



# Chapter 10

I hate border crossing.

I hardly do it, there isn't much that interest me outside the US. I'm not the globe trotting kind, or the world wise kind of whatever I am. I'm perfectly happy in my cool cellar sitting at my rig and bringing down bad guys. I'll go out, I'll do the legwork and get my hands dirty. I'll even visit that asshole who's forgotten I exist. But I can count on one hand the number of times I've had to cross the border for any of those reasons.

First there's the lines. I hate having to be stopped there, knowing what's coming and just not getting there. Why do all these people have to want to enter Mexico now? This is when I want to go there. Couldn't they have all waited half an hour before clogging the place? Half my coffee crate is gone already, and there are at least two dozen cars ahead of me.

Move!

Then there's the very real danger I'll run out of coffee. It's not like I can just get out of the F-150 and get more. Sure, there's a coffee machine in here, but it's still in its box in the back.

No one told me it'd be this long!

And finally, there's the fact that I have to watch my tongue when dealing with the officers here. It doesn't matter how idiotic they are; I need to get across the border, so I have to keep on smiling at all the stupid thing they say and nod and answer their questions and—

It's going to drive me insane!

And to be clear, I'm not saying that about the border in this direction, because the officers are Mexicans. It's the same stupid show coming back with the good old American officers. There's something about being put on the border that just kills brain cells. Or maybe they get sent here after losing those brain cells because that's the only place left that can handle them.

This is torture, do you hear me? I only have seven travel mugs left!

"Reasons for traveling to Mexico?" the officer asks, sounding bored and motioning for my ID.

"A well-deserved vacation." I smile as I hand over my passport.

Another officer walks a dog around the pickup. I wonder if the new-truck smell will cause it to react.

"What's under the tarp?" the officer asks looking through my passport after glancing at the back, where the dog trainer stopped.

"Camping equipment, along with a coffee machine."

"Excuse me?"

"I just don't want you to think I'm trying to smuggle good coffee—" I clamp my mouth shut as the eyebrow goes even further up. "I really need that vacation?" I risk.

He looks at me. "Is the tailgate locked?" he ask in the same flat tone, as if I hadn't said the most stupid thing I could have right now. If they confiscate it, I am dead.

"No."

He motions to the one at the back. "Not enough camping spots on your side of the border?"

Is that a dig? Is he implying I'm just going over the Mexican side because it's exotic? Does he think I'm a xenophile or something? I have a boyfriend. Thank you very much. He no longer knows I exist, but I'm not going to cheat on him with anyone.

"No, I—" I snap my mouth shut again. Telling him what I think of *that* isn't going to go over well.

I take a breath. "I need to go somewhere without anyone able to talk to be about all this political bullshit going on right now. A lake in the middle of nowhere and no English speakers."

The tail gate closes and the officer hands me my passport back. "You might be underestimating the number of people who can speak English here. Have a good vacation, Mister Crimson."

"Thank you." I don't look back as I drive.

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This part of Hermosillo isn't advertised to the tourists. I doubt anyone wants to know about the hovels I'm driving through. Fuck, I don't want to know about them, but coordinates where my contact said to meet him is here. I come to a gentle stop to the ping of the GPS telling me I've arrived, and I wonder if this is a joke.

The buildings are a combination of rotting lumber and galvanized aluminum sheets, and they look like the next strong wind will bring them down. Hell, me farting too hard might do it. There's a handful of men before then, looking like they haven't eaten anything in weeks, and think I'm a buffet.

The man who exits the ruin of hopes to be a house is better dressed than the others, looks well fed, but his eyes have that same hunger as the others as he looks the length of the pickup. When he speaks, I don't get one word of it. Well, I get one. Gringo might as well be English for as much as I hear it used in Phoenix.

"Sorry," I tell him. "My Spanish isn't good enough for conversation." I might manage a few insults, but tone would do most of the work.

That hunger shifts to suspicion. "Who are you?" he asks in an accented English.

"Mister Red." Yes-yes, I know, so clever of me. I'm the Einstein of aliases. I just don't see the point of complicating things when whatever name I use isn't going to exist anymore by the time I'm out of here.

"And what brings you to this part of the city, Mister Red? We do not get many tourists."

And we not turn this into a horse and pony show? I take a thick envelope from the armrest storage. "Business." I'm going to need a drink soon to deal with this and I doubt he's going to let me reach at the passenger foot-well so I can grab a mug. I should so have gotten one out before getting here, but you try navigating a place like this with only GPS coordinates.

