



Book Description

In 2053, Mariposa Hernandez sacrifices everything to get home from the Sino-American War. It's the first of many mistakes. Bored of civilian life, haunted by the war, Mariposa is invited by a long lost friend on a treasure hunt into the wastelands of Denver. Can Mariposa reclaim a fortune in abandoned dimes before the ghosts of her past consume her?

Armageddon Dimes

A PREQUEL TO THE JUNIPER WARS SERIES

AARON MICHAEL RITCHEY

Smashwords Edition - 2015

Armageddon Dimes

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarities to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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An excerpt from Dandelion Iron

Chapter One

About the Author

Also by Aaron Michael Ritchey

Case File #753

The Juniper Narratives Project #753 –May 31, 2103

Subject name: Mariposa Maria Hernandez

Veteran: Yes

Branch: Army

Rank: Corporal

DOB: 03/15/2023

Age: 79

Current Residence: Kansas City, Missouri

The Juniper Narratives Project is a government-funded program to record the stories of those who lived in the territories affected by the Chinese nuclear assault on the Yellowstone Caldera in 2029. Electricity ceased to function in Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming, Montana and sections of the surrounding states due to a basalt flow. This geological phenomenon created a permanent electro-magnetic field. Due to their technological isolation, the U.S. government relegated the states back to territories. The entire region became known as the Juniper.

In order to preserve the personal history of those who found a home in the Juniper, faculty of the project have traveled the country interviewing the surviving women so their stories can finally be told.

SESSION 1

INTERVIEWER NOTE: Ms. Hernandez's health was in decline, and so I was forced to break the interview into twelve sessions of various lengths.

Toci wasn't bad.

I want to start there cuz I haven't been feeling well, and I don't want to die with anyone thinking I hated her. I didn't.

She's not evil for what she did, *sabes*? She was just emotional, like crazy in love, but back then a lot of us were. There weren't so many boys cuz of the Sterility Epidemic, and when you are young, wanting to be in love, sometimes you go crazy.

I fought in the Sino-American War, and by the time hostilities ceased, my unit was only girls. No boys left. But I didn't really feel the effects of the Sterility Epidemic until I got back home.

Only, I wasn't home, I was in Kansas City. I went AWOL to take care of my *abuela*, but she died. I missed her by a day. It would've been a million times easier to bear if it had been a week, but she died the day before I got there. It was like God was jacking with me. I was a stranger at her funeral. Didn't tell anyone who I was, just ate the *carnitas*, drank the beer, and left alone.

I'd sit on the floor of my new house, new but empty as an eggshell, and I'd look at pictures of her and my family on my electronic slate. All the faces were dead now. All the smiles were gone. I'd sit and listen to the drunk *pendejo* in the house next door beat his wives. Night after night of that. I didn't know if they were Mormon or whatever, but like I said, not a lot of boys to choose from, and sometimes we make choices that later make us hate ourselves.

Like what I had done to get home from the Sino early. Like what was done to me.

In KC I bought a nice house, got a good job in IT at the Marriott near the airport, and I should've been happy, right? I mean, I went there thinking I'd be cleaning rooms, but they had Hindus doing that, *inmigrantes* from India, since they had tons of people and in the U.S. not so much. I had done a little IT work in the Kayleatown internment camp outside of Beijing, and that was good enough for the hotel bosses, and I got six figures to fix computers.

It was a lot better than what I got from the VAD—that's what we called the Veteran's Administration.

Anyways, one night in mid-November of 2053, I was in my house, pacing, thinking, looking at pictures of dead family, watching the clock hit midnight and keep on going. This was right before Toci came, and I couldn't sleep. No surprise there. I had insomnia so bad every time I got in bed it felt like a lie. The mattress was the only furniture I owned and it hated me.

I didn't have my firearm cuz of the anti-gun laws in the States, and that night, I wanted a weapon. When you're hateful, twisted up, and scared of stupid crapjack, holding an MG21 assault rifle can really help.

I walked the perimeter of the empty house and listened to the neighbors scream at each other. The *pendejo* would roar, the women would scream, and the babies would cry, which would make the drunk guy roar louder, and on it went.

Listening to them was bad, but being stuck in my head was worse.

Over and over, thinking about my worthless past—all of the dead, the times with Chicho and Toci, the war, Kayleatown, and Lieutenant Strauss on the steamship home.

Over and over, thinking about my worthless present—all these people getting so upset over jacking computers, like it was life or death. I knew life or death, and no one was going to die from a tangle server crashing. Still, the money, the money, the money...

Over and over, thinking about my worthless future—boring, stupid, and more of the same.

A big crash from next door made me jump, and then one of the wives started crying. I'd heard

crying like that before, when Charquida lost Ruiz in the Battle of Shanghai.

I couldn't stop myself. I was out the door, over the fence, jogged across the brown grass of their lawn, and into their house. It felt good to be moving, to be fighting, and the adrenaline—that was the best part, that feeling like I could do anything and I was invincible and I didn't care if I lived or died or did both.

The guy was big and stank. In the kitchen, he had one of his younger wives up against the refrigerator. He had a wife-beater on, you know, those sleeveless t-shirts, and jeans. I think he was some kind of mechanic cuz he had grease-stains on his knuckles, but then he would've made most of his money selling his Male Product to the ARK, the American Reproduction Knowledge Initiative.

Male Product. That was what the nice ladies called it.

All his wives wore those *guera* New Morality dresses, gray and covering up everything cuz nice ladies didn't want you to see their *chichis*.

Yeah, they really did wear those big, dumb dresses back then. I didn't. I liked jeans, and if I was going to wear a dress, it would be red-hot and sexy, with black stockings and *chica mala* pumps. I was a soldier, *mija*, but I was still a woman.

The big piece of crapjack turned and snarled at me. "What the hell are you doin' here?"

I didn't go in there to be interviewed, *sabes*? I got to work—put him down quick. He was stiff-kneed, so I dropped him at the knee, and then slammed my full body weight onto the back of his legs. He threw an elbow, and I grabbed it, levered it up to wreck his shoulder, then pounded his face into the fridge until his wives pulled me off him.

Easy. It was so easy to take him down. How come my *pinche* job wasn't so easy? How come normal life wasn't that easy? Then again, I guess violence is a simple thing. He was hurting his wife, so I hurt him. Simple. Uncomplicated.

He lay on the floor squealing. Two of his wives, pregnant to the point of popping, finally got me off him. One of the women had an eye going red, the lid swelling down. He'd hit a pregnant woman. It made me want to jack up his other shoulder.

A younger girl, twelve maybe, ran to take care of the toddlers who were upstairs wailing. An older woman held a baby. Maybe she was the *abuela*, but she didn't look very old. She stared at me. So did the two pregnant women, a few others, half-afraid, half-shocked out of their minds. The son-of-a-*puta* was crying now, real tears and everything.

"I won't listen to it no more!" I yelled at them. "You want babies so bad, there's an ARK clinic not five minutes from here. It can't be that expensive."

The *abuela* answered for them all. "It's not just that." Her eyes told me the rest. They loved him. He provided for them. He wasn't much, but he was a man.

Those poor women. Only a few men left, most sterile, and here they were stuck with a drunk dog.

The stupidly young *abuela* nodded to one of the pregnant women. "Call 911. Jeremy is going to need the hospital."

The baby in her arms looked at me with wide, frightened eyes. A baby girl. No surprise there.

I ignored the baby's eyes and went up to the *abuela*. "No more. If I have to come back, I ain't leaving with him still breathing. You get me?"

"It'll be better."

No. It wouldn't.

All those women started babying the *pendejo* on the floor, and crying with him, and the sight made me sick. I slammed out of the house.

Whatever.

Then Toci came. She came to save me cuz I wouldn't last there. Yeah, I had a job that paid well, a nice place to live, but I was alone, and no one really saw me for me. I was just some *chica* working IT for a big corporation, and if I left someone else would take my place.

I had busted my ass and sold my soul to get home to take care of *abuela*, but it didn't matter. She died. I was a nobody. I'd been happier in Kayleatown. At least there, I was part of something.

In KC I was an empty shell casing.

Toci didn't come to save me. She did, but that's not why she came.

Not at all.

She came to invite me on a treasure hunt. For real.

Guess you'll have to come back tomorrow to hear more about it, won't you?

SESSION 2

INTERVIEWER NOTE: The Sterility Epidemic affected several generations of people in the middle of the 21st Century. The first cases were noted after the Yellowstone Knockout. Male birth rates dropped to one in ten. Of males born, 90% were sterile. The sterility rates of adult males also increased. The number of “viable” males was reduced to approximately ten percent of the entire male population, which had previously been decreased due to the devastation of the Sino-American War (2028-2045).

Well, here I am, *mija*. I made it another day.

It'd be a shame if I dropped dead before I got to the end, but I don't think I will. If I did, you wouldn't know the end of my story cuz my story isn't going to be in any history books.

Wren's is, though. I'll talk about Wren later, if I make it. Pray I make it, *mija*, if you can believe in God.

A week after I put the drunk guy on his *culo*, I had my first day off in awhile, which was bad cuz the hotel was awful but at least it kept me busy. Without it, I'd get restless until I had a few beers.

I was drinking a Negro Modelo with my feet in the gutter and my butt on the sidewalk. The VAD therapists warned against drinking too much cuz they said if you didn't talk about your trauma and if you drank too much you'd go PTSD. Maybe they were right.

Anyways, it was my day off, and I was in the mood to do whatever I wanted, which meant getting all messed up.

I saw someone walking down the street. Most of the houses in the old suburb stood empty cuz there weren't so many people. Some houses were full though, of *Latinas* who liked to live together, or more Hindus fresh off the boat from India. You walked down the sidewalk, the smells of curry and jalapenos would be fighting it out, but not the women. Yeah, some walked around crazy for men who weren't there, or dealing with the never-ending *gillian* drama of that I-said-this-and-she-said-that-but-I-love-her-anyways crapjack. But most everyone was peaceful and hardworking.

The word *gillian* came from the Sino, from the Chinese words, *tong xing lian*, or same sex love. I didn't use it much. If someone was a lesbian, I called them a lesbian. Back home, though, with the New Morality everywhere, the word took on a life of its own. Stupid.

Straight girls, lesbians, whatever. People in my neighborhood kept the streets clean, there were flowers in the flower beds, and every other weekend someone would throw a big street party. Everyone was nice, except for me and the drunk *pendejo* behind us, but he'd been quiet. Probably busy paying his hospital bills.

I kept my eyes on the woman coming toward me. Even from a distance she looked familiar—she had a walk that was part strut, part hurry.

Then I knew. It was Toci. Her real name was Mariposa too, and since we had the same name, people started calling us both *tocayo*, only for her the name stuck as Toci. It's a Mexican thing.

She walked up and stood over me, hands on her hips, wearing a New Morality dress, which I couldn't quite believe. Toci was a lot of things, but not religious.

I squinted up at her. “*Hola*, Toci. You know, there's like a church down the street. You're all dressed up for it. Maybe you can save your soul or whatever.”

“*Hola, nita*. It's been a long time.” *Nita* was short for *hermanita* which is Spanish for sisters. We'd been close. But not for years.

Last time I saw her, I'd been a civilian just out of high school running the streets with Auntie. Uncle was gone to the Sino and Auntie liked to party and so did I. So did Toci, one of Auntie's third cousins twice removed or something. For me, Toci was family, a best friend when she wasn't

going behind my back to hook up with Chicho.

Before I left for China, we'd both been in love with Chicho in El Paso. I'd date him, get pissed, then she'd date him, get pissed, and we'd both swear off him for good, then one of us would go crawling back. We had him in our veins, like Skye6, the synthetic morphine medics gave us in the Sino. Chicho was big, which made his name funny, and he was always quiet and kind of shy. I guess he didn't need to talk very much since he was so handsome and viable.

He was a good guy most of the time, but he had a mean streak, and sometimes when he partied too much he had trouble staying faithful. Not that he was a player, no, too hardcore Catholic. Probably had carpal tunnel from crossing himself so much. I knew he felt guilty as hell when he cheated on us, or got mean and said a bunch of crapjack he couldn't take back.

The night before I flew off to basic training in Fort Jackson, Chicho and I had this huge fight. I told Toci she and him could go to hell together. Me and Chicho apologized later in emails, and ended things in okay terms, but just okay. We lost touch eventually. You know how that goes.

Toci and I kept in touch, but we couldn't talk about Chicho no more. Too much bad blood and too many bad nights. Toci hadn't been drafted since she had dual citizenship and kept her official residency in Juarez.

"Si, Mari, it's been ten years since we saw each other." Toci reached down and I surrendered my Negro Modelo to her. "Why are you drinking Mexican beer? I figured you'd be all like Budweiser or Coors. Drink it with your pinkie up like a good little American *guera*."

"Who's wearing the New Morality dress, *nita*?" I smiled. It was so easy to talk with her—snap your fingers, ten years felt like ten minutes since we last hung out.

She took a sip and handed me back the bottle. "I'm in disguise. My cousin said you called looking for me. Well, I was in Hays, just down the road. Close enough to come visit. I hear you're a big shot computer tech at a hotel."

"Resident *chola* genius."

"You make a lot there?"

I shrugged. "Enough."

"You get any money from the VAD? A place to live?"

"No, nothing. When I got discharged in Alaska, they made all these promises about housing and work in KC. I thought it would be cool, since I was coming here anyway to take care of my *abuela*. But she died the day before I got here. Sucks. And the VAD wouldn't give me a dime. *Nada*."

"Sorry," Toci said. "If your *abuela* is dead, how come you're still in KC? Why don't you go back to El Paso?"

I shrugged. "Everyone I know is dead there too, and you were in Juarez." I thought about asking about Chicho, but that would be too dangerous. Instead I let out a breath. "So, yeah, I survived the Sino and I got home, but it doesn't really matter now. And I don't think the VAD wants soldiers to come home yet. I don't think America is ready."

Toci reached into a gray purse, brand new and expensive by the look of it, and threw down a heavy, black plastic sack at my feet. The sack must've weighed six kilos or more and would've completely filled the purse.

"That's what I've been hearing," Toci said. "I've met some other *chicas* who made it home, and they're saying the VAD is screwing everyone over. Soldiers who make it back from the Sino ain't getting what they deserve. All these promises, but then no delivery. Like a bad marriage."

I shrugged and tipped the bottle to my lips with one hand, hefted the sack with the other. It was heavy and full of coins. "What the hell, Toci? You find gold?"

"Dimes," Toci said. "That's three hundred dollars in dimes."

The bag was sealed shut. I didn't feel like going back to the house for scissors. I was feeling too lazy, and besides, I trusted Toci.

"That's a lot of dimes," I said.

"There was a mint in Denver before the Knockout. You know that?"

I shrugged again cuz what did it matter? It would've been salvaged a long time ago.

Toci glanced around. The street was empty except for a few electric cars parked against the

curb. Those were the days before frictionless cars and the Eterna batteries. I hear those late-model electric cars are worth a fortune now. Back then, we were always complaining about them.

Toci sat down next to me and took the beer back, but only sipped it so we could share. “After the Knockout, it was chaos in Denver, *sabes?* They had a mint there, millions of dollars in coins, cuz they didn’t do paper money there, only coins. The military in the US was thin cuz of the Sino, so they had to hire private contractors to get the coins. They couldn’t leave all that money there, yeah?”

“Yeah.” I knew where she was heading. My heart beat faster.

“No more pennies were being made, but they got nickels, quarters, and dollar coins out of the Denver Mint, but not the dimes, *nita*. The dimes got lost. And a woman I met knows where they are. Millions of dollars in dimes. A friend of a friend of a friend took a crew in there for them, but only one *chica* made it out. All the rest were killed by that new Outlaw Warlord in Denver. The girl who made it out gave me this sack as proof, but now she’s too scared to go back in. Myra Belle Shirley freaked the crapjack out of her. Totally.”

I’d read a newsfeed on Pretty Myra, also known as Auntie Shirley. She used Denver as a base of operation for running contraband across the Juniper, drugs, guns, boys. Cuz of the Sterility Epidemic, you could get hundreds of thousands of dollars selling viable boys on the black market.

“So you come all this way and ask me in person if I want to help you get dimes in the Juniper. Why not just email?” I asked.

“Would you have said yes?” she asked back.

The bottle was back in my hands. I drank the last swallow, thinking how comfortably uncomfortable I was in KC. Those nights in my new house without any furniture, my days dealing with stupid computers at work. My life was jacked up and boring, but at least I knew what to expect. I could lower my head and just do the deal. It was safe.

“Ten years is a long time,” I had to admit. My mind flashed to the Sino, the gunfire, the bloodshed, that crazy, crazy adrenaline rush. How come sitting there all comfortable felt harder?

