

PITY THE DAMNED

PITY THE DAMNED

by

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BOOK SUMMARY

Globalization promised a better world with fewer barriers between countries. Criminals now threaten to exploit it. Delve into a dark world of Colombian narco-traffickers, Chinese people-smugglers, European prostitution rings, and Russian gangs, and see the human face of those trapped in this web of crime and misery.

BOOK DEDICATION

To my dear and wonderful family.

With special thanks to my friend and mentor, the late Raymond E. Ward, for being so generous of his talents and time, and for his unwavering encouragement and support.

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BOOK EXCERPT

Three malevolent looking Blackhawk helicopters in tight formation skimmed over the dense, mist-shrouded jungle canopy like three angry dragonflies intent on harm. The roar of their air-beating rotors sent wildlife in the depths of the dark undergrowth below scattering in every direction, their blood coursing with fear.

Two of the helicopters were each crammed with ten heavily armed Colombian army personnel as well as the three crew. The third Blackhawk carried eight uniformed soldiers and two men dressed in civilian dress. The taller and older of the two was FBI agent Richard Drake, while the other was his Colombian partner. They were accompanying this military airborne unit on a “seek and destroy” mission. The objective of the raid was to “take out” a drug-producing laboratory that intelligence had located deep in the jungle.

This particular laboratory was not in a region normally identified as being part of the officially designated and highly dangerous *zona de despeje*, but the need to remain fully alert was no less important. Drake knew that regardless of which drug baron owned the factory, the production facility would be well protected.

CHAPTER 1

The New Breed of Mafia

RUTHLESS REDS.

“When you cross the Italian Mafia they kill you.

When you cross the Russian Mafia, they kill you,

your family, your cousins and everyone related

to you.” ...FBI spokesman.

By Martin Kasindorf,

USA Today.

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The sky hung dark and menacing above the two armoured payroll vehicles as they sped towards the southern Italian town of Lecce. The duty crews in the two vehicles were eager to reach the town before the approaching storm broke, but the thunder echoing through the surrounding desolate hills told them that their chances of outdistancing the storm were not good.

Their destination, the town of Lecce in Italy’s Puglia region, was tucked away on the dry Salentine Peninsular. The *Penisola Salentina* was the heel of that geographical feature known as “the leg and boot” that was Italy.

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The *Penisola* region had once been an important center of the Roman Empire and was littered with ancient but well-preserved ruins. During the Middle Ages the region had developed a strong tradition as a center of learning and culture. An abundance of an easily carved stone, *pietra di Lecce*, ensured that the town was rich in ornate buildings and monuments of the Lecce Baroque style, which had flourished in the 17th century.

Unfortunately for latter-day Lecce, it was too far from the popular tourist venues to benefit from this cultural heritage, and the town had missed out on the benefits of the tourist-based prosperity that blessed other regions of Italy.

Aldo Mazzini sat in the lead armoured truck next to the driver, gazing out of the bulletproof window, his face alert with sharp-eyed concentration. He knew that this remote road winding its way through sparsely populated and rugged countryside was ideal “ambush territory”. He unconsciously tightened his grip on the automatic shotgun resting across his knees, comforted in the knowledge there were two other security guards armed with sub-machine guns in the back of his vehicle.

The two-truck convoy was transporting two and a half trillion lire in cash, equivalent to around US\$1.3 million. Each vehicle carried four heavily armed crew; two in the driver’s cabin, and two in the rear compartment that held the money.

Aldo turned to the driver and perhaps to increase his own self-assurance said, ‘**Anyone thinking of attacking us would have to be *pazzo* (crazy). Eh, Gianni?’**

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‘Certo! (That’s for sure!),’ agreed Gianni. **‘Anyway, we’re almost there... another thirty minutes and we’ll be home and safe! I just hope we beat the storm...I hate this shitty weather.’**

Gianni paused for a moment, then, without taking his eyes off the road, asked Aldo;

‘Why did you volunteer as a last minute replacement for Carlo?’

‘I need the money,’ replied Aldo. **‘When they told me Carlo was sick I decided I could use the overtime pay. My little boy Domenico has his birthday next week and the extra money I earn on this trip will buy the bicycle he’s hoping for.’**

Gianni nodded approvingly. **‘Your son is a good little boy, Aldo. You are very *fortunato* to have *una bella moglie* (a beautiful wife) like Lucia as well as a cute baby daughter like Silvia.’**

Aldo’s mind snapped back to attention when Gianne suddenly lifted his foot off the accelerator pedal and swore heatedly, hissing out the words **‘*Porca miseria!*’**

The armoured truck had rounded a blind corner and was bearing down rapidly upon a slowly moving school bus. The curves in the road prevented Gianni from overtaking with any degree of safety. Glancing impatiently in his rear view mirror Gianni checked that the second armoured truck had slowed down behind them. At that moment he also noticed that another vehicle, a tip-truck, had caught up behind them as well as two large black sedans.

‘Great!’ he cursed. **‘Can you believe it? We’re out here in the middle of nowhere, and now we’ve got a traffic jam! Fucking great!’**

‘Relax. Don’t be so impatient *amico*,’ said Aldo calmly. **‘We won’t be all *that* late.’**

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The next instant Aldo's body was violently flung forward when Gianni jammed his foot down hard on the brake, bringing the truck to a tire-screaming halt. The school bus up ahead had braked suddenly and without warning. A split second later, the lead armoured truck was rammed from the rear by the second security vehicle, which in turn had been savagely rammed from behind by the tip-truck.

Bruised, dazed and winded by the seat belts snapping across their chests, Aldo and Gianni struggled to free themselves. They reached for their weapons as four balaclava-wearing attackers leapt out of the school bus and opened fire on their armoured vehicle with heavy caliber machine-guns.

The gangsters raked the front of the truck with their weapons sending sparks and metal shards showering off the amour plating. The bulletproof glass deformed and was rendered opaque by a spider-web of cracks, as countless rounds struck and bounced from its surface.

Aldo instinctively shoved the barrel of his shotgun out of a gun port and fired a blast in the direction of one of the attackers. He aimed at the waist sensing that the bandit may be wearing a flak jacket underneath his black outfit. The attacker dropped his weapon and collapsed with blood showering out from his lower body.

Before he could fire again a massive explosion at the rear of Aldo's truck lifted it several feet into the air as the armoured car's rear doors were blasted open with explosive. The concussive force of the detonating Semtex plastic explosive burst into Aldo's eardrums and brain with a purple flash and plunged him into deep unconsciousness.

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The first *Carabiniere*-filled Alfa Romeo sedan to arrive at the point of the ambush, with its siren screaming, found a scene of devastation reminiscent of a wartime massacre. Both the armoured trucks were terminally damaged. One vehicle was lying on its side in a ditch by the side of the road emitting acrid smoldering fumes. The other vehicle was blazing fiercely on the actual roadway, a black plume of noxious smoke rising into the sky from its burning tires. The rear doors of both vehicles had been blown wide open and the money containers that had been packed with two and a half trillion Lire were gone.

The bloodied and mangled bodies of the four security guards who had been in the back of the trucks were scattered along the roadside like broken rag dolls. Three were dead beyond doubt, while one was badly wounded and barely clinging to life. The drivers and the other guards in the front compartments were all badly injured and their ultimate survival would rest on urgent medical evacuation and treatment.

The first of the ambulances arrived with lights flashing furiously and sirens wailing as the *Carabiniere* Captain asked one of his men, **‘Are we fighting common criminals or terrorist commandos in a war zone?’**

Don Vittorio Collazione’s villa was but one of many expensive terraced houses perched on the steep mountainous slopes of the village of *Positano* in this spectacular corner of the *Costiera Amalfitana*. Located on the southern side of Sorrento’s peninsular, it was accessed by a narrow and winding road that snaked down from the mountainous heights to the sea that foamed around rocks five hundred feet below. The surrounding scenery boasted splashes of lush green vineyards cascading down amongst the mauve colored cliff faces between villas that appeared to defy gravity, as

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though they were glued to the rocks. Centuries-old rustic stone villas, draped with wild roses and interspersed with Cypress and Aleppo pines, stood like embedded rocks defying the decay that would ultimately in some future century cause them to crumble and fall. While away on the right the brightly colored dome of the Church of St. Maria Assunta cast its lighthouse beacon to the members of the Christian faith.

Positano was once a charming little fishing village and a Mecca for writers and artists. Now the village had become a chic holiday resort for the international vacation throng. Bikini clad women and tanned males covered every square inch of its pebble beach or roamed cheerfully in holiday mood through its cobbled streets beneath the windows adorned with florid flower boxes. Notwithstanding this great influx of visitors, nothing could spoil Positano's natural charm, with its terracotta roofed houses and ochre yellow facades, and the ubiquitous washing strung out to dry in the warm sun. The aroma of pastas, olive oil, seafood, garlic and basil sauce permeated the village, and created an ambience of its own.

Don Vittorio Collazione strolled into the breakfast room of his luxurious Amalfi Coast villa with its floor-to-ceiling windows. Gazing out on the scene below he admired the shimmering waters of the *Golfo di Salerno* and instinctively knew that this was the same wonderful sight his ancestors had enjoyed before him. Nearby lay the *Isola di Capri*, the sybaritic island paradise that had been the holiday home of so many Roman emperors, and now enticed latter-day celebrities.

Although clad in his white bath robe and black leather slippers the Don remained an impressive figure, standing six foot tall with a ram-rod straight upright physique that belied his fifty plus years. His face was ruggedly handsome with a shadowy hint of his Italian descent and Roman heritage in the slightly aquiline nose.

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His hair was thick and black except for a noticeable graying at the temples and the betraying threads of age in the thin manicured moustache. The vitality of his eyes indicated a man who enjoyed every aspect of life.

'Buon giorno, Don Vittorio,' came the guttural greeting from behind him. He swung around and replied with warmth in his voice, ***'Buon giorno, Guido, another beautiful day.'***

Guido Leonetti, the Don's head bodyguard and a trusted "captain" of many years, agreed.

'Si, Don Vittorio. It is indeed a beautiful day.'

Leonetti then sauntered casually over to a far corner of the room and eased his broad frame into a chair, but the darting eyes remained ever alert, ever watchful.

The maid, Donella, had prepared Don Vittorio's customary breakfast, a long *espresso* coffee, soft boiled egg in a cup, and strips of buttered toast set out next to the neatly folded morning newspaper. Don Vittorio noted these touches of custom and order approvingly as he took his seat. Taking a sip from his coffee he carefully unfolded the newspaper. The front page headlines atop the graphic photograph of carnage and destruction made him freeze momentarily, before he exploded in a fit of rage that startled his bodyguard and caused him to leap to his feet.

Thumping the newspaper down violently onto the table Don Vittorio screamed out the words;

'Porco Dio! Those fucking Balkan scum! Who the hell do they think they are? First they fuck up their own country with a war that turns parts of Yugoslavia into a wasteland with mass graveyards everywhere..... now these crazy killers think they can cross the Adriatic Sea and move in on our territory. Do these animals think we Italians will roll over and let them give it to us up the

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arse? Those miserable vermin! They deserve to be exterminated like all other vermin!’

Guido Leonetti moved quickly to join Don Vittorio at the table, picked up the newspaper, and read out aloud the front-page headline that had so upset the Don;

“2:5 TRILLION LIRE HEIST

BALKAN GANG STRIKES IN TERRORIST ATTACK”

A graphic photograph below that headline depicted in stark detail the carnage at the scene of the robbery. Several mangled bodies were clearly visible near the burning and wrecked armoured trucks. The twisted lifeless corpses were made more pathetic by the stark black and white photograph with no attempt made in its presentation to spare the sensitivities of the viewer.

Guido continued reading out loud;

‘Ten balaclava wearing men with Balkan accents rammed and cornered two armoured trucks near the town of Lecce. Blasting open the doors with explosives they raked the security guards with machine-gunfire, leaving three dead and five wounded. In a second attack on the same day also believed to be the work of Balkan criminals, guards had a miraculous escape when another gang intercepted a delivery of pensions.’

