



H.L. WEGLEY

No
Turning Back

Witness Protection 3

No Turning Back

H. L. Wegley

Romantic Suspense

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DEDICATION

This novel, *No Turning Back*, is dedicated to Dr. Caroline Savage who lost her fight with cancer as I began writing this story. She left behind her husband, three children and a legacy of serving God in discipleship ministry and through her writing. I had the privilege of having Caroline edit two of my books. Both became award-winning novels. Heaven is richer and we are poorer ... but only for a little while.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to my wife, Babe, for her many suggestions for making *No Turning Back* a better story and for listening to me read her the story three times to catch the awkward wording and logical errors.

Thank you again, Samantha Fury, for turning a stock photo into the Beth Sanchez I envisioned as I wrote my story. Thanks for designing another wonderful book cover.

Our Lord says the days of our life are threescore years and ten. If we are strong enough to reach fourscore years, we can expect labor and sorrow, and then we fly away.

I am well into that decade of labor and sorrow, but I am thankful that God has not made it too burdensome and has left me with words and wits enough to complete another novel.

Finally, I thank my Savior that, when I fly away, I know my destination, and it will certainly be a glad morning.

*Do not seek vengeance, but leave it to God's
righteous anger, because the Lord says, "I will
avenge. I will repay."*

Romans 12:19

(paraphrased)

Chapter 1

June 14th, Big Bend National Park, Texas, 6:00 a.m.

Elizabeth Alicia Sanchez stopped on the dusty trail lining the north side of the river.

The Rio Grande flowed out of the shadowy Santa Elena Canyon like a wedge, splitting the desert in two and separating her two worlds and her two lives.

Her group of hikers had moved down the trail toward the canyon, but Elizabeth took a moment to look across the river.

Her seven-year-old world across the river assaulted her with brutal images. Flames lighting the smoke-filled night, the foul air carrying the stench of death. Her stomach roiled and she looked away.

People crossed the turbid Rio Grande for many reasons. Some fled poverty for what they hoped would be a better life. Others crossed it with criminal intent, bringing drugs, horror, and depravity with them.

Elizabeth had crossed the river for amnesty and found it in the nation that had given her freedom, citizenship, an MBA, the opportunity to pursue her dreams.

“I love you, America.” She smiled.

“Yeah. Me too.” It was the twentysomething guy who had sat near her on the van ride to the trailhead.

How had she not noticed him standing only a few feet away, invading her pers—

“Ms. Sanchez? Elizabeth?”

“Just call me Beth.” She adjusted the daypack on her back.

“Alright, Beth. Are you okay? You looked sort of ...” His frown wrinkled a forehead crowning a face that drew her gaze like a magnet.

Girl, it's time to reverse polarity.

She chose not to reply to him. Right now, that was better than either lying or telling the truth. And she also chose to ignore the obnoxious voice in her head, because reversing polarity wasn't something Beth wanted to do.

“Uh ... our guide says if we want to make it to the end of the trail for lunch, we need to go.” He waited for her, thumbs hooked in his backpack straps.

What was the name that went with that face? Drew something ... “I'm coming. It's just that this is the first time I've seen the Rio Grande in seven years.”

Drew something waved her on and then waited until she came alongside him on this wide portion of the trail. He glanced her way. “Seven years?” His steel-blue eyes looked down from several inches above her head. “So, did you grow up in Texas?”

“No, I—” Her right foot slid on pebbles acting like ball bearings. She tried to shift weight to her other

foot, but the sliding jerked to a stop. Her ankle rolled until the bone on the outside hit the ground.

A pulse of pain shot through her ankle and into her lower leg.

She fell forward, headed for a face plant on the trail.

The straps of Beth's pack bit into her shoulders and pulled her upright onto her feet. That placed weight on her right foot and brought another sharp pain, sending the muscles of her lower leg spasming.

An arm slid under her right shoulder and took the weight off her foot.

Beth gritted her teeth but couldn't suppress a small groan.

"We need to take a look at that ankle. Looked to me like you rolled it about ninety degrees."

Before she could protest, Drew scooped up her one hundred and twenty-five pounds, as if he were lifting a small child, then carried her to a waist-high boulder and set her on it.

"Hold it, Hunter!" Drew called out to their guide leading the procession of fifteen hikers. "We've got a sprained ankle here." Drew unslung his pack and dropped to one knee at Beth's feet.

He untied the laces on one of her cross trainers. "You know, if you'd been wearing hiking boots, this wouldn't have happened."

Of all the—"Who are you to be telling me how to dress?"

"I'm the person who's telling you your sprained ankle is swelling. I've seen worse, but this is going to hobble you up for a few days, depending on ..."

“Depending on what?” She managed to force out the words through her clenched teeth.

“Depending on how good of shape you’re in.” His gaze scanned her from her ankle to her waist, eventually reaching her face. He took his time.

“Are you through with your inventory, Mr. Know-It-All?”

“Yep. All done. And you’re in great shape. You’ll be hiking again in a few days, but not today.” He grinned until he saw the expression on her face.

She was mad because she hurt and even madder that Mr. Know-It-All had lectured her, grinned about it, then checked her out. “You are the most—”

“How bad is it?” Hunter stopped a few feet away, his gaze darting between Beth’s ankle and Drew’s face.

Drew had her sock off and was running his fingers around the outside of her ankle.

If a doctor had been doing that, it would have seemed appropriate. But a tall, twentysomething man, lean but well-muscled, one who was slightly on the rugged side of handsome, feeling her ankle and lower leg was highly—

“She can’t walk on it.”

“Would you two quit cutting me off.” She glared at both of them.

Hunter raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t know we were, Ms. Sanchez.”

They had been, but it was her thoughts they were interrupting. What must Drew think after her outburst.

Why do you care?

“I don’t.” Had she said that out loud?

Drew looked at Hunter and shrugged. “She don’t. Hope I didn’t just cut her off.”

Beth blew out a sharp sigh that sounded more like a growl.

Drew glanced at her then focused on Hunter. “But one thing is certain, she can’t walk on that ankle. It’s barely six o’clock. You wanted to eat lunch with the group at the far end of the trail. Why don’t you take them and go on? I can stay with Ms. Sanch—uh, Beth, until you get back. Her day’s ruined anyway after—”

“You can say that again.” She looked down the trail toward the canyon. “Don’t I have any say about what happens to me?”

“As I was saying, Hunter. I can stay and make her completely miserable until you get back and there’s not a thing she can do about it. Then a couple of us guys can grab her arms and legs and drag her down the trail to the van.”

