

The background is a painting with a textured, aged appearance. It features a yellow figure on the left and a blue silhouette on the right. The blue silhouette is positioned behind a table that holds a blue cup and a dark object. The overall color palette is warm, with yellows, oranges, and browns, accented by the blue and red elements.

Twisted Gods

Víctor Celorio

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InstaBook

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by

Víctor Celorio

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1

Cuernavaca Road. Spring.

One week before the assassination was to be executed, a 77 year old man was watching the President of the United States being interviewed on television. He was in his private study, —a large section of a huge mansion he had built for himself thirty years earlier, on top of a hill on the old road to Cuernavaca—. He had a wall to wall flat HDTV screen, the latest from Japan. The high resolution of the screen made it seem more like a cinema than television. Watching the news on the television was unusual for the old man. These days watching old films on it was his favorite pastime. His favorite ones were those films that came from Europe; especially those filmed before the Second World War.

His war.

Those films allowed the old man to return over and over to the days in Dresden when he had been a young man of 14, full of awe and passion for life. His father —who himself had been born in Dresden— had sent him across the Atlantic in 1937 to polish his education in a *gymnasium*, far away from the Mexican schools which his father despised. Karl Schmidt had been an engineer by profession. He had been hired by the Mexican government in 1919 to be the second in command at one of the most important silver mines in the state of San Luis Potosí, which had been in disarray after the Revolution of 1910 and later years. Since General Bracho, the man in charge of the mine,

did not even know how to write his own name, for all practical effects Karl Schmidt managed the mine himself.

Frederick had been born in México one year after the arrival at San Luis Potosi, because three months after arriving in México his father had married a beautiful young woman named Bertha Sánchez. Two years after his birth, the mother of Frederick had died in a freak accident during his second birthday party. As she came into the dining room of her house during the celebration with his cake in her hands, she slipped and cracked her skull against a coffee table. This had happened in plain view of her husband, and their 25 guests and their kids.

Perhaps his father blamed him for her death, or maybe the pain was just too much to bear, but for the next 12 years his father had left him in the care of Mexican nannies. Then, one day, both his father and the nannies realized with a shock that he was not a kid anymore. At this point in his life, after so many years of living alone, his father was more used to dealing with the stubborn, illiterate, hard working miners at his command, than with his son, who proved to be as sensitive as his deceased mother. When his father had used toward him the same strict demeanor that he used in the mine, the teenager would retreat into a fantasy world much in the same way that sixty years later *don Federico* would close himself into the private world of his mansion. Desperate, his father had decided to send him to his brother and his family in Germany, hoping that they could offer to his son what he was unable to give him: a good education and the discipline required to sustain it.

When Frederick Schmidt first arrived at the house of his uncle in Dresden, Adolph Hitler had just restored the might of the German army and his wild speeches were inflaming all citizens equally. The entire world was becoming mesmerized by the words and deeds of that short man. Politicians came from all over Europe to meet and deal with the creator of The Third Reich. The energy in the entire country was electrifying and invigorating: it was easy to be swept away by the fervor with which the German people received their *Fürher*.

For the young Mexican-German student, it was like being pulled by the whirlwind of a tornado. Young Federico —or Frederick

— lived through those days as in a dream. Those were the days that he — sixty years later — relived everyday, seating alone in front of the magnificent screen. The days of the tremendous excitement Hitler created in everybody in Germany and the way he and his fellow students at the *gymnasium* shared the accomplishments of the Fürher and of the German workers. Those two years —the days between his arrival in Germany and the day Hitler invaded Poland— were indeed glorious days for the young Frederick Schmidt. Days full of enchanting surprises and discoveries that kept him dizzy, in a slightly intoxicated state.

Afterwards, and for the rest of his life, he would miss the sweet air of Dresden during those spring days. He would never again enjoy anything as he had enjoyed those cobbled streets downtown with its beer-halls and restaurants, and those country fields during the summer *feasts*. He discovered music then. Oh, how he'd cherished music then! Beethoveen and Bach and Mozart and Wagner and so many other composers had absorbed his mind and his chest with emotions never felt before. He also found literature. And the world of ideas. He could feel still the thrill that he felt during his philosophy classes at the *gymnasium*, where he read and discussed Plato and Aristotle, and Nietzsche, and Hegel, Kant, and even Marx. Thinkers whose stature loomed larger in the young man's mind because back in the silver mine in México he had never suspected that such a marvelous world could exist. He had lived in Germany in a state of continuous amazement, exhilarated day after day by all the things he had not known existed until then, things that were his to take just by virtue of being alive.

Those were the days he tried to relive inside his private quarters. The days of magic and wonder. But above all, Oh Lord, above all he tried to relive the intensity of his love for his adored Ute.

She had captivated him from the very first time he had seen her.

When she walked into his life, he was in his uncle's house, formally seated in the receiving room and expecting his uncle to come down from his bedroom at any moment. It was early in the morning and the sun shone clear and bright out in the street. The snow was gone, and the fresh air of late March brought the smells of the approaching spring.

Since his arrival in Dresden only a few days before, Frederick was still trying to become used to the easy going and expansive character of his uncle Hans. His festive, kind and emotive mood was a sharp contrast with the serious, formal, demanding and often authoritarian character of his own father.

That day of spring in Dresden Frederick had seen her through the window as she approached the house. She arrived with the relaxed attitude of an old friend. Frederick would learn later that she was the daughter of a partner of uncle Hans, whom she called godfather; that she was one year younger than him; that she preferred lilies over roses; that she loved the fresh morning dew and thousand other details. But even more important, that first time he had seen her coming towards his uncle's house, Frederick knew she was to be his. Forever.

She stood in the door for a few seconds before coming inside. The sunlight coming from outside bathed her body and made her blonde hair shine as a magic crown. She was wearing a white dress, delicate and transparent, and during those brief seconds the young man's heart was captured and rendered prisoner. Then, when she turned and he was able to see her smile, he knew a joy as deep and powerful as anything he could ever have imagined. She looked at him, and he shook all over.

“You must be cousin Frederick,” she said.

He barely nodded, unable to utter a word.

“I was looking forward to meeting you. I know that you come from America, from a mysterious country called México, full of Indians and Revolutionaries. Is that true?” she carried on with the easy manner of a girl used to getting the attention of handsome suitors.

Frederick just looked at her with his mouth open, his mind paralyzed by her beauty and charms.

“Is that true?” she repeated.

“What? Oh, yes. Yes, *fräulain*.”

“You are my age so you may call me by my name. I am Ute Kadner,” she said, very proper.

And then she giggled for no reason.

Frederick started to giggle too and in a few seconds both, unable to stop themselves, were bent over with laughter.

From that day on Frederick followed Ute wherever she went. After twelve months of friendship he found she had the same strong emotions towards him. Shortly after this discovery they became formally a couple. Even though he was 18 and she 17, their families and friends gave them their blessings.

Their love grew stronger and stronger even in the midst of the rumors of war which grew uglier and uglier. Their love was like an invisible shield which allowed them to ignore anything which fell outside their moments together. Even after Hitler invaded Poland and the war became a reality, it was something that happened far away and its repercussions were muffled by their own feelings. Their love was so pure and so innocent even in the midst of the evil of war, that Frederick used to blush when he dared to steal a kiss from her while her mother pretended not to look. Their favorite time was their time to talk, which they did. For hours on end, during their walks in the forest in the warm evenings of that endless summer just before the war broke, they talked about everything and nothing at the same time. They talked about philosophy and music; about God and Man and about what they were going to do once the war was over. Kissing her lips was an extraordinary adventure for Frederick. When Ute laughed, nothing else mattered. Her laughter was his joy, and her pleasure his only purpose in life. Afterwards he would never know joy as deep or as wide reaching.

He loved her, indeed. He loved the young woman with a huge passion and the total devotion only a young man can muster.

Then the war grew and grew and kept on growing and slowly became a losing proposition for Germany. When the United States joined in the fight against Germany, Frederick's father, now fearful of losing him, ordered him back immediately to México using his Mexican passport and papers to get out of Europe.

Communications in a war ravaged continent took time. It took almost four months for his father's letter to finally reach Frederick, and by then it was almost too late to leave Germany.

Frederick talked to Ute, promised her a beautiful future in México for the two of them if she would marry him. When she said yes, Frederick set out to arrange things. He was able to hurry everything and everybody, and he and Ute married in a small ceremony in the Gothic cathedral of downtown Dresden, on July the 7th, 1944.

A few days after his wedding night, Frederick traveled to Berlin to arrange safe passage for him and his wife through the Mexican Embassy. In the middle of October, three months later, he was still in Berlin waiting for their visas and exit permits.

That's when his entire life was destroyed.

In October 25, 1944, the city of Dresden, a civilian target, was bombed by the Allied Forces.

When Frederick was able to get back from Berlin, he found nothing but ruins. Three quarters of the city had been destroyed. He barely recognized the streets where he had been so happy. He even lost his way several times among the devastation left behind by the Allied Forces. The American *B-17 Flying Fortress* bombers had dropped several hundred thousand pounds of bombs on the city. One of those bombs had directly hit Ute's house. When Frederick finally reached it, he found it turned into rubble and dust. He stumbled down to his knees to dig in the remains of the house with his bare hands, searching for a sign. He scratched and rummaged until somebody, an old woman, finally took pity on him and told him to stop.

"She is not there. She is alive. She must be in hiding", said the old woman.

Frederick held on to that slim hope. Possessed of a fear as large as his love, for several days he searched among the smoldering ruins of the city as he inspected once and again the shelters where the wounded laid in pain. It was all in vain. There was not even a trace of his Ute. Nobody knew what had happened to her and her family. In the last of those shelters Frederick did find his uncle Hans, badly injured.

“Uncle Hans! Thank God you are alive!”

“My dear boy, this old body of mine might be alive, but my heart is dead. My soul is dead. My country is dead. We have lost all”, he cried.

“We will recover, uncle. We will. As soon as I find Ute, we will take care of you. You shall see. You will get better.”

“Ute?”, said his Uncle.

“Yes! Do you know where she is?”

“You mean you don’t know?”

“No, I don’t know where she is. I’ve got to find her.”

“No, no, my son, my beloved Frederick, that is not true”, said uncle Hans. He started to cry.

When Frederick asked why, his uncle could do nothing but shake all over. It took more prodding from Frederick until finally Hans blurted out the awful truth Frederick had been avoiding.

“Ute is dead. “

“You are lying.”

“I wish I were, my dear nephew.”

“Tell me how she died.”

“I will not!”

“Tell me or I will believe you are lying to me.”

“Is not enough that she is dead?”

Dead.

DEAD

“NO! She is not. She cannot be!”

Dead

The simplicity of the word was not enough to convey the atrocious meaning. Frederick wanted details; he wanted to punish himself by hearing exactly how and when. His uncle, scared and in pain both from his physical as well as his emotional wounds, gave the details Frederick demanded from him.

“She died instantly, without pain...”

“Tell me how!”

“Are you sure you want to know?”

“Yes, I am! Tell me!”

“A bomb fell right onto her house. Nobody survived. She died immediately.”

“How do you know? How can you be so sure that she wasn’t alive?”

“Because...”

“Because what? Maybe she was unconscious. Maybe she woke up later...”

“Because Ute was decapitated!”

“NO!”

“I picked her up with my own hands. I wish I had been the one to die, my boy.”

Frederick wanted to know the rest. His uncle told him the best he could, how her mutilated body had been dumped among hundreds of others in a pile and then burned to avoid a plague. There was nothing left of her.

Frederick went mad.

The next year had been erased from his memory. He knew he had become a beast, a deranged animal who had fought with all his might against the invading forces; first against the Russians and then against the Americans. He had killed as many men as he could, for as long as he could, but all the killing had been in vain. His thirst for revenge had not been quenched. Then an enemy bullet wounded him in the back of the head and, when he woke up, the war was lost. The Russians were outside Berlin. It was a matter of days only.

Frederick thought he was going to die. He was resigned, even happy for it, since he would join his Ute. But he didn't and he hated himself for being alive. He pulled himself into his mind and the world ceased to have any meaning.

When Frederick had improved enough to get up and walk, he received the visit of a General at the hospital in Munich. The General stood by him, studying him in silence for a long time before he spoke.

"How do you feel?" the general asked. Frederick ignored him.

The General studied his face for some time and then he asked another question.

"Don't you want to extract revenge for what they did to your wife?"

That was all it was required to hook Frederick into a project that now, many years later, would finally bear fruit.

The General drove Frederick to a cave outside Munich, where the German Forces kept the treasures of art captured from the conquered countries. The General did not bother to explain to Frederick all of that wealth. He simply drove him all the way to the back of the cave, where he opened an enormous crate filled with gold bars.

"I know you have a Mexican passport, and the proper permits to get out. I want you to use your papers to get into Switzerland. Once you are settled, I will find a way to send you this gold. I want you to deposit it under your name and take care of it until the day comes when you can extract a measure of revenge equal to what they've done to our Fürher, to our fatherland, to your Ute, and to us all. Will you swear to do that?"

Frederick swore to the General everything and anything.

He was able to think of only one word. It was the word revenge. Revenge. REVENGE!

The General took 2 gold bars from the huge crate full of them, placed the bars in a leather suitcase with a false bottom, and gave it to Frederick.

"Inside the suitcase there is all the information you need, plus money in currency both in Swiss and American dollars. Go now. And be careful. Wait for our signal"

"Which will be...?"

"I know about the legend of Quetzalcóatl, the blond bearded God that taught the Indians in México how to grow corn, the one who was vanquished one day and left, but promised to come back someday."

"That's right", said Frederick, and for the first time in many months he felt a smile creeping onto his mouth.

"The signal will be *Quetzalcóatl*, then"

The General slapped him hard in the back, saluted as if saluting the Fürher for the last time, took Frederick out of the cave and left him in front of another car. While the car pulled away from the city towards the border with Switzerland, Frederick realized he didn't even know the name of the General.

He knew only one thing.

Revenge would be his someday.

Quetzalcóatl would return.

2

Washington, D.C.

President William Conover held the news conference at the White House.

The President of the United States planned to have a leisurely talk with the press, but as soon as he stood at the podium after a brief introduction by his Press Secretary, the interrogation started.

"Mr. President," said Sheila Roberts, from *The New York Times*, "your visit to México is being interpreted as an implied backing from you and the United States to the Mexican government, which is slipping fast. Are you in fact doing that? Are you supporting your friend, the Mexican President, against the wishes of the Mexican Citizens?"

President Conover did not hesitate a second.

"Wait a second. First of all, the internal problems of our good neighbors are for them to solve. Also, I would like to remind you that our visit is to celebrate another anniversary of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and to explore extending NAFTA benefits to all the remaining countries in South America. As you know, I am proposing to Congress to expand the treaty to include all of the countries in the hemisphere. Our plan calls for creating a hemisphere-wide free-trade zone by 2005. The main purpose of my visit is to fight for free trade. I want to make sure our point will be heard loud and

clear by everybody. Besides this, I will be one among dozens of Presidents in a trip arranged a long time ago. At the Summit of the Americas in México I will be just another guy," he said, with the self-effacing humor the press enjoyed so much. Before the reporter could react and ask a second question the President pointed at another whom he thought was safer. He was not.

"The timing of your visit is the problem, Mr. President. Most of the polls indicate that PRI is in third place, and that the rest of the votes are split evenly between the two major opposition parties. It seems almost certain that PRI will lose a presidential election for the first time in the last seventy years. Your visit at this time is being used as propaganda by the old party backers. Doesn't that concern you? Aren't you worried about it?" asked Peter Lattell, from The Washington Post.

The President made use of his considerable charm while thinking fast.

"Worried about what? The polls, or my visit?"

There was some polite laughter.

"Your visit, of course. And the fact that it might be misconstrued," said the reporter.

"I wonder how it could be misconstrued. I have an excellent relationship with the Mexican President, because my government is well aware that the election process in México continues to improve every day under his administration. "

President Conover pointed to another reporter.

"What would you do if the opposition wins?" she asked. She was a French writer, from *Le Monde*. Her accent was heavy, and she spoke softly, slowly, emphasizing each word.

"What do you mean?"

"In the past, the American government has tried to influence politics in Latin America."

"Well, I can tell you right now that we completely respect all political parties in México. It does not matter to us who wins, because I am convinced that regardless of the outcome, our two countries are bound together. In the future we will be even closer. To show our

respect, I have agreed to meet with the leaders of all the political parties in México.”

The President allowed that piece of information to sink into the reporters’ minds. Surprised faces appeared all around the room.

“You mean that? You will meet with the opposition to PRI?” asked a Mexican reporter. Her shock was so obvious that the President could not disguise a smile. He answered her question.

“Yes, ma’am. I received a request to meet with them and I have agreed because I know that Mexico’s government is working to erase all the bad experiences from past elections. I am ready to show our proud neighbors how much we appreciate those efforts.”

“What would happen to NAFTA if the opposition wins?” asked John Chancellor from *The Washington Post*.

This question allowed President Conover to launch into a small speech about the benefits resulting so far from the treaty. He indicated how much the three countries involved—United States, México and Canada—had prospered and their economies had grown beyond anyone’s expectations. The President was perfectly aware that his words were being carefully watched in México, where nationalism was at very high levels. He knew that either his support, or his non-support would be used politically for or against his friend Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León, the President of México. So he was very careful not to say anything that could be misused by anyone. The elections in México would be held in a few weeks, and he was well aware everything indicated that PRI was going to lose the presidency. For real. For the first time in almost eighty years. And he also knew that his friend, the Mexican President, would deliver the presidency to whomever won the elections. Honestly. This is why President Conover was careful not to close the door on anyone who might possibly win the elections in México; he didn’t want to leave a poisoned relationship with México to his own successor in the presidency. After all, México was already the second most important trading partner of the United States. In a few more years México was bound to displace Canada, and become the number one trading partner of the United States. That was something President Conover could not afford to forget.

Very carefully, he included in his speech the words recommended to him by his Communication Adviser; words like "friends, pride, prosperity, future, peace and progress". Words chosen among others as usual by the Response Measure.

The Response Measure (RM) was a technique developed in 1998 by Peter Moss, a mathematician at Stanford who, one day while in the shower, realized that opinions and beliefs were based on words, and that words could be expressed in a mathematical equation. Therefore, opinions and beliefs also became a logarithm. With the aid of a huge database, Moss created a statistically correct citizens' response to certain words, and how people perceived those words differently at noon or at midnight. The invention, applied to marketing, had made Moss not only a multimillionaire: it had allowed him to be chosen as the Communication Adviser in the White House. Before President Conover went to bed every night, his Communication Adviser would deliver through e-mail a small list of fifty to a hundred words. The computer's software picked the words depending on the key issues for next day, the audience, the time of the year, and several other factors. Instead of memorizing speeches, the President memorized just a few words. This technique had made his discourse strikingly fresh, powerful and always to the point; it strengthened his natural charisma and made him look smart, and funny, modest and brave all at the same time.

Since then, of course, the technique had spread all over the world and now there was even a new Internet browser that showed through instant graphs just how *'popular'* the President's opinions were.

3

Same time, México City.

Armando Molina, the presidential candidate of the PRI, did not need to use the browser in his computer to know that President Conover would easily avoid being caught in one of the verbal traps which television magnified. Molina was watching the interview through the POLIS channel, a satellite HDTV subscription that followed politics all over the world, twenty-four hours a day.

“In view of your strong friendship with President Zedillo, do you have any preference about who should be the next President of México?” asked a Mexican correspondent of *Televisión Azteca*.

“Of course not. I am sure whoever is the next President of México will be the perfect choice for the Mexican people.”

“Yes, but whom do you like personally?”

“It is not for me to like or dislike any of them. I am looking forward to a friendly working relationship with whoever is elected by the Mexican citizens. I am sure any of the candidates will be the right choice. If the Mexicans choose him, he will be the man with whom we will deal, no matter who he is. We know that the Mexicans are good people, hard working and honest folks with whom our great country has many ties. So we trust them entirely to choose the right person for them. And if he is good for them, he will be good for us.”

Armando Molina was getting increasingly exasperated by the lack of commitment he heard in President Conover answers. Since

both were graduates from the same university, he had expected a little bit more support from him.

"Mr. President, about the guerrilla fronts in twelve states of México..."

"What about them?"

"Is it true the FBI found some connection between them and our own terrorist groups in the United States?"

"No. That is not true." said the President of United States firmly and he immediately changed the subject. But his answer gave an idea to the Mexican candidate, who smiled after a few moments. Then, even though other answers given by President Conover hurt him politically, the Mexican candidate kept on smiling through the entire interview that lasted another ten minutes. He picked up the phone when the press conference was over. He ordered Roberto Peña into his office. *Inmediatamente*. He had a lot of work to do, and very short time in which to do it. Roberto was the acting *Secretario de Gobernación*. He also had been his favorite advisor for a long time. He was the one in charge of sensitive operations. He would be the perfect choice.

What Armando Molina was planning to do required utmost sensitivity and concentration. He turned off the television, and that's when he heard the noise. He walked to the huge window of his office to look out into the street. There were hundreds of men and women marching down the Avenue. Those at the forefront were already positioning themselves right in front of his campaign office. As usual in those manifestations, they were carrying large banners stating their case.

STOP THE KILLING!, was hand painted in red letters in one of the banners.

MOLINA ASESINA CAMPESINOS!, said another one.

There was a brief knock at the door, and then it opened softly. Roberto Peña came into the office. His short stature, coupled with narrow shoulders and a huge head emphasized by the thick glasses he wore, made him look deformed. His physical aspect disguised the tremendous intelligence lurking behind his clear brown eyes. He was

what Armando Molina called his ‘pocket genius’. His age was impossible to calculate, but Armando knew he was approaching fifty.

Armando Molina was the exact opposite of his advisor: Molina was tall, handsome, elegant, with a contagious smile, a great presence for the television cameras...and not too bright when it came to grasping truly abstract notions. He was at his best in the political battles fought in close quarters. In Palace intrigue he was superb. In a one to one match he was sure he could charm anyone, including the devil. That’s why he had been chosen as Presidential Candidate by the acting President of México: because he was a shrewd manipulator with charisma to spare. Barely forty-five years old, he had the perfect combination for a Mexican President of the new century; shrewd and tough, plus handsome. As the Mexican girls said openly, he even *looked* as a President should look.

President Zedillo had asked his chosen successor to interrupt his campaign for two weeks and to give him time to tie up loose ends; he wanted to receive the visiting Presidents of the Americas with some of his own political power still strong. According to the political rituals of the ruling party in México, once the acting President chooses his successor, the President himself becomes instant history. Nobody cared for a man on the way out, and everybody tried to ingratiate themselves with the man on the way in. That’s what Mexican political terminology called ‘*la cargada*’ or ‘the stampede’. That was true now more than ever; people lined anxiously outside Armando Molina’s offices wishing for a brief talk with the man himself.

“Are you up to a huge challenge?” asked Molina, looking at the eyes of his Minister Roberto Peña. Not exactly into his eyes, though; he looked at the stem of Roberto’s glasses. Or at his cheek. Or his forehead. He never looked straight into the eyes of his aide because he was afraid that the repulsion he felt against him would be transparent.

“As always, boss. What kind of a challenge?” Roberto Peña said.

“Before I tell you, *you* tell me who are those Indians,” said with repugnance Armando Molina, pointing through the window glass to the manifestation acting up seven floors below. He called them Indians because the men wore typical peasant clothes; simple cotton

blouses, worn straw hats, and old huaraches in their dirty feet. In México, to be called an Indian is a denigrating slur. Armando used it as a qualifier all the time, shamelessly, but only in private.

In his earlier post as *Secretario de Gobernación*, or Minister of Interior, Armando Molina had been in charge of overseeing the peace in the country. His post had been the equivalent in the United States to those of the National Security Adviser, the CIA and the FBI, combined. Only even more powerful because he did not have to deal with a Congressional Committee or the public. Merely with the President of the country. Most of the intelligence services in México reported directly to Molina before he resigned to become the Presidential Candidate, and still did so through his right hand, Roberto Peña, the man he left as acting secretary until the elections were held. Roberto was in charge of knowing who was behind every union strike, every act of protest, every newspaper article, and every political maneuver in all of México. Especially those happening at the door of the ministry. He was one of the most powerful men in México. Best of all, Roberto Peña owned all of his own power to Armando Molina. That made his loyalty unquestionable.

Roberto looked down to the street. The thick bullet proof glass muffled the shouts of the people blocking the avenue below.

“That’s easy, boss. Julio Santibañez organized those people. Do you remember him? He is the head of *Land for Everybody*, which is an organization that is against the private ownership of arable land. They say the Mexican Constitution of 1917 makes *all* land public, therefore it is illegally owned by private hands.”

“I remember him. What does he want with me?”

“They are here supposedly to protest the killing of one of their members in Guerrero. But in reality Julio Santibañez is being paid by Ernesto Barrios Mata to create negative publicity against you. You know that Ernesto Barrios Mata hates you and he wants you to bow out of your candidacy. He thinks *he* should be the one.”

Armando walked back to his desk, sat at his black leather chair, and drummed with his fingers on the polished surface. Roberto Peña waited; the finger drumming was the sign Armando Molina used every

time he was thinking and did not wish to be bothered. After a few minutes the drumming stopped.

“Do we have proof of his involvement?” Armando asked.

“Yes. And no.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, yes, we have photos of Ernesto Barrios Mata meeting with Julio Santibañez two weeks ago. But they were smart and met at a public gathering. If we try to use those photos, they could claim that is was a natural encounter since Ernesto is the Minister of Agriculture.”

“Maybe. But it would depend on *how* we use those photos, wouldn’t that be true?”

Roberto Peña did not answer. He took off his thick glasses and cleaned them before he said anything.

“I think you are right. Those photos could mean plenty, or mean nothing. What do you have in mind?”

“Oh, you are going to love this.” Armando Molina said. And he began to explain.

He was right. His friend loved the idea. It was so outrageous that it might actually work.

4

He used his Mexican passport to find his way into Switzerland, where he got in touch with a lawyer whose name he found in the papers inside the suitcase.

Other than that, he did not have to do anything. The Swiss lawyer took care of everything. The lawyer opened an account for him, deposited first the money and then the gold, and filled out any and all forms the Swiss required. Found a house for Frederick outside of town, and registered him with the police as a Mexican Citizen.

Then more gold arrived from Germany through an Argentinean courier, and Frederick and the lawyer just deposited it into the account. As the gold kept coming in through different means for many months after the war was over, Frederick and his lawyer would deposit it into the bank whose manager became a friend and partner of the Swiss lawyer. They made the deposits at night, and nobody knew about them except, of course, the bank itself. But since the Swiss knew how to keep a secret, especially about money, and especially about money in *their* banks, nobody ever knew who was the owner of account number 771944. Frederick chose that number so that he would never forget the happiest day of his life; that was the date he had married his beloved Ute.

Frederick did nothing but wait for several months. He nursed his wounds, repaired his body and strengthened his spirit and his will. He avoided human contact as much as he could. Except for his lawyer in Geneva and the family who fed him and took care of the house where he lived, nobody even saw him.

When the last shipment of gold arrived, he received a letter.

“Trail in danger. Move away. We will find you.”

The following month he went back to México.

It was 1947.

He was barely twenty-seven years old.

His father received him as a hero, but, since the Mexican Government had declared war on Germany also and had fought alongside the Allied forces, his father had created a convenient story for his disappearance of the last ten years. Frederick became *Federico* again, and to the people in the small Mexican town where his family lived they said he had been studying in the United States.

In the small town of Aguaprieta, where his father had become the General Manager of the mine, the war in Europe or the Pacific was as remote as the moon. Nobody could imagine the young Federico being involved in it. That he could not speak Spanish at all for an entire year helped Federico to keep his war activities a secret. He had never again listened to music, or read anything by his beloved authors. Where his character used to be warm and pleasant, now it was cold and dangerous.

His father, who had by now remarried to a beautiful young Mexican woman, did not like what he saw in this silent stranger who used to be his son. The idea of having a virile young male with an air of evil about him near his young wife was intolerable for the old Karl, so he put his son in charge of the family land in the forest. That suited Federico fine. Restless, unable to forget Ute, he also took a teaching job in a rural school as a way to spend his waking hours and to recapture his ability to talk in Spanish. It was also a way to get back in touch with humans, even if they were only the children of the peasants.

This was the basis for the story that years later made him famous, when he became governor of the state, and the press had succumbed to the charm he had learned to display through spectacular gifts. He was the rural teacher, the self-made millionaire, the star politician.

His new life took him far. So far that, by the time he was fifty years old, he almost became the President of México. Due to a

Constitutional rule that excepted the sons of foreign nationals from becoming presidents of México, a rule originally aimed to stop the sons of Spaniards, he did not make it, even though he was so popular that thousands of people signed a petition to change that law. The fact that he did not become President of México did not really bother him because that had been a secondary objective in his life, one that paled when confronted with the first one, the most important.

Which was revenge.

He had waited patiently for many years to claim his revenge against the nation which had taken away everything he had ever truly loved fifty five years earlier. It was a wound that hurt still as if it had happened the day before. Now, from the house on top of the hill, he would be able to orchestrate his masterful strike. A master strike, by a master of deceit. Against Lincoln's dictum, he had managed to fool many people for many years. Now his time had come.

Revenge was at hand.

He made sure the door to his study was locked and then, behind a large painting by Siqueiros, he opened a safe. Inside the safe he dialed his secret code on an electronic keyboard. The five buttons at the edge had to be punched in a special sequence, to stop any intruders who could have found the first code. Immediately the wall began to roll on metal casters. There was another door behind it, which he opened with a key he carried around his neck. It opened to an elevator that carried him to the top floor.

The huge room above was dedicated to the city of Dresden and the years he lived in it. Working through dealers in Europe during many years, he had been able to buy furniture, lamps, tables, paintings, sculptures and settings of Dresden porcelain—which in reality were manufactured in another city nearby. Amazingly he even got from her surviving family a series of photos that showed Ute as she was then, as she would always be for him. He had restored those photos and had them amplified to life size to make the illusion complete.

Now he turned on the compact disk of *Tristand und Isolde*, by Richard Wagner. He was the only composer of music he liked to listen now. As the music reverberated in his mind, he wandered through the

room. He approached a strange looking platform. It was large and heavy. Then he took off the material covering it. On top of it was laid the instrument through which his revenge would be fulfilled.

It was a surface to surface missile, laser guided, which he had bought from black market dealers after the war in Iraq. The missile had been buried in the desert sands of Kuwait by a corrupt American sergeant during the invasion of Iraq, and then picked up by an underground network of terrorists. United States made, it had been modified by dark geniuses all over the world. Each of them had his own reasons to seek harm for the United States. It had been modified to carry 20 gallons of reformulated Mustard gas. The tremendously poisonous gas originally developed by a German scientist at the turn of the century had come from the extinct Soviet Union after its fall in 1989.

Don Federico had paid for both weapons a total of ten million dollars. The payments were untraceable since they had gone through so many channels. Typically the order of payment originated in México and went to the Virgin Islands, then through Argentina to South Africa, then back to the Virgin Islands, then to Switzerland via New York, then to Albania through Italy, and from Albania to Switzerland again, where the money had been all the time since the war. Five million dollars from the account number 771944 were paid in exchange for 50 gallons of the gas, and two for the missile. Both things were delivered by the captain of a Russian fishing ship. The exchange took place aboard a yacht moored in international waters off the coast of Iceland, and occurred simultaneously as the payment was being received thousands of miles away, in the city of Geneva. Technology, Don Federico thought, was a marvelous thing; he had coordinated the final delivery from inside his house in México City, using a couple of cellular phones bought the same day and for that particular purpose with a phony credit card.

The aluminum canister modified to carry and protect both the missile and the gas was transferred to the yacht. The yacht took the container to another boat traveling under a Japanese flag, which carried it to Panama. From there it was sent through the Panama Canal to the Pacific Coast, where a fishing boat took it to Guatemala. It was picked up there by drug dealers. The drug dealers thought they where

protecting a shipment of weapons for their Mexican contacts. They were paid generously for transporting the load.

In the jungle of Quintana Roo in southern México, on a compound disguised as a research center established originally by the Mexican government, a team of five men -two Americans, two Mexicans, one Russian scientist - had modified the American missile so it would release the gas five seconds before crashing, regardless of whether the missile exploded or not. The unemployed Russian chemist reformulated the gas, concentrated its power, and made it a thousand times more deadly. Obviously the men hadn't been told clearly whom they were working for, but they all were acting out of ideological reasons: they had been led to believe they were working for Cuba. They thought they were building a defensive weapon for the besieged island. Of course, the large amounts of money they received for their efforts did not hurt either.

The missile would only have to fly its poisonous cargo through fifteen nautical miles: from the house on top of the hill, to the downtown building where the Mexican President was to host an especial performance by Plácido Domingo for the Presidents of the all the nations in the entire American Hemisphere.

What they did not know was that this America's Summit was to be the last.

The physical destruction would be limited, because the missile was to crash against the *Torre Latinoamericana*, which was one of the tallest buildings in México City. It was also across the street from the *Palacio de las Bellas Artes*, or Palace of Fine Arts. This was where the recital for the visiting Presidents was to take place. The *Torre Latinoamericana* building was so huge that the missile did not even need to be very precise. As long as it crashed into the *Torre* somewhere above a hundred feet of height, the job would be done. At the moment of crash the noise would be minimal, and nobody in the street would probably even hear it because the Mexican government was planning a big display of fireworks. But ten seconds later everyone breathing in a three mile radius of the target would start dying from the poisonous gas. Since it was odorless, and colorless, nobody would realize what was happening until it was too late. In five

minutes or less, anyone who breathed even a tiny wisp of the poisonous gas would die from a painful collapse of the lungs.

