

BYRON BALES

RISE

VAQUERO



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By Byron Bales

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For information, request through author@byronbales.com

Acknowledgement

Thanks as always to my Editor, Richard Baker.

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Glossary

abogado (*lawyer/attorney*)

arroyo (*gully*)

ave (*bird*)

baño (*bathroom*)

bello (*beautiful*)

buenas tardes (*good afternoon*)

buenos días (*good morning*)

burro (*mule*)

busco (*look for/search/seek*)

café negro (*black coffee*)

calle (*street*)

gracias (*thank you*)

hermana (*sister*)

hola (*hello*)

hombre (*man*)

huevos rancheros (*eggs in chili/tomato sauce*)

jefe (*boss*)

lavandera (*lauderer*)

loco (*crazy*)

lo siento (*sorry*)

mañana (*morning/tomorrow*)

marimacho (*butch woman*)

marimacha (*tomboy*)

mesquite (*spiny shrubs*)

nada (*nothing*)

norte (*north*)

paraguas (*umbrella*)

pare (*stop*)

patrón (*landowner/man of influence*)

peon (*peasant*)

pequeño (*little/small*)

por favor (please)

puta (whore)

querida (dear/darling)

ramada (covering of branches)

ranchero (ranch worker)

sargento (sergeant)

tamale (meat wrapped in a tortilla)

teniente (lieutenant)

tía (aunt)

tío (uncle)

vaquero (cowboy)

zorro (fox)

Prologue

Nogales, New Mexico

Hercules sniffed the crate, whined, backed away, and shook his head from side to side. He turned in circles, barking with authority, got his handler's attention. Officer Charlie Barrera, US Customs Service, checking a trucker's documentation further up the line, turned and studied Hercules. His dog had found something. Any good dog-handler knew his animal's traits, but he'd never seen this behavior before. It wasn't drugs or explosives; when Hercules found those, his ears and tail went down. This was something different.

Barrera broke from the trucker, walked down the canyon of giant tractor-trailers, and approached an old pickup truck tucked between two huge semis lined up to cross into the States. He looked around for the driver of the pickup, but no one identified themselves with the vehicle. He checked the vehicle's plate and the crate's destination on the shipping order tacked to it: The Office Source, Los Angeles. The origin of the crate was from some place called Ascension, in Chihuahua State, Mexico.

As Barrera got closer, the stench emanating from the crate almost bowled him over. "Whoaa-ho." He gagged, backed away, fought an impulse to vomit. There was little question of what was inside the crate, but how in hell did a dead animal get inside the damn thing? Holding his handkerchief to his face, he climbed up on the flatbed, edged around the shipment, looking for damage, some sign of where an animal had entered. Nothing. The crate was well-constructed, about three feet square, its wooden slats and supporting planks neatly hammered into place. Maybe there was a hole in the bottom. He shoved against it to gauge its weight, then kicked it. It budged only a little, and he guessed it weighed maybe 300 pounds. They would X-ray it – the whole truck for that matter – but this thing would need to be opened in any event. He called for his supervisor at the head of the line to come back and have a look-see, bring one of the other guys and a crowbar with him.

Hercules moved off to the side, sat in the shade under the station building's eaves, panting in the 110-degree heat pounding down on this strip of desert. He watched as more Customs agents walked down the line, and knew that Charlie would be skipping his lunch today. Any well-trained police dog knew his handler's traits.

Chapter 1

Long Island, New York

Roth stepped into the elevator, a goombah either side of him. The melodious voice announced, “Going up,” then called the floors as the elevator ascended. This was one of these so-called ‘intelligent buildings,’ everything operated by computer.

On the eighth floor, he stepped out and the goombahs followed. Giants these guys were. Roth stood there for a second, turned and stepped back into the elevator. Tank and House made a stupid face at each other, followed him back into the car.

“Damn, ain’t that beautiful,” Roth said.

“What’s that, Mr. Black?” Tank asked. For today, Roth’s name was Mr. Black to these guys.

“Her voice. The woman’s voice.” He punched the button for the first floor, and as the elevator doors closed, her voice repeated, “Going down.”

Roth looked over his shoulder at Tank, over his other shoulder at House. They didn’t get it.

When the elevator stopped on the fifth floor, a shapely gal in her mid-twenties got on, turned around and stood facing forward. Tank and House, hands folded in front them, stood back on either side of Roth, and the trio eyed her from brunette bob down to spiked heels.

As the elevator door closed, the voice repeated, “Going down.” On the first floor, they followed the woman outside, but Roth stopped on the steps at the entrance, lit up a cigarette.

Tank and House hung close by, kept their poses, like ushers at a wedding. Maybe a funeral. Finally, House asked, “Shouldn’t we be getting to the meeting, Mr. Black?”

These guys didn’t smoke. Probably didn’t drink. When he’d met them yesterday in Grassi’s restaurant, they’d been wearing workout shirts from Gold’s Gym. They weren’t called Tank and House for nothing.

“I want to be sure you guys got it straight. Know what to do.”

Sure, they said, nodding at Roth, and then at each other like dashboard ornaments. “Yeah, we got it,” House added.

“We done this before, Mr. Black,” Tank put in.

Roth kept his eyes on Tank. If there was going to be trouble, it would be from him. Had wise-ass written all over him. Roth pulled on his cigarette, having dreaded this moment.

The other day, he’d gotten a call from Giovetti Grassi. Or ‘Don Giovetti’ as the greaseball preferred being addressed. Grassi had heard that Roth was in town, wanted to see him. Wanted Roth to pay a social call, he’d said.

Roth had met Grassi ten years ago. Alfonzo Ponzi, one of Grassi's legions of nephews, had worked for Roth back then. Working undercover at JFK as a baggage-handler. There'd been a pilferage problem at one of the terminals, and Roth's investigative firm, Premier Services, had been contracted to stop the bleeding. The newspapers were having a field day with the revelation that as much as three percent of luggage at JFK was being pilfered or outright stolen; it took only a second and a razor to slash open a soft-cover suitcase, or a flathead screwdriver to pop open a lock. Premier had sent in undercover investigators posing as baggage-handlers. The handlers were unionized, and Roth had recruited young Italians, guys with clean records, so their fingerprints would clear with the Division of Licensing Services up in Albany. Then Premier trained them and sent them in undercover to identify the guilty. That they were Italian meant few questions would be asked about their non-union affiliations because the union was run by the Italians. But like everyone else, they joined up on their first day at work, and had to start paying dues.

In the end, the investigation had netted a dozen guys, and the Queens County District Attorney had gotten half as many prosecutions. Didn't matter; six months later, that terminal was again rife with theft. You wanna fly into JFK? A missing bag or suitcase was the price you paid. This was New Jack City, Jack. After a passenger lost his luggage and ended up holding a handle minus a suitcase on the sidewalk outside the terminal, vultures cleverly disguised as taxi-drivers got their shot at him. The usual fare into New York City ran about 45 bucks then. But the first-time visitor usually paid seventy. And the Japanese visitor paid three or four times that; those dumb fucks being accustomed to paying top dollar, compliments of a feudal, multi-tiered system of middlemen ingrained in their culture.

After Premier had wrapped up that assignment, Al had asked Roth to meet his uncle Giovetti. Thanks, but no thanks. Roth refused. PIs meeting with meatballs who regularly featured in the newspapers wasn't good for business.

But they'd met anyhow. He'd been on a surveillance in Bensonhurst with Alfonso, tailing a worker's-comp scammer. When they broke for lunch one day, Alfonzo had suggested a pizza joint on 4th Avenue. As they were munching down slices, Don Giovetti just happened to walk in. Just happened to own the place. Surprise, surprise.

Grassi had invited him for dinner that evening at one of his seafood joints, thanked him for getting his nephew work, said he was indebted to Roth. So much horseshit. What Grassi needed was someone who could think. So, Roth had done a few collections for him. But he'd refused to do locate work. Your average Brooklyn-variety goombah couldn't find a toilet seat in his own home, so if Roth had located people, he'd likely read their obituaries the next morning—in the unlikely event the body was even found.

The collection work had been profitable; ten grand a throw. Tax-free. Of course, tax-free; listing 'extortion services' on his income-tax filings might have attracted attention. PIs in New York State weren't permitted to engage in collection work. For obvious reasons: PIs carried pistols, and for extortion Roth could lose his PI license and pistol permit, maybe even do time. But worse things could happen if a collection turned ugly; some people had a way of resenting threats, others had a way of getting hurt. Bad hurt.

Grassi liked Roth. Said he did, anyhow; probably aimed at making Roth so grateful that he could just shit. But what Grassi really liked was having his business conducted neat and clean, something his apes couldn't guarantee.

Ten years was a long time ago, and Roth hadn't done a collection since then, ever since he began running on international claim itineraries and finally settling in Bangkok, and opening an office there. He'd considered spots throughout Asia in which to base his Asian operation, from North to South: Seoul, Tokyo, Taipei, Hong Kong, Manila, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, and down to Singapore. Forget Jakarta. Forget anyplace in China or Vietnam. He'd settled on Bangkok for many factors, chiefly because at the time Premier was were doing a lot of work in Hong Kong, Pakistan and the Philippines, three hours by air to any of these destinations from the Big Mango. He left his next senior partner, Nina, to handle the New York office.

But Roth visited the States once, twice a year, did some marketing, glad-handing clients so they wouldn't forget him. Had to keep contacts up, let 'em know he was still involved with the business.

Grassi had called him yesterday, heard he was in town, asked to see him. Say hello, have dinner, all that happy horseshit. In two days, Roth was scheduled to fly to Bangkok via LA, where he'd stop over, assess the feasibility of opening an office out there. He'd told that to Grassi.

"Won't take but an hour of your time, Mike," the don had promised. "Honest to God. Just a little collection from a real scumbag."

"Can't your guys handle it? What do you pay them for?"

"This I gotta ask myself, Mike. This I gotta ask myself. These guys are so fuckin' dumb, you wouldn't believe it."

Roth believed it. "I just haven't got time, Don Giovetti. I leave day after tomorrow, and I'd need time to check the guy's finances, see what he owns—"

"Already done, Mike. See, you learned me things. I'm even calling you from a pay phone. One I never use, 'cause everybody's listening in these days, you know what I mean. Anyhow, this scumbag's got a home out in Westbury the likes you never seen before. Worth maybe two mil. Unencumbered. I got the transfer papers all drawn up and everything. Even set up a meet with the guy for you. Day after

tomorrow, at noon. Your plane ain't until four in the p.m. See, I checked it for you, knew what you'd need."

Someone at Roth's office had been running their mouth. Just because they recognized Grassi's name when he called was no reason to gab about Roth's schedule. Nina wouldn't have said anything. Not to Grassi, that's for sure. It was that new gal at the reception desk, Veronica. Trying to be helpful. She needed a talking-to, had to understand that information and schedules concerning confidential investigators were, after all, confidential. Duh!

One of Grassi's businesses was olive-oil import and export. It was like every mob wannabe had an olive-oil business since Mario Puzo wrote *The Godfather*. Importing olive oil conveyed that an Italian was a wise-guy, a made man. Grassi wasn't Mafia. Wasn't made and never would be, because he wasn't Sicilian. His family came from somewhere around Bari. Didn't much matter, did it? A thug was a thug; never mind his pedigree.

"When I see you tomorrow, you meet my guys and I'll tell you a story," Grassi said. "'Bout what happened last year. That's why you gotta help me, Mike. I need you on this. Honest to God. For old times sake, Mike."

So they'd met yesterday in one of Grassi's restaurants in Sheepshead Bay. Roth entered the place just before 11:00 a.m. He stopped inside the door, turned and looked across the street, checked out the cars parked along both sides of the avenue, studying any vans or small closed trucks. Was it likely the Feds rented an apartment facing the avenue? Maybe so; there were Wop cops as well as Wop thugs. Plus the Feds liked to hang out around places like Grassi's, film who went in, who came out. But if Grassi was under surveillance, it was unlikely that the law had this place wired. These days, most of the spaghetti joints swept their premises monthly for bugs and taps. It was the cost of doing business for the likes of Grassi, and a convenience he boasted about to their regular clients; a guy could talk freely in his places. 'Don't worry 'bout it,' was his favorite mantra, another hymn picked up from Hollywood. Even if customers had nothing illegal to talk about, it gave people a warm, cozy feeling, he said.

The list of wannabe crime figures was short these days. Organized crime had gotten its ass kicked by RICO, the anti-organized-crime racketeering statute that gave repeat offenders long vacations in exclusive upstate gated communities—those places where guards stood atop very high walls. The big bosses were all doing time—long stretches. Still, the wannabes hung on, even if Italian OC was in recession. With American criminal evolution, a Russian migrant might complain that it was time he got his chance. Move over, you Hebes, Micks, Wops, and Jive Asses. The same for you Chinks. You had your turn at the trough, now Ivan's here. Give your new immigrant bro' a shot at fame and fortune, maybe infamy and misfortune, an equal opportunity to get sent up for life, maybe get his head blown

off.

Grassi was sitting at a large circular table in the back of the place. He was already eating—eggplant Parmesan, vegetables on the side, and a red wine. Tank and House sat at the bar, slurping down Cokes. They eyed Roth as he entered, sizing him up.

Tank stood up, stepped in front of Roth. “Can I help you, mister?”

Roth pointed to Grassi.

Tank stepped forward, turned Roth around, ran his hands over him. “Hey, he’s carrying, Don Giovetti.”

“Don’t worry ’bout it,” Grassi managed through a mouthful of pasta, and with his fork waved Roth back to his table.

Tank exchanged glances with House, stepped out of Roth’s way, and they resumed their vigil atop their stools. A couple of dunces. Roth walked to Grassi’s table, sat down.

“Lo, Mike. Let me introduce youse guys.” He beckoned Tank and House to his table. They stood, adjusted their shoulders, looked around importantly, even though the joint was empty except for the bartender and a cook in the back.

They came strutting back, not too fast, like they didn’t hustle for anyone, House with a habit of working his shoulders. They stood by the table, respectful, hands folded in front of them.

“Dis is Mr....” Grassi raised his eyebrows at Roth.

“Mr. Black,” Roth said, tired-like. He looked at the guys, nodded.

They nodded back. “Nice to meetcha, Mr. Black,” Tank said.

“Youse guys will be working with him tomorra,” Grassi said. “You’ll be doin’ like he tells you.” He gave a stern look to his pair of ogres. “Youse two clear on that?”

Tank and House nodded, and Grassi dismissed them with a wave of his fork. House worked his shoulders again, and they did their strut back to their stools, out of hearing range. Any more exaggeration in their gait and you’d have to call it a Harlem shuffle.

Roth turned to Grassi, raised an eyebrow.

“Ah, they just came from the gym, Mike,” he said by way of explaining their workout clothes. “But they’re sharp dressers. You’ll see tomorrow. Beautiful guys.” He dug into his eggplant. “I understand from Al that you’re doin’ a lot of work for the insurance companies these days.”

Roth said nothing, waited for Grassi.

“International, Al tells me.”

Roth shrugged. He wasn’t going to tell Giovetti a fucking thing; might make the fucker start thinking up a new scam.

Grassi chewed his food, didn't look at Roth. "So, uh, why's an insurance dick carryin', Mike?"

"I always carry when I'm dealin' with Wops."

The Italian shot him a hard look. "Ain't respectful, Mike. Like you don't trust me."

Roth shrugged.

"Tell me somethin' like you carry because it's all these friggin' niggers on the street these days that you gotta worry about."

"Okay. I carry because it's all these friggin' niggers on the street these days that you gotta worry about."

Grassi let it pass. "My guys. They look good, but they ain't too smart, Mike. That's why I need you to handle this. Show 'em the way." He stuffed a fork with a wad of pasta wrapped around it into his mouth, held up his other hand as a sign for Roth to wait until he got it down. He swallowed hard, snapped his fingers to get the bartender's attention, made a motion to the table; his way of asking if Roth wanted something. Roth waved it away.

"So, what happened last year, you ask?"

Roth hadn't asked, but that didn't stop Grassi.

He pointed his fork towards the bar. "Them was the clowns dropped that financier out of his window Last year. Guy named—"

"No names, Don Giovetti." There was no way that Roth might let himself become an accessory after the fact.

Grassi eyed Roth, shrugged. "Anyways, they'd gone to collect my money from this fuckin' guy what tried to stiff me. Somewhere in the process, they had him by his feet, dangling his Hebe ass outta da window. Fifth floor. But his secretary was also in the office, starts screaming bloody murder, and scratching at the locked door, tryin' to get the fuck out. These bums run to grab her, you know, to shut her up, to calm her down. Then they look at each other like a coupla fucking dummies. If they both got her, who got a hold of da guy hangin' outta da window? Catch my drift?"

Roth looked down, rubbed his eyes, kept his hand in front of his face. If he started laughing, he'd never stop. These new bums were no brighter than the last crop. Stupidity was a prerequisite for their jobs.

Grassi stuffed some steamed broccoli in his mouth, talked through it. "Seems that the fuckin' guy couldn't fly. Well, 'course the fuckin' newspapers had a jamboree. We had to shut the secretary up. Cost a pretty penny. Condo down in Miami. Coulda' just thrown her out the window, too. But we ain't that kind. Don't hurt no innocent people. 'Sides, da broad was so fuckin' scared, she lost her voice. No shit, she actually couldn't talk. Nuthin' came out when she opened her mouth." He washed down the

broccoli with his wine. "So whaddya need?"

"Twenty thousand," Roth said.

"I was thinkin' fifteen," Grassi returned.

"You said something about 'for old times sake'?"

Grassi shrugged. "What else?"

"The two goombahs will do." He nodded towards the bar.

"We don't like that word, Mike." Grassi pointed to the bar. "Sherman—'Tank'—is my nephew by marriage. Good Italian girls don't marry their own kind these days. Sherman's only part Italian, like he ate a pizza once, and that makes him Italian, already. But he always ran with the Italian kids here 'bouts. Anyhow, he was firing on Louise. That's my wife's niece. Well, her fatha—that's my wife's brotha—comes to me, says, hey, Don Giovetti, can't you do something to keep this Waspy fuck, Sherman, from marryin' my Louise?" So I sent two guys out to talk to him, to change his mind about marryin' Louise, you know. But guess what?" Grassi bumped Roth's elbow. "Tank puts 'em both in the hospital. I woulda' sent more after him, but Louise got word, and I'd never hear the end if we whacked Tank. 'Sides, Tank's the kinda guy could be useful. So they got married and I put him to work in the business. End of story; they live happily ever after, right...? Wrong. Now, Louise calls me every other day, cursing at me. Me? Her uncle and her kid's godfather. Tellin' me I shoulda' put the bum down, after all. He's fuckin' around on her, she says. Popping every broad in Brooklyn. Nigger bitches included. Even balling her girlfriends." Grassi chuckled, chewed away.

"But I can't whack him now. He's family, ya know? And we don't mix into man and wife bullshit. She wanted him—she got him; gonna have to live with him, unless she takes him out herself. And I think one of 'em will kill the other some day. Romantic, huh?" Grassi laughed so hard, his stuffed mouth threatened to choke him. He gagged, coughed, hacked, finally cleared his throat. He slurped more wine, then got down to business.

The deadbeat on Grassi's mind was a real-estate developer out in Suffolk County. He'd pay up, Grassi assured Roth. Sure, Roth thought; the guy wouldn't want it known that he'd dealt with organized crime, or his competition might call his next housing development Goodfella Estates.

The guy had borrowed 500,000 dollars last month. Cash. No questions asked. With a vigorish of ten percent per week until the debt was paid.

He'd made his first payment of 50,000 on time, but his second installment had been three days late, and now his third payment was overdue by a week.

Grassi handed Roth a sales contract for the guy's home in Westbury, a place easily three million.

"So, we talked yesterday on the phone and the fuckin' prick thinks he can just give me back

400,000 when he gets around to it. But he knew the terms; he's behind on the vig and still owes me the half mil."

The deadbeat, a guy named Williams, knew the terms when he accepted the money. He'd run a tract housing development over budget, was overextended with the banks, needed fast cash, but was going back on his handshake with Grassi. Dumb move. Grassi wasn't Citibank.

Grassi's unwritten terms were simple: either Williams repay 700,000 by the end of the month or he'd lose his home. The 700,000 was for additional interest until the end of the month. Roth's job was to make sure he signed the transfer deed.

"See?" Grassi said. "All nice and legal. Just like you learned me, Mike." He handed Roth an envelope with 20,000 in it. Roth's fee. He'd had it prepared all along, just wanted to quibble, then show how magnanimous he could be. Grassi shrugged with exaggerated nonchalance. "That's for you, Mike. Inflation." He took another slurp of wine. "Don't worry 'bout it," he added. As though Roth was worrying.

Roth told Grassi to have Tank bring him the papers tomorrow afternoon in an attaché case, since he had to catch a plane right after meeting with Williams. He got up and they shook hands. Roth walked over to the bar, told the guys where to meet tomorrow morning. He looked them over, stared them down in turn, letting them know who was in charge. Tank looked part Italian, maybe a 'look' he tried for. But House was maybe Ukrainian, maybe Slovakian.

He took Tank by the arm, pulled him off to the side. The guy's arm was thicker than Roth's leg.

"Tank. This is my movie. You got that?"

"Whaddya mean?"

"I'm the director and I'm the star. You clear on that?"

"Uh, yeah, sure, Mr. Black."

"You do what I tell you, when I tell you. Right?"

"Sure."

"Good man." He slapped Tank's shoulder, friendly-like. Like slapping a brick wall. He left the restaurant, just knowing he was going to have trouble with Tank. The only muscle the guy never exercised was in his head.

Chapter 2

Roth took the last hit on his cigarette, flipped the butt into the bushes next to the stone steps.

“Hey,” Tank inquired. “You really a PI, Mr. Black?”

Roth didn’t want these Brooklyn bowling balls knowing a goddamn thing about him, but Grassi talked too much. He nodded, thinking yeah, I’m a PI—a private fucking imbecile, for knowing the likes of you guys. He picked up his attaché case, walked back into the building. The bookends followed.

On the eighth floor, Williams’ office was at the end of the hall. The trio stood outside for a minute, and at exactly noon, entered the office. An attractive secretary seated behind a reception desk looked up, flashed a smile.

“Mr. Williams,” Roth asked polite-like.

“He’s in a meeting, sir.” She nodded towards a conference room, whose door was closed. “If you gentlemen will just have a seat.”

Noon was noon. It was an obvious delaying tactic, so that Williams could set the pace, drive home the point that this was his turf.

Roth gave a sign to House, who walked past the receptionist, checked the two executive offices, a small library with another conference table, and a larger room set up with drafting boards and architectural renderings of homes and developments. All empty. The conference room was the only other area in the suite.

“Hey,” the secretary objected, standing up. “Mr. Williams will be with you shortly.”

Tank ogled her, turned and locked the door to the suite. He bent down and threw another bolt at the base of the door as House moved over to the reception desk, pulled the telephone line from its jack, snapped it in two like it was a piece of thread.

“Hey! Wait just a minute here,” the receptionist demanded as Roth opened the door to the conference room. Williams, sitting at the head of the table, speaking with two men, stood and said, “Excuse us, we’re in conference here!”

“It’s noon, Williams,” Roth said. “But you have a problem with promptness, don’t you.” The two other men in the room, huddling on either side of Williams, looked up, surprised. Roth sized them up fast. Not cops. Maybe attorneys, but not a DA. The older guy, about fifty, reached into his jacket, took just a second too long to remove a pen. The other guy was younger, in his late twenties, had nephew or some variety of family dork written all over him.

Roth entered and placed the attaché case on the table. “We’re here to remedy that.”

Tank and House pushed in behind Roth, their massive frames jamming each other in the doorway

momentarily. Roth groaned quietly as they managed to untangle themselves. Dumb fucks needed practice just walking through doorways. What had Roth expected; these guys were challenged just walking upright. Good thing they weren't chewing gum at the same time.

Roth patted his chest, and House thought for a few seconds and then walked around the room, starting with the young guy, patting them down. Williams remained standing, but House pushed him down in his chair. The first guy had nothing in his coat, nor did Williams, but Roth told House to check the older guy's left inside breast pocket. Sure enough, the guy had a miniature tape recorder in there. House pulled it out, threw it to Roth. The tape was running. The guy had turned it on when he'd reached into his coat, ostensibly for his pen. Yeah, these guys were conferring, all right. About just how to handle this situation.

He held up the recorder. "This won't help you, Williams." Roth shook his head. "What could you possibly be thinking? Bringing in heat? Turning in your benefactor?" He frowned at Williams, and shook his head slowly with a "tsk, tsk, tsk."

Within seconds the situation had gotten out of Williams' control. Not the way he'd envisioned this. He reached for the phone behind him, punched buttons. Nothing. He called outside, "Juliet. Call the police."

Tank and House laughed out loud. Just as Roth had instructed. Tank went back out to the reception area, moments later rolled Juliet in, tied to her chair with the phone line. He pushed her over to face the wall, then came around and stood towering between the young guy and Williams, standing close, violating their space. House took up a position between Williams and the older guy, standing just as close.

Williams said, "L-look, whatever your name is—"

"Call me Mr. Black," Roth said, then pointed to House. "And this is Mr. Blue." He thumbed to Tank. "And this is Mr. Blacker Still." He pointed to the older man. "Your attorney?"

"Yes, this is—"

"You don't need an attorney, Williams. What you need is your fucking priest."

"This isn't the way to handle this, Mr. whatever your name is," Williams objected, trying for confidence in his voice. "This strong-arm business doesn't work these days."

Roth raised an eyebrow. "Let's put it to a vote. I say it works; you say it doesn't." He opened his attaché case, withdrew a hammer. "Let's see what Mr. Hammer says." He tossed the hammer to House, who caught it on the fly, and then tapped the older guy once on the head. It wasn't hard, but a hammer on skull isn't something people should try at home.

The attorney let out a shriek, grabbed the top of his head with both hands as he slid off his chair

to his knees, doubled over on the floor, moaning, his eyes watering.

Roth turned to Williams. "I'd say Mr. Hammer's vote makes it unanimous. You think? Or do you want another ballot?"

Williams stared in disbelief, shook his head. The young man on his right looked down, threw up his hands, waved them back and forth. He wanted nothing more of this business.

Roth took out the contract for the sale of Williams' home, slid it across the conference table to Tank. The attorney beneath the desk was trying to stand. House hefted him up like a sack of garbage, dragged him to the corner of the room, sat him down in a trash can.

"He's a dunce, Mr. Blue," Roth said, by way of reminding House of the routine. Dumb fuckin' goombah couldn't remember instructions.

House threw Roth a blank look, then remembered what he'd been told. He yanked the attorney around to where he faced the corner, crunched his ass deeper into the can.

Roth withdrew a pen, threw it at Williams, hitting him in the chest. "Sign at the places indicated, welsher."

"What is it?"

"A post-dated bill of sale for your Westbury home. Dated at the end of the month. Either come up with 700,000 by that time, or be sure your furniture is off my client's property."

"You're crazy. That property is worth that four times over!"

Roth nodded to House. "Let's consult Mr. Hammer again."

House grabbed Williams' right wrist, pulled it in front of him, raised the hammer.

"He signs with his right hand, Mr. Blue," Roth said, trying for patience.

House muttered, "Oh, uh yeah." He released Williams' right wrist, grabbed his left.

"No. No. No. I'll sign," Williams moaned.

"Mr. Hammer thought you would," Roth smiled. "Hey, shyster," he addressed the guy sitting in the trash can. "Get over here and dig out your notary stamp."

The attorney was jammed so far down into the can that he couldn't stand up. It would require two people to pull him out. Tank went to him, slapped him on the head, and the attorney hopped the can over to the table, where his eyes just reached the top. He dug through his case, which was sitting on the floor next to him, withdrew his notary kit. Williams signed at the places indicated, and the attorney, still shaking, managed to steady himself and notarized the signature. House pushed the documents back across the table to Roth, who checked the papers. It was then that they noticed the receptionist was sniffing, afraid to turn around.

“We’re ahead of schedule,” Roth said casually. “You guys wanna throw her on the table, fuck her?” His instruction had been for them to decline. It was to make a point, to show control.

House said, “Naw,” staying with the script. But Tank was considering it. Roth shot him a look. “No,” Tank agreed, half-hearted. “But maybe a blowjob,” he added with a chuckle.

Roth thought, you’re cute, you know that, you dumb fucker. Who told you to ad lib anything? The secretary didn’t deserve this trauma, but it went with the territory if she worked for a hump like Williams. Even money she’d be reading the want ads tonight. Roth checked the papers again, spoke to Tank: “We know you, Mr. Dark. You’d rather fuck him, wouldn’t you?” He thumbed towards Williams.

“No,” Tank blurted, defensive, his face incredulous. “I don’t fuck guys.”

Roth winked at House, who gaffawed. Roth dropped the signed contract into his case. “Okay, tax time, Mr. Blue.”

House raised the hammer.

“No. No. I signed it, didn’t I?” Williams protested. “For Chris’sakes, I signed it.”

“Open your fucking hand or I’ll nail it to the table,” House threatened.

Williams opened his hand, spread his fingers. They were trembling. He squeezed his eyes shut.

“I can’t watch,” the young guy said. He put his face in his hands.

Wham! The hammer smashed Williams’ middle finger. For a moment he felt nothing, then the pain was so severe, he could barely breathe. Juliet cried out a mousey squeak, and Williams’ associates moaned.

House tossed the hammer back to Roth. “That’s in case you get any more bright ideas, Williams,” Roth said. “Please don’t. That would really upset your benefactor.” He lifted another tool from the case, examined it. “A shame; Mr. Pliers didn’t even get to vote.” He shrugged, threw the hammer and the pliers back in the case with the signed bill of sale, closed and snapped the locks.

As he and House left the office, Tank picked Juliet up, chair and all, and kissed her on the mouth, then dropped her back on the floor. The chair bounced, then spilled her over the floor, still tied to it. He followed them out.

In the elevator, Tank protested: “Hey, Mr. Black, I don’t fuck guys.” Roth ignored him, handing House the attaché case to deliver to Grassi.

Outside, they headed for the car. Roth rethought what had just taken place, and wanted to lace into Tank. Dumb fucker couldn’t walk and pick his nose at the same time, but the idiot thought his ad lib was funny. That was how things get out of hand, how control gets lost; broad started screaming; someone gets courageous; someone gets hurt bad.

As they reached House’s car, Tank proved Roth’s theory: he stopped to pick his nose.

Roth took his travel bag from the trunk and sat in the back seat.

On the drive to JFK, House drove and Tank rode shotgun, still protesting. “Why’d you say that I fucked guys? House, you say something to him? I don’t fuck guys.” He slapped House on the shoulder. “You tell him I fuck guys?”

The weather was warm, so Roth rolled down the window in back. As if a reminder that it was hot in the car, Tank also rolled his window down. Goombah see, goombah do.

Roth watched this section of Queens go by, thought of something: “How are Wops like spaghetti, Mr. Dark?”

“Uh, yeah, sure. I like spaghetti.”

They stopped at a traffic light on the service road leading into JFK. A taxi pulled alongside their car, two good-looking babes, flight attendants, talking in the back seat with the window down, on their way into the airport. Roth just knew that Tank was going to make a lewd remark if he looked over and saw them.

“You need to learn to listen carefully, Mr. Dark,” Roth said patiently. “How are Wops like spaghetti?”

“Oh, how. Uh, I don’t know.”

“They’re straight until they’re hot.”

House howled, snapped a punch at Tank, struck him in the arm.

Tank’s eyes bulged. He threw up his hands, yelled at the top of his voice, “Now leave it alone, youse two. I’m telling ya, I don’t fuck guys.” Roth looked over at the taxi, and Tank followed his eyes, turned also. The women in the back seat and the taxi-driver were staring at him, and jerked eyes forward, pretending they hadn’t heard his disclaimer. The light changed, and the taxi screeched away.

Tank slapped his forehead. “Agghhh, holy shit!”

House exploded in laughter. He laughed so hard, he had to pull the car over to the curb.

Tank ran a series of furious blows at the dashboard, the veins in his forehead pulsing as he punched, his face red with rage. The guy had a violent temper. After about a minute, he cooled off, settled down. House started driving, and everyone was quiet—what Roth had been waiting for. “I’m sure those girls believed you, Tank,” he said in a stoic tone. “Whaddya think, House?”

House cracked up again, and Tank started punishing the dashboard furiously. He demanded that House stop the car. House pulled over, and Tank hopped out and slammed the door, and then kicked the door. He stood on the shoulder of the roadway, cursing House and Roth as they pulled into the airport road.

Chapter 3

Los Angeles

Roth's flight landed at LAX close to midnight. He took a courtesy shuttle to the Westin Hotel on Century Boulevard, where he had a reservation. He dropped his bag in his room, thought about going down to the bar for a drink. But no, there was no smoking in California bars. Or restaurants. Or just about anywhere else for that matter. This was LA-LA land, home of road rage, health nuts, and baseball fans. The Anaheim Angels had won the World Series a few years back, and southern California, awash in baseball caps, was going to suck on that glory for as long as it could.

He made a rum and Coke from the mini bar, not bothering to check the beverage charges posted on a triangular paper sign next to the little bottles. Couldn't cost more than a small mortgage, judging from the way American hotels operated these days. When it came to real service, such as fast laundry, smart and prompt room service, and good food, they couldn't do squat—a favorite complaint for Roth; American hotels joined their European counterparts, and were operated for the convenience of their employees, not the guests.

Even more aggravating were the three hours he'd spent waiting in lines at the airport this afternoon, going through all the security checks. It was annoying, especially when one was involved in the security business and knew that the airlines were still only hardening the target, throwing up a profusion of obstacles aimed at minimizing the chances of a terrorist getting through the process, the cost borne completely by the traveler, who paid in cash and aggravation—because the airlines certainly hadn't spent money on technology or innovation until after 9/11. Homeland Security, yet another expensive bureaucracy, damn well knew it.

Roth had been in the States for nearly two weeks for this foray back to the land of the Big PX, and he missed Bangkok. But tomorrow afternoon, he'd be on a plane back home.

He showered, drank another mini bottle of rum, hit the sack.

He woke at 5:00 a.m. It wasn't yet light outside. He made coffee, Starbucks no less, drank it while he shaved. By the time he got into workout clothes and went downstairs to the health club, dawn was threatening to the east. He rarely bothered with health clubs, as he usually swam every day in Bangkok, often several times a day. But he hadn't had a workout for a while, and felt tight.

He ate breakfast, then back in his room, put in a call for Roger Schiff, an investigator who'd moved out to California from Illinois last year. Schiff had worked for an insurance company in the Midwest, and now worked for himself, handling, as Premier Services did, assignments for the life and health insurance industry: death claims, hospitalization and disability claims, and disappearances. The

difference was that Premier's orbit was global.

Nina wanted an affiliation on the West Coast, and Schiff wanted to be an element of a large investigative group with a guarantee of building equity. But most of Premier's work was international, and Schiff, married with kids, might not fit well into that scenario.

Premier's people often spent months on regional itineraries. Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean were considered local work—Premier's backyard. Then there were the itineraries to South America, over to Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

Roth had handled assignments in over 170 countries, and had moved to Asia three years ago, worked there almost exclusively. He liked the cultures, the weather, and the lifestyle. In all of Asia, a suit was only necessary in Japan, where little work was required of Premier amongst the xenophobic Japanese.

Like most of his employees, Roth was single. Well, single again. Married affiliates weren't desirable, even if they took a stationary post somewhere. Most couldn't cut the mustard overseas; living abroad only sounded good. But the reality was that wives didn't want husbands gallivanting all over the globe, and there was always the problem of the kids' education. So, Premier avoided hiring married field personnel.

Schiff might be another matter. He'd exchanged correspondence with Nina, wouldn't be dissuaded, it seemed. She asked Roth to stop over in LA to check him out on the way back to Bangkok.

It was almost 8:00 a.m. Schiff answered his phone on the first ring, real snappy: "Schiff Investigations, how can we help you?"

By 'we' he meant him. Schiff was a one-man shop, working out of a home-office from what Nina had learned. That was becoming a common thing these days, thanks to the Internet. Investigators spent most of their time in the field, anyway, and with LA traffic, running back and forth to an office accomplished nothing more than wasting two or three hours a day plus a tank of gas. So, working with a laptop and cellular phone in the car, a guy may as well operate out of the house. Providing, that is, his work wasn't dangerous and his family wasn't under foot all day long.

Schiff was agreeable to meeting Roth at the hotel. But Roth wanted to meet at his place, wanted to see his set-up, meet the wife and kiddies. A man's family life spoke volumes—about the man.

Roth rented a car and drove south on 405 for a half-hour. Schiff's home was a new, two-story cracker-box with a small swimming pool, in a good neighborhood in Long Beach. The Schiff's had two small children, still of an age to mind their parents. Behind the home was a sizable bungalow of some 1,500 hundred square feet that Schiff had converted into an office. It had everything an investigator needed, and then some, plus all the conveniences of home—and his commute every morning was just

twenty paces from his back door.

Schiff made a point of dressing before he went out to his office— something Roth rarely did in his Bangkok office/apartment, where he usually wore a swim suit. Or shorts, if he wanted to dress up.

Schiff also made a point of staying out of his home during the day. His office had a spare bedroom, plus a half-bath and a small kitchenette, so he ate lunch there, and on those occasions when he took a swim at lunch-time, his boys, three and four years old, wondered where he suddenly appeared from. In another year or so, they'd discover Daddy's workplace – then they'd have to be taught what 'off-limits' meant. As it was, whenever his wife needed to speak to him, she'd call on an intercom he'd rigged up between his home and his office. And that wasn't often from what Roth could see. Business was business with Schiff, and Roth liked that.

They sat around Schiff's office and discussed his working as an affiliate. Premier had two reps in Mexico: one in Tijuana, just across the border from San Diego, and another in Cancun. But they could use someone to represent them on the West Coast, particularly working close with Premier's clients. That could be tricky in that it would put Schiff in a position to walk off with clients if an affiliation didn't work out. They agreed that more discussions were necessary, and if it was workable, they needed to hammer out a clear understanding on paper, to include a penalizing non-compete clause in case of a divorce. And if he was a demanding boss, Roth explained, Nina was absolutely hell on wheels. There should be no doubt on several points, one being that business came first with Premier. Just the way God intended.

Roth would leave the rest to Nina. From what he'd seen of Schiff, and from what privileged information Nina had accumulated on him, it was do-able. Schiff also agreed to handle assignments—if called on—out in Hawaii, in western Canada, Alaska, and twelve western states. As to lending a hand in Mexico, he was hesitant. To his thinking, Mexico was dangerous. To the Premier bunch, it only meant good Mexican food. The dangerous places were Nigeria, Yemen, maybe Colombia, depending on the case. Of course, Iraq and Afghanistan had also joined their list of places they'd rather not handle at the moment. But they did, through two solid middle east affiliates.

Any place could be dangerous, but Roth's bunch disagreed in general about Mexico. The only drawback to Mexico that they'd ever experienced was that the working señoritas were the laziest hookers in the entire world. Maybe the fattest, too. What first appeared to be gushing, nicely-packaged, well-turned-out professionals often turned out to be the world's least enthusiastic prostitutes, whose bodies spread like gelatin across a bed once unwrapped. But he spared Schiff this piggish bit of travel philosophy. At 37, Schiff was a wholesome type, seemed healthy, was certainly energetic and experienced. But a bottle of tequila and a piece of Mexican tail at the same time just might kill the guy.

Roth told Schiff that he was heading back to Bangkok tomorrow. They shook hands and he left. Yeah, Schiff was a possibility. That he couldn't travel extensively wasn't too much of a drawback, plus he had a sober personality; not exactly a prerequisite for handling Premier's overseas work, anyhow.

Roth returned the rental car to Thrifty's office just up Century Boulevard, then walked back to the Westin. In his room, the message light on the telephone was blinking. There were two messages, both from Nina. It was 3:30 p.m. here in LA; 6:30 in New York. Maybe she was still in the office.

She was, and sounded harried.

"What's up, boss?" Roth asked.

"I need your body, chief."

"Tut, tut, my dear. They all say that, and a line forms in the hallway at this very moment."

"You wish. Listen, you gotta run down to Mexico City. Deliver a benefit check."

"Aw, Christ," Roth moaned. "I'm out of here tomorrow for Bangkok. Have one of the guys do it."

"Can't, Mike. Alfredo's working on a shitload of hospitalization claims over in the Rio Grande Valley. He's got a run of over twenty cases. And Pete is over on Cuba."

"Can't it wait until they're available? Or send Cass up, or one of her people." Cassandra Straiter operated under the legal alias of Cass Jones for obvious reasons. Her Christian name was a present at birth from her father, who had wanted a son, but got a daughter he made tougher than any boy. Cass was Premier's principal rep in South America, but her territory, by agreement, spilled over into Central America, and at times even up into the Caribbean, if needed. A former US Marine and police officer, she'd signed on with the company a few years ago, and was far and away one of the firm's best investigators. She was based in Bogota, and handled Premier's major cases in South America, also supervised other reps and affiliates both north and south of Panama. Roth had liked her from the get-go; for starters her name. Female ops had trouble with male subjects or sources occasionally. But it cut both ways; a guy working Spain got zero cooperation from the police, but enter a skirt and the coppers and courts fell all over themselves to assist a señorita.

"She's busy," Nina said. "So are her people. Look, it's a long story. We've already investigated this thing. The client is in a jam. There were four policies, all re-insured, and everyone put their hands in this, so it didn't get paid for some dumb reason or other, and now the agent and the beneficiary's attorney are screaming bloody murder. So, we've got to get the check to the bene yesterday. And you're the closest available body to Mexico City."

"How big is the check?" It was usual procedure for some companies to have benefit checks hand-delivered to beneficiaries in certain countries. When large checks got lost, everyone from the beneficiary to the broker to the beneficiary's attorney threw conniptions. Sometimes the checks were

stolen en route; passing through dubious hands, each discounting the amount to the party they'd received it from. Eventually, the check ended up back at the bank where it had been drawn, with a half-dozen signatures on the back. And the beneficiary had never even seen the thing. But another cute scenario was that beneficiaries pulled the same scam themselves, greased the same chain of hand-offs, ended up with most of the funds but still claimed that the check had been stolen out of the mail. If the insurance company couldn't prove that it was a scam, they were on the hook to pay the claim a second time. In any event, whether they paid a second time or not, it was usually one big, embarrassing mess, with a nasty round of finger-pointing and bad publicity because, unlike many foreign underwriters, American companies actually paid legitimate claims. That's why insurance policies were on everyone's shopping list when they visited the America.

"Four point two million," Nina answered.

Roth whistled. "Who was the insured?"

"I told you about this one. We handled it earlier this year. Alfredo did it. That exec who was kidnapped, then his body ended up in a crate at the border. Even after the family shelled out a million bucks. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah," Roth said, scratching his ass mentally, recalling something about it in Nina's e-mails several months back. The policies were old ones, non-contestable, and two of them carried accidental death benefits—double indemnity—in case the insured died by accidental means. The deceased was a Mexican-American.

Back in January, when Nina first received the case, she contemplated having Roth fly over from Asia to handle it personally. Sometimes she was more comfortable when he took the bigger cases. Roth owned the largest percentage of Premier, but he listened to Nina and usually did as she suggested, since she managed day-to-day operations, kept her finger on where reps were at any moment in time, and also kept her finger on the clients' pulses. She had good instincts, and if she wanted him on a particular case, he usually obeyed. Pissing and moaning maybe, but he went along dutifully. But at that time, he'd been tied up on a rash of nasty claims in Cambodia and Vietnam. Eventually, she assigned the investigation to Alfredo, their rep in Tijuana.

"Look," she said, getting impatient, "all you gotta do is see the widow, give her the check, do the usual routine, then say adiós, señora. It'll take twenty, maybe thirty minutes. Think you can remember how it's done?"

"The agent can't do it?"

"Mike, I hate whining. The client wants us to do it, and the agent doesn't want to go near this case because of the way the guy died. She's Mexican-American also, lives in Orange County, licensed

in California. The policies were written over the past five years right there in California, where the family also owns an estate.”

Roth saw his flight tomorrow to Bangkok going up in smoke. Well, shit. “Who’s the client?”

“Amalgamated.”

“Kincannon?”

“No one but,” Nina said. “Couple years ago, they had a problem with another policy payout. Down in Colombia. They wired the funds down, but there was some sort of snag. He thinks someone in the bank tried to divert the money, got the bene’s signature on the receipt and all that, and then deposited it in another account. The bene was an old woman, didn’t know shit from Shinola, and was about to be ripped-off by someone in her own bank, maybe even a relative at that. We’re talking Latin America here. The money eventually ended up in the right account, and she got her funds, but Kincannon had to fly down to Bogotá to sort it all out.”

“Good for him,” Roth said. “Guy needs exercise....Well, Shit, shit, shit, shit.”

“On your own time, please. So, you’ll handle it?”

“Yeah. I’ll see if I can get a reservation.”

“You’re already reserved. Take down the flight info.”

Roth picked up a pen on the desk. “Great, so it wasn’t really a question of whether or not I’d agree, was it?”

“I like volunteers. It builds morale and character, firm pecks and allthat happy horseshit, makes you a better leader,” Nina said. “Start writing: Aeroméxico 491, departs 7:50 tomorrow morning. Direct, no stopover in Guadalajara. You get in to Mexico City just after one p.m.”

Roth made the notes. “How will I get the check?”

“I sent it out to you last night. Kincannon called when you were in the air yesterday, sent it over by messenger from their New York office. I sent it care of the Westin. It should be at the hotel as we speak. Overnight, Guaranteed. I put a return FedEx envelope inside. All you gotta do is call me when you’ve finished, mail the bene’s receipt, details, and your report to me right there from the FedEx office at the airport in Mexico City or when you go back through LA, and you’ll be on your merry way.”

“Nothing like being taken for granted,” he sulked.

“Clam up. You love being used.”

“Not like this. Now, that line of women in the hallway; they could use me all—

“Knock it off!”

“—Tie me up and spank me—“

“Whenever you’re through,” Nina said impatiently.

“Alright, alright. Crusher of dreams. I’ll need a hotel for tomorrow night.”

“Done. Take this down...”

He wrote down the particulars of where he’d be staying in Mexico City tomorrow night, a place called the Hidalgo, close to the airport. “Okay, I got it. Now I got a present for you: you can take the rest of the day off.”

“Thanks, chief, it’s already seven.”

“See how good I am to you.” He hung up and went down to the reception desk, where the package was indeed waiting for him. He usually kept room keys with him so he wouldn’t need to stop at reception, so he hadn’t thought to ask if there was anything for him when he returned from seeing Schiff.

Back in his room, he opened the package, went through the documents. Everything was there. He looked at the check: 4,216,000 US dollars drawn from a Citibank account and payable to Felicia Christina Romero Alvarez de Morro. He whistled; if the check was an eyeful, the beneficiary’s name was a mouthful.

On his way out of the hotel, he stopped at the desk again, opened a safety deposit box, put the check in. He left the hotel, walked across the wide boulevard, hurrying to beat a swarm of traffic shooting out from LAX.

He wolfed down a snack at Taco Bell—well, this was LA—and then walked down a block to a go-go joint he’d passed many times when he’d laid over in LA, but had never visited. He needed something to remind him of Bangkok.

But the place was depressing. There were metal bars everywhere, like the customers were apes. Still, he paid ten bucks and went into the darkened place, found the bar, sat down. Smoking wasn’t permitted of course, and even worse, because the girls danced nude, alcoholic beverages weren’t sold. Roth didn’t even try to work out the logic of that. A few guys at the bar were wearing the inevitable baseball caps, watching a girl up on the stage work through an exotic routine. Over in one corner, a well-stacked babe was giving some slob a lap dance. She straddled his legs, shaking her breasts. The guy seemed transfixed, bayed witlessly at two loads of silicon shimmying in front of his face.

Still, the joint had a good selection of gals, with an interesting mix of black, white, oriental, and Mexican dancers. A bartender with a name tag reading ‘Lucy,’ came over, asked what he’d have. He looked around, pointed to a petite Asian girl standing next to a colleague, a big blonde of about five-ten. “Her and a rum and Coke,” Roth said.

“Sorry, no alcohol.” Lucy shook her head.

“Okay, her and a Coke.”

“Sally?” she asked. “Blonde?”

“No. The little one. Ponytail.”

“That’s Teri,” Lucy said, studying Roth, trying to make him for a cop. “No alcoholic beverages, no flasks, and the girls don’t date the customers, you know?”

“And I should have worn a baseball cap, right?” he said, trying for a voice like Forrest Gump.

Lucy shrugged, went over and talked with Teri, pointed to Roth. Teri and her blonde colleague looked over, smiled. Teri came over and extended her hand as Lucy poured his drink.

Roth bought Teri a flaming orange juice with a maraschino cherry in it. Wild times, here. They exchanged names, where they were from, their astrological signs, miscellaneous horseshit, and he laid a few witticisms on her, made her laugh, obligatory or otherwise. Inevitably, she asked what kind of work he did, smiling and touching, teasing that he was probably a cop. Roth didn’t confirm or deny it, but suggested they go across to his hotel, where she could handcuff him, and let her play with his nightstick. She screamed a laugh, again obligatory or not, which drew Lucy over. She’d been hanging nearby; eavesdropping to make sure the place didn’t get busted for soliciting.

Teri was 22, lived in Torrance with her mother and younger brother. She’d been born in Cần Thơ, Vietnam, came to the States when she was a baby, like a lot of Vietnamese. She was about five-foot-nothing, maybe 100 pounds after a heavy meal. Neat little package. Roth bought her more drinks so she wouldn’t have to take a turn up on the stage, and giggled and tickled with her until midnight. He got her home telephone number—discreet-like—said he’d probably pass back through LA day after tomorrow, said he’d call her. She said that would be fine, but she wasn’t scheduled for a night off until next Monday. He stood to leave, paid his bill, tipped her twenty bucks, gave her his business card.

She read it. “Aha. I wasn’t far off about your job.”

“Further than you can imagine, Teri.”

She walked him to the exit, reconsidering his proposition. She pulled him off to the side, put her arms around his waist, said to be sure to call when he got back into town. He pinched a nipple, said sure, meaning it, and headed out.

Back at the hotel, he thought about taking the beneficiary’s check from the deposit box. But no. Teri might drop by. He might get about five hours sleep tonight. Might not. Didn’t matter either way, tomorrow would be a short day.

He was asleep when the phone rang. It was Teri.

“Did I wake you?”

“How’d you know where I was?” he asked.

“Just a guess,” she said. “Want company?”

She knew where he was staying from the matches he'd purposely left on the bar. No doubt, a lot of guys who stayed here wandered across the street. Convenient location. He looked at the clock: 2:00 a.m. She must just be finishing up.

"You bet. There's something I'd like you to handle for me." He gave her the room number so she wouldn't have to stop at reception.

"Ten minutes," she said, hung up.

Roth yawned, crawled out of bed, went into the bathroom to rinse his face, take a hit of mouthwash. Well, two hours was all the sleep he'd get tonight. He turned on the TV while he waited for her, pondering how much to tip her in the morning. She hadn't mentioned money, usually the first order of business, certain he understood her visit was commerce. If he gave her money afterwards, it was generosity, not solicitation. Cops had to tape their stings, but there'd been no negotiations—nor would there be. Therefore, if Roth was a cop, she couldn't be arrested. Smart girl.

He'd slip a couple of bills in her purse in the morning when she wasn't watching. Well, pretending not to be watching.

Chapter 4

Mexico City

Aero Mexico Flight 491 dropped down to 12,000 feet and banked east over the outskirts of the capital. Soon, the 737 descended again, and the huge sprawl that was Mexico City came into view, as far as the eye could see – the home of over 20 million souls. Mexico City was gigantic, dwarfing even Los Angeles.

In another ten minutes, as they dropped down to 7,000 feet, air pockets shook the plane, as if reminding the passengers that they were flying over the largest metropolis on earth. Roth could make out the details of the main arteries that chopped the town into colonias – neighborhoods – as the plane flew over the heart of the city on its approach to Benito Juárez International Airport. They were over Chapultepec Castle, and his eyes followed Avenida Insurgentes north to where it disappeared between distant mountains. He traced Avenida Chapultepec to where it became Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, then felt the plane banking again into its final approach, felt and heard the flaps grinding down for landing.

He hadn't been here for maybe four years. But he'd worked in and out of Mexico before that for a few years, and remembered the city well enough. Still, he'd pick up a map when he landed.

For a moment, he envied Alfredo, who was up busting fake hospitalization claims along the Tex-Mex border. Roth had always liked those cases. They were quick, easy assignments; basically, all the investigator had to do was prove that the insured had never been confined to a facility, but had nevertheless ran up astronomical billing charges that deliberately confused the Mexican peso, also called the dollar, with the US greenback. The exchange rate was ten to one, and if a US insurance company didn't understand the conversion rate, all the better for the hospital in question. If the doctors charged US dollars, the amounts were well above what the insurance industry considered usual and customary for a particular service, in a particular area. Ninety percent of the claims were bad. He'd knock down a claim in two hours, and then be off again, running from one end of the Rio Grande to the other, from Matamoros on the Gulf of Mexico to El Paso. Normally, he'd driven the roads on the US side, dipping down across the line into Mexican border towns where American claimants sought out doctors more than anxious to cooperate in a slight case of larceny.

The best part of those border excursions was the Mexican food along the route, the kickback honky-tonk saloons, and the shit-kicking dance clubs. And for the traveler with an itch, there were the boys' towns just across the border. Mexicans were very understanding when it came to philandering, so throughout the country, small bordello communities – entire miniature towns – could be found on the

outskirts of many cities. Prostitution was illegal within the city, but a ten-minute run out to a boys' town brought and bought an impressive variety of pros marketing their merchandise at their front doors. It was like the red-light district of Amsterdam, but without all the steps to climb.

A run of cases along the border took days, sometimes weeks. But tomorrow, Roth would be flying to Bangkok via LA and Taipei. He hated traveling, had logged enough miles by his reckoning to reach the moon and back five or six times. His accumulated frequent-flyer miles hovered around the million mark. Two round-trips right there.

In the airport, he bought a city map, and then made a reservation for his return to LA tomorrow afternoon. With any luck, he'd be back there by late evening, possibly for an encore with Teri. His ticket to Taipei had been cancelled, but there were open seats for the remainder of the week. Maybe he'd lay over in LA for an extra day, what with American-Vietnamese relations needing all the help he could give them.

He hopped into a taxi, proceeded towards Centro, checked into the Hidalgo off of Avenida Hidalgo. It was near enough to the airport and a place where their reps stayed whenever they visited Mexico City. Nina had included a source card for the hotel in the FedEx package. The New York office maintained thousands of sources worldwide – hotels, travel services, translators, even cab drivers – in places their reps visited often. Especially resourceful sources, called 'men on the ground,' or MOGs, could be contacted by any Premier rep when they visited a location and required someone who was familiar with their business. Other sources – police officers, coroners, US consular officers, experts and technicians of all types – were also indexed. But for Mexico City, she'd only given Roth the hotel location and name and number for a bilingual taxi-driver their reps used here.

But a translator wouldn't be necessary on this visit. Roth spoke some Spanish, and all he had to do was meet the beneficiary, Señora Alvarez, and then catch the flight back to LA. According to Nina, by way of Alfredo's investigation report, the señora was fluent in English.

In his room, he opened the file with the papers on Daniel Romero Alvarez that Nina had enclosed with the check and a receipt that Señora Alvarez had to sign. As a matter of routine, he'd take her photograph, several for good measure, copies of her personal identification – passport, driver's license, and whatever else she had.

From the city map, the Alvarez home appeared to be situated just off of Carretera Toluca, south of Colonia Lomas Reforma, twenty minutes outside Centro. Roth recalled the area. The old-money part of the city, where the wealthy lived on huge estates. These walled compounds ran on for acres, stretching along several miles of major routes in the southwest reaches of Mexico City. From the outside, many of these estates looked simple enough, just expansive walled grounds. But behind those walls were the

largest and most lavish homes in all Mexico. And always, there was private security on the grounds, often dozens of armed guards around the clock. Sentries could be seen from the boulevards, shotguns slung over their shoulders, patrolling the grounds. Compared with some estate security that Roth had seen over the years, an armored truck would be easier to knock over.

Kidnapping was rampant in Mexico, and the capital led in statistics. The last time Roth had visited, he'd been in an unmarked livery car driven by a hotel employee. They'd been coming from Nezahualcoyotl – Neza for short – a notorious suburb, and had exited the highway on Viaducto Alemán. At the bottom of the ramp, two lanes were blocked by an old, battered car, backing up traffic. Suddenly, two men flew from the heap brandishing .45-caliber automatics. They rushed back to a dark SUV, their intended target, and demanded that the driver unlock the doors. Instead, the occupant backed up, smashing the grille of Roth's taxi. The bandits, on either side of the SUV, pumped rounds in the doors of the vehicle, but failed to get them open. The victim threw his SUV into drive and literally ran over the trunk of their junk heap, pushing it out into oncoming traffic. The bandits ran back to their vehicle to pursue him, but couldn't get the jalopy started. Seeing a lone driver in the small vehicle next to Roth's livery, they jumped out and ran back with pistols leveled at the driver, who surrendered his vehicle, his hands grabbing air. They crammed into his car and zoomed off after the SUV in hot pursuit.

The driver whose vehicle they'd jacked stood on the sidewalk, wiped his face with shaking hands, just glad he was still breathing. This had all taken place within twenty seconds, and the line of drivers coming off the highway who'd witnessed the entire episode sped past the abandoned jalopy, not even looking back. There would be no witnesses. For the hell of it, Roth had checked the newspapers the following morning, and found nothing on the incident. Roth had no idea if the kidnappers had caught their intended victim. Probably not; Mexico City was like the Serengeti – most attempts by the predators failed. But the bold attack was typical of what occurred daily in broad daylight.

Roth called the Alvarez residence. A young woman, speaking Spanish, answered the telephone. A beautiful voice. But once Roth asked for Señora Alvarez de Morro, the girl made an easy slide into educated English, for a gringo's voice was easy to detect. She asked who was calling. Roth introduced himself and the purpose of his call. The pleasant voice asked him to wait. He heard her put the receiver down, and after a minute, she came back on the line, informed him that he could see Señora Alvarez tomorrow morning at 10:00 a.m., asking if that would be convenient. He said that ten o'clock was just fine. She asked where he was staying, and if he would like to have a car collect him in the morning.

Roth said he'd find his way, but gave his hotel number in case there was any change in Señora Alvarez's plans. The beautiful voice said that there wouldn't be. She advised that the Alvarez hacienda was named Cuernavaca, and that many taxi-drivers knew it by name. She ended the call with a pleasant

“Buenas tardes.”

Mexican youngsters from prominent families were often educated in the States or Europe. He shouldn't have been surprised by the young woman's proficiency in English, and from what little ear he had for Spanish, her greeting sounded Castilian. Well, these were moneyed people, after all. Plus, Daniel Alvarez had been an American citizen, also. So, his children were probably also Americans.

Roth opened his laptop, plugged it into the Internet connection, sent a message to Nina in New York that he'd be seeing the widow Alvarez in the morning, expected to be back in LA, at the Westin, tomorrow evening. He also hammered out a report of his meeting with Schiff, recommending that she proceed with structuring a limited affiliation agreement.

He went down into the hotel restaurant that evening, had a beer in the cantina. If there was one thing he liked about working in Mexico, it was the food. Unfortunately, Mexican cuisine, as it existed in the capital, wasn't his favorite, and didn't compare to that in Guadalajara and other places. If he'd learned anything from his travels throughout Mexico, it was that food wasn't consistent by locale. Worse, in Mexico City, fast food was popular – standardized menus, prescribed portions.

Several well-dressed working girls were allowed roaming privileges here in the bar. That was rare in Mexico City; working girls were relegated to areas like boys' town. So, Premier's rep who'd recommended this hotel obviously wasn't interested in the food.

Roth finished his beer, went through to the restaurant. He ate what passed for tamales, accompanied by rice and frijoles, or beans. The rice and frijoles were all right, but it took little effort to cook up good frijoles. He returned to the cantina for an aperitif, flirted with a few señoritas. But Mexican putas rated low in his book on the flesh trade. He declined two discreet offers for services. Another time, he said. Instead, he took a bottle of rum upstairs to keep him company. Little Teri would be a hard act to follow so soon.

Chapter 5

Along the Mexican side of the Rio Grande.

1911

The young vaquero reined in his magnificent black stallion at the edge of a steep arroyo. He twisted around on El Dardo's back and looked at where he'd just come from. Cuernavaca, the Alvarez ranch house, looked gray and ominous, appeared distant and chalky under a cloudy moon, although it was only two miles off.

The way ahead was forbidding. There had been federal patrols searching the area this evening. The trail was hidden from the moonlight by the intermittent clouds, and he sensed rather than saw the hazard ahead of him. But there was no one in front of him on the other side of the embankment that he could see. He walked his stallion down the slope and, at the bottom, dismounted, and examined the ground. No horses had passed this way. He remounted, riding bareback, and dug his heels in El Dardo's flank, galloping hard to the north, skirting the Rio Grande.

Somewhere nearby were the messengers to Juárez. And lurking somewhere in the night to waylay them was the federal patrol, the evil forces of the old tyrant, Porfirio Díaz. It had taken a revolution for president-elect Madero to dispossess Díaz, and the job wasn't finished yet. Wouldn't be until Díaz turned over the government today, before the entire world to see. As he'd promised to do. Yes, 33 years as presidente was long enough for this country to have suffered so.

Alejandro reined in again at the edge of a natural ramada of mesquite thickets. Dust and scrub stretched out before him.

Suddenly, seven or eight sharp pops rang in the distance. Rapid gunfire from three, maybe four pistols. He listened hard, but only heard the sound of his heart beating. He rode in that direction, and soon came to a wooden bridge crossing the arroyo, where the smell of cordite hung heavy in the otherwise cool, sweet air. He guided El Dardo up a small path made by washerwomen, where they'd once beaten soiled clothing against the rocks when water ran past this place.

Sprawled in the dirt on the narrow, wooden bridge were two dead men. The messengers. Blood, like black ink, still crept across the ground. They were naked, their clothes having been stripped away and scattered around, the pockets turned out, the cloth ripped apart in a frenzied search. Their horses were gone.

Alejandro dismounted and knelt over the dead men. "Dios," he muttered. "God be with you, señors." If they'd been interrogated, it had been quick, before they were executed on the spot. There were footprints in the dust of bare feet and cavalry boots, showing where a brief, violent struggle had

taken place before the men were murdered.

The horse tracks led north, towards Juárez. Horse shoes. Army riders. Maybe a dozen. Unless Alejandro turned back, he'd have to follow in their wake. "Mi Dios, mi Dios. What should I do?" Was he the last hope to reach Juárez with this message? If he didn't get through, Señor Madero might well be assassinated, and that old diablo Díaz would continue to reign.

Alejandro made the sign of the cross, remounted El Dardo, and rode on. Five miles ahead, he came upon the patrol cantering their mounts. He slapped his reins hard against both flanks of El Dardo, and broke into a gallop. The last two soldiers, holding the reins of the horses taken from the dead messengers, looked back when Alejandro closed from behind, gaining fast.

"Jefe!" Alejandro shouted out, urgency in his voice. "Jefe. Por favor. Pare!" Boss! Please stop. Alejandro rode to the head of the column, reined in as a trooper grabbed El Dardo's bridle. Alejandro jumped down, ran towards the officer at the head of the column, but a mounted sergeant threw out his booted foot, stopping him.

"He is not called jefe, you ignorant peasant." The sergeant leaned over, snatched Alejandro's straw hat off his head, and threw it in the dust. "He is Teniente Salgado."

Alejandro picked up his hat and thanked the sergeant for this enlightening information. "Teniente Salgado," he begged, running forward, telling the officer that there were two dead men lying on the road.

The troop laughed, for they well knew this.

"El camino está cerrado," the sergeant rode forward and shouted at him. This road to Juárez is closed.

Lieutenant Salgado asked Alejandro what business such a small boy had on this deserted road in the middle of the night. One of the men in the column called out that Alejandro was a rebel, and the troop laughed again. Alejandro lied that he was hurrying to Juárez to fetch a doctor for his father, who'd been bitten by a rattlesnake.

"Cuándo?" Salgado demanded.

"At dusk, Teniente. He sleeps now, but he still breaths."

Lieutenant Salgado asked Alejandro where he came from.

"Guadalupe, Teniente." His village of Guadalupe was five miles south.

The lieutenant told him to return home, for by the time he reached Guadalupe, his father would be dead. More laughter from the troop, but Alejandro pleaded that he must go on.

"Sargento." Salgado motioned to his sergeant, nodded down at Alejandro. Sergeant Rodriguez and another soldier dismounted. The trooper grabbed Alejandro by his thin arms and held him as

Rodriguez turned out the boy's pockets, ripped off his camisa, tearing the shirt to shreds. Rodriguez told him to pull up his pants bottoms, and yanked his hat off again, looked inside. He knelt down and tore the sandals from Alejandro's feet. There was nothing. No message. They looked at El Dardo, but since Alejandro had ridden bareback, using only a rope bridle, there was nothing else to search.

The lieutenant informed Alejandro that they were confiscating his horse, since he was violating the curfew. It was, of course, Salgado's arbitrary curfew, instituted and unanimously voted upon by a committee of one – Salgado – at this very moment. Alejandro begged Salgado to allow him to continue to Juárez. Salgado made a benevolent face, sweeping his arm ahead magnanimously, nodding towards Juárez. "Dirrecion a Juárez."

The men in the patrol jeered. Sergeant Rodriguez slapped Alejandro in the face with his sandals, knocking him down, and threw them off to the side of the road. He remounted his horse, handed El Dardo's bridle to a trooper behind him.

"Beware of bandidos, Rodriguez called back to him. The soldiers howled again, since Alejandro had just been robbed of his only possession.

The boy was, after all, only a stupid peasant of ten years. Lieutenant Salgado, confident his patrol had caught all of the messengers trying to reach Madero, cantered his troop towards Juárez.

Alejandro was frustrated by his small size, nearly in tears at losing his father's magnificent mount. Nevertheless, he recovered his sombrero and sandals and ran after the patrol, which was putting distance between itself and him. But later, when they were walking their mounts, he caught up, tagged alongside the column. The troopers harassed him in turns; one soldier asking if he had sisters at home, another inquiring if he was now in the market for a donkey. But over the next hour, Alejandro stayed up with them until they reached the outlying adobe homes of Juárez.

He couldn't have had a safer escort, even if these dogs who had violated their oath to Mexico and her people had stolen El Dardo. Such was the curse upon the country in these miserable times.

On Geronimo Road, just outside Ciudad Juárez, Alejandro veered away from the patrol. The troop cantered on, leaving the boy to wonder if he'd ever see the black stallion again. Had Lieutenant Salgado been any judge of horseflesh, or possessed the intelligence expected of a cavalry officer, he'd have realized that no peasant could own such a magnificent animal. El Dardo's grooming alone should have told him. In any event, Salgado would surely claim El Dardo for himself, despite the Alvarez brand on the stallion's flank.

Roosters crowed, and cooking fires began blotting the clear sky over Juárez. It was a warm morning in November, but the quiet streets and smoke plumes seemed to cast an ominous pall

overhead, similar to another town that Alejandro had seen where the stillness had been death, the smoke roiling up from destroyed property. Once Díaz had declared martial law last year, thousands had been arrested for plotting against him. Towns and villages across Mexico were razed for resisting the old dictator's edicts, and then the revolution had begun. Such rebels as 'Pancho' Villa and Emiliano Zapata, and millions crying for Díaz's overthrow, answered Madero's call to arms. Twenty thousand US troops remained on alert at the border, then the rebels in Durango handed Díaz his worst defeat since the revolution began.

Yes, Alejandro had safely arrived in Juárez, but who was he to contact now that he was here? He had no name or description of the man he was to meet. Nor, for that matter, would the man know him.

His stomach rumbled. He should have eaten before he took to the road this morning. But it was still dark when Theresa, his older sister, had awakened him, when the filthy, foul-smelling vaquero had crashed into their home and collapsed on the floor. But the man hadn't lost consciousness before he laid his heavy responsibility upon Alejandro's small shoulders. The cowboy was exhausted and losing blood rapidly; a terrifying scene for the children and their old housekeeper to behold. The vaquero would surely die from his bullet wounds, but Theresa would see to it that at least he passed comfortably. He was, after all, a patriot, and the Alvarez family, like all of Mexico, owed him that much. Such men as these were loyal to Señor Madero, the rightful leader of the new Mexico.

Oh, how the fire in the dying vaquero's eyes burned when, in desperation, he struck upon the idea of sending young Alejandro to safeguard the warning, to find the contact at the Customs House in Juárez and give him the message. There had been much on Alejandro's mind as he listened to the cowboy instruct him in what he must do, and next, his young mind had reeled as the lacerations were made on his body – cuts that he and the dying man made into his young flesh in order to see the mission through.

Alejandro found the Customs House on Avenida Juárez easily enough, but it wasn't open yet. He tried not to think about his hunger, but by eight o'clock, he could think of nothing else. Not even his burning thigh erased the pangs of hunger. He'd forgotten to bring some pesos with him, but little did it matter after the run-in with the troopers.

Nearby was a cantina opening up for the day. The rotund owner stepped out onto the planked sidewalk with a broom. He stretched and rubbed his big belly, belched, then looked down at Alejandro. He just knew that the boy was about to beg for a meal. Such stares were common these days. He waited for Alejandro to offer to sweep out his establishment in exchange for a plate of rice and beans. It came, and he agreed – providing that Alejandro include the stables out back. So, Alejandro swept the

restaurant and, with a rake, mucked the horseshit out of the stalls before sitting down in the dust behind the cantina with a plate of food that even included a stale tamale.

Finishing, he thanked the owner and went back across the plaza to the Customs House, where he waited some more. By late morning, it seemed that the building would not be opening as usual, but many people were nevertheless arriving in the area.

The Rio Grande Hotel, across the plaza from the Customs House, was full up, and soon, Mexican flags began appearing on the balconies, and were being draped across the railings on the second and third floors. It seemed to Alejandro that people were preparing for a fiesta. And many Americanos and other foreigners were staying in the hotel. They were well-dressed, and many carriages and motor cars were parked in front of the hotel and along the streets running off from the plaza in all directions. The atmosphere had an energy and feel of merriment, the plaza becoming busier and noisier.

Alejandro crossed the plaza to inspect the motor cars. He'd only seen one before, driven by a man who visited the hacienda last year to buy cattle from his father. The motor cars were shiny and hard, many of their parts made of steel. He momentarily forgot his mission and, with other youngsters, wandered between the vehicles, staring in awe at these glittering horseless carriages. Older boys were polishing some of the machines, but no one else touched them lest they made that frightful exploding noise.

Two portly Americanos emerged from the hotel, having just finished breakfast. One got in a motor car, his weight shifting the platform on one side, and the other man wound it up, cranking a steel bar that he'd taken from under the seat and shoved into the machine's mouth. The vehicle rumbled to life, and the boys backed away. Suddenly, a loud pop issued from beneath the vehicle, sending the smaller boys running for their lives. A thick, stinking plume of smoke shot out from beneath the motor car, and an older boy laughed and declared that the machine was farting, just like a burro. The car moved off, grudgingly it seemed, with small kids and dogs chasing it, cheering, hollering, and barking.

More people were milling around the Customs House, and by noon, vendors began setting up tables, started to hawk food and drink. Adding to this air of free enterprise and festivity, Americanos wishing to witness the spirit of Mexican independence poured across from El Paso to see Señor Francisco Madero, Jr. sworn in as president. Most walked over, leaving their rides on the American side, but some rode in carriages, surreys, and on bicycles and motor cars. Even Yankee soldiers were crossing the bridges in uniform, unarmed, to witness the proceedings. With the Yankees coming over the border, the vendors expanded their inventory to include camisas and ponchos; sandals, belts, and buckles; oil paintings and handicrafts; and all manner of miscellaneous doodads. Youngsters hurried around, peddling miniature Mexican flags – made, alas, across the border in Texas. Photographers from

both sides of the border began setting up cameras – big black boxes on tripods – to record this historic event.

Alejandro had never seen so many people, and the throng grew by the minute, even though the ceremony wouldn't take place until evening. Strange how it was that the Americano President Taft and Porfirio Díaz had met with big smiles at this very place just two years ago. And now the Yankees were smiling now that Díaz was out, and Madero was in. But Yankees were always quick to smile when they wanted something.

Alejandro now remembered his mission, and his stomach churned with anxiety. Who was he to approach with the assassin's name? He took up a position on the porch of the hotel. It was elevated, so he could watch the comings and goings of important people, and still keep an eye on the frenetic activity around the Customs House. Besides, the porch provided shade for most of the ground floor terrace. It was getting hot now.

On one side of the hotel's entrance was a large dining room, with a second entrance around the corner, in addition to an arch off the lobby inside. Alejandro was ragged, and knew he'd be chased off if he became too visible, so he stayed where he couldn't be seen from inside. At one end of the porch was a spacious saloon, identical in layout to the dining room, and having the longest bar Alejandro believed possible. There were a dozen bartenders behind the high oak bar, and wall mirrors on both sides of the saloon made the place look even grander. There were many Americanos at the bar already, and Alejandro had heard something about there being rip-roaring good times upstairs. Whatever that meant.

