

1. A World That Contained Men Like Him

Some men speak of angels and devils.

Some talk about their emotions or unbidden urges.

Aragón Urrea knew it as a battle between two parts of himself in the dead center of his soul.

Standing now at the edge of the spit-polished dance floor watching his daughter pinball between clusters of friends in her burnt-orange *quinceañera* dress, he understood that he could not be as bad as his reputation suggested because she came from him. Anjelina's hair fell across one eye. Her skin, smooth as satin. Tejano cheeks like her mother's, broad and defined. The impossible sweetness of her gaze.

A pair of rhinestone-studded high heels swung at her side, looped around her index finger, her head swaying to the band's cover of the Stones. *Wild, wild horses couldn't drag me awaaay*. He'd offered Mick Jagger ten million dollars to fly down here to no-fuck-where South Texas and sing it himself, but Mick Jagger didn't need ten million dollars or the reputational damage.

Aragón watched his girl glide across the maple hardwood, her hips and shoulders moving separately and yet in sync, an orbit of muscle and grace. As if music was a language that spoke through her body when she danced.

He turned his gaze to the boys and men watching her. As they sensed his stare, they quickly moved their focus elsewhere.

Anjelina's purity – her inner light – brought a familiar ache to his chest. That the world did not deserve her. That it would

hurt her as it was designed to hurt all beautiful young women. And that even if he summoned the whole of the power and menace at his disposal to preserve her innocence, he would eventually fail, because innocence was destined for spoiling.

The one perfect thing he'd ever had a hand in creating, and now he was haunted by her very existence – her vulnerability in a world that contained men like him. The curse of every father who loved beyond logic, beyond reason.

Tonight was her eighteenth birthday. And yet she'd recut and altered her *quinceañera* dress, not wanting to waste money on something new, on something that would put her even more fully in the spotlight. She didn't want to appear garish in front of the other girls from Eden, this expanse of unincorporated land upstream from Brownsville on the north bank of the yellow-brown sludge of the Rio Grande.

Aragón had refrigerator-size blocks of shrink-wrapped cash stacked in various structures around his compound, so many that he had to pay teams of men to rotate them so they wouldn't rot or wind up chewed to a pulp by rats. And yet Anjelina preferred to alter a three-year-old gown so as not to show anyone up, even wearing a shawl draped over her shoulders and hanging down her front side to dress down further. He'd offered her Mexico City, New York, or Paris for the venue, and she'd chosen the community center right here at home. Tissue-paper decorations and a buffet served up by Arnulfo and Hortensia, the rickety couple who owned the local taquería and needed the business.

Aragón sat at the most prominent table with his aunt, who'd been both mother and father to him since poverty had killed his parents shortly after his birth in a Hidalgo County regional hospital – *Mamá* from an undiagnosed bladder infection, *Papá* from a knife in the kidney when he'd tried to stop a fight behind a Whataburger in Corpus Christi.

The band was in inadvertent uniform – alligator-belly boots, sapphire cowboy shirts, bedazzled vests, true-blue jeans and, of course, giant oval belt buckles featuring buckin’ broncos or Indian-chief heads or bullshit family crests cranked out at the mall gift shop in McAllen.

With the faintest flare of a hand, Aragón conveyed his wishes across the dance floor. At the tiny movement, the lead singer stopped in mid-chorus, the music severed with guillotine finality. The singer mopped his forehead with a hanky, nodded to his compatriots, and the band struck up a Norteño number. The notes of the wheezing accordion nourished Aragón’s very genes.

At the musical detour, Anjelina stopped dancing with her friends to set her arms akimbo and frown at her father with mock frustration. Then she broke into that life-affirming smile, impossibly symmetrical, impossibly wide, the smile of her mother, Belicia, who should be here at Aragón’s side rather than languishing in her bedroom.

Anjelina flipped her high heels aside, and the men clapped and cheered and the women trilled and she was twirling and gliding, her lush brown curls washing across her eyes, gold locket bouncing just beneath her sparkle-dusted collarbones. A number of boys surrounded her and clapped, but none dared ask her to dance, not with Aragón under the same roof overseeing the festivities with stern paternalism and an aquiline profile worthy of a coin. And certainly not with his men stationed around the perimeter, hands crossed at their belt buckles, jackets bulging at the hips. The young men held their ground respectfully, waiting in hope for her to choose her partner for the waltz.

Slumped bonelessly in a chair at the periphery, the Esposito boy watched from beneath his mother’s wing. Twelve years old with ankle-foot orthotics bowing out his sneakers

on either side. His arms, wrapped in elbow-prophylactic braces, were splayed wide as if anticipating a hug. Last year Aragón had had him flown to the Cerebral Palsy Clinic at Cook Children's in Fort Worth so he could be neuroimaged and fitted with carbon-fiber prosthetics.

Anjelina slowed, calves fluttering in place, hips swaying, her movements tasteful if not chaste. Her focus swiveled to take in her options. The young men encircling her were peacocking, showing off their best moves, their best faces, their eyes shiny and eager.

But she looked right through them all to Nico Esposito. Then she drifted to the boy's table, the crowd parting. When she crouched in front of him, his distorted face lit up with joy. She took his hands and helped him to his feet.

Walking backward gingerly, she encouraged him onto the dance floor. He waddled nervously on his orthotics. She was six years older and a head taller, and yet Nico found a solidity to his ruined spine, rising to the moment because her attention demanded it. The braces held his arms aloft, a natural strong frame for the box step, the Velcro straps rasping against Anjelina's dress until she adjusted for even that.

She held him firmly to aid his balance, creating the illusion that he was leading, and all of a sudden he was moving in her arms and she in his and he was beaming, freed for the moment from the prison of his body. The other young men overcame their envy and clapped along, whooping and patting Nico on the back as Anjelina swept him within the throng of bodies. He was sweating, a sheen across his face, and yet his sloppy grin was unencumbered. They moved faster, faster, courting disaster right through the crescendo, and yet impossibly they finished the waltz, eliciting a hailstorm of cheers.

