

**THE
GREATER DANGER**

KATHRYN CABLE

*America will never be destroyed from the
outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms
it is because we destroyed ourselves.”*

--Abraham Lincoln

PROLOGUE

The Beginning

Robertson Ranch

Ten Miles South of Big Springs, Texas

Parker Robertson took a deep breath of the West Texas morning knowing this could be his last. Sitting on a wooden bench beneath the shade of a wrap-around porch, this fifth-generation Texan squinted into the brilliant sunrise breaking over the horizon. It bathed the sky with a golden glow above what had once been his thriving south plains ranch.

As he sipped his black coffee, Robertson thought of his ancestors who had fought and died for this land, securing it for future generations. That could all end today. He was prepared to defend his home, just like the men in his family had done for generations, with his bare hands if necessary.

It would be hot today, soon reaching over ninety, but the wind was dry, etching more lines into this hard-working man's face. Robertson's wife Linda watched from the window wringing her hands, worried for her husband. Without a spoken word, they exchanged an understanding gaze. She knew her husband was not the kind of man to back down or run from a fight. That was what scared her.

Forced into bankruptcy because of overburdening regulations and a dismal economy that had persisted in a death spiral for years, Robertson was afraid he couldn't hold on much longer. Everything had been taken from him; his dignity, his pride, his self-worth as a man. Now, armed federal agents and the local sheriff were coming with a court order to seize his property, ending his ability to support his family.

After much self-reflection, Robertson made a vow. No bank was going to rob him of his birthright. No bureaucrat in some federal agency would tell him what to do anymore. As his Papa had always told him, 'a man who stands for nothing, falls for anything'. It was time to take that stand.

Robertson glanced down at the local newspaper laying on the table beside him. He scowled at a photo of the President who had imposed the harsh regulations and taxes that had brought many like Robertson to defeat. The anger and hate engulfed him as he stabbed the photo with his knife.

Curses flowed from Robertson's lips for a government that no longer listened to him; for leaders who had put themselves above the masses. The America he believed in was a sham of hypocritical lies perpetrated by a corrupt administration.

All that people like Robertson wanted was what had been promised by their elected representatives, but instead they felt cheated, coerced and betrayed. Washington had ripped up its contract with the people and thrown it in their faces. There was no rational reason why so many people were suffering in this land of plenty. Robertson would make it right again even if blood must be spilled.

A faithful and honest man, Robertson had lived his life trying to do the right thing. He was a good husband, father and friend. As a Marine, Robertson had fought for his country with pride. Now that same country had abandoned him. His rights had been taken away as the federal government became dangerously powerful in the hands of the fascist factions. His rage boiled over for a government granting itself more power than the authors of the Constitution had ever intended.

People had foolishly given away their freedom for a false sense of security promised by a

government who so eagerly deceived its own people. It was no longer about which political party a person belonged to but about common decency, honor and truth. Values that had been forgotten. The question burned in Robertson's brain.

What went wrong?

Next to the newspaper was a pamphlet a neighbor had given him. It spoke of a new ideology that was spreading like wildfire, not only in Texas. but throughout America in what uncaring and indifferent politicians called the 'fly-over' states.

Born out of resentment, injustice, oppression and desperation, this advancing movement had taken on a life of its own. Its loudest advocates preferred the laws of the land dictated by the Constitution as it was created, not as it had evolved. Their words fell on deaf ears in Congress.

Tired of the privileged and wealthy telling them how to live their lives, this opposition's message of revolution was getting stronger each day. Robertson believed that by joining the growing movement his friends and neighbors could save their land from the imperialism saturating the country. Its doctrine of resistance, revolt and justified force was all people like Robertson had left. He accepted that every revolution began with an act of rebellion, with men willing to give that last full measure.

Methodically, Robertson finished cleaning his shotgun, wiping away the dust and oiling the barrel. He loaded it with a double shot. He checked his two revolvers and long-barrel rifle. They were loaded and ready.

Like those Americans who had gone before him, Robertson knew he must bring back the glory of a free and independent republic where the people ruled, not government bureaucrats. It was time to take it back, and if it took force to do that, then so be it. He would die, or they would.

Robertson instructed his wife to take their two young children into the bedroom, lock the door and pray for a miracle. Just in case, he put a loaded revolver in her shaking hands, so she could protect herself and her babies. Then, his eyes caught sight of them coming up the road. Robertson's friends and neighbors were rallying to join the fight. He smiled.

Thank God, I'm not alone.

Dust kicked up as twenty vehicles advanced toward Robertson's house. They would make their last stand here, just like their predecessors had at the Alamo. Just like then, a line was being drawn in the sand and those brave enough would cross it. It didn't matter if they were outnumbered or outgunned. If the Feds were comfortable going to war with people who had nothing to lose, then so be it.

Let it begin here.

Unknowingly, this one man's decisive action not to give in would change the course of history in America. His last stand for freedom would ripple through the country like a mighty wave, engulfing and drowning those who had chosen to turn their backs on him and those like him. A sleeping giant was awakening and great would be its rage.

With his hand over his heart, Robertson vowed to God that this fight would not be in vain. He would not give up until things were set right again. The tall man rose to meet those who had come to join him. He clenched his jaw firmly as the sound of a shotgun chamber being cocked and loaded rang out.

Raising his gun over his head, Robertson defiantly shouted.

"Live free or die!"

CHAPTER 1

Twenty-Five Years Later
Independent News Network Studio A-1
New York City

W elcome! Thank you for joining me on this special edition of *America Today*. I'm Carole Dupre and with me this evening on our show is renown historian, Dr. Martin Delaney, author of the new book, *The Uprising: America's Second Civil War*, a comprehensive account of the violent rebellion that swept through America twenty years ago this week. We will explore some of the causes, effects and lessons learned from that conflict, which brought our country to its knees, changing us forever.”

The vibrant television host cheerfully read her well-written lines off the teleprompter with an overly done smile and perfect teeth. She stared into the camera that was staring back at her with a big glass eye. The floor manager cued Camera 2 to pan the studio audience as they clapped while the canned theme music played, upbeat and hip.

It was filming day at the Independent News Network for the next episode of this popular show, which would air next week. The aggressive producer of *America Today* wanted to give this unique production several days promotion. He had Carole Dupre on the fast-track to becoming the next rising star on the horizon of talk shows. Catching this big break would boost Carole to fame as one of the nation's top reporters, now a noble profession again.

Established after the war, INN's goal was to speak the truth and stop false reporting and bias interpretation of news, which had enabled corruption in the government and helped propagate the revolt fever. America took a hard look at itself and discovered this bias media of the past had allowed the destructive rhetoric spewed by prejudice and partisan pundits to mold the thinking of the American people. It had been proven much of what was said on the old news networks was slanted and tainted, fostering hate and division. Neither side was innocent.

INN was now the sole news source in America. It was something all networks and newspapers agreed to and pooled their resources. This astounding action was born out of the need to get back to reporting the news and holding the government accountable for its actions. It was run solely by accredited journalists and historians, not corporations or rich men with hidden agendas. Reporters were carefully screened to avoid any partiality, sensationalism or political ties. Facts were triple checked for accuracy. All sources had to be verified. It operated without advertisers and was funded solely by Americans as a tax on products they bought. Everyone contributed equally.

Social media also had a hand in creating an atmosphere of hate and divisiveness before the war. It too was regulated with the strictest of guidelines. Advertising of political campaigns was forbidden on either INN or social media.

It was difficult at first to get used to giving equal time to each side without prejudice. People still could voice their opinions, but it was just that opinions, not news. Guided by the will of the people, INN became a staunch watchdog as the Constitution had intended. Americans once more trusted what they were hearing as the truth. It was not perfect, and it had its shortcomings, but it was better than before, much better.

America Today was the most popular historical documentary show on INN or any network. Carole Dupre had won the privilege of interviewing Dr. Martin Delaney for a primetime special on the twentieth anniversary of the Texica War. The network was thrilled to be chosen. He rarely granted interviews but for some reason Delaney had specifically asked for her.

Carole paused, giving her blond hair a toss and straightening a dress meant to emphasize her long legs and spiked heels. A dipping neckline was respectable but flattering. Carole knew chances like this came along once in a lifetime. She was calm on the outside but inwardly, a wreck. No one was aware of her nervousness or self-doubts. It was her goal to be recognized as a serious journalist interested in only the truth.

Carole turned her head slightly to meet the red light on Camera 1 and gave it her megawatt smile.

“Dr. Delaney is the foremost expert on that infamous revolt in America led by the extreme radical group originally known as the Nationalists, later to be called Texicans. Benjamin Galloway, military genius, methodical tyrant, and brutal murderer led the rebellion. Hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives during that dark time in our history. I for one lost my father, an Army Ranger when Fort Sam Houston in Texas was invaded. As you can imagine, this topic is quite personal to me.”

Carole turned to shake the hand of her guest and they exchanged pleasantries.

“Thank you for coming Dr. Delaney. We’re honored by your presence.”

“Thank you for having me, Carole. It’s an honor to be here on *America Today*. It’s one of my favorite shows on INN. I’m so sorry about your father. I too lost many friends and loved ones. We all suffered greatly and are still recovering. Wounds continue to heal slowly.”

“Thank you for your kind words,” she said and took a deep breath. “So, let’s get started. There’s so much to cover. Would you please give our viewers a general overview of the facts leading up to what you are calling America’s second Civil War?”

“Well, it was brought on by many factors. Things fell into place like pieces of a puzzle,” Delaney said as he interlaced his fingers, setting them on his lap in a studious pose. His expression was serious and wise. The floor manager signaled to Camera 2 and it zoomed in on Delaney’s face, revealing wrinkles around his dark, piercing eyes.

Dressed in a tweed coat, crisp white shirt and brown tie, the middle-aged man looked like most history professors, a bit out of fashion and as dusty as his archives. He was tall and lanky, rattling around in his clothes like they were too big for him. Delaney’s smile was warm, peeking out from under a thick, salt and pepper mustache beneath a large hook nose. His chestnut hair was tinged with gray at the temples.

Delaney lived in the past, examining it, detailing it, trying to learn from its highlights and mistakes. History was his passion, lover and friend. His new book had brought such attention that Delaney was reeling from being in the spotlight. He felt awkward being pampered like a celebrity. The book had also garnered the interest of those in high places of government. Much of what had happened twenty years ago was still classified. He knew how far he could go.

The professor narrowed his brow as he addressed Carole’s questions. He pushed his black-framed glasses up onto his nose and adjusted his body in the chair. It was clear Delaney preferred the comfort of his university office to that of a fast-paced TV studio. His heart was racing, but soon found a regular pace with the help of Carole’s sweet personality and charm. She made Delaney forget about the millions of people who would be watching. He tried to relax. This story was too important to get wrong.

“When a cancer is ignored and left to grow undetected it can go to extremes, destroying the host. Sometimes it’s too late for a mild remedy. It must be forcibly excised. This radical and rebellious movement, which resulted in a violent and destructive revolution that almost destroyed our country, had to be cut out by whatever means possible or America would have died. War was the only way,” Delaney said.

“That’s quite a dramatic way to put it, Doctor.”

“It was a dramatic time in history.”

Carole leaned back in her chair, surprised. Delaney had gone straight to the nitty-gritty. She gave him a discreet smile and continued.

“As we all know, Americans have a history of being totally united when an outside faction threatens their freedoms. What caused us to go to war with ourselves?”

“It has often been debated by political analysts and scholars of history like me, that the defeat of America would not come from an outside enemy. Just like many great civilizations of the past, America was not immune to the greater danger from within.”

“We were all caught unaware,” Carole added.

Delaney raised a questioning eyebrow. “Were we really unaware? The signs were there all around us for years. Let me ask you Carole, what if you had to choose a side, knowing you could die if you made the wrong choice? What if all you held dear was at stake and your back was against the wall? Would you stand and fight or go along with the crowd? That’s what faced many Americans back then.”

“Intriguing questions. I don’t know what I would have done.”

“As any historian worth his salt will tell you, look at what happened in the context of the times. That is the only way to understand what happened. You see, America was at a critical stage back then. Washington should have been the center of democracy, freedom and equality for all its citizens, but that wasn’t the case during the corrupt administration of President Mark Anderson,” Delaney said.

The control room flashed two photos of the disgraced ex-president across viewing monitors; one of his swearing-in ceremonies, and one as he sat on trial in the Senate for high crimes and misdemeanors. The studio audience murmured.

“Many freedoms we have reestablished today were abolished under Anderson’s presidency. Somewhere along the way, the Constitution was put on a shelf; its importance diminished. Politicians, media commentators and radical factions became the rulers, not the people.” Ardently, Delaney pointed an accusing finger at the red light as Camera 2 zoomed in catching the dramatic moment. “We have no one to blame but ourselves. WE the people let it happen.”

Carole tried to bring him back down with another question. “So, are you saying the loss of some constitutional rights started the revolution?”

“It contributed to it, Carole, but there was so much more. There was a growing faction who believed that the American dream needed to be rekindled in the fires of revolution as true as the blue skies under which Old Glory flies. The fires of these dreams rested in the hearts of the downtrodden and forgotten. A growing number of individuals and organizations began voicing their discontent ever-louder. Increasingly, groups sprang to life, eventually forming what was later known collectively as the Nationalists movement. They advocated concentrating on the nation’s original purpose in stark contrast to the socialistic agenda by the President’s administration. Unfortunately, the goal got twisted and instead was the beginning of the end.”

