

HILL COUNTRY

Staring off into the distance, Junior lit a cigarette, savored a deep drag and leaned against the trunk of his car. Bringing his right foot to rest against the bumper, he took in the view.

Just outside San Marcos. Texas Hill Country, they called it. His car sat at the end of an old service road where no one ever went these days, at the crest of a steep ridge. Dawn was just about to break, and he was looking forward to it.

Junior's mama was white, and his daddy 1st generation Mexican-American. She'd been what they call 'no 'count' around here, Texan slang that translates into a sorry excuse for a mother. Shortly after Junior's little sister was born, she ran off for good, leaving his dad and the Mexican grandparents to raise the kids. Mama ran straight into a deadly meth addiction, OD'ing on a speedball too stout for her system before Junior's 8th birthday. He didn't really even remember her.

Just a shade under six foot, Junior was 175 pounds or so of ripcord and sinew. 24 now, he watched what he ate (which wasn't easy, living with his grands), and regularly pumped his dad's old set of weights that resided on their screened-in back porch. The only home he'd ever known. Even though it was supposedly his father's fault, they'd received a small consolation settlement when his dad was killed in an oilfield accident. At least that meant they owned the modest old house free and clear. Junior was 12 when he lost his last parent.

The cigarette's tip glowed bright red in the gloom as he inhaled. Half gone now. He never felt more exhilarated, or drained for that matter, in times like these. After a hunt.

Junior guessed that he got his color, like his height, from his mom. As long as he was staying away from his usual collection of odd jobs- roofing, construction, etc.- and staying out of the sun, he could easily pass for white. That had not been a problem lately; and certainly helped in his present line of work.

It had all started with his friend Randy. Junior noticed a few really nice things his friend had bought lately. A gun, a jet ski. Finally, a sweet new truck. Randy surely wasn't making that kind of money bouncing at bars, and that's all he did. Supposedly. But when Junior asked him, it was no dice. He made it crystal clear to Junior. Leave it alone, dude.

Finally one day, Randy approached Junior and motioned him to the side.

“Something’s come up, man. Do you really want to know about the side money I make? And I mean, think about it before you say yes.”

Junior really did. He thought for a good, long moment. He had no illusions about how far a GED was going to take a kid like him. He looked Randy in the eye and nodded yes.

His friend indicated his truck.

“Let’s go.”

He drove them to an old house on the outskirts of San Marcos that looked deserted. Junior followed Randy inside, and the house was empty except for a few chairs. And Huerta.

Junior knew *of* Huerta. He guessed most of the Mexicans in their town did. But he had never met him for real, only seeing him occasionally in a bar, or on the street. Always giving him the wide berth that anyone with sense would. Gangster for sure. He’d done serious prison time, and was rumored to have killed more than once, and gotten away with it. The man exuded calm and menace in equal measure. He was covered in tattoos that seemed alive with true stories of violence and blood. Junior’s head swam, as he tried desperately not to show it.

Huerta nodded towards the chairs, and the three sat.

“Junior, you’re here because Randy trusts you, and believes you can keep your mouth shut. That belief in you has already put his ass on the line. Can I trust you? And can you...keep your mouth shut?”

Huerta’s bald head gleamed, and his dark eyes burned holes into Junior. The man’s blue black mustache and goatee, peppered with gray, reminded Junior of illustrations of the devil he’d seen as a kid. I’ve come this far, Junior thought, I might as well hear him out. He nodded in assent.

Huerta reached into his pocket, pulled out his phone, and holding its face up to them, made a motion to turn theirs off. Both boys did so. He began.

“Junior, Randy had a partner in this business venture of ours. Well, let’s just say, he met with an accident, Wasn’t careful. Didn’t follow instructions. And now, your friend needs a new partner. And he said we should talk to you. See if you’re interested.”

That night, Huerta laid it all out for Junior. And make no mistake, it totally blew his mind. He asked for a day or two to think it over. Huerta didn't mind that, but simply reminded him about the need for silence.

"Brother, you've got to know who the bosses are here. It's not me, man, not by a long shot. I simply work for them and run this crew. It's the Cartel, mijo. And these guys, man, there's not a name for what happens when you cross them. It's their business, their reputation that's on the line. So they have to make an example of you. For everybody *else* to see."

"You. You, man, they would kill your Bela and Lito. Kill your little sister Chloe too, before you. And it wouldn't be pretty, or easy for that matter. Just so you would see it, and know. And when they finally strung you up, and tortured you, you'd know you'd killed them all. And *then* they kill you, son. So, for yourself, your family, your friend Randy, for me, man...keep your mouth shut."

