

## Chapter 1

*Grand Prairie, TX*

*April 3*

Paco squatted on a wheel well inside the back of the nondescript white van. Its faded, sixteen year old chassis concealed a recently rebuilt engine, drive train, and suspension. Watching through darkened rear windows, he awaited the final delivery. At almost one p.m., it was a cool spring day. Texas weather wasn't oppressive—yet. Otherwise, closed up in here, he'd be melting.

Half a block down, on the other side of the street, the Medina cartel safe house squatted beneath a canopy of untrimmed, mature trees. He'd dropped a load of drugs there two hours earlier. Others had dropped off cash. It had been Paco's last job as a cartel "mule". The neighborhood was transitioning downward from lower middle class. Foreclosed, unkempt houses spoke to the economic meltdown and job loss. Extra activity at the house went unnoticed amidst greater troubles haunting the area.

The money transfer funded a nationwide "Cash for Gold" operation. Medina's accountants came up with the scheme to launder the operation's massive cash infusions. The drugs Paco had brought would be distributed through the tentacles of the cartel network.

Until recently, Paco had headed up Jorge Medina's security team. A role he'd filled since they were teenagers together in Medellin, Columbia. Jorge had the brains, experience, and savagery to develop one of the largest cartels in Mexico when Columbia became too hot.

Jorge was recently assassinated in what looked like a rival cartel's attack while Paco was on vacation. Two things convinced Paco that Esteban Medina was behind the hit. First—the smooth way Esteban stepped into the cartel power vacuum after his father died. Second—Esteban had convinced his father that Paco needed the long overdue vacation—against Paco's wishes.

He'd kept his thoughts to himself, like always. Perhaps because of that, or since Esteban grew up fearing Paco, he didn't get rid of him. Instead Esteban demoted him. Now he was a delivery boy. Paco's teeth ground together. But Paco still had influence. He'd use it today.

The schedule called for a last drop off shortly after one p.m. At two o'clock, the cartel armored car would arrive to pick up the money assembled at the safe house. That left Paco a window of an hour.

After his morning delivery, Paco had switched from the delivery van to his one-year old black Cadillac Escalade. Arriving back in the safe house neighborhood, he'd parked two streets over and two blocks down, leaving keys in the ignition when he climbed out. In this neighborhood, the Escalade would be gone in under an hour.

He walked a small dog he'd picked up at the pound yesterday. A man by himself prowling the streets might be noted and reported; not a man walking a dog. Once he'd arrived beside the stolen van in which he was now sitting, he'd set the dog free to make acquaintance with the dogcatcher, again.

Old trustworthy, legendary Paco was about to take his revenge and collect a pension from the cartel for himself, Estralita, and the kids. His white teeth flashed in a grim smile.

## Chapter 2

*Grand Prairie, TX*

*April 3*

Six armed men guarded the house. Paco needed them together. If scattered around the house, those furthest would be warned and spoil his plan.

An unmarked van rolled down the street past Paco, slowed, and turned into the safe house driveway. It vanished from sight as it pulled to the garage in back. Delivery number five.

Paco shrugged his arms into a specially made harness. Two shotguns hung straight down below his arms. Shoulder holsters held two .45 pistols. His signature duster went on last, concealing the armament.

The shotguns were twelve-gauge automatics, based on the AA-12 Atchisson Assault shotgun designed at the end of the Vietnam War. At 300 rounds per minute, they provided tremendous firepower in close combat situations. Perfect for what he had to do. Each had the slimmer, eight round magazine with one in the chamber. The thirty-two round drum magazine was too bulky to conceal.

The delivery van pulled back into the street and drove away. It was time. He buttoned the duster's middle button. Two pinches and snorts from the baggy set aside earlier gave him a familiar sense of power as the cocaine flooded through his system.

He slipped out through the side door. Keeping the van between him and the safe house, he walked to the end of the block. After crossing the street he paced toward the small, red-brick home, glancing back at the van occasionally.

A concrete porch covered by a faded white and green-striped tin awning fronted the left side of the house. Peeling shutters flanked the picture window on the right side. Rumpled, stained drapes guarded against light and curious neighbors glances.

