



Death Water

A Ted Kline Adventure Novel

Tim White

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Death Water: A Ted Kline Adventure Novel

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Prologue: Thud, Thud..... | 6 |
| Chapter 1: Oops!..... | 10 |
| Chapter 2: Boom | 18 |
| Chapter 3: Sly | 23 |
| Chapter 4: Capper | 32 |
| Chapter 5: Crows..... | 41 |
| Chapter 7: The Dumps | 65 |
| Chapter 8: Trust Me? | 78 |
| Chapter 9: Accountant..... | 93 |
| Chapter 10: The Vet | 105 |
| Chapter 11: Monkey Dance | 114 |
| Chapter 12: Meechi | 126 |
| Chapter 13: The Letter..... | 139 |
| Chapter 14: The Stake Out..... | 151 |
| Chapter 15: Leaky | 162 |
| Chapter 16: Hostages..... | 175 |
| Chapter 17: Standoff..... | 187 |
| Chapter 18: Hallelujah | 200 |
| Chapter 19: In the Wind..... | 214 |
| Chapter 20: Revenge..... | 226 |
| Chapter 21: Escape | 237 |
| Chapter 22: Hide | 248 |
| Chapter 23: Dead | 259 |
| Chapter 24: Plans | 272 |
| Epilogue: Forgiveness | 279 |

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I must add a few apologies. To the good people of Sanderson and Terrell County, TX, this book doesn't reflect any of you, your attitudes, or your families. Your location was convenient, and the people in the book are purely fictional. And to the law enforcement agencies, the techniques, personalities, and responsibilities reflected in this book are, too, pure fiction. Hopefully, you will find it to be fun fiction, although not entirely accurate. Fiction!

Two last appreciations. Thanks to pneumonia that slowed me down to finish this project. And thanks to God who makes all things possible.

Prologue: Thud, Thud

“You are only young once, but you can stay immature indefinitely.” Ogden Nash

Six years earlier:

The dark clouds rolled in from the southwest, expressing their anger with white-hot spears of lightning and baritone rumbles of thunder. The trees danced in the wind as if trying to escape their rooted captivity. Discarded pieces of litter darted quickly across the streets and parking lots, trying to find someplace to hide from nature’s anger. To punish them, the clouds released large raindrops that fell at a sharp angle, soaking them and slowing their escape.

In the offices, employees watched the rain slammed against the windows to taunt them. Such was the fury the workers watched as they took unscheduled respites from their labors. They watch in amazement as the storm, with all of its elements, tried to rearrange the world.

“Do you think I’m stupid?” The sergeant screamed, flecks of spittle flying from his mouth like shrapnel from a grenade. He stood from his chair behind his desk, glaring at the MP sitting across from him. He despised this jerk. Hated him. He didn’t hate many people, but this one invited hatred.

Upon standing, he noticed that nearly everyone in

the building had diverted their attention from the rain to the drama playing before them. This “disciplinary action” had become more interesting than the angry weather outside, which was far more interesting than the mundane work on the desks and computers. Every cubicle in the office had one or two people designated to take care of some business for the military police in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and at the moment, he had all of their attention. And he didn’t want it.

Typically, Sergeant Clayton Bells, who hated the nickname “Clay Bells” that this MP had hung on him, would have kept the discipline private. But sometimes someone needed to be publicly shamed, even humiliated, especially when their public disregard for rank and authority was becoming legendary. It only proved that his respect was lacking.

What goes thud, thud? Clay bells. That was the work of this moron sitting across from him. Now Bells’ associates were heard saying, “thud, thud,” almost at a whisper when they passed on the sidewalks and in the halls. Even in the lunchroom, he could hear, “thud, thud,” said just low enough he couldn’t determine who said it.

“Do you think I’m stupid?” he repeated, this time a half an octave higher. The tall, black Sergeant glared at the disgraced MP for a moment and then sank back into his chair.

“No, sir.” Silence hung in the air like the clingy humidity destined to oppress this southern town when the storm moved east, and the wicked sun reappeared. This was the worst case of irresponsibility Bells had ever seen. His entire squad was ready to hang him. Nobody liked him. It was one practical joke after another. It never stopped. For this perpetual prankster, it never got old. But it did for everyone else. Really old.

“No, what? You don’t have anything to say but, ‘No, sir?’” Bells leaned forward in his chair, arms on his desk.

“No, sir. I don’t think you’re stupid. I believe you’ve removed all doubt about that.”

Bells immediately stood again. Repressed giggles could be heard around the room. Somewhere among the cubicle workers who were supposed to make purchases, transferring files, maintaining records, and processing assignments, a soft male voice, barely audible, said, “Thud, thud.”

Bells caught his breath. He looked around to see if he could see anyone laughing. There was no sign of laughter on anyone’s face, but many had looked the other way to hide their expressions. No one was taking credit for the inappropriate remark either. This was no laughing matter. The firing squad came to his mind briefly. He had been chewing on this smart aleck for 20 minutes now. This was reducing the production of the office far more than this rebel

was worth.

“I ought to throw you in the brig and forget where I put you,” Bells hissed. “I ought to court-martial you and issue a dishonorable discharge. But you and I both know the General would end my career if I did,” stating the last sentence decibels softer.

The MP’s expression never changed. He looked as though he was contemplating a nap. Bells had never seen anyone give up and become as utterly apathetic as this one. He never really fit into the army and never tried to fit. It was time to resolve this.

“Kline, I have your dismissal papers all ready to fill out. All you have to do is sign them, and you will be released from your duties to go and be worthless somewhere else.”

“Show me where to sign, Clay.”

Bells slammed the papers in front of the MP. He slammed a pen on top of it.

“What do you have to say about this?”

“Thud, thud.”

It took a day for Bells to realize that the MP had signed “Clay Bells” in the blank instead of his own name.

Chapter 1: Oops!

“Having a second chance makes you want to work even harder.” Tia Mowry

Monday

Ted Kline was never proud of his service as an MP in the Army. Nobody would have said he was good at it either. Nor would anyone say he was good at much of anything else he tried since being “invited” to leave the military. But he thought that had changed of late, at least some. He was trying. The question was, was it too late?

Some thought Kline was funny. His friend and coworker, Ben, seemed to enjoy him, at least when no one else was around. When they fished together or went for a hike in the canyons, they both laughed all day. But when others were around, Ben seemed distant, as if an offense had taken place.

Many would say Kline took nothing seriously. He could make most people laugh, but the ones not laughing were usually pretty put out with him.

Kline remembered his many disciplinary meetings with his dad through the years, a retired Army Two-Star general, and a hard man. You didn’t disagree with the General without asking for trouble, and apparently, you didn’t get away with disappointing him either. But Kline had disappointed Pops, and often. He had disappointed everybody. Despite his

concentrated effort, it seemed that disappointing people was something he could not stop.

He would always remember one such meeting with Pops a month after he “resigned” from the army. How badly he wanted to get out of that office chair in his dad’s suburban ranch house outside of Belton, TX, where the General had chosen to retire. It seemed like the “chair of shame” had been a part of Kline’s life since birth. It was a constant occurrence in high school in Killeen, TX. Home of the Fighting Kangaroos. *Really?* It followed him to college. Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. The fierce Horn Frogs. *I mean, really?* In every job he held, there was a chair of shame with his name on it.

When Pop’s had finished venting that day, Kline was dismissed. Just like that. It felt like he was disowned. Getting out of that chair, and even out of the house, did not remove the shame Kline felt. It clung to him like a stink; a stain that marked him for everyone to see. Only the passage of time and some moderate token forms of success could reduce the sense of failure he carried; the burden of the son who had dishonored. That memory would not fade quickly, and the pain seemed never to go away.

And here he was again, sitting in the chair of shame, this time across from Terrell County Sheriff Ruben Vargas, his boss. This was the only boss he ever liked, and the only boss that ever liked him, sometimes. That is when he wasn’t ruining something.

Kline noticed the sheriff's office never lost its musty smell. It had to be the orange carpet. No one ever vacuumed this carpet. The fake beige paneling probably didn't have a smell. It would have helped if it did. Real wood paneling would have smelled like wood, or maybe polish. Pine would be nice.

The sheriff was a moderate bather, as far as Kline could tell. It wasn't Vargas that stunk. But the smell of dirty feet must have been the billions of dust mites and bacteria living in the industrial, tight weave orange floor covering that had been put down in one-foot squares.

Kline wondered why he never thought of the stench until he was in trouble. Then again, why was he in trouble so much? It was like he was destined to fail again. This was a big mess, and it stunk worse than the carpet.

"You just don't get it!" yelled the sheriff, his face as red as a tomato and the blood vessels on his temples pulsing larger. "We're here to serve and protect! Protect! The imbecile had blood on his shirt, for crying out loud! What were you thinking?"

What was he thinking? *I don't want to be in this chair is what I'm thinking now.* But he would not say this. He would control his tongue the best he could. This was the one job Kline wanted to keep. He could hear the voice of the General echoing endlessly through the synapses of his memories, "It's time you grow up, son!"

It wasn't that Kline needed this job. The General had left Kline more than enough money to live out the rest of his life in comfort. There was more to it than that. To him, this struck at his manhood, as opposed to boyhood, that is.

Kline remembered the events of the fateful night before, Sunday night, while he was watching traffic on the highway that traversed through Sanderson, TX. He had attempted to execute a simple traffic stop to ask the driver to slow down. He noticed the red stain on the man's shirt and asked the lone driver about it, receiving a simple explanation. A french-fry, coated with ketchup, had fought for its liberty and slipped out of his fingers. It missed his mouth, leaving a smudge of red as it slid down his chest like a snow ski escaping a crumpled skier. It fell to the floorboard, so said the man, his face reddening to match the stain.

The driver was nervous, but who wasn't at the sight of a sheriff cruiser with the red and blue emergency lights of the light bar flashing in his rear-view mirror?

But as the driver was leaving the stop with a warning ticket, he recklessly whipped out into traffic without looking and clipped an elderly couple's Cadillac as they were traveling through the town. No one was hurt, so Kline decided to write a real ticket to the perp this time. Another deputy, Buck Young, ironically the oldest deputy in the squad, came by and saw an opportunity to embarrass Kline. He was

making a felony out of a traffic accident. In his investigation, Young discovered the driver's severely beaten and bound wife in the trunk. Apparently, she ordered fries without his permission.

"Sir, with all due respect, he said it was ketchup. I guess I didn't want to think it was blood. Beyond that, at first, he didn't seem guilty of anything except going a few clicks over the limit."

At that, Sheriff Vargas stood, his face redder still. His mouth opened, but no sound was coming out but a guttural click from the back of his throat as if he was choking. *Where is Heimlich when you need him?* In a few seconds, his angry expression changed to one of disbelief as he shut his mouth, and slowly shaking his head, sat down with a thud. In retrospect, Kline couldn't even believe what he had just said.

"Sir, I'm sorry. No excuses. None, whatsoever. I was wrong, stupid and careless, and... I don't know..." Kline dropped his head.

This was the situation he hated most, sitting in a chair across from a superior, getting smaller and smaller with each passing moment, with each condemnation. He was a kid again, and not a good one. Smaller and smaller he became. If this continued, his feet would not be touching the floor, dangling from the chair.

The sheriff recognized the pathetic, self-punishment that Kline was expressing. This boy had reminded

him of himself more than a few years ago. Slow to mature. Always in trouble. But he saw the effort he was making.

He knew the boy's job record, and Kline admitted to him, on the other jobs he didn't care to succeed. But he wanted to succeed here. He needed a chance. No, he needed another chance, again. *Fat chance!* Vargas took a deep breath, and when he exhaled, the anger and disgust seemed to leave with the bad air. He shook his head.

"Deputy Kline, you need to decide if this is a position you want. You need to determine if you're going to resign tomorrow or commit to doing this job right. You need to stop doing this job by just going through the motions, even in what you consider as menial tasks. Figure it out!

"You need to take the day off and think about it. Let me know tomorrow. You got it? Either show up for duty ready to do it right or turn in your things at sunrise. Now get out of here!"

Kline couldn't believe his ears. He was getting another chance. Vargas saw something in him that he honestly didn't see in himself. Kline felt a ray of hope. He might make it. Most of the other deputies wouldn't be happy about this, but he was.

"Sir, I can give you my answer now," he said with determination.

“Kline, I don’t want your answer now. I want you to think about what you did and what you should have done. I want it to sink in. I want you to think about it all day, so when you come back tomorrow, if you decide to stay, something better had been changed. Go home now!”

“Sir, don’t you want me to stay for the meeting?” Kline asked hesitantly. He didn’t know which would be worse, sitting through the deputies’ meeting with the other deputies, wondering what they were thinking of his stupidity or the humility of walking through the meeting room where they had already gathered.

“I said get out of here before I change my mind!” Vargas said forcefully.

And with that, Kline picked up his cap from the sheriff’s desk and stepped out of his office. *Out of the frying pan and into the burning judgmental eyes of his peers.* As he walked through the meeting room, all eyes were on him like laser dots on a surrounded perp. Everybody’s eyes except Ben’s.

For strength, he looked at Ben Parker, his only friend on the force. But Ben sat in his chair, looking down at the stinky carpet as if there was something very interesting there. *Could he see the dust mites and bacteria?* No. Obviously, he carried some of the shame of Ted Kline by association.

There was nothing said. No comfort was flowing back

from the deputies. Nothing to do but muster all the dignity he could and walk through the room and out the door. Kline knew that was the only right decision he had made in a while.

Chapter 2: Boom

“Grief is the price we pay for love.” Queen Elizabeth II

The Texas heat was pounding every living creature it could reach this early June day. Despite the rising temperature, children were playing in the streets and yards in the small community. That would stop in an hour or so when the temperatures would climb to three digits. Air conditioners and swamp coolers would hum until well after dark.

Kline settled into the driver’s seat of his squad car, all of his energy drained. He was sapped. No strength. For a moment, he wished he had time to drive to Killeen and visit with Pops. That’s where he wanted to run lately when faced with failure. He didn’t know why. Looking at the grave, he would be able to hear the General’s voice, “I told you so.” He didn’t want to go there.

He knew he didn’t have the strength to deal with all the other issues he had to face. This was not the time to visit the dead.

His mind returned to that painful phone call he received several years ago, a week after his last dreaded visit with the General. “Theodore Kline, are you the son of General Walter G. Kline?” asked the husky-voiced lady on the other end of the call.

“I would say so, but I’m not sure at this time if he

would admit it. Why?"

"Sir, I am sorry to inform you your father had a massive heart attack today and was pronounced dead around 2:00 PM in his home." Just like that. There was no sympathy in her voice. No compassion. Just another call she had to make.

Nobody wants to deal with the death of his parents. Kline's mother had died when he was a young teenager from a suspicious one-car accident. At least they called it an accident. Kline always wondered if she had grown tired of not meeting the General's unrelenting expectations as a wife and chose to end it all. That temptation had sometimes flashed through Kline's mind, but he didn't have the stomach for it. It sounded too messy.

Kline knew immediately he had killed the General, his dad, just as if he had put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger. Pops' only son had filled his life with too many failures for his heart to handle. A man of noted success produced a son who was allergic to success. Worthless. That would kill many men, especially one like the General.

The funeral was one of the most difficult things he could remember. He recalled people seeing his total breakdown and saying, not so quietly, "Oh, how that boy must have loved his father."

But his grief had more to do with continually disappointing his dad than losing him. His very life

was a representation of his failures. The ache in his heart only got deeper and harder to heal with every mistake, every failure, and every stupid decision.

Having to deal with Pops' death and the guilt it brought would boil over again if he visited the grave. Kline didn't need that. He hadn't dealt with anything successfully lately. No need to face all that disappointment again today. He had once heard one of his military buddies say, "Every day's worries are sufficient for the day." *Catchy. Must have been Shakespeare.*

The hot Texas sun had already created a sweat as Kline started the squad car. He pressed the buttons to lower both front side windows simultaneously. He had the only squad car without a working air conditioner. *That, he thought, should have warned him he was destined to fail as a deputy. Who didn't have air conditioning in Texas?*

If he were a drinking man, Kline would have found a quiet corner at a bar and drank away his pain, at least for a while. Or he would stop at the Grab-N-Go convenient store for a couple of packs of beer and lock himself in his mobile home for the day. But he was never attracted to alcohol. Pops wasn't a drinking man and never allowed him to participate in the liquid pain reliever. Once he was on his own, that was the one rule that Kline had honored. Well, that and the fact that when he did try it, he hated the taste of the stuff. Then again, this would be a great time to start.

No, he would go home and pack for a hike, just like he did when he was a boy. Back then he would scout around Lake Stillhouse Hollow, letting all the worries wrestle in his subconscious mind until he found some way to exist with them in peace. Or more often, they would crash into his conscious thoughts when he was too exhausted and hot to keep the mental gate closed. Then they would rush in like the Stillhouse dam bursting, flooding everything for about an hour. Those times, he just got where he didn't care anymore. He did not want to go there.

Kline backed the cruiser out of the parking space next to the combined sheriff's office and county lockup. He pulled out of the parking lot onto the hot, dusty pavement of West Oak Street, leaving the pre-fab metal building behind.

He wanted to keep his mind empty until he got into the canyons. He concentrated on thinking of nothing, trying to feel nothing as he pulled to the only stop sign in town. Going straight through the intersection, he could see the single-wide trailer he called home a few blocks ahead.

He wouldn't eat today, a form of self-punishment his mom called an eating disorder. She had done it often, too. But she could make him feel so weak when scolding him for it.

Kline passed the Grab-n-Go, realizing how difficult this day would be. He had been here, what? Six months? Never had been off probation. In trouble,

not once, but twice. First, for losing his temper with the drunken mayor who had no business driving on public roads in his condition. Now, nearly letting a wife-beater leave town with his stamp of approval and a warning ticket.

Little did he know his day was going to be even worse than he had anticipated.

BOOM!

Suddenly, Kline was ripped from his thoughts. “What the...” was all that came out of his mouth.

Looking into his rearview mirror, Kline saw the fireball consume the sheriff’s office and flaming debris falling from the sky. Slamming on his breaks and simultaneously throwing the car into park, Kline jumped out of the cruiser and began running towards the explosion, now two blocks away.

“Why didn’t I take the car?” Kline said aloud as he raced toward the burning building.

Chapter 3: Sly

“All good is hard. All evil is easy. Dying, losing, cheating, and mediocrity is (sic) easy. Stay away from easy.” Scott Alexander

It was approaching 8:15 in the morning and Sly wanted to be completely out of the area. He hadn't planned on sticking around for the explosion. He didn't want to see it or hear it. He didn't need to. He had seen that the sheriff and all the deputies in Terrell County were in one place for a meeting. He had properly prepared the explosives and handed off the package but didn't know if the goofy little man placed it right. That was the only variable. But that was out of his hands.

And then he boogied, only looking back briefly to see the plume of smoke from blocks away as he headed south out of town. *The goofy little man must have done OK.* He was surprised the explosion had already happened. He thought he had set it for fifteen minutes later.

Nobody called him Sly. That was the secret name he called himself. He had been called a lot of other things throughout his life, mostly because of his diminutive size and big round head. *That's what made me so mean, and sly,* he thought as he smiled at his private joke.

The moniker he hated most was “Bookworm.” He only mildly resented “Nerd” and “Geek.” But with his

round head and big eyes with thick glasses, a boy in his high school fifteen years earlier told him he looked like a human caterpillar. That jerk had started calling him “Bookworm” because of his looks and not his bookish ways. The guy’s car burned in the school parking lot the next day and nobody but Sly knew why. Well, maybe the guy who mislabeled him finally figured it out.

Oh, and that so felt good. Almost as good as today. He would leave this one-horse town with five thousand dollars, half of which he already had. The other half was due upon completion, and this completion was marked with a bang. Sly smiled again.

Five thousand was far too little for this job, Sly knew. He was probably the only reliable contractor who would have taken the assignment for that. However, once he heard the assignment, killing police officers, he knew he would have done it for a slick hundred. This was too fun.

Sly knew that the rich man he was working for would call him again. They always did. His list of clients was growing fast. A growing list of satisfied customers would ensure that Sly would stay busy and make the big bucks for a long time. He was the one contractor who would do the dirtiest jobs for a reasonable price and do it with perfection. Another smile.

It was difficult for him to get started in this kind of work. That was because most people

underestimated him based on his looks. He was a small man who looked powerless. But once he succeeded in knocking off a few spouses, lawyers and business partners, his reputation began growing on the Darknet, the secret criminal internet. Now he was turning down work. He had raised his prices a little but would make exceptions if the job sounded good enough.

This one was too juicy to pass up. Nine cops, meeting to organize another attack against the criminal world, never expecting to be blown up. Nine, mind you. *Three would have been an excellent day, Sly thought. But this was having your cake and eating it with ice-cream.*

Sly knew why he hated cops. How many times had some neighbor called the police when his stepdad was cruelly beating him or his mom? And what did the worthless police do? Nothing! They never did anything because his stepdad was a stinking pig himself. They always protected their own and looked the other way to protect them.

Not this time. There were none left to protect anybody. He got them all this time. Maybe, just maybe, he would ask the rich man for more money.



El Paso was a lifetime away from Washington D. C. and much hotter in the summer. One tiny cloud had lost the rest of its pack and wandered alone over the

city. Many found themselves lost in El Paso like the little cloud. For some reason, runaways end up here, and suddenly all options seem to run out.

And then there are those who are sent here in the same way the boy who put the tack in the teacher's chair is sent to the principal's office.

FBI Agent Kathleen McRae had a phone to her ear when she started waving to Agent Phil Morgan through the glass wall between offices. The FBI office in El Paso had been finished eight months earlier, and the new agency plan of openness was on display. That meant no visual privacy. Nobody liked it. And nobody in Washington D. C. cared what they wanted.

Morgan was tall, black, and handsome. At least that's what he liked to believe. His wife, Cindy, told him it was true. And she was beautiful, so her opinion counted. Morgan, at six-feet-four, had played basketball for Purdue before being recruited into the FBI. He could still hit on most shots from almost anywhere in the half-court. Not as many as he used to make, but he still had game.

McRae's right hand was in a fist, moving up and down at arm's length to her side like a pump handle. Morgan had learned that coming from her, this meant to pick up his overnight bags and get ready to roll. Since he knew he would be ready to go long before McRae, he waited at his desk until she finished the phone conversation.

“What’s up?” asked Morgan as he stepped into McRae’s “terrarium,” as she called it. She complained about everything, or more accurately, made a demeaning joke about everything.

“The sheriff’s department in Terrell County blew up. A suspected bombing. Only one surviving deputy,” said McRae as she gathered her purse and briefcase. “I’ll meet you in the parking lot, say, in forty-five minutes?”

Morgan nodded and then stepped out of her way as she rushed by in a hurry prepare for the road trip. As he watched her leave, he considered that she was by no means unattractive. She was quite pretty. She was a tall woman, maybe 5’11”. Brown hair, engaging brown eyes. Fit and healthy. But she tried to be hard and tough, and that didn’t exactly go with her gentle looks. She was the kind soul he had discovered her to be. Unfortunately, that could interfere with the job they had. When an agent wanted to know his partner had his back, he preferred hard and tough.

A woman in a man’s world, he thought. The FBI was still a “good-old-boy” network, even though steps were being taken to change that. The administration had begun implementing changes that allowed women to advance easier than for men. They were not working, and it had chewed McRae up. She was at her fifth station in eight years; a rising star in Quantico, now set aside, way aside, out of the way

where the higher-ups wouldn't have to worry about her. And she was angry. In her second year in El Paso, she had no remaining expectations of ever moving up in the organization.

It was not the kind of anger Morgan understood. He knew the type that one builds up quickly and is released just as easily with an afternoon in the gym shooting hoops, a workout in the weight room or an hour in the shooting range. No. Her anger was like grass growing. It wasn't noticeably worse from day-to-day, but from month-to-month, you noticed it was growing.

Morgan had not been put out to pasture in his current assignment like McRae was, he hoped. His third year after the academy, he was finishing his first year in El Paso. It was better than Tulsa where he spent a miserable first year. In a small office, he could get valuable experience working on different levels of operation instead of being slotted by a supervisor. If not for his ambition, he would love to stay on this post. However, he had bigger plans.



As promised, McRae showed up in her agency issued car mid-morning. She hit the trunk lid release and jumped out to help Morgan put away his bags. As if he needed help.

As Morgan approached the car with his luggage, he smirked when he looked inside. No, he would not say

anything. It amazed him how many “things” a woman needed for an overnight trip. He set his suitcase on the ground and put his suit bag and a duffle bag in the only remaining space in the large trunk

“I’ll put my suitcase in the back seat,” he said, unsuccessfully trying to show as little emotion as he could. “How long do you think we will be there?”

McRae rolled her eyes as she spun towards the car, sensing a bit of sarcasm. She got in the driver’s seat as Morgan put his bag away in the back seat. He then slid into the passenger seat with a small briefcase and his computer bag.

McRae had the car rolling almost before Morgan closed the door. She asked, “What additional information do we have?”

Before Morgan had left the building, he had stopped by Peggy Hawn’s desk, the office secretary and “do-it-all” who had gathered all the orders with available information and backgrounds on the case. Morgan pulled out the folder from his portfolio and opened it. He began to read the notes.

“Reported possible terrorism in Sanderson, Terrell County, TX. Need advance team to evaluate the situation. The sheriff’s office was destroyed in an explosion, and everyone inside was killed. One deputy was not in attendance at the weekly briefing; Theodore Walter Kline. Believed to be dead are

Sheriff Ruben Martin Vargas and seven deputies, two clerks, a 911 dispatcher, one prisoner in lockup and a custodian.

“What do we have on this Theodore guy?” McRae asked as she turned on the ramp onto I-10. They would stay on eastbound Interstate 10 until they reached Fort Stockton and then angle southeast to Sanderson; a long, dreadful five hour drive through some of the most amazing, and more of the most boring, scenery in Texas.

“Kline. He served as an Army MP but had a long disciplinary record. That’s odd,” he said as he looked up at McRae. “Usually you have to be a pretty straight arrow to qualify as an MP.” He flipped through the pages. “The disciplinary actions don’t go with a candidate for that position.

“This explains it. He is the only son of the late two-star general, Walt Kline. Wasn’t he the Prisoner of War in Vietnam who led the other captives to safety?”

“Sounds familiar,” McRae answered, changing lanes quickly, which caused Morgan to look behind them just in time to see a driver in a white pickup wave less than all five fingers. *She hates to drive. Why does she get into the driver’s seat?* Morgan thought.

“Daddy must have covered his bottom a lot,” Morgan said. “Hmmm. The IRS records show that he was a salesman for a boat dealership in Galveston for

a while and then did a short stint as a private investigator in Austin. Neither for very long. He never made much money. I guess Daddy couldn't reach that far to help him in those jobs," Morgan laughed.

McRae smiled at Morgan, looking away from the traffic. "Number one suspect?" The car next to the left honked as she wandered into that lane.

"Theodore Walter Kline," Morgan said, wincing and wishing he was driving. "This case is going to be easy."

Chapter 4: Capper

“When I write notes in my journal, I’m just trying to scribble down as much as possible. Later on, I decide whether to follow some of those first impressions or whether to abandon them.” Natasha Trethewey

Kline had always been proud of his poker face, although he didn’t play poker. You couldn’t be a practical joker if you couldn’t keep a grin off your face. No matter the situation, just like the General had emphasized, he had learned to keep a neutral expression.

But not today. It had been seven hours since the explosion. It still didn’t seem real, but Kline knew it was. It felt real on an extreme level. It was horrible and the reality of it would press on his mind for years, if not forever.

When McRae and Morgan walked into the conference room in the Sanderson City Hall, the last thing on Kline’s mind was his facial expressions. He was seated at the conference table in the drab, blonde paneled conference room and looked as if his entire world had blown up. To him, it had.

“I know I’m your number one suspect if this was no accident,” he said quickly, looking up at the two FBI agents as they stepped through the door. “Let’s get that over with so we can get to what really happened.”

Morgan took a chair opposite Kline and tossed his portfolio on the table. That had worked with many suspects. It gave the impression you knew everything, and you carried the proof in your little bag.

Kline was shorter than he was. Most people were shorter than Morgan. But Morgan wouldn't have wanted to tangle with this guy. He looked strong, the way you prefer your MP's if you needed protection. *You better be careful if someone this dangerous was sitting on the other side of the table in an interrogation.*

"So you think this is not an accident, and the ATF hasn't even arrived yet," Morgan stated dryly. "How would you know that?"

"I trained in Fire, Arson and Explosive investigation in the Army. You have that in my file. I am also certified as an arms expert, and I took one class in knitting."

"And...?" asked Morgan ignoring the quip as McRae took the chair beside him. "What did you see at the crime scene?"

"When I went back to see what happened, when I could finally get in, that is, I could detect the center of the explosion which was a janitorial closet with no gas lines," Kline explained, not looking up. "The only two reasonable explanations for an explosion like that would be a gas explosion after a major accumulation of natural gas from a leak, or a bomb

of some sort. I ruled out the gas theory pretty quick.”

McRae raised her eyebrows in surprise. Kline was, according to their records, 30 years old, not married and inexperienced as a deputy. But he was not what she expected. In Terrell County, you would expect a deputy to be a cop wannabe or police reject from one of the larger cities. Perhaps someone who was difficult to take seriously, particularly with his record. But that didn't describe Kline at all. He looked like he came from central casting for a Hollywood movie. He was in reasonably good shape. And, he looked, well, charming, for lack of a better word. He also seemed sincere, something she seldom saw in men.

“Why were you the only deputy who was out of the building?” she asked.

“I screwed up!” he said without thinking. “The sheriff sent me home to decide if I was going to take this job seriously. He was a good man. An honest man. He was caring, not just to me, to everyone. I want to catch whoever did this.”

“Wait, Kline!” snapped Morgan, thinking the suspect was getting ahead of himself. “Let's wait until the investigation tells us what happened instead of trying to get us to chase our tails.”

Kline looked up from the table to meet Morgan's glare. His pathetic look was replaced by one of burning anger. He ran his fingers through his hair, and his blue eyes sparkled with determination. He

then placed both palms on the table. Morgan was afraid he was going to stand up to challenge him, but Kline remained sitting.

“You wait a minute! I’ll find whoever did this. And they are going to pay, I promise you. It may take me the rest of my life. But I will get whoever did this.”

“OK, everybody calm down,” McRae said, resting her hand on her gun handle. “Deputy Kline, you are not in charge of this investigation. You understand that, right?”

Kline relaxed and took a deep breath. He had promised himself he would control his temper, and he knew the FBI would try to rattle him. But he didn’t do this. He had to convince them quickly, and he knew resisting them wouldn’t be a good strategy.

“I understand that. But the investigation will clear me, and if you don’t resolve this quickly, it will be harder to solve. Somebody is out there getting a good start at getting away. As I said, I will dedicate my life to finding the creep who did this. For mercy’s sake, you better find him before I do.”

The hairs stood out on the back of McRae’s neck from the last statement. It wasn’t the words as much as the tone. She looked at Morgan and motioned for him to step out the door. Morgan got up from the chair opposite Kline, and they stepped into the hall together, closing the door.

“What do you think?” asked McRae.

“He’s good. He almost had me believing him.”

“I believe him,” said McRae.

Morgan didn’t say anything for a moment, waiting for McRae explain her reasoning. But when she didn’t, he asked, “Why?”

“I don’t know, just a hunch I guess,” she finally said. “I think it’s his sincerity. He doesn’t seem guilty to me, and he seriously seems angry about this.”

Here we go again, thought Morgan. They had been down this road before. A hunch. A gut feeling. Morgan was only satisfied with facts. Facts don’t change their minds. Hunches do. Hunches were the bane of detective work.

“How do you want to proceed?” he asked with a sigh. *She is the senior agent*, he reminded himself.

“Let’s get the whole story, from the beginning to the end, several times, listen for inconsistencies and go from there.”

Morgan rolled his eyes, spun and went back into the conference room, with McRae closely on his heels. She took the chair opposite of Kline this time and fished out a notepad and pen from her briefcase.

“Now, tell me everything you did this morning, from the first bathroom trip forward,” she said.

Two hours later, Kline's story had not changed. There were no inconsistencies. He admitted that his relationships with six of the deputies were rocky. He acknowledged that Sheriff Vargas treated him with favor and this caused general resentment in the others. He told of his friendship with Ben and how that friendship had damaged Ben's relationship with the other deputies.

Kline told about his two acts, mistakes, which received discipline. The drunken mayor and the wife beater. One was in the files, but the latest one was not. Vargas hadn't filed it yet, and now it never would be.

He told about the conversation the sheriff had with him concerning his botched traffic stop. He told of leaving the office earlier this morning and pulling away, hearing the explosion, jumping out of the car and running two blocks.

"Why didn't you turn the car around and drive back to the office?" Morgan asked suspiciously.