“And after Chicho and that night,” Toci said gently. “You know, *nita*, how it could be with us. And I wanted to see you. It’s dangerous going into the Juniper, especially if you go way west, like where the dimes are. If I die there, I wanted to see you one last time.”

I turned and looked into her brown eyes. She had her hair long, clipped back. Mine was just now growing in. I’d had it shaved for years cuz of the lice.

We were both thirty, and I knew she had lived it hard while I’d been gone in China trying not to die or go crazy. Our scars were thick on us, our hearts calloused, from the years and the wars and Chicho.

“It’s not just me and you, yeah?” I asked.

“No, I have a team in Burlington. We found Juniper girls to guide us. They’re young but needing to get away from home. You know how that can be. If *Mamá* asks me one more time if I took out the garbage, *¡No manches!*” She paused. “Will you come?”

“You know I will,” I said. “You could’ve emailed me and I would’ve come. You know that. But Toci, I’m not who I was. The war, getting home like I did, it changed me. I don’t....” It was hard to say what I had to say and I had to swallow hard. “I don’t want you to hate me when you see what I am now.” I thought about how easily I’d put the drunk guy on his *culo* and how good it felt, smashing his face into the fridge.

Toci put a hand on my arm. “I’ve changed too, *Mari*. We won’t hate each other. We’re *hermanitas* to the end, *sabes?*” She smiled and laughed and laughed. “And *nita*, why do you think I’m here? I mean, I love you and all, but I also need a soldier.”

“I’m that,” I said. “You won’t believe how much of a soldier I am now.”

I held the sack of dimes in my hand. I felt rich, powerful, and it seemed like the world was finally gonna start delivering on her promises.

More than that, the U.S. owed me.

Might as well pay me in dimes.

SESSION 3

INTERVIEWER NOTE: The Sino-American War ended in 2045 with the Treaty of Honolulu. However, due to a shortage of fuel and the transportation industries in ruin after the conflict, the U.S. did not bring home its soldiers overseas until 2055 when the Eterna batteries were perfected. The soldiers trapped in American-run internment camps in China were dubbed “ladies in waiting,” since they were mostly women. Any soldiers caught AWOL during this time were severely punished.

So, *mija*, that’s the treasure hunt Toci took me on. To get dimes out of the Juniper.

I know you want to hear about how I got home from the Sino, and I’ll talk a little about it. But just a little. It might take me a bit, but I’ll get there.

We took the train from KC to Hays, and it stopped in most every town cuz they had to swap out the batteries. That was before the Eternas were perfected, and those first batteries weren’t so good.

Then in Hays, they switched over to a steam engine burning Old Growth, which was like coal, but synthetic and expensive. Train travel wasn’t cheap, but Toci paid for my ticket.

At the border, soldier girl guards looked over our passports carefully. Toci had her U.S. papers out, and I had mine, the only ones I had. The soldier girls told us to keep hold of our passports cuz if we lost them, we might not be allowed back in the U.S. Things were changing for the Juniper, even then, even before the Security, Identity, and Special Borders Injunction of 2054.

Toci smiled at them. “We’re *cholas*. We know all about borders.”

“Not like this,” one of the soldiers said. “You’re going back in time to a very bad place. Every story you’ve heard about the Juniper is true and worse. Be careful.”

Then they moved on.

Toci rolled her eyes at them. “Scary.”

I laughed with her, but I was scared. The border guards who came onto the train had AZ3 assault rifles on their backs, top-of-the-line armament, and I had the feeling they had used them.

The train swayed back and forth. Outside was just flat plain, yellow grass, gray sage, but mostly blue sky. It was a warm fall that year, even into November, and the sun was out, but I knew it could freeze up in a minute. I had some of my winter gear from the Sino just in case it did.

The stench of coal smoke drifted in through the windows, and I found myself sweating. Old Growth smells like coal when it burns, like the Russian coal on the steamship we’d used to get back home.

My lieutenant had found a woman who could forge discharge papers, perfect fakes, DD214s. She’d even found a way to make the document IDs match database entries in the master Oracle DB in Washington D.C.

Every one of us jumped at the chance to go home. My entire unit.

I’d been drafted in ’43. For two years it was running and warfare. Then the war ended, officially, but that didn’t mean we got to go home.

Uncle Sam said either all his nieces would go home together, or none of us would. So we set up Kayleatown outside of Beijing, just one of the U.S. military internment camps. There were a bunch of others.

We weren’t prisoners of war. No, the Chinese left us alone, and we policed ourselves. Most of the time. Sometimes local authorities came in cuz some of us made money running black ops missions for some mob boss who needed muscle. I never did, but my lieutenant did, which is how she got the discharge papers and the hacker to take care of the electronic records in the backend.

Lieutenant Alicia Strauss knew we’d all say yes to her offer. Screw Uncle Sam. We were ladies who weren’t going to wait. We wanted to get home, even though it meant risking court martial and prison if not outright execution. Rumors floated around saying that lethal injection was a definite

possibility for going AWOL, and supposedly there was legislation in Congress. There wasn't. But we didn't know.

Thirty-six of us, including Lieutenant Strauss, boarded the Alyona Ivanovna, a steamship bound for Alaska, where we could be processed out at Fort Wainwright in Fairbanks. We'd heard if you could get to Kodiak Island, the ICS Coast Guard there could arrange transportation inland.

Thirty-six soldiers took off from the city of Vladivostok on March 15, 2053. Two weeks later, only three of us made it to Kodiak Island. Three.

The Ivanovna was mainly used as a cargo ship, so we bedded down on pallets in the hold and you could smell the rust. You could almost hear it. About an inch of water covered the floor, so you needed to stay on the pallets or you'd wake up soaked in fish-stank water. The water got nastier as some of us lost it, puking into the slop.

We tried to stay up on the deck, but the wind would blow out of the North, blowing across miles of freezing water, and we could only stand so much. The sky never cleared. White-gray clouds didn't float above us, they were all around us. Chunks of ice floated in the sea, some glowing white or that creepy bright-blue color.

The old woman who owned the Ivanovna had her daughters for crew. Every one of them must have weighed a hundred kilos at least, and that's being nice, *sabes?* They'd talk to us in broken English, always with their cheeks bulging from plugs of tobacco. They'd pause every now and again to spit sloppy brown juice into the sea.

Strauss didn't trust them all that much, which is why she brought the thirty-five of us, for protection. Which, in the end, she needed.

The pirates hit us the night after we left some crappy port on the Kamchatka Peninsula. We were in the hold, shivering in the dark, listening to the pound of the steam engine. Every time a piston churned it shook the whole boat. Some of us were trying to sleep, others were talking, and that's when the door was thrown open.

The pirates were Japanese, more men than we'd seen in awhile, but also quite a few scowling women, scarred hardcases with bullet-blank eyes. A few pushed old school AK-47s against their shoulders, but others gripped next-gen Kashalnikov assault rifles, the Kalash 9s which were a superior weapon.

They had us, dead on the pallets. The fat captain had probably been bought off or might have been in on it the whole time. We never found out, but it was pretty clear what the pirates were after. The IEI, or Internment and Extraction Initiative, would pay for information on any soldier going AWOL. The Japanese pirates had come to ransom us back to the U.S. where we would be court-martialed.

They stood with their rifles on us, flashlights taped to the muzzles, and it was all just glare and gun barrels. A small woman with scars around her mouth spoke English. Kind of. "Guns! Guns! Give us your guns!"

We did.

Then she was like, "Who in charge!? Who in charge?! We kill you, you don't say!"

No, they wouldn't kill us. The IEI wouldn't pay for corpses.

Strauss didn't move. We were quiet for a long time, and then I went for them, just me, and if it'd only been me, I wouldn't be collecting Social Security today. No, my whole unit followed my lead cuz we were on our way home. Stand in the way of a soldier trying to get home and see what happens to you.

They took our guns, but we had our knives, and they opened fire, but only wounded a few. Those bullets pinged-panged around like pebbles in a tin can. One hit my hand but wasn't even going fast enough to hurt.

I faced off against some huge guy, slow but big. He tried to overpower me, but I stepped back and let him come, then used his own force against him, and got him down on the floor, between the pallets and in the water. I cut his throat and let the blood gush into the slop under us.

Then I went after the next pirate, a woman, who was wiry and strong, more of a challenge than the guy since he thought he had the advantage only cuz he had a johnson. We were highly trained

murdering machines, the weak of us killed off in the first month after hitting Chinese dirt while the strong only got stronger. The mean only got meaner. The bad, badder.

The pirate tried to bash me with her gun, since I was too close for her to shoot, but I pulled it from her and then shot her in the gut when she went for her sidearm. I whirled to shoot someone else, but by then my unit had mitigated the threat.

Listen to me, using those big military words though I ain't seen action in a long time. Strauss liked that military talk, analyze, execute, mitigate. She thought it made her sound smart since she had grown up poor trash in the Kentucky backwoods.

We marched the pirates up onto the deck. The night was as black as the inside of your belly, and cold, so cold our fingers froze to the triggers of our rifles.

The captain on the Ivanovna and her daughters were on the deck, cheeks bulging, each spitting calmly into the oil-black ocean. The pirates had their ship tied off to the Ivanovna. The one *vato* they left on the other ship didn't try anything with us, just came out with his hands up when we threatened to terminate his *amigos*.

That's when the truth came out. That's when Strauss admitted she'd screwed us over, but I don't want to go into that right now.

Later. Later. When I feel stronger.

Back on the train with Toci, going through the Juniper, the smell of the Old Growth smoke had taken me away into those nasty memories and Toci saw it.

"You okay, Mari?" she asked me.

Sweat was pouring off my face. I had my Nferno tek hood in my fists, and I used that to wipe up. Didn't really work cuz it was made from synthetic material to whisk moisture away and not absorb it. I needed a cotton towel. I had one in my grip, but that had been checked into storage.

"Yeah," I said. "It's hot in here. You hot?"

"No," Toci said. "I'm fine."

She was. I wasn't. I wanted beer, but I'd have to wait. We pulled into Burlington's train station in the early evening. The sun was going down and a chill breeze came up. And it was only going to get colder. I swear, I could smell the industrial wasteland of Beijing in the air, and my heart fluttered. Then I concentrated on a more earthy smell. Manure. Burlington's economy came from ranching and with enough horses and cows, you can stink up a whole lot of countryside, *sabes*? I'd seen a newsfeed on the three big ranchers in the Colorado territory. Howerter was down south, Meetchum up north, and Abigail Weller was located in Burlington, in the central part. Most likely, it was her cattle I smelled.

Burlington wasn't much of a town. I mean, the biggest thing was the grain elevator—that was the tallest structure in town by far and acted as a zeppelin port. Two zeppelins were tied down at the very top above a little wooden shack and platform. Watching those ultra-modern blimps tugging at their leashes above a grain elevator from the last century made me forget everything else.

I was in the Juniper. It really was like another world.

We walked from the train station to the downtown, which was just a few buildings, squat and concrete, dusty and dumpy. In some ways, it was similar to my neighborhood in KC. You could tell mostly women lived there. The buildings had been painted recently, had window boxes, and there were places for greenery if it had been the season for green. It was a small town going nowhere, but pretty, and I liked it. No electric cars, or high-speed internet, or electric slates, or tangle servers, or video, or all of the ridiculous comforts of the U.S., but the place felt right.

Toci led me into the The Chhaang House Hotel and Tavern. It was a saloon right out of some old video, you know, with bat wing doors and everything. All the tables and chairs were different cuz the place had been taken from the salvage work. A lot of people made a lot of money working salvage in the Juniper after the Yellowstone Knockout cuz I mean, you have like millions of acres abandoned by millions of people and they left most of their junk behind. Howerter and Weller got rich working salvage before they started ranching.

The tables were as mismatched as the chairs, all taken from dining rooms now deserted, or studies or bedrooms or whatever. The artwork on the walls was just as mismatched, posters of

movies, bad paintings from crappyjack hotels, and even a velvet Elvis and of course dogs playing poker. A smoky fire was trying to go out in the brick fireplace and the old Hindu guy at the bar didn't seem to care.

The place only had a few people, regular drunks, blotched and bleary faces and shaky fingers on smoky glasses. Some were ranchhands, no doubt, locals coming into town to spend money, and others looked to be travelers. Toci's group lurked back in the shadows of the corner by the dying fire. It was pretty apparent those *chicas* didn't want to be messed with.

Toci asked about a block of rooms she booked, and the old Hindu guy nodded, and grinned, and bowed. He then gestured to the table in the shadows. Me and Toci went over, and I felt uncomfortable. This wasn't a military op, felt more like we were planning a train robbery, but I kept having to tell myself it was really only a salvage job. We were going into the Juniper for dimes, money that didn't belong to anyone, not really. If the U.S. had wanted their dimes so bad, they would've had them by now. Oh well, finders keepers.

The table of women stood up as Toci introduced me to our team. Most of them. Only one of the Juniper girls was there, Pat Lee Cook, and she was young, probably only seventeen if that. Her freckles had been scorched into a rusty red color from too many days in the sun, too many nights in the wind, and the knuckles of her hands were large and white. She was missing some teeth, so she looked like total white trash when she smiled, which was all the time. She was a hard one, you could tell from a steely look in her green eyes, but she was also a girl who liked to laugh even if she had to do it alone most of the time. I shook her hand. Her grip was firm and her eyes didn't leave mine. I liked her.

Toci introduced me to Violet, and she wasn't nothing new to me. I'd known *loca chiquitas* like her all my life, but especially in the Sino. She had buzzed her hair into a Mohawk that laid lazily across the stubble of her scalp. Heavy piercings stretched her ears from lobe to crest, every ridge of skin full of metal.

Of course a white girl being a badass had to have tattoos, and I took stock. Permanent black lipstick and eyeliner marked her face. Tattooed X's trailed from lips to her ears and down her neck. I didn't need to ask. Of course every X was a kill.

On her veined, muscled arms were the words *semper fi* in greening ink. She was a cracked jarhead marine forever pissed off for ever having to take an order or take a hill.

"Toci say you a grunt skank, but you tough," Violet said. "How'd you get home from the Sino?"

"Same as you," I said.

Muddy eyes, a fading brown color, met mine, and we stood there, sizing each other up. Only two ways you got home from the Sino. Either you were lucky or you were a criminal, and I knew Violet hadn't left the Corps with flying colors and a pat on her butt.

No, she had waded home through blood. Like me.

"You gonna hate me for being regular army?" I asked.

"You gonna hate me for being a marine?"

I shrugged. "No, I'll probably find other reasons to hate you."

That made her smile. The other women laughed uncomfortably, Pat Lee the loudest, but Violet and I were still locked in a stare.

"If you two are gonna kiss, I guess you might as well get it over with," Pat Lee said. "Or is it gonna be a knife fight? If so, we should clear out some chairs so you can go gladiator on each other."

Toci got in between us and pulled me away to introduce me to a couple of Hindu girls with holsters strapped to their thighs. She had hired them on as muscle, some kind of mercenaries she found online outside of the Juniper where the internet worked. Kalpana and Kumari were nice enough, but after looking into the wicked night of Violet's eyes, I couldn't take them seriously. They said they had served in India when Pakistan was reinstated as a province, but I wasn't sure how much action they'd seen.

Then Wren came in, our other Juniper girl.

I figured Violet had been broken in the Sino, like I had.

Wren? She'd snapped all right, but not from any kind of war. She'd come out of the womb already jacked up beyond all repair.

I can't talk more about Wren today. No, let's save her for tomorrow, since I know you're dying to hear about her.

I mean, she did become world famous, and I met her right at the very beginning of her adventures. Only for Wren, I don't think it was an adventure. No, not an adventure at all.

Wren wanted revenge. She wanted to make God pay for bringing her into this jacked up world.

SESSION 4

Wren.

Yeah, I met her, *mija*. Everyone knows about Wren nowadays cuz her little sister wrote all of those books.

Well, Wren hadn't taken two steps into the Chhaang House when everyone turned to look at her, and a hush fell over the room. A few ranch hands at another table sighed and shook their heads. Others looked visibly afraid. The old Hindu working the bar kept his eyes on her, as if she was going to start breaking things and shooting up the place.

She had the gun for it—an M4A1 assault rifle from the Iraqi wars after the turn of the century. The weapon was slung casually over her shoulder, like a fashion accessory. The carbine had a scope, a forward grip, and two clips taped together with frayed gray duct tape.

Wren didn't have a teenage-girl walk. She slithered. Her smirk told everyone she enjoyed their eyes on her cuz that was her bread and butter. Love her or hate her but don't ignore her. Even without the rifle and the walk, ignoring Wren would've been impossible. I'm not *gillian*, but she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, a full woman at seventeen, the kind of beauty and *chica* good looks fathers hate and mothers fear.

