

## DAY CROSSER

### *When Empathy Is Your Only Savior...*

Even in the early morning, the sun heated the land. It would only get hotter across the Mexican horizon. The dirt beneath its rays was disturbed only a few hours before when the diggers still had the cool of the night in the wind. The graves were adorned with crosses made of scrap wood and wildflowers and had been placed around the burial site. High above in the tree limbs, a smattering of cicadas buzzed like a small orchestra accompanied by the rank smell of death that still lingered heavily in the air.

Miguel Hernandez didn't want to keep staring at the graves. It had been less than a week since the cartels last raided them, but it seemed like just hours removed. He stood to the side, swallowing down the knot in his throat while letting a few random tears slip down his sunbathed cheeks. His wife, Rosa, squeezed his elbow before she moved to go place a bundle of marigolds on the closest grave. Miguel easily supported her weight as she struggled to bend down, her nine-month pregnant belly making it difficult.

Rosa gently gripped the Virgin Mary pendant that hung from her neck and pulled it away from her body. She tilted her head down and whispered a prayer in her native tongue, *"May Mary, the angels, and all the saints come to meet you as you go forth from this life."* Her words drifted with the light breeze. *"Why did this follow us here?"* Rosa asked of her husband.

Miguel had no answer, as he looked out over the remaining livestock. It consisted of a small herd of goats and pigs wandering about the village as displaced as the humans. They too had been slaughtered indiscriminately, as the crows and magpies picked away at the bullet-riddled carcasses littered around the landscape. Miguel shook his head at the horrible sight. It was almost exactly as they had experienced three years earlier in troubled state of Michoacán. There they had witnessed friends and relatives killed by the ensuing cartel violence while working the vast avocado orchards of the region. It was their home... but now that swath of

destruction followed them here, near the base of the Sierra Madre Occidental in the state of Sinaloa.

*"We would have been safer in the labor camps,"* said Miguel. And they had done all they could to avoid those rat-infested labor camps, opting instead for the smaller, seemingly peaceful outlying farming communities to sustain and heal.

Behind them, a few paces away, Carlos Zapata tried to forget how much he knew of these kinds of deaths. The brutality. The heartlessness. He shook himself out of his own headspace and approached them, stepping to the right of Miguel.

*"How many did they kill?"*

*"Six,"* replied Miguel, as he gazed fearfully at the graves. *"They came only to kill... to leave us in fear."*

Rosa, still grasping her holy pendant, placed it gently back upon her chest and lightly pressed it against her beating, yet broken heart. A deathly silence suddenly resounded around them as even the birds and cicadas momentarily muted their songs. Carlos wasn't comfortable with that silence.

*"Yes, that is what they do. And they do it well. Join them or die. I'm so sorry, my friend."* Carlos said.

For another moment, they tried not to accept the reality, but truthfully, they both knew that some yards away, farmers were packed like sardines in a rusted-out van and a junk station wagon.

*"Everyone is leaving, though some want to stay behind,"* murmured Miguel as he pointed toward an elderly man - his tired, wrinkled face void of emotion. There was nothing left for this man to do, as he watched the people from his village turn their backs on their lands, their farms, their homes. Carlos didn't need to ask how the man might end up. *"The old fool has no more life to live. Sees no reason to flee..."* said Miguel.

*"Related?"* asked Carlos.

Miguel shook his head. *"No family for either of us here. But they've welcomed and accepted us like family in the short time we've been here. That's why it is so hard,"* he choked on his words and pulled Rosa closer.

*"No place is safe for us here."* Miguel strained to speak in simple sentences. *"I just want my wife and baby not to be threatened anymore."*

Carlos ran his gaze over the other remaining farmers as they lined up for exile. *"Say your goodbyes. Uncle Rodrigo is waiting."* Miguel nodded but remained still in his grief for a minute longer. *"We don't want to be anywhere near this place when they return."* Carlos' warning cut like a dagger.

Miguel and Rosa finally moved to the villagers and said their farewells with their chosen family. They kissed and hugged them all as they tried to portray their emotions and appreciation for everything they had given them: Love, gratitude, and community.

Rodrigo Zapata blew swirling smoke from his mouth as he looked over the countryside. It was very similar to the region in which he had been born and raised. He puffed on his cigar and reminisced. This was land that he had worked for years in spite of the cartels and threats. Despite all the death, this was his home and would remain so. The beauty still radiated within its natural boundaries, beyond the fleeing farmers and makeshift burials within his smoky viewpoint.