Beth stifled the urge to stick her tongue out at Mr. Know-It-All. But he’d already treated her like a child, so she wouldn’t justify it by doing something juvenile.

Hunter’s eyebrows pinched. “You’re staying with her? I’m responsible for the safety of everyone in this group. So I—”

“She’ll be safe, Hunter. You know that I’m probably the best person here to ensure that.”

Beth looked at Drew and raised her eyebrows. Mr. Know-It-All probably was the best person to stay with her. And he’s the one she would have picked, but Beth wasn’t about to tell him that.

Hunter dipped his head. “But I’m the one who’s sticking his neck out here, Drew. I’m counting on you, bro. I don’t want any of your drama or dramatics today. And no fights.”

“That depends on Ms. Sanchez.” One corner of Drew’s mouth turned upward.

She would not take whatever bait he was feeding her.

Hunter looked Beth’s way. “Sorry about your boring day, Ms. Sanchez. Guess we’ll have to give you a rain check.”

Drew chuckled. “Except that when it rains in canyon country, you don’t want to be here. See you about two o’clock.”

Hunter nodded and trotted down the trail toward the group of hikers standing fifty yards away on the bank of the river.

After Hunter left, Drew remained on one knee studying her ankle.

“You know, Mr. ... uh ... Drew—”

“It’s Drew West.”

“Mr. West. Staring at a woman’s bare ankle was scandalous behavior a few years ago. Do that to a lady and it could get you shot.”

“A few years ago? Try a hundred and twenty. Let’s keep things in perspective, Ms. Sanchez.”

“It’s Beth. And, yes, let’s keep things in perspective. This is going to be a long, *boring*, sweltering day.”

“So, I’m babysitting an optimist.”

She opened her mouth to protest.

Drew cut her off. “Sweltering is part of the problem. Your ankle is swelling. We don’t have any

ice, but we do have the Rio Grande. Thirty minutes in the water then thirty minutes elevated. How about it? There'll be less swelling, and you'll heal faster."

"So you've got my whole boring day planned for me. What do they call men like you? Alpha or beta something-or-others?"

"Not me. I'm just somebody who wants to help and who would jump at the chance to spend a little time with you."

The direct approach. At least he was honest. "And why, pray tell, would you want to spend time with me?"

He cleared his throat. "Besides the obvious reasons ..." His eyes studied her face then stopped on her eyes. "... I'm a writer, and from the little bit you've told me, I think you have a story."

An icy chill shook her shoulders despite the warm early morning sun. She had a story. One no one must know, because then no one could tell the wrong person.

The danger hadn't disappeared. It remained a few hundred miles and a border crossing away. Beth needed to make sure it stayed that way.

"My foot is swelling and starting to throb. Can you help me to the river?" She looked away from his intense, penetrating gaze.

He knew she was changing the subject. But would he drop the subject? If not, this would be an unpleasant day with too many nightmares and too many ghosts. And, at the end of it, he would classify her as rude.

Or psycho.

She squelched the irritating voice inside that had turned even more obnoxious.

“Stand on your good foot. We’ll go arms-around-shoulders like two buddies.”

“You need to understand something. Girls don’t have *buddies*.”

“Okay. You can be my buddy, but I won’t be yours. I’ll just be your crutch while we walk to the river.” He paused while she stood. “Too bad we can’t sit you in the water, so your leg can be elevated while we’re cooling it.”

“No way am I sitting in that muddy river. It’s probably full of little parasites, parasites that do terrible things to bodily functions.” She stood and put her right arm on a shoulder that felt like a rock.

Drew shook his head. “We wouldn’t want that out here, would we. Speaking of bodily functions ... the outhouse at the trailhead is a quarter of a—I guess we can cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Beth blew out a blast of air to empty her frustration. No facilities was another reason this day would be a disaster. She shook her head and took a step with her left foot.

Drew moved with her and his left arm, like a bar of steel, bore her weight when she raised her left foot.

Thanks to Drew’s strength, they walked in tandem to the river at near normal walking speed.

He led her to a flat spot on the bank, where the murky water swirled about a foot below her. He bent down to help her sit.

She lowered her injured ankle into the chilly water and grimaced when it felt like ice on the hot,

sensitized skin stretched tight around her puffy ankle.

Drew stood. “Be right back. Watch out for those parasites. I wouldn’t want to have to pack you back to the trailhead.”

How long would he keep up his string of irritating comments?

Drew ran back and grabbed his pack where he had dropped it beside the boulder.

While her ankle cooled, Beth scanned the wilderness around her. At only a little after 6:00 a.m. in the middle of the Big Bend National Park, this was an isolated area with no one around but the hikers. They were probably a half mile down the trail by now. There had been no other vehicles at the trailhead.

She was alone with Mr. Know-It-All, Drew West. If it wasn’t for her throbbing, swollen ankle, she might have enjoyed getting to know him better ... provided he didn’t start probing into her past.

The canyon was narrow and magnificent with its towering vertical walls. Morning shadows darkened the depths of the canyon. It would be cool in the canyon all morning. But the heat of the early morning sun provided a precursor to what mid-day would bring, the scorching, West-Texas sun.

Drew returned with his pack and dropped it beside a bush.

Beth studied the vegetation around them. Nothing big enough to be called a tree. “It’s too bad we don’t have any shade trees.”

“These scrubby bushes—we’d have to lie down under them to get any shade.”

She shot him a sharp glance. "I hope you're not proposing—"

"No. But you really are paranoid, you know." The look Drew gave her wasn't angry, just weird.

Maybe she *was* being paranoid, or pessimistic. But trust of other people, especially men, was not her strong suit.

"Beth, I've got a small plastic tarp in my pack. Maybe I can use it to give us some shade."

Beth looked up the river into the shadows of the canyon. "Too bad we can't go in there to get—"

She drew a sharp breath when two rubber rafts emerged from the darkness deep inside the canyon and floated into the light at the east end.

Two people in each boat. The bearing and dress of the men in the back of each raft had a familiar, ominous look.

Her heart rate accelerated until she had a driving percussion solo playing in her chest.

Cartel drug runners.

She pulled her foot from the water. "Drew, we need to hide, now."

* * *

Drew saw terror in Beth's wide eyes and his defenses went to high alert, DEFCON 2.

He pushed her pack behind some bushes then scooped up both Beth and his pack and scurried back into the thickest bushes lining the river.

Beth clung to him even after he set her down, out of sight of anyone in the rafts.

"Who are they?"

“Two of the men are cartel drug runners. They also traffic people in several ways. The other two men have no idea what’s waiting for them at the end of their trip. But nine times out of ten, it’s not good.”

The two rafts floated out of the canyon and were now only seventy-five yards upstream.

