

**Mexicali** – As the plane lands at General Rodolfo Sánchez Taboada International Airport, I can't help but be reminded of the original Doo Wop/RnB/Rock-n-Roll boy band, The Coasters, and their song "Down in Mexico." I wish I could say I'm going to a honky-tonk run by a cool pianist named Joe. But a man has been murdered and his father wants justice. Eduardo Calderon is rich enough to be able to pay Archangel SC's fee and apparently this city is corrupt enough that he has to. Don't get me wrong, there is definitely a bloody turf war going on in Mexico over illegal drug routes into the US, but Mexicali is not a known problem area. The main reason for this is Joaquín Guzman, (that's El Chapo to you) who happens to be one of the most successful and powerful drug kingpins on Earth, and quiet is just how he likes things in Mexicali.

The area surrounding the city is where El Chapo's marijuana crops come from and Mexicali itself is a useful pipeline through which he funnels his weed and other drugs into the US. I've been familiar with his operation since my Marine Corps days and he was a high-profile target even then. But I won't have to deal with El Chapo Guzman because he was recently arrested and is therefore off the game board now. El Chapo's arrest leaves a small power vacuum in this country, but his son will be taking over. There will be challengers, but sonny boy has allied himself with smart people and is in position to maintain much, if not all, of his father's empire. The problem is that he also inherits his father's struggles. The elder Guzman was starting a war with Chinese Triads that was heading toward a bloody international conflict that would leave the victor with a narcotics pipeline the likes of which has never been seen in history. No one knows what will become of that, but I'm here now for the here and now.

A young journalist has been killed. Now this isn't the first time a journalist has been murdered since the Mexican Drug Wars started. This isn't like a civilian uprising against an oppressive government that is recorded and shared with the world by upstart activists and teenagers. There is a real fear of reporting the truth about the violence that is going on down here. A conscious effort has been made to silence the reporting community, so people outside Mexico don't have a real sense of just how bad things are. As a photojournalist by day, I take this situation very seriously. It is for just this reason that I brought "Donna," my Kel-Tec PLR-16 semi-auto, with me. After I finish making a few adjustments to the positioning of the furniture in my room, I strap on my spring-loaded rig, position my Kel-Tec P-

3AT, and slip a navy blue linen Vicomte A. blazer<sup>1</sup> on over a white Lacoste polo shirt. It turns out looks really can kill.

There's a car waiting outside to take me to Eduardo Calderon's villa in San Pedro Residencial – a gated community right in the middle of the city. We arrive at 2654 Avenida De La Paz, which happens to be the biggest house I've seen since we passed through security. That's not exactly surprising, but it's an impressive place regardless. I ring the bell and in a matter of seconds I'm face to face with a tall, skinny Mexican in his early fifties. Before either of us even has a moment to speak, we are interrupted by a gruff voice from behind the lanky man.

“Diego! Quien es eso?”

I raise my eyebrow at Diego, who just rolls his eyes and waves me inside. Eduardo Calderon rolls up to me in his Nakajima Industries EMPD (Electric Personal Mobility Device<sup>2</sup>), brings the wheels to a stop, then raises up to my eye level. My mind is pretty well blown right about now, but I try to keep that inside, you know professional front and all. Calderon is a squat man in his sixties with intense, bulging eyes. If Juan Miranda from “Duck, You Sucker<sup>3</sup>” were a real person, not just Rod Steiger with a tan and a shitty accent, he'd look something like Eduardo Calderon. He reminds me of an aged prize fighter, the type of guy whose pocket you'd consider picking but realize you're more likely to lose your fingers than come away with anything. He's got his intense gaze trained on me and I'm pretty sure he is trying to make me uncomfortable. It's working.

“You are the man who is going to bring that bitch to justice?”

“My name is Ashiel Hammond. I work for Archangel Security Consultants. If you are Eduardo Calderon, then I was hired to find your son's killer.”

Calderon starts circling me in his EPMD, like a caged jungle cat contemplating escape.

“I know who killed my Arturo. It was that no good cock-sucking wife of his. She's Russian. She only wanted him for my money all along. You are here to find the proof to send that bitch to jail for the rest of her goddam life!”

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<sup>1</sup> <http://elegantepolo.com/vicomte-a-navy-linen-jacket>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3QZveLkJo>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THn36Mwmv7U#aid=P9x1qPYSTcQ>

I stand still, keep it cool, keeping up with him using as little effort as possible. He's obviously a man used to having the upper hand and leading the way. Personally, I never was very good at giving people what they want.

"Do you mind if I ask what the police think?"

"They don't! Things are very, uh, political here. She's protected. The police aren't going to do anything about my boy. That's why I need you. Are you man enough to see this through?"

"Okay, you've just said a lot of cryptic things. I'd appreciate a little--"

"Go down to the newspaper office and ask for Luís Jimenez. He will give you the answers you want."

And with that, the old bastard just rolls on out of the room.

Diego gives me the address and calls me a cab. In a matter of minutes, I'm at the offices of *La Voz De Pueblo*, the newspaper Eduardo owns, of which his son, Arturo, was editor-in-chief. I am met by Luís Jimenez, one of the lead reporters at the newspaper and one of the few friends that Arturo Calderon had in Mexicali. He hadn't been expecting me, but that doesn't surprise me much. *Señor* Calderon didn't strike me as the overly communicative type. Luís is average height, which is to say tall for a Mexican. The office is small, but Jimenez would stand out anywhere. I'd place him firmly in his forties but he has that Johnny Depp feel still – you can just tell he owns a lot of vests, hats, and leather wristbands. We agree to walk to the scene of the crime and he'll fill me in with all the details on the way.

"I just thought it would be better to talk away from the office," he says as we walk down the street. "When daddy owns the newspaper, the walls have ears."

