



EXIT ANY
WINDOW

MATTHEW C. McLEAN

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*“If suspense and menace didn't defeat reason,
there would be very little drama.”*

- Raymond Chandler

CHAPTER ONE

Most people are easy to make unhappy. A needling inconvenience, a surly, immature co-worker, a string of bad luck – small things are usually all it takes. Hell, in some cases all you have to do to make someone miserable is to give them what they think they want. I had another agent tell me about one girl in Reseda that had every reason to be happy. Young, bright, good-looking, she had her whole future planned out; college, husband, kids. All that had to be done to make her unhappy (and I mean pure, abject, sustained misery) was to give it to her. Sure, it was a long-term project, but when that blossom bloomed, the Council was pulling high-octane energy off her for decades.

But the surest way to make someone unhappy is to give them an Other, to setup an outside force, organization, person, or God they can blame for their troubles, that can take away the perceived power to affect their own lives. That's what they did to me.

The first time I got arrested was coming up I-35 from Mexico through Texas. We planned to get through the sea of people and custom officers at the border looking like exactly what we were – two over-privileged white boys and their Aztlan friend coming back from a good time in Coahuila. Even though it was a bit of a rite of passage for Texas boys to go into Mexico for a few days looking for cheap liquor, whores, and adventure, getting back in could still be unpleasant. While the number of people coming into the States had dropped to a trickle in comparison to earlier years, it was still an interminable wait, sitting on concrete that baked in the sun until you could see the heat waves rising off of it, each car only moving forward an inch at a time. Miguel, our

translator, friend, and fellow graduate student, was in the passenger seat, making jokes to pass the time. Gavin, despite barely knowing any Spanish, was driving, and spoke with his usual easy confidence even with the trunk filled with illegal pharmaceuticals. I laid in the back seat of the car alternately smoking cigarettes or trying to nap.

“We will personally be responsible for every boner in the great state of Texas for the next quarter, gentleman,” Miguel quipped. I laughed at that, choking a bit on my smoke. What had started as a drunken run into Mexico, blowing off classes for a binge, had become a black market enterprise fueled by cheap cocaine and tequila. One of us (most likely Gavin) over late night beers had cracked open the idea of loading up the trunk of my hand-me-down Mercedes with drugs from less than reputable pharmacies. While Viagra was among the stuff we bought, most of the items in the trunk were bound to be sold as study aids – items like Concerta and Adderall and whatever psycho-stimulants were popular with the student body that year. They'd turnover quick and put a nice little sum in our pockets. But while the enthusiasm for the idea had carried us to the pill joints the next day, it hadn't allowed for much thought beyond that. The bottles were barely hidden in the trunk and wouldn't be hard to find if one of the border guards started looking. I kicked back, put my feet up on the seat behind Gavin, and tried to put it out of my mind.

I came to when someone knocked my feet off the seat. I blinked away to see an angry and intense green-uniformed border guard glaring at me through the driver's side window. He had reached into the car and was alternatively snapping his fingers at me and curling them towards himself in an irritated gesture for me to give him something. “You want to pay attention son?” he asked.

Around the car, I realized, several other guards were circling it with mirrors on extenders, examining the undercarriage. The guard's pug-like face and the others' scrambling around, putting their extensions where they weren't wanted while growling into their radios suddenly reminded me of my mother's fleet of

tiny, yappy dogs. Waking to the unexpected hostility set my paranoia on edge. As I fumbled for my wallet I hoped my sunglasses covered that.

When I handed the guard my ID he stared at it as if trying to set it on fire with his mind. When that didn't work he glared at me some more, went back to the ID, then handed it to me while glaring some more. He then proceeded to examine Gavin's ID and interrogate him on whether or not we had anything to declare. Despite the load of contraband in the trunk Gavin just smiled that beatific smile of his, calm and serene, and answered all of Mr. Snuggleworth's questions, adding 'sir's onto the end of each sentence for good measure. Eventually, when he got tired of looking at us, the guard snapped Gavin's wallet shut and handed it back to him. "Alright," he said as if not too happy about it, "pull on through. Welcome back to the United States."

So we pulled on through, all of us visibly relaxing as if someone had just let all of the air back into the car. No one said anything as we listened to the tires move us across the pavement, faster and faster away from the danger of border crossing.

I felt all of the paranoia release out of me with a manic laugh, which the other two joined in. Gavin looked at me and Miguel with a wide and bragging grin, "I told you it'd be easy." The laughter went up an octave and a notch in volume and lasted a good ways along the desert road. I'm sure to an outsider it would have sounded slightly hysterical.

But it's a long road back to Austin from Laredo and the laughter died somewhere along the way. So did whatever lingering buzz we had come back with. Eventually Gavin got tired enough that we switched out drivers.

Somewhere between the flat scrub land of southern Texas and its central hill country I felt my paranoia sit up and pay attention again. I looked around to see what was setting it off but found nothing – there was no other traffic, no black helicopters, not even a billboard for Johnny Law to hide behind. For some reason, though, that didn't help and I felt myself sweating through my palms onto the leather of the steering wheel.

It was almost a relief when I saw the state police cruiser

break over the horizon behind us. Almost, but it wasn't. Whatever satisfaction I might have gotten out of knowing my paranoia wasn't misplaced was quickly overwhelmed by the same said paranoia yammering away in my head about all the things I needed to keep an eye out on: Check the speed limit, make sure you stay center, don't jerk around or make any sudden movements. He knows. HE KNOWS. Breathe.

It only became worse as the cruiser slowly closed the distance between us, moving from an abstract if recognizable shape to a growling predator right at our backside. I felt more pinpricks of sweat develop across my forehead and back as I stared into its grill. When it finally turned its red and blues on I felt my system light up with electricity causing my fingers to splay out from where I was holding the wheel. I slowed down and pulled a little onto the shoulder in the hopes that the trooper was only trying to get by us, but the cruiser continued to hover in my rear view.

The crunch of gravel and the change in the cycle of the tires' sound caused Gavin and Miguel to wake up from their fitful naps. Gavin rubbed sleep from his eyes and asked like he was about to start chewing ass, "What the hell are you stopping for?"

I adjusted the rear view mirror with a touch, suddenly feeling very calm. "Cop," I said. After having experienced the fear of authority alone for what felt like an eternity I took a certain pleasure in waking up the two of them with the cold water of this news. Covered with the new conductive information, the electric tension jumped from me to them, causing a twisting of limbs and torsos as they looked out the rear window to verify this, then snapped back into position as their own paranoia told them to try to act normal. After awhile of us sitting on the side of the road, the car getting hotter in the Texas sun, Miguel asked, "What do we do?"