Drew reached into his pack and fished through one pocket until his hand clamped onto cool steel. He pulled out his Governor. He’d loaded this potent little handgun with Winchester PDX1 Defender shotgun shells, basically a mixture of slugs and ball bearings. This ammo was powerful, but most effective out to only ten yards, about the distance from their hiding place to the river.

“Any idea what guns these guys use?”

“AK-47s. The cartel’s weapon of choice.” Beth’s gaze locked onto his handgun. She gripped his wrist. “No, Drew. You try to take them on with that and we’re dead.”

“Sorry. I’ll have to disagree with you. You don’t understand what *that* is.”

“It’s a revolver. A handgun. Drew, I’ve been with people who—”

It was the second time Beth had avoided revealing something about her past.

“Beth, I trusted you to identify them. You need to trust me to indemnify us.”

The wild-eyed look she gave him was short on trust and long on fear.

Drew wanted to hear about Beth’s past, especially the part she was reluctant to disclose. But he needed to focus on the source of danger, the two swarthy men each sitting in the back of a raft.

As if on cue, the two men grabbed paddles. They could have given Olympic synchronized swimmers a run for a medal as they paddled in synch toward the river bank. And they paddled toward the spot where Beth had been sitting a few moments ago, a spot ten yards away.

Drew sat on the ground behind the short bush, hunched over to stay out of sight. He leaned toward Beth. “These bushes won’t stop their bullets, so be still and—”

A soft rattle nearby turned to a loud buzz.

He turned his head and his gaze locked on the source of the noise. A rattlesnake, coiled and agitated, lay about six feet from his head. Maybe five feet from Beth’s.

Though Beth tried to cover her mouth, a sharp cry escaped.

Drew’s left hand held his gun, but his right hand had found a two-pound rock. He needed to make his choice before the snake lost all patience.

He couldn’t shoot the snake and then shoot two men at their current distance before the men in the boat could unleash their weapons.

Drew launched a short prayer, then he launched the rock. He threw as hard as he could from his sitting position.

The stone struck the snake’s neck and then drove into its coiled body, knocking it several feet away from them. The viper writhed on the ground for a few seconds, then slithered away toward some rocks.

When Drew looked back toward the river, the rafts bumped against the bank and both cartel men,

with packs on their backs, held their AK-47s in a ready position. They had heard Beth and the snake. Now the gunmen were also at DEFCON 2.

The vexing question was, when does it become self-defense if you shoot someone? When you know they will shoot you if they see you? But what if they don't see you and might shoot anyway?

One of the gunmen stepped into the shallow water beside his raft and raised his gun.

Drew's answer about when to shoot came in a flash.

Right now.

He gripped his gun with both hands, sitting in firing position, and squeezed the trigger.

The man about to shoot fell backward onto the raft, nearly turning it over. The pop from the Governor's two-and-a-half-inch shotgun shell echoed off the canyon walls leaving Drew's ears ringing.

Beth's hand on his ankle squeezed with surprising strength, but she kept her head out of his way.

The second gunman now stood on the bank. He fired a burst, mowing down bushes three feet to Drew's left.

Drew pushed Beth's head to the ground to protect her, then shot again.

The second man spun around and fell on the bank, half in and half out of the water. His pack landed on the shore.

Drew must have hit him in the shoulder.

One man floated in the water near the bank. Odds were he was dead.

The two *immigrants* began paddling their rafts for the opposite shore.

Drew let them escape.

He and Beth were in no danger now.

Beth's hand, still gripping his ankle, was trembling.

"It's okay, Beth. Both gunmen are down, and their guns are in the water. One's likely dead. But I need to check out the wounded guy."

"But how did—"

"Let's just say they got on the wrong side of the Governor." He popped open the cylinder and pulled out an empty shotgun shell.

Beth's forehead creased with twin frown lines. "A shotgun?"

"Sort of."

"Don't move. Put your *sort of* shotgun down slowly. *Comprende?*" The raspy voice came from behind them, loud, authoritative, and threatening, hinting that the man would love for Drew to try something.

He wouldn't. Not with Beth beside him.

"*Comprende?*" Impeccable Spanish. The guy could turn his accent on and off at will.

"Yes." Drew laid his gun on the ground.

"Hands on your heads and turn around *despacio*, ever so slowly."

Drew had only turned half way around when Beth gasped. "Suarez. He'll kill me," she whispered.

Suarez? Drew looked up into the barrel of an AK-47 held by a man who looked much like the two gunmen he'd shot. But this guy had the bearing of a leader, a guy who was used to giving commands.

Raspy voice scanned Beth then swore, part in English, part in Spanish. “Señorita Elizabeth Alicia Sanchez. Patience is one of my virtues. I have been waiting for this moment for seven years. What a pleasant surprise.”

“What’s he talking about, Beth?”

“Silence. No more talking, Señor. Be still and be quiet while I decide how you will die ... and while I decide how to give Señorita Sanchez the fate she deserves.”

Drew glanced Beth’s way, and the look he saw on her drawn face was one he’d only seen on an actress’s face in some old horror flick right before the madman killed her. But Beth wasn’t acting.

“What is your name, Señor?” He pointed his gun at Drew’s head.

He tried not to flinch or to glare at the man. “Drew West.”

“No. Your name is Drew who-shot-my-baby-brother.”

Not good. Was his brother the dead guy or the wounded guy?

“It would be most appropriate for you to pray to your patron saint that Ricardo is not dead. If he is dead, you will die for two days. If he lives, maybe eight hours ... or until I grow weary of your screaming.”

If Drew hadn’t fully understood the reason for Beth’s terror, he did now.

There were some mysteries to unravel here—how this man knew Beth, why he hated her. But Drew needed to study the end of that gun barrel

pointed at him and find a second or two when it wasn't pointed at either him or Beth.

In the meantime, Drew needed to appear frightened and subservient. The frightened part wasn't difficult. Feigning subservience, when he wanted to kick the man's head off ... that was another matter.

"Señor and Señorita, keep your hands on your heads and stand up, slowly."

"That's a pretty good trick. Getting up slowly from a sitting position with our hands on our heads."

"You do not listen well, Señor West."

"What do you mean, Mr. uh ..."

"Hector Suarez," Beth said. "CEO of the Del Rio Cartel. The man who murdered my mother and father."

The ugly picture came into focus, raising the stakes to the highest level. If Drew didn't act quickly, they were dead.

"My two prisoners, they are deaf. Silence! The only reason I do not kill you now is I need you to tend to my little brother, Ricardo. See, he moves. Walk to him, slowly."

