

GROUNDWATER

Written by

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EXT. EL PASO - RURAL HOME - FRONT YARD

Shadows gravitate over a barren patch of grass, human bodies ascending to the front door of a modest home.

Stark white characters on the back of their vests: HSI.

A dozen humans moving in unison.

Leading the pack, a stout Mexican-American woman, Her name is SOFIA DE LA FUENTE. Her furrowed brow breaks the moonlight. Her hair in a taut ponytail. Hand firmly on her holster.

Eight agents break from the pack skirting around the East and West sides of the property.

The remaining four approach the home's entrance.

EXT. EL PASO - RURAL HOME - FRONT PORCH

The agents climb the steps of the porch, weapons drawn.

Sofia knocks on the door.

A beat.

The sliding of a deadbolt--

A man with horned glasses and a balding scalp peers through a crack in the door. His gnarled nose sneers below his lenses.

SOFIA
Is Vincent here?

DOORMAN
Who?

Sofia jams her foot in the door way.

SOFIA
Do you need to see a warrant?

DOORMAN
No Ma'am.

SOFIA
Move.

DOORMAN stammers backwards into the living room.

Four agents flood through the front door.

INT. EL PASO - RURAL HOME - LIVING ROOM

The door opens to a HEAVY MAN watching television planted on a ragged couch. Behind the couch, a SCRAWNY MAN washes dishes in the kitchenette.

DOORMAN stammers into the middle of the room, blocking a bedroom door behind him to his left.

Sofia steps forward now nose to nose with DOORMAN.

All the men in the home rest in a trance.

Life's presence leaves the room ...

DOORMAN
THE HELL Y'ALL WANT?

Sofia unholsters her pistol.

SOFIA WHERE IS HE????

He backs away into the living room. Raising his palms.

A closed door to his left draws Sofia's attention.

DOORMAN
(quietly)
... I don't know nothin'.

HSI AGENT #1
Check door right.

DOORMAN
Ain't shit in there.

Two agents push past DOORMAN and open the door --

HSI AGENT #1 HSI AGENT #2
GUN!!!! FREEZE!!!

VINCENT, shaking in sweat cowers in the middle of a bedroom, in his left hand an aimless pistol hangs near his waist.

Both agents fiercely subdue the small man.

A round fires -- ripping into the carpet of the bedroom.

The pistol falls to the floor. Vincent slips through the men.

A round from the kitchen rings out, cracking the front door frame. Agent TOMÁS screams out in agony. He's hit.

Sofia fires five shots into the kitchen. SCRAWNY MAN's body bashes onto the linoleum counter and down onto cold tile.

Vincent tears away from the men in the bed room, shouldering his way into the living room ducking under bullet spray.

He turns to the back door, vaults over SCRAWNY MAN'S body.

From the couch, HEAVY MAN, raises an Uzi and aims at Sofia.

She pivots taking point, a double tap to his crown and chest.

On the porch Tomás tackles DOORMAN.

Sofia sprints after Vincent.

INT. EL PASO - RURAL HOME - SUNROOM

The sunroom ahead lies dark.

Empty?

Sofia breaks the corner, gun drawn.

Metallic scrapes claw into a screen door frame.

HSI AGENT
(from outside)
FREEZE MOTHERFUCKER!!!!

EXT. EL PASO - RURAL HOME - BACKYARD

Fluids chug. Sofia braces herself.

She opens the patio screen door, turning the corner.

Vincent pours lacquer thinner from a canister onto him.

All nine agents descend on Vincent. Weapons drawn.

Lacquer thinner coats his body.

VINCENT
(chuckling)
This what y'all want?

SOFIA HSI AGENT
VINCENT, THAT'S ENOUGH. DON'T FUCKING MOVE!!!!!!

Vincent digs into his hip pocket raising a torch lighter.

He pulls the trigger.

Flames engulf his body. All nine agents retreat to cover.

Vincent's stomping grows his laughing bleeds into gasps.

Asphyxiation takes over his being.

Sofia watches through the screen.

His posture loses its strength.

To his knees he falls.

A beat.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
(to herself)
Shit.

Two agents vomit.

HSI AGENT #5
FIRE EXTINGUISHER!!!???

Vincent's blood curdling coughs weaken.

The fire soars at full strength.

Two agents rush in with fire extinguishers.

It's dry powder chokes air from the flames.

His body at rest in fetal position.

Burning.

EXT. EL PASO - RURAL HOME - BACKYARD - LATER

The immediate chaos of the raid has subsided.

The air still smells of oil, burnt flesh, and the chemical tang of fire extinguisher powder.

Uniformed officials process the scene, documenting bodies, collecting evidence.

The remains of Vincent's charred body, visible through the screen door.

EXT. EL PASO - RURAL HOME - VINCENT'S BEDROOM

Bullet holes pockmark the room, plaster dust coats the floor.

One OFFICER, gloved hands sifts through the wreckage of a dresser. Drawers are pulled out, clothes tossed aside, contents spilled onto the floor.

Another checks under the mattress, probes tears in the upholstery with a penlight.

Another OFFICER searches the small closet. The door hangs open, slightly splintered.

He reaches into a shoebox on the top shelf. His fingers close around something small, wrapped in plastic.

He pulls it out. A small baggie. Inside are a few handfuls of pills and what looks like powder - a meager amount compared to the cache found in the container outside.

He holds it up briefly, exchanging a look with the other officer - not a look of triumph, but a quiet confirmation.

INT. EL PASO - RURAL HOME - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The living room is a mess of overturned furniture and debris. Sofia, a bandaged Tomás, and HSI Assistant Director Douglas walk through the chaos, their boots crunching on broken glass.

They move through the kitchen, past the body of the SCRAWNY MAN on the floor near the counter.

In the middle of the room, seated on the couch, is the covered corpse of HEAVY MAN. Near the screen door leading outside, the DOORMAN with the horned glasses sits detained.

They enter the SUNROOM, a slightly enclosed patio area at the back of the house.

INT. EL PASO - RURAL HOME - SUN ROOM - NIGHT

Sofia approaches Doorman

SOFIA
Where's the rest of your product?

DOORMAN
(Voice trembling)
Yeah... Yeah, that's Vincent. He...
he was the one.

Sofia, Tomás, and Douglas listen, their faces grim.

SOFIA
(Voice sharp)
He was the only one moving the
drugs?

The Doorman flinches, shaking his head rapidly.

DOORMAN
Yeah he's your mark ... Guess I'm
one now.

Sofia steps towards him, gaze intense.

SOFIA
Anything el-

Douglas lays a hand on Sofia's arm, a quiet gesture to keep
her moving.

DOUGLAS
We'll get his statement processed.
Cartel's moved on from here.

Douglas gestures outside.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)
That's enough Sofia.

Sofia nods, tearing her gaze away from the Doorman.

She turns and walks with Douglas towards the back patio
screen door. Tomás hesitates for a second, glancing back at
the living room then follows Sofia and Douglas out.

EXT. EL PASO - RURAL HOME - BACKYARD - NIGHT

Two HSI Agents are inspecting a large, metal shipping
container situated in the yard, partially obscured by foliage
and rubbish.

HSI AGENT #1
(Calling out)
Douglas! Over here!

Sofia, Tomás, and Douglas move towards the container.

Douglas nods to a couple of agents, who retrieve bolt
cutters. Metal SNAPS. The heavy container doors GROAN open.

Inside, it's dark and cluttered with medical supplies,
chemical bottles, and tarps. Centered in the space, under a
makeshift table constructed from crates, is a significant
cache.

The agents shine their flashlights ...

On the table - piles of individually wrapped bricks of drugs. Bottles of Phenobarbital. Weighing scales. Packaging materials.

The tools of a major trafficking operation.

Tomás lets out a low whistle.

TOMÁS

Holy hell. Look at all this.

Tomás and other agents move forward to examine the cache.

HSI AGENT #1

Jackpot.

Sofia steps past them, her attention drawn to the corrugated metal floor beneath the table and debris.

A seam is visible ...

She kneels, brushing away dirt and debris with her hands.

The seam becomes clearer - the outline of a hidden panel.

SOFIA

(Voice quiet, intense)

Hold on.

The other agents pause, turning their lights towards where Sofia is focused.

Tomás steps back from the table, watching ...

Sofia finds a handle recessed into the panel. It's stiff.

SOFIA (CONT'D)

Help me with this.

Two HSI AGENTS push the table back then kneel beside her. Together, they grip the handle.

HSI AGENT #2

Heavy. Bolted down?

SOFIA

Maybe on the inside.

They pull. The metal hatch RESISTS, then GRINDS upward.

INT. SHIPPING CONTAINER - NIGHT

Flashlights illuminate a cramped, dark space below the floor.

Dozens of pairs of eyes, wide with terror, reflecting the sudden light.

Small faces, pale and gaunt, huddled together.

Centered in the blinding beam is the face of a young girl, no older than seven.

Her eyes, enormous and filled with silent horror are locked directly onto Sofia's face.

Sofia freezes ...

The eyes of the young girl hold her.

INT. EL PASO - CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

The air is thick with post-raid adrenaline and stale coffee.

Diagrams of El Paso neighborhoods, crime scene photos, and raid manifests cover the yellow walls.

Officers and HSI agents murmur in clusters, voices low but punctuated by bursts of nervous laughter.

A few stand near a stanchion at the front of the room.

EL PASO SHERIFF MILLER, a beefy man in uniform, stands gesturing towards a whiteboard, wrapping up the debrief.

SHERIFF MILLER

...All in, a clean operation. High success rate on takedowns, no casualties for either team.

Textbook. Well done, everyone.

Scattered applause and murmurs of agreement.

Sheriff Miller beams, scanning the room ...

His eyes land on Sofia, who sits slumped near the back of the table, trying to disappear.

SHERIFF MILLER (CONT'D)

Agent de la Fuente ... Took some balls going in like that. Reckon you surprised 'em. Surprised us, too.

A wave of chuckles ripples through the room.

The El Paso officers glance at Sofia, some with grudging respect, others with snickers. Classic locker room energy.

OFFICER #1
(Calling out)
She went in first, Sheriff! HSI
don't wait for backup!

Laughter.

Sofia deflates deeper into her chair, jaw tight, peering out the window at nothing.

She feels the eyes on her, the snide amusement.

Tomás, seated next to her, shifts uncomfortably.

He meets Sofia's gaze, offering a small, sympathetic grimace.

OFFICER #2
(Voice loud)
Must be all that 'direct
oversight'! Gets you right in the
thick of it!

Snide laughter again.

Sofia stares out the window.

The heavy oak door clicks open with a soft thud.

The chatter dies. A palpable shift in the room's energy.

All heads turn.

Standing in the doorway are three figures in stark, perfectly tailored suits - an island of sharp authority in the rumpled chaos of the debrief.

HSI SUPERVISOR STERLING, her face stoic, radiating a cold, efficient power.

HSI ASSISTANT DIRECTOR DOUGLAS, his demeanor hard, impatient.

And a third, imposing figure, SHEPHERD. His presence is quiet but commands attention.

Silence falls over the room, thick and immediate.

El Paso Police files out of the room.

The crowd parting slightly for them.

Sterling scans the faces of Tomás and Sofia, her gaze sharp.

Sterling stands at the head of the table.

Douglas stands to her side, arms crossed.

Shepherd remains slightly back, observing from the perimeter.

STERLING
(Her eyes find Sofia)
Agent de la Fuente.

Sofia straightens slightly in her chair, her movements are stiff, still feeling the raid.

STERLING (CONT'D)
This operation ... while successful in interdicting narcotics ... highlighted certain ... vulnerabilities. Lines of supply extending beyond what was previously understood.

Douglas steps forward, his voice cutting and direct.

DOUGLAS
Specifically, links indicating a direct connection to smuggling operations transporting more human cargo. All immigrant children.

The room is silent ...

Sofia's gaze snaps from Douglas back to Sterling.

Tomás is watching Sofia closely.

STERLING
This shifts the priority. Narcotics remains critical. But the human element ... the trafficking aspect ... is now the primary focus. This operation has revealed a nodal point in a much larger network. Nationwide.

She looks directly at Sofia.

STERLING (CONT'D)
Effective immediately, you are reassigned.

SOFIA
Reassigned?

STERLING

Your expertise in this specific area, combined with your ... direct experience ...

Sofia's jaw tightens at the phrasing.

STERLING (CONT'D)

... makes you a necessary asset. You're being transferred to HSI San Antonio. You'll be assigned to another joint task force.

Sofia stares back, trying to process.

SOFIA

San Antonio? For what?

Sterling's voice drops, losing none of its cold precision.

STERLING

A series of related cases. Recovered bodies. Evidence indicating ritualistic mutilation and dismemberment of adolescent migrants tied to smuggling networks.

Tomás's face hardens further.

DOUGLAS

These aren't isolated incidents. There's a pattern. And they're not contained to the border. This is a national trafficking network. San Antonio is a hub.

SOFIA

(Voice tight)

How many children?...

STERLING

(Nods confirmation)

One confirmed body that matches others in California. Your work here has confirmed the connection between the drug supply and the human trade. Follow that thread. All the way up.

She gestures towards Douglas.

STERLING (CONT'D)

Douglas will be overseeing this operation from a strategic level. Alma be your direct liaison here in El Paso during the handover phase.

Tomás nods.

Sofia looks at Shepherd, then back at Sterling.

She expected praise, maybe leave... not this.

Not this immediate, brutal reassignment.

Sofia stands slowly.

The chair scrapes back.

All eyes are on her.

SOFIA

When do I start?

Sterling nods, a final, dismissive gesture.

STERLING

Arrangements are being made. You'll depart for San Antonio within 24 hours. All necessary files will be transferred. Report to Sergeant Avery upon arrival.

Douglas steps towards Sofia.

DOUGLAS

Your El Paso reporting is due before you leave. We'll need a full debrief on your solo movements leading up to entry. Standard procedure.

Sofia stares at him.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)

Make it count.

TOMÁS

I'll watch her.

SOFIA

(Voice quiet, but firm)

Right.

EXT. CORPUS CHRISTI - COAST LINE - NIGHT

Thunderous waves pound the shore.

Distant spiraling flashes and echoes from a carnival on the boardwalk bleed into the night. Gnarling wind howls against the wooden legs of the structure, crying out from the void.

Imprints of a child's path, etched into the sand, reflecting pale moonlight. Each barefoot step leads to another.

Meager strides carry the feeble body of a BOY, 6, hispanic, along the coast, footprints disappear into the tide's breath.

The child is awestruck, caught by the pull of the carnival lights, their beams cut him into a silhouette.

A couple, drunk and disheveled, stumble over mounds of seaweed rot, their sloppily dressed bodies lean into each other for support.

The MAN, 34, ragged and unkempt, rests heavily on the WOMAN, 32, his eyes bloodshot and half-closed. His head lifts just enough to notice the boy, his vision blurred and unfocused.

MAN

Lookin' for mommy, bud?

BOY

No.

WOMAN

Are you lost?

The boy's innocuous gaze reflects back at them, his mind is a blank slate. The man puckers his lips, raises his arm and swigs from the bottle.

MAN

... Remember what this feels like?

He chuckles, buries his face in the woman's neck, and jabs her ribs with his knuckles.

She winces and murmurs.

WOMAN

(chuckles)

Fuck off.

He pulls the woman down into the sand, their bodies entwined, kissing her, he mounts her as she helplessly watches the boy.

The boy pauses, watches them for a moment, questioning what the hell they're doing, then continues down the coastline.

His longing steps lead him closer to the carnival now. The boy's small frame quakes, the sharp air thickens. The salty breeze drives the ocean's ancient rhythm deep into his bones.

The waves crash with a primal force, their relentless roar filling his ears, drowning out the distant echoes of screams and clanking machinery from the carnival on the boardwalk.

The child stares into the abyss.

A form moves amidst the waves -- a lifeless carcass floating.

The water erupts. The form rises violently, sputtering, choking. Seawater cascades down off its heaving mass.

The boy freezes. His eyes wide. Wavering ghostlike cloth flows down its limbs. The shadow gravitates toward the boy.

Silence.

EXT. SAN ANTONIO - INTERSTATE 10 - NOON

A CHEVY TAHOE thunders over asphalt, threading the swarm of droning vehicles. The skyline juts forward, bleeding into broken sprawl, the earth suffocates under concrete.

EXT. SAN ANTONIO - INTERSTATE 10 - NOON

Sofia's lifeless body in the driver's seat, her raw eyes flicker between the road ahead and the rearview, eight hours of desert behind her clouding her present vision.

The air outside is bone dry.

