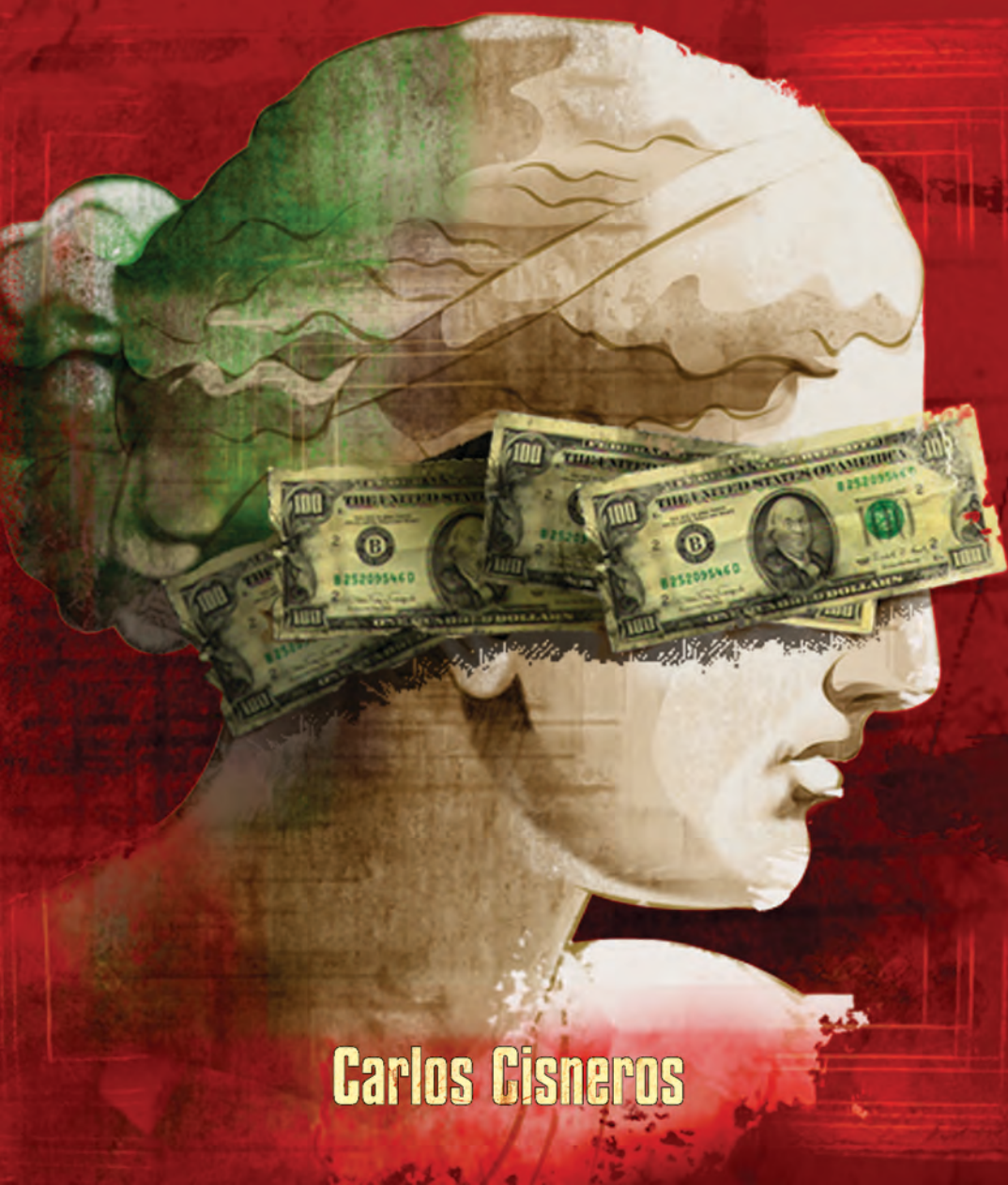


THE CASE RUNNER



Carlos Cisneros

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*This book is dedicated to my parents, Mere & Chabe,
and to my wife, Lynda, and the kids,
Carlitos, Alex, and Annie.*

Disclaimer

This is a work of fiction. All similarity to people, places, events and situations is purely coincidental

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Prologue

Rio Grande Valley, near the Texas-Mexico border, April 2003

THE YOUNG MOTHER STRUGGLED to move her legs but had no sensation in either of them. She lay pinned down between the soil and the flattened roof of the passenger van, barely breathing, her hip bones crushed to pieces. In the darkness, she could smell her gasoline-soaked clothes. With great effort, she freed one arm and ran her hand over her face. She was caked in blood and mud. Although her left arm was dislocated at the shoulder, her left hand still clutched a brown teddy bear.