Guido put the newspaper down, and shaking his head in irritation turned to face the Don. He spoke slowly, his deep voice accentuating every word.

‘This incident is not good for business, Don Vittorio.’

‘Si, Guido, you’re exactly right. With these robberies these mercenary bastards are virtually declaring war on the *Polizia* and *Carabiniere*, which is

utterly stupid! They will only succeed in unleashing an angry backlash of retribution and a police “crack-down”. Our businesses will suffer in the backwash of all this, and we will lose money. The army may even be brought in to deal with these foreign gangs of Albanians, Serbs and Montenegrans, putting unnecessary pressure on our activities. The trouble with these foreign *bruti bastardi* is they have no respect. No respect for anyone. Most of them are just fucking war criminals looking for a new killing ground. They’re used to butchering old people and children; they have developed a vile taste for blood. And now, they are openly challenging us as well!’

‘Si, Don Vittorio,’ Leonetti agreed wholeheartedly, ‘They are indeed disrespectful bastards covered in blood!’

Guido Leonetti watched as Don Vittorio walked over to the side table that stood against the wall. The Don took a cigarette from the wood-inlaid box on the table and lit it. Guido knew the Don was greatly annoyed and angry, for he did not normally smoke this early in the morning, so stood patiently as his boss inhaled the smoke deep into his lungs before blowing it out slowly. The Don remained silent although his brow was creased in a deep frown.

‘How do we respond to this act, Don Vittorio?’

The reply from the Don was cold and calculating.

‘I intend to immediately call for an urgent meeting of all “The Commission” members. The Dons from all the main *families* must be gathered to discuss and counter this threat. These bandits have thrown out a challenge to us, and we certainly won’t run from their insults. Our band of brothers must meet them head on, crush them like the vermin they are, and exterminate them! We will kill them and bury them deep in the pit that they have dug for themselves.’

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Don Collazione threw back his head and gave a mirthless laugh;

‘Soon, we will send them to the place in hell they deserve!’

It was two weeks after the Lecce armoured car massacre before a pivotal meeting took place in a secluded villa three hours drive east of Rome. The area of Abruzzo was selected because it was central to the majority of the Commission members, and importantly, because the location was sparsely populated. The business to be discussed and the identity of those attending to the business of the day had to be kept secretive. Security and concealment were the deciding factors of paramount importance in this line of business. An old Mafia saying put it succinctly, “For every crime there must be care, for someone will find a witness, and *that* will require *another* crime and perhaps create *another* witness.”

What better place than the wild, brooding landscape of Abruzzo, dominated by the Apennine mountain range. In these bleak surroundings only small ramshackle towns cling to the steep mountainsides, many semi-abandoned and in a state of forlorn decay. For most of the inhabitants who remain and look out over the vertiginous drops, life remains primitive and poverty-stricken; a location eminently suitable for a clandestine gathering.

The actual meeting place was a three centuries old villa situated in the heart of the Abruzzo National Park. The villa during its long history had been the country residence of many a wealthy noble family, being used as a retreat from the hot and stifling summer heat of old Rome when primitive sewerage and sanitation facilities made the city unpleasant. Moreover, it was a game hunter’s paradise, and many a nobleman of the past had flushed deer, quail or hares out of the thick underbrush.

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The two-storey villa was perched atop a high hill and from its vantage point looked out over the surrounding rolling hills of olive trees. The villa could only be reached by a narrow, ascending road bordered by rows of majestic pencil pines. The original and deteriorating exterior of the villa with its flaking walls and rustic terracotta roof tiles belied the modernized and luxuriously appointed interior of the apartments inside the building.

The black Mercedes sedan with the heavily darkened windows slowed as it approached the gates to the estate upon which the villa stood. Two four-wheel drive vehicles, one on either side, were blocking the drive whilst six heavily armed men clad in uniform dark suits and dark sunglasses stood checkpoint duty.

A scrutiny of the occupants of the Mercedes was carried out by the gatekeepers, and then came the words spoken with deferential respect;

‘Don Collazione, we have been expecting you. Please drive through and up to the villa.’

The tires of the Mercedes raised a cloud of dust from the unsealed road as it powered up towards the villa on the hill. Don Vittorio noted a dozen or so mostly black vehicles parked in its grounds as he spoke to Guido Leonetti who sat up front next to the driver.

‘It looks like almost all of the Commission members are already here.’

Guido nodded. He had already observed the armed lookouts scattered around the villa and on its roof, as well as the two helicopters circling lazily overhead. Two of the attending Dons had chosen to fly in and their helicopters had been placed in service as additional lookouts during the course of the meeting.

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The six-hour meeting proved to be a tedious and frustrating time for Don Vittorio. All of the Mafia heads related stories of ruthless Balkan gangs muscling in on their traditional territories, stopping at nothing in their attempts to establish power bases in their adopted country.

However, there was considerable disagreement and heated discussion over what should be done to counter the problem of these interlopers. To his chagrin Don Vittorio soon discovered most of the other Mafia “families” were in favor of trying to form a passive, almost peaceful alliance with the Balkan gangs.

One Don expressed his feelings on this matter.

‘They are not like us! This is a new breed of criminal, with new rules and new weapons. Where we use a stiletto, they use a machine gun. Where we use a pistol, they use a rocket launcher. We only kill when we must. They kill for the thrill of it! I say we make a pact with them. Let them have the illegal immigrant trade and the smuggling of drugs. We will keep the gambling, prostitution, cigarettes, liquor and the trade in arms. Let them get blood on their hands with all the dirty stuff. Let them break their balls using brute strength, we’ll keep doing business using our brains.’

The Don from Rome smiled as he entered the debate;

‘Besides, we can make far more money defrauding the European Union Subsidies Schemes, and running our scams in world wide stock markets, and through credit card and Internet fraud. There is much less risk of government intervention or of getting caught! Violent criminal acts only serve to shock people and governments into taking punitive measures, whereas, no one gives a fuck about our vices they can’t see!’

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The murmurs of approval from around the table indicated that the majority of “family” heads were in agreement with this opinion of an arranged pact and a division of illegal activities. Nothing in Don Vittorio’s arguments to the contrary could sway the other Dons against voting in favor of arranging this course of action.

The meeting concluded around mid-afternoon, and the participants then hurriedly headed to their waiting limousines or helicopters and departed in haste by different routes from the villa, back to the sanctuary of home territory.

Don Vittorio slumped back in the rear seat of his heavy black Mercedes as his driver joined the column of cars and drove down the winding road, and then away from the villa. He remained deep in thought after his defeat at the table of the Commission, and several minutes passed before he spoke slowly and deliberately to his bodyguard.

‘Madonna! Essi hanno perdoto i coglione! (They have lost their balls!). I swear by the cross on my mother’s grave.....’ he paused, and the menace in his voice strengthened as his mind ended all the controversy of his fruitless submissions to his fellow Dons, ***‘this Balkan trash had better not cross my path, or cause me a moment’s trouble, or these mongrel bastards will curse their mothers for ever giving birth to them!’***

CHAPTER 2

Operation “Colombia”

“The US interest in Colombia is clear: 80% of the world’s cocaine and most of the heroin sold in the US comes from Colombia. But in Washington many fear that military aid may drag the US into a complex and unwinnable jungle war.”

Martin Hodgson,

© **The Guardian Weekly,**

March 16-22, 2000.

Driving sheets of monsoonal rain pounded the fronds and the broad leaves of the dense tropical foliage outside the darkened bedroom window. The drumming of the rain failed to drown out the chorus croak of frogs that heralded the news that not every creature was sick of the incessant rain and humidity.

However, the man who stood naked, staring out into the soaking downpour, did not share the joy of the croaking amphibians. He took one last drag from his nearly spent cigarette then purposely flicked the butt out into the rain soaked bushes. He hated the fact that his resolve to quit had weakened, and that he had started smoking again. After five years of having given up cigarettes, he was now hooked again, and smoking almost a packet a day. He invented the excuses in his mind, blaming the pressures of his work for his lack of resolve. Perhaps the real unpalatable

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reason was simply that he was now much older and not able to handle the stress and fear of his profession as he once did when he was a brash younger man.

Richard Drake would turn fifty next birthday and knew that his retirement date was approaching with certain rapidity. His days of glory as an active FBI operative were numbered and he shook his head in resignation to the facts, and told himself, ***“It’s time to face it, bud. You’re getting too old for this kind of shit!”***

He cursed the ceaseless humidity that sucked the sweat out of every pore of his skin, and wondered if his estranged wife was similarly cursing the weather, the snow and wind chill factor in faraway Boston, Massachusetts. He guessed not. Luisa had always preferred the colder climates where she could dress up in a heavy coat and hat, or spend evenings snuggled up in front of a roaring log fire. ***“Maybe she’s right.”*** He acknowledged this silently in his mind as he imagined how pleasant it would be in a cooler climate.

For Richard Drake, Christmas Day and New Year’s Eve in this hell-hole had felt strange and unreal. Those days should have meant family and home, with presents and joy. Instead, they had come and gone as he continued to sweat it out in this mosquito infested and steamy jungle of Colombia. Normally, he never complained for he was a field agent, loyal to the Bureau and proud of its traditions.

Richard heard the sheets of the bed rustle behind him and turned around towards the outline of the dark skinned young woman who was stirring and stretching in his bed. She was really gorgeous by any standards, this girl with skin the color of lightly roasted coffee. Only eighteen years old, she was trained and ready to do anything to please him sexually. Yet despite that, Consuela meant nothing more to him than the nameless procession of other young whores who had helped him pass away many a night in this tropical hell-hole. It was now almost nine months since he

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had been posted here as part of the American offensive against the Colombian drug barons of South America.

He smiled in silent acknowledgment that he, Richard Drake, was but a small cog in the latest decision by the United States government to approve a further \$1.3 billion aid package to bolster Colombia's anti-drug forces. An action that saw this country become the third biggest recipient of U.S. aid behind Israel and Egypt. Four hundred million dollars of this package had purchased sixty Huey and Blackhawk helicopters from the United States, to be used for drug interdiction. A further massive amount of U.S. funds was allocated to bolster the program of aerial spraying of herbicide in an attempt to destroy the extensive plantations of coca and poppies hidden deep in the jungles in the south towards the Amazon basin. These were the vast plantations that allowed Colombia to produce most of the world's cocaine.

Drake was ambivalent about the effect that this chemical assault from the air with herbicides would have in the war against the growers of cocaine and opium crops. He had seen at first hand how the indiscriminate spraying of these foliage toxins had also devastated large areas of the local economy and caused a backlash of resentment amongst the farmers and the rural poor. The problem was that the crop-dusters who were carrying out the aerial blitz against the coca fields had no way of confining the clouds of the plant-withering herbicides purely to the specific illegal coca and poppy crops.

Guided by satellites and spy planes, and protected by helicopter gun ships, these crop-dusters criss-crossed the terrain flying as low as fifty feet above the ground. Often the pilots, many of whom were U.S. contract pilots, were forced to dodge heavy ground-fire from the rebel forces lurking in the surrounding jungle. Flying up to five missions a day, pilots repeatedly risked their lives, and the prospect of being shot out

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of the skies and crashing into the unfriendliest terrain on earth was daunting. It was the evasive action necessary to avoid ground-fire from small arms and hand-held missiles that resulted in the sometimes-haphazard release of the aerial sprays.

Moreover, high winds over the target areas often caused the herbicide to drift off target destroying surrounding fruit trees and fields of maize, cassava and plantain. Cases had been reported where clouds of defoliant had engulfed entire villages, schools and churches. The effects had been catastrophic. Not only had the local food crops been poisoned to wither and die, but river systems had become contaminated and fragile forest ecosystems shattered. Inhabitants had been accidentally doused in herbicide causing known deaths, serious health problems and side effects from the fall-out of the weed-killer that would continue to be felt for decades.