Camera 1 once again focused on Carole’s picture-perfect face. She gave a concerned look, narrowing her sculpted eyebrows and nodding at what her guest was saying, respectfully recognizing his fervor for the subject. The producer smiled his satisfaction and slapped the director on the back, approvingly. *She’s good.*

“I appreciate your passion, Dr. Delaney. Could you tell us more about the anti-government groups, radical factions and militias of that period?”

“Certainly. Our federal government and security agencies stood idly by as the militias and anti-

government groups grew powerful. No one even remotely considered the threat our government might face if the extremist groups banded together. They never had before. Yet now they were. Many Homeland Security agents in the field warned ignoring this unusual phenomenon was a fatal error that could cost lives if left unchecked. Something was different.”

“So, no one at the top listened?” Carole asked, her pert lips curling into a frown.

“Oh, they heard all right. Those in authority were in President Anderson’s pocket and weren’t about to disagree with him. These radical groups were pushing their agenda unfettered. This wasn’t just some nuts protesting. They rejected the power of state and federal courts or any other government agencies. They encouraged followers to refuse to pay federal income taxes or to display state license plates. They distrusted public education and mainstream media. There was a push to have courts return to a ‘common-law’ system of justice where everyday folks, not political machines or military forces, interpreted findings and dished out justice. This was just the beginning.”

“Really? How?”

“Well, it started slowly and methodically at first. As I said, many civil liberty groups and local police departments tried to warn the federal government that militia groups were coalescing in ranks and ideologies unlike ever before seen. It was unprecedented. Of those groups, some merely disdained rules and regulations. Others nursed deeper grudges and organized violent protests and riots. Then there were ultra-extreme groups who sought to throw off the yoke of a federal government they called tyrannical with violent revolution.”

“The one thing they all agreed upon – the government was usurping its power over them and taking away their freedoms,” Carole quickly added.

Delaney smirked and cynically raised one eyebrow. “I have come to believe as so many did, that government in general is our greatest obstacle to freedom.”

Carole didn’t have an answer that would fit her objectivity. Delaney gave the impression to her and the studio audience he agreed with the reasons for revolution. Carole shifted her weight, looked at her notes and moved on. She didn’t want to go down that path.

“In your book, you say that the FBI estimated that there were fewer than thirty militia groups countrywide, but in reality, there were more like a hundred. According to analysts’ best estimates, the movement’s strength was somewhere around five million nationwide, maybe more. We will never really know.” Carole shook her head, astounded. “That’s amazing. How in the world did this body of people from across the country communicate and grow so fast?”

“It started in local diners, at backyard gatherings and around kitchen tables at first. Internet sites spread the ideology, communicated political views, and gave updates on activities. Social media became a natural forum for members to keep each other updated about meetings and rallies. The major search engine and social media companies actually fought the government over censorship, citing freedom of speech. It allowed these groups to continue.”

“Wasn’t that what it was – freedom of speech?” Carole asked.

“Hardly. What it really turned out to be was propaganda for the violent overthrow of the government. There’s an enormous difference between speaking your opinion in an open forum and advocating hatred and violence. Cyberspace became a hot-zone filled with denunciations targeting the administration and Congress. When the movement proclaimed a desire for independence from the United States, websites were launched to spread the word.”

“Isn’t that treason? Couldn’t the FBI shut those sites down?” Carole asked.

“Sure, if they could have found the main source. Shut down one, and five more would pop up. Although the FBI combed cyberspace for evidence of criminal activities and violence against the

government, dark websites hid the groups secret communications. It's a tactic used by most terrorists and hackers."

Carole nodded politely, then opened Delaney's book and removed a place marker. She read a passage to the camera. A film of rallies, rioting and protest marches displayed on one screen behind her, while another screen showed the terrible aftermath of the Robertson ranch incident.

"After the slaughter at the Robertson Ranch in West Texas, the rebels, and other militia groups went underground and solidified. They likened the killing of several Americans by federal agents to the battle at Fort Sumter that started the Civil War or the Boston Massacre of 1770. The Nationalists saw it as their call to action and it set in motion a renewed fervor, an organizational turning point and a stronger dedication to their cause. However, the federal agencies misinterpreted the incident as just a few nuts with guns. Protests were many, and lawlessness reigned in the streets of major cities for a week after the massacre."

Delaney nodded in agreement at his own words.

"It was more than just disgruntled folks complaining. An unbearable injustice was spurring them onward. The embodiment of that injustice sat in the White House and in the halls of Congress. Fascism, imperialism, elitism, progressivism, or just plain one-party rule under a power-hungry president. Who cares? Call it what you may, the Constitution meant nothing to our perverted government. The silent majority had enough and would remain silent no longer."

"As they say, it was the last straw that broke the camel's back," Carole observed.

"That last straw occurred in Texas. The slaughter of Parker Robertson, several of his neighbors, and the burning of his home with his family inside was not the intention of the federal agents who fired on the small contingency, yet that's how it was perceived. Things disintegrated into chaos that day. The tipping point had been reached. The unprecedented backlash united the militias with a hardening so tough it was impenetrable. They had their martyrs. Every revolution must have martyrs."

"It was so unnecessary. As I understand it, Parker Robertson just wanted to keep his land. It had been in his family for generations."

"Isn't that what all Americans want, Carole, the God-given right to live free as our forefathers intended, in a land where there is liberty and justice for all? Robertson and those like him who had fallen victim to Anderson's corrupt administration and the rebels' agenda were just pawns in a bigger game. No one was innocent except the children who died that day."

Carole watched the Robertson video, outraged by the killing of innocent people.

"I was just seven or eight at the time, but I can still remember my parents being angry about it. My mother cried. It was awful, terrible..." Her voice trailed off as if she could no longer speak.

It was a memory seared into a young child's mind. It brought back the pain of losing her father to the war. Carole put her head down, taking a moment to compose herself and then looked back up at her guest. Delaney reached over and patted her hand like a kindly grandfather. One lone tear ran down her faultless cheek.

Whether Carole's glassy eyes were real or not, they did the trick. It was a great shot for the cameras and they ate it up. The producer jabbed a fist into the air in victory. *Yes! Perfect!*

Carole composed herself, delicately patted away the tear with a tissue and continued like the professional she was.

"As I understand it, members of Congress who were still loyal to the Constitution were outraged by this tragedy. They saw this movement growing within their districts and warned this new ideology would result in a real revolution."

"The President ignored them, calling them radicals, and dismissing their actions as insane.

Those who fell at the Robertson Ranch became martyrs like those who fell at the Alamo. They took sides. A deep rift split the country, and it was too wide to cross. Singing *Kumbaya* at marches for peace would not work this time. It was too late for that. The incident became a rallying cry for all who cherished independence from tyranny, at least it did at first. Things changed; it became a battle cry instead,” Delaney said soberly. Carole nodded.

Spot-on timing for a cutaway. The camera faded to black, and they went to commercial.

After the break, and Carole’s makeup had been refreshed, Delaney tried to explain the roots of the revolution.

“Targeting the frustrated blue-collar factory worker and rural citizens, the new movement offered a ray of hope to a people whose government had forgotten them. The group expanded into suburbia and was joined by the white-collar worker who had seen his dwindling paycheck and the enormously inflated cost of living hurting his family. Its tentacles reached into the ghettos of urban metropolises and pulled in those wallowing in poverty, crime and despair. The movement touched all kinds. In this fertile ground, the seeds of rebellion against our federal government grew unchecked. The weeds had taken over the garden.”

“But Dr. Delaney, America has always had disgruntled groups who opposed various injustices and actions by their government. The forefathers wrote it into the Constitution. It’s called the freedom of speech. Thankfully, we have restored it to its rightful place. People can now speak freely again without censorship or fear of reprisal. People respect opposing opinions and agree to disagree with civility. There’s no harm in challenging the government, but the way we do that is through peaceful protests, responsible investigations and passing laws, not violent revolution, bombs and murderous firing squads.”

Carole added more, something she was thinking of which was not in her carefully drafted script. She had always been too outspoken for her position as a journalist in today’s society.

“But... there are still people in our society even today who are not happy with everything government does. Some think our ‘new’ America after the war has become too sterile, stifling creative thought. We want peace and security at all costs, even if it’s forced on us. What do you think, sir?”

Delaney grimaced and paused. His eyes agreed but warned her. *Don’t go too far, Carole. Big Brother is watching.* It was best for them both he didn’t answer that question.

“As I stated at the beginning of this interview, that time in our nation’s history was quite different than it is today. It took near destruction as a nation to wake us up. Back then, there was such division in this country. Both sides hated the other. Words were no longer used to uplift and teach but became like daggers tearing at each other as vicious dogs. Civility was a lost art. People who spoke up were harassed, belittled. Love thy neighbor was replaced by destroy and degrade. It reminded me of another time in Nazi Germany when hate turned into death camps.”

“Yes, I know, I have read about how bad it once was, but history books are written by the winners, slanted their way. So, why didn’t the government stop the hateful rhetoric?”

“It was just as much to blame if not more so. Instead of making things better, Anderson’s new additions to the Supreme Court severely limited free speech and then attacked other rights, such as the right to bear arms, the right of assembly and freedom of the press. Things got worse. Private property was seized under eminent domain. The stranglehold of burdensome regulations stifled business. The military was scaled back. Taxes were unbearably high. Then the Great Recession hit, stocks plummeted, businesses failed. Our system was broken.”

“Are you saying those things combined together added fuel to the fires of rebellion?”

“Absolutely! It all came together in one huge pot of calamities. The powers that ruled Washington refused to believe these so-called radical groups screaming about injustices were a threat. They saw protests as nothing more than an inconvenience. What did they have to fear? They were in control and they had far worse problems to worry about.”

“Unlike what we have today, I understand biased media became a mouthpiece for the President. Others spoke for the rebellion. There was no news the people could trust to tell them the truth. Political pundits loyal to Anderson called militias crazy; considered them a joke. Those on the other side screamed that the President was trying to become king. In the middle, legitimate journalists seeking the truth were harassed, even arrested and jailed. Thank goodness, we got rid of all of that and established the INN network for all our news reporting,” Carole said.

“Well, INN is much better, but not the final solution. It’s still a balancing act. Freedom of the press is essential to a democracy, so is the right to express your opinions without retaliation; agree to disagree,” Delaney added. “As Ben Franklin said, ‘Freedom of speech is a principal pillar of a free government; when this support is taken away, the constitution of a free society is dissolved, and tyranny is erected on its ruins.’ That’s still true today as it was in Franklin’s time.”

“Once, the federal government’s primary concern was the threat from Islamic terrorism abroad and at home. The FBI distributed manpower to keep track of native-born jihad radicals, refugees and immigrants. Many laws and executive orders established under the guise of national security permeated our culture and way of life,” Carole said.

“When you opt for a false sense of security, you give up liberty and freedom.”

“Another wise tidbit from Franklin?” Carole asked with a polite smile.

Delaney wasn’t smiling back. He was on a roll and wound up tight. Dark eyes lowered and stared into Camera 1 with foreboding. Delaney was doing more than explaining history, he was articulating a dire warning. The producer signaled the floor manager to stay with him. This could be the perfect selling point for the promotional advertising.

“This growing rebellious movement was the real threat to Anderson’s administration and to our country. The signs were staring him in the face and he was too blind to see. America was ripe for revolution. Over a five-year period, groups from around the country came together to form a new alliance called the Nationalists. Quietly, under the radar, a hundred groups merged into fifty and then twenty, then ten until there was only one left. It was the mother of all militant groups. It was ready to strike like a rattler in the grass. It was immense. It was enraged. It was armed. Nothing on God’s green earth was going to stop it.”

Carole Dupre became aware she was staring with her mouth open and dry at Delaney’s dramatics on her talk show. She swallowed hard. It was a good thing the director had ordered a commercial break before Carole’s unflattering look was shared by millions. As they waited for the floor manager to signal the end of the break, Carole whispered to Martin Delaney while no one was listening.

“I heard you knew Colonel David Cougar.”

Delaney smiled like a Cheshire cat and nodded. He had often been asked about the Colonel but true to his promise, Delaney never spoke of Cougar. He had a secret no one would drag out of him.

“Is what they say about him true?” she tried again.

“Oh, what do they say?” he asked innocently, eyebrows accentuated.

“Dr. Delaney, please can’t you tell me anything? He was my father’s best friend.”

“It’s top secret. I’m not at liberty to discuss it. Bring up the Colonel’s name during our interview and I will walk off this set. After that, I kind of doubt you will be doing anything but the early

morning weather report.”

Carole gulped. He was right.

“I swore an oath to remain silent. Please don’t ask me. I like you, Carole and I would hate to see your career end so soon. There are powerful people who would see to that. All I’ll say is I knew him very well. He was a good soldier and he did his duty. That’s all you need to know. After the war, David asked to be left alone to live out their lives in peace.”

“Their lives? Do you mean... Charlie too?” Carole asked. Her eyebrows shot up under her blonde bangs, questioning him ever so carefully.

Carole could see she’d hit a nerve by the instant surprise registering on Delaney’s face before he became unreadable once more. This reporter knew more than most interviewers Delaney had been with and it astonished him. She had done her homework. No one ever asked about Charlie unless they had an inside source. No one dared. A small smile crept over Delaney’s lips as he remembered his dear friends. Carole knew then, there was more.

Before Carole could probe deeper, the floor manager waved everyone but the host and her guest off the set and began his countdown silently with his fingers...three, two, one, and pointed. The spotlight was once again on Carole Dupre and Dr. Martin Delaney.

Showtime!

CHAPTER 2

Before the War
Fort Benning, Georgia

The late summer sun was slowly setting. Marshmallow clouds tried to hide the sunset, but there was just too much sky to let that happen. It was almost six and quitting time at Fort Benning, the training ground and post for the elite Army Rangers.