Gavin and me slowly turned to look at the other, the others' expression confirming our mutual belief in the stupidity of this question, then turned to look back at Miguel. Gavin spoke first. "Nothing. We sit here and do nothing. We wait like the good little citizens we are. Cole will answer all of the officer's questions

and, when he gives us a ticket, which he will, we take it with a smile and wish him a lovely day.”

“Right,” Miguel replied, his tone already leveling out at our friend's practical advice. Miguel had always seemed nervous around cops while perfectly level-headed in all other aspects of his life. I thought about this and what it might mean to us now, about Miguel and his experiences, about society as a whole, all the while looking at the cruiser in the rear view. It continued to sit there, exuding menace like a beast in the heat, with no cop emerging.

I began to wonder how much of an officer's sitting in his car after pulling someone over was preliminary procedure and how much of it was intimidation. I imagined that most people, even ones who didn't have a reason to, tended to sweat while waiting for a cop to get out of the car. From this line of thought the image of a Texas Ranger sitting in the cruiser, laughing behind mirrored glasses, began to emerge. I thought it was ridiculous, but I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something sinister waiting in the dark interior of the other vehicle.

One of the thousand of semi trucks on its way from Mexico to who knows where blew by, causing the car to rock gently.

Eventually a perfectly normal looking state trooper stepped out of the cruiser. Tall and whip thin, I could see his smile through the side-view mirror long before he walked up to the driver's side window. When he did arrive alongside in his neatly pressed uniform and cowboy hat, his smile contained none of the malice that I was expecting. In fact, it seemed genuinely friendly, as if he were seeing an old friend for the first time in a long time. He did have mirrored sunglasses, though.

“License and registration, please,” he said without introduction, the smile still on his face. His name badge read “John Murphy.”

“Sure thing.” I tried to smile back as I handed him the documents, but I could feel all of the nicotine and God knows what else sticking to my teeth, so it felt like it came across as thin-lipped and insincere.

“Where you boys headed?” he asked as his pen worked its

way through the sheet on the clipboard he was carrying.

“Austin.”

“Coming back up from Mexico?”

The question primed my paranoia, hitting it like reflex hammer, causing a too long pause from me. When I did answer I lied, “Just visiting friends in Laredo.” I regretted it instantly. He stopped writing to look from the clipboard to me, his smile broadening a bit as if he might laugh. Then he went back to the clipboard. I turned away from him to look out across the flat pan of the Texas landscape, watching the heat waves dance, hoping he wouldn't ask me anymore questions.

“Do you know why I stopped you, Mr. Hagan?” For some reason that question put a hook in me. I had never been asked that question by a police officer before, had only seen it asked in movies. Also, I didn't know why he had stopped me. I had been obeying local traffic laws. I said so.

“I stopped you because you have a taillight out.”

“What?” I was honestly confused and let it show. The Mercedes was my father's car and, true to his fastidious nature, he demanded it be maintained in perfect condition. Part of me had taken it into our Mexican sojourn in the hopes it would get damaged or stolen.

Officer Murphy looked at me as if I had been struck dumb. He spoke his reply a little slow, with a small enunciation on each word. “You have a taillight out.” When I blinked more disbelief at him he stepped back from the door and said, “Come take a look.”

I popped my seat belt off, continuing to stare at him as I felt the rising tension from Gavin and Miguel. I only thought that this might be an unwise course of action after my foot had already hit the pavement. When I was completely out of the car Officer Murphy gestured for me to lead the way back to the rear of the car.

Arriving at the end of that short distance I found that he was right – one of the red rear lights was burning and the other was as dead as night. “But I don't have my lights on,” I said, more confused than before.

“Probably some electric trouble then. Pop the trunk and we can take a look at the wiring.” I had never had such a friendly turn of phrase cause my blood to run cold.

I shook my head, slowly, trying to play it casual as I dismissed the taillight with a wave of my hand. “Nah, don't worry about it. I'll have it fixed up when I get home.”

“Can't do it, son,” he said. I turned to him, his choice of diminutive rankling me beyond what was reasonable or, in this case, safe. His friendly smile now frozen he continued, “If it's a wiring issue it could be a safety hazard.”

“C'mon,” I said, feeling my paranoia and irritation wrestle each other into resignation, “I'm sure it'll be fine.” Looking at him I felt one cold drop of sweat roll its way down my back, lighting up my spine against the heat. In that moment I thought about everything from telling him the trunk was locked to running off into the scrub brush. Instead I said, “Can't you just give me the ticket? I'd really like to just be on my way.”

Officer Murphy cocked his head, causing my image in his glasses to bend in ways that matched my mental state. “If you don't mind me saying so, your reluctance has got me all curious now.”

“I don't...”

“Open the trunk,” he cut me off, his face frozen behind the sunglasses.

Another cold drop of sweat ran down my spine, straightening it. “Don't you need a warrant for that?”

That maliciousness I had been expecting came into his face then, mixing with a certain amount of glee. “Shit, son, if I was willin' to put into my report that I thought ya'll were terrorists I could arrest you and hold you until the cows come home. Now open the damn trunk.”

I watched myself blink in the mirror shades, trying to parse out how much of that sentence was true and the resulting best course of action. I shrugged, trying to maintain the illusion of apathy, and slid my key into the trunk's lock. When I was certain he couldn't see my face, I closed my eyes and breathed out what I'm sure was pure concentrated hope that the half-ass job we had

done hiding the pill bottles did the trick. I struggled with the trunk lid for a moment, the catch not releasing immediately, before lifting it.

The smell that came out when I opened the trunk was the first sign that something wasn't right. It was pungent and rancid and so strong that I had to close my eyes and turn away, my hand flying up to my face to cover my mouth. When I looked into the trunk to see what had been causing the smell I threw up into my hand.

Curled up between the wheel wells was a dead girl. While she may have been beautiful in life, the elongated strain on her face and the dried froth at her mouth took that from her. The soiled purple halter top, black miniskirt and fishnet leggings completed the picture of a hooker that had been pushed into the trunk to die.

My stomach bent me in half in its race to empty itself, racking me with a pain that forced me to catch the edge of the car with my hand. I issued a series of plaintives to a god I had abandoned in eighth grade parochial class. As I repeatedly called out the Lord's name Officer Murphy stood by me and let out one sharp short bark to His son.

