

That morning at the San Ysidro border crossing, the traffic snaked slowly through Tijuana. Four hours of staring at the bumper of the car in front of her. Kris' lungs were filled with gas fumes even as her eyes were filled with grit from crying and lack of sleep. She just wanted to get across the border and not be stuck here anymore. Was that too much to ask?

When the *trapero*, one of the rag men who walked the traffic lines, leaned over her hood and started cleaning her front window, it was almost a relief to start cursing. She didn't know much Spanish, but could swear fairly fluently. A tiny blonde American woman who could curse always shocked the locals, which is probably why Ryan had chuckled sadistically as he taught her after they moved to Mexico four months ago.

She hit the button to roll down the car window and stuck her head out and swore more—with gusto. The *trapero* froze, his dirty rag midair over her window. Meanwhile his friends were letting one of those *gaviotas*—line cutters—through a barrier in the side street.

“*Pendejo!*,” Kris ended her diatribe bitterly, hitting her horn. The *trapero* backed away but the damage was already done. The beat up Nissan slid into the lane in front of her. She hit her horn again. The Nissan's driver just gave her an exaggerated shrug and flipped her off. She swore again, returning the gesture.

A little boy with a cart approached, hopeful that her open window meant a sale, but she jammed the button to roll it up. He stood there with water bottle extended a few seconds, as she ignored him. Usually she'd give him a few coins or at least a sympathetic smile but today all she wanted was this line moving faster. She stared at the Nissan in front of her with a scowl as she rubbed her left arm, wincing as her fingers explored the sickly pattern of yellow, green, and purple playing out across her elbow. Her leg probably looked about the same under her jeans. The aspirin better kick in or she was

going to be stiff by the time she got out of the car.

A drip of sweat trickled down her neck and she tried cranking up the A/C. Ryan had said he'd fix it, but he'd probably spent all his money at the bar again. Bad enough he hadn't fixed the Corolla's passenger side door he'd broken two days ago. It was dented and wouldn't lock but at least it didn't make her uncomfortable like the weak A/C. Maybe the windows down would be better but she also liked to breathe and not be pestered. Not that the windows were stopping the fumes.

Again they inched forward a car-length. She watched as several vendors suddenly targeted the stupid line cheating Nissan at once. An ice cream vendor, pushing a little cart with a bell, tried to join, tipping over the water boy's cart. Immediately a loud argument broke out, with the boy shouting abuses, and other vendors shouting encouragements or just swearing. Several drivers in the area started honking their horns and Kris joined in. If this got out of hand, it could slow down her lane.

Suddenly her passenger door opened. Startled, she glanced up to find a thin, older man sliding into the seat next to her. His darker skin and hair said he was Mexican; his face showed he was a stranger. She froze. "What are you doing? Get out of my car!"

The man pulled a gun out of a portfolio case he had tucked under his arm. It was amazing how focused you could feel when confronted with a weapon. Its cold black outline filled her vision. Her heart was beating loudly in her ears.

"Don't try anything," the man said quickly. The gun jerked slightly in emphasis. He kept it low in his lap, out of view of the people in nearby cars but aimed directly at her. The man's hands were steady and the gun shiny in his hands. A car horn went off behind her and she jumped. The rest of the world returned to her vision and she realized she needed to slide her car forward a few inches. She did so on automatic pilot.

“What do you want?” Her voice cracked as she spit out the words over her suddenly dry lips.

“Shut up and cross the border,” the man growled.

Her mind ran through her alternatives. She could make a scene. If she yelled or honked the horn would anyone help? Would he shoot her? What about ramming that Nissan in front of her? It would serve him right and would certainly draw attention. It just seemed too risky.

She was gripping the steering wheel so hard her hands ached. She forced herself to relax her grip. “I don’t want any trouble,” she said in what she hoped was a reasonable tone. “Why don’t you just get out and we’ll pretend this never happened?” Hadn’t a TV show advised that if you were a hostage, try to get the kidnapers to see you as a person? “I’m Kris. I just want to get into San Diego safely.”

She automatically rolled her own car forward as traffic moved. Suddenly the border crossing seemed too close. This man could end up shooting her or getting into a gunfight with the officials up ahead.

“No trouble, shut up and cross the border like I’m just a friend you’re giving a lift to, okay?” The gun was still aimed directly at her.

