Once, the second day, Javi caught my eye. He nodded silently, as if to acknowledge something unsaid. It could've been a nod that said I'd made the right choice to not get back on the mata gente. Or maybe the nod was simply to say, "Okay, here we are again." I couldn't tell. Except for the nod, his face was blank.

I stared out at the land and kept my thoughts to myself. The only thing that mattered was making it across la línea. If the stories were true, the worst was yet to come. Once we crossed la línea, everything would change. Everything.

The border town was dust. It poofed up around our feet as we walked. The hoods of cars, windowills, a tattered blue awning above a closed shoe store, a single droopy mimosa tree next to the police station—everything was clothed in light brown.

Elena wiped her hand across the trunk of a parked taxi, then wrote "Lávame" with her index finger. Bright green paint shone through, glinting in the sun.

We walked toward the mercado, where my contact could be found. Elena and Javier walked side by side. Javi limped slightly, favoring his right ankle. With each step, he listed slightly toward Elena. She moved a little to the left, closing the gap between them.

We crossed the street and pushed our way onto the sidewalk on the other side. A crowd had gathered around the newsstand at the edge of the mercado. The headlines on three different newspapers screamed in giant letters:

¡SE DESCARRILLA TREN!
¡CIENTOS MUERTOS!
¡EL MATA GENTE MATA A MUCHOS!

Javi grabbed a paper and held it so Elena and I could see. The mata gente had derailed at a high speed, hours north of where we had jumped off. Many were killed, maybe hundreds. Many more were injured, and most were children. The photos were big and scary. Little bodies lay scattered, like twigs, across a grassy slope.

"Was it our mata gente, Javi?" Elena asked.

"I don't know." Javi closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "It could've been. Or maybe the mata gente that came through the next day. Who knows?"

We read every word of every article in each of the papers, but they all said the same things. Equipment failure. A tragedy.
Children with no identification. A government investigation. Javi shook his head, as if the news confirmed what he’d already known. All I could think was that Elena and I had cheated death again. How much luck could we have left?

We threaded our way through the shoppers. “Don Clemente’s instructions said to look for a guy in the boot stall, in the mercado,” I explained.

There were the usual fruit and vegetable stalls. But there were others you’d find only at the border. One spot, El Coyote, sold supplies you needed to cross the desert: knives, snakebite kits, light jackets and pants, a dozen kinds of hats, and water bottles—hundreds and hundreds of blue and clear plastic water bottles.

People crowded around, pawing through the items. An older man in a cowboy hat cradled an armful of water bottles. Two teenage boys grabbed several pairs of pants with drawstrings.

“We need two pair each,” one said to the other. “They said it gets cold at night. Get one bigger pair to layer, and to protect against scorpions.”

A man and a woman in matching bright blue Windbreakers stood off to the side of El Coyote. The words “Socorro Fronterizo” were stitched onto the front of each jacket. They held thick stacks of pamphlets, handing one to every person who left the stall.

An older woman took the paper politely, folded it, and stowed it in her shirt pocket. “Si Dios es servido, llegamos,” she said. She thought it was all in God’s hands. Nothing the pamphlet said would make a bit of difference to her.

Two young men about twenty years old each took one. They scanned the pamphlet briefly, shrugged their shoulders, and threw them to the ground as they walked off. Another looked at the paper quizzically. He frowned at the words but studied the drawings intently for several minutes.

“Joven,” the man said. He pressed a pamphlet into my hand. His touch was warm and firm. Kind eyes met mine. “Here. Take one. Read it.”

“Guía de Seguridad en el Desierto.” I glanced through the pages. Some of the advice was about desert safety, but most of it seemed to be about how to give yourself up, or how to get back to Mexico if you were lost.

Tip #3: “If the Border Patrol intercepts you, keep your hands visible at all times.

Never move them toward your pockets.”

Tip #7: “Follow the power lines south.”

“But the best thing is, don’t go,” the man cautioned. “Go back home. It’s very dangerous out there.”

He spoke to me as if I were the only one he would talk to all day, as if I was his son or brother or best friend. He must talk to hundreds a day the same way he talked to me, but I bet he didn’t convince more than one person a day to not try to cross.

“Gracias,” I said. “We just need one. We’re together.”

I nodded toward Elena and Javi. A trail of warning pamphlets littered each of the pathways that led away from El Coyote, ground into the dirt by the heels of border crossers in a hurry. Elena took the pamphlet out of my hand and stuffed it in her front pocket.