"That's the same question I asked myself a block down the road."

Kline recalled running to the burning structure. It was an hour before the fire department had the fire knocked down. Another two hours before he could get into the smoldering debris because of the heat. A fireman loaned him a PPE, the protective suit to guard against injury. He recalled futilely trying to

check for life, only to find none.

He told what he saw at the explosion site. The metal girders were bent away from the source of the explosion, which had almost cleared the foundation around the cleaning closet fifteen feet in every direction. There were fragments of charred bodies about the rubble. Ben, who had been sitting furthest from the blast, appeared to have lived briefly but died trying to drag himself out of the fire, something Kline couldn't get out of his mind. The rest of the bodies were charred beyond recognition and in pieces: some large pieces and some small.

Kline struggled through the details. It had been difficult to walk in the burning rubble after the explosion for more reasons than the heat. He had been careful not to disturb the evidence, although the fire department had compromised a lot of evidence hosing out the flames. It was painful to see fellow officers charred and in pieces, dead because of a planted bomb.

But it was even more difficult to describe, harder than he had expected. It was as if stating it made it more real and removed the self-preservation effect of shock. He was overcome with emotions several times but refused to take a break when offered. The body parts scattered around the foundation were the remains of his brothers in service and his friends, even though some of them didn't like him.

There was a tap on the door. Morgan, who was now

leaning against the wall near the door, opened it to a short, round man with a bald head, standing outside the conference room.

“You’re with the FBI, right?” he asked in a squeaky voice while nodding his head like a bobble-head doll.

Morgan nodded, noticing the smell of alcohol on his breath. “I’m Agent Phil Morgan, and this is Agent Kathleen McRae. Who are you?”

“I’m the mayor, Pug Capper. Can I speak with you two out here for a moment?” he asked, looking around Morgan to steal a scornful look at Kline.

Morgan and McRae stepped out of the conference room and closed the door behind them.

“I see you found the suspect,” he said. “I know he did it. He is a rascal. I don’t know what the sheriff saw in him, but I think the sheriff was the only guy who liked him. What are you going to do with him?”

Morgan let out a deep sigh. “Mayor, everyone’s a suspect at this point, even you.”

Mayor Capper’s eyes widened, and his mouth gaped open. A strange sound, like a high-pitched grunt, came out of his mouth as if he couldn’t remember how to make words.

McRae cleared her throat. “Mayor, the first phase of any investigation is to remove as many people from

the suspect list as quickly as possible. The more we eliminate, the closer we are to the one who is responsible for this. We've got this. Let us do our jobs, and we will get to the bottom of it."

"Err, uh, I didn't mean to interfere with your investigation," Capper exclaimed in almost a whisper. "I thought you might want to know who you were dealing with in there." He emphatically pointed to the conference room.

"We don't want opinions to shape our investigation, Mayor," said McRae. "We appreciate your desire to help. We can use your help this evening. There's going to be a lot of people showing up very soon, and we will depend upon your coordination to help get them settled. TV stations and media, ATF investigators, Texas Rangers, just to name a few. When they arrive, can you make sure they have what they need to settle in for a few days? Motel rooms? That sort of thing?"

"Yes, yes, yes, I will do all that I can. Vargas was a friend. And I am the mayor...."

Chapter 5: Crows

“To be trusted is a greater compliment than being loved.” George MacDonald

Worry, worry, worry. That’s what many people would say about Mayor Pug Capper. He worried about everything. He worried about nothing. Now he was worried about something. And he had a reason to be concerned.

Capper left the city hall building in a hurry. He had tried to steer the investigation to Kline, that smart-mouthed deputy who was supposed to be dead. But the FBI wanted to approach this “professionally.” He couldn’t afford them to be professional. That was something to worry about.

He had to do something. There must be something he could do. Perhaps he could talk to Meechi. Meechi always had an idea. He said he had the whole thing figured out anyway. Capper questioned whether he was that smart or that naive. He doubted it was intelligence. Only a fool would consider Meechi smart. Except for Meechi. Then again, the mayor thought of Meechi as a fool.

Capper didn’t like the giant of a man. He didn’t trust him. He had done the man’s dirty work. He had taken a package from that other creepy little man and had insisted that this was as far as he would go. He wouldn’t do any more of Meechi’s bidding. He had been desperate, yes, but he wouldn’t work with

such unpleasant characters as Meechi and that weirdo, Paisley.

He would call Meechi and give him an update. Then Meechi could take care of it any way he wanted. Capper would be done, get his money and resume his life. Maybe he would be more careful with the money this time. Unless he got an excellent opportunity. Sometimes you had to make opportunities, but he had learned his lesson. He would be more careful. You couldn't trust anyone these days.



The sun had given its best, which was oppressive, and was racing for the horizon to restore its anger overnight. As it lost its grip on the temperature, things began to cool quickly in the low humidity of Terrell County.

McRae and Morgan asked Kline to stay in the city hall while they did a preliminary investigation of the explosion site, hoping to get as much done in the fading light of day. Kline went to the restroom and got himself a cola from the vending machine before returning to the conference room to wait.

While the agents were walking to the rubble, a TV van arrived from El Paso. Morgan hurriedly ran to the car and grabbed the crime scene tape, chiding himself for waiting so long. Fortunately, Sanderson was hours from anywhere, and the scene wasn't

already overrun by the media as it would have been closer to a major city.

He trotted to the TV van and pointed the driver where he could park. After the white van with satellite dishes affixed to the top rolled to a stop, a bubbly female reporter with puffy blonde hair tumbled out of the passenger door and wiggled herself to where Morgan waited. He told her the parameters of operation and rules for access to the press. She agreed as she shot Morgan a wink and a smile. She said she would do a preliminary story from across the street, using the explosion site as a background.

Morgan started stringing crime scene tape around the explosion site at least 20 feet from the furthest recognizable explosion debris, using trees, parking signs, fire plugs and leaving one section lying on the ground until he could later find something to hold it up on the northwest corner. This took 20 minutes, and he rejoined McRae on the foundation.

“The center of the explosion was right there,” said McRae pointing to the middle of the foundation. “It was a cleaning room just like Kline said. See, the water plumbing is concentrated around the front with a few pipes running to the center, but the gas plumbing is confined to that back corner,” she said as she pointed to the pipes.

Morgan nodded. “It appears that the explosives were near or on the floor. Someone who planted this had

to have access to the building. There would be no way to plant the explosives in a secure sheriff's office without getting into the building. The building had to be secure since it contained the lockup."

"We need to find out who had access to the building," agreed McRae.

"Have you determined the type of explosives were used?" asked Morgan.

"Something small and powerful," she said, stepping over a burnt fallen office chair and walking to the location of the cleaning closet. The foundation was still radiating heat from the fire. The stench of burned wood and skin invaded her nose.

"The char marks on the foundation indicate that the package was a foot square or smaller. That narrows our type of explosives to about twenty. Some types will be ruled out because they're almost impossible to obtain. Civilians can't get their hands on them. Others in that class, you can't get without proper permits."

Morgan nodded. "So someone with access to high powered explosives and access to the building. That's who we're looking for. The forensic team from ATF and the Rangers should be here tomorrow. They should be able to tell us more."

Morgan rubbed his chin and continued. "Kline had access to the building. He said he had training in

explosives. The question will be, did he have access to the explosive type used in this bomb?"

McRae crossed her arms. "More importantly, did he do it or not?"

In the dark, McRae couldn't see Morgan's eyes roll. But she felt them.



It was past 10:00 PM when McRae and Morgan finished the preliminary inspection. Morgan had found a key box containing keys to the six damaged squad cars and had pulled one to the northwest corner where the crime tape stretched across the ground. He used the car to hold up the tape, completing the task.

"What should we do with Kline?" Morgan asked the senior agent as they started back to the city hall building.

"Let him go home. He's not going to run," she said, suddenly exhausted.

"How can you be so sure?" Morgan asked.

"If he were going to run, he would be gone now. It took us five hours to get here, and he didn't run. We've left him alone in the conference room long enough he could have slipped out a back door to get a good start."

When they entered the room, the agents found Kline still sitting and waiting. He seemed more composed, but there was a growing determination that was immediately detectable by McRae.

“Where’s the mayor?” asked Morgan, as if it was Kline’s day to keep track of the shady man.

“Probably at home or in the bar,” said Kline. “He spends about half his time at both places, as far as I can tell.”

“We asked him to help us make arrangements for the people coming in to work this explosion,” said Morgan, agitated. The mayor seemed to have bailed on them when they needed motel rooms.

“Welcome to Sanderson,” Kline said dryly. “It’s like Bethlehem. No rooms in the motels or hotels. It’s tourist season.”

“Where are we going to stay?” asked McRae.

“I’ve thought about that,” answered Kline. “Agent McRae, you can stay in my trailer. Agent Morgan, you can stay in your car while you keep an eye on me.”

Both agents reacted, but McRae spoke first.

“What? Is your trailer parked next to your house, or what?”

“No, my trailer is my house. It’s the best the city of

Sanderson can offer on short notice.”

McRae was taken aback by the offer.

“I’m not staying in your trailer,” she protested. “I don’t know you, and I am certainly not sleeping in your bed.”

“Agent McRae, you’ll find that my master bedroom is not used. I stay in the small bedroom in the middle of the mobile home on the half bed. It’s quicker and easier to make. And I sleep on the sleeping bag on top of it, which is rolled up on the foot of the bed. I won’t be there all night, and I will not allow you and Morgan to stay together in my house. House rules. My rules.”

“Ok, Kline,” Morgan said as if Kline had suggested impropriety. “My wife wouldn’t allow that either, and neither of us would ever suggest that. But what are you going to do that I have to keep an eye on you?”

“I’m going to guard the sheriff’s office,” said Kline. “It’s a crime scene, and there is at least one criminal out there, maybe more, who would probably like to catch it unguarded so he can contaminate evidence. I’m not going to let that happen.”

Morgan scratched his head. He didn’t like the prime suspect telling him what he needed to do. He wasn’t sure if Kline was guilty or not. But he didn’t have a better idea for the night. As a matter of fact, he

would keep his eye on Kline in case **he** decided to corrupt the crime scene.

McRae's exhaustion was gaining on her. It had been a long day, and a hard day on top of it. Eight law enforcement officers had died along with several citizens, and the reality of that had already begun to weigh on her. But how could she sleep in a comfortable bed when her partner and Kline were either not sleeping or trying to catch some winks in a car?

"No, that's probably not going to work," she said.

"Kline is right, McRae," Morgan conceded. "Kline and I will be fine, but you'll need to be sharp, especially since you will have to take the lead in this investigation. Tomorrow will be hectic enough. We need you to be well rested and at your best."

McRae tried to imagine the next few days. Several agencies would be swarming the small town of Sanderson, population under 700. The city was in the county that some called the armpit of Texas, where the Rio Grande River had turned from its southeast track to the northeast for 93 miles before resuming southeast towards the Gulf of Mexico.

The different agency members will be testy when they arrive. They will take this attack on a sheriff's department personally. They will also be working away from their homes, away from their families, for weeks, if not months, making them edgier. They will

be vying for control of the investigation, each believing their agency is the best equipped and trained, and she would have to stand her ground. She needed the rest. So, she relented.



McRae took one of the slightly damaged squad cars with directions to the location of Kline's trailer and a key. Morgan and Kline went to the explosion site. It seemed like a dream to Kline, even though he'd had 15 hours to work through it in his mind. It made no sense. *Who would bomb a sheriff's office in the wilderness of Texas?*

Morgan pulled the FBI car into a parking area just north of and facing the site. It was midway between the sheriff's office and city hall, two buildings that were built the same time, the same size, the same green color, by the same construction company, and using the same steel construction method. And, having the same stinking orange carpet.

"Can I ask you a question?" Morgan asked before Kline started walking the crime scene perimeter.

Kline nodded but didn't speak.

"Why did Terrell County have eight deputies working under the sheriff? Obviously, this town and this county couldn't afford that many."

"Resources," said Kline. "We receive funds and

additional responsibilities from the Border Patrol, Forestry Department, Parks and Wildlife, Homeland Security and the DEA. They don't want to put an office or employees here, so they send funds to the sheriff's department with a list of expectations. It expanded our responsibilities and paperwork. I always questioned if it was effective. And Vargas was always behind on the paperwork."

"Financially, it makes sense," commented Morgan. "But I can see where that's too much responsibility for a sheriff's department. It would make a deputy's responsibility here different than in any other county. You would have to watch a long border for drugs, human trafficking, poaching. You would have to do park patrols. A tough job."

Kline stretched his arms and yawned.

"It's my understanding that several border counties do the same thing. Saved the federal government literally hundreds of thousands. More responsibility? Yes, and you would have been impressed with Sheriff Vargas. He kept all the plates spinning, except for the paperwork. He was great at his job, (sigh) A great human being. He was a friend. This is a tragic loss for this county and community."

"I've noticed you had great admiration for Vargas," Morgan observed. "I guess he was kind of like another dad to you."

Kline bristled. "I only have one dad. I couldn't

imagine disappointing two of them.”



Kline walked the perimeter of the sheriff's office site most of the night. Morgan tried to stay awake, joining him on occasions. When he was in the car, he attempted to rest. But the conflict in his mind kept him awake most of the time. *Did Kline kill his fellow officers or not?*



Twenty-five miles southeast of town, a crow flew down to dine on his new find in the darkness of a cooling night. Then another flew in, sometimes sharing, sometimes competing. Soon more crows were involved in a choreography that included grabbing a bite, dodging other crows, chasing others away and flying back for another taste of flesh. And then came the buzzards to bring in peace and order, as far as they were concerned. The small, diminutive man with the round head and big eyes with thick glasses lay dead as a buffet for feather creatures.

This proves that it's not only the early bird that gets the bookworm.

Chapter 6: Cuff Me

“Cherish your human connections - your relationships with friends and family.” Barbara Bush

Tuesday

A light morning dew had fallen, and Sanderson smelled damp. Not a pleasant-smelling dampness, but a dusty staleness was carried on the slight morning breeze. It was going to be a hot day in west Texas.

McRae arrived at the crime scene before 6:00 AM. She was refreshed, finding in the master bedroom a new and unused queen-sized bed, with new pillows, sheets, and a comforter. Morgan had cat-napped in the car and wanted a shower, to his chagrin. Kline had kept a constant watch on the site with occasional sitting breaks, water and to relieve himself. He really needed a shower.

No one had shown up at the site to tamper with evidence, but there was plenty of activity this morning. More television crews from San Antonio, Austin, Odessa, Lubbock, Abilene and Dallas/Fort Worth had arrived. Most checked in with McRae or Morgan and began shooting scenes to splice into stories as they received more information. State Troopers and Texas Rangers began to arrive. The Rangers were setting up a command center tent. They checked in with Morgan before they began, respectful of the FBI's early presence and initiated

investigation.

Kline was sitting on the curb beside the crime scene, having handed over the responsibility of guarding the site to the Rangers who had the most personnel on the scene at the time. McRae went to the cruiser to join Morgan and slipped into the passenger seat.

“Do you think they will let us take the lead on this?” she asked Morgan who appeared to be only half awake.

“We’re the presiding authority in these types of situations, and we were first on the scene. The other agencies delayed getting here because they knew we were already here. But this will be a wrestling match until the Director puts his foot down. The Governor is kind of pushy, but I suspect this may be over his head if what I am seeing is close to correct.”

McRae tilted her head at Morgan with raised eyebrows. “What are you seeing?”

“We have to discover a motive, or we get nowhere with this fast. Kline still looks good for this, but we don’t have a motive. But down here along the border, it could honestly be almost anything. The President’s going to build a wall. Somebody will want that contract, and that could get pretty nasty. But I’m not sure what the Sheriff has to do with that.

“And, before the wall goes up, we can expect there to be a rush of activities. They have drug trafficking,

human trafficking, and possibly terrorists trying to sneak in before the wall goes up, just thinking of the worst.”

McRae nodded. “I’ve thought of that. Kline was the new guy on the block in the sheriff’s office so he may or may not have been involved in the pressing issues of the department. We can question him, but I think we need to talk to Vargas’ wife as soon as we can to ask her what was happening in the sheriff’s department. She may know something that can close this case fast.”

A disturbance to the left caught their attention. Looking into the sunrise, Morgan and McRae saw three ATF SWAT busses coming up US-90. They rolled up next to the site, and well-armed troops began unloading.

“What in the world?” McRae exclaimed.

“Looks like the petty infighting is about to begin,” said Morgan.

The ATF busses look like large motorhomes, each containing a complete field lab for investigation. Each one is also equipped with communication systems and can function as a field command post. They were white with blue letters saying “ATF” on the sides and immediately captured the attention of the TV crews and photographers.

McRae was startled by a tap on her window. Turning,

she saw Kline standing beside the car door with his arms extended and his wrists up. “Cuff me! They’re going to insist.”



The next two hours were a mass of confusion. The Texas State Troopers helped the Rangers set up the command post tent, and they were trying to rewire the 911 system. But the ATF demanded to take control because it was a bombing. That was their ballgame. As the higher-ups argued, ATF investigators began combing the explosion site for evidence without consulting with McRae or Morgan. Armed troopers dressed in navy blue uniforms with yellow letters “ATF” on their back surrounded the site and stood guard.

The TV stations representing their affiliated networks had cameras set up, and crew members were running about with increasing urgency. Several requests for interviews came to McRae, but she told them no information was available at the time. She would notify them of a press conference when they had something to share with the public. She was soon told that the Texas Rangers had a media director on site, and he would take care of interviews to keep distractions from the investigating team. That was fine with McRae.

McRae cuffed Kline, and they put him in the back of a slightly damaged squad car for holding. This seemed to be acceptable to everyone from the various

agencies except Major William Byrd, a tall, black ex-marine and the ranking State Trooper on site. He wanted to cart Kline off to Austin for in-depth interrogations. McRae used her FBI credentials to convince him that Kline needed to be more available to investigators.

Under the command post tent, little information was being exchanged because there was little information to be shared. Phone numbers were exchanged. There was no radio tower in Terrell County. The storm, the big one, had blown it down in 2008. It was easier and cheaper to use cell phones when you could get coverage in the sparsely populated county. That was a weakness in the department.

Each agency continued posturing for control of the investigation. McRae and Morgan reported on the little information they had gathered but now stood by as observers while expecting a call from the Director of the FBI to sort through the mess. They understood they didn't personally have the rank or clout to enter the fray, but that would change with a phone call.

The call came at 9:30 AM on McRae's phone. After answering and having a brief conversation, she handed the phone to ATF Special Agent Tom Wilcox, an average size white officer in his 50's with a shaved head. Wilcox was already winning the rooster fight for control, so he seemed the most likely to receive the call. He walked away from the group with the

phone to his ear while everyone looked on awkwardly. Except for Morgan and McRae, who anticipated what was coming down.

When Wilcox returned, he handed McRae her phone and announced authoritatively, “I have just heard from the Director of Homeland Security and the FBI. The ATF will do the site investigation and processing. The State Troopers and Rangers are being asked to patrol the county in the absence of sufficient sheriff personnel. The Governor is being called at this time to ensure his cooperation in the plan, to get that approved. The FBI will take the lead in the investigation and the coordination.”

McRae stepped forward. “First, thank you for your participation and cooperation in this investigation. We can operate as a team and quickly bring swift justice for this horrible crime. I know we all want that.” There were nods around the tent.

“Let me make this clear,” she continued. “I need every one of you. I need your participation, input, observations, and suggestions. The FBI is coordinating this investigation, but we are not going to try to control your responsibilities. We want to make sure we cover all areas of responsibility and integrate them into the complete investigation. Any questions?”

The group was silent and noticeably pleased with McRae’s approach. She had seen agents try to control a multi-agency investigation and they never

received full cooperation. This was one case everybody wanted to get right. She continued her coordination.

“The first issue to resolve is to determine if this is an act of terrorism. Homeland is monitoring electronic chatter to see if anyone claims responsibility.”

Byrd asked forcefully, “Shouldn’t the first order of business be with this deputy, to see if he had anything to do with this?” His suggestion resonated with several in the meeting, McRae noticed.

She spoke up quickly, “That reasoning is already being fully pursued, but the priority is national security.”

Byrd let out a disapproving “Humph!” and turned to view the explosion site through the opening of the tent. All the investigators had seen the damage the bomb had done and the toll it had taken on human life. All had seen the charred body parts of peace officers who had sworn a pledge to protect civilians, even at the risk of their health and lives. Every officer and agent at the scene was taking this personally. Every one of them wanted to deliver justice personally.

No one spoke for a moment, and then Byrd turned to the group and spoke. “I know national security is primary, but this is horrible. I’m mad, and every law enforcement agency member should be mad. This was some of our own; our family.”

Everyone in the group nodded in agreement. Everyone had their assignment. They scattered, and everyone busily went about their duties.

“Where’s the mayor?” McRae asked Morgan.

“Where is anybody in this ghost town?” Morgan added.



Beyond the official agencies working around the explosion site and the media, growing in numbers like forest mushrooms in Longview, trying to flesh out a story, there was no other movement in the town. There were no vehicles, no pedestrians, no gawkers, or anyone. No children were playing in the street, and no shoppers were in the stores. Was it fear that had gripped a small town and all were afraid to come outside? Or were they somewhere else? McRae and Morgan would soon find out.

The Rangers located a telephone company worker after a few calls to the phone company, and he finished connecting the lines to activate the 911 system. The sheriff’s office had served as the 911 Emergency Center, and since it was destroyed, that had to be operational as quickly as possible.

Wilcox went to the Night-Light Stay Motel and commandeered 20 rooms for the State of Texas. Guests using the rooms were escorted off the property with their luggage by ATF troopers, and

incoming guests were turned away. The manager was very unhappy about this until he heard what the rooms rates would be as part of a multi-agency murder investigation. Motel patrons were unhappy with this until they learned there was probably a bomber running loose among them.

After everyone left the command tent, McRae and Morgan removed Kline's cuffs and relocated him from the squad car to the back seat of their car.

"That was quick," said Kline. "I figured I would be locked up at least for a day or two. It was getting hot in there."

McRae looked into the back seat at Kline. "The others went to get a hanging rope," she said with a crooked smile.

"Good luck finding a suitable hanging tree in this county," Kline quipped.

"We need to talk to Vargas' wife. You know where she is?" asked McRae.

"They live... she lives out on County Road 75. Go west. North at the 285 split and to McCue Road."

After 20 minutes, Morgan, who insisted on driving, tried to pull the car into a dusty driveway off a dusty county road. There was no place to park, and cars were parked in the ditches along both sides of the road. The small frame house could have been a car lot for the number of vehicles parked around the

house. It looked as if the entire town was at the Vargas' house to comfort Missy, the sheriff's wife. Since it was a small house, large groups stood around the property in conversations. *Here are the town folks*, McRae thought.

Morgan knocked on the door and was greeted by a short, stocky Hispanic man in his mid-thirties with a tight beard and red eyes. It was noticeable that he had been crying.

"Can I help you?" he asked the two agents at the door. Then he spotted Kline behind them. He stepped between the agents and grabbed up Kline in a bear hug, burying his face into his shoulder. "Ted, what happened? What happened? What happened to Daddy?" he cried.

"I don't know, Marco. I just don't know. But I **will** find out, I promise."

Kline and the FBI agents were led into the small, crowded house. Vargas was not a wealthy man and had a simple house with simple taste. He had explained to Kline on one visit that his family always valued the land for farming and ranching more than having a fancy home and furnishings.

McRae asked to speak with the sheriff's wife. To get away from the townspeople to talk privately, Marco led the three into the master bedroom where Missy, a short, slender Hispanic woman with a pretty smile, was sitting on the bed alone, looking through photo

albums. Marco closed the door.

Kline introduced the agents and explained that they would be taking the lead in the investigation.

McRae asked, “Ms. Vargas, do you know if Sheriff Vargas was having any particularly difficult issues in the county? Problems with any of the citizens that seemed to stand out above the other issues?”

Missy’s lower lip trembled as she tried to steel herself to answer. With an accented voice, she said, “There were the border hoppers and the smugglers, and that was getting worse with the wall coming. There were the squabbles between neighbors, but that is just what a sheriff has to deal with. There was some stuff about the wall contract and who would build it. That was getting nasty. I don’t know the details because Ruben wouldn’t talk details. Ruben never liked to bring work home. He would talk about it briefly but would never talk about the details.”

Morgan said, “Ms. Vargas, we are sorry for your loss. Can you tell me if Sheriff Vargas had any problems with his deputies?”

McRae shot a quick look at Kline wondering if they should have him leave the room so Missy could speak freely.

“No, he loved his boys, especially this one,” Missy said as she stepped to Kline and held him while she cried. “I am so glad you are ok. You are the only one

who made it. The rest of our boys are gone. Ruben's gone."

While holding Missy, Kline reached up with his left hand and wiped a tear from his eye. "I am so, so, sorry, Missy. I am so, so sorry."

Missy held Kline tighter. "But I am so glad you are alive."

Not much more information was gleaned from the discussion. McRae noted how much the sheriff's family loved Kline. But their best lead had not broken the case. However, it did confirm that the angles they were considering for the bombing were, indeed, viable issues for a sheriff.

On the way out of the house, several town members came over to express sympathy to Kline. McRae and Morgan patiently waited as this continued until McRae indicated to Kline that they had to leave. When they reached the car, her phone signaled.

"McRae here. Yes, officer. Where exactly is that? Ok, we'll find it. Thanks.

"Deputy Kline, do you know where the Calvin Dupree place is?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Kline, his mind now spinning, wondering what the Duprees had to do with this investigation.

“Get us there quickly. They found a body, and he has already been identified as someone who may be of interest to this case. We may have caught a break.”

Chapter 7: The Dumps

“What we once enjoyed and deeply loved we can never lose, for all that we love deeply becomes part of us.” Helen Keller

Thirty minutes to the southeast of town down a long dirt driveway, the three found three State Trooper cars and a Texas Ranger pickup truck. Upon getting out of the car, McRae was approached by Ranger Paul Kestler, a young Yankee transplant from upstate New York with a short brown crew cut hairstyle.

“We have a body, and it’s one we’re familiar with. Bobby Paisley, a two-bit criminal for hire; arson and bombings mostly. He’s on our Texas Most Wanted list as number seven.

“Calvin Dupree, the resident here, saw the buzzards circling and went to see if a calf was dead. He found Paisley’s body just this side of that arroyo,” he said as he pointed east into a field of rocks and weeds. “He had two small-caliber bullets to his head. We think it may be related to our case.”

Kline had gotten out of the car and was walking around it to join the group. Morgan looked at him and asked, “Do you know Bobby Parsley? Have you seen him around town?”

“Paisley, not Parsley,” the Ranger corrected him. “And what’s Kline doing out of cuffs?”

“He’s fully cooperating with the investigation and has been proving to be quite valuable,” McRae said defensively, which caught Kline by surprise.

“Send him to the car,” snapped Ranger Kestler. “Please! I have some information that we might not want him to know. Please?” he added softer, remembering decorum.

Kline turned and walked back around to the rear passenger door. “I don’t know if I’ve seen him before or not. The name isn’t familiar. What does he look like?” Kline asked, speaking mostly to himself, and getting no answer. He slid into the car and slammed the door.

Trooper Byrd hurried out of the Duprees’ house with a shout of “Hey!” after observing the previous interaction between Kestler and the agents.

“It is highly doubtful that Kline knew this guy,” he said, almost running. “He’s an East Texas thug for hire. Mostly arson around Houston and Lufkin, and a few suspected murders. But Paisley has to be considered a key element in this investigation. Trust me. You don’t find this guy minutes from a major bombing as a coincidence. But somebody must have hired him. He has no natural interests in this part of the state. The key is finding out who hired him.”

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The Rangers had dispatched a forensic team from

Austin to Sanderson. Five techs of the six-man crew were busy working with the remains and debris from the bombing site in coordination with ATF investigators, searching for clues from the explosion and the grim work of identifying body parts. The sixth man, Abraham Karam, was sent to the Dupree ranch to begin processing the area in which Paisley was found.

McRae and Morgan stayed behind at the Dupree ranch as the other officers left to patrol the rest of the county; 2,358 square miles of desert, rocks, and canyons about the size of Delaware, about 40 miles northeast of Big Bend National Park.

At the time eight patrol officers were supplied by the Ranger and Troopers, cruising the few paved roads and many dirt roads of the county, some little more than a tractor path in width. With a sparse population of 903 in the entire county, most of which lived in the town of Sanderson, there was not much action to see.

Calvin Dupree, a tall and fit rancher, active and healthy for being in his early eighties, and Victoria, his tall Hispanic wife matching him in age and health, came out of the house to meet the FBI agents. Victoria made lemonade, which she offered to McRae and Morgan. When she noticed Kline in the back seat of the car, she quickly returned to the house to fetch him another glass, which he accepted gratefully. The three had not had lunch, and the day

was catching up with them.

As he remained in the car, Kline recovered from his anger and was trying to wrap his head around the situation. It made no sense to him. What possible reason would someone even consider killing a sheriff and his staff in the middle of the desert?

When the Duprees returned to the house, Morgan leaned against the front of the car and rubbed his chin, a habit that meant he was thinking.

“I don’t know. I just don’t know. The easiest conclusion is for this to be Kline’s doing, but that’s not adding up. This body kind of changes the game. So, we have a professional torcher coming nearly 500 miles out of his natural territory to a single stoplight town, or so we are supposed to think, and pulling off one of the largest peace officer assassinations in the nations’ history? Why?”

McRae shook her head slowly. “The sheriff was very well loved and respected by the people, from what I’ve seen. I don’t see any of the citizens doing this, not the ones I’ve met, anyway. And Vargas’ family practically adopted Kline as one of their own. Other than the fact that Kline was just reprimanded, which he admitted to, and we don’t know for sure what was said in that reprimand except what Kline told us,” She paused, “I believe him.”

“Yes, you said that before,” Morgan sighed. He took a deep breath and looked around the barren, dry

land. On the southeast side of the county, the area flattened with a few arroyos, or drainage creeks, that ran only during heavy rainstorms. There were a few scraggly mesquite bushes, or scrubs, as the locals called them, juniper and sage. A lot of cacti. The rest was desert creosote shrub and sparse desert grass. There were no oak, elm or pecan trees struggling to stay alive in the dry climate in this part of Texas, one of the rare places they couldn't survive. *Why would anybody choose to live here?* He didn't see the attraction.

"I think I believe Kline too, honestly, for whatever that's worth. But we have an army of investigators working on this. Let's wait and see where the evidence leads us," said Morgan. "I just want to know one thing right now. Whatever happened to that crazy mayor?"

Within four hours, the ATF agents had associated the bomb used in the sheriff's office explosion with Paisley's bomb-making signature.

McRae called the command post and sent a few officers to the mayor's house. It was empty, and the mayor was nowhere to be found. He was a bachelor with no children, and the empty house offered no clues as to his whereabouts.

Computer forensic teams in Washington, however, uncovered quickly that the mayor was in deep debt. He had an online gambling habit that appeared to be out of control. He had used all of the available credit

on his credit cards, and the Bank of West Texas had begun the process of repossessing his house.



Thursday

Despite the uncertainties and fears, Sanderson was starting to show signs of returning to normality, at least in appearance. Children were venturing outside to play in small numbers early in the mornings. Shoppers were trickling into the stores. Most of the media was beginning to drift out of town, busying themselves with covering other stories, with occasional references to the “Tragedy in Texas.” While the nation had other business and news, the citizen of this town would carry this tragedy in their hearts and show it on their faces for a long time.

And Thursday the mayor was found, or what was left of him. It was the day of Sheriff Vargas’ funeral. The mayor’s body was found along the Rio Grande by some fishermen. A .22 caliber pistol next to his hand initially indicated suicide, and the clean round hole in the temple seemed to confirm it.

McRae requested the command post be moved to a secure building. The best option was the VFD (Volunteer Fire Department) building. The 911 line was quickly rerouted to the building, and the electronics were put into a large closet that became the 911 dispatch room.

The FBI agents kept Kline in their sight as a precaution until they got the call about the mayor's body from the command post. They assigned him to ATF Commander Wilcox and sent them to the funeral.

The funeral for Sheriff Vargas was also a combined memorial service for all eight lost officers and the four county employees who died in the blast. Vargas had recruited his deputies from various parts of the country, so their remains had been shipped to their families' homes for burial. But the County of Terrell would remember all of them in this service.

The funeral was held at Saint James Catholic Church, the largest church building in the county. More than a thousand peace officers arrived in Sanderson from across the country for the memorial in honor of the fallen officers. The building was too small, with the crowd exceeding two thousand.

The First Baptist Church congregation served the family lunch and also moved their portable public-address system to Saint James Church to pipe the service audio outside to the lawn and street, which were packed with standing officers and guests. Citizens of Terrell County were given priority for seating in the church.