For an indefinite time the world was only filled with the bronchial noise of my vomiting. Eventually I heard Murphy ask, "Weren't expecting her to be dead, then?" through the echoes in my head.

Still bowed at the waist I looked up at him. "I didn't know she was in there!" I couldn't tell if I was crying out or whispering.

He leaned forward to take a closer look, covering his own face with one hand while producing a pair of handcuffs in a smooth, professional motion with the other. "Maybe so, but you'll forgive me if I feel a mite safer if you put these on while we finish our chat."

His turn of phrase made it sound like he was going to ask me to slip on a bracelet. Instead he kicked me in the back of my right leg, sending me to the pavement on my knees. Between the heat frying off the surface and the crush to my legs I was very aware of the situation by the time Murphy had my wrists

handcuffed behind my back. I tried to speak but couldn't, alternately gasping or salivating the vomit out of my mouth.

There on my knees I tried to watch over my shoulder as Murphy drew his gun and walked around the passenger's side of the car with the pistol leading the way. Miguel must have seen it first because I heard him yell out, followed by what was probably a reprimand from Gavin, then general pandemonium from inside the car. It wasn't long before I felt Officer Murphy grab me by the chain between the handcuffs and pull me up only to deposit me back on my knees, this time a few feet away in the loose dirt by the side of the road next to Gavin and Miguel. Handcuffs must have been in short supply as the other two had their hands on their heads. For some reason seeing the two of them there made the situation more real, Gavin glaring angry at the ground and Miguel looking terribly sad, as if his grandmother might show up at any moment to reprimand him.

Pushing through the soup in my skull I began to realize the state trooper looking through the trunk was very much real. I was overcome with the urge to beg or bargain my way out of this, even as the left side of my brain was desperately trying to figure out how all of this had happened.

One thing is for sure, it told me: We're going to miss class this week. That thought led further into the future, watching it stretch out like a walkway, now falling into empty space as I saw the university graduate education drop off into expulsion, causing the further extensions of Job and Money and Success fall into the abyss with it. Nothing that replaced these things was good, seeing very little beyond the bars of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, only accompanied by the disappointed and judgmental stares of the thousand or so friends, neighbors, colleagues, and strangers that would eventually learn of this and disapprove, in that lovingly Southern way that was somehow hidden and at once socially powerful.

I realized that Murphy had been talking to Miguel and Gavin when he stopped and walked back to the trunk. I hadn't heard a word he had said. He started to root around in trunk as we knelt there. My insides moved around on me and I felt weak

and light-headed.

“What are we gonna do?” I heard Miguel whisper. He was speaking to the ground, head bowed, his voice shaking as he tried to keep control of his fear. For a moment I stopped feeling sorry for myself and wished Miguel out of there. This hadn't been his idea, had only really come along out of a desire for approval and some extra cash and had worked too hard his entire life to see it all destroyed somewhere on the NAFTA highway for being too stupid to say “No”.

“We're gonna keep our mouths shut. I don't know what corpse this crazy shitbag is talking about, but I know you can't do a search because someone's taillight is out.” Gavin's normally ruddy complexion was turning even redder with the sun and his anger. I marveled at him for a moment, realizing it wasn't some kind of front, that he wasn't using it to mask fear or panic. I could tell that he was already planning his phone calls to a lawyer or his family or both, and how he was going to fight this tide of bullshit that he found towering over him.

Which brought me back to Miguel. While I might have the access to the same resources that Gavin did, I knew Miguel didn't. He didn't have any family north of the border and the money on his balance sheet was all in red from student loans.

A hollow rattle announced Officer Murphy's return to our side of the car as he shook one of the pill bottles, holding it between thumb and forefinger as if he'd need to hold it up to the light to determine what it was. The gravel of the road's shoulder ground under his boots as he turned on his heel to face us. “Jesus,” he said again, his tone heavy with disbelief, “It looks like your little chica back there got back into your stash and started chewing on 'em like M&Ms.”

“We have no idea who that girl is,” Gavin snapped angrily. His reply made me worry that he was going to make things worse than they already were. With all of the thoughts vying for space in my head it was just one more I didn't have room for, giving me a headache that made the heat and sun almost unbearable.

Officer Murphy cut through all that, though, when he said, “Funny thing is, I believe you.”

Even Gavin seemed stunned at that, managing only to utter a flabbergasted, “What?”

“Well, what it looks like,” Murphy went on, popping the top off the pill bottle with a flick of his thumb, “is that you boys went down to Mexico,” pronouncing it Meh-ee-ko, “hit up a bunch of loose pharmacies with less-than-reputable doctors, grabbed a girl who was probably willing to blow one and all of you to get into these United States, then stuffed her and your new stash into the trunk to jump across the border.”

He held up a hand to stop our collective protests then shook out a few pills into his palm. “But somewhere along the way she went crazy with the boredom or heat and started chewing on these little suckers.” He picked up one small pill, holding it up between thumb and forefinger to examine it. “Unfortunately for you, she must have kicked out one of the taillights on the way and here we are.” He flicked the pill away with a casual disdain.

Ignoring the officer's call for quiet, Gavin and Miguel burst into a cacophony of protest, Gavin angry and Miguel pleading, both of them trying to convince Murphy in their different way that his story is not what happened. I didn't say anything. I could see how perfectly everything Murphy said laid out, like a map of ruination. Not only were we going to look like addicts or drug smugglers, but we'd look like the worst of human beings, men that traffic in other humans with so little regard for them that we'd let a girl die in the trunk while we sat and laughed in the air-conditioned cab.

“Then I found this on her,” Murphy held up something that looked like a key made of bent wire, a short, sharp instrument that you could use to stab someone or jam up a lock, but for nothing good. “It looks like she used it to jimmy your trunk and climb in.” Miguel and Gavin verbally rushed into the space this reasoning provided, assuring Officer Murphy that he was correct in his deduction, that his intellect stood above that of other men in his ability to see this, but were silenced when he continued with, “I'm pretty sure she didn't sneak in there with garbage bags full of pills, though.”

