

The Border Safari Club

Rhett and Toni Sanders are private detectives in Houston. Their housekeeper introduces them to her cousin, Miguel, who had recently crossed the border illegally seeking employment. Miguel relates that just after crossing the Rio Grande, he witnessed his comrades being hunted down by a pack of dogs and then shot to death by men on horseback. Miguel believes many more Mexicans may have met the same fate. Rhett and Toni decide to investigate the possible existence of a secret hunting club, risking that they might become its prey. (31 pages)

Toni and I were proud of Maria. Not for being an exceptional domestic worker who cleaned our home every Tuesday and Friday from top to bottom. Not for her positive attitude, or for the loving way she provided for her children. But we were proud of her for becoming a U.S. citizen. We were her sponsors, and the three of us shed tears the day the judge rewarded Maria for her hard work and was the first person to call her an American. She was grateful, and we felt lucky to have her in our lives.

Until we met her cousin.

Tuesday morning, she arrived as always at 7:30 A.M. But this time she had someone with her; her cousin Miguel who we quickly learned was not a U.S. citizen. In fact, he'd been in America for only five days after illegally crossing the Rio Grande near Presidio.

In perfect English, Maria said, "Mr. Sanders, Toni, Miguel saw something that was horrible. But he can't go to the police, and we don't know what to do. But you're private investigators. Maybe you can do something."

Miguel was seventeen years old, clean-cut, and appeared to be sad. He spoke no English, and was staying with Maria. He planned to work in Houston like many of his friends from Mexico did, doing whatever jobs he could find, and send money every

month to his mother who lived in San Pedro, a small village in Chihuahua about thirty miles south of the Texas border. Miguel had four younger brothers, and two younger sisters who were counting on him. His intentions were good.

But what he had witnessed had aged him.

As we sat in our kitchen, Miguel talked to Maria, who translated his tale for us. And to Toni and I, it *was* horrible.

According to Miguel, he and two of his friends from San Pedro, had crossed the river, about fifteen miles east of Presidio, and about the same distance from Lajitas. The terrain was rugged, mountain desert, with virtually no population. While the route required a lot of walking, they had believed it was a safe place to enter the country.

The three young Mexicans had made it about a half a mile north, when Miguel, seeking some privacy to take care of a natural need, walked down a dry river bed, into a steep, rocky ravine. He told his friends he'd be a few minutes, but that he would catch up when he was through.

Alone, and about a quarter of a mile from his two friends, Miguel first heard the barking of dogs. Then he heard the sound of horses galloping, maybe five or six of them. Then he heard a man's voice yelling something in English that he did not understand. He first thought the commotion was being made by a government border patrol. He shinnied up the ravine to have a look.

As Miguel spoke to Maria, I could see in his eyes the fear he felt that moment five days ago. He perspired as he continued his account of what happened.

From his position above the ravine, and well-concealed by boulders, Miguel saw six men on horseback, wearing cowboy hats, and each one carrying a rifle. They were

following a pack of dogs -- hounds mostly, who had evidently picked up the scent of Miguel's two friends, and were in pursuit. They passed by the ravine without looking in Miguel's direction.

Miguel saw his friends running in an open, grassy area, a large sloping meadow surrounded on three sides by grassy mountains. He knew his friends would be caught in a matter of seconds. But he didn't know that it was in that meadow where his two friends would die.

Tears were in Miguel's eyes. Maria patted him on his shoulder and rather than encourage him to continue, she finished the horrible tale for she had heard the story before.

She said, "Rhett, Toni, those men shot Miguel's friends. Maybe twenty times or more each. Then they put a rope around their legs and dragged them away." She glanced at her cousin, and added, "Those were *not* border patrol. They were hunting those two young boys for sport. For fun."

Miguel said something to Maria that we didn't understand.

She translated, "Miguel believes others have been killed there. He knows of many people who crossed the river there, people he was going to meet here in Houston. More than twenty. According to some other men he's met since he's been here, none of those people ever arrived.

We gave Maria the day off, and told her to take care of Miguel. We had a lot to consider.

Toni said, "Rhett, should we report this to the authorities?"

I didn't like my answer, but replied, "I don't think it would do any good, unless we could offer Miguel as a witness. And then he'd be sent back, and that would be a betrayal to Maria."

She nodded, and asked, "Do you think this was just some hunting party who decided to chase a few wetbacks for fun, and then it got out of hand?"

It was July. I said, "Nothing's in season for hunting. Not deer. Not birds of any kind. No, I think they knew what they were doing."

Toni said, "I think we need to do something."

Knowing she was right, I called my friend in the police department, Dave Secrest in the Homicide Division, and confirmed what I already knew. According to Dave, only if Miguel himself was willing to file a report, or if someone else with hard evidence came forward, would there be an investigation.

Toni and I agreed that we would have to be the "someone else."

Toni said, "My dad – rest his soul – took my brothers and me camping in the Big Bend area when I was thirteen. It was beautiful, but desolate. It does seem like a safe place for Mexicans to cross the border."

