

ANGLE OF DECEPTION
by CASE LANE

CHAPTER ONE

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Table of Contents

[CHAPTER 1 A COCKTAIL IS NOT A BOTTLE](#)

[CHAPTER 2 A MEMORY IS NOT A PHOTOGRAPH](#)

[CHAPTER 3 A TALE IS NOT ATTACHED](#)

[CHAPTER 4 A SONG IS NOT A NOTE](#)

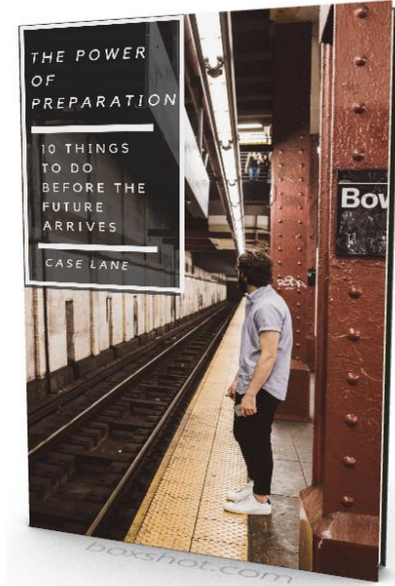
[CHAPTER 5 A FUNERAL IS NOT A GATHERING](#)

[CHAPTER 6 SUNDAY IS NOT A HOLIDAY](#)

[About Case Lane](#)

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CHAPTER 1

A COCKTAIL IS NOT A BOTTLE

“Remember the Molotov cocktail? It’s a bomb made from an innocuous soda bottle. A bottle filled with a gasoline soaked rag. You know, it’s a lethal weapon, not a party drink. It’s very deceptive, like these people we know.”

Scott to Karlie, last night

The assassination attempt on the life of Marco Fuentes brought Ambassador Malcolm Crane to his knees. “Julianne,” he whispered as his white, hot crystalline tears slipped through his fingers. “Julianne.”

“Ambassador the doctor has not confir...” Dax Waterman, the Embassy’s junior trade officer tried comfort as he stooped over his boss, one hand resting on his shoulder.

“I do not require confirmation,” Crane snapped. “I have looked at her.”

Dax froze. He had been avoiding looking at Julianne Crane’s body for nearly a half hour. From the time she had been wheeled in next to Marco, to the moment the Ambassador arrived, through the undeniable daring of Marco’s terrified family as they snuck him out of the hospital, to the pending arrival of Mrs. Crane. Deliberately, Dax had avoided looking.

The Ambassador remained on his knees at the side of the bed, but Dax kept his back to Julianne, the Ambassador’s daughter. She had been a nineteen-year-old history major with a comforting smile, who had arrived in the Mediterranean Republic of Alcazar two weeks earlier to spend her summer at her parents’ official residence. “Excuse me sir,” were the only words Dax could manage as he walked out of the room and into the hallway. He immediately reactivated his cell phone.

“The Ambassador’s daughter is dead!” the bitter announcement propelled from Dax’ trembling mouth. The water from his eyes gathered the last remnants of tear gas still clinging to his tanned cheeks.

“What?” Karlie Laker, the Embassy’s junior political officer moved her hand to adjust her cell phone earpiece, her face evoked an oncoming horror.

“Julianne,” Dax barely whispered. “Kar...Julianne is dead.”

“What? What are you talking about?” Karlie’s mind raced. Earlier that day she had seen Julianne chanting pro-democracy slogans in a crowd of college students, laborers, working professionals, and small business owners who were supporting the Free Democratic Union cause.

“The rally was over. People were walking away or hanging out or whatever. Then everything went crazy! She was shot!”

Four hours earlier, the Free Democratic Union, the FDU, the largest and best organized opposition party in Alcazar's history had assembled their supporters in an afternoon unity rally at the base of the Park of the People, an imposing cliff that marked the eastern edge of downtown Joyo, Alcazar's capital city. The FDU had promised a peaceful and joyous celebration of their right to ensure democratic change in their island nation. That had been as it had unfolded for Karlie and Dax in their capacities as their Embassy's political and economic trade officers. They monitored the rally speeches from a vantage point on the roof of Café Brazil above the crowd in the trendy coffee shop that catered to young adult professionals who preferred their four-dollar cappuccinos to be more than a few feet from the main stage. With the applause for the last speaker fading, the event was declared over. An exhausted Karlie had descended from the roof, and fallen into her car to drive home through garbage strewn back alleyways that bisected crowded neighborhoods, but avoided the post-rally traffic clustering into the central streets of her normal route.

"But we left there a few minutes ago!" she shouted back at Dax.

"They started shooting. Military...maybe police. There was a little chanting going on but...but it was nothing. They had no reason. They just started shooting!"

"But...when?"

"Minutes ago. This is unreal. Julianne and her boyfriend, you know Marco Fuentes, it looked like they were right there."

"What do you mean, right there?"

"There were a lot of people around but the shots...I don't know...they were right there."

"You mean they were targets?" Dax went silent. "Dax, I said were they--"

"I know what you said, and I don't want to think about that right now. Come to St. Bart's to help the Ambassador. This is hell."

*

In the second basement of Joyo Plaza, a glowing 50 storey downtown skyscraper housing the offices of international banks and insurance companies, half a dozen Alcazaran men stumbled into an enlarged storage area behind the reserved parking. Shaking their black suits made dusty from the dirt stirred by the rampaging crowd that broke apart in panic as the shootings began, they encircled a sixteen foot rectangular steel table and dropped their guns onto it, the meeting of the metals echoed up and around the room.

"How many?" Diego Harrison, the top assistant to Army Chief General Cage Baker, addressed the closest gunman as he approached the table from a spot at the back of the room beyond the men's view.

"I dunno but Fuentes was definitely one," one man confidently answered.

"Is he dead?"

"I dunno."

"What the fuck! Didn't you check?"

"Yeah, yeah, I guess he's dead."

"What do you mean, you guess?"

"I...guess." Trembling, the man stared at the table.

"Get a change of clothes and get out of here," Carlos Estefano Baker III, the General's 32 year old son, forcefully stated as he emerged from the shadows of a corner of the room to announce his instructions in a stern whisper. His boyish face turned grim as he told them, "go to North Port. Do not talk to anyone and you'll get the rest of your money. I want you all out of here. In five minutes, we'll know who's dead."

“*Si Señor Baker,*” the gunman replied complacently as his co-team members bowed their heads in deference and slipped from the room.

“Well Diego are you satisfied?” Carlos turned to face his father’s chief aide. He bit down hard on his bottom lip, controlling the trembling, and locked his hands in clenched fists behind his back, suspending a spontaneous attack.

“No I’m not. We have to find out the results of your orders.”

“The results of my orders? Killing my cousin. That’s the result, gunning down an innocent man.”

“Marco Fuentes is not innocent. He’s a threat to this family and to this country.”

“He’s a kid...”

“He’s an enemy Carlos. Do you still not understand that?”

“Get away from me Diego.”

“I’m going to go check the news. You should hope that what was planned came to be or you may have more to do.”

“I’ve done enough.”

“We’ll see.”

*

The Ambassador’s daughter, Julianne Crane’s body was flown home to be eulogized, then buried in front of her family, university classmates and a sympathetic country. Three and a half months later, Karlie leaned back in her dining room chair, reading an uncensored paper copy of the International Journal, that an Australian colleague had smuggled into Alcazar from Sydney.

NO SIGN OF SOLITUDE - An article by J.T. Tarmaine

The Republic of Alcazar is on the verge of civil war as the truth behind the June shooting massacre of 28 people at a rally for the opposition Free Democratic Union (FDU) party is revealed. Government opponents are alleging that the ruling Baker family and their supporters are directly responsible for the killings.

Alcazar is scheduled to hold democratic elections by the end of this year. The FDU represents the first time in the country’s bitter history of democracy that a strong opposition may replace the government party that has ruled since Independence. But the election battle is also a family feud. The open question remains whether Alcazarans really see a difference between the ruling Alcazar National Party (ANP) backed by the powerful Baker family, and the FDU backed by their cousins, the influential Fuentes family. Or does the electorate prefer the United Workers Coalition (UWC), a third party alternative representing the working poor, the majority of the country’s citizenry.

The UWC built its base of strength in the country’s factories, at its massive international seaport, and in the shantytown neighborhoods where the majority of Alcazar’s citizens have limited access to education, health care and social benefits. Children as young as two play with stick boats in mud-filled water that lies stagnant in steep sewage ditches running through the urban streets. Young girls not yet women barely out of their teens, bellies protruding from childbirth, chew tobacco in the doorways of non-descript prostitution houses on The Alcazar Strip, the country’s notorious red light district. Many men leave the country to work as seafarers, or end up in prison. Having succumbed to alcohol, drugs and their own lost hopes, the country’s rooted family bonds crumble and crack under the rival factions hostile aim at each other. This is today’s Alcazar; timid, uninspired and seething from its leaders corrupt official peace.

‘Oh for God’s sakes Jessie, here we go,’ Karlie thought as she rolled her eyes at the words written by her former high school friend, then crumpled the newspaper back over her arm. Grimacing uncomfortably at the cover story, she shook her head and stated aloud, “this is going to be some battle, proclaiming the country on the verge of civil war. The government could label that anarchist agitation. They’re going to want to kill her.” The comment drifted to the ears of Karlie's housekeeper, Maria as she returned from the kitchen with more coffee.

“*Si señorita,*” Maria quickly agreed as the short, demure Alcazaran woman approaching middle age with a round, youthful face filled Karlie’s cup.

“Do you follow what’s happening in the news today Maria?” Karlie hopefully asked.

“*Si,* I know you always look at news, then angry. This I know.” Maria looked at Karlie with melancholy. “You not read so much. Too young for much angry.”

“Maria it’s my job.” Karlie glanced at her wistfully. “If only I could ignore it.”

“*Señorita* can do anything,” Maria observed. “Young, rich, beautiful, do anything.”

‘I can’t help Jessie avoid the government’s wrath, even when she’s here,’ Karlie thought then whispered aloud. “I have a job to do.” She glanced at her dining room table which was laid with a plate of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies made with imported whole-wheat flour, and a basket of fresh fruit purchased that morning at the local market. Karlie lived alone yet Maria prepared the table this early evening as she always did, in encouraging anticipation of family to come. Karlie had asked for coffee and a snack, early sustenance leading into her evening event. Dressed for an official National Day cocktail party at the Ambassador’s residence, she wore a moss green silk evening gown. Adorned with gold earrings, matching bracelet and a Movado watch that could pay Maria’s wages for half the year, she felt like a fake. “I’m not rich, Maria,” she called out as Maria ducked back into the kitchen. Failing to comment on her youth and looks, “I just get to pretend that I am.” Karlie at 30 was all Maria observed and more, a beautiful, sophisticated, well-educated and intelligent diplomat living the cozy expatriate life in one of the world’s poorer countries.

Her passing comment had no impact on Maria. The evidence the housekeeper saw everyday was her employer’s one-use-only clothes, luxury car and food for a family of ten stocked on her kitchen shelves. If this wasn’t rich in Alcazar, she didn’t know what was. “*Si señorita,*” Maria replied unconvincingly. “*Es como todos nosotros.*” ‘You are like us,’ she whispered under her breath.

Karlie took the fading comment as a cue. Dragging the newspaper with her, she wandered out of her home and into the thick air of the Joyo night lingering on the fringes of summer. The streets of her neighborhood, Palm Gardens Village bent to the humidity at this time of the evening. Wealthy Alcazarans lingered next to their air-conditioners while awaiting dinner. Live-out maids, security guards, and chauffeurs rushed into the streets to flag down a ride home. The stillness in the air flirted with irony, there was little peaceful about the streets of Joyo.

“*Hola señorita,*” Karlie’s house guard, Frederico called as he opened the garage gate. Karlie waved, climbed into her shining silver Lexus, freshly polished by Freddy, and drove off without a backwards glance as the words from Jessie’s newspaper article played over in her mind.

*

The Republic of Alcazar should never have captured the attention of a journalist of the caliber of J.T. Tarmaine. But the fact that it did was an endless source of agitation for the Alcazaran government. Now the FDU massacre gave Jessie an opening to the country that Karlie had never imagined. Alcazar was no foreign correspondent’s dream territory. But Jessie’s unconstrained imagination knew how to describe a tapered poor, scorching hot country

dominated by indifferent wealthy families of its own creation, a country with a limited attention span for a murder massacre.

The island's history separated Alcazarans from their compassion. The country was conceived from the spectacular dreams of a morally vacuous Independence year president who had traveled to Monaco, and then returned to Joyo declaring his intention to build a Monte Carlo for the working wealthy. At the time, Joyo lingered as an eye-straining watering hole on the seaways of Southern Europe. But then President Winston Baker had identified a world economic order loophole that stunned, then delighted, global investors. Alongside the Bakers who engaged in all aspects of the country's commerce, the island's richest families were landowners cultivating fruits and nuts under the island's cooperative weather, and manufacturers accessing an abundance of cheap labor. These interests encouraged the government's raucous plans to legalize gambling. They enhanced the infrastructure by welcoming the transformation of miles of white sand shoreline into imposing cement hotel chain resorts with private boardwalks edging raked beaches. Prostitutes and drug dealers materialized out of the city's impoverished neighborhoods that had long before over expanded from immigration and internal migration of farmers to the city in search of work. With a prophetic timing that attracted the millions in petrodollars located within a three-hour flight, little over a decade after the idea had first been broached, pockets of Joyo stood transformed forever into a careless European and oil rich Middle Easterners temptation playground.

Now tourists searching for thrills come to Alcazar by the thousands to test their luck in the casinos and to deposit millions into the country's semi-controlled, nominally regulated and untaxed financial institutions for safekeeping. More convincingly than the tourist trade, Alcazar had discovered the business of money and a global financial system prepared to integrate another player under rules set by no known master. The country's elite demographic structure peaked at a hundred families connected, more often than not to the Bakers, who used unquestioned access to dollars to buy a comfortable society. The balance of Alcazar's population surveyed sprinkles of hope as they worked in every sector of the giant service industry or semi-industrial small parts and garment factories that occupied Joyo's manufacturing zones. On days off, these Alcazarans played the numbers at the low rollers casinos and hotels, staying away from the privileged and conveniently out of trouble.

Calls to diversify into sustainable economic industries for growth were ignored on the evidence. Despite decades of contrary prediction, no oil flowed under Alcazar's sands, no strategic shipping lanes encircled its borders, and no diamonds blasted out of its rocks. Instead Alcazar existed without promise. Its twelve million people drifted in a world where few knew their location. Foreign money drove Alcazar, propelled the country on its queasy way as sample numbers pulled themselves out of poverty and into the limited middle class. Until the FDU massacre, Alcazarans were annoyed by crime but not prone to internal violence; ignored by the world for lack of natural spoils but not exempt from a marker on the radar screen for the conveniences that they offered. Wealthy, spoiled Alcazarans, unfazed by social tragedy, would never consider that real economic development lay in building their country from the ground up. They encouraged Alcazar's poor to be content with the words in official government propaganda materials. The majority complied, resisting little in their existence, marching in step with the majority of the world's people, struggling to survive, desirous of plenitude, and frequently cheated. This evening, in its collective indifference, Alcazar's elite began gathering at Ambassador Crane's residence. Spent on their desires, these benefactors of the country's tentacles stretching from the flesh and greed industry to the global trade marketplace, sought an

acceptance that could be achieved by being on the social invitation mailing list of a well-connected Ambassador to whom they felt both culpable and indebted.

This was the story J.T. Tarmaine had been telling the world for years. But until the FDU rally massacre provided an inarguable excuse, she had never been granted permission to visit Alcazar to report directly from the country. The island's government, without explanation, labeled her a threat to their national security and repeatedly refused to grant her a visitor's visa. J.T. Tarmaine was one of the world's most visible and relentless journalists covering global political and social developments to critical acclaim. Read by Kings and Presidents, she was heralded as a cautious fact-checker who supported her prose with eyewitness verification. Now bristling under the strain of international curiosity, the Alcazaran government had opened a loophole of its own, and Jessie had been waiting.

The day before she was due to arrive, far in a pitching corner of New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport, Jessica Theresa Tarmaine flittered her eyes around the terminal in search of a faceless enemy. Soaked in an anxiety that did not suit her, Jessie was convinced that she was being followed. In 27 hours she would land in Joyo, it would not pay to be incautious. The FDU rally massacre had changed the world's grayed-out view of Alcazar overnight. Gone was the patient indulgence that her reporting had often inspired. Now she was the recognized expert and those that had questions had come to her. The daytime massacre of a foreign Ambassador's daughter, surrounded by too many youthful unarmed dead, and too many police officers that did not shoot back to defend their public, opened Alcazar to media scrutiny. Alcazar was in shock and, for the first time in decades, the world was paying attention. The massacre brought focus to the national elections, normally a rubber-stamp affair organized by the Bakers and defended by their supporters. But this year the FDU opened up a competition that the Bakers considered a threat. The rally day massacre was no police defense measure, enemies had fired warning shots, and international journalists sought out the country to uncover the truth.

Waiting for the hysteria to fade, and for moments to collide, Jessie had methodically prepared her own invitation to Alcazar. Now her public condemnation of Alcazar's government, online, in the pages of her global newspaper and on television, weighed heavily, but she was not the nature of journalist who backed away from her convictions. And the government of Alcazar had come to know her attitude through the fury of Jessie's keyboard prowess, a fury that made her a known entity and a marked enemy.

Glancing at the departures' screen, moving backwards through time as she sauntered from the lounge to her gate, Jessie kept her senses on alert. Trepidation rode on the forces of her mendacity, and she dared not consider how impossible it might be to align success with her plans.

*

In the brisling twilight on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, Luis Martinez prepared to come out of self-imposed exile. He took a long drag of his Marlboro cigarette, glanced around at the surroundings that had been his home for the past three months then backed away from the edge of his island, from the desolate city of North Port, back through the desert and into the steaming anxiety of the city of Joyo. His fading red Ford pick-up truck carried him through the battered streets, barely missing a dozen innocuous pedestrians as they scattered from the unstoppable direction of his drive. Now that he was back on duty Martinez had a party to go to, a meeting to attend, and a government official to see. In the months that he had lived on the other side of the island, he had plenty of time to forget what Julianne Crane had looked like when she fell into Joyo's sand covered streets.

*

Hands gripped tightly to her steering wheel, Karlie approached Ambassador Malcolm Crane's home through a ten-minute journey from Palm Gardens Village to the gates of his more exclusive neighborhood, Tuxedo Park. In the two years that she had been on assignment in Alcazar the value of official cocktail parties had completely worn off with the passing of the time spent in the first six months when exploring every social gathering and each personal contact was still mandatory, like a virgin's quest to be deflowered. After the initialization, the events turned strictly ceremonial, and Karlie developed the ability to automatically introduce herself and her story, to an uncountable list of curiosity seekers, in a matter of minutes. "Good evening, yes I'm Karlie Laker, Consul," she would repeat as the novelty wore hair thin. Her amicability to being asked how long she had been in Alcazar and what had brought her there was increasingly lost with each question.

"I came here to take up my posting at the Embassy," Karlie replied as she succumbed to the litany. "This is my second overseas assignment.

-No, I studied political science and economics and journalism in my country.

-No, I have no family here, I live alone.

-No, I have no children.

-Yes, I'm still single.

-Of course, Alcazaran men are attractive among the most attractive in the world.

-Of course I would like to meet your nephew, I'm sure he's very nice.

-No I don't think that I would be busy six weeks from Tuesday," and she would surrender her business card. The dread of similar encounters filled her thoughts as the neighborhood gates cloaked in triple security emerged in front of her. Here the immaculately manicured mansion lawns backed onto the golf course of the Evergreen Country Club that stretched to the edges of the secretive estates in the Joyo Hills. Soldiers in fatigues, AK-47 assault rifles pointed towards the unblemished asphalt surface of the entryway, paraded at two feet intervals, then stopped to peer into her car as it passed through unobstructed, diplomatic license plates checked against her name on the guest list. At the foot of the Ambassador's sweeping driveway, an upright Sergeant gestured that she roll down her window. Reluctantly Karlie hit the auto descend button.

"Si," she gave her more exasperated greeting dramatizing the inconvenience of his one minute question.

Women did not arrive unescorted to glamorous evening events in Alcazar. "Your name please miss," the Sergeant commanded in heavily accented English as he assessed the car's contents, in search inevitably for the contemptible man who would leave a lady at the wheel.

"Karlisle Laker." The soldier made a fuss of checking his guest list, flipping pages over the clipboard as he speculated on her solo status. Karlie glanced into the rearview mirror, checking her hair. In front and behind her Lexus were black stretch Cadillac limousines, tinted windows concealing their paranoid passengers.

Feigning relief the guard pointed at a page then stated, "Consul Laker, please proceed." Saluting, he stepped away from the car. Eyes front Karlie hit the auto ascend on the armrest and continued up the driveway. Exiting the car, keys in the ignition, she took the ticket from the surprised valet, on call for those few who would drive themselves to the Ambassador's doors. Karlie reviewed her reflection one more time in the car window then walked towards the open front doors. Uncharacteristically, invited Alcazaran guests were arriving on time, which in terms of protocol, made her late.

Passing through the archway, Karlie glanced around for Ambassador and Mrs. Crane. Seeing them trapped in a conversation with Alcazar's Minister of Justice, she grabbed a glass of white wine from a passing waiter, and slipped sight unseen into the emerging crowd. The ballroom's cedar floor was already filling with the most wrenching examples of the material excess that the Castle Country, as Alcazar was often called, had become known for displaying in false glamour. Bound by Mediterranean impulses in manner and dress, the Ambassador's guests carelessly deposited drained champagne flutes on the abandoned grand piano, as white-gloved waiters hustled to clear away the clutter faster than the glasses could be emptied again. The official residence of her country's representative in Alcazar, the Ambassador's home, a stunning multi-level Spanish adobe colonial mansion, stood ablaze in its shimmering chandelier light as Karlie pondered the word cocktail over the top of her crystal wine glass. The ballroom was abuzz, with slow murmur and soft laughter, as the first waves of over 500 cosseted guests and their entourages filled the spaces or drifted outdoors onto the two levels of terraces to greet those who chose quieter corners and night air to mark the time. By standing in the middle of the glitter, Karlie was swarmed on all sides by the best that the Republic of Alcazar, not to mention the diplomatic corps in Joyo, had to offer.

Standing on the edge of the room, Karlie watched as a tide of Bakers, Fuentes, Turners Dumonts, Parkers, Rodriguezes and members of every other prominent family on the island waltzed into the party room as they had done so often before during each Ambassador's tour in the Republic. With unrestrained feminine wonder, she observed Nicholas Turner, the all-Honors prodigal last-son-from-first-marriage of business tycoon Peter Turner, looking drop-dead gorgeous in a perfectly cut Armani suit, working the room to the obvious interest of both men and women alike. Then she caught, the actor Michael LaPierre shouting at the Indian Ambassador who was complaining about the discrimination of his fellow citizens in Alcazar. "Alcazarans do not discriminate," Michael, improbably devoid of talent but not popularity, argued in response. "How can a country with our mixed ethnic groups discriminate?" The Indian Ambassador did not look convinced.

