

DUELING EAGLES



CHAD CLABO

Dueling Eagles

by Chad Clabo

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Minneapolis, MN
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Chapter One

Ned Albrecht was used to waiting. He had spent more time waiting in his current position than in any employment he had ever held. Ned was three months in this new position, working as primary aide to Senator Michael Andrez, and it didn't look like the waiting was likely to end anytime soon. Once this latest trouble on the border had started, the senator wasn't taking much time to deal with anything else.

The senator was currently in a meeting with five other senators and the President of the United States. Ned would prefer to be doing something, anything, other than waiting around for the meeting to end. The senator, however, wanted Ned to be immediately available, should something come up that might require his assistance. And being the senior senator from the Great State of Texas, he was going to require a lot of help given the current crisis.

The waiting room was pleasant enough. The chairs were comfortable, the decoration was agreeable, and Ned had gotten used to wearing a suit during the long campaign. Agreeable, thought Ned. That was exactly the word. This wasn't his first visit to the White House, but he'd never given it much thought before. The décor of the White House seemed, most importantly, not to offend. It was very agreeable. From the neutral colored walls, to the plush oversized chairs. Even the abstract patterns in the carpet weren't too abstract. Ned was about to get lost in one of those patterns when he heard the door to the oval office opening. Ned saw not only Senator Andrez and his fellow senator from Texas exit the room, but also the two

senators from California, as well as one senator each from both Arizona and New Mexico.

“Come on Ned,” said the senator, as he walked quickly across the room. “We’ve got to get going.”

“I thought you’d be in there for a while longer. What’s going on?”

The senator remained silent, and appeared agitated. Ned thought it best to let the matter drop for the moment. They traveled down the halls and through security without any further conversation. It wasn’t until they were alone in the back of the senator’s town car that Ned decided to try again.

“What’s happened Senator?” Ned knew that there was only one issue contentious enough to have caused this kind of reaction from the senator. “Is there a problem with the deportation program?”

“I don’t know if it’s a problem.” The senator looked hesitant through the dim light of the darkened windows. “But it’s definitely going to cause some waves. Ned, I want you to prepare for a flight back to Texas.”

“I don’t know if that’s the best idea right now.” Ned was trying to hide his surprise. “Sir, your calendar is full for the next two weeks, and there are several important votes coming up.”

“No Ned, you misunderstand.” The senator gave Ned a sideways glance. “We are not going to Texas. You are going to Texas.”

“Texas?” said Ned in disbelief. “You’ve hardly let me out of your sight for the past three months, and now you’re sending me to Texas?”

“I know you wanted to get a better feel for how things work in Washington Ned, but you’ve had four months here, and you’ll be coming back.”

“But what about Marlene? We have plans this weekend. She’d

probably understand if I were accompanying you, but...”

“She’ll still understand Ned. She knows the kind of work you do. I need someone at home who I can trust, someone who’s going to give it to me straight, and without all the pandering.”

Both men were silent for a moment.

“Okay,” said Ned. “Texas. So what’s going on anyway?”

“The president,” the senator stopped, then started again. “The president has decided to accelerate the deportations.”

“Accelerate? How does Mexico feel about that?” asked Ned, knowing that Mexico would not be happy. Mexico already wasn’t happy. Even though the deportations were following a schedule that both governments had agreed to, Mexico’s agreement was under threat of major trade embargoes.

“I’m pretty certain that Mexico doesn’t know.” The senator paused again. “And neither does anyone else Ned, so keep this quiet.”

“But how long can we keep this quiet?” asked Ned. “People will notice an acceleration.”

“Acceleration might be somewhat of an understatement,” said the senator.

“Well then, exactly what kind of acceleration are we talking about?”

The senator looked contemplative, and after a moment, he answered. “The president is planning a mass deportation Ned, and it’s happening tomorrow.”

Chapter Two

“You have to leave today?” asked the voice on the other end of the telephone?

“I have to leave right now,” said Ned. “I’m getting into a car as we speak, and it’s taking me to the airport directly.”

Contrary to what the senator had told Ned, it didn’t sound like Marlene was very understanding.

“And you can’t tell me where you’re going, or why?” she asked.

“I already told you I’m going to Austin. As far as the reason, the senator wants me to keep this quiet for a few days. You know, national security and all.”

“What kind of national security concerns can there be in Texas?” Almost as soon as she asked the question, she seemed to realize. “This has something to do with the border.”

“Now don’t read too much into what I say, Marlene. The bottom line is that I have to go to Texas, and I can’t tell you why. Don’t go trying to think that this is some kind of grand conspiracy.”