Black hair, dark eyes full of night and mystery, and her skin bone-white. Full red lips covered perfect, white teeth. A lot of tough girls get too thin and lean, like a garbage dump coyote, but not Wren. She shook off a duster that swept across the floor. Her jeans clung to her hips and her red cowgirl shirt and leather vest showed how chesty she was.

Wren dropped her duster onto the floor and tossed her cowgirl hat into the middle of the table. A Colt .45 was tucked into a holster on her right hip and her right hand fell onto the grip. On her other hip was a long knife in a leather sheath. She set her rifle next to the other Juniper girl's chair.

"Hey, Pat Lee," Wren said.

She caught me staring. "You got a problem?"

"How old are you?" I asked. I knew it was the wrong thing to say, the wrong place to start. She wanted to fight—the guns and swagger proved it, but more than that, it was the hurt I saw in her, the kind of hurt that won't stay still. I was egging her on cuz I needed to know if she was too violent to trust, or if she had some self-control. Pissed off and violent is fine. Pissed off and violent, reckless and stupid, could get us all killed.

Wren snorted, like I was ridiculous and she didn't have time for a bad joke like me. She turned on Pat Lee. "Who's your friend in charge?"

Pat Lee chuckled, "Why, ain't you just the sweetest thing, Wren? My God, you're a prom queen and Disney princess all rolled up in pink and kisses."

Wren snorted at her as well, then stared around the table. She pointed at Violet. "You're just muscle, obviously, back from the Sino and lookin' for more." She dismissed the Hindu girls with a wave. "These Indians are just along for the money. Mercenaries, I'll bet. And I've known Pat Lee since we were in kindygarten. So that leaves the attitude and Miss Pretty." She smiled at Toci. "You like your long hair, don't you? It's a good cut on you. I'd think you were girly 'strogen if not for the company you keep. Or do you belong to tattoo there?"

"No," Toci said. "The attitude can vouch for me. I'm into men. Right, Mari?"

I didn't say a word, but yes she was. One man in particular.

"Shame." Wren said. "Not many men around and if you swung the other way you'd do well in Amarillo or so I hear. That's where Yankees come into the Juniper to slut around and there's money to made down there." She then faced me again. "Today is my birthday. I'm seventeen. Not yet legal, sorry. You in charge, Mari? That's short for Mariposa, ain't it? You sure as hell don't look like a butterfly, but maybe you would with longer hair."

"Toci is the woman in charge," I said, "and yeah, Mariposa, that's me." I paused. "Happy

birthday.”

“Jacker my birthday.” Wren pulled a chair over and sat down, and leaned forward, and spoke in a low voice. “So, Pat Lee says this is all about dimes. How many dimes are we talking about?”

Toci got drinks for us and then went into the details. On a trip to El Paso, she met a woman who had worked in the Denver Mint before and after the Yellowstone Knockout. U.S. Treasury agents went in and retrieved all the special rare coins, the nickels, quarters, dollar coins, but not the dimes. They would still be at the airport cuz that was the retrieval point. The woman knew where. She blew her dough on the first expedition that got killed by Pretty Myra, so she agreed to tell Toci the location of the dimes for a cut.

So Toci alone was financing this little treasure hunt. We’d split the take ten ways, seven for the women at the table, a share for the woman in El Paso, and then we had two zeppelin pilots that would rendezvous with us at the airport.

“Dimes are heavy,” Toci said, “so I figure we’ll divide the coins between a zeppelin and a Cargador. Tomorrow I’ll show you the warehouse where I have the rig, fuel, winter gear, supplies, and weapons.”

“Cuz of Pretty Myra,” Wren said. “She gets wind we are going in for dimes, she’ll have her outlaws on our tail. She’s not the worst Outlaw Warlord in the Juniper, but she ain’t good.”

“But her name is Pretty Myra.” Pat Lee laughed. “Or is it Auntie Shirley? Either way, how can she be so bad with names like that? Maybe her greatest evil is knitting ugly sweaters for Christmas gifts.”

Wren smirked at her friend and then got back to business. “So how many dimes are we talking about? Ignore my question again, and I’m walking.”

Toci took the bag of dimes she’d thrown to me in KC and set it on the table. “One dollar’s worth of dimes weighs twenty-two grams. My contact in El Paso said they didn’t measure it in coinage but weight, and she said there should be about forty thousand kilos of dimes. So that should be about two million dollars. Two double-axel bank trucks would be able to handle the load. Worse comes to worse, we tow the trucks out of the Juniper.”

A blink later, Wren drove her long Betty knife into the bag. That girl was fueled-up fast. Bright, shiny dimes spilled out across the table and she whistled. “Nice paycheck. Happy birthday to me.”

“Jacker your birthday.” I echoed what she had said, again to gauge her reaction.

She gave me a little smile and tipped her head to tell me she could take a joke.

Pat Lee patted Wren’s knee. “See? I told you this was real. And you said I was full of crapjack.”

Wren shrugged and threw a glance over at Toci. “Lots of stories of El Dorado in the Juniper. Been like that since the real cowboy days. I’ll think you’re all full of crapjack right up until the minute I’m knee-deep in dimes.”

Toci lifted her glass. “To that day.”

We toasted and drank.

Wren kept throwing me glances, and I kept throwing them back. I was getting some kind of weird *gillian* vibe from her, but I couldn’t be sure. And she kept looking at me like she was trying to figure me out as well.

Pat Lee launched into the story of how her and Wren got involved. Toci had gone to Hays, Kansas and found a zeppelin she could hire, the *Bron-Yr-Aur*, crewed by some old lady named Smythe and her first mate Hugeback. Smythe knew Pat Lee’s grandmother and though Pat Lee was young, she had nine older sisters who worked the ranch while she ran wild. Pat Lee’s mother wasn’t home very much, out searching for a man to give her that rare boy they could use like a prized bull to make a fortune.

One boy could change everything if he was viable. If he wasn’t, he was just taking up space, *sabes?*

Pat Lee threw back beer, so did Wren, like both were no strangers to the bottom of a glass. I remember thinking they probably came from bad families, poor families, families I’d seen in El Paso before I got drafted. Everyone knew the Juniper was a magnet for desperate people and those Juniper *chicas* seemed to have been born desperate. Why else would Pat Lee be so quick to drink

and laugh? Or Wren, loaded up with guns and smirks and a chip on her shoulder the size of Tijuana.

Toci and Violet brought their heads together, talking and talking about something, but what? The Hindu girls were internet mercenaries, but what about Violet? How had Toci met her?

I didn't know. But Violet kept her eyes down, talking low, and I was wondering how many Xs she would have inked into her skin before the treasure hunt was over.

I still don't have an exact count, but it was more than a few. I'll tell you all about it, but not today.

SESSION 5

The doctors don't think I'll make it another week, so I'll have to hurry. You okay with that, *mija*?

I'll have to skip ahead to the next day, when we left Burlington.

Wren and Pat Lee scouted ahead on horses since they were far quieter than we were in the Cargador. Built by Caterpillar, with a steam engine from ASI, the Cargador was huge, the size of a piece of highway road equipment, a bulldozer, or whatever. It was a train on rubber wheels. Storage and steam engine and a tight cab for driving.

I checked out the rig to get an understanding of it, but one thing that confused me was the caged-in enclosure and a spool of strong cable next to it. The enclosure had a seat, controls, and a window. The spool was connected to a cannon, which held what looked like the world's most wicked speargun. Like a grappling hook but with a sharp point.

Pat Lee noticed me wondering about it. "Hey Mari, word on the street is that Outlaw Warlords ain't happy with only stealing from land-dwelling creatures, but wanna snag angels out of heaven as well. Or zeppelins. Salvage monkeys used to use the winch to tow all sorts of crapjack, but, well, someone got creative it seems."

Pat Lee showed me where the big foldable struts of metal built into the side of the Cargador could be fixed to the ground or whatever else.

"This must've cost a fortune," I muttered.

Pat Lee laughed. "Which is why you'd need to pull zeppelins out of the sky to pay for it."

The Cargador was expensive, but so was the rest of the gear and weapons, and I kept wondering how Toci could afford it all. I figured she'd have MG21s for us since there were so many around after the Sino. She didn't though. She had the new AZ3s from Armalite. New. Expensive.

I only cared for a minute. Then I was happy to have any kind of assault rifle in my hands. In some ways, without a firearm, I felt like I'd been living with only one arm. Now that I had a weapon, both arms were working and I could do anything. I went through the action to make sure it was clean and oiled. It was.

We'd take turns in the cab, up on top in a grapple cage, or back in the wide bed where we'd eventually put the dimes if all went well. I felt the most comfortable in the grapple cage, looking out over the plains, above the exhaust of the steam engine burning Old Growth and manure and whatever wood we came across. It was cold, but Beijing had been cold and I'd spent years being blasted by foreign winds. At least the wind in the Juniper was American. It came from California and went right over the Rocky Mountains.

Wren and Pat Lee wore their long dark dusters and their hats with neck gators. They weren't as good as my tek hood, but they'd do. Their horses blended in with the brown landscape, which made me feel better. Good camouflage is important and the girls probably knew that.

The tires of the Cargador were big enough that we didn't need what was left of I-70. There wasn't asphalt anyway. The salvage monkeys had long ago broken the roads up into chunks of the asphalt and cooked them over a fire. Once you remove the gravel and let the hydrocarbons cool, you have cakes that look like coal and burn like it too.

Now and again, some *chica* would get smart and think to repave the roads with cheap concrete, or bits of Walmart junk plastic, or house bricks, or gravel, or whatever, but the job always proved too big and expensive.

So we left the multicolored, weedy stretch of dirt road that had been I-70 and rolled over the sage and across most of the arroyos and ravines as well. Fence lines we tore right through, trailing barbed-wire until it was stripped loose on sage or was chewed up under tires too thick for the barbs.

Both our Juniper scouts said that it was safer off the highway, less chance of meeting up with Myra Belle Shirley. However, the steam engine blew black smoke from its pipes. Anyone looking

could find us easily enough.

As we rolled along, I kept thinking about the old woman in her zeppelin, Smythe, and somehow, I had it in my mind she looked like the Captain of the Ivanovna, both big, fat, and emotionless. Before I knew it, I was breathing hard and sweating again, remembering that night on the Bering Sea, when we had the pirates lined up against the rail of the deck as the ocean swells took us up and down. Our own rifles were slung across our backs, but the pirates' guns we aimed right at their guts.

My buddy, Charquida, was the first to ask it. *What are we going to do with them?*

If we put them back on their ship, would they come after us again out of greed or revenge? I'd killed the big guy and the woman I'd gutshot wasn't going to make it. That pirate *chica* was on her knees, clutching her belly, glaring at me.

I didn't care. If you come after badass soldiers you should expect to get shot.

Petersen was our sergeant. Her spiky red hair tried to put some fire in her, but no, she was frigid from her pale, freckled face all the way down to her white, pimply butt. She glanced at Lieutenant Strauss, who nodded, and Petersen did it. She opened fire with her Kalash 9 and took out two before the others went for us.

Stupid. We should've talked about terminating them with extreme prejudice, and we should've all agreed on it.

But then, Petersen was always happy to kill someone. She'd done time for armed robbery before the U.S. army took her. I'd read about the cellblock-to-soldier program. Who better to kill than killers, *sabes?*

The pirate who spoke English got to me, and I expected her to try and clock me, but she didn't. Fisted in her hand was a K3B3 fragmentation grenade. Primed. Sure. She was going out the hard way and might as well take as many of us as she could along for the ride.

If the grenade had gone off, right there, chest level in the middle of us, the captain of the tub would've had to hose at least five of us off the deck and clean up the rest with a toothbrush and a spoon.

But I was quick back then. I snatched her by the hair and threw her into the Bering Sea right as the grenade went off. Shrapnel peppered the side of the boat but didn't touch us. In less than a second that girl was gone.

As were the rest of the pirates.

Now we had two ships, and that's when Strauss told us the truth cuz she'd been lying all along about how many discharge papers she had. We thought she had forged thirty-six, one for each of us, including herself. But she didn't.

She had ten. That was it. She'd wanted the whole unit together just in case we got hit by pirates, and so no one would rat out the others. A hundred kilometers from Kamchatka, in the middle of the Bering Sea, she figured it was safe enough to tell us the truth.

She pointed to the boat and said it all calm. Ten of us would continue on the Ivanovna and the others could get on the pirate's boat and go, well, where? Where could AWOL soldiers go if they didn't have the paperwork to go home?

I didn't think about that for too long cuz I knew I was going to be one of the ten with a DD214.

I was so lost in memories, it took me a minute to realize the Cargador had stopped moving. I was sweating again and had to wipe the sting out of my eyes so I could see the shadowed mountains in the distance painted orange by the sunset. Those Rocky Mountains rose above the crumbling skyline of Denver, chewed up by time and salvage monkeys. Looked like Satan lived there, and I guess he did, only he was a she by the name of Myra Belle Shirley.

Plan was, we'd camp for the night out on the plains and then head for the airport early the next morning. If we were quick, we'd get the dimes and then tear off back to Burlington the same day. Two days, one night, and millions of dollars. Not a bad paycheck and we'd have enough money for turkey and stuffing cuz it was Thanksgiving week.

I should've been happy we'd made it a day without running into trouble, but the memories of the Ivanovna wouldn't leave me alone. I needed to get off the Cargador, walk around, clear my head.

VAD therapists would've said to talk about it with someone, to get it out, but who did I have? Toci wouldn't be able to relate, Violet wouldn't give a crap, and the rest were either civilians or strangers.

I got first watch, so I was lucky I wouldn't have to wake up in the cold in the middle of the night—unlucky cuz my head wouldn't shut up.

I had gotten home. That's what mattered. Dead pirates. Dead friends. Oh well, *¡Me sabes madres!*

Only it did matter. I'd trusted Strauss and gotten screwed over. Could I trust Toci? I thought I could, but her being friends with Violet put me on edge. And those two always had their heads together. I guess I got jealous, you know, cuz I thought Toci and me would be as tight, only Toci was busy with her psycho friend, and I was left babysitting Wren and Pat Lee. They took to me. I don't know why. It was probably like Auntie always said, *El muchacha malcriada dondequiera encuentra madre.*

In English it means—the bad girl finds a mother wherever she goes.

Didn't take long, but I soon found out why Wren had been eyeing me, and what she wanted to know surprised the hell out of me.

The Cargador had a tent attachment we snapped into place. Inside the tent we could access different compartments on the side, and it was heated by the steam engine itself. I was kind of impressed. A rig like that costs a pretty *peso*, but again, where had Toci gotten the money?

Pat Lee came in, and we ate MREs, which brought back more war memories, but these were the good kind. A hot meal, even out of some government-issues plastic tube, was still a nice thing on a cold night.

I had to hurry through my meal, so I could keep watch. Unzipping the tent entrance, I ducked through and zipped it up behind me. The smell of the tent and the sound of the zipper, well, more memories hit me. To think, some people only ever live in houses, with doors and everything. I'd spent years unzipping myself out of my home. Gets old, *sabes?*

I figured I'd climb up into the grapple cage, but then I saw Wren. She hadn't come into the tent, and was messing with something in the storage compartments where we held the extra ammunition and weapons.

I went to her. "If you're out here, do you want to take watch?"

She laughed through her sneer. "I ain't gonna do your work for you."

"Then why aren't you in the tent?" I asked.

She grabbed a box of AZ3's ammo, 7.62x39mm shells. In the fading light, she squinted to read the fine print before shucking off leather gloves way too big for her so she could open the lid. She saw me looking at her gloves. "Yeah, Mama didn't believe in anything new. She only ever gave us salvage. If you could duct tape it to fix it, it was good enough for us."

"You call it salvage, but my *tia* called it hand-me-downs. Same idea though."

Wren's sneer had turned into a smirk and she laughed through that as well. "No, hand-me-downs come from family. Salvage comes from dead people. All my life I've worn dead people's clothes. Completely different." She fingered out a bullet and then compared it to the 5.56 mm NATO round her M4A1 used. I noticed one of her clips was empty.

Suddenly, I wanted to argue with her, not sure why. "Those won't fit. One is a 7.62 and the other is a 5.56. You need a different caliber, and poor is poor, *chica*. If you want to compare stories we can."

I expected her to explode at me. She didn't. Instead, she sighed. "I know most of the ammo we brought is the wrong caliber. Just wanted to see for myself. I figured Toci would have packed MG21s. From the Sino, yeah? But, no, she has the new AZ3s and I've never fired one. For combat, I only ever trust my own rifle. I didn't think to bring more ammo for it."

"When have you seen combat?" I asked, partly to be snide, partly cuz I was curious.