Her breath as shallow as the road carrying her South.

EXT. SAPD - SOUTH SUBSTATION - NOON

The Chevy rolls into the parking lot.

Sofia hankers out of her vehicle, stiff as hell.

Tomás stands by his SUV, chomping on a cup of eloté.

"Sombrero Blanco" by Grupo Arriesgado buzzes in the background. A few San Antonio Officers linger around picnic tables, their chattering voices are low, casual.

Sofia thuds over to Tomás, her boots heavy on the pavement.

TOMÁS
You make it in okay? Oughta get you
some eloté ...

SOFIA
Long drive.

TOMÁS
Seven hours, if you gas it. Gotta
look out for the White Tail.

SOFIA
Two hundred pound buck through the
windshield ain't worth it.

TOMÁS
Well ... we get what we ask for.

Sofia glances over at the presence near the food truck.

The people gathering in the sun light are too alive for her.

TOMÁS (CONT'D)
All Souls Day ... Not big on mass?

Tomás talks another mound of eloté to his gullet.

Chewing slowly.

TOMÁS (CONT'D)
True faith is a rare thing.

SOFIA
Yeah, alright ...

A beat.

TOMÁS
Think you're going to survive?

SOFIA
I just gotta stay awake.

Tomás takes his final bite. Grinning through his corn.

TOMÁS
Wake the fuck up, de la Fuente.

INT. INTERROGATION VIEWING ROOM - NIGHT

The room is cloaked in shadow, a pale green glow of the interrogation room seeps through the one-way mirror.

A heavyset presence fills the room. SERGEANT KAMAR AVERY (mid 50s, black) stares through the mirror, arms crossed.

The faint gurgle of the air conditioning disrupts the peace.

The door creaks open, Sofia and Tomás step in.

Avery glances at them.

AVERY
HSI in the flesh ...

A beat.

AVERY (CONT'D)
Sergeant Kamar Avery. SAPD.

He nods. Tomás gives a warm nod back.

Sofia looks through the mirror.

AVERY (CONT'D)
(to the mirror)
Mercer is in with our perp now.

Through the glass, SAM MERCER, description, looms over the suspect.

A skeletal white man in his fifties, slumped in his chair, his head drooping below hollowed shoulders.

Mercer, leans in, his movements deliberate, predatory.

AVERY (CONT'D)
We've had him on a narcotics charge, adding on trafficking unless he has something for us. Runs pills with a local ring, El Coro ... poetic.

SOFIA
Trafficking?

AVERY
Cellie says he's a double dipper ... Throw two pedophiles in the same cell, they'll always sing to each other.
(MORE)

AVERY (CONT'D)

Admitted to stalking and raping
locals around the Choke Canyon
Reservoir ... We found a mutilated
body out there last month ...

SOFIA

What was the cause of death?

AVERY

Coroner reported it as a drowning.
Wildlife ate the majority of it.
Brown boy, probably nine. No
identifiers beyond that ... Not
enough carcass.

SOFIA

And the toxicology report?

AVERY

We didn't order one until your
people got on board.

SOFIA

That's bullshit--

TOMÁS

(hushed)

Sofia.

Avery looks at her. He doesn't answer ...

TOMÁS (CONT'D)

(soft)

You got anything to nail him with?

AVERY

Decades worth of drug running ...
El Coro runs through the veins of
the state's southern border. They
control it by any means ... but ...
child torture isn't in their
wheelhouse ...

Mercer straightens suddenly, pushing back from the table.

He tosses a sneer through the mirror.

He juts the door open and strides into the viewing room.

Mercer tosses his paperwork onto the monitor table.

The door clicks behind him.

MERCER
We ain't got shit for a RICO.

He looks through Sofia and Tomás.

MERCER (CONT'D)
(to Avery)
Nothing on the body. Nothing on
trafficking. Doesn't know shit
about sedatives.

Mercer doesn't wait for a response, his eyes already sliding toward the exit door.

Avery takes a moment.

AVERY
Detective Mercer - HSI Agents,
Sofia de la Fuente and Tomás.

A smirk sits at the edge of Mercer's lips.

He holds out his hand to Tomás.

The men shake hands firmly.

MERCER
Y'all're wastin' your time.

Mercer turns, dismissing Sofia with a wave, steps into the office corridor.

Her eyes narrow.

SOFIA
Perfect.

The door clicks behind him. Avery and Tomás share a look.

Sofia turns her attention back through and into the mirror.

The man sits alone. Shaking.

INT./ EXT. HSI CHEVY TAHOE - I-37 SOUTHBOUND - AFTERNOON

Sofia's eyes are heavy, unfocused, glued to the horizon line beyond her passenger's window. The road ahead is straight, endless. Derelict properties break up the barren plain.

Tomás is in the driver's seat. One relaxed hand steers.

TOMÁS
(smirking)
Gotta love shit-hole counties.

Sofia doesn't look over.

SOFIA
This faster than the interstate?

TOMÁS
That's what the phone's tellin' me.
Probably be 'bout an hour.

SOFIA
You trust that shit?

TOMÁS
Why wouldn't I? We're not in a
third world country.

SOFIA
... What?

Sofia leans against the glass, the engine drowns out Tomás.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
(hushed)
Shut the fuck up.

INT./ EXT. HSI CHEVY TAHOE - THREE RIVERS - AFTERNOON

Sofia stirs at the sight of decaying industrial plants.

Railway slices through the middle of the town, cars scattered
like forgotten toys, dusty buildings line the streets.

Tomás slows the vehicle, scanning the road, his gaze narrows.

TOMÁS
Mortuary's up ahead.

Sofia shifts up in her chair. Silence pulses between them.

INT. THREE RIVERS MORTUARY - DAY

The rear bay doors of the mortuary push in.

Sofia and Tomás step inside, Tomás trudging behind her.

The space is cramped. Stacks of case files and medical
binders spilling off of worn shelves onto rickety desks.

Two clerks are hunched into their computer screens, ignoring the presence of visitors.

Sofia scans the room.

At a desk in the corner, MORTICIAN CHUCK MCGREGOR, late 50s, white, balding and heavyset, peers over his computer monitor through his bi-focals, as they enter, a faint smile forms on his pockmarked face.

His gaze softens with recognition.

CHUCK

Y'all must be them ones. Federales
called ... Been expectin' y'all ...

He slowly rises, wiping his cheeto dusted fingers onto his gut, and gestures toward the back.

CHUCK (CONT'D)

Choke Canyon carcass, right?
The body is full of water.

He ambles past the agents. They follow the man leading them.

The hum of coolers overtakes the faint sounds of the office as they step deeper into the mortuary's examination room.

INT. THREE RIVERS MORTUARY - EXAMINATION ROOM - DAY

Sterile light floods the narrow room.

A series of stainless-steel drawers line the walls, each with a name card etched in graphite.

The door slides open with a low metallic groan.

A lone embalming tech fishes his trocar into a body lying on an examination table in the back of the room.

Chuck waddles into the space, his boots clicking against the concrete floor as his hands squeeze into black latex gloves.

CHUCK

(chummy)

Chuck McGregor, nice meetin' you
folks.

He stops at the fourth drawer from the end, its waist-high name card reads "Un-identified".

He grips the cold metal handle and draws it open.

CHUCK (CONT'D)
Welp... Here it is.

He sharply slides the tray out to its full length, separating his body from Sofia and Tomás, revealing a woven body bag.

Sofia watches closely ... Her eyes narrow with suspicion.

Tomás stands back, hands in his pockets.

SOFIA
This the correct child?

Chet chuckles and slowly unzips the bag ...

CHUCK
Yup, city coroner ain't want it.

The body is grotesque -- a bloated, purple, mottled mass, ravaged by water exposure. There's nothing human about it.

The skin is swollen, a decaying canvas of fascia. The child's features are unrecognizable, torn to pieces by animals.

Chuck's gloved hands hover over the body like an artifact.

Sofia leans in. Her eyes narrow.

SOFIA
They said he was a drowning victim?

Chuck looks down at the body with a slight shake of his head.

He inhales ... And exhales ...

CHUCK
That's their official word. I'm not of the authority to say ... clear signs of hemorrhaging in the windpipe. Coyotes and buzzards ate their share of dermis.

He gestures to the limbs ... what's left of them ...

He makes a sweeping motion to the exposed rib cage.

CHUCK (CONT'D)
Don't explain how the skull or limbs are nowhere to be found ...

His gaze flickers back up to Sofia.

CHUCK (CONT'D)
You ever met a predator worried
'bout portion control?

TOMAS
We're here for a toxicology report.

CHUCK
Folks, I'm not of the authority to
answer any specifics ... if you got
questions 'bout what's directly in
front of us ... We could rest our
attention here.

Chuck moves his hand across the torso to the shoulder.

A sharp break on the edges of the rotting braised flesh.

SOFIA
What do you see?

CHUCK
... Animals don't eat in straight
lines ...

Chuck hovers his fore finger over the child's solar plexus, a gnarled circular black scar.

He glances back up at Tomás and Sofia.

SOFIA
What is that? A burn?

CHUCK
Cigarette? I'm not sure ... Sick
fucks tortured this boy ...

SOFIA
And what about the tox report?

Chuck drops his chauffeur hat.

CHUCK
Look, y'all've gotta go through the
official request process with the
right people. Coroner's team came
in, did their scan a few days ago.
I can't grant y'all permission to
the results.

A beat.

Chuck takes a peak at the embalming technician behind him,
still painting with his trocar.

He turns back to face Sofia.

CHUCK (CONT'D)
But ... they did find enough
Phenobarbital in his tissue to
knock a quarter horse unconscious
... looks like thirty milligrams to
me ... supposed to be Xylazine ...

TOMAS
(to Sofia)
There's our sedative.

Chuck gives a slow nod. He motions to the other drawers.

CHUCK
Yup ... anyways ... useful to store
a carcass like this down here
rather than havin' the city have
it. They's got better things to
focus on. Can't afford to lose real
estate ... That wouldn't be proper.

SOFIA
Easy to let a case go cold.

CHUCK
Well, it's just another dead body.

Chuck rests his hands on the torso.

CHUCK (CONT'D)
Hell, a lotta kids come through the
border camps jacked off all kinds
of junk. Especially the ones that
cross over out of their own will.

A beat.

CHUCK (CONT'D)
If you wanna make a fairytale outta
it, little bastard hit the jackpot.

Chuck's words float in the air.

Tomás shifts uncomfortably.

Sofia's eyes snap up.

SOFIA
What do you know about the local
shelter system?

CHUCK

There ain't exactly a lotta eyes on
some of 'em... Lotta people getting
pushed through that system...

Chuck pauses, his eyes flickering, almost amused.

CHUCK (CONT'D)

A lot of families surprisingly.
Hell, they're lucky to have each
other on that trek. A forgotten
child like this ... not so much.

SOFIA

Have there been other bodies like
this within the past few months?

CHUCK

No ... not kids ... not in this
condition. Our main crops boomers.

The door behind Sofia and Tomás cuts open.

A little man, underfed, Mexican, slips through the crack.

His face is covered in sweat from the Texas heat.

In his arms, a bundle of body parts in a courier's bag.

TOMAS

Thank you for your time Mr. Chuck.

Chuck gives Tomás a half hearted smile, shifting his
attention to carcass on the table in front of him.

CHUCK

Sure. Sure.

The little man, LEANDRO ROSALES, early 20s, Mexican, presses
his white mortuary technician's jacket against Chet's
shoulder, whispering into his ear.

Chuck nods as Leandro stares into Sofia's eyes.

CHUCK (CONT'D)

Si, guarda la cabeza del viejo con
las otras.

LEANDRO

Si, papi.

Leandro and Chuck chuckle. Leandro works his way behind Chuck
and places a canvas transport bag into an empty drawer.

SOFIA
Well ... alright.

TOMAS
Alright.

CHUCK
Alright, y'all.

Sofia and Tomás step back and turn away from the slide out tray as Chet closes the zipper of the boy's body bag.

Tomás walks through the partition back into the office.

Sofia steals a final glance behind her ...

Leandro's arms are trembling under the weight of the human remains as he stretches up to the highest overhead drawer.

His jaw clenched as if he's in the middle of a bender.

It doesn't matter. Sofia follows Tomás through the door.

INT./EXT. HSI CHEVY TAHOE - I-37 NORTHBOUND - AFTERNOON

The sun struggles above the horizon. Tomas is a stone behind the wheel. Sofia digs through the laptop in her lap.

She pauses.

SOFIA
That was fucked ...

TOMÁS
Avery doesn't have the resources to waste time with this shit.

Sofia jerks her head up from the laptop.

SOFIA
They're sex-trafficking orphans.

Tomás exhales.

TOMÁS
It may feed into something more depraved ... follow the money.

SOFIA
More depraved? That's disgusting.

TOMÁS

Trafficking is an irrational crime.
It's not a problem that can be
solved ... It's downstream from
something worse.

SOFIA

Drugs don't create pedophiles.

A beat.

TOMÁS

Show me the incentives and I'll
show you the outcome ...

A beat.

TOMÁS (CONT'D)

... The sedative is the strongest
lead we'll get on trafficking.
Douglas wants the Narcotics bust.
They put you here for the drugs.

SOFIA

Of course that's what he wants.
Call in DEA, cabrón.

TOMÁS

We don't get to choose.

SOFIA

And you're three time zones away
from your family ...

Tomás shifts up in his seat. A grimace tugs at his lips.

TOMÁS

We're talking about a corpse here.
What's your real question?

SOFIA

It's a fucking child, Tomás.

TOMÁS

We're not here to solve all of the
world's problems. Just focus on
what you've been assigned.

Sofia scoffs, but the sound is hollow.

SOFIA

A corpse ... you're disgusting.

The hum of the road pushes distance between them.

TOMÁS

Death services isn't the worst
industry to be in.

Sofia looks back at him.

SOFIA

Hm, what kind of freak works in a
morgue ...

TOMÁS

Well, the job calls to some pretty
unique individuals. I think it
takes a special and caring person
to have any empathy for the dead.

SOFIA

That's woke of you.

TOMÁS

Go to sleep, asshole.

INT./EXT. GREYHOUND BUS - SAN ANTONIO - NIGHT

Leandro's head slumps against the trembling glass of the bus window, every jolt rattling his skull.

The cabin hums with the low murmur of lost souls, scattered in worn seats, cloaked in shadows.

Outside, broken buildings loom like hollowed-out corpses, their facades peeling under streetlight.

The concrete gives way to a void.

INT. MAUSOLEUM - SAN ANTONIO - NIGHT

Leandro stands before a hollow carved into white marble, nestled within the empty hall.

Marigolds and asphodels rest on a linen cloth, their colors muted in the dim light. An ornate silver frame cradles a faded photo of a Mexican woman, late 70s, her smile - frozen.

Beside it, a weathered brass urn.

Leandro's gaunt hands tremble as his fingers trace the worn beads of a rosary in his palms.

He bows his head, muttering unspoken prayers.

The rosary clicks faintly into the stillness.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - SAN ANTONIO - NIGHT

Leandro walks down a deserted suburban street, the homes -- relics of the 1960s, bathed in mercury vapor street lights. The night air hums along with the whispers of cicada.

A man, resting against a telephone pole, cloaked in its light's sickly green glow, notices Leandro as he draws near.

Each footstep echoes into the asphalt. The man watches the back of Leandro's head as he is swallowed by the night.

EXT. LEANDRO'S HOUSE - SAN ANTONIO - NIGHT

Leandro drags his body to the front of a modest house with a neglected exterior -- sagging porch, unkempt front lawn.

Two college-aged kids lounge in the grass.

A WOMAN, 20, stares into her phone's blue light, dressed in a worn band tee and ripped shorts.

A MAN, 24, flannel shirt and torn jeans, leans against her.

The man looks up as Leandro approaches.

HOMELESS
Gotta rillo?

Leandro stares at them.

He says nothing, walks past them and into his house.

INT. LEANDRO'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The door creaks as it closes behind him.

The living room is dimly lit.

The TV screen's light is the only thing that is alive.

Leandro collapses onto the worn couch, his body sinking into the cushions as the noise of the broadcast washes over him.

NEWS ANCHOR

San Antonio police are asking for the public's help tonight after a gruesome discovery in Choke Canyon Reservoir. The remains of an unidentified child were found earlier this week, prompting a multi-agency investigation.

(MORE)

NEWS ANCHOR (CONT'D)
Officials have announced a \$10,000 reward for any tips leading to an arrest. They're calling on the community to come forward with information, as investigators believe the case may be tied to a larger human trafficking organization ...

The news report drones off into ether.