“There's also the fact that she's still dead,” he added,

quieting even Gavin's ill-advised anger. The wind shifted and brought the over-cooked stench of her corpse to us as another reminder. Murphy coughed into his hand, a wet glob of disgust at catching the scent himself, and wiped it off on the leg of his uniform as he bent at his knees to bring his tall form down to our level. "Now I know you boys were probably just down in Coahuila having a good time and thought you'd make a buck or two out of it." He bowed his head as he pinched the bridge of his nose, so we couldn't see his eyes when he lifted up the sunglasses. When he raised his head again we only saw ourselves in his mirror shades. "But somebody's gonna have to answer for this."

The silence that followed was so long and absolute that I'm sure a tumbleweed went by somewhere. After a time I heard Gavin ask, "What are you saying?"

Murphy stood up, rocks gnashing underneath his heels. "This may not be your fault, boys, but it's going to ruin somebody's life. No use in it bein' all three of you, but it'll have to be someone. I'ma gonna go back to the cruiser and phone this in, let 'em know I picked up a single with a truckload of contraband and a dead girl. You figure out who that single's gonna be." With that he turned and headed back to his car.

"What're we gonna do?" Miguel asked as Gavin followed Murphy back to the cruiser with his gaze. I already knew the answer to that, so I didn't bother answering.

"This isn't right," Gavin said, his tone thick with the beginnings of suspicion, his eyes narrowing as he followed the officer's disappearance into the confines of the cruiser. "This isn't right," he repeated, turning to us. I just stared at him, misunderstanding that he meant the situation wasn't morally correct. The idea that this state of affairs had ever been ethical in any way stunned me into confusion.

When I stared at him slack-jawed, he said, "Something's not right here. What kind of cop offers to let people he's cuffed go? Who does a search because a taillight is out? It doesn't make sense," he enunciated each word of the last sentence as if trying to communicate to us across a vast distance through some device that wasn't up to the task.

“So what do we do?” Miguel asked again, head still bowed under his hands, confusion mixing with his fear. The heat and his panic had mixed as well, uniting to squeeze every drop of moisture out of him. He was covered in sweat, the drops coming off his forehead forming a wet halo around the shadow of his head on the ground.

Gavin dropped his hands from his head and I could see the back of his neck had already begun to burn in the sun. “Fuck this guy,” he indicated the cruiser with a jerk of his head as he spoke. “We don't play whatever game he's playing. We force him to call for backup or we all go with him or,” Gavin stopped, running up against the wall of logic as each of the ideas he tried to articulate led, clearly, to only very bad places. “Fuck this guy,” he repeated, exasperation frustrating his intent, whatever that might have been.

Miguel stared at him with desperation in his eyes. “You can't be serious,” he stated, his voice as steady and sound in the exact way the rest of him wasn't. “You want to have us all get arrested because,” he stopped then, his fear wavering in the face of his disbelief, “because you think this is some sort of hoax? You want us to go to jail because you think we're on Candid Camera?”

It was time for Gavin to shake his head and lower it. “No, but something isn't right here.” After a moment he questioned, “How the Hell did she get back there? How did we not smell her?”

I had been listening, letting the heat and the sharp rocks in my knees sweep away the rattle of everything that had been bouncing around in my head since this started. “What does it matter?” I heard myself say. Gavin looked at me with suspicion and Miguel with something like hope.

“What do you mean?” Gavin asked.

I looked up at last, gesturing towards the cruiser with as much of my body as my handcuffed hands would allow. “The guy's a cop. It doesn't matter if he's crazy as a shithouse rat, he's still a cop. And while we may be able to get out of this because of an illegal search or because we can prove we didn't have anything to do with that girl, we're still gonna get arrested. We're still going to go to jail, probably face a trial, and God and everyone's going to

know about it. Which means we're done with school. Or it's done with us. I mean, would you touch us after this?"

There it was, laid out on the line in such a way as to resemble the truth, which could shut even Gavin up. I think that caused all three of us to bow our heads, but I couldn't be sure. I was too busy staring at the dirt.

After a time I heard Gavin ask, "So who's it gonna be?"

"Who's what?" Miguel replied.

"The single," Gavin's tone was drained of the spitfire it had held since he'd been pulled from the car.

My tone held the same resignation when I answered, "It's got to be me."

I felt both of them turn towards me, but I just kept staring at the ground. I could imagine the desire in Miguel's face and the survivor's guilt already breeding in Gavin's, so I didn't want to look at them. I just kept going with, "The car's registered in my dad's name. If I'm not the one to stay it'll come back on me anyway."

I looked up at them then, having to close one eye against the glare of the sun, trying to fix the other eye on them. "You should go."

After a few moments, Gavin nodded with a cool resignation and started to stand. Miguel looked confused at that and I worried he might decide to do something foolish. I did my best to implore Miguel, "You should get out of here before he comes back. He might change his mind. Start walking now and it shouldn't be long before you get a signal. You can call someone for a ride back to Austin. If you stay you're going to get caught up in this mess."

Miguel stood then too, helped by Gavin pulling at his arm. The weirdness of the situation still hung over both of them as they looked down at me, trying to sketch out some way to say goodbye. They stammered out words while giving shifty looks to the cruiser. Eventually I broke it off with a simple, "Get out of here." Uncertainty and shame caused them to stay for a few moments longer but when I went back to staring at the dirt they shuffled off into the scrub brush.

I went back to my dread thoughts about the future when

Officer Murphy's shadow fell on me. I looked up at him to see my reflection in his glasses again.

“Looks like we've got us a lucky winner.”

And that was how it all started.

“None of which explains how you ended up in that chair.”

“Well, hold on now, I'm getting to that.”

CHAPTER TWO

Beyond that, I don't remember too much about the actual arrest. At some point Officer Murphy read me my Miranda rights, told me the charges, then pulled me from my knees and pushed me into the back of his car. But the minutes during these events vanished from me the way Gavin and Miguel vanished into the desert. I'm sure there are traces of it, but I don't want to go looking for them.

The back of the cruiser was, at least, infinitely more comfortable than the road. Murphy had left the engine and air-condition running, finally pulling me out of the Texas heat. My knees were also getting some relief, with my ass finally sitting on a padded seat. After a time the coolness of the interior air caused all of the sweat, grime, and blood to congeal onto me, forming what felt like a thin shell.

I stopped paying attention to any of this when the ambulance arrived. A couple of men jumped out, their emblomed white shirts and dark blue pants marking them as EMTs or medical examiners or some professional collector of the dead. I watched as they wheeled out a gurney to the trunk of the Mercedes and lifted the girl's body out. From there I couldn't see much, just the long streak of black hair that fell off her like so many rags, the white froth that covered the rest of her face, and the cheap purple and black of clothes over her stiffness looking like a table cloth from a strip club. I watched as they wheeled her away to the back of the ambulance and forgot, for a moment, the troubles that lay ahead of me.

