

# *Mexico Limpio*

## *ONE*

Midwinter in the Mexico highlands. Darkness comes early, devouring the fragile light of afternoon, chilling the air. The pueblo's citizens call in their children and close their doors. Soon the vast lake beside them reflects only black night and the myriad lights, like diamonds afloat in eternity, that are the now-hidden life of the village. The elegant lake reflects light as well from the distant, opposite shore, of other villages withdrawn. Also hidden in darkness is the crown of mountains that surrounds and has sheltered the majestic lake since its primeval origins.

Into such a dark night the intrepid Polly Allen drove her Ford Escort through the narrow cobblestone streets of the village called Ajijic, in Mexico. She held back a smile. She had been holding it back all day, for she knew she must not indulge herself in the least congratulation, not until the prize was firmly in her pocket. But so close it was.

Beside her sat petite Greta Farnsworth, fourteen-year-old daughter of a recent acquaintance and the only translator Polly thought she could trust in the crucial encounter ahead. Greta sat straight in the seat and knew by the sullen severity of her new employer to keep silent. When Polly stopped beneath a street lamp to study the directions she'd scribbled on an envelope in haste that morning, Greta leaned and looked as unobtrusively as possible to see what Polly read. Greta had been told yet no details of their mission, though she expected nothing out of the ordinary, or memorable. The twenty dollars that would be her fee she would spend in Puerto Vallarta next week when her parents took her there. Greta wore a loose red and white striped tee shirt and levis and white athletic shoes. Straight blond hair, pulled back, hung in a ponytail to her shoulders.

Polly Allen, a fifty year old divorcee and expatriate, was short but large, and she seemed uncomfortably wedged between steering wheel and seat. Her blouse, canary yellow and full in the sleeves, hung loosely over her waist and upon the dark blue, heavily-pleated skirt that covered stout hips and stocky thighs. Her hair was black and straight and covered her ears. For tonight she'd chosen eyeglass frames of tortoise shell rather than the bright colorful assortment of frames she usually wore. She peered closer at the scribbles on the envelope. Finally she said, "Ah!", then refolded and tucked the envelope into her blouse pocket. She backed away from the streetlamp, the only one in view, and drove ahead again slowly along Calle Rivera, parallel to the lakeshore that was no more than a hundred meters away.

She repeated the house number to herself silently, though she was unsure if any such number would be upon the house. The house was said to be dark green, but every house appeared dark and of indistinguishable color. Senor Cuevas said, all else failing, she would know

it by the candle in the front window. That she could count on. It should be somewhere in the next two blocks, on the right. The Escort ambled ahead at five miles per hour as Polly squinted at the dark housefronts.

As she did so she said to her innocent companion, “When I find the house, we’ll be speaking with an old Mexican, Greta. This conversation isn’t anything complicated. You’re to translate immediately to me what he says so I can answer him. And you’ll translate that in Spanish back to him. Nothing hard. Soon after that conversation, if he gives me what I’m after, I’m going to meet two other men, and most of *that* conversation will be in English. However—in that second meeting, if *either* of those men talk Spanish to each other, I want you to translate *their* conversation to me immediately, regardless of how rude it may seem to you at the time. You understand?”

Greta spoke softly but certainly. “Yes.” She did understand; more than Polly assumed. For innocent though she may be, Greta could even so detect the mystery in Polly’s words. Hints of deception. This might not be the boring, ordinary little job she’d imagined. She stared ahead, even as she sensed her heart beat with this unexpected excitement. Greta had read plenty of Nancy Drew.

At last Polly saw the little candle in the window, in a house set back from the street. Her eyes brightened; she took a deep breath. She parked, the only car on all this dark street. Greta followed closely behind Polly as they climbed a brief dirt incline from the cobblestones to a level of hardpack whereupon stood the house, candle in window, perhaps thirty paces from the street. As they approached the house, Polly called out. “O-la! Senor Cuevas! O-la!”

Moments later a little man appeared from the side of the house carrying a kerosene lantern, which illuminated the innocent smile upon his face. The old man was small and slender as a child, shorter even than Polly’s five foot three, and not half her bulk. He offered each one in turn his leathered farmer’s hand. He was no longer young, but who could say his age: gaunt of face, dark indio, dressed in grimy pants, a shirt of uncertain color patched and repatched, dark hair uncombed, huaraches: portrait of the ancient peon.

He spoke a few words and indicated the house. They followed him and his lantern glow as it shifted over the ground, over concrete brick walls, around the corner and upon a blue tarp covering the doorway, which Senor Cuevas drew back so they might enter. Polly’s courteous smile was rigid; she would betray no distaste or dismay at these primitive conditions.

Though she saw it was preposterous to call it a house. Concrete bricks stacked by some miracle to form the walls of rooms, obviously not a cup of mortar to it. Castoff sheets of tin for roof laid across the walls overhead, only a few inches between her head and the tin. Floors were hardpack dirt. Old wooden boxes were tables, covered in bright cloth. The one easy chair and one sofa both sagged and were of no discernible color or pattern. Many pictures were on the walls, half without frames, most cut from magazines; some were children’s drawings. Two kerosene lamps burned on the biggest table, and four candles in jarlids fluttered on the box table beside the sofa.

She saw no sink in the kitchen, but only a makeshift platform with basins upon it. Beside that a rusted gas stove connected to a tall cylinder of propane propped against it. A doorway draped with a brown blanket led elsewhere, to sleeping quarters, to what else Polly refused to imagine. Would there be a bathroom, plumbing? Maybe, maybe not. She knew from her initial conversation with Senor Cuevas a week ago that he and his senora's four children lived here; one child's wife and their two children; and a bedridden uncle.

Senor Cuevas offered her the favored stuffed chair against the long wall. A penumbra of dust and filth seemed to rise and float where he touched it. Polly indicated that one of the two white plastic chairs by the door would be sufficient, and she sat there before he could say otherwise. Greta sat in the chair beside her employer. Confused that his visitors would refuse the best he had to offer, Senor Cuevas sat in the favored chair himself. He asked if he could serve them limonada, made from his own fresh limes. Greta translated.

Polly shuddered imagining that she might drink something prepared in that kitchen. Still, she forced a grateful smile and said No, she had just come from dinner. Polly studied his face a moment, saw this little man uncertain of his visitors. In that instant, however, she smelled something that was incongruous in this squalor-perfume. She sniffed again. It was there; then maybe it wasn't.

The paradox bothered her only a moment, however, and she returned her attention to business. Polly spoke to Greta, though her eyes still remained on the old peasant. "Tell Senor Cuevas that I've looked at his property. Tell him that I like it very, very much, that I'm certain I can sell it for him, and quickly. As soon as we sign the contract. All the terms are exactly as we agreed on when I spoke to him the last time." Greta spoke all this in Spanish. Polly removed from her purse the aforesaid contract and held it up for the landowner to see.

Senor Cuevas leaned forward in his chair, as if the better to see Polly and her document. Yet it was more than that, for he seemed to be searching her face for something she had *not* told him, something that troubled him. Polly, however, misunderstood him, interpreting that he was merely making a thoughtful, sentimental hesitation before taking this monumental step of selling a property his family had owned for more than a century.

As she allowed him this little wistful farewell, her mind wandered and in doing so she also scented again the pungent perfume, seemingly adrift in the air near her, and the paradox again teased, for who in this household of peasants would wear such sophisticated fragrance? It seemed to be part of the very chair she sat in. It was so familiar, she could almost say its name.

At last, his searching curiosity still unsatisfied, Senor Cuevas spoke several sentences, all imbued with the puzzlement that remained on his face, and which in translation would misdeceive Polly of her incorrect assessment of his hesitation. Greta listened politely, then reconstructed Senor Cuevas' sentences to Polly, even as Greta was thinking that this might not be good news to Polly. Or-who knew?-maybe someone had meant to save Polly the trip, and she'd be grateful.

Greta translated. "He says he is confused. Only a few hours ago someone else came with this contract and Senor Cuevas signed it. They said they were your friends."

Suddenly all these ugly pieces fit together. “Goddamn *Jade East!*” cursed Polly, naming the mystery fragrance; also then naming the conniving bastard who had no doubt contaminated this peasant’s hovel with it—“Goddamn *Ramon!*” And also naming the bastard’s inseparable other, who would also have been present, the leading wheeler-dealer, “And goddamn *Alfred!*”

Polly tried for hospitality’s sake to restrain her erupting rage, so that she also might get confirmation from this stupid farmer. “You mean to say that two men—one of them an American, one of them a younger, sweet-faced, charming Mexican, both of them fancy dressers—came here tonight, and gave you a contract to sign, giving exclusive rights to sell your goddamn eight-five acres?”

Trembling, Greta re-asked the question in Spanish, leaving out the swear word. The old man, seeing how this news so angered this senora, was now himself frightened, and he reverted to a cowering shyness that was natural to him. Feebly, he spoke and Greta translated. “Yes, yes, Senora. An americano and a mexicano. They said they worked with you. Senor Cuevas asked if he was wrong to do that?”

For all the fury that screamed inside her, Polly would not waste any of it on this old pathetic man. Alfred and Ramon loomed in her mind now like two cold moons, and she turned a silent fury on them both: utterly departed from the here and now, she cursed them and cursed them in every form that she knew. She let her rage flog them. But silently. And of so unfulfilling.

Greta and Senor Cuevas watched her face with alarm as it tensed and glared, unable either one to comprehend what passed behind that tortured façade of Polly Allen. For those silent moments she was a blind fury, and she saw neither peasant nor Greta nor anything in that room, only the deceitful cold moons of Alfred and Ramon. It was a smoking cauldron of poison she poured over them. She wanted to stomp and strangle; her hands quivered with it.

Yet the first wave of this silent, terrible fury must quickly pass: the war must be carried on, and she must be ready. The next battle had already begun. Therefore she must let this seething anger quiet and retreat and simmer deep inside her. Though it would assuredly not be forgotten: it would be the fire and brimstone fueling her vengeance on these two scoundrels. Davils, not partners.

When Polly once again returned to the here and now, her eyes still smoldered. She would assault Alfred and Ramon. They would not withstand her.

Finally fully back in the here and now, Polly recognized again the old peasant. Bitter but biding her time, Polly spoke to the old man the words that galled her. “Yes, it was wrong of him to sign that contract. That was *not* my contract. Those men had no right.” Because the agony within was too much to speak more than that, she turned to Greta and spoke abruptly. “That’s it. I’m taking you home. There won’t be anymore translating.”

Stunned, but beginning to realize that she must indeed be in the midst of the very mystery she’d hoped for, Greta Farnsworth could say no more than, “OK, Mizz Allen. I hope it’s nothing *too* bad.”

Because it was the spiked heel that spurred the fury she must ride into the coming battle, Polly spoke the crude numbers. "This property's selling for two million dollars. I'm supposed to get ten percent of that. So yes, it's bad."

Polly packed up quickly, ready to go. She would skip the farewell etiquette. Polly went to the blue tarped doorway and pushed her way through it and went outside. Though embarrassed at the sudden and unsocial departure, Greta stayed close behind her.

Senor Cuevas followed them outside with his lantern and walked behind them across the hardpack to the little incline that led them down to the parked Escort, but he could not keep up with them, and his shifting arc of light lagged behind them as well. Polly and Greta found the Escort, and they got in. Polly started up her car and made a sharp U-turn and drove rudely away: leaving the old man at streetside, in the depths of night holding his lantern high and looking into that darkness after something fast disappearing.

## *TWO*

Polly as quickly as possible unburdened herself of Greta to the girl's mother, with the briefest of explanations. Polly could then be without distraction and she could at last unleash her fury into the night, as she drove alone and hunted for her thieving partners. Neither the thieves' office phone nor their home phone answered. She drove to their mansion in the cow pasture and honked her horn out front and pounded on the wooden gates, but no one responded. She parked there and waited an hour, till she could sit still no more.

So she drove the highway from San Juan Cosala to Ajijic, and watched for either of their cars. In the village it was midnight, and no one drove the cobbled streets; even the taxi drivers had all gone home. She saw neither Ramon's nor Alfred's car anywhere.

She drove back to San Juan Cosala, the tempered fury still burning its steady flame in her blood; she must drive all night or wait somewhere till dawn. She waited outside the gates of the mansion again for two more hours, until she realized she would not find them before morning. Then she drove home to her own hacienda on Calle Aldama.

Even then she didn't sleep. She paced the dining room, where the Christmas tree blinked its lights year round. But for this grim, late night pacing, she must at last extinguish the Christmas lights: darkness would be her better friend.

When the Sun at last rose she was already on her third cup of coffee, for today nothing would be too much. She must wait two more hours for the office to open, and still no telephones answered.

At ten minutes before nine Polly parked a half block down the street on Morelos from Lakeside Realty. Like all the other employees Polly had a key to the office, but she thought it better tactics to be outside and surprise them. If they dared show themselves.

At nine precisely Rosario's little blue Volkswagen bug stopped in front. Rosario the dapper bilingual secretary and recent graduate of the University of Guadalajara, a flirty young man, and handsome, opened the gates to the courtyard, and drove inside. Before he could close the gates, Polly was at him.

She must treat them all as accomplices. She reached a hand out and stopped him closing the gate. Surprised, Rosario stood back and let her have what she'd already taken. From the night's long, ponderous meditations Polly's voice had sunk an octave, and when she spoke Rosario heard her as if she spoke to him from a deeper, denser dimension. "Where's Alfred and Ramon?"

Rosario the graduate could perceive the simmering violence in his fellow worker. Best he tell the truth and stay out of harm's way. "They're away on business in Guadalajara. They took off yesterday, late afternoon. Some new business."

"I just bet. What else do you know, Rosario? Believe me, this isn't the time to be hesitating with me."

He feared her. "OK, no one's sworn me to secrecy. I'll tell. There's an investor flying in from San Francisco today. At three-thirty. They're picking him up at the airport and bringing him back to the lake, probably to the Posada. Then—what else?—they'll go look at some property, I imagine."

She knew just where that property would be. Likely they'd be there about four-thirty or five. Polly let go of the iron gate and turned and went back across the street and got into her Ford Escort and drove away.

She arrived at the Cuevas property earlier than she'd planned. She walked out upon the long slope of hillside, barren as a desert, and she stared a bittersweet moment at the great extent of the precious property. A big rock outcropped near the middle of it. Only four scrubby trees were visible anywhere else. Little scattered clumps of leafless brushweed abounded, and no doubt all the hillside earth was rocky as hell. But a golden egg. In two years or three, several hundred luxury homes for Americans and Canadians would be built upon it, surrounded by a great wall. And she was a founding partner, though a minor one and female, which made it a certainty that she would have to fight like a tigercat for every dollar she might earn of that bonanza.

With consummate smug Polly saw Alfred's new black Range Rover turn off the carretera and move up the steep road toward them. He would see her Escort waiting. He would see her waiting in the field. And he could not now turn back. She had him.

The black Range Rover parked beside her dwarfed Escort, fifty yards from where Polly stood and stared maliciously at them. Only one person got out of the Rover: Ramon, the thirty year old Mexican so recently reborn and restyled, wearing pleated gray slacks and a silky pale shirt. Brazenly he waved at Polly, but Polly didn't wave back. She had strategically taken her stand

beside the great outcrop of rock that distinguished the property. The rock was thrice as tall as Polly, and massively huge, a great stubborn giant, immovable. Polly hoped these scoundrels would notice the similarity.