Inside one of the government-style buildings sat David Cougar, Colonel and Ranger. He was busy working on the schedule for next week's training exercises. Cougar's concentration was matched by his devotion for the Rangers, his duty to his country and his mission – to turn green recruits into fighting men.

David Nathaniel Cougar was an Army guy through and through. Like his father, a Green Beret who'd fought in the Gulf War, and his grandfather who'd served in Viet Nam, David was raised on discipline and self-control. Generations of military men in David's family had served their country from the Revolutionary War through Desert Storm.

A tall, attractive man in his mid-thirties, it was clear that he treated his solid body like a fine instrument. His cropped mahogany-brown hair complimented his striking amber eyes, thick brows, and Roman nose. His unusual surname was inherited from a Shawnee ancestor somewhere in the family's history. David liked to think his warrior talents came from his Native American blood.

David Cougar had entered boot camp at the age of eighteen and Officers Training Corps the following year. He'd finished at the top of his class and the Rangers recruited him immediately after graduation. He had led many missions in the Middle East, earning promotion after promotion for his leadership and courage. Now stateside his mission was training newbies. His best friend and brother-in-arms, Colonel Jack Dupre, had been by his side through all of it.

A rapping on his door broke his concentration. Cougar looked up from the desk to see a quirky grin and laughing blue eyes looking back at him. Jack was leaning against the door frame, looking as mischievous as always.

A good ol' boy from the Louisiana bayou, Jack Dupre was about Cougar's height, fit and lean. Jack's fair skin was a dark bronze, thanks to the Georgia sun. He was dressed in tan desert fatigues as was Cougar. A brown beret sat tilted atop his unruly blond hair in an impish manner.

No welcome was given. David knew why Jack was here and so did Jack. He considered it his duty to get his straight-laced friend out of that chair and over to the bar. It was Friday night beer call at the Officers Club.

David had work to do; play later.

Jack didn't say a word as he sauntered in uninvited. Cougar went back to his paperwork as Jack wandered around the room looking at David's various commendation awards and pictures of teams he had trained. Artifacts from family history were prominently displayed on one wall including two crossed sabers and a finely detailed replica of a Shawnee war shield. A German hand gun his great grandfather had taken from a Nazi officer and other ancestral military antiques sat on the credenza.

Jack just kept smiling and wandering as David gave him an occasional dirty look. Jack stopped at a picture of him and David taken when they were trainees, still wet behind the ears but ready to take on the world. Now they were on their way to forty. Jack snickered. David gave up and put his pen down. He set his elbows on the desk and interlaced his fingers.

"Okay, what's making you giggle like a little girl this time?" David asked.

“Us... in this photo. Just a couple of kids in big-boy uniforms. Boy, we thought we were God’s gift to the Army and the ladies back then. *Coo Weee!* What a pair we were!” Jack’s voice was smooth and rhythmic due to his Cajun ancestry.

Jack put the photo back and plopped himself down in a chair squarely in front of David. He put his feet on the desk and leaned back, his fingers interlaced behind his head. Jack just kept grinning knowing this was driving David insane. David ignored him and put his head down trying to look like he was still working. Jack sighed. He was through being nice.

“Damnit, Cougar! Don’t you ever give it a rest, man? You are too uptight. You need to relax and enjoy life. It is six o’clock. Quittin’ time, good buddy. Time to get our butts over to the O’Club and check out a couple of cold ones. C’mon or we’ll lose our place at the bar. You know I don’t like to be a-drinkin’ next to jarhead Marines.”

“I have to finish this schedule.”

“Fuck the schedule. Your babies are fine. Let the world run itself for a while and take a break. You know, if y’all weren’t such a great pal I would have nothing to do with such an uptight, stick-in-the-mud, career guy like you. However, it’s my lot in life. Someone must shake you out and loosen you up. As my grandpappy would say, *Laissez les bons temps rouler.*”

“Don’t give me any of your Cajun crap, okay? Good times will roll when I’m done.”

“C’mon *Bon ami*, pleazzze?” Jack begged with a twinge of mockery.

Finally, Cougar smiled. It pained him to do so but his friend was right. He stared at those blue eyes again. They seemed to twinkle with unruliness like a naughty child. David shook his head; Jack had won, as usual. How could he resist?

Jack Dupre loved life. He loved his beautiful wife Angie and his two little kids; Eddy and Carole. David also knew Jack loved him like a brother. The feeling was mutual.

The more he looked at Jack, the bigger Cougar’s smile got, deepening dimples on that good-looking face of his. He wished he could be more like Jack, not so serious. Jack knew how to live, and he did it with gusto.

David wanted a life like Jack’s but had not yet found the right woman who would put up with him. Maybe he was meant to walk this world alone. But for now, the Army was his mistress and his life.

“I’m almost ready to stop for the day. Be patient, Jack. You’re right, I could use a beer, maybe two...or ten. The Rangers are going out on an extended survival training mission without me and I can’t seem to be able to let them go.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it,” Jack said smugly. David knew he could.

David picked up a photo of his sister and him as kids that sat on his desk.

“Lisa will kill me if I’m not there to give her away at the wedding. I promised Dad before he died. Since I’ve been both brother and father to her now, I would rather risk the wrath of a four-star general than make her mad at me for missing her wedding.

Jack chuckled. “Just like her big brother huh? Won’t take no for an answer.”

Sheepishly, David nodded his head in agreement. “Guilty as charged.”

“Your little babies will be fine! It is about time you gave Captain Meza a little more responsibility. JoJo has the makings of a good officer and a fine leader. Let it go, David. Give him a chance on this mission to show you. Don’t worry, I’ll be sure Meza is ready to go. I’ll give him The Talk.”

“Oh, ‘The Talk’ huh? Is that the same one where you tell him I’ll bust his butt to private if he screws up?” David asked tongue in cheek.

“Yep. The same one you always give. I know it by heart. Besides you need a vacation.”

David nodded his head in agreement.

“When did you last take one? Wasn’t it that summer before I married Angie when you and I went to South Beach? Remember those hot chicks? Damn, they were good looking and with bodies to die for. Did we have fun or what? If my Angie ever knew what wild men we were before I married her, I’d be dead.”

Cougar leaned back in his chair and smirked wickedly at his friend. That look confused Jack. His asking eyes had to know.

“Too late good buddy. She already guessed it. I told her how over-sexed you were before you two married. I thought it was my duty to warn the poor girl what she was getting into.”

Jack threw his hands up in the air and let them come crashing down on the arms of the chair. His face told the story. Cougar had one-upped him, and he was shocked.

“What? You dog you! No wonder she is always jumping my bones. She must think I’m some kind of love machine.” Jack rubbed his chin and reconsidered. “Hmmm, maybe I owe you one. Thanks, good buddy.”

“So, are you still going to Fort Sam Houston for that seminar?” David asked.

“Yeah. The C-O wants me to represent the Rangers. Hey, it’s a free trip. Why not?”

“I wish I was coming with you. Keep you company or out of trouble, not sure which. I like San Antonio. Great Mexican food, pretty women, lots of tequila,” David said.

“I wish you were coming too. We could get drunk on our asses at this place I know on the Riverwalk. It has these giant margaritas and buckets of steamed clams. I can’t wait.”

“Sounds great. How is it you always know about these ‘places’ to get the best drinks?”

Jack smirked. “A Cajun always knows where to party down on the Bayou. It’s in our blood, don’t you know?”

David chuckled but his thoughts drifted back to his team. He wrinkled his brow, still concerned about the upcoming survival training mission and how they would do. “Do you think my team is ready for this test? I’ve been extra tough on them. They probably hate me.”

“I swear you worry too much. Don’t you know, David, just how much the men respect you? You bring out the best in them. You don’t just teach them how to fight, you teach them honor and duty. They’d walk through hell and back for you. That’s no joke.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that. My father and grandfather always said the quality of a warrior’s integrity in training is the difference between life and death on the battlefield. I just try to instill in every person who comes through here how important honor and duty is. That’s why I try so hard, I guess. I don’t want to lose anyone. I’ll do whatever I have to, so we all come back alive.”

Jack smiled at David’s humbleness. It was genuine. “There’s no one I’ve ever known who exemplifies honor and duty more than you, brother. That team of yours is very lucky.”

Cougar returned the smile, taken aback by Jack’s sincere compliment. It meant everything to him to hear that from Jack, the person he respected and admired the most.

“Enough mushy stuff, you ol’ Cajun gator. It doesn’t get you any free beers. Now, get your stinkin’ combat boots off my desk or I may just have to come over there and teach you a lesson or two.”

The uneasy moment between them was broken when Cougar leaned over and pushed Jack’s feet off the desk. They landed on the floor with a bang. Jack laughed.

“Bullshit! You never could take me. I always beat your ass.”

Dupre stood and grabbed Cougar’s hat, throwing it at him like a frisbee. It bounced off his thick chest and dropped onto the desk. Cougar picked it up and dusted it off. His tan beret was the mark of distinction that branded him as a proven warrior. Jack wore one too.

“Now let’s get the heck out of here and go get those beers before they’re all gone,” Jack said, grinning. “At least I know I can still drink you under the table.”

Cougar busted out in a loud laugh. “In your dreams!” David adjusted his beret on his head, then slapped his pal’s back, leading him out the door.

Theirs was a friendship that had stood the test of time and trials. Brothers could not have been closer. It meant everything to David having a good friend like Jack who he could count on to have his back, listen to his doubts and trust without question.

“Hey, did you hear about the riots at the border? Something to do with that revolution going on in Mexico, I think. The Marines got called up. Shit! I hope they don’t call us,” Jack said.

Cougar agreed. “Me neither. I don’t want to go anywhere near Laredo or El Paso. It’s a real hot mess. President Anderson stepped in it this time for sure, closing the U.S. border. What an ass. I’m glad I didn’t vote for him. What happens next is anybody’s guess.”

“Maybe we should go hear that Nationalists guy, Galloway. He’s speaking at the city’s auditorium next Tuesday. He’s got some pretty good ideas on how to fix this country,” Jack said.

Cougar gave his friend a dismissive gesture. “Hell no, just another nut spouting his radical views. I heard he’s auditioning for president... or emperor. You should know by now good buddy, me and politics don’t mix. I could give a rat’s ass what they do as long as they leave me alone. Politicians are all crazy as far as I’m concerned. I stick to what I know. I’m a warrior – nothing more, nothing less.”

CHAPTER 3

After the War
Independent News Network Studio A-1
New York City

When Carole Dupre with her lovely, smooth face and full lips came back into focus after a longer break of sponsors ads, there was a man's face on a viewing screen behind her and Delaney. Everyone in America, everyone in the entire world recognized this villain.

General Benjamin Jefferson Galloway, leader of the Nationalists and later, leader of the Texica revolution, possessed the physical attributes that appealed to his followers. He was rugged, strong in mind and body, and quite handsome, with steely green eyes, squared chin and haystack strawberry blond hair. His sly grin could melt butter as well as women's hearts. Galloway looked as impressive as a Greek god and as good-looking as a movie star. His tall, muscular body wore a sharply pressed black uniform with the red patch of the Texican flag. His stance was of a confident leader of men.

"So, I guess we all know who this guy is," Carole said sarcastically as her hand gestured toward the screen showing Galloway's face.

The camera zoomed in on the portrait until it filled the frame. Delaney looked up at Galloway and grimaced. The studio audience whispered. He knew what they were thinking – hero or madman. That depended on what side you were on. Delaney sighed.

"Unfortunately, we all know him. The face of evil seems to stay in our memories longer for some reason. Isn't it amazing how enticing that face still looks after all these years?"

Once again from Delaney's book, Carole read a description of the would-be dictator to the television audience as if it were the biography of a superstar. In some ways, it was.

"Ben Galloway was crafty, intelligent, and charming. His uncanny ability to read a situation is why he knew when the time was ripe to seize the moment and wage war on America. His followers were united by the sense of betrayal by their government. Galloway masterfully used that in his twisted ideology to satisfy a thirst for revenge. Galloway traveled the country gathering disciples by the thousands. His speeches were awe-inspiring. Words dripped from his mouth like honey. His passion for what he believed in was electric. The crowds were energized. They worshiped this false savior unashamedly."

The screen flashed to one of Galloway's many speeches in front of thirty-thousand adoring people in a football stadium. Many in the studio were too young to remember what others tried desperately to forget. No one would have believed it possible this man could do what he did.

Galloway's voice was rich and powerful coming through the studio speakers. Carole and her guest listened to this masterful orator, as did the studio staff and audience. Their silence was almost reverent. Galloway could still hold the attention of the crowd. It gave Delaney the shivers to hear that devil speak again.

"My friends, my brothers and sisters... I'm willing, as I'm sure a lot of people in this country are willing, to do whatever it takes to establish a republic guided by the organic law that America was founded upon. If we can't do that, we are no better off than any of those ideologies foreign to freedom and the rights of the people. That includes the corrupt administration sitting on their asses in Washington who even now plot evil against you. The Nationalists are the only thing in self-government that's ever happened to this world, where free people can rule themselves. Don't be deceived, you are being tricked on every front to voluntarily trade your birthright for government-

granted privileges. Join me as we take back our natural-born rights.”

The camera angle changed and zoomed in on Galloway’s resolute green eyes. They grabbed his audience by the throat and made them listen. He shook his fist at the camera.

“Know this my friends... if the government can circumvent our beloved Constitution and take our precious rights away from us, then we have no country. The America you have known is dead and you are at the mercy of tyrants and demons. Join me and let’s birth a new nation; a nation built on the integrity of the individual. Join me in this noble cause. You have only two choices. Live free or die!”