He reaches through the window for it.

I move it away. "Hey there. Personal space, it's a thing." I make shooing motions with my free hand. "And you're not touching that until after I've confirmed you have what I ordered."

He raises his voice, speaks Spanish, and a muscular man exits that same sad excuse for a building carrying a duffel bag. He stops a dozen feet from the pickup and drops the bag.

Okay, so that's how we're going to do this? I take off the light jacket before exiting, and everyone is suddenly alert as they see the shoulder holster. "Open it."

He eyes the envelope in my hand before hurrying to the bag. As he unzips it, music drifts from inside. He pulls it open and the guns and knives become fully visible. I swallow as the melody crescendos. Death and joy, it promises.

"That's good." Is my voice shaking? "You can close it." The music refuses to stop calling to me even once the zip is closed again.

"That is a lot of tools," the man says as I hand him the envelope. "What will you be doing with them?" he takes the stack of bills and starts counting.

"I'm going to do a bit of hunting." I pick up the bag, turn, and three more men have joined us, each of the better fed type. One walks around to the other side of the pickup, eyeing it like it's a woman and he hasn't gotten laid in months.

"Are we going to have a problem?" I ask as that man lays a hand on the pickup. The one counting the money keeps on counting. Twenty grand in hundreds is a lot of bills. Casanova makes a comment in a tone that makes me worry his next act will be to hump my truck. If that happens, I'm

going to have to give into the song and kill them all just on for the principle of the thing.

The money goes back in the envelope and that's closed. The man says something in Spanish. Casanova argues, tone goes sharp, Casanova relents and head to one of the hovels.

Money man smiled at me. "It has been a pleasure doing business with you, Mister Red." He puts the envelope away. "I will advise you to be careful. Mexico is not a safe place for men with enough money to afford a new truck."

I chuckled as I throw the bag in the passenger seat. "No worries there. I just bought everything I need to ensure I'm going to be left alone." I get back in and drive off.

Next stop, a good fishing spot with a view.

It takes me seven tries before I pull out a travel mug that has coffee in it.

Nix that. A good coffee shop has to be my next stop, then I can worry about fishing.

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How does anyone do this?

I've been sitting here for what, ten minutes and nothing.

How the fuck does anyone just sit here and do nothing?

Is that all the people in this country do? Sit around and wait? No wonder the murder rate's so high here. Well, it's got to be if this is all they do.

I'm up and looking at the camp I set up under thirty minutes. The tent, the solar panels on its roof, the coffee machine in the process of making me another wonderful cup of coffee, then I eye the hated fishing pole in its holder, the line in the water and...

What the fuck's supposed to happen now?

I take the travel mug out of the coffee machine, place another one, and get it working again. I take the binocular off the back of the fishing chair and look at the large villa far on the other side of the lake.

Juan Manuel Fernan's home is located a good thirty miles, kind of north by northwest, of Mexico City, on a few hundred acres patrolled by enough people to fill a baseball stadium. There is no way a frontal assault on this place works. The villa itself is something Spanish, with a footprint of over two-thousand square feet, based on what I could tell from Google Maps. There are no good views of it. Whoever Fernan uses to scrub his presence off the net is making sure that it's just as hard to get a bead on where he lives, too.

If I'd done this part of the research from home, I'd have gotten a high-rez picture, as well as the blueprint and dimensions down to the eighth of an inch, but I was fed up with sitting there and not getting that call.

That means all I have to work with are the internet cafes in Mexico City, and let me tell you, it doesn't matter how high class one of them is; they don't have anything like the processing power needed to get that information. Don't let movies fool you. It doesn't matter how good of a hacker you are. The quality of your gear matters.

So now I have to sit here and look at the place.

I have to do actual surveillance.

How the fuck does anyone do this?

How long is it going to take until I have enough information to sneak in and kill the bastard?

"Why didn't you fucking call?" I yell loud enough birds fly away. If he'd been a decent human being and at least told me he was done with me, I wouldn't be sitting here moping—I mean planning to sneak into a villa guarded by an army, kill one guy and get out.

Well, kill one guy. We'll see what happens afterward.

I look again at the villa, the men walking around the property, and sigh. I put the laptop on my lap and start documenting. I'm looked at a day of doing this before I can get in there.

Why didn't I do all this research before leaving?

I glare at my phone.

This is all because of you!