Leading Nico back to his mother, Anjelina eased him

down into his chair and crouched before him. Even across the dance floor, Aragón could read her lips: *Thank you for the dance, guapo.*

Nico's dark eyes glowed, his face flushed from the miracle he'd just played a part in.

Aragón realized that his own cheeks were wet. And yet he was unashamed. Like them all, he was blessed to breathe the same air as his daughter, to admire her and know that some part of her was his and some part of him hers.

La Tía reached across the table and took Aragón's hand. Her palm was dry, the skin papery. Arthritis gnarled her knuckles, but still she wore big turquoise rings on all her fingers. Over prominent wrinkles she'd applied foundation, blush, eye shadow, lipstick. Neither age nor ailment could dampen the spirit of a Mexican matriarch.

'My boy,' she said. 'Now you give your toast. Speak to your daughter.'

Aragón stepped forward, and the hundred-plus bodies in the community center took note. The boys in their cheap church clothes and the men in their polyester two-tone suits and the women flashing shawls of primary colors. All that beautiful brown skin and the scent of cologne in the air and everyone hanging on his next movement.

Facing his daughter across the dance floor, Aragón held out a hand, and his body man, Eduardo Gómez, materialized out of thin air to place a flute of Cristal in his palm.

Aragón began his toast. 'Today you turn eighteen.' He paused, caught off guard by the emotion graveling his deep voice. 'You become an adult in the eyes of the law. For me and your *mamá* – who wishes with all her heart that she could be here – this is wondrous. And yet also bittersweet.'

'I'm sorry, Papá.' Anjelina's eyes were moist, her slender fingers at her gold locket.

‘You apologize too much,’ he said. ‘You must unlearn this now to be a woman.’ He turned to the crowd, catching a glimpse of himself in the big window’s reflection. Broad shoulders, undiminished by age. Big, bold features. Ugly-handsome and virile, like Carlos Fuentes or Charles Bronson. ‘Our children grow up and our hearts hurt for it, but they must grow up.’ He swung the flute back toward his daughter, the perfumed liquid catching the light, fizzing and straw-colored. ‘They tell us it goes by so swiftly. Blink and they’re grown. But the thing is . . .’

He felt the gravel gathering in his voice and paused once more to compose himself.

‘It didn’t go by fast for me. I didn’t miss a single moment. Not when you were one breath old and I held you to my chest. Those first steps on the front lawn of the church, how you wobbled and fell and got back up again. Three years old in panties and sandals and not a stitch more, clanging pots and pans on the floor of the kitchen. Your first tooth falling out. I remember listening at the door of your piano lesson while you tortured yourself over the fingering for “Here Comes the Sun.” Picking you up from cross-country practice when you were all braces and a messy ponytail and that awful music you’d sing into your deodorant stick on the drive – who was it?’

Anjelina was hugging herself around her stomach, crying and smiling. ‘Ed Sheeran.’

‘Yes. Yes. Sheeran. And that bad haircut you got before your confirmation. Your first dance. That time you crashed your car –’ He crossed himself. ‘Our trip to Zihuatanejo during Semana Santa and the fight we had over that string bikini –’

‘It wasn’t a *string* bikini, Papá!’

‘You’re right. More like dental floss.’

Laughter washed through the room.

‘Feeding you ice chips when your wisdom teeth came out. How you cried yourself to sleep the night we had to put Lulu down. And now your eighteenth —’ He stopped, his eyes moistening. Cleared his throat. And again. The room waited for him. He lifted his gaze to her once more. ‘I didn’t miss a second of you.’

Heat in his chest. His throat. There was heartbreak in every rite of passage, in every living moment if careful attention were paid. Not a shattering or crumbling of the heart but a cracking open to accommodate *more*. More feeling, more understanding, more room for the cruelty of time without which there could be no beauty, no meaning. It was so much greater than anything he could convey here amid the cheap birthday decorations and fake wood paneling and the scent of cilantro and table wine. She had saved him. She had breathed life into him. She had civilized him, turned him into a human.

The community center was silent. The squeak of a shoe on the dance floor. Someone coughed. La Tía held a crumpled tissue at the ready. Could the emotion of this moment squeeze a tear from even her?

Aragón cleared his throat. Hoisted the flute. ‘*Hija de mi alma*. To you. The best person I know.’

The hall thundered with applause, as much from relief as anything else. He sipped, set his glass down, and the band struck up a lively western number. Anjelina wiped at her face and held her arms wide for him to cross the dance floor and meet her in an embrace. He paused to admire her. There was an impossible hugeness to her dark eyes that brought him back to when she was two, seven, thirteen. Maybe that’s all aging was, an ability to see the past in the present, to comprehend the totality of a living soul all at once. Maybe that’s what love was, too.

As he started for her, Eduardo grasped his biceps gently. As Aragón's right-hand man, he was permitted a casual proximity that Aragón's other men wouldn't dare attempt. 'The business we discussed, *Patrón*,' he said quietly. 'It requires you. We have him waiting in the next room.'

Aragón hesitated and regarded his daughter once more through the press of bodies. One of her girlfriends – Teresa, the chesty one – tugged at her hand, reeling her toward the dance floor.

Eduardo released Aragón's arm and tilted his head to the door behind them.

Aragón gestured to his daughter. *Be right back.*

Before she could respond, she was swept into the dance-floor mix.

He followed Eduardo out, his other men coalescing at his back. He had not nearly as many enemies as he once had, but that left plenty still.

Even at ten at night, the South Texas humidity hit him in the face like a tar mop. They'd taken Chucho Ochoa to the administrative office building next door. This was helpful. For what was to come, adjoining walls were not preferable.

As they pushed into the lobby, Eduardo hummed to himself off-key, another of the tics that had earned him the nickname 'Special Ed'. He wore cover-up to hide the acne scars pitting both cheeks, a particular the others noticed but didn't dare acknowledge. He had a tattoo of a gun at his appendix and upper groin, so when he let his guayabera flutter open, it looked like he had a weapon tucked into his belt. Right now the ink was redundant, a Glock 21 with a gleaming hard-chromed slide set in place over the tattoo like a saw filling out its outline on a workshop pegboard.

