

An Acceptable Sacrifice

Bibliomysteries

by Jeffery Deaver, 1950-

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*I have always imagined that Paradise
will be a kind of library.*
— Jorge Luis Borges

Wednesday

THEY'D MET LAST NIGHT for the first time and now, mid-morning, they were finally starting to let go a bit, to relax, to trust each other. *Almost* to trust each other.

Such is the way it works when you're partnered with a stranger on a mission to kill.

"Is it always this hot?" P.Z. Evans asked, squinting painfully against the fierce glare. The dense lenses of his Ray-Bans were useless.

"No."

"Thank God."

"Usually is *hotter*," Alejo Díaz replied, his English enriched by a luscious accent.

"You're shitting me."

The month was May and the temperature was around 97. They were in Zaragoza Plaza, the picturesque square dominated by a statue of two stern men Evans had learned were generals. A cathedral, too.

And then there was the sun... like burning gasoline.

Evans had flown to Hermosillo from outside D.C., where he lived when he wasn't on the road. In the nation's capital—the nation to the north, that is—the temperature had been a pleasant 75.

"Summer can be warm," Díaz admitted.

"Warm?" Evans echoed wryly.

"But then ... You go to Arizona?"

"I played golf in Scottsdale once."

"Well, Scottsdale is hundreds of miles *north* of here. Think about that. We are in the middle of a desert. It has to be hot. What you expect?"

"I only played six rounds," Evans said.

"What?"

"In Arizona. For me to only play six rounds... I thought I'd die. And we started at seven in the morning. You golf?"

"Me? You crazy? Too hot here." Díaz smiled.

Evans was sipping a Coke from a bottle whose neck he'd religiously cleaned with a Handi-wipe before drinking. Supposedly Hermosillo, the capital of Sonora, was the only city in Mexico that treated its water, which meant that the ice the bottles nestled in was probably safe.

Probably.

He wiped the neck and mouth again. Wished he'd brought a miniature of Jack Daniels to use as purifier. Handi-wipe tasted like crap.

Díaz was drinking coffee, to which he'd added three or four sugars. Hot coffee, not iced. Evans couldn't get his head around that. A Starbucks addict at home and a coffee drinker in any number of the third-world places he traveled to (you didn't get dysentery from boiled water), he hadn't touched the stuff in Hermosillo. He didn't care if he never had a hot beverage again. Sweat tickled under his arms and down his temple and in his crotch. He believed his ears were sweating.

The men looked around them, at the students on the way to school, the businessmen meandering to offices or meetings. No shoppers; it was too early for

that, but there were some mothers about, pushing carriages. The men not in suits were wearing blue jeans and boots and embroidered shirts. The cowboy culture, Evans had learned, was popular in Sonora. Pickup trucks were everywhere, as numerous as old American cars.

These two men vaguely resembled each other. Thirties, compact, athletic, with round faces—Díaz's pocked but not detracting from his craggy good looks, reflecting some Pima Indian in his ancestry. Dark hair both. Evans's face was smoother and paler, of course, and a little off kilter, eyes not quite plumb. Handsome too, though, in a way that might appeal to risk-taking women.

They were in jeans, running shoes and short-sleeved shirts, untucked, which would have concealed their weapons but they weren't carrying today.

So far there was no reason for anyone to wish them harm.

That would change.

Some tourists walked by. Hermosillo was a way station for people traveling from the U.S. to the west coast of Sonora. Lots of people driving, lots of buses.

Buses...

Evans lowered his voice, though there was no one near. "You talked to your contact this morning, Al?"

Evans had tried out shortening the Mexican agent's name when they first met—to see how he'd react, if he'd be pissed, defensive, hostile. But the man had laughed. "You can call me Al," he'd said, the line from a Paul Simon song. So the test became a joke and Evans had decided then that he could like this guy. The humor also added to the infrastructure of trust. A lot of people working undercover think that saying "fuck" and making jokes about women creates trust. No. It's humor.

"Sí. And from what he say... I think our job, it will not be easy." He took the lid off his coffee and blew to cool it, which Evans thought was hilarious. "His security, very tight. Always his security man, a good one, Jos, is with him. And word is they know something's planned."

"What?" Evans's face curled up tight. "A leak?"

And this, Díaz seemed to find funny, "Oh, is always a leak. Every egg in Mexico has a crack. They won't know about us exactly but he has heard somebody is in town to kill him. Oh, sí, he has heard."