Karlie ducked close to hear Constance Rodriguez, the country's leading businesswoman, tell German investors, in fluent German, that the mining opportunities in Alcazar's north region were real, and despite two decades of anti-government, anti-business lethal protest from insurgents, unthreatening. They did not look convinced either.

Karlie's global counterparts, consuls from Brazil to Malaysia, Sweden to South Africa, were defending their countries' economic policies; glorifying Alcazar's chances in the next international soccer match; or flirting incessantly with a newly arrived contemporary who had yet to sample the male or female options available on The Alcazar Strip. A dazzling mix of intimate gossip circles ringed every inch of the floor. She briefly noted her current boyfriend, Scott Taylor, holding court in a corner, deeply engrossed in debate with a half dozen other impeccably dressed young men. Alcazar's elite, wealthy, uncompromisingly attractive professional expatriates, who have been handed the best of life available on an island desperate for their money and the promise that their kind provide, melted into the generosity of the country's air. Briefly Scott looked up and smiled as Ambassador Crane approached his group, then turned serious again as the conversation rang on.

The room swirled around Karlie. The evening's clothes were designer conservative and the alcohol and food overflowed. Competent, tuxedo-tailed men balanced trays of an unlimited variety of thirst quencher, wine, scotch, champagne, and lemonade, uneasily through the swarm. The tables near Karlie offered an array of smoked salmon and deep fried calamari, streaming

canapés and enticingly fresh vegetables, rare food in Alcazar, except in homes like this. Every sense was heightened to its artificial maximum, and Karlie could feel the sweat of success and the clamor of pretension whirl through the night air. The mood encased her own fear, she had arrived minutes before, but would soon have to pick the right time to make her exit. Karlie had an errand to run before the night was over, she had a guest arriving in Alcazar whose presence in the country would shock everyone in the Ambassador's ballroom.

*

High in the hills above Tuxedo Park, Carlos Baker III slipped ten one hundred dollar bills into his inside jacket pocket then stepped through an unobtrusive side door of his Tudor mansion. The homes in the Joyo Hills, the residential neighborhood of Alcazar's permanent money, dwarfed the working wealth that they overshadowed on the opposite side of Evergreen. From the perch of his doorway, Carlos looked across his city with respectful dominance. Burly, immaculately polished and un-intimidated at six feet, he moved to join his wife Luisa, inside a circle of eight bodyguards that walked them in step from the front door into their waiting limousine. The armored doors sealed them inside with the finality of a closing coffin. Three escort vehicles, one in front, two behind, each loaded with three soldiers sporting semi-automatic assault rifles surrounded their descent from above the Alcazaran capital, Joyo's emptying streets lying at their feet. Approaching the Ambassador's mansion sixteen minutes later, they passed the extensive greeting line leading up to the doors, the couple imperceptibly waved and nodded as they approached their hosts.

"*Señor Embajador*," Carlos began as he took the somber and understated Malcolm Crane's pale, dry hand at the doorway. "Our gracious thank you for the invitation, on what, for you, must be a celebratory yet stressful day. Let me assure you that my government continues to do all it can to find those responsible for your loss."

"*Gracias Señor Ministro*," Crane replied, then feigned a smile through his aching heart and lightly acknowledged Baker's hand. A lifelong diplomat, Malcolm Crane began his career trapped in Algeria's war of independence from France. In the forty years of service that followed, he had witnessed organized starvation in Nigeria, the carnage in Vietnam, the battle for control of the Suez, the rise and conquering of revolutionary guerillas in Central America in parallel to the birth, maturing and emergence of his own children. His family had survived every country where he insisted that serving would make his career. He had accepted the most dangerous locales, and the Cranes had managed to travel unscathed. Malcolm had grown convinced that they were protected. But Julianne's death altered that illusion. Now edging closer to the expected retirement age of 65, Malcolm Crane had refused an offer from headquarters to depart early from Joyo. He wanted one final assignment, justice of the kind that Ambassadors, as purveyors of good will and equilibrium, were not expected to covet. Malcolm Crane no longer cared about diplomacy. He no longer cared about the career he had risked his life for, his last care, his only care, would be to avenge Julianne's death. In response, he accepted the cold lie of Carlos Baker's vacant words with an imperceptible nod of recognition. Crane knew all about the Bakers' plans for the coming election and 40 years of diplomatic instinct told him that they, the ruling family, had engineered the FDU massacre.

"Anna," Luisa commented, brushing her lips against Mrs. Crane's cheeks. "As a mother, I am terrified to begin to imagine how you have suffered these last few months."

"*Gracias*," Anne Crane whispered. The Ambassador's wife disliked the Bakers on principal. Through her own four decades of service without pay, she had seen the scope of documented greed and corruption that ruled countries in every corner of the globe. She

volunteered in the underserved neighborhoods, and at underfunded schools and clinics as a benevolent contributor from a foreign government, while families like the Bakers ignored the toil of their fellow citizens in the name of organized ignorance alone.

“If there is anything we can do, ever, anything at all, remember the Bakers are always your friends.”

“*Gracias.*”

“Carlos.” Luisa turned back to her husband as he took her arm.

“We will find them, *Señor Embajador,*” Carlos offered one more time as he turned to enter the great hall. Chatter dimmed, all eyes turned to rest upon him. The country’s Minister of Public Security, nephew to the President and heir to the Baker family’s extraordinary wealth, had arrived.

*

“Is there any reason why the Cranes would throw this party so soon after their daughter’s death,” Constance Rodriguez demanded of fellow entrepreneur Alex McIntyre as he switched her empty champagne glass for a full one. “Here in Alcazar we honor our children...”

“Connie, they are foreigners,” McIntyre offered as he signaled a waiter to refill his empty scotch glass. “They have to keep up appearances. People always expect self-proclaimed leaders to smile through adversity. In case you didn’t notice there is an election scheduled for this country. And for now the whole world seems to care.”

“How ridiculous! What an insult to the child. They should be more discreet and still in mourning. The world cared for a day, then went on to other disasters. People are making too much of this.”

“What people?”

“Never mind Alex.”

Alex glanced towards the entryway. “Oh look, our Minister of Public Security is here. Carlos has arrived.”

“Hmm.”

“Aren’t you going to greet your cousin?”

“Let him come and kiss my ass.”

Alex exploded into a deep laugh and those standing nearby turned to look at him. “That I would love to see.”

“He should you know. It’s people like me who keep this country going, not idiots like him.”

“Actually it’s people like Peter Turner.”

“How dare you say that! Watch yourself, Alex.”

“It’s true. Alcazar needs the hard work and spirit of newcomers. Every day the Turners are becoming more established than the established. Someday Carlos will figure that out.”

“My grandfather will never allow it. We are generations away from having foreign scum like the Turners challenge us.”

“No we’re not Connie. It could be this election.”

She glared at him. “No it won’t. I don’t mean to be rude Alex but even an impoverished Scottish gentleman such as yourself owes his success to us. And the Turners, whatever they are, were poorer still than you. They owe everything to us, they only think that they don’t.”

“Connie you are missing the future if you ignore them.”

“Alex, you are missing the fact that my glass is empty again.” He grinned at her. “Would you mind?” She stretched her hand towards him, “I need some more if I’m going to continue to pretend to enjoy myself.”

“Alcazar is changing,” Alex proclaimed as he took her half-full glass.

“Alcazar never changes Alex. Everyone knows that.”

*

Within an hour of his arrival, Carlos excused himself from a group of business people and told Rey, his closest bodyguard that he had to use the restroom. As he re-emerged, he noticed the twenty-year-old Danish supermodel Brigitte Johansen balancing on swaying feet, and awkwardly staring into the crowd. Johansen was in Alcazar for a photo shoot on the country’s beaches. Carlos measured his opportunity. Striding towards her, then taking her aside while affecting a flattering greeting, he waved Rey away. The guard hesitated then backed off. Using her razor thin but six foot two inch high frame as a shield, Carlos took the inside lane as they walked. He commented in short clips on the progress of her work and her first impressions of the country, while steering her through a corridor that ran along the side of the ballroom. Slipping through the sparkling lines of wealth, beyond the sight of Luisa, Ambassador Crane, Connie, Alex, diplomats, businesspeople, sports stars and movie stars, they approached the isolated swinging metal kitchen doors at the far end of the hall.

“Brigitte my dear, I’m going to look in and see if they have some fruit juice. My throat is sore,” Carlos commented as he smiled at her. “Please go on back into the party. I do not want to keep you.”

Brigitte stood horrified as Carlos’ hand reached for the door then hastily whispered, “but Minister Carlos, the waiters will bring you whatever you want.”

“I want it now,” his voice turned harsh, “so you go back to the party.” Carlos moved quickly, he had only a second before Brigitte could respond or seek support. When the kitchen door swung open, he stepped inside. Startled waiters and cooks glanced at him in dismayed silence. “Where is the back door?” he demanded. No one moved. “Where is the back door?” After a few more seconds, a waiter pointed. Carlos hustled past the shocked faces.

As he emerged outside the house, a stark, shimmering white light blanketed the heavy mounds of trees circling the sloping side lawns of the mansion. Beaming torches and the occasional blare of a walkie-talkie, turned the still night air into excited chaos enwrapped in its own pretensions. Dozens of armed military guards, personal bodyguards, and weary limousine drivers, failed to notice Carlos as he slipped behind the security and military personnel to arrive on the open service road that ran along the mansion’s quiet west side. As vehicles carrying guests continued to pull into the front driveway, attention was diverted in that direction. Carlos paused. Looking skillfully around for lurking security guards until he was certain that he had not been spotted, he moved until his nationally renowned face was through the open window of a non-descript Ford truck that was parked, away from the spectacle, waiting, lights off, engine running.

“Tonight’s a good night, there’s no one around to notice,” Baker began barking orders in Spanish through rasping shortness of breath into the truck driver’s face, “so go ahead and do what I have told you to do.”

From behind the wheel, Luis Martinez squinted, then checked his side-view mirror to monitor for approaching cars. Removing his cigarette from between his teeth, he reached out the window to flick ashes onto Carlos’ three hundred dollar Brooks Brothers Italian calfskin leather oxfords.

Baker growled at him. “Don’t be an asshole Luis,” he continued, ignoring the gesture as he shook his foot. “I said it’s a good time to go, so go and do it now.”

“Yeah well it will have to be later. I've got something else to do tonight and it will take some time,” Luis finally responded, as 200 feet away a police car, slowed to stop at the top of the street. Carlos ducked his head further into the truck until he was practically kissing Martinez' chest.

“What the hell could you have to do that's more important than my orders?”

“Look *Señor Ministro*, other people give me orders too.”

“Don't fuck with me Luis!” Carlos screeched between clenched teeth, then sighed and looked around as the police emerged from their vehicle and began moving on foot along the west side lawn. “Do whatever it is you're doing, then go as morning approaches,” Carlos awkwardly hissed up at him. He glanced back to see how close the police were. Luis waited, made no move, and exhibited no curiosity. Controlling his breathing, Carlos slowly rose, removing his hands from the dashboard. “I can't stand here any longer,” he remarked, “just do it quickly, that's all I ask.”

“You have any cash,” Martinez demanded.

“For fuck's sake!” Carlos reached into his pocket, then handed Luis five one hundred American dollar bills not Alcazar pesos.

“*Gracias Señor Ministro*, I will do as you ordered,” Luis laughed as he hit the gas and sped away leaving Carlos standing in the street within sight of the patrolling eyes. The government minister straightened and turned, walking with purpose back towards the kitchen door where he would make his graceful re-entry into the mansion while trying to force one less worry from tapping at his mind.

The moment Carlos reappeared under the glaring lights of Ambassador Crane's rich foyer, he focused instantly and directly on Karlie. Standing at the base of a 25-foot Mayalee Sakamoto snow scene print that dropped from the ceiling to the floor, Karlie was framed on either side by admiring, tuxedoed official Alcazar. As Carlos approached, they departed, conceding the superiority of his official status. “You look fabulous as usual this evening, my darling,” Baker, the Republic of Alcazar's incredibly handsome, but obligingly married, Minister of Public Security whispered softly but directly into the unsuspecting ear of his friend and erstwhile lover as he planted a discrete, light kiss on Karlie's cheek. Across the ballroom, Dax and Scott individually and involuntarily bristled, Anne Crane raised an eyebrow, Luisa pretended not to notice, and the official photographer moved his camera into position.

Carlos had been on the periphery of Karlie's vision from the moment that she had spotted him glide into the ballroom, looking devastatingly held together, stunning, manicured and tailored without blemish or crease as always. Her heart ached at the sense of his closeness, the memory of his passion, the emptiness of loss to a world waiting for his error. Even through the gape of her Ambassador's expansive hall, Karlie could monitor Carlos through the crowd that had gathered to honor her country, and he could enrapture her almost without perceiving where she stood. Barely managing to be heard as the din of the evening's cocktail party conversation danced around them like notes on a haze, Carlos expressed with his eyes a yearning that had no end despite the liability that it held for them both. Ignoring Karlie's year long demands that he forget his persistent desire to be with her, Carlos played with the temptation and the opportunity to make her his again. And tonight he would have no protest because tonight of all nights, Karlie desperately needed him on her side.

“*Gracias Tee*,” she replied receptively, using the diminutive for his nickname, Tercero. Tercero meant third in Spanish, the third Carlos Baker of Alcazar. She had met him literally on her knees. Shortly after arriving in the country, she had accidentally tripped in the midst of a

receiving line at the British Ambassador's residence to honor Carlos' appointment as Minister of Public Security. Posturing as an uncompromising Mediterranean gentleman, Carlos had pulled her up with his hands on her arms, tightly gripped to the edge of her breasts, he had smiled down into her cleavage and proclaimed, "Hello, I am Carlos Baker." Instantly she nearly dropped again but his grip on her, the hands that held her breasts and the emerald eyes that held her gaze did not even allow for a stumble. She straightened, as a gathering crowd looked on. "*Gracias, Señor Ministro,*" was all that she could manage. "*De nada,*" was all that he needed to say. One month of uncensored phone calls and non-coincidental meetings at an array of official events on the 3,000 square mile island, and they came together. But less than six months later, she was overcome by the absolute requirement for discretion in a country that thrived on scandal and gossip. Sheer will cloaked in fear ended their affair, and it had been a year since she had last told him that their relationship was over, forever.

Tonight, seeing him draped in his full evening classic black tuxedo, reaching out for her, feeling and looking fabulous in her floor-length gown cut to tight perfection on her tall and firm body, she smiled despite herself into the glorious emerald green of his waiting eyes. "I have to tell you," she immediately whispered knowing that he had risked approaching her and that more than one set of eyes were now upon them. "I'm going to be leaving early."

"No, why?" Having waited half the evening to speak to her alone, he could barely cover his disappointment as concern played in his eyes.

"I'm going to pick-up a friend at the airport," she instantly explained.

"Oh how nice, a visitor?"

Karlie hesitated. She had been dreading this moment with Carlos. The government's most well-connected Minister was by far the last person on earth that she wanted to inform that she would be hosting, J.T. Tarmaine, official Alcazar's most hated and feared foreign journalist, in her own home, under the protection of her diplomatic status, for the next two weeks. Daring to come to the country, Jessie set out to test the government's election driven pledge to expand press freedom and secure political rights. Alcazar had been a paper democracy for nearly fifty years. The proclamations of its constitution were never enforced. Political leaders who sought to challenge the government in court were now in prison or had gone into exile. But a world uneasy with its commerce-led connection to Alcazar's banks and indirectly to the Bakers, now wanted stability, not shootings. By coming into the country, Jessie hoped that she could tip the tables, and turn the rogue tide against the Bakers, who have never relinquished an ounce of their power to the dozens who had tried to take it throughout the family's history in the Republic.

Yet on the verge of this national election, with the murder of the Ambassador's daughter, the Bakers looked more vulnerable than they had ever been. The Bakers and the ruling Alcazar National Party had been one since the country's independence. But the Fuentes, their cousins for four generations, were the backers of the Free Democratic Union Party, and targeted the ANP to end its political hold on the country. An ascendant middle class did not want to change Alcazar's free market or foreign supported economic base, but they did want to derail the Bakers and their decades of nepotism and control. They were the Fuentes hope, as were a cadre of self-made, local businesspeople who believed that their economic contributions to the country's treasury should be accompanied by intendant political influence.

Karlie was more than aware of the rumors associating the Bakers to the FDU massacre, more connected to the source of the machination than anyone dared to speculate. With the vote still weeks away, scheduled for the first Tuesday in November, her unofficial Carlos was the one person whom she considered had an opportunity to help her keep official Alcazar at bay, ever

quietly, out of loyalty and love alone. If anyone could be trusted with the news that Jessie was coming to Alcazar, it had to be Carlos. Karlie cleared her throat and braced herself. "A friend," she paused while Carlos smiled and waited patiently. Sucking air to the depths of her courage she finally, carefully, bravely, proclaimed, "J.T. Tarmaine."

Carlos' face went ashen as he stared at Karlie in utter disbelief. Then suddenly a look crossed his eyes, signaling that he had decided that he had not heard her correctly. "What? Who?" He kindly inquired, his eyes scrunching to accept the answer.

"I...she..." Karlie's confidence disintegrated, and words stumbled away as she surveyed his glazed over look of concern. "This may be a problem but if...Carlos, Jessie Tarmaine is a friend of mine, and she's on her way to Alcazar."

"What are you talking about?" Fury flirited to the top of Carlos' brow. "That woman can't come back to this country!"

Karlie stared at him. "Back?"

"She can't come here," he quickly continued. "What do you mean that she's coming here?"

"Look Carlos, Jessie is a friend of mine. She's a journalist. There's an election. She's coming to Alcazar to work, that's all. She's under my protection, my care."

"What are you talking about, your protection? There's no protection for Jessie Tarmaine in Alcazar, she..." Carlos stopped himself as Karlie's eyes clouded over in alarm. "She's not welcome here."

Over Carlos' broad and muscular shoulders, Karlie caught sight of his furious wife Luisa quickly but gracefully walking towards them, raising her voice she continued, "and I'm certain that we have so much more to discuss on this issue, *Señor Ministro*."

Still in shock, Carlos caught the look in her eyes and the tone of her voice, and turned quickly to catch Luisa's suspicious gaze. "*Querida*," he stated barely covering up in time with a touch of charm while turning, to kiss his wife on the cheek as she came to stand beside him. Then he turned back and gestured to Karlie. "Darling, you remember *La Señorita* Consul Laker," he remarked to Luisa with a smile.

"*Si*," Luisa responded with little effort to cover her tartness. She eyed Karlie and held out a limp and frozen hand. "*Encantada*."

"*Igualmente*," Karlie replied, lightly shaking her hand.

"Carlos we must speak to the Van Dammes," Luisa announced in Spanish as she took his arm and began to turn him away.

"Of course," he turned to Karlie with a shattered stare but all he said was "*con permiso, Señorita*."

Karlie nodded, delivering her consent in her unanswered smile as she watched him walk away. One of her all-time favorite men disappeared into the crowd with his ice-queen wife, before she had a chance to explain the details that she so desperately wanted him to understand this tense evening.

"Hey," Scott Taylor, Karlie's boyfriend strode up beside her for the first time that evening, and instantly spiked her fear about Jessie. "I totally do not approve of the way that Baker was looking at you," he whispered.

"Scott!" Karlie exclaimed, blushing as she leaned up to kiss his cheek as cover for her embarrassment, "where have you been all evening?" Tall and muscular like Carlos, shockingly handsome and a diversely successful 30-year old expatriate businessman in Alcazar, Scott shadowed Karlie at official events, confidently folding into the crowd to continue to add to his range of acquaintances and fuel his real estate and finance deals.

"I've been watching the way Baker looks at you," he angrily replied.

"Scott please," she whispered as she looked around, "remember where we are. He's just one of them."

"A rich, powerful and good looking one," Scott warned.

"Not as good looking as you," she smiled and leaned up against his solid six foot four physique. Scott tentatively smiled and moved his hand down her back, Karlie ducked away. "I said remember where we are."

"So."

"So behave yourself."

"Only if I know I don't have to later." Karlie looked at him gravely. "What?" he asked.

"Scott there is no later tonight. Don't you remember? I have to go to the airport."

"Oh yeah." Scott's smile faded and bitterness etched his voice. "To pick up some old boyfriend."

"Scott!" He had reacted the same way when Karlie first told him that she would see little of him over the next two weeks. Her refusal to tell him why always ended in a fight.

"No that's okay, I can take it. You want to fool around or whatever, I can handle it. And I suppose that I have to put up with Baker too."

"You know damn well that nothing's going on. It's not an old boyfriend."

"But it doesn't have a name. You won't tell me anything. I mean, what is this? You leave me--"

"Scott, I wish you wouldn't--"

"Yeah right, you want to be with someone else and I'll just fucking not care!" His tone revolved into a hard edge.

"Scott, please," Karlie pleaded.

"I need a drink."

"Just a second..."

As Karlie reached for him, a voice came up behind her. "*Señorita Consul?*" Karlie turned and felt the expensive fabric of Scott's suit jacket sleeve slide off her hand as he turned his back on her, and moved rapidly back into the ballroom crush. "My dear I absolutely had to come and say hello to you..." began Alex McIntyre.

Karlie smiled as McIntyre launched into his personal monologue on the upcoming elections. But as he continued talking, Karlie looked over Alex's shoulders into the hum around them to appeal with her eyes for Scott, and her heart for Carlos.

*

"Your *chica* looks delectable as usual *Señor Ministro*," Diego said as he came to stand at Carlos' side on the mansion's top floor terrace, where the Minister stood alone gazing into the deepening void of an Alcazar night.

"Fuck off, Diego," Carlos instantly responded as he had been thinking of Karlie but paused to consider that the ballroom below them was filled with several of his former conquests, and his father's top aide could have been referring to at least one of a half dozen women who were also guests of the Ambassador.

"It must be quite a different experience to do a foreigner," Diego paused. "Although I guess she wouldn't be so easy if she knew what you had done."

Carlos glared at him. "In another time I would have you flat on this ground."

"There is no other time for you Tercero. You owe us, so we own you."

"Oh fuck off!"

“You owe us a lot. We are covering for you, for the mistakes that are costing the family money. We are making it easy for you---”

“I owe you nothing.”

“What do you think your little foreigner would be worth out there.” Diego pointed his chin in the direction of The Alcazar Strip, the city's adult entertainment red light district, three blocks of dance clubs and restaurants that fed into alleyways of brothels and drug houses. The glowing lights across the city on the edge of the seaport could be seen from the height at which they stood.

“Don't even think about touching her. You leave Karlie out of this you little asshole. Don't even consider--”

“We will consider what we want. Diplomats are as expendable as Ministers and in many ways much more valuable. You don't think we're serious Carlos, maybe a little action with your foreigner would convince you.”

“Watch yourself Diego. I'm not only a Government Minister, I am a Baker.”

“But a stupid one.”

Carlos' fury accelerated. “You're a marked man, Diego.”

“No, you are Carlos. If your father knew what I know about you, your life, as you know it, would come to an end.”

“My father would not forsake me for the likes of you.”

“Your father would do anything for money.”

Carlos winced and glanced back at the lights of The Strip as Diego's words danced between his ears. The faultless truth of Alcazar's dependable servants rarely failed to equalize a competitive discussion. “Leave me alone, I came up here to get some air.”

“Give us what we need and you will have plenty of air.”

Carlos stared further into Alcazar's passing evening. A minute went by. “I need time,” he finally whispered.

