

The Last Stand

Kelly drove out the driveway, crossed I-8 and drove to Friars Road, then headed East to Fairmont, then turned by the Nurseryland, ducked down a little used street, and turned right into the parking lot of Troy Jr.'s Greek Restaurant. Tom never ate Greek food before but from what Kelly was telling him in the car, he was looking forward to it. The hostess turned out to be the owner's wife named Anna, and part-owner of the restaurant. She gave them a really nice table for 2 since they were early for the dinner rush. She seated them at a table with a red tablecloth and 2 lit candles. Tom guessed he'd been set up by 2 conniving women, but he didn't argue. Five minutes later, the food started coming out. Tom turned to Kelly, who said "I took the liberty of ordering the Greek Sampler for the 2 of us, hope you didn't mind?"

"Mind, I'm glad you did, confused but glad. You weren't on the phone long enough to set this up." Anna answered for Kelly "Call it Woman's Intuition. When a woman tells another woman she wants something special for dinner, we know what she wants. I'll keep bringing out courses periodically but I'll leave you alone otherwise. If you like, I'll bring out a bottle of wine and 2 glasses." Tom nodded, and Anna went to get the wine. She brought back a nice bottle of white wine that Tom couldn't read the label, then it dawned on him that the writing on the bottle was in Greek. Anna poured 2 glasses, then went to go get the food.

The first course, and the bread for dinner, was a dipping sauce made with cucumbers and yogurt called Tzatziki, and the bread was called Pita bread. Tom had pita bread before, so he was on familiar turf here. When he dipped the piece of bread in the sauce, he tasted cucumber, garlic and a taste of dill in a yogurt based sauce. Next they brought out a classic Greek salad with ripe Greek olives, crumbled feta cheese, diced cucumber, lettuce, spinach, tomatoes, green pepper, and drizzled with Extra Virgin Olive oil. The next course was grilled steak on skewers called Souvlaki according to Kelly. Tom thought it was tasty. Next they brought out a dish called Spanakopita or spinach pie. Kelly explained the fyllo dough made the pie light and pastry-like. Tom thought whatever it was it still tasted great. The next dish was called Gyros, pronounced "Year-os" and was a grilled combination of ground lamb, ground beef, and spices that was grilled on a vertical rotisserie and sliced as it cooked. Tom really like the gyros, and almost asked for seconds. Finally for desert, they had a choice of Baklava or Galactobouriko. Tom knew what Baklava was, and Kelly suggested 1 of each. Tom remembered the taste of Baklava, he'd had it somewhere before, but the taste of Galactobouriko was exquisite. They took Fyllo dough, filled it with a vanilla custard and poured a sweet syrupy glaze over it. When dinner was over, Anna brought the check, and Tom took out his credit card, and gave her a healthy tip, and said "Thanks, that was excellent!" Tom groaned as he got up from the table saying "I'm such a pig sometimes, but that was good!"

Kelly let Tom drive back to the hotel - big meals made her sleepy. They made it back right after dark, and Tom had the attendant park in their parking garage for the night, and waited for the key. When they got to the room they were too tired and stuffed to fool around, so they showered together, which was a lot of fun, then laid in bed and cuddled until they fell asleep.

The next morning, they ate at Denny's, then they decided to go to the Zoo. Tom checked the map that morning, and realized that Texas Street to Park Blvd was the quick way to the zoo from where they were, so he drove east back to Texas Street, up a big long hill, made a right on El Cajon Blvd, then a left at Park Blvd, and followed the signs for the San Diego Zoo. It was the middle of the week, and fairly early, so they got a good parking spot up front, unloaded Tom's camera gear into the vest, and carefully loaded his Colt Commander from the glove box into the same vest pocket as last time.

Since he was standing in the open passenger-side doorway, no one could see what he was doing. Kelly helped him put the cased 600mm lens in the back, and carried the tripod again, since Tom assured her there might be shots that he could use the big lens on, or at least the 100-400 telephoto. Once everything was secure, Tom set the Mustang's alarm, and they walked to the main gate, presented their passes, and walked through the gate.

They got two zoo maps from a zoo employee, and turned right to the bus loading zone. While they waited for the bus, Tom mounted the 28-135 lens, and got ready to take a bunch of pictures. Before they went to breakfast that morning, Tom remembered to download and clear the images in the camera to the laptop, but he didn't need to - the 2 gigabyte chip could carry a week's worth of images easily between downloads. As the bus pulled out, Tom was sitting on the right side of the bus, which the Driver/guide said was the best side for pictures. They stopped at the classic Flamingo Lagoon, and Tom shot almost a dozen pictures ranging from a wide angle showing the whole lagoon, to several medium shots showing groups of flamingos, and finally several close-ups using the 135mm maximum zoom to shoot single flamingos. Thinking quickly, he turned the camera vertical and isolated a single flamingo from his feet to his beak in the frame. He didn't have enough time to switch back and forth for the 100-400 mm zoom, then realized the bus was over 50 feet from the animals, and unless he wanted to shoot wide-angle locator shots, he'd be better off with the 100-400 zoom on the low end of the zoom, and save the 400mm end for the occasional close-up of a distant small animal. He quickly switched lenses with Kelly's help, and fired off several frames of the isolated flamingo before the bus started moving again. By going vertical, he was able to squeeze the flamingo into the frame at around a 200mm focal length.

They drove around a construction area, and headed downhill, passed the Reptile house on their left, and further down the canyon they drove past the Tiger River exhibit, which the driver said was the Zoo's first attempt at a ecosystem exhibit meaning all the plants and animals belonged to that same climate and geological area. Tom told Kelly that if they wanted to see the tigers, they'd have to walk through this exhibit later. She nodded, and the bus pulled forward. The driver said that the old hippo exhibit was one of the oldest, dating back to the original 1916 Exposition. Less than a year later, a San Diego philanthropist and animal lover named Dr. Harry Wegeforth organized and designed the basic layout of the San Diego Zoo, and started the San Diego Zoological Society as a fund-raising and management organization for the zoo. The zoo prided itself for having as few animals in cages as possible, and built enclosures to allow the animals to roam as much as possible. As the bus pulled up to the new Hippo enclosure in the Ituri Forest exhibit, Tom focused on the biggest hippo, and right as it opened his mouth, Tom snapped off 4 quick frames. He hoped the picture would come out through the glass enclosure. Luckily the glass was in the shade, so all he had to worry about was diffraction and distortion of the image due to the glass/air/water interface.

He asked Kelly if she wanted to come back and see this exhibit later, and she said "Sure, we'll be right down here anyway checking out Tiger River." As the bus pulled away from the Ituri Forest exhibit, there wasn't much to see until they got to the bird lakes and the Birds of Prey aviary. Tom wanted to take a picture of an Eagle he spotted in the Birds of Prey aviary, but when he zoomed in, it was obvious the bird was too close to the netting to make a good picture. Even at the minimum f-stop he could still see the mesh in the image. He shot 1 anyway, it wasn't like he was paying for film. That brought him to a full stop, he was being really picky choosing his shots like he had to develop his own film, and decided to shoot even marginal pictures in case he could use his photo software to improve the image. As they turned the corner, he was on the wrong side to take pictures of the Polar Bear

plunge, the new Polar Bear exhibit at the zoo, but from what he could see through his viewfinder, he'd have to get off the bus and get much closer to get the right angle and lighting to see anything. He did zoom out to 100mm and snapped a couple of pictures of the buildings and enclosure as a background shot.

Tom turned to Kelly, who was checking her map "Best route I see is to walk down Cat Canyon, which is much steeper, down Panda Canyon, check out the Ituri Forest and Tiger river, then come back up Bear canyon. I know it involves some backtracking, but I can't see any other way to see everything in this end of the zoo on foot."

"Kelly, you forgot the Polar Bear plunge on the end of Horn and Hoof Mesa."

"There's an escalator going up from the Panda exhibit, and it looks like a trail next to it going back down."

"Glad I wore my hiking shoes!"

"You're one to talk, I'm lugging around this tripod. You better use it, or I'm liable to whack you over the head with it!"

"Yes Dear!"

As the bus pulled away from the Polar Bear Plunge, the driver/guide was telling his passengers they were entering Hoof and Horn mesa, and there was stuff to see on both sides of the bus, so he'd go slow. Tom took a picture of practically every animal he could, and decided to ID them later. Some had strange names like Takin. Tom thought "What's he takin?" and decided not to tell Kelly the joke, she had his tripod handy. He recognized the zebras, and shot several pictures of them, including a really cool head and shoulder shot of a zebra that was close to the front edge of the enclosure. He was pretty sure he could count the zebra's whiskers in the viewfinder. He recognized several of the gazelles that the guide was talking about, and was glad he bought the 2 gigabyte chip for the camera. Kelly wondered if the shutter would still work after he got done taking pictures of every animal in the zoo. The next display was the Giraffe exhibit, and Tom took a bunch of different pictures ranging from groups of giraffe, to a close-up of the head of one of the bigger males. When one of the males mounted a female, Tom chuckled and Kelly said "Don't get any ideas!"

"I'm not getting any ideas, I'm envious!"

Kelly got Tom's drift and started laughing too. In the next enclosure were several species of pigs, and Kelly quipped "See the family resemblance?" Tom was too busy taking pictures to comment. The driver pulled forward to the Bongo enclosure, and explained what the Bongos were, and some other trivia while Tom and several other shutterbugs snapped away. When they got to the Meerkat exhibit, Tom got to use the 400mm end of the zoom again, the little rodents were small. He set up his monopod on its shortest setting, and connected it to the mounting collar of the lens, which greatly reduced camera shake. He took some images at between 100 and 300mm, and several 400mm shots of single Meerkat lookouts standing on their hind legs to keep a lookout for hawks and other birds of prey. He quickly reviewed his images in the viewfinder, and was really pleased with the results. Once the bus turned past the African Kopje, or rock outcropping, it turned downhill and headed down Cat Canyon. The first enclosures included various sheep and goats. He spotted a huge Bighorn Sheep ram with an impressive set of horns on the top of the rocky cliff, and used the 400mm setting to pull him in tight for a close-up image of his face and horns, then zoomed out a little and took a profile shot as the ram turned. Next door were several species of Mountain Goat, and Tom was too busy shooting to pay attention to what the driver was saying. They next drove past several enclosures with various species of wild pig in them, and Tom took a shot of a wild boar with a huge set of tusks, and another one of a Warthog that he quipped must be related to Janet Reno. Kelly started laughing

and said "Either her or Hillary Clinton."

Finally the bus got to the small carnivores section, and Tom took shots of anything that looked interesting. He skipped the animals in cages. He didn't think anything should spend the rest of its life in a cage. When they reached the bottom of Cat Canyon, the driver said the lions and other large Carnivores would be coming up on the Left, so Tom switched seats with Kelly, and got ready to take some pictures. He was grateful the lions and other large predators were in enclosures instead of cages, and took numerous pictures of them too. Finally they left the big cats and headed toward the Hornbills. Tom had heard about them, but when he saw the birds were in dark wire cages, he skipped taking a picture of them all together. The bus reached the end of cat canyon, and turned back up hill to go back up Bear canyon. When the bus stopped in front of one of the biggest bears Tom had ever seen, and the biggest ham according to the driver who called him Spanky, Tom quickly switched sides, and shot a bunch of pictures of the bear standing and waving, then catching a bear treat in mid-air. Once he had his treat, the bear sat down, and Tom got a funny picture of the bear sitting like a human with his feet pointed at the crowd. Kelly was laughing, she thought the bear was cute. The driver explained that if they wanted to see the new lion-tail Macaque exhibit, they'd have to walk down Bear canyon since the exhibits faced the trail instead of the road. Further up the canyon were other bears and a lion with a huge mane, but they weren't as comical as the first big bear.

As the bus exited Bear Canyon, they made a quick loop around Elephant Mesa. This early in the day, the elephants weren't doing much, and Tom only took 6 shots. They stopped at the Black Rhino exhibit, and Tom got a couple of shots, then the bus moved along. On the way back to the bus unloading dock, they drove past the Koala exhibit and the Driver told them the best way to see the Koalas was to walk back to their exhibit. Looking at the map, Tom suggested they walk down Bear Canyon instead of Cat canyon, go visit the polar bears, then walk over to Tiger River and the Ituri Forest, then check out the Pandas, go up out Cat Canyon. When they got off, the driver handed them passes for the Express bus, and said that if they waited over by the hornbills, there was an Express stop that would carry them up the canyon instead of walking. Tom thought that was an excellent idea. He already took pictures of everything he wanted to in Cat Canyon. The bus would drop them off at the top of the canyon, then they could walk past the flamingo lagoon to check out the monkeys and apes. If they had any energy or time left, they could check out the Reptile house and the Galapagos Tortoises.

As they exited the bus, they turned back toward the Koala exhibit. Tom reached down and gently took Kelly's hand, and they walked hand in hand toward the Koala exhibit. Once they got there, Tom was busy taking pictures of the Koalas. One of the zookeepers walked up to Kelly and asked her if she'd mind holding a koala. 2 minutes later, she came out with a juvenile Koala, and handed it off to Kelly like she was handing off an infant. The koala climbed onto Kelly like he would with his mom. Right then Tom turned to see what the excitement was, and quickly focused on Kelly and the koala. After he snapped off a dozen shots, the zookeeper walked up to them and asked Tom if he were a professional photographer.

"Not by trade."

"Could you stop by the zoo administrative offices on your way out? If any of these images turn out, the Zoo might be interested in buying them for the Zoonooz magazine."

Tom was reticent, the last thing he needed was Kelly's picture in the paper, and his legend name on it. Still, he didn't want to disappoint Kelly so he agreed. The zookeeper handed him a card and told him to give it to the receptionist at the Warner Administration building next to the Membership booth. He took the card, and took several more images, including a close-up with the koala at the bottom of

the frame, and the top of Kelly's head at the top by going vertical. When they were finished, the zookeeper took the koala back to its mom. Kelly gave Tom a big hug, then when they were away from the crowds, she asked "I hope I didn't cause a problem back there?"

"Nothing I can't deal with. Even if they buy any pictures, I'll make sure they put the check in your name, and I'll just have them list the photo credit as T. Cruise to eliminate any problems."

When they were finished with the koalas, they walked down Bear Canyon, and Tom got some great pictures of Sparky the Alaskan brown bear when the next bus full of tourists showed up. They walked further down Bear canyon, and into the Sun Bear Forest exhibit. They spent about 15 minutes taking pictures and reading the plaques. Finally Tom looked at his watch. If they were going to see the rest of the zoo today, they needed to hurry, it was almost noon. Tom disconnected the monopod from the lens collar and capped the lens, then they strolled down the trail to the Lion-tailed Macaques exhibit. He got several good pictures, then they picked up and moved again down the trail. At the end of the trail, they spotted the up escalator to the horn and hoof mesa, and the Polar Bear Plunge. When they got to the top of the escalator, an Express bus was waiting there empty. He told the driver they wanted to go to the Polar Bear plunge. "It's not a normal stop, but I need to keep moving down the road to maintain a schedule and there's no one else here, so I'd be running empty. Ok, hop on board and I'll drop you off at the plunge." Kelly and Tom climbed aboard, and two minutes later, they were at the Plunge. Tom thanked the driver, who nodded and drove off once they were safely off - he obviously didn't want to get caught stopping there by a supervisor. The drive up was steep enough that Tom was really glad the driver gave them a lift.

They walked into the exhibit, and were faced with a huge tank with an acrylic wall so they could see above and below the water. A big polar bear was swimming in his pool as Tom connected the monopod to the collar, and got ready to shoot. Tom thought polar bears were white, but these bears ranged from dingy grey to green in color. He read the plaque, and it explained that a wild bear would look more white because it had a lot of snow to keep its coat clean, and the water was much colder, usually near freezing, which suppressed the growth of algae in the water. The bears were comical, and he got some nice shots when 1 came up close to the glass to check out the humans. When things settled down, Tom walked over to the diving ducks display and took some pictures of them too. Finally they headed back to the path that would take them back down to Panda Canyon and the panda exhibit. It took them almost 20 minutes to walk what it had taken the bus maybe 2 minutes to cover. Tom was really glad it was downhill. This time when they passed the Takin enclosure, Tom couldn't help himself, and said "I wonder why those animals are behind bars - maybe because they were takin stuff!" Kelly groaned then laughed at the bad pun and said "Very punny dear." Thankfully when they got past the Takin enclosure, the jokes stopped. When they reached the trail back down, Tom decided to extend the monopod to its full size and attach the hiking ball to help him balance down the trail. 5 minutes later, they were at the bottom of the trail in Panda Canyon.

They passed the Canyon Café, and Kelly asked Tom if they could stop and get something to eat. He had cash, so they grabbed a hot dog and a Coke, then sat down to eat. They felt much better after the food and the break, and got up and walked over to the Panda Research Center and strolled around. Finally they came to the panda viewing area, and Tom was ready with his monopod already attached to the camera. Several roly-polly pandas were playing in the viewing area, and one was munching on a piece of bamboo. He read somewhere that Pandas were very picky eaters and would only eat 1 variety of bamboo, and if the plants died out, the pandas would starve. Between that and habitat encroachment, the Giant Panda was listed as Endangered. Tom thought they were cute, and it would be a shame if they became extinct as some feared. Tom shot several dozen shots of the

pandas in various poses. Once he took about every picture he thought of, he was ready to go and see the tigers. They passed several pig enclosures, and Kelly bit her tongue. Tom was just waiting for the comment, and was surprised when none came. Finally he said "Did I miss something?"

"No, I'm just trying to behave myself!"

"Thanks."

Kelly leaned into Tom, who held her and gave her a kiss. She returned the kiss and the hug, then they kept walking. They had a long way to go. Finally they saw the sign for Ituri Forest, and crossed a bridge into the exhibit. They finally reached the hippo viewing area, and Tom quickly got out his camera, there was a monkey messing with an otter, but as he watched it seemed they were playing. He shot several frames, including 1 of the monkey trying to catch the otter's tail. When they stopped playing, Tom turned his attention to a large hippo who had motored over to the viewing window to check and see who was visiting him today. He got a cool shot of Kelly standing next to the glass, and the hippo behind the glass like they were standing next to each other. As they left the forest, they came to an Okapi enclosure, and Tom got several neat shots of the distinctively marked animals. Finally they reached Tiger River's viewing area right as a tiger came out and was roaming around. Tom quickly set up, zoomed in, and got some great close-ups of the tiger's face, then some action pictures of the tiger playing with the toys the keepers left in the enclosure, including what looked like a tetherball. Eventually he got enough shots and checking his watch, they needed to get moving. Tom looked at his map, and pointed out a short-cut instead of walking all the way back around, they could take a short-cut through the Scripps Aviary, check out the Pygmy chimps, and walk up some stairs into the back half of the Gorilla Tropics exhibit.

The Scripps Aviary was really interesting, and he had to force himself not to take a picture of every plant and bird in the aviary. Still he got some great pictures of orchids in bloom, and other flowers, and some very exotic birds. They stopped and admired the pygmy chimps, otherwise known as Bonobos, and Tom took several pictures of a mother and baby who were sitting there playing. Tom finally decided they had to go, and they walked into the back of the Gorilla Tropic exhibit. There was a whole troop visible in the viewing area, and Tom was taking pictures practically continuously. He could get used to not having to reload. A huge silverback walked closer to the viewing area, allowing Tom to get a bunch of great shots, including a super-tight closeup of the gentle giant's face. When they finished, Tom checked his watch, then suggested they take the path they were on out past the lagoon and to the exit since it was almost 3 o'clock. They headed to the Absolutely Apes exhibit, and Tom got some seriously funny pictures of the Orangutans. When he was finished, they walked the short distance from the lagoon to the exit, then remembering he promised the zookeeper to go to the Administration office, he dug the card out of his shirt pocket, it read "Debbie Andrews, Zoonooz Editor". They walked into the tiny lobby which was strangely empty and all the doors were locked and looked very sturdy. There was an intercom on the wall and a sign that read "Press for assistance", so he pressed the intercom, and a receptionist asked "May I help you?"

"A zookeeper by the Koalas handed me Debbie Andrews' business card, is she in?"

"One minute please sir, could I have your name?"

"Tom Cruise."

Tom could hear the giggling over the intercom. The lobby security had been upgraded to include a sally port entrance to keep the locals/terrorists out of "terra sanctorum". 2 minutes later, he heard the receptionist's voice over the intercom. "Mr. Cruise, Debbie will see you now" and a buzzer sounded, so he pushed the door marked entrance, and walked into the office itself. Debbie greeted them on the other side "Sorry about that Mr. Cruise, we don't get much walk-in traffic, and our Security Director

thought the sally port lobby was a good idea to keep robbers, terrorists, and your garden-variety crackpot out of the offices. Come this way please." Kelly and Tom followed her down a corridor, and to a door marked "Debbie Andrews, Editor". She showed them comfortable seats and came right to the point.

"Mr. Cruise, occasionally Zoonooz buys images from freelance photographers. I've had an idea for months for the magazine to use a photogenic brunette middle-aged female zoo guest holding a Koala cub on the cover. When you and your wife showed up, she fit the profile, and we got a bonus when a zookeeper spotted the camera you had. Several bus drivers commented to their supervisors that you seemed to have gotten some really nice shots of the animals, so I'd appreciate if I could hook your camera up to my computer and download the images, unless you have anything personal on it."

"Ok, I downloaded and cleared the camera before we left the hotel this morning. Can you download and leave the images on the camera so I can download them later?"

"Sure, also I can make a backup CD and give you a copy just in case."

Tom dismounted the lens, put the lens caps back on, and the body cap on the camera, then handed the camera to Debbie, who already had a USB cable hooked up and ready to go. She plugged in his camera, turned it on, and a few keystrokes later, downloaded the images, then burned 2 CD copies, one for them, and 1 for the zoo. Finally they took the CD to another room, where she inserted the CD into a different machine connected to a 6-foot projection screen, and had them take a seat in their viewing room. She picked up a legal pad and pencil, and pushed a remote, starting the slide show. The system assigned each image a number, and when she saw 1 she liked, she pressed another button on her remote. It took an hour, and several belly laughs, "aww's" and one "oops" from Tom, but when they were finished, Debbie turned to Tom and said "We could use most of these images, especially the ones with Kelly. Since you're on vacation, how about I just go ahead and buy 50 images, and pay for first-use rights, and get a model release from Kelly."

They walked back into Debbie's office, and she took two pieces of paper, a Model Release for Kelly, and a standard first publishing rights contract. Tom asked her what rights he retained.

"All you're selling is first publishing rights, since I took them right off your camera, I know they've never been published before. All I ask is if you want to sell the images in the next couple of years, you notify us and get our permission. If we haven't used the image, or already used it more than 6 months before your permission request, we normally grant permission."

"Ok, 1 other thing, could you list my photo credit as T. Cruise, and make the check payable to Kelly Johnson."

"Sure I can do that."

When they signed the documents, she typed some information into her computer, and the laser printer spat out a check for \$5,000 payable to Kelly. Debbie handed Kelly the check, shook their hands, then said she had some work to do, and she showed them out to the exit, and opened the electronic lock so they could leave. When they got outside, Kelly squeezed Tom like a python, and laid a fairly passionate lip lock on him despite the people standing around. She broke the clinch and whispered "You'll get the rest of that tonight!" They walked to the Mustang, transferred their stuff back into the car, and drove to a nearby Bank of America that the check was drawn against. Kelly walked into the bank by herself, and came back later with \$5 thousand in cash. She climbed into the car and said "You'd think I was trying to rob the place, they were giving me so much of a hassle trying to cash the check. Finally the Branch Manager came over, checked my ID, called the zoo, and cashed the check."

"Good thing I'm packing, that much cash would be a tempting target."

They drove back to the hotel, got an envelope, and had the assistant manager count it, then they put the camera in its case and the five thousand dollars in the safe and got a receipt. Tom whispered in Kelly's ear, and she grabbed the phone book, borrowed the lobby phone, made a quick call, then they got back in the Mustang. Tom drove back to Troy Jr.'s, and Anna greeted them like long-lost friends. This time they didn't go for the fancy table cloth and candles, and Tom asked for a menu. When Anna returned with the menus, Tom asked her if they could handle a special order. It was fairly early, and not busy, so she said "OK if it's on the menu."

"Great, can I order a double-order of the gyros plate, substitute the rice for the fries, include a side of souvlaki, and Baklava for desert. Oh, and can we have another bottle of that wine from last night?"

"Do you want two whole gyros plates?"

"Just a single order of rice thanks. What I really wanted was a double-meat plate, extra pita and Tzatziki sauce with the usual amount of rice."

Anna nodded and turned to Kelly. "Could I have a large piece of Spanakopita, and a side order of Souvlaki with rice?"

"Anything for desert?"

"Can I have some Galactobouriko?"

Anna smiled and said "I'm sure we have a bunch left."

Anna walked back into the kitchen, talked with her husband, and 15 minutes later, two huge platters full of food and 2 plates appeared on their table.

Anna explained "I talked to Nicholas, and he decided to prepare the meal like we'd eat at home. Enjoy."

Tom's eyes bugged out, there was enough gyros on the platters for 3 people, and another pile of Souvlaki. The pile of rice was enough to feed a small Vietnamese family. Anna came back with several service spoons. "Anna, I don't think we can eat all this?"

"Don't worry, we've got "to go" packages for all of this to take with you."

Tom was grateful that their room had a microwave and a small refrigerator, and decided to eat what he wanted, see if they had some styrofoam plates and plastic utensils, then they could eat the leftovers for breakfast, or lunch if they didn't leave the room early in the morning. Tom didn't pig out this time, knowing he had leftovers for whenever he wanted them. When they were finished, Anna took their platter back, and came back with several styrofoam boxes, 2 sets of silverware and napkins, a sealed cup full of Tzatziki sauce, and a ziploc full of pita bread.

"I gave you fresh sauce and extra pita bread, it looked like you ate most of what was on the platter already."

"Thanks Anna, could you tell Nicholas thanks for us?"

"Sure, he really likes it when customers thank him for the meal."

"We're on vacation from Phoenix, and hopefully we'll be able to stop by before we go home."

"If I don't see you by then, have a safe trip."

Tom handed Anna his credit card, and she came back with the charge slip. He added the tip and signed it. 2 minutes later, Anna was back with the receipt, and they got up to leave. Kelly helped him carry all the food, and they set the bags on the back seat. Tom drove back to the hotel, and they took the food out and let the attendant park the car in their underground garage. 5 minutes later, he came back with their keys, and they went up to their room. After a shower, Kelly came to bed with a big grin on her face that told Tom he was in for a long night.

Author's Note: Chapters 1-14 conclude the Last Stand. Earlier readers might note a different

ending. I incorporated Part into The Last Stand, and made it 1 story with a 5-year gap between parts 1 and 2.

Chapter 14

The next morning Tom woke up almost as tired as when he went to bed, took a shower and crawled back into bed to get some sleep. He woke up around noon when Kelly crawled out of bed and started the shower. He put his bathrobe on, heated the leftovers, and told Kelly lunch was ready when she got out of the bathroom. The image of Kelly coming out of the shower made Tom wish he had some energy left, then decided that he really did love Kelly, and vowed to himself that if they survived this, he'd marry her. He decided that they were going shopping in Fashion Valley Shopping Center after lunch. Kelly was starved, or at least she acted like she hadn't eaten in a week, and quickly polished off her half of the leftovers. While she was in the bathroom, Tom logged onto the internet, and found the mall directory, and located some promising stores, then logged off before she got out. When she was out of the bathroom, it was his turn, then they got dressed, and Tom asked her if she wanted to go shopping. The look on her face was priceless, and they walked hand in hand down to the lobby and waited while the attendant brought up their Mustang. 15 minutes later, they were parked in the same garage they used last time, walked through JC Penny, and took the escalator to the second floor of the mall. Tom acted all nonchalant like he was just window shopping until they got to Tiffany's Jewelers. He told Kelly that he wanted to check something, and they walked inside. The store manager greeted them, and Tom gave Kelly a heart attack when he asked to see some ½ carat engagement rings. Kelly turned and gave Tom a liplock right there in the store.

"I take it that means yes?"

"What do you think silly - This is my dream come true. I've fallen in love with you, and want to spend the rest of my life with you - why do you think I asked if I could come along with you on this trip instead of staying in Phoenix?"