I asked, "Isn't it hot there at this time of year?"

"Yes, but the nights are cool. I suppose it's at night when they did most of their traveling once they get into Texas. They could hitch a ride with a friendly Latino who worked in the area." Toni had it all figured out.

Knowing we didn't have a case to work on at the moment, I asked, "Do you want to revisit Big Bend?"

She did, but she had a question of her own, "What will we be looking for?"

We thought about the six men on horseback, and the dogs. Were they part of an official border patrol? Not likely. Were they hunting other game and just lost control? Again, no game was in season in the middle of the summer. Were they just Texas good old boys, playing a sadistic game? Maybe.

I said, "With the dogs, it sounds to me like it *was* a hunting party. An illegal one, of course. And if Miguel was right about the other missing illegals, then maybe there's an organization that does this kind of thing on a regular basis. Maybe a secret club."

Toni cringed and said, "That's sick."

I agreed.

"Who would do such a thing?" Toni was not into hunting of any kind.

I had willingly given up the sport many years ago. I said, "Maybe people who are tired of killing deer or other animals. Maybe people who are violently opposed to illegal immigration. Maybe people who just don't like Mexicans. I don't know."

For the next hour we discussed our theories. We agreed that if there were a lot of killings, more than just Miguel's friends, then there had to be an organization. One that supplied the horses and hunting dogs. One that hid the bodies. A very secret organization and there had to be someone in charge.

We concluded that there *was* some sort of a club, and that money probably changed hands, and that club members were scrutinized carefully, and participation in a hunt was costly. That is what Toni and I finally agreed upon; a club of sick, sadistic bastards.

Toni suggested that we go to the Big Bend, and back pack into the area where Miguel's friends were murdered. That we just hide and hopefully witness the club in action. Then we could file a report, and let the authorities take over.

I asked, "You want to go watch some poor Mexicans get killed?"

She frowned, "Not really. What do *you* suggest, Rhett?"

I said, "Maybe we should go down there, and try to join the club. Find out who's in charge, what it costs, and what they do with the dead bodies."

She agreed, but added, "If we can't find out anything about the club, then we can always go with my plan."

We were on the road Wednesday morning. It would take us a full day to get to our destination. We drove through San Antonio, took Highway 90 past Del Rio and the surprisingly gorgeous Amestad Reservoir -- deep blue waters surrounded by barren desert mountains. Then on to the town of Marathon, and then South to Lajitas.

Eleven hours in the car gave us plenty of time to discuss strategy.

Toni said, "If this really is the work of some sick secret club, then some of the locals must know about it, or at least heard rumors about it."

"I hope so." I discussed a plan, "We'll hang out at Lajitas and talk to some of the employees, like the bartender and maybe some of the waiters. Let them know we're big game hunters and that we're looking for some excitement."

Toni added, "And let them know we have lots of money."

"And that we have no morals." I wondered how members to this club had been recruited. Toni and I believe that if this was indeed a secret club, then members must pay a lot for the opportunity to participate in the hunt. We also concluded that members

obviously would have no qualms about killing human beings, and that they place no value on the life of an illegal immigrant from Mexico.

Toni said, “If we can find out who has horses and a pack of hunting dogs, that would be helpful.”

Lajitas is a western-style resort with a golf course. It’s location is hundreds of miles away from any major city. It has a landing strip that accommodates those guests with private planes or jets, and many guests do fly in.

We checked into our suite, unpacked our suitcases, and headed for the bar. It was seven o’clock, and there weren’t many customers. Evidently, the middle of the summer is not the popular time of year to visit Lajitas. We sat at the bar and ordered drinks: a beer for me, a glass of white wine for Toni.

The bartender’s name was Gordy. He said he lived in nearby Terlingua, but that was a lie, and he appeared to be a dropout from society. He was tanned and rugged looking, with a full beard and in his fifties.

After introductions, I began the conversation, “This is our first trip down here. What’s there to do around here other than play golf?”

Gordy handed us our drinks and said, “Hiking. If you can stand the heat. The resort’s got horses if you like that sort of thing. Or you can go across the river to Mexico, but it ain’t exactly Acapulco if you know what I mean.”

Toni said, “We just heard it was a unique place to visit, and we’re sort of bored with our usual vacations.”

He didn't bite at first. We were hoping he'd ask what our usual vacations consisted of, so I added, "That's right, honey, I suppose we've shot about everything we can over the past ten years."

Gordy stopped wiping the counter and looked at us. I'd gotten his attention. He asked, "You hunters?"

Toni answered, "We love the outdoors. Started with deer hunts in the hill country, and then bear and Carribou, in Alaska, and then three safaris in Africa."

I was stunned. Toni actually sounded as if she knew what she was talking about.

By ten o'clock that evening, Toni and I had repeated "our story" to the concierge and to our waitress during dinner. The next morning, we strolled around the town, and shared our supposed boredom with hunting, and our supposed willingness to spend a lot of money, with the head wrangler at the stables. While there, we were invited to sign up for the evening trail ride, but we declined. I don't trust horses – especially ones that can tell if a rider has a fear of horses – and it is my opinion that all horses have that ability.