Ramon bravely came forward, so happy to see her. “My, my isn’t it a beautiful day?” Polly expected no less.

As he came near she smelled the Jade East in his hair, and this warmed her fires. “Fuck off, Ramon. Tell Alfred I want to talk to him. Right now. And I’d advise him to find an excuse to keep the investor in the car.”

“Investor?” Ramon said. Then he saw in Polly’s eyes that they were caught and that he must now be a little forthright. “Well, yes, the investor. Yes, good idea, leave him in the car. Alright, Polly, I’ll go tell Alfred your message. Actually, we’re really *so* glad you’re here. The sooner you meet Ed Bustamante the better.”

A little fire-tongue of her fury lashed out at him. “You’re a liar, Ramon. You’re *not* glad I’m here. Go get Alfred.”

Ramon went back, unhurried, still mindful of his dignity. He re-entered the black Range Rover. Darkly tinted windows revealed nothing inside. A moment later prim Alfred came out of the car and walked toward her, a pleasant smile on his face, happy to see his old friend. He wore tan linen slacks, crease pressed, and a bulky white v-neck sweater. He was only a few inches taller than Polly, and looked frail in comparison. However, he exuded confidence and charm.

Polly saw also that Ramon and two others had dismounted from the black Range Rover, but remained standing by the car. A handsome well-dressed latino man, and a woman taller than the latino or Ramon. To Polly’s chagrin the woman was Carlotta, the new sales woman who had arrived about a year ago from California with someone else Polly didn’t like. (She made a point of not remembering his name.) They’d built a house and now lived in it. Ramon gestured toward the lake, already pitching the investor. Tall Carlotta took notes.

There would be time for them later. Alfred stood in front of her, still as brassy as she’d expected him to be. She growled her grievance. “I want you to give it back to me, Alfred. That was a low trick. In broad daylight too.”

Alfred was impressed with her calm, for he knew Polly as a volatile woman. Today she indeed had cause. He had hoped to have had more time, and a sale to his investor, before he tried explaining his long reach. Still, there was nothing illegal in what he had done. “It’s understandable that you’d be unhappy, Polly. But if it’s a mistake, it’s an honest mistake. Ramon’s been looking for weeks in public records for *just* this kind of property. How could I have known it belonged to the same client *you* had been telling us about? You’d never mentioned the name *Cuevas* to us, now did you?”

Of course she hadn’t, but Polly knew how he lied about all the rest. She spit it at him, “You’re full of shit, Alfred. The truth is, you probably had Rosario follow me out to the property.”

He had not expected such concentrated vehemence. “Oh Polly, we’re not *that* mercenary. The courts are full of cases where two people wanted the same thing, and one of them got there first.”

Polly spoke it so the others wouldn’t hear them, but her words hissed at Alfred. “Fuck you, Alfred! Courts! You stole that from me and you’ll give it back to me! Or I’ll make your life hell! And I’ll start with your Senor Bustamante!”

Alfred stood back from her. He had never seen her so intense. She was capable of biting him. She stepped forward until she breathed on him, and she gave him one more. “You give it back or I’ll fucking tell Ramon all about you and Mal Voglio.”

Alfred squeaked, as if he’d been stepped on. “Polly, Polly! This is becoming rude. If we have a dispute, perhaps we should consult the law. Personal nastiness isn’t necessary.”

She sneered at him, and he drew back from her again. She said, “There isn’t going to be *anything* done with the law, Alfred. You stole that from me and you’re going to sign backover your commission in that contract to me. Or you’ll have me at your throat for the rest of your fucking life.”

Nothing he knew of her made these threats unlikely. “Well Polly, that seems extreme. Why not be fair and maybe we could say fifty-fifty?”

“No! You *knew* Cuevas was my man. And you beat my time. Christ, Alfred—we’re supposed to be some kind of *partners* in this project!”

“Oh yes, Polly, and we will be. And we could start that right no~so be fair, partner, fifty-fifty. I’ll say we both got to Cuevas at the same time.”

“No, you *sonuvabitch!*” she yelled, loud enough this time that the other three by the cars heard her and turned to look. Alfred cringed. Polly said, “You’d better be careful Alfred. I’ll embarrass the hell out of you in front of your investor.”

Alfred looked fearfully at her. “No, you wouldn’t! That’s cruel, Polly.”

Polly sneered again. “I really don’t care if your whole goddamn deal blows up, I really don’t. Investors come and go. He who has the property is king. Where have I heard that before?”

Alfred looked in her eyes, swarming with the glittering snakes of her fury. He saw she was capable of anything. “Don’t make the scene, Polly. He’s going to be hard enough to land. Alright, I give up. I’ll assign the commission over to you. But the buyer commission goes to me.”

Polly Allen would accept that. Now she could allow herself a little smile. “You’re lucky I didn’t find you last night, Alfred. I’d have crippled you for life.”

He flinched; but then he immediately joked it away, already maneuvering to reassert his superiority. “Oh we have our arguments, Polly, but you see, when I’m at fault, or even *maybe* at fault, how ready I am to make peace.”

Polly scoffed. “You made peace to save a lot of embarrassment for yourself ~you’re too dangerous.”

Alfred now had other worries. He looked nervously toward the investor. Polly said, “Go bring the investor, Alfred. And in future you’ll remember why I *never* trust you.”



As he went away, he tossed back over his shoulder, "Polly, you are *always* joking, that's why I can never take *you* seriously."

Alfred at the cars gathered his happy flock and urged them out onto the fabulous, barren property. The dark and handsome investor was shepherded between Alfred and Ramon. Pesty Carlotta walked to the side, carrying a clipboard and file folders.

Polly repressed her irritation as Alfred halted a little distance from her with his dark-skinned, handsome moneymen, where he kept up his tiresome jokes. He seemed to be making a point of not introducing his big client to Polly.

Today she would have none of that. She walked enthusiastically toward them and extended her hand to the investor, saying in her feeble Spanish, "Nombre Polly, gusto."

Alfred's cheerful investor replied to Polly only two words of Spanish, "Mucho gusto," and then in English he said, "I'm Ed Bustamante, and I'm not really Mexican, I'm American. And I'm embarrassed to say I don't know a word of Spanish, except a few phrases that every idiot knows." At this Alfred and Ramon smiled and gave their silent blessing to the introduction, then wandered off toward the rock outcrop to show their exceptional grace. They seemed to be studying the terrain, the hills above, the fabulous spread of the lake that showed itself so dramatically and gorgeously from horizon to horizon.

Ed Bustamante continued smiling at Polly, so charming—this charming she liked—and he went on. "Glad to meet you. Polly your name is?"

She had hardly spoken "Yes—Polly Allen," when Carlotta came up behind. She leaned between them all her six feet of overbearing stature and said, "Hi, Polly, buenos dias. I guess you've met Ed. Isn't he a cutie?" Which grated in Polly's ears. Carlotta could only have known him since the ride from the airport. Polly showed her a smile that conveyed all her disapproval, and then she turned back to Ed Bustamante, saying, "It's refreshing, really, to meet someone who doesn't make all those ridiculous pretensions of Spanish. All the important Mexicans speak English anyway. How do you like the view?"

He turned to see it, far broader and wider from this vantage so far above the village. He seemed impressed. "It's really something. It's like wall to wall lake. This is a perfect location, every house will have a super view."

Polly began walking again, following Alfred and Ramon to the rock, and Ed Bustamante walked beside her, his eyes going everywhere, studying everything, seeing if this would be the one.

Carlotta joined the group last and stood beside Polly. Carlotta wore a long, bright, flower print dress and cowboy boots. To Polly it was a frivolous and appalling outfit, considering the business importance of the moment. And Carlotta's perky patter irritated her continually. No doubt Carlotta thought she was making subtle contributions with Mr. Bustamante, pointing out what anyone could see. Polly would take cognizance of her only if forced to.

Alfred opened the map and handed it to Mr. Bustamante. "This is eighty-five acres," Alfred said as he drew a well-manicured finger along the blue lines that boxed in the property from the vast emptiness surrounding it. "The southern boundary is the highway, down below. The

upper boundary is much further up slope, on the other side of the knolls behind us. To the west it extends beyond that swell and over the next knoll. And east, to this road, where we're parked."

Ed Bustamante nodded thoughtfully as he looked about him and surveyed the expanse of the property. Yet he turned back to Alfred with a critical squint in his eye and said, "I'm very impressed with this, sure. But I'm concerned about the water permits, the wells. I think we'd better talk about that before anything else."

Ramon's smile showed how reassured their investor would be when he heard Alfred's answer. Alfred gestured with his free hand to the plentitude before them as he began his speech. "All our water comes from the lake, and from the ground water beneath it, and of course even beneath us, where we stand on this hill. The lake's sixty miles long and fifteen miles wide—there's plenty for everyone, wouldn't you say, Ed? Water permits for house construction are given routinely, usually in a matter of days. And the cost is trivial, compared to the same costs in the US. Our project will be granted water permits like any other project. We may have to pay a *little* more and we may have to wait a *little* extra time to get all the permits we need. But no *significant* wait. That's the truth."

**Ramon believed his own wit and** levity kept the clients light-hearted and softened them for Alfred's suave persuasion. Thus Ramon must interject, "It's to our great advantage that we're on *very* friendly terms with the local officials—I'm sure you know what I mean. We grease the wheels, as you Americans so cleverly say, and then the wheels run smoothly. Besides," he winked, already enjoying a joke he hoped they'd catch, "it is not in the official's nature to refuse the grease. It is an old, old tradition."

"That's exactly right, Ed," Alfred continued, immune to jokes. "In a few minutes Andres from the water permit office should be here to answer your questions more specifically. I'm sure you'll be more than satisfied about that. In the meantime I think you'll want to hear some of our plans for this fabulous project." Alfred hesitated and smiled, knowing this was exactly what Mr. Bustamante had come to hear. "We're going to call it MexicoLimpio. It's going to be unlike anything that's been done in Mexico up to now. It'll be the model for all future American and Canadian developments."

Polly saw the smile lurking in Ed Bustamante's face, which she knew could also be a skeptic's smile. Though today the boys were in good form.

"We're going to build a big wall around all of it. A big guard house at the gate. Nobody gets past the guard. Or the TV cameras. Which will be everywhere."

Ed Bustamante had leaned back against the rock monolith, settled his hands in his slacks pockets and gave Alfred all his attention. He gave him also a little smile, a good faith down on a good story, something he could take home and sell this thing with.

Alfred enthused. "So imagine it—four hundred quality homes, on big lots, some with swimming pools, all with this same fabulous view. And protected. Walled in. Guarded day and night. And then we'll have a small but *very* comprehensive shopping mall in the center of the community—all the most necessary things. We'll lease some of them to famous franchises. But you

see what I mean? The home owners who don't *want* to leave the compound—you know, to go mixing with the natives and all—“

Ramon could not at this point resist completing the happy picture. “And believe me, we've researched it—most of them *don't* want to. *Well!* Now they won't have to! They'll *never* have to leave the compound if they don't want to.”

Alfred allowed the intrusion, then resumed. “Our homeowners have everything they want right inside their own castle walls. And they're still in Mexico.”

Ramon felt the need for a capper, and he spoke it with delight. “But you see what we mean?—MexicoLimpio? Mexico! Without the dirty parts!”

Polly heard Carlotta twittering behind her, heard the pest say, “Oh, well, oh...uh Alfred—is that really *true*? I mean about everyone wanting to live in a closed compound? I thought it was just the opposite. Don't most people come here to get to know the people, to see what Mexico's *really* like? Max and I are pretty close with the men from the barrio who built our house. Especially we're close with our maestro Lupe.”

Polly cringed, even closed her eyes; but she heard Alfred field the loose cannonball with a customary smoothness she should have expected. “Oh my *no*, dear Carlotta. Though I understand why you might think that. You had that wonderful experience hiring your crew, building your own house, cooking little lunches for them. So yes, I understand. And you're *so* good to raise the point and give me an opportunity to explain it further. Thank you, dear.”

Alfred closed. “Okay, Ed. Ten years ago there was one agency in the village and it sold maybe ten houses every year. Maybe. Now there are ten *agencies* in town, and they sell *hundreds* of houses a year. And more. The snowbirds are moving down here like crazy—that you know. But it's only been in the last few years that living in walled communities has been possible. There are only a few small ones in town, and they're always filled. But now, when new Americans or Canadians come to the office, or when they call us, they want to live in a walled community, with a guard house, eighty percent of them. It's the first thing they want, even before they tell us how many bathrooms they want. MexicoLimpio will be the ultimate in walled-in communities, and *all* the gringos will want to live here. We *might* sell our four hundred houses in a couple years. Who knows—we might end up selling MexicoLimpio franchises—why not? MexicoLimpios all over Mexico. We could advertise on the internet. In US newspapers, and Canadian. I know you can keep up with those numbers, Ed.”

Those numbers. Polly had done them up herself long ago and even today she hardly dared recount them to herself. So many, many zeroes. Ed Bustamante leaned forward away from his rock and smiled a bottom-liner's satisfaction. “Yeah, I see those numbers. But what about the other numbers? How much seed money do you need to get this project planted?”

Alfred shifted gears happily, staying right with him. “Before we can sell the first house we'll need to build some infrastructure—a significant amount of wall, the guardhouse, some streets and two or three models. Three preferably. And sewer lines beneath the streets. The power lines

as you can see are along the highway. It won't take much to bring the power in a little further. And we'll lay it underground. I'm expecting we'll be able to do phase one for a couple million."

Ed Bustamante frowned. "Is that all? It doesn't seem like enough. Not for buying the land too."

Alfred brushed that aside. "The land will be *my* half of the investment. You won't need to worry about that end of it. That's why I'd be a full half partner. That is, my company, MexicoLimpio, would be a full half partner."

Polly would have gasped had the others not been present. Alfred's brazen declaration she had not expected. Surely Alfred had some angle here, some later counter-ploy in mind. She was sure he didn't have enough money to buy out Senor Cuevas. Not after he'd put most everything he had into his mansion.

Ed Bustamante seemed to like what he had heard. "I'll need renderings of the models, of the entrance and the guard house, some floorplans, and some kind of prospectus. And your projections of expenses and sales, in quarterly increments."

Polly had seen none of these things, but Alfred didn't blink. "Of course. I can have all that for you right away."

As Polly heard these princely numbers announced and compounded, she let her attention diverge and follow a yellow and blue third class bus along the highway, laying a trail of dark diesel smoke behind itself. She saw it shudder to a stop near their road, and saw a speck of human climb off. Then she watched the bus ease back onto the highway, precisely into the drifting smoke cloud that had caught up with it. The tiny human moved away from the carbon cloud as the bus shuddered into faster motion, escaping its own pursuing exhaust, heading for San Juan Cosala around the bend.

The human climbed the dirt road toward them. It was obviously an effort, for he stopped often.

Carlotta still stood beside Polly and glanced at her moment to moment, no doubt wishing to say something distractive. But Polly kept her eyes on the plodding road-climber, allowing her as well to cleverly demonstrate the secondary importance of Carla's conversation. Of Carla herself. To this speck in the roaddust.