The "he" they were speaking of was Alonso María Carillo, better known as Cuchillo—in Spanish: "Knife." There was some debate about where the nickname came from. It probably wasn't because he used that weapon to kill rivals—he'd never been arrested for a violent crime... or *any* crime, for that matter. More likely the name was bestowed because he was brilliant. *Cuchillo*, as in sharp as a. He was supposedly the man behind one of the cartels in Sonora, the Mexican state that, in addition to neighboring Sinaloa, was home to the major drug gangs. But, though it was small, the Hermosillo Cartel was one of the most deadly, responsible for a thousand or more deaths ... and the production of many tons of drugs—not only cocaine but insidious meth, which was the hot new profit center in the narcotics trade.

And yet Cuchillo was wily enough to avoid prosecution. The cartel was run by other men—who were, the *Federales* were sure, figureheads. To the world, Cuchillo was an innovative businessman and philanthropist. Educated at UCLA, a

degree in business and one in English literature. He'd made his fortune, it appeared, through legitimate companies that were known for being good to workers and were environmentally and financially responsible.

So due process wasn't an option to bring him to justice. Hence the joint operation of Alejo Díaz and P.Z. Evans—an operation that didn't exist, by the way, if you happened to bring up the topic to anyone in Washington, D.C., or Mexico City.

"So," Evans said, "he suspects someone is after him. That means we'll need a diversion, you know. Misdirection. Keep him focused on that, so he doesn't figure out what we're really up to."

"Yes, yes, that is right. At least one diversion. Maybe two. But we have another problem: We can't get him into the open."

"Why not?"

"My contact say he's staying in the compound for the next week. Maybe more. Until he think it's safe."

"Shit," Evans muttered.

Their mission was enwrapped with a tight deadline. Intelligence had been received that Cuchillo was planning an attack on a tourist bus. The vehicle would be stopped, the doors wired shut and then the bus set on fire. The attack would occur on Friday, two days from now, the anniversary of the day the Mexican president had announced his most recent war on the cartels. But there the report ended—as had, presumably, the life of the informant. It was therefore impossible to tell which bus would be targeted; there were hundreds of them daily driving many different routes and run by dozens of companies, most of whom didn't want to scare off passengers by suspending service or cooperating with law enforcement. (In his groundwork for the mission, Evans had researched the bus operators and noted one thing their ads all had in common: they began with variations on *Mexico Is Safe!!*)

Even without knowing the specific bus, however, Díaz and Evans had found a way to stop the attack. The biggest cartels in Sinaloa and Sonora were pulling back from violence. It was very bad publicity—not to mention dangerous to one's health—to kill tourists, even accidentally. An *intentional* attack on innocents, especially Americans, could make the drug barons' lives pure hell. No rivals or anyone within his organization would challenge Cuchillo directly but the agents had learned that if he, say, met with an accident his lieutenants would not follow through with the attack.

However, if Cuchillo would be hiding in his compound until after the bus burned down to a scorched shell, then Díaz's contact was right; their job would not be easy. Drone surveillance had revealed that the house was on five acres, surrounded by a tall wall crowned with electric wire, the yard filled with sensors and scanned by cameras. Sniping wouldn't work because all the buildings—the large house, the separate library and detached garage—had thick bulletproof windows. And the walkways between those structures were out of sight of any vantage points where a shooter could set up.

As they sat bathed in the searing sun, Evans wondered if your mind slowed down the hotter it got. Oatmeal came to mind, steaming sludge.

He wiped his forehead, sipped Coke and asked for more details about Cuchillo's professional and personal life. Díaz had quite a bit of information; the man had been under investigation for the past year. Nodding, Evans took it all in. He'd been a good tactician in the Special Forces; he was a good tactician in his present job. He drained the Coke. His third of the day.

Nine fucking forty-five in the morning.

"Tell me about his weaknesses."

"Cuchillo? He has no weaknesses."

"Whatta you mean? Everybody has weaknesses. Drugs, women, men? Liquor? Gambling?"

Weakness was a very effective tool of the trade in Evans's business, as useful as bullets and C4. Usually, in fact, more so.

Díaz added yet one more sugar to his cup, though there was only a small amount of coffee remaining. He stirred elaborately. Figure eight. He sipped and then looked up. "There is maybe one thing."

"What?"

"Books," the Mexican agent said. "Books might be his weakness."