“There is no more time to give.” As Diego continued, the sound of chatter and laughter interrupted the two men and they turned to see a man and two women stumble out onto the terrace.

“Oh,” the man gasped upon seeing the immaculately recognizable Baker profile, “*desculpenos, Señor Ministro,*” he immediately apologized. “We were invited to look at the view.”

“*Si pasan,*” Carlos replied, graciously waving the intruder in. Then he turned to Diego giving him his frostiest stare as he walked away.

Diego swirled to depart, then instantly perceived that one of the women was smiling provocatively in his direction. Glancing at the male stranger who simply shrugged and took the hand of the other woman as they turned away into a darkened corner, Diego gazed at the willing guest. The woman, still watching him, approached, took his hand in hers and led him with the force of her body to the terrace rail. With the soothing strains of Mozart ringing up into their ears from the ballroom floor, they reached for each other. As the orchestra played, they compromised the formality of the evening, shrugging off the confines of convention as unacquainted couples so often did in the Alcazar heat with the lights of The Strip reflecting off their shoulders.

*

Fifty feet away at the other end of the terrace, Scott glanced around to ensure that he was not being watched or followed, then crouched into a space between the manicured shrubs and

imposing glass doors, out of Diego's line of sight. Diego's preoccupations with his belt buckle, and the obliging party favor prostitute's dress zipper, would keep him from hearing Scott hit the speed-dial button on his IPA issued secure phone. Scott tucked further into the shrubbery as he listened for the call to connect.

"Greenbelt," a voice on the other end announced itself.

"Hey," Scott replied in a whisper.

"You secure."

"Yes."

"And?"

"Anything on those flights I asked you about?"

"Captain, this obsession with Laker's private life has got to end."

"You can't do me any favors Marty?"

"I can do you plenty of favors when you're working."

"This is work."

"Oh yeah."

"Yeah, she was talking to Carlos Baker again."

"Oh that's interesting. And?"

"Any info on the flights?"

"Captain, you are quite persistent. But just for you, I'll let you know that there is absolutely no one of consequence arriving in Alcazar tonight, and no one who fits your profile for a connection to your beloved Consul. We checked the names on the manifests of international flights, no hits came up. Whoever your girlfriend's guest is, it's no name that we would know. So I think that your girlfriend is just doing her own thing."

"I don't think so." Anger ripped through Scott's mind.

"Well that's what I've got. What's going on with Baker?"

"I'll report tomorrow."

"Were they talking about the election?"

"I don't know. Didn't catch a word. See ya Marty."

"Hehh..." Scott cut off the call before he could hear Marty's protest. He had known the senior analyst since first arriving at headquarters and now outranked him by more than field experience and skill. But he knew that there were no more questions that he would be answering that night. Cursing his phone, Scott slipped it back into his pocket. If the IPA, the International Police Alliance, the security organization operating above all other law enforcement entities on the planet, had no ability to track obvious people flying on an airplane then no one did. Scott knew that his superiors would hardly appreciate the thin line that he was treading between investigating Karlie's connection to Carlos and Karlie's private life, but he didn't care. Karlie Laker was more than an IPA watch file, she was more his connection to reality than his respect for his job. IPA agents did not compromise their covers for anyone. The IPA was too rich, too well connected, too far above the global laws that it had written to play nature's games. Scott's heart froze. His mind disconnected from two years of drilling with IPA rules to the relationship that he was so desperately trying to secure. He was determined to find out whom Karlie was meeting tonight.

A week earlier, on a night when Karlie had told Scott that she would be working late, he had arrived at the Embassy, talked his way past security guards and waltzed unannounced into her office. Karlie had been stationed behind her desk, typing communications to headquarters from

notes and local newspapers clippings that had been organized into neat piles that lay in front of her.

“What are you doing here?” she had shouted after his greeting ignited an initial scream of terror, which only subsided with the confirmation that it was his shadow gracing her office doorway at that hour.

“Wow, I didn’t mean to scare you,” Scott had calmly responded.

“Didn’t me...you scared the hell out of me!”

“Sorry, I didn’t expect that reaction.” Scott had stood back to observe her. Dressed down in blue jeans and a tight v-neck tee-shirt, her hair hung loosely shaping her face, devoid of make-up, she made his blood stir.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Karlie had warned. “How did you get in here anyway? What are you doing here?” She had reiterated in confusion.

“The guard let me in, he recognized me. I told him you had called me,” he had corrected himself, uncomfortably adjusting his stance. “You said you’d be working late. I didn’t want you to be alone. Ready to go home?”

“The guard? He’s supposed to call me first to confirm.”

“Well whatever, I told him you were expecting me. Anyway, what are you working on?”

“What’d you bribe him?”

“Never mind, the guy was trying to be helpful. Besides he recognized me. He knows I’m not dangerous.” Scott had started to walk towards her desk. “What are you working on?”

“What do you think I’m working on?”

“My guess would be the murder of Julianne Crane.”

Karlie had hung her head as her shoulders drooped. “We haven’t done much else for months. I’ve got contacts. I’ve been doing interviews. I’m supposed to figure this out.”

“Do you have anything new?”

“Well...” Karlie was quickly adjusting to, and admiring, his late night presence in her office. “Why are you asking?”

“C’mon you can trust me, who am I gonna tell?”

“Well this is sensitive.” Karlie had fondled a manila folder beneath her hands.

“And I’m a sensitive guy.”

“Very funny.”

“Actually I’m worried about you. I want to make sure that you’re okay.” Karlie’s stance had softened as Scott had dropped into a chair, reaching for the dense file while entwining Karlie’s fingers in his as he looked at her. “Let me have a look, maybe I can help.”

“Scott, it’s not really appropriate,” she had whispered releasing the file.

“So, let me have a look.” He had gracefully pulled the folder out from under her grasp and leaned back in his chair to begin reading. Karlie had created crisp, concise notes, dated and organized, laying out the trail of the investigation against classified communications between her government and prominent Alcazaran business interests. Scott had scanned the pages committing details to memory. “Hmm,” he had nonchalantly handed her back the file. “You’ve really been checking this out.”

“And that’s only the piece of it that the Ambassador wants to read on paper. There’s so much more. But what are we going to get with this information? Some asshole killed the Ambassador’s daughter. Julianne was so great, so much fun. I mean 19. She had everything ahead of her... And all the witnesses claim...they claim that the shooter just disappeared. Disappeared!”

“Karlie this is Alcazar. The shooter could have been standing right there with the smoking gun and nobody would say anything.”

“But she was one innocent---”

“She might have made a mistake Karlie. In this country---”

“Scott, please...” Karlie had pleaded, fighting tears. She was weary of the speculation that Julianne was more than superficially involved in the FDU. “I need to believe that she was in the wrong place at the wrong time, not that she was involved in something.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why? Because she’s the Ambassador’s daughter, an innocent kid.”

“She was Marco Fuentes’ girlfriend.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She was 19 but there’s a good chance she wasn’t an innocent kid. Who knows what they became involved with, what they were doing.”

“They were working towards a truly democratic election.”

“Through what means?”

“What are you talking about?”

Scott had bristled. “Look, I’m only saying that there could be more to the shooting than how it turned out. Julianne could have a stronger connection to political activity in this country than you think.”

Karlie had stared at him. “How do you know? Where would you get that idea? From someone in business? Someone close to the Fuentes? The business community has been split on---”

Scott had stopped her. “I’m just saying, it’s not obvious. I’ve got no connection to the Fuentes or anyone. Like you, I’m interested in what happened, like everyone is. I’d love to see justice for Julianne, of course I would. At the same time, I wonder if there is more to her story than the official statements that the press have been reporting and the diplomatic community wants to believe.”

“What I know is that she was a civilian. The family members of diplomats are not supposed to get killed. In any other country we might have some progress on this investigation by now. We wouldn’t be trying to get information from people who are bent on saying nothing. We might have a police force and an investigative unit that actually knew how to do its job. I can’t stand this! I hate this country enough as it is! I hate the crime. I hate the poverty. I hate the disorder! I hate the corruption! And I actually have to work through it all to try and get some answers for the Ambassador and Mrs. Crane!” Karlie’s voice had cracked as she held back tears.

“Karlie this is not your personal mission,” Scott had responded with care. “Other people have this investigation as their full-time job. This is not your case to solve.”

“Yes it is! I’m infuriated by what happened!” Karlie had replied. “I have to do something. Why am I even in this country if I can’t do something? I don’t want to write another boring report about the state of the elections or the poor health care. I don’t want to cut another ribbon or read another standard press release. I want to do something real. I want to get justice for Julianne!” Hanging her head low over the desk, she had returned to paging through the file. Anxious, Scott had come around the desk, and knelt down between her legs, taking her face in his hands.

“I’m sorry this is getting to you,” he had offered as he kissed her. “I’m really sorry.”

“Well, thanks, but this is my job. It’s supposed to get to me then I’m supposed to fix it. That’s what diplomats do. We fix complicated global situations,” she had put her arms around

his neck as she leaned in to return his kiss. Lingering in shared thoughts, they had responded instantaneously to each other's yearning as their lips met again, their faces glowing against the glare of Karlie's computer screen.

After a few minutes, Scott had risen and sat on the edge of her desk. "Karlie this is Alcazar. There is not much that you'll ever be able to do here. What does Crane think you're going to find?"

"Someone to prosecute."

"When did he arrive? Yesterday?" Scott had been incredulous. "Since when can you actually get anyone prosecuted around here?"

"Since they murdered an Ambassador's daughter." Karlie had taken a breath. "Scott, someone will pay for this you know that as well as I do. But we have to find one person, anyone, who did the shooting. Besides Marco Fuentes was also hurt. In the end, the Bakers know that he's family, they will have to respond."

"When it comes to politics, the Bakers and the Fuentes are not the same family."

"This is not politics. This is murder."

"Yeah I know Karlie. Those guns were aimed pretty directly..." Scott stopped himself as her relaxed glance stiffened.

"How do you know about the aim of the guns?"

"I saw that amateur video stuff on the Internet like everyone else," Scott had quickly recovered.

"Yeah but I didn't see anything with any shooters."

"Believe me everything is out there. Look, forget it. I think that you're working too hard and not spending enough time with your boyfriend." He had bent down to kiss her again. "That's what I'm really doing here. Let's get out of here," he had whispered holding her hand. Karlie had muffled her curiosity to subconscious. Relaxed again, she had begun to re-organize her files. As she had moved to clear away her desk, she had caught Scott staring at her with fire in his eyes.

"What?" She had half smiled, sensing his thoughts.

"Is there anyone else here?" he had mischievously inquired, glancing back at the door.

"Why?" Karlie had hesitated.

"You know why." He had moved forward, putting his arms around her.

"Scott we can't," she had tried as he leaned in to kiss her, one hand crawling up her shirt.

"Sure we can." He had breathed against her.

"No, what if someone comes in?"

"Who'll come in?"

"Whoever...the guard."

"Let's do it."

"Let's not." Karlie had put her hands against his chest and pushed him off, reluctantly he had backed up.

"You've no sense of adventure Consul Laker."

"Right, and that's what I'm doing in Alcazar."

Scott had laughed. "Before you leave this country I'm going to show you that doing it on federal government property actually heightens the experience."

"Like it can get any better." She had grinned at him.

"Don't you want to find out?"

"We'll get caught."

“Who cares, I want the moment with you...” Scott had suddenly stopped himself, then smiled embarrassed. “I think that you need a break.”

Standing up and edging towards the door, Karlie had taken his hand. “Then let’s go take a break.”

Now one week later, from his hiding spot on Ambassador Crane’s terrace, Scott’s concern mounted. What reason could Karlie have for not telling him the name of her houseguest? He caught the sound of Diego and the woman moaning against the terrace rail and his mind jumped back to his desire. Creeping out of the bushes and back through the terrace doors, he quickly returned to the noise of the party.

Clocking into its third hour, the officially over National Day Cocktail Party was emerging into Alcazar’s social event of the year to date. Searching for Scott in the crowd, Karlie failed to notice that the Australian Consul Roger Compton had approached her from behind and was leaning over her shoulder leering at her chest.

“Good evening Karlie,” he proposed when she jumped as he touched her shoulder.

“Good evening, Roger,” she replied graciously. Grateful for the distraction that Roger could deliver at exactly that moment, she smiled and waited for him to inevitably make a rude or outrageous comment.

Compton, a character, who typical of statue tall, preppie bred, sculptured, sun-kissed men, had captured Karlie’s attention until she had heard about his unhealthy roaming through every corner of The Alcazar Strip. On cue, he indiscreetly began describing to Karlie, and two Australian businessmen who came to make up the circle around him, his foray into a recently opened camouflaged all girls-for-men sex club. A half-dozen scotch and waters and Roger’s short lived intimate relationship with Karlie afforded him the opening to speak without inhibition. The Strip avoided advertising its most depraved activities to the passing tourists who wandered down into its confines for a naughty glimpse into the sex fantasy life. Only resident locals knew where the next level of action was truly hidden. Tuning out Roger’s annoying ramble and insincere apologies, Karlie surveyed the canapé of shrimp on a light avocado bed on cracker that she held before her as a sample of the evening’s near perfect cocktail nibbles. For one minute, Karlie could uncomfortably let thoughts of Carlos and the pending arrival of Jessie, slip to outside her consciousness, as Alcazar society mingled and danced around her.

Hope of speaking to Carlos again faded the moment she observed him pre-occupied with a group of *Señoras* dangling their diamond bracelets into champagne glasses now filled with club soda to satisfy their fear of over-indulgence. Alcazar had no shortage of public propriety practices, like absolute discretion in speaking to Carlos in public. Jessie’s pending arrival and stay in his country would eventually have to be explained to Carlos, but if she approached him now, all Alcazar would be watching, and that was the second last thing that she wanted this evening.

Their affair had been forced to fizzle and crash almost overnight, when Karlie demanded that it come to an end. One night at the height of their dating, she and Carlos had encountered Ambassador and Mrs. Crane leaving Christie’s, a secluded private seafood restaurant run by a Baker confidant in a house in a tiny fishing village five miles outside Joyo’s south shore city limit. It was a spot Carlos had assured her that was ignored by Joyo’s elite, too unfashionable to attract their attention. Ambassador Crane had looked like he had been there before, and immediately stated that the Chief of the National Police Force had recommended the location to him. At the moment of the surprised greetings, Carlos had searched his heritage and experience to face the Ambassador as if it were expected. They had immediately begun discussing a

multimillion-dollar bid to supply new weapons to the Alcazar National Police Force. Despite the fact that Karlie could have had legitimate reasons for having an out-of-the-way dinner with a government minister, Anne Crane had looked her in the eye, their country's two-century record of immaculate diplomatic decorum holding comment in check.

Ambassador Crane conveniently forgot that Karlie had been on the edge of his conversation with Carlos that night, until one of their country's biggest weapons manufacturers was awarded the mega-deal by the Alcazaran government.

"This is quite outstanding. We finally convinced Minister Baker that we had the best offer. We have been lobbying him for years and he always selected the Germans or the British," the Ambassador had told Karlie a month later when the news had broken and he was swimming in congratulatory accolades from around the world. "This is a wonderful opportunity for our weapons' manufacturers and my wife says that I should congratulate you too for your role in securing this for us."

"No," Karlie had nearly shouted in embarrassment. "Ambassador, I spoke to the Minister once or twice. We really did not speak very often about contracts."

"Well my wife believes otherwise. So for whatever it was, good work," he had replied.

"Thank you sir," she had replied in buried embarrassment. As he had walked away, Karlie had been too shocked to move. Deception had never been one of her moral weaknesses, but dread was, and broken heart and destroyed equilibrium had reached an irreversible peak.

That same night in Carlos' downtown condo, Karlie had cried for reason. "Tee, this whole relationship is too much," she had pleaded. "You have to understand. We are in a dangerous situation. We can't be found out. You're married. We have got to end this."

"But you don't understand Karlie. I hate my wife," he had responded. "This is Alcazar, people expect me to be with a woman I can love, not with my wife."

"Oh Tee come on. We'll be found out."

"So what! Why shouldn't we be together?"

"You know that's impossible. We're not going to manage a scandal. I'm a diplomat and you're a government minister. I can be kicked out of the country and you can be forced to resign. That is not how our careers are going to evolve, Tee. There's no way." Karlie focused on his emerald green eyes. "I love you but we will never be together again. This is not right Tee. Please try to understand when I tell you that we are over."

"Karlie." He had grabbed her hands. "You have to understand, they can't kick you out. My department manages our Vienna Convention obligations. I'm responsible for the diplomats. What are you afraid of? Don't you know that my family will protect us?"

"I don't want to be involved in anything like that..."

"Like what?"

"Carlos, we should end---"

"No, I want to stay together. Please don't leave me. Please don't leave my life. You don't understand. I'm not good---"

Karlie had put her fingers to his lips. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"Maybe if I told you more about myself."

"No I don't want to know. I want to end as we are now. Don't tell me any more."

Tears had streamed down both faces as they locked on each other's decisions and stepped back from the inevitability of discovery under the hold of their lack of self-restraint. Released from Carlos, Karlie returned to the social scene as one of Alcazar's youthful, desirable and powerful players, and in less time than it took to reconsider her decision, she caught Scott's

attention. Contact with Carlos would have continued to fade if not for this night, when the power he officially stood for would come to contention with Jessie's pending arrival. Karlie needed Carlos as an extra precaution against official Alcazar's notoriously over-zealous internal security police. As the Minister of Public Security, he could, if he was willing, easily arrange for Jessie to enter Alcazar freely and unharmed. But as Karlie glanced at her watch, the opportunity passed and a 747 would soon streak into Alcazar airspace prepared to land with Jessie on board.

"Alcazar has always welcomed all visitors from all over the world," the Deputy Minister of Public Security Alfredo Sanchez had told Karlie a month earlier. She had invited him to a social lunch then inquired about the new entry requirements for foreigners coming to Alcazar. She had chosen Le Bistro an expensive, heavily decorated restaurant where lunch would cost the equivalent of his one-week's official salary. Karlie encouraged him to drink, liberally, and to sample a selection from every course. Thrilled, he had gratefully complied. "All of this bad publicity by foreign media has hurt tourism," he had continued between mouthfuls. "We have responded by removing the last restrictions on our entry requirements. We would like foreign peoples to visit our country many, many times."

"All foreigners? Is there anyone you'd want to keep out...officially or not," she had ventured as he downed his fifth glass of scotch.

"No, why keep out? Except some criminals, terrorists, rebels, troublemakers, that type. Then everyone welcome. We are tolerant and fair people," he had replied, stumbling through his inebriated command of English.

"What about journalists? You're concerned about what the world media has been writing."

"We believe in free speech and all that," he had continued slurring his words.

"What about someone like J.T. Tarmaine?" Karlie had ventured.

The Deputy Minister had been taken aback, but too drunk to seriously contemplate the name. "Hmm... not sure. No, yes, ok, I say J.T. Tarmaine, lying liberal communist is ok to come too and see about our country. We are open country. We believe that world know that even if some troublemakers no like it."

"So there is no official or unofficial government order to prevent Tarmaine from coming here, especially with the elections coming up?"

"No...nothing...no official."

"What about an unofficial order?"

The deputy minister had looked up at the ceiling, his sixth scotch glass poised at his lips. "No...no I don't have that," he had burped.

"You don't have any special orders?"

"No Consul Laker, no, I have nothing, no special orders."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes *Señorita* Consul, I sure."

So spoke official Alcazar.

But Karlie did not trust official Alcazar, and official Alcazar had never trusted Jessica Tarmaine. Jessie's stories were official Alcazar's humiliation. She was the first journalist to cover the movements of political refugees who were fleeing from Alcazar for safety in Western Europe and North America. She had publicized Amnesty International's report of Alcazaran torture and imprisonment without trial, and she had covered the impact of the rebel movement in the north desert. Then she had begun to question the Bakers' fortune and power. Magnifying the extent of their wealth from selling sex and drugs to eager tourists in contrast to the untraceable finances of the industrial and retail operations that they claimed. Human rights

organizations and social justice politicians often quoted her award-winning insight into the country. Jessie's articles portrayed official Alcazar as the penultimate example of greed, lust, excess and abuse that rigged its elections and wreaked havoc on the lives of the poor through failed social policies and squandered international aid money. Debauched officials and rapacious ruling families hoarded its fortune, and exploited its underclass. Her reports graced the front pages of international newspapers, moved chatter on the Internet and put world-wide government and non-government pressure on Alcazar to reform or be cut off from the financial and military support that it needed to function. From the President through to the lowliest office clerk, official Alcazar hated, J.T. Tarmaine. Her stories swayed public opinion, public opinion swayed policy and lawmakers, and Alcazar dropped down the scale of countries of favor among the countries that handed the favors out. Then came the FDU massacre.

The Alcazar of a devastated mass of millions in the working poor population clustered on an island filling edge to edge with metropolitan sprawl, and the waiting sands of a hungry desert, was shocked beyond indifference by the teenage blood seeping into the polished concrete of its city center.

Now Jessie was coming to Alcazar under cover of darkness, on an unmatched route that had taken her halfway around the world, to arrive and dare the Alcazaran government into preventing her entry into the country or make it difficult for her to stay. Karlie held only her diplomatic status, and the government's hollow promise to leave the international media to its job as a shield against an eager official. Alcazar was now a global story, and Jessie was the globe's best-informed journalist on the country. She would arrive in a country in a state of verbal conflict with its rulers.

'I should have told the Ambassador,' Karlie thought. 'What will he say when he finds out...if he finds out...' She stopped herself, she would not let Malcolm Crane find out, nor Scott, nor Dax. She would handle the arrival herself. Jessie was legally allowed to visit Alcazar as a tourist, even as a journalist. Karlie had the right to host visitors in her home, technically they were operating within the boundaries of all defined law. A hint of desperation had crossed Jessie's request to visit Karlie. "I have to come now," she had told her. "You'll see when I get there, it has to be now." Jessie promised that she would come quietly to interview FDU and Workers Coalition candidates that she had contacted, and leave unobtrusively on a late night ferry to Greece. If they were silent, careful and most of all discreet it would be an uneventful two weeks and later they would laugh about it over champagne.

Bolstered by her own justifications, Karlie switched on her alertness as this inconspicuous errand called her to act, with or without Carlos' help. She looked around for Scott and spotted him encased in a corner between two stunning ex-Miss Alcazars whose combined age barely surpassed her own. He looked a little too interested in their company for Karlie's comfort, but that was no reason to disrupt him with a cattily timed farewell that would anger him again and set the women to talking about her. Alcazar women rarely accepted being interrupted when they were in pursuit of a beautiful man. Karlie trusted Scott, even if he was beyond trusting her for the next two weeks. She paused only for a second in an attempt to catch his eye. He did not look up. Finding herself at an impasse, she began to move towards the mansion's front doors with the full intention of exiting with time to spare.

The residence's public front extended through an archway where on the opposite side, Ambassador and Mrs. Crane had been standing for nearly an hour saying goodbye to their guests. Their drawn faces hid an inner pain that had washed away a night of celebration. Karlie walked towards them, hoping her nerves would not fail her. The foyer's elongated space

comfortably accommodated ten couples at a time, and as a steady mass of guests made up their minds about the evening, congestion overtook patience.

