

EXCERPT

The sun climbed higher. I scuttled to the rear of the Chrysler where I braced myself, hands on my knees and sucked air. When the panting stopped, I leaned out to the edge of the fender. I took a chance and checked the rearview mirror. There he was, motionless. But not asleep. He stared out toward the windmill.

The bawling of an old cow and the repetitive chirp of a cardinal chipped away at the silence. I imagined my mother shaking out my covers and putting out a search party. With my forefinger, I traced the letters spelling Imperial on the raised spare tire compartment and waited.

A snap of the glove compartment and another click. At last he would start the engine. George's eyes shifted to the rear view mirror. He saw me. I knew he did. He would tell I sneaked out. No other choice occurred to me. I must smile, come forward to be polite. Say hello, like I'd been taught. Just say I was out messing around and wondered if this was his car. Just say for him not to feel bad about Tío. Something like "Oh, you know how Tío can be...quiet." Ask if he was gonna come over for breakfast. And if he would, please sir, uh...not mention he'd seen me...that I'd been out looking for...for a surprise for Mama and Aunt Hilda. And did he know about the spirits in the *Camileño*?

In the reflection of his side mirror, George's grey eyes pinned me to the rear fender. My repartee caught in my throat. I was sure what George had to say would change my life, would pockmark it with a truth about my uncle that would finally erase all hopes of Tío's innocence in George's election fraud. But there were no words.

From the rear-view mirror, a glint of steel sparked in the morning light. Just a flicker. Searing into my face, his eyes left the fevered burn of standing too close to fire. As though he were enlisting me as a co-conspirator, George put the pistol to his head. He pressed his lips

together in a straight line, fine as a knife blade, depositing blame at my feet. Never taking his gaze off mine, he pulled the trigger.

A covey of bobwhites burst from the underbrush, but no shudder of wings buffeted the air. A bull opened his mouth in what should have been a leaf trembling bellow. The sound—the only sound—was a cherry bomb exploding. Nothing but the hot white roar of a single shot.

I stood there, wide-eyed, as if viewing myself from somewhere high above the mesquite—a small figure standing behind a dark car with her hands to her ears.

Until the full impact of the scene punched me into motion.

Flailing through the thicket, I pitched over the top of a low branch and fell flat on my back. I screamed once, I think, although I could hardly hear it. It was as though a nest of yellow-jackets invaded my ears. Crab-like, I scrambled backward against a flowering huisache tree. Its orange-colored blossoms drifted down dreamlike and filled the light about me. I swung at them and may have cried out “Stop!” It seemed I did. I flipped and belly-crawled yards before I could still the convulsions in my legs. I flattened my cheek against the sandy earth and became oddly aware of its comfort, a cool hand to mitigate the hot, hot light spearing through the sagebrush. Grit and blood in my mouth, I focused on a dung beetle’s single-minded bustling, a small white butterfly’s tentative probing of milkweed.

Silence.

Tears muddied my face.

Gripping branches, I pulled to my feet and stumbled back to the car. Maybe it hadn’t really happened.

A few steps closer revealed George’s slumped form, the thin strands of his grey hair smearing sticky color across the Chrysler’s sleek finish. Close enough to make out his liver-

spotted hands twisted like dead sparrows. Close enough to recognize the crosshatched handle of a .45 Colt pistol cradled in his lap. Close enough to see brain matter splattered against the early growth of April.

I wheeled around and charged back through the chaparral. A mesquite thorn caught the flesh on my arm. Feeling the pull of it but not the pain, I cocked my elbow across my eyes and parted branches with the other till I found Canela. Breaking loose from her tie, she had trotted several yards away and consoled herself with green grass in a patch of sunlight. She didn't leave me.

I clung to her. Sucking up heaves and tears and swiping my nose across my shredded shirt, I gulped air. It came in fits and swallows. "Okay, okay, we can do this." I flipped the reins back over her neck and dragged myself up. My hands shook, but I clucked her on and we moved into a lope.

The lope accelerated to a gallop, a better rhythm to match my heartbeat. *Don't tell. Don't tell. Don't tell.* The thoughts tattooed themselves in my mind. My head bent so low over Canela's neck that her mane struck me in the face like so many whips. I tried to match her strides, pick up the cadence of a dead run. *Don't tell.* She grunted with each lunge. Her sweat and my own stung my skin. I turned Canela across the pasture for a more direct route. She veered crazily around bunches of yellow flowers and tried to go back to the path. I kicked her then and hung on. Daring a glance over my shoulder, I saw blossoms scattering in our wake—a slow-motion shower of buttercups strewn behind us to make a pretty curtain to hide the horror I'd seen.