By using the names he called his grands, as well as his sister's, Huerta made Junior's blood run cold. And achieved the desired effect. Talk about this he would *not*. To anyone.

The money was too good, even for what he had to do to make it. Junior had said yes. And that eventually put him here, on this lonely morning, in this beautiful place. With a decision to make.

The whole scheme made such sense. Wicked sense. San Marcos was perfectly located for it. Just a 4 hour drive north to Dallas-Ft. Worth. 30 minutes to Austin. 3 hours east to Houston. San Antonio just an hour south. Each city with bustling, booming night life entertainment districts.

He and Randy would hunt together, Junior walking the streets because he had the looks to fit in. Randy would drive, always keeping as close as possible.

Just like wolves. The strength of the wolf is the pack. Work together, always. And just like it worked in the wild, look for the weak, the isolated, the straggler. The really pretty, built white girl, already impaired by alcohol, drugs or whatever she's willingly ingested. When Junior made his choice, he made a prearranged signal to his partner. One final, careful look around, and then come up from behind her with the handkerchief primed and ready. Whatever this stuff was, she becomes immediately pliable and super open to suggestion. But, you only had about 5 minutes before pliable becomes utterly knocked out for 8 to 10 hours.

Randy pulls up, you put here in the front seat between you, just like a good boyfriend taking care of his drunk girl. First safe place on the way out of town, usually a rest stop, find her phone and turn it off. But keep it. Really becomes important if she happens to be the daughter or relative of someone famous, powerful or both. Easier to prove you have her for ransom. Also check for Fitbits, TomToms, any kind of GPS tracking device. Smash and trash. Then, in the trunk she goes. When you make the safe house in San Marcos, call Huerta. The Cartel makes the pick up. You get your cash money.

It was bizarre when you thought about it. Human trafficking in reverse. Usually it was poor girls from backward, impoverished regions getting shipped here. Instead, this was entitled white girls going the other way. Junior had been told there was a huge market for them among the super rich in Mexico; South America, and the Arab nations; and especially, Russia. Guess you could've figured that one.

And it was impressed strongly on Junior that they valued these upper scale white girls the most. In the cartel's experience, these girls would do anything. Anything at all if they thought there was the remotest chance of saving their own ass. He felt terrible about it at first, then not so much. And now, he didn't know if he could do it for much longer.

What he didn't count on was becoming addicted to the adrenaline rush of the hunt. Really surprised him about himself. And he'd been instructed to never hunt alone, too risky. But wouldn't that extra risk heighten the rush?

Randy was away on a trip this weekend, and Junior had gotten that itch. So he thought, hey, I'll go look. If there's nothing promising, no harm no foul. Austin, and 6th Street it was. And sure enough, a beautiful blonde. Almost ready to fall over, and for the moment at least- alone.

The spot where she stopped for air and to try and clear her head was perfect, but at least a 5 minute walk to his car, maybe more. It would be close, and too obvious if he had to carry her. What the hell.

Junior made his move.

Sure enough, he had her calmed down and cooperative as they rounded the corner to his ride. There, leaning up against their police car, were two officers, obviously working security for the district and presently shooting the shit. Junior's heart literally pumped like it was ready to jump out of his chest. He could only hope and pray she'd stay quiet enough.

He gave the cops his best rueful grin as he helped her by. Thank God they bought it, and her semi-incoherent babbling blended right in.

And so. Here he was. He could take her to the safe house, and Huerta would act angry for a while. But he knew of another instance like this, and all anybody ever said it about it was how much balls it took. And that guy was still working too. Junior would be told to never do it again, and it would blow over. Especially when they got a look at this girl.

Or he could give her another good whiff of the Cartel's finest, and go to his grandparent's house. Get the money he'd saved (which was a lot), kiss them and Chloe goodbye. Tell them he was going to see what the West coast was like. Which he had mentioned many times.

Dump that girl off somewhere safe in West Texas. Boy, would she have a story to tell her grandkids. What she could remember of it.

Stay, and be a hero. Maybe move up in the organization. Leave, and get out while he still could.

He took his last drag, and flicked the remains away, making a red tracer arc through the dusky dawn just beginning. He took in the full beauty of his surroundings. A light mist covered the hills below him, the air was fresh and sweet, and the first rays of the sun appeared golden on the horizon. He tapped lightly, absentmindedly on the trunk's lid.

Junior had made his decision.