Rodrigo glanced over his shoulder when he heard people approaching from behind. He quickly rubbed out his cigar and smiled at Miguel, throwing his arms wide open as he hopped off the back of his pickup truck.

*"Miguel!"* He pulled the much younger man into him, hugging and patting his back with tenderness. *"It's been how many years?"*

Miguel reflected thoughtfully. *"At least five or six?"*

*"Yes. At least... I just wish it was under better circumstances."*

Rodrigo let the words wither, politely turning his attention to Rosa. *"And this lovely Senora must be Rosa Marie?"* He bent down, kissing the back of her hand.

*"Gracias, Senor. It is a great pleasure to meet you. We are very thankful,"* replied Rosa as she tucked her hand above her round belly. Rodrigo noticed the motion and then cocked his head.

*"May I, Senora?"*

Rosa nodded. Rodrigo reached out his palm and pressed it against her stomach just as the baby kicked and shifted inside its mother.

*"This baby is very active. A boy?"*

Rosa smiled. *"Miguel wants a boy. I just want it to be a happy, healthy baby."*

Miguel cut in. *"Yes, and a baby born far from here."*

Rodrigo slowly turned to Carlos, concern etched on his face. He waved Carlos to the side so that they could speak alone.

*"Excuse us. I need to have a quick word with my nephew,"* he explained as he and Carlos moved around to the opposite side of the truck. Miguel and Rosa gave no opposition as Rodrigo checked to see that they were far enough away from them both as he turned his voice down. *"I worry about this, Carlos. Trekking in the hot sun could be very bad for both Rosa and the unborn."*

Carlos shrugged. *"I can get them to where we need to go quicker in the day. I've done this route many times before."*

Rodrigo narrowed his eyes. *"Okay. Okay. But you won't have the cover of darkness on your side."*

*"Night is when border patrol and trafficking is at its heaviest, especially at this location. And we would have to move at an even slower pace because visibility and footing will be poorer and more treacherous for Rosa. Not to mention, rattlesnakes and scorpions are more active at night,"* Carlos stated firmly.

Rodrigo paused and mulled over his nephew's words for a long moment. He whisked out another Mexican cigar and studied it intently while remaining in deep thought. He finally nodded his approval and grasped his nephew's shoulder with a firm yet reassuring grip. They walked back around the pickup truck and rejoined the couple. *"We leave now. It's a two-day journey. But we are well prepared."*

*"Rodrigo. We just want to thank you again. You risk a lot,"* said Miguel.

Rodrigo kindly interjected and waved his hand in a friendly manner. *"No, no, no. I will assist you in any way I can, of course, but I am simply driving you to the location. Carlos is the one leading you to freedom and prosperity,"* he said with a certain fondness towards his nephew. *"I am so grateful you finally left the cartels behind,"* he muttered and gestured to the graves across the dirt lot.

*"I know, Uncle. And you'll never let me forget,"* said Carlos.

*"That is what concerns me. The cartels have not forgotten either,"* growled Rodrigo.

*"Looking over my shoulder, a small price I am willing to pay."*

Rodrigo remained quiet for a long moment. *"You don't have to pay if you join Miguel and Rosa in America?"* He suggested.

Carlos, shocked by his uncle's words, thought deeply, if only for a second or two. *"You will miss me?"*

*"Of course. But I want my nephew to lead his own prosperous life. Here, you have nothing but corruption and ruin. In America, you have a chance at something more,"* said Rodrigo.

Carlos glanced at the couple beside them and turned his gaze back to Rodrigo. This was not a suggestion he could ponder for any amount of time. *"Then I will stay with Rosa and Miguel,"* Carlos blurted out. Rodrigo grinned ear to ear.

Miguel and Rosa smiled, grateful that not only would Carlos help them achieve a better life, but he would help himself as well.

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The trailer park had seen better days. The land surrounding the mobile homes sported a variety of debris and useless, rusted vehicles. Stray cats gave chase to one another as they zipped underneath one trailer to the next. Their hissing and scratching were drowned out by the laughter of some Hispanic children who played nearby without a care in the world. It was a playground wonderland for the lower class.

Inside one of the nicer, singlewide homes, Miesha Cerrone worked at the kitchen counter making sandwiches. The young woman's daughter, Tabitha, sat patiently at the tiny, fold-up table near a clutter of old appliances as she awaited her own peanut butter and jelly treat.