The television networks and stations came in mass, though asked to remain two hundred feet from the Church. They somehow managed to ask for sound bites from officers and interview citizens about the

recent tragedy.

Kline was asked to sit with the family, which he gladly did. The service lasted an hour and a half, with two sermons; one each from the Catholic Priest, Father Luis Rodriguez and the First Baptist Pastor, Jerry Barnes.

In the meantime, McRae and Morgan grabbed a forensic team member, raided the sheriff's barn and commandeered three of the county's ATVs (all-terrain vehicles). They drove the four-wheelers south to 5 Mile Road, then to Case Road, and onto a desert trail that led to the Rio Grande where Mayor Pug Capper's body was found.

Ranger Abraham Karam was a city boy. Born in Syria and raised in California with his family, he graduated from Cal-Berkley. As a city boy, he had never ridden an ATV and quickly decided this would be his last time.

The 29-year-old forensic specialist for the Rangers was an expert in explosive forensics, but in west Texas, he had stepped up and volunteered for general crime scene duty for a chance to see the Rio Grande, and he thought riding the four-wheeler would be fun. *Not!*

Almost choking on the dust from the other two ATVs on the dusty roads and trails, Karam dismounted his ride coughing and wiping his eyes. For the early part of the ride, he had tried to ride three-wide to avoid

the others' dust. However, as the roads and trails narrowed, he fell behind, hoping to be far enough back for the dust to settle and yet still be able to keep the FBI agents in sight.

By following the trails to the coordinates, the three found two fishermen standing watch, expressions of sick disgust upon their faces. Jose Greccas from Fort Stockton, 53, had taken his son, Philip, age 30, fishing when they saw the body 30 feet from the edge of the Rio Grande River. Philip sought phone coverage by hiking a half mile north and called 911. Jose had remained with the body and tried to keep the birds from eating the flesh by screaming and waving his arms from a distance. After making the call, Philip returned to his father.

Jose pointed to the body as the team approached and immediately turned his head to regurgitate, again. He decided his fishing was over for the day. It was time to go home.

Fortunately, the two fishermen had stayed well away from the body, not disturbing the ground around it. Karam approached cautiously, looking for tracks. There were plenty of coyote tracks, as well as those of scavenger birds. McRae confirmed it was Capper.

How Mayor Capper got to this location was not immediately apparent. There was no vehicle he had driven and left at the scene. The pistol lay just beyond the reach of his right hand, and his body was on its back, spread eagle. The left arm was chewed

off and mostly eaten by animals, and his legs also showed signs of chewing varmints.

Morgan took a circular pattern beginning 20 feet away from the body and started a spiral path outward around the body. When he reached the river, 30 feet out, he flattened his pattern on the riverside and continued.

“McRae, here! Horse tracks. One horse and it’s shoed. Somebody dropped this body.”

McRae cautiously hurried to where Morgan was pointing, being careful not to cross any suspicious tracks. Someone had taken a mesquite branch with leaves and wiped the horse tracks to the body. The brushing pattern became more prominent and noticeable further from the body. Whoever was covering his tracks had sped up near the end and was less thorough the further he continued. The sweeping stopped about 60 feet from the body and horse tracks began to be more noticeable. The murderer had been careless in leaving the scrub branch beside the tracks.

Karam field-tested the body and body temperature. “This body has been here for more than 12 hours. That’s as good as I can do here. A close timeframe for death is not possible because the body has been here from the previous night and possibly part of the day before. It experienced cooling in the night and then warming again in the heat of the day. I don’t know for how many days, but not more than two,

from decay. That's all I can tell you now," he shouted to the two agents venturing further from the body as they followed the tracks.

Karam cautiously lifted Capper's head to inspect it.

"A small caliber gunshot wound in the temple," he called. "No exit wound."

"Why don't you go back to the body and log what you find," Morgan suggested to McRae. "I'll follow these tracks for a while. If I can't get much of a reading on where they are heading, we can get one of the Rangers or Troopers on an ATV to follow the horse tracks later today.

McRae returned to the body and began gently combing through the dirt around it with her gloved hand. As she expected, she found a shell casing. It was a .22 caliber short shell. She placed it in an evidence bag and secured it in an evidence pouch.

"A .22 is the preferred tool of assassins for close range work. The bullet doesn't exit a skull, but ricochets around in the brain," Karam added. He had never worked with McRae and didn't realize she had learned that in FBI 101.

Morgan returned 10 minutes later. McRae hadn't found anything else. Karam wrapped up his examination of the body. He reported ligature marks on the wrists. This was not a suicide, but somebody wanted it to look that way. However, it was set up

very poorly.

“McRae, we need to return to the Dupree ranch at early light tomorrow and do a spiral search. I bet we find horse tracks somewhere leading away from Paisley’s body too. Do the Duprees have horses? That can confuse the search.”

“I don’t know, but that’s one of the questions we will need to ask,” she said. “If they do, it may be difficult to determine if tracks were left by the killer’s horse or by one of theirs.”

McRae looked up when she heard a strange sound. It was familiar but out of place. Over the rocky ridge on the east flew a Texas National Guard helicopter and it landed in an opening 300 feet away from the body on the bank of the Rio Grande. Two guardsmen hopped out of the chopper and trotted to the agents, one carrying a rolled-up stretcher.

“Captain Key, Texas National Guard,” reported one of the soldiers. “Are you Agent McRae?”

“Yes. Are we under attack?” McRae asked in surprise.

“No, ma’am. Major William Byrd of the Texas State Troopers requested a body pickup. He said you would be surprised, but your phone doesn’t work out here in this neck of the woods.”

What woods? McRae thought. She realized she was missing trees.

“I’ll go with the body,” McRae said to Morgan. “We need a clean chain of evidence. I’ll leave my ATV and somebody can pick it up later. You can meet me back at the command post.”

“I’m going with the body, too,” said Karam. “In other words, I am not getting back on that ATV. It’s either the chopper or you will find my dead cold body out here too.”

For the first time in three days, McRae laughed. She sent Karam and returned to the command post with Morgan.

Chapter 8: Trust Me?

“Honor bespeaks worth. Confidence begets trust. Service brings satisfaction. Cooperation proves the quality of leadership.” James Cash Penney

The line of police cars seemed to continue forever. No one counted the cruisers parked at the internment, but the Sanderson Memorial Cemetery did not have enough parking spaces. All the lanes in it and the road running next to it, Legend Street, and were lined with cars.

The Vargas family rode in a set of rented limousines from Austin, paid for by the governor of Texas, Stan Miller. Many Texas politicians were present at the funeral. Kline rode with ATF Commander Wilcox immediately behind the family at Missy’s request.

Kline was asked to sit with the family at the graveside and say something as part of the service, but he declined with apologies. Marco said he understood when he noticed Kline’s lower lip quivering. Marco didn’t understand fully the ghosts of Kline’s past and how this was unchaining them to haunt anew. Wilcox kept Kline in sight but was beginning to think he was not a concern.

Pastor Jerry Barnes read Psalm 23 over the casket. The Air Force sent an honor guard to play taps and perform a 21-gun salute in honor of Sheriff Vargas’ stellar military career.

This was more difficult for Kline than he expected, for more reasons than the loss of his mentor, Sheriff Vargas, who he loved. The military honors brought back memories of his father's funeral and the disappointment that came with it. Every familiar aspect of Vargas' funeral arrived with another stab of shame, loss, and failure. Wanting to let it all out, Kline fought to remain composed and silent, wrestling against any and every expression of emotion.

After the internment, peace officers and military representatives filed by the casket to say their respects to the family. Many of them knew the sheriff personally and were deeply moved when speaking to Missy and Marco. Kline stood to the side and watched.

Wilcox moved beside Kline and leaned into him.

"Why don't they water this cemetery? There are only a few weeds here. No grass at all," whispered Wilcox.

"I was told they tried that for two years a while back, but the water table dropped too much," said Kline. "Around here, water is more valuable than gold."

"Water!?!!" Wilcox said with a quizzical look.

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That evening, McRae called an "agency leaders" meeting as instructed by the Directors of the FBI and

Homeland Security. They met in the First Baptist Church conference room because of convenience, privacy, and proximity to the crime scene. Pastor Barnes unlocked the building and was asked immediately to leave.

Kline was asked to ride patrol around Sanderson with Ranger Paul Kestler.

McRae began, "The first thing on my list is this: Can we all concede to Deputy Kline's innocence in this matter? The discovery of the mayor's body and the result of the autopsy report gives us knowledge that he was murdered when Kline was in our custody, and that pretty much clears him. Morgan and I had him in our sights the whole night."

Wilcox stood. "I have been with Kline for a major portion of the day, and I don't think he did it. I'm probably the last one to come to that conclusion, but the evidence points away from him. Kline is not incarcerated, something I have never seen in my life as an agent, particularly in a crime nearly this serious. But he shows no desire to escape. He wants to solve this case as bad as I do."

There were nods of agreement from all 15 people in the room.

McRae continued, "We have talked with Governor Miller and Lieutenant Governor Popelka, and they agree. And, since he is the only remaining deputy in Terrell County, they decide that, pending your

agencies' approval and cooperation, he be sworn in as interim sheriff until a special election. The FBI will continue to spearhead this investigation. As this is their recommendation, does anyone have any objections to allowing him in this meeting?"

Everyone looked around the room and nodded in agreement. McRae pulled out her phone and called Kline. "Can you have Kestler drop you off at the meeting at the Baptist Church now? OK, see you in a few."

She then turned her attention back to the room of investigators.

"Now, I want to thank you for all you've done. In my years as an agent, I have never seen a case like this, as I'm sure you can say. I have also not seen such professional cooperation in a multi-agency investigation. I cannot express my appreciation for everyone's cooperation on this team."

Trooper Byrd cleared his throat. "Are we being dismissed?"

"Hold on. Please, let me finish, and I'll explain. Homeland Security, the FBI and the State of Texas believe we need to adjust our personnel now. We have the bulk of the evidence being evaluated in labs, and we are scrambling to find something for 30 people to do. Some of you may be asked to stay a while longer. However, some of you will be going back to your agencies and other assignments. As a

matter of fact, I will be staying here for the duration of the investigation, but Agent Morgan will be going back to El Paso.

“But before disburse, we need to review everything together and make sure this transition doesn’t leave something to fall in the cracks.”

Kline arrived and slipped into the back of the conference room.

McRae acknowledged his presence with a nod and said, “I need to take a five-minute break. Please reconvene at 7:15. We’ll go over all the evidence at that time.”

McRae and Morgan walked to the back of the meeting room, and she said to Kline, “Come with us.”

They stepped out onto the porch-way at the side entrance of the church as the unforgiving sun was disappearing behind the rock mountains west of town.

“Kline, you are now officially cleared of this crime,” McRae said.

“Finally,” he said as he exhaled a big breath. Then with a puzzled look, asked, “What’s next?”

“The Lieutenant Governor will be here in the morning to have you sworn in as interim sheriff until an election. That will probably take a year, maybe shorter, with the investigation going on.”

Kline was stunned. The energy drained from his body, replaced by numbness. He felt nothing, thought nothing. At first, he didn't believe he heard her right. "What did you say?"

"I said the governor wants you to be the interim sheriff until elections can be held. You're the only remaining deputy in the county, so you're the most reasonable choice. The people here know you and trust you."

"I think I could push you over with a feather right now," Morgan laughed as he shook Kline's hand.



As the meeting continued, Kline felt as if his spirit was lifted out of his body. He was watching everything from a distance. It was like a movie in a foreign language without subtitles. This couldn't be real. His thoughts were too confusing to focus on the meeting. He found a notepad and tried to jot down his thoughts and the evidence to keep him focused. He gave that up after 10 minutes. He would remember very little of this night.

The investigative team reviewed all they had discovered. The explosion was determined to be TNT wired to a simple kitchen timer. It had somehow been placed in the cleaning closet in the center of the Sheriff's office and local lockup. The door locks had been collected and confirmed that the building had been properly secured at the time of the

explosion. Whoever planted the bomb had access to the building, or someone with a key allowed them in.

The timer had apparently gone off earlier than planned, based upon lab inspection of the pieces gathered in the explosion. All the personnel in the building had been killed immediately except Deputy Ben Parker and the custodian. Parker had lived long enough to attempt to drag to himself away from the fire but made it only three feet.

The report on Ben snapped Kline out of his numbness. His heart sank. He looked away and wiped a tear from his eye. Though he was back into the meeting mentally, that clarity lasted only for a few moments.

A prisoner had been locked up in the jail. Kline's driver who had beaten his wife, Jeff King, had died in the blast. The custodian, Antonio Martinez, was killed by a falling wall in the women's restroom, which was at the far front of the building. The bathrooms were next to the lobby to allow public access. The additional walls of the two bathrooms between him and the explosion had protected him from the initial blast, but the backdraft of the blast had sucked the exterior wall in, and a beam crashed onto his skull, killing him seconds after the explosion. Two clerks, Linda Nichols and Isabela Perez, had died in the lobby, and the 911 operator, Margie Toller, died in the 911 communications room.

Both Paisley and Mayor Capper were killed with

shots in the head. The pistol used in both murders was identified and found next to Capper's body, a Luger Mark V .22 caliber target model. It was not registered in the national database, and there were no prints on the gun, magazine or the remaining bullets, except Capper's smeared prints on the handle. It had been wiped, indicating the one who had killed the two had at least some experience at killing and most likely behind the bombing.

The autopsy on Paisley indicated he was killed early evening of the bombing and Mayor Capper was killed early morning the next day. Both times exonerated Kline. He was in custody during the times both were murdered.

Horse tracks were leading to and from Capper's body, and the revised team would return Friday morning to the Dupree ranch to do a spiral search for similar tracks from where Paisley's body was found.

A state trooper had followed the horse tracks from Capper's body to an arroyo that flowed into the Rio Grande during heavy storms. But the ground was so rocky in the arroyo the tracks were impossible to follow from that point. However, there was a signature pattern on one of the horseshoe tracks due to wear, cracking and the placement of the nails. It was on the horse's left side, and probably on the back of the horse.

Each horseshoe, like a fingerprint, develops a distinct pattern over time that can be identified. Some are

easily recognized, and some do not register in sandy soil. This signature was clear. Molds of the tracks were taken that were found near the edge of the river in the softer moist ground, giving the forensic team a clear image of the horseshoe pattern.

There was no chatter on the internet or cell networks for any viable group taking credit for a terror attack. That, having the body of the bomber and a dead mayor, removed terrorism from the most likely possibilities, but left a new set of questions.

The group focused on any issues in the community of which the Sheriff may have been addressing. But since the file cabinets were not fireproofed, the fire was so hot the paper was burned from the heat inside the metal frames. The fire had been hot enough that the guns in a gun safe were warped, and the ammo had fired off.

The loss of the records in the fire, plus the fact that Sheriff Vargas hated to write things down, made a clear picture challenging to determine. Vargas also hated computers. They were used minimally as required for filings and were destroyed in the fire.

McRae opened the meeting for group discussions, and a few logistics were discussed. McRae finished the review by handing out new assignments to the agency field leaders. All of the ATF agents would be leaving. Most of the Troopers and Rangers were going to leave the investigation. Four Troopers and four Rangers were going to remain, and those

agencies were going to send two additional officers each to serve with Kline as temporary deputies. Morgan was leaving, and his replacement was undetermined at that time.

McRae ended the meeting by inviting all the officers and agents to Pepe's Restaurant for a departure dinner on the Federal government's dime.

Kline thought about not attending because he was exhausted and just wanted a night's sleep. However, McRae insisted.

Pepe's is the largest dining establishment in Sanderson, which makes it the largest in Terrell County. Everyone on the investigation team was familiar with it. All team members were there except a few unlucky officers who had to maintain county patrols.

Pepe's offered decent Tex-Mex, some traditional Mexican and American favorites and sandwiches. But Morgan had discovered that they prepared one of the best ribeye steaks he ever tasted. Since the FBI was buying, he recommended it to everyone.

The restaurant's staff had cleared the back room which could hold up to 40 diners. Kline took a chair beside McRae because he felt closer to her than any of the others through the early stages of the investigation. Morgan sat next to her on the other side, and Wilcox sat across from her.

Everyone ordered drinks and took menus from the waitress. Kline ordered a soft drink.

“You don’t drink?” asked Wilcox.

“I drink. I drink water, coffee, tea, soft drinks, sports drinks, and such.”

“Ok genius,” Wilcox chuckled. “Alcohol! You don’t drink beer?”

“No,” answered Kline, wondering where this was headed.

“Why?” asked Wilcox after not hearing a reason.

Kline noticed an apologetic look from McRae.

“My dad was very strict about that, and by the time I tried alcohol, I didn’t like it. Got buzzed once and I didn’t like that. I said that was it. I can live without it.”

“I knew your dad,” said Wilcox. “He didn’t drink. Served in Fort Hood with him. A heck of a man.”

Kline nodded, thankful that the waitresses were bringing in drinks. He took a big gulp of his cola and hoped the conversation was ended.

Drinks were consumed, food was eaten and enjoyed, and as the evening progressed, the group became louder and louder. Kline considered this was another reason not to drink alcohol. People begin to lose

control in a short period. Even McRae, who had ordered wine and drank sparingly, was getting a little giggly.

As things began to wind down, officers started drifting out to go to the motel or replace others on patrol. Kline waited for a moment that seemed to be appropriate to make his exit, but McRae placed her hand on his arm and asked him to stay. Kline was not much in the mood for the social scene, but since he would be working with McRae throughout the rest of the investigation, he stayed.

There were a few stragglers, but when the room was almost empty, McRae asked, "Tell me what it is about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You could have had a splendid military career. Nepotism lives, especially in the Army, I know. But you obviously weren't interested. Instead, you stayed in trouble."

"I thought I was no longer a suspect!" Kline protested.

"You're not. That's not why I'm asking. You have displayed some of the best investigative instincts I've seen. You grasped situations while the rest of these guys were trying to figure out what was happening. But you seemed to have lost your way for a while, a long while. Honestly, I believe you were finding your

way here in Sanderson. I want to know who I'll be working with."

Kline was stunned. Speaking of grasping a situation! He felt as if his life had been ripped open and McRae was looking directly into his heart. He thought of deflecting the question, but for the first time in a long time, maybe all of his life, he couldn't think of anything remotely funny to say.

"I... uh... don't know what to say. I didn't make a good general's son. I didn't make a good son, period.

"I joined to be an Army Ranger. Dad killed that, moving me to the Military Police. I hated it."

Both were silent for a moment.

Kline broke the silence with something he had been afraid to say. "But I think I could make a good deputy. A sheriff? I don't know. But a deputy? Yes. I am going to miss Sheriff Vargas."

For the second time, McRae placed her hand on Kline's arm. He looked away and sniffed.

"You'll make a great sheriff," she said. "I recommended you. Morgan, Wilcox, and Byrd agreed, even though they like to pretend it was too big of a job for you. Career guys believe you have to earn it. But when they saw what you were going through, they were convinced you earned it."

Kline looked away again and exhaled a shaky breath.

Sheriff Vargas was dead. His friend and mentor. Here was the rub. He was alive and was soon to be sheriff, not because he deserved it, or he was ready, but because he messed up again. If life was ever going to be fair, it wasn't starting now.

"Do you trust me?" asked McRae.

"I've thought about that," answered Kline. "Yes, I trust you. Why?"

"As I said, we're going to be working together, pretty closely. Somebody hired the death of your unit. I think you were supposed to be in that building, but I don't know why. Somebody killed the mayor and the bomber, so this is looking bigger than we may know. I'll still be in charge of this investigation. But I need you to trust me. Honestly, Morgan never completely did.

"And I need you to know that I trust you. Do you get that? I need you to believe that."

The question hung in the air. He looked into McRae's eyes. Even though she was a little buzzed from her drinks, he saw sincerity, the thing he sensed in her from the beginning.

"Yes, I believe you trust me."

With that, she picked up her handbag, stood and walked toward the exit with a smile.

“See you in the morning.”

Chapter 9: Accountant

“Bravery is the capacity to perform properly even when scared half to death.” Omar N. Bradley

Friday

Kline arrived at the VFD building at 6:00 AM. McRae was already there and on her cell phone. She tossed him a phone, and he caught it. It was a T-Tech satellite phone, one that wasn't dependent upon the one cell tower in Terrell County which was located in Sanderson. There was a box of them on the conference table, compliments of the FBI.

Kline noticed the new 911 set up in the building and a Texas Ranger who looked 14 years old sitting at the controls, smiling. Kline smiled, waved awkwardly and the Ranger waved back, awkwardly, too.

“You are kidding me,” McRae shouted into the phone. “Yes, I've worked with him. Yes, he's, well, thorough? I don't know. We've never gotten along on an investigation. He's demeaning, disrespectful, and, and something else, I'm out of adjectives.”

She looked at Kline and rolled her eyes. With a quick, “Yes, sir,” she put the phone away.

“What's the deal?” Kline asked.

“Have you ever worked with a guy nicknamed ‘The Accountant’?” McRae laughed immediately and

added, "Of course not. You're not FBI."

Kline gave her a puzzled look. "The Accountant?"

"Yes. By the way, I want to introduce you to Doug Collins of the Rangers. I set him up as the daytime 911 dispatcher until we find someone permanently. The other two civilians who were already doing the other shifts have agreed to return, so that's covered. I had to convince them that the bomber was dead, or they wouldn't come back."

Kline walked over, shook Collins' hand and welcomed him to the team.

"Glad to be here, sir," *Up close, he looks even younger*, Kline thought.

Kline turned and looked at McRae. "Did you say 'accountant'? Are we being audited?"

McRae laughed. Kline thought she had an attractive laugh. She had begun to smile and laugh more as the investigation trudged on, and he liked it.

"No, just a nickname. Don't get me started. Are you ready to head out to the Dupree ranch?"

Kline was refreshed from a good night sleep that seemed like 20 minutes. He vaguely remembered the discussion of a spiral search from the spot they found Bobby Paisley's body. Kline led McRae to his squad car. He had learned quickly that he preferred to drive.

“Lieutenant Governor Popelka will be here at 11:00 on a special commission from the governor with a federal judge to swear you in as interim sheriff,” McRae said as she slid into the passenger’s seat. “No press or fanfare, just a simple ceremony.”

“That’s fine,” Kline said. “I’m not one for ceremonies.” *So soon?*



The morning sun was losing its shyness and rising from its hiding place beyond the eastern horizon. The nights were cool in Terrell County, the temperature dipping into the 50’s. But the summer sun would soon be bringing the temperature into the 90’s or above. Early fieldwork, as in working in a field, was preferred in this harsh land.

The two didn’t say much on the way to the Dupree ranch. Both were busy thinking. Kline wanted to avoid the conversation from the night before at Pepe’s. In all of his desire to avoid it, he couldn’t get it out of his head.

As they arrived at the Dupree ranch, Kline drove the car into the field towards the east to the body site which was a couple of hundred yards from the house. Although it had been “cleaned” by the forensic expert, Ranger Karam, the disturbance in the loose dirt was easily recognizable. McRae started an outward spiral search from the site five feet from where the body was dropped. Kline stepped out five

more feet and did the same.

McRae worked her way ahead of him and stopped after four widening circles. "Here! Here's brush marks trying to erase the tracks."

Kline joined her, and they began following the sweep marks left by a leafed branch or thick weed. They found the horse tracks thirty feet beyond, but not the broom this time.

Suddenly a teaspoon amount of dirt kicked up in front of Kline's foot, followed immediately by a sharp crack of a rifle from the north. He knew a bullet traveled faster than sound, so a gunshot would be heard after the slug hit. He turned and dove for McRae, knocking her to the ground and holding her there.

"We're under fire," he shouted.

McRae fumbled to get her phone out of her pocket. She quickly hit 911 as she kept her head low. A few more plumes of dirt flipped into the air near the two, each followed by the nasal report of a small rifle.

"It's a .22 rifle, pretty sure," said Kline. "Wouldn't be my choice of an assault weapon. We may be lucky on that."

"Collins, we are under fire at the Dupree ranch. Contact any Trooper or Ranger on duty and get them out here," McRae shouted into the phone. She gave the coordinates that appeared on the phone.

Kline saw a large rock at the edge of the arroyo to his right and began to roll toward it for cover. He closed the 15 feet quickly and rose up to see if he could spot the shooter. When a bullet pinged off the rock, he ducked back, realizing the shooter from his vantage point had seen his maneuver.

“That outcropping of the ridge to the east,” shouted McRae. “A man on a horse. A big man.”

Kline pulled out his Glock and peeped around the rock, only to hear another “ping” and crack. He ducked behind the rock quickly, not seeing anything. He shot his pistol blindly in the direction of the sound, hoping it would frighten the sniper.

“What can we do?” he shouted to McRae.

“Just keep your head down. The cavalry’s coming.”

Help came, but sooner than they expected. And it didn’t come from the Troopers or Rangers. Behind them, from the Dupree house, a rally of gunfire rang out. From what Kline could tell, he heard a shotgun, a 12 gauge that wouldn’t reach the shooter, and a hunting rifle. He couldn’t determine the caliber of the rifle by the sound. Maybe a 30-06 (pronounced thirty-aught-six) or larger, which would outdo that .22 any day.

He looked back at the house and saw Calvin and Victoria Dupree firing rapidly at the big man on the horse from their front porch. Kline peeked around

the rock and saw the horse charging away, carrying the big man away from the gunfire.

Just for good measure, Kline stood and took a few shots with his service weapon hoping the perp would not considering coming back.

McRae stood, dusting herself off. The Duprees jumped into an old Ford pickup and drove out into the field to join the agents.

“How do you like that?” said Kline.

Dupree stopped the truck short of the agents. He and Victoria jumped out of the pickup, Victoria asking, “Are you ok?”

Kline responded, “Yes, just a little scared. That man was shooting a twenty-two. Do you know who would shoot at us?”

“No, but if I find out who it was, they are in big trouble,” said Calvin firmly, his mouth set in a straight line. “They were on my land without permission.”

Kline chuckled. Then he burst out in laughter. “Not to mention that he just shot at a federal agent and a deputy sheriff.”

“Only you would find humor in that,” McRae smiled.

The Duprees looked at them in wide-eyed bewilderment.

It took 20 minutes for Ranger Paul Kestler to find the location by the coordinates. Coming in from a different direction from his first trip out there, he lost five minutes by turning down a road that looked to be going in the right direction. However, it curved and veered eastward away from the Dupree ranch. Little did he know if he had kept going, he would have encountered a man on a horse with a rifle, and not in a good mood.

When he arrived, McRae and Kline were investigating the outcropping of rocks where the shooter had been hiding. There were plenty of shell casings. However, trying to find a .22 slug in the desert would be impossible. He hoped they could find a fingerprint on one of the shells. He didn't know they wouldn't need it.

Kestler followed a fresh set of horse tracks. Familiar with the previous investigation, he quickly identified one print clear enough to determine that it had the same horseshoe signature as the one found by the Rio Grande. It was one of the horse's left shoes.

Calvin and Victoria stayed at the truck as instructed by McRae. When the investigators returned, Kestler drove to town to retrieve one of the ATVs to follow the tracks further. McRae and Kline thanked the Duprees repeatedly, and the couple humbly said, "It was nothing."

On the way back to the command post, Kline asked, "If that was our guy, and I am convinced he was, what was he doing at the scene of the body drop again? There's no way he could have known we were going back there today."

McRae looked at Kline. "I wondered the same thing. My only guess is he knew about us finding the tracks at the Rio Grande, and he hoped to return undetected so he could do a better sweep job than he did before."

"How would he know about the tracks at the Rio Grande?" Kline asked.

McRae smiled. "One of the reasons we cut the investigation team, besides the fact we were running over each other is, cops talk. They have coffee together. They dine together, usually in groups of up to four. They talk about their jobs, often not so careful about being heard. Anyone could have overheard them. Once the curious public gets some interesting information, it's all over the county."

"That makes sense. So again, we are still at zero in finding the nexus of the crime in this investigation."

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Ranger Kestler pulled the ATV trailer into the Dupree ranch and parked near the house. After notifying the Duprees he was there, he began following the horse tracks on the ATV. He cautiously moved forward,

taking his time, not knowing whether he would reencounter the dangerous sniper. Someone out there was not averse to shooting at peace officers.

After 45 minutes of slow tracking, he came to a gravel road. It looked familiar. He stopped and looked both ways on the road. And then he remembered it. It was the road he had wrongly taken earlier. He realized that he had nearly crossed paths with a killer and admitted to himself something he would not disclose to anyone else. He would not have been ready for that encounter. He would be more cautious when tracking a killer from this day forward.

The tracks virtually ended at the gravel road, which was County Road 22. The horse and rider did not travel straight across the road at that spot, but must have followed it for some distance, he determined. Which direction, he could only guess. He also decided that finding where the rider was heading would have been sheer luck or would require more time than he currently had.

Again, he didn't know that the shooter had looped around and returned to the house from another direction. He would find that out soon, too.

On his way out of their field, Kestler stopped by the Dupree house. He knocked on the front door to notify them he was leaving. No one came to the door. It was a large older farm house. He walked around to the back of the house.

Next to the back door was a kitchen window. He saw two small clean holes in the window pane leaving spider-web cracks from the impact point. He grabbed his T-tech phone and called the dispatcher. "Send McRae and Kline back to the Dupree ranch as quickly as possible. The Duprees have been attacked."

Kestler slowly opened the back door and entered the kitchen, failing to identify himself. He saw blood on the counter by the sink beneath the window and some on the floor, but there was no body, injured or otherwise. He led with his service pistol, eased down the main hallway and began opening the master bedroom door, looking in. Suddenly someone quickly stepped out from behind the bedroom door in front of him. Kestler was staring down the barrel of a Nagant seven shot Russian revolver. He almost fired his pistol in surprise.

The barrel quickly fell. Calvin Dupree was standing in the bedroom shaking and holding his pistol at his side.

"Officer, I didn't know it was you."

Kestler nearly fainted, but quickly gathered his wits. He had never faced death so close to his nose.

"My wife's been shot," Calvin screamed at Kestler.

Kestler looked around Dupree to the bed and saw Victoria lying on her back, crying quietly, with a towel over her right shoulder which was stained with the

red fluid of life.

The officer quickly removed the towel, assessed the injury, and placed it back. The wound was small but was bleeding too much for its size. *Must have hit a vein or something.*

He slipped his hand under her shoulder to feel for an exit wound. She recoiled in pain, but there was no exit opening.

“Dupree, hold that towel tightly to slow the bleeding. I’ll be right back.”

Kestler had passed a restroom in the hallway. He returned there, looking for something to stop, or slow, the bleeding. After finding nothing in the medicine cabinet behind the mirror, he unrolled a stretch of toilet tissue and made a small, tight ball. He ran back into the bedroom and almost knocked Dupree over getting to Victoria.

“Ma’am, I have to slow the bleeding and get you to the hospital. Do you understand?”

Victory nodded and cried, “Just help me.”

“This is going to hurt, but this is our best chance,” Kestler said apologetically.

“Go ahead,” Calvin said sobbing. “Save my wife, please.”

Kestler removed the bloody towel and quickly stuffed the toilet tissue wad deep into the small wound. His index finger was too large for the .22 caliber opening. He switched to his little finger. Victoria squirmed in pain as he pushed it deep into her shoulder. The bleeding slowed but didn't stop.

Kestler bent over, pushed his hands under Victoria thin body and picked her up. "Go ahead of me and open the doors," he shouted to Dupree.

Dupree darted ahead, leading the way through the front door, down the porch steps and to the Ranger's pickup, opening doors as he went. Kestler, following closely behind, placed Victoria in the passenger's seat of the truck and slid her to the middle. He ran around to the driver's door as Dupree slid in next to his hurting wife.

"Where is the closest hospital or clinic?" Kestler asked.

"No," Dupree answered. "The vet is closer."

Chapter 10: The Vet

The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.
Robert Frost

Dr. Patrick Smythe operated his thriving large and small animal veterinarian practice from his ranch home due south of Sanderson. In all honesty, he would tell you he worked on far too many humans for a vet. He had delivered babies for many of his neighbors and had stabilized many emergency cases before they were transported to Fort Stockton. *Hey, it worked, usually.*

Kestler had Dupree alert the vet on the way by calling him with his T-Tech phone. When they arrived, he parked his vehicle in front of the vet office which was attached to the front of a modern style barn. Dr. Smythe, a medium-sized man of 60 with a ring of hair around a big bald spot, was waiting.

“I can patch her up, but she will still need to get to Fort Stockton for blood from the looks of that towel,” said Smythe. “She’s bled a lot. Bring her inside to the examination room.”

After they had laid Victoria on a pet examination table, Smythe told the Ranger and Dupree they would have to wait outside due to the possibility of contamination. Then he went to work. They stepped out into the burning sun on a cloudless day, not

noticing the heat.