"When Mama killed Queenie," she said evenly. Like she was talking about school books and crushes. "She was an Outlaw Warlord that attacked our ranch, and we fought her and her girls. I was thirteen. This was my rifle."

I softened right away cuz we were both soldiers. She had proved it and I knew by the way she talked it was the truth. "It's hard to take new gear into battle," I said, "but I'd stick with the AZ3s. Don't want to be stuck with a gun and no bullets."

She stayed silent. And let her actions speak for her. She picked up an AZ3, slammed a clip in, chambered the round, ejected it and caught the bullet in mid-air. Fast. Sharp.

I waited, watching her. She continued to ignore me until I turned to walk away.

Then she said in a quiet voice, "We weren't poor. That's the thing. We were rich, but Mama never spent money on anything we couldn't salvage. She grew up in the junk business in Cleveland and came out west after the Yellowstone Knockout. If the salvaging hadn't dried up, maybe she'd only had one daughter and called it good. But then she got into ranching and she wanted as much free labor as she could get. That's all we were to her. Free labor." Her next laugh came out sharp, cutting bloody. "Dumb skank. Most of her babies died anyway. Only three made it, but one was me, so she only had two girls stupid enough to work for her. Then she sends my little sister off east to some jacking school that's way too much money all cuz she thinks the power is going to come back on. Stupid *kutia*."

Wren put her rifle across her shoulder and then picked up her big leather gloves.

I was shocked I'd got all that from her. It came out in a rush, and I stayed quiet. There might have been other rich women in Burlington, but the richest would've been Abigail Weller. Could she be a Weller? I couldn't imagine that.

Wren waved the gloves in front of me. "My sister gets to go to this fancy, expensive school and I can't even have gloves that fit me. You want to trade stories now with me, *chica*?"

I still could. She had a mama but mine was long dead, killed off when we couldn't find enough to eat and the flu came through El Paso. The sky had been black from the Yellowstone Knockout, and it snowed ashes and opening a can of dog food was like Christmas. *Papi* died trying to scrape together food for us, for all his family. Then the Sino took my uncle, my brothers, my sister and never gave them back. I was still in China when Auntie passed. I got a three-line email from one of my cousins telling me. *Abuela*, abandoned by everyone, moved to Kansas City cuz she had a friend there. Then my *aubela* died too.

She knew about dead babies. I knew about dead family.

But she wouldn't care. She was seventeen years old and her own pain was all she could see. She'd laugh at my dog food stories.

So I hit her with something else. "Okay, Wren, your life is all like hard or whatever, but why do you keep looking at me like you want to kiss me? You *gillian*? Or do you want to ask me something?"

She colored. And dropped her head for a minute and then wrapped her arms tighter around the AZ3. She raised her eyes but couldn't look into mine. "I'd ask Violet, but I don't trust that skank. She's a hard case, and Toci seems okay, but she didn't fight in the Sino. I figured maybe you might know."

"Know what?"

Her mouth had grown small and her eyes darted around. What was she going to ask me? And why did she seem so upset about it?

She let out a long breath. "We have a family friend, and he fought in the Sino. Well, kind of fought, maybe. He's a Catholic priest, but in the military you call 'em chaplains, I guess. You'd know him as Father Pilate, but I don't think that's his real name. I don't suppose you've heard of him, have you?"

I didn't respond for a minute. I'd have been less surprised if she had tried to kiss me. I did the dates in my head. She'd been born in '39 with the Sterility Epidemic going strong. Was Pilate her father?

She took my silence wrong. "I know, the odds are you never heard of him, but I had to ask. He's close to us, and my own daddy died of cancer, and well, never mind. Never mind. It was stupid of me to ask."

She went to storm off but I stopped her. "I don't know him, but I've heard of him. Everyone has

heard of Pilate. He's kind of a legend. I heard he gets around."

She grinned at that. "Yeah, I guess he does. But we lost contact with him. You wouldn't know if he was alive or not, would you?"

"No," I said. "But the Vatican had special transportation arranged for their chaplains, so if he survived the final days of the war, most likely he made it back home. Have you seen him since the end of the Sino?"

Wren nodded. "Yeah, I did, but then he took off again. He said he was trying to get back to China cuz he left someone behind and felt bad about it. I don't know how you got back early, but well, I wondered if you and him might have crossed paths."

"Sorry," I said. "And I can't imagine anyone trying to get back to China. You sure he went?"

Wren shook her head and kept her eyes down. Talking about the priest had her shaken up. "No, we don't know much. We don't have internets and all that, so news is iffy. He left a year ago, but we ain't heard from him since. He's done this before, but he generally sends me a card for my birthday. Nothing this year."

"That you know of," I pointed out. "You left to join us on your birthday. Maybe when you go back, there will be a card from him. You don't know."

She spit and laughed loudly, meanly. "I do know. I ain't never going back to that jackerin' house. Never. Mama can kiss my ass...that's all she'll ever see of me again cuz I ain't never turning around to walk back."

She then gave me a view of her butt as she strutted away.

I kept thinking she couldn't be Abigail Weller's daughter cuz the Weller's ranch was huge and her family must live like princesses, not like vagabond gunslingers who knew their way around a rifle and wore gloves three times too big.

Then again, I was brand new to the Juniper. I didn't know how things worked or how much of a war zone Wren had grown up in.

But I'd learn. The Juniper was a hard teacher, *sabes?*

And if you didn't learn your lessons quick, you'd end up dead.

I climbed up into the grapple cage of the Cargador to look out across the gray November plain, lit up by a round moon.

Wren had talked to me about Pilate, and not Violet. I knew why, and Wren had said it herself. Violet wasn't right. She was dangerous.

If so, then why was Toci so tight with her?

Another of Auntie's proverbs went through my head.

Dime con quien andas y te dire quien eres.

In English?

Tell me who you walk with, and I will tell you who you are.

SESSION 6

Let's just get to it, *mija*. You don't want a medical report, and I won't go into detail about where the night nurse stuck the tubes in me at three in the morning. Funny, you fight your whole life to live, until you get so old, all you want to do is die.

But anyways...back to my treasure hunt into the Juniper.

So we camped that night.

After my watch, I slept in the tent on the ground and at sun-up we were moving toward the airport and the dimes. The wind was blowing again, probably trying to get the clouds over the mountains cuz behind the blue peaks swirled a whole bank of gray clouds. Snow was coming, but then I'd learned not to trust Colorado skies.

Late November, it might rain, it might snow, or it might be twenty degrees Celsius. I found myself missing my WeatherBee app on my slate. In the Sino, I'd memorize the daily weather reports cuz weather could mean the difference between life and death.

Violet took a chilly turn up in the cage, and I sat next to Toci in the cab of the Cargador. Kalpana and Kumari rode in the bed, and our Juniper scouts were on horseback, sometimes in front, sometimes behind, keeping watch.

I surprised myself a little, by being worried about Wren and Pat Lee. They were so young, and I didn't like the idea of having to bury teenagers. Again.

We followed an old strip of dirt road narrowed down to a single lane for a while until we hit bigger roads and civilization, or what was left of it. Mostly just concrete and piles of garbage the salvage monkeys thought were worthless. I remember a stack of sofa cushions the size of a house, surrounded by all this paper and cardboard boxes rotting down to dust.

We went through some kind of alley of cinderblock buildings, everything picked clean, even the doors. Looked like storage units maybe. It was hard to tell.

"So tell me about Violet," I said, trying to get my mind off my worry, and besides, I needed to know who my friend had become in the past ten years.

Toci smiled easily. "You know, she's just some *loca chica* I ran into in Steel City. She got home from the Sino in '50. She won't talk about it, but she's been AWOL ever since."

I'd kept my mouth shut as well, but at least I had my papers. "Where's Steel City?" I asked.

"It's the main gateway in Arizona into the Juniper. No big deal." Toci shrugged.

Her reaction seemed odd. I tried to recall what I knew, and I knew only a little. Border cities around the Juniper were becoming more important cuz politicians were promising stronger borders with the territories. Buzzkill in Nebraska, Hays in Kansas, where we crossed, and especially Lubbock, Texas cuz that was where the tourists went to go to Amarillo, which had become like a mix of the Old West and Las Vegas and Disneyland, *sabes?* You wanted to see the Juniper without getting shot, you'd go to Amarillo.

Wren had said you could make money there as a party girl, which was a nice way of saying prostitute. Nice. Like the nice New Morality ladies who went to Amarillo to go wild.

Toci was keeping something from me. My stomach felt like stone, and I had to unclench my jaws to talk. "What were you doing in Steel City anyways? I figured you'd stay in Juarez."

"You won't like my answer," Toci said.

"I need to know. Violet is one tough *buitre*, and I guess I'm surprised you and her are so close."

Toci patted my knee. "Oh, it's sweet to see you jealous. I love her, but I love you more. Wasn't that Chicho's line?"

"*Si*, all the time. We were stupid over him."

Toci went dead silent and her eyes didn't stray from the windshield. Her whole body seemed to change.

"What? You see something?" I searched the horizon—nothing but junked up buildings and

more trash strewn across the landscape, rusted out hunks of cars, stacks of tires, tangles of cheap aluminum, like lawn chairs or whatever.

She turned to me, dared to look me in the eye for a minute, then shook her head. “No, just had a bad memory, you know?”

I knew.

On the steamship, Strauss shot Charquida first. My best friend. One less person who would need a DD214. Only three made it off the Ivanovna—me, Murphy, and Martinez.

I couldn’t help but scowl. “What about Violet is such a big deal, Toci? What the hell?”

“Nothing,” Toci said. “I just don’t want you to hate me for what I was into. I mean, it was no big thing. It started out as a little Skye6 and just got to be more, you know? I’d bring crapjack out of Mexico to Steel City and Violet would mule it into the Juniper and then some outlaw or whatever would take it across to Hays or Buzzkill. We even had a route up to Coutts for a while, up in Canada, but the Wind River people, well, they put an end to that. Killed every one of our girls. No more caravans through their territory.”

I’d seen a documentary on the Wind River people, Native Americans who’d survived the Yellowstone Knockout cuz Wyoming and Montana had huge reservations. Some of the Native Americans left for the U.S., while others stayed and went back to how they lived before the white people came. It had been interesting when I was sitting in my apartment in KC, but now, it felt more than just a little real.

“You said Skye6 and then more. What was the more?” I knew. I knew, but I wanted her to say it.

She wouldn’t. “Just more. Contraband or whatever. Anyways, that’s where I met Violet. You called her a *buitre*? No, *nita*, vultures eat roadkill, stuff that’s already dead. She’s an eagle. She kills.”

Tell me who you walk with and I’ll tell you who you are. If Violet was a stone-hearted killer, then so was my friend Toci.

She turned to me. Looked me long in the eye. “You said you were afraid I wouldn’t understand who you are now. Well, I guess that’s the same for me. But listen, *nita*, I want to change that. If we get the dimes, it will all be better. I’ll get out of the life.”

I knew she believed what she was saying. But I also knew getting out and staying out was hard once you’ve had a taste. I’d had a good-paying job in KC, an apartment, and I’d still run from it when Toci came calling.

“I hope so,” I murmured.

She patted my leg again. “Don’t worry, *nita*. *Eso que ni qué.*” She then pointed to the horizon.

The Denver International Airport was ahead of us. The struts and spires of the old terminal tents were now stripped mostly bare. The ragged remnants of the telfon-coated fiberglass flapped in the breeze, making the whole place look like the haunted pirate ship from a theme park possessed by demons.

They were waving us away. They were telling us bad things were there.

I knew it.

Cuz I’d been hired on by true criminals, hardcore.

Toci might have started out running drugs to Violet in Steel City, but I knew what that had led to. Knew it cuz drugs might make you some money, but if you wanted a real paycheck, you’d run boys.

That was what Toci had been doing and how she had the money to afford the Cargador, the AZ3s, the gear.

Human trafficking. She’d been running boys from Mexico to Steel City and then across the Juniper. Maybe to Amarillo, where they had brothels set up, but most likely to Hays and then on to St. Louis, where the black markets were. Mexico hadn’t sent their boys to the Sino, so they had more than the States.

No one in the U.S. back then liked to think about black market Mexican boys. No, after decades of war, after the Yellowstone Knockout and losing five states, with the Eterna battery coming and

the New Morality and roses in flower boxes and a chicken in every pot, the citizens of Americana just wanted life to go back to normal and be all peaceful and crap.

Enslaved boys weren't something nice people wanted to think about.

Toci stopped the Cargador and we sat, looking at the airport as a dark silence filled the cab. Clouds were storming toward us, gray and black and bad. A plastic bag swept along, pushed by the wind.

"You still with me, *nita*?" Toci asked.

I couldn't face her for a minute, but then I thought about the blood on the deck of the Ivanovna. My hands weren't clean. I couldn't hate her for doing dirty deeds to get by.

I then turned and took her hand in mine. "*Si, hermanita,*" I said. "*Tú y yo para la vida.*"

"*Por vida,*" She said back.

For life.

Tú *y* *yo* *para* *la* *vida*

You and me for life.

I think I want to stop there, *mija*. But come back. You have to come back cuz I need to tell you the rest.

We're about halfway through, too far into it for you to go away or for me to die.

SESSION 7

I lived another night, *mija*. Good for me. Good for you. Let's get started.

The Denver International Airport had been a hub for the salvage industry so there was crapjack everywhere—mattresses, crappyjack pressboard furniture, old clothes turning into garbage and covered by dirt. I thought about Wren saying she'd grown up wearing dead people's clothes.

A Conoco plastic mug caught my eye, red bleaching into white, white going to ivory.

Before the power went out and the people ran off, DIA had been a big deal, for travelers and businesses and whoever else needed to fly. Around it were storage places and shipping places and warehouses and a world of industrial concrete now covered in grime. No more asphalt, just dirt roads.

Every hole in every building glared at us. It was the perfect place for an ambush since there were so many places to hide. But then hopefully Myra Belle Shirley had no idea about us or what we were there for.

Wren and Pat Lee now followed us on their horses since it was now Toci who knew where to go. And she did. She didn't pause. We rolled off the dirt of an old road, Tower I think a sign said, and we were back to crushing brush under the huge tires of our Cargador.

We rolled on past the parking lot, now blank ground, but with more cars than I would've thought, though nothing big since the salvage monkeys had converted the big trucks and vans into steam-powered vehicles with an ASI attachment. American Steam Ingenuity, it was a big company back then.

We bounced up a ridge and onto what would have been the tarmac if the salvage monkeys hadn't burned it all for the ASI engines. The sage and cactus had crept up to the stained sides of the airport itself, though it was thin enough you could tell where the land had once been covered.

Toci stopped for a minute and called to our mercenaries, Kalpana and Kumari, to throw more Old Growth into the firebox, and then we really went hell to heels down the concourse. Some of the planes had been left there, stripped-out hunks of steel and metal, leaking seats like broken teeth. Of course, their engine parts would've been grabbed, but how many old airplane seats do you need?

More than I would've thought cuz most of the planes had been gutted. Windows gone. Landing gear gone, everything stripped out except for the fuselage. Even the wings had been taken, for the metal I guess.

Toci looked at her watch, and I saw the sweat on her face. "You late for something, *nita*?"

She grinned. "Yeah, for dinner. I wanna buy us all a big Thanksgiving dinner in Burlington tonight."

"How do you think we'll convert the dimes into real money?" I asked.

"Slowly."

We moved past the concourses and at the very northern part of the airport were hangars, numbered and lettered. Toci parked in front of the hangar 11D. She adjusted the steam and let it vent some, kind of like letting an engine idle.

Violet slid down out of the grapple cage. She had knives on her belt, and an MG21 in her hand, complete with an under-barrel grenade launcher. The MG21's stock had been converted to wood, and a skull had been carved there in the ebony. I thought maybe I'd ask her for ammo so Wren could use her M4A1, but I never had the chance.

Things go fast when things go bad.

Violet caught me looking at her rifle and tapped the skull on the stock. "She's what I carried into the Hutongs. Were you there?"

I nodded. But that was a stupid question. Most every G.I. Jane had gone into Beijing for the Battle of the Hutongs. The bloodiest single day of war in the history of the world. I'd been shot there, but then so had everyone else. We joked that Uncle Sam couldn't bring us back to the U.S.

cuz he didn't have enough metal for all the Purple Hearts he'd have to give out.

Violet walked over to the Cargador and pulled road flares out of the compartment. She then started to light them, one at a time. The wind out of the west caught the smoke and blew it into long, boiling snakes. The main airport was to the south, rows of hangars to the east and west, but most of it was wide-open plain.

Even without the flares, I felt exposed. Clouds had blocked out the sun so the crimson light of the flares glowed brighter.

We all froze watching Violet cuz it felt wrong, *sabes*? What the hell? Did they want Myra Belle Shirley to find us? The sulfur stench mingled with the sagebrush in the cold.