The crowds on the video clip reacted with thunderous applause. Galloway’s words echoed in the TV studio, mesmerizing a new generation, just as they had done twenty-five years ago when he first started. It gave Delaney a stabbing pain in his gut to hear this man’s lies and see the people’s reaction. *They’re awe-struck. Doesn’t anyone learn from history?*

After the clip, Carole cleared her throat and continue. “Wow. Chilling. I’ve listened to other speeches from the archives preparing for this interview. They’re spellbinding. It was as if Galloway had a supernatural power of persuasion. Even though I know it was all lies, I found myself almost believing his rhetoric, lock, stock and barrel.”

Delaney scowled. “You and about five million others.”

Carole stared at the screen again, seeing more photos of Galloway flash by. It was almost compelling to look at him. “Yet, I must admit, in addition to his eloquent words, Galloway was quite striking, very attractive in a ‘bad boy’ sort of way.”

“Ha! Conceited is what I would call him, an egomaniac. Trust me, Galloway never went lonely for companionship. Women fought over who would be his next lover.”

“I guess it’s good to be the king,” Carole giggled nervously, trying to lighten the situation.

“And how! Men would do anything he asked of them, even kill their own family members if necessary, to further his cause. He had a way about him, that’s for sure. I see that even now he can still impress.”

Delaney smirked at Carole as he raised one thick eyebrow at her fatal attraction. Galloway still had it, even after all these years.

Embarrassed and blushing, Carole had succumbed. She found this dynamic leader both desirable and repulsive. The same man who had killed her father also left her breathless.

“Galloway does have something about him, I guess, if you like that sort of man.”

“Looks like you do,” Delaney said under his breath so only Carole heard him.

Carole cleared her throat again, smiled and put on her best detached persona. The producer wiped the nervous sweat from his brow.

Delaney chuckled. “Don’t feel bad, Carole. Ben Galloway had a way with women few men are favored with. However, he did love one woman, but she rejected him,” he said, throwing that tidbit into the conversation just to stir the pot. He sat back and waited for Carole’s expected response with mischievous expectation.

A few in the audience gasped. Carole’s mouth fell open. That shocking fact was unknown, and it was not in the book. The producer’s blood pressure shot up. Could this be the exclusive item he had dreamed of? *Ratings will go through the roof.*

“Seriously? Galloway was in love? Is she still... alive?” Carole’s voice went up an octave with anticipation.

“Yes, she is still alive and doing quite well, too. She lives with her husband and two children on their ranch outside of Dallas. She never gave in no matter what Galloway did to her and trust me, he tried. She’s a brave woman who stood up to a tyrant and almost died.”

“Can you tell us about her? Please, Dr. Delaney.”

Carole’s producer was almost giddy with anticipation, pacing the floor, unable to sit still.

“Nope. Sorry. That’s all I can say. I just wanted you to know that Galloway had weaknesses too just like anyone else. There were many courageous people that the history books have left out. Some wanted it that way. She did, and I respected her wish for privacy.”

Disappointed, the producer slumped into a chair in the control room and cursed.

Delaney’s face held the look of one who knew more than he was saying. Carole wanted to pursue the tantalizing teaser the professor had put forth about Galloway’s love life but didn’t. However, she was not going to let it go and would confront Delaney privately.

The director queued the control room and another video popped up. This time it was of Galloway hugging happy children. His smile was warm and cheery. Another shot was Galloway giving a new house to an unemployed man and his family. Another at a soup kitchen feeding homeless veterans. The last video showed the real Galloway, with the might of his army as they advanced on his enemies. American military forces were slaughtered in battle without mercy. Rebel soldiers mowing down everyday citizens with automatic rifles as they ran to escape.

After the screen went blank, Carole tried to resume her questioning, but Delaney’s mood had changed to engrossed and reflective. He was lost in another time, another place where he had witnessed such atrocities first-hand. It was a pain that never went away.

“Dr. Delaney? Are you okay?”

Delaney cleared his throat and mumbled. “Yes, yes, sorry. I was just thinking...”
Whatever it was, clearly it was agonizing to her guest. Carole decided to let it go.

“So, Dr. Delaney, tell us the REAL story about Ben Galloway.”

“It’s all real Carole, frighteningly real. They say all it takes is one individual to organize what seems like chaos. Hitler did it in Germany and Napoleon did it in France. Even fake messiahs like Dave Koresh or Jim Jones had that kind of appeal and hold over their followers. I saw it again here today as we watched the video.”

“How does that happen?” Carole asked, quite concerned and embarrassed.

“It only takes one charismatic, articulate person who stands head and shoulders above the crowd. Put him together with just the right time in history and everything will fall into place. Ben Galloway was such a man, emerging from obscurity to become a modern-day savior. Many worshiped him like a god. Galloway’s enemies even called him the Antichrist.”

“Antichrist? Really?”

“Humph! I wouldn’t give him that much credit. Little tin god is more like it. However, his message was clear, believable and what people wanted to hear. They committed to his beliefs as if they came from spiritual inspiration. Galloway was born to rule, to lead, to conquer. In another time in history he could have been another Caesar or Alexander. Of that I have no doubt.”

“What was Galloway’s personal background? What created this monster,” Carole asked.

“Ben’s parents were just the ordinary Midwest couple next door. His father was an Army colonel, strict but fair, until he was wounded and lost both his legs. His depression and post-traumatic stress drove him to suicide. Young Ben found his father’s body. He blamed the government for the poor healthcare his father received. Ben took over caring for his mother. She died a couple of years later, alcoholism and a broken heart. Ben survived and graduated from West Point. There were really no warning signs Ben Galloway would turn out like this. He was a very likeable guy and you couldn’t help be impressed by his character and willpower. He was

determined to rise above his misfortune.”

“I heard he was quite a control freak. I guess that’s a good quality to have when you want to rule the world,” Carole shot back. “Is it true we trained this murderer in our own military?”

“Unfortunately, it’s true, Carole. This mastermind of evil came from within our own ranks. It’s part of that greater danger I spoke of earlier. Galloway was a high-ranking officer and leader of a special forces team. A veteran of several tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. He was presented with the Medal of Honor for bravery under fire and a Purple Heart for wounds sustained in battle.”

“Sounds like the all-American hero.”

“You’d think, but it was clear that something was broken inside of him. Something had hardened his soul to stone. Galloway’s fanatical hatred blamed the federal government for abandoning the American people and especially veterans. He saw weakness, corruption and moral decay lying at the feet of Lady Liberty. His evaluation was spot-on and that’s why he captured the hearts of the people. Galloway truly believed he was destined to right that wrong and set about to change it. I believe it was then that hidden narcissistic sociopath was released.”

“Incredible. So, what did he do? Wake up one morning and decide to overthrow the government?” Carole asked with a nervous laugh.

“Hmmm, I don’t know, maybe. Or maybe it was always his plan. Galloway and a few of his inner circle military comrades got together and began to study why other militias and revolts failed. If they were going to do this, it had to be done right. They took this information and formulated it carefully and deliberately into detailed plans. The military had trained Galloway in the art of tactics and weaponry. His master’s degree in warfare furthered his strengths. His extremely disciplined mind did the rest. Galloway worshipped warfare, control and power.”

“The growing radical movement in America at the time had been created by anti-government, anti-tax and militia groups in at least forty states. Many groups weren’t dangerous; however, some were willing to step over that line. According to your book, Galloway’s Nationalists were the strongest and absorbed all the others,” Carole said.

“Once Ben Galloway took the reins, it was all over for us,” Delaney answered.

“It reminds me of what the Roman orator Marcus Tullius Cicero said thousands of years ago about his republic and corruption from within.”

“Ah, yes, a good example, Carole,” Dr. Delaney said. He thought for a moment. “Let’s see if I remember my philosophy. I think it went something like this: ‘A nation can survive its fools, even the ambitious. But it cannot survive treason from within.... for the traitor appears not to be a traitor... he rots the soul of a nation... he infects the body politic so that it can no longer resist.’ So true, so true.”

“From what you are telling us, Ben Galloway and President Anderson, were ‘infected’ with the lust for power. And because of their ambition, a great divide was formed pitting American against American, rotting us from within.” Carole added, then glanced at her notes, as Camera 1 came in for a closeup.

Delaney nodded yes as he watched her closely, quite impressed. This woman was not just a pretty face, but intelligent and insightful. She had done her homework and he could respect that. *I made the right choice.* Carole didn’t see the admiration Delaney had for her as she continued her interview.

“As I understand it, the federal authorities watched Galloway closely at first, auditing his taxes and jailing him on at least one occasion for inciting a riot. Nothing stuck though, thanks to his lawyers.”

“Correct, Carole. Over the next five years, Ben Galloway and his followers continued

challenging the authority of the government. They were loud, boisterous and unrelenting in their accusations. Galloway was well schooled in the intricacies of governing and commanding others. He led his followers onward, never giving up, never giving in. He was unstoppable. I must admit, it's amazing what he did."

"What he DID was almost tear America in half," Carole added sternly.

"Did he? Or was America already divided? I admired one thing about Galloway, though. He was a student of history and learned from it, used it to his advantage. I hope we all can do the same, in the right way of course," Delaney said.

"How so?"

"Because when we study history we can learn from others' mistakes; avoid repeating them. Once Ben made up his mind that our government had fallen off its constitutional track, Galloway embarked on an uncompromising journey. Tirelessly, he plunged into historical records, studying different forms of government from ancient Rome to Cold War Communism. He reviewed his rights and the government's wrongs. Armed with an abundance of new-found knowledge and bolstered by his rock-solid convictions, Galloway set out to help put government back in the hands of the people, or that's what he told everyone. He used his knowledge and abilities against those he felt had abandoned him and his fellow Americans."

"I'm surprised to hear such praise coming from you. Are you saying Galloway was right?" Carole asked.

"No, of course not but Galloway did attract a diverse group with one main premise – their government was broken, and they had been crushed by its injustices. That encompasses a lot of people: black or white, old or young, liberal or conservative, religious or atheist. He brought all groups together. Quite an accomplishment to cross so many barriers. We all believe what we want to believe. Ben Galloway succeeded where others had failed because of his fans, followers and worshipers in his jam-packed rallies. They truly believed that his ideas made perfect sense and quite frankly, they did make sense, a lot of sense, even though they were lies," Delaney said.

"Why didn't Galloway try to change things through legal, peaceful means? After all, he had the backing of the people."

Dr. Delaney laughed aloud finding that statement absurd, yet no one else found it funny.

"No, ma'am. Galloway portrayed himself not as a man of peace, but he believed the only way to destroy a corrupt system was as a warrior. He flaunted that fact like a badge of honor. He believed that war was all Washington would understand. Speeches and voting had failed to turn the tide. The administration was fooling themselves if they thought Galloway would listen to them. He had plans, we learned later, to bomb the White House and the Capitol and wipe clean all remnants of the corrupt system."

"Yes, I read that. We were so close to destruction it's frightening," Carole said.

"Ben wanted to kill every politician. He would have if given the chance. Galloway would have lined them up on the steps of Congress and shot them himself if he could have."

A few members of the audience sucked in a deep breath, shocked. Many whispered to each other at the unimaginable revelation and violence. Delaney had gotten the response he was looking for. *Good. They need to be scared.*

Once more, Carole referred to her notes. Nothing seemed to rattle her now. She was beginning to understand Delaney's talent for the dramatic. He didn't want people to ever fall victim again to what happened twenty years ago.

"Dr. Delaney, you said in your book the 'time was right' for Galloway and his followers to establish their own government. Can you explain?"

“Instead of overthrowing the present government, the Nationalists sought to establish their own country and break away.”

“Is that why they started by seizing a state?” Carole asked.

“Yes, Galloway believed more states would join as they had during the Civil War. One by one this new country of his would grow, eventually dividing the United States in half. Only the west and east coasts, still loyal to Anderson, would be allied with the present government. Remember what the Bible says: ‘a house divided cannot stand.’ Galloway believed it would end the United States as we know it. The Nationalists decided that Texas would be their epicenter of this new country.”

Carole looked puzzled. “I never understood why the Nationalists chose Texas. I mean, seriously, Texas is so big.”

“Big yes, but strategically perfect, right in the middle of the country. Texas is quite capable of being independent and self-sufficient from the rest of the country. It was a republic before it was a state, you know. Texas has vast resources of energy, oil fields and seaports, particularly the area south of Interstate 10. Galloway knew all about the many resources Texas had to offer and that is why it was chosen.”

“But they never took the whole state,” Carole said.

“They didn’t need the whole state. That would come later. Over the previous six years, there had been much unrest in Texas with failed immigration enforcement, gun control laws and burdensome regulations. That could be said of many states at that time. There was a deep divide brewing among us. Then there was the Robertson Ranch incident. Galloway used those things to win converts. He believed Texans would welcome him and laud him as a great emancipator like Lincoln, rather than the leader of a hostile takeover. All he had to do was to rid Texas of those who opposed him. Rebel firing squads got rid of a lot of uncooperative people.”

“No kidding! Galloway gave us a hint of his intentions in this national interview,” Carole said and again, the screen behind them flashed and a new video began. It was a chilling foretaste of events to come.

Galloway said, “These outrageous new regulations by the President are just another small step in the total erosion of our rights to free speech and free association. We must firmly express outrage over these invasions into private communications and private enterprise. I am not interested in any sort of diplomatic relations, international law or even what history will say about me. Texas will be the battleground for the next confrontation involving the Nationalists unless the government concedes to its mistakes and gives up its power. I have listened to the will of the people and only serve them. They want to be free. I will give them freedom, through blood and war if I have to.”

“Amazing. He said it, right there, in plain English. Texas was it and war was his plan.”

