



Beneath the Canopy

From the collection:

Pablo Collar

Minor Chords

PART I

Cañaza

Saturday

1630

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

Danilo Araya was back from swinging a shaky deal at the mill but stopped short at the sight of the black Montero in his driveway. With nothing left but to face the dogs, he pulled in and around the waiting car onto the grass. He took a few breaths, pulled the rear-view toward him, smoothed down his collar, and mustered a smile. He exhaled and stepped out, putting a hop in his step.

"Gentlemen." The two men stood from around the table to shake his hand. They did not return his smile. "Baby," he winked, "why don't you be a doll and step over to Lucinda's for a bit?"

The intruders looked at one another. The small one nodded, and she left.

"Hey, I have till next Friday," Danilo pointed out. "What's up?"

"Change of plans."

"Well, I only have one and a half now," he said. "I was counting on a million in the next couple days on a wood deal later this week to round out the note."

The little one studied it over. "This has reached its limit, Chapín," he said.

"Our agreement was for Friday; the last guy and I shook on it with Don Javier on the horn. A deal's a deal," he said.

"Let's see the dough."

He unlocked a filing cabinet on his desk and produced an envelope and laid it on the table.

The man counted the one hundred and fifty bank notes and folded the wad and put it in his shirt pocket. "You've got till Saturday week to pay the balance. Three and a half million."

"But the deal was a full month for the final payment. Don Javier agreed to it."

"The deal has changed. One week from Saturday. That's all you get."

They stood to leave. The big one stopped at the doorway and turned. "That will be our last trip over on this business, one way or the other, Araya. Got it?"

"Yeah," Danilo said. "I got it."

San Miguel	Sunday	1000
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"The dogs," Andrés said. "Where'd they get off to?"

"It's our neighbor up ahead," his father said. "She's laying for us."

"Why would she do that, Pops?"

"Set on lecturing me again, I figure."

"Why can't she mind her own business, Pops?"

"Not her way, I guess. Trying to save the world."

Andrés shuffled under his load. Day was full on them, but in the understory, it was dark and cool, even in the morning before the clouds moved in to kick up the breeze and bring on the rain. He carried the two field-dressed agoutis hanging from the rifle, one from the barrel, the other from the stock, the .22 balanced across his shoulders. Never one to waste rounds, Pop had shot twice and now drew up the rear as Andrés set the pace, the dogs somewhere up ahead, out of sight. They talked freely, unconcerned with stealth on their way home, their voices low out of

habit. Their feet could not tell the difference between going and coming and passed across the decaying humus silently.

Sylván Montes had never been sure of his age, but he called himself seventy-two. He had twelve children from four wives. The last one—Andrés's mother—died from a fer-de-lance that bit her in the outhouse ten years back, and he'd raised the boy up himself since. From a vantage point where he scanned the saddle below and rise beyond for sign, he signaled for quiet. Half way up and off to the right he saw one of the hounds bedded down still and devised another off to the right and then a third, flopped out on the ground, moving their tails. He figured the fourth was behind the tree with the gringa. He imagined her sitting cross-legged, her back to the trunk, keeping out of sight to him, Santos with his eyes closed getting his head stroked in her lap. The old man pointed down across the boy's shoulder to show him where she was laid up.

"Bet she's picking off ticks," the old man whispered.

"Why don't we double around down the hollow and up yonder crick, Pops? We can come up on her from the far side where she ain't expecting us."

"Nah, she don't mean no harm, boy, sides the dogs'd raise us, anyway."

"Our own dogs?"

"They ain't trained up on spy craft, Son. I ain't got 'em past running game and droving cattle seeing's there ain't nothing to protect and guard up here, anymore."

At the base of the saddle, Sylván whistled up the hounds and waited till they bounded down the trail to swarm him with tails wagging, eager for whatever was next. The old man had them walk ahead, but at his pace. The woman stepped from behind a manglillo and stood in the trail, her arms crossed, her brow furrowed, a machete tied to her waste, all bent, it appeared, on letting her man side out. The dogs broke to rub against her like cats, their tails wagging, and they looked up at her and then back down at their master.

“Doña Karmela,” he smiled broadly as the boy stepped aside for him to take the lead. “What a pleasant surprise.” He turned his palms to the sky. “Beautiful day, don’t you think?”

“You are hunting on my land, Sylván. We have talked about this.” Her accent made her hard to understand, but he’d gotten used to it. It didn’t much matter; he already knew what she was going to say.

“No, no,” he shook his head and smiled. “We took these on the other side of the ridge, in Camilo’s farm, nearly to the Park.”

“This is my land,” she gestured to her left, “and you’re poaching. Those are dead pacas you are carrying. Are you off to sell them?”

The boy lifted the loop from the barrel and held out the gutted carcass to the woman. “They don’t call Pops Tepe for nothing,” he offered. “If you want, you can have this one here for only ten thousand *colones*. That’s a third of what he’ll bring in Pérez!”

“She does not want a paca,” the old man chided gruffly. “She is one that does not eat animals that contain meat.” He raised his eyebrows toward her. “Only fish and chickens and things like that, right, Doña Karmela?”

She rolled her eyes.

Andrés looked at his father and again at the gringa, shrugged, and restrung the game and balanced the rifle again across his shoulders.

“Don Sylván,” the woman softened her tone and dropped her crossed arms to plant her hands on her hips. “These animals are protected. What you are doing is illegal. You’ll empty the forest of life. Is that what you want?”

The old man’s attention hardened upon her.

“Now you look here, daughter. This,” he gestured to his left, is my land. I have told you before, and I will tell you again. I don’t need some smarty pants gringa to come tell me what I may not do on my soil in my country. You come here on high horses to save the forest that birthed me, and you don’t understand it, and you don’t

understand me, and you don't understand my people. You come to tell us that we cannot cut wood to build our homes or to sell in town to buy rice and beans. You tell us that we cannot mine gold from the rivers because it will muddy the water and hurt the tadpoles and crawdads and other things of no importance. You tell me I cannot feed myself and my boy with this rifle. What is it that you would have me do in order to eat? Take tourists on walks, depend on their generosity like those young dandies from town?"

"So, you take your hardship out on...these creatures?" She gestured at Andrés's load.

"You would like for me to sit here in my little shack and and starve?"

"Of course not; you know that."

"Maybe I should go and beg in the streets of Puerto Jiménez? Go cry to my grown children with their own struggles to take me in or send me money? Go find an old folk's home in Villa Neilly or San Vito to take me in? What do you want from me?"

"What if everybody went out and killed the agoutis, peccaries, and tapirs, how long do you think it would be before there would be none left?"

"But everybody does not kill them," Tepe replied rationally. "And there are many, many animals in the forest. Why, there are not enough jaguars left to control the peccaries, so we are overrun with them, these days." He paused for a moment to conclude. "You should think of me as just a different kind of jaguar, that's all."

"Bullshit, this forest is not overrun with anything but poachers, miners, and illegal loggers, and you're no jaguar, old man; you're a poacher."

"You keep talking about this conservation group coming to buy me and the neighbors out," he reminded her. "I have five of us in—650 hectares—ready for you and your supposed buyers. I have done what you asked, but nobody comes with any money, and it is all talk, and meanwhile I still have to eat."

"You know the conditions. Look, I got word Friday that the ACOSA application was approved, just a question of the paperwork to catch up with the decision, a couple

weeks. And my title is due out any day now. It's not talk; it's a sure deal once those two things are set. I would never lie, least to you."

"If it's a sure deal then a deposit of say, ten million, would be a fair sign of good faith," Montes pointed out. "You have given fifty million so far to that Danilo Araya for Manuel Sanchez's old place. What's a little ten million for me?"

"If I had it I would."

"Don Manuel lived here with the missus next to me for sixty years the same as I live now. That's half a century, little miss. We hunted together years before you were a hunger in your father's loins, me and old man Manuel. And we partnered up on a few gold claims through the years also, and built our ranchos from the wood of our own land. Give me just ten million, and I too will let you owe me the balance." He let it hang for a moment. "But until you do, please don't lecture me about hunting."

"Selling the meat sustains a market, Tepe, and the gluttony of Pérez alone will empty this forest. You don't want that; I know you don't. But that's what you are causing to happen. Eat these animals yourself; don't sell them! The world has changed don Sylván, and you must change with it."

"Let's go, boy. No sense talking when no one's listening." He pushed forward and when the woman would not move to let him by on the path, he stepped around her.

"I will go to MINAET," she called up the hill after him. "I will file a claim against you."

"You have already been to MINAET," he called back over his shoulder. "Let them come back and lecture me. File your claims. I don't care. Let them arrest me if they want. I'm not going anywhere. You want to stop me, go back home and bring out that pistol you have threatened others with and come shoot me. The collared peccaries will sing your praises, Ms. Karmela. They will love you, their savior."

She watched him retreat up the ridgeline trail and stood as the silence enveloped her, one foot on her land, the other on his, to glare at his retreat. When he turned

to her after fifty or so paces, she was sure she had willed it. His armor could be dented. She just had to keep after him. That and close out the Green Leaf deal and get him off to Perez to bounce great-grandchildren on his knee, as he liked to put it, and eat Sunday cakes in a concrete house with indoor plumbing.

“You have a nice day, Doña Carmelita. You come down to the house sometime for some coffee. I have a little corn patch nearing harvest, and I will fry you a fat *chorreada dulce*¹. Or. . . you like something stronger, I got a little rotgut hidden under the floorboards. For you, I will take it out and we will drink the forest’s health together.”

Cañaza

Sunday

1800

The onions and sweet peppers hit the palm oil with an angry sizzle, and Maribel Sánchez de Araya winced over her shoulder with a stab of pain at her husband and stirred the pan with one hand and reached down a bag of rice from the cupboard with the other. Along with all his other ventures, she was wary of this wood business. She had married a handsome, sharp-dressing, sweet-talker and now had four kids with him—and counting—but had given up on her dream of him turning into a respectable community leader with a decent job as a manager for Palma Tica or running a little mini-super or some cabins or a couple taxis or any other type of honorable work with a regular paycheck and hours. Instead, it was these stories over the cell phone with strange men, creditors always hovering over them, suspicious looks from the neighbors. Once in a blue moon there was a bit of money to settle their account with the mini-super and catch up on utilities to buy a day or two of peace, rarely a Sunday at the beach with the kids, or a Saturday night dance with the kids at her mother’s, until he disappeared off to the cockpit for to drag back home dirty, sweaty, hung-dog, and mean. The pain in her abdomen flared up again as she poured water into the sautéed rice and vegetables. None of the antacids and stuff they gave her at the clinic seemed to make any difference.

¹ Pancake made from corn, can be either salty or sweet. In this case a *chorreada dulce* is the sweet variety.

“Don Fernando,” her husband cooed into the cell phone, “you worry too much. I told you it’s all there...*si, señor*, twelve thousand inches², blocked up and on the mountainside in San Miguel. It’s these rains, Don Fernando. With the river swollen we can’t get it to the mill. Just yesterday we got a backhoe stuck, Don Fernando, a backhoe...well sure we have a tractor...well, I don’t know why he would say he hasn’t been paid, why just yesterday...easy, easy...calm down. Anyway, that’s my business...yes even with a tractor or a backhoe or a team of oxen or goddamned D-8 Caterpillar for that matter, it would make little difference with the Rincón out of its banks...this is an act of God, Don Fernando.”

Danilo Araya sighed and looked up at his wife with a humorless grin. The things he had to put up with to turn a lousy few thou. “No, no, sir, heaven forbid, we certainly *cannot* move it to river’s edge and wait. This wood, you know good and well, sir, does not have all the legal...you just have to be patient. We can’t move it a centimeter until we can haul it all the way to the mill in one shot.”

He held the phone away from his ear and used his wife as an audience to roll his head back and forth to mock the disjointed voice spewing angry static from the cell phone into the kitchen air. Maribel turned back to the stove to grimace in private with a new stab of pain. The water that swelled her eyes came from a hurt, however, quite different from the physical pain that it exacerbated.

“Oh, I understand, Don Fernando, and I assure you, this is only the highest quality cortesa, and for one thousand six hundred per *pulgada*, this is practically a gift. You know it’s going for twenty-five hundred in Pérez, of course you know...” “Yes sir, of course, you made a deposit of three and a half million, no worries...but Don Fernando, don’t forget that this is special wood, not fully permitted, so don’t talk to me about law suits or I won’t be able to respond for the wood or the money...Don Fernando, there is no need to get overworked about this; it is only because of the rains. In a couple of days the river will go down and we’ll get your

² An “inch” (*pulgada*) is defined as a measure of wood 1 inch high, 1 inch wide, and 4 varas (each vara is 32.7 inches) long, so one “inch” is equal to 131 cubic inches of wood, or 0.91 board-feet.

wood across and to the mill, and once it is there, we have a permit to cover it, and you'll have it milled and planed to the millimeter and delivered to your construction site two days later, tops three . . ." He rolled his eyes and winked as his wife turned to plead with her eyes and brought the phone back to his ear. "Say, I can't hear you, Don Fernando, I'm up in the woods here above Cañaza, and the coverage seems to...you're breaking up...I'll call you first thing in the morning." He pushed a button on the phone and then turned it off altogether and rubbed his hands briskly together.

"Dani," she said gently as the rice came to a boil behind her and the skillet heated over an open flame. "Baby I can't go on like this; this is no way to live, sweetheart. We have babies, little sweet children in pre-kinder and grade school, and there are uniforms and books, and your mother will not be able to live on her own for much longer, and look at us... "

"What's gotten into you, Mami?"

I would not care much how people look at me in the street if had at least a decent dress and the kids new shoes or if we had a washing machine and I weren't wearing my fingers raw on the wash sink out back. I want to be able to eat shrimp or tenderloin every once in awhile instead of this." She peeled the thin *bistec* slices away from one another, and they separated reticently, strings of nappy mucous snapping back to the thin slices of separated meat before she laid them on the cutting board and turned away from him to begin pounding them with a stone from the river that her own mother had used before her to soften meat and mill corn.

"Ay Mamita Mimi, my baby," he rose to embrace her from behind. He wrapped his arms about her waist and kissed her neck and rubbed himself against her behind. "The way you handle that stone and slice those onions transports me, my queen, perhaps we should duck in the bedroom while the kids are out playing and put all of these crazy things out of your head. Turn the stove off, my pet, just a minute is all it will take."

She shook him off and whirled upon him furiously, the stone in her hand raised in one hand, the filet knife in the other. "Pull that thing out," she commanded him. "Right now!"

He smiled and withdrew to his seat and winked. "You play so rough," he said. "Pour me a cup of coffee, why doncha, Sweetheart."

She set the cup down to slosh on the table. "Sugar it with that *paja* that spills out of your mouth, why doncha, Sweetheart!"

They stared at each other frozen in their stances, the meat sizzling innocently in the pan, and Danilo squeezed a bit of water to fill his eyes.

"Baby," he said low. "What is it, darling?" he asked gently.

She glared at him.

"Is it the gastritis acting up again, honey?"

She cocked her head.

"I can't stand that you have to bear that. I must take you at once to a specialist in San Jose!"

She threw the onions in on the sizzling meat and turned around, knife in hand.

"With what money, Dani, Sweetie? Look at us, you don't work, and I have the kids to run me ragged all day, living here. In this hovel..."

"Baby this is a concrete house. This is no wood shack in the hills. This is no *rancho*. This ain't no hovel."

"Dani, it is a tiny little sweatbox, baby."

"It has indoor plumbing."

"There's six of us. One bathroom? Please, Papi."

"And what do you mean I don't work? I'm working now, Mimi, what do you want from me? To work for a day rate? I am a businessman, not a laborer. I have a

brain, and I have the clothes that a businessman needs, a car, the basics to do business. It takes money to make money. It's cash flow, Mimi. What, you want me to go down and work construction on the new supermarket in Jimenez? I could, you know. Or get Alvaro to hire me on as stock boy in the *almacén* or yard man at *La Costa*? I could do that. And make fifteen thousand lousy thou a day, tops, no more than a half a million a month. This one deal with Don Fernando will net us a cool two million for two weeks of nothing more than making calls and intermediating."

"Making calls to tell lies," she grouched. "And intermediating other people's money into your pockets!"

"It all spends the same, baby, what's the matter with you?"

She speared a piece of meat and flipped it and a cloud of aerosols spattered angrily.

"Fifty million colones!" she screeched. "My inheritance. My parents' farm. Fifty million *colones*. And you've blown it all in two short years."

Danilo lowered his eyes and dredged up a look of sober regret. "Investments don't always work out," he said.

"What investment?" she began to cry. "You call drugs an investment?"

"Look," he cut her short; "if that deal had worked out, we would be sitting on a couple hundred million and be well on the way to being set for life; it was worth the risk."

"But they were MS-13 Dani," she sobbed. "It's a wonder they didn't kill you. And then that crazy business with the gold and all those crooks up at Cerro de Oro...you threw so much away and on nothing."

"I can't help it that the old bastard had a stroke and died in his sleep. Again, baby, that claim is now pulling in ten million a month."

"For his sons," she screeched. "And bankrolled on my inheritance!" She stamped the floor with her foot and winced from the pain that shot through her abdomen.

"I couldn't have known he was going to drop dead, baby. It was bad luck, that's all."

"You could have drawn up a contract, all legal, and protected the investment. I told you to go see *Pecas* and have him draw up a paper. I told you."

"There's nothing to be done about it now. It was bad luck, that's all."

"And now this talk of borrowing money to buy sport fishing boats...what do you know about sport fishing, Danilo?"

"Look, nobody knows anything until they do something. There's a lot of money in sailfish and marlin. These gringos pay big money."

"And all the money you've thrown away gambling, Dani, frittering our children's welfare on those filthy animals! And who were those two men, yesterday? What did they want? They looked like gangsters."

"Enough!" he shouted.

She jumped at the outburst and removed the meat fussily onto a platter and stopped when it welled up in her and covered her eyes to quietly cry. When he encircled her from behind this time, he was gentle and corralled doves to tether with ribbons to his tongue.

"You are my queen, baby, and I will make everything right for you. I will buy you the Tower of Eiffel, my pet," he cooed into her ear. "And I will take you on a tour of the Liberty Statue in Washington. I will fatten you on jumbo shrimp, conch ceviche, and suckling pig, my little *cotinga*. Everybody will turn when you walk down the street and wish they could walk in your shoes."

"Oh Danilo...I don't need all that; I just want to have a decent life and be respectable to our neighbors."

"Look," he turned her around and widened his eyes before kissing her forehead and both cheeks then each eyelid in succession. He looked at her again and touched her lips gently with his own. "Doña Karmela still has a balance of twenty-

five million due in six short months. I swear that I will not touch it for anything with any risk. It will be your savings."

She looked up at him and stilled her sobs and felt the pain in her abdomen recede into a reticent well of hope, dependence, and a stirring in her womb, a tentative hunger that dared to exhale.

"I swear it, okay, Mimi?"

"Okay, Dani," she ventured a timorous smile and kissed him with passive lips, her limbs slack. "I believe you."

"And..." He cocked his head and held her eyes with his; "...and I think I know how to squeeze another twenty-five million out of her to boot...something I have been working on."

"Those gringos, they're all so rich," she reminded him. "And the land is worth far more than the price that you agreed to. That was two years ago."

"And times have changed," he agreed.

"And interest. To pay in payments over three years is the same as a loan, and for a loan, interest must be paid."

"Miguel Arce is charging 5% per month," he said.

"You have not borrowed money from don Miguel," she looked up, aghast.

"Oh no," he lied, chuckling. "Oh hardly; I would never borrow money on those terms. I was just saying that you are right, that there is big money in carrying a loan, especially when it is for a foreigner, of all people."

"You scared me there for a minute, Papi," she smiled, looking down, thinking of her mother, God rest her soul, and how she would have been shocked at how freely Mimi spoke to her husband, questioning his decisions sometimes, getting involved in the planning of the finances, involving herself in the things of men where she did not belong.

“Baby, go call the kids,” she smiled weakly. “Dinner’s ready.”

San Miguel

Monday

Early morning

Dawn came to the forest in stages that Karmel Greene allowed nightly to punctuate her waking. Before it began, in the black of night beyond the gentle patter of rain, the fragrance of orchids filling the air, animals moved around outside to forage and hunt. Around three-thirty in the morning, everything went dead, and even the solitary chirps of frogs ceased. The animals returned to their burrows. The orchids folded their dewy petals up into a ball. The amphibians settled against something wet and cold, the heavens stilled, and silence was the first morning flower to blossom. It was at this stage of the morning that Karmel dreamed the most vividly, dreams that she sought later to recall over coffee on the porch as she would wait for the sun to break over the jagged peaks of distant mountains.

The deepest blackest quietest part of night, the first stage of her morning, was broken daily by a single twitter from that bird that she imagined getting the worm, a twitter that would rise at first in a tentative trill from the small clearing around her cabin and progress to a more confident clutch of chirps that in the imagined stretching of wings broke into what could finally be called nothing less than song. She awakened to the clarion of the first solitary voice piped through a darkness yet unbreached by coming day and fell immediately back into a fecund sleep.

The third stage of morning was launched by the howler monkeys, which awakened at around 4:30. If they were far away, only the basso roars would reach into her near-surface dreams to speed her on through the remnants of her night. But if they happened to nest in one of the trees near the edge of the clearing, then she would awaken to the gentle clicking of their vocal cords that prefaced their monstrous howls, weird sounds that you had to be very near them to actually hear. To her they were the sounds of skeletons dancing on their knees as they banged their rib bones like marimbas with their own tibias. But on this particular morning the closest troop was far away, and she allowed its howls to fold roughly into her dreams without ever raising her from the pool in which her shallow breath rose and

fell. She liked to remind her gal pals that the howlers' role in life was to announce to the world that it was time to wake up and make love. But since Samuel had left—or since she had managed to run him off—she tried with scant success to walk back that association. After ten minutes or so of the howlers' chorus, a faint blush pushed at the ink of the horizon to fondle the night's girdle, and Karmel awakened to lie in bed and chart her day. She rose to make coffee and donned a slip left over from the wine-and-roses days to monitor the lifting of the darkness and the descent of the day.