Ned knew that Marlene was itching to turn this into a flashy news story. She was just getting started in the national news scene. Like Ned, she was new to Washington. That was probably one of the reasons that they seemed to get along so well. Both Washington outsiders, but both also wanting to be better connected. Marlene, however, had spent four years working in a Midwest newsroom cutting her teeth in the news industry, while Ned had spent most of that time campaigning in Texas for the senator’s reelection.

“Grand conspiracy indeed,” said Marlene. “You know, I’m not

going out with you just so I can get a heads up on the political news of the day. I can wait for the press conference like everyone else.”

“That’s good to hear,” said Ned. “I’ve been hoping that you wanted me for my body.” Ned was only half joking. He had always kept himself fit, and his years in the military had kept him in good condition, but Ned knew that he was never going to win a modeling competition. He just wasn’t that devoted to his appearance.

“Just keep hoping Ned, and be glad that your looks aren’t your only positive attribute.”

“More than one?” asked Ned. “That makes me want you to list them for me, but we just got to the airport. I’ve got to let you go. I’ll call you as soon as I can tell you more about what’s going on.”

“Call me before then,” said Marlene. “I don’t know if you’ve heard, but my plans for this weekend just went out the window.”

And with that, the conversation was over. Ned picked up his carryon bag and headed to security, the senator’s office having printed his boarding passes before he left. In less than five hours, Ned Albrecht would be in Austin.

Chapter Three

Ned found himself waiting again. It had been sixteen hours since the senator's meeting with the president had ended, but it felt like it might have been only one. The flight to Austin went as smoothly as any other, and Ned was supposed to have had a brief meeting with the governor the previous night, but it was rescheduled for this morning.

How unlike this waiting room was from the one Ned had found himself in the day before. While it wasn't entirely disagreeable, there was a certain ostentatious swagger to Texas politicians, and it was reflected in their decoration. There was a painting commemorating what could only be the governor's alma mater, The University of Texas and their Longhorns football team. Opposite the painting, and directly behind the secretary's desk, was a pair of actual longhorns, mounted for display. Even mounted on the wall they looked like they could gore someone.

The secretary's phone rang; she picked it up, placed it back down, and told Ned that the governor was ready to see him.

"Ned Albrecht," Governor Arvin Foster shouted with his trademark enthusiasm. "I haven't seen you since last November. It looks like you forgot all your friends back home once your boss won his campaign." The governor grabbed Ned's hand and shook it with great gusto. "Sit down, Ned, sit down. I trust your flight went well. I'm sorry I had to cancel our meeting last night, but man, did I have a day?"

"That's okay Governor," said Ned. "There's still plenty of time to

get to El Paso?” Ned looked to the governor for confirmation.

“Oh yeah Ned, don’t worry about that. I’ve got you on a military jumper at eleven o’clock. You should be there in time for a late lunch.”

“And you’ve been fully briefed on the situation?” Ned once again looked to the governor.

“Yup, I was on a secure phone call with the president and his staff for almost an hour last night. I don’t think I’ve ever spent that much time talking to el presidente before. Nothing like a crisis to get everybody communicating.”

“Do you agree with the president that this is the best course of action? I know that Senator Andreaz has his reservations.”

“Senator Mike,” Governor Foster said. “Has reservations about his morning coffee.” The governor gave Ned a circumspect look. “But to answer your question, I don’t know what the best thing to do right now is. There’s no good solution to this problem. The food stores are going to be gone in less than two weeks, and that’s only if we can keep filling them up at the current pace.”

Ned knew that what the governor said was true. The Alien Relocation Center that had been built at Fort Bliss near El Paso was intended to hold only 10,000 individuals, but the number of people there now exceeded 20,000. There had been a stockpile of wheat and rice in October that would have fed 10,000 for more than six months. Now, it was six months later and the supply was nearly depleted, even after collecting additional food donations from across the country.

“Is there anything you want me to do while I’m out there?” Ned asked the governor.

“No Ned, I’ve got a man out there myself, he can handle anything I need.” The governor stared out the window toward the skyline of downtown Austin. “I sort of wish I could go there myself, but those hounds in the media would say I’m abandoning my place

of leadership during this time of crisis.”

“True,” said Ned. “But they’ll say you’re ignoring the problem if you don’t go.”

“That’s right. You can’t win for losing with those folks.” The governor looked back toward Ned and then picked up his phone. “Jeanine, I want you to have my car ready downstairs to take Mr. Albrecht to the airport.” He put the phone back down and then reached out to shake Ned’s hand. “Listen Ned, I want you to watch your back out there. El Paso’s not the nice town it used to be. You keep yourself in the green zone, okay? We raised a lot of money together last year, and I’d hate to see you gone, just because you were stupid.”

“Well then Governor,” said Ned. “I’ll try not to be stupid.”