Two cracked and broken concrete ribbons separated by scraggly brown grass ran along the left side of house to the garage in back.

Paco opened the sagging chain link fence gate and turned up the front walk. A man stepped out onto the porch. He held a pistol hanging from his hand on the side away from the street. Another man stood just inside the doorway with an assault rifle.

Paco raised his hands at the foot of the steps to the porch. "It's me. Don't shoot." He kept his hands up as he climbed and gestured with a thumb over his shoulder at the van up the street in which he'd been hidden. "I think there's someone in the truck."

Through the partially open front door Paco saw a man twitch the front window drapes aside to look at the van. "Don't look!" Paco hollered.

He pushed open the door and walked in. "Stay away from the windows." He headed for the kitchen. "Don't let 'em know we suspect somethin'."

"Ever'body in here," he bellowed—taking charge. He stopped and gestured for two men to precede him. He couldn't let anyone bump into him and feel the guns, or worse, have one go off.

Herman, a tall, muscular black in charge of the crew, was already in the kitchen. "What are you doing back here?" he asked.

"The old white van across the street. I reported to Raoul that I saw movement in it this morning when I arrived and again when I left. He told me to come back and check it out. He thinks DEA might be monitoring cell phones so he sent me instead of calling. Stay off your phones. I can't tell if anybody is inside the vehicle. The windows are dark."

Four other men—another black, two Hispanic, and one white—crowded into the kitchen. Two had pistols. The others hefted assault rifles.

"We need to check it out. Is everyone here?" Paco asked.

Herman, leaning against the refrigerator, surveyed the crew. "Everyone except José."

A sleepy voice echoed from the hallway. "I'm here."

"Get in here." Paco turned to the window and moved the ragged, soiled curtain aside. In the window's reflection, he saw everyone standing in a half circle behind him. José stood in the doorway. The two with assault rifles were on either side of him.

The kitchen was empty except for a folding card table, four folding chairs, and the refrigerator. The other black man pulled a chair out and sat. Playing cards lay scattered on the table. A soiled rectangle on the linoleum floor outlined where the stove had been. A chipped and stained sink under the curtained window and cracked tan tile with brown grout completed the décor.

Still facing the window, Paco unbuttoned the single button holding his coat closed then reached into and through the cutout inside his right coat pocket. He wrapped his hand around the shotgun. Finger laced through the trigger guard.

“We have to check out the van. Decide what to do if somebody's in it.” Paco said while turning toward the men arrayed behind him. He raised the shotgun through the front of the coat. As it rose, he grabbed the forestock with his left hand and pointed it toward José, framed in the doorway.

Two shots erupted—sounding like a single explosion. One round caught José in the chest, blowing him across the hall. The next slammed the man on the left into the wall. Buckshot at close range tore bodies open and shattered bones.

He swept the gun back to the right. With the next squeeze, two rounds smashed into the other assault rifle bearer. Paco continued swinging to the right toward Herman—the most dangerous. Herman had snatched a gun from his holster but hadn't brought it to bear. Two shotgun blasts hammered him into the refrigerator.

Paco dropped his left hand from the forestock of the shotgun as he turned to the last two, before Herman hit the floor. The white guy almost had his gun up. Paco squeezed the trigger again. Two shots thundered. One hit the man in the gun arm, nearly ripping it off—starting a fountain of blood. The second went wide.

With only his right-hand grasping the shotgun, the recoil knocked it from Paco's hand. But he'd already flipped the coat out of the way and raised the shotgun on his left. The last man aimed his pistol as he rose from the chair.

Paco squeezed the trigger of the shotgun planted against his left hip. Four shots roared. A pistol bullet plucked at Paco's coat. He blasted the

other man in the groin, chest, and face as the gun barrel climbed. The shots shredded the black man and knocked him into the card table. It collapsed. Playing cards fluttered down. A red mist and the acrid smell of gunpowder filled the air.

Footsteps clomped in the echoing silence as Paco stepped over to the wounded man still twitching on the floor. He drew a pistol and shot him in the head twice.

Paco's wheezing echoed in the quiet. He looked at Herman's body crumpled in a pool of blood spreading on the linoleum. Remorse strummed his chest. Not a friend, but he'd known and respected him for years. "Sorry, man. It's for family."