Leandro's eyes are muted, blearily blinking. His head buried into the bottom of the sofa.

He reaches for the remote, turns the TV off with a click.

Leandro stirs awake.

The room plunges into darkness.

Leandro pulls his body off from the sofa and shuffles down the corridor towards a door at the end of the hall.

INT. BED ROOM - NIGHT

Leandro opens the bedroom door. The room is dimly lit by a bouncing mixture of streetlight.

A WOMAN, Mexican, late 60s, sits at the foot of the bed, her back straight, her hands resting in her lap, caressing a rosary in her palms. A melody hums through her lips.

Leandro's breath catches in his throat, his heart pounding as he takes in the sight of her.

Her head turns, watching him with a gentle, knowing gaze.

His face contorts, a jittering manic smile splits across his lips as tears flow down.

EXT. CORPUS CHRISTI - BOARDWALK CARNIVAL - NIGHT

The carnival buzzes with frenetic energy.

Neon lights flash erratically over the crowded boardwalk.

A BOY, 7, Mexican, with tousled hair, zips past the legs of adults, laughter bubbling from his chest. His small, nimble frame darts through the crowd.

Close behind him, a GIRL, 6, Mexican, with wild curls, giggles as she chases him.

The boy's eyes flash with mischief as he glances back at the girl, her breathless laughter filling the air.

They weave down the pier through the throngs of people, their excitement growing with every near-miss collision.

They dart between stanchions, slipping through gaps between adults, their small frames barely a blur.

BOY
You can't stop me!

The girl's laughter rings out, high and carefree.

GIRL
I'm right behind you!

She narrows her eyes, pushing herself to run faster, her little legs pumping furiously.

They dart past a couple sharing a cotton candy, the boy turns sharply, ducking under the arm of a man holding a massive stuffed bear.

The hypnotic lights from the ferris wheel spins above their heads its mechanical hum vibrating the earth beneath them.

The boy stumbles, laughing at his own clumsiness.

They hurtle past a carousel, its painted horses spinning slowly in the flickering lights, the soft strains of carnival music drifting over them.

The boy glances back, eyes wide with exhilaration, just as the girl's hand nearly catches his shirt.

They veer towards a quieter, shadowy stretch of the boardwalk, where the lights dim and the crowd thins.

His laughter fades as they move past an outdoor restroom, the faint, flickering bulb above casting long, eerie shadows on the walls.

The boy slows, glancing around the deserted area.

The air is cooler here, the carnival sounds a distant murmur.

The girl catches up, her small body colliding against his. They both look back, the vibrant, noisy carnival now a distant echo.

The lights are dimmer here, the sounds of the rides and crowds fading into the background.

A FIGURE, cloaked in dark robes emerges from the restroom. Its posture is rigid, the cloak hangs like tattered wings.

Its pale skeletal hands reach out with a stoic motion.

The kids freeze, their excitement abruptly replaced by a sharp, instinctive fear.

In one sudden, jarring movement, the hands latch onto them, pulling them into the shadows.

INT. SAN ANTONIO - RED ROOM INN - MORNING

The roar of the interstate pounds against the window.

The room's yellow circus colored walls take in the morning light. A half open Bible rests under a stained lamp shade on a warped table against the bed.

Sofia sits on the edge of the sorry excuse for a mattress, a hand to her forehead, tangled hair across her face.

Air fills her lungs.

INT. SAPD PRECINCT - AVERY'S OFFICE - LATER

The small office walls are lined with mugshots, old citations on cork boards and a map of San Antonio's arteries.

A framed American flag hangs lopsided.

Kamar leans back in a chair too small for his frame, arms crossed, eyes steady on Sofia and Tomás standing by the door.

Across the desk, Mercer sits loose, slouched, tapping his thumb against the chair.

SOFIA

The toxicology report confirms
Phenobarbital in the victims.
Significant levels.

AVERY

The official report isn't
finalized, Agent. And your methods
for obtaining preliminary results
bypasses standard procedure.

SOFIA

I don't have time for optics. The
shelters are a lead. Look into it.

AVERY

Optics? This isn't your jurisdiction to bulldoze through.

MERCER

We're stretched thin on personnel. You're chasing ghosts.

SOFIA

Homeland Security has direct oversight over this entire investigation. I'm not waiting weeks for clerical pageantry. There are dead kids and you don't give a fuck.

AVERY

You're burning all of your good will. We canvas suspects for a reason. We need direct measurable evidence. Your sedatives are a needle in a haystack.

MERCER

HSI is here to investigate a drug smuggling operation.

TOMAS

We're covering all of our bases.

Avery pauses.

AVERY

Fine. The main migration facility is off Somerset Ave, they close for visitors after 5.

SOFIA

We'll get everything we need.

AVERY

You've got 'til the end of the day. This is not blowing back on me. I'm not explaining to my chief why HSI agents are wasting our resources.

A beat.

SOFIA

What the hell are you afraid of?

They sit with her question.

Sofia walks out the door. The men watch her leave.

INT. SOMERSET SHELTER - LUNCHROOM - DAY

Long worn lunch tables stretch the length of an aged gymnasium.

Clumps of families and travelers fill the room.

Boys and girls, toddlers and teenagers sit in clumps, eating bland-looking meals on mismatched trays.

A few staff members hover, monitoring the children.

The SHELTER LEAD, a composed black woman in her early 50s, in practical clothes and weary eyes, leads Sofia, Tomás and Mercer through the space.

Sofia walks slightly ahead of the men.

Mercer lingers behind, staring at his phone.

SHELTER LEAD

It's a mixture. Teens might stay with us a few months ... Assigning homes chews into our turnaround. Most of the families stay here for a week or two ... The fathers tend to day labor their way into motel rooms ... Lot of the men end up abandoning the families.

SOFIA

What about unaccompanied minors?

She hesitates, glancing at Sofia.

SHELTER LEAD

We have a steady flow.

SOFIA

How many are you housing right now?

SHELTER LEAD

Not many ... maybe fifty or so.

Her stride quickens.

SHELTER LEAD (CONT'D)

The numbers always change ... It's hard to keep up with any of the names.

They pass by a table where a girl, no older than ten, is bent over a coloring book.

The girl's hand moves in jagged, deliberate strokes, filling the page with dark spiraling forms.

The Shelter Lead guides Sofia, Tomás and Mercer toward the end of the large room to a hallway in front of her.

SHELTER LEAD (CONT'D)

We've got a boy in our clinic that matches your BOLO. He's lucky to be alive. State Hospital transported him here after they were done.

SOFIA

What's his story?

SHELTER LEAD

Can't say. We don't have records for him. Mexican boy ... seems to be slow. Once we get him opened up, we'll get him re-housed.

Sofia lingers for a moment, watching the children.

The noise of the room feels distant ... muted ...

She turns and follows Daphne toward the hallway.

INT. SOMERSET SHELTER - CLINIC - DAY

The door opens with a soft creak. The Shelter Lead steps inside, Sofia, Tomás, and Mercer trailing behind her.

Cabinets line the walls, overstuffed with medical supplies-bandages, bottles, syringes, some half-hidden behind ill-fitting doors.

A child, thin and gaunt, no older than nine, sits on the examination table. His legs dangle, not quite reaching the floor. His arm is raised in the air, trembling slightly, his small fingers splayed open.

DR. JAMES GREYSTONE, mid-50s, tall and lean with precise movements, stands over the child, leaning close. His lips move almost inaudibly, voice low and steady.

The boy's eyelids flutter caught between sleep and waking.

The boy's arm falters and drops to his lap. Greystone straightens, turning to the door.

A polished smile spreads across his face.

SHELTER LEAD

Dr. Greystone. These are agents de la Fuente and Alma, Homeland Security... And Detective Mercer. James is our community volunteer pediatrician. We're blessed to have him.

Greystone's smile barely shifts.

GREYSTONE

Homeland Security. Welcome.

Sofia nods, stepping forward.

Her gaze flickers to the boy.

She crouches slightly, meeting his level.

SOFIA

Hi there ... do you have a name?

The boy's eyes dart briefly toward her, then away.

SOFIA (CONT'D)

My name's Sofia. You don't have to be scared. I'm here to help.

His lips quiver slightly.

Greystone steps in, placing a hand on the boy's shoulder.

GREYSTONE

He's been through a lot. He was found wandering alone near the interstate. Severely dehydrated.

SOFIA

(hushed)

Any signs of abuse?

GREYSTONE

None that we can tell. Some bruising under the arms, probably from the terrain. Other than that, he's physically intact.

Tomás leans against the wall, arms crossed.

Mercer, leaning near the doorway.

Sofia straightens, her gaze sharp and searching.

SOFIA
What's his name?

GREYSTONE
He hasn't spoken since he arrived.
Hasn't built the courage quite yet.

SHELTER LEAD
(stepping forward, voice
heavy)
He was found near... the old group
home. Darlynda's place.

Sofia's attention snaps to Daphne.

SOFIA
A group home?

SHELTER LEAD
Yes. He matches the general
description of the children that
went missing from there a few weeks
back.

Greystone steps back from the boy, his smile fading slightly,
a look of concern replacing it.

GREYSTONE
The situation at that home... it's
been deeply concerning. The
caregivers... some of them... they
don't seem equipped to handle the
level of trauma these children
have. My heart breaks for these
kids. They need stability, love...
not whatever they found there.

SOFIA
"Caregivers"? You have concerns
about specific staff?

SHELTER LEAD
Darlynda herself is worth talking
to.

Tomás pushes off the wall slightly, his interest piqued.
Mercer looks up from his phone, a flicker of attention in his
eyes.

SOFIA
Did she work directly with the
children?

SHELTER LEAD

She was supposed to. More like...
overseeing them. Took them on
"outings". Said it was for their
therapy. But the kids came back...
quieter. More withdrawn.

SOFIA

(Voice low, intense)
Did you report this?

SHELTER LEAD

We've processed the reports.

Greystone steps in smoothly, returning to the counter.

GREYSTONE

It's a systemic issue. These
facilities... they operate on
shoestring budgets. Quality care
often falls by the wayside. It's a
tragedy.

Daphne pauses.

SHELTER LEAD

Well, I'll leave everyone to it.

She glances at Sofia, and slips out the door.

Silence.

Sofia studies the boy for another moment, his small frame
barely a dent on the examination table.

SOFIA

Is he undocumented?

GREYSTONE

That's almost a given. I'm not able
to say for certain.

Sofia turns her attention to Greystone, folding her arms.

SOFIA

How often are you seeing children
like him?

GREYSTONE

Far too often. As you know,
children like him are the fallout.
(MORE)

GREYSTONE (CONT'D)

Desperate families send them north,
smugglers dump them when they're no
longer profitable. They slip
through every net built.

He moves to the counter, opens a drawer, and removes a clipboard. His movements are measured, deliberate.

GREYSTONE (CONT'D)

For every one we save, there are a
dozen we never see.

She steps closer, her gaze unwavering.

GREYSTONE (CONT'D)

The shelter has a great setup for
long-term care and transition into
the group homes and foster care.

Mercer finally looks up from his phone, eyeing the boy.

MERCER

Doesn't look all that stable to me.

Greystone's expression tightens slightly, but the smile
doesn't falter.

GREYSTONE

That's why I'm here.

Sofia tilts her head, studying him.

GREYSTONE (CONT'D)

I'm only part-time. My primary
practice opens me up to help these
souls. Facilities like this need
all the help they can get.

He moves back to the boy, adjusts the collar of the child's
shirt as though setting him back into place.

GREYSTONE (CONT'D)

There's only so much we can do.
These children need protection and
a caring eye watching them. Healing
them is a monumental task.

Greystone turns to Sofia. His smile fades just slightly.

GREYSTONE (CONT'D)

What are you investigating exactly?

She pauses.

SOFIA
I'm not at liberty to say.

Greystone's smile returns.

GREYSTONE
I see. Well, I'd be glad to help
however I can.

He steps toward her, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a business card.

GREYSTONE (CONT'D)
My office is nearby. If you'd like
access to my records—or just to
talk—I'm available.

Sofia takes the card without looking at it.

SOFIA
I'll stop by.

Greystone nods, turning back to the boy.

The child hasn't moved, his gaze fixed on the floor.

EXT. LOCAL GROUP HOME - DAY

The HSI SUV idles behind Mercer's cruiser at the edge of a forgotten cul-de-sac. Sofia and Tomás scan a weathered suburban house tucked behind a sagging chain-link fence.

The lawn, patchy and strewn with faded toys, lies silent.

Sofia steps out, pushes the creaking gate open, and walks in. Tomás and Mercer follow.

INT. GROUP HOME - FOYER - DAY

Sofia ascends the steps and knocks at the door.

A beat.

The door creaks open, revealing a dim interior reeking of stale air and disinfectant.

The voices of children murmur faintly from another room.

A heavyset woman, DARLYNDA (mid-40s, wiry, tense), pokes her head through the crack. She wears a frayed sweater and worn sneakers, her eyes darting nervously between the strangers.

DARLYNDA
Help you?

Sofia side smiles.

SOFIA
Ma'am, we're with Homeland
Security. We're looking into the
disappearance of a boy who was
recently being housed here.

Darlynda stiffens, glancing back behind her.

DARLYNDA
Well, what's his name? ... I got
dozens a kids comin' and goin'
every month. You'll have to be more
specific.

Tomás steps forward, raising a file and a photograph.

TOMÁS
Mexican boy. Small.

Darlynda squints, shifts her weight, fidgeting with the frayed hem of her sweater.

DARLYNDA
Yeah, I remember. He stayed here
maybe a day. Little slow, huh? Left
that night and never came back... I
already spoke to the police.

SOFIA
We'll need to look at your records.

DARLYNDA
Well y'all gotta warrant?

Sofia leans in, her tone dropping.

SOFIA
Why don't you let us see for
ourselves?

Darlynda hesitates, then forces a smile.

DARLYNDA
Wait here. I'll go grab what I got.

She backs away, her movements sharp. Tomás and Mercer exchange glances. Sofia's gaze sharpens.

The door slams in Sofia's face.

INT. GROUP HOME - OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Darlynda bolts into the cramped office just off the foyer.

She bolts to the cluttered desk in the corner.

She yanks open a drawer, spins back and raises a 9mm pistol.

Tomás crashes through the door.

TOMÁS
GUN!!!!

He surges forward, slamming her into the floor.

The pistol fires -- a deafening round penetrates the ceiling.

Darlynda hits the floor face first.

Her shrieks tear through the air.

DARLYNDA
Get the fuck off me!

Tomás bares his weight on top of her. She thrashes spinning over, her elbow snaps into his jaw, jerking his head back.

He snarls, wrenching the gun from her hand.

Her legs flail as she writhes, spitting curses.

Tomás breaks her grip on the pistol and hurls it aside, pinning her arm to the floor with his knee.

Mercer charges in, grips her legs, and slams them flat.

MERCER
Stop fucking moving!

Sofia strides in last, cold and unblinking.

SOFIA
Check her.

Tomás torques her left arm and flips her onto her face.

Mercer yanks a cuff from his belt, slapping it onto her right wrist. Together, they wrench her left arm, locking it into the other cuff behind her back.

Both men sit back for a moment, catching their breath.

MERCER
(to Darlynda)
Are you dumb?

Sofia and Tomás exchange a look, still watching her closely.

Mercer crouches, patting her down with clinical efficiency, her hands pressing into bony hips, searching pockets.

His fingers snag on a lump near Darlynda's waistband.

Mercer pulls free a small red-wrapped dime bag.

He holds it up silently.

Sofia recognizes its color.

Darlynda snarls, spitting as Mercer yanks her up.

DARLYNDA
That shit ain't m—

MERCER
Shut up.

INT. GROUP HOME - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

The muffled sound of voices precedes WANDA (early 50s, stout, sweat staining her blouse), who barrels in from a side room, eyes wide with alarm.

WANDA
What the hell is going on?

SOFIA
Are you the home owner?

WANDA
Yeah... Why is she in handcuffs?

SOFIA
What do you know about a runaway boy? He was picked up at the shelter. Came from here, didn't he?

WANDA
I just pay the bills. Darlynda handles the kids.

DARLYNDA
I already told you what I know. He ran away. What else do you need?

Mercer tanks Darlynda to her feet.

MERCER
Enough. Let's go...

He pulls her toward the door. Sofia and Tomás watch, until the screen door bangs shut behind them.

MERCER (CONT'D)
(to Sofia and Tomás)
I'll transport her to the station.

Sofia steps closer to Wanda.

SOFIA
Now's the time to tell the truth
and be honest. What's really
happening here?

WANDA
What are you talking about?