Due to the fact that México City is surrounded by hills, the gas would not be dissipated by the wind, so Federico calculated that some twenty thousand people would die that day. But he did not care. He thought it was just about fair: in October 25, 1944, a greater number of people had died in Dresden.

The amount of people who would die didn't matter to him. It was not relevant. What mattered was the consequences to such an action. He foresaw the government of United States reacting in fear with an immediate invasion of México; at the same time, military governments would rise again in all of the South-American countries. Democracy in the Americas would be set back at least twenty years. All free trade agreements would be dead. There would be terror and mistrust, and the possibility of the Americas competing against the European Union would disappear. By the time the Americas settled down, it would be too late.

He would divide and conquer, indeed. And his revenge would be complete.

He walked up to kiss a brown photograph, taken fifty-six years earlier, of a beautiful young girl.

His beloved Ute would live forever.

Quetzalcóatl had returned.

5

Boris Rykiv used to be a very proud man. Born in Tobolsk, Siberia, he was the youngest of five children. His father was director of one of the local schools. His mother Maria was a teacher in the same school.

When he was eighteen, Boris moved into Moscow to assist to the grandiose Moscow State University, which was founded in 1755 by the great Russian chemist, physicist and poet M. Lomonosov. The life at the university was like an extension of his joyful childhood, but now featuring lectures of world-renown teachers, raging disputes between students and a exhilarating campus life that, during the seventies, was strongly sexual. He had slept with so many women that he couldn't remember them all.

He had chosen chemistry as his field because the great chemist Dimitri Ivanovich Mendeleev had been born in his own hometown, back in 1834. Boris also trained as a pilot for the Soviet Union Air Force. When he received both his wings and his diploma from Moscow State University the same year, nobody could be more proud than him. He was a scientist from one of the greatest universities in the world, and he was a soldier in the same armed army that had defeated Napoleon and Hitler. He believed with his heart and soul the Communist party line and could not understand when other scientists doubted the benefits it had brought to their nation.

He stayed on at the university until he received his doctorate, and then he was sent by the government to work in a secret research facility outside Leningrad. By then he was married, and his second

child was on the way. He was assigned to work on a refined version of the mustard gas created by the Germans during the first world war.

The main problem with mustard gas was that it diluted easily with water, and it dissipated quickly. This is why large amounts were required to cover a relatively small area, for a short time. His mission was to make it less unstable. After several years of working with the gas, he had an inspiration: what if, to make it truly stable, he were to add another, heavier component? One that, by itself, was as deadly?

After considering many elements, he settled to work with the most promising: a rare form of mercury, first synthesized more than 130 years ago, called dimethylmercury. It was so rare, that at any given point in time there were no more than a 100 laboratories working with it in the entire world. And it was incredibly toxic. He had read about a chemistry professor in the United States who had died after accidentally spilling a few drops of dimethylmercury on his latex gloves while performing a laboratory experiment. The substance, which had no practical application, was used in research on heavy metals, and the couple of drops spilled onto his gloves had passed quickly through the latex and been absorbed through his skin in less than 10 seconds. The symptoms, which included problems with balance, speech, vision and hearing, progressed rapidly and ended in a coma and death. Even when treatments were administered to eliminate the mercury in a human system, they were unable to prevent irreversible damage to the nervous system.

He was working on that when his world began to disintegrate piece by piece.

First there was the meltdown at Chernobyl. Then, in rapid succession, Afghanistan, Gorbachev, and the attempted *coup d'état* against Gorbachev, a ridicule from which the all powerful Soviet Army didn't recover: there was also, in a sequence which his mind couldn't capture in all their magnitude, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the German reunification, Yeltsin coming to power and the smaller republics demanding their independence... and then, suddenly, his world was gone. In 1991 the once mighty Soviet Union ceased to exist.

All of it had happened in a few years.

Then, came problems he had never even dreamed of.

When the Soviet Union disbanded itself, his laboratory was closed. His wife found a position as a teacher but her salary (1,000 rubles) was drastically insufficient, especially for a large family like theirs, which meant that Boris had no other choice but to find any type of work. He was reduced to working nights at a hospital for a modest wage. At least, he said to himself in the darkest moments of depression, he was still able to feed his children.

So when the stranger appeared one day at the hospital, bearing a letter from an old Mexican colleague in which Boris received an offer to continue his research in México, and an enclosed envelope with ten thousand dollars in cash if he accepted, he didn't think twice.

He signed on the spot all the papers the stranger produced at his hotel, including the confidentiality letters.

When he arrived home that same night, after walking home with a pocket full of cash, he had regained some of his old self-confidence and pride. For the first time in years he slept peacefully.

He was flown to Paris, first, and left to wander by himself a few days. Then he was flown to Cancun, and from there in an helicopter to a small research facility called CIEN (*Centro de Investigaciones Ecológicas Nacionales*). There he encountered other "scientists" from different parts of the world who told him they were working on an ultra secret defensive weapon for Cuba.

Boris didn't really care about that. He cared for his work.

For the next six months he didn't leave the laboratory. As part of their contract, the scientist were promised a bonus of one hundred thousand dollars each if they finished their project in time. And indeed they had finished it.

After delivering both fifty gallons of modified mustard gas and the formula to produce as much as needed, Boris received his one hundred thousand dollars and was flown back to Europe, this time to Spain. He had never been in Spain, so he decided to stay for awhile and bring his family for a vacation. For the next couple of months they basked themselves on the sunny beaches of Spain, and found that there were millions and millions of tourists from all over Europe

vacationing just like them. At the resort in Palma de Mallorca where they were staying, Boris met the director of a the largest medical laboratory in Spain, whose headquarters were in Madrid. Boris thought it was a good time to promote himself and he began to let it be known to that he would love to establish in Spain. The director of the laboratory, a doctor named Manolo Vega, was a short man who had a strong resemblance to Picasso; the same balding head, the same bulging eyes, the same crooked smile and quick temper... When Manolo Vega expressed interest in Boris recent work, Boris had been drinking wine all night. He felt safe and he bragged in a whisper about his secret work in México.

What he didn't know was that Manolo Vega's company had important outsourcing contracts with NATO. Manolo Vega kept Boris in Palma de Mallorca, telling him that there might be a job for him, while Manolo flew back to Madrid and rendered a full, detailed account to General James Bradford, who was in command of the unit that supervised the outsource companies. Bradford, in turn, sent a coded report up his chain of command, and at some point somebody decided to share that information with the State Department, who in turn advised the CIA. They started the check the information.

But by now it was too late.

Boris drowned one afternoon while swimming at the beaches of Palma de Mallorca, in front of his family and another thousand witnesses who could do nothing to save him. When they rescued the body, the postmortem indicated that Boris had a lethal level of alcohol in his blood. He had drowned because he had been drinking non-stop, thinking of how happy he and his family where going to be living in fun loving Spain.

His family collected his money, and went back to Russia.

6

Secret Service Special Agent Melissa McDuffy had two daughters and, in spite of her busy schedule, she longed to have another one. She loved babies, and babies loved her back. Now that her daughters were old enough to go to school, she missed the feeling of being needed by a baby. She knew that is an experience only a woman can have, and it was an experience she relished.

But of course it was useless to think about it, because she probably would never have another baby. Not only because she did not have the time, since she was the head of a department in the Secret Service, but also because she no longer had a husband. Just last month the divorce papers had been signed and delivered and now she was single again. A single Secret Service Agent mom.

Sometimes, at night, lying in bed by herself and feeling the loneliest woman on earth, she went back through her early years with Larry to search for her mistakes she might have made as a wife. And when she couldn't find many, she invented them because she wanted to find a reason. It was still too soon for her to accept that there really was no guilty party in her divorce. Their marriage had died of natural death, with no fault either on Melissa or on Larry.

It was, as they say, one of those things...

Still, during those nights, after hours of turning in bed unable to go to sleep, she would end up reaching the conclusion that, without her job, she would easily go mad. Her job gave her a sense of security, a sense of belonging that she had lost when Larry told her he did not love her any more. So she threw herself into being the best agent in a

corporation that received only the best of the best from all over the country. And by doing so she regained a sense of purpose in life, and most of the time she was content.

Except for those lonely nights.

When the trip to México was announced, she offered herself as an advance Agent. She left her kids under her mother's care, and she flew into México one month before the official visit, among almost seven hundred other advance people, and began the enormous task of securing the places where President Conover would be physically present during his stay in México.

She worked out of an office inside the unimposing American Embassy, which occupied a square building on Paseo de la Reforma. It was across the street from the Maria Isabel Sheraton Hotel, which was where the State Department had reserved the top two floors of rooms for the advance team. Arranging a Presidential visit to another country was a gigantic labor, but she and her group had structured the tasks and divided the responsibilities in such a way that it all moved rather quickly and mostly without a hitch.

She was surprised to find that the coordinators of the Mexican Security Forces were noisily efficient. They represented a force composed by almost 3000 agents, police officers, and soldiers. Always jockeying and singing among themselves —really— they worked with the Secret Service in a friendly fashion finding a solution for any possible problem.

The Secret Service team started by writing a minutiae of every step President Conover was going to take in México, literally. From the moment he boarded Air Force One at Andrews Air Force Base, in Washington, the President was to follow the very strict timetable the Secret Service and their Mexican counterparts had created for each one of his steps inside or outside a building or a car.

Once the minutiae were ready, they rehearsed and filmed the rehearsal. When and where the plane was going to land, and from which direction; how large the air space above the city reserved for Air Force One was, who would be at the Control Tower and who would man the radar systems; how many steps from the plane to the red carpet; how long was the red carpet; how many people would be in

line to receive the President; who would be the members of the army who were to salute him, what kind of weapons would be used, and who would be carrying them...

More: how many weak points could be found at the place where the plane was to land, from how many sides could the door of the plane be seen; how far away from the plane were the nearest buildings and how tall were they; who inhabited them and for how long they have been there; what type of topping was used in the pavement of the airport strip; how far away would the limousine be parked; what type of armor was used to bulletproof it; who would be driving the limousine for the president and who would be driving the rest of the cars in the convoy; where would they park; how many people per car; what type of weapons would they be carrying; create a file for each one of them, their names and their photos and with an in-depth personal background check...

All of this for the first five minutes of President Conover's visit. And the President had not even boarded the limousine yet. But the added experience of so many agents who had done this in the past, and the many trips President Conover had made already around the world, allowed Melissa and her team to work quickly and everything moved along as it should.

That is, until the day she asked Bob Allen, the Station Chief of the CIA in México, for a list of Mexican citizens who had expressed a threat against the President of the United States, or the United States government, during the past year.

Bob Allen was an old friend whom she had met in Washington shortly after she had been accepted as a member of the Secret Service almost fifteen years earlier. Since then they had kept in touch, off and on. He was a fan of Citizen Kane, which he considered the greatest film ever made, and wherever he went he sent her a postcard with one word written in the back. "Rosebud", the cards said. After so many years, she had collected about fifty of them.

"How would you like a list of about oh, 30 million people?" Bob Allen said with a grimace. Just now Melissa realized he had lost a tremendous amount of weight. He looked haggard and tense.

"What do you mean?"

“In the last 5 years, because of the stupid Certification Law, our relationship with México has become a very tense proposition. Just like we love America, these people love their country very much and nationalism is running very high. They perceive the so-called certification as a deliberate insult to México. Add to that the new immigration laws, whereby, for god’s sake!, any illegal cotton picker can be thrown in jail for being a hard worker. Oh yeah, at one time or another I would guess that 30 million Mexicans have expressed a threat or two against our government. And, let me add, I don’t blame them.”

“I gather you are angry.”

“Of course I am! Congress likes to pass these incredibly stupid laws and then they expect us to enforce them. Now, please tell me, what is the purpose of the certification? Who on earth are we to put a star in the forehead of our neighbors? To qualify their behavior as if they were children? First we request, no, no, we *demand* their help to fight the drugs *we* consume, and then we turn around and first of all punish them for not doing enough to help us, and then throw their illegal workers in jail! Come on! “

“But don’t you think that we were loosing the control over our own borders? I mean, we cannot allow the illegal immigrants just to come and go as they please, can we?”

“Of course not. But to throw them in jail? As if they were criminals? This goes against everything we have believed and practiced as a nation for more than two hundred years.”

“I see your point. But what would you do to stop the flow of illegal workers?”

“What an earlier American Ambassador in México proposed: *make them legal.*”

“Just like that.”

“Yes. I mean, what’s the big deal? They come and do the work we are too civilized to do. Like picking cotton. Or cleaning toilets. Or washing dishes. But instead of being good practicing Christians by helping our brothers in need, we send them to jail for seeking work! Come on! We are creating a tremendous resentment among the

Mexicans. Gratis. For free. Because we get nothing in return, except grief”, said the CIA Station Chief, pacing furiously around the room.

“In the last year alone I have lost most of my informants, and those that keep working with me do it grudgingly. They don’t see the point of helping us when we turn around and bite their heads off.”

“I am sorry.”

“Yeah, me too. Did you know that México City has been the most active field in espionage activities in the last seventy-five years? Did you know that right now I could count at least one hundred different operatives working the streets of this city? Oh, yes. They have been coming here for many years, trying to establish a beach head right next to United States. Even Hitler tried to win over the Mexicans by promising them that, if Germany won the war, México would get back the territories it lost in the war against the United States in 1848. The Mexicans said fuck you, and declared the war on Germany. Because of the war we requested Mexican workers to come to work in our fields. Ever since, the growers in California and Florida have relied on that labor force to pick their produce on time. Now we are going to put them in jail?”

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Nothing. There is nothing you can tell me. I think it’s time for me to move on. I have been here too long, and to tell you the truth I don’t want to deal with this anymore. I am tired of seeing my work being dismantled by politicians who play games 3,000 miles away. I am through. I have requested my transfer. If they don’t give it to me, I will submit my resignation.”

“You are not serious.”

“Oh, yes I am.”

“But what about President Conover’s visit?”

“Don’t worry. My transfer won’t go into effect until after the Mexican elections, next July. After that, as a very smart man said once, ‘*Hasta la Vista, Babe*’ “

Melissa looked at the drawn face of her friend and understood his rage and frustration. She had never seen him this angry, but then she knew that he had never been able to deal with the system. He

disliked bureaucracy intensely. That's why he was so good at his job. But while she had learned to deal with the bureaucratic monster as a matter of survival and in fact, sometimes she rather enjoyed it, he wanted to slay the Dragon. Now the dragon was slaying him. She felt sad. But she had a job to do.

"So..."

"So?"

"I need your help."

"And you have it, as much as I can give it to you."

"Okay. Let's go back to the beginning. I need to check what threats have been expressed against President Conover, and by whom. You know the drill."

"Open the newspapers."

She took a deep breath. She needed to be patient.

"Have you kept a list of those threats considered serious and dangerous?"

"Yes. You will have it in your desk in one hour. Let me calm down. It is just a matter of printing it, really."

"Thank you. I will check with you after I receive it. Is that okay?"

"For sure. But you need to remember something, and that is that nothing is what appears in this country. So don't be surprised."

"Thanks. I will keep that in mind."

"The Mexicans are hard to understand. There is an old story which might make it easier for you. It is a fictitious story about the origins of the way the Mexicans embrace when they see each other. Such a friendly tradition has a darker undertone: it is said that the revolutionaries embraced each other that way to check whether the other one carried weapons."

"So they pretend to be friendly, but they were watching their backs at the same time. Makes perfect sense to me", she said.

"You are wrong: they are not faking their friendliness. They are genuinely friendly. It's just that they recognize that even friends can become your enemies."

“And you say that the story is fictitious.”

“Yes. Totally fake. Whoever invented it forgot that the Mexicans have been embracing like that for centuries. There are many historical instances in this country where the embrace shows. The most famous of which is the embrace between Vicente Guerrero and Agustín de Iturbide. Both were heroes of the Independence War against Spain.”

“But even if the story is fake it applies because it deserves to be true.”

“That’s right. Things like a simple embrace go very deep in the Mexican psyche. You need somebody to explain the Mexican system to you. I will think of somebody to guide you through it. Now, here in this country there it is another mess, worse than our own. The old power structures are falling down, and there are none to replace them.”

“I understand the polls are good for the opposition.”

“Yes, and that’s another reason you have to be extra careful. Our hosts are afraid of their own future, as they should be, and they won’t commit to anything. Listen to the advice of whoever I chose to help you, but do your own homework. It is crucial at this moment in history that we don’t make a big mistake in México. Know what I mean?”

“Yes. Thank you again.”

“On the contrary. I should thank you for your patience. Listen, you caught me in a bad moment, but tomorrow I will be a Better Spy. I promise.”

“Don’t worry about it. See you later.”

“I’ll stop by your desk.”

“Okay.”

She looked at her watch.

“Oops. I got to run. Bye.”

“Bye.”

She knew, in the way women do, that he was in love with her. And she also knew that she was grateful to him because he had never mentioned it. She valued his friendship more for his silence.

She walked very fast toward the office of the Ambassador. She had an appointment to talk to the Ambassador himself. She was walking into his office when the Ambassador came out of the elevator.

“Agent McDuffy! Good thing you are here. Come on in. We need to talk.”

“Yes, sir.”

She followed him, after nodding at his secretary. He rushed her into his office and immediately told her.

“I just came back from a courtesy luncheon with the Minister of Interior”, the Ambassador said as she was closing the door. He was pale. Just three years earlier Bill Casper had been the governor of Massachusetts. Before that, he had been a successful dealer in antiques. Before that, a student of politics at Harvard, where he had met William Conover. Through the years, they had remained friends.

“And?”

“There is a plot to kill the President at the America’s Summit.”

“What? How do you know?”

“I’ve been told.”

“Who told you?”

“The Minister of Interior, Roberto Peña, told me.”

“How did he know?”

“It’s his job to know. He handles all the intelligence services in México.”

“Can I talk to him.?”

“No. He told me this in the most confidential of terms.”

“Did he tell you who, or when?”

“He told me what he knows, which is not much at this point. A man was captured in the southern state of Chiapas. He belongs to one of the guerrillas fighting in the jungle. The prisoner said that in exchange for security he would give all of the details.”

Melissa was writing as fast as she could in her notebook.

“Do we know why they want to kill President Conover?”

“No.”

“What else do we know?”

“So far, that’s it. The Minister is having the prisoner brought into the city right now by a special flight. We will find out more about it then.”

“Okay. Can I be present when they interrogate that man?”

“Of course not. Are you kidding?”

“No, sir. Just asking. Because, you know, we might even need to cancel the trip.”

“The President won’t even consider it. So that is not an option.”

“I am sorry, Sir, but it is more than an option; right now is a possibility...” she said, and got up. “With your permission, I am going to assemble my team and have them ready.”

“Don’t leave the embassy grounds. I’ll need to find you immediately when the information comes.”

“I won’t, sir. I will be downstairs.”

She walked down to the basement, where she had a meeting with her coordinating agents. They were ten coordinators, each one in charge of a team of twenty agents. Now that they were in code yellow, they would deploy twice as many.

All of a sudden, she felt a streak of cold traveling down her spine. For the first time in her life she felt fear. Melissa knew that she was going to need all the luck in the world to clear this one.

7

University of Florida
City of Gainesville

He didn't like his name.

Never had.

He thought that Manny Perez was a curious name for a professor of history, with a masters in Latin-American History, and a Ph.D. in Mexican History. To him Manny Perez sounded like the name of a Cuban mambo player, a musician on the stage dressed with flashy clothes and flashier girlfriends.

Or a Puerto Rican baseball hitter.

Even a Brazilian soccer player.

But...

Manny Perez, Ph.D. in History?

Dr. Manny Perez?

No way.

But that was exactly his name, and there was nothing he could do about it. Not especially now, anyway, that his new book was out on the air. Or, to be more precise, in cyberspace. It had taken him five years to do the research, two to actually write the book, and *one hour* to publish it all over the world through the Web.

It was his major work to date. He had called it;

The Rise and Fall of the World's Greatest Political Party

and it had just been released by him and his University of Florida editors. Now, two days later, Dr. Manny Perez and his book were beginning to receive reviews from his peers all around the world, through his e-mail.

With a deep sigh the professor opened his laptop and began to read his e-mail.

Some letters were embarrassingly nice, and others were infuriatingly rude, but in the end Manny knew that what mattered was that his work was being read. That was something that many other history professors didn't have the joy or luck of achieving.

He had debated long and hard over the title of his book, because he feared that it was going to be too controversial. Controversy was a delicate thing for an academic book to create, because too little and nobody cared about it. In other words nobody would *think* about it. Too much and nobody would read it seriously. So he tried to strike the proper balance.

The main thesis behind his historical research into the 70 years of life of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, or PRI, the main Mexican political party, was that the party by itself had been an extraordinary political tool, a unique case in the history of the world. Versus other enormous political parties, which had also controlled in a monopolistic way the activities in their countries -such as the Communist Party in the extinct Soviet Union- the PRI had controlled the Mexicans almost without bloodshed.

The control of the Mexican citizens had been as complete as in the Soviet Union, or China, but with a huge difference: it was done *without* a political ideology. That is to say that a political party had remained in power for more than 70 years, had steered México

through two very hot world wars, and one very extended cold war, and had managed to keep away from fascism, communism, socialism, and all other extreme ideologies.

That was an important detail that had been often overlooked by other historical analysts. Many of them had confused the statements and ideas written into the Mexican Constitution of 1917 as a political platform for the party. But the party itself had been born ten years later; it had been created by President Plutarco Elías Calles as a politically expedient way to pacify the country, which had been in a civil war since President Francisco I. Madero had been killed in a *coup d'état* in 1913. The party had been created after several years of intestine revolt as means to pacify the country, and had included all of the political bosses and groups. Each with his own view of what the country should become after the fighting. Left and right political views lived within the same party. Held together by the raw power provided by the physical control of the country -all of the mayors, all of the election posts, all of the justice ministers, all of the employees of the government and, most importantly, all of the good businesses; railroads, telephones, oil, communications, mining, land... everything controlled by a State which was as centralized as a communist State, but that wasn't communist. It recognized itself as democratic and republican. Therefore it was a capitalist system, but armed with the political controls used by the fascists and the communists. A system controlled by a few families. The Revolutionary Families. The financial power held by those families was awesome. And their political power was even greater.

His research into the development of the party in later years confirmed Manny's original insight; the party had never had a long term plan, and therefore never had a true ideology. Since the Mexican Constitution of 1917 was an amalgam of ideas, this in turn had created an interesting political phenomena: the members of the party were allowed to believe in pretty much anything they wished; there were Communists working shoulder to shoulder with radical Capitalists, Socialists and Troskytes with Anarquists, and Maoists with Masons... their one point in common was the party itself, which allowed them to get positions of power, influence and wealth. The only requirement was their loyalty to the party and to their friends within the party.

In that order.

This loyalty was always well rewarded.

Even if the country was devastated, the members of the party had a guaranteed protection, both from the law and from outside attacks. Thanks to this the party itself had held its power longer than any other political party ever in history. It had combined all of the political tricks created by the fascists -such as the propaganda and the violent means of persuasion- and the communists -such as the isolation of opponents, the bribing of the intellectuals, or re-education by the state. It was common for rebels -even armed rebels- to end up a few years later as distinguished members of the PRI and to receive a post as a deputy, an Ambassador, or even a director in one of the enterprises owned by the state. Only the most stubborn ones were isolated, first, physically and psychologically abused, second, and in the most extreme cases, killed. Or disappeared.

The party had been so difficult to defeat by the opposition because the PRI members, coming as they did from all political colors and hues, knew all the tricks in the book and they applied them wisely. Never too harsh, as in Chile, and never too late, as in the Soviet Union or Iran.

The political machine didn't have a single dictator the people could hate and try to overthrow, and it didn't have an organized ideology the people could rally against. But at the same time the party had all the dictators and all the ideologies and all of the extremes. In 1990 it had been called "An almost perfect dictatorship" by Peruvian-Spanish writer Vargas Llosa. Immediately he had been corrected by Octavio Paz, a Mexican writer -a Nobel Prize winner in literature- who said that it wasn't a dictatorship. Paz himself had call it a Philanthropic Monster in one of his own, earlier, books. But that book was published by the government's publishing house, like all of his works, and Paz had written most of them while working as a consul or even Ambassador of México, and so he became the most acclaimed writer in México thanks to the state he critiqued. Just like Carlos Fuentes, Agustín Yáñez, Juan Rulfo, Fernando Del Paso, etc. All of them had worked for the party at one point or another in their lives.

And all of them had described themselves as “critics” of the Mexican state.

According to Manny Perez, that was exactly how the PRI operated at all levels.

The Mexican party was like a huge unbreakable balloon, which contained all of the riches, all of the miseries, all of the glories and all of the controls in the country. When somebody shot at it, the balloon simply swallowed the bullet. And rolled over the attacker, swallowing him too.

That’s why Dr. Manny Perez had called it The World’s Greatest Political Party.

At the beginning of the twenty first century, this was still true. Even though Manny was well aware that in the year of 1994 The World’s Greatest Political Party had begun its slow descent into political madness. In that year its presidential candidate Donaldo Colosio had been assassinated in Tijuana. Since then PRI had lost several governorships to the opposing party PAN, and even the mayor in México City was from the PRD, another political party. Now everything seemed to indicate that the PRI was going to lose the presidency, and therefore some measure of power. Finally.

Manny was still reading though his email, and laughing aloud or being irritated by some of the critiques he received, when the telephone rang.

Manny didn’t do anything. He just said aloud ‘*Answer the phone*’, and his laptop established the connection.

“Hello.”

“Hi. Is this Dr. Perez?” a clean voice came through the speaker.

“Yes, this is he.”

“Sir, I am sorry to bother you this early, but could you turn on your videophone?”

“Actually, yes, I do mind. I don’t like people I don’t know to see my ugly face at this time in the morning.”

“I need to confirm your identity, Dr. Perez”

“What do you mean? Who is this?”

“Special Agent Melissa McDuffy, sir. I work for the Secret Service of the United States.”

That caught the attention of Dr. Manny Perez.

He punched the F7 button of his computer, and on the top right corner of the screen appeared a small square. He touched the square with his finger and immediately it covered all of the screen. There was a stunning redhead smiling at him. Behind her beautiful face there was a big seal of the United States Government. And a flag, of course.

“You don’t look so bad to me, Doctor.”

“Thanks. But flattery won’t help you, Agent...”

“Melissa McDuffy, sir. I am the head of the Secret Service Section on Foreign Soil. You are receiving my data as we speak, so you may include me in your memory, if you wish” she said, and he knew exactly what was happening. Their computers were exchanging information about their owners. It was an extra-precaution to make sure you were talking to whom you were supposed to talk, and keep proof of it. “But you may call me Melissa.”

“Okay. What is this all about, Melissa?”

“Dr. Perez, I know that—”

“Manny.”

“Sir?”

“Call me Manny.”

“Thanks, Dr. Manny.”

“Just Manny.”

“Okay, Manny. I am sure that you are aware of President Conover’s trip to México next week.”

“Yes, very aware.”

“I also know that you are one of the foremost experts in the world today on Mexican politics and politicians.”

“Well, I know something about it, yes.”

“I just finished reading the book you published yesterday, Manny. You don’t need to be modest, because I am calling you due precisely to your knowledge of the Mexican political system.”

Manny didn’t answer.

“What I need is an adviser, Manny. In view of what is happening in México right now, we feel we cannot trust our traditional channels. And we need your advice fast, because we have less than a week. So I’ll get right to the point. I have a limited amount of time to find somebody to help me. I am hoping it can be you. I am sorry if I seem rude.”

“Don’t worry about it. But tell me something. Why me? Why not the CIA, or the Embassy in México?”

“As a matter of fact I am at the Embassy in México. All of the above are helping us, along with the DEA, the NSA, the FBI and the State Department, of course. But we need you for the same reasons you underline in your book, Manny. Everybody is accustomed to think of México in certain ways. What I need is somebody like you, with a new approach and tons of information. A fresh viewpoint so as to make sure we don’t make big mistakes.”

“Is that it?” said Manny, and the reaction he saw in her pretty face was a clear indication to him. She was keeping something from him.

“No, —she said after a slight hesitation— but I can not release the rest of the information until you agree to help us.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Manny, very simple: if you agree to help us you will also agree to keep all information you receive from us strictly confidential. You will have to sign this agreement.” she said, and she clicked her keyboard. Instantly, a document appeared on the screen of Manny’s computer.

Manny read it carefully. The letter bonded him to keep his mouth shut for the next 25 years. But only on information provided by the government of the United States. After thinking about it for a minute or two, he decided it was a fair request.

“Are you through?” said Melissa , her face peering from a small window on the right side corner of the screen.

“Yes.”

“Will you help us?”, she asked.

“I need more time to think about it.”

“Time is what I don’t have, Manny. I need your decision *right now*.”

Manny rubbed his eyes. He thought about his moral duty, and about his prestige as an intellectual. A prestige which, judging by his e-mail, now was world wide. Would his professional life be harmed, or benefited from this? He didn’t know. But he knew that if he didn’t accept the plea for help and something went wrong in México, something that he could have helped to avoid, he would never be able to live with himself again.

“Okay. I’ll help you. What do you need?” he said.

“Thank you, Manny. First I need you to please sign at the bottom of the letter.”

Manny took his electronic pencil out of its holder, and wrote his name on the screen. It didn’t matter where he signed. The software would automatically place his signature at the proper place. When he finished, the electronic document was replaced by the beautiful face of Agent Melissa .

“Thank you. Now I can tell you. We have a big problem in México.”

“Which is?”

“That somebody is planning on killing the President of United States along with 23 other Presidents and Prime Ministers during the America’s Summit.”

“Shit!”, said Manny, as he jumped up from his chair.

“I concur,” said Agent Melissa.

8

“Do I look like a whore?”, Carmen Nuñez asked softly, but the question seemed to sound louder than a scream inside the elegant restaurant in México City.

“Of course not!”, answered the government official. He looked around, alarmed. Luckily for him, nobody was close enough to hear their talk. They were seated at the back of the *Ambassador*, a five-star restaurant in Paseo de la Reforma. The restaurant had become the main meeting point for reporters and government officials in México because of its location; in a five block radius around the *Ambassador* were located all the main newspapers of México City... and the offices of the powerful Minister of the Interior. Just half a block away from Bucareli Avenue, the restaurant was convenient, expensive and very discreet.

“Then why are you treating me like one?”, Carmen asked innocently. She smiled as she gave him back the envelope. She had just glanced at its contents, but it was enough to know there was a lot of money in there.

“I am sorry”, he said. His face flushed, he tried to get up, he sat down again, he looked around nervously and he quickly placed the envelope back into his suit jacket. All of it in thirty seconds.

“It wasn’t my intention to offend you”, said Fernando del Campo, the Press Secretary of the Minister of Interior.

“What was your intention?”

“Actually, I thought I was doing you a favor”, he said recovering his color and his self-control.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really. We all know how badly paid reporters are. I mean, I was a reporter once.”

“Oh, yes. I remember.”

“I know that it is an ungrateful job. Especially in México. I mean, look at you. You just received an award in journalism and your paper didn’t even pay for the taxi that took you home. That’s wrong. So I thought you could use a little help. It is a common practice among friends. I scratch your back today, you do the same for me tomorrow. No big deal. Everybody does it.”

“Not me.”

“Why not?”

“Just because everybody does it, does not mean it is right. I happen to believe it is wrong. Totally wrong.”

“That is a puritanical position.”

“No, It’s not. It is an issue of honesty. And truthfulness. How can I point my finger at the corruption in government, if I take money *from* the government? I mean, it doesn’t make any sense.”

He took a sip of his *cuba libre* before he answered. He was back in control now.

“Newspapers in México have been doing it forever. There is not a single news organization which has not received money from the government, in one way or another. It might be advertising. It might be help in buying their paper, or paying their taxes. Whatever. That has never stopped them from criticizing as they see fit.”

“It depends on what you understand by criticism.”

“Look, I am not asking you to do anything you don’t like. If you want to keep on writing against the government, that is your right. As a matter of fact, we want you to keep on writing about the corruption.”

“Really?”

“Really. It helps us to focus our batteries. To keep it under control.”

“Then why the payment?”

“It is not a payment. It’s a helping hand.”

“In exchange for what?”

“For nothing. Besides, this money comes from the oil exports at PEMEX, so think of it as your share of the dividends” he said, and laughed at his own joke.

She looked at the press secretary, and measured carefully her next response. She knew that by not taking the money she would be insulting him, which in turn would make life for her much more difficult because many doors would close for her. She had seen many journalists destroyed because they didn’t play along. Even her own father, many years earlier, had been forced to forget a promising literary career because he’d crossed somebody very powerful at some time.

By accepting the money, she would be recognized as one of the players. From then on they would tolerate any kind of critique from her, even insults, as long as she took their money. She had thought many times before about this strange system which had developed along the years in México. It was a system best defined by Porfirio Diaz, a turn of the century Mexican dictator, who once said that journalists and writers were like dogs: they made a lot of noise until he threw them a bone. This is why government posts in México received the popular name of ‘*hueso*’. If you got a ‘*hueso*’ (bone), you got a government post where you could steal left and right without worrying: nobody would prosecute you.

“Look, I don’t want to turn you down, but I don’t feel right about it. It makes me feel like a whore. So let’s do something else: if you want to help me, then get a job for my brother. He doesn’t have a job and has three kids to feed. Is that okay?”

“Sure. Tell him to give me a call tomorrow morning”, he said, and snapped his fingers. The waiter brought the bill. He paid, left a large tip, and got up. “I will leave this here too. In case you change your mind, there will be a similar amount delivered to you every

month. If you don't change your mind, send it to my office with your brother. No questions asked" he said, placing the envelope on her lap. He gave her a kiss on the cheek, and left. He was very nice, and very easy about it all. He made her feel like she was the one making the mistake, not him.

