

# WETBACK



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BY J. C. PETERSON

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*For Cheryl, Karen and Ashayrah*



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## CHAPTER 1

Night brought little relief from intense daytime heat. Blanketed in moist darkness, Nogales citizens dreamed. In a modest home in this Mexican border town a teenage boy moved carefully in order not to wake his younger brothers who shared his bed. He slipped from the tangle of their arms and legs and retrieved his denim jeans and fanny-pack from the back of a chair and his shoes from beneath it and tiptoed from the room. He made his way in darkness to the back door where he dressed before leaving the house and slipping through the quiet streets to wait in the shadow of a factory warehouse where he worked after school and weekends assembling electric fans. Once there, he pressed his back against the padlocked corrugated tin doors and peered in the direction she would come. For the first time he considered what he should do if she didn't. His breath caught at a stirring ahead in the darkness, a motion, the materializing of a form.

She hesitated once she saw him and ran to clasp the hand he offered. They set off silently without speaking. The sky lightened in anticipation of dawn as they found their way to a narrow part of the Rio Grande where now, late in summer, it ran shallow.

The boy waded into the still water until it reached his chest. He swam with swift strong strokes cutting through reflected sunrise. The girl followed, taking but a few steps before parting the warm water's surface into pleats of rosy silk. Gasping lungs full of



sage-scented air, the two emerged on the opposite bank arriving in another country. “We made it! No border guards! I could run all the way to New York City!” the girl shouted, prancing in place.

The boy moved steadily ahead. “We can’t afford to slow down,” he told her. “We need to get away from the border and gain distance before the day heats up.” He slowed as she caught up, dug a hand into the pocket of his jeans and took out a limp and dripping map. “I’ll feel safer when we reach Tucson, Carla.” He knelt and gently unfolded and smoothed the faded paper on the ground. “We should come to a dirt road. It leads to a highway where we can try our luck hitchhiking.”

“I know, I know—even without the map, Tino. We’ve planned so long I see that map in my sleep at night.” She squeezed water from her thick dark braid and tossed it over her shoulder. “Come on, before the sun fries us,” she coaxed, walking ahead briskly, swinging her arms in rhythm with her stride.

Tino carried his open map like a small weathered flag to dry in the warm desert air as he caught up, then folded it and carefully tucked it in his pocket. The sun climbed the sky, burning away dawn’s color as they hurried on. Evaporation from their saturated clothes cooled them, dried and became damp with perspiration by the time they reached a dirt road that wandered through the tumbleweed. “Now that we know we’re on the right path, let’s use that clump of manzanita for cover and sleep through this heat,” he suggested as he headed toward the bushes. Neither had slept the previous night and very little for many

nights while their minds raced through excited details of their escape.

Carla gazed toward the road they would follow and thought 'road kill' when she spotted a small form beside it. She took a few cautious steps for a closer look and saw movement as she approached. Forgetting her agreement with Tino that they would not use their native language once they crossed the border, "*¡Dios mio!*" slipped from her lips. She clasped her hand over her mouth. Tino turned to see what had caused her lapse. "It's a child!" she exclaimed. "Where did he come from?"

A boy jumped from the ditch and stumbled to them on swollen feet and fiery-red legs. His puffy face was tear-streaked. "Help my daddy!" he pleaded, pointing to a scribble of road that disappeared into a watery mirage on the horizon. "He's back there."

Tino put his arm about the boy's shoulders and walked him to a mound of brush. Carla followed and all three hunkered down on the shadowed side out of view from the road. Tears coursed down the boy's sun-burned cheeks. He wiped his nose with the back of his wrist. Tino untied the rolled bandana from his forehead, shook it out and gently wiped the child's sun-blistered eyes and nose. Carla unscrewed the top of her water bottle and offered it. The boy gulped, choked, coughed, and gulped again. "Easy, not too much too fast," Tino warned, taking the water from him. "How did you get here?" he asked.

Intermittent sobs garbled the boy's words. His tongue moved tenderly over cracked, parched lips and stopped a tear that found its way to the corner

of his mouth. His brown eyes pleaded. "He won't wake up. Please help my daddy!"