SOFIA
We're investigating reports of a
boy housed in Somerset that ran
away from your property. Now she's
got charges for assault on a LEO,
attempted murder and a drug charge.
What else are we going to find
here?

WANDA
Well, she's the best I can afford.
I don't micromanage her all hours
of the day ... She's no junkie.

Tomás' phone rings.

He reaches for it as he shuffles out of the room.

TOMÁS
Yeah, go.

Sofia raises her in front of Wanda.

A photography of the boy.

SOFIA
Do you recognize this child?

Wanda squints.

WANDA

... We turn kids over all the time.
I don't know... What was his name?

SOFIA

That's why we're here. We need all
of the information you have.

A beat.

WANDA

I don't memorize every kid's
personal history. I'll get you the
files but it'll take a few days ...

WANDA (CONT'D)

We're a small group home, okay? We
take what we can get. Funding's a
joke ... Look, I--I don't know what
happened to him. If she's saying he
left in the night that's the best
I'll be able to provide.

SOFIA

That's bullshit. I'll charge you
for obstruction--

TOMÁS

(from Outside)

Sofia!

Wanda's expression hardens again, but before she can reply, Tomás steps into the room, his phone pressed to his ear.

Sofia reads the tension on his face.

SOFIA

What?

TOMÁS

Two more bodies, on the Frio.

A beat.

SOFIA

(to Wanda)

We're not done here.

TOMÁS

SAPD is on the river with the
Medical Examiner.

EXT. FRIO RIVER - DAY

The steady hum of the river is drowned out by the chattering of the mass of HSI Agents and San Antonio Police personnel gathered near the shore line. Divers noodle in the river.

Sun rays glisten off of a white tent shielding forensic technicians huddled around blue tarps on the ground.

Sofia and Tomás wade through the crowd, arriving at the tent.

Tomas's jaw is set firm.

Sofia inhales deeply.

They look down.

Remnants of two humans, grotesque, barely identifiable.

The bloated forms are swollen with water, skin stretched so tight it could tear at the slightest touch.

The MEDICAL EXAMINER, JIM MASON, mid-40s stands near the bodies, his expression unreadable, his voice devoid of warmth.

JIM

Two days. Maybe three day. The river's done its work. Soft tissue decomposition is evident.

He pulls back a tarp, revealing a bloated boy's chest.

His skin is slick, stretched taut, several limbs are missing. The arm, from the elbow down, is gone. The boy's face is barely visible, swollen to an unrecognizable mass.

JIM(CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Notice the discoloration. The water's pulled a lot of the blood out. What's left--well, it looks like a different color, right? Not just pale, but off. The fat tissues, they're breaking down.

SOFIA

How long's he been in the water?

JIM

Like I said, about two days. If you look at the neck and hands, you can still see some veins. Water doesn't hit everywhere the same.

(MORE)

JIM (CONT'D)

The skin here's still tough. Those spots, though? They've started going soft.

He shifts to another body, this one a young girl.

Her face is bloated, her eyes half-open, a layer of dirt clinging to her exposed skin. Her legs are completely severed, just below the thighs.

JIM (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

It's consistent. Almost all of them. Arms, legs, gone. Clean cuts. Whoever did this knew what they were doing. No jagged edges.

SOFIA

You're saying they were... removed while they were alive?

JIM

I'm saying they weren't just hacked off. Whoever did this, they didn't take their time, but they knew the anatomy. The cuts were precise. No panic.

Sofia examines the body closely.

Her hands shake for a brief moment before she steadies herself. Tomas watches her with a careful, measured gaze.

SOFIA

The burns?

JIM

They're just above the solar plexus. Right around the abdomen. Might be lighter burns. Like someone was marking them. They're not deep—just enough to scar. See the pattern?

He points to the faint, circular burns on the young girl's abdomen. The marks are too uniform to be random.

SOFIA

What's the significance?

JIM

Hell if I know. Could be a gang thing. Or something more. But it's clear as day that these marks were intentional.

TOMAS
There's more.

JIM
Yeah. Over there.

Jim gestures.

JIM (CONT'D)
She's the one that's worse off. The hands, see? They're already decomposing. The arm's missing, but it was cut clean, like the others. But look at the ribs. They're exposed, partially. The water's loosened some of the flesh here, but the ribs themselves, they've started shifting.

Sofia crouches, her face rigid with disgust.

SOFIA
How did they...

JIM
The river. If the body's floating around long enough, it'll work its way loose. Bones and cartilage come apart before the flesh. But... these cuts are deliberate. I'd say the body's been dismembered before it went in.

Tomas watches her, the tension between them thickening.

SOFIA
Have you ordered a toxicology report?

Jim's eyes flicker for a moment before he turns away, his gaze going to the clipboard in his hand.

JIM
I don't know why you'd need one.
They're just immigrants.

He chuckles.

SOFIA
Just immigrants?

Jim's shoulders tense at the tone of her voice, but he says nothing.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
Is there a toxicology report being
done?

Jim's eyes flicker, then he glances away, avoiding her gaze.

JIM
Uh, sure.

SOFIA
I'm ordering you.

Jim stands rigid, his hand going to his clipboard, though his attention seems to waver. He mutters under his breath.

JIM
I've got the burns, I've got the
limbs. That's enough. I'm not
wasting funding on this.

Sofia steps closer, her voice a low, controlled hiss.

SOFIA
It's not enough. You don't get to
decide. I'm ordering a toxicology
report.

Jim turns away, his posture defensive.

JIM
I don't take orders from you. This
is my department.

SOFIA
I don't care about your department,
Jim. You're gonna do the damn
toxicology report or I'll have your
ass removed.

Tomas shifts behind her, his gaze never leaving Jim.

JIM
Fine. You want it so bad, I'll do
it. But don't start telling me how
to run my team.

She takes a step back, but before she can speak, an officer steps between them, placing a hand on Sofia's arm. He holds her back firmly, and Sofia doesn't fight it.

Her breath comes out in slow, controlled bursts.

OFFICER
That's enough, Agent.

Sofia's chest heaves with the intensity of her frustration. She glares at Jim, her words sharp and final.

SOFIA
Asshole.

The officer keeps his hand on her arm, giving her a steady pressure, urging her to calm down.

Sofia finally exhales deeply, walking away from Jim.

Tomas watches her for a moment, then turns toward the tarp, his eyes scanning the scene again.

EXT. HOMEOWNER'S PROPERTY - BLUE HOUR

Sofia and Tomás stand near a burn pile, the glow of the fire casting long shadows.

The HOMEOWNER, late 60s, leans against his 1980s Chevy truck.

SOFIA
You didn't see anything unusual?

HOMEOWNER
(Shrugs)
Unusual is a hell of a thing to pin down ...

TOMÁS
Bodies in the river- That unusual?

HOMEOWNER
Bodies, yeah. But this ... feels like more.

He glances at the burn pile, the orange glow flickering in his eyes.

HOMEOWNER (CONT'D)
You ask me, it's not just about the kids. What do they want? Black market organ farmers? You ever think about that?

SOFIA
That's what we're here for.

The Homeowner reaches down to grab a log from the pile.

He squats and feeds it into the fire.

He flames grow higher, crackling in the cool night air.

He watches the flames for a moment.

HOMEOWNER

What's it all mean? These bodies,
these kids. This ain't just for
thrills.

He slowly straightens, eyes darting between Sofia and Tomás.

HOMEOWNER (CONT'D)

Maybe it's bigger than y'all
realize. What's it addin' up to?

Sofia and Tomás exchange a glance, waiting for him to continue, but he only stares into the flames.

TOMÁS

You think it's connected to
something else?

HOMEOWNER

You reckon any of this makes sense?

The Homeowner doesn't answer right away.

His hand feeds the rests of the log into the fire.

EXT. MT. CRISTO REY - CAVE ENTRANCE - EL PASO - DUSK

Water pours from a flask over an open flame inside a cave.

Smoke coils, dancing in the dying light.

A MAN, early 30s, bearded with dark, curling hair, sits cross-legged in the thickening smoke.

Silence drapes over him, broken only by the quiet rustle of his sleeves and the soft hiss of the extinguishing flame.

Mosquitoes hover near his face.

He gathers a small burlap bag, slinging it over his shoulder.

The last vestiges of daylight slip away as he rises.

Robe whispers against stone as he ascends out of the cave.

The night's wind kicks up dust.

EXT. PATH - BLUE HOUR

The sky is deepening to navy, stars piercing through.

The chill desert air bites at his skin.

The path stretches out before him, steep and uneven, winding through sparse desert vegetation and rock outcroppings, each step pressuring the gravel deeper into the earth.

He pauses.

The man glances back at the orange glow of the city, a distant, fiery sea beneath him.

Each breath is heavy, mingling with the cool night air.

EXT. STATUE BASE - NIGHT

The man reaches the base of the Cristo Rey statue.

His gaze is carried above.

The colossal figure stands silent in front of the cross against the dark sky, its arms outstretched, offering a cold embrace to the desert night.

The man drops his burlap bag to his feet.

The wind howls around him, a mournful wail that echoes through the vast emptiness. He drops to his knees.

His arms extend outward, palms facing the heavens.

His mouth agape, but no sound emerges.

His breath comes in ragged, uneven gasps.

Tears stream down his face, glistening in the dim light.

The cold night air presses against his trembling corpse as he closes his eyes, prostrating himself.

MAN

Hear me...

INT. MORGUE TRANSPORTATION VAN - NIGHT

The van idles parked in the back lot of the morgue.

Leandro sits motionless in the driver's seat.

His breath is shallow.

The aerosol can in his hand trembles.

He raises its siphon to his lips.

A sharp hiss.

He leans back, his head knocking softly against the window.

His eyes flutter, unfocused, pupils wide and glassy.

A slow exhale slips from him, shaky, as the air escapes.

EXT. MORGUE TRANSPORTATION VAN - REAR DOORS - NIGHT

The doors swing open with a groan, hinges creaking like the strained breath of a dying animal.

The dark interior of the van yawns open. The bin waits inside, black and ridged.

Leandro drags the bin to him, its plastic scraping.

Inside, the bags are slick and heavy.

Leandro's hands struggle for grip.

The torso shifts as he drags it free, the plastic rasping over itself.

He moves faster now.

The head -- obscured by the bag's folds -- slumps into the bin with a hollow thud.

He doesn't look at it.

The van doors slam shut.

INT. MORGUE - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Leandro pushes a cart carrying the bin down the corridor.

The wheels squeak and snag on the cracked linoleum.

The doors swing apart under his weight.

He stumbles slightly, catching himself against the frame.

INT. MORGUE - MAIN OFFICE

Chet sits hunched, the screen painting his face blue.

Leandro sets the bin on his desk.

His fingers twitch as he steps back.

He looks at Chet.

Leandro pulls the can from his pocket.

Drops it into the trash.

It lands with a hollow clink.

He waits.

Watches.

Chet doesn't move.

Leandro picks up the bin again, his shoulders hunched.

He turns and walks away.

INT. MORGUE - UNIDENTIFIED PARTS STORAGE ROOM

The door creaks open, the sound sharp and raw.

The room is chaos. Bags piled high, spilling over.

The stink of old plastic and sour meat clings to the air.

Leandro shoves the bin into the nearest gap.

It catches, the edges grinding against the stacks.

He presses harder, his breathing quick and shallow.

The bin disappears into the mess.

He steps back, staring at the heap of bags.

INT. GREYSTONE'S OFFICE - LOBBY - DAY

Sofia stands in the cramped lobby by the reception's kiosk.

Across from the receptionist inside clicking on her computer.

The door to Greystone's office opens.

He steps out, ushering a MOTHER and her CHILD past Sofia. The mother nods, a polite but distracted look on her face. The child avoids Sofia's gaze.

GREYSTONE
(softly, to the mother)
Take care now.

He turns to Sofia after the door shuts. His smile shifts.

GREYSTONE (CONT'D)
Oh, Sofia...

Sofia nods, stepping forward as he gestures toward his office.

She follows him inside, he closes the door behind them.

INT. GREYSTONE'S OFFICE - DAY

Greystone moves to sit behind his desk, motions to the chair opposite him.

Sofia takes her seat.

GREYSTONE
What can I help you with today?

Sofia looks at him for a moment, weighing her words.

SOFIA
I'm following up on the boy from
the group home

He leans back, folding his hands on the desk.

GREYSTONE
Ah, yes. Poor child. You're looking
into that incident by the river as
well, I take it?

She pauses.

SOFIA
I take it you know the medical
examiner.

He smiles.

GREYSTONE
Yes.

SOFIA

Burns on their abdomens. Just above
the solar plexus.

GREYSTONE

Children can be clumsy. They get
hurt in all sorts of ways, I spoke
with Jim, he thought it was a
malformity from the water ... You
think it's a pattern?

Sofia doesn't respond immediately. She's thinking, scanning
his face for anything that might tell her more.

SOFIA

These are clearly burns, doctor.
They're no accident.

GREYSTONE

(quiet)

And what leads you to believe that?

SOFIA

Your medical reports -- the same
burn on the boy in your clinic.

GREYSTONE

Yes, he has it ...

Sofia nods, but doesn't look away from him.

SOFIA

No coincidence.

He looks away for a moment, briefly staring out the window,
as though collecting himself.

GREYSTONE

Well yes, the child has it ...
potentially a trafficking marker,
if that's what you're after ...
I'm much more concerned with his
behavior, it's clearly PTSD. I
can't imagine the horrors he's been
through.

She watches him.

SOFIA

(softly)

The bodies are missing limbs.

Greystone glances back at her, his face a bit tighter now,
but still composed.

GREYSTONE

(slow)

So what are you suggesting, Agent
de la Fuente.

Sofia leans back in her chair.

There's a pause, the room suddenly feeling smaller.

SOFIA

I'm just trying to get a sense of
what's happening here. Have you
noticed anything ... unusual? Any
signs of drug activity?

GREYSTONE

I've been here a long time. Things
come and go, you know. Murders,
suicides. But nothing like you're
describing. Not with the kids.

SOFIA

What do you know about the group
home supervisor? Darlynda.

Greystone's eyes tighten just a fraction, his voice steady.

GREYSTONE

I've never worked with her
directly.

Sofia holds his gaze for a moment longer, then nods, though
the doubt in her eyes remains.

GREYSTONE (CONT'D)

I'm sure your investigation will
come upon what its after.

She leans forward.

SOFIA

(slowly)

You're the medical professional. I
trust your insight.

Greystone watches her closely. The moment hangs between them.

Finally, he breaks the silence.

GREYSTONE

(softly)

I appreciate that.

Sofia's eyes remain fixed on him.

INT. SAPD - INTERROGATION ROOM - DAY

White walls. Small room. Darlynda sits across from Sofia.

Tomas leans against the wall, arms crossed, eyes sharp.

SOFIA

A drug addict dealing drugs out of
a group home.

Darlynda stares at the table. Her fingers still move, picking at the skin around her nails. She breathes in shallow bursts.

SOFIA (CONT'D)

You're tellin' me you don't know
where they came from?

Darlynda shakes her head, slow, deliberate.

DARLYNDA

I ain't never ask. They just show
up.

SOFIA

Who's supplying you?

Darlynda shifts, pulling her hand back, tensing up. She licks her lips but doesn't speak for a long moment.

DARLYNDA

I don't... I don't deal with that.

SOFIA

(leaning forward)

Who does?

Darlynda glances up at Tomas, but doesn't say anything. The tension thickens. She drops her gaze back to the table, swallowing hard.

Sofia doesn't blink. She knows Darlynda's playing a game, but she's not having it.

SOFIA (CONT'D)

Who's supplying you?

Darlynda stares at the table for a long moment, eyes unfocused. Then she says it, almost to herself.

DARLYNDA

It's a cop.

Sofia doesn't react.

Tomas shifts, his face darkening.

He looks to Sofia for a beat.

TOMAS
(quietly)
Of course it is.

Sofia ignores Tomas. She leans closer, her voice like ice.

SOFIA
They have a name?

DARLYNDA
Yeah. I can't say.

SOFIA
What do you know about sex
trafficking, Darlynda?

SOFIA (CONT'D)
Missing immigrant kids. Are you
torturing any of them?

Darlynda's throat tightens. She swallows.

DARLYNDA
I ... don't know nothin' about
that.

A beat.

DARLYNDA (CONT'D)
I ... I don't know where they go
after staying with us. We vet the
families well enough ...

Darlynda looks at her, defiant now.

DARLYNDA (CONT'D)
I'm done here gimme a lawyer.

Sofia stands. She doesn't say a word.

She turns and heads for the door.