She looked down from the porch swing Samuel had built over the canopy of old growth forest that reached up the mountain. Beyond the shadowy blues and greens of an awakening forest, the alluvial plane below swept gently in penumbral chartreuse toward the coast. There were cattle ranches, rice farms, palm oil plantations, copses of secondary forest, and small houses with thin ribbons of wood smoke rising from hearths scattered across the land. The plane was broken by the sinuous weave of rivers working their way to the gulf. From her porch she could see the Barrigones to the north and the Sábalo to the south. Their meandering traces were inked into the peninsular canvas by remaining stands of old growth, now highways for the monkeys to descend by morning to feed on the fruit trees of the plains. But farther to the north and south were the gold-bearing Tigre, Agujas, Conte, Terrones, and Rincon, rivers untamed by bridges until 1991. The gulf was still and black, the mainland across the water shrouded in clouds. The near shore was lined with mangroves that thickened to swamps in the estuaries that graded from water to land. Beyond the gulf, the coastal mountains rose vertically from the sea as deep green bluffs. Beyond their tops a second row of higher mountains in the distance was a lighter shade of green, and beyond those lay a ribbon of lavender cordillera visible only on clear days like today that were the Talamanca Mountains, the first line of defense against the coming sun. This spine of Central America, she was sure, must be as wild and virgin as the Osa inland to her back—more so even—and she liked to imagine herself perched upon the highest peak that she could see over there. She was certain that on a day as clear as today she would be able from that promontory to see both the Caribbean to the east and the Pacific to the west. One day, she liked to imagine, one day she would find that peak and camp there

night after night until a dawn like today's that would let her look out upon both oceans. Making its appearance, finally, like a flaming spear hurled from her favorite horizon, the sun wiped from the rising land the misty grays and dusky blues and murky greens to leave every color transcendent and raise the contours of the land into a three-dimensional grid. With the sun's appearance, a breeze lifted from the lowlands and swept up the mountain slope and lifted her bangs and spirits and left a smile upon her face.

"Buenos Dias, Karma." Her staff of four *campesinas* arrived on foot up the two-track drive, red clay stains high on their rubber boots. She greeted them by name as they made their way to the shop in back to get the day's work started. She poured herself another cup of coffee before wandering around back to look in on the startup of another day of chocolate production. Today they were husking the forty-five kilos of cacao seeds that they had had roasted yesterday following Day One's harvest and Day Two's pulping. Once the gals were settled into the routine, she returned to cut onions and peppers for the *gallo pinto* to get the breakfast underway that they sat down to share daily at eight.

It wasn't their fault that they were trained to hunt, and Montes's dogs generally paid her a visit around this time of the morning when he didn't have them off in the mountains. Unlike back at their real home, she encouraged them onto her porch, and all four were laying there when the sound of a motor on the road came into hearing and they raised their heads in its direction. She was working on the layout for a marketing brochure for her line of boutique chocolates and expecting Barb, but the sound wasn't a quad, and she took her reading glasses off and allowed her face to set into a frown as she worked her way through her mental inventory to settle on the identity of that particular motor. She decided against fetching her pistol. He wasn't a threat and it wouldn't be right to just have it out to make a point. The hounds began to growl.

When Araya's Samurai rounded the bend and came into the clearing, they boiled off the porch, ears laid back, to swarm the car and snarl. She allowed herself a smile as the glass on the driver's side went up and Chapín cut the ignition and sat

looking at her from inside the vehicle, hemmed in by the dogs. He lifted his palms toward her.

She looked at him a good long while and called the dogs off. They quieted and retreated to the porch to gather round her to sit and watch the visitor.

“What’s the matter, Chapín,” she called out as the driver set one foot cautiously on the ground and hesitantly got all the way out and eased his way closer, leaving the door open. “Ain’t afraid of a few dogs, are you?”

“Them’s Montes’s dogs, right?” he asked, putting a friendly side to his voice.

“They stay with him mostly,” she allowed. “I like to think they belong to themselves, like every living thing.”

“What about cattle?” he asked. “Do cattle belong to themselves?”

“What do you want, Chapín? What are you doing up here?”

“Paying my respects,” he smiled. “Maybe buy a little chocolate to take home to Mimi for a surprise.”

“You can get that in town from any number of stores; I only sell wholesale from up here. You know that.”

“I hear you’re putting together a big land deal,” he said.

She made no move to rise from her chair, and the dogs watched the visitor attentively, and he did not stray from where he stood leaning against the hood of his car, distances measured.

“Can’t always trust what you hear,” she replied. “You know how it is with rumors.”

“Yes ma’am, Doña Karmela,” he replied, smiling. “I know how it is. Still, rumors, however exaggerated, tend to always have some basis in fact. Maybe we can put our heads together on this; two’s better than one, they say.”

“No thank you; one land deal with you in one lifetime is plenty for me. What do you want, Chapín? What are you doing up here?”

Danilo chuckled. He doffed his Panama and curled the corners of his mouth even higher. “Well, speaking of which; that’s why I’m here, mostly, we gotta talk about our agreement.” He cocked his head to put his sales cap on for this challenging assignment.

“What about it?”

“We need to renegotiate terms a bit. There have been some changes in circumstances.”

“What are you talking about?”

“That balance that’s due. I need at least a quarter of it now—or as soon as you can come up with it, next week at the latest—me and Mimi have some accounts we have to settle.”

“Tough shit. The note comes due in December, and that’s when you’ll get your money.”

“Well, I think it will be in everyone’s interest to discuss this amicably...”

“There’s nothing to discuss.”

“Well, if you are not able to come up with at least five million now, we can settle on doubling the final payment. I can give you another six months to settle.”

“What?”

“That way, me and the missus can take out a loan to cover our immediate needs without having to trouble you further.”

“Are you smoking crack, Chapín? Why would I do that?”

“Well, if you won’t work with me on this, we’ll have to put the finca up as collateral for the loan. And if we do that, then the bank will have a lien, so come December, we won’t be able to sign it over to you, not clean anyways...”

“Wait a minute.”

“I’d hate for something like this to get in the way of your land deal. Course if you hold back on the final payment in December because the title is compromised, then that would be a default . . .” Chapín shrugged his shoulders to let her do the math.

Karmel studied him closely.

“And you have fifty million sunk into it and would surely not want to risk your equity, all from being unwilling to work out this little problem now.”

“I want you off my land right now.”

The tone of her voice set the pack of dogs to snarling, their ears lain back, and Araya took a step back.

“Doña Karma, there’s no need to get hostile about this. It’s not a big thing, a few million colones to tide us over, a gesture of good faith. And this is not your land. Not yet it’s not. You haven’t finished paying for it.”

“Get out,” she barked, causing Chapín to jump and the dogs to boil off the porch.

He gained the safety of his car, and she called the dogs back off him, and he rolled the window down half way.

“Perhaps I got off on the wrong foot,” he said, producing a facile smile; “I didn’t mean to seem pushy. It’s not any great difference for you to pay us a part now. It means less to pay later.”

“A deal’s a deal.”

“It is going to complicate things to get the bank involved. And you know of course that my nephew is well placed there, loan officer and all; he’s already assured me they can put it together. It’s likely to complicate the closing if you leave me no choice. I’d really prefer to keep it all clean and simple. All I need is five little million.”

“Tell your wife if I catch you on my property again, I will shoot you.”

Chapín shook his head slowly before turning the ignition.

After the noise of the motor faded, she drew the dogs around her and loved on them. On cue they looked up over through the woods in the direction of Sylván's place and then up at her. "Go on, then," she told them. "Get on home; Daddy's wondering where you've gotten off to."

They bounded off the porch and set off baying through the clearing and into the forest.

Banco Civil, Puerto Jiménez (PJ) Monday 0930

Few things and even fewer people could dent the cheer that Diego Bonamérito wore to work every day along with his business suit. His uncle Danilo was one of those things and one of those people. When he looked up from the loan application package to see his uncle between the two sliding security doors of the bank's entrance, he knew Uncle was not there to check his balance. Their eyes met, and Diego swallowed, put on a smile, and went to receive him.

Diego had started off after finishing his bachelor's in accounting at Paso Canoas. He spent six months training in San José and Puerto Jiménez and put in two years as a teller. He leapfrogged the colleague he had trained under to the teller supervisor position when his predecessor was fired over something and worked a year in that thankless post. He applied for a transfer to *Plataforma* and the chance to work directly with clients again. The brass agreed that his interpersonal skills sufficiently exceeded his valued attention to detail to grant him the transfer. He liked attending commercial clients, mostly for the variety, and was not ready after a year for his next move but allowed himself to be trundled off again to *Chepe* for training, this time in credit cards. He worked as the commercial credit card liaison officer for another two years and would have been happy to continue in that capacity. But his sunny disposition, attention to detail, and popularity among his subordinates, superiors, and peers alike had escaped no one's attention, least of all the Southern Zone regional manager, who pulled him back up to San José for more training, this time in loans, and called him up on that occasion to his fifteenth-floor office to explain the great expectations they all had in young Diego. Self-confidence was no stranger to him, and he acquitted himself admirably and with a modesty that reaffirmed the Regional Manager's self-professed acumen for human

resources. Diego knew now to politely take on each new job with a smile, that they were all temporary, and that he was being groomed for the top. They were rounding out his edges, and a few months away from his thirtieth birthday, he expected to be tapped for branch manager somewhere before he turned thirty-five, a good five to ten years ahead of the curve. He would not even have to go out of his way to get there; all he had to do was stay steady and show up on time well-groomed, wear the smile that came naturally, and keep doing his job, whatever it happened to be.

Things had always gone Diego's way. He was deferential toward those that were not doing as well as he and gregarious toward those better off. He had just paid cash for a nice half-hectare lot on the edge of town and had a late model Daihatsu Terios with only eight more payments to go. In less than a year he would have the money to build a little house. He had youth, health, smarts, and good looks. He had placed second in last year's Lapa Rios marathon and had a beautiful blond American girlfriend. His nickname was *Galán*.

"Hey Uncle Danilo," he smiled. "Come, come, let me show you my new office!"

His visitor stepped in gingerly, bringing with him an unpleasant reek of cigarette smoke. He doffed his Panama to look around appreciatively at the glass partitions with their frosted trim and the framed documents hanging on the wall in back. Diplomas. Certificates of Achievement. A photograph of Diego shaking hands with the former President of the Republic. The desk was pressboard with simulated-wood laminate. A bookshelf against one wall had a row of binders neatly lined on the bottom shelf, titles printed on the spines. A blown glass paperweight and a mineral specimen sat on top. A flat screen monitor faced him on one side of his desk, and two manila files were stacked neatly on the other. Diego closed the open file and placed it on the stack. Beside the monitor was a hinged frame. Danilo turned it around: his saintly mother on the left and a magisterially endowed blond woman with fierce blue eyes and thickened eyebrows peering out from the left-hand side of the folding tchotchke.

"This your girlfriend? The gringa?"

“Yes sir. Her name is Barbara Salazar. But don’t let the surname fool you. The only thing Latina about her is her perennial tardiness (and reticence at oral sex, the inner voice resounded).”

They chuckled and Danilo set the frame back in its place. The nameplate on the outer edge of the desk had bold white text engraved into plastic with simulated wood grain that matched that of the desk, held in a shiny brass holder. It read:

DIEGO BONAMERITO ARAYA

Commercial Loans

“You must be doing something right around here, Galán. This is the nicest office in the building.”

“Oh, no, Uncle,” he grinned. “In back there are nicer ones. Trust me. How is Aunt Mimi, Uncle? And my little cousins? I hear Danilo Junior is turning into quite the little striker.”

“Mimi struggles with her gastritis but stays strong, and the kids are great, and yes, Lillo scores at least one goal every match. Let me get down to it, Nephew; you’re a busy man.”

“By all means. How may I help you, Uncle?”

“You may not be aware,” Danilo began, “but the gringos with that big walled compound in Sándalo? You know who I mean? Well, they’re selling their sport fishing business, two boats, gear, moorings, office lease, corporation, permits and licenses, everything. Lock, stock, and barrel.”

“I heard about that. Selling that compound as well. And some property they have in La Balsa. Clearing out.”

“Well, I don’t know about their real estate,” his uncle grinned, “but I have looked closely into their sport fishing operation, and the boats alone are worth twice what they’re asking for everything.”

“Seventy-five million, right?”

“Asking. Reliable sources say they’ll take sixty.”

Diego lifted his leg and rested his calf on the corner of his desk and studied the shine of his shoe leather. He looked up and settled his chin between his thumb and index finger, his elbow grounded on the armrest. Cold air blew down from the air-conditioning duct and played with a loose lock of his hair, which rose and fell inside the sterile office.

“I got a partner that’s got thirty. Now all I have to do is come up with my thirty. We got us a captain ready to sign on and a mate that speaks English. I already spoke with the agencies in town and a few of the hotels and lodges. The business plan is solid.”

“Sport fishing, Uncle?” Diego looked at the folder he had just closed. It was a loan application from Reel Big Fish for an operational expansion. They were the largest sport fishing outfitter in Central America—right here in little Jiménez—and had not turned a profit since opening their doors twelve years ago. Ice was also solid, at least until it melted.

“You know a day’s offshore rate is one thousand dollars these days. With two boats and conservatively counting only half the year as fishing days, that’s one hundred twenty-five million right there, gross, over twice the asking for the whole business.”

“But what of the costs, Uncle? Fuel. Permits. Labor. Insurance. It’s considerable. Maintenance. Boats take lots of maintenance, you know.”

Danilo squinted, hating the formality of places like this where even his own kin presumed to know better than he. He forced his moist upper lip into a semblance of a smile. Beneath his sallow complexion, behind his pointy cheek bones, within the folds of his cerebral cortex lurked a chained and beaten dog unable to flee, left with the sole options of either wagging its tail or showing its teeth.

“I know enough about boats to know they need maintenance, Galán; we got that all worked out.”

“Well, if you need volunteers when you’re ready to start up, I’ll pay for the gas whenever you’re ready to take me fishing.”

“Atta boy. I’ll remember that. But first I gotta come up with that thirty million.”

His uncle’s shortcomings in financial prudence were legerdemain within the Bonamérito fabric of gossip, and Diego assumed that the money from the sale of Mimi’s share of his deceased grandparents’ finca, about which a number of rumors swirled freely in town, was surely long gone.

“Have you had a good look at their books, Uncle? It’s one thing to project gross revenues on your optimistic forecast of 50% working days. I don’t think any outfitter does that well here. But even so, what about their net? What does this business actually pull in?”

“Their books don’t tell the story, Galán. Some folks don’t have much sense for business. What do these people know about doing business here; they’re from Florida.”

“Perhaps, but they ran a sport fishing outfit there. They know the business.”

“Apparently not, or they wouldn’t be tucking their tails to run back to their Fort Lauderdale.”

“What about savings, Uncle? I imagine you have investments tying up part or most of the fifty million you’ve collected on Aunt Mimi’s farm so far, but I bet you still have a nice chunk of that set aside for something like this.”

“What I have left out of that is already leveraged, Galán. I need fresh money for this deal.”

“Hmm. So, you’re here to see about a loan.”

“Just my luck that my nephew,” he pointed to the nameplate on the desk, “is the Commercial Loans Officer. That makes my loan application practically a formality, doesn’t it?”

They both chuckled.

“You know, Uncle Danilo, that what is being purchased cannot be counted as collateral, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if you want to buy that business, for example, you can’t put up the boats as collateral.”

“I can’t?”

“Technically they do form part of your collateral in a way since the bank would receive them in case of default, but to issue a loan the bank requires collateral that amply guarantees the loan itself, well beyond what is being purchased.”

“Mimi and I are ready to put up her farm to secure the money; it’s only thirty million that I need, and that farm got appraised two years ago by that Johnny Morano for two hundred million, so it’s probably worth two fifty or three today.”

“But Uncle. You sold that to that gringa, right...Karmel Greene?”

“Oh, but that is just an option. The title is still in Mimi’s name. So, technically...”

“But the option is a legally binding document. That is a done deal, right, Uncle?”

“Well, if Doña Karmela does not pay the final payment in time, the land returns to us completely.”

“But if she does, then title is transferred to her. Completely. Right?”

“Well, even so, we have equity in what remains to be exercised on her option, so I can still use the remaining third that she owes as collateral. And one third of the appraised value is still one hundred and fifty million or so.”

“Wait, wait, wait, I’m confused.”

“And one hundred fifty million is five times what I am asking. Together with the assets of the business itself, that should be an adequate guarantee.”

“You sold the farm for seventy-five million, Uncle, right? And you have collected fifty million to date and have only a single remaining payment of twenty-five million to collect, right?”

“Well, fifty million to go, actually. Doña Karmela and I are in negotiations over the final amount of the last payment.”

“I thought the last payment was not due for another eight months or so.”

“Six months, actually, it’s due in December.”

“And she has already asked for an extension?”

“Not exactly, I can’t get into the details until the deal is finished.”

“Well...I suppose it is not out of the question to use your remaining equity as a partial guarantee on a commercial loan. But if we do that, you will still need to come up with more collateral since twenty-five million does not cover a loan of thirty million, and to do that we’ll naturally have to make the note mature before her balance comes due.”

“It would be hard for me to repay thirty million in six months.”

“Plus interest.”

“Pardon?”

“Thirty million plus interest.”

“Yes of course. Plus interest. Hard,” he caught himself. “But not impossible.”

Ninety-eight percent of the people that walked through his door had no business taking out loans of any kind, and the other two percent—like the Reel Big Fish people—did not need the loans but simply found them more convenient than using their own money. Diego’s uncle was the poster child of the first demographic, aspiring to a seat at the table of the second.

“We can try it,” Diego frowned, weaving his fingers together on his desk “. . . but I think we’ll have trouble getting approval on this one. It’s a little shaky.”

“What about if I push the closing back one more year and secure an extra twenty-five million on the balance?”

“Would it not be better to option the sport fishing business and use your cash payout in December to close? Then you would have only five million to produce on your own.”

“But it’s a steal, Diego. They won’t give me a six-month option when somebody will come along any day to scoop it for cash.”

“The bank might agree if you had twenty-four months to repay, fifty million contractually guaranteed and if you put up your two hectares as well, something like that.”

“You mean our home?”

“Well, not the house itself so much as the land, which is where the value is. That’s worth thirty million by itself.”

“Oh, more than that,” his uncle frowned.

“I’m sure it is, excuse me. I’m not trying to sell it short, don’t get me wrong.”

“But that’s our home, Galán. If anything were to go wrong, we would be in the streets.”

“You could also guarantee just a portion of the loan if you can find someone with solid credit that will guarantee the rest...your new partner, maybe?”

“If I were asking for favors, I wouldn’t be here in the first place, nephew. . . .”

They sat still on either side of the desk as the cool air blew down upon them and looked at one another for several seconds.

“Sometimes,” Diego said calmly, “it makes more sense to pass on a deal if you don’t have the cash to make it work.”

The realization that his nephew was not going to roll over for him settled in around Danilo Araya like fog on a runway, and a curtain closed around him. His nephew had presumed to lecture him on affairs of business. Diego Bonamérito, pride of the family, mister helpful and considerate, had in effect just told him to go pound sand.

Danilo should have resisted the temptation to come here in the first place, though it was too obvious a solution to let pass untested. He imagined Diego going off and having a good laugh at his expense, and he hated those gentle eyes, that phony smile, the ease with which the arms hung and the fingers weaved together. His own family—in-law family anyway, not flesh and blood—was sitting over there all sanctimonious and laughing at him, vengeful, enjoying the power, savoring the rebuke. Little punk.

“Well, I will take my proposal elsewhere, I suppose. I wanted to give you the first chance. I know that it would look good for you here at the bank to be behind this. But I guess I’ll just have to go and meet with Don Miguel.”

Diego managed a pinched smile and a reflexive wince.

“You know best, Uncle,” he said slowly. “But I’d step careful around Miguel Arce if I were you.”

“Oh, one more thing.”

“Yes, Uncle?”

“If you hear of anybody looking for wood, I have Cristóbal, nazareno, cortesa for eighteen hundred a *pulgada* and manglillo and *níspero chicle* for fifteen hundred. As much as anybody wants, cash and carry.”

“I will keep that in mind, Uncle.”

It was Monday, and Danilo Araya had eleven full days to come up with three and a half million.

Bar and Restaurant Carolnas, PJ Monday noon

It had been years since Johnny Morano had last heard the phrase “two-bit punk” tossed in his direction. Since those days his frame had thickened in his mid-thirties and there were flecks of grey in his coarse black hair. He had more or less made good in paradise and mostly put that stretch of troubled years behind him. He sat in the Carolina restaurant, his conscience unencumbered as he admired the sweating foot traffic of backpacker babes and the ungroomed armpits that

betrayed them as European or even Canadian nationals, before a fish fillet *casado* and a cold Pilsen. He had pulled in on the bus from San José five years ago with a backpack and twenty-five grand in cash remaining from a deal he'd had to skip town over back in Chi-Town. Puerto Jiménez in the mid-ought's had everything he was looking for in a place to lay low. And these few years later, the aggrieved party had probably mostly gotten over it and the statute of limitations was coming up back home. He had been accepted into the community here, had him a little business, some regular squeeze, was playing daddy to his squeeze's kid from a bio father in the joint and found the climate did wonders for the asthma that had troubled him as a kid.

As he was squeezing lime on his *mahi mahi*, Danilo Araya leaned up against the half wall to level his pale, shifty eyes and his sniveling little nose and intrude upon Morano's repast with his annoying voice. "Hey Shades," he said. "I gotta talk to you, can you see me in your office after lunch?"

Morano took a swig of beer. "Yeah sure, Chapín, give me a half hour."

Johnny poked a few more bites into his pie hole, but Chapín's appearance had taken away his appetite. It wasn't like Morano was some kind of goddamned saint or something, but Chapín was in trouble with the wrong crowd, a crowd that Morano did a little business with on the side. Everything pointed to a score getting settled, and he was not too hot to get very close, even though Morano had brokered the Greene deal with him, Chapín acting the big shot with his wife's inheritance. Now he was up to his eyeballs in red ink with a rough crowd. It wouldn't look too good if word got back that Morano was seen talking to him, but it was, after all, a small goddamned town. It wasn't like you could just act like people weren't there or something.

He pushed the half-eaten plate away, dropped a toucan³ on the table, took another swig, and shuffled back to his office, wondering what the sneaky little bastard could want from him.

³ A 5000-colon banknote, worth about \$10 at the time of the events of this narrative.

"You got anybody needs any wood, Shades?"

"Maybe. Whudduya got?"

"Whatever you want in hard wood. Fifteen to eighteen hundred a *pulgada*, less for anything over ten thousand inches.

"I can move cristóbal for you at fifteen hundred."

"*Cristobal's* eighteen hundred."

"What's my cut?"

"Whatever you can add on and get away with."

Shades rolled his eyes. "I think I can do better on my own, thanks."

"I'll go seventeen hundred net for you."

"Fifteen."

"Ten percent is the best I can do: Sixteen-twenty an inch."

"Dry?"

"Of course it's not dry. Not for C1620 an inch. What are you, crazy?"

"Permitted?"

"Sort of."

"Right. Sort of." Morano smiled. "Let me look into it. I'll let you know."

"That's not why I'm here."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

"The Cañaza deal is not working for us, Shades."

"You mean with Karmel Greene? What your wife sold her?"