Critics of the aerial spraying pointed out that since the program had begun, the area under cultivation for drug crops had in fact tripled. Interestingly, the main broad-spectrum herbicide being used was produced by the same American company that had manufactured Agent Orange. The latter herbicide had been used extensively by the United States during the Vietnam War to defoliate huge tracts of jungle in a futile attempt to expose the opposing Viet Cong forces. Instead, its use left a legacy of ill health to the civilians and American troops exposed to its deadly effects. Drake could not help but wonder if this new herbicide would prove to be the “Agent Orange” of the United States’ new Vietnam in South America.

The Colombian government had tried to alleviate the situation of the rural population by promising to provide emergency food aid and long term financial assistance in those areas adversely affected by over-spraying, and to those farmers who voluntarily tore up their coca crops.

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Usually, as so often happened in this country notorious for its corruption, mismanagement and criminal embezzlement, the promised aid failed to materialize. This breach of faith caused villagers to despair and to immediately replant illegal crops, this time with a new strain of high-yield Peruvian coca. Drake knew that the problem was not one of simply eradicating coca. He suspected that, unless the root cause of abject rural poverty was eradicated first, the war against the coca growers would prove to be unwinnable.

Colombia's President Andres Pastrana had advocated the present anti-drug strategy after taking office in 1998. His proposal, known as "Plan Colombia", was an attempt to win international support from the United States and the European Union by presenting Colombia's drug problem as an international problem. "Plan Colombia's" \$7 billion anti-drug strategy had been based upon a \$1 billion European commitment of funds which in reality never eventuated.

The European Union pledged only one quarter of the amount anticipated, and even that amount came with qualifications. European countries disagreed with the U.S. providing military support; in their view the problem was a humanitarian crisis and should be solved through social programs only. They forcefully condemned the military elements contained in the aid package as being open to criticism as yet another U.S. military intervention in Latin American. This lack of support from other foreign powers resulted in "Plan Colombia" being viewed as strictly an initiative of the United States.

Some of Colombia's neighbors were openly hostile and anxious about an increased United States involvement in their part of the world, especially the rulers of Venezuela and Panama. Opponents of "Plan Colombia" alleged it signaled a resurrection of the image of the arrogant, insensitive and brash "ugly American"

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syndrome. Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez angered Washington by refusing to allow U.S. warplanes to fly over Venezuelan territory from their new bases in the Dutch Antilles. At the same time, the President of Panama, Mireya Moscoso, refused the Americans access to their former bases in the Panama Canal Zone. Friction between Washington and Venezuela was further heightened by the fact that Venezuela was a major supplier of fuel oil to the United States, and that President Chavez was heavily involved in OPEC's push to force oil prices sharply higher. This state of unease had even caused rumors to circulate that "hawks" in Washington would not be sorry to see a military coup displace the uncooperative Venezuelan President.

Richard Drake knew how serious the drug problem had become in the United States. His early years with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) had taught him that America was losing its three decade long war on drugs. Americans across the full strata of society were spending over \$75 billion a year on illegal drugs. Cocaine and heroin production had doubled in recent years and the world was awash with the "stuff of dreams". Drug money was estimated by some to now account for over 7% of the world's gross revenue.

Despite fears in many quarters that involvement may drag the United States into another quagmire like Vietnam, Nicaragua or El Salvador, the U.S. had sent in its military advisers. Some two hundred of them were training government forces in jungle warfare, intelligence gathering and combat tactics. Groups of U.S. Green Berets were helping to train two anti-drug battalions for deployment in southern Colombia, where confronting them would be two left wing revolutionary groups that between them ruled roughly 40% of the southern Colombian countryside...the *zona de despeje*.

These two revolutionary "armies" were the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Of the two groups FARC was by far the larger and more notorious with a force of 17,000 guerrillas under arms. This force had grown stronger despite a war dating back thirty-six years and costing some 40,000 lives.

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FARC strongly denied claims it was a “narco-trafficker”, stressing the rationalization that it merely levied “taxes” on drug producers to help its “just political cause”. At the same time FARC extorted a ten per cent tax from all wealthy people via the implied threat of kidnapping. With an annual revenue of over \$1 billion this guerilla force, too, could afford all of the arms it needed to continue its war.

In a New Year’s message to the Colombian people, FARC declared its resolve to “defeat the evil war plans of the governments of the United States and Colombia”. Furthermore, it sought to exacerbate anti-American sentiment by erecting large billboards within the territory under its control. These read:

PLAN COLOMBIA

los gringos ponen las armas, Colombia pone los muertos

PLAN COLOMBIA

the gringos supply the weapons, Colombia supplies the dead bodies

In its defense, FARC claimed much of Colombia’s cocaine was actually being produced by large landowners to the north under the ruthless protection of the army and violent right wing paramilitary groups. Spokes-people from the FARC guerilla army pointed out that the Colombian armed forces were themselves guilty of atrocities as bad as those carried out in Chile, Africa and the Balkans. They also pointed to the army’s collusion with civilian death squads and the documented torture and massacre of civilians that continued to go on unchecked and unpunished.

FARC maintained it was being singled out by Washington purely as a vote buying exercise by pragmatic U.S. politicians waving the emotive banner of an anti-drug crusade while trying to deflect attention away from themselves, for no politician wanted to be labeled as being “soft on drugs”.

Richard Drake knew there was an element of truth in the propaganda presented by FARC. The picture was so murky and had so many dark sides that it was hard to tell who the “good guys” were and who were the bad. FARC professed to espouse a just political cause yet relied on drug money, extortion and kidnapping to achieve it and actively recruited fifteen-year olds from poverty stricken villages to do its killing.

In reply to the criticism about encouraging such young to bear arms a FARC spokesperson answered, “This is a war! Besides, many of them are better off with us.

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At home they were living in appalling poverty, many being abused and forced into child labor camps and even into prostitution as young as fourteen!”

The northern drug barons, protected by corrupt government officials and right wing paramilitary, were known to have ruthlessly massacred people who got in their way and violated human rights with impunity. How else could drug barons like the infamous Escobar have been allowed to build such vast drug empires? Escobar was known to have purchased Russian military helicopters to help in his operation and had almost succeeded in purchasing a Russian attack submarine for six million dollars. His intention had been to sneak cocaine into United States West Coast ports by stealthily gliding under the bows of Coast Guard vessels.

Within just a few years Pablo Escobar became one of the most prolific killers in Colombian history. He bribed or murdered almost every judge he faced, and attacked members of their families. Reporters who dared write articles denouncing him and the drug cartels were harshly dealt with. When a secret anti-drug unit of two hundred special police officers was established, Escobar succeeded in murdering thirty of them within the first two weeks. He also had no qualms about blowing up an aircraft carrying one hundred and ten passengers in an attempt to silence a crusading Colombian politician.

“And the rightwing paramilitaries are not much better,” mused Drake cynically.

Drake was well aware that one of these paramilitary groups, the self-proclaimed United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, had gone so far as to declare many university figures and students as “military targets”. This force of eight thousand soldiers had stealthily infiltrated most of the nation’s thirty-two public universities in an effort to identify professors, administrators and students suspected of leftwing ideals and activities. Paid informers posed as students, monitored lectures and spied on classmates in an effort to neutralize leftist guerrilla armies from recruiting there. Death lists were drawn up and several dozen murders carried out. When student demonstrations were carried out, police officers often took photographs or videos of those involved, some of whom were later killed or disappeared.

The truth of the matter was that the drug trade, far from being closed down by the U.S. crackdown on Colombian drug cartels in the 1980’s, was growing rapidly. More drugs were being channeled through Mexico with it also being in danger of

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being labeled a “narco-state”. Mexican cartels were now the major drug suppliers to the U.S.A. and could become richer and more powerful than the Colombians. Seventy per cent of America’s illegal narcotics were now passing through the Mexican border towns of Tijuana and Juarez.

The scenario was the same in many locations around the world. It only required a lethal mix of abject poverty, huge cash flows from illicit criminal operations, and a lack of respect for human life or moral values, to unleash a tidal wave of drugs that drowned the end users in misery and violence.

It sometimes made Drake question his personal involvement in this war on drugs and whether the battle to control the never receding tide was worth all the lives and efforts of those involved. There were times when he just felt like walking away from it all, and escaping somewhere on his own. “*Let the world go to hell!*”, he would sometimes say to himself, but he never took this ultimate step. It was not in his nature to back off from doing what he knew he had to do. If enough people did their duty and were incorruptible, then it just *might* make a difference in the end. He hoped so, it had to be so!

His wife Luisa had been unable to cope with the extraordinary pressures made by the demands of his work. The danger and the absences had put an extraordinary strain on their marriage. They had been married for over twenty-seven years and Luisa had coped through most of those years by focusing on raising their two wonderful sons. However, once their eldest had moved to New York to work in finance and the youngest had moved to Los Angeles as a cinematographer, Luisa could not cope with the lonely periods without him allied with the constant doubt as to whether he would come back safely. Luisa had suffered a nervous breakdown, and had been hospitalized for a short period.

Drake had desperately sought help for his wife from one of the FBI’s counselors from the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). It was not assistance he would normally have sought out for himself, as FBI field agents are highly motivated, tough characters with a strong belief in themselves. Most were loath to admit to any weakness, either physical or mental. Richard had always been able to cope with the particular problems and stresses of his avocation without physiological support. However, in this case it was his wife who desperately needed help, and he turned to the EAP.

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The EAP was just one indication of how the FBI was reshaping itself to a rapidly changing world and shaking off the rigid mind-set of the Hoover era. Some of those who began their careers with the Bureau in the late sixties and early seventies were still skeptical about the value of such a program, declaring that it would merely encourage malingerers. These disciples of a dogmatic J. Edgar Hoover believed there was only a place in the Bureau for a special, tough breed of field agent. That “if they can’t stand the heat then they should get the hell out of the kitchen!”

This sentiment made no due allowance for family consideration. The Bureau employed the husband, not the wife! Drake had always been sympathetic to his colleagues in the CIA who were often posted overseas on dangerous assignments, often to inhospitable locations and under trying conditions. It was well known that this unsettled way of life was often harder on the wives than their husbands. While agents were pre-occupied with activities that demanded their full attention, their wives often suffered a devastating combination of boredom, loneliness and fear. Some found solace in drinking, others succumbed to affairs with other men in their quest for comfort, whilst a number of wives simply divorced their husbands and returned to a more normal life in “Main Street” U.S.A..

Fortunately, in today’s FBI the majority did not share that sentiment of “old-timers”. The EAP counselor, who was a psychologist trained to help in matters such as post-trauma stress disorders, alcohol or drug abuse, and relationship problems had helped to some extent. However, his advice and expertise were not enough to change Luisa’s mind about separating from her husband. Luisa chose to go and live alone in Boston where she would be close to her aging mother and father.

Richard reluctantly accepted this situation, but maintained regular contact with Luisa, occasionally talking to her for more than an hour on the telephone. He still regarded her as his soul mate after the twenty-seven years of love, affection and companionship they had invested in their lives together. The last time he had spoken to Luisa he had told her he was planning on retiring soon, and in those circumstances hoped she would consider the matter of a reconciliation.

Richard knew he needed Luisa as much as he hoped she needed him. Together they could pick up from a past point of happiness and spend the latter years of their lives together doing those things they had dreamt of doing, like touring Europe.

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His mind flashed back to the moment he had first laid eyes on Luisa, the day that their destinies had become wonderfully entwined. The pivotal meeting had occurred quite by chance during Richard's final year of college. Their paths had crossed one perfect sunny spring afternoon on the grounds of a tennis club where Richard had been invited to "go a couple of sets" with a male friend. ***"It was a Saturday afternoon,"*** he recalled vividly, ***"and warm."***

Being first to arrive at their designated tennis court, Richard had taken a seat courtside to await the arrival of his tennis partner. He soon found himself being entertained by a group of four boisterous young women playing doubles on an adjacent court.