Suarez jammed his gun barrel into Drew's back, prodding him to walk toward Ricardo who lay moaning and holding his injured shoulder with his good hand.

Beth and Drew walked side-by-side to the edge of the river where Ricardo lay. His eyes were closed now, and his jaw clenched as he panted out his pain.

Drew studied the man's right shoulder. The Winchester PDX1 had damaged the outer third of his shoulder. He needed the bleeding stopped and then needed to see an orthopedic surgeon, or he'd never regain full use of his arm.

Ricardo's rifle was nowhere in sight. He must have dropped it in the river. That meant Drew's only available weapon was his body.

He needed to draw Suarez in close and disable him with one well-placed blow or kick. But he must make sure Suarez's rifle was not pointed at Beth when Drew made his move.

"We've got to stop the bleeding." Drew knelt then looked up at Hector Suarez.

Hector dipped his head and motioned Drew toward Ricardo with the barrel of his rifle. That motion moved the gun barrel upward until it pointed over Drew's head and toward the river.

Drew's right leg exploded into motion, driving a powerful kick into the side of Hector's left knee.

He screamed as his knee bent sideways.

Beth had dropped to the ground to Hector's right.

Drew gripped the barrel of the AK-47 and ripped it from Suarez's hands. "Get away from him, Beth."

She rose and backed away.

Suarez stood on his right leg swearing in Spanish and glaring at Drew.

"Shut up and don't move!" Drew pointed the gun at Hector's mid-section.

Suarez sneered. "No green-behind-the-ears gringo tells Hector Suarez what to do."

“It’s wet behind the ears. And anyone who gives up his gun so easily has no right say that to the man who took his gun away. Now down on your stomach and hands behind your back, or I’ll shoot your other knee, then maybe a shoulder like I did for Ricardo.”

Beth stuck a thumb out toward the Rio Grande. “Drew, the two, uh, immigrants paddled across the river.”

“Let them go. They’re probably going home. Maybe they’ve realized illegal entry isn’t such a good idea, especially when you go on a Del Rio Cartel cruise.”

Hector fell when he tried to lay down using only his one good knee. He stretched out on the ground on the bank where Beth had dangled her foot in the water.

“Don’t move, Suarez ... Beth how’s that ankle feeling?”

“I can walk on it a little. It doesn’t hurt as much.”

“Good. I need you to go to the bushes and bring my gun and my pack. We need to make sure the Del Rio CEO sticks around for the next board meeting in District Court.”

Beth laid a hand on his shoulder. “Please, Drew, be careful. You don’t know what he’s capable of.” She limped away from the river toward the bushes.

“Right now, he needs to know what I’m capable of.” Drew worked the firing mechanism of the AK-47 to produce a metallic click.

Suarez’s body stiffened at the sound.

“Drew, Elizabeth! Are you okay?” The voice came from up river and was now accompanied by the sound of running feet.

Drew looked toward the canyon.

Hunter ran down the trail toward them. He came to a sliding stop fifty yards away when he saw the gun and the carnage. “We heard the shots and came back to—”

A splash came from the river.

Drew glanced down.

Hector Suarez was gone.

Drew jumped to the edge of the river and scanned the murky water.

Nothing.

He let his gaze rove over the Rio Grande, mostly downstream.

With a blown knee, Suarez wouldn’t be a strong swimmer. Regardless, he would have to come up for air soon.

“You’ll never catch him, gringo.” The pain-filled voice grunted out the words. Ricardo’s eyes were open now.

Beth returned and stopped beside Drew. “He’s probably right. Some call him Hector Houdini Suarez. He’s escaped from some impossible situations.”

Hunter approached them. “Does somebody want to tell me what’s going on here? I see a dead man and a wounded man and—what happened to the guy on the ground?”

“Hector Suarez got away,” Beth said.

“What the—Suarez? The Del Rio Cartel? You sure?”

“I’m sure. He wants to kill me and would have if Drew hadn’t stopped him.” She put her hand on his shoulder.

That was the first thing he could remember Beth doing that wasn't done in opposition or as an argument. Maybe Suarez's pain was Drew's gain.

He glanced at Beth then looked down at Ricardo. "Suarez hasn't gotten away yet. I'm going down the river to see if I can spot where he comes up."

Beth's hand slipped down to his arm and gripped it with more strength than a woman should have. "Don't go, Drew. There were two AK-47s in that water where he went in."

"Beth, I blew out the guy's knee. He's not going far, and he couldn't afford to stop and look for a gun in muddy water. We need to tie up Ricardo's free hand and then get some pressure on that shoulder wound to stop the bleeding. Here." He handed Beth his Governor. "Hold this on him and let Hunter do the binding. Ricardo may be hurting, but he's still dangerous. If he tries anything, shoot him. Those three slugs and the ball bearings in the shotgun shells will put an end to anything he tries."

Beth took the gun, looked at Hunter, then back at Drew. Her eyes softened to an expression warmer than any she had shown him since they met this morning.

Maybe she liked guns.

Maybe she likes you, dude.

He doubted that just like he doubted he would find Hector Suarez in this jaunt down the river.

Chapter 2

Beth pointed the Governor at the chest of Ricardo.

Hunter had bound the man securely and then had tied a wadded-up T-shirt over Ricardo's shoulder wound. The crude bandage had stopped most of the bleeding.

She glanced at Drew walking down the river with one of the cartel's AK-47s in his hands. He reminded Beth of her father carrying his gun, patrolling their property. He was her hero and she had loved her father dearly, but not his dreadful decision. That decision had cost her family everything.

The picture of Drew also brought back the vivid memories of the death and destruction, of the loss of everything and everyone.

Her breathing turned to panting. Beth willed it to slow.

When the flashbacks came, she no longer flipped out in a full-fledged panic attack. Thankfully, Beth's faith had helped her overcome the attacks, but not yet the nightmares.

Why did she have such a strong emotional reaction to Drew searching for Hector Suarez? This wasn't the normal concern she would feel for anyone in danger. It was palm-sweating, heart-thumping

worry. Did the worry come from Drew's similarities to her father?

Part of her concern might have come from realizing that she hadn't been nice to Drew, the man who helped her when she sprained her ankle, saved her from a deadly rattlesnake bite on her face, and then, like some superhero, had stopped three cartel thugs from killing her.

When Drew took down Suarez, he had accomplished feats not even her father could have done. And Rafael Sanchez had performed some incredible exploits.

Hunter walked her way. "I finished the calls on my satphone. The Border Patrol will be here in about thirty-five minutes. Would you like me to take over covering our friend, Ricardo?" Hunter pointed at Drew's Smith and Wesson in her hand.