At the far corner of the mercado, we found the one and only botas stall. The scent of new leather filled the air. Some boots sat displayed on shelves in the back. Others hung from the ceiling, out of reach. These were pointy-toed boots made of fine black, brown, tan, and white leather, with lots of tooling. These were boots for misa, for baptisms, for weddings, quinceañeras, and funerals.

A man sat in the middle of the stall on a short three-legged stool, hunched over a boot in his hands. He rubbed paste into the leather with his bare hands. He used a practiced, circular movement. With each pass, the leather became softer and more pliable. We watched the man silently for several moments.

He finally looked up, continuing to work the leather by touch.
He was not young, but his face was as smooth and unwrinkled as the leather he held. A carefully trimmed moustache covered his upper lip. His green eyes moved slowly from me to Elena to Javier.

“What can I show you?” he asked. “I have a fine pair right here. They would be perfect for you.” He spoke to Javier first, out of respect, or practicality. Javier would be the one with money.

“We are looking for El Plomero,” I replied quickly, cutting off Javier. I wanted to be the first to talk.

“I make boots. If you need a plumber, I know a good one.” He bent once again to his work. I wondered if there was a code or a password or secret sign that Don Clemente forgot to tell me.

“No,” I insisted, “I’m sure. He told me to ask for El Plomero in the boot shop at the mercado. I’m sure that’s what he said.”

The man’s head came up again. He raised one eyebrow ever so slightly. “Who told you?” he asked. He continued to soften the leather.

“Don Clemente told me,” I said. “I was supposed to have been here days ago, but I was delayed.”

“What’s your name?” he demanded. “And what do you know about Don Clemente?” He stopped his work now. I had his full attention.

I didn’t want to say much until I knew who this man was. I needed to know if he really was “El Plomero” or if he knew him. Most of all, I needed to know El Plomero’s loyalty. Since Don Clemente’s death, did he now work for Juanito? If he did, I couldn’t trust him.

“My name is Miguel de Cervantes. Don Clemente arranged for El Plomero to help me.” I didn’t say the obvious—that El Plomero was to help me cross the border.

“I spoke to Don Clemente this morning.” His eyes locked on mine. He didn’t blink. “He said nothing about you,” he continued. “Your name means nothing to me.”

So he was El Plomero. That much was now clear. But what he said was a lie, and a test for me.

“Don Clemente is dead. He died in an accident. Juanito told me so himself,” I answered.

And then I took a risk, to see if I could trust the man or not. The most I’d lose was this one coyote. There must be others, lots of others.

“Juanito either killed Don Clemente or had him killed,” I declared. This thought had been forming in my mind for days, but it wasn’t until I said it aloud that I knew it was the truth.

The man’s eyes flickered. He stood up and placed the boots on the counter.

“You can tell that to your grandchildren, but for now, keep it to yourself,” he warned. “Juanito is a worm, the lowest of the low. He’s trying to take over. I worked for Don Clemente for over twenty years. I won’t work for anyone else. And, yes, I am El Plomero.”

He examined us again. “Is it the three of you, then, or just you?”

“The three of us . . . me, my sister, Elena . . . Javier . . .” I paused. “Originally, it was just me, but—”

El Plomero interrupted, “No matter. Be here at three. I’ll have it all arranged.”
We returned to the boot stall at exactly three o'clock. Nothing so far had gone according to plan, but now with El Plomero, I allowed myself to feel a small bit of optimism. Maybe things would go the way Don Clemente had intended, finally.

The iron grill had been pulled down and locked up tight. Javi ratted the metal with both hands. Elena poked her nose through the grating and peered into the darkness. I pulled at both of the giant padlocks.

"Where is he?" Elena asked anxiously. "He said three. Do you think he's not coming?"

"Calm down, Elena," I replied. "He'll be here. He's probably just running late. We'll wait. At least it's cooler in here." It was a relief to escape the afternoon heat.

Javier sank down onto the concrete floor and leaned against the metal grill. He closed his eyes, pulled his ankle toward him, and rubbed it carefully. He probed the area above the anklebone, grimacing slightly.

Elena looked at him with concern. She sat down next to him, cross-legged, and motioned for him to prop up his ankle on her knee. Then she reached into her pocket and pulled out the pamphlet. She thumbed through the pages, scanning the contents.

"Listen to this," Elena said. "This is what happens if you don't drink enough water out in the desert."

I leaned over to check out "Danger Signs of Dehydration."

"Irritability. Angers easily," she read. "That's one of the first things to watch out for."

Elena gave me a little grin. "I finally know what's wrong with you! It looks like you've been dehydrated your whole life, Miguel."

I grabbed the pamphlet out of her hands and read the next warning sign aloud. "Confusion. Makes irrational decisions."

"What? Is this whole thing about you?" I teased back.