And he starts telling me the whole prologue. Back in the 70's, a young Eduardo Calderon was just a bank manager, but by the mid-80's when Mexican drug runners, guys like El Chapo, started pumping cocaine into the US for Pablo Escobar, Eduardo made his play. He became the personal banker for several of El Chapo's men and eventually El Chapo himself. By the mid-90's, old Eduardo had bought the bank he used to work in and invited the cartels into Mexicali. They started growing marijuana just outside the city and because the weed was being distributed all over the US/Mexico border, Mexicali remained a quiet town. And when the cartel wars broke out, this

city became the hub where the designer drug pipeline was protected the best. Fast-forward to the past few years and El Chapo is taking his business global but meeting resistance from the Chinese.

With the war already taking its toll and the Americans cracking down on his operation, El Chapo went into hiding. This left Mexicali without his personal protection, and that's when El Susurro<sup>4</sup> came to town. Apparently El Susurro took a bullet in the throat and now talks in a low raspy tone, like a whisper. This guy comes right out of a Dick Tracy comic book, but was able to take advantage of the migrant workers that the Americans have been "repatriating" through Mexicali recently. In these desperate men, El Susurro has found people willing to oppose El Chapo's army. Now that El Chapo has been arrested, El Susurro is making his move for a complete takeover.

"So, was killing Eduardo's son an attempt to hit his enemy's powerful ally? It seems to me there are better ways to go about that."

"Not exactly. You see, this is where the plot thickens. Shit starts to get Shakespearean around here."

"Well, I'm a stranger in this town, so hang the Punch & Judy on me. That's what strangers are for."

"What?"

"Never mind. Go on with the Elizabethan tragedy that's going on down here."

"So, papa Calderon is dying of old age and evil, and convinces his son to come back to town from London. Arturo brings his Russian wife and settles down to be with papa in his final days. The kid really was a special guy. Doing that took some huge balls, considering how he said he was raised, so you would've thought he'd known what his father was up to."

"You really think he didn't?"

"One thing I'll say about Arturo Calderon, he always wanted to see the good in people. He seemed genuinely surprised by how things were here. When he left, there was no bloody drug war and no busloads of Mexicans being dropped off in the middle of the city from the US. I guess as far as he knew, his father was a successful banker. Here in Mexicali, we've all had the privilege of ignorance for too long, and now reality is biting us in our collective ass."

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<sup>4</sup> Spanish for "The Whisper"

"I can't argue with that logic. But it also sounds like Arturo benefitted from the war, at least in the sense that it gave him a target to crusade against, and with the factions dedicated to massacring each other, they didn't spend their time trying to shut him up. But I think I've got all the history I can take for now."

"Good. Because what happened the night Arturo was murdered is way more fascinating."

"Great, just when I thought I was sick of hearing your voice..."

"I'll be brief."

"Don't be. Give me as many details and specifics your journalistic memory can recall."

As it turns out, Arturo asked Luís to come by his house on what would be the night he was murdered. Luís stopped in at the agreed upon 10pm and was met by Arturo's wife, Iliana, who said that her husband wasn't home. Luís asked if he could come in and wait since they were scheduled to meet. According to Luís, he was left alone waiting for about 20 minutes when the phone rang. Shortly after that, he heard a car pull out of the driveway and return about 45 minutes later. Mrs. Calderon eventually informed him that her husband will not be back for the evening. This is of course more than a little off putting to Luís, who also notices a dark stain on Iliana's left shoe - beige Christian Louboutin pumps naturally.

And here we are. Before parting, Luís leaves me with a manila folder with El Voz's coverage of the murder. It has all the facts I'll need about the case as well as the colorful characters that decorate this city. Luís guessed that I wouldn't be getting much cooperation from *la policia*. Now that I'm reading the file, Eduardo Calderon's words don't seem so cryptic. The sheriff, a guy by the name of John Noonan is an American brought in from Montana to handle the recent viciousness. He made a reputation for himself clearing the uber-violent Valhalla Bound Motorcycle Club out of his area. His reward? A big offer to come south of the border and do it again. According to Luís' investigating, it didn't take long before El Susurro convinced the new sheriff to side with him. So Johnny Law is working to help rid this place of the remnants of the previous regime and it's looking like he chose the right side. I would imagine Sheriff Noonan stands to benefit quite a bit by taking up with the other newcomer in town. My man, *El Señor* Eduardo Calderon, is in too tight with El Chapo's people to survive this

thing with his fortune intact. I'm going to try like Hell to avoid this whole mess. I just want to find this killer then make a run for the border.

As far as the facts of the case go, Arturo Calderon was gunned down at approximately 10:55pm on Calle Huracán. He was shot from behind three times (twice in the back and once in the right shoulder) with .38 Special bullets. Several witnesses saw a woman standing over the body shortly after hearing the shots, but this woman was never identified or found by the police. Was she the person Arturo was meeting instead of Luís that night? If not, why was he across town instead of at home? Perhaps he knew he was being followed and tried to lead his pursuer(s) down a false trail? Nah, that's not very likely. I think I can safely cross her off the list as the killer though. Even a rank amateur isn't going to step out of the shadows to confirm a kill. Then again, who knows, maybe the killer is an amateur. But from what I've learned so far, the young Calderon doesn't really strike me as the type to be mixed up in a crime of passion. This particular manila folder creates more questions than it answers. Tomorrow I'll have to pay a visit to the old man with the EPMD in the big house, so will sleep on this for now.

Hopefully the phone in my room that's ringing at 6:05 is my client calling to tell me that the case has been solved and I can go home. Because if the reason for this cacophonous ringing is anything other than that, someone on the other end of the line is going to have one pissed off Marine to deal with. I have guns and the means by which to find you, foolish early morning caller.

"Hello?"