The house itself was kept tidy, unlike the trash-strewn lots and streets outside. In the living room, on an aging Sony flat-screen, a political opinion show

host engaged in a heated debate with one of his guests as the American/Mexican border was discussed.

Miesha finished prepping the plates and glanced at Tabitha. "Remember, when daddy gives us the good news on his new job, we're going to do what?"

"Cheer for daddy," answered Tabitha as she took her sandwich from her mother.

"Until I can afford to buy some more cereal, you get your favorite,"

"Peanut butter and jelly!" an overly excited Tabitha exclaimed.

"Daddy will probably want to eat out tonight to celebrate. So that will have to tide you over till dinnertime," said Miesha as she dabbed a chunk of peanut butter onto her daughter's nose. Tabitha squealed in joy.

Outside, Eric Cerrone pulled up his old Toyota Tacoma to the side of the single-wide. The young man threw the driver door open and stepped out. The former soldier still had the classic military buzz-cut and a clean-shaven profile. He adjusted his gray suit jacket and moved towards the trailer.

Distracted in his own thoughts, he nearly tripped over a toy fire truck underfoot. He managed to stumble forward and regain solid footing, but not before aggravating an old injury he had acquired in the heat of war. He grunted and rubbed at his knee, more agitation than pain, while the neighbor children sheepishly stared and snickered under their breaths.

Eric turned, his eyes narrowed in disdain. He punted the fire truck back across the open space of the trailer park lot, and pointed his finger like a duelist would his rapier before engagement.

"Keep your shit on your side of the property!" he shouted out to them as he stomped off. The children exchanged looks of confusion and apprehension as their angry neighbor entered his trailer in a huff.

Miesha turned as the front door to the trailer was thrown open. She smiled at Eric, but he returned her gentle greeting with a bitter scowl. Tabitha, with a mouthful of peanut butter, looked up to her father and smiled. "Daddy! Yay!"

Miesha put a finger to her lips and hushed Tabitha while Eric roughly loosened his tie. She took a deep breath and waited for the bad news as he tossed the tie aggressively at the floor.

“What’s wrong?” asked Miesha.

Eric ignored the question, stripping off his blazer as he headed for the fridge. Beer in hand, he dropped onto the couch and grunted. Miesha grabbed the television remote from the kitchen counter and waved it at him to elicit a response.

On the screen, the opinion show still played as a guest cleared his throat to speak in protest. “These immigrants are not the enemy. They are good, decent people trying to find a better life—.”

“Turn this crap off,” hissed Eric.

Miesha clicked the power button on the remote. She watched him swig his beer as her lips twisted and pursed, almost as if she was trying to mouth the words for him.

“I failed the polygraph,” Eric finally barked.

Miesha shrugged. “So what does that mean?”

“It means Customs and Border won’t hire me.”

Miesha frowned in confusion. “How did you fail?”

Eric shook his head and glanced down at his beer bottle. He peeled the label off as he sneered out a jaded reply. “They treated me like a criminal, not a veteran.”

“What questions did they ask you?”

“Just questions. Stupid shit to trip you up and say things you didn’t mean.”

Miesha eyed him critically. “Is it your PTSD?” She got no response. Not verbally, anyway. She knew him well enough that the expression on his face told her everything she needed to know. “I thought you said they would take that into consideration?”

“I don’t want to talk about it now, Miesha. They grilled me all morning. I don’t need it from you,” snapped Eric

Tears streamed down Tabitha’s cheeks, as she sniffled and cried. Eric offered her no comfort as he tipped the rest of the beer into his mouth. Before anything else could be said or done, someone knocked loudly at the door.

Miesha sighed. "Jesus... what now?" She muttered as she walked over to the window and peeked through the blinds. An older man stood at the screen door, waiting patiently. His handlebar mustache was growing a bit long and wild. One of his large, burly hands rested just above the sidearm on his belt. "It's Thomas. Do want me to shoo him away?"

Eric considered it for a moment before he shook his head. "Just let him in..."

Miesha's lip curled in apprehension but she decided it best not to argue the point. She opened the door and invited Thomas inside. "Hey..."

Thomas Rockhold stepped in through the door with a tilt of his cowboy hat. "Miesha. What's the good word?" He asked before catching sight of Eric's gloomy disposition. He glanced at Miesha, then back to Eric.

"He didn't get the border patrol job," She dejectedly offered up.