One of the women in particular caught his attention, with her smooth tennis strokes and style, and her court poise and prowess. However, it was her striking figure and great legs, highlighted by a short tennis skirt and skimpy top that attracted Richard most. She wore her long blond hair tied back in a ponytail so as to fully reveal the classic features of her pretty face. Richard soon found himself so totally enthralled by this graceful female that he had not realized that his tennis partner was now some twenty minutes overdue.

Instead, he was daydreaming, but was suddenly and rudely awakened by a tennis ball whistling past his ear and striking the wire-mesh fence behind him. He looked up to see the pony-tailed blonde woman walking quickly towards him. Looking around, he spied the errant tennis ball and was bending down to pick it up when he sensed her nearness to him, and heard her speak.

'I'm so terribly sorry about that,' she said smiling sheepishly.

Richard reached towards her and handed back the ball and replied, **'Not a problem. I was enjoying watching you and your friends play. You're very good, you know.'**

The woman blushed a little, shook her head in the negative, and said, **'With a shot like that...I don't think so! By the way, what happened to your partner?'**

It was only then that Richard glanced at his watch and realized that his tennis partner was probably going to be a "no show". With a shrug of his shoulders, he replied, **'I've got no idea. Perhaps he's forgotten. Never mind, I'm still glad that I turned up. Otherwise, I wouldn't have met you!'**

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Her green eyes danced with his for a second, as he cursed his clumsy words and thought, ***“You idiot! She thinks your hitting on her!”***

However, she offered her hand in a handshake and introduced herself, **‘My name is Luisa. Would you like to come over and join my friends?’**

Richard would never forget that moment, or the wonderful sensation of touching her soft skin for the first time. The rest, as they say, is history. Their lives together had started from that Saturday afternoon and unfolded into twenty-seven special loving years of marriage that had seen them blessed with the birth of two handsome sons.

Richard came to learn that Luisa had been born in Italy, in the town of Tivoli in the province of Lazio, and had migrated to America with her family when she was six years old. She had always dreamed of one day returning to her country of birth to rediscover her roots. He loved the way she cooked Italian and he had picked up some of her language, often referring to her as ***‘mia bella ragazza’***.

Luisa’s only commitment at this stage on a possible reconciliation was a guarded **‘We’ll see, Richard, we’ll see when the time comes.’**

He regarded even her conditional reply as a lifeline of hope, for him it was necessary to hope, for hope is its own form of happiness, and again for him hope meant that those wonderful aspects of their past life were not entirely extinct.

Luisa was intensely proud of her Italian heritage and had tried to pass some small part of it onto their two sons, John, and Dean. For his part, Richard Drake had also never forgotten his own European heritage.

He was born in a small village in Slovenia, not far from the Croatian border, and his birth certificate bore the name of Raco Draskovic. He had been brought to the United States of America by his parents when only two years old.

His late father had chosen to take his family and flee the post World War II Communist regime of Tito’s former ‘Yugoslavia’ after becoming disillusioned with life in the newly formed nation.

His father, Stanko Draskovic, had returned home at the end of World War II having fought with the partisans against the Nazi’s for three years. He had been looking forward to and expecting a hero’s welcome and a better life.

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Instead of coming home to a liberated homeland, Stanko Draskovic found he had returned to a ruthless and harsh socialist dictatorship. Born and raised as a Christian he was distressed to see the Cross-of-Christ replaced by the hammer and sickle of communism, even if it was a peculiar adaptation of Mother Russia.

All transport was now nationalized, including the truck Stanko had owned before the war; a vehicle that had provided him with a good living carrying rocks and soil and had been his symbol of independence and a life of moderate wealth.

Owners of shops and factories were informed that their “bourgeois establishments” were now at the disposal of the new regime. No one was to be allowed to own more than one suit; extra suits were to be handed in for distribution to those without clothes.

The Secret Police (OZNA) began seeking out those suspected of being anti-Marxist. Some citizens were ruthlessly evicted from their homes and businesses. Others were marched away never to be seen again. Those not declaring themselves to be a communist were subjected to food shortages and had to survive on bread, vegetables and fruit with neither meat nor lard being made available to them. Meanwhile communist officials lived the life of the comfortable, privileged elite stocked with foodstuffs, furniture, clothing, and jewelry confiscated throughout the “new, greater Yugoslavia”.

During the post war years an estimated half a million people fell victim to this communist purge. Many had been or were suspected of being Nazi collaborators during World War II. Others were religious dissenters that could not and would not shoulder the yoke of Communism, among them many Christian clergy.

President Josip Tito’s “new Yugoslavia” was christened by a horrific and savage purge of blood letting while the western world looked on in mute silence. In fact, the British and Russian armed forces stood accused of having returned several hundred thousand refugees back from across the Austrian border to the prospect of torture and death.

Many perished into mass graves covered with such a light blanket of soil that starving dogs dug them up and tore them to pieces. Some found themselves lined up in front of a Communist firing squad. Others had hands and feet bound with barbed wire and were thrown onto the back of trucks like so much fire wood, driven to isolated locations and machine gunned! Yet others were herded into caves and blown

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apart with dynamite, or thrown alive down into deep wells or ravines and finished off with hand grenades.

When Stanko Draskovic finally decided to escape from Communist Yugoslavia he discreetly made arrangements for a guide to lead himself, his wife and baby son to the border between Slovenia and Italy, close to the Italian city of Trieste. During their preparations Richard's mother and father had to ensure that no one, not even members of their own families, had even the slightest idea of their intentions to depart. To do otherwise would have risked being denounced by communist informers and immediate imprisonment or worse.

In the darkness of night on the designated date Stanko and his wife Svetka, had packed two small bags, taken their sleeping two-year-old baby son and silently crept out of Stanko's parents' house where they had been living.

Svetka, ever the dutiful wife, had done so with great anguish and trepidation not knowing what lay ahead. She had no way of knowing then that she would never again see her parents alive. This was a pang of regret, a hurtful remorse she would carry with her for the rest of her life.

Under cover of darkness, the guide had dropped them off as agreed, pointing and saying **'The border is only a few hundred yards *that way!*'** He had then driven away leaving them to venture on alone through the silent darkness. To their consternation, they soon discovered they had been dropped off at the wrong location! The border was more than *two kilometers* away!

Desperate to reach the heavily guarded barbed-wire border fences before sunrise they frantically scrambled forward over the rugged, hilly terrain.

Upon reaching the border they managed to dodge the border patrols, all the while frightened that their two-year-old baby son may begin to cry and give away their location.

Many were the times Richard's mother repeated the tale of how he had been **'Such a good little baby and not cried. You just kept sucking on a little strip of prosciutto I had put into your mouth.'**

They had eventually managed to cross the border and made their way to the city of Trieste. From there, they obtained assisted passage to a new land, and a new way of life arriving as penniless but thankful refugees in "the promised land; the United States of America."

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His mother struggled to adapt and settle into her new environment, while his father drove himself to learn the American ways and language as quickly as he could. Stanko Draskovic was soon mouthing Americanisms with relish and pride although still speaking with his thick Slavic accent. He eventually decided a change of name would stop people from having difficulty pronouncing “Stanko Draskovic” and may help his family being accepted into American society by averting some of the prejudice he encountered against “foreigners.” A name change by deed poll resulted in his father becoming “Stanley Drake” and his son became “Richard Drake”.

Richard recalled with amusement how his father used to tell one of his favorite jokes about the man who decided to change his name because he was sick of all the ribbing he received over it. The man’s name was “Franz Fuchs”. When asked what he would like to change it to he replied enthusiastically; “Bill Fuchs!”

The joke was pathetic but his late father could not help but crack up laughing while telling it, with tears in his eyes and gasping to get the words out. The sight of him in hysterics over such an incredibly bad joke usually caused everyone else to follow suit and burst out laughing too. Stanko never realized they were laughing *at* him, not *with* him.

Richard Drake could not perceive why he and his father had never been close in affection. His father had always provided for him and done his duty as a parent, but it seemed there had never been the strong bond of filial love between them.

Richard still recalled the memory of his last contact with his father. It had been at his father’s funeral. The funeral had taken place in a nondescript small country town to which his father had moved following his acrimonious divorce from his mother. Richard’s mother, who had made the great sacrifice of leaving her family and homeland to follow her husband to a new and unfamiliar country, had felt betrayed and abandoned.

Throughout her marriage, she had stoically tried to overlook her husband’s philandering nature and his tendency to fly into a rage when confronted with the evidence of his infidelities. Yet, in the end she had been left to carry on alone when he ran off with another woman.

His father, “Stan Drake” had remarried and begun a new life with his second wife, helping raise his two stepchildren. Richard had then not seen him for almost ten years, although they occasionally remembered to exchange birthday and Christmas

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cards. Every time Richard had posted the occasional greeting card he'd always done so with mixed feelings; a feeling of duty to the parent that had brought him into the world and raised him until he was able to stand alone, but also regret that rather than having a warm place for his father in his heart he felt only a strange kind of nothingness.

The news of his father's death came as no shock. In fact, in the lead up to the funeral Richard felt increasingly guilty and dismayed that instead of feeling overwhelming anguish and grief for the parent he was about to bury, he felt only a numbing emptiness.

During the simple church service, with its pitifully small handful of mourners, Richard saw "Stan Drake's" stepson and stepdaughter crying freely in their grief. Yet, *he* could not bring himself to cry at all!

How was it that they could grieve his loss so much after having known him for a much shorter period than his own son had? How could their relationship have been so much closer and more joyous than the one with his own flesh and blood? "***What went wrong between us?***" Richard asked himself this question. "***Did the fault lie with my father, or is there something wrong with me?***"

Richard never found the answers to those questions. The only time his eyes had moistened slightly was when his father's casket was lowered into the ground of that isolated country town cemetery. A chill wind whistled across the barren hillside as mourners threw last handfuls of dirt down onto the casket lid and Richard's mind asked the question: "***What am I doing burying you way out here? Why weren't we closer, dad? How did it come to this?***" Questions left until graveside are never answered!

Richard's mind was dragged back to the present by a movement in the double bed behind him. Giving out a loud sigh and stretching her arms to signal her full wakefulness, his sensual companion sat upright allowing the sheet to fall away from her body. The feeble rays of sunlight highlighted the glistening sweat on her skin, accentuating the curve of her beautifully formed firm breasts and enlarged nipples. Her eyes flashed and teased him as she beckoned him in Spanish to "***come back to bed, signor,***" and seductively ran her moist tongue across her full upper lip.

She could not speak very much English but Consuela was always much more interested in body movements than linguistics.

Richard momentarily reminded himself that she was several years younger than either of his sons. Not that it really mattered at this point in time and in this place of corruption, humidity, heat and hopelessness. Consuela needed the money and he needed not to be alone.

Drake slipped back under the sheets satisfied with his immediate erection, and smug in the knowledge that his ego had not written a check that his body could not cash. He smiled as he remembered the sexually evocative words of a pop song from the eighties band the Commodores, “Going to the Bank”, where a girl sensuously teases her man that there will be “*a substantial penalty for early withdrawal!*”

The young siren that had so seductively beckoned him back to bed now pushed him gently onto his back and swung one leg over his body so that she sat astride his loins. Her soft, moist labia pressed against the shaft of his penis. His body and mind tingled together in anticipation of the ride Consuela was about to perform on him, as his hands were drawn to her irresistible breasts and hardened nipples.

He closed his eyes and for a few erotic moments allowed himself to become captive to the beast that was capricious lust. Reason and thoughts of an estranged wife in snow-covered Boston were momentarily lost in passion, as outside the house the monsoon rain continued to pelt down, and the earth to run with rivulets of water.