“*Excelencia*, thank you for coming.” Karlie heard the Ambassador graciously exclaim as he shook hands with Alcazar's Minister of Trade, an aging, rounded, cigar-smoking billionaire, Francisco Von der Krantz, whose power stood second only to the President's. The Ambassador nodded, bowed slightly and said thank you again as the passing Ambassador of Egypt tried to sneak through without catching Von der Krantz's attention. Boatloads of contraband products washed up in Joyo through the eager efforts of merchants in Alexandria. The point of contention, lax security on the Egyptians part had never been resolved, and the Egyptian Ambassador was in no mood to continue the dialogue again tonight. As his wife stopped to bid farewell to Mrs. Crane with kisses on both cheeks, Alcazar style, the Egyptian Ambassador slipped through the front door.

His escape went unnoticed as Alcazar's Minister of Social Development approached Malcolm Crane. “Yes Minister, I will inform my government once again of your need for the financial assistance for the fisheries. Of course we are always willing to help within the bounds of our own fiscal constraints,” Crane bantered on. Karlie, drawing ever nearer, pondered running past them and reminding herself as she had been for weeks not to tell the Ambassador that she was leaving early to pick-up J.T. Tarmaine, of all people, at the airport.

Catching the Ambassador's eye, Karlie confidently raised her eyebrows as he acknowledged with surprise, her attendance on the edge of the departure line. Cocktail mingling begins to conclude, when the official couple resumes their stand at the front doors to reverse their earlier welcomes with goodnights. But this diplomatic formality did not apply to Crane's officers, and he immediately fixed Karlie with a disapproving look further wracked by a weary and pre-occupied mind. Consciously, Karlie realized that her departure was too uncharacteristic, her own invited guests had yet to finish their next to last cocktail. Guilt sat on her shoulders as she wavered. Voices swayed around her, she started once more towards the official couple, and then a laugh caught her attention. As Karlie hesitated again three more couples slipped in the exit line ahead of her.

Turning back into the crowd, she fixed her glance on a striking young man whose eyes had fallen upon her. Taking a step forward, the evening's crowd parted naturally for the Ambassador's fourth ranking officer in Alcazar as Karlie decided to extend her social evening to the time it would take to say good-night to Daniel Xavier Waterman. From her first day in Alcazar, Dax was Karlie's closest friend, shopping partner and last minute dinner guest. The night Julianne was murdered, he had become more than an exemplary confidante as the two irreversibly wielded through the appalling task of navigating the Ambassadorial couple's official death procedures. Tonight he stood looking typically underwhelmed in a French language conversation circle focused on the repeatedly doubtful mining prospects in Alcazar's north island region. As her country's trade and commercial affairs officer, he would be required to report to headquarters if the mines were to be developed with sufficient investment prospects to garner the attention of the businesspeople in their own country. Anti-government rebels had been launching terrorist attacks in Alcazar's north region for more than twenty years. They were prone to demonstrate their impatience for inconsequential government subsidies to the region by planting plastic explosives on the construction encasings of foreign owned mining projects, and destroying in seconds Alcazar's attempts at industrial progress. The renewed prospect loomed as Dax tuned out the conversation around him and briefly fluttered his gorgeous blues around the room until Karlie strolled up beside him.

“Hey, where are you going?” Dax demanded as she approached.

“I’m getting out of here,” she whispered as he turned his back on the circle.

“Oh yeah? A little early for you isn’t it.”

“Well I’ve got things to do, you know…”

“You have a date?”

“No.” Laughing, she mock hit him and automatically looked around for Scott, but he was no longer in sight.

“Well I’m going soon too. But I have a date.”

“Oh yeah, who?”

“This one I’m not going to tell you about. This is top secret personal information.”

“Oh c’mon.”

“No way.”

“Why not?”

“I have to see how it goes first.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This one is pretty dangerous.”

“Who?” Karlie flicked her eyes around the room.

“I don’t want to jinx it.”

“Give me a hint.”

“Hmm, okay, he’s inhumanly gorgeous and everyone has been staring at him all evening.”

Karlie looked around the room again. “Oh, no way!” Her eyes locked on a target. “Nick Turner?” Dax grinned. “You’re going out with that super babe?”

“It’s in the works.”

“Oh my God, how fabulous is that!”

“I think it will be fun.”

“No kidding. Well I guess that settles it for all the girls in the room. Too bad, although I do hear that he’s got it all.”

“So they say.”

Karlie grinned at him. “I mean, I hear he’s brilliant, speaks several languages, has traveled all over the world, he’s some kind of super human specimen. And he’s so gorgeous,” she commented again.

“I agree.”

“Well as much as I would love to trail you two hotties tonight, I’ve got to go to the airport.”

“Who you meeting again?” Dax innocently inquired.

“I never told you in the first place,” Karlie replied.

“So who is it?”

“I’ll let you know when the timing is right.”

“What’s this, some guy?”

“No it’s not a guy. Why does everyone think it’s a guy?”

“Everyone? Hmm, why all the mystery?”

“Some people want their privacy.”

“You mean it’s a celebrity?”

“I guess you could say that.”

“Really? Now I’m really curious. You’re hiding some kind of girl celebrity. Is it Madonna?”

“Okay that’s it.”

“Oh ma god! She’s coming to *la isla bonita!*” Dax grinned.

“Good night,” Karlie smirked exasperated. “I’ll let you know soon, I promise. But right now I’ve got to go.” Karlie smiled and leaned up to kiss him on both cheeks, Alcazar style. “See you tomorrow, *chico mio.*”

“*Ciao, babe.*” Dax turned back to his circle, as Karlie feeling lightly contented made her way once more towards the Ambassadorial couple, and failed to notice Scott hurtfully monitoring her farewell kiss for Dax and her deliberate movement towards the front doors.

Now she was running late, Jessie's flight was due to arrive at midnight at President Winston Baker International Airport, Joyo's shoddy excuse for an international terminal. A thrilled apprehensiveness whipped through her as she plotted the fastest way past the Ambassador without saying a word. This was Alcazar after all, deception cloaked the culture.

Waiting behind two official wives hobbling on spiked heels, Karlie emerged back under the archway and gracefully cut through the line. She hurriedly offered the appropriate compliments to the Ambassadorial couple, ensured them that all of her contacts had been properly thanked for coming, kiss-kiss, kiss-kiss, and she was out the door as quickly as she could move without responding to any of their questions.

A valet ran for her Lexus parked among the Mercedes and BMWs, and steel-plated bulletproof Land Rovers and Escalades for those fearing the eventual social backlash, all were party parking lot material in Joyo's wealthy neighborhoods. Maneuvering quickly but carefully out of the residence's long driveway and away from the exclusive blaze of the party lights, the soft comforting shield of the Ambassadorial home receded in her rear view mirror. She passed through the gates of Tuxedo Park, drove the neighborhood's main connecting road and emerged onto the capital's blacked out streets. The reality of Alcazar’s social contract prompted energy supply shortages forcing streetlights outside the upper middle class neighborhoods to be turned off between every tenth block. This level of austerity prompted Karlie to develop a sixth sense about the city. Test driving the neighborhoods on early Sunday mornings when the traffic was lighter, she came to know the streets by their pot-holes, blind corners and commercial landmarks. As a general rule, Joyons did not drive slowly, signal, use lights, or stop at either red lights or stop signs. Joyo was never a city for young, attractive, single females alone at night at the wheel of an expensive foreign car. Friends would criticize her for not ordering a driver for the night, but Karlie wanted no additional witnesses to Jessie’s arrival in Alcazar.

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The second he spotted Karlie walk out the Ambassador’s front door, Scott made his move. He knew a back roads route to the airport and would arrive ahead of her and wait for an opportunity to scout arrivals. He began walking back towards the archway.

“Scott!”

“Ambassador Crane,” Scott exclaimed as he turned towards the voice that had called his name.

The Ambassador had temporarily shed the goodnight comments to his guests. “I need to speak with you right away.”

“Ambassador I’m sorry but---”

“I said right away. Come to my study.”

Scott’s eyes glanced towards the front door. “Yes sir.” He turned and followed Crane out of the ballroom and down the corridor to his study. As soon as he entered, Scott realized that it was not going to be a private conversation. Languishing among the poised bookshelves and

leather chairs sat Martin Carrière, the Ambassador's senior political officer, Martin's American counterpart Adam Walker and British Ambassador Sir James Layton. Scott took a step back.

Crane moved towards an oak desk in the center of the room. "Gentlemen you all know Scott Taylor, he is one of our top businesspeople here. He has extensive contacts, and I have asked him to join us to add his insight." The men nodded their greetings. "Now as I mentioned earlier, for the sake of all, I welcomed Carlos Baker into this house as if he were a friend," Crane stated inhaling deeply, as he ran a hand through his graying hair. "But I am extremely uncomfortable with his presence here. I must have options for addressing this, do you have any information for me?" One man looked to the other. Scott stared directly at the Ambassador, no one spoke. "Look, we all know why I called you here. I want to know the exact effort that is being made to uncover the details of the Bakers' role in Julianne's murder."

"Ambassador Crane, this is a delicate situation we cannot accuse Baker outright," Carrière cautioned.

"We know it was his men."

"We believe there was a connection," Sir James clarified in a calming tone. "We cannot know for certain that it was him."

"But we do know---"

"Malcolm we know that Carlos Baker is in no way capable of authorizing and organizing that kind of public shooting. He doesn't have the stomach for it."

"But our informants say---"

"They say he was there. Yes I know. But it is not him. He is simply not capable. We haven't even confirmed who is running the Baker family's election activities, which as we all know are not the same as the government's, nor the party's even though they are all literally related to one another. We are unaware of which Baker or Baker contact is really involved. We do not know who would do direct battle with the Fuentes?"

"I think that Peter Turner would," Walker responded, the tall, lanky American was leaning back in a broad leather chair, his legs draped over the armrest. "Turner is itching to be number one."

"The Turners and the Fuentes are on the same side."

"No they're not," Scott added. "Adam's right. The Turners want their own power. They do not want to share it."

"Look that family political power struggle is not my immediate interest," Crane interrupted. "I want the shooter identified. Who gave the orders and who did the shooting? I need evidence to take to the President, and facts that will settle this once and for all."

"With all due respect Ambassador, the President of this country is never going to turn in a member of his family to make up for one of yours."

The room fell silent. Crane came around the desk to stand in front of Scott. "Scott I have served in this profession since long before you were born. I have seen a dozen President Bakers come and go and people like that are always ready to trade."

"Ambassador Crane with all due respect, what are you going to trade?" The Ambassador backed away. "I mean what could there be," Scott speculated. "They'll be out of pow..." he stopped and stared at the Ambassador who regarded him with hollow eyes. Scott's mind raced. "They're expected to be out of power," he corrected himself then almost in a whisper added, "unless there has been a change to that prediction." He monitored Crane's reaction as he awaited the impact of his own comments, then continued with the analysis he knew was forthcoming. "Ambassador Crane, are you thinking about exchanging political endorsement of the Baker

government for a name, for Julianne's murderer?" The Ambassador looked down at his desk, all eyes in the room were on him. "Ambassador, Julianne was one person, this country is 12 million."

"Julianne was my daughter!" Crane emphatically proclaimed. "And this is not about her. All people want stability in Alcazar, after that no one cares who is in power." He gestured around the room. "You are fooling yourselves if you believe that this country has any significance for those with real power in this world. In reality, in comparison to our other concerns, the Bakers are not hurting anyone. The people here are poor, the people everywhere are poor. If every government with poor people were forced from power there would be elections every day. On a practical level, it is of no consequence if the Bakers run the country for another six years."

Adam Walker gasped and Sir James raised his eyebrows to the full height of his stature. But Carrière commented first, "Ambassador the Alcazaran people care who runs this country. They want a change. They're supporting the FDU as never before. They are tired of the Bakers' corruption. Peter Turner and the Fuentes are powerful people. Our country has already pledged to support democratic change and the FDU is ahead in every poll. We can't reverse our position now. Everyone has agreed that the Bakers' time is over, and we would support a new government."

"Martin, I am well aware of the statements our country has officially made," Crane spat back. "Innocent people lay dead, and we made our promises as every other country was making theirs. Look gentlemen the only reason that world opinion has turned against the Bakers is because the press, with our confirmation, has whipped up some fantastical commentary that this country is worse off than any other around the world. Well it is not true and you all know it. Look at the way you live here." They looked at each other.

"Ambassador there are serious problems here. The Bakers are out of control. They are intensely corrupt. They lock up opposition journalists and political leaders. We have reports of torture, many people have gone into exile. We do not want the Workers Coalition to get the upper hand, and try and change the economy. If we support the FDU, we have change and we have the status quo. Everyone is tired of the Bakers. They have stolen international aid money and they are running this country as their personal all-night party. They have massive drug and prostitution trading--"

"Stop lecturing me!" Crane shouted him down. "I am well aware of the Bakers' record. I live here. But I also know the reality of living here as do you. The Bakers are not massacring people or chasing them out of the country. Of course they are corrupt, every government is corrupt! And as for their businesses, well let me remind you that our governments and our fellow citizens have billions of dollars invested in this country's banks and it is very convenient for everyone to just leave well enough alone."

"But the people have turned to the FDU. They know the party will protect and maintain the financial system," Walker commented.

"I prefer the structure I know. And that structure is run by the Bakers. We have no concept of the Fuentes' intentions for managing this economy. We do not know who their real friends and enemies are. What if they end up in battle with the Turners? We want stability. What kind of a world do you want to live in? One run by unknowns? We are in the best position to benefit everyone by keeping this country operating as it has been. There are no consequences to supporting the Bakers to stay in power by not supporting the FDU and definitely keeping the UWC from further developing its base of power."

“And if the FDU still wins, we lose. They will know that we have changed sides, and in the end our governments will never forgive us for messing this up,” Martin interjected.

“There will be no possibility for the FDU to win. That is your job. You are compensated to ensure that our agenda is not compromised.”

“Ambassador I don’t think it’s my job to---”

“You may also remember that Julianne is not the only one of our citizens who was affected by all this. There is one more.” Martin and Scott looked at each other. “There is someone else and the Bakers can help us there too.”

“That’s true Ambassador but we are also supposed to stand for---” Martin began.

“Martin, where would you prefer to be assigned after your posting finishes here?” Crane calming asked as he maneuvered to alter the tone of the discussion. “After Alcazar, this little, inconsequential Mediterranean country, where would you like to serve?”

“Ambassador I---”

“A comfortable, beautiful country, somewhere prestigious, I suspect. I see you as at least number two in a high profile position, perhaps in London or Brussels, where you can have an impact on multilateral affairs. And then since you are always exemplary in your work, I see that post as your final step to head of mission, as an Ambassador, within three to four years.”

Martin took a deep gulp of air, on any other measure he was ten to fifteen years away from being appointed an Ambassador. “Ambassador, I’m not sure that the Ministry would consider my experience---”

“They would consider it, believe me,” Crane smirked and turned around, “and Scott?”

Crane faced him. “You can do almost anything that you would like. I wonder where Karlisle would be interested in serving next.” Scott’s eyebrows arched. “Yes I know about that. I like Karlisle very much. She is an excellent officer and a fine person. She is expected to have a brilliant career. I imagine it would be difficult if you were assigned to the opposite ends of the earth.” Scott stayed silent as he controlled his heart rate and willed himself down from a quick response. Crane took that as acquiescence. “And the rest of you can well understand that I would like to see this job done well and done right and I always reward loyalty, I promise you.”

The group held their silence for a minute until Scott broke his mental vow. “Ambassador Crane, I believe that the work that I’ve been assigned---”

“Ultimately we answer to the same people Scott. All of us,” Crane interrupted. “Now I have to get back to say farewell to more guests before Anne comes looking for me. All of you go back into the party and enjoy yourselves. I would like to speak with everyone again after the guests have left. I will break out the best scotch. Now back to the party.” With strictest obedience they all turned and headed towards the door. Scott hovered as his opportunity to follow Karlie to the airport faded, and a new crisis unfolded.

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Driving 90 mph in 50 mph residential zones that backed into the airport’s entry, Karlie passed Joyo’s cardboard and sheet metal suburbs, the Sewage Garden Housing Projects as she and Dax referred to the rubble of tossed lightly constructed clapboard shelters that were erected overnight on the shores of the city’s sewage drainage canals, by refugees from the countryside. The residents had fled from a decade of rebel activity in the northern part of the island where men fought the government with car bombs and random shootings that trapped civilians in the middle. The rebels wanted their share of wealth they believed would be worth millions that mining companies would pay to exploit deposits of iron ore, manganese, phosphate rock, copper or gypsum that they speculated lay in rocks beneath the desert sands. Subsistence farmers,

fishing villagers and North Port dock workers fled in fear into Joyo where there was no low-income housing and no services for those who could not afford to pay. Unlit, non-pumping gas stations lined the stark pitch black streets playing for attention with boarded up storefronts, exposed water pipes, fallen electric poles, abandoned maintenance boxes with the remnants of wires left dangling in the wind, and an alternative zoological collection of pigs, sheep, chickens and rats wandering to their deaths in Joyo's streets. And at every glance there were also people. Every open wedge of air was consumed by human occupation pursuing subsistence in the dense dirt. On a corner under a lone street light four men sitting on plastic crates played cards on an empty cardboard fruit box while an intrigued audience of 20 boys and men watched. In the middle of a block, two pregnant women sat on the curb, their legs stretched into the street, their smiles and continuous conversation oblivious to the heaps of trash that lay a foot behind them. Children of all ages ran up and down the roads, bumping into each other, laughing, and playing on as the night moved towards midnight. None were going to school, each day was spent looking for food and money, and all sense of time had been obliterated long ago. Ahead a barefoot teenage girl carried two gallon buckets of water along a narrow sand path that had carved its way among a conglomeration of cardboard box homes many with cooking fires still burning precariously close to each corner.

Throughout the capital, traveling by car took on the dimensions of a dare as much as a necessity. Joyo bubbled at night. Its shadowed, drained roads ached beneath the cautioned and slowed movements of its uncountable residents. Millions in perpetual poverty earned a national average two dollars a day, then poured over the wastes of the minority, facing each day as a pact with survival. To the external observer, Alcazar's majority continued to go through the motions of life in a state of resigned misery.

Karlie had no place on the streets of Joyo at night and she knew it. Many diplomats refused the offer to walk out their front door into intense humidity and engage in a driver's battle on the city's clogged streets. Coupled with daily electricity stoppages, intense urban crime that made armed guards an understood necessity, and the frustrating isolation innate with island living, everyone in Alcazar, notwithstanding the weight of a financial portfolio or the number of flights that traversed the defective airport, barely managed the country's reality every day.

Karlie's mood lightened as the strains of her dance mix CD blared from her car stereo and the last road to the airport came into view. The overseas diplomatic service was the domain of those who had the courage to leave home, trading comfort for the unknown. It was fastened to her psyche, it was life, heightened, it was continuous motion in a stagnating world, it was the fantasy existence against a background of painful reality. The foibles of Alcazar living were a dimension of the exotic, envied, expatriate lifestyle, through which her friends back home claimed they lived vicariously.

She drove on towards the Airport Road, a four-lane highway at the beginning of independence that had deteriorated under neglect to two lanes of cracked asphalt with pieces from the closed lanes used to fill in potholes for the functioning paths. At peak times, the back-up to the airport gates stretched for seven miles and lasted three hours. Twenty-foot cement walls rolled up on both sides of the road, as she squeezed her car into a narrowed sense of space. The walls, erected two years earlier for the first official visit of a U.S. President, blocked the view of the cardboard shacks that were home to over a thousand families bordering the airport runways and outer buildings. The wall construction was an idea championed by those Alcazarans who believed that the country could stride quietly in the world, accepting its fate and living for today. They wanted to set up a stage for the Presidential visitor that reflected their

illusions. Surprisingly to Alcazar's elite and the visiting media, those intentions sparked representatives of the majority to demonstrate that they were tired of the daily struggle to find food and affordable housing for their growing families. Their leaders called for peaceful protests but charged-up university students and labor unionists instigated riots in the streets, a rare display of angst and anger from the country's overworked people. Official Alcazar responded the only way it knew how, with guns, rubber bullets and tear gas. The manifestation was not permitted to last, the hungry were silenced before dinnertime. The Bakers responded by extending the runway at their private airstrip on the opposite side of the city to accommodate larger planes carrying visiting officials, favored friends and family members.

Carlos' official rule was demonstrated with rapid precision that day. It was Karlie's first insight into his command, her first sound of his voice as the dictates of the Ministry of Public Security rained through the seized radio and television airwaves in a demonstration of proclaimed order. She had known then that she wanted to meet this man whose polished threats laced in nationalistic rhetoric turned off the spigot of protest power and reverted Joyo to its even calm.

"Welcome to chaos," Dax had told her as they had run for cover through the garbage-lined streets. Karlie and Dax had decided to monitor the demonstrations from street level, as members of a multilateral Task Force set-up to analyze the contrasts in a country far from content below its surface. The first month in Alcazar, Karlie had reported to her Department of Foreign Relations on the rioting, the police reaction and the silence of Alcazar's wealthy. Eleven people had been killed, 273 were injured, many seriously, the struggling public hospitals were overwhelmed. That day Karlie had run through the streets behind crowds of fearful urban squatters, determined small factory union organizers and disillusioned students. She had felt their adrenaline throughout her body, now she could almost sense the faint burning smell of tear-gas still itching at her nose. She had measured the direct response of her actions, the completeness of being a witness, participant, communicator and negotiator at a moment that the foreign press would later claim opened the door for opposition parties to organize a verifiable election contest.

Looking straight ahead as the airport came into view, taken aback as color re-illuminated the darkened sky like a lighthouse beacon guiding sailing vessels around unobserved obstructions, Karlie sat up straighter in her seat. The airport outlined by its yellow expanse of buildings, glowed into the deep sky with only the neighborhood around the Ambassador's cocktail party, and the never-ending action on the shoreline Alcazar Strip, as fully electrified rivals. The buildings shone over the highway bridge to meet her. Even in the poorest countries, airports always function. Little more discomfoting than anywhere else, planes take off and land without incident. Taxis wait outside the terminal and moneychangers and ATMs line the walls. Kiosks sell water, chocolate, magazines and Chinese-made souvenirs of the country's culture. At random locations around the world, the local people consider it paramount to maintain the ability to get out of the country as fast as they can.

As Karlie drove closer a dozen hawkers, who spent their days waiting for people like her, began to press themselves against her car as easily drawn to the light as flies to a lamppost. "Buy newspaper, buy cigarettes, *señora, señora...*" were the cries of vacant faces pressing against her window with wide eyes and open palms. "*Señora por favor, una propina*, a tip, please." Karlie slowly continued straight ahead, imagining how a 40 minute drive can take one from lobster cocktails and emeralds to rotting garbage and desperation faster than the last lines of a hip-hop rage. She slowed down, then flinched involuntarily as armed guards suddenly

surrounded her car, their assault rifles swinging towards her. Stopping at their command for an expected few seconds at the main gates to the Arrivals ramp, Karlie braced as she gave them a moment to see the diplomatic license plates on her car. Intensely they gazed at her and then waved her through the fenced-in area where only the privileged were allowed to park.