"Kelly, I feel the same way about you, and if you want, we can stop in Las Vegas on the way home and get married."

"Where'd you want to live?"

"I've got a house and a business in Tennessee."

"Great, when we get out of here, I'll call a realtor I know and put the house up for sale. I can't stand Phoenix anyway, it's too d@mn hot!"

They sat down, and the manager showed them a tray full of ½ carat VVS diamonds mounted in white gold engagement rings. Kelly decided she wanted a marquise cut, and that narrowed it down to 3 rings. The manager suggested a low-mount since they got snagged less often, and that narrowed it down to 2. One of the two seemed to sparkle more than the others, and Tom told the manager they'd take it. He wrote the number down, and sized Kelly's finger, then said the ring would be done in an hour. Tom handed him his credit card, and signed the receipt. He was glad the government was

paying for it, the ring cost almost \$6,000.00! The manager said it would be done in an hour, so he took the stub the manager handed him, shook his hand and left. They cruised around the mall for about 50 minutes then came back. The jeweler had just finished sizing the ring, and put it in the ultrasonic cleaner after polishing it. When he finished it, the manager handed it to Tom, who got on 1 knee, asked Kelly to marry him, and when she said "Yes..Of course yes dear!" he slid the ring on her finger. Remembering that they didn't have any wedding rings, he asked the manager if they had any white gold simple bands, and they selected 2 that fit them, and Tom charged them on his credit card. The manager ran them through the ultrasonic cleaner, then put them in another ring box, and put both boxes in the same bag. Once they were outside the store, Kelly gave Tom a passionate kiss, and then they walked back to the car.

They took the escalator down, which dropped them off near Sharper Image. Looking in the window, Tom spotted a Casio watch display, and they went inside. He checked the display, and asked to see a watch that said "Atomic Watch" and asked the clerk if it was radioactive. She grinned, and said that they called it that since it received the time frequency from Fort Collins, CO atomic clock to automatically reset the time. As long as they were within about 2,000 miles of Fort Collins, it would be accurate to within 1 second per day, and if not, there was a manual backup if you could get a reliable time source. He looked the watch over, and it was as tough as he remembered the Casio G-shock line was. His Rolex was starting to be a maintenance hog, and he wanted something as accurate that wouldn't need to go in the shop so often. She explained the combination of the solar power and the battery meant that unless something was wrong, the watch should never need to go to the repair shop until 2039.

Tom doubted the watch would still be on his wrist by then, he was over 60. She showed him the other features, and he was sold. The clerk showed him the woman's model, and he asked Kelly if she wanted 1. Kelly smiled, so Tom bought 1 for her too. The clerk took 1 of each out of the case, and Tom handed her his credit card, and signed the receipt a minute later. Tom took his Rolex off, put it in his pocket, put on his Casio, and Kelly did the same, then they walked out of the store, through JC Penny, and got to the Mustang. By now it was late afternoon, and Tom asked Kelly where she wanted to go for dinner. As they drove out the driveway, Kelly spotted Pizzeria Uno about a block south of the driveway, and said "how about Pizzeria Uno - they're about a block to the left on the right side of the street." Tom looked where she was pointing and said "Ok, Pizza for dinner!" and made a left turn. They parked, walked inside, and Tom let Kelly order what she wanted, he was glad she was a Traditionalist when it came to pizza, she ordered a cheese, pepperoni, and sausage regular crust pizza, and a short pitcher of Miller lite with 2 glasses. The kid who took the order asked her for her ID, and Kelly laughed her head off. "Shouldn't you be opening at the Comedy Store?" Tom handed him his credit card, and 20 minutes later, their number was called. Kelly carried the pizza and napkins, and Tom carried the beer to their table. It was still early so the place was pretty deserted. They ate a nice quiet dinner, and drove back to the hotel. Tom downloaded the pictures off the CD, then cleared the camera's memory while Kelly called a realtor friend and put her house up for sale. He said that he should be able to sell it within the week. She told him to take the highest cash non-contingent offer with a 30-day escrow. She'd hire movers to move or store her stuff. When she got off the phone, she gave Tom the good news.

"Guess what, the realtor said my house should sell for \$350 thousand cash, and I told him to take the highest cash non-contingent offer. I told him to make it a 30-day escrow. Hopefully we can get back to Phoenix before then so I can pack and sell my stuff."

“Ok, if worse gets to worse, I’ll put you on a bus and give you my cell number.”

After a shower, they crawled into bed, giggling like kids in a schoolyard.

The next morning, Tom had some thinking to do, the speech was 8 days away, he needed to do a daylight and a night recon from the area around his potential hide, and he needed to rent a non-descript Crown Vic or Chevrolet Caprice to simulate a fed or a local. With the federal CCW, it would be easier to impersonate a fed, so he hoped he could locate a white or tan Crown Vic. Once he had the vehicle, he needed to do his daylight recon as soon as possible, then do his night time recon, then just a day or two before the speech, drive by and see if they included his hide inside the security cordon. There would be so many police vehicles parked around the park that weekend, he hoped another Tan Crown Vic would just blend in. He needed to buy some clothes to help the image too. He didn’t know if he should bring Kelly, then he remembered she was his fiancé and he had to start trusting her sometime.

“Kelly, I need to talk to you. Now that we’re going to be married, I can tell you a little more, but not a lot, I don’t want to further endanger your life. You know I work for the government, and by now you probably know that Tom Cruise isn’t my real name. I can’t tell you my real name yet, and I need to know if you’re OK marrying me using my legend name.”

“Tom, I’m Ok marrying you under whatever name you choose to use. My guess is you’re not a spy, you haven’t met anyone or followed anyone, you liked taking pictures, and you’re real detail oriented. My guess is either an analyst or field Agent. Probably a field agent with your military background.”

David decided he might as well come clean. “I’m in the Pest Control business, and when I get a call, I go take care of the problem. You remember George Bush’s final speech?”

“Who could forget it, George shot Ted Kennedy, who bled green, then he vaporized George - Wait a minute, you’re not an Eldonian?”

“Not hardly, but the people I’m after ARE.”

“Wow, that was you? They said some assassin took them out with a RPG or something.”

“Not exactly. I’ve got a couple more assignments, 1 here, and I several months later in San Francisco. Hopefully after that, I’m officially retired.”

“Let me see that credit card!”

Tom handed over his card, and Kelly said “That routing number is to an off-shore bank. OK, that explains things. I don’t dare ask any more questions, or I could get us both in trouble. I just wanted you to know that whatever name you go by, Tom, I love you!” She handed the card back, and gave him a soulful kiss.

“Kelly, I need a favor, do you have a credit card?”

“Sure, what do you need?”

“I need another vehicle for the mission, and it would be a bad idea for me to rent it in my name, even in my legend name. I can reserve the car over the internet, and drop you off at the agency. I can even give them your credit card number over the internet so all you have to do is sign the contract, pick up the car, and drive it back here.”

“Ok Tom, here you go.”

Tom took Kelly’s card, and started surfing the net for local rental places with Crown Vics. He finally gave up in disgust, grabbed the Yellow pages, called Alamo’s location on Kettner Blvd, had Kelly talk to the manager, who said they had several Crown Vics on the lot, and one was tan. She asked him to reserve it for her, she’d be right down - she needed the Crown Vic for 2 weeks. He gave her a reservation number, and they got in the Mustang and drove downtown. Tom dropped her off and parked 2 blocks away. 15 minutes later, he saw a tan Crown Vic drive out the driveway headed back to I-8 and the hotel. He pulled up next to her, waved, and drove ahead of her so she wouldn’t get lost on all the 1-way streets. When they got back, he had her park it out front so it would get dusty and dirty. No fedmobile looked like it had been recently washed. He peeled the rental stickers off the vehicle and rubbed some dirt onto the license plates. He parked the Mustang and they walked back up to the hotel room.

“Ok, thanks Kelly.”

“I got the Collision deductible waiver just in case, after I saw you in that E&E course, I wouldn’t want to be responsible for paying the deductible if you smash up a car.”

Tom laughed and said “Good move, but if I do this right, no one will even know I’m there. That reminds me, we need to get you a pre-paid cell phone so I can call you if we’re separated.”

Tom checked the yellow pages, looking for a Target, Walmart or someone who sold pre-paid cellular. The Mission Valley Mall was just a couple of miles East of them off Mission Center Road, so he asked Kelly the dumbest question of his life “Do you want to go shopping?”

“What, already?” Kelly giggled.

They went back down, got the Mustang, drove to the Mission Valley Mall, parked near Target, and walked in. Half an hour later, they walked out with a pre-paid phone that worked anywhere in the US, with a 400-minute card that they activated immediately. Tom wrote the number down and slipped it into his wallet. Kelly wanted to shop some more, but Tom said he had work to do. He told Kelly that if she could give him the keys to the Crown Vic, she could take the Mustang and shop all day if she wanted, just keep her cell phone on. Kelly gave Tom a big kiss, drove him back to the hotel, dropped him next to the Crown Vic, gave him the keys, and drove off to spend some money. Tom was glad she had a lot of cash on her, she might spend it all judging by the huge grin on her face when she left!

He strode into the lobby, got his camera case out of the safe, and loaded it into the Crown Vic. He drove up and down 6th Ave several times, stopping and taking pictures of the west end of the park, and noting times when a black and white SDPD vehicle drove by. Just like he suspected, they were driving a loop, which would make them more predictable. He'd have to come back later at night and see if the route timing changed at night. So far they were averaging about 1 car per hour down 6th Ave from South to North. While he was there, he located a cross-street on 6th near his hide that would be easier to find a parking space on the night of the speech.

Later that afternoon, he mounted the 600mm lens for the first time, and carried the table-top tripod with him to go check out his hide. What he saw disgusted him. In the bushes was tons of trash including used condoms and other items he didn't want to look to closely at. He found a bush that might have been a bum's sleeping area, since it was relatively clean, and set up shop. Using the GPS, he pointed the camera right at the Starlight Bowl, took the lens cap off, and was amazed by what he saw. He could pick out details just looking at the view screen, and his compass rose display on the GPS pointed him right at the center of the stage. He quickly shot several shots, then packed everything up and hiked back to the car. He remembered he still needed the disguise, and called Kelly on the cell phone once he got to his car. She was just finishing shopping, and found a restaurant she wanted to try. Tom said he could meet her at the Hotel so they could take 1 car. Kelly said she'd be there in 15 minutes. Tom said "See you then sweetie!" They arrived within minutes of each other, and Tom repacked the camera bag, and stuck it back in the safe. Tom let Kelly drive since she knew where she was going, and she drove back to Mission Valley as Tom suspected, then drove right up to the Outback Steak House. He'd seen their ads, but never eaten there. They walked inside, and were immediately seated and given menus. Tom decided to try the Ribeye and Lobster, and split a Bloomin Onion appetizer. Kelly ordered the ribeye and lobster too, and they ordered a pitcher of beer. 15 minutes the waitress came back with two very hot plates. The steak was still sizzling it was so hot. Tom was starting to worry about his waistline, then realized he hadn't eaten since Breakfast, and all he had was a muffin and coffee at the hotel's Continental Breakfast bar, so he didn't feel guilty about pigging out. 2 hours later, they were stuffed to the gills, took a pass on desert, and Tom drove home. They fell asleep shortly after they took showers.

The next morning after breakfast, Tom and Kelly drove back to Target, bought him a navy blue windbreaker, several white button down shirts, and a pair of shoes that screamed "FED". He hoped that anyone giving him a casual glance would guess the same and ignore him. His worst fear was that his hide would be inside the security cordon, but his survey the other day seemed to indicate that the Secret Service was concentrating on threats inside the bowl judging from the Police tape around the bowl and the dogs and handlers he saw. He'd have to do 2 more surveillance runs later in the next week to see if they expanded the cordon in the days before the speech. From what he read on the Internet, the Vietnam Veterans Associations weren't too happy with Kerry, and most considered him either a pogue officer or a traitor, or an impostor. Tom thought he might be able to use that to his advantage. He spent the morning doing internet research, then asked Kelly if she wanted to go anywhere today.

"How about Seaport Village, I overheard these two ladies talking about it."

"Ok, let me get directions."

“Already know how to get there, I asked them. Take 163 south to 10th Ave, make a right turn on Market Street, and it runs right into the entrance to Seaport Village. If you buy enough stuff, they validate your parking.”

Tom located the website on the internet, and decided “what the heck, I’ve got time to kill anyway.” They got the camera out of the safe, and Kelly took the rest of the cash from her \$5 thousand stash (she was down to two thousand dollars by now, one thing Kelly was really good at was shopping!) After the attendant brought the Mustang back up, they drove west until they got to the on-ramp for 163 South, drove until they came to the 10th Ave exit on the other side of Balboa Park, and by the time Tom got to Market Street, he was glad he had his Colt Commander in his IWB holster. Kelly caught his look, and made sure her door was locked. 5 miles later when they drove through the gate into the Seaport Village parking lot, Tom was glad to see the guard was armed and they had a serious perimeter fence. He took his parking ticket, stuck it on the dash, kept the stub so he could validate it at the first store he bought something from, and found a parking spot in the East lot. Kelly was looking at the map the guard handed them with the parking receipt, and when they got out, Tom put on the photo vest, but left the tripod behind, for which Kelly was eternally grateful. He did keep the monopod/walking stick because he hated walking on uneven surfaces. He already had the 28-135mm lens mounted with the lens cap on, and the strap over his neck. One of the last things he did was to put his spare Colt Commander in his vest pocket from the glove box. When he closed the doors, he set the alarm, and they walked away to begin their adventure in Seaport Village.

Since they were in the Eastern parking lot, the logical choice would be to work east to west, checking out the shops, and ending up in the food court by the carousel. Checking the map and directory, they walked to the center of the East Plaza, and spotted the Crystal Palace. Kelly loved crystals, and they spent over half an hour wandering through the shop. Tom ended up buying Kelly a pair of crystal earrings, and a blown glass bear ornament. When they got out of the Crystal Palace, they headed toward the gazebo, and Tom smelled fresh baked cookies, so they walked over to Seaport Cookie Company, bought 4 chocolate chip macadamia nut cookies and 2 cups of French Vanilla Latte coffee. They sat at a nearby table, enjoyed the view of the bay, and ate their cookies. 20 minutes later, Tom saw a huge sailing yacht sailing by, and took several pictures of it. He was glad they were big and close enough for the 28-135mm lens, he didn’t have time to put on the 100-400mm zoom. As the boat sailed by, he couldn’t help but notice the damage to the North Island Naval Air base across the harbor. While the sailors had done a good job cleaning up, the missing hangars and buildings were evident to anyone, yet the people around him acted like everything was normal. He shook his head, the average US citizen made a flock of sheep look paranoid they were so clueless. All around them was evidence of the Eldonian attack against the Navy, yet they acted just like it was another day in Paradise. With that thought out of the way, he was glad things had returned to “normal” so quickly after the Eldonian attack against the US military or his job would be much tougher. He finished his cookies and coffee, then they got up for more shopping. While Tom was ruminating over the clueless sheep, Kelly was reviewing the map and located some more promising stores to check out. He thought about the Navy, and remembered a time an older Carrier had saved his butt, and taken out a large concentration of VC. He was on a rare scouting mission with his rifle and a radio that linked him back to the base and the Air Controller for that sector. A helicopter dropped him off, and after several days worth of hiking and hiding, he located a large group of VC that had been giving the Army fits

with their hit and run tactics. He kept track of his location on the map, and felt confident enough in his location to call in an air strike to take out the pesky VC. His call sent a pair of A-6 Intruders loaded with nape and snake up his valley. He used his e-tool to dig a deep hole in case they had a bomb go astray. He was up on a hill overlooking the valley, yet he'd lived this long by being careful. Right as he finished, he heard the roar of jet engines, threw himself into the hole, and peeked up just long enough to see several bombs coming off the racks of the lead Intruder then he ducked back down. The resulting explosions destroyed the area around the VC, decimating them. When he looked out of his hole again, there was nothing left where the VC were, so he got on his radio, and said "Target Eliminated." and the lead A-6 wiggled his wings, and turned for home.

He came back to earth when he realized Kelly was speaking to him. "So where do you want to go?"

"I don't know."

"Do you do this often?"

What, sorry I was just thinking."

"What about?"

"See anything unusual across the bay?"

"You mean the destroyed naval base?"

"Yeah, and it doesn't even seem to register with anyone else around here."

"Not everyone walks around in Condition Orange all the time."

"What?"

"Cooper Situational Awareness Conditions, you know."

"Ok, just didn't dawn on me you'd be exposed to that."

"One of the nice things about living in Arizona, we went to Gunsite shortly after we got our CCW's. So, you ready already?"

"Lead on MacDuff!"

They got up, threw their garbage in the trash, and headed west for more shopping adventures.

Chapter 15

They spent the rest of the afternoon at Seaport Village, and Tom made sure they were out of there before dark. He bought a box of flavored cigars Kelly liked, and he could stand, and she bought him a British Racing cap at another store. Kelly got a beautiful ladybug cloisonne music box at the Carousel

Music Box Company. The Mexican restaurant they stopped at was disappointing, Kelly ate better Mexican food in Phoenix all the time. She called the food they served here “Tourista” since it was so bland. She told Tom “When we get back to Phoenix, I’ll take you to a REAL Mexican restaurant!”

They carried their bags back to the car, drove out, paid the difference between their validation and the parking fee, and drove as quickly out of downtown as he legally could. One of the vendors suggested taking G Street to 94 to 805 back into Mission Valley, at that time of day they wanted to get out of downtown as fast as possible. 94 East was bumper-to-bumper, but at least it was moving. 20 minutes later, he arrived at the 805N off-ramp and was glad to see traffic moving well on 805. He took the 8 West off-ramp, then the Mission Center Road exit and finally got onto Camino Del Rio South, then into the hotel parking lot. One thing he hated was driving in rush hour traffic with a stick shift. They carried their bags into the room, and when Tom saw how stuffed Kelly’s closet was, he sat her down and suggested she pare it down to 2-3 suitcases for the next couple of weeks, and ship the rest of her stuff home. She realized that all this stuff wasn’t going to fit in the Mustang once she got a good look at it, and grabbed the Yellow pages. UPS was too expensive, but she found a common carrier who agreed to store and ship a large box for her, and they’d even send a driver to the hotel to pick it up. She thanked them, then told Tom that they needed a large shipping box and some tape. He called the front desk, and the manager said they had a huge shipping box they could use and they had a tape gun as well. He’d send a bellboy right up with it. 5 minutes later, there was a knock on their door, and Tom took the box, and gave the bellman a \$5 tip for the trip. He helped Kelly pack, then they took a shower and went to sleep.

The next morning, they called the shipping company, who said their driver was already out and about, and could be there in 15 minutes. Tom gave them their room number, and the dispatcher said the driver would have the paperwork for them to sign, and a roll of anti-pilfer tape they were to use to seal the box. 20 minutes later there was a knock at the door, and a delivery driver with a big dolly was at their door. He helped Tom cover all the seams with anti-pilfer tape while Kelly filled out the shipping instructions. The company had a depot in Phoenix, so she was going to have them ship to the Phoenix depot for will call with a storage fee for anything longer than two weeks. The driver showed her where to sign, and told her that she could pay the shipping and storage fees at Will Call when she picked it up, and handed her a receipt. Once he left, Tom asked Kelly what she wanted to do. She asked Tom if he minded spending the day at Sea World. He shrugged, then told her the only thing he needed to do in the next week was 2 night recons to check things out. He saw the look on her face and said “Don’t worry, I’ll be back in an hour or so each night. I just need to check something at night to see if anything changed.”

“Just be careful, OK?”

“Now that I’ve got something to live for, you bet!”

They gathered their stuff, went downstairs, grabbed the Continental Breakfast, and drove to Sea World. They spent the day seeing the shows, and Tom took a ton of pictures. Kelly said she wanted seafood for dinner, and someone suggested Anthony’s Harborside. Tom found a yellow pages, and realized it was two blocks from where they were last night - there was no way in heck he’d voluntarily go downtown after dark! Then he spotted the La Mesa location of Anthony’s Fish Grotto on 9530

Murray Drive, and called to make a reservation, and get directions. The lady was really nice, saying since they put 125 through, getting to their restaurant from San Diego involved some funny driving. Tom took notes, then got a reservation for an hour from that time, since the lady said it would take them about an hour to get there from Sea World. Tom told Kelly they had a reservation for the La Mesa Anthony's. She shrugged and they walked out to the car. They barely made the reservation an hour later, but when they got there, Kelly decided it was worth the hassle. The restaurant overlooked a park setting with a pond full of swans that floated elegantly across the pond. They got one of the restaurant's nicer tables since it was relatively early for dinner on a weeknight, and had a romantic table for two.

When the menus came, Kelly suggested Tom order for them, so he ordered a bottle of the house white wine, the crab stuffed mushrooms for an appetizer, 2 cups of their famous chowder, and 2 orders of their steak and lobster special. The waiter nodded approvingly, and 5 minutes later, was back with their wine. Next came the appetizer, and Kelly was glad she didn't eat anything more than a muffin that day, the appetizer was almost a meal in itself. When the waiter cleared their plates, he brought 2 small cups of Italian style chowder. Tom was glad he only ordered a cup, he expected New England Clam Chowder, and didn't understand the difference. He hoped he could remedy that error when they went to San Francisco. Once they were finished with the soup (Tom barely touched his) the waiter brought out their entrees, which were delicious, with garlic drawn butter sauce, horseradish, steamed vegetables, and a nice rice pilaf. An hour later, they were ready to go, and Tom was amazed that he could get up he was so stuffed. The waiter brought the check, Tom added the tip to the check, and signed the credit card receipt when it came back. They walked back to the Mustang and reversed their directions to get home. Tom stopped at a gas station when he noticed the tank getting low, and mentally berated himself "If you needed to bug out, and let the gas get low like that again, you're a dead duck!"

They drove to the hotel and went upstairs to their room. When Kelly came out of the shower wearing a sexy negligee she bought at Victoria's Secret, he wished he'd gotten some Viagra, but he made the best of it, and woke the next morning tired and sore. They took it easy and Tom slept in most of the morning. By the time they got dressed, it was mid-afternoon, so Kelly suggested lunch at a taco stand she saw in Mission Valley. Afterward, they went back up to the room for a nap. Tom told Kelly he'd have to go out that evening for a couple of hours, and she needed to stay in the room dressed and ready to go with her cell phone on just in case. He hoped he wasn't being melodramatic, then he realized that if he got spotted and had to run, he might not have time to pick up Kelly on his way out, but having her dressed and ready improved the odds of getting her if he were spotted and chased. He left her the Mustang keys, got a passionate kiss, a hug, and she got a promise to be careful, then he was out the door. He drove the Crown Victoria up 163, and around the western edge of the park for 2 hours, didn't see anything out of the ordinary, and if anything, the police patrolled less frequently at night, he only saw 1 cruiser the whole 2 hours on 6th Street, and none on the rest of the roads bordering the park except University. When he got back to the hotel, Kelly was waiting for him, and when she realized everything was OK, she held him, and they wound up making love again as soon as they could get their clothes off.

Since he didn't see anything that night, Tom guessed the coverage for Sen. Kerry would be around the Starlight bowl only. One weird thing he did notice was that the Starlight was right under the

landing route for Lindbergh airport, and was noisy as all heck when planes flew over. He came up with a plan to use the noise of the plane to hide the noise of his shot, and to shoot when a plane flew over. It meant more Internet research, but the next day he had the arriving flight schedule for that Friday. 2 flights coincided with Kerry's speech. He decided to take the first opportunity and shoot 15 minutes into his speech. The next couple of days, they did some more sightseeing, and spent more time in the sack. Finally Friday arrived.

That evening Tom told Kelly to take the Mustang and go shopping in Fashion Valley, and leave her cell phone on. She knew what he was up to and it made her nervous that he might get caught. After Kelly left, Tom locked the door from the inside, assembled the XM-109 25mm setup with the suppressor and the NV scope, turned off the active laser rangefinder in case a Secret Service agent was wearing IR Night Vision Goggles on the lookout for lasers, changed his clothes, got into his Fed outfit and walked downstairs carrying the rifle in a dark green nondescript sports bag. He drove carefully to the cross street just west of 6th Ave. When he checked his watch, it was just over an hour before the start of Kerry's speech, and it was already full dark, but light enough for him to see. He wasn't quite invisible wearing a navy blue windbreaker and black pants, but he was close. He walked into the brush headed toward his hide, looking around to spot potential trouble. There was plenty of vehicle traffic around, but no one was interested in him.

When he reached the bushes, he took a canvas tarp out of the bag and laid it down, then set up on the tarp. He took another look around, and knew that no one was around. When it got within 10 minutes of the start of Kerry's speech, he checked again, didn't see or hear anything or anyone out of the ordinary. He took the gun out of the case, and set up. He used the GPS to get his bearing to the Starlight bowl which was about 1,000 yards away according to the GPS. Once he had the scope lined up, he could clearly see the stage. When Kerry started, he focused the scope, dialed in the range from the GPS, and waited. 10 minutes later, the jet flew over right on schedule. Tom checked, and the crosshairs were still centered on the podium. He knew that if he hit the podium, the explosion should take out Kerry even if it was armored. As the jet noise peaked, Tom fired the first round, then less than a second later, he fired a second insurance round. The first round destroyed the podium, sending shrapnel flying into Kerry, mortally wounding him. The second round made contact with Kerry's dying body, and blew him to pieces. Tom quickly put up the rifle and the tarp, and walked back to the car. He waited 5 minutes to listen for any local police response, but most of the sirens he heard were heading toward the other end of the park. Tom hoped that no one realized that Kerry was shot instead of blown up. He started the car, backed up, and drove slowly toward 163. When he made it to 163, he relaxed and drove the speed limit home. He kept checking his mirrors, but there wasn't any police cars in sight. 15 minutes later, he parked in the parking lot, took out the bag, and walked up to the hotel room. Once the bag was up, and he got changed, he called Kelly, who said she'd be home in 20 minutes.

When she got into the room, Kelly blurted out "Kerry's dead - it's all over the radio. They said it was a bomb planted in the podium, and they suspect the Vietnam Veterans group of doing it. There was a large number of protestors outside the Starlight Bowl being held back by police. I'm glad you killed that SOB. My oldest brother died in Vietnam, and it killed my Mother. All he got was a lousy Purple Heart, and this scumbag gets two of them for band-aid wounds! I'm surprised one of the protestors

didn't shoot him!"

"Easy Kelly, I was just doing my job. He was on a list of Eldonian leadership they wanted me to eliminate."

"You mean the Eldonians are invading for real?"

"Yes, despite what the media has been saying, they're on their way, and I'm trying to eliminate their leadership before they get here, so they will get a warm reception instead of being invited in like they expect."

Kelly swore like several sailors and Marines Tom knew, and when she came up for air, he said "Wow, I didn't know you knew how to swear like that!"

"I know, it isn't ladylike, but I just realized the Media has been lying to us since probably before the 1960's."

"The whole system's been behind the coverup. The government, politicians, reporters, etc. Not all of them know about the Eldonians, but they are so well penetrated by Eldonians who are calling the shots that the truth can't come out."

"Is Geraldo on that list?"

"Not that I can recall, he's just another scumbag reporter."

"That stunt he pulled in Desert Storm made me mad, too bad the Iraqis didn't have a howitzer available, they could have taken him out!"

"Yeah and a company of Marines that were with him - that wouldn't have been so good."

"I know, the loss of that many Marines would have been tragic. So what's next on the agenda?"

"San Francisco. I need to get close to a couple of Eldonians posing as California Senators who are going to march in a Gay Pride Parade."

"Too bad you can't use the rifle. Yuck, now I realized why you had a fuschia colored Guyabera in your bag, you need to blend in with the rest of the Sodomites to get close enough to guarantee success."

"I know it turns my stomach too! I can't think of any other way to get close, but I'm open to suggestions."

"Why don't I help you do the recon, maybe I can spot something."

"Ok, but we'll have to get there early, the closer it gets to the parade, the better chance I have of getting spotted. If I have to do this the way I've planned, you're going to have to stay in the hotel, or

better yet, I can make a quick trip to Phoenix and back, drop you off, let you pack, and then I can come back for you when the mission's over and we can drive to Las Vegas from Phoenix and get married."