Meanwhile, McRae and Kline arrived at the Dupree ranch. They spoke with Kestler on the phone, getting information and updates on Victoria Dupree. As McRae searched the house, Kline quickly scanned the backyard and the field directly behind the house and well house, quite sure he would find what he was looking for. And he found it. Horse tracks and two .22 caliber shell casings.

"I'm taking the ATV Kestler left behind and following the tracks," Kline shouted to McRae.

"A waste of time," McRae shouted back, coming out the back door. "They will lead to County Road 22 and disappear. We will need to do a dedicated search along that road when we have more time."

Kline and McRae quickly drove to Dr. Smythe's ranch to find Kestler and Dupree pacing outside the vet's office. Dupree was visibly scared and worried. Kestler was not much better.

"This is taking too long," Dupree said as he was ringing his hands.

Kline was going to put his arm around Dupree's shoulder when Smythe stepped out of the office, smiling like he had delivered a brand-new baby. "She is going to be just fine," he said. "You got a mighty fine wife, Dupe."

Dupree gasped, "What about the blood she needs?"

“I gave her plasma,” said the smiling vet. “She’s a healthy woman, and that will take care of her. But take her to Fort Stockton anyway. She’ll need it cleaned up and plenty of time in rehab.”

“You put horse plasma in my wife?” Dupree asked in surprise.

“No, horse plasma wouldn’t work, Dupe. But I happened to have a fresh batch of hog plasma that worked just fine.”



Kline swapped vehicles with Kestler. They loaded Victoria, who was heavily sedated, into the back seat of the cruiser, surrounded by pillows fetched by Smythe. Kestler and Dupree darted off to Fort Stockton with assurances from the vet that Victoria would survive the 65-mile trip. Kestler said it would take only 30 minutes for him to reach the hospital. Dupree said, “I hope not!”

Kline and McRae thanked Dr. Smythe for his quick care of Victoria.

“What the heck is going on here?” asked Smythe. “The Sheriff’s department’s been bombed, the mayor is murdered, another guy is found dead, and Victoria is shot. This ain’t the wild, wild west.”

“You could have fooled me,” mumbled McRae.

“Dr. Smythe, this is an ongoing investigation,” Kline said politely. “We’re not at liberty to say where we are in it, but we’re working as hard and as fast as we can to give you, and the fine people in this county, answers.”

“You’re that FBI lady then,” guessed Smythe, smiling at McRae. “You’re a mighty fine looking woman. I never met an FBI lady before. Well, in fact, I never met an FBI agent that I know of.”

McRae extended her hand and blushed, and the vet shook it heartily.

“Dr. Smythe, I can assure you the FBI sent us the best,” Kline said. “This here is a good one,” he added, pointing to McRae.

On the way back to town, McRae asked Kline, “Am I the best or just a good one? I couldn’t figure that out from what you said.”

Kline looked at McRae, not knowing what he was going to say. But he decided to sit there with his mouth opened and see if she would figure it out.

McRae started laughing. She laughed most of the way to town.



When Kline pulled up to the command post, a tall, slender man in his fifties with wire-rimmed glasses, with wild salt and pepper hair and a 30-year-old gray

suit was awaiting them in the parking lot, expecting their return.

“Get ready to meet ‘The Accountant,’” McRae said softly.

Philip Gruber winced when he saw McRae. He went to the driver’s side of the Ranger truck to greet Kline first despite knowing McRae and that she was the lead investigator.

“I’m Philip Gruber from the FBI,” said the Accountant, extending his hand before Kline got out of the car.

Kline shook his hand. “Deputy Sheriff Ted Kline. Glad you could join the team.”

“You have some more visitors inside the fire department, Deputy. Or should I say, Sheriff?” Gruber smiled showing the gap between his front teeth.

“Hi, Phil,” McRae called out, not even looking at the Accountant. She stomped directly into the command post.

The three were met by two men in newer suits than Gruber wore. One was black and introduced himself as Federal Judge George Matthews. The other Kline recognized as Lieutenant Governor Pete Popelka, a former college football player from his Alma Mater, TCU. He introduced them to the agents.

In a quick ceremony, Judge Matthews led Kline in the oath of office. As Kline placed his hand on the Bible held by Lieutenant Governor Popelka, the words sounded heavier than Kline would ever have imagined:

"I, Theodore W. Kline, do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the duties of the office of Sheriff of Terrell County, State of Texas, and will to the best of my ability preserve, protect and defend the Constitution and Laws of the United States and the State of Texas; and I furthermore solemnly swear that I have not directly or indirectly paid, offered, or promised to pay, contributed, nor promised to contribute any money or valuable thing, or promised any public office or employment as a reward for the appointment of this office of which I was appointed, to secure my appointment. So help me God."

Popelka shook Kline's hand. "I had never met you, but the reports about you in Austin are glowing. Everybody thinks you're the man for the job," he said.

Judge Mathews smiled broadly, shaking Kline's hand. "You are now the duly appointed Sheriff of Terrell County, Texas, young man, until a proper election shall be completed. Congratulations, Ted. Do us proud."

There it was. "Do us proud"; something Kline had not experienced in 31 years of living. Now he had pledged before God, he assumed, and before a

federal judge that he would do that to the best of his ability.

McRae noticed the face of a lost soul in Kline's expression. She quickly embraced him and said, "Congratulations, Sheriff. You've got this." He held the hug for a few seconds.

The moments of embrace allowed Kline to compose himself and put a smile on his face. However, it was not genuine. He was hiding what he knew were doubts and fears. But with her touch, a warm feeling went through him. Courage seemed to flow from her.

A badly burned badge was handed to him by the judge. "You will have to order another one. But, son, I would wear that one proudly. It was Sheriff Vargas' badge."

Kline swallowed hard, looking at the marred badge and what it represented flooded his mind. Again, McRae stepped up, this time removing his deputy badge and replacing it with Vargas' burnt badge. She quickly hugged him again and backed away. Their eyes met, but Kline quickly looked away. So many expectations for one who knew so little about success.

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Meechi swaggered into the home office of the ranch as if he was part owner. At least, that's the

impression the man behind the desk was getting. And he didn't like it.

"Took care of," he announced in poor English as he slid his bear-like frame into one of the two wingback chairs facing the desk. The chair groaned under his massive weight, crying for relief.

In reality, after the things the owner had asked him to do, Meechi deserved to be part owner, at least in his mind. He would find a way to cash in on the information he had about this crime spree someday. Well, that was the plan.

"How did you take care of it?"

"I went back and removed my tracks. And I killed a lady who was shooting at me," he said laughing.

"Shot her right in the heart. Scared her husband to death. I don't think anyone else will be stupid enough to shoot at me anymore."

"Did anybody else see you?" asked the ranch owner.

"Not from where I was hiding," he lied. "I'm more careful than that. They shot towards me, but they didn't see me. I was too far away."

The ranch owner already knew better. He had already received phone calls about it. Or more specifically, his wife did. She was always on the phone with someone.

He knew Victoria Dupree had been shot from a short

distance in the shoulder as she finished cleaning some dishes. She survived, thanks to the quick work of a Texas Ranger and that nosy veterinarian. Odds were the lady got a good look at Meechi when she was doing dishes. No doubt, she would talk during her recovery.

The worst of it, Meechi was only supposed to kill the sheriff, not the entire department. Either the mayor or this ranch foreman had changed the order. So, it created a national crisis, and every law enforcement agency in the nation was looking into it. If he had just followed instructions, this problem would be over by now.

Now it would be impossible to eliminate all the witnesses who saw Meechi. The ranch owner knew that an FBI agent and acting sheriff Kline saw Meechi. The liar could not be trusted anymore. The man behind the desk wondered if he should have ever believed him. He was sloppy. His caution was exaggerated. It appeared he wasn't careful at all. Too many bodies were being found.

There was an easier way to deal with this, one that would spoil the investigation of the bombing. He would make sure that they would never find Meechi's body.

Chapter 11: Monkey Dance

“For every minute you remain angry, you give up sixty seconds of peace of mind.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

Gruber left the sheriff’s swearing-in ceremony and drove to Fort Stockton to the Pecos County Memorial Hospital which was located on the north side of town. Along the way, he met a Terrell County Sheriff car on Highway 285 and guessed it was Ranger Kestler returning to Sanderson. He wondered aloud why Kestler couldn’t, or didn’t, ask the same questions he was sent to ask.

Gruber made his way into the newly built hospital and, after a few questions to the staff, quickly located Calvin Dupree in the cafeteria getting a free cup of coffee. Gruber grabbed a cup. That was the price he preferred to pay.

After introductions, Dupree wanted to go to Victoria’s room before she was moved from recovery. Gruber walked with him. “Mr. Dupree, did your wife say anything about seeing the person who shot her?”

“Yep. On the way to the hospital, she kept saying, ‘I saw him. The man on the horse.’ Over and over.”

“Did she say she recognized him, or describe him?”

“No. She was going in and out of sleep because of the medication. We kept telling her to save her

strength.”

Gruber and Dupree arrived at the empty hospital room. It always looked strange to Gruber for a hospital room to be missing the bed. He always imagined that before the patient returned from surgery, the room was filled with worry. In many cases, after the patient returned, the room would be filled with hope.

“Mr. Dupree, do you suspect you might know who shot your wife? Do you know the man on the horse?”

Dupree took a deep breath. He slowly released the air, trying to control his anger.

“I don’t know. I have my suspicions. But our county is a small community. That narrows down who it might be, but it also makes throwing accusations around more hurtful. I’d rather not say.”

“Mr. Dupree, please! I assure you we will handle this with all discretion and ensure that no one who’s mistakenly caught up in suspicions based on your word will get hurt. Tell me who you think it might be. The alternatives are both losing propositions.”

Dupree tried to appear puzzled by that last statement, but Gruber could see the flash of recognition in his eyes. He was a pretty sharp tack.

“What are the alternatives you’re talking about?”

“One, any idea of you handling this yourself outside the law, or, two, the idea of letting this go unpunished. Both of those are non-starters.”

“Ah! I see. Well, I don’t want to make any false accusations. I really don’t want to say what I thought. I’d be guessing. And furthermore, I really don’t want you talking to my wife, particularly since she’ll be under the influence of medications for quite a spell.”

With that, Dupree shut down. “I appreciate you coming up here and all. But I really would appreciate it if you leave before my wife gets out of recovery.”

Gruber complied and made his way out of the hospital and to his car.

By the time Gruber was fastening his seat belt, he had McRae on the phone giving her a report of what he had found.

“Oh, no!” McRae responded. Pulling the phone away from her mouth, she mouthed to Kline, “Dupree isn’t talking.”

McRae and Kline were sitting in the Chicken Wing, a fast food place that featured both fried and roasted chicken. More importantly, they had homemade biscuits. They were eating a very late lunch and going over the details and plans.

“OK. Well, head on back,” McRae said into the phone. “We’ll catch up when you get here.”

Kline didn't take his eyes off McRae, which was easy, until after she disconnected the phone. He was trying to read in her expressions both ends of the conversation.

"Did he say why Dupree isn't saying who he thinks her shooter might be?" he asked quietly, looking around to see if anyone could hear their conversation.

"Something about it being a small town and false accusations being hurtful. Gruber said Mrs. Dupree saw someone but Dupree doesn't want us to talk to her."

"He's scared," Kline said, and then looked up suddenly. "Either that or very, very mad. I'm afraid he wants to take care of this himself."

"This is a scary situation. Gruber said he saw anger, and if he's that angry, he may go after the man on the horse."

"You're right about that," Kline agreed. After thinking a moment, he added, "I think I know someone who can help." He began fishing his phone from its carrying case on his left hip. He quickly made a call.

The phone rang three times, and an answering machine answered. *Who still uses answering machines?* Kline motioned for a pen and paper as he listened to the message. McRae already had her notepad and pen out for making notes. She slid them

across the small table.

Kline jotted down the number at the end of the message. He wrote "Barnes" beside it. He then dialed the new number on his phone. McRae craned her neck to read it and then smiled knowingly.

"This is the Barnes' residence," answered a young girl. "May I help you?"

"Is this Kaytee?"

"Yes, it is."

"Is your daddy home?"

"I'm not supposed to say," Kaytee said in a business-like manner.

"Is your mommy available?"

"I'm not supposed to say that too."

"This is Deputy, or, uh, Sheriff Kline, Kaytee. I worked with Sheriff Vargas. Do you know who I am?"

"Maybe."

Kline blushed and looked up at McRae with a silly smile. He shook his head slowly, dreading the next words he was about to say.

"I'm the deputy that does the funny monkey dance," he said softly.

McRae could hear the little girl's giggle from Kline's phone. She laughed too.

"I need to talk to your daddy, and it's really important. If he's not home, can you give me his cell phone number?"

Kline jotted down the number and repeated it to make sure he had it right. He then dialed the third number, a number he was determined to save on his phone.

"This is Jerry," responded the voice.

"Reverend Barnes, this is Sheriff Kline. Listen, are you aware that one of your church members has been shot and is in the hospital in Fort Stockton?"

"Why, yes. I'm on my way there now. Do you know if she's OK?"

"I think she'll be fine. Dr. Smythe patched her up good before they took her. I may need your help on this."

"Ok," Barnes answered hesitantly. "What is it you want me to do?"

"Victoria may have seen her shooter. Calvin's probably pretty worked up and wouldn't tell us who he thinks the shooter might be. I'm afraid he may have his mind set on revenge, if you know what I mean."

“Dupe’s got a temper, but I’ll talk him down,” said the pastor. “But if they tell me something, without their approval, I really can’t help you more than that, you know.”

“I know. Just don’t let Dupree do anything he’ll regret.”

Kline ended the call and said, “Let’s go, I’ve got another idea.”

McRae smiled. “Not until I see the funny monkey dance.”



Kline drove McRae’s FBI issued car to a small, well-kept frame house a block west of the old downtown area; a row of brick buildings on each side of First Street that had been vacant for years.

After knocking on the door, a tall, slender cowboy in his seventies greeted them. Typical of a cowboy, he had his boots on with blue jeans. But out of character, he had on a red “Beat Cancer” tee-shirt. He walked with a limp and stooped over slightly from too many days on horseback.

Bailey Birdwell invited the investigators into his quaint living room. The walls of the entryway and living room were covered with framed pencil drawings reflecting the old west. Cowboys roping calves, riding bulls, branding cattle. Scenes of old homesteads with simple houses and barns,

surrounded by wildflowers. McRae paused at one drawing in the entryway to read the name of the artist scribbled artfully on the bottom right-hand corner: Bailey Birdwell.

“These are amazing,” she said.

“Have a seat,” Bailey shouted, not hearing McRae. He was near stone deaf. “I’m goin’ to sit, so you might as well join me.”

Bailey took his seat in a recliner chair that was made of corduroy several decades ago. The matching loveseat was positioned opposite of the chair in the small room, and an old tube TV was at the end of the room in front of a bookshelf. A black-and-white episode of “The Lone Ranger” was showing on the TV, but it was more green and white.

“Bailey, this is FBI Agent Kathleen McRae. We’ve come to ask for your help,” Kline shouted, knowing Bailey was nearly stone deaf.

“I heard all the goin’s on around here,” he said. *How does he hear anything?* “Pretty sad state of the world. Sorry ‘bout your boss, Kline.”

“Yes, sir. That’s why we’re here. I need a drawing to make a wanted poster. I was hoping you could whittle out enough time to help us,” Kline shouted, suddenly developing a strong Texas drawl as if the accent would help the old ears recognize the muffled words.

McRae smiled at Kline's effort to match the cowboy talk that Bailey used.

"You goin' to describe this feller so I can draw him up?" asked Bailey.

"Kind of. All we saw was a huge man on a horse with a .22 rifle taking shots at us. We didn't get a good look. That's all we have."

"Looked kinda like a bear on a horse?" Bailey asked.

"Exactly," Kline answered.

"You don't need no drawing, sir," Bailey said. "You just described Meechi, the ranch foreman on the Double D. He's a nasty feller, and I wouldn't put this all past 'im."



Kline had heard stories of the foreman at the Double D Ranch. The Sheriff's office had received several complaints about him from ranch hands, as well as others around the county because of his bullying tactics and sour disposition. But they never got any citizen to come in and sign a written complaint.

Sheriff Vargas had been to the Double D Ranch at least two times the previous months, as Kline could recall. He chided himself for not remembering this when they were trying to identify suspects. He had never seen Meechi before so that he wouldn't have recognized him as "the man on the horse." But if he

were, he would be easy to identify.

He explained this all to McRae as they were returning to the command post. Each time Vargas had shown up at the electronic gate of the largest ranch in the county, he couldn't get in. Shortly after each attempt, Pete Alvarez, ranch owner, would call the Sheriff and set up a meeting to "work things out."

Pete Alvarez's father had founded the Double D Ranch in the 1970s. Pedro was about to lose the small ranch that had been in his family for generations in a poker game, the story goes. But in the final hand, he decided to "double down." He won the hand and 100 thousand acres, thus adopting the name, "The Double D." To pay his back taxes and fund his planned expansion, he sold off 20 thousand acres and his small ranch. From that point, he had kept it afloat. The story says that he gave up gambling after that. *Very doubtful.*

Pedro had his best success when he began raising rodeo bulls and selling them for large profits to brokers. In eight years, the Double D, nicknamed the "DD," had become one of the five top rodeo bull producers in North America.

Pete sought to diversify the ranch even before his dad handed the operation over to him. He brought in some buffalo, but he quickly lost interest in those once he found that the market was soft. He still allows them to wander around the ranch.

He then purchased an excellent herd of Longhorns which are very popular, and expensive, in Texas.

But his most successful improvement occurred after he took full control of the ranch from his dad. His fortune came when he ceased selling the rodeo bulls to brokers and began leasing them to the rodeo circuits directly. Some said he discovered the proper lease amount by blackmailing, or physically beating, a broker.

Kline knew if his hunch was right, Alvarez had the resources to make the investigation far more difficult, so he wanted to proceed cautiously. When he and McRae arrived at the VFD, he pulled the firefighter's map off the wall and placed it on the table. McRae started up her tablet computer and looked up the boundaries of the DD.

Though the DD was the biggest ranch in Terrell County, it was nowhere near the largest in Texas, which was the King Ranch, spanning more than 900 thousand acres. But it was big enough to make the website register of the 50 biggest ranches, and the map on the internet site showed the boundaries.

Gruber, the Accountant, arrived a few minutes later, and they brought him up to speed. Looking at the map, they marked the locations of the horse tracks and the body dumps on the south side of the county.

"If you were going to ride a horse from the DD to these locations, what path would be the best?" Kline

asked.

“That wouldn’t make sense,” McRae observed.

“That’s some 45 miles as the crow flies. Meechi couldn’t have made the entire trip by horseback. At best, five miles an hour for that distance would be a nine-hour ride one way. That’s if the horse survived.”

“He would have had to haul his horse with a trailer somewhere into the area, and then ride the horse in for the body drops,” Kline observed.

“I have to show you something,” Gruber said as he pulled a folded piece of paper out of his jacket pocket. “When I was in here earlier before the ceremony, I sketched this map of the county. I noted the body drop locations down here. See, criminals aren’t that smart.”

Gruber placed his paper on the map that was spread on the table.

“When I looked at the body locations, I thought, ‘Where would this unsub most likely be hiding?’ The assumption I made was the opposite end of the county.”

Gruber stuck out his right-hand pointer finger and brought it down on the paper like a dart.

“Bingo! The Double D Ranch,” Kline said.

Chapter 12: Meechi

“You cannot believe in God until you believe in yourself.” Swami Vivekananda

Dominic Pacheco, known to most as Meechi, had been ranch foreman for the DD for the past three years. He was not the social type and had gotten off the ranch very few times. Most of the residents of Terrell County didn't know Meechi and had never seen him. You couldn't miss him if you saw him. He had a body like an NFL linebacker except for the badly bowed legs.

He was, however, seen by some, particularly during the annual private rodeo and barbeque on the DD. It was by invitation only, and Bailey Birdwell had been a regular invitee.

McRae logged into the FBI database and looked at his criminal record. Pacheco was raised in Lubbock and was constantly in trouble as a youth. He worked for the livestock auction there for several years but was released when he had to spend six months in lockup for disorderly conduct-- literally tearing a bar apart when the owner refused to serve him after he was drunk.

His record seemed to disappear when he was 21 years old. Dominic didn't have a driver's license, credit card or any other public transaction for the last 13 years. He had become a digital ghost which was possible if you worked as a ranch hand at the

larger ranches across the state. The ranch owners seldom reported incomes to the IRS.

“If Sheriff Vargas had gone out to the DD because of a complaint against Meechi, perhaps he had some record of the complaint,” Kline said as the team was researching, looking for any digital clues as to who this man was.

All the paper records in the sheriff’s office were destroyed in the fire after the explosion. However, any previous reporting would have gone to the Texas Attorney General’s office and should be on file.

McRae typed in her access code and pulled up all records that had to do with the DD, Pete Alvarez or Dominic Pacheco. Only one record appeared. There was an electronic photocopy of the report. The incident, written in Sheriff Vargas’ handwriting, had one word: “Water.”



It was getting late in the afternoon when Kline tried to call Pete Alvarez to arrange entrance to the DD before they drove out. However, there was no answer on the phone. They decided to drive out anyway. Gruber had another place to go.

Kline and McRae drove up Highway 285 to the north side of the county and began taking the tangled network of dirt roads eastward. When Kline passed County Road 75, he thought about Missy and Marco

Vargas. He had been so busy the past week and had failed to stop by to visit. He made a mental note that he must plan to check on them.

McRae tried several times to call Alvarez during the trip. After 30 minutes, the last portion of the drive a dusty one, the investigators pulled up to the eight-foot-high electronic security gate with two offset iron letters proudly welded on front: "DD," with the ranch sprawling south of them.

Kline parked in front of the gate and walked up to the "squawk box," a six by six-inch speaker box with a button to page the ranch house for entry. Kline leaned towards the box, mounted about four feet off the ground on the side post beside the gate, and pressed the button. He called, "Hello, hello," and released the button.

Nothing. Kline tried a few more times as McRae walked up to stand beside him.

"They're not answering," Kline said, mostly thinking aloud.

"You are a brilliant detective, Sheriff," McRae said with a crooked grin.

"I'm learning quickly from you," he responded, smiling also.

After a few more tries, Kline and McRae decided to return to the office and develop another plan to interview Meechi.

Gruber called McRae and said he was south of town on County Road 22 looking for signs of stock or horse trailer tracks slightly off the road. He found something. He would share it later. McRae told Gruber to meet them at Pepe's around 8:00 and they would discuss the case as they ate.

When Kline pulled into the parking lot of the VFD, there were eight pick-up trucks parked outside, taking all available parking. As he and McRae entered, they walked into a Volunteer Fire Department training session. The problem with sharing a multiple-use building and meeting room was the reason the team kept the evidence board on the computers and not on the wall. It was not private space.

The investigators excused themselves with an apology and decided they would go to Pepe's early to wait for Gruber. He was expected about 40 minutes after they arrived.

Kline asked the waiter for the most private seating. They were seated in the back meeting room. It was a slow night, and the restaurant had not needed the meeting room to seat overflow patrons.

Kline ordered a cola and McRae followed suit.

"No wine tonight?" he asked.

"Not tonight, thank you," she said, smiling.

Kline shifted in his chair and looked across the table at McRae.

“You’ve read my dossier and know me from birth up to the present. But what’s your story?” he asked.

“Not much to know. My dad was army before he and my mom married. He was a cop in Atlanta. Mom didn’t want children until dad retired. She didn’t want to raise a child alone if he died. They had me very late in life. They died when I was a teenager about a year apart. Nothing dramatic, just declining health. I don’t think they foresaw that happening.

“I was moved to Birmingham to live with my uncle and his wife. They had no children. Uncle Claude was an officer in Birmingham. So, all I ever wanted was to be an FBI agent. I went to George Washington University and was recruited into the FBI.”

“Never married?” he asked, suddenly wishing he hadn’t. *I have to start thinking before I speak!*

“I was married, to the job. Tempted, but refused to give up my position. Most prospects I knew were in the FBI, so there would be a problem if we got married. After a while, I supposed I was easier to stay single.”

“You like the FBI then?” Kline asked, more comfortable with a new topic.

“I did, but it’s not turning out as I planned. It’s a men’s club, and I’m not a man. I rose fast to

investigator level and then somebody felt threatened. I was shipped off to El Paso to rot, I guess.”

“Wow!” Kline responded. “Wow!”

“That wasn’t that interesting,” McRae laughed. “Maybe one ‘wow,’ but two is overdoing it.”

“No, sorry. That was not what I was thinking. Early in this investigation, you asked me if I trusted you. You also asked me if I thought you trusted me.”

McRae smiled again. “Yes, I did.”

“I didn’t think you would trust me enough to tell me that,” Kline said. “That was personal and is probably painful. Thank you.”

The two were silent for a few moments, and Kline was not comfortable with silence at the moment.

“Have you thought about how we can get on the DD if Alvarez isn’t cooperative?” he asked.

“We don’t have enough for a warrant,” she said. “We’re making progress, but this is slower than it should be. Slower than I want it to be, anyway. God knows when we will get a break that will blow open this case.”

Kline thought about that for a moment.

“Do you believe in God?” he asked.

McRae took a deep breath. "Yes, I have to."

Kline waited for an explanation, but McRae didn't offer one. "Why do you say you have to?"

A somber expression washed over McRae's face. *Even that is cute!* "What I've seen and what I know about people; how evil they can be, how they can hurt others with no regrets. I have to believe in God. Either that or I would not like people at all," she said and took a sip of her cola.

Kline considered that. He had been a deputy for six months and had seen people at the worst moments in their lives. A sheriff's family brokenhearted over the death of their loved one. A wife shot while doing her dishes. A mayor killed, and another body found: a case of evil killing evil. Even a man who had beaten his wife and stuffed her in his trunk.

That didn't include the calls for domestic abuse, drunken fights, teens running away from home, animal cruelty, drug abuse and the other calls he had taken. All of that in, what? Six months?

What had McRae seen in here law enforcement years? If she was recruited out of college, she had probably been with the agency for at least ten years. Kline could not imagine what he would see in the next ten years if he remained in law enforcement.

Suddenly, McRae reached for her phone.

"Gruber's late. He's never late, believe me."

Gruber didn't consider himself a rebel, although he would admit he did have a bit of a problem with authority. To put it simply, he was smarter than his superiors. They obviously knew it because they would always keep a thumb on him. He operated better out from under a thumb.

He had discovered some tire tracks on County Road 22 that he suspected came from a horse trailer, but that was well outside his specialty. He knew he would not sleep the night if he didn't get a close look at the trailers on the DD.

He left south Terrell County and drove to the northeast corner of the land. He drove the last little stretch with his lights off. After parking, he left his flashlight in his car because he didn't want to be seen. He stood outside a gate. Under the early full moon, he could make out the "DD" welded on it.

Gruber moved eastward along the wildlife fence looking for another entrance. Similar to the standard chain-link fence, a wildlife fence stands eight feet high to prevent wildlife from jumping over into the ranch, mainly the bountiful whitetail deer that ate the cattle's feed.

He checked the pockets of his jackets, moving a small whiskey bottle from his left side to his right, merely to get it out of the way. In the bottom of his left pocket, he retrieved a small pair of wire snips. It took

15 minutes to cut a small hole in the fence at a location that was visually protected by some mesquite scrubs. He crawled through the hole onto ranch property.

Gruber began to move stealthily east of the drive, but parallel to it, south towards the ranch house and bunkhouses. The gravel drive was three-quarters of a mile long and took a sharp right around a rocky cliff before it reached the ranch buildings.

As Gruber approached the buildings, he spotted the horse and stock trailers to his left. There were seven cattle livestock trailers approximately 35 feet long parked behind a barn. There were also three fancy horse trailers roughly the same length, and a simple one that was only about 8 feet long.

He eased his way behind the trailers and crawled slightly under the short one, finally lying on his back in the sand three feet from the left tire. He retrieved his phone and took a picture of the tire to capture the tread pattern. He sent it immediately to McRae's phone.

The flash was too noticeable in the dark, he thought. Gruber heard a disturbance from the bunkhouse next to the barn. He remained there, still and quiet, and within a minute, he could hear the shuffling of boots and shoes heading his way. He reached into his right pocket, pulled out the whiskey bottle, removed the lid, did a quick gargle and poured some on his jacket for the smell. Then he ruffled up his hair and

started to sing off-key.

∞

It took several punches of her phone's buttons for McRae to find the location of Gruber's cell phone by using the built-in GPS tracker.

"Oh, no, Ted! He's at the Double D Ranch," she said. "He's gone rogue. Again!"

She called me "Ted," he thought as he grabbed his cap and ran for the door.

∞

Gruber was belting out an old Irish tune when three cowboys pulled him out from under the trailer by the legs.

"I miss you, Maggie, come back to me, Maggie, I will always love you, sweet Maggie. Hey, what are you doing? Let go of me."

"What are you doing on this ranch?" demanded a cowboy wearing blue jeans, boots, and suspenders over a long-john thermal undershirt.

"My c-car is out of gas. You (belch) got some gas?" Gruber asked with a giggle as he feigned to stumble into the skinny one with bucked teeth.

"Get him off the ranch," demanded a cowboy wearing house shoes and blue jeans, but no shirt.

Long-john and Skinny forcefully escorted Gruber to an old, rusty pickup and pushed him in the passenger door.

“Whatcha want us to do with him, Chico?” asked Long-john.

“I miss you, Maggie, come back to me, Maggie, I will always love you, sweet Maggie.”

“Shut up, you idiot!” snapped Chico as he walked, dragging his house-shoed feet through the sand as he returned to the bunkhouse. “Make sure he doesn’t come back, if you know what I mean.”



It usually would take Kline 30 minutes to drive from Sanderson to the entrance of the DD. He made it in 20 minutes. It would have been faster if not for the poor condition of the dirt roads he encountered after he left the highway. McRae was a bundle of nerves because of the drive and concern for Gruber as they pulled beside the gate. What made her more nervous was the picture of a tire she received on her phone.

When they arrived, they noticed Gruber’s vehicle also beside the gate entrance. They could see the headlights of a pickup coming down the long gravel drive, slowing at the gate. The gate opened automatically, and the truck started through the gate. Kline flipped on the emergency police lights

and stepped out of the car.

The pickup skidded to a stop short of the squad car. Long-john jumped out of the driver's seat and began charging the cruiser where he met Kline and his pistol.

"What's going on here?" he yelled.

Upon exiting the car, McRae pulled her service pistol and approached the passenger window of the rusty truck. Gruber was sitting beside Skinny with a big smile on his face.

"What took you so long?" he asked.

∞

McRae was so angry at Gruber for "going off-reservation" as she called it, she didn't speak on the return drive to town. Gruber was told to report in the morning at 6:00 AM. Kline hoped the rogue agent had more than one suit. *That one stunk.*

McRae spent two hours in the command post trying to obtain a search warrant for the DD ranch. Gruber had verified that the tire tread on the trailer matched the tracks beside County Road 22, but she didn't want to mention that the evidence was obtained illegally. The evidence was circumstantial, but with the other information, one judge in Austin agreed.

When they had finished at the command post, Pepe's was closed. McRae went to the Motel. Kline stopped at the Grab-n-go and picked up a bag of chips and soft drink, and then headed to his trailer for a night sleep.

Chapter 13: The Letter

“People find meaning and redemption in the most unusual human connections.” Khaled Hosseini

Saturday

Sanderson always started slowly on Saturdays. Slower than usual, that is. The chilly mornings lulled the residents into sleeping late. There wasn't that much in the town to get up early for anyway.

That morning, the team left the command post at 6:30. Ranger Kestler was pulled off county patrol to help on the raid. They arrived at the DD's entrance gate at 7:00 AM. They could hear the cattle complaining about being the victims of the day's work that the cowboys had planned.

Kestler pulled a battery powered reciprocating saw from his vehicle to cut through the gate latch. Kline stopped him.

“That won't be necessary.” *City boys!*

Kline pulled a highway safety reflector out of his squad car trunk. He walked to the gate and reached his arm as far as he could to one of three vehicle sensors. The one closest to the entrance was two feet away. One was 20 feet up the drive, and the third was at 40 feet.

With the metal reflector being detected by the

vehicle detector, the gate began to swing open almost before Kline could move out of the way. McRae giggled. *Nerves.*

Three vehicles entered the property and drove directly to the ranch house. Pete Alvarez came out the front door like one of the raging rodeo bulls he raised. "What's the meaning of this? You have no right to be on my private property."

"We have a warrant," said McRae, waving the paper in Alvarez's face. "You've been avoiding our calls, and that doesn't look well for you right now, Alvarez."

Alvarez grabbed the papers and quickly scanned them.

"This says you've come to apprehend Dominic Pacheco," Alvarez said. "He no longer works here."

"Where is he, Alvarez," demanded McRae. "Where's Meechi?"

"Not here, lady."

"When did he leave?" Kline asked suspiciously.