Wren was off her horse and in the next breath was reaching for the flare in Violet's hand. "Dammit, skank. What are you thinking?"

Violet took Wren by her wrist, turned in a whirl, and threw Wren up against the Cargador. She hung there for an instant until Violet swept the Juniper girl's legs out from under her.

It was so sudden.

But that's violence. In Hollywood video, it's all telegraphed and slow-mo and dramatic. In real life, violence happens in an instant and usually it's not too pretty. Effective, but far from a ballet.

Pat Lee had a Colt .45 in her hand, aimed at Violet. "You stop with those flares right now and step back from Wren."

Just like that, snap your fingers, and we were pulling guns on one another.

Kalpana and Kumari stood watching, but I noticed both quietly switched off the safeties on their AZ3s.

I looked on as well, waiting for Violet to decide how she wanted to die. By Pat Lee's Colt or my own AZ3. I didn't cover her, but I had my weapon ready.

Toci ran from the front of the Cargador. "Hey, hey, what's going on?"

Wren's eyes couldn't have glared harder at Violet. "This *besharam kutia* starting lighting road flares. Smoke and light gives our position away. The Cargador is bad enough."

Violet didn't respond. Didn't do much of anything else. Except light another flare. This one she tossed into the distance.

Toci put up her hands, "Easy, Wren. It's for the zeppelin. The *Bron-Yr-Aur* will need our position."

Violet ignited another flare and flung this one in the opposite direction. She kept her eyes on Wren, her sneer part playful and part jacker you.

Toci looked at her watch again. I thought at first it was to check on the schedule she had set with Smythe and Hugeback for our rendezvous, but it didn't feel right. Something else was going on, but what?

Toci gave out orders. "Kalpana and Kumari, open the hangar door. We'll get the Cargador. There should be bank trucks in there." The two got to work. Then Toci went after Pat Lee. "Put your gun away, now. And Wren, no more name calling. You got me?"

"You gonna spank me if I keep cussing?" Wren was on her feet now, her hand near the pistol.

"I will," Violet muttered. And tossed another flare.

"You'll try," Wren shot back.

"Did it once. Couldn't be too hard to do it again."

"Enough." Toci stood between them. I looked on, but some deep instinct in me knew that things were bad and about to burst. Like in the old Country Mac Sterling song.

I edged on over to Pat Lee and gently helped her pistol into its holster. I bent close. I could smell the fear in her body odor. God, I'd spent my whole life with the stink of scared women in my nose. "Stay near me. Try and get Wren under control. Something's about to go down."

Pat Lee nodded. Didn't make any sort of joke. Not then. Her jokes would come in a minute.

Toci's eyes were on me. "We still good, *nita*?"

"Why do you have to ask?"

Toci didn't answer. "Violet, I think we have enough flares. We'll drive the Cargador into the hangar. Then we'll wait for the *Bron-Yr-Aur*. We need to bring the horses inside as well."

Kalpana and Kumari rolled the hangar doors open. Inside, two big armored vans sat there, just sat there, on bare concrete. The only things in the big, wide open space of the hangar were the two trucks.

Maybe they could hold tons of dimes, but then why hadn't they been salvaged already? They were right there. A line of dust marked where the hangar doors had been closed. On our side, the scrubby ground. On the other side, inside, smooth concrete. Clean cement. Which made things worse and made Toci a lot harder to believe.

Wren and Pat Lee were close together, whispering, probably about the trucks and how all of this wasn't right.

Toci glanced at them, then at me, and then I knew. Right then, looking into her eyes, I knew. Didn't know what was really going on, but down to my guts, I knew the dimes were a lie.

The trucks had been planted there. Why else weren't they covered in layers of dust like everything else? Why weren't they better hidden?

Kalpana and Kumari approached one of the bank trucks, grabbed the handles of the back doors, and pulled them open.

Violet drove the Cargador into the hangar, blocking my view, but I heard the doors creak open.

That was when Wren yelled, loud, "Skanks coming in fast from the south. Trucks and guns and a world of hurt."

I couldn't move. I had to see what I already knew to be true.

The Cargador moved on to park next to the trucks. The storage compartments of both of the bank trucks were open now, all the doors flung wide. Do you know what was inside?

Nothing. A whole lot of nothing.

Kalpana and Kumari turned back to us, eyes wide with surprise.

I whirled on Toci.

She looked me dead in the eye even as sweat dripped off her nose. "You said you were a soldier, *nita*. I'm hoping, no, I'm praying, you'll fight one more time."

That's what she said.

It hurt me, but there was worse hurt to come, as you'll see, *mija*. If I don't croak over dead tonight.

Ha. Wouldn't that be a laugh?

SESSION 8

I can't talk so long tonight, *mija*.

It's been a bad day, like real bad. And what's coming up is hard, the hardest part of the story, and I've been dreading it. After my time in the Juniper, later on, after the thing with Toci, I went to see some *puta* therapist who said we heal through our mouths. Maybe that's right.

But sometimes, to heal, you have to tear open the wound. And that's what this feels like, *sabes*?

Betrayal is hard to live with. It's a poison.

But it's not a poison that kills you. It's a poison that keeps on poisoning you every minute you live cuz once you get screwed over enough, you just assume it's going to happen again and again. No matter what you do, or who you meet, you've been poisoned and it won't go away.

Staring at those empty bank trucks, I knew Toci had betrayed me. Like Strauss.

Back on the Ivanovna, Strauss only had ten sets of discharge papers. There were thirty-six of us. So ten of us would stay on the Ivanovna and power on to Alaska, and the rest would go off on the pirate's ship.

Ten of us would go home. Twenty-six would go on to whatever hell awaited on the seas or in some foreign country where you couldn't get a cheeseburger. Cheese, *nita*, you know, cheese?

Asians don't do much cheese, and I grew up on *queso* dip.

The pirates were dead. The fat old woman and her fat daughters had scurried off the deck cuz they knew what was coming.

Charquida got up into Strauss's face. "No way, *puta*. Either all of us go home or none of us do."

Strauss shot her. In the chest.

Violence. Sudden. Unexpected. Heartbreaking. All my life, I've wondered why I didn't open fire right then cuz a firefight was coming. Of course. And I might have saved a lot of lives if I'd have put Strauss down right then.

But I was shocked, *sabes*? I never would've thought Strauss would kill one of her own girls. Never would've thought it in a million years.

Toci wasn't evil, but Strauss was. She was evil and if there is a hell, she is burning there as sure as I'm here talking.

Petersen stood by her, armed to her teeth, loyal as a dog that's been beat a lot but fed more.

The night grew colder, darker. The LED's on the deck flickered in a cold mist ghosting around us. Batteries weren't what they are now.

Strauss yelled across the deck, "I am going home. Petersen is going home. We have eight passes left. You can decide how it plays out."

It started out logical, you know? Even with Charquida lying face down on the deck, we were going to discuss who should go home. We all had our reasons.

Martinez had a mom who had Alzheimer's. Pulasky had kids she hadn't seen in a dozen years. I had my *abuela* in Kansas City who needed me.

We all had reasons.

We all were going home.

Not sure who shot first. Someone drunk, I think. Or on Skye6, out of their mind on the drugs and painkillers and numb to anything human. Or Peterson. Who just liked to kill.

Murdering the pirates had primed the pump, got our blood going. That's how it works. Once you start killing, it's hard to stop.

We were soldiers and soldiers are killers with orders, and if you take away the orders, sometimes just killers left. That was Peterson's story. Violet's story, the same.

I'd like to think I was different, but I wasn't.

Before we knew it, our whole unit was going at one another like junkyard pitbulls. I shot Petersen and Strauss myself.

And when we finally popped up from wherever we were hiding, once our chambers clicked dry, we realized we'd killed more than we'd needed to.

Three of us were left, three of us, bloodstained, shaky with adrenaline, clips in our hands, ready to gun anyone else down so we could get home.

Three of us.

At first I didn't know what the smoke was drifting around the deck. The air smelled like gunfire, sure, but no, the smoke wasn't from our weapons. It was steam, lifting off the dead on the deck like we could see their souls. It was cold, *sabes?* And their blood was warm, and so, it steamed for a while then the steam blew away. Only the lumps of the corpses were left.

We looked at one another and then dropped our eyes. We wouldn't be able to look anyone else in the eye for a long time after.

Then I knew why the Ladies in Waiting stayed in China. I knew why Uncle Sam had a policy of either we all went home or none of us did. Cuz if you opened the gate a little, it would've been stomped down and more would die in the struggle.

Sometimes America gets it right. Sometimes.

So I made it home.

I made it to KC. Went to *abuela's* funeral as a stranger. Found a job. Bought a house.

Toci came and grabbed me and we went to the Denver International Airport where she betrayed me.

I can't talk no more tonight, *mija*. I know you want to get to the truth behind Toci's fake treasure hunt, but I can't go into it right now.

Come back tomorrow.

Just come back.

You understand, I didn't want it to go the way it did.

You understand, right?

Toci wasn't bad. But me? Me?

We'll see. We'll see.

SESSION 9

So yeah, *mija*, in hangar11D there were no dimes. Never had been.

But we didn't have time to yell at Toci. Wren had said outlaws were coming toward the hangar, drawn by the flares.

Wren and Pat Lee got their horses through the doors of the hangar before they slammed them shut.

Violet pulled the Cargador around to circle back to where Toci and I stood.

Kalpana and Kumari were by the empty bank trucks. By their faces, they were wondering what the hell was going on just like I was.

Toci looked down at her watch. Sweat dripped off her nose. "Early. Dammit. They're early. And the zeppelin is late."

"Who's early?" My scream echoed Wren's. Outlaw skanks were coming and would be there any minute.

I was stupid to think I would get an answer. Instead, Toci laid out a plan only she could possibly understand since she'd been lying since the beginning. "Violet and I will run the Cargador smokeless and circle around and hit them from the flank. Wait for our signal. You're in charge in here."

"Jacker you, Toci. I'm not going to fight. What about the dimes?"

"You'll get paid, *nita*. It'll just be different, that's all. There's money coming. Trust me."

Trust her? That was a laugh.

Before I could grab her, Toci climbed into the Cargador, and she drove it through the hangar toward the rear doors.

Wren and Pat Lee were clustered by one set of murky windows in the hangar. Next to them was a smaller door for quick entry and exit, I guess. Kalpana and Kumari were on the other side of the main hangar doors peering out another set of smeared windows. All of them had their rifles in their hands. They looked ready but pissed off even as they were pissing themselves scared.

I hustled over to Wren and Pat Lee, to try and explain, but what could I explain? That my best friend, my *chica* closer than a sister, had lied to me? Was using us all? But to what end?

I got to the window by the Juniper girls, and Wren snarled at me, "What the hell, Mari? Goddamn, I didn't think there'd be no dimes, but your psycho friend is trying to get us killed. You better hope Pretty Myra didn't see us duck in here."

Sweat and fear, those smells filled my nose as well as the musty dust of the hangar. Even the window stank of it.

Outside, five trucks of various makes and models bashed through scrub and sped toward the flares that smoked and sputtered out a crimson light. ASI steam attachments smoked behind the cabs, filling up the beds. Next to the chugging pistons of the engine, outlaws in camo gear, dusters, cowboy hats, and neck gators held assault rifles and shotguns in gloved hands. One of the trucks pulled a horse-trailer.

I counted at least thirty women and if the horse-trailer was full of outlaws? We'd be outnumbered five to one.

Pat Lee laughed too loudly even though it would be drowned out by the steam engines of the outlaws who had come to circle up around the flares. "You know, if she'd said quarters, I wouldn't have believed her, or nickels, or even those old half dollars. No way. But dimes, yeah, cuz why wouldn't there be a whole boatload of dimes lost in the Juniper? Dimes are small. Dimes are cute. Even the word 'dime' is nice."

"Shush up, Pat," Wren muttered.

The outlaws were not five meters from us. They had all piled out of the trucks and were looking into the air, but we couldn't see what they saw. Then a few caught ropes tossed down from above.

Others drove stakes into the ground.

A zeppelin we couldn't see floated above, obviously, but was it the *Bron-Yr-Aur* or another blimp full of more outlaws?

One of the women, though, wasn't worried about the zeppelin. She was an older woman, with a slash of white through her dark hair. A black duster hung from her shoulders down to her ankles. A big, sawed-off shotgun filled her hands. She was bent over, regarding the flares, but it was clear she was in charge. Women kept throwing her glances, expecting orders.

She took off a glove, squatted down, and touched a flare. Her eyes shot up at us. She'd seen the tire tracks going into the hangar, or maybe horseshoe-shaped prints in the ridges of dirt.

I could finally see her face. A scar echoed the white in her hair, cutting down the right side of her cheek. Wrinkles wrinkled up everything else. Pretty Myra. It was a joke.

"What are we gonna do?" Pat Lee asked.

Run. We needed to run. There weren't any dimes, and fighting Pretty Myra and all her outlaws was not something I was going to do for free. But what about the Indian mercenaries? I turned on them. "What's your story? You here for the dimes or do you know something else?"

Kumari talked. "We were very surprised there were no dimes in the trucks. We were paid to come with Toci, but she promised more money after. We are unsure of what to do."

"Join the jackin' club," Wren said. "If we're gonna go out the back, we need to go now. Pretty Myra is lookin' real suspicious over here."

She was right. But Toci had put me in charge and was counting on me to hit Myra with her.

"Can you shoot from horseback?" I asked Wren and Pat Lee.

Pat Lee breathed hard out her nose. "I came as a guide. I'm not like some Calamity Jane, and since there aren't any dimes, I think my job here is done. Consider yourself guided."

"I can," Wren said. "I mean, I ain't never done it for reals in a fight, but how hard can it be?" She swallowed hard, but kept her bravado up. No surprise there. She'd take that bravado into the grave and beyond to smack God in the face for killing her.

Wren continued. "If Toci and Violet are running that Cargador smokeless, it's going to take them forever to get back. You have to build up the pressure, then bleed out the firebox, and all that is going to take a lot of time. We can't count on them coming."

More bad news.

I took stock of their eyes, the Indians, the two Juniper girls, and I wished Charquida had been there, or Jackson, or Pulasky. Even Strauss and Petersen. If I had even a few of the girls from my unit, I'd have gone after the outlaws to help Toci.

But these girls weren't hard, you know? They had some soul left in their eyes, and I couldn't ask them to die when we hadn't been told the truth.

I just couldn't do it.

"We run. Use the bank trucks to get away. Kalpana and Kumari, you go in one. Wren, Pat Lee, and I will go in the other.

"If they ain't diesel, they won't run," Wren said. "Regular gas engines need a constant electrical current. We ain't got that in the Juniper. And the starter won't work neither. And what about keys? Chances are, there won't be no keys. And what about our horses?"

"The outlaws are coming," Kumari whispered from her spot at the window. "Four of them. What are we going to do?"

We'd run out of time to run. It was either fight or hide.

"What about hiding in the back of the trucks?" I asked.

Wren rolled her eyes. "Where is the first place they'd look? Can't believe you survived the Sino thinking like that."

We were out of options. Couldn't fight, couldn't hide, it was time to talk.

"Stay here and don't fire unless you need to." I walked out the smaller door by the window and strode across the ground.

I stopped to let all them outlaw *chicas* look at me.

Clouds shadowed us all. A cold wind, smelling like snow, swept over my face. I cradled my

rifle in my arm. In seconds, thirty guns were pointed at me. My breath was coming short, my head dizzy from the adrenaline. Still, it felt so good to be in a life or death situation. I wasn't dealing with stupid computers. I was dealing with fate, *sabes?*

Above us floated a mid-size zeppelin, a solid tube of dirty silver with fins on one end and a glass windshield on the other. Ropes, staked down, held the blimp above us, bobbing, pulling, but fixed into place. Smoke from the engine drifted off in the wind.

A rope ladder dangled from a hatch in the center of the zeppelin to the ground.

On the side, in wide letters, were the words, *Bron-Yr-Aur*. It was our blimp all right, but the outlaws didn't seem to be too surprised that it was there. What confused me more was the ladder. If Smythe and Hugeback had seen the outlaws coming, why hadn't they floated away? Instead, they had dropped the ladder.

Where was Toci? How wide of a circle was she making to hit them in the flank?

Pretty Myra stepped forward. "Did you miss your flight?" she asked in a deep, damaged voice. More scars marked up her throat.

"You could say that," I said. Shapes moved inside the horse-trailer, but they weren't big enough to be horses. And they hadn't come out. Outlaws around the trailer stood stiff, rifles ready. Guard duty. But what were they guarding?

"So what are you doing here?" She glanced around. The flares were mostly gray ash now. A few still sputtered with sparks. "Other than lighting flares."

