

A Missing Daughter, a Violent Cartel,  
and a Mother's Quest for Vengeance

FEAR

IS JUST

A WORD

AZAM AHMED

"A WORK OF JOURNALISTIC BRILLIANCE AND  
RARE HUMANITY." —GEORGE PACKER



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**FEAR IS  
JUST A  
WORD**

**AZAM  
AHMED**

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*Mortui vivos docent.*

Let the dead teach the living.

—LATIN PROVERB

...

*El desaparecido se lleva hasta su silencio.*

The disappeared leave nothing behind, not even their silence.

—ELENA PONIATOWSKA,

*Fuerte es el silencio*

...

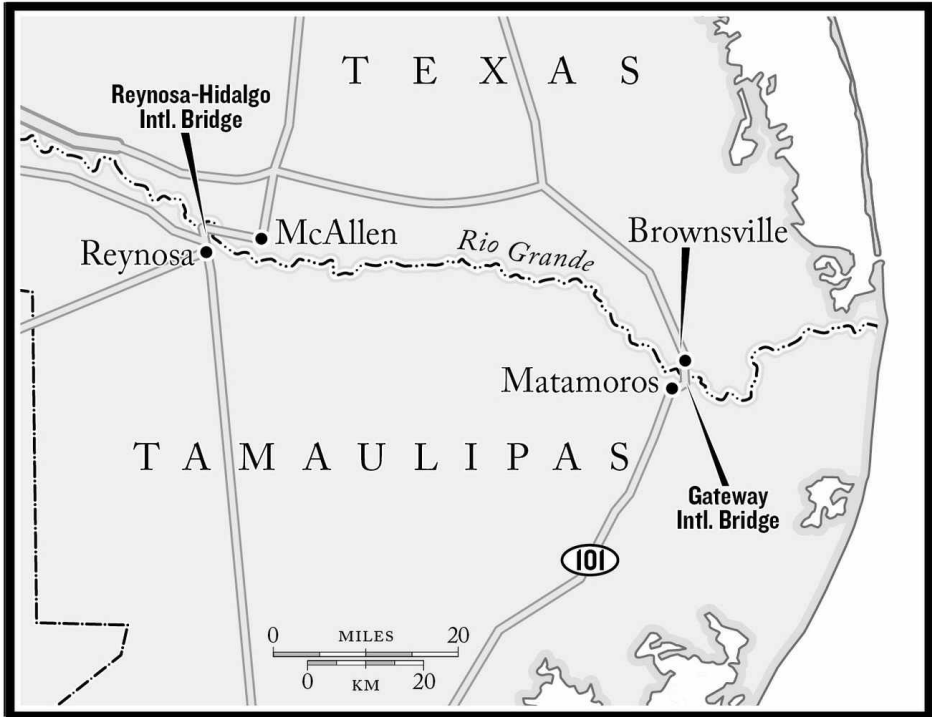
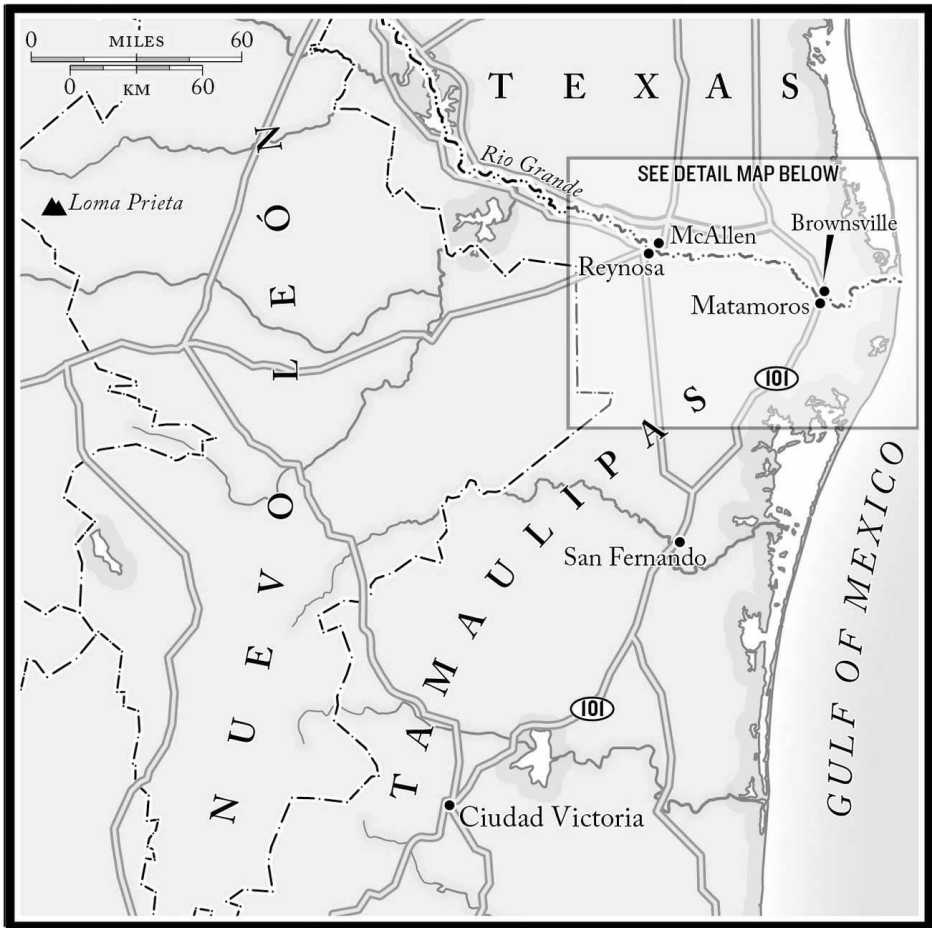
*Tomé conciencia, tal vez como nunca antes, de que la comunidad que se había formado alrededor de un puñado de moribundos estaba desaparecida. Y desaparecidas nuestras voces, nuestros olores, nuestros deseos. Vivíamos, por decirlo así, a medias. O mejor: vivíamos con un pie dentro de la muerte y otro todavía pisando el terreno de algo parecido solamente de manera remota a la vida. Pocos sabían de nosotros y aún menos se preocupaban por nuestro destino.*