"He disappeared about a week ago, which was not soon enough to suit me. He had too many grudges with people around here. He was a hot head, and I couldn't control him. Good riddance, as far as I'm concerned. What did he do this time?"

Kline looked at McRae. She simply raised her

eyebrows.

“Where’s his bunk?” Kline asked. “The warrant includes a horse trailer, as well as an inspection of his bunk.”

Alvarez thought about demanding that they leave. But they had a warrant. He had prepared for this, so he relented. “This way,” he said as he angrily stomped to the bunkhouse.

All of the cowboys were out in the fields and the barns, so the bunkhouse was empty, so to speak. It was virtually a pigsty with dirty shirts and jeans piled by every bed. The odor was almost intolerable, worse than any of the football locker rooms in the older schools Kline remembered from his high school days in Killeen.

One space at the very end of the bunkhouse was cleaned, swept and empty. Alvarez walked to that bunk and pointed.

“Sorry about the mess,” said Alvarez. “Meechi was a lot of trouble, but he kept a tight ship. He kept these guys cleaned up. Not like this. I will miss that.”

McRae approached Alvarez and looked him in the eyes.

“You said he disappeared. Are you saying you don’t expect him back?”

"I meant I wouldn't have him back," Alvarez shouted, matching her glare. "He abandoned us at roundup and branding. He was missing, and he lied to me about what he was up to. I don't tolerate that, even from a stupid cowpoke."

"...he lied to me about what he was up to." That was a strange statement indicating Alvarez found out something. *Did He know what Meechi was up to?* Kline wondered.

Gruber made his way to the bed and began to inspect it. He raised the mattress, looked under the bed, and examined the cubby storage area beside it. It was all meticulously clean. A little too clean, as far as he was concerned.

It was natural for Gruber to look for blood. There were blood spots not only in the cleaned area. He could see them around all the other bunks.

"What's the story behind the blood?" he asked.

"These are cowboys, not the movie kind and their jobs are rough. They get bloody noses, torn off fingernails, cuts, and scrapes. They also carry blood from the livestock when they come in at night."

Outside, Kestler hooked up the horse trailer to his pickup. The rest of the team left the bunkhouse dissatisfied with what they had found, or not found. There was nothing they could do unless they found Meechi.

On the way back to town, McRae said, “Alvarez is lying. When I looked him in the eyes, he lied to me.”

“You can do that?” Kline asked surprised. “Look someone in the eye and tell if he’s lying?”

“Yes, usually. Part of our training is to look for changes in patterns of twitching.”

“Twitching patterns in the face or the eyes?”

“Mostly the eye,” McRae said. “If you focus on twitching in the eye, you’ll catch any twitch on the face. It’s involuntary, so it’s not something someone can hide.”

“Remind me not to let you look me in the eyes anymore,” Kline laughed with a twitch.



Kline had not heard from Reverend Barnes for a couple of days. However, he called Kline as the team was entering the city limits.

“Sheriff, I have some information for you. Finally,” he said.

“What is it, Pastor Barnes?”

“Victoria Dupree heard today that a guy called Meechi had been identified as the shooter and she said that’s who she thinks she saw. Dupree said he would cool off after a while and wouldn’t do

anything stupid.”

“Thank you, Pastor,” said Kline. “I owe you a big one.”

“No, you don’t. We’ll be even if you would call me Jerry.”



As the team returned to the VFD building, McRae wanted to have a team meeting. The small group met in the meeting room.

“I want us to review where we are and make sure we are covering every angle,” she began. “We know who supplied the bomb for the sheriff’s office; Bobby Paisley. But we don’t know why, how he got the bomb in the building, or who ultimately put him up to it. Did he have an accomplice to let him into the building? Or did he have someone else plant it? I think they had something on Mayor Capper, but we need proof.

“Our best suspect for the murders of Mayor Capper and Paisley, as well as who shot Victoria Dupree, is Dominic Pacheco, or Meechi. But we don’t know if he masterminded this, and if so, why. He seems to have little or no motive. However, his boss, Alvarez, is more likely to have had motive and it probably had something to do with the ranch.

“What are we missing? What other angles are still open? Where do we need to focus?” she asked the

group.

Kline spoke up next.

“We’re not totally ruling out terrorism, but with no legitimate internet chatter, that reduces the possibility of that. Ranger Kestler, what do your officers in the county patrol see in terms of border crossings?”

“Sheriff, based upon our information, there seems to be less border traffic, fewer illegals crossing, and we have not had any discoveries of human or drug trafficking over the past week. We’re assuming that’s because of increased police presence.”

Kline said, “Another issue that Missy Vargas said the sheriff was involved in was something to do with the bids for the contract to build the wall on the border. I found out the sheriff’s responsibilities in that process for each county is to filter the candidates to make certain questionable nefarious characters don’t get involved in a local project. I got an email this morning that said the Texas Comptroller’s office had delayed the bid dates in our county due to the recent events. We can pursue the other angles without that in mind for a while. We can always return to it if the evidence begins to point that way.”

McRae raised her hands up from the table, palms up. “Right now, it all comes down to finding Meechi. We need wanted posters and to set up a tips line to locate this guy. But we don’t have any pictures of

him that are less than ten years old. We need to put out a BOLO (be on the lookout) alert for his vehicle and get that around the state, and probably New Mexico. But we don't know what vehicle he has.

"If he ran to Mexico, we will need to get in touch with the Mexican officials for their cooperation. But we don't know what to tell them to look for."

"McRae, I know you're still kind of mad at me," interrupted Gruber. "But something isn't adding up at the Double D. That bunkhouse was a filthy petri dish, but Meechi's spot was recently cleaned and scrubbed. Today. Recently. Not a few days ago. Certainly not a week ago. I bet if you inspected it tomorrow, you would find some other cowboy's shirt on the bed, socks on the floor, or something. Messy doesn't stay that compartmentalized. Alvarez knew we were coming. He was too ready for this. He's involved, but I don't know how. And he knows more about Meechi's whereabouts than he's saying. Like you said, he lied."

Kline and McRae agreed.

Kline added, "He said Meechi wasn't honest about what he was up to. That would indicate that Alvarez knew, or at least found out, what Meechi was doing. I think he misspoke. I think he gave himself away. He's in on it, trying now to pin it on Meechi."

"The key to solving this case, I believe we all understand, is finding Meechi," McRae repeated.

“But we have to be smarter about it this time. Alvarez is cagey, I can tell. He’s outsmarted us so far, but with pressure, we can get him to make a mistake.”

Kline knew that someone had been pulling the strings from the beginning. This someone was not afraid to murder to cover his tracks. All evidence was beginning to point to Pete Alvarez. But without Meechi, that would be nearly impossible to prove.

“Something else has been bothering me,” Gruber continued. “Access to the building. The only keys were those of the sheriff, the deputies, the custodian and the mayor. Did the mayor unlock the office? Or did he take the bomb and plant it?”

No one had the answer. Another mystery, but a minor one.

“I bet we will discover that Alvarez had something on Mayor Capper and he gave Pacheco access to the building. Or the mayor took the bomb into the building himself,” Gruber said.

“OK, let’s prove it,” McRae said.

Gruber logged into the FBI servers with his tablet and began looking for the latest satellite imagery. He was seeking any places where Meechi might find to hide on the ranch or disturbances on the 125 square mile ranch that could mark his grave. Most agents would become bored with the tedium of an extensive

search as this, but the Accountant preferred the solitude of computer and document searches to field investigations, thus his nickname.

“If we find that Meechi has fled and is hiding, as Alvarez suggests, I would say revenge was his most likely motive,” Kline reasoned. “But if he was controlled by someone, he will not be found alive.”

After a hearty lunch, Kline and McRae returned to the VFD. Ranger Collins, who had stepped out to the post office and returned, waved to Kline with a large envelope. Kline took it and read the return address.

“It’s from Governor Miller,” he announced as he joined Gruber and McRae in the meeting room. Gruber continued his computer search of the satellite images of the DD.

Kline opened the envelope, sat down in a meeting chair beside the conference table and began to read silently.

Sheriff Ted Kline,

Let me first apologize for not attending your swearing-in ceremony and Sheriff Vargas’ funeral. We are trying to keep this out of the news, and I count on your confidentiality, but my wife is terminally ill. She doesn’t have long to live. I hope that’s enough to explain why I couldn’t come.

We met your father and mother in D. C. several years ago at Homeland Security meetings and a banquet.

Your father was a good man with some excellent qualities. Quite frankly, he had an edge to him that was often difficult for most people to handle. I'm sure you understand what I mean by that, and I don't intend any disrespect. I liked the man.

My wife, Margie, and your mother bonded quickly. They remained friends until your mother's passing. They weren't best friends but exchanged Christmas cards and occasional phone calls.

I have spoken with several of our agents who were immediately dispatched to Sanderson to help in the investigation. They all gave you passing grades. I was thrilled when we were able to appoint you as interim sheriff. From all reports, you have obtained your father's strong qualities and your mother's sensitive heart.

It's an honor to have appointed you sheriff, and it would be an honor for your state, your father and your mother if you would consider running in the special election. Enclosed is the paperwork to file. There is a small fee for filing, but that has been paid.

Sincerely,

The Honorable Governor Stan Miller

State of Texas

When Kline finished the letter, he couldn't breathe. He stood, realizing that McRae and Gruber were

focused on him.

“Excuse me,” he said as he laid the papers on the table and stepped outside.

McRae hesitated briefly but gave in. She picked up the letter and read it silently. As she read the last paragraph, she resisted pumping her fist above her head and saying, “Yes!” But she couldn’t keep the smile from spreading across her face.

“What is it?” Gruber asked. Now his attention now completely pulled away from the computer screen.

“Governor Miller is personally asking Ted to run for sheriff.”

“Did you call him ‘Ted?’” Gruber asked as if the news was less significant than the moniker.

“I believe I did, Philip,” she answered with a smile. “I believe I did.”

Chapter 14: The Stake Out

“There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan.” C.S. Lewis

Kline walked around the corner of the building and then proceeded behind it. His head was spinning at high speed, and he didn't know where to start to slow it down.

As he stood in the unrelenting Texas heat, he thought about the sentence from the letter, *“From all reports, you have obtained your father's strong qualities and your mother's sensitive heart.”* Things started to come into focus, but slowly.

That melding of qualities would be a problem. It would have been for his dad, at least. The General resented his mother's sensitivity and considered it a weakness. He probably detected it in him, his son. The good old military way is, if you don't like it, stomp it out. The General tried. *If he had just once explained it!*

Was that the problem? Was that the internal battle he fought most of his life? He didn't know. And he didn't know how to find out. Was there anyone to ask? No one immediately came to mind except the governor, which was very strange in itself. He had never met the governor. He hadn't known about his mother's friendship with the governor's wife. Who would have guessed that friendship may have held

the key to unlock his troubled past?

“Are you OK?” asked a soft voice behind him.

Kline was startled and turned to see McRae. “You won’t believe it,” Kline said in a low, almost inaudible voice.

“I’m sorry, but I read it,” she confessed. “And I do believe it.”

“This is a lot to process. I don’t know where to start.”

McRae didn’t respond, not knowing what to say.

Kline felt a drop of sweat coursing down his cheek. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. His forehead was dry. So, he traced the moisture tracks back to his eyes.



Kline asked McRae as lead agent in the investigation if he could take a few hours off. She was behind on her paperwork, and Gruber still had two-thirds of the ranch photos to examine. She granted it knowing she and the other agent would be busy. She knew Kline needed help with this.

Kline looked up the number on his phone and made a call.

“This is Jerry,”

“This is Sheriff Kline. Jerry, do you have a little time? It’s very important to me that I speak with you.”

“I’m in my office, and I’ll make all the time you need.”

∞

Kline entered the side door of First Baptist Church under the sign that said, “Office.” In the hallway was another door that read “Office.” Kline knocked as he looked through the glass window on the door. Pastor Jerry Barnes motioned for him to enter.

After greetings, Kline began.

“Jerry, I need help sorting through some things. Personal things, and I guess maybe some professional ones.”

Barnes nodded, “Go ahead.”

“My dad was a successful general, and I was his biggest disappointment.” He paused and then shook his head.

“This is all twisted together, and I don’t know what you need to know to help me sort it out. The General was a religious man. I remember him consulting with his pastor on occasions, and it always seemed to help. He was a hard man. I think I rejected his religion as a way of rejecting him.”

“Wow,” Barnes responded thoughtfully. “Tell me more.”

“I asked... (sigh)... I asked a friend if she believed in God. She said she had to because of the evil of men she has seen. She said she wouldn’t be able to stand humanity at all if she didn’t believe in God. What does that even mean?”

Barnes leaned back in his office chair and massaged his chin between his thumb and forefinger.

“Well, without speaking with your friend,” he started with a smile, suspecting he knew who the friend was, “I think she was saying humanity’s hope could not be found in humanity. She needed to believe there was something, or someone, who offered hope and he would have to be more than human.”

Kline considered that reasoning. “But I see things from the opposite direction. I mean, if there is a god, why all the evil? He either doesn’t care, or he’s powerless to help. I read that somewhere, and it kind of got stuck in my head.”

“Sheriff, that’s certainly one way of looking at it if you don’t consider what God says about his entire plan. You can believe that only if you believe everything should revolve around us. But God is the center of the universe. That’s the God I believe in. Let me think about how to put this.”

Barnes sat quietly for a moment before he spoke

again. “If there is a god, if he’s the creator, he has to be almighty. He would have to be a super genius, with every bit of knowledge and wisdom that could ever exist. I mean... just to create it, he would have to understand all about it. He would have to have a plan. Everything is too complicated otherwise.

But, to give us hope we could appreciate, he would have to give us a choice. To make it a real choice, there would have to be resistance. In other words, evil.

He continued, “I believe in God who has this all figured out. Evil exists, and God gives hope. But he doesn’t dictate that hope to us. It’s offered in peace.”

Kline nodded but wasn’t sure he was following. Barnes recognized the look of confusion.

“Ted, you’re stuck on one issue that seems to conflict with something you know. You believe in evil. That’s a given. Even in this corner of Texas, evil has no problem finding us.

“Evil is so powerful and destructive. It’s rattling your ability to believe in God. But think about this. If there wasn’t a good God, just like your friend suggested, the evil we know would have completely overpowered good many, many generations ago. You have to decide if you believe in a good God or not.”

“It’s that simple?” Kline asked.

“No, it’s not that simple,” Barnes laughed. “That’s just where you’re stuck.

“Let me say this. God designed you for a purpose in life. I see his hand in your life, even the little I’ve come to know you. If you don’t see him working around you, you need to go to detective school.

“That purpose for your life is a long road and isn’t simple. Did you know that, given the time, I can show you every strong point in your life that God gave you, and every weakness sin gave you? I can also show you in this book that God has an answer for every one of your weakness and flaws, and,” he lifted a finger as if making a point, “how every strength fits into your designed purpose. In this book,” Barnes said as he tapped the Bible on his desk.

“I hope I can have that time with you. He is doing a wonderful job in my life, and He wants to do a wonderful job in yours, if you will allow Him.”

With all the news Kline had received that day, the weight of the investigation and this consideration of God, he determined he had enough for the day. He thanked Pastor Barnes and was excusing himself when the pastor surprised him.

“Sheriff, may I have a word of prayer with you before you go?”

“Certainly,” Kline answered with uncertainty.

Barnes placed his right hand on Kline's shoulder as they stood and said a prayer. He asked for God's protection, his blessings upon the investigation and his direction in Kline's life. It was a powerful moment for Kline. With a "Thank you," Kline quickly left the building and started for his car.

Who knows, Kline thought. Maybe, just maybe, that prayer may be what we needed to solve this case.



Kline left the church and drove out to Missy Vargas' house. There were only three vehicles in the drive this day. One was Sheriff Vargas' personal truck, one Missy's and the third he recognized as Marco's. He knocked on the door, glad to be greeted by the late sheriff's son.

"Marco, I was afraid you wouldn't be here."

"We have tons of details to take care of, and I didn't want Momma to have to do this by herself. Come in, please," he said, stepping out of the way.

Missy met him inside the door with a big embrace. She invited him to sit with them and visit.

"How's the investigation going?" asked Marco after they sat down in the cozy living room.

"It seems like it's going slow, but if you count the days, it's moving along pretty fast."

Marco laughed, "You heard that from Dad, didn't you?"

Kline laughed, "I don't know how many times I heard him say that, but yes. More importantly at the moment, how are you doing?"

Missy sighed, "It's hard. Really hard. But with God's help, we will get through."

"Ted, I know you lost your dad," Marco interjected. "Did you have to do all this life insurance and social security paperwork after he died?"

"No. Pops had a lawyer and a financial guy. He always said to leave that stuff to the guys who get paid too much."

Marco laughed.

"Is there anything I, or the sheriff's department, or the citizens of Terrell County can do to help you at this time?"

"Find the man who killed my husband," Missy said softly. "Not the bomber but the reason why."

Although the sentence wasn't properly stated, Kline knew exactly what she meant.

∞

The sun was going down the sixth day after the explosion, having burned through its welcome. It

looked tired through the haze on the horizon as if it were looking for a good twelve hours of sleep.

Kline was exhausted too, mentally, physically and emotionally. He called McRae to inform her he was going home.

“We have nothing new,” she said. “Could you meet us at Pepe’s in a bit?”

Instead of going immediately home, Kline decided to go to the restaurant. He wanted to see Kathleen McRae. He was glad he was going to see her but began to worry about that desire.

∞

An angry but refreshed sun continued its relentless purpose. It surveyed the defenseless territory it was going to torment. Seeing a few clouds trying to offer relief, it poured out its energy to destroy the clouds.

Sunday morning, Kline was still tired. He didn’t sleep well. The team had decided to take at least a half day off, having worked six days straight. Kline made a pot of coffee and a few eggs with toast. As he sat drinking his coffee and looking out the window of his trailer, he saw the young family across the street loading the children into the car all dressed up in their Sunday best.

“Why not?” he said to no one particular.

He dialed McRae.

“Can you dress up? I have someone I want to stake out. I will tell you about it later.”

“Sure,” she said flatly. “Who needs a half a day off?”

Kline picked up McRae at the motel and drove to the First Baptist Church parking lot. As they got out of the car, she asked, “Who are we watching?”

Kline put his finger to his lips and said, “Shhhh, he’s watching us.”

McRae looked around as they walked towards the building. She was puzzled about Kline’s lack of straightforwardness about who this person was and why Kline wanted to keep an eye on him. She didn’t see anyone watching them. She was still confused as they entered the Church and took a seat. There was a moderate crowd for the early service. The church people sang songs she wasn’t familiar with, but they were charming songs.

Officious looking men passed offering plates down the rows of seats, and Kline thought it might be appropriate to contribute. He put in two dollars.

“Tightwad,” McRae whispered.

“How much are you giving, McRae?”

Barnes stood and walked to the lectern after a rousing special song by a man with a smooth, tender

voice. He began to read from the Bible and speak on his topic.

Kline listened, trying to connect the dots in his life. They weren't connecting. Maybe he was listening for the wrong information.

After the service, he escorted McRae to the exit. Kline introduced her to Barnes without mentioning she was with the FBI, but Barnes already knew who she was. Everybody in town did. Everybody in the county had heard, and many had seen, the attractive FBI agent Kathleen McRae.

When they got into the car, she asked, "Were you staking out the pastor?"

"No," Kline answered. "God."

Chapter 15: Leaky

"Gossip needn't be false to be evil - there's a lot of truth that shouldn't be passed around." Frank A. Clark

After a quick lunch, Kline and McRae returned to the VFD building. Gruber was there. "I think I've got something," he said. He hadn't taken a half-day off either.

Having printed off screen shots from the digital satellite photo, he circled a place with a pickup truck parked and what appeared to be disturbed ground.

"A dollar on a donut that's Meechi's truck and that's his grave."

"That could be anybody's truck, and that could be anything instead of a grave," said Kline as he squinted at the page. "And it could be an anomaly in the photo."

"No, look," said Gruber, handing him another sheet. "This was six days ago. No truck, no disturbance of the ground. Now, here's the day before yesterday," handing him another sheet of paper.

"You tell me we have a person of interest disappear and the slimy ranch owner doesn't know where he is, he says, but a perfectly good pickup abandoned in the middle of a field with a ground disturbance, and that's a coincidence? I don't believe in coincidences. Look, the disturbance from yesterday is slightly

darker than the rest of the dirt. Fresh dug, slightly moister than the soil around it.

“Now look at today’s image. It dried out some, and the color almost matches the other ground, but not totally. Plus, it’s free of weeds and grass like the ground around it.” Gruber handed Kline and McRae another picture.

Kline squinted at the pictures and after a moment recognized what Gruber was describing.

“Good work, Sherlock,” he said. Gruber smiled.

“How are we going to get back on that ranch?” McRae asked. “If I know my job, and I think I do, Alvarez has a lawyer sitting in his living room right now planning for our next move.”

“Is this enough for another warrant?” Kline asked, still eyeballing the latest photo.

“I didn’t tell you about this,” began McRae, “but I took a lot of heat on the first warrant. First, we failed to check out the horses. When Chapman, my supervisor, questioned me about it, I looked back over the warrant. We left off the horse. Second, it was premature. I got a severe warning. Which reminds me, Kline, we need to have a discussion. Alone.”

Kline felt the hairs stand up on the back of his neck. He had no idea what this was about, but he had

learned a long time ago his body could detect danger even if he don't understand what it was. This had proven true many times in his life. "A discussion. Alone", particularly how McRae said it, would make any man shiver.

"Sure, when?"

"Later," she answered.

"Wait a minute," Kline said. His mind was churning fast, but he was still paragraphs behind. He was afraid if he didn't say what he was thinking now, it might come up too late. "Alvarez knew we were coming the first time. How? I don't know. What was that, Gruber? A dime to a donut?"

"A dollar on a donut," Gruber corrected him. "No discounts here."

"I bet you a dollar on a donut the horse isn't anywhere to be found. If Alvarez was dumping evidence, the horse is dead. Didn't Chapman realize that?"

"We still have to talk." The hairs on his neck stood at attention for the second time.

"Ok," Gruber said. "OK. Then you talk now. We have to know our next move, and you two can't concentrate with all this drama, not fully knowing what's going to hit us next. Go outside and have your little pow-wow before you end up talking in front of me. I don't want to hear it."

"Ugh," McRae sighed as she led Kline out the door.

The two stepped around to the side of the building.

"I need to apologize to you, Kline," she said.

"For what?" he asked. "Campbell, Chapman, Kool-Aid, or whatever your supervisor's name is, he will not be a problem to me. Let him steam off, and he'll get over it."

"It's not that. I've let you down. I've let this investigation down. Trust me when I tell you, I am an excellent investigator and agent. But you haven't seen it. I've been running around like a school girl, with my heart going pitter-patter. I've been far too distracted, and it's hurt our investigation."

"Distracted by what?"

"By you, you idiot," she answered as she looked at the ground.

Kline was shocked to hear it. He paused and thought a moment. "Is that what you believe? You haven't been doing a good job?"

"Sheesh! Sometimes you can be so dense. Yes. I did the paperwork, and I saw it. And that's what the paperwork's for; to see if I missed anything. This Alvarez has been a step ahead of us, and we've been blindsided too many times. Maybe if I had been more focused on the job..."

“Stop,” Kline said. “You sound like me now. Don’t put this all on yourself. We shipped you in from El Paso to this Hicksville, and who would have expected murders, deception and such a crime wave in a simple place like Sanderson. I certainly didn’t, and I live here.”

“You can’t deflect this, Kline, and if I know you, you’ll blame yourself for all this,” she said, almost sadly.

“So you’re going to take all the blame? No way! Let me. I’m a lot better at it.”

McRae laughed. “Listen to us. Simply accept my apology, and let’s get to work.”

“McRae, listen to me,” Kline said as he slowly processed what she had said. He was beginning to catch up. He placed his hands on her shoulders. “If you really were distracted by me, thank you for caring that much. I needed it. You have meant wonders to my life.”

McRae stood still for a moment looking at Kline. *He finally got it.* She hadn’t been talking about the job or the case. The poor guy finally figured that out. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek and said, “Let’s catch this creep.”

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Monday

Monday morning, a week since the explosion, and

except for the crude scar of the crime scene, the quiet town had only a broken heart and deep sense of loss as a result of the crime. Birds were singing. Maybe they didn't know. Butterflies were scrambling to find a bountiful flower before the heat drove them into hiding. Perhaps they were showing the citizens of Sanderson how to move forward.

Little did anyone expect another bomb, of sorts, was going to explode. It was, in fact, a series of unexpected events, coming so fast, they were impossible to process in real time.

Gruber came into the VFD at 6:00 AM where Kline and McRae were looking at the photos again and batting around ideas.

"Folks, we have a leak," he whispered.

"What are you talking about?" McRae asked.

"Not here," he whispered. "Let's get into a car and go for a ride."

The three hurried out to Kline's squad car, a slightly damaged one with the working air conditioner. *Every vehicle should have an air conditioner, Texas or not.* After boarding, Kline began to drive slowly north out of town on Highway 285.

"When I was eating breakfast at the Sage Diner, one of the local guys came over and asked me if I was with the FBI," explained Gruber. "I said, 'Maybe.' He

sat beside me and told me about as much about the case as I knew. He said it's all over town."

McRae, in the front passenger seat, turned so she could see Gruber in the back seat.

"Exactly what did he tell you?"

"That Meechi worked for Alvarez, and when we went out to apprehend him, Alvarez stalled us. They believe Alvarez is behind it. That our search warrant didn't produce any new evidence. He knew about the horse tracks, the trailer, and the bodies. He even suggested that he bet Alvarez buried Meechi somewhere on that ranch."

McRae gasped, "We can't contain this. This is bad."

"What can we do?" asked Kline.

Before he got an answer, his phone rang. He answered it quickly.

"This is Jerry. We have a problem, Sheriff."

"I know, but I don't know how big of one," Kline said, preparing to hear more bad news.

"Victoria developed an infection in the shoulder. Something about some toilet tissue the doctors missed. She's running a high fever. Dupe is all fired up mad again about who did this. Somebody, and I hope it wasn't one of you, told him Pete Alvarez is behind all of this trouble."

“He didn’t hear it from us, directly, but I think we’re going to find out who is leaking information. Can you keep a lid on Dupree?” Kline asked the pastor.

“He’s out of the can. The lid’s long gone. I can’t find him. I’m afraid he’s gone to confront Alvarez.”

“Keep looking and keep in touch.”

Kline told the agents what he had just learned. He placed his left hand over his eyes and asked aloud, “Why did I say ‘yes’ to this job?”

“Gruber,” McRae said with authority. “We’ll drop you off at the command post. Look into the leaks. Find them. Look into everyone, including us and the other officers in town, the dispatchers, bugs in this building, everything. Find out what’s going on. Kline and I will head to Double D and see if we can sort through this.”

“And Kline,” she added. “Drive slower this time.”

Kline drove back to the VFD and let Gruber out. He said to Gruber, “Also, round up some help! Send them to the DD.”

Off they went, and not slower this time.

“Well, I wasn’t all that happy with the FBI,” McRae sighed as they headed north. “I guess my career is about to come to an end since this hit the fan.”

“No, it’s going to end on your terms when you’re ready. Me, you and Gruber have to take responsibility for the leak together, but I’m doing another dime, or dollar, to a donut, or on a donut, that it’s not any of our faults.”

Gruber ran to the communication room. He instructed Collins to call the Troopers who were patrolling the county to route them to the DD as fast as they could drive get there.

“There are four on rotation, six off rotation, and Kestler’s on a call. I can get them all if we need to,” suggested Collins.

“Get them all,” Gruber said. He then set a trap to narrow the leak down. “We think Meechi is buried on that ranch.”

“Yeah, I know, sir.”

Gruber put his face in Collins' face. “How did you know that?”

“Sir, I can hear everything you say in the meeting room. The air conditioning vent,” he said, pointing to the grate above his head.

∞

As Kline pulled to the gate of the DD, Dupree’s truck was being driven up the drive to the house, and the gate had closed. Barnes had driven to the ranch and was out of his car at the gate, trying to push it open

again.

“Is that Dupree heading up to the house?” Kline asked.

“No, Dupe was not in his truck,” said Barnes. “Some big cowboy was driving it.”

“That means Dupree is already in there and probably in danger,” Kline surmised. “I can get us in there, but since we didn’t see Dupree going in, we will have no right to be there.”

Gunfire, a solo shot, was heard from the direction of the buildings.

“We’re going in now,” announced McRae. “Gunfire noted and personal knowledge of a possible hostage in there. We have probable cause. That’s better than a warrant.”

Kline retrieved his highway safety marker and stood out of the way of the gate this time. He stretched it past the gate with his arm and tapped the vehicle sensor. The gate swung open and McRae, who had jumped into the squad car, drove through. Kline and Jerry Barnes raced to the car and got in. McRae then drove them speedily to the ranch house.

As the officers exited the car, ranch hands came out of every building aiming guns at the officers. The three found themselves surrounded.

“You’re trespassing,” Alvarez yelled from the porch of the ranch house flashing a victorious smile. “You are armed trespassers and there are different laws for armed trespassers on my land.”

“We are peace officers,” yelled McRae. “And you know that. And you know there are specific laws concerning situations like this that favor us. Don’t make a stupid mistake.”

“Like the one you just made?” Alvarez asked laughing. “Unprovoked trespassing on my property, planning to pull guns on my men?”

“We know there’s a hostage on this ranch and we heard gunfire. That permits us to enter,” said Kline.

“We had to shoot a sick cow,” Alvarez said. “You don’t have permission to be on my land, gringo. This land belonged to Mexico before you came here. It was my family’s land before there was a Texas Rangers, and an FBI, and before sheriffs were brave enough to come here. This is sacred family land, and my law rules here on this ranch. You violated the laws of this ranch, and you will have to pay for it.”

“The shooting of the cow was an unfortunate mistake by you,” Kline said. “And Alvarez, before you get too far in this ‘Republic of the Double D’ stuff, I want to remind you that this land is entirely in the state of Texas and within the borders of the United States of America. We go by those laws.”

“Not here, gringo. Not here. That’s why we have a gate. Lock them in the barn.”

McRae’s T-tech phone had two specific buttons that looked similar, one especially for situations like these. The “Home” button worked like the home button on any phone. It was on the left bottom of the face. But the “Home 2” on the right bottom was a danger and distress alert giving the exact coordinates of the phone when the button was pressed. She subtly pressed the “Home 2” button, not sure how things would be working. She had never used it before, just reading about it the night before from the instruction manual.

The cowboys, showing total loyalty to Alvarez, took the guns and phones away from the three, and then led them into the barn.

The barn was not what Kline expected. He had seen too many westerns when he was a boy. This wasn’t the unpainted wood structure with two haylofts, one on each side. It was more of an industrial building designed for work with cattle utilizing modern techniques. There were stalls along one side of the 200-foot barn except for two storage rooms in the center. The other wall held offices, an industrial garage-style door, and more storage rooms. Stacks of hay and barrels of chemicals were stacked in various places on the concrete floor.

“Jerry, you shouldn’t have come in here with us,” Kline said.

“I thought I could talk Dupe down if it were needed,” the preacher answered. “I would have come in anyway.”

“Shut up!” Alvarez yelled as he walked behind the group. “You will have plenty of time to visit before the sun goes down.”

When McRae had pressed the button on her T-Tech, it sent out three urgent messages. Peggy in the El Paso FBI office was alerted that McRae was in trouble. Morgan received the alert that his partner was in danger. And the signal went to FBI national headquarters in Washington D. C., Felix Chapman, Southwest Director, would be interrupted from any meeting he was in unless with the FBI Director or the President.

Morgan was in the El Paso office and immediately sprinted for a vehicle. He started for Sanderson as fast as he dared. He also received a call from FBI Headquarters and told the communications agent to hold off sending anyone else until he found out what was happening.

Chapter 16: Hostages

“He who prays often is in the protection of God, and he who is protected by God cannot be harmed by anyone.” Abu Bakr

Alvarez and two of his bigger cowboys led the three at gunpoint to a storage room across from the barn office while the other ranch hands resumed their ranching. The room had a key-locked door and a hasp with a padlock. Alvarez removed the lock, opened the hasp and stuck the key in the doorknob. With the twist of his hand, the door opened. The three hostages were roughly shoved into the storage room which measured 12 feet by 12 feet. They found they were not alone. Dupree was sitting along the wall.

The door was shut, and in the silence, all four heard the “click-click” sound of the hasp latching and the padlock clicking into place.

Barnes immediately went to Dupree. Dupree’s face was beginning to bruise and his lip was bleeding.

“Dupe, are you OK?”

“I think I have a broken rib,” he winced as he rubbed his left side. “Alvarez’s boys worked me over pretty good.”

“Are you breathing OK?” asked Kline as he and McRae joined Barnes hovering over Dupree.