"Well, if you want to know the truth, I'm here with a few girls, looking for dimes. Like, you know, from the Denver Mint from back in the day. We were told there were dimes stashed in this hangar."

Pretty Myra laughed. "Denver stopped making dimes a long time ago, way before the Yellowstone Knockout. You were lied to."

"Yes, I was." She had no idea how much, and neither did I. Not really. "So my girls and I don't want any trouble. If you let us be, we'll go in peace."

"Peace." Pretty Myra said the word and gazed at me. Her right eye was milky from the scar, almost hidden by her wrinkles. "That's a nice word. But it's not a word we use in the Juniper. You a vet?"

"Yeah. 7th Army. Regular. I just got back to the states from Kayleatown."

The wind eased some, which meant the zeppelin above us stopped bobbing for a minute, and things went quiet.

"I was air force," Myra said. "I got shot down in '42, and they still had enough juice to send us home. Purple Heart. You?"

"Yeah." Chatting was nice enough, I guess, but if I was going to have to shoot her, I didn't really want to get to know her, *sabes?* I'd already killed friends on the Ivanovna. Strangers were easier. "So, Senora Shirley, I guess I'm asking for you to let us go. We don't know anything about your business, and we don't want to. There aren't any dimes in the bank trucks in the hangar, and so we'll be leaving if that's okay with you?"

She dropped her eyes, and I watched her, watched her close. If she was going to come at me, this was the moment. I'd asked her a question, and now it was her turn to answer. Yes or no.

A yes. We'd take off. Not sure what Toci and Violet would do, but that was their fault for not being honest with us from the start.

A no. I'd be forced into a fight. Outnumbered bad. Out in the open, I wouldn't last five seconds. Oh well. At least I wouldn't never have to troubleshoot a tangle server ever again.

"You picked the wrong place to be at the wrong time, girl," she said in a low, quiet, slow voice. "Either you're a liar or you're unlucky. Either way..."

It was a no. Oh well.

Remember how I said I was cradling my rifle? I also had a K3B3 grenade in my fist, pin out, holding the lever. I dropped it at her feet and then charged the horse-trailer, running as fast as I could and then throwing myself into a roll as the gunfire started.

It was a suicide move, I know, but what were my options? Die standing there? Not this *chica*.

Not ever. If I was going to die, I'd die with an empty clip.

The grenade went off, not sure if I'd taken out Pretty Myra or not, but then I was shot, running. A bullet hit me. Then another. I felt the shove of the round in my skin, in the side of my thigh and in my neck above the collarbone. The pain was immediate but distant.

One thing they told me in basic, in South Carolina, you can survive getting shot. One bullet ain't nothing. Two bullets ain't nothing. What kills you is the freak out.

I'd been shot before and lived. Being shot ain't nothing to go crying to *Mamá* about.

I ran between trucks and tossed another grenade near the ASI attachment in the bed of a Dodge Bull. A head popped up from behind another truck, and I put holes in it with my AZ3.

The Dodge went up, heat, noise, the whistle of shrapnel flying—the dust and explosion, it was the Sino again, and I didn't have to think.

Another thing they taught me in basic. You can't think. You act. You act on your training cuz what kills you is the freak out, and a thinking mind loves the freak out like warm churros, *sabes*?

I went low, found cover in another of the trucks, and started taking out targets, one, two, three, before I was pushed back to the horse-trailer.

I heard one of the outlaws scream, "She's by the trailer, but hold your fire. We can't risk them." Them? Them who?

Lucky. Those couple of minutes might've been the luckiest in my life. I'd outrun the outlaws, but I still had more running to do – I had to outrun the gunshot wounds in my thigh and neck before the pain and blood loss put me down.

I dashed to the back of the trailer, breathing hard, feeling the trickle of blood running down my thigh, running down my chest. I could still breathe so my windpipe was okay. I coughed to check my esophagus. No pain. Blood wasn't gushing out so they missed my jugular. Like I said, lucky. My neck wound was superficial. I didn't know about my thigh, but I knew I'd have to check it cuz if I couldn't run I couldn't fight.

Behind the trailer, I took a minute to reload. Then I chanced a look to see who was coming for me.

Some of the outlaw *putas* had made it to a Ford Excelsior and were driving back around to get behind me, while others took up cover behind a Chevy Workhorse II. It was only a matter of time before they got to my flank or got a good shot at me.

I heard voices inside the trailer, whispers. Even soft, I heard how deep the voices were. Boys.

Boys were in the trailer.

Toci hadn't brought us to the airport for dimes. No, the payoff was going to be in boys. I remembered our conversation about what she had done in Steel City, Arizona. Where she first met Violet.

"Go!" Pretty Myra's voice yelled it. I knew, it was going to be a full-on charge, and I'd be cut down for sure. Well, my AZ3 was loaded and I had come to appreciate the rifle. Yeah, but I always thought I'd die with an MG21 in my hands, *sabes*?

Two dozen charged. More than I could shoot. No escape for me. I figured I was dead.

Then the cavalry came.

The hangar doors clattered open in a loud thunder of horse-hooves and gunfire.

Wren came charging out on her horse, holding the reins with her teeth and in her hands, two fully automatic AZ3 assault rifles, their flying straps tied to her arms. Both gun barrels flashed in the dim light.

Behind her rode Pat Lee on the other horse, and the two Indian mercenaries ran out after them. All opened fire.

The outlaws turned, and I wanted to catch them in a crossfire, but then bullets peppered the trailer around me. The girls in the Ford Excelsior were coming at me, but not for long.

From the south came the whoosh and whistle of a rocket-propelled grenade. The Ford Excelsior was sent rolling and crashing, the windshield skittering out and the whole steam engine bouncing across the ground in a shower of sparks and fire and smoke.

Our Cargador raced across the dirt and weeds toward our little battle. Hanging out the side of

the grapple cage was Violet with an old-school Norinco Type 69-IV RPG.

Now Pretty Myra had three targets, not just me, leaking blood. No choice but to chance a quick medical break.

I knelt, got in my pockets, and pulled out an EMAT spool, Emergency Medication Absorption Tape. It was yellowed cuz I'd had it so long. Even crossed on the Ivanovna with me. I slapped it on the wound on my neck, then undid my belt so I could twist around and press one on my thigh. The adhesive would stop the bleeding and it also had both a painkiller and an antibiotic. I knew I'd need both. I checked my leg and found an entrance wound but no exit. The bullet was still in me.

I'd just got patched up when the trailer slammed into me, and I was thrown back, my head hitting the hard ground, ringing my bell. Something big had hit the trailer and then hit me. *A la verga!*

It was the Cargador. Toci had rammed the trailer. Violet had a whole arsenal in the grapple cage. She was shooting her MG21, but Wren's M4A1 was hanging off her shoulder by the strap. She emptied the MG21 then switched to the M4A1. When you are shooting on full auto, the bullets go quick.

Wren was yelling something, screaming, and then I couldn't hear cuz of the ASI steam engines pounding in the outlaw rigs. Pretty Myra and her girls were in the three remaining trucks, swinging around. Bushes thwacked the grills as the spinning tires sent dust clouds sputtering to brown up the air.

I was still dazed, blinking, totally out of it, when I saw Toci throw open the back of the trailer.

A bullet sparked against the door. She didn't turn. Violet was there, with the Type 69 RPG on her shoulder. An explosion followed. One truck down. Two to go. Then she brought up the M4A1 laying down a cover fire.

A horse clipped past me, riderless, and my first thought was that either Pat Lee or Wren had been shot off it, but then my head stopped working again.

My heart stopped too.

Cuz Toci led four boys out of the trailer, skinny, wearing rags, shaken up by the battle. Four boys. One man. Chicho.

Chicho was there, older, bigger and more handsome, even in torn jeans and some ripped-up Country Mac Sterling t-shirt. Damn, but he was a good-looking man.

Toci ran the boys to the rope ladder, while Violet returned fire. They didn't have time to check on me, or I know they would've. Toci would've. But Pretty Myra was coming back at them in the trucks.

I watched the teenage boys climb up the ladder, one after another, up into the zeppelin. Then Chicho. Then Toci. Violet went last.

I was shocked for a long time. Stunned, totally out of it.

Then?

I got mad.

On my feet, I stumbled after them. Toci stopped climbing when she saw me. Violet dangled off the ladder, the RPG with one last rocket in its mouth. She'd dropped her assault rifles. Even her MG21.

That makes me feel better sometimes. I mean, Toci left me behind, and she loved me, and Violet left her MG21, and it was like the same thing, *sabes?*

Toci and I stared into each other's eyes across the field of blood.

She'd sold me out for Chicho. All of this, for Chicho.

She turned and started up, and maybe she was crying. I want to think she was, but I couldn't tell. And we never had the chance to really talk about it.

Snowflakes whirled down, blown on the wind and sweeping across me. Violet shot her last rocket and it spiraled crazily away to explode in front of the Pretty Myra's trucks. The pushback from the RPG made the ladder shake, and one of the boys fell. He cracked his skull to pieces among the weeds.

But the others? They got into the *Bron-Yr-Aur*.

Three trucks smoked on the airfield around me. The Cargador had been crashed into the trailer, but its engine was still hot, and then I saw the one horse left, lying dead. The other one had run off, like I said.

Wren stumbled toward me. Her hands were bloody, and at first I wasn't sure if she was wounded or not. Then I saw the three other bodies lying there.

Kumari.

Kalpana.

Pat Lee.

You don't lie motionless on a battlefield unless you're unconscious, dead or faking it, and no reason to fake it. The zeppelin was moving off, the ground lines cut. Pretty Myra in her last two trucks chased after it cuz the boys were worth something. Me and Wren? *Un montón de nada*.

Most likely they'd all been killed for dimes that had never been there in the first place.

No, they had died so Toci could rescue Chicho.

It had all been about Chicho.

Okay, now you know, *mija*. So you can leave.

Please, go.

SESSION 10

Death is stupid, *mija*.

Life, death, fate, it don't make no sense. I've thought a lot about that day since we talked.

I should've died. I'd been covered by thirty assault rifles, right there, standing in the middle of them—a few grenades later, and I'd made it out alive.

But then Kumari, Kalpana, and Pat Lee go down. Stupid.

And they had wanted to live. Not me. Right then. I wanted to die.

The look Toci had given me from the rope ladder had been so helpless, like it wasn't her fault she had lied to us. It wasn't her fault she was taking off with Chicho and leaving us. Like she didn't have a choice. Maybe she didn't. I don't know.

It hurt though. I stood there on the ground without a home. I only had a grave to fall into.

The zeppelin drifted off. Pretty Myra and the remnants of her gang chased after it.

Which left me and Wren standing next to the wrecked horse-trailer, the Cargador, and the trucks we had destroyed. Flames crackled and smoke boiled out from the wreckage.

"What the hell, Mari?" Wren screamed at me. I turned to her, blinking, feeling the blood loss and the distant ache of my wounds. My heart hurt far worse than the bullet in me.

"Your girl Toci just took off. Grabbed those boys and left. Why?"

"To sell them," I whispered. "Her and Violet were in on it from the beginning, but it's more than that. The big guy, Toci and me..."

I couldn't say more.

Wren let out a scream of frustration, grabbed me, and pulled me over to Pat Lee. The girl lay on the ground, pale, her head gashed open, probably from some piece of shrapnel. The blood pooled around her head, getting her hair all tacky.

"Do something!" Wren yelled.

I bent and felt for a pulse. Good news there. She had one.

Pat Lee's eyes flickered open. "Hey, you guys, so did we find the dimes and hit the jackpot? And why cherries on slot machines? I'll never understand this crazy world."

We helped her sit up. I had one strip of EMAT left. I tore it off the spool and pushed the tape against her forehead. She winced.

"Them other Hindu girls are dead," Wren said. "Both drew the fire for Pat Lee. They danced a jig they got hit by so many bullets."

An explosion in the distance. Pretty Myra had used some kind of rocket to hit the zeppelin. The back end, where the fins were, was smoking, and the blimp had slowed, which meant we had a chance to get to her.

Wren had my exact same idea.

"We gotta go for it, Mari," she said. "We gotta get Toci for what she did. Make her pay for her lies."

We scooped up Pat Lee, Wren and me, and we carried her to the Cargador and set her into the cab. Wren sprinted over to the bed and loaded up the firebox. I climbed up into the grapple cage.

The *Bron-Yr-Aur* was stalled, drifting over Concourse B. We were still north of Concourse C, so we'd have to hurry to catch them.

"Wren, what's taking so long?"

Wren sighed at me. "Dammit, your skank buddy ran her smokeless. The Cargador needs boiling water to jackin' work, and boiling water needs fire. But I'm hurrying. I'm hurrying." She ran around to our stores, grabbed a bottle of Pains whiskey, and threw the whole bottle into the firebox. "That should do her."

I felt the heat blast my skin.

Wren ran for something else, but I didn't see what, wouldn't know why, until later.

The zeppelin inched through the sky. The wind was coming out of the north, thank God, blowing the blimp south. If the wind had blown her east, we would've lost her.

Back in the cab, Wren gunned the Cargador. The whole thing shuddered under me and took off, pistons churning, firebox blazing and blowing smoke.

I checked the pressure gauge in the grapple cage and tried out the yoke. It had an old-school metal hoop with crosshairs at its center, and a trigger on its right wing. Took a second, but I figured out how I could fire the grappling hook.

The needle on the pressure gauge rose steadily. It was filling some chamber full of air, some kind of pneumatic system, and when I hit the trigger on the yoke, it would launch the grappling hook and the spool of cable would trail out. Also on the control panel was a winding mechanism for the spool, but I knew we wouldn't have time for two shots. I had one chance to get it right.

Gunfire erupted down south over Concourse A. Tracers flashed down from the *Bron-Yr-Aur*. They had a gunner there, in a little bubble on the butt end of the zeppelin, and she was aiming at Pretty Myra who was damn sure not going to lose the boys.

We drove past Concourse B, trying to get to the battle. The *Bron-Yr-Aur* swung about, still being pushed by the north wind. Snow swirled about her, the airport, us, making it hard to see for a minute.

A last gust and I could see. A section of the zeppelin sagged. Pretty Myra must have punctured some of the gas cells inside the blimp. The *Bron-Yr-Aur* wasn't looking good, and I planned on making it so much worse.

We swung around a few planes sitting like dead dinosaurs beside Concourse A. We cornered the last gate and headed toward the covered bridge connecting Concourse A to the main terminal.

One of Pretty Myra's trucks was blowing steam and smoke. Most likely the gunner in the zeppelin had blasted through the piping and the firebox. Bodies hung dead over the side of the bed.

The other truck had been blasted completely into a blackened wreck.

Pretty Myra was between the two vehicles, on her knees, staring up at the zeppelin.

I can only guess what was going through her head. She went there for a pay-off and to transfer boys to the *Bron-Yr-Aur*. Probably had done it a hundred times. But that day, that day, one badass *chica* had walked out of a hangar and the next thing she knew all her outlaws were dead and she was on her knees.

But only for a minute. The zeppelin's gunner fixed those .50 caliber twin-barrels on her and wiped Pretty Myra from the earth. Might as well have taken her to a butcher shop.

Then the wind changed direction. A big blast of western wind caught the smoking zeppelin and pushed it east. Her engines were working again, or so it looked like, and with Pretty Myra and her girls dead, I bet Captain Smythe was smiling as she headed toward Kansas.

I stamped my boot on the roof of the cab. "Faster, Wren! Faster!"

We were going full-on toward the zeppelin, but it looked like she was getting away.

I had no idea of the range of the grappling hook, had no idea how much cable we had, and I only had one shot.

It was all so out of my control—it was all so much fate. I turned the yoke, the grapple cage turned with me, and I put that zeppelin in the crosshairs.

I knew we were still too far. Maybe it was intuition, maybe something else, but then I'd spent a great deal of my life judging distances and contemplating wind and ammunition.

No, still too far.

I felt it all—the speed, the wind, the snow. We flashed by the fires of the trucks and the pieces of Pretty Myra, a splotch on the ground, bits of flesh hanging from sagebrush.

I remembered the plastic sack of dimes Toci had thrown to me in KC. How heavy and right they had felt. Wren taking her knife and stabbing the bag open. The glittering dimes spilling out.

Toci's eyes. Helpless. Chicho, looking bigger, but beaten, carted off across the Juniper cuz I guess he'd somehow stayed viable. A lot of men didn't, but he did.

Still not right.

Still not right.

Still not right.

I was thinking and that was *realmente estúpido*.

Thinking isn't aiming. Aiming is about intuition and surprise. When you know, you know, and you pull the trigger. You don't think about it.

I stopped thinking.

And I pulled the trigger cuz it was time.

The force of the cannon firing shook the grapple cage, and I yelled in surprise.