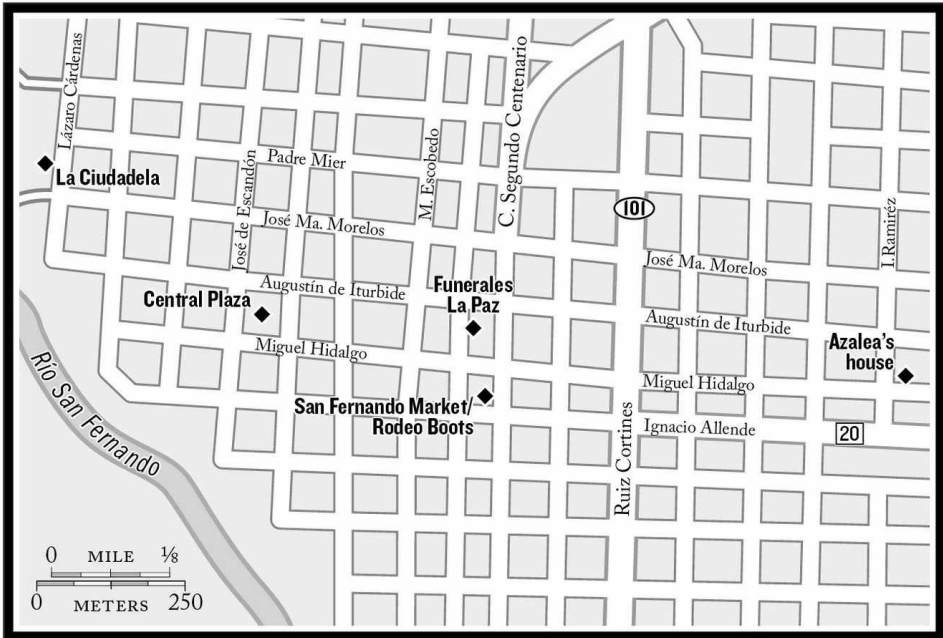
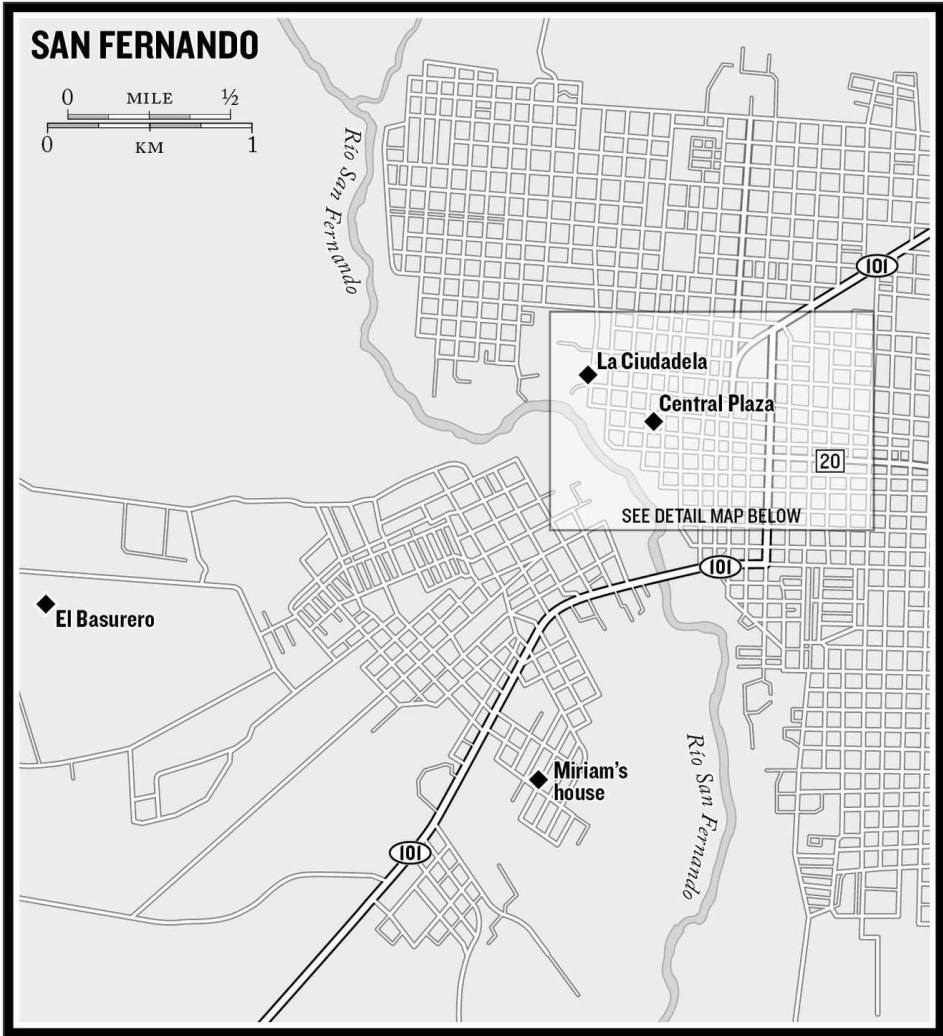
I became aware, perhaps like never before, that this community formed around a handful of failing souls was, in fact, disappeared. And disappeared were our voices, our smells, our desires. We lived, if you will, in the in-between. Or rather, we lived with one foot in the grave and the other on terrain that held only a remote resemblance to life. Very few knew about us and even fewer worried about our fate.