SOFIA
(to Tomas)
Stay with her.

EXT. SWAP MEET - AFTERNOON

Rows of sun-beaten tarps flap over tables cluttered with rusted carburetors, cracked engine blocks, and tools dulled by decades. Grease-streaked men haggle in low tones.

Smoke rises from oil-drum grills, carrying the scent of charred meat and cheap beer.

Sofia threads through the bodies, her boots crunching on gravel.

Her attention fixed in a trance.

Ahead, hunched behind a folding table stacked with brake rotors and dirty spark plugs, sits ZANE.

He's rail-thin, wearing a threadbare hoodie despite the heat. His face is smeared with sweat and grime.

He sees her and freezes mid-gesture, a wrench dangling from his fingers.

SOFIA

Zane.

He blinks, his eyes darting to the sides.

SOFIA (CONT'D)

Don't even think about it.

Zane smirks, nervous.

ZANE

I don't know nothing.

She pulls a plastic baggie from her pocket—yellow pills, indistinct but damning. She holds it just low enough not to draw attention but high enough for him to see.

SOFIA

You're an informant for a reason.

Recognize this?

Zane's smirk fades.

He sets the wrench down, wipes his hands on his hoodie.

SOFIA (CONT'D)

Answer me.

Zane leans against the table, crossing his arms, then shrugs.

ZANE
I ain't pushed that shit before.

Sofia steps in closer.

SOFIA
Wanda said different.

ZANE
She's full of shit.

Sofia doesn't blink.

SOFIA
Maybe. But she's tellin' me you're
selling again.

A beat.

ZANE
I don't know what you're talking
about.

Sofia steps closer.

SOFIA
Tell me about the supplier, Zane.
You're not high enough on the food
chain to move this alone.

Zane snorts, tries to play it off.

ZANE
Is that so ... yeah I've got a deal
in a few nights. At a chop shop
couple nights from now. Big one.

Sofia doesn't blink.

Zane hesitates, eyes flickering toward the crowd.

SOFIA
They got you on the hook for a lot
more than just some meth.

He looks at the ground, swallowing.

The noise of the swap meet roars around them.

He doesn't answer. His jaw tenses.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
The kids you're trafficking--

His eyes snap to her.

ZANE
I ain't no fucking trafficker.

The sun beats down hard on both of them now, the sweat dripping down his face.

SOFIA
Who's behind the trafficking, Zane?

ZANE
I ... just sell what I'm told. I push meth. I ain't pushing no fourteen year olds.

His voice cracks. His whole body is tense.

ZANE (CONT'D)
I got protection for a reason. You know how it is.

Sofia leans in.

SOFIA
What about fourteen year olds?

Zane looks genuinely surprised, then guilty.

ZANE
That ain't me.

SOFIA
You'd better hope not.

Her phone buzzes in her jacket.

She answers without looking away.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
Yeah?

TOMAS (V.O.)
Cops ID'd the morgue tech.
Suspect number one.

Sofia straightens, her focus shifting.

SOFIA
When?

TOMAS (V.O.)
Just now. They're rolling out to look for him.

Sofia watches Zane slink away, blending into the crowd.

EXT. HOSPICE CARE CENTER - NIGHT

The van idles under the awning, headlights off.

Rust eats at the paint.

Above, the hospice sign flickers weakly.

The building stands tired.

Windows dark.

Brick stained.

Inside, faint sounds—a television hums, a nurse's distant laughter.

The van fades into the quiet.

INT. HOSPICE CARE CENTER - FRONT DESK - NIGHT

Leandro stands rigid in front of the desk,

A gurney parked behind him.

The clerk chews gum, staring at her phone.

She glances up, then back down.

LEANDRO
I'm here for the body.

She lets the words hang. Finally, she puts the phone down, stands, brushing crumbs from her scrubs.

INT. HOSPICE CARE CENTER - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

The gurney wheels groan against the tiles as they walk.

They stop at a door.

The clerk pushes it open with her shoulder.

INT. HOSPICE CARE CENTER - PATIENT ROOM - NIGHT

Dim light spills in.

A body lies still on the bed, shrouded under a sheet.

The air is stale.

The clerk waits, leaning against the doorframe.

Leandro doesn't meet her eyes.

She stays put, smacking her gum.

CLERK
Got my pills?

He hesitates, then reaches into his back pocket.

A small baggie -- blue pills, wrapped tight in red plastic.

He hands it over.

She palms it fast, slipping him folded dollar bills.

Her smirk sharpens.

Leandro nods, barely.

His fingers tighten around the cash before tucking it away.

She lingers, chewing loud, watching him move to the bed.

Leandro grips the sheet.

His hands shake as he pulls it back.

The frail body is exposed -- skin waxy, limbs stiff.

He stares down, swallowing hard. His breathing slows.

EXT. MORTUARY - NIGHT

The van's rear doors swing open. Leandro grips the gurney, its wheels squeaking as he drags it down the ramp.

The body's outline presses against the shroud beneath the straps. The mortuary looms dark and still.

A faint light spills from the back entrance.

INT. MORTUARY - BACK HALLWAY - NIGHT

Leandro maneuvers the gurney through narrow corridors.

The linoleum floor shines under flickering fluorescents.

The muffled hum of machinery grows louder.

INT. MORTUARY - EXAMINATION ROOM - NIGHT

The room is cramped, bodies on gurneys cluttered along the walls. Stainless steel drawers line one side, their handles smeared with fingerprints.

RALPH, mid-50s, heavyset and balding, stands hunched over a corpse on the embalming table. The trocar buzzes in his hand, its vibration a harsh whine cutting through the silence.

Leandro freezes in the doorway, eyes darting to Ralph, then the covered bodies.

Leandro nods, tight-lipped. He moves past Ralph, the gurney bumping a parked one. Ralph chuckles, his voice drowned by the trocar.

Leandro's gaze sweeps the room.

Drawers blocked by gurneys. No clear path.

LEANDRO
Why are the drawers-

The trocar cuts out suddenly. Ralph leans back, wiping his forehead with a grimy towel.

RALPH
What's that?

LEANDRO
Why are the drawers blocked?

Ralph gestures lazily toward the clutter.

RALPH
City dropped their load from the
Frio yesterday. Ain't got space for
'em again.

He lets out a wheezing chuckle.

RALPH (CONT'D)
A damn jigsaw puzzle in there.

Leandro grips one of the gurneys and shoves it aside. The wheels screech against the floor.

The drawer labeled Intake sits behind it.

He pulls it open. The cold air rolls out, biting.

Inside, a clear zippered bag filled with body parts.

Limbs stiff, skin pale, some bruised.

Leandro stares.

His eyes settle on a torso.

Above the solar plexus, a cigarette burn.

Small, round, unmistakable.

His hands begin to tremble.

He just stares, the drawer still open, his breathing shallow.

RALPH (CONT'D)
(from around the corner)
Leandro?

Leandro flinches, slamming the drawer shut.

He grips the handle tight, knuckles white.

LEANDRO
I need to finish.

Ralph shrugs, turning back to his table, the trocar revving to life again.

Leandro stands there, motionless, the tremor in his hands spreading through his body. The sound of the machine fills the room.

Leandro's trembling worsens. His breaths shallow, erratic. His eyes dart back to the sealed drawer.

A sharp step backward.

His foot strikes a gurney. The body atop it teeters.

A sickening crash as the corpse spills onto the linoleum.

Leandro whirls, gasping.

RALPH
(half-turning)
Jesus Christ --

Leandro doesn't wait. He bolts for the double doors, shoving through them.

INT. MORTUARY - BACKROOM - NIGHT

Dim and cluttered.

Walls lined with shelves sagging under bins and supplies.
Leandro stumbles into the room, his legs shaking beneath him.
He pulls open a narrow closet door.
Inside, chaos.
Stacks of bins, boxes, and, at the bottom, an uncovered body draped in a soiled sheet.
His hands claw at the mess, yanking a corrugated plastic bin from beneath the pile.

INT. MORTUARY - STORAGE CLOSET - NIGHT

Leandro crouches, his fingers digging into the edges of the bin's lid. The plastic creaks under his grip.

His breath quickens, shallow and wet.

RALPH (O.S.)
What the hell're you doin'?

Ralph stands in the doorway, his shadow long and still against the cluttered walls.

RALPH (CONT'D)
Leandro --

Leandro jerks, pulling the bin closer. His gaze wild.

RALPH (CONT'D)
Put that back, man.

Leandro doesn't answer.

His hands shake, his body folds inward.

He clutches the bin tighter.

Ralph steps into the room, cautious.

Leandro presses back against the shelving.

His breathing hitches, turns ragged.

Ralph reaches out, his hand settling on Leandro's shoulder.

RALPH (CONT'D)
Hey --

Leandro flinches violently.

The bin falls, its lid cracking open.

RALPH (CONT'D)
Goddamnit!

Leandro lunges forward.

Ralph braces, grabbing him by the shoulders.

The two crash into the shelves.

A tangle of arms and gasps.

Ralph's size overpowers Leandro, forcing him to the ground.

RALPH (CONT'D)
CHUCK, CALL THE COPS!

His arm loops around Leandro's neck, pulling him into a controlled headlock.

Leandro thrashes, his legs kicking against the floor.

RALPH (CONT'D)
CALM DOWN!

Leandro sputters, clawing at Ralph's arm. His eyes wide, chest heaving.

INT. POLICE CRUISER - BACKSEAT - NIGHT

Rain batters the cruiser.

Leandro's head slams into the rear passenger window.

The dull thud mingles with the roar of the rain.

He does it again. Harder.

COP #1
Stop that!

Leandro doesn't stop. His face contorted, his breath ragged.

Blood streaks the glass where his head strikes.

LEANDRO
I need a hospital!

COP #2
You're fine! Quit it, goddamn it!

LEANDRO
Help me!

He throws himself backward again, rattling the whole cruiser.

COP #1
(to COP #2)
Pull over.

The cruiser jerks to the side of the road.

The tires hiss against wet asphalt.

EXT. HIGHWAY - SHOULDER - NIGHT

Rain falls harder now, relentless.

The cops climb out, their jackets soaked in seconds.

Cop #2 yanks open Leandro's door.

LEANDRO
Stay back!

He spits at them, the rain washing it down his chin.

COP #2
Jesus Christ.

They lunge for him. He thrashes, legs flying.

INT. POLICE CRUISER - BACKSEAT - NIGHT

The cramped space becomes chaos. Leandro kicks. A boot connects with COP #1's chest.

COP #1
Fucker!

Cop #2 forces him back into his seat, subdues his legs.

Cop #1 comes around the cab, pulling out a padded helmet.

Leandro jerks his head away, but they wrestle it onto him.

The spit hood follows, the mesh clinging wetly to his face.

Leandro's muffled screams rise as they slam the door shut.

EXT. HOSPITAL ENTRANCE - NIGHT

Sliding glass doors part. The cops step in, drenched and silent, their boots squeaking on the linoleum.

INT. HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY ROOM - NIGHT

Leandro is strapped in a full-body restraint.

His limbs locked, his torso bound.

A gurney wheels him in, its metal frame rattling.

Leandro jerks against the straps, his eyes wide and frantic.

LEANDRO
(muffled)
Let me go!

NURSES glance at him, their faces impassive. The cops push him down the hall.

Leandro lies on the gurney. His body bound, spit hood damp and clinging to his face. The fluorescents hum overhead.

Nurses move around him with detached precision.

NURSE
(to the officers)
What's in his system?

Rainwater pools at the cops' boots.

One of them shrugs, eyes on Leandro.

Leandro's voice rasps beneath the hood.

LEANDRO
There's nothing in me.

The nurse doesn't look at him.

NURSE
Any injuries?

COP
Self-inflicted. Slammed his head into the cruiser.

LEANDRO
I can't breathe!

The nurse exchanges a glance with the others. The gurney wheels creak as they push him toward the examination room.

INT. EXAMINATION ROOM - NIGHT

The spit hood comes off. Leandro's face is pale and streaked with blood. His breath comes in short, jagged gasps, chest rising too fast.

The Nurse fingers loosen the restraints on one arm.

A cuff wraps around his wrist. Leandro doesn't move. His fingers twitch once, then still.

The cuff tightens.

He lunges forward.

Teeth clamp down on flesh.

The nurse cries out

The room detonates.

Hands shove him down, bodies colliding.

The gurney lurches. Leandro bucks against it.

COP
Hold him!

Leandro's head thrashes, veins standing out in his neck.

He spits, snarls, his screams raw and feral.

NURSE
Sedate him now!

A syringe flashes in sterile light. The needle pierces his arm, sharp and deliberate. Haloperidol surges into his vein.

Leandro's muscles seize. He stiffens, neck arching.

A guttural sound tears loose from his throat.

He collapses into the bed.

Limbs heavy and limp, breath coming in slow, shallow waves.

His eyes flutter, unfocused, rolling back.

The room grows still.

INT. PSYCHIATRIC HOLDING ROOM - STATE HOSPITAL - DAY

Leandro sits, back hunched in the chair, his head bent forward. His body is drawn thin.

Blood has dried in streaks across his face, a deep crimson that meets the black bruises around his eyes. His nose is swollen, crooked.

Jagged cuts across his hairline.

His lips tremble as he breathes, shallow, fast.

He jolts awake, eyes snapping open, mouth dry, gasping.

He presses his handcuffed palms to his temples, fingers scraping the dried blood off his face.

SOFIA (O.S.)

Leandro ...

He flinches, a small, involuntary spasm, recoiling from the sound.

SOFIA (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Mr. Rosales!

Sofia's voice claws at the inside of his skull.

He blinks rapidly, his eyes unfocused, his vision swimming.

The sterile room swims with it, the walls tilting.

SOFIA (CONT'D)

Look at me.

Sofia steps fully into his line of sight, her presence filling the small, oppressive space.

Her gaze cuts through him, a clinical detachment in her eyes.

She pulls a hard plastic chair closer, the legs scraping on the linoleum floor, and sits opposite him.

SOFIA (CONT'D)

We know you're involved with the cartel. The drugs. The bodies. We have evidence. You were there. It's all on your hands Mr. Rosales.

Leandro doesn't respond.

SOFIA (CONT'D)

You disposed of the bodies. Why?

LEANDRO

I didn't.

His voice cracks, a thin, reedy sound, barely a whisper. He clasps his face again, the cold metal of the handcuffs pressing against his bruised skin, a physical anchor to his misery. He shivers, a tremor running through his thin frame.

SOFIA

Bullshit. You didn't act alone. Who gave the orders?

LEANDRO

I didn't kill them.

His voice is a desperate whisper now.

SOFIA

Who are you covering for, Leandro?

Leandro's teeth grind together. He manages a twisted grin, a grimace of pain and fear that doesn't reach his eyes.

LEANDRO

I had to hide 'em.

SOFIA

How has your mental health been lately? Are you hearing voices? Any visual hallucinations?

LEANDRO

I see everything clearly.

SOFIA

And what's everything to you?

LEANDRO

Their faces.

Leandro flinches, a more violent tremor this time.

His breathing becomes even more shallow.

SOFIA

You dismembered them, didn't you? Cut them up. Tell me about that.

LEANDRO

No.

SOFIA

You kept them hidden, didn't you?

...

(MORE)

SOFIA (CONT'D)

When they were done raping and murdering the children, they didn't want to touch the aftermath. That's where you came in. They had you clean up their filth. Had you butcher them. Tell me, Leandro.

Leandro's eyes snap open, wide with terror.

Sweat beading on his forehead despite the cool room.

He begins to hyperventilate, shaking his head back and forth, tears streaming down his face, mixing with the dried blood and grime. He makes a guttural sound, a choked sob mixed with a gag, as if trying to expel the memory itself.

LEANDRO

(Whispering, broken)

Their bodies were so cold... they
... they .. wouldn't sink...

SOFIA

What do you mean? The pieces? You
couldn't keep them down in the
reservoir?

Leandro whimpers, shaking his head frantically.

LEANDRO

Their bodies were too small to
sink...

Sofia's expression remains hard, but there's a glint in her eye now, a predatory focus.

SOFIA

How many times, Leandro? How many
trips did you make to the
reservoir?

LEANDRO

I can't remember.

SOFIA

I don't think you acted on this out
of your own will. You're a very
afraid little man ... Who made you
do this?

Leandro's body shakes with silent sobs.

He looks up at her, his eyes red-rimmed and filled with a desperate, pleading terror.

LEANDRO
(Barely audible)
A detective...

Sofia catches her breath, a sharp intake of air. Her eyes narrow.

SOFIA
Name them.