"Where is your father?" Tino asked.

The child's eyes moved up the sun-bleached sky. "In our car," he began in a small voice. "We was have'n fun. Daddy was singin' with the radio and all. I climbed in back with my comics and musta gone t'sleep." A huge hiccup shook his body. He swallowed and continued, "I woke up when the car stopped." While the child spoke he tried to unfasten the buckle on one of his sandal straps.

Seeing how those straps cut his poor swollen feet, Carla realized that was probably what he was doing when she saw him beside the road and she leaned down and unfastened both his sandals.

"Then what happened?" Tino urged.

"I thought Daddy was asleep." The boy dipped his head as he described, "His head was on the steering wheel. I tried to wake him, but he wouldn't move." The child's voice rose in alarm, followed by another hiccup.

"You're okay now," Tino said, laying one hand on the boy's shoulder and the other on Carla's. "My name's Tino, and this is Carla. What's your name?"

"Adam."

"Well, Adam, Carla here, she'll take good care of you while I go see about your father." Tino dropped his hand from Carla's shoulder and patted her knee. She gave him a hard look, afraid to be abandoned in the desert. "You're not leaving us here," she said—a command, not a question.

"You'll be fine. Go easy on your water and sleep in the shade," he answered. "Before you know it, I'll be back."

Carla pointed to Adam and raised her voice. "Look at this kid. He's been on that road some time. You don't know how far it is to the car. You'd be dumb to head off in the hottest part of the day. Wait till evening and we'll all go."

"That'd be too late," Tino called as he jogged away. Carla jumped up, called, "Stop, Wait!" Tino turned and ran backward a few steps with his finger to his lips. He pivoted and ran on. Carla and Adam watched him jog through the sagebrush, a safe distance away from the road, and then at the sound of an approaching car, duck from sight. A battered pickup emerged from a cloud of dust on the horizon and rattled into view. Excited at the sight of the car, Adam jumped up. Carla pulled him down beside her and clamped her hand over his mouth until the truck rumbled past. Crouched behind the dusty brush, they watched Tino spring from his cover and run on. Adam cowered beside her, trying not to cry.

Wondering how Tino could run off without her, sensing this boy meant trouble, she told him sharply, "Stay still. Go to sleep." Adam curled up like a small animal, squeezed his bloodshot eyes shut and bit his lip.

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Tino prayed as he ran through the scorching desert. *Please, God, let Adam's father be alive so I can*

*help him. Maybe then he'll help us.* At last he saw the car a short distance from the main highway turnoff. The door on the driver's side of the Buick was partly open and there appeared to be someone in the driver's seat. Tino figured whoever drove the pickup would have had to pass this car and see the man inside. Maybe he'd helped the guy and maybe they'd come looking for his son. Maybe Carla was right and he should've stayed with her. A heavy sense of dread weighed each of his steps as he approached the car.

Unprepared for the body he found wedged behind the steering wheel of the blue Buick, in his seventeen years, aside from movies and TV, the only dead person Tino had seen was his Uncle Arturo. Arturo had lain in an open casket, powdered and dressed in his Sunday best. Tino thought at the time that his uncle looked improved by death: his grizzled face shaved smooth, his fat, sweaty body washed clean. The sight of this body, bloated and stiff with rigor mortis after hours in the sun, made Tino's belly clench. Tino backed away and yelped into the yellow sky, "This man's death has nothing to do with me." About to run away, he thought of the little boy he'd left behind. *What about Adam?* Again he prayed, *Dear God, Help me know what to do.* Tino turned back to face what he believed he must do.

Leaning into the car to unfasten the seat belt, the putrid smell of the corpse and the brush of its hair on his cheek terrified him and he pulled away. As he did, the man's shirt snagged on Tino's belt buckle, pulling the corpse sideways, half in and half out of the car. Unnerved, Tino jumped aside,

struggling to disentangle from the body as it fell against him and slid to his feet.