* * * * *

The weather in Washington, D.C. was pleasant this May evening so he picked a Starbucks with an outdoor patio... because, why not?

This was in a yuppie area of the district, if yuppies still existed. Peter Billings's father had been a yuppie. Shit, that was a long time ago.

Billings was drinking regular coffee, black, and no extra shots or foamed milk or fancy additives, which he secretly believed that people asked for sometimes simply because they liked the sound of ordering them.

He'd also bought a scone, which was loaded with calories, but he didn't care. Besides, he'd only eat half of it. At home in Bethesda, his wife would feed him a Lean Cuisine tonight.

Billings liked Starbucks because you could count on being invisible. Business people typing resumes they didn't want their bosses to see, husbands and wives typing emails to their lovers.

And government operatives meeting about issues that were, shall we say, sensitive.

Starbucks was also good because the steam machine made a shitload of noise and covered up the conversation if you were inside and the traffic covered up the conversation if you were outside. At least here on the streets of the District.

He ate some scone and launched the crumbs off his dark blue suit and light blue tie.

A moment later a man sat down across from him. He had a Starbuck's coffee, too, but it'd been doctored up big time—almond or hazelnut, whipped cream, sprinkles. The man was weasely, Billings reflected. When you're in your forties and somebody looks at you and the word weasel is the first thing that comes to mind, you might want to start thinking about image. Gain some weight.

Have a scone.

Billings now said to Harris, "Evening."

Harris nodded then licked whipped cream from the top of his coffee carton.

Billings found it repulsive, the darting, weasely tongue. “We’re at the go/no-go point.”

“Right.”

“Your man down south.”

“Adam.”

As good a code as any for Harris’s contracting agent in Hermosillo, presently dogging Alonso María Carillo, AKA Cuchillo. Harris, of course, wasn’t going to name him. Loud traffic on the streets of D.C. is like cappuccino machines, only loud. It masks, it doesn’t obliterate, and both Harris and Billings knew there were sound engineers who could extract incriminating words from cacophony with the precision of a hummingbird sipping nectar in a hover.

“Communication is good?” A near whisper by Billings.

No response. Of course communication would be good. Harris and his people were the best. No need for a nod, either.

Billings wanted to take a bite of scone but was, for some reason, reluctant to do so in front of a man who’d killed at least a dozen people, or so the unwritten resume went. Billings had killed a number of people *indirectly* but, one on one? Only a squirrel. Accidentally. His voice now dropped lower yet. “Has he been in contact with the PIQ?”

Person in Question.

Cuchillo.

“No. He’s doing the prep work. From a distance.”

“So he hasn’t seen, for instance, weapons or product at the compound?”

“No. They’re staying clear. Both Adam and his counterpart from the D.F.” Harris continued, “All the surveillance is by drone.”

Which Billings had seen. And it wasn’t helpful.

They fell silent as a couple at a table nearby stood and gathered their shopping bags.

Billings told himself to be a bit subtler with his questions. Harris was on the cusp of becoming curious. And that would not be good. Billings was not prepared to share what had been troubling him for the past several hours, since the new intelligence assessment came in: that he and his department might have subcontracted out a job to assassinate the wrong man.

There was now some doubt that Cuchillo was in fact head of the Hermosillo Cartel.

The intercepts Billings’s people had interpreted as referring to drug shipments by the cartel in fact referred to legitimate products from Cuchillo’s manufacturing factories, destined for U.S. companies. A huge deposit into one of his Cayman accounts was perfectly legal—not a laundering scam, as originally thought—and was from the sale of a ranch he had owned in Texas. And the death of a nearby drug supplier they were sure was a hit ordered by Cuchillo turned out to be a real traffic accident involving a drunk driver. Much of the other data on which they’d based the terminate order remained ambiguous.

Billings had hoped that Adam, on the ground in Sonora, might have seen something to confirm their belief that Cuchillo ran the cartel.

But apparently not.

Harris licked the whipped cream again. Caught a few sprinkles in the process.

Billings looked him over again. Yes, weasely, but this wasn't necessarily an insult. After all, a sneaky weasel and a noble wolf weren't a lot different, at least not when they were sniffing after prey.

Harris asked bluntly, "So, do I tell Adam to go forward?"