Elena poked me in the ribs, and yanked the paper out of my hands. "Oh, yeah, well just look what it says next," she began.

"He's here," Javi interrupted. He was looking down the long corridor of stalls. Striding toward us, head high, was El Plomero.

"Come! We're running late," our coyote commanded.

He motioned for us to follow him. He unlocked the grating and pulled it up. As we stepped inside the boot stall, he quickly slammed the grating back down and locked it up tight. Then he moved to the back of the stall toward the shelves of boots and reached under the lowest shelf. I heard a small click, and a small section of the shelves swung out.

We walked through the opening, squeezing into the room behind the stall. The secret door closed. One dull bulb revealed a small storeroom stuffed from floor to ceiling with survival gear, organized by category.

"Here, try these," El Plomero shoved a pair of light but well-made synthetic hiking boots into my hands. I kicked off my worn-out sneakers and replaced my filthy, stinky socks with new, thick ones. The new boots fit perfectly. Elena tried on several pairs before she found ones she liked.

Javier selected a high-topped pair. He laced them, stood up, and took several tentative steps. He limped only a little. He nodded to himself and muttered, "These will do."

El Plomero gave us new pants, caps, and bandannas; two shirts to layer; and waterproof jackets, all in light colors. We each got a backpack stocked with raisins and packets of brown sugar, a small first-aid kit, and a tarpaulin. Mostly, though, the backpacks held as much water as we could carry.

El Plomero was a professional. He knew what he was doing. Nothing was left to chance. No wonder Don Clemente's fees were so high. No wonder they said he had never lost a single person.
“We leave now,” El Plomero announced. “We have a full moon tonight. We need to take advantage of that.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out our remaining money. “Here. Take this. It’s all we have left.”

“We’ll have plenty of time to take care of that later.” El Plomero didn’t touch the money. “I’m taking you myself. Don Clemente said I was to take special care of you. This is the last thing I’ll do for him.”

He looked at us hard. “It’s at least two long nights of walking, perhaps more. It depends on your stamina, the weather, la migra . . . many, many things can happen in the desert. Most of them are unpleasant.

“We’ll take a new route, to the west,” El Plomero continued. “There’s too much surveillance, too many other problems to the east. The new route is longer than the eastern one. It will be very difficult. If you’re not able to withstand the heat and other hardships, you won’t make it.”

He paused, letting his words sink in. “I’m giving you one last opportunity to reconsider. You can turn around and go back home now.”

Again he waited. Our silence filled up the little room. Did he really expect that we would back out? He didn’t know what we’d come through. I wasn’t about to give up yet. Elena was even more stubborn. And Javi? He’d never turn around. Never. This would be his only chance.

“You’re like everyone else,” El Plomero said matter-of-factly. His warnings had not changed our minds one bit. “Everyone believes they’ll make it. And, of course, you must have faith, mustn’t you? It’s the only way to enter the wilderness.”

He turned and opened a door that led to an alley outside. We piled ourselves and our gear into a dirty white pickup truck. Elena and El Plomero sat in front with the driver, Javi and I in the back.

For maybe an hour and a half, we headed west along a dirt road. The driver swerved to avoid the worst of the potholes, but Javi and I flew up and down on the hard metal of the truck bed. The road gave way to a faint dirt track that ended abruptly at the edge of a dry gully.

We got out and stretched. The driver pulled plastic jugs from the toolbox in the truck bed and thrust them into our hands. We took long swigs of warm water, as much as we could, before the truck headed back to town. A large trail of dust marked its slow passage east. The sun had set, but the heat of the day still rose up from the sand under our feet.

We adjusted our bootlaces and backpack straps for comfort. My shoulders ached and we hadn’t taken a single step. The water was heavy. Really, really heavy. I’d carried enough agua in San Jacinto, for the corn, to know that soon it would feel like I was hauling around a load of bricks.

Javi hefted his own pack higher on his shoulders and tightened the belt at the waist. I couldn’t see that it made any difference. The weight just seemed to settle down low again, as if the water were pulling him toward the center of the earth. He grunted, tugged at the pack again, and cinched the shoulder straps even tighter. Sweat poured down his face, too much for the effort he was making.

El Plomero checked his own pack. He shifted some contents, reached into Elena’s pack, took out three-quarters of her water and put it in his.

“I can carry it, Plomero,” Elena insisted. “I want to do my share.”

“No, you can’t. You’ll slow us down. We can’t wait for you.” El Plomero squared his shoulders.

“Me llamo Moisés,” he added quietly. “You can call me Moisés.”