Gunshots weren't unheard of around this area, but not this many all at once. Neighbors would call the police. Move.

He raced to the van he'd left on the street, jumped in, and backed it to the house—engine racing. He whipped the wheel to send the van weaving backward down the driveway, around to the back. Brakes squealed. Sweat ran into his eyes. He felt weak, dizzy, and couldn't catch his breath. He crossed his arms on the wheel and laid his head on them. When he looked up, colorless spots floated in front of his eyes. Leaving the van running, he pulled on the door handle and heaved with his shoulder to open it. "For Estralita," he muttered.

Stacked boxes of money and cocaine filled most of the laundry room at the back door. He pushed the lip of a two-wheel dolly under a chimney of five boxes. It was down one step and ten feet to the van. Paco shoved the cartons into the back of the van and returned for more. Six more trips filled the back of the van. On the last trip, he threw the shotguns, duster, and harnesses on top of the boxes. He'd left many boxes of drugs behind. He only needed enough for personal use. Finished loading, he leaned forward and put his hands on the floor of the van, gasping raggedly. He shut his eyes, but dizziness forced them open when nausea surged.

Pushing erect with an effort, he started to shut the van's back doors but stopped. He thrust his hand into a box and dragged out a powder-filled baggie, then closed the door. Walking around to the driver's side, he maintained an unsteady balance with his right hand against the van. A lacy

curtain fell back into place in the house next door. Hurry. He placed the van in gear, drove to the front of the house, and accelerated into the street.

As he made his turn toward the freeway heading north, sirens whooped.

## Chapter 3

*North Texas*

*April 3*

Still laboring for air, Paco began the eight-hour drive to Estralita's home near Kansas City. He'd stay away from I-35 and follow lesser-traveled highways from Dallas, past the Lake Texoma dam, then through small Oklahoma and Kansas towns.

In a Walmart supercenter parking lot he changed to the license plate he'd stolen the last time he was in Kansas City. When done, he hunkered in the driver's seat for two minutes—trying to catch his breath. He'd been up almost twenty hours, running on nervous energy and cocaine.

He was in worse shape than he thought. But with a pinch of powder from the baggie in the passenger seat, two sniffs, and he was ready to go. Between the cocaine and energy drinks, he could make it.

He planned to pick up Estralita and drive north to Canada. Canadians had good healthcare.

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Paco's mind wandered as he drove. Forty years ago he began as street muscle for the Medellin cartel in Columbia. Jorge Medina, then a minor player, first saw Paco playing soccer on the streets in Bogota. After a few tequilas, Jorge would tell listeners that he wondered why a man was playing with kids. Paco had towered over the rest of the boys. At sixteen, Paco was already six feet four inches and, although slim, he had a massive frame. He played goalie, protecting the space between two broken-down, rusting cars. Jorge said Paco had reminded him of a jaguar.

Jorge had come at Estralita's request to look after her *little* brother. Six years older than Paco, she took care of him after their parents and two siblings died in drug wars. With no skills, other than an attractive face and



a voluptuous body, she sold herself to raise money for food and housing in this rundown section of Bogota.

Her pimp made the mistake of hitting her in front of Paco. He beat the pimp to death with a nicked and dented cricket bat he'd found in a trash heap outside the Bogotá Cricket Club. He left it on the man's broken body along with his dreams of becoming a cricket hero, and wearing the brilliant white uniform like he'd seen through a hole in the Club fence.

Fearing reprisals from the pimp's large family, Estralita fled Bogotá leaving Paco in the streets.

Jorge, her ex-customer, thought he'd find a scrawny teenager he could put to work picking coca leaves. Instead he discovered a hulking teenager who took to violence like a coyote to baby chicks.

Jorge's rise within the cartel, based on native cunning, accelerated when backed by Paco.

Paco developed expertise in a wide range of weaponry including knives, handguns, rifles, shotguns, and machetes.

Foreseeing that the Columbian government, backed by US weapons, money, and men, was going to crush the Medellin cartel, Jorge moved to Mexico. He took over distribution organizations falling apart along with a failing cartel. Paco headed security.