“*Mi hijo, mi hijo,*” she cried out in a raspy whisper, her jaw bone broken in two places. “My son.” There was no answer. All she could hear was the agonized moaning of another victim dying inside the van. She felt herself drifting in and out of consciousness. “*Por el amor de Dios,*” she sighed one more time, “*¿dónde está mi bebé?*”

Struggling to stay awake, she was now shivering and going into shock. She thought of her husband back in Mexico and how much she missed him. She wondered if this was the end for her and her baby boy.

When she came to again, two figures were working on her legs. “*Por favor, ¡encuentren a mi bebé!*” she wept desperately. “*¡Por favor!*”

She tried to pull herself up and get their attention. To her horror, both her legs were missing. That’s when she felt the knife like pain from the tourniquets.

“No!” she screamed in agony. Seconds later, one of the figures reached over and gave her a shot of morphine. The pain was gone, and so was she.

The tire blow out that had sent the passenger van flying off the South Texas highway—ejecting most of its passengers to their death—was caused by a poorly constructed Firelazer XP All-weather Radial Tire. When the 911 call came, Emergency Medical Services and law enforcement personnel were dispatched from the nearby cities of Raymondville and Harlingen.

The Valley Methodist Star Flight helicopter and crew were also summoned and put on standby. For State Trooper Tom Martinez—an accident reconstruction specialist with the Texas Department of Public Safety responding to the call that muggy Saturday morning—the bloody carnage smelled of payday.

“What do we have?” Martinez asked one of several Emergency Medical Services technicians working frantically on the victims.

“You don’t want to know,” said Peterson, a paramedic at the scene. He was fuming. “If you ask me, it appears like a bunch of illegal aliens being smuggled up north.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Martinez said, sounding disgusted. “How many fatalities?” He was wearing the standard-issue gray uniform, black boots, and black windbreaker with the words *DPS FORENSICS* across the back in white.

“Don’t know yet . . . still counting, maybe eight. Wait! Make it nine, if the amputee over there doesn’t make it.” He pointed out a female lying next to the overturned van. “She’s in bad shape.”

“What are her chances?” Martinez asked.

“Not good.”

“Man, what a mess!” Martinez uttered as he photographed and measured the scene. He was having difficulty negotiating his way around the muddy sorghum field, twisted metal, debris, and dead bodies.

“I hear you,” agreed Peterson, “It’s been a few years since we’ve had a rollover with so many fatalities.”

“Any ID on the victims?”

“Yes, I think Sheriff Deputy Guerra has that info,” replied Peterson as he pointed the deputy out in the distance. Deputy Guerra could be heard a few feet away communicating with headquarters as he exchanged information regarding the victims and the company that owned the passenger van. Another deputy was

sitting in a patrol car parked on the road's shoulder, writing his reports.

"Hey, Deputy Guerra," yelled Martinez, "come take a look." The trooper was kneeling down near the crumpled front end of the van.

"What is it?"

"Have you had a chance to see this tire?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

"Here's the cause of the accident," Martinez said matter-of-factly. "The left front tire's treads came apart, causing the driver to lose control. Add to the mix the van's high center of gravity and speed . . . and nine times out of ten you'll end up with this, a deadly combination."

"Yes, you're right," said Guerra. "And look here. The van flipped at least four times, tossing its occupants like puppets . . . some as far as seventy feet." He was pointing out the places within the twenty-acre sorghum field where he'd found some of the bodies.

Martinez fixed his hat and, pointing to the horizon, added, "I found pieces of the tire's treads, about two hundred feet that way from the point of impact with the cattle fence. Judging by the weight of the van, the distance between the rim's prints on the asphalt and the final resting point . . . I would say the van plowed through the fence at eighty miles per hour. Not even Jeff Gordon would've been able to bring the van under control at such speed."

"They must have been flying," the sheriff deputy replied as he scratched his head in amazement.

While pretending to continue to canvass the scene's large area, the state trooper walked away from the rest of the emergency personnel and placed a call on his cell phone.