Billings took a bite of scone. He had the lives of the passengers of the bus to save... and he had his career to think of, too. He considered the question as he brushed crumbs. He'd studied law at the University of Chicago, where the theory of cost-benefit analysis had largely been developed. The theory was this: you balanced the cost of preventing a mishap versus the odds of it occurring and the severity of the consequences if it does.

In the Cuchillo assassination, Billings had considered two options: Scenario One: Adam kills Cuchillo. If he's not the head of the cartel and is innocent, then the bus attack happens, because somebody else is behind it. If he's guilty, then the bus incident *doesn't* happen and there'd be no bus incidents in the future. Scenario Two: Adam stands down. Now, if Cuchillo's innocent, the bus incident happens. If he's guilty, the bus incident happens and there'll be more incidents like it in the future.

In other words, the hard and cold numbers favored going forward, even if Cuchillo was innocent.

But the obvious downside was that Billings could be crucified if that was the case... and if he and Harris and Adam were discovered.

An obvious solution occurred to him.

Oh, this was good. He finished the scone. "Yeah, Adam's green-lighted. But there's just one thing."

"What's that?"

"Tell him however he does it, all the evidence has to be obliterated. Completely. Nothing can trace the incident back here. Nothing at all."

And looking very much like a crossbreed, a weasel-wolf, Harris nodded and sucked up the last of the whipped cream. "I have no problem with that whatsoever."

* * * * *

Díaz and Evans were back in the apartment in a nice section of Hermosillo, an apartment that was paid for by a company owned by a company owned by a company whose headquarters was a post office box in Northern Virginia. Evans was providing not only the technical expertise but most of the money as well. It was the least he could do, he'd joked, considering that it was America that supplied most of the weapons to the cartels; in Mexico it is virtually impossible to buy or possess weapons legally.

The time was now nearly five p.m. and Evans was reading an encrypted email from the U.S. that he'd just received.

He looked up. "That's it. We're green-lighted."

Díaz smiled. "Good. I want that son of a bitch to go to hell."

And they got back to work, poring over data-mined information about Cuchillo's life: his businesses and associates and employees, household staff, his friends and mistresses, the restaurants and bars where he spent many evenings, what he bought, what he downloaded, what computer programs he used, what he enjoyed

listening to, what he ate and drank. The information was voluminous; security forces here and in the U.S. had been compiling it for months.

And, yes, much of this information had to do with books.

Weaknesses...

"Listen to this, Al. Last year he bought more than a million dollars' worth of books."

"You mean pesos."

"I mean dollars. Hey, you turn the A.C. down?"

Evans had noticed that the late afternoon heat was flowing into the apartment like a slow, oppressive tide.

"Just little," Díaz said. "Air conditioning, it's not so healthy."

"Cold temperature doesn't give you a cold," Evans said pedantically.

"I know that. I mean, the mold."

"What?"

"Mold in the ducts. Dangerous. *That* is what I meant, unhealthy."

Oh. Evans conceded the point. He actually had been coughing a lot since he'd arrived. He got another Coke, wiped the neck and sipped. He spit Handi-wipe. He coughed. He turned the A.C. down a little more.

"You get used to the heat."

"That's not possible. In Mexico, do you have words for winter, spring and fall?"

"Ha, funny."

They returned to the data-mined info. Not only was the credit card data available but insurance information about many of the books was often included. Some of the books were one of a kind, worth tens of thousands of dollars. They seemed to all be first editions.

"And look," Díaz said, looking over the documents. "He never sells them. He only buys."

It was true, Evans realized. There were no sales documents, no tax declarations of making money by selling capital items described as books. He kept everything he bought.

He'd want them around him all the time. He'd covet them. He'd need them.

Many people in the drug cartels were addicted to their own product; Cuchillo, it seemed, was not. Still, he had an addiction.

But how to exploit it?

Evans considered the list. Ideas were forming, as they always did. "Look at this, Al. Last week he ordered a book inscribed by Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The price is sixty thousand. Yeah, dollars."

"For a book?" the Mexican agent asked, looking astonished.

"And it's *used*," Evans pointed out. "It's supposed to be coming in, in a day or two." He thought for some moments. Finally he nodded. "Here's an idea. I think it could work... We'll contact this man—" He found a name on the sheet of data-mined printouts. "Señor Davila. He seems to be Cuchillo's main book dealer. What we'll do is tell him we suspect him of money laundering."

"He probably is."

"And he'd pee his pants, thinking if we announce it, Cuchillo will..." Evans drew his index finger across his throat.

"Do you do that in America?"