Leandro shakes his head violently, the movement sending a fresh wave of pain through him.

LEANDRO
I won't... I can't betray him...

SOFIA
Betray him? He betrayed you,
Leandro. He used you. He broke you.
He left you in this state.

This hits a nerve. Leandro's sobs intensify.

LEANDRO
He said ... he said it was
necessary ...

SOFIA
Necessary? To butcher children? To
dump their pieces in a reservoir?
What kind of business is that,
Leandro? What kind of cop is
involved in that?

LEANDRO
I just ... I just did what I was
told ... I sell what needs to be
sold. I do what he tells me.
Nothing more.

Leandro looks up at her again, his eyes pleading, but also holding a deep-seated terror.

LEANDRO (CONT'D)
Please.

Sofia leans forward, her voice dropping to a low, intense register.

SOFIA
What else are you not telling me?

Leandro nods, a small, jerky movement. His eyes are fixed on Sofia's, searching for something, anything, that isn't judgment.

LEANDRO

He ... was the only one ... their
murders ... he sedated them. It was
him ... I swear

SOFIA

What's his name?

Leandro's body tenses. He looks like he's about to speak, about to break. The air crackles with anticipation. He opens his mouth, a soundless plea escaping his lips.

LEANDRO

I can't ... he knows ...

SOFIA

Is that who you're afraid of,
Leandro?

Leandro is shaking his head violently, tears streaming down his face again.

LEANDRO

No ... they're watching.

SOFIA

Who, Leandro?

Leandro whimpers, pulling at his restraints.

LEANDRO

I can't ... I can't betray them ...
They're more powerful.

SOFIA

More powerful than the truth,
Leandro? More important than the
mothers looking for their children?
Give me the detective's name.

Leandro lets out a choked sob, burying his face in his hands once more.

LEANDRO

I can't ... I can't ...

Sofia watches him, her expression hardening again. The moment has passed.

SOFIA

Yes, you can, Leandro. You just
won't. Not yet. But you will ...
Remember I offered you a way out.

LEANDRO

There's no way out.

She stands up, slowly, methodically.

The scrape of the chair on the linoleum, leaving Leandro in complete silence.

INT. HALLWAY - SAN ANTONIO STATE HOSPITAL - DAY

Sofia walks down the sterile corridor.

The weight of what she's learned hangs on her.

She pauses a few steps down the hallway.

Her shoulders drop, her body feeling heavier with each passing second. She exhales a long, quiet breath.

She doesn't turn back to the room. She can't.

Sofia leans against the cold brick wall.

SOFIA

(whispers to herself)

God...

EXT. INDUSTRIAL PARK - NIGHT

An unmarked sedan rolls through the darkness. The only light is the dull flicker of street lamps and the harsh yellow glow of distant factory windows.

The engine hums low beneath the night air. The ground is cracked asphalt, littered with forgotten debris.

Sofia drives. Her eyes narrow, locked on the tail of the car ahead. A steady breath. The world through the windshield is just a blur of headlights, hard lines, and motion.

The sedan she follows pulls up in front of a rusted metal garage. It squeals as it opens. The air shifts-thick, humid.

Sofia's grip tightens on the wheel.

The car ahead, reverses then pulls inside, the door clanking shut behind it.

A quiet, sudden stillness.

Sofia shifts the SUV into park. The interior is dark, save for the faint glow of the dashboard.

Her pulse is steady, calculated. She checks her weapon.

No hesitation.

She opens the door and steps into the night.

EXT. CHOP SHOP - NIGHT

The ground under her boots crunches with gravel and dirt.

The smell of oil, rust, and something metallic clings to the air. The garage door looms ahead, low and dark.

Sofia moves quickly, no wasted motion.

She moves up to the door, her fingers brushing cold steel.

The garage, dark and cluttered, spills faint light.

Just enough to see figures inside.

Her breath catches.

A soft scrape of a chair.

Zane sits at the wheel of the beat-up sedan. His eyes are wide, darting-nervous, watching.

CARTEL MEMBER stands beside him, shoving something into the trunk.

Another figure moves in the shadows, a distant silhouette.

SOFIA doesn't hesitate. Her voice cracks the air.

SOFIA
Hands where I can see 'em!

Zane's eyes widen, his breath sharp. He freezes, then slowly, instinctively, his hand slips toward the glovebox. The Cartel Member beside him looks up, his face a mask of calm.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
Don't make me say it again.

The tension hangs. Seconds stretch. A loud crack of metal rings through the air.

DOOR SLAMS OPEN – HSI agents pour in from the side.

SAPD rushes in behind them.

Guns raised, flashing in the dim light.

Chaos explodes.

HSI AGENTS
WATCH YOUR CROSSFIRE!!

Gunshots punctuate the air, sharp and fast, echoing in the hollow space of the shop. Sofia drops to a crouch, her gun drawn, eyes darting.

The noise is deafening—shouts, screams, the sting of gunfire.

Zane makes a move. His hand comes up—too slow.

Sofia fires first.

The crack of the gunshot rips through the chaos. Zane jerks back, his body spasming, blood spraying across the dashboard.

He goes limp. The gun drops from his hand, still warm, rolling on the floor. His eyes stare blankly.

Sofia moves, eyes scanning, no time to breathe, no time to think. Another CARTEL MEMBER lunges for cover.

Gunfire flashes in the dark, rounds punching through the air.

CARTEL MEMBER #2 dives behind a table.

Mercer spots him, turns and fires twice.

Sofia's arm jolts as it catches the edge of the bullet. Her vision blurs. She grits her teeth, forcing herself to stay focused. She fires again.

The CARTEL MEMBER slumps, a spray of red exploding across the garage wall. He crumples to the floor, dead before he hits the ground.

Tomás yells for backup, but the noise is a blur, the words lost under the deafening sound of the gunfight.

Sofia staggers, her body aching.

She pushes herself back up, moving into cover. A hand clutching at her side, blood staining her jacket, but she doesn't stop. Not now. Not here.

She spots the THIRD CARTEL MEMBER -- he's on the move, his eyes flicking around, too fast. Gun raised, he's got Sofia in his sights.

Her fingers burning, slipping on the gun-fires once, twice. The first shot misses, a screech as it slams into the metal. The second shot catches him in the shoulder.

He stumbles, then crumples to the floor, his gun skittering away.

Sofia stands, blood seeping through her jacket, a red trail marking her every step.

She moves through the wreckage of the raid, stepping over bodies, past the chaos of law enforcement and the smoldering wreck of the chop shop.

Her vision fades, the edges of the world softening. She stumbles again. The pain in her side is sharp, spreading. But she pushes forward. She has to. She has no choice.

A voice calls from the chaos.

Tomás enters the wreckage. He steps over a body, rifle still raised. His voice cuts through the ringing in her ears.

TOMÁS
It's done. Let's clear it out.

The room feels smaller. Sofia's legs give out, her body hitting the floor. She can't breathe. She watches as Mercer moves through the wreckage, cold and unfeeling. His eyes flick over the dead cartel members.

Officers move through the wreckage, checking bodies, securing the perimeter. Flashing lights blur against the darkness, casting sharp shadows.

Sofia is still, blood pooling around her, breathing shallow. Her face is pale, eyes barely open.

Tomás leans over her, scanning the scene. He kneels beside her, his hands moving quickly.

TOMÁS (CONT'D)
Where's the bullet wound?

His voice is harsh, cutting through the chaos, but Sofia doesn't respond. Her eyes flicker, unfocused.

Tomás arrives at her side, pushing Mercer aside. He crouches down, his hands gentle but swift as he checks her wounds.

He doesn't look at Mercer, doesn't even register the tension in the air. His focus is solely on Sofia. Blood is seeping from her midsection, pooling around her, dark and spreading. He moves her shirt aside, inspecting the wound.

AVERY
(to an Officer, low)
Tourniquet. Now.

Avery kneels at Sofia's side, ripping fabric from her sleeve.

He pulls the tourniquet tight, his hands quick but rough. Tomas checks the gash in her side, his face tight with concentration.

Sofia's eyes flutter, her breath hitching. Her lips barely move as she tries to speak. Tomas leans in, his voice low, more to himself than her.

TOMÁS
Hang on Sofia.

Sofia's chest rises, but it's shallow. Her body shudders with pain. Tomas looks up, his eyes moving over the chaos around them. The medics are still minutes away.

SHE FADES OUT.

The world around Sofia distorts. She hears muffled voices, feels the ground cold beneath her. Her body is weightless, slipping further away.

SHE FADES IN.

Tomas' hand is still on her shoulder. The pressure of it grounds her, pulls her back, though the edges of her vision blur. The paramedics finally arrive, moving quickly.

TOMÁS (CONT'D)
(softly)
Hold on.

Sofia's body jerks slightly as the paramedics lift her. A groan slips from her lips. She doesn't scream, but the pain is raw, deep, leaking from every part of her.

They move her quickly, hoisting her onto the stretcher with precision, but her body tenses, the pain too much. The cold metal of the stretcher meets her skin like an alien thing.

MERCER stands off to the side, his arms crossed, face set in a grim line. He watches Sofia with an indifference that cuts through the tension.

MERCER
What the hell was she thinking?

Tomas doesn't answer. He watches as the medics secure Sofia, the rhythmic beep of the equipment cutting through the haze of noise.

He moves to the stretcher, walking beside them as they roll her toward the ambulance. The cold night air hits Sofia's skin as they pass through the door, her breath a faint rasp.

Mercer and Avery trail behind, their voices low, murmuring, though their words are lost to the blood in Sofia's ears.

They continue to mutter, but Tomas doesn't listen. He's focused only on Sofia, eyes fixed on her face, watching every twitch, every shallow breath.

The paramedics push the stretcher into the ambulance. Tomas climbs in after her, his eyes never leaving her. The door slams shut, muffling the noise of the world outside.

Inside the ambulance, the lights are harsh, flashing over Sofia's face. The medics work fast, adjusting the IVs, setting oxygen to her mouth.

Tomas crouches next to her, his hand still resting on hers.

Sofia's eyes flicker, her gaze darting across the sterile, buzzing chaos around her. She's slipping again, the edges of her vision folding in.

Tomas leans in, his voice softer than before.

TOMÁS
Stay with me, Sofia.

Sofia blinks, barely hearing him. Her body jerks, fighting the weight of the darkness creeping in again.

INT. SAN ANTONIO STATE HOSPITAL - TRIAGE - NIGHT

The room is cold. Bright fluorescent lights buzz above.

Sofia lies on a surgical table, her body still, her eyes darting around the room, trying to focus.

The pain is dull but relentless, spreading through her torso, a deep ache that wraps around her ribs.

Tomás stands at her side, close enough that she can feel his presence, but his face blurs in her vision.

His hand is warm on her arm, steady.

Sterling, stands across from Tomas, arms crossed, eyes scanning the room. Her posture is rigid, impatient.

She's watching Sofia, but it's clear she's more concerned with the bigger picture.

Sofia's breath is shallow, quick. She tries to speak but her throat is raw, dry. Her mouth tastes metallic.

TOMÁS

(soft, calm)

You're going to be okay. They've got you. You just need to rest now.

Her mind is a blur. There's noise. Voices. Her pulse is thudding in her ears.

SOFIA

(whispers)

I... I can't... I don't...

TOMÁS

You're fine, Sofia. Just breathe. I'm right here. They're going to take care of you. You're not alone.

The air is thick, her thoughts spinning, falling into pieces. She feels the weight of the world on her chest, but it's getting softer, slower. His voice cuts through the fog.

STERLING

(impatient)

We need to move. She's stable, but we can't waste time.

TOMÁS

(to Sofia, ignoring Sterling)

Just breathe.

Sofia's head feels too heavy to hold up. She closes her eyes, but even that hurts. The world is a half-lit blur, edges soft and indistinct.

SOFIA

(distant, weak)

I... I don't...

TOMÁS

(staying calm)

I know. It's all right. It's all right. You're safe.

Sofia's fall into sleep is insistent, a slow tide.

SHE FADES OUT.

INT. SAN ANTONIO STATE HOSPITAL - TRIAGE - NIGHT

The world outside is distant, the hum of the ER faint through the walls. The sounds of people moving, talking, but muffled.

The cold of the room presses in. Tomas's voice is steady, an anchor in the dark sea of her mind.

TOMÁS
(whispers)
Sleep now. I'm here.

Her head lulls to one side. The quiet rush of anesthesia floods her, dragging her down deeper. She feels like she's sinking.

Her body, once so alive with pain, now feels too distant to claim.

SHE FADES IN.

Her eyes open again, but it's not the same room. The lights are different. The hum is quieter now. She's not sure where she is, but there's a calmness in the air, a stillness. Tomas's voice cuts through it, a tether.

His voice is soft, but everything feels slow. His words float around her like they don't belong to her. She can't catch them all. She wants to speak, but it's like her tongue has forgotten what to do.

Her eyelids are heavy. Every movement is a slow, deliberate struggle. She thinks she sees Tomas's face, but it flickers, like it's not real. The sound of his voice is muffled, too far away.

SOFIA
(weak)
Tomás... I can't...

TOMÁS
(soothing)
Rest, Sofia.

The anesthesia takes her again. The world blurs into a haze.

She doesn't fight it. She can't.

INT. SAN ANTONIO STATE HOSPITAL - EXAMINATION ROOM - NIGHT

A bare bulb casts pale light, sharp edges on every surface.

Leandro sits slumped in the chair, body bound in cloth restraints. His head jerks, tremors coursing through him like waves. Sweat drips from his brow, pooling beneath his chin. His breath is shallow, rasping.

His eyes flutter open-wild, glassy.

The door opens. A NURSE steps in, clipboard in hand, a soft professionalism about her. Behind her, a POLICE OFFICER stands, arms crossed, watchful.

The nurse moves closer, crouching slightly to meet Leandro's line of sight.

NURSE
How are you holding up?

Leandro doesn't answer. His mouth quivers, his breath catching in spasms.

She reaches for his wrist, fingers pressing to find his pulse. Her face tightens at the rapid beat beneath her touch.

NURSE (CONT'D)
(quietly, to the officer)
Vitals are unstable. He's deep in withdrawal. He's not going anywhere tonight.

The officer nods, silent. His stance doesn't shift.

Leandro's head lolls forward.

LEANDRO
Water.

His voice cracks, barely audible.

The nurse stands, moving to the sink. The faucet creaks as she twists it, the flow sputtering before rushing into a paper cup. She turns back and brings it to him.

NURSE
Here.

She holds the cup to his lips. Leandro tilts his head back with effort, gulping greedily. A few drops spill onto his chin, trailing down his neck.

The nurse steps back, glancing at the officer again.

NURSE (CONT'D)
We'll monitor him through the
night. He'll need fluids.

Leandro jerks against the restraints, his body arching
momentarily before falling limp again.

His breaths grow heavier, rasping like a broken bellows.

The nurse watches him for a beat, her face unreadable.

The officer says nothing.

Leandro begins to convulse again, his body trembling
uncontrollably. The chair creaks under his weight.

The nurse steps back, observing him with clinical detachment.

The officer leans against the wall, crossing his arms
tighter. The room grows still, save for Leandro's erratic
breathing and the faint hum of fluorescent light.

HOLD on Leandro, trembling, bound, drowning in sweat.

EXT. SAN ANTONIO STATE HOSPITAL - COURTYARD - DAWN

Sofia steps into the cold morning air, her sling awkward,
pulling at her shoulder. She walks without aim, the ache dull
but insistent.

Near the edge of the courtyard, a LITTLE GIRL sits on a bench
brushing her doll's matted hair. Her movements are slow,
deliberate. Her MOTHER watches, silent, a scarf wrapped tight
over her head.

Sofia stops, her breath shallow. The girl pauses, looks at
her, then back to the doll, the brush caught in a tangle.

The mother reaches, untangles it with ease. The girl resumes.

Sofia watches until she can't anymore. She turns, adjusting
the sling, and walks outside.

INT. SOMERSET SHELTER - MESS HALL - AFTERNOON

The room buzzes with faintly-distant voices, trays
clattering, chairs scraping. Children cluster at long tables,
murmurs rise and fall like the tide.

In the far corner, a BOY sits alone. His tray is untouched,
an apple teetering on the edge. He stares at nothing,
shoulders hunched, legs swinging.

SOFIA steps inside. Her gaze sweeps the room, landing on him. She crosses slowly, weaving between the tables.

SOFIA
Hey there.

No answer.

She lowers herself onto the bench across from him. Her injured arm hangs stiff in the sling.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
Not hungry?

The boy doesn't look at her. His fingers curl around the edge of the tray, nails pressing hard into the plastic.