Thomas removed his hat and turned his gaze hard on Eric. "Well, what the hell happened?"

"He failed the polygraph," she interjected before Eric could utter a word.

"Well fuck. It's that bureaucratic bullshit to root out bribery and other corruption. And it ends up fucking over our own boys in end." He shook his head in disgust.

Eric finally looked up at Thomas with a straight expression. "If you want a beer, go ahead and grab one."

"A little too early for me. Plus, I have some work to do. Border run." Thomas tapped his holster. He then peeked over at Tabitha quietly nibbling away on her half-eaten sandwich.

"What are we going to do, Eric?" asked Miesha. "You were so sure you were going to get that job. It would've changed everything—" Eric cut her off in mid-sentence.

"I said I don't want to talk about it! Let me think a little, okay?"

"I have the right to speak, too," muttered Miesha as she gathered Tabitha up into her arms before storming out of the living room.

Eric shook his head and gazed up at Thomas in defeat. "Sure you don't want a beer? It's cold?"

Thomas studied him for a long second. "Why don't you come with me? Clear your head out a little." Eric didn't move a muscle. "Give Miesha some space, too."

"I don't want to join your militia group," snapped Eric.

"I'm not saying you have to join anything. Just come tag along."

Eric considered the offer as he eyed his empty beer bottle. "Yeah, maybe you're right. Got nothing better to do at the moment," He mindlessly dropped the bottle to the floor. "Let me get out of this monkey suit."

Thomas inconspicuously observed him as he walked to the bedroom. "I'll be waiting in the Suburban..."

On his way out of the mobile home, Thomas stopped before a cluster of photos of family and friends on a tattered, old display case. He picked one out in particular: Eric, in his dress blue uniform, standing straight and proud. He looked it over, carefully studying the young man's expression before he placed it back on the shelf and exited the trailer.

Inside the bedroom, Eric walked in to find Miesha curled up on the bed with Tabitha in her arms. He noted her glare as he proceeded to take off his dress shirt and tossed it casually on the floor. He grabbed a t-shirt with a Marine logo boldly decorated upon it and quickly changed out of his slacks for a pair of rugged blue jeans.

As he stepped in front of the bedroom mirror, he looked past his own reflection and saw Miesha's expression of despair and disappointment. Tabitha, childishly innocent, looked confused. He snatched his skull-adorned Semper-Fi ballcap and avoided the gaze of his family as he walked toward the bedroom door. He suddenly stopped in place. "I'm sorry I let you both down," he whispered, as he tugged his hat and exited the bedroom, his head lowered in shame.

Eric crossed into the cluttered bathroom and reached into the medicine cabinet for a pill bottle. He swallowed a pill and then reached for another bottle: one for the anxiety, and one for the pain. He closed the cabinet to find Miesha standing in the reflection behind him. Her eyes mixed with worry and aggravation.

"Shouldn't take those when you drink," she said.

Without a word, Eric stuffed the bottle into his pocket and walked past her.

Thomas waited in his late-model, tinted Suburban to the soft beats of country music. As the singer touted his own love for America, Thomas searched his phone contacts, taking care of some quick business before hitting the road. His militia group, The Border Patrol Patriots, kept him a busy man. Within a short time of his arrival in Pima County, Arizona some five years earlier, his group had grown to over three hundred strong: like-minded Americans who harbored the same resentments and white fears.

As he raised the cell to his ear and made the call, his cold gaze locked on the Mexican children romping around the trailer park. He pinched a wad of chew with his free hand and stuffed it under his lip. He spat out a few loose grains as he left a voicemail for one of his underlings within the militia.

“Hey, Joseph, it’s Thomas. Listen, we have some new recruits coming in, and one’s that black fellow, James, whatever the fuck his last name is. Actually, I like the guy. Hates the spics just as much as me. If anything, I just want him aboard, so along with DeVante and Leroy, we have some color in the ranks and no one can holler white supremacists. I’m also working on Eric, the young vet. I’ll have him real soon.” Thomas looked up as Eric exited the trailer and sauntered over to the Suburban. “Sorry for the long winded message. Talk later.”

Eric opened the door and flopped down into the passenger seat. A scowl instantly formed on his face. “Okay, okay. I know you hate country,” Thomas conceded, and turned off the radio in favor of rolling down the windows. His expression of disdain for the children playing outside did not wane. “There goes the neighborhood,” he muttered under his breath as he sped off the trailer park grounds onto the adjacent road.