—CRISTINA RIVERA GARZA, *The Iliac Crest*









# PROLOGUE

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## ON THE HUNT: THE FLORIST, #11—MARCH 27, 2016

IN THE EARLY-MORNING HOURS AT the Matamoros international bridge between Mexico and Texas, the air had a bracing chill. Miriam Rodríguez had left home in a rush and wore a trench coat over her pajamas. A baseball cap covered her hair, which had been dyed bright red to distract from her face. In her coat pocket she carried a loaded .38 pistol. She scanned the crowd of street vendors selling cold water, knockoff sunglasses, and pirated movies along the concrete esplanade that led up to the bridge. It was shortly after eight in the morning on Sunday, March 27, 2016.

Miriam's husband, Luis, had parked the truck somewhere safe and stayed there, out of the way, which he often did when Miriam was on the hunt.

Miriam was stalking one of the killers of her daughter Karen. Known as the Florist, he was a member of the Zeta drug cartel, which U.S. authorities considered to be the most violent group in all of Mexico. In their campaign to dominate the nation's criminal economy, the Zetas had blazed a trail of violence through more than a dozen Mexican states, trafficking drugs, smuggling migrants, and kidnapping for ransom.

Two years earlier, in January 2014, the Zeta cell that the Florist belonged to had kidnapped Karen. Miriam had begged, pleaded, and paid ransoms she could not afford, following the Zetas' every instruction. She got nothing in return, not even knowledge of what had happened to Karen. Government authorities had dismissed her, ignoring her entreaties or meeting them with a practiced formality that barely masked their apathy. In that void, her grief

gave way to acceptance, and then to resolve: to seek revenge and pursue justice herself, for Karen, and for the other families of the disappeared.

Karen, her youngest, had been for Miriam an unexpected pregnancy; the baby's birth had breathed new life into her failing marriage. With Karen gone, Miriam had vowed to track down everyone responsible or die trying. Four of the people on her target list, people she deemed responsible for her daughter's disappearance, were now in prison; another six were dead at the hands of the Mexican marines, gunned down in a raid of the ranch from which the group operated. Retribution for Miriam began as a means to transform pain into purpose, and then became an all-consuming force. And now, based on a tip, she was close to her new target, number eleven: the Florist.

As she moved among the vendors up toward the bridge itself, she clutched a photo, the sole image she had of the Florist. Skinny, with oval eyes, and a bright complexion, the Florist still very much looked like an adolescent. Miriam had known him as a child, when he sold roses on the streets of San Fernando, where they lived in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. The Florist had moved to San Fernando as a kid and had stopped attending school in order to earn a living; in later years, he struggled to read and write. On his daily rounds, he would often walk past Miriam's store with a bouquet of roses under his arm. Miriam had once had a soft spot for the boy—he was skinny, and not well looked after, in her opinion. If he passed her market and Miriam and her three, more fortunate children were eating, she would invite the Florist to join them.

But like the town itself, the Florist of earlier years had become little more than a memory. Once a small village of farmers and cattle ranchers, San Fernando was now cursed, run on violence and fear by the Zeta drug cartel, consumed by the same daylight gunfights, beheadings, and disappearances that plowed through all of Tamaulipas, located in the far northeast of the country. The town was now infamous for the atrocities that had come to define Mexico's War on Drugs, the military campaign launched by the Mexican government in 2006 to curtail the flow of narcotics to the United States—and the growing power of the drug cartels who were moving them.

With Mexican soldiers on the streets, violence between the army and the cartels grew ubiquitous and unpredictable: The military fought the cartels, the cartels fought one another, and innocents trapped on the battlefronts fell prey to the volatile whims of armed groups.

Now, on the street leading up to the bridge, Miriam walked by eateries, money changers, and pharmacies selling Viagra, studying the faces of everyone she passed. The moment she hung up with the tipster, she had called Luis to drive her to the bridge, located two hours north in Matamoros, a bustling city of half a million people. Though she and Luis had separated years before, they still worked together, an unlikely pair of vigilantes, to find Karen's killers. Miriam paused every few minutes to show locals the photo of the Florist, hoping someone might have seen him in the area. Street hawkers often recognized one another, even total strangers. Luis sold home goods and cowboy hats in the San Fernando Market, a single-story building fronted by a brick colonnade near the town center. She worked there, too, selling cowboy boots from her own store, and she could remember the face of just about everyone that came and went with any regularity. But none of the people she asked now recalled seeing the Florist—not from her dated picture, anyhow. She edged closer to the toll plaza at the end of the street, where vehicles and pedestrians climbed toward the bridge's twin spans leading in and out of Mexico.

Miriam moved with a deftness that belied her age, sliding in and out of stores and among the individuals crowding the sidewalk. She stood about five foot six, with short-cropped hair, a round face, and metal-frame eyeglasses. At fifty-six, she got around with greater ease than she ever had in her thirties and forties. For most of her life, Miriam had been obese. Though always particular about her looks, wearing earrings and makeup and carefully selected matching outfits for even the most basic outings, she had weighed more than 350 pounds in the mid-2000s. Her friends called her *gordita bonita*, a playful way of referring to someone both large and beautiful. Fed up with the physical constraints of her weight, Miriam decided to get a gastric bypass in 2007.