"This is Diego. If you recall, I work for *Señor* Calderon. He requests that you go to the Wachovia Bank on Boulevard Bénito Juárez and speak with Pilar De La Vega. The bank opens at 8am. Pilar will expect you at 7:00."

I don't know who I hate more, Diego for waking me up early or myself for the loss of discipline that I know is probably giving my old drill sergeant chest pains this very moment. I give myself a one-hundred push-up penance then take a shower. I leave the hotel in an Ermenegildo Zegna suit and a new attitude. This is a very curious case and, while mysteries aren't exactly my specialty, I think I can get to the bottom of it. Breakfast

consisted of an avocado and eggs (sunny-side up) with a pastry I've never heard of that was way more delicious than I'd expected. Maybe that explains my improved mood, I don't know.

The woman waiting for me outside the bank is petite, and that's being generous. It's 7:12 in the am and Pilar doesn't look pleased. She seems to recognize me but doesn't greet me in any way, nor does she roll her eyes and sigh heavily - basically it's hard to get a read on her. Pilar unlocks the door to the bank and we go in. No one else is there. We walk to her office in the back of the main area. It looks like she's the bank manager.

"The other employees will start arriving at 7:30, so we shouldn't waste any more time."

"You sure are direct. Nice to meet you too, my name is Ashiel. I like motorcycles and long walks on the beach."

She does not look amused, "One of our customers deposited a certified check for ten thousand dollars. The check was made out by Arturo Calderon."

"That certainly is a clue. How did you come by this?"

"My father works for Mr. Calderon's father. I was asked to be on the lookout for a deposit of just this size."

"I see. Have you informed the police yet?"

"No. This deposit was just made yesterday."

"Great. Can you give me the info?"

"Sure."

With just a few taps on the keyboard, the account information appears on Pilar's computer screen. Bingo! Our mysterious depositor lives on Calle Huracán. I scribble down the address quickly - time is apparently of the essence.

"Do you know anything about this person," I ask.

Pilar squints at the screen for a moment. "Danna Brigante. She's a local gold digger, with a preference for the fast money. Before Arturo came back, she even tried to get her claws into Mr. Calderon. But when she realized that he has no intention of dying soon or leaving her anything when he does, she moved on. Now she spends most of her time going from one drug kingpin to another. The last I heard she is spending her time with the new cartel leader around here."

"El Susurro?"

"Yes, Maximo Trevino. He's supposed to be some kind of ladies' man, so the two of them must make quite the pair."

“Well, that was surprisingly detailed and judgmental.”

“My father is Eduardo Calderon’s assistant, I hear things.”

“Diego is your father?”

“Yes.”

I’m very much interested in following up this Danna Brigante lead, but here I am in front of Iliana Calderon’s house instead. This was how I had originally planned to start my day and I’d like to get this interview over with before I start filling my head with theories. I watch the house for a bit before approaching the door. It is pretty early to be visiting with a recently widowed trophy wife after all. Then again, maybe not. From across the street I see a man leave the house who looks a lot like the pictures of El Susurro I’ve been looking at recently. He’s wearing one of those hipster fedoras with the shorter brim, but I’m fairly sure it’s him. A large Mexican with no neck gets out of a nearby car and opens the backdoor for him. I write down the license plate as the car speeds off.

Now I have to wait a bit before going to the house myself. I don’t want her suspicious when I arrive. This is a perfect opportunity to make a small purchase. The downtown shopping district is a short 15-minute cab ride away. Finding a large eyewear shop, I go in and really take my time making the purchase.

About an hour later, I’m back at the Calderon residence, sporting my new BCG<sup>5</sup> vanity eyeglasses. Channeling my inner Clark Kent, I make my way up the steps and ring the doorbell. The widow Calderon answers rather promptly. She is a stunning blonde – tall with big blue eyes. And there I am, big glasses and all, with a huge smile on my face, holding out a business card that says I work for Marsh Services in the Global Casualty Practice.

“Hi. My name is Anderson Howe. May I come in?”

She looks at me suspiciously then glances down at the card, her strikingly blue eyes regarding it with further doubt. On the other hand, Iliana’s pupils don’t dilate with pleasure at the sight of it – so maybe old man Calderon is wrong about her. I don’t move a muscle, which sucks, because

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<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GI\\_glasses](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GI_glasses)

she doesn't take the card from me. It's good though, because now the onus is on her to decide how to handle me. Knowing that does not stop me from feeling like an idiot standing here like this. She finally puts an end to my misery and motions for me to follow her inside. Now, lots of Russian women look like they could have a modeling career and Iliana is no exception; she's tall, broad shouldered, almost lanky. She could have been a basketball or volleyball player, but I can see a little bit of the catwalk in the way she moves.

"So, who are you, really?"

"Excuse me," I say, trying to sound incredulous.

"You are obviously not who your little business card says you are. If you were, you would have said so, instead of standing there letting that piece of paper talk for you. Now I've done what you wanted, I've let you in, so tell me who you really are."

"That's a bold move on your part. How do you know I'm not dangerous?"

"How do you know I'm not?"

I like her. "Point taken. I've been hired by Eduardo Calderon to investigate Arturo's murder."

"And the old bastard told you that I'm the good-for-nothing whore who entrapped his son, then murdered him - because I'm fucking one of his rivals. Is that correct?"

"Something like that."

"Right, something like that, I'm sure."

"Now, as far as I'm concerned, I've been hired to find a killer, not just collect the evidence that points to you. If the old man doesn't like it, that's his problem. But I'm going to do this right. Will you talk to me?"

"Of course I will. I have nothing to hide.<sup>6</sup>"

"Great. Let's start with the night your husband was killed. I spoke with Luis Jimenez, who works at the paper and says that he came here for a meeting with Arturo."

"Yes, that is correct. Luis came here around 10pm but Arturo was not home. I don't know where he was then. Well, I know now but I didn't then."