"Hello?" answered the man at the end of the line.

"Jeff," Martinez said quietly, "Jeff Chordelli, is that you?"

"Yes," the man said, "this is Jeff. What can I do for you, Tom?"

"Hey, Jeff," Martinez said as he struggled with the cell phone on his shoulder and tried to light up a cigarette at the same time. "I didn't recognize your voice." His back was facing the others, and he was trying not to speak too loudly.

"What is it?" Chordelli asked.

"I got a case for you and Willy."

"Oh yeah? I'm all ears."

"Here's what I got so far," Martinez replied, blowing a cloud of cigarette smoke. "Rollover accident outside Raymondville, middle of nowhere. Defective left front tire. Fifteen-passenger van. So far, there are eight fatalities, including a young boy, three survivors with serious, life-threatening injuries."

"It smells like big money. With that many fatalities, we should be able to squeeze the defendants for at least twenty million, possibly more."

"You want Willy to take over?" asked Martinez.

"Yes," ordered Chordelli, "tell him we need all of the relatives signed up, ASAP. Wives, husbands, parents, everyone with a potential claim, I want all of them on board. There's no time to waste."

"All right. I'll have him get on it right away."

"Bye."

Click.

The investigation into the rollover accident later revealed that all victims had boarded the fifteen-passenger van in Brownsville, Texas at 4:30 a.m. that foggy Saturday morning. They had been on the road a little over an hour when the rollover occurred. Most had been headed to Houston.

Two were headed to Gary, Indiana, where they worked at the IBP meat plant. They had been visiting relatives in Mexico. Wives and children awaited their return back in Gary.

One young female, en route to Florida, worked in Orlando as a housekeeper in one of Disney's properties, the Floridian Hotel. She shared an apartment with two friends from El Salvador.

Five young men, all in their twenties and single, worked together on an oil rig off the coast of Houston. They were from the Mexican Gulf cities of Tampico and Veracruz.

The only other female passenger and her young son were believed to be from a place near Puebla in Central Mexico. Their origins were not exactly clear.

Chapter 1

THE LAW OFFICE OF ALEJANDRO DEL FUERTE was scheduled to open for business sometime in the late summer or early fall of 2004. For three months, prior to hanging his shingle, the twenty-five-year-old had been busy making plans to move back home and embark on his professional career. That summer in Houston, while waiting for his Bar results, he'd started making plans for his return to Brownsville. He'd sold his worldly possessions in a garage sale, netting about one thousand bucks, and sank about two hundred dollars into his old beat-up MG Midget to fix the brakes and tune it for the trip. And he'd spent the week before he left visiting old friends before the big send-off celebration at Elvia's Jazz Cantina on Westheimer Boulevard.

As a baby lawyer, he'd managed to score a small office across from the Cameron County courthouse. He had convinced the landlord of the old, decrepit office building to agree to an oral lease for two hundred dollars a month. The deal had been done over the phone. They had exchanged the one-hundred-dollar deposit and office keys through the mail. The newly licensed attorney was ready and anxious to hang his shingle and start making money to pay off his student loans.

Saturday morning, Alejandro del Fuerte landed in downtown Brownsville and headed to his office to get ready for Monday. He'd driven through the empty streets in and around downtown with the car's top down, enjoying the South Texas morning. Alex, as his friends and law professors knew him, had yet to step into a courtroom, lock horns with opposing counsel over a contested hearing, argue a simple motion or even make an announcement. He was a

baby lawyer, plain and simple. Even the time spent as a child working at his grandfather's Notaria Pública No. 44 in Mexico had not prepared him for the real practice of law, with real clients and real judges, in the real world.

The young attorney was in the process of unloading boxes from the trunk of his car when, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed an old man sitting on the curb across the street. The old man seemed to be talking to himself, oblivious to what was going on around him and puffing away on a cigarette. The man was deep in thought and never noticed Alex walking briskly up to him.

"Are you okay?" asked Alex. "*¿Estás bien?*"

Startled, the old man jumped to his feet and looked the young man over, glancing at his South Texas College of Law T-shirt, worn jeans, and tennis shoes. But he said nothing.

Alex pressed him for an answer. "*Buenos días*," he extended his hand to greet the old man.

Trembling, the man took his hat off, pulled it close to his chest, looked down meekly, and said, "*Buenos días, señor*." He would not shake hands with the young attorney.

