

Gabriella Riis Gutierrez stood short of five foot seven. At one time, during a low point in her young life, she weighed less than ninety pounds, the size she was when Charlie Draper found her in running from cartel enforcers in the Sonoran Desert. When she stepped on the scale this morning, it read one-twenty. Pleased with the figure, she resolved not to let it go any higher. Alone, due to her husband's night shift duty at the Sheriff's Office, she prepared for work at the hospital, content, and happy. As was her habit, she checked her Glock 9mm before leaving. It sat in her carryall bag, secure under make-up, tampons, coin purse, Kleenex, and other mysterious female necessities. Her Sheriff's Deputy husband, still new to her bed, claimed a steel trap resided in the bottom that only snapped at male fingers.

Gabriella never went anywhere without the weapon. Draper insisted on it and spent hours teaching his adopted daughter how to use it. They practiced together until she could beat or tie him at the range half the time.

Locking the house, Gabriella drove to the hospital enjoying a crimson Arizona sunrise and singing along to a Taylor Swift ballad on the radio. She parked in the employee area and began gathering her necessities when the car door opened and a man stuck a chrome-plated automatic in her face.

"Make a sound, bitch, and you're dead," he growled, his voice harsh, leaving no doubt in his statement. He wore dark clothing that melded him into the early dawn. Gabriella detected strong body odor behind a face masked in dark cloth, and a foreign accent making bitch sound like beach.

Gabriella's initial reaction of fear, turned in a quick moment to cold resolve, a condition she had not felt for several years. She remembered the odors of uncounted men, reviving buried deep memories. When her instincts resisted, the man hit her with something hard, causing flashing lights in her brain and a short mental video of the *casa de puta* where she spent her formative teenage years. When stressed, Gabriella mused in Spanish, an old habit she, of late, forgot. "*¿Qué es lo que quiere?*" she thought. Rough hands dragged her; a car seat lay under her, and then a moving car, all in the space of fleeting moments clouded by head pain. Lying death still, with little difficulty feigning unconsciousness, her mind raced, sorting the lessons Draper taught her. Opening one eye, she saw a seat back and the top of the driver's head. Groping for her purse, she touched it, still looped over her arm. Inside, her hand filled with Glock. She took a breath, and sat upright. The back of the driver's head blurred a moment, and then focused.

"Hey, asshole," she said, "where we going?"

Her captor glanced back and slammed on the brakes, his last conscience action before Gabriella's first nine-millimeter bullet tore through the seat back and into his upper chest. The car, slowed by the loose sand on a Sonoran Desert goat trail, stopped sudden when it smacked into a multi-armed Saguaro cactus.

“I hope you’re not dead, asshole,” Gabriella said to the silent car, “because you will be in more trouble for damaging that Saguaro than for kidnapping me.” The sharp crack of the Glock inside the car penetrated her mind and made her realize she was still pulling the Glock trigger. She remembered Draper’s words, *‘if you are going to shoot someone, shoot to kill, because dead assholes cannot shoot back.’* Her kidnapper’s blood decorated the steering wheel and most of the driver’s half of the windshield when she stopped pulling the trigger. Without ceremony, Gabriella tossed her meager breakfast into the backseat foot well.