With that, he faced north and began scrambling down the rocky slope into the gully. “Vámonos,” he commanded. “There’s no time to waste. I set the pace.”
He'd made his way across the wash and up the other side before we had even taken one step.

"Keep up. No one can afford to wait for anybody," Moisés's voice echoed across the emptiness. "We wait for no one."

The desert stretched out on all sides of us, flat and immense. We had unlimited space, but we walked single file behind Moisés, first Javi, then Elena, then me. Moisés hiked at a fast, steady pace. He stopped now and then to check his bearings. In the fading twilight, and then in the rising light of the moon, it was easy to see.

Perhaps two hours into the hike, we paused briefly. Moisés doled out raisins and a few almonds. Between bites, he gave us a lecture on basic survival.

"Unfortunately, this is the hottest time of the year. So don't talk more than you need to, even at night. It uses up moisture. Drink before you're thirsty. If you wait, it will be too late. Never take off any of your clothes. You lose water twice as fast if you're not covered up. We have just enough water to make it, if everything goes perfectly. Don't go anywhere without your pack. It has everything you need to survive, for a while anyway."

I didn't need to ask Moisés to repeat any of it. It's easy to learn something when it matters to you. Javi nodded, as if he already knew most of what Moisés said.

"Watch where you sit and where you walk, especially at night. Scorpions and rattlesnakes will be out, just like us," Moisés continued. "Don't sit on the ground, in the sun, during the day. Sit above the ground. Even a meter up, it may be ten to twenty degrees cooler. Take care of your feet. They're the only way to get out of here."

So, we had a whole new set of enemies here—the sun, the heat, the animals. We could stay for a short time only. If we stayed longer, we would pay with our lives.

"Of course, there's always la migra to worry about," Moisés said. "But here, in this section, once we cross the border, it's the
militia we need to look out for. Ranchers have their own armies, equipped with uniforms and guns. And hatred for us.”

Moises turned his back to us and began to walk once again. He had long legs and took big steps. With my own height, I could match him stride for stride. Elena had to take almost two steps for every one of Moises’s. Javi was somewhere in between. Moises didn’t look back to see where we were. He kept up the same relentless pace. I fell into the rhythm of the hike.

I daydreamed about the end, the very end, my homecoming in California. Papá would hug me and not let go. He’d ask for my forgiveness. He’d say he’d made a big mistake by making me wait.

Mamá would cry and hold my hand and offer up small grateful prayers a Dios. Papá would crack open a beer and hand it to me and no one would say I was too young. They’d beg me to tell them everything.

Javi and Moises, Colmillo, Capitán Morales—all would figure into the story, but I’d be the main character. I would, of course, give Elena some credit. And I’d have a big heart. I wouldn’t blame Elena for any of the trouble she got us into. Elena would tell everyone how I saved us both.

I replayed this fantasy a hundred times in my mind. I was so deep into my thoughts that I didn’t notice that I was now third in line. Moises, Elena, then me. I looked back over my shoulder. Javi had fallen behind, way behind. He straightened up and walked evenly, just as I turned to look.

We stopped twice more, the second time just as pale gold and pink tinted the eastern horizon. It took Javi more than five minutes to catch up to us. Moises frowned, checked the ground around us, and spread a tarpaulin for us to sit on. We drank the small rations of water that he allowed us. I wasn’t hungry, but he insisted that we eat small portions of the energy bars.

“We move again in ten minutes,” Moises announced. “Two or three more hours, then we’ll stop for the hottest part of the day.

Javier, come with me.”

Moises motioned for Javier to follow him. They moved out of hearing distance, but they needn’t have bothered. We could guess what was being said. Moises pointed at Javi’s ankle. Javi shrugged, then raised his hands, palms up.

“Well,” I could imagine him saying, “it’s just a small sprain. It’ll be fine again once we rest.”

Then Moises turned his back to us. He wanted to be sure we couldn’t read his lips. But there were other things to read. I could hear the harsh tone of Moises’s words. I could see his stiff back, his shaking head.

It wasn’t hard to understand what Moises meant when his hands and fingers pointed first back toward Elena and me and then toward the rocky ground and the mountains that rose in the distance in front of us. The conversation might as well have been written out in the red sand at our feet or across the pale blue of the morning sky.

“He doesn’t know Javi like we do, does he, Miguel?” Elena said. “Moises doesn’t know how strong Javi is.”

I was silent. I didn’t know if I should say what she wanted to hear or what I thought she needed to hear.


“Well, I think you’re right,” I replied. “Javi is strong. He’s going to make it.”

I couldn’t see how telling the truth would help Elena make it out of this desert. She needed to believe that the three of us would survive together. Besides, what was the truth about Javi? He’d surprised me again and again with what he could do, with what he knew. He’d made it this far. Why not all the way?