"Are you okay? *¿Le puedo ayudar en algo?*" asked Alex, both in Spanish and English.

"I don't know, *señor* . . . I come look . . . for my *familia*," replied the old man in broken English. "I need help. Lost, *perdido*. *¿Me puede ayudar usted?*" He was clutching his hat over his heart with one hand and with the other making signals as he tried to explain his words.

"Let's talk in my office," Alex shot back in Spanish as he grabbed the old man by the arm and led him toward the small building in the middle of the city block, across the street. The old man struggled to follow Alex. He made it into the building and followed him down a dark, narrow corridor.

"*Qué bueno que habla español*," he said as he gave thanks to the *Virgen de Guadalupe* for enabling him to meet someone who spoke Spanish.

"I also speak English," added Alex.

"*Qué ventaja*," the old man marveled. It was such an advantage to speak both languages, and speak them well.

"It can be," Alex acknowledged.

They walked through a door with the words *Alejandro del Fuerte—Abogado, Criminal Law, Personal Injury, and Family Law* on it.

"Here, take a seat," said Alex, pointing to a fold-out chair placed in front of a small desk. They were both now talking in Spanish, just like two long-lost friends who had not seen each other in years.

"*Gracias.*"

"I'm sorry for the way my office looks," explained Alex as he gestured at the boxes of books on the floor. "I'm barely starting out. I hope you will excuse the appearance. *Disculpe el tiradero.*"

"It reminds me of my home, back in my mountain village," said the old man. "We have very little furniture."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Sí." The old man looked toward the boxes scattered throughout the office. "We lead simple lives. . . . We even sit and sleep on *petates* on the floor. It is a humble home, with dirt floors and twigs for a roof."

"I see."

"How long have you had your office?"

"Just started. I'll be open for business on Monday."

"May I have some water?" asked the old man tentatively, seeming embarrassed to be a pest.

"*Seguro.* Let me get it for you." Alex got up from the desk and walked to another room in the back. He rummaged through a box looking for an old coffee mug from law school. The sound of the running water faucet filled both empty rooms. Seconds later, Alex returned to his place behind the desk and handed the cup to the old man. "Here you go. What's your name?"

The old man took a big swig, put the mug down on the desk, and said, "Porfirio Medina, *Señor Licenciado*. But my friends back at the village call me Pilo . . . P-i-l-o." He took another drink out of the cup.

"Please call me Alex, and forget the *Señor Licenciado* stuff. Did you just cross the river?" Alex asked as he looked the man's clothes over. They were muddy, wet, and covered with grass stains.

"Yes. There was a heavy fog as I waded across the river. I vaguely remembered the area from over thirty years ago when I came to the States looking for work."

"So, you got here this morning?" Alex peeked at his watch. It was only 8:00 a.m.

"Yes. It took about two weeks to hitchhike from my village in Central Mexico to Matamoros. I crossed the river two or three hours ago, when the fog was thickest."

"So that was around four or five in the morning? Any problems?"

"I almost went down," explained Pilo, "but managed to elude the agents. The two parked under a large *huisache* tree were asleep. The agents on bikes were another story. They gave pursuit, but the fog was thick, and I lost them. I hid under a bridge at a nearby golf course."

"Ah, sí, I know the area," said Alex, "it's called the Fort Brown Golf Course, right on the river levee." It was an area with heavy traffic that was flanked on one side by the campus of the University of Texas at Brownsville and on the other side by the downtown area. "Well, I'm surprised you didn't get caught," Alex added, sounding amazed. "The agents even harass the golfers who go down there to play."

"Even guys like you?"

"Even guys like me. It's a hassle. Let me tell you, one time a rookie even detained a Texas state official by accident."

"So, what happened?"

"They let the senator go, but he raised hell, and the rookie got transferred to Alaska," said Alex with a grin.

"I guess I got lucky, then."

"Yep, you did. You must have a pretty strong reason to risk getting arrested and maybe even going to prison, especially at your age."

Pilo stopped for a moment and took another drink. "I'm searching for my wife Rosario and my three-year-old son, Juan José. It has been almost a year, and I haven't had any news of them."

"How often would you hear from them before?"

“My wife would wire me some *pesitos* every month. She would drop me a line every other month or so.”

“So, the money and the letters stopped coming altogether?”

“Yes,” Pilo replied.