"No. But thanks anyway. I'm holding the gun on the brother of the man who murdered my family. So, if Suarez shows himself, he knows I'll have no qualms about killing his little brother."

"I'm so sorry, Beth. I didn't realize all you'd been through. But what are the odds that you'd run into that snake out here in Big Bend National Park?"

"Odds don't matter when God is involved." Beth kicked Ricardo's boot and shook her head when he looked up after trying to slide toward the water.

If he was that stupid, maybe she should have let Ricardo go. If he rolled into the river, he would drown, not escape like his big brother.

Hunter cleared his throat. "How do you know it was God?"

She met Hunter's gaze. "He sent me Drew West. If he hadn't, I'd be dead ... or worse."

Hunter nodded and grinned. "Can I tell Drew what you just said?"

"You do that, Hunter, and the Governor might decide to fill your rear end full of buckshot."

"I see. Wouldn't want my rear looking like his shoulder. Okay. I can keep a secret. But, you know, I've known Drew since were kids in Oregon. Just to let you know, he's a little dense when it comes to anything relational or romantic. You've got to spell things out for him if you want him to know."

"Who said anything about romance?" Hunter could be a shortcut to getting to know Drew with minimal risk. And minimizing risk was a way of life for Beth. It was too good of an opportunity to pass up. "If he's that relationally challenged, he probably hasn't had any serious relationships."

The corner of Hunter's mouth turned up, then turned into a full-fledged grin. "So nobody said anything about romance, huh. There have been serious relationships ... on the part of some women. But not Drew. He's left a trail of frustrated, broken-hearted women."

Drew sounded toxic. Maybe she'd played her cards right by not encouraging him.

Hunter continued. "But I've never seen him react like he has around you."

"Me? Why do you say that?"

"When Drew wants something, he goes after it, whole-hog, relentlessly." Hunter cleared his throat again. "May I speak frankly?"

"Of course. I'm not a school girl, Hunter."

“Uh, yeah. I’ve noticed. And so has Drew. But it’s more than how you ... look. Drew looks deeper than that until he finds what he wants or thinks he needs. I think he’s found—”

“Come on. We’ve only known each other for a few hours. How can you, or even Drew, know—”

“Mark my word. You’ll see, Beth. Be prepared, because he’s good at storming the castle and taking it.”

Beth glanced down river.

Drew sauntered up the river toward them, carrying the rifle in one hand. His eyes laser-focused on her.

Decision time. Was she going to raise the drawbridge or leave it down? If Hunter was right, it might not matter. If Drew thought he wanted her, he might storm Beth’s castle to get her.

I’m not sure how I feel about that.

* * *

As nearly as Drew could figure it, Suarez had gone under and swam downstream for at least two-hundred yards to surface out of Drew’s sight. Suarez had done that in two minutes with a throbbing, useless knee.

Even going with the current and with two good legs, it would have been impressive. With only one good leg, the man seemed superhuman. But Suarez was only human, or Drew couldn’t have disabled the man when he had the drop on Beth and Drew.

He focused on Beth, fifty yards down the trail, still holding the Governor on Ricardo, though

Hunter stood nearby. And her gaze seemed locked on Drew, studying him.

Ricardo wiggled in the dirt by the river.

She kicked his foot without looking down.

Alert, intelligent, intense, noble-looking like a Spanish aristocrat, and beautiful in a way that was real and significant. Almost no make-up. That was the Beth he'd observed from the outside.

If he was to keep them both alive through the events that would come rushing at them—interrogation, lawyers, maybe depositions, a trial, probably in federal court—he needed to know Beth on the inside. Know what she wanted and needed. Understand the fears lodged in her heart. Then, when he made his offer, would she accept it?

Drew prayed she would. Otherwise, based on what he'd seen today, he feared for their lives.

Would the warmth still be there after Beth had time to digest all that had transpired in the last hour? He was about to find out.

“Bro, did you see any signs of Suarez downriver?” Hunter circled Beth and approached Drew.

“Nada. Eventually, that made the telltale tingling run up the back of my neck, so I came back while I still could. The way he disappeared—guess it gave me the creeps. What's the word on law enforcement?”

“They're on the way. Border Patrol should get here first ... in about twenty-five minutes.”

“Good. But I'm not looking forward to this. It's the first time I've ever killed a person.”

Hunter nodded. "But not the first time you ever *shot* a person."

"Hunter, the dude had knocked an old lady down, grabbed her purse and then started kicking her."

"I didn't say he didn't deserve it, bro. Just that you've been through these kinds of questions before."

"Don't worry, Drew. They'll listen to what I have to say." Beth's gaze met his. The warmth he'd seen earlier radiated from her eyes.

Maybe something good could come out of a fun hike gone badly awry.

"Thanks, Beth. Guess I'm a little antsy. I've never talked with Border Patrol before."

"I have. They're easy to reason with. They've got a tough job that you just made a little easier."

Was that a smile on Beth's face? Yes. The first genuine smile she'd given him. She was beautiful without the smile, but now ... wow.

Hunter had noticed too. "Somebody should have warned me about you two. I thought this was a group of fun-loving college students out for an all-day excursion. Someone forgot to tell me about the two drug war vets and the firefight right on the Santa Elena Canyon trail."

"You're getting a little carried away, Hunter."

Drew walked by Hunter and stopped beside Beth. "Did Ricardo give you any trouble?"

"No. But I saved his life." She grinned.

Drew sensed his frown growing. "How so?"

"Ricardo Suarez, brother of Hector Houdini Suarez, was going to try to escape. With one

shoulder shot to pieces and the other arm bound, he was about to roll into the river to escape like his big brother.”

Drew laughed. “You should have let him. Any guy that dumb can only learn the hard way, by experience.”

“I wouldn’t have let him drown. Just *almost* drown.” Beth laughed too.

“You know nothing about my plans.” Ricardo growled the words at them.

The ridicule had gotten to him, so he said something almost as stupid as what he’d almost done before Beth stopped him.

Drew looked down at Ricardo and shook his head. “Tell your plans to the cops. They can use a little humor. It’s a tough job trying to stop tough guys like you.”

“You ought to know,” Beth said.

Ricardo lapsed into Spanish.

The man must be deep into his vile vocabulary. Drew had never heard those words, but he’d seen that expression on the faces of men just before Drew had to fight them.

Ricardo eventually stopped and lay still on the ground, panting out his anger and frustration.

“Beth, would you like to translate that for me?”

She shook her head. “I don’t talk like that. Mama would have washed my mouth out with soap.”

Hunter pointed to the northeast. “Dust cloud on the road by the trailhead. Cops are here. Remember, Drew, you can’t use your Oregon LTC in Texas. There are no agreements.”