"Okay, so let's just get right down to it. Luis also mentioned that you got a phone call, left, then came back and said that Arturo would not be

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<sup>6</sup> People who say this usually do have something to hide...

home tonight. Now, that's already enough to raise suspicions, given what happened to your husband, but Luis also mentioned that he saw what he thought was blood on your shoe when you returned."

"Look, I believe you are genuinely trying to find my husband's killer, so I will tell you what I did not tell the police."

"Please do."

"I was there that night," she says, setting fire to a cigarette I didn't notice her take out, using a match I never saw her strike. "I got a call that Arturo was meeting a woman at Calle Huracán. I wasn't even sure I could believe it, but I was furious anyway. I still don't think my Arturo was having an affair, but I am Russian, so I had to know what was the truth."

"So you drove over to Calle Huracán. Then what happened?"

"I parked my car across the street from the address I was given and waited. Eventually I saw Arturo walking down the street. He had that look he always had when thinking too much about something. He did that - thought about things too much."

"What happened next?"

"Then I heard these sudden, sharp sounds. I don't really remember how many there were, but apparently there were three. The next thing I was aware of was that Arturo was no longer in my sight. I must have been following him with my eyes but didn't stop when the shots rang out. I looked back and saw him lying on the ground. Before I knew what was happening, I was out of my car and rushing over to him."

"So you're the mystery woman that witnesses saw."

"I didn't know anyone had seen me. Afterwards, I couldn't bear to read what was being said in the papers. Living through all the police questioning and suspicious looks in the streets was more than enough for me. I know how that old bastard feels about me, and I expected to be targeted by the police. Apparently evil old rich men in Russia have more control over the authorities than in Mexico."

"Perhaps. Now, let's go back to the phone call you received. Did you recognize the voice? Was it familiar to you in any way?"

"No. Whoever it was, I think it was a man, was whispering. I assumed he did not want to be heard by anyone that could be around."

"Did he, let's go with 'he,' speak in English or Spanish?"

"It was English."

"Do you speak Spanish?"

“I speak four languages, of which Spanish is one. But very few people here know that.”

“So, does that mean anything to you, that the caller spoke in English? Who knows that you can speak Spanish?”

“Who can know? In this country, you never know who is paying attention or why.”

“Okay, I think that’s enough for now. I’ve got to run to another interview, but think about that caller. There may be a clue there.”

My next destination is 1232 Calle Huracán, the home of Danna Brigante. I won’t have to tiptoe around with her, like I [initially] had to with Iliana Calderon. Danna must feel comfortable about her situation or she wouldn’t have deposited the check. She waited just long enough for the media frenzy to die down, so she’s no fool. Still, the smarter move would have been to get the Hell out of Dodge. If the police actually gave a shit about finding this killer, they’d have tracked down her check already. Yes, Arturo Calderon withdrew a large sum from the paper’s bank account, so it wasn’t as obvious as if he’d taken the money from his own account. But any detective worth his whiskey would have looked for any kind of financial anomaly, given his odd behavior the night he was killed.

The man who answers my knock appears to be in pretty rough shape. Standing at about 5’10” he looks emaciated, like the remains of a bigger guy who died. His weathered, leather-like face reads like a roadmap of hard knocks. I really want to take his picture right now. A visage that betrays one’s natural age deserves the vindication that posterity often awards. Fighting the urge, I ask if this is where Danna Brigante lives. He hesitates before saying “No.” That’s good enough for me. Figuring he can’t handle my weight, I jam my foot in the door as he tries to close it and bull rush my way in. There isn’t even much commotion, since I caught him off-guard, so I get in with relative ease.

From upstairs I hear a woman shouting something in Spanish. And then there she is, standing at the top of the staircase like a voluptuous Norma Desmond from Sunset Blvd. She is hurriedly tying a fluffy blue bathrobe, but I can see she’s wearing something black and lacy beneath. And even though I

know she is doing this quickly, I would swear it's all happening in slow motion. Helping the gaunt door man back to his feet is simple enough so by the time Danna has descended the stairs, he's grumbling and I'm smiling.

"Like Death, it was only a matter of time until you arrived," she says, slinking past me on her way into the living room, but she may as well have been saying "Why don't ya' come up sometime and see me."

"So, who exactly do you think I am?" I say just, no longer smiling. As I begin to follow here, a skeletal hand grasps my shoulder. Apparently the guy doesn't realize just how much strength he no longer has. I shoot him a piercing glare, all full of daggers and he gets the picture. Following Danna unabated into the living room, I body the skinny guy to prevent him from entering.

"Danilo's my brother, you can say anything in front of him," she says, sitting down on a chaise with such a casual grace that it's hard to believe she's wearing a bathrobe and not an evening gown – though something tells me she's too sophisticated for her own good.

I ignore the fact that there is no physical resemblance between the two of them; she can have that little tan lie. I'm not feeling particularly frisky right now.

"Well, I've made it past your bony bodyguard, but I don't know if that gives me license to start calling myself 'Muerte.' I came here to ask you some questions, but now I get the feeling I'm going to be leaving with even more."

"Then I'll try not to be vague."

"Let's just aim for 'honest' for now."

"You don't seem like the others from Montana, but Noonan can't involve the F.B.I. So whose questions are you asking?" She picks up an empty rocks glass and tinkles the remaining ice lightly. Danilo makes a move, but I hold him up with my hand. Spying the liquor cart across the room, I retrieve the glass then go over to take in the selection. It's mostly tequila and rum, but the one I want is the mescal. The bottle says "Real Minero<sup>7</sup>" and is right next to a faded green one with no label, most likely containing "the good stuff" distilled in some mezcalero's back yard. Maybe another time, I need to actually remember what goes on today. Pouring three glasses and distributing them, I hope this goes a long way toward softening the crowd.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.realminero.com.mx/inicio.html>

“Chin-chin,” I say, to which there is no reply. Danna sips slowly, never taking her gaze off me.