Suddenly, cheers erupted as a ragtag assembly of revolutionary soldiers poured into the plaza. Peasants ran to welcome them. The saloon emptied out briefly as drinkers emerged to witness the arrival of these soldiers who'd fought in Durango earlier this year. That battle had swung the tide once and for all to put Madero in the presidency. Old Díaz had been in power since 1876, even when Alejandro's father had been a boy. He'd promised sweeping reforms at the National Assembly – then with characteristic perfidy, had sent his army against the people. Too late now for the old liar. Nothing could save the hypocrite. Yes, hypocrite because his tragic legacy and final shame was that fifty years ago he'd unwaveringly served the first hero of the republic, Benito Juárez.

The heroes of Durango waved banners and flags of the republic, were here to witness their new presidente sworn in. Regular soldiers looked at them with enmity, for these newcomers were the citizen soldiers who'd joined Villa and Zapata and defeated the powerful forces of Díaz. But with the reins of power changing, all but the zealots and conspirators of Díaz would remain in uniform. After all, the nation needed an army, and their crime had, for the most part, been military obedience to superiors.

Alejandro stayed at his post – such as it was. He approached several officious-looking men in white suits and white straw hats, but he was reticent, inarticulate, unknowing how to reveal his mission yet remain discreet. So, he was shooed away. How could he risk blurting out that he alone knew the name of the assassin sent to dispatch Francisco Madero? Who would listen to a dirty, half-naked boy? Who would believe he wasn't just a peasant spinning tales? More precisely, who would tolerate him dropping his pants to show the name of the assassin, a gringo, which had been cut into his own flesh? The cuts still stung. When they didn't burn. The vaquero had spoken the gringo's name, repeated it over and over for Alejandro – that and the irrefutable source of the information. But Alejandro couldn't remember the assassin's name, couldn't repeat it. It was a Yankee name, a foreign, tongue-twisting, impossible-to-speak name. But he remembered the source: Galena. An agent from Pancho Villa.

He walked around the Customs House again, having no notion of what to look for, only knowing that something terrible was going to happen here. But no one would be carrying a sign reading, 'Deliver confidential messages for Francisco Madero here,' or 'Drop assassination details, along with your suggestions, in this box.'

The Customs House was a huge building, but aside from the open doors in the front, the structure remained locked up. It had ventilation slots high up, just beneath the eaves, but the wooden side-shutters and back doors were all closed and latched. The normal course of business, as Alejandro remembered it, had been abandoned. He'd been here once before, with his father, who shipped hides across the Rio Grande to the Yankee tanning companies. He remembered a frenetic place, with white-suited officials and tan-uniformed soldiers checking through goods, arguing with shipping agents, stamping papers, approving or disapproving boxes and crates and packages and barrels, all moving hither and yonder. Even his father, who had the patience of a saint and got on well with everyone, was exhausted and irritable after a day of waiting, answering questions, completing endless forms throughout the rising heat of the day.

Alejandro had wandered inside the hall then, but now, at 4:00 p.m., men at the front doors were turning people away, allowing only workmen to come and go. From what Alejandro could see from the outside, they were arranging chairs and tables, and hanging flags of the republic from the rafters and in front of the dais. He returned back across the street, to the shade that had worked its way to the eastern side of the hotel. The establishment had gotten even busier, and whereas he'd been hustled along earlier by hotel employees, no one bothered him now, took no notice even as people all but trampled over him. Painted ladies laughed and lined the balcony railing on the second floor, or squatted, peeking through the balusters, waving handkerchiefs to passers-by, who returned their calls. The street was crowded with horses and carriages and motor cars, kicking up blinding dust, and the buildings along the

sidewalks were lined with tarpaulins against the sun, and jammed with vendors hawking yet more of those small flags and every kind of food and drink.

Oh, how Alejandro missed Mama and Papa. They'd been away only since yesterday, gone to Chihuahua City on business. But Alejandro knew he was doing the right thing. Even if it had cost him El Dardo.

He thought of his beautiful horse, in his mind's eye saw him jumping the fence in the corral, saw how he'd look back at him whenever Alejandro mounted, saw him prancing around the hacienda, and . . . mi Dios . . . saw him this very moment being cantered under the weight of a fat colonel riding at the head of a cavalry detachment. Alejandro couldn't believe his eyes, but yes, it was El Dardo! And there was a saddle on him. A magnificent saddle trimmed with silver, a saddle befitting this regal animal.

As the troop approached the hotel, the crowd opened for them. These were different soldiers, and neither Salgado nor Rodriguez was amongst them. Most likely, the colonel had requisitioned the stallion from the thief Salgado, and Alejandro took some comfort in that fact.

The troop passed in front of the Rio Grande Hotel, where the colonel looked with interest at the throngs standing on the porch and up on the balconies. He tipped his hat to a few señoritas, but seemed to be searching through the crowd for someone. The crowd admired El Dardo, and the colonel turned the horse in a circle for their benefit. El Dardo kicked suddenly, seemingly spooked by the crowd. But Alejandro knew it was because of his new rider. Maybe El Dardo even saw Alejandro in the sea of faces. The colonel reined in, and swore, but got control of El Dardo. A fleeting thought rushed through Alejandro's young mind, and he nearly ran out into the street to claim his animal, thinking that surely this high-ranking officer would do the honorable thing, acknowledge the 'Circle A' brand on El Dardo. "Idiota!" he reprimanded himself. The colonel was just a bigger thief than Teniente Salgado. Well, fatter, anyhow.

The colonel was laughing and talking as he ambled El Dardo through the crowds past the hotel. Peons gave these men a wide berth, and whenever they didn't, got knocked aside by a teniente who appeared to enjoy his role of path-maker for his overfed colonel. After a half-block, the fat man dismounted and handed the reins to a trooper, who also held the reins of several other mounts. He started walking them down to the stables on Calle Riverino, a block away.

This presented an opportunity for Alejandro to reclaim his father's property. Yes, he'd wait until they were out of the area, and then . . . but no, he'd nearly forgotten his mission again. He stood there, torn between reclaiming El Dardo and the duty that brought him here in the first place. Salgado's patrol had murdered the messengers, and this rotund usurper had ended up with El Dardo. Were they

connected? Of course they must be; they were army men. Díaz's minions. Alejandro began to dislike this fat old soldier even more. To begin with, the colonel was a cavalryman, had surely seen the 'Circle A' brand on El Dardo, and must have known the animal had been stolen, or in the vernacular of the military, requisitioned.

He decided to follow the colonel.

Alejandro trailed the officers back towards the plaza. They stopped on a street corner, talking, eyeing people as they passed around a bottle of tequila. When the bottle was finished, they separated, the colonel bearing towards the hotel, the major and captain walking to the Customs House.

The colonel crossed the road, climbed the stairs up to the hotel porch, and looked in through the dining-room windows. Apparently not spotting who he was looking for, he made his way along the crowded porch to the other end, peered over the swinging doors into the saloon. The place was smoke-filled and noisy, drinkers three deep at the long bar. He pushed his way in, and Alejandro slipped up beneath the swinging doors, saw the colonel meet his party, a gringo. Back-slapping and hand-shaking, the gringo finished his beer and the pair went back out onto the porch, chummy, like old amigos. They almost flattened Alejandro against the wall with the swinging doors. But they paid him no attention.

"Por favor, Coronel. Let us sit in my automobile," the gringo invited.

His accent sounded strange to Alejandro, unlike any he'd heard before. But the only gringos he'd ever met were the buyers from Texas. Those men had talked funny, like they had until eternity just to utter a solitary word. This man was another kind of gringo. From another place.

"You are looking well, Herr Kruszewski," the colonel appraised, brushing dust from the man's lapel.

Alejandro froze. That was the name! The name he'd copied from the paper that the dying vaquero carried, the name he'd carved into his flesh. He tried, but couldn't repeat the name to himself, couldn't work his lips about all the consonants. Dios! So many consonants. He hadn't been able to repeat it for the dying vaquero, and still couldn't. If his life depended on it, he couldn't. But that was the name, all right.

"Ja," the Prussian said. "You are looking fit yourself, Coronel."

More back-slapping as the two big men headed along the row of carriages and automobiles parked along the side street. They climbed into a large vehicle, the biggest one parked on the dusty thoroughfare. It was a 1906 Renault with a rear cabin enclosed, a glass pane dividing it from the driver's seat. The colonel flopped into the back of the saloon, while the Prussian pulled out a jump seat, managed to plant his hefty rear end on the small chair. Alejandro wrinkled his nose; they were fat men who ate too many tamales, and he almost laughed at how the car groaned from their weight.

In front sat the driver, a younger gringo, a wiry fellow with short-cropped hair, ruddy complexion and unfriendly black eyes. He had stingy lips, Alejandro thought. No lips at all. His flesh looked like leather, and the right side of his face was scarred. Alejandro had seen such scars from saber-fighting. The glass partition was up between this man and Señor Kruszewski in the cabin, but with the warm weather, the Prussian dropped the side windows of the cabin, ordered the driver, a man he called Keigel, to get out and take a walk.

Alejandro pulled off the rag that had been his shirt, then slipped up behind the Renault. By pretending to polish the headlights and grille on the vehicle parked behind the Renault, he could hear what the men were saying. But they were speaking in broken English and Spanish, and Alejandro couldn't understand any of the English. They could be saying anything, and he'd never know. But it didn't matter, did it? Kruszewski was the name Alejandro had been given by the dying vaquero. This was the man who would kill Francesco Madero.

As Fritz Kruszewski and Colonel Martinez spoke in the cabin – Martinez with a small command of English, the Prussian with a passable knowledge of both Spanish and English – Alejandro listened as he rubbed his dirty cloth across the paint of the 1904 Oldsmobile. While he managed to catch only a few Spanish words, he was sure he knew what they were talking about.

Minutes later, the owner of the Oldsmobile came out from the side door of the saloon. He was well under the influence, but fixed his eyes on Alejandro tampering with his vehicle. He shouted out, "Git that dirty rag off my auta-mo-beel, you little heathen."

Colonel Martinez turned in his seat, looked through the narrow rear window at Alejandro. Kruszewski half-stood, peered over Martinez's shoulder.

"I ain't told you to clean mah property, you filthy beggar." The owner of the Olds staggered over, took a flying kick at Alejandro. He missed, fell hard on the boarded sidewalk. Some of the other boys laughed, and Colonel Martinez chuckled. But Kruszewski kept his eyes on Alejandro, who'd glanced up at him through the tiny window to see if he was watching. Alejandro's eyes could have gone anywhere, looked in a thousand other places – at the car's owner scraping himself off the sidewalk, at the other boys – anywhere at all. But he'd made the mistake of looking straight at Kruszewski.

"Now what do you suppose that dirty little peon finds so interesting with us, Colonel Martinez?" Kruszewski pondered, casting a suspicious eye at the officer.

Martinez shrugged, turned again, and watched Alejandro walking away.

"It is nothing. He is just an urchin. A peasant boy." He turned back, finished counting out the money he was paying the Prussian.

But Kruszewski's instincts were piqued. "My profession is intrigue, Coronel. And I've been

practicing it far too long to take a seemingly innocent coincidence for granted.”

Martinez shrugged again. Yet Kruszewski continued to watch Alejandro as he walked away, turned the corner in front of the hotel. Kruszewski stared after him, was almost convinced that the boy was coincidental, but Alejandro peeked back around the corner at the Renault.

Kruszewski smiled to himself, shot a glance at Martinez. He'd seen the colonel send his major and captain over to the Customs House, but how did the boy figure in this business with the colonel? It seemed unlikely that this Mexican dog had recruited such a young confederate; that required more imagination than this buffoon possessed. Martinez was no more than a messenger himself, an unnecessary spoke in a larger wheel. Diaz's wheel.

Still, the boy was involved. On that, Kruszewski would wager his life. And wagering his life was a game he had played often. Also just as obvious was that Martinez's henchmen were going to silence him at the first opportunity, once he'd shot Madero. Why would Diaz's soldiers risk letting Kruszewski live? And why leave the contract fee in a dead man's pocket? It would go like this: as soon as Madero was dead, one of Martinez's triggermen – a regular army officer, for certain – would be Johnny on the spot, heroically gunning down the vile foreign assassin before he could flee. Kudos to the vigilant officer, kudos to Martinez as the officer's superior.

Obvious to a blind man, Kruszewski thought. But he wasn't worried, because his own deception lay just ahead.

“You like my automobile, Coronel?”

Martinez was finishing the count. He handed the money to Kruszewski, then looked around, taking in the splendid vehicle with its polished brass fittings and plush, velvet-covered seats. “Yes. It is very beautiful.” He appraised the machine, coveting it immediately. “Although it does not compare to my new stallion.”

“Perhaps not. But it doesn't smell of dung.” Kruszewski laughed. “Would you care for a ride?”

Martinez smiled, wondering just how regal he might look, riding in one of these handsome machines. Yes, he accepted with thanks. Why not take a ride? After all, it would become his property just as soon as Kruszewski met his maker.

Alejandro watched Kruszewski step out from the back of the vehicle and Keigel, the chauffeur, return to the car and get in behind the wheel. Kruszewski went to the front, cranked the starting handle. The engine jumped to life.

Martinez stuck his head out of the back window. “It may not smell, but I have no need to wind up my stallion,” he reminded Kruszewski with a laugh.

“But my automobile does not shit on your boots,” the German returned.

They both laughed as Kruszewski stepped aside, motioned for Keigel to carry the fat colonel away for a spin. Martinez was surprised that Kruszewski wasn't coming along. He watched him, waving goodbye on the sidewalk, a strange smile on his face as the Renault started off down the street.

Indeed, goodbye, Kruszewski thought as he returned to the saloon through the side door. He had time to kill.

Chapter 6

Mexico City

From first appearances, Roth thought that the Alvarez property was an old Spanish-style mission set back fifty yards off of busy Carrereta Toluca. Modest by any account. A high, ornate, wrought-iron fence ran the width of the property. In iron lettering at several places along the top of the fence, the name Cuernavaca was spelled out. On either side of the mission-style building were high juniper trees that obscured everything beyond.

Roth's taxi pulled up at the closed gate and the driver checked the address on the slip of paper Roth had given him. There was no number posted on the property, so the driver got out and asked an armed guard patrolling the grounds from inside the fence.

The guard, with an Uzi machine-gun slung over his shoulder, listened to the driver but kept his eyes on Roth. Another guard fifty yards away also carried an Uzi, but didn't seem interested in them.

"This is the address, señor," the driver said, coming back to the taxi. "But cars do not enter here."
"Where do we enter?"

"He will tell me," the driver said. He walked back over to the fence, talked with the guard. They jabbered in Spanish, pointing here and there. It seemed there was a main driveway somewhere along a lane running off of the boulevard.

The driver returned, tried to construct what he wanted to say in English. He pointed back to the lane in question – now in the direction of oncoming traffic as they looked – made a circular motion with his finger. "We have to go to a road behind us, go all the way around that way, and we will see the main gate."

The service road in front of them was one-way, and they'd missed the turn-off.

"So we have to circle several blocks just to get back to there?" Roth asked, pointing back to the lane.

"Sí, señor. Several kilometers. I am sorry. The property is very large, and there are many one-way streets."

"Can't I go in here? Isn't that the house." He pointed to the building.

The driver asked the guard, who told him no, that this building was just servants' quarters. Roth understood enough Spanish to get the gist of it, but he was tired of sitting in the taxi. "Never mind," he said to the driver. "I'll walk around to the side gate."

"Sí, señor." The driver opened the car door. "It is perhaps 500 meters down that lane." He pointed with his hand, held like a salute.

“Five hundred meters?” Roth got out of the taxi, paid the driver, tipped him another ten pesos, and studied the traffic flowing along the boulevard. There shouldn’t be a problem catching another cab back to the hotel.

The guard inside the fence walked him to the end of this side of the property, pointed down the shady lane. The wrought-iron fence, or paling – thick iron bars shaped like spears at the top – was about eight feet high and continued as far as he could see. As he started down the lane, he heard the guard talking into his radio.

Cars were parked along both sides of the lane, apparently owned by occupants of smaller homes and apartment buildings whose high walls faced the Alvarez property. Most of the cars were parked up close to the paling so that traffic could squeeze by without losing a fender. Still, the width of the lane with cars parked on both sides was precarious to all but the smaller cars, or maybe two skinny cats passing each other.

Shrubs and trees along this side of the lane grew close to the fence, making it impossible to see the grounds inside. If all of this was the Alvarez property, he estimated that the estate covered twenty acres. A hundred meters further on, there was a small closed gate in the fence. Roth tried to look through the bushes inside, but another armed guard wandered across his path. This guy also carried an Uzi. He pointed further down the lane. As Roth proceeded, he took in the cameras positioned at intervals atop steel poles. They were likely monitored from somewhere inside the premises.

Roth reconsidered his original appraisal of the place. It seemed like a fortress. Seemed. But diligence wasn’t a Mexican trait. He searched his Spanish vocabulary, limited as it was. Did ‘diligence’ even translate in Spanish? Yeah, maybe. Diligente. Maybe aplicado. Roth’s occupational hazards—insatiable curiosity and the occasional challenge—percolated when he saw such places: to compromise the premises by stealth, steal in for something valuable, and out again without detection.

After what he thought was a quarter-mile further along, he saw a gate up ahead, situated at a small T-junction in the lane where another small street ran perpendicular to the entrance of the property. An unoccupied police car sat in the shade outside the gate. The main driveway was inside a large double gate that opened wide enough for a pair of M1 tanks to pass each other. Once again, over the gate, the name of the estate appeared in large, cast-iron letters: Cuernavaca. There were three guards here, two with Uzis strapped over their shoulders. As Roth approached, one pointed out the third man, who sat in a guard shack off to the side. He was an older guy with a long, silver mustache and a .45 automatic tucked into his trousers.

He waved Roth over. “Who are you, señor?”

Roth checked his watch. He was exactly on time, so if the security was any good, the old geezer

should know who he was. "Name's Roth."

"What is your business here?"

"To see Señora Alvarez. She's expecting me."

"Have you identification, señor?"

Roth entered the shack, took out his passport, handed it to him. Inside the gate, he saw men working on the lawn and in the flowerbeds along the driveway that ran back into high juniper trees. Everyone on the estate, including the security, wore grey uniforms, but these guards looked like they'd slept in theirs.

Silver Mustache thumbed through the passport. "Have you any other identification, señor?"

Roth smiled. The old boy wasn't stupid; he seemed to miss nothing. Couldn't say the same about the guards, who seemed to be sleeping on their feet. Roth took his billfold from his breast pocket, pulled out his driver's license and New York State Private Investigator's ID card, both of which had his mug shot. Silver Mustache compared his features on all three documents, scratched down some info in a logbook, handed them back. He held Roth's eyes as he picked up a radio, announced in Spanish that Señor Roth had arrived. He had to repeat the message several times on an old radio that, from appearances, had been at Custer's last stand.

Roth looked down the lane to where it disappeared around a bend several hundred yards further. He'd counted three security officers in front and along the southern reaches of the property. There were obviously more. Estimating two twelve-hour shifts, plus maids, gardeners, cooks, and drivers, the household expenses amounted to a pretty penny, even here. Just possibly, the check he carried for 4.2 million amounted to chump-change for the widow.

He walked over to the gate, expecting one of the guards to open it, but a metallic click sounded, and a doorway within the gate opened.

"Please wait a moment, señor. Someone will come to receive you," Silver Mustache said.

Roth stepped inside the gate. There were cameras above it and the guard shack. He smiled for the camera. Apparently, the closed-circuit monitors weren't in the shack. He moved off to the side to get out of the sun, lit up a cigarette. There was a huge carport nearby, under which were parked vehicles of all description. Beyond that, a bridle path that ran down into some trees.

After a few minutes, a young woman came walking down the driveway. She was dressed in white shorts, white tank top, white tennis shoes, carrying a tennis racket, on which she bounced a ball. She turned to wave to the gardeners, chirping something in Spanish. They stopped their work, laughed, and admired her openly. As she neared, Roth could appreciate why.

He flipped away his cigarette as the girl approached. She was in her late teens, stood about five-

three, bumps and curves everywhere. She smiled, her face reminding him somewhat of that movie star, the one with the wide mouth and the nose that looked like she'd caught it in a pencil-sharpener. Except this girl had meat on her. Just the right amount, in all the right places. Soft olive complexion; lustrous black hair tied in a ponytail that bounced with her stride.

"Señor Roth?" she called out, coming up to him, extending her hand.

He took her hand and shook it firmly, since her body language dictated that.

"I am Lily," she said. "Most pleased to meet you." She was the same girl he'd spoken to last evening on the phone. She looked around. "Where is your car?"

"I took a taxi," he said, releasing her hand.

"You are very hot, yes?"

The question took him off-guard, and he wondered if that's what she'd intended. Probably; she seemed the precocious type. Playful. "Not at all," he answered.

Lily searched his eyes, then turned to one of the guards. "Paraguas, por favor."

Before Roth could say that it wasn't necessary, the guard ducked into the shack, where Silver Mustache handed him an umbrella. He opened it and hurried over, handed it to Lily.

"In the States, we only use these when it's raining," Roth said.

Lily put the tennis ball in her pocket, tucked the racket under her arm, and closed in on Roth. She took his arm, carrying the umbrella above his head as she led him up the driveway. "You did require a car, then?"

"No need to bother," he said. "That's what taxis are for."

"We shall return you in a car. No argument." She smiled wide, looked up at him with flirting eyes.

"Señora Alvarez is home?"

"Of course. She awaits you."

"And you are?"

"Aunt Felicia's niece," Lily replied, looking askance, like it should be obvious.

The smell of fresh-cut grass hung in the air, and on sections of the vast lawn that had been cut, water sprinklers threw up a mist in the morning light. The drive was lined with rows of giant junipers set back behind beds of azaleas and roses. It was an impressive garden; a small army of gardeners kept it that way.

They reached the tree line through which the Alvarez hacienda came into view across another wide garden. Off to the right was a croquet lawn, and, further back, Roth saw the top of a three-meter diving board. The horse trail weaved through the trees and into another wood.

The main house was an immense, rambling home, probably built generations ago. Maybe twenty bedrooms. It likely housed an extended family, typical of wealthy Mexican clans; sons and their brides never left the parental home once married, and daughters did so only when they were married.

“Your home is beautiful,” he said.

“You have not seen my home,” Lily corrected, looking up and making certain that the sun didn’t find a path to attack Roth under the umbrella.

“Where do you live?”

“My family is from Guadalajara. I am visiting. Summer vacation from university.”

“Where do you go to school?”

“Madrid. Where I will return in September for my final term.”

Which accounted for her accent. They reached the main house and, under the eaves, Lily closed the umbrella, dropped it into a large adobe vase by the main entrance. A servant stood ready to open the door for them. Lily smiled, stood a little too close to Roth, said, “My aunt awaits you inside, and my cousin awaits me with the foolish notion that he’ll beat me at tennis. I must keep him in his place, of course.”

“Whack him with your racket if he doesn’t concede,” Roth said.

“Hola.” A voice from behind him.

He turned to see Señora Felicia Christina Romero Alvarez de Morro standing in the doorway. Holy friggin’ frijoles! The widow was in her early forties, but looked maybe thirty, a slightly older version of Lily, but possessing far better nomenclature, if that was possible; bumps and curves everywhere, plus a wondrous, beautiful face. Shocking blue eyes in a perfect complexion. Devastating. She was dressed entirely in mourning black: a long, flowing, thin wool skirt; a silk camisa up to her neck and covering her arms – her long, dark hair melting into it; lace stockings, black shoes. And gold all over; a profusion of bracelets on both wrists, several necklaces, and rings on nearly all fingers. A beautiful, walking, talking El Dorado. The only thing that hinted at her age were a few wisps of gray around her temples, and Roth guessed that she had no intention of hiding her vintage, for if all women in their forties looked like the señora, younger women would fade out of fashion.

She approached, extending her hand, bringing a faint scent of musk and a fainter smile. She stood close to Roth, as seemed to be a familial habit, flanking him between herself and Lily. Roth shook her hand, his heart rate increasing instantly. A good thing that hand-kissing was out of style, lest he started with her fingers and proceeded to chew her arm off up to the elbow before onlookers could beat him away.

With no small effort, he pulled his attention away from her when Lily spoke. “This is my Tía

Felicia,” Lily introduced. “Aunt Felicia. This poor man came in a taxi.”

Felicia bid him welcome. “We will see that you are returned to your hotel properly.”

“That’s exactly what I told him,” Lily insisted.

“And we advised Miss Souza, the agent, that you were to stay here at Cuernavaca on your visit. You must think us rude.”

“Not at all,” Roth replied, as a double whammy of exotic perfumes came wafting in from both flanks, assaulting visual and olfactory senses. Basic infantry tactics. A knockout blow from their heavy artillery would come in the form of these heavenly creatures actually touching him. Roth couldn’t help thinking he’d landed in the middle of an X-rated movie, the tired plot being some unsuspecting slob who stumbles upon a pair of beautiful, horny vixens intent on seducing him.

“Come in, please, Mr. Roth.” Felicia swept her arm towards the door. “And Lily, tell Taurino that lunch will be in one hour.”

Lily wrinkled her nose at the mention of Taurino. “Sí, Auntie,” she said, bored-like. She pushed around Roth like a lazy cat, her shoulder brushing ever so slightly against him, and sauntered off. Roth made a bet with himself that she’d look back, and when she reached the end of the terrace, he won the bet. A trace of a smile seemed to leave a promise in her wake. Lily was an appetizing little heart-collector. And knew it.

With half of the assault forces disengaged, Roth could regroup. How unfair the magic that women could work on men.

Inside, it was cool, although many windows were open. The foyer led into a gigantic hallway, high, wide and long. Halfway up the hallway stairs was a wide landing, over which a life-size painting dominated the entire area. It depicted a beautiful young woman walking in a meadow. Were the ceilings not as high, and without the great expanse of the home, the painting would seem inordinately huge, but here in Cuernavaca, it was appropriate.

The hallway led into a cavernous living room, two floors high, with balustrades circling the upper floor, off of which Roth guessed were more corridors with bedrooms.

“You must pay no attention to Lily, Mr. Roth,” Felicia explained. “She is such a coquette. Her family is from Guadalajara, where the señoritas are notorious flirts, and before that, their ancestors were citizens of, alas, the other Guadalajara. The little Guadalajara, outside Madrid.”

“She looks a bit like that movie star.”

“Julia Roberts? Everyone seems to think so, although I do not see it.”

“Far more beautiful, actually.”

“You are very kind.”

“Softer,” he added.

“Uhm, yes, I suppose.”

“Shapelier, too,” he pushed.

“I take your point, Mr. Roth,” she said with finality. She showed him to a large leather divan, sat down, studying the business card he’d handed her.

Roth remained standing, looking around the room. In one corner of the room was a massive mahogany desk surrounded by leather and cast-iron chairs. “Could we sit over there, señora? I have papers for you to sign.”

“It is too early to talk business.” She patted the divan for him to sit next to her. “And the cook is preparing lunch, which you must take with us. Would you care for something to drink?”

“A coffee if it’s no trouble.” He chose instead to sit in a large, matching easy chair across from her. Felicia rang a small bell on the coffee table, which, like everything in the room, was a heavy, monstrous affair not easily moved when the maid vacuumed. The living room, like the rest of the home that he’d seen thus far, was distinctly Castilian. Roth studied a large oil portrait hanging high on one wall.

“That is my late husband,” Felicia pointed out.

The late Daniel Romero Alvarez stared down benevolently at them. If the artist had executed the portrait faithfully, the deceased had been a very handsome man.

“He was a wonderful person,” she said.

Roth was already wondering how fast he could get out of here. Not that Señora Alvarez’s company was hard to take, her being a visual feast, but he was here on business, not a pleasant mission at that, and he never appreciated temptation when it would go nowhere, could go nowhere. He’d be here an hour at the outside if he didn’t stay for lunch, which he had no intention of doing, was just wondering how to tell her. But he couldn’t rush it; some widows seemed to need conversation before accepting cash on the barrelhead for a husband’s life. Maybe the señora was one of those.

It was at this point that he expressed condolences on behalf of Amalgamated Life of Illinois, and agreed with her that Daniel Alvarez’s death was indeed a sad loss. What he didn’t say was that the loss was particularly sad for Amalgamated and their re-insurer. Four point two million worth of sadness. A lot of tamales.

His return flight to LA was at 4:00 p.m. He’d have to stop by his hotel for his bag and shoot for the airport by 2:00. He checked his watch: 10:30. No problem.

He was about to advise Felicia that he was on a tight schedule and regrettably wouldn’t be able to stay for lunch, when Lily came running into the room through doors leading from a terrace. She

appeared to be very upset, nearly in tears. She looked at Felicia, then at Roth, and ran out to the hallway, then up the stairs, disappeared somewhere down a wing of bedrooms on the second floor. They heard her bedroom door slam shut, its sound echoing around the cavernous home. Cousin Taurino – a dark, handsome young man of around twenty, came in moments later. He also threw a glance over at them, then went off somewhere downstairs.

Felicia rolled her eyes, smiled apologetic, and stood. “Excuse me, Mr. Roth. Lily is having another emotional crisis and I must see to this emergency.” As she headed up the stairs, a maid entered the living room, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. Felicia called down to her to prepare coffee for Señor Roth, then she too was gone.

The maid returned with his coffee five minutes later, but Señora Alvarez hadn’t. He wanted a cigarette to go with his coffee, but saw no ashtrays. Along the side of the room, sets of immense double doors led out onto the terrace from whence Lily had flown. It was crowded with patio furniture, enough tables to host a large dinner party, but no one was out there. He carried his coffee outside, lit up a cigarette, every now and then peeking inside to see if the señora had returned.

When he finished his cigarette, he returned inside. But thirty minutes more passed until she returned carrying a thick file folder. It was now 11:15. He should have been finished with this business by now. Gettin’ close to saddle-up time.

She sat down, apologizing again. It seemed that Lily and Taurino could barely tolerate each other. They were second cousins and, it seemed, too much alike. School vacation schedules just happened to place them in Mexico City at the same time. Taurino, Felicia explained, was also studying in Spain, but attended school in Barcelona.

“You would think that one of them could have spent the summer in Europe. But no, Tía Felicia gets both for the season!” She laughed, apologized again. “I should send one of them to Puerto Vallarta. Like cats and dogs. They bicker over everything. Now it is tennis.” She held her hands out, claw-like, smiled with her jaw tight. “That fiery Latin temperament, you know.”

Roth smiled and nodded his understanding, but before he could press his business forward, she asked: “What do you think about my husband’s death?”

Roth hadn’t thought about it at all. “I’m not aware of the details, Señora Alvarez.”

“But your firm investigated on behalf of Amalgamated Life. I recognize the name from your calling card.”

“One of our representatives, yes. But I’m stationed in Asia. I heard about the case from my partner. But I know very little.”

“Your company was satisfied?”

How could he explain that Premier had been hired only to confirm Daniel Alvarez’s death, and as for who killed him, Roth didn’t give a rat’s ass. As long as it wasn’t the widow here. In fact, the company that held the K&R – kidnap and ransom – coverage at first suspected the case was a put-on, that Alvarez had had himself kidnapped to defraud the ransom payment from them. But with a ransom note came Daniel Alvarez’s right index finger, checked against his known fingerprints. The ransom was paid, yet a week later, his body turned up in a crate at the border. As long as it wasn’t a suicide, or death hadn’t occurred as a result of misadventure, the policies came with double indemnity and all were payable. Insurance-wise, it really didn’t matter who killed him – as long as it wasn’t Felicia Alvarez. Even if she had, the policy would still pay his estate. “We weren’t involved with the ransom coverage, señora. Only the death benefit.”

Once it had been determined that it was Daniel Alvarez’s body in the crate, Amalgamated was satisfied, and authorized payment.

“But what do you think?” she pressed.

Roth held up his hands. “I really know nothing more, ma’am. I’m only here to deliver your check.”

“Why did Miss Souza not want to come?”

Evelyn Souza was the agent on the policy. From what Nina has said, she didn’t want to fly down, and rarely set foot in her native Mexico. Something had spooked her about the insured’s death. Roth thought that a bit unusual.

“No idea why.” Roth shook his head. “Insurers usually utilize the services of firms such as mine for these matters.”

“But doesn’t the agent usually deliver benefit checks? I mean, is it not a good thing for the agent to pay a call, perhaps seek more business prospects when the company they represent pays a benefit? That would seem like a good business practice.”

Smart woman, Roth thought. “Well, yes, that’s good marketing, of course.”

“Of course. So?”

“Normally, in the States, the agent personally delivers the check.”

“But not in Mexico?”

“I have no idea why Amalgamated asked us to do it. We’re an international firm, so—”

“You work internationally?” Without waiting for an answer, she went on: “You must be very skillful, Mr. Roth.”

Roth shrugged. “I’ve been around is all it amounts to.”

“You’re too modest. Please, tell me about yourself.”

“I really need to finish this, señora. I’ve got a return flight to LA this afternoon.”

Felicia studied him for quiet moments. “I would like to know what happened to my husband.”

“I have no idea where the matter rests. Haven’t the police come up with anything?” It was true. Until yesterday, he’d heard nothing on the matter since Nina ran it by him months ago. He knew only that the investigation had developed nothing on the widow’s involvement, and there was no question that Alvarez had been abducted and murdered by a person or persons unknown.

“Nothing much,” she replied. “Daniel disappeared between Puerto Vallarta and Mexico City. That is all that anyone seems to know.” She bit her lower lip, seemed to search the surface of the coffee table, covered in magazines, for where to go next. “The president himself, you know, has pledged his complete assistance. Daniel was a very important man. And the police have been here several times with questions. They are most polite, and promise that they will get results. But nothing has been learned. Not really. I have also hired private investigators.” She produced a business card from the file in her lap.

Roth read the card. Blackwell Security. They were a well-known international investigation firm. Pricey. “What have they come up with?”

“Nothing more than the police. I believe Blackwell is merely repeating the police reports.”

“I know this firm,” he said, handing the card back to her. “Good reputation. I’m sure that between them and the Mexican authorities, they’re doing everything possible.”

Felicia shook her head, didn’t take the card back. “I do not think they will ever find the people responsible for this.” She turned her head aside, covered her face with her hand.

“Well, shall we complete these formalities, señora?” Roth pulled his papers from his jacket.

She didn’t answer immediately. When she looked at him, her eyes were watery. “I cannot just now, Mr. Roth. Please excuse me.” She stood and walked upstairs again.

Chapter 7

There had been few times in his professional life when Roth didn't know what to do. This was one of them. It was nearly noon, and at this rate, he was going to miss his plane.

Felicia hadn't said that she wasn't going to accept the check. She just hadn't accepted it. Yet. Hadn't even looked at it. The money had to be paid, of course, and in his memory, he couldn't recall a beneficiary ever refusing money.

He had a notion to leave it on the coffee table, but he filed that idea away in his hip pocket. He needed her signature on a receipt, even though a cancelled check would bear her signature. He wondered if Daniel Alvarez wasn't dead after all – and if she had knowledge of this, taking possession of the check constituted fraud. No. He filed that idea in his other hip pocket. If there was one thing about Alfredo, it was his instincts and ability. If he said Daniel Alvarez was dead, then he was, with no plan to return to life.

Maybe accepting the check finally drove the loss home. Here, lady, here's the money for your dead husband. Now let's everybody just forget about this hiccup on Amalgamated's balance sheet, shall we?

Was she coming back down? He sat back on the couch, went over the papers he had again. He needed her identification, needed to photograph those items, plus take a snapshot of her, and needed her signature on the receipt. He'd tape record all this, of course. Openly. No need to record her surreptitiously. Plus, a witness would be preferable, even a maid. When it came right down to it, all he'd need was five minutes. Five lousy minutes and then he'd head back to his hotel, grab his bag, hop back in the taxi, make a dash for the airport.

After a while, it was obvious she wasn't coming down soon. Maybe in an hour or so. Hell, this was Mexico. Maybe mañana. Sure, just take your sweet ol' time, honey. I've got nothing to do but wait until you finish your bawling or whatever you're doing up there. The guy's been dead for months. Get used to it. Get over it.

That was a callous thought. He felt bad. Well, not really. More annoyed than anything else, especially when he thought back to Teri in the saddle, with a growing suspicion that he wasn't going to reach LA tonight.

He went out and wandered down another immense hallway, where paintings covered the walls from shoulder to ceiling. A very high ceiling. He turned into yet another long hall, and wound his way back out onto the terrace by the living room. He lit another cigarette. From here, he could see the swimming pool. A few girls were frolicking in the water. Looked too young from this distance to be of

any interest. But when one sprang out of the water and climbed up the ladder to the three-meter board, Roth decided to amble over to the pool; the babe preparing to dive was stacked. No kid, this one. Not from the neck down, anyhow.

He reached the pool enclosure, walked down a few flagstone steps to a large, tiled area surrounding it. The girl had dived in and was now back with a bevy of others, huddling in the shallow end. They turned when he approached, giggled, casting looks with their hands up to their mouths. They looked older than he'd estimated; all were probably college age.

He sat on a bench at the far end of the pool from them, stubbed out his cigarette on the sole of his shoe, put the butt in his pocket. The girl who'd dived broke from the pack and waded over to where he was, glancing back at her girlfriends, as if she was approaching him on a dare. She asked him something in Spanish. It was about Lily.

"No hablo Español," he replied, smiling, thinking that this place was getting to be more like the Playboy Mansion by the minute. Except for employees, he hadn't seen another male aside from Taurino.

"Oh!" the girl said. She turned and relayed this to the others, and they all giggled again. She turned back to Roth, asked in English, "Who are you?"

She was very pretty, and Roth smiled at her lack of subtlety. "Another 'who am I?' I'm the only American who still drinks French wine. But don't let that get around."

"You were speaking with Lily. Is she coming down?"

"I have no idea, sugar." He stood and walked over, squatted down at the edge of the pool. She was now explaining 'sugar' to the others. "I'm here to see Señora Alvarez," he added.

The girl translated this also. "You are a friend of hers?"

Roth shook his head. This place was just full of curious people. "Business."

"But Señora Alvarez is not in business."

"So it seems." He turned, looked back at the terrace, then back at her. "While I'm waiting, I thought I'd come over and watch you dive. That was pretty good."

She held her hands up to her mouth, smiled through her fingers.

"Do any of your friends speak English?" he asked, his eyes not on her face.

The girl shook her head.

Roth almost said something untoward, but thought better of it, feeling like an old reprobate. A joke came to mind, one about an obscene caller who gets a little girl on the phone, asks to speak to her mother or older sister. When it becomes apparent that there are no adult females in the home for him to shock, he gets his quarter's worth by saying 'pee-pee, ca-ca, pooh-pooh,' and hangs up. Roth laughed,

and a question mark crossed the girl's face.

She held her hand up to her eyes to block out the sun. "Why do you ask if they speak English?"

He smiled, shook his head, and stood up.

Her eyes said that she suspected why he'd asked. "Are you staying for lunch?"

"So I've been told."

She started to backstroke over to the clutch, threw her head back, her obvious charms ever more prominent. "Good," she called back. "Please sit by me so that I may practice my English."

Roth started back to the terrace. He knew the girls were chattering about him. He caught a word here and there, some more basic Spanish returning to his vocabulary, but he couldn't imagine what there was to make such a fuss over. They were silly, spoiled, rich kids; anywhere else they'd be working for a living or carrying some brat around on their hip.

In the living room, Felicia still hadn't returned downstairs. He sat on the couch, flipped through a few women's magazines, looking at the lingerie ads. He noticed a fund-raising letter and a brochure from an orphanage next to the magazines, with a letter to Señora Alvarez. She apparently sponsored the institution.

A maid came in and announced in Spanish what he took for lunch being served. She swept her hand towards the rear of the home, as if he should follow her.

He trailed her through corridors leading to a huge, circular atrium, like the living room, where lunch would be served. He counted eight placemats at a large, round table. But no one was there. Three servers hurried around, and he sat down as one of them filled the water glasses.

From somewhere upstairs, doors slammed, chattering, laughter, and playful screams resounded through this part of the home. The girls from the swimming party came down a back stairway into the courtyard. Most had just thrown terrycloth robes over their swimsuits.

The girl he'd talked to at the pool saw him, swept into the chair next to his. "Hola, Señor Businessman," she greeted him. She was prettier with her hair dried; a small round face, large eyes, long reddish hair. And he couldn't help noticing those very prominent Dagmars pushing out under her bathrobe. Yet, on second thought, she was younger than he first estimated. Maybe fifteen, sixteen. And he guessed the other girls ranged from seventeen to twenty. It was difficult to tell; they were all very healthy young women, sunburnt from playing away their school vacation.

"I'm Tina," she announced. She pointed to the three other girls who sat together on the other side of the table. "And that is Lena, and Gina – my sisters – and our precious, good friend, Carmelita."

"Hola, Tina, Lena, Gina, and their precious, good friend, Carmelita," Roth said. "Sounds like a song, doesn't it?"

The girls traded appreciative looks and giggled.

“Say that three times, real fast, I dare any of you,” Roth added. Teenyboppers or not, there was always a level at which to reach any group of women.

Tina translated this to her girlfriends, and they took up his dare, running off their names as he’d done. On the second try, Carmelita put a melody to it, and they all screamed. Menudo groupies. Or was it Abba?

Last year, they’d spent the school vacation at the summer estate of Taurino’s family in Acapulco, and this year, it was Felicia’s turn to chaperone. It seemed that all of the wealthy families had places in Acapulco, Mazatlán, or Puerto Vallarta. The sisters attended school in California, and Carmelita studied in Switzerland. They’d all be heading back to school in a few weeks.

Lily came down and sat on the other side of Roth. Taurino followed her down, but took pains to sit as far from her as possible, and they didn’t speak, didn’t even acknowledge each other.

Lunch was served. Without any notion of propriety, the kids attacked the plates as soon as the servers slapped food on them. Except for Taurino, who made eye contact with no one, waited until the others had all but emptied the serving dishes, then ate little.

It wasn’t long before Felicia came down. Roth and Taurino rose as she took the last place next to Tina. She turned to Roth as more, many more serving dishes arrived on the table. “Mr. Roth, please excuse my absence. This afternoon....” She didn’t finish.

“Of course,” he said, assuming she meant that after lunch she’d attend to the business at hand. He wondered if there was a later flight to LA.

Lunch was a circle of chatter, giggles, and Olympian gorging for the girls. How they maintained their figures was a wonder. Taurino eventually joined in their conversation, but never spoke to, or even acknowledged Lily, who was questioning Roth on his exact purpose in Mexico City. He evaded her question, playfully telling her that she had a big nose for having such a small nose. Everyone laughed, but she screwed up her face, thought on that, then pretended an insult had been done her. Roth noted that she missed very little, and seemed to have a canny ability for following several conversations at once. At one point, she leaned over to Roth and whispered that she thought he was a policeman. He whispered back that he was a brassiere salesman, visiting Mexico to size up the market. “You’re not!” she said. He continued, saying that actually he was a manure salesman, carrying samples of the world’s largest inventory. Tina thought that was funny. Yes, they were all little cuties, but he was bored long before lunch ended.

When they were done eating, everyone peeled away from the table, going up to their rooms for a siesta. Felicia was busy supervising the girls and her staff. Roth slipped in that he’d wait for her in the

living room. He walked back the way he'd come, passing a huge library whose door was open. He wandered in for a look-see, curiosity being his vice since childhood, and knowing he needn't hurry, since promptness wasn't a virtue in this household. Nor in Mexico, for that matter.

The library was impressive, with many collectibles, limited editions, and more than a few gigantic reference books under glass. Shelf upon shelf climbed the walls, and a narrow second tier ran around the entire room, where more shelves stretched up to the vaulted ceiling. Running ladders ran around both floors. Roth estimated there were up to 100,000 books here, with tables, desks, chairs, and couches scattered throughout. He wondered where they hid the comic books.

A series of large oil portraits hung along one red-velvet-lined wall. Resplendent older gentlemen wore stern, self-important faces for the artist, or photographer. Only Latinos, Roth mused, could manage to look so severe, as if all of life was a seventy-year-long tango.

On another wall hung the pleasant likeness of an older gentleman in a general's uniform. It was a portrait intended to hang in the ancestral home rather than a military academy, for the general wore a near-smile, not a face at all befitting a man who inspired men to kill one another. He read the inscription on a silver plaque at the bottom of the frame: 'General Alejandro Garcia Alvarez.' The artist signed his name in very small letters at the bottom, dated 1971.

There were also portraits of the general's father and grandfather, judging from their names and dates. Progressing along the family tree, there was a portrait of Eduardo, Daniel's father, and another one of Daniel. Roth had seen these generational paintings and photos in many homes; he often thought it would be a rip to place a black man's portrait somewhere in the lineage for a joke. Better yet, an oil of Mad magazine's Alfred E. Neuman smack in the middle.

No one had gotten around to painting Daniel's son yet. Maybe the kid hadn't yet developed the prerequisite stern frown suitable for portraits of serious people. Roth remembered reading in the reports that Alvarez had had two children from his first marriage. A son and a daughter. Both in college, or around that age. Daniel's first wife had died of cancer. Fifteen years ago. He'd married Felicia a few years later.

The artist had captured Daniel's likeness well, as he stood in this very room. Roth looked around to place the background in the painting – the old desk at the far end of the library. He walked over to a nook, looked back several times to fix the subject's location in the painting. The desk was centered between two glass-fronted bookcases, and a Mexican and an American flag stood on either side of a wide window that backdropped the scene. Except for modern office equipment, everything was antique, even the flagpoles. He wondered how many hours Alvarez had posed there with three fingers placed on a pile of books, the thumb of his other hand in his watch pocket. The modern conveniences

were shaded lightly in the background under rays of sunlight: a computer, photocopier, fax, phones, defused in such a way so as not to rob the portrait from looking like a nineteenth-century canvas. The American flag? Oh, yeah; Daniel Alvarez had also been an American citizen.

The place was dust free. Several books, which Roth guessed were legal journals, lay positioned neatly at the right hand of an ornate, framed blotter. For all practical purposes, this place was a monument. Maybe a shrine.

He wandered back out into the corridor, disoriented for a moment until he made the correct turns leading back to the living room. Big surprise: Felicia wasn't there. He sat on the couch. It was 2:35. LA was definitely out of the question tonight. He wondered what he'd do later. Maybe hit the Zona Rosa, not far from the Hidalgo. He'd have to check back in, make a new reservation for tomorrow's return flight.

At three o'clock, Felicia returned downstairs. She seemed to be in a lighter mood as she apologized again for her tardiness, asked him what he required.

"Your photograph, señora."

"Oh, my," she replied, feigning flattery.

"Some identification – passport, driver's license. And you need to sign a receipt." He took the papers from his jacket pocket, and a Minox camera from his trouser pocket.

Felicia smiled upon seeing the camera. "Oh, such a cute little thing you keep in your pants."

He looked at her with a question on his face, wondering if she was jerking him around. He could never tell with Latino babes. And however mature, educated, and proper Felicia Alvarez might be, she definitely qualified as a babe. But Latino women had a mean streak in them, could get as nasty as a viper under the right, or rather, wrong, circumstances.

She had his business card in her hand. "Your firm's profile on the Internet is very interesting."

She'd checked that, then. So, that's what she'd been doing all the while he thought she was so upset? She'd probably even checked with the airlines, knew it was too late for Roth to catch his flight, and had gone through all that charade to wind down the clock. Was she that sharp? And if so, why?

"Our webmaster takes care of that," Roth replied. "Good for business."

"Your background appears on it, also."

"All of the partners are on it, as I recollect."

"But you are the principal partner?"

"Partner is a loose term. We're a corporation actually, but yes, I founded the company and have controlling interest."

"You have really been to all those places? Can you speak all those languages?"

He usually said that he could order a rum and Coke in a dozen languages, maybe get laid in a few more. He shook his head. “A working ability in a few.”

“Español? Spanish?”

“Sí. Enough to get around. To keep from getting lost. It’s not a difficult language. Not like Thai or Chinese. Tonal languages, you know?”

“You speak those?”

“A smattering here and there.” He unfolded the receipt. “If you could have one of your maids witness your signature—”

“You investigate homicide cases?”

“Well, frankly, once we’re certain that an insured is, in fact, deceased, and it’s not a suicide, and no question of beneficiary involvement...” He was working on a delicate way to convey that insurance companies couldn’t care less who killed their policy-holders if they had to pay out anyhow.

Amused, Felicia clapped her hands twice. “Ah, I am not a suspect in my husband’s death?”

“You never were, señora.” That wasn’t true. Of course, beneficiaries were always a possibility. But she’d been ruled out, or he wouldn’t be here delivering the check.

“But your client was not certain my husband was dead?”

“It’s a routine that a reported death be verified, of course.”

“Particularly in Mexico?”

“Anywhere.” That also wasn’t entirely true. Most faked deaths occurred outside the States, particularly in developing countries, places difficult to reach, places with inefficient cops, corrupt officials. So, yeah, that definitely included Mexico. He looked her in the eyes, tired of her leading the conversation. “Insurance fraud is big business, Señora Alvarez.”

“But you are sure my husband is dead, or that I did not kill him?”

Roth folded the receipt, stared hard at her. “Lady, are you trying to tell me something?”

Felicia stood, moved across the room. There was a small bar built into the well of a large, mock antique globe that opened up at the equator. She lifted out a bottle of sherry, poured a shot. “Would you care for a sherry?”

“I never drink before nine a.m.,” he answered, watching her. “A port if you have it.”

What was going on here? Had Alfredo missed something? Was Alvarez alive? Was she hinting at complicity in his death? The fact that she so far hadn’t accepted the check, was still procrastinating for that matter, crossed his mind again. But he couldn’t believe that Alfredo had misidentified Alvarez, or that the police and her private investigators were all being fooled, too. He remembered reading something about the Mexican president even eulogizing Alvarez at his funeral.

She carried the drinks over, sat down, placed them on the table. “I am not telling you anything, Mr. Roth. I want to ask you something.”

“Shoot.”

“I want you to please help me learn who killed my husband.”

That’s what this was all about. Her procrastination, her bantering with words, raising his curiosity. Feigning the tears. Well, maybe not that part of it. “Señora, I’m sure the police and your investigators are handling this just fine.” Actually, he wasn’t certain the police were doing all they could. This was Mexico.

She shook her head, emphatic. “No. They are getting nowhere. Four months, Mr. Roth. I believe the longer it takes, the worse the chances are of finding the guilty parties.”

“Homicide cases are never closed until they’re resolved.”

“And in Mexico, many cases are never resolved.”

“If the police have their marching orders from the president, I’m sure they’re doing all they can.”

“His involvement is token, Mr. Roth. He is the president, and has the country to run. What more can he do?”

“I’m sure you’re in capable hands.”

Blackwell, the investigators she’d hired, had an excellent reputation in some quarters. They had a few dozen offices worldwide, had earned their reputation tracking down hidden assets in the millions, maybe billions, of deposed dictators, and they’d also cracked some high-profile homicide and disappearance cases. But if he had to be one hundred percent impartial, he’d met a few schlock Blackwell reps. A few years back, Blackwell had tried to enter the insurance field, tried to break fake death claims in some of the world’s less inviting locales. Roth had a friend in the FBI who’d grown tired of the Bureau, resigned, and took a position with Blackwell. But he soon became disenchanted with his desk job of patching together reports from their second-string field representatives. Blackwell and Associates was a business, after all, and apparently their best people weren’t always on the job. But if the sky was the limit, as it seemed to be in this case, they’d come through. Money did that.

She went quiet, and after a few seconds, Roth said, “Señora Alvarez, I need to finish this.” He unfolded the receipt again, handed it to her, pulled out a pen. Try to get her moving, he thought, then take her picture and a photocopy of her passport, or even a photograph of it would do. He pulled the envelope containing the check out of his pocket, opened it, showed it to her. She took the receipt, didn’t bother looking at the check. She reached for the pen, locked eyes with him.

“Mr. Roth, I will gladly sign this check over to you, if you can find the people responsible for my husband’s death.”

He stared back at her for long seconds. Apparently, she meant every word of it. Or rather, every dollar of it. Money talked, and Roth was one hell of a good listener. He turned a dozen factors over in his mind, the first being the challenge she was throwing down, plus the fact that business was stacking up for his office in Bangkok, and he needed to get back. Then he weighed a half-million other reasons....“If there is no conflict with my client, my fee will be three thousand US dollars a day, plus expenses, plus a bonus of 500,000 dollars US when I’ve successfully concluded the assignment.”

She paused to consider this. “Agreed.”

Roth jotted down a note, handed it to her. “Here’s our bank in New York. Wire a 50,000-dollar retainer there. Do it today, Señora Alvarez.”

“Fifty thousand dollars?”

Roth nodded. “US dollars. Now understand me: I agree to identify and prove those responsible for your husband’s death, but I make no guarantees regarding the arrest or successful prosecution of that person, or persons. Agreed?”

Felicia nodded.

“I will have a contract drawn up for your signature pursuant to our agreement, stipulating California, USA as the venue for adjudication in the event of a disagreement. Felicia raised her eyebrows. But Roth was taking no chances with the Mexican courts – or rather, the mañana courts – in the event that she reneged on payment. A failing, Roth seemed to suggest, of the wealthy. She realized that Roth likely knew that the Alvarez’s had considerable holdings in California. She nodded again, waited for what she was certain would be more.

And Roth had more. “In that case, we will both agree on binding arbitration rather than litigation. Agreed?”

She nodded.

“My fee will be payable within a reasonable time, but not to exceed 45 days from the conclusion of my handling. I will answer only to you confidentially, and not to your counsel or surrogates. I will explain matters as you wish, but will brook no interference, or delays for information or cooperation. If it develops that you are involved, our agreement nevertheless remains valid. All of this will be spelled out in the contract.”

That last stipulation took her back. “Of course. I understand. When will you start?”

“I already have. And I charge double-time for waiting, Señora Alvarez.”

She looked away, wide-eyed, tolerating his scolding.

And Roth noted that she still hadn’t bothered to look at the check he’d given her.

“Sign the receipt for this check, señora. And please call in a maid and have her witness the receipt

of the funds. Then I'll require copies of your passport, driver's license, anything with your photo on it. I also have a few routine questions regarding the payment."

She did as instructed, then called in a stern-looking, matronly woman whom she introduced as her executive housekeeper, a Señora Lucinda Vargas.

Lucinda looked over the documents she was to sign as witness, then looked long and hard at Roth, like he was a con man here to defraud the widow, maybe run off with her knickers, too. Finally, she signed the receipt as witness, and Felicia sent her into the library to make copies of her identification while Roth snapped a few pictures of her, asked details on her identity. She was obviously Felicia Christina Romero Alvarez de Morro, but the procedure demanded a routine.

Lucinda returned and sorted out the copies for the widow and those for Roth. He folded the papers and put them in his jacket, put the camera away – in his jacket pocket this time. He told Felicia that he would return in the morning, told her to make herself available at ten o'clock. Prompt. She agreed to that, too.

As Roth left the home, Lucinda was patrolling the garden, hammering on some hapless worker for something he'd neglected. She turned and glared at Roth as he walked down the path towards the gate.

He returned her stare. "Adiós, Señora . . . was that . . . Lucretia Borgia?"

Señora Lucinda Vargas just glowered, didn't reply.

Roth chuckled at the woman's menacing glare; she'd probably trained North Korean negotiators for those stare-downs at Panmunjom.

Chapter 8

Roth refused the ride back downtown. On Carretera Toluca, he caught a cab, returned to the Hidalgo, checked back in. He called Nina in New York. It was nearly 3:30 p.m. An hour later in New York.

“She wants us to work for her, find her husband’s killers,” he opened.

“You can’t, Mike. You’ve got cases stacking up in Asia. Three in China, one in the ’Peens, one on Taiwan—”

He cut her off, told her his fee, plus expenses, adding that the bonus would be 500,000 dollars. “She’ll be wiring 50,000 to us today. Tell me if you don’t receive it.”

Nina whistled. “Forget the cases. I’ll have them taken care of.”

“Thought you would. Get to Kincannon. For his ears only. See if he has any objections.”

“He shouldn’t have.”

“Just the same, run it by him. Then start preparing a contract for the widow. But let’s talk before you scan it to me. I’ll have some stipulations I want added. I’ll get back to you on that within a few hours on e-mail.”

“Right.”

“And include all the reports on whatever you did, and whatever Alfredo did on the investigation. Anything and everything we have.”

“Gotcha. Anything else?”

“Have Kincannon wangle the Harmann reports from them. They had the K&R coverage on Alvarez.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll send Mrs. Alvarez’s receipt for Amalgamated’s check and the attachments out to you tomorrow. Call me back after you reach Kincannon.” He hung up, opened his laptop, hammered out a brief report of the meeting with Felicia, put the receipt, film with her photo, and the photocopies in an envelope, called a local FedEx office for a collection tomorrow morning, giving his Amex card number for billing. Then he set about e-mailing the contract stipulations that he’d explained to Felicia so that Nina could amend their standard contract.

As he was zipping that off to Nina, she called him back, told him that Kincannon was gone for the day, should be in tomorrow morning.

“I just e-mailed the additions to the standard contract. Tomorrow, when you speak with Kincannon, be sure to stress that this is for his ears only. No need for him to gab to the re-insurers or

anybody else about this.”

“Right.”

“Review Alfredo’s schedule. When he’s finished, I want him to bring some things down here.”

“I have his number here. He just checked in with me, just pulled into Eagle Pass, Texas. He’s got a hospitalization claim there; another two across the river in Piedras Negras, then he’s gotta hop up to Del Rio. Got two there in Ciudad Acuña, and then....”

She rambled on, and Roth could visualize her in the office, moving Alfredo’s pin up the Rio Grande from Laredo on the large map of the world. She kept track of all of the reps that way, got furious with people when they didn’t advise her of their movements, pronto. She liked to say that she’d never lost a rep yet, but that nearly happened to one of their guys handling a fraudulent death claim in Nigeria. He hadn’t bothered to notify her when he arrived in Lagos, and developments happened so fast that he’d been incarcerated without anyone’s knowledge.

“Thanks for the travelogue,” he finally cut her off. “The next time you talk to Alfredo, just tell him to contact me.”

“What I’m trying to tell you is that it’ll be a few days before he’s finished up along the Rio Grande.”

“Fine. Okay,” Roth said, a dozen things on his mind since leaving Cuernavaca. “Also, line up Manny Sokoloff. I want him here in four days’ time. E-mail me his coordinates. And I’ll give you a list of things I’ll want him and Alfredo to bring when they come.”

“Manny will charge a fortune if he has to fly in. Isn’t there anyone down there who can sweep for you?”

Nina wasn’t arguing with him, and he knew that. But he was charged, his mind turning over scores of possibilities, and things he needed to accomplish. Did he regret taking this case? He wouldn’t likely see home for weeks, if not months. “There’s no budget on this,” he snapped. “And I want Manny. He’s the best goddamn guy there is.”

“Whoa! Okay. I gotcha,” she answered defensive. “Anything else?”

“I’ll let you know if there is.”

“Watch your ass, chief. This kind of fee doesn’t come with a soft case.”

“Well, thank you very much for that of bit of wisdom, Plato. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“I await my lord and master’s beckon with bated breath,” she squeezed in. “For his excellent people skills, deserving of such titles as His Royal Fullness in some venues, and in others as Mein Fuhrer, but here amongst us simple folk who love and care for him as ... well, just plain ol’ Asshole.”

Before Roth could counter, Nina said, “Bye, chief,” and hung up.

Roth showered and shaved, went down for dinner. He hit the cantina first for a few cocktails while he mulled over the case. He'd be living with this monster for the foreseeable future. Every waking hour, and likely in his dreams, too. He was like that. Always had been, when something weighed heavy on him.

Premier's daily rate was hefty. Of little consequence, really, if he didn't find the perpetrators. And if he did, that bonus might be hard-earned. He was anxious to see what the police had so far, and what Blackwell had. Blackwell was also pricey, but well connected. Lots of former FBI agents on the payroll with good ol' boy connections, and they could pull in lots of favors. By Roth's way of thinking, Blackwell should already have this case rolled up. Maybe their investigation was further along than Felicia knew. With all these players involved, someone was likely dealing with a member of the president's cabinet; the Attorney General's Department, the public security minister. Roth tried to remember what these departments were called. Oh, yeah – the 'Order and Respect' branches of government. Sounded medieval.

If Roth would only be in the way, he'd bow out. It wouldn't help for him to stumble all over an ongoing investigation if it was yielding results. But he was an authority on committees and bureaucracies; rule by fiat – and how perfectly well that didn't work. Someone once said that no one ever built a monument to a committee. When more than one person was responsible, it became everyone's boast when things went well, but no one's fault in the event of failure. With Alvarez having been both a Mexican and an American citizen, perhaps there was built-in reason for failure; a satisfactory resolution becoming the other country's responsibility.

For instance, there were holes in what he'd read and heard so far. Something was very obviously missing, something so clear that he could hardly believe no one realized it, and it was that something that made him decide to take the case.

The cantina was getting busy. This was a businessmen's hotel, and it was cocktail hour. He decided to drink his dinner at the bar, ordered a few appetizers to go with his rum and Cokes.

After he'd had a few drinks, one of the regular fixtures wandered over, sat two stools away from him. Discreet-like, surveying the possibilities at the bar. She looked over at him, and he checked the bartender to see if he was paying attention. He deliberately wasn't, which meant that she was on the manager's A-list to troll for customers here.

She was about 25, attractive, wore little makeup. She made eye contact, he patted the stool next to his. She glanced around, threw him a big smile and a "Hola," slid over next to him. "Cómo estás?"

Some things were simple in Mexico.

Chapter 9

As he was leaving his room at 8:30 the next morning, the FedEx package under his arm containing his report and attachments on the contract with Señora Alvarez, the maid was about to knock. She held a mop in one hand, and asked in Spanish if it was okay to clean his room.

He told her not to bother right now. When it was apparent she didn't understand English, he shrugged it off with "La señorita es muerto."

The maid backed away, wide-eyed, brought her free hand up to her mouth.

Roth closed the door, walked to the elevator bank, waited next to two American businessmen talking about automotive parts. When he reached the lobby, the day manager rushed up to meet him at the elevator.

"Señor," he said, excited, pulling Roth off to the side. "The girl in your room. It seems that she is taking a shower."

Roth shrugged. "Is this something I need to know?"

"But you just told the maid the girl was dead."

"Oh, that." Roth shook his head, laughing. "Well, she was last night. I didn't think she'd recover. I apologize for that." Relief fell over the manager's face. Roth slid the express package under the man's arm. "A FedEx man will be here soon. See that he gets this." He dug into his pocket, pulled out a wad of bills, peeled off a twenty-peso note, tucked it in the guy's breast pocket.

In the restaurant, he took a small table by the window, ordered a Bloody Mary. A hangover is what you get for drinking without having dinner the night before. The waiter returned with his drink, and Roth ordered a big breakfast of bacon and eggs, with frijoles on the side. "To fartify myself for the day," he told the waiter.

"Of course, señor."

Bad puns delivered in English don't play well in Mexico.

When he finished breakfast, he went out through the lobby just as the FedEx man was leaving with his package for New York. On the curb, he was about to hail a taxi, when he heard a car's horn, and a woman's voice. "Hola." He looked around. It was Lily, waving to him from the back window of a late-model Mercedes, a big smile on her face. He walked over to the car. The silver-mustachioed man at the gate yesterday was behind the wheel. As usual, tucked into his belt was the .45.

"You are not to take taxis, Señor Roth. Tía Felicia will not hear of it."

She held the door open for him to sit in back with her.

Roth preferred to come and go to Cuernavaca on his own. A routine of visits to such a home had a

way of attracting attention. He got in, and the car pulled from the curb.

“You have had your breakfast?”

Roth nodded, taking in Lily’s fresh appearance. She was dressed in a low-cut cotton dress, the straps of which hung a bit off her shoulders. Her legs were bare, seemed to have grown longer since yesterday, and she wore open-toe sandals. Her perfume was on the sweet side.

“Your scent is too heavy for the morning,” he said.

“Oh. I am sorry,” she said, taken aback.

He might as well just have punched her in the mouth, thought maybe she was going to cry.

“Nothing to be sorry about,” he recovered. “Such a sweet flower as yourself doesn’t need perfume.” Christ, talk about syrup. “Have you forgiven Taurino yet?”

In an instant, she forgot his criticism. “Oh, he is such a prig.”

“A what?”

“A prig?”

“That’s what I thought you said.”

“He’s an impossible boy.” She folded her arms, looked out her window. “Unbearable.” Her folded arms bunched up her breasts.

Roth smiled. “Beat you at tennis, did he?”

She whipped around to face him. “He certainly did not.”

Roth held his hands up in surrender. They were quiet for a while as the Mercedes turned on to Paseo de la Reforma, proceeded south with traffic. They crossed Boulevard Ávila Camacho, cut through Lomas de Chapultepec, and continued southwest to where it split off towards Carretera Toluca.

“Is there another route into the hacienda?” Roth asked her. “A back way, for instance?”

“I don’t know.” Lily sat forward, spoke with the driver. “Jorge.” She relayed Roth’s question in Spanish.

Jorge said, “Sí, señorita.” His stoic reflection caught Roth in the rearview mirror, and a few blocks further on, he cut off of Toluca. After a series of turns down narrow streets, Roth realized they were coming up from the opposite direction of the lane he’d walked down yesterday.

At the gate, Roth asked if Lily would have Jorge turn into the narrow street that ended at the junction of the Alvarez gate, and drive up the hill, away from the property.

She shrugged, spoke again to Jorge. He turned left and drove up the winding street. Roth looked back at the estate from the highest point on this street, just after a curve. No way to even see the gate after the first 100 yards where the road curved. He told Jorge in English to turn around, and without waiting for Lily’s translation, Jorge U-turned and coasted back down the hill to the gate which one of

the guards opened as the Mercedes approached.

“I’d like to walk from here,” Roth said, getting out.

Lily opened her door, started to get out also.

“No. Jorge will take you up to the house. I’ll be along.” He closed her door, nodded to Jorge, got out.

Jorge said nothing, but Roth could read the surprise in his face. Since when was this gringo giving orders? The Mercedes pulled away. Roth lit up a cigarette, and a minute later, Jorge returned from the home and parked near the gate, got out. Roth called him over.

“In about twenty minutes,” Roth said in English, “I’d like you to show me around the grounds. Jorge, isn’t it? Pronounced ‘Horhay’.”

The old man nodded.

Roth walked up to the home, Jorge staring after him. The teenybopper’s convention had resumed at the pool, and he saw a few others he hadn’t met at lunch yesterday. Beyond the pool, more kids were playing croquet on the lawn.

He went inside and found Felicia in the living room, sitting behind the desk.

“Buenos días, Mr. Roth.” She rose and came over to him, extended her hand. A little too formal under the circumstances, he thought. She was decked-out in black again, head to toe: shoes; flowing, billowy slacks; a throw-around top. And the gold everywhere. She asked if he’d care for a beverage.

“A coffee would be fine.” He pulled up a chair in front of the desk, sat down.

Felicia rang for a servant. “Would you not be more comfortable on the couch?”

He smiled. “If I’d come for a nap. Let’s talk, shall we.” He withdrew a notebook from his breast pocket, flipped it open.

Felicia returned to her side of the desk, pushed a few papers aside, sat down, and folded her hands on the desktop.

“I’ll have a contract here in a day or so,” he started. “My office is also sending me the claim reports to bring me up to speed, so we can dispense with a lot of the basics.” Indeed, between Premier’s reports, the K&R investigation, and the police reports, there was already a mountain of paperwork.

As the servant was coming in, Felicia asked, “What can I tell you?”

Roth turned to the servant. “Café negro, por favor.” He turned back to Felicia. “What documents or other materials have the police taken from the home?”

“None,” Felicia said. “I believe they took Daniel’s business calendar from his office in town.”

“How about his personal diary?”

She eyed him. “How did you know he kept a diary?”

“It’s here?”

“Yes,” she answered. “In the library. His study is at the back of the library.”

Roth had seen the study yesterday. “Did the police read his diary?”

“No,” she replied with indignation. “Why should they? You have not answered how you knew he kept a diary.”

He smiled. “Suppose you let me ask the questions. That’s what you’re paying for.” Actually, he hadn’t known, but it was a logical assumption. Important men kept diaries, and one had only to view Daniel Romero Alvarez’s portrait to know that he believed in his importance, in his significance, possibly that he was a man with a destiny. And biographers always turned to the diaries kept by such men.

“How many volumes?”

She shrugged. “Four, I believe.”

“I’ll take those with me.”

“Why do you want them?”

“I’m going to want a lot of things, señora. But not questions. Okay?”

“But those are his most personal thoughts, his innermost feelings....” She became upset, tears in her eyes. “He is still alive, Mr. Roth. In here.” She put her small fist up to her breast. “I have never even read them, and there is nothing of interest. Not to you. The police did not want them, did not even ask if he kept a diary.”

Roth said nothing, just stared as she wept. He got up, poured a sherry at the liquor globe, took it back and put it in her hand. He sat down again, waited for her to compose herself.

He continued: “And I don’t want a car picking me up. Or dropping me off. I’ll be going through his study, through his clothes – providing you still have them – and over the grounds. Tell your staff I’m here to appraise the property, assess some belongings, and that I’ll be around for a while. Tell them nothing else about me. In fact, I don’t want you telling anyone about our arrangement except for a trusted attorney and Roberto, Daniel’s brother. And advise them that they are to keep this confidential.”

She nodded, sipped at her sherry.

“Also, I’ll want to look over his finances: the division of house, business, and personal finances, and those accounts he personally signed on.”

Roth made notes as he spoke. “I assume your contact with Blackwell is the name on the card you gave me yesterday? Tell him that he’s to provide me with any and all information; whatever I ask for, and prompt. Pronto. Make certain he understands this. It’ll be obvious to Blackwell that I’m involved, but say nothing more, nevertheless. I’m sure they’ve given you progress reports. Include those with

Daniel's diaries. Now, the police will likely refuse information in an ongoing investigation, so get to the highest-ranking officer you know, tell him I'll expect complete cooperation. Who supervises your security?"

"Señor Alcantara.

"On a contract?"

"Yes."

"Is he here?"

"No. He comes here occasionally to inspect."

"Well, who's in charge here?"

"No one."

"No one...? Include Alcantara's contact information. That'll be it for now, señora." Roth ripped the page out of the notebook, handed the list to her.

"You will take particular care of my husband's diaries, Mr. Roth?"

Roth stood up, nodded. "Unless there are spicy details. In which case, I'll alert the media immediately."

"Please do not joke, Mr. Roth."

"You should joke more, señora. It'll do you good. I'll be back in a while for the diaries, the Blackwell reports, and those names. How long has Jorge been in your husband's employ?"

"Jorge? Why?"

Roth just stood there, waiting for an answer.

"Since Daniel was a little boy. Since, well, forever."

"Thank you, Señora Alvarez," he said. "Buenos días."

"Good morning," she said, meekly.

The servant was coming in as Roth was leaving. He took the cup off the tray, carried it outside. He stood under the eaves, sipped the coffee, lit a cigarette. The kids at the pool were huddled under umbrella tables now, eating snacks, chomping and yakking away, oblivious to the servants who stood away from the tables, awaiting their commands. No one was playing croquet now, and he didn't see Lily, also couldn't make out if Tina was with the group at the tables.

He finished his coffee as Jorge came walking up to the house. He dropped the cigarette butt in the cup, put it down.

Jorge was pushing seventy, but he looked in good shape. As an Alvarez family relic, he probably had it pretty easy.

"You wanted me, señor?"

“Let’s walk, Jorge.”

Roth was concerned if a threat still existed. Whoever had killed Daniel Alvarez just might try it with the señora or other family members. A million bucks had been shelled out for his ransom, and nothing succeeded like success. There might be something more to knocking off Daniel than just poor salesmanship.

They started over towards the pool. A few of the girls from lunch yesterday waved to him, and he waved back. Beyond the pool, the estate seemed to run on forever, a gazebo here, a pond there, flowerbeds interspersed in patterns to break up the back of the property that Roth at first estimated was larger than three, maybe four football fields. Small groups of trees dotted the landscape, where chairs and seats were built into rock outcrops. In the middle, a larger group of coconut trees housed a cottage surrounded by boulders, rock gardens, plants, and loveseats. As they reached this point, Roth saw a large Jacuzzi built into a gazebo amidst the foliage. It was also concealed by boulders and tall shrubbery and plants. No doubt, this place was off-limits to all but immediate family. It was a lovers’ getaway, maybe a honeymoon cottage.

Beyond another row of junipers, the property opened up to a building identical to the one facing the boulevard. More servants’ quarters.

“How many people are employed here?” he asked Jorge.

Jorge thought. “In total, over 100, señor.”

“How many live on the grounds?”

“About half.”

“My name is Michael, Jorge.”

“Sí, señor.” Jorge nodded, repeated the name.

“Almost said ‘Miguel,’ didn’t you?”