Kelly gave Tom a big hug, and realized either way, if they lived through it they were going to get married in Las Vegas right after the job was done.

With that out of the way, David got back onto the internet, mapped the route to San Francisco, which was just under 500 miles north on I-5, and located a nice hotel just 2 miles from Fisherman's Wharf. He really liked the location of the hotel, which was also less than 5 miles away from the start of the Gay Pride Parade on Market and 5th at the San Francisco Shopping Center. He thought about a great way to bring his suppressed .22/45 and make it hard to recognize him. He remembered the long coats and cool glasses they wore in the Matrix, which should hide his eyes, and his .22/45 if he did it right. He'd leave the front open enough to show the fuschia colored shirt to make anyone looking at him think he was in the closet and possibly coming out at the Gay Pride Parade. He was "coming out" all right, coming out to shoot 2 Eldonian Scumbags! He had a shoulder holster for the .22/45 which should work great with that costume. It was a break-front cross-draw holster that held the gun vertically under his left armpit until he grabbed the grip and pulled the gun forward through the retention springs. He'd try and practice with it in Phoenix if he could. He told Kelly about his idea for a disguise, and she said that there was a couple of stores in Fashion Valley mall that carried Neo glasses, and she was sure she spotted a men's leather duster in several men's stores.

Once that was settled, they decided to go shopping today, eat dinner at the Troy Jr's, then get an early start tomorrow for San Francisco. David booked the room at the Hotel Vitale for a week, then they went shopping. They stopped at the Sunglass hut first, and bought their last pair of Neo Sunglasses, which weren't cheap, but the government was paying for it. The leather duster was almost \$500, but again the government was paying for it. It was a dead-ringer for the one Keanu Reeves wore in Matrix. It was also loose enough for him to wear his shoulder holster without printing or leaving any tell-tale bulges. Kelly thought it was sexy as hell. "That's all I need" David thought - "I gotta get a Viagra prescription or beg for mercy!"

Kelly remembered one last thing, Tom needed to dye his grey hair to make himself look younger, or he'd never pull off the Neo look. They stopped in a department store, bought a rinse-in black, and a rinse-in blonde hair color. She'd dye his hair dark before he left her place, and he could do a quick rinse job with the blonde if he had time after he made the hit. He could wear the British racing cap until he was ready to become the Neo persona. With that out of the way, Kelly called Troy's and got an early dinner reservation, and a setup similar to the first time. Anna told her they had a belly dancer performing that evening. She thought that would be fun, so Anna booked them a table with a front row view of the entertainment. They drove over to Troy's for a 5:00 dinner, and as they finished dinner, the belly dancer came out. She ordinarily didn't start until after 7:00, but Anna asked her to perform a special command performance for some friends of there's who were dining early and driving back to Phoenix tomorrow. Suddenly the recorded music started, and this beautiful 40-something woman with jet black hair came out wearing a traditional belly dancing outfit, which left her midriff bare, but was otherwise fairly modest. She performed her dance routine in front of their table, to clapping and cheering from David and Kelly. When she finished 20 minutes later, they both applauded, and then

she went in the back room. Anna came out and said “How’d you like it?”

“Thanks Anna, that was memorable. Kelly and I appreciate everything you and Nick have done for us. Sometime when we’re in San Diego, we’ll have to stop by again.” Anna gave Kelly a hug, then Nick came out, and Tom shook his hand. They talked for a minute, then Nick said he had to get back in the kitchen and finish preparing for the dinner rush. Anna handed Tom the bill, and Tom added a healthy tip, and signed the receipt when Anna ran it through the card reader. They almost made it out the door when Nick came out with a bag full of desert items for later including Greek cookies, baklava, and Galactobouriko saying they were for later, and on the house. Tom thanked Nick, and they finally made it out the door, then drove back to the motel. After they showered together, they laid in bed for some cuddling and serious love making. Tom reminded Kelly they had to get up early tomorrow, it was a 10-12 hour drive tomorrow to San Francisco, so she let him go to sleep around 10:00.

The next morning, they packed quickly while Tom checked the GPS and downloaded everything. The bellboy helped them load their bags onto the cart, and when they reached the lobby, the assistant manager was there to check them out. He presented them a bill for the room charges, and Tom signed it, then retrieved his camera from the safe, while the parking attendant went to get the Mustang. Between the attendant and bellman, they got the Mustang loaded, and Tom gave them each a \$5 tip for the help. Since they were in a hurry, they ate a muffin and drank some coffee from the complimentary breakfast bar. Tom stopped at a gas station, topped off the tank, and then drove down I-8 west to 163 North to 805, and eventually picked up I-5 near Del Mar. Once they got out of San Diego City, the traffic cleared out and the speed picked up. Tom accelerated to match them, and soon realized he was doing 80mph in the #2 lane, and people were passing him on both sides. Since everyone from the fast lane to the slow lane were going at least 80, he decided to speed up and pace traffic. The funniest thing happened when traffic in front of him suddenly slowed and moved right for no apparent reason. Tom remembered he was driving a black Ford Mustang, and must have looked like a CHP Mustang from the front. As long as the real cops didn’t mind, he wouldn’t sweat it. Kelly told Tom she was perfectly happy letting Tom drive on I-5. She hated 2 things, heavy traffic, and high speeds with a bunch of cars running practically door to door. Checking the GPS, they had enough gas to drive through Los Angeles, and get gas on the northern side near Santa Clarita, where it hopefully wouldn’t be so jam packed busy. Once they filled up there, they could make it easily to just south of San Jose, but he programmed a waypoint near Avenal to avoid having to go near a really big city until they made it to Oakland, then San Francisco. During the drive up, they talked when they weren’t listening to the CD, and Tom was telling Kelly all about the hotel, and how close it was to the Fisherman’s Wharf. He highly suggested they take a cab if they went anywhere in San Francisco since they made the drivers in San Diego look sane and careful. Kelly suggested buying a couple of thousand dollars worth of traveler’s checks and getting a cash advance on their credit card to pay the cabbies, since most probably wouldn’t take a traveler’s check, and definitely wouldn’t take a charge card.

A little over three hours later, they arrived in Santa Clarita. They got out, stretched, filled the tank, used the restroom, washed the windows, emptied the ashtrays, and hit the road. Kelly lit one of the flavored cigars for Tom, and then she put the Bach CD pack in the player. Tom grinned, thinking “Now this is the life.” When they got to the on-ramp, he had a problem for a second. Traffic was passing them moving at 85mph, and the metering light was lit to restrict traffic. When they got to the

head of the line, he let the guy in front merge in and get way ahead of him, told Kelly to hold on, and stood on the throttle. Luckily he remembered the nitro, and didn't go all the way to the floor. Still, he was rocketing down the on-ramp passing traffic, and had to slow down to merge onto the freeway. "Oops, overdid it a little" Tom said to himself. Kelly was just laughing. Finally they made it to the #2 lane that Tom knew was the safest lane on the freeway since it gave him 2 exit routes in case of trouble up ahead.

The rest of the trip was uneventful, and they made it to San Francisco shortly before dark. The most eventful thing was the trip over the Bay bridge. Once they got off the bridge, the GPS gave them directions to the front door of their hotel. Tom parked in Registration, went in and gave them his credit card, and signed the bill for 1 week's stay. They left the bulk of the stuff in their trunk, and the attendant parked the Mustang in the secure underground lot, then gave them the keys. They ate dinner in the hotel restaurant and went to bed tired. Chapter 16

The next morning, Tom and Kelly got on the internet, and located some stuff they wanted to do in San Francisco. They were several weeks early for the Gay Pride Parade, and there wasn't much recon that Tom could do right now, instead he wanted to spend time with his fiancé and Kelly gave him a kiss for saying it. Tom knew he could still lose Kelly, but he didn't dwell on it, and he did find himself praying they made it out of this alive and together. He didn't care where, as long as they were together. Tom brought up a list of San Francisco attractions, and Kelly said "O look, dear, they have a tour of Alcatraz!"

"Not exactly what I would like to do right now, if I screw this up, I could wind up in Leavenworth or worse. I'd rather not visit a prison right now. How about Golden Gate Park?"

"What's there?"

"About a weeks' worth of sightseeing, museums and stuff. Kind of like Balboa Park minus the Zoo. Although the California Academy of Science does have the Steinhart Aquarium, which is at least as good as Sea World's aquariums, the Morrison Planetarium, which is like the Ruben H Fleet Planetarium we missed, and a really cool Natural History Museum. Right across the street is the new De Young museum, which is supposed to have one of the best collections of art in the western US. Next to that is a really neat Japanese Tea Garden. Then there's Fisherman's Wharf, and a bunch of other stuff around town."

"I remembered you were disappointed with the fish chowder at Anthony's."

"I think there are a couple of places here I can get New England Clam Chowder, and I think I read about one place that sells it in a Sourdough bowl."

"Sounds like fun, let's make our plans and get going. First thing is to stop at the nearest B of A." Kelly picked up the yellow pages, and said "Look, there's a B of A less than a mile from here." Tom called downstairs and had them call a cab for them, then asked the front desk if they knew where they could get Traveler's Checks.

“Sir, we offer American Express Traveler’s checks to hotel guests for no fee.”

“Could you cancel the cab. We’ll be right down.”

Five minutes later, Tom got the Hotel Manager to authorize a \$10,000 cash advance against the credit card, and exchanged it for \$8 thousand in American Express Traveler’s checks, and \$2,000 in small bills for cab fare, etc. He thought it was highly irregular, but the credit card company approved the transaction. When everything was signed sealed and delivered, Tom handed the manager a \$20.

“Sir, I can’t take this, I said there was no fee involved.”

“Nonsense, it’s a tip for going out of your way to help me out. It would have cost me most of that anyway to take a taxi back and forth to the B of A, and you saved me a trip.”

“Very well, if you insist sir!”

“Thanks, now could you call us another cab.”

“I can have one here in a few minutes. If I may suggest, we have a limousine service available to hotel guests. It’s safer than a cab, and we give you a cell phone with a GPS unit. All you do is call dispatch, and the limo picks you up where your GPS says you are.”

“Ok, you’ve talked me into it. Could you call the limousine instead and bill it to my room.”

Tom filled out some paperwork, and the manager handed him a cellular phone with Dispatch on the speed dial. He said the cell phone was free to dial dispatch, and any other number would be billed at a dollar a minute. 2 minutes later, a black limousine showed up at the front door, and the driver got out and opened the passenger door for them. Tom and Kelly giggled as they climbed aboard. The “Rich potentate” treatment was a bit much, but the Manager did say it was cheaper and safer than cabs. Kelly checked the Traveler’s checks, and asked Tom why they were in her name.

“We’re together most of the time, and you seem to be spending the majority of the money. Besides, if you need to bug out, they’ll take traveler’s checks before gold.”

“Right, well you keep the cash then.” The intercom buzzed, and Tom picked up the phone.

“Where to sir?”

“Golden Gate park if you please, near the California Academy of Science.”

“Yes Sir.”

They leaned back into the upholstery, and Tom picked up the intercom again.

“Yes Sir?”

“Ok if I smoke a cigar in the limo?”

“You’ll notice an ashtray in the console, and a wet bar for your use to the right.”

“Thanks.”

Tom lit a Cuban Crafter, found a Classical Music station, and thought, “Now all I need is the Cognac!” Kelly leaned up next to him, and he put his arm around her. This was much more fun than driving in San Francisco traffic. Half an hour later, the limo stopped right out in front of the Academy of Science building, and the driver hopped out to open the door. “If I may sir, there’s no smoking in the building. No one else is using the limo today, so I can keep it for you.”

“Could you get a nice bottle of Cognac and two glasses as well?”

“Sure, I’ll take care of that right after I let you out. All you need to do to have me pick you up is to press Star 1 to dial dispatch. They know exactly where you are. If you’re on a tight schedule, you might phone ahead so I can be there when you need me.”

“Thanks, I’m sorry, I never got your name.”

“It’s Nelson sir.”

“Thanks Nelson. I’ll see you later this afternoon.”

Tom left the cigar in the limo, grabbed his photo vest with everything already in it, and headed toward the admission booth. After paying the admission, they went inside and spent the rest of the day wandering around the aquarium, planetarium, and Natural History Museum. As usual, Tom took a picture of everything, or at least it seemed that way to Kelly. Tom called the dispatcher around 4:00 and asked the limo to meet them in front of the Academy of Science building. The dispatcher told them Nelson would be there in 20 minutes, then Tom disconnected. 20 minutes later, the same limo showed up, and Nelson got out and opened the door. He said “I took the liberty of purchasing a bottle of Remy Martin cognac, I hope you approve.”

“Thanks Nelson. Could you suggest some place to eat that serves New England style Clam Chowder.”

Nelson observed they were dressed casually, and said “There’s a great casual dining place on Fisherman’s Wharf that serves New England Clam Chowder in Sourdough bowls.”

“Great Nelson, could you make a reservation for 2 for us?”

“They don’t take reservations, it’s first come first served, but you’re early for dinner, so there shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Very well, could you take us there?”

“Yes sir.”

After Tom got in, Nelson closed the door, got in the driver’s seat, and moments later, they were on their way to Fisherman’s Wharf. Tom opened the cognac, poured 2 glasses, and re-lit his Cuban Crafter cigar, then handed Kelly a glass of cognac. “Cheers!” He set the glass down on a built-in coaster, and Kelly snuggled up to him while she sipped her cognac and he smoked his cigar. San Francisco traffic was living up to it’s reputation, and it took over an hour to make it cross-town. The limo stopped at the foot of the Embarcadero at the entrance to the Fisherman’s Wharf, and Nelson gave them directions to the restaurant since they’d have to walk from there. Tom slipped into his photo vest, and they strolled along the boardwalk to the restaurant.

They located it when Tom remembered Nelson said it was Boudin Bakery. They walked up, and were immediately seated in the second-story restaurant overlooking the harbor. They got a menu, and Tom ordered a half-carafe of the house white wine since they already drank a cognac each. Perusing the menu, Tom was glad they served New England Clam Chowder in a sourdough bowl like Nelson said they did. Kelly wanted the soup too, and Tom asked her if she wanted to split a pizza since the soup came with a Caesar salad. She smiled, and Tom took that for a yes. The waiter came back with their wine, took their order, and came back 5 minutes later with 2 sourdough bowls full of New England Clam chowder. 10 minutes later, he brought out the salads, then the pizza made with fresh sourdough bread, mozzarella cheese, fennel seed, and sausage with roasted peppers and balsamic onions. They took their time since there was no one else in the restaurant. Tom asked Kelly if she wanted to go sightseeing at the wharf tonight or some other day. She said she was getting tired, so Tom called the limo, and when the waiter showed up with the bill, paid for it with his credit card. Right when they made it to the curb, the limo pulled up, and Nelson hopped out to open the door and let them in. He asked Tom “where to sir?”

“Back to the hotel Nelson, we’re through for the night.”

“Very well sir, have a good night.”

Twenty minutes later, they were at the door of the hotel, Nelson opened the door, offered both of them his arm, then the doorman opened the door, tipping his hat to Kelly, who giggled at the royal treatment. They walked past the desk, and took the elevator up to their room. After showering together they laid in each other’s arms and fell asleep.

The next morning, Nelson drove them back to the Golden Gate Park, and they spent the day at the new M. H. de Young Museum that just re-opened in 2008 after an extensive remodel. They decided to go back to the Boudin Bakery for dinner again, and they tried something else on the menu. The next day they went back to Golden Gate Park, checked out the flowers at Strybing Arboretum and Botanical Gardens, then visited the Japanese Garden. They were tired and not in an adventurous mood, so they went back to the Bakery again.

“We’ve got 2 more days in San Francisco, then I need to get you to Phoenix so you can pack, that will

give me a week to drive there and back, do my recon, and take out Subjects 4 & 5, then get you, drive to Las Vegas, get married, and drive home to Tennessee. I live in a small apartment above my shop, and don't have room for furniture, so you'll either have to store or sell furniture and excess clothing and stuff."

"Don't worry dear - I'm going to have a big massive yard sale - cash on the barrel, most of the junk there is Nick's anyway, and it came with the house in the divorce. All I'll need is my personal stuff, the contents of the gun safe, a couple of closets full of clothes, and that's about it."

"Remember you've got that box of stuff waiting at will call. That reminds me, Do you have a passport?"

"Why?"

"Once this is over, we might need to leave the country to be safe. I've got a feeling someone might want to take me out after I'm through to plug any potential leaks. I'm what you'd call expendable, which is probably why they gave me this job in the first place, I'm expendable and deniable."

I've got one in my married name, obviously that might not work anymore."

"Why not, just keep your old Arizona Driver's license. Later you can use your married name as a second identity in case we need to leave."

"I guess I shouldn't unpack."

"Not anything you won't need in the next month or so."

The more Tom thought about it, the better leaving the country sounded. He could sell his business, building, apartment, tools, etc. for at least \$1 million cash based on a previous offer by a competitor who really wanted his building and equipment. Between that and the \$350 thousand Kelly was going to get for her house, plus all the gold and the magic credit card, that was a lot of money. He decided to spend some more internet time planning to bug-out and leave the US in a hurry. He knew he could load everything they needed aboard a container ship, and sail to Costa Rica, where they could live like kings on \$1.5 Million, best of all, the last he checked, they had pretty liberal gun laws and no extradition treaty with the US, so even if they blew his cover, they couldn't touch him unless they decided to send a cleaner down to get him. He hoped he wasn't worth the trouble. He'd have to check into buying vehicles down there, he was pretty sure the Mustang wouldn't be an ideal vehicle unless their roads were in much better shape than the US roads. He could use another Deuce and a half, or a Uni-Mog.

He wondered how much it would cost to ship his custom deuce to Costa Rica? He decided to add all that to his "do list" - right now he needed to get Kelly to Phoenix, take out #4 and #5, then retire.

Kelly got on the internet, made a list of the things she wanted to do in San Francisco, prioritized them, and arranged it so she could do it in two days without too much strain. She wanted to go to Ghirardelli Square and buy some chocolate, and to make Tom feel better, Kaplan's Surplus & Sport Good which

was 2 blocks West of the San Francisco Shopping Center on Market Street. When they finished, they were too tired to do anything else, and went straight to bed.

The next morning after breakfast, they started on Kelly's list. Tom endured hours of shopping in San Francisco, enjoyed the brief limo rides, and the stares of people wondering who was getting out of the limo, like they were some big movie stars. Finally they got to Kaplan's, and Tom spent as much time looking around as Kelly would allow. He was grateful this was their last stop of the day, so she let him spend several hours shopping. He filled several carts with stuff they'd need in Costa Rica, and once he had paid for all of it, got the manager to let them borrow the phone, found out that the shipping company Kelly used had its main offices in SF, and they would be glad to pick up the stuff and ship it to Phoenix and hold it in Will Call. Tom told them to send a truck, and they'd have it boxed up by the time they got there. Tom asked the Manager for some help boxing all this stuff up, and between the Manager and two stock clerks, they got it all boxed up and sealed with anti-pilfer tape right as the shipping company showed up with a truck and backed up to their loading dock. It took several trips with the dolly to get them all out to the truck, and when they were finished, Kelly signed the paperwork, and Tom paid the manager and the stock clerks for their help.

He'd already called the limo, and Nelson was outside waiting for them. They were too tired to go anywhere else, and decided to eat at the hotel's restaurant. Nelson picked up his phone and made a reservation for them while they drove back to the hotel, so when they got there, the doorman opened the door and they walked right into the restaurant, where the Maitre de was expecting them, showed them to their table, and they had a menu and a bottle of white wine minutes after they were seated. Tom thought the royalty treatment was over the top, but was too tired to argue. He ordered the Grilled New York steak stuffed with trumpet mushrooms, sautéed fingerling potatoes and Barolo wine sauce, and Kelly ordered the Brick oven chicken with slowly simmered Italian butter beans and a fennel-orange-almond salad. When they got back to the hotel room, they collapsed exhausted on the bed and fell asleep.

The next morning, Kelly looked at her list, and realized there wasn't anything she really wanted to do outside the hotel room, and they spent the rest of the day sleeping, making love, and getting ready for the trip to Phoenix. They got up early the next morning, called the bellboy, who hauled their suitcases down to the lobby. They ate breakfast at the complimentary breakfast bar, and were checked out by 6:30 so they could get out of town before the worst of rush hour. Tom almost fainted when the hotel presented the bill for the limo service, they charged \$300 per day or part thereof for limo service, and twice what he paid for the last bottle of cognac. Still it was worth it, and the Government was paying for it anyway, so he really didn't care when it came right down to it. He signed the credit card slip, and let the bellman help him load the car, then they set the GPS in the Mustang up with their start and finish points, and any waypoints he had identified the previous night from Mapquest. It was a long drive, but there really wasn't any place to stop in between. Tom explained the problem the night before to Kelly, who really didn't like driving on California Freeways, but took a look at the map, and told Tom if he could get them to the I-10 east, she could take it from there. It was only a couple of hundred miles in California, and mostly desert once they cleared Indio, so the traffic shouldn't be so bad. Tom gave her a hug and a kiss, and said "Thanks sweetie - it's kind of pointless to stay in Los Angeles, it's only 300 miles from San Francisco, and once we're in LA, the next logical stop would be between Pasadena and San Bernardino, which only adds 50 miles to the trip. Like you said, once we

reach Indio, it's desert until Phoenix, with no really big towns between here and there on I-10."

"Besides that, it would be worth it to sleep in my own bed instead of a hotel bed."

Tom thought about his return trip - he wouldn't have Kelly to split the driving with, and decided to do it in two days, and stop overnight somewhere between San Bernardino and Pasadena depending on how tired he was, and the traffic. One good thing about staying for a week in Phoenix was he could unload the Mustang, just bring the bare essentials like an overnight bag with the 22/45 and his Neo costume. He'd leave the AK with the E&E kit in the trunk, and leave the big rifle in Phoenix, he wouldn't be needing it. He'd still carry his suppressed Colt Commander as a defensive weapon in his IWB holster. He kind of felt naked without the big rifle, but from their travels up and down Market street, he realized he didn't have a clean shot that would guarantee he'd kill them unless he got into the crowd and shot them from the curb. The 22/45 with the subsonic .22 ammo was the quietest gun he owned, and the shots would be inaudible over the crowd noise. For that matter, the .45 might be inaudible over the crowd noise, but the .22 was almost 10dB quieter, and this needed to be a silent kill for his own safety. He was sure Secret Service, SFPD and FBI would have the parade staked out for potential trouble. He saw some Drag Queen walking down Market while they were shopping the other day and had an idea.

Once they got the Mustang loaded, Tom got in and drove out of the parking lot, and quickly made their way out of San Francisco, and onto the Bay Bridge, through Oakland, and onto Interstate 5 south before the traffic had a chance to build up. They stopped at the same places they did on the trip from San Diego to San Francisco, and eventually got off I-5 and onto I-10 East. When they stopped for gas near Santa Ana, Kelly told Tom she could drive from there, and they switched drivers. Tom helped her get the steering wheel and the seat adjusted to fit her, then lit a cigar and stuck a 6-pack of Bach CD's into the CD changer. This time Kelly seemed to enjoy driving the Mustang more than last time. A little over 2 hours later, they stopped in Blythe to fill up and stretch their legs. Kelly took advantage of the opportunity to use the little girl's room while Tom filled up the Mustang, then Tom emptied his tanks. Kelly got back behind the wheel, and was soon in Arizona. 3 hours later, they were home, and Kelly was about ready to kiss the concrete. Tom knew how she felt, even with the special racing seat, his back really hurt.

They quickly unpacked, and Tom offered to give Kelly a backrub if she'd do his back. Her smile told him that he might get more than a backrub if he didn't rub her the wrong way. Kelly's bed was way more comfortable than the hotel beds, and they didn't wake up until 10 the next morning. Kelly made Tom breakfast, then she called the paper and the realtor, who said he got a cash non-contingent offer for her house, and they were willing to pay \$375 thousand plus all costs, meaning they'd pay the realtor fee, and all closing costs. Kelly told him to take it, and he said he already did - they had 3 weeks to vacate the premises, escrow closed in 24 days. He told her the money had already been deposited in the escrow account, and all they were waiting for was for escrow to close. Kelly thanked him, gave Tom the good news, then they started packing her stuff and Kelly placed an add in the local paper for a huge moving sale. They moved everything they were going to keep into the spare bedroom, and started moving stuff to the garage they wanted to sell. They were sore every night, and Tom got pretty good at giving Kelly a massage, and Kelly could give Susie a run for her money. Tom thought about that, and realized that Kelly cheated, and used a couple of massage techniques that

could cost Susie her license.

The next day the yard sellers showed up, and the cheapskates too, who were offering pennies on the dollar. Tom refused to deal with them, and frankly told a couple to get lost. Finally he stood up and addressed the crowd. "Anyone not prepared to offer at least 80% of the marked price, go home, we'd rather donate the stuff to charity!" With that several people left, then the rest of them took the hint, and Kelly's stuff sold for the asking price. That evening, Kelly counted her money, and gave Tom a big hug "We made over \$10 thousand, I doubt if I would have made 5 grand if you hadn't given your speech."

"I'm sick and tired of these sleezebags coming to estate sales and moving sales and offering pennies on the dollar when people need the money the most. It felt good to tell them off."

"Well, it worked, the sleezebags left, and everyone else started offering 80% or better of the marked price. Thanks!"

Several days later, the movers showed up, loaded all their packed boxes, and Kelly turned the keys over to the realtor and moved into a hotel at Tom's insistence. She had to anyway, she sold the master bedroom furniture a couple of days after the garage sale to a nice young couple who had just bought a new house and needed bedroom furniture. Kelly joked with the newlywed bride, saying that the bed was nice and comfortable and well broken in, and they both had a good laugh at that. She told Kelly that she was tired of hotel beds, her back was killing her and she'd love a nice soft mattress to make love on. Tom and Kelly helped them load the furniture on their truck, and they wrote Kelly a check and drove off. Kelly was beside herself, between the yard sale and the nice young couple, she'd made over \$12 thousand selling some old furniture and junk. She kept the Kimber .45 and the Mossberg 590 with some ammo, and the rest of her guns got packed and went to the moving company for shipment to Tennessee. Tom and Kelly spent the night at the hotel, made love since it would be a week or more before Kelly would see Tom again, and she let him get some sleep since he had to be up early to drive to SF tomorrow. Tom got up at 6:00 the next morning, packed his overnight bag, and already had the AK and the E&E kit in the Mustang. Kelly walked him downstairs, wished him luck, told him to be careful, and gave him a passionate goodbye kiss. Tom left before they both started crying. Kelly walked back to their room, and managed to get the door locked before she fell on the bed and dissolved into tears. Chapter 17

Tom drove back to California, as angry and frustrated as he had been in a long time. He had to leave his fiancé behind, shoot a couple of Liberal Dykes who were really Eldonian Scum in disguise, and in order to do that, he had to associate with a bunch of cursed Sodomites, and worse than that, Kelly had even dyed his hair jet black! If he had the PAL codes, he would have launched a nuke at San Fag and taken care of the problem, picked up Kelly and moved to Costa Rica. Still he had a job to do, and guessed the Joint Chiefs wouldn't appreciate SF going up in a nuclear explosion. Finally he just pulled over at a gas station, filled the tank, and sat there for a moment composing himself. He said a quick prayer that he'd make it through this OK and be able to spend the rest of his life with Kelly, then he started the Mustang, lit a cigar, and put the Dvorak 6-pack in the CD player. He was really in the mood for Rachmaninov but he didn't have any. The raucous atonal nature of his music fit his mood. He was ready to kill, and didn't care whether it was 2 Eldonians, or the entire population of San

Francisco. He managed to keep his speed down by using the cruise control, and only stopped when he needed to, thinking the sooner he got this over with, the sooner he could be back with Kelly.