“You’ve got your money, I’m not here to try and take it from you. But I do want to know what made Arturo Calderon bring it to you the night he was killed.”

She giggles deliciously. “Simple,” she says with all the confidence of a lioness, “Because I asked him to.”

“You don’t take me seriously,” I say with a playful grin. If flirtation is her game, she’s definitely winning, but I’m not without my own charms.

“Why would I kill a man who just gave me ten thousand dollars?”

“You see, it’s no fun playing detective if someone steals your stuff, asks all the questions.”

“I like to know what’s going on,” is Danna’s reply.

“Funny, I’m like that too. Is that why Arturo was here with the money? Something you knew about?”

“In a city like this, a woman has to make her money where she can.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“But it’s a fact.”

I get up and pour another round of the mescal. Danilo gets his and I have mine. I stop right in front of the chase and hold Danna’s with my gaze and her glass before taking a nice long swallow.

“So what-- I guess I should say ‘who’ were you selling that night? I’m pretty sure it wasn’t Keyser Söze.”

Danna Brigante stalks down to the end of the chase and stands up right in front of me. Nice and slow. She locks her eyes onto mine, removes the glass from my hand, and empties it. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

I can’t restrain a smile and chuckle. She’s good. This is going to be fun. Following her example I drain my glass, then lean in close to whisper in her ear. “Why then?”

Danna settles back into a comfortable position, pauses a beat and smiles - more to herself than me, I think. “When I tell a man to bring me ten thousand dollars at ten pm and he does this, it makes me very happy.”

“That’s nice. You said jump and Arturo jumped. Then he’s shot right outside your building when he leaves. Hopefully I won’t meet the same fate.”

“If you don’t want to find out, maybe you shouldn’t leave.”

I get back to me hotel exhausted. What a day. And almost as if on cue, the phone rings. It's Iliana.

"I've been thinking about what you said earlier. I'm not sure whether you knew what you were saying or not, but it doesn't matter."

"You sound upset," I say, recognizing the frenzied cadence of her speech.

"I'm leaving. Now. I've been going over this in my head since you left and there is really only one answer. I'm scared."

"I'll be right there."

"No, don't. I'm leaving. It will be safer for me this way. But I wanted to tell you, it was Maximo that killed my husband. When I knelt over Arturo as he lay there, bleeding out his life, the last thing he said to me was 'Max.' He was trying to tell me who shot him."

"You don't have to go. I can protect you if you're here."

"I need to get away from this place. After all, there is a reason I never told the police about Arturo's last moments. I thought the son of a bitch would protect me. But if he's the one who called, then I have to believe he is trying to set me up. That is all I have to say. I'm going now. I hope you kill the bastard."

The next morning, I'm awakened by a loud knocking on my door. This is what I get for not learning my lesson from yesterday. The police officer standing in the hallway is a sneaky tall<sup>8</sup>, wiry blond with a hard face. He looks like a lightweight MMA fighter.

"Get dressed. The chief'd like to have a word with you."

Did I mention that he's very direct? He doesn't cuff me but I do have to ride in the back of the squad car.

"Let me guess, you must be Bob McSwayne," I say from the backseat. "You were the first officer on the scene after Arturo Calderon was murdered. What's your angle on the killer?"

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<sup>8</sup> One of those guys who you always find yourself being surprised by their height

“Arturo Calderon is with God now. Someone sent him on his way with three bullets for good measure. That much is fact. Anything else is just speculation.”

“So you’ve got nothing. Are you people investigating it at all? Do you even know that he gave a woman named Danna Brigante a certified check for ten thousand dollars the night he was killed? This is the same Danna Brigante who is involved with a local cartel leader and lives mere steps from the scene of the crime. I mean, what the Hell happened to justice in this town?”

“Justice will be determined by due process of the law. Don’t you worry about that. And as regards Ms. Brigante, I wouldn’t go barkin’ up that tree, were I you. She’s into real men, you see, like me. I’m a cowboy. You’re just a pretty boy. So I suggest you sit back and shut up.” That last part is spoken to the rearview mirror with a menacing tone reserved exclusively for backwater lawmen.

After a few silent minutes that felt more like an hour, I’m in the office of John Noonan. He’s the chief of police in Mexicali but looks more like a Midwestern sheriff. He reminds me of Joe from Reservoir Dogs<sup>9</sup> – a very large older man with a voice like a gravel pit. I can tell he’s old school, the kind of guy that’ll beat a confession out of a suspect with a phone book then walk an old lady across the street. I don’t like old school and I don’t think he likes me.

“So what’s your story, young man? You down here to cause trouble?”

“I’ve been hired by Eduardo Calderon to investigate the murder of his son.”

“That so,” he says folding his arms as he reclines in his chair.

“If you guys aren’t going to do it, I may as well.”

“Oh, I see,” he says, easing back to an upright position. “That’s mighty helpful. Well why don’t you tell me a little more about how to do my job then?” His smile is full of spiders.

“Look, I don’t care if this Susurro guy pays you to look the other way while he funnels death into our country. I have a job to do and as soon as it’s done, I’m on a plane back to my comfy apartment in New York.”

“Good, because nothing else that goes on here concerns you. Now, yes, I’ve had to play ball with these fellas, since I’m new around here and all.

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<sup>9</sup> That’s Rod Steiger reference #2 for those in the cheap seats...

But I'm still the law. And as you should know, when you fight the law, the law wins. His people are just a bunch of farmers, gardeners, and roadside fruit sellers. There's not a hard case among 'em. Now Susurro, sure he's got the stuff, but it's just a matter of time before he gets his."

