

Chapter One

Night

Under my coat is a weary heart, but a kind one—one that would do nobody no harm.

— Two-gun Crowley, after murdering a policeman.

The call that no parent should ever receive came at four a.m. I groped for the phone and had to unglue one eye to see the time.

“Hello? Jesse? Are you there?” Her voice trembled. “It’s Debi. I need your help. Are you awake?”

“I’m here. I’m up. What do you want?” I’ve only spoken to Debi, my very ex-girlfriend and mother of my child, two or three times in the months since I’ve been back. If I were lucky, she would answer an email or text.

“Oh God, Jesse. It’s Sheri—she’s missing!”

My brain shifted into high gear. Debi must have been desperate to phone me; I’m *persona non grata* in her family, especially with Sheri’s grandfather. Although I’d remembered my daughter’s birthdays and at Christmas over the years, my ex and her family had set her against me. The price of being away for so long. I should have done better.

“Some cop from Laredo called.” Her voice caught. “Sheri traveled there to celebrate her birthday with girlfriends and crossed the bridge to party in Mexico.”

My jaw clenched. “Wasn’t she supposed to spend her birthday at your father’s in Dallas? Wasn’t that the reason I couldn’t see her again?”

“Why can’t you get it through your thick skull? She doesn’t even want to know you.”

The bite in her tone stung. “You’ve never been a part of her life; all those years away in the Army or wherever, instead of making something of yourself. My father says—”

I slammed my fist on the rickety table. “I don’t care what your damn father thinks anymore. For years, you and that bastard did everything you could to keep her from me. You poisoned any relationship I might have had with her. And only *now* you want me to help?”

“Please, Jesse.” She broke down. “I’m sorry. Please help me. She is still your daughter.”

I swallowed my frustration. It wasn’t the time to argue. “Okay, tell me precisely what happened.”

“I don’t know. The police don’t know. Nobody knows. I have to get down there.”

Not good news. My mind raced through a multitude of dire scenarios.

“The police told me Sheri went missing from a bar in Nuevo Laredo. In Mexico, for Christ’s sake! They think someone kidnapped her.”

Shit. I put the mobile on speaker while gathering what I needed. I snatched the backpack with all the cash I’d saved from twenty years of combat pay and crammed it full of clean underwear, socks, a few t-shirts, a toothbrush, and deodorant—just in case. Then I pulled on a denim shirt and combat boots and hitched a Bowie knife and case onto my belt.

The knife and an even more valuable Colt six-shooter from the 1870s were the only things worth having from my father’s share of the estate. In many ways, he embodied the Old West; his heritage included both Mexican and Apache roots. Mine too, I suppose.

“Where are you now?” I searched the kitchen for my truck keys.

“At home in San Antonio. Don and I are about to leave for the airport. Daddy is bringing the jet from Dallas to pick us up.” She hesitated. “Jesse, please. I’m scared.”

“Don’t worry. It’ll be all right.” Even as I expressed those reassuring but worn words, I recognized that if someone took Sherilyn in Mexico, things would not be “all right”—not at all. Too many girls went missing along the border towns, never to be found. Those lost souls are the *Desaparecidos*—the Disappeared. And I knew that depending on the Mexican police to save her would be pointless. The cops often looked the other way, or worse—they took part.

Ten minutes after the phone call, I put my dad’s six-shooter into the truck’s glove box and slung the backpack onto the passenger seat of my big Ford pickup. Pre-dawn light crept over the low trees. I accelerated down my mile-long driveway and careened south onto the paved road. It was a four-hour trip from my ranch, south of San Saba, to Laredo and the Mexican border. I jammed the pedal to the floor.

The unlikely romance between Debi and me began and ended in less than a week. It wouldn’t have lasted anyway. Rich girl, poor boy. A pretty, White, bleach-blonde daughter of a banking baron dating the son of a Mex-Indian rancher. No way. Not that I’m bad-looking. An easy grin and eyes a unique shade of green, courtesy of my mother, often drew a second look from women. That smile came less often now, worn thin by too many hard years on the killing grounds of Afghanistan.

Her father, George Pike, owned Longhorn Bank, a medium-sized, state-licensed bank with thirteen branches across Texas. When faced with his wrath, Debi’s rebellion against Daddy proved short-lived. He made sure she ended it as soon as he learned about me, so I bottled my anger, joined the Army, and didn’t return to Texas for two decades.

I later learned my one-night stand with Debi resulted in her pregnancy. The good thing was that the baby resembled her mother and not me. I never had the chance to raise Sheri, but I did care about her and tried to stay in touch. The Pikes ghosted me.

Until now.

I racked my brain to recall every bit of information I knew about the southern border. The land was once part of Mexico until 1836, when rebellious Texans signed a Declaration of Independence, and the battles of the Alamo and San Jacinto took place. Modern conflicts now center on illegal immigration and drug trafficking. Along the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, there's an epidemic of unspeakable gang violence taking a devastating toll on the innocent, with well over one hundred thousand people missing and presumed dead.