He stopped overnight in Pasadena, parked the Mustang right in front of his room, set the alarm, took out his Colt Commander, threaded the suppressor onto the barrel, and left the gun and his Surefire P-3 light on the nightstand. He had a dream that night that Arnold Schwarzenegger took his Hummer and a GE 50-caliber Minigun to the San Francisco Gay Pride Parade, pulled in front of the parade crossing their T, and with a cigar clamped in his jaw, he turned the gun on the parade, mowing down row after row of Perverts and Sodomites, who fell like blood-soaked dominoes while Arnold laughed maniacally. In the back of his mind, Tom thought that this was definitely a dream, because there was no way a Hummer could carry enough 50-caliber ammo to keep a GE Minigun firing at over 3,000 rounds per minute for 15 minutes. For some reason Tom woke with a ear-splitting grin on his face. His alarm went off at 5:30, he got up, dressed, and was on the road by 0600. He made it through LA before the worst of rush hour, still he caught the tail end of it leaving Santa Clarita after filling up with gas. This time he merged much slower into traffic and didn't use the nitro.

Later that evening, he arrived in San Francisco with black hair and Neo glasses, wearing a pink guyabera with a pink ribbon he bought at a gas station in SF pinned to the shirt pocket . He hated himself, and wanted to throw up, but he had to at least look the part to get close enough to shoot the Eldonians. He checked into a Holiday Inn a couple of blocks from the Gay Pride Parade route under an assumed name, paid cash for a week, and later that evening came down to the front desk wearing his Neo costume and asked the desk clerk if there are any nightclubs nearby. The night clerk, who looked like a raving fairy and was eyeing him appreciatively, lisped "There's one right down the street - You'll fit right in dear."

Tom showed up around 10:00 wearing the Neo glasses, the leather duster and his Colt Commander in a IWB holster. He walked to the bar and ordered a beer, then stood in an out of the way corner with his back to the wall near the dance floor and just watched everyone. Several men approached him, and quickly left, including a drag queen, a younger clean-shaven man, and an older man like him, but he looked his age. Everyone who saw him called him Neo, but he didn't acknowledge them. He left around midnight, walked out to his Mustang, and to be on the safe side, drove away from the hotel, and sure enough he spotted a Mercedes sports sedan following him when he did his tail ID run, and decided to have some fun. He slowed down to let the Mercedes catch up, and right as they pulled up next to him, Tom floored the Mustang, forgetting about the nitro boost, which threw him back in the seat, and he went from 30mph to over 100 within a quarter-mile with smoke pouring off the tires until he reached 3rd gear. He made the first right after he lost sight of the Mercedes and doubled back. He ran another tail ID run just to be on the safe side, and no one was following him, so he drove back to the hotel and parked in a nearby parking lot, then went up to his room.

The next morning, he got dressed in his tan chinos, fuschia guyabera, pink ribbon button, leather loafers, and slipped his Colt Commander with the suppressor mounted and a spare mag in a custom IWB kydex holster into his waistband. Next, he shrugged into the custom cross-draw front-break vertical shoulder holster that held the suppressed 22/45 loaded with 11 rounds of 22-caliber 40-grain Elley subsonic ammo that should scramble the Eldonian's brains. The off-side magazine holder carried 2 10-round spare magazines and clipped to his belt. Once the holster was secure, he put on

his black leather duster and Neo sunglasses, and made his way out of the hotel, taking the back way.

He was within walking distance to the start of the parade, and kept his Mustang out of view as much as possible so no one would associate him without his Neo costume with the Mustang. As he walked to the parade, it got noisier, rowdier, and more obnoxious. Finally the parade started. This was the moment Tom waited for. He was right behind some huge drag queen with a flamboyant costume near the edge of the sidewalk, and could easily kneel next to it, fire two quick rounds, and split before anyone was the wiser. As Subjects #4 and #5 came into range about 20 yards away, he crouched down, swept the duster aside, grabbed the butt of the 22/45, and using the outlandish costume of the Drag Queen next to him as cover, drew, sighted and fired 2 quick rounds which were inaudible over the crowd noise, striking Subject 4 and 5 right in their foreheads. As soon as the women fell, the crowd screamed and panicked, so he pivoted and duck-walked back from the edge of the crowd while he re-holstered his gun. When he had 4 people between him and the parade, he slowly stood up, and walked away from the parade.

5 minutes later, he made it to the hotel, slipped in the back door, and into his room, shaking like a leaf. He took off the Neo costume, took off his clothes, took out the blonde hair rinse, stepped into the shower, and followed the directions on the bottle. The results were less than satisfactory, but no one would guess he had black hair half an hour ago. His hair ranged from brown to blonde, and after a few washings, he hoped the grey would settle back in. When he was finished, he put on a pair of exam gloves, and took out a pack of instant wipes, and thoroughly wiped all surfaces in the hotel room including the knobs to deny the police any prints. He took the trash bags out of the trash cans, and stuffed them into the duffle bag with the Neo costume and the clothes he was wearing. When he finished, he went out the back way, walked to the parking lot, threw everything in the Mustang, drove to a store 5 miles away, emptied the duffle bag, and dumped everything into dumpsters then threw the duffle bag into a different dumpster 25 yards away, then finally took off the exam gloves and threw them into another dumpster, then drove out of town wearing his British racing cap, a green knit pullover and blue jeans to look as different as he could from any possible description of the shooter.

2 days later, when he arrived in Phoenix, Kelly told him he had nothing to worry about. "The Secret Service is looking for a huge Drag Queen dressed like Aretha Franklin, who they think was the shooter. The reporter on the scene managed to get a glimpse at the bodies before the police covered them up, and just like Sen. Kennedy, there was a puddle of green around them, not red. It was the creepiest thing."

"Hi Honey I'm home!"

Kelly realized she was rambling, and solved that problem by laying a very passionate kiss on Tom's lips.

"I checked into getting married in Las Vegas, and all we need to do is pick up a marriage license at the Marriage License Bureau Office and check into the Venetian Now that you're back, I can make reservations."

"Ok, sounds like a plan. You want to honeymoon in Vegas, or head east?"

“I wanted to stay in Vegas for 4 days. I’ve got everything I need for the next couple of weeks in 2 suitcases. The moving company is going to store the stuff in Phoenix until I tell them where I want it. They’ll ship anywhere in the US, or overseas.”

Tom thought that was a better idea, since they’d only have to ship it once, instead of shipping everything to Tennessee, then either to Virginia or Florida. Tom decided to sell the Mustang to Bob Bondurant when he remembered how much he liked it, and called Bob, then called the dealership when he said he was interested. Tom negotiated a good price for the Mustang from the dealership, and called Bob Bondurant back and offered to sell the car to him for \$50 thousand, which included the buyout on the lease, plus what Bob charged him for the improvements made. Bob asked him to drive over to the track so they could talk in person, he wanted to see the car. Tom unloaded the Mustang, and drove it over to Bob’s racing school. When Bob got a good look at it, he took out his checkbook and wrote a check for \$50 thousand. Tom had him make it payable to Kelly, since she was the only one with a local checking account to cash the check. Bob shrugged his shoulders, and wrote the check for \$50 thousand payable to Kelly, and Tom handed him the title and bill of sale forms the dealership had e-mailed him.

“Bob, any ideas where we can rent a high-performance luxury car for the trip. We need to go to Tennessee, then to Seattle or Alaska.”

“Sure, there’s a rental place right down the road that rents cars to clients all the time, I’ll drop you off over there, and make sure you get the client pricing.” Bob opened the back door, and Tom drove them to the rental place and after the Manager assured Bob that he’d take care of them, Tom handed Bob the keys to the Mustang, and said “Enjoy.” Bob’s grin could have lit the Sun Devil Stadium, he bought a car worth at least \$75 thousand for \$50 thousand. Tom was glad Bob was happy, since he didn’t need the car anymore, and the stiff suspension was wrecking his back. He rented the Cadillac GTS for 3 months, with a return in Johnson City TN. Tom got them to include an early return refund clause in case he didn’t need the car for 3 months explaining he was in the process of moving to Alaska, which was the same story he told Bob when he told him he wanted to sell the car.

Tom and Kelly drove back to the hotel, took a nap, then ate dinner in the hotel’s restaurant, checked out first thing in the morning, and started the long drive to Las Vegas. Tom was feeling much better, his back wasn’t sore, and between the suspension and upholstery, he felt like he was riding on a cloud, albeit a cloud that was cruising at 70mph. It was about 162 miles to Bullhead City, their first stop, and about the half-way point on their 288 mile trip. Since both of them were on the rental agreement, Tom let Kelly drive to Bullhead City, and he’d take it from there to Las Vegas. Once they pulled out of the hotel’s driveway, Tom inserted a CD (he kept the CD’s and left the 6-packs for Bob to refill later, the Cadillac only had a single-disk CD player and a GPS unit) and lit a cigar. Kelly didn’t question anything he put in the trunk after Finestein and Boxer’s deaths, she knew better than to ask too many questions. Tom already transferred the AK-47 and a much improved E&E/BOB kit for the both of them into the trunk, and loaded 2 suitcases each. With all that in the trunk, it was full. Bob barely had enough room for his cigars and camera gear after they loaded the suitcases. He still had a dozen liter bottles of water left from the case he bought, and they were in a box on the back floor next to a box containing the remaining snack food Tom hadn’t eaten in his travels. He knew the water was

more important than the food, but you never knew when a woman would have a “Munchie Attack” and they weren’t pretty, so he made sure there was enough stuff to survive a deadly attack of the munchies. Kelly had added a blanket and pillow to the supply in the back so she could take a nap when they reached Bullhead City. They drove north on 93 until they reached the junction of 40 west/93 North, then turned toward Bullhead City. Less than a half-hour later, they pulled into a gas station, and Kelly made a mad dash for the restroom while Tom filled the Cadillac. Once the car was full, and windows washed, he used the restroom as soon as he saw Kelly coming out. When he came back, he reset the seat and the steering wheel to suit him, switched CD’s, lit a fresh cigar, grabbed 2 liters of water and stuck them in the console, then headed North on route 93 to Las Vegas. Just under 2 hours later, they arrived in Las Vegas, and the GPS gave them turn by turn directions to their hotel. They drove into the Grand Entrance of the Venetian Resort Hotel Casino. The attendant opened their door, welcomed them to the Venetian, and when Kelly showed their on-line reservation to the doorman, he showed them where their check-in was. They’d purchased a wedding package, and a bridal suite in the Venezia Tower for 4 days/3 nights. When Tom saw the total on the credit card, he was glad the government was paying for it. The bellmen whisked their bags up to the room, and they were hard-pressed to keep up. The elevator opened to their floor, and the bellman opened the door to their suite. The view and the luxury took Kelly’s breath away. Tom turned to her and said “Boy, you really know how to pick a room dear!”

Once they were checked in and relaxed, they drove out to the Marriage License Bureau Office., paid for the marriage license, and took it back to the hotel. They ate dinner in the hotel, and went to bed early, tomorrow would be a long day. The next morning at 0800, there was a knock at the door. The bellman was delivering their rental tux and her rented wedding dress. Tom shook his head, Kelly was full of surprises. They tried their rental outfits on, then it was time for Kelly to go get pampered and preened before the wedding. Tom made an appointment with the cosmetologist to hopefully fix his hair, and return to his normal distinguished grey. The cosmetologist reminded him of the guys he just left in San Francisco, but if he wanted to look good for the wedding pictures, he’d have to put up with it. An hour later, Tom was impressed. His hair looked like it had never been colored, and was cut just like he liked it, a flat-top with the hair just off the ears, not quite a full-military cut, but close. The cosmetologist was about to put some mousse in his hair, when Tom stopped him “Don’t you dare, you’ll ruin a perfectly good haircut!” Tom’s tone of voice brooked no argument, so the cosmetologist lisped “Well all right if you say so dear - you’re done!” Tom wanted to punch the little fairy out, but decided it wouldn’t be a good idea to spend his wedding day in the slammer. They charged him \$50 but he felt it was worth it. He made it back to his room and 15 minutes later, Kelly showed up looking more beautiful than he imagined. “We’ve got 30 minutes to get dressed, then we go downstairs and get hitched.”

“Kelly, are you sure you’re OK getting married under my legend name?”

“I’d spend the rest of my life with you even if we weren’t married, so I don’t see a problem.” Tom kissed his bride-to-be, got dressed quickly, and they walked hand in hand to the Venetian Wedding Chapel, the most exclusive wedding chapel in the Venetian hotel. They were met by a non-denominational minister, who went over their wedding vows and readings with them. They both chose the Traditional Vows, but elected to delete the Obey part. Tom got a good laugh thinking about that one, Kelly was pretty headstrong, and needed subtle hints or else the “drill instructor from Hell”

approach sometimes. With that out of the way, they entered the Chapel, and Tom handed the minister their rings while Kelly waited in the Bridal Chamber for the music to start. "Ok Girl moment of truth, you know what happened last time you did this!"

When the music started Kelly stood up, walked to the door... and entered the candle-lit chapel. There waiting for her was Tom, the minister, and two employees of the hotel as witnesses. The Chapel Director was wearing a dark suit, and the Wedding Coordinator was wearing a blue floor-length dress, and they were standing on the bride and groom sides respectively. As Kelly walked down the aisle, her eyes were locked on Tom, who looked handsome in his black tuxedo. What amazed her was Tom's hair was back to it's normal distinguished silver-grey, and looked almost perfect. As she reached the end of the aisle, she took Tom's hand and turned to face the minister. "Dearly Beloved..."

The rest of the ceremony was a blur until they came to their vows. Tom nearly choked up, remembering the last time he'd made that vow. Kelly could see the tears welling in his eyes, and knew what was going through his mind, so she smiled a soft smile that said "It's all right dear." and he recovered enough to finish. Finally it was Kelly's turn, and she choked up too, but because she remembered what a disaster her last marriage was. Still she knew that Tom wasn't a jerk. She'd been around him long enough to know he had a tough exterior, but was a total teddy bear inside and loved her to death. She made it through her vows, then when they exchanged rings, and the minister pronounced them married, and told Tom to kiss his bride, it was a tearful kiss, full of some sadness, hope, and love. The photographer loved it, and shot several frames. After the wedding, they posed for the mandatory wedding pictures, then went directly to the Honeymoon suite. Instead of tearing each other's clothes off, Tom held her and cried for a while, and she joined him. Finally when they came up for air, Tom said "Don't worry Kelly, I'll never be like Nick. I'll always love and cherish you, even while we grow old. Unfortunately you'll probably outlive me, so you need to prepare yourself to possibly be a widow longer than you planned."

"Tom, I can't replace Nancy, but I'll try to love you as much as she did. As far as being a widow, I cherish each and every day with you - I learned that a long time ago. God doesn't promise us tomorrow, so we need to make the most of each day."

Finally with all the tears out of the way, they remembered they were on their honeymoon, and made up for lost time. Chapter 18

Two days later, they checked out of the hotel and headed back to Tennessee. Kelly made Tom stop at a music store where she bought some more Classical CD's that he liked, and they headed to Flagstaff. They stopped for gas and breaks every couple of hundred miles. Later when they reached Flagstaff, Tom asked Kelly "Ok If we stop at a cigar shop, I'm almost out of my Cuban Crafters. Since we're here anyway, it would save the shipping costs."

"Sure dear, I like the smell of those cigars."

They pulled into the cigar shop, and when they got out, the owner recognized Tom, and asked "What happened to the Mustang?"

“I sold it, and I got a new wife.”

“Aren’t you supposed to trade the wife in for a new Mustang?”

“I traded up.”

Kelly leaned over and gave him a kiss right in the store.

“I can see you two are still newlyweds, I take it you want 2 more boxes of cigars?”

“How many will your large cherry wood humidor hold?”

“The one I was going to sell you holds 100, that would be 4 boxes.”

“Ok, I’ll take 4 boxes, the humidor, and here’s the charge card.”

“If you don’t need to smoke the cigars, I’d leave them in the boxes and transfer them when you’ve got the humidor set up.”

“Ok, I’ve still got a dozen left.”

The owner went into his walk-in humidor, pulled out 4 boxes, plus an open one with 5 left, and handed it to Tom.

“What’s with the 5 extra?”

“They’ve been open for a month, and I just got a fresh shipment. Your cigars are from the fresh shipment direct from the factory. I thought I’d give them to you and make room in the inventory for 5 more boxes of fresh cigars.”

The owner went in back, got the cherry wood humidor, showed it to Tom, included a quart of humidor fluid, wrapped it all in bubble wrap and put it in a shipping box. Next he took the 4 cases of cigars and helped Tom carry the boxes out to the Cadillac. “Nice trade, the Cadillac is much classier than the Mustang!”

“So’s Kelly!”

“Take care, and when you smoke these up, I included a couple of my cards and a confidential price list in the box.”

They walked back in the store, the owner ran Tom’s credit card, and once Tom signed the slip, the owner shook his hand, and said “If I don’t see you again, nice meeting you Tom. Ma’am.”

Tom and Kelly walked out of the store hand in hand. Tom asked her if she wanted to drive, and she smiled and said “Sure.” Tom made sure the GPS had the next waypoints including their overnight

stop programmed, then helped her adjust the seat and steering wheel, then climbed into the passenger seat, loaded 1 of the CD's Kelly picked in Las Vegas, lit a cigar, and they drove on down the road. It was another 4 hours or so to Albuquerque, and Tom had already made a reservation for an overnight stay there. Between the two of them, with the more comfortable car, they could easily make 600 miles per day. He changed the next stop from Sayre to Oklahoma City, making tomorrow's leg 540 miles, then they could make it to Memphis, then home the next day. He'd save a whole day, and get home earlier. Judging by the last couple of weeks, the wheels were starting to come off, and he wanted to be as close to home as possible.

They arrived in Albuquerque later that afternoon, filled up the tank with gas, located the hotel, checked in, went downstairs to eat at the restaurant, turned in early, and got up early the next morning so they were on the road by 0800. They were on the road to Oklahoma City on I-40 east and driving into the sun. Tom wished he hadn't thrown out his Neo sunglasses, then remembered he had his Ray Bans, found them, and put them on. The polarizing lenses made it much easier to see, and soon the sun was up high enough so it wasn't a problem. Fort Smith was about 2 hours east, and their first pit stop. They made it just after 10:00, and when they were ready to go, Kelly asked Tom if she could drive. Their next stop was Little Rock Arkansas, and Kelly would let Tom drive from Little Rock to Memphis, since that stretch would probably have the most traffic. They quickly set the car up for Kelly, and Tom took advantage of the break to light a Cuban Crafter Cigar, and switch the CD to one of his favorite Bach CD's. Kelly liked Bach, so she was OK. The sun was up high, so she didn't have to squint. She set the cruise control to 5mph over the speed limit, and leaned back and relaxed.

A little over 2 hours later, traffic picked up, and she knew they were close to Little Rock. They found a gas station, made their pit stop, and Tom got behind the wheel for the final leg to Memphis Tennessee. He'd be home sometime tomorrow. The traffic between Little Rock and Memphis was heavy, so it took longer, still they made it to their hotel by 5 pm. First they stopped at a gas station, then they ate dinner since this hotel didn't have a restaurant attached. They were checked in and in bed by 8:00 and up by 5 the next morning. This morning's leg was only 500 miles, then they were home, at least for now. Nashville was the half-way point, and they had a full tank of gas, so Tom decided to drive straight through with 1 stop if they could. It was 4 hours to Nashville, so Tom made sure Kelly used the bathroom.

Four hours later, Tom was praying there was a gas station nearby, and finally found one just outside Nashville. When he slowed and turned on his blinker, Kelly's sigh of relief was audible. They both ran to the restroom, then Tom came back and filled up the tank and washed the windows. Kelly asked if she could drive, and Tom said there were several cities between here and Johnson City, their eventual destination, so if she got tired, she could stop at any one, and he'd take over. Kelly took care of setting up the Cadillac all by herself this time, and Tom stuck in a Beethoven CD then lit another cigar. Kelly liked the smell of Tom's cigars, she just didn't like smoking them. Once they left Nashville David decided to come clean.

"I know you've been dying from suspense. Once we reach Johnson City, everyone knows me by my real name, and calling me Tom might get you some funny looks. When I'm not shooting Eldonians, I'm a mild-mannered Machine Shop operator by the name of David Adams. I'll be 62 in December, I've got 2 grown kids that I haven't seen or talked to in years. My son Don grew up during Vietnam,

and called me a Baby Killer the last time we spoke. My daughter Sarah married some sleazy lawyer and lives somewhere in New York in a high-rise apartment. Last time I talked to her, she needed \$ 5,000.00 to make bail on a cocaine possession charge. I told her to get her rich husband to bail her out, and she cried and said he was in jail too. I thought about it, and decided not to bail her out, and maybe she'd learn that just because they were rich and connected spoiled brats, they weren't above the law. I own a Machine shop with an apartment above it. Between the business and the building, I've got a standing offer of \$1 million cash for the whole shebang. My best friend Larry is independently wealthy, but you'd never know by looking at him. He made it big investing wisely in the dot.com boom, and got out right before the bust. He's taken all his earnings and invested in gold and silver. The last time he counted everything, he had over half a million worth of gold and silver in his safe. He still earns right around 30 thousand per year from his investments he hasn't cashed out yet, which is more than enough to support his lifestyle. He's really into guns, and like me is an Army Vietnam Veteran. We were in the same infantry company until I got re-assigned as the battalion sniper. We hardly ever saw each other in-country until I got out, and he looked me up after he returned to the world. I was pretty messed up, and he helped me through it. Nancy hung right in there even if it was tough, but I drifted apart from my children. Don reminded me of the 12-year old Vietnamese boy I shot, and Sarah was way too demanding and clingy. She always wanted to be the center of attention, even when I felt like killing myself. The sad thing was Nancy was dying of Cancer all along, and she was so worried about me that she didn't know she had cancer until the very end. She died right after Don and Sarah graduated college. I'm sure somehow they blame me for their mother's death. I've been a widower for almost 20 years, and until I met you, I was virtually celibate. So there you have my life story. You still want to stay around me?"

Kelly could see the fear in David's eyes, and since there wasn't much traffic, pulled over and gave David a passionate kiss.

"David, you've made me the happiest woman in the world. I know you couldn't tell me the truth to protect me, but I trusted you anyways. Somehow I knew you were a really good man and wouldn't hurt me. I want to stay with you as long as we live. That answer your question?"

David looked in Kelly's eyes, and saw love, understanding, forgiveness, and that special twinkle her eyes did when she was really happy. He leaned over and kissed her back, then said "We better get going before a cop pulls over and tells us to get a room!" A couple of hours later, they arrived in Knoxville, Tennessee, and Kelly asked David to drive, she was getting tired. They stopped, got gas, used the restroom, and Dave drove from Knoxville to Johnson City. They pulled into a gas station, filled up the tank, then drove to David's building. Kelly was amazed at how clean it was, considering it was your classic studio bachelor pad. She was sure it was a bachelor pad when she opened the refrigerator, and it was full of beer, the freezer had frozen steaks and hamburger, and the cupboards were full of boxed cheese and macaroni and other easy-to-cook foods. Kelly decided they'd go out for dinner, then she'd go grocery shopping tomorrow.

Two days after they arrived in Tennessee, David got a call on his cell phone.

"The remaining Eldonian Leadership are holed up in the UN building in New York City. If you can hit the natural gas cutoff valve, the resulting fire and explosion should destroy the building."

“Ok, but after this I quit - I want my life back!”

“I’ll pass it up the chain of command, anything else?”

“No”

“Very well, you need to do this ASAP, we don’t know how much longer they’ll stay there.”

“Ok, I’ll take care of it.”

“Kelly, we need to go to New York right now!”

“Another assignment?”

“Hopefully my last one. Can you pack an overnight bag for both of us while I do some research?”

While Kelly packed David surfed the Internet, found some obsolete building department files about the UN building, including the location of the gas cut-off valve. He quickly made a list of motels and hotels within a mile of the UN building on that side, packed his XM-109, the AK-47 and their BOB into the Cadillac, and added the overnight bags. He programmed the GPS for the quickest route to NYC, called Larry and told him to keep an eye on the place, and they drove off. The GPS said it was about 10 hours and about 630 miles. They stopped in Harrisonburg a couple of hours later to stretch, fill the tank, and empty theirs. David liked driving the Cadillac GTS way more than the Mustang GT even with the more comfortable racing seats. The Mustang’s suspension reminded him of the ride he got with the go karts at Bondurant’s racing school. Their next stop was Fredericksburg PA, which they made right on schedule. They stopped right outside New York City for gas, then drove into the city. The GPS gave them turn-by-turn directions to the UN building, and they spent an hour driving around it before David spotted a hotel with it’s rooms facing the vulnerable side of the UN building, and far enough away to escape the blast - he hoped. They checked in, paid for two nights, then David told Kelly he had a strange request for her. “I need you to lay on the bed, thrash around and act like you’re having The Mother of All Orgasms”

“You getting kinky on me?”

“No I need you to drown out the noise I’m going to make shooting out the window at the UN Building. Even with the suppressor, the gun’s loud enough to be heard in the other room. If you’re raising a racket, they’ll just think we’re having a great time in bed.”

“OK, but when you’re finished, you have to come to bed and finish what you started!”

“Deal!”

As David got ready to shoot, Kelly got ready to make Meg Ryan’s performance in “When Harry Met Sally” look like she wasn’t really trying. She got undressed, got on the bed, and started quietly, and

gradually got louder and louder until she was practically screaming and slamming the headboard into the wall rhythmically. David was impressed, but he had a job to do. He set the rifle on a table next to the window, opened the window wide, took the screen out, sighted on the UN building over a mile away, and carefully sighted the gas shut-off valve, which looked microscopic in his sight. He steadied his breathing, and slowly the wobble in his scope gradually subsided to a small figure-8 around the pipe. He swore under his breath when the first shot missed, so he adjusted his aim, and the next 3 rounds got progressively closer, with the 4th round striking the valve, knocking it askew, and breaking the pipe. The 5th HEDP round ignited the pooled natural gas, starting a fireball that enveloped the building, and raced skyward. Knowing he had less than five seconds to escape the blast and the flying glass, he dove toward the bed, knocking Kelly on the floor, who screamed right as the windows of the hotel room exploded, throwing glass fragments into the opposite wall. Through good fortune or blind luck, the bed protected them from the fragments and flying glass. David was laying on top of Kelly's naked body, protecting her's with his, and once he was sure she was OK, took his clothes off and took care of his promise. A couple hours later, they emerged from the room with satisfied grins on their faces. David put their bags back in the Cadillac, and went to see the manager.

"What the hell happened, one minute we were making love, and the next the windows blew in."

"Oh my God, you're OK, right?"

"Just a couple of minor cuts and scratches."

"The UN building blew sky high, someone said something about a gas main leak. They're shutting down everything within a mile on a precautionary basis. Here's a refund of your payment, plus \$500 to cover any doctor's expenses, and locating a new hotel. Obviously the hotel will be closed until we can clean up the glass."

"That's OK, we already packed everything in the car. Do you think it's safe to stay in New York?"

"Sure, the NYPD said it was a gas main explosion that destroyed the UN building. Once they get the fire under control, I'm sure the Fire Marshall will want to look at it and possibly upgrade the code on those gas mains."

David took the cash and walked back to the car. They got in, and drove West until they were in New Jersey, and stopped for the night at another motel. This time when they made love, there wasn't any flying glass to deal with. 2 days later, when they made it home, the David's cell phone rang.

"Nice job, they don't suspect foul play, and the explosion and fire melted the evidence. All the Eldonians in the building are dead according to latest accounts. You might want to keep close to home for the next month, the Eldonian invasion fleet is less than a week from their scheduled landing, and we've got a warm reception planned for them."

The phone went dead seconds later, and David decided to notify the Johnson City Militia of what he heard. They met an hour later in the back room of their favorite bar.

“So David, not only did you get to “Save the World for Democracy, you got yourself a new wife?”

“The job doesn’t pay that well, but the fringe benefits are great!”

The dozen retired veterans laughed their heads off, then David said “I called this meeting to give you a serious update. My contact says the Eldonian Invasion Fleet is less than a week out. I suggest we get the women and children to shelter, and prepare to deal with the Eldonian Invasion on a personal basis.”

“With what, we don’t have any tanks or anything to stop them?”

David held up his rifle “With this - they’re vulnerable to sniper fire, the proverbial shot out of nowhere. They’ve got personal shield generators, but leave them off for the most part unless they know they’re in danger. They must have a limited power supply or be inconvenient since they don’t leave them on all the time. Find a good hide, break out your BMG-50 rifles and go Eldonian Hunting. If they’re wearing a space suit, it might stop .308 rifle fire, so I’d only shoot Eldonians with suits using 50 caliber or better. Choose your hide wisely, if they find you, you’re a pile of ash.”