Relief flooded her face. A single tear made its way down through the dirt on her cheek. “Gracias, Miguel. We can all make it, together. I just know it.” She leaned over and kissed my cheek.
Javi and Moisés made their way back to us. Moisés kicked at the sand grimly, his eyes fixed on the ground. Javi had put on his best smile, but there was pain in his eyes.

"Hey, you two, guess what Moisés told me?" he said excitedly. "We're here! We're already here!"

I looked around, confused. "What do you mean? We're in the middle of the desert! We're not anywhere."

"No, no!" Javi said. "We are here. We crossed la línea, la frontera . . . sometime in the night."

Javi stretched out his arms as if to embrace the idea. "Don't you see? We made it! ¡Ya llegamos!"

We all looked at the desolation that surrounded us. There was nothing but scrub brush and a single, tailless lizard skittering across the sand toward the safety of a rock.

I began to laugh first, then Elena and Javi. His big donkey laugh echoed across the desert. Moisés grinned. Soon we were laughing out loud. We laughed until our stomachs hurt and we couldn't laugh anymore.

I laughed so hard that I cried. It was crazy . . . una tontería. I'd arrived at the very place I always wanted to be, across la línea in el Norte, but I was in the middle of nowhere.

Had I come this far to feel just like I did in San Jacinto? To be somewhere and nowhere at the same time? To belong and be lost at the same time?

We fell silent. The tension had lifted. Elena sighed, almost contentedly. Moisés set himself to the task of charting our course; Javi stood next to him, closely studying the landmarks that Moisés pointed out.

"I always thought I'd know exactly the moment I crossed the border," I admitted, folding up the tarpaulin. "I thought I'd feel it, somehow. But I didn't even know. I had no idea. How could I not have felt something?"

Moisés, who had most likely crossed the border dozens of times, just shrugged. And with that, he strode off toward the North at an even faster pace than before.
The morning started out cool, but the reprieve from the heat didn't last long. Moisés led us northeast across the sandy desert floor. Javi still brought up the rear, and Elena had also now fallen behind me. She didn't complain or ask to stop once, even though the sun now beat down relentlessly. And then the terrain turned uneven and rocky, but it didn't slow Moisés down one bit.

We stopped before noon at a large outcropping. It consisted of several large boulders leaning against each other at odd angles.

"We stop here for the afternoon." Moisés motioned us to the eastern side of the rocks.

"The rocks will give us some shade during the hottest part of the day. The shadows will get longer later in the afternoon," he explained.

In the shade, Moisés rationed out several large gulps of water and packets of brown sugar.

"Get out the tarps." He reached into his own backpack. "Once I check for rattlers, we'll spread them out and rest."

He cautiously inspected several likely spots for snakes: underneath a ledge jutting out from one of the rocks, an indentation between two of the boulders, and a hole that appeared to lead down into the ground right next to where our heads would be when we stretched out.

"Good," he announced. For the first time, he smiled. He was clearly in charge, in his element. "We've made decent progress. We're just where we should be."

He kicked a few random rocks out of the way. His smile widened. "We were lucky to get such a nice hotel this time of year. People just can't seem to get enough of this place. They're dying to come here!"

Moisés pointed to the left. "Your room is here, Javier. Sorry, Miguel and Elena, you'll have to share a suite."

"That's okay," I replied. "We're used to it." If Moisés felt like we could have a little fun, I'd play along.

I pictured the postcards of the fancy Acapulco hotel Tio had worked at, before he got lonely for Tia and the kids and came back home. All I could remember was the water, pool after pool of perfect, clear blue water.

"I think I'll go down to the pool later for a swim. Anyone want to go with me?"

"I'll go," Elena chimed in. "But first I'm going to take a nap in this nice, big, soft bed." She patted the hard ground under the tarp.

"For me, a hot shower, first. Then, a steak, papa's fritas. Maybe two steaks." Javi smacked his lips.

"Well, enjoy your stay," Moisés said. "I'll wake you when it's time to check out."

He lay down flat on his back on the far edge, closed his eyes, and appeared to be asleep within moments. He probably made the same joke every time he came through here with a group of pollos. Things were going well. We all felt like we could afford a joke.

Elena picked up the corner of the tarp nearest her and checked for rattlers one last time. She seemed satisfied and rolled over onto her side. Javi loosened his boots slightly but didn't take them off. He sighed, lay back, put up one knee, and propped his bad ankle on top.