"We did not sell it. We optioned it."

“Oh. Right.”

“We have to make some changes; the deal as it stands ain’t gonna work.”

“How so? She’s made her payments.”

“We need more money, Shades.”

“A deal’s a deal, Chapín. You agreed, she agreed. I put the option together. You took her money. Pecas made it legal. You can’t change your mind now. You can’t demand more money.”

“There has to be a way, Shades.”

“The only way you can get more money is if Karmel agrees to give you more. And she ain’t gonna do that.”

“Why don’t you talk to her about it?”

“No thanks. Anything else?”

“I guess that’s not really why I’m here, either.” Danilo looked up from the Panama in his hands.

“Okay, Chapín, so tell me why you’re here.”

“I need you to get a message to our friends.”

“Our friends?”

“Don’t get coy with me, Shades; I know your business.”

“That sounds a bit like a threat, Señor Araya.”

“It’s no threat. It’s just a fact. They moved a deadline up on me to a week from Saturday. I got a deal closing the week after that. I need a few more days to come up with the dough and get right with them.”

Morano shook his head slowly. “No can do, Chapín, old pal.”

“Come on, Shades, those guys play for keeps.”

"I ain't carrying your water on this, bud."

"You have made money off my back, Shades. Now I need a hand."

Morano studied it over and worked out the angles and let a long silence hang between them.

"I might can loan you a couple million," he said. "But you'd have to sign over your property as a guarantee, well, your wife's property."

"I can get a loan from Don Miguel if I want a loan; why would I borrow from you?"

"Arce charges up to eight percent per month...I might could do it for four, for old time's sake and all.

"Arce gives me five."

"Well, I'm not so set on points. Maybe we can trade, say you bring me the finca next door to your in-laws' old place on an exclusive. Maybe set aside a few hundred "inches" of zebra wood or something nice like that for me."

"The Montes finca?"

"Why not? I hear that's where you're getting your wood."

"It's not titled."

"Didn't stop us with your in-laws's piece."

Chapín smiled. "So, I guess that means you're not brokering that deal I keep hearing about?"

"We're working on it," Morano lied.

"You let me know about that wood. I'll talk to Don Sylván about his farm. Maybe we can work something out."

Johnny sat back after Araya left and mulled his position. He chopped out a couple lines and snorted them and sat back to feel it come on. Danilo Araya had taken a turn. Ever since that land sale, he had slipped off into worse and worse choices.

Word was he had blown the deposit on a bad drug deal with a Salvadorean mob that had had to blow town too fast to settle scores. And then he'd blown his balloon payment on some sort of gold thing up at Cerro de Oro. Rumor had it he had since brokered a couple small powder deals with Johnny's crowd, the Canoas boys and their Medellín backers, probably Chapín's way of getting his confidence back after his run in with the *maras*. But now he was on the outs again over this five million in "lost" merchandise, and so long as the Colón cartel and their Calí muscle didn't win the Canoas turf war by one week from Saturday, and so long as Chapín didn't come up with that payment, then he was living on borrowed time. Word was he had used the proceeds from the Colombians to settle a gambling debt; he had it bad for the cockpit. That and stake his current wood deal, an illegal Forestry Reserve operation, and it was only a matter of time before MINAET caught up with his ass. The mob ran the joint, and any preventive prison for Chapín over illegal logging would be a death sentence in the joint unless and until he got that five million paid off. Plus, interest.

Morano didn't care one way or the other about the guy, other than his desire to now take a shower. He felt sorry for him deep down, but not too sorry to not get a lock on his old lady's place for a little two million loan. Chapín might squeak by with the Colombians this time, but it was just a matter of time before destiny caught up with the guy. As an investment Morano couldn't lose on this one. Truth was Chapín was as like as not to blow the loan at the cockpit and then get wacked the next day. Wouldn't that be the height of irony? He retraced from a visceral glow the day's fruit bestowed and decided it was time to get out of the office and go pay Karmel a visit.

Esquire Lubricio Parimaldo Natas was editing a corporate charter when the front door opened and Danilo Araya stepped into the reception area and up to Silvia's desk.

Giorgio never played himself in Pecas's dreams. Giorgio always appeared disguised, always playing the role of an authority figure before whom Pecas was obliged to appear to learn some little fate or settlement of accounts. In last night's recurring dream, Giorgio appeared at the driver's window, a lit cigarette butt hanging from the corner of his mouth, a slobbering gas-station attendant leering over Pecas's indisputable pedigree. "Regular, super, or diesel?" asked the wight through a twisted grin, the butt bobbing with each syllable between pursed chapped lips. Pecas could not recall which car he was in and therefore whether to fill with diesel or gasoline. "You must turn off your motor, Licenciado Parimaldo, or risk the danger of an explosion," grinned Giorgio in disguise, waving the fuel handle through the open glass, drips of fuel falling onto Pecas's starched dress shirt. Pecas smelled the gasoline on the ground spreading to encompass the four tires and reached for the door handle. He awakened in a cold sweat as the cigarette butt slipped from Giorgio's blue lips into the driver's window.

The anxious memory washed over him in a wave and left dots of perspiration on his forehead.

"Have him wait five minutes. Then send him in."

The one-way glass allowed him to examine Chapín freely from a few feet away without being seen in turn, and he noted the half moon of perspiration beneath the sleeves of his expensive shirt, the moistness of his upper lip, and the sharpness of his cheek bones.

"I need you to bust that option, *Pecas*," Danilo declared on the heels of the pleasantries, having declined the offer of coffee, taken his seat and donned the obligatory mask.

Lubricio was short and squat. He was broad-shouldered, powerful, and sported a gruff demeanor made the more intimidating by his shaven head. He had vitiligo, a congenital skin condition that left blotches of pink on his face, the source of his unusual sobriquet. He was a small-town lawyer that spent his days with estate planning, real estate, tax and social security mediations, corporate constitution, national registry reviews, and comparable bureaucratic dreck. He had not accepted

a criminal defense case after getting burned on his first. Occasionally he got the nod for a civil lawsuit but with awards practically non-collectible, he took the work reticently for cash and where actionable directed the clients that could pay toward shadowy associates for the mediation of accounts. Mainly he used his law license to further his own business interests, which included a couple seedy bars in La Palma and Cañaza, a run-down apartment building in town, a share in a rice operation, and commercial leases of the downtown building where they sat, which he owned. He dabbled on demand in usury but let Miguel Arce take the town's loan-sharking lead. Occasionally he got involved in shady things, but he was discriminating in who he would work with on ethically marginal cases and by his personal convention only with people from off the peninsula, at least usually. He was notoriously private, even hermetic, and though rumors swirled, he had a solid reputation, and was either openly or begrudgingly admired, nominally one of the town's *de facto* leading elders. He was rumored to be from Liberia, a seed that he himself had actively scattered upon his self-imposed exile to Puerto Jimenez shortly after passing the bar.

"Is doña Karmela involved in anything illegal? Growing pot, maybe?"

"I doubt it."

"Are you still living on the land?"

"No, we're cleared out. She lives in my in-laws' old place."

"Has she been late on payments?"

"No."

"If she was breaking the law, we might be able to do something. And if you were still on the land, you could refuse the last payment and not move off, and maybe bluff your way toward a settlement. And of course, if she was late on a payment, you could reclaim the land through default." The attorney turned his palms upwards and shrugged.

"There's gotta be another way."

“Any other way would require a “creative” solution, Chapín.”

“Meaning it will cost a lot of money.”

“Meaning it will cost a lot of money and not be a sure thing.”

“If it is going to cost a lot of money, I need for it to be a sure thing.”

“There is a certain proportionality between the degree of certainty and the amount of money you put up.”

“How much are we talking?”

“Probably ten million, something like that, maybe fifteen.”

“I don’t have that kind of money sitting around.”

“I have someone might take it for a 50% stake. I’d have to run it by him.”

“Greedy goddamned someone.”

Pecas shrugged. “Aren’t we all?”

“You study on it some and I’ll see what kind of dough I can come up with.”

The men stood and shook hands.

“How much do I owe you, Counselor?”

“Oh, don’t be silly, Chapín. Your money is no good here.” The lawyer curled his lips upward.

“Oh and Pecas...” Danilo turned, his hand on the door knob.

“Yes?”

“If you know anybody that wants wood, I have anything you want for as little as fifteen hundred for run of the mill, no more than eighteen hundred for top end.”

“I don’t need your help, Shades.”

Karmel had not recognized the sound of the motor lumbering up the hill and had sat back, wondering if maybe Barb, who was running late, had trouble with her quad and taken a taxi instead. The Four Runner pulled into view through the clearing, and she tensed up and leaned back on the porch swing. The smell of killed meat hung low over her farm, and all the dogs, it seemed, were locked on its scent.

“Karm, look; it’s a complex deal, and this Santa Cruz outfit has also reached out to me about a package of farms I have in Carate; it’s not like you’re holding solid cards on this.”

She kept any reaction off her face, resigned to hear him out.

“I put you together with this place,” he reminded her. “Negotiated the complicated option, handled everything without a hitch, and landed you a great deal. It would have never happened without me, and now look.” He waved his arm across the sloping forest and the lowlands and gulf beyond. “All yours.”

“You got your commission. You got paid.”

“Karm, real estate’s my business. You don’t know the ropes like I do, especially with untitled land and these mountain people.”

“What’s there to know, Shades?”

The sound of the quad intruded on the late afternoon as clouds gathered and settled in, the rain still not ready to fall. It gave her a lift, and her visitor looked out toward the sound, its intrusion unsettling him, the clip of his stridency ticking up a notch.

“Look at all we went through with Araya and his old lady to get your option through, and he’s at least literate and drives a car. These folks out here will be on board one day and then from gossip from a neighbor insist on twice as much the next. A single finca is convoluted enough, but a package of several to an offshore non-profit group is a very tricky bit of business.”

“Shades, look. You just want to edge in on the action. I don’t blame you for that, but the deal’s framed, and I put it together, and there’s no room in it for you.”

Barbara Salazar roared up into the yard and cut her engine to step off the quad. When her helmet came off it was Morano she was looking at. She crossed the muddy yard in her white rubber boots and stood before the two of them in her short skirt and halter top, as Shades wound up to his final say.

“Well,” he smiled, draining the coffee and standing to look out over the meadow and the lowlands before turning back to Karmel. “I appreciate you taking the time to see me. Think it over. I bring a lot to the table. Let me know if you have a change of heart. Barbara,” he touched his fingers to his forehead and conjured a smile. “It’s always a pleasure to see you. Sorry we can’t visit a bit; I was just on my way back down the mountain.”

“That guy creeps me out,” she said as the sound of his ride faded back into the forest. She sat on the porch swing beside Karmel.

“He’s a piece of work alright.”

“Tell me it’s true, Karm,” the newcomer looked over at her friend, bursting into laughter at the shifty grin she got in return. “You’ll eat that son of a bitch for dinner,” she laughed. “Reduce him and pour him over bananas and ice cream and slurp him up. And I’ll wash the dishes! ACOSA approval? Really? For sure?”

“It’s just verbal,” Karmel said. “My lawyer says it will take a week or so for the edict to follow the council vote. But he says it’s a lock.”

Barbara Salazar jumped out of the porch swing and leapt into the air and pulled Karmel up and made her dance around the porch before she contained her excitement to sit them both back down and get the full scoop.

“Shades claims he’s in touch with Green Leaf—that they’re feeling him out over a tract he says he has on the Carate side.”

“He’s lying,” Barbara said. “Just trying to weasel his way into a payday.”

“That’s my take,” Karm said. “But you never know around here.”

“Well, you can bet that if they haven’t reached out to him, he’ll sure be calling them, pitching them whatever he has up his sleeve to lure them away and muscle you. But it won’t work, Karm. It’s your turn! You’ve worked too hard for this to let that guy—ew—get in your way.”

Hwy 245, Bamboo Turnoff

Monday

1630

Danilo Araya kept his mind focused on the modest gains of the day and the objectives for tomorrow and did not let it drift into that dangerous territory that could get him in trouble in Bambú if he allowed his mind to wander there. It was hard because despite the fact that he had come away from today with nothing firm, he was sure that something was about to shake loose for him, and he felt like celebrating and was not ready to go home. He often found himself envying men that drank; things were easy for them. It was business, he told himself, and it was called cash flow. You can’t make money without spending money. Okay, so he had taken the Colombians’ dough to pay off his Bambú debt. Now he had the wood profits and whatever else he could come up with to settle with the Colombians. It was just cash-flow, nothing more. Well, and timing. He had to do all this before Saturday week or have to skip town till he did. Still, three and a half mill was such a small amount of money and he was such a good goddamned talker that they would probably just rough him up, put a real scare into him, try to collect before making an example out of him.

He might have made it past the Bambú turnoff had his phone not rung. It was his wood client, and the traffic cop was up ahead along the straight-away, so he pulled to the side rather than risk a ticket, and where he pulled over was by pure coincidence within twenty meters of the Bambú turnoff. They discussed their differences calmly this time, and Araya felt good afterwards. He would head up to San Miguel and crack some heads tomorrow. The river was low enough to get the blocks across. It had been high when he used that as an excuse, but the wood had not been ready then, and now it was still not ready but the river was low, so he had to get his boys moving faster to get this wood out and quit making excuses to get paid before his Colombian note was due. That bastard Shades would not put in a

word for him, but would stake him with their house as guarantee. He was banking on Danilo getting capped. He thought about that and laughed. In this world, you wanted the dogs off your back, you had to shake them off yourself, wasn't nobody else gonna do it.

He turned up the Bambú road and felt his insides knotting up and uncoiling. Some people liked drugs. Some liked sex. Some liked to gorge themselves on food. There were those with foot fetishes and others that compulsively washed their hands. And then there were those fanatics that worshiped God and believed the Bible was true and spent their time wailing and singing and trying to convert honest folks to their cause. There were those that liked to hurt people and those that liked to be hurt. There were all kinds of weirdoes in this world.

His thing was cockfighting, and as he neared the turnoff that led back up to the *galerón* where the cockpit was, he could feel his limbs loosening and his brain chemistry meshing with the approaching pulse of chance and the elegant beauty of the noble avian gladiators.

He parked his car and counted his money, and it came to fifty-three thousand colones. He stayed for three hours and left the pit with four hundred fifty thousand colones and walked swiftly to his Samurai, cutting his eyes around to make sure he was not being followed. Now he had nearly a million on hand and only 2.5 million to go to settle his debt. Of that two and a half, Shades had offered two on loan and could surely be squeezed for the final five bills. Putting the house up did not worry him since two million, three and a half million, ten million, whatever, it was all chump change. In business, you make or break based on your ability to channel dough, and it all came down to cash flow.

He had a missed call from Carmona and pulled over down the road to assimilate.

"What do you mean, ate out?"

"It's hollow, rotted inside. We'll be lucky to get two thousand inches."

"But we're counting on five."

“Ain’t gonna happen, Chapín. The first one’s fine. But the second one’s for shit. Figured you would need to know.”

He was going to need another tree. Tepe wouldn’t like that. But you know what. Fuck Tepe. He’d sold him a bad tree. They’d work it out. It was just a permutation to the contract that had to be made, change of circumstances. It was a big day, tomorrow.

In business, after “buy low, sell high,” it all came down to cash flow, nothing more, nothing less. And that was the main secret to any successful business.

All you had to do was keep that cash flowing.

Xocola Farm, SM

Monday

1700

“Be forewarned,” Barbara glanced down at her pack as the afternoon settled around them, the rains still at bay. “I brought Patrón and limes, and we’re going to celebrate!”

Barbara Salazar was a thirty-two-year-old surfer chick with the self-effacing sense of self to refer to herself as a bit of a ditz. Physically beautiful and well sculpted by standards both inside and outside her crowd, she had a master’s degree in cultural anthropology from Cal State, a rich and doting daddy, and had never earned a day’s wage in her life. She carried neither guilt nor entitlement and had negotiated the overtures from the lineup with enough class to avoid being trashed behind her back. She paid her way everywhere and volunteered at the turtle hatchery on Piro and beach cleanups both in town and on the Pacific side as well as Matapalo. She allowed herself to be dated by a Tico from town that she liked, about whom she spoke sparingly to her girlfriends when asked. She was a regular at the Friday night raves at Martina’s, but she did not take drugs and was usually in bed by midnight and up by dawn for the first set of the day. Local guys had quit trying to pick her up and she could make short work of fresh imports. She did not eat red meat but did not speak against it. She attended yoga sessions and enjoyed them but stayed well outside its militant fringe. She allowed herself reticently the label of

environmentalist, but she had Tico friends that would eat turtle eggs if offered, and she withheld the condemnation expected by her erstwhile coreligionists. Fifteen years younger than Karmel, they had met in the lineup a year and a half ago, and their friendship grew not out of causes but from roots.

“Look,” Karm said. She pointed downhill to a balsa that rose from the middle of a landslide scar now re-colonized in secondary. “See him there, up in the top?”

Her guest leaned forward and peered a long time.

“See him?”

“It’s a monkey . . .”

“It’s not a monkey; not in a balsa tree. . .”

“It’s a sloth!”

“It’s not just any sloth...”

Barbie stood up and leaned forward and scrutinized the distance, her jaw slack. “It’s a sloth prince,” she speculated. “A prince of sloths.”

Karmel laughed. “Well, it may be a prince of sloths, but if so, it is a prince of two-toed sloths.”

“Oh no,” Barbie turned in horror. “What happened to its other one?”

“Silly. There’s two kinds. Three-toed and two-toed.”

“What?”

“The three-toed sloths are more common. The two-toed are kind of rare.”

“How can there be two kinds of sloths and the only difference is their number of toes?”

“That one,” Karmel pointed, “is a two-toed sloth.”

“Do you think they can mate?”

“Please don’t talk to me about mating.”

“I mean, you know, could they reproduce?”

“Perhaps with sterile offspring.”

Barbie thought about this a minute. “If a two-toed baby daddy sloth mated with a three-toed baby mommy sloth, how many toes would the baby baby sloth have?”

They laughed.

“Man,” Barbie looked back down...” you sure do have good eyes, Karm. For real. How’d you spot him?”

“He’s been there a few days. I’ve been down to check him out. And yes, he is a male.”

“Yeah. He looks like he wouldn’t take no shit from no one. Like a real alpha sloth.”

“Don’t be impugning the masculinity of my man-sloth, girlfriend.”

“Was that a toucan?” Barb jumped at the sound.

“There she goes down there,” Karm pointed off to the southeast. “See her? Loping through the air?” But she could see that Barb could not. “There,” she moved where her guest sat in the porch swing and put her arm out by Barb’s face and pointed. “She just lit in that nazareno tree, see? There? See the spot of yellow?”

“Yeah! Yeah, I see her now. She’s beautiful...only how do you know she’s a she?”

“I just made that part up. I can’t tell. I just want her to be.”

They sat and admired the greying of the approaching dusk, the clouds impossibly still around them, and Barbara spoke up after a long silence between them to channel the cosmic funk that filled her.

“The future is written over everything natural,” she said. “Only it’s written in invisible ink. Like if the sun’s light was ultraviolet, we could make out all these

messages that God is trying to tell us through the forest but that we are blind to because we don't see in the wavelengths of light in which truth is written."

"I think they have places for people like you," Karmel said.

"Someday, Karm, there will blow up a storm, and instead of water, the heavens will rain a developing fluid that will leave prophecies that were always hidden newly revealed on all the jungle's leaves and on the trunks of trees and on the hides of animals. Perhaps even on the foreheads of our friends and neighbors, and every message revealed will be unique."

"You mean like Revelations in The Bible, something like that?"

"Not like the Bible. Like the Tao. And that when that happens, we will all wander around in awe at what we should have been able to see all along and will no longer be able to live in denial about cutting trees and diverting water and hunting animals, stunned at the truths we could not see before for not wanting or for having limited powers of vision. And when that happens, Karm, my Matapalo days will be over, and I'll come up here to live with you. If you'll take me, of course."

"And leave Galán in town to all the hot little Ticas on his trail?"

Barbara sighed. "He's not like that. He could pick and choose if he wanted that."

"You guys getting serious?"

"Serious is not in my DNA," she said. "But he's an okay dude."

Barbara could not shed Samuel's echo around the clearing as the last words recessed into the past. He was out there on that world ocean tonight, pushed out there by that thing, that incomplete acceptance lurking in all her sisters' hearts, hers included, that tragic flaw of the sisterhood that lived a bit larger in Karmel, alone now on the finca that was to be theirs, their dream now emptily hers alone and hollowed out a bit, its veneer shorn of an iridescence it had once irradiated, its substance sucked of its eager concentration of energy back out into the cosmos now, dispersed into the void.

"Have some chocolate, Babs," Karm said, "lest we stray too far into the dark."

Barbara wiped tears from her eyes and nibbled.

Karm looked down at the pack. "If we're going to do this, we better get with it."

She put a Marvin Gaye playlist on her laptop and hustled up coffee mugs and a bag of salt and set them down and took Barbara through a soulful bachata on the porch above the dark lowlands and the Gulf's still deep, the mainland's kelly-green beyond and the Talamanca's deep purple ribbon the highest thing below Venus to catch the sun's final hurrah. They made faces at one another and mimed the throes of pimply teenagers in gangly love, and when the song was over cut the lime and raised their mugs to clink.

"To the bush," Karm said.

"To the bush."

Shots down, they bit into the salted lime and swung on the porch over lengthening shadows to listen to the understory overcome its shyness. The air stirred and quickened as the clouds jousting behind them backing their ways up into the rear cordillera, the Pacific vanguard, the infinite vastness to the west.

Montes Farm, SM

Tuesday

0800

Sylván Montes was in the lower five when he recognized the sound of the Samurai lumbering up the two-track. He had eight head of cattle gone missing overnight, and after tracking them down over to Carmona's place had raised the dogs to round them up and drive them back to the right side of the fence. A fallen branch had broken the top strand and bowed down the bottom two. He had the branch sawed and had only to put up an eight-meter length of barb wire he had cut and readied. He finished and drove the dogs on ahead across the field and up the slope. It was surely some new problem with the wood. It was nothing but trouble with the kid, and Sylván was reaching his limit.

Sure enough the kid was holding his ground in the car, dogs growling all around, and he called them off.

"You sure they won't bite?"

"Not with me here," Araya grinned. "What's the matter, scared of dogs?"

"Just making sure." Danilo got out and walked over to shake hands. "Sure is a nice view you got up here." He looked out over the water.

"Nice and cool, too, mornings and evenings and when the breeze kicks up." Montes doffed his hat and raked a forearm across his brow. "Gets a little warm during the day, though. Gitcha some lemonade, son?"

"That'd be nice, Don Sylván. I was hoping we could sit down and talk."

"I didn't figure you was here to sing hymns and praise the Lord."