“Yep, I’m OK. I’m stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

“You’re not stupid, Dupe. You were mad. There’s nothing wrong with being mad,” Barnes said as he bent down to inspect the rancher’s ribcage. “I would have been mad if someone shot my wife.”

Dupree thought on that a few moments.

“If it was just because I was mad, why did this go all wrong?”

Barnes smiled. “Dupe, you let your anger make your decisions. That never turns out well.”

Barnes sat down beside Dupree, and the other two joined him.

“Fine situation we got ourselves into,” sighed Kline. “What are we supposed to do now?”

“Keep your head down,” answered McRae with a smile. “The cavalry is coming.”



Alvarez had never seen T-Tech phones before. After taking them from his cowhands, he stood in the barn considering his plans. He looked over the two phones they had taken from the officers. They looked different, but there didn’t seem to be anything else special about them, as far as he could tell. He popped off the backs of the phones and removed the batteries. He did the same with Barnes’s cell phone

as well. Then he threw all three into a trash barrel beside the storage room as he walked out of the barn into the glaring heat.

Little did Alvarez know that each T-Tech phones had two batteries. The ones he removed were the primary batteries for full function of the phones. The other was built onto the circuit board and would allow limited use for up to four hours if the main battery was removed or dead. This built-in feature insured that the GPS locator continued to work.

∞

Gruber arrived at the gate too late to be involved with Kline and McRae's entrance. Not knowing what was happening, he decided to wait outside the gate.

Morgan tried McRae's phone several times as he raced down the highway towards Fort Stockton. Not getting an answer, he immediately called Gruber.

"Morgan, how did you know to call me?"

"I got the danger alert from McRae's phone. What's going on?"

Gruber filled Morgan in on the recent events and the significant development of Dupree seeking revenge at the DD.

Morgan commented, "Apparently it went sideways at the DD. McRae would not have hit the panic

button unless she was in immediate danger. More than likely, they have her and Kline hostage and have taken their phones away. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Gruber wasn't going to wait. Not his style. He had to act. He didn't care that he would be breaking protocol. He had "gone rogue" on a regular basis and knew if things went his way, forgiveness would always be extended. He backed out of the drive and continued further down the gravel road past the gate. He found a vacated entrance into another field across the road that was hidden by some scrub brush and small trees and parked his car there.

He quickly, but stealthily, located the small hole in the wildlife fence he had previously snipped on another visit. It was hidden from view by mesquite scrubs and for a second time on this assignment, he crept through the fence. The sun was high in the sky, tattling on his every move. He wished he had the cover of darkness this time, but he wasn't going to wait for it.

Gruber carried a copy of the map of the ranch he had printed in his side pocket. He retrieved it and developed a plan to approach the buildings, hopefully without being seen.

∞

"I am not familiar with these 'water rights,'" Kestler said.

Raul Gomez looked frustrated, so he tried to explain again in his broken English. *Louder would be better*, he thought.

“De water ese mine. By law, ese mine. I have paper, ese mine. Somebody steal my water.”

Kestler took off his cap and scratched his head.

“So, the water is not on your property, but legally it’s yours?”

“Sí, sí,” Gomez said, pointing to the paper.

Kestler looked at the paper again. It was old and faded, but explicitly said that the Gomez family had water rights for surface water for up to 100,000 gallons per year from Indian Creek. The creek ran all year long except in severe droughts. It coursed through the north part of the county and onto Gomez’s property. But recently it was being drained dry before it got to him.

Kestler’s phone rang.

“Please, give me a moment, and I’ll try to help you. This may be a phone call.”

The humorous remark was lost on Gomez. His mind was too occupied with his current problems.

“Kestler, has Collins reached you yet?” asked Gruber.

“Yes, I’m on the call now. Something about water

rights.”

“No, I mean now. It looks like Kline and McRae have been captured. We need you out here at the DD ranch right now, and anybody else we can get.”

Kestler put the phone into his pocket and addressed Gomez.

“I have to go right now, but I promise I will take care of this.”

“You going to de DD?” asked Gomez.

“How did you know?” asked Kestler.

“Cause they steal my water.”

∞

Gruber slowly worked his way toward the ranch buildings by stooping from cover to cover, mostly behind mesquite scrubs. After a few mistakes, he became an expert on dead mesquite limbs, which had thorns, and prickly pear cactus. His knees were throbbing from his earlier carelessness.

Gruber used his T-Tech’s GPS system to locate the other two phones on the property. The screen overlaid a satellite photo showing the buildings. There was a small orange flashing triangle on top of the image of the barn.

∞

Inside the storage room, the hostages tried to get comfortable. Barnes and McRae finally convinced Dupree he would put less pressure on his ribs if he laid down.

“Jerry, I am so sorry we brought you into this situation,” Kline said. “It was careless of us to put a citizen in danger.”

“I’m glad I’m here,” Barnes responded as if he didn’t have a care in the world. “I don’t think you knew I was getting in the back seat of the car when you were getting in the front seat. That’s not on you.”

Kline shook his head. “We had a civilian with us, and we should have first made sure you were secure before we entered the property.”

“I’m not in danger,” Barnes smiled. “I’ve got an FBI agent and a county sheriff with me. How much safer could one be?”

“Jerry, regardless of our credentials, this situation is not in our control. We’re in danger, and we put you at risk.”

“Sheriff, actually I am not at risk at all, and I was never at risk,” Barnes said.

“That crazy Alvarez could have killed us immediately. I still can’t figure out why he wanted to wait until after dark.”

“He couldn’t have killed us. No way!”

Kline looked at Barnes incredulously. “Do you know something we don’t?”

“Apparently,” Barnes said confidently. “My boss wouldn’t let him kill us. Not if our time isn’t up. Alvarez can’t determine that. God’s plans can’t be thwarted by any man, much less a criminal. If he would have killed us, our times on earth were scheduled to be up. That would only be determined by the Creator. Until then, I can live fearlessly unless I act foolishly.”

McRae was listening to this conversation and had chosen to remain silent. She believed in God, but she had never drawn it out to that conclusion. Barnes was naturally confident and courageous. She was a bit envious. Even expecting help, she was scared. *Would they get here in time?*

Barnes’ reasoning made some sense to Kline, although it had a crazy edge to it. But if God was who Barnes said he was, how could it be any other way?

Dupree smiled broadly. “That’s my preacher. Yep, that’s my preacher.”

“Jerry, I made up my mind,” Kline said after a moment.

“About what?” Barnes asked.

“I believe in God. Does that mean I’m unstuck?”

Barnes found a piece of straw on the floor. He stuck an end in his mouth and started chewing on it, the other end flopping as he talked.

“No, it means you’ve taken a step. You can get stuck on any step.”

“What do you mean?”

Barnes looked at McRae and Dupree.

“Are you sure you want to handle this right now? We aren’t alone, you know.”

Kline smiled. “I brought it up. I don’t care about that anymore. I want to get this settled. Besides, we may be dead in a few hours. That is, if our time is up tonight.”

“McRae, do you mind us talking about this in front of you?” asked Barnes. “I mean, I would ask you and Dupe to sit quietly and not comment. This is Ted’s journey.”

“No, go ahead,” McRae said. “I think I want to hear this myself.”

“Sheriff...” Barnes started, but was interrupted.

“Just Ted, please, for now.”

“Ted, you believe God. But what do you believe about God?”

“Hmm. I guess what you said the other day. He has to be the smartest, strongest, wisest being because of the complexity of his plan. He has to be loving and good because, as you say, he is our only hope.”

McRae was surprised at this answer and looked inquisitively at Kline.

“So, you believe all that, and of course you believe in evil,” Barnes stated more than asked.

Kline nodded. He knew evil existed. He realized how much he despised evil. It was cruel and destructive, filling its greedy belly with the most vulnerable. It had brought him much pain. But in his life as a deputy, he had seen it bring others far more pain.

Barnes continued. “If God is all that, all right and no wrong, all wise and no mistakes, all-powerful and no weaknesses, we could never qualify to get to know him, to have a relationship with him, to be his friends and him be ours. Do you see that? We’re too messed up.”

“I know I am,” Kline answered with a chuckle but returned to his serious expression.

“So, God had to become one of us, live completely right and die an innocent man. In doing that, he would pay for our weaknesses and mistakes, not paying for his own. So, he made a way to forgive us by paying our fine.”

“That’s the Jesus story,” Kline said. “I’ve heard that

all my life. I never understood what it was about. But I think I'm beginning to see where it fits in all this mess."

Barnes smiled. "Believing in God is one thing, a good thing, but it's not enough. God always assumes that we have enough sense to believe in him. Only a fool wouldn't. That's why the Bible says, 'The fool has said in his heart there is no God.'

"God's plan is for you to believe in his Son, Jesus Christ. It says, 'If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe with your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved,' or forgiven. It's about who Jesus is and what he did. It's about just believing in Jesus and allowing him to turn that belief into an active, living faith. In the faith he offers, you can live as if you were justified and forgiven for every sin, mistake and weakness, past, present and future. You are to believe it, and despite what you feel or experience, you live like it.

"Ask him for it, Ted."

Kline sat quietly, looking around the room but not looking at anything in particular. Forgiveness. That was the biggest thing missing in his life. Maybe he didn't forgive the General for being critical and condemning of his every move. Perhaps he didn't forgive his mother for being so weak she didn't stand up for him, her child. She didn't stand up for herself. She was such a soft and weak person, she probably chose to kill herself. Maybe he never forgave himself

for being inadequate and a constant disappointment to the General.

After a moment he took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly.

“I believe, Pastor. I believe”

“Atta boy,” said Dupree with a smile, still lying on the floor. “You just got my vote for sheriff.”

“I believe, too,” McRae said softly.

Chapter 17: Standoff

“I could not have made it this far had there not been angels along the way.” Della Reese

Kestler and six officers were outside the gate, occasionally receiving messages from Gruber, who had slowly and cautiously moved to the far end of the barn, the most distant from the house. It was the hardest thing the Ranger had been asked to do; to wait and not know why he was waiting. He would rather act.

Gruber had acted. He could see cowboys out in the field working the cattle, but they had not spotted him. On the opposite side of the house he could make out a rodeo arena, and several cowboys were working on making the bulls mean for the rodeos. He could make out the hands popping the bulls with electronic cattle prods to make them angry.

In the building between the barn and the house, several mechanics were working on trucks, tractors, and equipment, occasionally stepping into the sunlight to smoke. *It's too hot for that.*

Gruber approached a single door in the back corner of the barn. He reached up and was gratified to find it unlocked. He twisted the knob slowly and opened the door. He crept into the barn and pulled the door closed behind him.

It was much darker in the barn and Gruber couldn't

see. He stayed stooped, hoping his eyes would adjust quickly.



Morgan was entering Fort Stockton on I-10. Campbell had alerted all agencies of his high speeds. Fort Stockton police officers had closed down the highway ramps, clearing the way for him to travel as fast as he wanted. As he passed each ramp, an officer from the police department and the Pecos County Sheriff's department waved at him. He felt obligated to wave back, not realizing the tinted windows didn't allow them to see him.

He turned on the ramp to I-285 south, slightly over 60 miles away from Sanderson and the Double D Ranch. As he exited town, he called Gruber again for an update but got no answer. He was dialing Campbell for an update when a white-tailed deer darted across the road from the right shoulder. He tried to dodge the animal, but clipped her hip, sending the doe flying and twisting in the air. The SUV went into a spin because of his hard turn and began to flip.

Morgan's nose immediately hit the steering wheel before the airbag deployed. The airbag slammed into his chest at a high velocity, breaking ribs, driving him back into the seat. For what seemed like an eternity, he was jerked around as the car did three flips ending on its right side.

He unsuccessfully tried to reach across to his seatbelt to release it because of the pain. Everything hurt, but his ribs seemed to hurt worse. It hurt to breathe. He began to worry about fire and an explosion, which made him squirm more to reach his seatbelt to release it with his left hand. He tried again with a primal scream. His right hand pressed the button, and he fell roughly down to the passenger's door. The landing intensified the pain.

Kicking several times, he knocked out the windshield and painfully pulled himself out of the car. He rested on the ground for a few minutes to gain strength. Then he could smell gasoline. He began crawling to the highway which was 30 feet away from where he landed. He blacked out.

∞

Kestler remained at the DD gate with six officers, not knowing what to do next. He planned to stay there until he received orders. Gruber was not calling in, and Morgan had not arrived.

His phone rang, and he anxiously answered it. It was Collins.

"Kestler, I heard from Fort Stockton. Agent Morgan isn't going to make it to the DD. He was in a car accident and is on the way to the hospital. He's pretty messed up according to the sheriff's department there."

“Sheesh, what else could go wrong?” Kestler exclaimed.

“I called my command supervisor, and he recommended that I contact ATF Commander Wilcox. He recommended that I request the ATF return under these circumstances. They are the closest complete unit. Should I do that?” Collins asked.

“Do it,” answered Kestler, trying to sound confident, but not knowing if he had the authority to say it. As far as he was concerned at this point, he would have accepted the news that the entire Army’s First Cavalry Division from Fort Hood was coming.

∞

Gruber looked over the barrels of livestock dip to take in the layout of the barn. The office on the left had a 15-foot long window, giving the office worker, a rotund lady at a computer, almost full view of the barn. Her back was to the window. Gruber crept to the wall on the left so he could stoop under the window and pass by it, and hopefully not be detected.

He began spider crawling on his hands and feet under the window. When he was halfway past the window, he heard men’s voices. He rolled to a stack of hay towards the center of the barn and hid behind it. Three men entered the garage style door next to the far end of the office.

Gruber hoped the hostages were in the barn somewhere, but he would have to figure out where as soon as the cowboys had left.

∞

McRae had been in many situations, but nothing like this. Barnes had completely taken over the activities in the storage room. He had everyone praying one at a time. *No one will believe this*, she thought. But what else could she do? She would say a prayer and hope that God was listening.

∞

Morgan was conscious when he was wheeled through the hospital emergency door but in terrible pain. He had an oxygen mask on his face which he wanted to remove. That's when he discovered that his arms were bound and the mask was connected to a tube running down his throat. He squirmed to get free, but the man dressed in surgical blues leaned over to his face and calmly said, "Just relax. We will take care of this for you."

The man didn't understand, Morgan thought. He wasn't concerned about himself. His partner and friends were in danger, and they needed help.

He struggled against the restraints as they rolled him into the surgery theater. The blue-white lights in the overhead parabola were terrifying. The vinyl smell of the mask was nauseating. He tried to motion to the

nurse with his eyes that he needed to say something, but with restrained arms, he couldn't communicate with her.

She smiled sweetly with her eyes, her mouth hidden behind a surgical mask. She inserted a syringe into the IV tube that went into his arm. She pressed the plunger, and his arm immediately felt numb. Slow moving warmth spread from his arm, up to his shoulder and across his chest. He felt the invading anesthesia coming up his neck. His head was spinning. He tried to yell, "No, no," but nothing was coming out.



The three cowpokes spent a short time in the barn, grabbing supplies, but mostly talking about nothing important. Gruber impatiently waited behind the hay until they were gone.

He rolled back to the wall and continued spidering below the window on his hands and feet, sometimes mistakenly touching his painful, thorn-filled knees on the floor. He noticed two storage rooms across the barn. One of them was open. He deduced that his associates, his friends, must have been in the second one with the padlock.

Just past the office window was a table of tools. Gruber quietly approached it, looking for the tools he would need. There were two pairs of bolt cutters. One would get him through the padlocked hasp. But

most likely the door was locked. He would need something to pick the lock.

∞

Kline heard another quiet disturbance outside the room. He heard a metallic “click.” At first, he thought someone was unlocking the padlock. It was followed by a soft knocking on the door and a curved hoof knife with a flat, wooden handle sliding under the door.

Kline called out, “Who’s there?” but there was no answer.

Dupree chuckled, coughed, and winced in pain, “It’s an angel. We were praying, weren’t we?”

They all laughed.

Kline stood up from his sitting position against the opposite wall and hurried to the door. He grabbed the hoof knife and examined the lock.

The storage room door was made to open outwardly. With the blade, it was easier to maneuver the latch bolt from the inside because he could push on the slanted side of the taper. If, that is, he chipped away the wood door stop trim. That took about four minutes, removing about two inches of the one by one-half inch strip of wood.

He immediately started working on the latch bolt,

applying pressure with the hoof knife by leveraging against the striker and pushing the blade to occupy the space each ply created. In a few moments, he had the hoof blade successfully wedged between the striker and the latch bolt and quickly pushed the door open.

By the time he stepped out of the storage room, Barnes, McRae, and Dupree were close behind him. The secretary looked out the big window and saw them. She stood with her mouth opened. Without looking she reached for the phone on the desk and missed it, knocking it off the desk to the floor.

“Run,” McRae yelled and then spotted Gruber by the back corner door motioning for them.

The secretary grabbed the phone off the floor, accidentally pressing buttons on the face as she picked it up. She dialed the house number. Since she had previously pushed buttons while picking it up and additional tones preceded the house number, all she received was an incorrect number signal and announcement, “The number you dialed is not a working number. Please hang up and dial again.”

She hung up and dialed again, but by now the hostages were running for the gate. When Alvarez answered the call at the house, he couldn’t understand the secretary’s loud screams. At his insistence, she finally took some deep breaths and was able to tell him.

“There were some strangers in the barn, but they ran out the back door! One of them was a sheriff!”



Gruber called Kestler to alert him they were going to be coming out hot. The Ranger armed three of his men with rifles and placed them at the gate. They first saw the team running, still a half mile away. McRae was in the lead while Barnes and Kline were helping, almost carrying, Dupree.

“Hurry, hurry,” Kestler mumbled.

He saw a red dually Chevy pickup come around the bend.

“Can anybody hit the radiator?” he called to his snipers. All of them confirmed the angle of the shots would be safe for the escaping hostages.

The driver in the truck, Alvarez, reached a shotgun out his window with his left arm and fired towards the running escapees without aiming, harmlessly missing as the pickup bounced down the gravel drive.

Kestler shouted, “Fire”.

All three snipers quickly hit the front of the truck. Two of the armor-penetrating rounds penetrated the radiator and continued into the motor block. The snipers shot twice more for good measure. Seeing

the snipers' fire, as the truck slowed, Alvarez dove out of the door, rolled, and ran for cover.

"Cease fire," Kestler called.

As soon as Alvarez notice the shooting has stopped, he ran for the ranch house.

Minutes later, the four winded escapees were approaching the gate. Kline took off the burnt badge of the previous sheriff from his chest and held it to the vehicle detector hoping it was big enough to fool the gate. The gate swung open, and the team stepped into safety.

McRae began, between deep breaths, discussing with the team the next step. They were trying to determine if they should immediately raid the ranch or find another option. One of Kestler's men called out, "You guys are going to want to see this."

As the team looked up the long drive, they saw about 30 cowpokes, armed with rifles, setting up on the distant ridges for what looked like would be a battle.

"Now we have another Ruby Ridge! Everybody leave the area before we have an escalation!" McRae shouted.

Everyone rushed for the vehicles and sped down the road away from the ranch.

∞

By the time the group arrived at the VFD, an ambulance was waiting to take Dupree to the same hospital in which his wife was recuperating. He was in a lot of pain, but there wasn't any noticeable injury that might be life-threatening. Before he was loaded, he called Kline, McRae, and Barnes over to the gurney. They waited for an apology for this fiasco.

"That was pretty cool, wasn't it?" he laughed. Barnes nodded with a smile, but the other two stared back in amazement.

McRae learned that her FBI partner, Morgan, was also in the hospital in Fort Stockton. He would be transferred to El Paso after he stabilized.

Now Campbell was on the phone and insisted that the phone be put on speaker mode. He wanted McRae, Kline, Gruber, and Kestler to hear what he had to say.

"This is the biggest mess in the nation right now," he yelled.

"With all due respect, sir," Kline responded forcefully, "It was that when eight of my fellow officers were murdered."

"And everything that's been done since has made it worse," Campbell said even louder.

"Sir," inserted Gruber. "We've located and stopped

the bomber, identified the murderer of the bomber and the mayor, the same perp who attempted to murder another citizen. We have stopped the assassination of two officers, a clergy member and a citizen. We have reason to believe we have identified the one who was behind the whole thing. He is at minimum guilty of assault, unlawful imprisonment, interfering with an investigation and intent to murder peace officers. We have snipers hidden and assigned to stop any and every vehicle that comes out of the ranch. How many other agents do you have that has done that much in slightly over a week?"

Kline chuckled quietly. McRae covered her smile with her hand.

"You don't know who put the TNT in a locked building in a secure area," Campbell said. "That would seem like a priority to me."

McRae answered this one. "Sir, there were only twelve people who had keys. There were only two people who survived the bombing who had keys. It doesn't matter now, technically, whether the mayor let Paisley in or took the bomb from him. They're both guilty, and both are dead."

"Let me tell you what else you don't have," Campbell said, trying to regain the momentum. "You don't have a motive, and you don't have the body of the murderer, Pacheco."

Gruber said, "Sir, a dollar on a donut we know where Pacheco's body is if we can just get in there."

Kestler raised his hand.

"Kestler, you don't have to raise your hand to speak," McRae said, sounding like a school teacher.

"I think we may have a motive," he said.

Everybody looked at him and waited for his next word.

"Death Water."

Chapter 18: Hallelujah

“If we dare to ask, GOD will dare to answer.”

TemitOpe Ibrahim

It took Kestler about five minutes to explain his theory, but everyone agreed it had merit.

In Texas, groundwater in the underground aquifers belongs to the property owner of the property under which it lies, based on the rule of capture. Surface water, such as found in lakes, rivers, and creeks, is a different story entirely. It belongs to the state and can be used only by permit. Those permits, called “water rights,” have been granted for almost two centuries and some of the older ones are still in effect. Designed for another time, they often go against the needs of the community and can present problems, even feuds and crimes when there is a shortage.

If someone uses more than their allotment of surface water, this could impact down-stream users’ ability to raise livestock and grow crops, or even have water for their homes.

This was the nature of the complaint Raul Gomez filed against the DD and Alvarez. The ranch was using too much surface water, and the ranches and homes south of the DD were suffering. Gomez had filed the papers to charge Alvarez with theft. The person who received the charges was Sheriff Vargas. He hadn’t submitted them to the court or the Attorney

General's office. Knowing how the man operated, he probably called Alvarez to resolve this peacefully without filing the papers, Kestler guessed.

Campbell was happy with the information. Satisfied that he had sufficiently corrected the problems surrounding the "Tragedy in Texas," he ended his call.

Kline sent Kestler to pick up Gomez and his copies of the paperwork so they could interview him and investigate the situation.

McRae called the hospital in Fort Stockton to find how Morgan was doing. He had a punctured lung which had been repaired and would be out of commission for several months. She felt fortunate and amazed that things had not completely come apart at the seams and began to relax. A little, anyway.

"Did you get anywhere on the information leak?" McRae asked Gruber.

"I think so," he answered. "I'll be right back."

Gruber went into the communications room and asked Collins to join them briefly in the conference room for a meeting. Gruber opened the questioning.

"How have you enjoyed your time on the investigation team?" Gruber asked him.

The young-looking Ranger rookie smiled broadly. "This is the most exciting thing I've ever done," he answered. "I love it."

"Who's your girlfriend?"

"What?"

"The girl that you tell everything to every evening? Who is she?" Gruber asked again.

"Oh, I met the waitress at the Sage Diner, and we talk, but not about nothing important," he said.

"What's her name?"

"Felicia Alvarez," he said, and his breath caught.

Alvarez! McRae's hand went up to her forehead as if she suddenly became dizzy.

"I didn't think about that," Collins said defensively. "Oh, no!"

Gruber walked out of the command post and drove to the diner to pick up Felicia. She was somewhat confused and afraid. "Don't worry," he said to the pretty 21-year-old girl with curly hair and a blemish-free complexion. "We have a few questions we need to clear up."

Kestler returned with Gomez and took him into the conference room with some coffee. Kline, McRae, and Gruber sat Felicia down in a side room designed

to be the fire chief's office.

"We understand that Doug Collins has been talking to you about the investigation we are conducting. Is that true?" asked McRae.

Felicia looked from person to person, trying to read the situation.

"We already know the truth," said McRae. "You're just clearing yourself from any wrongdoing. Relax."

"Yes, he's been keeping me up to date. I love hearing him tell about it. I guess I thought it was exciting and, you know, we didn't think we were doing nothing wrong."

"Are you in any way related to Pete Alvarez?" Gruber asked about the elephant in the room.

"He's my uncle."

"Do you tell him what's happened in the investigation?" Kline probed.

"No, we don't talk to him. He's evil. Really, the only one I ever tell is my momma, I promise. You can ask her."

After a few minutes of further unproductive questioning, Kline returned Felicia to the diner and apologized to the manager.

McRae and Gruber were waiting for Kline when he

got back.

“We have to send him home,” said McRae.

“We shouldn’t be too hard on the boy,” Gruber said.
“She is kind of cute.”

“Gruber?” exclaimed McRae.

Gruber smiled. “Well, not movie star cute. Maybe like hamster cute.”

“Gruber!” McRae walked out of the room. Kline laughed.

McRae and Gruber sat with Gomez and took his statement. They filed the papers with the state, utilizing the fax machine and let Gomez go home.

Upon returning, Kline found Wilcox waiting for him. He was surprised to see the ATF Commander had returned.

“I brought twelve men. We’re going to relieve the Troopers and Rangers for county patrol, plus we’ll be available when we have a resolution for the DD affair,” he reported.

“Glad to have you back,” Kline said sincerely.

“Just one more thing, Sheriff,” Wilcox added.
“Kestler requested to see this through. I contacted his supervisor, and he was willing to allow him to stay, if you and McRae didn’t have any objections.”

“We would be glad to keep him on the case,” Kline answered, assuming McRae was on board. Kestler had played an essential part in this case already, and if he wanted to stay, he deserved that.

“I have one more thing, Wilcox. Do you think you can soundproof the communications room?” Kline asked.

“I bet we can. I’ll get right on that.”



Collins was dismissed and sent to his home in Mesquite, TX. They reviewed the discovery of the leak. Collins would tell Felicia about the adventures of the day. She would tell her mother. To Kline, it didn’t matter how the information got to Alvarez from that point. Once a leak starts, there is no containing it. But it explained how Alvarez was always a step ahead of them.

After assigning two men to the soundproofing task, Wilcox returned to discuss how the Double D situation could be handled without becoming a Ruby Ridge or Branch Davidian fiasco.

“I’ve sent snipers to the ranch replace the Troopers that will be going home,” he told the group. “I believe having them disable any vehicles that try to leave is an appropriate response. We must assume they became a part of this rebellion when they raised their rifles for a shootout. But perhaps a better solution would be to stop any vehicle at the gate,

question the people inside and then detain them. There may be some cowboys on that ranch who want to get out.”

“Contact your men and adjust the orders,” said McRae. “Thank you, Special Agent Wilcox. That’s a better approach at this time.”

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Tuesday

Tuesday morning, the team decided to have more of a physical presence at the DD, so the snipers moved closer and, although they had cover, were detectable. Two squad cars were parked on each side of the drive outside the gate. The ATF agents were ordered to search any vehicle that tried to exit, as well as preventing anyone from entering the ranch.

What they didn’t know was the ranch had a visitor who had already entered.

The phone lines were tapped, but not much was expected from it because Alvarez anticipated it was going to happen.

Governor Miller requested Sheriff Dave Rau of Pecos County to spend the day with Kline to walk him through the paperwork requirements of a county sheriff. Miller also asked that Rau give Kline any advice he deemed relevant. Rau was a runner, and at age 68, he could outpace most of his deputies in a

marathon. About 5'10" with a head full of curly red hair that stood up when his cap was off, he resembled a lit match.

While Kline was training on paperwork, McRae and Gruber searched the maps to see if there were alternate entrances into the ranch. They located one each at the south and west ends of the ranch, but they had not been used for a very long time.

Dupree was recovering, and his wife's fever broke overnight. The hospital put them in the same room. Victoria heard of Dupree's exploits, and he was now hearing how foolish his actions were several times a day. He agreed. The couple was told they would be released on Friday.

Pastor Jerry Barnes was busy on the phone. Those he couldn't reach by phone, he texted, or emailed, or even dropped by to visit. He also visited the Catholic Church and Father Rodriguez. As a result, the priest busied himself making calls, too.

Tuesday night, Kline was called to attend the county commissioners' meeting. He knew two of the commissioners; Diego Valdez, a tall, rugged man in his 50s, and Ken Pickney, who was almost as wide as he was tall. Kline was introduced to Paul Pitts, a very tall, strong black man in his 40's, and Matias Herrera, a small, but powerfully built Hispanic with a pot belly. The County Judge, Dale Peterson, was on vacation.

“We have received building funds from several agencies, plus the insurance said the sheriff’s building was covered,” Valdez reported. “It was insured for two million, but I don’t know anything about the deductibles yet. I believe that will be covered by the agencies contributions. We have also received gifts from police associations across the nation. We certainly have enough to start clearing the foundation if the site investigation is finished. Kline, where are they on releasing the foundation?”

“They’ve finished collecting evidence,” said Kline. “The rest of the investigation work on the debris is being done in labs. But I will call you in the morning if it’s clear to start cleaning.”

Matias said, “Moneywise, I don’t think we need any funds to clear the foundation. The county owns backhoes, skid loaders, dump trucks and anything we need. When we get the sheriff’s approval, let’s get it done. We have eight county workers for road work we can use, and I can spare some time.”

Pitts asked, “Are we going to collect bids for the new building? That’s going to slow the start of the sheriff’s building down for sure.”

Valdez answered, “All the funds will be public funds, so I believe we are legally bound to put it out for bids.”

Kline asked, “What about the vacant brick building in the old town area? Could we save some money by

building out one of those for a sheriff's office?

"No, with today's metal building rates and the cost to repair those buildings, we would be saving to start over," answered Valdez. "My family looked into making one a restaurant, but roofs have to be torn out and rebuilt, and that drives the construction costs out the roof. No pun intended."

"Another thing," Kline added. "Is there any way we can word the bid request to say we will not necessarily take the lowest bid? I know that Sheriff Vargas never thought the county got its money's worth last time."

Pickney, an attorney, answered, "It can be done, but it's tricky." He took a slow drink of coffee from his cup, a habit he had when he had the floor. "The problem comes if the lowest bidder challenges the selection process in court. It could be tied up for a while."

Diego leaned back in his chair, "If we specify quality and value, stating right up front that we are not going with the lowest bid unless it has high enough quality, and hire a consultant to pick the best bid, we might avoid that. I've seen bids that say no bid will be valid if that company legally challenges the results. So, if a company challenges the bid, their bid will not be considered anyway. So, nothing would be in it for the low bidder to challenge."

Kline liked that idea. "I hope we can name the

building the Ruben Vargas Memorial Sheriff's Building, and I certainly hope we don't have to cut corners. He and his family deserve a first-class building."

"Here, here," Pitts said with a big smile. There was agreement across the room.

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Wednesday

Wednesday is often called hump day because if you can get past Wednesday, you are over the hump for the week. Everybody knows that. Humpday is usually the hardest day because it seems so distant from the weekend. Thursdays and Fridays are filled with expectations. But this Wednesday marked a notable series of important events.

The ATF team at the DD gate called Wilcox at 8:00 AM. Wilcox immediately notified McRae. Everybody rushed to the gate and most arrived a little after 8:30 AM.

There were seven civilian's cars, a First Baptist Church's passenger van and Saint James Catholic Church bus parked outside the gate at the DD. Over 50 men and women were standing near the entrance, all of them praying aloud. It sounded like a big argument, but it was not.

"I have never seen anything like this in my life!" McRae exclaimed. "It's like a protest-prayer

meeting.”

Jerry Barnes broke from the crowd when the team arrived. He went straight to Kline as he was getting out of the squad car.

“Do you see what’s happening here?” Barnes asked with a broad smile.

“I see people praying, but I’m not sure I fully understand what’s going on,” he answered honestly. “I hope we’re not putting any of these people in danger by letting them be here. This is a hostile situation, as you are personally aware of.”

“They’re not in danger. We talked about this, Sheriff,” Barnes said. “And I wanted to tell you that behind every conflict and battle in this world, there is a spiritual conflict supporting it. The best way to win the earthly conflict is to win the spiritual battle. The best way to win the spiritual victory is to bang on Heaven’s door.”

Kline thought about an old Bob Dylan song, “Knock, Knock, Knocking on Heaven’s Door.” He doubted this was what the songwriter had in mind.

McRae stepped towards Barnes.

“Pastor, we aren’t sure everyone is safe. And we are the presiding authority here.”

“Ha, ha,” Barnes laughed. “We are perfectly safe.

We're safer here than we would be at home not praying. Remember, if someone's time is up, which is determined by God, and they stayed home, they would have choked to death on a biscuit. Besides, you know there is a higher presiding authority, right?"