“But do you think anyone caught that little hint? Nope. Sometimes we can’t see the forest for the trees,” Delaney answered.

“Galloway continued to expound on the idea that it was time to break away from the evil and unconstitutional policies infiltrating the halls of Congress with fascist ideologies.”

Delaney nodded yes. “They did that by using an underground website operating under the radar of the FBI. The Nationalists covertly recruited mercenaries. In undisclosed locations throughout the western states like Montana, Wyoming and Idaho, rigorous training refined a well-organized army. They even trained civilians to be domestic terrorists. There are more details on how they did this in my book. Slowly and methodically, various groups joined the Nationalists in a calculated migration to Texas. Tens of thousands were well-entrenched before anyone knew of their existence.”

“Sounds like the great migration of the 1930s during the Dust Bowl.”

“Well said, Carole. That’s the way it was supposed to look. People looking for a better life and employment in Texas. It even fooled the Texas government, which is quite a feat.”

“It was really a call to join a revolution,” Carole added.

“It was a good disguise. Then when everything was in place, Galloway petitioned the United Nations for recognition for his new nation. He also demanded that the Texas governor leave office so the Nationalists could take over the state government. Needless to say, Washington laughed at such demands. They weren’t laughing when Galloway’s armored vehicles rolled down the streets of Houston and missiles destroyed entire city blocks.”

“I guess he got the last laugh,” Carole quipped.

“Hmmm, it would appear so. The Nationalists established a base just outside of San Antonio in the Hill Country. The natural caverns were a perfect hiding place. The caverns had been a tourist attraction but were in financial trouble. Galloway’s lawyers bought the failing attraction and shut it down for major renovations. It became a perfect fake cover story. They paid off city leaders to be left alone. A mini city began to grow literally underground.”

On the screen was the entrance to the underground headquarters after it had fallen to the American forces.

Carole commented quickly. “I was able to tour that place a few years ago before they dismantled it completely. It was like a mini NORAD or a Mount Weather, just awesome inside. You have to admit Galloway did some unbelievable things in such a brief time.”

“Galloway was a genius,” Delaney said flatly.

“You mean insane. There’s a fine line between the two.”

“On the contrary, Carole. Galloway was never insane. He was a cunning sociopath with delusions of grandeur; a methodical genius. Everything he did was calculated, planned right down to the tiniest detail. That makes him even more terrifying than if he were insane.”

“You speak of supporters of Galloway in your book. Can you tell us more about how he was able to gain so much support?”

“Supporters of the Nationalists were everywhere in plain sight. Inconspicuously, regular folks did their part to prepare for war. They were in local government, police departments, schoolrooms, banks and grocery stores. Even teenagers passed out propaganda leaflets. Galloway had spies everywhere, even in the military and as White House aides.”

“What about the arsenal they had? Where did they get it all, especially the nuclear bombs?” Carole asked.

“The Nationalists stocked their arsenal with illegal weapons purchased from gun dealers in South America and China. Using abandoned docks along the Gulf coast, weapons of all kinds arrived under the cloak of night and were stockpiled in various locations throughout Texas. They made pipe bombs in kitchens and barns, dug minefields, weaponized drones. They covertly set up military outposts around the state in old warehouses and small towns. They got their money from small contributions all the way to donations from billionaires, looking to cash in when this new government came to power. Their pride and joy were the big bombs, old-style nuclear warheads bought on the black market from Iranian arms dealers. America’s enemies were delighted to help Galloway.”

“I guess you can buy anything on the black market with the right connections.”

Dr. Delaney leaned back in his chair and set his folded hands in his lap. Like a master storyteller, Delaney drew Carole into his suspenseful drama.

“Ms. Dupre, what the ruling government failed to grasp during this time was the coming

rebellion, this second Civil War, was not in the hands of a few angry and isolated groups, as it had been in the past. It was now a well-trained and highly equipped army with a solid governing body and plan. The strategy for the battle for independence was planned and preparations were ready. Then... nothing.”

“What do you mean by nothing, Dr. Delaney?” Carole asked, leaning forward.

“No more protests, no more talking, no more rallies, no more activity of any kind as the movement dropped out of sight and went eerily silent for more than a year. President Anderson smugly thought he had won. FBI agents were pulled back. That was Galloway’s plan, for Anderson to let down his guard. And then...”

Delaney let a small smile play across his face. It was a smile meant to entice. Sitting on the edge of her seat, wide-eyed and breathless, Carole asked the question that was on everyone’s mind.

“Then what? Why did Galloway wait for more than a year before he attacked?”

Delaney didn’t say a word but let a few seconds tick by, a long time to be silent on air. It did the trick. Even the crew held their breath waiting for his response. The producer knew the television audience would do the same.

“Have you ever seen a spider wait patiently for its prey to touch the web? Galloway was waiting for just the right moment to strike. The attack came swift, covert and expertly executed. America was at war before we knew what hit us.”

CHAPTER 4

Before the War
Mexico/United States Border
Laredo, Texas

An executive order to close the border came from the White House. Tensions between the United States and the new dictator in Mexico was high. No one knew for sure what would happen next. Closing the entire southern border indefinitely resulted in widespread panic and mass confusion for those in border towns now split apart from family in Mexico. Everyone was on high alert with directives to defend their side of the border at all costs. Anderson authorized the use of deadly force. It was necessary to keep America safe from an unstable government in the south.

Detachments of National Guard and Border Patrol stood with guns at the ready. They lined up like toy soldiers in a row along the gates. The fear on their faces was hidden behind full riot gear and helmets. Martial law gave them the authority to act and defend but facing unarmed men, women and children with loaded guns was not what they had signed up for. Behind them were rows of local police officers, also ready for battle. They had been sent to keep a lid on the chaos in town and back up the military.

General Francisco Valdosta's Freedom Fighters stood by and watched on the other side in *Nuevo* Laredo, Mexico. They were joined by what was left of the former Mexican Army and law enforcement who had changed sides and now worked for the new supreme ruler of Mexico after a coup. This was not their fight, but they would respond if the turmoil spilled over into Mexico.

In the streets of American cities, protesters staged demonstrations urging President Mark Anderson to open the borders again, but their request was denied; their petitions ignored. This was the opportunity Anderson had hoped for. He could rid himself of the immigration problem and blame it on the turmoil in Mexico. Breaking further ties with bankrupt Mexico, which was falling into anarchy as the new dictator took over, an executive order was given to U.S. Customs – revoke passports and visas, deporting all green-carded Mexicans currently living and working in the states. Those in prisons or here illegally were treated with even less civility. Any Mexican native who wasn't a naturalized citizen was to be kicked out of America. Bus after bus delivered all legal and illegal Mexicans to the border, sometimes at gunpoint. The scene was reminiscent of when the Japanese-Americans were forcibly relocated during World War II.

Anderson cited his right to defend Americans from a hostile people and government, which Mexico had now become. Constitutional rights to privacy were suspended under the guise of national security as the search for Mexicans within the United States was conducted. The reign of terror brought on by General Valdosta's armed takeover justified Anderson's actions, or so the President believed.

Americans criticized Anderson's actions as having gone too far. Lawsuits choked the courts, but the deportations continued. With the federal courts stacked in his favor, the President was unstoppable. Anderson had nominated three new Supreme Court justices and several federal judges, shifting the balance of power to his way of thinking. Some confirmations were bought and paid for with contributions to key senators. With the court rulings, the President now had the law on his side.

In a swift and brutal action dictated to them by Anderson's Department of Justice, law enforcement, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, with the help of the National Guard,

rounded up Mexican men, women and children. Under executive order, federal troops swept through American neighborhoods like avenging locusts. Some law enforcement and federal agents refused to take part and were quickly fired. Things were falling into chaos, but nothing could stop this power-hungry president. This was an opportune time for pushing his isolationist agenda while making lucrative deals in backrooms to fill his pockets.

Ben Galloway and his Nationalists remained quiet allowing Anderson and his administration become even more hated by the American people. During this time the membership in Galloway's growing movement tripled to millions. Galloway knew the fires of revolution were simmering on a low boil. Time would come when he would turn up the heat and declare war.

At the border, reporter Sylvia Greene and her cameraman Joe, a news crew from one of the national networks, had slipped past the guards and managed to get close enough to film the rioting as it was happening. It was dangerous, but the gutsy reporter was not to be deterred.

"This is Sylvia Greene coming to you live from the Laredo border. I am standing on the American side, fifty feet from the gate and fences that hold the line between Mexico and the United States. Mexican nationals are trying desperately to reach family and loved ones on this side of the border. More buses are crossing the bridge now with another batch of the deported. People on the American side are trying to stop the buses by blocking the bridge with a human barrier. They are being cleared away by the U.S. military. A few people are trying to leave the buses but are being forced back inside. This chaos has persisted non-stop since President Anderson's order to close the border to all Mexicans."

The split screen showed the station's news anchor, John Keating, cautioning the field reporter, "Please be careful Sylvia. The situation is getting worse. We have word today that Francisco Valdosta, the self-proclaimed new dictator, has just taken Mexico City. Widespread terror and mass executions are reported. Have his men taken any action there?"

Sylvia, a veteran field correspondent, was not rattled by the noise and violence. She had lived through bombings, natural disasters and fire fights in war zones. She calmly continued her report over the background noise.

"That is disheartening to hear, John. The last bastion of democracy in Mexico has been crushed. No, the Mexican soldiers seem to be welcoming the buses and helping them across. The Mexican police are taking away deported criminals. We don't know their fate, but the new dictator doesn't have a problem with using force to rid himself of undesirables. Valdosta's Freedom Fighters aren't acting aggressively toward our military, but the National Guard is taking no chances."

"That's a good sign at least," Keating said and turned to face Camera 2 giving his update to the television audience. "As we reported yesterday, President Anderson has ordered the shutdown for the safety and protection of U.S. towns along the border due to the instability and hostile nature of the rebel forces in Mexico. He has reinstated the Alien and Sedition Acts by executive order. Anderson has ordered the immediate deportation of all legal and illegal aliens to Mexico. He says he is afraid they might start a rebellion in the U.S. to support Valdosta and overthrow our own country. The federal courts are debating the constitutionality of this unusual action by the President, yet the deportations continue. It begs the question, what has happened to civil liberties and constitutional rights in America? Why and how did we ever give a president this much power? Did we give away our freedoms for security?"

The news report returned live to the border and Sylvia. Joe panned the area with his camera, getting even closer to the action. People on the American side of the border began shouting profanities at the soldiers as the situation quickly deteriorated. They pushed at the fence trying to break it down. Border Patrol agents smacked nightsticks at heads, torsos and legs trying to break

up the crowd. The pushing got rougher. Some agents were attacked and bloodied. The National Guard stepped in and the pushing intensified. With rifles pointed, they marched into the crowd. People were trampled as they ran from the advancing soldiers.

Greene sidestepped out of the way of a deputy in riot gear beating back three protesters. He was being overwhelmed when two more deputies came to his aid. Their nightsticks slammed into backs and knees. Two protesters went down in front of the reporter and her cameraman was quick to catch it all on film. Undaunted but clearly shaken, Greene continued her report.

“John, I have just witnessed a man beaten right in front of us. He’s bleeding profusely. One of the cops has been injured too. I’ve also learned the National Guard from Fort Hood, Fort Bliss and other military installations in Texas have orders to contain and protect the lives of U.S. citizens who are fleeing to the American side. The Marines have also been ordered to report,” Sylvia said. When a large bang went off behind her, the duo ducked. Seeing it was okay to continue, Sylvia resumed her report.

“Fear grips this city, as it does in the border towns of Juarez, El Paso, Tijuana, Brownsville, Matamoros, and many others. Mexican-Americans on this side are worried about their loved ones as Valdosta’s army marches on, taking town after town. There have also been rumors of Mexicans living in the U.S. who have left to fight alongside Valdosta and his new regime. They are calling him and his Freedom Fighters liberators. This seems to confirm what President Anderson has been saying about defending our country from revolutionaries living here.”

“Sylvia, we just got word that the final representatives of the former democratic government of Mexico have been given safe asylum on the American side of the border until such time as order can be restored,” the news anchor informed her.

“That’s probably for the best right now if they want to remain alive. Valdosta is killing anyone even remotely associated with the old government. The border situation has become very unstable. It’s like a powder keg ready to blow. I don’t know if...”

Suddenly in the background, rapid gunfire rang out from automatic rifles as the reporter gasped. Screams filled the air. More shots were heard along with explosions from teargas canisters. Greene’s face turned pale from fear. She ducked behind a car, still gripping her microphone. Joe followed, still filming. Her eyes began to water from the tear gas. Quickly, she and Joe covered their noses and mouths with bandanas. Noises from inside the smoke and tear gas fog were terrifying.

“Sylvia! Are you okay? Get to cover!” John yelled in horror from his cushy studio desk back in New York City. The technicians in the sound booth were frantically trying to keep the live feed intact. The world was watching, and they couldn’t lose the story.

“Oh, my God! They are firing into the crowd. I repeat, shots fired! I can’t be sure if it’s the National Guard, the riot police, or Valdosta’s men. Tear gas is everywhere. People are falling to the ground like dominos – shot, I suspect! People are storming the gates and the buses. Holy crap! The fences are collapsing. I repeat, the fences are collapsing. People are being crushed! The National Guard is advancing, guns pointed at the crowd. Joe, are you getting this? It’s unbelievable! I hear more shots fired. Yes, definitely gunfire! Rocks and bottles are being thrown by the crowds and...”

Greene didn’t get to finish. As soldiers ran past the camera’s lens, they shoved the cameraman out of their way. Joe landed on the ground, hard. The angle of the camera was upside down, but it continued to film the chaos. Greene dropped to her knees to see if Joe was okay. There was blood on his forehead from a soldier’s rifle butt. He wasn’t moving.