Jorge smiled. “Sí.”

Behind these quarters were the stables. Six of them. And behind those was more land, only it was unkempt woods. Roth’s original estimates had been wrong; the estate encompassed nearly three square miles.

“Does that paling—the fence—run all around the property?”

“Sí. Yes, sir.”

“How many guards on duty?”

“Sixteen.”

“And then another sixteen come on?”

“Sí.”

“Are there supernumeraries . . . extra guys for relief?”

“Sí.”

“How many guards in total?”

“Sixty-eight.”

“And before Señor Alvarez was kidnapped?”

“It was the same.”

“That’s a lot of guards, considering all the cameras. Let me guess: the guards work twelve-hours shift, right?”

Jorge stroked his silver moustache with a thumb and forefinger; an affectation that told Roth when the old boy was mulling something over. Jorge nodded. Long shifts for guards was the standard in countries like Mexico. The guards worked 72-hours a week, had one day off. It was too many hours for a guy to remain diligent.

In all, the señora had one hell of a payroll.

They walked every foot of the perimeter. The paling was in good repair, had been painted recently. The estate was nothing if not beautifully maintained, thanks to the legion of gardeners. What Roth didn’t see were lines connected to the security cameras. Unless the lines were underground, the electronic eyes were just for show.

At the rear of the property, they ran into another guard carrying a shotgun, and then a second guard dozing under a tree, his automatic weapon lying next to him. Roth put his finger to his lips, crept over to the weapon, picked it up, and they moved off in silence. Jorge looked at Roth, wondering what the gringo was up to.

The weapon, an Uzi like the others, was dirty and rusty. Worse, Roth released the magazine, pulled it out, and it was empty. But there was one round chambered. He slung the Uzi over his shoulder, and they walked on, covering the northern perimeter of the property, adjacent to another estate that Jorge said was also well-guarded. Therefore, no guards were posted along this section of the paling.

Along two sides of the property, the northern part that abutted the other estate, and the eastern side, in back of the woods, there were fewer cameras, and from what Roth could see, they looked old; were probably inoperable if not fake.

“Jorge, let’s have a look at the monitors.”

They returned to the south wing of the home, went into a room on the left. Inside, a guard was sleeping at the desk, his head buried in his folded arms. An empty bottle of Corona sat on the desk next to an unfinished tortilla crumpled up in paper. The place was a pig sty; old newspapers, dust, empty

soda and beer cans everywhere. On the monitor board, only three screens were on, and the images were fuzzy. The others were blank.

Roth put the Uzi on top of a filing cabinet, walked over and stood next to the dozing guard. He looked at Jorge, who shrugged. “Fire him,” Roth said.

“Señor?”

“Fire him.”

“I do not have the authority.”

“You do, now. Until further notice, you’re straw boss, Jorge.”

“But I do not know who you are, señor.”

Roth moved to within a hair’s breadth of Jorge, eyeballing him. He whispered, “Yeah, Jorge, you know who I am. And you know exactly what I am.” Jorge stared back at Roth for long seconds, then averted his eyes. Roth nodded to the sleeping guard.

“But he is employed by Señor Alcantara, Mr. Roth.”

“I’m Miguel, remember?” Roth smiled, then let it fade. “Get him out of here. Take him up to the gate and throw his ass off the property.”

“He is also one of Señor Alcantara’s nephews.”

Roth shot Jorge a dark look, moved around the desk, grabbed the sleeping man by his collar and belt, yanked him out of the chair. The guard jerked awake, let out a bewildered protest, his arms flailing at the shock of sleepy limbs suddenly challenged. Roth threw him over the desk, and he crashed to the floor at Jorge’s feet. Jorge stepped back, shocked at the violence.

“I don’t care who he is. Get his ass out of here.”

Jorge took hold of the man’s arm, helped him up.

Roth moved back around the desk, grabbed the guy’s hair, kicked him towards the door. Roth limped immediately, screamed “sonofabitch, and hopped on one foot. “Don’t coddle the bastard, Jorge. He won’t get the message.”

The guard nearly fell, caught his balance, stood erect, his eyes bloodshot, the smell of alcohol strong on his breath. He rattled off a stream of curses at Roth, until Roth went at him, limping. The guard backed away. He demanding from Jorge to know who this fucking gringo was. Roth replied with his own ugly tirade in Spanish, telling the man that if he ever set foot on the property again, he’d be shot. He flew at him, kicked out—this time with his left foot—barely missing the guy’s ass.

Jorge rushed to grab the guard, more to protect him from Roth than anything else, and pushed him out the side door.

Limping, Roth yelled after them. “You hear me, Jorge? That cockroach doesn’t come back here.

Not ever.” Roth took the Uzi off the cabinet, threw it to Jorge, who caught it on the fly.

“Sí, Miguel. Sí.”

Roth watched the old man handle the guard by the collar, pushing him along a brick path that led around to the front of the hacienda. The guard was screaming curses, demanding to know who Roth was. But he didn’t resist Jorge.

Roth straightened his jacket, limped back inside. He hobbled to a chair, and fiddled with the console, brought one more camera on line, but no others. The equipment was old, poorly maintained; early closed-circuit TV stuff. Junk.

He limped back through the halls to the living room. There was a servant, a young girl, standing near the door, a document case at her feet. “Los documentos?” Roth asked.

“Sí, señor.”

The case was locked, two small keys on a chain snapped to the handle. He unlocked and opened it. There were four diaries; one thin, the others thick, maybe 1,500 pages total. Yes sir, either Señor Alvarez had accumulated a lot of memories, or ate a lot of frijoles. The diaries were dusty except for Felicia’s fingerprints, showing where she’d handled them. There was also an envelope. He opened it to find addresses and contact numbers for Señor Luis Alcantara and the local Blackwell rep, an American named John Byrd.

He snapped the case closed, carried it down to the main gate, his limp less noticeable. The police car he’d seen yesterday was parked in the same spot, but no one was in it. Jorge was in the guard shack. Two guards were trying to calm the man that Roth had thrown out of the security office. He saw Roth coming, pulled away from his comrades, started backing up the lane, shaking his fist and swearing at the gringo.

Roth watched after him, then turned to Jorge: “What are the police doing here?”

“Nothing, señor. We—”

“What happened to Miguel?”

“Excuse me . . . Miguel,” he started again. “We have an arrangement with the police. An officer leaves the car here for a few hours each day. Sometimes in the evening.”

“Where’s the officer?”

“He takes his lunch.”

It was an old ploy used throughout Latin America. Prominent citizens worked a deal with the local cops to supply a presence. It was just hardening the target. The value was minimal, impressing only ignorant petty thieves while the cop went off for a meal, maybe a siesta with a friendly neighborhood señorita.

Jorge noticed Roth's limp. A sympathetic look crossed his face. "When you kicked that guard, did you hurt yourself, señor?"

Roth shook his head. Last year, he 'd been shot out on Fiji. Took two bullets, one in his right thigh the other in his right foot. Lost a toe. Sometimes, he forgot, but if he stubbed his toe, he'd surely remembered that bullet.

They turned to see the guard who'd been sleeping in the woods running across the lawn, heading their way. He looked frantic.

Jorge glanced at Roth.

"Where's his Uzi?"

Jorge nodded to the corner of the shack.

"Does he speak English?"

"No, Miguel."

"Tell him that Señora Alvarez has just been shot dead with an Uzi. Then ask him where his weapon is."

Jorge looked at him, incredulous.

"Tell him."

As the errant guard reached the gate to report that his weapon was missing, Jorge cut him off, repeated what Roth had said.

The young man's face went white. He was speechless, his eyes widening to where Roth thought they'd roll out of their sockets.

"Where is your weapon," Jorge shouted.

The guard looked pathetic. And Jorge was beginning to understand the game. The guard's lips trembled. He looked at Jorge, at Roth, then at the other guards, expecting an accusation. He saw the police car, tried to speak. Shaken, he turned and ran down the lane, moaning out loud.

"That's one you won't have to fire," Roth pronounced.

Chapter 10

When Roth returned to the Hidalgo, there was a message for him at the desk. From Felicia. He went up to his room, dropped the document case by the desk, returned her call. A maid answered, but Felicia pounced on the line.

“Mr. Roth,” she began, her voice stern. “Señor Alcantara is here and he wants to speak with you. He is on the extension.” No sooner had she finished than Alcantara spoke: “Meester Roth. What right have you to dismiss members of my security force?”

“Señora Alvarez,” Roth said. “I’ll see you later. Then to Alcantara: “And you, shyster, don’t be there, or I’ll kick your incompetent, thieving ass off the property, too.” He hung up, opened the envelope with the name and address of John Byrd, the Blackwell rep. There were several numbers, one for an address on Avenida Observatorio, another with a Guadalajara area code. There were also a fax number and a cellular number. He called the number on Observatorio, got an answering machine announcing that he’d reached Blackwell, John Byrd speaking, please leave a message at the tone. He did, giving his name, phone, and room number.

He thought to call Nina, but it was after 6:00 p.m. in New York, and it was better that he spell out what he wanted in an e-mail. He pulled his laptop from its case, plugged it in at his desk. After a few tries, he was connected to the hotel’s server.

He thought about where he’d leave the diaries. They were too large for the safe. He hadn’t been concerned with leaving the hooker alone in the room this morning, since the cantina manager knew her, and likely received a percentage. If his girls had sticky fingers, it would rest on his shoulders. But the diaries were another matter.

He thumbed through the Mexico City Business Directory, tearing out pages here and there, which he stuffed in his jacket, then checked his incoming e-mail. There were a dozen messages, one advising him that he shouldn’t delay one day longer gaining three inches to his penis. In only four weeks, he could be longer, thicker, harder – could just wow and plow the ladies senseless. Imagine that. There were also a few messages from Nigerian bankers advising him that, as CEO of his firm, they required Roth’s urgent assistance, as they’d just stumbled across 26 million dollars, unattended and unknown to government auditors, that they would trust him with completely, transferring these funds to his account if only he promised to take but a fair share. Oh, and they required his banking details and a blank company letterhead with his signature. T’was a beautiful world indeed where everybody wanted to do wonderful things for you.

There were also jokes from a wacko buddy in Bangkok. His material was generally depraved,

sick, perverted, and disgusting. So Roth read these first before scrolling down to a message from Nina.

She advised that Alfredo had gotten his message, to wait for his contact, and that 50,000 dollars had been wired into their corporate account from Señora Alvarez this morning. Roth hit reply, and then spent an hour composing a message to Nina. He wanted to re-equip the Alvarez property as soon as possible with new surveillance gear. But if he ordered it in the States, and had it shipped down here, it would require US declarations, and then likely get hung up in Mexican Customs, not to mention shipping delays for international cargo.

He told Nina what to buy, and to have Alfredo take delivery in McAllen, Texas. He could cross the border there – no questions asked going out of the States – and drive it down to Mexico City. It was either this, or risk delays at every turn, not to mention bribes and pilferage at Mexican Customs. Neither US nor Mexican Customs would ever see the equipment, since Roth had no intention of applying for a resale tax refund. He wasn't avoiding duties, just the delays. He reckoned that Alfredo could be down here in four days with the gear, depending on how long it took the distributor to expedite shipment to McAllen. With no Customs declarations, things would go smoothly once Alfredo received the equipment. Sometimes, operating in broke-dick countries had its advantages.

He sent the message off, disconnected, closed his laptop. He was about to put in another call to John Byrd when his phone rang. He answered with the room number. It was Byrd, calling from Guadalajara, where he lived. He seemed to know what Roth's call was about; so, Felicia had spoken with him.

"I want to see where you are with this thing," Roth said.

"Will you be working for Señora Alvarez?"

That should be obvious, but Roth wasn't here to answer questions. Roth had stressed for Felicia to be very candid and make it clear that Byrd was to be completely forthcoming. "You get into Mexico City often?"

"Maybe once, twice a month," Byrd said.

"You wanna come here, or you want me to fly over there?"

"That depends, Mr. Roth. What is it you require?"

"I told you, but here it comes again: to see what you've done to date, what you're doing now, and what oars you've got in the water." Roth was thumbing through the International Airline Guide as he spoke. There were a whopping 53 daily flights to Guadalajara, a dozen departing even before 8:00 a.m. for this one-hour commuter flight. If he read Byrd correctly, the guy was a retired cop-type, maybe an ex-government guy, living near a golf course in Guadalajara with a fat, bubbly wife who wore muumuus and started on cocktails each evening at six o'clock sharp. He was probably just covering the

bases for Blackwell, giving them a presence here in Mexico. Roth expected more from Blackwell; after all, Mexico City wasn't Podunk.

"Well, I sent my latest report to her this morning, in fact."

Roth asked Byrd for his address in Guadalajara.

"Well, Mr. Roth, I don't normally give out my address here, and if you can wait until week after next—"

"Hey, Byrd," Roth snapped. "I'm trying to work with you, and I want some cooperation. If you can't, or won't, meet me in Mexico City, I'm flying over there. Now give me your coordinates, or wherever you want to meet—the airport lounge, your golf club, maybe a dark theater with men wearing hats in their laps. You name it, pard.' Just be there by . . ." he circled an 8:45 flight . . . "ten a.m. tomorrow morning. Think you can manage that?"

Instantly cool, Byrd gave his residential address in Guadalajara. Roth scribbled it down, reiterated, "Ten a.m.," and hung up. A few minutes later, there was a knock on his door. A bellboy had the FedEx package from Nina. It was about four inches thick, weighed maybe five kilos. A lot of reading. Roth threw it on the bed, and while he had the bellboy here, ordered up a bottle of rum with Cokes, and a bucket of ice.

He moved the FedEx package aside, poured Daniel Alvarez's diaries out on the bed, began leafing through them. Each was labeled, in gold leaf no less, with the years covered therein. The first volume began when Daniel was only eleven. This volume was in Spanish, and by the time he'd started a second volume, he'd been twenty-five. It was during the later years of the second volume, between ages twenty-five and 30, that much of that diary was recorded in English. The third volume was mostly in Spanish, particularly when Daniel flirted with politics. The third ended when Alvarez was in his fortieth year.

The last volume covered the remainder of his life. Doubting there could be anything helpful from Daniel's early years, the last volume offered the best possibilities. So he'd begin with it and work backwards.

His drinks set-up arrived. He worked on a highball as he pulled his carry-on bag from the closet, emptied it in a dresser drawer. He put Daniel's fourth volume and the package from Nina in the bag, then showered, shaved, changed, and threw on a light windbreaker that snapped closed at the waist. He threw dirty laundry on the floor by the door. By tomorrow, he'd need fresh clothes.

He finished his drink, threw his carry-on over his shoulder, hefted the document case. Downstairs, he requested the case be put in the hotel's vault. There was no such vault, the clerk said, only safe deposit boxes, which were hardly large enough to accommodate the diaries.

“Then lock them in the manager’s office,” Roth ordered. “In a closet, and lock that.” The clerk poked his lower lip out, said he supposed that was possible, and took the case. “Sí, señor. They will be safe there. Do not be concerned.”

Roth pressed twenty pesos on him, asked where he could buy some clothes fast. The clerk told him that there was a gentleman’s shop here in the hotel, next to the cantina, but it was closed now. He could have a tailor visit Roth in his room late tomorrow morning. Roth shook his head. He wrote down his waist size and trouser length, shirt size, neck and sleeve measurements.

“Give this to the tailor in the morning. I need two pairs of trousers, black; four shirts – two white, two black. I’ll need them by tomorrow afternoon. I don’t care if they’re off-the-rack. Got it?”

The clerk nodded.

“Will you be around in the morning to tell him?”

“I will make a point of it, señor.”

“Good. Now, look at me and listen carefully. The tailor may hand you some snooty crap about wanting to build me some quality clothes, and refuse to stoop so low as to pick something off-the-rack for me. Understand?”

“Yes, of course. He is a tailor.”

“Correct. But I need these things now. Not in two days. I’m in fucking rags now, and dirty clothes. Get it? I want these things tomorrow afternoon before two o’clock, whether he builds them, or buys them and passes them along to me with his mark-up, or chases some hombre down the fucking street and rips the clothes off his back. I don’t care. I need them tomorrow before two o’clock. If I don’t have them tomorrow before two o’clock, I won’t want them at all. And I won’t pay. Be sure the tailor understands that. Before two o’clock. Okay?”

Roth had been through this in innumerable countries, on countless occasions. In the States, a hotel clerk or a tailor would grasp the imminent necessity, but in places like Mexico, the simplest requests became a history in themselves, and tailors took their sweet ol’ time.

“Sí, señor.”

“What’s your name?”

“I am Felipe, sir.”

“Felipe. Here’s what’s going to happen if he doesn’t have these clothes for me tomorrow afternoon before two o’clock: I will go out to a department store and buy them myself. It will waste my time. And I won’t want his clothes when he finishes making them. See?”

“Of course, señor.”

“And if that happens, I will not pay him. Understand?”

“Naturally.”

Roth leaned across the desk. “Now, Felipe. If that happens, who do you think he’s going to blame?”

Felipe thought on this for a few moments, then his eyes widened. “Oh. Well, he does not know you, so he will be angry at me, sir.”

“That’s right, Felipe. And so will I. So you must be certain he understands. Right? If not, he gets screwed, you get booted, and I will have to go shopping in a department store tomorrow evening. Everybody loses.”

He left that bit of wisdom with Felipe, and gave it a fifty-fifty chance that he’d have new clothes by tomorrow afternoon.

Chapter 11

Roth grabbed a snack at the bar in the cantina. The night stalkers weren't on duty yet, but if the girl from last night returned, she'd probably

zero-in on him again. It would be a bad idea if she did; he'd ask for a refund since necrophilia hadn't been on her list of services.

He took a taxi out to Cuernavaca. Evening traffic was heavy; it took an hour to get there.

It was 7:45 when he approached the main gate. Roth told the driver to park up the hill, keep the meter running, and he sat in back, watching the gate as shifts changed. The twelve-hour shifts, starting at 8:00 a.m., were too long for a guard to remain diligent. None of the guards signed in when they arrived. Instead they just went to relieve the man where they'd been stationed last. No one was in charge, but Roth took satisfaction that the guards on the front gate looked around, anxious, probably looking to see if Jorge was around. Several guards for the new shift arrived as late as 8:30.

Finally, having watched for nearly an hour, Roth walked down to the gate. The guards, familiar now with his face, were wary, uncertain after the terminations this afternoon. They passed him through without comment.

"Busco, Jorge." Roth wanted to know where Jorge was.

One of the guards ran into the dusk, heading for the building that fronted the boulevard. No surprise, there was no working radio at the gate. Roth continued up to the home, settled into the security office at the south entrance. Jorge came along, said he was just having his dinner. His .45 was tucked into his waist.

"Where are your quarters, Jorge?"

"I have a room at the dormitory." He nodded towards the building facing the boulevard, Roth's first sight of Cuernavaca.

"You're not married? Family?"

"Señora has passed away, and my children are grown. They live in Puebla." He shrugged. "I am alone now."

"There's a vacant room with a lavatory off the vestibule abutting this room," Roth said, knocking on the wall as if it was a door.

"Yes, señor?"

"Have some workmen knock a door through the wall tomorrow, to connect that room with this one. You'll use it for your quarters. I'm replacing these monitors and installing new equipment. I want you close to the monitors and close to Señora Alvarez."

“I will live here? In the home?” Jorge was incredulous.

“You will live here. In the home.”

“Has the señora authorized this?”

“I’m authorizing this, Jorge. Just do like I tell you. In the morning, get a maid in here to clean this room up. Thereafter, one maid only, the same maid, will clean this room and yours. The maid you choose, and no one else. Understand?”

“Sí, Miguel.” Jorge was uncertain.

“Jorge, this hacienda is named Cuernavaca. But isn’t Cuernavaca the capital of Morelos State. South of here?”

“Sí. General Alvarez’s mother came from Cuernavaca. When she married his father and moved up to Chihuahua with him, he named the hacienda there in her honor. Then, when the general built this hacienda, he also named it for her. Here is Cuernavaca Grande, and up there is Cuernavaca Pequeño. The general was very devoted to her. She was so beautiful, Miguel.”

Roth nodded. The haciendas were named large and small, likely to avoid confusion between the two. The general’s mother was likely the girl in the enormous painting in the hallway.

He withdrew one of the torn pages from the business directory from his coat, drew a circle around several ads under ‘Electronic Technicians.’

“All right. Call these people in the morning. Tell them we want to see a technician tomorrow evening. About eight p.m. Got it?”

“Sí, Miguel. And if they are not available? Eight o’clock is very late—”

Roth flicked the page with his finger. “Security is 24 hours, Jorge. Any security company that can’t see us in the evening won’t be available when you really need them. You dig?”

“Dig where, señor?”

“Do you understand? Do you grasp what I’m saying. Comprender? Claro?”

Jorge thought about that, and agreed.

Roth wondered if it would be necessary to bring some technicians down from LA. They could fly a thousand miles and spend days installing the equipment before a local outfit could finish their friggin’ frijoles and scoot their asses across town. He continued searching through the directory listings until he found what he was looking for. “Look, here, you got a dozen companies to choose from. The job goes to the first company that can make it. Right? Call the US listed companies, also. Now, tell me, where do the guards sleep?”

“The ones who live on the grounds all sleep in the front building.”

“Who decides which guards live on the grounds?”

“Señor Alcantara.”

“Based on what? Why?”

“They belong to his family.”

“Nothing like nepotism to jam up the works. All right, I want eighteen guards on the premises at all times. You choose the best ones. Divide them, by watch, between the front and rear buildings. There’ll be a total of eighteen guards on duty as part of what’s called a five-platoon system. Three teams of six men each will work each day. Got all that?”

Jorge scratched his head. “Sí.”

“Starting next week, there will be six guards only on each shift. Three shifts per day. But each shift will work only four hours. Four hours on, eight hours off. And then four hours on again. During their off-hours, they will remain on the grounds.”

“Only six guards, Miguel?” Jorge wasn’t sure. “How can six guards do the work of eighteen?”

“Only six guards, Jorge. The new equipment will do some of their work. Of the six, two will be here inside, monitoring the new cameras. Two will be on the main gate. And for each shift, there will be a fifth man who may be dispatched across the grounds, going with a watch commander, or being at the watch commander’s orders. The sixth man will be that watch commander. The watch commanders will be your best men. They will maintain a log, and will report to you, as director of security. Out of the five platoons – thirty guards in total – you will select a deputy to you. He’ll be the most loyal and capable, after you, and his salary should reflect that.”

Jorge started to interrupt.

“Hold it, Jorge. Just listen. Each man gets two days off per week, and no man will work longer than forty hours per week. That’s where the fourth and fifth platoons – six men each – come into play. You’ll rotate them amongst the first three platoons. Can you work all of that out?”

“Sí, I think so, Miguel. But I don’t decide the pay.”

“You will. And your salary will be highest of all. Now, the radios. How many are there?”

“I believe there are twenty.”

“But they don’t all work. Am I right?”

“Sí. Only a few work.”

Roth chuckled. “But everybody carries one. How many automatic weapons work?”

Jorge shrugged. “I am not certain, Miguel. Señor Alcantara would know that.”

“Your .45; can it fire?” Roth held out his hand in a gimme gesture.

Jorge pulled it from his belt, handed it to Roth. “Sí, señor. It is my own.”

Roth pulled the slide back. A round in the chamber flew out. He held the slide back, ejected the

magazine onto the desk. There were seven rounds in the mag. “Let me give you a little tip: keep only five rounds in the magazine, Jorge. That way, the spring doesn’t get fatigued, doesn’t wear down to where you get a feeding malfunction. Carry spare magazines, also with five rounds only, and don’t chamber a round. That’s how guys get their cajones blown off. Also, I want you to wear a long shirt outside your belt. I don’t want anyone in the home, or visitors, to see your pistol unless you have a reason to pull it. You’ll be in the home more often now, and we don’t want it looking like Dodge City. Understand?”

“Yes, señor.... Dodge City?”

“We don’t want Cuernavaca looking like Neza at midnight. Right?”

“Oh, no, Miguel,” Jorge said, emphatic.

He handed the .45 and magazine back to Jorge. “Before you retire, check the perimeter. You catch anyone sleeping—which I doubt—you know what to do. From here on, set your alarm clock for a different hour each night. That’s when you check the guards. Without giving them notice. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay. You have a good night, Jorge,” Roth said by way of dismissal.

After Jorge left, Roth went through the room. In the battered filing cabinet, he found an old accounting register that someone had once used as a log. But there were no entries for over a year. There was also a six-pack of Sol in one of the drawers, a roll of toilet paper, and a porno magazine. Hardcore. He opened his carry-on, took out the last diary and the FedEx package from Nina, dropped in the six-pack and flipped through the magazine. It definitely required review for security reasons. He dropped it in the case, also.

He scanned the monitor. Only two screens were on now. Again, he managed to get another one working, but the picture quality was between bad and horrible, depending on its mood.

He walked around to the kitchen for a coffee. Cooks and servants were hurrying around, serving a dinner party. In the formal dining room on the other side of a hallway, he saw Felicia as one of the servers pushed through the swinging doors. She was speaking with a departing guest. She looked into the kitchen, saw him walking away with his cup of coffee.

He passed the door to the atrium where he’d had lunch the other day. The youngsters were in there, having their dinner. There were more girls now, around twelve of them, ages ranging from maybe fifteen up to Lily and Tina, who were probably the oldest.

Lily looked over, saw him pass. She jumped up and ran out to catch up with him. She pulled on his sleeve, asked him to join them, saying that she wanted to practice her English.

“Not this evening, my dear. I have work.” ‘My dear’ sounded more patriarchal than he intended.

She sashayed closer, her arms behind her back, working her coquette routine. “Please,” she whined, closer yet, well aware of the spell her figure worked on men.

“Go back to your friends before I give you a spanking.”

Lily pretended shock, then smiled. “That’s a very naughty thing to say, Señor Roth.”

He laughed, and walked on.

“Tomorrow?” she called after him.

“We’ll see,” he called back. “But I usually only give out spankings on Fridays.”

Lily screamed a laugh.

Roth continued on, thinking how annoying these girls could be, yet wondered again how old Lily was. What really bothered him was that she and Tina made him feel like an old lecher. Well, if the shoe fit.... They were in college, so they couldn’t be that young. If Lily were going into her final year, she’d be twenty at least. Maybe their vacation antics just made them seem younger.

Back in the security room, he sat down on a rickety chair. He slipped a sheet of paper out from under the blotter, made a note to junk it and order four new swivel chairs. He opened Premier’s investigation file on the death of Daniel Alvarez. Essentially, their assignment had been only to verify the death. If that conclusion seemed obvious, it wasn’t: faked death claims were a pandemic for which there was no permanent cure. Insurance companies needed to know for certain that a dead person was, in fact, their insured. Breaking bogus death claims and man-hunting were Premier’s forte.

Daniel Alvarez had been 44 and the major shareholder of the Central American affiliate of International Offices – IO Mexico. He held 51 percent, while the US parent, also a major shareholder, retained 26 percent. Daniel’s family and friends, a dozen or so, held the balance of the shares.

Alvarez had disappeared somewhere on the highway between Puerto Vallarta and Mexico City. He’d been alone, driving his favorite SUV, a customized job, supposedly bulletproof. He’d gone to Puerto Vallarta the Thursday before he disappeared. He often traveled alone, as he liked to drive, and had been known to boast how safe he felt, that it would be easier to break into Fort Knox than his SUV.

That proved false. Within hours of the kidnapping, the family, in the person of Roberto Alvarez, Daniel’s brother, received a phone call that Alvarez had been abducted and would not be seen alive again unless a million-dollar ransom was paid.

At first, Harmann North America – the company that carried the K&R policy on Daniel – wondered if the threat was a hoax. It wouldn’t be the first time that an insured had faked his own kidnapping to scam his insurance company. But then, Roberto Alvarez turned to the police after Daniel’s finger arrived by parcel post, and he paid the ransom, dropping a large bag containing a million bucks in 100-dollar bills in a Metro trash can early one morning. Another week went by, then

Daniel's body turned up at the US-Mexican border town of Nogales in a shipping crate.

International Offices had done its own investigation, and Premier investigated on behalf of Amalgamated Life of Illinois and their re-insurers. Alvarez's murder had cost Harmann a million bucks, and Amalgamated had to cough up four million plus interest in death benefits to the widow.

Just before the kidnapping, IO's South American affiliate president, Carlos Espada, had died of natural causes, and his wife had offered up the franchise for bidding. IO Mexico – nicknamed 'Hi Ho' by its employees – was about to bid when Daniel Alvarez was kidnapped. Espada's spouse, Muriel, was an old friend of the Alvarez's, and was holding off the bidding as a courtesy to Felicia and the other shareholders of IO Mexico.

The case had been simple enough for Premier, because all they'd been asked to do was substantiate the death. The policies were old, having been taken out in California, where the Alvarez's holdings in Orange County were considerable.

Through the Ministerio Público office in Nogales, Sonora State, Alfredo had gotten photos of the body that the police had taken at the scene, plus autopsy photos taken by the Servicio Médico Forense—SEMEFO—pathologists in Nogales. Also, the dead man's fingerprints had been rolled and matched against military records. It was Alvarez, all right.

The Ministerio Público office, whose function was similar to a district attorney's office in the States, shouldn't have released copies of anything in its file, since it was an open homicide, but Roth reasoned that money had changed hands. He looked at the breakdown on the final bill to Amalgamated. Alfredo had spent a week on the case, and his expenses were over 2,000 dollars. Pricey for handling a case in Sonora State, and unusually high for Alfredo – so, yeah, he'd forked over some greenbacks on the sly to buy what he wanted. It was good work as far as Roth was concerned. Bribery was common in Mexico.

But it didn't matter, really; the same gruesome photos had appeared in newspapers across Mexico a few days after Alvarez was found dead, all balled up in the crate. The photos had cost the media a few hundred bucks, obviously slipped to someone in the pathologist's office. Alvarez was very well known around Mexico City and in his part of the country. If it wasn't his face on the dead man in the newspapers, someone would have said something. More likely, a thousand readers would have called the newspapers.

International Offices was engaged in office supplies, office real estate, business centers, printing, and just about every ancillary enterprise imaginable, employing tens of thousands throughout Mexico alone. A multi-billion-dollar business, making Alvarez a high-profile target. If brutality made the kidnapper's point, Alvarez had been tortured to death; several thousand staples riddled his body, and

he'd been left to bleed to death or die from shock, perhaps exposure, whichever the Grim Reaper decided on first.

Roth shook his head. These were sick sonsofbitches he was dealing with. He re-read Alfredo's report, taking notes, then was about to start on Daniel Alvarez's last diary when Felicia appeared at the door.

"Oh. There you are," she said, her voice cool.

"Thank you, I was wondering where I was." He closed the diary, returned her stare.

"Could you please come into the library." She turned away, not giving him a chance to reply.

Roth followed in her musk-scented wake through the home. Passing the dining room, he saw maids clearing the table, rearranging the chairs of a dozen or so dinner guests. The kids had finished their dinner, and the home was now quiet. Roth guessed the madam of the manor was in a disagreeable mood, her spirit infectious. A few of the departing dinner guests were milling around outside, waiting for their chauffeurs to drive up from the gate.

They reached the library and Roth followed her in.

"Close the door, if you please," Felicia said, turning, folding her arms in front of her.

Roth closed the door, folded his arms, waited for her to begin.

"You had no authority to dismiss Señor Alcantara's man. And your violence towards them—"

"They were sleeping on the job, and that violates the first element of security. I answered an irresistible impulse in the face of such unprofessional conduct, señora. You see, I just couldn't help myself. I kicked one of them the hell out of here."

"One of them?"

Obviously, Alcantara had bleated about Sleepy getting bounced out of the security room, but hadn't mentioned Dopey in the woods. Yeah, she hadn't heard about that one. "One was sleeping in the security room, another in the woods. You also have too many useless guards on the payroll—"

"Whatever," she snapped, cutting him off. "Señor Alcantara is an old friend and has a contract to provide security for the estate."

"I suggest we review your old friend's bill. You're getting soaked for an incompetent crew and inferior equipment. The camera monitors don't work, most of the radios don't work, and there's more rust in their weapons than on the Titanic. I'll have Jorge look at the bills, if you like."

"That is not your concern."

"There'll be some changes made over the next few days, Señora Alvarez. Please stay out of the way. If I tell your employees to do something in the interest of security, don't contradict me." He reached into his jacket, pulled out the contract, handed it to her.

“Read the contract very carefully, señora. Have your attorney or brother-in-law look it over. Someone you trust. Implicitly. And have him witness your signature. Thereafter, disclose this agreement to no one unless I authorize it. Other than that, say no more than you have to about me. Do you understand?”

Felicia fumed; this sounded like another scolding. She unfolded the contract, glanced through it. It was seven pages.

“There’s something else I want from you,” Roth said. “A family tree.” He took out a slip of paper he’d made notes on. “Yours and Daniel’s. The who’s who in your family, and their spouses—legal or otherwise—parents, grannies, siblings, offspring, cousins, uncles, and aunts. Their ages and where they live; contact numbers, addresses. I’ll need that as soon as possible. Tomorrow would be fine.”

Felicia looked uncertain how to respond. She glanced through Roth’s notes, put a stubborn look on her face. “Why do you want this?” she demanded.

“As soon as possible,” he repeated, ignoring her question. “When I’ve finished with this job,” he continued, “I’ll be out of here and you can turn this place back over to Alcantara’s circus if you like. Until that time, your safety is my concern.” He turned and opened the door.

“No.” She stomped her foot. “Your sentiment is very touching, but that is not why I hired you. I want to know who killed my husband. Do not trouble yourself with my safety.”

He walked back, stood close to her, flicked the sheet of paper he’d handed her. She flinched but didn’t retreat. “Yes. I will concern myself with your safety,” he said, emphatic. His nose almost touched hers. “But only until I find your husband’s killers. Because a dead client can’t pay my bill, Señora Alvarez.”

She blinked.

He turned and walked out the door. He didn’t look back as he added, “How’s that sentiment touch you?”

Chapter 12

Roth remained in the hacienda throughout the night, reading the fourth volume of Daniel's diaries, Premier's files, and the Blackwell reports.

Another express mail package that arrived at his hotel this evening had a copy of the Harmann investigation. Nothing new. In fact, their people had learned less than Alfredo.

He took a break at 1:00 a.m. to patrol the premises, inside and out, checking the guards. He ran into Jorge coming out of the woods, having just checked the guys there. Good. Jorge was clicking into his new job.

They walked near the main gate and the carport, which seemed large enough to park the fuselage of a 747 under its corrugated roof. There were normally only a dozen family and estate vehicles, but it was packed now because of all the visiting kids, many of whom drove.

The keys for the estate and family vehicles were kept in the guard shack outside the gate. Jorge got them, and Roth checked each of the SUVs and sedans that Jorge identified as having been modified to deter an attack. Aside from two pickup trucks used by employees who regularly toted in tons of supplies with the cooks and gardeners, there were two SUVs and two sedans, one of them the car Lily had picked him up in the other morning. There was another Mercedes that Felicia used. From sitting on the hood and bobbing the nose up and down, Roth could see that that vehicle hadn't been modified with anything remotely resembling serious protection. While it and the other vehicles were a little heavier than normal, they hadn't been fully modified. The windows were thicker than usual, and a little darker. At a quick glance, they might fool someone into thinking they were bulletproof. Roth took off his jacket, dropped down on his back, slid beneath one of the Mercs. The fuel tank wasn't protected, and he doubted that the floor and roof of the vehicle were lined with ballistic nylon. Neither Mercedes would survive an anti-personnel mine, let alone an armor-piercing explosion. But he supposed that anti-kidnapping, and not anti-assassination, had been the objective when these vehicles were modified.

Did a threat still exist? Would one successful kidnapping lead to another attempt, bring back the perps? Hopefully, Felicia wouldn't revert to the old system once Roth's work here was finished. He'd need to hammer a new philosophy into her as well as old Jorge. What at first had looked like good security was full of breaches. The place was easily compromised.

He liked Jorge, instinctively trusted him, had no question that the old man would lay down his life for the family. What would the outcome have been had Jorge been driving Daniel the day he disappeared?

"Who modified these vehicles?" he asked Jorge. He had to explain 'modified,' and Jorge

understood when Roth said ‘armored.’

“That was done by Señor Alcantara.”

Big surprise. Roth instructed Jorge to lock all car keys in the security office starting tomorrow morning, and maintain a log on the use of vehicles by any employee, mileage out and in, and purpose of the trip.

“Some of the guards use them for personal reasons, Miguel.”

“Alcantara’s relatives?”

“Sí.”

“Even before Señor Alvarez’s death?”

“A little then. But much more now. Señor Alcantara doesn’t come often, doesn’t bother with anything much.”

Sure, the prick was taking advantage of the widow, and the only person who’d stood between Alcantara’s monkeys overrunning the place had been old Jorge. But Alcantara was family, had supposedly been a friend of Daniel’s, so Jorge’s situation surely hadn’t been a happy one.

“That stops now, Jorge. No guard will use Cuernavaca vehicles unless you authorize it.”

“Sí, Miguel.”

Roth had noticed that most of the downstairs doors had remained open while the kids romped with a noisy pool party that went on until past midnight. Thereafter, the routine was that most doors were locked. But the only security inside the home was an elderly matron who sat on virginity vigil upstairs throughout the night upstairs. There were bedrooms on that wing occupied by the kids. A matronly vigil was customary when men and boys were in the home, and this was Felicia’s responsibility. The vigil was a moot point, as Roth definitely called Lily and Tina’s status into question. Still, flirting was a Latino preoccupation that didn’t necessarily mean romping in the hay. Besides, from what he could see, the only man around was Taurino. Maybe Felicia worried that Taurino was given to lurking in dark corridors, waiting like a spider for an opportune moment to fly out and ravish the girls. All of them at once. Atta’ girl, Felicia; protect their virtues. Never mind that gunmen could breach security, take out some old crone, murder everyone in their sleep. No problem; just as long as no one got fucked.

Roth returned to the security room, continued with Alvarez’s diary. The truth be known, it wasn’t all that interesting. It was erratic, sparse, with blank pages for many days. Then, during other periods, he’d written as though riding an emotional roller-coaster, especially when he waxed political. Some entries were confusing, others read like he was grandstanding, these passages likely for posterity, as though he was certain that his words would someday be revealed to the world, to illuminate the masses,

to evidence Daniel Alvarez's brilliance. So much crap, really.

But some entries were telling. When a passage was brief, Alvarez seemingly wanted only to recall an event, and a date, but didn't expound on an issue. As though someone would assuredly be reading this one day, and he didn't want questions arising from certain entries—simple remarks like 'Luis!' or 'Federico! Again!' or 'Madrigal!' or 'Hi Ho USA!' All followed with bold exclamation marks.

If there was any substance here that might help Roth, it might be in these terse entries. This volume was as much a calendar as a diary, at times even a political manifesto with sophomoric rhetoric. Roth rolled his eyes; if there was true justice in the world, the guy should have been kidnapped if only to end his dramatic ramblings. Despite Daniel Alvarez's fortune, he'd wavered socialistic. But that was common among the wealthy.

Roth stuck post-it notes with questions for Felicia, and those he'd run by Alfredo or Jorge. By 3:00 a.m., he'd gotten through most of this diary, taking his own notes. He turned back to the reports submitted by John Byrd. Felicia had hired him seven weeks ago, and so far he'd generated three reports, or statuses. Most of the initial status included details generally known about the kidnapping and murder, and clarified, in writing, what Blackwell was to do for their client. Just so many words. The next two reports covered consultations and meetings with a list of authorities on both sides of the border, but so far it was just speculation, and Byrd outlined areas of future inquiries.

Throughout the reports, 'sources' were referred to, but remained mostly unnamed, except for certain Mexican law enforcement officials that Byrd stayed in close contact with. As far as Roth was concerned, Byrd was just going through the motions, parroting these sources, whom, Roth felt, were themselves just speculating and theorizing. If there were any solid suspects, they weren't named here. Roth decided that he wouldn't bother with Mexico City's top cop, since Byrd stayed in contact with such sources.

Roth threw the reports in his bag, lit another cigarette. He was less than thrilled with Blackwell's reports, and an old axiom came to mind: if you can't dazzle the clients with brilliance, baffle them with bullshit.

He took a taxi back to the Hidalgo, showered and napped for an hour. Then he rose, dressed, put on his last clean shirt.

The flight to Guadalajara was only half-full, as flights left every five or ten minutes, there being strong commercial ties between the two cities. He landed just over fifty minutes later. From the airport, Colonia Truman was only twenty minutes away. The area was what Roth expected, except more so. Every other home had a small swimming pool, and there was a community center at the edge of a nine-

hole golf course. The place was overrun with happy, porky, older Americans who could bronze themselves in paradise on medium-sized pensions.

But Byrd's home was exceptional—a two-story hacienda with four bedrooms, a smallish courtyard surrounded by what appeared to be guest rooms on the second floor. Beneath an arch, the place let out to a private pool. This place had cost a pretty bundle. In the States, you couldn't touch it for under a million.

Another likely reason that Byrd retired here was Señora Ave Byrd, a warm-natured woman in her mid-forties. She was dark, with deep-brown eyes, looked more than a little bit Indian of the American variety. Like Felicia, there were wisps of gray around her temples, but unlike Felicia, Señora Byrd was overly fond of tortillas, being on the chubby side, which she hid under a Guatemalan equivalent of a muumuu. Damn! Roth had pegged her just right. Ave Byrd had a cat, which she carried around the home with her. She had a bubbly personality, was apparently fond of entertaining guests.

Roth had arrived at exactly 10:00 a.m., but Byrd didn't make an appearance until nearly 10:30, during which Ave served Roth several cups of coffee and gave him a tour of the home. She finally settled him in the study, where a solitary file was placed squarely in the middle of an otherwise clear desk. There were a few books on a credenza and shelf, all neatly organized, strategically placed and dusted. It was like a study or den in a model home. There were plaques on the walls, an Air Force Honorable Discharge, and a commendation for the years Byrd had subsequently served as a postal inspector. The guy was a triple-dipper, living fat off the land, having been a government employee all his life; the guy had never really busted his ass.

Ave Byrd didn't leave Roth unattended while he waited. She was either a congenial hostess, or didn't trust him not to palm something from her bric-a-brac collection. She sat and chatted with him.

“Ave? Isn't that Spanish for bird?”

Señora Byrd laughed, explained, as she probably had a thousand times that, yes, her nickname was Ave. Therefore, her name was Bird Byrd, and most people just called her Birdie. To make his day, she gave Roth permission to call her Birdie, also. She stroked the cat, and it looked up when she mentioned her nicknames, as if it understood 'bird,' those feathery little morsels.

“Your cat finds that interesting,” Roth pointed out.

“Yes, I guess she does,” Ave said. She nuzzled the cat, made baby talk to it. The cat meowed, wallowed in the attention.

“What did she say?” Roth asked.

Ave laughed. “She said she likes my name. Do you like cats?”

Roth wanted to reply that cats were okay if there was nothing else to eat. But animal lovers had

no sense of humor when it came to their pets. “They’re all right,” he allowed.

“They’re adorable,” Ave corrected with a frown. Then, to the cat: “Yes, Mommy’s little girl is just so lovable. Don’t you think so, Mr. Roth?”

She was just asking for it. “Yeah, just lovable,” Roth agreed, smiling. “But if she were your size and you were hers, you’d be lunch. After she’d tormented you mercilessly before clawing you to pieces like a paper shredder.”

Ave stopped cuddling the little dust muff and shot daggers at Roth.

“Actually,” he continued, a little payback being in order for John Byrd making him wait, “she’d make a nice pair of mittens. Well, one, anyhow, seein’ how she’s such a runt. You know, a kitten mitten.”

Ave Byrd was shocked right out of the room. She stood in the hallway, staying close to the study, but ignoring Roth, to his relief. Yep, she was safeguarding the bric-a-brac. Roth turned to reading the notes he’d made for the interview.

When Byrd came down, he shook hands, was pleasant but cool, and likely noticed a change in his normally happy spouse. After he entered the study, Ave closed the French doors leading to the hallway.

Byrd moved behind his desk, sat down. Yeah, he was the happy retired civil servant: suntanned, mid-sixties, likely mid-eighties in golf, some chubbiness, all carried on a slightly shorter than average frame. He removed reading glasses from a drawer in his desk, put them on, and then opened the file. Roth waited, sure that Byrd knew exactly what was in it, had probably glanced through it yesterday after they’d talked on the phone. After Roth had raised his voice, that is.

“I’ve read your reports,” Roth started. “Got anything else?”

Byrd lowered his head to look over the rim of his glasses as Roth spoke. He had no intention of rushing. He turned pages slowly. There was a manual Safeguard brand time sheet in the file, similar to what attorneys used before computers. No doubt Byrd would add an hour onto it for this conference. He held a two-page report in his hand, spoke without looking up at Roth. “My last report was last week, and I was about to mail this one to Mrs. Alvarez.”

Roth held out his hand, and now Byrd did look at him. “I’ll mail this myself, if you don’t mind.”

Roth reached over, snatched it from his hand, plopped back in his seat, looking at Byrd. “Let’s save the postage.” He read it, occasionally looking up at Byrd who had turned his chair sideways, was looking out the window. Fuming.

The report, this being the fourth, was more of the same: vague references to ‘sources,’ speculation, further mention of known criminals and crime syndicates in northern Mexico, inquiries he’d made – mostly over the phone – and meetings he’d attended. Some of those meetings had been

with impressive titles: political leaders, Ministerio Público officials up in Chihuahua State, old American colleagues of the alphabet variety – FBI, DEA, and INS – plus the Border Patrol and Customs officials on both sides of the line. Byrd was certainly making the rounds.

“Why do you think he was killed?” Roth asked when he’d finished.

Byrd favored him with eye contact again. “We don’t know why. The family cooperated with the kidnapers.”

Roth wondered who the ‘we’ might be. But to Byrd, it probably sounded better than saying ‘I don’t know why. It was rather MacArthurian –as in ‘we’ were thrown out of the Philippines, but ‘I shall return victorious. But then, Byrd had fed at the government trough all his life.

“No La Hermandad types involved?”

“I wouldn’t think so. They kidnaped children–”

“I mean: police organization involved?”

“If police are involved, it’s a very closed secret.” Byrd shook his head. “No. Again, I don’t see such involvement.”

“Are you laying out any reward money?”

“I have a few people pounding the beat, a few sources checking around.”

Sources, again. “Yes, but has any money been offered for an arrest?”

Byrd shook his head. “We don’t feel it would do any good.”

Roth wondered again who ‘we’ were. “Other than what I’ve read here and in the earlier reports, is there anything else I should know?”

Byrd made a long humming sound leading up to a considered “No.” Roth thought maybe he was working on his personal mantra. While Byrd didn’t seem the type, a close look at Juanita in her muumuu, and, yeah, he could picture them back-to-back in a yoga position, nipping at a jar of peyote juice. “So, no noise out there about police involvement?” The police were often behind kidnappings in Mexico.

“Nothing,” Byrd said. “And we don’t think that’s the case. Why would they kill their victim if they wouldn’t be caught and prosecuted for merely kidnapping? Mexican law enforcement doesn’t step on the other fellow’s toes.”

“Good point.” Roth nodded. “So, why did they kill Alvarez?”

“If they didn’t collect, I’d understand it.” Byrd shrugged. “But after they collected? That’s not the usual pattern. Killing after a collection is bad for business. Soon, families of kidnap victims realize that it doesn’t matter whether they pay or not since their loved ones will be killed anyhow.”

“And they just served up the body in a crate at the border?” It was a statement of fact, but Roth

made it a question.

Byrd shrugged again. “Anybody’s guess. They could have buried the body in the desert. Who would know? Why make his death so obvious? No one would have known he was dead. No one called the family again. So, we have to ask ourselves: why didn’t the kidnappers play it straight?”

“First-timers?”

“Maybe. But not necessarily. After all, they grabbed Daniel without a soul even knowing he was missing until they made the first call. Very smooth operation, it seems. Four of the Alvarez autos had been modified to where, if not kidnap-proof, they certainly offered a harder target than the standard street vehicle. Unless unlocked from inside, it would have been difficult to get the doors opened. All four doors plus the back hatch panel on the SUV had double locks in case kidnappers tried to blow the doors off with pistols or a shotgun.”

“You reckon he was taken unawares?”

“There’s no way of knowing, since the vehicle hasn’t been recovered. And I doubt it will be found.”

Like thousands of vehicles stolen from the US border states to disappear into Mexico, cars had the vehicle identification number, the VIN, replaced with a fake one, and bogus registration papers were created to go with it. A few hundred bucks for the whole package, plus of course the cost of the stolen vehicle. If the driver was ever stopped by a cop, a few pesos usually made the officer see things in a favorable light.

“The same with the pickup truck that carried Daniel’s body to the Nogales crossing,” Byrd went on. “The VIN number had been chiseled off the engine block and other places on the truck, and it couldn’t be traced, and the license plate had been stolen. The driver of the pickup joined the queue of trucks US bound, then vanished at the border crossing. Customs theorized that he jumped into a confederate’s vehicle who had coordinated his crossing into Mexico at the same time. Simple, smooth operation. Before you ask, yes, cameras at the crossing were checked. Nothing. We know that one or two hundred vehicles had crossed into Mexico within a few minutes at around that time. As you know, there’s no problem going in to Mexico. US Border Patrol doesn’t check who goes out, only in.

“We canvassed all the way from Puerto Vallarta to Mexico City,” Byrd went on. “Meticulously. He was last known to be in Puerto Vallarta the morning he disappeared. He was driving home to Mexico City, would probably stop overnight somewhere along the way. Our guess is that he didn’t reach a hotel, otherwise he’d have called the señora. They spoke on the phone every day when he was away.”

“Why did he drive?” Roth asked. “That’s gotta be a ten-, twelve-hour haul.”

“According to everyone we interviewed, he liked driving. And didn’t care for flying. Plus, he had a lot of time on his hands, as I understand it. He drove to Puerto Vallarta often – often with Señora Alvarez, and there are some usual places where he’d stay over on his way home.” He pointed to a list of hotels in towns between Puerto Vallarta and Mexico City. “We canvassed them all, plus many others, and he never stopped at any on that last trip.”

“Did Alvarez have a tootsie? Someone he’d stop and play with along the way?”

“Absolutely not. He was very devoted to Mrs. Alvarez.”

Seeing the widow, that was believable. On appearances, any other woman could only end up second best. Still, there was no way Byrd could know that Daniel wasn’t playing around on the side. Philandering was practically a vocation in Latin America.

Roth recalled what he’d read in Byrd’s earlier reports. “So, he was in Puerto Vallarta in the morning, then no one heard anything from him the rest of the day or in the evening, and the first ransom call came the next morning?”

“That’s right. Mrs. Alvarez had tried to call him, the night before, but his cellphone was turned off or the battery was dead. She got the call at around the same time as her brother-in-law – Daniel’s brother, Roberto. Same caller, it’s believed. After Roberto hung up with the kidnapper, he tried to reach Daniel on his cellphone, and it was answered by a woman, who quickly hung up and didn’t answer it again. Eventually there were more calls made on Daniel’s phone, and we traced them to the parties called. Mostly businesses, so they didn’t know who might have called them at any given time, or how the calls were made to them.

“But, we’re looking for a pattern, something to narrow the caller down. Even if she is innocent and just happened on the cellphone, or thought she was merely buying a hot one. Very probably, the phone was purposely tossed away to throw us off. So, his phone could have been lost, stolen, what have you, and then used by someone who eventually discarded it when the service was cut off. Or maybe when the news of his kidnapping came out, because even the newspapers reported the details regarding his phone.”

Byrd shook his head in disgust. “Mexican cops will sell any information for a few pesos. Even if it jeopardizes a case.”

“You’re carefully checking all of the parties called on his cell?”

“Absolutely. It continues. Looking for a common denominator. We had so little to go on as it is. But just imagine that you have a business receiving hundreds of calls daily; incoming calls from the public, from other businesses, maybe personal calls. You don’t maintain a log of incoming calls, never mind bothering to ask the caller’s number. And these days, fifty percent of all calls in Mexico are

probably made on cellphones.”

Roth nodded. It was also the drug-dealer’s phone of choice.

Byrd seemed to be pondering something. He glanced at Roth, looked away.

Roth stood. “All right. I’ll be in touch.” He extended his hand. Byrd stood, shook his hand, a question on his face.

“Mrs. Alvarez hasn’t given me any further instructions. Am I still—”

“Stay with it,” Roth said. If Felicia wanted Byrd off the job, let her tell him herself. As far as Roth was concerned, Byrd might still be helpful, although so far, all he had was information which tended to point out what hadn’t happened to Alvarez, and who wasn’t suspected. But the guy was touching all the bases, kept his fingers on what, if anything, the authorities were doing, and was plugged into US intelligence sources. Eliminate what hadn’t happened and you’re left with what had happened. Yeah, Byrd could save Roth a lot of time, even if he was looking in the wrong places.

Chapter 13

Mañana in Spanish means ‘tomorrow,’ and in Mexico it is an oft-spoken word; in fact, the most commonly spoken word. Mexico is a land where people see little need to tend to something today since there is, after all, mañana. Or, never do today what can be put off until tomorrow.

It was close to 3:00 p.m. when Roth arrived back at the Hidalgo, and it was this word he expected to hear from the tailor. He was prepared to get back in the cab and visit the nearest department store. But there they were: two pair of trousers and four shirts; tailor made, at that. Pricey, perhaps, and Roth could have the same goods made in Bangkok for a quarter of the price with better material. But it didn’t matter; he needed these things now, and it was going on Señora Alvarez’s bill, anyhow.

At reception, there was a fax from Alfredo, announcing that he expected to be in Mexico City day after tomorrow. The message had been sent from McAllen, Texas, and Alfredo said that all of the equipment had been delivered to his hotel, prepaid by the New York office. He was preparing to take to the road, estimated arriving in about thirty hours.

Roth showered and changed into the new clothes, threw his dirty stuff in the corner for the maid tomorrow morning. His other laundry had been returned and was hanging in his closet. He started on a rum and Coke, hoping to finish volume four of Daniel Alvarez’s not-so-extraordinary life. It seemed to Roth that resolutions and – to Alvarez’s way of thinking, at least – brilliant insights came periodically and at notable dates; his own birthday being one. On these occasions, Alvarez waxed philosophical more than at any other time.

Roth was somewhat savvy on Mexico, and from his take on politics south of the border, Alvarez had been a waffler. Politically, he sounded like a centrist, and while he didn’t own up to any party affiliation, his rhetoric made him akin to the Partido de la Revolución Democrática, a liberal, left-of-center party, while other passages might have placed him in the ranks of the hard-nose conservatives. These were Mexico’s old guard who’d been in power for seventy years, until Vicente Fox’s Partido Acción Nacional won him the presidency in 2000.

Peppered throughout this diary, the one Daniel had started on his fortieth birthday four years ago, were more references to family members and friends. He never failed to mention birthday and anniversary parties, an occasional military ball, political conferences here and there, political campaigns started and finished, social and political confederates, most written or delivered in a paternal, patronizing vein. The name of Federico, followed only by an exclamation point, appeared a few more times, and there were others, as well – just names, but no comments. The names of Roberto and Maria, Daniel’s children from his first marriage, appeared here and there, usually complimentary of

an achievement, school honors and such.

Volume three of the diary was downstairs in the document case in the manager's office, but Roth decided before starting on that, covering Daniel's life between 35 and forty, he'd flip back through the past six months of Alvarez's life, concentrate on those pages. If there was anything helpful to unfolding a mystery, Roth reasoned, it would be more recent.

Federico was mentioned several times in the last months of Daniel's life. During his last month, the name Ricardo began appearing. Roth made notes of these and other entries and names – things he'd have Felicia explain to him. One name stood out, also followed by an exclamation point, a man named Hernando, who apparently was a pesky debtor, a distant cousin of Felicia's whom Daniel had lent money to and was having trouble recovering.

At six o'clock, Roth went down for dinner. Beef enchiladas and frijoles; his staple these past few days. He knocked back a pitcher of margaritas in the cantina, and on his way out of the hotel, ran into the girl he'd taken the other night. There was a clutch of patrons at the entrance, and both pretended not to recognize the other. She out of propriety; he out of a natural aversion to the walking dead.

It was Thursday night. Maybe Saturday, he'd hit a few places over in Polanco, a trendy neighborhood packed with clubs and restaurants. Not that he was trendy; maybe he'd be lucky enough to hit on some little airhead who thought banging Americans was trendy. Maybe there were still places in the Western hemisphere where the average guy stood a better chance with women than incarcerated serial killers.

He circled the block on foot, and when he was certain he wasn't under surveillance, hopped in a cab and headed for Carretera Toluca. A half-mile from Cuernavaca, he got out and walked, approached the estate from the street running off the hill down to the main gate. The guards didn't see him approaching, yet he'd been exposed for a hundred meters. They were used to vehicles approaching the hacienda, accustomed to hearing engines coming down the lane from Carretera Toluca, or gears grinding around the downhill curve. But a man on foot coming from this direction was uncommon, so they hadn't even seen Roth until he was upon them. Even then, one guard hadn't noticed Roth until he stood next to him. When the man turned and saw Roth, he jumped back, let out a muted sound. The other guard chuckled. It could have just as easily been him, but he'd noticed Roth approaching, pretended to have seen him walking towards the gate all the way.

Roth walked inside and up to the home. At the south entrance, a young man stood in the shadows, waiting it seemed. Roth wasn't surprised that only a single security professional had shown up, was frankly surprised that even this one had. Roth bid him buenas tardes and went inside. In the security room, Jorge had unfolded an old US Army cot, made himself a bed in the corner. No work had been

done on the wall.

“Jorge. I told you to break through those bricks.” He nodded at the wall behind the desk. “And make your quarters in the room behind it.”

“Miguel, I cannot tell workmen to break down the wall without the señora’s permission.”

“Have one of the guys get me a sledgehammer.”

Jorge looked puzzled. “A what, señor?”

“A big hammer. To punch through the bricks.”

Jorge started to object, but Roth motioned for him to get on with it, and Jorge went off without further comment. Roth stepped outside, called the young man into the office. He introduced himself and they exchanged business cards. Kelly Moore was not yet thirty, looked even younger. Despite his name, he was Mexican, but spoke perfect English. He operated a small audio-video retail and service operation started by his uncle, an American. He didn’t represent any closed-circuit TV manufacturers that Roth deemed reliable, but his company could install and maintain anything along this line.

When Jorge returned with a sledgehammer, Roth took off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves. He gauged where a door would best adjoin the rooms, swung the hammer with all his might. It shattered a brick, but it would take many more whacks until he punched through. It was at least two bricks thickness. He swung again, closing his eyes at the last instant, just before the hammer slammed into brick, and shards flew off. Despite the violence, the demolition didn’t make much noise. After a dozen swings, the hammerhead became stuck in the bricks; he’d punched through to the other side. He worked the hammerhead loose, turned to Jorge. “It’ll go easier now. In the morning, have workmen complete it and get a door up between the two rooms.”

Jorge stared at the hole, fearful of what Señora Alvarez would think of the mess.

As if reading his mind, Roth said, “If the señora says anything, just refer her to me. I wanted this room finished today, Jorge. Make sure it’s done tomorrow, because by Saturday we’ll have other things that need to be done in this room. Got it?”

Jorge nodded. He liked the idea of having the room on the other side of the wall. It was a large space, maybe twenty by thirty feet, and it overlooked a small atrium; even its private bathroom was larger than the dorm room where he now slept. He especially liked the atrium, a place where an old guy could sit and repose himself.

“All right, gentlemen.” Roth motioned to both. “We’re going to take a walk around the grounds, and I’ll tell you where I want cameras installed.

They finished surveying the new camera positions. In all, there would be sixteen new cameras. Everything of Alcantara’s would be ripped out and replaced, and there would be qualified men

monitoring the screens at all times. Roth didn't feel that motion detectors would be practical; the hacienda was far too active, too many employees on premises around the clock.

"For the time being, string the lines above ground," he told Kelly. "Later, you can put them underground. Use the existing tubing if it's still serviceable." He led them back inside the security office, where he instructed Jorge to create guidelines in writing. In two weeks' time, he wanted a manual prepared, created exclusively for the estate. There would be only one copy of the manual, which each remaining guard would read and initial. Thereafter, the manual would be in Jorge's safekeeping; security procedures wouldn't be left lying around for just anyone to read. He also told Jorge to have a large safe installed in the morning. Only Jorge was to have the combination. Kelly Moore volunteered to take care of that.

Roth released Moore, and before leaving himself, he inspected the perimeter again with Jorge. There were no guards sleeping. Roth gave Jorge new instructions for the guards: those who remained after next week would have their salaries increased. However, if a guard was ever found sleeping on duty, not only would he lose his job, but the estate would sue him for taking wages under false pretenses. Of course, it would never stand up in court, but the shame factor might prevent any self-respecting guard from remaining in the business.

"What about Señor Alcantara, Miguel?"

"He's a thief, and he's out of this movie."

"Movie?"

"Yeah, Jorge. Movie. Like a motion picture. Get it?"

That's what Roth's existence felt like this past week – a film noir beginning with the muscle job for Grassi. Not only was Roth not in his hemisphere, he wasn't in his element. The work didn't make him uncomfortable, but he wasn't a happy camper.

"No, Miguel," Jorge replied. "What motion picture?"

"Never mind. Alcantara's out of the picture. Finished. We'll be keeping the best people and cutting the security payroll in half. That's how those remaining will get salary increases without denting the señora's household budget. And you're going to see that they deserve it. You'll be selecting the guards who stay, and you'll be authorizing payment. You'll establish how you'll do that when you speak with Señora Alvarez."

Roth had considered hiring a security professional in the States and bringing him down here. But he'd decided to stick with Jorge, at least for the time being. Jorge could do the job, and in a few years, when he got too old, Jorge would know when to make a change and have the depth to select a new security director.

Jorge wondered how all these changes with the guard force would happen. He'd never heard of such an arrangement, chopping a security force in half and dividing their salaries amongst the remaining guards.

"How is it that you drive Lily around?"

"She asks me whenever she visits. She likes it when I drive her."

"Who drives Señora Alvarez?"

"She has a regular driver."

"One of Alcantara's relatives?"

"Sí. Señor Alcantara chose this driver for her."

"He chose the driver?"

"Sí."

"Well, you'll choose her new driver soon. You'll also see that that driver receives training for evasive measures. Understand?"

"A school?"

"Exactly. For security. You choose it, and make arrangements."

"That will be expensive, Miguel."

"I'm sure it will. Especially if it's in the States. If so, you'll need to get a visa for the candidate from the American Embassy. If it's necessary for the driver to be trained in the States, I'll provide him with a letter to the visa section at the embassy. Also, order a computer set-up. Kelly can do that for you. Ever use a computer?"

"A nephew has a computer. I've written a few letters on it, and I use his e-mail address."

"Get your own e-mail address. Hotmail for the moment. Your nephew can show you how. So, you can type?"

"I am very slow on the..." He mimed typing.

"Keyboard."

"Sí. The keyboard."

"The biblical method."

"Excuse me?"

"Seek and thee shall find," Roth explained. "Hunt and peck."

Jorge smiled. "Sí, Miguel. The biblical method."

"I'm a hunter-pecker graduate, myself. Okay, this space will be ready by Saturday, correct?"

"I will try, Miguel."

"And Jorge, you don't drive Lily anymore. You don't drive anyone. Got it?"

Jorge made a face. “Lily will be upset, Miguel.”

“Crushed, probably. But she’s young and she’ll recover. All right, I’ll be out here first thing tomorrow morning. Good night, Jorge.”

As Roth was leaving, Lucinda approached. As usual, she shot daggers at him, but said nothing. She handed him a thick, sealed envelope. Inside was Premier’s signed copy of the contract. He glanced over it. Felicia had made no changes, and the document was witnessed by Roberto Alvarez, Daniel’s brother. At the instructions that Nina had indicated, each page was initialed by both Felicia and Roberto.

Truth be known, Roth was surprised that she had signed so fast. He expected a delay because she wasn’t happy with him. And before this movie was over, she’d be even less happy. He tucked the contract into his jacket, thanked Lucinda, almost addressing her as Lucretia. As he walked from the home, he felt her eyes burning a hole in his back. He smiled in the darkness; the old crone had a built-in shit-detector, no doubt alert to lecherous thoughts that men harbored for the widow. But she needn’t be concerned; tripping Felicia into bed wasn’t in the program. Maybe after this business was finished. He visualized Felicia’s icy glare, pictured her holding up handcuffs on a long, manicured finger, the nail painted fire-engine red. He shook his head. He had to put her out of his mind.

By the time he returned to the Hidalgo, the manager’s office was closed and locked. He wanted to start on Daniel’s third diary. Also, equally important for digest was the porno magazine he’d confiscated from the security room.

He had a few drinks and a snack in the cantina, then went up to his room and hit the sack. His thoughts before dozing off were that Byrd should have done a security audit at Cuernavaca as soon as he took the assignment. But Byrd was a garden variety triple-dipper; he’d retired from the military, then retired from a federal agency, and yet again retired on Social Security. He’d never been a businessman, and was clearly just holding the fort for Blackwell. They could do better by having a guy who could generate revenue for Blackwell. But maybe their reputation, vis-à-vis a promotion campaign, wasn’t up to speed south of the border.

As always, his thoughts turned to the case, whether he wanted them to or not. What nagged at him was that the perpetrator, likely plural – perpetrators – as much as handed over Daniel Alvarez’s body. Why do that? Why not just bury it? Who would know? Why risk the possibility of leaving leads behind. If the body hadn’t turned up, no death certificate would have been created. Why would the perps care? No body, no claim; Amalgamated and its re-insurers might declare that Alvarez was only missing. A ‘missing and presumed dead’ case wasn’t the same as having a corpse. They could have taken years before they paid out on a missing insured. So, for claim purposes, a body was important.

And only the señora benefited. The contingent beneficiaries were Daniel's two children. There were yet other policies, favoring IO in the event of the loss of a key man, that being Daniel, but those policies had been paid to the corporation.

The perpetrators made the death obvious. Advertised it. Practically bragged about it. And who outside the family knew that Alvarez was insured for four million bucks?

An hour later, having done his add-ons and take-aways, and tossing a few dozen what ifs around in his head, Roth at last fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 14

“Yes, Mr. Roth,” Felicia spoke over the phone. “I have questions for you, as well.” Her tone didn’t sound good.

Roth had called her right after breakfast. He wanted answers to a few questions, and Felicia Alvarez was a hard person to catch on the fly.

“I see that you are destroying my home,” she said.

“The room off of the south entrance? Jorge will make his quarters there. I want him in the home, near the monitors I’ll be putting in.”

“The monitors you will be putting in?”

“Yeah,” Roth said, tired-like. He was fed up with her resistance to change. “Alcantara’s equipment is garbage. I told you that. If you have any questions about it, drop by the security room, have Jorge give you a tour of security features used in the time of the Spanish Inquisition— but charged to you at modern prices. Also, with the new equipment coming in, I’ll be cutting the security force in half. Next, I want you to check the bills your accountant has been paying to Alcantara. Finally, I want you to find a mirror. Look into it and say *Hola, Señora Tonto*.” Tonto meant ‘fool.’ Harsh words. But Felicia needed a dose of reality.

He heard her gasp. Then she got angry: “Mr. Roth, no unrelated male has ever lived in our home. Jorge is not—”

“Have your staff call him Tío Jorge if it makes them more comfortable. He’s practically an uncle, anyhow, isn’t he? But the important thing is, I will be more comfortable with him near you. For the time being, concern yourself with my feelings. I am sensitive, tender, and temperamental. Easily upset. Emotionally fragile. Give me what I want. Otherwise I may have tantrums, maybe throw things around, even go so far as stomping my foot. Do this for me and I will be out of your life as fast as is humanly possible. I have a life and business elsewhere, señora.”

Roth pictured her staring at the receiver, doubting she’d heard such words coming out of it.

Roth went on: “Also, Jorge will be selecting your driver, and I want that driver trained.”

“All of the employees can drive.”

“That’s not the training I mean. Never mind. It’ll be taken care of. Let’s move along; will you be available in an hour?”

She was silent for long moments. Finally, “Yes, I will be available.”

“I’ll need ten minutes,” Roth said. “Have you completed that list of relatives?”

“Yes. Jorge has it.”

Which meant that she'd given it to Lucretia Borgia to give to Jorge.

Roth hung up, then called Nina in New York. Their new, overly talkative receptionist answered; the girl who'd given Roth's schedule to Grassi. "Oh, hello, Mr. Roth. Where are you calling from?"

"If I tell you, who else gets told?"

She went quiet, then: "I'm sorry about that, Mr. Roth. Nina has talked to me about giving callers too much information."

"In our business, it works like this: we gather information, but we don't give it out. It's like playing marbles; we keep them, not lose them."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"When people know too much about us, things could go bad. Loose lips sink ships. Right?"

"Yes, sir," she said. She understood now, apologized again. Roth said okay, then Nina came on the line.

"Kincannon has no objection to us investigating the death," she said right off. "Said it was no skin off him, and has every confidence that should we develop anything that might concern them, he'd expect to hear about it. He doubts you'll come up with anything, since the Mexican authorities haven't."

"Fine," Roth said. "Alfredo should be here soon. Probably tonight."

"I know," Nina said. "He called me from San Luis Potosi last night. He couldn't reach you at the hotel. He'll have originals of the invoices for you. Mike, we've laid out a bundle on all that equipment."

"I'll get payment as soon as it's installed. I don't want the widow getting behind on our bills. Not the way she thinks."

"She's unhappy?"

"Eternally. It's what she lives for."

Downstairs in the manager's office, Roth dropped the fourth volume of Daniel's diaries back into the document case, collected the third. He took this diary, the six pack, and the porno magazine up to his room, then left the hotel. On the sidewalk, he studied the street as he walked out of the area by another direction before catching a taxi.

As on his first visit to Cuernavaca, he walked down the lane from Carretera Toluca. The guards smartened up as he approached the main gate. One guard, whose English was better than the others, told him that Jorge was in the home.

Roth found him in the kitchen, then they went back to the security room. The wall had been breached, and workmen were starting on the frame for the door. A tub of concrete had been mixed to

form an arch consistent with the home's interior. An old, heavy wooden door leaned up against another wall. It was a beautiful piece of wood, rounded on top, again consistent with the motif of the home. Roth was impressed. The workmen were some of those he'd seen gardening here.

"Where did you get that?" Roth motioned towards the door.

"I found it in a shed by the stables," Jorge replied. "It wasn't doing anything, so I took it."

"Good work." Roth walked through the gaping hole in the wall. Jorge followed him through, and they looked around. The room was in good shape, just smelled musty. It would only need a little cosmetic work. The connecting baño, having rarely been used, was in good working order.

"As soon as the door is installed, have the workmen slap a coat of paint on the walls out there in the security room. Get the office in shape before you work on your quarters."

"Sí, Miguel. Oh, here is something for you. Señora Lucinda brought it down."

Roth laughed; he hated always being right. But the señora would have to learn to deal more with Jorge. The envelope was sealed. He tore it open. It was the family tree. Very extensive. There were over a hundred names of Felicia's and Daniel's family. Every living relative was listed with their contact information. He scanned for a few names, didn't find one in particular. There was a note from Felicia clipped to the list: 'You will be discreet, of course.'

Roth smirked; everyone knew Daniel Alvarez had been murdered! That being the case, he couldn't care less about people's feelings. They walked back into the security room. Roth pointed to the desk.

"In front of the desk, I want a barrier set up. No one— not even the

Guards— are to come further into the room unless you tell them. The only exception to that will be the maid who cleans this room and your quarters. One maid, the same one, as I said before. Have you selected her, yet?"

"I have one in mind, but Señora Lucinda does not agree."

Turf politics. No matter which maid Jorge chose, Lucretia Borgia would likely dissent. "I'll speak with the señora," he said. "You have a good reason for choosing that particular maid?"

"She has been with the family for over ten years. She lives on the grounds and is a quiet widow. She is watchful, and I trust her. I cannot explain why."

"Are you poking her?"

"Excuse?"

"Doing the ol' in and out? A little slap and tickle...? Jorge, are you intimate with her?"

Jorge drew back. "Oh, no, Miguel."

"Then you don't need to explain. Aside from you, she'll be the only other person to have a key to

the security room.”

“Not Señora Lucinda?”

“No. Not her, either.”

“She is the housekeeper, Miguel.”

“I know, she sits on God’s right hand. But you are in charge of security. That takes precedence, and I’ll explain everything to God. Does Señora Lucretia pay all the household bills?”

“Her name is Lucinda, Miguel.”

“I’ll try to remember that. She pays all the bills?”

Jorge scratched his head. “She pays the maintenance bills, for sure. And supplies. Petty cash. Other bills, I don’t know.”

“Fuel bills? For the vehicles?”

“I’m not sure. Señor Alcantara’s men always gas up. Always gassing up.”

So those bills were likely padded, also. On top of that, they probably empty the tanks into their personal vehicles.

“You don’t keep trip sheets? Records on vehicle use?”

“No, Miguel. Señor Alcantara had the men stop that. Said it was too much bureaucracy. A waste of time.”