Sick with fear, feeling exposed, Tino glanced up and down the road, adrenaline surging through his body. What defense would he have if discovered? He dragged the dead man to the rear of the car, raced back, retrieved the keys from the ignition and unlocked the trunk. He threw out a child's fishing pole and overnight bag covered with Looney Tunes characters, ran his hands across the shirt pocket and chinos that clothed what he believed was Adam's father, took a wallet from the pants pocket and shoved it into his. He hauled the body into the trunk, forced its stiff arms and legs in and slammed the lid shut.

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Meanwhile in the nearby town of Paloverdes, Sheriff Patterson was eating a plate of *huevos rancheros* at the Cactus Café when his meal was interrupted by a call from his deputy, Jason Phelps. He forked the remaining eggs, rice, and beans onto his last tortilla, carefully folded it into a bundle, stuffed it into his mouth and washed it down with the last of his coffee.

"Police business or funny business?" Mama Martinez questioned as she made change for the five-dollar bill he tossed onto the counter.

"Don't sound too funny. I'll take me a ride and find out," he said placing his Stetson on his pony-tailed hair and striding from the café.

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Tino glanced up and down the road, dry-mouthed, lightheaded, then swept the overnight bag and fishing pole from the ground and tossed them into the back seat among the comic books and huge stuffed dinosaur already there. Tino leaped into the driver's seat, turned the ignition key, released the brake and headed in the opposite direction from Carla and the boy. As he merged with the highway traffic, he glance in the rear-view mirror and saw a police car turn onto the dirt road he'd just left. A sense of having escaped some unknown threat washed over him.

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Adam slept a troubled sleep disturbed by sobs. An overhead sun inched west enlarging the spot of shade he shared with Carla. She sat on her haunches, paralyzed with anxiety as she watched the empty road, her back and legs cramping. She began to ease into a sitting position to relieve her aching legs when she spotted a scorpion, its tail curled, ready to strike Adam's bare leg. Moving, oh so slowly, she took the water bottle from her lap and with as little motion as possible, slowly pushed the scorpion away. To her relief, the insect disliked being bulldozed and scurried off.

Hot wind whirled tumbleweeds across the sand. Among the sounds of small animals and the drone of insects she thought she heard the rattle of a snake.

A hawk floated overhead so noiselessly that his shadow was what she saw first. A small animal's sudden squeal made her edgy, ready to jump. Looking up, she saw its tiny body clutched in the hawk's talons and she, too, felt small, vulnerable and unprotected.

Though she ached with weariness, she was afraid to close her eyes. The sun's throbbing rays blazed relentlessly down. Yesterday, her mother's efforts to disrupt her plans replayed in her mind like a movie: *"Here in Nogales," her mother said, you're safe. In the United States, who knows what problems you might have?" she'd warned. You're too young to think of such nonsense—you fifteen and Tino, what? Seventeen?" She'd waved a hand before Carla as if that would clear the ideas from her daughter's mind. "Get those crazy thoughts out of your head," she'd said.*

*"I have no future here," Carla had argued.*

*"Stay in school. Learn how to make a future for yourself," her mother told her. She'd grasped both Carla's hands in hers. "There are borders we don't cross, interior borders that are part of us, that we come to know as we live our lives," she'd said, "they're the laws we live by." She'd tightened her grip. "To cross them would destroy who we are," she'd insisted.* Carla didn't know what her mother meant by interior borders. She only could feel how rough her mother's hands were, see how deep the lines around her mother's eyes and mouth and how she longed for a life unlike her mother's.



Carla tensed as she watched a puff of dust in the distance roll towards her. She hoped it was Tino and Adam's father coming for them and fought an urge to jump and run toward it. It was the opposite of her hope—a police car. She quickly ducked low over Adam's sleeping body. He sobbed as he dreamed and she prayed he wouldn't wake. Alarm pulsed through her. Thoughts, one after another, stabbed her with fear. *Had Tino been caught? Was the law now looking for her?* She froze as the car passed, wheels crunching too near before it receded along the dusty road. She curled beside Adam and overcome with fatigue, began to doze. After half an hour she woke in fear when the police car retraced its path, passed by and disappeared in the distance. Adam's sleep eased into a quiet slumber. Carla studied him and decided the boy must be about five or six, her little sister's age. His auburn hair was neatly cut, trimmed close across the back and around his ears, a bit longer on top. His plaid shirt and shorts, colored in bright blues, reds, and greens, looked new.