"Hallelujah" shouted a woman from the crowd. People were pointing through the gate towards the ranch house.

The investigation team looked up the long drive toward the ranch house. Eight cowboys were walking towards the gate with their hands in the air. A cheer broke through the crowd. They then started praying again even louder.

McRae yelled, "Make sure these citizens are safe. Everybody alert!"

It took a little more than five minutes for the slow walking cowboys to reach the gate. When they came through it, ATF agents cuffed them with the intent of beginning the interrogation process later in the day back in town. There was hope some of them would be witnesses against Alvarez, strengthening the case against him.

"How many more are there in there?" Kline asked the cowpokes.

"I thank about 30. Maybe 25," answered the cowboy Gruber called Skinny in a slow, Texas drawl. "That

man is crazy. He said he would shoot us in the back if we were caught leavin'. We had to sneak through the barn.”

It was only 15 minutes later when the group saw seven more ranch hands coming up the road, three of them younger and slowly jogging. A few “Amens” and “Hallelujahs” echoed from those who were praying and then the praying started again.

“Hallelujah” whispered Kline.

Chapter 19: In the Wind

“Nobody thinks that they're evil or bad, they think that they're doing the right thing.” Andrew McCarthy

Over the next hour, six more cowpokes drifted down the drive, past the gate and into the waiting arms of the ATF. Kline wondered if the town's people kept praying all day, would Alvarez surrender. *It could happen*, he thought.

The crowd kept praying. Several late-comers drove up and joined in. At 10:00, the citizens began packing up to leave. Someone yelled, “Look!”

A black Lexus was barreling down the drive. When it was halfway to the gate, more than 20 cowboys rounded the bend and were walking, hands up, towards the entrance.

“Praise the Lord!” said Father Rodriguez.

The Lexus came to a stop at the second vehicle sensor, and the gate opened. A tall man in a black suit got out of driver's seat with papers in his hands, raised towards the sky. For a moment Kline thought he was caught up in the spirit of prayer, but then realized he was signaling he didn't have a weapon.

Gruber said, “That suit isn't off the rack.”

The man was in his 60 with a mustache and hair that were too black, and he had what appeared to be a spray-on tan. He sauntered through the gate and was

surrounded by the officers. Barnes wandered over from his van to hear what was going on.

The man cleared his throat as though he was making a proclamation for a king. "My name is Stephan Callaster the Third. I was, until ten minutes ago, Peter Alvarez's attorney. I'm here to tell you that, based upon the documents I hold in my hand, he is no longer the owner of this ranch. He sold it to our firm."

"Where is he?" Kline demanded.

Callaster pointed with his thumb over his shoulder back towards the ranch house. "You will have to find him yourself," he said. "He is no longer my responsibility. He said if he ever saw me alive, he would cut me up, one inch at a time. I believe him."

Wilcox cuffed him, just to be sure. Kline, McRae, Gruber, and Kestler started for the squad cars. Barnes followed.

"You're not going in this time, Pastor," Kline said firmly.

"Ted, I told you I would not be in any danger. Just relax."

"You also said something like, 'With God, I can live fearlessly if I don't act foolishly.' Pastor, if you go with us, you will be acting foolishly this time."

“I knew I should have left that part out,” he said with a sneaky smile.

They raced toward the house. When they arrived, they pulled their service pistols and moved as quickly as they could, remaining as cautious as possible with no cover. Before they reached the stairs, Chico, the new ranch foreman Gruber called “House Shoes,” came out the front door, showing that his hands were empty. He stood on the western style porch that extended across the front of the ranch house.

“Where’s Alvarez?” McRae asked.

Chico shrugged. “You can put those guns away. He’s not here.”

Kline put his pistol in his holster and went up the steps of the ranch house porch to Chico. McRae, Gruber, and Kestler kept their guns trained on him.

“Where is he?” Kline demanded.

Feigning as if he was going to answer, Chico attempted a right-handed looping sucker punch for Kline’s jaw. Kline was expecting it and threw up his left arm to block the blow at the wrist. The punch was very forceful, almost knocked Kline off balance.

He grabbed Chico’s wrist and twisted, pulling his arm behind his back. Kline pushed the cowboy’s wrist upward and forward with his right hand, freeing his left hand to reach downward. He gave another powerful shove upward and forward with his right

hand, sending Chico off balance. He shoved Chico forward again, and when the poke stepped with his right foot, removing all weight from his left foot, Kline reached down with his left hand and hooked the foot. Now holding Chico' arm high on his back and pulling the cowboy's foot higher behind him, Kline added a final firm shove forward across the porch.

Chico could only hop once on his right leg and went crashing to the porch, chest first, with a hard thud and the "Uhhhhhh" sound of all the air leaving his lungs. Kline fell with him, landing with his right knee in Chico's mid-back causing an additional grunt that Chico managed with no wind. He then grabbed his handcuffs from his belt and quickly had the cowboy contained.

Chico had the wind knocked out of him, and good. He couldn't breathe and started gasping. Kline rolled him over on his back. Chico's face turned red and was beginning turning lobster purple. Kline grabbed his belt buckle and lifted, then set him down. He repeated this action several times, stretching Chico's diaphragm until he could breathe again.

"Ouch! I never saw that maneuver before," Gruber observed.

"When you're an MP facing marines bigger than you are, you better have something that works," Kline said. "Kestler, watch this guy. We're going in."

Chico, having recovered his breath, growled, "Sheriff, I'm going to kill you for that."

"Chico, you're pretty tough when you rough up an old man like Dupree. And you talk tough when you in handcuffs. If you wish, I'll take the cuffs off, tough guy."

Chico contemplated the offer. "Someday, Sheriff. Not today, but someday."

"Watch him, Kestler. We're going in. If Chico so much as grunts, shoot him."

McRae and Gruber hustled up the stairs of the porch. Kline opened the front door and announced, "Sheriff!" He, McRae and Gruber went inside, following their guns.

Upon searching the house, they found Pete's wife, Patsy, a bleach-blonde wearing too much makeup, and a teenage girl, Penny, a smaller version of her mom with less paint. They were in the den seated on a sofa, embracing each other and crying. The rest of the house was empty.

"He's not here," cried Patsy, her tears making paths from her mascara down her cheeks, reminding Kline of a scary clown.

"Where is he?" demanded Kline.

"He left! He's gone!"

“How did he leave? What’s he driving?”

“I don’t know if he took one of the trucks, or an ATV, or a horse. He’s gone.”

Kline quickly left the house and ran into the maintenance building, identifying three ATVs in three parking places. He returned to McRae and Gruber.

“He must have taken a truck,” Kline reported. “There are three ATV, and it doesn’t appear one’s missing.”

Gruber said, “He’s probably heading to one of the two back exits.”

“We can take the ATVs to see if we can catch him,” said Kline.

“Do you remember the trails to those exits?” McRae asked Gruber.

“Yep,” said Gruber looking up and batting his eyes as he pictured the maps he spent hours studying. “The trail to the right of the house goes to the west gate. It’s pretty clean. The one between the barn and the mechanical building on the east is the lesser traveled one, but it ends up at the south gate.”

“I’ll take the car and go back and get Wilcox,” said McRae. “We’ll follow the trail to the west gate. You two get ATVs and try to catch him before he gets to the south gate.”

Off they raced, getting ready for what they hoped was an uneventful but successful chase.

McRae called Wilcox on her way to the gate for him to be ready to help her chase Alvarez. She picked him up. Kestler stayed at the house with Patsy and Penny. Two ATF agents drove to the ranch house and hauled off Chico.

Kline and Gruber selected two ATV's that were full of fuel and started down the trail towards the southernmost gate. That's when they discovered Alvarez's next trick. He had taken a truck with the range feeder, a large container that sits in the truck bed to drop feed pellets. About every 200 feet, he had automatically dropped feed pellets on the trail, and the cattle had gathered to eat the pellets, making any chase more difficult for Kline and Gruber.

They proceeded slowly for 30 minutes dodging cows when apparently the pellets had run out. They added speed but kept their eyes active, looking for the fugitive's next trick.

It didn't take five minutes to discover it, and it was painful. A bullet nicked Kline's shin, sending a burning feeling that felt like it paralyzed his leg. The bullet lodged in the cylinder of the ATV motor, bringing it to a rolling stop.

"Get down!" Kline shouted as he rolled off the ATV.
"Shots fired."

Gruber jumped off his ATV while it was still moving at 27 miles per hour. He landed on his shoulder, tucked it and rolled several times, picking up some cactus in unreachable places.

“If you move, I’ll blow your heads off,” yelled Alvarez. He then sent a volley of 50 mm bullets into both ATVs. “Drop your guns.”

Kline and Gruber, not having adequate cover, pulled their pistols and dropped them onto the dusty trail. Alvarez came from a small rock rise on the left pointing an M24 rifle at the officers.

“Back up 20 feet from your pistols,” He demanded. Alvarez quickly retrieved the pistols and started backing up to the rise, keeping his rifle pointed at the officers. “I promise. If you try to find me, I’ll kill you.”



Kline and Gruber watched Alvarez drive away towards the south gate. They were thankful he didn’t take their phones because Kline’s leg was bleeding freely, and it was hurting worse by the minute. Kline spent the wait for a ride pulling cactus spines from Gruber’s back and a little lower.

Kestler picked up the two agents and took them to the house so they could bandage Kline’s leg. Kline refused to be transported to the hospital but directed them to get him to the vet.

Smythe examined the leg and put in five stitches with a local anesthetic. Kline was thrilled that he didn't need plasma. McRae tried to talk Smythe into giving Kline some anyway.

An ATF team resumed the chase towards the south gate. But Alvarez had too great of a head start.

Every available unit was called to search the county for Alvarez. Sheriff Dave Rau sent six deputies in three cars from Pecos County to assist. With all the assigned officers in vehicles, everyone was hopeful that Alvarez would be found quickly and with no further incident.

The description of the feed truck was distributed. It was located later that day parked beside the Rio Grande near the spot where Mayor Capper's body had been found. It was then assumed that Alvarez had gotten away into Mexico.

McRae and Kline left the vet and, with McRae driving, returned to the ranch. Wilcox had questioned Lawyer Callaster for the details on how the standoff ended and the ranch was sold. He had released the lawyer.

He met them at the ranch house and filled McRae in on what he found. They sat with Patsy and Penny, trying to get more information on how to locate Alvarez.

"Do you know where he might be going?" asked

McRae.

“Mexico,” Patsy said. “He said Mexico. I hope he dies there. And soon.”

Penny pushed away from her mother in surprise. McRae realized that the two needed to be separated because they had different perspectives that could confuse the investigation.

McRae asked, “Ma’am, can Penny go with one of our officers?”

Patsy nodded, and one of the ATF officers, Agent Kent Pettis, took Penny outside and questioned her. She didn’t know anything except her dad was gone, and her life was upside down.

“Patsy, are you aware that your husband has murdered several people?” Kline asked.

“No, he didn’t tell me. But I’m certainly not surprised.”

“You know that if you have information that we need and you don’t give it, or you try to mislead us, you will be charged with these crimes as an accomplice.”

“I’m not helping that snake. I’ll tell you anything I know.”

“Do you understand that if we can find him safely, he will get a fair trial, but if he continues to run, he may

be killed?"

"I hope you kill him," she hissed.

"Mrs. Alvarez," McRae said changing directions. "Technically, this isn't your house anymore, but you have 30 days to move. As a courtesy, I want to ask your permission to search it. We will mainly be looking for clues, notes or messages that may point us in the right direction in our search for your husband."

"Go right ahead," she said as if she was in a trance. "Don't damage any of the furnishings. That's all I will have left of my home." She began crying again. "That monster ruined my home and destroyed my life."

Gruber went to the ranch office. He grabbed the laptop and looked for other computers, not finding any. The laptop was password protected, which took him two minutes to defeat. He saw nothing helpful in a quick search. He then began searching the desk for anything useful.

"What are you going to do?" McRae asked Patsy.

"We'll pack in some luggage and stay in a motel, I suppose. Then, I don't know. I guess we'll get a moving company to get our furnishings. But honestly, I don't know."

Kline, McRae, and Wilcox stepped outside and allowed Patsy and Penny, in the presence of an officer, to pack some bags.

“You have to feel sorry for her,” Kline said. “Alvarez apparently left them to fend for themselves.”

Wilcox chuckled, “Not exactly. Callaster said Alvarez gave both the wife and the daughter five million apiece from the ranch sale. The rest of the purchase price went to an offshore bank.”

Later Gruber directed some of the available ATF agents to the location where he expected Meechi to be buried. One of them located a backhoe in the equipment garage on the ranch to help with their digging. Within an hour, the team found Meechi’s body, buried with a horse. He and the horse each had shotgun blasts into vital organs.

Chapter 20: Revenge

“With every bowl of revenge I consume, seven reasons for more revenge are being prepared in a larger kettle.” Tim White

Kline was in a lot of pain, but he tried not to show it. The local medication used on his leg, which he was afraid to guess what the vet had injected into him, was wearing off. Smythe told him to stay off of his leg as much as possible. And he was. In other words, that wasn't possible at the moment.

He wasn't familiar with the process to initiate when a suspect disappeared into Mexico. McRae explained that the State Department would put in a request to the Mexican authorities and they would resume the hunt. Hopefully, an honest police officer would find the fugitive. When he was apprehended, he would be turned over to U. S. authorities. McRae called the Washington headquarters and began the process.

Kline was tempted to go into Mexico after him. But if he did, he would not have the authority to bring him back, and his career as a law officer would be over. Plus, he could spend some hard time behind bars in Mexico if the police found him before he got Alvarez back. And an American police officer in a Mexican jail had a shortened life-expectancy.

McRae also had the FBI offices freeze any domestic accounts in Alvarez's name. They began tracking the funds to the offshore bank. Callaster volunteered the

information concerning which foreign bank was used; The National Bank of Abu Dhabi (NBAD). That was good news because the USA had previously struck a deal with that bank on other similar cases. They readily agreed to freeze Alvarez's account.

The price, according to Callaster, was \$28.5 million, which consisted of \$350 per acre and a half million for the structures. Nothing was added for the livestock. When asked why the attorney's firm, Heath, Callaster, and Peace, wanted the ranch, he said it had been appraised as a desirable property at \$41 million with the livestock included. They would resell it as quickly as they could find a buyer.

Alvarez had no idea that the NBAD had a long-standing agreement with the U. S. Treasury Department and would freeze accounts on requests made concerning major crimes. Callaster knew and set it up to bring Alvarez down. He had come to despise this scumbag.

The FBI allowed \$10 million to clear into accounts at West Texas Regional Bank, the five million each for Patsy and Penny, after verifying that Alvarez would have no legal access to those funds. It wouldn't be long before Alvarez found out he was a fugitive in Mexico with just pocket change, Kline hoped. That should flush him out.

Back in town, Kline stopped by the post office and gathered a handful of mail addressed to the sheriff's office. He noticed there was a small stack of

resumes.

The team went to Pepe's for a late lunch and to discuss the status of the case. As they passed the original crime scene, it was comforting and painful to see Matias Herrera running large equipment with four men to clean up the foundation for a new sheriff's office.

As the team sat around a table in the noisy restaurant, Wilcox said, "Sheriff, you'll need to start finding deputies to take over patrol duty."

"I've never hired anybody in my life," he admitted, the sense of inadequacy sneaking back into his mind.

"May I make a recommendation?" Wilcox asked.

"Please!" Kline answered.

"Well, it isn't standard practice, but you have two good FBI agents here that I think would be pleased to help you sort resumes and make recommendations."

Gruber, sitting uncomfortably on the edge of his chair because of cactus wounds, nodded, but added, "I want to help in any way I can, except cleaning toilets."

The group laughed.

McRae observed, "Things will be a bit slower around here until Alvarez crawls out from the hole he's hiding in. Headquarters may request us to return to

our offices, but I think I can hold them off a week or so to tie up loose ends.”

The news caught Kline by surprise, and it felt like a punch in the stomach. He knew McRae would be leaving at some point, but the very thought nauseated him.

Wilcox added some helpful information. “There is a little-known website that lists law enforcement jobs and matches them with pre-qualified candidates. I believe it’s operated by the Texas Rangers. I’ve found several good agents from it. Ironically, some from the Rangers.”

Wilcox wrote the web address on an extra napkin and Kline stuffed it into his shirt pocket.

The group talked about details and plans for the investigation. Wilcox said his agents would remain in place until deputies were hired and cleared for service to replace them. The ATF had come because the State of Texas didn’t have the budget to continue with a full team of Rangers and Troopers, but Kestler would stay. The federal government had other options, but at the moment, the ATF had more available men and fewer investigations in progress.

“We will need to track Patsy and Penny closely for a while,” McRae said. “If Alvarez is in Mexico, which is the best we can tell, he’ll soon find that his funds aren’t available. I wouldn’t put it past him to make contact with Patsy and take her money. I don’t know

if he would do that to his daughter or not.”

Wilcox nodded. “We’ve asked the Rangers to put a watch on them. We have their phones tracked. We will tap their motel room phone. If he contacts them or they try to contact him, we have a good chance of catching it.”

Kline shook his head. “Something’s not adding up. Do you guys ever get that nagging feeling that things might not be what they appear?”

McRae nodded. “That same feeling that kept you from behind bars on day one.”

Something didn’t feel right to Kline. Was it the remaining pain medication in his system? Or the increasing burning pain from his shin? It was more than the grief of losing his brothers in service. It was more than his life almost completing a 180-degree turn. It was more than the prospects of McRae leaving soon. It was something about this case, something about Alvarez.

“What if Alvarez didn’t go into Mexico?” Kline asked. “We backed off and are waiting, and he’s got time to operate under our noses. But doing what?”

The question hung in the air. Kline could tell by the looks on the others’ faces that they sensed the same thing.

After a few moments, McRae sat up straight in her chair as if someone popped her with one of Alvarez’s

cattle prods. "Revenge!"

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McRae called Chapman to alert him. Three people were most likely the prime targets: Raul Gomez, the landowner who started the complaint against Alvarez over water rights, attorney Stephan Callaster, who set up the offshore account that ultimately could be frozen, and Sheriff Ted Kline, who brought the hammer of justice down on his empire. Secondary targets were believed to be Gruber, herself and any peace officer working the case. It was a possibility that Patsy may even be a target for the money before her planned divorce went through.

Chapman not only approved for McRae and Gruber to stay in Sanderson, but he also ordered it. His tone had moderated significantly from his previous call. He ended this call with, "Good work, McRae. That's more like it."

Kline and Gruber raced to Gomez's house. It was on the east side of the county, just south of the DD. It was a small ranch with goats. Gomez lived alone, living a simple life. But he had to have water, of which he accused Alvarez of stealing.

As Kline pulled into the drive to the wood frame house, they noticed the front door was open. Exiting the car, they both drew their weapons and moved quickly to the house. Kline looked into the window and saw nothing.

Hoping the goat rancher would recognize his voice, Kline called, "Gomez. It's the sheriff. Are you in there?"

As they listened, only the occasional bleating of goats in a distant field could be heard.

Kline slipped in the front door with Gruber a step behind. They searched the house. The bad news was they didn't find Gomez or Alvarez. The good news was, there was no apparent sign of a struggle.

Kline exited the back door and looked around the back of the house. Looking into the field behind the house, he saw a lone man at a distance walking towards the house with a dog.

"I found him," Kline called to Gruber.



Alvarez was a dangerous man. He had always been a dangerous man, but now much more than ever since he had lost everything. He was usually dangerous because he was a narcissistic psychopath who would do anything to anyone for an advantage. But this was different. Alvarez didn't care now if he lived or died. He just wanted to take a few enemies with him when he died. That was dangerous.

He was on a mission. He had unfinished business to take care of, and he was determined to finish what he was forced to start because of a peasant's claim of water rights.

Alvarez had called a distant cousin, Victor Alvarez, from Dryden, east of Sanderson. They met by the Rio Grande where Alvarez left his truck. They drove north to Sheffield where Alvarez dropped Victor at the bus stop to find his way home. Alvarez kept going. Victor was mad.

He was now in the big town where he could get lost. But he remained cautious. Costume shops are good for getting lost in a crowd. He admitted the fake mustache, and the long hair wig looked ridiculous, but even that would help. If someone saw him, they wouldn't look at his facial features. They would immediately focus on the hokey wig and stupid mustache. That's what they would remember to tell police.

As his next task, Alvarez found a gardener in the Hyde Park neighborhood in Austin with his same build and, after killing him with a rope around his neck, took his clothes. He knew his next mark was near or would be soon. He knew with his mustache and wig, donning a gardener's khaki uniform, he could move freely in Hyde Park. Everyone here had a gardening contractor who employed numerous gardeners.

Alvarez parked down the street from the address he had written down earlier. He walked along the neighborhood sidewalk, pretending to examine the grasses in the lawns as he approached 4490 Cabin Road. *What a stupid name for a street in a ritzy*

neighborhood full of mansions, he thought.

He would occasionally pick up an acorn, small stone or twig and toss it into the street. A few times, he stopped and ran his fingers through the grass, examining the turf. No one seeing him would suspect he was planning yet another murder.

Arriving at the address, he turned up the long circular drive towards the beautiful house. He admired the structure, a representation of class combined with the appearance of age. Everything about the house was perfect, from the color, trim, hedges, and decorations. It was elegant, yet slightly understated. Alvarez thought, *I paid this guy way too much money.*

He went to the door and knocked. Hearing a noise coming from the house, he rapped on the door again, this time harder and more urgently. The door was opened by a woman in her 30's or 40's, still in her housecoat. A lot younger than Callaster. *Yeah, way too much money.*

"Ese señor Callaster here?" he asked.

"No. He won't be back for a little bit, honey," said the lady, seeming to lose interest in the conversation before it started.

As she started to close the door, Alvarez hit it with his shoulder and barged his way into the house. He pulled out a gun from his back belt and sticking it in

her face, growled, "I'll wait, honey."



Campbell notified the FBI office in Austin. Two agents quickly looked up the address and called the home number. No answer. They then called the Austin Police Department, in the hope that a patrol officer could get to Callaster's house before they could drive into the heart of the city from their suburban office.

The report in the police department didn't get routed quickly, and neither was it taken very seriously. It was prioritized when it was finally noticed and placed under two suspected burglaries and a dead, undressed gardener in Hyde Park.

Two FBI agents left their office in Research Park northwest of Austin twenty minutes away. Agent Chad Rawlison called Callaster's phone, but there was no answer. Agent Eddy Storm drove as fast as he safely could.

When they pulled into the circular drive, everything looked calm. There were no cars in the drive. Their information told them the possible perp was armed and dangerous, so they drew their Glocks and approached the door.

"FBI!" shouted Rawlison. The stood quietly and listened, but the only sounds were a few birds in the nearby trees and a dog barking at a distance.

Storm tried the door latch, and it easily swung open. The agents entered, alert for any danger. Unlike on TV shows, the two agents didn't separate to clear the house but began a coordinated search which started and ended in the kitchen. They found a woman gagged and tied to a breakfast nook chair, very much alive and very much unhappy. Across the room lay Callaster in a puddle of blood. Storm went to the woman to remove the gag. Rawlinson checked for a pulse on Callaster. He was dead.

As soon as the gag was removed, the woman cried, "He groped me! That monster groped me!"

∞

McRae received the news about Callaster from a phone call. Rawlinson stated in that call that it appeared Alvarez had waited on Callaster after tying up his wife. He shot and killed the attorney and took his car. A BOLO (Be one the lookout) alert was released to all agencies for a black 2016 Lexus IS.

The description of the perp's physical build matched that of Alvarez except he was wearing long stringy hair, a tacky mustache, and a gardener's uniform.

Chapter 21: Escape

“You can only protect your liberties in this world by protecting the other man's freedom.” Clarence Darrow

Alvarez removed the wig and put it on the seat beside him. He would probably need it again. He drove the Lexus to the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport southeast of the downtown Austin area. Following the signs, he located the “long-term parking lot.” He pulled through the unattended gate, taking a time-stamped ticket from the ticket machine.

He parked the car among a cluster of vehicles, laying the ticket on the dash as per the instructions on the back of the card. Getting out of the car, he began looking into the nearby cars to see the check-in dates on the tickets. Some of their tickets were improperly placed upside down, and he couldn't read the times and dates.

After about five minutes, he found his next car. It was perfect; a seven-year-old silver Toyota Camry, well kept, with a ticket that said the car had checked in only two days earlier. It could remain five more days to meet the long-term minimum. Alvarez hoped the owner wouldn't miss soon because he wouldn't be back for at least five days.

Alvarez knocked out the rear passenger window with the butt end of his five-inch pocket knife. He reached

into the car and unlocked the door. After dusting the glass out of the seat, he sat in the back seat for a moment and casually looked around. He reached into the front, hitting the unlock button on the front passenger door which unlocked all the doors. He then moved his baggage and guns from the Lexus to the Toyota, attempting to look casual to the cameras aimed at the parking lot or anyone watching from inside the airport bus depot.

He moved to the front passenger's seat and then looked around to see if anyone was coming. Satisfied he was unnoticed so far, he lay on his side and slipped his head and shoulders under the driver's side dash. Being a big man, he had little room to work. In a few minutes, his hotwire attempt worked, and the engine was humming to life.

After sitting back up in the passenger's seat for another moment, he looked around again. There was an older couple pulling luggage out of a late model Buick Lacrosse two rows behind him.

Alvarez causally got out of the Toyota, walked to the driver's side. The elderly man waved at him as the couple passed by four cars away. Alvarez smiled and waved back. He got into the driver's seat and waited until the couple was in the depot. Upon checking the steering wheel, he found it locked. No problem. He gave it a powerful jerk to the right and then to the left, breaking the locking devices in the steering column.

He then pulled away, paying the attendant for the seven days parking minimum. He lied to the attendant, saying he had to return early because his father was sick, and headed off for his next marks.



Kline talked to Gomez about accepting protective custody. He took him to the VFD building so they could convince him he needed help. Gruber typed and printed a non-disclosure form for Gomez to sign so they could give the small-time rancher enough information to see the danger of not accepting protection. The document was worthless, but they hoped it would influence his silence. He signed it and allowed the protection.

“In all likelihood, Alvarez will be coming this way,” McRae said. “We have a BOLO on Callaster’s Lexus, but my guess is he will dump that car and steal another.”

Gruber added, “If Alvarez wants complete revenge, McRae and I are on his list, too. He knows us. But he may see killing one of us as a representation of all law enforcement. Everybody will need to be careful and vigilant at all times.”



Sanderson had no safe house. It never needed one before. Gomez insisted on staying in Terrell County because he would need to tend to his goats twice a

day. Those feeding times would be periods of higher vulnerability. Kline decided to allow Gomez to stay in his trailer in the master bedroom. An ATF agent was guarding the mobile home at all times. Gomez would be accompanied when he had to tend to his sheep.

It seemed to Kline evening feeding came quickly. He and Gruber accompanied Gomez to his ranch. Kline stayed with Gomez and helped him load oats into his truck. Gomez explained that for non-market goats, such as those for breeding, the weeds available in the desert would be sufficient. But the goats that were going to the meat markets needed grain to prevent the wild flavor from tainting the meat. He had a good reputation with the meat markets and got a fair market price for his goats. He wanted to keep it that way.

Gruber was assigned to stay on the periphery, hidden, keeping a protective eye on the two without being noticeable. He suspected Alvarez was in the area and focused on Gomez and Kline so Alvarez couldn't approach them.

Gomez and Kline put out 200 lbs. of oats for about 300 goats.

"Sheriff, can I sit down on my tailgate and watch my goats eat? They ese the only family I got."

"I don't think that would be a problem," Kline answered. But he was not comfortable, continually scanning the horizons for trouble. Enough time had

passed for Alvarez to have returned from Austin. Danger was in the air.



Gruber found an arroyo to follow bordering the south side of the ranch. From it, he could keep low and keep an eye on Gomez and Kline. As he looked north over the ridge, he was protected on his west side by large rocks, making the position ideal for stealth surveillance. He kept his pistol in his right hand, and his left hand held his T-Tech phone.

But the same rocks that hid him also screened him from seeing Alvarez approach. He didn't hear the footsteps behind him. He heard Alvarez when he softly said, "Drop the gun and turn around slowly."

Gruber turned slowly, holding his arms out to the side. When he completed his turn, he dropped his gun, simultaneously pressing the second "Home2" button on his phone, alerting his team and FBI offices of immediate danger.

"Now, drop your phone."

Gruber released the phone, hearing it click as it hit the rocks and bounce to the left away from him. He kept his eyes on Alvarez.

"Turn back around and put your hands behind you," Alvarez softly growled.

Gruber complied, expecting a bullet in his back. He heard Alvarez approach him and felt a sharp pain on the back of his head as his world turned black.

Alvarez knocked the agent out with the butt of his pistol, coming down sharply on the back of his head. He was hoping he could hit him hard enough to crush into the skull, but the agent's neck gave way enough that his head bound forward. Even a crushed skull would not have satisfied the rage that was burning in Alvarez's breast.

To satisfy more of his rage, he pulled out his long pocket knife and stuck it deep into Gruber's back.

∞

Kline's phone vibrated. He casually pulled it out of his hip pouch and looked at the screen. Two words and a series of numbers were displayed: "Alert – Gruber, 30.246935, -102.287655". The coordinates didn't mean anything to Kline.

He twisted and craned his neck in both directions, scanning the scene. Gruber's purpose was to guard the two against an unseen threat, which would give Gruber an advantage if Alvarez approached Gomez and Kline. But if Alvarez found Gruber first, his hidden location would be a disadvantage. Kline didn't know where the danger was, for Gruber or himself.

"We've got to get out of here," Kline said urgently.

“Alvarez is here, but I don’t know where.”

When the two got into Gomez truck, Kline was in the driver’s seat. He started the vehicle and sped away towards the ranch house.

“Keep your head down.” He immediately hated himself for leaving Gruber in danger, but the commission was, first, to get Gomez to safety.

Gomez was frightened. He had learned of Alvarez’s killing spree and wished he had never filed the charges of water theft against the more successful rancher. “Do you think he’s hiding at de house?”

“I don’t know where he is,” Kline confessed. “Is there another way out of this field?”

“Sí, turn around.”



McRae was working on paperwork in her motel room when she got the alert text. Alarmed, she called for Gruber.

“Hello,” said a voice that had become frighteningly familiar to her.

“Alvarez, where is the agent you took that phone from?”

“He’s dead. Three more to go.” Alvarez disconnected.

McRae called Kline who answered immediately.

“Kline here. McRae, have you heard from Gruber?”

“Alvarez answered his phone and said he killed him.”

A deep pain hit Kline’s heart. “Get the ATF and every available officer to Gomez’s ranch. Alvarez is somewhere on this property. I’m going to get Gomez to safety. I’ll check in with you later. I’ll be back as soon as I can get back.”

“Where are you?” McRae asked.

“There’s a back exit for this ranch, and I’m taking Gomez to Del Rio.”



20 minutes later, seven ATF agents, including Commander Wilcox, arrived at Gomez’s ranch. They searched the house and then began searching the fields behind the house.

“Commander!” shouted one of the agents. “Over here.”

Wilcox ran to the arroyo. His agent was bent over Gruber’s body with two fingers on his neck. “There’s a pulse, but it’s weak.”

Wilcox checked Gruber. He had a bloody wound in his lower right back and a bleeding knot on the back of his head. He could not believe he would ever say

his next words. Never in his life would he have imagined saying this, particularly about an officer, an FBI agent at that.

“Quickly, get him to that vet.”

∞

McRae raced to the Gomez place. She parked between the ATF trucks and started for the house. Wilcox shouted and motioned her to the field, so she revised her direction and joined him.

“Gruber was apparently surveilling from that arroyo at the left, and Alvarez found him first. Probably snuck up on him. He knocked him in the head and then stabbed him in the right kidney area. He had a pulse but was unconscious. We took him to the vet.”

“Where’s Alvarez now?” McRae asked as the pit in her stomach deepening with every bit of news.

“Not here. We searched the property. He came from the south on foot. My guess is he parked on Reginald Road and walked in.”

Both Wilcox and McRae had talked to Kline. He found his way to the east to Pandale, and then turned south to Del Rio, both in Val Verde County. Del Rio was a town of about forty thousand.

Kline alerted the Val Verde Sheriff’s office and was going to deposit Gomez into their safekeeping.

The ATF agents began a search for Alvarez, checking every backroad for a clue. Two agents followed his tracks to Reginald Road, but the trail fizzled there.

McRae went to Doctor Smythe's veterinarian practice to check on Gruber. Wilcox ordered an ambulance, and the only EMS vehicle in Terrell County was sitting outside the vet's office waiting on Gruber to be stabilized for transport.

After 30 minutes, Smythe stepped out and motioned for the paramedics to bring in the gurney for Gruber. He spotted McRae and was happy to see her. He approached her and began immediately giving her an update.

