

Excerpt from Call of the Jaguar

Lupe and the other migrants spent another miserable night on the hardpacked floor. Long before sunrise, the doors burst open, and the freezing night chill swept through the room as the travelers tried to wipe the sleep from their eyes.

“Time to go!” It was the kind man, El Jaguar.

Whispering in the dark, they gathered their belongings and walked out to two vans. Lupe glanced at El Jaguar, who gestured for her to get in the second one. She gathered her friends together and led them into the cold van, where they huddled with their belongings on their laps.

A gruff-looking man filled the door of the van and stared at the women, his eyes lingering on Lupe and Brenda. He grabbed Lupe’s forearm and yanked her out. “Get in the other van!”

Lupe struggled. “No!” she yelled, between rasping breaths. They couldn’t take her—fear clutched her heart. The man wrapped a steely arm around her waist and lifted her as if she was a child. She kicked at him without landing any blows. He walked toward the first van.

“Leave her!” shouted El Jaguar.

The man looked up at El Jaguar, then at Lupe, and let her go. Snarling, he spat on the ground, turned back to the van, and dragged the protesting Brenda out. Lupe climbed back in, breathing rapidly. Nancy and Carmela glared at her. Lupe blushed, trying to ignore Brenda’s screams as he flung her into the other van. What was she supposed to do? She didn’t know they’d take Brenda, she swallowed, she wished her no harm. She turned her face to the window, away from the others, eyes shut, relieved it wasn’t her in the other van.

El Jaguar got in with another man, and they drove off in the night.

“What will happen to the women in the other van?” Lupe asked.

“Don’t worry, you and the rest are safe. We’ll get you across, and by tomorrow you will be in the USA.”

“But what about the other van?” Lupe insisted.

“Only the devil knows, *chiquita*, only the devil. Now shut up and let me drive. There’s no road here in the desert, and there are *ladrones* everywhere.”

Lupe was grateful for the darkness as he weaved through the night, then stopped, making them walk in single file into the unmarked desert, with only the dim glow of the half-moon to light their path. El Jaguar and the guide took the front of the line, and three young men came next, then Nancy, Lupe, and Carmela. They walked fast, the pace closer to a jog than a walk. Numb, her mind blank, Lupe tried to ignore the cutting cold, the rocks that twisted her feet and tortured her toes, and the shadows and movements of what could be snakes, scorpions, or the demons of her imagination. After the tenth or the hundredth time, she barely noticed the thorns that tore her clothing and skin; imagining Brenda being raped and dying in terrifying ways. She dug her nails into her palms, wanting to feel something, anything.

The sun burst into the eastern sky with only a pale pink warning and quickly vaporized the cold into sweltering heat. Onward they went, walking over sand and rocks, through ragweed and sagebrush, under *canotia* shrubs that grew up to thirty feet, covered in giant crucifixion thorns. The sun pounded them mercilessly, and one of the younger men started to lag. He was

overweight and lighter-skinned than the rest. His face burned a brilliant red as his panting became rapid.

“Please, wait for my little brother,” begged the older, leaner version of the man. “He’ll get lost!”

The guide kept walking, but El Jaguar told him, “You knew before leaving, you fall behind, you get left behind. Waiting puts us all in danger.”

They walked on, and the man stood there, glancing back at his brother and turning so as not to lose sight of the group. After a few minutes, the leaner man caught up with them, out of breath, his eyes lowered to the unforgiving sand. They kept on.

Lupe sipped a few precious drops of water and thought of Brenda and how she’d shared hers with Nancy. She walked over to Nancy and extended her bottle. Nancy looked at her, turned away, and kept walking. Lupe’s face was already flushed by the sun, but she blushed almost purple. She slowed and took her place at the end of the line.

Night found them huddled on top of a hill on a patch of sand scraped clean of cholla and scrub brush. Saguaro, standing like mute sentinels, fanned out in all directions around them. Carmela and Nancy huddled together, and the men slept alone. Lupe sat with her back against a boulder still warm from the sun and braced herself as the darkness dropped a cruel frozen curtain around them. The walking, jogging, stumbling, scratching, dehydrating ordeal of the long march tore at her muscles. She pulled and discarded her toenails and bandaged her bloodied toes, numb from the cold and pain. Her thighs and calves contracted and twitched as she shivered and shook until, at last, teeth chattering, she fell into a fitful slumber.

A few hours later, a loud growl pulled Lupe from her dreamless sleep. For a few heartbeats, she didn't know where she was until her aching body and the freezing air slapped her into wakefulness, and she roused herself from the now-cold boulder that framed her back.