At noon we were sitting on the patio of the hotel restaurant, having a light lunch – chicken and avocado wraps and salad – wondering if our plan had any chance at all.

I said, "Toni, we've told the right people. If any of them know about a private hunting club, then maybe we'll get an invitation to join. So now we wait."

Toni took a bite of salad. Then she replied, "Well, we're not sure if they're interested in taking on any new members. We may just have to go take a look around ourselves. We can find that area Maria's cousin told us about, and just go from there. It's probably no more than ten or fifteen miles from here."

I didn't like that idea. The place where the killings happened sounded like rugged terrain, not easily accessible by car, which meant we'd have to search the area either on foot in one hundred degree heat, or by horseback. Neither appealed to me.

Before I could present the case for waiting, a man walked up to our table. He was tall, dressed in jeans, cowboy boots, and a t-shirt. He had a weathered face; he could have been thirty five or fifty years old. I couldn't tell. He held a cowboy hat in his left hand as he approached. By the way he was dressed, I was not surprised by the first words out of his mouth.

"Howdy." It was a drawled greeting. He asked, "Mind if I join you for a few minutes? I might be able to offer something you might enjoy."

I stood and extended my right hand, which he accepted with a firm handshake. I introduced Toni, and offered the stranger a seat.

As he pulled out a chair and sat down at our table, he said, "My name's Rod Miller. Been living down here for over ten years. Moved here from San Angelo. Do a little bit of everything, I suppose; ranching, tendin' bar, mechanic, hunting guide. You name it, I've done it. What do yawl do?"

Although we had not rehearsed, Toni and I had discussed what to say when asked that question. We knew that if this secret club did exist, and if it was involved in killing humans, then they'd be extremely careful about whom they'd talk to about it. Toni felt they'd be smart enough to do some background checks on prospective new members. She believed that it could prove fatal if we were caught in a lie.

Toni responded first, “Rod, we’re semi-retired. We both had businesses that did well, and we sold them a few years ago. Luckily, we can do just about anything we want.” She nodded to me and smiled.

Then it was my turn, so I said “So we travel. We’ve done a lot of hunting, and a little fishing, but we’ve also got into being private detectives. We both got our licenses, and we’ve had a few clients. Not many, but enough to give us something to do.”

Normally when Toni and I tell people that we’re private detectives, we get some sort of reaction; like “wow,” or “really,” or even “how exciting.” But Rod Miller didn’t react in any way. I could have said we were bankers, or insurance salesmen and gotten the same reaction.

In a deadpan voice, he asked, “What’s that like?”

I said, “It can be fun.”

Rod asked, “Any danger?”

Toni replied, “Sometimes yes. Some of our friends don’t understand why we do it, knowing we don’t need the money. They think we’re adrenalin freaks.” As she is apt to do, Toni gave the cowboy, Rod, a disarming smile.

He smiled back, and had another question. I thought that maybe this *was* an interview of prospective new members to the secret hunting club. I was starting to get excited.

Rod asked, “Then why do you do it?”

I took the first part of the answer and said, “We don’t do cases like divorces, or parents wanting to spy on their kids. We only take on cases where someone has broken the law.”

Toni chimed in, “Rod, we don’t like people getting away with doing something illegal. It’s just that simple. Whether it’s stealing, kidnapping, or selling drugs. We don’t like criminals.” Toni was careful not to mention that we also have no respect for people involved in murder.

Rod smiled and said, “I like that.”

I asked, “You said there was something we might enjoy?”

Neither Toni nor I thought it would be this easy, and for a few moments, we believed we were hearing a confession about the secret hunting club that killed defenseless, poor Mexicans looking for a better way of life.

Rod Miller, in a half whisper said, “Gordy, the bartender you met last night said you folks might be interested in some different kind of hunting.”

I nodded, and Toni leaned forward.

He continued. “We’ve got this little hunting club going down here. It’s illegal, *and* it’s expensive -- \$10,000 per day -- but it might be something you’d enjoy.”

I could tell Toni was, like me, not believing it was this easy.

She asked, “Illegal?”

“But don’t worry, ma’am,” Rod assured us both. “There ain’t no game wardens within a hundred miles, and nobody on our club talks about what we do.”

I said, “Sounds intriguing. Go on.”

“Well we use dogs, and that’s illegal for a lot of hunting in Texas. And we hunt on horseback.”

It was time for the \$64,000 question, and I asked, “What do you hunt?”

Rod leaned back in his chair, and I could tell he was sizing Toni and me up. He didn't speak right away. He looked around the room to make sure nobody could hear what he was about to say. Finally he said, "Puma. Javelina. And there are a few bears in the mountains."

We were deflated. Illegally hunting those animals wasn't the confession we were hoping for. Toni and I leaned back in our chair, and looked at each other, then at the cowboy.