On the other side of the gate, in a specially marked reserved parking area watched over by three armed guards, Karlie stepped out of her car and briefly looked down over the rail to the night hawkers below who were hoping to earn a few pesos before sunrise. Tossing an unassuming nod in the direction of the goons with the guns, she looked out quickly to the tarmac to see if Jessie's plane had arrived. It was already past midnight. Only domestic aircraft were visible. Karlie quickly walked to the night office to sign-in for an access pass, cautious that she was still in high heels and a cocktail dress, and was wearing pure gold jewelry bought for haggled prices at a market in Bangkok. Karlie snapped the pass in place and turned over her own diplomatic identification. Regular people were not allowed into the airport, unless they were about to embark or had recently disembarked from an airplane. Too many loiterers would be suspected of making the terminal a permanent home or a new alley of criminal activity. No indoor farewells and reunions were permitted in Alcazar. Greeters waited outside by the hundreds to search the sea of arriving passengers for loved ones and employers. Karlie passed by them, walked right by the soldiers and their guns, the police officers and their wooden sticks and the night shift employees giving her blank stares, knowing that a woman dressed as she was tonight was no regular person in Alcazar.

Karlie was an anomaly in Alcazar, a young woman in a position of respect, authority and power, a demographic that was almost unheard of in the macho-run island state. With confidence, she passed through the Immigration Control barriers murmuring “*Buenas*” and fumbling over the “*noches*,” for the officials who were waiting for the passengers to arrive. Appearing as if she had the authority to act in Alcazar was as important as actually having it in the form that it was available. A yawning guard nodded back to her in greeting, attempting to hide his surprise at her appearance. Arriving at the information board, she checked the flight’s projected arrival time and walked over to gate six to wait.

The anticipation of Jessie’s arrival carried more than the fear of official Alcazar’s wrath. Jessie had refrained from inspecting Karlie’s prior posting under the guise of a career that took her beyond the organized musings of the diplomatic corps. Instinctively, Karlie deduced that Jessie hungered to over-engage Alcazar beyond the ‘election coverage research,’ lines that had straddled their phone calls prior to this night. The Bakers were facing organized opposition from within their own family. Lurking below both dominating parties was the United Workers’ Coalition, the UWC, inspired by garment and seaport employees, who despite their appeal to the poorest had no traction with the pragmatic. If the UWC had their way, the election would be about balanced tax collection, more schools and health clinics in the poorer neighborhoods and an end to nepotism in government appointments, but on these issues the Bakers and the Fuentes were not political opposites.

Karlie had yet to determine if Jessie was a democracy supporter who would be happy to see the ANP ousted under any circumstances, or specifically wanted to witness the UWC come to power and gain control of the country’s budget. Jessie’s visit had many options - cover the political rallies, interview witnesses to the FDU massacre, find sources who would comment on the Bakers’ record, and personally determine if the government’s free press policies were real. And underneath all those options, she could challenge official Alcazar to ignore a national threat that they called J.T. Tarmaine.

An incomprehensible message blasted from the airport's speaker system to break Karlie's speculation, and the muffled engine drones of an approaching aircraft came with it. Her heart danced through leveled temperance. She flashed her pass at another guard, and drew closer to the gate. The plane parked at the bridgeway, and a few minutes later, weary passengers emerged into the void terminal. By speculation, Karlie guessed that Jessie would not be among the first, she always flew coach class as if sitting in the business cabin automatically compromised her principles. Karlie always sat in business as if sitting in coach automatically made her poor. Jessie argued that there was much more to learn and observe from the people at the back of the plane. Karlie countered that she intended to gain leverage from the people at the front, through a ride of peace and quiet not to mention legroom. Straining over the heads of the arrivals, to ensure that she would see her friend among the fat *Norteamericanas*, wealthy Alcazaran women who imitated bleached blonde American *señoras*, and always returned to Alcazar with a full load of their favorite products from the shops of Rodeo Drive or Fifth Avenue; the North Asian suits, Japanese and Korean businessmen, arriving to sample the offerings on The Alcazar Strip; and the latent hippies of both sexes, who had forgotten to come in the '60s when the island was still an unspoiled playground, Karlie surveyed the crowds on the anxious look out for Jessie.

As the waiting area filled, Karlie avoided missing her friend by focusing on a woman wearing Levis and a faded gray university sweatshirt with DARTMOUTH printed across the chest. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail held together by a multi-colored ribbon, her face was tanned and un-scrubbed. She was carrying only her laptop computer bag in one hand, and a passport and official government immigration and customs forms in the other, she barely escaped classification with the college-age hippies.

Karlie, coming from the National Day cocktail party, for which she had spent over an hour getting ready, looked their mutual slightly past thirty years. As they came together in the crowded and muggy airport, a college time and sense of memory passed through as the two women reached for each other in an embrace. "My, my don't we look diplomatic," were Jessie's first words as she took a step back and sized up her high school friend.

Frustrated taxpayers and reckless school board members had been responsible for Karlie and Jessie's meeting in an aging brick high school building bursting at its foundation. Budget cuts and dwindling enrolment of kindergarten starters had forced their hometown school board to amalgamate more and more of the neighborhoods' public schools into the same buildings. Karlie and Jessie emerged as allies in a battle to secure at least one classroom space for the school newspaper. With a shared career desire to be journalists, they wrote together for their scholastic rag *The Banner*. Karlie had intuited that Jessie harbored a desire for companionship, and Karlie was their high school's reigning social director, at least for the academically-minded, not for the druggies or the snobs. Karlie dragged Jessie along to parties and sports events. In their spare time, they would imitate foreign correspondents covering war and famine in exotic countries that other classmates failed to place on a map. In their final year, they provided encouragement through applications to journalism schools around the country. But after four years of university and one-too-many international relations classes where Karlie engaged in substantive debate on global policies on disarmament, trade, the environment and immigration, she applied to the Foreign Service.

For Jessie, dozens of attempts at an international assignment with national newspapers took her no further than local community newspapers. Chasing police vans, monitoring court cases and flushing out the banality of government press releases for rural readers would become valuable experience, create a massive portfolio of sample work and test her patience. For Karlie

such discipline would prove unconvincing, with degrees in political science and economics and the foreign service recruitment process, she would end up reporting on events on the other side of the world much sooner than her friend and for a completely unanticipated audience.

The year they had both finished Graduate School far apart, Jessie joined the staff of an expanding circulation and respectable large community newspaper and spent her spare time bombarding big city editors with her resume whenever she heard that there might be an opening. After several articles earned her national attention, she was hired by the country's leading national newspaper, The National Standard. First assigned to the city desk, as the years went by, she wrote her way on to a grinding level of accomplishment, winning accolades for the paper as an international affairs correspondent, filing stories from around the globe. Neither Karlie nor Jessie had envisioned that their education, work experience, determination and courage would eventually bring them back together in a muggy, dirty inconsequential Mediterranean country on the opposite side of the earth from where they had first met.

"It's so great to see you Jess. Come on let's get through the border police," Karlie sincerely commented as she took Jessie's arm and they hurried towards the now full and steaming immigration hall. Karlie made quick inquiries about Jessie's father and her work. "How was the flight?" she continued.

"Long."

"Anything happen?"

"No, the usual."

"Did anyone notice you?"

"No one."

Karlie took a second look. Jessie's tanned, youthful face was strained from the demands of a twenty-seven hour air routing around the edges of Europe into Italy to catch a post cruise ship Mediterranean regional carrier's late night gambling charter flight that landed in Alcazar at 12:01 am. "Did you sleep?"

"No"

"Well I'll get you home soon. As long as we can get through these lines."

"Oh you're optimistic."

"I'm just saying..."

"Is there anything I should do?" Jessie inquired, glancing around.

"I don't think so."

"What's the worst that could happen?"

"I don't know," Karlie dropped her voice to a whisper. "If they detain you, they don't have charges which even in Alcazar is not a good thing. They're trying to rebuild the reputation that you were so good at destroying. With the FDU rally and the election, you know, people are watching. My guess is that they will question you. But it's after midnight, there are no high-ranking officers around at this hour and these lower ranking types won't know what to do and they won't want to stay here into the early morning. Keep your fingers crossed, and don't say anything."

Jessie nodded, as Karlie surveyed the various lines at the immigration counters to find one that did not harbor possible visitors that looked like drug-dealers or young, skinny single women coming to work as "entertainers" in one of Jovo's infamous Alcazar Strip sex clubs. Those were the individuals who brought movement on the line to a rapid halt. The desk behind the sign for diplomatic passport clearance, typical for a post-midnight arrival, was empty. Karlie and Jessie

moved to stand in the next line over and engaged in stunted conversation until they reached the window.

“Por qué usted viene a Alcazar?” the immigration officer asked while picking Jessie's passport and immigration form up off the counter, his drooping eyes barely glanced in their direction.

Standing nervously side-by-side, Jessie opened her mouth to answer but Karlie jumped in. *“Turismo,”* she quickly and uneasily responded for her. The officer looked up quizzically, catching Karlie's airport pass hanging from the dropped cleavage front of her cocktail dress. The officer glanced at Jessie then refocused on Karlie with an intense sense of recognition.

“Señorita Consul Laker cómo está usted?” he inquired suddenly smiling.

Deducing from the greeting that he was one of the officials that she had spoken to on one of several previous occasions, Karlie demurely turned up the corners of her mouth to offer the lonely officer a glimpse of her willingness to engage his attentions. Avoiding complications on entering or exiting Alcazar required smoothing the way through charm and grace, traits Alcazarans worshipped. Karlie had been through the airport many times to escort one of her citizens out on a deportation order or to meet visiting officials. Appreciating Alcazar's share of friendly and polite working men, it was impossible not to flirt with them on occasion, and sensing Jessie's chance she responded instantaneously to his inquiry. *“Muy bien gracias,”* her most charming smile graced her face. Tossing impression into her eyes, and she slightly puckered her lips in a gesture of remembrance.

“Está muy bonita esta noche,” he complemented her.

“Muchas gracias,” Karlie breathed in his direction, as she leaned forward on the counter. *“Está un hombre muy simpático.”* Returning the compliment, Karlie smiled and pointed a finger at Jessie's passport.

“Una amiga suya, a friend of yours,” the officer responded instantly with a grand, excited smile as he pointed to Jessie without looking at her.

“Si señor.”

“Bueno,” flashing Karlie a lick of his lips, tossing the immigration form into a pile on his left, he stamped and initialed Jessie's passport, glancing down only to avoid writing onto the counter. He handed the document to Karlie. *“Bienvenidos.”*

“Gracias,” Jessie answered, as she reclaimed the passport.

“Gracias muy amigo,” Karlie responded as she straightened off the counter and shook the officer's hand.

The man blushed and barely caught his breath for the next-in-line as Karlie and Jessie quickly walked away.

“I can't decide if that was too weird or too lucky,” Jessie protested.

“It doesn't matter, it worked,” Karlie noted. *“There's nothing like the indifference of an underpaid civil servant to manipulate the rules in your favor.”*

“He didn't even ask if I was a liberal radical.”

“He didn't care, that's even better. He barely looked at your passport, thank God.” Karlie laughed as memories of Jessie's more critical articles filtered through her mind. *“That was almost too easy. Now let's see if the customs guy is just as horny.”*

Passing off Immigration, they reached the baggage carousel. *“What does your bag look like?”* Karlie asked.

“It's a duffel bag.”

“Of course it is,” Karlie mockingly retorted.

“Sorry *Señorita* Consul, I'm still Bohemian.”

“And thank God for that too,” Karlie laughed and hugged her, grabbed her bag which drifted around the carousel among the two extremes of the wealthy’s designer luggage, and the poor’s cardboard boxes that reflected Alcazar’s fractured demographics. Walking rapidly towards the exit, Karlie quickly and confidently flashed her pass at the sleepy customs official before he could stop them to ask questions. Clearing the airport in record time, Karlie and Jessie stood in the night air as unlucky arrivals bribed officials by placing cash in their passports to slip into waiting hands as the only way that they would leave the airport in complete possession of all of their bags and the gifts of food, clothes, appliances and toys that they had brought back for their eager family.

Surprised that she had made it that far, Jessie stopped, looked up at the Alcazar sky, and instantly began to soak in the atmosphere, as Karlie ran back to exchange her airport pass for her diplomatic ID. In alarm, Jessie stared at the hawkers and begging children who gravitated towards the airport’s offering glare, assuming that those who had the money to get on one of those great silver birds must have it in them to drop a few pesos. She watched them in distracted disbelief, a look of increasing disappointment crossing her face.

“I think you've been through enough emerging market countries to know that this is routine,” Karlie replied to Jessie's curiosity about the hawkers as she rejoined her and they approached the car.

“Yeah, but for some reason I didn’t expect Alcazar...”

“What?”

“I don’t know, to have so many I guess, especially the kids.”

“Jess, you’re kidding. What developing world airport doesn’t look like this?” Karlie flung her arm through the air. “They’re all like this. This is the way the world really works. The way we live in the West is the exception.”

Jessie fell silent as they climbed into the car. Back on the road home, Karlie drove at Joyo speed, which was unlimited, swerving around children on bicycles and fanatical taxi drivers as Jessie gripped the sides of her seat. As they pulled to a stop at an overtly crowded intersection, a child of no more than eight years old, in a ragged, white T-shirt, grease and mud stained shorts and bare feet, carrying either a live baby or a doll in a blanket, took the opportunity to approach the car, hand outstretched. Jessie hesitated only for a second before reacting to lower the window.

“Don't do that!” Karlie scolded with alarm, as she hit the gas and ran a red light, taking inches to avoid pedestrians.

“Are you nuts?” Jessie screamed.

“We do not open our windows around here. This is not some middle class suburb, this is Joyo after midnight. Even you know that.”

“Maybe I...,” she cut herself off.

“What?” Karlie glanced at Jessie in surprise. The hint in her voice, and twist to her face signaled a sudden distress. “Maybe what? God what’s up with you? You must be really tired.” Jessie didn't answer. “Jessie, that kid could have a gun or pepper spray or worse. Carjacking happens to be a favorite pastime around here.”

“That kid did not look big enough to carry a gun.”

“They’re all big enough, including the guy that you didn’t see standing off to the side under the street light. He looked ready and waiting. It’s all a racket you know. I mean they’re poor

kids and everything, but it's still a racket for adults to make money off of them. C'mon you know all this, Joyo is no different than anywhere else."

Jessie fell silent again, then reached forward to turn up the music, REO Speedwagon singing 'Take it on the Run.' "Where in the hell did you get this?" Jessie quickly recovered and changed the subject.

"It's been rediscovered, all the old music comes around again."

"Nostalgia city," Jessie laughed as they simultaneously broke into tune with the 1970's hit song from the one-album-wonder rock band. And they laughed and laughed as the song of a youth spent on the edge of triviality faded itself out in the background. Feeling relieved, they reached the gates of Karlie's neighborhood.

"What the hell is this?" Jessie exclaimed once again surprised, as they pulled in front of an armed guard station at a 20-foot high steel gate covered in electric shock warning signs.

"Security."

"Are you kidding?"

"No."

As the city had long settled into its darkened deep night cover, Karlie had driven around the cement walls and barbed wire that surrounded her neighborhood but the continually dark streets had prevented Jessie from noticing that they were moving into position to be barricaded inside. The neighborhood was officially named Palm Gardens Village by the developers but the locals referred to it as The Village. At the main entrance the guards, weapons poised, recognized the blue and gold neighborhood resident sticker displayed on the driver's side of Karlie's windshield and waved her through.

"Jesus Christ, what was all that?" Jessie repeated.

"Security."

"Against what?"

"God knows."

Inside the gates The Village shockingly resembled an upper middle class neighborhood, built for the outskirts of Miami or Phoenix, then transformed to an intensely tropical country lingering in colonial heritage. Spanish style stucco and cement homes lined the sidewalk-less streets next to over dramatized experiments resembling architect's work that had gone array. All were blessed with azaleas and roses marking every trim green lawn. Palms trees hung over the sides, a sense of quiet shrouded the lifestyle, and streetlights shone their luminescent yellow glow upon the inhabitants resting peacefully as the morning of the night before stretched on.

"Wow step out of reality," Jessie commented as the sudden proliferation of street lamps involuntarily forced her to readjust her eyes. "You have all the electricity."

"Yep," Karlie replied uncomfortably.

"I've never got this. There are obviously pretty good homebuilders in the country so why can't this be extended over there." She pointed back towards the wall.

"Who's going to pay for it, Jess?"

"You know as well as I do that this country has the money."

"There's a big difference between having money and spending money---"

"That's because the Bakers are in charge, if we could get rid of them..."

Karlie flinched. "Jess, the Bakers aren't the only problem."

"Yes they are."

"There are other rich people in this country."

"All connected to them."

Jessie angrily looked away as Karlie pulled the car into her own driveway. Within a minute a sleepy Freddy rushed across the lawn, nightstick swinging in the air, he waved, opened the gate and they were inside.

“You don't open your own gate?” Jessie asked incredulous yet again.

“When in Rome,” Karlie answered exasperation ringing in her voice.

“*Hola señorita! Hola,*” Freddie greeted them as he held out his hand to Jessie. Karlie answered while opening the trunk, and providing introductions as tried to shake his hand while he reached for her bag. While anxious to ask the amount of his wages, whether his children were well fed and the extent of his health care services, Jessie was forced to take the bag from him and let Karlie steer her inside, before she could begin the interrogation.

“Wow!” Jessie remarked crossing the threshold and forgetting Frederico's social progress. Despite walking into the house through the servants' entrance on the side, she was already impressed. Karlie's temporary, government assigned residence had originally been leased for a diplomatic couple with three children but when the election related unrest began to escalate and frighten foreigners, the government had moved the families out and single people in. Single people were an easier risk than innocent children as the killing of Julianne Crane quickly reinforced. The houses were under fixed leases and exceeded the Department's own regulations for square footage relative to family composition, a circumstance of international life that married luck with timing. Alcazar's limited middle class was in neighborhoods too far away from the city center to be considered practical by the diplomatic corps. Housing options were balanced between manicured neighborhoods of the wealthy or the distressed infrastructure of the struggling poor. Karlie's government paid premium rents to keep its officers and their families from living in dangerous under-maintenanced suburbs that would triple security costs. Her assigned Joyo home had a bathroom for each of four bedrooms, a raised dining room to a sunken living area, which was all separated from the family room and kitchen. The maid's quarters on its own could have been a snug but comfortable apartment in Barcelona.

“Wow,” Jessie repeated while looking the house over with a desirous eye.

“Jess.”

“Pretty good,” she commented as she ran her hand across the couch fabric.

“Yeah and it costs me ten grand a year in shelter paybacks to the government, and for general upkeep, all for which I'll have nothing in the end.”

“Yeah but it's fun while it lasts.”

“I'd rather be a Bohemian reporter.”

“Yeah right,” Jessie sarcastically replied while continuing her self-guided tour.

The clock approached 2 am, as they dropped onto the family room sofa to drink lemonade that had been laid out by Maria who had stayed up to wait for them even though Karlie had told her not to bother. Maria, sometimes with the help of her husband Guillermo, looked after the house for Karlie at all times. She cooked and cleaned, he gardened and handled minor repairs. Guillermo and their three children lived in a working class district on the city's westside, a corner that Karlie had never seen. From Monday morning, Maria boarded at Karlie's and every Friday night she would make the three-hour, four-bus trip across the city to spend the weekend with her family. They lived in a two-bedroom bungalow that had been built for British soldiers in 1941 and never maintained. Paint peeled from the walls, the one toilet, used by two families, 11 people in total, was constantly clogged. Guillermo worked when he could find an opportunity in factories near the city's port. His random employment, the extra money that Karlie gave him, and the regular \$200 a month salary that was paid to Maria meant that the family always had

food, school fees, bus fare and enough left over to occasionally see a movie. They had furnished their home with a fridge, television and a compliment of furniture. They even had their own maid, a 16 year old girl whom they paid \$20 a month to sweep their rooms, keep the toilet functioning, cook, clean and watch their children when they were both working. The girl slept on a straw mat placed at their back door. Maria and Guillermo were comfortable, at the top of the social class in their area. They were saving to build a house in their home village on the country's south coast. They felt lucky, and they liked working for foreigners who were more easygoing than Alcazarans. In their gratitude, Maria did not hesitate to stay awake to serve refreshments at 2 in the morning.

"So you've made it," Karlie finally began to relax as she and Jessie settled into the living room sofa with their drinks. "I still can't believe it. We may pull this thing off yet. What do you want to see?"

"Everything," Jessie strongly stated.

"And do."

"That too."

"Okay, but keep---"

The house phone rang, making Karlie jump, then quickly rise to answer it. Jessie continued to survey the house, "if it's the police tell them that wasn't really me they saw arriving at the airport!" she called out.

Karlie half smiled as she put the receiver to her ear. "Did your friend arrive?" Scott asked quickly on the other end of the telephone line before Karlie could cautiously answer.

"Yeah. It's kind of late isn't it," Karlie whispered back, relieved that it wasn't the police, and a little annoyed that Scott was checking up on her. She was floundering under the obligation to be vague about details to protect Jessie's privacy. At some point, she felt that she may tell him the truth. She trusted Scott and hated to keep him away from the house for two weeks, but tonight would not be the night.

"I wanted to check, and make sure that you got to the airport and back okay," he hurtfully replied. "I figured you'd be back by now."

"Thanks for calling, but I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay," she abruptly cut him off.

"Look Karlie, I wanted to make sure that you were all right."

"I know. I'm fine, thanks. I appreciate it."

"Do you really have nothing else to say to me?"

"Scott please, let it go. I promise you will understand." Silence gripped them.

"All right, fine, goodnight." He curtly hung up.

Karlie hung up slowly, looking at the receiver for a second before re-entering the room.

"Well was it them? Are they coming to get me?" Jessie instantly inquired, only half-jokingly as she flung her arms out in front of her, wrists together, ready to be handcuffed.

"No, it was a friend."

"At this time?"

"Yeah, well people know I was at the National Day thing and that I was picking someone up at the airport. It's not a good idea for women, or anyone for that matter, to be out alone at night here. So he was checking that we made it back."

"He?"

"Yeah, yeah. Don't get excited. I'll tell you about him later."

"Oh, c'mon, tell me now. Who's this guy who calls to check up on you at...whatever hour of the morning this is?"

“Just someone.”

“Yeah so, and does he have a name.”

“Listen, I'm tired. Let's catch up on all this later.”

Jessie grinned but let the subject drop, she was as tired as Karlie. They finished their drinks quickly, then Karlie directed her upstairs to one of the guest rooms.

“In the morning, you can ask Maria for anything you need. How's your Spanish?”

“Pretty good.”

“Oh yeah,” Karlie thought she had never heard Jessie speak Spanish but she couldn't be sure.

“Good. I'm out the door at 7:30, and back around 7.”

“Okay.”

“It's great to have you here Jess,” Karlie offered with genuine sincerity. “Welcome to Alcazar. It's going to be a great two weeks.”

“Yes it is,” Karlie heard her reply almost fitfully as she closed the door and dropped her bag on the floor.

*

Three hours after Karlie and Jessie had fallen asleep, Carlos Baker III, passed unseen but for bodyguards and overnight security, through the back entrance of the Ministry of Public Security's national headquarters office building. Club wielding armed guards escorted him up the three flights elevator ride and down the two block long marble hallway to his corner of the building. Despite feeling, at that point in the pre-dawn, well beyond his thirty-two years he flipped the light on over his paper-strewn desk. Shadow enveloped his top-floor corner office in the 1960s style Italian baroque monstrous building that dominated Joyo's palm tree lined government office boulevard, Liberty Way. Carlos had an insomnia that he had not been able to alleviate since he began to cross and re-cross the dimensions of his adult life with the liberal scotches being handed out at Ambassador Crane's National Day party. Once he had made his own exit, Carlos had managed to find enough excuses to leave Luisa at home. Seeing Karlie accelerated his tensions, he had longed to talk to her more, to learn if she had really told him a secret that he, at heart, dreaded having heard. Yet as the evening wore on, and the alcohol drained through him, the time, the place and the contents of his latest conversation with his ex-lover faded into the smoke of unconsciousness.