I thought about the girl now ended, and what type of horror show her life must have been to make what she did seem

like a good idea. I couldn't imagine what her life must have been like to prefer taking the chance of being discovered or leaving for a place where she had nothing, rather than continue with the same existence. I closed my eyes, trying to push out the image of her corpse from my head, trying to focus on my own plight, but my brain ran the reel of her discovery over and over for me. It lingered on the once beautiful girl now covered in dead sweat and protein, her eyes empty, the spittle and choke oozing from her mouth.

The last bit stopped me as I tried to seize on something else to think about. While my own comfortable life made imagining the one that would drive her to such desperation difficult, I could understand it. But why the pills? Why go through all the effort of climbing into the trunk only to start chewing up strange pills you found there?

All of this piled up in my head until I considered ripping open the door and running out into the brush, screaming like a madman, perhaps to catch a bullet. I tried the handle only to realize you can't open the doors from the backseat of a cop car. This sparked an old fear of being trapped in the back of the car as it pinwheeled off the highway and crashed in a burning wreck on the side of the road: Something that had been with me since childhood family trips, riding in the back of the mini-van with the child-locks engaged, equal parts phobia and morbid fantasy.

The cruiser door opened with a noise like the breaking of a vacuum seal as Murphy slid into the driver's seat. He tossed his clipboard onto the seat next to him then adjusted his hat, all without looking at me. He picked up the handset of the radio and said something into it in indecipherable cop talk. He set it back into its cradle as he watched the ambulance pull away.

“What was her name?” I asked, breaking into his reverie.

Between the mask of his hat and sunglasses his facial expression was hard to determine, but I think he looked back at me with a kind of disgust. “You don't know?”

“I told you, I don't know how she got in there. I'd never met her before.” I looked out at him in the rearview mirror, catching a tiny reflection of myself in his shades through it,

wrapping us into a recursive tessellation.

When his only reply was an incredulous grunt, I suddenly became very tired. His guttural dismissal told me what I already knew – that I'd be repeating this story a great many times in the near future. I turned to look out the window.

“I'm sure it'll come as a huge surprise to you that she didn't have any ID on her.” I didn't say anything, his words adding another facet onto the gem of poverty and misery that my mind had been constructing for the girl. I wondered if I had checked the trunk at a gas stop if she would still be alive.

Murphy bent forward over the steering wheel, then stopped. He straightened enough to look at me again through the rear-view mirror and asked simply, “What the Hell were you thinking?”

“What?” My internal ramblings and the cool interior of the cruiser were beginning to have an effect on me. I felt as if I were being pulled out of a dentist's chair, both distant and numb from anesthesia.

Murphy pushed the brim of his cowboy hat up to scratch his brow, resting his arm on the curve of the steering wheel. He looked at me through the mirror and said, “I can't figure it out. A trio of boys like ya'll, nice clothes, nice car, probably headed back to San Antonio or Austin to finish up school.” He scratched his brow again reminding me oddly of an old cop show where the bedraggled little troll of a detective convinces everyone that he's a sucker. “I can understand heading down to Coahuila. I been there for a good time or two when I was younger. But why bother bringing trouble back with you?” I couldn't tell if he was talking about the pills or if he had decided that the girl had been our idea after all and he now regretted letting the others go.

I thought about that. Or, it would be more accurate to say, I had been thinking about it the entire ride, from the first impulse to play hooky, long before the decision to buy farmicia pills and risk everything for the cheap buzz of adventure and money I didn't need. But money was a part of it, I had to admit, the desire to have some source of income that wasn't my father's, but not from some shit job, but the chance to grab as much as I could as

fast as I could in a way I knew he wouldn't approve of in a million years. And biting my thumb at him was definitely a bonus, even if he would never know about it. More than that, I knew that I had just wanted to do something out of the bounds before I fell in line, lockstep with the expectations that had been laid on me, for the rest of my life.

Out of all the things Murphy had said to me in my arrest, though, "Anything you say may be used against you," stood out. So I decided that pouring out my inner motivations for committing an international crime probably wasn't the best idea.

Instead an old line I had read somewhere popped into my head and I said, "Trouble is my business."

"What?" For the first time my favorite state trooper looked confused. When I didn't reply he stated, "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," giving me a look of disbelief and judgment.

Then he turned the key in the ignition and we were on our way.

CHAPTER THREE

The flat, straight highway of south Texas eventually became the crooked, somewhat greener interstate of central Texas, all without changing its name. The cruiser moved up and down gently as the road it was on snaked through the hills. Any other time I would have found it relaxing, probably would have lulled me to sleep. But at that particular moment the motion made me nauseous and turned the ride into a long eternity.

When I realized we were slowing down I asked, “Where are we going?”

“We’re stopping in La Salle. I’m dropping you off for processing. Once you’re done they’ll take you up to Austin to face a judge in the morning.” Officer Murphy seemed tired himself, perhaps the highway putting him into a bit of hypnosis, his speech slow and lazy.

“Great,” I thought, moving my butt around on the seat in an attempt to find a position that would calm my stomach. Austin – home. Friends, family, school, church folk, all located there. I would be delivered into the belly of the beast in shackles. Hell, I might even make the news.

I imagined for a moment the conversation that I’d seen so many times, the one where the pariah approaches an old colleague. There’s a change in the old colleague that even humans who want to can’t cover up, a change in the eyes, like a flip of a switch or a setting change and you can see the colleague’s shields go up, a polite but impenetrable wall goes into place that neither party can move. A polite deference is given, but nothing real exchanged, no help offered or handshake raised, as the colleague doesn’t want to catch any transmittable stigma from the pariah.

There's a reason that Kenneth Lay was killed by a heart attack before he was convicted. He may have died in an Aspen mansion, but he was a Texas prisoner just the same.

I put that aside to try and think about more immediate issues – like how was I going to make bail. I thought about that, realizing that most of the people I could rely on for that were probably still wondering around in the desert outside of Laredo. That only left a few choices, none of them pretty.