I grabbed a large coffee and a couple of breakfast burritos at the McDonald's in Comfort. I kept driving, cursing the city's early rush-hour traffic. Down I-35, the sparsely populated land south of San Antonio became a flat patchwork of farms and ranches. I seldom slipped under eighty-five the entire drive to Laredo. Flashing past forgotten towns—Moore, Derby, Cotulla, Artesia Wells, Encinal...

Dots on the map of the Old West.

Chapter Two

Morning

I swung into Laredo police headquarters on Maher Ave, across from Laredo Airport, and parked in the sun. The temperature climbed to ninety-three degrees, and heat waves shimmered off the asphalt, making the lot look like a lake of rippling water.

My sunglasses fogged the moment I exited the truck's cab, and the pavement roasted the soles of my boots. I circled to the passenger side, put my knife in the glove compartment with the six-shooter, and then hurried toward the two-story building. The roar from a departing flight muffled when I entered the air-conditioned lobby through the glass front doors. Inside, they had the cold air cranked up.

Two beefy officers handling security looked like twins: super-short hair on the sides, a number two cut on top, biceps like professional wrestlers, and muscular chests. Not much different from me. Except in the time since I've been back, I added a scruffy beard and let my hair grow out. A little softer around the middle, maybe.

I peeled out my driver's license and handed it to the officer behind the desk. "My name is Jesse Arroyo. I'm here to see—" Shit, I'd forgotten to ask who Debi was meeting. "They kidnapped my daughter in Nuevo, and a detective called."

The cop cast a judgmental look and picked up the phone.

Debi and her spouse, Don Lawton, and her father, George Pike, were already there, huddled around a conference room table. My ex-girlfriend looked good despite her red, tearful eyes. She'd layered on makeup and styled her hair in that TV anchor helmet hairstyle that some Texan women are known for. Blonde hair was always her pride, and it showed.

The proverbial “elephant in the room” was George Pike. Debi’s father dominated the group with a type-A personality, thinning hairline, and sizable paunch. He dressed “expensive-casual” in gabardine slacks, a light green golf shirt, and a crested blue blazer. I caught him pontificating to the couple when I entered. They all stopped and stared. Unsurprisingly, the family didn’t exchange warm greetings with me. Debi was distraught, and her father’s bearing bordered on palpable animosity.

Pike rose from his chair, planted himself in front of me, and folded his arms across his barrel chest. His attitude required no explanation. His stance said it all. The man hated me for no other reason than I wasn’t “their people.” Lily-white. Rich Republican.

I ignored him. Difficult, with him up my nose. After their conversation ended, the only sound in the room was the hum of the air conditioner from a vent high on the plain beige wall. Two peeling posters promoting last year’s “Turn On A Light Against Crime Night” decorated the interior. The conference room felt pocket-sized and stuffy with just the four of us inside.

“Debi, what happened? Have they heard anything?”

Pike strode back to the other side of the table but kept staring daggers. Don Lawton rubbed his wife’s shoulders. She seemed oblivious to the attention. “They’re talking to the police in Mexico,” Debi said. “They’ve notified the FBI already. So, we have to wait to hear any news.”

I leaned against the wall. The room remained near-silent, except for the sibilant sound of the air conditioner and faint whispers between Pike and Debi. I didn’t care about their secrets.

First, I stood. Then I perched on a chair. I got back up and paced back and forth. It was the same before a mission. Once I was into it, a focused calm took over. But the prep work, the waiting to go, that roiled me. By the time the conference room door opened, I had peaked. In a fight-or-flight mood, I was ready to fight.

Three lawmen walked in, one in a deep-blue uniform and two in summer suits. The uniform, Lieutenant Campos of the Laredo police, a middle-aged, heavy-set officer marked by a bulbous nose and a lousy complexion, introduced himself. A faint whiff of Old Spice cologne followed him—my dad's scent.

One suit belonged to police detective Martín García, who eased into a corner of the room. García boasted a thick Pancho Villa mustache and a white Stetson cowboy hat. He'd stuffed his broad shoulders into a jacket and tie. We shook hands.

FBI Agent McFarland wore the other suit. He wasn't very tall, perhaps the former minimum service height requirement of five-seven. He wore a politically correct American flag lapel pin. Lieutenant Campos explained that Agent McFarland was on loan from the Bureau's Houston office because the resident agent for Laredo was on vacation. The FBI man dipped his head in acknowledgment. I jutted my jaw out.

"Mr. Arroyo, I already went over this with Ms. Lawton, but let me fill you in on what we know," Campos said. "Your daughter's friend, Maria del Valle, escaped across the Gateway Bridge from Nuevo Laredo last night around two in the morning, barefoot, with her hands bound. Not hurt badly, but terrified. It took ICE a while to get her story and contact us."

"ICE is Immigration and Customs Enforcement." Agent McFarland's pedantic voice grated on my nerves. "Part of Homeland Security."

Unnecessary info. I'd been away, not living under a rock.

"Right now, she's in Doctors Hospital here in Laredo. Agent McFarland and I will conduct a follow-up interview with her later today. In the meantime, we're trying to locate relatives. She is a U.S. citizen, but given her attitude, her folks may be undocumented."

"What about Sheri? What about my daughter?" I gritted my teeth.