Yet, even in that act of wanton enraged passion, some deep inner instinct for survival warned Drake that he dare not forget the shadow of danger and death that was inexorably closing in on him.

CHAPTER 3

Deliverance from Bosnia

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*“Thousands of men executed and buried in mass graves,
hundreds of men buried alive, men and women mutilated
and slaughtered, children killed before their mothers’ eyes,
a grandfather forced to eat the liver of his own grandson
... ..truly scenes from hell, written on the darkest pages of
human history.”*

Judge at The Hague, International Crimes
Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

*“The manner in which these people perished, and the scale of this atrocity is
truly incomprehensible by every standard of humanity... ..a planned and organized
mass execution of thousands of captured Bosnian Muslim men .”*

Prosecutor, Hague War Crimes Tribunal.

Bosnia, October 1995.

The barrel of the Russian made PKM light machine gun moved slowly, tracking the two vehicles on the narrow road below. Its operator, twenty-three year old Bosnian born Dusan Mirkovic, lay flat on his stomach with legs spread apart, keeping the second vehicle in his sights and his weapon steady with its barrel resting on a folding bipod.

The lead vehicle was a Serbian main battle tank, slowly clattering and squealing its way towards a bend in the road. Dusan knew the rest of his unit were waiting in ambush and had the tank in the sights of their anti-tank missile launcher. The anti-tank operator’s finger would already be tightening on the trigger as he waited patiently for the APC to draw abreast of the land mines. Once the tank was “taken out” the armored personnel carrier following behind would be blasted simultaneously by the remote control mines hidden along the side of the road.

Dusan’s concentration wandered momentarily as he noticed how quiet the surrounding forest had become. Not a solitary bird sang or living creature could be heard or seen. The only sounds of nature were the faint rustling of leaves as the gentle breeze fanned his face.

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Like a sudden and unexpected thunderclap, there was an ear-splitting explosion and the tank stopped dead in its tracks as its turret vanished in a fireball of incandescence and black acrid smoke. Seconds later the APC following behind was lifted into the air as the ground beneath it heaved skyward in a shower of exploding earth. The armored personnel carrier crashed heavily onto its side in the ditch beside the road and began to smolder. Dusan nestled his cheek against the stock of his weapon and prepared to open fire.

Moments later the rear doors of the APC flew open and out scrambled six Serb soldiers, all heavily armed and wearing flak jackets. Dusan's machine gun exploded deafeningly and unleashed its power as he stitched through the running soldiers with a hail of deadly 7.62 mm cartridges that saw three men fall like dead weight. The survivors threw themselves against the side of the ditch, pressing their bodies hard against the dirt, clawing for the slightest bit of protection. It was then that Dusan's backup on the other side of the road announced their presence by raking the backs of the unfortunate Serbs with small arms fire.

It was all over in an instant. The entire ambush had taken no longer than five minutes before the surrounding hills and woods again fell deathly silent. Now there was only the smell of smoke, cordite, and death, and the occasional moan of the wounded that remained to disturb the tranquil rural scene.

Dusan snatched up his machine gun, scrambled down the hillside through the thicket and cautiously crossed over the road towards the wrecked armored personnel carrier. He was first to reach the bodies of the Serb soldiers lying scattered on the blood-soaked ground. He saw immediately that two of them were still alive. One young soldier was fatally gunshot and obviously in excruciating pain but he still tried to raise his weapon towards Dusan, who rewarded his defiance by blowing his head off. Blood and gobbets of flesh sprayed onto the ground as the helmeted remains of his head rolled down the grassy verge and into the drainage ditch.

The other, slightly older Serb soldier lay spread-eagled flat on his back unable to move. It was obvious that he had several horrific wounds including a sickening neck wound that may have accounted for his paralysis and the gurgling foam of blood bubbling from his open mouth. Every gasp for air was strident and labored. Only his eyes moved, looking up as Dusan stood over him. The man knew he was dying. The look in his eyes showed terror and the misery of knowing that everything precious in

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this life was rapidly slipping away. The dying soldier was begging with his eyes to be put out of his misery.

For a moment, Dusan stood motionless, contemplating, reminiscing. Then he carefully laid his weapon down, noting the questioning look in the dying Serb's eyes as he did so. Slowly he reached down towards his thigh to which was strapped a scabbard and pulled out a wicked looking, Special Forces knife. The Serb's eyes widened further in horror as he saw the sun glint on the razor-sharp stainless steel edge. The blade was double-edged with the back blade deeply serrated to allow cutting and slashing forwards and backwards.

Dusan's lips thinned to mere slits as he hissed out the final words the dying man would hear, **'Your Serb militia bastards slaughtered my family, you piece of shit! Now I will show you how it feels to be butchered. You will die slowly and painfully. Now go to your God, Christian scum!'**

Dusan then knelt down next to the distressed and suffering soldier and proceeded to gut him alive.

Podgorica, Montenegro, October 1997.

Sitting out on the sidewalk café enjoying the sun's rays and the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee, Dusan Mirkovic was reflecting back to the day he had butchered that wounded Serb soldier. On that day he had felt like the avenging angel of death for all that his family had suffered. Not that it was the first time he had killed; far from it.

When war had broken out between Muslim Bosnians, Orthodox Christian Serbs and Croatians in April 1992, Dusan was already in hiding deep in the mountains of central Bosnia. Police wanted to arrest him for the murder of a young man following an argument outside a Sarajevo nightclub. Dusan had been just twenty years of age when he had stabbed and hacked his victim to death with seventeen knife wounds!

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Dusan gloated, *“Served him right! He should have known better than to mess with me and get me so mad!”* Up until that time, Dusan had only ever been in trouble for relatively minor offences such as assault and suspicion of burglary.

It was ironic that his being in hiding had almost certainly saved his life. If he had been at home when the Bosnian Serb death squads had descended upon his small village and carried out their mission of “ethnic cleansing”, he would have perished along with the members of his family and their neighbors.

Women too old to run were shot to death, as were young children. Younger women were raped then led away to be thrown into brothels for their ordeal to be continued. Some were eventually murdered while others were released once pregnant, weighed down by the torment that their “seed had been spoiled forever” after being inseminated by countless Serb soldiers. All males were butchered on the spot no matter how young or old. Some were shot, many were tortured before having their throats cut and bodies mutilated by having eyes gouged out, genitals and ears cut off. A grandfather was forced to eat the liver of his own grandson.

When Dusan finally returned to the charred remains of his village he was wearing the camouflage greens of a Bosnian freedom fighter, and fired by the passion of revenge. His natural tendency to be easily angered and provoked to violence was fanned by the hatred and bitterness residing in his malevolent heart.

These feelings expressed themselves in battle where he soon developed a reputation amongst his comrades of being “a crazy man who fears nothing”. Though none would dare say it to his face, many thought him to be a cruel, sadistic maniac out of control. In civilian life, such a person would have been incarcerated to protect the public, yet in wartime he was a valuable weapon to be turned loose on the enemy like a wild, rabid dog. His superiors commended him on his valor and determination.

The truth was he had grown to love killing. There was nothing more intoxicating than that instant where you held another life in your hands, and then extinguished it for eternity. The sense of power at that moment produced an indescribable rush when the final and permanent act of snuffing life out was taken. After thirty or more killings, it was a feeling that for him had become an addiction.

Dusan took a sip from his cup of coffee, and thought about why he was here in Podgorica.

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When a cease-fire had eventually been declared and the Dayton Peace Accords signed late in 1995, United Nations peacekeeping forces had swiftly moved to keep the warring factions apart. White-painted military vehicles and a multinational force of blue helmets and berets were deployed intent on maintaining the shaky peace.

Dusan smirked to himself, “*Strasno je smesno (That’s really funny).*”

Did anyone really believe a lasting peace could ever be achieved? How could these foreign peacemakers ever hope to understand Slavic hatred? How could they so greatly underestimate the ability of Slavic people to keep alive a grudge and crave retribution, even if it took centuries to achieve revenge?

These deep-seated hatreds dated back hundreds of years, to the time the advance of the Islamic Ottoman Empire against Christian Europe had been stopped in this region. These hatreds were still alive and recalled as “yesterday happening”, the wounds kept evergreen. This region was a “melting pot” of Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. The Serbs had never forgotten nor forgiven the defeat of the medieval Serb Empire by the Ottomans.

The latest conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina had ripped open the scars of old wounds and unleashed unimagined and ferocious savagery from both sides. The repressed hatred of centuries was unleashed and Serbs and Croats saw it as a splendid opportunity to reclaim old lands and settle old scores. With the Croats attacking from the West, and the Serbs from the East, they hoped to partition Bosnia between these two countries and drive out the Muslims, whom they derogatively nicknamed “Turks”.

However, many pockets of Muslims had survived the conflict and now the U.N. peacekeepers were charged with maintaining peace in the “melting pot” area and devising a plan for segregating the many irreconcilable factions.

Dusan hated the Serbs with a vengeance, his memory fuelled by Serbian Television ceremonies held during the war where soldiers were given awards for the number of Muslims they had killed. He hated the Croats just as much, and despised the United Nations peacekeepers as a bunch of ineffectual do-gooders.

He would never forgive the way up to seven thousand Bosnian Muslims sheltering at Srebrenica were handed over to Bosnian Serbs by U.N. peacekeepers, and then massacred. Dusan reminded himself contemptuously “*They were handed over without a single shot being fired in their defense!*”

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The 100 United Nations peacekeepers had been hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned by a Serb militia, which included the notorious General Krstic's 15,000 strong unit, the Drina Wolves. Twelve of the U.N. soldiers had previously been taken hostage and were being threatened with possible death. Unfortunately, the unit's commander was also being given contradictory directives. U.N. head command had instructed that they "defend Srebrenica by all means", whereas their political leaders back home were stressing "don't bring back body bags; none of *our* men are to die".

Supreme Commander of the Bosnian Serb Army, General Ratko Mladic, was filmed striding into Srebrenica loudly proclaiming, "The time has come to take revenge on the Muslim." And take savage revenge they did! Muslims were hunted down and dispatched to mass graves. During the civil war in Bosnia, which raged from 1992 to 1995 some 200,000 people were killed and a further 20,000 disappeared, presumed dead. Nearly ninety per cent of the dead were Muslims.

Such atrocities could never be forgotten or forgiven. The only way a final resolution would ever be achieved would be in a battle to the death. However, that was no longer of any concern to Dusan Mirkovic. His allegiance to any particular nation or people had been extinguished with the obliteration of his village and his family. From now on, his only allegiance was to himself; with loyalty to no one but Dusan Mirkovic.

There was no future life for him in Bosnia, only the prospect that some day the warrant for his arrest for murder may resurface as some semblance of normality returned. With that prospect in mind, he had headed south to the city of Podgorica in Montenegro.

Dusan had been given the name of a Kosovar involved in a smuggling racket that crossed the Adriatic Sea and into Italy and thence into other European countries. Reliable rumor had it that this man, one named Slavko Tijanic, was well connected with a powerful Albanian gang. Like Dusan, the largely Muslim Albanians also shared a fierce hatred of both Serbs and Croats.

Dusan hoped to approach Tijanic with the intention of joining his group in some form of illicit employment. He had heard that "**A man who knows how to handle himself could make *big money* working for someone like Tijanic.**" Without doubt, Dusan knew how to handle himself.

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There was an old Yugoslav proverb that proclaimed: “*Nuzda ne poznaje zakona* (Necessity knows no law.)” Dusan certainly had the necessity and no law or lawmaker would stand in the way of him getting what he wanted!

The white sign hanging on the entrance to the “Big Black Pussy” nightclub said, “CLOSED”. Dusan ignored this message and pushed his way through the unlocked glass double doors. He knew Slavko Tijanac was inside the nightclub and was expecting him.

Dusan slowly climbed the flight of steps covered by a badly stained and smelly red carpet and entered the blackened-out interior of the nightclub. The dance floor was silent, mute as death, so different from how it would be later that night. In several hours time it would be obscured by boisterous dancers urged on by the blaring sound system, and transformed by flashing disco lights and the mirrored strobes reflecting and refracting the harsh light and converting this somber room into a hedonistic playground.