Murphy didn't say a word as he started to pull off the highway. The cruiser began a slow, decaying orbit around a structure that rose out of the rural Texas landscape, circling it as we followed the road off the exit ramp we were the only car to take. The building itself looked like a sand castle, its beige and browns blending in with its drought riddled surroundings, a large cylindrical water tower being the one feature of the compound that I could see from any angle. Noticing a ladder that scaled the side of the tower, for a moment I thought about climbing it to jump off. But it was only three-stories tall or so, so it might not killed me.

The cruiser turned onto a driveway before the main drag took us to the front entrance, pulling around another circle until it terminated at a dingy looking docking bay. It had three tall metal doors that looked like they were designed more for moving supplies onto trucks than they were for moving humans, plus a small door off to the left side. The bay was filled with vehicles of all shapes and sizes: what looked to be a few local cop cars, a couple of border patrol jeeps, and white van with an eagle emblem and the letters HSI emblazoned on its side. Wherever we were it looked like cop central.

With the ripping sound of another vacuum opening Murphy stepped out of the cruiser. When he came around to take me out I could see the pavement was covered in a series of dark stains, some oil from leaking pans, most unidentifiable. He pulled me out with a simple, “C'mon,” and pushed me towards the single door.

The inside of the station wasn't any prettier than the outside, the walls of the hallway we passed through being concrete

slapped with a single layer of paint. We passed by machines that looked like they belonged at airport security and some that sprouted plastic tubes, dull metal, restraining devices, and the rare but sinister syringe. Murphy just pushed me past those and I jangled forward with my emptiness.

After what seemed an impossibly short walk in which concrete gave way to wire glass windows the two of us came to a room divided into halves like a short dumbbell, each end a bulbous octagon with a narrow hallway joining them. On one side, Murphy pushed me onto a central island of hard plastic seats, each of them moulded and bolted to a concrete block that rose out of the floor. Now sitting, Murphy had me scoot around on my butt so he could loosen the cuffs from behind my back and finally join them in the front. Once done he disappeared into the narrow hallway with a curt, "Stay here."

I followed his footsteps along the ugly tan carpet until he disappeared through the adjoining hallway into a room busy with other cops moving around standing desks, the noises of telephones and the occasional printer emanating forth. When he had gone I looked around my end of the dumbbell, conveniently from my central location.

In addition to the connecting passage there were a number of doors radiating off this end. Most of them appeared to be empty holding cells, heavy metal entries with thick glass next to them looking into dimly lit concrete bunkers designed to hold the more unruly elements. For some reason these reminded me of the classrooms of my elementary school.

Beyond that, opposite the passage Officer Murphy had disappeared into, was a bank of green telephones. Above it were the words LA SALLE DETENTION CENTER, in large block letters. In case you didn't know where you were, I suspect. Next to these was the door we had entered from, this one with a barred twin immediately on the other side, that led off into parts unknown.

I looked around the room to realize that other than an unconscious figure in one of the holding cells, I was completely alone. Well, I figured, it's early yet. I resisted the temptation to get

up and knock on the glass wire window of the occupied cell. A part of me wanted to see if the person in there would move. He lay so still that a something whispered that he was dead or dying, thrown in beaten and bleeding by the local constables. I tried to shake off that paranoid and sinister image, not sure what to do with it but unable to completely let it go.

Time passed very slowly, even more slowly than in the cruiser, and I spent most of it looking at the row of phones, thinking about who to call. Eventually, Murphy strolled back through the hallway and picked me up by my elbow, with a helpful, "Upsy-daisy," speaking to me I were drunk. The unreality of the situation did resemble some of the more unpleasant psychedelic buzzes I had inflicted upon myself so I went with it without a word. The less said the better at this point.

Turning me towards the bustlings of the other end of the dumbbell and Murphy pushed me ahead of him. Through the narrow hallway was a different world of activity and order, cops typing, speaking on the telephone, holding conversations over coffee, and one very tall brown-haired woman who stared at me through her glasses as if I she had just pulled me off the bottom of her shoe. She stood behind a white desk that stretched across the other half of the room, elevated to put her and everyone behind it a good foot and a half above anyone standing on my end.

Murphy walked us up, my head barely coming above the gray top of the white desk and said to her, "This is the one." I looked her over while she surveyed my pitiful state and noticed her name tag read, "Sergeant Eugene."

Whatever distaste she had at having to deal with me didn't extend to touching me. Excluding my parent's participation in a child loss prevention program, it was the first time I'd ever been fingerprinted so I made quite a mess of things. Eugene never lost patience with me, instructing me in a careful, professional monotone, and guiding my hands along the inkblots with a firm gentleness that I had no doubt could break my fingers if it came down to it. After three or four tries we filled out an ink-blotter and Eugene set to finishing out the paperwork while I continued to stand there. As she did I stared at the shadows of all of my digits

on the paper and thought about what that meant. In a way, it didn't matter now what happened from here, whether or not I stood trial or even if I was found guilty – I was in the system now, a person of interest where I wasn't before. The implications of how this would change the architecture of my life began to truly settle on me then and for a moment I found myself on the edge of tears. I fluttered my eyes, blinking them back and breathing deep.

“Sergeant Kurtz will take you back for your phone calls now. You have two.” Eugene fixed her eyes on me as she spoke and I realized for the first time her glasses made her eyes look larger than they really were. “You'll be transported to Austin in the morning to see the judge. You can arrange for someone to pick you up after that.” Her eyes blinked behind the glass, reminding me of a fish dodging through a bowl. “Assuming you make bail.”

The last sentence brought up the possibility that, given the fact that a dead girl was found in my trunk, I might not be granted bail at all. I nodded slowly while this sank in, following Eugene's gesture. I looked to my left to see that Murphy had been replaced by a thickset white man who stood tall enough to crane his non-existent neck to stare down at me even without the benefit of standing on the elevated side of the room. This was Kurtz.

Without a word Kurtz took me by the shoulder and pointed me back at the narrow hallway. I turned and shuffled in that direction, not in any particular hurry to get back to the bank of telephones. Going through the hall I had to turn sideways to let another officer walk through. He never looked up from the clipboard he was examining – I'm quite certain that he would have bumped into me had I not turned to let him pass.

Kurtz pushed me forward when there was room and kept moving me to the green bank of phones. He pointed there and said, “You may make two calls. When you pick up the phone handset an operator will answer. Give her the number of the person you want to contact and she will make a collect call for you. If the person does not accept the charges the call will terminate and will still be counted as one of your telephone calls.” He said all of this as if he were reading it off cue cards. This only changed when he looked at me for his final pronouncement, his

eyes widening and his head nodding, clearly trying to make sure I understood the importance of what he said next. “So make sure you're calling the right person.”