Toni said, "That sounds okay, but really, I've shot two lions in Africa, elk and moose in Canada, and in Alaska, a Grizzly bear. Hunting little pigs, or a mountain lion doesn't sound that thrilling."

Again I was surprised and proud how well my darling, Toni, could lie. I decided to play along, and said, "Toni, tell him about the tiger?" And I smiled at Toni, who did her best to suppress a laugh. She was good.

Toni said, "Oh yeah, the tiger."

I said, "So you see, Rod, what you're talking about, even if doing it illegally adds to the excitement, isn't something we'd be interested in. We've hunted practically everything. Maybe we're done with hunting."

Rod looked disappointed, and said, "I understand. Maybe we need to find some game you haven't hunted before."

Rod stood and said, "I'll be in the hotel bar at five o'clock this afternoon. There's someone else I'd like you folks to meet. Can you be there?"

I said yes, and Toni nodded.

Rod's parting words were, "I think you're not through with hunting . . .not just yet."

At a quarter to five in our room, Toni and I were rehearsing the roles we were about to play. We discussed the questions that might be asked of us, and the answers we'd provide.

Toni asked, "What if they ask us about guns? You know, like what kinds we own or what we've used before?"

I assured her that I could handle that one. My father took me hunting when I was young, and even though I hadn't shot a bird or an animal in more than twenty years, I remembered the guns I had used, and could fake it if asked.

I said, "You handle the animals we supposedly killed. I was impressed with your story earlier, about the lions, bear, and elk."

She laughed. "My ex-husband made me watch a lot of hunting and fishing shows on cable. That's one of the many things I don't miss about that chapter of my life."

Then Toni asked, "Who do you think we're meeting in the bar?"

I wasn't sure, but said, "Whoever it is, he might be in charge or he might be the one who evaluates new members to the hunting club."

Toni warned, "Let's be real careful. If this *is* an interview, and if it's not going well, let's just not press the subject, or seem too anxious. Remember, these guys may be used to killing people."

I agreed.

We walked into the hotel bar promptly at five o'clock. There were several hotel guests already there enjoying happy hour. Standing at the bar was Rod Miller, who waved and signaled us to join him, which we did.

Rod smiled and said, "Let's go out onto the back deck where we can talk in private."

He led us outside, and because the temperature was still hovering around a hundred degrees, the deck was empty except for the one man we were supposed to meet. He rose from his table to greet us as we approached.

Rod made the introductions, "Billy, I'd like you to meet these folks from Houston. This here's Toni, and this is Rhett. Meet Billy Carmichael."

We shook hands, and took a seat. Billy Carmichael was in his late forties, well-tanned, and had scars above his right eyebrow, and on the left side of his neck. He sported a slight beer gut, but other than that seemed to be muscular. I concluded he was one tough hombre.

Before we began, a waitress who's evidently followed us outside interrupted and said, "Hi Billy. Rod." She nodded to Toni and I, and continued, "You all gonna sit out here? It's hotter than hell."

Billy said, "Aw Cheryl, there's a nice breeze. This is fine with us."

The waitress took our drink orders and left us alone. I was nervous, but Toni looked calm. I didn't particularly like the way Billy Carmichael was eyeing Toni, but I'd gotten used to the many men who'd done the same.

Rod Miller began the conversation, "Rhett, why don't you tell Billy about yourself."

Before I could reply, Billy said, “Rod that’s okay. I already know where they live, what they do now – a little private detective work – and what they did before that. I know where they bank, what kind of cars they drive, and how old they are.” He glanced at Toni and added, “Sugar, you don’t look a day over thirty, I swear.”

If Billy asked Toni what her astrological sign was I was ready to leave. But I was still too nervous to be jealous, and I knew we had a mission to complete. So I said, “She *is* beautiful, isn’t she.”

“You’re a lucky man, Rhett.”

I nodded, and Toni smiled.

Cheryl brought us our drinks, and while she served them, nobody at our table said a word. When she was gone, the conversation continued.

Toni said, “I’m impressed, Billy. But why would you go to the trouble of doing all that research on a couple of tourists from Houston?”

I forced a smile and said, “You’re a pretty good private detective yourself”

Rod Miller sat in silence. It was obvious that Billy was *the* man.

Billy took a sip of his beer and said, “Rod tells me you folks are bored with hunting. That you’ve gone all over the world . . . Africa, Alaska . . . bears, lions, elephants, . . .”

Toni interrupted, “No elephants.”

I still didn’t want to appear overanxious, but I asked, “Rod tells me there’s some hunting down here, but that it cost a lot of money.” I looked at Rod who still wasn’t talking, and added, “Ten thousand dollars. For Javelina and pumas?”

Billy laughed and said, “You’ve spent more than that before to go on a hunt.”

Toni said, “Yes, and for the most part it wasn’t worth it.”

Then she made me proud.

She continued, “There was *no* excitement. We’d sit and wait, and when the right animal came along, we’d just aim and pull the trigger. They never knew what hit ‘em.”