Now, she weighed about 135 pounds and took more pride in her looks than ever. Beyond the change to her looks, though, the transformation allowed her to more readily track her daughter's killers. The effort required mobility—Miriam spent entire days hiking through abandoned ranches and barren scrubland under the punishing sun, driving to and from Ciudad Victoria, the state capital of Tamaulipas, to pressure prosecutors and government officials there, and staking out safe houses where she believed kidnappers might be hiding their victims. On more than one occasion, Miriam had chased down and tackled Zeta members belonging to the Florist's cell.

As an amateur criminal investigator, Miriam was fearless and relentless, twin attributes that served her mission well, even if they left those around her uneasy. Miriam's children—Azalea, Luis Héctor, and Karen—had often teased their mother that she secretly wanted to be a cop but wasn't corrupt enough to qualify. Back in 1989, when thieves emptied her husband's safe, Miriam had found the culprits and recovered the stolen goods. In 2012, when kidnappers had threatened Azalea's husband, Ernesto, Miriam had insisted on paying the ransom herself. While some people in San Fernando expressed shock at how much Miriam had changed over the years, how she had grown as bold and relentless as the Zetas she was hunting, others saw the same woman they had always known.

Around the time of Miriam's physical transformation, San Fernando was undergoing its own metamorphosis. Like so many others that grew up in San Fernando, Miriam had watched in awed silence as her town descended into violence. One of nine children born to ranch hands and farmers, she had spent her entire life there, from high school to marriage to motherhood. Violent death was rare; in the 1960s, when she was a child, a single homicide stunned townspeople.

Back then, the criminal group that would come to be known as the Gulf Cartel dominated the state of Tamaulipas, and as a result had always had some sort of presence in town. But things had been relatively peaceful. The criminals never bothered regular working people, and in fact relied on their support to conduct business. In those days, Miriam would see them around, driving luxury trucks, throwing parties, eating opulent meals in the town's

restaurants and then paying the tabs of diners to curry favor with the population. The locals had learned to coexist with the group's operators in San Fernando, and Miriam, like others, came to accept the symbiosis between them—each left the other to their own devices.

And then, all of a sudden, 2010 had happened and everything she thought she knew about San Fernando and her life there changed. A vicious breakup of the Gulf Cartel in Tamaulipas, a key smuggling route into the United States, led to the area being carved up by two main cartels, the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas.

The criminal organization that became the Gulf Cartel had run things in Tamaulipas for more than seventy years, first by smuggling alcohol, home goods, and electronics into the United States and then, in the 1990s, by trafficking massive quantities of cocaine, a move that took their earnings into the billions of dollars. As competition from rival traffickers stiffened, the leader of the cartel decided in 1998 to form a paramilitary wing within his organization to protect his interests. That group, originally made up of Mexican Army Special Forces deserters, was known as the Zetas.

For more than a decade, the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas worked together, side by side like the fingers of a glove, smuggling cocaine into the United States and warring with rival cartels across the country. But in 2010, as disagreements between the two groups mounted, the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas split, and the Zetas decided to go into business for themselves. The fight that ensued between the Gulf and the Zetas for control of the drug trade changed the way cartels operated in Mexico.

The Zetas, given their military background, were more studied in violence than their onetime Gulf bosses, and far more adept at logistics and planning. They began in 2010 to wage a war for territory and smuggling routes that staggered even the most hardened cartel killers. The Zetas' bloodlust made the already grim violence that marked the government's War on Drugs seem quaint by comparison. The Zetas beheaded their victims or dissolved them in vats of acid; they forced captives to fight to the death for their own amusement, like a medieval death rite; and they killed innocents by the hundreds.

Then, the Zetas' brand of dehumanization caught on—and spread. For all its exceptions, the drug economy often follows the laws of markets. It demands adaptation, flexibility. Once the Gulf had militarized by adding the Zetas to their ranks, other cartels in Mexico did, too. Competition between criminal groups got a lot deadlier after that. In 2011, the year after the Gulf and the Zetas split, Mexico registered nearly 28,000 murders, more than any other year since the government began collecting homicide data two decades before.