Having failed to attract Polly's attention, Carlotta herself tried to make out what so occupied Polly down the slope. Presently Polly spoke, but her words were to herself. "Well, could it be that this is our man from Obras? But it doesn't look like Andres."

When the stranger was three-quarters up the hill, Ramon, Alfred and Ed Bustamante also stopped talking to watch the figure approach. When this young man eventually arrived at the parked cars and started shambling across the field toward them, Alfred seemed to recall who he was, for he walked toward him waving, saying, "Buenas tardes." The young man waved back and spoke the same greeting.

It's Andre's flunky, Polly realized suddenly. Alfred couldn't possibly have been expecting this guy. But this was all wrong. This guy must be bringing some news that Andre was too coward to tell us face to face.

The flunky had dressed much more fashionably than Andres ever would have, poor as this fashion was. He wore a striped shirt, short sleeved, pale yellow, tan slacks with no crease, and old black shoes, forgivably dusty. He was large in the chest, larger around the middle. His face was round, pudgy like the body. His long black hair had been combed straight back, but now it flopped onto his forehead, despite his repeated efforts to push the hair back. Closely shaved, he was a young man, not much more than twenty. His quick eyes glanced briefly at Alfred. He offered them all a humble, tortured smile. Then he looked nervously away, to the sky, to the mountaintop, to the lake, to all the rocks scattered here and there. He lit a cigarette with tiny stick matches from a box.

Alfred stood beside him. They shook hands as Alfred spoke something in Spanish which no one else heard. This young man laughed anxiously. Then he spoke in English what everyone heard; and he spoke it so expertly that he could have been a native of California, rather than this sad Mexican who earned no more than one dollar thirty cents an hour working for Obras Publicas in Chapala. "Glad to know you too, Mr. Alfred, my name's Fonzo. But I lived in LA four years, I went to school at Santa Ana JC. We can speak English. OK if I smoke?" Alfred continued his confused smile at this Fonzo, who exhaled looking at the ground. Alfred didn't bother to answer.

Polly watched Ed Bustamante leisurely drift toward this newcomer. Ramon followed a little behind him, no doubt with the idea of shepherding. But all of that was wasted effort anyway, for obviously all of this would be in English. Carla followed behind Polly. Alfred introduced Fonzo to everyone. Polly shook Fonzo's hand and watched him fake the smile, watched the eyes flit away.

Meekly Fonzo explained a complicated reason that kept Andres from meeting them.

Irritation displaced Alfred's smile as he spoke to this Fonzo the messenger. "Andres knows this property though--am I right? He told me last week he'd been out and taken a look." Fonzo nodded vaguely, uncertainly, that this was true. Probably. Maybe.

Polly saw that Alfred's smile had become a flawed cosmetic and threatened to break apart. Alfred, incredulous, said, "But what does he say about the wells? I told him we'd need probably two big wells dug here, for two hundred houses this year, one or two hundred more next year--he said it would be no problem. He said anything past Rancho del Oro was no problem. I spoke with him five days ago."

Fonzo looked puzzled. Discomfort started his eyes roving again, and he drew a little wire-bound notebook from his shirt pocket and opened it. He flipped through two or three blank pages, then closed it and replaced it in the same pocket. Fonzo extended his open palms at his sides to show them all that--not only did he not *know it*, in his head--but that he also didn't have it, in his hands, this something they wanted.

Then suddenly a light seemed to go on for Fonzo. He glowed a happy surprise. “Oh *now* I understand! *Water permits!* You confused me—Andres didn’t tell me anything about *wells*. But you must mean *water permits*, of course. Ohhh! Yes—Andres told me to tell you that he can definitely promise you one, maybe two water permits, every month, depending on what the commission in Guadalajara says.”

Ed Bustamante was a few feet away, trying to look composed, but showing a little squint of disenchantment anyway. Alfred struggled with his own composure, a sudden spastic twitching in his jaw that Polly knew from experience to be Alfred at his limits. She saw his face flush. He wouldn’t let himself go in front of Bustamante, she was sure of that, but he would not be pretty holding back.

She felt the least bit detached watching all this. There was even a slightest enjoyment seeing smug Alfred up against the wall. Risk for her too though it was.

Fortunately for them all, Ramon spoke to Fonzo rapidly in Spanish, smiling lustroously all the while. However, Ramon spoke something that made Fonzo suddenly *not* so pleased with himself, which made him instead revert to his former anxious, unconfident self. Slumping shoulders, he listened to Ramon continue so cheerfully, as if he were describing to Fonzo a trip the lucky young man had just won to the seashore. What Ramon spoke could not be such happy news of course, because Fonzo grew pale listening. He stared transfixed at Ramon, the first time he had allowed his eyes to rest for long on any of them.

Ramon ceased his Spanish. Still smiling like a happy bearer of good tidings, he turned to Ed Bustamante and said, “Please excuse me, but Mexican etiquette required us to be private that moment. Now—Fonzo’s family owns a factory in Chapala—everyone has heard of them. They are the largest employers on the lake, an old family, very wealthy. I know of one of the uncles, a fine man, Sebastian Suarez. I was reminding Fonzo in our little Spanish conversation that his experience with the family business has perhaps given him a confidence that is not warranted in his new job with Obras Publicas. You see his command of English seems perfect, even like an American. Yes—but *sometimes* he may make his translations in English and be confident of them, even when he may be *misunderstanding* words and terms that he has not used much before. Such as these terms used in building and construction and property development. With second languages it is easy to be confused. Is that not so, Fonzo?”

Fonzo stared at his shoes and spoke with great sadness, “Yes, sir. At times I don’t understand well.”

Alfred suddenly revived, refilled miraculously with optimism. He said to Ed Bustamante, “Sadly, our official has sent a boy to do a man’s job. I know he’s confused—you see how he doesn’t understand the difference, in English, between wells and water permits. But this is easily rectified. We’ll go, you and I, tomorrow to Andres’ office and we’ll get it from the horse’s mouth. We’ll have our wells, he’s promised me. You’ll see.”

Ed Bustamante still looked warmly at Alfred and nodded, showing complete confidence. Polly couldn’t help smiling. How graceful. Ed Bustamante could believe them, or he could watch

them all flame out-it really didn't matter which. There were a hundred business opportunities like this, especially if your heart was set on the maverick money in Mexico, which his heart obviously was. Alfred, Ramon and Carlotta hovered now around Ed Bustamante, laughing, so friendly, oh nothing for anyone to worry about, certainly not about these pieces of paper.

Fonzo stepped away from that company and lit another cigarette. Happy to be at last unnoticed, he shuffled toward the big rock and leaned back against it, eyes toward the lake. Polly followed him there.

"Hi, Fonzo. I'm sorry about what happened back there, it wasn't your fault."

"Oh I know," he said, not looking at her, "Ramon said that too. Along with all the rest of the heavy stuff he said. But I don't care. I don't like this Obras job anyway. I won't be there long." But when he looked at her again, he startled her: his eyes sparkled, he had a sly, jokey grin. He spoke as if she were his old friend. "The thing is, I *could* really help you. When I came here today I didn't know anything. Andres didn't tell me *anything*. He just gave me that little message. I thought he wanted me to do it because I spoke English. But I didn't know this was such a big deal. But one thing I do know-you're not gonna get all that water you want. Not *wells*. Not unless you know the President of Mexico, or somebody like that."

Polly's heartbeat seemed to falter and her head went light. Not possibly true, was it? Andres had promised Alfred. How could this kid Fonzo know more than they did?

But he was persuasive. "I've only been working in Obras for three weeks now, but I'm around the chief all day. He's Andres' boss, and that's all I hear-how everybody wants water permits and how there's a prohibition, and they just *can't* give out anymore. The Governor's even watching it. And I'm talking about one permit here, one there. And you guys want-some *wells*. What?-hundreds of permits? I don't *think* so."

Polly now, as she struggled to keep calm, urgently tried to persuade herself that despite this sudden grim news, there might be a note of hope in what he'd hinted, that he could help them. She said, "OK-so what can *you* do?"

The grin widened. "Because of my family. Like Ramon said. They're bigtime. The biggest. The biggest factory, the biggest employer on the lake, for sixty years. I've got cousins and uncles and aunts and grandfathers everywhere-lawyers, judges, policemen, head of this, head of that, you name it. My uncle Sebastian's the biggest of all. He's good friends with the Governor of Jalisco. The Governor has lunch with my uncle every time he comes to town. They drink together, just the two of them sometimes, all afternoon. My uncle has a special secret room where all the big shots go and make their deals. The Power Room." He paused, enjoying the impression he knew he was making.

But Polly was skeptical. "But you said I'd have to know the President to get that many water permits. So you're saying that knowing your family's as good as knowing the President?"

He snorted. "*No!* But damn near! And no, I'm not saying even *my* family could get you two hundred water permits *right this minute*. As you must know, if you've lived here a while, the

truth is, nobody should be getting *any* new water permits as long as the lake's getting smaller every year. *But*-if you knew the right people, and paid a little here, a little there, and could be patient, you could get a lot more water than anybody else. That's all I'm saying."

"A hundred permits?"

He looked away; he blew a stream of smoke skyward. He grinned again. "Maybe."

Polly laid a warm hand on his shoulder. She smiled. "Fonzo, how about I give you a lift home. The afternoon's getting a little chilly, I'd hate to see you walk back down the hill, and then have to wait who knows how long for that crummy bus."

He stood away from the rock. He flicked his cigarette stub away, and looked at her warmly. "I would really appreciate that."

Fonzo walked back beside her. When they came to the others Polly leaned intimately to Alfred and said, for only him to hear, "I'm gonna drive Fonzo back to Chapala-that sound like a good idea?"

He gave her a quick look of disgust. "Thanks, I don't want to see that little shit Fonzo ever again. But I'll see *you* tomorrow. Good work, Polly. And sorry about that misunderstanding yesterday with Cuevas. Really."

Of course she owed him not even a goodbye. She nodded and smiled and just walked away, keeping this little chubby Fonzo for herself.

## *THREE*

Ramon was free until four o'clock.

He drove his blue Chevy Sport a little recklessly toward Jocotepec, wanting to hurry past that grimy, distasteful pueblo situated on the western extremity of the lake. He hated everything about the poverty, the filth, the ugly architecture, the sad stone faces of the plodding citizens who would never know anything but this. He shivered as he hurried by, recognizing everywhere the ghosts of his own recent past.

Only when he was well beyond that grime and doom and he was comfortably upon the Guadalajara highway was he able to settle back in his seat and dial up his favorite station. He let the peppy music invigorate his blood as he cruised the broad highway among farms and hills giving way to distant horizons, even the ocean way, way out there: feeling the joy of the truant. He bobbed his head to the music and sang out the "*Ya, ya, ya, madre meeee-heeee-yaa-haa*" of the chorus. He would even buy a pack of cigarettes at the Gato.



As he drove at last among the spare, drab houses of the Zapopan district of Guadalajara that he had a year ago been so happy to escape, he well understood the irony of this, today's daring flight of escape, which returned him to it.

He drove a familiar route to the far end of Zapopan, where fewer neighbors, certainly fewer prosperous ones, would be witness to and complain about the stealthy, exotic customers of El Gato Negro. He parked where only two other cars were parked. In the old days he had rarely gone there so early in the day. Today when he entered he saw only indistinct shapes moving in the dim light, two slow-dancing, two or three more sitting separately at the bar. Reynaldo the bartender he recognized, who nodded pleasantly, as if he had seen Ramon only yesterday. Ramon stood near the door, waiting for his eyes to bring him more detail, thinking one of those at the bar could be Babina.

As he waited a little sadness invaded him. The Gato had always meant joy and excitement to him. This was where he'd discovered himself, where he'd made so many friends, where he'd learned that life could be joyous. It was also where he'd met Alfred. That of course had been the peak of all happiness. Then he'd said goodbye to the Gato, had moved back to the lake with Alfred, to live a fabled life, a newmade man. Even so, a little sadness continued wriggling inside him and made him uncomfortable; made him suddenly want to turn and leave.

But of course he couldn't do that. He must talk to Babina. And the sadness was not the fault of the Gato. He thought it might even be a terrible permanent flaw in his mind—this seeing imprisonments and escapes that might become new imprisonments themselves. He saw how funny it was. A dog chasing its tail. The Gato was only the most memorable of all his life's jails and escapes.

He saw Babina come out the bathroom door, saw him dressed modestly, only a blue sash around his waist. His levis he'd rolled to his knees, exposing shapely, shaved calves—only these might indicate his eccentricity. His shiny, dark hair today lay uncurled over his ears, upon his collar. Babina saw Ramon and smiled; he wore no makeup that Ramon could see.

They walked toward each other and hugged like old friends, and then sat at the table nearest them. Babina asked in Spanish, "Anything to drink?"

"No, I have business back at home later today. But have something if you like—I'll buy."

Babina signaled to Reynaldo behind the bar that they would order nothing. Then he turned to his friend and said, "How goes it, amigo? How goes the capitalista?"

Ramon smiled greatly, despite himself, suddenly again becoming the salesman he thought he had left behind in the village. "Oh I'm fabulous, fabulous. New clients, new projects, the palace is all finished, lots of parties. How about you?"

Babina smiled without envy. "Good for you, as it should be. And me? I'm doing what I like. Sleeping late, hanging out at my favorite bars, still making good money. Trying to keep away from the bad drogas."

These stories did not surprise Ramon, though they did return him to his sadness. "I worry about you, Babina. About these strangers you go home with. Don't you worry about the disease?"

Babina shrugged. "I protect myself. Most of the time." Then he laughed. "And I lift weights now. I go to a gym—you won't believe how strong I am—none of these guys would mess with me."

Suddenly the life of El Gato seemed like a long, long time ago. Though he still loved Babina, and always would. But who knew, back in those days, that it would come to this? (Or maybe they all knew, and it was just him now, seeing it as strange and remote, who was the alien one.)

In those days it had all seemed innocent enough. Even outrageous Babina, still in the village high school, taking the hormones and dressing up like a puta, hair in braids, lots of makeup, like the joke of a puta, walking around the barrio. Then, when they'd all taunted him, daring him to go to the plaza like that, he'd done it. Then he'd done more, he'd gone up to the carretera, where Babina had walked up and down waving at the cars. Before long he wore gowns and feathered shawls as he paraded. Finally he'd started taking money from strangers who would pick him up and take him places. He was the one to laugh last. He was the one with money to buy all the pretty things he wanted, to go to Guadalajara when he wanted, wherever he wanted. He came back to the barrio with stories they wouldn't believe; or believed and became terrified of him, of what he might talk them into. Those friends he had frightened stopped meeting him and they became humble, respectable citizens again.

But none of those stories had scared Ramon. Babina not only taught him to laugh, Babina taught him not to be afraid of who he was.

Ramon withdrew from inside his jacket a long leather wallet and opened it and picked out a folded pair of five hundred peso bills and handed them across the table to Babina. "I want you to have this." Babina took the money and slipped it into his jeans pocket without any show of surprise. Ramon continued. "I know this won't keep you off the streets, but maybe you'll be more selective."