“What?”

“You know. That thing, your finger, your throat? I only saw that in bad movies. Laurel and Hardy.”

Evans asked, “Who?”

Alejo Díaz shrugged and seemed disappointed that he’d never heard of them.

Evans continued, “So Davila will do whatever we want.”

“Which will be to call Cuchillo and tell him his Dickens book arrived early. Oh, and the seller wants cash only.”

“Good. I like that. So somebody will have to meet him in person—to collect the cash.”

“And I’ll come to his house to deliver the book. His security man probably won’t want that but Cuchillo will insist to take delivery. Because he’s—”

“Addicted.”

The Mexican agent added, “I’ll have to meet him, not you. Your Spanish, it is terrible. Why did they send you here on assignment?”

The reason for sending P.Z. Evans to a conflict zone was not because of his language skills. “I like the soft drinks.” He opened another Coke. Did the neck cleaning thing. He cleared his throat and tried not to cough.

Díaz said, “We’ll need to get the book, though. That Dickens.” Nodding at the list.

Evans said, “I’ll make some calls to my people in the States, see if they can track one down.”

Díaz asked, “Okay, so it is that I’m inside. What do I do then? If I shoot him, they shoot me.”

“Effective,” Evans pointed out.

“But not the successful plans you’re known for, P.Z.”

“True. No, what you’re going to do is plant a bomb.”

“A bomb?” Díaz said uneasily. “I don’t like them so much.”

Evans gestured to his computer, referring to the email he’d just received. “Instructions are nothing’s supposed to remain. Nothing to trace back to our bosses. Has to be a bomb. And one that produces a big honking fire.”

Díaz added, “Always collateral damage.”

The American agent shrugged. “Cuchillo doesn’t have a wife. He doesn’t have any children. Lives pretty much alone. Anybody around him is probably as guilty as he is.” Evans tapped a drone picture of the compound. “Anything and anyone inside?” A shrug. “They’re just acceptable sacrifices.”

* * * * *

He liked his nickname.

Alonso María Carillo was actually honored that people thought enough of him to give him a name that sounded like it was attached to some Mafioso out of a movie. Like Joey “The Knife” Vitelli.

“Cuchillo”—like a blade, like a dagger: How he loved that! And it was ironic because he wasn’t a thug, wasn’t like Tony Soprano at all. He was solid physically and he was tough, yes, but in Mexico a businessman must be tough. Still, his voice was soft and, well, inquisitive sounding. Almost innocent. His manner unassuming. His temper even.

He was in the office of his home not far from the upscale Hidalgo Plaza area of the city. Though the compound was surrounded by high walls, and sported a number of trees, from this spacious room he had a view of the city's grandest mountain, Cerro de la Comana, if a thousand-foot jut of rock can be described thus.

It was quitting time—he'd been working here since six that morning. No breaks. He put his work aside and went online to download some apps for his new iPhone, which he would synchronize to his iPad. He loved gadgets—both in his personal life and in business he always stayed current with the latest technology. (Since his companies had sales reps throughout Mexico and he needed to stay in constant touch with them he used the Cloud and thought it was the best invention of the last ten years.)

Rising from his desk, declaring it the end of the day, he happened to regard himself in a mirror nearby. Not so bad for an old man.

Cuchillo was about five nine and stocky and resembled Fernandez, Mexico's greatest actor and director, in the businessman's opinion. Though he was in scores of films, Fernandez was at his peak as Mapache in *The Wild Bunch*, one of the few truly honest films about Mexico.

Looking over his face, thick black hair. Keen brown eyes. Cuchillo thought again, No, not so bad... The women still appreciated him. Sure, he paid some of them—one way or another—but he also had a connection with them. He could converse with them. He listened. He also made love for hours. Not a lot of 57-year-olds could do that.

"You old devil," he whispered.

Then he gave a wry grin at his own vanity and left the office. He told his maid he'd be staying at home for dinner.

And he walked into his most favorite place on earth, his library. The building was large: sixty feet by forty, and very cool, as well as carefully humidity controlled (which was ironic in Hermosillo, in the heart of the Sonoran desert, where there were two or three rainy days a year). Gauze curtains kept the sun from bleaching the jackets and leather bindings of the books.