Kris looked around. The people behind her apparently hadn’t been looking or didn’t care that someone had opened her door and got in. Nobody was going to help her. She gave a quick nod of acknowledgement to the man, biting her lip. She didn’t trust her voice right now. The cars moved forward another length. She had maybe 15 minutes before the border.

Kris kept her face forward as if concentrating on traffic but she weighed the idea of leaping out her door to freedom. Would he be able to shoot her before she could escape? She eyed her enforced companion. While his hand was steady, his eyes darted around and he was breathing hard like he had

run from a great distance. Something about the way he sat might indicate his ribs were sore, as if he had recently been worked over. Kris remembered how it had felt when she had two cracked ribs and the protective way she sat and how it hurt to breathe heavily, as he was doing. If he was panicking, she was in more danger. She needed to calm him down. Still, if he was injured, it might slow his reactions which could help.

“We’ll be at the gate soon. You might want to buckle up and hide that gun or you’ll draw a lot of attention to yourself.”

He looked startled at her and then nodded. “Don’t get any ideas.” He placed the gun back into the portfolio case but sat it on his lap. He carefully slid the seatbelt on and then adjusted himself so he could hold the gun and make it look like he just had the case on his knees.

She needed to get him talking while she thought. “What’s your name? If it comes up at the gate, I should know.”

“Don’t pull anything.” The man practically growled even as he eyed the traffic around them anxiously.

“They will check our IDs. If I’m supposed to be giving you a lift because we’re friends, I should know your name.”

“Enrique,” he said. “If it should come up.”

“Okay, Enrique, so you have an ID on you, right?”

He nodded. “Just drive.”

The car slid forward another few feet. This was the slowest border crossing of her life. More sweat was collecting on the back of her neck and she wished the air conditioning was working better. She

didn't dare make a move to roll down the window.

"I'm driving, I'm driving," she realized her voice was going up an octave and willed herself to keep it together. No need to antagonize him. It would just lead to trouble. "I'm just thinking ahead to how we'll make this work."

They were just a few cars from the crossing signals now. In the months they had lived in Mexico she had crossed pretty frequently, although usually when it wasn't so crowded. She had missed San Diego, her friends, her old stomping grounds. It had been hard moving down to Mexico with no one but Ryan. It wasn't like she got a lot of quality time with him, after all.

She moved the car forward another car length. They were next to the light.

"Just get us through and it will all be over," said the man next to her.

She licked her lips and clutched the steering wheel a little tighter to stop the shaking but she nodded, keeping her eyes on the agent up ahead. It was their turn.

She rolled the car forward when the light turned green and moved into the short block for scanning passports, as she pushed the button for the window down. Holding out her passport to the machine, she could feel her heart racing. They would be looking up her info for when she got to the booth ahead.

They moved ahead again and after a short wait, the light changed and she slid in front of the immigration booth. A young man stepped out. Enrique handed a passport to her. She grabbed it with her booklet and handed it to the waiting official. He glanced at them both and then looked at her.

Her face felt frozen into a grimace. The young man glanced at her and then the passport. Then he leant down to look at Enrique, who was sitting with the portfolio case on his lap and his hands crossed casually on top of it.

The young agent glanced down at the two booklets and frowned slightly. “What’s your purpose for crossing today?” Kris was sure he was suspicious.

“Shopping.” It was the first thing she could think of.

“And you are from....?”

“I live in Rosarito now. Going back to my old home of San Diego.” She felt like she was babbling. Did he notice something was wrong?

The young man leant down a little more to get a good look at her passenger. “And you?”

Enrique turned and gave a wide smile. “I’m helping her with some shopping for a home repair I’m going to do.”

The young man nodded and then just when she thought he’d hand over their passports and let them move on, he frowned and said, “Wait here,” retreating into the booth.

Were they going to be sent to secondary inspection? Was Enrique going to pull his gun? She glanced at him. He was shifting uncomfortably.

A jolt of cold ran into the palms of her hands clutching the steering wheel. She could practically feel the gun in Enrique’s lap even though he still had it hidden by the case.

With all of this traffic, you’d think they’d be anxious to get people moving. She stared at the red light ahead, wishing her passport was back in the car and the light was green. Then they could merge into traffic, be on the freeway and away from Mexico. Maybe then she wouldn’t have to deal with Enrique—instead of sitting here about to be in the middle of a gun battle.

The young man returned and leaned down to see them. Kris braced herself for a problem.