“Where were they supposed to have been staying?”

“*Aquí mismo, en Brownsville.* The last letter I received from my wife had a Brownsville return address.” Pilo pulled a crumpled envelope from a brown paper sack covered in oil stains and handed it to the attorney. “That’s why I’m here. I hope they’re okay.” The old man was now staring down at the worn, stained carpet that covered the floor. His eyes were watery.

“So, you got worried and came looking for them?”

“Sí, señor, that’s it.”

Alex took the envelope. The return address read:

*Rosario Medina
49 Shadow Brook Lane
Brownsville, Texas 78520*

It was addressed to:

*Sr. Porfirio Medina
Callejón de Palmas 36
Tepantitlán, Edo. de Puebla
México, C.P. 213789*

Alex examined the envelope carefully. He recognized the residential area listed on the return address but did not recognize the area in Mexico.

“Where is Tepantitlán?”

“It’s a little village on the outskirts of Teotihuacán in Central Mexico,” Pilo explained. “Have you heard of the Pyramids of Teotihuacán?”

“Yes, I’ve always wanted to go. Maybe I’ll get to see them someday.”

“We live nearby. There’s not much there. The villagers take their chances and travel to *El Norte*. Some die at the hands of co-

yotes, others drown or die of dehydration. I got lucky and made it, but not before getting robbed by highway robbers and beaten to a pulp by the *federales*, who were trying to extort a bribe.”

“Is that the reason for the black eye and scratches on your forehead?” Alex asked, probing a bit.

“Sí.” Now Pilo was also pointing to his teeth.

“They knocked out your front teeth, too?” asked Alex, eyes wide open. He felt terrible for the old man. Even his own teeth started hurting.

“This is nothing,” explained Pilo, shrugging his shoulders. “I have heard of others that get arrested by *la Migra* and spend years in prison. My wife and son got lucky and managed to sneak across in the spring of 2002. They were to stay with a relative until my wife could find work as a live-in maid somewhere.”

Alex interrupted. “Do you have the relative’s name?”

“Her name is Aurora López, she’s my wife’s aunt. I have a phone number.” Pilo pulled a folded piece of paper with scribbling on it from a crumpled paper sack.

“Did you try calling her?”

“No. I could never figure out how to call the States.”

“I see. When was the last time you heard from them?”

“That letter was the last thing I received. It was around March of 2003.”

“I see the envelope. But where’s the letter?”

“I only brought the envelope. The letters are back home, buried in a box. I thought all I needed was the address. Why, do you need the letter?”

“No. I was just wondering.”

“All the letters had the same return address. That’s where they had been staying in Brownsville.”

“Well, I guess the address can point you in the right direction,” Alex said. “At least that’s a starting point.”

“You know, I heard all these horror stories of things that happen to the *mojados*, so when my family found a job, a place to live, I thought they would be safe. But now I don’t know what to think. For her not to write, to not send money is very strange. That was not like my Rosario. It’s killing me.”

"I know what you mean," Alex replied as he looked at Pilo. The old man was having a hard time containing the tears.

"I prayed to God every day and gave him thanks because they were okay," Pilo said between sobs. "At least Rosario had not fallen prey to a slave ring. Rumor had it there was a sex ring in McAllen, across from Reynosa. Did you hear about that?"

"What was that?" asked Alex, dumbfounded.

"Smugglers that keep the women as sex slaves."

"No, I never heard that. But I read somewhere that the organizations kept the children for ransom."

"Really?" blurted out Pilo in shock, eyebrows raised. It was obvious he'd never considered that possibility.

"That's what I heard. So, you're lucky that Rosario and Juani-to made it to Brownsville okay." Alex glimpsed at the calendar on the desk and realized that it was now almost the end of August 2004. The letter was postmarked Brownsville, March 17, 2003.

"I hope they're safe. On my way over here, I kept thinking the problem was the mail. Mexico has the slowest mail, and Tepantitlán is in the middle of nowhere. That's what I wanted to believe. I don't mind dying, as long as I know that they are fine. That's all I want. Can you help me?"

The toothless *indio* looked like he was ready to croak of sorrow and affliction. He was clutching his hat and the paper bag close to his chest as he blew his nose into a rag. He turned away as he struggled to contain his tears. Alex could relate. He'd been raised, single-handedly, by his grandfather. His parents had died when he was in the fourth grade. He missed them every day, probably the same way the old man missed his wife and baby.