The hooked spear went streaming through the air, trailing cable, spinning out of the spool in an explosion of whirring that was even louder than the wind.

It seemed to take forever, and then, that big hooked spear went into the side of the *Bron-Yr-Aur* and our whole vehicle shuddered as the tension in the cable snapped. I looked down. The spool was empty of cable. I'd hit the *Bron-Yr-Aur* at the very limit of our range.

I flicked the switch to wind the cable back in and pull the zeppelin down.

Then I remembered. You know how I described the Cargador's landing struts? It was designed to be stationary when you used the grapple. Like stationary and anchored. We weren't.

The *Bron-Yr-Aur* continued east, and I felt the Cargador lift off the ground, but only just enough so the wheels couldn't quite get any traction.

A huge blast of freezing wind and snow pushed the zeppelin toward the covered bridge connecting Concourse A to the ragged tent-poles of the main terminal.

The Cargador was dragged along, the wheels touching, spinning, and then lifting off the ground. Toward the glass and steel of the covered bridge.

I was thrown about, scared to death we'd tip, even more scared the zeppelin would lift us completely off the ground and we'd go flying off into the sky. Well, until the grappling hook tore loose. Then we'd fall to our deaths.

Wren, though, Wren was laughing. I could hear her, crazy but happy, in some kind of weird way, *sabes*? We were going to die and she was laughing.

Then we both got to the bridge. The zeppelin zoomed above it. The Cargador roared below. Until the cable hit the bridge.

The cable gave out a metallic *sproing* that reverberated up and down the wire. The spool on the Cargador groaned then squeaked as the tension maxed out, and the blimp was yanked down.

We had traction again, and Wren drove the Cargador under the bridge and east, using the bridge as a fulcrum point to pull the zeppelin down, down, down and it rammed into the top of the bridge.

We came to a slamming stop.

I shimmied out of the cage and leapt to the ground, rolling. The wound in my thigh screamed and I felt the EMAT strip pull away. I'd bleed again, but oh well.

I got to my feet. I didn't have a rifle, but I had my pistol holstered to my thigh. My sidearm would have to do.

Limping into a run, I headed for the bridge and the rope ladder dangling there from the *Bron-Yr-Aur*. Violet and Toci had thrown it down, to get from the zeppelin and into the covered bridge, but they probably hadn't thought the ladder would stretch all the way to the ground.

I didn't hear Wren behind me, but I knew she would come cuz she'd burst out of the hangar to save me when there had been thirty outlaws. Now we only faced two women and a few boys who were probably too busted up to fight.

I got to the ladder and noticed the broken glass under my boots, shattered fragments from the windows of the bridge now smashed up by the force of the zeppelin crashing down onto it. Bootsteps tromped behind me.

Wren. Good. Backup.

Two against two.

Pat Lee must have been in the Cargador, keeping the tension tight on the cable, keeping the zeppelin from flying away. Though that probably wasn't much of an issue. Part of the *Bron-Yr-Aur*'s frame drooped over the bridge—most of the gas cells had been punctured. Looked like a cat lazing over the back of a sofa.

The ladder jerked under my grasp. Above me a figure disappeared through a window and into the airport bridge.

I started up the rungs, hand over hand over hand. I was in good shape back then, strong and fast. I got up to the window and slid into the bridge.

To my left the floor sloped down to the gloomy halls of Concourse A. To my right was the main terminal. The old people-movers were gone, and the insides salvaged so only the rails and glass sides were left.

Between the people-movers on each side, in the middle of the arch of the bridge, stood Toci, Violet, Chicho and three scared teenage boys.

The women of the bunch had guns. AZ3s.

Barrels on me.

My hand dropped to my thigh, where I thought I had my sidearm, but no, my holster was empty. I must have lost my pistol in the roll off the Cargador.

I was unarmed. They weren't. Behind me, though, Wren was coming. But what could she do against a soulless marine like Violet?

I didn't know, but I was unarmed, in Violet's sights, looking at Toci, and wondering if our friendship had ever meant a thing to her.

Or if Chicho, in the end, would be what destroyed us both forever.

No more for today, *mija*. No more.

But come back tomorrow. That one therapist said I would feel better if I talked about it all.

I never believed it.

Now I do. Now I do.

SESSION 11

I slept last night for the first time in a long time. Old people don't sleep, and I never could understand it. Maybe it's your body. It knows it's going to sleep soon enough, and it doesn't want to stop until it's time.

But the mind? The mind always goes and goes cuz the body is smarter than the mind. Which is why in basic training they told us not to think.

Your body knows what to do when your mind is chasing its tail.

I was thinking too much, standing on the bridge connecting Terminal A to the main terminal. That's what almost killed me. My training went out the window and my head spun and spun, looking at Violet and Toci, staring down the darkness of their rifle barrels.

Blood from my wound dripped down the back of my thigh. Tickled kind of, *sabes*?

"*Hola*, Chicho," I said.

"Hands in the air!" Violet ordered. She was in charge. Maybe she hadn't been, but now that all the jackering crapjack was out in the open, Violet was calling the shots.

I did as I was told. Cuz I was listening to my head and not my body.

Wind whistled through the window. The ladder clattered outside the window. Wren was coming.

"We still on the same team, Toci?" I asked.

Chicho kept quiet. He didn't have a gun, and he looked beyond tired. No smile, no greeting, just watching us.

Toci didn't lower her gun. "I don't know. How pissed are you?" She paused and smiled. "Jesus Christ, *nita*, you took on thirty of them outlaws and were doing pretty okay when we showed up. Yeah, you're a soldier."

"Said I was a soldier," I shot back.

"A stupid army grunt who doesn't know when to stop," Violet growled. "Why did you shoot down our zeppelin? We would've rendezvoused back in Burlington."

"Oh, really? Was that before or after you sold these boys?"

"*Nita*," Toci said, "You know you wouldn't have come if you knew the truth. Not with how you and Chicho ended things. Not if you knew about the boys. Driving here, you got all pissed when I talked about how I've been paying my bills. The whole dimes thing was the only way. And I didn't want it to go down like it did. Smythe and her zeppelin showed up late, Myra showed up early, and it all got jacked up. I wanted to tell you everything back in the hangar."

"Tell me now," I said.

"No." Violet said. "You shooting us down means you don't deserve the truth. Go back down the ladder. Get the hell out of here. The deal is off."

I knew Wren was outside, listening. She would be at the top of the ladder by now, probably waiting for some kind of signal from me.

Toci went on anyways. "I knew Myra had Chicho, and I was going to buy him, but Myra knew how much I wanted him. She jacked up the price on him. So I went to Violet, and we came up with a plan. All we needed was to get the boys into the *Bron-Yr-Aur* and then fly away. We didn't trust Smythe would deliver them to us unless we were on board. I'm sorry I lied. I'm sorry, but you wouldn't have come if you knew the truth."

"Same old, Toci," I whispered. "You never did trust me. Not like I trusted you."

"Can I say something?" Chicho asked.

"No!" Violet took a step forward and shouted at me. "Down the ladder, grunt. Now."

In her eyes was violence and greed. Less people to split the profits. She was pissed I'd destroyed their getaway plan right when they were in the clear. Myra dead, most of the boys on board, and a big paycheck waiting for them back in the U.S.

The grenade hit the floor. I recognized it immediately. It wasn't a K3B3. No, this was a K84A, a flash-bang smoker.

I kicked it toward Violet and Toci. Turned. Closed my eyes.

It went off, and in that enclosed space, it sounded like the end of the world.

Wren threw me her M4A1. She'd retrieved it off the ground by hangar 11D before we took off. She had Violet's MG21 hanging from a strap off her shoulder. I figured if Wren had the rifles, she'd found Violet's stash of ammo. She wouldn't throw me a rifle with an empty clip.

Armed, I turned, and I opened fire. Smoke from the grenade filled the space, but I saw figures there, four males, two females, with guns. I went for Violet and Toci. Both.

You don't shoot at people to wound them. You shoot to kill them.

They fired back. At least Violet did. I don't know about Toci. It was happening fast, but combat happens fast mostly.

I dove behind the people-mover's side, hoping it was safety glass. It was. Bullets spiderwebbed the glass on impact.

Wren dove onto the bridge next to me. She whirled and fired Violet's skull-stocked MG21 and then sank back down.

I rose. Violet appeared like a specter out of the smoke and smashed her AZ3 into my forehead. Which meant she was out of ammo. If she'd had one more bullet, she'd have put it in my brain.

I fell to the side, my bell rung. Blood from my head splattered the dusty concrete.

Wren stood over me, and I knew it was going to be a massacre. No way could some seventeen-year-old girl from the Juniper get the better of a Sino Marine with the Xs of her kills painting her cheeks.

Violet swung her rifle, bashed Wren, and the girl put up her own rifle, forgetting to use it. She was in full defensive mode, when she should've been attacking. No training. If Wren had done basic with me in South Carolina, she could've won the Sino all by herself.

The rifle was torn from Wren's hand. Violet continued to pound on Wren with the stock. She was forced to her knees. Wren shoved her back, but Violet danced away, kicked Wren in the chest, then jammed her foot into Wren's throat. She brought the AZ3 around. A final crushing blow that would knock Wren back and then the marine would crush Wren's throat with her boot.

It was over. Wren would die, and then I'd have my chance at Violet. But I was so nauseated. Concussed. Sure. Blood dripped down my face, and I couldn't think, couldn't act.

I could only watch.

Violet went to drive her rifle stock through Wren's head, but at the last minute, Wren ducked. She drew her Colt .45 in her right hand, making a big show of it. Violet went to bash the pistol out of the Juniper girl's grip.

What was in Wren's left hand? Her long knife. What the Juniper women back then called a Betty knife.

Violet saw the Colt, didn't see the knife, and Wren stuck her, rammed it into her diaphragm, and then jammed it upwards into her heart.

The marine girl hissed into Wren's face, "Stupid Juniper trash." Then slid off the blade and onto the floor.

Wren stood trembling, the blood-coated knife in her fist, shaking, shaking, and oh, I knew what she was feeling. Horror. Exhilaration. Guilt. But mostly adrenaline. Shooting people from ten meters is one thing, killing up close is another. I knew I'd seen her first hand-to-hand combat kill.

It marks you. It marks you deep.

I scooped up Violet's MG21 and ran through the smoke, looking for Toci, Chicho and the three boys.

I sped out of the smoke to where the old security must've been. Glass stalls were still there, set up to channel people through security, but of course all the tech was gone. I bent and puked and knew I didn't have long.

Head wounds suck. I staggered into the main terminal.

It was a ghostly place. Snow hung in the air. Everything else was dust. The yellow remnants of

carpet remained glued to cracked concrete. The gray sky filled tears in the old canopy. Long strands of fiberglass flapped in the wind, their slaps echoing through the cemetery the airport had become.

Toci and the boys were there, and it was over. It was so over.

I approached them. Must've looked like death. Blood covered my face. I could feel it drying tacky.

My rifle, though, was held in a rock-steady hand. An MG21. It felt so good in my hand, so familiar, so full of power.

Toci saw me and went pale. She still had her rifle, but it wasn't pointed at me. She didn't have the heart to kill. Or maybe she had enough heart to know we were sisters, friends, but I didn't. My heart was gone.

I grabbed Chicho and pulled him back. The boys waddled with him like he was their daddy duck.

"What the hell, Mari?" Chicho asked angrily.

I didn't respond.

My eyes were on Toci. My gun was on Toci. Her eyes were on me.

I backed the boys up away from her, backed them toward the bridge where smoke still swirled from the grenade. Wren would be there, with her M4A1. Chicho didn't fight me. Smart man. And the boys would go with whoever had the gun and wasn't afraid to use it.

"Say goodbye to me, *nita*," Toci whispered. "Say goodbye or you'll regret it."

I didn't.

I never saw her again.

I left her, standing in the airport, with the snowflakes falling through the ceiling, the rooftop fabric flapping, and the gray sky looking down.

I don't know what happened to her, and sometimes, I think she killed herself. Other times, I think she tried to walk out of the Juniper and died on some highway somewhere. Or maybe she made it back to the U.S. and went to Juarez and lived to be an old woman but was afraid of me still. Afraid of what she saw in my eyes.

Cuz you know what? I could've killed her.

What does that make me? What kind of monster did I become in the Sino or on the deck of the Ivanovna?

Toci lied. She betrayed me. But she wouldn't have shot me.

Who's bad?

Me. That's who. Toci was just crazy in love.

I was crazy and looking to kill.

And in this world, you know what? Killing is cheap. It's the love that's expensive.

And I could never pay those bills.

I regret not saying goodbye to Toci.

I've regretted it every day of my life.

SESSION 12

I slept again last night, *mija*. I dreamed I was on a ridge of sagebrush on the Juniper plains. Of course I had Violet's MG21 in my hands.

I still have it. After all I did and everywhere I went, I still have Violet's rifle with the skull carved in the stock. It's mine. Wren killed her, but it's my rifle.

In my dream, standing on the ridge, I saw a deer standing neck deep in sage, staring at me with such soft, doe eyes, but I didn't have a good shot at her. You don't shoot a deer in the neck or the head. You shoot them in the chest, to get to their heart, because if you take out their heart they can't run.

The deer wouldn't come out of hiding. I thought I would get frustrated, but I didn't. I waited. And when the deer moved, I shot her. It was a clean hit, and she dropped into the grass, dead immediately.

The next thing I knew, I was in a tent with my outlaw sisters. June Mai Angel was there, and we were eating venison and laughing and drinking beer—crappyjack Juniper beer brewed out of God knows what kind of grain. But we were laughing until I woke. Then I wasn't laughing no more.

But you didn't come back to listen to my dreams, *mija*. You came back for the end.

Well, here is the end.

Pat Lee Cook was dead in the Cargador.

Her head wound had been more serious than I had thought. She was sitting straight up in the seat, looking out the windshield at nothing no more.

Wren didn't stop, didn't pause, didn't do anything to show she cared a bit. She got into the cab and slammed the door. Didn't meet my eyes. "I'll drive. You get the boys in the bed. I want to get away from here, and yeah, I'll drop Pat off in Burlington. Mrs. Cook won't be too surprised. Me and Pat Lee were never gonna live very long anyways."

In the storage of the Cargador we had the blankets and sleeping bags we'd used on that first night, and the boys wrapped themselves up in them.

The zeppelin stayed floating above the bridge, half of it sagging against the bridge and the other half struggling toward the sky—half trapped on earth, the other half wanting heaven but no way to get there.

I never saw Smythe and Hugeback. Don't know if they died in the impact, or if they were busy trying to fix their zeppelin or if Violet murdered them when things turned south. All possibilities. All a mystery.

We didn't go and bury Kalpana and Kumari. I heard this song, you know, like Johnny Cash or whatever, and he sang that he didn't want to be buried on the lone prairie. I understand that. We should've buried them. We should've done a lot of things.

But we just left.

In the bed of the Cargador, next to the warmth of the firebox, Chicho helped me with my head wound and my thigh. We tried to talk, but we were both shy, *sabes*? He'd seen what I'd become.

He hadn't fought me when I'd taken him from Toci cuz he knew—he could sense it. He outweighed me by fifty kilos easy, but not where it counted.

We drove straight through to Burlington. My leg stiffened up so I couldn't move, and I was in pain, but physical pain is only weakness leaving the body.

Marines say that. Violet might have said that, but Wren killed her.

I got the bleeding stopped, and I knew I'd find some ghetto surgeon to dig the bullet out, and I'd survive. Medicine got real good at keeping people alive after the Sino. Even cured cancer like it was no big deal.

The snow never got serious and the flakes stopped falling with only a few inches left on the plains. Made them pretty. Chicho and the blankets kept me warm, and I remember loving being

near him, being near a man whose smell I knew by heart.

Wren didn't take the back roads going home. She got on the patch of scrap that had been I-70, and we went straight east. We weren't worried about no Outlaw Warlords no more. Pretty Myra was dead, but you just knew some other *puta* would rise up to take over.

I don't know who replaced Myra in Central Colorado, but it wasn't anyone important. No, the next woman to rule the Juniper was June Mai Angel. She wasn't a warlord though. June Mai was something completely different.

You know, *mija*, when you first got here, I thought I would talk about June Mai and what we did, but then I went into the whole Toci thing. But she's my story, *sabes*? If I talked about June Mai Angel, it would end up being her story, or Cavatica Weller's.

Cavatica wrote all those books. She talked about why the Chinese nuked Yellowstone in the first place, what caused the Sterility Epidemic, things like that. That's her story, not mine.

And mine is almost over. For real. The doctors are surprised I've gone this long, but I had to finish it for you, *mija*. So you know. So someone knows about me.

Three things more. Just three.

Wren first.