The microphone picked up orders from a commanding officer. “Stop that filming at once! The

President has ordered all media out of the area. No press is allowed. Get out!”

“Freedom of the press! Freedom of the press!” Greene shouted back, angry and defiant, shaking her fists at the officer.

“Not anymore! We have the authority to shut you down by order of the President. All media must leave. You’re in an unauthorized and classified zone.” The officer bellowed in her face as he shoved her back.

“Stop pushing me! You can’t do that. The American people have the right to know what is going on here,” the reporter yelled and stood her ground. That was all the commander was going to take. He had his orders.

“Arrest them, NOW!”

Greene was thrown to the pavement, face first. Her hands, and unconscious Joe’s hands, were roughly pulled behind their backs and handcuffs were applied by soldiers in riot gear. Greene saw by the red light that the camera was still filming. She screamed at it knowing that this was being broadcast live. Her language resorted to curses, which no one bleeped out.

“Holy shit! We’re being arrested! Repeat! We are being fucking arrested! The press is being thrown out. This is fucking madness! You’ve got to stop! Stop this now before more people are killed! Ahhhh! You’re hurting me! Damn it! Owww! Stop! Joe! Joe, are you okay? Joe’s not moving! Oh my God, I think he’s...”

“Get these assholes outa here! Destroy that damn camera!” a rough male voice shouted.

“Get your fucking hands off me!” she screamed at the man in charge.

“Shut up, bitch!”

A backhanded slap hit Sylvia’s face. Blood spattered over the lens. As the reporter and cameraman were dragged away, the audio picked up a disembodied voice from one of the soldiers. A closet member of the rebellion, he gave a foretaste of the coming war.

“Enemies of the people! Galloway will destroy all traitors! Live free or die!”

The screen went black; the camera smashed.

“Sylvia! Sylvia!” the anchor in New York City yelled to no avail. She didn’t answer.

Back in the studio, a stunned crew watched in horror. Silence filled the room and the airwaves. No one could have predicted such a turn of events. They were all in a state of shock. A pale-faced John Keating turned to his co-hosting anchors and in a faint voice, almost afraid to speak he expressed what everyone was thinking.

“Is this still America?”

CHAPTER 5

After the War
Independent News Network Studio A-1
New York City

After a station break, Carole Dupre began the next segment by looking directly into Camera 1, excited to continue this fascinating interview. She read the excerpt from Dr. Martin Delaney's book on the teleprompter like a dramatic script. It was her lead-in to the next hour.

"Call it fate, destiny or just dumb luck as unpredicted international events ruled in favor of the Nationalists. Galloway was handed a gift. He saw it as a sign from God that his was the true way; the only way."

Carole turned to look directly at Dr. Delaney. "Could you explain how Mexico and General Francisco Valdosta linked up with the Nationalists? Historic facts are a bit sketchy here. Mexico became a territory of the United States after the war, like Puerto Rico once was. The history on how and why seems vague or conveniently lost, possibly suppressed. It's hard to imagine Mexico was once such a chaotic mess. As a U.S. territory, it's such a thriving and modern place to live these days. No more illegal aliens and immigration disputes. After the reconstruction and rebuilding, their economy is booming with job growth and new industries. Tourists once more flock to its pristine beaches and the people are flourishing, now looking forward to possible independence as a sovereign, democratic country again, that's if Congress approves.

"After twenty years under the rule of the United States, Mexico has changed dramatically; like night and day. As for the war and Mexico's part in it, much is still classified, Carole. I can only say what I know and am allowed to say."

"Of course, I understand, Doctor, but you were there, right?"

"Yes, I was in Mexico after the war. As you know from history, during Galloway's 'quiet year' before he put his plans into action against President Anderson's government, a devastating, once-in-a-lifetime, 8.5 earthquake rocked much of Mexico, destroying its capital city and other major cities. Then if that wasn't enough, those two hurricanes, both Category 5 storms, hitting the Gulf Coast were the icing on the cake. It was if all of nature was attacking Mexico. The country was in ruins. The economy collapsed, riots broke out and the streets became the battlefield for armed fighting. The drug cartels wage war with each other to usurp the failing government's authority and take over the country. The weak democratic government couldn't hold the country together. The military suffered major desertions. The ousted government officials and influential citizens who had abused the system gathered their assets and flooded the United States fleeing for their lives. Factions broke off and influences from outside dictatorships fanned the flames of revolution. It was a no man's land, total chaos."

"That was a very dark and bleak period in Mexico's history. Many, many Mexican lives were lost even before the war," Carole interjected, her voice colored with pity.

"True. After the hurricanes, the resort cities on the coast were in ruins. Fires in the luxurious hotels went unchecked. With no government in place, violence and looting overtook the beach communities. Tourists scrambled desperately to leave the country as all hell broke loose. Military planes evacuated American citizens. The world watched a country fall apart at the seams, but no one came to the rescue. No one wanted to get involved. It was unclear for months who exactly was in charge. It was tragic."

Carol replied, “We know now that President Anderson conducted a lot of backroom deals with the Mexican government at this time. He tried to profit from the country’s collapse. It’s what got him impeached and thrown out of office. He was as crooked as a dog’s hind leg as my father would say.”

“Anderson was crooked all right and so was much of Congress at the time. Twenty-five years ago, after the disasters, Mexican rebel groups fought amongst themselves until one leader, Francisco Xavier DeLuca Valdosta, united them into an army called the Freedom Fighters. Valdosta was a savior of his people, much like Galloway wanted to be. Quite frankly, I believe he could have made a real difference for his country and his people if he hadn’t gotten involved in our civil war.”

“Even as a totalitarian government ruled by him?”

“For a while at least. I believe once the country was on its feet again, he would have allowed some form of parliament to be established,” Delaney said.

Again, the screen behind Delaney and Carole displayed a photo of General Francisco Valdosta, a strong, confident leader. Standing six feet three, with broad shoulders, a chiseled face and flowing black hair, he was the perfect reincarnation of his Aztec ancestors. Delaney crossed his legs and clasped his fingers around his knee. He kept his eyes on the photo of Valdosta. It gave Carole the impression he admired the General. She asked him to explain.

“He was such an intelligent man, quite savvy and resourceful. Valdosta was a Harvard graduate and was like Ben Galloway in many ways – charismatic, calculating and sometimes very cruel. His appearance struck fear, respect and awe in the hearts of the Mexican people. He felt it was his destiny to restore Mexico’s great Aztec empire. To win the support of the people, Valdosta showed no mercy as he swiftly rid the country of the drug cartels, street gangs and corrupt officials of the government. There were no trials or prison sentences as drug lords, politicians and gangs were killed in mass executions. The streets ran red with blood.”

“He did a lot of good. The drug cartels never came to power again,” Carole admitted.

“Valdosta’s goal was twofold. He wanted to usurp the power of the drug lords and use the money they held in offshore accounts to fund his revolution and rebuild Mexico. Valdosta was obsessed with ridding his country of drugs and corruption. Marijuana and poppy fields were burned. Drug-making operations were destroyed.”

“As his troops advanced on the capital, more joined his cause. Town after town fell under Valdosta’s control. By the time he reached Mexico City his army was more than fifty thousand strong,” Carole added. “I read where Valdosta walked in and took over, with no fighting.”

A photo showing the destruction of Mexico City after the earthquake was displayed on the screen as Delaney continued, “All who opposed Valdosta and did not make it out in time were lined up in the city’s square and executed by a firing squad. Bodies piled up as the world watched in horror.”

“That’s what I don’t understand. How could he do that to his people? It was horrible.” Carole spit out the words as if they left a bitter taste in her mouth.

“Don’t be mistaken here. Valdosta was a hero to the underdog and the downtrodden. Men praised him, and women worshipped him. He did more to help his country become whole again than anyone had in a hundred years. He stepped in at a very bad time and took charge. That takes a lot of courage and strength of purpose. Yes, I agree, Valdosta was a ruthless killer and mercenary who murdered his own father and brother when they opposed him, but he did the U.S. a favor by taking over. He united the country. It paved the way for us to obtain Mexico after the war as the U.S. territory we have today. Valdosta’s troop numbers were not large at first, but his men were

well-trained and merciless. It had to be that way to gain control,” Delaney continued.

“There were countless executions and firing squads. I’ve seen the photos. How can you say he was a hero?” Carole asked, a bit of irritation in her tone of voice.

“That’s your perception, Carole, and not what the Mexican people saw in Valdosta. An overwhelming majority of the citizens adored him for delivering them from a weak and corrupt government and the cartels. There was little opposition. He became their father, even their idol. There were parades with children throwing flowers and women dancing in the streets as he entered each town. The world saw chaos, but the Mexicans saw a savior.”

“Really? I never knew that,” Carole said, sitting back into the soft leather of her chair.

“With Mexico isolated, left by the world to die, Valdosta took advantage of the situation to portray himself as his country’s redeemer. Francisco Valdosta was unstoppable and unopposed.”

It was clear Delaney was trying to paint this leader in a more positive light. “Instead of helping its neighbor to the south, President Anderson ordered the borders closed to all traffic. He felt he had enough problems of his own and he didn’t need Mexico’s too. He had the perfect excuse to shut down immigration and deport undesirable people from America. Once he set up martial law in the border states, Anderson could do what he wanted.”

“Historians see this action as a terrible decision by Anderson. Do you agree?”

Delaney chuckled. He knew where she was going with this. He was not political, and he chose not to be drawn into any discussion on immigration law, then or now. He would just state the facts of history and let others interpret them.

“Right or wrong, Anderson decided to rid America of all green-card and illegal Mexican aliens, using the excuse of national security. Mass deportation started within days of his executive order. American Hispanic leaders petitioned President Anderson to reconsider, but he refused to listen to them, fearing an entanglement in Mexico’s problems. If you weren’t an American citizen, you were outta here.”

“Congress protested. Governors refused to obey the order and the courts debated it,” Carole added.

“And still the deportations continued, dumping people inside a country that was in shambles and controlled by no one. It was inhumane, to say the least,” Delaney said.

Carole perked up. “Yes, but the more people coming to Mexico, the better it was for Valdosta. Their anger and hatred for the United States would be fuel for his cause. Surely he welcomed them gladly.”

“That he did. The U.S. Border Patrol was cautious and alert. They followed orders knowing that this deportation order would come back to bite them later. President Anderson’s policies added fuel to the fires of both the Freedom Fighters and the Nationalists. Valdosta laughed at the weak man in the White House who thought he was in control.”

“So, how did Galloway see all this?” Carole asked.

“Oh, he was thrilled. Galloway watched with interest as events unfolded, knowing that President Anderson was digging his own grave. His growing movement swelled to almost five million because of Anderson’s unlawful action and abuse of power. Only circumstances could have created the conditions that brought Galloway and Valdosta together to do what they did. Determined and cunning, they capitalized on their citizens’ discontent and need for someone to save them. As fate would have it, Galloway was the right sonofabitch at the right time to link up with Valdosta.”

The floor manager shot a glance at the control room for direction. The producer nodded yes, deciding not to bleep out the curse word. Its effect was priceless. He would fight the censor gods

later. The floor manager ran his hand across his throat indicating 'cut.' They went to commercial.

Before they came back from commercial break, Carole quickly tried again to find out about Colonel Cougar.

"Dr. Delaney, you can't fool me. I can see you want to tell Colonel Cougar's story. You want to talk about Charlie too. I promise I'll handle it with the uttermost discretion and professionalism."

"No, Carole! Absolutely not. I may want to tell the world what a hero the Colonel was, but I don't wish to go to prison for disclosing confidential information. You know how strict the rules are these days about that."

Carole sighed and gave in. The red light on the camera flashed and she began.

"Although General Francisco Valdosta controlled the area near the border of Texas, he didn't have enough money or military might to control the entire country. He looked to the north to the border towns of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona hoping they would be sympathetic to his cause. Yet he didn't dare risk angering the federal government, even though no one was doing a thing to stop him."

"True," Delaney replied. "Valdosta stationed his troops along the closed border towns and held them. It was an uneasy peace. His need for money and additional troops made Valdosta ripe for a deal. He'd heard stories of Ben Galloway and his army of Nationalists but wondered if the stories were fact or fiction. It had been a year since Galloway had been seen or heard from. The FBI had put him on the back burner thinking his movement had died of natural causes. Valdosta knew better and sent emissaries to contact Galloway. He was welcomed with open arms by the Nationalists."

"So, Valdosta contacted Galloway, not the other way around?" Carole asked.

"Yes, it was a decision Valdosta lived to regret. After the FBI Director gave his report about a possible deal between Valdosta and Galloway, the President scoffed. Anderson didn't see this deal as a threat to the United States. He decided on a wait-and-see policy and did nothing but issue a condemnation in a formal statement to the media on the rise of this dictator now ruling Mexico. Then he officially cut all ties with Mexico. The stage was set for Galloway to step in."

"So, Galloway saw Valdosta as an asset to his cause, huh?" Carole asked.

"Absolutely! Events couldn't have played out better for Ben Galloway if he had planned them himself. Galloway admired Valdosta's style and proposed an idea mutually beneficial to both. It was a 'marriage of convenience.' Each had something the other wanted. Their war would begin with the invasion of Texas. The two leaders met in secret and formed a coalition under one name, the Republic of Texica...Texas plus Mexico...Texica. The combined forces now called themselves Texicans. It was a temporary solution until they could think of a better name once the government was established and more states joined the rebel nation."

"So that is where the name came from!" Carole smiled as if she had guessed the answer to the final *Jeopardy* question.