"That's a good one, don Sylván."

"Care for a little rotgut instead?"

"No sir, thank you. Never touch it, personally."

The old man squeezed two limes into a plastic pitcher and ladled in four heaping spoonfuls of sugar and filled it quarter full of water. He stirred it around and poured two glasses and motioned the young man down and sat across from him. Both the kid and his wife was kin on different sides, and the old man wondered if this peninsula had gotten too small for its gene pool.

"Them woodsmen of yours...you sure they're cut from the right bolt?"

"We had some problems with the saw, don Sylván, and then the mill. And then the rains. But they know what they're doing. Mind if I smoke...?"

"...But there is a problem, don Sylván. That second tree is ate out inside. We were looking at maybe five thousand "inches" from that one. We'll be lucky to get eight hundred. Tops."

"I sold you the tree, not its inches."

"Yes, don Sylván, but if the wood is not there the tree is not really there either."

“Oh, the tree was there alright.”

“I don’t mean to seem ungrateful, but I still have to have the wood to fill the contract.”

“What are you driving at?”

“I have to fill the contract.”

Sylván set his glass down and looked out the open window across the lowlands and let the silence hang before turning back slowly upon his visitor. “I don’t know, Chapín,” he said, introducing a roughness to his tone. “I’m kind of partial to what’s left standing.”

“Don Sylván,” Chapín chuckled hollowly. “Don’t fool with me. If I can’t supply the wood that’s promised, there’s no sense in taking any at all.”

“You’ve already cut two trees, boy.” The old man held his hand up and raised two fingers on his left hand. “Two. And you and me have a deal.”

“But a contract is on paper, for the inches, not the number of trees. And it’s my ass. You got nothing invested; I gotta supply the wood I said I could. I am already holding a deposit.”

“What do you mean I got nothing invested? It’s my ass if anything goes sideways.

“You got plausible deniability,” the kid replied. “Me, I got a crew there and equipment and a real liability should the law fall on us.”

Sylván Montes thought about this for a good long time. “Not sweet enough for you, Chapín?” the old man shrugged.

Danilo stared nervously back, till the old man looked down at the glass of untouched lemonade. Chapín grabbed it up and drank it down in three gulps and set the empty glass back down on the table.

“Just right, actually.”

Tepe got up and went back to his bedroom to lift his rifle out of its hanging spot to sling across his shoulder. He picked up the machete from the table and tied the scabbard about his waist.

“We’d best go take a look at that ate-out tree.”

Chapín grabbed up his Panama and outside Sylván pointed him in the direction and called up the dogs with a low whistle. On the trail that divided his farm from Karmela’s he kept them heeled and imagined what she would think of him cutting down trees. Killing animals was one thing, but cutting trees, oh good Heavens to Murgatroyd, would he ever have a war on his hands. At the turnoff on the little creek trail, the old man ducked into the forest and staked a position beneath the canopy to make sure they weren’t being shadowed. Then he cut down through the forest and gained five of the lost ten minutes and fell in behind Chapín and the dogs and picked up the pace to finally catch up with them at a point a few hundred meters shy of the massacre, where the whine of the distant saws could now be heard in the distance.

They walked down the shaded channel together as the whine of the chainsaw grew. They rose onto the terrace where the two trees had stood. They had fallen in opposite directions and each opened up a crevasse in the forest a good thirty meters long and four meters wide, the killed underbrush wilted and crackling and driven into the mud. The blocks from the sound tree were stacked roughly and being hauled, and the crew was salvaging what it could from the bad tree. Montes traced his finger around the perimeter of the central cavity from the sawed-off trunk at a point that still standing would have been eight meters above the ground. He looked into the deadened black void inside the felled tree and imagined his own soul contained by it. He took in its whole length, its shorn branches, and he revived the life it harbored, all that lived on its outsides and in its canopy, as well as inside its black fleeting hollow. He looked up to find the hole in the canopy it had left cobalt blue, wisps of clouds intruding.

He sidled up to the kid as the pair of Ming and Mango rounded the bend below them, old man Carmona’s stick on the yoke, back for another block, the thick brass nose rings clouding from each exhale of the gelded cape buffalos’ powerful lungs,

a quick intelligence in each of the four eyeballs. A troop of squirrel monkeys tittered from the guava tree on the far side, and Sylván had an urge to vomit but choked it down.

“This way,” he said to the young man, turning upriver. One hundred meters on he led the young man out of the channel and onto a terrace on the far side. Sylván caught a whiff of pecc and knew ‘em from their smell as white lips, pushing ahead and just around the next bend, fifteen or so, but he wasn’t mad at them and left his rifle shouldered. He leaned against the trunk of the cortesa that he knew to be there and in the silence before his distant kin caught up, he measured the distance between himself and God and marveled at its vastness. The kid stumbled up over the boulder throw of the channel and onto the terrace, mumbling about snakes and that foul smell in the air, breathing hard. But looking up he dug out a cigarette and flicked his lighter about twenty times till he lifted a flame and pulled on that cold roll of factory press. Montes watched the blue rise from the angry ember and then Chapín’s exhaled billow of smoke reach up through the understory as the kid stood gauging the tree’s inches.

“This is the last one you get, young man.”

Sylván walked upstream even further to be away from it as Chapín brought up the crew chief and showed him the new target. Upstream the forest was gentle, the light dappled beneath the canopy that hung over the banks. The stream flowed clear and he made out blue crayfish scuttling in a pool beneath a rock in the boundary of its shade where the light let him see, bigger ones in the dark part. He was unsettled in a way that sitting around wasn’t going to shake. Sylván was well past his tunnel days, but he could at least cook and keep the sluice moving, and Andrés’s posse was less than four hours away. A few days up at the gold camp with the boys would clear his head out. Wasn’t like he was any use here. Besides, the way Chapín was going, the next thing you know, MINAET would show up and force him into trying out that plausible deniability horseshit. Killing a white-lipped peccary or a tapir every now and again was one thing, but these trees were old growth forest and besides the pound of flesh, cutting them without a permit carried five years in the big house.

With the kid stopping to catch his breath every little bit, it took a half hour to hike back out. By the time they reached the ridge, Montes was mentally packing for his trip. It was too late in the day, but this was an unusual day. Anyway, it was pure summer today, so it wouldn't rain till late, and he wasn't made of sugar anyhow. He figured he could make it with two hours to spare before dark.

He stopped in his tracks when the dogs were no longer there. Chapín's heavy breathing trailed him and caught up and came to a stop, but the forest was uncanny quiet.

"Is anything...?"

"Ssh," Sylván cut him off.

"What is it?" Chapín hissed.

"We got company," whispered the old man.

"We're just checking out your land," Chapín hissed. "For some buyers I got interested."

The dogs trotted up. "I don't think she's going to show herself," Tepe said.

"She? Doña Karma?"

"She's taken a bit of interest in my doings, lately," Tepe said.

"She could be real trouble for us."

"Yeah, but she's supposed to have some buyers gonna buy me out," he replied. "I think she'd look the other way to not get cross-ways with me and maybe muck that all up."

"Buyers?"

"Probably just talk."

"You got any smoked meat for sale," Chapín asked, his nerves settled as they drew back to the old man's house. "It'd be nice to surprise Mimi with a little treat."

“No, I don’t,” Montes replied. “And you know what, I ain’t gonna have no more neither.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m gonna go hang this rifle up on the wall in my room and leave it there and leave the pacas and collared pecs to their own devices from here on out. I’m done with it.”

Chapín did not know what to make of the odd statement but sensed it was something veiled about the wood.

“In fact,” the old man looked at him hard. “I’ll tell you real straight that I am not very settled with this here deal you and me got and I’m going to head up into the mountains for a few days instead and clear my head out, go join Andrés and his posse for a turn at honest work. By the time I get back, I want you off my land with your wood and the rest of my money ready. Today’s Tuesday. I’ll show up at your place a week from today to get paid and be done with this mess.”

“I’ll have your money waiting.”

Things got better when the Samurai’s engine faded in the forest below. It took him a half hour to pack and batten the hatches. He picked up the rifle from the corner to hold it in both hands and look at it. He couldn’t remember the last time he had gone out without it. He carried it to the bedroom and hung it on the wall. He shouldered his pack on the porch, whistled up the dogs, and headed off up the trail under a late morning sun.

By an ugly coincidence Special Agent Jaime Ramirez happened to be in the town of Puerto Jiménez on official business when the call came in. A break in the long-festering case of the two Austrians, missing and assumed killed two years ago, had come up the day before yesterday when a family, picnicking on the Tigre River, had investigated black plastic poking up from the sand on the bank to discover human

remains. It was solid enough before forensics to settle like a hard rain on the prime suspect to arrest him before he got wind of it to hightail it off the peninsula. Ramirez had arrived Monday afternoon with the judge to lift what was left of the bodies and by nightfall had the suspect in custody and off to preventive prison in Golfito by yesterday noon and wrapping up paperwork and would have been headed back to Regional in Villa Neilly by noon today had the call not come in. The same Judge was already notified and, on his way, over to lift the new body, the local police already on the scene, and Ramirez bolted his coffee and hit the road, hoping the scene was not too trampled for him to do his best work.

The road was bad, and he came across the police truck on the side of a slope they couldn't pull. The rain was slacking off, but it was still red clay. The tires on his truck were like tractor tires, thick gnarly tread driven by a 3-liter diesel engine, and he ground up the soapy two-track without once spinning and turned into the drive at the top, where the going was easy to the clearing. Crime scene tape was already up and extended in a polygon from the porch to the outhouse and around the yard, a woman's body in the middle of it. There was a barn out back and a gaggle of old women huddled and some of the cops and Captain Brazona were on the porch with a blonde woman that sat there looking out vacantly over the scene. He walked over to the porch and stepped out of his muddy rubber boots and up the steps and introduced himself to the woman and walked Brazona down to the end where they looked across the clearing as the rain gentled.

"She claims she's a friend of the decedent," the captain reported, "and those old ladies out back are employees of the victim. She had a little chocolate operation in the shop out back."

"Any witnesses?"

"The old ladies arrived this morning at six to find the body. The gringa pulled up a few minutes later. They were supposed to go to town, she says, the two of them, some business about the farm they had to deal with."

"Who's tampered with the scene so far?"

“Well, the old ladies that found her. And me. Our shooter ambushed her from the outhouse. There’s a .22 casing on the floor in there.”

“Touch anything?”

“I did not touch the body or anything on the scene and only looked in and taped the shutter off when I saw the brass.”

Inspector Ramirez put on gloves and a hair net and called for a plank of form wood to be hauled out from the shop out back to stand on to keep his own tracks out of the mix. He studied the ground and put the wood a meter away from the body and stepped onto it and squatted to study it from the distance. The body had belonged to a middle-aged female—a foreigner apparently—and was clad in a thin house dress, what he figured she slept in. He backed away and laid the board at another angle and walked along it to examine the body from the far side. There was a muddle of tracks around the torso and head, all from rubber boots, and he studied where the blood was pooled on the dirty ground, squatting down to get a closer look.

It came from between the left arm and the trunk and was copious and fresh, the face distorted in a grimace. It would take the coroner to confirm, but he had her shot in the heart and dying within a minute or so. There was no clotting, no browning, and though the rain made it hard to place confidence limits, he estimated death at around dawn, five, a little before, a little after. With the rain stopped he took pictures of the ground around and moved the plank to get a full set of pictures of it. He would wait for the judge to actually turn it to confirm his suspicions and walked back to the outbuilding to open the door and confirm it as an outhouse and examine; clearly, she had been ambushed on her way to it.

His preliminary inspection done, Ramirez checked the judge’s twenty, pulling into the harbor, and got Brazona onto a vehicle that could get him all the way up to the farm, no slogging through the mud for the judge. The ambulance was not yet to Chacarita, a good hour and a half away. The woman was blond and pretty, nice body, mid thirties. She wore a leotard, athletic shorts, and was bare foot, the small muddy white boots by the steps apparently hers, no socks in immediate evidence.

Her eyes were swollen and red, hair unkempt, and her look up was vacant and brief. Now she looked out over the rain that returned to pelt the lowlands and hide the gulf.

Ramirez had a look around. He found a dish towel by the sink and dried his face and hands before draping it across the backrest of a wooden dining chair to dry. He fished his plastic bag out of his pocket and retrieved the notebook and pen and slowly dragged a chair across the floor and out onto the porch up to the gringa. He looked at her and licked the tip of his ballpoint pen.

“What is your name, Señora?”

“Barbara Salazar.”

“And you are...European, Canadian, Gringa...?”

“I am a Gringa.”

“A friend of the decedent?”

“Yes.”

“You were here when this happened?”

“No sir. I arrived to find her laying there.”

“You were the one to discover the body, then?”

“No. Karm’s employees—Karmel Greene is her full name, Officer,” and she spelled it. “They start up at six every morning in the chocolate mill out back. They found her. I pulled in a few minutes later. Doña Magda—she’s the one that went down to meet your truck—she hiked up to the ridgeline over there where there’s signal to call you guys.”

“Doña Barbara, did Señora Greene have any conflicts with anybody, anything that could have led to this?”

“Well,” Barbara moved head back and forth, unable to suppress a smile. “It would be a long list.”

“How so?”

“Well, she’s an environmentalist and was in open conflict with hunters, miners, loggers, turtle egg vendors, those guys that raid parrot nests to sell the chicks. She had conflicts with all kinds of people.”

“Anything recent?”

“Well,” she caught her neighbor over the way last week with a couple pacas, and they argued over that.”

“His name?”

“Sylván Montes. He lives on the next finca over, right over there,” she pointed.

“Anything else recent?”

“Well, she was complaining about the guy she bought this farm from, Danilo Araya, said he was hassling her to speed up her final payment. I know the real estate agent, that’s Johnny Morano—the guy they call Shades—he was pressuring her to cut him in on a deal. They were both up here just yesterday.”

“These guys known to you,” Ramirez looked up at Brazona.

“Morano is a foreigner, shifty and sloppy, but pays his bills. Montes is a country bumpkin, poaches a bit, respected though, old timer. Araya is a hustler, always behind on debts, but none of these guys are killers, Inspector.”

Ramirez turned back to the gringa. “Any man in her life?”

“Not for a few months. It didn’t work out with them. He’s sailing or something, merchant marines. Anyway, he hasn’t been to Costa Rica in eight months or more.

The sound of an engine laboring up the road broke through the quickening beat of the rain pounding on the zinc roof, and Ramirez looked up at Brazona to learn who the MINAET guy was and what he might want up here.

“That’s Virgilio Verdecampos,” Brazona said. “Regional Director for MINAET. Head guy. Oversees ACOSA and Corcovado Park and I don’t know what all. “Must’ve

heard about this and up to check it out and pay his respects. I think the victim was very well known to him from her many complaints and struggles against the loggers, poachers and hand miners.”

PART II

Platanares Beach

Wednesday

1645

Diego looked out on the Gulf and squeezed Barb’s hand. “Sweetheart, this is going to sound callus, but you have to hear me out.”

He had left work moments after arriving as the news spread. He had driven to San Miguel and waited at the cordon on the San Miguel Road. It was mid-afternoon before the phalanx of vehicles returned off the mountain. He had forced Barbara to leave her quad at his Aunt Mimi’s place, insisting she was not safe to drive and had turned onto the harbor road on the entrance to town to skirt the chaos of rubberneck gossip loose on Main Street and driven to Playa Preciosa and once there had taken the old road, abandoned a few years ago for the new road put in back of the lodges there, and locked in his four wheel drive in the deep sand and pulled up to the beach to cut the engine. There were a few tourists on the beach below them, but he and Barbie had the privacy he wanted and the peace she needed. Clouds built across the water, hovering on the far side, but the new rain was still an hour or more away, and the water was still in the distance, waste-high breakers rolling onto the gentle beach before them. It stretched for kilometers to the north and south. Her eyes were puffed, her hair akimbo, but her chest was stilled now as she looked out over the water.

“I can’t talk about this anymore, Diego; I just need to be out in the water on a board, away from it. All of it.”

He let that stand for a moment and continued. "Barbie, a feeding frenzy is about to begin, and it's going to be ugly. Have you prepared yourself for the phone call you must make to her family?"

"I know I have to do it," she said. "How the hell can I prepare myself for that?"

"Her heirs need to know what they are walking into."

"I don't know that she even had a will."

"Of course she had a will. You know who her lawyer is?"

"Well, that guy they call Pecos handled the land sale."

"That's not her personal and corporate lawyer. Here," he handed her a name on a piece of paper. "That's his name, pass it on to her family; they need to contact him right away."

She took the name and number.

"She has a mortgage, Barbara, a five year note on her twenty-five million balloon payment."

Barbara frowned. "I don't want to know all this."

"Be quiet and listen," he said.

She scowled and crossed her arms and turned away from him.

"If the estate misses just two payments—just two—then the bank will foreclose on the property. At that point the bank will then own it."

"What does it even matter at this point?"

"It matters because she has fifty million in equity and only twenty-five million to go to pay off the land. It matters because she got it under market value in the first place and with the title coming out any day, the land is worth twice what she's got into it, maybe more."

"Who cares?"

“Her next of kin will care. Her heirs. It’s a pile of money at stake.”

“From what she’s told me about them, none of them will come down and pick up her payments and carry on her vision. That’s just not going to happen.”

“Are you aware of the deal that doña Karmel was putting together with the Green Leaf Foundation of Santa Cruz, California?”

“I am.”

“Well, that’s a very big deal, not just the money involved, but also for protection of the forest and for the local economy. Do you have any idea how much conservation organizations have brought to this peninsula over the past ten years?”

“You’re right, Diego. This is callus.”

“Somewhere around one hundred million dollars, Barbara.”

“That can’t be right.”

“One hundred million at least. Not colones. Dollars.”

“This revolts me. How can you be so insensitive? What’s your stake in all this?”

He shook his head and smiled grimly.

“There are three men that you mentioned to the police that are surely being looked at as persons of interest: Morano, Uncle Danilo, and Montes. Each of these men had a possible stake in the deal that Karmel was putting together, and possibly the lawyer you mentioned as well. Well, they’re not the only ones; there’s lots of others. It’s about to get fucked up around here, and you have to be ready for that, and your friend’s family needs to know a bit about what they’re walking into.”

Morano Realty, PJ

Thursday

0830

“Bless her heart.” Danilo Araya doffed his Panama to lay it across his chest and squeezed some water into his eyes. “She sure didn’t deserve such a fate. But you have to be careful making enemies with men with nothing to lose, gold miners and poachers...”

“And illegal loggers,” Morano agreed.

“As insensitive as it may seem,” Danilo replied soberly, “life goes on, and however awkward it may be, this may relate to possible business between us.”

Morano weaved his fingers together on top of his desk. “I am able to swing the full two and a half million for you on loan,” he announced, “to get you through your situation. I can have it for you Friday afternoon. I’ll call up our pals for you, smooth the way.”

“Doña Karma’s tragic demise has changed my circumstances a bit. I may not need the loan after all.”

“It hasn’t changed a damned thing; I just got off the phone with the sister,” Morano said. “They’ll be on their way down in a couple days to settle affairs of the estate. We’re pretty close. I was the one had to call her and break the news. You know she put up the collateral for the bank loan, right? As well as half the initial deposit?”

“If she even had a will.”

“Oh she had a will,” Shades said. “Don’t be stupid.”

“Well, we’ll see, not with Pecas she didn’t. He was her lawyer.”

Morano laughed. “Don’t be naïve, Chapín. She had three lawyers; Pecas just handled the land purchase. There was also her corporate attorney for the chocolate operation, and her personal attorney, who just so happens, was my recommendation when she moved down here happens to be my own personal attorney as well.”

“So, you’ve seen her will? What does it say?”

“Look, Chapín, get a clue. I’m not here to feed you privileged information because you ask. And you’re not sitting on a cage of winning cocks. You’re here because you need me and you know it.”

“There’s a lot hanging on that land deal,” Chapín said. “They’re my people, the owners, all of them relatives and friends of the family. I am going to close that deal.”

“Look, you need help with our friends, I’ll help you. I’ll even front you the dough to settle. But the price is 25% of the action, exclusive, when I get the sister to sign the land back to you and we keep Green Leaf in play, the two of us.”

“Twenty-five percent?” Chapín was staggered by the lack of rapacity. “No tricks?”

“I’m expecting you to pay me back the two and half mill on your own, not as a part of this; I’ll give you a month.”

“How many points? Four, still?”

“Just throw me some cristóbal, Chapín, five thousand inches or so for 1500 an inch. That can be on your conscience, whatever you think it’s worth.”

“And you can get me the money on Friday?”

“Before business hours close.”

Danilo leaned back to appraise the scene, chilly beneath the AC. He put his Panama on and approached the desk to shake hands.

“I’ll study it over and let you know first thing tomorrow.”

“You play any games, Chapín, and I’ll lock the sister down and cut you out altogether and you’ll get nothing. You hear me?”

“I told you,” Chapín replied un-cowed. “I’ll study it over. Let you know.”

He’d be on his way to see Pecas next. Both ends against the middle. But Pecas and he could winnow the grain and come to an understanding. Both ends against the middle indeed. Honor among thieves. Pecas was not the problem. The problem was Chapín. His wife would be pliable. He did not want it to come to this, but Chapín had himself uncomfortably puffed up. He called Octavio Benavides and

struggled to hear the voice with the saws whining in the background. They arranged to meet after work.

“Not here,” Shades said, “too many eyes out. I’ll drive up. Los Amigos Bar, five o’clock.”

“My turf,” Benavides brightened. “See you at five.”

Shades did a couple bumps and leaned back to feel it come on.

Parimaldo Law Office

Thursday

0945

When Chapín reappeared in the foyer through the one-way glass, Pecas had been on the horn all morning, trying to pin down the angles. He had Cinthia send him in before she even announced him.

“We don’t even know if she had a will,” he explained.

“Shades says she does.”

“Saying doesn’t make it so. I doubt he’s in a position to know.”

“You think he’s bluffing?”

“I don’t think one way or the other. But he does have a vested interest in keeping you on a tight leash.”

“What do I gotta do here, Pecas? And what’s it going to cost me on your end?”

“Fifty fifty split.”

“That’s pretty greedy. It’s my finca, not yours.”

“I have liability; you don’t. Besides, it’s not your finca yet.”

“What about Shades?”

“Shades can be useful,” Pecas said. “Let’s see how tight he really is with the family and keep your options open in case he has an angle on Green Leaf we don’t know about.”

“You find out if there’s a will and what it says, Pecas,” Chapín flexed his new muscle confidently. “And I’ll consider your offer.”