She waited ten more minutes, as agreed before-hand, and left afterwards.

The envelope in her bag seemed to weigh a ton.

All the way back to her house she tried not to think about the envelope, and its implications, but it was impossible. It was the longest trip in her life.

It took her almost two hours to get back to her home. She lived with her parents on the eastern side of México City, on the way out to Puebla, in a housing development built by the government for lower level bureaucrats. Secretaries, department bosses, chauffeurs, typists, etc. Just like her mother and father were. The lines of red brick houses covered several square kilometers, and each house was a duplex; one family per side. They were small houses, each identical to the next, but livable and best of all, affordable.

Carmen disliked that house.

She saw the house as the main symbol of why she hated the Mexican government. She felt the house as a trap. One from which her parents were unable to escape. For her, the house symbolized what was wrong in México: the citizens conforming themselves with whatever crumbs the government gave to them. As if the government owned the country and allowed the citizens to live in it. A house like that was a very small reward for a lifetime of hard work, she thought often. This was why at school she vaguely thought of herself as a leftist; because anything must be better than what she had. She didn't see any contradiction in her despising the big government in her everyday life and wishing at the same time for a political system with an even bigger one. Not even the fall of the Soviet Union back in 1989

had any effect on her views; she still liked the idea of an utopian paradise where everybody was well fed and well treated.

It had been her own father who, in one of his drunken stupor's long ago, had advised her to accept a '*hueso*' if somebody offered it to her. Now, with the envelope in her purse, she didn't want to face him so she opened the door to her house very carefully.

Nobody was downstairs. There was the noise from television coming from her mother's room.

Carmen ran up to her own room, — a few feet away from her mother's, across the tiny hallway — and locked herself in before anybody saw her. She lay down on her bed for a few minutes in the darkness. Then she turned on the light, sat up, opened the envelope and counted the money.

There were 3,000 dollars inside the envelope. In cash. It was the equivalent of a year of her salary at the magazine. Her hands trembled. She had never seen so much money in her life. She could do so many things with that money.

She hated herself for allowing herself to think about it. She was going to send it back.

Tomorrow.

She dreamed again of all the things her mother and father needed, and she thought about her brother and his kids. Then she thought that if she kept the money she would be just as corrupt as the political system she hated.

Would she be just as corrupt? She had not asked for that money, and had not agreed on anything. It was delivered free of conditions. It was a gift, wasn't it? Didn't that make a difference? It was not like she had sold her information, as other reporters did. Or threatening to publish an article against somebody just to be paid off. The technique was well known and practiced by many reporters; there was an old saying in journalism; flies and politicians die after a newspaper blow. So many politicians did pay to receive better treatment. But this was different, wasn't it?

No, it was not, said a little voice in her head.

She cried in misery. She threw herself on the bed and covered her face with a pillow so as to silence the voice.

Carmen Nuñez was only 27 years old and was being forced to make a decision she had always hoped she would never have to make.

She had graduated from journalism school a few years back, had joined a small magazine which covered political gossip -like most magazines in México- and soon found herself being recognized by doing something very simple; she always told the truth, for good or bad.

Her articles ran from the banal -the hair styles in fashion among the women in Congress- to the articles exposing the deep levels of corruption within the government. It was her incapacity to lie in her articles that brought her recognition in the shape of an award presented to her by the Mexican Union of Journalists, an award which now hung on the wall of her room... and brought her also the money which now was lying on her bed.

She stopped crying after a while.

She looked at the money, and thought about it once more.

He had said that a similar amount would be delivered every month.

My God!, she thought. Help me to make the correct choice.

9

Special Agent McDuffy took up quarters in her temporal office at the basement of the American Embassy in México City. She had requested and got twenty telephone lines. The long experience of the Secret Service had taught her that the best way to avoid an attempt on the President's life was to clip it in the bud before it had a chance to fully develop. After the fiasco of Dallas in 1963 the Secret Service had created a series of methods, systems and checks all designed to avoid another assassination before it was born. This is why they always took things seriously, even threats made as a joke. The advance team would fly in, gather information from local and federal sources, and locate and neutralize potentially dangerous people. All threats were checked, all discontents were watched with vigilant guards, and nobody was trusted. Period.

In México they were dealing with unknowns. So McDuffy decided to seek people who knew best. After Manny Perez was on board as an adviser, she kept him on the line and placed a call to Jim Barnett, the head of the Terrorism Warning Group at the CIA. He was in Washington. The Terrorism Warning Group had a sole mission; which was to make sure that civilian and military leaders were alerted to specific terrorist threats. They were already working with the Mexican Government trying to locate the source of the threat.

The three-way videoconference was held through their computers, all being able to see their faces on the squares which appeared on the screen.

“First of all you have to define what type of terrorist is likely to make an attempt against the live of an American President.”

“What do you mean?”, asked Agent McDuffy.

“Is he a SMA, or a IMA?”

“Am sorry, but you’ve got me there. What is a SMA terrorist?” asked Manny Perez.

“SMA stands for Single Mad Agent. IMA stands for Ideological Motivated Agent.”

“Could you explain the difference to me, please? I am new at this.”

“No Problem”, Barnett said, full of himself. He was extremely proud of his knowledge. After all, it had taken more than twenty years of his life to acquire it. His freckled face and flaming red head made him look younger than his 57 years of age.

“Let me go back a bit. Terrorism in the world has changed through time. In the last 100 years we have gone full circle; from the single mad agent of the 1800’s, through the ideological wars of the 1900’s, to today’s single mad agent again.”

“What do you mean by a mad agent?”

“The Unabomber type. Remember him? The highly intelligent man or woman who has a vague grudge against society in general because he doesn’t fit in. So he decides to blow it up, because...”

There was a pause.

“Because?”

“Just because. For no reason at all, or for a reason so convoluted only he can understand it. This type of terrorist was the type that killed Lincoln, for example, or McKinley in 1901. It began to change at the turn of the century with the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria and his wife at Sarajevo in 1914. That assassination was carried out by a coordinated band of anarchists and it truly was the beginning of the ideologically motivated agents; those are the ones who wanted to change the world with a single, supreme act of destruction, believing they were acting for others who thought like them. Many poor and unemployed found themselves attracted to

this kind of activity. They had a greater goal and that goal was sufficient to offer their lives for it. There were hundreds of those groups in the nineteen-sixties in the United States that carried out thousands of attacks against the government. “

“That type of terrorism began to wane with the collapsing of the Soviet Union in the nineteen-nineties. Today mostly we have the SMA, or Single Mad Agent type of terrorists, such as the one who blew the Oklahoma City Federal Building in 1994. And that is our biggest problem.”

“Why?”

“Because the terrorists during the ideological war were those which had a *collective* goal to pursue. They sought others like them. They were able to coordinate their attacks, because their ideas gave them an identity in common. Collectively they were far more dangerous than the single mad agent type, since they could and did create entire revolutions in many parts of the world.”

Barnett made a pause to drink some coffee.

“Paradoxically, at the same time those groups were easier to control because they were easier to detect and to infiltrate by counter-terrorism forces. Due to their numbers, we could always find a trail or a snitch. On the contrary, a single mad agent can be virtually impossible to detect before the fact, and almost as hard to find afterwards, as it was proven with the Unabomber Case. Remember him? It took almost twenty years to find him. That we did find him, was due to the fact that his family turned him in. Not because of our abilities. That is the truth.”

“Now, México is another problem entirely. In México there are many guerrilla fronts. I believe they are fighting in twelve states, both in the north and in the south. There are groups on the extreme right, and on the extreme left. They both have grudges against the United States. I suggest we concentrate on those groups, because the probability is that this is a case of a IMA terrorist.”

“Professor Perez, what do you think?”

“Judging by those parameters, I would agree that we should be looking for the Ideologically Motivated Agent type of terrorist.”

“Okay, then—”

“But there is a big problem.”

“Which is?”

“I don’t buy it.”

“What do you mean, *sir*”, immediately Jim Barnett asked. Melissa understood him immediately. He was reacting as she would react if somebody doubted her own work.

“I am not implying anything about your research, *sir*. I am just saying that I don’t believe *those parameters* apply in this case, and I will tell you why.”

“Go head”, said McDuffy.

“The most traumatic event in the historic memory of the Mexicans is the loss they suffered during the War of 1848 against the United States. You have to remember that at that point in time México was the giant country of the south. All of Texas, California, New México, Arizona, Nevada, etc., belonged to México at that time. After México lost half of its territory in the war, the United States became the giant of the north. Afterwards, the United States government sent the marines several times into México, be it to chase Pancho Villa in Chihuahua with Pershing and The Punitive Expedition, or to invade Veracruz in 1918 to stop German weapons being delivered to the revolutionary forces... This is a long-lived trauma for Mexicans. They are always afraid that we will invade them again to take the rest of the country and turn it into another star. No Mexican would ever do anything so foolish so as to provoke another war with the United States. An assassination attempt would surely qualify as an excuse to send in the marines again. This is the last thing the guerrillas fighting in the mountains or the jungle would wish. So any ideological motivated agent would be very careful *not* to attack the United States in *any* way.”

“I am thinking of the radical groups such as the Puerto Rican nationalists who tried to shoot Harry Truman at the Blair House in 1950”, said Barnett.

“The key word there is *nationalists*. The Puerto Rican radicals were seeking independence for the island. Mexican nationalists see

their best interest served by not sacrificing the independence they already have by provoking the United States. They know that such a provocation would probably result in another invasion of their homeland by a vastly superior force. Therefore they would lose their independence. They could not dream of fighting against the United States armed forces. The most treasured word for them is sovereignty. So, the more radical they are, the more careful they become.”

“How about the extreme right, and the secessionist groups of the northern states of México?” asked Jim Barnett, not willing to concede anything.

“I am glad you mentioned them, because it underlines my point. These are minor groups that historically have had very little impact on the citizens of México at large. Now, their stated goal is to secede from México towards a later integration with the United States, just like Texas did in the nineteenth century, right?”

“Yes.”

“So why would they want to kill the President of the country they wish to belong to?”

There was a long silence which Agent McDuffy broke.

“I see what you mean. It would be bad Public Relations”, she said.

“Exactly. It doesn’t make much sense politically, does it?”

“No.”

“I see your point too, Dr. Perez.”, added Benett “Still the problem is that México has guerrilla fronts in twelve states. Surely they would like to take a shot at the United States.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why would they do that? What could they possibly gain by killing the President of the United States? What possible benefit to their cause would an action like this carry?”

There was another long pause while Jim Benett considered this. Then, graciously, he said.

“I am glad you are on our team, Doctor. Still, I disagree. I stand by my earlier analysis.”

“Thanks, Jim. Would you talk to your people in Washington?” said Agent McDuffy.

“As soon as we hang up.”

“Thanks. I’ll call you later.”

“You do that.”

At that moment there was a call on another line. She placed Manny on mute, and answered the line.

“McDuffy speaking”, said Melissa.

“I need you to come over immediately”, said the Ambassador. He sounded upset.

“I’ll be right over.” Melissa said, and then “Manny, I’ll have to call you back. Please stay within reach.”

“Sure. I’ll be here.”

She ran up to the ambassador’s office.

10

One year earlier, they had found him in the jungles of Guerrero, outside a small village that had been closely watched by the secret commandos.

When the guerrilla fighter walked into town that afternoon, in one of his usual expeditions to buy salt, rice and black beans with which the rest of the guerrilla troops fed themselves, he was followed discreetly by a team composed of twelve armed men.

Even though he had been instructed over and over to be very careful, Emilio Ronquillo didn't really believe he would be a suspect. He was not yet twenty, and his slight built made him seem smaller and frailer than what he was. His leather huaraches didn't cover his feet from the dust of the path, and now he looked as dirty as if he had been walking for days on end. His straw hat was just as dirty, and his clothes were torn in several places. His entire figure reeked misery.

Emilio Ronquillo had been born in a poverty stricken little town up in the hills of Guerrero State. His father had been a rural teacher, who had been killed in a fight by the corrupt Mayor of the town. The outward reason for the killing was that Professor Ronquillo had been a member of the Communist guerrilla which had been fighting on the hills on and off since the nineteen-seventies. The fact that Professor Ronquillo did sympathized with the guerrilla was true, so nobody voiced a question which was in everybody's mind. The question was: why? The professor had always refused to become involved in the fighting, so everybody thought it strange that overnight he would take up arms. The killing was, to say the least, very

suspicious. But Emilio, his four brothers and sisters and his mother found out better when a week later the Mayor took away their house and their land, accusing them of guerrilla complicity.

Emilio ran off to the jungle, and soon he joined the guerrilla for real. He didn't care what they were fighting for: he only knew that they were against people like the Mayor and that was reason enough for him.

As he walked into the small town, he felt confident. Who would believe he was a member of the *Ejercito Popular de Liberación Nacional*? Who would think of looking twice at him?

He walked through the unpaved streets of the village towards the public market. It was a hot and nasty day. The weather was humid and heavy and it was difficult for Emilio to breathe.

He didn't notice the shadows moving behind him, nor the sudden absence of noise in the town, until it was too late.

The team of commandos fell on him at the corner of the public market. Seven of them formed a protective circle, while the other five immobilized Emiliano. They immediately covered his mouth with a cloth. One of the commandos injected him a sedative right into his chest. Emilio was asleep within fifteen seconds. They wrapped him with a brown cotton blanket. Then they placed him in the back of a van, and left.

Less than sixty minutes later, Emilio Ronquillo was on board a small Cessna flying towards México City. He slept peacefully the entire way. It would be his last serene sleep for many months to come.

To torture a man without leaving traces is actually very easy.

The recipe has been around for many years.

First, throw in darkness.

Few things inspire more dread in man than absolute darkness.

Then you add silence or noise in different levels and proportions, depending on the amount of harm you want to do to a man. If you want to make them truly disconcerted, turn on a high pitch

sound for a long time. First the mind rejects it, and then the mind gets used to it until it reaches the point where it expects the sound; when it doesn't get it the brain suspects something is wrong. If you want them to become introspective, on the other hand, turn off all sounds. Make the room soundproof. Darkness and silence is the best way to force a man inside his head.

If you are in a hurry, you can use a rather simple apparatus used by ranchers all over the world. It is called a cattle prod. The cattle prod is a short rod made of high impact plastic or metal, with a button in one end and two prongs at the other end. Inside its cylindrical body, it holds eight D batteries. It is a device used as a modern version of a whip. The difference is that the release of a sharp discharge electricity in a concentrated point is a much more efficient way to catch the attention of cows and bulls. When used in the genitalia, it has proven to be so efficient in convincing people to change their minds that there are on the market short-size versions, small enough to hide in your coat or your purse, and they discharge the electricity in a single zap that normally paralyzes people for up to half an hour.

If the subject is still refusing to listen to your convincing arguments, you may lower him head first into a vat of excrement. Human excrement works the best. There is something in the human mind that rejects instinctively the scum of other human bodies.

Repeat as needed.

Normally that does the trick.

One year later, after countless interrogations by the secret team of commandos which Armando Molina paid out of his own money, in long sessions in which Emilio was tortured by applying mineral water with chile juices into his nose; in which he was submerged head first in a vat full of excrement and in which he received electric shocks in his genitals and his nipples, Emilio hadn't been broken.

He simply had gone mad.

His captors were surprised when they arrived one morning for the customary interrogation and found him babbling like a baby saying he needed his mother. Then he would get enraged and shout at the top of his lungs that he was Emiliano Zapata and he was going to have all

of them shot by a squad. Then he would cry again and ask where he was. After two more months of isolation in a dark room, in which Emilio saw nothing and heard nothing but his own breathing, his deranged mind became pliable as putty in the hands of the psychologist who reported to his superior that Emilio was whoever they wanted him to be.

The guerrilla messenger had become so afraid of being sent back to the dark room, that his mind would agree to become anyone his captors ordered him to be. It was interesting to see this case in particular, because it was as if Emiliano's mind was frozen in a permanently hypnotized stage. If the commandos told Emilio he was fifteen years old, he acted like a teenager; if they told him he was naked, he would cover himself; if they told him the room was very hot, he would actually sweat. If they told him to close his eyes and not to feel pain, they could stab him his arms until he bled and he would not flinch.

The special unit of commandos placed Emilio in a security house in Toluca, a small town near México City. They told him that he was a secret agent for the Revolutionary Forces of Liberation, and left him in care of his 'wife', a woman working directly under the orders of Armando Molina. He had ordered her to keep Emilio alive and well until a proper use could be found for him. Meanwhile, the 'wife' continued working on the feeble mind of Emilio.

She was still doing it when Armando Molina sent for him.

Armando Molina didn't have to deal with Emilio directly, of course. For that he had countless numbers of helpers who, wanting to be well thought of by the next President of México, were willing to do things he barely suggested. Armando knew that this willingness to serve him was what having power meant: to have things done for him by others.

Even though he didn't have to deal with Emilio, Armando Molina had listened to so many reports about him that he wanted to see him first hand. Besides, he had developed a special taste for those kinds of affairs. He had acquired such a special taste while he was head of the *Secretaría de Gobernación*. He liked best of all the way a male prisoner always stood tall and strong at the beginning. All of

them did it in various degrees. Some were more aggressive than others, but rarely did any prisoner fail to act courageously.

Initially.

Normally that attitude lasted the first few days, at most. Then they would crumble. It usually happened suddenly. The transformation was so complete, and so abrupt, that the first time Armando had witnessed it he believed the man was faking it so he had sent him back to be tortured some more.

After they disintegrated, men became docile at first. Having lost their claim to dignity, they accepted orders and obeyed commands as willfully as trained animals. Then they became friendlier and nicer, so grateful for each extra day they were allowed to live that they would run around like little dogs around their owners.

With Emilio all of the work of disintegration was done. Emilio had been broken and rebuilt. When they brought him into the tiny office that had a one way mirror, Armando saw that there wouldn't be any challenge from him. Bored, he proceeded quickly.

He turned off the lights inside of the tiny office, and at once there was a cry of terror from Emilio.

“Don't be afraid, Emilio. I am your friend. Do you want me to turn on the lights?”

“Yes! Please!”

Armando flicked on the switch.

“Emilio, I know that you are ready to do whatever is needed to fight for your country, is that true?”

“Yes.”

“I also know that you love your wife, your mother and your brothers, is that right?”

“Yes, that is right.”

“Do you want them to die?”

“No!”

“What would you do to keep them alive?”

“Whatever you tell me to do.”

“I also know that you would like to be rich, is that right?”

“...yes...I guess... but its okay. I don't want your money.”

“You want to be rich, yes or no.”

“Yes.”

“There you are. You have three very important reasons to do what you are told: the first is your duty to México, your beloved country; the second is your love for your family, and the third is the love for yourself. I am right?”

“Yes, sir. Whatever you say.”

“What if I tell you that there is a way for you to fulfill your duty, to keep your family safe, and make a lot of money all at the same time?”

Emilio didn't answer.

“Would you like that?”

“Yes, sir. Very much.”

“Okay, then. I am going to tell you what you are going to do. Remember that by following my orders you will be protecting México, your family, and yourself. Is that clear?”

“Yes.”

“If for any reason you failed in your mission and you are captured, you need to remember that this was your idea, understood? If you mention any of this nobody would believe you because I don't exist. This room doesn't exist. But your family would began to die one by one. First—

“No!”

“-first your wife, then your brothers, then your sisters, and then, at the end, your mother. Would you like that to happen?”

“No, please, for your mother's sake, don't.”

“Shish, don't shout. That is not going to happen, because you are going to do what I am telling you, right?”

“Yes, yes, whatever you want me to do”, said Emilio, already crying and sweating at the same time.

“If you don’t do it, do you understand what will the penalty be?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me.”

“You will kill my family.”

“That is right. Do you understand what the reward will be?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then. I believe you will be a good element for our group.”

Armando Molina got up after another half an hour of this, and left the building never to return.

He did not see the presence of a Volkswagen van painted as a collective taxi that was parked about a mile away. Inside the van there was a camera with a high-power lens installed on a base that came up from the floor of the van and rose to the roof. The lens came out above the driver’s head. The camera was able to take pictures from a distance of two miles without any trouble at all.

The next day Emilio was taken out of the house inside the trunk of a car.

He also would never come back.

11

Armando Molina wanted to make it as spectacular as he could, so he arranged for all the press to be there. Working through several reporters who were in his payroll, he spread the rumor that a dangerous terrorist had been captured, that it was being interrogated by the Policia Judicial Federal at the offices downtown of the *Procuraduría General de la República* -a few blocks away from the Newspaper Strip— and that somehow the Presidential Candidate was involved.

In a few hours both the PGR and the office of the Candidate were surrounded by hundreds of reporters from radio, television, and print media. Armando Molina sent his Press liaison with a short statement saying that he could not comment on the affair.

This only increased the media curiosity. At the PGR they released a statement saying that there would be a very important announcement, but they didn't know at what time it would be finished. It could be ready at any moment. That as soon as the Attorney General was through with it they would release it. For the moment they had no more information.

This statement only increased the media tension, and forced them to wait.

Among those waiting was Carmen Nuñez.

She was through for the day at her usual beat at Congress when she received in her beeper the message from her office that something was going on at the PGR, so she had taken the subway from the new

building that Congress occupied on the eastern part of the city, to the Reforma Avenue offices of the PGR.

Carmen was whistled at as she approached the building. Most of the reporters knew her, so she didn't mind their playful attention. She was used to being approached by strangers in the street, and to receive propositions by almost every male she knew. Young and beautiful, she liked being admired. She wasn't one of those ultra-feminists who considered a male compliment as an insult. She liked to be feminine, which was something that had always set her apart at the University. In her generation of journalism graduates most of the girls had believed that being feminine was being anti-feminist and therefore they had tried their best to look ugly. Carmen always thought that was silly, and worked herself to always look her best.

After a boy had broken her heart in high school, she had learned to be tough, and not believing in love anymore, she acted towards men as she saw fit; sometimes she would chase after a man she liked, and sometimes she allowed herself to be chased and caught. This is why she had five boyfriends at the present time, each one ignoring the existence of the others. The five men swore they were in love with her. She, in turn, loved no one.

One of her boyfriends was there. As soon as she came out of the subway station a block away she saw the distinctive car he drove: it was flaming orange, with the logo of the radio station he worked for displayed prominently all around the car.

When the whistling started, Sergio saw her too and left the group of reporters he was with. He approached her. She saw him walking towards her in the hurried, decisive way which she found so sexy. She had started going out with him just because of the way he walked.

"Hey", he said seriously. Unsmiling, his face had an ugly disposition.

"Hey", she said. And smiled. She pecked him on the lips. He melted under his suit. She saw the effect she had on him and felt gratified for having put on a dress instead of pants. Dresses always had that effect on men, she didn't know why. She herself didn't like her legs.

“What do we have?” she asked him. She took out a Kleenex out of her purse and started wiping off her red lipstick from his mouth.

“Nothing yet. They gave this out”, he gave her the press release.

Carmen read it carefully, and put it in her purse.

“I called you yesterday”, he said, and she understood he was offended.

“Oh, I am sorry *amorcito*, but when I got back home I had a terrible headache.”

“Why didn’t you call me today?”

“Look, love, what is this? Just because we are at the prosecutor’s office doesn’t mean you can interrogate me”, she said lightly.

“I am not interrogating you. I just want to know what the fuck is going on.”

“Nothing”, she said with a whisper, shaking her head. She knew what was coming; a barrage of recriminations. She didn’t understand why it always had to come to this: a jealous boyfriend, a few fights, and then another relationship was over. The pleasure of a few dates didn’t seem worth the aggravation afterwards.

“What do you mean, nothing?”

“Just that: nothing is going on. And we have a deal, remember?”

“I don’t like that deal anymore. You can’t treat me that way. If you don’t like the way I am, let’s call it quits.”

“Okay, let’s”, she said, and walked away.

He hadn’t expected that. He just stood there, watching her walking away. She was afraid he would make a scene, but he didn’t. She sought refuge with a group of female reporters. After a while, he approached her with a huge smile on his face, and a large ice cream in his hand. He gave it to her, and tried to start a conversation again. He did it so nicely, she was hard pressed to stay mad at him. But she wanted to stay mad, because she knew that if she didn’t stop him immediately, his reactions would only get worse.

What saved her was the police.

The spokesman and a couple of detectives in dark suits came out of the building with the announcement that the conference was to be held at eight at the auditorium around the corner.

Carmen saw her watch: it was almost six. She had plenty of time to make a few phone calls. Sergio had left to get his equipment out of the orange car, so before he came back she took off in a taxi.

“Where are you going, pretty lady?”, said the old driver.

She made sure the taxi drivers’ credentials were in plain view. With so many assaults lately, she had to be careful.

“Take me to the Pink Zone, please.”

Ten minutes later she got off in front of a VIPS, which was the nearest coffee shop. It was a chain of fast food restaurants, with huge panoramic windows and Formica tables.

When she went in she realized she hadn’t eaten anything all day long, so she ordered chicken tacos and a salad. Normally the place was too expensive for her, and although she visited four or five VIPS in the course of her working day, she rarely had anything but a coffee. But today she felt like money didn’t matter.

It was a feeling that she hadn’t had before in her life. A feeling that felt so good it almost made up her mind.

Maybe —*maybe*— she would keep the money and buy herself a car. She needed a car to move around the enormous city. She was tired of the subway being always so full and so hot, and the minibuses being so crowded and slow.

She made some numbers in her head while she ate.

By transporting herself by bus and the subway she was able to do at most a couple of good interviews per day.

Working all day.

If she had a car, she could move from one place to another in the big city with less trouble and easily double her work, which in turn would allow her to write for another magazine or newspaper, therefore earning another salary. And if she could make more money, then she could save some of it towards buying a bigger house for her mother.

Yes.

A house out in Cuernavaca, where the climate was perfect all year round and her mother could live out peacefully her remaining years. Her mother could have a small garden full of roses —she liked roses— and gardenias.

And she could visit every weekend.

Her dreaming and planning made the time fly away and when she realize it, the two hours had gone by.

She forgot entirely about her phone calls.

At five minutes past eight, she was back at the press conference.

12

Mario Beltrán had always dreamed of becoming a bullfighter.

Ever since he was a kid, he had been fascinated by the bulls and the art of fighting them. He thought bullfighting represented the highest degree of valor in a man; to willingly enclose yourself in close quarters with an animal weighting 600 kilos, which was armed with not one, but two incredibly dangerous knives, was to prove that you were a man above all men.

He had trained himself to become a bullfighter. As a teenager he used to skip school and go to Chapultepec Park, where the aspiring bullfighters trained. Later, as he grew older, he would go instead to Deer Park, near the National University, where the professional bullfighters gathered. When he turned 17 he fled his poor home in México City and joined the retinue of a *Matador* who traveled all over the countryside fighting against bulls of all sizes and ages. Some of those bulls had been in the ring before, and that made them tremendously dangerous. To avoid this jeopardy, the Matador had created a large number of tricks to help him confuse even the smartest of the bulls.

With him Mario had learned then not only the mechanics of bullfighting, but he also got a glimpse of the moments of art and glory that few —so very few!— of those afternoons gave to the practitioners of the old Spanish art. He had learned that a fighting bull is a special breed of animal that grows up in the mountains, surrounded only by other bulls and cows, and that the first time the bull saw a human was the day he was taken to the ring. This was the reason why the bulls

were so enraged coming out of the gates into the arena; having being taken from his pleasant existence in the hills, to a wooden box in a truck and then into a ring were vociferous people welcomed the disconcerted animal, the bull's instincts were to fight for his life.

Mario had learned that the horns in the bull are extremely sensitive, and that they are a kind of an antenna for the animal. The bull uses its horns as a natural extension of its body, and the beast always kept them perfectly calibrated and sharp by filing them against trees. The creature had a perfect understanding of the length of its horns and it could measure with deadly exactitude the distance to a target. This is why cheating bullfighters sawed off an inch or so of the horns of a bull: not to make them less sharp, as many people thought, but to throw the bull off balance.

He had learned that an animal weighting 600 kilos can move faster than a human body weighting 70 kilos, and that a single mistake in front of a bull was always paid with blood and too often with human lives.

When he was 20 he had had his first *corrida* as a *novillero*, and it had turned out great even though his bull had been rather small. But he was grateful for being there at all because he had learned also that a *corrida* is a very expensive affair and that even the most diehard fans have trouble financing young *novilleros* who might or might not make it.

Three years later, after getting him into as many novilladas he was able to, his mentor, the older matador, gave him the *alternativa* when Mario was 23. The *alternativa* was the act of the bullfighter receiving the recognition of his peers; it was akin to receive a doctorate from a university. He became a true *Matador* then in the proudest moment of his life, and he had received his first favorable newspaper articles.

After that, nothing.

For the next 10 years he tried unsuccessfully to get into the circuit of the big bullfighters. But his luck wasn't good enough—even though he had the heart, the looks, and the talent. He had done everything he thought he was supposed to do: he had fought in small rings around the states, often fighting old bulls, or even Brahma bulls.

He had participated in every festivity he could think of so people would recognize him as a *Matador*; he had been a frequent client of the *taquerías* and bars where bullfighters would meet at night to exchange gossip, he had learned their lingo, and learned the dress code, and he knew by memory all the great afternoons had by remarkable historical bullfighters such as *Manolete*, *El Curro Rivera*, or *El Soldado*.

Everything to no avail.

There were many reasons for this lack of results: one was the very cost of the bulls. Each good bull could be as expensive as a small car. Another one was the fact that bullfighting seemed to be a dying art in México. Every year fewer and fewer people paid tickets to watch men perform their valiant rituals. Then there were the leeches of the *fiesta*; the newspaper reporters who would not write a good review unless they were paid properly; the bullring owners who would charge enormous fees as a way to stop competing bullfighters from challenging their own; the government officials who requested money even after exorbitant taxes were paid... All extending their hand and demanding money. And on top of all this, the unforgiving fans who requested and applauded suicidal risk takers instead of *artistas* of the bull.

When Mario turned 30, a Customs Office boss who felt pity for this ragged bullfighter without a bull who was penniless and starving, advised him to take a stable job to help him live in a decorous manner. He offered his help. In a flash of lucidity, Mario understood that he was becoming too old to be a bullfighter, so he took the job he was offered.

This is how he ended up in Quintana Roo, guarding the Mexican border with Belize. Somehow he blamed the government for his failure as a bullfighter, and he blamed also the rest of the Mexican society for not caring after the so many sacrifices he had made to pleasure them. Bitter and disappointed, he didn't care for his duties as a guard. At this point in his life he only wanted to make as much money as he could.

He didn't care how.

After a year in the job he had learned the ropes well enough to fall into a routine which was mostly satisfactory for all people involved, meaning that the families in Guatemala and Belize who organized the entry of illegal immigrants into México would pay him a certain amount every month to make sure that the immigrants would not be stopped by him at the point of entry. The drug runners paid him a much larger amount to guarantee that their shipments of cocaine and heroine would not be opened, and the guerrilla fighters promised not to kill him as long as he didn't stop the flow of weapons and ammo.

When he made his deals Mario would say that the best policy was to keep things moderate: if there was a huge shipment of immigrants, drugs, or weapons across the border it was bound to catch the attention of somebody somewhere. Mario would be pressured into action, and all of them would end up losing their benefits. So he regimented the movement to a few kilos of powder and two illegals every day. Everybody understood that the deal Mario devised was the best, and everybody was relatively content with this micromovement across the border point under the supervision of Mario Beltrán.

This is why Mario was so surprised the day the pick-up truck carrying a long aluminum canister arrived at his station. He knew nothing about it. And it was a large cargo, way outside of the established parameters of a few kilos per day.

"I have some gifts to deliver", the driver said quietly. It was the signal.

"Who send you?" Mario asked.

"Your mother, asshole." said the driver. His eyes were hidden behind the mirror glasses. Mario didn't blink. It was the second password.

Mario inspected the canister that was encased in a wooden crate. The blinding sun made the metal shine in the open spaces between the wood slates.

"How much does it weight?"

"About a thousand kilos"

Mario tried not to react to this news.

He walked around the truck, pretending to check the tires.

Meanwhile he made numbers in his head very fast. 1000 kilos of powder was a lot of money. Be it cocaine or heroine, the amount was large enough to be noticeable in the market. This cargo would send the feds into a frenzy of activity, and sooner or later they would arrive at his station.

He decided not to risk it.

“Sorry. No can do. Turn around and go back. I’ll talk to José later on.”

The driver seemed unconcerned. The mirror glasses turned to face Mario.

“This is different shit, man. The boss said that this is a gift for the other men.”

“Which men?”

“Those in the jungle” said the driver and Mario understood suddenly. These were not drugs. There were weapons for the guerrilla. That explained the weight. But it didn’t explained why it was being carried by Pancho, one of the couriers for the Martínez brothers, who were the Kings of the Cocaine in this region. Drug runners and Guerrilla fighters despised their respective activities. They normally shot at each other.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, man. So what, am I going through or what?”

Mario thought fast. If he send it back, the Martínez Brothers would call him on the phone and require explanations. It could be nasty. If he detained the shipment as he was supposed to do in his position as a Customs Officer, the brothers would come looking for him. It could be deadly. And if he did let it across, his boss would come looking for his share of the profits, which he would have to pay out of his own pocket. It could be expensive.

He didn’t like it.

“I don’t like it.” he said.

“You are not supposed to like it, man. You are supposed to waive me through.”

“I will let you go ahead, this time. But tell José that I need to talk to him. This is not part of the deal.”

After saying this he placed a paper seal around one of the slates of the crate, glued it at the ends, and signed it. This paper seal meant that the contents had been inspected, so if another Customs Agent stopped the truck on the road he would not break the seal.

When the truck pulled away, Mario called his assistant and ran to his own car.