On one side of the lobby, Chucho slumped in a vinyl

chair as if he'd been soft-served into it. Chipped nails from working the sorghum fields, jeans with dirt stains at the knees, sun damage ripening his middle-aged face into that of a septuagenarian. A homely man with a hawk nose, folds of skin gathered like fabric around the eyes. His face quivered, on the verge of crying, and his hand jogged back and forth in his lap in something just shy of a tremor.

On the opposite side of the lobby, as far from Chucho as the room allowed, sat Silvia Vélez and her nineteen-year-old daughter, Celina. A pretty girl, shiny dark straight hair, full in the face and chest and hips. She was curled into her mother's side, feet drawn beneath her, her face pressed to the ledge of her mother's bosom. Her shirt was pulled up to reveal a strip of smooth flesh at the waist. There was a bruise around her right eye. Silvia looked as weary as Aragón had ever seen her, eyes sunken as if trying to retreat into her skull. She'd been working hard in Eden for the past five years, sending money back to her husband in Reynosa.

Like the hundred or so bodies next door, they were Aragón's people. All the residents of Eden were his people. They flourished in the light of his grace and withered in its absence.

Aragón's number three, Enrique Pérez, stood at the back of the room, hidden in shadow, thumbs looped through the wide leather belt along with the holster of his overcompensatory *Dirty Harry* S&W .44 Magnum. To augment his height, he wore lifts in his cowboy boots that pushed him to five-seven. A distended beer belly stretched his polo shirt, dimpled by his belt buckle. A bristling mustache sought to add gravitas to his sweet, soft face. He went by 'Kiki', which, on top of his partnership with Eduardo, had saddled him with the inevitable sobriquet 'Special K.'

Kiki held his head tilted back as always, either in an

assumed air of righteousness or to smooth out the rolls of his chin. ‘*Patrón,*’ he said.

Aragón strode across the open floor between the parallel rows of hideous chairs. They were cheaply cushioned beneath cracked teal vinyl, connected armrest to armrest, suited to a hospital or a DMV. His men spread out through the room, positioning along the walls.

Chucho slid himself forward, elbows finding his knees, his eyes rising only far enough to take in the tips of Aragón’s boots. Even at this small movement, Celina gave a little cry and burrowed further into her mother, her childish affect so at odds with her womanly body. Nineteen was such a confusing age for girls. Confusing for them and for men lacking restraint.

‘I’m sorry, Don Urrea,’ Chucho said, his voice soft with humility. ‘I couldn’t help myself.’

‘Couldn’t help yourself?’ Aragón paced over, breathing down on Chucho’s head until he lifted his gaze. ‘You want to give her that power? You want to let a nineteen-year-old girl reduce you? A husband? A father? A son? Reduce you to a savage?’

‘I’m sorry, Don Urrea. I’d worked a long day. She was walking along the roadside wearing a tight dress. Very revealing.’

‘I am saving for new clothes for her,’ Silvia snarled, patting her daughter’s head. ‘It was not a revealing dress. It was too small.’

‘Please, Doña Vélez,’ Aragón said. ‘Allow me.’

Silvia silenced.

He turned back to Chucho. ‘Did Celina ask for your attention?’

‘It was impossible not to give it.’

‘Impossible.’ Aragón tried the word on, found it not to his liking. ‘Did she resist you?’

Chucho folded his hands, stared down at them. ‘Sometimes girls like a man to be in charge.’

Across the lobby Celina sniffled and covered her exposed ear with the flat of her palm.

‘But she did not, and she told you,’ Aragón said. ‘Women should never be dominated. If you want a woman, you must earn her.’

‘You’re right, Don Urrea. I am ashamed.’

Aragón’s chest filled with a cold-burning rage, a flame inside a block of ice.

‘*Shame*,’ he said. ‘Men get to have this kind of shame. Do you know what a woman has? *Fear*. Fear that a man like you will come along, pry her open, and shove yourself inside her. That you’ll blacken her eye, take from her what she doesn’t want to give. That she’ll have to remember the stink of you for the rest of her life. That she’ll see you in the darkness of every room she enters before she turns on the light. That she’ll need to fight you out of the memories of her muscles on her wedding night. That she’ll go to her grave having learned that she can be reduced to a thing because some men’ – and here he paused to give oxygen to his disdain – ‘cannot help themselves.’

As Aragón spoke, Chucho deflated in his chair, shoulders bowing, arms curling inward.

‘And,’ Aragón said, ‘she has shame, too. Not your shame. Your shame is a luxury. *Her* shame is a stain you put on her soul.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Chucho’s words came warped from sobs. ‘I’m sorry, Don Urrea.’

‘Do you remember Juan Manuel Marín?’

Chucho broke now, his head drooping, the bumps of the vertebrae thrusting up at the base of his neck like knuckles. He shook and drooled a bit onto his knee. ‘Please, Don Urrea. Please, no.’

‘Do you remember him?’

Unable to muster words, Chucho nodded.

Everyone in Eden remembered. A few years ago, Marín had visited a similar violation upon a school friend of Anjelina’s. By sunrise the next day, he’d found himself tied naked to a street sign in Matamoros, the south-of-the-border town from which the girl’s family hailed. She had sixteen cousins still there, ten of them male and capable with hacksaws.

‘You have two choices,’ Aragón told the top of Chucho’s head. ‘You can greet the sun tomorrow morning in Reynosa. Or we will take all ten of your digits at the first knuckle.’

A wail escaped Chucho. It did not sound human.

‘You will be allowed stitches.’

‘Please,’ Chucho sobbed. He reached for Aragón’s hand, but Aragón held it limp until he let go. ‘Please. How will I work? My family?’

‘I will take care of Daniela and your sons. They will not want for basics.’

‘No,’ Chucho said. ‘*No no no.*’

‘Not answering evil is the greatest evil of all,’ Aragón said. ‘I will not let you ensnare me in your sin. Choose.’

‘Don Urrea, I beg of you –’

‘*Choose!*’

Chucho jerked back, hair spilled across his eyes, chest heaving. He stared at Aragón, but Aragón gave nothing up. He was a wall of stone.

Chucho shook his head like a child, stifled a sob.