“But I also have license to carry in Idaho. They have a reciprocity agreement with Texas. Remember? We talked about that when I wanted to bring my gun today, Hunter.”

Beth’s eyes darted between Drew and Hunter. “Reciprocity, virtuosity, animosity, LTC—what are you two talking about?”

“Whether or not the handgun, stuffed in my pack, was legal. By virtue of my Idaho LTC, it is. So, I didn’t shoot anyone with an illegal gun. And everything I did with my gun was in self-defense or defending you from a known drug lord.”

“Bro, you don’t have to convince us. I agree and will back you up. Beth has the identity of the drug lord covered and—”

“He admitted who he was when he called Drew a green-behind-the-ears gringo,” Beth said.

“Green-behind-the-ears?” Hunter shook his head. “He admitted who he was then admitted he was stupid. But, bro, even stupid cartel leaders out here will drive away my business.”

“If we tell Border Patrol exactly what happened, you don’t have to worry about it reflecting on your business reputation.”

“I don’t know,” Hunter said. “After a firefight with a cartel took place right on the trail where I take my hikers, I may not see any more customers this year. Would you hike here if someone told you what happened today?”

Drew nodded toward the trail, where two heavily armed men in uniform approached about one-hundred yards away, their gazes locked on the scene by the river.

Drew needed to prepare Beth for what was coming and for his proposition. He laid his hand on Beth's shoulder. "Beth, after they sort all this out with the various agencies in the DOJ, we might be presented with some hard choices, choices made even harder because of your history with Suarez and by what I did to him. Remember, we have other options than what they'll offer. I'll help you—whatever you need. We don't have to do—"

"Thanks, Drew. But I can take care of myself. You really storm the castle, don't you?"

If that's the way she felt about his offer to save her life ...

Beth reached for his arm.

He ignored Beth's hand tugging on his arm and continued to turn away, toward the men in green uniforms.

One carried a shotgun and the other an M4. The guy with the shotgun pointed at Ricardo.

Then the two looked at Hunter, Beth, and Drew standing on the riverbank. It seemed that the eyes of both men bored into Drew and the two Border Patrol agents did not look happy.

After Beth's initial response to his offer, Drew felt like those men looked. And he needed someone to take out his frustrations on. He glared at the two men approaching him.

Dude, you'd better cool it, or you'll get locked up with Ricardo.

Chapter 3

The two Border Patrol agents stopped seventy-five yards away.

Drew hooked an arm around Beth's waist and pulled her several steps from Ricardo.

"What are you up to, Drew?"

"Keeping us safe." He laid the AK-47 on the ground then held his Governor by the barrel, using his thumb and forefinger, and laid it beside the rifle.

Drew stood and again hooked Beth's waist.

"So putting an arm around me keeps us safe?" She gave him a corner-of-the-eye glance.

"It does. Two young people in love. Looks innocent. Draws sympathy."

"From their faces, I'm not sure about the sympathy part. And love? Speak for yourself, Mr. West."

"Maybe I was."

"Maybe you were what?"

"Speaking for—uh, I think we should put our hands on our heads. That shotgun is pointed at us."

"Border Patrol! Are you the person who called about a shooting?" The man on the right, the guy with the M4, focused on Drew.

"No. He's about two-hundred yards up the trail with a group of hikers on his Big Bend Canyon excursion. I'm Drew West." It was best not to

volunteer information about the shooting until he'd given the shooting some context and identified the cartel men.

"How many weapons are here and where are they?"

"My handgun and that man's AK-47 are on the ground. And there are two AK-47s somewhere in the river."

"Keep your hands on your heads." The man on the right motioned for the man with the shotgun to advance toward them. "Check out their guns, Abbott." The man paused and looked at Ricardo. "What's the status of the guy tied up on the ground?"

"That's Ricardo Suarez, baby brother of Hector Suarez. He's wounded in one shoulder. We stopped the bleeding."

"Suarez's little brother? You sure about that?"

"Certain," Beth said. "Hector came here to pick him up, but Drew took Suarez down and got his gun, then Suarez escaped."

"And who are you? Ricardo's girlfriend?"

"No. She's mine." Drew spoke, forcing more confidence into his voice than he felt.

Beth shot him a sharp glance, then the look in her eyes softened.

"Okay. Drew West's girlfriend, identify yourself."

"I am Elizabeth Sanchez, the woman Suarez wants to kill."

The man with the shotgun turned to face his partner. "All visible guns accounted for. Do you want me to search them, Coy?"

"Just Mr. West."

“Seriously? Not the girl?”

“Abbott, you don't know who she is, do you?”

Abbott shrugged. “Ms. Sanchez, I guess.”

“Was your father Rafael Sanchez?”

Beth nodded.

“Then I can understand why Suarez wanted to kill you.”

“Coy, you want to explain that to me?”

Coy blew out a sigh. “About eight years ago, Rafael Sanchez organized a militia made up of businessmen and farmers, any Mexicans who had grown tired of being fleeced and intimidated by the Del Rio Cartel—well, any Mexican who had guts enough to fight. With his militia, Sanchez nearly drove the cartel out of Northeastern Mexico. But Suarez regrouped and one night brought an army and killed every militiaman in the town and surrounding countryside. Suarez destroyed their houses, killed their livestock, destroyed all their worldly goods, and killed every member of every family. The Laguna Norte massacre.”

Abbott swore then shook his head.

Coy continued. “Suarez killed them all ... except Elizabeth Sanchez. And he believes he's got to avenge every betrayal and every resister, or he will lose power. So, Ms. Sanchez is a burr under his sombrero.”

Drew turned toward Beth.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. Had she relived those horrific events as Coy described them?

Drew put his arms around her and she cried softly on his shoulder.

The two border agents stood in silence.

After a few moments, Beth raised her head from Drew's shoulder, wiped her eyes, and focused on Coy. "So now you understand why this happened."

Coy nodded but didn't speak.

Drew looked at the body in the edge of the water, hidden from Coy's view by the river bank. "There's a body by the river. That cartel member had his AK-47 trained on us when I shot him."

Coy blew out a sharp blast of air. "Abbott, call an ambulance. Mr. West, Ms. Sanchez, now let's take this from the top. I want to hear what happened." Coy paused. "But keep in mind that we are federal agents."

Beth gave Drew a puzzled frown.

"He's helping us, Beth. Anything we say that can be disproven, or made to look like a lie, is a crime, and he doesn't even have to warn us. No Miranda rights ... nada."

"But he believes us, Drew. Isn't that a good thing?"