I nodded, his words weighing on me heavily. I stared at the phones, thinking over my options again. I stepped forward and reached for one of the handsets, then stopped. After a few moments I dropped my hand, turned back to Kurtz and said, “Can I make my calls later?”

He looked at me as if this part of the conversation was routine as his monologue from the first part. “You can make them now or you can not make them,” he answered. I nodded, feeling the same kind of binary code for existence pushing down on me as it had during the rest of the day. A part of me felt this was unfair, wanted to say so, but the rest of the me was already starting to accept this type of disappointment as the new normal. There was also the fact, truth be told, that I didn't want to argue with a man Kurtz's size.

I turned back, picking up the third handset from the right. The phone had been molded out of one solid piece, the lack of buttons or display of any kind making it look like something of alien manufacture. When I put the earpiece to my head I heard a flourish of electric notes then an electronic voice say, “PayTech Communications,” followed by a beep. Not sure what to do I stood there examining the wall. After a few moments of this a human voice came on and said, “PayTech Communications. How may I help you?”

The distance between me and the woman operator felt very great, a yawning and empty space that didn't quite seem real. I said into it, “I'd like to make a collect call.”

“Name please.”

“Cole Hagan.”

“The name and phone number of the person you are trying to reach?”

“Linda Lewis,” I answered and gave the phone number. There were precious few numbers that I had memorized, most of them being entombed in my phone that was God knows where, but this one I knew.

“Hold please.”

The twittering of the phone signal came through the handset from whatever distant place I was trying to reach. It droned on long enough that I was certain she wasn't going to answer. I wasn't certain if I was more disappointed at having wasted a phone call or more relieved she didn't pick up.

But she did. A light and lilting voice came on the line, holding a tone of concern, probably from not recognizing the caller number. She answered, as she always did in the face of the unknown, with a bit of ritual, as if identifying herself would somehow act as a ward of protection. “This is Linda Lewis.”

“Hi.”

I figured out that she couldn't hear me when the operator came on and asked, “Will you accept a collect call from Cole Hagan?” I placed my left hand on the wall just above the phone to steady myself, feeling the first of the seismic shifts that this affair was going to create for me.

There was a long pause from Linda in which I imagined the warring emotions in her mind. “Yes,” she told the operator, quickly and sharply, as if she had resolved in the moment of her silence to deal with this unpleasantness quickly, like ripping off a band-aid.

There was a click followed by a silence that I filled up with another, “Hi,” but I realized she couldn't hear this again when the operator said, “You can go ahead.”

I didn't speak immediately after that, feeling stymied at the failure of having tried twice, and now at the need of having to be given permission to do so. This might be the rest of my life.

“Cole?” Unlike the operator Linda sounded like she was right in the room and I wished I could touch her. I didn't respond immediately. She repeated my name followed by a, “Are you alright?”

“Hi,” I said, getting over the wall of my shame. “How are you?” I asked stupidly.

“What's going on?” She knows already, I can tell from her tone, that I'm in trouble, in need of help, that this time it isn't some joint in a dorm room or plagiarized project or a girl in the

wrong car. Or maybe it was that last one, just in a completely different context this time.

Cut to it then. "I'm in trouble."

Longer pause this time followed by the disturbingly familiar sound of negative expectations being fulfilled. "Cole," she said simply, disappointment ringing as clear and as soft as a silver bell.

Normally, this would have been the part of the conversation that I rushed in with an explanation of my actions, a justification that would allow her to put aside her reflexive judgement to come rescue me. But this time I didn't have one. There was no explanation, only the image of the dead girl in the trunk of my car staring back at me.

My hand didn't seem like enough to hold my weight now so I leaned forward to put my forehead on the cool surface of the concrete as I spoke. "Linda, I'm in real trouble. I'm somewhere south of San Antonio and I need help."

"Cole, I can't." No explanation, no hemming and hawing, no indecision. Just, I can't.

"Linda..." I started, then stopped, trying to come up with a reason for her to drive down from Austin to bail me out that didn't involve me begging. I didn't get very far.

"Cole," I knew I was in trouble when I detected genuine guilt in her voice, "I can't. I'm in D.C. I got offered a job here last month."

I didn't know then if your life really flashed before your eyes as you died, but I found out it happens in a relationship when you know it's over. I thought about the girl I had taken back to my dorm room a long time ago and watched her change in my mind's eye to the woman on the other end of the phone, realizing the two didn't have much in common. One of the things they didn't have in common was me.

"I didn't know," I replied, suddenly sounding like the distant one. I remembered her talking about a job in D.C. vaguely, it coming up during conversations near the end. She had always had an interest in public policy and my cynicism towards such things had provided a good foil for her arguments. Eventually the

arguments had grown less hypothetical and more heated as she had grown closer to being actual involved.

“No, I, uh,” embarrassment now, “thought it was better if I just went.” I couldn't tell if the shame was for her or of me.

“Well, uh,” I struggled for what to say next, this additional bit of bad news having come out of nowhere to blindside me. My thoughts inadvertently began to crowd with good, some naked, memories of Linda, and I was suddenly very uncomfortable with them sharing the same cerebral space as the dead girl. “Congratulations,” I said, feeling like I was congratulating someone on the crib death of their baby and sounding like it too.

“Cole, look,” she rushed in to fill the stunned silence, “I can call Amber or Heather and ask them...”

“No,” I cut her off, suddenly not wanting her help or pity, certainly not wanting to get second-hand pity from one of her Houston friends who would probably never leave Texas, whose pre-programmed lives I suddenly had nothing but contempt for, especially now that mine was gone. “I'll figure out something. I'll call Gavin or someone,” I lied, then lying again to cover up the first lie, “I just called because I thought it'd be a good chance to talk.” I groaned inwardly at the stupidity of that, feeling foolishness leap on top of the dog pile this day had become to wrestle at its crest with the bitterness this conversation was suddenly causing in me. The bitterness won and I said, “I guess it's a little late for that, though.”

“A good chance to talk?” Linda's voice told me she was stunned. Without intention I imagined the scrunched up expression she would get whenever we were about to get into a fight. “You get into trouble and it's a good chance to talk?” Anger rose as she got that out. She didn't take it any further, though, bringing the conversation to an end with, “Why don't you call your dad?”