Babina looked at him as if he were amused. "Thanks, amigo. But I'm good as ever, Ramon, you shouldn't look so sad. Or maybe you're sad about something else. Yes? You said on the phone you wanted to get in touch with Amelio again. That makes me think you're not as happy at home as you say you are."

Ramon shifted in his seat, wishing to explain himself well, but he could only say, "Oh Amelio, you know, he really makes me laugh, I miss him. It's been a long time."

"So you're saying you don't get to laugh so much these days?"

Ramon knew it would be like this. He wanted the favor; he was even willing to talk about Amelio, even confess a little lust. But he didn't want to talk about Alfred. Not to Babina. But as he thought of what else he might say, how else he might explain himself, he knew it would be impossible to leave Alfred out of it.

As he looked at Babina, still amused, Ramon knew that Babina might also be recalling that night at the Gato when Ramon had first met Alfred. He and Babina that night had gone there together, already half drunk, determined to pick up the first boys that made a pass at them.

Babina had seen Alfred first, who was sitting alone near the juke box, dressed in a prim suit and tie, obviously a first timer at the Gato. Babina had dismissed him immediately; but something about this awkward loner appealed to Ramon. Ramon had gone to the juke box, had laughed to tell him that he could never find a good song, and Alfred had immediately bought him a drink.

However, Alfred was more than he'd seemed. He had a quiet wit. A busload of sophistication. He'd been very successful in Houston as a veterinarian. And he was a little shy, and that had appealed to Ramon especially, for Ramon had a talent with the shy ones. He knew how to make them dance.

So he had stayed there at the table with this Alfred, while Babina got drunk with two American soldiers and eventually took them both back to his little room in Zapopan. Ramon and Alfred had talked till the Gato closed. Ramon had been too embarrassed to ask him to come to his own shabby room in the same building where Babina lived; and Alfred had seemed reluctant to invite Ramon to return to the village where he lived. There had been a few drunken kisses and a few squeezes here and there, and then they'd each gone home alone.

But they had agreed to meet again the next weekend. Oddly, the anticipation had made Ramon shy. He let Alfred talk, and Alfred had opened up. He became the master, Ramon the eager protege. Alfred had traveled everywhere, but he had settled in the village for good. He'd bought two acres in San Juan Cosala, five miles down the road from Ajijic, and he had begun building a very large house there. He would likely spend everything he had on it. It would have a swimming pool; all the grounds would be landscaped; there would be two little guest cottages. Of course it had a spectacular view of the lake. He wanted Ramon to see it.

That night he had. Though the entire project had been still months from being completed, the living room, kitchen and two bathrooms were finished opulently, with fifteen foot ceilings everywhere and twenty feet in the grand salon. Marble in the baths and Italian tiles throughout the kitchen. Ramon had stared in unabashed awe.

As a sliver of Moon rose over the lake, they had set on the wide deck still without its balustrade, which overlooked the pit that would be the swimming pool, toasting each other in brandy and espresso. Alfred had told him he had other dreams too, that he'd thought of opening his own real estate agency. It had surprised Ramon that a man wealthy enough to build such a house—paying for all of it with his own savings—would also work.

Yet Alfred did work, and he freely confessed it, saying he had to do always something. New plans, new dreams. One such dream might be the new real estate office in Ajijic. In the two years Alfred had been there he had learned the trade well; his Spanish was fluent and he could out sell all the others. Yet he knew he'd make far more with his own agency. Ramon could well imagine such success for Alfred. Such an adventurer Alfred had seemed to him, such revolutionary ideas and ambitions. Who could say what future schemes he might think of?

In less than a month Ramon had been sharing the master bedroom with the master. Never had he seen such elegance. Both wardrobe closets were marbled and mirrored. More importantly, Alfred had taught Ramon real estate, and quickly Ramon had sold two houses to gringos and with

the commission had bought himself a Spanish gentleman's wardrobe. Then it had all happened so fast. They had been mobbed by gringo clients; they'd made a quick rise to the top; everybody envied them. And now this, Mexico Limpio, fighting on through obstacles, but lots of money in his pocket. More of course in Alfred's.

Babina listened sympathetically. So then why does he think about Amelio? Why has he come back to the Gato?

Ramon bowed his head. "I concede. At heart I'm still a wild man, just like you told me I would always be." And then he looked up, showing but a flash of that irrepressible smile, and adding, "Or maybe I'll surprise myself. Maybe this will all be too much for me, and I'll just go home in a few minutes from now."

Babina's smile grew. "Not much chance of that, amigo. I've seen you too much in action."

"Or maybe I just want to talk to Amelio. I need to see the gang again."

"Amelio's not just one of the gang. Not to you."

"So what! Doesn't everyone have someone like that?"

Babina gave it up, for of course he had always had someone like that. Many someones. "Yes, everyone should."

So Ramon had the last word. "Please, tell Amelio to leave a message with you, when and where I can call him. I've got a nice car, I come into Guadalajara all the time. Or we can meet anywhere."

Babina frowned. "So I guess you're not going to talk about Alfred? You could trust me. When did I ever hold out on you? Shit, I told *you* about every fucking *one* of them."

This seemed to loosen Ramon a notch; he laughed. "Oh it's much harder than I thought it would be. To talk about Alfred I mean. To myself I complain all the time about him. Yes, I have many complaints. I always think it would be great to have someone to tell them all to. But now that you invite me to tell you, it feels~no, it's impossible. Alfred is so private, so careful. And he has been *very* good to me. Suddenly it seems not right to talk about him. He burns me up with anger *so* many times. So *much* is not fair. But no~that is all I can say about him. Enough to know, amigo, that I want to talk to Amelio."

Babina smiled. "So...sounds like you're in love with Alfred to me. "

Ramon's delicate fingers fluttered up from the table like startled sparrows as he blushed and said, "Perhaps I am. Even though you always said I was too cynical truly to be in love. I don't know. Most times it seems I am in love. But sometimes, no it doesn't. But hey!"~and suddenly it was Ramon the showman again, effusive, ebullient~"Enough of this heavy talk! Things have been going so well with us. We have a new exciting project, a walled-in community that will be the talk of the town."

"Which town is that, Cha Cha?" he asked, using Ramon's name from the old days.

But even recalling that name, and how strange it sounded to him now, even that could not diminish him. "You know exactly what I mean, Babina. Money makes things happen. Especially in Mexico. In another year I could be a rich man."

“Then I will *never* see you again.”

Ramon laughed at the thought of so much success, so many changes to his life. “Oh of course you will see me again, Babina. I will have all the freedom that money can buy.”

“How much is that?” But then he sat straight and looked seriously at Ramon. “Let’s not talk about this business. It’s boring. Making money, spending money—nothing new in that. Tell me what else you’re doing with your life. Besides business.”

Ramon slumped back in his chair, so easily deflated. A little sadly Ramon said, “I don’t mean to be throwing this at you, Babina, about the money. But you see, the money has let me come out. In my own way. Not so extravagantly as you. But then I could never be you.” And with that he brightened again, reached out to touch his hand, and said, “You’ve always been my idol, Babina. I know I’ve told you many times. Even in those old days, when you were prancing on the carretera in your scandalous outfits, you scared me to death—but still, I thought you were a hero, and I would have done that too—if I had had the courage.” Babina’s eyes softened; Ramon continued. “No—I could never have been you, however much I wanted that. But now, don’t you see, I have the money and the position to flaunt my style, in my own way. Believe me, none of the agents or brokers—for that is what I am, Babina, not just a salesman, but a broker. None of my colleagues in the business would dare dress the way I do. Oh it is all within the bounds of what is acceptable—but just barely. Oh but I make them wince, I promise you! Some of my shirts and vests are shocking to them. And I am *so* friendly. They just can’t *be* friendly the way I do it. I see it startles them, I see it in their eyes. See—I’m still a bad boy. But I like that. So I wear my flashy clothes, every day, in important client meetings, to meetings of the Chapala Society where it is *all* gringos. Even when I go to the mayor’s office to ask his support in important matters. Oh yes, I shock them. Not like you did, Babina. But I shock them.”

Ramon was happy to see this amused Babina, who spoke again warmly. “So what do your old friends in the village think of you now, Cha Cha?”

Ramon laughed. He leaned forward, confidentially, though no one was near or interested, and he spoke quietly but with glee. “No one recognizes me! Believe it! No one. I see them—Roderigo, Hortensia, Carillo. Sometimes I see them in the plaza, or on the street, but they don’t know me! And I don’t say anything, because I don’t want to embarrass them by showing off my success. I know you can recall how I looked in the old days, my hair down to my shoulders. I was a little gordo, I had pimples, I wore ugly, shabby clothes. I went barefoot half the time.” He laughed, it was such a good joke. He leaned back in his chair, spread his arms that Babina might see all of his fine clothes, and the colossal smile. “Yes—how could they know me? My smart executive haircut, my four thousand peso suits, my silk shirts. It is a wonderful disguise—no?”

Babina smiled at this story, and seemed to enjoy the contemplation of it. Ramon glanced toward the bar and saw the figures of Reynaldo the bartender and the thin curly blonde boy he spoke to all in shadow. All the while their images in the long mirror came alive in colors, then extinguished, over and over, as the Christmas lights around the mirror blinked on and off. Ramon didn’t know the boy with Reynaldo. Nor the two others further down the bar. This could

be any normal bar. The cockateels came out after dark. He remembered those nights, warmly. As he did so he realized as well the old gang would probably not recognize him here either, so complete was his disguise. This part of the joke was not so funny.

He turned back to Babina. "Want to dance?"

Ramon watched Babina scoot his chair back and rise. Ramon looked away and paused to let the sad musica of the guitarras and trumpets from the juke box take hold of him. He watched Babina's eyes become dreamy, as he swayed his torso a little side to side.

This was the Babina he'd wanted to see. Then Babina turned, so sultry, toward Ramon, and he opened his arms to him. Ramon stepped forward, took his hand, then settled his other hand on the strong muscles of Babina's back. He let the musica enter him too, and they each let the musica move them onto the open floor where they were the only ones.

Their bodies gradually settled into each other. So perfect, yes, thought Ramon--this is what I came for, this, with Babina. Just like old times. For them the juke box played the old songs, the sad songs. And they danced, holding tight to each other. They didn't speak anything as they danced. Just like the old times.

## *FOUR*

At four o'clock precisely Ramon returned to the mansion in San Juan Cosala.

He turned off the carretera onto his own familiar, rutted dirt road, where on both sides many fence posts leaned and others had fallen, where barbed wire hung so loosely it kept out neither man nor beast. This momentary passage through these cow pastures to the manison was not pleasant for Ramon, but it was an embarrassment he'd learned to live with. Two right turns and a left, then a last narrow passage between a telephone pole and Senor Rudolfo's capsized galvanized feeding trough--in all probably four hundred meters of everything ugly. No use trying to miss the cow pies; the gardener knew to wash off the tires immediately.

Nonetheless, once he passed through the manorial gates, and once those four meter tall timbered barriers slammed shut, this palace and its gardens and waterfalls and princely view could be for all anyone might guess on the slopes of the Italian Riviera. Or so Ramon imagined, who had seen recently a picture of an estate overlooking the Italian Riviera. Even if sad Lake Chapala was not the Mediterranean Sea.

Stoop-shouldered Antonio the gardener came around the corner as Ramon stepped out of his Chevy Sport. Ramon handed him the keys and said, "I see a little mess on the fenders there, Antonio, get that too. Then you can put it in the garage." Antonio felt compelled by his master's easy, famous smile to return one of his own, humble as it must be and no match for the other.

Tall round pillars framed the broad steps rising to the oak and beveled glass double doors of the entry. The door clicked open with the precision of a bank vault. He entered, then stopped,

listening: he heard no sound. He sighed, since at least for a moment he might regard this fabulous vista that always thrilled him when he came through the big doors: the wide and soaring space of the foyer and the living room's grandeur, the wall of glass that separated interior from the equally elegant exterior of patio and its carved stone balustrade; and beyond that the pool and the waterfall, the garden's flourishing agapanthus and hibiscus and palms and passion flower vines. Beyond all that, best of all, the beautiful lake sparkled in the summer Sun like the shimmering of diamonds in a miner's pan. He sighed again.

Then he heard Alfred's welcoming home voice from an unseen sector. "Just in time, Ramon. How was Guadalajara?"

Well, Ramon had stories to tell alright, and as he walked lightly across the yellow and ivory marbled floors, his black patent leather shoes gleamed and squeaked. He unbuttoned his jacket for the flare. He was grateful he would be able to give himself first to Polly Allen, to bring himself into perfect conviviality, before addressing Alfred with his well rehearsed story.

Ramon passed beyond the foyer and saw Polly standing beside the LeMoire chair that faced the fireplace. Alfred reclined in his green striped house shirt against one end of the Allison three meter long sofa, his right leg lazily outstretched upon it, holding his glasses idly in his right hand, elbow balanced on the sofa back. Over the striped shirt he wore the silk aquablue house jacket Ramon had given him. Creamy leather slippers. The host seemed quite apart from his visitor.

Polly looked most serious, even though the violent red of her eyeglass frames clashed brutally to all but her with the splashy vibrant green of her blouse and the happy skyblue of skirt that swelled over her chubby hips and hung to her ankles. Ramon had no doubt the innocuous skirt color in contrast to the other brilliance was meant to make all that region of draped hips and thighs seem *not there*.

This scene for a moment disarmed Ramon, suddenly seeing Alfred poised between movements and looking straight at him. Thankfully smiling. Suddenly in the silence it seemed not the moment for flights of conviviality. Yet, a moment more and he saw that Alfred was attuned to Polly more acutely than Ramon had at first assumed. Alfred this moment had no thought at all for him, and that scenario would serve Ramon as well as the other.

Alfred continued looking at Polly, but his words were for Ramon. "Polly has given us the pleasure of a little surprise visit. She's just been telling me she thinks she ought to have a bigger share than we'd agreed upon."

"Bigger share?" said Ramon, struggling to adjust to the terminology and temper of the affair begun without him. "Oh yes. Water permits and all."

"No, Ramon," Polly said with a burst of anger that startled Ramon, "not water permits *and all*. Just *water permits*. Twenty-seven of them by my count. And I'm getting a few more, in a week or so. When you and your friend Andres would have had two or three by now-if you were lucky."

"Yes," said Alfred, unruffled, still lounging, despite her roaring. "But also do please recall that it was *my* money that paid for all those permits. And brought Senor Cuevas to the table."

She glared at Alfred, the angry tora, who would gore him with a hideous truth. “It was Bustamante’s money, Alfred, don’t shuck me.”

“Alright, Bustamante’s money then. But even so, that money’s mine. That is, it’s the corporation’s, to spend on expenses, as we see fit.” Ramon saw it was an effortless parry by the master.

But Polly the tora rushed him again, what might yet be a direct hit, and the last word. “Bustamante’s money wasn’t supposed to be paying off Cuevas.”

Yet he danced away again, utterly evading her. “Perhaps. But we had to do it. And look what it got us.” Yes, a little twirl of the cape too, maestro.

“Poor Senor Cuevas,” she said, though the pity was more likely for herself, outdueled, perpetually. But still she would not go quietly, or graciously. “You squeezed him, Alfred. You gave him a drop in the bucket. And a lot of promises. And conned him into that phoney deed.”