Shadows lengthened and softened into shades of lavender as she watched for Tino's return. Awful questions surfaced: *What if he doesn't come? What if he's been arrested? What if he figured his chances were better going it alone?* Fear turned to rage as she decided, *Tino was wrong to leave me.*

Sand stuck to Adam's face where the breeze lifted it against the moisture at the corner of his mouth and eyes. Just as Carla raised her hand to brush the sand away Adam opened his eyes. His brown irises were no longer red-rimmed. He was very still, fixing

her in his gaze as if his consciousness still had a long way to travel.

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At first Adam thought it was his mom's hand, there to smooth away his fear. No, this was a different hand—brown, with short, dirt-rimmed nails. His mom had long, red nails. The face above him wasn't hers, either. His mom had a pointy nose and narrow lips that she colored red. This face was caramel-colored, with full lips, a rounded nose, eyes and hair the color of cocoa.

He wanted to go back to his dream. In it he slept in his mother's big bed, tucked in next to her body, feeling little puffs of her warm moist breath in his hair, her arm cozy around him, keeping him safe.

"There's sand on your face." It was the voice that had ordered him to sleep. Now he remembered and a long worm of fear uncoiled in his stomach. Without brushing the sand away, Carla dropped her hand into her lap, unscrewed the water bottle top and handed it to Adam. "Have a swallow or two," she said as he sat up, looked around and took it with both hands to drink. When he stopped for a breath, Carla took it away and drank the last of it. "I've gone without," she said. "It's all we had." She threw the empty bottle down and he wondered if she was mad at him for drinking too much. Carla softened her voice. "Can we sit here and talk awhile, Adam?" She moved closer to him. "Let's get acquainted while we wait for Tino? Tell me, where do you live?"

“Tucson.” he answered.

“Is that where your mother is?” she asked.

“Uh-huh,” he answered and wondered if she knew how to get his mother to come get him.

“Where were you and your dad going?” was her next question.

“Mom didn’t even know Dad was taking me camping,” he told her, hopeful now, ready to confide whatever information might get him home. “He said it was a surprise vacation, bought me a new fishing pole, but we hadn’t gone fishing yet.”

A breeze swirled sand around the two youngsters, catching the setting sun’s light like gold fog. Carla squinted through it down the empty road and fished a small gold cross on a chain from beneath her blouse, held it to her lips and closed her eyes as if praying. “Your feet aren’t so swollen now that you rested,” she told Adam, fastening his sandals on the very last notch. She jumped up, smiled down at him and in a cheery voice coaxed, “Let’s go find Tino and your dad?” She gave him her hand, pulled him up and led him to the road. “Do you have any brothers or sisters, Adam?” she asked.

“No,” he answered, taking two steps to one of her eager strides. He stumbled and she slowed down. “Well, let’s pretend I’m your big sister,” she said.

Adam looked dubious, squeezed his hand free from hers, but continued to walk along without answering. Instead he asked, “The man in the truck could’ve helped my Daddy. Why’d you keep me from stopping him?”

Carla's eyes ran sideways like they were looking for an answer. She didn't say anything right away. They walked several yards before she explained, "Tino already was on his way to help your dad and we didn't know the guy in the truck. He might have been a bad guy." Adam glanced up at her. "I was only looking out for you," she added. "Your sunburn's bad and I thought you needed to rest." Her voice took on a plaintive tone as she recognized the look Adam gave her. She knew that look, had seen it before at home when she tried and failed to fool her younger sister. Nothing was turning out right. Her mouth felt like cotton as she thought of the plastic water bottle she'd discarded in frustration. *Dumb! If we find water, I'll have nothing to carry it in.* She told herself. *I should go back for it, but if I tell Adam to wait while I go back for the water bottle, he'll feel abandoned again and we'll lose time,* she decided. Mumbling, thinking aloud, she muttered, "Who am I kidding? Water! Where?"

"There's water inside cactus," Adam offered.