We talked for fifteen minutes about imaginary hunts Toni and I had been on. I let Toni do most of the talking, and it was evident she *had* seen a lot of hunting shows on cable TV. Occasionally I would just nod in agreement that the hunting had not been very satisfying. Billy asked questions, and Toni played her role beautifully. And I still didn’t like the way he kept ogling her.

Toni summed up our supposed sentiments about hunting. She said, “We thought about fox hunting. You know, where there’s a chase involved. Where the animal knows it’s being hunted. But then Rhett and I thought that shooting an exhausted little fox, treed by some dogs, wouldn’t be that much fun.”

Billy asked, “Would you pay ten thousand if I could arrange an exciting hunt?”

I answered, “Sure. I guess. But we don’t think . . .”

Billy Carmichael leaned forward in his chair and whispered, “What are your feelings about wetbacks?”

I knew what he was getting at. I was excited. But I realized the question was non-sequitor – out of the blue – so I had to act as if I was surprised by the question. I asked, “What do you mean?”

He repeated the question.

Toni made me proud again.

She answered Billy. “They’re ruining America. They’re illegal. They take jobs away from Americans. They don’t speak English, and they’re filthy. I hate ‘em.”

Billy looked at me.

I said, “I agree. Absolutely. In fact, I worry about Toni when she has to go in certain parts of Houston. They all carry knives. They steal, rape, and get drunk. And all our government can talk about is either amnesty or spending millions of dollars building a big ass fence.” As I spoke, I hoped that Billy’s research on Toni and I hadn’t uncovered our wonderful relationship back home with Maria.

Toni and I deserved Oscars. The offer was made.

Billy said, “How would you like to hunt wetbacks?”

Toni asked, “What do you mean?”

As Billy Carmichael explained, I occasionally glanced at Rod Miller who just nodded and smiled. The hunting of wetbacks according to Billy was exactly what Maria’s cousin had communicated to us. The hunting club had eight hound dogs that would be released along the northern bank of the Rio Grande. The hunters would wait on horseback until the dogs picked up the scent of one or more people who had crossed the river.

Rod was the dog handler, and he would command the dogs to track the scent. The hunters would follow, and according to Billy, within an hour at the most, they would find their prey. Then they’d ride them down and shoot them.

Billy said, “What makes it different from what you’ve done is we let ‘em know we’re coming after them. We take our time, and watch the bastards try to get away. Might even fire a few warning shots, just to make the bastards move faster.”

I asked, "How many people you take on a hunt?"

"Five maximum."

Toni leaned forward, trying to appear interested, "What happens if there's only one wetback?" Saying the word "wetback," I knew was difficult for Toni.

"That rarely happens. Those Messicans always travel in small groups, Billy said." He added, "But every hunter gets to shoot. In fact, we sorta encourage hitting them in the arm first, then the legs. Let's 'em know they made a mistake comin' here."

Finally Rod Miller spoke. "At the end, all the hunters get a kill shot." The look in Rod's eye suggested that the kill shots were his favorite part of the hunt.

I didn't want to know exactly what a kill shot was, although I had a good idea. I nodded, and asked, "What do you do with the bodies?"

Billy answered. "That's included in the price. You get the dogs, horses, guns if you didn't bring your own, and we take care of the bodies." He smiled at Toni for at least the tenth time in the last fifteen minutes.

Toni took another chance, wanting to know specifically what was done with the poor illegals' corpses. She laughed and asked, "You and Rod have their heads mounted somewhere?"

Billy Carmichael laughed. I was relieved by his reaction. He looked at Toni and said, "We take 'em to an old abandoned mine about twelve miles from here," and he nodded in the direction west and north of where we were sitting.

I asked, "When's the next hunt scheduled?"

Rod answered, "Tomorrow evening. Six o'clock."

Billy asked, "It's sort of the ultimate safari. You in?"

I looked at Toni who nodded. I said, “Yeah. Why not.”

Billy stood and extended his right hand. As we shook, he said, “Besides being the best hunt you’ll ever go on, you’ll be helpin’ to send a message to those wetbacks to stay the fuck out of Texas.” He looked at Toni and added, “Excuse me ma’am.”

She said, “No problem, Billy.”

I asked one more question, “Billy? What about the local authorities? You ever have any problems?”

Billy Carmichael reached into the back pocket of his jeans, pulled out his wallet and flipped it open. I looked at the sheriff’s badge. Billy Carmichael was the Sheriff of Brewster County.

He said, “No, sir. No problems with the law.” And he winked at Rod Miller who smiled.

Before we left, we discussed how payment was to be made. The Sheriff of Brewster County, besides being a murdering son of a bitch, was a shrewd and careful businessman. He had a financial partner, his brother, in Houston who ran a plumbing business there. Billy handed me a card with the plumbing company’s bank information on it. We were instructed to wire the money from our bank to the plumbing company, and his brother would mail us an invoice for ten thousand dollars worth of new pipes throughout the house, new fixtures, tubs, sinks, and even French drains . . .none of which would ever be installed. His brother would telephone Billy when the transfer was completed. Billy assured me that if I called my bank first thing in the morning, that Toni and I could participate in the next hunt.