He showed himself out and Pecas sighed at all the puffing up. Chapín had no cards to play; he couldn’t cut him out. But Shades could mess things up big time, especially if he really had an in with the family. And Shades was a greedy bastard, greedier even than the Counselor himself. He looked at the phone and called his fixer in San Jose. “Can you meet me at our regular spot tomorrow at noon? I got a little job for you.”

“Two hundred fifty rojos to give you a listen,” the voice replied. “Have the same for a deposit if I take the job and it’s a simple one.”

“That’s rape.”

“That’s the big leagues, chief.”

“Tomorrow noon then.”

“God willing, I’ll be there.”

Matapalo

Thursday

1130

Barbara was unable to sustain her anger at Diego. No sooner had she demanded he take her back to her quad and screamed off to Matapalo than Shades was on the phone with condolences, feeling her out about Karm’s next of kin and lawyer, will, that sort of thing, all out to protect her interests following the outrageous events of that morning. And there was an email from Samuel, and she accepted his Skype request, and he was bawling his eyes out in port in Auckland, and she walked him through what she knew.

“Watch out for Pecas,” he said. “He’s a sneaky bastard. The contract he put together has some soft spots that we found out about later, something he’ll surely

try to exploit. Call Esquinas," he said, the name on the paper Diego had handed her. "He's a straight arrow and on Karm's side, and he'll do right in this."

"Samuel, can you come," Barbara pleaded.

"There's nothing I can do but cry," Samuel said. "I'm no good there, don't speak the language and not on any contracts. I'd only be in the way."

"But you love her!"

"She's dead, Babs. I can't bring her back. I can't recover her body. I can't fix anything."

"Does she have a will, Sam?"

"I don't even know. I would guess not."

"What about her sister, this Allison? You know her?"

"Her family is all really rural, Babs, country people, not sophisticated, in this bum fuck place in Maine, nearly all the way to Canada."

The attorney picked up on the second ring. "And how did you get my cell phone number," he asked politely.

"Uh, what does it matter," she said, frowning.

"Well, forgive me, Ms. Salazar," he replied in good English. "I learned from the news this morning. A number of people have since reached out to me. There is a question of confidentiality. You understand I am beholden to certain standards."

"Look, I'm the only one in Karm's corner down here, and I'm just trying to help."

"Okay, let me get back with you after clearing this."

"Clearing it? With whom?"

"I have your number here. I'll call you back once I'm able."

Octavio Benavides slid the palmed hundred-dollar bill into his pocket and took a sip of his Imperial. They sat in a far corner under the cover of bad karaoke, the afternoon trollops half drunk, fighting over the microphone. "You have my undivided attention, Shades."

"You breathe a word of this to anyone, I can't be responsible for the consequences. It's bigger than me."

"On the souls of my children, you know me, what's up?"

"I need you to fix a fight."

"On who?"

"Your old man's milling some wood."

"We have a wood mill; that's what we do."

"Yeah, but you have a contract on the table right now."

"We got lots of contracts. What does fixing a fight have to do with wood?"

"The pigeon is Danilo Araya."

The hard thin young man assessed this noncommittally.

"He's a regular at the cockpit, good customer. Who's Big Daddy?"

"Miguel Arce, possibly; I haven't closed that deal; perhaps a stand-in. I have to get it set with you first. In stone."

"Chapín is a case," Octavio said. "Only thing he's any good at is cockfighting. Kid has an eye for winners."

"So you're not making much off him if he's mostly a winner."

"He pays his debts when he loses. All business is good business, Shades. We make money no matter what bird wins."

“What’ll it take to set this up for Friday’s fights?”

“Six hundred fifty for the boss—that’s if Recto will allow it—two fifty for me, a hundred for the vet...”

“One million, that’s a lot of dough.”

“It’s serious business what you’re asking.”

“Set it up and confirm tomorrow. I’ll get you half up front and half when it’s done.”

“No can do, boss. Half up front, a quarter on Wednesday, and fifteen before bets close on the fight. I’ll leave one hundred rojos of my pay on the loose as your guarantee.”

“What if the wrong bird wins?”

Octavio smiled. “Out of the question.”

“So it’s a lock?”

Benavides smiled even bigger.

“Do it then, send word when it’s a go and I’ll round out the other end and pay Recto.”

Back in his car, Shades did a couple bumps and leaned back to take it all in. After a while he turned the ignition. Big day tomorrow.

Villa Mills**Friday****1100**

It was unusually cold at Georgina’s, and Pecas waited on the asset over a steaming bowl of beef stew and watched the hummingbirds fight over the nectar outside the glass. Last night Giorgio, now incarnated as Jorgito Camacho, had taken the form of the judge hearing a pedestrian civil case Pecas had brought years earlier.

No sooner does the judge take his seat than he starts banging with his angry little mallet.

“Bailiff, remove the plaintiff’s attorney in handcuffs and remand him to the police officers awaiting outside the courtroom...”

Pecas stared open-mouthed at the stunning revelation that Jorgito had made judge, even after Giorgio having to serve that ten stretch all those years ago. Pecas had avoided prison turning state’s evidence, which seemed clever at the time, thirty-five years ago, but did not seem so clever now, in today’s world, where he was just a two-bit lawyer and Giorgio had somehow made judge, though to be fair, it was all in a dream of his, not in the actual world. Clouds moved from the west over the divide, dry air from the Pacific overriding the hot low wetness of the Caribbean flank. Rain squalls hugged slopes as the quarrelsome hummingbirds fretted about as a cold front settled in.

“Counselor,” the man slipped up on him from behind, a cup of coffee in hand.

Pecas scowled and slipped across Johnny Morano’s business card.

“A gringo. Real low life. Makes a play at real estate. His real business is powder. He’s overstayed his welcome in Puerto Jimenez.”

The asset looked up at the seriousness of the proposition.

“I don’t want him rubbed out,” Pecas clarified. “I want you to set him up. A quarter kilo. Enough to cool his heels six months in preventive and a spell at *La Reforma*⁴ unless he can find his way out of it; by then it won’t matter.”

“When?”

The lawyer looked up and shrugged. “Yesterday.”

The asset did the math on the two hours he had driven to get to this god-forsaken place, another five and he could be there, the goods and all. He could have wrapped this all up and been back in Chepe by noon tomorrow absent this client’s penchant for cloak and dagger.

⁴ La Reforma is Costa Rica’s primary high and medium security prison and is located in San Rafael de Alajuela

“Have you not heard of airplanes,” he asked. “Oh yeah. You don’t fly.”

“Don’t get too critical. I have my ways. Now you tell me what you want and let’s get this done.”

“Two and a half million for me, one and a quarter for the blow, two fifty courtesy call, that’s two point seven five mill down, one and a quarter when it’s done.”

Pecas pushed an envelope across the table. “There’s two and a half mill. I’ll pay you the balance when I read the news in the paper. I’ll be chilling in Chepe, following the *Extra*⁵ with more interest than usual.”

The asset pulled the envelope and stuffed it in his jacket pocket. “For you, Counselor, good enough,” and turned on his heels out into the cold spitting air to call his coded order in to head back to *Cheps* to then turn around again for the Southern Zone, this time along the *Costanera*.

PJ Landing Strip

Friday

1430

Allison Sanders and Stan Greene stared grimly at the cemetery across the half wall as they filed off the puddle jumper. Barbara Salazar had a taxi waiting. She hugged them each as they introduced themselves in the grim morning sun. They kept it under wraps.

“We don’t have money,” Allison was frank, once beyond prying ears. “It’s all we could do come down to take her back, all on my credit card. I haven’t stayed at a hotel this nice since my Honeymoon.”

“We’re simple folk,” the younger brother, a dead ringer for Karmel, said. “Karm was the wild child, the black sheep. None of us can say what made her tick, but we all have our clues. But she was not made of sugar and spice.”

⁵ The Extra is one of Costa Rica’s daily newspapers and carries sensationalist articles, contemporary equivalent of “yellow” journalism.

Barbara smiled.

“Always a wanderer,” Allison said.

“Guys,” Barbara backed up. “Look, Karm had a dream, a good hopeful dream, a selfless dream, and it’s a dream that is still in reach. I owe it to her as her friend to help bring it to bear. It’s her legacy. Help me make it happen. You are the ones with all the keys.”

“There’s fifty thousand dollars due on that land,” Allison pointed out. “Even if we had it—which we don’t—we don’t know anything about Costa Rica. We’re from the sticks. I’m just a grade-school teacher, not some big chocolate impresario. It’s just not in us to pick up in Karm’s footsteps. Besides, this place—beautiful as it is—is scary and hostile. It took our Karm from us. You can’t think that somehow, we can forgive that and it all be somehow okay, like oh, well, shit happens...”

“I know it’s indecent to say it,” Barbara said. “I love Karm, and it makes me feel dirty, but it’s true and it has to be said. She has \$100,000 in equity in that farm with her title due out any minute. It’s actually worth \$200,000 in real terms once the title is out; at least that’s what I’m told by reliable sources. For better or for worse, that’s your inheritance from her, and if you walk away from it, then you lose, I lose, Costa Rica loses, and most importantly, Karmel loses.”

A tear rolled down Allison’s face.

“Karm can’t lose any more than she already has. None of us can!”

“What is it,” Stan said, “that you want us to do?”

“It’s a match, Inspector. The rifling is an 88% only, but the firing pin has a ding that’s perfectly duplicated on the brass casing. There’s no doubt. It was the rifle that fired the shot.”

“Fingerprints?”

"We got twelve lifts from two individuals; ten for Subject A, two for Subject B. The son, at least under variants of the name Andrés Montes is not in our database, so no prints to compare. But Subject A is a 99.2% match of Sylván Montes."

No surprise there. His gun. The boy was eighteen, a country boy. No big surprise that he'd not yet trundled off to Perez to pick up an identity card and turn over his prints.

"Either of your subjects snazzy dressers, Inspector?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"There were fibers wedged under the near sight," the technician said.

"Fibers?"

"Silk."

"Silk fibers, under the near sight," Ramirez repeated. He redrew the scene in his head, the thin white house dress of the victim. It was sheer. Could've been silk. Ramirez personally owned nothing made of silk. "What color?"

"Turquoise."

Ramirez called Brazona. "Need a favor; can you head back up to the crime scene?"

"What am I looking for?"

"Go through her clothes. We're looking for anything turquoise in color."

"Sky blue?" Brazona clarified.

"Turquoise, sky blue, aqua, anything like that, a shirt, blouse, undergarments, a wall hanging, anything made of cloth."

"Care to fill me in, Inspector?"

"Not yet, let's keep this on the QT, just see if you can turn up anything. I'll be there in the morning with a warrant for Montes. You got a feel for his twenty?"

"We understand he's in the forest, mining."

"Mining?"

"Gold, Inspector. This is the Osa, remember?"

"So he's far from a road and on foot. Cake walk."

A laugh came from the line. "Ain't no cake walk, Inspector. We got no friends up there. That's all outlaws in those parts. Hell, they're probably in the park, and that terrain is impossible. They'll raise us five kilometers away, those are mountain people."

"Well, it ain't Desamparados or Infiernillo. We'll get him."

"If you say so."

"Captain," Ramirez said.

"Yes sir?"

"Keep this under your hat."

The Projects, PJ

Friday

0730

Miguel Arce emerged from the front door to his house at Morano's "anybody home" to stand shirtless and look out.

"What, Shades, you need a couple hundred rojos?" he grinned. "Got a little hooker lined out and your eyes set on an eight ball?"

"What?"

"Put up that nice little truck; maybe we can do business. Five percent for you, Shades."

"In your dreams, Arce. I'm here to buy Danilo Araya's debt off you."

Miguel Arce looked at him. This was a new one.

"Buy his debt?"

“His loan. I want to buy it from you.”

Don Miguel ran numbers. “Why, Shades? What’s this all about?”

“That’s my business.”

“It’s three and a half million. I’ll sell it to you plus 25 points, if that’s what you want.”

“Four point two five? I’ll give you three point seven five.”

“I’ll let you have it for three nine, final offer, cash.”

“I have to have his guarantee signed over and legal,” Shades glared.

“Be my guest. Help yourself to his wife’s little hovel.”

“Work it up, Arce; let’s wrap this in the morning.”

“You want Pecas to make it legal?”

“Let’s go with Gonzalez from Golfito, you acquainted?”

“We’ve done business.”

“Nine o’clock, my office, okay?”

“You’re the paymaster, Shades. Hey, keep a million on loan,” he grinned, “and put up your truck.”

“I can pay my bills, thank you.”

Miguel Arce shrugged. “You let me know you change your mind.”

Cañaza

Monday

1500

The pain woke Maribel around midnight, and she tried to still her thrashing to not disturb Dani’s sleep. She tried the antacids and pills but stayed doubled up and could not sleep. At three she staggered to the bathroom to vomit. Chapín heard

the noise and its gravity intruded upon his sleep, but he pushed it away to remain in the sweetness of dreams where his angles usually squared out and monsters seldom trod. Her dry heaves pushed him beyond his Elysian Fields well before dawn and he stared at the ceiling until there was nothing left to do but go see what it was all about.

He had never seen her so bad. Her night dress was crumpled in a corner and she slouched against the commode naked, her arm draped around the rim, her head leaning upon the seat, frightening sounds coming from inside her. Her skin was silver and glistened through a film of sweat.

"Mimi, baby, you okay," he asked. "How you feeling?"

She had no reply and held her position.

The plan was to bundle her off on the bus today anyway to San Jose to Clínica Bíblica to get her out of the way for a few days. It would cut into his reserves by a couple, three hundred thou, and that was a big hit, all over a little gastritis, but it showed his concern for her and gave him the space he needed. But that plan was now out the window; she could not get on any bus in this condition.

"Baby," he said, his sympathy welling. "We gotta get you to the clinic. You don't look so hot."

She moved her head and managed to turn it to look up at him. Her eyes were glassy and feverish.

"I am pregnant," she said.

"Well," he found a smile. "This morning sickness is hitting you harder than before."

"It's not morning sickness, Dani."

"Certainly, it must be, my pet."

"The *clínica* can do nothing for me," she said. "But there is no choice now. It's too late now for me to get to the *Bíblica*."

“Let’s get you dressed and off to town to get you checked out.”

She rolled to her knees and collapsed on the tile floor to curl into a fetal ball, and he tried to raise her, but it was no use. Stirred from their beds, the kids gathered round outside the door jam.

“What’s wrong with Momma,” Lillo stared in shock.

“Nothing, go back to bed,” he hissed, rising to run them back to bed.

But he could not raise her and scratched his head, suspicion clouding him that maybe the gastritis was complicated by this pregnancy thing, which was probably hysterical and untrue. There was something legitimately wrong with her, whatever the full cause. He retreated to the kitchen and called the Red Cross to explain the situation. The ambulance arrived as dawn peeped around, its birds in lively song.

The ER guys got her on a stretcher and covered her with the sheet that Chapín stripped from their bed.

“I’ll be down as soon as I get the kids fed and off to school,” he told them.

But by the time he made it to the Clinic, she was already on her way across the water to Golfo and by the time he got through to the attending physician there, they had her on the way to the air strip, emergency air lift to San Jose. He considered his many commitments and had no room but to concede that it wasn’t a terrible thing; now at least she was out of the way and he could send off the kids to their aunt’s and focus on business. And his social security was all paid up, so there would be nothing to pay, a bit of a silver lining to all Mimi’s suffering.

Civil Bank, PJ

Monday

0930

The late Karmel Greene’s account was held in San Jose, but in light of developments it was transferred to the local office and landed on Diego’s desk.

“Great news.” Sandoval Campos was the Branch Manager, an import from Perez, and Diego’s direct boss. He had descended from his Olympian perch in the recesses

of the bank's inner sanctum into Diego's little glassed-in bubble, the door closed behind. "She was behind on last month's payment, and the next note is due tomorrow."

"Wow," Diego replied. "Big news."

"On Friday morning we can foreclose. You handled the loan; you get the foreclosure." Campos smiled at him, tossing him the bone. "You'll get a raise for sure, and if you can manage that sale to that conservation outfit everyone is talking about, even my job won't be safe from your rise in the ranks."

"Wow," Diego managed.

"Congratulations, son. Couldn't have happened to anyone more deserving. Good luck."

Bamboo Cock Pit**Monday****1000**

Chapín paused just inside the entrance to the front gate to let his eyes acclimate to the dimness inside the galerón. The scream of saws assaulted his ears, and in the beams of light that penetrated cracks in the walls, saw dust billowed in the air to permeate the shadowy enclosure with a fecund odor and a bucolic reticence belying the scream of the machines and the bustle of men. Stacks of raw and planed wood were all over the floor, and he strolled up to the band saw where a crew of three worked with ear protection and goggles to cut a 12" x 12" block into 2" boards. Chapín ran a finger along a fresh surface to feel the moist cool of the wood and ribs left by the teeth. A second crew a few meters away took the feed stock and squared and ripped the planks into boards 4 ½" wide. A final crew planed the product and stacked the finished 1"x 4"'s upright neatly as if to dry. An operator glared up as Chapín pulled his pack of cigarettes out, and he strolled outside obediently, away from the confusion and noise—and sawdust—to light up.

Severino Benavides shuffled over to him on dime-thin flip-flops to extend his hand. They would have it planed and ready by Thursday and expected the last load to

come in under darkness tonight, and they could deliver the last of it by noon Saturday.

"I can pay part as soon as I deliver the first part Friday and get paid," Danilo said.

"You pay when we load, Chapín."

"Come on, Benavides; you know I need to get paid in order to pay you."

"That's not my problem. I would hate to have to add in warehousing fees."

If he pleaded a case the old man would just gloat. Anyway, Danilo would have the dough; it was just that with wood like this, you weren't home free until it was in the client's hands and the money in yours. The chance of getting popped at this point was remote. The permits were practically legitimate. Anyway, this was one job, and others would follow; no sense rocking a boat carrying you into harbor, even if your momentary captain was a greedy, humorless, soulless, vacant-eyed, brain-eating zombie fuck.

"I'll have your money."

"Noon, Friday."

The noise from the mill stilled and the men spilled out to doff muffs and goggles to converge on a picnic table under a lean-to where wood was stacked to dry in a welcome shade. There was coffee, sweet bread, crackers, pickled jalapeños, and a couple tins of tuna set out for them, and they set upon the snacks and coffee politely, happily free from the bedlam of the mill. Severino's son Octavio strolled over as Chapín settled plans with the old man and puffed on his cigarette. The kid was grinning, as usual, and shook Chapín's hand as don Severino turned away to take coffee back at the house with the old lady.

"Looks like we're going to get you all taken care of," the miller's son grinned.

"I was starting to worry," Chapín owned up. "The rains and all."

"I figured as much since you ain't showed up again at the pit since walking away with all that money last week."

"Every dog has his day," Chapín allowed.

"Some dogs get two," Octavio smiled. "Ain't no luck in picking a winner," Octavio gave Chapín a knowing glance. "Lessin' you don't have to pick one."

"Meaning?"

"Lessin' you already know which bird is gonna win . . ."

Chapín looked into Octavio's eyes long and hard. The kid had cocks of his own that he fought ever once in a while and moonlighted for Justino when there were evening matches and was a regular pit-hand at the Friday night fights. Recto had taken him under his wing years ago and taught him the ropes. It was speculated that Octavio might take over the whole operation once Justino wore out on it and moved off to Chepe or Pérez with his decade of proceeds. The kid looked around discretely, but his smile stayed put.

"I got a business for you, but you can't tell nobody, you gotta swear, and it's gonna cost you."

"A rigged match?"

Benavides smiled.

"How do you know?"

"I walked in on Don Justino and Don Americio planning it; Justino shared it up with me and brought me in."

Don Americio was the most widely admired cockmaster on the peninsula. He was rich and spent a lot of money on staff and stables to have the best birds always. Chapín had learned that you could come out better than even by just showing up and betting on Don Ame's birds, and he had done so whenever his confidence was shaken but not quite enough to stay away. Half of his earnings from the other night had come from safe bets placed on two of Don Ame's gamecocks.

"Don Americio is throwing a fight?"

Again, Octavio smiled silently.

The information was explosive. "Why me?"

"Look, this can't get back to Justino, or I'll lose my job and won't be allowed back. And I can't put my money on the fight from conflict of interest. And I can't trust any of the regulars that's in with Justino...they'd rat me out."

But Chapín was not in with anybody, he realized. And his attendance was spotty, his bets not particularly patterned, and he could see that Benavides was not as dumb as he looked with that shit-eating grin and goofy face. He was frankly entitled to such inside information and upon sober reflection was a trifle offended that he had not been brought in before. He let his mind drift beyond sport fishing to imagine a future in rigged cockfights, and then he came back down to earth and looked into the grinning smile of this in-bred savant.

"I'm going to give you one hundred to bet for me, and I keep the winnings from that at the full spread," Octavio explained. "You can put whatever you want of your own money on it, but you pay me two hundred thou on top for the dirt."

Chapín looked up at the math and came back down. "I'd have to put up a million or more just to make it pay," he said.

"You should bet the farm on this one, pal."

Chapín narrowed the lids of his eyes; his cohort's grin maniacal.

"The pigeon thinks the fight is rigged the other way. And Americio won't be dropping the bird; he's just in on the fix. It's his bird, but he's got a kid from Rincón new to the pit that will be bringing Ame's bird to fight. So, the pigeon thinks that the fix is in on his opposition. We're gonna dope the birds. A little valium for one guy, a little EPO and benzadrine for the other."

"EPO?"

"It helps with oxygen uptake, endurance. Epogen. It's a scientific thing."

"You mean like what American athletes use?"

"I don't know about that," Octavio owned up, "but I know it turns a fighting cock into a champion!"

"Who's the pigeon?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters."

"Well, it's don Miguel Arce, but so help me God you'd better keep that under your hat."

Knots began to tangle and unwind in his stomach, and Chapín kept it all off his face. It was one thing to land a couple million in free money. It was a whole other dimension to silently revenge himself at the same time."

"I haven't seen him around the pit for over a year now."

"Once it's in your blood," Octavio said, "it's hard to shake. He has placeholders for big matches. I'm surprised you didn't know that."

Danilo frowned. "But what's in it if he's not there for the beauty of the birds in action."

"He's a greedy bastard; he gets his kicks from money alone."

Danilo nodded. He would, the cold-blooded bastard.

"Anyway, he'll have a stooge there for him as well, but he'll lay two or three million out on this, whatever the market will bear. Now I have a million lined out from some others on the QT, so there's still a million at least maybe as much as two remaining in play."

"I'll take up the slack, at least up to two; that's as high as I can go."

"I need your word on that. Jacobo would trade me a night with his wife for this scoop."

"Who'd want that old hag?"

"She's not that bad," Octavio laughed. "I'd do her."

"And how will I know how the fix is in?"

"I will go buy a beer at five on the dot. Come buy one for yourself and I'll pass the winning name and lay my dough on you."