Chapter Four

While it wasn't Ned's first time on a military flight, it was the first time he had flown on one as a civilian. He couldn't get used to everyone calling him sir. He had thought about becoming an officer during his time in the military, and he almost certainly would have, had he stayed in, but the highest rank that Ned had attained while in the army was that of sergeant. Most of the passengers sharing this flight were soldiers headed to Fort Bliss for added security in support of the mass deportation, although it was likely that they didn't know exactly what was going on just yet. Except for Ned's conversations with the governor, no one seemed to know about anything out of the ordinary.

For the past six months, the Alien Relocation Center at El Paso had been sending four hundred LTAs across the border daily. LTA was the acronym used for those legally classified as Long Term Aliens. To be considered a Long Term Alien, the person had to have been residing in the United States for at least two years. The current expulsion agreement with Mexico allowed for not more than one thousand deportations of Long Term Aliens per day. Of that number, the El Paso Alien Relocation Center was allowed four hundred deportations daily. This number did not include STAs, or Short Term Aliens, of which there was no limit on the number that could be deported.

Once the plane had landed, Ned made his way across the dusty airfield and set out to see the base commander, one General Donato Everley. Ned had been assigned a local soldier as a guide and driver

while on base, a Private Philips, and was very glad of it. He had visited El Paso once during the senator's reelection campaign, but they had never gotten to Fort Bliss, and it was also before the deportation center had been completely set up. Ned felt at once familiar with being on the military base, and also somewhat out of place. It seemed an incalculably long time since he had visited an army post, while in fact, it had only been four years since he had been released from active duty. Having finally arrived at the base headquarters, Private Philips introduced Ned to the general.

"General Everley," Ned said. "It's good to meet you. I only wish it could have been under better circumstances."

"Yeah, if wishes were horses, and all that." The general didn't seem up for the usual small talk. "Listen here Mr. Albrecht. I've got less than six hours to get this operation underway, and orders to maintain secrecy. Do you know how difficult it is to give vague orders to people when you can't really tell them exactly what's going on?"

"Well..."

"I didn't think so," the general continued without waiting for Ned to finish. "So what can I do for you anyway? You have my full attention for exactly five minutes."

"Well," Ned started again. "What I really need from you is a brief understanding of how this operation is going to happen. I know that there is a plan for a mass deportation this evening, and that it is scheduled for approximately nineteen hundred hours, but I would like to know some of the logistics involved, as well as the final number of Long Term Aliens that will be deported."

"Operations won't be any different than a standard day, except for the numbers of course." The general sat down at his desk. It was a massive desk that divided the small room in half, but it looked

decades old. Ned wasn't sure, but the room looked like it hadn't had a redesign since the time the building was built, although the paint looked fresh, with off-white walls to match the austere environment. "We're going to round them all up starting at seventeen hundred and then march them all down Old Highway Fifty-Four until we get to the drawbridge."

"But the Juárez officials won't be ready to take any more than the usual four hundred."

"No Mr. Albrecht," the general continued. "They won't be ready, or willing I expect. That's why I've been authorized to send in an advance team to secure the Juárez side of the bridge. They will move in at eighteen hundred."

"You're conducting a military operation on Mexican soil?" asked Ned in disbelief. "Aren't you concerned that this is going to provoke a political response from Mexico City?"

"Everything about this operation is going to provoke a response from Mexico," The general said. "I don't make the policy here son, I just implement it. As for the actual number of deportees, I've been told that as a special representative of Senator Andreaz, you have clearance to receive this information, but I also need you to understand that this information is not cleared to be released in any format until this operation is complete. That is, no electronic or traditional correspondence of any kind. Don't mention it in a phone call, put it in an email, or even write it in your diary, is that understood?"

"Surely I can discuss this with the senator..."

"He should be cleared for this information in Washington, but it isn't something that should be discussed outside of secured communication, is that understood?"

"Yes sir," said Ned. "I understand."

“Good,” said the general. “The number of deportees for today’s mission is approximately fourteen thousand.”

Chapter Five

Ned had been aghast. Fourteen thousand deportees. This number had provoked so many additional questions that Ned didn't know where to begin. Unfortunately, General Everley had insisted that their time was up, and even though he had set up a meeting with his civilian counterpart to address any further questions, Ned felt somewhat slighted by his brusqueness.

Once again, Ned was riding in the military transport vehicle with his driver. It was about ten miles from General Everley's office to the operational headquarters in El Paso. Most of the time was spent driving through Fort Bliss and around the El Paso International airport. Ned expected a war zone in El Paso, but the streets seemed quite settled.

"Is it always this quiet, Philips?" Ned asked the driver.