Claiming to Luisa that he had work to do before morning, an excuse of incomprehensible weakness as no Alcazaran man, least of all a rich one, goes to work after a party, Carlos dragged himself to his latest girlfriend's beachside apartment condominium. Rosalie Morales had been asleep when the doorbell rang, and she had no time to protest or adjust to Carlos' presence before her. He paid the bills, and at 2 am he had come to collect. They went directly into bed where he pulverized his sense of the tribulations that battled to occupy his senses throughout the evening. Crawling away from Rosalie over an hour later, Carlos directed his driver to his office to avoid facing the inevitability of dangling empty hours, and to proclaim for a minute that he was not lying to everyone. In any case, the dank and hollow halls of the grotesque headquarters of state control were as appealing as the feel of his wife's cold body between their silk sheets.

Carlos carried his senses on air, smoked-out black hair and deep set emerald green eyes mocked his stark Mediterranean skin supporting a statute and chiseled man frayed from years of battling with intellectually superior and strikingly more attractive Baker cousins. He lived through a contempt that required him to work as a government official, albeit a Minister in the Government, while his cousins dictated over successful business concerns, not only living off the Baker money but generating it too. If he were one of them now he would be arriving at Joyo

Plaza, downtown, encased in the superior technology of its amenities not the crumbling, poorly maintained government building miles from the real center of the country's political, financial and social life. That aspect of the Baker legacy had always been denied to him. The family claimed that he did not have the skill for it, and he resented that, as much as having married a woman who refused to take his orders and always demanded part of his time. As these thoughts tossed through his mind, his forceful and muscular body cried for sleep.

Grateful at least for his office's electricity generators, Carlos dismissed the guards at his double oak doors and pushed aside the papers on his desk. He pressed a key on his desktop computer to stir the machine out of sleep mode. As the screen flickered on, transforming the grayness of the office light into a radiant blue, he double clicked on an airplane icon that lay in the middle of the screen, covering the right nipple of Miss September's breast on his bootleg 'Whores of Alcazar' calendar desktop wallpaper. The international airport arrivals' log application opened. Upon returning to Alcazar from university abroad, Carlos had been appalled by Alcazar's lack of a technology infrastructure. He had insisted that the Ministry commission a database application infrastructure that would link the key customs and immigration activities of the airport and seaports. Sipping a lukewarm beer, he entered his password, and the information uploaded as a list of the entries by the airport's administrative staff. On an average workday, Carlos would occupy his time with this ritual only to see if his employees had been working and entering the information in real-time as they had been trained. The night shift was particularly notorious for leaving piles of entry forms undocumented. Carlos had reassigned his supervisors to correct the problem to ensure that the information was constantly updated. Prior to the evening's conversation with Karlie, this activity had seized him as actual work calculated to modernize his country, but now, at this point of this particular early morning, he more clearly understood the necessity of the operations he had developed. For a change, his time wasting habit of searching for family names unfamiliar to native Alcazarans, and verifying for the Tourism Ministry the number of foreigners that were coming to the island, had a purpose. Prior to this evening, Carlos held his finger on the forward button and let the data rapidly pass by like an old film running off the end of the reel. Tonight Karlie's words at the party had forced him to be enraptured with his computer screen. With one hand on the mouse, Carlos scrolled through the information, stifling yawns and sipping at his beer as the names went by like dots of firelight on the dark seas that had surrounded Alcazar every night for eternity.

He could barely see through the slits in his eyelids that his own yawns were making ever more frequent. Then a bolt of lightning from a forgotten storm propelled him forward in his chair as a name flashed by. Carlos lifted his finger off the page down button and hit page up. He held his breath as his eyes scanned the rows until he saw it again. 'TARMAINE, JESSICA T.' - purpose of visit, she had checked 'tourist and business,' her listed occupation was 'journalist.' As plainly, directly and legally as possible, Jessie Tarmaine had re-entered Alcazar.

"No!" Carlos screamed at the vacant and hollow walls of the Ministry building. "Oh shit, they let that woman into this country!" As memory began to wade through his alcohol tinged intellect, Carlos blinked. Flashing lines of many lives began to race through his mind, he checked the age, the passport details and the name again, then address in Alcazar. Carlos glared at the screen, at Karlie's familiar Palm Gardens Village contact information. He felt a seismic migraine approaching, he ran a sweaty hand across his forehead and gaped again at his glowing computer. "*Dios mio*, oh my God," cried Carlos Baker III who as Minister of Public Security, was responsible for the entry of every person into the country. Everyone, anyone, at any time, including this woman who he was waiting his entire lifetime never to set eyes on again. Fear

gripped him, heightening a disturbing sense of paranoiac doom that often followed him as he waded from one scheme to another in his daily deeds. A personal nemesis, disdained by everyone that he was required to keep happy had done the unthinkable, come within reach for the first time since they had all began hoping that it would never happen. Carlos heard his heart pounding as he considered the trap of a world beyond his control beginning to soak his stability. Suddenly he felt as if he wanted to hide.

*

The island territory of the Republic of Alcazar has no obvious hiding places. The jungle of boulder thick, evergreen black palm trees blocking the sun's relentless press upon the heads of the citizenry had long since disappeared beneath the weight of progress. The last trees shrunk into oblivion on overcrowded urban corners and rarely provided shade for sweating workers tolerating the streets with the heat that sits firmly above the island day in and day out, year after year. Today the desert owns Alcazar. The dry, drifting sands greet every visitor at any time, upon approach, from any direction. "The whole country is a beach," a tourist boosting ex-President had once proclaimed. With few trees, on an open plain, exposed to the heat, sea and satellite, one must be ingenious if one is truly trying not to be found and Luis Martinez, learned at the hands of an expert a sense of indispensability. Luis knew parts of Alcazar that had no known entry and no effortless exit. Like the location that he had come to hours before a rising sun would awaken the island again.

Scruffy and lean, Martinez looked more like a teenager than a man in his late 30s. He parked his battered Ford pick-up beside a desert marker that he had hammered eight feet into the shifting sands three weeks earlier. The entire area had once been base camp for a mining company whose departure provided the sands' signal to return and cover obvious indications of human existence. Turning off the ignition, he listened. Martinez knew when to move and when to wait, he waited. No sound rises unsolicited from the Alcazar desert, but for those who care to listen it is desperately alive. Trillions of grains of sand pass over the echoing footsteps of nomads, circle around the ants and scorpions, and fall lazily on those that come out at night to a spot that did not invite them. Martinez listened, then when he was certain, and not a moment before, he took a deep breath and climbed out of the truck. Leaving the keys where they hung, he traced his way from the marker to a wooden hut, its walls leaning in towards each other at precarious angles. Martinez entered and stood before The Prisoner.

The chained man's head hung low in despair, but as he rolled his neck up to view Martinez his eyes lit up with consternation, "what do you want now asshole?" he demanded. The Prisoner, who despite being locked to a dirt ground dozens of miles from helpful ears, would, upon seeing Martinez display magnificent, unconquerable courage that always impressed.

"This one has such guts," Martinez admiringly noted to himself, then he answered aloud in English "fuck off," as he spit onto The Prisoner's head.

Chained to a solid steel pole sunk twelve feet deep into the sand and bolted to the wall, The Prisoner had no option but to allow the saliva to trickle down the side of his head and into his ears. His legs were bound in steel 20-pound weights wrapped around from his ankles with casings stretching to his knees, and his hands were locked in police-issue handcuffs behind his back. His clothes, transformed into the odor of his own sweat, and the swirling dirt and droppings of rotting food, clung to him. Martinez could barely stand the sight of him. The location matched the decrepit state of the man. The hut was barely ten feet square, made of cracked wood with rusted corrugated steel for a roof, and dirt and sand for a floor. The structure was rarely used, but Martinez liked it in emergencies.

“I brought you shit,” Martinez commented as he kicked The Prisoner, and placed a bag with two small roasted chicken pieces, a vat of sticky white rice in a Styrofoam container and a bottle of water in front of him. He pulled The Prisoner's arms up and twisted them around to one side, a scream reached him.

“You prick!” The Prisoner shouted.

“Fuck off,” Martinez replied while releasing one hand from the cuffs. “And eat.”

Walking back outside as The Prisoner dug into the bag and stuffed the food into his mouth like an animal, which is what he had become, Martinez stopped. He visited only two or three times a week, and he did not trust the others to do it, so The Prisoner received infrequent deliveries of food. The rationing had limited effect, the man seemed indomitable. Martinez could not stand this ritual. Not having a plan for dealing with this man was making all Baker people dangerously uneasy. He hated this job. His mother had raised him to appreciate an uncompromised level of decency, not this. Looking at his watch he made a mental note of the time, he would give him ten minutes. Looking at the stars that flickered low in the desert sky over his head, Martinez enjoyed the moment of letting the time wash silently over him, then he re-entered the hut. The food had vanished.

“Get up!” he ordered, releasing the main connection of the leg chain that was fastened to a post near the door, and placing his .45 Magnum gun firmly in The Prisoner's back. “Go!” he commanded.

The Prisoner knew the routine which had become useless now. With his feet still in chains, he shuffled out the door and around to the back of the location, towards a hole that had been dug into the ground sometime ago. The Prisoner stepped towards the hole. He struggled to pull open his pants, his wrists were scraped and cut through, the stiffness in his fingers was acute. Martinez tried not to look but The Prisoner's exposed penis quickly filled him with yearning, he closed his eyes to listen only to the sound of the trickle onto the sand. The second The Prisoner had finished, and had refastened his pants, Martinez grabbed his free arm and re-cuffed him. Martinez half dragged him, shuffling to his spot, and began to lock him up again.

Already soaking in his own fluids, The Prisoner knew that there was only one reason why Martinez bothered to let him make the trip to the hole at the back of the hut, and he needed to use that reason to liberate himself from this hell. “Come on, don't leave me here,” The Prisoner begged in a whisper close to Martinez's ear as he bent towards him to reconnect the chains. He felt Martinez hesitate, even stir. Martinez was so close to him, so close to touching him, the heaviness of the decision hung between them. Temptation played its hand, trapped in the proprieties of his macho upbringing, Martinez had never been afforded a moment like the one that lay before him. Despite the disgraceful scent of urine, sweat and decay, he sensed the possibilities of the opportunity. But as the seconds ticked on too long, The Prisoner felt the sensation change, saw Martinez' eyes shift from a careful consideration to an awareness of the dread of consequence. In an instant the free man hunched his shoulders, then contorted and punched The Prisoner directly across his right eye. The blood cut a stream down his cheek and over his cracked lips, before falling as drops into the sand below.

“Fuck off,” Martinez stood up and was gone as The Prisoner licked the blood that was trickling down into his mouth. Martinez did not look back through fear that The Prisoner had finally uncovered the thoughts his captor had been contemplating for weeks.

*

Diego Harrison hated to be awakened early, but as General Cage Baker's top aide he had grown used to it. Cage Baker had no tolerance for weakness nor idleness, his day began at dawn

as did that of his employees. Had he cared about the habits in his own family, he would not have suffered his own son Carlos for long.

“Hey Diego, wake up,” a voice came across the mobile phone that Diego had stretched across his bed to answer. Listlessly shifting the device to his other ear as he glanced at the clock that read 6:15 am, Diego moved to sit up.

“What do you want, Alain?” Diego slowly answered.

“You’re not going to believe this,” the other man continued.

“What?” Diego impatiently demanded through a yawn.

“You will never guess who has dared to come back to this country.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake tell me.”

“This is huge *amigo*.”

“What?” Diego screamed.

“J.T. Tarmaine,” a note of triumph struck Alain’s voice.

Diego gripped the phone against his ear. “What?” he asked again more carefully.

“Jessie Tarmaine, man, Jessie Tarmaine, the journalist. She’s here in Alcazar.”

“No, that’s impossible,” Diego’s voice cracked as he spoke, his knuckles turned white against the black phone case as he nearly crushed it in his hands. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m telling you she’s here.”

“Alain if this is some kind of joke...”

“I’m telling you.” It was now Alain’s turn to grow exasperated. “She got here last night.”

“What?”

“You know Santo, Tercero’s bodyguard. Okay, well Santo had to trail Tercero to the office last night. He said the boss was hanging at his desk, then freaked out. Santo was sleeping outside the door, but he says he got to him right away, and Carlos was yelling about Tarmaine. Santo says he even saw her name on the computer but he wasn’t sure what it meant.”

“Are you sure about this? Did you check this out? That idiot Santo can barely read.”

“Of course I checked it out. I had our man at the Ministry, you know Seran, he went into the computer and double-checked. Tarmaine arrived last night. There’s no mistake.”

“Shit!” Diego began to massage his rapidly aching head. “What does she want?”

“We don’t know, we only know she’s here. You know she’s gonna say she’s here for the election.”

“Yeah but this isn’t some general election in some country, this is Alcazar. She must want something. I mean is she gonna hold a fuckin’ press conference or what? Shit, how could anyone let that bitch back into this country?”

“Well it happened man. What do you wanna do about it?”

“Shit I don’t know. I guess I have to get to Carlos and figure out what the fuck is going on? Where the hell is Tarmaine staying anyway?”

“Oh this is even better. The address is that Consul, Laker.”

“Are you fuckin’ serious? That fuckin’ bitch diplomat, she knows her? Oh that’s great, that’s fuckin’ great. She’s at a fuckin’ diplomat’s place. If that asshole Carlos knew all along that Tarmaine---”

“Should we tell the boss?”

“What are you a fuckin’ idiot? You’re gonna walk up to General Baker and tell him his number one enemy is right under his nose. Are you kidding? Don’t say a word to anyone. I’ll go see that idiot Carlos. That stupid idiot. As if we needed this. You promise me there is no mistake.”

“I swear man, this is real.”

“Okay don’t say a word to anyone.”

“Okay I won’t.”

Then Diego re-checked that answer. “Hey, how many people know already?”

Alain hesitated, “I dunno man, a few.”

“Oh you fuckin’ idiots!” Diego threw the phone down and crawled out of bed. The house was still, his wife and children had already left for their day. To avoid the daytime heat, school classes began at 7 am, his wife and the nanny had the children up at 5:30, washed, fed and dressed in their uniforms, before she prepared herself for her day’s work as a fourth grade private school teacher. Diego ignored a waiting, ready breakfast as he raced to his Ford Explorer to make the hectic drive from his comfortable professional suburban neighborhood to the grand mansions in the Joyo Hills. He would be on Carlos’ doorstep in two hours.

*

Morning unfolds before daylight in Alcazar, with the crisp wave of straw brooms on sand, the rising bounce of laughter and stories from school bus drivers, the organized commotion of farmers and day traders opening food stalls in makeshift markets, before the sun burned their shadows into the dust. Roosters and crows matched the first light with their clamor and the call to prayer rings from mosques laid out in squares at the edge of every fourth neighborhood, church bells peel on the hour and clangor again on the half hour. Jessie could not recall such commotion at 6 am. She sat bolt upright in bed as the first hint of the morning tunes reached her at slumber and shocked her into awareness.

“Jesus Christ,” she remarked looking at her mobile that she had tossed on the night table. She readjusted as the pangs of jet lag began to recede. “Fuck, these guys make a lot of noise.”

Dressed only in a T-shirt that barely reached her knees, and exposed by a V-neck from her throat to the top of her breasts, she clambered out of bed to the window and spread open the curtains. In her early morning daze, all that were on the busy residential street below seemed to turn and look up towards her, some stopped. Jessie also looked, realized that they were looking, then in a fit of uncharacteristic self-consciousness, grabbed one end of the curtain and wrapped it around herself from the neck down.

A haze of white and yellow floated over Joyo at daybreak. On Karlie's street, gates and fences blocked the view of the houses, but the road appeared to Jessie to lead to markets, to schools and to a police station. She watched the succession of ample women wearing colorful headscarves carry fresh fruit baskets on their heads; school children in uniforms of pale blue shirts and black shorts and skirts chased each other laughing along the gates of the wealthy; and old men in white sheets used sticks for balance as they pulled their sandals through the dirt. Security guards of wildly varying hue and shape, yawned, shuffled to stand, straighten and gripped their guns and saluted passing military vehicles.

The emerging day mirrored Alcazar moving forward as she coped with a present handed from her history. The island, geographers claimed, had broken away from North Africa and drifted into the Mediterranean Sea, a million years ago. The terrain had once shown promise, encouraging successive waves of Europeans to relocate and take control of a territory that the settled North Africans and Arabians in the area had spent centuries cultivating. The island rested at a diagonal point where Africa veers off enroute to the Arabian Peninsula and central Asia. An uncountable tally of original settlers became in that tiny space, an entire world. These first locals had sought to form each other when they had both first realized that they were all there to stay. The island's early years recounted little war, a negotiated collective rule, and a disgruntledly

cooperative island style organization, until the Europeans began to arrive five centuries ago. In Alcazar, the invader kept changing his tongue, the locals learned later that he kept changing his culture too. First came Muslims expelled from Spain, as the island nominally became part of the Ottoman Empire. Then as the Spanish battled the Ottomans in the region, they used the island as an operating base. Hating the weather and with no sign of mineral wealth, by 1850 the Spanish had informally conceded island control to the French and British who were opening the Suez Canal. British domination prevailed in both the Suez and Alcazar yet the Spanish remained to functionally administer the island. Time allowed the Alcazarans to select the cultural formation that best suited their circumstances, a Western style of manner and dress closer to Europe or America than Asia or Africa, especially for the rich; and the Spanish language rose to prominence through the Catholic Church as the people adopted French cuisine and favored English television.

By the end of World War II, the island had little remaining to sell or grow beyond its location. The city of Joyo choked in refugees and sprawled relentlessly in every direction over one side of the island rushing to meet the expansive unforgiving desert that occupied the other. The nominally ruling British government was trapped in its own reconstruction, and had little time to recognize the development of the island nation that had begun to make a name for itself by building vaults. Formal independence came in 1960 through a hastily written constitution ultimately conceding the island to the family that had solidified its business, financial and political hold there, the Bakers. By the late 1970s, for the first time, a tense political ease encased the Mediterranean nation, like a smoky-colored cloud whose multi-year refusal to release its rain instills a measure of security in all people except those who insist on continually looking up. With a sense of identity built from the assimilation of the invaders, a corner of Alcazarans grew to believe that their country was emerging as the future of Europe with the grace of Africa and the diligence of Asia, that they were on the edge of becoming the successful development example that they had always stopped short of achieving. Yet the rest, those that did not have the luxury of dreams, knew that the operation that was seeking to pass for democracy and prosperity in the march to the new millennium was a sugar-coated tyranny, one that operated under a sophisticated torture for those who tried to protest. A line of Alcazaran presidents supported by the country's richest families was believed to control the world's largest government sponsored criminal organization, the entire country. With the coming of oil wealth to their neighbors, a spectacular sex and gambling tourism binge was underway, changing the scene for a powerful, moneyed minority, and changing Alcazar beyond recognition as Jessie observed from her second floor window, all Alcazar now meshed and passed each other uneasily in its streets.

'I wonder if there are any quiet places to live around here,' Jessie thought as she watched the public street action inside one of Joyo's more exclusive neighborhoods. But as she observed all that one road could offer, she doubted it. Through their best efforts, the majority still found a way to remind the secluded of their existence.

Walking away from the window, poised as it was overlooking the everyday of Joyo in motion, she stretched and looked at her brightly painted room, with crisp, clean cotton sheets on the bed, air-conditioning running, and carpet beneath her feet. 'What am I doing here?' she thought. 'Why have I, of all people, come to Alcazar?' Making her way to the bathroom, she threw water on her face, pulled on shorts and a tee-shirt and headed downstairs.

Minutes later Jessie sat facing Karlie over breakfast, "I left you a list of sites to see," Karlie told her. "You know, touristy things, it can't be all cloak and dagger while you are here. You

should see the country. That's where you'll find your average Alcazaran and see everyday life. There are the mosques and churches of course, and the museums and the Park of the People. Anyway these places are always packed but they're actually worth seeing and no one will notice you in the crowds."

Jessie barely followed her friend's rambling. She was indifferent to Karlie's advice, having already prepared a plan for her days in Alcazar. She focused instead on the breakfast laid out before her with such stunning beauty that she did not want to disturb it by eating. Maria had cut fresh papaya, squeezed orange juice directly into the glass, and baked croissants to sit steaming in a basket, while thick, aromatic black coffee beckoned on the side. To Jessie this was the most substantial private breakfast she'd ever seen. She couldn't help staring at it as if it wasn't even real.

Karlie obliviously continued talking. Dressed in a solid gray business suit, with crisp white ironed blouse and smart length skirt, Karlie could read the morning newspaper while explaining that Palm Gardens Village was open to the public during weekday daylight hours to allow for a quicker crossing from one side of the neighborhood to the other. "It's for the hired help really," she explained as she tucked her head around while turning the pages. Jessie could tell that Karlie, while she talked, was implanting the news reports into her brain for future reference. "All four gates are open during the day. But anyone can still be denied entry, believe me unaccompanied men always get shaken down. And they can enter only on foot, no cars without a pass or prior approval. Parties are the worst, you have to leave names and license plate numbers. It's a hassle but so is a home invasion." Despite the late night cocktail party and airport run, Karlie looked fresh, shining and poised to tackle her day. Jessie personally felt at the end of a desert camel ride where she had forgotten to disembark. She could barely continue to stay awake while trying to sample the scrumptious food.

"Aren't you hungry?" Karlie asked concerned having looked up as she tossed the completed newspaper aside.

"Not really," Jessie truthfully replied.

"Jet lag?"

"Yeah, I think so. I'm going back upstairs to rest. I'll call you at the office later."

"First time in Alcazar you better take it easy, it's pretty crazy here," Karlie continued. "It's super hot by noon, and when you go out taxis are okay, but make sure you're the only person going for a ride. Flag them down at designated stands only, they have complete documentation and driver identification numbers. And get the price before he starts driving, the meters never work. Don't get on a chop-chop, that's the main public transport, but they're really dangerous for outsiders. Walking is hell in the heat, make sure you grab a bottle of water before you head out."

"Okay, okay."

"And really try to speak a little Spanish if you can. If people think that you're a local or at least that you have an idea about what you're doing, it's a lot easier because they won't bug you for money."

"Right."

"Anyway there's a bunch of tourist stuff by the door for you, including city maps, so don't get lost."

"Don't worry I won't."

"Make sure you have my number, and the number for the Embassy, and this address."

"Yeah, yeah," Jessie laughed exasperated.

Karlie smiled. "Sorry, but this is a wild and wacky place."

“I know.”

Karlie gave her a look, as if knowing Alcazar only meant living there, and knowing it as a journalist meant little. “Enjoy, and stay out of trouble. Bye.” Karlie rose and headed for the back door without giving Jessie a chance to reply.