"Yes. But he's not the federal prosecutor, the man who can call us liars and then twist our arms to get what he wants. Now, with that in mind, let's answer the man's questions."

Beth and Drew answered Coy's carefully constructed questions. Evidently, the senior Border Patrol agent had a lot of experience pulling facts from witnesses.

Beth proved clever in covering herself when answers to questions had the potential to be misconstrued and to be used against her and Drew.

She was clever, intelligent, incredibly beautiful, tough enough to survive tragedy—his admiration

seemed to grow with every new discovery about Elizabeth Sanchez.

After about thirty minutes, the questions for Beth and Drew slowed to a trickle, then they ended.

But Ricardo had refused to answer anything directed at him. His response to each question was to swear at the agents in Spanish.

“Ricardo lays there in pain and swears at the people who control his future,” Beth said. She lowered her voice. “In Mexico, we would call him *tonto*, a fool.”

“So the Lone Ranger was calling his sidekick, Tonto, a fool?”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about. But calling his sidekick *tonto* probably made him angry. What did he call the Lone Ranger?”

“Kemosabe.”

“Did you say *quien no sabe*?”

“Maybe. It sounds sorta’ like what I said.”

“Then they must have argued a lot.”

“Argued?”

“Drew, *quien no sabe* means a person who has no understanding. You know, stupid, idiotic, a moron.”

“As a kid, I enjoyed watching those old Lone Ranger and Tonto reruns. I had no idea they had such a toxic relationship.” Drew grinned then looked down the trail at the two paramedics headed toward them carrying a stretcher. “Hey, Ricardo, here comes your ride to the hospital. What would you do if one of those guys called you kemosabe?”

“I kill them, just like I do to you one day.” He growled out the words through clenched teeth.

“Now that’s what I call a toxic relationship.”
Drew stepped off the trail to let the paramedics pass.

They set the stretcher on the ground and unslung their packs. One of them, with a small container in his hand, approached Ricardo.

He swore at the man and turned his head away.

“I was going to give you something for pain,” the paramedic said. “I’ll just note that you refused it.”

Ricardo turned back and opened his mouth to speak.

The paramedic turned away and put the container back in his pack.

Drew leaned close to Beth. “You’re right about Ricardo. I hope Hector does hand the cartel over to him. It won’t last long with Tonto holding the reigns.”

“Suarez won’t give control to Ricardo. It is the family bond Mexicans have that makes Hector say this, but it will never happen.”

“Well it sure won’t happen with Ricardo in prison.”

“But you and I have to put him there, Drew.”

“That’s a discussion we need to have with Coy. They’re not going to just turn us loose. There will be a grand jury then, if Ricardo’s indicted, a trial. All of that happens in a federal court somewhere in Texas.”

“We won’t be safe in Texas, especially if we’re going to testify to the grand jury. Suarez will send people to kill us.” She gripped Drew’s arm. “He won’t stop coming after us unless he’s dead ... or until we are. He sent a whole army to my town.”

“I’ve got a plan, Beth.”

“To kill Suarez?”

“Not exactly, but that could be accommodated.”

“You're as crazy as Ricardo if you're thinking of taking on Hector and the Del Rio Cartel.”

“I'm thinking about keeping you safe. But let's talk to Coy before—”

“Am I going to like this plan, Drew?” Beth's eyes studied his, searching for an answer. She didn't look alarmed or angry.

“I hope so. Because I don't think you'll care for any of the alternatives, including what the prosecutor offers.”

Her eyes said she'd settled on an answer to her question. Her conclusion seemed to be that Drew West was full of it.

But Drew could change her mind. He'd always been able to change people's minds. Most often by pounding that person into submission. Or letting them watch while he did that to someone else. If blowing out Suarez's knee hadn't been enough for Beth, maybe he needed to take different approach with her.

Other law enforcement officers arrived, ending the discussion of Drew's plan and leaving him in a quandary.

From the bits and pieces of conversation Drew gleaned from the officers, it sounded like one was a Brewster County Deputy Sheriff and another a DEA agent stationed in Pecos.

The third man, the tall, quiet one, remained a mystery. Maybe he was from the FBI.

Drew took Beth's hand and pulled her toward Coy.

The Border Patrol agent sounded like he was wrapping up a discussion with the DEA agent.

Coy turned toward Beth and Drew. "I'll bet you two have some questions about your future."

"How did you know?" Drew said. "A lucky guess?"

"You and Ms. Sanchez are pretty sharp or you couldn't have taken down Suarez. So you've probably deduced that there is a federal court case in your future."

Drew nodded. "If we testify, there—"

"No, Drew. *When* we testify."

Coy smiled. "I like that kind of talk."

"Okay." Drew looked down at Beth. "*When* we testify." He turned toward Coy. "Where will this take place and what protection will we have? Suarez will come after us for a lot reasons. But the personal reasons are the most concerning."

"Yeah." Coy blew out a breath. "The center of this activity will be US District Court in Pecos."

"Seriously? Pecos?" Drew said. "Isn't that in the middle of nowhere?"

"Want my advice? Don't say that to the judge."

Drew nodded. "Point taken."

Coy continued. "The first item of business in Pecos will be a grand jury then, most likely, the trial. And I know for a fact that the prosecutors in Pecos will go hard after the Del Rio Cartel, trying to damage it as much as possible."

"But will they prevent Suarez from damaging Beth and me?"

"We'll have to talk to the prosecutor about that. And, these days, you never know what the DOJ has

up it's sleeve. Come on, you two. Get your things ... well, whatever we haven't confiscated as evidence. We're taking you to Pecos."

Beth's gaze dropped to the ground. She stared at the sandy soil with a blank expression that didn't belong on such a perfectly sculpted face. "So, it begins." She looked up at Drew, with those searching eyes. "I may never make it out of this alive."

"Yes, you will, Beth. I'll see to that, no matter what it takes."

Her eyes widened. "No matter what? That covers a lot of possibilities from dangerous to deadly."

"I realize that you hardly know me. But I promise you this ... before Suarez can get close enough to hurt you, I'll kill him, Beth. *No matter what.*"

Chapter 4

Beth did not trust the federal prosecutor.

Dana Whittaker, the man who would oversee Ricardo's prosecution, leaned back in his office chair, thumbs hooked in the pockets of his suit pants. "So, that's the plan. Any questions?"

She had seen men like him, anxious to move up the ladder in their organization. Putting away members of the cartel was a feather Mr. Whittaker wanted in his cap more than any concern he had for Drew and her.

Beth tried to stare the man down, but the intensity of his eyes matched hers, and he refused to blink.