The line went dead in my hand. I lifted my head off the concrete wall as I took the handset away from my ear. I heard Kurtz behind me say in a fine basso voice, “That's one.”

I looked over my shoulder at him and nodded. I was operating in a vacuum, my head feeling like it was deprived of

oxygen, the last reliable stone on the walkway into the future gone, leaving me to fall into space.

“Don't be so dramatic,” said a voice in my head. It was, of course, my father's voice and I looked at the phone and thought about calling him. This was a careful balancing act, requiring me to weigh all the pros and cons.

Pros:

- 1) He'd be able to get me out of jail in Austin, maybe even before then.
- 2) If I called him now I would be miles away from him when he got the news his only son was in jail for murdering a Mexican prostitute.

Cons:

- 1) I'd have to speak with him.
- 2) During this conversation I'd have to tell him that his youngest son was in jail for murdering a Mexican prostitute.

I almost started to panic once I had finished organizing my offenses, my rational brain getting a good look at just how much trouble I was really in. I squeezed the handle of the handset as if it were that rationality, choking it off. Think, Hagan, is it worth bringing the old man into this one?

A repeating chorus of, “Of course it is what choice do I have,” began to run through my head and wouldn't stop until I had set the handset back in the cradle and picked it up again, listening for the dulcet tones of PayTech Communications. When the operator came on again I gave my father's name and phone number.

I can tell from the noises in the background and the slight slur in his voice that he's at Scholtz Garden and I think about being there as well, a cold glass of beer in my hand while I sit in the shadow of the capitol. When the operator asks him if he'll accept a collect call there's a pause in which I can feel his growing disapproval. He excuses himself from whomever he's with and I can hear the crunch of gravel from the ground as he steps away.

Then, finally, "I'll accept the call." I'm almost disappointed he doesn't hang up.

"Hi Dad," I speak very quietly, the operators permission to do so making me feel like I'm 14 years old.

"Cole," he responds, clearly speaking around the cigar in his mouth. I can hear him chewing on it, his irritation at my interruption already growing from me not having already explained what the situation is. After saying my name he waits for it, his presence swelling in my mind, absorbing my fear and uncertainty.

"I'm in trouble." I let those words out by themselves, see what fire they draw.

"Son," I heard him take the cigar out, shooting off the word like the attack I knew was coming, concern mixing with his irritation to make the powerful anger for which he's famous. "What's going on?"

"I'm in jail."

"Were you drunk?" he asked before I really had a chance to get any further. For a brief moment this caused me to wonder about his opinion of his youngest son (me) as it's still well before dinner time. But his words reached past that to make me wish for a different world, one in which the headline the next day states, "State Senator's Son Arrested for DUI" not "Senator's Son Arrested for Smuggling and Murder." I wished for it so hard that I closed my eyes, but when I opened them I was still staring at the bank of green phones and the block letters of La Salle Detention Center.

"Yes." I didn't know what else to say. The situation had long gone past my comprehension and then, speaking to my father, I couldn't get over my lizard brain fear of him or his disapproval, both of which made fierce and sudden appearances.

He launched into a multi-minute tirade, yelling into the phone. He was loud enough that I'm sure that Kurtz could hear him, calling into question my intelligence, my mother's child-rearing techniques, my own self-discipline, and my respect for him and our family. He ended with, "How do you think this reflects on me?"

By the time he'd asked that question I couldn't even fathom telling him the truth, and it wasn't just fear anymore. There was a tiny ball of passive resolve that grew the more he yelled, like he was fanning it with his breath, until I was standing ramrod straight in front of the phone, not feeling a thing. When I was sure he was done I responded by saying, "I can't say as I thought about that," for the sole reason that I knew it would infuriate him.

There was a silence so stony on the other end of the phone I thought I could hear his cell creak in his hand as he squeezed it. After a few seconds of listening to him get his breathing under control I heard him say, "I'll send Patrick to pick you up in the morning. We'll talk then." The promise of future reprisals was implicit.

As I hung up I felt Kurtz's presence behind me as he stepped closer saying, "That's two." I turned around and looked at him without saying a word. He pointed to the barred door to the left of the bank of phones, making it clear he wanted me to lead the way. I did.

Stepping closer to the door there was a heavy thunk and it somehow unbarred itself from the other side, revealing a guard who looked at Kurtz and gestured us in with his eyes. Beyond him another concrete hallway stretched out, lined with barred doors, each one a cell that housed various perpetrators. Kurtz pushed me through the door with a firm hand between my shoulder blades.

The perpetrators in the cell Kurtz led me to looked more like a large extended family than criminals; a group of Mexicans that were as dirty as me, but from hard traveling rather than hard partying. There were a few women, girls really, who huddled near the back as I was led in, but it was the men, little more than boys except for a few that formed a curtain between me and the girls, that eyeballed me as I stepped in. One of them in particular, a guy about my height and age whose sleeveless shirt showed ropey, muscular arms that reminded me of a fighter I saw once at a Muay Thai match, gave me the stink-eye. All of them, though, looked hungry and this filled me with equal parts pity and trepidation.

I looked over my shoulder at Kurtz as he slid the barred door shut. Not sure what to think I asked, "Co-ed cells?"

"Illegals processing," he said by way of explanation. Correctly interpreting my concern he finished with, "You'll be fine. Just don't touch the girls." With that, he turned and left.

Head down and shoulders hunched I walked over to a bench bolted into the wall opposite the side of the cell the girls were on. I sat down, put my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands, and tried to mentally fortify myself for what was surely going to be a very long wait through the remainder of the day and the fresh new night. Eventually, whatever was left of my common sense was overcome by weariness and mental stress of the day and I laid back on the bench and fell asleep.

Eventually I woke up, not really to full consciousness, but my awake mind surfacing out of the ocean of my fatigue long enough to see what I thought was Murphy standing at the bars talking to Muay Thai. I drifted back down, my head feeling like it disappeared into the bench.

I was brought to by a kick, hard enough into the bench that my head snapped up, half-expecting to see my father hovering over me. Instead I saw Muay Thai and a couple of boys that could be his brothers looking down at me. I tried to blink myself awake, catching words like "Coyote," "chuloputa," and "proxeneta." Rubbing my eyes, I stopped when I could see real anger on Muay Thai's face. When my brain connected the words I was hearing to the rage I was sensing I realized they knew about the girl.

I got about as far as, "Hey now listen," before Muay Thai punched me in the face. I don't remember much after that.

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