Roth shook his head. He doubted that old Lucretia was in cahoots with Alcantara, having her pad the household bills, as well. Alcantara was inept at least, criminal and criminally negligent at most. There was definitely some not-so-petty thievery thrown in—which had a way of amounting to substantial sums when it continued. As for the security matters, including the cars, Lucretia, or Lucinda—whatever her name was—was out of her depth. She wouldn’t know faulty equipment from a nuclear reactor.

“I’m going to have you oversee financial matters, as well, Jorge. It’ll cause a storm, but there’s no other way. Lucretia doesn’t understand her job; as housekeeper, she should know where every centavo goes.”

Roth found Felicia waiting for him in the library. She was sitting behind her husband’s desk in the area he’d set aside as his study. Maybe it allowed her to keep a distance from him. Interesting, he thought, how she selected this place to meet.

A silver chalice was on the desk in front of her. Probably her sherry.

He sat down opposite her, not waiting for an invitation to do so.

“A few items,” he began. “There should be only one regular maid who cleans the security office and Jorge’s quarters.”

“Really?” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes, really.”

“He cannot clean his own room?”

“He shouldn’t. It makes a statement to the other employees for a maid to clean his quarters. As you know, in Mexico, face means everything. He’s selected the woman he feels would best suit our purposes.”

Felicia arched an eyebrow. “Our purposes?”

“You’re included in that.”

“Thank you very much,” she said, facetious.

“Don’t mention it. No one but Jorge will have total access to that space. Aside from you, of course. Only Jorge and the maid will have keys. Not Señora Lucretia. She has no need to ever go in there. She can spare the maid for an hour a day.”

“Señora Lucinda,” Felicia corrected.

“You say toma-toes, I say tomay-toes.”

They locked eyes. Damn, if her coldness didn’t make her even more beautiful. Maybe once this business was over with, he could teach her a few things involving security. Like how to slap a pair of handcuffs on him, chain him securely to a bed. Basic stuff, nothing fancy.

“I’m also asking Jorge to oversee all things financial around the hacienda. You’re getting hosed right and left, señora, and Lucinda, as housekeeper, should have spotted all these excesses.”

Felicia was becoming visibly upset, her mouth tight, looking everywhere but at him.

“Look,” he said. “It’s not good to have morale problems with this arrangement, so it’s up to you to straighten Lucinda out. Something else: anything that involves even a remote possibility of a security breach, she, like everyone else, should report it to Jorge as soon as possible. To Jorge first.”

“Mr. Roth, we have never had a security problem in this home before—”

“Before what, señora?” Here we go again, he thought. “Before your husband’s abduction? Before he was murdered? Is that the ‘before’ you’re referring to? It must be. You could be the next target.”

“That was not connected with this home.”

Roth stood up. “If you know that, then you know something I don’t. Is there something you haven’t told me?”

“I mean that I do not see what one has to do with the other.”

“You’ve never had real security before. When and if you are in a position to tell me what happened to your husband, then I’d say you’re entitled to make such a statement.”

She looked stunned, sat back in her chair. “Entitled?”

Roth sat back down. “Look, let’s not argue on these points. I told you before, when I’ve finished, you can return to however you want this zoo run. No one wants this matter put to bed faster than I do. Agreed?”

She said nothing. Roth wasn’t sure, but thought maybe her eyes were a little moist. As though she’d been scolded.

“Who’s Madrigal?”

“How do you know about him?”

Roth stared at her.

“He was my husband’s attorney.”

“Private? Corporate?”

“A friend, really. No business affairs, I do not believe.”

“Who’s Hernando?”

“A gardener.”

“Who’s Federico?”

“He’s . . . Daniel’s nephew.”

“And he’s in the headquarters here in the city?”

“Yes. But he travels considerably. Throughout Mexico, Guatemala, most of Central America, and to Los Angeles.”

Roth made a gimme gesture.

“He is a vice president with IO Mexico.”

“Is he in town now?”

“I believe so.”

“Who’s Ricardo?”

“R-Ricardo?”

“Y-yeah,” Roth mimicked. “R-Ricardo.”

“Ricardo . . . who?”

“I don’t know,” Roth said. He locked in on her eyes, certain she was holding back on something. She couldn’t conceal an emotion, couldn’t lie if her life depended on it.

Felicia shook her head, searched across the top of the desk. “I don’t know a Ricardo.” Then her face flushed.

Roth leaned back in his chair, waited. It was like she’d set off a lie alarm.

“Well, of course, I do,” she amended. “Many, actually. Ricardo is a very common name.”

Roth stared at her. But he'd let it pass for now. "And Roberto and Maria are your step-children. From your husband's first marriage?"

"That is correct."

"Daniel's older brother is Roberto, and Daniel's son is also named Roberto?"

Felicia nodded.

"The bills for Alcantara's services; who okays payments?"

"Our accountant."

"That's what I thought. I suggest that you have Alcantara's bills audited, señora. If there are equipment charges, you've been getting jammed."

"I beg you pardon?"

"Cheated, señora. Cheated."

"I see."

"You should also check for phantom billing—hours you were charged for when no one actually worked. As I said, Jorge will help on that. Once you determine how much has been stolen from you, and it's considerable, please don't hesitate to seek my opinion of what you should do about it."

She nodded. "Señor Alcantara is my husband's cousin."

"Wonderful, you have a thief in the family. But then, you said he was also an attorney, so that's consistent, isn't it? And if his bills include phantoms, and someone in the household had knowledge of this, and purposely overpaid to get kickbacks, thereby avoiding taxes, then I'd guess you have still more thieves in the family." He leaned forward. "Understand this, señora: just as familiarity breeds contempt, unabated thievery breeds hatred."

"Is that a fact," she said, facetious again.

"Absolutely. And feel free to quote me. Don't ask me why, but when someone steals from another person, where you'd expect guilt, or recrimination, what you often get is loathing. Maybe it's a perp's way of justifying his continued thievery. Ask yourself this: what do you imagine Señor Alcantara really thought of your husband? Or thinks of you? Does one steal from those one admires? From those one respects?" Yeah, respect, or absence thereof, was important to Latinos.

Felicia's eyelids fluttered with the word, and she just stared at him.

"If you think I'm insinuating that Daniel purposely overpaid bills for services to receive untaxed kickbacks—a common thing here in Mexico—I'm not. But, if he was, that's your business." Roth waved a dismissive hand. "But you've been told, and that's my obligation. Now, let's take it further, to something called association of traits. Is a thief a liar? Of course he is. Is a liar a sneak? Bet your bottom dollar, he is. And if you think a sneak is liable to do anything behind your back, you'd be on the

money again. So don't treat lying, sneaking, stealing and cheating so lightly, señora. It leads to other nasties."

Roth checked an item in his notebook. "In the three, maybe six months before your husband was abducted, was there anything unusual about his behavior? Did he have any problems?"

"Just sleeping problems."

"Why?"

Felicia shrugged. "He did not tell me everything. There were always, of course, business worries."

"But he took a lot of time off, I understand. Is that consistent with business worries? He could afford the time to drive to and from Puerto Vallarta. Often, I believe."

"He could afford the time, Mr. Roth. The business ran well with his minimal management."

"Then 'business worries' isn't consistent, is it?"

Felicia looked helpless.

"What else stands out in your memory?"

She seemed to search back, finally shook her head.

"Nothing or no one giving him any grief?"

She shook her head again.

"Let's add sound to that, make this movie a talkie, see what we get."

"N-no," she managed.

Roth stared at her, worked hard to hide his disbelief. This dame was like a walking lie detector. She could shake or nod her head easily enough, but when it came to verbalizing something, she stuttered when she lied; no different than a sensor arm scratching across polygraph paper. Blowing ink all over the paper, as polygraphers say. She wouldn't last two seconds under interrogation. Candy from babies. He looked at his notes, trying not to smile at her transparency. "No financial problems?"

She shook her head.

"The sound went off again."

"No," she replied, cool.

"No health problems?"

"None."

"Personal problems. Something emotional?"

Felicia shook her head.

Roth cupped his ear, smiled. "There's that audio problem again. Personal problems? Something emotional?"

“N-no.”

Roth got up again, turned his back to her; so close he was to breaking out in laughter. No one but an interrogator could appreciate the humor in this. He put away his notebook, paced the room, looked away from her until he fought back the urge to explode in laughter. Felicia just looked into her lap. Maybe Daniel had had a little sweetie on the sneak who'd been nagging him, and Felicia had learned about her. But then, who was Ricardo? Maybe that was her sweetie on the side, and Daniel had found out about him. “Finally,” he said, “one last item: I want the lane—Minetta Calle, I believe it's called—coming off Carretera Toluca—cleared of all parked vehicles.

“How can you do that? It is a public road. What for?”

“Questions again. Here I've been thinking that asking questions was my job. I'll have to refer to my PI license again. The part where it says that I ask the questions, and people give me answers.” He looked at her deadpan. “I want Minetta Calle cleared.”

“Well, I have to understand why you want something,” she said, defensive.

“Let's start with it being a fire hazard. Fire trucks would find it impossible to negotiate the lane in an emergency. But the whole truth is, I don't want private vehicles crammed up along there. It's a security risk.”

“But there are dozens of people in the neighborhood who park there.”

“Probably hundreds.”

“Well, the police cannot just—”

“Yes. They can. And they will, if you ask them. I'm sure you can bring the police chief around to posting the lane for no parking. I'd appreciate it if you could attend to that as soon as possible.” Roth turned to leave. “Thank you for your time. Have you anything for me?”

Felicia shook her head, like maybe she wasn't sure.

“Then may I say you're looking well this evening, señora.” Roth turned and left the library.

Back in the security room, Jorge was puttering around, straightening things up. He'd acquired a large logbook, which he was writing in.

“I'm out of here, Jorge. You'll be sleeping here tonight?”

“Sí, I think so. I'll move my belongings down this evening.”

“Have the maid and gardeners do it. You don't schlep things any longer.”

“Miguel?”

Roth smiled. New Yorkese didn't translate to Spanish, although ‘schlep’ was actually Yiddish. “You don't carry things anymore. You have people who do that. How are you coming on selecting the guards who will stay on?”

“I know who I want. But there’s Señor Alcantara. They work for him.”

“Are you keeping any of his relatives?”

“None, Miguel,” Jorge said, apologetic. “They are all—”

“Prima donnas?”

“Yes. That is an excellent description.”

“Good. Tomorrow morning, we’ll begin installing the cameras. Then you can round up the crew you’ll be keeping and explain that, as of the first of the month, they go off Alcantara’s payroll and onto the señora’s, and their salaries will be increased. As for the rest of them, you’ll run ’em off the property.”

Jorge smiled. “My pleasure, Miguel.”

“Call Kelly Moore and tell him to be here at ten a.m. tomorrow with his technicians.”

“Sí, Miguel.”

“Two more things. Who’s Ricardo?”

“His last name?”

Roth shook his head.

Jorge shrugged. “One of the guards is named Ricardo. But Ricardo is a common name. I have a nephew named Ricardo.”

“The guard named Ricardo; is he one of Alcantara’s relatives?”

“No. And Ricardo is a good man. One of those I will keep.”

“Is he a lady killer? A good looking guy?”

“Good looking?” Jorge shook his head., “Maybe his wife things so.”

“Okay. Last thing, and then I’m out of here: I want a .45 by next week. In good working order. Like yours. Clean and lightly oiled. Holster, two spare magazines, and a box of ammunition. Hollow points, preferably.”

“No problem, Miguel.”

Chapter 15

That evening, Roth faxed Nina the names and details of the list Felicia had given him. He wanted backgrounds on everyone. She called him back. “Are you nuts, chief? Most of these people are in Mexico. They don’t have financial profiles on people like we have up here.”

“I’m aware of that, boss. But lots of them have connections in the States. A lot of them have probably bought cars in the States, had them driven down here. Some have homes and businesses in the States. There should be header data on lots of them.”

“And then what?”

“Line up every reputable detective agency, confidential source, credit reporting firm, newspaper archive and clipping service you can possibly find down here, and get them on it. I want the book on every one of those names.”

“There’s over two hundred people on this list.”

“Tells us something right there,” Roth said.

“Yeah? Like what?” Nina asked, facetious.

“That Mexico has a lot of people. That Mexicans fuck a lot.”

“Nina laughed. “Well, what are you looking for?”

“Shotgun approach.”

“Pull the trigger and see what we hit.”

“Exactly,” Roth replied.

“This’ll takes ages.”

“Take all the time you need. Just have it for me in three days.”

“Aww, Mike!”

He hung up and laughed as she delivered a torrent of curses.

Alfredo arrived at midnight. Had he proceeded directly to Mexico City from El Paso, he’d probably still be 200 miles north, crawling along the desert roads of Durango at twenty miles an hour. He’d chosen McAllen, Texas as the equipment pick-up point, taking this less direct route on American highways because they were better, faster, and safer. Once back in McAllen, having driven for twelve hours, he’d picked up the equipment, proceeded south into Mexico, reaching San Luis Potosi, where he could no longer keep his eyes open. He’d slept in this morning, got a late start.

His room was waiting for him, but Roth had left a note for him to call when he got in. He parked his car in the hotel garage, called upstairs. Roth was halfway through Daniel’s third diary, had been flagging pages written in Spanish that he wanted Alfredo to read.

Roth threw on trousers and a shirt, and they met in the garage. Alfredo’s trunk and back seat were loaded with equipment. His car was parked next to the attendant’s booth, in a well-lit area. The hotel was a busy place, car and pedestrian traffic coming and going at all hours, so the attendants never had a chance to doze off.

But this was Mexico, where anything could happen right under your own eyes, where sleeping was a national pastime practiced with supreme diligence. So Roth decided to have all the equipment taken up to his room, just as Alfredo had last night at a motel in San Luis Potosi. Either that, or Alfredo would sleep in his car. Alfredo agreed pronto that he and the equipment would sleep better in his room.

He had originals of the bills for the merchandise, and didn't want the responsibility of losing any of it after hauling it a thousand miles. He organized two bellboys to carry the equipment up to his room.

They arrived at Cuernavaca just before 10:00 a.m. next morning. The swimming pool was packed, youngsters spread out across the lawn, some playing croquet, others badminton. The tennis courts, further back, also looked busy.

Kelly and six technicians were waiting by the security room with new CRTs and consoles. The place smelled of new paint. Whitewash. Jorge had installed new tables and chairs, and had a divider constructed. The door needed a coat of shellac, but aside from that, the premises were clean and professional-looking. It wasn't just for appearances: the new look was the beginning of a new security philosophy, and the guards couldn't miss the new attitude that went with it.

After unloading the equipment, Roth let Alfredo return to the Hidalgo in his car to get some more sleep. By late afternoon, closed-circuit cameras had been strung up around the perimeter, and another dozen covered the approaches to the home and all the doors. Electric lines were visible from position to position, but that would be taken care of later. Roth told Jorge to keep the old cameras for inspection later.

Nothing would move – day or night – on the entire estate that monitors in the security room wouldn't detect. In all, there were two dozen eyes watching every inch of the grounds, and between infrared lenses and trained guards, the movement of a mouse would be picked up. Joysticks could zoom in, magnifying any object up to 500 percent, with perfect resolution. The monitors, 24 in all, were set in quad consoles; six 34-inch screens displaying four fifteen-inch panels, all with magnetic tapes rolling continuously.

Jorge was astounded by the coverage. He knew every foot of the grounds, but was amazed how, with this button or that, he could tour the entire estate visually within seconds.

"And they don't go to sleep, Jorge," Roth said, demonstrating on a VCR. "One of your jobs is to make certain the guards monitoring the screens don't sleep either. That's why you'll have two guards on duty in here at all times. Each keeps the other on his toes. The men will earn enough now so they won't need to work a second job, or moonlight at anything else. That's a requirement, in fact: they work no other jobs. And if they sleep on the job, they're fired. Immediately. Permanently. Both guys go, not just the one caught sleeping. They go, and the watch commander goes with them."

Jorge nodded, still amazed. "There is no need for guards now, Miguel."

"Yes, there is. A camera can't answer a breach in the paling, or fire a shotgun, or put out a fire, or protect property."

"No guard would want to sleep, having such equipment."

“Staring into screens gets tiring after a while, Jorge. That’s why they’ll only be monitoring for four hours at a stretch.”

Jorge shook his head. This was too little work for the guards by his reckoning. He said this.

“It’ll be more intensive than you think,” Roth assured him. “You’ll see, once you start the routine. Every week, like I said, the guards get two days off.”

“Two days? Not one? But their duty is already easy enough, Miguel.”

“Trust me, Jorge. Have a training program and a proper schedule, and a guard will perform well for you. Demand too much, and as time goes by, you get less and less.”

Roth broke open some other boxes, removed two portable radios with batteries installed and channels set. He switched them on and tossed one to a technician, told him to go down to the main gate for a test. He turned to Kelly. “Tell him to leave the transmitter button open and only whisper as he walks along.” Kelly translated this to the technician.

The radios weren’t much larger than a cellphone, weighing only a few ounces, and snapped onto a belt or shirt, whereas those Alcantara supplied weighed two pounds and were twenty years old. If they even had crystals in them, the guts had been worn out ages ago.

Roth connected earplugs to the radio, handing it to Jorge. He showed him the squelch knob. “For silence, Jorge. You don’t want squelching sounds and loud voices coming across the radio, particularly at night.”

Jorge was more fascinated by the radios than the cameras. Stepping outside, they saw the technician walking towards the main gate, and when Jorge worked the earplug in, he could hear the man’s breathing perfectly. “Dios, Miguel. It is like I am walking next to him.”

Kelly clipped a small microphone on Jorge’s shirt collar, said, “Say something to him.”

Jorge clicked the transmit button and whispered. The technician had reached the gate, and answered. Jorge was more than impressed; he was astounded.

“Come inside,” Roth said. “You’ll be talking with the guards from the office most of the time.” They went back in, and Roth sat Jorge down at a console. “Now, let’s marry sight and sound. Tell the guard to walk down to the end of the property, and you’ll follow him on the monitors, walk him all around. You want to be sure you are both audible from any point. Then walk him around the block, even off the premises, in all directions. You’ll do that test with all of the radios.”

Jorge directed the man as Roth said.

Kelly helped Jorge work the joysticks for this or that remote, and in a few minutes he was navigating the system almost perfectly. The guard was clearly audible, no matter where he was on the property, even when he whispered. There were no clicking or hissing sounds when the transmission

button was depressed.

“Dios. It is like I have eyes and ears everywhere.”

“You do, Jorge. You do,” Kelly confirmed.

“My job will be too easy.”

Roth looked at him ruefully, yet smiled. “We’ll see about that, won’t we?”

Moore would return next week to train those guards that Jorge selected as monitors. And he would continue as a consultant to Jorge, making repairs as needed and training new guards in the event that became necessary. Roth told Kelly to prepare a contract that stipulated 24-hour, on-call service. Kelly agreed, told Jorge that he’d return Monday and work with him throughout the week. In the meanwhile, Roth instructed Jorge to buy new weapons, since those belonging to Alcantara would be gone soon. He left the choice of weapons up to Jorge, but suggested .38-caliber revolvers and shotguns. Revolvers don’t jam, he told Jorge, and shotguns deter trouble. Alcantara must have gotten a deal on the Uzis, pushed them off on Daniel, no doubt swearing that automatic weapons were needed.

“Tell the señora what funds you require. Don’t go through Lucretia Borgia. Not anymore. I wanna see the señora dealing with you while I’m still here.”

Jorge had drawn up a roster, also grids of the estate. As Roth had suggested, there would be six guards per watch, two in the security room, two at the main gate, a supernumerary, and a watch commander who would be in charge of the other five men.

The other two watches, when standing down for an eight-hour period, would remain on the premises and be technically still on duty. One team would be billeted in the front employees’ quarters, the other at the back of the property, near the stables. The watch commander on the upcoming four-hour shifts would have two men dressed and equipped, standing ready at all times, while the others slept or read. So, in addition to men at the gate and on the monitors, there were four men who could be dispatched to any grid at a moment’s notice when alerted by the commander, and any point across the estate could be reached on foot in one minute.

Roth instructed Jorge to inspect all guards regularly; snap inspections, without notice and at irregular intervals. The four guards on duty could not watch television or listen to the radio or music discs plugged into their ears. They could read, however. “But,” Roth added, “providing that the reading material is security related.” In other words, the guards were to learn while they were being paid.

“Okay, Jorge, the ultimate test,” Roth announced. The old guy was glued to the camera focused on the guard who was testing the radio back in the woods. Kelly glanced over at Roth, and smiled. He knew what was coming. He’d installed CCTV’s for many a client.

“Go to camera ten, I think it is,” Roth instructed.

Jorge shifted his chair over to another console, found camera ten. This camera covered the swimming pool, the honeymoon cottage, and a great expanse of lawn. It was dark now, but lights were on around the grounds, and the pool area was lit up. Roth couldn't see Lily anywhere, but he saw another familiar target.

"Swing it over to the swimming pool."

Jorge did as instructed.

"See that top-heavy girl in the pool? Tina. In the red T-shirt?"

Jorge leaned closer to the screen, strained to see the girl frolicking in the water.

Roth and Kelly laughed. "No, Jorge. Use the joystick," Kelly said. "Don't go to the image – bring the image to you."

"Of course. I forgot." Jorge turned the knob on the joystick, zoomed in on Tina. "I see," he said.

"Let's see more, Jorge," Roth urged.

Jorge turned the knob further and the view rushed up at him. Tina wore a 'Guess?' T-shirt, but no bra. She was bobbing up and down in the water. Roth reached over and manipulated the stick to where Tina's bouncing breasts filled the screen with clarity as sharp as a TV screen.

The three men watched, each in their own thoughts.

Roth broke the silence, clearing his throat. "Okay, I'll guess," he punned. "I'll guess those beautiful bouncers are the real McCoy."

Kelly cracked up. Jorge blushed.

"Dios, dios, Miguel. This thing is wonderful."

"No, Jorge." Roth winked at him, nodded to the image on the screen. "Those things are wonderful."

Alfredo was in the cantina when Roth returned to the Hidalgo. Roth climbed on a stool next to him, ordered a rum and Coke. A few of the working girls were already patrolling the place, working their smiles on Alfredo.

"I want you to stay here for a few days," Roth told him.

Alfredo was eating a chili plate. In most places in Mexico, a chili plate consisted of a steak, rice, and beans. Maybe even French fries on the side. No Mexican would recognize what Americans called chili, or fathom that all of this – minus the rice – could be crammed into a can.

"Call or send Nina a fax that you'll be here until further notice."

Alfredo, munching on a tortilla, nodded.

"I'll be heading over to Polanco tonight. Wanna come along?"

"No, thanks," Alfredo said. "I'll call Tijuana. I've been away from home for two weeks; I'm

anxious to see my wife.”

“About now, I’m anxious to see anyone’s wife. Even one of my own,” Roth replied, sliding off the stool. “I want you to read something.” He went into the manager’s office, returned with volume four out of the document case. He laid it on the table as Alfredo finished his meal, ordered another beer.

“Go through this tonight. I’ve already read it. But there’s a lot in Spanish, and I don’t want to miss anything. I’ve marked the places. And if you read anything else interesting, jot it down and we’ll talk about it in the morning.”

“It is very big, Mike.” Alfredo frowned, hefting the diary.

“So read fast. You don’t have to memorize the thing, but explain my questions I’ve written on the slips. There are three more we’ve gotta read by next week.” He slapped Alfredo on the shoulder. “I’ll call you in the morning for breakfast.”

Roth went up to his room. Fresh laundry hung in his closet. He shaved, showered, put on fresh slacks and a button-down shirt under a sports jacket. No tie.

Alfredo was waiting to go upstairs when Roth came down on the elevator. They nodded in passing, and Roth left the hotel. As usual, he circled the block on foot before catching a taxi, and arrived in the Polanco neighborhood just before 10:00 p.m. But on a Saturday night, this was early in Mexico City; the place wouldn’t be interesting until maybe midnight, and not really jumping until 2:00 a.m.

He hit a few clubs, inquiring where the glitterati slumped. Every place, it seemed, was loaded with actors and theater people, and tagging along were young, wealthy hangers-on.

At one club, an expansive, upscale joint named Confetti’s, he chatted up a few babes at one of the four bars. The girls worked on the fringe of the film industry, were all outgoing and bubbly. He flirted, they flirted, and he collected some business cards, weighed possibilities for later tonight – or rather, in the morning – but didn’t find any hopeful prospects. These girls were cruising for serious contenders: young, wealthy, potential husbands. Not that a film producer, which they assumed Roth was, wouldn’t do fine, just as long as their virginity remained intact – as far as the world knew – and until a real hubby prospect came along. Around midnight, the place began to fill up. Trendy dressers bounced here and there, everybody following the prescribed three kisses protocol. Roth thought many of the guys were fops—what young peoples magazines described as metrosexuals. They were straight blades despite the preening and Chardonnay and exfoliating body parts in the same salons as the women and acting nonchalantly vain. Real or rumored heart throbs of both sexes paraded their stuff like peacocks. The first time Roth had ever heard of a metrosexual, he imagined some deviate skulking around railroad yards in the dead of night, getting it on with subway cars.

Among the throng, Roth singled out a bubbly, young aspiring actress who gave her name as Tessa Mondragon. She was tallish, wore spiked heels, and was imposing. Her hair was either blonde with reddish streaks, or red with blondish streaks. She was twentyish, popular in her circle, wore expensive fashions in good taste. She wanted to practice her English and talk about California. So, Roth became an instant West Coast transplant, and they got on just smashingly. She spoke, for some unfathomable reason, with a crisp English accent, changing from English to Spanish and back again, depending who she met between exchanges. Roth envisioned a scenario involving Tessa, and at one point whispered a raunchy limerick into her ear, at which she howled – a treat she repeated for her English-speaking friends. She was certain to remember him from his limerick when he called her in a few days.

At 1:00 a.m., just as the place promised to get really interesting, given the hot salsa music and touchy-feely girls, Roth got Tessa's card, excused himself, saying he had business elsewhere. Tessa objected, pouted, and wanted to go with him to some place she assumed was exciting. He offered his regrets, and as he worked his way through the revelers to the exit, he looked back and saw her laughing with some new friends, and had already forgotten him. He caught a cab out front, headed for the airport.

It was well after 2:00 a.m. before he saw Manny Sokoloff push through the doors at Arrivals. The fat old guy was cursing, at no one in particular, it seemed. His plane from New York, scheduled to arrive at 12:20, had been on time.

But here he was, hefting his considerable bulk from the bowels of the airport two hours later. Roth noted that he was lugging all of his equipment and an overnight bag. A half-dozen bags of varying sizes, all carry-ons. That must have taken a lot of explanation on Manny's part. Roth chuckled, called Manny over to where he was standing with a paper cup of beer in his hand.

Manny saw him, corrected his path, came over. "Cocksuckers at JFK did everything but shove their fists up my ass."

"This stuff set off alarms, huh?"

"I told Nina I'd have a problem getting this fuckin' gear through security at JFK. Got the fuckin' third degree inside, too." He nodded back towards the Customs area, scratched his bearded face. "Those dumb fuckers wouldn't know sweep equipment from a microwave. This is going to cost you, Roth."

"Why didn't you check it as baggage?"

"No fuckin' way, pal. This stuff costs too fuckin' much. It don't get outta my sight."

"You bring my stuff?" Roth asked, taking Manny's overnight bag.

"I'm fuckin' here, ain't I?"

“You ever speak a sentence without throwing a ‘fuck’ into it?”

“Why the fuck should I?”

“No fuckin’ reason I can think of, Manny.”

“Fuckin’ good, then. Let’s get the fuck out of here. I’m fuckin’ beat.”

Chapter 16

Sunday morning at ten o'clock, Roth and Manny were in the cantina having breakfast when Alfredo came down from his room. Roth introduced them, asked Manny if he minded Alfredo looking over his shoulder today when he swept the Alvarez hacienda.

"I look like a fuckin' schoolteacher, here? No, I ain't teachin' no fuckin' school. Fuckin' right, I mind." He managed all this through a mouthful of huevos rancheros, his stuffed mouth looking like he was chewing up a rainbow. He didn't look at Alfredo.

Manny Sokoloff was a TSCM expert: technical surveillance counter-measures. He swept homes and offices for bugs and taps – any devices that could legally or illegally be used to eavesdrop on a subject under investigation. In the US it was legal to sweep and remove any transmitters or other paraphernalia found, but illegal to install such devices without a court order.

Manny had been in the business for eons, and was KGB trained in Moscow, having been recruited by the organization to spy on his fellow Lithuanians. He'd spent ten years working Eastern Europe, and like most Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians, he hated the Soviets. But he never minded spying on his fellow citizens because he also hated Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians. Manny was an equal-opportunity hate merchant. He couldn't stand people, and the feeling was mutual. But he was the best TSCM op that Roth had ever known, and the only people Manny ever got along with were a few guys in the business. Those and blondes. Big blondes. Nordic amazons. Russian Helgas. Ever since the Soviet Union disintegrated, the Russian influx into America had supplied him with no small measure of Russian hookers.

He'd defected because over time, his superiors had made the mistake of allowing Sokoloff greater freedom of movement. After all, he'd efficiently and passionately helped jail dissidents and criminals for years, and the KGB had been lulled into a false belief that because Manny had a wife in Moscow, he wouldn't defect. They could always jail, torture, and kill her. Little did they know that Manny's greatest incentive for defecting was that they hopefully would jail, torture, and kill her – primarily because she was neither big nor blonde. Manny was a real sweetheart.

So, on an assignment up in Tallinn, he hid on a ship bound for Stockholm, via Helsinki. The Americans were happy as pigs in shit to get their hands on him after the Swedes finished debriefing him. He spent a year in Washington telling everything he knew, speculating with great enthusiasm and conviction on things he didn't. Finally, he was granted asylum.

But Manny was as ethically pure as he was morally corrupt – a fact that contributed to his excellent business reputation. He normally charged four grand for sweeping premises, but since this

was Mexico, and he liked Roth, he was only charging double. Plus expenses, of course.

Roth gave Manny a dark look, said to Alfredo: “Just the same, stay with him, Alfredo.”

“But I ain’t teaching him a fuckin’ thing,” Manny insisted.

After breakfast, Manny went up to his room to get his equipment, while Roth explained a few things that he wanted Alfredo to do. They arrived at the hacienda just after noon. Manny, with his bags of gear, followed Roth and Alfredo in another taxi. Minetta Calle, leading to Cuernavaca, was still congested with vehicles, but their cabs moved unimpeded down to the main gate.

As they approached the office, Roth told Alfredo to say nothing once they were inside, told him to utter not a sound. First, Roth went into the security room alone. Inside, Jorge was sitting with two guards who were learning to operate the remote cameras and familiarize themselves with the monitors. Roth whispered that Jorge should send them out for a break. When they went out, Manny and Alfredo entered. Roth motioned where Manny was to set up his equipment for the first sweep, but didn’t introduce him to Jorge, just whispered “sshh” and explained what they would be doing. He asked if Felicia’s car was on the grounds. It was. He told Jorge to go over and make certain that none of the guards approached it, that no one was to touch the car until they finished with it. He followed Jorge outside.

“Do you have the list of terminations?”

“Sí, Miguel. In the office.”

“The señora will want to see it eventually. That and the list of Alcantara’s shortcomings for his services, equipment, and personnel.”

“All right.”

“Okay. But you’ll be busy this afternoon.” Roth went in search of Lucinda, found her supervising a brunch set-up for what seemed to Roth to be an ever-swelling assemblage of guests. Tina, Lena, Gina, and their precious, good friend Carmelita were putting on a fashion show before a bevy of young women who feasted like hyenas between pretending to swoon over the outfits that their hosts were changing in and out of behind an ornate Chinese screen.

Roth watched the show from the door until Lily slipped up behind him and grabbed his arm.

“Hello, Mr. Roth.”

“Hi, kiddo. How you doin’?”

“I am not a kid, Mr. Roth. But I am doing absolutely marvelous. I have not seen you for so long. Have you been away?”

Roth shook his head. “Just trying to avoid you.”

Lily put on a hurt face, leaned into Roth a little too much, feigned injury. “Why do you want to

hurt my feelings?”

“How old are you, Lily?”

She laughed, pretended indignation. “Mr. Roth, you should never ask a lady that question. You have no manners.”

“People tell me that. Answer my question.”

Lily thought about it... “Nineteen.”

“In two years?”

“No, truthfully. I am nineteen. How old are you?”

He gave her the old line: “Old enough to know better, but too young to resist.”

She laughed out loud, this time drawing Lucinda’s attention to where they stood out in the corridor. The old gal glared at him.

“Is your aunt around?”

“She just came in from chapel. I think she is upstairs.” The estate had its own chapel. The family went nowhere unless they wanted to; a padre came to them. And when the home was full of guests and family, it was a congregation of impressive size – a soul-count meriting a padre’s attention.

“Would you tell Señora Lucretia Borgia that I’d like to speak with her.”

Lily drew out a coquettish smile, put her arms behind her back, swung side to side. “She does not speak English. But I will translate for you. If you like.”

Roth slapped her bottom, not hard, just enough to urge her inside. “Just go in there and tell her.”

Lily’s smile spread across her face. She was too old to be touched in such a familiar way, and her eyes told him so. She looked inside to see if anyone had been paying attention, then went in, glancing back with a mischievous look.

Roth watched as she approached Lucinda, whispered in the woman’s ear. Lucinda looked up at Roth, then took her sweet time before breaking away from what she was doing. She came out to the corridor, Lily trailing, and folded her arms across her chest, waiting for the gringo diablo to state his business. Like Felicia, Lucinda was always dressed in black, her husband likely having hung himself years ago to escape her. And like her deceased husband, she’d also have a fine, thick mustache some day if she stopped shaving.

“I’d like to see Señora Alvarez. Can you ring her upstairs? Or just point the way and I’ll go up?”

Lily translated this, and Lucinda stared at him in disbelief, as though he was Attila at the gates of Rome, about to sack the city and carry off all the virgins, as if the devil were banging at Felicia’s door with you-know-what as a knocker. She told him in Spanish that she would ask if Señora Alvarez could see him, and before leaving, closed the door to the atrium where the girlie party was underway.

Roth waited at the bottom of the stairs, and soon Felicia appeared on the upstairs landing. As usual, entirely in black. Roth wondered how long she'd remain cloistered up in her mourning garb. Probably forever. What a waste. She came downstairs with a question on her face.

"It is Sunday, Mr. Roth. I have only just come from mass. Why are you here today?"

"I want to get into your bedroom."

"I beg your pardon!"

"We're examining the home for eavesdropping devices. We'll need maybe a half-hour in your bedroom."

Felicia didn't know what to say, but after a moment's contemplation, she threw her hands up. "I will have the maid come in and—"

"We'd prefer that your bedroom remain exactly as it is. No one going in before we do. Except you, of course." Roth looked at his watch. "Will an hour from now be okay?"

"Yes. I suppose so."

"You'll be hearing strange music throughout the day, wherever we're working. Also, will you be using your car this afternoon?"

"Not until this evening."

"Good. On another matter, heads will be rolling this week. Jorge has a list of guards he's firing. I don't know how you handle it here in Mexico, terminations and all that. Most of the men he's kicking out are Alcantara's relatives, and the firings are for cause. I believe that's just a matter of terminating each contract, and the employee compensation problem is on each man's shoulders. But please make arrangements for final paychecks, or however you handle that."

Felicia stared at Roth. That look, again. The one Roth couldn't determine if she was dumbfounded or about to explode in his face.

"I believe Señor Alcantara will have a recourse written in his contract. Abrupt terminations and things such as that."

"I suggest you strike a compromise with him. More than that, I'd suggest he not attempt a court action. I haven't seen his contract, but I can guarantee that he hasn't lived up to it. Jorge has the details when you want them."

"Very well," she said. "Would you ask Jorge to see me when he's free?"

"Of course."

Roth returned to the security room, told Jorge that the señora wanted to see him. That was good; she was going to Jorge rather than Lucinda first.

Manny had finished examining the telephone in the office, was now checking the room for bugs.

He'd placed a portable tape recorder on the desk, and a tape was playing "Jingle Bells" loud. Alfredo sat behind the desk, watched what Manny was doing.

"I'll explain exactly what he's doing later, Alfredo. Just watch closely."

Manny took off a headset that was plugged into a device he carried around his neck. He had a wand in his hand. After a minute, he stopped and shook his head, whispered, "Nothing on the phone, Roth. It's clean."

"I didn't think there'd be anything here," Roth whispered back. "When you finish the RF check in this room, we're going into the library. There's a study in there. Then we're checking a bedroom upstairs. Need a hand with anything?"

Manny shook his head, put the earphones back on, continued waving the wand in slow, steady movements, running a motion pattern across the walls and surfaces. This was an RF probe, designed to receive radio frequencies that Manny bounced over with the wand antenna. "Jingle Bells" ended and the recorder clicked off. Manny stopped what he was doing, reversed the tape, hit 'play.' Bing Crosby began dreaming of a white Christmas.

Roth went to the kitchen, made a coffee. He carried it outside, lit a cigarette, and walked over to the junipers. He watched Jorge leaning against Felicia's Mercedes, talking with Felicia's driver. The man seemed to want something in the car, but Jorge shook his head, sent the driver back to where he'd been sitting under the carport.

The guards he'd sent out of the security room were milling about at the main gate, waiting to be called back inside. They were likely wondering what all the secrecy was about. Roth finished his cigarette, went back in. He sat down before the monitors. The camera covering the carport flashed up on a quad screen. Roth held the image and with a joystick, zoomed in on the driver, who was watching Jorge by the Mercedes. The guy looked nervous, was maybe wondering if he was out of a job. Since he was Alcantara's relative, he would be – tomorrow. Maybe he knew the end was near. Or, maybe, just maybe, he was worried about something different.

There'd been a lot of talk amongst the guards, and it was likely that there were two camps: those who would be remaining and those who sensed that Jorge had no use for them. Just a week ago, Jorge had been one of their number, but now he was running things. Had they been at all astute, they'd have known that he never cared for many of them, rarely talked to those he didn't approve of. They knew who they were.

Manny took off the headset, shut off the tape recorder. "This place is clean. Nothing here, Roth."

Roth finished his coffee, and the three of them shifted Manny's equipment into the library. Going in, Roth motioned again to Alfredo to say nothing, make no sounds. He showed Manny where to set up,

then closed the door to the hallway. The maids in the corridor had watched them as they moved through the home, curious about what was going on.

Manny set up and first checked the phone. Roth wandered around the library as Alfredo moved as close to Manny as the grumpy geezer seemed to tolerate. It wasn't long before Roth looked over and saw Manny staring at him hard. He walked over and looked at Manny's voltage settings. A severe variation from the clean phone in the security room appeared.

Manny took out a pen and notebook, scratched out a message, pushed it in front of Roth. "Hot phone."

Alfredo came over and read the note, looked at Roth.

Roth took the pen, scribbled a reply. "Find it."

Manny nodded, began searching for a transmitter. After a few minutes, he found it in the phone's handset. They examined the tiny gadget.

"Leave it in," Roth wrote on the paper.

Manny squinted at him, questioning this wisdom. He shrugged, then reinstalled the transmitter into the handset. But before he did, Roth took a pen from his pocket, marked something in the guts of the handset. He scribbled again on the pad: "Check the fax machine."

Manny nodded, began checking that. Roth watched him, but Manny shook his head. The machine was clean.

Roth waved his hand around the study area. Manny acknowledged, put his recorder with the Christmas songs on the desk, turned it on. He started checking for bugs with the RF detector. Within twenty minutes, he'd found two tiny transmitters. One was pinned behind the window curtain, the other was stuck under the middle drawer of the desk – in a place where a maid wouldn't discover it while cleaning.

Roth marked both of these also with the pen from his jacket. He tapped the notepad where he'd written "Leave it in."

Manny started to pack up his gear, but Roth touched his arm, wrote another note: "Put ours in." Manny wrinkled up his face, confused.

Roth nodded, so Manny opened the handset again, planted his own tap in the phone line and installed some bugs.

When he finished, they all left the study and went into the kitchen. Roth and Manny poured coffees, Alfredo just had a glass of water. Roth motioned them to follow, and they carried their drinks outside to the terrace.

"Whaddya wanna leave the taps in for?" Manny asked once they were outside. "And why are you

bugging your own client?"

"Well, if they're listening right now, and we take them out, they'll know we found them."

"What the fuck do you care? You can't find out who is tapping the phone and bugging the place."

"Maybe I can."

"No. No way, Roth. The tap's using the power off the phone. No one needs to change any batteries. As for the bugs, I don't know how long they've been there or how long the batteries are good. There's no telling when someone will come back in to check them if they're working okay."

"I can change that easily enough," Roth answered. "Tell me about the equipment you found"

"Well, obviously, the authorities aren't tapping her. If they were, they'd do it from the central exchange, and there's no way anyone could determine that. But these taps and the bugs, they're all basic stuff. Low-tech, but effective. The place is hot; someone put in bugs near the phone just to be certain they got anything the tap might miss."

"Like personal conversations in the study that aren't on the phone."

"Exactly. Anything said in that room, whether over the phone or in the flesh, is being picked up."

Alfredo drew in a breath. Roth looked at him. He understood.

"Where do you think a receiver would be?"

Manny thought, was about to answer.

"Very close is my guess," Roth put in.

"Yeah, most likely. Unless they're using a repeater. Repeating the signal from another receiver and transmitter nearby."

At this, they both looked over at the apartment buildings outside the gate whose roofs were visible from where they stood. There were any number of places where a repeater could be positioned. Maybe even right here on Cuernavaca's roof.

"What's a repeater?" Alfredo asked.

Roth turned to him. "A message is transmitted nearby from either a tap or a bug to where a receiver picks it up and then re-transmits it with a stronger signal to just about anywhere. Across town, even to LA, or even to Madrid if a computer is used."

Alfredo whistled.

"Somebody could be sitting in his office on the other side of town or anywhere else in the world, listening to every fuckin' thing that's being said in that library," Manny added.

Roth was surprised at Manny's sudden generosity. He wasn't a talkative guy, and thus far had ignored Alfredo.

Manny shrugged, nudged Alfredo. "No charge." He studied Roth for a second. "Why the fuck are

you bugging your own client? He ain't gonna like it, he finds out."

"She," Roth replied, just as the subject of the conversation came outside, saw the men talking. "Speaking of which."

Manny looked over at Felicia, said "Damn," immediately wondering what she'd look like in a blonde wig. "Some good-lookin' cunny. So, why you bugging her?"

Roth thought for a few seconds. "She's not being entirely straight with me."

"Your own client is lying to you?"

"Maybe lying to herself. Same difference."

Felicia stood watching them until Roth realized she'd finished with Jorge and wanted to speak with him. He excused himself, went over to her. She asked if they were finished. He shook his head, said they were going up to her bedroom now. He waved Manny and Alfredo back inside, and they went up to the second floor.

The bedroom in Felicia's apartment was massive, and the bed, an ancient four-poster, dwarfed a king-sized mattress. There was a large walk-in closet at one end, and a bathroom nearly the same size again as the room. Roth guessed that the home had been constructed back in the 1920s, maybe 30s, when rooms were built large, ceilings five meters high or more. The bath was more like a wading pool than a bathtub. Big enough for five or six bodies. Fine for customers like Roth, but a waste in a monogamous relationship, unless the Alvarez's had enjoyed water volleyball. There was a wall phone installed by the side of the basins, one in the toilet stall, another on the bed's nightstand.

Manny set up his equipment, and in short order determined that the phones in the bathroom were only extensions. There was only one line in the bedroom, and it had a 'call-waiting' feature.

Alfredo watched as Manny did his magic, and within ten minutes he'd discovered a tap on the bedside phone, plus two bugs planted near the bed. One was under the heavy oak bed supports, the second behind the headboard. Both were close to the phone on the nightstand.

Just how up-close and personal was the intruder getting? Roth whispered for Manny to carefully check if there were any pinpoint cameras in the bedroom. He did, but found none. So, there was nothing kinky going on. Couples usually agreed on such devices, but occasionally one did it on the sly with a reluctant or unknowing partner.

Now, the question was, how long had these listening devices been in the bedroom? Was there any chance that Daniel Alvarez had been bugging his own wife before his death? A lot of people would be surprised at how many spouses did that. Alvarez had taken trips, was away from the home on occasion. But Roth couldn't picture the señora tumbling some other guy, let alone in the conjugal bed.

Roth returned to Felicia's walk-in. The room, divided into sections and looking like a funhouse of

mirrors, was immense, like everything else in these quarters. Rows of closet doors and bureaus, hanging racks and drawers, shoe chests and storage bins, the smell of mothballs in those, but the more familiar heady musk in other places.

He stood still and took in the feeling of the space. It seemed like an invasion of privacy just standing here. He opened her closets. In one side were clothes pre-Daniel's demise. Volumes of pretty stuff; loud tropical dresses; shirts and slacks; one- and two-piece outfits; frivolous shirts of material so soft that it seemed to melt at the touch. In another wide closet, he struck upon the señora's new wardrobe – a row of what seemed like a mile of black dresses, cloaks, shawls, sweaters, capes and gowns; enough to outfit a convent.

As he delved further into Felicia's private space, the emotion of intimacy became stronger and so surprised Roth that it made him feel like a trespasser. He took in Felicia's most personal possessions, feeling like a pervert who secretly sniffed women's panties. Hell, he'd have to think about that; the señora brought out some weird emotions in him.

But his interest was even more intimate, yet professional: should he have RFIDs sewn into her clothes? These were miniscule radio frequency identification chips, smaller than a grain of rice. If Daniel had had such a device on his person, or even in his SUV, he could have been located within hours of his disappearance. The señora's new wardrobe would make it easy, since she wore black exclusively. He searched through drawers and found her underwear, checked the labels where chips might be sewn in. He pushed from his mind the size of the brassiere cups, noted that her panties were the baggy type, sensible cotton. There were hundreds of items with straps and snaps, hooks and clips, buttons and bobs. Roth couldn't begin to fathom what some of these items were or how anyone managed to work their body into them. Too many cutesy things. He shook his head; if he was going to insist on RFIDs, he'd have to persuade her to limit her wardrobe for the foreseeable future so that the chips could be sewn into only a selection of her clothes. But was it practical to ask a woman to limit her wardrobe? Maybe her shoes. Nope, it was either ask her to do so, maybe just her unmentionables or, preferably, sew a chip under her skin. It wouldn't be difficult to do. He'd have to think on it.

Manny called for Roth to follow him out into the hall. He closed doors and drawers, went back into the bedroom. Alfredo trailed them. Two maids were sitting near the door, talking in whispers, fresh linen stacked next to them, waiting to get into the bedroom. Roth and Manny walked over and stood above them, close to them, scowling down for long seconds. The maids spoke no English and likely weren't well-educated. They shrank from this scrutiny, dropped their heads and stayed silent, nervous from the proximity of these strange men. Exactly what Roth and Manny intended. Like Roth, Manny was a trained interrogator. They knew how to rattle someone under scrutiny. For starters, most subjects

began to squirm when their space was violated. But these girls remained motionless.

Manny looked at Roth, shook his head. “They’re not doing this. They wouldn’t know a transmitter from a vibrator, and they wouldn’t have the balls to plant devices.”

Roth agreed. “No, they surely wouldn’t have the balls, Manny.”

“Ha fuckin’ ha.”

They walked back to Alfredo standing at the bedroom door. Manny spoke in a whisper, since the hallway was so cavernous that loud sounds echoed: “So who the fuck’s getting into the lady’s bedroom?”

“Not sure.”

“Well, that’s your fuckin’ problem,” Manny finalized. “You want me to wire her phone in there, also?”

Roth nodded. “Throw in a couple of bugs, too. Ones that can’t be found.”

“Hey!” Manny hissed, looking insulted. “Nobody finds my stuff, Roth. Nobody.”

As with the contraband found in the study, the transmitters in Felicia’s bedroom were inexpensive. Manny said again that he doubted there was a repeater anywhere.

“I don’t think so, either,” Roth said. “Whoever put this stuff in, didn’t spend much money. So I doubt they’d pop for a repeater.”

Alfredo screwed up his face with a question. “They must be listening from somewhere near.”

Manny and Roth smiled at each other. “He’s catching on,” they said in unison.

Roth looked up and down the hall. Next to Felicia’s apartment, on the same side of the hallway, there was another door. He checked it. Locked. Across the hall were other corridors and more doors. All of these were locked, too. “Alfredo, go down and find Lucinda. The housekeeper. Tell her to bring the keys for these rooms.”

On the wall between two of the bedrooms was an old oil painting of a desert hacienda, two by three feet. Roth studied it. The artist had caught the scene as the sun was setting. A vaquero wore chaps and an old brown fedora shaped in the early twentieth century fashion, a style that disappeared in the 1930s. It was a drab oil, but it grabbed the viewer’s eye, and was signed only with the name: Alejandro. Roth thought it would look good in the security room now that the walls had been whitewashed. He removed it and leaned it against the wall, then he and Manny moved to the end of the corridor by a large window near where the maids waited. The maids stood up, their body language asking if it was all right to enter the bedroom. Roth waved them down, and they sat again.

A few minutes later, Felicia came upstairs without Lucinda. Alfredo followed. She had a monstrous ring of keys in her hand, and without comment, opened the other doors along the corridor.

She stood back as the men entered an equally large apartment next to hers. It was darkened and smelled musty. There was a door adjoining Felicia's apartment and, like hers, there was also a walk-in closet and spacious bathroom.

"Whose apartment is this?" Roth asked her.

"It was my husband's. Sometimes he had difficulty sleeping and did not want to disturb my rest, he said." She looked down, as though it were a sin in the eyes of the Church for Daniel to sleep in a separate bed.

"These other bedrooms?" Roth motioned to the other side of the corridor.

"They are Roberto's and Maria's. They are not coming home for vacation. Roberto is interviewing for a position in New York."

"That one?" Roth pointed to the first smaller bedroom, along near the stairs.

"A spare bedroom. For other family members when they visit."

"The other wing opposite, who's in those rooms?"

"Roberto, Daniel's older brother, and his wife have a room, and their children each have a room. One of Daniel's sister's also has a room. But they all have homes elsewhere, just as Daniel and I have a home in Puerto Vallarta. His other sisters do not live here."

"Okay," Roth said. "Open Roberto's room. Daniel's brother. And leave the door open." He started to turn away, but remembered to say "Please."

Felicia took that as a dismissal.

"We'll be down when we've finished."

She turned and started down the corridor, but her eyes fell to the painting on the floor, leaning against the wall. She inquired to the maids.

Roth called back, "If you don't mind, I think it would look good in the security room."

Felicia said nothing, and walked on.

Roth turned to Manny. "Okay, let's check this larger room."

While that was going on, Roth went through Daniel's wardrobe in his bedroom. Felicia hadn't packed his things away in boxes. Instead, his clothes hung in the massive walk-in closet, probably just the way he'd last seen them. Roth went through the coats, vests, and jackets, checking for sewn-in pockets, watch pockets, running his fingers up the linings. Several of Daniel's leather belts had hidden money stashes, and in one, Roth found two 100-dollar bills. They were the old notes, probably long forgotten by Daniel. He checked the trousers, inner pockets, and linings of the jackets and coats, but there was nothing else.

Manny finished in this bedroom. There was no tap on the phone, and no 'quick' bugs. Roth

explained to Alfredo that ‘quick’ meant alive, able to transmit. A dead bug no longer had a power source, like from a battery or an electrical outlet. Without power, they died. Often, dead bugs were ignored after an intrusion, and if someone ever stumbled across them, the intruders didn’t care because their job was long over. So, dead bugs could be anywhere, and although ineffective, nevertheless could be telling. A radio frequency scan couldn’t pick them up any longer, since they were dead, so Manny did a physical check, running his hands around and under furniture, behind drapes, and had Alfredo assist him now that he knew what they were looking for.

“Room’s clean,” Manny reported.

“So,” Roth concluded, “either the señora has been bugged since Daniel’s death, or he was bugging her before he was murdered.”

Manny jerked his head around. “Murdered?”

“Yeah. That’s what this is all about.”

Manny looked from Roth to Alfredo, made a face. “Not my fuckin’ business.”

“Okay, hot wire her bedroom,” Roth ordered. “And then check Roberto’s room across the hallway. I’ll give those other bedrooms down the corridor a once-over and see you downstairs.”

“Yeah,” Manny grunted. “Where do you want me to put the recorders?”

“In the security room.”

“Fuck! You gonna wire the lady and sit right under her ass and listen to her?”

“Why not? She never goes into that part of the home. Servants quarters, utility rooms, and all that.”

Manny shrugged again. “Fuck it, then. It’s your case, Roth.”

Manny started back into Felicia’s bedroom. He stopped and turned to Roth. “Want I should throw in a video recorder with a pinpoint camera in the lady’s bathroom so you can abuse yourself while you’re listening to her?”

“Thanks, Manny, but my imagination is good enough.” Too good, actually.

Manny shrugged, closed the door, mumbling to himself, “That’s fuckin’ gratitude; I wasn’t gonna charge you nothin’.”

Roth checked through the other bedrooms, then beckoned for Alfredo to follow him back down to the security room. There, he took a small tape recorder from his attaché case, and they went out to the carport. Jorge had opened Felicia’s Mercedes and was sitting in the front seat on the passenger side.

“Okay, you guys, here’s what I want: take this tape recorder, Alfredo. Turn it on and put it in your shirt pocket, then you guys saunter up and down Minetta Calle. Both directions. Walk slowly, talk like you’re killing time, taking a break, taking a stroll, just bullshitting.”

Jorge and Alfredo looked at each other, then back to Roth.

“Pay attention to any parked vehicles with people sitting inside. Particularly vans, whether you can see anyone in them or not. Got it? And pay close attention to the smell of piss.”

“Piss?” they asked together, looking at each other.

“Urine. The odor of urine. Pay attention – discreet-like – to any area if there is the smell of piss.”

“Sí, Miguel,” Jorge answered.

Alfredo seemed to be thinking about the piss.

Roth turned to him. “You know what we’re looking for?”

Alfredo smiled. “Some place where there’s a receiver?”

“You win the cigar.” Roth slapped his shoulder. “Record the license plates of any suspicious cars you see. But don’t be obvious. Don’t stop and jot down numbers. Just talk naturally into the tape recorder. Quietly. Give the make and color of the vehicle and the license plate. If you see anyone, describe them into the recorder. Just don’t be obvious. Understand?”

He turned to Jorge. “What did the driver want with the Mercedes?”

“He said he wanted to polish the car. The wax and rags were in the trunk. I told him to do it later.”

“Trunk, huh?” Roth smiled, gave a little chuckle. “All right, give me the keys. I’ll see you guys back here. Alfredo, while you’re walking, explain to Jorge what we’ve been doing and what we found.” He poked a finger in Jorge’s chest. “Jorge, you tell no one what Alfredo tells you. Understand? Not Señora Alvarez. Not your mother in heaven. Not anyone.”

“Sí.”

Jorge and Alfredo went out the gate. Jorge lit a cigar, made obvious gestures as he and Alfredo sauntered up the lane, Alfredo briefing him on what Manny had been doing. The guards watched them depart, then their attention went to Roth as he got in Felicia’s car and started it up. He drove out the gate, proceeded up the hill, around the bend, out of view from the estate. He stopped, turned off the engine. He lit a cigarette, kept his eyes on the rearview mirror, checking to see if Felicia’s driver walked up the hill to see where Roth had gone, or what he was doing. When it was clear that he hadn’t followed, Roth popped the trunk latch and got out.

When you know what you’re looking for, it doesn’t take long to find it.

In the trunk, there was a cardboard box of tools and a kit for changing a tire. This equipment belonged in the tool kit, which was under the trunk bed. So, bingo! If it was here in a cardboard box, there must be something else in the well where the tool kit should be kept. Keeping the tools in a cardboard box was a giveaway, but he doubted most people would have realized it. Beneath the bed of

the trunk, under the carpet, a panel lay flat over the well where the tool kit should have been kept with the spare tire. Inside was a wooden box. It opened from the top. He flipped it open and there the little darling was: a standard-size, voice-activated tape recorder. There was a standard tape cassette in it, nearly at the end of its spool.

Roth ran his fingers around the box, felt wires running from the back of it, under the carpeting, into the cabin. He moved around, opened the rear door, removed the seat. Tucked behind the back rest were two microphones, one on either side of the car. With the windows up and the air-conditioner on – which was usual – the cabin provided perfect acoustics. Yes, a Mercedes was a very quiet automobile. And in Mexico City's heat, no one rolled their windows down.

A simple, voice-activated recorder. All anyone had to do was change the tape when it reached the end, and give it to whoever wanted to know Felicia's conversations, either in the car or on her mobile phone. Whoever listened to the tapes could only hear Felicia's end of the conversation when she spoke with someone on a cellphone, but that was usually enough.

He arranged the box in the trunk just as he'd found it, and took out a plastic jar of powder. It was florescent theft detection powder, only visible under ultraviolet light. He tapped some of it on the box and put the panel down, smoothed the carpet back in place. He replaced the cardboard box where he'd found it, then the seat, then drove back down the hill, in through the gate, parked the car. Felicia's driver remained seated to the side. Alfredo and Jorge were ambling back down the lane. Roth lit another cigarette and waited for them. When they came through the gate, they huddled off to the side.

"Anything?" Roth asked.

"Yes," Alfredo said. "A couple of possibilities. A couple of guys talking in a car down that end, and up the lane, a van is parked with a guy sitting in front, drinking coffee."

"And I think there was someone in the back of the van," Jorge added.

"Yeah," Alfredo concurred. "I think so, too. Sounded like movement as we approached. The guy behind the wheel spotted us at the last moment and probably told the other guy to get back out of sight. There's a black curtain hanging down behind the driver's seat."

"Smell anything unusual?"

"Oh, yeah," Alfredo affirmed.

"Sí, Miguel. Sí. It is the pees. Very strong pees."

"The smell of piss? Near the van, right? You think that you guys alerted him?"

Alfredo and Jorge looked at each other, shook their heads. "Naw," Alfredo said. "We just walked past talking, didn't look at the guy."

"Okay. Jorge, stay with the señora's car. No one goes near it. No one."

Inside, Manny was installing the tape recorders, which he labeled by number. Next to them, attached to the recorders, were small receivers. From now on, everything Felicia said in her bedroom, bath, and downstairs in the study could be monitored right here. He'd installed the four tape recorders in an old metal cabinet he'd found amongst the junk that was now piled into Jorge's room. The cabinet had a key that hung from the handle lock.

Alfredo listened to his own tape, made while walking up and down the lane. He had three license plate numbers and descriptions of the vehicles he and Jorge thought most suspicious. He wrote down the details.

"Okay," Manny called them over. "Gather round. You got four receivers here—"

"Hold up," Roth interrupted. "I want Jorge in on this. But someone's got to watch the señora's car."

"Should I relieve him?" Alfredo asked.

"Nope. I want you here, too. Tell you what, could you find Lucretia Borgia, ask her to come in here?"

Alfredo went to locate the housekeeper, and was back with her in a few minutes.

Roth took him off to the side. "Alfredo, tell her that I want her to report to Jorge down by the gate. Tell her that she is to sit in the car, and allow no one to go near the vehicle, and to ask Jorge to return here. Tell Jorge that this is what I want, so they don't get into a pissing contest. Oh, Christ. Alfredo, just go with her, sort it out: I want Jorge here and her in the car, shooting daggers at anyone who goes near it. Make it very clear: no one goes near the car. If St. Christopher walks up and wants a ride, tell him to take a bus. Got it? The car's hot, and I don't want the driver going near the trunk. But don't tell her that."

When Jorge and Alfredo came into the office, Manny again gathered them around the recorders. "If you got every fuckin' thing sorted out, Roth, maybe I can get on with this."

Roth smiled an apology.

"All right," Manny started. "I've put a tape recorder on each; one per phone, and one for the bugs. Receiver and recorder number one is the study. Number two is for the mikes in the study. Number three is for the phone in her bedroom, and number four is for the mikes in her bedroom. Naturally, anything she says on the extension in the crapper will be on tape number three. These mikes are good, Roth. Real good. You'll even hear her on the can." Manny stopped and reflected on that for a second.

He pointed to a small light on each machine next to the word 'recording.' "When a tape is recording, you can see the spool turning, but to get your attention, this little light will go on."

Jorge stared at the tape recorders, absorbing what Roth was doing to his employer. Roth could read on his face that he wasn't happy about all this. He placed his hand on the old man's shoulder.

"It's necessary, Jorge." Roth put his finger to his lips.

Jorge said nothing.

"Not one word to anyone, Jorge. I know how you feel about the señora, but if I didn't trust you, I wouldn't let you know what we're doing. So I need to ask for your loyalty, also. We're on the same side."

To make him feel better, Roth added, "I also found a tape recorder in the trunk of her car. Someone's watching her, Jorge, and we need to know who, and why she's so interesting that someone needs to intrude on her privacy. We have an idea who that is, don't we? But for now, this is the only way. Do you understand?"

They looked at Jorge as he turned all of this over in his mind. Here were three men he didn't know. Not really. Two gringos and a Mexican. Strangers all.

Roth began to wonder if he'd misjudged Jorge, had made a mistake by drawing him in on this. He, Manny, and Alfredo were completely impartial, indifferent to anyone's feelings. They had a mission, and that's what they concentrated on. But to Jorge, this was very personal. Still, the old guy was essential to Roth. He needed Jorge, because Roth was comfortable – if not absolutely certain – that Felicia had nothing to do with her husband's murder. To have initially suspected otherwise would have been foolish. Just because she'd hired him to investigate Daniel's murder didn't mean she was innocent. Roth couldn't count the times clients had hired him to investigate something they were guilty of. Those clients were usually businessmen, manufacturers who were skimming their own business, beating the IRS. They'd hire a smart PI, complaining of pilferage, just to gauge how safe they were with their scam. If the guy's books tallied, and a PI couldn't find anything, the IRS stood little chance of uncovering a bilking operation.

As for Roth, there was too much at stake not to suspect everyone.

He wasn't surprised at finding the bugs, yet hadn't been certain they were there. The sweep had been routine, a standard security exercise, a logical step in his investigation. But the sweep had yielded valuable leads and eliminated other avenues of investigation, had opened some doors and closed others, and posed some very interesting questions. He'd been certain from the start that Daniel's murder wasn't a stranger crime. This fact alone put Roth half way there. Hadn't the police theorized this? Had they been too routine, assuming all kidnap cases were outside conspiracies?

The police should have taped the widow. But for all he knew, maybe they were monitoring her from a central telephone exchange. No one could detect such a tap. But he doubted they were. They'd

had no reason to suspect her. And clearly, dedication was lacking, the police likely hoping that they'd resolve this case one day with a squealer.

Just as Manny was finishing with the recorders, the red light blinked on recorder number one. "She's using the phone in her bedroom," he said. He hit the 'play' button and they listened to the conversation. Roth motioned for Jorge to close the door to the hallway.

But it wasn't Felicia. It was one of the maids. The men all looked at each other. Alfredo stepped closer and translated, but it turned out that the maid was only sneaking a call to a girlfriend. More than likely, the other maid was watching the hallway to be certain that Lucretia Borgia wasn't patrolling.

"Not important," Manny said. He punched off the 'listen' button, but the tape continued whirling as the maid spoke on. Alfredo would listen to this seemingly mundane conversation later. You couldn't always be certain of domestic help.

"Okay," Manny summarized, "everybody straight on all this? Any questions?"

No one had any questions, so Manny began packing up his equipment.

"Leave me some taps and bugs," Roth said.

"I don't rent this fuckin' stuff out, you know. You see Hertz rent-a-spy stenciled on my ass?"

"Put it on the bill."

Manny smiled. "That's different. Here." He threw a small transmitter to Roth. "That's a microphone. He also tossed him a miniature harmonica bug. "You know how it works."

It was called a harmonica bug, and once installed, a call was made to the phone, and when the handset was picked up and the line was opened, one blew a note down the line with a tiny harmonica that activated the bug. Cute, and it usually worked well. Roth nodded, selected a few other things from Manny's kit.

Manny noted down what Roth was buying. "You coulda' done this job yourself, Roth. Fuckin' simple sweep. You know that?"

Roth agreed. "But I didn't know if there'd be anything. Or, if so, how sophisticated it might be. I could have missed something, maybe a VLF job. Something very low frequency that I wouldn't find. So I wanted the best. You're the pro, Manny. Not me."

Manny leered at him, a trace of a smile on his mug, which faded just as fast. "Hey, kissing my ass ain't gonna make your fuckin' bill any less."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Manny."

Manny pointed to a small device connected to the telephone in the security office. "As a freebee, I hooked up a monitor there." He poked Jorge in the chest with his finger. "If your phone is even tapped, that light will blink. You got it?"

Jorge scratched his head. “What do I do if it does light up?”

Manny erupted, arms flailing, wide-eyed. “What do you do? What the fuck you think you do? You run like hell. Clear the fuck out as fast as your legs’ll carry you, ’cause this whole place is gonna fuckin’ blow. Smear your ass all across Mexico City.”

Jorge stared at Manny, looked around to Roth, Alfredo for confirmation.

Manny relaxed. “I should give a fuck what you do if the light comes on. All I’m saying is, if that lights up, then someone’s listening to you.”

Roth put his hand on Jorge’s shoulder. “If that happens, you need to find a tap or a bug. A transmitter. And remove it. That’s all. If you can’t find it, you call an expert. Like Manny here. That’s his job.” He turned to Manny. “Can’t you keep things simple, you fuckin’ Hebe?”

Manny chuckled and gave Roth the finger.

Roth asked Jorge for a car to take him and Manny to the airport, then he wanted Jorge to sit in the señora’s car. As they were leaving, they ran into Felicia coming down the stairs from the second floor.

“Have you found anything? Mr. Roth?”

Roth tapped his coat pockets. “Just all of your cash and jewels, señora.”

He thumbed to Alfredo. “My man, Alfredo, will drive you anywhere you want to go. Your driver is not to go anywhere near your car. He can finish for the day.” He walked past her, and outside, got into the car.

Felicia followed him out, glared at him, not at all appreciating his rude sarcasm, not to mention his evasiveness. She had asked him a question and expected an answer. As they pulled out of the main gate, Roth realized he’d forgotten to give her the two 100-dollar notes he’d found in Daniel’s money belt.

When they arrived at the airport, Manny started in with his favorite explicative, since he’d have to start explaining all of his equipment to airport security again. “This shit’s gonna light up those fuckin’ X-ray machines. Then I gotta fuckin’ open everything and explain to these fuckin’ monkeys what all this gear is. Then, you know what comes next? Some fuckin’ so-called security expert gets called in and he goes through it all again. I show the fuckin’ papers for this equipment, and they scratch their heads, pick their fuckin’ noses, and X-ray everything again. Finally, they say they want me to check my gear in, then I gotta argue that there ain’t no fuckin’ way this stuff gets outta my sight. You see all the bullshit I go through for you, Roth?”

They shook hands as Manny readied to wheel his overflowing cart into the terminal. “You’re a sweetheart, Manny,” Roth called after him. “Always a pleasure.”

“Fuck you, Roth.” Manny disappeared inside the terminal.

Chapter 17

Roth took a cab back to the Hidalgo. He showered and changed, grabbed a fast bite down in the cantina as he made notes to Nina requesting a financial profile on Luis Alcantara. He wondered if there'd be much on Alcantara. This was Mexico where, like most of the world, credit wasn't as common as in the States. In cash societies, financial profiles weren't necessary. For one thing, it required merchants to share information on their customers, and few had the vision to understand that while they were sharing their info, they could receive it back a hundred fold.

Still, as Roth had discussed with Nina, many Mexicans did have financial profiles, since they did business in the States, and Felicia mentioned that Alcantara had some business connections in California. Many prosperous Mexicans did, even more now with the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The only address he had for Alcantara was his office on Observatorio, several blocks from the Blackwell office. No home address, no date of birth. Only his age, which according to Felicia was around 45.

Roth left the hotel, carrying the third volume of Daniel's diary with him, and was back at Cuernavaca by 9:00 p.m.

Alfredo had returned with the señora, and was waiting in her Mercedes. Two guards were monitoring the screens. Jorge also spent quite a bit of time panning the cameras across the estate, still enthralled by the coverage and image quality. At the very back of the estate, in the wooded area, the night seemed to be lit up with infrared lenses. Nothing could move through the thicket without being seen.

"Better than a sleeping guard, isn't it, Jorge?"

Jorge pulled his attention from the screen, smiled at Roth.

"Did you see Señora Alvarez about the terminations?"

"Sí. I gave her the list." Jorge pulled out his copy of the list. Roth looked it over, but recognized only a few of the names. He hadn't paid them much attention individually.

"She read the list?"

"Sí."

"She say anything?"

Jorge shook his head.

"Have you set up your watches? All set to go for tomorrow?"

"Sí, Miguel. All the shifts are set for eight a.m. For the first month."

“By the way, Jorge. What’s the age of consent in Mexico?”

“The age of what?”

“In Mexico, how old does a woman have to be before you can lay her down?”

“Oh.” Jorge chuckled. “I see. Eighteen.”

Roth raised an eyebrow, made an agreeable face.

“Unless,” Jorge amended, “she has brothers. And a father. Uncles, also. Then, an hombre needs their consent, also, no matter her age.”

“They’ll consent?”

“Oh, seguramente, señor. Certainly.” Jorge gave a sarcastic frown. “As you say in el Norte, when the Pope and the bear drink Schlitz in the woods.”

Roth laughed, not sure if Jorge was punning or misquoting.

“Unless you marry the girl, of course,” Jorge amended further.

Roth wondered if Lily had any brothers. He nodded towards the tape recorders. “Anything?”

“Yes. The señora has used the telephone off and on.” Jorge glanced at the guards, who were busy scanning, learning the controls. “But I have not listened.”

Jorge moved over close to Roth, whispered that the cabinet should be moved into his room, since tape review would be lengthy, and he didn’t want the guards to know what they were doing. For two reasons: first, the señora’s conversations were private, and second, Jorge had every intention of eavesdropping on the guards in this very room from time to time. No point in tipping them off.

Roth smiled, winked at Jorge. Yep, he was really coming up to speed with this business. He glanced at the floor in one corner, where Jorge had placed the old oil painting of the hacienda. He went to the tool box, picked out a nail, took a hammer. He motioned for Jorge to help him. They hung the painting on the wall behind Jorge’s desk, then stood back and admired it. A few more touches like this and the security room would look presentable. “All right, back to work.” He nodded towards the two guards monitoring the consoles. “These guys don’t speak English, do they?”

Jorge shook his head. “No,” he whispered. “We can talk freely.”

“Then why are you whispering?”

“A habit from all this business, Miguel. I cannot help it.”

Roth shrugged. “We’ll listen to the tape when their shift changes at midnight.” He turned to Alfredo, who was down to the last pages of Daniel’s fourth diary, it being the first he’d read. “Anything interesting?”

“I’ve made some notes, under the dates of the entries.” He handed Roth several slips of paper. Roth put them in his case, then picked up Daniel’s third volume and went to the kitchen, poured a cup

of coffee.

He remained in the kitchen for several hours, reading the third diary. This volume covered Daniel's years between the ages of 35 and forty, and was mostly in Spanish. It was mainly about business and the development over the years of IO Mexico. Boring stuff. There were also personal events: birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, christenings, baptisms, vacations. Daniel had always written these family milestones in his diary.

There had been the usual business problems and disagreements, a political altercation, a personal lawsuit or two. People were named, and Roth made notes to check these entries with Alfredo. Occasionally there were passages where Daniel quoted his deceased grandfather, Alejandro. Apparently, the old man had been his first mentor. Daniel briefly recounted stories or examples as he employed the old man's wisdom in current situations. He clearly adored the old guy, who'd been a surrogate father, what with Eduardo away much of the time.

Voices came from upstairs where the girls and Taurino were quartered. A door would slam and music resounded along the corridors and down to the ground. At 11:00 p.m., the home became quiet, and Roth read on, fighting the tedium of this volume. If Daniel Alvarez were still alive, Roth would tell him to get a life. It was boring crap. But then he thought of his own existence. What did he have to show for his life other than a black book of sporting gals, thousands of files with case notes, and itinerary slips all bundled up and packed in envelopes, stored away according to the tax year?

Chapter 18

About ten minutes before midnight, Roth closed the diary, carried a fresh coffee back to the security room. He told Jorge to change the men monitoring the cameras, but keep the guys coming on duty outside until he called them in.

When Alfredo had returned earlier from driving Felicia, he'd had a tarpaulin thrown across the Mercedes, tying the ends under the frame. A camera sat aimed at the car, and would remain so throughout the night, the guards instructed to notify Jorge if the driver approached the car. Since returning, Alfredo had spent the evening in the security room with his nose in the fourth diary

Roth closed and locked the door behind Jorge when the old guy returned from a late supper.

"You have those license plates from this afternoon?" Roth asked Alfredo when the guards had left.

Alfredo pulled the note from his pocket, handed it to Roth, who in turn passed it to Jorge. "You know a cop who can get license plate info? So we can see who owns those vehicles."

"Sí, Miguel. But it will cost some pesos."