She broke eye contact with him. "The DOJ is going to force us into some old ranch house around here and use it as a safe house until you get an indictment on Ricardo, aren't they?"

"Ms. Sanchez, do I detect a lack of appreciation for what we're doing for you? And we're not forcing you to do anything except comply with a subpoena to testify after we convene the grand jury."

Drew plopped his hand on the prosecutor's desk. "A subpoena to testify. That means we're free to go, right?"

“Yes. You have that right. But if you leave without our protection, you won't live to testify against the little brother of Hector Suarez.”

“Beth,” Drew cupped her chin and lifted her head until she looked up into his steel blue eyes. “Do you trust me?”

The look in his eyes was wild and fierce, but also exhilarating.

No. Those eyes are downright scary.

Regardless of what the little voice inside Beth said, those eyes attracted her like no other eyes ever had. “You saved my life, Drew. Two or three times. Yes, I trust you.”

“Hold it, Mr. West. You have no ability—”

Drew shoved a Palm at Whittaker. “I can keep you safe, Beth. I know how to do that. Come with me to a place this guy doesn't need to know about, and Suarez won't be able to find.”

“Ms. Sanchez, you need my—our protection. Don't listen to this—this—”

“This what?” Drew whirled and grabbed a fistful of Whittaker's dress shirt. “You don't know me from Adam, Mr. Prosecutor. And you have no idea what I'm capable of.”

“If you don't take your hands off me, you'll see what I—what the law is capable of.”

Drew released the wad of wrinkled white shirt he'd used to pull the man out of his chair and onto his feet.

Whittaker looked down and tried to rub the wrinkles from his shirt. He didn't reply.

Beth looked up at Drew. He was powerful. She had felt those arms of steel. Drew was a skilled

fighter, as Beth had seen. But could he stop a professional killer like Hector Suarez?

His eyes said he could. Said he wanted to.

Beth looked at Whittaker, then back at Drew.

No comparison.

“I’ll go with you, Drew. Let’s get out of here.”

Drew waved at Whittaker. “See you when the grand jury convenes. A day or two before if you need to go over things with us.”

“But—but how do I contact you? How can—”

“Call Hunter Jones, Big Bend Excursions. He’ll know how to reach me.”

Beth pulled Drew out the door of the prosecutor’s office. “You take too many chances. He could have you arrested for assault, you know.”

“Nah. To satisfy him, I’d just promise to send his shirt to the cleaners. You never have to take men like Whittaker to the cleaners, physically, because the only place they’ll fight you is in a courtroom.”

In the hallway, a man approaching called out to them. “Mr. West, Ms. Sanchez, may I have a word with you?”

Beth recognized him. The tall, mysterious man who wasn’t with the DEA, Border Patrol, or the Brewster County Sheriff’s Department. “Drew, maybe we should hear what he has to say.”

“Yeah. Whatever it is, it’s got to be better than Whittaker’s suggestion.”

The tall man stopped in front of them. “I’m Special Agent Tom Preston, FBI. I happened to be in this area and heard about the call for help and then heard Suarez’s name. You turned down Whittaker’s offer for protection, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.” Drew said. “We didn’t want to be cooped up in some house in this area with Suarez and his army trying to get us.”

“I’ve seen what he can do, Agent Preston,” Beth took Drew’s hand.

“Yes. You have.” Preston said. “More than any of us here in Pecos.”

“And Drew has already saved my life several times.”

Preston nodded. “What I came to tell you is that I’ll keep a close watch on info coming from our Intelligence Branch. They’re pretty good at tracking cartel movements across our borders. If I see anything you should know, how can I contact you?”

“I’ll tell Hunter Jones, the tour guide, you might be calling him.” Drew pulled out his wallet and fished out a business card. “Here’s Hunter’s number. You can reach him twenty-four-seven and he’ll always be able to reach me.”

“Cautious. That’s good.” Preston turned to Beth. “You’ve hooked up with a good man, Ms. Sanchez. You two take care.” Preston shook their hands and walked away down the hall.

“Hooked up? Drew, what did he mean by—”

“It’s just an expression. He didn’t mean what you’re thinking.”

“Then I hope he *did* mean what *you’re* thinking.”

“Beth, regardless of what I’m thinking or not thinking, you’re safe with me.”

“Here’s something for *you* to think about. I’m going to hold you to that, Drew.”

There was a lot to this hooking-up-with-Drew arrangement that, due to the threats and danger

from Suarez, Beth hadn't carefully thought through. The best she could do, for now, was to address each issue as it arose and pray that she could handle each one.

But one concern that she hadn't been able to handle was the sway that Drew West had over her thoughts and decisions. Beth had that research scientist personality type, the type that used evidence and rationality to make sense of things and then, and only then, would she make decisions.

How in heaven's name had she been so easily persuaded to place her life in the hands of a near stranger? It seemed that Drew had short-circuited her decision-making process. So did that make him a danger to Beth Sanchez?

I don't want to think about that right now.

Beth led Drew out of the federal building and into the scorching afternoon sun. She looked at the cars along the wide street, then she drew a sharp breath. "We don't have a car. How are we getting—"

"There he is." Drew pointed across the street to the large van in front of the Brewster County Courthouse, directly across from the federal courthouse. "Hunter almost flunked civics in high school. Keeps confusing country with county. Maybe spelling was his real problem."

"Mr. West, I'm beginning to think you are full of you know what."

"I see I'm coming up in the world—well, in your estimation. The first time I mentioned having a plan for us, you acted like you *knew* I was full of it."

Hunter slid out of the van and waved at them.

The engine was running. That meant the van would be cool, a good place to relax and think through what was coming. How far had Drew thought his plan through? Was he the spontaneous type who never bothered to—

Beth realized her hand was in Drew's and he had just squeezed it. “

“Bet you're wondering how we're going to get your things and slip out of Texas unnoticed. Right?”

She squeezed back. “So what are you really, Drew West? A musclebound psychic?”

“This is going to be fun. Not a dull moment with you around. So what are you really, Beth Sanchez? One of those mysterious, play-hard-to-get women? INTJ or is it K? Never did understand that Meyers-Briggs stuff when I took psychology?”

Drew knew her personality type. This was uncanny, weird. Like a dozen other things about Drew West. But, despite their precarious situation, it was weird in a nice sort of way.

As they climbed into Hunter's van, a song played in Beth's mind. It was on repeat. That Wizard of Oz song about being off to see the wizard. But she didn't need to travel to see him. The wizard had just sat down beside her in the van.

And Beth Sanchez was not clicking red heels, because she wasn't going home. She was going somewhere that Mr. Whittaker didn't need to know about—wherever that was.