The Mexican government could neither combat nor clean up the mess it had helped spark with its War on Drugs. Even the declaration of the war, rendered in such stark language, had set the terms for violent confrontation. But in a nation where the rule of law often didn't exist, where government corruption and complicity with organized crime dated back nearly a century, further back than even the Gulf Cartel itself, the police and prosecutors were largely powerless. Having ignored criminality for decades, a time in which politicians grew wealthy running their own criminal rackets and the cartels grew increasingly powerful in the shadows, the nation's law enforcement was hardly in a position to enforce the new mandate of confrontation. So the cartels took to the streets for control as regular citizens suffered under the weight of all-out conflict.

Tamaulipas, located along a prime stretch of the U.S. border, was an epicenter of the war; the town of San Fernando, located in the center of the state, became an epicenter of the epicenter.

And around the time that everything changed, when Miriam Rodríguez would still see the Florist selling roses along the main avenues of town, the whole state was engulfed in conflict.

With few economic prospects, the Florist had joined the Zetas in 2013, inducted by a fellow flower vendor who was soon after beheaded. By then, the original, highly trained leaders of the Zetas, the former Special Forces operators who brought military skills to match their ambitions, were long gone. With the increase in violence and bloodshed, and with ever-more-vicious battles raging across the country, the Zetas needed more recruits willing to join the fight, regardless of their experience.



With little to recommend him for the world of organized crime, the Florist joined as a lookout, earning in one week what took a month of hawking flowers and washing car windows. But as his slide into the underworld progressed, he began participating in the kidnappings-for-ransom the Zeta cell in San Fernando used to finance itself. One of those kidnappings, in January 2014, was of Miriam Rodríguez's daughter Karen.

Organized crime touched everyone living in San Fernando, if not directly then through friends or relatives murdered, neighbors disappeared, or the simple privation of life that marked everyday routines. And yet for years Miriam had held closely to the belief that as long as she kept her family out of trouble, as long as they continued working in the market selling cowboy hats and boots, and her son remained two hours away in Ciudad Victoria, and her daughter stayed within the confines of working-class mores, nothing would happen to them. That was the promise of cartel coexistence, as they had come to understand it—to leave alone the innocent and uninvolved.

Even as things began to change in 2010, Miriam had clung to that faith. She admonished her children to keep their heads down, to mind their own business. This was a violation of her own character—Miriam was always direct with others, never shy about sharing an opinion or pushing back against something she thought of as unfair or unjust. But all that had changed now. She told her son, Luis Héctor, not to come home as often, that she would visit him in the state capital instead. That was another fallacy she had once held—that the violence would target only men, that she and Karen and her older daughter, Azalea, were safe.

As homicides skyrocketed and a fifth of the population abandoned San Fernando, Miriam held out. Sure, there were kidnappings, but only of the rich. Sure, people disappeared, but most were probably involved in organized crime somehow. The grisly murders? That was just the two warring cartels fighting it out. Denial allowed one to survive under the most abject circumstances, to avoid reckoning with the horrors of daily life and persevere in the face of them. The alternative was admitting that the life she had built for her family was gone; the alternative was fleeing or, in Miriam's case, fighting.

It was only after Karen was taken in 2014 that Miriam really grasped how dire the situation was in San Fernando, understood the extent of the damage wrought by organized crime and that its effects were inescapable. Karen had been living at home back then, on a hiatus from university. At twenty-one, she had wanted to switch careers from psychology to radiology and needed a few months to transition.

Miriam and Luis were newly separated, a split that Karen had taken hard. Unable to convince her parents to reconcile, she had found her outlet in rebellious behavior—staying out late, drinking with friends at parties, driving alone at all hours. With her rosy complexion and blond hair, Karen had always turned heads. Young men flagged down her truck on the town's main drag to buy her flowers from the street vendors—including from the Florist.

Miriam worried about Karen's safety but struggled to control her. It did not help that she was dealing with her separation from Luis—a seismic shift in her domestic life after more than thirty years of marriage. Having accepted infidelity, disrespect, and cruelty from her husband, Miriam wasn't really in a position to demand things of Karen. At least, Karen didn't think so.

When Karen was kidnapped, Miriam had been living in the United States, working as a housekeeper and nanny for a pair of doctors in the border town of McAllen, Texas. She had needed to get away from Luis and the market where they both worked, to put some distance between herself and the overlapping parts of their lives that had made it so hard to separate in the first place. So Miriam placed Karen in charge of her store, Rodeo Boots, and went north to earn in dollars.