"Good to know," is all I can muster in the face of his bluster.

"It is. Now let's get back to you telling me what you've found that you think we haven't."

"Well, it isn't exactly a smoking gun, but Arturo Calderon withdrew a cashier's check in the amount of ten thousand dollars, which he then gave to Danna Brigante. He was shot and killed coming from her apartment that same night. I think he was buying information from her on El Susurro, which he planned to publish in his newspaper."

"That's certainly a possibility."

"It sure in Hell is. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

"Oh a tough guy, I see. Well, I just happen to know where we can find El Susurro this very minute. I'd be happy to take you over so you run this whole business past him. Would that make you feel better about how we do things down here in Mexicali, tough guy?"

This Sheriff Teasle wannabe<sup>10</sup> has a real sense of humor, handing me over to the wolves, all the while smiling like a jackal. I like my chances though. Setting up an opportunity like this would take time on my own, so I'll take him up on his offer.

It isn't long before we're on our way. I ride shotgun with Noonan in his hulking black Silverado<sup>11</sup>. His lap dog, McSwayne, follows in a patrol car, with another behind him carrying three more officers in it. With a convoy like this we certainly won't be mistaken for cordial visitors.

"You know, you came at just the right time, son," Noonan begins. "These kinds of things are all about timing. Susurro came to town with big ideas, but he'd still be nothing if El Chapo hadn't already been spreading himself too thin. That guy was at war with everyone and couldn't keep his backside covered. So we got him. Susurro is no Chapo. He's already exposing himself with stupid shit like this. Oh yes, the old days are over for these cartels and I will happily throw away the key after we lock up this little wetback."

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<sup>10</sup> [http://villains.wikia.com/wiki/Will\\_Teasle](http://villains.wikia.com/wiki/Will_Teasle)

<sup>11</sup> That's Brian Dennehy reference #2 if you're counting...

Not that he needed to include a racial slur to punctuate his immense douchiness, but it is good of him to check that box as well. Without a doubt, I've encountered plenty of guys just like Noonan in the Corps but at least we were all serving a common good together. I don't know what's going to happen at this little sit-down but even a bullet to the spine would be better than being trapped in a confined space with this asshole for much longer. And then things become very clear. Noonan slows down as we approach a gaggle of at least five other police cruisers parked strategically around a large warehouse outside town. Now I understand why we came so heavy.

"You see, this here is harvest season and your pal Susurro is in there right now overseeing the preparation of a shipment of marijuana headed for the Texas border. This is what it's all about for me. Now the murder of Arturo Calderon is a tragedy, I do understand that. But McSwayne and I have been planning this little bit of Montana justice for months. So I'll tell you what, you can go in there and get the confession you need to take back to old man Eduardo, if you can. Then El Susurro's ass is mine."

He's grinning like a Cheshire cat now. He wants me to be impressed and I am. Then a Mexican deputy walks up and taps on the window. Rolling down the glass, Noonan speaks some Spanish to him with a heavy American accent. What I can gather from the deputy's worried demeanor and stammering is that they are expected and El Susurro plans on standing his ground. Noonan waves the deputy away with a dismissive hand.

"Goddammit," he says after a beat. "The little bastard's smarter than I thought, but he's still trapped like a rat," he says out loud, but not to me.

"He's in there waiting for you?" I ask rhetorically.

"You." I can almost see the light bulb hovering over his head. "You go in there and have your little powwow. And while you're in there, you talk some sense into him. Make him understand that he'd rather be judged by twelve than carried by six."

"Seems fair," I said. "No reason for a rumpus."

"Yeah, that's right. But try to be quick, will you?"

I happily get out of the 4-wheel monstrosity and, raising my hands, make my way over to the warehouse. As I get closer I can actually hear the sound of guns cocking inside.

"No hablo Español," I shout. "English!"

“The fat ass that sent you talks English, chivato<sup>12</sup>!”

“I’m not with them,” I say lower. “This has nothing to do with me, but you know what the deal is out here.”

Pulling the Caracal out of my shoulder holster, I toss it into the dirt gingerly.

“That’s my favorite pistol. I just want five minutes to talk about Arturo Calderon.”

I can hear several voices whispering in Spanish but can’t make out the words. The next thing I hear is the latch click, then the door creaking open a crack.

Then all Hell breaks loose. Just a few feet behind me the sound of over a dozen guns emptying themselves dominates my attention, shattering glass and splintering wood all around in the process. I crash through the door, kicking it shut with my foot. In between bursts of gunfire I can actually hear laughter coming from somewhere nearby.

Looking through the bullet holes in the door I can see McSwayne out in front licking off shots with two pistols like Yosemite Sam in a John Woo movie. I jerk my arm up, releasing the P-3AT<sup>13</sup> from the spring-loaded rig up my sleeve. I return volley with four shots, hitting McSwayne twice in the torso, and once in the leg judging by the way he crumples to the ground. The shooting stops as other officers rush over to take him back behind the line of cars. As this happens, burly hands latch onto my shoulders, dragging me away from the door.

“Somebody out there don’t like you, homes.”

The smell of the cannabis plants is overpowering but far less jarring than what just happened. I’m at the back of a large room surrounded by a crew of guys that look like they should be in East LA.

“Did I get a contact high? Where am I?”

“Nah, man, a Mexican bullet hit you in the head and now you’re in cholo heaven,” growls a husky voice from behind me. Looking up, El Susurro is leaning over me blocking out the sun streaming in from a window above. An ugly scar on his cheek breaks the slight beard shadowing his strong jawline.

“I guess that makes you El Susurro.”

“You win the fuckin’ prize, *gringo*.”

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=chivato>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.keltecweapons.com/our-guns/p-3at/pistol/>

"Yeah? And what's that?"