I lay for some minutes just listening, but all I heard was our own breathing. I thought I heard the roar of a small engine far, far off, but the sound was gone before I was sure I'd heard it. A hawk screeched after prey. A whiff of a hot breeze blew silently across the sand, just enough to move a few grains here and there. The sand moaned softly, then went quiet again.

I filled up the silence with imagining the sound of Abuelita's voice, gravelly and low, talking and humming to herself as she
worked. What would she say if she saw this place? I bet she and Doña Maria would say to beware. I fell asleep holding Abuelita's medallion in my right hand.

I woke to Moisés's voice, low and urgent. "I heard something. I'm going to investigate. Stay here. Don't move. I'll be back quickly."

Moisés picked up his pack and headed around the northern edge of our outcropping. Elena hunkered down next to the closest boulder. Javi and I crawled as far as we could in the shelter of the stones. Then we crouched and peered out around the last rock.

Moisés was making his way north across a stretch of rolling dunes. Beyond the dunes were several small hills dotted with cactus. He went up and down with the landscape, finally disappearing beyond the crest of the first hill.

"It's probably nothing," Javi said knowingly. "The desert can play tricks on you. It can make you believe things are there that aren't.

"You know about a mirage, the trick of light," he continued. "Distances, too, they trick you. Things look closer than they really are. The illusions are everywhere."

He crawled back to Elena. They both took drinks from Javi's water supply. My mouth was bone dry and fuzzy, so I checked my own water. Almost half of it was gone. Moisés had done a good job of rationing. I drank thirstily. The rocks cast giant shadows now. I figured we'd been out for twenty-four hours. May bien. We'd make it. Moisés had led us into this place, and he would lead us out.

And then, the crack! of a rifle echoed across the desert from the north. Elena's head jerked up. Javi froze. No more shots followed the first, but fear spread through my arms and legs. I didn't feel the heat anymore. I was colder than I'd ever been.

"It could be la migra. They could've fired a warning shot, perhaps," said Javi. "But I don't think it's the law. It's the other ones, the milita that Moisés said would be here." He bent quickly to fold up the tarps and stow the remaining water.

Elena didn't budge, except for her head. It moved side to side, like radar scanning for signs of life. "Shh!" she said. "Did you hear that? I heard something else!"

No one moved. From the north came the whine of an engine straining to mount a hill. I crawled once more to the edge of the outcropping to search for any sign of Moisés. Coming down the closest hill and across the dunes was an open four-wheel-drive vehicle. An oversized United States flag flew from the antenna.

Two men in military-type camouflage fatigues sat in front. The one in the passenger seat held his rifle ready, the sun reflecting off his wraparound sunglasses. Moisés's long body lolled across the backseat.

They appeared to be heading straight toward us. I crouched lower. "Don't move!" I turned to warn Javi and Elena. "Keep down! It's the militia!"

Not more than one hundred meters from us, the driver turned the vehicle toward the west. Moisés's head rolled to one side, his eyes closed. He held one hand to his right shoulder where blood oozed from a wound. Cradled in his other arm was his backpack.

I started to get up, but Javi pulled me back. The last thing I saw was Moisés slowly pushing his backpack out of the side of the jeep. It landed with a soft thud on the desert floor.

Javi, Elena, and I sat, unmoving, for many minutes. We waited until we could no longer hear the sound of the engine, until silence descended again on the desert. We stood together and looked to the west. There was no sign of the jeep, not even a hint of dust.

"He threw his backpack out as close as he could to us. It's over there," I pointed to the black blob in front of us.

We approached the pack slowly, as if it were alive, and dangerous. A dark circle of wetness spread out around it.

"Es mi agua," Elena said, pointing at the wet sand. "He had the rest of my water."

She knelt down, picked up the pack and turned it over easily.
The bullet in Moisés’s shoulder had first ripped through both sides of the pack, leaving a hole big enough to put your finger through.

Elena pulled her hands away from the pack. They were rosy pink, a mixture of Moisés’s blood and the water he was carrying, the same colors as the sunset on the western horizon.

It was just the three of us again. I’d started out my journey alone. Elena had made us become two, then Javi had made us become three. Moisés made four. We should have finished as four. I didn’t like the math.

Moisés was gone. Everything he knew about the desert, good and bad, was gone. His water and most of Elena’s was all gone, swallowed by the desert sand. I had less than half of my water, Javi about the same. Water couldn’t be stretched. Even with the best of luck, there was enough for two of us, not three. More math.

We were going to make it, or we weren’t. We were going to live, or we were going to die. So, right off, we broke two of the rules Moises had spelled out for us. First, we sat right on the ground. Second, we talked, more than we had to. Behind the boulders, we made a plan.