Returning to her room with no plans of resting, Jessie took a cold shower and quickly changed her clothes. According to the stamp in her passport, she had 30 days to spend in Alcazar and noting how intent Karlie would be on monitoring her time, she knew that she would have to move quickly. Grabbing a couple of croissants off the soon to be cleared table, she hesitated over the tourist material that Karlie had piled on the edge of the table. Wary that Joyo had transformed into a megacity, she selected a detailed city map. Walking out the back door before Maria would notice, she waved to Freddie as she fell in step with the rest of the procession moving down the street.

Jessie knew Alcazar, she knew Joyo, knew morning was the time to complete business before it became too hot and everyone who could disappeared for an afternoon nap. Jessie knew more about the inside of everyday Alcazar than Karlie and a tourist brochure could ever tell her. But this, she insisted to herself, Karlie could never know.

*

“Morning Dax,” Karlie beamed into her buddy's office. At 8 am, he was already on the phone. Dax' office was across from her own, the mission's Trade and Commerce Section lined one side of the hallway. The Embassy occupied the entire nineteenth floor of the Island Republic Bank building, high above the downtown action, in a glittering skyscraper built on Joyo's main commercial avenue, Broad Way. Other country's embassies were located in the building and along Broad Way. The diplomatic corps in Alcazar topped 500, representatives from nearly every country paying an inordinate amount of attention to an innocuous island in the Mediterranean Sea. Limited altruistic reasons existed for the presence of a numbered and senior diplomatic corps, however as with most outcomes in Alcazar, few cared. Each nation had its plans for the country, its desire to be part of the fast and easy money that was made all through The Financial District, on The Alcazar Strip and at Joyo's port. Broad Way, built to resemble Paris' Champs de Élysée as a palm tree lined median, was cluttered with vendors hawking an uncountable array of questionably edible products and daily supplies from kleenex and pens to gum and water. The vendors parked below and around an envious collection of glass and steel buildings that rose from a wide sidewalk lined with immaculately manicured trees and potted flowers. The avenue ended at the Park of the People, a grass and cement monument filled plaza of national construction, symbolism and legend. Alcazar mirroring its neighbors on all sides of their section of the world had a legacy to write as modern events permitted. Bequeathed as it was to the residents, at a time when they had little to identify as a nation, the Park was set up to feed Alcazarans a collective memory that some insisted on calling history.

Nature played a gracious part in the planning. The Park lay at the base of an imposing cliff that rose up over the city and the sea. At its plateau stood the country's grand cathedral, Santo Domingo, with its spire stretching into the sky, topped by a cross that glowed down on the people at night. The walkway to the Cathedral's doors began at the National Monument to Peace where Alcazar's flag, white with a bright yellow sun hovering over a strip of blue ocean was hoisted high and fluttered in the breeze rising from the water below. From each spot in downtown Joyo, and on clear days, deep into the suburbs, wanderers on the land below would see those symbols of God and Country beaming down upon them, designed as they were to emphasize to the people the common bonds that made them one.

From the Embassy's windows, The Cliff was clear and dominating and those in the building could see it and all Jovo in motion in every direction. As the floor had been designed to their government's own specifications, all offices were ample and comfortable. Dax' was decorated with mementoes from his last assignment and from his home, his mother was always sending him pictures, reminding him of a life that she feared he wanted to forget.

He hung up on the caller. "What's up?" he yelled across the hall to Karlie.

"How'd the reception end?" she replied from her office while perusing the morning mail.

He came to her door. "We turned it into a wild party."

She looked up at his grinning face. "Yeah, right," she responded sarcastically.

Dressed to perfection, as usual, in a tailor-made blue suit, Dax brought his tall and slim body across her threshold and threw himself into one of the clients' chairs. He sat to face her across the desk with his straight nose, soft pink mouth, and classic blond hair framing impressive blue eyes. Crossing his legs and positioning perfectly manicured hands on his lap he asked, "everything go okay last night?"

"Yep"

"Madonna arrived alright."

Karlie laughed, "yes."

"So everything's okay?"

Karlie eyed him. "Yeah, why?"

"Just because of how you left. I don't think that your boyfriend appreciated it very much."

"Scott?"

"Do you have another boyfriend?" Dax caught her surprise.

"No." Karlie backed down embarrassed as Carlos' face flashed before her eyes. "What did he say?"

"Very little."

"Well I'll call him this morning. You know it's some of us have lives outside the cocktail circuit."

"Tell me about it," Dax recalled as he rose from the chair and shook his pant legs out.

"And speaking of which..." Karlie stopped him. "How did your post-party evening go?"

"Very well."

"Oh yeah."

"Yeah."

"C'mon, details."

"No way. This one is between me and the walls."

"And Nick Turner?"

"Hah," Dax grinned at her, his eyes dancing. "I'm not telling." Laughing he turned and wandered from the room.

Karlie smiled as she turned to her desktop and settled into the documents staring up at her. She noticed Dax close the door to his office as he re-entered. Files were demanding her attention, piled as they were in one corner of her desk. The telephone begged to be answered. E-mail messages flashed across her computer screen. Visitors had begun to line-up at the window. Members of her staff wandered into her office with information and action items. She threw herself into the tasks that were awaiting.

*

Carlos did not need to formally report to work until he was ready, that was the unwritten rule for the Alcazaran elite. But the rule was of no use to him this morning, sleep had been

completely illusory from his arrival at home minutes before sunrise. As he lay in bed, only thoughts of Jessica Tarmaine in Alcazar dominated his overtired mind. Scenarios rushed through his head as he contemplated a course of action to manage her unwanted arrival in the country. He was afraid of all possible consequences, afraid of meaning behind her actions, afraid to react yet knew that he must. His mind whirled as he tried to register a move that would avoid a chance meeting, or an emerging disaster, that would once again make Jessie Tarmaine the center of his family's attentions. Carlos thought only of nightmares, of family anger, of pain and of suffering whenever he saw the J.T. Tarmaine by-line, and he saw it all too often. She was not who he wanted here, now, when his life, his work and his role in the family business had turned to daily pressure for him. He put his head in his hands and fought back tears. 'Mustn't let anyone see,' he inwardly decided as he buried his head in his pillow, then pretended to be asleep when he heard Luisa come through the bedroom door.

"Carlos," she inquired timidly at his side. The body on the bed did not stir.

"*Lo siento*, Diego," she turned to the man who had wandered to the bedroom door behind her. "He is very tired from last night's cocktail party."

"We had a meeting scheduled," Diego stated with limited patience. "I expected him to be ready to see me."

"Of course," Luisa turned back to the body in the bed. "Carlos, *cariño*," she requested but still he did not stir. "I'm afraid he's fast asleep Diego. *Lo siento*."

"Tell him," Diego started angrily then softened. Even his confidential position within the family would not permit the awakening of a sleeping Baker in his own bed. "Please ask him to call me the minute he awakes."

Luisa nodded as Diego turned and sauntered from the room. She turned back to her husband. "You can stop pretending now," she told him with scorn. "He's gone." And with that she too turned and marched from the room, closing the door forcefully behind her, as Carlos in his fear kept his face turned into his pillow.

*

At the far end of downtown, at the intersection where Imperial Road, the main street leading to the gates of Palm Gardens Village meets Broad Way, Jessie forced herself onto the streets of Joyo, a city that she was more than stunned to see in daylight. Dressed in khaki Bermuda shorts and a non-descript blue T-shirt, with only thong sandals for her feet, she was already sweating as she climbed into a chop-chop, Alcazar's excuse for mass public transport. Chop-chop was the nickname, derived from the sound, for any flat bed truck that plied the streets to carry the public through the broken city that had never organized an inexpensive form of modern public urban transportation. Each chop was equipped with benches running along its sides, and usually a makeshift tent covering to protect passengers from the sun and the seasonal rains. Chop-chops carried seemingly endless numbers of commuters, in a city where everyone was hoping to go somewhere. 'How many Alcazarans can you fit in a chop-chop?' 'How many do 'ya got!' The joke rang. People held the back bumper with one tightly clenched hand, and others sat literally on top of one another knowing that every hour was rush hour in a densely packed city of ten million inhabitants. Jessie squeezed between an overburdened mother who had two small children on her lap, and a bag of rice between her knees, and a school boy in full uniform, book bag swinging off his back. Propelled out of the city's exclusive villages where Karlie lived and the downtown core where rich and poor alike came to work, Jessie headed towards the neighborhoods that defined the country, dense, cramped quarters where most Alcazarans had managed to procure shelter. One place in the city occupied her conscience at that moment,

before Jessie could begin her work in the country she would go there first, she would go to The Row.

Two excruciating hours later, after clambering with a succession of city travelers onto the fourth chop-chop of her journey, Jessie could finally begin to see the once familiar sights of her destination looming ahead. Joyo had overwhelmed her with its deterioration and the incredibly oppressive weight of its teeming population. Hanging in the air, a pressure of heat and poverty pressed upon her and filled her senses with its excess. Karlie had been right, Jessie had seen many developing world cities, but she had never expected Joyo to have easily fallen beneath the challenges of population, and poverty without organization, that plagued other regions. She had never completely considered that the state of the country and its capital had altered to such an extent that it was barely recognizable. The unaccomplished rot descended through daily living to astonish the idle traveler and unnerve seasoned journalists. The haunting inexplicably of want and suffering, the painstaking detachment from the year's boundless consumer offerings, and the excruciatingly absent scent of hope and trust dominated her senses. This reality differentiated cities like Joyo from an uncertain world that barely understood her desire to exist, until one happened upon a corner that seemed like home.

Boxed in by mounds of squalor intensifying on all sides of the road, the meager, rusting government sign that signaled the beginning of Barrio Santa Maria de los Angeles peeked through the odor to stare directly at Jessie. Surprisingly, the sign was still hanging exactly where she had always looked for it. The neighborhood emerged from behind the chaos of cars, chop-chops, taxis and residents that swarmed all over the streets. As Jessie looked around the area and noted how the city's streets were worn down to a state of continuous destruction by the treading multitude that had probably never seen a completely paved road, the area's smells swirled up into her nostrils and reminded her of exactly where she was. The scents of urine and rotting garbage, pepper and bougainvillea, blended into a pollution soup with the city's smog and dirt, sitting on the heads of the people caught up in their personal struggle with life. And always the desert was there, threatening the shell-shocked urban dwellers with its sand and heat launched from far out in the distance of the island. As government officials raced to pave it over with development pride, they created again and again another desperate, wretched neighborhood that failed, further and further away from the city core.

Jessie observed the shifting scenes from her side of the chop-chop bench as the driver drew ever closer to her stop. Men in wrinkled, open shirts and cut-apart sandals ran through dirt to jump on the chop-chop as it sneaked by. Children in soiled T-shirts played in the road and ran up to passing cars with hands outstretched, shouting, '*señor, señora, una propina, a tip.*' The Joyo women, lines on their faces marking the wear on their lives by existence alone, wrapped their arms tightly around themselves careful of those men who would deduce that she was for sale as so many of them had become. Jessie watched and watched, stared and stared and remembered and remembered an unrepeatable story of her own childhood, as her destination became readily clear.

The streets of Santa Maria de Los Angeles had been dubbed Carnaby Row by children of British missionaries who had come to work in the area at Alcazar's Independence. The neighborhood had none of the attributes of that London street and that was precisely the point the nickname made. 'The Row' to Joyons, had once been an internationally aided housing project of single story bungalows with functioning wells and the possibility of electricity. But the many tiers of the country's bureaucracy had prompted a diversion of funds. Their actions left the one hundred homes for 100 families that had been built, for the 5000 families that came to settle in

and around the remnants of the cement block shelter dwellings that lined the streets. The wells were pumped dry, and people now walked a dozen blocks in both directions to collect fresh water, when it was available. A moat had been dug to pick up all forms of human waste, including carcasses of wild dogs that collapsed from heat and hunger, a sight that rarely disturbed the residents. The runoff of the society's inadequacies were gathered on The Row with disease ridden insects swarming over the children that cried in every corner. Jessie descended the chop-chop at her stop, tossed the peso equivalent of seven U.S. cents to the driver, and turned towards the street to look down into her past.

"There but for the grace of God go I," she whispered, wincing at the cliché that seemed so trite in the circumstances. Any visitor to The Row could repeat that phrase as a daily prayer. Jessie began to walk down the dirt road of her childhood. People glanced her way, but no signs of recognition were noted. She looked at every sorrowful dwelling, the crumbling remains of every past-repair house, and searched for a particular sign. Children played soccer in the middle of the road, a rolled up newspaper acted as the ball. Row children had no money to go to school, they played between the open sewers, and begged for a reason to laugh. Jessie regarded them as she reached the end of the street, her eyes already sore from the dust as she tried to hold back tears while sensing the coming heat. Turning around and heading back up the road, she thought 'it must be here somewhere.'

A chicken, casting the shadow of a stick apparition moving through the dust, crossed her path. Jessie stopped to wipe sweat from her face and almost immediately caught sight of a sign rusting but glowing in the morning sun. 'That must be it,' she reasoned as she walked towards the item. An aluminum sign, hanging from the cracked wooden trace of an electricity pole, was as she had expected to remember it. Jessie's heart leapt, she edged closer and saw that the writing on the sign had faded but remained visible, the word - TARMAINETOWN- written in block letters and pointing, as if prophetically, to a house on her right. Overwhelmed by fear, trepidation, and with total excitement and anxiety bubbling up inside her, Jessie turned toward the house that was maintained to look more permanent than the others. She stepped on a plank that had been laid across the open sewer trench that ran between the road and the walkway to the front door. The walkway itself was an unfolded cardboard box that lay over the mud. As a half dozen children watched her from the front of the neighboring dwelling, she knocked on the door.

"Who you want?" one of the little faces suspiciously questioned her immediately in Spanish.

"*Señora Tarmaine,*" Jessie surprised herself by replying immediately.

"*La doctora?*" he inquired again.

"*Si.*"

"*No està aquí. Là-bas,* over there." He pointed across the street. "*Al clinico.*"

Jessie turned around and immediately saw the Red Cross sign hanging almost imperceptibility from another decaying wooden pole. "*Gracias,*" she commented, turning to leave.

She crept back across the street, knowing now that she was really here. Walking more slowly, as realization rose to fill her with dread, she repeated her own understanding that this was the first act she had to complete upon returning to Alcazar. If she didn't, she may not have another opportunity, she had no idea how long her visit to the country would pass undetected. Walking closer and closer to the sign, she reached the waiting area of the clinic it was indicating, and came to stand on a cement patio littered with broken plastic chairs, and overcome by fumes from antiseptic and infirmity wafting out of the open door ahead of her. As she was about to announce herself, she became visible to those who were waiting inside the door. A woman in a

white coat stepped across the threshold, poised to speak to a patient, then saw Jessie in front of her and gasped.

“Hello mother,” Jessie could barely let the words escape from her, before she was overcome with tears.

Dr. Amanda Tarmaine stood frozen still to the ground God allowed her to walk on as every movement on The Row slowed to a crawl. She was in a state of shock that rocked her to her core, she could not believe the vision that stood before her. She could not feel her heart beating nor her eyes seeing, she could not speak. Time and emotion were no more, her tongue hung suspended in her dry mouth. The many patients who were waiting in front and around her could only sense a moment of high drama and had fallen silent, but it was a silence charged to the edge of limited self-control. Amanda readjusted her eyes, blinked, cried out and clapped her hands to her mouth. “Good Lord of Mercy,” she finally exclaimed, and as emotion whipped through them both, a moment slipped by and Jessie was in her mother’s outstretched arms. The patients relieved at last broke into cries of pure glee and joy, Alcazarans, always highly emotional, loved scenes, given separations and reconciliations, the burdens of their daily lives disappeared in context. Mother and daughter stood crying, hugging, and slowly recalling in their own ways, the incredible circling of circumstance that had brought them to this moment, eighteen years after they had last seen each other.

*

The Prisoner struggled desperately to adjust his eyes to the accommodation where he had been living for four weeks. His boundless abilities were weakening. He squinted, working to fully open his eyes, attempting to reassess the full import of the location where he was being held, and the condition that he was held in. Silence hovered. His body ached with each move, his bound legs screamed from the constraints, his arms sagged at his sides.

“Shit, I hate this country,” he shouted at the ants that crawled across his thighs.

“I hate this fuckin’ country!” he screamed at the top of his lungs.

Silence responded.

Tears began to form, his muscular and once indomitable body shook, and his mind receded into blankness. “I hate this country,” he whispered and closed his eyes to imagine himself into another space, the exercise of the imprisoned. An image came into view of a boy he knew, one who could never imagine torture. The boy ran along a beach, a white sand beach, that stretched as far as the eyes could see and turned around every corner of his island, and he ran, and ran and ran. Trailing behind him was a kite string, the kite, a white flag with the sun at its center and a wave of blue ocean ambling along the bottom, bounced against the mythically uncontaminated, cloudless sky. The image faded into the reality of the grime and mire that surrounded him, seeing the boy broke his sense of strength, and readily made him cry harder, as he asked an unforgiving desert, “What the fuck have I done?”

*

Karlie re-entered the Embassy from an onerous interview with one of her taxpaying citizens, now a suspected drug trafficker who would be held in custody by Alcazaran police, indefinitely, as the court system balanced a three-year backlog. She had been asked by her colleague in charge of citizen affairs to investigate and provide a second opinion to the suspect’s claims of prison abuse. Karlie’s responsibilities included monitoring Alcazar’s implementation of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Any alleged violation had to be reported and recorded for further action by her colleagues managing cases for international review. ‘If only the world truly functioned under the mass of UN declarations and conventions

that the people of the world had all negotiated,' she thought. The case was a nineteen-year-old man who cried into the phone as she carefully explained the dilemma that he faced. Alcazar treated drug dealers harshly, and playing in the country with more than an ounce of an illegal substance carried the risk of being branded, charged and hopefully deported, but he would have to wait. She bit her lip as he collapsed in terror. She had seen the insides of Alcazar's prisons, and she did not need to be reminded of the difficulty that he would face. But no foreign aid would be sent to fix Alcazar's prison system, global sympathy did not extend to criminals. With disguised concern, she completed her job, delivered her message and rapidly returned to the city.

Once Karlie had taken pride and honor in the receipt of a consular commission, and the opportunity to relocate and serve in another country on her tour of duty for her fellow citizens. Explaining her country's position on global security or economic issues to a foreign colleague was still a challenge, as was obtaining solutions to insurmountable differences in crucial bilateral negotiations. But the work had its disillusionment, glamour faded, Alcazar was soaked in easy access to the benefits that revved her life as a foreigner with privilege in a country of poverty. The country handed out accessible travel excursions and excessive social events with exceptional food, continuous alcohol, diverse narcotics, and uninhibited sexual exploration with the country's wealthy and incestuous elite. For a diplomat, in a country of Alcazar's opportunities and extremes, all that was right about the work came together at once, and more that was wrong existed in graphic abundance. Alcazar thrived on crime, deceit, drugs and violence too, and every foreigner knew that with the most accommodating Alcazarans as friends and acquaintances, one could acquire all or one of a product or service, illegal or not, in quantity and without question at any hour of the day, for a price that the buyer was willing to pay. Her drug-dealing citizen knew that and had risked his freedom for the potential reward.

Karlie's desk phone was ringing as she approached her office, moving quickly to pick up the receiver, she checked call display and noted that it was her assistant, Trina.

"Hi," she casually answered.

"Consul Karlie, I've got the Minister of Public Security's office on the line. He'd like to speak to you. Would you like to take the call?" Trina inquired.

"The Ministry? Who?" Karlie's heart jumped at the thought of Carlos.

"The Minister." Karlie responded with silence. Trina hesitated, "Miss Karlie, it's the Minister do you want me to put him through."

"Yes, yes of course. Put him through."

A moment later, Karlie heard the click on her line. "*Buenos dias*, this is Karlisle Laker," she stated in her sincerest diplomatic tone.

"*Señorita Consul Laker?*"

"*Si habla con ella.*"

"*Señorita Consul espera un momento, por favor. Tengo el Señor Ministro Baker en la línea.*"

The sound of Carlos' name made Karlie's heart jump again. "*Gracias*," she barely managed to choke back over the line.

"*No me cuelgue. Stay on the line.*"

"*Si*," Karlie replied shaken at the prospect that Carlos was calling to speak to her. He could have only one reason.

Another moment passed, then Tercero was on the line. "*Señorita Consul*, this is Carlos Baker. You may not remember me," Carlos spoke in English with a charm all his own, at once Karlie knew that he was not alone. He had always told her that she must never call him

unofficially, as all conversations in his office were recorded. They had rarely spoken directly over the phone. During their affair they would send text messages using second and third unofficial phones, or pay a trusted messenger a few dollars to travel back and forth with official looking documents that sealed hand written, unsigned notes. Such was the luxury of an abundant labor force that would be discreet for a price. Karlie sat up straighter in her chair, preparing to be cautious. "I spoke with you yesterday evening at the reception. Let me pass on my regards to your Ambassador and Mrs. Crane for such a glorious evening. And let me repeat again that we will continue to do all we can to bring to justice those responsible for their beautiful daughter's death."

"*Gracias Señor Ministro.*"

"Well *Señorita*, how is your work going?"

"Very well thank you."

"Well that's very good. And how are you enjoying my country?" Now Karlie's imagination perked, Alcazarans commonly preferred small talk to business but Karlie remained on guard with every answer.

"I love your country. It's beautiful."

"Good, good and our people how are they treating you?"

"Very well thank you, Alcazarans are the friendliest people." Karlie danced through her answers as she wondered where Jessie was at that moment.

"Good, good, well *Señorita*, I am so sorry to disturb you. You must be working so hard and the weather is not cooperative."

"No *Señor Ministro*, you are not disturbing me. What can I do for you?"

"As you are aware, *Señorita* Consul, my responsibilities as the Minister of Public Security include migration control at PWBIA, the airport."

Karlie's mind raced. "Of course *Señor Ministro*, and how can I be of assistance?"

"I was wondering if you would help me. I wish to speak to one of your citizens."

Karlie's shoulders tightened. "I see."

"How would I go about finding her?"

"This person is here, in Alcazar?"

"Yes as I understand."

"Well *Señor Ministro*, as you know not all citizens register with the Embassy."

"I see."

"Of course if there is a specific reason, suspected criminal behavior for example that requires our cooperation, I'm sure that we---"

"No, no, no, *Señorita* please, I would not dream of asking you to inconvenience yourself."

"Is this person a resident in Alcazar? Perhaps you may try the person's place of employment. Or *Señor Ministro*, if this is a security matter I'm sure that the Ambassador---"

He immediately cut her off again. "No, no, no," he anxiously countered. "I am only asking. I do not wish to disturb the Ambassador."

"Well I'm sorry *Ministro* Baker, I may not be able to help you."

"Oh of course, you are most helpful."

"I'm sorry I couldn't do more."

"Of course. Ahh, *Señorita*, tell me have you had many guests come to visit you in my country?"

Karlie's heart skipped a beat. "Ahh, yes..."

"Well I hope that they enjoy my country."

Hesitating, she replied, “yes, people always do.”

“Well, *muchas gracias* for your time, *Señorita*.”

“*A sus órdenes, Señor Ministro*,” Karlie replied as she heard him hang up.