"I don't drink beer."

Octavio's smile vanished. "Buy a goddamned coke then; you don't have to get smart with me."

"Easy, Octavio." Danilo dropped his cigarette and stubbed it out with his foot. "I'll think about it. I'll let you know tomorrow."

Corcovado National Park**Wednesday****1530**

The days were perfect for mining, sun in the mornings and enough rain in the afternoons to keep the sluices moving but not enough to drown them out. But on the afternoon of Sylván's seventh day heavy clouds moved in and the wind kicked up to whip through the forest, the tall trees swaying above them, the canopy dancing, and Carne, the boss-man, sent word into the tunnel for the miners to pull out. They left the wheelbarrow race and sluice to the coming water and retreated to their black plastic mining yurt to batten down, the edges of plastic flapping maniacally. For a half hour it was just lightning and thunder and growing wind and dark, the air quickened with water, its smell like a drug. The sky broke, finally, water like from a spigot, the clouds at war. From the distance came the crash of the first fallen tree, and the men strayed to the edges of their whipping cover to glance up into the shimmering undergarments of a raging canopy. The lightning quit after an hour, and the thunder rolled off down the spine to drop off the cape and across the chop to Burica and Panama beyond. The unflagging rain on its heels was torrential. They put their brains together enough to make and drink coffee, but when the rain did not let up by dark and they perambulated where each lived privately with the weather, they cooked awkwardly a meal considerably south of their collective par, and after the idea was set out to walk among them, the gang coalesced around it

to call the dig. It rained all night, and in the morning their stream was a torrent of mud, the wall collapsed in on their tunnel entrance, serendipitously hidden for their return. They washed yesterday's concentrate with difficulty in the rushing water and returned to the tent to do a count, and each man began in his mind to spend the dough his forty-two-gram share would fetch. It was a six-way split, Andrés and his four partners each getting a full share and one share split between Sylván, who had not been an original partner but showed up to cook and man the sluice to free a full partner to work, and Miguel Arce, who had staked the crew two hundred thousand for supplies. They separated the twenty-one grams necessary to repay the loan. Carne scooped that up along with his share and shook his head with a respectful grin. The money-man was pulling over 100% in seven days, eighty times more, he figured, than he made off his loan-sharking operation. Yeah, Arce would sprout a big old smile out of this. Each man stowed his share, and they dismantled the camp as the rain gentled around them. It took them two trips to hump the sluice, pump, hose, remaining fuel, and tools down the stream and then down the Piedras Blancas River to the miner's camp downstream. The terrace there was high enough to be safe from flash floods and on the civilian side of the National Park boundary, legal eagle, base camp for farther-reachers like Andrés's posse. Don Ernesto stored their tools in exchange for the occasional use of the pump and a couple bottles of guaro whenever they made the trip in and discreet forays when attention was scant into any fuel he might with little risk purloin. The Piedras Blancas camp was battened down, the river raging, and the going was tricky with the swollen current, even here at the top of the watershed. The men scowled at one another as they struggled the last hundred meters on their last trip down, imagining what the river must look like downstream, how you could probably stand on the Rio Tigre bridge and feel the bed load's rumble reverberate through the earth and rattle up through the foundations and through the deck of the bridge and perhaps through flesh and bone to the very fillings of your teeth. Families sat inside tents, the children animated by the storm, the womenfolk trying to keep things dry, the men huddled around hot coffee and parsimoniously sharing Delta cigarettes to scratch their balls and rub their bare chests and out-do one another in the recollection of olden times when things were really tough.

“Come in and sit down, boys,” Old Man Ernesto roared from beneath a flap of his tent, the glint in his eye reflecting his bottle of guaro, even this early. “I’ll get coffee going.”

“It’s good to be out of the rain,” Carne allowed, rubbing his hands together. The boys all grinned and rubbed their arms and looked around, booze and hookers intruding into the newly dry place of their minds.

“I’d offer you a towel to dry off,” the old man laughed, “but from the looks of it you’ll just get wet again, anyway.”

“I doubt there’s anything dry in here anyhow,” Andrés ventured as he held up a damp piece of wood and took over the fire.

The old man’s smile vanished as he recognized Old Man Montes, hanging in the back.

“Sylván Montes; you’re the last one I expected to see here. I figured you’d a been lit outta these parts faster than a nun in trouble from the Jiménez convent.”

Sylván looked up at Ernesto. They’d crossed swords a couple times in the old days. But Ernesto was just an old drunk now, making do, not so different from himself.

“Why would I light out for anywhere?”

“The law’s been up here, looking for you.”

“I ain’t worried about no park rangers,” Tepe declared.

“I don’t know that MINAET has much to do with it,” Ernesto replied. “It’s the OIJ, word has it, that’s wanting a word with you.”

“What the hell would OIJ want with me?”

Ernesto raised his eyebrows and spooned coffee into a sock and settled it into a homemade holder and put a plastic pitcher under the sock. “How’s that water coming, boy,” he said, turning to Andrés, who had the fire happy and crackling, steam rising from the surface with the first bubbles forming at the bottom of the

kettle as it prepared to boil. Ernesto looked at the next youngest of the gang and led him by the eyeball over to where the cups and sugar were, and the kid went dutifully and fetched. Andrés poured the water into the sock, and the smell of coffee erupted inside the pocket of men, filling them all with the imminent promise of its goodness.

"You're just funning with Pops," Andrés chuckled, as he poured water slowly into the sock.

"What's going on?" Carne wanted to know. "If he's got trouble with the law," he looked at Andrés and jerked his thumb at the old man, "I need to know about it. I ain't gonna be no goddamned sitting duck for something this old coot has stirred up."

"My Pops ain't got trouble with no one." Andrés set down the pot to cross the ground in three steps and glare up at the boss, the muscles of his jaw twitching as Ernesto took over the pouring of the water into the sock. "You better watch what you say about my old man, or there'll be trouble with me."

"Take it easy, Andrés," Sylván said. "It's clearly some misunderstanding. Ernesto, what's this you're talking about?"

"They're saying you shot her, Tepe, that you killed the gringa."

"What? Who's saying? What gringa?"

"Doña Karmela," Ernesto said softly. "Your neighbor."

"What about her?"

"She's been kilt. Shot dead through the heart."

Sylván Montes blanched, and Andrés whirled to gape at his old man.

Carne began to murmur and pace around inside the yurt as the rain calmed a little. "I ain't too sad to have her out of our way," he allowed. "Thorn in my side if ever there was one. But you should've said something, Old Man. Now they're sure to think we're all involved in this."

“I ain’t killed no one,” Montes snarled. He turned to glare at each of the young men, forcing their eyes one-by-one to lower toward their nervous hands. He glared up at Carne, who after a long while finally averted his eyes as well.

“Your word’s good enough for me,” Ernesto broke the silence, pulling his bottle from where he had it secreted away. He took a long pull and put it away again, gesturing the men toward the coffee. They drank somberly and thanked him and hiked back up the river and then up the little tributary inside the park to their claim. Once they’d broken camp and had their personals loaded into packs, they said their farewells. Andrés and Sylván were headed up the watershed to pick up the ridgeline that ran north to Mount Muehler, where they would cross the saddle and over to Mount Rincón and then drop down on the far ridgeline into the Barrigones headwaters to work their way home. The rest of the gang was headed down the tributary and then up the Piedras Blancas headwaters to cross the pass and drop into the Carate watershed to go hang out with pals over there a few days and drink rotgut they would trade for at the Mini-super and wait for gossip to filter in from town about whether there was going to be any trouble for them over this reputed killing or not before filtering back into town. The clouds lifted a bit and the rain stilled to a sprinkle as the hidden sun brightened the day through the shroud of clouds wrapping up the peninsula. It was working up to break again, and they were eager to move. His dogs whined on the trail and shook their tails as they looked back at the huddle of wet men shaking hands. They were sick and tired of this mountain camp and its mud and boredom and ready to get on the trail and raise some game or at least lay under a familiar dog run in the dry dirt and feel the gentle breezes tickle them about the muzzle.

Diego handed Barbara an envelope as he drove her to the airstrip. Her quad was at his house, secure while she was off in San Jose. It was six-fifteen and her flight was for seven, and he had till eight-thirty to be at work, enough time to return home, shower, put on his work clothes and muster that award-winning attitude. He was now on a slippery slope, risking the entire future so formerly secure for him.

"There's twenty-five hundred dollars in there," he said.

She turned to him to frown.

"There's a piece of paper in there with an account number. Go straight to a bank and deposit this to that account number and be sure to identify the transaction as the mortgage payment on Karmel's land. That account number is also written down."

"Diego, this is not right. This is not your responsibility. Are you losing it, here?"

"Barbara, just do it. Today's the deadline for this month's payment, and she's behind on last. On Monday the bank will foreclose on the property."

She thrust the envelope back toward him and when he wouldn't take it put it in his lap.

"You deposit it if you think it's so important."

He pulled the car over two blocks shy of the air strip.

"I cannot," he said. "I would lose my job over this." He opened her purse and stuffed the envelope into it.

"I'll explain it to the Green Leaf people and have them pay it," she objected. "You can't get your own money mixed up in this."

"There's no time, Barbara. They're here for a meeting with you and the family. To hit them up for money, particularly like this, will make them suspicious."

"I can explain it. There's nothing suspicious if it's true."

"Of course it's true, Barbara!"

"I'm sorry, honey; I didn't mean it that way."

"They will have to get clearance. Money will have to be wired. There is no time. If this payment is not made by four thirty this afternoon, the bank will foreclose on Monday, end of story. Not just the bank," he frowned at her. "Me. I will foreclose."

I have been handed this dirty work like it is some sort of damned reward for all my hard work. I will get a bonus, maybe a raise, a promotion.”

“Why are you doing this, Diego?”

“I don’t want this on my conscience, Barbie. Now just go and pay this money to buy a month’s worth of time to close your negotiations with these people.”

“Okay, Diego, I’ll do it,” she said, leaning over to kiss his cheek. “This is an incredibly selfless thing to do, Diego,” she said softly.

“You could not be more mistaken,” he said sternly. “It is as selfish a thing as I have ever done. Perhaps even arrogant and crass. Still, it’s the right thing.”

Cabinas Iguana Iguana, PJ

Friday

1000

Jafet Gallego awakened with a splitting headache and a compelling sense of doom to wonder where he was and how he had gotten there. He jerked upright in bed and stared around the room. He had not seen this room ever before and this time had gone too far. It was not a jail cell, nor a hospital room. As nausea pushed upward on his diaphragm he fell back on the pillow and closed his eyes. He was in a hotel cabin, and he was alone, and in that sense, he was for the moment safe. He retraced his steps from yesterday’s happy hour at Juanita’s Mexican, where he had begun to drink. Yesterday had been pay day, Juanita’s raucous and rowdy, everyone buying drinks. Yesterday had been Thursday, meaning that today...he bolted upright, and when his electrical system caught up with his upright flesh, the two collided in a jolt that brought tears to his eyes and caused him to break out in a sweat. He tore his head around desperately and made out the bathroom and lunged in time to hang his head over the commode to retch. There was nothing in his stomach but a bit of viscous clear fluid, and this he expelled on the first heave. His sequence of ensuing convulsions produced bile and stomach lining, though there was no blood this time to worry over. He hung his head against the toilet seat and rested and felt a cold chill sweep across him.

He struggled back out of the bathroom and found his pants, where his cell phone read 10:30. He fell back and lay flat on the cool floor. He had two hours to pull himself together and prepare the work he had been paid to do. He dozed there in haunted dreams for another half hour and awakened again to retrace his steps from Juanita's to Agua Luna. From there flashes of memories came from Iguana Iguana, where he now remembered there was to have been a karaoke last night. He had planned on a couple happy hour beers, a ceviche on the harbor boulevard and an early evening, perhaps rent a DVD. But a contingent of Reel Big captains and first mates had started buying rounds of tequila, and then he had bought rounds of tequila, and the next thing he knew rather than ceviche and a DVD, he had headed off for cubalibres and cigarettes to Agua Luna and then as insanity would have it, to probably sing at Iguana Iguana where he could not remember but surely kept drinking rum, laced with a couple beers, no doubt, perhaps more shots of tequila. He had a memory of singing *La Puerta Negra* badly but it sounding good to him, a memory like déjà vu, like something that felt like it had happened and on the verge of happening again but something that had not really happened after all, something surely that could not possibly happen. In that thread of memory, he was hanging onto a post and fell to the floor, and he felt his left elbow and winced from its pain. For any other commitment, any other at all, he would have called in sick or just not showed and apologized later. But Justino Recto was no man to be let down, and this was too important, a huge amount riding on this. He had one hundred thou in pure pay and two and a half percent of the winnings riding on this job, a big money match with more than a million hanging in the balance, another twenty-five thou for him. Today's payday was a month's pay at the Veterinary. He apprenticed under the traveling vet that made Southern Zone rounds and owned the town store along with outlets in Golfito, Rio Claro, Palmar Norte, and Villa Neilly. Gallego had plans to study in Canoas once he completed the Spanish exam to wrap up his high school diploma five years late. They sold feed and livestock supplies and had a little clinic in the back where they spayed and neutered every other Wednesday and did miscellaneous veterinary surgeries and examinations, and it was a good gig, and after Canoas, he had plans to go on to vet school in San Jose. It was a long road, and moonlighting as a ring vet in the Bambú was a serendipitous and vital milestone along his path.

He pulled himself to his knees to crawl to the shower and flashed upon a faint recollection of being smothered in mounds of flesh and cringed at what he vaguely remembered from the stupor. He could not find any evidence that a woman had been there but now began to remember things in glimpses that made him gasp in shame. Inside the shower, he reached up and turned the water on and lay on the floor and felt the water spray over him to cleanse him of sins that resisted being so easily washed away.

An hour later, he had drunk copious amounts of water and made it to his apartment where he took another shower and drank two Alka-Seltzers in four fingers of water and followed it with stale Coke on ice from the half-empty liter bottle in the fridge, which he kept down. He shaved and put on clean clothes and combed his hair and gargled with Listerine and took three aspirins and sensed that if he had a little bit of *gallo pinto*⁶ that he might pull through and manage his duties and get beyond the hook. It was critical that he obscure his condition once he got to the cockpit as this would not be seen in any favorable light.

He withdrew the ampoule that Recto had given him and wrapped it and put it in his shoulder bag and pedaled down to the shop. It was his day off and he made excuses to Charma who was keeping shop about an email he was expecting and hustled through to the back office to close the door behind him. He turned the computer on and unlocked the glass dispensary on the wall and pulled two syringes. In the small refrigerator he fingered phials till he came upon and withdrew the tranquilizer and the amphetamine. He went for a second time through the formulations he had worked out the day before to confirm the dose aliquots. To the syringe containing the amphetamine he withdrew 10 ccs from the ampoule of EPO, precisely according to the instructions of Justino. As he prepared the green marker, there was a knock on the back door, and he froze at the prospect of discovery. He placed the two syringes in the back of a desk drawer, the winning

⁶ Gallo pinto is the national breakfast of Costa Rica. It consists of leftover rice and beans that are fried together with onions, sweet peppers, cilantro, plus or minus any meat that was left over the day before. It is served with eggs, cheese, sour cream, meat or chicken in red sauce or with pork chop, beef steak or anything else on hand.

one in front of the losing one and tidied quickly up and went to the door to find Octavio and his silly grin.

“Come in and be quiet,” he told him. “Charma’s up front.”

“Justino wants to make sure you’re on,” Octavio whispered. “Word is you were quite the party animal last night.”

“Never mind that,” Gallego replied, closing the door and returning to the office chair.

Octavio leaned against the door as Jafet withdrew the two syringes and completed his work, marking the one in back green for winner and the one in front red for loser, their convention. He produced two small corks and inserted the needles into them and wrapped the syringes together, carefully taping their plungers so that nothing would be lost in transport. He wrapped them in toilet paper and snapped them into a hard case for eyeglasses that he had used before for this purpose. He double wrapped it with rubber bands and secreted it in his day pack, otherwise empty but for a stray pen and a notebook of random poetry, and looked up at Octavio. Jafet lifted a conspiratorial eyebrow and smiled for the first time that day.

“You better go on ahead of me,” he told Octavio. “Best if we’re not seen together. Tell Justino I’ll be there in forty-five.”

He showed Octavio out the back and powered down the computer and retraced his steps to return all the medications to where he had found them and stuff the syringe wrappers in his pocket. He pushed the chair into place behind the desk and breezed through the store front where Charma was giving change for a couple bags of rock salt to a ranch hand, said “so long, Charma,” and once on the sidewalk got on his bicycle and began to whistle a bar from “Muelle de San Blas” and felt nearly human. He pedaled slowly over to the Soda Thompson and ordered a *casado*⁷ to

⁷ The *casado* is the traditional Costa Rican lunch. The word means “married,” and the dish is comprised by: white rice, black beans, a pasta, bean, or green salad, fricassee-ed squash or tubers, a protein of any variety, and fried sweet plantains. It is always served with a fruit drink, like lemonade, tamarind, and a wide variety of tropical fruits for which English names remain either elusive, obscure or both.

push the remains of the dreadful hangover over the edge and return to the remaining and still dreadful business of the day.

“Mr. Greene, Mrs. Sanders, I am desolate over your loss. Karmel was an incredibly special person for whom I have an enormous amount of respect. I know that this will seem tawdry to discuss such matters as you prepare to return home with her partial remains.”

Esquire Jaime Esquinas looked away from those gathered around the conference table of his office and out the window across the sprawling city below. He was silent a moment but stilled emotions welling in him to control his voice and suppress tears fighting to break forth. Barbara looked down at the immaculate glass of the table and her untouched glass of water. The siblings looked at one another.

“But your sister had a vision, a good decent vision, one that was good for her and good for the community, good for the nation of Costa Rica, indeed the wider world. For her sake, I need for you to put aside the revulsion with which this must fill you and take care of this bit of business, so that together we can honor your sister’s memory by doing our part to complete her unfinished work.”

“Here we sit,” Stan replied, reaching over to squeeze the back of his sister’s hand. “What can we do?”

“The title for your sister’s land came through yesterday. It was approved, and the paperwork will follow in a couple weeks.

“Really,” Barbara looked up. “The title has been granted?”

The attorney turned from Ms. Salazar back to the heirs. “You already know that MINAET has granted environmental protection, inclusion into ACOSA, also something that has been approved in executive council for which we are awaiting final paperwork.’

“It will likewise take some time, as much as two months for the estate to clear our bureaucracy and settle the terms in her will. Now here’s the deal. Ms. Greene had a negotiation firmed with Green Leaf Nature Conservancy, as you are also aware. This is an option agreement with the exact terms that she negotiated.” He pushed copies of a document in front of the two siblings. “It is complicated because you are not yet fully vested with the power to execute an option, not till the estate clears our system. Nevertheless, this will lock in the deal—assuming Green Leaf has not gotten cold feet—and put fifty thousand in escrow, money that will go to the estate if they should later back out. That’s enough to settle her final balloon payment, leaving only a few thousand on her active mortgage outstanding.”

“So, we would not have to come up with money of our own if this deal falls through at the eleventh hour?” It was Allison’s question.

“A few thousand dollars to get through the remaining six months of mortgage payments. A pittance compared to what the property is actually worth.”

“And what if they’ve gotten cold feet,” Stan asked.

“Well, if they had cold feet,” Esquinas said, “I don’t think they’d have flown down for this meeting today.”

The siblings looked at one another, and it was Allison that spoke.

“Okay, let’s do it, then.”

“For full disclosure,” the lawyer said, staring at the two very hard, “there are two things I need to tell you. “First of all, her property is probably worth quite a bit more than what she has negotiated, now that there will be full and clear title. It’s yours now—or will be soon—and by all rights, you can re-evaluate things.”

“No sir,” Stan said. “We would like to abide by what Karm had worked out.”

“Secondly, there are a few irregularities in the original option on the property, some legal funny business that I have been looking into.”

“Why did you not see it at the time of the sale,” Allison asked.

“She hired me for her corporate stuff a year after she took out the option; it was a local attorney that handled the land deal, this option, and there was only one involved. And it was not me.”

“And that’s a problem?”

“Well, it’s irregular; usually there are attorneys for each side to circumvent a conflict of interest.”

“Chapín and Pecas are tight,” Barbara spoke up, “and Karm was always edgy about that.”

“Chapín and Pecas?”

“The husband of the woman that sold the farm and the lawyer, Parimaldo.”

“Well,” the attorney continued, “there is some irregular wording in the contract, nothing that invalidates it, but if there is any move on the part of the former owners to try to re-possess this land at this point, that will suggest premeditation.”

“And what does that mean to us?”

“A complication perhaps. A delay. But if I have anything to do with this, such a development would be a bit of a problem for the attorney that handled the transaction. This is a nation of laws, and fraud is not a civil peccadillo here, but a criminal offense. It’s nothing that stops us and may be nothing anyway, just a bit of unintentionally sloppy work on the part of my homologue. But I do need you to be aware so that steps can be taken if any untoward developments should arise.”

“What’s a homologue,” asked Stan.

“The other lawyer,” Allison replied. “So, what do we do,” she asked Esquinas.

“I just need you to be able to fly back down should the need arise, not just in the unlikely event that anything weird happens with the former owners, but also two or three times in the next few months for details of the various legal issues pending, finalization of title, ACOSA inclusion, your estate, and finally for a closing. I’ll try to keep these travel requirements to a minimum and package things where I can, but

we don't have the luxury of sitting on our hands. Anyway, I think that we can modify the terms of the deal slightly so that your travel expenses toward this are borne by Green Leaf."

"We've thought about that, Mister Esquinas," Stan said, "and talked it over."

"Then you are settled on it."

"Actually, we would like to sign a power of attorney here today to have Ms. Salazar to represent our further interests in all this—that is if she is willing to take this on. We're prepared to pay her for her time out of the proceeds of the sale."

It felt like the building moved, like a temblor built from the ground and reached up into their sky, and Barbara sank into her chair, shrinking inward. It had not occurred to her, yet it was clear now that it should have, and she had the abhorrent sense of having subconsciously angled for this, or being seen to have. She closed her eyes to tell herself it was not so.

Allison continued. "We think she's in a much better position than we are to understand everything, and we trust her."

"And you have discussed this with Ms. Salazar," Esquinas said, looking over to find the young lady's face ashen, her eyes closed.

"Actually no," Stan said. "Barbara, sorry to spring this on you."

"Will you help us out," Allison asked.

Barbara opened her eyes and stared out the window and felt a tear roll down her face. "If that's what you want," she said, after following the attorney's glance around the world outside his window, "I'll do it."

"Esquire," the intercom buzzed. "Your Green Leaf people are here."