The ceilings were thirty feet off the ground and the entire space was open, lined with tall shelves on the ground floor and encircled with levels above, which one could reach by climbing an iron spiral staircase to narrow walkways. In the center were three parallel shelves ten feet high. In the front of the room was a library table, surrounded by comfortable chairs and an overstuffed armchair and a floor lamp with a warm yellow bulb. A small bar featured the best brandy and single-malt scotches. Cuchillo enjoyed Cuban cigars. But never here.

The building was home to 22,000 titles, nearly all of them first editions. Many, the only ones in existence.

On a night like this, after a long day working by himself, Cuchillo would normally have gone out into the relatively cool evening and eaten at Sonora Steak and then gone to Ruby's bar with his friends and—of course—his security. But the rumors of this impending attack were too real to ignore and he'd have to stay within the compound until more was learned about the threat.

Ah, what a country we live in, he reflected. The most philanthropic businessman, and the most hardworking farmer, and the worst drug baron all are treated equally... treated to fear.

Someday it will be different.

But at least Cuchillo had no problem staying home tonight, in his beloved library. He called his housekeeper and had her prepare dinner, a simple linguine primavera, made with organic vegetables and herbs out of his own garden. A California cabernet, too, and ice water.

He turned on a small high definition TV, the news. There were several stories about the ceremony in the D.F. on Friday, commemorating the latest war against the cartels. The event would include speeches by the country's president and an American official from the DEA. More drug killings in Chihuahua. He shook his head.

In a half hour the food arrived and he sat down at the table, removed his tie—he dressed for work, even when staying home—and stuffed a napkin into his collar. As he ate, his mind wandered to the Dickens that his book dealer, Señor Davila, would be delivering tomorrow. He was delighted that it had arrived early, but pleased, too, that he was getting it for a lower price than originally agreed. The seller whom Davila had found apparently needed cash and would reduce the price by five thousand if Cuchillo paid in U.S. dollars, which he immediately agreed to do. Davila had said he would reduce his percentage of the finder's fee accordingly, but Cuchillo had insisted that he receive the full amount. Davila had always been good to him.

There was a knock on the door and his security chief, José, entered.

He could tell at once: bad news.

"I heard from a contact in the *Federales*, sir. There is intelligence about this bus attack on Friday? The tourist bus? The reports are linking you to it."

"No!"

"I'm afraid so."

"Dammit," he muttered. Cuchillo had uttered only a few obscenities in his life; this was usually the worst his language got. "Me? This is absurd. This is completely wrong! They blame me for everything!"

"I'm sorry, sir."

Cuchillo calmed and considered the problem. "Call the bus lines, call the security people, call whoever you have to. Do what you can to make sure passengers are safe in Sonora. You understand, I want to be certain that no one is hurt here. They will blame me if anything happens."

"I'll do what I can, sir, but—"

His boss said patiently, "I understand you can't control the entire state. But use our resources to do whatever you can."

"Yessir, I will."

The man hurried off.

Cuchillo finally shrugged off the anger, finished dinner and, sipping his wine, walked up and down the aisles enjoying the sight of his many titles.

22,000...

He returned to his den and worked some more on the project that had obsessed him for the past few months: opening another auto parts fabrication plant outside

of town. There was a huge U.S. automobile manufacturer here in Hermosillo and Cuchillo had made much of his fortune by supplying parts to the company. It would employ another 400 local workers. Though he benefitted from their foolishness, he couldn't understand the Americans' sending manufacturing *away* from their country. He would never do that. Business—no, all of life—was about loyalty.

At ten p.m., he decided to retire early. He washed and walked into his large bedroom, thinking again of *The Old Curiosity Shop* he would receive tomorrow. This buoyed his spirits. He dressed in pajamas and glanced at his bedside table.

What should he read now, he wondered, to lull him to sleep?

He decided he would continue with *War and Peace*, a title that, he thought wryly, perfectly described a businessman's life in Mexico.

* * * * *

In the living room of the apartment with the complicated ownership, P.Z. Evans was hunched over his improvised workbench, carefully constructing the bomb.

The care wasn't necessary because he risked getting turned into red vapor, not yet, in any event; it was simply that the circuits and wiring were very small and he had big hands. In the old days he would have been soldering the connections. But now improvised explosive devices were plug and play. He was pressing the circuits into sheets of especially powerful plastic explosive, which he'd packed into the leather cover after slicing it open with a surgeon's scalpel.