Camera 2 zeroed in on Delaney's face. His eyes looked directly into the camera's lens.

"This unholy alliance was a deal with the devil. Galloway now had the ways and means to execute his master plan. The Texica War for independence was set in motion and nothing was going to stop it."

At the conclusion of the taping, Carole Dupre escorted Dr. Delaney to the lobby. She was hoping for answers to questions that were more personal than official. Delaney was heading for the parking lot elevator when she grabbed his arm, causing him to turn and face her. He

heaved a long sigh.

This girl is not giving up.

“Dr. Delaney please, this is totally off the record. I’m not acting as a journalist right now. I promise. I must know more about Colonel David Cougar. As I told you, he was my father’s best friend and so much of what happened is shrouded in secrecy. I need to know about this man and what he did.”

Martin Delaney glanced at her hand on his arm, gently keeping him in place. She released it as the elevator doors opened. They rode in silence until the doors opened into the parking structure. Delaney continued walking, leaving her following at his heels, but speaking to her over his shoulder.

“Yes, I know what Jack Dupre meant to David Cougar. I know all about your father. Why do you think I picked you above all others to interview me? I swear Ms. Dupre, you’re unbelievable. I have only ever met such determination in one other woman. I can’t help you, Carole. I won’t. I’m sorry. Go through official channels. Nothing about Cougar’s public record is hidden. What is private is best left alone.”

“Please Dr. Delaney, wait. I just want to know what he did with his team of Rangers that brought about an end to the war. I want to know about Charlie. Your book is based on cold, hard facts, but I know there are other stories about people who made a difference. I know that Colonel Cougar was one of them.”

“Yes, many people made a difference. But, I...I just can’t.”

“I know you wouldn’t have dropped that bombshell about the woman who refused Galloway if you didn’t secretly want this to all come out in the open. You’re dying to tell the other side of the story, aren’t you? Please talk to me. I have to know!”

Dr. Delaney stopped again. He could see in her eyes that she was not asking as a talk show host but as a daughter who had lost her father twenty years ago to a war. Delaney’s heart melted, and he heaved a deeper sigh. He took her hand in his and patted it gently. She deserved to know the truth.

“If I tell you...,” he began.

“I promise I just want to know, just me! Colonel Cougar and my father were like brothers. I know what he did in the war was driven by my father’s murder.”

“Then why ask me? Your family knew him. Ask them.”

“My mother knew what happened but would never tell me no matter how often I begged her. I was just a child then. All I remember was this nice man coming to visit my parents at our home at the Army post in Georgia. He had kind eyes and a big smile. He brought toys to me and my brother. I never saw him again after the war. My mother said he kept in touch, making sure we were all right and if we needed anything. But I know there was something more. I also know this person, Charlie had a big part in David Cougar’s story. Please, Dr. Delaney.”

Martin Delaney knew the story behind the headlines because he’d been there. Could he tell her and be sure she would keep it their secret? She was a risk as it was right now because she already knew too much to keep her quiet for long.

“I can’t promise anything, Carole. Give me a few days. I have to make some calls.”

Carole’s bright smile flashed across her face as she threw her arms around Dr. Delaney’s neck, hugging and thanking him.

“I hope I won’t regret this,” Delaney said, returning the hug, his thoughts filled with trepidation. *I hope David and Charlie won’t either.*

CHAPTER 6

Before the War

Perea Ranch

Six miles south of Pearsall, Texas

Sergio Jose Perea was hard at work building a home on his ranch for himself and his wife, Charlene. He knew a storm unlike any other was coming his way and bringing the winds of war with it. He needed to ensure protection for his family. Charlene had recently told him she was pregnant. Sergio was overjoyed knowing he was going to be a father but concerned for their welfare deepened his resolve.

Beads of perspiration rolled down his face and arms as Sergio's hammer echoed against the limestone hills of South Texas. His thick muscles were taut and strained by his labors. It was unbearably hot, but he was motivated to finish the job. At least his house had a completed basement. It was more of a bunker than a house but was naturally cool and comfortable. It had all the conveniences of any surface house. Charlene had been trying to make it a home, giving it some womanly touches. It would serve them until Sergio could finish the rest of the house.

Stopping to wipe the sweat from his face with a red bandanna, Sergio looked over to see his wife, a petite, young woman with long, sandy blond hair tied up in a ponytail. A large straw hat protected her head and fair skin.

Sergio smiled. He loved her so, such a delicate flower of a woman, yet with an inner strength of purpose and will. He was eternally grateful for her devotion to him and this small ranch out in the middle of nowhere. It might not be much, but it belonged to them debt-free after Sergio's uncle had left it to him in his will. He had big plans for it. Sergio felt fortunate knowing many families in the area had lost their ranches and businesses to bloated government interference, high taxes and burdensome regulations.

As Sergio worked, Charlene dutifully toiled in her vegetable garden next to a thirty-foot, self-contained Airstream trailer with all the conveniences of a house. The gleam of the all-steel trailer reflected the afternoon sun like Mexican silver. Sergio had brought electricity to it and his basement home from the powerlines nearby. The couple was living in the trailer until the basement was completed. A fresh-water well nearby served all their needs. Chickens cackled in a shed next to the trailer, laying eggs. From a pen outside a small barn, two cows mooed, grazing among the green weeds as goats mingled among them. A modular shed sheltered the livestock and stored supplies.

Charlene noticed the hammering had stopped and looked up from under the straw hat's wide brim to see Sergio staring at her. He'd let his shoulder-length, coal black hair down from its ponytail and shook it in the cooling breeze. A big grin filled with bright, white teeth deepened the smile lines on his chiseled cheeks.

"You'll never finish if you keep looking at me like some lovesick puppy, my love," Charlene said as she smiled at him. Truth was, she loved the way he looked at her.

"I can't help it if your beauty distracts me," Sergio answered in a deep, smooth Spanish accent. His grin was lustful. This beauty was his; guardian of his heart and keeper of his dreams.

"It's just an excuse to be lazy," she said, removing her gardening gloves.

Sergio laughed. "How about some water for your lazy husband? I feel like my whole body is on fire under this unforgiving South Texas sun. I need to take a break and cool down."

A native Texan girl who'd married Sergio against her wealthy parents' wishes, Charlene smiled

and waved Sergio off with a dismissive gesture. Although estranged from her father and mother, Charlene was welcomed with open arms by Sergio's family in Mexico. She never regretted loving him, this kind-hearted, strong and handsome Hispanic man, now a naturalized American citizen. She had met him while on a trip to the university in Mexico City where he was a professor teaching computer science. It was love at first sight, and they married after knowing each other for only six months. He had given her a good life, undying love, and soon a child.

Without a word, Charlene fetched the water jug from the shade of a huge oak tree. Its massive limbs stretched outward from the trunk like crooked octopus arms. Wild locusts buzzed in the tree's high branches. Sergio put the hammer down, stepping away from the foundation and meeting her halfway. He reached to hold her in his arms, but she turned away, giggling.

"Uh, no you don't. You're all sweaty. I'll willingly give you my body tonight after you wash all that dirt off."

Her protesting did her no good. Sergio pretended not to listen and grabbed Charlene's waist pulling her close. He gave her a salty kiss. Charlene laughed and playfully pulled away.

"Don't you love me with all your heart, Charlie?" Sergio called her by a pet name. He stood with open, but empty arms, teasing her.

"Of course, I do silly, but you're still dirty. I like my men clean and sweet smelling like a fresh Texas rain, which I hope we get soon. My vegetables are baking in this drought."

Sergio grinned as he took the cup of cool water from her hand and chugged it. His eyes didn't leave hers. She blushed knowing his thoughts. Charlie filled the cup again and he drank it a little slower this time. Sergio poured the last of it over his face and Charlie tenderly wiped the water away with her own scarf. Their eyes met.

Sergio recognized how naturally beautiful Charlie was and how he found such pleasure in just looking at her face. The closer he got to those rose-colored lips the more difficult it was to take a breath.

Charlie could sense his need for her. She smiled at him and turned her head away to study Sergio's work on the house.

"Not bad for a computer nerd. The house is coming along well."

"*Gracias*, I'm trying. I wasn't always a computer nerd. I like working with my hands."

"I know. Your hands can work on me anytime," Charlie baited him with a sultry smile.

Sergio laughed at her playful nature. That remark guaranteed Charlie another kiss. Sergio was in awe of his wife. She had a sweet way about her that lit up any room when she entered it. A kind heart and optimistic attitude about life made him happy beyond words. God had blessed him with a rare gem.

Together they rested in the shade of the oak tree on a swing Sergio had made. Charlie looked out over their green land dotted with more oak trees. Limestone hills stretched across the horizon. The sky was a brilliant blue, much like the color of the bluebells growing near the trailer.

Charlie fanned herself with a magazine as Sergio's arm rested on the back of the swing behind her. The serene breeze was a welcome guest. She closed her eyes and tried to think cool thoughts. Sweat dripped along the sides of her face running down her neck into her thin cotton blouse. Sergio watched each drop, finding her tempting. He couldn't get enough of his lovely wife. His thirst for her was more than his thirst for water. All he needed was her.

Sergio took the magazine from Charlie's hands, a survivalist's publication that teaches a person how to live off the land and off the grid. It reminded him of what he knew was coming. Worry stabbed at his heart. He must tell her now. He couldn't keep this from her any longer.

Sergio and Charlie had watched the news in horror as Mexico was torn apart by chaos, natural disasters and revolution. He was dismayed upon seeing his homeland in such turmoil and although he was a naturalized American citizen, he was concerned for the future of his native land. It angered him that America was turning its back on its ally to the south.

When his native country was devastated, and civil war broke out, Sergio was one of the first to pledge his loyalty to a new leader emerging on the home front – General Francisco Valdosta and his Freedom Fighters. Like most of his countrymen, Sergio saw Valdosta as the savior of Mexico. Valdosta was fighting for his people, and to save his country. He led his crusade out of love for his native land and the restoration of her greatness.

At first, Sergio agreed with what he heard in Valdosta’s speeches concerning returning Mexico to its former glory as a powerful Aztec empire, ridding itself of crime, corruption and interfering imperialistic nations, especially the dominating United States. Sergio was becoming uncomfortable with the accelerating tension between America and Mexico. It would only damage Mexico more.

Sergio held master’s degrees in both political science and information technology. Appreciating what an asset Sergio would be, Valdosta gave him a prominent position on a secret project – running the computer systems for his entire operation. But as the political climate changed for the worse in America, Sergio realized that he would soon have to decide to which government his allegiance belonged. That is why it was important to include Charlie in his decision.

“Charlie, I must talk to you about some things that are weighing heavily on my heart.”

“Of course, darling, what is it?” Charlie was puzzled at Sergio’s troubled expression. “Does this have something to do with Mexico?”

“*Si*. I’m worried that things are not as they were when I joined General Valdosta and the Freedom Fighters. I thought I was making a difference, but that’s no longer the case.”

“Why not? You have always believed in their cause. Valdosta has done so much to bring all of Mexico together. His methods are not pleasant, I know, but war is ugly, and change is difficult. You are making a difference for your people, Sergio, a big difference. Are you telling me now you are leaving the Freedom Fighters?”

“No, that’s not it. Their cause is just and good, but things are different now. Maybe it would be better if you stopped working for the Sheriff’s Department. There might be something else for you to do that is more important.”

Sergio could tell by the worried expression on her face that Charlie was confused.

“What’s going on? What job is more important than being a paramedic? You should be the one changing jobs, my love. I know Valdosta pays well, but with what you know about computers, you could do much better with an American company, even the federal government or the FBI. I have never seen someone as knowledgeable as you with all that technical stuff.”

Sergio took the magazine from her hand. He sighed deeply, acknowledging to himself that he must tell her everything.

“I’d never work for that pig, Anderson. He’s a stain on everything the office of the presidency stands for. He’s spineless and egotistical. *Americanos* are suffering because of him. I spit on him and his administration of fools.” Sergio spat on the ground to emphasize his disdain.

Charlie patted her husband’s hand reassuring him she felt the same.

“I know what a sleaze he is, but we could use the money. The house is costing more than our paychecks and now the baby is coming. Soon I won’t be able to work.”

Sergio frowned. He had more important things to tell Charlie. He was not concerned with

money. Soon it would be irrelevant.

“Listen very carefully to me, Charlie. That new anti-government group in America we have heard about is real. They have not gone away as the Feds think they have.”

“You mean the Nationalists? I thought they disbanded.”

“Not by a long shot. The Nationalists are planning to take back what they feel rightfully belongs to them. They hate Anderson and all his cronies in Washington. Charlie, their numbers are unbelievable, much greater than Valdosta’s. They’re planning a revolution, a violent one. It’s coming very soon.”

“Oh my Gosh, seriously? When?”

“Soon, very soon. They’re lying low for now, getting ready. Anderson thinks they’ve gone away but the Nationalists are bigger than ever. Covert operations are hidden behind phony companies and websites on the Internet. Their new army has bought weapons through governments who hate the United States. Stockpiles of artillery are in underground caverns near San Antonio and other locations around Texas. They’re building a city, their headquarters there. It’s all underground. Hundreds of people are flocking to it. I fear the situation is only going to get worse and many will die.”

“Worse? Who’s going to die?”

Sergio opened the magazine and flipped to the page he wanted. He pointed to a strong man with a determined and powerful stance. His arms bulged under a black, military-like uniform. His smile was arrogant, almost smug. A red beret was tipped strategically over one sparkling green eye. Even his photo had charisma.

“This is Ben Galloway, leader of the Nationalists.”

“Yes, I know who he is. What about him?” Charlie asked, still confused.