"We'll get the power of attorney worked up after our meeting," he said. "Have a drink of water, Ms. Salazar," he suggested, standing to withdraw a box of tissue paper to offer her. "And steel yourself up a bit."

He pushed the button on the intercom. "Show them in Nancy, and see if they would like coffee or soft drinks or anything."

Danilo convinced don Severino to at least let his guys load while he rounded up the payola, so when he got the dough from Shades at one the wheels were in motion. He made La Palma by one-thirty, checked again with don Fernando that he had the cash on hand to pay for delivery by three, and paid his two million at the mill for today's shipment. Octavio, the old man reported, was off at the cockpit getting ready for the evening fights. Araya's trucks rolled through town at two and were onsite at the Tamales building site a half hour later. Fernando haggled for form over some sap wood on a few pieces but was happy to see his wood, and he paid out his five million balance in cash, minus a negotiated hundred thousand for the sap, leaving Araya with six point nine million.

With another two hours to go he studied it over and decided to settle his debt with Miguel Arce then and there to get out from beneath his monthly interest payments. Arce would be in the bank this time of day and did not pick up on his cell, and Chapín waited out front. Sure enough, Arce stepped out at four fifteen, his deposits made, on his way to Juanita's for a couple happy hour cocktails to celebrate another lucrative day in the usury industry. And wait for the call from his Bambú stooge. Araya called him over to the Samurai.

"Hey don Miguel, let's head to your office," he said. "I'd like to settle my debt with you."

Miguel Arce smiled at the serendipity of his continuing run of great luck.

"Well," Arce put his foot on the running board to rest the expando-file that he pulled from beneath his arm to rest on his knee. He rummaged around for a copy of the paperwork executed earlier with Shades. "Your debt is clear with me," he handed over the document. "You have a new creditor, so you can go see him about it. You and me are even Steven; you don't owe me a penny."

Araya frowned and stared at the document where all the big words ran together.

“What’s this?”

“Shades bought your debt off me this morning. It’s him you have to pay.”

“What? Why would he do that?”

“Beats me,” Arce replied. “I won’t cry about it, though, seeing as I wound up with a free million that I would be out if you’d paid me up before he sealed the deal with me.”

The two men looked at one another, Danilo racing through it, none of it adding up.

“Come down to Juanita’s, Chapín,” Arce chuckled. “Let me buy you a drink to help celebrate. This is the best deal I ever had with you.”

“You know I don’t drink.”

“Oh, that’s right.” He took his foot off the floorboard, a bit too quickly. “Well, you know where you can find Shades to settle up.”

But Shades’s truck was not parked on the street in front of his office, and with his appointment at the concession stand now less than forty-five minutes away, it was too late to go track him down.

Platanares Beach

Friday

1400

“Two and a half million.” Shades put it on the table and the man who introduced himself as Flaco counted it out. They huddled behind closed curtains in the room Shades had set up.

“And this is a sure thing,” Flaco asked. With the high margins in their product line, his outfit didn’t even bother with the gambling and prostitution rackets, leaving that for smaller fry. But odd contracts came up. Anyway, his bosses wanted this done, and he was going to make a quarter million thou either way it went, though it was settled in their favor.

“Money in the bank,” the real estate guy leaned back and smiled.

“So, if I put a half mill of my own on this bet,” he said, “I walk with a half mill on the plus side plus my pay?”

“Depends on if our inside guy scares up any more action. Right now, we’re sure that there will be 2.5 million bet on the opposing bird.” He pointed out the cash on the table. “There might and might not be room for a side bet of yours. That said, Octavio is pretty resourceful. All you gotta do is ask.”

Civil Bank

Friday

1630

Wary over being called in for a meeting with the branch manager at four-thirty on a Friday afternoon, Diego Bonamérito mustered without great enthusiasm his game face and tapped on the door jam and leaned his head in. “Ready for me, Chief?”

“Come in, come in,” the boss moved his keyboard aside and waved expansively to the seat in front of the desk, swiveling his chair away from the monitor on his desk. “A bit of bad news, son; it looks like they came up with those payments on the Greene place in the nick of time. Deposit made this morning at ten thirty in San Jose.”

“Oh really, well, no overtime for me next week, after all?”

“It looks like it’ll just be the regular old grind.”

“It’s no grind, sir. I love my work.”

“Galán, I’m not sure if you’ve ever met Marco Santabria.” Señor Campos stood to welcome the newcomer in. The new guy shut the door behind him and shook Diego’s hand and turned to Campos and shook his.

“Never had the pleasure,” Diego smiled.

“Regional Security Manager, out of the Perez office, recently promoted from an HR slot at HQ.”

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Sir. If I am able to be of any assistance in your important work, don't hesitate to ask." They retook their seats.

"Galán," Campos continued. "The deposit for the mortgage payment shows that it was made by Ms. Barbara Salazar."

"My girlfriend," Diego confirmed. "She's in San Jose with the relatives of Karmel Greene. You know she was best friends with her. I understand they were to have met with Ms. Greene's attorney and some people traveling down from the US that were in negotiations with doña Karmel to buy her property and others, you know, the whole land deal."

"You are pretty well informed," Campos said, his smile dipping an octave.

"It has been a very emotional week for Barbara," Diego said. "After all, Chief, her best friend was murdered in cold blood five days ago."

"A great tragedy," Santabria commented, crossing himself. "Good thing for her she has someone to lean on in such a troubling time, Diego."

"Yes, well, I have tried to be a small comfort in my little way. But some things are so large that there can be no consolation, however slight. Ever."

"We are a bit concerned, Diego," Campos interjected, "about the timing and nature of this payment today."

"How so, Chief?"

"Well, this may be my fault in the end. I did not understand the complicated nature of the relationships in this case. I am not from here and may have acted in haste. In retrospect, I certainly would have assigned this foreclosure to someone else, someone without a vested interest. It's just that I have such confidence in you, Bonamérito, and did not understand your fundamental conflicts of interest."

"Sir, with all due respect, it was not a foreclosure, just a potential one."

"I think you know what I mean, Diego."

“Now I don’t know anything about this sort of stuff,” Diego said, “but don’t you think, with so much riding on the outcome, a high-powered lawyer of the deceased, a flock of buyers flying from overseas to ink a deal, the heirs on the ground, that it may be possible—perhaps even likely—that with all this brainpower and vested interest, that they may not have seen it incumbent upon their interests to pay the note and keep this property out of foreclosure?”

Campos leaned back and smiled. “It’s a very good point,” he acknowledged. “Frankly, I was expecting that to happen, would have been amazed in fact had they not taken care of it. Anyway, now they have.”

“Chief,” Diego leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his smile now very genuine. “Why don’t you just say what you have to tell me?”

His boss’s eyes glanced at Santabria.

“Bonamérito, you withdrew 1.5 million colones from your personal account on Tuesday.”

“Señor Santabria, I am fully aware of my personal banking transactions, and I am also fully aware of our institution’s internal standards of ethical conduct and bylines, enough to know that your looking into my personal banking transactions is a fire-able offense.”

“Bonamérito, I am a Security Manager, and it is my job to investigate irregularities. I am fully authorized under the bank’s personnel bylaws to look into your transactions.”

“Only,” Diego held his finger in the air, “if I am suspected of an irregularity on the job. Now, the two of you seem to be engaged in a witch hunt here. But I will politely point out that even if your suspicions were actually founded—a pretty big if”—he turned to glare at his boss, “even if I were to have personally paid off Greene’s mortgage, that would not be against any rule. So, even if your suspicions were to prove completely founded, your actions of looking into my account, actions that you have just admitted in front of a witness,” he turned again to his boss before looking back at Santabria, “you have committed an infraction for which you

can be fired and for which you can arguably be held not only civilly but even criminally liable.”

“Diego, Diego, Diego, calm down,” Campos lifted his hands in the air. “What’s got into you; nobody’s accused you of anything here. Listen, you have to admit that it is a little suspicious is all. You had full knowledge of this, you withdrew money from your bank account that would more than cover the mortgage payment, and that mortgage payment was paid today by your girlfriend. Now you have to admit that the coincidences here are considerable and a bit unsettling.”

“Actually, no, it sounds like you are being paranoid, sir, and second-guessing yourself.”

“Look Bonamérito,” Santabria got stern, “just tell us what you did with the money, relieve us of our suspicion.”

“I’ll be happy to tell you what I did with my money,” Diego turned to reply. “In front of a full board of review, with your two bosses in attendance and legal counsel of my choosing.”

“You’re making too much of this,” Campos snapped. “Your girlfriend has fifteen hundred dollars in her account, and it has not been touched. That money came from somewhere. We think you gave it to her.”

“Why would I do that, Chief?”

“That’s what we want to know!”

“Listen to yourself. You’re out on a limb here. Now you have admitted to snooping into a customer’s account to satisfy your own curiosity about a hair-brained scheme that you have cooked up. You and me, Sir,” Diego said, “appear to be cut from wholly different bolts of cloth. When I sit in your chair—not if, Sir, but when—I will not flout company policy on a whim, unlike yourself, for my personal advancement.”

“Diego Bonamérito, you are out of line.”

“Very well, Sir. Will that be all?”

Regulars huddled in the stands and Chapín worked his eyes around the handlers on the periphery of the action, trying to make out Americio's Rincon boy. He monitored Octavio's rounds shaking hands and slapping backs, all smiles, and when he backed away from the buzz at five on the dot in the lead up to the second fight to head to the concession stand, Chapín followed him over.

"Let me buy you one," he offered. "Hey, an eagle⁸ for my friend, and a Coca-Cola for me."

Octavio turned his smile sideways. He took a drink and wiped the moisture from his mustache. "Fix is in."

"Okay, well, I'm in for four million."

Octavio mulled this over. Knowing from his wood deal that Chapín would be flush with cash, he had brought five hundred thousand of his own money prepared for just this eventuality, and Shades's stand-in wanted another five hundred.

"Three point five is the limit on this. One little million is all the additional action I could scare up for this"

"Three and a half it is."

"Okay, I'll let Justino know; your bird fights fifth. Bets open five minutes after the fourth fight. You know the drill." Benavides turned away.

"Hey Octavio," Chapín stopped him, his hand on the man's elbow.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks, dude."

⁸ An Imperial beer.

Octavio flashed his megawatt smile. “You’ve earned it, Chapín, old pal. Enjoy the fight.”

They joked back at headquarters that with all the time he was spending in Jimenez, that headquarters was thinking about opening a branch office here and putting him in charge. Ha ha ha. Still, it wasn’t half bad over here. The town had a weird charm of sorts, and there was something about the gulf out front and the cattle fields and mountains out back that appealed to the memory of his grandpa’s little finca outside of San Ramón. It was a little hotter than he liked, a little rainier than he was used to, but you acclimated to worse things than that. He smiled at the idea of breaking the imagined news to Yanori. She had pitched a fit about the move from San Jose to Villa Neilly; imagine her apoplexy at being further downgraded to an outpost in the real boonies. Ramirez chuckled at the thought. A couple more years and a supervisor slot would be his back in Chepe as a division head, and Yanori’s sacrifice would be worth it with the bigger salary, a nice little house in Santa Ana or somewhere nice like that, good schools for the kids, a late model car, all those trappings of the upwardly mobile.

Neilly had its panties in a wad about a hot tip on their hands. The Commander worried over an expiration date on the intelligence, and with Gutierrez on vacation and his narco-boys tied down with their sting in Canoas, Ramirez had gotten the nod for this bust, and the warrant had come in an hour earlier on the last boat from Golfito. Anyway, how fine a distinction was he going to draw between homicide and narcotics, or armed robbery, extortion, kidnapping, or anything else for that matter. A felony was a felony, and he hadn’t batted an eye at the special assignment. His closure on his own cases was unusually high, and a little side job like this would only look good when it came time for the big cheeses to fit him back in at HQ.

Captain Brazona had his officers readied at the station-house, and they all knew something was going down, just not what that something was. On Brazona’s

counsel only the two of them were in the know. It cut into the versatility of their local intelligence a bit but kept the possibility of any leak under wraps. The suspect had slipped off unnoticed, his truck vanished from where he parked it in front of his office a few blocks down from the station house. Ramirez figured the chances were fifty fifty that the guy had got wind and had cleared out with the merchandise—that is if the tip was even on the up and up—he was not particularly confident from his stake at the cemetery that it would come to anything. When he saw the suspect's car across the runway coming back in from Preciosa, he texted the captain to be ready. Sure enough, the Four Runner rounded the tarmac and returned back up on this side, and the subject turned a couple blocks past where Ramirez ducked into the NatureAir waiting lounge to watch him pass. Their boy was headed home, and he texted the code word and motored to the corner to wait for backup.

*

Morano pulled into his driveway and stepped in the house, his insides twisted from the tension behind the complicated gambit now past the planning stage and in full execution. He had nearly his entire wad invested in this thing and if it went south for whatever reason, he'd be left with a measly thousand bucks to his name. But if everything clicked, he would recover his full investment tonight and when they wacked Chapín tomorrow he'd have a lock on his wife's land and a potent new accomplice to cut Pecas out and a clear path toward taking over the deal with Green Leaf. He could net as much as two hundred large all told, and the suspense was thick all around him. He did a couple bumps and leaned back to switch on ESPN and try to turn his attention away from the stress of the moment. He had done his part and had now to rely on his hired guns to do theirs.

When his doors burst open on either side of his house, he just stared, stupefied as cops surrounded him, weapons drawn and aimed at his head. Hammers were cocked and one of the men's hands trembled on his service revolver, beads of sweat broken from the man's forehead to run down his face. Morano raised his hands slowly.

"Easy, fellows," he said. "Put down your guns. I am not armed."

“At ease, men.” Captain Brazona rounded the corner of the splintered door jam, his pistol held in both hands aimed toward the floor. He edged into the living room, followed by a plain clothes guy in blue jeans and a polo, badge showing over his belt, a Glock holstered on his hip. “Shades,” Brazona greeted him grimly.

“Captain,” Morano greeted the captain in return. “What is this all about?”

“Look here,” one of the officers called over from the dining room, holding up a small bag of blow.

“Captain, tell your men to keep their hands off everything. Officer,” Ramirez said, turning to the young officer. “Please put that back where you found it.”

“As the Inspector says,” the captain barked. “Polanco,” he said to the offending patrolman, “you know better than that. What are you thinking?”

“Señor Johnny Morano, I presume.” The Inspector sat down on the easy chair across from Shades.

“They call him Shades,” Brazona said.

“Yes sir,” Morano replied. “What is this all about?”

“I am Inspector Enrique Ramirez, Homicide Division, OIJ.”

“Homicide? If this is about that gringa, I had nothing to do with it. Or with anything. I’m not a killer.”

“Oh no,” Ramirez smiled. “Nothing of the sort, sorry to startle you. I’m on loan for the day to the Narcotics Division.”

“Well, there you go,” he looked over at the baggie returned to the table surface. “There you have it. Personal use.”

Ramirez pulled a folded sheet of paper from his shirt pocket and tapped his open left hand with the folded document. “I have a warrant here to search the premises. If there is anything at all you’d like to declare up front, I can assure you, on my

honor, that I will have your cooperation noted for possible judicial leniency later on. My word, Señor Morano.”

“I have nothing to declare,” Shades chuckled. “You’ve already found what you’re looking for. There’s nothing else.”

“We are going to turn your house upside down, Señor Morano. Are you quite certain you don’t want to cooperate with us before we do that?”

“Inspector, do what you gotta do. That’s all I have. I swear.”

Ramírez turned to Brazona and gave him the nod. The captain stepped into the bedroom beyond view and the adjoining bathroom and returned holding a package wrapped in packing tape, his hands in plastic gloves.

“Oh bullshit,” Morano laughed. “No fucking way. You assholes planted that. This is a set up.”

“Señor Morano,” Ramirez said. “I need you to stand, please, and turn to the wall and put your hands against it. I want you to spread your legs. I’m going to need to pat you down before I cuff you up and take you in.”

The Cock Pit**Friday****1800**

Flaco had never been to a cock fight before and had no idea what to expect. But within a few seconds of the birds being dropped, it didn’t look good for the home team. Octavio Benavides stared grimly at the unfolding but forced a vacancy onto his face to dispel his surprise. Justino Recto took it all in coolly from the side of the pit and mulled his options over the vet, who had clearly gotten the two syringes backwards. The kid had been out carousing the night before and had done his work with a muddled head, and now rather than walk away with his million, Recto would be honor-bound to return the three million in bets that were under his implicit guarantee, making this a four million colón screw-up. Benavides would have to eat his own bet; he had been sent out specifically to make sure Jafet was on his game and shared the responsibility. He couldn’t sweat Jafet to make up the dough; hell,

the kid was an apprentice without even any formal schooling yet and had no money of his own. Benavides, he would have to study over further; after all, he had brought the business in in the first place. Still, it wasn't Benavides's fault. It was that foolish Gallego and that demon rum. In his line of work there were those at bigger venues that would take a harder view about such a mistake and at least give the kid a thorough beating, perhaps worse. But Recto was a devout Evangelist and hardly about to stray off into some moral deep end with no payout for nothing more than retribution. That would be a compromise of his own integrity, both in the community of men and that of angels. In the end it was just three million of actual losses, a couple weeks of profits. As the fight went on, he prayed to the Lord for a miracle that might allow the chemical imbalance to be countervailed by the intrusion of divine will but sensed that the issue really did not rise to a sufficient standard for the Lord to personally interest Himself.

At ringside Chapín cheered and roared, and when his bird rose above the pigeon's bird and tore down through its breast with the razor spurs tied to its shanks, he knew it was over before the bird fell to the ground to flap around in the growing stain in the dirt beneath it. The cockers erupted into the pit to pull their birds, the bout over, and the loser carried the wounded bird by its feet, clearly beyond even a once-over by tonight's ringside vet. Araya punched the air and threw his arms up, careful not to look over at Octavio and risk a meaningful glance that might be spied by those watching for such things. He had just gotten lucky, that was all, and had now only to go and collect his three and half million bet and three and a half in winnings. It was not a bad little bit of business for the day, especially on the heels of closing out the long-festering wood deal. He was nine million up at this point.

He took Mimi's call on his way to the bet stand. Only it was not Mimi.

"Señor Araya, this is Doctor Alfonso Villareal, at Calderon Guardia in San Jose. Mr. Araya, I need you to make plans to travel to San Jose at once."

"What is it, Doctor Villareal? How is my baby, how's my Maribel."

"I am so sorry, Señor Araya. We were not able to save her."

The chaos about him stilled into slow motion, a preternatural silence supplanting the bedlam around the cockpit as they prepared for the sixth and final fight of the night. He could hear his own heart pounding at the collecting due and was nudged forward in line by the guy behind him, eager to collect his few thousand rojos. "What?"

"Your wife arrived in a state of advanced septic shock from an ulcerated stomach. She was in the final stages of an apparently undiagnosed gastrointestinal carcinoma. We brought her in immediately upon her arrival for surgery...but it was too late. I would like to explain it to you in person as soon as you can arrive to claim the body. I am so sorry for your loss, Señor Araya. Particularly in light of your unborn child."

He put the phone away and stepped vacantly toward the table and allowed don Justino to count the money onto the table and place the stack into his hand.

"Congratulations, Chapín," he said gravely. "You always have a knack for picking winners."

"Thank you, don Justino."

"What's the matter, boy, you don't look too happy."

"My wife," he said. "I just got word she died on the operating table."

Justino held the young man's eyes and they looked at one another for several seconds.

"Your wife was in surgery and rather than be at her side, you were here betting on gamecocks?"

Araya pocketed the dough and turned away. It looked bad alright, but it was not his fault. He had no idea that she was going to go into surgery and did not place any stock in the pregnancy business. He did not know how bad it was. After all, it was just a bit of chronic gastritis. He sat in his car a few moments, unable to see the next move, a world of unbidden responsibilities and duties now settling in around him. He shook himself out of it, awakening to the reality of the large

amount of money he was carrying. He glanced around to see who might be casing him. He started the car and raced downhill over the Bambú road potholes, his car bouncing and banging along the way. At the highway he looked to the left to get back to Cañaza and stash the dough to prepare himself for breaking the news to the kids, but turned right instead to track down Shades and find out what the hell kind of racket he had going on and get his ass paid off and get the cartel boys on the horn to come get their money tonight as well.

But Shades's truck was parked outside the police station. At the corner of his street, it looked like a cop convention at his house, marked and unmarked cars, a van, crime-scene tape, a guard out front, plain clothes and uniformed cops. He drove slowly away, and turned the corner to putter along the air strip road and mull who to call to get the scoop when his phone rang.

"There's been a change of circumstances, Chapín," Pecas announced. "Looks like our boy Shades has checked himself out of the game."

"He killed himself?"

The lawyer chuckled. "He's in the jail house. Under arrest."

"Under arrest? What for? The cops are swarming at his house."

"Something to do with drugs, something serious; I don't have the full story yet."

Danilo motored along and thought it over.

"Chapín, wake up," Pecas said. "Listen, I'll be back in town tomorrow afternoon. I need to see you at the office Sunday morning. But first thing tomorrow I need you to pack your shit and move back in up at the finca, wife, kids, dogs, the whole bit."

"I don't have any dogs, Counselor. I'm a cynophobe."

"You know what I mean. Get it done tomorrow, put your place up for rent. I got an angle. Meet me at ten Sunday morning."

"Pecas, something else has happened," he said. But the line was dead.

He dialed the number in Canoas.

“Tell don Javier I got his dough and to send his boys over now. I’ll be waiting at my place.”

He was stunned to pull up in his driveway a half hour later to find a late-model Gran Vitara—black, no less—sitting beside the uncharacteristic darkness of his house.

“That was fast,” Araya said as the new man followed him into the house where he turned on the lights.

“In the neighborhood,” the man said, lifting an eyebrow.

“Didn’t I see you at the fights tonight?”

“Hot tip. Didn’t work out so well, though.”

Araya counted out the dough, and the man counted it again, divided it into two wads, and stuffed them in his pants pockets.

“Nice doing business with you.”

“Yeah, drive safe.”

“Hey, kid,” the man turned at the doorway. “What do you know about that slime ball gringo real estate guy?”

“Shades? The guy that got busted tonight?”

The man looked at him a few seconds from the doorway, the focus of his eyes seeming to shift from Danilo through him into some far distance. The man turned without a word and the engine started outside. There was a spit of gravel and the spinning of wheels and a fading roar that settled into an exclamation point to end one shoot of Chapín’s nightmare.

Pecas made the up and back every week and knew every curve along the highway, and it had been a year or more since they had the checkpoint at Chespiritos manned and active, actually checking passing motorists. Even the Hacienda cops, which used to have smuggling checkpoints regular years ago at El Brujo and Dominical, seemed to rarely be out on the road these days checking trucks for contraband. The country's fiscal challenges were no secret, and he imagined that this was the ground truth of cutbacks. There were even noticeably fewer traffic cops in the past few months out standing by the road fishing for bribes for minor infractions. But sure enough, they were reviewing cars today, and he prepared his driver's license, *cédula*, and vehicle registration for his turn as he waited in the short line in front of him in the chilly morning air on the *Cerro*⁹.