He followed the truck to a place two hours outside Chetumal, that had a long stone wall at the entrance and was heavily guarded. It had a large sign that said: Research Facility. Mario assumed it was a fake sign.

He wrote down the name and made sure he would remember it later on, when he talked to his guerrilla contact. If the cargo wasn't for the guerrilla, then Mario expected to collect a lot of money from the Martínez Brothers, because a thousand kilos of cocaine were a lot of dollars.

13

The announcement was spectacular indeed.

The conference room in the *Procuraduría General de la República* was full of newspaper journalists, radio reporters and television cameras. On the stage there was a long table covered with a traditional green felt cloth. The table was overflowing with microphones bearing colorful cubes with the names of the media companies they belonged to. The reporters were stepping over each other trying to get their tape recorders in place beside the microphones, and the best angles for the television cameras.

On the wall behind the table were two huge seals: the one of the PGR, and the one of the Republic of México, which was represented by an eagle eating a snake.

The noisy reporters were immediately quiet when the high officials of the PGR walked out onto the stage one by one. When they were seated at the table, the head of the PGR—which was the equivalent of the Attorney General in the United States—spoke into the battery of microphones.

“Good afternoon, friends of the media. We asked you to come today because we have an important announcement to make.”

He cleared his throat before going on. He was visibly nervous. He was middle aged, and bore an aggressive mustache *à la* Pancho Villa. His demeanor was tempered by wire-rimmed glasses which made him look like a good hearted professor.

“As you know, next week México will have the honor of hosting the Second America’s Summit. The President of the United States, and twenty-three other Presidents and Prime Ministers will start arriving in our country in a few hours. That’s why we believe you should have the following information.”

He was handed a folder by a pretty woman in an executive suit who was standing behind him. He opened it, and closed it again without looking at the contents.

“We have proof that there is a plan to kill the President of the United States while he is on Mexican soil. The plan was engineered by the *Ejército Popular de Liberación Nacional*. They want to produce an international incident between México and United States, aimed at disrupting the upcoming Presidential elections and to paralyze the entire country.”

There was a collective oooh, followed fast by dead silence in the conference room.

“We don’t know yet when or how this assassination attempt was to take place, but we are here to tell through you to the people involved, that we are aware of their plans and that starting now we will triple the security measures around the Heads of State visiting México to insure their safety. Hereby, we also ask all Mexican Citizens to forgive the extreme measures we will be putting into effect starting today.”

“Normally we would not make public this type of information, but after much debate it was considered by the President and the Cabinet that the public interest would be best preserved by being totally open. We are sure that the Mexican Citizens will support our actions. We have also put on notice the embassies of the countries involved.”

“Thank you for your attention and your understanding.”

The Mexican Attorney General picked up his papers, and amidst the shouting of all the reporters, he left the room without answering any of their questions.

14

At the American Embassy they were receiving a direct feed that came from one of the television cameras placed by *Televisa* inside the PGR. *Televisa* was the largest media company in México. For many years a virtual monopoly, *Televisa* owned not only most of the television channels, but also several of the Mexican satellites, thousands of radio stations, hundreds of magazines and dozens of other corporations.

When the signal from the camera was sent through to one of the big yellow trucks parked outside of the PGR, it was picked up by a smaller van parked nearby. The van was old and battered, but inside it held the most advanced communications system in the world. One of main pieces of equipment was a laser guided antenna; it picked up electromagnetic vibrations in window panes and cables, transformed them into positive input which was in turn converted back into its original form by a specialized software working out of a row of computers hidden inside the side covers.

With this machine the CIA technicians were able to “listen” and to “see” what people inside an office of the top floor of a building forty stories high were typing into their computers. By directing the laser beam to the window pane from inside their van, they could pick up the vibrations from inside a room and the software would make a description of the room and its contents.

Picking up the feed from a television relay system was child’s play. The American Embassy in México had found this technology very useful because *Televisa*, being owned by the sons and daughters

of the Mexican political system, was totally partial to the regime. Televisa didn't need censors from the government to check the contents of their material, like newspapers did: Televisa's self-censorship was harsher and tougher than the government itself. This is why, when one of the main shareholders of Televisa, Emilio Azcárraga, and his right hand hatchet man Jacobo Zabludowsky had tried to establish a news corporation in the United States in the nineteen-eighties, the American media had boycotted them so hard they had had to leave the country. Fast.

Often the field reporters of Televisa would film important information which the company kept off the air. When the new technology showed up at the embassy, Televisa was not be able to keep the information secret anymore. Many times since then, the CIA had filtered some of that information back to México through other channels.

"What are they doing?" asked Agent McDuffy.

"I have no idea", said the Ambassador. Bill Casper looked ashen. This was way over his head. Although he had proven to be a very adept Ambassador—which was a surprise to everybody because México had always been difficult—the situation they were facing was nothing he could be prepared for. He had often told that his success as an Ambassador had been achieved by following his mother's advice: be a decent man, she had said. Always. He had been a decent man to the Mexicans and they had appreciated that. But this time he didn't know how to handle the situation. This wasn't something that could be solved through sheer decency and common sense.

"Coming out with this information at this time serves no purpose, but to put the assassins in notice that we are after them", said Bob Allen. "Either the Attorney General knows something we don't, or this may be a political play. You know, sort of I tell you, Peter, so you listen too, Paul."

Melissa McDuffy had an idea.

"Do you think they might be trying to scare the President into canceling the Summit?"

There was silence in the room for a moment, while the three of them considered the idea.

“I don’t think so. The Mexicans know that it is too late to cancel something as big as a Summit. They also know that no President of the United States would refuse to keep an appointment out of fear. Can you visualize the damage that would do to the President? ‘Mammy, mammy, I don’t want to go to México because there are bad boys over there’”, said Bob.

“Bob is right. I don’t think the Mexicans even considered that as an option.”

“Then there is something we are missing.”

“Have they finished interrogating the prisoner yet?”

“Not that I know. But I will keep on checking through the night. As soon as I find something, of course, I will tell you both.”

“Okay, so why did they go public with this information?” asked Bob again.

“You know, it might be just what the Attorney General said: they want the Mexican citizens to know and to understand what’s going on.”

Bob laughed. His laughter sounded hollow. The skin in his face was thin and the bones beneath were clearly visible. He certainly needed a rest.

“No politician takes a step without wishing for a double band effect, as in billiards. In México they always shoot for three bands. They have been doing it many years, and they are good at it. Very good. Remember what I told you earlier? México has been a prize much desired by all ideological camps. If it didn’t fall into fascism or communism is because of their political skills, not because they are concerned about their citizens’ opinions. No, there is something more we are missing.”

“But maybe-

“I agree with Bob, Melissa. You have never dealt with the Mexicans before, and you have no idea of the political talent they have. They can make you dizzy with their footwork. Just let me remind you that this is a political group which has managed to stay in power through the better part of the most politically convoluted century in the history of the world. Social revolutions, world wars,

ideological confrontations... you name it, the Mexicans have dealt with it successfully. That requires political talent. So I agree entirely; this announcement was either a message to somebody, or a preparation for something else.”

“We cannot wait to guess what they have in their minds. We have to find the assassin...”

“If there is one...”, mumbled Bob.

“What? What do you mean?” said the Ambassador. Even he was startled.

“You don’t mean to say this is announcement was a fake, do you?”

Bob kept quiet for a long moment before he got up.

“It was an idea that crossed my mind. But you are right: it was a stupid idea. Let’s get to work. I have the list you asked for, Melissa. Would you like to see it now?”

“Of course”

“We’ll be downstairs, Mister Ambassador. If you need anything, just whistle”, said Bob.

“I’ll certainly will, Bob. Same yourself. I think I will spend the night here.”

“Good night, sir.”

“Good night, Agent McDuffy. Thank you for coming up.”

“On the contrary, sir. Thank you for calling me.”

They walked in silence to Bob’s office.

It was going to be a very long week.

And she was already tired.

15

It was like an explosion.

Newspapers, television, radio, Internet, email, people in the streets, everybody talking about it. Opinion columns, editorials, background articles on the history of assassination attempts, visual images of past assassinations from Kennedy in Dallas through Colosio in Tijuana, critical analysis of the guerrillas fighting inside México and historical perspectives of terrorist activities, interviews galore, and talk and more talk about the possible assassins origin. For awhile at least, people in México forgot the problems derived from living under a political system that was falling apart.

But this happened also outside México. The repercussions were felt immediately all over the world.

The fact that there was somebody out there wanting to kill the President of the United States and the rest of the American Presidents on Mexican soil captured the imagination of people in France and in China, in Australia and in Russia. Up to that point the Second Americas Summit had been a routine diplomatic affair just like there are dozens every year in any given country. The people of the European Union had expressed mild interest in following the attempts of the American President to create an economic community much like Europe had already done in their part of the world. The main concern of the European governments with the Summit was mainly economic, because the governments of Spain and France didn't want to be left out of those countries where they had once held so high an influence.

But suddenly everything changed. All at once the interest of the European citizens demanded more and more information and literally overnight there were thousands of reporters from all over the world roaming the streets of México City. Since the PGR kept silent after their announcement, saying only that there was nothing new for the moment, the correspondents felt compelled to justify their presence in México by reporting on everything they could think of, from the political structure down to the ecological system of México.

And of course about the hunt for the assassin.

For the next week the search for the assassin was the only thing people talked about. It became something of a national obsession, and the tension increased as the time to the welcoming ceremony approached.

Carmen wasn't planning to write about the affair at all due to the amount of ink already being spent on it by everybody else, but two days after the announcement had been made she received a visit which forced her to change her mind.

When the woman knocked on Carmen's door, the reporter was thinking that maybe she would use the money that was underneath her mattress to open up a business for her brother.

She knew that the young man was desperate because he had been out of a permanent job for over five years now. He had been employed before by a printing shop and his references indicated that he was an excellent printer. But then the printing shop had had to close after the economic crash of 1995, and he had been out of a permanent job since then.

He and his wife and two daughters had come to live with Carmen and her mother after one year of his being out of a job. Carmen had returned home many times during that year to hear him cry out of impotence and the daily humiliation he suffered. Every morning he would go out to buy the paper and scan the columns of help wanted, looking for an opening he could apply to. Every night he would come back home defeated and discouraged.

Carmen had seen the terrible degradation a man without a job experiences. She had seen it twice now, first with her father and now with her brother. She was anxious to help, but opening a business

might not be such a good idea after all, she realized, because then they would have to deal with the tax collectors and the public inspectors who roamed the streets of México City looking for new shops.

Carmen remembered that she had written an article on the travails of the small businesses in México City. She fetched the issue from her private collection and she read her own words describing that just to open a new small business there were seventy-five different steps and legal requirements to fulfill in México City. Because there were so many permits and regulations the inspectors were able to coerce the owners into an exchange: the businesses gave them some money, and the inspectors pretended all the permits were in order.

It wasn't appealing at all.

Besides that, her brother Roberto didn't know much about businesses.

Maybe she could buy a taxi for him, she thought suddenly. He was a good driver and if he took good care of the car, driving a taxi could provide him with the income he needed so desperately. He could drive it all day long, or half a day and rent the car to another driver the rest of the day. And she would have the added advantage of having a private chauffeur at her beck and call. Just like a queen.

She was laughing at herself for the last part of this idea when there was a knock at her door.

When she opened it she saw a small figure leaning against the wall as if she were trying to catch her breath. The old woman acted like she was sick. She was wearing a black shawl over her head and shoulders, and her diminutive body made her look like a ghostly representation of the Virgin of Guadeloupe.

"What's wrong with you, granny?" Carmen said, talking to the old woman with the affective tone of voice Mexicans use to convey mercy. She had recognized her as the woman who handled the little quesadilla stand around the corner. Carmen embraced the old woman by the shoulders and she was going to bring her inside her house, when the old woman's face peered from underneath her shawl.

Her hand shot up and held Carmen very strongly by her arm. Carmen was paralyzed by the surprise she felt at the strength of the woman.

“You are Carmen Nuñez, is that right?”

“*Sí, abuelita.* That’s me. What’s wrong?”

“I have this for you” said the woman, and very quickly she produced a brown envelope which she placed in Carmen’s hands.

Then the woman walked away so quickly that Carmen was left speechless for a moment. When she reacted, the woman was turning at the corner.

Carmen took the envelope inside her house and opened it immediately.

What she read curled her blood.

16

Manny kept his schedule at the university next day.

After waiting the rest of the night in vain for Melissa McDuffy to call him back, Manny decided to stick to his daily activities. So at five in the morning he had a long hot shower, then fixed himself toast and coffee, and at seven sharp, as usual, he was reading the Mexican newspapers through the Internet.

Manny had been following the Mexican newspapers for the last fifteen years, since the mid-eighties. Back then he had had to do it through the physical papers which were delivered with a fifteen day delay in the University Library. In the mid-nineties, when the Internet allowed him to read them the same day, Manny thought he was dreaming. The electronic editions were different than the paper ones, of course, but what he lost in extension he had gained in expediency and convenience.

After analyzing the Mexican newspapers for so many years, Manny knew exactly which was which. He was well aware that the *Excelsior* was the favorite arena of the old guard politicians. *Excelsior* had been turned into a cooperative by President Luis Echeverría back in 1975, amidst a huge scandal, and ever since the paper had been the place where PRI *politicos* fought and aired their grievances.

There was the *Universal*, which was owned by a sharp man who had gained his position by marrying the daughter of the original owner, then taking control of the paper by acquiring a majority of shares. It was known that for many years he had had trouble with the government which accused him of evading a huge sum in taxes.

The *Jornada* was the refuge of the Mexican *Intelligenza*, those who fancied themselves as progressive and on the political left. It reflected the weaknesses derived from their political position. One of its directors had been heard saying once that the only thing left to do with México was to burn the entire country and start from scratch.

That paper had been born out of a split from *unomásuno*, another daily whose original director had been bought off with a million dollars in cash and then kicked out of the country in the late eighties by President Carlos Salinas.

Novedades and *Heraldo* were basically the mouthpieces for their owners, in the tradition of the Hearst Newspapers in the United States. The only two newspapers which had managed to keep a clean reputation of integrity and journalistic standards in México City were the *Reforma* and the *Financiero*, both relatively young newspapers.

Manny had learned that a piece of information in México was seldom complete. One newspaper gave a piece of the puzzle, and another the next piece, until the whole picture with a semblance of truth emerged. So he had disciplined himself to go through all of the newspapers very fast every morning. In fifteen minutes he would download the articles he wanted to read from each one of the papers, and then compare them in the evenings. This is how he had managed to get a very accurate picture of the Mexican political infighting.

This time, however, all of their headlines were about the assassin, which surprised Manny because he thought the information was a secret. All of the dailies —the *Excelsior*, the *Universal*, the *Jornada*, *Reforma*, etc.— carried it as their eight column front-page headline. But even more surprising was the fact that, when Manny went through the opinion and the columns pages, he found many pieces dealing already with the subject. The leading news took time to seep down into the opinion pieces everywhere, but especially in México since the Government had so much control over the content of the papers. To find those opinions written and published so fast was very unusual, to say the least.

He downloaded nearly two-hundred pieces that morning, twice the usual, and then he hurried to class.

During his first class he decided very fast that he wasn't good at keeping secrets, because even though he tried to act normally, the fact that he was *trying* at all made his actions look rigid, and his lecture forced.

His students were the first to notice, because they were the ones who saw him first at his eight a.m. class on Latin-American history. One of them even asked if he was feeling all right, since Manny was distracted through the entire period.

The news from México was the chat of the day, of course, and the first ten minutes of the class were spent talking about the possible motives behind the assassin's existence.

Manny didn't participate much in the discussion. Normally he would direct it by asking pointed questions and letting the students reach the conclusions on their own. But this time just knowing that he was bound by a confidentiality agreement with the Secret Service chilled his normal enthusiasm.

The second class improved a little but only because he gave them a quiz that he had included in the syllabus at the beginning of the semester.

At noon, when he went to his small office at the Center for Latin American Studies in Grinter Hall at the university, he didn't feel like facing his peers, so he created a headache as an excuse and left the University for the day. He evaluated whether he should be sick for the remainder of the week. It would be the first time in ten years he would miss his duties, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was cheating his students by not sharing with them what he knew.

When he went back home he took a long shower before fixing himself a sandwich.

Manny lived alone in a two bedroom house five minutes away from the University of Florida. He liked the house because it was close enough to the school so he could walk the distance if he felt like it. In the autumn and winter he felt like it very often. The rest of the year Gainesville was too hot to walk the streets carrying notebooks and school papers, so he had bought himself a small Buick which he

used to drive around during the weekends. He would drive with dates over to Cedar Key on the Gulf of México for lunch, or to Jacksonville or St. Augustine on the Atlantic Coast for the weekends.

He had a number of girlfriends, two of whom were his sexual partners, but nobody he really loved. He had never loved any one woman in his life the way other people say they did. He used to joke with his best friend Tim that his heart was too generous to be dedicated only to one woman. Tim called him the Last Don Juan, even though Manny had never really tried to be a ladies man.

Sure, he liked women. And women liked him back. But it was a natural occurrence in his life more than an active pursuing. He disliked men—or women—who bragged about their sexual affairs, and had always refused to tell Tim anything about his sex life. Tim, on the contrary, loved to tell him even the smallest details of his.

Like in the conversation they had had this day.

“Hi, *compadre*” said Tim on the phone. “Wanna have lunch?”

“Like to, but I can’t today.”

“Who is it?”

“Nobody.”

“A new girl?”

“Nobody.”

“Yeah, right. Guess who came home with me last night?”

“I don’t want to know.”

“Susan, your secretary.”

“You’re kidding”, said Manny although Susan was the Department’s secretary, not his. She was a pretty blonde, who was also a dancer. Slim and tall, she was very cute. She had the longest legs Manny had ever seen.

“Swear to God, man. And oh, man, she does have the best titties in the universe.”

“Tim, I don’t want you to tell me those things.”

“You should see them, man. Perfect titties. Her legs were a surprise for me too, because I expected them to be very muscular, you

know? what with her dancing lessons every day and all? But I was wrong. They were soft as butter. And long... oh, man. What a night!”

“Tim, shut up.”

“Why? Are you getting a hard-on?”

“You are an asshole.”

“Talking about asses-”

“Good-bye, Tim.”

Manny hung up.

Tim called right back.

“What did you do that for?”

“I told you. I don’t want to know those details of your sexual activities.”

“Manny, don’t be a prude. You are my friend, right? If I don’t share this with my best friend, then with whom?”

“It bothers me.”

“Yeah. Because you get horny!”

“You have trash for a brain.”

“Anyway, who’s your date?”

“Nobody. I am staying home. I think I am catching the flu.”

“Okay. Then you *should* stay home. See you...”

“Later.”

As soon as he hang up, the telephone rang again. It was Susan. Immediately Manny had a flashing thought of her breasts, and imagined her naked.

“Son of a bitch!” he muttered.

“I am sorry Doctor Perez, is this a bad time?” asked Susan.

“No, Suzy. I am sorry. What is it?”

“Well, Dr. Leslie asked me to go over the schedule for the fall semester with you. Are you sure this a good time for you?”

“Sure. Let me get on my computer and I’ll be with you in a minute.”

“Thank you, Dr. Perez.”

“No problem.”

When Agent McDuffy called him one hour later he was still furious with Tim because he would not be able to see Susan the same way ever again.

17

Don Federico was dreaming in front of his huge television. He was remembering what once was.

In 1952, México was booming. The governing party had found a stable political frame out of which the country could profit. The political groups worked together for a piece of the pie and brought peace to the entire nation. The economy benefited from the wealth of the oil wells after they had been nationalized by Lázaro Cárdenas in 1938. By 1941 the international oil companies had settled all their claims, and the Mexican government used the extra money to build roads and schools. The oil income also gave the government a certain independence from the need of collecting taxes, so the industrialists found themselves in a paradise of an almost tax free environment; the only tax to pay was the periodical money given to the inspectors, and to the officers of the party. Small entrepreneurs paid a fixed yearly rate in a way of licenses. Unions were organized by an ex-milkman called Fidel Velázquez into a single powerful union known as the CTM (*Confederación de Trabajadores de México*) which pledged its alliance to the party and kept a tight rein on the workers. Everyday there were more and more jobs created. The PRI was delivering on its promises, even though it kept part of those promises for itself, and the people were happy. A small amount of corruption didn't really matter; it was the grease that kept the country moving.

The postwar brought also heavier industrialization, and this had increased the need for silver and minerals of all type, which in turn

had placed more demand and more responsibility on the operation handled by Karl Schmidt.

The Engineer, as he was known now by friends and family, had also become popular with the people in town because of his willingness to show them how to fix the water pump that brought water out of the wells around town, or the easy way in which he could fix electric generators, or pulleys handled by tractors. He had his way with any machine, and in a town that was living still as in the 18 century, this knowledge of technology was much appreciated. Thanks to his second Mexican wife, he had learned to drink tequila, to celebrate in parties like the best and hardier of the Mexicans, and he had become the godfather of fifteen boys and girls just like a regular Mexican. Their parents had turned him into their *compadre*. That is an honor Mexicans bestow only on their best friends. A *compadre* becomes the godfather of the kid and becomes the substitute father in case something happens to the real one.

When Karl died suddenly of a heart attack, there was true sorrow in San Pablo Ostotepec, the small town in San Luis Potosí where the mine was. The entire town turned out for his funeral, and walked behind the casket to the cemetery. His widow, young still, all of his godchildren, their families, and his only son were there to cry for him for the last time. He had been a good man.

Frederick Schmidt Sánchez, now known by his Mexicanized name of Federico Schmidt Sánchez, was teaching young kids in the town deep in the forest where he lived. Three years earlier he had started teaching them how to read and write Spanish as a way of recuperating his own ability to read and write the language. When his father died, he moved back into town.

His son had inherited some of the charisma from the old engineer, and when he passed away, people tended to see the young man with the same endearing eyes. *El maestro Don Federico*, as he became known very fast, discovered also that he had an enormous appeal with women. As soon as he smiled, his green eyes made them languish as if he were one of those romantic crooners much in fashion at the time.

Other people noticed his appeal too.

One of them was the General who had been his father's boss at the mine. General Fernando Bracho was now the Governor of the state. Since the engineer Schmidt had been good for his political standing in the party, because the mine under his command had been one of the largest and most efficient producers of silver in the country, the General had turned Karl into his *compadre*. The General prided himself in always watching out for his *ahijados* or godsons. And even though Federico was not really his *ahijado* since General Bracho had not assisted at his christening, the General thought it was a good idea to call him so because he liked to surrounding himself only with the best men and women. The General thought that maybe the son of the engineer could be good asset to his staff.

He was right.

One day, he asked the young man to join him for lunch at his house in the state capital.

When young Federico arrived, the General was surprised first at his height, —Federico was 1.85 meters (6 feet) tall— and then at his good looks. He had the aspect of one those damn movie stars the general had seen. His daughters also noticed the visitor, because they kept interrupting the meeting for one reason or another, and during lunch they giggled nervously while they served the food for the men who, as it was customary, ate by themselves.

“Do you know what are you going to do now that your father is gone?”

“No, sir. I am happy right now with my classes.”

“Well, maybe that is noble and all that. But a man like you can have a better future than to be a teacher of dumb little Indians”, said General Fernando Bracho, even though he was an Indian himself.

Federico didn't blink. He was used to the fact that some Indians, as soon as they acquired money or prestige, disliked their own people and began to treat them worse than animals. They were called *Ladinos*. The appellation had been born after the Christening of the country by the Latin speaking Catholic priests. *Ladinos* were Indians who spoke Latin. Then, the name came to be applied to any Indian who proved to be smart and spoke Spanish.

General Bracho was a shrewed *ladino* who knew all too well how to use raw power, and in many aspects Federico agreed with him, so they became true friends. The young friend of the Governor was soon a rising star in the political world of the state, and one year later the professor was offered the elected position of mayor of his small home town.

Federico took some time to think about it.

This was at the height of the power structure of the PRI, so it wasn't a matter of whether the people would vote for him. No. His winning was guaranteed by the fact that nobody else would run for office. And even if somebody else tried to run against the official candidate, the unions, controlled by the party, would block the candidacy and would sabotage it in a thousand ways; the police would not allow another politician to stage rallies; the state office bureaucrats would lose the permits and the legal registrations, and the ballots would disappear... At that time and place, to be a candidate of PRI for any post was to have that position guaranteed, like a signed blank check.

What made Federico stop and think about it was that his life in Germany was fast becoming a forgotten matter. Here in México nobody talked about the war much, nobody even knew he had been in the war, and he found himself facing a future which his past could cancel if he didn't bury it. But burying his past meant forgetting it. Even though he would have liked to do that, at the same time he could not forget his beloved Ute, nor would he ever.

Also, there was the matter of *Quetzálcoatl*.

A *quetzal* is a magnificent bird of beautiful iridescent green and crimson colors which is a native bird of the rain forest of México and Central America.

Coátl comes from the *Náhuatl* tongue and means snake.

Together, the two words compose *Quetzalcóatl* and the name means feathered snake, or, as many people prefer, *flying* snake. Quetzalcóatl is the name given to the man-god whose presence was felt all over Central America, from México to Peru. All of the cultures in such a vast area knew him with different names similar in meaning. The Mayas knew him as Kukulcán, for example. It hasn't been

deciphered exactly who came first, the man or the god, but either way the folklore says that Quetzalcóatl was a tall, bearded white man who came from the east. He appeared in Mesoamerica around the year one thousand, and showed the ancient Meshicas how to grow and cook corn, which then became the favorite staple of the entire nation. Mexicans make everything from tortillas to beer —*tesgüino*— out of it. He also taught them the arts of painting, of music, of poetry, of sculpture; he demonstrated the principle of sciences and revealed how to study the stars through the use of a calendar. In short, he was a superior man. A god-like figure that arrived to bring civilization to the ancient Mexicans.

While Federico had never listened to or cared for the racial ravings of Hitler during the war and the pathological hatred of the Führer towards races different from the one he believed to be his own, Federico did read about Quetzalcóatl and felt himself a little bit like him when he taught the kids at school. He felt so superior to these poor kids whose lives were destined to be resolved in a quagmire of poverty, disillusion and frustration; so rich for knowing about the music they would never listen too, and about the literature they would never read; he felt so invincible because he knew how to solve problems through mathematics and the world of science; so wise because he had read the philosophers of antiquity and of today. And yet, so miserable because he also knew about the killing and hatred that world had produced. This he knew because of the Americans. He had truly concentrated both his intellectual and his emotional hatred into a single enemy: the United States. He despised everything about that country. The bad and the good of it.

He came to understand that Hitler's lunatic musings about superior races was politics. Bad politics. He also came to believe that the mistake had Hitler made was precisely that; a political mistake. Federico didn't know about politics. But he could learn just as surely as in front of a class full of kids whose huge brown and black eyes he opened wide in wonder, he felt so like a god. So like a second edition of *Quetzalcóatl*.

In the end he made a deal with himself: he would go out and acquire as much power as he could and wait for the future to place him into the proper place and time to avenge his Ute.

He took the job.

One year later, now as a mayor of San Pedro Ostotepec, in a coldly calculated move he married Graciela Bracho, the youngest daughter of the Governor, General Bracho. He didn't love the woman. He didn't despise her either. He simply thought she was ugly. But with his marriage his political future was guaranteed. He took advantage of an old saying his now father-in-law had. General Bracho used to say "poor man, he is a poor politician" whenever he wanted to disregard the abilities of someone. Federico turned it around. He said that a poor man was a poor politician, and with that argument convinced his father-in-law to give him the concession distribution for the gasoline and oil in the entire state.

"But you would need tremendous amount of working capital to build the infrastructure. You need trucks, warehouses and delivery stations. Where are you going to get that amount of cash?"

"Don't worry. My family in Europe left me some money. Besides, I am bringing in some other people as partners."

"Like who?"

Federico told him. They were all younger members of politicians' families. Federico didn't tell the General that the young men were not putting up a single cent of the money. He was providing all of the funds needed out of the secret account in Switzerland. The other partners were just quality names, partners that Federico felt he could use.

General Bracho immediately understood the advantages an economic association like that would produce. Both in the political and economical fronts. Not in vain was he a shrewd *ladino*.

"You will make me proud yet, Federico."

"I will, General. I will."

Almost fifty years later Don Federico smiled to himself. He had done him proud.

Now it was time to make Ute proud of him too.

Twisted Gods

18

The letter Carmen found inside the envelope said;

Miss Carmen Nuñez, we have read your articles and we believe you are an honest woman. We trust you with this information because we are sure that you will know what to do with it.

Yesterday, the repressive government forces accused us of masterminding an attack on the dignitaries visiting our beloved country next week.

We denounce this action as another example of the lying and deceit with which the corrupt oligarchy has controlled México for so many years.

Not happy with unleashing a genocide war of attrition on the Indigenous people of México, they have sequestered and disappeared many of our comrades and symphatizers. This killing has got to stop.

Now they have created this imaginary assassin so the repressive and murderous army can have an excuse to declare a war of annihilation against the revolutionary forces. We all know that they have been trying to exterminate the truly nationalistic people that are fighting to liberate our country from the tyranny of the present regime. Now they are planning to exterminate the people that give us their support. They have used all means, including a smear campaign such as the one in which they accuse us of being common criminals. They are trying to set us up in felonies such as drug dealing, something that the revolutionary forces reject completely.

Proof of this is the introduction of approximately a thousand kilos of cocaine introduced as contraband in an aluminum container through the border with Belize. This contraband was detected by our intelligence branch last month. We have reason to believe that such drugs will be delivered to the poor people used living in the mountains, to keep them enslaved to their landlords.

We accuse the government forces of being the ones protecting the drug lords in México.

We denounce the government actions as a violation of the Geneva Convention on acts of war.

We accuse the government of breaking all international agreements on the matter, and hold them responsible to the entire world of any aggression against our people.

*Viva México Libre!
Viva La Revolución!
Comando General
Ejército Popular de Liberación
Nacional
Quintana Roo
México*

Carmen Nuñez felt a cold finger of fear sliding down her spine when she read the letter. It wasn't so much the information she received as the manner in which she had received it that made her feel suddenly very fearful for her life and the lives of the people she loved.

The way the old woman had given her the message, at the door of her own home, made her feel like she was being watched right now by some invisible eyes that were everywhere.

She felt sick.

Still, she knew that the information she received was valid because the letter enclosed an official document: an invoice from the customs office in Quintana Roo.

Carmen sat down to write her article for next day.

She postponed for another day the interview with *Senador Garduño* about the use of drugs among government workers.

This was much more important.

Twisted Gods

19

Agent McDuffy concentrated on Dr. Manny Perez's face.

He seemed rather shy today: when she looked straight at him on the screen he hesitated and looked away. For a moment there she could swear she saw him blush. His face was full of hard edges, as if cut by a machete, and they gave him a distinctive appeal.

"So, what do you think we should do now?" he said, suddenly looking straight at her eyes.

"Manny, given the information you have now, where would you start looking? Where are the most likely sectors in México that an assassination attempt would come from?"

Manny rubbed his eyes for a moment with his hands.

"I have been thinking of nothing else all night long, Melissa, but I need more information.

"You know what I know."

"Not quite. Remember; I am a historian, not an antiterrorist or a criminologist."

"What do you need to know?"

"Help me for a moment. Let's break this down. Is that okay?"

"Sure."

"Tell me, what kind of an attack do you expect?"

"I have no idea. What do you mean?"

“Put yourself in the terrorist shoes. Do you think a handgun would be used?”

She understood immediately what he was trying to do.

“Doubtful. He —or they, whatever— would have to get too close to the President to use a handgun successfully. And we make sure nobody comes that close.”

“A rifle perhaps, such as in Dallas in 1963?”

“Again, not likely. We learned from that. There won’t be a building in a mile radius that won’t have our agents in it.”

“A bomb, then.”

“Yes...That would be my inclination, yes..”

“Okay, that narrows the search tremendously. Since I do not believe this threat comes from the guerrillas, then we are looking for an FMB.”

“FMB?”

“Yeah. A Fucking Mad Bomber” he said, mimicking Barnett’s tone of voice.

She smiled in spite of herself.

“All right, I see what you mean.”

“Okay, now we need to think of what kind of bomb he would likely use.”

“That is more difficult to guess, because there are literally thousands of explosive elements. It could be anything.”

“Well, let’s see. Would it need to be a little bomb, or a large bomb?”

“By a little bomb you mean something like a hand grenade, right? Something he could throw at the President.?”

“Right.”

“Doubtful. Again, he would need to get close to the President, and today we can detect explosives from afar. Anybody with explosives would be detected immediately by the machines or the dogs. Besides, a little bomb would probably not do the job.”

“Then it needs to be a large bomb.”

“Yes. Place explosives in a spot where the President will be or pass by, and then.. A large bomb that can be detonated from a distance. A bomb of some type strong enough to guarantee the death of the President. A bomb that brings down a building, like in Oklahoma. A bomb that kills hundreds of people in single flash of destruction. A bomb that serves as a catalyst for all of the terrorist anger and hate. Yeah, we are looking for a big, a *very* big bomb.”

“Those bombs are expensive to build and to hide, right?”

“Right.”

“I mean a factory worker could not afford it, right?”

“Not usually, no”, she smiled again. Then she blushed. She was disturbed because she found that Dr. Perez was cute.

“Okay, that certainly narrows the search. You are looking for somebody with enough money to build a very big bomb. But this creates another problem.”

“Which is?”

“In México all weapons are forbidden by law. All explosives are controlled very carefully by the army. The only people who have access to any type of explosives are the guerrillas. They get their weapons from United States and Europe through mercenaries who work out of Central and South America. A few years back a whole ship container filled with Chinese automatic rifles was stopped in California.”

“So we are back into the Ideological Motivated Agent, as Benett suggested.”