Alfred sneered: oh he would not let her get by with any of it, she’d see. “It’s not a phoney deed. There was no con. He still owns the property till he’s fully paid.”

“The deed doesn’t say that.”

“No it doesn’t, dear Polly. It’s all in the little addendum that is *our* little secret with Senor Cuevas. He’s not being cheated, he agreed to keep it secret. But if the deed didn’t show us owners free and clear, we wouldn’t have our money from Bustamante now, would we? And you wouldn’t have had your eight thousand, which isn’t peanuts, my dear.”

She sneered at him; but she had little left to counter with. “It’s peanuts compared to what you still owe me.”

Alfred turned and reseated himself on the sofa. He would let her cool. “You sound like you think you’re not appreciated, Polly. You’ll get the rest of your commission. And we already agreed on your share in the corporation as compensation for each water permit. I appreciate all you do for us, believe me. Ask Ramon. I’m the first to admit it—we’d be lost without you.” Ramon was pleased to agree, and nodded solemnly, yes, so true.

Polly exhaled an audible huff of air. “You aren’t hearing me, Alfred. I’m going through hell to get these permits. I’m having to make little promissary notes of my own to get them—you know damn well what I mean. These will cost me. I’m meeting a lot more resistance than I thought I would when we started all this. And if I’d known you’d be deferring so much of my commission, and for so long, I would’ve demanded a bigger share to begin with. In effect, I’m letting you use my commission like capital. Which means I’m an investor too. You know you’d have none of that Bustamante money without me.”

Alfred contorted his face into little agonies trying to express that maybe that was true, maybe it wasn’t. He seemed to weigh it with all his keen judgment. Finally he declared, “OK, Polly, let’s just for the moment say you’re right—” But in that fractional pause Alfred saw her umbrage, for Polly seemed prepared to loose her considerable fury.



Fortunately Alfred retraced just enough swampy ground to say-“No, no, you *are* right of course-we’d have been sunk without your batches of permits. No, I don’t mean to disparage any of that effort-please believe me.”

She frowned, the steam of her near fury dispersing invisibly, harmlessly. But there was more where that came from.

Alfred sat up, set both slippers on the Balistario cross-weave carpet, and laid his dark prescription glasses carefully beside him. Ramon admired Alfred’s adroit retreat and counter-thrust. He knew Alfred was quite right-they could not fool with this volatile woman. Holding, as the Americans say, so many good cards. Alfred seemed to have heard Ramon’s thoughts, for he then spoke respectfully, precisely. “Alright, Polly. You’re being forthright with me. I’ll be forthright with you. We’ve got problems here too. Expenses we hadn’t counted on. You’re getting us water permits, that’s true. But even so, the dates on them are so staggered that we couldn’t start building the first models till last week. You know I’m committed to building two models before I build a house we can actually sell and convert to money. I’ve got expenses too. Senor Cuevas will be coming by in another month for his first little installment. I say *little* as a joke, because he’s expecting a quarter million dollars. And you can see I’m *not* going to have it-am I? No I’m not. I’m not going to have anything until we see revenue from that first sale. Who knows when.”

Ramon watched Polly’s eyes begin to drift around the room. She was hearing alright, but liking it less and less. It was all heavy news, and the weight of it dropped her into the LeMoire chair, where she leaned forward and settled her sad head into her own consoling hands. At home alone with this she’d probably be doing the tears. Without looking up from her consolation of hands, she spoke words that trembled out of her. “This is not fair, boys. I’ve worked too hard for this. You owe me *something* more-and I want it.”

Alfred started sympathetically toward her. She must have sensed it, because she looked up at him and glared, which stopped him cold. “No, Alfred, don’t come fawn over me, I don’t need your sympathy-I need better compensation for what I bring. I need something on paper I can believe in.”

Alfred halted in mid carpet; well he did. “OK, Polly. Here’s something you can believe in. The fifty percent of MexicoLimpio that belongs to our corporation is fifty percent because of *me*, because I had the brains and the balls to make it look like we’d put up two million of our own to buy Cuevas’ property. That was my idea, and you agreed with me it was necessary. Fortunately we could work our little deal with Senor Cuevas. Soon enough, I will pay it off and we *will* own it. And I’ll be entitled to the fifty percent because of that.”

Polly countered. “Yea, but we also agreed you’d get me some significant commission money within a few weeks. That hasn’t happened. But I told you I’d live with it, even if I don’t like it. And I’m not asking for any hard cash right now-that isn’t the point. The point is that I deserve *a bigger share!*”

Alfred's eyes sharpened on her. Ramon knew well that look—he was preparing the deadly thrust. Ramon himself had felt the sharp steel many times. “And perhaps you still do not see my point, Polly. Besides Senor Cuevas, there are other hands out for money. All these delays with the models and the first houses for sale have thrown our timetable way off with the investors. They're expecting their first interest dividend in three months. Do you think I'm going to be ready for that? Well, as a matter of fact, no, I am not. So, Polly, what do you think will be the consequence of these delays that I'll be throwing at Senor Cuevas and Senor Bustamante? What?”

Polly was now completely neutralized, hands limp at her sides, starting to see the writing on the wall. Alfred pressed on. “I'm going to have to promise them something. And what do I have to promise—huh? Nothing. I have nothing to promise them. Except more future payments. And when these become due and I am delinquent again, I will have to promise greater payments, all with interest penalties. And, in the end, when I cannot pay even these I will have to offer them little shares. Which of course will break my heart. And it should break yours too, Polly. Why?”

Ramon by now was gliding along with Alfred's irresistible rhythm; it actually was getting him hot. No one could reduce the opposition like Alfred. He was brilliant. Polly let her eyes slip to the carpet, her head nodding to the rhythms of Alfred's drubbing of her spirit. She could see only a chaos of pesos and dollars tumbling out of her treasure chest into a cavernous pit.

“You know why, Polly? Because we are a team, aren't we? And all these shares should belong only to us. But we're going to have to give some of them away. To appease our great benefactors. So they don't march us all off to jail. You do understand me, don't you, Polly? How can I tell you what your share will be when I don't know how many shares will be left to us after it's all over? It's a mess, I admit it.”

Suddenly, Ramon felt sorry for her. She could be no match for Alfred. Who could? Ramon saw how he'd handled Senor Cuevas. Senor Bustamante equally. After that Ramon was calling him El Matador. Poor Polly. She looked so helpless now. But don't forget all those important cards of hers, Alfredo mio.

However, Alfred was no monster; he would not let her go with nothing. He tossed her something for her dignity. He said, “I'm not really disagreeing with you. I'm only saying, we are really flying by our pants, if you know what I mean. We can't really be too specific right now about *any* of those things you want carved in stone. But we *will* get specific. I'm open to negotiate, believe me. When we get there. When we know more what we're up against. We're basically underfinanced. Bustamante's money has to cover a lot of bases. I've never concealed that from you. More than it should.”

He looked unrelentingly at her, boring her into submission. Till at last she said, “OK, I give up.”

Suddenly animated, Alfred sprang off the long cream leather sofa and went to Polly Allen and set one fatherly arm around her slumped shoulders. He patted her, then helped her rise and turned her away from the fireplace and back toward the entryway double doors. She knew it was over.

He said, still like a father, "Time to go now, dear. Always good to see you, but you can't stay long if you don't call first. Ramon and I are late for an appointment and I know you'll understand. You see I made all this special time for you anyway. Because you are my dear partner." He opened the door; she passed through it in silence; he closed the door.

Alfred lowered his eyelids and took a slow, deep breath. Then he opened his eyes and displayed a feeble smile, for it had been indeed a close call. Ramon watched him all the while, enchanted. He effused. "Oh Alfredo mio, you were wonderful! Subduing her like that. And then *whisking* her out of the way. I'll bet you even found a way to keep our little Fonzo from running into Polly here."

Alfred showed a mock alarm. "No, it was all luck. Fonzo's just late, that's all."

"Ah, you're so clever. I'm sure you would have turned even that to our advantage. No wonder I admire you so!" The physical evidence of how much he admired was still erect in his pants and he moved closer to his idol. He laid his fine fingers on the aquablue silk collar of his paramour's house jacket, a present from Ramon of love's give and take, and cooed. "You were so forceful, so commanding, you made me so hot...that even now I could still show you how much. Want to see?" He rubbed against him so that he might feel just the slightest hint of what Alfred might have in full measure, if only he would say the word, and make the time.

Despite the troublesome preoccupations that had haunted him all afternoon, Alfred allowed himself to feel this soft rigidity, its beckoning warmth. He let his own passion tremble awake and rouse his blood: just a moment of it, which he could afford, this rare but most favorite moment of arousal and desire, when, alas, there was no time to follow through: for Alfred a perfect situation.

"Ooooh," Alfred spoke, breathing a little coo of desire himself, "that would be so nice. I've got the urge myself, Ramoncito, but *ah!*"—and that gasp was both harsh and cruel, for it heralded a very sudden and contrary direction to their train of love, bypassing the hoped for dark romantic tunnel and suddenly plunging off through snowdrifts of danger that called for full alert, all hands on deck.

Alfred stepped back, smiled apologetically, and said, "Fonzo will be here any moment, my pet. I am ready for you too; but we'll have to wait, won't we. We'll try to make time later. Now don't be disappointed."

But Ramon knew well how to get over these things. He imagined making money. He imagined what he would buy with this money. He imagined this Fonzo who was coming to be a messenger with tidings of more money to be made. Ramon would buy a silver Mercedes 530S. With silver leather upholstery. He would drive and drive and drive.

## *FIVE*

Several times that day Fonzo regretted having dressed so thoughtlessly. Clothes that morning had seemed the least of his concerns. He'd put on the tan denim pants he'd worn all week and a favorite red and blue checked shirt that he would as usual not tuck inside his belt, to conceal the well fed stomach. He'd slipped on the black loafers he'd been wearing everyday the last year. He'd shaved, combed his hair, brushed his teeth, as usual.

Thus attired, he'd climbed aboard the second class bus and rode it with the peasants and their poultry and produce. The bus had rumbled and chugged through Ajijic, where so many thousands of the gringos lived, and then along the lakeshore to San Juan Cosala, a mere forty minute ride from his aunt's house in Chapala. Disembarked in San Juan Cosala, he had walked a rutted dirt road past fragrant cow pastures and alongside fields waist high in corn.

The surprise at the end of this road was the newly completed million dollar mansion of the americano businessman Alfred Ulster, where today Fonzo's recent good fortune would either be multiplied, or it would be rudely smashed. And he was not optimistic. Clothes and appearance would have nothing to do with it. Probably nothing he did or could do would have anything to do with it.

However, when he saw Senor Alfred Ulster open the ponderous front doors of his great house, Fonzo had that day his first moment of regret. He had never seen Alfred looking so stylish. He wore a silver-gray coat and matching pants that had an expensive sheen to them. Fonzo had never seen material like that in any stores he'd ever shopped. He gawked at the lustrous sky-blue shirt, open at the throat, and at the pointy-toed, black shoes, shined to brilliance. Alfred's face shined also, with a smug, rich smile. The longer Fonzo stared at him, the more he felt like a fat little wretch. The cards were already all against him: he would likely go down without a fight.

As Fonzo walked inside the palace, he stopped to behold the five meter tall windows which exhibited the sculpted and groomed gardens beyond, awash in green and every color of tropical flower in bloom. Fonzo's curious, round eyes both lingered and drifted. No doubt the opulence entranced him.

Yet even so, his attention was a fragile and flighty thing; it soon wandered away to wondering again, as he had all morning, whether this mysterious invitation portended ill for him or good. Or how much of either. And would Fonzo's secret partner be there, the tough little Senora Allen, who also worked with Alfred Ulster?

Alfred graciously guided the young man by the elbow toward the palatial living room. The lord of the manor extended a hand to show him that he might sit his peasant's bulk on the creamy leather upholstery of the sofa. Fonzo sat self-consciously, unsure if it would be proper to let himself relax into the sumptuousness of it. He could not indeed finally believe it, and so he sat with back straight, glancing repeatedly at the vault of ceiling that made him feel as if he were a mouse in an auditorium.

Alfred reclined in the luxury of the Allizon fainting couch nearby, stretching his legs out before him, fingers interlaced upon the pretty blue silk of his shirt. He nodded several times, just slightly, as if bestowing a gentle benediction on his guest, before he spoke. "Now, dear Fonzo, I'm sure you'll see this interview will be beneficial to you. May I ask a few questions?"

Already realizing that any stratagems of his would be infantile and useless against this obviously superior man, Fonzo could only say, "Yes, sir, you may."

At that moment Alfred's partner Ramon entered the room and stood silently beside Alfred on his divan, deferring as he always must to his elder and greater. Ramon also dressed smartly, in fine pressed white slacks and green silk shirt with little black stripes. He smiled brilliantly. That seemed to Fonzo to be the way with these genteel persons of the upper castes: always smiling, as if there were no end to the good news arriving daily.

Alfred blessed Fonzo again, this time with a little smile. "Very, very good. Now Fonzo, you get along well with Polly Allen, don't you? I hope so, because as you know she's my partner too."

Fonzo was taken aback by this. He'd believed his own relation with Polly Allen was a secret no one must know; at least Polly Allen had always insisted that was so. But this Senor Ulster was knowing things unaccountably; Fonzo realized then that this might be a trick question, so he resolved to tell the truth. "Yes, sir."

"Good. I thought so, and I'm pleased to hear you verify it. Now—we know you've been helping us all out with the water permits, and I want to take this opportunity to thank you. Personally. Very, very much."

Fonzo brightened at all this comradery and graciousness. Yes, this might be profitable after all. He thought to lean back at last, for the comfort; but then he thought it still too soon. He remained sitting upright and said. "I do my best. I'm glad you're happy."

"How much does Miss Allen pay you? For each permit."

Fonzo's eyes widened, a little alarm flaring in him. He wasn't sure how much a true answer would betray the senora. But then again, could he lie to the man who owned all this? And then, which side most deserved his loyalty? Once more he decided he ought to speak the truth, though he was unaccustomed to this strategy in crucial showdowns like this one. He said in a subdued voice, "Twenty dollars US, for each one."

Alfred hmmm'd agreeably: the master seemed pleased with this figure. Alfred continued interrogating. "These permits come because of your Uncle Sebastian—am I right?"

Fonzo twitched: how could he know this about the uncle? There was no time to hesitate, however, or to ponder; so Fonzo nodded. Yes, a nod was better. How could anyone hold him to a nod?

"Does your uncle expect to be able to continue providing the permits?"

Fonzo hesitated a moment, but knew he had committed himself already beyond recall; he must nod again.

"Well, that's fortunate. And my last question. Does your uncle know the Frances brothers?"

Fonzo's fleshy brow furrowed, puzzling this unexpected question. Fonzo answered, "Yeah, I've heard of them. So I guess my uncle has too. But I don't *know* if he knows them or not. He probably does." Then he smiled, the sly provider. "But I can find out for you. I can find out *anything*."

Alfred smiled, pleased with that. "Yes, I just bet you can. Well then Fonzo—I propose we make a radical change in all our dealings. The first thing I want to do is to give you a substantial raise. Henceforth, you will receive forty dollars US for each water permit you deliver to *me*." Alfred paused to let this hook penetrate and take hold. Fonzo's astonished and happy smile told him that this was accomplished.