With that out of the way, the group discussed potential hides for their group to await the coming invaders. Chapter 19

Two weeks later, David and the Johnson City Militia started receiving reports of huge spaceships landing all over the world. Unfortunately the “Hot reception” the Joint Chiefs had planned was more of the same, and resulted in massive casualties among the defenders. The Eldonian ships, and their armored soldiers were equipped with shields, and carried a weapon that made Phasers look like old technology. Instead of melting an Abrams tank, 1 burst would resolve the tank to a pile of ash. Any planes that attacked simply disappeared in a bright flash as they got within range of the ship’s weapons. Soon the Eldonians reached population centers, and they slaughtered everyone, even people who didn’t resist. They kidnapped millions of pretty women, and the rumors ran rampant as to their fates, since they were never seen again. The only people who had any luck against the Eldonians were firing 50 bmg or 20mm rifles against the Eldonians from hidden shooting positions. Several tanks got lucky by firing from concealed positions using DU penetrators, but they usually only got 1 or 2 shots off before the Eldonians leveled all the nearby buildings, taking the tanks with them.

Kelly hid with the rest of the women and children in Johnson City, despite her protests that she was just as good of a shot as David. “Kelly, I’ve only got 1 50/20mm rifle, and I need it. You might be a crack shot with your National Match M-1a, but we’re getting word that .308 rounds aren’t penetrating their suits, and they’re killing anyone they can see. You’re safer in the bunker, and I’m counting on you and the other wives to protect the kids in case the Eldonians show up. Whatever you do, don’t let the Eldonians capture you. I love you, and remember to save that last bullet for yourself.” Kelly and David bid a tearful goodbye, and Kelly made David promise to come back. “I’ll do everything in my power to come back, but if my number’s up, I can’t prevent it. If I die, remember what I died fighting for, and don’t give up! I’ve got a deuce and a half fully stocked, it runs on any kind of fuel, including filtered vegetable oil, waste oil, diesel, kerosene, fuel oil, methanol, av gas, etc. If I’m not back in a couple of weeks, and it looks like the town is getting overrun, head for my place, grab the deuce, and

try to head for the hills. It will take years if ever for them to find you there. I love you, and I hope I'll see you soon!"

David walked out to Larry's pickup, and they drove to their 2-man sniper position. One nice thing about Larry's relative wealth was that he had a Barrett's Light 50 with a killer Swarovski scope and a suppressor made by the same manufacturer as David's. They both had top-notch spotting scopes, and could spot for each other. David's 25mm rifle would be their principle weapon, he wanted to see what that HEDP round would do to an Eldonian's armor. Two days later, they got their wish, when a fancy-looking spaceship landed just over a mile from their hide in the hills, and something wearing a bright shiny gold-colored spacesuit got out of the craft and looked around. David didn't remember hearing anything about gold spacesuits in his briefing, so he hoped that this was an Eldonian General, and took a bead on him. The gun automatically compensated for the range and elevation difference, and when the crosshairs settled on the Eldonian, David aimed at the upper chest, and squeezed the trigger. Seconds later, the suit exploded in a green mist, and Larry said "You got him!" As the rest of the Eldonian crew came out to investigate, David and Larry had a field day shooting the rest of them. Finally David said they had to relocate, and they crawled backwards out of their prepared hide, climbed aboard their heavily muffled ATV's and drove to their next hide. Over the next couple of weeks, David and Larry killed over 20 Eldonians, but no more generals. Finally they drove back into town, and Kelly's kiss when she saw that David was alive made David realize that he'd scared Kelly half to death waiting so long to come back for some R&R. They kept going out for 2 weeks at a time, ranging further and further from Johnson City until 1 day David's phone rang.

"David, there will be a Blackhawk waiting for you at the Johnson City Municipal Airport in an hour. Be on it, and ask no questions, and don't tell anyone anything."

David hung up, grabbed his bag, kissed Kelly, said he'd be back as soon as he could, and borrowed a jeep to get a lift to the airport. Right as he got there, a Blackhawk touched down, and the door slid open. He ran to the chopper, bent over at the waist, and jumped aboard. As soon as he was seated, the pilot revved the turbines, grabbed pitch, jumped about 50 feet up, and nosed the chopper over and accelerated as fast as he could. Two hours later, they were met by a Hummer and two MP's who searched David with metal detectors, took his weapons and his bag, and told him to get into the Hummer. They drove to an isolated building surrounded by armed Marines. The MP's flanked David, and escorted him into the building, where he was turned over to the Secret Service, who frisked him again, and put him in a room, and told him to wait. There was a coffee maker, so David made himself some coffee, then as the door opened and he recognized who opened the door, he sprang to his feet and stood at attention.

"Mr. President!"

"Have a seat David, I don't have much time, and I need to talk to you."

David sat down, and President Hatch started.

"First of all, your country owes you a huge debt of gratitude. If you hadn't taken out the Eldonian leadership, they would have been able to just walk in and take over. Second, I wanted to tell you that

when you shot that Eldonian General, it seems you released some Eldonian virus. It makes humans sick, but the Eldonians have been dropping like flies.”

“That’s great, but what do you need me for?”

“David, we tried way back in 1935 to get an Ambassador from the Alliance so we could prevent the Eldon from taking over, but you guys had to turn him into a Rock Star.”

David thought for a minute and blurted out “You mean Elvis Presley?”

“His name was Garfan, but his parents called him Elvis, so he used that name.”

“Elvis is dead!”

“No he’s not, we recalled him when it was apparent that he’d failed to become an Ambassador for the Alliance. You wouldn’t recognize him now, he’s skinny!”

“So what’s at Graceland?”

“Just a casket - it would be kind of embarrassing and obvious to have Elvis just disappear, so we gave him a long-acting sedative that simulates death, and once the casket was closed, we beamed him up.”

“What about this virus we discovered that seems to kill Eldons?”

“I’ve got an idea, but it means sacrificing an Earth Woman.”

“Mr. President, millions of Earth Women have already died, what’s 1 more.”

“Thanks David, we’ll take it from here.” President Hatch stood, shook David’s hand, and he as escorted back to the Blackhawk, then flown back to the airport.

Two weeks later, David went over to Larry’s place to see how he was doing. Right before he left, Larry stood, holding a suppressed pistol.

“Larry what’s going on?”

“Don’t look so surprised David. They needed to get rid of you once you’d done your job. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs wanted me to tell you did a good job, and it’s nothing personal.”

Pop...Pop!

David stood there for a second, strange, he didn’t feel like he’d been hit. When he looked up again, Larry was slumped on the floor with two bullet holes in his forehead. He looked over his shoulder to see Kelly standing in the doorway with his smoking 22/45.

“I didn’t trust him, and it seems my instincts were right. Let’s get the heck out of here before they send someone else after you.”

“I need to get some things first that will help us survive. How would you like to retire to Costa Rica?”

“Works for me - let’s get going!”

David opened a false panel, turned a lever, and a door slid open. He walked into Larry’s armory, selected a few items, and grabbed a heavy box full of 1 oz Canadian Maple leaves that Larry stored in his gun vault in case TSHTF. The case weighed over 65pounds, and contained right around half a million dollars worth of gold and silver, and Kelly helped him carry it outside. David ran back inside Larry’s place, filled a wine bottle full of gasoline, tied a rag to it, turned to Larry’s cooling body, and said “Nothing personal buddy”, and once he was outside he lit the rag and threw it through the open door. In a minute Larry’s house was fully involved.

Two hours later, David’s phone rang. “Hello?”

“I disagreed with the Joint Chief’s decision, and as a show of good faith, I want to give you some numbers. Ready?”

“Kelly, hand me a pen please!”

“Ok.”

“8734-1223-4564-9684-2601 Got it?”

“Yeah”

“Ok, copy this: Alpha Zulu Echo Six Romeo Foxtrot Bravo Niner November Sierra Delta Oscar Three Juliet Delta Zero One Tango Romeo Niner.”

David read it back to him, then the voice continued.

“That’s the account number and pass code for the account you’ve been using. Contact Dilbert at the International Bank of the Bahamas, give him those numbers, and request him to transfer anywhere from one to five million dollars into a new account. Good bye and Good Luck!”

When the phone went dead, David looked at Kelly, and said “It seems our Guardian Angel’s been looking out for us. My contact just gave me the account number and pass code to the secret account the credit card’s been tapping, and told me to transfer 1-5 million dollars to a new account number. Obviously he’s trying to help us flee and re-establish ourselves in another country.”

“Tom, I’ve got \$350 thousand from the house, you’ve got \$1.2 million from your house and business, don’t you think you should just walk away and count your blessings?”

“You’re right, I’ve also got half a million in gold from Larry’s stash. OK, I’ll shred the credit card, and let’s book a ship to take us to Costa Rica. How do we get ourselves and our stuff from here to Miami or some other port?”

“Silly charter a plane, a private jet could haul us, all our stuff, and we’d be flying in style instead of driving.”

“I wonder how much \$1.2 million worth of gold weighs?”

“Why?”

“How are we going to get almost \$2 million worth of cash into Costa Rica without attracting the wrong kind of attention?”

“Why not just wire transfer it to a bank in Costa Rica?”

“That much money would set off a bunch of red flags.”

“Only on this end dear. I doubt the Costa Rican government would care 1 way or the other unless they suspected it was drug money. Maybe if we were starting a legitimate business that needed that kind of capital?”

“You mean like an auto dealership, or a high-end repair shop for rich people?”

“Exactly, it would make a great cover story, and once the money’s inside the country, we can do whatever we want with it. I’d still take that half-million in gold as gold to be on the safe side. We can secret it in our luggage and other stuff.”

“Are you sure you haven’t been watching one too many James Bond Movies?”

“That’s funny Mr. Cruise! Look who’s talking. I didn’t even know your real name until last week!”

“Mea Culpa, now let’s make plans to skedaddle while we can!”

David got on the internet, located a Charter company in Nashville that had a Cessna Citation which could easily fly to Costa Rica with a fuel stop in Miami. David booked them for the next morning, and started packing. Kelly called the shipping company, and arranged for them to ship all her stuff to Limon, Costa Rica for Will Call. They made the arrangements to ship the stuff, then Kelly remembered that David wanted some stuff shipped too, and asked him.

“I’d like to have the Deuce, and about a half-dozen boxes of stuff shipped including all my firearms and ammo. Can you make the arrangements?” Kelly talked to the clerk at the shipping company, who said they could have a truck there that evening, and they’d make sure it made the boat, so they could put it all in 1 or 2 shipping containers. Kelly gave David the good news, then he went and quickly

packed everything he wanted into shipping boxes that he wasn't going to bring with him. Shipping by air as excess baggage was expensive, so all he was going to bring with them were 2 weeks worth of clothes, the gold and silver, and his XM-109 rifle. He'd keep 10 rounds with him, and send the rest via container. 4 hours later, the driver and a loader showed up and loaded the boxes. David called his competitor, who said he could be by within an hour with a check for \$1.2 million, or the receipt for a wire transfer. David told him to transfer the money to his B of A account, and he'd accept the receipt as proof of payment. A little over an hour later, Donald showed up with a transfer receipt for \$1.2 Million into David's account. David signed over the business, property, equipment and furnishings, with the understanding that his personal property wasn't part of the deal, including the deuce, which they were going to ship to Alaska. Donald agreed, shook his hand, and David handed him the signed paperwork and the keys. They loaded the Cadillac, and David followed Kelly in the deuce to the shipping company depot. They said they'd haul the deuce on a low-boy behind a truck hauling their stuff to Miami, and put it on the next container ship bound for Costa Rica. It should be there within the month. David signed the paperwork, paid them in full, then they drove back to Nashville and stayed overnight in a hotel. While they were there, they transferred David's funds to Kelly's B of A account and closed David's account in Johnsonville. They were at the airport at 7:30, and the baggage handlers complained about the load, then the Charter Manager approached them. "Excuse me Mr. Cruise, you're way heavy on baggage."

"Can you make the flight from here to Miami and then to Costa Rica with the existing baggage?"

"Yes, but you're shipping almost 1,000 pounds."

"So charge us for excess baggage, everything has to be in Costa Rica tomorrow for my business. If you can't do it, tell me now and I'll arrange another charter!"

"Ok, Mr. Cruise, I'll adjust the bill."

They went back into the office, and the manager added \$5,000 to the charter. Kelly cut him a check for the extra charges then and there, and they boarded the aircraft right at 0800. Once the air stairs were secured and they were seated, the plane taxied to the runway and took off. Once the seatbelts sign went off, the co-pilot came on the air "Sorry, but with the excess baggage, we had to leave the stewardess behind. If you want, there's coffee, muffins, and juice in the galley. Just help yourselves." Kelly got up, grabbed two coffee mugs and 4 muffins, sauntered back to the seat and said "Coffee, Tea, or Me?"

"I'll settle for the coffee for now, but you'll pay for that wisecrack later!"

Two hours later, the seatbelt sign went back on, they were landing in Miami. David and Kelly stayed in their seats, and the plane taxied to the fuel farm, filled their tanks, got a quick fill-up, and the attendant washed the windows, then they taxied back out to the runway and took off, bound for Costa Rica. As soon as the seatbelt light went off again, Kelly got them some juice and muffins without the silly comment this time. Two hours later, the pilot announced they were landing in Limon, Costa Rica. The plane touched down with barely a jar, and once the plane came to a stop, they were met by a Customs official. David handed him their passports with a \$50 in each. He smiled, slipped the \$100 in

his pocket, stamped the passports and said "Welcome to Costa Rica." then he went to inspect the cargo. When he opened the case holding the gold and silver David thought he'd have to shoot him for a second, then David asked "Is everything OK?"

"Sure senior, I've just never seen this much gold at once, not to worry, ownership of gold is perfectly legal."

David slowly moved his hand back from his waistband, stuck his hand out and shook the Customs Official's hand.

"I'd really appreciate it if you could arrange secure transport for us and our metal to the nearest major bank. I need to make a deposit."

"Sure Senior, my cousin Ramon owns the Banco Limon. I'll have him send an armored car and a limousine. Uno Momento por favor."

15 minutes later, an armored car and a limousine appeared on the tarmac. They loaded the crate of gold and silver under the watchful eye of the Customs inspector and David, then they got aboard the limo for the trip to the bank. The limo stopped in front of the Banco Limon, and the Bank owner Ramon was there to greet them, and escorted them inside his office. The guards brought the crate inside the bank, and took it straight to the vault and weighed it, then gave a receipt to Ramon, then left. Ramon took a look at the receipt, and there was almost 3/4 of a Million dollars worth of gold and silver in the crate.

"Welcome to Costa Rica Mr and Mrs. Cruise. I understand you wish to deposit 3/4 of a million worth of gold and silver with the bank. I have to ask if the money is the proceeds of drug trafficking."

"Ramon, the money is mine, I'm independently wealthy, and I shot the last drug dealer I saw in Vietnam."

"Sorry, but I had to ask. Did you wish to deposit any cash, or transfers?"

Kelly rattled off her account number including the routing number, and Ramon was surprised to learn that there was almost \$2 million in that account.

"It seems there's almost \$2 million in that account. Do you want to transfer the whole amount?"

"Yes Ramon, I sold my house, and Tom sold his house and business. That's the proceeds of sale."

"Very well. I'll take care of the transfer right now. For this much of a deposit, I can give you 20% annual interest, adjusted for inflation." Ramon handed David and Kelly two copies of the deposit receipts with the new account number.

"Ramon, I don't want my money just sitting in the bank, are there any worthy projects in Limon that need financing?"

“We just had a deal fall through to build Diesel trucks in Limon. The owner’s financing fell through, but he’d already done all the leg-work, got the government approvals, and even bought the equipment.”

“What would it cost to open the doors and start production?”

“Probably around \$8 million.”

“Do you have a phone I can borrow, it’s an international call, and I can assure you you’ll like the results.”

“Here you go, just dial.”

David pulled the number for the Bahamian bank out of his wallet, dialed the number and said “Is Dilbert there? Dilbert, I’m going to give you an account number and a passcode. Once you’ve verified the account, I need the balance, then I need 1 additional transaction. OK, here goes 8734-1223-4564-9684-2601 Got it? The passcode is Alpha Zulu Echo six Romeo Foxtrot Bravo niner November Sierra Delta Oscar three Juliet Delta Zero one Tango Romeo niner.”

Five minutes later Dilbert came back on the phone “Sir that account and passcode are confirmed. The balance is \$20,358,016.35 What was the other transaction?”

David read the account number off the deposit receipt. “Transfer the entire balance to the Banco Limon, Account Number 0122-3598-9184-3356, understood?”

“I’m transferring the money as we speak. Do you wish a receipt?”

“One Minute please.”

“Ramon, do you have a fax or e-mail?”

“Si, my e-mail is ramon@bancolimon.com”

“Ok Dilbert, it’s ramon@bancolimon.com. I’ll hold the line for confirmation.”

2 minutes later, Ramon’s computer said “You’ve got Mail!” They opened the mail, and it was a wire transfer receipt for \$20,357,016.35 with a note that the \$1000 wire transfer fee applied to international wire transfers to close the account. David nearly fainted, and Ramon checked his account balance: \$22,989,783.92. He subtracted the opening balance, and it agreed with David’s opening deposit to the penny. David picked up the phone, and said “Thanks Dilbert, nice doing business with you.”

Ramon was staring at the monitor stunned. He’d never seen any number that big before anywhere besides a government agency. “Mr. Cruise, with the new deposit, I can now make you a majority partner in the bank, and we will split any profits 50-50 instead of paying interest.”

“How much did the bank make last year?”

“Much less than it would this year. If you take \$10 million to open the truck factory, that still leaves \$12 million to invest and loan throughout Limon. Conservatively the bank should earn between 4 and 6 million per year on that kind of money.”

David knew that if he were a partner in the bank, he wouldn't earn as much interest as a customer, but there were advantages to owning the bank. He'd get instant respectability and preferential treatment from the government.

“Ok, Ramon, could you draw up a contract in English, and I'll sign it. We need somewhere to live nearby, but with a lot of acreage and privacy.”

“There's a vanilla plantation for sale nearby with over 200 acres, and it's a working plantation. It includes the buildings, equipment, and everything for \$200 thousand. It has a really nice 8 bedroom house, and everything else.”

“All our stuff's coming by container ship in the next couple of weeks, could you make hotel arrangements, and hire a car and driver for us?”

“Certainly Mr. Cruise.”

“Please Ramon, call me Tom.”

Chapter 20

Over the next couple of weeks, David and Kelly got settled, and David met with the various board members and other politicians involved in the truck project. David was grateful the previous owner had already greased all the palms that needed greasing, and the building was already built, and the line installed. David couldn't understand what happened, all they needed to get busy producing trucks was to have the manufacturers ship parts. David paid the previous owner \$5 million for the business, licenses, and permits after he contacted the parts manufacturers, and was given assurances as soon as they received either payment or a letter of credit from his bank, they'd start shipping parts. They stood up and paid attention when he told them he was the majority partner in the Banco Limon in Costa Rica. They checked, and the bank had over \$50 million in assets, and over \$30 million in deposits. The bank was cash-flush. Normally a very solvent bank maintained 5-10% of it's assets in cash, but with David's \$20 Million deposit, they had 50% of their assets in cash until they started loaning it out. They immediately signed contracts and started producing parts.

The previous owners were planning on building a heavy-duty commercial truck with a 250 horsepower multi-fuel 6-cylinder diesel, with an enclosed cab, dual rear-axle, dual-speed differential and 8-speed manual gearbox, 2 speed transfer case with a PTO connected to a powerful hydraulic pump, air-locking differentials, huge on/off road tires and wheels, and a 10-ton carrying and 20-ton towing capacity. The vehicle had a much longer wheelbase than the UniMog, but had a lot of it's features, including the locking differentials, modular bed, and the ability to mount various implements.

Most of the roads in Costa Rica were actually either dirt roads or dirt trails through the jungle, and the 6-wheel drive setup was preferred to the 4-wheel drive and shorter wheelbase of the UniMog which was designed to get through Europe's narrow streets.

The Chinese diesel was not only rugged, but was totally mechanical, making it easy to work on without computers and fancy equipment. It was a multi-fuel diesel, meaning it could burn anything from filtered used cooking oil to kerosene, jet fuel, waste oil, fuel oil, various thinners and solvents, and methanol. The multi-speed gearbox, dual-speed transfer case, and dual-speed differential gave it a wide range of speeds from around 1mph to 70mph in rear-wheel drive, high, and the top gear. It had a provision for a 20K hydraulic winch up front, or any hydraulic-powered implement including a front loader, dozer, trencher, grapple, basket lift, and several others. The vehicle was equipped with air brakes, air-locking differential, air starter, a huge compressor, and several reserve tanks, air power for various tools and implements, and central inflation to control traction. They had plans to produce a dual-axle front-steering off-road capable trailer that mated to the trailer hitch and carried 20-tons in either an enclosed box trailer, stake bed, or lowboy.

Several weeks later, they got word that the Container Ship showed up, and they needed to know where to put the deuce and the container. Kelly had finalized the purchase of the plantation, and they had moved in. She told the moving company to deliver the deuce and the container to their new Vanilla Bean plantation. The container showed up, followed by the deuce on another truck. She got some of the men from the plantation to help unload and arrange the furniture. She always wore her Kimber on her hip, and knew she was safe with David in town working on getting the factory up and running. The first thing they did when they took over the plantation was to double everyone's salary and invest almost a million dollars rebuilding the plantation and the village, they had over 100 workers and their families living on the plantation. David had a heliport installed, and signed a contract for the lease of a helicopter to fly him back and forth from Limon to the plantation, which was almost 50 miles from Limon over a rough jungle road. He also hired a bulldozer to smooth out the road and cut it wider, then they were going to dump tons of gravel along the road to build up the road base. The locals thought it was a waste of money, but were grateful for the work from the "Crazy Americans". David had something up his sleeve besides his arm, and knew if he improved the vanilla plantation, and the road to it, he could double the production and the profit, and soon re-coup the investment of building new buildings and the road. The goodwill he was earning in the local village was worth 10 times what he was paying for the work. They found a huge floor safe set in concrete in the main house, and paid a locksmith to open it, then show them how to set a new combination. The safe was big enough to hold their passports and almost a million dollars worth of gold and silver. Kelly joked that it was their emergency cache. That brought David to a full stop, and he ordered a bunch of stuff over the Internet, and they converted their basement to a shelter/storage/power room with a huge battery bank/inverter setup, diesel generator, solar panels on the roof, a small pod of wind turbines, a bathroom, kitchen and blast door. Their 2 story house had a 2000sf footprint, so the basement was 2,000 square feet as well, easily enough room for a nice set of apartments, storage, armory, battery bank, and water storage. David wasn't too worried about nuclear fallout, nothing around there was a target, except Venezuela to the east, and Panama to their north.

The truck manufacturing plant was perfectly situated, they had a Pacific port for the Chinese engines, and a eastern port for the Mexican cabs and the American transmissions and differentials. They

imported all the parts and assembled it at his plant. They had contracts from various South American governments who wanted a source of good well built inexpensive trucks that were easy to maintain and repair, and they sold a bunch to people in Costa Rica who could afford them. The plantation was one of the first buyers, and bought a dozen of them to work the plantation. With the easy-change bed and hydraulics, they resembled a stretched version of the UniMog, except they had 6 wheels instead of 4, which worked even better in the Costa Rican Jungle. They didn't get stuck as much as the 4wd Mogs they replaced in many plantations. The Plantation owners loved them since they only needed to buy 1 basic vehicle, and as many different bed configurations as he wanted. David's company made almost as much money selling the various pre-configured beds as he did selling the trucks themselves since most owners bought 2-3 beds for each truck. The hydraulic PTO setup was simplicity itself, and allowed them to power virtually any implement that could be mounted on a truck. David's genius was installing a PTO-powered hydraulic power pump that was almost as powerful as the engine and a huge hydraulic fluid reservoir. The frame of the truck protected the steel hydraulic lines and the air lines from the huge air compressor that ran off engine power as well. He fitted the truck with the largest diesel saddle tanks he could, knowing that they might have to travel a long ways between fill-ups. He upgraded the diesel storage tanks at the plantation to hold 50,000 gallons of stabilized diesel total when he found out how cheap diesel was in Costa Rica. They bought refined diesel from Venezuela for around a dollar a gallon, and didn't charge \$2 worth of taxes on it like they did in the US. Within a year, they were stable well-respected members of the community.

While all this was going on, President Hatch and the rest of the Alliance hatched a plan to kill the rest of the Eldonians while they could. The Alliance was a inter-planetary trade group, and the Eldonian Conquest was interfering with trade, costing them trillions of credits per year. They were totally Laissez-faire regarding planetary governments, but the Eldonians were bad for trade, and that meant they needed to go. Eventually the Earth would be brought into the Alliance, but first we needed a stable planetary government. They decided to have a Miss World Beauty Contest, and the winner, Miss USA, a 5'10" bleached blonde bimbo with a chest by Dupont and brains by Mattel, a College Graduate (Phys Ed Major), and dumber than a box of rocks minus the rocks, was given an assignment by President Hatch personally.

"Glenda, we need you to fly to the Eldonian Home planet and give them this sealed note. The ship is programmed to deliver you, and when you push the big red button after the mission's completed, it will return you safely to Earth."

"Mr. President, I'd be honored! I always wanted to Save the Planet!"

Right before Glenda left, she got a series of shots, including a massive dose of the Eldonian Plague, which only made Humans sick like they had the flu, but killed the Eldonians, who had no resistance. She got aboard the spacecraft, and no sooner had she closed and locked the door then it disappeared from sight. 6 months later, she was standing nervously in front of the Supreme Leader of Eldon, and handed him an envelope.

Garalon the Supreme opened the envelope and read the note: "Dear Supreme Leader of Eldon, we offer this woman as a gift to you, and ask that you spare the survivors of Earth."

Garalon laughed maniacally, and ordered Glenda stripped and brought to him in his torture chambers. When she got a good look at him, she started screaming, and when she stopped, she started sneezing uncontrollably. There were thousands of the most senior members of Eldon's ruling council in the chamber who were anticipating the horrendous torture that Garalon would inflict on the young Earth Woman. As Garalon approached her bound nude body, she passed out and slumped to the floor. Garalon was just reaching her with his talons when he fell next to her. Minutes later, the rest of the Ruling Council collapsed unconscious and foaming at the mouth. A page opened the door of the room to spread the alarm, and fell dead outside, spreading the Eldonian Plague to the rest of the planet. Two weeks later, every Eldonian on the home planet was dead, and the plague quickly spread to other Eldonian worlds by freighters that didn't know they were carrying the plague. Eventually Glenda recovered her senses, and managed to get herself out of the ropes she was bound with, found her clothes, and made her way to the space craft. She breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed and locked behind her, and she pressed the red button, and a computer voice said "Auto-Destruct Sequence Activated. 29,28,27..." Chapter 21

Over the next several years, the vanilla plantation made money hand over fist, and David plowed that money back into the surrounding villages, building a new school, church, upgrading houses, and finally adopting several Costa Rican orphans from that village. Kelly finally got to be a mom, and stayed at home running the plantation and raising her family. The Adams were universally loved in Costa Rica, and they loved Costa Rica, and considered themselves Costa Ricans, even though they never surrendered their citizenship or passports. David's truck manufacturing company was turning out hundreds of trucks per month, enough that several US distributors were interested in importing them for US use. By now they were worth over \$30 million, and had recouped all the money they invested in the plantation and the factory. They even turned the old jungle track to the plantation to an excellent hard surface road, and David bought a BMW M5 Sedan that had been recommended by his Chief of Security, and had been upgraded extensively.

Unfortunately his operation had also come to the attention of the Medellin Cartel, who were interested in using his truck shipments to the US as a cover to smuggle cocaine to the US. Several weeks later, David was in his office when 3 armed men barged in, and told him to sit.

"Mr. Adams. We're here to buy your company."

"I'm sorry it's not for sale."

"We're from the Medellin Cartel, you don't have a choice."

"Want to bet?"