"You get to live for exactly 5 more minutes. So you better start talking real quick," and with that those rough hands are on me again, jostling me to my feet.

"I've been hired to find out who killed Arturo Calderon," I say, dusting myself off.

"That don't explain why you're here."

"Doesn't it? A young newspaper editor from out of town sweeps in and starts a crusade against the violence going on around here. That's bad for business. On top of that, his rich daddy just happens to be supporting the man you're trying to replace. But worst of all, you catch him coming out of your girl's place in the middle of the night. That had to suck."

"That all sounds good, white boy. Too bad its *mierda*."

"Is it?"

"Arturo Calderon was nobody to me. Didn't even know the fucker's name before somebody capped him. I don't give a shit what anybody writes about me in a newspaper. I mean, who reads those anymore anyway? And Danna? Danna Brigante is a whore. She fucks around with cops and gangsters, like that shit is cool."

"Danna said she was selling info on someone to Calderon."

"Look, I only do one thing with whores, and telling them my secrets ain't it. Now Calderon's wife, that bitch was the best piece of ass I ever had. You get to see her before she left town? She must've got spooked about her husband getting waxed. I'm gonna miss her fine ass."

At that point he drifts into memory and a smile crawls across his face.

"So, what are you and the rest of the cast from Stand & Deliver doing down here?"

"You ain't heard enough yet, man?" He glances at his watch then shrugs. "My uncle was a bad motherfucker out of Juarez, a real Mexican gangster. He knew shit was going to change real soon and wanted his *familia* to be the strongest. He told me if I could build myself an army, I'd be *el rey* soon enough. Too bad he didn't live long enough to see all this."

I take the opportunity to take in the whole operation going on around me. It really seems to be running like a well-oiled machine excepting, of course, for the death squad with badges outside. My moment of observation is interrupted by what I think is more gunfire, before realizing it's a

helicopter. There's a sharp whistle from above before a humongous hatch in the ceiling is opened revealing three Huey helicopters hovering above.

"That's our ride, *gringo*. Thanks for helping pass the time. Good luck with the pork rind outside!"

As I watch El Susurro and a cadre of his men file up a staircase toward the waiting helicopters, I notice that another group of men is hurriedly carrying the pot plants down into a hatch in the floor. They must have been at it the whole time I've been in here, and I just didn't spot them before. I rush over to the opening in the floor and jump down in to a well maintained escape tunnel. Ashiel Hammond is nobody's fool. I know a few growers out in California that live in a community of farms. Each house has its own power generator, electric fence, and underground escape route. Neither farm has connecting tunnels so, even if they are found out, the cops can't use them to gain access to neighbors. To make a long story long, I've seen things like this before, though not on this level. I don't know where this tunnel goes, but anywhere is better than here. I shot the deputy. But I did not shoot the sheriff.

"Ashiel, Street's<sup>14</sup> found something you need to take a look at."

Hurtling myself through the front door of Danna Brigante's house is not a daunting task. Danilo Rodrigues arrives almost immediately. With a speed he's hopeless to counter, I seize him by the lapels and jerk him close.

"You'd better get help."

It's been two days since the incident at El Susurro's farm. Old man Calderon is losing patience with me, especially since he's gotten wind of Iliana's disappearance. But this is not a desperation move, it's a checkmate. When not being berated by an old Mexican in an EPMD, I've been

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<sup>14</sup> Victoria "Street" Calle – information and technology specialist for Archangel Security Consultants

spending my time doing research with Street and we've made one mother of a discovery.

In the living room, Danna Brigante looks less than surprised to see me. She doesn't even bother to feign anger at the breaking and entering that constitutes my arrival. Her visitor, on the other hand, is incredulous enough for the both of them.

Deputy McSwayne rises to his feet as quickly as he's able - which isn't very quick at all. He draws down on me with a wince, and if that's his slower draw, I really don't ever want to be on the other end of it at full speed. He's got me, so I ease my hand away from my shoulder holster.

"That's my damned gun!"

"That it is. It's a mighty fine weapon, you shouldn't ought to just throw it away so casually. Now those three bullets you gave me? Well, I aim to get those back to you right now."

Raising my Caracal slowly, McSwayne takes aim at my forehead.

"You did get away with murder once, but I don't think you'd be so lucky a second time."

"Is that so?"

"Oh it is. I'm sure you couldn't wait to hobble out of the hospital and get over here to tell Danna how much of a big man you're going to be around here. And soon. Because you know she likes to side with a winner, don't you sweetheart?"

"Maximo was a fun, but he was just a boy. A man can take three bullets and keep going. Are you a man?"

"See, there it is. Right before the veiled threat, of course. She called our little friend El Susurro "Maximo." Every woman I've ever spoken to around here has called him by his name. But I've never heard a man call him that, only El Susurro."

"Maybe I should just put a few more holes in your face. 'Cause the one you're usin' right now sure ain't makin' a lotta sense."

"Oh, it gets better. You know just like I do that Iliana Calderon was there the night her husband was murdered."

Danna glances over at the man holding his gun to my face. McSwayne's arm is starting to tremble. His pectoral muscle has to be killing him by now. The procedure to remove my lead from his chest would definitely be taking a toll on his arm strength. So I'll just keep on talking while the cowboy plays tough guy.

“You see, his last words were ‘Max-’ and she naturally thought he was trying to name his killer, ‘Maximo Trevnio.’ But he wouldn’t have said that would he? No, he was naming his killer, all right, but ‘McSwayne’ was what he was trying to say.”

McSwayne’s pupils dilate and a moment later his finger is squeezing the trigger. By then I’m already tackling him to the ground and by the time he realizes what’s going on I’ve already got my Caracal back and aimed at his temple. Meanwhile my right foot is crushing his hand as my left leg is planted firmly in the small of his back.