"Secondly, henceforth you will report directly to *me-not* to Polly Allen. I will tell her myself that I have made contact with someone in Obras Publicas who can get me all the permits I need. All *you* need say, when and if she asks you, is that you have no more influence, that someone new has taken over giving out permits. Do you understand that? *You have no more influence. And someone new is in charge of giving permits.*"

Fonzo chewed the corner of his lip and agonized.

Alfred from his silk jacket pocket drew forth a thick fold of money and extended it to Ramon, who knew to take it and then hand it with a gracious, sly smile to Fonzo. Astounded, Fonzo stopped chewing. He was unsure if he might count it or not; but the wad enchanted him irresistibly and he did count it.

Alfred anticipated him, saying, "Two hundred dollars US, Fonzo. A little gift to inaugurate our new arrangement. This will be *apart* from any permit payments. *And—*" he added, sounding the grand note—"I have another, *bigger* gift for you. *If you introduce me to your Uncle Sebastian.*"

Turbulent emotions of great happiness and great fear confounded Fonzo utterly. He knew this could be fabulous, or it could mean the end of everything. He knew his most valuable asset was Uncle Sebastian. Not to be sold. To be milked. And milked. Fonzo feared the loss of this fabulous resource. But he feared this cagey gringo too. And most of all he feared giving up this splendid bundle of cash Alfred was tempting him with.

Reading his mind precisely, Alfred withdrew another, thicker fold of money and extended this also to Ramon. His confederate rose again, took it, walked to Fonzo, smiling even more grandly than before, and handed it to their new ally. Without scruple Fonzo counted it. Five hundred US more! So be it then. He would have to take the chance that this gringo would not steal his uncle the cow.

Fonzo slid the additional fold of bills into his pants pocket where the other had gone. He leaned forward, elbows on his thighs, his hands enjoined hanging limply between them. He spoke softly, solemnly, for he knew it was momentous. He hoped he would not regret it.

"Alright," he said, "I'll introduce you. I'm your man."

## SIX

Fonzo was put to service immediately, for two hours later he and dapper Alfred were at Tamarindo Tamales, after Fonzo had arranged by telephone with Uncle Sebastian for the meeting. At which, Fonzo would increase his recent windfall, or all windfalls would be lost forever. The more he thought about it, the less optimistic he became.

Yet as they entered the tamale factory, the friendly way Alfred shook his hand and spoke his name and remarked about the beautiful day were all meant to make him see their relationship otherwise. Yes, it did seem now to Fonzo that he and Alfred were equal partners, making new contacts, enhancing their already flourishing association.

So it was that as Fonzo pushed open the arched door to the tamale factory he had regained a small portion of hope. And after all, this factory did belong to his family. *His* family. And Uncle Sebastian was *his* uncle. It also made Fonzo feel more at ease to be in the factory, which had been like a second home to him, than in the Power Room, which was the domain of all the great seniors. Fonzo knew it was likely they would all three go to the Power Room eventually of course, but only after Uncle had shown off his grand operation.

Fonzo and Alfred walked inside and Fonzo closed the door. Suddenly they were engulfed by the clang and rumble and buzzing of machinery and the noise of eighty humans propelling the busy, complex world of Tamarindo Tamales. Fonzo knew it well, for Uncle Sebastian had been grooming him for big things. Uncle Sebastian had made him work in this room a year and more, till he knew most of the workers. He had worked the filthy rendering room, the cook vats, the assembly lines. He had tended the machine that wrapped the filling in masa and corn husks. He could operate the canning and seaming machines. Uncle Sebastian had even insisted he experience the heat of the pressure cookers, isolated in their own miserable room, where all the newest, least capable workers began.

The loading dock, despite the heavy lifting, Fonzo had enjoyed, which had both surprised and encouraged his uncle. But that of course had been Fonzo's downfall, the loading dock, what had got him fired last November. He'd not been back to the factory since that unfortunate severance.

Fonzo looked fore and aft for the slim, still energetic figure of his uncle, who would be easily distinguished from the others, who all wore regulation white cotton sanitation caps. He checked his watch, exactly on time. Alfred was taking it all in. "Very impressive," Alfred said pitching his voice above the roar. Fonzo smiled, the proud insider.

"Yes," said Fonzo, turning toward him, "*we* are the biggest employer in Chapala. *We* always have been." Yes, this might turn out well after all.

"And *we* ship to thirty cities in the United States," said a voice behind them, which was of course Uncle Sebastian, speaking his good English in his earthy, rasping voice. Both Fonzo and Alfred turned to greet him.

Fonzo opened his mouth to make the introduction, but the opportunistic Alfred was too quick, speaking the first words. "You must be Senor Sebastian Suarez. I'm Alfred Ulster." His uncle quickly accepted Alfred's hand and replied, "At your service, Senor Ulster. I already know of you. I hear about all the important people." And Fonzo knew that from then on he would be merely the tagalong, hoping for crumbs.

Uncle Sebastian would be in no hurry; he would have to show off. Fonzo saw that he had already begun, for he wore his fine brown vest with the gold stars, that he might also display his half-century dead grandfather's gold chain, pocket to pocket, the old patriarch's antique watch snug in one of them. The uncle's thin remnants of hair today were not haphazard over his ears as usual, but were slicked back precisely, his little moustache trimmed. The uncle and Alfred smiled a mutual admiration at each other and walked along side by side. These two knew what they were up to, each one a confident hound stalking a fat rabbit, both probably thinking it might be fat enough to share. Between the two of them anyway.

Fonzo followed, listening to their light chatter, to Alfred's occasional chuckle at Uncle Sebastian's old jokes. The workers had time only to glance up quickly to see the elegantly dressed visitor and the chief passing. Uncle Sebastian knew most of these workers by name, but today he acknowledged no one. Now Alfred had his paw on the shoulder of Uncle Sebastian. Already they were such good friends.

Once beyond the noise of the food processing and into the quieter sector of seamers and pressure cookers, Fonzo heard Alfred ask, "How long have you been shipping to America?" His uncle, for whom this was the happiest question imaginable, answered, "Oh, only these last fifteen, sixteen years. It was the great dream of my deceased brother, Ricardo, our little Fonzo's father." At that he crossed himself, then turned a brief benedictive smile toward his nephew, letting him know that he was not forgotten in all this, and might yet be tossed his own little scrap.

Uncle Sebastian continued. "Ricardo worked ten years to make this happen. We were small, we sold then only to mercados here and in Ajijic and Jocotepec, oh and a few in Guadalajara. A small company. But Ricardo knew the United States was the mercado ultimo and he was determined to make this company great, the company that his own father had given him. But there were many obstacles, and I will not tire you with the details. Enough to say that he made things go his way. He knew how to make friends, I think you call it. Yes, making friends. Of the right people. To get what he wanted. Zoning laws changed. Exemptions from taxes. Permits that were not possible." Then he laughed and Alfred laughed with him, for on this ground of outwitting bureaucracies they were communicating perfectly. "Politicos helped him. Officials of transito helped him. Yes, he knew how to make friends. He courted the Governor, who became his good amigo. It is a great Mexican art, making these friends." At this only Uncle Sebastian laughed; though Fonzo could see that Alfred was learning this Mexican art rapidly now himself.



At last the two hounds and the pup went outside onto the loading dock, which was empty, where only a security guard now sat in his folding chair. The guard nodded gravely, respectfully at the boss of bosses. The guard then touched his pistol, ready in its holster, to indicate his vigilance.

This was something new, this security guard, someone who had not been part of the staff during the time Fonzo had worked there. Only when Fonzo looked from the guard to his uncle did Fonzo see that the sly uncle was privately grinning at his nephew. Uncle Sebastian caught Fonzo's eye and winked; then made a motion with his hands and arms as if he were throwing something heavy from beside him to some place nearby. Then the uncle winked again, the hound become the fox. Fonzo blushed: for this mime was an exact re-enactment of the moment Uncle Sebastian had caught Fonzo that November night heaving cases of tamales into the waiting taxicab of his accomplice Enrique.

Uncle Sebastian turned again to Alfred, who had seen none of Uncle Sebastian's fun. "Pues, enough of these tamales. Let's go to my office and enjoy ourselves, maybe have a little fine tequila-no?" Then, without looking at Fonzo, he added, "Come along, nephew."

As Fonzo trailed obediently behind them, Senor Alfred and Uncle Sebastian walked side by side the narrow sidewalk of Calle Zaragoza away from the loading dock. They crossed the street midblock and continued passing featureless drab residences whose metal doorways lined the sidewalk. Several on the block had made themselves into timid storefronts with cheap signs in the window to announce their service or product. The stucco building at the corner, unlike all its neighbors, was freshly painted, burnt orange, but otherwise showed no sign that it was the executive offices and sometimes residence of El Presidente of Tamarindo Tamales.

Uncle Sebastian unlocked and swung open the iron gate. He unlocked the mahogany door and held it open so that Alfred, then Fonzo, could enter and climb ahead of him the carpeted stairway to the Power Room at the top. A finely-carpeted hallway led away from the Power Room's closed double doors to further rooms that Fonzo had rarely been permitted to see. He knew that sometimes Uncle Sebastian, like Ricardo his father before him, had slept there. Others also, names and relations alike unknown to Fonzo, had also sometimes occupied these forbidden rooms on special occasions.

Uncle Sebastian held open one double door for his guests, beckoned them to enter, and then closed it behind them. Two steps inside, Alfred stopped to look about him at the old world elegance. He had seen nothing like it in whatever quarters he had visited in Chapala or Ajijic in the four years he had lived there. Old sumptuous leather chairs and sofas, red and black, were arranged in friendly groups at either end of the long, tall-ceilinged room, each group upon its own large and identical Persian carpet with intricate patterns in red, black and green. The floors between carpets showed varnished terracotta tiles, and in that ample tiled space was a large carved oak table with matching chairs, cushioned seats and backs dark green, to accommodate twelve. An elaborate and delicate crystal chandelier hung above the table from an oval relief of white vines and flowers in the white ceiling. Walls were dark green wallpaper with alternating columns of white scrolls and white diamonds. Two tall arched windows, side by side in the middle of the long

wall opposite the double doors, were adorned with heavy red drapery to the floor. They'd been drawn back to frame the windows and flood the sanctum with summer light. Certainly more than a hundred framed photographs and a few paintings were upon all the walls.

Uncle Sebastian enjoyed watching Alfred see it all, especially the photographs and paintings, for these to Uncle Sebastian were the essence of this room. He pointed to the large painting that dominated the end wall and said, "That is my grandfather, Gonzalo Suarez, who began this business. We owe everything to him." Alfred might see the resemblance; more to fleshy Fonzo than to his uncle, however, which was a secret, spiteful pleasure to the nephew. Uncle Sebastian then led his distinguished visitor to a large, gold-framed photograph, before which Alfred uttered the sound, "Ah."

Alfred had noticed exactly what Sebastian had wished his guest to notice, that this was indeed the former President of Mexico, Salinas Gotari, whose arm enwrapped the shoulder of Ricardo Suarez, Fonzo's father. El Presidente of Mexico in the photo smiled at Ricardo as if he were his best friend.

As Alfred continued admiring, Uncle Sebastian said, "Yes, our grandfather began this, but it was my dear brother who made us great. He wanted tamales in America, the real tamales, and he made it so. He was El Presidente of our company for twenty-three years. He was a genius. He showed us all how important to have the good friends." He winked at Alfred. "And now we have them, many of them. And I know you are an hombre inteligente, senor, so I know you know that it is because of those friends that I am able to help you with these permits. May I offer you a tequila?"

Alfred, perplexed at times by Mexican society, said water would be enough. But the uncle would not allow him his careless manners. "Oh but senor, I mean no ordinary tequila. I have a blue agave that is more than a hundred years old. To me it is like milk from the Virgin, a sacrament."

Hearing that tequila might have such a pedigree and sanctity, Alfred knew to change his mind. Uncle Sebastian poured three precious samples into slim, short-stemmed tulip crystal, and gave one to each of them. Fonzo had not expected to be so honored. Uncle Sebastian lifted his own to eye level and said, "To friends. And good business."

Alfred repeated the same words and knew to smile. Uncle Sebastian drank his off completely. Fonzo tried to do the same but it required three swigs. Alfred merely sipped and let his attention wander elsewhere. He said, "You probably know everyone in the village."

Uncle Sebastian beamed. "And their parents and grandparents. And all the stories and scandals. Yes, Ricardo taught us this also, that even the gossip is important, and can be used to make the good business, if you know how to use it. Yes," he went on, turning and surveying his domain, "brother Ricardo gave us much." This thin, seemingly frail man gestured with a hand that was meant to encompass everything in the room. "Especially Ricardo gave us this room. This sanctuary. This holy place. He bought every piece of furniture, everything; bought the paintings, framed the photographs. He was a man of style I think you call it. He dressed like no other in

those days, and he gave grand parties in this room. But not like other parties, no. These were only for business, only for men—excepting rare occasions when a pretty lady or two was specially invited. But such business! Ricardo made fiestas, comidas deliciosas, everything to drink, every Friday afternoon, the finest blue agave and French wines. He was famous for his Friday afternoons. Twenty years of them. All the important men in the village would come, and important people from Guadalajara as well. He knew the Governor—*he* came to the afternoons, the Governor did, and they became friends. Oh yes, there was nothing like it in those days.”

Uncle Sebastian then turned to Fonzo and smiled. “You and I inherited none of that style—eh, Alfonso? No, you and I are simple people.”

Struggling against the mystification of his brain by the powerful tequila, Fonzo nodded yes, of course; though he was barely aware of his Uncle Sebastian’s question. The uncle saw that, had expected as much, and turned his attention back to Alfred, who still sipped.

Uncle Sebastian said, “But I learned the lessons. I inherited all the friends, and I still bring them here for little drinks and coffees and conversations. We have our Friday afternoons still—but now only once a month—and that only to honor the memory of my brother. But no grand affairs like the old days. But I’ve grown old enough to see that’s not so necessary. It is the little favors that are necessary—am I right, Senor Alfred?”

Alfred smiled; he understood the truth so spoken, though he was but yet an amateur practitioner of the art, doubtless a fault of his American social education. He watched the old general of so many political and economic skirmishes and battles move toward the window and look out. “This is my window, my advantage,” the uncle said, speaking the last word with particular relish.

Alfred, sensing that perhaps courtesy required it, went and stood beside him and looked out also. He saw below the plaza on a summer afternoon: children, parents, the old, mostly dark-skinned peasants, some selling, some buying, most merely enjoying the leisure of the day with each other.

The uncle spoke again. “I watch them, but they don’t watch me. I see who comes and goes, and poco a poco I learn what is happening. For example—see those two there? The man with the fancy suit talking with the poor farmer.” Alfred replied that he did. “They have met several times this week, the same time of day. The man in the suit is Carmelo Delavaca, nephew of my wife, her brother’s son, and therefore—such is my fate—a nephew to me. A lawyer. I avoid him. The other is Adalberto Lopez. I know from gossip that Senor Lopez has a little property that his brother Luis is trying to take from him. This should have been settled long ago, in the brother’s favor. But Adalberto has fought him hard, and now I see that Adalberto is desperate, for he has gone to Carmelo for help, to ask for the services that only lawyers like Carmelo can provide. No one has told me any of this—I learn simply by standing here and watching. I know everyone and everyone’s business. And I add up the two and two, as you Americans say.”