David had managed to get his hand under his desk drawer, and extracted the Colt Commander he kept in a desk holster just for emergencies like this. Right when he said "You want to bet?" he pulled the gun, and before any of the 3 of them blinked, he pulled the trigger 3 times, blowing the backs of their heads all over the back wall of the office. Suddenly Jorge, his Security manager came crashing in with his gun drawn, saw the three dead Cartel members and said to David "do you know who these men are?"

“They said they were from the Medellin Cartel, and they wanted to buy the business - I turned them down.”

“Madre de Dios, the guy in the middle is the brother of the cartel leader. When he finds out, you’re a dead man.”

Hours later, the phone rang. “Senior Adams?”

“Speaking.”

Suddenly David heard a scream of terror and pain then Kelly’s voice. “Tom, please help!”

“Kelly!!!!!!”

David heard the phone being snatched away from Kelly, and a vicious slap, then the first voice came back on the phone.

“If you want to see your wife alive again, do exactly as I say. Drive to the market alone. Meet a white truck next to the first fish stall. Bring the documents transferring ownership of the corporation to the Medellin Cartel. You have 1 hour.”

The phone clicked dead, and David flew into a panic. He grabbed the paperwork the drug dealers left on his desk, threw them into his briefcase and ran downstairs to his personal BMW. It looked like a stock M5, but by the time the body shop finished with it, it was a rolling tank, and not much slower than the stock unit, with run-flat tires and dozens of other little upgrades including a full-auto weapons system. He jumped in, and before Jorge could say a word, he drove off in a cloud of dust. 45 minutes later, he arrived at the market, which turned out to be an ambush. 6 Medellin Cartel shooters opened fire with AK-47's, and they were surprised when the rounds didn't cause any damage. Before they could un-sling and aim the RPG's they carried, David said “Now it's My turn!” and opened the console, and using a joystick fired short bursts from a 308 caliber machine gun, taking out all the shooters. When he was sure everyone was dead, he drove up to the back of the truck, jumped out of his BMW holding an AK-47 with a drum mounted, and a bandoleer of magazines and several grenades. He shot the lock off the back of the truck, thinking Kelly might be inside and rolled up the door. The next thing he saw made him wish he'd never opened the truck. Kelly's nude body was strung up spread eagled, her face was beaten to the point that he almost didn't recognize her, and there were burn marks and knife cuts all over her body and other signs of hours of horrible torture. Finally he looked at her neck, and saw he throat was slashed from ear to ear. Knowing he could do nothing for Kelly, and realizing he might still be in a trap, climbed down, jumped back in his BMW and drove as fast as he could to the American Embassy, where he knew he was safe.

2 days later, the police report and the coroner's report caught up with him. He was in the Charge de Affairs office when his secretary brought in the forms. It looked like she had been crying, and David knew exactly what she was feeling. He'd gone through the mourning process, now he was feeling white hot rage and the need for revenge. Realizing he still had the Iridium phone, he asked to be

excused, went to the restroom, and hit the redial button.

“Hello, David is that you?”

“It’s me.”

“God I’m sorry about Kelly.”

“That’s what I’m calling about, I know who did it, and I want them dead, and I’m willing to die in the process as long as I get them first.”

“Keep the phone on, someone will call you back. Do whatever they tell you to.”

When he walked back to the Charge de Affair’s office, the diplomat told David he could stay there indefinitely until he could safely leave the country, or whatever he wanted to do. He was white as a ghost, and had obviously read the report sitting in front of him. David snatched it up, and started reading. What he read made him physically ill. The coroner’s report detailed the brutal torture and gang rape of his wife. If anything, his rage at the Medellin Cartel burned even hotter, to the point that if he had the ability, he’d launch an ICBM and take out the entire country, just to make sure he killed every one of those G@# D@\$%^& Drug dealers!

Right then the satellite phone rang, and David answered the phone, and asked to be excused. He was shown to another office, and when he came back on the phone, he was surprised to learn that none other than President Hatch was on the phone.

“David, I’m sorry about Kelly. I can help you kill the people responsible, and you can help me and the United States while you’re at it. We’ll set you up as a 1-man hit squad, and while you’re killing drug dealers and causing commotion, we’ll use the disruption to sneak in aerial sprayers with a new biocide that kills cocoa plants. It’s selective and specific, and won’t harm anyone or anything else. Within 2 years any surviving producers will be out of business, and there won’t be any more cocaine to import. We’ll provide you with intel, resources, and some transport and back-up. I’ve got a black team set up totally outside gov’t control just for stuff like this. With your money, no one will think you didn’t buy your weapons yourself. The team is totally deniable and willing to die to accomplish the mission.”

“The last time I did something like this, when I was finished, my best friend tried to kill me.”

“I had nothing to do with it, that was the Joint Chief’s idea. Does the name Dilbert ring a bell?”

“Yeah”

“Well it should, I’m the one that called you with the account information. It was my way of saying I was sorry.”

“What about my family in Costa Rica?”

“They’re being taken care of as we speak. The Costa Rican President’s personal guard has the plantation surrounded, and your adopted kids are fine. Any Medellin shooters found in Costa Rica will be taken care of with extreme prejudice.”

Ok, Mr. President, you’ve got your man.”

“Stay at the Embassy for now. I’ll send a chopper to pick you up in a couple of days and fly you to a secure location where you’ll be trained and equipped, and link up with your team prior to infiltration of Columbia.”

“Thanks Mr. President.”

“Don’t thank me just yet, your chances of survival range from slim to none.”

“I’ve already buried 2 wives, and the last one was brutally tortured to death. I don’t care if I die, as long as the SOB’s who hurt Kelly die first.”

“I’ll do whatever I can to make sure that happens. Goodbye and Godspeed.”

“Hasta La Vista El Presidente!”

The phone went dead and David pocketed it. He walked back into the Charge’s office, and said someone was making arrangements for his safe evacuation of Costa Rica, but he’d have to stay at the Embassy for a couple more days.

2 days later, a civilian Sikorsky S-76 landed on the Embassy roof heliport, and the same Major that David met years ago got out, showed his ID to the Marine guard, then was shown to the Charge de Affairs office, where he handed him a letter, and after he read it, the diplomat said “I’m releasing you to this man here, you’re free to go.”

David gathered his bags, and whatever personal effects he had managed to gather in the last couple of days. Jorge had taken his M5 and drove fast to the plantation, packed several suitcases, loaded several other cases the plantation manager helped him load into the BMW, and drove carefully back to the Embassy. When they were ready to go, he enlisted the help of several Marines who had befriended David during his stay at the embassy to help load the helicopter. Once David, the Major, and all his baggage were aboard, the helicopter pilot grabbed pitch, climbed and flew to the east. David learned shortly after take-off that the Major’s name was Tom, and he highly suggested no David Bowie jokes.

“We’re heading to a small private island in the Gulf of Mexico where you’ll be staying and training for the next couple of months. President Hatch didn’t want to make this a suicide mission, so he’s ordered us to get you in shape and up to speed. What we’re up to could be classified as an Act of

War, but President Hatch signed an EO, so it's all legal. Now if you get caught, you can assume the least they'll do is execute you, so legal doesn't really matter. I'll be leading a 6-man team including you. You're our designated sniper with the XM-107 and the XM-109. You still have to be trained on all the entry weapons we'll be carrying, jungle navigation, survival, hand to hand combat, etc."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Meaning me personally - My daughter died of a overdose. Her boyfriend got her hooked, then one night at a party, she overdid it, took too much and killed herself. The boyfriend did prison time, but I knew that the kingpins were ultimately responsible. I volunteered for this mission once you wiped out the Eldonians. We're going deep behind enemy lines without any support except a radio for an emergency extract if needed. Don't count on the pantywaists in DC to bail us out either. Once we go, we're basically on our own."

"Ok, well they can only kill us once. I just want to get the SOB who ordered Kelly's death before I die, and ensure him a low slow painful trip to Hell!"

The chopper flew for several more hours, landed on a small island in the Southwestern Gulf. They quickly unloaded the chopper, which then refueled and flew off the island to an undisclosed location. The next morning, he met the rest of the team. He was almost twice as old as every other member of the team, and asked Major Tom about that later.

"You were added by Presidential Order. President Hatch guessed you were going to Columbia to get some revenge, and realized that you'd have a better chance with us, and we needed a sniper, but he didn't want to risk an active duty sniper in what he has been told is a suicide mission. With your 25mm XM109, you might tip the odds in our favor, since we don't have to get as close to our targets to kill them. If you could blow up their armored cars like you did to Hillary and Chuckie's limo, it will make our job much easier."

David thought about the fireball that the HEDP round created when it hit the limo, and realized that if the SOB's were to burn to death, it might give them a taste of the afterlife, and give him some satisfaction to know he didn't just shoot them, and they died without suffering. David's grin got bigger and bigger as he thought about barbecuing some Columbian Drug Lords, thinking "Payback's a Bitch!"

"David, one other thing, for this mission, you'll be my second-in-command with the rank of Captain by Presidential Order. I know you were Enlisted during Vietnam, but President Hatch decided for this mission you needed to be an officer for organizational purposes. The other 5 guys in the team are all retired Special Forces Sergeants, including 18 Delta, Charlie, and Echo. That's 2 Special Operations Weapons Sergeants, a Medical Sergeant, an Engineer Sergeant, and a Communications Sergeant. Feel free to ask their advice, and if they "suggest" something, I'd highly advise you doing it."

"Don't worry, I remember how our Company Sergeant worked back in Nam. He'd get a new butterball Lieutenant, and the ones that would listen tended to live longer than the ones that didn't."

“Since you’re carrying the big gun, we don’t want to weigh you down too much. Would you prefer a .45 caliber subgun or a pistol?”

“I’d rather have the subgun since I brought my suppressed Colt Commander. Could I get a suppressed Mini-Uzi?”

“I’ll see what I can do. Is your suppressor threaded?”

“Yeah, so I could use the same suppressor for both weapons.”

“Now you’re thinking. Once we’re dropped off, we have to hump everything we’re going to need, and that can get heavy in a triple-canopy tropical jungle, and you’re not as young as you used to be.”

“No need to remind me, the heat’s pretty intense right now. I’ve been in Costa Rica two years, and I’m still not used to the heat.”

“Why’d you leave if you don’t mind me asking?”

“After the Joint Chiefs tried to get Larry to kill me, I couldn’t risk they would send another hit man after me.”

“They never did, President Hatch ordered them to cease and desist or get fired.”

“Damn, if we’d have stayed in the states, Kelly might still be alive!”

“Then again, she might have died in a car wreck. We all die sometime.” Chapter 22

Over the next couple of months David worked out, got in shape, spent 24 hours per day with his team, and got to know them like his own family. Everyone except him and Major Tom were Hispanic, spoke several Hispanic dialects, and understood several more. Sergeant Manuel “Manny” Gonzalez, one of their Weapons Sergeants, was from the Honduras, and his family had migrated North to California. He was born in the US, so he was an automatic citizen. He inherited his Patriotism from his father, who told him how much they owed this wonderful country called Estados Unidos. Manny studied hard, graduated in the top 1/3 of his California High School, and enlisted in the US Army right out of high school, and was selected for Special Forces. The day he graduated Ranger School was the proudest day in his life according to his dad. He told David his motivation for this mission was his sister, who got involved with a drug dealer, who got her hooked on cocaine first, then when that wasn’t a big enough rush, crack cocaine. A week after he graduated from Ranger School he learned his sister died alone in a dark alley from some bad crack. She was once a beautiful vivacious girl, full of life with a great future ahead of her, but the dealer seduced her, told her what she wanted to hear, that he could make her a movie star, got her hooked, and forced her into prostitution. David could see the red hot anger in Manny’s eyes that he barely kept under the surface, and understood exactly how he felt. He told Manny his story, and they started to bond as a team, with a common goal to eradicate the Cocaine cartels, kill the kingpins, and wreck their operations.

Over the next couple of weeks, he spent time talking to the rest of the team members, starting with Sergeant Benito "Ben" Ramirez, the other Spec Ops Weapons Specialist. Ben was from Costa Rica, and had heard about David's run-in with Medellin, and told him his sad tale of the Cartel wiping out his entire village when they refused to harvest coca for the cartel. He escaped, and was adopted when he was 10 years old after living in an orphanage for 5 years by a rich New York couple who couldn't have any kids. He was raised in wealth and privilege, but never really fit in due to his skin color and accent. Finally at 18 he left home and joined the Army, and eventually got accepted for Special Forces, where he spent the next 20 years trying to make Central America a better place, only to be stymied by the Cartel, and corrupt politicians in the US and Central America.

Next he met Sergeant Gustavo "Gus" Hernandez, the Spec Ops Engineering Specialist, who went by Gus or Fingers, since he still had all 10 of them. He loved playing with explosives ever since he set off pipe bombs in the LA Barrio, and the Army turned his illegal skills into a lifelong vocation of improving life through the use of High Explosives. His story was similar to Manny's. Sergeant Oscar "Doc" Lopes was their Special Forces Medical Specialist. Of the 5 Sergeants, he was the most senior and the oldest at just a couple of years shy of his 50th birthday. Once he joined the Rangers, he spent the rest of his life in South America, patching up wounded soldiers and doing what he could for the villagers they came across. His motivation was as personal as David's. His Nicaraguan wife was killed by terrorists who were paid by Columbian Medellin drug lords to keep Nicaragua unstable so they could trans-ship huge quantities of coca paste across their country without any interference. He met and married her while he was visiting his native country while on leave, and 6 months after they were married, she was living in Nicaragua with her parents, and very pregnant with their first child when the FARC terrorists bayoneted her to death, killing her unborn son with their first thrust.

David understood why he spent so much time keeping his M19 bayonet razor sharp - he wanted to return the favor to some scumbag cocaine kingpin, even if it wasn't the same one who paid the terrorists with drug money. He carried a custom-made Mossberg shotgun based on the 935 Magnum Autoloader action with a collapsible M4 style stock, an 8-shot magazine, 20-inch cylinder bore barrel, and the 590-style bayonet lug. The synthetic forend carried a P-3 light with an imbedded momentary contact switch. He had a 6-shot sidesaddle mounted to the left side of the receiver, and a 10-shot sling. He preferred the shotgun as an entry weapon, but also carried a .45acp suppressed mini-Uzi like David did.

Sergeant Raul "Rolo" Ramirez was the quiet one of the bunch, and the hardest to get to open up. His motivation was personal. His family had been executed by the local drug lord before his eyes as he hid behind a wall of their hut. He grew up near Medellin Columbia, and knew the area intimately. He spent most of his childhood moving from orphanage to orphanage. He never got adopted, but managed to smuggle himself north to Texas when he got work as a merchant seaman and jumped ship in Galveston harbor. 2 years later, he applied for Amnesty and enlisted in the US Army. He was trained as a Communications Specialist, and volunteered for the Rangers, then soon found himself back in Columbia running black ops during the Reagan Administration's brief attempt to destabilize the corrupt governments in Central and South America. He was wounded twice and escaped with his life both times. He had been retired for 5 years, and volunteered for this mission, knowing they were finally going to get some payback.

When Major Tom realized David was as ready as he could be, they arranged covert transportation to Columbia via a USAF CV-22 Osprey that had been outfitted for covert operations. They flew in under radar, and landed 5 miles away from their first target. David was groaning under the heavy pack he carried, but was glad he wasn't one of the Weapons Specialists, whose packs were 30 pounds heavier since they had to carry all the ammo for their M60a3 machine guns. They decided the extra weight was worth it, since the .223 SAW had notoriously poor penetration and stopping power. They obtained two of the SEAL modified guns which were designed to be carried and fired by 1 very strong SEAL. They were the bulk of their firepower, and normally took point and drag, with Major Tom spelling them. David walked in the middle of the group when Tom was working point, or slack when either Manny or Ben took point. His XM-107 and 109 were cased in his pack, and he carried a Mini-Uzi with the suppressor mounted as a quick-reaction weapon. He had trained Major Tom to act as his spotter, and the rest of the team were to stay safely out of sight when David was acting as a sniper, but close enough to support them if they came under concerted attack.

David spent most of his time when he wasn't working out building two Ghillie Suits and reading the new ARMY and USMC sniper manuals. Once they were "In-country" hundreds of repressed memories came flooding back, and it was like David never left Vietnam. In a way, he was home again in the jungle, hunting the most dangerous prey on the planet. The Osprey had dropped them several miles away from a hill overlooking the hacienda of one of the biggest and most ruthless members of the Medellin Cartel, and according to Major Tom, probably the one that ordered Kelly killed. He drove a white armored Mercedes Limousine back and forth to his meetings. They were in a hurry to get to the hill, because their intel source said he was leaving the hacienda the next day at 0800 for a major cartel meeting. Between the heavy packs and the need for security, it was slow going, and David made it to the spot he was going to shoot from right after dawn, or about 0600 local. The team stayed back in the undergrowth while David assembled his XM-109 and Tom broke out their ghillie suits. Once the gun was assembled, David grabbed a 5-shot magazine, put on his ghillie suit, and they crawled into position to await the departure of the limo.

15 minutes before 8 o'clock, a McDonnell Douglass MD-500 spooled up on the launch pad, and Tom kept his eye on it. The only occupants were the pilot and the observer. David guessed they were the kingpin's eyes in the air to keep him from getting ambushed. He hoped they weren't too observant and wouldn't notice them underneath their ghillie suits. The MD-500 took off, made two laps around the hacienda, making sure the area was clear, then slowly flew down the road 500 feet up. Minutes later, the drug lord ran out to the limo, jumped in the back, and drove down the hill. David made sure they were well away from the house, lined up the crosshairs on the center of the trunk so it would puncture the gas tank and hopefully send Ernesto to hell in a raging inferno. David touched the trigger, and seconds later, the gas tank erupted into a huge fireball that completely enveloped the limo. David was glad they didn't need a second shot, and silently slithered back into the underbrush to await developments. All the activity seemed to be centered on the limo, not in locating a shooter, so David hoped the suppressor did it's job, and the noise of the helicopter covered the rest, and they thought the limo had been booby trapped. Hopefully the small 25mm entry hole would be lost in the much bigger explosive rupture of the trunk lid when the gas tank exploded. With that out of the way, the team high-fived each other, and started hiking to their next target.

David suddenly remembered one thing he hated about Vietnam. The thick, lush jungle growth could

slow the fittest man to a crawl, and he was far from the fittest man in the team. He realized why Major Tom never let him take point when he saw Manny right after Ben had relieved him on point. He looked like he'd just got done swimming with his clothes on, yet they were miles from the nearest river. Manny took that opportunity to drain one of his canteens, and David saw that he drank the whole thing down without bothering to breathe. David was very grateful that Manny and Ben were breaking trail for them, and tried as best as he could to be quiet while he hiked behind them. Over the next couple of days, more long-repressed memories flooded back, and he remembered how to move silently in the jungle, and soon was as quiet as Ben and Manny were. Still, Tom didn't let him take his turn at point telling him he needed to be the freshest member of the team because if they couldn't kill the scumbag drug lord from long-distance, they'd have to close in and do it personally, greatly increasing their chances for taking casualties. It dawned on David that in Tom's eyes, this entire team was in the Columbian jungle to support him and his rifle. If they were planning on taking out a Drug Lord at close range, they would have sent a much bigger team. David hoped he survived this mission so he could thank President Hatch personally.

Over the next couple of days, they moved several kilometers through the Columbian Jungle, built a cold camp to stay overnight, and set out the next morning to remove another Columbian Scumbag from the Gene Pool. Tom whispered to David while they were getting set up that this drug lord liked to fly his personal armed MD-500 to and from any meetings between his heavily fortified and defended hacienda and the meeting location, usually another heavily defended and fortified hacienda. Tom asked David if the 25mm round could take out a helicopter. He said it didn't have to - the explosive charge should turn anyone inside the cockpit into sushi if he hit the canopy in the right spot. They set up and waited for the kingpin to get ready to leave. They were positioned broadside-on to the left side of the chopper, so David knew that the bulk of the explosive force would nail the kingpin, and if they got the fuel tank, the chopper might burn as an added bonus. 10 minutes later, the pilot walked out, did a thorough walk around accompanied by 2 armed Security men and a bomb-sniffing dog. David noted the extra security precautions, and realized it would get harder and harder to take out the trash as they escalated their security precautions. Eventually they might be forced to use his laser designator and bomb the hacienda with a laser-guided JDAM. He doubted President Hatch would go to that extreme since it would be impossible to deny once someone analyzed the bomb fragments.

David's reverie was interrupted by the pilot getting aboard the helicopter, then starting the engine. Two minutes later, Tom positively ID'd the drug lord wearing a white Armani suit headed toward the chopper. David had already lazed the target, so he turned the laser aiming system off after locking the settings so there would be no tell-tail laser dot to give him away. He was in the zone, and waiting for the dirtbag to get in the chopper and close the door, which was the agreed signal for him to shoot. The drug lord walked up to the chopper like he didn't have a care in the world, climbed into the passenger seat on the left, and a second after he closed the door, David fired. The 25mm HEDP round impacted the plexiglass window and detonated. The shaped charge turned the door into supersonic shrapnel, and turned the drug lord into what Tom said resembled the results of putting a gold fish in a blender through his spotting scope. An instant later, a piece of white-hot shrapnel penetrated the fuel tank, and ignited the entire helicopter, which burned to the ground before the security team could put out the fire. Once they were sure that the kingpin was dead, David and Tom quietly and carefully crawled back into the jungle, and once they were out of sight, stayed low until they were on the other side of the knoll, then stood up, gave the team the good news, and Tom gave

Ben the GPS coordinates of their next target.

The team formed up, with Ben taking point, David in the #2 spot followed by Doc then Rolo, who luckily didn't have to carry one of those huge Vietnam-era radios, instead he had a satellite transceiver that was heavily encrypted and totally directional, and an encrypted handtalkie to call in reinforcements. Since he was so lightly loaded, he carried 2 spare belts for the M-60's in his pack. No one in the team knew the identity of their backup, only that someone in Columbia would monitor that radio frequency 24/7 until they were out of Indian Country, and send whatever help he could. Major Tom thought that they were CIA-trained mercs, but he really didn't care, and prayed he never needed their help. Gus walked 6 paces behind Major Tom followed by Manny who was bringing up the rear, armed with the other M60. Every so often, Manny would stop, turn around and listen to make sure no one was following them. He also did his best to cover their trail without making any noise. Major Tom was glad to hear his team moving through the heavy jungle growth virtually silently, and he didn't have to remind anyone about noise discipline.

Ben found a stream, stopped, took a knee, and hand signed "stop" and "down" while he checked things out. Once he was sure it was secure, they formed a security perimeter while Doc filled all their canteens with a Katadyn Pocket water filter. At 1 liter per minute, it wasn't fast, but would filter down to 0.2 micron absolute, which should stop 99% of all viruses, plus bacteria and anything else in the water with the Activated Charcoal cartridge he added to it. Doc knew the carbon post-filter cartridge was overkill, but knew that if there was anything in the water that tasted funny, the carbon filter would get it, and the rest of the team would be more likely to drink good tasting water, which was why he took the time to use the filter instead of the horrible-tasting iodine solution in his Polar Pure. Each member of the team had their own bottle of Polar Pure in their canteen cover for emergency water purification, but Doc kept a separate supply since he was responsible for the health of the whole team as the team hygienist. It took him nearly 30 minutes to refill all their canteens and water carriers, but it was worth it since he had a source of clean flowing water, they were in a relatively secure area, and he could use the Katadyn filter, which made everyone in the team happy.

Once they got the water taken care of, Tom pushed them to make up for lost time. They needed to cover 10 klicks in 4 days so they were in position to bag their next target.

3 days later, they received an intel update that the Dirtbag in question had upgraded his security, and wasn't leaving his hacienda for anything. Major Tom gathered the team, and they quietly discussed their options. David wanted to have the USAF drop a JDAM using his laser designator, but Tom said that wouldn't happen since the President wanted to keep plausible deniability. Manny suggested an Anti-tank Missile, but Tom said it would have to be a foreign missile to maintain deniability, which eliminated two of the best ones for the job. Finally Gus suggested the MILAN anti-tank missile, it was light, packed a bigger punch than the Dragon, was a two-man set-up, and best of all they were trained to use it. With a max range of 2,000 meters, they were pretty sure they could find a suitable hide, blow up the hacienda with the dirtbag in it, and move on to the next target. Rolo set up the satellite system, and Tom joked "ET Phone Home, get some more toys!" Once the satellites connected, he started typing on his keyboard, then pressed Enter. 2 minutes later, a reply appeared on his screen, and he gave the team the good news. "They're going to air-drop a Milan and some other stuff tomorrow. We need to set up a drop zone by first light tomorrow. Let's locate a position,

call it in, then get some shut-eye.”

They checked the topo map, located a suitable clearing 2 clicks away, and once they got there, they decided it was a suitable drop zone, prepared the drop zone with a locator beacon that they'd turn on 2 minutes before the scheduled drop, set security, called in the GPS coordinates of the drop zone, started dinner, then got comfortable for the evening. The next morning at 0758, Major Tom turned on the locator, and 2 minutes later, they heard the roar of a low-flying turboprop. Right as the Osprey passed overhead, a package was kicked off the rear ramp, and floated right into the center of the clearing attached to a parachute. The Osprey didn't climb, but slowly turned for home, maintaining radio silence. Inside the crate were 2 MILAN missiles, the launch assembly, and a small box for David with a note.

“Barretts thought you'd like to try out these new high-explosive rounds. They're made with a new more powerful high-explosive, and are fragmentary rounds instead of AP. The hardened tip will still punch through an inch or so of armor, but have an effect like a miniature grenade.”

Bravo Zulu,

The Prez

David had to laugh, here President Hatch was all worried about Plausible Deniability, and here he goes and signs a note to him. He threw the note in the fire, and made sure it burned completely. Tom nodded approvingly, while Manny and Ben read the Technical Manual for the MILAN missiles.

Chapter 23

Before it got full dark, they distributed the components of the MILAN Anti-tank rockets. David got to carry a spare rocket, since it was the lightest component. The next morning, they were up at first light walking stealthily through the jungle. It took them several hours to cover the remaining distance to the Hacienda. Major Tom was NOT happy, he wanted to shoot at first light, then scoot, but he knew they couldn't stay another night so close to the kingpin's hacienda, they'd eventually be discovered. He remembered his orders to kill as many kingpins as possible, even if he had to sacrifice the team. He just hoped the backup team was doing it's job, and had seeded the entire coca growing region with the microbes that were supposed to destroy the coca plants, and not harm any other plants. He didn't know how they did it, he was just glad they finally came up with something to eradicate the scourge of cocaine once and for all. While he was ruminating on the far side of the knoll, Manny and Ben were setting up the system on a knoll that was just barely within range of the missile. Manny was scanning the hacienda through his binoculars, and started laughing.

“Hey Benito, check this out, this stupid scumbag has a huge above-ground propane tank - talk about Estupido! Let's target the tank, and hopefully get a massive secondary to take the rest of the hacienda down.”

They finished setting up the missile, and Ben got behind the sight since he had more experience with the system. He placed the piper right on the tank, and squeezed the trigger. Since the target was stationary, he didn't have to touch the tracking device, and allowed the missile to burn in. 1 second

later, the propane tank blew up in a massive fireball, wrecking the hacienda. By the time they had the remaining missile and the launcher torn down, the house was fully involved. Manny thought he saw signs of pursuit, then saw the missile had left a visible smoke trail in the humid jungle air, and realized that shooting a missile at the hacienda might not have been the best idea he ever came up with. They ran back to the team as fast as they could and Manny told Tom that he was pretty sure their firing location was spotted, and they could expect pursuit. Unknown to any of them, the house was empty, and the kingpin's men were hiding in the jungle waiting for word to surround and eliminate the American hit team. One of kingpin's lieutenants spotted the smoke trail from the missile, and called it in. Soon hundreds of armed men were headed toward the coordinates.

5 minutes later their position was buzzed by a helicopter, and Tom knew that they had been located. He grabbed the handtalkie from Rolo, and said "Mayday...Mayday...Mayday... We've been compromised and expect heavy reception in 20-30 mikes. Need emergency exfil."

The silence on the other end of the radio told Tom everything he needed to know - They'd been cut off, and there was no support. Tom started swearing, and David grabbed him and said "What's wrong?"