And then – slowly, slowly – held out his hands, proffering his trembling fingers.

Kiki reached in his back pocket, removed a pair of pruning shears, and handed them to Special Ed.

Urrea turned to Silvia and Celina. ‘*Señoritas,*’ he said. ‘You may remain or not, as you desire.’

Celina pried herself from her mother and rushed out, hand clamped over her mouth. Silvia straightened in her chair. ‘I will watch every last second.’

‘Then I will leave you in the care of my men, Doña Vélez.’

Chucho slid out of his chair, puddled on the tile, and curled into a loose fetal position. Advancing on him, Eduardo flicked the catch on the shears, and the spring-loaded blades scissored open with a sound like a plucked wire.

Aragón exited, closing the door firmly behind him.

The wind scraped between the buildings, drowning out the sound of Chucho’s wail. An actual tumbleweed jounced along the corridor like an escapee from a Gary Cooper movie. Aragón paused to watch it journey out beyond the lights into the eternal dirt. He could taste grit in the humid air. This blessed godforsaken land.

He swung open the door to the dance hall and halted at the threshold. His breath froze in his chest. It was immediately apparent that something horrible had happened. The guests stood immobile on the dance floor, the band silent, instruments lowered. A napkin swirled above the dais, caught on a current from . . . what? There: The big window shattered, the rear door shuddering in its frame as if it had been slammed open. A trio of overturned chairs and the buffet table knocked askew.

‘What happened?’ Aragón’s voice seemed to come from far away. For the first time since his childhood, he heard panic in it.

The guests stared at him wide-eyed, a statue garden. La Tía’s makeup was streaked in neat channels down both cheeks, her expression glazed. Through the maw of the window, the wind howled and howled.

Aragón wheeled to take in the room. Everything was wrong. ‘*What happened?*’

Standing by the rear door, Arnulfo held a red handkerchief to his mouth. No, not red. Not originally. He lowered the cloth, his bottom lip split straight through, a flap hanging loose. As he spoke, blood misted over his cheap server's shirt.

'They took her,' he said, the words blurred through the wreckage of his face. 'They took our Anjelina.'

2. Supervillain Lair

No one noticed the battered cargo van at first.

Tinted windshield, no rear windows, just a slow-rolling creepmobile coasting into the parking lot. All that was missing was FREE CANDY spray-painted on the side in dripping letters.

Mexican day laborers lined the curb of the Home Depot, propping up the cracked stucco with their shoulder blades, fingers pinched around smoldering cigarette butts. Flannel shirts and jeans – always jeans – to protect them from prickly brush or splintering roof shingles or whatever a day of off-the-books work might bring.

June gloom had finally cooked off, the 6:00 A.M. Los Angeles sun spiking over the horizon like a spear through the eye. The air smelled of gas-station coffee and hot garbage wafting from the row of dumpsters.

When the van grumbled up before them, the men flicked away their cigarettes and perked up, assuming postures of swagger or humility. *Pick me, pick me.*

No movement behind the tinted windshield.

Exhaust leaking from the rattling tailpipe.

Finally the driver's door opened.

An Original S.W.A.T. boot stepped down onto the baking asphalt. The gringo attached to it had a quiet energy and a stillness that made the world around him – the half dozen workers stirring in their steel-toe Rhinos, the balled-up fast-food wrappers wagging in the gutter, the commuters lurching endlessly by on Van Nuys Boulevard – seem to flutter with nervous energy. He wasn't particularly tall or muscular.

Just an ordinary guy, not too handsome.

The Mexicans hooked thumbs through belt loops, drew back their shoulders, tilted their chins high with pride. *Pick me, pick me.*

The gringo approached the most amply proportioned worker, who had peeled himself off the wall. ‘Do you speak English?’

The worker nodded, his double chin tripling. ‘I do.’

‘What’s your day rate?’

The worker tugged at his droopy mustache. ‘One hundred per day, my friend. That is for eight hours. Then twenty an hour beyond that. If you want more of us, I will handle the money.’

The gringo nodded.

The others turned their dark eyes to him. The youngest had a shiny scar on his forearm, likely from a tattoo’s being removed with a knife. The man beside him wore jeans with patches at the knees that had been restitched so many times the surrounding denim had turned threadbare. He smiled kindly, showing off a front tooth chipped down to a nub.

The fat worker said to his peers, *‘Nos está ofreciendo ochenta al día para diez horas.’*

The men looked down at the sidewalk. Cheekbones raw from malnutrition. Fake gold crosses glittering at their chests. They nodded, resigned. They were in no position to negotiate.

The kid with the forearm scar lifted his gaze to the gringo. ‘*Gracias, señor,*’ he said. And then he forced out a bit of broken English. ‘We . . . work hard for you.’

The gringo looked past the fat worker to address the others, switching to seamless Spanish. ‘*You five are hired. You will be treated fairly. I’ll come back here at midnight to pick you up. I will pay you each one thousand dollars for six hours of work.*’

The men stiffened and looked among themselves. Except for the big guy, who glared at the gringo.

The gringo ignored him. Started back toward his van. Paused with his back still turned. *'Do not trust your friend here anymore. He is trying to steal your wages.'*

The gringo climbed into his van. And drove off.

At 11:59 P.M. the van returned to Home Depot.

The five workers hummed with excitement. They had not wanted to believe it was true, this magical offer.

There was nervousness as well.

What kind of work was worth one thousand dollars a day?

Scraping by in the broke neighborhoods of Los Angeles, they'd had plenty of brushes with perversion and vice. Back home in Sinaloa, they had endured worse.

They were scared, but they were willing.

They had mouths to feed in Culiacán. And *polleros* who demanded additional payment for bringing them here, who knew where their wives and daughters slept.

But the gringo had been honest with them. He had laid bare the truth of Gordo's deception. That meant he could be trusted. Didn't it?

The gringo emerged from the cargo van and opened the back.

Benches lined either side.

The men were familiar with claustrophobic transportation. The old joke: Why did Santa Anna take just six thousand troops to the Alamo? *Because he only had one Chevy.*

The workers climbed in.

The doors swung shut behind them.