It took several minutes for Dusan’s eyes to adjust to the gloom and to make out the perimeter of the large dance floor encircled by bare tables and chairs, and the huge bar away at the far end. A thin shaft of light spearing from the far right hand corner told him that the man he was looking for would probably be found in that direction.

Dusan’s footsteps echoed loudly in the silent club as he began to cross the wooden dance floor. He halted when a menacing, gravelly voice came out of the darkness.

‘Looking for someone?’

Dusan looked towards the source of the voice in the dark corner and answered casually, **‘Slavko Tijanac is expecting me. My name is Dusan Mirkovic.’**

‘Are you armed?’ The voice was flat, level and tinged with menace.

‘No,’ replied Dusan.

The shadows moved in the corner as a huge hulk of a man stepped forward into the half-light. He was built like a “gorilla” with massive shoulders and long arms

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that reminded Dusan that man is truly descended from the apes. Dusan guessed his body weight to be more than two hundred and fifty pounds. The man wore a black polo-neck sweater beneath a dark suit. He stopped several feet short of Dusan and spent some moments looking Dusan over carefully as a carrion bird eyes its prey. Both men stood motionless, each looking for the slightest body movement that might betray a hint of fear, anxiety, or even hesitation. Neither man moved or gave a telltale indication.

The “gorilla” finally asked, **‘Mind if I take a look?’**

‘Suit yourself,’ shrugged Dusan, raising his arms slowly up towards the ceiling. He kept them raised until “the hulk” had methodically felt over his entire body. Once satisfied that Dusan was indeed unarmed the man pointed towards the slightly ajar door and grunted, **‘Through there,’** before melting back into his cave in the dark corner.

The door opened into a small room where two men sat at a table playing cards. Dusan noticed immediately that both were armed with holstered weapons. They looked up at him with expressionless faces, then one indicated with a slight nod of his head for Dusan to proceed through the next door. That doorway opened into a long corridor that led to a heavy door at its far end. Dusan raised an eyebrow when he realized it was made of thick steel and sported a peephole in its center and an inter-com to one side.

“This guy is careful,” thought Dusan approvingly. A press of the inter-com button brought an immediate response. A voice crackled out, **‘Come in,’** whilst simultaneously the door bolts clicked open electronically. Passing through and letting the heavy gauge door swing shut behind him Dusan found himself standing inside a brightly lit and plush office.

A man sat in a red upholstered swivel chair, behind an expensive, leather topped antique desk. The odor of the expensive cigar he was puffing filled the room. He was of medium build, his hair cropped short and harsh to his scalp, with a thin anorexic face that resembled a concentration camp inmate. On the desk sat a computer monitor whilst in the wall to his left was inset a row of small Closed Circuit Television screens that monitored various areas of the building.

“Yes,” Dusan reiterated to himself, **“this guy is very careful!”**

The man looked up from his executive swivel chair and asked, **‘Well?’**

‘I heard you might be able to use another man in your organization,’ began Dusan.

‘And what makes you think you might be the right man for the job?’

‘With respect, you must know something about me or you wouldn’t have let me get this far,’ Dusan suggested.

‘You’re a clever man, Dusan. You are right, of course! I do know a lot about you, and perhaps we might be able to find something for you to do. But first we need to know what your capabilities are.’

Slavko Tijanic smiled as he rested his head against the high back of his chair. **‘Actually,’** Tijanic paused for a moment, obviously considering a proposal, **‘There is a little matter of some unfinished business that I’ve been meaning to take care of for some time. Perhaps you can take care of it for me, Dusan? What do you say, kind of a trial run?’**

The modulation of Dusan’s voice did not alter as he answered coldly, **‘Try me!’**

Tijanic gave a wry smile, before broadening into a wider grin. He liked what he saw of this Dusan Mirkovic. There was no nonsense about the man. Dusan Mirkovic was all business.

‘Dusan, there’s this young punk called Goran Brankovic who thinks he can steal some of my illegal immigrant-smuggling clients. He is actively touting for business and saying he can arrange their passage for half price. The little shithead and his gang of boys wouldn’t know shit from clay! Now, what I would like you to do, Dusan, is to deliver a message from me that I am *very, very* unhappy about what he and his gang are doing. A message not just to him alone, but also to everyone else connected with him to make sure it does not happen again! Do you think you can do that minor chore for me?’

Dusan shrugged nonchalantly and replied, **‘I’ll do my best to oblige.’**

The opportunity had been presented to Dusan Mirkovic. Now all he had to do was impress Slavko Tijanic by doing it a manner that was professional, clean, and final.

The sound of “rap” music thumped loudly in the lounge-room of the third floor apartment as a young man dressed like an American “rapper”, moved into the

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kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee. Goran Brankovic was awaiting the arrival of a young woman that he had arranged to meet with him. She needed help in transportation and assistance in order to cross the Adriatic and enter into Italy. All that he knew about her was that she was a refugee from the war zone of Tusla in Bosnia, and that she had the required two thousand dollars to pay her fare.

He paused in the middle of stirring his coffee and cocked an ear towards the lounge-room. Was that a noise he had heard above the blare of the CD player? ***“No, I must be hearing things,”*** he decided and returned to stirring his coffee.

Seconds later Goran Brankovic was dead, his neck almost severed by the wickedly thin garrote of piano wire Dusan Mirkovic had quietly slipped around his throat and pulled tight, cutting deeply into flesh.

Dusan was preparing to dispose of the body of the late Mr. Brankovic when he was interrupted by a loud knock on the front door. He quickly let the corpse fall to the floor and slipped out of the long, black raincoat he was wearing, and then pulled the latex gloves from his hands. He walked over to the CD player, turned down the volume, and calmly turned to answer the door.

He opened the apartment door slowly with his left hand, all the while holding his right hand behind his back, his fingers wrapped tightly around the grip of his automatic pistol. To his surprise, he found himself standing face to face with a beautiful young woman. His visitor stood just over five feet two inches in her flat-heeled shoes and looked stunningly attractive despite the absence of make-up. Her dowdy dress and unsophisticated auburn colored hairstyle could not detract from her round hazel eyes, flawless skin and classic facial features. Dusan guessed that she was in her early twenties.

‘Good morning,’ she said in a soft voice. **‘I am looking for Mr. Goran Brankovic.’**

Dusan Mirkovic’s quick response of, **‘I am very sorry, but he does not live here any more,’** brought an instant frown to the woman’s forehead and then a look of great despair to her face.

‘Why are you looking for him?’ Dusan asked the question casually.

‘He said he could help me get to Italy, but now...’ she stammered, obviously distressed.

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Dusan hesitated for a moment. He normally would not concern himself with other people's problems, but for this beautiful woman his instinct was to make an exception. Perhaps curiosity made him ask, **'Where are you from?'**

'I am from Mostar. The Bosnian Croats killed all my families and I was the only one to survive. I can never go back to *that* place. Never! Do you understand?' Her voice was pleading, her eyes filling with tears, her composure totally gone.

Dusan understood only too well. He dug into his pocket, pulled out his handkerchief, and handed it to her. She took it gratefully and dabbed at the corners of her eyes before handing it back.

'Look, I know some people who may be able to help you. Give me a contact address and I promise I will be in touch soon. I'm in a hurry at the moment and can't talk to you now. My name is Dusan. What is your name?'

A look of renewed hope swept across her face and she answered eagerly, **'Slavica, my name is Slavica.'**

'Okay then, Slavica. You run along now and I'll contact you soon, I promise!'

'Thank you,' she said and turned to leave.

'Don't mention it,' Dusan replied before closing and bolting the door.

He then returned to finish what he had been about to do before her knock on the door interrupted him. He had the task of cutting up the body of Goran Brankovic to complete.

The next day three members of the Brankovic gang each received a message from Slavko Tijanic, courtesy of his new employee Dusan Mirkovic. One discovered a box on the passenger seat of his car; inside was the head of one Goran Brankovic. Another found a pair of shoes belonging to Goran Brankovic wrapped in newspaper on his front door step; the feet were still inside them! The third awoke from a good night's sleep to find a pair of hands on his bedside table. He instantly recognized the ring on the left hand as having belonged to his former boss, Goran.

Slavko Tijanic was extremely pleased to hear that the remaining members of Goran Brankovic's gang had all hurriedly fled town. He showed his appreciation of the way Dusan had handled this matter by welcoming him into his organization.

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Dusan Mirkovic had made his mark. Not only had he accomplished the task set for him by Tijanac, but also he had completed his task in a manner that showed a sadistic imagination as well as initiative. And, more importantly, he had shown a ruthless and callous disregard for any fellow human beings that happened to get in his way.

He was now on his way up in the criminal world!

CHAPTER 4

The “Snakeheads”

“Apologists for the free market claim it has cleared the way for growth and prosperity. But the reality is one of islands of extraordinary wealth surrounded by growing oceans of poverty. Some 1.3 billion people live on \$US1 a day or less----the World

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Bank's arbitrary figure for absolute poverty. About 850 million people go hungry daily. In the Third World, between one-third and one-quarter of children die before the age of five and one-third of the adult population does not live past 40."

David Glanz,

© THE AUSTRALIAN,

September 4, 2000.

Jiangle, Fujian province. China.

Chen Lin was ecstatic. He would soon be leaving China and embarking on a journey that would enable him to live and work in London. Apart from the pain of family separation, there would be little sorrow at leaving this impoverished southern Chinese coastline that bordered the choppy, gray waters of the Taiwan Strait.

The deal had been arranged. Chen's father had reached an agreement with Mao Ying Li, a matronly woman in her fifties who headed the local "Snakehead" organization. The term "Snakehead" originated from a Chinese Triad bastardizing another gang name; "Dragonhead."

"Big Sister Li", as she preferred to be called, had agreed to arrange for twenty-two year old Chen Lin to be illegally smuggled into England, for the sum of US\$30,000.

The "fare" had been scraped together by his family by borrowing from relatives, friends, and money-lending loan sharks that charged an exorbitant 30% interest per annum. The amount of the "fare" represented a fortune. It would take Chen thirty years to save that much if he remained in Fujian. In England, on the other hand, he had been told he could earn one hundred and fifty English Pounds a week by working six days a week, thirteen hours a day. Board and food were usually included in his employment "deal" and no tax was payable as he would be a *toudu* ("one who steals across the water"); an illegal alien. That meant he could send most of his wages back to his family and have his passage debt repaid to the moneylenders in four to five years.

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Chen's mother had understandably become terribly upset when first told her only child planned to seek a better life in the West. However, she understood that Chen wanted more than the village offered, and she did not wish to hold him back when she knew how few other men in the twenties and thirties age group remained in their village. Those still here either had failed in attempts to get away and were awaiting the next opportunity to try again, or were now working for the smuggling gangs as "Snakehead" foot soldiers.

The Fujian province had a centuries-old tradition of its people immigrating to other countries. Young Chinese becoming *toudu* and crossing the seas to seek riches as gold miners and merchants had first established many of the "Chinatowns" around the world. That many *toudu* were successful in achieving their goals of a better life was obvious from the material signs of wealth scattered throughout the villages.

Many villages were dotted with garish mansions, some costing as much as US\$250,000 to build. Often they were several storeys high, lavishly adorned with expensive tiles, marble staircases, and stainless steel kitchens, and came equipped with sauna, spa, and gymnasium. Some of these mansions, of course, belonged to the "Snakeheads" who ran the illicit trade in people smuggling. The members of these syndicates were ruthless individuals recognized in the villages by their love of gold watches and obscene and tasteless large pieces of jewelry.