Roth's eyebrows went up, a question.

"Maybe ten dollars gringo, per plate that we want checked."

Roth nodded and the three of them pulled up chairs around the tape recorders. Jorge pressed 'listen' on recorder number one, whose light was lit up, since Felicia was talking with someone again. Side A of this first tape was nearly full. They'd have a lot of listening to do once she hung up, but Roth decided to save time, so they'd just cut in on the current conversation. Although no one could hear them, they sat quiet as Roth switched on the recorder.

Felicia sounded tired. Her voice was weak, throaty. She was speaking with a woman, in Spanish. Jorge translated as they watched the tape turn slowly in the spool.

"Oh, I am so lonely, Conchita," Felicia said. "Thank God the children are here, or I wouldn't know what to do with myself."

The woman on the other end was comforting her. Roth opened his attaché case, took out the copy of the family tree. He searched down the list.

"Conchita is her sister," Jorge slipped in. "She lives in Chihuahua. The city."

"They keep me busy, and it's good for me to see their happiness. They are so carefree, so wonderfully young and alive."

It sounded as though Felicia was choking on her words. She began sniffing. Roth glanced at Jorge, saw the pain in his face. This was very difficult for him.

“I miss Daniel so much. I thought it would get easier.”

Roth tapped Alfredo on the arm, wanting him to take over the translation. Now Felicia cried harder. Jorge rubbed his face, but set his jaw, forcing himself to listen.

“I thought time would heal. But it hasn’t. It hasn’t at all.”

More weeping, to which Conchita pledged to be on the first plane in the morning to Mexico City.

“It is not at all easier. It’s harder. My days are empty, no matter how busy I stay. My bed is empty and I reach for Daniel during the night in my sleep. I miss his touch, his warmth. But he is gone from me—”

They heard the receiver drop from Felicia’s hand, but still heard her crying. Jorge was in such anguish, he was beside himself, embarrassed at hearing such intimacies.

Felicia picked the phone up. “Gone forever, Conchita. He won’t be coming back. It’s not as though he’s gone on a trip. Like when he traveled a lot. How we both would look forward to his return. We would lock ourselves away for days, close out the world.... His touch, I will never have his touch again, will never feel his arms around me . . . all those wondrous things we did with each other....”

Jorge was really upset now, and Roth considered sending him out of the room. But decided not to. Jorge had to know what went on. Everything that went on. But this seemed too much for him. And he too was weeping, the loss of little Daniel, whom he’d taken care of those forty years ago, was as devastating to him as Felicia’s words. Roth reached over, patted him on the shoulder. Sure, it was easy for Roth. This was a case, and he wasn’t moved at all. Alfredo was also impartial, if not slightly embarrassed in front of Jorge for witnessing such intimate feelings.

“My life isn’t worth living without him, Conchita.” Felicia’s voice shook. “I’m afraid of what I will do, so afraid these lonely nights. God would never forgive me. Oh, mi hermana, mi hermana,” she cried out to her sister. “What shall I do? God help me. What shall I do?”

Jorge stood, turned in circles out of frustration.

“She’s okay as long as she’s talking, Jorge,” Roth said. He waved Jorge to sit down, but the old man couldn’t. He took a handkerchief from his hip pocket, blew his nose, wiped his eyes.

Conchita scolded Felicia, insisted that she would come in the morning. But she sounded just as frightened.

“No. Don’t, sweetheart. I will be okay. As long as I pray. I pray constantly.” Her voice changed now, and was hard, angry. “And, God forgive me, I want those bastards who did this to Daniel to pay. I won’t rest whether in this life or the next until they pay for this. I hate them so. Oh, dear God, please forgive me for hating.... So, no, don’t come, darling. I will be all right for now.”

Felicia and Conchita talked about the investigation, how the police had nothing new, and how

Felicia worried the murder would never be resolved.

“That man I told you about, Señor Roth. He hates me. He’s very mean to me. Not at all gentle.”

“Discharge him,” Conchita advised.

“Luis says that I should not trust Señor Roth. But I do, because Señor Roth said something the very first day I met him that decided for me that I could. I don’t know, but maybe the more people there are to help me, maybe we can learn the truth. But it seems to be going nowhere. And Señor Roth is here when he should be out doing whatever it is detective people do. He is very Norte Americano. He dictates to me, and he taunts me. I am his client, yet he taunts me. Like I am of no consequence. He is disrespectful, and he is . . . is especial.”

“I see,” Conchita said.

Jorge and Alfredo looked at Roth, who shrugged.

“He and some men went into my bedroom this afternoon. To look for those little buggers, or whatever they are called. But Señor Roth never tells me anything. As if he doesn’t trust me. As if I’d tell someone what he’s doing. As if I even know what he is doing.”

“Well, you tell me,” Conchita urged.

“But you are my sister. Of course I tell you. Maybe I should have told him that Luis did the same thing in my bedroom last month.”

Roth’s head shot up; he hit the ‘off’ button. “Luis Alcantara?”

“Si. Señor Alcantara,” Jorge said, sitting down. He thought about that, and his eyes burned.

Roth reached over, plucked the slip of paper with the license plates on it from Jorge’s hand, put it into his pocket. There was no point in checking, unless they wanted to identify which vehicle was involved. Didn’t matter very much; if they wanted to shut Alcantara down, all they had to do was remove his tap and the bugs.

Whatever they knew, Alcantara also knew. And more, if he’d been bugging her all these weeks. But why was he bugging her? He wasn’t involved in the murder investigation, never spoke with John Byrd, and – foolish for Byrd – wasn’t even on the interview agenda. Since the kidnapping – if that’s what happened – had occurred elsewhere, the police had only interviewed Alcantara for anything he might be able to contribute. But according to the police reports, most of which Alfredo had managed to bribe from the authorities at the time he’d investigated the death, Alcantara could contribute nothing. He tapped the ‘play’ button.

“God is punishing me. I know He is,” Felicia said.

Conchita didn’t respond for a few seconds.

“What’s she talking about,” Roth asked Jorge.

The old man shook his head, wide-eyed, his face ignorant of what Felicia was referring to.

“No, darling. He is not. You know better than that,” Conchita returned.

“I don’t know what I know anymore.”

Their conversation turned lighter, and Felicia told her sister about the children’s holidays, and plans to shift the children to Puerto Vallarta at the end of the month for the annual masquerade ball, after which they’d have a week at the beach before they’d fan out, head back to school, to what seemed like the four corners of the earth. Felicia told Conchita about lovely Carmelita, who had an excellent singing voice, about one of the girls breaking her finger on the diving board, about Lily and Taurino’s angry spats that drove everyone crazy, and about the trials of managing a house full of teenagers with boundless energy. Finally, she laughed over an episode with the teenagers eating habits, and how they ran the maids in circles with all their demands.

The conversation went into family gossip and other matters, and after an hour, wound down. Felicia hung up, but was on the line again shortly, this time to her mother, who lived in Mérida, in Yucatán State.

With her mother, it seemed as though Felicia sounded as positive as she could. There were no crying jags, and she stayed away from discussing Daniel’s death.

After Felicia hung up, Roth asked, “What did she mean by I’m especial?”

Alfredo and Jorge looked at each other. “That is just a saying in Mexico, Miguel,” Jorge volunteered, shrugging it off.

Roth raised his eyebrows at Alfredo, who scratched his head, didn’t want to answer. “Well . . . it means a person is . . . difficult to get along with.”

Roth waited, made a gimme gesture.

“When a person is . . . demanding . . . thinks he’s special.”

“Full of shit, you mean?”

“Sí,” Alfredo said. “No, no, Mike,” he recovered hastily. “But a very insistent person.”

“A pain in the ass?”

Uncertain if Roth was playing with him, Alfredo grew cautious with his words. “No, Mike. Just exacting. But bossy-like.”

Roth laughed. “Damn right, I’m especial.” He’d never heard that expression before; Mexican men didn’t speak in such terms that he was aware of. Especial was probably the señoritas’ euphemism for a high-maintenance bitch, and Jorge and Alfredo didn’t want to put it that way. “A bastard would be more like it, guys,” he muttered in his defense. “Bastardo.”

Roth rose and went to the kitchen, wondering what he’d said to Felicia to earn her trust. He

hadn't tried to sell himself; at times was surprised she didn't throw him out on his ear. Maybe she thought she wouldn't get the retainer back. Didn't matter, the equipment and costs were denting the hell out of that, anyhow. He'd better sit down and do a bill for the señora before he got too far ahead of her.

He poured another coffee. When he returned, Alfredo was finishing up with Daniel's fourth diary, and Jorge had the guards back inside, scanning the monitors. Roth settled in and continued with the end of the third diary. A half-hour later, he was about to have Alfredo pack up to return to the Hidalgo when the light on recorder number three came on. This one was for the tiny transmitters they'd hidden near the phone in Felicia's bedroom. They all looked at it, then at each other. Roth glanced at his watch. Nearly 1:00 a.m. Who could Felicia be talking to in her room at this hour? Jorge shuffled the guards out of the room, telling them to take a break, that he'd call them in when he was ready. As they closed the door, Roth nodded to Alfredo, who reached over and hit 'play.'

Felicia's voice was faint. Roth moved around the desk and turned the volume up. Soon, it became obvious that she was praying. Roth pictured her fresh from the shower, wrapped in a white cotton nightgown, kneeling beside her bed near the nightstand where the phone was. Her prayers went on and on, passionate pleas for Him to hear her, to guide and help her. She confessed to her weakness of wanting revenge for Daniel's murder, praying for God to forgive her just this one sin, professing that even the fires of hell could not assuage her. She went on and on. It could go on for eternity. It was little wonder with her nightly routine of worrisome phone calls and confessions to Him on high that he rarely saw her early in the morning.

"Okay, Alfredo. This is our signal to say goodnight. Let's get our things together and get out of here." Roth changed the old tape on recorder number one with a new tape, and locked the cabinet. He'd listen to the earlier conversation back in his room.

Could they trust the guards on the monitor with the Mercedes? They'd see on the screen if anyone approached it. But would Felicia's driver bribe them? He had desperate reason to get into that trunk.

As they left, Jorge was summoning the guards back into the room. He would inspect the posts, then turn in.

At the gate, Roth decided not to chance it. "We're taking the señora's car," he told Alfredo, who uncovered it and threw the tarpaulin in the back seat. They drove out, Roth at the wheel, up the lane to the boulevard. Roth slowed the car as they approached the suspect van whose license plate they'd recorded earlier. It was still parked as it had been this afternoon. It was an older model, dark-blue Chevrolet Astro. No one sat in the front, but they sensed that someone was in the back. They could feel it as they drove by.

Whoever was in there was listening to Felicia's rosary.

Chapter 19

Driving back to the Hidalgo, Roth instructed Alfredo what he wanted him to do in the morning. Roth planned to be on hand at Cuernavaca at 8:00 a.m.; Jorge might need the moral support for what he'd be doing. Firing people might not come easy for the old boy, however much he knew it was necessary. He parked the Mercedes in the hotel's garage, covered it again with the tarpaulin. He had a problem now: the ultraviolet dust was on the tape recorder, but the driver hadn't had a chance to get his hands on it, and wouldn't have a chance before Roth exposed him.

Roth thought, then nodded to himself; the problem was easily solved.

There was an envelope stuffed with faxes from Nina at the reception desk. There were financial profiles on some of the individuals whose names he'd given to her, and another stack on several individuals named Luis Alcantara. In his room, Roth showered and shaved, since he wouldn't have a lot of time in the morning. He set his alarm clock. Tomorrow – check that, it was already 2:00 a.m. – would be a repeat of another long day.

But he was too wound up to sleep. He looked over the financial profiles, found one for the Luis Alcantara in question. It showed his office address, also a residence address. And, in three days, it would be his birthday. He'd be 47.

None of the other profiles on Daniel's relatives seemed interesting, but he'd start files on them all the same.

Roth turned to Daniel's third diary, and an hour later, as he reached the end of this volume – or rather, the beginning, since he'd been reading back in time – he came across Daniel's first mention of Felicia. This entry was six pages long, and covered several months. It was mostly in Spanish.

There'd been passages about Felicia throughout this third diary, which had continued into the fourth, all the way up until only a few days before his disappearance. But these passages here concerned Daniel courting Felicia, and their wedding, and a long honeymoon in Barcelona. Daniel never held back his thoughts where Felicia was concerned, and Roth had learned that Felicia was apparently barren. They'd tried for years to have children, but it wasn't to be.

Daniel had met her thirteen years ago, a year after he'd been widowed. She was a teacher, and they'd met one evening at a Catholic charity fund-raiser for children. In Daniel's own words: "I felt my eyes were deceiving me, for there stood the most beautiful creature I have ever seen. She was speaking with Father Ramon, and when she looked my way, I saw a most loving smile upon her face. As God is my witness, and I cross myself as I write these sacrilegious words, she appeared like the Madonna. I knew that I must meet her, and I did."

Over the next five pages, Daniel described Felicia in vivid detail. Not just her looks, which, at age 27 were remarkable, but her gentleness and temperament. She was kind to all, impossibly patient for a Latino woman, and had none of the failings of the human character. Daniel described himself as undeserving of such a creature.

Roth, struggling with the Spanish, understood enough to catch the gist, and he sat up in his bed when he – or rather, Daniel – discovered early on that Felicia had been a novitiate some years earlier.

“Well, lock my ass away in a convent,” Roth uttered. That explained a lot about Señora Felicia Christina Romero Alvarez de Morro. She’d damn near become a nun!

According to Daniel, Felicia had felt guilty about giving up the convent. But, worse yet, in her mind, God had made her barren as punishment for leaving the Church, and it explained her present anguish. He’d continued her punishment, now taking Daniel from her. And so, her guilt for wishing the worst upon Daniel’s murderers was yet one more sin for which she prayed for forgiveness, another cross she’d have to bear.

Roth laughed at the analogy as he closed the diary. Never envy another’s life; there was always a chance that he or she was locked away in some dark place, in a distorted, tortured mind. Roth was a Catholic. Well, like many others, had been a Catholic at one time, but even the dread of a Marine Corps brig, in which he’d served as a cell block turnkey, hadn’t been as punishing as the hell the señora’s mind was conjuring up.

He turned to the tape of her earlier conversations, those calls she’d made after they’d installed the tap but before they’d listened in this evening. There was a series of calls to concessions in Puerto Vallarta, something to do with decorations, party favors, things connected to the masquerade ball someone was throwing week after next. Another call came in from a female friend, during which chit-chat ensued about friends and family. Last, there was a call from Luis Alcantara.

Roth turned up the volume. It was in Spanish, like all the others.

“Felicia, it will be impossible to re-zone Minetta Calle,” Alcantara said right off. That was the lane where the van was sitting.

Roth had to replay the passage several times to make certain he’d understood correctly. But, apparently, Felicia had asked Alcantara to handle that little detail.

“I have made inquiries, and it’s no use bothering further,” Alcantara continued.

“Sure, you little prick,” Roth muttered aloud. “You wouldn’t want your van sitting out there like a sore thumb.”

“And I see no reason why the lane should be cleared. Señor Roth doesn’t know what he is doing, to ask such a thing.”

“I see,” Felicia responded.

“And I have made inquiries on your Señor Roth, querida.”

He was calling her ‘darling’? Of course, why not? It was just an affectionate term, all in the family. And, after all, he was screwing her – after a fashion.

“Do you know,” Alcantara continued, whispering. “That he was with a prostituta the other evening. In his hotel room. A woman of very ill repute.”

Roth laughed. “She certainly doesn’t deserve her reputation, bub. Your sister would have been more fun.” But this was interesting: Alcantara was investigating Roth, and apparently doing all the damage he could. Of course, he needed to attack Roth’s reputation. The rotten slime ball.

“To tell you the truth, Luis, I can’t understand what Señor Roth is doing,” Felicia said. “Today, he just duplicated your work.”

Alcantara was quiet for a long moment. Then: “What work is that?” he asked.

Roth could hear Felicia taking a sip of water or something. Maybe she was hitting the sherry again. “That buggy thing you were checking for in my bedroom.”

Alcantara was silent.

Roth smiled.

“I should have told him you already looked,” Felicia continued. “But he didn’t find anything.”

“Oh?” Alcantara sounded surprised. Then he recovered. “Oh, well, of course he didn’t find anything. He is incompetent. And I would have told you if there was anything. You don’t need him. After all, what befell poor Daniel did not happen at the hacienda.”

“We will see, Luis. We will see.”

Roth switched off the tape and laughed. Neither Alcantara nor Felicia caught the attorney’s inadvertent admission that he was bugging Felicia, assumed that Roth hadn’t found anything. She, of course, didn’t know that he was bugging her, but he’d charged Roth with incompetence for not finding anything. Alcantara’s sweep yielded nothing, so if there was still nothing, Roth naturally wouldn’t have found anything. Therefore, the ‘incompetent’ remark wasn’t logical. But it sailed right over Felicia’s head also. Roth decided to save this tape, maybe play it back for Alcantara and Felicia at a later date. Dumb and Dumber.

He switched the tape back on, but neither said anything for long moments, then Felicia bid him goodbye.

There were no more conversations on the tape. Roth made a rum and Coke, sat on the bed and relaxed. It was 4:00 a.m., and he doubted that he’d get any sleep. But he finished his drink, and its effect conspired with the fatigue catching up with him. He lay back on the bed and dozed off.

His alarm sounded at 6:30. He sat up, yawned. He envied Alfredo; all his associate had on his plate today was a little shopping, to locate and purchase the best desk calendar money could buy. He'd inform Alfredo about Alcantara's upcoming birthday, gleaned from his credit report. Day after tomorrow. It afforded the perfect opportunity for what Roth had in mind. He went into the bathroom, threw water on his face, then put on fresh duds, kicked his soiled clothes into a heap by the door, arranged some papers, and was out of the room in five minutes.

The manager's office was open but no one was inside. He dropped the third volume back in the document case, pulled out volume two. This volume was thin, covering Daniel's life between ages 25 and thirty. The first volume, begun when Daniel was eleven years old, was a little thicker. Roth almost ignored this first volume altogether, but decided to take it, as well. If things went as planned today, he'd have plenty of time for reading. He locked the case just as the day manager came into the office, and Roth advised him that Alfredo, also a guest here, could have access to the case. He removed one of the keys from its chain, put it in an envelope with a note, sealed it, and had the desk clerk put it in Alfredo's box.

Monday morning traffic was murderous. It took over an hour to reach Cuernavaca. He stopped just before Minetta Calle, opened the trunk of the Mercedes. The tarpaulin was folded up inside. He sprinkled the invisible fluorescent powder lightly on the tying cords, got back into the car, and drove down to the main gate. The Astro was still parked halfway down the street. No one sat in front. For all Roth could recall, maybe the van had been there since he first visited the estate, its occupants coming and going. That made sense; Alcantara's spies couldn't always be guaranteed they'd get the same space whenever they arrived. The parking spot was under the shade of a huge oak that hung from the Alvarez property out across the lane. It was near the side gate, but blocked from view by shrubs. No one could see the occupants, and while they also couldn't see anyone, their job was listening, not watching. Aside from the windshield and cab windows, the van was completely closed. No windows on the side, and the rear windows had been painted over.

Guards were hanging around the gate, talking and smoking cigarettes, waiting for the shift to change at eight o'clock. As Roth got out from the Mercedes, the mood grew somber. No one greeted him. Terminations were in the air.

Felicia's driver had reported for work. Roth called him over and told him to cover the car, to tie the tarpaulin down and then tie the cords beneath the vehicle's frame. He did, then returned to where he'd been keeping his own vigil on the car.

On the huge east lawn next to the swimming pool, workmen were setting up tents, tables, and chairs in one area, and what appeared to be volunteers were preparing children's field games.

Apparently, Felicia was going to entertain a horde of orphans today.

In the security room, Jorge was at his desk, working up a few last-minute changes. Two guards sat at the console, monitoring the screens. Roth entered and instructed one guard, who spoke a perfunctory English, to leave a camera on the Mercedes, and as before, no one, absolutely no one, was to go near it.

“Buenos días, Miguel,” Jorge greeted him. They both looked over at the screens, then Jorge said, “I wonder if we cannot cut more guards. Look at it, Miguel.” He pointed to the console. The cameras were panning across the property at regular intervals, the images perfectly clear. It was a beautiful morning, but on the screens, the grounds seemed even brighter. “We hardly need anyone.”

“Let’s keep it as planned,” Roth replied. “You’ll need more than you think. Security cameras can’t do everything. Never be lulled into believing they can.” He took Jorge’s list, reviewed it. “This is fine. You can cut these guys, but not today.” He motioned Jorge outside.

They went out, and Roth lit a cigarette, offered one to Jorge. “Yesterday, listening to these tapes, changed a few things, Jorge. Go ahead and post the watch this morning. We’re going to delay the terminations until tomorrow.”

“Okay.” Jorge shrugged.

Roth couldn’t tell if Jorge was disappointed or relieved. He’d built himself up for confrontations, but now, some guards had a one-day reprieve.

“Late tonight, go up by the side gate.” Roth pointed towards Minetta Calle. “Relieve that man. Send him away, then unlock the side gate. Got it?”

Jorge frowned, but nodded.

“Be discreet. When the new man is posted, he probably won’t check the lock. Make sure it’s one of Alcantara’s men. Understand?”

A slow smile began crossing Jorge’s face.

“Then,” Roth continued, “I want you to search around for anything that looks valuable, but isn’t. Statues, busts, vases, silverware, things like that. Put them in your room for the time being. Got it?”

“Sí.” Jorge grinned, made a stabbing motion. “We give him a good fucking, yes?”

Roth cracked up. “Something like that, but more.” He copied Jorge, made a pumping motion as if he’d scored a touchdown. “Soon, Jorge, we fuck many people.”

Jorge clasped his hands together, rubbed them.

Roth went into the kitchen, poured a coffee, carried it back to the security room, where he settled in with the second volume of Daniel’s diary. Towards the back, where he started first, he learned where Daniel had set up his first business operation, in an industrial section of Mexico City. He’d been an

enterprising young man of 25, had already married a girl his same age while he was in graduate school. It was during that time that he began dabbling in politics, and his social and business connections grew. He was well-off, even then, from inheritance, but he wanted to create his own empire. Two children and eight years later, that first wife, Juanita, had died of leukemia at the tender age of 29. Their children were small then: Roberto was only four, Maria was two. Sad, indeed. Daniel had been distraught for months, and his mother, who'd left Cuernavaca when Daniel married, returned home to live with him, looking after the children.

Her leaving had been unusual for Mexican families, where mothers and sisters, and often aunts, stayed on forever. But she had wanted to live in their home in Puerto Vallarta after Daniel's father died and his sisters – three of them – had married and moved away, leaving the estate to Daniel. They visited often, as did Roberto, Daniel's older brother. This was Mexico; everyone visited often.

During this period, there had been more devastation in Daniel's life. Alejandro, his grandfather, had also died. Daniel's recorded eulogy of this momentous period went on for weeks and months, with passages and poems so absorbing that Roth could feel young Daniel's passion and sorrow. No question that the old general left a lasting impression on Daniel.

Roth read on about Daniel's first marriage and the birth of both children, these milestones covered in typical flowery prose reserved for such events. Roth took a few notes from this volume, added these to the pages he'd already outlined. There wasn't much here, but he'd have Alfredo go through it again, to be certain he hadn't missed anything. He yawned wide as he stacked his notepad and Spanish dictionary on top of the diary. He idly watched the monitors, waiting for the phone call from Alfredo, knowing that if he didn't do something, he'd nod off. In the security room, that would be an unforgivable sin, and he couldn't very well throw his own sleepy ass over the desk as he'd done to Dopey. Or was that Sleepy who'd taken a flyer across the room?

He went back into the kitchen for another coffee, and was surprised to run into Felicia. It was only 9:30. She sat at the large table, buttering toast as the cooks cleaned up breakfast plates and were busying themselves around the kitchen, getting ready for lunch. There would be a lot of mouths to feed.

"Buenos días, señora," Roth greeted her.

She seemed surprised to see him. "You are here early," she answered. "You must be tired."

Roth wondered how she knew that. The home was too big for her to know all of his comings and goings, to know that he'd been here late last night. Either Lucretia Borgia was spying for her, or she was jabbing him for his lifestyle, according to her phone conversation with Alcantara yesterday. He sat down opposite her, stirred sugar into his coffee. This close to her, he could see that her eyes were a little puffy. But she'd done damage control – a dab of powder here and there. As usual, she was

completely in black, and knowing what he knew now, yes, she resembled a nun. Out of her novitiate's garb all during her married years, perhaps she secretly delighted in wearing black now. Stranger things have happened.

"You look as though you've had a bad night," he said. As well he knew. He just hadn't known that all her nights were bad.

Felicia looked down, played with her toast, thinning out the butter on top. "I did not sleep well," she said.

"It's a beautiful day," he said. "I think if I lived here, I'd have my breakfast outside every morning in the sunshine. It has vitamin A. Or is it B? Or C or D, or X or G. Whatever. It's good for you. I eat breakfast on my terrace in Bangkok every morning."

Felicia didn't say anything.

"Especially after a hard night," he added.

She looked up, studied him, then took a bite of her toast.

"I like the night," he went on. "But I'm nocturnal. Most people aren't. Nights can be bad for some. It can be quiet, and all sorts of imaginings creep into the mind. Fatigue and loneliness conspire against us."

Felicia stopped chewing and looked at Roth as he'd never seen before. He hoped he wasn't giving away too much, certain she'd freak if she even suspected she was being bugged.

"Like it says in the 'Desiderata,' señora. But we gotta remember, can't ever doubt it: the sun will always come up. Always has." Damn, he felt like Hemingway with that little soliloquy.

She continued to stare at him for long moments, locked eyes with him, in fact, as though Roth had read her mind, had looked into her soul. She swallowed the toast, then said, "Forgive me, but I never asked. You are not married?"

"Not at the moment. It comes and goes."

"Ah, you have weaknesses?"

"Oh, ho ho, many, señora. Many."

"Do you drink much?"

"As I said, never before nine a.m."

She smiled. "Beautiful women and fast cars, yes?"

"Well, fast women, anyhow. Slow cars suit me just fine."

"Do you never go to church?"

"Actually, I do look in occasionally. A good place to think. Now, if they ever got around to putting in a bar, perhaps a small cocktail lounge in those places, I'll be all sorted out."

Felicia laughed. "You are terrible."

"Horrible," he agreed. This was the first time he'd ever seen her laugh. It wasn't a big, gut-wrenching laugh, just a small one, but it made her absolutely gorgeous.

She went quiet, seemed to be mulling something over. "The week after next, we are holding a masquerade ball in Puerto Vallarta. You must come."

"If I'm still here."

Her smile faded. "You will be finished that soon?"

"All in all, it's gone very slowly. I operate on New York time, you see, and don't like delays."

"You can tell me something, perhaps?"

Roth shook his head.

She sat back in her chair, uncertain what to think. "Well, if you are not finished, you must come. And you will arrive costumed as el diablo, I suppose?" That smile again.

"Señora, please," he feigned indignantly. "Surely you know that the devil never forewarns." He returned her smile.

"Is that it? I have employed the devil?"

"Close enough. Perhaps the devil is required for this work."

Jorge appeared at the door, beckoned Roth outside. Roth nodded to him. To Felicia, he said, "And with that, I will now get the hell out of here." He stood, picked up his coffee, joined Jorge at the door. He turned back to Felicia. "Señora, you're making progress on having Minetta Calle cleared, I hope. It's more important than you know." He turned to Jorge without waiting for an answer.

"Alfredo is calling you on the telephone, Miguel."

"Mike, I can't get in to see Alcantara," Alfredo said over the phone. "There were three people already waiting when I got there, and his secretary said it wouldn't be possible to see him today."

Roth, sitting at Jorge's desk in the security room, played with the rim of his coffee cup, and thought. He'd anticipated that possibility. In Mexico City, cold-calling was usually a bad idea; executives adhered to business protocol, and that meant appointments. Particularly for a stuffed-shirt like Alcantara. How important could he view himself if just any stranger could drop around to his office for a chat.

"Did you get an appointment, Alfredo?"

"Yes. For tomorrow. Ten a.m."

"Excellent. Did you get a good look at the office?"

"Good enough, I think." He described it to Roth.

"And you got a good look at their phone system?"

“Yes. His secretary and an assistant sit outside his office. They use the same equipment. It’s a common system throughout Mexico. So, he’ll likely have the same phone in his office. We have the same phones in Tijuana. Should I come out there?”

“No. Go ahead and finish your shopping. You know what to buy. Pick it up and I’ll meet you back at the hotel for lunch.” Roth told him about the key, and where Daniel’s diaries were kept. He hung up, turned to Jorge. “How’s your scavenger hunt going?”

“Not too well. I must evade Señora Lucinda, or she will think I am stealing, Miguel. She has the eyes of a hawk, and misses nothing. So I have found things in the other buildings.”

“Show me what you have.”

They went through the door, into Jorge’s quarters. On his bed, he’d set out an old macramé clay vase and a bronze statue of Mercury or some wing-footed fairy carrying lightning bolts. Roth pointed to it, and Jorge shrugged. “Whatever the fuck it is, it should be stolen,” Roth muttered.

“I think so, too.”

There was also a large, black lacquered box. At first glance, this stuff looked expensive, but upon closer inspection, it was of a quality that would blend well with Early American orange-crate furniture.

“Good enough. Get a few more items.”

“Sí, Miguel.”

“All right, we’ll do the terminations tomorrow. At around ten a.m. Make certain that the side gate is unlocked tomorrow morning. Discreetly, Jorge.”

“Sí.”

Roth nodded to the outside office. “Has the señora made or received any more calls?”

Jorge shrugged. “I moved the cabinet into my room early this morning, but haven’t checked the tapes.”

Check them as soon as you can. At this point, it’s important to be up to speed on what’s happening.”

They went back into the security room, and Roth loaded up his case with the diaries. “I’ll be at the hotel if you need me.”

He thought for a moment. The Mercedes. He didn’t want to drive it, and couldn’t take the chance of leaving it. As if reading his thoughts, Jorge broke in. “The car will be all right. I have passed a story around that an insurance adjuster must inspect the car’s paint. It is fading, and will soon be peeling. The insurance company says it must remain in the shade and it must be covered until the adjuster can inspect it. I have explained this to the señora and her driver. She will use another vehicle.”

“Brilliant, Jorge. Except her driver washes it. He’d have noticed the finish—”

“No, Miguel! That is the thing: he does not wash her car. He has one of the gardeners do that. Like all of Alcantara’s relatives, he has taken liberties, bossing around the staff. Already, he is having the other car polished.”

“But he’ll want to put the tape recorder in that, also.”

Jorge shook his head. “I told him that the adjuster will come tomorrow, so he cannot get to the tape recorder until afterwards.”

“Good work, Señor Jorge.” Roth smiled. “But keep a monitor on it.”

Walking up Minetta Calle, Roth saw the Astro was still there. Sure, it had been sitting there all along. Probably for weeks, with monitors coming and going in shifts. What could possibly be so important that Alcantara had to monitor the widow all this time?

As he walked by the van, he heard a faint, tinny echo inside. It was likely hollowed out, with tape recorders sitting on boxes, probably surrounded with folding chairs for the listeners. Any movement echoed on the metal floor of the van. The dummies should have at least thrown a carpet across the floor. As far as Roth could determine, the person or persons inside could only see out the front window, and of course through the rearview mirror – if they were sitting in the front seats.

Chapter 20

Alfredo had purchased a handsome desk clock, calendar, and pen holder, complete with Cross pens. He also bought a telephone of the same make and model as those in Alcantara's office.

He was sitting in an easy chair in Roth's room. On the cocktail table were the new items. Roth sat at the desk. The phone by his bed was also the same make and model as Alfredo had purchased. Telephone styles in Mexico weren't the fad they were in the States, nor had they the variety of models in Europe, where a dozen manufacturers competed even with their own brands.

Alfredo watched Roth take apart the desk clock and install one of the bugs he'd got from Sokoloff. He next tore open a package of double-A batteries, installed those in the clock. He set the correct time, beckoned for Alfredo to lean in close.

"The batteries will also power the bug, which is a transmitter. All bugs and taps need a source of power, remember. When the batteries die, the clock will stop, and the transmitter won't function. So, what happens is that the victim will unwittingly change the batteries himself, thereby keeping the transmitter active.

"This is basic stuff, Alfredo. No big deal. And Alcantara might be too smart to fall for this. After all, he knows something about bugs, doesn't he? But, my guess is that he had someone teach him this stuff, like we're teaching you, but I'm thinking that whoever helped him isn't the pro that Manny is. Otherwise, Alcantara wouldn't be using such simple stuff. A school kid with a radio and a little imagination could have found those bugs." Roth took a piece of gum from his pocket, unwrapped it, put it in his mouth. He chewed for a minute until the flavor was gone, then took the gum and stuck it on the table.

Alfredo admitted that he wouldn't have found the bugs. "Why did Manny play 'Jingle Bells' when he was searching?"

"Right," Roth snapped his fingers. "I forgot to explain that part. He could have used any radio or tape recording to play music, but local stations naturally play Mexican music, and of course everything is in Spanish. What happens, when you're scanning RF – radio frequencies – is that radio signals become jumbled, coming in through airwaves like missiles, and it can get confusing. If there was a transmitter hidden in a room, it would pick up the sound of the music. And the sound of the music would be repeated when Manny scanned frequencies. If he played salsa on a tape, he could have missed it, since dozens of stations here play that kind of music. But 'Jingle Bells,' in English, isn't something you're likely to hear in Mexico or anywhere else on the planet this time of year. So, when he heard 'Jingle Bells' in his earphones, he knew that there was a transmitter nearby. Understand?"

“Yes. Sure.”

“You understand electronics, don’t you?”

“I built a radio once.”

“There you have it. I only know this basic stuff myself, so you’ll be light years ahead of me in no time.” Roth turned to the new phone that Alfredo had taken out of its box. “Okay, we only want the handset, because we’re going to put a mike in that. Now, open the handset carefully, like you saw Manny do. Don’t force the cover off. Don’t break the plastic.”

Alfredo did this, while Roth dug through the envelope that Manny left for them, and pulled out a harmonica bug. When Alfredo got the handset open, Roth installed the mike, fixed it to the plastic surface inside with the piece of gum.

“Real hi-tech, huh?”

Alfredo laughed, closed the handset. “Now what?”

“Let’s go downstairs and get lunch. I’ll tell you what you need to do tomorrow. But first—” Roth rummaged through his case, pulled out a small stack of business cards he’d collected since arriving in Mexico City. He thumbed through this, found the card he was looking for.

He dialed the number. The phone was answered by a young man. Roth heard chattering in the background, young men and women gabbing. He introduced himself as Señor Michael Roth of Toro Productions, Los Angeles, asked to speak with Señorita Tessa Mondragon. The gal he’d chatted up at Confetti’s. She was out, the young man reported, then he rattled something off to the kids in the background. No one knew where she was or when she’d return, but the consensus was that he should provide Tessa’s cellphone number. Producers, it seemed, were not to be kept waiting by Tessa’s circle of friends.

After lunch, Alfredo settled in his room, reading the third volume of Daniel’s diary, while Roth, in his room, stretched out on his bed and opened the last one. This was Daniel’s first diary, maintained between his eleventh year and age 25. As usual, Roth read from back to front, although by now, there seemed little purpose in continuing. What could he learn from Daniel’s life of three decades ago? Still, he’d been skimming across Daniel’s years on earth, so he decided to see it through.

Between ages twenty-two and 24, Daniel had been in graduate school, studying in Arizona. He recounted these years as happy ones, as he did of his vacations back home in Mexico City, his love for Cuernavaca, his many friends and family. He’d taken school friends home on breaks, also took them to Cuernavaca Pequeño, the old ranch hacienda outside Ciudad Juárez. Good times, lots of friends, and special squeezes, upon whom Daniel lavished flowery poetry, recounting evenings in this or that garden, with this or that señorita, strumming a guitar. Young Daniel had been a bit of a cocksman his

diary seemed to suggest, but he'd remained a gentleman throughout his recollections, leaving events to the imagination of any potential biographer.

Going back further, Daniel's twenty-first birthday, as with all his birthdays, was recorded happily. He'd just graduated from UCLA in Los Angeles, and returned home to Mexico City. Cuernavaca was decked out for a festive welcome back. His parents and uncles and aunts welcomed him and regaled his academic standing.

It was later in this passage that the words were written. Roth, having grown bored and lacking sleep, sat up abruptly and stared at this entry. There was nothing else written on the topic. Just the three words: "Federico is born."

Roth pored through his notes. Daniel hadn't mentioned Federico until just a year before his death when he'd entered the name Federico several times, followed by an exclamation mark. Roth noted this entry, read on with renewed interest.

Whoever Federico was, he wasn't just an executive with IO Mexico. And he wasn't just a nephew. Roth opened the family tree. Daniel had an older brother and three older sisters. Lots of nephews. But if Federico was a nephew, what was so important about another one to a 21-year-old Daniel just out of college? Roberto, Daniel's older brother, had two sons. Roth ran his finger down the tree again; Roberto's sons were both older and younger than what Federico would be today, and Daniel hadn't mentioned them in his diary. At one point, Daniel had commented when an older sister had had a difficult pregnancy. She'd borne a son, but his name hadn't been recorded in the diary.

Roth shook his head. He was tired, he'd been putting in long days.

What else had he missed in the diaries? It was mundane stuff, never mind the endless relatives. He stood up, yawned, and stretched. Mid-stretch, he stopped suddenly, looked down at the family tree spread across the bed. The name Federico appeared nowhere on the chart, not even on Felicia's side of the family. And, of course, Daniel hadn't known Felicia back then.

His telephone rang. As he answered, a thought flashed through his mind: if Alcantara knew about Roth galloping Señorita Rigor Mortis in this room, someone had obviously made inquiries about him at the hotel. That he'd banged a trollop was simple stuff – any hotel employee could, and would, provide that information for five bucks. But what else did Alcantara know? Who had he gotten to in the hotel? The manager? Room service? The maids? That Alcantara knew where he was staying could have come from Felicia. But after his initial cautions to Felicia about confidentiality, Roth doubted that she'd tell Alcantara anything, even if he asked directly. Of course, Alcantara could simply have had his secretary canvass hotels. There were hundreds of places where Roth could be staying, but the logical ones would be either in Zona Rosa, in the center of town, or out by the airport. It isn't difficult to find someone

staying in a hotel, even in a major city.

It was Tessa Mondragon. Roth had left a message on her cellphone, and she was returning his call.

He reminded her that they'd met at Confetti's, over in Polanco. She hummed and hawed, but finally laughed in recollection when he repeated the limerick he'd told her. He asked if she could come to his hotel, as he wanted to discuss an acting job with her.

More hesitation, and she repeated his request: "You want me to visit your hotel room, señor? Is that what you're asking?"

Roth realized his mistake. In Mexico, proper young ladies did not meet men in their hotels. "Yes, downstairs in the restaurant. My associate and I will be there. Can you make it in, say, two hours?"

"Downstairs? In the restaurant?"

"Yes, Tessa. In the restaurant. We'll have dinner."

"May I bring a friend?"

She meant, of course, a chaperone. "Yes. You may bring a friend. But not to sit in for our discussion."

"Okay," she agreed, cheery now. "Five o'clock?"

He gave her the name of the hotel. "See you downstairs." He hung up, called Alfredo's room, told him to be in the dining room at five. He set his alarm for 4:30, laid down, and was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

The meeting with Tessa went about as well as Roth expected. Mexican actresses, as he saw it, all came from good families. Good, as in wealthy. To begin with, talent wasn't nearly as important as looks, and both those factors meant less than family, and hence, industry connections. That's how most actors in Mexico got jobs. The real talent – a strong command of English required – headed for Hollywood or New York to find agents.

Plus, fame in the Mexican film and television industry was more important than money. The young elite already had money, and now they required an ego massage. Posters of themselves splashed across the capital were more satisfying than compensation.

Tessa was antsy, a bundle of energy. Seemed anxious to get on with business as soon as she arrived. She was dressed like a ballerina, heavily made up, as though she were playing dress-up as a child might. She slurped on a mango juice, didn't drink alcohol, and spoke obliquely to her group of six friends who sat a few booths away. That was annoying, but a plus was that she seemed very taken with Alfredo.

After Roth explained her role several times, Tessa accepted the job, such as it was, but had her

objections.

“A-ha,” she concluded. “So, Toro Productions is all about bull? Is that correct?”

Roth laughed. Toro in Spanish means ‘bull.’ “In a way. But it’s entirely legitimate, I assure you.”

She accepted the task, perhaps for something to do, or maybe she agreed because Alfredo was handsome. She smiled at him, rather adoringly Roth thought, asking if he could play guitar. He couldn’t, he said, but she offered nevertheless to introduce him to her Uncle ‘Frankie’ Francisco, a television director. Maybe he could learn, she said. All actors should know how to play guitar, like this was Mexico’s version of method acting. One of the chaperones she towed along for virtue insurance was her girlfriend’s suitor. He arrived carrying a guitar over his shoulder, and Tessa just adored him for that. That he may not be able to play well didn’t matter; what counted was the cute way he slung it over his shoulder.

She wanted twice what Roth offered, but settled for 800 US dollars, which would probably buy her a weekend in Acapulco with her pals. Not bad for a five-minute gig. She refused money up front; would ‘bill’ Roth after she’d delivered her performance.

She agreed to meet Alfredo outside Alcantara’s office building on Observatorio at 9:45 tomorrow morning. Alfredo, to her delight, would explain what had to be done.

When Tessa and her entourage left, Roth and Alfredo went up to the bar. Alfredo, not much of a drinker, had a coffee; Roth ordered a rum and Coke. Alfredo covered a few things he’d read in Daniel’s second and third volumes, Roth taking notes. He’d missed some things, but not much.

“By the time I’m finished here, I’ll be speaking Spanish,” he said to Alfredo. They looked at each other and laughed; Roth realized he’d said that in Spanish. Alfredo corrected a few words, tenses, and gender, but told Roth not to be concerned: anyone he spoke with would instantly know he was a gringo, and would forgive his Spanish, yet applaud his effort.

Roth went outside, called Cuernavaca and asked to speak with Señora Felicia, but Lucinda came on the line. Señora Felicia was resting in her room, she said. She’d had an exhausting day. That was the first time that Lucinda had offered up anything she didn’t have to. But, yes – no doubt Felicia was exhausted. She’d had a bad night and a house full of toddling orphans to ride roughshod over this afternoon. Would she be up and around later, he asked Lucinda. It was likely, Lucinda said; the señora’s naps were never very long.

He returned to the bar. Alfredo was finishing his coffee, said he was going upstairs to call Tijuana. Roth gave Alfredo his room key, asked him to go up and do a physical check for bugs on his phone and the immediate vicinity around the desk in his room. When he was finished, he could drop the key off at the desk. Alfredo went upstairs and Roth stayed drinking. It was nearly 8:00 p.m.

Poor Alfredo; he'd been away from home for nearly three weeks. A long time for a family man. He missed his wife and daughter, and it seemed to show more each day. Still, Roth wasn't certain when he could let him go home. Poor Alfredo? Hell! Poor me, he thought. He'd had all of Mexico he could take, and yearned for Bangkok. He finished his fourth drink, signed the check, walked outside. He scanned the cars parked along the street. The only van parked nearby was the hotel's airport shuttle. But someone could be sitting in a car, watching him, even monitoring his room if they had it bugged. But Roth didn't think they'd gotten that far. Not yet. Why bother; Alcantara seemed able to keep tabs on him through someone in the hotel. Roth wanted to tell Felicia to clam up to Alcantara. But that would only reveal that he was monitoring her.

He did a slow walk up the block, crossed the street, returned down the other side. Reaching the hotel entrance, he felt his skin crawl, and he knew he was being watched. Funny how that is; when you rush around with a thousand things on your mind, you sense nothing. But just stop, and listen, smell and feel the night, and danger screams at you. And the night belonged to Roth. Always had.

Jorge would have given him the .45 today, but since they'd delayed the terminations, no pistols were available yet. Still, it wasn't imminent physical danger that he sensed. Not yet, but that would come. For now, they were just watching him, weighing the threat he posed, assessing his vulnerability. Roth felt a rush of exhilaration; he was close to the truth, had somehow felt it these past two days, and was getting closer. Yet, he'd actually done little so far. Hadn't needed to; it was coming to him. Like he was sure it would if he made the right moves.

He picked his key up at the desk, made a point of conversing with the man on duty, and the night manager, holding their eyes until manners dictated they look away. But neither had avoided eye contact. Roth wasn't likely to learn who was feeding information to Alcantara. Not without some arm-twisting or some pesos – whichever method appealed to Roth most at the given moment. He'd get the employees alone and question them.

He took his key, went up to his room. Alfredo had scribbled a note, lying on his desk, saying that he couldn't locate any bugs, and there was nothing in the phone handset. Roth made another drink and called Cuernavaca. Jorge wasn't in the security office, but he was summoned over one of the new radios, and returned Roth's call. Jorge reported that all was quiet and he hadn't seen the señora since this afternoon. The Mercedes hadn't been disturbed. Another pool party was in full swing, and Lucinda would be on hall patrol later. Jorge had appropriated a few more junk items from around the estate, including a concrete bird bath. His report was concise. He was growing sharper the busier he got.

Roth said that he'd be out first thing in the morning. His chat with Señora Alvarez could wait. He showered and turned in, reaching for the last volume of Daniel's diaries. But before he finished a page,

he dozed off.

His phone rang just after 2:00 a.m. Roth rolled over, squinted from the lamp he'd left on, picked up the receiver.

"Yeah?"

"Señor Roth?"

"Yeah. Who's this?"

"Bad things happen to nosy gringos. So, if you know what's good for you, motherfucker, you'll get your meddling ass back across the border. Pronto."

Before Roth could ask who the fuck was calling, the line went dead. He swung his legs around, sat up in bed. He rubbed his eyes, stood and went to the bathroom, threw water on his face. The caller had been a Mexican. Good English, though, not too much of an accent.

Roth grabbed his cigarettes, lighter, cash, room key and hurried out of the room, down the stairs. Like everything else in the hotel, the elevators would come mañana. Maybe things were going to happen a lot faster than he'd thought just a few hours ago. And maybe it wasn't too smart to go bolting out of his room like this right after getting a threatening phone call.

The night manager was gone, but the same desk clerk was on duty. He was putting charge slips into guest folios.

"I just got a call in my room," Roth began.

"Sí, señor. I picked up the call. Lo siento. I am sorry if you were disturbed. I reminded the caller of the time, but he insisted, saying it was urgent, that you were expecting his call."

"Any idea where it came from?"

The clerk shrugged, continued sorting bills. "There was no operator, but it probably came from the US."

"The States? No, no. It was a local call. I mean, from Mexico. The caller was Mexican."

"No, señor. The caller was a Norte Americano."

"No. He was a Mexican," Roth insisted. "I heard his accent. His English was good, but he definitely had an accent."

The clerk stopped what he was doing, fixed Roth with a dead eye that defied a challenge, shook his head. "No, no, señor. I am sorry. It was an American speaking English with a Mexican accent."

"What?"

"It was the first thing I noticed, señor."

"You can tell the difference?"

The clerk nodded. "If you speak Spanish, señor, I will know you are an Americano. And if you

try to sound like a Mexican speaking English, I will know you are an American trying to sound like a Mexican speaking English. Unless, of course, you have been speaking Spanish for many years. And have lived in Mexico.” He shrugged again. “Then, perhaps, you will fool me. But the caller, he has never lived in Mexico. Escuela Español. Perhaps he took Spanish in school in the States. Like that. But his Spanish is not good, I think. Tourist Spanish. You understand?”

Roth wasn't sure, shook his head.

“Say something in Spanish,” the clerk challenged.

“All right.” Roth thought. “Mucho gusto en conocerle.”

“And it is a pleasure to meet you, as well. Clearly, your accent is American,” he declared.

“Yeah, but you know I'm an American!”

“That is what I just said,” his voice snappy, precise. “I know you are an American.”

“Yeah, but you know me! You've seen me all week. In and out, out and in. And I'm standing right in front of you.”

“Okay. I will close my eyes.” He did so. “Now, go ahead. Speak Spanish to me again. And I will know again, with my eyes closed, that you are an American speaking Spanish. Go ahead, señor, try again.”

Roth rolled his eyes. “Have you heard the caller before?”

The clerk kept his eyes closed. “Are you not going to add a Spanish accent?”

“No. Forget that. Just forget it. Have you heard the caller before? Hey, open your eyes.”

The clerk opened his eyes as though surprised at a birthday party. “No, señor. I have never heard that person before. Not as I recall.”

Roth glanced across the lobby. Except for an armed guard wandering around out front, there was no one around. Arm-twisting time, if that became necessary. “Someone has been asking about me,” Roth stated.

“I know.”

“You know?”

“That is what I just said.”

“Who's been asking questions?”

“A police officer, señor. We did not ask his name.”

“We?” Roth raised an eyebrow.

“He asked, spoke with several people.”

“How do you know it was a police officer?”

“One can tell.”

“Just how can one tell?”

“Okay. It is like this: I will close my eyes, and I can tell that your profession is the same as that man who came and asked questions about you—”

“No. No. Don’t close your eyes. Just tell me how you can tell.”

“The way policemen behave, señor. Like they want to be mean. Tough hombres. How do you say . . . pushy. Descortés. Like you, señor. You are police. Yes?”

He was calling Roth rude. Well, if the shoe fits. “What did the cop say? Police officer, I mean. What did he say?”

“He said nothing. In Mexico, the police ask questions, but they do not say why they want information.”

So, Alcantara had a copper make some inquiries. “What did you tell the cop?”

“Whatever I knew. Which is not much.”

“And what did everyone else tell him?”

The clerk shrugged. “What they know about you. Which is not much.”

“Did anyone let him in my room?”

“Oh, no, señor. That we cannot do. The police would need to present a special paper from the court to do that.”

“Or they just pay you to look the other way, maybe pass them a key.”

The clerk laughed and shook his head. “No, no, no, señor. In Mexico, it is the police who are paid. They pay no one. Nada.”

That was logical. Whoever the cop was, he’d learned only what was written on the hotel’s register, maybe the phone calls Roth had made, what he ate and drank. And, of course, he’d learned about Señorita Rigor Mortis. Nothing, really. But Alcantara had been quick to use it against Roth. The cop was likely a friend of Alcantara’s, or maybe someone he paid to make inquiries. Would he be back?

But that obviously wasn’t Alcantara’s voice on the phone a few minutes ago, and according to the clerk here, the caller wasn’t Mexican.

Roth walked out into the night. He stood beneath the hotel marquee, lit a cigarette, watched the guard ambling around the grounds. Parked cars lined the block just as earlier, but now it was dead silent.

Funny how he’d felt the danger earlier. And there it came, in the form of a menacing call. Fine with Roth; he was beyond bored with just baby-sitting the señora and running endless background checks on everyone under creation.

In a few hours, the New York office would be open. He needed to speak with Nina, make certain

she was prepared to receive a certain phone call later this morning.

Chapter 21

At a minute before 10:00 a.m., Alfredo pushed through the frosted glass external door. The office of Señor Luis Alcantara – abogado. Attorney. Anywhere else, he was called a shyster, Alfredo thought. He caught himself up short—he was starting to think like Roth. He hoped he'd never be that cynical. Also, hopefully, never as mean.

On Alcantara's interior door, a sign read, Alcantara y Compania, with his menu of services and business interests listed. He specialized, it seemed, in every area of law, not to mention – although it did – investigative and security services, real estate, insurance, and travel services. And these were the major categories. Beneath those functions, a myriad of lesser services were offered: notary, interpreting and translations, even photocopying. A jack of all trades, Luis Alcantara was not a man to let an opportunity slip past his door.

That's what Roth had liked about Alcantara's set-up when Alfredo had reported it to him. It offered any number of workable, plausible pretexts under which to meet the man.

Alfredo met the same secretary who'd sent him away yesterday with an appointment. A foxy, but snooty broad, her nose in the air, but not quite as high as the hem of her skirt. Any higher – to paraphrase Roth – she'd have two more cheeks to powder.

Her name plate read: Candice. He smiled at her, but received an icy glare for his trouble. He instinctively knew that Candice was Alcantara's squeeze on the side. A few years ago, before he began working for Premier, he'd never have recognized this, would never have had reason to even think such a thing. Now, there were a dozen reasons why he reached that conclusion, but he didn't have time to dwell on them.

Tessa, in the hallway, walked past the external door, her flaming red dress casting a fuzzy image across the frosted glass.

A minute later, at precisely ten o'clock, Candice's intercom buzzed. She answered it, then announced that Señor Alcantara would see Alfredo now. Alfredo stood, straightened his suit jacket, picked up his attaché case as Candice showed him into Alcantara's office. Alfredo hadn't known what to expect, but couldn't have pictured Luis Alcantara more incorrectly. He was tall, impeccably groomed and dressed, handsome, if pockmarked, and well mannered. The guy could have been a movie star; probably what Alcantara thought, too.

He met Alfredo halfway across the room, extended his hand, shook with a firm grip. He had Alfredo's business card in his hand, the one Alfredo had left with Candice yesterday. The card read that Alfredo was a manufacturer's representative, but Alcantara treated him as though he was a long-lost

relative. He showed him to a cushy chair, but Alfredo remained standing as Alcantara returned behind his desk, sat down. Alfredo opened his samples case, removed the desk clock that he'd wrapped as a gift. "For you, Señor Alcantara. As a token of our appreciation. Jovial extends its best wishes for a long and satisfying relationship. To your continued success, señor."

Alcantara was taken aback as he accepted the gift. It was heavy and substantial, whatever it was; weighed perhaps three pounds. He untied the golden ribbon, tore the wrapping paper off. It was a black lacquered, wooden digital desk clock with gold trim. Even the box, also wood, looked expensive. The gilt edges of the clock glittered. It was impressive. But he was thinking that, just possibly, his meager contribution to the Jovial Novelty Company coffers had been exaggerated in someone's estimation. He'd purchased items from Jovial over the years, but rarely did his orders exceed twenty or thirty dollars. Well, there had been that large order a few months back – the baseball caps and T-shirts for one of Felicia's orphanages. That amounted to something like 300 US dollars. Of course, he'd doubled his bill to Felicia.

More surprising, the clock had his name etched in a small golden plate at its base. Usually, such giveaways had the name of the promotional enterprise plastered all over. But not on this, an item of real quality. But perhaps not; after all, digital clocks were dirt-cheap these days, and anything could be manufactured to look expensive. So, it probably wasn't that exclusive, particularly if Jovial handed them out to such small customers as himself. Plus, a big novelty supplier could have them manufactured for even less. For sure, they weren't paying wholesale mark-ups. Jovial was a novelty wholesaler. One of the biggest, in fact.

Alfredo took the clock from Alcantara, pointed out the time set that the mechanism had an automatic time conversion table. All Alcantara needed to do was touch a major city on the map of the world, and the local time there appeared.

Alcantara looked at Alfredo's card again. "You are an American, Mr. . . . Goode? Richard M. Goode. From New York?" he asked, curious.

"No, señor," Alfredo said, smiling. "My grandfather was English. So, my father was Goode, and I am Goode." He smiled, sheepish. "Perhaps better," he punned. "I live locally. Jovial is very large. Representatives all over North America. Twelve of us here in Mexico alone."

He reached into his samples case, removed what appeared to be catalogues, but was actually Jovial promo material pulled down from the Internet. As he handed them across the desk, they were jolted by a shriek from the outer office. They stared at each other stupidly, and Alcantara dropped the papers and went to the door, swung it open.

As Alcantara disappeared into the outer office, Alfredo dug into his case, grabbed the phone

handset, moved around the desk, unsnapped the handset on Alcantara's desk phone, and inserted his, placing the receiver back on the cradle. He returned to his side of the desk, dropped the original handset into his case.

He was shaking a little, but the changeover had taken exactly eight seconds – just as Roth had had him practice in the hotel room. Except that Alcantara's desk was bigger than he'd imagined. Also, he'd never done this sort of thing before. He closed and snapped the lock on his case, composed himself. This was interesting, just working with Roth on this case. Risky business, to be sure. He followed Alcantara out to the reception area.

Tessa Mondragon was sprawled across the floor, crying, tears streaming down her face. She sat up, her dress tantalizingly hiked up to well about her knees, as she held her ankle. Her purse lay next to where she sat, its contents spread across the carpet. Alcantara and Candice were bent over her.

Tessa screamed again as the secretary touched her ankle. They lifted her off the floor, at which point she peeked up, saw Alfredo. He winked, whereupon Tessa started to control her tears. Alcantara supported her as Candice stooped and gathered Tessa's belongings into her purse.

Just then, a couple entered the office – Alcantara's 10:30 appointment, arriving early. They stood back, noting that a mishap had just occurred.

"If I could just sit a moment," Tessa said. She hobbled, guiding Alcantara – who thought he was guiding her – over to a chair.

I don't think anything is injured," Alcantara said.

"Sí," Tessa agreed, giving him a forced smile. "Perhaps just my pride." She sucked in air, grimaced, threw yet a bigger smile Alcantara's way.

Alfredo glanced at Candice, in whose estimation Tessa was baring a little too much flesh.

"What happened?" Alcantara demanded, torn between annoyance at this intrusion and Tessa's legs.

Candice shrugged, explained that as Tessa entered the office, and as she approached her desk, suddenly went ass-end over tin cup, sprawled out on the floor. Those weren't exactly her words. Tessa threw in that she'd caught her heel on the carpet.

Alcantara's attention went down to Tessa's shoes, being as they were on her feet, which, in turn, were immediately attached to the end of her lovely legs; the usual place one finds feet. Her shoes had five-inch spikes. Damn, Alfredo thought, Roth had been right: showing some leg made a man's brain go limp, but only alerted a woman. Candice scowled, bent over and pulled down on the hem of Tessa's dress, and Tessa looked up lovingly at Alfredo, glad to see him again, as though yesterday had been eons ago.

“Your ankle is not broken,” Alcantara said feeling her right calf and ankle – his touch comforting whereas Candice’s hand had hurt like hell. Yessir, Alfredo noted, Alcantara’s hand was one happy fellow.

“It is my left ankle, señor,” Tessa put in, sticking out her other foot. At this, Candice nudged Alcantara out of the way, took charge. “No swelling,” she said.

“If I can just get downstairs to a taxi.”

“I will assist you, señorita,” Alcantara volunteered.

“I’ll do it,” Candice insisted, trying to elbow him away, wanting to throw Tessa down the elevator shaft.

“No. Allow me,” Alfredo joined in, staying with the script. He elbowed in and helped Tessa up, steadied her against the desk, asking Candice to retrieve his samples case in Alcantara’s office. She did, and Alfredo turned to Alcantara: “You are busy, señor.” He nodded towards the couple that had just entered the office. “And I wanted only to make this courtesy call as your birthday approaches. Many happy returns.” He extended his hand.

Alcantara was taken aback. Yes, tomorrow, he would celebrate his forty-seventh birthday. He was impressed, flattered even, that a vendor would know this. He shook Alfredo’s hand, thanking him for understanding the situation, asked him – and meant it – to call back whenever he was in the neighborhood. “Thank you, Mr. . . . Goode.”

Richard M. Goode was an alias that Premier reps sometimes used when stinging people. They mimicked Roth, who used this moniker regularly. If anyone called Nina in New York, asking for Richard M. Goode, she automatically went to a rehearsed routine, saying that Mr. Goode was away on a trip and asking the caller’s name.

As Alfredo assisted Tessa to the door, it opened and a desk clerk from the Hidalgo pushed his way in. Alfredo bent down and hid his face behind the limping Tessa, who now favored the wrong ankle. Tessa sensed that Alfredo didn’t want this man to see his face, and hiked her skirt higher, as though wading through water. Predictably, the clerk feasted on Tessa’s legs and didn’t notice Alfredo. He carried a manila envelope, apparently intended for Alcantara, who motioned for the clerk to go into his office. Alcantara held the glass door open for Tessa and Alfredo, thanking him again for the gift. As the door was closing, Alcantara turned to his 10:30 appointment, asked that they excuse him for a few seconds while he attended first to the hotel clerk who’d gone into his office.

Outside the office, Alfredo guided Tessa, who was walking fine now, towards the fire stairs. He couldn’t risk having the desk clerk recognize him. The guy was obviously on Alcantara’s payroll, and had been watching him and Roth. If Alcantara’s conversation with the clerk was brief, the guy would

be coming right back out, putting them on the same elevator down to the lobby.

Alfredo and Tessa stood inside on the landing to the fire stairs. She was calm and quite proud of her performance, whereas Alfredo was nervous, first from the maneuver of bugging Alcantara's office, then avoiding the clerk, who could have blown the sting right there. He held the heavy metal door open an inch, watched for the clerk to leave Alcantara's office.

"Was I okay?" Tessa asked, her hand on Alfredo's shoulder.

"Magnífico," Alfredo said, turning to her. "For a moment, I really thought you were hurt."

Tessa looked around the bleak innards of the building. "What are we doing in here?" Her voice echoed down the stairwell.

"Just waiting a few minutes," Alfredo said, looking back at Alcantara's office door.

"You are going to get fresh, yes?"

Alfredo whipped his attention from the hallway back to Tessa. "Oh, no, señorita. Never."

She reached for the door, but Alfredo pushed it closed. He didn't want to tell her his concern. That would only bring more questions, and Roth had had enough trouble just recruiting Tessa to perform her trip 'n' spill act. While she had a bubbly personality and the best legs he'd seen in a long time, she was far too nosy.

So, to save on conversation, he pressed her against the wall and kissed her. To his surprise, she threw her arms around his neck and clung tight. Then she gushed dramatically, "No. No, I must not, Alfredo, my darling. You must not. We must not. Not right here on the stairs...."

When Roth had arrived at Cuernavaca this morning, he had Jorge get on the phone and line up some off-duty cops, who'd accompany Roth day and night. Yes, he told Jorge, they should definitely be armed. One had arrived soon after, and would stay with him until midnight, when another would take over. Jorge arranged for the one on the night shift to camp outside Roth's hotel room. Roth knew that this arrangement wouldn't make the Hidalgo's management happy, but fuck 'em. After all, Alcantara already had an inside man, didn't he?

At 10:30 a.m., Roth hung up the phone in the security office, turned to Jorge, who was watching a screen, zooming in on guards, gates, even the Astro van parked on Minetta Calle. "That was Alfredo," Roth reported. "He's finished with Alcantara. All right, start the terminations. Let's see if we can get this over by four o'clock. Save the driver and the guard at the side gate until last."

The firings and new assignments went on into the afternoon. No one knew for certain if they were being canned or allowed to remain until they were called into the office. The first two guards who were retained were instructed to stand by the door in case a terminated guard became difficult – thereby immediately polarizing the force. Roth had no intention of fostering the enmity of one group against

the other, but there'd been two camps all along: Alcantara's usurping relatives and the rest of the guys, who'd been discriminated against.

Those who were canned, handed in their weapons unless they were the property of Alcantara. When a .45 automatic pistol became available, Jorge pulled Roth into his room and turned it over to him, along with two extra magazines and a box of ammunition. Jorge turned to go back into the security room, then remembered, "There will be another .45 available soon. You can also take the barrel and firing pin from that one, if you like."

Roth smiled, and Jorge shrugged as he repeated, "Only if you like, of course."

Jorge was offering Roth a 'hit' package. For .45 caliber automatics, the barrels were interchangeable, as were the firing pins. It was simple to change each. Once fired, a projectile was left with its distinguishable mark from the lands and grooves inside a particular barrel. That was what police checked for when they did a ballistics test – to determine if a round came from a particular pistol, out of a particular barrel. But more than that, even a spent cartridge could link a shooter to a pistol because microscopic tests could determine with exactitude if a strike mark from a firing pin matched that mark on a spent cartridge. By changing the barrel, it wasn't possible to get ballistics evidence, and by changing a firing pin, a shooter could leave the spent brass cartridges all over the place and not likely be connected with a shooting if he was apprehended with the pistol – once he'd changed both barrel and firing pin. But professional hit men always collected their spent cartridges because there could still be fingerprints on the brass casings.

Roth checked the .45 to be certain it was clean. Big surprise: it wasn't. He swabbed out the barrel at least, then took three magazines with five rounds each, slammed one into the well of the .45, dropped the two spare magazines into his coat pocket. He left the chamber empty – the same advice he'd given Jorge – tucked the pistol into the waistband at the back of his trousers, under his jacket, since he didn't care for the holsters that became available.

Back in the security room, he stayed in the background as Jorge terminated or reassigned guards. The two guards watching the proceedings stood by, stoic, and the guys monitoring the consoles of course heard everything, as well, but stayed silent, pretended extreme diligence, panning the cameras back and forth across the property. It was good that they saw this, Roth thought. In earlier days, Jorge would have run them off the place with a whip. Take it back another century, and he could have lined the sonsabitches up against a wall.

The fault with the lax security wasn't Felicia's; Daniel had allowed things to go too far, and cousin Alcantara had taken ever more liberties with his privileges once Daniel was out of the way. But Felicia was aware of it now. Probably had been for some time. Roth didn't kid himself that he'd put her

in her place over the security issue; she wasn't interfering now because she knew it was necessary. Maybe she'd wanted action. As long as she wouldn't appear responsible. Roth suspected that she held higher expectations for security help than Daniel had. Given her background, she could be a stubborn task-master. Roth again indulged himself with a flashing fantasy of Felicia brandishing a whip . . . then turned his attention back to the proceedings. There were no surprises amongst the guard force. Those being canned expected it, but some hoped the ax wouldn't fall on them.

At around 3:00 p.m., as the firings wound down, Roth went out to the Mercedes. Felicia's driver was nearby, speaking with one of the guards who'd been canned. Roth edged over towards the carport, loosened the tarpaulin on the car.

He called the driver over, told him to tighten the cords holding the tarpaulin over the Mercedes. The guy did so, gladly in fact, likely thinking that he was escaping Jorge's ax.

Roth returned to the security room, told Jorge to find Lucinda and have her find Señora Alvarez and request that she come downstairs. He went into Jorge's bathroom, scrubbed his hands thoroughly, then summoned the driver into the office.

When Felicia came down, Roth intercepted her at the bottom of the stairwell, asked her to come outside with him. She followed him out, and they walked in the sun to the carport, passing Jorge and her driver, who were heading inside. As Felicia watched, Roth uncovered her Mercedes, careful not to touch the draw strings. He motioned Felicia towards the rear of the car, unlocked the trunk, pulled up the cover, exposing the box containing the tape recorder.

"Would you lift the lid, señora," Roth instructed.

Felicia looked at him, shrugged. She reached in, opened it. The tape recorder sat motionless.

"Watch the reel, señora. I'll sit in the back seat and say something aloud." Roth opened the rear door, jumped in, and began reciting the first line of the limerick he's used with Tessa.

Felicia could hear him talking, but his words were inaudible as she watched the spool turning. He stopped talking and the tape stopped. He got out, moved back around to the trunk. "Rewind the tape, please, señora. Just hit 'rewind' for a few seconds, then press 'play,' and you'll hear my voice." She did as instructed, and Roth's voice, clear now, came on: "When Titian was mixing rose matter, his model reclined on a ladder. Her position to Titian suggested cohesion, so he leapt up the ladder, and had her."

"I apologize for my choice of limerick. But I think you understand what I'm getting at. Yes?"

Felicia turned her head away, and Roth couldn't tell if she was angry, shocked, or maybe amused by the limerick. She turned back, the tail end of a smile on her face. Maybe there was hope for the lady, yet. "So," she concluded, "whatever I've said in the car has been recorded?"

"If you smoked cigars, señora, I'd give you one. Yes, whatever you've said has been recorded by

this voice-activated tape recorder. If you spoke with someone in the car, both of you would have been recorded. If you spoke on your cellphone, only your end of the conversation would be recorded, of course. But that's usually enough. Now, if you will, please come to the security room."

Roth slammed the trunk closed and they walked back up to the home. In the office, her driver was sitting before Jorge's desk. Felicia looked around, studying the monitors, watching the electronic eyes work their magic across the grounds. She was impressed. Her driver fidgeted in her presence, wondering what she was doing here. Roth moved to camera sixteen, worked the joystick to zoom in on the Mercedes. Then he tapped the guards monitoring the consoles on the shoulders, told them and the others to take a break. As they went out, Roth went through an equipment cabinet, found a small flashlight.

The driver was watching the Mercedes on the screen. He was getting edgy, but wasn't sure if he had anything to worry about.

"Señora, if you'll step over here." He beckoned her closer.

The first thing he said was a lie: "You just touched the box containing the tape recorder. A week ago, I found the tape recorder in the trunk of the Mercedes and dusted it with a powder that shows up under an ultraviolet light." He looked at Jorge, who pulled down the window shades and, for good measure, closed the wooden shutters. He moved over to the light switch, stood there for Roth's instruction.

"Señora, would you hold out your hands."

Felicia did as instructed. Her driver, who couldn't speak English, was as curious as she was, but had no idea what was coming.

"Okay, Jorge, for the benefit of the driver, explain in Spanish that the señora has just touched the tape recorder in the trunk of her car.

Jorge did, then Roth told him to turn off the light as he switched on an ultraviolet flashlight. A deep-blue light came on. "Señora, place your hands under the light." She did, and the fingers on her right hand glowed in the darkness.

Jorge described, in Spanish, what caused the glow, so that her driver could understand. The driver let out a gasp, and when Jorge told him to hold out his hands, he bolted for the door in the blackness. Roth threw his foot out just as the driver reached for the door. Jorge stepped in and grabbed the guy in a headlock.

Felicia backed away from the sudden violence.

Jorge was a lot stronger than he looked; the grip he held the driver in came from a lifetime of bull-dogging cattle. The guy was nearly paralyzed, could barely move. Roth was impressed. He went

over and took the guard's hand and shined the UV flashlight on him.

"Jorge. Who does this guard work for?"

"He is one of Señor Alcantara's men. A relative."

Roth knew very well that the man worked for Alcantara, but wanted Felicia to hear it. He turned to her: "What do you want done with him?"

"You can release him, Mr. Roth. He is not dangerous."

Roth smiled at her. "You think not? Just because he doesn't have a gun to your head, señora? Wrong. He is dangerous. All traitors are dangerous." Roth grabbed the driver by his collar and hair, bounced him against the door.

Felicia winced. "Please stop. What can I do, Mr. Roth?"

"Have him arrested."

Actually, Roth didn't know the laws in Mexico pertaining to illegal eavesdropping. In the States, the driver could be charged with a felony, good for at least a year in the slammer in most states. But here, for all he knew, there may not even be a law against it. He shoved the driver across to Jorge, who turned him around and handcuffed his hands behind his back.

"Lock him in your room, Jorge."

"Sí, Miguel." Jorge shuffled the driver through the door, into his room.

Roth was glad the guy tried to bolt, because over the past few days, when the Mercedes had been covered, the driver certainly had washed off all of the UV powder if he'd gotten any of it on his hands in the first place. His hands had a new coating only because Roth had just shaken some of the powder on the tarpaulin straps and then had the guy adjust them. But the driver hadn't known that. If he was smart enough to have an attorney other than Alcantara, and if this was the States, he'd probably beat the rap, chronology being the first element of detection. Or a defense.

Roth said, "That's all for the moment, señora. But I'm sure we'll be coming across more irregularities that will require your attention. Could I ask that you remain in the home for a while?"

Felicia agreed, and her interest returned to the consoles.

Roth looked at his watch. He had a little time. "Please, sit down." He pulled up a chair for her. "Jorge will give you a tour of the estate." He had wanted to show the set-up to Felicia, wanted to show her what she was going to get a bill for very soon. He also wanted to continue her reliance on Jorge.

Jorge came back into the room, and within a few minutes had Felicia working the joystick with the enthusiasm of a kid in a video arcade. She zoomed in on this or that person, the kids by the pool, guards at the main gate – one blissfully picking his nose – and at features across the expanse of the estate, looking into every nook and cranny.

As Roth was certain she would, she zoomed in on the area near the Jacuzzi, that private section of the grounds that was off-limits to everyone but family. No cameras covered that place. But Felicia was surprised to see that the halls and corridors throughout the entire home were covered.

“I’m not sure I care for this, Mr. Roth,” she said.

“Think it over, señora. If you decide you definitely don’t want the coverage throughout the home, we can shut down those cameras. You may also choose to have monitors in your room, or in your study. The point is, the security features can’t be beaten. Your eyes can be everywhere you could possibly want them to be. In an instant. You can have the same set-up in your study, or in your apartment. Rigged over your bathtub, for that matter.

“Jorge can explain the watch shifts. By the end of the day, your security force will be more than cut in half, as will your payroll, but security effectiveness has been increased to the maximum. Jorge has the details for you. I suggest a salary increase for the remaining guards. Their hours and schedules have been decreased for maximum alertness, and with these cameras, coverage is absolute. Good personnel deserve good pay, and when a man must work a second job, his dedication and attention suffers.”

“How many guards are there now?” she asked Roth.

“As of this morning, there were 68. By tonight there will be thirty. Plus Jorge, as director of security.”

Felicia stood and looked from Roth to Jorge. She was pleased, they knew. Impressed, actually. She thanked them and went about her business, preparing for a dinner party this evening, during which the girls in her charge would be presented to many elders.