Uncle Sebastian turned his guest away from the window that they might browse again among the photographs that covered the Power Room’s walls. No doubt Uncle Sebastian would

have wished the conversation to perambulate around the room all afternoon and dwell on pictures and memories and the glories of his family's connections; but Alfred, American in most essential things, did not understand this kind of sociability preceding, sometimes eclipsing, business, and so he spoke instead his own personal preoccupation. "So I suppose you know the Frances family. I mean Alejandro and his brothers."

Uncle Sebastian was a gentleman and would indulge this American his lack of social grace. "Oh yes, and their deceased father, and his father. They are of even older generations than my own family. Great property owners, which you probably know. And fine men. Everyone respects them. Probably our Fonzo does not even know that it was Alejandro's father Eugenio who first brought water to the village of Ajijic."

The patriarch continued, not bothering to see if Fonzo knew this odd fact or not. "Thirty-no, forty years ago. Everyone in the old days took their water from the lake, in buckets and cans. The lake was beautiful then. So sad to see it now receding year by year, perhaps dying—who knows. But Eugenio paid to have a great well dug near the plaza, and he made faucets there so that everyone could get their water more easily. It was later that pipes were laid from this well, and the water was made even more convenient, as it is today. All that because of Eugenio Frances."

Gradually the cloud began lifting from Fonzo's brain and he became unexpectedly happy. His more and more apparent uselessness in this meeting was suddenly a trivial matter to him. He wanted another tequila, but had not the courage to ask or to help himself. Only with great difficulty was he able to keep his attention on what had now become to him a dull and certainly profitless time.

Alfred said, "No, I didn't know any of that. I've met Alejandro only once. But that brings me to another question, Senor Suarez. It's about the permits. As you know, we still need many, many more water permits to complete MexicoLimpio. I'm sure you know it is only because of your good will and your fabulous connections that we have the permits we have. So I ask you—What if...what if the Frances brothers wanted to build a large development, such as my own MexicoLimpio, and what if they came to Obras Publicas for water permits? For many, many water permits. Would there be any way to prevent them from getting permits that I should be getting?"

As Fonzo watched the fox's sly smile reappear, it frightened him, as it always did. His uncle said, "You ask if the influence of Suarez or of Frances would be the stronger—is that it?" Alfred nodded yes. Uncle Sebastian became thoughtful, serious. Then he said, "The Frances family is old and influential. And they are all old friends to the Suarez family. They would certainly receive their share of permits. And there would never be a question of one against the other, of a fight. I like them and respect them too much."

Alfred frowned. Uncle Sebastian suddenly seemed amused; he said, "But I think your concern is unnecessary. I know this family, as I say. I know Federigo, the brother who is the architect. His experience is making office buildings and factories, he knows nothing about houses. And none of them know anything about the americanos—what *they* like. The Frances brothers are

very, very conservative in business. They don't like to take chances. They could be no rivals to you."

Fonzo thought this would be good news to Alfred, but the americano continued frowning. He said, "I have heard that same thing from others. But recently they have made allies, with two Americans, who are building very attractive houses, and selling them. Alejandro sold them property, and I think he will sell them more. I suspect they are going to join forces."

Uncle Sebastian said, "Are you sure? Wait—I think I've heard of these americanos."

"They call themselves Bellacasa Construction."

"Yes," said Uncle Sebastian, "that is the name I heard. Building in Rancho del Oro."

Alfred nodded yes and continued speaking. "But you asked me if I was sure—and no, I'm not *sure* they're joining forces. But all the signs point to it."

Uncle Sebastian showed him a little doubt. "I too heard they sold property to those Americans. Still it would surprise me that they would collaborate. What you need, Senor Alfred, to know for certain, is a spy. That is what you need. To tell you what are the plans of your opposition, so you can know what to do. That is what my brother Ricardo would have done, pay for a spy. Am I right, Alfonzo?"

"Without doubt," Fonzo answered, though he was barely relating to the conversation now. Uncle Sebastian went to pour more tequila, Alfred his new amigo right behind him.

The conversation then shifted to the trivialities that Uncle Sebastian enjoyed, and fifteen minutes later when his uncle suggested that Fonzo's presence was no longer necessary, that he had done well in bringing Senor Alfred for this visit, but that he could now excuse himself and go make whatever diversion he wished, Fonzo was ready and willing.

Fonzo had expected the dispossession. He knew he would probably never carry to the tough Senora Allen or to Alfred another water permit again, nor would he likely be receiving any more nice packages of folded money. But he still had eight hundred twenty dollars US to spend. And already he was thinking where to buy new clothes, some *nice* clothes.

And there was always a new opportunity waiting. Always.

## ***SEVEN***

Fonzo hurried down the stairs and came outside and felt suddenly like a free man. His first act would be to have a limonada at the Paris Café on the main corner. And a cigarette. Or two or three. Then, oh yes, go buy some new clothes.

However, after Benito the waiter pointed Fonzo to an empty table and he went to it, Fonzo turned and thereby experienced his second regret of the day about his clothes, that they doomed

him: for he saw at the table beside him as he sat down, a tan, sexy gringa in a white blouse off her shoulders, with a pretty red, red mouth. Yes, a little older—how much older he couldn't say—but those older ones were probably his best chance anyway, until he lost a little weight. Even before he'd picked up the menu, she glanced at him. He tried to smile; he would have done better if he'd had a better shirt.

Benito Murillo came to take his order, a grandfather and half-owner for all its twenty-six years of the Paris Café, dressed in the same drab style of unpressed shirt and pants he'd worn all those years. The Murillo brothers didn't believe in paying money for help, so they did everything themselves, even to washing the dishes. Fonzo had known them both since Fonzo had come there begging candies as a boy. Benito stood beside him now without greeting or impatience, exactly as he treated all his customers, new or old. Fonzo decided he needed more than limonada, and he ordered a coca. And a coffee. No, an espresso, a double, remembering that recently they had installed the new machines.

Benito put away his order pad in his shirt pocket without writing anything on it and went back inside. Fonzo fished out of his shirt pocket a cigarette and lit it with little stick matches. Then he glanced again at the colorful *senorita*, for surely *senoras* would not dress this way, even *gringa senoras*. He saw no ring on the left hand.

She seemed to sense his attention and she looked at him again and smiled. He saw the long eyelashes and rosy cheeks. He saw that behind all the flouncy platinum curls piled on her head was a long, happy ponytail that liked to bob and swing. Her ruffled red skirt billowed over the chair, a perfect match to the lipstick. Two little white sandaled feet, crossed at the ankles, peeked from beneath the pink lace hemline.

She spoke first; it startled him. “Habla ingles?” This was gringospeak at its hobbling worst, and those words had been no doubt a large portion of her Spanish vocabulary. All the better.

He gave her his most confident LA street patter. “Of course, doesn't everyone? I lived in the 'hood, I hung out on Hollywood Boulevard with the homeboys, I surfed with the technos. You betcha I speak English.”

“Well!” she said, obviously impressed, but, fortunately for Fonzo, ignorant of most of his meanings and their implications. “And what do you do in Mexico?”

She was making it easy for him. He eased back in his chair, settled his arms on the armrests, let the cigarette dangle in his fingers so the smoke could curl up and away suggestively. “Oh I have *several* occupations. My family owns the tamale factory here, Tamarindo. I'm a troubleshooter for *them*. And I do a little private work here and there, for certain clients, that I can't really talk about.”

“Well!” she said again so vivaciously. She drew a cigarette from her own pack of boxed Benson and Hedges and leaned toward him with the cigarette between her fingers and said, “I need a little fire, young man.”

Fonzo fumbled with his matchbox, unsure if she'd used an expression he had never heard, or if she were being boldly suggestive, as he'd heard these gringas so often were. He struck the match and extended the flame across her table, his hand just perceptibly quivering; he hoped only he had seen that. She took his hand gently in her own and guided the flame to her cigarette tip and consummated the union in a little flareup that as quickly flared out. Then she drew back her lit cigarette, smiling, and relinquished his hand, more atremble than before.

She seemed intent on continuing this, and Fonzo adjusted his chair so he could face her directly. She was drinking something that looked chocolatey, in a tall glass with ice. She sipped, holding the straw delicately in two fingers, holding the smoking cigarette away from her with the other hand; all the while smiling, looking at him.

He was still confounded by her and he could only ask, "And what do *you* do in Mexico?"

She looked as if she were about to laugh, but didn't. "Oh I do *whatever* I please, you know. Why be in Mexico if you have something to *do*? The idea's to come and enjoy the sun, drink margaritas, sleep late-isn't it? And of course the handsome men. I enjoy all of it."

He would like to think she might be referring to him, but he recalled the tasteless shirt and pants he wore, and was shamed again. Then, as his recent ill-fate would have it, he noticed further embarrassment approaching in the form of his dapper uncle, ten years his senior, Carmelo Delavaca, who had just turned the corner and seemed to be looking for an empty table for himself on the sidewalk. Fonzo's luck worsened, for Carmelo saw him and acknowledged his presence with a courteous nod. Carmelo an instant later saw the colorful senorita, who had not as yet seen him. The sight of this senorita brought the little smile to Carmelo's face that Fonzo knew well, the one Uncle Carmelo saved for his frequent encounters with the delights of life.

Carmelo then walked to Benito, spoke an order to him, and made his slow elegant way among the sidewalk's tables toward Fonzo, the suave little smile now a fixture that would likely remain as long as the gringa remained. Fonzo rose to greet his dashing uncle. They shook hands and Carmelo sat in the chair beside Fonzo, from which he would have an easy view of the pretty senorita of uncertain vintage.

Fonzo was humbled by the fabulous ensemble his uncle wore: suit and pants light gray with a dark blue pinstripe, a pale yellow shirt with long collar points, a matching yellow silk handkerchief in his breast pocket, black patent leather shoes. A thin moustache reminiscent of Uncle Sebastian, but this one curled a little at the ends. And how did he keep his hair slicked back and so perfectly in place all day? Carmelo would be seen as never hurrying, never being in a sweat. Although Fonzo knew that was the opposite of the truth.

Carmelo spoke in Spanish, "How goes it, nephew? Still working at Obras with Andre?" Fonzo could see Carmelo straining to look at the senorita without seeming to do so. The senorita was definitely looking at Carmelo, and what could Fonzo do?

Fonzo answered, "No, I didn't like that job. Actually..." and he paused to let his uncle know that what followed was significant. "I've been working for the owners of the new project out the other end of Ajijic, they call it MexicoLimpio. They pay me very, *very* well."

“Never heard of it,” said Carmelo as he nodded to Benito, arrived with his iced tea. “But I’m glad at least that you’re not working in the tamale factory anymore. Menial work is not for you, Fonzo. You’re a clever boy. You should be in the law, or in politics, that’s where the good money is. You know what I mean?”

Fonzo did know. And these remarks recalled to him his most recent dis-employment. “Maybe you have something good in mind for me, Uncle.”

Carmelo looked briefly at him, long enough to say, “I thought you were already working. And being very well paid.”

“Pues, that may not be much longer. But I have skills that might be good for you. I’m clever, like you say. Maybe I could work for you. I can even be tricky.”

Carmelo glanced at his nephew’s shirt and pants for the briefest moment, causing Fonzo to add in a voice that showed only a little of his anxiety, “Oh these clothes! I have a new wardrobe, honestly, a suit and tie even, two suits and ties. And very nice shoes. You should see me! No—of course I couldn’t work for you looking like this. Hah!” he finished, to show how preposterous that idea was to him too.

But Carmelo shook his head, dismissing the idea completely. “I think no, Fonzo. Our Uncle Sebastian would never approve you working for me. He doesn’t like me. And even if he does treat you roughly—and I hear about those things—I know beneath it all he likes you and still has hope for you. No—this work of mine he doesn’t like. And soon—when I start off my political career—and that will be soon—he will like me even less.”

Fonzo was puzzled. “Why? Because you will go PAN?”

“Why else?” he said smugly. “But PAN is where all the money goes nowadays in Jalisco. I suppose you did not know that even our Uncle Sebastian has changed over to PAN. I’m no fool, I follow the money. Just like our uncle.” And then he leaned toward Fonzo; for the first time since joining him he looked directly, intimately into his eyes, and said, “Who is the lady at the next table? I thought I saw you talking to her.”

“A gringa. Too old for you, Uncle.”

Carmelo snorted. “Then *much* too old for *you*, nephew. But introduce me. Como no? If only for the practice.”

This rude counterfate seemed woven into the fabric of Fonzo’s day: here he was again, watching the prize slip away. And Fonzo had absolutely nothing in his meager arsenal of social etiquette to prevent this happening.

Fonzo turned back toward the senorita, who quickly shifted her eyes away from Carmelo to the nephew. Fonzo said in English, “Senorita—I don’t know your name, but my name is Alfonso Suarez—they call me Fonzo—and I’d like to introduce you to my uncle, Carmelo Delavaca, a lawyer.”

She glanced at Carmelo and her sudden smile for the sophisticated uncle was brighter than any she had given poor Fonzo. “Well, so glad to meet you, Fonzo. My name is Gwendolyn O’Connor. And I’d be delighted to meet your uncle.” Carmelo was already standing, so tall, so



suave, so ready to swoop. He bowed and offered his hand like a frenchman, to take, not to shake. Fonzo, with regret amplifying, watched her possess the offered hand like it was a gift, watched her hold it a tender moment, feel it, weigh it, then slowly let it go, probably with a little regret of her own. To Fonzo, the happy ending of this grim romantic story was already inevitable.

Fonzo sat enshrouded by his predictable doom. However, very soon he knew it was time to give in to it, as he always must, and always did. He was adept at letting go promising but spoiled situations, and he let this one go, and so became free to let his attention wander away.

Yes, it would be a great diversion to buy some new clothes. No telling how all these disappointments might have turned out if he'd had the snazzy clothes. He thought he'd like something really different, some foreign look. Fabulous clothes could change his life. There was still the wad of money. There were still new opportunities everywhere. Everywhere.

Meanwhile, Carmelo leaned back in his chair, unbuttoned his coat, showing how easy it was for him. Gwendolyn admired. Much as he wished it otherwise, Fonzo knew no way discreetly to make the escape he now longed for. He sat, smiling pathetically as these two models of romance talked. He seemed to follow them as he tried to nod and tried to make the smile better. But he was conniving the escape. And dreaming of new clothes.

Nonetheless, Fonzo saw a tall woman cross the street at the intersection, a gringa with long, loose auburn hair, in knee pants and a simple blouse, in cowboy boots, carrying a zipped leather folder. She seemed familiar. He tried remembering where he might have seen her. It could have been anywhere. Or perhaps he was mistaken, but he thought not. She walked past without looking at them and stopped before the large community bulletin board in front of the pharmacy and studied it.