"Mr. Gruber was extremely lucky. He will probably lose that right kidney. The knife missed the major vessels, but I still had to give him some plasma. God bless hogs!

"I couldn't evaluate the head injury because I kept him too heavily sedated. He should remain that way until he's examined in Fort Stockton in case there is internal bleeding. If the knock on the head's not serious, he should make a full recovery, but with one busy left kidney."

McRae felt a small bit of relief, but it came with the feeling of exhaustion. Kline and Gomez were out of harm's way. Gruber was alive and had a decent chance of recovery.

The Accountant had always been just out of the range of controllable, the reason no one wanted to work with him. He had often spoken disrespectfully to his immediate supervisors, but that was tolerated because of his exceptional investigative and analytical abilities. Despite the trouble, McRae had developed a fondness for him on this assignment.

All in all, except for a couple of occasions, Gruber had been tolerable in Terrell County. More than that, he had proven invaluable to her. His ability to rescue them from the barn would not have been expected from any other agent she knew. In that incident, she owed Gruber her life because there was no question that Alvarez intended to kill them that night.

It would be at least four hours before Kline would return from Del Rio. She decided to go to her motel room and work on reports. No one expected any sleep that night with a killer on the prowl. She wished Kline was back.

Chapter 22: Hide

“Anger is a killing thing: it kills the man who angers, for each rage leaves him less than he had been before - it takes something from him.” Louis L'Amour

Alvarez wondered why Kline had started one direction out of the field and then returned in the opposite direction, dodging goats as he passed them.

When it was safe, he returned to the Toyota and began searching for a place to hide. He would have to kill Kline and Gomez some other time. After getting the nerdy looking FBI agent, he could at least make plans to get the good looking one. The thought of killing the lady FBI agent caused Alvarez to smile.

He assumed that the attorney's murder had been discovered. He considered himself, not one step ahead of the law, but five steps. In reality, they were closing in on him and knew more than he imagined.



Kline received the report on Gruber from McRae. He placed Gomez in the protective hands of Sheriff Wade Potter in Val Verde County and was racing northwest on Highway 90 to Sanderson. Usually a two-hour drive, he informed Sheriff Potter he would try to make it in less than an hour. Sheriff Potter's response; “Be careful. If you have an accident, there is no protection for you in the law if you're speeding, even if you're a sheriff.” Kline drove slower than he

wanted. He decided to play it safe.

After phoning McRae in her motel room, Kline called Wilcox.

“It appears that Alvarez has at least McRae and me on his vengeance tour. Can you put a couple of officers at the motel to protect her?”

“I’m running thin on agents, Sheriff, but, yes, I think that’s wise. If Alvarez comes after her there, it would be nice to catch him before he can do any more damage.”

Kline worried all the way back to Sanderson. He drove to the VFD building and called McRae to join him. He felt better protecting the FBI agent than assigning someone else to do it. The two ATF agents guarding McRae rejoined the search.

Wilcox and his men continued to scour the county, but no one knew what vehicle he was driving. They also didn’t know about the fake mustache and wig that came off and went back on as needed.

“Any further word on Gruber?” Kline asked McRae after she arrived.

“He’s in surgery. His CT scan showed no bleeding in the brain. After the surgery, they’ll allow him to wake up.”

“I knew from the start you weren’t pleased with him

being assigned here. What is it you have against him? He seems to be a good investigator.”

McRae sighed. “He has a pattern of going off the reservation, like the night he went illegally on the DD ranch for pictures of the trailer tires. His hunches are typically right, which is how he gets away with it. But his lead agents get bad reviews for not controlling him while he gets accolades for finding hidden evidence.

“But he has been on fairly good behavior, except for that one incident,” she added. “Thank God he went off the reservation to rescue us.”

McRae took a seat at the conference table where Kline already had papers organized.

Kline said, “He didn’t seem to be thrilled with working for you again, but that seems to have changed as you have worked together. I think he’s benefited from being in Sanderson.”

“I’ve noticed that too,” said McRae.

∞

Not knowing if the owner of the Toyota had returned to Austin and if the car he stole had been reported, Alvarez found a pick-up truck parked behind a house in Sanderson and swapped license plates. That should give him a couple of days if the car theft were reported. He then arrived at the Night-Light Stay Motel and sat in the Toyota in the parking lot away

from the lights. He was afraid to kill the engine because it would have to be hotwired again.

Upon observing the vehicles at the motel, Alvarez noticed there were no ATF trucks or trooper cars. The parking lot held a few family cars, a construction truck, and a healthcare car. None of them looked like what he imagined an FBI agent would be driving.

He had planned to trick the motel clerk into giving him McRae's room number. Maybe he would take the motel clerk into a back room and beat it out of them. He preferred the latter. But if McRae wasn't at the motel, it could go sideways quickly. He decided to drive around and try to find the FBI vehicle, hopefully locating McRae. Maybe McRae and Kline would be together.

Alvarez pulled out of the motel parking lot onto Highway 90 and turned towards the VFD building.



Kline and McRae were feeling edgy. Suspecting they were on Alvarez's target list, and with Alvarez in the wind, they were extra alert. Kline kept his pistol on the conference table easily within reach. He felt protective of McRae, and little did he know that the more experienced agent felt protective of him.

They opted to eat at the Sage Diner which had previously been a Dairy Dip. Kline felt he could cover them better there because the building was framed

almost entirely with glass windows. He could keep an eye on the parking lot, and no one could enter without showing themselves to those inside as they approached.

Kline pulled out of the VFD parking lot and was immediately met by a silver Toyota on the road. He strained to see the driver, but darkness had set in for the night. The silhouette appeared to be a woman with wild hair, so he continued.

∞

Alvarez sank down in the seat to look shorter as he passed the sheriff's cruiser. He was hoping that, and the wig would disguise him enough. If they recognized him, they would have stopped and tried to arrest him. But they kept going. Alvarez let out a long breath, realizing he had quit breathing for half a minute. Perhaps the wig had helped him again. One of the best three-dollar investments he ever made.

He drove two more blocks and turned around. He had let too much time and distance pass between them, and now he had lost them. A hunger pang struck him, reminding him it was well past time to eat. That was a place to start looking for cops. They always ate at odd times. He would check the local eateries and try to locate the two he wanted to kill next.

∞

Kline and McRae asked for a seat where they could keep an eye on the door. They were given a booth in the back-left corner of the dining room, and so both could see the door, they squeezed in one side. Also, in this booth, a sniper would have difficulty getting a clean shot.

“I’m going to miss this,” Kline said, surprised by his honesty. He wondered how his statement was taken. He wondered how McRae would respond.

“I am too, Ted,” she said with a sad smile. “I’m going to miss you.”

With no family alive, Kline didn’t have many friends. His high school and college days were so troublesome, he hadn’t kept up with any of those temporary friends. In Sanderson, his best two friends had been Deputy Ben Parker, now deceased, and Sheriff Ruben Vargas, also deceased. He and Marco had shared some activities together, hunting, fishing and hiking, and always had lots of laughs, but they didn’t have that close of a friendship. They didn’t know that much about each other. With such a messed-up history, Kline realized he was sitting beside his best friend now.

The two ordered soft drinks when a silver Toyota pulled into the parking lot. Kline noticed it, recalling the car he met when he pulled out of the VFD. It appeared to be the same. He didn’t believe this was a coincidence. With the dim lighting in the parking lot, he couldn’t make out the driver.

McRae noticed the change in Kline's disposition. From her vantage point, she couldn't see the car because the booth in front of them was occupied. But she knew Kline had seen something.

"I need to go to the restroom," she said as she slid and bumped him, straining to see what had captured his attention.

Kline slid out of the booth and stood, pretending to stretch and look away. But he kept the car in the corner of vision. McRae walked to the hallway which led to the restrooms, stopping in the dark hallway to look back into the parking lot. She saw the silver car. *Hadn't they passed a silver Toyota on the way to the Sage?*

She continued into the women's room and quickly fished out her phone. She called Wilcox and told him about the silver Toyota Camry. She wasn't able to see the license plate, but she wanted Wilcox to check it out.

Wilcox had been driving around the city streets, looking for something suspicious when he received the call. After he disconnected, he checked on his men on patrol. No one else was in town. He quickly turned his truck around. If McRae and Kline were bothered by a car, it probably meant something. He would check it out immediately.

McRae rejoined Kline at the booth. He eased out of the bench seat to allow her to slide onto it. When

she brushed by him, she whispered, “Wilcox is on his way.”

Kline and McRae ordered salads, knowing they probably wouldn't be able to eat them if their instincts were right. Kline wanted the open roast beef sandwich with mashed potatoes and gravy. He was hungry. His mouth watered, but the danger outside was the priority issue. His stomach growled loudly. He kept an eye on the Toyota but tried to disguise his peeks.

It took Wilcox five minutes to arrive. He came upon the parking lot without his emergency lights but flipped them on when he pulled beside the suspicious car. With his gun aimed, he approached the vehicle.

“Keep your hands on the wheel as I open the door,” he shouted.



Kline was watching from the diner. He saw Wilcox approach the car alone. He saw a muzzle flash inside the car's passenger compartment, glass blowing out towards Wilcox, and the ATF agent jerked backward. Wilcox fell back onto his pickup, sliding down to a sitting position, leaving a red streak on the fender.

Kline had already started out of the booth. He drew his pistol and ran for the door. McRae was more than a few steps behind him. The Toyota's lights came on.

Kline banged open the glass door with his shoulder and fired four shots, aiming as quickly as he could at the driver's seat through the front windshield as he ran.

The Toyota shot backward and to the left, temporarily hiding behind the ATF truck. Then it pulled out quickly, with a sharp turn to the right, sped off the curb, sending sparks from the undercarriage's rough kiss with the concrete. Kline stopped and steadied himself. He fired three more shots. Two speared into the trunk, and the third shattered the rear window. Quickly the Toyota was too far away to get another accurate and safe shot in a busy neighborhood.

Kline ran to Wilcox, McRae behind him. He had been hit with a direct shot in the right side of the chest. Blood was leaking out the corner of his mouth. Kline could feel a weak pulse. He slammed his hand onto the hood of the ATF truck creating a loud bang.

McRae ran up, looking inquisitively into Kline's eyes.

Kline shouted, "Let's get him to the vet. Quick!"



An all-points bulletin went out. The ATF agents converged from the county roads to the little town of Sanderson. From there they spread, hoping to find the murderer who had hurt their supervisor.

Val Verde sheriff Wade Potter sent three deputies,

and Pecos County Sheriff Dave Rau sent three more to join the hunt. The race was on and would not end until Alvarez was found, dead or alive. The second option was best, most would agree.

Neither Kline nor McRae was hungry at this point. After leaving Wilcox with Dr. Smythe and ordering the EMS service to wait for transport, they joined the search for the man who demanded to use more than his share of water.



Alvarez was livid. His right arm was bleeding, and he was convinced a lone bullet hit the bone. With burning pain which would have overcome the average man, Alvarez felt little but rage wrapped in two slices of hate.

He was confident Gruber was dead. He was sure he had killed Wilcox, but Wilcox was on a secondary list, which was so long of a list Alvarez knew he would never finish. However, two of three of his primary targets were together, and somehow, they had sensed the danger and alerted Wilcox. As a result, he missed his marks.

What was it with this Kline? Each time he got near him, the sheriff seemed to know the danger instinctively and took evasive actions. He had resurrected the complaint about water usage, and his aggressive style of law enforcement had cost Alvarez his entire business. His whole world. He had

to be number one on his list. Anyone else was icing on the cake.

Where could he hide? He knew his ranch home was empty; the one he was forced to sell. However, he had grabbed the title papers from Callaster's briefcase after he put a bullet in his head and groped his wife. He knew now that the document was worthless. He was a fugitive and would never enjoy his ranch again.

But he rightly assumed that Kline had his house under surveillance. That would not be a safe place to hide.

He needed a vacant house, one he knew was unoccupied. He knew of a good one, the place where this all started. Earlier, he had returned to Gomez's place an hour after he had fled it in hopes of catching the goat roper home alone. But he wasn't there. Kline had taken him away. Alvarez doubted they were keeping that empty house in the middle of nowhere surveilled.

Chapter 23: Dead

“Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals”. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Kline took every road in Sanderson, sometimes slowing down to observe something he wanted to inspect. He slowed when McRae wished to examine a place longer. After 40 minutes, having backtracked in the densest areas, they had come up empty. Kline pulled to a stop and slammed his palm onto the steering wheel. His leg was throbbing. His heart was hurting worse.

After a moment of silence, McRae said, “Let’s think. What would you do in that situation?”

“I don’t know. I have a hard time putting myself in THAT situation.”

McRae remembered an exercise that was part of her FBI training.

“OK, suppose this was all a game, or training, and you were in THAT situation. You had to become invisible, but your mission wasn’t completed. You were spotted and managed to get away. You may be injured, or you may not be. Either way, the police are very active, so you would have to find a safe place to let things cool down, preferably out of town. Where

would you go?”

Kline thought. A game. A training exercise. He wished this was a game. Where would he go? What would be his next move?

“I would find a place where I could hide safely. Alvarez probably figures his ranch is under surveillance unless he’s desperate enough to lose his cool completely. But that hasn’t been his style.”

Kline began thinking of the vacant houses in the county. There were several that would make good places to hide for a while. Alvarez needed a place where he could also conceal the identified car from view.

He and McRae went to the VFD and made a list of vacant houses, looking up coordinates on the computer. They gave the list to the dispatcher who distributed the assignments to different agents. The order was, however, that no one would approach a property alone. And, if in doubt, shoot to kill. Everyone was reminded that this was a cop killer who wasn’t afraid to kill again.

After officers were dispatched to each suspected vacant property, Kline and McRae sat back in the conference room chairs.

“We have all the prime locations dispatched,” he exhaled. “All we can do now is wait.”

“Not all of them,” McRae said. “Come on, Ted. We

have one more.” she started out the door with Kline on her heels.



Alvarez drove the bullet-riddled car through the yard, around to the back of the house and parked it as close to the house as he could manage, completely hidden from the road. After opening the front and back doors hoping for a breeze in the stale home, he looked for something to bandage his arm. A bathroom towel was the best he could find, but the bleeding continued to ooze.

He also found pain pills in the medicine cabinet with instructions, “Take up to two every six hours as needed for back pain.” He took five.

Sensing the growing need for rest, he turned out all the lights, got a glass of tea out of the refrigerator and sat in Gomez’s reclining chair. Besides the fact it smelled like goats, it was surprisingly comfortable. And it gave him a view through the front window so no one could sneak up on him.

He was angry. His anger had built up for a lifetime. His dad had told him the stories of how settlers moved in and stole the land from the peasants. He had read how Zapata, a hero in the history of Mexico, always stood up for the peasants and tried to return their lands to them. Although the DD ranch wasn’t in the family from the beginning, to him it represented the small ranch his dad owned and

almost lost. His win in a double-down bet was a sign of destiny.

He was the wealthiest man in the county, but he still considered himself a peasant against the tyranny of imperialism. The carpetbaggers moved in, forced him to pay taxes, made laws to govern his ranch and never gave anything back. They told him how much water to use as if they created it. It was his family's water before they were here. He hated them.

And then they forced him to sign his property over for half of its value. Callaster had deceived him. He forced him to run because his own cow hands lost their backbones and walked out. When he went after his shotgun to make the weakest pay, to use the deserters to set an example, Callaster said dryly, "Texas has the death penalty, Pete." He was trying to set a courageous example to those who were getting weaker, but Callaster had gotten into his head.

The death penalty. Alvarez had the death penalty, as people were finding out. Callaster got it. Meechi got it. That stupid mayor got it. That FBI agent got it with a knife, and that meddling ATF agent walked right into his bullet.

Alvarez made a few calls for money on a burner phone he snagged in Austin, only to find out all of his assets were frozen. Callaster did that, but now he was burning in hell. But the lack of funds would limit his options and where he could go. If he survived to escape, he would have to get money from that whiny

wife and at least start out in Mexico. Where he would end up, he didn't know.

His eyes were getting heavy.

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Kline stopped about a half mile from the Gomez ranch in east Terrell County. He popped the clear plastic lens from the interior light of the cruiser and removed the bulb. He flipped the kill switch on the left side of the dash.

He recalled Sheriff Vargas complaining that he had seen too many stealth approaches blown by tail lights and brake lights. Having to patrol for human and drug traffickers along the border, the worst of the lot, through miles of desert, a stealth approach was imperative to getting close to the perps quickly. He had kill switches installed in every cruiser that, when flipped, disconnected the rear lights, allowing the officers to remain dark as they approached.

Kline eased off the brake and rolled slowly down the gravel road to the ranch drive. He pulled into the driveway but stopped well short of the house.

He and McRae quietly opened their doors and got out of the car, leaving the doors open to remain quiet. They approached the front door of the house, guns ready and hearts pounding.

∞

Alvarez had almost drifted to sleep, but something startled him awake. He looked out the window into the night and could see two blackened silhouettes stealthily approaching the front door. He eased out of his chair and tiptoed to the back door. He slowly opened the wooden screen door, stepped out, and quietly closed it. He hid to the side of the doorway in the darkness of the night, gun in hand.



Kline and McRae were at the front door. The solid door was open. There was only a screen door closed, and it wasn't locked. The officers entered quietly, scanning the living room, but taking a moment for their eyes to adjust to the greater darkness. They flipped on their flashlights.

Kline led McRae into the kitchen. They quickly scanned it and returned to the living room. They followed a hallway to their right that led to the bedrooms. They moved as quietly as they could.

The first door on the right was the bathroom. Kline quickly checked it, looking in the tub and behind a shower curtain. He returned to the hall. The next room door, on the left, was already opened. It was a guest bedroom from the looks of it. Kline checked the room, under the bed and then the attached closet. He realized that without the lights, even with the flashlight, he was at a severe disadvantage. He determined to change that.

Two more bedrooms at the end of the house had to be cleared. The two doors were facing each other at the end of the hallway. Kline assumed that the room to the right was the master bedroom. He wanted to flip on the light and find Alvarez snoring in the bed. He motioned for McRae to guard the door on the left.

Kline hesitated. If Alvarez was in the third bedroom, he would be alerted by the search of the master bedroom and would come out shooting. But he trusted McRae. He continued, knowing McRae had his back.

Kline cracked the door and flipped the light switch in the master bedroom. The room became bright. Kline had his gun trained on the bed, but the bed was empty. He heard McRae open the left door. She turned on the light and found the room was also empty. She looked back at Kline, and he motioned for her to assist him checking the master closet. Kline opened the closet door standing to the side, ready to shoot, but kept his eye on the hallway. McRae moved to where she could see in the closet and cover the hall. No one was there.

The two quickly moved to the third bedroom closet, the last place in the house that had not been cleared. Kline quickly opened the door. Nothing. "House is clear," Kline announced and they holstered their weapons.

"Isn't this convenient," Alvarez said behind them. He

had come in the back door and followed them down the hall. He waited until he heard them put away their weapons away before he stepped into the light. He was holding his gun in his left hand, his right arm hanging limp, wrapped in a bloody towel.

Kline reached for his gun.

“I wouldn’t do that, sheriff,” Alvarez warned.
“Remove your hand from your gun, or I’ll shoot.”

Kline noticed that Alvarez’s left hand was unsteady. He also noticed his eyes were glazed and half closed. He said a quick, silent prayer, hoping McRae was doing the same.

“I’m not going to remove my hand from my gun, Alvarez. And McRae is reaching for her gun now. You will get me, but I assure you, she will kill you on the spot.”

McRae smoothly moved her hand to rest on her holstered Glock.

Alvarez smile. “Oh, we're going to play games. How fun. I like games.”

Kline stepped away from McRae towards the bed, creating distance and more difficulty for Alvarez to shoot them both. McRae stepped further away from Kline towards the closet.

“You’re caught, Alvarez. You can drop your gun and give yourself up, or we can see how this is going to

play out.”

“I can kill both of you before either of you can pull your weapons.”

“You will only get one of us. And that will be me.”

“You’re not afraid to die, Sheriff?” Alvarez laughed.

“No. That’s been settled. As a friend told me, that decision isn’t up to you or me. If I die, it was meant to be. I also suspect that if you don’t drop your gun, your time in this life is up.”

A moment of doubt flashed across Alvarez’s face. The five painkillers were blurring his vision. He was afraid but covered it with a laugh.

“All I have to do is pull the trigger, and your death IS my decision. Just like I decided to end your friends’ lives, the other sheriff and the rest of the deputies. And the Mayor, and Meechi. I decided to kill Callaster and that ATF agent. Oh, don’t forget, I already killed the other scarecrow looking FBI snoop.”

McRae spoke. “The ATF and FBI agents are not dead. You’re not as good as you think you are, Alvarez.”

“Yes, they’re dead. I killed them. I decided they were going to die.”

“They’re alive and recovering in the hospital,” Kline

said with a smile. "Thanks to some good work by our friendly neighborhood veterinarian."

Alvarez shifted the weight on his feet. "Well, they may be alive, but you won't be that lucky. Now take your hand off that gun or I will kill you right now."

Kline knew that taking his hand off his gun was suicide. Alvarez had plans to kill both of them anyway. Kline wanted this to end on his terms, with him fulfilling his sworn duty. He realized that he might be giving his life to stop this criminal. His heart was pounding. He was afraid but had already made that decision.

If Pastor Barnes was right, this was in God's hands. But he could not keep the thought out of his mind that he would rather die than for McRae to die.

"I know," Alvarez said after a moment. "I will kill the pretty lady, and you will watch."

"As soon as your gun goes in her direction, my gun is out and firing," Kline warned. "I promise. You will not kill her."

Alvarez thought about taking this as a challenge. For a moment, he was mentally prepared to point his gun at McRae, shoot and get ready for whatever Kline could do. But Kline already had his hand on his pistol. Alvarez didn't know how quickly Kline could draw and fire.

It was Kline he wanted most anyway. Most, that is,

after Gomez, but that was looking less and less likely.

“You’re going to have to shoot, Alvarez,” Kline said.

“You want to die?” Alvarez asked skeptically.

“I would rather die than you kill us both.”

Alvarez smiled. “You’re bluffing. Raise your hand off that gun, Sheriff. Last warning.”

Kline wrapped his hand fingers around the handle of his gun. “I’m not raising my hands.”

“I’m going to kill you both. Neither one of you has your gun out.”

For seconds that seemed like hours, no one spoke. The only sounds Kline could hear were crickets outside the house and the pounding of his heart.

“You aren’t afraid to die,” Alvarez stated in surprise.

“No, that’s settled, like I told you,” Kline said. “You, Alvarez, have to decide if you’re afraid to die because if you don’t drop your gun, you’re a dead man.”

“I’ve never seen this kind of bluff before,” Alvarez said, trying to grasp the situation that was getting blurrier every passing second.

“I’m going to pull my gun now,” Kline said. “You’re going to have to shoot me.”

Alvarez was confused for a moment. Then a resolved look came over his face.

Kline watched for his eye to twitch, and when it did, he dove for the bed, pulling his pistol.

Alvarez was startled by the move but was able to follow the dive, although slightly behind and catching up.

Boom, boom.

Alvarez didn't hear the third shot. Everything went dark. His life ended.

McRae held out her gun, trembling. She had pulled her weapon and taken a headshot at Alvarez. She had seen his head snap back, and he slowly fell, leaving a red spray pattern on the bedroom door behind him.

She ran to Kline. He had been hit. He was bleeding. The bedspread was turning red around the edge of his body. He was lying still on the bed, and McRae's heart stood still. She reached down and touched his shoulder, not knowing what to do next.

Kline groaned and rolled over, gun still in hand. He had a growing bloody circle covering his left shoulder.

McRae then looked at the charred badge that had once belonged to Sheriff Vargas. The second shot had hit it squarely in the center, saving Kline's life,

but it was going to leave a very nasty bruise.

“Jerry said Alvarez couldn’t kill me until it was my time,” Kline moaned. “But he didn’t say it wouldn’t hurt.”

McRae laughed. Kline laughed through the pain.

“Let’s go, cowboy,” she said as she helped him to his feet. “I’ll call and wake up the vet.”

Chapter 24: Plans

“A grateful heart is a beginning of greatness. It is an expression of humility. It is a foundation for the development of such virtues as prayer, faith, courage, contentment, happiness, love, and well-being.” James E. Faust

Two months later.

Kline stared at the wallpaper in his kitchen. It wasn't any different than when he bought the 40-year-old mobile home eight months earlier. It wasn't pretty. *Whoever thought about putting those pink flowers on yellow wallpaper and considered it attractive? Probably someone in a leisure suit.*

His phone was in his hand. He looked at it again. *It wasn't going to dial itself.*

With the help of his friends in the FBI, Kline had tracked the man down in Florida. That's an excellent place for him in his retirement. He deserves it. Going to the beach often, taking his teenage kids, maybe fishing, or swimming, or just soaking in the sun.

Pastor Jerry said the hard part of this would be dialing. And he said the freedom it would bring was many times more powerful than the dread.

So, Kline dialed the number.

“Clayton here,” said the voice from 1,600 miles away.

“Sergeant, this is Ted Kline. Please don’t hang up on me.”

“Kline? I read about you in the papers,” said Bells. “I thought maybe aliens had taken over your body. From what I read, it wasn’t the Kline I knew.”

Kline laughed. “I deserve that, Sergeant. I’ve called to ask you to forgive me. I was angry at that time and didn’t know why. Well, I did know why. That’s no excuse. I did you wrong.”

“Well...” Bells said and paused. “I never expected this. What happened?”

“That’s a long story, and maybe, well, definitely, for another time. Let’s just say now I think I finally grew up. But I did you wrong. Take the time you need and let me know if, and when, you forgive me.”

“I can tell you now,” Bells said in a low soft voice, a voice Kline never heard from him. “I forgive you.”



It was early morning in Sanderson. The peaceful little town was waking up from dreamland and wiping its sleepy eyes. Some dreams lingered for a few minutes, and some were immediately forgotten.

Roosters were crowing, complaining that the sun was rising and they needed more sleep. Occasionally a dog would bark from sheer boredom. Coffee was

brewing, bacon frying, eggs sizzling and biscuits were coming out of the ovens.

Morning papers from Fort Stockton were being read, thrown in the dawn by a man with a cigarette hanging from his lips as he tossed the paper through the open window of his twelve-year-old car. Sanderson was closer to returning to normal.

The real excitement in town was in the homes with children. They were being dragged out of bed by giddy parents. They would be hurried through breakfast, dressed, brushed, combed and groomed like a champion at the Westminster Dog Show.

But the children were not happy. It was the first day of school after the summer.

Jimmy Todd, the newest deputy, entered the interim sheriff's office. He stood with a smile until the sheriff disconnected the call.

"Someone's here to see you," he said, still smiling.

The sheriff was expecting this meeting. Looking forward to it, actually. "Send him in, Deputy.

Kline walked in and took the seat across from the sheriff's desk.

"You look good behind that desk," he said with a beaming smile.

McRae laughed. She reached up to the badge: a fire-

charred badge of a friend she never met and then marked by a killer's bullet. She would only be serving until the election. No need to order a new one until then.

"You would say that wherever I was, Cowboy."

"You're right, Sheriff."

Kline thought McRae looked better in a sheriff's uniform than she did in her FBI pantsuits. He learned something else about himself. He loved a woman in uniform.

"How's your shoulder today?" McRae asked.

"Still a month of rehab, but it doesn't hurt all the time," he answered, rolling his left shoulder with a wince. "Getting comfortable in bed is the biggest problem. It's hard to sleep when every time I move, it sends a sharp pain through my shoulder."

McRae had resigned her position with the FBI after speaking with the governor. He and Federal Judge George Matthews drove to Sanderson from Austin and swore McRae in as interim sheriff while Kline was in surgery. A wild, wild, west town like Sanderson couldn't do without a sheriff, not even for a day.

McRae had visited Kline often in the hospital. She brought the papers for the special sheriff's election, and they filled them out together with a lot of

laughs. Kline tried to convince her to apply for the position, but she vehemently refused. She had, with Kline's approval, hired four deputies from other agencies and police departments across the state.

When Ranger Paul Kestler requested a position in the department, both Kline and McRae approved it. He became McRae's top assistant and would soon assist Kline. He found one of the few houses in town available for sale, one that once belonged to the mayor, and purchased it, moving his pregnant wife and little girl to the sleepy community. Even with his Yankee accent, locals welcomed him like a life-long resident.

When Kestler was asked why, after all the evil he saw in Sanderson, he would move his family there, he would smile and say, "It's the safest place in the world. Kathleen McRae's the sheriff, and Ted Kline will soon be."

The word came that Special Agent Tom Wilcox was recovering from his gunshot wound and had put in for his retirement. He was planning to move to Wyoming.

FBI Agent Philip Gruber was on extended recovery. Extended, extended. He was drawing full recovery pay and working for a friend in Kansas City who owned a computer store. He was repairing machines for customers. He called McRae occasionally, but wouldn't say when he was going active again for the FBI.

Construction was well underway for the new Sheriff's office. It wouldn't be completed until after the election. But everybody was ready for a big open house party. Even the governor was expected to come if his wife's health permitted.

After Kline was released from the hospital, the county offered him a consultant's position until the election. He declined. He didn't need the money, but they didn't know that. He preferred it remain that way.

No one else applied as a candidate for the election. It was four months away, but there was no way anyone else would get a single vote in Terrell County. Kline was a local and national hero.

"Have you decided what you are going to do after the election?" Kline asked for the hundredth time. "I could use another good deputy."

McRae laughed, but Kline didn't.

"I don't know yet," McRae answered honestly. "I have to decide what to do with my apartment in El Paso. I do NOT intend on going back there."

"After the election, I will be able to see you, won't I?" Kline asked.

"Under one condition," she said, trying to hide a smile.

“Oh, no! What’s that?”

“You’ll have to show me the funny monkey dance.”

They both laughed.

Epilogue: Forgiveness

“The idea of redemption is always good news, even if it means sacrifice or some difficult times.” Patti Smith

Kline was a frequent visitor to the Sheriff’s office. He said it was to keep his finger on the pulse of law enforcement in preparation for his upcoming term as sheriff. Everybody knew better. He even made excuses to spend time with McRae when she was off work.

On one visit, Kline came with a determined purpose. McRae saw it on his face when he walked into her office.

“I’m going to take a trip,” Kline said. “And, Sheriff, if you don’t mind, I would like you to go with me. Kestler can watch the shop.”

“Where are we going?”



It never rains in late August. Not in this part of the country. But only people who don’t know Texas would ever use the word “never” when talking about the weather.

Kline pulled into a parking space at the Central Texas State Veterans Cemetery in Killeen. He sat in the car with McRae briefly, hoping the rain would let up. But

it looked as if it was going to rain harder. He fished out an umbrella from behind him and exited the car. Quickly moving around to the passenger side, he opened the door for McRae, holding the umbrella over her.

“Care to join me, Ms. McRae?”

“Thank you, Mr. Kline. You’re such the gentleman,” she said with a smile.

The two crowded under the umbrella and walked arm-in-arm in silence into the graveyard. Kline knew where he was going and they quickly arrived. He looked at the name on the grave marker.

“General Walter George Kline,” he said aloud.

“Ted, he would be so proud of you,” McRae said, a tear leaving her eye but undetectable amid the fugitive raindrops that had been whipped by the occasional gusts of wind. “I wish I could have met him.”

The two remained in silence for a while. Ted felt the resentment leave him, all the anger and bitterness. As Pastor Barnes had told him recently, every ingredient was added to Kline’s life from every direction, guiding and enabling him to find his destiny. Now he was beginning to see that every mile in his life journey had become valuable when God was in control.

He sometimes wished he could have another chance

with his dad. A do-over. A mulligan in life. But the only way he would accept a mulligan is if he could keep what he learned from each phase of his life. That was not likely, but neither was a do-over.

He was learning so much in such a short amount of time. So much about life. About himself. About God.

And the beautiful woman next to him was taking that same journey. He looked at McRae, leaned over and kissed her.

McRae was surprised but pleased. She had watched this man rise from the ashes. He was a broken man when they met, broken much in the same way she had been. She was with him as he found his balance. She was so proud of him. And he had helped her find her balance. For the first time in a long time, Kathleen McRae was happy.

The sun suddenly broke through the clouds. The rain stopped just as suddenly. Everything seemed new, washed and clean.

Kline smiled and looked at McRae. "Kat, I'm ready to go now."

The two turned and began walking back to the car. Kline looked over his shoulder.

"Pops, I'll see you later."

The End

A Message from Author Tim White

Dear reader,

You are the reason I write. I hope you have enjoyed my book enough to look into the other books in this series.

In today's publishing market, positive reviews are crucial to the success of the writer. They assure other readers that a book is worthy of their time.

I would highly appreciate if you can take a few minutes to post an honest review of this book on Amazon. This will also assure that I can keep writing adventure novels that don't offend people's morals.

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