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The journey thus far had gone smoothly and uncontested. Though the first day of travel dragged on for what seemed an eternity, they had strategically planned well ahead and stopped to rest the night in a spacious farmhouse just outside Hermosillo through a close acquaintance of Carlos. From there, the destination was

a mere five hours away. Well rested and up at the crack of dawn, they had made good headway in the early morning hours and were well ahead of schedule. Rodrigo drove as Rosa sat beside him in the front cab of the truck. He knew the routes to take as he had driven them many times before, transporting goods to the border for some of the larger produce wholesalers.

Carlos and Miguel were sitting in the back of the truck bed. Carlos entertained himself by whittling away on a stick with a fixed-blade hunting knife. He knew these routes too but from a much different perspective. He glanced over at Miguel who had been watching the scenery go by; this was the farthest north Miguel had ever been.

Carlos looked down at a large scar on the back of his hand. The majority of his scars were acquired by his past border runs smuggling drugs and guiding migrants. But he was fond of this particular one — his very first, suffered at the tender age of twelve when he was initially recruited. Sliced clean open by some nasty barbwire, it had become infected, nearly causing him to lose his limb. But it healed and Carlos continued on for many more years, braving venomous snakes, the searing heat and biting cold of the desert. And he craved the adrenaline rush that came when evading border patrols and rival gangs.

Carlos glanced at the back of Rodrigo's graying head through the dusty rear window — his own savior, throughout much of his young life. Rodrigo gave him the ultimatum as Carlos decided what path he should choose: leave the cartels for good and come work with him, or stay with them, and eventually end up dead. In time, Carlos heeded his uncle's entreaties and joined him for many years after, toiling in the fields spanning Sonora and Sinaloa. But as of late, his sordid past had been coming back to haunt him.

Carlos looked back at Miguel and wondered: was his old friend, who had never once entertained the thought of joining the cartels, truly any better off?

The landscape shifted from the gorgeous, familiar farmland to the harsher environment of the high-mountain desert. *"This area looks rough, Carlos. Are you sure this is the safest route to cross?"* asked Miguel, the concern etched on his face.

Carlos smiled and projected his own cool demeanor to ease his friend's anxiety. *"We'll be fine, Miguel. Don't worry."* He stopped whittling and hurled the stick out amongst the passing cacti and cat-claw mesquites scattered throughout the rocky terrain. He noticed Miguel's unnerved gaze at his knife. He tucked the blade into the sheath attached to the belt hidden beneath his shirt. *"For rattlesnakes,"* said Carlos. Miguel then glanced at Rosa through the back of the cabin window.

Carlos cleared his throat to speak. *"I'll be strong for you, my friend. But I need you to be strong for Rosa. And for your new American-born baby."*

Miguel nodded and offered a smile. *"We'll all be strong together,"* he paused briefly before he continued, *"Carlos, why did you leave the smuggling life? You made such good money doing it."*

Carlos barked a burst of laughter. *"I'm too old now! Once you turn eighteen you become a liability. The cartels have little use for you unless you do other things for them..."* He trailed off and looked Miguel dead in the eyes. *"Those things... I was not willing to go there."*

Miguel could not stop his own eyes from widening. He knew what Carlos was speaking of, kidnappings and beheadings, all which lead to terror and death.

*"I only stuck around years after to smuggle the people. Honestly, I could care less about the money. But the people, my people... that's different,"* said Carlos.

*"I still wish we could pay you something for your help."*

Carlos scoffed at the offer. *"We talked about this... your friendship will always be enough for me."*

*"You have always had a good heart, my friend. A true heart,"* Miguel's sentiment was heartfelt, raw emotion.

Carlos smiled as his gaze drifted northward toward the inevitable man-made barrier standing in their way. A mere formality to Carlos, who had made this trek many times in the past under much graver conditions.

Rodrigo continued to navigate the bumpy dirt road with practiced ease. He dodged one large, deep hole, opting for a smaller, shallower one. It still shook the truck cab with thunderous jolts. *"So sorry, Senora. This road just gets worse and*

worse over the years," said Rodrigo. Rosa put her hand over her stomach and grunted in pain. Rodrigo noticed her discomfort. "Senora, are you okay?"

Rosa grimaced. "I'm okay. The baby just kicked after you hit that hole in the road."

"More like a crater. I will be more careful, I promise."

"Gracias, Senor," she replied, focusing on hiding her true discomfort from Rodrigo.

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