However, many of the poorer families also benefited and depended upon the money flowing back into China from their *toudu* relatives overseas. This was evident from the number of television satellite dishes springing up on rooftops, and the many homes proudly displaying photographs of successful family members now working in far off countries. Some showed sons and daughters proudly posing in front of the Chinese restaurant where they worked, or showing off sitting in a car recently purchased. To proud parents this was similar to the custom in the western world of showing off pictures of the children's college graduation. Even the local government and the banks in Fujian benefited immensely from people smuggling. Both shared in the profits sent back, be it in direct bribes to police and officials or by way of revenue. Either way, the migration of the *toudu* had become the most potent economic force in the region.

However, behind the wholesome aspects of this illegal industry lay the fact that violent criminals with evil intentions were conducting it; criminals who cared

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nothing for their human cargo. Globally this lucrative trade was now estimated to be worth more than US\$15 billion annually and rivaled drug running for profitability.

An estimated 100,000 Chinese *toudu* each year were known to put their lives into the hands of the gangs conducting international people smuggling rackets. The risks the *toudu* took were grave, many of them becoming helpless victims and sometimes perishing during the course of the arduous journey.

This dice with death was all about making the right choices. Firstly, choosing the wrong “Snakehead” syndicate would mean threats, injury, and perhaps death if debt and other payments were not made on time. Some syndicates were known to be more vicious and dishonest than others.

Secondly, the risk of extortion was ever present. On any individual shipment the passage price could suddenly be increased from, say, \$20,000 to \$30,000 or even to \$50,000 if some of the *toudu* being smuggled died or were arrested. This happened because operatives further down the smuggling chain still expected full payment from each group irrespective of the numbers of illegals who actually arrived alive and well. If the bill could not be paid a hapless immigrant might be made to pay it back by selling heroin on the black market, forced into prostitution, sold as slave labor in sweatshops or even killed without compunction. Some gangs were known to have sent home the finger or sliced-off ear of a loved one in order to make the point that extra passage money was required.

Thirdly, the dice with death involved the route to be taken and the desired destination. The most basic service offered, at around US\$10,000, was passage in the “tween-decks” compartment of a cargo ship crossing the Pacific Ocean to Australia or Japan. This usually meant lying cheek by jowl locked in a cramped compartment, with no furniture and only a bucket for a toilet. Meager supplies of water, rice and vegetables were provided by the smugglers but *toudu* were often too seasick to eat, or else were too nauseous from either the unhygienic conditions or the pervading smell of fuel oil to hold down any food.

Many ill *toudu* died in appalling filth or from dehydration caused by constant vomiting. While others perished by drowning, as occurred in December of 1996 off the coast of Sicily. In what became Italy’s worst maritime disaster, almost three hundred illegal immigrants drowned. The victims had been forced at gunpoint to disembark from the freighter *Yiohan* onto a ferry designed to carry one-third that

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number. The ferry had then accidentally collided into the larger vessel and rapidly sunk. The freighter limped to Greece, where a handful of survivors recounted the horror, but no one cared.

The fishing trawlers off the Sicilian coast soon found themselves hauling in bodies along with the catch of fish. However, as time passed the pieces in their nets were heads, arms, a jawbone with teeth, as well as the occasional plastic identity card and bits of clothing.

The longer, more difficult overland passage, which most immigrants took to reach Europe and Britain, cost over \$20,000. The most expensive “deluxe” package to the United States or anywhere else included airfares, fake passports and training in how to deal with customs officials. This package could cost up to \$50,000.

In spite of the risks involved Chen Lin never once faltered in his determination to follow his fellow countrymen and women overseas. He was going to England! He was exhilarated at the future prospect of earning “big money”. He was going where there was freedom and opportunity!

There were two sayings that Chen had often heard and had been his inspiration: “Better to die hopeful on the road than to die hopeless in China”, and “One person goes abroad; the whole family makes money”.

Two weeks later Big Sister Li called for Chen Lin and his father. Arrangements had been completed. The departure date for his leaving had been set. His journey to England would begin by Chen being driven out of Jiangle by truck in one week’s time.

Chen Lin had just seven days to prepare and to say his goodbyes to the family and friends he might not see again for a very long time. The possibility existed he might *never* see them again.

The hot monsoonal wind blew into the face of Chen Lin as he sat on a large boulder looking down onto the small river that meandered below on its voyage to the ocean. Next to him sat his father, Jiang, who was hunched leaning slightly forward with both elbows resting upon his knees. His father was deep in thought. Chen

glanced sideways and saw from the darkly stained armpits of his father's blue shirt that he, too, was perspiring freely and feeling the energy-sapping humidity.

The moisture-laden winds blowing in over the waters of the Taiwan Strait were strengthening noticeably. A severe storm was on its way. It was too early in the summer rainy season for the dreaded typhoon, but the weather forecast was still warning of a fierce electrical storm later that evening.

His father, Jiang broke the silence, **'I remember the day you caught your first fish down in that river, Chen. You were just five years old.'**

'I remember that, too, father,' reminisced Chen and smiled. **'The fish was so small, but it tasted so sweet when mother cooked it for me.'**

Jiang turned slowly and put his arm around his son's shoulders. **'Your mother and I will miss you very much, my son. You have been the joy of our lives. We are extremely proud of you. You know you go on this journey with our blessing and our hopes.'**

This was the heart-wrenching part of the departure, because Chen had been raised in a family where the government of his parents was a reign of affection, and his obedience to his parents was a submission based on filial love.

Chen's eyes moistened as he spoke, **'I will miss you both, father. I will be impatient for the day I can start sending you both much money from England. Once I am working, just you wait and see! I will have your loan paid back in four years and after that your lives will get easier. No more breaking your back in the fields! You will be able to buy all the things you cannot afford now. Do not worry. I will make sure you and mother are well cared for in the future; that will be my repayment to you.'**

Jiang shrugged. **'Do not worry so much about us Chen. We will be fine. We are doing this thing for you, so that you can have a better life than we have had. We know there is no future for you here!'**

'How will mother cope with my leaving?'

'She cries herself to sleep every night,' confessed Jiang, **'but she is a strong woman. She does not wish to make it harder for you by sobbing and weeping in front of you. She will keep her grief well hidden!'**

Jiang paused for a moment, then continued: **'I do not know how else to help you, son, other than to say be careful. It is a different world over the seas in the**

lands of the white ghosts. A world I know nothing about. We can but hope and pray for your safety. Be careful whom you trust. Try to get as much help as you can from your fellow Chinese countrymen, they are “the” people, but always be on your guard against Triad gangsters who would try to prey on you.’

Jiang then reached into his hip pocket and pulled out his pocketknife. It was decorated with an ornate silver handle and opened out as a ten-centimeter long switchblade of the highest quality steel honed to a scalpel-sharp edge. Chen knew it was his father’s favorite and most treasured possession. Ever since he could remember he could envisage his father using it for countless hours engrossed in his hobby of witting. His father had fashioned hundreds of miniature wooden figures and a beautiful chess set composed of pieces styled on the warrior armies of the Ming Dynasty.

‘My son, I want you to have my knife. It will bring you good fortune, and lucky money.’

‘I cannot take your favorite knife, father!’ protested Chen.

‘Please take it, my son. I really want you to have it. It will remind you of me. Keep it in a safe place where you can reach it quickly if you need to,’ insisted Jiang and thrust the pocketknife into the palm of his son’s hand.

Chen accepted the gift of the knife with gratitude knowing that the acceptance would please his father. After taking a long last look at one of the favorite places of his childhood, Chen turned his back on the river and together with his father followed the dirt path back down to their village.

His mother had been busy all day preparing her son’s favorite dishes for tonight’s farewell dinner. The final evening together was a tender mix of joy and sadness. Chen’s grandmother, uncle, and family joined his parents to reminisce about the past and wish him well for the future. Past, funny memories were laughed at and special nostalgic moments relived, until the evening ended with a sad, tear-filled farewell.

Before retiring to bed Chen’s mother insisted on coming into his bedroom to help him pack for his morning departure. Chen was only taking a small, battered suitcase to hold his meager possessions. There really was not much to pack. He could have done it easily and quickly himself, but he knew his mother wanted and needed to fuss over him this one last time. She carefully and lovingly folded each item of

clothing, packing a few personal items in between. Last and most importantly, she added a framed photograph recently taken of Chen, herself, and his father.

‘My dear Chen, remember you are never alone. The spirits of your grandparents are always with you, and your father and I will always love you.’ She could no longer hold back her tears. Mother and son hugged each other long and hard at the thought of the painful and enduring separation that would begin tomorrow.

Ominous black clouds from the previous nights’ storm still hung low overhead when the anticipated lorry finally rumbled up to the front door of Chen’s house and squealed to a halt. Its diesel-belching engine was kept running as the front passenger door flew open and one of Big Sister Li’s “Snakeheads” jumped out into the drizzling rain. The sinister looking man bore a hideous scar on his right cheek that looked like it might have been inflicted by a knife. He was an unsmiling character with no trace of civility.

He saw Chen’s father standing in the open front doorway, and barked out the words, **‘Is Chen Lin ready?’**

Chen emerged from the house clutching his suitcase.

He gave each parent one last hug, and then was bundled into the back of the canvas-covered lorry. Two-dozen faces were already in the back, all looking at him curiously as he joined them. What they had in common was a display of eagerness and an anxiety based on unknown dread etched deeply into their faces.

The truck lurched off and roared away from Chen Lin’s birthplace, and the last sight Chen had of his mother and father was of them disappearing in the distance behind him as they stood in the soaking rain, waving their mechanical “goodbyes”.

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CHAPTER 5

The Curse of Cocaine

“Guard its leaves with love, and when you feel pain in your heart, hunger in your flesh and darkness in your mind, lift it to your mouth. You will find love for your pain, nourishment for your body and light for your mind . If your oppressor arrives from the north, the white conqueror, the gold seeker, when he touches it he will only find poison for his body and madness for the mind.”

13th century Legend Of Coca.

“ The white man duly succeeded in extracting the 0.5% alkaloid cocaine from the coca leaf at the end of the 19th century-----Dr. Sigmund Freud became the first to contract nasal cancer from snorting it -----and all hell broke loose.”

Nick Thorpe,

© The Guardian Weekly,

October 5-11, 2000.

Three malevolent looking Blackhawk helicopters in tight formation skimmed over the dense, mist-shrouded jungle canopy like three angry dragonflies intent on harm. The roar of their air-beating rotors sent wildlife in the depths of the dark undergrowth below scattering in every direction, their blood coursing with fear.

Two of the helicopters were each crammed with ten heavily armed Colombian army personnel as well as the three crew. The third Blackhawk carried eight uniformed soldiers and two men dressed in civilian dress. The taller and older of the two was FBI agent Richard Drake, while the other was his Colombian partner. They were accompanying the military airborne unit on this “seek and destroy” mission. The objective of the raid was to “take out” a drug-producing laboratory that intelligence had located deep in the jungle.

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This particular laboratory was not in a region normally identified as being part of the officially designated and highly dangerous *zona de despeje*, but the need to remain fully alert was no less important. Drake knew that regardless of which drug baron owned the factory, the production facility would be well protected.

Sitting beside him near the forward cabin window was his Colombian counterpart Miguel Garcia, a thickset strongly built Latino in his mid twenties. Miguel was of swarthy complexion and was distinguished by the pencil-thin moustache adorning his lip. A squat five feet six inches, he was some six inches shorter than Richard and had laughed to see the “tall Yankee” hunching down in the chopper’s fifty-four inches high cabin. Two manned 7.62mm M60 machine-guns were mounted, one from each of the forward cabin windows. Miguel Garcia was peering out at the sea of dense foliage below while Richard carefully examined the map spread across his knees.

Suddenly Miguel sighted something below that made him nudge Richard to attract his attention.