“No, not necessarily. There is something here that does not fit entirely.”

“I agree. We were wondering about it ourselves. I imagine you’ve heard the news today.”

“Of course. And I was very surprised to see in the headlines this big secret I was going to carry to my grave.”

“Well, it wasn’t us, I assure you. The Mexican government decided to go public with the threat and we cannot understand why.

Later today the Ambassador is going to meet with the Mexican President to find out more about all of this.”

“I would be interested to find out what transpires at that meeting. I mean, if I am allowed to know, of course.”

“Of course. But right now do you have any ideas as to why they went public?”

“None. It is very surprising. The Mexican government is not the most open government in the world, you know. Even the salaries of the government executives is a state secret, for goodness sake.”

“Really? The Mexicans don’t know how much their bureaucrats are being paid?”

“Nope. That is one of the advantages of having had power for almost a century, you know.”

“I hear *that* is about to change.”

“Hopefully.”

“You, yourself, in your book call it a dying system.”

“And I am right, of course. But the problem is that it has been a very long agony.”

“Okay, you can tell me about it some other time. Now we should—

“When?”

“When... what?”

“When can I tell you about it?”

Melissa could not believe it.

“Manny, are you flirting with me?”

“Is that a no-no in the Secret Service?”

“I am the mother of two little girls.” Melissa said.

“Oh, I didn’t know you were married. I am sorry.”

“I am not married.”

“I thought you said—

“I am divorced. Recently.”

“Well, then maybe I can invite you out.”

“Look, let’s stick to our job which is very important. If you don’t mind.”

“Okay. We will leave it for afterwards.”

“So let us summarize what we have: you are of the opinion that the attack might come from a, er, what did you call it?”

“...A Fucking Mad Bomber. Right.”

“Right. I am not sure yet, but I tend to agree with you. We also agree that the attack probably would be carried out through an explosive device. A large one to have any chance of success.”

“Right.”

“Such a device would be expensive to get, hard to hide and impossible to get past us.”

“If you say so.”

“I have gone through the lists of possible suspects, and none seem to match a lone mad man with tons of money to burn in an explosive which he won’t get to detonate near the President. All I find is people with ideological grievances against the United States. Those, according to you, would not try to carry out this sort of attack.”

“Right.”

“So what am I missing? We seem to be going in circles.”

“As I said, something doesn’t click in all of this.”

“I need more input from you, Manny.”

They both were silent for a moment.

Manny was amazed at his own reactions with this unknown woman. Every time he saw her green eyes, he wished to get lost in them. He fought the urge to flirt again with her.

“How would he get the bomb near the President?”, he said.

“He cannot. We make sure of that.”

“You know that.”

“Of course I know it.”

“But he might not know it. He might not know about your technological barriers. He might believe he can get close enough with the bomb.”

“You might have a point there.”

“I believe you should go back and check all the people who are going to be near the President, even in the vicinity of the President. You know, like in a state dinner, or a welcoming reception. There are always hundreds of people in events like those.”

“I’ll call you later”, she said.

He was right, of course.

What he didn’t know is that she and her team had already checked everybody. But they had checked for the legitimacy of their identities and invitations.

Now they would go deeper.

She immediately convened her group of coordinators.

While they came to her office, she made her daily call to her daughters.

She missed them terribly.

Her mother answered, and after telling Melissa that everything was all right, she gave the receiver to the oldest child.

“Hi, mommy.” said Ruthie. She was four and she was always bumping against walls.

“Hi, precious. What are you doing?”

“Lucy is sleeping.”

“And what are you doing?”

“I got a doll today from granny.”

“You did? That’s awesome, darling. Listen, I got to run but I want you to know that I miss you terribly and that I love you very much. Do you understand me?”

“Love you, mommy.”

“Love you too, darling. I will see you soon.”

She hung up.

Melissa placed the receiver in the cradle. She thought about her daughters. They were too young still to understand why she had to be away. She could only pray they would not blame her later on for leaving them so much time.

Twisted Gods

She worried that any harm would come to them, and she prayed to God every night to keep them safe.

The first coordinator arrived.

She had work to do.

20

On Wednesday, Manny decided to take advantage of the attention generated by the assassin's threat in México and tie it in with his lectures. He thought this time he truly would wake up all of his students. He scrapped the planned lesson, on the Monroe Doctrine, and he restructured around the Chapultepec Act.

"Who can tell me why Chapultepec was chosen as the site for this summit?", he asked.

"Because it is a pretty place", said Crissy. Everybody laughed.

"Well, that is one good reason. Give me another one."

The young faces looked around, disconcerted.

"I thought the class today was going to be on the Monroe Doctrine", complained Ken. He was always complaining.

"This Summit is tied with it."

Silence.

"Nobody knows?"

Silence.

"Come on, guys. You are supposed to be graduate students. Has the university made a mistake?"

That hurt. Immediately two hands rose.

"Tell us, Charlie."

"It was the place where the Act of Chapultepec was signed in 1945."

“Very good”, Manny said, and he pointed at Amanda, who had lowered her hand already.

“Amanda, what was the origin of such act?”

“It derived from the Interamerican Conference on Problems of War and Peace.”

“Right. Keith, what was the main declaration of the Act of Chapultepec?”

“Uh? Oh, yeah, that no American country could be attacked by a non-American army.”

“Without...?”

“Without the immediate retaliation by all other American countries. It basically meant that if an American country was invaded by another, everyone would jump in to defend that country. Like the three musketeers. One for all, and all for one.”

“Very good. Does anybody know what concept gave birth to such conference and such agreement?”

Silence.

“I’ll give you a hint: the conference at Chapultepec was more than a hundred years late. The ideas behind it are very old.”

Silence.

“Okay. The conference of 1945 was born out of the concept of Panamericanism. Panamericanism itself was born out of the independence wars held by American countries against European powers. These wars gave the American countries a sense of a shared purpose. Originally, Panamericanism was conceived by Simón Bolívar and his notion of a *Patria Grande*. At that time, Bolívar was the most powerful man in the entire continent. He was the president of Greater Colombia, which as you know was formed by the countries we recognize today as Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama. Bolívar also controlled Peru and created Bolivia.

“Although he tried to join forces with the other great liberator, the Argentinean José de San Martín, their meeting came to nothing. Nobody knows why.

“Maybe they didn’t like each other”, said Crissy.

“Maybe. It is one of those mysteries historians in Latin America have fought over for the last hundred and fifty years. Be that as it may, Simón Bolívar pursued his dream on his own until he held the first Pan American Conference in 1826. But the conference failed to achieve any results. However, he had an early supporter in Henry Clay, the United States Secretary of State. He wrote the practical principles of a Pan-American community and was able to secure congressional approval for United States participation in it.”

Manny paused for those of his students who didn’t have tape recorders on. They were fewer every day, but still he had to allow time for those who actually wrote down their notes.

“While Bolívar envisioned a sort of single huge country composed by all Spanish speaking countries in the western hemisphere, Henry Clay conceived Panamericanism as a movement towards commercial, social, economic, military and political *cooperation* among all the republics of north, central, and south America. What we call now Free Zone Agreements. It was a logical movement of cooperation among those countries who shared a common ground. The common ground, mainly, being on this side of the Atlantic.”

There was some scattered laughter.

“The first Pan-American summit under the United States government auspices was held in Washington in 1889. The second in México City in 1901. For many years it had been derailed by another concept closely related to it, known as the Monroe Doctrine.”

“Now I get it”, said Ken.

“Since you do, then tell us when the Monroe Doctrine was born.”

“In 1823. December the second, to be precise.”

“It was named after whom?”

“After President James Monroe.”

“Karen, what was the main principle of the Monroe Doctrine?”

“Well, it basically described the rest of the countries in the hemisphere as protectorates of the United States.”

“Not exactly, but that was the practical result. What I want you to tell me is what principles it held.”

“It said that the American countries were not to be considered as prey to be colonized by the Europeans.”

“Ken, what was the fear of the United States government at that time?”

“That the Holy Alliance would seek to conquer again all the Latin American countries.”

“What was the Holy Alliance?”

“A group of European countries.”

“Who was in that group?”

Silence.

“Okay, I want you to look that up for next class. Now, the reaction to the Monroe Doctrine in the Latin American countries was favorable at first. But then they began to see it as an excuse for the imperialistic tendencies in the United States. Who can give me some examples of these tendencies?”

“I can”, said Larry, “The United States military interventions in Colombia, Panama, Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and México.”

“That’s correct. The Monroe Doctrine became openly imperialistic under Theodore Roosevelt, who added his own ideas to the Doctrine. In the Roosevelt Corollary he claimed the United States had the right to put down *any* revolution in Latin America, because otherwise the unrest would invite European invasions. This was the excuse for many military interventions of the United States.”

“So by the early part of the twentieth century, the Monroe Doctrine had all but killed Panamericanism. Then, all of a sudden, things changed when another Roosevelt arrived to the presidency. Franklin D. Roosevelt killed the Monroe Doctrine and changed it for the “Good Neighbor” policy, which in reality was a new approach to Panamericanism.”

“Since then the concept of Panamericanism —now transformed into the free zone agreements— has been championed by

all American presidents in the later part of the twentieth century. In 1948 Panamericanism finally gave birth to the Organization of American States.”

Manny stopped right there to have sufficient time before the class was over to deal with all the questions his students were bound to have. And he was right, because ten seconds later the first hand rose in the back of the room.

21

Carmen had made a momentous decision. It was a decision that was to change her life forever.

When she finished writing her piece with the information she received from the guerrilla fighters, it was clear for her that it could not wait until the weekend when the magazine was to be printed.

So that same night she took her purse, asked her brother to go with her, and she took the article to the desk of the night editor at the *Reforma*.

She identified herself, she told him about her journalism prize, and about the information she had received. Then she offered the article to him. He read it quickly, and he himself made another huge decision. He not only took the article; he decided to turn it into the headline of the paper next day. He literally stopped the presses, — something he had always dreamed of doing—and made the changes.

Carmen didn't expect her article to have the effect it did. She was still asleep when she started receiving calls. It had been but one hour since the newspaper had come out.

She ran to the nearest avenue to buy the *Reforma*. Because the paper had refused to bend to the demands of the union that controlled the newspapers stands, the paper was sold by part time vendors that roamed the streets of México City. She had trouble finding one, but when she saw her name on the front page she almost cried. She bought all of them and took them home.

It was an awesome feeling to see her work displayed like that.

GUERRILLA DENY ACCUSATION

by Carmen Nuñez

In a surprising development, the General Command of the EPLN (*Ejército Popular de Liberación Nacional*), denied today the accusation made by the Attorney General in regards to their involvement in an assassination plot aimed to kill the President of the United States during his visit to México.

Last night, a woman delivered the following letter to this reporter:

(here, the paper included the text of the letter, minus the personal references it made about Carmen)

The EPLN has always been the most mysterious of all the guerrilla groups fighting in México. Until today, they have always rejected any request for interviews, and refused to accept or to participate in any kind of publicity in a startling contrast with the other guerrilla groups which for a long time have been fighting among themselves to find who can gather more headlines or public attention.

The EPLN was known to appear the first time in the southeast part of México right after Julio Luna

Gutiérrez, then governor of Quintana Roo, was accused of having stolen hundreds of millions of pesos from the citizens in his state by a financial operation which he controlled through a distant third cousin. The operation was described as a sophisticated pyramid scam. He was also accused of having distributed to children in schools contaminated milk which a company his brother owned bought for pennies and sold to the government for pesos. After the federal government refused to act legally against the governor, even though enraged citizens delivered the invoices and the papers that seemed to prove the governor's involvement in those crimes, EPLN took arms and blew up the residence of the governor after evacuating it. So far, their actions have been directed only to the destruction of material targets, having caused no human damages. Even this is not known for certain, because the EPLN has never released a communiqué or a manifesto.

Until today.

President Conover will be arriving tomorrow to México, to participate in the Second Summit of the Americas, a Summit first held seven years ago in Miami, Florida. On Monday, the Attorney General

announced that there is a plan to kill President Conover, and that the assassin was a member of the EPLN.

This announcement seems to have pushed the EPLN out into the open for the first time.

That was it. The editor had changed but two or three words! It was incredible.

Carmen's mother did cry out of pride and joy.

Carmen went to answer the phone.

22

The embassy had reserved the entire five top floors at the Chapultepec Hotel. Melissa McDuffy sent teams of her men, joined by CIA agents, to do x-rays on walls and floors. The embassy had chosen that hotel because it was right across Chapultepec, the huge park which provided most of the oxygen for the city. The park was almost a forest: it covered thousands of square kilometers inside the city. It was like a green ocean smacked in the middle of the gray concrete.

Melissa was told that there was a dark legend being acted out. Basically, the legend said that Chapultepec had a long history of being bad for national heads of state, and deadly for the foreign ones.

Chapultepec meant, in Náhuatl, “the grasshopper’s hill”. It referred originally to a forty-five meter high hill which rose in the middle of the park. On top of that stone hill an Aztec emperor, Itzcoátl, built in 1435 his summer house. He died in 1440. Many years later, in 1785, the Spanish Viceroy Bernardo de Gálvez built on top of the ruins a country house for himself. The Viceroy had had a distinguished history: he had fought against the English in Texas, Louisiana and Florida, and he had secured the purchase of Florida by Spain after the war. The town of Galveston in Texas, was named after him. Even so, the building of what was later on called the Chapultepec Castle brought him so many critiques and troubles from the Spanish crown, that he died of grief the very next year, in 1786. After that the park was turned into a botanical garden and the Castle itself into the Military College. It was in there that, in 1847, the Mexican Army had resisted to the very end the advancing forces of the United States. The

last young cadets had chosen to die fighting before surrendering the flag. Several had jumped out of the roof of the castle into the rocky hill below, electing death before capitulation. They were known as the *Niños Héroes*, and they were one of the most enduring and beloved images in México. The Castle was revived when another emperor, the Austrian Maximilian von Hapsburg, had it rebuilt in 1865 as his home during his short reign of some three years in México. He said it reminded him of his house in Miramar. He was shot by the independence minded army of Benito Juárez in 1867. Benito Juárez himself had died five years later, in 1872. Then Chapultepec Castle became the summer home of the President Porfirio Díaz, who was forced out of México in 1910 by the revolutionary forces headed by Francisco I. Madero. After the revolution the castle was the home of the presidents of country, and one after another had to deal with revolts, assassinations and untold problems. Madero had been killed in 1913, Obregón in 1929, The bad luck had stopped when the castle ceased to be a Presidential residence in 1937 after a decree given by then President Lázaro Cárdenas that turned it into a museum.

Melissa not only hoped that the dark legend would not apply this time.

She wanted to make sure of it.

Every hour of the day she received more information, and the more information she received the more confident she felt.

With the unconditional support of the Mexican police, and General Roberto Gutiérrez, from the *Estado Mayor Presidencial*, which was the branch of the army in charge of taking care of the Mexican president—her own equivalent— she went through all of the possible leads.

She checked and rechecked each and every one of the biographical files of the people who were invited to the ceremonies that president Conover was to attend.

She accompanied General Gutiérrez and his men in several raids on possible suspects, and she witnessed the temporary detention of those whom, according to the list given to her by the CIA Chief of Station in México, had expressed any kind of threat against the United States. She saw first hand the power that the Mexican army had, but

she wasn't surprised by their heavy-handedness because she had seen the FBI do the same thing to suspects in the United States. The suspects were rounded up, detained for a day or two, and then released. Mexicans were doing the same, now. The protection services of all the world had learned that in the matter of presidential security it was better to be sorry, than to be late.

Her teams, meanwhile, rehearsed the route that the presidential motorcade would follow through the streets of México City. The secret service agents wanted to have a direct knowledge of every inch of the path the convoy would travel. Although the armored presidential limousine had been brought from Washington—two of them, in fact—, for the rehearsal the agents used the standard cars issued to the Embassy. Their only distinguishing mark was the diplomatic plates. The secret service agents didn't want to call attention to themselves, so they didn't ask for police escorts. The entire trip was filmed by two cameras with wide angle lenses, and timed. Four analysts were on board also, each one describing verbally the streets, the buildings, and all possible traps.

They practiced on five different routes, the final and true one being a secret that only two people would know; the Ambassador, and at the last minute, the head of the convoy.

During the rehearsal, some of the agents had posed as the executives from the American government that would be coming to México with President Conover, but the list kept changing and it seemed to grow by the minute. This Melissa found disturbing. Besides the President, the First Lady, the Secretary of Commerce, the Attorney General and the Secretary of State had jumped on board for the trip. They were the most important members of the contingent, and Melissa had assigned to each a personal squad of eight secret service agents. Eight was the number needed to create a diamond shape protective shield around the person in question: one agent forward and another at the back, then two more in the middle between them and the target, and one on the left and one on the right. This had proven the most effective formation to handle anyone trying to get too close to the target.

These were the *personal* squads. Then there were the teams that handled the bomb-sniffing dogs moving around the crowds. Then there were the counter sharpshooters covering the high points. There were also teams making sure there were hospitals nearby capable of handling any emergency. There were the teams in charge of the automobiles...

All told, more than a thousand secret service agents were working in México. That number was more than half of the total number the Treasury Department hired for the Secret Service. And, if Melissa requested them, *all* of them would fly in. At least, that's what her boss had told her.

The streets surrounding the hotel where the President was going to sleep the two nights of his stay in México, were being patrolled twenty-four hours a day by the Mexican police and the *Guardias Presidenciales*. The Mexican government had kept its promise and instead of two thousand men, it had deployed six thousand. There was not a centimeter in a three mile radius around the hotel that wasn't inspected by someone, often every hour. There was not a strange car that wasn't stopped and inspected. There wasn't a piece of paper going in the hotel without being reviewed or a package opened.

The hotel faced the park, and it was the tallest building in the area so that was one front less to worry about. The CIA had infrared readers installed in satellites which, at night, would allow them to see every living entity in the forest. So there was not a chance of somebody hiding between the trees. And if somebody managed to avoid the infrared detectors, the dogs handled by the Mexican police, the patrols of the Mexican army, and still managed to hide in the forest, nobody could take a shot at the presidential suite: it was twenty-five floors up.

All of the workers at the hotel had received an in-depth background check, and so had all the inhabitants of the residences around the hotel. When the barriers started to go up, people began to get mad. This was to be expected because the area behind the hotel was an expensive zone of the city, where many very important people lived. They didn't appreciate the fact that they had to identify

themselves to go in or out of their homes or offices, and they didn't like the metal barriers they had to go through, nor the dogs sniffing around their cars.

In that manner the visit was a public relations disaster, but there was nothing Melissa could do but feel sorry and hope the inconvenience wasn't too large.

Each and every one of the agents carried microvideo cameras. There were the size of a credit card, and were the most advanced technology in the world. They would be coming out into the market in a year or two, but the intelligence community had already been using them for the last two years. The electronic cameras didn't use film: instead they turned the captured images into an endless stream of binary information, which was transmitted continuously to a gathering relay system. The visuals were still a little jerky, but Melissa could pick her view out of any of the dozen monitors she had around her, and instantly see what was going on. The agents carried their cameras as ID tags on their suits. The batteries were attached to their belts.

At nine thirty every morning, she hooked up with her boss back in Washington in a video conference that allowed her boss to review Melissa's job. Thursday morning, the day before the president arrived, there was an exception.

23

That morning, Manny had gone through his daily ritual of scanning the Mexican newspapers, when something caught his attention.

It was an article written by Carmen Nuñez. She was a new writer whom Manny had started reading and found refreshing. He wasn't really surprised to find her article published by the *Reforma* newspaper. Her talent was so obvious it was just a matter of time before someone noticed her. Normally Manny found her articles entertaining.

Today he found her information crucial.

Immediately he called Agent Melissa McDuffy.

"Did you read the newspaper today?", he asked her very excitedly.

"About the denial of the guerrilla? Yes, but I hardly think it is worth your excitement, Manny. Unless you called to gloat and rub in your analysis", she said, rather put off by the vibrancy on his voice.

"No, no, you are missing the point. Do you have the article at hand? I can email it to you right now if you don't."

"No need. I have it and I can call it up in a second."

"Bring it up and read it again. Carefully."

"Is this important? Because I am very busy. The President is arriving here tomorrow, you know."

“Of course it is. I would not have called you otherwise”, Manny said, offended. Now he was getting irritated.

“Okay. Hold on a moment.”

She decided to take a look. She froze the image of Manny on her screen, and opened up a new square. Three clicks of her mouse and she was reading the Carmen Nuñez article of that morning.

She read it twice before going back to Manny.

“I fail to see your point.”

“Are you reading it?”

“Yes, and if you split your screen you can see it too.”

“Never mind. Read the part about the border.”

“Contraband, drugs, thousand kilos of cocaine in an aluminum container, war of extermination...bla, bla...

“If you don’t see it, then I am mistaken and I beg your forgiveness for bothering you”, he said sarcastically.

“You better begin to apol... -wait! The aluminum container. Who would stash a thousand kilos of cocaine in an *aluminum* container?”

“You’ve got it!”

“Manny, are you thinking that this could be...

“Yes. There it is. It’s got to be. Your bomb was probably inside that container.”

24

Frederick didn't waste time. After he got the concession to handle the distribution of gasoline in his state, he discovered that the best way to make money in México was to spread it around. The political system was as a giant club where friends gathered to exchange favors and power. As in any group, all it took was a recommendation from an insider.

His father in law.

The General not only explained the mechanism of the party to him, he *showed* him how to work it best. The General used to say, whenever it was appropriate: "If you scratch my back, I will scratch yours." From those commentaries, sayings, and endless conversations Frederick held with his father in law, he learned that the entire system was based on the conventionality of personal favors. Having a *friend* in government meant anything from having some influence to outright corruption.

Frederick knew he had the money needed to do any given amount of favors. He had so much money in fact that he was sure very few other men in México could compete against him. The account in Switzerland had kept on growing in the 15 years it had been left untouched, and by the time Frederick began to use it for his own goals, there were close to a hundred million dollars in it.

Frederick learned that money breeds money. In a few years he had been able to multiply that amount by ten, because he became a master of the game in the Mexican political system. His mornings were dedicated to making the rounds among the restaurants were the

politicians gathered to exchange information. He was always the fastest with the wallet when the tab came. Nobody could recall ever seeing him *not* paying the bill, so very soon his name was pronounced with glee and affection. He used to depart from a meeting only after asking very politely if *he* could do anything for the more powerful politicians.

To increase the effect of his largesse, Frederick began to form his own army of newspapermen. He recognized the importance of getting good copy, so he made a point of being extremely generous to reporters. In the most celebrated of his actions, he learned that the mother of a reporter needed an emergency operation and he rushed to his aid; he not only paid the hospital charges, but he also gave a car to the reporter so he could take his mother to and from the hospital in comfort. He insisted on the confidentiality of his actions, but confidentiality and journalism are a contradiction in terms, so soon the whole of México was murmuring about this new politician with such a great heart.

After that, things began to happen fast.

First he was nominated as a deputy, but he frowned on it, so they offered him the senate. At that time, being nominated for a post in México meant automatically receiving it. Voting was a mere formality since all of the candidates belonged to the same party. Although from time to time there was an opposition candidate, they were steamrolled by the sheer numbers and power of the main party. Thus in a few years Frederick breezed his way through the Senate, the Ministry of Mines, and the Governorship of his state, all the while nurturing his ambitions for the Presidency. His group of friends grew, or so it seemed, exponentially day after day.

The nearest he came to becoming President of México was when, serving under President López Portillo as Minister of Agriculture, he was told by the president in the utmost secrecy—a whisper in the ear after a cabinet meeting—that he was considering changing the law which barred sons of foreign nationals from seeking the highest office. That, and the look Frederick received from the President, meant only one thing: he was the Chosen One.

Soon, the rumors of the columnists in newspapers and magazines were celebrating before-hand the choice of the President López Portillo. The reaction was so favorable, that indeed the Presidency would have been his. Except that it was then that Frederick made the gravest mistake of his life.

It began innocently enough. As usual during the meetings held at the luxurious restaurants during breakfast, a friend of his asked his opinion about the exchange rate.

“What do you think about the peso?”, his friend asked over coffee.

Historically, the exchange rate of the peso versus the dollar had been set by the Mexican government as a way of controlling the internal inflation of the country. Even though the runs on the peso every few years proved how unattainable this policy was, the government insisted on enforcing an official rate of parity. When his friend asked for his advice on the exchange, what he meant was “Should I keep my money in pesos, or should I turn it into dollars?”, which truly was the question most people with money in México were asking. At that moment, instead of answering as the shrewd politician he had become, Frederick said unguardedly:

“I don’t think is going to hold.”, he said.

That was it.

Those seven words pronounced by the man rumors held as the Anointed One, The Chosen Successor, the *Tapado* (hidden one) as the official candidate was called in México, ended up provoking such a furious and panicked run on the peso that President López Portillo was forced to nationalize the banks as a desperate measure to stop the bleeding.

Since Frederick himself had not taken his money out at that time —although his companies had been buying dollars all along— the president could not accuse him of anything. But it became well known who was the source of the panic of ‘82, and for all practical purposes his dream of becoming President of México was over.

The two things he had truly wanted in life had been taken from him by the same country. Once because of war.

Twisted Gods

This time because of the power of the dollar.

This reactivated his hatred of the United States and consumed him so much, that from that moment on Frederick lived only for one purpose. To extract some measurement of pain from his enemy.

25

México City was already 200 years old when the Spanish group of 500 desperadoes under the command of Hernán Cortes arrived from Veracruz, led by tribes unsatisfied with the Aztec empire.

The city's earlier history came from a very old tradition which said that *Tenochtitlán*, —the older Aztec city built in the same place México city occupied now— had been founded in 1325 by errant warriors who, following the advice of seers, started building the city on the spot where they saw an eagle devouring a snake. The fact that they had found such an eagle standing in a cactus in the middle of a lake didn't faze them. The fact that there were other people living there already didn't bother them either.

They were the Aztecs.

The lake was one of several that irrigated the land in an extraordinarily beautiful valley surrounded by a string of mountains of volcanic origin in the shape of a queen's crown. At the center of this valley, surrounded by the rich forest lands of Chapultepec, Tacuba, Toluca, Puebla, and Tlalpan, Tenochtitlán was built.

The Tenochca-Meshicas build channels to move around and in and out of the city, with small landings to the houses. Most of the streets were like this, with a few ground streets on the inlets. Even so, by the time Cortés arrived Tenochtitlán already had an estimated five hundred thousand inhabitants.

When the conquest was over, the city had been totally destroyed. The siege for it took from May to August of 1521, and

Cortés came close to loosing his life and that of his men many times. However, historians all over the world could never really understand how had it been possible that less than five hundred Spaniards who had scuttled their means of escape, had managed to win a war against a vast Aztec warrior empire that stretched from the northern part of México, all the way to Guatemala. When Cortés decided to built what is now México City on top of the ruins of Tenochtitlán, he had no way of knowing that five hundred years later, in the year two thousand, the same city would be the most populated metropolis in the world with nearly twenty-five million people leaving and breathing in the old magnificent valley. Its lakes desiccated long since, the city was a hard place to live in.

At the beginning of the twentieth first century, fully one quarter of the population of México lived in México City alone. The old Tenochtitlán, established seven hundred years earlier, had become a monster of terrible proportions.

Melissa thanked God she had to deal with that huge monster for only a few more days. To establish the secure parameters for President Conover, she and her colleagues from *Guardias Presidenciales*, the Mexican Secret Service, agreed to restrict all political acts to one area of town.

This area was basically around the Chapultepec Park. It had many advantages; first, the presidential house was near the hotel were Conover would sleep. *Los Pinos*, the beautiful enclave of the Mexican President at the western side of Chapultepec Park, was three minutes away. Then, the huge Auditorio with a capacity to seat ten thousand people, refurbished for the Summit of the Americas where the Mexicans would hold the sessions with their continental neighbors, was basically across the street on Reforma Avenue. On the same avenue, five minutes towards downtown, was the American Embassy where President Conover would hold a small party for the people at the Embassy. People at the diplomatic representation of United States would not easily forgive him if he didn't show up to thank them personally. President Conover didn't like to forget those kinds of details.

For the second day, after the speeches and signing of agreements at the Auditorio, —speeches and agreements which had been written and approved with months of anticipation— the presidents and prime ministers would visit two of the many museums conveniently located, again, at Chapultepec Park: the Museum of Anthropology, which Melissa knew was marvelous but she hadn't seen yet, and the Museum at the Castillo de Chapultepec, which told the story of the Mexican people.

Still, no problem.

The only real problem Melissa saw, from the security perspective, was the act which would be held the last night at the Palace of Fine Arts. This building was the farthest to which the President would have to travel in his armored limousines.

The Palace of Fine Arts was situated on the corner of Avenida Juárez and Avenida Lázaro Cárdenas, across from the Bank of México and half a mile away from the Zócalo, the huge explanade which was the literal center from which all roads in México were measured. The building of the Palace of Fine Arts had taken more than thirty years, from March of 1904, through September 1934. And although it was a stunning work of art, the construction of it took so long because of an outside problem: the revolution of 1910 which interrupted works for many years.

The Palace of Fine Arts, like everything in México City, had been built on top of something else. In this case, the old Great National Theater. The Italian architect Adamo Boari presented his plans for tearing down the old one and re-building of the new theater, at a budget of 4,200,000 pesos. The government agreed, and the Milliken Bros., a foundations company from New York, was chosen to start the works. The same company built the metallic skeleton through 1906. More Italian and Spanish artists worked on the façade and the monuments, and the Tiffany Company was hired to build a spectacular crystal curtain, armed like a jigsaw puzzle with over a million opalescent colored crystals representing the Valley of México and the two most famous of its volcanoes: the *Popocatépetl* and the *Ixtlazihuatl*. After the revolution, the theater was modified and completed by the Mexican Architect Federico Mariscal. At the

inauguration of the Palace, in 1934, the play by Ruiz de Alarcón *La Verdad Sospechosa* was represented.

The last night of the Summit, in a special performance for the governments of the Americas, the famed tenor Plácido Domingo was to sing a special repertoire; he had chosen that night to announce his retirement as one of the best singers of the *bell canto*. Even though he had been born in Spain and held a Spanish citizenship, Plácido Domingo grew up in México, had discovered his singing virtuosity at the *Palacio de las Bellas Artes* and many times had said that he wanted to be recognized as a Mexican singer. He thought it only fitting to retire in the same place where he had started his lustrous career.

Melissa agreed that it was fitting and she knew it was going to be a glorious night for everybody who had the luck to be there.

She was going to be there, for sure.

Working, but there.

Even though she was looking forward to the show —she had reconciled herself to the fact that as a good American she was a sucker for good spectacles— the logistics of moving President Conover and his party of VIP's all the way to the theater wasn't appetizing at all.

The Palace of Fine Arts stood at the corner of one of the busiest streets in the entire city. This made more difficult the control of people and cars around the theater. It was across from the *Torre Latinoamericana*, which was one of the tallest buildings in the entire city, and it had sixty floors with hundreds of offices and thousands of windows from which a sniper could take a shot. And that was only one of the buildings. The theater itself had no underground entrance; everybody had to go through the same beautiful facade made with Carrara marble. The access inside and out was too open and too wide, and even the way the stairs to the second floor curved around inside the hall made Melissa nervous.

That was the only part of the entire trip that had Melissa McDuffy worried.

Really worried.

26

“You fucking bitch! Who do you think you are?”, said the voice.

“What? Who is this?”

“You are a stupid bitch, and if you don’t watch it you are going to regret it. This is the first warning”, hissed the voice at the other end of the line. It startled Carmen so much she went cold. The voice and the words it was spewing out had an undeniable evil quality to it.

“Why are you telling me this-”, she said before she heard the click on the other side of the line.

Carmen felt her legs going limp.

She hang up the cordless and looked at her mother in silence. She decided not to mention it. She didn’t want her mother to be worried. Especially in a day like this.

“Who was it?”

“I don’t know. I think it was a wrong number”, Carmen said even as she felt hear heart beating rapidly inside her chest. Her mother, enraptured in her pride and joy, didn’t noticed the concern in Carmen’s eyes.

“Your uncle Jorge called this morning. He wanted to congratulate you. It was funny, because first he asked for your full name, and then he said that there was a woman writing with that name in the newspaper. When I told him it was you, he could not believe it.”

“My uncle likes to play dumb, because he knows fully well that I am a journalist.”

“Well, yes, but you know him. He gets sick even with food he hasn’t eaten yet.”

Carmen laughed at her mother’s expression. She was always talking like that, using old Mexican sayings whether they applied or not.

The telephone rang again.

Carmen hesitated for a second before answering. If it was the same person, she braved herself. she was going to let him have it this time.

“Who is it?”

“Congratulations, gorgeous! I saw you article today in the *Reforma*”, said Rubén, one of her boyfriends. He was a young lawyer who was just finishing his doctorate in law. He was the brightest young partner in a small law firm whom she had met when she interviewed him for the magazine, on the story she wrote about the judicial logjam. They had started going out soon after he had called to thank her for her objectivity in writing the story.

“*Gracias, corazón.* Did you like it?”

“What it there to like? I think it’s clear that those people, whoever they might be, are trying to cover their skins”, said Rubén, who was an extremely conservative young man. His passion for the law as an abstract form led him to defend the legal establishment even in the cases where it had proven to be very wrong.

“Maybe. But the point they are making about the threat is interesting, don’t you think? That the government is creating a false menace as an excuse to send in the tanks?”

“I think that on this one I agree with what my man Fidel Velázquez said a few years back, before he died. Remember? ‘We should have them all shot’”, Ruben said, and he imitated the slurred speech of the old union leader who had died in 1997.

“I know, I know, you would like to have the power in the hands of the soldiers.”