“Was that a lion?” she asked, sitting up and peering into the shadows lengthened by the half-moon. A figure strode out of the dark, and Lupe stood up, relaxing when she recognized El Jaguar. He padded noiselessly to her, sat on his haunches, and motioned her to join him.

“Why aren't you sitting with the other women? You'll be warmer.”

“They're mad at me because of Brenda,” she whispered, blowing into her hands and rubbing them together, tears in her eyes.

El Jaguar patted her back. “Ya, ya, ya! You did what you needed to survive.”

Lupe turned her red-rimmed eyes to him. “Thanks to me, Brenda is probably dead or worse!”

“You're right, *niña*, I'm sure whatever happened to her wasn't good or right. But it wasn't your fault! It's the bad men that prey on young girls.”

“But they didn't want her—they wanted me!”

“They already had their eyes on both of you, don't you see? They pick the young ones because you're easier to break in as prostitutes. You were just lucky I was there; if not, they would've taken both of you.”

Lupe looked ahead, drying her eyes with her sleeves. The guilt and shame struck her soul in a place where even the kindest of words would never penetrate.

“You should try to sleep. We will start walking again in a few hours.”

“I thought I heard a lion or something.”

“Maybe a cougar. Jaguars and cougars used to roam this desert.”

“Why do they call you jaguar?”

“We never use our real names. I chose it because the jaguar is the largest predator and hunts at night.” He paused and smiled, remembering something. “Also, they protect their own.” He rose, turning to her. “Get some sleep. I’m going to walk around the camp.”

As the shadows embraced him, he dropped on all fours and a golden, spotted tail swishing once before he disappeared. She squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head, she was imaging things.

It was still dark when they were up and walking. Lupe left the tattered remains of what had once been a pair of jeans by an organ cactus, grateful she had two more pairs to wear before the thorns found undefended skin. Every muscle complained as she stretched and stamped her feet for warmth. She peeled off her last toenail easily as it hung from her big toe. Her feet throbbed. As the group set out, she willed herself onward. She glanced at Nancy, putting one foot in front of the other, determined, a scowl on her face.

The sun returned hotter than the day before, testing their endurance. Their pace had slowed to a dusty, dragging shuffle. Even the guide was worn-out, his confidence as ragged as the cadence of his steps. By noon, Lupe’s water was gone, and a vicious pounding threatened to separate her head from the rest of her body. With her eyes on the ground in front of her, she willed one step to

follow another. I should just give up, sit down here and rest, maybe fall asleep. One more step. One more jolt of pain up her leg. One more. One.

Carmela fell back, zigzagging in the wake of the walkers. As the weary travelers forced themselves on in the punishing heat, Carmela crumpled on the ground.

“Get up!” Nancy urged, standing over her friend, but Carmela shook her head, too weak to speak.

“Get up now!” Nancy yelled, grabbing Carmela’s limp arm, trying to raise her friend. “Wait!” she yelled at the slow-moving line. “Help me!”

El Jaguar whistled for them to stop, and they did. He walked back to where Nancy was trying to get Carmela to stand and said, “We’re only about two hours away, then you can rest. If you stay here, you will die.”

Carmela looked up at El Jaguar. She shook her head weakly and motioned with her hands for them to leave her. He bent over and pulled Carmela to her feet, Nancy held her up, and one of the men walked over and held her by the other side. They continued, half dragging Carmela over the desert’s hardpacked scrub.

Minutes crawled painfully into hours that unraveled into a timeless furnace of throbbing heat and thick air. As they stretched taut beyond the point of snapping, El Jaguar called a halt in the meager shade of a clump of ragweed and creosote brush. Ahead, marching from west to east, lay a cruel razor-wire fence. Beyond, the same unbroken vista from which they had emerged resumed, except for a lonely ribbon of blacktop that cut across the desert parallel to the savage steel strands in their path.

“We’ll wait here. When the car arrives, one by one, you run and crawl through the hollow underneath the fence. You have fifteen seconds to run to the car and jump in the trunk. It doesn’t matter how you land, just jump in and stay down and make room for the ones behind you.”

El Jaguar looked at all of them. His catlike gaze lingered on Lupe.

“*Listos*, get ready,” he growled.

When the car arrived, they took turns running to the car. Carmela was the first to get in, then Nancy, and then it was Lupe’s turn. She ran and jumped into the trunk. The men came at the end, and the car drove off with them inside. It was hot and hard to breathe, but Lupe was happy to be off her feet. Soon, the vehicle stopped, and the trunk opened. A man ordered them out. Lupe crawled out into the cluttered garage of a decrepit house. The lone dirty, cracked window showed the desert stretching to a slight rise and beyond.

“Welcome to Arizona,” the man said. “You will stay here until we arrange transportation to wherever you’re going.”