"I expect so sir, at least in the green zone," the driver replied. "But I don't get off the base too much these days, except for the deportations."

They were on their way to the former campus of the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, where the operational headquarters were located. Chosen for its proximity to the deportation port as well as the military base, the Health Sciences Center facility was a relatively new complex of buildings that supplied the civilian leadership of the operation a stable headquarters in the heart of the green zone. While the deportations were officially a joint operation with the military, the civilian command structure was supposed to

be responsible for operational authority.

Driving through the city seemed like a rather normal affair, but Ned knew that the safe looking streets belied the reality of life in most of greater El Paso, as well as in Juárez, just across the border in Mexico. There were other cars on the street as they traveled down Airport Road, and the closer they got to downtown, the more people they could see walking. Ned knew that outside of the green zone, things would not be so normal. He had heard stories about gangs roaming the streets with little interference from the police, and knew that since the closing of all ports of entry between Juárez and El Paso, the crashing local economy had made the city's commercial viability all but nonexistent.

When they finally arrived at the operational headquarters, Ned found himself surprisingly impressed with the buildings. The capitol building in Austin was terribly grand, while the military buildings on the army post were extremely utilitarian. The buildings here seemed to blend the two styles somewhat gracefully. The brick exterior of the main building and the abundance of windows made for extremely well lit offices and conference rooms. Classrooms, Ned had to remind himself as he walked down the halls to meet with the director, they used to be classrooms.

Abigail Rodriguez was the civilian director of the Alien Relocation Center here in El Paso. When Ned arrived at her office, he was told that she was already speaking to a Mister Stuart, but that he should go on in. Her office had a very academic feel to it, which was almost certainly a holdover from when this had been the office of the president of the Health Sciences Center.

“Mister Albrecht,” the director greeted Ned. Ned was a little surprised that she wasn't very tall. In his experience, most women in powerful positions were tall and at least a little imposing. Abigail

Rodriguez was neither. “I’m glad that you’ve made it. I cleared some time in my schedule for both you and Mister Stuart, who arrived this morning. Have you met Mister Stuart?”

“I told you to call me Jack,” said the other man in the room. “And I met Ned a couple of times last October, though we never really did get a chance to get acquainted.

Ned recognized Jack Stuart as one of the workers on the governor’s reelection campaign, although, like he said, they didn’t really know each other. Jack wore a dark suit that didn’t quite fit, and his hair was a bit shaggy. This must be the governor’s man in El Paso.

“And you both can call me Abby,” said the director. “Why don’t we all sit down? So Ned, I understand that you had a brief meeting with the general, but you probably still have questions.”

“I’d say that was a bit of an understatement,” said Ned. “That meeting left me with more questions than I had going in, and at the top of the list is, where did this fourteen thousand number come from?”

“Fourteen thousand?” asked Jack. “Is that how many y’all are sending back today?” Ned felt a little bit of relief that he wasn’t the only one who was dismayed by this large number.

“Yes, fourteen thousand is the approximate number,” said the director. “And yes, I realize that this seems like an insanely high figure. I argued against it. I told both the general and the president that the Juárez officials won’t be able to handle anything like that number, but they insist on following this new formula, and...”

“Wait,” said Ned, cutting the director off. “What’s this about a new formula?”

“Well, you both know that according to last year’s treaty there is no limit to the number of Short Term Aliens that we can deport, and that Mexico is responsible for transporting any Non Mexican Aliens

through their territory if deemed suitable?” Director Rodriguez looked to both men as they nodded in agreement. “Up until now, we’ve been taking people at their word for how long they’ve been residing in this country, as well as their country of origin. The justification, therefore, for deporting so many, is that we are now classifying all those without proof of United States residency for more than two years as Short Term Aliens, and those without proof of Mexican citizenship as Non Mexican Aliens.”

“Thereby appearing to hold to the letter of the treaty,” said Ned. “While completely ignoring the spirit of it.” Ned knew that the director had been correct. This sounded completely insane. “There is no way that Mexico is going to tolerate this. Has anyone given any thought to what their response is going to be?”

“I think the president’s feeling is,” said the director. “That they won’t like it, but won’t be able to do anything about it. With their trade being so heavily reliant on us, there isn’t much that they can do.”

“Yeah.” Jack added his voice back into the conversation. “It isn’t like we can expect a military response from the Mexicans.”

“This doesn’t just sound insane,” said Ned. “We’re talking about the inability of the Mexican Government to form a military response? This is completely nuts. The United Nations would probably sanction us for this deportation if we didn’t have our veto.”

“You’re probably right there Ned,” said Jack. “It’s a good thing we have that veto. Wait, did you hear that?” One quiet boom was followed quickly by several louder ones. Then the building shook.

“What the hell was that?”