“Absolutely. At least they would bring peace and order to this country. Without the rule of law and order México is never going to become a first world country.”

“The rule of the death.”

“Better than the un-rule of anarchy into which we are falling.”

“Says who?”

“Says I. Anyway, I’ve got to run. I have a Court appointment in five minutes. How about dinner tonight? We could finish this conversation then, and I will prove to you how wrong you are”

“Sounds good. Give me a call later.”

“Okay”, he said and was gone.

Carmen loved to argue with him because he had such an extreme political position, that she found him funny. His saving grace was, of course, that he didn’t take himself seriously. Otherwise he would be unbearable.

She returned to her room and she opened her closet, trying to decide what to wear. This morning was special, and she wanted to look special. But five minutes later she was getting depressed. All of her clothes were getting too old and worn. With the ridiculous salary they paid her at the magazine, she hadn’t been able to buy herself but an occasional blouse and shoes.

She remember the money underneath her mattress and she felt tempted to grab the bills and go out and buy herself a full wardrobe. She daydreamed about all the combinations and blouses and shoes and skirts and pants and matching shorts and Channel suits and dresses and coats and more dresses and skirts and blouses and Channel suits... she saw them overflowing her closet and she saw herself trying them all, one by one, until her head would spin..

The telephone woke her up and brought her back to reality.

“*Bueno?*”, she said.

“Who is this?”

“Who do you want to talk to?”, she asked in return although she had recognized the voice immediately.

“Is this Carmen?”

“Who is this?”, she asked, prolonging the game.

“This is *el señor* Jacinto Mateos, her boss at the magazine”, he said with so much self importance that she felt like laughing. But she didn’t, of course.

“Don Jacinto, how are you? This is Carmen.”

“Fine, Carmencita, fine. I just wanted you to know that I have read your article in the newspaper.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I am not mad at you, but you should have told me that you were writing for them too.”

I am not, Carmen almost screamed, but she only said

“Yes, sir.”

“When did this started?”

“This time.”

“You mean is the first article of yours they have published?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why didn’t you bring it to me?”

Because you pay me a misery, she wanted to say. Instead, she said

“Because the EPLN send me the information with the express indication that it had to be published by a newspaper.”

“I see. Well, okay. At what time are you going to bring your article for the magazine?”

“Before five, as always.”

“Remind me, please. What was your assignment?”

“The interview with *Senador* González about the peace talks in Chiapas. Remember?”

“Do you have it ready?”

“Almost”, she said. The interview was scheduled at twelve.

“Why don’t you write instead a follow up of your article in the *Reforma*?” her editor said.

Carmen hadn't thought of it. But now that he mentioned, it seemed like a perfectly reasonable suggestion.

"Can I?"

"Of course you can. You should."

"Maybe I will."

"I'll see you later", he said hanging up.

"Thank you", she said to the empty space.

She didn't like the man.

Her boss, Jacinto Mateos, was the owner, publisher, editor in chief, and jack-of-all-trades of the magazine she worked for. Because he had thirty years of experience in the business, he was able to handle everything and anything in journalistic land. The problem was that he did it in such a shoddy fashion. He paid low salaries because he knew that most of the reporters working for the magazine were on the take from one or several sources, and he not only didn't care; he expected his share. He said it was only fair since it worked both ways. In advertising, for example, every reporter who brought in a paying client for a full color ad would get 15% as a commission. Equally, if the same reporter brought in an article attacking some politician in particular, Don Jacinto knew that this reporter had been paid by the enemies of that politician so he expected *his* 15% commission. If the same reporter wanted to be assigned to the Presidency, for example, where national and international trips joining the President of México were abundant, free, and there was always an envelope with money delivered at the end of each trip—a practice called *chayote*—the reporter would then buy the assignment from don Jacinto and share with him the *chayote*. If still another reporter had great contacts in the PGR, for example, he could make a rather comfortable fortune by trading information back and forth between drug dealers and cops. And if you were a rich or important person and wanted your name to appear in a society column, the mere mentioning of your name had a price. If you wanted compliments it had a larger price, of course. There were journalists in México who even had private yachts and planes. Two or three of the most famous ones made so much money that they actually had bought their way on as members of the boards in

many corporations. One had been exposed as a partner in the criminal dealings of Raúl Salinas de Gortari.

So far, don Jacinto had not asked any money from her because he didn't know she had received any.

She planned to keep it that way.

She went back to her wardrobe.

After much dissatisfaction, she settled on a warm, dark blue skirt, a white blouse, and an open yellow sweater. The combination of colors was dramatic and made her appear even younger. She looked like a college girl. She liked that.

As she was getting dressed, she took three more phone calls from boyfriends and wannabes. They were all the more impressed with her article published in such an important newspaper, than with the award she had received. She thought it was odd that an article in a newspaper had so much resonance with people who normally looked down on her writing. Many she was missing something. Anyway, with so many calls coming into her house, she decided to write the follow up at the magazine. Otherwise she wouldn't be able to concentrate.

Then she left.

She went to the twelve o'clock interview with the Senator, who treated her very differently. Now his deference was overwhelming, and instead of snapping, snotty answers, he was patient and gracious to her. She was able to finish her interview in one hour, and she left with some good solid pieces of information. From there she then traveled by bus to the old building where the magazine was edited and published. When she got there, she found there were two urgent messages waiting for her. The messages were from Fernando del Campo, the Press Secretary of the Minister of Interior.

She called him on his direct line.

"Hi, Carmen, how are you?," he said as soon as she identified herself. His voice changed too, from cold and bored, to warm and interested. She thought he was very good at projecting how much he cared for her. Whether it was a lie, wasn't important. What mattered was the detail.

"Fine, thank you. How about yourself?"

“Oh, busy, as always. But happy for you.”

“For me? Why?”

“I read your article in the *Reforma*. That was a good scoop.”

“Thank you.”

“You didn’t tell me you had such a good relationship with the EPLN.”

“I don’t. They sent me the letter, just as it says in the article.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Out of the blue.”

“Out of the blue.”

“Just like that.”

“Just like that.”

“Interesting. You know that most journalists in México have been dying for an interview with them.”

“I know.”

“And they just sent the communiqué to you.”

“That is right.”

“Interesting.”

There was a long silence which Carmen didn’t bother to break.

“Carmen, may I ask you a favor?”, asked Fernando finally.

“What is it?”

“Next time you receive something from them, would you let me know?”

“Of course not!”

“Don’t misunderstand me. I want to help you, you see. If you keep receiving communications from them, my bosses might think you are in permanent contact with the guerrilla. They might even think that you are their spokesperson. The police might start investigating you. You know how they are.”

They are?, she thought. It was great the way Fernando always managed to present the case in such a way that, even when he worked

for the people who handled the intelligence services in México, he seemed to be against their methods. She didn't like that. She saw it as a very clear attempt to manipulate her. And scare her. The threat hidden in the warning was loud and clear.

Then again, the soft tone of his voice and his convincing concern made her doubt. Maybe he was being honest. If there really was a danger, how else could he warn her? Was there any way to shout watch it!, without scaring you to death?

“Look, Fernando, thank you worrying, but I don't think the EPLN will get in touch with me again. I am sure next time they will chose somebody more important.”

“But if they do, if they send you more information, would you do me the courtesy of consulting with me before you publish it?”, he said, and he made it sound like a personal favor.

She didn't like it, but since she really didn't think the guerrilla would get in touch with her again, she agreed.

“Sure.”

After that conversation, she'd had enough.

She turned off her beeper and at the magazine she told the telephone operator to hold her calls, to take messages, to lie and say that she wasn't in and she wasn't expected in for the rest of the day.

Because of this, it wasn't until she returned home very late that same night that she learned about the two plain-clothes detectives who had visited her house.

And about the call from a certain Professor of History, a Doctor Manny Perez, from the University of Florida, calling her long distance from Gainesville, in the United States.

In spite of her self, Carmen began to get scared.

What had she done but write an article?

27

The first day went without a hitch.

President Conover and party landed at the Benito Juárez Airport in México City at 10:45 am, local time, and the Air Force One had been parked at the Presidential Hangar, where President Zedillo personally welcomed everybody attending the Summit. After the protocol ceremonies, President Conover and his wife were flown by a helicopter to the hotel in Chapultepec. The armored limousines were sent by two different routes.

The rest of the day went exactly according to an agenda that had taken months to prepare and refine.

12:00 p.m.- Hotel suite for rest.

12:30 p.m.- Briefing by the Ambassador to México.

1:00 p.m.- Lunch with the Ambassador and his wife.

2:00 p.m.- Visit at the Museum in Chapultepec Castle, with President Zedillo. Here, as his first public act in Mexican soil, President Conover himself had requested to place a wreath of flowers at the feet of the monument dedicated to the Boy Heroes who on September 13, 1847, had died defending that same castle from invading United States forces. The monument consisted of a semicircle of six granite columns, 28 meters tall, surrounding a figure of a woman holding a child in her arms.

This decision by President Conover had caused a great deal of discomfort on both sides of the border because nobody could predict what would be the interpretation of such an act by the Mexicans, but

everybody was surprised when everybody was pleased. Even the most extremely leftist journals next day called it an “elegant act” by President Conover.

4:00 p.m.- Meeting with industrialists from the United States, and members of the American colony in México.

4:20 p.m.- Break

4:30 p.m.- Meeting with the President of Brazil.

4:50 p.m.- Break

5:00 p.m.- Meeting with the President of Panama

5:20 p.m.- Break

5:30 p.m.- Meeting with the President of Chile

5:50 p.m.- Break

6:00 p.m.- Meeting with the President of Argentina

6:20 p.m.- Break

7:30 p.m.- Dinner with President Zedillo and his wife at Los Pinos.

9:30 Back at the hotel.

GOOD NIGHT.

When Melissa saw the last line, she smiled. Being written all in caps like that was meant as a shout of exhaustion.

Indeed.

Next morning it all went very similarly during the morning.

7:00 am.- Wake up call.

7:15 am.- Run for two miles at Chapultepec Park.

The doctors had advised against his running the usual distance because of the height of México City.

7:45 am.- Shower

8:00 am.- Breakfast at the main ballroom of the Hotel with Mexican industrialists.

9:00 am.- Break

10:00 am.- Speech for the Inauguration of the Summit at the Auditorio.

Twisted Gods

12:00 noon.- Break for lunch at the Auditorio with all the Presidents seating around a huge round table.

1:00 p.m.- Picture and photo sessions with the press.

2:00 p.m.- Back at the Summit for more speeches.

The rest of the schedule looked like this.

4:00 p.m.- Break

4:30 p.m.- Hotel suite.

5:00 p.m.- Meeting with the heads of the opposition parties in México.

7:00 p.m.- Meeting with Embassy people.

9:00 p.m.- Back at the hotel suite.

GOOD NIGHT

However, something terrifying managed to upset the carefully controlled agenda of the President of the United States.

28

Every time Melissa had occasion to venture outside the embassy, she had marveled about this huge city which seemed to have an endless capacity to surprise her. Melissa was fascinated by the mixture of old and new, by the feeling of being in a small town and in the center of the biggest city on earth at the same time.

When she had checked the security measures at the *Auditorio*, she had been impressed by the lightness of the building notwithstanding the sheer size of its massive construction. Despite being a large structure of concrete, the *Auditorio* looked like it could float away, as if it were a ship about to sail. It had a low profile which was flat and wide, the entrance was gigantic, the stairs endlessly broad and easy to climb. And from the security point of view, it was a dream. There were no hidden spaces, there were no treacherous accesses...

That's why she was so surprised at what happened when President Conover was there that afternoon.

The guests were the first to arrive and everyone of them had to have a personal invitation in his or her hand. This allowed them to pass the first barrier of Mexican soldiers. Then they all had to go through one of the 10 metal detectors installed in a row at the second barrier, this one being a combination of police and army. Then they had to go through the third barrier, this one composed of Mexican *Guardias Presidenciales* and United States Secret Service agents, each one of which was carrying a portable metal detector attuned to the slightest metallic charge; to avoid things like the Gluck or other

plastic guns, everyone had to endure a brief body search; and whenever they saw a suspicious bulge on anyone they would do a more specific one. Among the important people who were searched this way were two senators, many officers in the Mexican government, and scores of industrialists who complained bitterly at being treated this way. The press howled at the treatment they received. There was also a second team of agents from both countries doing random checks as they saw fit.

The Auditorio was filled to capacity by 9:30 am. At 9:55, President Conover arrived from the Hotel across the street in his armored limousine, and surrounded by a double diamond protective cocoon, with sharpshooters ready in place on the flat roof of the Auditorio and among the trees, placidly climbed up the wide steps at the entrance.

In two minutes he was inside the building.

Once there, he proceeded to chat amiably with all VIP's in his wake, until he reached the podium. He was quickly introduced with a genuinely warm general applause, and gave one of the best speeches of his life. The central point of his exposition came at the end.

“For the last 200 years the countries in our hemisphere have been trying to build pathways of understanding and cooperation. Although sometimes it seems that the Americas have coexisted in an endless wave of misunderstanding, the truth is different: we all have always tried to find ways of erasing mistrust among ourselves because we have always known instinctively what time has reinforced: that all of the countries in our beloved Americas are interlocked by something more than a passing interest. By reasons of geography and history, our countries are truly dependent on each other to survive in a world made smaller by the global economy. In a few years the largest minority in the United States will be of Hispanic origin. México and Canada are the first and second most important trading partners of United States. We all share the wonder of being in a land that stretches from Alaska to Argentina, that is full of riches and promises. As it has been true throughout history, our people have moved faster than we have; we, who were chosen to lead them to the future. They have already showed us the path of the future. I say it is time for all of us to follow

that path already taken and lock our futures in a commercial zone that encloses all of our countries. This will create a new frontier of almost a billion people living in the Americas today, and shall take us all into the new millennium and beyond knowing that we are secure in our neighborhood, surrounded by good people who are our good friends and also partners who respect each other.”

The next day, almost forgotten in the lower columns because of what happened next, the analysts of all the newspapers in the world concluded that the speech had been a masterpiece. It was a speech in which Conover had echoed the Pan-American vision of Simon Bolivar and Henry Clay, and the Good Neighbor policy of F.D. Roosevelt; at the same time he had added his own vision of a shared future, and had been strong in his advocacy and sensitive to his equals in the rest of the hemisphere.

When he took his seat at the long table on the stage, he listened carefully to the speeches of all the other presidents, each one retaking United States position and modifying it slightly by adding their own parts to the image until a collective picture that pleased everybody began to emerge.

At twelve there was a break, and everybody walked out to the gardens to have lunch. From two to four the speeches continued, and at four in the afternoon the speech by the Argentinean president closed the day.

All Presidents posed for a collective picture and began to move out of the building.

As they were walking out of the Auditorio surrounded by their respective body guards, there was a shout, a sudden scuffle, a small man running towards Conover being chased by a second, taller man who caught him and threw him on the floor.

Melissa was proud to report that everybody reacted at the incident as they were supposed to. The secret service agents moved fast immediately after noticing the unexpected movements and the scream, and they closed their protective shield around Conover. The *Guardias Presidenciales* did the same around President Zedillo, and in less than twenty seconds both chiefs of the executive were off in

their limousines. It all had happened in a flash of less than thirty seconds.

It was not until both presidents arrived safely at their bases that they found what had happened.

The tall man who had caught the smaller one turned out to be none other than the presidential candidate Armando Molina, who claimed that the man he had tackled was the terrorist everybody was searching for. Molina himself had been hurt badly in one hand during the fight. The police had confirmed that Emilio Ronquillo was the man they were looking for.

The news ran like wild fire.

Mexican Candidate saves President of United States.

(UP)

President Conover asked today for a continent of neighbors and partners who protect each other. He got it sooner than he expected.

Tonight, Americans have an extra reason to like their neighbors to the south.

The Mexican presidential candidate, Armando Molina, gave chase and caught single handily a man who was about to make an attempt on the life of President Conover. Armando Molina, 43, is the presidential candidate for discredited PRI, the official party that has controlled México for the last seventy years.

Mexican Police has confirmed that the man captured today was the terrorist who had threatened the life of the President of the United States in days past.

His assault and his capture occurred at the courtyard outside

of the Auditorium where President Conover had just received a rousing applause for one of the best speeches of his political life.

It was 4:07 in the afternoon on a cloudy day in México City as President Conover and President Zedillo walked out of the main building onto the courtyard towards a long line of waiting VIP's who hoped to shake the hand of President Conover on his way out.

The Mexican candidate Armando Molina says that while standing in line, he noticed that a man on his right, who clearly didn't belong among the important guests in that group, was trying to blend in with the rest of the people. The fact that President Conover likes to chat with Mexican President Zedillo may have saved him, because the two strolled slowly out of the building exchanging funny stories. This gave time for Armando Molina to closely study the man with the blue suit until he remembered where he had seen his face before.

Armando Molina used to be the Minister of Interior of México, and as such he was responsible for the interior security of this country. Molina is believed to have an extensive knowledge of the terrorists and guerrilla groups

fighting in México. Obviously, he also has a photographic memory.

When Molina approached him, the man in the blue suit knew he had been recognized and made a desperate run against President Conover, trying to get close enough to throw a very potent acid on him.

Armando Molina chased after the man, calling for the heavily armed security forces to stop him. Five seconds later Molina himself jumped on the man and wrestled him to the ground. Immediately, both were surrounded by dozens of guards, soldiers, and police, while President Conover and President Zedillo were whisked away by their bodyguards.

None of the 23 Presidents and Prime Ministers attending the Summit was hurt. Conover and Zedillo were never in danger thanks to the reaction of candidate Molina. They both could have gotten badly burned by the vial of acid that the terrorist carried in his hand.

Molina got hurt when he tackled the man. The vial with the acid broke and some of the corrosive liquid fell on Molina's hand, burning a hole to the bone in seconds. If Conover, Zedillo or

any of the other presidents had been sprayed with that acid, they could have been maimed for life, or even killed.

The man captured today by Armando Molina has been identified as Emilio Ronquillo, an important member of the guerrilla group that calls itself EPLN (*Ejército Popular de Liberación Nacional*). Emilio Ronquillo is reputed to hold the number two position inside of the secretive guerrilla fighting in the southern part of México. He is accused of killing ten soldiers last year.

A preliminary investigation on how it was possible for Emilio Ronquillo to have gotten through three barriers of security checks around the Auditorio in one of the most heavily guarded Summits ever with close to ten thousand soldiers, body guards, and police officers on duty, reveals that Emilio killed a member of the Mexican Congress who had a physical resemblance to him, used his invitation and his ID to access the Auditorio. Emilio carried in his rectum the vial with the acid. Once inside the auditorium he removed it in the bathroom and waited for his opportunity.

An opportunity that never came thanks to the opportune intervention of Armando Molina.

Twisted Gods

Emilio Ronquillo is now been interrogated. The PGR will hold a press conference at tomorrow at 10 am, central time, to announce the arraignment of the terrorist.

President Conover did not cancel the meetings already scheduled with the candidates of the opposition in México, as they were programmed months ago.

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“I don’t care what they say, I don’t believe this is the man you were looking for”, insisted Manny on the screen.

The video conference was now being held four ways, between Melissa McDuffy in México, Manny in Gainesville, Jon Campbell, the Secret Service Director in Washington, and the FBI Assistant Director in Langley.

“Professor, this is the man who made the threats; this is the man who carried the acid; this is the man who was captured trying to carry out his threats. If it sounds like a duck, and looks like a duck, it is a duck. I don’t see how you can deny his culpability.”

“Mr. Campbell, please don’t put words in my mouth. I am not denying his culpability in this specific action. What I am saying is that this man does not fit the historical profile of the kind of Mexican who would carry out this type of attack. He doesn’t even fit the historical profile of a guerrilla fighter in México.”

“You are an historian, right?”

“Right. I have a doctorate in Mexican History.”

“You have no criminology degrees or knowledge, you have never worked in a security agency, so you have no idea what we do or how we do it. Am I right?”

“Yes, you are. But—

”Then, how can you presume to tell us how to do our job?”, said Jon Campbell, who was known to be very dismissive of people not working in the intelligence community. He had once told a

congressman that, if he wanted to find more about the duties of the Secret Service of the Treasury Department, he should become a professional bodyguard for awhile. Only then could they talk the same language.

“Sir, excuse me, but I don’t think professor Perez was trying to do that. I believe he has a valid concern and this is why I requested this conference. The responsibility is mine, but as I told you before, I wanted you to listen to what Professor Manny Perez has to say.”

“Melissa is right. We should listen. It doesn’t hurt”, said the FBI Director. He was an older man, which was strange because President Conover had always chosen to have young people in important posts. Manny didn’t remember his name, but was grateful for his intervention.

“All right, so he doesn’t fit your *historical* profile. So what?”, asked Jon. “He fits our *criminal* profile and the profile drawn by the Mexican police.”

“Mr. Campbell, I believe that there might be another, bigger threat still pending and now everybody is shrugging their shoulders as if the danger were over. As a matter of fact, I believe the danger has just reached the critical stage.”

“Because...?”

“Because tomorrow night is the last night of President Conover’s visit to México. Within the next twenty-four hours somebody is going to try to kill him.”

“Who is going to try it?”

“I don’t know who. We wouldn’t be sitting here if I knew.”

“What weapons will he use?”

“I don’t know yet, but something big if you guys don’t move fast.”

“Move fast against whom Mr. Perez?”, he said exasperated, but the tone of his voice remained cold and uninterested.

“Sir, I don’t know yet. But I suggest that you keep your people looking for an assassin. He is out there, somewhere. I believe he introduced a large bomb into México through the border with Belize

last month. I also believe this is a lone killer, without affiliations in México to any of the guerrilla groups. A man whose own life doesn't matter to him any more, because he is willing to exchange his own life for President Conover's. A man of means, and possibly of influence, who has a personal grudge against the United States."

"Why do you say he may be wealthy?"

"Because of the cost of putting together a sophisticated explosive device large enough to blow up an entire building; because of the logistics of moving it, placing it, whatever."

"Melissa, do we have anything to support this theory?"

"Nothing firm, sir. But I find myself having doubts about the alleged assassin. There are things that just do not fit."

"Name one."

"The fact that this man Emilio Ronquillo is being presented as the number two in a guerrilla organization that doesn't acknowledge him at all. The EPLN is a very secretive group, whose only known attacks have been against military targets. They have always remained in silence, and they broke it the day before yesterday to deny their involvement. Besides, they have never expressed any particular hatred towards the United States."

"There are several guerrillas in México, on both the extreme left and right. It could be another one."

"Maybe. But If this were an attack planned by another such group, I believe they would jump at the opportunity to claim it so as to make their political point. Nobody has."

"And remember that they don't have an historical reason to make such an attack", said Manny.

"That, too."

"Anything else?"

"There is also the fact that the Mexican government went public with it. I found that disturbing", said Melissa .

"You make it sound like it was a staged attack."

Nobody said a word for a moment.

"Could this have been staged?", asked the FBI Director.

“The answer is yes, it could. Everything is possible. But the important question is why, and who. Who would stage this, and why?”, said Manny.

“Melissa, do you understand that we don’t have any possible way to continue with the investigation on our own?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“We need the cooperation of the Mexican government. It would not be smart to have agents running around México, without the Mexican government’s knowledge. It would run against the Summit principles, and it would certainly create a huge diplomatic incident. On top of that, if we accuse the Mexican government of staging a false attack, well...”

“I understand, sir.”

“What you are giving me is not enough to tell my wife about, much less the Mexican government. Either you find some hard evidence that there is another killer on the loose, or you just have to hold on tight and pray for the best.”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s seven in the evening. I will be here until midnight. If you have something better by then, give me a call.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good bye, professor.”

“So long.”

“Jon, could you call me later?” said the FBI Director. “I have other things to talk to you about.”

“Sure.”

Their images disappeared.

Melissa and Manny contemplated each other’s face in silence for about fifteen seconds.

“We better start moving”, she said.

“I agree.”

“Can you find any more information about the letter published in the paper?”

“I will call the reporter right now.”

“Thanks.”

Melissa called Bob Allen, the CIA Station Chief. She explained the situation as fast and succinctly as possible. He agreed.

“I’ve had a bad feeling about this all along. That’s why I been using all of my agents to find out where and when the rumor about the assassin originated.”

“Do you have an answer?”

“Everything seems to point to the same direction.”

“Which is?”

“Roberto Peña. He is the acting head of the Ministry of Interior.”

“That makes sense. They are the ones in charge of handling that information.”

“Yes, but get this. Roberto Peña was hand-picked by Antonio Molina to be his replacement.”

“The hero of the day.”

“Right. Roberto Peña has been his right hand for the last fifteen years. They have always worked together.”

“So the entire thing could have been a fake.”

“Yes.”

“But why?” she said and she thought she sounded just like Manny.

“I have several ideas, but nothing that I can share with you yet. I am waiting to get a confirmation on something. If that pans out, I’ll let you know.”

“I have until midnight.”

“I’ll do my best.”

She hung up and began to go over the list of people who would be attending Placido Domingo’s last recital.

Manny's call caught Carmen Nuñez in the shower.

He waited ten minutes and called again.

"Who is this?", she asked. She was mad.

"I am Professor Manny Perez, from the University of Florida, in the United States."

"Is this the same person who called before?."

"Yes. I called you yesterday, and earlier today."

"Yes, my mother told me. What can I do for you?"

"I am sorry to bother you this late..."

She laughed sarcastically.

"Don't worry. This is early for me. If I sound cross is because I've received some strange calls lately. But don't mind me. Just tell me what can I do for you."

"It's about your article in the *Reforma* on Tuesday morning."

"You too?"

"What do you mean?"

"You wouldn't believe the amount of trouble that article has caused me."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Threats, warnings, things like that. What about you? Are you upset about it too?" she said and she laughed. She had a nice laughter, warm and sexy. Manny liked her instantly.

"Not at all. I have become a fan of your writing. I find it very honest and appealing."

"Well, that's nice of you. Thanks. What can I do for you?"

"Well. As a told you, I am a professor of history at the University of Florida, and I am writing an analysis on the historical activity of rebel groups in Mexico", he said, halfway lying.

"I see", she said noncommittally.

“Your article is the first one that has provided any information on the EPLN. What I would like to know is whether you can get in touch with them.”

Immediately she became defensive.

“Who is this again?”

“Professor Manny Perez. University of Florida. Latin American Studies Center. If you have access to a computer, you may check my references. My latest work was published last week, and it is called *‘The Rise and Fall of the World’s Greatest Political Party’*. If you don’t have access to a computer, you may call professor Jorge Guzmán, at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and ask him about me.”

“Do you have his number?”

“Sure.” He gave the number to her, and also two or three other names and telephone numbers from professors he knew through his work. He gave her his number too.

“Señorita Nuñez, it is crucial that I ratify some information from your article. It is extremely urgent. I am not interested in your contacts with the guerrilla, if you have them. I only need to know three things.”

“Which are?”

“Their letter said that the drugs were smuggled inside an aluminum container. I need to know if they are positive about this. The second thing I would like to know is if they know how it was wrapped. The third is whether they have any idea where the shipment went.”

“This doesn’t sound like history to me.” She said.

Manny debated for a moment with himself. He couldn’t tell her why he needed the information, of course. But she obviously was seeing through his lie.

“If I tell you that you could get a great exclusive story out of this, would you help me?”

“Maybe. I need more information, though. What kind of an exclusive story?”

“Would you promise me not to use anything I tell you until I give you the green light?”

“I promise you.”

“It has to do with the recent assassination attempt announced by the PGR.”

She kept silence, waiting for more.

“Look, I believe that the container mentioned by the EPLN carried not drugs, but an explosive device of some kind. I need more information so I can go to the police.”

“If I help, you will give me all the details, right?”

“Right.”

“I cannot promise you anything, because I am not sure I can send them a message. But let me find out what I can. I’ll call you later.”

“If I don’t immediately answer the phone, just stay on line. Sometimes the transfer takes a few moments”, he said. He had a phone service which, if he didn’t pick up the phone in his house, rerouted the call to his cellphone, and then to the minute beeper he carried with him wherever he was. “If I don’t answer by the tenth ring, leave your name and a number where I can reach you.”

“Okay.”

“Before you hang up, let me emphasize how important this is.”

“I understand. Don’t worry.”

After making some phone calls to make sure he was who he said, Carmen walked to the quesadilla stand on the corner two blocks away from her house. The stand was improvised with a metallic table covered with a red and green paper, a couple of cheap plastic chairs and a metallic stove which was fired by a small gas tank. From the window of the house in back ran a cable to the nearest post, and from

that cable hung the naked bulbs that lighted the stand. There were several people seating in the chairs or against a parked car, eating and talking loudly. When Carmen approached them, several people saluted her with a respectful *buenas noches*, and then resumed their banter amongst themselves.

The old woman Carmen was looking for was seating on a low stool by the stove, behind a younger girl who was making quesadillas in a large frying pan with boiling oil. The old woman prepared the dough, and made small balls with it which she placed on a plate on the table.

“*Hola, marchanta*, what are you going to have tonight.”

“I would like one cheese quesadilla.”

“With salsa?”

“I’ll put it on. Thanks”

Carmen leaned against the wall while the young woman took a small ball of dough, made it into a tortilla shell in a small machine, filled the shell with cheese, folded it, and placed it in the boiling hot oil.

“And how are you, abuelita?”, Carmen asked, casually, to the old woman.

“Don’t ask, because if I started telling you, we would be talking all night” the woman answered while she kept on working in the dough for the tortillas. They both smiled. The old woman’s face was wrinkled and weather worn.

“You sound just like my grandmother”, Carmen said.

“Is she alive?”

“No. She died five years ago.”

The young woman fished the quesadilla out of the oil and placed it on a plastic plate covered with a paper napkin. She sliced the quesadilla open, and gave it to the old woman.

The old woman looked at Carmen.

“You said you wanted salsa, or not?”

“Yes, please.”

“Red or green?”

“Green.”

The woman poured a small amount of salsa on top of the quesadilla.

“I give you little because it is really hot tonight.”

“It is fine. Thank you.”

Carmen said, and gave a bite to the quesadilla. The melting cheese inside was a special Mexican cheese made on the outskirts of town. It was called *Los Volcanes*, and tasted a bit like a mixture of mozzarella cheese and Monterey jack, but its texture was softer and the taste smoother and deeper. The green salsa added another dimension to the taste.

“Mmmm” said Carmen

“Is it good?”

“Delicious.”

She didn’t say another word until she finished eating. With her eyes, and hands, however, she was having a furtive exchange with the old woman. Starting when Carmen fixed her eyes on the old woman and then raised her eyebrows in a questioning look, pointing at the young woman. The old woman indicated that no, she wasn’t safe. Carmen then pointed at her mouth and then to the old woman. She nodded, and made a circular sign with her hand, indicating that Carmen should come back later. Carmen shook her head and pointed at her wristwatch.

The two woman were exchanging glances and signals as if they had known each other for years. But to any of the other people who were at the stand buying quesadillas, the exchange was invisible.

Then the old woman made a sign with two fingers which meant that Carmen should wait a little bit.

“Can I have another one?”, Carmen said to the young woman.

“The same?”

“Yes, please.”

Fifteen minutes and two more cheese *quesadillas* later, there was a lapse in which the stand had no customers. The old woman got up.

“I am going to the bathroom, Sonia. Do you need anything?”

“No, mama, but don’t take long because I want to close early tonight.”

“I’ll be right back.”, said the old woman and left.

“Could you tell me how much damage I produced?”, said Carmen. The young woman told her, and Carmen paid her bill. She walked nonchalantly behind the old woman. When they turned the corner, Carmen ran up to her.

“I need to talk to your people.”

“Sonia doesn’t know anything. She is mad because her brother is in the mountains, and she would throw me out of the house if she knew I help him” explained the old woman in a hushed voice.

“Don’t worry. I won’t say a word in front of her. But this is really urgent. I need to talk to whoever send me that letter.”

“I don’t know where my son is” the woman said fiercely with an absolute determination.

Carmen felt defeated.

“Well, if by any chance you have the means to send him a message, tell him to call me at home. Here is my number”, Carmen gave her one of her cards. “It very urgent.”

The woman wrapped her shawl around her head and hesitated.

“I told you, I don’t know where he is”, she said, but she wasn’t as adamant.

“Take it. Just in case. It is extremely urgent.” Carmen repeated, hoping that her insistence would have some effect.

Apparently, it did.

Two hours later she was in the small kitchen at home, writing down numbers on how much it would cost to buy a small Volkswagen,

two or three years old. She had enough for that, but the taxi plates were needed too and they were very expensive. When her mother answered the phone, Carmen was giving up on the idea of a taxi for her brother.

“Carmen, is for you.”

“Who is it?” said Carmen, suddenly worried.

“Who is this?” asked her mother.

“He says he is a old friend of yours.”

Carmen picked up the receiver.

“*Bueno?*”

“*Hí, mamacita.*”

“Who is this?”

“Pablo Castaño”, he said, and she recalled immediately the long and sad face of a boy she went to high school with.

“Pablo! My god, where have you been all these years”, she said, pleased. She used to like the boy a lot, because he was always reading interesting books and magazines. Pablo had been the most intelligent kid she had ever known. And yet he was always so sad. While they exchanged pleasantries she remembered how frustrated she used to feel with him because no matter what she did, she could not shake him entirely out of that permanent sorrow he lived in. It was as if Pablo had carried on his young shoulders all the worries and problems of the world.

“And such a miracle? How come you call me after so many years?”, she asked.

“Well, I learned that you were dying to talk to me”, he said, playfully.

“Oh, yeah? What gave you that impression?”

“I don’t know. My mother told me”, he said with the same playful tone, and all of a sudden it hit Carmen.

“Your mother?”

“Yeah, she told me you wanted to talk to me. That it was urgent.”