We dropped Pat Lee's body off at the Cook ranch under a cold night sky. We pulled into the long driveway, and Wren eased her friend's body out of the Cargador and laid her on the ground in front of the house.

Then Wren climbed back into the cab.

Like she said, she wasn't going back to Burlington, not even to attend her best friend's funeral.

Wren knew a girl who knew a girl who knew a girl who could help us smuggle the boys and Chicho into Kansas. We were set to cross at this huge junkyard on the border of the Juniper, another airport, but this one was some nowhere place, the Plainville Airport renamed the Plainville Dump. It's still there in Kansas. I guess there's a monument there, or whatever, for what happened later.

All the salvage that couldn't be sold had been stockpiled at the Plainville Dump, and it felt like the world's biggest trash heap.

The border there was weak, but of course, that was before SISBI passed in 2054. Then the border changed. Everything changed.

Wren and I talked in the Plainville Dump. Paper blew around us, white ghosts in the night, stirred by that wind, always that wind, blowing and blowing.

"So, *mija*, are you coming with us?" I asked. I hoped she would. That girl needed some guidance, and I was stupid enough to think I could do the guiding. *Qué estúpido*.

Wren knew what I was thinking. "I left one Mama behind, and why would I want another?"

"What about your take of the profits?" I asked.

"The boys? You going to sell them?"

I couldn't tell if she was excited by the money, or if she was going to get all moral on me. By that time, I was too tired to really care.

"Yeah," I said. And just like that, I was planning on a career in human trafficking. Snap your fingers and suddenly you're evil. Oh well.

Wren grinned. "Well, unless you wanna come back into the Juniper to pay me, they're all yours. No way am I going to get a bank account, or a jackerin' email address, and go legit. No, you Yankees enjoy your little paradise. I don't imagine I'll leave the Juniper. It ain't much, but it's home."

"You sure?" I remembered how she had faced down Violet and killed her with her Betty knife, how she had charged out of the barn on the horse, how she had walked into the Chhaang House, a strut in her hips and an assault rifle over her shoulder. "Listen, Wren, there's still time for you to live a normal life. You don't have to spend your days ducking bullets and trying to forget the things you've done."

For the first time since we'd fought together, we looked each other in the eyes.

"My Mama is Abigail Weller," Wren said. "How much of a normal life did you think I was ever gonna have?"

At first I couldn't believe it. Here was the daughter of a legend, a rich girl, and yet she was going off to live like an outlaw. Then again, I imagine that happens more than you'd think, *sabes*?

"Goodbye, Wren." I said. And we shook hands.

She got in the Cargador and drove off. She'd gotten her pay for the job after all. Those Cargadors cost a fortune.

But Wren hadn't come with us to get rich. No, she had come for some other reason. I hoped, right then, she'd find what she was searching for. If she was looking for vengeance against God, I hoped she'd find it. Even if it meant she'd wade through heaven in blood up to her knees.

But I guess you know all about Irene Weller and what happened to her. Irene. That was Wren's real name, but how jacked is a name like that?

Next. Chicho. Next the hard stuff.

Chicho and I moved back to KC, as good a place as any, and bought a big mansion. We decided not to sell the boys. They were Jalisco *vatos* and glad to be in the U.S. however illegally. More than that, they were viable. So we started a Craig's List business selling Male Product delivered the old-fashioned way. We made a ton of money. Yeah, I was a pimp, and sometimes that bothered me, but not too much.

It was easy to justify it cuz it's easy to think boys are just their johnsons and all they care about is using them as much as they can. Like they aren't human.

We bought more boys, got our stable to a dozen, and we had a room in the basement where we put them if they talked back or didn't show up where and when they were supposed to. We had them microchipped. Tracked their every movement cuz like I said, I was pretty good with computers.

I thought about going straight and working IT again, but we were making too much money to stop. Things were good for about ten minutes.

Our drinking got bad. Chicho would come at me drunk, and I'd beat the crapjack out of him, and then I'd go and apologize like I was some wife beater. Which I was. You know I was, only he was a man, and I was a killer soldier girl with a body that knew violence and not much else.

Lady cops would show up at our door. They knew what we were doing, sending boys out to women who needed to get pregnant, but they didn't care. I guess they thought enslaving boys wasn't really slavery. Our *vatos* had their Playstation XEs, tons of food, Skye6 if they wanted it, and beer, always a lot of a beer around our place.

You've seen all them videos about gangsters breaking bad, too much money, too much shame, and not enough light.

That was us.

And when I beat up Chicho, however big he was, I'd think about the guy I'd slapped around when I first got back from the Sino. How violence was so easy, and living real life was so hard. I'd become that guy, beating up on innocent people who didn't deserve my hate.

Chicho would always say the same thing. *I should've went with Toci...*

Those words would kill me.

Two years I spent dying like that.

In 2055, the Ladies in Waiting came home from China. Eterna batteries had been perfected, and the world had unlimited clean energy. There were jobs everywhere, and the world was humming along. Crime rates dropped and prisons closed and it was like heaven, *sabes*?

Only every day I chose hell.

Until one day, I chose something else.

I'd started hearing rumors about a new Outlaw Warlord in the Juniper, June Mai Angel, who had a cause, a righteous cause, only the government didn't want us to know about it.

I left Chicho and went back to the Juniper, found June Mai Angel, and I served as one of her soldiers. But really, I was an outlaw. She wasn't, but I was, cuz that's what I was born to be.

Toci was crazy in love. But I was born bad, and when you're bad, you go to bad places and do bad things and when the memories come, you drink tequila and walk around at night with an MG21 on your shoulder looking for someone or something to shoot cuz nothing matters and there's a howl

in you that won't stay quiet.
I hope death is quiet, *mija*.
My life has been so loud.
I hope to God...please Jesus...death is real quiet for me.

The End

Other Prequels Available

Thank you for reading *Armageddon Dimes*, a prequel novella based in the world of the *Juniper Wars Series*. *Armageddon Dimes* takes place five years before the events of *Dandelion Iron*, the first book of the series, available 2016 from WordFire Press. Mariposas' story ends with the novella, but other characters including Wren Weller and Father Pilate come to life in the series.

Two other prequel stories are available. Free on Wattpad.com, *Trapdoor Boy* tells the story of a rare viable boy with a secret that threatens to destroy him. Also free, *Four Clubs*, first posted on <http://www.literaryescapism.com>, introduces Cavatica Weller at a family poker game where the stakes couldn't be higher.

Finally, other award-winning authors including Eytan Kollin, Mario Acevedo, and Jeanne C. Stein have written short stories set in the world of *The Juniper Wars*. They will be available to Aaron Michael Ritchey's newsletter subscribers. To sign up for the newsletter and for more information about this upcoming series, visit www.aaronmritchey.com.

Coming Soon

In 2016, a new series by Aaron Michael Ritchey will debut.

Dandelion Iron (*The Juniper Wars Series* Book 1)

It is the year 2058.

The Sino-American War has decimated several generations of men, and the Sterility Epidemic has caused 90% of the surviving males to be sterile.

Electricity does not function in five western states—Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming, and Montana are now territories once again. Collectively, they are known as the Juniper. It is the most dangerous place on Earth.

Welcome to the world of *The Juniper Wars*.

On a desperate post-apocalyptic cattle drive to save their family ranch, Cavatica Weller and her two older sisters stumble across a rare boy. Charlotte wants to send him away, Wren, the middle gunslinging sister, wants to sell him, and Cavatica falls in love with him.

Little do they know that an inhuman army is searching for the boy and will stop at nothing to find him.

An excerpt from *Dandelion Iron...*

MAGNIFICAT

The Sino wasn't a war. It only looked like that to the casual observer. Really, the Sino was an Armageddon.

— Former President Jack Kanton, 48th President of the United States, July 28, 2057 on the 29th Anniversary of the start of the Sino-American War.

(i)

Holy Mary, Mother of God, help me to tell my story right, 'cause the memories make it hard. Some are sharp, like the devil's thorn weeds that grew out of the dandelion patch near my Daddy's grave. Others are pretty, like those dandelion flowers in spring sunshine.

I've read a lot about the tragedies of the first half of the twenty-first century. Lots of history books about the Sino-American war, and the Sino is a hard bit of bacon for anyone to chew, Chinese and Americans alike. Lots of novels and videos about the Yellowstone Knockout and the five states it plunged into darkness—New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, and Montana. Otherwise known as the Juniper.

My story is about what happened after all that—after the city people left the Juniper, after the salvage operators took everything that wasn't nailed down, and folks started ranching and farming. A story about how my love for a boy almost got my family killed when everything we ever loved was in dire jeopardy and our only hope was on a gamble, bad cards in an impossible poker game with the Devil grinning us down. A love story, an adventure, but also a family drama about three sisters who loved each other as much as they hated each other as much as they wanted to be like one another.

When I was sixteen, I was living in Cleveland, Ohio, going to the Sally Browne Burke Academy for the Moral and Literate. A bright future lay ahead of me. That all changed forever on the Ash Wednesday of 2058, a holy day of obligation that broke my heart.

Like always, my sister Wren did the heartbreaking. She was good at that.

Chapter One

I truly believe in boy meets girl. I have no doubt romantic love is Divine will. Even though our men are waning, we must trust in the wisdom of romantic love and not let money, fear, or force interfere with God's perfect plan.

—Sally Browne Burke, Founder of the New Morality Movement, February 14, 2058

(i)

Wren was on her way to my boarding school with bad news and a gun in her hand. She'd been living wild in Amarillo.

If I'd known my sister was coming, I'd have run.

My best friend, Anjushri Rawat, and I were ditching history by hiding out in an empty classroom—just the two of us surrounded by school desks and wood polished to a shine. Dust motes floated in the sunshine streaming through the tall windows. Made the room smell musty, but in a good way. Between the windows were RSD screens embedded in the wall, each showing a different bit of video. Some were of famous alumni from the Sally Browne Burke Academy for the Moral and Literate in Cleveland, Ohio, women doing important things, flashes of their biographies. Others showed nature scenes, which supposedly were meant to soothe us, but no one paid much attention to them. I didn't.

Right then, all I cared about was making sure Anju went to the Sammy Hawkins dance with Billy Finn, so true love could win the day. Well, true love was going to need a lot of help. Anju didn't have a chance at all with Billy.

Her ethnicity wasn't issue, nor was her religion, since she was Catholic, from Goa, a particularly Christian part of India. Anju and I went to Mass together.

No, the problem was Billy's parents, who were drooling over the wealth Becca Olson brought to the table.

Boys were rare, and I knew I'd never get one. I wasn't rich or pretty enough. My body betrayed me at every turn—too big, too tall, my face too round. My eyes were reddish-brown like Colorado mud, my hair as strawed and yellowed as Juniper grass in January.

Only about fifty boys attended the Academy, roughly ten percent of the student population. For some girls, the competition for a date could be brutal, but not for me. Most days, I accepted the fact that my true treasures were my dedication to the New Morality and Anju's friendship. I had my fantasies about boys like any sixteen-year-old girl, but I figured I'd die unmarried. There were worse things.

I'd grown up in the Colorado territory, and I'd witnessed such worse things firsthand. Not that Mama sent me away to boarding school to keep me safe. She'd made it clear—safety was an illusion and God loved the bold. At twelve, I packed my gear and climbed aboard a train, eastbound. I'd only gone home once 'cause it's a long way from Cleveland to the Juniper, a long trip, dangerous and expensive.

No electricity in the Juniper. None at all. During the early years of the Sino-American War, the Chinese nuked Yellowstone and killed the buzz in five western states. Nearly thirty years after the Yellowstone Knockout and still no power. President Jack tried to govern those states, but it wasn't long before America was sewing flags with only forty-five stars.

In that classroom with Anju, I figured I was done with my home in the Colorado territory

forever. Sure, I might visit the ranch now and again, to see Mama and my older sister Sharlotte, but I was learning electrical engineering and looking at fat jobs in big corporations.

Besides, could I live without the internet and video? Not hardly.

But first, true love, Anju and Billy Finn, forever and ever, amen. That was the only reason I would sin by ditching class. Anju, however, wasn't impressed with my plan.

"I know you're trying to be all heroic, but it's not going to work," she said. "Billy and I can still be friends I guess, but we both know Becca Olson is going to get him in the end."

Everything she said was the truth, but my plan popped all hot and greasy in my head. Regardless of the odds, I'd win the day for love and get revenge on that no-good, stuck-up Becca Olson. "Come on, Anju, throw it in gear and think happy thoughts. How many seasons of *Lonely Moon* have you and Billy watched together?"

"All of them," she admitted.

"All of them. And do you think Becca Olson ever watched even a single episode?"

Anju shook her head. Her hands were wrapped up in her New Morality dress, lots of gray fabric from throat to ankles. I'd seen her in a sari, all that brightly-colored fabric contrasted beautifully with her dark features and darker hair, but she was New Morality, like me.

"You get to class," I said. "I'll be the hero. Just you watch."

"Okay." Anju moved to the door then turned around. "You know, odds are, we'll both die alone."

I rolled my eyes. "Thank you, oh voice of doom. I woke up with a little headache. Prolly brain cancer, huh?"

Anju's dropped her eyes. She wasn't laughing.

I laughed for both of us. I was used to doing it. "It's gonna be okay."

"Thank you, Cavatica. Thank you for being my friend."

Anju disappeared out the door, leaving me alone with my Hayao 5 electric slate and my plan, two things I loved as much as any girl ever loved a cute boy or the season premiere of their favorite show. The first thing I did was text Becca Olson to invite her to come chat with me, face to face. Kept it vague and real mysterious so she'd come. Then I checked the audio cables plugged into my slate, checked the server connection, checked the microphone. Everything was ready.

A flicker on one of the RSDs caught my eye and I had a moment of wonder. One screen showed Canadian geese on the wing flying in a 'v' during migration. Outside the window, I caught a glimpse of the same species of geese, flying through a sky blackened by clouds. The downy white of their breast feathers gleamed in contrast to the gray storm, both on the video and outside the window. For a moment, strong memories of the ranch took me away—feet in stirrups, a restless horse under me, listening to the honking racket of geese on the wing.

I didn't feel nostalgic, only grateful. If I wanted to hear geese, all I had to do was Google the noise. Reality is often times overrated. Case in point, *Lonely Moon*, the Juniper-based TV drama Anju and Billy loved. That show was a whole lot easier to understand than the reality of those states turned territories.

Since my trap was ready for Becca, I had a chance to pray. Eyes closed, I asked for forgiveness for ditching class. Next, I prayed God would shine His all-powerful light upon my righteous cause—true love.

About the Author

Aaron Michael Ritchey is the author of *The Never Prayer*, *Long Live the Suicide King*, and *Elizabeth's Midnight*. In 2016, the first book in the epic *Juniper Wars Series*, *Dandelion Iron*, will be published by Kevin J. Anderson's WordFire Press. Aaron was born on a cold and snowy September day in Denver, Colorado. While he's lived and traveled all over the world, he's a child of the American West—sagebrush makes him homesick. He lives in Colorado with his cactus flower of a wife and two stormy daughters.

Also by Aaron Michael Ritchey

Dandelion Iron - Preorders Available (<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/619049>)

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Little do they know that an inhuman army is searching for the boy and will stop at nothing to find him.

Welcome to the world of The Juniper Wars.

The Never Prayer

Beautiful writing and a story of courage, hope, and unselfish love mark this as a not-to-be-missed debut from an exceptionally gifted new talent. I look forward to more from Aaron Ritchey.

—Jeanne C. Stein, bestselling author of the *Anna Strong Chronicles*

An engrossing supernatural smackdown between good and evil.

—Mario Acevedo, bestselling author of the *Felix Gomez Vampire series*

Long Live the Suicide King

...acerbic, witty and at times achingly poignant...a compelling tale of teenage depression handled with humor and sensitivity.

—Kirkus Reviews

Mr. Ritchey inhabits a seventeen-year-old boy so thoroughly that the reader honestly believes JD is, himself, speaking. The voice is on point, the outlook is eerily familiar. Every moment, every choice JD makes is understood intimately...it is genius.

—InD'Tale Magazine

[Elizabeth's Midnight](http://www.amazon.com/Elizabeths-Midnight-Aaron-Michael-Ritchey/dp/0986184500) (<http://www.amazon.com/Elizabeths-Midnight-Aaron-Michael-Ritchey/dp/0986184500>)

Beautifully written, deeply moving, Elizabeth's Midnight is a magical adventure that grabs you by the heart and never lets go.

— Bonnie Ramthun, author of *The White Gates*, a Truman Award Finalist

A transformative tale for those who believe in magic and in a young girl's heart—a grandmother's too.

—Kirkus Reviews

...a wild adventurous roller-coaster ride that tests friendships, loyalty, obligations, responsibilities, reality, love, and truth.

—Big Al's Books and Pals Review