"I see," Alex added nervously. "Let me think." He played with the envelope in his hands. Yes, he felt terrible for Pilo, but the whole thing also made him uncomfortable. Having the old man sitting in front of him opened the door to all these sad and distant memories. Maybe it was better not to get involved.

"Ayúdeme . . ." Pilo begged with sad eyes.

"So how are you going to find your family?" Alex asked, trying to ignore the old man's request.

"That I don't know. I guess the *Virgen de Guadalupe* will show me the way. She kept me from dying on the side of the highway. And how do you explain the fog this morning? And not getting nabbed by the Border Patrol? My faith will get me to my family. She put you in my path. Please help me find them."

"I don't do this kind of work, but I can show you how to find the address on the envelope on a Brownsville map."

What Alex, the recent law school grad, needed was paying clients. Clients with big fat cash retainers. And from what he could gather, the decrepit old man probably didn't have even a hundred dollars to his name.

"*Por favor, señor*, help me find my family. It shouldn't be too hard."

"You don't understand. I don't have the time or the resources. What's worse, I don't even know if an attorney can help an illegal alien. As we sit here, for all I know I might be breaking some shitty federal law somewhere. And I just got licensed. I don't want to lose my license right off the bat because it turns out I was helping a person in your situation. Besides, do you have any money?"

"I have *trescientos pesos*."

"Thirty dollars?"

"*Sí, señor*. Those are my last *pesitos* I managed to hide from the highway robbers. You can have them."

"I can't take your last thirty dollars. It's not worth it. Besides, what's going to happen to you?"

"I'll be fine. I can eat from the garbage cans and find a place to hide in the meantime. It won't kill me."

"I don't think I can take your last three hundred pesos," replied Alex, all the while thinking of the fifty- and one-hundred-thousand-dollar retainers his criminal trial advocacy professor would flaunt in class. Hell! Professor D'Guerlain had shared with the class the story about the rich millionaire accused of murder who paid a million-dollar retainer. That was what Alex needed. Clients with cash. With *billetes, lana, feria!* Not some poor, undocumented wetback asking for a handout.

"*¿Por favor?*" begged Pilo with sad eyes.

"I just can't do it," Alex explained. "It's not right. I would feel terrible taking your last three hundred pesos and then forcing you to eat out of a dumpster or something like that." Truth be told, the young man didn't have the guts to tell the old man that thirty dollars just was not going to cut it. What kind of retainer was that? If D'Guerlain ever found out, he would die laughing.

"I see," Pilo muttered in anguish.

"Why don't you go seek help at the Mexican Consulate here in Brownsville? It's not far from here."

"*Ta bueno*, I guess I'll be going, then. Sorry to have bothered you. I didn't mean to take your time."

Alex felt terrible, but he needed to be firm. This was a business, and he needed paying clients. Professor Lawton had said that was the hardest part of the job: having to say no.

"*Mira*," Alex interjected, "I'm sure the Mexican Consulate can help you. They're very good about helping all the Mexican nationals that end up in trouble over here."

"Do you really think they will want to help a Tlahuica Indian like me?"

"I don't see why not. They're there to help. That's their job."

"Well, then, can you tell me how to get there?" Pilo asked. "I don't want to waste any more of your time."

"We're on Harrison and Eighth. Go to Sixth Street, two blocks up, and left until you see Elizabeth Street," said Alex, pointing the way. But right then and there, Alex stopped cold in his tracks. He remembered seeing agents on bikes always casing the consulate. He was sending the old man to the vultures. It was one thing to need paying clients and quite another to hand the old man over to the feds.

"*Espera*," said Alex, "maybe that's not such a hot idea. I don't think you should walk to the consulate. Not now, anyway. I don't think you should walk around downtown looking like that. You'll stick out like a sore thumb."

"Eh?" the old man muttered. He stood there, looking confused. He seemed to be struggling with the grim prospect of having to leave the safety of Alejandro del Fuerte's law office.

"Damn it!" mumbled Alex quietly under his breath. It looked like he was stuck with the old man. Certainly he couldn't let him walk out of the office in plain daylight.