Jorge continued with the terminations, saving the last for Alcantara’s man who usually covered the side gate. Jorge held him at the main gate while he and Roth rolled the contraband junk across the property in a wheelbarrow. They stashed it all in the hedges just inside the gate.

“Okay, Jorge. Make the call.”

Jorge used his cellphone to call the police. After a few explanations, he hung up. “They’ll be here in five, maybe ten minutes,” he said. “I know their reaction time from past experience.”

Roth eased open the gate, which Jorge had left unlocked. They poked their heads out, looked up, then down the lane to where the Astro van sat.

“The only way they can see us coming up from behind them,” Roth said, “is through the rearview mirror.”

“If someone is sitting in the front seat, and if they’re looking,” Jorge amended.

“It’s a chance we gotta take. Okay, let’s go.”

They carried the contraband out through the gate, slipped up behind the van, sat the goods down beneath the back doors. Two trips were necessary. They had three vases, a cast-iron statue that someone with the worst taste wouldn't want, a bronze bust of some Roman beauty, and a few wooden jewelry cases, minus any valuables.

They went back inside the gate. "Okay," Roth said, "get the guard up here."

Jorge got on his radio, told the remaining guards at the main gate to send Jose to him. Jose came sauntering along a few minutes later. Hell, he knew he was history; every one of Alcantara's relatives had been canned, and old Jorge hated his guts.

As he approached Roth and Jorge, a police cruiser turned off Carretera Toluca and started down Minetta Calle. Roth watched as the patrol car neared, then grabbed Jose by the collar, threw an armlock on him, pushed him outside the gate. Jorge rushed ahead, banged on the rear doors of the van.

As the police cruiser approached this point, Roth tripped Jose off his feet, leaving him to fall into the street just as two men opened the van's rear doors, wondering who was banging on their vehicle. Jorge drew his .45.

What the police officers saw was an open gate, two men in the van, contraband stacked behind the vehicle, a man down in the middle of the street, and two other men apprehending all three. They jumped out of their cruiser and had the culprits in cuffs in a flash. One of the cops recognized Jorge from the estate.

Jorge called Felicia again, asked if she or Señora Lucinda could come to the Minetta Calle side gate and identify some stolen property. Lucinda came, and witnessed the proceedings.

One of the men in the van was an off-duty guard, and the other was Dopey, of sleeping-in-the-woods fame. Or was he Sleepy? More of Alcantara's relatives. The back of the van held a card table, three wooden milk crates used for seats. On the card table was a receiver and a tape recorder.

Jorge acted shocked; Roth acted indignant; the cops acted confused. Except they weren't acting. They looked over the receiver and tape recorder. There was also a notepad, pencils, a deck of cards, multiple beer cans, a porno magazine, and a five-gallon jar of piss. Stupidly, they'd emptied the jar dozens of times right where the truck sat. Having the constant smell around them was bad enough, but they had advertised that a surveillance was taking place. The dumb fucks. A lesson there: use amateurs and you get sloppy results. The porno rag was first-rate. If the situation allowed courtesies, Roth would have complimented them on their excellent taste.

Jorge identified the equipment as eavesdropping devices, and thereupon learned that there definitely were privacy laws in Mexico. Jorge couldn't have played it better in front of the cops, mimicking Roth's indignation at this horrendous violation. Jose and the two men in the van were

arrested, and then an unmarked car with two detectives came on the scene. The suspects all denied having anything to do with the stolen property, but what criminal ever owned up to breaking the law?

The trio was taken to the station, Jorge going along as complainant. The van was towed to a police compound, the receiver and tape recorder confiscated as evidence.

Roth had Alfredo call Byrd, give him the courtesy of being up to speed on developments out at Cuernavaca.

Chapter 22

“Are you crazy, Federico?” Alcantara’s voice screeched on the tape. He was talking on the phone. “Are you absolutely insane?”

For some reason, Alfredo hadn’t been able to activate the harmonica bug he’d installed in the handset of Alcantara’s phone. However, the bug in the desk clock was transmitting perfectly. But the drawback was that, unless Alcantara was speaking with someone in the flesh, only his side of a conversation could be heard.

It was midnight. Roth, Alfredo, and Jorge were in the security office, bent over the desk, listening to the micro tape recorder Alfredo had done the recording on. Alfredo had sat in his car outside Alcantara’s office building until 8:00 p.m., when Alcantara, weary and haggard from his relatives complaining to him, finally left for the day.

Jorge had been at the police station while the three men were booked, and Alcantara rushed there when he began getting calls from his men about the discharges and then the arrests. Jorge was present while Alcantara had argued with the cops that the charges against his men were impossible, that they’d never do such a thing. But the arresting officers report carried the day; they saw what they saw. Alcantara’s men had been caught with contraband from the Alvarez estate, and with eavesdropping equipment in the van. It was an open-and-shut case.

The police theorized that Alcantara’s employees had been acting on their own, as a way of extracting retribution; one had been discharged earlier, and it became obvious that the other two were getting their walking papers, as well. The police believed that Alcantara hadn’t known about his men’s conduct, or they would have charged him, too.

“I have done absolutely all I can do,” Alcantara continued on the tape. “All I will do. I will do no more. They have discovered my bugs, and have arrested my men.” Pause. “For what have they arrested my men? It doesn’t matter what for. Trumped-up charges of thievery. Lies! Also, all of my men have been discharged and Señora Alvarez will not even speak with me when I call her, and I am not even allowed on the property. Do you understand what that means, Federico? I, Luis Alcantara, am not even allowed onto the property of my poor, deceased cousin. I have other security clients, Federico. If this gets around, I will lose my business.”

There was a pause, while Federico spoke. But they couldn’t hear what he said.

“No. Absolutely nothing” Alcantara continued. “And, you can tell that to Ricardo. There’s absolutely nothing to implicate her involvement in Daniel’s death. I told you at the beginning, Ricardo’s theory is fantastical, and—

Federico apparently cut him off, and was speaking. This went on for a minute or so.

“No. The only thing she’s done is hire those gringo cerdos. Those pigs. Those . . . those animals. Señor Byrd and this vulgar Roth person and some Judío gordo. A fat, nosy Jew cerdo, whose name we did not learn, but whose language is so vile, no decent person should hear him. I cannot imagine where she found such people. Gangsters, I am sure. No. Neither Byrd nor Roth has contacted me about Daniel’s death. It’s just as well; I would have nothing to tell them.”

Federico spoke again.

“No. I’m certain that Byrd has nothing. Felicia even showed me his reports. Not lately, however. But this new gringo, he is different. He isn’t giving her reports, I don’t believe. And all he’s done that I can tell is take over some security matters . . . a few oversights on things around the hacienda. A few things that needed attending to – cameras, things like that. And–

Federico cut him off again.

“And terminate my people is what he’s done.” Pause. “What? All of my people. All of them,” Alcantara yelled into the phone. “And now I must find them new jobs. This will not be easy, Federico. I need to return to Felicia’s good graces. Perhaps I should–” Pause. “No, no. Of course not. I won’t mention you.”

Federico spoke.

“I will think of something to tell her. That I needed to monitor her calls for her own protection. But I want nothing more of this business.” Pause. “Yes, yes. I’ll settle down. But Ricardo is wrong, I tell you.”

There was a longer pause as Federico spoke.

“She’d made no mention of a sale to anyone. I have spoken with Madrigal. I have also spoken with Muriel Espada, casually, and some other people in her company. Felicia has made no overture towards buying their stock.”

A brief pause, and it was apparent that Alcantara and Federico were aggravated with each other, neither allowing the other to get more than a few words in. “Well, I have not spoken with her for two days now. I tell you, she’s changed since this gringo bastard has been around. She was telling me less and less, and now she will not even take my calls. Perhaps you should just approach her and tell her how you feel–” Pause. “All right, all right, Federico. You needn’t yell. I won’t say anything. I swear I won’t.”

The conversation wound down, and Alcantara closed by saying that he’d speak with Federico again tomorrow.

In his office, Alcantara hung up and looked at the envelope the Hidalgo’s clerk had brought him.

He'd meant to open it earlier, but after Señor Goode's visit, he began to get phone calls from his employees who'd been fired from Cuernavaca. They'd drifted into his office all afternoon, complaining and demanding to know what work he had for them. His goddam wife had too many shiftless relatives. Then, as office hours were ending, a call had come in that three of his employees had been arrested. He'd rushed down to the police station, and was there all evening.

He opened the envelope and pulled out photocopies of fax communications to and from Mike Roth at his hotel. They were from a woman named Nina Davis in a New York office.

The desk clerk, acting on suggestions by the cop who'd made inquiries on Alcantara's behalf, had photocopied incoming and outgoing faxes, which he agreed to sell for 100 pesos each.

In the envelope were bits and pieces of data on many people. 'Credit headers,' Nina called them. Names and addresses of people all over creation. In Mexico, but many had US addresses, also. There were also clippings and printouts from Internet searches, confidential police reports, and memos from investigators in Mexico and California: Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey, Puebla, Puerto Vallarta, San Isidro, Mazatlán, Acapulco, Tampico, Juárez, Tijuana, San Diego, and Los Angeles. Holy Mother! Many of these were Daniel's relatives. Maybe all were. Roth was investigating Daniel's entire family!

He shouted with glee. Now, he had information for Felicia: Roth was checking on her and Daniel's relatives. When she heard this, she'd terminate that gringo bastard, for sure. But wait. Why was he investigating all of these people? What devious plan was afoot? Perhaps the señora knew about this. Perhaps she'd wanted this. But why? Why?

Alcantara grew tired in his confusion. A miserable day. A debacle. He went over to his bar, poured a drink, regretting that he'd sent Candice home earlier. But what the hell, let her husband screw her for a change. On second thought, her husband was away, she'd said. He'd call her later, have her meet him at the apartment he kept for their trysts.

He carried his drink back to his desk, sat down. He returned to the stack of notes, and his eyes widened when he read his own credit report that Roth had requested from this Nina woman.

He was unaware that such a report even existed on him. But then he realized that a profile had been started in California when he bought his Lexus and drove it down to Mexico City. This was the way it was done, to avoid paying import taxes in Mexico. He'd provided an LA address at the time of purchase – his brother-in-law's place in Encino. He'd also obtained a VISA card through his LA bank. That was listed also, and what else...? Oh, sí; he read the name of Jovial Novelty, and also another credit-card query; credit-card offerings seemed endless these days. Wait. His eyes returned and rested on the item from Jovial. Then he stared at the desk clock. He searched across his ordinarily neat desk, a shambles now with the notes he and Candice had taken all afternoon from his fired employees. He

found the business card Richard M. Goode had left.

There was a New York address and phone numbers, and an address and phone number in Texcoco, an industrial town just northeast of Mexico City.

It would be after 10:00 p.m. in New York, so he dialed the number in Texcoco. It rang and rang, but wasn't answered. Maybe Goode lived there and wasn't in. He let it ring.

Richard? What was the Yankee nickname for Richard. Rick? Ricky? Yes, but also . . . Dick! That was it. Alcantara picked up a pen, scratched Goode's nickname down on the card as he dialed the New York number. He read: 'Dick M. Goode.' He stared at the name, at the clock, and then at the phone handset in his fist. He dropped it like a hot potato, and screamed, "Sonofabitch!"

The bastards were bugging him. Even threw it in his face: 'Dick 'em good!' No Mexican would say such a thing. That gringo bastard was behind this.

Alcantara cursed himself. He'd been distracted this afternoon by the girl who'd fallen down in the office. At the time, he wondered what she'd wanted in his office in the first place, but he never got around to asking, with those legs, everything going on, the hotel clerk coming in, and his next appointment – too many things happening at once. He'd hoped that the girl would return some time; bring those legs with her. He'd found it curious that Mr. Goode so graciously assisted the girl downstairs to a taxi. He wasn't a persistent salesman, hadn't even offered to go over his catalogue, had only paid a courtesy call, he'd said, because it was Alcantara's birthday. Alcantara looked at the credit report; of course his date of birth was shown. "Aaarrggghhh!" He jumped up, slapped his face with open hands, turned around several times, then plopped back down. "Idiota!" He caught his reflection in the mirror on the credenza behind his desk. "Idiota!"

He scooped the desk clock into the trash can, lifted the phone handset to call Federico back. He definitely wanted out of this mess. He looked again at the handset, this time closer, inspected the caramel-colored plastic mouthpiece, saw that it was brand new. No smudges or minuscule scrapes or abrasions, no signs of normal wear and tear. But the cradle was his old one; the letters on the touch dials were smudged. That meant that there was a bug in the handset. Just like he'd watched his technician put into Felicia's telephones.

He struck his head repeatedly with the handset until he winced, nearly in tears. Defeated, he dropped the handset back on the cradle, stood and aimlessly walked towards the door. He'd call from the cellphone in his car. No. Not that one, either. He'd call from home. Bad idea, again. His home phone could be tapped. He'd call from a public phone in the lobby restaurant, tell Federico that he was quitting, that he was out of this mess. How long would it be before the police started looking at him, wondering what his part might have been in Daniel's death? Federico had been wrong all along; Felicia

wasn't behind Daniel's death. Alcantara felt like such a fool for having listened to Federico in the first place. Sure, Federico was smart for hiding behind him. But now it was his dick caught in the wringer. Idiota!

Chapter 23

Roth read Nina's latest faxed material over breakfast in the cantina. There were lots of credit headers, so many in fact that it would have days to scan them; copies of e-mails and other data from a score of private investigators across Mexico and southern California, in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas; and a police report on one of Daniel's cousins who'd received stolen goods in Mexicali. The latter was no big deal; everyone in Mexico received stolen goods. There was a branch of the family that settled in the Santa Ana-Magdalen region of Sonora State. That was about fifty miles south of Nogales. Roth put those in one stack, would do a second round with deeper searches on those people. An uncle had been shot to death ten years ago in Juárez. No immediate reason shown. Another stack. A cousin had been killed in Iraq with the US Army during Operation Desert Storm, and two nephews had been killed in Vietnam. Quite a few of Alvarez's relatives lived in the States, and many were also American citizens.

One character had claims against every credit-card issuer on the planet, always complaining that his cards had been stolen and exorbitant charges incurred. Old scam. That went into another stack. A special stack.

Nina's envelope also included some Internet search results, newspaper announcements, and clippings on cousins, in-laws, aunts, and uncles. Another man, Daniel's first cousin, was a prominent physician with a practice in Washington, D.C. There were reports on Roberto and Maria Alvarez, Daniel's children, and lots of information on Felicia. She was notable for her involvement in just about every imaginable charity in Mexico City.

Nina wrote that there was much more data to follow, as she had three office staffers on this full-time. These bits were just preliminaries on about a third of the names on Felicia's list, and half of the names hadn't even been fielded yet. Before Nina finished, she'd be able to tell these subjects more about themselves than they'd even recall. But it would take weeks; in some cases, months. In-depth backgrounds were costly and time-consuming. The señora would have quite a bill when Nina finished. Nothing looked very promising yet, and Nina would soon zero-in on poorer relations, particularly those who might have come into money recently. Always follow the money.

And the money would be a whole other round of inquiries, and would have to be fielded across northern Mexico and the southwestern American states. That round would first be a light brush-over, to see which family members stood out in any particular way, which could be eliminated, and which were just screaming with recent wealth and acquisitions.

Roth drove out to Cuernavaca with an off-duty cop, who was armed with an automatic pistol. He

entered the security office, dropped his attaché case on Jorge's desk, put the document case containing Daniel's diaries and Nina's reports at his feet. He only had the remainder of Daniel's first diary to read, and hoped to get through that today. It seemed pointless, really. He was just now reading about Daniel's first year at UCLA.

The off-duty cop hung around outside, in case Roth wanted to go out somewhere.

There was an envelope with his name on it lying on Jorge's desk. It was sealed. He opened it, unfolded the latest of John Byrd's reports. Lucinda must have left it here for him. The report had nothing new, but it eliminated more possibilities. More conversations with Byrd's sources, and the results of some interviews with police officials up in Sonora State, where the authorities were concentrating their investigation. It seemed that an auto-theft ring had been busted a few weeks ago, and there'd been a shoot-out down in Hermosillo between the police and a suspect. There was also mention of possible kidnapping activities with the gang. But the suspect had had his head blown off in the gunfight, so he wasn't in the mood to give out much info. Byrd reported that he thought it was worthwhile that he fly up there for a firsthand look.

It was just coming on 8:00 a.m. Roth sat down and looked around the room. His eyes settled on the old oil painting of the hacienda. The scene appeared to be placed in a purple evening haze. What first appeared to be a mediocre painting took on subtle hues and character depending on the lighting in the office. The more one stared at it, the more the old place came alive. The vaquero was leaning against a supporting column of a portico. Close-up, he was represented by only a few seemingly careless brush strokes, but if one stepped back, the image became distinguishable and drew the viewer into the scene. Was the image that of the old general as a young man?

Roth returned to the moment. He'd told Alfredo to sit again outside Alcantara's office building and listen to the bugs. He'd suggested that Alfredo lease a car or van with dark windows. But in Mexico City, tinted windows were illegal. Too many kidnapping cases, too much crime involving automobiles. But if a vehicle came with tinted windows, as many did from the States, the police didn't do much, or anything. Everybody was buying their SUV in America. Didn't matter really; criminals usually did whatever they wanted right out in the open, anyhow.

Alfredo had said that it didn't matter if the windows weren't tinted. These days, everyone walked about with earphones stuck into radios, CD players, cellphones, or MP3 players. So, he'd just sit there in his car and listen when Alcantara talked to anyone in his office. Neither he nor Roth could figure out why the harmonica bug in the phone handset wasn't working.

Felicia hadn't come downstairs yet. Roth went into the kitchen, poured a cup of coffee, took it back to the security room. Jorge's shift commanders had just changed the guard. The on-coming shift

would work from 8:00 a.m. until noon, only four hours, then would be off for eight hours, returning for their second shift at 8:00 p.m. to midnight.

So far, the guards liked this routine better. It was easier to stay alert, and four hours went by fast, whereas the previous twelve-hour shifts seemed to drag on forever, making it difficult to remain diligent. Even four hours was a long time to scan the consoles. It was the watch commander's responsibility to relieve each monitor for ten minutes every hour, or he could also elect to relieve the monitors for the guards outside. Everyone liked that arrangement better. What no one liked was that, during their four hours on, they couldn't smoke. Still, four hours was tolerable.

In all, the guards were sharper. In a few weeks, if Roth was still around—which he prayed and expected not to be—he'd run a few drills aimed at breaching the security. A simple test, really: if he didn't enter through the main gate, but nevertheless arrived at the security room, the guards had better be able to tell him exactly when, where, and how he entered the property. Or someone's head would roll. He wouldn't recommend that Jorge discharge a guard if Roth managed to slip past him. Not the first time, anyhow. But ridicule would be in order. He instructed Jorge to have someone build a 100-pound, six-foot high mock magnifying glass that any errant guard would carry around for a week and sleep with on the nights he remained on-premises. Sort of like a crucifix. A Mexican would relate to that.

It would be easy, actually, to penetrate the security. All an assassin had to do was watch when the shifts changed. At this time, people were least diligent, occupied as they were with the switch. That's why Roth assigned the guards on the consoles to be changed last. At any rate, that would be the best time to breach the perimeter. From there, an assassin would blend in with the background, moving as slow as a snail, so slow that a camera, at long range, wouldn't detect anything; so slow that unless a guard was staring right at a particular place on the monitor for long minutes, he wouldn't detect movement. It would take an assassin, perhaps covered with a ghilli suit—a canvass throw-over with imitation shrubbery—eight or ten hours to steal through the woods up to the hacienda, the time during which three shifts would come and go. But for a professional assassin, that would be child's play.

"I've been here since seven a.m.," Alfredo said. "And Alcantara hasn't come to work yet. Not that I saw, anyhow." He was calling from a pay phone this time. "Maybe he returned last night. After I broke off."

"Probably not," Roth said. "Maybe he's just running late. Is there anything at all?"

"Nothing," Alfredo said. "Candice arrived at nine. Yesterday, once the desk clock was in, I could hear her every now and then. Could hear her answering the phone out in the reception. The acoustics in his suite are terrific. The mike is very powerful. Very sensitive."

“But nothing now?”

“Nada, Mike.”

“Well, stay on it. That’s all we got going at the moment. But I’ll have a nice little tête-à-tête with the señora when she comes downstairs.”

Felicia came down just before ten o’clock. She looked tired, and if Roth had bothered to ask Jorge, he could have told him that she was praying in her bedroom until 3:00 a.m.

Roth waited until she’d nibbled down a breakfast at poolside, then turned to chatting with Lily. At least she was taking his advice to add a dash of sunshine to her breakfast. A pity he had to bring her a storm this morning. He went over, stood a discreet distance from them, but close enough that Felicia understood that he wanted her ear. She broke from Lily and came over.

“Buenos días, Mr. Roth.”

“Good morning, señora. Let’s talk.”

“Right to the point, as always, Mr. Roth. Shall we sit down?”

“I’d prefer the study,” he replied.

They walked into the home, past the living room, down the corridor to the library. Felicia showed him in, closed the door. She moved to the back of the library, sat behind Daniel’s desk.

“Do you have a copy of the contract handy?” Roth asked her.

Felicia looked at him, then motioned to a large, wooden bureau off to the side. “Shall I—”

“Refer to it or not, but I’ll tell you what one of the articles reads. You initialed it, so you must have read it. ‘If you purposely fail to disclose any information relative to the prompt and satisfactory resolution of the matter contracted for, this contract shall be deemed completed, and the amount of compensation shall become due.’ I asked you to have the contract witnessed, which you did. You understand the meaning of those words, do you not?”

Felicia stared at him.

“Last time, sister—” Damn, he hadn’t meant ‘sister’ in the convent sense, but to imply that she was an empty-headed broad. “Look, lady,” he started again. “I’m gonna ask you once more, and if you stonewall me again, I’m catching a plane. You got that?”

Felicia dropped her head.

Roth moved forward, pressed his hands on the desk, leaned over. “Do you understand me?”

Felicia nodded, but didn’t look up.

“Who is Federico? I know you said he’s Daniel’s nephew. But his name isn’t on the list. Let’s try it again.”

“He is Daniel’s son,” she nearly whispered.

“His son. Thank you. You’re one for one. Let’s see if we can’t keep you honest. Who’s Ricardo? Tell me again there are many Ricardos, and my business here is finished.”

“No,” she cried out, and stood up. “Do not leave. I need you.” That took Roth back. It wasn’t like the señora. That must have been hard for her to admit.

“This is the way it’s supposed to work,” Roth fired on, straightening up. “You want my services, I want your money. It’s a good system. The American way. Tested over the ages, tried and true, works every time. So, help me to help you. Then the system works even better. I save time, you save money. Okay? Who’s Ricardo?”

Felicia sat back down. Roth moved around the desk, sat on the edge, close to her, violating her space.

“Richard Cramer,” she answered. “He is a vice president with International Offices, USA.”

“The original parent company? Up in LA?”

“Sí. Daniel always called him Ricardo. His name is Richard, of course.”

“All right,” Roth said. “Federico and Ricardo. Let’s use their names in the same sentence and see what we get.”

“Within the companies, they . . . interface . . . logistically, I think it’s called.”

“You see, you’re getting good at this, señora. What else?”

“I-I do not know.”

There was her lie detector going off again. Roth stared at her. In all his years in this business, he’d never met such a poor liar, so easy to read. The woman was transparent. And she wasn’t making eye contact again.

“Look at me, now. I wanna see those baby blues.”

Felicia looked at Roth.

“How long have they interfaced?” Roth asked.

“I am not sure. . . . Ricardo has been with IO USA for perhaps ten years, and Federico has been with IO since he started college.”

“Federico’s mother?”

“She is American. And lives in California. I am not sure where.”

“Let me guess: no one knows about Federico being Daniel’s son. Am I right?”

Felicia dropped her head, nodded.

“Does Federico know Daniel was his father?”

“Oh, yes. Daniel never kept that from him. He always took care of him and his mother financially. He got him the job with IO USA when he was in school, and when he finished college,

brought him down here. Federico has done very well, and Daniel was proud of him.”

“Obviously not proud enough.”

Felicia’s face jerked up at Roth, searching for the meaning of his remark. Roth had never seen that look. He’d just implied that Daniel kept his kid in the closet, hadn’t owned up to being his father. Was there something else?

Felicia shook her head. “You do not understand. Daniel was involved in politics over the years. It would not be good, not for either of them, if it became known. This is Mexico, Mr. Roth.”

“Federico is an American?”

Felicia nodded. “Yes. As was Daniel; Mexican-American. Federico was born in America, and his mother is American.”

“How long has he lived here in Mexico City?”

“Off and on for many years. Federico went to school here and in California. Some high school, some college, in both countries.”

“How’s his English?”

“Perfect. As is his Spanish.”

“Does he speak English with an accent?”

Felicia thought about that. Shrugged. “No. I do not think so. Both his Spanish and English are, as I said, perfect. Speech-wise, I mean. Pronunciation.”

“Do you get on well with him?”

“I once thought so. But lately....”

“Does he inherit?”

Felicia looked down at her lap. “No. Not anymore. Aside from a few more shares in the business he will receive when Daniel’s estate is finally settled.”

“Nothing more? And you control the majority of shares?”

“That is correct.”

“Did he know that he wasn’t going to inherit?”

“I am not certain.” Before Roth could object, Felicia held up her hand in defense. “Perhaps I should know this, but there were some things that Daniel did not discuss with me. Daniel may have told him that he would not inherit, after—”

After? After what? After he passed on? “So, Daniel was proud of his oldest son, but not enough to give him his name, and not proud enough to put him in his will. Not even an insurance policy.” Roth stood and walked back around the desk, ambled over to a maritime encyclopedia under glass. He leaned over, studied the old collector’s masterpiece. After a minute, he straightened up, turned and

walked back, stood in front of the desk. Felicia was quiet, avoiding eye contact again. “Well, shucks, señora.” Roth pulled on an ear lobe. “What doesn’t sound right here?” He muttered to himself: “We’d get to the bottom of this a lot faster with a hammer.”

Felicia said nothing. She was still holding out.

“Okay, let’s go over it again. See what doesn’t fit here. You agree that something doesn’t fit quite right?”

Felicia said nothing.

Damn, Roth thought, getting hot; the woman loved a seduction. Just needed to have it drawn from her, pulled out of her. “We’ll get back to Ricardo. Richard Cramer. And to the ‘after’,” Roth said. He was being patient, a quality he wasn’t renowned for. He didn’t like being lied to. That led to anger, and soon Nastyman would come leaping out, look around for someone to rip into. But he asked, “Why haven’t you gotten back to me with Daniel’s financial information? His bank statements?”

Felicia didn’t look at him. She’d been caught out.

“You thought I forgot? No, señora. I look for what’s missing, as well as what’s there. And you’ve supplied me with everything but Daniel’s bank statements. And you’re too thorough, too conscientious to have forgotten my request.”

“As with my husband’s diaries, Mr. Roth, his bank statements have nothing to do with why I hired you. There is no connection to Federico, or Ricardo, or with Daniel’s bank statements to this tragedy.”

“Then what’s Alcantara’s connection to Federico and Ricardo?”

“What connection?” She looked at him. “There is no connection. Señor Alcantara barely knows Federico.”

“Daniel was having trouble with Federico and Ricardo. Why?”

Felicia looked back into her lap, didn’t speak.

“Adiós, señora. I’ve got better things to do than wade through a pool of bullshit.” Roth turned and headed for the door, calling back. “You’ll get my bill, and I expect it to be honored. The whole enchilada.”

Felicia was up and around her desk in a flash, hurrying after Roth. She caught him at the door, threw herself in front of it. Roth stood there, arms akimbo, waiting.

“It is not in me to speak ill of someone, Mr. Roth. To inform on anyone. It makes no difference to you.”

Roth took her arm and spun her out of the way, opened the door.

She grabbed his sleeve with both hands, clinging like a cat.

“Let go, sweetheart, or you’ll end up on the floor, grieving widow or not.”

Still she clung to him, as tears welled in her eyes. “It is not my place, sir,” she sobbed. “It is not my place.”

Roth stared through her, immune to her plea.

Felicia grabbed Roth’s hand, like a lifeline, it seemed, and pulled him away from the door. He jerked his hand free, folded his arms across his chest.

It took her a long minute to gather her thoughts. Finally, “Federico is being blackmailed. He and Ricardo . . . they are . . . they are....” She couldn’t get the words out.

“Licking cookie batter from the bowl?” Roth coaxed. “Reading naughty magazines? Or bilking the company, perhaps?”

Felicia shook her head, tried to speak again, but couldn’t. She cried harder.

“Señora, what the hell is it?”

“They are homosexual,” she blurted out, almost screaming it.

That took Roth back. Not that he was shocked. He wasn’t even surprised. What stunned him was the ineptitude behind her logic. Or emotion. Or whatever it was that’d been jamming her up about all this. “That’s it?” he asked, incredulous. “They’re gay? So what?”

“It tore Daniel apart when he learned about Federico. And to learn in such a way. From a blackmailer. He tried, but he could not accept this in Federico. Could not forgive him. But he paid the blackmailer to keep silent.”

“Paid a blackmailer? What for? This is the twenty-first century, lady. Who gives a damn who sucks what? Pardon the indelicacy. But the fairy-day parade or whatever it’s called, is bigger than Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. Fruits and nuts coming out of your ear. Gays don’t hide it anymore. They advertise it. They celebrate it. Are you jerking my leg?”

“I must remind you, Mr. Roth. This is Mexico!”

Roth reconsidered. It was true, he really didn’t know what being gay meant in Mexico. Latinos were melodramatic about all things sexual, that was for sure. Like with dancing; they never laughed, but instead glared into each other’s eyes, dead serious, like avowed enemies preparing for mortal combat. So, yeah, maybe homosexuality was still hidden down here. Hell, maybe they still burned epileptics at the stake.

“But there is more, Mr. Roth,” Felicia continued. “For some time, it had been the wish of many that Federico and Theresa Espada would consider the sacraments. Theresa is the daughter of Carlos and Muriel Espada, our very good friends.”

The Espadas owned the IO franchise in South America. Carlos had died, and Muriel, in her mid-

fifties, was waiting on a bid from Felicia or the IO Mexico board towards buying her out.

Roth contemplated this, snorted. “Well, it’s not my business, but Federico should come clean, or someone should quash the young lady’s hopes. Both of them chasing boys around the pool could be a little awkward. Not to mention, although I will, that it’s something neither of them will likely grow out of.”

At least it explained a few things. But according to the one-sided conversation they’d overheard with Alcantara, Federico suspected Felicia in Daniel’s death.

“Have Federico pay us a visit here,” Roth suggested.

“Oh, no. He will not. He would not refuse outright, even though I am acting chairperson of the board, his boss’s boss, but he will not come. He will find an excuse. He grows more alienated each day, more distant, angry with me.”

“Why?”

“He must feel that he is being left out because of me. Because of Roberto and Maria. The union that Daniel planned between him and Theresa would have given him everything eventually. Theresa is an only child. Roberto is pursuing astrophysics, displays an incredible aptitude for this, and has no interest in taking over the business. It is the same for Maria. As for me, while I control the majority of shares now that Daniel is gone, I will chair the board only until all of this is settled. I also do not care to run the business. I will remain on the board, but I am neither qualified nor interested in anything beyond that.

“Who will likely become CEO?”

“I will recommend Juan Solis. He is president and a very capable and trustworthy man.

“Daniel was so heartbroken. He maneuvered Federico into place over the years, and Federico truly earned his promotions up to vice-president. At only twenty-three. There are fourteen vice-presidents under an executive vice-president, and then Juan Solis, who reported to Daniel, the CEO. Daniel had awarded Federico a few token shares of the business on his twenty-first birthday, and when Daniel retired, he would have awarded him many more. With Theresa’s shares in the event of a merger, he would have eventually controlled more than fifty percent. He would have everything he wanted.”

Well, apparently not everything. “When was Daniel planning to retire?”

“Within a few years. Oh, Daniel loved Federico so, and it was mutual. You would never know Federico’s sickness to look at him. He is so handsome, and masks this weakness supremely well. Truly, Daniel was arranging for him to have everything. Maybe even his name, too. We had spoken about it. The children are nearly grown, and politics had played only a little part in his life lately. Still, things move slowly in Mexico, and Federico’s weakness was making it all so impossible.”

“And now that Daniel’s gone?”

“I do not know, Mr. Roth. Perhaps I will elevate Federico as time goes by, if he continues to do well. Maybe I will inform the board of his . . . his proclivities, and let them decide his future. But if I do, the world will know. Or maybe the right thing is . . . what is the saying in the States...? Do not ask, do not tell?”

“Who’s blackmailing him?”

“I do not know.”

“How long has it been going on?”

“About a year. Someone sent a note to Daniel when Federico could not afford to pay more . . . what is it called . . . shut-up money.”

“Hush money. Do you have the note?”

“No. I never saw it. Daniel told me about it, then destroyed it. Whoever was blackmailing him found out that Daniel was Federico’s father. That was surprise enough. Daniel said that it was a very ugly note—from someone who possessed very sordid details of Federico’s life—that if a certain sum of money was not paid by a specified time, the details of Federico’s degenerate lifestyle would be made public.”

“How much money was demanded?”

“Fifty thousand dollars.”

“How was it paid?”

“Daniel was instructed to give it to Federico. So, he had to confront Federico that he knew about his sickness. At first, Daniel had not even told me. He was heartbroken, upset for weeks over this. His ulcers were acting up, and, oh, it was horrible. Late one evening, he was terribly upset. He was vomiting blood, and it tore me apart. Finally, he could bear his secret grief no longer, and confided in me. I resented Federico at first for the pain he was causing his father.”

“No more demands since then?”

“I do not know. Maybe Federico has been approached again. I expect to open a letter or receive a telephone call any day from the blackmailer. I understand that this kind of person never goes away.”

“That’s true,” Roth said. There’s only one way to get rid of a blackmailer. “Were the police made aware of this?”

“Oh, dear God, no. Absolutely not. To tell them would be to tell the media.”

“Mister Byrd?”

“I saw no reason he should know.”

“But you were gonna tell me. Weren’t you?” Roth said, sarcastic-like.

Felicia shook her head. The conversation fatigued her. She was sniffing in a handkerchief she kept stuffed up her sleeve for such occasions. Tears were a penitence, something she was experienced with. A pity, really; her beliefs created one hell of a waste of a beautiful woman.

Roth opened the door, turned back to say, “You see there, señora: confession is good for the soul, isn’t it? I would think you’d know that.”

Roth closed the door, headed into the kitchen, made a coffee. Back in the security room, he remembered once again that he hadn’t given the two hundred dollars he’d found in Daniel’s clothes to Felicia.

He took out his wallet, handed the two bills to Jorge. “Exchange this and have one of the boys pick up a mini-refrigerator, and one of those Mr. Coffee jobs and the supplies that go with it.” He looked at his watch, called Alfredo’s cellphone.

“Nothing yet,” Alfredo said by way of answering. “I haven’t seen him come in, but from what little I can hear, Candice is in the office. I hear something, but it sounds like it’s coming through a tunnel.” The transmitter that they’d installed in the desk clock was powerful, and should be producing a clearer sound.

“Okay, just stick with it,” Roth instructed. “We’ve got his home address and number, maybe we’ll see what we can do with that.” Meaning, of course, that they’d determine if Alcantara’s home could be tapped.

Roth next called Nina. She said that she’d been prepared to backdrop Alfredo’s story if Alcantara called to verify his employment with Jovial. But, so far, he hadn’t called. This was a regular routine that Premier used in undercover investigations; once an investigator gave a pretext, Nina was alerted that the target might call to verify his story. Anyone with any real sense would realize that, if a scam was being pulled, it stood to reason that it would be back dropped. But most people, lazy by nature, did little more than make a phone call to the very number that appeared on a business card, the number that the scammer wanted them to call.

Roth gave what identifying information he had on Federico and Richard ‘Ricardo’ Cramer, and asked her to develop credit reports on them first, and throw their names into the background case load. Federico’s last name was Blakely, which was his mother’s maiden name. He hung up, and thought for a second, then called Nina right back. “On second thought, move those names to the top of the list and prioritize it. And give the names to Roger Schiff out in LA. See what he can come up with.” It would be a good test for him.

Roth went out for an early lunch. The off-duty cop, his bodyguard, walked behind him up Minetta Calle as the police were finally clearing it. It had been posted ‘no parking’ and officers had

stretched tape up and down the lane and patrolled at intervals to make certain the ordinance was being enforced. The señora had gotten action. But Roth knew that she could.

Off a side street, he found a small food stall that catered to domestic employees and the army of workers, contractors, and delivery men who poured daily into the area—an army dedicated to the maintenance and upkeep of homes belonging to the privileged, creating a subculture on the fringe of these wealthy estates.

He had rice, beans and a beef enchilada. Pretty much the same fare he ate almost daily at the Hidalgo, but this tasted far better. Food from street vendors often did. Delicious. He motioned for the cop to come over, grab a bite, but the man declined. If the guy spoke English, he didn't let on. The cop was sharp, kept looking around, didn't seem to miss much. Not bad for ten bucks an hour. His two bodyguards were each pocketing over 1,000 pesos a day.

The hotel. Yeah. He had a little thinking to do about the clerk Alfredo crossed paths with in Alcantara's office. It would be easy to get rid of the bastard.

He returned to the hacienda, pulled out the last—or rather Daniel's first—diary to read, then called Alfredo again. There was no change, Alfredo reported. Alcantara still hadn't come in, as far as he could determine.

As Roth ended the call, he turned to see Felicia standing in the doorway. It was unusual for her to be in this part of the home, and aside from when he invited her in for the demonstration of the UV powder on her driver's hands, he couldn't recall her ever being here.

She stared at Roth. She was holding a piece of correspondence in one hand, a letter-opener in the other.

Roth's eyes fell on the letter-opener in her hand. He stood up and threw up his hands in surrender, joking. "Heard about the two-hundred bucks, eh?"

But from her expression, he grew serious, dropped his hands. Was the letter in her hand from the blackmailer? Not unless Federico had refused to pay, and the blackmailer was moving the game to another level.

"Roberto just called me," she said. She seemed numb as she stared at him, then at Jorge, and back to Roth. "He heard it on the radio: Señor Alcantara has just been found dead. Shot to death."

Chapter 24

Luis Alcantara had been shot dead in the love-nest he rented for trysts with Candice Figueroa. They'd spent a few hours together late last night, then she'd gone home. She reported for work at the usual time this morning.

Alcantara's wife, of course, was in shock to learn that he hadn't shuttled over to Guadalajara on business, as was his usual alibi, and the media was already pounding on the poor woman's door.

According to the news reports, he'd told Candice last night that he was supposed to meet someone this morning. Then he'd be in to work. He'd told her to cancel his morning appointments.

While it appeared to be a robbery gone bad, since the apartment had been tossed and Alcantara's wallet, wristwatch, and rings were missing, the police weren't buying it. A single gunshot to his heart. At close range. A pillow to muffle the sound. No witnesses. The cleaning woman, the wife of the building manager, had found his body. She'd heard nothing, didn't think that anyone was in the apartment when she entered. She knew the apartment was used for trysts, and in fact, most of the small apartments in the building were rented to couples who tumbled on the side. Apart from silk sheets, a collection of sexual aids, some personal effects, and a well-stocked bar, neither Luis nor Candice kept anything else in the apartment. According to the reports—which, typical of Mexican tabloids, took no pains to spare Señora Alcantara any humiliation—the police had no suspects.

Roth called Alfredo and told him to break off, get over to Cuernavaca. Alfredo asked what was up, but Roth told him to just hustle on over.

He suggested that Felicia make herself unavailable, as there was a good chance the authorities would be paying a visit. Unless Alcantara's murderer was nabbed in quick fashion, the police would surely explore his problems at Cuernavaca. Alcantara's employees had been arrested, and now he'd been killed. Candice was probably blabbing whatever she knew about the terminations right now.

It was nothing of great concern for the señora, but Roth wanted to protect her from being linked to Alcantara's death. The Mexican media were muckrakers who'd speculate on any story, actual substance being no criteria. But it would be ridiculous to speculate that Señora Alvarez terminating Alcantara's contract had anything to do with putting a bullet through his pump. The bastard no doubt had a lot of enemies. For starters, he was an attorney, wasn't he?

Roth called Byrd, who'd heard about the shooting and was already on it, contacting higher-ups in the government to stifle any news connections to the señora. Byrd had his good points.

Roth returned the document case with the last three diaries back to the library, stopped off in the kitchen for another coffee. In the security office, he took a radio, told Jorge where he'd be, then carried

the first diary outside. He walked past the swimming pool which, miraculously, was empty this afternoon. There were a few kids reading on the lawn, but otherwise, the grounds were quiet. No sign of Lily. Funny that he should think of her; perhaps because he was heading for the private Jacuzzi area nestled in the trees. He found a spot under a tree, set his coffee down beside him, lit a cigarette.

The whole game had suddenly changed with Alcantara's murder. Roth did some more add-ons and take-aways. Added on was a blackmailer. And Federico. In the take-away column was Alcantara, who, befittingly, had been taken out of the frame. To the morgue. But Roth saw no immediate connection between the two that would amount to murder.

Roth continued with the last diary. In Daniel's second year at UCLA, he'd met Virginia Blakely, Federico's mother. Diary entries over a year's course covered their relationship. They'd met off campus, in a restaurant where she worked. A popular girl, she'd been a California transplant from Lima, Ohio. Like many young women who arrived in LA, she flirted with the idea of working in films. She had all the right equipment, that was for sure, even came prepared with high-school drama classes and theatrical workshops at a community college to her credit.

Despite lacking connections, she nevertheless made friends fast, and had landed in a few commercials before graduating to porno, which paid a lot better. Roth had to read between the lines. Daniel's vague lines. It seemed that Virginia, somewhere along the road to stardom, had struck on the old game of having wealthy men finance her career – college boys from well-to-do families, in particular. They came to her in the restaurant, dozens of them, most afternoons and evenings; fresh, eager young faces away from home. Horny boys. Desperate souls. Lonely lives. Especially the kids from Asia and Latin America. And they came with big allowances. So, Virginia fished and juggled a few at a time before landing Daniel. And once she'd determined that his family had a pile of money, Hollywood wasn't as attractive as haciendas in Mexico City and Puerto Vallarta.

But to Daniel's embarrassment, his father, Eduardo, had other ideas. Virginia Blakely had played her best card – the pregnancy ace, taking her own sweet time doing it – but it hadn't been good enough. By the time Eduardo Alvarez kissed her off with 100,000 dollars, it was too late for her to have an abortion.

Thereafter, Daniel had done the right thing all along, faithfully sending money to Virginia for Federico's support until she'd sent him down to Mexico City one year to attend school as a sophomore. From then on, Daniel supported Federico directly, and at seventeen, when Federico returned to LA for his senior year, he had a Corvette, an apartment, and lots of jingle in his pocket. By his second year at UCLA, he was working for IO USA, and Daniel continued generous supplements to his income. He'd also bought Federico his own apartment.

Virginia had married a real-estate salesman a few years later. A high-roller. Federico got on well enough with his step-father, but by the time the boy finished college, his future was with Daniel's business in Mexico.

Roth made a note to have Nina start a background investigation on Virginia and her husband. Had Virginia felt that she'd let Daniel off too easily? Would she blackmail her own son? Naw. Probably not. But Roth would check just the same; mothers had done far worse things to their children. What had Sherlock Holmes once said in a story? Oh, yeah – the most fetching woman he'd ever known had thrown her infant children out the window for the insurance money. And Roth had seen this scenario played out in New York many times over the years, particularly on cheap life-insurance policies. The usual alibi was that someone had removed the window guard without the mother realizing it. One mother, he recalled, had even blamed her dead infant – who, it turned out, at eight months, couldn't even walk, let alone remove a safety gate from a window. Mom had been straight when the police and medical examiner's office investigated, but gave a different story to Roth because she was under the influence of Mr. Jim Beam – compliments of Roth – at the time he took her statement.

Roth shook the past away, and reading further back, still found it interesting that Daniel had started to keep the diary when he was only a boy. Turning back the pages, taking Daniel back to his years before college, there were mentions of vacations at the ranch, Cuernavaca Pequeño, and of time spent riding with his father, Eduardo; also of time spent with a matronly old woman who'd died during his teenage years. Apparently, that old woman had been very important to Daniel, for he spoke of her as if she were his mother.

Old Jorge was mentioned throughout Daniel's early years. Funny it was: although no blood relationship existed, Daniel had called him Tío Jorge in the old days. Roth laughed; he'd been close when he suggested that Felicia have the household address Jorge as 'Uncle.' Roth would make a point of addressing Jorge as 'Tío' now, particularly in front of the household staff. If he regarded him as an uncle, he felt certain they'd follow his example. As for the security force, Roth doubted that Jorge would care to be addressed as anyone's uncle. Being an 'uncle' and kicking employees' butts wouldn't be compatible. In front of the guards, Roth would address him as Señor Jorge. It was formal, but not patrician.

Going back farther, working towards the front of the diary, Daniel had filled many pages from conversations with his old grandfather, General Alejandro Garcia Alvarez – particularly a tale from 1911 that had stuck in his memory throughout his life.

Chapter 25

1979

Mexico City

Cuernavaca Grande

Daniel Alvarez sat on his grandfather's lap as the old man took a break from having his portrait done. His seventieth birthday was approaching, and he would be fêted at the painting's unveiling.

Silly indeed did he look in his embroidered, bright azure tunic over striped pajama bottoms. And a peon's straw hat sitting on his head at a rakish angle made him look all the sillier. He looked as though a peasant had struggled out of the desert and happened upon this glorious, decorated tunic and, seeing no one around, stole off with it.

Old Alejandro had no idea of what his wealth amounted to, for at this stage in life, it mattered little. Many millions for sure. He was content to roam around the grounds dressed as a peon, and was often dismissed by first-time visitors as a poor old handyman, since he enjoyed tinkering with things around the hacienda. Some people at first thought he was Eduardo's poor relation. His closest friend was Jorge, from the ranch up in Chihuahua. Or Cuernavaca Uno, as Jorge used to say. Jorge, in his late-twenties then, and doing his best bull-dogging at rodeos rather than on the ranch, hadn't wanted to come down to Mexico City, but Alejandro wanted his company, so down he came. It didn't matter, really; ranching as they knew it was all but gone with the dust that swept across the historic cattle trails.

Old Alejandro's white whiskers were in stark contrast to his thick, dark mustache that drooped down along his cheeks, making him look rather like a walrus. He had no intention of scraping the stubble from his face while the artist only painted a likeness of his tunic on the canvas.

In pajama bottoms, chemise, beat-up leather thongs, and an old straw hat is usually the way Daniel saw his grandfather dressed. Except for special days, holidays and such, when the old gentleman would turn out in his fine military uniform or perhaps an impressive tuxedo, medals dangling across his chest. Alejandro was a retired general from the Mexican Army and from the diplomatic corps, and had served as ambassador in uncounted countries. Over the years, he'd met all the great people – all the young beauties; handsome señoras; the distinguished gentlemen of this or that nation, industry, or army; the many great Mexican figures. He'd met all of the presidents, up from the tyrannical Porfirio Diaz – whose conspiracy against president-elect Madero he'd help thwart – and he'd known Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa, more commonly called 'Pancho.'

He cared now only to spend time with his family, particularly with his grandsons, Daniel and Roberto, as their father had so little time for them. Alejandro saw few people – they only annoyed him

now – and spent his time riding El Dardo Cuatro. Or was it El Dardo Cinco. While there was only one stallion, Daniel was never certain which number it was, because old Alejandro was never certain. He confused the numbers, and no one except Tío Jorge claimed to know the correct order of ancestry. This was El Dardo Cinco – the fifth generation in a long line of magnificent black stallions.

Alejandro smoked a cigar, to which Daniel made a face. Other than that, the boy was always delighted when his grandfather took him off to the side and spun stories of the old days, especially his army years. But his favorite story of all would become the one that Grandpa Alejandro had started yesterday, for the first time to his grandson. A story in which Alejandro had been a young boy, just like Daniel was now.

For at that tender age, just ten years old, Alejandro had saved the life of President Francisco Madero. This was a new tale for Daniel, but long heard here at Cuernavaca and up at the ranch in Chihuahua. If it was true, no one outside the family seemed to know about it. Yet, old Alejandro spoke with great authority and remembered the names of the men involved in an assassination attempt against Madero.

Eduardo had grown suspicious of his father's tale of thwarting an assassination attempt, so he'd looked into it many years ago, and learned that, indeed, there had existed a colonel in the Mexican cavalry named Martinez and a Prussian diplomat named Count Fritz Kruszewski who'd been an attaché with the German Embassy in Mexico City around that time, up until the beginning of World War One. So, it was doubtful that Alejandro, at ten years of age, could have invented such a story.

Today, Alejandro continued the story from yesterday:

“So, I watched this mean-looking Prussian go back into the saloon, and I spied on him from beneath the swinging doors of the establishment. Until it was nearly dark. And, oh, how my tummy growled again from hunger, as I hadn't eaten since morning. And I was so tired, Daniel. I was so tired, as I hadn't slept since the day before, and my little legs had run twenty miles into Juárez to stay up with the cavalry patrol. And with Señor Sol now hiding behind the Sierra Madres, the late autumn winds swept across the desert and chilled my skinny bones. Now, I was not only tired, but cold, as well, my teeth clicking like castanets. And El Dardo . . . El Dardo numero uno,” he whispered, as if the current El Dardo could hear him all the way back in the stables, “had been stolen from me. And, oh, I just wanted to eat and lie down to sleep.”

Daniel squirmed in his grandfather's lap. Now this was a story!

“Two hours passed,” his grandfather went on, “before I saw Count Kruszewski's chauffeur return to the hotel. He was alone. Sí. The fat colonel was not with him now.” He glanced around, leaned close to Daniel, nodded his head and whispered, “I believe they done him in.”

Daniel looked around also, in case someone might be listening in on what the general was confiding to him.

The old man continued: “The driver, Señor Keigel, sat in the car, waiting for his boss. Or so I thought. But Señor Kruszewski remained in the saloon, drinking with some men at the bar.

“It was dark now, and there was a thunderous commotion as president-elect Francisco Madero was escorted into the plaza by an enormous entourage of politicians and soldiers. Men, women, and children, rich and poor, all swooped down on him as a band played the national hymn and streamers were thrown from the balconies of the hotel, and fireworks lit the night sky, firecrackers popping everywhere. Kruszewski seemed not interested, didn’t even go outside to see the ocean of people sweeping into the plaza.”

The artist came looking for his model, but General Alejandro struggled to remove his tunic, waved the young man away. He was instructing Daniel now, and that was more important than having his portrait finished.

“So,” Alejandro continued, lighting another stogie, “I could not understand how this Prussian dog, whose name had been carved on my butt, was to assassinate our beloved hero if he remained in the saloon. I was a rancher’s son, and I well knew how far a gun could accurately spit a bullet. The count could be armed with nothing more than a pistol, and certainly could not shoot across the plaza, filling with thousands of people, and hope to strike his target.

“President-elect Madero was carried up to the platform in front of the Customs House, where he began to address the crowd before the delegation moved inside the hall. Not everyone could enter, you see, for the hall wasn’t large enough to hold the thousands who’d assembled to see their new presidente. From what I could see from across the plaza, the Customs House stood empty, brightly lit up, having been made ready for the ceremony in which the power of the government would be bestowed on President Madero.

“I pushed my way through the onlookers standing on the hotel porch, and crossed over to the plaza. I do not know what forced me to look back at Kruszewski’s automobile. But I did. And the driver, Keigel, was gone! He wasn’t there, nor was he inside the saloon with Count Kruszewski. Nowhere to be found!”

Alejandro’s eyes grew wide with amazement, his suspense contagious as Daniel was caught up in the mystery, also wondering where Keigel might have gone.

“I looked around for him. Behind the hotel, along the side streets. Nowhere! I hurried across the plaza, hopping up and down, for I couldn’t see above the people pressing in from all sides to be near the Customs House. I was bumped, pushed, and crushed just trying to see what was happening. The

bright lights inside the Customs House lit up the loading platform where Señor Madero and many officials stood, lighting the dignitaries who milled around up there, waiting for him to speak.”

The old general stood now, said to his grandson that it was lunch-time. Surely little Daniel must be hungry. He turned to go inside, but Daniel held his hand and pulled him back, pleading with him to finish the story. Alejandro relented, acting tired from his ordeal of sixty years ago. He sat down again and continued:

“Where was I...? Oh, yes . . . off to the side, I climbed up on a buckboard wagon. A ruffian pushed me off, claiming that this vantage point belonged to him. But I climbed back up, and just then, cheers went up, which distracted the bully as Señor Madero stepped forward with papers in his hand to speak. Then, I saw the major and the lieutenant who’d been with Colonel Martinez. They were also up on the platform, packed in with other officials near Señor Madero. They seemed concerned. Extremely concerned. Why, you ask? Because their paid assassin, Count Kruszewski, was not there to do the evil deed for which he’d been hired. The deed for which Colonel Martinez’s men would, in turn, immediately shoot him dead, so as to silence the only source that could reveal their conspiracy. I watched the colonel’s men, and soon they too caught sight of Count Kruszewski, could clearly see him across the plaza in the saloon, drinking at the bar, surrounded by foreigners. It seemed he was indifferent to the ceremony going on across the plaza. I jumped down from the wagon – with, I should mention, the assistance of the nasty young ruffian, who pushed me off again – and hurried around to the back of the Customs House, to where no one was, the only place I hadn’t searched for Señor Keigel. But I could not get inside, for all the doors were locked along the sides and in the back. A large, saddled palomino stood tethered behind the building. I climbed up into the saddle and stood, hopped from there onto some crates piled alongside the building, leapt to a drainage scupper, and pulled myself up to the eaves of the roof, where there were ventilation transoms. I wedged myself through one, and inside, crawled along the rafters high above the place, which had been converted to an assembly hall for the ceremony to take place. I saw no one was inside, but hundreds of officials and soldiers and others stood on the loading platform outside, their backs to the hall.

“But I was wrong, Daniel. For someone else was inside!” The old man’s eyes blazed, and Daniel squirmed again. Loving to be scared, he nevertheless tried to shrink away. His eyes widened at this point, as they always would whenever his old grandfather would embellish on the story, adding color and suspense. Daniel didn’t breathe; his entire being was in that very building with his grandfather six decades earlier. But, he realized that he had to pee, and, as he got up, swore that his grandfather had scared the piss out of him with this tale. He ran off to relieve himself, calling back that he’d just be a second. He returned in a flash to find the old man snoozing. Or so he thought. He shook him, begging

for him to continue.

Old Alejandro shook himself awake with a snort that always made Daniel giggle. He looked around, disoriented. “Where was I?”

“You’d just climbed into the Customs House, Grandpa.”

“Yes! Someone was inside. With me. I saw him hiding up in the rafters at the back of the building. It was Señor Keigel, Count Kruszewski’s chauffeur! He had braced himself in a darkened patch of the rafters, by a ventilation shaft, and was holding a rifle, aiming it at the front door, preparing to fire as soon as Señor Madero entered the hall. How he’d gotten in, I never learned, but his avenue of escape was behind him, back out through one of the transoms at the rear, and beneath that, he planned to drop down into the waiting palomino’s saddle.

“So, it was this man, Keigel, who was the assassin, and not Kruszewski. In fact, Kruszewski was Keigel’s decoy. A simple, yet brilliant plan to distract Colonel Martinez and his henchmen. So, Martinez’s men were waiting for the wrong person to kill Madero, waiting to shoot him down after he fired the fatal shot, but Kruszewski stood surrounded by witnesses across the plaza. It suddenly made perfect sense, a brilliant stroke; Keigel had taken Colonel Martinez out and murdered him. Then, posing as a simple chauffeur, he was about to assassinate President Madero and make his getaway.”

Daniel’s skin crawled. He was glad it was daylight now, for there was enough darkness in how Grandpa told his story.

“So, the delegation was about to enter the building. I saw Señor Madero shaking hands with men all around him, saw the soldiers preparing to usher him inside. I yelled at Señor Keigel. He looked over to find the source of my voice, and when he saw me, he swung his rifle in my direction. But I ducked back, and in doing so, lost my balance, and fell off the rafter. I landed on the platform, crashing down onto a dais that luckily broke my fall. It is fortunate. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here to tell you this story.” The general laughed. “And come to think of it, you wouldn’t be around to hear this story, either. So, maybe the angels blessed that dais.”

Daniel didn’t quite follow this last bit. But Alejandro’s eyes went wide again with fear, and Daniel cringed, even though his grandfather had survived the adventure.

“I bounced up and ran for the front doors. A shot rang out, and struck the floor at my feet, throwing up splinters. But apparently no one heard the report of the rifle because there was so much noise outside with the band starting up again. I hit the main doors running, shot outside like a bullet. Just as I did, two soldiers saw me, and ran at me. I panicked and ran back into the building. I thought I heard laughter. Some people in the crowd saw what was happening, and there I was, being chased now by two men. There was a locking bar that swung across the doors from inside. I swung these down and

secured the doors. Mi Dios, Daniel. I was so stupid, because I then ran to the windows and closed and locked them so that no one could enter from the front of the building.

“People began knocking on the doors, trying to push them in, confused why the doors were suddenly closed and locked. It was now dark on the loading platform, since the huge doors and windows blocked the light inside. There was confusion everywhere.

“Señor Keigel shouted something at me. I don’t think it was anything nice. And he fired again. His bullet missed my head, though just barely.”

The old general slapped his forehead. “Mi Dios, Daniel,” he repeated.

“I suddenly realized that I’d just locked myself in with this madman! Estúpido! I was so stupid! Well, Señor Keigel slung his rifle across his body, hung from a rafter, and dropped to the floor. Now, we were both trapped inside. Unless I could climb back up to the rafters somehow, and crawl out through the ventilation transom, I was finished. Señor Keigel had landed not well, I think. He howled, but jumped up, hobbling, and I think he’d injured his ankle. He whipped the rifle from across his body, and came limping fast across the hall. Not wanting to fire another shot, I guess, he cornered me and began swinging the rifle at me. But I ducked his furious swipes, and retreated to the back of the hall. He chased me around, flailing his rifle at me. But I knew that he couldn’t possibly catch me. Not with his injury. And me so scared I could mess my pants. No, I was not to be caught by this maniac.”

Alejandro shrugged, and nudged Daniel. “Not even if his foot was well could he have caught me, for like El Dardo, I too was like a dart, ducking here and there, dodging this ferocious lunatic. Like a mad dog, he was, snarling and grunting as he swung his rifle at my head. Finally, as it seemed that the men on the outside would break down the doors, he stopped and cursed me to hell for all eternity, realizing that just as I had locked the doors from inside the building, he could open the back windows as easily. He ran to the back of the hall, and disappeared out of the building.

“But the banging soon stopped,” General Alvarez said, wiping sweat from his forehead, as if recalling a play-by-play all these years later. “The men had given up trying to crash the doors down, and I heard some people on the side of the building, checking to see if a window had been left unlocked. I thought to open the doors, but the voices outside were angry, and I feared what they might do to me. Yet, Señor Keigel had disappeared, and gone was my reason for keeping the delegation outside.

“I made certain that he was gone, then I too went out the rear. I doubled back around to the front of the Customs House, and there saw that soldiers were supervising drivers with motor cars to line their vehicles up in front. They formed a semi-circle, turned on their headlights, illuminating the front of the Customs House. And soon, right there in front of the building, the oath of office of president of the

republic was administered to Francisco Madero.

“Some people said they’d heard what sounded like gunfire close by, and I believe that for this reason, they rushed the ceremony. I made my way up on the platform to tell them there had been an assassin inside. But they laughed and didn’t believe me. So, I turned around and dropped my pants and presented my backside to President Madero so that he could read the name.”

The old general nodded solemnly at Daniel. “Sí, I showed them all. On my buttocks, very near my . . . ahem . . . manhood was the name ‘Kruszewski,’ that the dying vaquero and I had cut into my bottom. But what they saw of me did not in any way resemble a name.

“One soldier, an officer, became so infuriated that I should salute our presidente with this part of my anatomy, he booted me so hard in that very place that I thought I’d land across the river in Texas.”

General Alvarez laughed as he shook his head, and Daniel giggled. “What happened to El Dardo, Grandpa?”

“Ah. You might well imagine that since we have here his grandson, or is it his great-grandson, that El Dardo remained Alvarez property. Well, I suspected, rightly, that Colonel Martinez would have no further use for El Dardo, and would not be claiming him. Señor Keigel, the real assassin, had dispatched that evil man, and his bones rest somewhere in the desert around Juárez to this day.

“So, I returned to the stables and told the wranglers that the colonel had sent me for his mount. They were suspicious, of course, but I said that the horse had a Circle A brand. They pointed to where El Dardo was stabled. But as I reached him, I saw the colonel’s saddle was upon his back. Apparently, the stable hands had been instructed to feed El Dardo, but nothing else. The colonel apparently had had plans for El Dardo soon. With all that he’d schemed, he’d sensibly made no plans to remain in Juárez, in case something went wrong. One of the hands became suspicious. Why would a colonel trust such a small, half-naked boy with such a magnificent animal? He yelled, and started for me as I untied El Dardo. I grabbed El Dardo’s reins, these also being different, and swiftly flew upon his back. Mi Dios! I sat so high in the saddle, how strange it felt. I urged El Dardo on, and started to canter him towards the gate. But two men ran in front of El Dardo, and he shied back. They closed the gate up ahead, and I saw my only chance was to jump El Dardo. I’d never jumped him before, but I’d seen my father do it. I guided him back towards the rear of the corral, turned him, and slapped him hard with the reins, galloping him towards the rail, screaming for him to fly over the obstacle. He cleared the barrier with ease, nearly dismounting me from the saddle I wasn’t accustomed to. I bounced so high off his back, there would have been enough space beneath my butt and El Dardo to build a magnificent hacienda.”

Daniel laughed so hard, he wanted to pee again.

“I came down on his mane and hung on for dear life until I regained my balance. I galloped down

Calle Riverino as fast as El Dardo could fly, and soon, two riders came tearing out of the corral after me. I turned into the plaza, scattering all the people who were celebrating there. So many automobile headlights shone on me, and just then fireworks went off high about my head, lighting the entire area as I rode through. I saw President Madero safely in the midst of his entourage, and as I galloped past, I ripped off my hat and waved it, yelling ‘Viva la Mexico; viva la Presidente Madero.’ The crowd rallied in my wake, shouting ‘Viva la Mexico’ and closing in so tight behind El Dardo that the pursuing riders had to yield to the sea of bodies cheering me on. And President Madero actually took off his hat and waved to me.

“As I galloped past the hotel, Count Kruszewski stood on the porch, his chilling eyes glaring at me. He pointed his finger as though it were a pistola. He knew what I’d done, all right.

“What happened then, Grandpa?”

“Well, the air in Juárez was electrifying. The people were joyous, and celebrations rang throughout the city. I galloped El Dardo through downtown, and when I reached the South Road, El Dardo turned towards home. I was so very hungry, but also very tired. Soon, El Dardo slowed to a canter, then a walk, and I slept astride him until we reached home.

“The vaquero had died that afternoon, and Theresa and the servant had washed his body and carried him outside, where they’d dug his grave. Mi Dios, how the poor man stank by evening! We buried him and said prayers over his grave.

“When my parents returned two days later from Chihuahua City, my father asked me what news there was.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Why, I told him we had a new presidente, of course.”

“But the grave?” Daniel asked.

“I told him the story. He did not believe me, of course. But he spoke with the servants, who showed him the place. They started to dig, as my father still could not believe my story, but after a few feet of earth had been shoveled away, his nostrils told him that we spoke the truth. At least about the dead vaquero.

“I was not about to show my backside to my father, not unless I wanted to be a cripple to this day. But a few days later, when my back acted up, compliments of the boot I received on the Customs platform, mama examined me, and . . . hola! She made the acquaintance of Señor Count Kruszewski there upon my rump.”

Daniel covered his eyes and laughed, and the old man chuckled.

“She showed the name to my father, and he started to believe the story. And, of course, there was

Colonel Martinez's saddle, his initials carved in silver upon the saddle horn. The initials are 'D. D. Martinez.' You can see for yourself, as that saddle is in the stable to this day. Many weeks later, we traveled to Juárez on business, and Father confirmed that, indeed, the oath of office for President Madero had been administered outside of the Customs House because, mysteriously, no one could get inside."

"He believed you, then?"

General Alvarez shrugged. "Perhaps he did."

"But the saddle. With Colonel Martinez's initials on it?"

"Yes, well, my father learned that the initial stood for Dominic Destino Martinez. As though he had a destiny, you see. He had, and I considered those initials to represent 'Dead in the Desert' Martinez."

Daniel laughed again, then stared solemnly at his grandfather for long moments. "Can . . . can I see Señor Kruszewski's name?"

"I would gladly show my ass to anyone back in those days, but, alas, the scars have disappeared over time."

"And Señor Keigel?"

"He vanished. As for Count Kruszewski. He fled Mexico after America entered World War One. I believe he was instrumental in delivering a message from the German government to ours. The Germans wanted Mexico to declare war on the United States, to distract America from the conflict in Europe. And when the Americans learned of this deceit, President Wilson pressed the American Congress for a declaration of war against Germany, and got it."

Little Daniel wasn't interested in all this, only in his grandfather's role in saving the life of President Madero. "So, no one will ever know the whole story, Grandpa?"

"My father did. Your father does. And now you do. Don't you? As for me, before I entered the army, our family went on to operate one of the largest ranches in Chihuahua State. My father – your great-grandfather – and I built a reputation for the Alvarez's to enjoy for generations. We raised and shipped bulls, you see. And some people said that I was the biggest shipper of bulls in northern Mexico."

Jorge and the artist came out once again to where Daniel and the general sat. Jorge spoke about hacienda business, and the artist was waiting for them to finish. The old man stood up to oblige him, and put Daniel down to dwell on what he'd just heard. Alejandro rubbed his grizzled chin, and said in English, a language Daniel understood: "Yes, my boy. They said that I was the biggest bullshipper in all Mexico."

Chapter 26

Roth laughed uproariously. He re-read the last entries, closed the diary, walked back into the hacienda, still chuckling, wondering if Martinez's bones had ever been found. If he ever existed in the first place.

Jorge, working on next week's posting schedule, which now included a weekly training period for all the guards, looked up. "What is funny, Miguel?"

"You worked for General Alvarez, didn't you?"

"You know of the general? Sí. I worked for him. And Eduardo, the general's son; Daniel and Roberto's father. I started working at the ranch when I was thirteen."

"In Chihuahua? When was that?"

Jorge ran his palm over his silver moustache. "Over fifty years ago."

"You're an old fucker, aren't you?"

They both glanced at the guards monitoring the consoles. Neither understood English.

"Sí, Miguel." Jorge winked. "A very old fucker."

"What happened to the ranch?"

"We did not send it anywhere," Jorge said. "So I imagine it is still there."

Roth laughed. "About a few miles from the US border? South of Juárez?"

Jorge nodded.

"Are there still cattle there?"

"Very few, now. The ranchers drifted away many years ago. Some south, some north, across into Texas."

"But the family still owns land there?"

"Much land. The family is still involved in cattle, but that has all changed. Years ago, Señor Eduardo combined operations with cattlemen in the north, and they handle all of that now. Cattle are bred from the bull's sperm, which is stored in frozen vats. Something like that. The bulls are slaughtered after their sperm is drawn to inseminate the cows." He shrugged. "The vaquero is a dying profession. Now, it's laboratories and testing tubes and needles and those modern things. Yes, the old ranches are gone, the bulls are gone. The only Alvarez beef you will see now is in a tin of meat." He pointed to the painting on the wall.

"That's the ranch?" Roth asked, turning in his chair. "I had no idea."

"That's what it looked like sixty years ago. Before Daniel was even born. That was the old hacienda, even then, built far away from the stink of cattle," Jorge explained. "The bunkhouses and the

corrals and pens were further back.”

“The general was born there?”

Jorge nodded. “It is where he was born and where Eduardo was born, and where Roberto was born. But Daniel was born here in Mexico City.”

“Did Daniel ever see the ranch?”

“Oh, many times. Alejandro built Cuernavaca Grande here in Mexico City in 1935. Property prices were very low then. That is why there is so much land here. This place was once a ranch, too. But Mexico City has closed in around us. Anyhow, Alejandro stayed at the ranch mostly, but he lived here sometimes. When he got older, he lived there all the time. And he died there. When Daniel and Roberto were boys, they sometimes spent the winter months up at the ranch, but it is too hot in Chihuahua in the summer. Daniel rode well, and would have been a grand vaquero, Miguel. A grand vaquero.”

“What’s up there now?”

Jorge looked at the painting. “Dust, Miguel. Only dust and sand.”

“No one’s there?”

“No. Youngsters are different these days. They like the city. Or Guadalajara, or Puerto Vallarta. Or Acapulco. To zip around on those water motorcycles. Roberto and Maria, Daniel’s children, they come and they go so fast when they are in Mexico, running here and there. But to visit the ranch back then, you would stay for weeks, perhaps months. Life was slower then, Miguel. No one goes there now.”

“But you liked it better there?”

“Of course. We swam in the creeks, swam in the Rio Grande, rode into the desert, raced our horses and drove cattle to the junction where trucks came and took them away to market. Rode at night to wrangle strays and keep watch for rustlers.”

“Rustlers?”

“Oh, sí. There have always been rustlers. Back in the 50s, they started using cattle trucks. No more cowboys pushing herds. They could steal more cattle, faster. They even landed cargo planes and flew out the cattle they’d steal.”

“Sounds like a cross between Zane Gray and Buck Rogers.”

Jorge made a face. “I have never met them, Miguel.”

In his head, Roth reviewed Alfredo’s investigation report. He didn’t recall seeing any photos of Daniel’s gravesite. Normally, in questionable death claims, Premier’s investigators usually made a stop at the cemetery, got details of an insured’s burial, snapped some photos, maybe give close scrutiny to

the grave and headstone. Those were claims where they'd suspect that the grave was either fake, or someone had replaced a headstone, maybe laid a fake plaque over an old one. Greed as well as need is the father of ingenuity

Also, Roth had seen the autopsy photographs, but the pathologist hadn't done a microscopic examination of the body. "I recall that Daniel is buried up there. Isn't he?"

"Sí. On the ranch. With all of the Alvarez's. His father and the general. And Daniel's first wife, Juanita."

Roth wondered what Felicia felt about that. Where would she rest when her time came? At Daniel's side, opposite his first wife? "Did you go to his funeral?"

"Yes. Of course. After the authorities were finished with Daniel, his body was taken care of in Nogales and flown down here for the funeral in Mexico City, and then his body was flown back up to Juárez and taken to the ranch for burial. We all went up." Jorge smiled sadly. "When his body was discovered on the American side of the border, his remains were returned to the Mexican side. He was, how do you say when the doctors cut...?"

"Autopsied."

"Sí. Autopsied in Nogales."

"Nogales, Sonora? Not Nogales, New Mexico."

"Sí. The Mexican side. Mexican and American officials determined that he was murdered in Mexico. It should have been obvious. Then they squabbled over where the body should be autopsied. Aiya! Miguel. Are government people everywhere so stupid? So small-minded?" Jorge held up his thumb and forefinger, separated them by a few centimeters. "It was what he wanted. To be buried with his ancestors."

"Big funeral down here?"

"Oh, muy grande, Miguel. Muy grande! Thousands came here in Mexico City. All of the employees from IO Mexico. Three thousand employees in Mexico City. It was a holiday for the company. And again, when we buried him up north, many hundreds came from miles around, up from Chihuahua, and gringo friends and associates came down from Texas. The Alvarez name was well-known around northern Mexico."

"You were there?"

"Of course. I had gone up to get the body with his brother, Roberto."

"You saw the body?"

Jorge nodded, looked pained. "It is horrible what they did to him, Miguel. After the police released the body to Roberto, we had the funeraria in Nogales prepare Daniel so that we could bring

him back. The . . . embalsamador . . . the man who pumps the juice into the dead bodies did the best he could, but....”

“It was a closed-casket funeral?”

“Sí. It had to be.” Jorge grew quiet. His eyes were wet. He took out his bandana, blew his nose.

“What they did to him was horrible. I miss him even now, Miguel.”

Roth patted the old guy’s shoulder. “You’ll see him again, buddy.”

Jorge looked at Roth with an uncertain expression, maybe an indignant look. He certainly had no plans to join Daniel anytime soon.

“There was an old saddle here or at the hacienda up north. With initials on a silver plate on its horn.”

Jorge stared at Roth for long seconds. “How do you know this?”

“Whatever happened to it?”

Jorge stood and motioned Roth back to his quarters. There, on a small sawhorse painted white and obviously well-cared-for, sat the saddle. It rested on another, smaller English-style saddle to maintain its shape, and smelled as though it had been freshly saddle-soaped. The leather, once probably brown, had turned blackish in spots, but despite its age, it remained a beautiful piece of work.

“I have kept this for many years, Miguel. I will always keep it. There is a story behind it.”