Without trying to shout above the deafening sound of the four-bladed rotors Miguel pointed, indicating that Richard should “take a look!” Richard leaned across, looked down, and saw a wide stretch of river snaking its way through the lush green jungle. Its smooth surface was being ploughed up into waves and foam by the wake of the two government patrol boats as their powerful engines sliced their way upstream against the current at high speed. The battleship gray gunboats with their bow-mounted cannon were part of the coordinated attack and their task would be to block the river as a possible escape route.

Richard looked back at the troops filling the Blackhawk’s cabin. All wore camouflage greens and fatigue caps, their faces daubed with streaks of green, black and brown paint. Heavy cartridge-stacked ammunition belts criss-crossed the chests of the machine-gunners. “*They sure look fierce,*” thought Richard. He knew they could fight fiercely too, if given the right incentive.

The problem as Richard saw it was the principle of motivation. The opposition FARC rebels were extremely motivated to fight for their idealistic political objectives. The narco-traffickers were extremely motivated to fight and kill for the huge amounts of cash and riches they could amass. However, these Colombian soldiers, many of whom were merely unwilling conscripts, were poorly paid and

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risking their lives for what? To serve a government that many suspected or knew was riddled with self-serving and corrupt officers.

The booming narcotics industry had debauched the morals of Colombia's society to the point where all respect for honest work, civil rights, and education had evaporated. Instead, many Colombians lived only to "get rich quick no matter what it takes". The judicial system and most government institutions had become compromised in a nation being inexorably destroyed both internally and externally by the cancer of violence and corruption.

"It's a real shame," the FBI agent sympathized. Drake knew that this had not always been so. Centuries ago the indigenous South Americans had regarded coca as a sacred plant and a source of traditional medicine. They chewed it to derive a burst of energy from its conversion of carbohydrates to glucose and to stimulate their respiratory systems. The 0.5% cocaine contained within coca was actually destroyed by saliva and digestive juices. It took the white man to invent a way of injecting or snorting it to make it dangerously potent!

Richard's train of thought was disrupted as the pilot alerted everyone, **'We are going in!'** There was the sudden surge of adrenaline in the cabin, that mixture of fear and excitement that every combatant knows. The specter of death or injury with extreme pain threatened. The fear element was mastered and held in check by last minute inspections of equipment and ammunition. Grenade belts were adjusted, magazines re-checked then snapped back into place, weapons locked and loaded.

The chopper landed with a heavy thud, its roaring blades sending a whirlwind of dust and grit swirling all around them. The aft-sliding doors on each side were slid open and Richard and Miguel leapt out and hit the ground running, bent low beneath the whirling blades.

The other two choppers were already down and Richard could see their complements of Colombian soldiers had deployed themselves as planned. Some had quickly established a defense perimeter whilst others were advancing warily towards the now visible buildings.

Richard immediately sensed that something was wrong! There was *"Not a single gun shot!"* The raiding party had expected to be greeted with a hail of gunfire from the defenders of the laboratory, but the only sounds that they were hearing were the engines and the scything blades of their helicopters.

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Around the edge of the clearing that had been hacked out on the banks of the river stood three large prefabricated aluminum sheds. All were carefully positioned and nestled hard up against the dense jungle, and were covered by heavy camouflage netting. Drums of chemicals and other supplies were stacked nearby, also hidden from the air by netting.

Miguel and Richard, weapons in hand, sprinted towards the biggest of the sheds. Captain Ramos and half a dozen troopers had already stormed through the empty laboratory. The signs were obvious. Half-filled cups of cold coffee, a cigarette butt now nothing but ash, and chemicals half way through their treatment process on laboratory benches, all told, the story of a hasty but planned exit.

An angry Miguel muttered, **'They knew we were coming! Some bastard has tipped them off!'**

Captain Ramos saw them enter the laboratory and quickly came over and spoke to Miguel in Spanish, **'There is no one here! I have ordered my men to destroy everything and then we get the hell out of here! Our choppers are sitting ducks in this clearing. *Vamos!*'**

Richard and Miguel moved hastily from one building to another as they searched for documents or papers that might reveal some clue as to the people behind this operation. Meanwhile, the soldiers were busy laying explosive charges that would shortly vaporize the entire drug making facility.

'Looks like they have not left us much, *amigo*,' Richard called out to Miguel as he looked through the drawers of an old desk. **'They seem to have taken everything with them.'**

The words had no sooner died on his lips than he spied a half-full waste paper basket tucked away in a corner. Stepping towards it Richard emptied its contents out all over the floor, and began rummaging through and uncrumpling pieces of paper. One page torn out of a notepad caught his attention. On it was penciled a name; a name he knew well. ***"Was it just a coincidence that it was the same name as a Colombian army general? And what did the message underneath mean?"***

"MAKE PAYMENT!"

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Drake folded the piece of paper neatly and was tucking it into the breast pocket of his shirt when Captain Ramos poked his head into the room. The Captain surveyed the scene for a moment, noticed Richard standing by the overturned waste paper basket surrounded by various bits of paper, then promptly barked out an order, **‘Every one back to the chopper! We’re about to blow the lab!’**

Without hesitation, Miguel and Richard did as commanded and sprinted back to the waiting helicopter. Several minutes later the three Blackhawks lifted off and swung up over the treetops just as the two gunboats came into sight around the bend in the river.

This time it was Richard’s turn to nudge Miguel and point to them. **‘They’re just in time to see the fireworks, *amigo*,’** he shouted above the din of the rotors.

Seconds later the clearing where the drug laboratory had once stood disappeared into a searing yellow ball of flame as a towering column of acrid black smoke billowed up into the heavens.

After the debriefing session, Miguel drove Richard back to the secluded house the FBI agent had called “home” during his past nine months in Colombia. Whilst they were driving, Richard pulled out the piece of notepaper he had salvaged from the wastepaper basket during the raid on the drug laboratory, and passed it to Miguel.

Miguel’s reaction was to ask in a voice thick with concern, **‘Why didn’t you show this notepaper at the debriefing?’**

‘I couldn’t see the point, Miguel. Captain Ramos didn’t seem much concerned that the drug traffickers had been warned about our raiding party; and besides, if there is a high-ranking General involved, there is no telling who else below him may be a part of this operation. Do you get my drift?’

Miguel understood perfectly and nodded. The debriefing after the raid had been nothing more than a formality, a meaningless farce. When Richard and Miguel had expressed their concern at how the narco-traffickers may have been “tipped-off” about the mission, Captain Ramos had simply responded pragmatically, **‘Don’t worry so much or be so disappointed. After all, we have shut down another drug**

operation and both my superiors and your government will be more than pleased with the success of today's mission!'

When the black Jeep Cherokee eventually pulled up outside his house Richard asked his partner, **'Thanks for the ride, Miguel. Want to come in for a quick drink?'**

'Si amigo. Why not?' answered Miguel as he slid out of the driver's seat and began to follow his partner up the wooden steps to the verandah.

Miguel froze when he saw Richard stop suddenly and raise a warning finger to his lips signaling, **'Don't make a sound!'**

He watched as Richard quietly unholstered his 9mm Bureau-issue automatic from his hip and then quickly reached for his own weapon. Richard edged his way carefully and silently towards the front door. It was closed, as he had left it, but the tiny blade of grass that he had inserted near its upper border had fallen out. Someone had entered through this doorway while he had been away!

He slowly turned the doorknob, and then paused for a moment. Suddenly, he threw the door open with all his might and jumped aside.

Standing to one side of the doorway, Drake waited, but there was no answering hail of bullets. Instead, a nervous query greeted him from within. A young female voice asked, **'Is that you, Signor Richard?'**

The expression of tense concentration on Richard's face relaxed to one of puzzlement as Miguel asked him, **'You have got a girl in there, amigo? You sly old dog. Are you keeping her a secret from your friend Miguel?'**

Bemused, Richard stepped through the front door and was greeted by the sight of young Consuela standing in the center of the room; she was wearing only the flimsiest of bras and thong panties.

Miguel hesitated, cleared his throat, and then in a chiding voice said, **'I think I'd better take a rain check on that drink until tomorrow, Ricardo. I can see you've got other commitments.'** A cheeky smile broadened across his face. **'What is that saying you gringo's have; something about an old dog and new tricks?'** Now he was laughing outright.

'I'm sorry, amigo,' apologized Richard. **'I didn't know she would be here.'**

'Niente problema, my friend. I will see you tomorrow. Then we will begin our inquiries into the name on that piece of paper you showed me.'

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Miguel quickly retraced his steps, climbed aboard the Jeep and with a cheerful wave and '*Adios, amigo*' drove away and headed back towards his apartment in town. Richard knew that Miguel was not annoyed in the slightest. Miguel was himself very much a ladies' man who loved nothing more than to impress the girls with his footwork on the dance-floor and to seduce them with his Latino charm.

The night was still young, the beautiful and sexually charged woman waiting for him was also young, but the Cognac she had poured from his bottle was V.S.O.P, just like himself. Right now, he could do with some of that special "sexual healing" that Marvin Gaye had once sung about in a pop song. It had been a long and frustrating day, and everything else would have to wait until tomorrow. Tonight the cares of the day would be swept aside by the Cognac and the beckoning body of Consuela.

Richard Drake awoke suddenly with a start. He felt dazed, his heart was thumping wildly, and he felt himself covered in a lather of sweat. His eyes bulged wide-open in the gloom and darted around momentarily before he realized where he was. It had all been a dream, a horrible tormented dream!

In a second, he realized that he was still in bed and had just experienced a terrible nightmare. He could only remember the last part of the dream. He was trying to run and escape from something horrible with all his might but was barely moving. It was as though he were moving in slow motion as he struggled vainly to step through a mire of deep, sticky mud that kept sucking him back, restricting his every step. Not far behind him a crowd of howling demons was skimming across the gooey mess with ease, almost floating upon it, and bearing down on him rapidly, intent on tearing him apart. He was frightened, so terribly frightened; yet when he opened his mouth to scream out for help, not a sound emerged.

Richard shook his head to assure himself that he was indeed awake and his mind asked the question, "*I wonder how a 'shrink' would interpret that dream?*" Thank God, the nightmare was over. Instead of waking refreshed, the dream had awoken him fully leaving him feeling drained and troubled.

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He raised his head slowly so he could look across the head of Consuela, who was still sound asleep, and towards the clock radio. The green glowing numbers showed 5.50am. The alarm was set to go off in another ten minutes at 6.00am.

Richard decided to quietly ease himself out from under the sheets and go to the bathroom. His bladder was full from drinking too much the night before, and besides, he needed to wash the perspiration of terror from his body and freshen up his foul-tasting mouth. The darkness lifted a little from his spirit as he realized that as soon as the music turned on with the alarm, Consuela would rouse and would almost certainly be recalling him to bed for another session of carnal endeavor. His young seductress would again summon him to lose himself in the oblivion of her moist flesh and to block out time, duty, and reason.

He looked in the bathroom mirror at the tired, lined and stubble-covered face that stared back at him. *“God you look bad! Black under the eyes! You’d better freshen up man, or Consuela will really think she’s in bed with an obsolete old fart!”*

He had just bent down and splashed water up onto his face when he heard the clock radio switch itself on and burst into life. However, the music was instantly cut short by a massive, ear-splitting explosion that tore through the bedroom!

The force of the blast blew out part of the bathroom wall and sent Richard crashing down into a corner behind the bathtub, knocking him into a state of semi-unconsciousness. He could recognize his devastated surroundings, knew he was alive and aware, but he could neither move nor focus; events and moments passed without time, measurement or meaning.

When he had partly recovered from the effects of his concussion, he found a uniformed Colombian firefighter leaning over him and trying to revive him. On seeing Richard begin to stir and hearing him groan the firefighter called out, **‘Medic, come quickly! This one is still alive!’**

It took some several minutes before he was physically able to stand up unsteadily on his feet. Then, supported by the firefighter, he shuffled slowly over the rubble and into the fire-charred remains of what had been his bedroom.

The body of Consuela had been blasted and burned into an unrecognizable smoldering corpse. The whole room was an amorphous mass of blackened, burned