“We’ll walk again tonight, as far as we can,” Javi said. “Moisés said to head to the east of that mountain.”

He pointed at the jagged peak that loomed in the distance to the north. One kilometer away? Ten? Twenty? More?

“There, somewhere, is a town, and a highway. West for you two. East for me.”

Javi held out his thumb, as if he were hitching a ride. In Moisés’s pack we’d found some twenty-dollar bills. It seemed like enough to buy us bus tickets or a ride, but who knew?

I didn’t have much experience with dollars. Papá and Mamá could never get enough dollars together to send for us, even when they worked nonstop, day and night. Maybe one of those twenty-dollar bills was like nothing in California. Maybe people carried around dozens of them, big piles of them, just to buy a bit of goat meat or some milk or to put a little gas in the car.
Javi looked to the east. "How far do you think we can see? How far before there's a river or a stream, any water at all?"

I shrugged. There was nothing to block our view. The sky had turned from dark blue to a blue so deep it was nearly black. There was no hint of the horizon, no clue as to where the desert, or the earth, ended.

"New York is over there, somewhere. If I just walk east, I'll get there. I'll see my brother. He's waiting for me, you know. He's expecting me, soon. All I have to do is get there."

Javi stood up and took a few steps eastward. He seemed ready to take off into the darkness at that moment, in the wrong direction.

"Javi." I rose to stop him.

"You take the lead," Javi said, turning back to me. "Walk at Moisés's pace. I'll keep up. Don't worry about me. You have to make it tonight . . . you don't have a choice."

"What if we don't make it?" Elena asked quietly. "What if we get lost, or we run out of water?"

"We're going to make it, Elena." I said it as much for my benefit as for hers. I let the possibility of failure creep up from deep in my mind, then pushed the thought back down. Failing now meant dying. "It's too late to give up now, isn't it?"

"But what if one of us can't make it?" Elena persisted. She wanted everything spelled out.

Even in the heat, goose bumps popped up on my arms. Goose bumps, not for a chupacabra or La Llorona or stolen body parts. They were a result of cold, deep fear at having to make a choice that no one should have to make. Escalofríos, no de fantasmas, sino de vida y muerte.

"It's all of us or none of us," Elena declared. "We won't leave anyone behind. We won't . . . I won't. I can't."

"It won't come to that. It doesn't have to come to that. If worse comes to worst, give yourselves up to la migra." Javi grabbed the edge of a boulder to steady himself. His breath came again in ragged puffs.

"Look," he pointed out matter-of-factly. "It's better to be alive to try again. You're young. Your whole life is in front of you. If you cross enough times, you'll make it sooner or later."

So we set out. Before the moon rose, the night was as black as black could be. I tried to walk quickly but I had to watch every step to avoid a rock or a rut or a cactus in our way. Then, when the moon did rise, we came to terrain crisscrossed with ravines. We slid down the soft earth and sand on one side, picked our way across, and climbed clumsily up the other side.

Javi and Elena grunted behind me as we crossed through our third ravine. The bottom of it was covered with stunted mesquite and chaparral. We had to push our way through thorny branches that punctured our arms, even through our long sleeves. Deep scratches soon covered my palms and the backs of my hands. Was this the route that Moisés intended to take? Maybe he knew a different path around this part of hell.

But we didn't stop. After midnight, clouds began to cover the moon. I paused briefly to check our progress. The mountain was still in the right position, but it didn't look much closer than before. I was disheartened, but I kept it to myself.

More clouds built up across the sky and, to the east, a mighty bolt of lightning cut down to the ground. Thunder followed. I sniffed the air. The smell of newly wet earth reached us. It was raining to the east.

Huge sheets of lightning showed our way briefly, followed by deafening thunder and then complete darkness. We had to stop to let our eyes adjust to the change. Each time, the lightning seemed more blinding. Each time, the darkness seemed darker. The thunder reverberated in my skull and my ribs and my shins.

Then, suddenly, it started to rain. It was a hard, pounding downpour that soaked us within seconds, before we even had a chance to pull out our jackets. We stood and let the water stream over us for several minutes. The storm passed as quickly as it came.
It lasted long enough to cool the temperature by maybe thirty degrees. It didn’t last long enough for water to collect, water we needed, badly.

“Now what?” Elena asked me, her teeth chattering wildly.

“Change. We take off the wet shirts and put on our jackets. We’ll dry the shirts tomorrow.” I was making this up as I went along. It seemed like a good thing to do, or the only thing we could do.

So we changed. And we walked, and we walked, and we walked. The ground leveled to a sort of valley. I thought I found a faint trail. It was narrow, but it headed in the right direction. I lengthened my stride, hoping to make up for time we’d lost earlier in the night. I moved to avoid a branch on my left, brushing up against a cactus on the right.