On the cracked leather near the horn, Roth read the inscription, ‘D. D. Martinez.’

“I’ll be damned” he said.

As Roth expected, two police officers, one a detective, visited the estate in the late afternoon, inquiring about Alcantara. They interviewed Felicia, then came into the security room and questioned Jorge. They studied the room with great interest, eyed Roth a few times, but had no questions for him, didn’t even introduce themselves. Fine with Roth. They had passed by the off-duty cop guarding Roth, and if they recognized him, they hadn’t said anything. In Mexico, one cop doesn’t take the frijoles off another’s tortilla.

If anything, the cops seemed confused about how to report what they’d learned here. That Alcantara and his men had been robbing the estate blind squared with Alcantara having enemies. Clearly, they weren’t buying a robbery-gone-bad theory, but saw no connection to Señora Alvarez as his client.

They had also asked many questions about Candice Figueroa, but neither Felicia nor Jorge could supply any information on her, since they hadn’t met the woman. Felicia had only spoken with her on the telephone a few times.

As for Candice, it was doubtful that she’d be rushing home anytime soon. By evening, her

husband would be looking for her. Probably with a baseball bat. While señoritas acted real flirty, they often didn't mean it. But husbands acted real jealous, and meant it every time. It was a hell of a way for a guy to learn about his wife's infidelity – splattered across Mexico's tabloids. Still, she was fortunate she hadn't been with Alcantara when he was murdered.

Roth had Jorge ask the detectives if they knew who'd paid a visit to the Hidalgo and inquired about him. Jorge hadn't known about that, but he asked. The cops looked at each other, shook their heads and denied knowing what he was talking about. But they didn't like answering questions. Especially from a gringo. Roth shrugged. They probably had no idea. It didn't matter; Alcantara had likely known cops all over Mexico City, and they were close-mouthed people.

Chapter 27

“That’s him,” Alfredo said. It was dark, and they were sitting in Alfredo’s car at the curb across the street from the Hidalgo.

Roth nodded, recalled seeing the guy at the front desk a few times. The clerk who’d delivered the package to Alcantara in his office the other day walked out from under the awning, turned and neared the corner, and waited to cross the street. He was carrying a manila envelope, which he threw into a trash can on the corner. He started across the street.

Roth told the off-duty cop to stay in the car, while he and Alfredo jumped out and intercepted the clerk halfway across the street. Jumped him would be more accurate. Roth threw a headlock on the guy as several onlookers stopped short and moved aside to watch the altercation. Roth managed the clerk onto the curb, and Alfredo picked the envelope out of the trash.

“Where you goin’, Chico?” Roth asked, releasing him, but keeping hold of the guy’s jacket lapel.

The clerk recognized Alfredo and Roth, but said nothing. He looked around, nervous. Maybe for help. Alfredo tore the envelope open, pulled out photocopies of faxes addressed to Roth. They were credit profiles on Federico Blakely and Richard Cramer. Roth dragged the clerk back into the lobby, brushing aside several guests who were on their way out. Inside, he propped the clerk up against the front desk, held him by the lapel with one fist as he flipped through the pages with his other hand. The night manager, attending to a couple at the counter, hurried over to investigate the commotion.

Roth handed the pages back to Alfredo, and when he was certain he had the manager’s attention, gave the clerk a shot so hard to his face that Alfredo thought the guy’s head would come off. The clerk ricocheted off the desk, plopped to the floor.

“Oh, Jesus,” Alfredo uttered, backing away. He wished Roth would brief him before he was going to assault someone. He thought they’d just intercept the clerk, have a little chat.

The manager’s mouth dropped open. “Mi Dios, mi Dios! What is this? What is happening here?” He darted around the granite-topped counter. “What are you doing, señor? Have you lost your senses?” He stopped a safe distance from Roth, but swooped down to aid his employee sprawled across the floor. The clerk was holding his head and moaning.

Roth showed him the contents of the envelope. “He was copying my faxes and selling them.”

“That is no reason to beat the poor man,” the manager said.

Roth moved in. “You’re next, fella, if you knew about this.”

“No. No, of course not.” The manager backed away.

“This guy just waltzed outta here, carrying copies of my faxes in his hand. You didn’t see that?”

How do you know he wasn't carrying money from the cash drawer?"

"I did not see the envelope, señor. I swear it."

"Uh-uh," Roth said, doubting it. The clerk apparently knew that Alcantara had been murdered, and having no further use for the faxes he'd already copied, was getting rid of the evidence.

The clerk was conscious, but dazed. A second shot would have put him in dreamland. Maybe in a head cast.

"If I see him around here again," Roth snapped, "he'll take another beating."

The manager helped the clerk stand on wobbly legs. Roth moved in, but Alfredo stepped between them. "No more, Mike. No more. I'll look into this."

Roth turned away, just a bit pissed at Alfredo. "Nothing to look into. We caught him outside with my faxes." He looked at the clerk. "You wanna file charges against me, fella?"

"He stole more copies of Mr. Roth's faxes the other day," Alfredo explained to the manager, and then lowered his voice. "The man who received those papers, Señor Alcantara, was murdered today. It's in the newspapers. So perhaps the police will want to have a conversation with your clerk."

The manager looked soberly at Alfredo. He'd heard about the murder, and worried that the hotel would be brought into this – something he wouldn't want, particularly if his clerk had in some way inadvertently caused Alcantara's death. He assisted the clerk over to an easy chair by the newsstand. Roth motioned Alfredo to follow him, and they went through the lobby to the cantina.

Inside, they took stools at the bar. Roth was a touch angry with Alfredo, even though he'd done the right thing by stopping him. In truth, Roth was pissed at himself, as well. If the hacienda could be compromised, then his faxes, from a hotel of all places, were just as easily compromised. Faxing was ancient technology, already. Still, Internet connections weren't available everywhere, and in most instances, faxing to and from a hotel was just fine – providing he and Nina worked with a code. But it would be better if documents were scanned through employing secure Internet programs, even stenography coding, if it came down to that. Yeah, he'd been dumb. The bad guys knew where he was sleeping, so further invasive measures against him should have been obvious.

He ordered drinks, told Alfredo about the threatening phone call, the reason he'd acquired the bodyguards. He watched Alfredo mull this bit of information over, no doubt wondering if he too was at risk.

Roth poked Alfredo's chest with his finger. "Puts a different perspective on things, doesn't it, pal? So let's not worry about their fucking casualties."

After a few minutes, Roth cooled down. "You about ready to head for home?" Dumb question. Alfredo had been ready from the moment he got to Mexico City.

He nodded.

“What about Tessa? You gonna run off and break her poor little heart?”

Alfredo’s face flushed. He wondered how Roth knew, and started to explain. But Roth cut him off. “Hey, it’s not my business.”

“She is nice, Miguel. But I am married. Happily. She wants me to learn how to play the guitar. Wants me to stay in Mexico City and be near her. Wants me to get work in films. She says she can help me. But that’s not for me.” He shrugged. “Are you almost finished here?”

“Perhaps. But now it gets nasty.”

“Nasty? Like beating that poor man in the lobby?”

“Nastier. In fact, I’ll be catching a ride with you up north. In a day or two.”

Roth finished his drink just as Señorita Rigor Mortis entered the cantina with a colleague. They sat at the bar several stools away, perused the joint, their eyes settling on Alfredo. If Señorita Rigor recognized Roth, she didn’t let on.

Roth nudged Alfredo. “Beware the one in red.”

Alfredo looked over, gave an awkward smile to the pair, then turned back to Roth, a question on his face.

Roth shook his head, paid the tab, said he’d see Alfredo back here at nine o’clock.

The bodyguard who covered the night shift came into the cantina looking for Roth.

“Alfredo, tell him to go out to the car and relieve the other guy.”

In his room, Roth showered and made another drink, then called Roger Schiff in LA.

Chapter 28

The headquarters of International Offices Mexico occupied the top ten floors of a building bearing its name on Paseo de la Reforma. Hi Ho Mexico was a household name.

It was 10:00 p.m., and lights lit up the twenty-fifth floor, where the executive offices were located. With an appointment arranged by Felicia, IO's president and acting CEO, Juan Solis, was waiting in his office.

Roth, Alfredo, and Kelly Moore met Solis briefly, and he showed them to Federico Blakely's office. It was a large affair, caddy corner to Juan's office. There were smaller offices on either side of Federico. Unlike most of the executives, Federico locked his office at night. Solis tried a passkey, and was surprised that it didn't work. Roth brought out a pick set, and within seconds, unlocked the door.

He asked Solis, "What's directly under this office?"

Solis thought. "I believe it's a conference room." He turned around to get his bearings. "Marketing occupies most of the floor below, and, yes, there is a conference room beneath this office."

Kelly started pulling cabinets and a credenza away from the wall behind Federico's desk. He got down on all fours, studied the edges of the carpet. He shook his head. "We'll have to drill through twelve inches of concrete to run a line downstairs."

"There should be an easier way," Roth said. He turned to Solis. "The offices next to this one, on either side – who's in them?"

Federico's secretary is there." He pointed to the left. "And on the other side is a copier room. Photocopier, a fax, a coffee machine, supplies, things like that."

"Beyond those?"

Solis stepped out into the corridor. "There is a guest office next to the copier room, and one on the other side of his secretary's office."

"The guest office nearest Blakely? That's a free office that one of your visiting execs or reps might use?"

"Yes. Exactly. Or a visiting customer."

Roth rapped his knuckles on the wall leading into the copier room. It was sheetrock. "Will that office be used tomorrow?"

Solis shook his head. "I don't believe anyone will be visiting us tomorrow, so I don't think so."

"All right, we'll need access to the rep's office again tomorrow. Maybe several times during the day." He thumbed towards Alfredo. "This gentleman will be going in and out."

Solis nodded to Alfredo. "This is Señor Blakely's area. He'll want to know why."

“Leave that to us. We’ll have a chat with him first thing in the morning. He extended his hand to the president. “Señor Solis, thank you very much for your assistance. That’ll be all.”

Solis stood there, uncertain if he should take his leave. He was president and acting CEO of IO Mexico, and he’d been summarily dismissed in his own building by people he didn’t know. He’d given them Federico’s personnel file, which contained his residential address, among other pertinent data, and he hadn’t been told why. These were spooky people, taking but giving nothing other than cold smiles and nice manners.

As he departed, Roth said, “You understand, señor, not a word of this to anyone?”

“Yes. Señora Alvarez has made that quite clear.”

Roth closed the door behind Solis. “Okay, Kelly, let’s keep this simple. Put a recording switch on Federico’s phone, then run the line through both walls, all the way into the rep’s office. String the line down low and tuck it under the carpets so no one will see it.

“Alfredo, go into the rep’s office and find a place to hide a tape recorder. Where it won’t be seen. Then, disable the phone in that office. Don’t just unplug it. Go into the outlet and snip a wire or two, so a new phone can’t just be plugged in if someone discovers it’s out of order. We don’t want anyone else using that office tomorrow. Got it? Then, tomorrow morning, pick up a pair of coveralls.”

“So I’ll look like a repairman?”

“Exactamente. You’ll come in and check the line at lunch-time. Twelve o’clock. That’ll be two hours after I see Federico. The tape should last two hours if we put it on slow speed. Change the tape when you come in at noon, then return at two and four p.m., changing tapes as necessary.”

“Why don’t we put in a bug, just to be sure,” Kelly suggested.

“Can you handle it?”

“Sure. I’ll install it there.” He pointed to a wall outlet near Federico’s desk. “That way, the electricity will power the transmitter.”

Roth nodded. “Good idea. Alfredo, in the morning, you’ll listen from your parked car downstairs. So, when we’re finished here, find a place and leave your car here overnight to guarantee you have a spot near the building in the morning. You can monitor the bug from there.”

Alfredo looked out the window. The streets were deserted, no cars were parked outside the building. Damn, he thought, Roth thinks of everything ahead of time.

As Alfredo and Kelly busied themselves, Roth walked around Federico’s office, taking in the room. Tastefully furnished, probably from one of IO’s executive lines. Expensive-looking paintings, plants – some exotic, needed no sunlight perhaps – a large, soft leather couch, perfect for giving his secretary dictation. No, check that; Federico wasn’t likely galloping his secretary – unless the

secretary's name was Raul or Carlos or Julio.

A large, chrome-and-glass bookshelf lined one wall. Also probably out of IO's inventory. On it were dozens of matching framed photographs. One was of Federico on a beautiful mount, polo mallet in hand. He was a good-looking kid, sure to send a lady's heart aflutter; about six feet tall, trim, light-brown hair with an olive complexion and wide-set eyes.

Another photo showed him and a slightly older man, early thirties maybe, standing on a balcony high above an ocean. They stood next to each other for the camera, a few inches apart, not touching. But the other man's hand was on the railing behind Federico's back, and Federico's left forearm was also behind his back. While it couldn't been seen, Roth would bet they were holding hands. To the casual eye, particularly with women pictured in other shots, the photo seemed innocent enough – a blow-up of good buddies and colleagues. But knowing what Roth did, the photo portrayed a more intimate relationship. The other guy was blond and also good-looking. It was probably Ricardo. Richard Kramer. He was the same height, same trim build, tanned, athletic-looking. Ricardo wore an arrogant, top-of-the-world smirk, an expression that said he had it all and that everyone should know it just from looking at him.

Not surprisingly, Federico's desk was locked. Roth picked the lock, opened it. The desk drawer, like everything in the office, was neat, organized. There was an address book. Roth took this out, went through it and compared these names to his Rolodex. The names in the book didn't appear on the Rolodex, which was obviously for business. He took the address book into the copier room, turned the machine on, and once it was warmed up, copied the entire thing.

Interesting was that in Federico's address book, names like Robert and William, Theodore and Frederick and Richard, Jerold and Norman were written as Bobbi or Willie, maybe Billy, Teddy, and Jeri and Normy – all names gendered to end with a 'y' or 'ie.' Cute.

He looked into the rep's office where Alfredo was installing a tape recorder on a window sill behind a row of heavy filing cabinets. He was squeezed between the backs of the cabinets and the window, struggling to place the recorder just so. For anyone to discover it, they'd have to crawl over five-foot-high cabinets just as Alfredo was doing. To anyone who might be watching from the street below, Alfredo probably looked like a spider splattered up against the glass.

Kelly was drilling the second hole through the sheetrock wall between the copier room and the rep's office. Roth poured a cup of very old, black and bitter coffee, stood at the door and watched Kelly work.

By midnight, they were all back at the Hidalgo. As they entered, the doorman stood aside, eyeing Roth. Another floorwalker and two clerks were at the desk, reading newspapers. There was a shot of

Luis Alcantara plastered across the front page.

They walked back into the cantina. The place was busy for a Wednesday night, a mariachi band working the floor. It was a warm evening, and outside, tables and chairs had been set up on the sidewalk.

They went outside, took a table, ordered pitchers of beer. As they were being served chips and salsa sauce, Señorita Rigor Mortis approached the hotel, appearing out of the darkness. She passed their table, smiled at them – but not Roth – and sashayed inside.

“Marimacho,” Kelly commented, watching her stride.

“Marimacha,” Alfredo added, nodding.

Roth looked over at them. “What are you guys saying?”

“She is a manly woman,” Kelly explained.

“A lesbian, I am certain,” Alfredo put in.

“Oh, jeez, good pick,” Roth muttered to himself, looking down and rubbing his forehead.

Chapter 29

At ten o'clock the next morning, Roth tried the door to Federico's office. It was unlocked. He stuck his head in. Nobody home, but there were papers on the desk, and a large directory that looked like a telephone book was opened on top of a stack of files. Federico had apparently just stepped out.

Juan Solis walked past the room, saw Roth, but made as though he didn't. He didn't know what was going on, and he wasn't sure he really wanted to know.

Roth entered, sat behind Federico's desk.

A minute later, Federico glided into his office, his nose in a file that he carried. He closed the door, started towards his desk, then looked up to see Roth sitting there. He stopped short, thinking he'd walked into the wrong office.

"What...?"

"Come in, Federico," Roth said in a pleasant tone.

"Thank you very much," Federico said, sarcastic. "Who are you, and just what do you think you're doing in my office?"

"Come to see you. Say 'howdy'," Roth said, getting up. He walked around the desk, past Federico, opened the office door just slightly, and motioned his bodyguard and Alfredo forward. In a voice that Federico could hear, he said to the bodyguard, "Pull the garbage truck up to the shipping platform." He reached out and took something from Alfredo. He closed and locked the door, stood in the middle of the office.

"Who are you?" Federico demanded again, more indignant.

"Me? I'm the only guy Elizabeth Taylor never married." He took the body bag Alfredo had handed him, snapped it open on the carpeted floor, knelt down and unzipped it.

Federico sat down, watched what he was doing. "What's that?"

"Body bag." Roth stood up, pulled a leather glove out of his coat pocket, started towards Federico.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Federico grabbed the armrests on his chair.... Body bag? Garbage truck out back?

Roth put the glove on his right hand, working his fingers into the tight leather with his other hand. "I want information, Federico. Now, we can do this the easy way, or we can do it the hard way, which means we'll likely be using the body bag." Roth punched his open hand. "I prefer the hard way, and I'll tell you why. Because I'm working. That fact alone annoys me no end."

He moved around the desk, Federico's eyes alternating between the body bag on the floor and

Roth's gloved fist.

"Also," Roth went on, "I'm where I don't want to be. Haven't taken a serious drink for two weeks, and I don't like Mexican hookers. Of course, none of this makes any sense to you, but the point is, somebody's gotta pay for it." He raised his fist, shot a gloved finger at Federico. "And you're elected."

Federico opened his mouth, started to yell, thought better of it. "Who are you?"

"You know who I am," Roth said, closing in. "Luis Alcantara told you all about me."

Federico's eyes went wide. "Roth!"

If Federico hadn't killed Alcantara or didn't know who did, it was a logical assumption for him to think that Roth had. He'd heard about Roth beating Alcantara's man at the estate. Roth smiled; let Federico think what he wanted. It only made his work all the easier. It wasn't Federico's threatening voice that Roth had heard on the phone the other night. In fact, there was nothing the least bit threatening about the kid. Milquetoast.

Federico reached for his phone. "I'm calling security."

Roth lurched forward and grabbed Federico by his necktie, yanked the receiver from his hand, dropped it back on the cradle. "You fucking simp. I am security." He grabbed Federico's nose in a knuckle vice and twisted it, pushed him down into his high-backed swivel chair to where he teetered on tumbling backwards. He let go of Federico's nose, straddled the chair, twisted the necktie tighter. "Now, here's the way it goes. For each wrong answer, you get a reward: a shot to the head."

Federico grabbed Roth's left wrist with both hands, held tight. Speechless.

Roth cocked his fist. "Let go. Or you earn bonus points."

Federico let go, but couldn't gain equilibrium with Roth hovering over him, balancing his weight only by his necktie.

"Who's blackmailing you?" Roth demanded.

"Blackmailing me...? I don't know what you're talking about. Where did you hear that?"

"That's a question, not an answer. I don't like questions, so you take a shot." Before Federico could ward off the blow, Roth smashed him in the mouth. Federico's head flew back, hit the headrest, bounced back for more. Crimson appeared at the corner of his mouth. He covered his face with one arm, flailed the other to ward off a second blow.

"Next question," Roth announced. "Uh, lemme think." He made a face and pondered. "Oh, yeah: same question." Roth coiled to strike again. "Same penalty for a wrong answer."

"I don't know who it is."

"Who does?"

“My friend. My friend knows.”

“Ricardo?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“What did I tell you about questions? For that, you take another.”

Federico covered his face with his arm. So, Roth punched him in the solar plexus. Federico issued a sharp cry, then wheezed and sucked air as hard as he could, his eyeballs the size of silver dollars.

Roth twirled Federico’s tie around his fist, pulling it even tighter. “Did you see any notes from the blackmailer?”

Federico was making gurgling sounds, turning red. Roth cursed under his breath, loosened his grip on the necktie, but remained hovering over him. Federico coughed, needed to spit up whatever he was choking on. Roth slapped him on the back of the head, told him to spit up on himself. He did. More blood was forming at the edge of his mouth from the first blow. Roth waited until Federico got his wind back, then started again. “Did you actually see any notes?”

Federico shook his head.

“Who’d you give your daddy’s fifty grand to?”

Federico tried again to speak, but couldn’t. He nodded when Roth asked, “Ricardo?”

“Alcantara was investigating the widow for you. Why?”

Federico tried to speak. Really wanted to talk now. Now his nose was running, and his eyes were bloodshot. Roth waited until Federico managed to croak out some choppy words: “She was . . . going . . . to cheat me out of everything.”

“Why do you think that? You’re not in your father’s will, anyhow.”

Federico fixed his eyes on Roth. That Daniel Alvarez was his father wasn’t common knowledge. Roth must have gotten that from Felicia. “No, but he planned for me to take over the company. He never told me as much, but I know that’s what he wanted.”

Roth smiled. “With little Theresa Espada at your side and Ricardo behind you, bumping your buns. That woulda’ made a cute picture. Again, why do you think she’ll cheat you?”

“I think she had my father killed.”

“Why?”

“To get control of the company. She’s going to overpay the Espadas, take a kickback on that, too. But you work for her; you must know all of this.”

“Where are you getting your information?”

“I’m an officer in the company. I know what goes on.” He sneered, his wind returning.

“What did you think of your father?”

Federico looked away. At times, even he didn't know what he'd thought of his father. He started to tear.

“Did you kill him?” Roth demanded.

“No,” Federico blurted. “I would never raise a hand against him.”

“Who did?”

Federico shook his head. “Kidnappers. Felicia's people.”

Roth ignored that. Felicia's people were a bunch of orphans from what he could determine.

Federico had obviously never liked Felicia, but more importantly, the kid didn't strike Roth as capable of running a scam, not to mention a huge conglomerate. That had been wishful thinking on Daniel's part. Hope, after all, springs eternal. But Federico wasn't stupid, so it didn't make sense why he'd suspect Felicia. “You and Ricardo are in the hole, aren't you?”

“I don't know what you mean.”

Roth shook his head. “Now, you know what that gets you, don't you?” He punched Federico in the eye. Not too hard this time. The guy couldn't take hard.

Federico's head reeled back, his hands up to his face. He spat, “Kill me. I don't give a shit, you bastard.”

Roth grabbed Federico's hair, pulled him upright, slapped him open-handed a few times. He saw from the slight nub on Federico's middle finger, right hand, that he wrote with this hand. He opened the drawer, shoved Federico's left hand in, leaned against it. Federico's eyes bugged out and he opened his mouth to scream. But the pain was so excruciating, he couldn't utter a sound.

“Bastard...? Is that what you said?” Roth rapped his knuckles on Federico's skull to ‘Shave and a haircut, two bits,’ like it was a door. Federico covered his head with his right hand.

“Don't give a shit?” Roth asked. “Think this hurts, do you? Next, both hands and your toes go in the drawer. Let's try it again. You and Ricardo think you're a couple of sharpers, don't you? Lost your squeaky butts at the tables, got thrown out of the casinos for counting cards, cheating at cards. What you didn't know was that when the casinos sued you, it appeared in your credit record—under ‘outstanding litigation.’ Just like when you buy a car and don't keep up the payments.”

Federico hadn't known that, but he should have. He should have checked his own credit rating once the trouble began with the casinos.

“The casinos don't send people to break your legs anymore,” Roth continued. “Not compatible with Vegas's new image, what with Mickey Mouse lollygagging up the strip, his hand up Minnie's skirt, and all. So, they sue, like everybody else. Take a write-off, like everybody else.” Roth slapped

him, and Federico covered his face, so Roth rapped on his skull again, and Federico's hands flew back up to protect his head.

"Hey, you're Larry, Curly, and Moe all rolled into one," Roth muttered, repeating the routine. He got bored with that, stopped tormenting the kid. "How much do you owe on gambling debts?" Roth readied to punch Federico again.

"Nearly . . . nearly seventy thousand to the casinos," Federico managed through gritted teeth, close to passing out. He grabbed his left arm, tried to pull his left hand from the drawer.

"And?"

"About the same to a private club."

Roth slid a pen and notepad under Federico's nose. "Write the name down. And the address. What other debts do you have? Gambling or otherwise?"

"Credit cards." Federico managed as best he could against the pain in his left hand to write the name of the club. He was grabbing breaths in spasms, started mouthing a mousey, "Please."

Roth eased off the drawer and Federico yanked his hand out, held it to his chest as though it were a bird with a broken wing, moaning. Roth tore off the sheet with the club's name on it. "Yeah, I know, you're maxed out on your cards. Won't be long before you start embezzling company funds, look around for kickback opportunities. If you haven't already. Why hasn't the club sued?"

Federico shook his head. He had no idea why the club hadn't filed against him as the casinos had. But he'd been getting phone calls. Warnings. Scare tactics. He wondered for the first time if they had been behind the blackmail note. That would be their style. But how would they know about him and Richard? He discarded the notion; even if the club did know about their relationship, no one in the States gave a shit about such things these days, so that gave the club no leverage.

Roth rattled off some numbers. "You're into the casinos for seventy grand, maybe the same amount to this club. Another thirty large on your credit cards. Savings accounts are tapped out. You're in a pile of shit, boy. Sinking deeper."

"I know," Federico murmured, inspecting his left hand.

"Why do you suppose the blackmailer contacted Ricardo, before contacting your father? Why not you?"

"I wondered about that. Ricardo thought maybe he was just easier to reach, being up in LA. He also thought that the blackmailer was going to go after him next."

"Would he care?"

"Not really." Federico shook his head.

Roth took a credit report from his inside jacket pocket, snapped it open. "Ricardo was in to the

casinos for nearly a hundred grand. How much does he owe now?”

“I don’t know. The same, I guess.”

“Wrong, bucko. Not anymore. His slate is clean. You didn’t know that?” He laid the paper on the desk.

Federico looked over it, surprised. “No.”

“Well, shucks, how do you suppose he paid them off?”

Federico’s eyes were tearing. He looked up at Roth, a question on his face, and grimaced as another pain shot through his left hand.

Roth picked up the directory on the desk, idly thumbed through it. It was a manufacturer’s directory, a thousand pages of who made which widgets. “What did Alcantara learn from spying on Felicia?”

“Nothing, really.”

“Who killed Alcantara?”

“Didn’t you?”

Roth closed the directory, weighed it in his hand. Then he swung it with all his might, knocking Federico back in his chair, toppling it over. The guy flipped backwards, did a somersault, crashing against the credenza behind him.

Roth went around the desk, kicked the body bag aside, went over to the bookshelf that held the photo of Federico and Ricardo. He smashed the frame against an edge on the bookshelf, ripped out the photo, stuffed it in his jacket pocket, and tossed the frame at Federico, who was moaning, trying to get up. Federico dodged the frame as it sailed across his desk. He made it to his knees, looked over the desk, holding his head with both hands. Roth opened the door and went out. Standing solemn near the door were the off-duty cop, Juan Solis, and a secretary, probably Federico’s. Roth pulled the glove off his hand, put it in his pocket. The cop didn’t say anything, didn’t care to know what had happened.

“Mr. Blakely needs some aspirin,” Roth told the secretary.

Downstairs, on a side street, Roth found Alfredo in his car. He opened the door, stood with his foot on the runner. The cop stayed on the sidewalk nearby, scanning the area. Alfredo had a headset on, a pocket tape recorder on his lap. He was listening for whatever he could pick up from Federico’s office, his eyes fixed on the turning tape. He glanced up at Roth. He’d heard everything that transpired in Federico’s office, said that after Roth had left, Federico screamed at everyone to leave him alone, even yelled at Juan Solis. And no, he’d hadn’t wanted any fucking aspirin.

“But I think he’s alone now,” Alfredo continued, his hand cupping one of the earpieces. He shrugged at Roth, shook his head. “He didn’t tell you anything, Mike.”

“Yeah. He did. Volumes, in fact. Anyhow, the idea now is to get him to act.” He slapped Alfredo on the back, leaned on the open door. “Okay, the machine recording his calls has a two-hour tape. If he doesn’t call anyone, or doesn’t talk for long, there’s no reason to change tapes every two hours. Just keep track of the minutes he talks.”

Roth closed the car door, nodded to the cop, and they headed for the guy’s car.

Roth was talking with Jorge in the security office, giving him a list of things he wanted the old man to load up when Alfredo returned with his car. Just then, Alfredo appeared in the door. Roth looked at him with a question on his face.

“He left for the day,” Alfredo said. “Took off shortly after you left.”

“Did he meet with anyone in his office or make any phone calls?”

“One call.” Alfredo held up the tape, and smiled. “And it’s interesting. I went up and got the tape, put a new one in, in case he goes back. But I don’t think he will. Listen and you’ll hear why.” Alfredo rewound the tape, started to play it back. Roth looked over at the guards monitoring the consoles. Jorge mimed that one of them understood a little English, so they adjourned into his room, closed the door. Roth and Jorge sat on his bed, and Alfredo pulled up a chair.

“Ricardo. Freddy,” the tape began. Apparently, Federico was ‘Freddy’ to Ricardo. “That bastard Roth was just here. Beat the shit out of me.”

“What! How’d he get into your office?”

“Just walked in. Sat behind my desk. Like he owned the goddamn place. The guy has the run of the place. Juan didn’t say ‘boo’ to him. He just started knocking me around. Said he was gonna kill me. Toss me out in the trash. Had a goddamn body bag with him, Ricky.”

“What?”

“Yeah. He had a body bag with him. No shit. And a garbage truck downstairs that they’d throw my body in. Like I was garbage, Ricardo. Like I was garbage. Trash, Ricardo. Trash.”

Roth rolled his eyes. Federico was sucking all the sympathy he could out of this.

“That rotten bastard,” Ricardo hissed. Then, “Why didn’t you call security?”

“He is security, Ricardo. Duh! Didn’t even introduce himself. He was just there, and started pounding on me.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“You see my face, you’ll believe it.”

“Did he hurt you, babe?”

“No. Ricky,” sarcastic-like. “He came in to give me a facial; a dab of lipstick, a little blush, eyeliner. What do you think? Of course he hurt me. My face looks like hamburger.” Federico sounded

like he was about to cry. From first impressions, you'd never know what a little twerp he was. But now, speaking to Ricardo, he was pathetic. But Roth had reason to know that Ricardo wasn't a pushover.

Roth moved closer when Ricardo spoke.

"He'll pay for this, baby. I guarantee he'll pay," Ricardo swore.

"Never mind me . . . oh, I wish you were here," Federico was definitely sobbing now.

Roth glanced at Jorge, at Alfredo, shook his head. The guy was a dishrag. Whatever made Daniel Alvarez think Federico could run his company? Of course, Daniel had been devastated when he received the blackmailer's note. Maybe deep down, he really knew about his son.

Federico's demeanor changed: "I want to know something, Ricky."

"Yeah, what, hon," Ricardo said, soothing.

"Have you paid off your gambling debts?"

"My—"

"Don't bullshit me, Ricky. I know you have. How did you do that? Where did you get the money?"

"I hit it big at the tables."

"When?" Federico demanded.

"A couple weeks ago. I was going to tell you this weekend—"

"Bullshit. You paid off your debts, but didn't pay anything on mine?"

"I have some cash for you."

"Oh, yeah? Then you also have copies of IRS deductions?"

Jorge leaned forward. He didn't understand what Federico meant. Roth stopped the tape to explain. "If you hit big in the casinos, your winnings are taxed—on the spot—by the casino. Federal income tax, anyhow. If Ricardo could pay off 70,000 dollars, he either hit really big, or he got the money somewhere else."

Roth started to depress the 'pause' button, then added, "At the same time, if you have casino losses, you can deduct those against your winnings at tax time, but only to offset your winnings. So, Ricardo would definitely keep a record of both—his losses and his winnings. That's what Federico wants to see—as proof that Ricardo won money that was taxed."

Jorge was surprised. "You can deduct casino losses from your taxes?"

"Only against winnings," Roth repeated. "But if you lose more than you win...." Roth shrugged. "It's el tougho shitto, as they say in the Mexican Marines."

He started to release the 'pause' button again, but Jorge held up his hand. "That is Federico's voice, for sure, Miguel. But he sounds . . . different."

“Yeah. I know.” Roth chuckled, glancing at Alfredo. Federico sounded like somebody’s bitch. He released the button.

“IRS deductions...? No,” Ricardo said. “I had a run of luck at a number of tables. Nothing big at any one place. Just a lot of hits at roulette.”

“Yeah? Where?”

“Lots of places . . . Luxor, Bellagio, Caesars, the Mirage. Lots of places.”

“Yeah. Right,” Federico challenged. “It’s bullshit, Ricky. When did you do this? I know it wasn’t in the past month. I saw you week before last in LA, and you were down here three weekends ago. So just when did you have a chance to win a hundred grand?”

“Oh, stop it, Mary.”

Jorge wrinkled up his brow, whispered, “Who’s Mary?”

Roth stopped the machine again. “I think it’s what gays call each other when they’re upset, or emotional . . . melodramatic, or on the rag or something.”

“What’s gays?”

Roth glanced at Alfredo, who rolled his eyes away. It was obvious from Federico’s voice that he was the passive partner in the relationship with Ricardo. Squaring-off with Federico in his office, you couldn’t have told that the guy was gay at first, even if he was more handsome than a guy ought to be. But, here, speaking with Ricardo, Federico was yielding, and upset with Ricardo about where he got the money to settle his debts. Alfredo put his head down, hid his smile, leaving Roth to grope for an explanation to the old man. Jorge’s naïveté was humorous.

Roth scratched his head. “Delicately put, Jorge, Federico *él es dulce*.”

“He is sweet...? I do not understand, Miguel.” He stared from Roth to Alfredo. Both just held his eyes, waiting for the dime to drop.

It did, and Jorge was incredulous. “Federico is . . . homosexual?”

“It would appear so.” Roth shrugged. There was no way he could keep Jorge from knowing about Federico. He hit the ‘play’ button again.

“I want to know,” Federico insisted. “I have a right to know. I can’t even pay my rent, I’m being hounded on my credit cards, and there you are, cleaning up your debts.”

“I went over to Vegas one night a few weeks ago.”

“Ran over and came right back?”

“Yeah?” Ricardo didn’t sound very convincing. “You flew over? Or you drove?”

“I flew – no, I drove over.”

Federico apparently realized that if Ricardo had flown, there’d be a record of that. “Well, which

is it?”

“I drove.”

“It’s a five-hour drive each way, Ricky. You’re lying to me.”

“No, I’m not. I took the next day off.”

“Ricky, you’re a very poor liar. We speak every day, and you didn’t say anything to me.”

Before Ricardo could respond, Federico asked, “Who did you go with?”

“I went alone.”

“Now I know you’re lying. You’re telling me that you left work, drove all the way to Vegas alone, won I-don’t-know-how-much money, then drove back? Is that what you’re saying?”

“It doesn’t matter, you fucking twat,” Ricardo snapped. “I said that I have money for you.”

“Well, thanks for telling me.” Federico retreated, sulked. The line went quiet for a few seconds.

“I think Roth killed Luis,” he said finally.

Silence. Then: “What makes you think so?”

“I don’t know. He’s mean enough to.”

“Have the police talked to you about Luis?”

“No. Why should they? They don’t know he was working for us. Unless they’ve found something in his office or he told that slut, Candice. But I told you, some of his men were arrested for stealing. Luis said it was a trumped-up charge that Roth and that old shit, Jorge, had set them up.”

Jorge straightened up, looked like he’d been punched in the face. Roth smiled; it could be gratifying to learn what people really thought of you. In New York, he’d once put a recording switch on his own phone, and it had been enlightening what girlfriends said about him when they were alone in his apartment, gossiping on his line.

“All right,” Ricardo said. “We’ll talk this weekend. Fly directly to San Francisco and I’ll meet you there. Wait. Where are you calling from?”

“My office. Oh, Ricky, I’ll look so terrible for you this weekend, and—”

“Oh, shit,” Ricardo interrupted. “Shut up!”

“What?”

“Shut up and get off the phone.”

“What?” Federico repeated. “Why?”

“Just get off the phone. Call me later. From your place. No. Not from there. Go somewhere else and call me.”

“Why?”

“Think about it, you stupid bitch. Don’t call me from your apartment. You understand?” The line went dead.

Roth, Jorge, and Alfredo were hunching over the tape recorder. They straightened up, looked at each other. Roth turned off the machine. “Okay, Alfredo, I want you to write a transcript of this conversation.”

“Should I go back to his office and collect the bugs?”

“May as well. Ricardo’s wise to bugging, or he just isn’t taking chances. We won’t get anything more from Federico’s line. Same with his home phone. You just heard Ricardo tell him not to even use his home phone.” He turned to Jorge. “Tell the señora you’re taking some time off. Finish packing that gear into Alfredo’s car, and we’re heading out tomorrow.”

“Where to, Miguel?”

“We’re taking Alfredo home.”

Alfredo looked up, surprised. He beamed.

And Roth was smiling, too; his suspicion confirmed—Ricardo was the threatening voice on the phone call to his hotel room the other night.

Chapter 30

By dawn, the trio had driven 100 miles north of Mexico City. Last night, they'd left Alfredo's car at the estate for Jorge to load the things Roth wanted to take with them, and at 4:00 a.m., he picked them up at the Hidalgo.

The night clerk, aware of the altercation in the lobby with the clerk, seemed delighted to be losing Roth's business. He had quickly but nervously tallied their bills.

They stopped at a roadside restaurant in Tepeji, ate breakfast, and as they were finishing, the sun was rising over the mountains to the east.

Roth didn't intend to push it. He just wanted to avoid the monumental traffic congestion of Mexico City. And make certain they weren't followed. In the unlikely event that surveillance devices had been placed on the car overnight, they'd run a check for transponders and other low-tech mechanisms like luminous or ultraviolet wax shoved in a tailpipe that left its spoor on the highway for someone to follow. The vehicle was clean, and on the empty highway, a tail would be obvious. He'd settled with the off-duty cops before leaving, thanked them for their diligence.

As it turned daylight, Roth sat in the back seat and read the latest batch of reports from Nina. The covering letter said that there were still a few dozen names yet to field, and thus far, 194 files had been created. Every Alvarez male relation, eighteen or over, was being checked. He'd discussed about eliminating females with Nina; she didn't think it was necessary. We – meaning women – don't kidnap men, she'd said. "We poison you sonsabitches."

There were less-fortunate family relations, of course, but none were destitute, none poverty-stricken. Most were middle- and upper middle-class, many were wealthy and successful. A few divorces, a dash of mistresses here and there, and modest scandals offset by achievements for others.

Roberto and Maria made uninteresting reading. Roberto was an avid polo player, and was realizing his dream in astrophysics, while Maria seemed interested in fashions. And boys. Both maintained nominal bank balances supplemented monthly by Daniel's older brother, Roberto, who was co-executor on Daniel's estate, and wealthy in his own right.

Roth had told Nina last night to stop faxing the Hidalgo. He'd give her his new location in two days' time. They'd lay over tonight in Zacatecas. With any luck, they'd reach there by evening; have a long, relaxed dinner, and get a good night's sleep before continuing tomorrow morning. It would take two days to reach Juárez. From there, they'd do what they had to, then Alfredo could proceed on to Tijuana alone.

Problem was, neither Jorge nor Alfredo yet knew what they had to do. Roth thought he'd save

that little tidbit for later, when they were in a difficult position to refuse.

The past week came crashing down on all of them, and between taking shifts at the wheel, they dozed off. By the time they arrived in Zacatecas, Roth was wide awake, but Jorge, just waking up, was groggy.

Zacatecas was a beautiful city, with many public buildings and a cathedral dating back 400 years to when the Spanish had discovered silver deposits in the surrounding mountains. Like Ciudad Juárez, revolution had also visited here, and like Juárez, Pancho Villa had also figured in it. But that was a later revolution, the one three years later, in 1914, against Presidente Victoriano Huerta. As Roth had read in Daniel's diaries, Madero had ousted Díaz, and was himself executed by Huerta who was turned out of office after only a year in power. Lots of job turnover in those early days of the twentieth century, with revolution and assassination being the preferred method of layoff.

They found an upscale hotel in Zacatecas whose architecture complimented the venerable structures in the center of town. They checked in, cleaned up, then went down to dinner. Jorge and Alfredo dug into first-rate dishes far superior to the food in Mexico City, but Roth was dry and just noshed on tortillas and salsa sauce, knocking them back with cervezas.

Afterwards, Roth asked if either were up for a little carousing. No surprise that Alfredo wasn't; he'd done most of the driving, and as usual, wanted to call his wife. Roth wondered what, if anything, had taken place between him and delicious little Tessa Mondragon. Aside from reading the first three of Daniel's diaries and handling the technical surveillances, Alfredo had had some free time this past week.

Jorge, wide awake now, wanted to hit a cantina, maybe croon along to a mariachi band. Roth had been to Zacatecas before, didn't think they'd find many shit-kicking joints, and suggested they hop in a taxi and visit the boys' town outside the city limits. Jorge may not have known what 'gay' meant, but he certainly knew what a boys' town was.

Alfredo retired to his room with the ever-mounting stack of background investigative reports, while Roth and Jorge were drinking cervezas in a small village on the outskirts of town, fifteen minutes from their hotel. Roth drank hard and fast, and uncharacteristically reached an inebriated condition fast. He began expounding on the virtues of such places to Jorge, for this zoned hamlet had some twenty establishments whose caliber ranged from cantinas to dives, all patrolled by floosies whose sole purpose in life was making men happy. A entire town devoted to sin and whoring was, in his humble opinion, a hallmark of civilization. Similar perhaps to ancient Rome, a society openly devoted to bacchanalia and debauchery, which, so far, outlasted the United States of America by at least 400 years. Conjugal visitations for Mexican prisoners was also a humanitarian feat of no small virtue, he lectured

Jorge, while American prisons only offered backdoor entertainment for its guests. Jorge followed little of what Roth rambled on about, and indeed, Roth had been surprised that Jorge wanted to tag along in the first place. More surprises from the old ranchero came when he bought drinks for a plump, lively bargirl pushing forty, finally taking her to a room at the back of the joint. The woman was energetic, with an impressive caboose, and if ol' Jorge could do her, power to him, Roth thought. He'd tossed Jorge a few condoms, but the old vaquero reminded him that he was quite capable of riding bareback. If the old boy ever heard of sexually transmitted diseases, he never let on.

Roth meandered around to a few other joints, finally selected a petite hustler and convinced her to recruit a girlfriend. Taking them back to the hotel wasn't allowed, but one of the girls lived nearby, and reserved her place for special occasions, rather than using the seedy rooms in back of the cantinas. And a well-heeled gringo constituted a special occasion. They disappeared into the night with two six-packs, a couple bottles of tequila, and a bag of limes.

Roth crawled back to the hotel at around 8:00 a.m. Alfredo and Jorge had finished breakfast and were waiting to head out. Roth, his head the size of the Bridgestone dirigible, went up to his room, showered, and came back down with his grip. He stopped by the newspaper kiosk in the hotel's courtyard, bought a couple of packs of cigarettes and a small jar of Vicks VapoRub. He doubted he could hold down a breakfast, so they packed themselves into the car and started for Juárez.

A few miles outside town, Roth had Alfredo pull the car over. He got out and spent ten minutes trying to hurl. But tequila is famous for causing dry-heaves. No luck. After that, Roth forced himself to help with the driving. After a late lunch on the road, he felt better.

Fourteen hours after leaving Zacatecas, they reached Ciudad Juárez. It was too late to visit the Alvarez ranch, so they found a hotel. It was Friday night, and Roth estimated that by this time, Federico and Ricardo had flown up to San Francisco, knowledge of their itinerary being compliments of Roger Schiff, whose information was spot on. The dirt on Ricardo seemed endless. A lot of it was record information, free for the asking. Or rather, free if you knew where to scratch around.

He left Jorge and Alfredo down in the hotel restaurant, and in his room went through the photocopies he'd taken of Federico's address book. He found a dozen names listed in the Bay Area. Friends and acquaintances of Federico and Ricardo. He noted those numbers, then turned in.

Big day tomorrow.

Chapter 31

Juárez is situated at the very top of Chihuahua State, just across from El Paso, Texas, on the southern reaches of the Rio Grande. New Mexico is a few miles to the northwest, and these three points are intersected by the river.

Before heading for Guadalupe, the nearest town to the ranch, Roth told Alfredo that he wanted to take a pass by the old Customs House in which, from reading a guide map, he'd learned had been converted into a museum. It was at Avenida 16 de Septiembre and Avenida Juárez.

At that intersection, Alfredo pulled his car to the curb. Roth was in the back, while Jorge rode shotgun. Jorge had been here a few months ago when they'd taken Daniel's body out to the ranch, but he hadn't had a chance to see what changes Juárez had undergone. Before that, he couldn't remember how many years had passed since he'd walked these streets. "Back then, I came here every week," he said. "We would hit the cantinas. Get drunk, and then visit the girls. We only had Saturday night for that. And had to be in church on Sunday morning. No exceptions. All week, we looked forward to going out Saturday night. And each Sunday morning, we regretted it." He looked around. "Much has changed."

Roth was trying to determine where the Rio Grande Hotel had been, and if there had been a plaza, it was long gone, probably part of the widened streets. He reckoned if they turned north on Avenida Juárez, they'd run into where the stables had been. Of course, they'd be gone now, too.

The Customs House, now the Museo Histórico de Ciudad Juárez, had been refurbished. But there it stood, a beautiful relic dominating the block.

"This is where Alejandro foiled the assassination attempt on Francesco Madero," Roth told them.

Jorge whipped around in his seat, surprised to hear this from Roth. "You know that story, Miguel?"

"Jorge," Roth began, scanning an English language newspaper at a curbside newsstand. "I have neglected to tell you something. I know everything from the beginning of time, until the end of time. Things that haven't even been learned, found, or discovered yet, I know. I learned these things from the great one-eyed oracle of the Nile as we stood upon its sandy shores one balmy day, contemplating our navels, munching down pizza, and pissing into said Nile."

Jorge screwed up his face, and Alfredo turned around and stared at Roth. Neither had a fucking clue what he was on about. "How do you know this, Miguel?" Jorge asked. "And about the saddle?"

"I'll tell you later." The newspaper headline read that five men and a woman had been found murdered, their bodies dumped into an abandoned Chevy Suburban, wrapped in blankets. Drug deal

gone bad, no doubt. Nothing had changed in Juárez in that regard; a lot of violent people here. “All right, Alfredo, let’s head for Guadalupe. Point the way, Jorge.”

The road leading southeast to Guadalupe was probably the same dusty trail that Alejandro had traveled in 1911. The old general had spoken about how it ran parallel to the Rio Grande most of the way to Juárez, so this had to be it. It was paved now, but that hadn’t improved much; sections were potholed and nearly covered by sand from winds kicking up out of the desert.

Locals stopped what they were doing and studied them as they drove by, slowing down for chickens, potholes, burros. Not many people passed this way. Jorge pointed out features as they passed. “The original ranch ran in sections on both sides of the road and, if you didn’t know its boundaries, you could be on the Alvarez property and not even know it. The general sold thousands of acres as the cattle ranches began to disappear, and Eduardo sold off more in the 1960s and 70s. After all these years, it is difficult even for me now to know what is, and is not, Alvarez land.”

Guadalupe was a border town 25 miles southeast of Juárez, consisting of a few buildings at a single intersection. As the saying went, you’d miss the place if you blinked driving by. They passed a beer stall cum bus stop where a small band of men congregated outside, sitting on an old trailer bed in the shade of a two-story building. The men studied them, talking amongst themselves. Jorge recognized one of them. He pointed the guy out, muttered “Bad hombre, that one.”

“Take us to the hacienda, Jorge. You know where it is?”

“Of course. We employ two rancheros who live nearby, in Praxedis. An old friend, Rico, and his nephew. They watch the property, although there is little to watch these days.”

“What do they do, then?”

Jorge shrugged. “Custodians, really. They keep an eye on things, watch the hacienda, make a circuit ride every now and then. Occasionally, there are stray livestock. And there’s an old landing field to watch over. There are also many old dwellings that may be squatted from time to time; migrants coming up from the south, trying to sneak into Texas. We keep them off the property. Another concern is that the landing field isn’t used for anything illegal.”

“Like drugs?”

Jorge nodded. “That, and illegals. Between here and Ojinaga, a hundred miles to the south, where you can cross the Rio Grande into Presidio, illegals try to enter the States. Many die in the desert, Miguel, betrayed by the desperados who charge them money, much money, and promise to get them into Texas. But sometimes, they just take them into the desert and abandon them, even kill them.”

Roth asked, “How much of this area right here is Alvarez land?”

“I don’t exactly know anymore. Maybe our surveyor knows. At one time, there was perhaps a

million acres.”

Roth whistled.

“Yes,” Jorge said. “A lot of land. Too much to watch. Rico and his nephew cover most of it in a truck, but for some places, they need horses.”

“You have horses?”

“Sí. Many. Rico keeps them in Praxedis. Sometimes, Texans come over and rent the horses.”

“What for?”

Jorge made a face. “Dancing, Miguel. They take the horses dancing. What one usually does with horses.”

“Well, pardon me, all to hell.” Roth chuckled; it was the old vaquero’s turn to put one over on the city slicker.

“They will ride out to the desert, and camp. Perhaps for a few days. How do you say in el Norte . . . kick back.”

A few miles on, they came to a dirt road leading off to the west. There was an old, battered signpost: ‘Alvarez Camino.’ From here on, Jorge said, they were definitely on the Alvarez ranch. They turned in and bumped along a dusty drive for a dozen miles, according to the odometer. Over a rise, a valley spread out beneath them, and several miles further, they could see the old hacienda. As they got nearer, Roth could discern that part of the home depicted in the painting. But there had been an extension added on since. Old oaks surrounded the hacienda, keeping most of the property in the shade.

The front of the home was surrounded by a six-foot concrete wall, but the sides and rear, where there was still any wall remaining, had been constructed of adobe. Alfredo drove in through the open gate.

The home was closed and boarded up, un-lived in for more than ten years. Dust covered everything, and for this reason, windows and doors had been shuttered.

“It must have been beautiful,” Roth said.

“Oh, sí. Bello. Very beautiful,” Jorge replied. He looked around for long moments before getting out of the car. Like he wasn’t sure he wanted to.

“Why don’t the rancheros live here?” Roth asked.

Jorge looked indignant. “It is not their home. Only the Alvarez family can live here.”

“Well, pardon me all the way to Shitsville,” Roth said.

“It is not only that, Miguel. There is no power, and these days, people cannot live without electricity. They must have their television.”

“Can’t someone turn it on?”

Jorge looked at Roth as though he was daft. “Do you see power lines? Telephone lines, even? There is no electricity, Miguel. Except for an emergency generator, there never was power,” Jorge said with some pride. “Not even for the wells. Everything was done by hand. Kerosene lamps, wood-burning fireplaces, the wells. We took from the earth what was there for us. And there was plenty.” Jorge shook his head. “The general would not allow those telephone contraptions here. But he once had a ham radio, took it up as a hobby in his later years.” He pointed to a large shed set off from the home. “There is an old generator there. Actually, the entire compound was wired from the generator. Eduardo did that. When Daniel was an infant.

“But the lights were never turned on. Alejandro never wanted it, never liked it. Hated the noise the generator made, was going to move it further back. A hundred miles further back, he would say. He’d also built Cuernavaca in Mexico City by that time, and said that if the family wanted electricity, they could go there and find it. But when he grew too old to remain out here, he came and stayed in Mexico City most of the time. Took me with him. Back and forth. Forth and back. The old man wasn’t sure where he wanted to die.”

They got out of the car and walked around the outside of the home. It was a huge, one-story building, but the roofs were high, and arcades surrounded the front and sides of the home. In the rear, rooms belonging to the ghosts of servants stood open. Many no longer had doors.

“Can we get in?” Roth asked.

“He died here,” Jorge talked on, not answering Roth’s question. “The general. He knew his time had come, and decided finally to die here. Not many of us can do that these days.”

He went in through a back way, which led to an interior door. He banged here and there, called for Alfredo to bring a flashlight. Alfredo went back to his car, retrieved a heavy-duty, six-volt emergency light from his trunk, and went in behind Jorge. Roth followed, and after more banging, they entered into the bowels of the hacienda.

It was pitch black inside, and despite the care taken to shuttering the place up, a fine dust had settled throughout the home over the years. They passed through a massive kitchen, where there’d been open-flame cooking hearths and brick ovens stoked with wood. Beyond that, they entered a dining room, where an old walnut table dominated a tremendous space. The table had once seated forty people. Roth admired the old monster; with a lot of stripping and woodwork, it could be restored. Many chairs were missing from around the table, but those remaining were heavy cast-iron and leather in a Castilian design. With high, vaulted ceilings, the darkened place was cooler than Roth thought possible. He guessed that it was around ninety degrees outside, maybe eighty in here. If the windows were open for the breeze, the temperature would drop further. He thought of this afternoon’s work, and didn’t look

forward to it. What was gone should stay gone.

“The general outlived his wife and most of his friends,” Jorge said. “As he got older, fewer people came here, and with me and a servant, we lived alone when we were here.” Jorge looked around, lost in his memories. “But I told you that, didn’t I?”

There were fireplaces throughout the home, even in the bedrooms, the largest being in the living room under a ten-foot-high mantle of huge rocks. The slate floor-tiles, still in excellent condition, echoed as the men stumbled close together, since Alfredo had the only light source.

As they worked their way back towards the light in the kitchen, Roth thought that even without power, the hacienda would still make a fabulous home if someone cared to bother, and preferred the slow pace of ranch life.

“Where did you live, Jorge?”

“Me? Come and I will show you. We cannot see it from here.” They crossed back through the kitchen, through another dining area in the rear, this one for the wranglers, where meals for dozens were prepared. Outside, Jorge replaced a plywood sheet he’d torn away.

Going back around to the front of the home, they piled into the car, and Jorge directed Alfredo a half-mile up and over a ridge that overlooked a small valley.

Below the ridge, some adobe structures were set amidst a clump of trees. As they coasted the car down the hill, the hacienda disappeared from view behind them.

One of the buildings was a long bunkhouse that had housed thirty or so wranglers at a time. A large section of the roof had burned, much of it collapsed into the building. Jorge stopped short and scratched his head. “Qué pasa? What has happened here?” he uttered.

“Looks like a fire,” Roth said the obvious.

“Sí. But when? We have not heard of this.”

Next to the burned-out bunkhouse was a smaller, three-room adobe building. Jorge cursed furiously under his breath in Spanish, and then, for Roth’s benefit: “Squatters have been here. Very careless and not very polite ones.” He swore again, got out of the car, and approached the building slowly, pulling his .45 from under his shirt.

Roth put his hand on his .45 also, but didn’t really see the need. There should be nothing threatening about squatters. Besides, the place looked deserted. He and Alfredo got out of the car.

The door of Jorge’s old quarters was locked from the outside with a combination lock. Jorge cursed again, banged on the door with his fist. “They have locked it. This is not my lock. He looked through the window on one side of the door, and Roth and Alfredo peered through the other window. The glass was dirty, and Roth used his sleeved elbow to wipe off the grime.

“Someone was staying here,” Jorge said.

From what Roth could see, the space inside looked neat, if a bit primitive. Jorge was frustrated that he couldn't enter. He looked around for something to force the lock off, asked Alfredo to fetch a tire iron. Alfredo obliged, and Jorge placed the bar in the ring of the lock and easily forced it open. Inside, the place didn't look as neat as it had through the windows. There was hard, caked mud left by shoes across the slate floor. The place was furnished with old chairs and a wooden table crafted by hand, an easy chair and foot rest in front of a small fireplace. Beer and tequila bottles were scattered around, and in the small bedroom there was mud from shoes caked on the old mattress.

“Yes. Some pigs have stayed here,” Jorge confirmed.

“How long ago?” Roth asked.

Jorge wiped his hand across the easy chair and table. “Not for months, I think.” He tucked his .45 back into his waistband and moved through the place, appraising what might have been taken, or what the squatters had left. There were newspapers on the floor, some of which had been used in the fireplace.

Roth picked them up. They were dated December of last year. Whoever had squatted here was at least literate. Double-A batteries were scattered on the floor beneath the table. He knelt down and picked one up. It looked used, judging from minute scratches on the points. He started to stand up, but something else in the corner caught his attention. It was a strip of metal staples. Hello! He nearly touched the strip, thought better of it, took out his handkerchief, and with that, picked it up.

He stood and placed it on the table, went over to the newspapers, picked them up by sliding his pinkie fingers in the folds. Alfredo was leaning against the door jamb, not paying particular attention.

“Jorge,” Roth called.

Jorge stopped going through the cabin, looked at him. The old guy was angry. “Qué?” he snapped.

“Don't look for what's missing. Look for anything that shouldn't be here.”

“People should not be here,” he returned, bad-tempered.

“Aside from that. What's here that they might have brought with them?”

Jorge motioned to the empty bottles that littered the place. “Those shouldn't be here.” He started to pick up a cluster of bottles that had been thrown into the fireplace. Some, but not all, had been broken.

“Don't touch them, Jorge,” Roth ordered.

Jorge froze mid-bend, looked back at Roth. He straightened up.

Roth turned to Alfredo. “When did Daniel disappear?”

Alfredo thought. "November twenty-seventh."

"And his body turned up at the border on December tenth. Right?"

"That's correct."

"How often does Rico check the hacienda, Jorge?"

"There is no schedule, but once, maybe twice a month, I would think."

"Does he check these buildings down here?"

"Apparently not, Miguel. But he should."

"These shacks can't even be seen from the hacienda, can they?"

"No. Not unless you drive up to the top of the knoll." Jorge pointed to the rise they'd just come over. "Rico could not see my old house and the bunkhouse from the hacienda."

"Can you find Rico?"

"I will definitely find him. He works during the day at a garage in Praxedis. We passed it coming down from Juárez. His nephew, I don't know where he works. But they'll be around Praxedis later. Lunch-time, for sure."

Roth looked at his watch. It wasn't yet 10:00 a.m. "Take the car and find them. Bring them here. Can you round up three or four more guys?"

"Certainly, Miguel. There is not much work for people out this way. You saw the men back on the road. They wait for what, they don't know. Maybe just to get old and die."

"Okay, take off. Get back as soon as you can. We got a lot to do today."

When Jorge left in Alfredo's car, Roth and Alfredo continued looking around the old cabin. Roth picked up more newspapers off the floor, using a twig from the fireplace.

"Mike, why so cautious? You can't lift prints from a newspaper."

"Yes, you can, Alfredo. With iodine fumes and heat, you can lift fingerprints left on paper from decades before."

"Oh. Sorry. I didn't know that."

When Roth had seen everything in Jorge's old cabin, they ambled over to the bunkhouse. Although it was one long, low building, it was divided into small rooms, each about twelve by fifteen feet. Each had bunked four men, and each had its own front and back doors, with no connecting doors between the rooms. The doors didn't seem particularly sturdy, and some stood wide open. But for others, it was necessary to break them in, and it took both men and a lot of muscle to do it. They went through all the rooms, and when they finished, plopped down in the shade outside the last door, breathing heavily and sweating profusely.

"I wonder," Alfredo said. "Do you suppose Jorge has keys for these rooms?"

Roth caught Alfredo from the corner of his eyes, and goombahs Tank and House came to mind. He laughed at his own stupidity.

There'd been nothing of interest in any of the rooms, or in the cook shed behind the bunkhouse. In one of the rooms, Roth had found an old straw hat that miraculously hadn't been touched by fire. He put it on, and it fit. It gave protection against the scorching sun.

"You look like a peon."

"I feel like a peon. Sí, I am very tired now, senyoor. I weel go to work tomorrow. If I have time to work in work. But I 'tink I said that yesterday. And the day before. Maybe mañana I weel say eet again."

Alfredo shook his head at Roth's pitiful act.

They sat for a while, watching the heat waves of the desert beyond the buildings. The place seemed timeless; a minute could feel like an hour, an hour like a day. Living out here could stretch a lifetime into eternity. Their eyes fell on a scorpion scratching its way over a moon-like surface, inching its way toward them, to get into the shade where they sat. Roth thought how its world was like the landscape of a pebbled furnace. He picked up a loose mud brick to crush the creature, but thought better of it.

Alfredo nudged him. "Don't chance it, Mike. Better use your .45."

They laughed and Roth threw the brick away, kicked pebbles at the scorpion. It halted, turned around several times, perhaps indignant, then crawled away in the direction it came from.

A common toilet and wash house lay further back behind the bunkhouse. Roth pointed it out. "May as well check that, too," he said, standing.

"I'll do it," Alfredo volunteered, picking himself up, dusting off the seat of his pants. He walked over to the toilet, put his shoulder to the door, but it didn't give. He rammmed against it repeatedly, but just bounced off each time.

"Give it hell," Roth urged. Damn, but a beer would be great right now. Maybe Jorge would think to bring some back. He took off his straw hat, mopped his sopping wet head with a bandana.

Just then, Alfredo butted the door harder and yelped as it caved in, him on top of it. Roth cracked up, then rose and started up the knoll towards the hacienda, where they'd wait for Jorge. He was halfway up when he glanced back, called for Alfredo to catch up. Alfredo had gotten up, and was standing outside the toilet. He was covered in soot, his faced blackened from charred debris.

Roth called back, "What'd you do, amigo? Fall into a shitter?" He kept walking up the hill, thinking that when Jorge returned with the help, he'd have them fan out and search the area. He hadn't planned on looking for anything except in Daniel's grave. But the newspapers, batteries, and staples

found in Jorge's old quarters suggested there was a lot more out here. The newspapers were dated a few days after Daniel had been kidnapped, and Double-A batteries might have been used to power a small radio. Something to keep up with the news. But the strip of staples...?

Something made Roth stop. He turned around to see Alfredo still standing down there, outside the toilet, looking lost. Then he heard the flies buzzing.

Chapter 32

Arson hadn't destroyed the evidence. The perpetrators were inept amateurs to believe that it could. Dried blood covered the walls in the toilet, and was literally caked on those parts of the floor that they could see. It looked like someone had painted the toilet red with blood. But the sanguine coating had long ago turned black, baked onto the dirt floor and adobe walls by the sun that pounded this part of the building. A blackened industrial stapler was partly exposed from under burnt timbers, and strips of staples were strewn around. Hundreds of strips. In a few places, bloody fingerprints were visible. The ghouls who'd done this had taken no precautions. To keep Daniel company while he'd been alive, his feces were caked in the dirt. Even after all these months, the dried blood stank to heaven, and the place swarmed with a thousand gorged bluebottle flies.

Roth didn't want to contaminate the crime scene, so he touched nothing. Alfredo had also seen more than enough, and looked a little pale, didn't care to investigate further. Roth thought, that's just a prelude to what comes next, Alfredo, ol' boy.

According to the autopsy report, Daniel Alvarez had bled to death, his blood all but drained from him. He'd also been caked in feces. He'd lost considerable weight. Roth thought how the wooden box containing Daniel's body had had mud and feces in the bottom, but his body had been relatively free from dirt and grime. But of course: post-mortem, from the immense heat inside the crate, his body had dehydrated, washing away much of the filth. When his corpse had been removed from the crate, medicos reported that portions of his flesh were watery and had peeled away from his musculature like old skin from a rotten potato.

There are approximately five quarts of blood in the adult male. And most of Daniel's was here in the toilet. Roth was torn between safeguarding the scene and getting to a phone. He decided they'd wait up at the hacienda, where they could watch several miles of the road leading onto the property, wait for Jorge to return. They started back up the knoll when they heard an engine and gears changing, and saw dust clouds over the rise.

Roth stopped to listen. "Must be Jorge."

"I don't think so," Alfredo replied. "It doesn't sound like my car."

Roth backed down the hill and told Alfredo to stop. Alfredo turned back, just as an old pickup truck rattled to a halt at the top of the rise, kicking up dust. The vehicle sat there, its engine idling.

"Probably Rico," Alfredo started up again.

"After all these months, they just now decide to check down here?" Roth questioned. "What are the odds? Stay put. Let them come to us."

But the pickup just sat there, engine running, a rusted fender partly torn from the body vibrating loudly. Whoever was in it was just watching them.

“How many people in the cab?” Roth asked. The sun reflected off the windshield, but even without that, the glass was covered with dust except for the half-moon made by a single windshield wiper. Roth backed further down the hill, told Alfredo to do the same. If it was Rico and his nephew, having missed Jorge on the road, they’d call out, ask what Roth and Alfredo were doing here.

But the pickup still didn’t move. Roth turned around and withdrew his .45 from his waist, racked a round, and turned back, holding the pistol behind his back.

“I can’t see inside, Mike.”

“Could be bandidos.”

Just then, two men bolted out of the pickup from both doors. They were carrying rifles, and they separated, widening their distance from the truck. The driver went down on his belly, assuming a prone firing position, as the other man aimed his rifle.

“Take cover,” Roth yelled.

Alfredo turned, nearly fell, and started running just as a shot rang out. The round struck the ground just beyond them, having zipped past Alfredo. It was no warning shot. Alfredo was the closest, and had he not been moving, would be lying there with a bullet in his chest.

Alfredo yelped as a second pop hit the bunkhouse just as he ducked inside the toilet. Roth, furthest away, had flown for cover, zigzagging around the other end of the long building.

“Alfredo,” Roth called out. “Is there a back door in there?”

“No,” Alfredo shouted back.

“Then scramble over that wall, pronto. These guys probably know there’s no back door, and you’ll be trapped in there.”

Another round popped and rang off of the bunkhouse, somewhere close to Roth this time. He heard Alfredo scurrying over some corrugated steel from the collapsed roof, and then drop to safety at the rear of the structure. Alfredo jumped up and ran to where Roth was. Out of instinct, both looked behind them at the desert. Heat waves bounced off the horizon, distorting the landscape. There was no retreat. Nowhere to run. The ground was flat, open prairie, and if they made a run for it, the men up on the knoll would hop back into the pickup and run them down, picking them off.

“Fire at them, Mike. Shoot!”

“No.” Roth shook his head. The men on the knoll were 200 yards away, and a .45 wouldn’t hit anything at that distance. “Too far.”

“It would scare them off, Mike.” Alfredo sounded desperate. He moved closer to Roth, limping a

little from having landed wrong.

“It doesn’t work that way, Alfredo. They’d know we only have a pistol. I’d rather they think we have nothing, save it as a little surprise. Get those sonsabitches closer.”

“No. Return fire and they’ll run away. We don’t want them closer!”

“Yeah, we do.” Roth dropped to the ground, peeked around the corner. The driver was in his same position, but the other man was advancing down the hill towards the bunkhouse, cocking his rifle and firing from the hip. No rush. Taking his sweet ol’ time. Having fun, popping rounds out of the lever-action rifle, waist high. And he probably had plenty of rounds. Roth had no idea how many rounds lever-action rifles held.

Alfredo moved up close to Roth. More shots rang out. The driver, still in prone firing position, was shooting faster now. Several of his rounds struck the other end of the bunkhouse; so apparently, they hadn’t seen Alfredo tear over the wall, and assumed he was still in the toilet. But the other shooter’s rounds struck this end of the building. Aside from the deadly thud of the bullets, the shooters had no targets. They were firing blind, just throwing out ammunition. The guy on the knoll was holding down the position while Cowboy, shooting from the hip, would be doing the killing when he got up close. It was encouraging, actually; they were overconfident, making a game out of this. Once they got within pistol range, together or separate, they’d start to lose their advantage because they assumed their targets weren’t armed. Still, a reliable range for a .45 was a mere fifty feet, at best. In Roth’s hand, anyhow. He was a good shot with a .45, but Sergeant York he wasn’t, so he wanted the bastards closer. Right in his face. Preferably one, then the other. He felt his hip pocket for a second magazine. He had five rounds in the .45 and another five rounds in that. He’d left a third magazine in the car. So, ten rounds in all. If he kept his head, he’d only need two.

Suddenly, it was quiet. They must be on the move, Roth thought. He eased forward for a better look. The man on the knoll was standing now, but not firing, while Cowboy had reached the bottom of the rise, still coming their way. He was reloading, carrying the rifle in a high port position, dipping into his jacket for rounds and alternating his attention between what he was doing and where he was walking. Straight at them. Why not; the dummy assumed Roth and Alfredo defenseless. He finished reloading, began firing again at a distance of fifty yards, his rounds striking everywhere, haplessly aimed. Hip-shooting was about the dumbest thing he could have done. Roth waited . . . ten, fifteen feet closer . . . and he knelt, took aim, and supported the .45 on his other hand, ready to squeeze off a round, take the dumb sonofabitch down with one well-aimed shot. “This cowboy’s a goner,” he muttered, starting to aim.

Alfredo groaned. “Shoot him. Shoot. Shoot.”

A second later, the man on the knoll yelled, and ran for the pickup. Cowboy looked back, but kept advancing towards Roth. Then he stopped in the middle of a cocking action as the pickup's horn sounded. The truck was moving now, the horn blaring. It coasted down the hill at a ninety-degree angle to the bunkhouse. Cowboy just stared at his companion bugging out. Now. Roth ran out, straight at Cowboy, his .45 aimed at his torso. Cowboy's back was to him now, and he was yelling something at the driver. He turned around and was surprised to see Roth rushing him, an automatic pistola aimed at his chest. He froze. Roth closed to within ten feet. A blind man couldn't miss from here. There was no way Cowboy could complete the lever action and fire a round before Roth popped one into him. Cowboy started backing up, didn't raise his rifle, but wouldn't drop it.

"Freeze, you sonofabitch," Roth commanded.

But Cowboy kept backing away. Then, he did drop his rifle, turned and ran after the pickup that was rolling away. Roth shouted again, raised his pistol over his head and fired a round. No effect; Cowboy was skedaddling as fast as his legs could carry him.

Roth screamed a curse, but didn't fire again. Alfredo ran up behind him, scooped the rifle off the ground. He completed the lever action, aimed the weapon at Cowboy, who was chasing the pickup that showed no signs of slowing down.

"What's happening, Mike?" Alfredo asked. He didn't fire the rifle, just dropped it from his shoulder.

"Damned if I know." Roth made a face.

The reason for the pair's flight became apparent as Jorge's car, followed by another vehicle, flew over the top of the knoll. The cavalry had arrived. That's why the pickup driver had freaked.

Roth and Alfredo watched the battered pickup buck along the prairie, seemingly headed nowhere, just away from the scene as fast as it could. Cowboy was running after it, chasing his ride in hot pursuit. His hat flew off, and a half-mile out, the pickup slowed, and Cowboy caught up, jumped into the cab.

"Why didn't you shoot him?" Alfredo asked.

Roth shook his head. Shooting Cowboy could have meant jail time down here in Mexico. Regardless of the circumstances. He would have been in the clink waiting for a hearing. Weeks, probably. Maybe with bail; maybe not. Not would be his bet, since he was a gringo, and it would be easy for him to jump back across the border, even if the Mexican authorities held his passport.

Jorge screamed to a stop at the bottom of the knoll, kicking up dust. The pickup truck behind him, containing Rico and his nephew, also hit the brakes hard, almost running into Jorge. Soon, the area was choked with dust. Roth and Alfredo moved away from the clouds of dirt as Jorge jumped out, came

running over.

“I heard the shooting, and started honking my horn,” he said.

They watched the pickup rocking over the plain, nearly distorted now by the heat bouncing off the desert. It left a dust trail in its wake that you could see for miles. “The driver saw me and ran for the truck.” Jorge was excited, and not a little nervous.

“Good thing he did, Jorge. Somebody was gonna die for sure.” Roth, shaken now that it was over, cursed with regret. “I should’ve nailed that sonofabitch. Regardless of what happened afterwards.”

“I saw those men outside Praxedis,” Jorge reported. “They took great interest in me. I think they knew I’d come from the ranch. They were keeping an eye on me, and when they left, I had a feeling they were heading this way.”

Rico and his nephew came over. Rico, the ranchero in charge of the place, was in his late sixties, up around Jorge’s age. He also carried a lever-action rifle, and looked bewildered by the fire damage to the bunkhouse. There’d probably been words between the two old men about Rico not checking this area of the ranch.

“Get their plate, by any chance?” Roth asked Jorge.

“Sí. Of course.” He shrugged. “But they will just change it.” Plates down here meant nothing. By law, plates had to be on a vehicle, but few people understood or cared that vehicles actually had to be registered, so they just slapped on any plates they found. “This is the border, Miguel. But people around here should know about them. They didn’t just happen to be here.”

“Right,” Roth confirmed. “No one knew we were coming, not even you and Alfredo. So we were either followed – very unlikely – or those guys are local. Probably scum recruited in Juárez.”

Roth told Alfredo to drive out on the flat and pick up Cowboy’s hat. The gunman’s initials might be in it. He motioned for Jorge to follow him over to the toilet. “Prepare yourself, my friend.”

Jorge’s eyes held his, then shifted towards the toilet. He edged up to the doorway and slowly leaned in for a peek.

Roth lit a cigarette, and Jorge turned back. “You knew they had Daniel here?”

Roth shook his head. “I hadn’t even considered it, Jorge. That’s not why we’re here.” When Alfredo returned with Cowboy’s hat, they left Rico and his nephew with the rifles to keep watch over the ranch and the toilet in particular. They drove back to the highway in Alfredo’s car. They entered Guadalupe, where they stopped at a Pemex gas station.