“Are you—?”

“Before you reject me—he said— what if we meet face to face. We can go out for coffee. I really dislike telephones, you know?”, he said and she understood perfectly that he didn’t want her to say anything on the phone.

“Sure, when?”

“I could pick you up now.”

“Now?”

“Yes, I am very near your house.”

“Okay.”

“Just step outside.”

“Okay.”

Carmen hung up, grabbed her purse telling her mother that she was going out for awhile, and ran outside.

Pablo was already there, in the shadows among the parked cars. He had called her from a cell phone he had in his hand.

“Carmen” he called softly.

She didn’t recognized him at first.

The young skinny boy with the sad face had been replaced by a very muscular man with a determined look on his hardened features.

“Pablo?”

“Have I changed that much?”

“Yes. A lot.”

“For better, or for worse?” he said with a wink and a radiant smile. Was he flirting with her? Could he have changed that much?

“I don’t know. I’ll tell you at the coffee shop.”

“I can tell you right now that you look extremely beautiful. But of course you were always gorgeous, so that is nothing new.”

“What ever happened to the painfully shy Pablo I used to know?”

He hesitated for a moment before he answered.

“He died long ago.”

He was driving a medium size car, gray in color and gray interiors. Nothing fancy, and nothing too damaged. Nothing on the dashboard, or on the roof. Nothing that could readily stick in the mind. It was a nondescript, eminently forgettable car.

Which suited him fine.

He started to drive aimlessly, but she noticed he was making sure he stayed on wide, well lighted avenues. In time, he answered all of her questions.

She learned that he had finished high school and moved out of the barrio because his father had died and they could not keep up with the rent on the apartment where they lived. His mother and sister had moved in with his grandparents, while he had gone to the south to live with one of his uncles in the state of Quintana Roo.

Quintana Roo is in the Yucatán peninsula, and is the farthest state on the southeastern part of México. It has almost twenty thousand square miles of deep, wet jungle which has been little explored because of the heat and the endless rainfall that produces an almost solid undergrowth. Without any important industry except for precious woods, the state is better known internationally for its beaches; Cancún, Tulum and Isla Cozumel— all of them on the Caribbean Sea. Chetumal, the capital of the state, is at the point where the beaches end and Belize, old British Honduras, starts.

From the beaches, it looks like paradise.

While attending the public schools in Chetumal, Pablo had become involved with a group of radical students advocating the overthrow of the Mexican political system because they thought it was unjust, and corrupt. At the same time he started working with the scattered Mayan people, trying to teach them how to improve their meager crops. But the misery of the peasants was so great and so extended, that any hope of modifying individually their situation was non-existent. He saw first hand how fast and how rich the government workers became by stealing the federal funds sent to alleviate the

situation. When his group made petitions and sent them to the state government, instead of answers they were harassed by the local police. When they tried to complain at the federal level, to the government in México City, they were simply ignored. This is when Pablo started contemplating the armed revolution as a the only possibility to change the system for another one, better and more just.

“Then my friends and I talked about it and decided that we needed to put into practice what we were preaching. So we moved into the jungle, and begin to live with the peasants. We eat and slept like they did. And we started training ourselves in hand to hand combat, handling weapons, tactical warfare, and all of those things.”

“Where do you get your money?”

“We learned how to assault banks”, he said matter of fact.

“Have you killed people?”

He looked at her for a moment before he answered.

“I don’t know”, he said. “We try not to, but I really don’t know. My people and I made a deal. We would not make the same mistake of other groups in the past that have started a fight that soon runs out of their hands and damages innocent people. We believe armed response is the only alternative this government has given us, but we also understand that people have to make the final choice. So our actions are just a way to send a message to the people: if you want us, here we are.”

“What if the people don’t want you?”

“I am sacrificing my life for them”, he said as a way of answering her question.

She decided not to go into that.

“You haven’t told me yet what was so urgent”, he said.

“I friend of mine is a professor, and he needs some information about the letter you sent me.”

“What kind of information?”

“He wants to know if you are sure that the container had drugs.”

“Pretty sure...” said Pablo, but his voice trailed.

“Did your people see the drugs?”, she asked.

“Of course not. But what else could it be?”

“Okay, so you are not sure. Next he wants to make sure that the container was made of aluminum, he wants know how the container was wrapped, and he also would be delighted if you could tell him where the drugs went.”

He laughed.

“What strange things he wants to know. Except for the last one, this doesn’t make sense. Who is he?”

“I told you. He is a professor friend of mine.”

“Are you sure he is not a spy?”

“No. But I don’t think so.”

“What is his name?”

“Manny Perez. He teaches history.”

“The name sounds familiar. Where does he teach?”

She really didn’t want to tell him, but she had no choice.

“At the University of Florida, in United States.”

He turned to look at her, but instead of being mad as she expected, he was smiling.

“Really! Is he your friend?”

“Yeah, do you know him?”

“Yes, well, no. But I read some of his works. The last one just came out.”

“You keep up with these things pretty good.”

“With a computer at hand it is very easy. And you know me. I am a poet at heart.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Anyway, why does he want to know?”

She told him.

Pablo became suddenly serious.

“That would explain many things.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing, nothing. There are things you should not know.”

Disregarding his cellphone, he parked the car by the curve near a public booth. He got off, and for the next ten minutes he talked into the phone in animated whispers as if he were talking to a girlfriend.

Carmen watched him through the windshield of the car. He had certainly changed since the last time she had seen him. So much so that she had not decided yet whom she liked best; the kid with the sad face she loved years before, or this brash young man who wanted to change to world and was all too willing to die to achieve his goal. She wasn't scared of him, or of the armed revolution he was preaching and actively fighting. But instead of feeling something for him — admiration, repulsion, whatever— he put her off. And she remained off until much later. It was only after several hours of talking, when they were already naked at the motel and he was softly kissing the back of her thighs and her entire skin was burning and her head was slowly spinning, that the image of the sad kid fused with that of the young man and she understood finally that they were not two images, but one; somehow there was a perfect continuity between the boy and the man. She, however, was the one who had changed. She would understand then that she wanted nothing else from him but this; to hold and be held in a warm, slightly intoxicating embrace.

That would be later. Now, when he came back to the car, he smiled.

“We need to wait two hours. Let's go have a drink somewhere”, he said.

“Please.”

Three hours later Carmen had the answers to her questions. But by that time she was too far gone to even think of calling Manny.

Manny did receive a fax early the next morning.

It was the copy of an invoice made at the customs office in Chetumal, Quintana Roo, which had been the point of entry of the canister.

The invoice indicated the place where the canister was being delivered. It was the address of a certain place called CIEN (*Centro de Investigaciones Ecológicas Nacionales*).

In Chetumal, Pablo's contact saw the fax being transmitted. He waited until the machine stopped and the bored girl in attendance hung up the phone. When she gave him back his original invoice, he fold it absent-mindedly in four and put it into his shirt.

When he turned to leave the long distance booth, he saw the group of four men waiting at the entrance under the bright and scorching daylight. He knew they were soldiers in spite of their civilian clothes and their dark glasses because of the way they were standing against the wall with their backs straight as boards. For some unknown reason, that posture was something they could not hide.

He hesitated for a second.

He had nowhere to run.

He took a deep breath and, gathering all of his courage, walked slowly towards them.

Immediately after receiving the fax in his computer, Manny called Melissa and sent her an email with the attached information. After printing a copy of the invoice on her machine first, she in turn called Bob. She gave him the invoice, and asked him if he could find more about it.

Bob called back in half an hour.

“The *Centro de Investigaciones Ecológicas Nacionales*, better known as CIEN, is an institute created in 1994 by then President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. It was supposedly a research center, but we have always suspected as being one of those fronts Mexican politicians use when they need to launder some money. It had a staff of twenty with Salinas, and his brother Raúl was in charge of it. Now, I don’t know if you know about Raúl Salinas...”

“Not much”, said Melissa slyly. “Only that he was accused of killing his brother in law, that his wife was captured in a Swiss bank trying to withdraw almost one hundred million dollars that Raúl had stashed there for rainy days, under an assumed name of course, along with another two hundred million dollars in different banks all over the world. Are we talking about the same Raúl Salinas?”

“The one and only. All of that money came out of his salary as a researcher, can you believe it?”

“Sure. And do you know that the American government is selling Alaska?”

“Right. Anyway, after Salinas left power and his brother was indicted, the CIEN was abandoned until about two years ago, when it was handled over to Federico S. Sánchez.”

“Hold on a moment”, she said. She clicked on her mouse until a list of all the Mexican VIP’s names showed. There it was. Federico S. Sánchez. She pulled up his file on the screen.

Then she started reading aloud the main points.

“Federico Schmidt Sánchez. Born in 1923. Father was of German nationality. Mother was Mexican. Federico was baptized as Frederick, changed it in later years. Went to high school and college in California from 1937 through 1947. Rural Professor, Mayor of his town, Governor of his state, Minister of Commerce with President De la Madrid, Minister of Energy and Mines with Salinas. He is also the main share-holder of at least 200 enterprises ranging from trucking to computers. Personal fortune estimated at around two billion dollars. Impressive.”

“Right. Typical Mexican politician with strong ties in both industry and politics, but with a slight difference.”

“Which is?”

“He didn’t steal money from the budget.”

“You are kidding.”

“Nope.”

“You mean his money is straight and honestly earned?”

“I didn’t say that. What I said was that he didn’t steal taxpayers’ money directly. However, he was happy to traffic with his influence and he was extraordinarily generous with everyone who crossed his path. People love him. He could have been the President of México, except that in his time there was a law that kept the sons of foreign nationals from becoming president. Most of the people who have met him have expressed their admiration for this man. Even his enemies, which are not that many.”

“Interesting. But what would a man with his wealth and power want from a small research facility *cum* laundry-mat lost in the jungle?”

“That is the question, isn’t it? Especially now that Don Federico is seventy-seven and practically retired from politics.”

“What else do we know about him?”

“That he is the last person I could imagine to be a terrorist.”

“He fits the general profile Manny talked about. He has the money, and the opportunity.”

“Yeah, but he lacks motive. And without a motive a man does not try to kill presidents.”

“Let me get Manny on the phone.” she said.

“Oh, God. I am getting jealous. But it is my fault. I shouldn’t have told you to call him in the first place.”

“I love you too, Bob. Don’t hang up.”

She waited a minute or two while the connection was established to Manny.

Manny was working at the garden of his house in Gainesville at that moment. The sun outside was splendid. For the last year and a half he had been building a path from the garage to the backyard with stones and dozens of bags of pre-mixed concrete. He added a stone or two on the footpath whenever he was too tense or tired to read, to write, or to do research for his classes. Since none of those things happened very often, it had taken him nearly eighteen months to do a job that any contractor could have finished in about five hours. This time, however, he was sure he would complete the path. There was only about a meter left to go.

When the phone rang he was sweating profusely after having just mixed and poured some two hundred pounds of concrete and water into the trail, so he stopped into the bathroom first to get a towel.

Then he answered the phone.

“Hi, Manny.”

“Melissa ?”

“Yes.”

“I am surprised to hear from you so fast.”

“Could you turn on your video?”

“If you give me a minute while I walk over to my computer.”

“Sure. I am sorry to bother you. I hope you are not too busy.”

“Don’t worry. I was working in the yard”, he said as he turned on his computer.

“There you go. Hi again”, he said as his face came on view.

“Hi”, she said. And then she felt silly when she blushed. Watching this man’s strong chest glistening with perspiration had turned her on immediately. She could not believe it.

“So...”, he said.

“So...”, she said. Her mind was blank! What was going on? She had never in her entire life had reacted physically to a man in this way!

“Melissa ...?” said Manny.

“Oh, I am sorry. I just remembered something I have to do”, she said and she made an effort to concentrate on the business at hand. She wished she hadn’t asked Manny to turn on his video. Too late now.

“Manny, what do you know about Federico S. Sánchez?”

“The Teacher?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that he is quite a politician in the Mexican tradition. In a sense he is the perfect representation of what Mexican politics were at one point in time. He used power for the benefit of his people and, in passing, for his own benefit. I know that he made tons of money but not by stealing directly from the budget as became a practice later on with younger politicians. He was much more refined and sophisticated for that. He used his different positions to favor his friends with contracts from the government. Then his tons of friends were only too happy to grant him anything he wanted when *they* were in power. He used this trading of favors in a masterful manner. He learned from a General Bracho, who was a hero of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and who later became his father-in-law. General Bracho was governor of San Luis Potosí, and gave the young Federico S. Sánchez his first post as mayor of his home town.”

“Very good”, she said, still slightly breathless.

“His generosity towards his friends is a legend in México. It is said that money really doesn’t mean anything to him, but at the same time he is the creator of the concept that a “Poor Man is a Poor Politician” which many younger *politicos* have taken as an excuse to steal all they can from the government coffers.”

“Really.”

“Really. At one time or another, in the seventies he was the natural candidate to become President of México, but—

“I know about that.”

“Right. Anything else?”

“Do you think he could be the man we are looking for?”

“What?”

“As you know the container was delivered to a research center. We have traced the control of the center to a Federico S. Sánchez.”

“Well, yes, that’s him, but there is got to be a mistake. Maybe somebody else in the center...?”

“Maybe, but you said that our candidate needed the means; money and opportunity. Federico S. Sánchez has both of those things.”

“Yes, yes, I see what you mean.”

“So could it be possible?”

Manny didn’t answer. She saw him staring at his computer.

“Manny?”

“Give me a second.” he said. ”I am looking in my files at something that always struck me as odd about Federico S. Sánchez.”

“What is it?”

“Here it is. Well, he has always claimed that he was in California ten years from 1937 to 1947, but I have never been able to find any traces of his been there.”

“Bob, you’ve got that?”

“I’ve got it. Give me half an hour.”

“Okay.”

“You know, it might not mean anything. Lots of Mexicans come to study to the Unites States and they enroll in courses in private schools that then go bust, things like that.”

“Somebody is checking that out. Meanwhile, can you think of anything else that might help?”

“Not off hand. But I will think about it.”

“Then I will let you go back to your garden.”

“Thanks, but I rather be here talking with you. The view is much nicer.”

“Like wise”, she said, and smiled back.

“When are you coming back to the States?”

“In a few days.”

“I would like to take you out to dinner sometime.”

“Sounds good. Except that I am in Washington and you are in Florida.”

“That’s why God invented planes.”

“Yes, but *she* made them too expensive just to go out for dinner.”

“Maybe I’ll be in town for a conference or something.”

“Maybe. But...”, she stopped, not knowing what to say next. She wanted so much to be with him, that it scared her.

“But, what? Are you afraid of something?”, he said with a seductive smile. She blushed again, feeling that he was reading her mind.

“Right now, I am afraid of my boss. I need to go back to work. Talk to you later.”

“Okay.”

She turned of the call, but kept Manny’s image on her screen. She could not believe how outrageous her behavior was. She felt she was acting like a teenager, but just the same she didn’t want to stop being silly. Anyhow, she shrugged, his image was something nice to look at while she worked. Nothing bad about it, was there?

No, she answered her own question, there was nothing wrong with being attracted this much to a total stranger. In fact, she told herself, wasn’t that the secret dream of every woman? To fall head over heels and have a totally romantic relationship with a man? To love and be loved with an equal intensity that would never, ever, end?

Yes, yes, but she had to be watch herself against falling into the trap many divorced women stepped into. A divorce generally was a time of personal crisis and reckoning so deep that left many women feeling weak and vulnerable, full of doubts about themselves and with a self esteem lower than the basement of a New York skyscraper. In such conditions those women were anxious to prove they were still lovable and because of this they were liable to fall for the first man that crossed their path. And that was generally a very bad move.

But surely, she told herself, being careful about not making that mistake didn't mean that she could not date anyone. She just had to be on guard... when she thought this, she recalled her duties with a jolt and she went back to work.

“The first and only registered visit of this guy to the States was in 1967, for a quick visit across the border to San Antonio, in Texas”, said Bob matter of fact thirty five minutes later.

“No other sign of him before that?”

“Nope. Nor before, and not after. No driver's license, no permits, no nothing. You know, even illegal workers leave more trail behind than this guy. If Federico Schmidt was ever in California, he was the invisible man.”

“So where was he all of those years?”

“Well, his father was German...”

“He was in Germany. Of course!”

“My people in Germany are checking that right now. We should have more information in about one hour.”

Melissa checked her watch.

It was almost 10 in the morning.

She checked on the monitors around the office the different views from the field offered by the cameras carried by her agents. Everything was peaceful. The Summit of the Americas was winding down.

Still, she knew that she could not afford to wait too long.

Lieutenant Francisco del Mar was called by friends and enemies Paco the Sailor, because of his last name.

Ever since he could recall he had wanted to be a policeman. As a child, he was fascinated by the law and those who broke it. When he turned eighteen, fresh out of high school, he applied at the police academy in México City, but he was rejected because of his height. Paco measured exactly five feet of height.

At the same time he applied at the police academy, he was complying with the mandatory military service for eighteen year olds, and when he finished it he discovered that he very much liked the military life he had envisioned during his weekend duties and practices, so he enrolled in the army.

He was trained as a radio operator, then was sent to the provinces. Because he proved to be far more intelligent and diligent than most, he was soon receiving his first promotions. Two years later he was transferred to the military intelligence section, where he was further trained in deciphering messages, and in counter-insurgency measures. He completed the courses with honors. He was sent to further his training to Fort Bragg, in the United States, under an agreement the two governments had signed in 1994.

When he returned to México, he was sent to the southern command post at Quintana Roo. At this post his duties were concentrated in one; to keep track of the rebels belonging to the EPLN.

He had been able to pinpoint the owner of a small restaurant as the courier of information between the armed guerrillas and their supporters around the country. He had deciphered their code in a manner of days using an IBM processor capable of performing 200 million operations per second.

Once with the code of the rebel's messages in his possession, he monitored all the communications of the restaurateur. Soon he was able to locate all of the outside supporters of the guerrilla. He knew their names, addresses, backgrounds, and all of their personal data. He then assigned a personal shadow to each one of them. All of their phones were intervened secretly, and their mail intercepted.

After Carmen had published her article, the first thing Lieutenant del Mar did was to place her immediately under surveillance.

When Carmen's personal shadow had reported her meeting with Pablo, the Lieutenant immediately requested the transcript of the phone conversations between Carmen and Manny, and the guerrilla and the courier. This is how he learned about Manny Perez' involvement and about the information requested by him. Then Paco the Sailor personally had followed the courier in Chetumal to the house of another man, who in turn had gone to fetch four of his friends. Together they had gone to the house of Mario Beltrán, the Customs Officer.

It didn't take them long.

When they came out, smiling and shaking the hand of Mario as if they were good old friends, Paco understood that the information they required was in their hands.

He had orders against capturing any of them. The orders had come directly from the *Defensa Nacional*, the army general command post at the *Zona Militar Número Uno* in México City. Paco knew that one of the greatest advantages of the intelligence activities in México was that so few people even suspected of their existence. It allowed them to do their work very nicely. Paco agreed that the best strategy for now was to let them stay in place, and consent to everybody's activities until they were sure they could dismantle the entire operation.

So Paco waited. As luck had it, the group of men drove to the house of the first man on the chain; the restaurant owner.

Paco decided to go after him.

After the courier sent the fax to Manny, Paco's men bumped against the man as if they had just stumbled into him by accident when he was leaving the Long Distance Service stall. One of them took the piece of paper from the pocket in the shirt of the courier. The man was so scared of the soldiers, and so glad they didn't arrest him, that he didn't even noticed that he had lost the paper. Paco had the information he needed by nine. The picture painted by the information he had was deadly.

Twisted Gods

At ten he was on a military plane to México City.

At three thirty, Bob called Melissa back.

“Listen to this: they’ve found three references to a Frederick Schmidt Sánchez in Germany’s records. One was when he went into the country in 1937. The second was his registry with the local government in Dresden as a student at the local college, and the third one from his marriage license. He was married to a woman Ute Kadner in July 7, 1944. After that, nothing.”

“How about military records?”

“Nothing yet. But listen, there is something else: there is a rumor going on in Europe about a group of Russian scientists working in a new type of mustard gas somewhere in México. I received the notice just now.”

“Uh, oh.”

“I am sure we have our man. We just need to move fast.”

“What do you suggest?”

“We need to go to the top. It is too late to pussyfoot around. The Ambassador will receive us immediately. Bring whatever you have.”

“I am ready.”

Seven minutes later they were at the ambassador’s office. They presented their findings to the man, and saw him turn pale.

“What do you want to do?” he said.

Bob didn’t hesitate. His demeanor and his voice had changed. He was decisive and firm, and his eyes had the old shine. Whatever demons and doubts had possessed him had been put into the back of his mind. He was back in shape, Melissa thought.

“We have a limited amount of time, sir. We need to go to the president with this.”

“What’s Conover going to do? Cancel his remaining appointments?”

“No, sir. I am talking about the Mexican President. He is the only one who can order an immediate raid on all the properties of Federico S. Sánchez and have him arrested.”

“I see. Let me think for a moment”, said the Ambassador.

He closed his eyes and put his fingers together. He looked like he was praying. William Casper III was a man who belonged to a distinguished political family in the state of Massachusetts which had always been overshadowed by the Kennedy’s. Both families had been rivals for as long as it could be remembered in the state. In part because of this piqué, and in part because his brothers expected him to follow the steps of his father and grandfather, Bill Casper had run for governor in 1993. Until then he had had a very successful career as a businessman dealing in antiques. Then, after his term was over, his friend Bill Conover offered him the post as Ambassador to México. His nomination had resulted in a minor fracas in congress, because Senator Helms from North Carolina was opposed to his confirmation, but after major pressure from the White House and other republican senators was applied, Bill Casper became the Ambassador of the United States to México. His only perspective to the job was the one provided by his own personal decency. His best credential was the impeccable, almost accent free Spanish he spoke.

“If you think too much, we’ll lose precious time.”

“I guess there is no other way”, he said, picking up the phone.

“Put me through to President Zedillo”, he said to his secretary.

They waited anxiously for three minutes. When the telephone rang they all jumped.

“The secretary of the president is on the line.”

“Thank you. - he clicked a button on his phone - “*Hola Juan. Cómo estás?*” —he said, and after a pause — “Juan, may I please speak to President Zedillo?... Yes, this is very urgent... Don’t worry, I’ll wait”, he said.

He looked up from the phone and fixed his eyes on Bob while he waited.

“I was just thinking that this was supposed to be a cushy job”, the Ambassador said, covering the speaker of the phone.

“Somebody lied to you.”

“I gather that.”

His attention was back on the phone.

“Mister President, good afternoon. I am sorry to bother you, but I need to request an extremely urgent meeting with you.”

He listened.

“No, sir, and I apologize for this but I am sure you will understand our concern when we present the facts to you.”

He listened some more.

“Yes, sir, thank you, Mister President.”

He hung up the phone at the same time that he was getting up from his chair.

“He will see us in half an hour.”

Melissa saw her watch. It was 3:45.

She hoped they would be in time.

At the same time, there was a meeting at the Defensa Nacional Headquarters. Earlier in the morning, Lieutenant Francisco del Mar had been picked up by an helicopter at the military air base at Atizapán de Zaragoza, outside México City, and taken to the Zona Militar Número 1 where he delivered his information to Colonel Guillermo Domingo Díaz.

Lieutenant Del Mar and Coronel Guillermo Domingo Díaz were both members of an elite team of junior officers hand picked by the Defense Minister to route out the corruption inside the government. Their group was called *Juego Limpio* (Fair Play). Sworn to secrecy, the men who belonged to this corps had been assigned by President Zedillo himself to different areas under assumed backgrounds. They had been distributed throughout the armed forces, secretaries of state, government offices, and even police departments. Their goal was very specific; to locate the spots where corruption was

most entrenched, identify the culprits, and gather enough evidence to place them behind bars.

Now, the Defense Minister was receiving very disturbing information. The meeting being held at the austere office of the Secretary was very tense. At one end of a very large table, a man with several files stacked in front of him was talking. He was Colonel Guillermo Domingo Díaz. He was a man in his early forties balding rapidly, which was strange in a Mexican so young. He had the vague air of an intellectual, but the cold stare in his dark eyes changed that perception very fast. The way he moved betrayed the supreme physical condition he kept by a rigorous exercising regime that included jogging 10 miles every morning at five thirty. In his hand he held the remote control of a slide machine. The images on the screen on the wall changed as he spoke.

“We now know that the man who is accused of trying to assassinate President Conover, Emilio Ronquillo, used to be a farm worker from the state of Guerrero. The last time anybody saw him was about a year ago, when he was a poor peasant with some sympathies for the guerrillas. Many people in his town thought he was dead. He came first to our attention about ten days ago, when he was driven around México City by these men—the screen on the wall showed a group of men boarding yet another a car, and then their faces in rapid succession— We were following them because they work for Roberto Peña, the acting Minister of Government. There was a rumor that he was involved in the drug trade. In the process of checking his people out, we bumped into their activities.”

“We believe now that Emilio Ronquillo was captured and kidnapped from his home town by these thugs. They held him at a safe-house they control here in México City.”

“Is Emilio a patsy?”, demanded the General.

“Not exactly. The psychologists are doing in-depth studies of Emilio Ronquillo’s mind right now, but the man seems to be convinced that it was his duty to kill President Conover. He really did wanted to kill him.”

“Why did he wanted to kill him?”

“That is a very good question, sir. He doesn’t have an answer for that. In fact, he doesn’t have an answer for many things. His behavior is so strange that it has led us to believe that the man was brainwashed during his captivity. But in the end, his intention was to kill President Conover. I believe he was induced to want that.”

“Induced by whom?”

“By this man. —he pointed to a grainy photograph taken from afar, but clear enough to distinguish the subject; it was the presidential candidate Armando Molina— This is a photograph of the candidate entering the safe-house where Emilio Ronquillo was held. We were very surprised when the candidate showed up. Emilio came out of there only to be taken to the *Auditorio*. By Armando Molina’s men, of course.”

“Molina told Ronquillo to attack Conover and then he stopped him? Why would the candidate stage such a charade?”

“I believe he was trying to bring attention towards himself, sir. As you know, he was trailing badly behind in the polls. Yesterday, he rebounded instantly after so much positive attention. Today the polls show him to be even with the opposition candidate.”

“Well, that son-of-a-bitch has some imagination, I grant you that.”

“There is more, sir.”

“What more could there be?”

“After we took that picture, we did a background check on all people associated with the candidate. We also managed to infiltrate two of our men into his security detail, although I had to promise General Rubén Castillo, the head of *Guardias Presidenciales*, that you would reconsider his seniority. You know that he wants his second star.”

“I will do no such a thing. You should have consulted with me”, the Secretary scolded his man. Colonel Guillermo Domingo Díaz was too smart for his own good, and he tended to forget who was in charge. Promising a second star to a General! Making promises to a man who outranked him! Indeed, it was too much. General Abrego was suddenly very irritated.

“Well, sir, before you get too mad at me let me show you this. Thanks to that infiltration we also have photos of Armando Molina meeting secretly with a group of generals from five different military sectors. We ordered one of them to be detained overnight, under the excuse of an investigation of drug trafficking in his sector. I interrogated him personally, as you might expect, and he confessed to me Molina’s plan to capture the presidency through a *coup de d’etat* if he loses the election at the voting booths.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? He could not stage such a coup without my knowledge”, said the Defense Minister with such an arrogance, that Colonel Díaz almost smiled.

“Sir, I have here the confession. General Bonillas, your second in command, is involved. His role is to kill you outright a day before the election, so as to become the acting Defense Minister during the voting and disrupt the process. In the confusion of the post electoral results, the other generals plan to rise. General Huerta will lead the charge against Los Pinos from inside this compound, and will be followed by General Chávez in Cuernavaca, General Pimentel in Querétaro, and General Peniche in Puebla. They will move their troops out and surround the capital.”

“Son of a bitches!”, shouted General Abrego as he stood up. He was a tall, heavy man, with the face of an ugly bulldog. During childhood, his countenance had made him shy and withdrawn. Once in the army, however, he had learned how to use to his advantage the ferocious expression he was born with to instill the fear of God into his men.

“And today I received this extra information”, said the Colonel, suddenly afraid of the General in spite of himself. Watching warily the big man pacing around the room, he briefly summarized the report brought by Lieutenant Del Mar.

“All told, I am certain that Molina is planning to move, probably tonight, against President Zedillo.”

General Abrego’s fury was contained by himself after he listened to his junior officer. This was not a time to be enraged. The country was in danger. The President was in danger. *He* was in danger. Colonel Díaz had done his job superbly. Instead of being mad,

he should be thinking of how to stop the catastrophe about to unfold. He needed to think fast and act smartly.

After a minute or two of pacing and breathing hard, like a bull, he regained his control. He went back to his chair behind his massive desk. Now his pride in his five stars outweighed any possible hesitation. He picked up a gray telephone resting on his desk that had no dialing numbers. It had only one red button at the center. It was the private network of telephones that interconnected all Secretaries of State with the President himself.

“Mister President, I need to talk to you immediately...No, sir. It cannot wait. Sir, the nation is in danger,...I’ll be over in five minutes”, said General Abrego.

Then the General hang up the phone, stood up again, straightened his tie, put on his green cassock and he ordered Colonel Guillermo Domingo Díaz to follow him.

Los Pinos is the Mexican President’s home. It was built originally in 1692 on a choice piece of real estate next to Chapultepec Park that was once known as *Rancho La Hormiga*. The ranch was first confiscated in 1913 by the revolutionary government, which then paid for it in 1923 with the idea of turning it into a house for the president. But it wasn’t until President Lázaro Cárdenas decided in 1934 not to live in Chapultepec Castle anymore, that it became the official residence for the presidents of México. The name of *Los Pinos* came from the thousands of pines planted on the grounds of the old ranch *La Hormiga*. The construction had been rebuilt and reconditioned constantly throughout the years, and a block of administrative offices was added. It has convenient accesses through several main avenues; Reforma Avenue is two blocks away from it, and right outside of *Los Pinos* is the *Periférico*, a freeway that travels around the entire city.

The Ambassador William Casper III, Melissa McDuffy and Bob Allen could not arrive from the embassy following Reforma Avenue, which was congested because of a manifestation outside the hotel where President Conover was staying. They had to take a detour.

General Abrego, on the other hand, had no trouble. From his offices on the Military Zone Number 1 which was along the Periférico freeway, to *Los Pinos*, his chauffeur made ten minutes flat.

Outside the Presidential office, the Minister of Defense encountered the Ambassador, who had arrived but a minute before. They exchanged polite salutations in hushed, worried tones and then, nodding to each other, they stepped aside when Juan Martínez, President Zedillo's personal secretary, came out from a small hall that led to the door of the Presidential office. The Ambassador went in first.

Melissa had never seen President Zedillo up close, and she was surprised at his youth. He was a slender man, unprepossessing. He had a playful smile which he flashed rarely. Most of the time he had the quiet expression of a man crunching numbers. Which, as an economist with a Ph.D. from Harvard, he had done most of his years as President. He was, somebody had said, *The Accidental President*. A man who had become the PRI candidate only after the first candidate, Donaldo Colosio, was assassinated during his campaign in 1994. Zedillo had gone on to win the elections, only to have the economy of the country come crashing down on his head two months after taking power. The Tequila Crash of 1995, as it was known because of the effects it had on the world economy, was now long forgotten thanks to the efforts of this man, who had managed to stabilize the economy of México.

"Mister Ambassador, I should say that this is a most unusual surprise", said Zedillo guardedly. He seemed to be upset. Standing beside him was his secretary, Juan Martínez. Behind him, watching everyone like a hawk, his personal body guard from the *Guardias Presidenciales*. President Zedillo motioned them to move towards an area that had a couple of large couches.

"Yes, sir. It is highly unusual. Believe me, we are very sorry to bother you", said the Ambassador.

“President Conover and I have an appointment later today, so I would assume that this visit is related to my meeting with him?”, asked the President.

“No, sir. This a totally unrelated matter. First, let me introduce you to Special Agent Melissa McDuffy, who has been in charge of the Secret Service activities in México.”

“Mister President.”

“Agent McDuffy, nice to meet you” said President Zedillo, nodding as a stern teacher.

“And Bob Allen —”

“I know, he is your CIA Chief of Station,” said Zedillo casually. The Ambassador was off balance for a moment. “You are not the only ones with intelligence services, mister Ambassador”, said Zedillo and smiled briefly for the second time.

“Mister President, I’ll get to the point; we have reasons to believe that there is another assassination plot afloat. All evidence we have is circumstantial at this point, but we are convinced of it completely. So much that unless you act immediately, I am prepared to advise President Conover against showing up at Bellas Artes tonight”, said the Ambassador without hesitation. He had decided to state his case as clearly and as fast as possible, but his burst sounded worse than it was because the Ambassador was not used to talking that way.

President Zedillo looked straight at him. His stare was cold and hard.

“Mister Ambassador, before you get to the point of playing hardball with me, shouldn’t you tell me what’s going on?”

The Ambassador blushed. President Zedillo was right, of course. Melissa jumped in.

“With your permission, Mister President, I would like to give you the information we have come across”, she said softly. After receiving his approval, she explained about the inconsistencies in the Emilio Ronquillo attempt, told him everything they knew about the mysterious object that came across the border from Belize, mentioned the rumors floating in the international intelligence community about a

group of Russian scientists working in a new type of poison gas somewhere in México, about the research center in Quintana Roo, and about Federico S. Sánchez and his lost years in Germany.

“In view of this evidence, sir, we believe that there was a weapon of some sort delivered to that research center, where it was probably modified, and then moved out of there and brought to México City.”

“And you believe that Don Federico is involved in this?”, said President Zedillo. The doubts he had about the matter reflected clearly on his face.