I said, “No problem.”

Rod said, "Meet me in front of the hotel tomorrow afternoon at four. I'll drive you to where we mount up."

Toni said, "Great."

I nodded.

Back in our room, Toni said, "I can't believe it. It's true."

I agreed that the secret hunting club was unbelievable. That it involved the Sheriff, and that it involved money laundering. I said, "Do you think we have enough to call our friends in the Houston Police Department?"

Toni thought for a moment and replied, "Not yet."

I wasn't sure what she was thinking and with conviction in my voice said, "Well we sure as hell aren't going on that hunt tomorrow evening."

She said, "You're right. But we have to do something." She smiled that familiar smile that meant she was about to suggest something exciting for us to do.

"What?"

"Let's go find that abandoned mine. Didn't Billy suggest it was just north and east of here. What he say? Twelve miles?"

"That's what he said,"

We decided to leave after midnight. Most of the hotel guests would be asleep then, and we hoped Rod Miller and Billy Carmichael would be too. Toni and I figured there would be some kind of dirt road that would lead us to the mine, and that there wouldn't be many such roads to investigate. Neither of us was looking forward to discovering dead bodies, but knew that would be the evidence we needed to get the legal

authorities involved – that is legal authorities *other* than the Brewster County Sheriff's Department.

At ten o'clock, I telephoned our contact at the Houston Police Department, Dave Secret. As expected at that hour, the call was answered by his voice mail.

I said, "Dave, it's Rhett and Toni. It's ten o'clock, and we're in Lajitas. We found out there *is* a secret hunting club down here that is killing Mexicans who cross the border -- exactly what Maria's cousin told us. Man named Billy Carmichael seems to be in charge. And Dave, he's the local sheriff. Anyway, after midnight, Toni and I are going to look for where they hide the bodies. Supposedly in an abandoned mine about twelve miles northeast of here. So, if you don't here from us, at least you know where to search for our bodies." I hung up and looked at Toni.

She said, "Very nice. Where to search for our bodies?"

She was right. It wasn't all that funny.

One nice aspect of road trips, you can pack a lot more "stuff" than if you travel by airplane. And fortunately, Toni and I had packed well, including hiking shoes, flashlights, and of course, our guns – hers a nine-millimeter Springfield, and mine a Smith and Wesson .38.

Just after midnight we quietly left our room, got into our car, and slowly drove out of the hotel parking lot with our lights off. Being careful. On the highway going west, and our headlights on, we drove fifteen miles and noted only two dirt roads on the north side of the highway. One was four miles from the hotel, and the other was ten miles. We stopped and turned around.

I asked, "Which one?"

Toni replied, "Either one of them could be it. But let's try that last one we passed last. That's closest to being twelve miles from the hotel."

We drove back toward the hotel, and took a left onto the first dirt road we would investigate. I stopped the car. The sky was clear, as always in the Big Bend, and the moon was almost full. We could see well enough without our headlights, so I turned them off. It took us a minute for our eyes to adjust, and then we proceeded.

Toni said, "Look. There seem to be fresh tire tracks."

"That's either a good sign or a bad sign." I wasn't sure which.

Within a minute we crested a hill, and saw a farmhouse below. There were two cars in front, but no lights were on inside.

I asked, "What do you think?"

Toni said, "Let's walk down there and look around."

It was the right thing to do. After all, we were on a mission. Even so, I said, "Damn."

Now on foot, each of us holding our guns in one hand, and our flashlights -- turned off -- in the other, we walked down the dirt road to the farmhouse.

Toni whispered, "There's a corral behind the house with horses."

I whispered back, "I see them."

When we were fifty yards from the farmhouse, I noticed that the dirt road extended beyond the farmhouse, rising into the hills and out of sight.

I pointed and still in a whisper, I said, "You think that road leads to our mine?"

"Maybe."

I asked, "Wanna go?"

She whispered, "Absolutely."

Even though there were no trees and no vegetation of any kind taller than a foot to conceal us, both Toni and I instinctively crouched as we quietly walked past the farmhouse. Neither of us said a word until we were a hundred yards past the farmhouse and on the road climbing a very steep hill. At the top of the hill, we looked at each other.

Toni asked, "Are we out of our friggin' minds?"

I answered, "Absolutely."

As we began descending the hill, we heard something that momentarily paralyzed us. The sound was coming from behind the farmhouse.

"You hear that, Rhett?" Toni asked.

I heard it, and said, "Shit. Dogs."

Toni said, "Probably eight of them."

They were howling, and barking.

But the barking didn't become louder so we assumed the dogs were not coming after us. That they were in a pen and that something, probably us, had awakened them. I prayed they were in a pen that was locked.

I said, "Whoever is in that farmhouse is awake now. What do you want to do?"

Toni said, "Let's keep going, and hope they think some animal stirred up the dogs, and that they'll go back to bed."

We moved on, and those damn dogs kept howling for ten minutes. When they stopped, I said, "Finally."