Miriam had been gone barely two months when she got the call telling her that the Zetas were demanding a ransom to give Karen back.

Two years on, Miriam had pursued the men and women responsible, with more than a little success—four of them were in prison awaiting trial, and six were dead from a Mexican marine raid. But the trail of the eleventh Zeta, the Florist, had been faint. The intelligence on his whereabouts never amounted to much more than rumor and whisper. The young man had fled San Fernando after Karen's disappearance and, as far as she could tell, never resurfaced in town. Miriam had tracked down his family, friends, and former

cartel compatriots, and had even made friends with the widow of a fellow Zeta that was close to the Florist. From this woman, she heard that the Florist was back living in Matamoros, his hometown.

As the sun crested over the bridge's red archway, Miriam searched for the Florist in vain. He was not among the vendors stationed along the esplanade, the sidewalks, or even the narrow entrance to the bridge itself, where pedestrians paid tolls to cross over to the United States. The plaza beside that narrow entrance, a triangular patch of concrete with white wrought-iron benches and a large tree growing in its center, was filled with people. Just not the Florist.

Ever since Karen's disappearance, there were few friends that Miriam could confide in, whose lives and worlds were close enough to her own that she never felt the need to caveat or explain herself. One such friend was Chalo, the director of San Fernando's main funeral home. Chalo admired Miriam for being perhaps the only person in San Fernando not silenced by fear: She had told him once that fear was just a word.

Having spent the better part of half an hour scouring the area leading onto the bridge, she wondered if the tip had been wrong. With no remaining options, she decided to cross onto the bridge itself and look for the Florist there.

Miriam crossed the toll plaza and began to climb the covered footpath. The walkway had a prison-like feel, everything demarcated and bordered: corrugated tin overhead, textured stone slabs underfoot, and chain-link fence on either side of the handrails, marking the boundaries of public access. Concrete barricades directed cars into bright yellow customs lanes. Traffic, human and vehicular, moved in both directions along the two asphalt decks, while the dull green waters of the Rio Grande passed quietly beneath.

To the right of the walkway, through the rusted fencing attached to the balustrade, the river divided the United States and Mexico. On one end of the bridge was the state of Tamaulipas, where in recent years organized crime had murdered a leading gubernatorial candidate, two mayors, and numerous police officers. And on the other was Texas, where a pox of empty storefronts offered the only outward sign of crisis along its end of the divide.

Thousands crossed every day from one country to the other, connected by family, culture, history, and commerce. Miriam had worked in the United States, as had her husband and son. She had crossed this bridge in Matamoros more times than she could count—often to visit the large, air-conditioned malls of Texas. Miriam had once carried Karen as a toddler across another bridge, in the city of Reynosa, for life-changing surgery in Texas.

Miriam loved to shop, a passion she had passed on to her two daughters. Except that Karen, unlike her mom and older sister, had always been less materialistic. She gave things away freely: clothes, shoes, money. Her siblings thought Karen was just spoiled, having grown up during the flush years, when Miriam and Luis no longer struggled to get their businesses off the ground, and could not understand the value of their relative privilege.

But Karen was softhearted, a characteristic that set her apart from her siblings. She would take indigent women off the street and clean them up, give them outfits to wear. Karen had missed the lean years, when her parents struggled to make ends meet, and perhaps believed that relative comfort was something to be shared, not clung to. She had treated the Florist with kindness before he ever joined the Zetas. She would see him selling flowers on the main drag of San Fernando, known as La Calle Ancha, or broad street, and while most motorists passed the Florist without a second thought, Karen would hand him a dollar or two, just to be nice. Her daughter's kindness toward the Florist lodged deep inside of Miriam.

Miriam continued to study the photo of the Florist, though by now she knew the picture by heart. The Florist, with three others, dressed in a cowboy shirt, drinking beer. He was hard to find on social media—while the others had boasted on Facebook about their exploits, snapping photos with machine guns, piles of drugs, and their fellow Zetas in sordid hotel rooms, the Florist barely showed up in any. Their online profiles had made the young men and women involved in Karen's murder easier to track. The Florist's lack of one, meanwhile, had helped him evade Miriam for longer.

As she walked along the footpath, she glanced up and noticed a young man selling compact discs. Roughly five foot eight, slender to the point of malnourishment. The odds of it. Moving closer to him, she was certain.