There was a barrier between them and the front cabin.

They couldn't see where they were going.

As the van pulled out, they joggled on their seats like inmates on a prison bus. Heading to God knew where.

They rumbled across train tracks and then banked around in a wide curve, maybe onto a freeway. They did not know if they would be traveling ten minutes or ten hours. If they paid close attention, they might have realized that they were being driven in a massive loop. And then another. And then another.

One hour and seventeen minutes later, the van bumped over a curb and descended abruptly.

It parked.

The men heard the driver's door open and then close. Footsteps moving away. Now moving back.

The van's rear doors yawned open.

The gringo stared in at them. *'Come with me. Quickly.'*

They walked through a concrete subterranean garage. The lights had been turned off. It was very dark.

They ascended a brief flight of stairs.

There was a sign to the side of the door, but it had been covered with a square of cardboard.

They stepped into the building. It was dead-of-night silent. A lobby of some sort lay ahead, but the gringo immediately steered them down a rear hallway to a service elevator. Its doors rested ajar, waiting.

They boarded and rode up. The floor indicators were taped over. None of the men spoke. The gringo did not either. They might have ridden ten floors or thirty.

When the elevator stopped, they walked down a carpeted hallway to a door. The number on the door had been covered with cardboard as well.

The gringo unlocked the door.

The space inside was not visible. Construction tarp had

been hung on either side of the doorway, describing a narrow path from the entry through the interior. Additional sheeting draped the top of their labyrinth route, forming a low ceiling. The men huddled together and followed the gringo as if progressing into a coal mine. They walked farther down the makeshift corridor than seemed to make sense, the space unfolding and unfolding. Were they in a multilevel warehouse? A storage facility? A supervillain lair?

They reached an open space.

A series of huge windows composed a wall.

But they couldn't see through the glass; a few feet beyond the building, more tarp had been suspended presumably in midair, blocking the view in its entirety. A closer look revealed that the windows had been prepped. Drywall crowbarred away from the frames. Sashes, springs, and stops revealed. Panes ready to be lifted out. Several oscillating saws rested on plastic sheeting as well as hammers and chisels, calking guns and flashing tape, levels and drills, gloves of various sizes, and jugs of water and yellow Gatorade.

The gringo whipped a tarp off a mound to the side, revealing a stack of enormous replacement windowpanes. They looked identical to the ones that were to be removed.

'The new windowpanes are too heavy for me to lift alone.' The gringo stripped off his outer shirt, revealing a gray V-necked T-shirt. *'But I will work at your side until they are in place. I'll ask you to be as quiet as possible. I can handle the finish work myself.'*

The men could not distinguish the difference between regular glass and bullet-resistant polycarbonate thermoplastic resin. Just as they could not know that the neighbor who lived immediately downstairs was away for his August vacation. Or that they were not the first secret midnight shift of workers to be brought to this location to perform a highly specific task.

In teams of two, they toiled. Bruises, sweat, an occasional grunt, the crack of a knee.

The kid with the forearm scar – Rogelio – noticed scorch marks seared into the concrete floor. Growing up in Sinaloa, he knew what the aftermath of an explosion looked like. He waited for the gringo to pause for water and then asked him, *‘What happened here?’*

The gringo took a swig, wiped his mouth with his forearm, and then looked into Rogelio as if scanning his very thoughts.

The gringo’s eyes held a story he did not seem eager to tell.

3. Not the Best of Circumstances

Six Months Earlier . . .

Evan Smoak is midair and plummeting.

The overpressure from the detonation inside his penthouse was sufficient to blast him straight off his balcony into thin air.

Pebbles of bullet-resistant glass shower around him, gleaming bits catching the sunset gold.

The breath of the explosion blisters his neck.

After his last mission, an airborne incendiary device had flown autonomously to his bedroom window and detonated, reacquainting him with Newton's Second Law of Motion. A longer story, not one worth recounting now with the pavement waiting to introduce his spleen to his uvula.

He has eliminated all the threats beyond this blast. There is no one after him, no one left to neutralize. All he has to do to be free and clear is not die in the coming seconds, a possibility that seems increasingly unlikely.

Fortunately, the Lexan windows and discreet armor sunscreens provided sufficient buffer from the blast for his bones to remain inside his skin.

He'd had just enough time to rip the BASE-jumping parachute from its hiding place in the succulent planter on the balcony before he was swept off the twenty-first floor into thin air.

But he decides not to count his blessings just yet.

For one, he's only managed to get his left arm through the parachute strap; the other strap flutters tauntingly before him.

Two: He is rotating, the world a washing-machine whirl around him.

Three: This is not a reasonable BASE-jumping height.

He spends a precious quarter second on math. He has already fallen beneath the lip of his balcony. Twenty floors at a luxurious sixteen feet per gives him 320 feet, or approximately one hundred meters.

For a BASE jump, thirty meters is suicidal.

Sixty meters is idiotic.

Under the best of circumstances, one hundred meters is optimistic.

This is not the best of circumstances.

Neglecting air resistance, he'll hit the ground at forty-five meters per second or nearly one hundred miles an hour, a survivable impact if he lands on a haystack or a deep snowdrift, neither of which is very likely off Wilshire Boulevard.

Which means he has less than six seconds to figure something out.

Every inch, every instant, is life-or-death.

He'd packed the parachute with no slider around the lines, which means it should deploy with air-bag-like speed. That is, if he can even himself out, get the backpack properly positioned, and pull the rip cord.

The building's façade blurs by.

Was that the seventeenth floor?

No, the fifteenth.

Flattening out to add more drag, he threads his free arm through the flapping strap. No time to cinch, but he feels the vinyl bands seat against his shoulders.

Ground rush quickening.

He reaches for the rip cord, misses.

Ninth floor.

Eighth.

The rushing air roars in his ears, forces water from his eyes.

He grabs again, the steel handle tapping across his fingertips, dancing in and out of his fist.

The sidewalk looming.

His hand closes around the rip cord.

Fifth floor.

Too late?

Metal against his palm. Clench, yank.

Foomp.