Why me? thought Alex. *I didn't sign up for this. I need clients that can pay big chingón honorarios—fat, juicy retainers! I don't need this crap right now! Please God, help me figure out what to do. Someday down the road, I'll do my pro bono work, but not right now. My student loans will be due any day now. I need paying clients, please, for the love of God!*

"Ándele, Mr. del Fuerte, écheme la mano," interrupted the pesky old man. "Lend me a hand. I'm almost sixty years of age, and I don't have much time. Diosito will repay you. Not knowing what happened to my family is killing me."

"Sixty, is that it?" Alex said, annoyed by the whole situation. "I thought you were older."

"Bueno," Pilo said, the comment having gone right over his head. "I labored all my life in the fields, under the hot sun. As you can see, the hard work and hard life have taken their toll."

They stared at each other in silence, Alex watching Pilo across the desk: two different worlds brought together by chance, just like that. The old man looked as if the American Dream had chewed him up and spit him out; the baby lawyer stood at the Dream's starting gate.

The attorney was deep in thought, shaking his head, looking at the ceiling. Would he end up like the old man, he wondered? Hungry and decrepit, his spirit broken? And if his girlfriend, Paloma, found out he was helping *mojados*, would she approve, especially after the last break up? Hadn't he promised that after the Bar, he would buy her the biggest engagement ring this side of Mexico? But the timing wasn't right, not while he was setting up shop. Surely the moment she found out he was representing an illegal alien with no money, she would hit the roof. Especially when her father, the most powerful figure in the Texas legislature, had offered to call his friends and land him whatever job he wanted, as long as he was serious about marrying his daughter.

Did he want to be the youngest administrative judge the State of Texas had ever seen? Or did he prefer a job as an assistant attorney general, or clerk for the chief justice of the Texas Supreme

Court? Maybe he was cut out to be an insurance defense attorney? After all, several Austin firms had heard that Lieutenant Governor Yarrington had a *yerno* in law school. They had already advised the high-ranking politician that his future son-in-law could count on an excellent-paying job upon graduation. The truth was that those firms were not really interested in Yarrington's future son-in-law. Besides, who the hell was Alejandro del Fuerte? They had never heard of him! He didn't have a famous lawyer dad or famous mother judge. He had no distinguished judicial lineage. He was a nobody. *Who am I kidding?* he thought. *I don't even have the grades. I graduated at the bottom of my class. I barely finished "Summa Cum Difficulty."*

The firms, like all the major players and lobbyists, just wanted the lieutenant governor happy. And with good reason. Using his dominant position in the Texas legislature, Yarrington could pass laws that could either help or destroy a person. Laws that could put someone out of business or help line his or her pockets. Laws that could make a firm a ton of money when clients came knocking. It was about being on the right side of the fence. State agencies and public universities knew this. Daddy Yarrington controlled the purse strings: a \$130 billion budget, a budget the size of the state of Texas.

And what if his future son-in-law had not wanted to practice insurance defense? With one phone call, Rene Yarrington had boasted, Alejandro del Fuerte could become an associate at Brace, Kemp, Liddell & Elkins, a plaintiffs' firm with Yarrington's seal of approval. As one of the Texas Five and a big campaign contributor, it was what people called "a firm with Austin and Washington connections." Just one call, and he would be guaranteed the partnership track.

All that is out the window now, thought Alex. *Especially if I choose to help Pilo. Once Paloma tells her daddy that I'm representing wet-backs, the backlash will be intolerable.* He could already hear the harsh words that would be said. This kind of dirt-poor client was a far cry from the lobbying jobs the lieutenant governor had in mind for his future son-in-law. After all, Paloma was used to a certain lifestyle. Time and again, Yarrington had made it perfectly clear that the man who married his little girl had to meet certain standards.

"All right," Alex snapped as he cursed his luck and reached, grudgingly, for a pen and a piece of paper. "Please, sit down. Tell me about Tepantitlán."

"It's a small place with three hundred inhabitants. Mostly Tlaluica Indians, except for the doctor and his wife. We all farm the land in order to survive. There are no jobs, really. The young ones leave to go to *El Norte*. However, it is a beautiful place surrounded by mountains. The beautiful río Caracol runs nearby."

As the old man rambled on about Tepantitlán and its portrait-perfect landscapes, Alex interrupted him. "Did you ever consider that maybe your wife and son moved somewhere else?"

"Yes, the thought crossed my mind. But she would not have just packed up and gone without telling me. That was not like my Rosario."

"Well, let me ask you this. What did she say in her last letter?"