Toni smiled and said, "Either those dogs went back to sleep, or they've been released, are tracking our scent, and will be here any minute."

Her thought was not comforting. But I said, “They went back to sleep. Otherwise they’d be barking, and it would be getting louder.”

“I hope you’re right.” Then she added, “Obviously that farmhouse is the secret hunting club. The horses, the dogs.”

I asked, “Who do you think lives there?”

Toni said what I felt, “I’m not sure I want to know.”

In five more minutes, a mile from the farmhouse, the dirt road ended at a clearing beneath a steep hill. I turned my flashlight on and pointed it at the clearing. Toni did the same with her flashlight.

She said, “Look. Hoof prints everywhere.”

I aimed my flashlight at the hill, and fifteen feet up, we saw it.

Toni said, “There it is.”

The mine entrance was a cave, about ten feet wide and six feet high. It was partially framed in boards, that appeared rotted out in many places. Obviously abandoned.

I knew what had to happen next, and again said, “Damn.”

Toni looked at me and said, “Well, let’s go.”

I said, “No. I’ll go. You stay here and be the lookout.” Having a guard was a good decision, but mostly I thought that whatever was in the mine, only one of us needed to see it. She did as I asked.

The walk up to the mine entrance was steep, but short. I glanced back at Toni and waved before proceeding into the dark cave.

My flashlight lit my way, and I could tell by the clear footprints on the mine's dirt floor, that others had been here recently. It also appeared to me by the patterns in the dirt that something had been dragged into the mine. I kept going. Slowly. Ten feet. Then twenty. Then a hundred. And still nothing. The light reflected off the irregular ceiling and walls, creating an eerie appearance. It was spooky. I kept going.

About three hundred feet into the tunnel, I smelled something unusual. It was not a bad smell, the foul smell of rotting human flesh I expected, but had never experienced. At first I couldn't recognize it, then I knew what it was. Lime. The hunting club must use lime to help in the decomposition of bodies and to keep wild animals from desecrating the grave I knew lay ahead.

Another hundred feet, and I found the evidence we needed. It was a sight, I'd never be able to expel from my memory no matter how hard I would try. It was a sight I would recall in the middle of the night for years to come. I stood there and at first wanted to look away, but I had to examine the evidence. We had a mission.

After a couple of minutes, I turned around and began my exit. By the time I reached the entrance, I had gone through various stages of emotion. Fear first. Then sadness for what I'd seen, and for the friends and loved ones who would miss those people dusted in lime. Finally anger.

I suppose the look on my face conveyed to Toni that I had seen something horrible. As I came down into the clearing, she asked, "You okay, honey?"

I spoke the truth. "Not really."

She said, "Let's get out of here."

We walked, and after some silence I told Toni what I'd seen. I thought I'd prepared myself for my inspection of the mine, but was still shocked by what was there.

I said, "Toni, there may be a hundred in there. Some looked no older than ten years old. Stacked on top of one another. At least five high, and the pile went on and on for as far as my flashlight could show. There were a lot of bags of lime they use to put on the bodies. Hell, there may be *more* than a hundred."

Toni didn't know what to say, and remained silent.

We continued to walk.

As we approached the top of the hill overlooking the farmhouse, she asked, "I hope they're still asleep."

A moment later at the top of that hill, she said, "Shit."

The lights in the farmhouse were on and a third car was now parked in front. I recalled that we'd done nothing to conceal my car when we began our walk to the farmhouse and then to the abandoned mine, and knew that whoever was the most recent arrival had seen my car and had told the others inside. We both knew it wouldn't be long before the inhabitants of that farmhouse would start looking for us.

I looked at Toni, who appeared to be as anxious as I was, and asked, "Any suggestions?"

Before she could answer, the front door of the farmhouse was flung open, and three men walked out onto the front porch. One headed around the corner of the farmhouse, and we heard him yell to the other men, "I'll check on the dogs."

Toni said, "We're screwed."

There was no cover. No trees, and nowhere to hide. I said, "Back to the mine."

There was no choice. If there was going to be a standoff, it was the only place that afforded any protection. We began running. It took us fifteen minutes when we walked there, but running would take only seven. Would that be fast enough?

Apparently it was.

In the clearing I grabbed Toni's hand, and helped her up the steep grade to the mine entrance. Once there, we stopped and looked back, and saw nothing. We heard nothing.

I asked, "Where are they?"

Toni replied, "I don't know. But they'll be here soon enough."

I looked at my watch, and said, "It'll be light in about four hours. You think they're waiting for the sun to come up?"

She thought a moment and said, "That man said he'd *check* on the dogs. He didn't say he was *releasing* the dogs. Rhett, I'll bet your right. They don't want to hunt for us in the dark."

Toni was smart and observant. She added, "They know we can't make it back to the hotel on foot over these mountains. So they're in no hurry."

I said, "Well if this is where we make our stand, let's get ready for 'em."