"We've been cut off - there was supposed to be someone on the other end of that handtalkie 24/7, and there's no one there."

"Try the satellite comms."

Rolo quickly set up the satellite comms, then started swearing when he got an error message. He looked it up, and started swearing profusely in Spanish. That brought the rest of the team in a hurry. "Those SOB's in DC cut us off from the satellite, they changed the codes."

When David heard that, he knew in his heart that the Joint Chiefs finally figured out how to kill him. He was the first to snap out of his lethargy, and started assembling the XM-109. Tom asked him what the hell he was doing, and David said "we can make a stand here, or we can run across the country with no support and die tired. Now I know how Custer felt!" The rest of the team took David's lead, and started digging fighting holes and setting up the two M60's. Once everyone was set up, David and Tom gathered the team. "OK, except for the one remaining MILAN missile we have, I've got the biggest weapon. If they're stupid enough to drive their trucks within a mile of this knoll and I can see them, 1 round should blow up the truck and hopefully the dirtbags riding in it. Gentlemen, it's been nice knowing you."

David shook each team member's hand, then went back to work digging his fighting hole. They didn't have enough time to build bunkers or dig deep holes, so they did what they could, set up behind the biggest fallen logs they could find, and dug as deep as they could. They had a surprise for the attackers, along with the MILAN missiles and David's new rounds was a case of a prototype 40mm grenade for their grenade launchers. It was an anti-personnel grenade designed to air-burst 6 feet above the ground, and contained a shrapnel load of serrated wire wound around the explosive charge like the M61 grenade. Manny split the crate of grenades among the whole team, giving David and

Doc a dozen hand grenades instead of M203 grenades since they didn't have an M203. David suddenly wished he'd picked something with more range than the Mini-Uzi, then he remembered he had the XM-109, and if he ran out of ammo for it, he could swap the XM-107 barreled receiver and fire 50-caliber rounds until he ran out of ammo. He checked his ammo supply, and it wasn't good. 30 25mm XM-109 rounds including 20 of the new HE-AP rounds, and 50 BMG-50 Match rounds. He hoped the dummies would stop their trucks within range of his rifle, not realizing that he could hit a truck at almost a mile. They were just finishing up their fighting holes when they heard the rumble of diesel trucks. David knew it was time to get to business, and Tom broke out the spotting scope, spotting for him to locate targets in the thick jungle. Tom made 2 sweeps of the jungle when he saw a line of 10 trucks climbing the hill. "David, they're climbing the hill in trucks, they ought to be in range in a minute."

David looked up the road, spotted the lead truck, and decided they were in range now, loaded a magazine full of 25mm HEDP rounds since he only had 10 left, and targeted the fuel tank of the lead truck. Before he could fire, their last MILAN anti-tank missile streaked downhill, and connected with the lead truck, turning it into a flaming wreck, and killing the kingpin who insisted on riding in the lead truck to personally supervise the destruction of the American team that had killed several drug lords, and destroyed his hacienda. The drug kingpin was looking up the hill toward the American team, and saw the anti-tank missile streak off its launcher headed right for him, and had barely a second to scream before the missile impacted the truck, and the explosion blew him and the truck into unrecognizable fragments. Seeing the first truck was destroyed, David targeted the last truck in the convoy. His first shot must have been a lucky shot, he hit the truck in the fuel tank, immolating the driver and his gunner. Seconds later, the truck was fully engulfed in flame, and the campesinos who survived were bailing off the back. While the convoy burned, David coldly and dispassionately fired the rest of his 25mm ammo into the convoy, hitting the fuel tank of each truck, and hopefully killing the majority of the people who were trying to kill his team.

Tom was grateful that they had whittled down the attackers by 30%, but the rest of them were really mad, and started hiking up the hill. David quickly mounted the 50 caliber barreled receiver once he fired his last 25mm round, and got ready to engage any survivors that showed any inclination to attack them. Every time someone got the gaggle of campesinos organized and headed up the hill, David shot him with a BMG-50 round. Soon the leaderless campesinos either dug in, or turned and walked away from the sound of the guns. David thought he might actually survive this battle until he heard the dreaded sound of a machine gun firing behind him, and the dying screams of Manny, Ben, and Rolo as the enemy's 30-caliber bullets tore into their bodies. David took that opportunity to get down in his fighting hole, which saved his life, since the machine gun's second set of bursts killed Doc when he tried to save Manny and Ben, then killed Gus when he tried to return fire. David almost out of 50-caliber ammo, but realized if he didn't find the shooter, he was dead as soon as he moved, so he set his XM-107 up on the opposite side of his fighting hole, and dialed down the magnification to improve the image intensification in the darker jungle behind them. David finally spotted the machine gunner when he opened up again and wounded Major Tom in the leg.

With the image intensification, the tracers looked like red meteors, and David quickly located the gun, then remembering that he needed to wreck the gun in case there was someone with him that could

shoot it, steadied his breathing as best as possible, and right as the image steadied briefly on the receiver, he squeezed the trigger, wrecking the gun, and mortally wounding the gunner. David scanned the rest of the area around the gunner, and couldn't see anyone. His rangefinder said the gun was 500 yards away, so he felt reasonably safe getting up and moving around, since only a 30-caliber rifle would have a good chance of reaching that far to hit him. Still he low-crawled to Major Tom, who by now had slit the leg of his BDU pants and applied his battle dressing. Tom was able to move, but obviously in pain, and said to David "We've got to move before dark, or we're history. First we've got to strip the bodies of any thing we can use, and put any equipment we can't bring with us in the bottom of a deep fighting hole, put half a block of C-4 on top, then put their bodies on top, then a Claymore mine wired with a trip wire underneath the top body so if they move the bodies, they blow sky high and hopefully take whoever was checking out the bodies with them." David was in the better shape of the two of them, so he got the enviable task of dragging the bodies to the deepest fighting hole after stripping their bodies of anything useful. He put both M60's, any remaining ammo, and his beloved rifle in the bottom of the hole, then Tom carefully placed the C-4 charge and wired it to blow when the Claymore went off. David carefully laid the bodies on top of the charge to tamp the explosion and guarantee the destruction of the equipment. Tom positioned the Claymore under Manny's body, then connected a trip-wire detonator to Manny's LBV so if the body was moved the claymore underneath him would explode and detonate the C-4 underneath it.

Doc's Uzi still worked, so David gave it to Tom, and split Doc's ammo between them, and gave Tom all of Doc's magazines. Gus's M4/M203 still worked, so they rounded up all the ammo, magazines, and 40mm cartridges they could and divided them up. David loaded all the empty mags he could find out of the combat packs he located in Gus and Rolo's packs and stuck them in his LBV. Between the two of them they had 6 40mm rounds, 600 rounds of 5.56mm SS-109, and 360 rounds of .45acp between the Uzi 30-rd magazines and David's P-14 magazines. They were dangerously low on ammo, wounded, and over 50 miles from the nearest major city. Their plan was to head North, hopefully locate a friendly village, and beg, borrow, or steal a ride to a major city where they could make contact with some of Major Tom's friends stateside who could arrange their transport out of Columbia. Once they loaded their LBV's and their backpacks with everything they could carry and still make good time, they set out North to get at least 4 klicks away from the ambush site. David had found a suitable branch, and with a few wacks from Manny's machete, made Major Tom a crutch to take the weight off his injured leg. Tom and David split up several items in Doc's pack, including IV's, antibiotics, and morphine for Tom's leg wound. He didn't want any morphine until they were safely away, but he did take an antibiotic before they left, knowing how fast wounds could get infected in the jungle. Slowly they walked and hobbled north until they ran out of daylight, and made a cold camp.

The next morning David was making coffee in his canteen cup when he was surprised by the noise of gunfire, and felt bullets hitting his chest. Strangely, it wasn't as painful as he thought. He looked over, and Major Tom was shot too. They both slumped over, and David saw Major Tom take out a grenade, pull the pin, and roll over with the spoon resting between him and the ground. David realized what he was doing, and copied him. "Vaya Con Dios, Tom" David whispered. "My name's Larry, Tom's a legend, like Tom Cruise. I was a David Bowie fan, and chose Major Tom for my legend, since I was a Special Forces Major before I retired. I picked Tom Cruise for you because I thought you'd think it was funny, and I knew it would work in a reverse-psychology way since no one would believe a real CIA agent would be called Tom Cruise."

“Ok Larry, Vaya con Dios mi amigo!”

David’s last thoughts were of Kelly, then he closed his eyes.

Chapter 24

***Several Years Later - Costa Rican Jungle near Limon ***

Carlos Adams stood and stretched, his back was tired from laying on his shooting mat for hours in the hot Costa Rican sun while shooting at the 1,000 yard bull’s-eye on his private range. He fingered the crucifix on the leather thong around his neck, and remembered the vow to avenge the deaths of his adopted mother and father. So far he had done pretty well. He was only 25, and already a Colonel in the Costa Rican Special Forces in charge of a paramilitary company that didn’t exist as far as the Costa Rican military was concerned, which received most of it’s funding from the trust fund his dad set up before he left and never returned. Carlos was befriended by Jorge, David’s Security Manager at the plant, who took him under his wing, and watched over him as he assumed the reigns of power on his 18th birthday. David and Kelly had legally adopted him, his twin sister Maria, and the rest of his family 6 months after they settled in Costa Rica. When they were adopted, Carlos and Maria were almost 15 and the other 6 kids varied in age from 6 to 12. Their parents had been killed when their village was attacked by FARC guerillas, and they made their way to the nearby plantation where they were taken in by the village.

On his 18th birthday, 6 months after his Dad was declared missing and presumed dead, Jorge handed him the summary sheet of Kelly’s coroner’s report, and a note from President Hatch detailing what David was up to when he died. The combination kindled a huge bonfire in Carlos that still burned bright. He turned the business over to Maria, who was as competent to run it as he was, and joined the Costa Rican Army Special Forces as a Sniper. David had taught him everything he knew about long-distance shooting, and the art of being a sniper while they practiced daily at their 1,000 yard range with their personal XM-107/109 rifles. He read every book on long-distance shooting, every military manual he could get, and when he joined the Costa Rican Army, he was immediately selected for their Recon and Sniper schools. Within 2 years, he was a Special Forces Officer, and was racking up quite a score of dead FARC terrorists. With success came promotions, and finally an interview with the President of Costa Rica.

“Colonel Adams, you’ve done an excellent job ridding Costa Rica of Terrorists, but that doesn’t solve the problem. I’ve had an idea to take care of the problem permanently, but it would involve resigning your commission and entering into the world of black operations. The government doesn’t have the resources to fund a first-class anti-terrorist team, but I checked with the bank of Limon, and the Bank President said you had a trust fund worth over \$10 million just sitting there.”

“Yes Mr. President.”

“The interest alone on that kind of money could equip a company of around 100 well-trained and equipped men to finish the job. Specifically I want you to infiltrate Nicaragua and take out their base

of operations and leadership. With them out of the way, the Nicaraguan Army should be able to suppress the rebellion, and that should stop FARC guerillas from crossing into Costa Rica.”

“Mr. President, isn’t that an act of war?”

“They’re already invading Costa Rica. We’re not attacking Nicaragua directly, we’re eliminating the FARC terrorist organization, which is a direct threat to our country.”

“Why didn’t we do this before with the Costa Rican Army?”

“We couldn’t, for exactly the reason you mentioned. We’d be crucified in the International Press as invaders and collaborators with the Nicaraguan Army. Will you do it?”

“Si El Presidente!”

Carlos stood at attention and saluted, and the President returned his salute. “One last thing Colonel Adams. Keep this radio handy. If you receive a transmission on it from Archangel, treat whatever they tell you as if it came from the Pope!”

“Thanks Mr. President.” The president handed Carlos the radio, who saluted again, and as soon as the President returned his salute, he turned and marched out of the office.

Carlos drove back to his plantation, and several days later, ex-Special Forces men just started showing up at his plantation saying the President sent them, then the radio squawked, and he answered it “Digame.”

“Colonel Adams, this is Archangel. I’m sending you some people. They’re all US trained, and I’ll be sending some special stuff you can’t get in Costa Rica. I knew your father, and I’m sorry about your loss. I’ll be calling you from time to time.”

Carlos was about to thank him when the dial tone told him whoever was on the other end had hung up. He closed the lid and pocketed the phone.

2 weeks later, a container ship docked in Limon, and a dozen 18-wheelers escorted by several armed deuce and a halves drove up the road to Carlos’ vanilla plantation. They were met by a bunch of very tough looking men armed with full-auto weapons. The driver of the deuce and a half leading the convoy stepped out unarmed and said “Archangel sends his regards.” Once Carlos heard the codeword, he told his men to stand down. Carlos walked up to the truck wearing a Glock 21 on his pistol belt, dressed in jungle fatigues and wearing a black beret with a badge on it with crossed daggers, and their motto underneath “Libre vivo o dado” meaning “Live Free or Die”. He was confused when 6 hispanics stepped out of the back of the truck wearing jungle fatigues, he was expecting a bunch of white gringos. Finally a white man with blonde hair and a very intense thousand-yard stare climbed out of the passenger seat, marched over to Colonel Adams, and saluted, even though he out-ranked him by 6 months. “Colonel Adams, Captain Tom Riggs US Navy.” Carlos

returned the salute then said "What brings you to Costa Rica?"

"Archangel sent us. We've all been sheep-dipped, and have Top Secret Clearances. I was a SEAL before I resigned my commission to work for the President, and the rest of these gentlemen are all Special Forces trained. Archangel heard what your President was planning, and decided to send us, some surplus vehicles, helicopters, a couple of armed Predators, and a dozen containers of stuff you might want."

Carlos looked over Tom's shoulder and the 18-wheelers were towing a 40-foot shipping container, and he hoped they were fully loaded. Seeing the look on Carlos' face, Tom asked him if he wanted to take a look. Carlos grinned, and followed Tom to the back of the first truck. Tom took out a key, and unlocked a high-security lock, and opened the doors. Tom jumped up, and extended his hand to Carlos, who climbed up next to him, and marveled at the sight. There were crates piled floor to ceiling, and stacked in as tight as possible. Tom reached down, detached the manifest from the crate, and handed it to Carlos.

150 M4 SOPMOD kits w/ M203

1.5M 5.56 NATO SS-109

120K M406 40mm Grenade HE

60K M433 " " HEDP

45K M781 " " Practice

3K M585 " " White Star Cluster

3K M713 " " Ground Marker Red

3K M715 " " Green

3K M716 " " Yellow

48 M249 SAW (LMG)

10K 200rd linked belts 5.56mm Ammo

200 spare barrels/service kits for M249

48 FN MAG / M240G

10K 200rd linked belt 7.62 NATO

200 spare barrels/service kits

6 Mk19 mod3 40mm AGL

5K 48-rd boxes M430 HEDP

5K 32-rd boxes M1001 Cannister Round 40mm

5K 48-rd boxes M918 Practice/Marker Round 40mm

6 tripod mounts w/ kits

6 pintle mounts w/ kits

50 AT4 LMAW

500 M72 LAW

12K M61 Fragmentation Grenade

12K M67 Fragmentation Grenade
24K M69 Practice Grenade
12K MK3A2 Concussion Grenade
12K AN-M8 HC White Smoke Grenade
12K M84 Stun Grenade

Carlos finished reading the list and said to Tom “What am I supposed to do with all this?”

“Shoot the bad guys! By the way, the vehicles, helicopters and predators are back at the dock, along with some other stuff we brought. ”

“That’s about 5 years worth of ammo at our current operational pace.”

“ That’s about how long the President felt it would take to eradicate the FARC guerillas, and there’s more if you need it. We’re here officially as advisers, but we really wanted to be team members. Your people know the terrain and the locals, we just wanted in to kill the bad guys. You see, my Dad lead the mission that your dad was on in Columbia. I didn’t find out for years, then a friend of my dad’s told me what he knew. Dad posted a letter before he left, it was pretty cryptic, but if you read behind the lines, you realized that he was working a black ops project in Columbia, and the only target worth 6 men’s lives were the drug lords. They finally eradicated their crops years later, and they went out of business. The other guys in my team were related to men on that team, and we’ve kind of vowed to help whoever is working in the jungle to finish the job. The FARC guerillas are the last remnant of that evil alliance. Since you’ve got a hunting license and no bag limit, we’d like to join you.”

“Ok, we could always use the help. See my aide about housing and I need to get someone to store all this stuff.”

Tom shook Carlos hand, then as they walked past the deuce and a half they were riding in, Tom reached in and pulled a strange looking weapon out of the cab that reminded Carlos of an M4, but much bigger.

“What the heck is that?”

“My personal weapon. I was a point man for years in the Teams before I was promoted to the CO of Team 5 in Coronado where I served 6 years until I resigned my commission and went to work for the President.”

“Con Permisso?”

Tom safed the weapon and handed it to Carlos. “It’s a Prototype Benelli M1 Super 90 with a 14-inch barrel, an M4 style collapsible stock, and an M203a3 40mm grenade launcher mounted to the magazine tube where the forend used to be. It fires 3" Magnum 12 gauge shells out of either a 6 or 10-round box magazine, or a 15-round drum magazine. As you can see, it’s either Full Auto or Semi-auto depending on which way you set the 3-position safety.”

Carlos hefted the weapon, then shouldered it, and saw the ghost-ring sight and the tritium-enhanced front rifle sight lined up naturally in his sight. He held the gun with his left hand on the M203 grip and his right wrapped around the pistol grip of the M4-style collapsible stock.

“Muy Bueno, but it’s kind of heavy.”

“The weight keeps the front end down when I fire it Full Auto - 6 rounds of Flechette ammo could take out a whole squad of bad guys with 1 burst. The 15-round drum magazine contains 00 Buck loads. I carry 4 6-round mags full of flechettes and 6 10-round magazines full of buckshot, plus 2 15-round drums full of buckshot in the big pouch on back. The rest of my ammo pockets hold 40mm HEDP rounds for the M203. They give me a 200-yard range, and the shotgun is lethal out to 50 yards. I really should load a 6-round mag full of slugs to give me a 100-yard range, but I was walking point when I carried it, and rarely had a chance to shoot much past 25 yards with it in the jungle. It was usually someone popping up right in front of me with an AK in his hands, and I just shot first.”

“Can you get some more? I’m sure our Point men would appreciate something like this.”

“Let me make a few calls, I’ve got some other stuff in mind too that someone overlooked.”

After Tom introduced the rest of his team to Carlos, Carlos gave them a tour of his compound. “Nice setup you have here Carlos!”

“That’s what happens when you have an unlimited budget. Dad left me a \$10 Million trust fund, plus the profit from the truck manufacturing company and the vanilla plantation. My sister Maria is running the truck company by herself, and she’s got a \$10 million trust fund too. The rest of my family is running the plantation here, and that leaves me time to be a professional soldier.”

“I guess this means we won’t need the President’s slush fund for this operation?”

“Slush fund? What do you mean?”

“Money they took from the drug dealers banks. They seized their accounts before they sprayed their fields with a specific herbicide that killed just the coca plants.”

“You might want to tap the account for operating expenses that we weren’t counting on - I really wasn’t planning on touching the principal of my trust fund yet. If you’re ordering equipment, some anti-tank missiles like Milans or TOWs or Dragons would be nice. Even if we’re not up against tanks, they make great bunker busters.”

“Yeah, but they weigh a ton, and they’re a bear to slog through a jungle trail. You’d be far better off using RPG’s or LAW rockets for that.”

“You’re probably right, I like the stand-off distance those missiles give you.”

“Besides, with the choppers, you can have a couple of heliborne air-assault teams that are more

heavily armed since they're not leg infantry. Basically you can use the infantry to locate the enemy and send the air assault team in to take them out. The Super Cobras all by themselves can take out just about any kind of fortification the FARC could build in Nicaragua. The President's given you some Bradleys and Hummers, but they're more for transporting troops up any available roads than for fire support. Still, half the Hummers carry the MK-19 grenade launcher, and the other half carry the Ma Deuce, and they're all ballistically armored. We brought a couple of trucks, but since you manufacture them, I can assume you have access to all the trucks you need?"

"What we really need are fuel trucks and trailers. Fuel depots are few and far between. We need to carry twice as much fuel as we'd ordinarily need. Hopefully you brought a heavy-lift chopper to fly in a couple of fuel bladders if necessary?"

"We figured you might need some heavy lift, so we included a CH-47F Chinook"

"Great, if I remember, that can haul over 20 thousand pounds internally, plus another 20 thousand on the cargo hook system."

"Also, it can carry up to 33 passengers, so you could fit a platoon plus their equipment in there if you needed to, and still haul stuff underneath. If you need a tactical fueller, I can get you a M978 HEMTT with a 2500 gallon fuel tank and dispensing hardware that can fill all your tactical vehicles and your helicopters."

"That would be great - go ahead and order it. Glad you guys are on our side!"

Carlos and Tom walked into his Command Center, and saw a huge map of Costa Rica and Nicaragua on the wall. Tom walked over to it, and studied it for several minutes, then called Carlos over.

"Do you think you could set up an advance base right here, just inside Costa Rica?"

"How come?"

"It would cut down on transporting fuel and equipment across Costa Rica, and keep everything close at hand. Just moving your forward base 150 miles North, closer to Nicaragua would save time transiting Costa Rica and increase your operational tempo."

"It would also increase the risk of attack from FARC guerillas!"

"I've got a couple of things to make the base secure - don't worry about that."

"Ok Tom, if you say so, that would cut down considerably on time and fuel crossing between the border and our base here in central Costa Rica."

Carlos picked up his cell phone, and dialed a number. "El Presidente, Senor Riggs suggested we locate north of Pavas. Ok, thank you very much."

Once he hung up, he turned to Tom "There's a huge abandoned plantation just north of Pavas that would make an excellent base. We'd need to fly a bulldozer in and build a road to it, but now that we've got all this heavy lift capability, it will be worth it. He said it was about 100 square miles and only about 15 miles from the border. If you could make it secure, it would be a perfect base of operations."

Tom looked at where Carlos was pointing on the map, wrote down the UTM coordinates, and started making some phone calls. Later that afternoon, the Kiowa Warrior checked the area out, and there weren't any guerillas in the neighborhood, so they flew in a huge bulldozer, cleared enough space out of the jungle for a landing pad for the helicopters, then started cutting a road back to Pavas. As the bulldozer made room, Carlos started lifting in men and equipment to secure the base, and make it quickly ready for occupation. Tom and his men helped out too, and within a month, they had a very well built forward base including several underground 20 thousand gallon tanks full of JP-8, which all their helicopters and diesel trucks could run on OK, tents and bunkers for the men, a mess hall, showers and other creature comforts, a small MASH setup, and shelters for the vehicles and maintenance crews. They surrounded the entire compound with 3 layers of concertina wire with minefields between them, and the entire area was secured by IR and other detectors. Once they got set up, Carlos realized another benefit - this location was in a cooler, higher region of the country. That and the fact that they were 150 miles closer to the border meant that the helicopters could penetrate deeper into Nicaraguan airspace with their on-board fuel and loiter longer would help immensely. After talking to Tom, they decided to split their forces in thirds, take 2 Platoons into Nicaragua at a time, leave 1 behind as a reaction force, and the other as a Base Security force. Base Security basically amounted to R&R since the sensors and concertina plus the Predators flying overhead eliminated any chance of FARC guerillas getting close enough to hurt them. When they realized how dense the Nicaraguan jungle was near the San Juan River, they decided to use the Bradleys and Hummers for convoy security to keep the fuel tanks full, and the supplies moving from their rear base to their forward base. The Bradleys covered the dirt track from their forward base to the road just outside San Jose and the Hummers worked from San Jose to their rear base outside Limon. That way they were both within easy round-trip range of their base without needing to refuel.

With their base secure, and their vehicles busy running convoys back and forth from Limon, that left the Blackhawks, Kiowa Warriors and Chinook to transport anything they needed into the Nicaraguan jungle, and the Super Cobras to act as an airborne artillery, and armed escort to the Blackhawks when they were flying the reaction force in to either save a platoon under fire by a superior force, or engage a larger force that had been located by the in-country platoon and attempt to destroy it. Each MH-60K Blackhawk could carry an infantry squad and all their gear into combat, and protect them during infiltration and exfiltration with their door guns. The Kiowa Warriors were armed for close-support/self-defense with 2 pods full of LCPK rockets and 2 50-caliber machine guns, but their main job was reconnaissance.

The Chinook was a big unarmed target, but it's heavy lift capacity was greatly needed in the jungle when sometimes the only way into an area was by air, and they needed to fly everything in. The Blackhawks could carry over 8,000 pounds of cargo or up to 14 troops, but the Chinook could carry over 20,000 pounds or up to 33 troops. With the Super Cobras acting as security, the Chinook pilots

felt pretty safe. Most of the time the Cobras left their Hellfire and TOW missiles back at the base, and loaded up with LCPK rockets since they could carry more of them, and they rarely needed the huge warheads of the other two missiles. The 20mm chain gun could take care of anything the LCPK rockets couldn't, and that still left room on the stub wingtips for a pair of Sidewinders for air-to-air defense.

Once they made sure they had all contingencies covered, Carlos and Tom sent the Kiowa Warriors into Nicaragua looking for targets. They didn't have long to wait. Chapter 25

Several days later, a convoy drove from Limon to Pavas, then on to their forward base. The Hummers protected the convoy from Limon to San Jose, and the Bradleys took over there. Even though the guerillas knew that they were transporting military supplies, the escort was heavy enough to keep the remaining guerillas from attacking it. The Bradleys were invulnerable to the small arms they had. They were out of RPG's, and without the funds from their drug-dealing patrons in Columbia, they had no money to buy more. They followed the convoy from a safe distance, and were thoroughly dismayed at what they saw when they located the new base. Their leader knew the base was invulnerable to their existing weapons, and even a suicide squad couldn't get close enough to do enough damage to make it worth it. All the fuel tanks were underground, the helicopters were stored in sandbagged revetments, and the triple-zone perimeter was outside of rocket range of the base. He was sure the zones between the concertina were mined. Finally, he decided he needed to get back to Nicaragua and report this new development to his commander.

The fuel trucks filled their underground fuel tanks full of 100K gallons of JP-8, then the empty trucks were escorted back to Limon for the next run. They quickly unloaded the container truck and stored the contents in their armory bunker. Tom took the packing list in to Carlos to show him what they received. The shipment was courtesy of the US Government, and contained a whole bunch of stuff to make their jobs easier like encrypted tactical radios with lip mikes and ear buds that were compatible with their load bearing gear and ballistic armor. What surprised Tom was a note from Winchester saying they'd shipped a crate of new shotgun ammo for his point-man gun that he'd have to check out to believe. The binary explosive they used was fairly insensitive, but the detonator was fairly sensitive, so they had to handle them carefully. Binary explosives were the second most potent explosives known to man next to nuclear explosives, and a 1oz charge would have the same effect as almost a pound of C-4. Tom couldn't wait to check out the new rounds. The next line down indicated they also received 20 copies of Tom's semi-auto Benelli short-barreled shotgun with the M203 launcher. Evidently Benelli had done a short production run for further testing. Tom located a box of 5 of his new high-explosive rounds, an empty 5- round magazine, and went to go set up a demonstration of the power of the new round. Two hours later, he called Carlos on the radio, and asked him to have his command assemble at shooting range, he wanted to show them something.

When everyone was assembled, Carlos saw that instead of paper targets, Tom had staked out a large Javelina, a rusted-out truck, and a 4 foot by 4 foot sheet of ½" armor steel. Once everyone was assembled, he began.

"Gentlemen, We received a new shipment from the United States, and part of that shipment was 20 copies of the shotgun I'm now holding, and a new high-explosive ammo. I wanted you all to see this

at once so I wouldn't have to keep repeating myself. 100 yards is a bit far for this weapon, but for safety reasons, I didn't want to try it any closer with these rounds. I'm going to fire 1 round into each target, and you can see for yourself what they can do."