“Ow!” I complained. I rubbed my hand, and the pain intensified. Hundreds of tiny spurs covered my fingers. I bent to see if I could pick them out, but the light was too dim. There were too many anyway.

“Ah, these are the chollas I heard of.” Javi took out his comb and handed it to me. “They penetrate your skin and stick in. Rake them off. It’s the only way.”

A cholla had also attacked Elena. She sniffed in pain but said nothing. We took turns with Javi’s comb many times that night. Every stop cost us precious time and energy.

What was this place trying so hard to protect? Why bother with fences or la migra or militias? The heat, the cold, the snakes, the evil cholla spurs—they all conspired to keep us out or slow us down or outright kill us.

I tried and tried, but I couldn’t seem to find a route straight toward our landmark. Whenever I headed us north, a ravine or cactus or part of a barbed-wire fence made us veer either east or west. Each time, it slowed us down. Twice we ducked down flat and hid when headlights flickered on a dirt road. We believed it was la migra out on patrol.

But I worried most about something else. We were going slowly, yet Javi continued to fall behind. He caught up when we stopped, but each time it took him longer to reach us. The rough terrain had to be hurting his ankle. At dawn, I turned to watch Javi struggle toward us yet again. He limped slightly, but it was more than that. He looked shrunken and wizened, as if the desert were sucking out his insides.

Elena came up right next to me. She squinted her eyes toward the mountain. It now appeared to be several kilometers away. “It looks closer. How much farther, do you think?”

I remembered what Javi said about illusions in the desert. I had no idea how far we had to go. I looked at her, then at me. Our condition was the opposite of illusion. Deep scratches covered our hands, arms, faces. Barbed wire had torn my shirt in front and one knee of my pants. One thorn was deeply embedded in my forearm. It would be infected soon if I didn’t get it out. Elena’s face was badly sunburned. She sat and pulled off her left boot. A blister, broken and leaking fluid, covered her heel.

But the worst part of it all was the thirst. I’d allowed us only small sips of water during the night. But what was it that Moisés said? Something about not getting too thirsty. Something about not saving the water. I couldn’t make sense of that advice. I figured we had enough left for a small amount each. Then it would be gone anyway.

It was early morning and already the sun had no mercy. I didn’t want to think about how hot it was going to get. I pulled out the water and swallowed several small drinks. Elena watched me closely and then took exactly the same amount for herself. Javi barely wet his lips.

“Drink,” Elena and I said together. He put the bottle up to his lips and rolled his head back.

“Listen, you two,” Javi said slowly, stowing his water bottle in his pack. “I have something to tell you.” His usual fast talk had
slowed to a crawl. His words slurred together. Everything about him seemed to have slowed down.

“Miguel is in charge now.” He looked at Elena to make his point. “Do what he says.”

Then he seemed to summon something from deep within. He pushed himself up, groaning with each movement. “You’ll make it. I promised, remember? And I’ll be right behind you, every step of the way.”

The sun beat down fiercely and the heat rose up from the ground in wavy, pulsating bands. Once, mid-morning, Javi stopped suddenly. He let his pack slide to the sand and began to fumble with the buttons on his long-sleeved shirt.

“It’s hot,” he mumbled to himself. “I’ll be cooler.”

“No, Javi!” I pulled his hands away from his chest. “Remember what Moisés said?”

Javi wrinkled his brow. “Moisés?” he asked. “Moisés? Oh, yes, him.” But he gave me a puzzled look as I heaved his pack up and placed the straps around his shoulders.

I forced us to go on an hour more, but it was clear we needed rest, Javi more than anyone. The best protection I could find was a scrawny stand of mesquite bushes. They gave poor shade, but it was better than nothing, maybe.

We spread our tarps the way Moisés showed us. I looked around for snakes. Elena looked farther and harder, but even she gave up after a minute or two. A snake seemed like a small thing, or just another thing. It seemed neutral, a part of this place. I didn’t have enough energy to care about a culebra.

I slept off and on. We moved to try to stay in the shade, but more than half of my body stayed out in the sun. I tried to lick my lips but I couldn’t find enough saliva to do it. A steady wind came up that seemed to suck the last bit of water out of my body.

Late in the afternoon, I watched a dusty brown scorpion climb up my shirt sleeve to my chest, just below my chin. It stopped, as if it might stay. It held its tail high, at the ready. I took in a breath, very slowly, held it, and waited.

But the scorpion suddenly scurried away, down my body, and disappeared on the other side of the mesquite. Was the scorpion