After Jorge died Paco was demoted to transport mule.

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Estralita called two months ago. "*Hola, Paco.*"

"*Hola hermana, cómo está?*"

"*No es buena,*" she replied.

"*Qué?* What have they done?" Paco immediately feared that one of his nephews was in trouble, maybe in jail.

"*Cáncer.*"

Paco inhaled and his breath froze in his chest. "Who?" He breathed out.

Estralita explained that cancer was spreading through her body. She and her husband didn't have insurance. They were using up their life savings on cancer treatments, which weren't working.

After she'd left Columbia and snuck into the US, relatives helped her find work cleaning homes, offices, and hotels. She met and married a cook who dreamed of opening a Mexican restaurant. While he cooked, she cleaned.

She and her cook eventually moved to the Kansas City area to open a restaurant with a cousin in Lawrence—not known as a hotbed of Mexican cuisine. They filled a gustatory niche by downplaying Mexican spices for Midwestern tastes. The restaurant grew successful—so successful Estralita quit cleaning homes except for her own.

Paco visited them whenever he could, which was infrequent. He swallowed his disappointment when he couldn't interest his nephews in cricket. Since they excelled at *fútbol*—soccer in the US and a game he only played a few times on the streets in his youth—he learned their sport.

Estralita's news devastated Paco. In her early sixties, she deserved many years to play with grandchildren. He had to help her and the boys—like she helped him. The best medical care possible was what she needed.

Paco had no retirement plan, no health insurance. Most people in his line of business never needed them. A pre-purchased cemetery plot was more realistic.

But what could he do? He had no savings. He'd always spent everything he received—and that was a lot. Liquor, whores, gifts, and shit he didn't need and most of which he didn't have anymore. Now when he woke up it took a half-hour of creeping and creaking before he could walk without supporting himself on the furniture and walls.

He'd made up his mind after talking to his sister to take what the cartel owed him.

## Chapter 4

### *Oklahoma to Kansas*

*April 3*

Paco drove the van through North Texas into Oklahoma. Twenty-five miles inside Oklahoma, he stopped on a bridge over the Blue River. When traffic cleared, he dropped the shotguns over the railing into the river. They disappeared from sight. Shotguns were too much trouble to smuggle into Canada. He'd keep the pistols.

Back in the van, he panted again from the small exertion. After another pinch of cocaine he pulled onto the highway and continued north.

As he rolled down the highway, labored breathing made his chest hurt. He needed rest but couldn't stop. A dash of cocaine every hour sustained him.

He stopped for gas. Stepping from the van, Paco slapped white powder from his shirt and pants. He rubbed a dusting from his lips and chin as he trudged inside and laid two fifties on the counter. He waved his hand over his shoulder. "White van, fill up." Back outside he went through the gasoline ritual—flap, cap, nozzle, trigger squeeze. He stared at the unresponsive nozzle. "Damn." He turned to select a grade of octane. He leaned his forehead against the van while it filled. The cool metal felt good on his head.

Returning inside for his change, he snatched up a hotdog along with a six pack of Red Bull.

Four and a half more hours to Estralita's. By the time he got there he'd have been awake for almost thirty hours. He couldn't stay at her house. The cartel may already be after him. A few cartel friends knew Estralita. He'd take her to a motel where he could sleep. Her husband could sell the restaurant and follow to meet up with them later.

He popped the top on a Red Bull, took another pinch of cocaine, part of which drifted down to dust his clothes, shifted into drive, and steered

back onto the road. The drugs in back would keep him going until he could quit them. The money would be enough for Estralita and the kids.

Driving grew harder. He panted for air. Sweat ran into his eyes and soaked his shirt. When the buzz wore off, he caught his eyes drooping closed. He took more finger squeezes of powder.

His left arm throbbed. He rubbed it as he drove. Must be sore from the shotguns.

It was dark before he turned west toward Lawrence. He was within thirty minutes of Estralita's when the arm ache intensified, spreading to his shoulder, neck, and chest.

Talons of pain clutched at his chest. Doubled over in agony, he was oblivious when he jerked the van to the left. It ran onto the shoulder, dipped down in the middle of the grassy median, then shot back up on the other side; airborne for moment.