"That they missed me and that she had been thinking about coming home for a while. She wanted to come visit for a few months, let the boy see his dad, and then return to the States. Maybe next time venture up to Houston."

"Really?"

"Yes, she was going to ask the *patrón* if she could go home in the summer and then return in the fall."

"So, after she mailed her last letter, you were expecting her and your son in June, thereabouts?"

"Yes, late May or early June, 2003."

"And they never arrived?"

"That's correct. Then, to make matters worse, I never heard from them again. So, all this time I've been agonizing. Do I go? Do I stay? What if I go search for them, and they show up back home and we miss each other?"

"In her letters, did Rosario describe the family she was working for?"

"No, not really. Only that they were very demanding, but that they loved Juanito. That anytime the couple's grandchildren came to visit, Juanito would play with them. The grandchildren really loved him. They were very nice to my boy."

As Pilo spoke of Juanito, Alex noticed a smile of joy appear on the old man's face. His eyes lit up. No doubt about it, it was clear

to Alex that the old man loved and missed his baby boy. It was plain as daylight.

"Now," asked Alex, "during this period of time, when the mail stopped coming, was the mail still being delivered to others in your town?"

"Yes," said Pilo, "the man at the general store and others were getting their mail. Once or twice a month, but it was still coming."

"So, then nothing? No mail? No telegram or moneygram? You never received anything else from Rosario?"

"Nada."

"So for the last eighteen months, you have not had any news, correct?" asked the young attorney as he scribbled notes on his yellow pad.

"Yes. That sounds about right."

"And you're sure that that was their last address at Shadow Brook, here in Brownsville?"

"That has been the same address in all the letters I ever received."

"All right," said Alex, "I'll tell you what I'll do."

"What's that?"

"On Monday," Alex started, "I'll track down the address and maybe call the house or even your wife's aunt Aurora, see if she's heard anything."

"I really appreciate it, Mr. del Fuerte. You don't know how happy you make me."

"So, have you thought about where you're going to stay in the meantime? You need to lay low, you understand that?" Alex pointed out.

"Yes, I will try to do that. I just hope I don't get picked up."

"I'll tell you what," Alex said, rubbing his chin, "go down to the Hotel San Carlos on Washington Street. It's two blocks down that way," said the young attorney as he pulled a couple of bills from his jeans pocket. "Take this sixty dollars and pay for two nights. I'll see you here on Monday after lunch. Maybe I'll have some news for you."

"*Gracias, gracias, señor,*" Pilo replied, barely able to hold back the tears.

"Don't thank me," snapped Alex. "You owe me that money! I had earmarked it for business cards. Believe me, not only am I broke like you, but I'm also eighty thousand dollars in the hole on student loans. If you think about it, that means you're eighty thousand dollars richer than me! How do you like that comparison?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"Am I laughing?" Alex asked in a firm tone. "If you have money left, use it for food, and if you can, go to Jim Jones' Ropa Usada and get other clothes."

"All right, then. I'll do as you say, Mr. del Fuerte."

"Very well. On Monday I'll try to track down the phone number for 49 Shadow Brook Lane and call. Who knows? Maybe Rosario and the boy are still there. Of course, that won't matter if you don't stay out of trouble. If I was a betting man, I'd say the Border Patrol will pick you up. I hope I'm wrong. Watch your back. There are a lot of agents hanging out in the downtown area. So, I wish you luck. Until Monday, you're on your own."

"I'll be careful, Mr. del Fuerte, I promise," Pilo replied. "I thank you with all my heart."

"I mean it, Mr. Medina!" Alex countered. "If you get busted, you'll go in front of Judge Politz. Then you'll serve prison time. Finally, the INS will deport you back to Mexico. To make matters worse, the deportation proceedings can take another year. So, in the meantime you'd be just rotting in jail. And there would be nothing I could do. So, don't get caught."

"I promise I'll watch my back."

"Just to show you how bad things have gotten, I can't even put you up for a night. I could be charged with harboring an illegal alien. And if I gave you a ride anywhere, I could also be charged with transporting an illegal alien. One can never be too careful now that we have Border Patrol agents coming out of our ears here in Brownsville."

"It is that bad, eh?" Pilo asked.

"Like Nazi Germany," replied Alex. "I'll see you Monday after lunch. I'll try to have some news for you."

Alex led Pilo out of the office and pointed the way to the Hotel San Carlos.