Suddenly Uncle Carmelo was standing and ready to go and saying to Senorita Gwendolyn that he was sorry that he must leave, that he had important appointments. Before Fonzo could even imagine how this sudden good fortune of Carmelo's departure could befall him, Carmelo leaned down confidentially to Fonzo and said in Spanish, "I must leave. You see that tall woman over there? She is a client. I took her retainer to investigate for her a property that was falsely sold. But it is a hard case, so I gave it up. But now she wants her money back. And you know what I say to them *then*." And with that Carmelo bowed courteously again to the senorita and hurried off undetected in the direction from which the tall woman had come.

Fonzo resat himself. He settled in, perhaps once more in command—a miracle!—and he said to Senorita Gwendolyn, "What can anyone say? He's flighty. And he's married. But not happily." He leaned forward to speak his own confidentiality. "And they say he beats his wife."

He thought this would shock her but she merely raised one eyebrow and said, "Ohhh," as if she found that interesting. She looked where Carmelo had gone but he had already disappeared.

Fonzo felt his confidence rising. He said, "May I join you?" Inhaling deeply from her cigarette, she waved her hand at the chair opposite her. Fonzo moved coffee and cola to the spot she'd indicated, and a little clumsily moved himself into the seat. Remembering Carmelo's suave

pose, Fonzo settled back in that chair and dandled a spoon in the tiny espresso cup before looking to her again and saying, “The truth is...I work for my uncle. He’s a lawyer. He gives me special assignments. You might say, yes, you *should* say, we’re associates. My cousin and I are the same. The truth is...I wear these awful clothes because I’m doing undercover work for my uncle. I’m spying you might say. I can’t say all I’d like to say, but I can tell you it is with politicians high up, and much, much money is involved. We suspect there are...big crimes being committed. I’m on the edge of finding out everything. That’s the real reason my uncle had to leave suddenly. Our chief suspect passed by and Uncle Carmelo and I can’t be seen together. Or else.”

This indeed astonished her; even more than he’d hoped, for her mouth held open in a perfect little O, and her long cigarette ash drooped precariously. He made a sly smile and gave her time to react. Finally she said, “My, my. I never would have guessed.”

“Yes,” Fonzo said in a deeper, softer voice of great mystery, “I’m not exactly what I appear to be.”

“Well Fonzo!” she said, eyes aglitter, “I’m so *impressed!*”

As she should be. A new opportunity. Things were indeed looking up. He became bold. “Gwendolyn, what do you say we go for a little walk? Over by the pier. You know—where all the vendors are. They sell so many pretty things—I’d like to buy you a little something. Or how about a nice lunch in the Lido Hotel? I know the owner, he’ll give us a nice table. He won’t think a thing about my sad clothes—he knows all about my spy work. He’s seen me in lots of disguises. What do you say? Let’s go spend some money.”

Gwendolyn preened and fluffed her ponytail. Her smile was rich, he knew he had her. So confident he became that he rose without waiting for her answer, and he offered her his hand. Certainly Uncle Carmelo could not have done it better. She rose too and took it and they walked away arm in arm as she cooed, “Oooh Mr. Fonzo, I *like* your style!” And that was the first time anyone had ever said those words to him.

At the corner was Chapala’s principal intersection. Traffic policeman Carlos Santos, in uniform, who had known Fonzo all his life and had always called him youngster, saw the extravagant woman on his arm. Although the traffic light was contrary for the romantics, the policeman held up a prohibitory hand to the oncoming traffic and insisted that all give way to this lad who seemed suddenly to have come of age. Fonzo glowed with happiness and gratitude, and held his chubby face up that all might regard him, contradicting a lifetime habit of downcast countenance. From the corner of his eye he knew that his Gwendolyn noticed the special regard of the policeman, because he felt her snug her playful body closer to his arm.

On the opposite corner the colorful couple turned toward the lake and would have to cross the intersection once more, and this too against the light. In that direction the traffic was negligible and policeman Santos smiled and waved them on, the young local prince and his lady on parade.

As they passed the shoe shine stand, Tomas, who had once worked at Tamarindo, though busy with a customer, looked up and smiled at Fonzo’s good fortune. A teller in Banco Bital, who

had gone to school with Fonzo, through a plate glass window saw him passing with his lady and looked back a second time, and a third, then waved. Two old gringos standing inside Bing's Ice Cream, eating off their cones, recognized Gwendolyn. They spoke a simple greeting, which she acknowledged with a smiling nod, but no more.

Approaching the Hotel Lido, Fonzo said to her, "How about dinner? Order anything you want, I'm buying."

Her sweet grip tightened on his arm. "Oh Fonzo, it's too early for dinner. But I'd love a nice dessert. Would you?"

"Oh yes," he said, for desserts were always welcome. They went up the steps and into the quiet lobby that opened onto the spacious dining room beneath twenty foot ceilings. Fifteen or more tables were already laid with linen and china and silverware. These were all, however, vacant of late afternoon customers; this fancy dining room a lonely elegance in this otherwise old and rustico hotel.

"Oh goodness," she said, "look at all that water!" Fonzo turned to see what she saw: a dozen framed photographs on both foyer walls, documenting a legendary highwater mark of the lake in its greatest plenitude, covering the streets of downtown Chapala, halfway up the steps of the iglesia grande. One largest photograph showed the water lapping at the doors of the Hotel Lido itself, and a boatman and a child rowing past.

"Oh that," said Fonzo. "That was fifty-one or so years ago, the same year my great grandfather died. The great flood. You can bet that won't happen again."

As she continued studying the photographs she answered, "I would *hope* not."

From nowhere the host Emmanuel Corona came to them, dressed in fine black pants well creased, and a white long sleeved shirt. He too had once worked for Tamarindo, and nodded a slight recognition to Fonzo; then something larger, warmer to the senorita. He seated them and handed them both menus and remained beside them, invisibly waiting.

"Oh I can't decide if I want the cherry pie or the cream pudding with chocolate sauce," she effused.

Pudgy Fonzo grinned at her. "Have both then. You see, cost is no object. Not when you're with me."

"Oooh Fonzo," she tittered. "Well I guess I will. But you may have to help me. I eat like a little bird you know."

"No problema," he said. "I think I'll have the flan and the peach pie. Ala mode. Two for you, two for me-huh?" Fonzo gave their orders in Spanish.

The waiter departed and Gwendolyn looked to her escort coyly and asked, "And where do you live, Fonzo?"

He should have anticipated this question, but had not. It would doom him to admit living with his aunt. He must have a small interruption of coughing into his napkin while his mind raced away into the cluttered closet of possibilities, which must also be probabilities. His mind was agile, swift and clever at such high speed searches, but nothing he discovered in the intervening eight

seconds of coughing seemed quite right. There would be holes in the story he now chose in desperation, but hopefully she would not perceive them. Or could be confused away from implausibilities, if she did discover any.

“I live here in Chapala, at a private club, for men only, no women allowed inside. I have my own room, very nice. It has a great view of the plaza. Only a few other men live there. There’s a communal sitting room that’s very, *very* ritzy.”

“Oh ritzy! Well, I always like *that*, Fonzo. My, my, you *are* the one.”

Yes, he would like that very much, to be the one. It would be the first time.

Waiter Emmanuel returned with a tray of their desserts, set it on the little chrome utility stand beside the table, and set before them each their choices. Then he turned to go, but as he did so he made a sly wink to Fonzo that only the young man could see, before departing again.

Each one ate with obvious pleasure. Gwendolyn nipped at both pudding and pie with alternate nibbles of her teaspoon. More quickly than his birdlike lady, Fonzo used his fork to gouge out and feed himself chunks of the pie and the ice cream till both had soon vanished. Then he replaced his fork with a tablespoon to consume the caramel covered flan in four prodigious mouthfuls. The conversation lagged, but there would be time for that later. Whenever he looked to her she rolled her eyes with the guilty pleasure of it. Still, she only nibbled and half of both her desserts remained when Fonzo had finished everything before him.

She sat back and laid down her little spoon. “Oh I just can’t eat anymore! You’ll have to help me, Fonzo. Please.”

He nodded knowingly. He was beginning to think like a gentleman: for his lady he would do it. He reached and drew the pie, then the pudding, toward him. A minute later when Emmanuel came to refill their water glasses Fonzo had finished both. “La cuenta por favor,” he said, already thinking of the impression he might make among the vendors at the pier.

Fonzo didn’t bother to inspect the charges, but pulled a fold of hundred peso bills from his pocket, drew off two, and laid them on top of the bill with a flourish, and a private wink of his own to Emmanuel. Fonzo said in Spanish, “Keep the change.” Then he looked to her, who’d watched all this smiling, and said, “Let’s go shopping, my dear.”

They walked away again arm in arm out the door. Now hardly remembering the shame of his blue and red checked shirt, Fonzo turned right and walked the sidewalk leading to the pier. Dozens of vendors behind their tables of wares, lazy in the slow-selling late afternoon, watched them coming. It was a perfect day. Rain the night before had softened the late summer heat. The sky was clear. Fonzo recalled in all his life no day like it.

Arm in arm they walked. At the table of a small brightly dressed Indian and her daughter, the *senorita* stopped and let her fingers play upon several silver bracelets. “Try them on,” Fonzo encouraged her. “Pick any one you like. Or as many as you like.” Her appreciative body leaned into him, and she said so intimately that only he would hear her, “Oooh Fonzo.”

She tried on several at once, holding up her forearm so the sunlight sparkled off them. She admired them immensely. “We’ll take them all,” Fonzo told the vendor in Spanish. He

pulled out several more bills and gave them to the happy lady who slipped the pesos instantly into her skirt pocket. Gwendolyn squeezed his arm, a very private intimacy, then lay her head more publically upon his shoulder and seemed to be nuzzling there.

They strolled on. She continually admired her new silver. She slowed and stopped beside a table where shirts, purses, and all things of bright Guatamalan cloth were displayed. A long fringed shawl in bright red and gold made her smile. She looked at Fonzo, expressing her delight. Ever more the gentleman, he lifted up the shawl and laid it around her bare shoulders. She snuggled into it and purred, "Oooh it's so, so soft, Fonzo. Just like you."

Fonzo liked that very much. He paid the old man, and would take no change. They walked on. Near the pier's end they came upon a vendor selling copper pans and bowls and kitchen utensils arranged on a colorful indian blanket laid upon the concrete of the pier. She bent to look, saying, "Oh Fonzo, such beautiful copperware! My kitchen's such a dingy place. Oh-I can just see all these beautiful pieces hanging on those walls! Oh someday I'll have to have these."

But a gentleman does not make a lady wait. "Pick out all the ones you like. I want you to have them."

She stood and looked at him, astonished. "But Fonzo, they're so *expensive!* A whole collection! I couldn't do it!"

But he insisted, and so she must do it. She chose a pair of long-handled saute pans, a double-boiler, a baking pan for turkeys, a cute nesting of half a dozen sauce pans. Mixing bowls. A variety of stirring spoons, a ladle, a funnel, a measuring cup. The overjoyed dark Mexican lady who'd owned these articles moved each one aside as Gwendolyn bespoke it, the vendor letting out a little excited puff from her cigarette with each choice. Soon the pile seemed more than Fonzo and Gwendolyn both could carry away.

Yet Fonzo, because it was the ultimate challenge of a gentleman to bear all things for his lady, attempted to do so alone. Mixing bowls he cradled in one arm. Bake pan and bundled utensils cradled in the other. Like warrior's armor his arms and chest seemed bursting with copper. Finally he bent and slipped both hands through handles of the remaining pots and cauldrons and he lifted them all. They hung in his hands like gigantic copper cufflinks. He staggered forward three steps, but then his knees buckled beneath the great weight, and he stopped, lest he topple. He gasped for breath and had to set all of it down.

Gwendolyn stood for a moment hands on hips, laughing. "But how will I get this all home, Fonzo? Do you have a car?"

Another question he had not prepared himself to answer. But one suddenly came to him like easy money. "My car's in the shop. I can't use it now anyway, because of the undercover-remember? I have to use taxicabs until my investigation's finished. So it's really no problem. We'll just load you up in a taxi-alright?"

Such a smooth, unentangled conclusion to her romantic adventure Gwendolyn had not foreseen. "Oooh Fonzo, you're such a gentleman, you think of everything. A taxi would be just the thing. But when would I see you again, my dear?" With this unexpected but welcome

question, she settled her face again into the hollow of his neck and shoulder. This time he felt it certainly, her lips nipping at his neck, perhaps a kiss. His heart fluttered wildly. It had all happened so fast. Certainly she was saying that she was his, and no way would she be able, or want, to forget him. There would of course be more. And better. The winds of his fate had changed, he was sure of it. No, no need to worry, no need to show himself desperate.

He looked down upon her adoring eyes. “When would you like to see me again, Gwendolyn?”

“Would tomorrow be too soon, Fonzo, my dashing little spy?”

His confidence rose again. “Tomorrow would be perfect. Where? We can’t meet at my rooms, you know, they’re for men only. Maybe I could go to your place.”

Her eyes danced with delight. This was too easy. “Oh *that* wouldn’t be good. But we could meet again at the café, where we met today. I’ll be there same time tomorrow. We can’t rush things now—you naughty latinos are all alike!” It thrilled him that she called him that; also thrilled him the way she’d spoken the Spanish word. OK, he could wait, because he could see she couldn’t resist him. He waved to a driver who’d been standing one foot outside his idle cab, a quarter block away, watching them. The man rushed in his taxi to them.

“The *senorita* would like all these copper pans put in your taxi, and then for you to drive her to her house.” But he realized he knew not where that was, and he asked her. “And where *do* you live?”

She laughed. “In the village, Fonzo, where do you think?” Her ravishing, triumphant frivolity overwhelmed and diminished him so completely he dared not ask a further question.

After the taxi had been loaded and Gwendolyn made ready to enter and sit in the back seat, she turned to Fonzo with her most brilliant smile and she kissed him on the mouth. The kiss was long enough that when he peeked he saw her so closely he might have been an astronomer through a telescope examining desiccated Mars: seeing millennia of dried river beds crossing and crisscrossing around her eyes. He could also see the fragrant cosmetic sands of time partially obscuring, partially filling these filigreed arroyos. He also saw his beloved’s eyes suddenly open wide, staring strangely back at him, in the midst of their great kiss. But none of this could diminish her or the moment.

At last she broke away, and with a flounce she settled herself in the seat and waved a pretty hand out the window. The cab reversed into the street, and drove away. The ponytail bobbing was the last he saw of her.

Fonzo stood silent a moment to feel the great glow of his triumph. What a day!

Fonzo began walking back from whence he had come. Like a smug director reviewing the brilliant work of the shoot, Fonzo let the scenes of his meeting and courting and winning of Gwendolyn unroll once again in his mind. As he watched he chortled and congratulated and let his great satisfaction tumble through him. When he crossed streets, he nodded hello to strangers. He imagined tomorrow afternoon, and further, more eventful scenes.

When he passed by the farmacia, however, he noticed the community bulletin board and the mundane concerns of the day returned to him with a crunch. He needed a job. He needed more money. Lots of it. He spotted a posting in English. Help Wanted. Must be bilingual. Great opportunity for advancement. Excellent starting pay working for new construction company. Call Carla at Bellacasa Construction. A phone number.

Bellacasa. Had he heard of them? It seemed so. But he couldn't recall when, where. Or maybe not at all. It didn't matter.

He tore the notice free of its thumbtack and put it in his shirt pocket.