It landed on the wrong side of the road, running at an angle toward the far shoulder. He didn't have on a seat belt. The bounce had thrown him between the seats. He barely registered lights coming toward him.

Hauling on the steering wheel, he pulled himself back, and then had to push on the wheel to wrench the van left. He slid out of the seat onto the console again. The guardrail passed within inches on the right. Blurred images flashed by. A wall of rock appeared in his headlights. He wrenched the van back right. Metal crunched and squealed.

Searing, tearing pain gripped his chest and arm as his vehicle rolled forward. Fingers clutched at the source of agony. A jolting bounce slammed him against the dashboard. Trees materialized in the headlights. He stretched his leg to stop, missed the brake pedal—stabbed the gas instead. The front of the van rotated downward as the ground dropped away. Paco floated off the seat. A hand clutching the steering wheel was his only anchor.

Everything moved too fast. The van hurtled toward a too small gap in the trees. The rear view mirror rushed at him. He jerked his head sideways to miss it.

No chance for a last thought about Estralita. A blast of pain and his world winked out.

## Chapter 5

*Rural Kansas – Near Kansas City*

*10:10 p.m. April 3*

Steve flung the Taekwondo uniform into his gym bag. He couldn't catch a break. The bag hung limply from his hand as he shambled to the exit. His brow furrowed. It seemed like more shit kept getting shoveled onto the pile of his life.

As the door swung open, the frown relaxed. His mouth pulled into a smile. Bobby and his dad, Frank, were waiting in the parking lot for him. “Great match today,” Steve said. He raised a fist. “Sorry it went so late.”

“Thanks coach,” Bobby said.

Steve's fingers flared in a mock explosion when Bobby's fist touched his. The corners of Bobby's lips twitched upward and he ducked his head.

“Thanks, we stayed to watch yours,” Frank said. “Too bad. You were winning.”

Steve shrugged. “Master Lee told me the difference between a red and black belt is control. I have to learn.”

Frank draped an arm over his son's shoulders as they turned toward their car. “Remember, no punches in the nose.”

Steve waved goodbye before pitching his gym bag into the back seat of his Land Cruiser SUV. He jumped in, started it, and flicked on the seat heater. It may be spring, but it felt like winter.

Despite his earlier depression, Steve's chest swelled with a deep, satisfied breath. The kids he'd trained did well. Three of the four kids he brought tonight had won their age group. Bobby, the youngest at twelve, hadn't, but he showed marked improvement. If he kept improving he had a chance to medal next time.

Steve had done well and like Frank said, he might have won his own match if he hadn't been disqualified. He'd punched his opponent—a younger black belt, a level higher than his own red—in the nose.

He shook his head. Taking satisfaction in a loss—it summed up the way his life was going. He blew out a heavy breath.

Yes, the head was off limits in matches, but that guy unleashed a combination of punches and moves that left his nose hanging like a piñata. Steve instinctively whipped out a backhand, smashing his first two knuckles down into the bridge of the opponent's snout as he'd been trained to do. He wished he could take it back as soon as it made contact.

Well, it was a lesson for both. Steve would learn not to take every available opportunity. And the black belt would learn to keep a guard up—after his broken beak healed.

Steve swung his SUV out of the parking lot and headed home. He pressed the icon on his cellular for home. It rang three times.

“Done with the games?” Jen answered.

“The kids did well. Me not so much.”

“Did you set up any interviews today?” She demanded. Jen blamed all their troubles on his inability to find work.

“I made about a dozen calls,” he said. “Tried for decision makers, but mostly got shuffled off to HR. Did catch one VP at lunch. He didn't sound happy to hear from me.” He'd tried to explain that jobs for fifty-nine-year-old quality control engineers these days were as mythical as baby dragons. It was like talking to a wall.

“But you have time for martial arts,” she said frostily.

“You know Master Lee gives me free lessons and workouts if I teach these classes.” When Steve was going to drop out, Master Lee told him “You good teacher. Kids like you. Leave me time for better students. You teach—your lessons and workout free.”