“Now that that’s settled, let’s continue with your confession. You made it pretty clear to me when we first met that you had a thing for *señorita* Brigante here. It must have driven you nuts to think that a guy like Arturo Calderon could be taking what you wanted. Things got clearer after you tried to kill me the other day.”

The deputy begins to weep. This is unexpected. He calls out to the object of his affection,

“Danna! *Ayudame!*” Then his gaze lands on me and, as if he realizes what I have reduced him to, his pain is replaced with an intense rage. He’s looking into the mirror behind me, focusing on Danna, the woman for whom he is willing to kill. “I’m going to run this town soon. Take this bastard out and you’ll be by my side always.”

She’s now next to the fireplace. In my periphery I can see her hand inching toward the poker in the nearby stand.

“Don’t do it, Danna. It’s just not worth it. Yes, McSwayne and his boss, Noonan, are planning on taking over the drug business here in Mexicali. And yes, they can do it. But I’m not going to let that happen. Any minute now your friend Danilo will be back with a few guys from El Susurro’s crew. He’s too stupid to go to the police, though that could be fun too. But when the cholos arrive, I’m going to hand McSwayne over to them along with a brief explanation of his plan. I’ll even talk real slow and use small words too; just to make sure they get it. I don’t think you’ll want to be on his side then.”

Danna stops her advance on the poker and I can’t help but smile.

“Good idea. I’d hate for something bad to happen to a good girl like you.”

Releasing McSwayne, I pick him up and drag him into the kitchen. There I handcuff him to the oven and walk away with the sound of his curses and sneers fading behind me.

I go to pay a visit to Chief Noonan, but he isn't in his office. Actually, the place is pretty deserted. Maybe he's already making his move on El Susurro. I head down to the armory, just in case there's a chance to catch them in the act. After all, no one has said he isn't here yet.

Bingo. Noonan and a few other deputies are in the room strapping on bulletproof vests and carrying automatic weapons outside to the parking lot. Noonan is taking his time with a particularly nice Winchester he has removed from a separate gun cage. He's checking the barrels when he notices me.

"Pretty boy! I'm glad to see you made it out of that whole mess the other day. We thought the bastards had kidnapped you for ransom."

"Aw, give me more credit than that."

"I heard the widow Calderon has skipped town. If you're here for advice, she's your killer. The runner is responsible. That's what I always say. You can send me a nice portion of your check from the old man in the mail."

"I'm not here for advice."

"Oh, come to see it through, then, have you? We're going after El Susurro just now. This time we'll get him too," he cocks the Winchester for dramatic effect. "You want to ride along?"

"Looks like you're expecting a fight."

"Didn't you see those Hueys? Besides that, the son-of-a-bitches put three holes in my best deputy. He's been with me since Montana goddammit. That won't go unavenged. Damned savages."

He goes through the door leading into the parking lot where more than a few squad cars are waiting, engines purring. There's also a tactical unit in a black truck as well. He's stepping up his game. This is a desperation move. El Susurro's got military connections so Noonan can't afford to miss again. I can't afford to mess this up either or my situation's going to get real desperate as well. Noonan climbs into his Silverado and slides the

Winchester into a holster by his left leg. I get in the passenger seat and the big guy's demeanor changes the moment my door is closed.

"That thing silenced," he asks, staring blankly out the front window.

"It is."

And then his big meaty fist is crashing into my face. My ear starts ringing and my vision blurs after he belts me a second time. He takes advantage of my stunned state to take my guy away from me and toss it into the back seat.

"You're no killer. A real hard case would have put me down before getting into the car. I'm afraid you're just too soft for this line of work, son." Slipping the Winchester out of his holster, he gets out of the car and trains the weapon on me. His men react quickly. Almost immediately, I'm dragged out of the car and propped up by my arms. The beating will continue. Noonan strolls up to me and places his hands on his waist. Taking off his sunglasses he leans his face to within inches of mine.

"Well?"

"Once I realized it was McSwayne who killed Calderon, I assumed that you'd put him up to it."

He slams the butt of the gun into my stomach, actually knocking the wind out of me. It takes a moment to recover then I'm able to eke out the rest of my story.

"I had my team run a background check on you. You cleared the bikers out of Montana, but the drug business is still thriving. Things have gotten worse there."

Noonan chuckles, "You find that out on the Google? I took the business from those filthy mongrels and gave it to some good 'ol boys from the Klan. Now that's the kind of reputable organization I can work with. These boys here are about to find out how profitable it is to be a reputable organization that works with me."

Now everyone is laughing. It isn't so funny how hard he hits me for the next few minutes though. My eyes are filling up with tears and one is even swelling shut, so I can no longer see the fists flying in my direction. My nose is broken so I don't recognize the pungent scent of gasoline in the air anymore. Eventually the ringing in my ears drowns out the laughter all around me. The salty taste of blood and saliva in my mouth is troubling, but I welcome the feeling of the cold concrete floor as I'm finally released and fall to the ground.

Waking slowly into consciousness, I attempt to identify my surroundings. I'm not at a military hospital nor am I in some underground drug dealer's bunker. Where I am is on Danna Brigante's living room chase. Apparently she claimed my body after the favor I called in from El Susurro arrived. As it turns out, my caregiver was going to be a nurse - way back in another life. Lucky me. Noonan and his boys were quite surprised when they found out they were surrounded by a sizable portion of the Mexican army. Not so lucky for him. Still, I would have loved to be able to see the look on that fat bastard's face when the realization hit him.

Luis Jimenez wrote a great piece in the *La Voz* and didn't leave out a single detail. Danna has to translate the article for me. While I'm sure it sounded even better in Spanish, my translator has excellent oral skills. *El Señor* Calderon was not pleased with my results, in fact, he gave me Holy Hell. But he had to acknowledge the facts. Still, what do I care? I wasn't expecting a tip anyway.

END