finding any spit to wet her lips.

A low rumbling noise was coming from the northeast.

“What is that sound?”

She posed the question to nobody in particular—not even sure if anyone was listening. It might have been the first time she’s spoken that day.

The older woman who had given her the cookies was sitting on her hams a few yards away, her back to the sun. She half-walked, half-crawled over and put her hand on Sabel’s forehead.

“It’s the truck, *querida*, coming to take us to Phoenix. How are you feeling?”

Sabel just shrugged. She was awake, but just barely. Her mind couldn’t hold onto much more than that realization. She seemed to recall being told that the truck would bring plenty of water to drink and even wash. It would feel very good to wash. The walk was over; someone was coming to help them. They would be in Phoenix by evening.

Eventually the truck rumbled into sight.

At some point in the past, it had been a U-Haul truck. The cab was still white and orange, but the cargo box had been painted in a sloppy coat of plain white. Whether it had been stolen or purchased as surplus was anyone's guess. The *coyotes* jokingly referred to it as the "Haul You" truck.

The boxy vehicle stopped on a rutted road about 20 yards from the wash. Sabel watched as a young Hispanic man climbed down from the passenger side of the cab. Still half-dazed, she didn't see the bruises on his face, or register the awkward way he held his hands in front of him. She had just noticed the duct tape around the man's wrists when a second man climbed out on the same side and pointed a short-barreled shotgun at the first man's head. The report of the gun's blast was still echoing around the hills as the mist of blood, brains and skull fragments settled in a wide fan across the sand. The illegal aliens and their guides just squatted there, blinking in the dazzling sun, looking from the man with the shotgun to the inert body on the ground. Nobody moved, nobody said a word.

A metallic screech shredded the warm air as the truck's cargo door rolled up. Three more men—armed with black rifles and side arms—jumped down and joined the driver on the high bank of the wash.

"Change of plans," the driver called down to them in Spanish, his shotgun in the crook of his arm. His head was clean-shaven and he had an elaborate tattoo on his neck, below his right ear. Like the three guards, his eyes were hidden behind wrap-around sunglasses. "You will all be coming with us instead. Here ... *now!*"

With the heel of his boot, the tallest of the three enforcers scuffed a long line in the dirt along the edge of the bank. His black tactical vest made him look like a cop, but he was definitely not the law. The other two gunmen herded the frightened *pollos* into a tight queue. The illegals traded looks of terror, but their fear was nothing compared to what the two *guias* were

experiencing. They had both known Toño, the young man whose head had just exploded in front of them. When the man with the shotgun turned to look down the line, the *guias* could see that the tattoo on the man's neck was a pair of dice inked above a slogan they couldn't quite read. The dice were double-fives, which didn't mean anything to Albert or Memo, but they were both pretty sure they wouldn't have much luck dealing with this group of unfamiliar men.

"First, who has drugs?" barked the man with the shotgun. "Show me."

After a moment of hesitation, Sabel lifted her hand into the air. One of the black-clad men slung his rifle and relieved her of her contraband. Then he moved past her to collect the other packages. He and another gunman ferried the bundles back to the truck.

On their final trip back, they each carried a case of bottled water. Ripping away the plastic, they handed two bottles each to the older women, then a pair of bottles to the three teenaged girls and the younger boy. The tall man's eyes lingered on Sabel's willowy figure as he placed the warm bottles in her hands, but he didn't allow himself a second look. He gave water to the few older male walkers, then stepped back. Albert and Memo and more than a dozen other young men had not received any water at all.

"Now, which ones are the *coyotes*?" the man with the shotgun asked casually.

The members of the group exchanged private looks, but nobody spoke. Many of those who had been given water had already cracked open the caps and were drinking greedily. Memo's knees were beginning to tremble.

"Nobody wants to say?" the leader asked again. He took Sabel gently by the wrist and led her a few steps forward. She was still holding a clear bottle in each hand, both unopened. "How about you, *Señorita*?"

Sabel kept her eyes on her shoes, her lips pressed together as if afraid the man might force his way in.

The bald man sighed theatrically. “Tell me, *Señorita*, did you walk by yourself?”

The girl nodded, not looking up.

“Then I think *you* probably know who the *guias* are, isn’t that right? A pretty girl like you, I’d bet they were talking sweet to you before you even crossed into *El Norte*.” He looked up and down the line. “Did they hurt you, *Señorita*?”

The young woman looked over her right shoulder, then over her left. When she met the eyes of the man with the shotgun, she nodded.

“Then why don’t you point to just one of the men who hurt you?”

Sabel hesitated. The one called Albert was to her right, the fourth person down. The fat one with bad breath was far to her left, almost at the end of the line. Making her decision, she leaned forward and whispered to the man. This close, she could read the words inked in Gothic script beneath his double-dice tattoo: “*Jugar con la Muerte.*” *Play with Death.*

The tattooed man cracked a wide smile and walked down the line to where Albert was staring straight ahead. “‘The ugly one who likes baseball’ ... that must be you.” With his muzzle trained on the *guia*’s chest, he said, “Kneel down and cross your ankles.” Albert complied without expression. “Your gun, *Señor*. Slowly, please.”

Albert slowly handed his .38 Special to the man with the shotgun. As the leader pocketed the revolver, there was a burst of movement from the other end of the line. Memo had whirled and bolted, and was stumble-running down into the wash. The driver nodded to the tall man, who took careful aim with his rifle and fired three quick rounds. The chubby *guia* cried out and fell, clutching his side and moaning in pain. As the man with the rifle raised his gun again, the driver cut him off with a look. “He’s finished.” The shooter nodded and crouched down to look for his spent shell casings.

At a nod from the driver, the gunmen began distributing the rest of the water, handing out the few extras to the women and girls. The walkers drained their bottles and tossed the empties into the wash with all the other garbage. While Albert knelt with his eyes clenched shut, the gunmen herded the two dozen illegal immigrants into the back of the truck. The driver pulled down the noisy door and latched it in place, then walked back to the kneeling *pollero*.

They could both hear Memo moaning faintly in the gully below them.

The man cradled his shotgun and took the last unopened bottle from the now-empty case. With a detached smile, he twisted off the top and took a long sip, then poured the rest onto the sandy ground in front of Albert. He tossed the empty bottle on the ground at the *guia*'s feet. "I don't think your friend is going to make it," he said casually, "but there is no reason *you* can't make it to Tucson and back to Mexico." Albert looked up at the man in puzzlement. In answer, the man dug a wad of cash out of his hip pocket and thumbed off several twenties.

"That should get you back to Sonora," said the man, dropping the bills among the trash and filth. "I'm taking over this operation. It might be a good time to find another line of work."

As the truck lumbered away, Albert picked up the bills and spent a few minutes digging around in the trash. He was able to locate a mouthful or two of precious moisture in some of the *pollos*' discarded bottles and jugs. Memo's moaning was getting fainter; he would probably pass out soon. The fat *guia* didn't even look up when Albert unbuckled the dying man's backpack and retrieved his pistol and a folded stack of papers. Albert briefly considered dispatching the chubby *guia* himself, then decided against it. *The bastard can die without my help*, he thought as he began trudging north. *Why make it easy for him?*

With any luck, he would be in Tucson by tomorrow.