Mute, Karlie dropped the phone back on to its console. Her surroundings unfolded into silence, her hands gripped a pen to still incessant shaking, her mind reeled. Carlos was on to her now, now that he finally understood that Jessie was in Alcazar. His voice, guarded and hesitant, signaled that he was grasping and debating his next move. Someone else had been with him, while he made the call, but who? If official Alcazar wanted to talk to Jessica Tarmaine they could come by the Embassy, tell the Ambassador the situation, and probably pick her up for questioning. Carlos could order it himself, foreign journalists like Jessie fell under his jurisdiction. But the Alcazaran government had no grounds for arresting Jessie, only long term grudges. Ambassador Crane would likely not be accepting of that kind of harassment of one of his citizens. Carlos had no direct route for establishing security grounds nor issuing a direct warning.

Glancing at the memorabilia wall of her office, Karlie noted for an extra second the picture of Jessie and herself standing in front of the Foreign Press Club in Hong Kong. The picture hung on her wall next to her consular commission. An Alcazaran official had once noticed that picture hanging at her home during one of her receptions, and asked if she personally knew J.T. Tarmaine, a question that prompted Karlie to remove the picture from her public residence and hang it in her less frequented office. The memory of the question remained on Karlie's mind with the words from the conversation with Carlos, as she considered the range of consequences for which he was trying to warn her.

*

At the other end of the line, Carlos hung up and closed his eyes, as was his habit when he could not decide his next move. Lids firmly down, he faded into remembering days when he was a student abroad under no pressure from family or a job. Diego stood next to him and waited. Finally Carlos looked up, “nothing. She has nothing,” he solemnly declared. “Tell them, I can do no more.”

Diego gave him a puzzled look of incomprehension. “Oh there is plenty that you can do *Señor Ministro*,” he sarcastically replied. “You just haven't tried hard enough.”

“I didn't hide that she was here. Then I did what you asked, I called.”

“You called? I told you to do it! And what was all that shit anyway? What were you trying to do? Warn your girlfriend. You think I'm an idiot? I want to know what Tarmaine wants. I want to know if she's coming after your father. You didn't find out what that bitch is doing in this country!” Diego shouted as he moved to stare out the window of Carlos' private home office.

“Diego there's an election. She's a foreign journalist. What do you think she's doing in this country?”

“Don't be so naive Tercero. In Alcazar, Jessie Tarmaine is no regular foreign journalist, we all know that.”

“Maybe this time she is.”

“This time? So why didn't she register with the Ministry and get her credentials. She hasn't been here since she was a kid. She came back for a reason. I know it. The election is a cover.”

Through the window the shimmering tropical green, red and yellow grounds of this Baker estate glowed beneath an uncompromising sun. Diego fingered the gold brocade hanging off the settee at the windowsill. The room was appointed in oak, and an intricately stitched Persian rug

dazzling with a design of flower symbolizing family and unity, rolled across the floor to the edge of each wall. Instinctively he hated the privileged world that the Bakers had always stood for, ostentatious wealth, in a country of misery. But Diego was an Alcazaran who knew his history, loyal to the man who had saved his father's life, and loyalty to General Baker meant keeping Carlos in line. "You are to find out what the hell she wants," he finally stated.

"But I couldn't be that direct," Carlos pleaded.

"You'll be more direct than that, Carlos," Diego spat as he leaned in towards the young government Minister and stared into his emerald greens. "You will be as direct as we need you to be or we will deal with that little foreign bitch you like so much ourselves."

"Leave Karlie out of this."

"Give us what we want. Find out what that woman is up to."

"I will do what I can."

"You will do what you must." Diego stared down at him again in fury, registered his command in his mind, then turned and walked out of Carlos' home office, slamming the door behind him.

Carlos tried to breathe easier but considered that in his hastiness and fear he may have made a crucial error. Angst for Karlie began to creep into him. He wished that he could concentrate only on riding horses and screwing women on all corners of his father's sprawling ranch in the country's western desert. Before he was sent abroad, Carlos had thrived in that atmosphere. Again when he had returned from Oxford, a contented man in his early twenties, he had had the run of the estate while his parents spent most of their time in their mansion in the Joyo Hills. Then the family decided that he was to marry and to work, and upended the tranquil existence that he thought was to be his life. Now his situation had deteriorated beyond recognition, he answered to various masters, none that he considered his equal. He closed his eyes tighter. "What the hell is going on?" He asked the carpeted walls of his comfortable surroundings. A Baker out of control was unheard of in Alcazar. Bakers defined control in Alcazar, not defiled it.

Carlos knew, he had been taught, that to live the life he was mandated to live would require the sacrifice of not continuing the illusion that he had once dreamed - to marry a woman like Karlie and return to Oxford to study, row and reflect upon the mystery of life. Living in Alcazar to build a career that he had never wanted, he now came to realize that in juggling the horrors of the past to live the fantasy of the present, he was losing his ability to control the future. Unexpected visits from Jessie Tarmaine unbalanced his quivering equilibrium. Locked in the battle with his father's assistants, Carlos knew that he had to get to Jessie before she came to him. He had to find out what she was doing in Alcazar and what she could possibly want. But, first he had to find out where she was, and the activities that she was getting up to.

*

The Row had been reduced to a respectful buzz. Young children's faces encircled the door frame of Dr. Tarmaine's modest home which she had jokingly labeled Tarmainetown when she had first acquired it, and brought her children there, determined that they would know the reality of living in Alcazar as they grew up. Anxious to sit down and talk to the daughter she barely knew, and lived in fear of forgetting, Amanda directed them away from the curious eyes in the clinic. As they crossed The Row in silence, holding hands, mother and daughter rose to the realization that time had separated more than their physical bodies.

Amanda's home was two rooms of cement walls and a clay roof. She offered Jessie one of her two chairs. A bulky, tattered mattress covered in a worn blue cotton sheet lay in one corner of one room, with two open steel trunks one displaying clothes, the other books, propped against

the wall. In the other room, Amanda had placed a table, next to a sink on the wall hung a United Workers Coalition election poster. Through the open back door, Jessie could see an outhouse and a curtained area with a drain in the clay ground, the shower. It had no overhead water spray but two buckets and a place to start a fire were set in front of the structure. The stench of the neighborhood encircled them, seeping onto their tongues. Jessie grew nauseated, she had been on The Row for 30 minutes, Amanda had been there in one capacity or another for over thirty years, she no longer noticed the air.

“Do you live here permanently now?” Jessie broached as they sat down.

Amanda looked younger than her 50 years. Soft lines had begun to etch her clear, tanned skin and her straight black hair shone as it fell to her shoulders. She had an oval face, and the straight nose and command of an aristocrat. Enfolding her slight build into a chair, she warily eyed Jessie with an arched golden eye, the look of ennui, edged with distrust already creeping into their relationship. “Yes,” she answered with only a hint of impatience.

“Do you work here permanently also?”

“Yes. There isn’t much opportunity for me in the big hospitals anymore.”

A girl half Jessie’s age approached with a tray of coffee and a plate of sugar cookies, Jessie had noticed her hanging clothes in the back when they had first come in.

“*Gracias* Isabella,” Amanda remarked as she handed the plate to Jessie, who stared at it with rank abstraction.

“*Si doctora,*” the girl replied, placing the tray down and stumbling out.

“You have a maid?” Jessie asked incredulous.

“Where do you think you are Jessie? Yes I have help. I work at the clinic 16 hours a day, and have little time to shop for food or wash my clothes. I have help. I keep someone employed. A guest comes and the guest must be served. Isabella helps me do that, is that alright?”

“Yeah, of course.” Jessie struggled to settle down. Her celebrated writing skills disappeared beneath the strain of seeking the appropriate oral statements. She had returned to The Row to observe, to see, to confirm, before she continued her time in Alcazar she had to know for certain that Amanda was still alive. She felt drawn back, yanked, by that rush of yokes, that destroyer of spirit, the family.

Sensing her sudden reflection, Amanda looked her daughter up, down, and through and finally asked, “Jessica, you of all people, what are you doing in Alcazar?”

*

For busy diplomats, lunch comes quickly on working days, especially Fridays, and out of habit Dax looked into Karlie’s office to proffer eating together.

“How about Pedro’s,” she suggested at first.

“No! Didn’t you hear that they found dog meat there,” he replied screwing up his pert nose.

“Oh gross, get out!”

“The Hollywood Garden?”

“Oh I hate that place, it’s so pretentious.”

All day long they made decisions changing peoples’ lives and linking million dollar deals, but they could not decide where to go for lunch.

“Mama Lucille’s?”

“God, the worst Italian food this close to Italy!”

“Like we haven’t eaten there a hundred times, come on.”

“Let’s just walk outside and see what hits us.”

Ten minutes later they spilled out of the front of the Island Republic Bank building and joined the mass of people in the street, fighting the noonday sun. Dax and Karlie towered over typical Alcazarans and still rated a few stares, although Karlie liked to joke that they should all know her by now. As her country's consul, Karlie had thousands of local files at her disposal, and in any visa country she was a popular diplomat to know.

"Mario's," she ventured.

"Okay," Dax agreed.

They turned the corner onto one of Joyo's frantic and over-crowded downtown pedestrian passageways. A street blocked off from vehicular traffic, it exemplified pure living, absolute humanity at high noon. Thousands of people gathered there, out of doors at the same time with such singular purpose that they unavoidably knocked against one another. Tow-headed shoe shine boys tugged the sleeves of young professionals whose shoes did not have a scuffmark; seniors curled up on mats backed up against street lights held their hands outstretched and offered their pleas as a song of request; office girls in the short, tight skirts and plain pastel-colored blouses of their company uniforms walked holding hands, and chatting incessantly, over the horns of the chop-chops and the criers of the daily headlines from the country's many newspapers. Into the melee, Karlie and Dax moved every working day appearing as any other Western couple that had come to Alcazar to make a load of money and be on their way.

Followed by three children with hands outstretched, they reached the inviting glass doors of Mario's restaurant and did not notice as Mario's guard pushed the children back onto the sidewalk. Inside, the air-conditioning and charming atmosphere of excited conversation and clinking silverware, encircled the tree-lined Italian food haunt popular with business professionals. They were seated instantly, and ordered from memory before settling back into their chairs. "I had a funny call today," Dax started telling Karlie as he reached for a slice of focaccia, "from Carlos Baker, the Minister, you know him personally don't you?"

Karlie started, then readjusted to ensure that her voice sounded perfectly level, "yeah, of course I do. I cover his department. I've had to speak with him several times. What did he want from you?"

"I don't really know. But I believe that he was fishing."

"Fishing for what?" Karlie asked quickly replaying her own conversation with Carlos in her mind.

"I don't know," Dax replied. "I guess he's looking for someone."

"Looking? Officially?"

"Does anyone do anything officially in this country?" Dax disdainfully responded.

"No, but---"

"He was all friendly then asked about visitors in the country."

"Visitors? Like who?"

"I don't know, it was like he was trying to verify something without saying anything," Dax eyed Karlie. "Like a visitor that he wanted to find out about. It was very weird."

Averting his gaze, Karlie ignored the comment. "I'm sure it's just some curiosity about some foreign woman he saw. Aren't there like international beach volley ballers or something like that in town?"

"No, not that I know of." Dax eyed her with concern.

Karlie hesitated, then drifted. "Well forget it, I'm sure it was nothing."

"I hope it was nothing," Dax continued. "The Bakers are not exactly the most trustworthy people in this country, and if they're looking for someone...maybe they have a reason."

“I don’t know what it could be.”

“Really Karlie?”

“Yes Dax.”

“You would tell me if there was a problem wouldn’t you?”

Karlie glanced at him briefly. “Of course.” She averted her eyes. “If there is a problem I will tell you.”

“I hope so, I can help with whatever. Better than Baker, you know that don’t you?”

“Yes Dax, I know that.”

The meals arrived steaming hot and spilling over the sides of their plates. Alcazaran chefs piled food on the restaurant plate, allowing those who ate in restaurants to consume for the segment of society that regularly searched for their meals in back-alley garbage containers. Karlie and Dax participated in the engorgement by skating around conversation about their social lives. As friends and colleagues they were often forced into the same circle on official and semi-official business, but when it came to their real private lives they rarely crossed each other’s paths. The two rose above a predestined expatriate cliché to create a genuine friendship that radiated between them. They found each other completely desirable company in a country where few could be trusted. Yet as far as Karlie knew, Dax had no hint that she knew Carlos, intimately and affectionately, as more than the Minister of Public Security.

As they exhausted a series of casual topics, conversation strayed again to work related matters and inevitably for Karlie, to Carlos Baker.

“Those Bakers are all so fucking untrustworthy. And if Minister Baker called me directly, I don’t know. I still wonder what it means,” Dax inquired aloud as he wound the conversation back to the phone call.

“Dax forget about it. If he wants to find information he’ll get it. He’s a Baker after all. He controls the Interior Ministry.”

“Yeah and other Bakers control the rest of the country.”

“Right, so don’t worry about the Minister’s curiosity. He’ll find out whatever he’s after.”

“Do I need to find out before him?”

“No, I told you, everything is fine,” Karlie replied. As the morning had worn on she could not help but believe that Jessie was in danger, and now she considered that maybe she needed an excuse to see Carlos officially and confront him directly.

“So I should really drop it?” Dax asked.

“Yes,” Karlie conceded automatically. Although desperate to confide in Dax and solicit his advice instead, to avoid sounding suspicious, she encouraged his consideration and remained reticent. The subject was tossed aside, along with the black olives from her salad that she hated and had forgotten to ask be removed. “Let’s talk about your date last night,” she changed the subject.

“Let’s not.”

“C’mon, all I want to know is if Nick Turner lived up to his reputation.”

“That and more.” Dax grinned.

“Is he brilliant as well as gorgeous? Cultured and sculptured?”

“Yes he is.”

“What’s he like?”

“Nicholas Turner is a little Greek God. A blessed child, who has everything. Not only the bounty his Daddy provided but also those intangibles that only the Creator dishes out. He’s fantastic.”

“Sounds like Dax Waterman.”

“Well thank you, but Nick is more than like me. He’s got, *je ne sais quoi*, an aura around him and a startling confidence. He’s the future of this country.”

“Wow, sounds dangerous and impossible to ignore. Are they thinking of putting him up as an FDU candidate?”

Dax grinned. “As intriguing as that may be, I think it would be a little premature. The FDU has enough trouble without a political novice like Nick to mess things up even further.”

“Yeah they do have some trouble. There’s tension between the Fuentes and the Turners.”

“The Fuentes are freaked because one of their sons almost got killed. They want to tone things down, and the Turners wants to rev it up. They are heading for a split.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Yeah, the Fuentes are beginning to hate the Turners’ attitude, the fact that they seem to be immune from everything.”

“Yeah they sure are. Look at the grief that the Ambassador and Mrs. Crane are going through, and they’re innocent bystanders.”

“Still no movement on identifying Julianne’s killers?”

“This is Alcazar, what do you think?” Karlie looked away exasperated. “I hate it so much. I hate the fact that we haven’t been able to do anything. You see how the Cranes have aged. It’s so unfair.”

“Karlle you may have to let it go.”

“There’s no way I’m going to let it go. At some point this country has to act like a responsible nation, with the rule of law. If I can make that happen, if I can do something, I will.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.” She hesitated over her words as a thought crossed her mind. “Don’t you ever want to be a real diplomat? You know, living up to our official role, resolving a conflict for the lasting good of everyone involved.”

“Oh c’mon, at the end of the day we’re bureaucrats.”

“Not in Alcazar, here we can take chances. This murder investigation is my responsibility, and a chance to make a real difference. If I get an opening, I’m going to pursue it. Whatever opportunity becomes a lead, I’m going to take it. It would make my career, and I know Ambassador Crane would be eternally grateful.”

“Oh so this is a power trip.”

“No it’s not! I genuinely cared about Julianne and I want to see her avenged.”

“Avenged?”

“Whatever. I want to make sure that there is justice. Someone has to be held accountable for killing her.”

“Do you know how dangerous your anger is?”

“I don’t think it’s that dangerous.”

“Why? Do you have some kind of extra-terrestrial protection?”

Karlle thought briefly of Carlos yet again. “No I don’t. But I’m keeping my eyes and ears open.”

“Karlle be careful, this may all lead directly to the Bakers.”

She vacantly eyed him. “Yes it might.”

“And if they win the election over a split in the opposition, the victory will consolidate their power. That would be the end of the massacre investigation. They won’t like it if you’re still snooping around.”

“I don’t care. Besides, do you really think that could happen? The FDU are way ahead in every poll, they are so close to winning. It’s all anyone talks about. Do you really think they could blow it now.”

“They could over personal differences.”

“But they’re ideologically aligned---”

“Yeah, they hate the Bakers. What a great way to build an opposition party.”

“Worse excuses have changed the world.”

“Yeah I guess so.”

“Besides if they have the likes of Nicholas waiting in their corner, it could be over sooner than everyone thinks. Unless of course you’re correct and he has no real political future.” Karlie smiled as she diverted the conversation’s focus off of her plans.

“Not that I can tell for now, thank God.” Dax smiled back at the memory.

“He’s in Alcazar to look gorgeous and get us all excited.”

“Yes he is.” Dax could barely contain his contentment.

“And that makes him all the more attractive.”

“Yes it certainly does.”

“Sounds kind of reckless to me Dax.”

“Well I like to be reckless every now and then.”

“Really? It’s okay for a social life.”

“Yes it is. Look around us. Here we sit, the privileged expatriates in a country brimming with need. Look at the people around us, quite comfortable, quite socially unreckless. Everyone should at some point go out on a limb and enjoy themselves.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let things go. Look at where we are. We should enjoy it. Things change instantly in this country, with Julianne’s murder still unsolved and the election coming up who knows how long our lives will be like this.” Dax raised his hand to motion around the room. “We should be enjoying it Karlie, for as long as we can. This and not whatever you have planned to extend your investigation.”

Karlie did not answer. The two blended back into the conversation around them, as overhead ceiling fans kept time to the words of the idle rich with whom they dined. Karlie and Dax melted into the beat of the room, cool and protected against the intensity and the crush of the populace that surged by outside.

*

Long before Alcazar was an island it was part of the land link that transcended time between Africa and Arabia into western and central Asia. An ethnically and culturally mixed group of transient farmers were already connected when modern developments sought to tear them apart. Under European domination and colonization, the locals grew up together at times feeling inferior and mutually despising each other while vying for the Europeans’ attentions. When colonization brought dissension, they descended into name-calling: unhygienic, rude, hardheaded and deceptive; lazy, ugly, boring and unteachable. Deciding too late to merge their complaints into a new unity, they became silent witnesses to the fusion of Europe, the calamity of modern Africa, the explosion of the Arabian nations, and the acceleration of East Asia. Preferring against reason to disrupt Alcazar’s quest for harmony in diversity, and ignoring the fact that time’s oldest civilizations had much that was not mutually exclusive but could be complimentary and even disarming to the West, they cultivated a vaporous dissent of which Nicholas Turner had been born to exemplify.

A product of every world with a European father and an African mother, and an Asian step-mother, he had been sent away for over a decade to be educated in America and Europe and ordered home as he passed the age of 30, to define his place in Alcazar, a command that he was far from prepared to answer. He carried every prejudice of history, and every opportunity of the new millennium, deep within. Dictated to by a father pushing relentless effort, because Alcazar was not the kind of country that simply allowed people to walk away with the prizes, he was on track to reach levels of accomplishment that no Turner had ever seen. Nicholas was summoned home to construct the latest chapter in his family's empire, to contribute, and to define the expanding family business, to lead and to conquer in the halls of power long denied to his father. But Nicholas always preferred to win accomplishments, on his own terms, and the expectation requiring him to build the next generation of dreams was a request that he was having a difficult time accepting.

As the middle of the day unfolded, as Dax and Karlie lingered over lunch, Nicholas had yet to rise from his bed. He was not a disciplined Turner, he was more of an adventurous spirit than the family dared to calculate and he loved it. He loved to keep them off balance, loved to make them think and fear that he would never be a credible Alcazaran. By this time of the day, all family members would be at work or school, the cooks and housekeepers would be out shopping for groceries and completing work in the gardens, and at the furthest edges of the house and grounds. Nicholas measured the silence that enveloped him as he contemplated returning to sleep.

Turning over to stare at the empty side of his bed, which had only been that way since he returned home, Nicholas mused, annoyed, and adamant that he would have to take action against the constraint of lodging in his father's home. Sighing he stood, stretched his naked frame before a wall length mirror and pronounced, "fuck I'm gorgeous." Nicholas, balsam brown with deep set black eyes, full red lips and a mock of soft, curly black hair had inherited his father's physique, six feet of pure muscle proportioned perfectly from top to toe and a feminine beauty gifted from his mother, Miss Alcazar 1958. He stood out in every room and carried himself with a quiet dignity learned from watching his stepmother tread so carefully.

Stumbling into his bathroom, he shut the door. Turning on the sink tap he began by brushing his teeth, finishing, he turned on the shower. Only half of Alcazar's people had regularly available and serviced running water, Turners were a wealthy and recognizable fixture of that half. For several minutes, Nicholas let the water go hot and then cold and then perfectly warm. He stepped in, pulled the sheer curtain and closing his eyes, he began to lovingly lather his body. Once ready to reach for the shampoo, he did not open his eyes but raised his hand toward the shower shelf, then froze. His hand had brushed an object - cold, metal, and brutal - the butt of a gun - too late for the shampoo; an intruder had already claimed it.

...to be continued

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[About Case Lane](#)

Case Lane is a global writer, traveler and observer to the future. Educated in communications, political science, business, law and economics, she has lived and worked all over the world as a reporter, diplomat and digital media corporate executive. Building from her interests in international relations and technology, Case envisions a next century world where the essential battle is between the advancement of technology and the instincts of our basic humanity. The majority of people will be non-technologists who have to learn to live and manage in a technology-controlled world that they do not understand.

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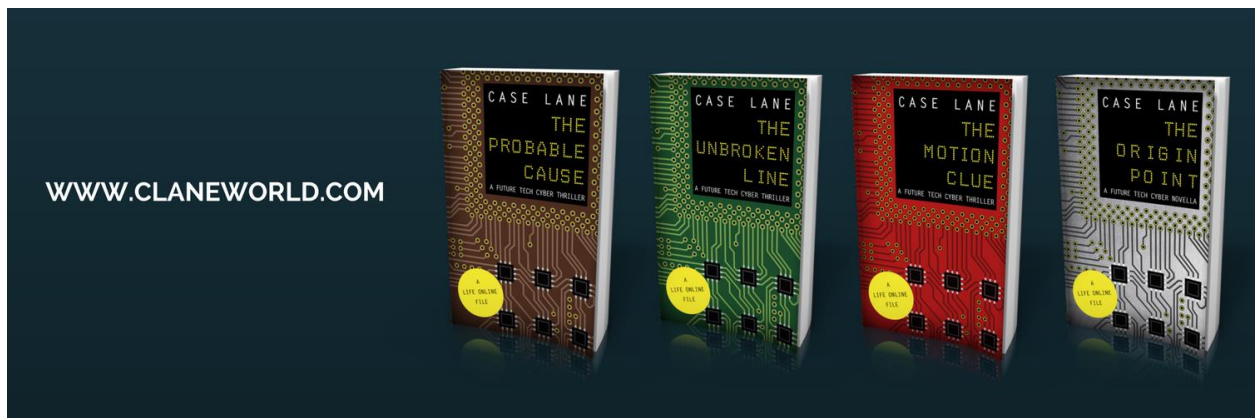


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