With Shades out of the way, there was no more both ends against the middle game for Chapín to play. He was boxed into the court where Pecas wanted him, and now it was time to put on the old Parimaldo charm and channel his inner deal-maker to pull this whole thing off. Chapín, fast talker that he was, was sleazy, a turnoff to anyone, but particularly anyone serious. And these conservation people, for whatever else they might be, were serious people. It was too bad about Shades; if it were not for greed and the likelihood of betrayal, he could have been an asset with his language skills, a partner even. Parimaldo had few regrets, but one of them, one that came back to haunt him regularly, was his laziness back in college with learning English, the second of course, selling Giorgio out like that. He had had no aptitude for the language and less an aptitude for the jail cell and hated both things evenly. Looking back, it was one of those things that had he only bit the bullet and overcome pride and worked at it, he'd be better off today. Any two-bit legal hack that spoke that language had him beat just by showing up. He was too old at fifty-six to blame the foreigners themselves anymore. Hell, they weren't any different from Parimaldo himself, just wanted to be able to speak their own language. Back in the heady days with Central America awakening to a Socialist

⁹ El Cerro de la Muerte, the Hill of Death, is the alpine region separating San Jose from San Isidro. The pass has an elevation of over 12,000 feet above mean sea level and the cold temperature and frequent rains make the region dangerous due to the threat of hypothermia and death. It was for centuries a wild outpost of the country that required expeditions to traverse. The Panamerican Highway pushed through in the year 1947.

and even Communist ideology, it had been easy to reject the Yankee yoke, embodied nowhere so much as in their awful language. And with their numbskull president ceding Panama unilaterally, Nicaragua falling to the Sandinistas, El Salvador to the FLMN, and Guatemala teetering on the brink, law school in staid Costa Rica had been about as tiger's milk as it had ever gotten around here, at least since the Revolution, eight years before he was born. He remembered those good old days fondly and reviled his own stupidity and laziness. You can't beat your opponent without understanding his ways, but back then, young and handsome, a bit of cash in his pocket, a year away from a powerful law license, hell, it had been easy to convince himself he didn't need their language, that he could get by better than ever with his own and boast if he had to about his linguistic prowess in French, a language in which he had gained a passing capacity. Boasting was one thing; cashing checks was another, and the Quebecois and French were few and far between, the gringos swarming over his country with their money like vultures on road kill.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, and now it was too late in the game. No new tricks for old dogs. At least he had not punted on the Internet, even if had come around late to it. Now his email, his cell phone, texting, that whole digital thing, they were great tools, no, they were indispensable. But the Internet only reminded him continuously of his great mistake in bowing out on the English language. For better or for worse, one day the entire planet would speak English, that was for sure. At least now there were online translators that he could run on a web site of particular interest as needed. But it was a missed opportunity, a tragic flaw, his single greatest regret.

"Senor Parimaldo," the officer looked at his documents and then stepped to the front of the car to check the license plate, returning with a grin. "Licenciado Parimaldo, Sir?"

"At your services officer, how did you know I am an attorney?"

"Well, well, well," walked up the new man, an officer from his prim garb. He turned into the lawyer's window and flashed his golden-toothed smile. "So, we finally meet again, Lubricio. It's been a long time."

Pecas felt a drop of urine escape his urethra into his boxers as he stared into the scarred face of Giorgio, all time-worn and ravaged and felt the iron-clawed grasp of his hand upon the attorney's shoulder.

"I'm afraid you will have to step out of the car, Licenciado Parmaldo, and come with me."

"Jorgito, what a surprise," Pecas managed a weak smile. "A traffic officer. It's been a long time, hasn't it? Why must I step out of the car?"

The policeman un-holstered his sidearm and reclined the side of the barrel against the top of the window pointed at the lawyer's freckled temple. "I need you to step out of your car for me, please."

"Hey Jorgito," Pecas chuckled, opening the door to step out. "Let me take care of this, settle up with you. I have money now."

"All the money in Tiquicia will never buy back the ten years I spent locked up, Licenciado, gleefully anticipating this very moment."

Pecas stared back into the bottomless pits of the black orbs that sucked him in.

I need you to turn around and put your arms against the car and spread your legs."

"You are going to arrest me, Jorgito?"

"Something like that. It has sure been a long time, Pecas, you got that much right...But every dog has his day, and some dogs, they get two!"

"I think something's going on, outside, Pops," Andrés said.

Sylván was aware from the light beneath the door that it was morning again. He was lain down in the corner of the cell, unable to sleep anymore, waiting for the appearance of a meal, a chance to see the light. Alone he'd bash himself to death against these walls. But in here with his boy, he had to be strong—an example—

even though the boy was all grown into a man and could handle himself in the world. He knew he had it in himself to will himself to death, and two days into this, he was worn out and ready for it. But it would be the same as bashing himself against the walls. For Andrés's sake, he would hold out and resist that temptation. They had them trumped up in here on a murder charge, and it was getting clear to him that he was going to have to come up with some wild story that would clear Andrés, about how he had killed her on his own. So, he lay there on the dirt floor, stilling his mind against the battles raging inside, forces of dissipation arrayed against those that clung to battle-worn ideals of decency. He was holding out. He would hold out more. But he wasn't going to hold out once they took him up to the *Reforma* and locked him away for life. Then it would be okay. Today, today it was not okay. It was not yet time.

"Just breakfast, son, don't get your hopes up."

"They gotta take us to Golfito, Pops; it's the law; it's the way it is."

"They ain't no law applies to us, son. They ain't no rights we got that we ain't able to defend, and quite frankly we ain't got much of a defensive posture at this point. Don't get your hopes up and just settle into yourself to ride it out, however long it takes and tough it out."

There was the noise of a key in the lock, and the door swung open, and they squinted at the daylight.

"Help your old man to his feet," said the guard's voice, "and come along with me, there's someone here to see you."

They were not handcuffed and were escorted to a front office where they were asked to sit and brought coffee and treated respectfully. Inside the small hot office, they were not watched over, and the door was left open. Presently a man came in, turned the fan on, and introduced himself as Inspector Ramirez, OIJ. He shook their hands and took a seat behind the desk and reached toward the corner to hoist up Sylvan's rifle.

"Don Sylvan, your .22 here was used to kill your neighbor last Saturday."

“Everybody’s saying it was me, but I didn’t do nothing,” the old man said. “And you certainly got no business holding my son, here. Now you’re saying it was the rifle done it, but I think you don’t know nothing and just need something to pin it on.”

“Señor Montes, we have laboratory methods that can match bullets to the rifles they’re fired from.”

“It’s true, Pops,” Andrés said. “I seen it on the television over at Pánfilo’s. On CSI Miami. It’s a tv show. From America.”

“This is the rifle that was used to kill doña Karmel.”

“I left it hanging in his spot when I left out to go up to Piedras Blancas,” the old man said.

“Reports from people that know you say this is out of character.”

Andrés chuckled. “That’s for damned sure.”

“I just soured on killing for meat,” Sylvan said. “I don’t know if it’s right or not, just came over me, and I set out with my dogs and let the rifle hang. Where is my dogs, anyhow? Anybody feeding them? Taking care of them? I suspect they’re wondering where we’re at by now, getting a little cagy.”

“Señor Montes, did anybody know you were headed up to mine gold?”

“Just that Araya kid, Danilo. You can ask him. He’ll tell you straight.”

“Señor Montes, did he know that you were headed up to mine gold and leaving your rifle behind?”

“You don’t think he shot that lady? Hell, that kid don’t have the constitution for killing. He’s a bit of a slicker tell the truth, fast talker, sharp dresser. But he ain’t no killer.”

“Mr. Montes, did Danilo Araya know you were headed into the mountains and leaving your rifle behind.”

“Yessir,” Sylvan allowed. “I reckon he did.”

"How do you reckon that?"

"Well, I told him as much."

"You were with Chapín the day you took off into the mountains?" The Inspector checked a calendar. "On Saturday, the day before the murder?"

"Yessir. He was up to the house."

"What was he doing up to the house?"

Sylvan looked over at Andrés, who looked his daddy in the eye and shook his head.

"I reckon that's my business," Montes replied. "Mine and Chapín's."

"Fair enough. What time was it?"

"A little before noon. I lit out before it began to cloud up, probably around one. He took off a half hour earlier."

"Do you recall what Senor Araya was wearing that day?"

"Just his old regular fancy clothes. Panama hat."

"What color was his shirt?"

"How the hell am I supposed to remember what color his damned shirt was?"

"Think about it a minute," the Inspector replied. "You were there with him. You can remember."

"It was red."

"Red?"

"Yessir, red."

"Not blue?"

"It was red. I recall now that the dogs wasn't taken too kindly by him. I think animals are often made uncomfortable by the color red."

"You have a lot of mountain friends, Señor Montes."

"I don't know about all that; I just try to get by is all."

"I'm telling you it's true."

"When are you taking us to Golfito," Andrés piped up. "We got rights you know. You can't keep us holed up here in that little dark box forever. You gotta charge us or set us loose."

Ramirez glared at the old man. "Your mining pals all came in to vouch, giving you a pretty solid alibi."

"Well," Andrés ventured. "That ought to count for something."

"Indeed, it does," Ramirez smiled. "You guys are not going to Golfito. I am going to give you a ride back home myself. I am sorry for your inconvenience, but you will understand our reasonable suspicion."

"Well," the old man studied it over. "Okay, then, let's go."

"Any idea where we can find Danilo Araya?"

"We'll drive right by where he lives," Andrés said. "If he ain't there, I'm sure his old lady can raise him."

"Actually, his wife died last night in surgery in San Jose," Ramirez said gently. "Sorry to say. And he seems to have mostly moved out of his house. There's furniture and dishes, but his clothes and personal things, they're gone."

Sylvan and Andrés looked at one another.

"Awful lot of dying going on around," Sylván muttered, "and chances are it ain't all spent out yet."

"Have you looked for him up at doña Karma's" Andrés asked.

"No, we haven't. Should we?"

"Just a thought."

“How convenient,” Ramirez replied. “We can drop in there on our way out to your place.”

Puerto Jiménez

Saturday

1000

“My man.”

Barbara was the first one off the plane and wrapped her arms around Diego at the foot of the steps he moved to once the propeller stopped. They embraced, and she held him tightly and pulled back to look at him, her eyes steady, before her new face moved toward his.

“Take me home,” she said to him, after their kiss, her hand on his chest.

After making love, he bounded up to make the coffee that she said would be required. She showered spartanly and reappeared in a tee shirt of his pulled from a drawer to sit across the table and wore a Mona-Lisa smile as he set the cup before her, cream, no sugar.

“I’m all yours,” he said. “What’s today’s agenda?”

“I have accepted a job offer,” she told him.

He laughed.

“Seriously,” she smiled. “A bit out of character, perhaps. Call it the new me.”

“A job offer?”

“Interim Director of Green Leaf Osa.”

His smile faded, and he leaned back and gazed upon a vibrant butterfly emerged from its chrysalis. It was invigorating to see this thing that he had sensed at the airstrip but had been unable to grasp, a thing in the air but out of context and irrational, scary to him in its foreignness, iridescent in its awesome emergence.

“Congratulations, Ms. Interim Director.”

“Thank you. And I need you to help me round my rough edges a bit with today’s second order of business in my new life, first order of business in my new job.”

“My pleasure. Are we going out to look for office space?”

She looked at him as never before in a bemused gentleness. She felt the husks of the chrysalis fall away on the floor around her and knew herself to be wholly made new and also that nobody else, not even Diego, could possibly see or understand it in the moment of its becoming. She had known it would be like this, and he was just the first in the line of dominos before her, the first and most important. It would take time, and this did not diminish her, did not diminish him, did not change anything, no matter what anybody thought. Whatever chip on her shoulder there might have ever been, whatever surrender to whatever sense of inadequacy, it was gone up in smoke, and it was now in its vanquishing hard to even recall, hard to put a finger on, and he leaned back, dazzled by the aura around her he had never really truly known was there, only always suspected, always sought in his selfish way to draw out. Now she had found it on her own. His eyes welled with unbidden, traitorous water.

“No. We have to go talk to those landowners and firm up the terms Karm negotiated.”

“Okay. You know those terms?”

She tapped her temple. “I have studied the files.”

“Let’s go then.”

“Diego, I want to play house with you.”

He looked at her a long time, his palms flat on the table and then drew his left hand to cradle his chin. He raised his coffee to his lips but set it down before drinking.

“House?”

She looked around the room and lifted her palms. “House.”

“Why not ‘home?’”

“Why not?”

“And Sylván Montes? You are ready to go and firm up terms with the man that killed Karmel?”

“We are going to him first. Right now, in fact. As soon as we get dressed.”

“Can you handle that?”

“It’s my second action item on today’s new life agenda.”

Diego took a drink for form and mulled that over, second action item. He rose to go shower. “Okay then, he’ll be easy to find. Just a question of whether the cops will let us speak with him.”

“I am sure, Darling, that you will find the way to convince them.”

Xocola Farm, SM

Saturday

1100

Chapín took a third run at the second to last rise with a good head start and had the motor revved to the yellow. All the weight should have compensated for the worn tread of his tires, but it didn’t, and he lost forward momentum three quarters of the way up under a thin mist, what remained from the morning’s hard rain, and when it was clear he wasn’t going to pull the grade, he slammed on the brakes. But that didn’t do much, and the car, wheels locked up, slid back down the two track, and rather than gentle it down to the flat below, he overreacted and turned the steering wheel and the front tires bit into the rut and the sliding car jumped the tracks and slid back against the clay wall on the driver’s side. He put it in reverse but couldn’t break free. He rocked it back and forth between first and reverse, but it was no use. He was stuck. He cut the engine and smiled, reaching out to touch the clay out the window and then rub his fingers together until its wetness rubbed dry, leaving a red stain on his fingers. It wasn’t any big deal, hell, he was just stuck. He might be able to pull out on his own power after it dried a bit, and if not, Carmona was just a couple kilometers up the road and could bring his oxen over and have him out in a flash.

He leaned back in the seat and lit a cigarette. It'd been a rough week, but he was out of it now. Hell of a shock with Mimi, but when it was your time, it was your time, mysterious ways and all that, and he could've never imagined it like this, but here he was. The kids had taken it pretty hard, of course. Little Yosenia was too young to understand but bawled her eyes out on cue from the rest of them, who all had a better reckoning of what it meant. He'd done his part pretty admirably, wrapped them all up and held them close and cried alongside them until they wore themselves out in their wailing and finally slept. Lillo not so much, and he'd come out and stood in the doorway as Danilo told his in-laws how it had to be there in the kitchen, how he'd be down to collect them later on today after getting all moved back up to the finca. He'd looked up to find little Lillo glaring with an eye too evil for a twelve-year-old boy. What the hell did the kid think, that his old man could work miracles and save his momma from a cancer nobody knew she had? Lillo had ducked back away into the darkness back where his brother and sisters slept it out, and Chapín had let him be, or maybe was too fearful to follow and draw him out and work on it with him. It wasn't like he had all the goddamned answers. He was pretty sure it was the truth when he'd told them he'd be back to collect them all up and haul them up the mountain later on, but as the rain gentled and he exhaled a billowing flood of cold blue smoke into the cab and watched little pockets of breeze move it around into eddies and out the window, he saw that it was not fair on the kids, that he didn't have what it took to raise them up proper, that it wasn't right, wasn't fair to them. They'd be better off with his sister-in-law and her husband and their little cousins, and he'd take them money and see them regular and then after he found himself someone new, he'd fetch them up off to a big house he'd buy in town or on some great finca after closing this deal with these conservation folks and making a ton of money.

It was all cash flow. That was the secret to business. All you had to do was move money and have a part of it stick to you on the way past. Here he was six and a half million in cash in the black and not five days ago he was five million in the red. That was an eleven million turn around in one little week. Factor it out and that was forty-four million a month, five hundred and twelve million colones a year, and that was a hell of a living by any standard. Of course, five and a half million of that was

dumb luck. With Shades locked up he could write off the two and a half million rojo loan, and as crazy luck would have it he was out from under his debt to Arce as well. Of course it wasn't really luck. He'd played Shades and come out on top. Somehow Shades had figured he'd wind up leveraging him with the security on Mimi's Cañaza lot to surely edge in on the land deal. What a bad bet, probably all that powder he was running up his nose, making him all loopy. No, it wasn't that, it was Chapín's own powers of persuasion and deception. He'd hedged his bet with Sylván pretty good, after all. He'd earned that three million the hard way, and now the old man in jail and about to be sent up for life for murder, well, that wiped that balance sheet clean. Yeah, that had been a nice little inspiration: two birds with one stone. And Shades too...if that didn't just beat all, and on coke charges; it just goes to show that it was true: live by the sword, die by the sword, and Shades had sure tripped all over his own. Good riddance to bad rubbish. He took a last puff. Can't win 'em all, he chuckled, flicking his butt out the window, if you don't win the first one.

The rain was quit, and he rolled his window up and locked the door and wiggled through the pile of shit on the passenger side to clamber out the door to stand on the ground in the stillness to study out his next move, comforted by the bite of his boot tread into the road's red clay. He had not slept since being awakened yesterday well before dawn by Mimi's collapse and was stumbling tired. He pulled her face up in his mind and held it there framed by the dark understory of the forest rising on the side of the road. But her face moved around in the air and warbled and weaved and walked itself through the faces of earlier conquests and settled at last into the visage of a girl he'd had his eyes on, a school girl now in her last year, coming up, forming out, pretty and hard-working, smart, but dirt poor, a girl that could be swayed with his easy charm and the flash of cash, some pretty dresses, maybe one of them touchpad phones, the scent of a good life.

He appraised his ride. The little Samurai had been good to him and with new tires it would have chewed through this clay like nobody's business, but it was time to trade up and get himself some wheels more appropriate to his new station in life. There was no way he was going to haul all this stuff on his shoulder up this god-forsaken hill. It'd take him twenty trips and he didn't have it in him. He did the

math on it and had the dough on his person. He reached under the seat and pulled out the nine-millimeter he'd traded for a year and a half ago when he was going to make a run at it as a narco. He tucked it into his waistband and pulled his expando-file of superfluous documents to tuck under his arm and a sheathed machete and checked his pockets to make sure he had the keys before locking the door and slamming it closed to trudge on up to the mountain to marvel at his new finca and start taking stock.

He was going to have to sit down and have him a real serious talk with his little buddy Octavio. That had been a real solid little piece of business, last night, and Chapín was a serious businessman, and there was the possibility of a bright future in the business of fixing fights. He'd surely have to throw a few along the way, but it got back to cash flow, money in, money out, just have enough stick to you along the way to make it all pay, and Benavides was just a front man. Justino Recto, now there was a man more in Chapín's league, and he'd move on out of the bush leagues from Benavides after pulling his chain long enough to discharge any requisite loyalties. Because it was all a people game, too, and you had to stroke egos along the way and humble yourself as needed to achieve the bigger end-game they had no idea was actually in play. Recto, even, was just small fry in the wider world, and this was something that Chapín was good at. Hell, the old man was not long from bailing and maybe Chapín would buy him out and run the show himself. Since you had to make a living, might as well make it doing something you liked, something you were good at.

He made the flat and breathed hard, thankful for the easy going before the final steep up to the turnoff to his new finca. Maybe he'd turn his hand to the chocolate business. That sport fishing on full analysis might be a tough nut to crack, after all. He laughed at how proud little Diego would be of his new math. Course he'd have to hire a new set of crones to work it, no way any of Karma's old crew would return under him. Meaning he would have to learn how it all worked. He laughed at them and at the old gringa, how she'd told him to warn Mimi that she would kill him if he ever set foot on her finca again.

“How’s that working for you, Doña Karmela,” he asked aloud, halfway up the steep, breathing hard, one foot ahead of the other, his vision a little blurry from thirty hours on the move. “Forward, march,” he told his right foot, then his left, and the world at large, and keep that cash flowing, in and out, what don’t stick to you. Just keep it moving.

The rain started back again as he reached the driveway. He ducked into the forest to stand beneath the canopy of the uphill stand of primary and looked downhill across the road and over the recovering secondary, water leaking through to drip on him. He raised a flame after twenty or so flicks and got a Delta going and fire-boxed it as the rain stepped up its tempo. He was carrying six and a half million in cash and would need to scout out a hiding place for it once he made the house. He laughed into the mist that rose from the forest floor but quieted when the air held his sound and kept it alive beneath the canopy. Water fell onto his ember and he could not get it going again and dropped it to the ground. Soaking wet anyway, he shrugged his shoulders and stepped back out into the driveway under the rain and walked on up to the clearing and the house, where he could dry off and sit out on his new porch and cool his tired heels a spell and let the rain run its course before going down and rousting Carmona to haul him out and up the hill.

He was no more than twenty meters from the porch when Tepe’s dogs boiled out from beneath the house to stake out a stand around him. Their fur was dry and him sopping wet, the world all backwards. He looked around at the four of them, unafraid for once, even with their hackles all raised on their backs, even with their lips curled back. They were getting wet now. Low snarls rose first from the throat of the lead dog Tepe called Santos, then from the other three. It was a chorus that rose and fell in the rain.

He whistled. “Nice doggies.” He held out his hand and whistled again.

Their snarls rose in pitch and Santos darted closer and pulled up short to paw the ground and snarl. The other three closed in by an equal measure.

He reached behind to pull the nine and allowed the expando-file to fall from the crook in his left arm and slung the scabbard off the machete.

“Come on, then,” he told them. “You filthy animals. Come meet your maker man.”

He shot Santos square in the chest as the dog leapt toward him, the animal falling like a hammer to twitch and bleed out. He swung around on the second, but the pistol jammed, and the animal had his left wrist in its maw before he could swing the blade. He was pulled to the side by its thrashing weight but held his feet to shake it off as the third locked onto his right and the last his calf, all of them pulling and thrashing, and he felt helpless beneath their power. With an outsized effort he held his ground and against the dog locked on his right arm, he forced his wrist to work and turned the weapon around onto the animal’s head and squeezed the trigger. But it would not fire, and he recalled the months it sat in his drawer uncoiled and uncared for, never run through its mechanistic paces. It dropped to the ground, and he was pulled there next. They now let go of his limbs, and he covered his head with his mauled arms and tasted the blood that dripped onto his face as they drew in around him snarling, their breath hot against his face. The snarls rose in volume, to a breaking point, and the rain pounded harder until the sound broke into a gentle muffled commotion of teeth, sinew, and hate.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this.