“It's not about the cost,” Jen said. “It's the time wasted.”

“You said it would be hard for me to find a job looking like the Pillsbury Doughboy. That it made me look older,” Steve said in exasperation. Years ago he'd slipped easily into the sedentary suburban life style—his riding lawnmower had a beer cooler on the back. “I work out so I look fit and energetic—like you said I needed to be.” He'd

dropped forty-five pounds in the last fourteen months by dieting, exercise, and taking up Taekwondo again. Now, Jen complained that he was wasting time better spent looking for work.

“I saw the letter from the bank. It warns of foreclosure,” She said, changing subjects. “What are we going to do about that?”

It looked as if a job didn’t magically appear they’d have to sell the house. At least they weren’t upside-down like so many others, but they wouldn’t make much if anything. He’d tried to convince himself that it was better than letting the bank foreclose. “Let’s talk about options tomorrow.” Steve said. “I’m bushed.”

“Alright,” she said and disconnected.

He hoped Jen would be asleep when he got home. Their marriage had gotten rocky since his layoff at the beginning of what the media now called the Great Recession. Maybe hit-the-rocks was too mild an expression. It was more like falling off that giant rock at Yosemite—El Capitan.

The only good thing about being laid off—he was now in the best physical shape in twenty years.

But he needed some way to vent his frustration—his opponent’s broken nose was the result. Damn.

Driving this desolate Kansas highway gave him too much time to dwell on his problems. Tonight, dark, dense clouds stole all celestial light. No cars were in front or behind and few passed on the other side of the wide, undulating median that divided the four lane roadway. He raced along the tunnel that his headlights carved through the darkness. Only the dashed lines whipping by on the road gave any sense of speed.

“Holy crap!” His hands clamped the steering wheel. Headlights charged across the median from the other side of the highway, dipped down out of sight, and then shot into the air. They bounced, tipped at an angle, banged back to level, and headed right at him.

## Chapter 6

*Rural Kansas*

*April 3*

Steve stomped on his brakes. The ABS system moaned as his three-ton SUV decelerated to halt on a bridge. Two east-bound lanes enclosed by guard rails left little room to maneuver. He shifted into reverse, preparing to take evasive maneuvers. But the oncoming headlights passed across the road at an angle. Barely missing the guardrail, it left the roadway on his right.

Jouncing high beams charged toward fractured bands of limestone climbing a rocky cliff. The light colored van swerved sharply to avoid a head-on collision with the stone wall. Metal squealed as its side scraped against rock. It rolled erratically down the long slope toward the creek—dropping out of sight.

He tracked its progress by jittering flashes of light on trees as it bounced down the incline.

Lights winked out with an abrupt crunch.

Steve drove across the bridge and parked along the right shoulder. A semi-truck whooshed by in the fast lane. It was the first vehicle he'd seen on this side of the divided highway since leaving the tournament.

He jumped out and waved his arms at dwindling tail lights. The truck kept going.

Steve shut off his headlights and flicked on the flashers. Didn't need two accidents in the dark tonight.

After hustling around the SUV to the guardrail, he looked toward the wreck. It was a pale form in the darkness of the trees lining the creek.

On the other side of the rail, between the highway and rocky cliff, the ground descended toward the creek. A narrow concrete drainage ramp followed the incline down.



He needed to call for help. Report the accident first. Then check on the passengers. He retrieved his phone from the console and punched in 911. Silence. He tried again. Still nothing. He squinted at the screen. Shit! No bars.

Steve ran along the road and rechecked twice more—the signal still flat lined. Drive to somewhere with reception?

No. Check on the passengers. He had Red Cross certification. He could administer first aid or CPR. Maybe someone stopping would go for help.

Steve grabbed the first aid kit from the emergency bag he kept in the back of the SUV “in case.” He yanked on his leather gloves. There might be jagged metal or broken glass.

Carrying the first aid kit and his flashlight, he strode to the guardrail. He swung his legs over and jogged down the grade toward the creek. Branches of lightning danced across the clouds. “One, two, three... ten, eleven....” His instinctive count matched the slap of his right foot on the concrete drainage ramp... “fifteen....” *BOOM!* The lightning was three miles away. Close.