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Sir, if we are right, tonight is his last chance to launch an attack against you, President Conover, and everybody else. That’s why this is so urgent.”

“And if you are wrong?”

“Then nothing is lost, sir, but a few uncomfortable hours for Federico S. Sánchez while we find out the truth”, said Bob.

“Do you have any ideas as to why Don Federico would do something like this?”

“Not yet, sir. But there are a couple of possibilities. One is that there might be a European interest in destabilizing America. As you know, for a long time European powers have tried to use your country as a springboard against United States.”

“And México has always refuted those attempts.”

“We know, sir, and we are grateful for that.”

“What is the other possibility you mentioned?”

“The only thing I can think of right now is a personal motive, but I just cannot figure out why would Federico S. Sánchez hate United States so much.”

President Zedillo got up.

“Mister Ambassador, thank you for bringing this to my attention. Of course you can count with our full cooperation. With the single condition that nothing is made public until I approve. I don’t

want Don Federico to be slandered in the media if this turns out to be a baseless suspicion.”

“Of course, Mister President. And please forgive my abrupt behavior earlier.”

“I’ve already forgot it, Bill”, said President Zedillo graciously. Then he turned around and faced Melissa, “Agent McDuffy, thank you for all your good work. I’ve heard from our people that you have been most cooperative and kind to everyone”, said President Zedillo while he walked them out towards the door.

“Thank you, sir. Just doing my job.”

“Something else, Mister President...”, said Bob, suddenly. Everybody stooped.

“Yes, what is it?”, said Zedillo, glancing at his watch, and then at Bob.

“May I suggest one of us goes with your people? In that way we may offer our assistance and advice, if needed.”

President Zedillo considered this for about a second or two.

“Are you offering yourself?”

“Agent McDuffy would be glad to go, sir”, offered Bob without consulting with her, which annoyed Melissa. What was he doing?

President Zedillo looked at her, and smiled.

“Only as an observer. She can go only to watch. Can I have you word on that, Mister Ambassador?”

“Yes, sir. Absolutely.”

“Okay. Please, Juan, see that the lady is comfortable while I talk to General Abrego.”

“Of course, Mister President.”

Once they were out of the office, Melissa whispered angrily to Bob, “Why did you do that for? I have work to do.”

He looked at her and was about to answer, when he thought better.

“Do you have your phone with you?”, he whispered.

“Of course.”

“Call me in ten minutes.”

The Ambassador and Bob departed and Juan led Melissa to another room, way down the hall.

When she was left alone, she took out the cellphone out of her bag. It was a special edition of the Iridium phone that Motorola sold, and that could be used to receive calls anywhere in the world. The signal was bounced off a series of low-altitude satellites Motorola had begun to put in place a few years back. The special edition part was that it automatically scrambled the calls. She dialed Bob’s number. He answered after the first ring.

“I hope you are not angry”, he said. He and the Ambassador were already in their car.

“Of course I am. Why did you do that without consulting with me? Why did you offer me as an observer?”

“Well, it was either you or me. And I am too old and ugly. You, on the other hand, are a gorgeous young woman.”

“What on earth has that got to do with anything?”

“It has to do with the fact that Mexicans consider acts of chivalry as to be very worthwhile. Being a gentleman towards a woman is part of their ethical behavior. By sending you, they get the message that we trust them enough to send our women on a mission with them. Mexicans do not like foreign observers of any kind. It is something that they grant very rarely. But because you are a woman, President Zedillo’s cavalier attitude kicked in and he approved. I made sure we have an observer at the scene, that’s all.”

Melissa complained for a few more minutes, but when a young steward dressed in white arrived with a coffee tray and pastries, she decided to calm down.

“Okay, what about my office?”

“I’ll take care of it. Just stay in touch through the phone, and everything will be okay.”

“All right.”

“How much time do you have left on the battery of your phone?”

She looked at the indicator. It was almost full.

“About fourteen hours. That should be plenty.”

“Okay. Call me as soon as you leave *Los Pinos*.”

“All right.”

She poured herself a cup of coffee, and ate a cookie. Then her stomach growled and she remember she hadn't eaten anything all day, but she didn't pay attention. What mattered now was that the cards were on the table.

There was nothing else to do but wait and hope they would come up aces.

Back at the Presidential Office, Colonel Guillermo Domingo Díaz finished making his presentation, and was ordered by General Abrego to wait outside. When the Colonel tried to pick up his laptop and the slide equipment, the General ordered him to leave everything as it was.

He was worried about his friend, the president.

President Zedillo was silent for what seemed like a very long time.

General Abrego stood straight and stared ahead, waiting for the orders of his Commander in Chief. They both had known each other for years, ever since Zedillo had come back from Harvard and had started working in the government. It had been General Abrego whom Zedillo had chosen to organize the Fair Play team, and that was something about which General Abrego was proud. Even more than for his nomination as Secretary of Defense, because General Abrego felt that Fair Play would mean more to México in the long run than a mere Secretary of Defense. Therefore for him it was an historical honor to be the head of it. He was so very grateful to President Zedillo for having chosen him, that he was willing to do anything for him. Up to this day, President Zedillo and General Abrego had had a cordial and easy going friendship. Now, General Abrego didn't know what to say to his friend and boss. President Zedillo seemed to have been deflated. He sat there, on the couch, and stared at the floor with an empty expression in his eyes.

"I am ready to arrest Molina personally, Mister President", said General Abrego after what seemed an eternity.

"Under what charges, General?"

"Treason, sir."

"Do you realize what would happen? We would have a civil war in less than a week. The elements are already there. The only chance we have of avoiding this civil war from breaking out, is the hope the elections have created in the people. If we do anything to stop the process...", he didn't finish, because the prospect of what he was thinking was too ugly to envision.

General Abrego didn't answer, but he knew President Zedillo was right.

"We have an enormous problem in our hands. Remember General Bernardo Reyes?", asked the President. The general nodded. Of course he remembered.

Bernardo Reyes had been a very distinguished and well regarded General and governor of his state who, in 1911, had tried to rebel against the government of Francisco I. Madero. Placed in prison in 1913, Reyes was freed by his followers in a battle that was known as the *Decena Trágica* (The Ten Tragic Days) because so many worthy Mexicans had died needlessly. Bernardo Reyes had died trying to assault the presidency. President Madero had died after General Victoriano Huerta staged a *coup d'état*. That *coup* had been the beginning of a civil war in México that lasted many years and caused the death of almost a million people.

"Surely you are not saying we do nothing."

"Not at all, General. What I am saying is that we need to think very carefully how are we going to deal with this. But right now we have to take care of a more pressing problem. Outside there is a woman waiting to join your commandos."

"My commandos?"

"Yes, General. I want you to order a group of your best men to seek Professor Federico S. Sánchez and place him under arrest. I am sure it is nothing, but the Americans believe that he has placed a bomb somewhere. Find him! In half an hour I will be leaving for my meeting with President Conover. After that, we will join the rest of the presidents in the concert at Bellas Artes. I expect you to be back here tonight after the concert. Then we will plan what are we going to do about Molina."

"Yes, sir!", said the General. He saluted smartly, and left.

President Zedillo was left alone in his office. This was another test to his courage. If he failed, the future stability of México, the United States, and even the entire continent would be in danger.

He could not fail.

México City is in a valley at 2,240 meters (6, 720 feet) over the sea level, surrounded by a semicircular range of mountains of volcanic origin. On the southern part of the city there is the road to Cuernavaca, a city internationally famous for its wonderful year-round climate. Cuernavaca had been a choice site for weekend homes of wealthy Mexicans ever since Hernán Cortés built his own home there in. To travel there they had to cross one of the highest mountain ranges in México.

Between México City and Cuernavaca there are about 70 kilometers. At about half way, traveling on the old road, there is a lookout point known as *El Mirador*. From this lookout point the entire city can be seen. *El Mirador* is a full one thousand meters higher than the city and is nothing more than a small rest area cut out from the mountain, a slice taken out of the rock that is also a treacherous drop from which many cars and people have fallen over the years.

Beside the lookout point, there is another hill, yet some 200 meters higher than the road.

That was the place that Don Federico had chosen to build his home many years before, when on a trip to Cuernavaca he found that from the top of the that hill he could have an unobstructed view of the entire city. He paid several of his employees to walk up and down the road until they found the owners of the hill. The landholders turned out to be peasants who tried to till the rocky land to plant corn and squeeze out a living from it. When the strangers offered to buy the land from them, they were only too happy to sell.

Once he had acquired the rights to the entire hill, some fifty thousand square meters, Don Francisco sent in the machinery needed to open up a road, and to level off the top of the hill. Once there was a flat surface on top, he sent in troops of bricklayers commanded by architects. In two years he had built his retirement home. His private paradise.

He named it precisely that.

Valhalla.

The Valhalla was, in the Nordic mythology, the place were slain heroes go to rest.

Tonight, his paradise was to become a shrine for the return of the gods.

From the enclosed terrace of his personal paradise, Don Federico made the last preparations. The city extended way down below in an ocean of lights that seemed to be never ending. Red lines and white sparkles bathed the city in a multitude of colored waves. They seemed to vibrate in anticipation of what was about to happen. Millions of lights coming from millions of sources; cars, homes, streets, that seemed to combine into a single magnificent work of shining points. He, however, was looking for only one; the blinking light on top of the *Torre Latinoamericana* that had been placed there to warn the planes of its presence. Much like a lighthouse that guided lost ships in centuries gone, tonight the blinking light would serve a higher purpose.

Moving slowly, but firmly, the Don Federico opened up electronically the windows of his terrace. The cold wind of the night rushed in and made him shiver. He placed a narrow metal box about half a meter long on the metal frame of one of the windows, and held it in place with metal clamps. It was a laser-light lamp. He turned it on and a green ray was faintly visible after a moment. Don Federico pointed the lamp to the ground below, and a dot appeared on the grass. With the help of the viewfinder on top of the metal casing, he locked the green ray on the strobe light fifteen miles away.

He looked at his watch; 8:05 p.m.

The concert was about to begin.

All presidents must be inside Bellas Artes by now.

Don Federico sat on a chair by the missile.

He patted his Valkiria affectionately.

He poured some white liquid into a glass, and then a special red wine he had ordered specially from Germany for the occasion. He turned on the Valkiries, by Richard Wagner.

According to the German folklore, the Valkiries were the maidens of dead. They were fierce and fearless women who rode on a horseback to the battlefields and chose those who were to die, and brought the heroes back to Valhalla. In Richard Wagner's opera the

best one of the Valkiries is a woman named Brunhild. She is a mighty warrior who defies the god Wotan to help the lovers Siegmund and Sieglind. Wotan punishes her by making her fall asleep on a mountain top surrounded by fire, from which she is rescued by Siegrfried. Through some magic crafts he forgets her, and for this unfaithfulness she brings about his death, her own death on his pyre and the burning of Valhalla.

Frederick Schmidt Sánchez was ready.

He opened up a small door on the side of the missile. There was a lighted numeric keyboard. Moving carefully, he punched in the firing code. He then set the timer for fifteen minutes, so the missile would get to Bellas Artes right after the start of the last act, when Brunhilde brings down the destruction.

He then turned up the volume on the music.

He concentrated on the music and on the world of his mind, populated by ghosts of people long dead. All of his loved ones had died so long ago he barely remembered their faces, but the burning in his heart remind the same.

He would be joining them in a only few more minutes. He had prepared everything meticulously. When the missile left on its flight of death, he was going to drink his wine laced with a few drops of cianide and a narcotic. He was going to share their death. Then he was going to start the fire. The explosive charges were set all around his Valhalla. By the end of the night there would be nothing left of this giant, magnificent pyre he had constructed for himself and for his beloved Ute.

He had to recreate the myth so as to bring it back to life.

He was creating the conditions for the return of the gods.

At long last.

Melissa traveled with General Abrego on the military convoy. There was a green painted truck ahead, and another two were following them. General Abrego had decided not to waste time, and instead of sending his men alone, he led the charge. But, just in case, he brought with him an entire battalion of soldiers.

As they traveled, Melissa kept looking nervously out the window because the road seemed narrower the higher they got. And they went up the mountain...and up...and up.

“How high are we, General?”

“More than 3,000 meters over sea level,” he said, curtly.

She saw that the city at times seemed to be behind, and then beside them because of the curves. It wasn't until the trucks stopped that she realized that the huge city was everywhere.

For a moment she was awed and distracted by the sight of the largest city in the world. The air in the mountain was extremely light and pure, cool and clean. Melissa breathed deeply, filling her lungs and savoring the sweetness of the atmosphere that was so different from the one in the city below, dirty, hot, and polluted.

Then, the trouble began.

When the soldiers descended from the trucks, and spread in fighting units along the volcanic stone wall that surrounded the entrance to the house, from somewhere inside the yard came a search light and the gunfire started.

The soldiers hit the ground and returned the fire.

“Kill the light!” shouted General Abrego. He pushed Melissa down on the ground while he stood bravely, with an automatic .45 in his hand. He shot at the search light, but it was too far away for his handgun. His men concentrated fire from their rifles on the spot and the light went out under a barrage.

“Move in!”, ordered the General.

The soldiers began to climb the wall. There was more bursts of rifle fire and handguns, followed then by the distinctive sound of Uzis and shotguns. Three soldiers fell by the General, who didn't flinch.

Melissa tried to get up from the floor, but the General pushed her back.

“You stay there, little girl. This is man’s job”, he said.

“Like hell it is”, she murmured.

Several soldiers secured the entrance gate, and opened it by shooting out the chains wrapped around it. The rest of the battalion moved into the compound under the cover of darkness.

When General Abrego advanced inside, Melissa got up and grabbed a rifle from a fallen soldier. Bending over she ran into the compound behind the General. Before he could catch her, she turned to her left and ran through the trees towards the back of the house while the soldiers concentrated on the resistance encountered at the front.

She went around a large structure, and then into a second garden. It was a rose garden and running through it her legs were sliced by the thorns, but she didn’t even feel the cuts. The gunfire was behind her now, and she heard another faint sound. It was the sound of music. She ran through the roses towards the sound.

The main house was an imposing building that was divided in two parts. On the front it was a long structure, rectangular in shape. Then there was an arcade and in the back there was a huge wall covered with vines. The wall supported a long terrace enclosed by windows.

The music was coming from inside.

She hung the rifle on her shoulder and began to climb the wall with the help of the vines that covered it. They were thorny too, so by the time she reached the terrace her hands and face were bleeding from tiny cuts that smarted. She heaved herself up to grab to edge of the window, and found herself staring into the large conic point of the missile.

The level of the sound from the music inside the room was deafening.

She jumped into the room and that’s when she saw the old man. He seemed to be asleep sitting on a chair by the missile. His hand held

an empty glass. He looked comfortable, as if he were dreaming. On the table beside him there was a bottle of wine, and a remote control.

She touched the missile with trembling fingers and her blood left a trace of red on the white paint. It was a large weapon, over six feet long and two feet wide. On the tail protruded small wings, like fins on a fish.

She turned off the music with the remote control. The silence was heavy for a moment, broken only by the muffled sounds of cross fire that seemed to come from far away. They diminished in intensity and frequency until there was only sporadic shots.

Then she saw the timer flashing on the weapon. She watched, frozen in a sudden attack of panic, as the seconds changed.

5:07

5:06

5:05

5:04

5:03

5:02

5:01

5:00

4:59

4:58

4:57

Then she forced herself to snap out of it.

She turned around and she shook the old man.

“Wake up! Damn you, wake up!”, she screamed. She kept on shaking him and slapping his face. He had to wake up. He had to turn off the damn machine!

4:20

4:19

4:18

The old man opened his eyes for an instant.

“Ute!”, he said happily, and he died.

Frantically, Melissa unhooked the cellphone from her belt and dialed the only person who could help her now.

4:10

4:09

4:08

4:07

4:06

4:05

4:04

“Come on, answer the phone!”, she shouted when Bob failed to answer on the first ring.

“What is it?”, he responded.

She explained as fast as she could.

“I am standing in front of a dead man and a missile ready to go off. It has four minutes before it fires. You need to evacuate everybody!”

“There is no time! What kind of a missile is?”

She described it the best she could.

“It measures about six feet long, and it is mounted on a metal rail. It is white, and it has fin-tails in the back!”

“Is it ours?”

3:49

“I don’t know...wait! Yes! It is!”, she screamed as she found the markings of the United States Army.

“Look for a compartment on the left side.”

She did, moving as fast as she could.

3:25

3:24

3:23

“Found it”

“Change the time of firing.”

Melissa was already punching buttons.

“It’s no use! The timer won’t work.”

2:45

“It has a code! Try to jam it!”

Melissa looked for a metal bar or something heavy that she could use to jam or break the electronic mechanism, and in that moment she saw the laser-lamp attached to the window sill.

“There is a laser light on the window. I think it is the guiding system.”

“Turn it off!”

She ran to it.

1:30

1:29

1:28

1:27

“IT IS OFF!”

“The target is already locked! Don’t move the lamp and tell me what you see through the viewfinder.”

“I...I don’t see...wait, a light, a blinking light. It is on top of a very tall building. Skinny. Like a skyscraper from New York.”

“*La Torre Latinoamericana!* It’s got to be! That’s got to be it!”, Bob shouted.

At that moment there was click, then a loud noise. Sparks flew from the tail of the missile. It ignited. The entire house seemed to rumble and shake.

“IT IS ABOUT TO FIRE!”, she shouted right when the roar became overpowering. Desperately, driven by the rage and the feeling of impotence that had tensed her body like a coiled spring, without thinking, she dropped the phone and began hitting the missile with both hands as she pushed it to try to topple it and stop it, but it was useless.

The missile took off.

The fin of the missile caught on her jacket and dragged her and then the force of the thrust flew her out of the window. She fell the three floors to the ground cursing and screaming. She landed on the bed of roses. Melissa hit her head and stayed there like a broken doll.

The explosives planted around the residence started immediately after the missile launched. The first one blew the entire terrace away. The rest of the detonations, in a quick sequence, destroyed the entire house.

Then the fire started.

When Bob heard the roar he knew. He ran as fast as he could across the street to the *Torre Latinoamericana*, which was the skyscraper diagonally across the street from *Bellas Artes*.

He knew that he had but a few minutes left.

A group of Secret Service agents, both American and Mexican, who had seen him take off, ran after him.

“What is it?”, they yelled at him.

Bob didn’t answer.

He was too busy seeking a way to stop the missile.

He knew that the guiding system of the missile was not radar based, not a heat seeking device. It was laser guided. The laser light had pointed to the target. Since the guiding system of the missile had its mark already locked, the only possible solution now was to *hide* the target. To make it disappear. But it was too late now to run up to the roof of the building and turn off the strobe light. Then, though the corner of his eye, he saw that on the sidewalk of the avenue there was a metal lamppost, instead of the usual one made out of concrete. He immediately recalled what the metal posts were used for. They supported high-tension wires.

“The transformer! Shoot the transformer!”, he shouted, running down the avenue looking for a transformer up in the posts.

When he found it, he started shooting at it. The other guards did the same, even though they didn’t know why. For a moment

nothing happened. Then sparks flew, there was a flash of light, and some smoke came out of the transformer. Several buildings and entire blocks of the city went dark.

The lights of the Torre stayed on!

Bob felt a terrifying pain in his chest. Now he could hear the faint whistle of the missile approaching. The guards ran in opposite directions along the avenue. Short of breath, Bob Allen ran up behind one of the Mexican guards, a young man who moved fast and easily. Immediately they found another transformer up a post, and both emptied their guns into it. A cascade of sparks fell on their heads.

Then, just as the noise in the sky increased, the lights in the *Torre Latinoamericana* went out gracefully from the bottom up in a fireworks of electricity.

Bob clutched his chest and heard the missile pass them by.

He fell on the asphalt.

Lying there, unable to breath, he watched the white tail of smoke left by the missile moving across the dark sky. He didn't have the strength to smile.

He was soon surrounded by the other guards.

After a few minutes of darkness, the backup lights for the *Torre Latinoamericana* came on.

Inside *Bellas Artes*, Placido Domingo was receiving the last standing ovation of his career.

The missile, having lost its locked target, kept on flying straight until it ran out of gas some thirty miles outside the city, and fell onto a field of corn where a cow was sleeping. The canister with the poison gas split open, and the cow died. The gas stayed at the ground level for four more hours, like a thick cream floating in coffee, and it killed every living being that flew by or walked onto the field.

Boris would have been proud.

Since the head of the rocket didn't explode, it was recovered the following morning at 5:30 am by a team of experts sent by General Abrego. It was slightly damaged, but otherwise fine. It would be returned to the United States with the formal protest required by international protocol. Both countries promptly filed it in the '*forget me*' drawer.

A team of soldiers dressed in special suits cleaned up the field during the whole of the next week, and afterwards General Abrego felt compelled to send a couple of cows as a present to the farmer.

30

A day after President Conover left the country, Carmen Nuñez received an envelope delivered personally to her by a commercial carrier. This time, she never knew who sent it to her.

Inside, she found a series of documents, photos, and a detailed description of each one. It told very succinctly about the involvement of Armando Molina in the “*assassination attempt*” at the Auditorio. The documents proved beyond a doubt that he had staged the whole thing.

Carmen took a deep breath and sat down in her kitchen table to write a very extensive article. When she finished it was late. Again she went to talk to the night editor at the Reforma. She was surprised when he welcomed her with open arms. His hard face even tried to smile, but the grimace made him look uglier than before.

“Why haven’t you come back to see me before?”

“Well, I didn’t have anything to bring you”, she said, pointing to the folder she carried like a baby “Now I have this.”

“We will talk about it, but let me ask you this first. Will you be willing to come to work for us?”

She was speechless for a moment.

“I have an opening right now, and I thought that maybe you would like to come aboard. The money is not much, but fair, and-”

“I accept”, she interrupted him.

“Don’t you want to know more about it?”

“You can tell me all about it later, *boss*, but right now we need to think about this”, she said. With a flourish she opened up the folder and placed it in front of the stern man.

The information was so rich, the documents supporting it so conclusive, the photos so clear, that the editor didn’t hesitate.

“Stop the presses”, he ordered on the phone.

“Again?”, said the chief of the printing plant. He was ready to roll.

“Yes. Isn’t it great?”, chuckled the editor.

Since the information was so extensive, the editor decided to divide it into a whole series lasting the entire week. They worked together for two hours on the first installment. At two thirty, the layout on the computer was ready for the presses.

When the paper came out next morning, the entire Mexican population seemed to hold its collective breath. For an entire week they rushed every morning to buy the newspaper, while the rest of the media could do nothing but follow their lead.

Armando Molina denied everything, of course, and called it a trick played by the opposition, but the evidence was so overwhelming that his denials only made matters worse. There were no criminal charges brought against him, but his maneuver was so evident that people was furious with him.

As easily as Armando Molina had become a hero, overnight he became an international joke.

If there is something that neither the Mexicans nor the Americans ever forgive, is to be played for fools.

When the Mexicans finally exhaled their collective breath four weeks later at the election booths, the results were awesome. Never in the history of México, not even when there had been no other candidate running but the official one, had the results been more decisive. For each vote in favor of Molina, ten were cast against him.

President Zedillo received Armando Molina the morning after the elections. Headlines in all types of media were announcing Molina's crushing defeat and the start of a new era in México.

"You don't expect me to accept those results, do you?" said Molina. He was waiting for General Bonilla to set out with their plan at any moment now. They had talked to each other the night before, and agreed that it was time to start rolling the tanks.

"Of course I do. It was the way the citizens of México voted. Whether you like it or not, is not my problem."

"It had to be a computer malfunction. I mean, those results *must* have been due to a computer breakdown, as in 1988. But there is still time, you know; we can fix it."

President Zedillo laughed.

"You will stop at nothing, will you?"

Molina misread the signals, and smiled himself.

"I knew you wouldn't hand over the presidency of México to those imbeciles", he said smugly.

President Zedillo smile disappeared.

"Of course I will. If I had any doubts, you have convinced me of the importance of having a real democratic process in our country. You have proven to me beyond any doubt that the absolute power the Mexican presidency has enjoyed for so long, has to end forever. This power gives us a tremendous potential to be mistaken without being challenged. That is what democracy means in the last instance: that the rulers of a country might make a mistake, but the people are able to correct that mistake though peaceful means."

"What are you talking about? What was your mistake?"

"*You* were. Choosing you was my gravest mistake. In the last few weeks I have come to understand that the greatest danger to our country is not the opposition parties, like I used to think, but the possibility that a monster like you arrives in power. And if by chance some other like you arrives, from now on the people will be able to throw him out of office without bloodshed. Since I cannot watch all other monsters like you, the citizens will."

“Why are you talking to me like this? I have always loved you like the elder brother I never had”, said Molina, feigning a wounded surprise.

“Stop the pretense, Armando. —President Zedillo said, and he threw a folder on top of his desk. — I know everything you did and everything you were planning to do. I know about General Bonilla, and the rest of it”, the President said, becoming enraged. “As of this moment, they have all being arrested by General Abrego.”

Armando Molina went pale. He tried to talk but his mouth was suddenly dry.

“For the sake of the country I am not throwing you in jail right now. But if you don’t leave the country within twenty-four hours, and stay out for at least 10 years, I will accuse you of treason. And you know that treason is the only crime punished by death in México.”

“Ernesto, I-”

“*Mister President*, to you.”

“Mister President, I would like to explain...”

“There is nothing to explain. Get out of here! And if I don’t receive confirmation of your immediate departure, I will arrest you myself.”

“I—”

“Get out!”, shouted the President so loudly, that his guards rushed in.

Armando Molina could barely walk out of Los Pinos by himself the way his legs trembled.

That same night, an announcement one paragraph long was distributed to all newspapers.

It did not make the front page.

Ex-Candidate Leaves México.

UP/México City

Ex-candidate to the presidency Armando Molina has decided to leave the country for some time, to allow the healing of wounds that might have been provoked by the recent election. The destination of the ex-candidate is not known. No return date has been set.

Melissa didn't want to wake up.

She was having a dream in which several of the happiest days of her life were combined into one single moment that she relived over and over in her mind. When consciousness threatened to snap her out of it, she willed herself back again and again into that soft place, nice and sweet, that was so full of joy.

The first one of those days that flowed through her mind took her to the time when, as a teenager, she had ridden her horse for hours on end through the woods near her house in the small town in Virginia where she grew up. It was a clean, sunny day, and the ground was wet after a recent shower. The earth smells were rich and plentiful and made her feel at home much in the way that the smell of a bakery wakes the same emotion in other people. For her, though, the fresh smell of the wet, fertile land in the forest was just as welcoming and fulfilling. This fertile scene combined with the images of the birth of her daughters as if they had been born out of that clean air, and she could hear their laughter multiplied in the echoes of her mind.

The last part of her dream was the day she had begun working as a Secret Service Agent. In her dream she didn't relive the actions of the day, but the emotions: the way that her heart beat had increased with excited anticipation as she drove to her first day on the job: the happiness she had felt when she sat at the space she would occupy, the

pride of being one of the few female agents working there, and the deep confidence she had in herself and her capacity. In her dream both days blurred into one where the images superimposed on each other in a bizarre way, but the images didn't matter. What mattered was that the emotions were pure and simple and that's what she didn't want to leave behind by waking up. She didn't want to wake up to her own personal reality of a broken marriage and a loveless life. She didn't want to wake up to her lonely nights in her apartment, after the girls were asleep, where she would sit for hours on end trying to find some meaning to it all. She didn't want to wake up to the fact that she had never really loved her ex-husband. That was the hardest part of it: she could handle falling out of love, perhaps, because that meant there had been an emotion to start with. But she couldn't handle not having loved at all.

Worst of all, she didn't want to wake up to face what she thought was her failure to protect the President of the United States.

She stayed in her coma for seven days, until the moment that, like an echo in her mind, she heard a voice.

It was the voice of a man she had known only for a short period of time, but that had somehow had insinuated himself into her life in such a way that now she felt ashamed of being asleep while he was talking to her. She wanted to talk to him. She wanted to share with him what she was feeling. She wanted to see his face and his eyes again.

So she woke up.

"Hi", she whispered.

Manny was reading aloud from a slim book. He was so startled by her voice that he dropped it.

"Hi yourself", he said, shyly.

She smiled at his nervousness.

"What were you reading?"

"T.S. Eliot", he said. He picked up the volume and showed to her. *Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock*, said the title.

"Nice." she said.

"My favorite poet", he mentioned.

“What are you doing here?”

“We had a date, remember?”

“No, we didn’t.”

“Of course we did. You just don’t remember”, he said with a picaresque smile. She laughed.

Then she went back to sleep again.

The next day they had their dinner date at the Hospital in Bethesda where she was being treated for her various injuries; she had broken her right leg and left arm, and scabs had begun to already form on the dozens of small cuts all over her body where thorns had sliced her skin. She asked the nurse to help her get ready, and when Manny arrived with Chinese food, she was looking more than nice for a woman under her circumstances: she looked great.

That morning she had found out from her boss what had happened to Bob Allen. Now as she told Manny, she cried unashamedly because Bob had been a good man and she was sorry he was gone. Manny looked at her silently. She liked the way that Manny respected her feelings and didn’t impose on her with his presence. His being there felt natural for her. It was as if the two of them had known each other for many years.

The next morning he left to go back to his classes in Gainesville, and they made another date: as soon as she left the hospital, she would go to Florida to spend the summer by the ocean. With him.

And it came to be so one month later. As soon as the casts were taken away from her arm and her leg, her mother drove her to the airport. The girls happily stayed with their grandmother,.

Manny drove from Gainesville as she flew directly into the city of Melbourne. He was there, waiting anxiously, when she was rolled off the airplane in a wheelchair pushed by an airline employee.

“Are you okay?”, Manny asked. She could see he was worried.

“Absolutely, but when they saw me walking with the crutches, they insisted I had to use this chair.”

“It’s for your convenience, ma’am”, said the flight attendant.

“And to avoid any lawsuits”, Melissa said with a smile.

“That, too”, said the attendant, smiling too.

Manny helped her to get up, and as Melissa leaned on his arm she realized it was the first time they had touched. Then, as they walked slowly out of the airport, their mutual attraction released such a tremendous amount of energy that people turned to look at them with smiles on their faces. They knew.

A couple of retired professors from the University of Florida, friends of Manny, owned a beach house that had been built many years earlier right on the ocean’s edge in Indialantic. Small, but beautifully kept, the house was open to the winds of the Atlantic Ocean. It had an open terrace, a small garden facing the sea, and a wood deck that was also the access to the beach.

“This is marvelous”, Melissa said, raising her face to the sun. Being in Washington year round, working all the time, made her forget how good the sun felt.

“And the best thing is that we can have it for an entire year. My friends are in Europe.”

“Can’t thank them enough.”

He showed her the house. It had two bedrooms, a nice kitchen, and a fresh living room which the wind coming from the beach passed through to keep the house cool.

When Manny placed her bags in the bedroom on the right, the one closest to the beach, Melissa felt a little disappointed. Even though she wasn’t ready to move their relationship into the next level, his action still felt like a small rejection. She knew she was being silly, but still...

At that moment, as if he were reading her mind, he turned to look into her eyes.

“I am going to be very honest with you. I desire you as I have never desired any other woman in my life. But I don’t want this to be just another adventure. I’ve had enough of them.”

He paused. Then, with the playful smile she had come to know, he said “However, please let me know when you are ready for something else”

She laughed and she had to turn her face away to stop herself from kissing him.

The days began to pass as they settled in a discreet routine. Every day when she woke up, Manny had been up already for hours because he liked to work in the early hours of morning. He would be at his computer when she came out of the bedroom. Then, after their respective showers, they would go out for breakfast at a nice Italian restaurant named Rocco's, where soon they were recognized and treated as old and favored clients.

Then they would come back to the house where they would lie under the sun for hours, walk on the cream colored sand of the beach and chase rose colored crabs, read a lot, and talk a lot. They talked about every conceivable subject in their minds and got into many arguments when they found they held contrary viewpoints on several subjects—the death penalty was one of those subjects— but even their disagreements had a quality of good faith. They learned that they respected each other, and the world outside became kind of irrelevant. It didn't matter what they said: what mattered was that they were together.

Her body and her mind healed very quickly under those conditions. Soon, she was ready for more of everything.

Manny had been tremendously respectful of her privacy, and had behaved so much a gentleman that she began to believe he didn't desire her anymore. She began to worry that they were becoming too much like good friends, but then she noticed the way he looked at her when she came out of the house with her swimsuit on, a black and gold bikini, and she knew she had nothing to fear in that area. He was just keeping true to his word. And many times, while she lay down under the blinding sun on the beach and she watched the pelicans diving into the waves for food, she wanted him to hold her and to kiss her but then she knew that it wasn't the right moment. Not yet, anyway.

Then the Fourth of July arrived and other tourists like them set up fireworks all along the beach. Manny and Melissa sat on the open deck and watched the spectacle that was echoed up and down the coast. She turned on the television to hear the Boston Pops rendition

of the 1812 Overture and when the cannons went off, she moved close and she kissed Manny fully on the mouth. They kissed for a long time as all around them the fireworks flew, screamed, exploded in multicolored balls. All the time she felt his heat and his passion and she replicated it in kind and she finally abandoned herself to the same intense feelings.

They made love for the first time right there, in the garden of the beach house under the clear July sky lit by the celebration. They took off the few clothes they had on and allowed their bodies to make their own definitions and rules. There was nothing out of place in their caresses, or the way their skin came together. They moved in unison as if the waves pounding a few meters away were also the pounding of their own hearts. Her skin was hot and soft, and his was hard and rough, but the desire they had felt for each other since the first day had built into an uncontrollable passion that moved through their bodies and made them fuse into a single being.

After that she had no more doubts.

She knew she had found a new home for her heart.

THE END

Twisted Gods

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