His shoulders are ripped upward. He feels the right dislocate, tendons screaming. His body is torn in two directions, his torso snatched to heaven, his legs sucked to hell. It's like being caught between the warring jaws of a great white and a pterodactyl.

He has precious little time to register the fresh hell of sensations before the sidewalk flies up and bounces against him, or him against it.

He hears a bone crack. The area around his patella goes numb. He is mostly sure his face is still attached to his skull.

The pavement holds the daytime sun; it leeches into his cheek.

A lesson branded into the base of his brain flickers to awareness: Pain only wins when you fight it. When you tense up around it, you put your muscles into spasm, lock it into your cells. If you let it in all the way, let it wash through, you show it that it doesn't own you.

He lets it in. Relaxes so his body is nothing more than soft flesh poured over his bones, melting into the pavement, softening, softening, softening. The pain thunders through him, a barbed-wire express train.

He says, 'Ouch.'

Or at least the vowels.

Across the street a white guy with ratty dreads and a crocheted rasta-cap is leaning against his VW Beetle, a vape pen suspended before the perfect O of his stunned mouth. A breeze ruffles Evan's hair, bringing with it the skunky scent of weed.

Too late he tries to shed the shoulder straps.

Before he can, the wind fills the canopy, jerking Evan off his chalk-outline sprawl. It drags him six feet across pavement and bowling-balls him into a parking meter. He hears a rib crack.

He says, 'Ouch.'

The white Rastafarian jogs over. His eyes are rimmed red, as are his nostrils. He seems to be in shock, trembling like a Chihuabua. He looks down at Evan. 'Brah,' he says. And then, with more feeling, 'Brah.'

Evan finds a knee, the knuckles of one fist pressed to the concrete like a superhero landing from a great height. He rises, every last vertebra complaining.

Twenty-one stories up, a secondary explosion blows out another mist of bullet-resistant glass. Fire belches from the penthouse orifices.

The rastadude stares up. His mouth still has not closed. 'How'd the fire start?' he asks in a hushed voice.

With a groan, Evan shrugs out of the backpack straps, lets the wind drag the parachute away across Wilshire.

He says, 'Really, really small.'

4. Protection from Your Protection

The van arrived back at Home Depot with the rising dawn. To the east, pale blues and lavenders suffused the clouds where mountain met sky. Los Angeles is most alluring as it bookends the day. A city with a million secrets to keep and a million promises to break, so much deceit and ugliness hidden beneath that violet splendor.

There Gordo stood, alone in front of the stucco wall as if he'd never left. It was like a police lineup once the innocent suspects cleared out. He glared at the approaching van as it coasted to a stop just past him.

The gringo got out and swung open the rear doors.

As the workers emerged, he handed out rubber-banded rolls of hundred-dollar bills and thanked them for their work. They nodded and smiled, showing off questionable dentistry and a kind of gratitude that no school can teach.

As the others drifted off, Rogelio paused and scratched at the shiny patch scarring his forearm. '*The explosion,*' he said. '*It targeted the gas line?*'

The gringo studied him. '*Why do you think that?*'

Rogelio said, '*The dress factory I worked at in Culiacán as a boy met the same fate. The owner was a courteous man.*' He lifted the cross pendant and pressed it to his lips – respect for the departed. '*But at some point you can only pay so much protection. And who do you turn to when you need protection from your protection?*'

'That's a fine question.'

Over by the building, Gordo started bickering with the other workers, but the gringo paid them no mind.

'This work we did for you . . . ?' Rogelio scratched at his scar some more, his eyes lowered. He held the roll of money at his hip; he still hadn't put it into his pocket. *'I'd like to know that it isn't bad work. That it won't hurt anyone. That we didn't help you if . . . ?'*

'If what?'

'If you are a bad man.' Rogelio wet his lips. *'Are you a bad man or a good man?'*

'I suppose both.'

'What is it you do?'

'I help people who are desperate. Who have nowhere else to turn. Who are powerless.'

'Do you have power?'

The gringo thought about it. *'I don't know if I have it. But when I am trying to help others, sometimes it finds me.'*

Only now did Rogelio pocket the cash. But he remained where he was, staring down at the toe of his boot, which he ground into the asphalt as if crushing a bug. Weighing something.

The gringo waited patiently, and finally Rogelio spoke. *'I know someone who needs help like this. He is desperate. He has nowhere else to turn. But he is not powerless, my friend. Far, far from it.'*

The gringo looked at the sunrise, the light turning his face bronze. *'Is he a bad man or a good man?'*

'He is both. Like you.'

'What he needs help with – his cause. Is it just?'

'It is the most just cause I have ever known.'

The gringo looked at Rogelio. Rogelio looked back at him.

The gringo thought about how hard the kid had toiled. How he'd refused to pocket the money until he'd confirmed that the work he'd done wasn't dirty.

The gringo said, '1-855-2-NOWHERE.'

As he walked away, Rogelio called after him. '*What's that?*'

The gringo paused at the driver's door. '*When your friend calls, he will find out.*'

5. Unsafe Asset

Seven thousand empty square feet.

Well, not *entirely* empty.

The open floorplan of Evan's penthouse in the Castle Heights Residential Tower made the sparseness seem even more sparse.

The workout stations, training mats, and furniture of the great room had been incinerated in the blast, but the freshly restored fireplace rose like a tree from the middle of the poured-concrete plain. A few pillars had made their way back into existence, along with a steel staircase that spiraled up to a partially rehabbed loft with empty bookshelves that still smelled of sawdust and wood glue.

The kitchen had come along the furthest: gunmetal-gray countertops, brushed-nickel fixtures, and a broad center island at which Evan ate his meals alone. Bluish plastic wrap colored the face of the unused oven and lined the edge of the dishwasher. About half of the mirrored subway tiles composing the backsplash had been laid in place, trailing off like an abandoned Lego project.

Last week's work had seen the return of his glass vodka freezer room, though its shelves had yet to be fully replenished. And the week before had brought the restoration of the living wall, a vertical garden that thrust up from the floor. At the moment it was little more than a rise of caked soil and buried seeds fed by drip irrigation, but one day it would sprout mint and basil, peppers and chamomile.