“He’s been talking with General Valdosta and it looks like they might be joining forces.”

“What? When did this happen? Is that why you went to San Antonio last week?”

“Yes Charlie. I was there with General Valdosta when he met with the Nationalist leader in secret at his hidden base. It was the first time they have met face to face. He and the General are talking about joining forces, forming a new country. War is coming.”

“A new country in Mexico?”

“No, they plan on taking part of Texas with them.”

Charlie shook her head. “Oh, that’s not going to happen. Texans would never allow it.”

“They may have no choice. It’s getting bad, sweetie. I thought I shared the same political ideals and philosophies as Valdosta but if he joins with Galloway, I am not so sure anymore.”

“What are you saying? Please tell me the truth, Sergio. Stop beating around the bush.”

“I can’t take up arms against America. I became a citizen because I love this country. General Galloway wants to tear it apart. Valdosta took over after *México* fell apart and saved it, but Galloway isn’t the same. Benjamin Galloway is power-hungry, dangerous and greedy. Trust me, this man is not what he seems.”

“I saw him once at a rally in Dallas. Galloway seemed so likable. His words were sincere. I believed what he said as did everyone there. He’s right about the corruption in Washington. Is he really that bad?” Charlie asked.

“His words are just that...words, empty words and promises. Galloway believes the only way to change things is through revolution. He considers himself the new George Washington. Trust me, he’s more like the new Hitler. Galloway’s every move is aimed at being the first emperor of this new country he wants to set up. He lacks a conscience, morals and honor. He will do whatever it takes to accomplish his goal. There’s something very frightening about him.”

Sergio tossed the magazine aside and held Charlie's hand. He put his other hand over her stomach where his unborn child was growing. Charlie put her hand over his. Sergio's deep brown eyes gazed into hers. She could tell how very worried he was.

"Sweetheart, I don't mean to frighten you, but we must be prepared. That's why I'm working so hard now, trying to finish our house. If war comes, we have to be ready and have a safe place for us."

"No, this can't be. You must be wrong about Galloway."

"I wish I were. You know how much I love both of my countries. I'm afraid Galloway and his agenda are going to ruin what Valdosta started. His goal is to destroy, not build. I must find a way to stop him. I think that if I can get enough documentation, I can share it with the military leaders, the FBI, Homeland Security, someone... anyone who will listen. We might have a chance to stop him."

Charlie glanced over at the unfinished work Sergio was doing then back to her husband, with questioning eyes.

"What will we do? Should we move away? Leave all of this?"

"Not yet. I've made plans. I bought tarpaper and I'm going to cover the basement, then put dirt and seed over it. I'm making two entrances, so we have a way of escape if necessary. They are hidden well, and no one will know where we are."

"I'm afraid, Sergio. I'm afraid for us, for our child. I'm afraid for my country."

Sergio wrapped his arm around his wife's shoulders. She leaned her head against his chest. Charlie didn't want to believe what she was hearing but the way things were going these days, revolution seemed the next step.

"Don't be afraid, be brave. I'll take care of us. First, we must prepare by collecting water and dry food. We need to have supplies ready. I want you to start speaking more Spanish and color your hair black, like mine. It would be better for you if you can pass for Mexican as war gets closer. I also want to train you on how to take care of yourself. I can teach you self-defense moves that will keep you safe. You're a strong woman, Charlie. Draw on that inner strength, courage and fortitude I know you have. And my love, know you're always in my heart and on my mind. I'll protect you and our child any way I can. I would give my life for you."

Charlie's big brown eyes glisten. She nodded her commitment and submission to Sergio as the leader of their family. There was no doubt in Charlie's mind, Sergio would take care of her.

"If things get worse, I want you to go to my mother's house in *Juárez*. She and my sister will welcome you. My brothers are there too. They are in Valdosta's army now. The General said you could come to work at his headquarters. That's the job for you I was talking about. The headquarters is hidden high in the mountains near El Paso. It will be safest for you because you will be working for the Freedom Fighters like me. I have earned much respect among them. Valdosta values my work and devotion to his cause. He has promised me that you will be well taken care of."

"Why can't you come to Mexico with me?"

Charlie's panic showed. Her eyes filled with tears, slowly dropping one by one down her cheeks. She wiped them away with her hand.

"*Mi alma*, how can I make you understand? These are not *loco hombres* running around in fatigues practicing war games on the weekends. This is a well-trained and prepared army that is about to wage a war on the United States of America."

"I... I can't believe it."

Sergio took Charlie's face and cupped it in his hands. He must make his wife fathom the severity

of the situation without putting too much stress on Charlie in her condition. She had never known the horrors of war or what it might take to survive.

“Charlie, Texas is about to become a war zone and this stupid government in Washington does not have a clue. I love both of my countries and I must try to convince Valdosta that Galloway is not his friend before it’s too late. Once I have enough information I’ll go to the authorities. Galloway is almost ready to strike. These problems in *México* have only enabled him. He is taking it as a sign that his revolution is just.”

There had always been a man in Charlie’s life to take care of her. First it was her father and now Sergio. With war coming, Sergio must leave her alone for long periods of time. He knew Charlie must learn to take care of herself. She had to be ready.

“What are we going to do?” Charlie asked.

“I’ll work the rest of the week and get our home finished. You can help by going to the store and buying batteries, flashlights, water, dried foods, everything you can think of that can be stored. I want us to be prepared to sustain ourselves. I brought home some military rations as well. We can keep those to use after the other supplies run out. Things could get very grim before they get better.”

“What do we do with our home here? Just leave it?” she asked.

“No, we will stay at least for a while. When the time is right you must go to *México*.”

“You’ve known all this for a long time haven’t you sweetheart? Why have you been keeping this from me?”

“*Si*, I wanted to tell you when I was ready to execute my plans but then you discovered you’re pregnant. Now I have no choice. I have to move up my timetable.”

Charlie wrapped her arms around her stomach as if to hug her child. She was concerned she had become a liability to Sergio. He sensed her anxiousness and gave her a reassuring hug, then leaned over and gently kissed her baby bump.

“Don’t worry my love. I’m very happy you’re giving me a child. I’m blessed beyond words. It was meant to be. Now let me show you what I’ve been working on.”

Sergio took Charlie’s hand in his and they rose from the swing. He led her to the foundation under the plywood at the back corner. There was a loose board that folded up. Sergio pulled it up and showed her how to enter the underground shelter. Sergio turned Charlie to face him and gave her specific instructions.

“This is one of the entryways. It will be covered over. Find this corner and lift. I’ll cover another tunnel that you will find from inside and where it leads out. If anything happens to me, I’ll know you’ll be safe in our basement home. It will give me peace of mind while I’m away.”

Charlie began to shake her head from side to side, saying “no, no.” She didn’t want to hear anything about Sergio dying. Sergio took her shoulders and held them firmly, emphasizing his need for her to be courageous.

“Charlie, you must be brave. I’m counting on you to protect our *niño* and to stay safe.”

“I can’t live without you, Sergio. I just can’t.”

Sergio lingered, staring into the face of the woman he loved more than his life. “I can’t live without you either. I don’t want to die. I want to live happily ever after with you, but you must be strong now and do as I say. Trust me, my love.”

Reluctantly, Charlie agreed. She vowed to Sergio she would do whatever it took to keep her family safe.

Charlie Perea took their Jeep into town to the local grocery store. She stocked up on non-perishable items and lots of bottled water. Preparing for war was on her mind as she shopped. Next, she went to the hardware store for some tools and other items her husband Sergio needed to complete their home. Lastly, she drained their savings account.

Just as she was loading the last of the purchases, Charlie heard her name called from behind. She quickly turned around to see Sheriff Pete Griffin striding over to her Jeep. A robust native Texan, fiftyish, with rusty hair, straight poles for legs and leathery skin, Pete spoke his mind and held his own in a fight. He could back a man down with his deep-throated voice but was shy and tender to the ladies. A straw Stetson sat on his head at a low tilt. Dusty, well-worn boots kicked up the dirt as he walked. Pete had worn the badge of a Texas Ranger once but now was semi-retired as the sheriff of this small town.

“Hey there Miss Charlie. I thought y’all were taking the week off. That husband of yours get back from San Antonio yet?” Pete asked, giving her a big toothy grin, his blue eyes sparkling.

Charlie returned a tight-lipped smile. After what Sergio had revealed to her, she felt like she was being watched by unknown persons at every turn.

“Sheriff Pete, what a surprise. I was just getting a few supplies. Yes, Sergio’s working hard on our house as always,” Charlie said, trying to act normal and not give away her uneasiness.

Being so tall, it was not hard for Pete to see over Charlie’s head into the back seat of the Jeep. He spied bags and bags of groceries along with cases of bottled water. It seemed like Charlie was stocking up for the long winter like a crazed squirrel. It looked odd.

“That’s quite a bit of stuff you have there. Are y’all planning to feed an army?” Pete joked.

“Well, our place is such a-ways from town, I like to be prepared.”

“For what? Armageddon?”

Charlie nervously laughed. “Oh, Pete, I love your dry sense of humor. Say, I need to talk to you about a leave of absence. I might have to take some time off. Sergio’s mother is sick, and I must go help her. Can you take our livestock and chickens for a while?”

“Sure, Charlie. Anything you need, just ask.”

“Sergio is so busy these days, commuting back and forth from Mexico. It’s getting harder and harder to do these days with the revolution going on there. I want to help take this worry off his mind.”

“That boy needs to be careful though. I know Sergio wants to help his country but what can one man do. Besides he needs to put his family first. Betty tells me you and Sergio are expecting. Congrats, kiddo. I know y’all will make great parents.”

“Don’t worry he is aware of that but what he is doing is important. Trust me, Pete. Sergio is trying to make a difference. I want to support him any way I can.”

“I know, but I still worry about you, Missy.”

Charlie felt suddenly sad and very troubled. She cared for Pete like an older brother. *What will happen to him when the war starts? Which side will he choose? Would Texas really allow some stranger and his army to take over their state?*

Charlie was almost sure Pete would defend his home and this town to his dying breath. That was what she was afraid of. Texans don’t take kindly to being told what to do and especially by outsiders. Charlie threw herself into Pete’s strong arms, hugging his neck. It surprised him.

“Whoa, little lady. What’s come over you?” He hugged her and patted her back affectionately. He thought of her and Sergio as family.

Charlie felt embarrassed and pulled away. “Can’t a girl get mushy sometimes? I just wanted to say thank you for all you have done for Sergio and me. You are such a good man, Pete. Promise

me you'll take care of yourself, okay? You don't have to be John Wayne all the time, you know."

Pete looked confused at this sudden outpouring of concern. "Hell, you know me. Too ornery to die, too stubborn to give in. Are you sure you're okay, Miss Charlie?"

Charlie quickly donned a brave face. "Yeah, just moody I guess now that I've got a bun in the oven. I think of you as a brother don't you know? I care what happens to you with all the craziness and violence going on in Mexico. It worries me that it will spill over to us. We're not that far from the border."

Pete shook his head. "Yeah, that's one sorry mess down there. There's talk of closing the border. It's not much better on this side either. Another family left town, broke and out of work. Rob McAlister lost his farm. That sonofabitch Anderson and his new regulations struck down another good man. This place is going to be a ghost town soon."

"Oh no, not Pattie and Rob too. Do you know where they'll go now?"

"Yeah, they said something about going to San Antonio. I guess there's some big project in the Hill Country that has jobs. A lot of folks have been headed up that way lately."

Charlie knew from what Sergio had told her that San Antonio was where the Nationalists were headquartered. Another convert for Galloway. There had been a steady stream of people moving there over the last year. Now she knew why.

Pete continued his rant. "That asshole in the White House hasn't done a damn thing to help this country. He's too busy appearing on late night TV shows like he's an air-head movie star. He and that bunch of idiots in Congress are running this country into the ground. I've never seen our country in such dire straits or so divided with hate. Mexico is worse. I can't blame the people for revolting."

"Me either. That's why Sergio is trying to help."

"Your husband is a brave man. Some of my ranch hands left to go join that Valdosta fellow. I understand. I'd fight for Texas the same way. Defend her to the death if I have to. Valdosta seems like a guy trying to make a difference for his people. I heard he got rid of all those cartel thugs and their drug empires. That's something in his favor. War is hell no matter how justified it might be."

Charlie nodded her agreement with Pete's assessment of the country, Valdosta and government interference. She got into the Jeep and Pete shut the door for her. He rested his arm on the open window frame. Pete's big heart of gold was clearly seen in his wide smile.

"Y'all take care Miss Charlie and say howdy to Sergio for me. Y'all worry me some, being out there so far from anyone. Keep your guns loaded, okay?"

"We will, promise."

"Hey, I'm fixin' to have a barbeque next Saturday at my place. You're coming, aren't you?"

Charlie laughed and started the car. "Yes sir, that sounds great. I'll bring my peach cobbler. I know how much you like it. Stay out of trouble, Pete."

"Hell no! I wouldn't have any fun then."

Pete laughed and shifted his belt. Charlie looked down to see the .45 revolver strapped to his belt. He and that pearl handled gun had seen some action.

Pete can handle himself. I shouldn't worry.

Pete waved to Charlie as she drove away, still wondering what was really going on with her.

Charlie didn't leave town but got out of sight of the Sheriff. She swung the Jeep around in a U-turn and headed for the highway. A few miles down the road, Charlie pulled into a strip mall near the interstate and a beauty salon there. When she reappeared two hours later, Charlie's sandy blonde hair had turned midnight black. A tanning spray treatment darkened her fair, Caucasian skin. Charlie's transformation into a Mexican woman had begun. (end of sample read)