She watches him for a moment, then leans forward.

Nothing.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
It's okay. You don't have to talk.

His eyes flicker up, just for a second, before settling back on the tray.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
But I'd like to know what happened.

The boy's fingers loosen, his hand slipping away from the tray.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
You were missing for a while.

His legs stop swinging.

She softens her voice, gentle.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
Can you tell me where you went?

The boy shakes his head, barely.

Her gaze lingers on him, her face unreadable.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
Was someone with you?

No response.

The boy nods.

She exhales, her grip tightening on the edge of the table.

A faint shake of his head.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
What did they look like?

His lips press together.

BOY
Scary.

He pauses.

BOY (CONT'D)
He told me to follow him.

SOFIA
Why?

The boy lifts his hand, absently brushing at the table.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
It's okay. Take your time.

His voice wavers, fragile.

BOY
He scared me.

Sofia's breath catches, her posture stiffening.

SOFIA
Why?

He doesn't answer.

She leans closer.

The boy's hand presses flat to the table, his fingers splayed.

BOY
He was big.

His voice is tight, clipped.

SOFIA
Anything else?

A pause. The hum of the room distant now.

BOY
A badge ... He was with you.

The boy glances up.

Her breath slows. The tension in her jaw softens.

His gaze falls again, retreating into silence.

She sits back, her shoulders weighted, her injured arm heavy in the sling. The scrape of her chair feels loud, intrusive.

Her eyes drift to the boy.

The noises of the mess hall blur, distant again.

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - PSYCH WARD - DAY

Leandro's feet twitch in the wheelchair, jerking in quick, violent spasms. His legs sprawl out, stiff.

Sweat rolls off him in beads, his body shaking.

The chair moves, quick, relentless.

A man's chest fills the frame, his pace brisk.

Mercer, pushing the chair with sharp, unyielding force.

His face a mask, eyes fixed straight ahead.

MERCER
(quiet)
Hold it together.

Leandro's head slumps forward, eyes flickering.

He makes no sound.

They reach the checkout kiosk. The CLERK behind the counter eyes them, unbothered. Mercer steps forward, not waiting.

MERCER (CONT'D)
He's ours now.

The clerk's hand hovers over the keyboard, slow, uninterested. She looks up, vaguely confused.

CLERK
What?

Mercer drops his badge onto the counter with an abrupt snap.

His gaze hardens.

MERCER
Inmate transfer.

The clerk blinks.

CLERK
I need confirmation first... A
release form.

MERCER
(snarling)
Call the station.

The clerk hesitates, squinting at the card.

Her fingers twitch over the keyboard.

CLERK
(sharply)
I can't do that without a-

Mercer's voice cuts through. He scoops up his credentials.

MERCER
(icy)
Call them.

Before she can respond, Mercer grabs the chair again, pulling it from the counter with a sudden jerk. Leandro's head rolls to the side, his eyes unfocused, his body limp in the seat.

The clerk's voice rises, angry.

CLERK
(raising her voice)
Sir, you need to come back..

Mercer doesn't stop.

The automatic doors part. The two men exit the hospital.

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT - DAY

Mercer throws open the back door of the SUV.

With a quick, rough motion, Mercer pulls Leandro out of the wheelchair, his limbs dangling like a broken doll.

Leandro's head lolls. His breath shallow, uneven.

Mercer shoves him into the back of the SUV.

Leandro doesn't resist.

The door slams shut with a sickening thud.

Mercer moves around the back of the car, sliding into the front seat. The engine roars to life.

The SUV peels away. The wheelchair sits still behind it.

EXT. MERCER'S DRIVEWAY - NIGHT

Mercer pulls past his driveway, the soft hum of the engine filling the silence. The weight of the night pressing in.

He shifts the SUV into reverse, the tires crunching on the gravel as he backs into his spot.

Headlights in front of him flare. Harsh, blinding.

He halts. The world narrows.

A chorus of spotlights from unmarked HSI cars and patrol vehicles blind him.

TOMÁS
Don't do anything stupid.

The air, thick. Mercer raises his hands slowly.

Sofia and Tomas stand by the back of the SUV.

Tomas' hand on his weapon. Sofia's eyes fixed on Mercer.

She steps forward, emerging from the shadows.

With her wounded shoulder, Sofia takes his arms and moves them behind his back.

The officers move in. Tomas pats Mercer down, checking his pockets, his body -- nothing.

Sofia steps in closer. Her eyes cut through him.

Her voice sharp, biting.

SOFIA
We got you. Motherfucker.

Mercer stares at her for a beat, his lips curling into a faint smirk.

Sofia pushes Mercer towards the SUVs.

MERCER
Yeah, alright.

Mercer shrugs, his eyes distant.

MERCER (CONT'D)
You think I give a shit?

Mercer doesn't reply. Tomas throws open the back of an SUV, pressing Mercer into the back seat.

SOFIA
Who are you working for?

Mercer tilts his head chuckling

Sofia nods to Tomas. Tomas slams the door shut behind them.

The vehicle lurches forward, tires biting the gravel as they drive off into the night.

INT. SOFIA'S SUV - MOVING - NIGHT

Rain pelts the windshield. Sofia is at the wheel, Tomas beside her. The tension is thick in the confined space.

Mercer sits in the back, rigid, his reflection fractured in the window.

Sofia looks at Mercer through the rearview, her expression unreadable.

Mercer doesn't answer. His eyes move slowly to the passing scenery, blank.

SOFIA
How many kids have you killed?

Mercer's lips twitch, his gaze still on the road.

MERCER
(quietly, flat)
What are you talking about.

SOFIA
You swore an oath.

Mercer doesn't respond.

Sofia presses harder, leaning forward in her seat.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
I talked to the little boy. The one
at the shelter.

Mercer glances at her, his voice soft, almost dismissive.

MERCER

... You've been doing this long enough. You know how this works. How much people pay to make things disappear. I don't need to say anything.

Sofia's jaw tightens. Tomas shifts uncomfortably beside her.

SOFIA

Silence is your worst option ...
Where is the morgue technician?
Leandro Rosales. You took him.

MERCER

I'm not sure I've heard that name.

SOFIA

We're going to throw the fucking book at you.

MERCER

What could you possibly do to me?

Mercer's lips curl into a smirk, his gaze distant ...

The SUV roars through the night, the road ahead stretching infinitely.

INT. POLICE SUBSTATION - HOLDING CELL AREA - NIGHT

Mercer is dropped into the small, dimly lit office space.

Sofia stands with Tomas by the doorframe.

Three SAPD officers preparing the holding cell.

The officers talk with Mercer casually.

OFFICER #1

You catch a good one tonight?

Mercer chuckles.

Officer #2 gestures to the slab bench across the room.

OFFICER #2

Take a seat, Sam. I'll let you get comfortable.

He sits down heavily on the stone slab.

The officer with his back turned opens the cell.

Sofia and Tomas stay still, watching from the door.

Mercer shifts slightly on the bench.

SOFIA

Who takes them? Where do they come from?

He doesn't respond.

SOFIA (CONT'D)

What do you know about the barbiturates? The same shit we found in El Paso.

A beat.

SOFIA (CONT'D)

We know how they're transported. Kept compliant. Like that boy from the hospital. What did you do to him?

Mercer's gaze is fixed on her. Sweat pooling on his brow.

SOFIA (CONT'D)

And the others... the ones who didn't make it. Who wanted them dismembered? Who sedated them?

MERCER

I do what I'm told. Don't you?

Mercer jolts up.

He grabs the gun from the waist of the officer beside him.

The officer's eyes widen in shock.

Mercer unholsters it, pressing the chamber to his temple.

Tomas is the first to move, but he's too slow.

The officers stay back, guns raised.

Sofia freezes, her eyes wide as she watches.

SOFIA

MERCER!

The shot rings out.

The sound of it echoes long in the confined space, sharp.

Blood spatter kicks up at the agents.

Mercer's body jerks, then slumps to the floor.

The room goes still.

Sofia is frozen, watching, her hand still holding the gun, but now her grip is loose. Tomas doesn't move either.

Both of them stand there, staring at the aftermath.

The room is silent. Sofia's eyes stay fixed on Mercer's lifeless body, the blood already beginning to pool beneath his head.

Her expression is unreadable, her eyes distant.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
(quietly)
Goddamn it.

She lowers her gun slowly, but her gaze never leaves him.

INT. SHIPPING CONTAINER - NIGHT

Leandro trembles, his body jerking with each desperate inhale. The faint sound of water lapping against the shore.

He spits up mucous, his face slick with sweat.

He coughs violently, choking on the wetness in his throat, then vomits-thick, dark, foul-smelling.

His stomach writhes, every convulsion a pain he can't escape.

He stumbles to his knees, gasping for air, his hands pressing against the cold steel of the container's floor.

A sharp cry escapes him-weak, then louder, a guttural, primal scream. It echoes through the metal, twisted with agony.

LEANDRO
Sálvame.

The words barely form, swallowed by his pain.

He claws at his own skin, fingers trembling. Bloodshot eyes dart around the dark, the blackness suffocating him.

His feral cry fades.

The sound of raven wings, distant. Cicadas hum.

Water, lapping against shore.

His body shakes, the only movement now the flicker of his chest rising and falling.

Leandro lies still.

INT. SAN ANTONIO POLICE DEPARTMENT - DAY

Sterling, stands near the doorway, her face stoic, unreadable. Her tailored suit seems at odds with the chaos around her.

Avert leans against a desk, head bowed. His shoulders heave with the weight of grief. Tomás stands nearby, watching him, hands fidgeting at his sides.

Across the room, Sofia sits slouched in a chair. Her arms hang limp, a faint sheen of sweat betraying the pain she's trying to hide.

Blood stains cover her shirt.

Sterling walks over, her heels echoing against the tile. She stops in front of Sofia, looking down at her. Sofia doesn't move, her eyes half-lidded, distant.

Sterling pulls a small orange pill bottle from her pocket. She holds it out, her expression unchanging.

STERLING

Time for an internal review.

Sofia's gaze flickers to the bottle. After a moment, her trembling hand reaches out and takes it. She stares at it, her grip tightening, knuckles white.

Sterling's eyes linger on Sofia for a beat longer. Then she turns and walks away, her figure disappearing into the dim hum of the room.

Avery sinks into a chair, his face buried in his hands. TOMÁS steps closer, hesitant, then stops. She glances at Sofia, then looks away, lost in the weight of it all.

The voices in the room swell and fade. The fluorescent light buzzes overhead, constant and cold.

INT. SHIPPING CONTAINER - NIGHT

Leandro lies prone on the cold, metal floor. Weak. Still.

His body aches, trembling with exhaustion.

Skin slick with sweat and clinging grit.

Leandro looks up to the source of the light, breaking through a crack at the top of the container's door.

He exhumes an amount of liquid from his stomach.

He is barely conscious. A long moment passes. Then, a finger twitches. His head LIFTS to the side.

He begins dragging himself across the corrugated metal floor, inch by agonizing inch. Crawling towards a sliver of moonlight visible beneath a door seam.

His hand, trembling violently, finds the rough edge of the heavy, shipping container door. He presses a shoulder into it, pushing. Metal GROANS, a terrible, scraping sound.

The door RESISTS, then CRACKS open a sliver.

Cold, salt-scented air spills in.

He pushes again. Harder. Pain flares through his body.

The door CRACKS open a sliver, then wider.

EXT. BEACHFRONT - NIGHT

He stumbles out, collapsing onto yielding sand.

The air is thick with salt, damp and cold.

Confusion clouds his eyes.

Sand? A beach? His body aches, wracked by tremors, breath ragged. He pushes himself to hands and knees, looking around.

He forces himself upright, unsteady legs shaking. He takes a step. Another. Moving without direction, simply away from the container.

His bare feet sink slightly. Above, a thin slice of moon hangs in a vast, star-scattered sky. Waves whisper.

His gaze falls to the ground. In the wet sand ahead, clear in the moonlight, are FOOTPRINTS. Walking steadily away from the shoreline.

He follows them, one unsteady step after another, his eyes fixed on the prints leading into the pale moonlight.

He follows them for a few yards, the only sound the slosh of waves and his own ragged breathing. He glances up, following the line of prints to their source.

Standing maybe fifty yards ahead, where the wet sand meets the dry, is a MAN.

He is in his early 30s, wearing a dark shawl draped around his shoulders. His long hair is pulled back, and a beard frames a face that seems... familiar.

He is looking out at the sea, still.

Leandro stops, his chest heaving.

The Man remains still.

LEANDRO
(hoarse)
... Who ... are you?

The Man doesn't turn immediately. He stays facing the sea for another beat, a dark shape against the moon. The only sound is the indifferent pull of the waves.

MAN
(voice quiet, carries on
the wind)
A man that sees.

Leandro stumbles closer. His hands are shaking.

LEANDRO
I... I don't understand.
Where...are we?

The Man finally turns, his face still shadowed, but his presence feels... heavy. Or perhaps, weightless.

MAN
Where you are meant to be.

Leandro gasps, a choked sound. Memories flash behind his eyes - dark rooms, cold water, the smell of chemicals.

LEANDRO
(a broken whisper)
I've been kidnapped.

MAN
Is that what happened?

The Man is silent for a beat, his gaze steady. The sound of the waves seems distant now, muted.

MAN (CONT'D)

You saw the children. You are one of them.

Leandro shudders violently, burying his face in his hands again. Grit and dried blood scratch against his skin.

LEANDRO

I ... I saw what they did. And what was left. My hands ... they made me ...

He trails off, unable to say it. The memory is a physical weight pressing down on him.

MAN

Touch what was broken.

Leandro flinches hard, a guttural sound escaping his throat. He clasps his hands over his chest. He looks up, eyes filled with horror and guilt.

LEANDRO

They were ...

He gasps, unable to finish the thought. The image is too much.

MAN

Children.

Leandro nods, tears mixing with the dirt on his face.

LEANDRO

I'm not sure ... The water ... I had to ... make them disappear. So no one would find them.

He looks out at the dark sea, shivering.

The Man walks slowly towards the water's edge, his back to Leandro for a moment.

MAN

Some things refuse to be forgotten.
Even by the waters.

He turns back, his expression calm, but his eyes seem to hold the depth of the ocean.

Leandro crawls forward a few inches on his knees, desperate for understanding, for relief.

LEANDRO

I just ... I just did what I was told. They made me. I didn't want to touch them. I didn't want to...

MAN

Understanding why does not remove the reality of the action.

Leandro buries his face again, sobbing, the sound muffled.

LEANDRO

It's on my hands. It's on my skin. I can feel it!

He gasps, convulsing with a dry heave. Vomit mixes with sand.

LEANDRO (CONT'D)

Am I like them now? The traffickers?

The Man stands silently until Leandro's retching subsides slightly.

MAN

The question of who you are... that remains yours to answer.

Leandro looks up, his face streaked with tears.

LEANDRO

They took my soul.

MAN

(Kneeling in the sand,
speaking softly)

The soul is not a thing that can be taken.

He reaches out, not to touch, but gesturing towards Leandro's chest.

LEANDRO

What do you mean? I am a monster.
Everything hurts.

MAN

Truth brings pain.

LEANDRO

What do I do with this? With...
with all of it?

The Man stands slowly.

MAN

You carry it. But you choose the
direction.

Leandro looks at the footprints, then back at the vast, dark sea. The Man's presence is a quiet anchor in the chaos.

MAN (CONT'D)

The path back... is a choice.

The men remain together.

EXT. GAS STATION PARKING LOT - NIGHT

The lights of the gas station cast sickly glow across the empty lot. Gasoline hangs in the thick night air.

Sofia and Tomás stand against the brick wall of the station's convenience store.

Both agents are smoking cigarettes, the orange glow of their butts briefly illuminating their faces before fading back into the darkness.

The air between them is still, tense, but not hostile.

SOFIA

(quiet)

We don't have a single lead besides
a dead cop. We're following
bullshit leads.

Tomás exhales a long stream of smoke, watching it swirl up and disappear into the night.

TOMÁS

What else can we do?

Sofia takes a drag, the smoke harsh against her lungs. She exhales slowly, the smoke mixing with the cold air.

Her gaze drops to the ground, her boots grinding against the dirt, the cigarette burning low.

SOFIA

(slowly)

I don't know...

The sound of a car engine rumbles faintly in the distance.

The light above them buzzes, flickering.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
They only care about the money.

TOMÁS
HSI has a clear mandate to protect
what's in the best interest of the
United States government.
Casualties are a part of the job.

SOFIA
So we just accept it? Accept that
kids are being moved in the shadows
and murdered and no one gives a
fuck because it's not in their
'best interest'?