Suddenly she was being handed back the passports and he was waving her through the green light.

Kris stared unbelievably up at him for a full second before realizing she could go. She dumped the two passports in the center console between her carjacker and her and rolled up her window as they slowly merged into traffic.

All the lanes merged slowly but once the border was truly behind them the road eventually opened up and they hit freeway speeds. They rode in silence. Kris glanced at Enrique. He had the gun back out on his lap and pointed at her. He had a thin smile and she couldn't decide if that was a good sign. Would he kill her and take her car? Or would he get out and disappear, like he had never forced his way into her life today?

The silence was weighing on her so she finally blurted out, "What now?" She was pleased to hear her voice sounded calm.

"Just keep driving for a bit. I'll tell you when to pull over."

He looked so damn smug. She'd seen that look on Ryan's face when she told the San Diego cops she didn't want their help, that month before they moved. In fact, Enrique's build was a lot like Ryan. Probably had his same wiry strength too. She'd have to be careful.

Enrique was only a bit darker than Ryan. Ryan fit in well in Mexico while she always felt like she stood out like a tourist with her fair skin and pale hair. It didn't matter now though. She just needed to get away from Enrique and she'd be safe. Home free.

They were sliding by Chula Vista landmarks now and heading towards San Diego. Enrique started giving her directions. Kris kept an eye on her surroundings, looking for a chance. She wanted him to let down his guard so she was careful to follow his directions to the letter. They got off the freeway and began generally heading east, with a few turns here and there. They were rapidly leaving the more

heavily traveled areas.

Kris could feel her heart pounding and felt flushed all over. If something was going to happen, it was likely to be soon. She rubbed at her left elbow and stretched her legs a little surreptitiously to relieve the aches and stiffness. If she needed to move fast, she wanted to be ready.

They were pulling into a deserted side street, more an alley, with the backs of businesses and dumpsters lining the side. Kris considered the possibilities. If he was planning on killing her, this could be the time. She would have to fight. Suddenly he directed her to pull over. Holding the gun at her, he turned in the seat to face her more directly.

“You did good. I’ll get out now. You can pretend like you never saw me. I’ll just take your cell phone so I can get away before you can report anything—and then off you go.”

“You’re letting me go?” The surprise and relief was in her voice.

“Look, I’m not a bad guy,” her carjacker said in a wheedling tone, “ just desperate. I was being chased and needed across the border quickly without being caught by them. I don’t want to harm you.”

She glanced at the gun in his hand and he smiled, putting it back in the portfolio. He then unbuckled his seat belt and started to open the passenger door.

Now was her chance. She hit the gas pedal, hard. Enrique, just starting to duck out the car door, slammed back, his head hitting the frame and he tumbled out. She stopped quickly and looked back. He was lying on the ground stunned but still moving, trying to get up on his knees, holding his head.

She put the car in reverse and quickly backed up. The thump on the back corner of the bumper and then of the tires going over the man was satisfying.

Best to be sure. She stopped and then sped forward. More thumps and then she came to a halt

again. He wasn't moving now.

Kris got out carefully. Enrique was lying in the alley, the gun and portfolio flung out a few feet from him. She grabbed them both. Opening up the case, she was pleased to find a large wad of cash, along with a bunch of financial paperwork. Who knew how useful that could be. Then there was the gun. Enrique certainly didn't need it anymore.

She rolled his body over, searching his pockets but finding very little beyond some change, a folding knife, and a wallet. It wasn't easy to push him out of view but luckily he wasn't a big man. Stashing him between two dumpsters, she looked around to make sure she hadn't missed anything.

It was almost as satisfying as early this morning when she'd finally had enough of Ryan bullying her. He'd slapped her across the arm, already bruised from their argument last night, and she'd snapped. She still wasn't sure how the knife came into her hand but when it was over, she made sure to clean up and then pack. She'd used his name when they moved in—almost like they were married, he'd said. Nobody really knew her. Now that she was back in the U.S., she should be able to start her life over again under her own name. And now Enrique had given her a little cash and protection. It was more than she could have hoped for when she started driving to the border almost without thinking.

She was just glad his little stunt hadn't drawn attention to her at the crossing. Nobody should connect her to the body in their little place in the suburbs of Tijuana, especially when she told the agent at the crossing she lived in Rosarito. She was truly home free now. She hopped in the car and drove off, relieved. Today was a fresh start and she wasn't going to let anything get in her way.