Enormous floor-to-ceiling windows opened the corner

penthouse to the world, downtown looming twelve miles to the east, Century City high-rises taking a bite out of the sky to the south. Twenty-one stories below, constipated traffic worked its way through the infamous Angeleno congestion, automotive peristalsis encouraged by horns and expletives.

Evan finished enhancing the bullet-resistant Lexan windows with sensors that detected shattering glass, approaching foreign objects, and any significant compression sound signatures from the quartz rocks layering the balconies. He stepped away from the transparent wall, wiped his forehead, and stared at the vast interior space.

It was cold. Lifeless.

Safe.

Not nearly as tidy as usual, with stray tools, tarps, and the occasional plastic water bottle left over by the legitimate construction crew or one of the clandestine night-shift workers. The discreet armor sunscreens, a fetching shade of periwinkle, still had to be hung. They lay on the floor, rippled like chain mail. Composed of a rare titanium variant woven together in rings, the shades provided an additional layer of protection from sniper rounds or explosive devices, a feature that had been put to the test right before his grudging defenestration.

The elaborate alarm system had been installed and its firmware updated. As well as the front door that hid interlocking steel security bars and a water-filled core that dispersed the effect of a battering ram. The wood façade matched every other residential door in the building and ostensibly complied with code, a veneer sufficient to keep Hugh Walters, the officious president of the homeowners' association, at bay.

Evan had managed to swap out the standard half-inch residential Sheetrock with five and eight-tenths commercial grade for soundproofing and protective rigidity in the event

someone gave up on the front door and tried to come through the walls themselves with a fire ax, a chain saw, or Wile E. Coyote shot out of a cannon. A coat of paint layered the unsanctioned upgrade out of sight.

Why was he going through all this rather than finding a new burrow or drifting from city to city as he had before, anonymous and solitary? This stretch of floor, the taste of this air, the views from these windows, they'd become a part of him. He'd never understood what it meant to have a place in the universe, and now that he had one, he was loath to give it up.

Then there was Mia Hall, nine floors down. Single mother, district attorney, beauty mark at her temple. And her son, Peter, on the cusp of turning ten years old. With a raspy voice and charcoal eyes, he was innocent and mischievous, the kind of boy Evan might have been in another life. For years Evan and Mia had skirted the issue of what Evan actually did, a dance made necessary by the fact that what Mia actually did was prosecute people who – like him – broke the law.

He shook off the thought. He wasn't intent on staying here for Mia and Peter. It was the view. His fortress. The Vault.

The Fourth Commandment: *Never make it personal.*

Evan crossed to the kitchen, his boots leaving dust impressions on the polished concrete. He soothed the OCD compulsion gripping his brain stem. The footprints could be swept up and cleaned, any trace of his movement eliminated. The rebuild had his mind on permanent alert, his visual scanning for imperfections at a high level. Everywhere he looked, there were splinters to sand and scratches to buff and trash to haul, a mess that constantly replenished itself. All these signs of life and human imperfection were hard to bear for a man who preferred to leave no trace, who'd always kept his refuge here above the city more spotless and stainless than a mausoleum.

On the broad island, his RoamZone rested on its stand, charging and ready.

Of everything in the penthouse, the encrypted phone was the most important.

The process was simple. After he completed a mission, the only payment he asked was that his client find someone else in an impossible situation, someone who had nowhere else to turn. That they pass along Evan's number. The new client dialed 1-855-2-NOWHERE as had the preceding client and every client before.

The call would be converted into digital packets, encrypted, shot through the Internet, and routed through more than a dozen virtual-private-network tunnels in nations ranging from Andorra to Zambia. The RoamZone would ring. He would answer.

The first question was the same every time.

Do you need my help?

As a government assassin pulled from a foster home at the age of twelve and trained in the deep-black Orphan Program, Evan had an arsenal of skills at his disposal that few people on the planet could match. He'd been raised by a handler and father figure who'd bucked procedure and tradition to keep Evan's sense of morality intact. Jack Johns had forged him into a weapon while never letting him forget that the hard part wasn't being a killer. The hard part was staying human.

For about a decade, Evan had neutralized targets unofficially designated by the Department of Defense. He did not technically exist, drifting in the shadows, nourished by heavily stocked bank accounts earning interest in nonreporting countries around the world and known only by his code name: Orphan X.

When he'd fled the Program, the powers-that-be had designated him an unsafe asset, a man who knew too much.

Now he had to live his life below the radar, a challenge complicated by his pro bono work and his desire to live here among ordinary people, both of which were attempts to keep the pilot light of his humanity alive.

Most days he was Evan Smoak, boring Castle Heights resident and importer of industrial cleaning supplies.

But when the RoamZone rang, he became something else. The Nowhere Man.

It was his way of paying penance for the blood he'd spilled in European alleys and Middle Eastern sweat lodges, in South American *plazas* and African fields.

His own moral compass, pegged to his own true north.

Staying human the only way he knew how.

Now he picked up the encrypted phone and checked it for missed calls, though he'd been within earshot of it every waking minute. In keeping with the spirit of his remodel, he'd given the RoamZone some additional upgrades. The organic polyether thioureas screen with a capability to stitch itself together when cracked was ensconced in an 'antigravity' case, able to cling to most flat surfaces. He tested it now, flipping the phone at the Sub-Zero, the nanosuction backing enabling the RoamZone to stick in place.

He drained a glass of water, washed and dried the cup, and put it away. Then he popped the RoamZone off the refrigerator and padded across the empty great room, stripping off his clothes.

He dumped them and his boots into the fireplace, struck up a fire, and burned them. It was habit, destroying DNA and trace evidence of anything on his person at the end of a mission or a day when he interacted with strangers or unusual materials.

He continued down a brief hall at the north-facing side of the penthouse and into the partially rehabilitated master

bedroom suite. In the corner a king-size mattress lay on the floor, neatly made up with white sheets. Normally it rested on a metal slab that floated three feet off the ground, suspended by neodymium rare-earth magnets and tethered by steel cables, but the explosion had loosed it, sending it flying up to smash into the ceiling.