Steve ran up behind the van and swung wide to see what he had to work with.

Steps he taught in Red Cross first aid classes for the Boy Scouts raced through his mind—look around, make sure the area is safe. Rescuers often rushed in, turning themselves into victims. Sniffing the air, he detected the sweetish smell of antifreeze, but no gasoline.

Two thick trees growing from the creek were all that kept it from falling in. He heard the roar of rushing water. It must be raining upstream.

The ground upon which the vehicle rested descended precipitously. And then it fell away. The undercarriage just behind the front wheels rested on the edge of what he estimated to be a twelve-foot drop. Front wheels dangled in space.

Lodged against the trees that had smashed it’s front end, the van appeared secure. Steve tried to open the back doors. Locked. He shined the flashlight through darkened rear windows. He saw a jumbled cargo of boxes—no passengers.

The loading door on the right side was also locked. The impact had buckled the front passenger door. It didn't look like it would open without the Jaws of Life.

He circled to the driver's side. Although the ground was steeper, there was less damage in front. That door might open.

Steve glanced up at the bridge. Red flickers from his emergency flashers reflected off the bridge rail. Any traffic sounds would be inaudible over the rumbling water. The bridge was at least thirty feet straight up. No one could see the van down here unless they leaned over the rail.

Maybe someone would stop for the blinking lights. If they did, would they think to look down here? *Please, someone stop and look.*

He eased beside the van, down the steepening grade toward the driver's door. Steve kept a hand on the vehicle's rain gutter for security in case he slipped.

Leaning forward, still gripping the gutter with fingertips, he grabbed the door handle. The handle moved but the door didn't open. Stuck.

His flashlight played over the driver. A man was out of the seat—stomach draped over the top of the steering wheel. No seat belt. Deflated airbags sagged below him. His head and neck stuck through the top half of the broken windshield.

Steve used the flashlight to trace from where the man's thigh lodged against the bottom of the steering wheel down to his foot pressed against the front of the seat bottom. It wasn't a straight line and the angle was in the wrong direction. Some part of that limb must be broken. The way it was wedged perhaps was all that had kept him from flying through the window to the creek below.

Steve stretched his left leg until his toes rested on the edge of the bumper. Re-gripping the rain gutter with both hands he took a deep breath and lunged with his right leg, positioning those toes on the bumper, too.

The left shoe started to slip, but he shifted weight and planted his foot against the sycamore tree holding up the van. The sole slid on the smooth pale bark and then caught on a knot on the trunk. He held a death grip on the rain gutter with his fingertips. This was crazy.

Breaths coming in short gasps, Steve glanced down toward the thundering water. If he fell, they might find his body ten miles away—or not at all.

He inhaled deeply. Thank god the tree was sturdy—an eighteen-inch diameter colossus growing from the bank. It arched over the cascade below.

Two feet away, the driver's head protruded through the shattered windshield. Steve flicked the flashlight back on.

Fractured, laminated glass bulged outward where the man's shoulders had slammed into it. His head and neck sagged crookedly out of the hole they had ripped through the windshield. Steve grimaced. Necks shouldn't bend like that.

He dragged off a glove and pressed fingers against the carotid artery on the neck just below the jaw. No pulse. Was it his imagination or was the dark olive skin already starting to cool?

The rearview mirror dangled—touching the driver's shoulder where it pressed against the torn opening. Steve reached his fingers into the hole. His glove scraped glass edges. With a tug, he pulled the broken mirror loose.

No fog formed when he held it under the driver's nose. Steve's mind flashed to deaths he'd encountered up close and personal in Vietnam. “May God receive your soul,” he whispered.

He dropped the mirror and watched it bounce off the rocks. Water swept it away.

Steve shined his flashlight beam at the churning water. All this for a dead man. He started to ease his way back to firm footing. Then he stopped.

Could there be a passenger? Shining his light around the right side of the cab, he noted that a box had broken open and spilled its contents between the seats. He must be a craftsman. It looked like a scattering of tiles or small bricks. Steve held the light still and squinted. His heart surged. “Holy shit,” he gasped. The flashlight revealed packets of money scattered all over the floor.