For the next hour, Toni stayed at the front of the entrance, holding her gun, and keeping watch. While she did, I went deep into the mine ten times and retrieved ten bags of lime -- heavy bags -- and built a wall, three-and-a-half feet tall at the mine entrance. The lime would serve as good shield behind which we could return fire if need be. Handfuls of the lime could be hurled at approaching dogs, making an effective defense against the pack of hounds that we expected would be a part of the hunting party.

During the two hours before sunrise, Toni and I sat and talked. We declared our love for one another, both considering that this might be our last time to be together. Our last time to be anywhere. I wondered if we would be added to the pile of tragedy deep inside the mine.

We talked about our mission, and if we get out of here, how Billy Carmichael and his hunting club would be brought to justice, although we agreed that even the death penalty wouldn't be enough justice.

The hunters who had joined the secret killing club would be brought to justice as well. Wire transfers to the plumbing company in Houston could be traced. Toni and I speculated whether we might know some of the members, maybe friends we knew that enjoyed hunting. We concluded that nobody we knew would participate in what Billy Carmichael referred to as the ultimate safari. I thought about the incredible number of bodies, lying a few hundred feet away, and estimated that sadly, the hunting club may have collected hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Much of those two hours before sunset, Toni and I just held each other and said nothing. We felt responsible for each other. We felt resolute in accomplishing our mission. Together like that, I never felt stronger, even though we were soon to face perhaps the greatest peril of our lives.

The sunrise was spectacular. The light haze of pollution drifting up from Mexico actually added to the beauty, helping turn the dawn sky a fiery crimson, and the desert hills and mountains slowly evolved from black to gold. Toni and I agreed that the Big Bend was indeed beautiful, although there was definitely something ugly here now. Something we agreed to help eradicate.

In the distance we heard the howling. They were coming.

We took our positions behind our wall of lime.

The dogs appeared first. Some with their heads down, glued to the scent, others with their heads up, ears flapping, confident in their fellow trackers, and sensing their destination was near.

We heard the hoof beats. Three riders. Maybe more.

I grabbed a handful of lime, and so did Toni. I said, "Wait until they're on us."

All eight dogs raced across the clearing and scurried up the slope toward our fortress. When they were five feet away, we let loose, and the lime did its job. The airborne powder was enough to send the first wave of the assault headed back down the slope. I felt a twinge of remorse as I knew the poor, obedient dogs' eyes were burning. I hoped they'd recover.

The horsemen entered the clearing, saw their retreating pack of trackers and stopped. We recognized them. Gordy the bartender was one. He must have been the last arrival at the farmhouse, getting there after closing the hotel bar at one in the morning. He held a rifle in his hands. Rod Miller dismounted and was trying to control the dogs. And the third was the Brewster County Sheriff, Billy Carmichael. He stayed on his horse and glared at the entrance to the mine. He too was holding a rifle.

Billy shouted, "I guess you folks changed your minds. That's too bad."

Toni and I had our guns ready.

Then suddenly thunder. I looked up, but there were no clouds. And besides, rain is a rarity here. I looked at the three men in the clearing. They too were looking up, above us, looking into the sky.

The thunder became deafening, and then a large shadow appeared in the clearing.

Toni, to be heard above the noise, yelled, “What’s going on?”

A dust storm arose in the clearing, and as it did, Billy Carmichael, Rod Miller, and Gordy raised their hands.

Then we saw it. The descending helicopter. Army green. Large. Landing in the clearing. As it turned, we saw the side door was pulled open, and inside were four men, dressed in military uniforms, all pointing their guns at the officers of the Border Safari Club.

It was over.

One of the last men to disembark from the helicopter was a man in civilian clothes. He was a man Toni and I knew. Dave Secrest of the Houston Police Department.

As the some of the National Guard troopers cuffed the men responsible for the horrible deaths, others began attending to the horses and dogs, the innocent collaborators in the crimes, and began leading them back to their pens.

Toni and I walked down the slope to the clearing and greeted Dave Secrest.

The Houston cop said, “Man am I glad to see *you*.”

Toni said the obvious, “The feeling is mutual. But how did you find us? And why’d you come?”

He said, “After Rhett called me on Tuesday and told me what might be going on down here, I called a contact I have with Immigration, and found out that there might be something to what you wanted us to investigate. Evidently there were rumors, but nobody had ever come forward with any evidence.”

In a somber voice, I said, “You’ve got all the evidence you need now.” He’d find out the gruesome details soon enough.

Dave replied, “That’s what I was counting on, but I was afraid you might get yourselves in trouble. Then when I got the message you left for me last night, I *knew* you’d get in trouble, so I called my friend in the National Guard, flew to San Antonio, and hitched a ride here.”

Toni said “Thank you.”

I said, “Thank you.”

We were both grateful that our standoff with Billy Carmichael and his pals hadn’t developed into the shootout we believed was imminent just ten minutes before. Toni and I were also grateful that the abandoned mine was not going to be the place where we took our last breath.

Dave looked at both of us, and said, “No, Rhett. No, Toni. It is I, and a lot of other people who thank *you*, for what you’ve done.”