"You're right, Adam, but I have no knife. Tino has a knife. We need to find Tino." She quickened her pace but Adam dragged along so slowly that she feared it would be dark before they got to the highway. The day had started with such hope. Only that morning she swam the silky warm waters of a dawn-tinted Rio Grand, off on a wonderful adventure to *The Land of Promise* with a guy she loved. How could he have abandoned them, leave them stranded in that Godforsaken desert? She plodded on, her mind frenzied, panic turned to rage.

She felt desperate, her stomach hollow. Adam also needed food and where the fuck would that be? Where the fuck was Tino.

She was glad she'd insisted on carrying her own money. Before leaving Mexico, Tino suggested they pool the American dollars they'd saved. "What's the matter?" he'd asked, don't you trust me?" She'd replied with a quick excuse: "Just in case we get separated." At the time, she'd believed they'd always be together, never apart, but she'd worked, saved, gone without to get that money. It was her investment in future dreams and not easy to part with. For reassurance, Carla ran her hand under her T-shirt to feel the money belt tied firmly beneath her breasts. *When we get to the highway, I'll pretend the kid's my little brother, she thought. Might even be safer—with him along, a man's less likely to mess with me. Maybe we'll get lucky, get picked up by a couple—hopefully some kind people. Dear God, help us!*

Adam lagged behind, his head down as they trudged on. She kept watching the road, hoping Tino would appear. In an effort to make Adam speed up, she urged, "I'll race you to that tumbleweed," and sprinted ahead to a large lacy sphere, but that solemn little kid continued to walk at his own steady shuffle. Her next attempt to hurry Adam along was inspired by the bizarre forms of prickly pear, spiny cactus and a few towering desert saguaros. "Let's play we're exploring another planet and the cacti are aliens who are after us," She suggested. "Let's pretend we'll be safe once we reach the highway." She could see by the look in Adam's eyes that a

connection was made even though he continued to plod slowly through the dry red sand. Suddenly he stopped, looked with intense interest at a cactus up the road and began to run.

“What the... “I didn’t mean to frighten you, Adam,” she called. “It’s just pretend.”

He ran ahead, ignoring her.

“Wait for me!” she shouted.

He ran until he came to a stately saguaro that rose close to the road. It had a dried seedpod on its uppermost stalk on which a few petals remained creating the appearance of a human head, the petals wisps of hair. Two stalks projected like arms from its massive body. “This is the one I asked to look after Daddy,” Adam shouted. “Where’s my daddy?” He started to cry.

Carla didn’t know what Adam was talking about, but she saw tire tracks and footprints in the sand. They confirmed her worst doubts. Hope seeped from her body and evaporated in the dry evening air. Crimson and gold ribbons faded into one long burnt-umber banner above the horizon. The sun slipped from view allowing a pale moon to appear. At any other time, she’d have seen the beauty, but the coming night terrified her. Turning resolutely back to the road, she listened carefully and believed she heard a distant hum, perhaps highway noise. Taking Adam firmly by the hand, she continued along the dirt road.

“Where’s my daddy?” He insisted.

“I wish I knew, Adam,” she sighed. “How I wish I knew.”

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Forty minutes after he left the Cactus Cafe, Sheriff Jim Patterson returned for a second cup of coffee. Mama repeated her earlier question as she filled Jim's coffee cup. "Police business or funny business?"

Jim rubbed his square jaw. The creases around his eyes did his smiling for him. "Ma'am, some days police business *is* funny business. You know Old Pete, lives in that lean-to a few miles down Border Road?"

She nodded.

"Called in claiming he passed a car with a dead man inside. I drove clean down to Pete's place. Seen nothing but sage and tumbleweed. Pete's maybe losing some of his marbles, or his dead man got resurrected and drove hisself home."

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By the time the highway appeared, Carla was carrying Adam piggyback. He slept, his head heavy upon her shoulder. His sandals hung from Carla's belt, buckled together, one with a broken strap. The hum of traffic and the bouncing illumination of headlights held the promise she struggled to reach. Her legs no longer seemed a part of her: numb, beyond pain, they moved automatically forward. Her teeth clenched against the ache in her shoulders and back. Her burden steadily rubbed against her sunburned skin.