“Mr. Arroyo.” McFarland stepped forward. “Let me assure you, the FBI is in charge of this investigation, and we’re already making progress. I have informed the State Department about the issue, so I’m confident they will prioritize your daughter’s kidnapping with the Mexican authorities, especially the *Federales*.”

“Now. I want her back now, not after a bunch of bureaucrats chew it over for a week.” I rotated back to Campos. “Lieutenant, you know the players down there. Tell me about them. Who took her? What is anybody doing about it?”

McFarland answered instead; his chest puffed. “The Bureau excels at catching kidnappers, and we are confident we’ll have your daughter home soon. We know you’re worried about her, but leave it to us, we’re the experts. Do not think you can take the law into your own hands.” He brushed me off with a wave of his hand.

I’m not so easy to dismiss. “Her name is Sherilyn. Don’t forget it.”

Campos, who appeared uncomfortable with our exchange, intervened. “Your daughter and two *amigas*,” he said, “Maria, a local girl from here in Laredo, and Bianca Smith from San Antonio, crossed the bridge around ten last night.” He motioned for me to take a seat, but I stayed standing.

“Are either of those names familiar to you?”

“How would he know?” George Pike jumped up, fists clenched. He planted them on the table. “This bastard has never been a part of Sheri’s life. I don’t even know why he’s here.”

Campos moved between us in case I popped the pompous shit. A born peacemaker, the Lieutenant must have been a middle child.

“Ms. Del Valle told us the girls drove to the León del Noche, Lion of the Night, a local nightclub just a few blocks into Nuevo town. It was once *the* party place for young Americans,

but with all the drug violence, night border crossings are way down. Local well-to-do Mexican kids now haunt the club, and any place that attracts young people with money brings the cartels out.”

Campos grimaced. “According to Ms. del Valle, someone they met here in Laredo assured the girls of their safety in Nuevo. This unknown person invited them.” While he spoke, Agent McFarland leaned over to George Pike and whispered in his ear. I made a mental note of it. It was a familiar gesture that hinted they knew each other. Off in the corner, Detective García observed with an impassive face.

“After some heavy drinking, the girls left the club around 1:30 in the morning. Their car wouldn’t start, so they piled into a taxi waiting outside.” Campos’ expression conveyed paternal sympathy. “Instead of taking them to the border crossing, the driver took a side street where two men in a pickup truck blocked the road—a tragically familiar modus operandi for kidnappers.”

I closed my eyes and imagined the abduction. The fear. The terror.

“The men grabbed the girls at gunpoint, bound their hands, and threw them into the back of the pickup. Your daughter put up a fierce fight when they tried to lift her into the truck bed. Her resistance allowed Ms. del Valle to break free and run for her life. She made her way to the bridge, where Immigration stopped her.”

The lieutenant explained his theory that one of several drug gangs battling to control the smuggling routes along the border had taken the girls for ransom.

“Why would they want my daughter?” Debi choked back tears. “She had nothing to do with drugs or anything. She’s just a girl.” Her husband placed his hand over hers, but she pulled away.

“It is becoming more common for these gangs and criminal offshoots to ransom wealthy Mexicans and Americans,” Campos said. “It’s called ‘express kidnapping.’ They haven’t made any demands yet, but it’s still early. I spoke with the Tamaulipas State attorney general; they are very familiar with this crime. It will take some time, but the Mexican police are confident they will recover her unharmed. As soon as we hear about the ransom—”

“I will pay it.” Debi’s father flew up from his seat. He spread his arms in a wide arc. “Anything they want, I will pay.” George Pike—a man who saw the world through dollar signs.

Oh sure, you’ll pay. Money was all you ever thought of. But if they hurt her, the cartel is going to pay—me.

“The FBI will handle this by the book,” McFarland said. “We are used to this kind of situation. Unfortunately, the American consulate in Nuevo Laredo has been closed temporarily. However, the U.S. State Department will work closely with Mexico City and the Tamaulipas State government. Don’t worry.”

The police detective, García, failed to hide a frown.

McFarland’s words did little to reassure me. They might placate Pike, but not me. I needed a plan and sound intel. I wondered why García had nothing to say.

Lieutenant Campos sidled over to Debi and placed his hand on her shoulder. “I guarantee you, we will let you all know as soon as there is a ransom demand. Or any news at all.”

He swiveled to me. “There’s nothing more you can do, Mr. Arroyo. We all understand that finding your daughter is urgent. So, please, everyone, go home. We will be in touch if we have any updates. If you prefer to stay in Laredo, we can find a hotel for you.”

As Debi and her husband left the room, Pike pushed up in my face again. “This is your fault. You fucking half-breed son of a bitch. You stay the hell out of our lives and don’t get involved.” He poked me in the chest with his index finger. “You’ll be sorry if you do.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath instead of pummeling him into a pulp. He reversed and stamped out without another word.

From the moment Debi called me, I knew the odds of US law enforcement finding the kidnappers were slim to none, even if they had a working relationship with the Mexican authorities. I waited until Pike and family disappeared down the hall and then shoved the door open. I felt trapped in the small room and needed fresh air.

García stood outside, waiting.