In the bathroom the plumbing had been replaced – toilet, tiled stall, shower arm sticking out of the wall – but there was still no cabinetry and the new barn-hanger shower door had not been installed.

He threw the RoamZone at the wall, where it stuck upside down, and stepped into the stream of water from the metal pipe, rinsing off. When he was done, he gripped the hot-water lever, waited for the upgraded embedded electronic sensors to scan the vein pattern in his palm, and turned the lever the wrong way.

A hidden door, disguised seamlessly by the tile pattern, swung inward to reveal the Vault, an irregular four-hundred-square-foot space that served as his mission-planning room. Given its concealed position, buffered behind the rest of the space, it was the only part of the penthouse that hadn't been destroyed by the explosion. An L-shaped sheet-metal desk piled with electronics. Server racks and gun lockers, ammo crates and surveillance devices, all positioned neatly beneath exposed beams and the underbelly of the public stairs to the roof, which crept downward in Escheresque fashion.

The equipment had slid around from the force of the blast – a few cables snapped, a server rack on tilt, a toppled Yagi directional antenna. A few of the 2.57-millimeter-thin OLED screens that covered three of the rough concrete walls had cracked, fissure marks etched through their invisible surfaces like forks of lightning.

Evan's sole companion, a pinecone-sized aloe vera plant

nestled among blue cobalt pebbles in a glass bowl, had died in his absence in the weeks following the explosion. Vera II, second of her name, faithful companion.

Dripping wet, he walked over and picked her up. Brown leaves, brittle core.

He said, 'Rest in peace,' and dropped her into the trash can.

Emerging back into the bathroom, he toweled off, then plucked his phone from the wall to text Joey Morales, an Orphan Program washout who had inexplicably wound up in his charge. At sixteen years old, she was the finest hacker he'd ever encountered, with a processing speed matched only by her smart-assery. For reasons they neither understood nor fully acknowledged, they had become family to each other.

He thumbed in:

Need your help to make repairs on the nails.

Less than one second later:

nails?

I meant vault. Autocorrect.

bummer, x! was hoping we could do some french manicure action just get over here.

or maybe like gels you could get em in black so youd still feel all orphan-y

Joey.

i'm just glad yr finally getting in touch w your feminine side

Josephine.

fine. c u in 10.

Trudging out, he moved to the stacks of clothing resting in the corner of the bedroom. Gray V-neck T-shirts, tactical-discreet cargo pants, dark blue 501s, boxer briefs – eight each, folded in perfect squares. Though the bedroom was spotless, their proximity to the floor made his brain itch, so

he dusted off each item before donning it and made a mental note to check when the replacement bureau was coming in.

The walk-in closet was empty save for eight hanging Woolrich shirts, eight watch fobs made by Vertex, and eight Original S.W.A.T. shoe boxes.

No, wait.

Seven.

Seven Original S.W.A.T. shoe boxes.

He stared at them, willing it not to be. He'd gone through an extra pair of boots today when a circular saw had bitten a chunk out of the sole, and now there it was, a stack containing one fewer item than the others. That made his face twist with discomfort.

He scratched at the back of his head.

Stared at the boxes. Counted them. Counted them once more.

Still seven.

He'd ordered to replenish his supply but hadn't accounted for the stagger in numbers.

He buttoned up a Woolrich over his T-shirt and tugged on a fresh pair of boots.

Now there were seven of each. But six of the boots.

By the time the new articles of clothing arrived, the numbers would still be off by one.

It was okay. He could handle this.

He started to walk out.

Halted at the threshold of the bedroom.

His place was a mess, covered with sawdust and tools and fucking half-drunk water bottles with germs of other people on them. He could manage this – barely – along with the unfinished state of the penthouse, but having his clothing count misaligned was too much. Distress roiled in his stomach, pressed at the backs of his eyes.

He reversed course, plucking one item from each stack on the floor. Then one hanging shirt and watch fob from the closet.

Holding the mound of brand-new items against his chest, he walked back to the fireplace, tossed the RoamZone to stick against the rise of the flue, and threw the clothes into the fire.

Now there were six of everything and order had been restored to the universe.

With an exhale he uncramped the muscles around his neck. Stared into the flame. Took measure of his breath. Felt the coolness at his nostrils, his throat, the expansion of his ribs, the belly.

A sound pierced his awareness.

The RoamZone.

Ringing.

He stared at the phone stuck magnetlike to the chimney before him. The tech enhancements he'd made to his RoamZone included a holographic display incubated by Chinese and Australian researchers at RMIT University in Melbourne. Visible without 3-D glasses, the images thrown beyond the device were twenty-five nanometers thin – a thousand nanometers skinnier than a single strand of hair.

Right now the pop-up visual displayed a phone number with a South Texas area code.

Evan tapped the holograph to answer, the RoamZone reverting to speaker mode.

Adrenaline and anticipation converged into something dangerous and delicious. The start of a mission that could lead to his death or another piece of his salvation.

He took a breath. Exhaled to calm.

Then said, 'Do you need my help?'

6. A Catalog of Horrors

The voice from the phone was deep, resonant. ‘Will you help *anyone* who is in need?’ Holographic electric-blue sound waves augmented the audio, rising and falling with each consonant.

Evan’s question had rarely been answered with a question. He felt the heat of the fire against his chest, his face. ‘If they’re worthy.’

‘I don’t know, then.’

‘What?’

‘If you’ll find me worthy.’

An unusual start, unlike any preceding mission. Evan let the man breathe. He sounded troubled. A faint kiss of a Hispanic accent, a formality to the cadence of his words. Unrushed, composed. A man accustomed to being listened to.

‘So that’s what you do?’ the man asked. ‘You help people? Outside the law? People who no one else is willing to help?’

‘Yes.’

‘What do you want for it?’

‘Nothing.’

A note of incredulity. ‘Nothing?’

‘No money. No credit. And no permission.’

A long silence. Then the man said, ‘A man who needs none of those things can move the world.’

‘How did you get this number?’ Evan asked.

‘From the Esposito cousin. Rogelio Esposito.’

The young worker with the forearm scar. Evan had given him the phone number less than twenty-four hours ago.