He told Jorge to round up at least four more men, preferably with a vehicle, and to also circulate and inquire about the desperados in the pickup. Then he called John Byrd in Guadalajara,

Byrd was at home. Roth reported what they’d found, and told Byrd to line up his ducks and get

some people out here, pronto. Byrd was excited that, after all these months, there was break in the case. He took down the directions to the Alvarez ranch, and Roth described the gas station where they were and the name of their hotel back in Juárez, where they'd be staying again tonight. Byrd would try to meet him there, but in any event, he'd have the authorities on hand.

Next to the gas station was a cantina, of sorts. Roth went in, looked around, called out. An old lavandera who was ironing clothes shuffled around from behind a curtain, crossed the floor to the food section, and rustled up a plate for him of the only thing she had on the stove – rice and frijoles. The food was cold, but not to worry; the old gal found a piss-warm beer to keep it company.

Shortly, Alfredo came along and reported. No one knew anything about the men in the pickup, but Jorge had come across them in Praxedis, five miles down the road.

“Rico didn't get a good look at them,” Roth said. “Maybe he'd know them if he did.” As he was finishing his meal, Jorge drove up. Another pickup loaded with five more men in the truck bed followed. Alfredo ordered rice and beans, but took an ice-cold Coca-Cola from a tub of ice instead of a warm beer. Guy wasn't stupid. Jorge joined in on this smörgåsbord, and later, as they readied to leave, Jorge asked where they were going next.

Now came the bad part of their visit to this area. “Take me to Daniel's grave.”

As Jorge was turning to go back outside, he suddenly realized why Roth had him load shovels into the trunk of Alfredo's car. He wheeled around. “No,” he shouted. “You cannot do this.”

“There's no other way, Jorge. I'm sorry.”

“It is illegal,” Jorge argued. “We will need a paper from the court. And for that, we must have the señora's permission first.”

“Help me, Jorge. Or go home.”

Alfredo stood aside. What Roth planned was indeed illegal, not to mention irreverent, and he couldn't imagine why Roth wanted to do this. But Roth was his boss, had been right all along, and was just as stubborn as old Jorge. “We have to, Jorge,” he agreed with Roth.

Jorge whipped around to him. “No. Alfredo,” he insisted. “We dare not.”

Alfredo brushed past him, going outside. “I'll find out where he's buried, Mike.”

Roth caught Alfredo by his arm. He moved next to Jorge, put his arm over the old man's shoulder. “Daniel's dead, Jorge. We want his killers.”

Old Jorge locked his jaw, folded his arms, didn't say anything, didn't look at either of them.

“What do you think Daniel would want?” Roth asked.

No answer.

“All right, if it had been you they murdered, what would you want? You surely wouldn't want

your friends standing around scratching their asses, wondering if you'd mind them picking over your old bones in a box if it helped to find and punish the men who laid you there."

Roth shifted over to the counter, ordered two more cervezas. "Me...? Well, when I die, Jorge, I'll be cremated and my ashes dumped in the Gulf of Thailand. There'll be nothing left. Maybe that way the Creator won't be able to find me, 'cause He's gonna want words with me, see? Doesn't matter, Jorge; my soul will already be where it's going. But the point is, when they cremate me, the funeral people will smash my skull, so that it'll burn and crumble to ashes like the rest of me. If not, that hard block of a head would survive the fire, see? The point being: I won't give a rat's ass what my friends do with my worthless carcass, particularly if some sonofabitch does me in and it'll help punish him."

The old woman opened two cervezas and Roth put pesos on her counter. He offered a beer to Jorge, who didn't take it, was mulling Roth's words over, still not looking at either of them. "Just tell me, Jorge; what would you want? If you tell me that you wouldn't want justice at any cost, we'll pack it in right here, right now, and head back to Mexico City."

Jorge took the beer. He looked Roth in the eyes for what seemed like forever. Neither blinked, Jorge chewing at his inner lip, as he was occasioned to do. Then he turned and stood in the doorway, looked at the men sitting in the pickup. They didn't know what was going on, but knew there was a disagreement over something. Jorge stepped out into the sun and told them what they must do this day. The men huddled for a minute, then one jumped out of the pickup and walked away, but the other four remained.

"We are ready," Jorge said over his shoulder to Roth.

The Alvarez cemetery was four miles away. From the other side of the road, they'd driven across a barren, dusty plain to where they reached a wooded area overlooking the Rio Grande. It was a quiet place, the silence broken only by a faint rushing of water and birds chirping in trees down at the water's edge. If a fellow had to go under, this was as good a spot as any. Probably what folks thought 200 years ago when they planted the first Alvarez.

Across the narrow Rio Grande was Texas. You could practically throw a stone across the water, it was that close. The cemetery held several dozen plots – relatives and employees of the Alvarez ranch. Some of the headstones dated back to the 1830s.

Jorge showed them Alejandro's grave first. A large headstone read: 'General Alejandro Garcia Alvarez. Born 1901, Died 1984.' His wife lay next to him, and at his feet were Eduardo and several of their children, their wives next to them. At their feet were more graves – an infant granddaughter who'd died at birth, and a son, one of Eduardo's brothers who was killed in the army, down in Chiapas State. The headstones were laid out like a family tree, recorded in ascending order.

Daniel's tomb sat beneath Eduardo's. The inscription on his headstone read: 'Beloved father of Roberto and Maria, devoted husband of Juanita and Felicia.' There was no mention of Federico. Next to him was the grave of his first wife, Juanita, and on the other side was a space no doubt reserved for Felicia.

Daniel, interred in late December, was buried beneath a wide concrete slab. Roth decided that they'd dig down in the space reserved for Felicia, and once deep enough, mine under the concrete and pull the coffin out sideways.

The men piled out of the pickup, took the axes and shovels from Alfredo's trunk, and started digging. Roth looked at his watch. It was just before noon.

Shortly after 2:00 p.m., everyone stopped working and watched as an army helicopter roared past overhead. They'd seen it coming from miles off to the north, from the Texas side. Probably coming from Fort Bliss. From wherever it originated, the pilot would have needed permission to cross into Mexican air space.

The chopper headed towards the Alvarez ranch. Unless Roth missed his guess, it had to do with his call to Byrd. Another chopper appeared four miles off, from where Roth had phoned Byrd. It had come from the general direction of Juárez. Like the first one, it appeared to be hovering over the road running through Guadalupe. Soon, it dropped down, apparently also landing.

Roth told Alfredo to drive into town, see what was happening. "If it's who I think it is, don't talk to them."

Alfredo left and was back in a half-hour. "Some officials from El Paso came in the helicopter, Mike. There are also patrol cars in Guadalupe. Three of them, and another parked down near the Alvarez Camino turnoff."

They have come to arrest you, Miguel," Jorge said without humor.

"Also a couple of unmarked cars with Juárez license plates," Alfredo continued. "An ambulance from the SEMEFO in Juárez...."

SEMEFO was an acronym for the state medical and forensic facility.

"And a car marked Ministerio Público and an SUV from the Servicios Pericales Zona Juárez."

"Good," Roth said. "The gang's all here." The Ministerio Público was the equivalent of a US state district attorney's office, and Servicios Pericales were the technical people. "Byrd got action fast. What about the people in those choppers?"

"They're there, too. Everyone seems to be waiting for something."

Roth nodded. "They're waiting for us. Also, likely some departmental honchos. Maybe a US consular officer will come down from Juárez, maybe some FBI types."

“There’s also a van from a television station, and a camera crew,” Alfredo added.

Jorge came over, still grumbling but curious. “Why are the Americans interested?”

“Daniel was American, as well, Jorge. The FBI likely wants in on this. They’re never far away where publicity is concerned. Other branches might be here to offer assistance. Byrd made inquiries across the border, as well, in the States. Daniel was an important man on both sides of the line, so some highly placed people are going through the motions, showing support.” He shrugged. “Maybe those fuckers we ran into at the bunkhouse are from the Texas side. My guess is, once the Americans shake some hands and make important sounds, they’ll see they’re not needed and will pack up and go home.”

The digging crew, having switched every half-hour or so, were down about three feet, and hadn’t seen the top of Daniel’s coffin yet. It was hot, hard work, but after they’d dug down a foot or so, the sun-baked, rock-hard earth gave way to softer soil.

Roth looked at his watch. “Okay, Jorge, scoot back into town and direct all those people out to the ranch. Don’t rush. Show them the toilet and the bunkhouse. Caution them first that it’s a crime scene, so they don’t go stampeding in like cattle. Tell them that the perpetrators also used your old cabin. Same thing: tell ’em to protect the scene. We’ll have the casket up in another hour.” Roth showed his watch to Jorge. “Set your time to mine. In an hour, and not before, you can tell the Servicios Pericales where we are and what I’ve done.”

Jorge huffed off. “I will tell them to bring their handcuffs for you.” He was cooperating, but that didn’t mean he had to like this business.

Roth winked at Alfredo. It was best that old Jorge didn’t see what happened next.

“Tell them about the pickup,” Roth called after Jorge. “I already told Byrd; those assholes should be rounded up immediately. They’ve got to be involved. I can’t read it any other way.”

Jorge got into Alfredo’s car and headed for the road. Roth had taken his camera from his grip earlier, and starting with Daniel’s headstone, had been taking photos of what they were doing here.

Ten minutes later, one of the men’s spades struck the side of the casket. Thankfully, it was a metal job. Nothing worse than bringing up an old, deteriorated wooden coffin; neither the box nor the body stayed intact during exhumation.

It was more difficult digging around the metal coffin to free it from the soil. This took another half-hour. The men pulled and jerked, tugged and swore, but were able to free the casket and jimmy it out into the hole they’d dug. They managed in the cramped space to get ropes under the casket, and started lifting up. At one point, Daniel Alvarez was standing straight up in his coffin, and at another, when the coffin slipped out of the workers hands, the dearly departed was resting on his head. Definitely better that Jorge wasn’t here to see this.

It took six men, Roth and Alfredo included, to finally get the casket above ground. Once it was, they all dropped exhausted on the ground. They pulled out bandanas, mopped themselves off. If it was possible for six men to think one exact same thought at this very instant, it was *cerveza*.

“Alfredo, I’ll need you as a witness,” Roth said as he got up to take more photos. “I want you to see this.”

“The things I do for you,” he answered unhappily, mopping his neck with his handkerchief.

“Tell the men to take a break down by the river,” Roth said. “Send one into town for beer, give him the money.”

While Alfredo spoke to the men, Roth opened his grip and took out the jar of Vicks. The owner of the pickup volunteered to go into town. He collected money from Alfredo and started out. Alfredo called after him to speak with no one.

The other men meandered down to the river, fanning themselves with their hats, removing sweat-soaked shirts. At the shore, two of them waded out into the brown water and sank down.

The investigators stood at either end of the coffin. Roth took another photo, then opened the Vicks and dug out a glob. He wiped it under his nose, stuffed a thick glob into each nostril. His eyes watered, and in the intense heat, the gunk stung fiercely. He tossed the jar to Alfredo, who did the same, but didn’t look happy.

“Step away as soon as it’s open,” Roth said.

The lid came off easily, emanating a hissing sound as gases escaped. They backed off a few feet, and Roth snapped more photos.

Daniel Alvarez was dressed in black, baggy pantaloons and a large white silk shirt, socks, and slippers. Someone, probably Felicia, had decided that he should sleep his eternal sleep in comfort. Roth was glad that Daniel hadn’t been dressed in a lot of fancy garb, like a dress shirt and tie, vest and coat. That would have made this work all the more difficult.

Daniel’s face was sheet white. He looked peaceful, yet almost comical, what with too much makeup. Like Bela Lugosi in a 1930s movie. No doubt the undertaker in Nogales had tried to mask the scars on the face. Roth waved Alfredo closer. It was hard to look at the face, the way it had been abused, but all things considered, the undertaker hadn’t done a bad job. The flesh was lumpy, like it had been ravaged by a pox, and it was evident where it had been punctured over and over with staples. His mouth had been stapled closed, as had his eyelids and nose. Sick sonsabitches had done this. There were cuts, cosmetically closed staple holes, on Daniel’s nose, his ears, cheeks, chin, and neck. Probably the reason the embalmer did such a good job was that the body had had no fluids remaining; Daniel’s blood had been left in the bunkhouse toilet.

From what they could see, because of the heat, decomposition had started fast after death. Then the body had been crated up for an estimated 48 hours by the time the Customs officers had opened it at the border, so no doubt the pathologists had thoroughly chilled the remains before performing the autopsy.

“Okay, Alfredo. You remember Daniel’s first diary? The last one you read?”

Alfredo shook his head, made a face like he’d been caught not doing his homework. “I rushed through the last one.”

“At the very beginning, when he first started keeping the diary as a boy. You remember that?”

At first reluctant to look at the body, Alfredo now seemed mesmerized at the sight. Bluish lividity marks were permanently etched everywhere in Daniel’s remaining flesh.

Alfredo shook his head. “Which part?”

“When Daniel sat one day with his grandfather, General Alejandro. The old man told him the tale about President Madero. Remember that?”

“I thumbed through that part very fast. I didn’t think it was worth bothering with. What about it?”

“Do you remember what Alejandro did so that he’d remember the assassin’s name?”

“The German?”

“Prussian. Correct.”

“He . . . carved the name in his flesh. Yes, I remember that. He was a very brave boy. Jesus! Do you think Daniel did—”

“That impressed Daniel no end. He mentioned it several times in the diary in those early years. The old man’s tale was what compelled him to start a diary in the first place.”

“I thought the old man was bullshitting Daniel.”

“Maybe he was. But Daniel had a long time to think while he was held hostage. And the tools to do the job.”

“What tools?”

“Staples. He had staples across his body. Even handcuffed, judging from the marks on his wrists, he could have pulled a staple out from somewhere?”

Alfredo shook his head. “No idea, Mike.”

“Well, we’ll see. Let’s make this fast, shall we?” Roth said.

Even after all these months, the sun would begin to melt the cosmetic base in short order. Roth removed his shirt, placed it over the top part of the casket both to protect the makeup and so they wouldn’t have to look at the face. Alfredo also removed his shirt, and Roth worked to pull the collar down Daniel’s back. “Give me a hand,” he snapped.

Alfredo squatted, wrapped his shirt around Daniel's wrist, so that he wouldn't have to touch dead flesh. The torso was hairy, looked like globs of dark chest hair had been pasted to the flesh, like it was just so much wax. He pulled up one arm gingerly.

"He's not gonna wake up, Alfredo," Roth barked. "Help me get the shirt down."

They managed that. "Check under his arms. Any part of his body that he could have reached, even handcuffed. Anywhere he could have seen where he was cutting, but where it wouldn't have been obvious to the killers."

They lifted the stiff arms. There were staple penetrations there, as well. In most places, the body had been stapled so much that if a message was there, it would have been difficult to find. The flesh looked like bird tracks in white sand. Roth ran his fingers through the underarm hair, down through the chest and into the stomach. The torso was rock-hard, the flesh felt like stone. There were no patterned lacerations that they could see.

They stood up and backed away from the coffin, breathed heavy. Then Roth started again. "Check his feet. His ankles."

Alfredo took another deep breath, and continued. There was nothing unusual on the feet or ankles, nothing up to the knees. The perpetrators hadn't paid any less attention to these areas, though.

Roth tried to recall how many staples had been removed from the body according to the autopsy report. There'd been thousands, staples over other staples in many places. He reasoned that Daniel had been unconscious for most of the time when he'd been attacked like this. More likely, his tormentors did their work in stages, waiting for him to regain consciousness so they could torture him anew.

"Now the pants," Roth said.

Alfredo grimaced.

"Look, the faster we work, the sooner we get this over with. So, let's get on with it."

They pulled the pants down around the ankles. Daniel had been buried with underwear. Roth pulled the shorts down, as well.

Daniel's tormentors hadn't ignored their victim's private parts. In fact, here they'd been particularly vicious; this area seemed to have taken more punishment than anywhere else.

"There are so many cuts, Mike. My God. Those animals," Alfredo uttered. "Animals." He stood and turned away from the coffin. He almost won the day, but couldn't stop from throwing up. The men down by the river looked over at Alfredo, then at each other. They didn't want to see this.

"Go ahead. Shove your fingers down your throat, get a good look at those frijoles you had back there at the cantina, and let's get on with it." Roth propped Daniel's legs up on the edges of the coffin, began inspecting the thighs, working from the knees up. Alfredo knelt down again. He shook away his

nausea, tried for humor. “There’ll be a bonus in this, you said?”

“Absolutely,” Roth said. And meant it. Alfredo was in line for a big chunk of bonus bucks. “Roll his inner thigh out as far as you think he could have seen what he was doing if he’d carved something on himself.”

Again, bird tracks ran up and down practically every inch of exposed flesh, nearly in a pattern, as though the degenerates didn’t want to leave any surface untouched.

Each took a leg, rolled the inner thigh outward, looking for a pattern of cuts. Roth finished inspecting the right thigh, and with Alfredo’s shirt, pushed the genitalia aside.

“What we’re doing is sick, Mike. You know that? Huh?” Alfredo complained.

“No, it isn’t,” Roth replied, wishing he had a magnifying glass. “Now, if we threw a tuxedo on him, took him out clubbing with Jorge’s dancing horses, that would be sick. All we’re doing is what the SEMEFO should have done: a microscopic examination.”

They continued, inspecting every inch of the pasty flesh, trying to see something that might be hidden amongst hundreds of other cuts and scars.

Alfredo was looking at a patch of skin on Daniel’s right inner thigh, had been looking at it for long seconds. Roth crossed over to where Alfredo was inspecting. He looked close, then moved his head back to double check. A different pattern revealed itself when he considered the staple marks that almost hid it. “What’s this?” he asked, almost yelling.

Alfredo, strangely oblivious now to their gruesome task, stared where Roth was pinching flesh together. He ran his fingers over the surface like he was ironing a shirt. “I see it.” Letters were among the pattern of staple marks. It ran down Daniel’s left inner thigh more than three inches.

Roth recognized the name, but asked Alfredo to read it.

“R . . . I . . . C . . . A . . . R. Richard? No, Ricardo! It reads Ricardo. It reads Ricardo,” he repeated. Then again, “It reads Ricardo, Mike.” He was excited like Roth had never before seen him. “It reads Ricardo.” He was almost happy. “Then a C. Holy Mother, Mike. It reads Ricardo C.” Alfredo looked up for Roth’s approval.

“Right. Ricardo C.”

“But how did Ricardo...?”

“We’ll get to that. At least now we know who. All right, hold the thigh like that. I’m going to take some shots.”

Roth took pictures from several angles and at various distances, working the lens, even throwing Alfredo’s shirt over their shoulders as they hunched beneath it and took more photos. There was no telling if the burning sunlight and the white flesh would conspire to overexpose the images. He ran off

sixteen shots from various positions, angles, and distances, uncovered Daniel's face, took more shots for continuity. "Okay," he finished. "Let's dress him up the way we found him."

They did, then lowered the casket lid. They stared at the coffin, thinking about what they'd just done and seen. At last, Alfredo said, "Rise, vaquero."

Roth looked at him, nodded. "It is like he's risen, isn't it? He's risen and told us who his murderer is. Now I wish Jorge was here to see this."

Alfredo nodded, sage-like, then looked out to see the man who'd gone for beer returning. When the beers had been passed around, the men came up from the riverbank and stood around the casket, drinking in silence. On his way back, the guy had been stopped and questioned by the police at the turnoff. Uncertain exactly what was going on with all the cops, he'd told them he and friends were just fishing down by the river.

Roth and Alfredo took a few cold beers over to a tree, sat down in the shade. It was one of the best beers either of them had ever had. Roth lit a cigarette, and out of habit, offered one to Alfredo, who never smoked.

A while later, as they were finishing the dregs in their bottles, they looked towards Guadalupe to see what looked like a dust storm kicking up, working its way towards them. It was a caravan of vehicles, bouncing along the dusty road.

"That'll be Jorge with the Marines," Roth said.

Alfredo studied Roth for a moment. "If Jorge had insisted we not do this, would you have abandoned the idea?"

Roth locked eyes with him, placed a forefinger up to his cheek just below his eye, and pulled down slightly.

Alfredo nodded, having not a clue what Roth meant by that, but knew he'd feel foolish if he asked. Yeah, dumb question; Roth wasn't one to be put off.

Chapter 33

“I’ll see that it’s smoothed over, Roth. I don’t think the Ministerio Público will arrest you,” John Byrd was saying. “Not unless Señora Alvarez files a complaint against you.”

They were sitting with Jorge and Alfredo in the dining room at the hotel in Juárez. A dozen government vehicles were parked out front, and by now, everyone in town knew what had happened. It was a late dinner, everyone exhausted from the day’s events. Byrd was stabbing at an appetizer, Jorge munching down a huge meal, but Roth and Alfredo only drank, Alfredo more than usual. They had no appetite. It was the heat, Roth said. Alfredo shot him a sideways glance, said “Yeah, right!”

The attorney from the MP’s office had thrown conniptions when he saw that Roth had exhumed Daniel’s body. He threatened Roth and Alfredo with immediate incarceration, then further threatened Roth with expulsion, soon amending that to writing up charges against Roth to file in the morning, and to see that he landed in jail. The delay meant that he wanted time to think this matter through. When he’d arrived with a handful of officials at the cemetery, Alfredo had done the talking. He’d told what had led them to this point in the investigation, but that finding the crime scene had been incidental. Had they not found the newspapers, batteries, and staples in Jorge’s old home, they probably wouldn’t have searched through the other building.

Rico, humble beyond words, confessed that neither he nor his nephew had checked those outer dwellings since last autumn. As to how the bunkhouse and toilet could burn without attracting attention wasn’t so incredible; it was nearly a dozen miles or more from the road, and if the place had burned during the day, no one would have seen the fire, and if it had burned at night, no one would have seen the flames or smoke.

Rico had told of two young men, one of whom he understood to be somehow connected to the Alvarez family, who had visited the ranch several times last year. They’d rented horses from a neighboring ranch and rode out into the desert, where they’d camped overnight. That had happened on two or three occasions, Rico recalled.

One of the men, the younger one – Rico couldn’t recall their names – had said that he wanted to return one day and restore the old hacienda to its former splendor. Roth had showed Rico the photo he’d taken from Federico’s office, and the old ranchero identified Federico and Ricardo. That’s how Ricardo had learned about the isolated bunkhouse.

The MP wanted to see Daniel Alvarez’s diary and also have a talk with Felicia before filing charges against Federico and the American, Richard Cramer. The name and initial, Ricardo C, written in Daniel’s flesh, wasn’t the best evidence. Without a lot more, a defense attorney could chop this one

detail to pieces. But Roth did have more evidence.

Later that afternoon, the police had found the old pickup abandoned in a yard on the outskirts of Juárez. Moreover, on the adjacent property, there was a garage, and in that, they'd found Daniel's black SUV. The license plates were missing, but the vehicle was identified by the VIN number. As for the missing plates, some unsuspecting Mexican was probably driving around with Daniel's number on his car at this moment. Daniel's SUV had been purchased in California, and thus had had California plates. Those who bought vehicles in the States and drove them down to Mexico never changed the plates. Police rarely stopped American drivers, so having California plates was an advantage. Particularly for moving drugs around the region.

The forensics crew from the Servicios Pericales Zona Juárez impounded the SUV and were combing through it, taking latent fingerprints and vacuuming the carpets for any other evidence. The FBI was providing forensic assistance. This time, the job would be done right.

Daniel's body had been removed to the SEMEFO in Juárez. The little prick threatening Roth with arrest said that the corpse would be used in evidence against Roth for his outrageous, unauthorized, barbaric act. That was just so much horseshit; Byrd was sure that what the authorities, including the FBI, wanted to do was a microscopic examination of the body to make certain they hadn't missed anything else. Some pathologist's head would roll for this oversight, and bureaucrats always engaged in a round of finger-pointing. In addition, a member of the Mexican cabinet would arrive tomorrow.

At 10:00 p.m., Roth went up to his room. He called Roger Schiff in LA. He listened to Roger's report, took notes, provided the fax number here at the hotel, and gave Roger new instructions. He called Nina next, woke her up in fact, told her to slam the brakes on the background investigations first thing in the morning. He got no argument there, and she went back off to dreamland.

It was time he called the señora. It was nearly midnight, so he might catch her between prayers. A maid answered first, then Lucinda came on the line. She asked him, nice-like, to hold for the señora. When Felicia answered, she said immediately that she was already aware of developments.

No doubt everyone in the Mexican government was jockeying for a little credit, Roth thought.

"I did not even know you were away until Mr. Byrd called me this afternoon, and told me where you were and what you had found."

"With what had been going on, I thought it best to say nothing," Roth replied.

"I suppose. Mr. Byrd said that he was going to start making calls, and this afternoon, everyone seemed to be calling me. Jorge is with you?"

"Yes. He's been very helpful. Like my right arm, señora."

"I thought he was just taking some time off. How did you know the ranch was involved, Mr.

Roth?”

“It was a long shot.”

“So, Mr. Byrd was of no help at all?”

“He was, actually. His work saved me a lot of wheel-spinning.”

“Still, you knew. Didn’t you?”

“I’ll tell you about it when I get back.” He went quiet, and they both knew the next question. “It was Ricardo,” he said. “Richard Cramer.”

“And Federico?”

“I’m not sure yet what he did, or what he knew.”

Roth thought Federico’s involvement should have been obvious. Or at least an obvious line of inquiry. It had been right in front of her nose, and the authorities’, all along. “I’m afraid that it was necessary to exhume Daniel’s remains.”

“Yes. I heard,” Felicia said. “From the MP’s office in Juárez. They seemed upset about what you had done.”

“They’re supposed to be upset,” Roth replied. “That’s what they’re paid for. I guess they wanted to break the news to you before you read it in the newspapers. It’ll be in the media tomorrow if I know Mexico.” Roth couldn’t imagine how many cops and other officials were being greased to provide some juicy tidbits for the headlines.

“It was already on the evening news,” Felicia said. “Except the authorities reported that they had exhumed Daniel.” Roth detected sarcasm in Felicia’s voice. She had a right to be angry. The SEMEFO blew a vital lead months ago. Microscopic forensic examinations weren’t usual for Mexico. Maybe the pathologist just hadn’t cared to play hide and seek around Daniel’s midsection.

Roth chuckled to himself, and was reminded of Cass. She’d worked in the Middle East and employed a trick when going through nose-y Customs inspections. She placed a pair of soiled panties right on top in her carry-on bag. When male Customs inspectors, either Israeli or Muslim, unzipped her bag and saw the unseeable and nearly touched the untouchable, they were mortified. Zipped that bag right up, and waved Cass right through.

If the SEMEFO had done a microscopic examination of Daniel’s body, the police might have come up with something sooner. But that hadn’t happened. It was fine with Roth that the authorities were taking credit for the exhumation. They wouldn’t very well recant their story and arrest Roth now. Not without looking stupid.

“I have had Señora Lucinda taking calls for me all evening,” Felicia said. “Friends and family are calling.”

“Well, I’m glad she put me through,” Roth said.

“Oh, yes. You were the most important.”

Roth didn’t say anything for a few moments. Then: “I’m having people look into the money that was paid for Daniel’s ransom. It’ll lead to Ricardo. Federico didn’t get any of it. Not yet, anyhow.”

“When will you be back?”

“Not sure. The case against Ricardo is circumstantial right now. Both Federico and Ricardo are in the States, so they can’t be arrested immediately up there for a crime that took place here in Mexico. It’ll take time, but they’ll eventually be sent back.”

“He is in the States? I believe the authorities are looking for him here in Mexico City.” Felicia sighed.

“Nope. He’s in San Francisco, as we speak. With Ricardo.”

“I do not suppose it matters. The news is very big; Federico will know by morning.”

Sooner, Roth thought. A lot sooner than that.

“We’d planned on going to Puerto Vallarta tomorrow,” Felicia said, turning to lighter things, but tired. “The ball is on Monday night, and my people have been making preparations all week over there. I told you about it. This is an exciting development, but I see no reason to cancel the arrangements. What do you think?”

“No reason at all. In fact, you have something to celebrate, morbid though it is. Just play the ball down, I’d guess.”

She seemed to need that validated. “You will come, yes?”

“I’ll try to be there.”

When Roth hung up, he looked through the photocopies of the pages from Federico’s address book. He circled a dozen names and numbers in San Francisco, took out a micro cassette recorder, checked the tape. He plugged in a phone recording pickup to the tape recorder, attached it to the phone receiver by its suction cup, pressed ‘record’ and dialed. It would be an hour earlier in California. It was a safe assumption that Federico and Ricardo would be staying with friends, or their friends might know where they were. Birds of a feather, and all that.

His first call got an answering machine, a sweet-sounding male with an effeminate lisp who said that he wasn’t in, and for the caller to leave a message. A girlish “Bye now” ended the recording.

Roth dialed another number. This was answered by an equally feminine male voice. Roth got few words in after saying that he wanted to reach Federico and Ricardo before the man began scolding him: “Darling, how could you dare miss their wedding? You should be inoculated against bad manners, bitch!”

Federico's wedding? "Whoa," Roth said. "You've got the wrong party.

I'm just trying to locate Federico."

"This isn't Teddy...? Oh, my." The man laughed at his mistake, and Roth obliged the flitting fellow with a chuckle.

"I am so sorry," Flitting Fellow cooed.

"No apology necessary. Do you know where I can reach Federico?"

"But of course; they're staying at Guy's place. Oh, it was wonderful. I just came from there. But whoever you are, you obviously missed the wedding, also. Shame on you."

"I should be flogged," Roth said, adding disappointment to his voice. He ran his finger down the page of notes. There was a Guy Elliott on the list. "At Guy Elliott's place?"

"Of course. How many Guys do you know, sugar?" Then Flitting Fellow gave a shrill laugh. "Oh, what a question. We know lots of guys, don't we?"

Roth hung up, shook his head. Married? He started to call Elliott's number, but put the receiver down on the cradle. Of course, gays were getting married in San Francisco. Thousands of gays and lesbians had flocked into the Bay Area this past week, after the mayor announced that they could be married at City Hall. But the California courts were debating the issue, so the rush was on.

He dialed Elliott's number. It was answered by a woman. Or what sounded like a woman. Roth asked to speak with Ricardo. There was partying in the background; Roth could hear the old Tommy Edwards hit, "It's All In The Game."

The woman asked him to hang on. "Richard," he heard her call. After long seconds, Ricardo came on the line. "Hello?"

"Ricardo?" Roth asked.

"Yeah, who's this?"

"I wanted to call and wish you all the best." The music in the background made it difficult for Roth to even hear himself.

"Thank you. Who's this?"

"This is Roth."

"Who? I can't hear you."

Roth could picture Ricardo with a finger in one ear, trying to hear over the deafening noise.

"Roth."

"Roth. Who? Wait a minute. I can't hear you." Ricardo put the receiver down on the table, and Roth heard him ask if he could take the call in the guest bedroom. Someone, probably Federico, asked who was on the phone.

Seconds later, Ricardo was back on the line, no background noise. Roth heard him call for someone to hang up the phone in the living room. “Now, who is this?”

“This is Roth. I’m at the ranch, Ricardo.”

“Where? What ranch? Who is this?”

“The Alvarez ranch, Ricky. Cuernavaca. Where you murdered Daniel.”

“Roth!” Ricardo took in a breath. Then long silence. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he sneered into the receiver. “And I don’t know who the fuck you are.”

“Sure you do, sweetie. You know who I am. You told me to get out of Mexico City if I knew what was good for me. And you know what I’m talking about. There’ll be a warrant for your arrest by morning. And for Federico.”

“You’re crazy, Roth.”

“Turn on the radio or take a look at the news. It’s on all the stations down here; you’ll be getting it up there soon enough. But the news gets worse, fella.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“I’m coming for you before the cops get a piece.”

Ricardo slammed the receiver down, thoughts flashed through his brain, beginning with how the hell Roth even knew where he was. What had those idiots left behind at the ranch? What could Roth prove?

The small bedroom seemed hot suddenly. Stifling. Squeezing in on him. Choking him. He threw the balcony door open. A cool breeze hit him.

The radio! He sat down on the bed, grabbed the clock radio on the nightstand. Could he receive Mexican stations? AM or FM? FM, of course. He turned it on and began thumbing through stations, stopped whenever he heard salsa music, then continued. So many stations. Roth was coming for him? Who the fuck is he to be coming for me?

Ricardo jerked his head to the door as it opened. It was Federico. He turned back, kept scanning the FM stations, knowing that Federico was staring at him. Shit! He’d listened in to the call on the extension in the living room.

“What’s Roth talking about, Ricky,” Federico felt subdued, deflated.

“He’s crazy.”

“No, he’s not.” Federico’s words were choked, tears started down his cheeks. “Where’d you get all that money, Ricky?” His voice was almost a whisper now.

“I told you a thousand fucking times. I won at the tables.”

Federico shook his head.

Ricardo put the radio back on the nightstand. He dropped his head, breathed hard, sat there dejected. Further lies were pointless. He stood and stepped out onto the balcony. He looked out over the lights on ships moored in San Francisco Bay, across to the lights twinkling in Oakland. "I did it for you, Love."

Federico closed the door behind him, incredulous. "You did it for me? You did it for me?" He began sobbing hard. Then he screamed, "You did it for me? You murdered my father, and you say you did it for me?"

Guests on the adjoining living-room balcony and in the other rooms grew quiet and the music died down; a lovers' spat made for prime-time eavesdropping. The woman who'd answered the phone looked at the wedding cake, saw that the ornament of two men in tuxedos with arms locked atop the cake had fallen over. She grimaced at the bad omen.

The television was on; they'd all been watching the local news about what a banner day it was for gays in San Francisco. But the anchorman changed the topic and an FBI spokesman came on. Someone turned the volume up, and Ricardo's photograph flashed on the screen. Stunned guests were torn between watching the news report and listening to the living drama unfolding right in the next room.

"Are you crazy, Ricky? Are you absolutely insane?" Federico screamed. "Murder?"

Ricardo hurried back inside the bedroom, cupping his hand across Federico's mouth. "Be quiet, goddammit. You wanna tell everyone?" He tried to embrace Federico, who pushed him away and began bawling out of control, filled with terror. Or maybe rage.

Chapter 34

“In a bizarre twist to a day that should have been filled with happy memories for the gay community, two gay newlyweds plunged to their deaths this evening in what some witnesses describe as possibly being a death pact....”

So began news reporter Lynda Lehrman before the Bay Area’s Eyewitness News camera.

“But maybe not, the police are uncertain if one of the men pushed the other and then accidentally fell. Or maybe jumped. Richard Cramer and Federico Blakely fell from the seventeenth floor here at Portman Towers behind me, during a reception party in the apartment of close friends, just hours after the pair were married in a ceremony under San Francisco’s same-sex marriage ruling.”

The camera panned to the façade of Portman Towers. Many of the tenants stood on their balconies watching the news crew below, but others had pulled their blinds closed. Behind Lynda Lehrman was a silent crowd of onlookers, except for one anti-gay demonstrator who was drunk and trying to get into camera view, screaming and carrying a placard that read ‘Throw Down More Fags.’ Police officers were pulling him away, conscious of the lights and camera.

Lehrman ignored the outburst, the cameraman shifting angles, continuing from a bulletin just handed to her: “In a flash bulletin from the network’s Mexico affiliate, there are further developments from south of the border in this nightmarish story. Federal authorities were reportedly preparing arrest warrants even at this late hour for Richard Blakely in connection with the gruesome murder last December of Mexico City businessman, Daniel Alvarez.

“As reported by Channel Seven Eyewitness News last December, Alvarez’s grisly remains were discovered at the US-Mexican border when US Customs officers opened a suspicious crate that had drawn their attention. Further details are sketchy at this time, but stay tuned for more on this breaking story at eleven.”

Chapter 35

Alfredo headed out for Tijuana just before sunrise. With luck, he'd be home before midnight. Since he had a border crossing card, he decided to drive up into New Mexico and take the road there through to Arizona and on into California, dropping down into Tijuana at San Diego. US highways were faster, not to mention safer. It would be a fourteen hour haul, but he wouldn't want to spend another night in a motel along the way. Roth saw him off, told him to get his billing time, expenses, and bonus figure to Nina in New York as soon as possible.

John Byrd had also been awakened early by contacts who'd reported the deaths in San Francisco last night. Bad news traveled fast.

Later, Jorge saw Roth and Byrd off at the airport, bound for Puerto Vallarta, via Guadalajara, where Byrd would deplane. Jorge insisted on taking a bus back to Mexico City. No planes for him, thank you. Besides, he was carrying his and Roth's .45s. He'd given the digging tools to the rancheros, and Cowboy's Remington had been turned over to the police. He wouldn't arrive back in Mexico City until the day after tomorrow, and that suited him just fine.

Roth arrived at the Alvarez estate in Puerto Vallarta that evening. Felicia greeted him, said that he would, of course, be staying here. The home was every bit as sumptuous as Cuernavaca in Mexico City, if not more so; a meandering property spread out, on four terraces, or levels, starting on the steep hills of Amapas and rolling down to Carretera Abarra De Navidad, towards the beach. The four levels included a swimming pool on one, a Jacuzzi and cabanas on another, a tennis court on a third. There were views of Banderas Bay from almost every room. An outside brick stairway ran down to the beach from the lowest level. During the day, one could see all the way past the marina and ocean liners to Point Rio Ameca.

After a late supper, Roth had cocktails on a balcony his room shared with other guest quarters. It overlooked the twinkling lights of Playa Olas Altas, and he could hear the surf below splashing against the rocks.

He could have cut and run this morning, headed for Bangkok and just sent the señora his report. But it was better he give his report in person. Didn't matter; he'd kick back for a day or two, hang around the pool, see what might develop with Lily.

Her clique was off somewhere in town, and Roth wondered what Lily was doing at this moment. Probably jiggling her abundant young proportions to salsa rhythms in some club.

Felicia came out onto the balcony carrying a glass of port. Tonight wasn't the time to delve into Roth's report, and they knew it. She was saddened over Federico's death, but relieved that the matter

was finished. She'd smiled at least three times this evening, and for her, that was a rave.

They sat and drank, listening to the surf, each to their thoughts. His being Lily. Hers being, well, who knew. Maybe her latest rosary, some somber if elegant job that would accessorize her black outfits. She sighed twice, signs Roth took as contentment, and finishing her port, she bade him goodnight. Roth stood and wished her pleasant dreams. Hopefully, she'd find peaceful nights and solace now.

Roth finished his rum and coke, went inside to make another. He ran into Lucinda, who also actually smiled at him. He also bade her good evening, built his drink and carried it back out to the balcony. Finishing that with a cigarette, he went to his room and was asleep within minutes.

In the morning, just as he'd promised himself, Roth went down to the pool, planning to lie around most of the day. He was dog tired now that the case was over. The girls, with the eternally unhappy Taurino tagging along, came down after breakfast, and upon seeing Roth, Lily shouted "Hola," and came skipping over to his lounge. Roth glanced around for reactions, since she was overly friendly. Wrong place, wrong time.

She sat down next to him, her naked thigh touching his, bubbling first with a recount of their exploits last night in town, then extracted pledges that he'd dance with her tonight at the ball. Her eyes flirted with him as usual, and she asked how he would dress for the ball. "It's a masquerade affair, you know?" It seemed to him that she accented the word 'affair.'

"I told your aunt that I would come as diablo."

"And you are a devil, Mr. Roth."

"You can call me Mike. My work is finished." He discreetly looked her up and down. Discreetly, that is, as far as anyone looking was concerned, but for Lily, he was obvious. And she loved it. "I have sold my quota of brassieres," he added.

Lily giggled, also glanced around to see who might be watching. Workmen were nearby, stringing lanterns and decorations for tonight's festivities. "You are very, very naughty, Mike," she said, her eyes flirtatious. She seemed to be thinking something deliciously evil. "Well, until tonight, then." She discreetly ran a fire-engine-red fingernail across his chest, stood, and rejoined the pack.

Roth took another dip, and as he was getting out of the pool, Felicia came down the steps to the pool area wearing a white terrycloth robe. She laughed and spoke with the kids as she stripped off the robe and dropped it on a lounge. Had circumstances been otherwise, Roth would have given a wolf whistle and zipped to her side like she was a vacuum cleaner and he a speck of dirt. In a New York second, in other words. But he contented himself with the visual feast that was Felicia Alvarez in a one-piece swimsuit which, of course, was black. Damn, but the woman was stacked. What a waste that she'd spend the remainder of her days cloistered away, clad in black, knees locked together in obedient

widowhood.

He turned away, lest he be caught gawking, and sighed; first, Lily, now it was this vision of Felicia to torment him. He stood and threw his robe on to go down to the beach. As he passed Felicia in the pool, she asked if one o'clock in the study would be all right for their meeting.

In his room, he showered and changed into a comfortable outfit that someone had laid out on the bed. The coarse cotton trousers and shirt were baggy by design, making him look rather like a peon, replete with straw sandals. It reminded him of the Thai fisherman's pants he wore around his apartment in Bangkok.

He found Daniel's study, spent the next hour on the phone to the States. Material he'd requested from Nina in New York and Roger Schiff in LA came rolling out of the fax.

After lunch, Felicia came in. Like practically every other room in the house, the office overlooked Banderas Bay through big windows, and as with the hacienda in Mexico City, this room was larger than most urban apartments. It seemed that if there was an Alvarez trait, it was a penchant for more space than anyone could possibly use.

Felicia carried a cup of sherry, to which she added a splash of java from an electric pot at a bar built into the wall. She came over and sat down in front of Roth, who remained behind the desk.

"Blackwell," he began, "were very thorough in their canvass for those places where Daniel might have disappeared from and where they thought he might have been taken. You told me he always called you whenever he was away, so if he intended to lay over en route, he never made it halfway. And there was no trace of the SUV. No shoot-up scenario, no wild chase anywhere along the route. So, Daniel knew his killer, or somehow had been drugged. But drugged was ruled out for too many logical reasons."

He handed her a photocopy of two airline tickets, one from LA to Guadalajara, and one from El Paso to LA. They were a week apart. Felicia looked at the dates. The ticket from LA to Guadalajara was one day before Daniel went missing, and was under the name of Richard Cramer.

"Ricardo had taken vacation time that week," Roth said. "Imagine Daniel's surprise on coming across Ricardo in the middle of Mexico somewhere between here and Mexico City, probably around Guadalajara. Ricardo had flown to Guadalajara, met a confederate, possibly two, and they watched for Daniel's SUV and followed him to a point where Ricardo could approach him casually."

He handed the widow another photocopy of a rental slip for a car hired at the airport and surrendered in Juárez, 800 miles north, the day he flew back to LA from El Paso, just across the river.

"Daniel had no reason to suspect Ricardo would do him ill. Plus, he had a few things to clear up with Ricardo, didn't he? Perhaps he even thought that Federico was with Ricardo, down for a vacation.

Just a coincidence. Whatever the ruse, Daniel went willingly. To a point, of course. I suspect that that point came rather fast, once he realized Ricardo's treachery. Someone had to have helped Ricardo. Another driver would be necessary to drive Daniel's SUV if Ricardo drove his own rental all the way up to the ranch in Chihuahua. That's a two-day drive. There were probably several accomplices. We ran into a few such characters on the ranch. There were more, of course – one obviously in Mexico City who murdered Alcantara; probably the same man or men who picked up the ransom in the subway station where Roberto left it. As for knowing Daniel's schedule, that wouldn't have been difficult for Ricardo to learn from Federico, or maybe even from Juan Solis. Daniel's life was no secret within his own company."

Roth wondered if he shouldn't notify Kincannon at Amalgamated, and the Harmann New York organization, the K&R insurer. With Ricardo being an employee of IO, was the company faced with an exposure?

"Whoever picked up the ransom, we can be sure that Ricardo was right there with them. A million bucks in cash is one hell of a pile of money. I'm thinking that Ricardo drove to Mexico City for that, because I'm sure Alcantara wasn't involved.

"Also, your telephones were tapped. Exactly when that started, we don't know, probably never will know, since Alcantara, Federico, and Ricardo are all dead. Alcantara's secretary, Candice Figueroa should be interviewed for what she might know about that.

"The ranch was perfect: Ricardo had been there before. Several times.

Horseback riding and camping in the desert with Federico."

He handed her the original of a signed statement that Alfredo had taken from Rico at the ranch.

"What the authorities missed, and I don't know how, was that the crime was so obviously one of hate and loathing. Nothing impersonal about it. Why would kidnapers bother crating-up the corpse? Also, why not just put a bullet in your husband? If you'll pardon the expression. Why torture him? So, yes: it was a hateful act. And we believe that Ricardo was there to witness that, at least initially.

"That meant it was personal. So, the answer lay closer to home. Who hated Daniel that much? Surely it was a sick mind. Add greed, and it gets narrower, yet. The motive was two-fold: hate and greed.

"The first 50,000 dollars, the money ostensibly for blackmail, was seed money, to set all this up. Both Federico and Ricardo were badly in debt. Gambling debts. A weakness, as you would say, señora."

He passed her a copy of their financial reports. "Desperately in debt.

But we learned that Ricardo had paid off his debts in full recently. That came from the ransom

money.

“Daniel’s body was shipped from Hermosillo to Nogales. A long way from where he was murdered, and in another state. So, everyone was looking in Sonora State. The first crime, that of abduction, occurred a thousand miles away, and the second crime, murder, occurred 200 miles away from where Daniel’s body turned up. That’s a lot of area to cover.”

Roth paused to sip his coffee. “Ricardo hated Daniel for how he regarded Federico’s ‘weakness,’ as you put it. It was also an indictment on his life. And it was a replay from Ricardo’s relationship with his own father. There’s an ugly story there, probably an earlier murder, a patricide. And if he’d murdered his own father, why stop killing when it came to Daniel.

“There was no blackmailer; it was Ricardo all along. Federico in particular was being singled out for blackmail. No one would have bothered to do that in the States. But, as you said, this is Mexico, and we know Daniel’s reaction upon learning that Federico was gay. Indeed, blackmail worked here in Mexico. I can imagine what the business community would have thought of Federico being Daniel’s son. The price for prejudice, in the form of machismo, señora, can be very high.”

“How did you know about the ranch?”

“I didn’t at first. As I’ve said, it’s a long way from the ranch to Nogales. Read Daniel’s diaries, señora. The very first one, especially. The one he started as a boy. As I mentioned on the phone the other night, it was a long shot. He as much as told us in that diary where he got the idea for leaving a cryptic message. Just as the old vaquero, General Alvarez, had.”

Roth told Felicia that there would be more information coming in. Although inquiries had been halted, there was still more in the pipeline. Roth shrugged. “You’ll pay for the information, so you may as well have it. There’s not one member of the Alvarez clan who hasn’t been investigated, at least initially. You might find some of it interesting, although there’s no connection to Daniel’s death.

“With Federico and Ricardo dead, the authorities will lose interest fast. Ricardo’s confederates in Chihuahua, if caught, probably didn’t even know the other guilty parties in Mexico City.”

Felicia seemed to think about that. “I want them caught.”

“You don’t need me for that. The police can take it from here.”

“Yes. You have done all that I have asked.”

Roth leaned back in his chair, stared at Felicia. “You knew, didn’t you?”

“I couldn’t imagine Federico killing his father.”

Roth shook his head. “I don’t think he knew about it. For a fact, he didn’t know about Ricardo sending the blackmail note, nor did he know about Ricardo’s gambling debts being paid off. So, he didn’t know about Ricardo having the ransom money. He also didn’t know that there is an open

question of Ricardo likely having murdered his own father in LA. Three years ago. This is something an associate of mine in LA discovered incidentally.”

He handed her more reports from Roger Schiff.

“Ricardo’s father died under mysterious circumstances – also went over a balcony, oddly enough – and Ricardo inherited his condo in Palos Verdes, a Mercedes, and some other things, but not much cash. There is information that Ricardo’s father disapproved of him, as well. The seeds for hating Daniel had been planted there. From grade school on, Richard Cramer had been a vicious little bastard; you know . . . tearing off butterfly wings, cats tails on fire, that sort of thing.”

“And Luis Alcantara?” she asked.

“He was never your friend, señora. He was a shyster, ripping you off and making money on both ends, poorly serving you, and spying on you at the same time for Federico, who’d been put up to it by Ricardo. For a long time, Alcantara was cheating you, according to Jorge, who, incidentally, has been tremendously astute and helpful throughout all of this. You’re in extremely good and loyal hands with Tío Jorge, or I’d have installed another security director. You really should give the old gentleman his due.”

Roth finished his coffee and leaned forward. “There’s something about human nature that apparently dictates that when a person hurts another, takes advantage of another, he grows to resent that person even more. Go figure, as they say in Scheboygen. At any rate, Ricardo put Federico up to engaging Alcantara, who held no respect for you or Daniel.

“Ricardo also poisoned Federico into believing that you were conspiring against him, denying him his birthright. We learned that Ricardo had retained an attorney in California who, in turn, hired a lawyer in Mexico City to look into Daniel’s will. Ricardo maneuvered Federico into whatever he wanted, and would probably have guided Federico into filing lawsuits at some point to inherit substantially more. From what I know about Mexican law, he might have had some degree of success.”

Roth could tell that Felicia hadn’t even considered this. She stared blankly at the desk top.

“You see, señora, you – and possibly Roberto and Maria also – may have been on Ricardo’s agenda. Considering Ricardo’s father, and then Daniel . . . well, you get the picture. That’s just so much speculation, but we learned that Ricardo, once he had the ransom million, had hired an investigator in New York to keep tabs on Roberto. He might very well have been the next victim. This information was developed through Ricardo’s telephone bills.” Roth shook his head. “Don’t ask how, señora. Anyhow, there were calls to New York numbers, you see, and my New York office followed up, tracked down the parties called. Ricardo paid a 10,000-dollar retainer to the detective there. Fortunately, we know that detective, and when we learned that Ricardo was dead, and might have become a fugitive

otherwise, my partner in New York had a nice chat with the detective. He'd had Roberto under surveillance because Ricardo had laid a bullshit story on him that Roberto was suspected of embezzlement.

"Alcantara's death was as a result of some devilment on my part. But I'm without guilt on that score, because conflict was inevitable given the deceitful alliance between those three. I'm also unrepentant for two much more personal reasons. First, I didn't like the sonofabitch. And second..." Roth thought, shrugged. "Same as the first reason."

Felicia frowned at Roth's profanity, but grew quiet at the thought of it all. Yeah, she'd suspected Federico, all right, Roth thought.

In a moment, she brightened. "Tell me about Cuernavaca Pequeño. Is it really in such a shameful condition?"

"Sadly, yes. But it's a grand old place, señora. Someone, I understand, had a notion to restore it."

Felicia thought about that, and unless Roth missed his guess, her mind was already working on the ranch as a retreat for orphans. She stood to leave the study. "Some people tried to convince me to fire you."

"I was ready to walk a few times myself. So, why did you tolerate me for so long?"

Felicia smiled. "Something you said when you accepted the case."

Roth remembered her saying that before, but still couldn't recall what he'd said that day in the living room.

"You stated your terms, and then said when you satisfactorily completed the assignment. Not if. That struck me as very confident. You are very smart, Mr. Roth."

Roth shook his head. "Not smart. Just thorough. I'll give you a short course in investigation, señora. I did what I call a risk continuum."

Felicia frowned.

"Kon-tin-you-um," Roth pronounced. "Actually, since I'd lost track of the case months ago, and I heard the other week that the perps hadn't been caught, I wondered why. On my flight down here, in my mind was a piece of paper, and on it I scribbled down what little I recalled. The pros and the cons, my add-ons and take-aways. On one side of the imaginary sheet, I listed the possibilities, the probabilities, and the impossibilities. And then, since there were no clear distinctions with some facts, I created an arbitrary division, and went from there, going through the same routine as each piece of information came in. In short, I considered scores of possibilities and investigated everyone, ruling out impossibilities. I even investigated you, señora."

He wondered if he should tell her that he'd tapped her telephone. No. No point to that. But he had

to know something. He repeated, "You knew, didn't you?"

Felicia sat down again. "Knew what?"

"Everything. Or at least most of what I've just told you."

"How could I have known?"

"You knew your husband. Knew how he felt about Federico."

"I-I don't follow you."

That built-in lie detector of Felicia's just clicked on. "Sure you do, señora. You understand exactly. You talked about Federico with him. Federico's weakness. Daniel fell inward, shame tearing at him more than it might have otherwise. Because of you. Because of how he regarded you. Loved you. Above any and all. You were a sacred perfection. A guiding light."

Felicia stared at Roth.

"You pray for forgiveness, don't you, señora."

Felicia looked away.

"Daniel long suspected his son's proclivities. But he didn't shrink from Federico, didn't withdraw his feelings until you condemned the boy in your heart, hammering Daniel on Federico's sickness, his weakness. So Federico turned to Ricardo, and confided in him. And Ricardo, sensing weakness in both father and son, struck first at the weakest point; Federico. Perhaps Ricardo expected to gain Federico's tacit approval for what he planned.

Felicia put her head down, a tear running down her face. She nodded, wiped her eyes with the handkerchief she kept in her sleeve. "Yes, Mr. Roth. I repent. Ever hour of every day." She looked up at him, dabbed her eyes. "I thought I was being punished for..."

"Leaving the Order? And later, marrying Daniel?"

Felicia looked up at Roth. "How do you know this?"

"It's my job to know things, señora.

"Yes, I have my weaknesses."

"Don't we all."

Felicia stood again and turned, seemed anxious to leave. To get away from this conversation. She hardened, for in her mind, what was done was done.

"Maybe they didn't jump from that balcony in San Francisco," Roth said to her back.

She stopped but didn't turn around. Roth stood and went around the desk to her. "The police said that their bedroom door was locked from inside. Guests heard them arguing, then heard what they believe was a struggle. Heard Federico screaming at Ricardo. The police figure that Federico pushed Ricardo over the balcony railing. Federico may have also fallen in the act, or maybe, having lost

everything, even Ricardo, he decided to follow him to hell. The point being, did he avenge his father's murder?"

Felicia seemed to think about this, then started to walk again.

"Daniel's headstone, señora? Federico?"

She stopped again, for a second, then swept from the room without looking back.

Roth looked out over the bay. He doubted that she'd add Federico's name on Daniel's tombstone. Even if she accepted his proclivities, there was, after all, a question of possible suicide that wasn't likely to be answered. And in the Church's eyes, would suicide put him in hell? Roth had forgotten his catechism. In any event, there seemed no way to please the señora. And Roth couldn't remember when he'd ever been so caring about a person's mental state. But, no more of that. The woman should have a tattoo over her heart: 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here.' What a waste, he thought for the hundredth, and hopefully, last time.

Cars and SUVs were lined along the narrow, winding roads of Amapas for a mile, having conveyed several thousand guests to the ball. Lucinda and her staff supervised an army of workers for the event, and if Roth had any further reservations about Felicia's safety, the place would have been a security nightmare.

Every costume imaginable was present, and in fact, there were several diablos in attendance. Plus many angels, popes, and bishops that far outnumbered the Satans. There were bandidos and peons, seventeenth-century military officers, sixteenth-century madams and gentlepersons, slaves and gladiators, excellent likenesses of Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, and Benito Juárez, courtesans, clowns, an Abraham Lincoln, satyrs and nymphs. The last reminded Roth of Lily, who, very much to Lucinda's displeasure, appeared as a Vegas showgirl.

Tables throughout the home and grounds were laden with food and drink, and waiters hurried about with serving trays as loud mariachi bands, at least three, wandered the estate. Streamers and party favors decorated the grounds, a ton of paper spilling over the balconies, falling to tiers below, and into the swimming pool, which no one bothered using.

Roth spotted Lily with her clutch of friends, and when she saw him, she broke from the pack and came running over, high ostrich feathers atop her head and affixed to her hips swaying voluptuously as she moved. She was heavily made up, looked gorgeous. She'd put any Vegas showgirl to shame. Men young and old tried but failed not to gawk at her.

She pulled him out onto a patio packed with revelers and dancers, took his arm, wrapped it around her waist. Roth was dressed in casual slacks and shirt.

"Why are you not in costume," she admonished.

“I am,” he protested. “I am in the costume of a twenty-first-century businessman. It’s unique. Look around; not another costume like it.”

Lily laughed, then hung on to him tight for a slow number. “At midnight?” she whispered. “I will meet you at the steps leading down to the beach. Yes?”

Roth nodded, regretting that he hadn’t taken a hotel in town. “Absolutely. But won’t Lucretia be watching?”

“The party will last until the wee hours. And she will not think anything if I go for a walk on the beach with you.”

Next to them danced another gorgeous creature dressed as a court jester. Roth didn’t recognize her from Lily’s usual crowd, and surmised that she must be local. She was dancing with Zorro.

“Absolutely silly,” Lily snapped.

“What is?”

“That is Taurino with her. Behind the mask.”

“Clever outfit,” Roth appraised. “The kid could pass for Tyrone Power.”

“Who’s that?” Lily asked.

“He played Zorro in a film.”

“That was Antonio Banderas,” she returned.

“He was the son of Zorro, or some such thing.”

“Well, Taurino looks ridiculous. Zorro means ‘fox,’ but it also means ‘crazy,’ and Taurino is loco. Zorro is so American. So gringo. We don’t think much of a crazy man running around in girlish tights, sword fighting with hacienda owners and killing soldiers of a patrón. Such men were revolutionaries, and Mexico has had quite enough of them, thank you.”

Roth laughed. Of course; Zorro was an American creation. There was no Zorro fad in Mexico, never had been. Zorro fought to free the oppressed, the underdog, fought to restore democracy, to do the right thing. But the powers that be in Mexico never saw it that way, would never glorify a champion of the peon. The wealthy were privileged, and were in a way the oppressors. “I’ll try to remember that,” Roth said. “No Zorro outfits in future.”

“Taurino will forever be a silly boy,” she finalized, dismissing the subject. She smiled up at Roth, squeezed his hand, and held him close. When the number ended, Lily saw people she knew, whom she must say hello to. She shot him a come-ravage-me look, whispered, “Don’t forget, midnight.”

Roth applauded the band, watched Lily’s alluring figure twist away through the crowd. He went up on a terrace for a punch – which lived up to its name. As he was drinking, watching the festivities, Felicia, surrounded by a mob of friends, came by and introduced them to Roth. She was laughing and

smiling brilliantly. A picture he never thought he'd see.

"I understand that you are leaving us in the morning," she said.

"Yes, señora. Duty calls me elsewhere." Well, maybe. That might depend on what happened at midnight. He could get a room in town tomorrow, shack up there, plow Lily stupid for a day or two. Yeah, he could do that. But he'd have to keep her away from gossiping at the home, and that could be tricky.

"I want you to know . . . Mike."

"Mike!" Well, the ice petticoat had a soft heart under all that lace, after all.

"I want you to know that you will always be welcome in our family. Do not hesitate ever to visit us, and you may call upon my services at any time in Mexico."

If he was a decent fellow, he'd at least feel guilty for what he was planning with Lily. But he smiled, feeling no such emotion. Lucinda stood behind Felicia, also smiling at Roth. Whenever she wasn't keeping an eagle-eye on her changes, she could be found trailing the señora around. He returned her smile, would have sworn that if the old gal's face broke out with laughter, it would crack.

"Thank you, señora," he replied. "That is very kind of you."

Felicia and her entourage moved on, and Roth went for a refill of punch, thinking about midnight. Waiting for midnight.

It came finally, and he made his way through the partygoers, to the steps leading down to the beach. Lily had been right; not only were there many more people now – Puerto Vallarta's social registry were late-night players – but old Lucinda was nowhere in sight.

She joined him, darting through the throng of bodies dancing on the patio. She seemed as anxious as he was. She took his hand, guided him down the steps, past couples coming and going to the shore. If Roth guessed right, the darkened beach had become a popular venue for lovers. They hurried down, and at the bottom, Lily took his hand and pulled him off to the side, into the bushes. She was breathing heavily, obviously from excitement.

"You can give me an hour, yes?"

"I can give you all night," he said, pulling her to him.

Epilogue

Roth stopped off in LA, spent another night with Teri. It was something he needed to do after that business with Lily. Desperately needed to do. Aside from that, he hadn't failed to investigate the porno magazines he'd found in the security room and spy van.

Two weeks later, as he returned to Bangkok from handling a case in China, Nina e-mailed him

details about the billing on the Alvarez case. Felicia had paid in full within days of receiving it, and also sent a thank-you note to Premier, which Nina had forwarded with his mail.

The Mexican authorities, not a little embarrassed, were continuing their investigations into the murders of both Daniel and Alcantara. They'd apprehended Cowboy and the driver of the pickup who told what they knew, but Alcantara's assassin might never be known.

Nina added a newspaper article. It concerned Don Giovetti Grassi. One of his nephews had murdered him. It was manslaughter, really. James 'Jimmy-Jacks' 'Tank' Sherman had punched the don in a fit of rage when the boss had taunted him with remarks that threw question upon his sexual orientation. Tank's punch had been a vicious shot to the head that had fractured Grassi's skull, and Grassi had lain in the hospital in a coma for a week before expiring.

Roth shook his head. It shouldn't have been too difficult for Grassi to see it coming.

He made a Mekhong and Coke, looked over the final reports from Alfredo, Nina, Roger Schiff and others, in connection with the Alvarez matter. In all, the paperwork would stack literally to the ceiling, little of which amounted to anything. Still, the Senora had paid for the work and therefore it should be her property. She'd eventually receive a half dozen very heavy cartons. If nothing else, she'd soon know on the achievements, aspirations, triumphs, affairs, finances, business connections, humiliations, failures, and shame of practically every member of their extended families. Roth had weighed the ethics of sending her every bit of information, but should a family matriarch have less? Roth could picture here in her suite at night, praying the rosary between reading some pretty tantalizing stuff.

There was also a letter from the sisters Gina, Lena, Tina, and their precious, good friend, Carmelita. They were actually cutting a record by that title. Included were the lyrics, in Spanish and English. Roth smiled at the thought of them, their heads bouncing along to some bright, cheery pop song. With their money and family connections, he was sure there'd be a hit record in a few months. They expressed their appreciation for his inspiration, and were dedicating the album to him. Gina added that she'd just gotten off the telephone with Lily, who was back at school in Spain, and that she said hola.

Lily. Against his will, he replayed those final ignominious moments with her.

She had flown into his arms, the scent of lilacs in her hair, the sweet smell of her skin rendering his knees weak, her breath as sweet as what he held in his arms. He replayed how he'd dismissed the notion of a mere hour, whispered that, for her, he had all night.

"Oh, thank you, Tío Miguel," she had spoken. "You are the most wonderful man."

He frowned at her, his forehead wrinkled. 'Tío' Miguel...? Uncle Michael?

Through the brush, a figure had moved towards them, parting the foliage. Then, a hiss. Roth turned to see who was there as Lily hung from around his neck, kissing his cheek. “One hour,” she whispered in his ear. “No more. I promise.”

Taurino, dressed as before, mask and all, slipped up next to them. “Por favor?” he said, taking Lily’s arm, gently pulling her from around Roth’s neck. Lily turned and clung to Taurino, her eyes intense, her hand splayed across his chest, stroking him. “Gracias, Señor Roth,” Taurino said, bowing slightly. “We are forever in your debt.” He swept Lily away, her whispering again, “One hour, no more,” and hand-in-hand they stole into the darkness, towards the high rocks on the beach.

Roth staggered back, stared into the dark. Like it hadn’t happened. Couldn’t have happened. Taurino? Taurino!

He sat down— before he fell down. For Lily, it had been Taurino all along. Roth could kick himself for expecting anything else. All the while, she’d been working her ruse about Taurino to throw off suspicions from Lucinda, Aunt Felicia, even her girlfriends. And she’d used Roth as an unwitting go-between, knowing he wouldn’t very well betray her after he’d schemed to garner those very favors that Taurino now savored. A hypocrite Roth wasn’t.

He stood and dipped into his jacket pocket for a pack of cigarettes, moved over to the bottom of the steps. Soon, he began chuckling, then he laughed uproariously. Couples gave him a wide berth as they reached the bottom of the steps, coming and going.

He lit up a cigarette, checked how many were left in his pack. An hour would be a long time under the circumstances. A chaperone!

Meanwhile, Zorro rides again! Galloping would be more like it.

The little shit.

Read on for the exciting prologue of Mike Roth’s next adventure thriller

The Valhalla Society

In the Mata Grosse, Brazil

Time to think. Plenty of time for that. Or maybe not. Aaron Benedict looked over his body, what little he could see of it since he could hardly raise his head. He laid, or rather half laid, half sit, with his head arched back helplessly like a Raggedy-Ann doll in a trashcan. Impaled on punji sticks four feet below the mouth of the pit. One stick was in his left buttocks, another spear protruded through his right thigh and the tip of another stick appeared through his torn bush jacket. He couldn't feel what damage the other one was doing, but his midsection was soaked in a deep, dark blood, so that couldn't be good. Strange how he could feel the excruciating pain in his thigh and buttocks, but not in his side. Was his spine injured?

What amazed him most was how he could be so analytical, clinical even, about his predicament. A survival mode kicking in. More likely, he was just trying to make sense out of his stupidity, trying to justify his decision to enter into this absurd game. He wasn't going to survive this pit and he logically knew it. He wondered when he'd be going into shock.

He laughed loudly at his predicament, for hard minutes until that denial gave way to sobbing like a helpless child. He was going to die. He was dying. Horribly, painfully, and worse; slowly. Very slowly.

He trained his ear to listen to a new sound of the jungle, a dull rush, like ocean waves in the distance. A shushing sound, distinctive but so very faint. Suddenly, his body sank lower into the pit and he screamed in agony as another punji stick penetrated his shoulder, also near his spine. His own weight was sucking him deeper into the pit where more razor-sharpened punji sticks waited for him. He prayed again that he wouldn't have long to wait.

He felt the butt of his rifle with his left hand. A thick punji stick that his head barely missed blocked his vision and he couldn't look down, but he knew the rifle was barrel first in the stinking mud at the bottom of the pit. The stench was from feces that had been smeared across the bamboo spears. If the punctures and bleeding didn't kill him, infection surely would.

No chance of freeing his rifle. Maybe if he could work his left hand down to the trigger, squeeze off a round. It might be heard. But probably not, and if the bore was packed in mud, the round would just split the barrel.

Nothing to do but think. Think about what a fool he'd been. Think about Egghead's rules. The shushing sound again, slightly clearer now, came from where he judged would be north. He slipped in and out of consciousness. When he came around again, he was light-headed, nearly delirious. Loss of

blood. Shouldn't be long now. Dear God in heaven: not long now. He hardly felt the searing pain in his leg and side now, and the punji stick in his back felt more like a brick trying to pass through his body than the razor-sharp sliver of bamboo. Were these bamboo sticks? Did bamboo grow here? So, he was back to applying logic in the face of total helplessness.

It was either getting dark or his life was ebbing away. Not sure which. No idea how long he'd been in the pit.

"Thought that was you," a voice suddenly came from above. "You sounded like a banshee from back in the jungle."

It was Skylar, so well camouflaged that were it not for the voice, Aaron wouldn't have recognized him, wouldn't even have seen him standing there. Skylar stood at the edge of the pit, his rifle cradled in his left arm as if holding an infant. He gazed down with a victorious smirk on his mouth. For all that Aaron knew, Skylar could have been standing on the side of a clearing all along, blending so perfectly into the jungle that he'd walked right past him. Knowing Skylar's penchant for games, he probably had at some point. This contest had clearly been a mismatch.

"Spare a bullet for me?"

"That might be hard to explain," Skylar replied casually, mock concern replaced the cruel smirk.

"A mercy-killing?"

Skylar shook his head. "The Brazilian authorities might not see it that way, should I be detained for any reason."

"You're not just going to leave me here?"

Skylar shrugged. "Well, it's true that some might take a dim view of that. And of course we know the Colonel's bullshit about 'never leaving anyone behind.' " He removed a digital camera from a haversack slung around his hip. "Still, there are mitigating circumstances: no way to lug your body back. Even if I managed it, by time I reached Culaba with what's left of you, you'll be pretty ripe. Too, too unpleasant, wouldn't you think?" He focused his camera on Aaron. "As a matter of fact, this hole already smells like a fucking toilet. Have you messed yourself? Besides, providing a proper burial isn't one of the rules, is it?" He adjusted the telescopic lens, clicked off a few pictures, and checked the results on the camera's LCD screen.

Skylar stopped suddenly and listened. That shushing, sweeping sound was clearer. Closer. If one could imagine a large steam roller crashing down through the jungle, crushing everything it rolled over, that's what it would sound like.

"You could bury me, you son of a bitch," Aaron hissed vehemently. A pain suddenly shot through his back and he screamed. He tried not to, didn't want to give this son of a bitch the satisfaction. But he

couldn't help it. His scream brought a cacophony of screams and jeers from the communities of birds and squirrel monkeys hidden in the canopy overhead. And it brought the smile back to Skylar's face.

Skylar shook his head again, checked his watch. "It's too hot for such work. Besides, it's getting late, and the jungle is no place to be at night," he snipped sarcastically, as though the prospect was too daunting. He dropped his camera back in his bag. "I must say, Mister Benedict, you haven't provided much of a challenge." He shook his head with disappointment. "Oh, well, I see that you're staying in tonight, so I may as well mosey along. You'll likely be getting some company later."

He gave Aaron a mock salute, and was gone.

It wasn't long before Aaron slipped into another void, and it was pitch black when he regained consciousness. Something was biting him, biting him everywhere. Sharp, painful bites, following by a burning itch that would send Aaron over the brink into insanity. The bites were marching up his leg, spreading to his crotch. Ants. Soon, areas covered with bites became numb, a poison mercifully taking effect just as other regions of his body were attacked with insanely irritating itching. Aaron slid expediently back into logic to hold a grip on sanity. He'd had an ant colony as a boy. What did he remember? Yes, Army ants. If that's what these creatures were. Family: formicidae; genus: eciton. Wasn't it eciton? Yes. That's it; sub family: ecitoninae; class: insecta; order: hymenoptera; species, E. eciton. Well, well, Mr. Benedict. Doesn't that just make you one smart son of a bitch. "Yes," he screamed for the jungle to hear. And the jungle screamed back, birds and primates screeching. He yelled at the top of his thinning voice; "carnivorous, yes." And blind little bastards, these ants. First, a few of their scouts would pop out of the brush, and then retreat back. But soon, the jungle floor boiled with them. Swarm raiders, millions moving at a meter per minute. Fast little bastards, devouring everything in their path, chemically signaling their aggressive incursions. But wait, wait. He laughed wildly, his grip on sanity fading. "Anything too big that can't be ripped apart, will be left behind. So... hello," he addressed the interruption. "Who's this?"

Someone was on top of the pit now. Skylar returning, after all? No, it wasn't someone. It was some thing. Its hot breathe smelled like rotten meat, its sibilant snarl so close that Aaron thought he might reach out and touch it. It was a jaguar, maybe a jaguarondi, drawn by the smell of Aaron's blood. Whatever it was clawed around the edge but knew better than to jump in; the beast's night vision missed not one detail in the pit. It circled the pit, whining its frustration, and finally settled down and lay near the opening until the victim's whimpering below trailed off. "Here, kitty, kitty," Aaron coaxed. "Would you like some ants? Huh?" Shortly, the great cat jumped wildly away, turning and spinning around to get free of his insects. It disappeared. Yes, the ants were defending their find, leaving their victim in the pit to their supremely efficient dissection

Now the jungle seemed to be splitting apart, and with the last of his mental processes, Aaron imagined how in the old King Kong film the ape parted jungle foliage with ease to claim his captive prize. But it was the sound of millions of ants parting and cracking and snapping and eating leaves and branches, everything in its trillion army path, a thousand billion microscopic mandibles slicing him apart.

Aaron screamed a laugh at his unrelenting pain, the itching, the stench of everything in the trench beneath him that now included his own feces, and railed against the god he'd worshipped his life long, the demons of agony so consuming him. How could God do this to him? Death; yes. Please, yes. Please not an instant longer of this hell. What if life after death was an eternity of this torment, each nanosecond of this mind-searing misery, his punishment for wantonly taking the life of another for the sake of a pathetic game.

By morning, all that remained of Aaron Benedict, age 27, American citizen, architect, affianced bachelor, and sports aficionado, was his skeleton. His heart hadn't stopped for nearly ten hours after the first ant bite, seemingly eons ago and it had beat on long after his mind went, reducing him to a faeces-soaked, drooling, howling lunatic.

For more please visit <http://www.byronbales.com>

About the Author

Byron Bales was born in St. Louis in 1942. At 15, he began working as an investigator until serving in the US Marine Corps, travelling throughout Asia with the Fleet Marine Force during the pre-Vietnam era.

Returning to civilian life in 1963, he continued working as an investigator, handling fraud assignments, and became licensed in New York and California, also registering his entity in the Kingdom of Thailand. He has handled assignments in over 170 countries and territories on all continents, establishing a worldwide network of agents.

He is married and retired in southern Thailand where he writes detective thrillers and Tales of the Inscrutable; stories of Asia-Pacific, many to do with the Pacific War. He is also found handling occasional assignments. He can be reached through author@byronbales.com