



Sworn to Protect

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Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

ISBN 978-1414320519

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Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will. -Romans 12:2 NIV

*"We are truly a nation of immigrants. But we are also a nation of laws."
-Brent Ashabranner*

Chapter 1

McAllen, Texas

The Rio Grande River separating Mexico and the US was not just murky. It was toxic. Danika Morales respected the river's temperament, lazy and rushing, crystal and muddy, breath-taking and devastating. To many illegal immigrants, its flowing water signified hope and an opportunity for a better tomorrow, while others viewed the river crossing as a means of smuggling drugs or spreading terrorism. But for Danika, the depths meant death, and it didn't discriminate among its victims. That was why she chose a Border Patrol badge and carried a gun.

Shortly after the 8:00 a.m. muster, Danika snatched up the keys to the Tahoe

assigned to her for the next ten hours and checked out an M4. A hum of voices, most with Hispanic accents and clipped with occasional laughter, swirled around the station. A labyrinth of sights and sounds had succeeded in disorienting her. A daze. She took a sip of the steaming coffee in hopes no one saw how the day's date affected her. Her hands shook. The twelfth of July. The second anniversary of Toby's murder. She thought she could handle it better than this, but the raw ache still seared her heart.

"Tough day for me too," Jacob whispered beside her. "We can get through this together." The familiar tone of voice, as in many times before, nearly paralyzed her. Jacob sounded so much like his brother.

She stood shoulder to shoulder with her brother-in-law and glanced at his muscular frame and the silver streaks in his closely cropped hair, everything about him oddly different from Toby. Gone were the gentleness, patience, and the out-stretched arms of love.

"Thanks. But I'm all right."

He frowned, a typical expression. "Well, I'm not, and you shouldn't be either." She was in no mood to rile him today. "I miss Toby every minute of the day, but we have to move on. He would have wanted it that way."

"Not till his murderer is found." Jacob's jaw tightened. "I'm disappointed in you."

Danika took another sip of the hot coffee, burning her tongue. Caustic words threatened to surface and add one more brick to the wall dividing them. "I want the killer found too. I'm committed to it. I think about him everyday and mourn for our daughter who will never know her daddy. But I choose not to spend my time harboring hate and vengeance."

"You must not have really loved my brother."

The words cut deep, and Jacob knew they would. No woman could have loved Toby like she did. "I refuse to be brow-beaten by you any more. Your hate is going to explode in your own backyard one day." She stopped herself before she lit a match to his temper. Actually, she'd rather have been dropped in the bush for the next ten hours with a shotgun and a can of OFF than argue with him. But the time had come to distance herself from Jacob.

"Hey, Danika," an agent called. "Do these belong to you?"

She turned to see wiry Felipe Chavez carrying a glass-filled vase with a huge bouquet of roses. They remembered. She swallowed a chunk of life. "Oh, guys, you didn't have to do this."

Felipe made his way toward her. The other agents hushed, then one of them started to clap. She smiled through the tears as he handed her the clear glass vase. The sweet fragrance no longer reminded her of death, but of life and her resolve to live each day in a way that commemorated Toby's devotion to her and their little daughter. Perhaps this was what the

two-year marker meant. She took the roses and studied the small crowd of agents. Good men, all of them, even Jacob.

“We cared about what happened to Toby too,” Felipe said, with a grim smile. Danika brushed her finger around one of the delicate petals and formed her words. Memories had stalked her like a demon since last night. “Don’t know what to say except thank you. Toby was a soldier for his own cause, and he spent his life doing what he believed in. Just like all of us.”

One agent shook his head, frowned, and left the room. Far too many reasons for his disapproval raced through her mind. But Danika needed to put the ugliness behind her. She set the flowers on the long table in front of her. “Today is the second anniversary of Toby’s death. All of you have looked after me and my daughter, especially during holidays and special occasions. His death is why I’m more dedicated than ever to help protect the border.” She paused, sensing her emotions rushing into chaos. “I appreciate your remembering him and the sacrifice he made, especially since his beliefs were controversial.” Enough said. She took a deep breath, what many called a cleansing breath. “I brought doughnuts.”

And they were buttermilk, Toby’s favorite.

She glanced at Jacob, hoping to end the tension between them. How Barbara could stay married to him was beyond her comprehension. He treated her and their four kids like yesterday’s trash. Danika wound through the crowd of agents, greeting those who offered condolences and others who offered a good-morning. The Field Operations Supervisor, Agent Oden Herrera, stood in front of the flags - the US, Homeland Security, and the Border Patrol. Pushing the emotions of regret and grief about Toby aside, she captured the supervisor’s attention.

“During the muster you said intel had picked up a cocaine drop last night?”

Herrera walked to a wall map and pointed. “Like I said earlier. Arrested seven men and two women right along here, your area. A kid had a small bag of cocaine on him. Most likely a deterrent. The drug smuggler either hid it before being apprehended, or he’s out there waiting for someone to pick him up. Dogs have been out there most of the night, but Barnett and Fire-Eater are headed that way in a few minutes.”

Danika finished her coffee and made her way into the stifling heat to Jon Barnett’s truck. As Fire-Eater’s handler, he had everyone’s admiration, and the Belgian sheepdog had a reputation of being the best of the K-9s. Barnett snapped on the dog’s leash and waved.

“I hear we’re working the same area today.” She refrained from patting Fire-Eater. Some days he wasn’t people friendly. After seeing the dog in action a few times when he’d found drug runners, she sometimes felt sorry for those he brought down.

Barnett grinned and wiped the sweat already beading on his face. "He's a good dog, Morales. Just needs a little help with his people skills." He laughed, his freckles deepening in the intense sun. "And he's great with the wife and kids. Like another member of the family." He pulled out his keys. "Do you want to talk? We have a few minutes."

All she really wanted was for the day to be over. Talking increased the chances of liquid emotion, which was more lethal than the river flowing between the US and Mexico. "No, thanks. I'm fine."

"Do you need to talk?"

"It's been two years." Therapeutic or not, she would not open up, even to a sweet guy like Barnett. She'd spent hours building a reputation as a tough agent, and she wasn't about to take a nose dive now.

"Right, and the sooner you admit that today has crept up on you worse than a case of food poisoning, the better you'll feel."

She had to agree. "Have you turned psychologist?"

"Fire-Eater and five kids taught me all I know."

"I had a dog when I was a kid," she said, looking for any subject except Toby.

"Gentle, sensed my moods, smart. My best friend. Sure missed him when he was gone." Danika blinked back a tear, despising her reaction. She stared at Fire-Eater rather than look into Barnett's face.

"I bet he slept at the foot of your bed." Fire-Eater climbed into the backseat of the double-cab truck.

"Sometimes in it. We even shared meals. I didn't like meat, and he'd eat it for me."

"Who's your best friend now?"

She swallowed the ever-increasing lump in her throat. "Toby's gone, and I have a tough time in church."

"Confession is a beginning. Any family?"

"Toby's family has been good to me." Never mind Jacob. "My folks never approved of my marriage." She sucked in a breath. It hissed like the poisonous snakes she feared. "Well-meaning friends do this to me."

"Do you feel any better?"

Sneak. "Yeah, thanks, doc. You--"

Fire-Eater barked. No doubt anxious to get moving. The animal and Jacob had similar personalities, but today she'd rather be with the dog.

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