Tom turned, loaded the 5-round mag full of the aluminum-cased HE rounds, and extended the buttstock of his shotgun, and took careful aim at the Javelina that was quietly nosing around on the ground. He squeezed the trigger, and less than a second later, the pig went up in a huge explosion, and cloud of red mist. Next he targeted the truck, and the round struck the engine block, further destroying the truck. The front hood and fenders flew off and landed 20 yards away, and the rest of the truck was burning fiercely from the diesel fuel the explosion ignited. Finally he shot the steel plate, and as soon as the round struck, it blew a 2-foot hole in the armor. Tom was impressed, even the 40mm HEDP round couldn't do that to ½" armor plate. He hoped Winchester could ship some more rounds, they were the Cat's PJs! With the demonstration over, Carlos dismissed the troops, and walked up with Tom to check the damage on the truck. While the block was still intact, they could see a hole blown into the block which would have wrecked the motor. Everything under the hood was damaged, and the rest of the truck showed the results of being fully engulfed in flames.

"I wonder what the range of this new round would be?"

"With a long-barreled shotgun, maybe 200 yards. I was having troubles holding my aim on the little Javelina at 100 yards, and I wouldn't engage anything inside 50 yards with the round. As you can see, the hood and fenders of the truck landed over 20 yards away. Let's go take a look at the armor plate."

They walked over to the plate, which was still smoking hot, and Tom took out a tape measure to record the diameter of the hole. "Yup, right at 2 feet even - this round is amazing. I need to get hold of Winchester and give them the good news, then we need to get this new ammo distributed to your troops."

They walked back to Carlos' office, and made a list of the people Carlos wanted Tom to train to use the new Shotgun/grenade launcher. His company was divided up into 6-member teams, and each team had a point man, which would account for 17 of his guns, which left 3 of them. 3 of his Platoon Sergeants asked for 1 after the demonstration, and Carlos agreed once he saw they would have 3 left. Carlos contacted the people on the list, and had them meet Tom at the range so he could teach them how to use the new weapon. Carlos would have loved to have 1 of them, but realized his job was now to command, not to get directly involved in the fighting unless they were being overrun, and he was in a fight for his life.

2 hours later, Carlos received a call that a Predator spotted a group of armed men crossing the San Juan River into Nicaragua, and he almost ordered them to fire a LCPK missile, then realized that he'd be giving away the fact that they had stealthy aerial surveillance, and decided to send an armed team onboard a Blackhawk to take them out. Carlos' men had it drilled into them that killing FARC guerillas was good, but getting intel was even better, and every team carried a digital camera to take pictures of faces, tattoos, and any other information they might be interested in. Minutes later, the Blackhawk took off with 2 6-man teams for the location of the guerillas. Once they were on scene, the

lead helicopter took ground fire, and the door gunner solved the problem with 1 burst from his door gun. The short burst from the minigun sounded like canvas ripping, and all the guerillas fell to the ground riddled with 7.62mm bullets. The chopper landed close to the guerillas, and the teams fanned out into a protective formation, and walked carefully to the now cooling bodies of the guerillas. The senior sergeant looked carefully at one of the bodies, and pressed the PTT on his radio. "Eagle to base, we have a situation. Site stable, but we need an intel team here ASAP. Roger, Eagle clear."

"Ok let's make this site secure gentlemen, we should be expecting company in 15. Looks like we've stumbled onto something that El Jefe will want to know about, so look sharp."

15 minutes later, another Blackhawk landed in the clearing, and Carlos, Tom and his team, along with 2 Intel Specialists walked toward the cooling bodies.

"Show me what you've got Sergeant."

Sgt. Martinez pointed to the body of an 18-year old with tattoos all over his arms and face. Carlos immediately recognized the tattoos and their significance. He called Tom over and explained to him that the teenage guerilla was a member of Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13. When the enormity of the discovery hit Tom, he started swearing under his breath. "Carlos, I have to get back to base ASAP and phone this in - it needs to go as high as it can as fast as it can. Make sure someone gets pictures of the face and the tattoos, then I'd highly suggest mutilating the bodies, and make it look like the Columbians did it."

Carlos uttered a gutter curse in Costa Rican, and looked Tom in the eye. The look he got in return made him curse again. Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13 as their tattoos proclaimed, was bad news, and if they were working with FARC, it could really be bad news. He didn't like mutilating corpses, it was against his Catholic upbringing, then he realized that if they wanted to survive, they had to make MS-13 think that remnants of the Medellin Cartel had attacked this group instead of a new Costa Rican Paramilitary company. Carlos nodded, and ordered his Sergeant to see to it. They walked back to their helicopter and flew back to base while the Sergeant and two soldiers mutilated the corpses by giving some of them Columbian Neckties, and others by removing their genitals or relocating them. First they stripped the bodies, loaded all the paperwork and equipment into duffle bags for later analysis at base camp, and finally when their gruesome task was finished, they climbed back aboard their Blackhawk and flew back home.

Tom and Carlos met later in his office, and Carlos still wasn't happy.

"Madre de Dios, why did we have to mutilate those bodies?"

"If MS-13 knew we were operating in their backyard, they'd do whatever they could to take us out. It's not that I'm running from a fight, it's just we've got bigger fish to fry, and longer we can keep them off-balance, the more effective we'll be. Our mission is to eliminate the rest of the FARC and allow the Nicaraguan government to get control of their country. Once we've dealt with FARC, we can take on MS-13 if you want."

“Thanks Tom, I still don’t like mutilating corpses.”

“Neither do I, but as our SEAL instructors said Psyops are very effective. In a Muslim country, you desecrate the dead with Pork, and in Catholic countries, you amputate their manhood. It’s twisting the knife, but it tends to cut down on volunteers for new guerilla cadres if they know there’s a good chance their corpse will be mutilated and they might spend eternity in their version of Hell. During WWII, they used an effective Psyops technique against the Moro tribesman in the Philippines by threatening to bury their corpses in a pigskin. The thought of spending Eternity in Hell took the starch out of their shorts real quick. In Vietnam, we pulled similar tricks, and the VC learned to fear us, and called us Devils with Green faces. Once you’ve got your enemy afraid of you, half the battle is already won.”

Two weeks later, the Alpha Team was patrolling their sector of jungle when they discovered a well-hidden encampment. Realizing what they had stumbled upon, they set an ambush to catch the guerillas when they returned. That evening, the guerillas returned to their camp. They weren’t being careful since they considered this area their home, and thought they were safe. Once the entire cadre was within range, Sergeant Martinez opened fire with his shotgun, and fired a HE shotgun round into the chest of the leader. The round detonated on impact, and blew him to unrecognizable bits, and shredded 3 other members of his team. The other 3 guerillas died in a hail of gunfire from the rest of Sgt. Martinez’s team. Once the scene was secure, Sgt. Martinez walked forward to admire his handiwork. When he realized the leader of the guerilla team was blown to bits, his smile turned into a maniacal grin and he said “Damage...Good!” Several members of his team avoided him for the rest of the day.

March 16, 2018 Hollywood, CA (UPI)

Happy Cola appeared on store shelves today, just 5 days after the street price of cocaine went over \$10,000 USD for a gram, driving all but the wealthiest addicts into the treatment centers. The only announcement was from the CEO of Pepsi Cola with the surprise announcement that all their cola drinks were being replaced by Happy Cola, which was certified caffeine free. Customers flocked to the stores to purchase 6-packs and even cases. Store managers are reporting shortages as they try to keep up with demand.

March 23, 2018 Wall Street (UPI)

In a rare move, several Coca Cola bottling plants have reached agreement with Pepsi Cola to bottle the new Happy Cola, as Pepsi stock soars. In other news Pepsi Cola stock is up 30% and market share is at 5%.

March 30, 2018 Washington, DC (UPI)

Department of Commerce first quarter reports indicate a sudden surge in productivity, and a sharp drop in absenteeism. Several business managers interviewed for this report are claiming the workers are happy and working harder than ever.

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Over the next couple of weeks, Carlos' teams scoured the Nicaraguan jungle looking for FARC guerillas and not finding many. Eventually, Carlos had the Kiowa Warriors flying at night to search for hot spots with their mast-mounted FLIR. Once the Kiowas started searching at night, supplementing the Predators, the spotted hot spots of campfires. Eventually Carlos decided to keep most of the patrols in camp ready to move at a moment's notice, waiting for the Predators or Kiowa warriors to locate a hot spot, then one or more teams would fly in and investigate. It was easier on the teams and more productive since they didn't have to hike through miles of trackless jungle searching for an elusive enemy when they were lighting fires at night to cook, and the Predators could spot the smallest, best hidden fire, or even the heat given off from a group of men on the ground. Team Alpha seemed to be having all the luck, and located the next large group of FARC guerillas. They thought they were safe in the deep jungle, but the Kiowa Warrior spotted the trail they used into and out of their bivouac site.

Team Alpha set trail watchers to watch the trail, and alert them to when they were using the trail, and set a large ambush using Bravo and Charlie to make sure they had all possible routes covered, and there was no escape from their kill sack. The two teams were set 100 yards apart back to back so they were crossing the T of the trail with a free fire zone to their 270 of front. Due to the close range of this ambush, Sgt. Martinez had to use flechette rounds instead of the High Explosive rounds he was so enamored with once he saw the damage 1 round could do. The next morning just before dawn, the two "tsks" Sgt. Martinez heard in his earpiece indicated the FARC guerillas were headed his way, instead of toward Esteban's team. He grinned an evil, death's head grin, thinking of the vengeance he'd soon get for the FARC guerillas who burned down his village and left him an orphan.

Sgt. Martinez had marked the perimeter of their kill box very subtly, so he had to look carefully to see the markers. Once he had them ID'd, he had to wait until their point man made it to far right point. He'd shoot the point man, and that would start the ambush. He had a 10-round magazine full of flechettes in his shotgun, and hoped to get a couple of shots in before the machine gunners opened up and killed the rest of the terrorists. He realized he was woolgathering right as the point man got to the IP. As soon as his right foot came down, Sgt. Martinez fired a burst of flechettes into his chest, which knocked him over and hopefully penetrated his vest. Almost simultaneously, the rest of his team fired, including the SAW gunner, who fired a burst into anything that moved in the kill box. Finally Hector realized they were all dead, and blew his whistle 3 times, the code for "Cease Fire", and they stopped almost immediately.

Sgt. Martinez and another member of his team carrying an M4 stepped onto the trail to check their handiwork. When he saw what Hector's shotgun did to the point man, he joked "Nailed that one Hector!" Hector started laughing too at the bad joke - laughter was a good way to reduce post-combat stress. Hardly anyone who hadn't been in combat could understand why some grunts could be pointing at some enemy's skull laying upside down in his hands and laughing their heads off until they'd been there themselves. They checked out the rest of the bodies, and when they were sure they were dead, the rest of the team quickly searched their pockets for paperwork that intel might be interested in, and removed any useful gear. Once they were finished, they dragged the bodies off the side of the trail, and leaned them up against a tree, and booby-trapped the bodies with a grenade. When they were finished, Hector called Sgt. Esteban Ramirez and advised Bravo Team they were going to check out the bivouac site, and they'd appreciate if Bravo would keep an eye on the back

door.

He got 2 clicks in response, so he gathered his team, and carefully made their way to the bivouac site. Right before they got there, Hector brushed a branch aside, heard a “snick” and yelled out “grenade” right before a Bouncing Betty detonated right in front of him at his feet. It jumped 4 feet in the air before the explosive charge blew, and shredded Hector and three of his teammates. The survivors laid on the ground groaning. Minutes later, a very worried Sgt. Ramirez made it to the location of the booby-trap detonation, and was immediately sick when he saw what was left of Sgt. Martinez. Once he’d emptied his stomach, he set about the gruesome task of bagging the remains of Sgt. Martinez so his family would have something to bury. Meanwhile his team Corpsman was treating the blast casualties, who were both bleeding from their eardrums and showing other signs of blast injury. Miraculously, all they had for injuries were some minor fragment wounds. Realizing there might be other booby traps closer to the enemy camp, he made a command decision and returned to the clearing that the slick had landed earlier before calling in a Medevac. 2 hours later, a Blackhawk showed up, and the casualties were loaded, then a second Blackhawk landed to pick up Bravo Team. Sgt. Ramirez didn’t believe in spirits, but he felt better once the Blackhawk lifted off and they were out of that cursed place.

When they landed at their advance base, Tom and Carlos were there to greet Sgt. Ramirez. They escorted him into Carlos’ office for a thorough debriefing. He told them what he knew, which wasn’t much, and that the survivors could shed more light on the incident once they regained their hearing since they were there when it happened. Judging by the damage, he guessed Sgt. Martinez must have somehow tripped an M16 AP mine, which detonated at chest high, and blew him into pieces, and killed 3 other team members, one of which was speared by Sgt. Martinez’s thigh bone through the gut, and hopefully died from blast injuries instead of bleeding out with his Sgt’s thigh bone stuck in his gut. Sgt. Ramirez looked like he was going to be sick again, so Carlos handed him a bag just in case. Once he was feeling better, he continued to tell what he knew. “Colonel, it was awful - one minute he was calling me and asking me to watch the back door, then I heard a loud bang, some screams and some moaning, then silence. I moved as quickly to the site as I safely could. I didn’t know if they walked into an ambush, and I didn’t want to get my men killed by the same ambush so we had to take our time. I’m sorry but I think one of the victims might have bled out while we were trying to get to him.”

“Sergeant, you did the right thing - you didn’t know if they were ambushed or what had happened to them, and it would have been foolish to go charging in to try and save them and lose your men. The Corpsman said the casualties died within seconds of the blast, and there wasn’t anything you could have done even if you had got there a minute or two later.”

Sgt. Ramirez seemed to relax when he heard his commanding officer tell him that he did the right thing. All the time on the long chopper ride home, he kept running the scenario through his mind, second-guessing himself, and wondering if he could have done anything different. Now that he knew the casualties were already dead, he knew that racing in to try and save them wouldn’t have mattered.

Later that afternoon, Carlos and Tom held a memorial service for the dead soldiers. It was small,

somber, and mercifully over quickly. The best news was the two injured soldiers would make a full recovery, and could return to duty once their eardrums healed and the doctor certified they had sufficient hearing to be fit for combat. Carlos didn't tell anyone, but he took it the hardest. These were his men who were fighting and dying in the jungle while he stayed back in camp where it was safe, and ordered them to face possible death or dismemberment. Later that afternoon, Tom sat him down and said "These the first men you've lost?"

"The first under my command."

"It doesn't get any easier. I lost 3 SEALs out of Team 5 in the 6 years I was the CO. They were all due to training accidents, but they all hurt the same as if I'd have lost them in combat. The hardest part is writing the letters home. I didn't know what to say, and I didn't want to patronize the family or stumble through some useless platitudes, so I told them that their loved ones died doing what they loved, and didn't die alone. One mother wrote back, and I saved her letter. She wrote "Dear Captain Tom Riggs: My son spoke highly of you when he wrote. He told us he loved being a SEAL, and that you treated him like your son. Knowing how much I miss him, I can guess how much you do. I know my son is in Heaven since he gave his life to Jesus in 6th grade Bible Camp. I know he didn't live the life of a saint, but that's not what it's about. It's about your relationship with God, who I believe created the entire Universe. He sent his son to die in our place, and if we believed that he was the Son of God, and that he died for us, and accepted God's pardon, we could be with him in Heaven for eternity when we died. I know my son Steve believed that, and is in Heaven right now." I've written back and forth with her several times, and I realized she was right, and gave my life to Jesus. That doesn't mean I've stopped being a hard-charging SEAL, I just know where I'm going when I die."

Carlos felt the Crucifix under his BDU shirt, and told Tom. "I was raised Catholic, but I haven't been to church in ages. I feel I've lost my faith."

"We've got a Catholic Chaplain here on base if you want to talk to him."

"That might be an idea. Could you send him over in about an hour?"

"Vaya Con Dios, Mi Amigo!"

"Hasta La Vista, Tom."

They saluted each other, then Tom marched out the door. An hour later, the Padre came in. "Tom said you wanted to see me?"

"Please sit Father." Once Father Gonzalez was seated, Carlos started talking. He told him his life story, then confessed he hadn't been to church since his mom was killed.

"Carlos, if you're mad at God, he's the last one you should be mad at. Your mom was killed by some evil drug lords, and God didn't have anything to do with it. On the other hand, you seem to be burning with hate towards the same drug dealers. From what I've heard in the news, they're all dead already."

“Si Padre. They’ve been dead for a while, now I’m going after the people who were the terrorists and assassins that killed my biological parents.”

“Seems all you’ve been doing all your life is killing people.”

“Si Padre, but they needed killing.”

“What they need is Jesus’ love, but I’m not going to argue with a man wearing a pistol.”

Carlos started laughing then said “Padre, I want to start going to Mass again.”

“Great, we have our Sunday Mass every Sunday morning at 0800. I’m always available for counseling, and we meet Tuesday night for prayers and socializing.”

“Thanks Padre, I’ll see you Sunday.”

Carlos felt better after having talked to the Chaplain. Maybe he could stop killing once the FARC terrorists were all dead.

Chapter 26

The next morning, Carlos woke to the noise of several helicopters spooling up, and got dressed quickly to find out what was going on. He arrived right at his command center as 4 Blackhawks loaded with commandos and a Kiowa Warrior lifted off and headed north to the jungle. As he ran into his aide he asked “what’s going on?”

“Archangel called, and gave us the coordinates of their training camp in Nicaragua. We’re sending this team in to fix their location and secure the area so we can send the Super Cobras in and blast them from the air. Tom decided that we weren’t going to risk any more men when we had ample firepower to destroy them from the air.”

Carlos had heard enough, and went looking for Tom. He found him in the mess tent, and motioned for him to follow him. Once they were outside and alone, Tom headed Carlos off at the pass. “Sorry Carlos, you were asleep, and after what happened, I realized you needed your sleep. I hope you didn’t mind me sending a small force to fix the guerilla base.”

“They’re my troops, I’m surprised they followed your orders.”

“Actually I asked for volunteers, and after what happened to Sgt. Martinez, the entire command volunteered, so I flipped a coin, and Teams Bravo and Delta won the coin toss. Charlie and Echo are suiting up in case we need a reaction force. It should be a couple of hours before they arrive at the camp if you wish to recall them.”

“It’s OK Tom, I just wish you would have told me. How long was I out anyway?”

“About 12 hours straight - you’ve been pushing yourself too hard. Ease up a little, they’re not going anywhere.”

Carlos realized he hadn’t seen his twin sister in almost a year, and he missed her. He decided to clean up, get something to eat, and fly to Limon and surprise her. Later that afternoon, Carlos made it to the plant, and was surprised to see Maria still working late in the evening. He saw the dark circles and her gaunt appearance, and he was worried for her.

“Hey Sis, how’s it going?”

Maria recognized her twin brother’s voice, and flew from around the desk to hug the stuffing out of him. She felt like a bag of bones to Carlos, and that really bothered him. His sister was always on the heavy side, but she was a beautiful woman with a curvaceous body and looks good enough to get several professional photographers interested in asking her to model. She needed the money like a second head, so she turned them down since they weren’t interested in her modeling with her clothes on, and she was a good Catholic girl.

“Madre de Dios, Maria, what’s happened to you?”

“What do you mean Carlos, the business is booming, the workers are happy, and I’ve never felt better!”

“Well you look like you haven’t slept in a week, and you look like a scarecrow.”

“I don’t know Carlos, since I started drinking this new Happy Cola, I haven’t felt like eating, and I only sleep 4 hours per night if that.”

“Stop drinking it Sis - it’s killing you!”

“Nonsense Carlos, how can it be killing me when I feel so great?”

“You remember those people we saw who were cocaine addicts - they felt so great, but they were killing themselves with the drugs.”

“According to the FDA, there’s nothing harmful in Happy Cola, they even took out the Caffeine.”

“Sugar water can’t have this effect, there’s got to be something in there besides sugar water. I’m telling you, you’ve got to stop drinking it.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“I’ll be back sis when I get to the bottom of this, but please try to stop, you’re killing yourself.”

Carlos hugged his sister hard, she was the closest living person to him, if she died, he didn’t know if he wanted to live. When she let him go, he ran out of the building to hunt down his Security Manager,

if anyone could find out what was going on, he could. Later that evening, he tracked down Jorge, and told him he needed to have a private conversation in a secure area. Jorge went out to Carlos' hummer, took out a black box, and swept it for bugs, then told Carlos to get in and drive.

"What's the big secret?"

"What's wrong with Maria?"

"Not anything that isn't wrong with two-thirds of our employees. This crap just appeared out of nowhere, and they're not even making Coke or Pepsi anymore. They claim there's nothing harmful in it, but I've seen for myself several people including your sister that show signs of amphetamine addiction. I don't think they use amphetamines per se in the cola, but they're definitely hooked on a powerful stimulant that the FDA can't or won't detect since they gave it a clean bill of health. Luckily I'm a diabetic, and they didn't come up with the sugar-free version before I saw our employees acting like they were addicted to something."

"Jorge, I need you to get to the bottom of this, I don't care how much it costs. Can we get Maria into treatment?"

"Not if she won't go voluntarily, the government isn't recognizing Happy Cola as an addictive substance, so you can't be involuntarily committed."

"Ok Jorge, do what you can, I have to get back to my command. If you find out anything, call me."

Carlos drove Jorge back to the plant, and then drove back to the forward base as fast as he could. He tracked Tom down, and asked him point-blank "Is there anyone in your command that's drinking this new Happy Cola?"

"Not that I know of, several people asked about it, but Supply hasn't been able to get any yet, it's been back-ordered for the last 90 days - the civilian market is grabbing everything they can produce."

"Great, I want to issue a General Order banning anyone from either of our commands from touching the stuff. I just came back from Limon to visit my Sister, and she's showing all the signs of Amphetamine addiction. Jorge, my plant security specialist says that two-thirds of the plant's employees are hooked too. I don't want any of our soldiers getting hooked."

"When you generate that order, I'll countersign it, so it will apply to both our commands. What sort of discipline do you think we need to enforce this?"

"How about anyone found with the stuff in their possession, or under the influence will be summarily kicked out of the unit without recourse?"

"Works for me - for a second there, I thought you were going to say "Shoot the SOB's!"

"I was thinking about it, but most of these men are my friends now, and I can't shoot them for simple

negligence.”

Two days later, Carlos got a phone call from Jorge, asking him to meet him at the plant. Carlos had a Blackhawk drop him off, and he met Jorge in the parking lot. They walked to Jorge’s armored Mercedes that used to belong to David, and he swept it for bugs before they got in. Jorge drove off, and handed Carlos a manilla folder while he’s driving. Carlos read the biochemist’s report, and was stunned. The only suspect ingredient in Happy Cola was a previously unknown and totally unfamiliar CNS stimulant that passes right through the blood-brain barrier so the minimum effective dosage was measured in single milligrams. The biochemist took the liberty of experimenting with lab rats, and observed their behavior based on various dosages. At very small dosages, the equivalent of 1 can per day, they were active and productive for a 8 hour day, then slept for 4 hours, and with another dosage, were active again. At 3 cans per day, they were showing signs of Amphetamine addiction, at the equivalent of 6 cans per day, they acted like they were on crack cocaine or methamphetamine, highly agitated, and incapable of sleep for several days, then sleeping for 8-12 hours, and showing withdrawal symptoms if not immediately given another dosage. Carlos asked Jorge how many cans of Happy Maria was drinking.

Carlos could tell by Jorge’s demeanor he didn’t want to answer. “Jorge, it’s not your fault, and I won’t hold you responsible since Maria is your boss, but I need to know.”

“She’s been drinking an average of a 6-pack per day, even after you asked her to stop. Two other employees who were drinking that many died of heart attacks last week.”

“Quick as you can, back to the office, don’t worry about traffic laws!”

Jorge stood on the throttle, and they were quickly going faster than 100mph. Jorge slid to a stop next to the office complex right behind an ambulance. When he saw the attendants wheeling a gurney with a sheet-covered body, he knew who was under it, but still he couldn’t stop himself. He lifted the sheet, and his dead sister stared back at him. He turned and walked away to be alone. The thought struck him that he really was alone, and almost reached for his pistol.

Later that evening, the Blackhawk flew him back to his camp, and the Padre was waiting for him.

“Carlos, I heard, is there anything I can do?”

“I need someone to talk to. Let’s go to your office.”

Once they got seated, Father Gonzales put on his red stole with gold crosses symbolizing his authority as a Catholic Priest. Carlos immediately assumed a more reverent attitude and bowed his head. Father Gonzales intoned the sacred words “In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen” as he made the sign of the cross. Carlos copied him, touching his forehead, sternum, left shoulder, and his right shoulder. He sank to the kneeler weeping.

“Why Padre, she was beautiful, loving, caring, everything I wasn’t - that should have been me!”

“Carlos, we don’t know the Will of God. All can do is have faith in God’s perfect will.”

“I’m so mad right now, I could spend every penny I have, find out who’s responsible for this poison, and torture them to death!”

Carlos. The Lord Said “Vengeance is Mine.” It’s not your job to seek Vengeance for Maria’s death. God will deal with them in his own time.” Father Gonzales opened his bible and started reading.

“ In the Book of Romans, Chapter 12, verse 1: I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

3 For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.

4 For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office:

5 So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.

6 Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith;

7 Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching;

8 Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.

9 Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.

10 Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another;

11 Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord;

12 Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer;

13 Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality.

14 Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not.

15 Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.

16 Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits.

17 Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men.

18 If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.

19 Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

20 Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.

21 Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”

When he finished reading, Carlos stopped weeping, and it was like a lightbulb went on over his head.

“Padre, if this is true I shouldn’t have been spending my life killing evil men.”

“Carlos, you need to seek solitude and pray. The path you’re on only leads to death and destruction. Even if you killed every evil man on the Earth, more would take their places for Man is basically Evil.”

Carlos looked at the priest, and said “Father, will you receive my Confession?”

“Yes my son, we’re in my office, and I’m wearing the stole, so go ahead.”

Carlos began “Bless me Father for I have sinned, it has been several years since my last confession. These are my sins. I’ve killed men, maybe even innocent civilians. I’ve tortured prisoners, I may have committed rape once or twice, I’ve stolen food and supplies that didn’t belong to me when my soldiers were hungry, and gotten drunk on ill-gotten drink. I’ve used the Lord’s Name in vain, I’ve been mad at God and doubted his Grace and Mercy, I haven’t been to Mass in several years, I’ve failed to bury and even mutilated the dead, I’ve committed numerous venial sins, too many to remember. Father, I’m sorry....”

As Carlos wept, Father Gonzales made the sign of the cross over his head, and said “ “Et ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.”

“Amen - Gracias Padre.”

“Instead of a traditional penance, I’m going to ask you to change your life. Live for God, take care of his people. Love his People.”

“Gracias a Dios, Padre!”

“Vaya con Dios, Carlos.”

Carlos shook Father Gonzales’ hand, then walked into his office. After thinking about it for a while, he called Tom into his office.

“Tom, I’m resigning my commission effective immediately. Maria’s dead, and I’m tired of killing people.”

“I understand Carlos. What about the compound, the troops, etc?”

“I’m signing over the land and the gear that’s here to the Costa Rican Government as a military base to keep our Northern Border secure. I’m going to sell the truck plant, and retire to the vanilla plantation. I’m sure the Costa Rican government will agree to make you the Commander of the base if you want the job.”

They shook hands, and Tom went to take care of some details for the pending assault. Carlos took a fountain pen out of his drawer, and wrote out his resignation letter, then addressed it to the President of Costa Rica and sealed the envelope. With that detail out of the way, he hopped aboard the next Blackhawk flying into Limon, and landed at his factory.

When he found Jorge, Carlos saw Jorge had a Colt 1911 in his hand, and the barrel was coming up, pointed at Jorge’s head. “Carlos, I’ve failed you and your sister. Adios!”

Right before he could pull the trigger, Carlos leapt, grabbed and twisted Jorge's hand so the round blew a hole in Jorge's desk. He took the gun out of Jorge's hand.

"Jorge, you haven't failed me - I failed you. I left you and Maria in a situation you weren't able to deal with, while I ran off and played soldier. I talked to Father Gonzales, and I've resigned my commission. I want to sell the factory and retire to the vanilla plantation. I need a plantation manager if you want to work for me."

It dawned on Jorge that he was still alive, and finally remembered to breathe. Once he caught his breath, he remembered Carlos was there too. "Si el Jefe! I'd like that." Carlos gave his friend, mentor and surrogate father a hug, and asked him to make the arrangements to sell the factory, just not to sell it to Cartel members. Carlos got in his Mercedes and drove back to the plantation.

The End

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