Tomás is quiet for a beat, considering her questions.

TOMÁS
You really think it's just that
easy? We're clearly not just
sitting back and letting it happen?

He pauses.

TOMÁS (CONT'D)
You could have died Sofia...

SOFIA
(softly)
I keep thinking about them. Not
just the ones we've found... but
the others. The ones we never will.
(tightens her jaw)
The hundreds of thousands. They
just disappear. They're erased.
Stripped of their families. Their
names. Who they were.

A beat.

TOMÁS
We follow the threads we're given.
We build the case the way they let
us build it. We aim for the win the
mandate allows. It's not justice,
maybe. But it's something. It's all
we get.

Sofia turns back to stare out at the empty lot, at the darkness stretching beyond the flickering lights.

SOFIA
It's something.

Her voice is flat, heavy with disappointment.

TOMÁS
It has to be enough, Sofia. For us to survive.

Sofia is quiet for a long time.

The wind stirs dry leaves across the pavement.

The hum of the neon sign feels louder.

SOFIA
I don't know Tomás...

Tomás nods slowly.

TOMÁS
I've been doing this a long time. I see things clearly. Maybe too clearly.

SOFIA
Maybe that's the problem.

Tomás flicks his cigarette away, it sizzles when it hits the damp pavement, leaving behind a fading trail of smoke.

There's a pause.

Tomás stares out at the lot, the weight of Sofia's words settling between them.

TOMÁS
I can't change what exists.

Sofia inhales deeply, her fingers tight around the cigarette as she stares out at the darkness beyond the gas station.

TOMÁS (CONT'D)
I don't know. Maybe you're not built for this Sofia. Maybe home is better for you.

Tomás stays quiet. Smoke lingering around them like a fog.

SOFIA

(sighs)

I thought I was going to change
something. But... I don't even know
what the hell I'm doing anymore.

A beat.

SOFIA (CONT'D)

I can't help but feel like we're
missing some--

Sofia turns, looking at Tomás.

HARD CUT

EXT. BEACHFRONT - NIGHT (DREAM SEQUENCE)

Leandro looks back at her.

LEANDRO

Sofia--

He turns slowly, his face shadowed but sharp. There's something distant in his eyes, like he's not really seeing her, but seeing through her. The sound of the waves seems louder now, deafening.

SOFIA

Where did it start?

Leandro doesn't speak for a long moment. He just stares at her, his hands clenched by his sides, his breath shallow.

The words are empty, a confession without a cause. Sofia steps closer, the sand soft and cold underfoot. She feels the pull of something, the unanswered weight of it.

Leandro finally looks away, his gaze lost in the vast horizon. His voice is barely audible over the crashing waves.

LEANDRO

I don't... know.

The wind picks up, the waves pounding with more intensity now, as if everything is about to break. Sofia steps back, but the dream begins to unravel around her, the edges blurring.

INT. CRATE - NIGHT

Leandro's eyes snap open.

He gasps, his chest tight, throat raw.

He stares up at the dim light above, flickers of his dream still clinging to him. The taste of metal is in his mouth.

His stomach churns.

His hands scramble for the edge of the crate as a violent convulsion hits. He coughs once.

Then, his body betrays him. He retches.

The vomit splatters against the crate floor, thick, dark.

The stench cuts through the air.

He gags, eyes wide, breath shallow.

The crate creaks beneath him.

He shifts, pulling himself upright, the world is spinning.

A distant sound.

Footsteps, slow.

Coming closer.

Leandro wipes his mouth again, his breath ragged.

He lowers his head, trying to steady himself.

His hand trembles against the crate.

The footsteps stop.

Nothing. Then, the sound of a lock turning.

INT. HSI SUV - NIGHT

Sofia jolts awake, her face pressed against the wheel. The dark outline of the city stretches behind her.

Her hand snaps to the door handle.

A loud, abrupt knock. The glass rattles.

She flinches, her breath quickening.

Douglass stands outside the window, his face hard in the dim light.

DOUGLAS
(gestures, impatient)
Roll it down.

SOFIA
I'm--

Sofia hesitates, her mind sluggish. She lowers the window, the air stale, too thick.

Douglass leans in, his breath hitting the glass.

DOUGLAS
You're a fuckin' mess.

He steps back, eyeing her like a bug he's about to squash.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)
I'm sending you back to El Paso.

He pauses.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)
You're a liability. You can't handle this.

Sofia stares forward, trying to hold it together. He leans in again, his voice lowering, colder.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)
Badge.

A beat.

DOUGLAS (CONT'D)
And gun. You're done.

She pulls her badge and pistol from the center console.

Hands it to him through the crack in the window.

He turns, walks off, his boots clicking on the pavement.

Sofia watches his silhouette recede through the glass.

INT. ROOM - AFTERNOON

Soft light seeps through the blinds. Dust in the air.

Sofia lies still, eyes closed.
The bed creaks as she shifts, wincing.
She sits up slowly. Blood stains her shirt, dried and dark.
She reaches for a glass of water, her hand shaking.
A dull throb in her arm.
The sting is sharp as she touches it again.

INT. SAN ANTONIO POLICE DEPARTMENT - DAY

The building hums with a quiet tension.

Officers move through the halls like ghosts, some pausing at the crime scene tape that marks off part of the office.

A few linger, eyes down. The sense of loss is palpable.

Sofia enters, face tight, her boots clicking softly on the tile as she walks past desks piled with folders.

She heads for the back cubicle where Tomás stands, arms crossed, looking over the clutter of papers.

Tomás looks up, his face unreadable, then steps forward.

Sofia glances at him.

SOFIA
He leave anything behind?

Tomás pulls a manila folder from the stack of papers on the desk, hands it to her.

TOMÁS
Phone shows he was deep in the
cartel. Covered his tracks well.
It's all here.

She flips it open.

SOFIA
He was just a middle man?

He adjusts his collar.

TOMÁS
A piece of shit.

She exhales slowly, eyes steady.

TOMÁS (CONT'D)
Toxicology's back on the kid in the
river ... Phenobarbital.

SOFIA
He knew where it came from ... Sam
was too deep to not know.

She pauses.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
Still doesn't get us to the source.

TOMÁS
Keep looking ... That's all you can
do now.

Tomás stares at Sofia.

INT. GREYSTONE'S OFFICE - DAY

Sofia stands at the reception desk, her boots tapping lightly against the linoleum. The desk clerk flips through papers.

CLERK
He's not in.
A beat.

CLERK (CONT'D)
Hasn't been in since Monday.

SOFIA
(to herself)
Shit.

Sofia lets the moment linger.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
Who's your primary medical supply
vendor?

The clerk pauses, then glances up.

CLERK
... Med-Tech.

Sofia turns, steps to the door, she exits.

EXT. MEDICAL SUPPLIES DISTRIBUTOR - LATE AFTERNOON

The streets hum with distant traffic. Sofia jogs up to a modest storefront. The OWNER, late 60s, locks the glass door.

SOFIA
Excuse me?

The OWNER turns, weary. He glances at her.

OWNER
Yes?

SOFIA
Special Agent Sofia de la Fuente, HSI. I'm investigating trafficking crimes. Some might be tied to your supplies.

OWNER
You got a warrant?

SOFIA
I just need a few minutes of your time.

He smirks.

OWNER
Rules is rules.

SOFIA
This is about missing kids. You want to bullshit, or help me?

The OWNER's jaw tightens. He stares at her, then exhales.

OWNER
Alright. Five minutes.

He unlocks the door. Sofia follows him inside.

INT. DISTRIBUTOR - OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

The OWNER leads Sofia to a cramped office, paper-strewn and stifling. He moves to a desk, opens a thick ledger.

OWNER
What exactly are you looking for?

SOFIA
Large, unusual orders of Phenobarbital. Anything stand out?

The OWNER frowns, flipping pages. Sofia leans against the door frame, scanning the room. The hum of a distant fan.

OWNER
Barbiturates?

SOFIA
Someone could be abusing your supplies.

OWNER
You know how many clinics and hospitals we deal with? We don't vet every order.

SOFIA
You don't do your fucking job?

OWNER
Lady, I've been in this business forty years. Ethics don't pay the bills.

He stops on a page. His finger taps a line.

He narrows his eyes.

OWNER (CONT'D)
It's a feeding frenzy. Every clinic, every hospital, clawing to squeeze another penny out of the sick and dying.

OWNER (CONT'D)
Who are you looking for?

SOFIA
A local doctor.

He laughs bitterly, shaking his head.

OWNER
Alright ... No shit.

A beat.

OWNER (CONT'D)
... In the meantime, the whole country's drowning. Teens hooked on pills before they can drive.

The OWNER exhales sharply, leaning back in his chair.

OWNER (CONT'D)
Now here's something.

Sofia steps closer. The paper's edges are worn, ink smudged.

OWNER (CONT'D)

Maybe your doctor ... James
Greystone. Order's too big for a
clinic. Address don't check out
neither.

INT. SHIPPING CONTAINER - SAME

Leandro, sits slumped against the corrugated steel wall.

His face is a grotesque map of bruises, dried blood crusting his nostrils and lips. His shirt mottled with grime and dark stains.

His wrists bound with fraying rope, raw and blistered. A makeshift gag silences his shallow breaths.

The faint crunch of footsteps on gravel grows louder.

Shadows flicker across the doorway.

Leandro's eyes dart to the entrance.

Greystone stands in the doorway. He steps inside.

James looms over Leandro. No words.

He squats, grabs Leandro by the forearm, yanking him forward.

The gag muffles a low, choked groan.

EXT. REMOTE LAKESIDE PROPERTY - CONTINUOUS

The container door swings wider as Greystone drags Leandro.

Greystone's truck sits nearby, its engine ticking softly in the cool air. Hitched to the back is a small aluminum fishing boat. The dull gleam of its hull reflects the dying sun.

Leandro's body grinds against the earth.

Greystone reaches the boat.

He pauses, breath clouding in the cool air.

With a sharp motion, he hoists Leandro's limp form onto the edge of the boat, his body thudding against the metal.

Leandro lies crumpled in the bottom of the boat. His breaths come in ragged and shallow, a faint rattle in his chest.

Above him, Greystone straightens and steps back.

Greystone turns to his truck. The driver's door creaks as he opens it. He climbs in. Headlights flicker on.

EXT. INTERSTATE - DAY

The sun beats down, a harsh blur of light against the windshield. HSI SUV speeds southbound, cutting through lanes, tires humming on asphalt. Sofia's eyes are fixed. Determined.

The SUV surges forward, narrowly passing a semi.

The roar of the engine fills the cabin, muffling the distant sounds of horns and tires. Sofia doesn't flinch.

INT. HSI SUV - CONTINUOUS

Her breath steady.

Asphalt is the only thing she sees.

She swerves around another car, the tires screeching.

SOFIA
(under her breath)
Come on.

She shifts lanes, the SUV roaring back into the flow of traffic. Time tightens, each second a little heavier.

EXT. DIRT ROAD - MOMENTS LATER

The truck lumbers forward, the boat swaying behind it.

The sound of the engine fades into the distance, leaving the container and the barren yard cloaked in silence once more.

EXT. CHOKE CANYON RESERVOIR - NIGHT

The boat grinds against the dark water, engine humming, the truck gone behind them. GREYSTONE sits at the wheel, grim and focused. Leandro is bound, gagged, and slumped in the boat. His breathing is shallow, but he's awake. Barely.

Greystone steers with one hand.

GREYSTONE
What a mess you've made... Couldn't even do one simple thing.

Leandro struggles slightly against his restraints, but the movement is weak, broken. His eyes are wide with fear, his mouth still gagged.

Greystone watches him, his lip curling into a sneer.

GREYSTONE (CONT'D)

(laughs bitterly)

Hell, I should've known better than to trust a fucking Mexican. You're nothing but dead weight.

He slows the boat. The water laps against the sides of the boat, a slow, rhythmic sound.

He stands, his boots slamming against the floor of the boat.

Leandro's eyes dart around, trying to process what's coming.

Greystone yanks Leandro up with brutal force.

Leandro's legs flail beneath him, his back arched in agony. The gag is soaked through, but he still can't speak. The terror in his eyes is palpable.

Greystone kicks him hard in the chest.

Leandro's body jerks, his arms flailing, the boat rocking violently from the impact. Greystone grabs the rope tied to the back of the boat and lashes it to Leandro's bound wrist.

He doesn't hesitate.

With a sickening grunt, Greystone forces him over the side.

Greystone sits back down and forces the throttle down.

The rope pulls tight, jerking his body under the surface.

Leandro's body lurches as he's dragged through the water.

His bound limbs thrash helplessly.

His chest heaves under the pressure of the cold, dark depths.

Leandro gasps, his mouth still gagged.

His eyes bulge, wide with terror.

Greystone watches, pulls out a knife and cuts the rope.

Greystone grins as he twists the throttle forward.

The engine roars to life, cutting through the water with renewed speed.

The boat lurches forward.

The boat cuts through the water, the sound of the engine overwhelming, the floundering body disappears into the void.

Greystone doesn't look back.

EXT. GREYSTONE'S PROPERTY - NIGHT

The silhouette of a boat hitched to a truck looms in the driveway, water dripping steadily onto the gravel.

Greystone haggard and damp, stands by a shipping container.

A garden hose hisses in his hand, water splashing over faint crimson streaks on the container doors.

Headlights pierce the night, sweeping across the property. Gravel crunches under tires.

Greystone shields his eyes.

The SUV stops. The headlights die.

Sofia steps out of the vehicle.

SOFIA (O.S.)
Sorry to blind you.

A beat.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
Didn't mean to drop by unannounced.

Greystone sets the hose down deliberately.

Water pools near his boots.

GREYSTONE
Didn't expect you out here.

She approaches, gravel crunching under her boots.

Her wounded arm hanging limp.

Greystone nods.

Her eyes drift to the boat.

The sheen of water glistens under the faint light.

SOFIA
Late night on the water?

Greystone smiles faintly.

GREYSTONE
Keeps me sane.

She doesn't smile back.

Sofia walks towards the boat, keeping greystone in her line of sight.

Her expression hardening she scans the interior visible from the stern.

SOFIA
Dump any limbs?

GREYSTONE
Excuse me?

Sofia steps back from the boat.

Her gaze narrows on him.

SOFIA
I looked into your pharmaceutical
orders. Bulk quantities.

Greystone shifts.

GREYSTONE
... I have many patients.

SOFIA
And enough Phenobarbital to sedate
the county.

He straightens.

GREYSTONE
You need to go home.

He takes a step closer to her.

SOFIA
You know why I'm here.

GREYSTONE
I can't say I do... We maintain a
significant supply of everything
that's needed ...

He gestures to a dock next the house.

GREYSTONE (CONT'D)
Fishing poles. I got those too.

He smiles and walks meekly past her.

EXT. BACK PATIO / DOCK - NIGHT

The two walk across the wooden planks.

Sofia lagging behind.

The water laps softly against the dock.

GREYSTONE
You're quite thorough. Most can't
see through immediate appearances.

A beat.

GREYSTONE (CONT'D)
Nurturing a patient's state is just
a part of the job.

SOFIA
Barbiturates stopped being used in
the sixties.

GREYSTONE
Is that right? It's a cheaper
option ... We tend to run into a
lot epilepsy cases.

GREYSTONE (CONT'D)
It's just a precaution. That's all.

He picks up a rod leaning against the dock.

She stares at him.

GREYSTONE (CONT'D)
Alright?

He sets the rod back down.

She watches him carefully.

SOFIA
That's all? Why are there
barbiturate traces in the bodies?

GREYSTONE
I wouldn't know.

The silence stretches.

Sofia stands near the edge of the dock, away from James.

Greystone leans on the dock's railing.

GREYSTONE (CONT'D)
They don't vanish. They're moved,
like cattle.

SOFIA
They're children.

He exhales, slow and deliberate.

GREYSTONE
And they're herded along, just like
any other commodity. It's
appalling... Those bastards rape an
entire population of kids. Enough
to fill stadiums, sight unseen...
Motherfuckers ...

She steps closer, her gaze narrowing.

SOFIA
What does that make you?

A beat.

GREYSTONE
... a Shepherd.

SOFIA
As a precaution, I'm going to bring
you in for questioning--

She looks back to James.

The crack of a gunshot.

Sofia's corpse sinks to the bottom of the reservoir.

EXT. EL PASO - CITY STREETS - DAY

A Mexican boy walks alone along a city street.

He stops, looking up to the mountains.

A greyhound bus passes in front of him.

A woman places her hand on his shoulder.