It was eleven p.m. and the agents had not had a moment's respite today. They'd spent the past twelve hours acquiring the key items to the project, like the surgeon's instruments, electronics and a leather-bound edition of the play *The Robbers* by Friedrich Schiller, which their new partner—book dealer Señor Davila—had suggested because Cuchillo liked the German author.

Through a jeweler's loupe over his right eye, Evans examined his handiwork and made some small adjustments.

Outside their door they could hear infectious *norteño* in a nearby square. An accordion was prominent. The windows were open because the evening air teased that it was heading toward the bearable, and the A.C. was off. Evans had convinced himself he had a mold-induced cough.

Alejo Díaz sat nearby, not saying anything and seemingly uneasy. This was not because of the bomb, but because he'd apparently found the task of becoming an expert on book collecting and Charles Dickens daunting, to say the least.

Still, Díaz would occasionally look up from Joseph Connolly's *Collecting Modern First Editions*, his eyes on the bomb. Evans thought about diving to the floor, shouting, "Oh, shit! Five... four... three..." But while the Mexican agent had a sense of humor, that might be over the line.

A half hour later he was gluing the leather into place. "Okay, that's it. Done."

Díaz eyed his handicraft. "Is small."

"Bombs are, yes. That's what makes them so nice."

"It will get the job done?"

A brief laugh. "Oh, yeah."

"Nice," Díaz repeated uneasily.

Evans's phone buzzed with an encrypted text. He read it.

“Bait’s here.”

A moment later there was a knock on the door and, even though the text he’d just received had included all the proper codes, both men drew their weapons.

But the delivery man was just who he purported to be—a man attached to the Economic Development Council for the U.S. consulate in northern Mexico. Evans had worked with him before. With a nod the man handed Evans a small package and turned and left.

Evans opened it and extracted the copy of Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Six hours ago it had been sitting in a famed book dealer’s store on Warren Street in New York City. It had been bought with cash by the man who had just delivered it, and its journey to Sonora had been via chartered jet.

Killing bad guys is not only dangerous, it’s expensive.

The American wrapped the book back up.

Díaz asked, “So, what are the next steps?”

“Well, you—you just keep on reading.” A nod toward the book in his hands. “And when you’re through with that, you might want to brush up on the history of English literature in general. You never know what subject might come up.”

Díaz rolled his eyes and shifted in his chair, stretching. “And while I’m stuck in school, what are you going to do?”

“I’m going out and getting drunk.”

“That is not so fair,” Díaz pointed out.

“And it’s even less fair when I’m thinking I may get laid, too.”

Thursday

The latter part of his plans did not happen, though Evans had come close.

But Carmella, the gorgeous young woman he met at a nearby bar, was a little too eager, which set off warning bells that she probably had designs to land a good-looking and apparently employed American husband.

In any event, tequila had intervened big time and the dance of your-place-or-mine never occurred.

It was now ten in the morning and, natch, hot as searing iron. No A.C., but Evans’s cough was gone.

Díaz examined his partner. “You look awful. Hey, you know that many of Charles Dickens’ most popular novels were first published serially and that he wrote in a style influenced by gothic popular novels of the Victorian era, but with a whimsical touch?”

“You’re fucked if you go in talking like that.”

“I going to read one of his books. Is Dickens translated into Spanish?”

“I think so. I don’t know.”

Evans opened an attaché case he’d bought yesterday and had rigged with a false compartment. Into this narrow space he added the Schiller he’d doctored last night and sealed it. Then he added receipts, price guides, scraps of paper—everything that a book dealer would carry with him to a meeting with a collector. The Dickens, too, which was packed in bubble wrap. Evans then tested the

communications app on the iPad that Díaz would have with him—it would appear to be in sleep mode, but a hypersensitive microphone would be picking up all the conversation between Cuchillo and Díaz. The system worked fine.

“Okay.” Evans then checked his 9mm Beretta. He slipped it into his waistband. “Diversion’s ready, device is ready. Let’s do it.”

They walked down to the parking lot. Evans went to a huge old Mercury—yes, a real Mercury, in sun-faded Mercury brown, with an untraceable registration. Díaz’s car was a midnight blue Lincoln registered to Davila Collectable Books, which Señor Davila had quickly, almost tearfully, agreed to let them borrow.

According to the unwritten rules of times like these, the start of a mission, when either or both might be dead within the hour, they said nothing of luck, hope, or the pleasure of working together. Much less did they shake hands.

“See you later.”

“Sí.”

They climbed in, fired up the engines and hurried out of the lot.

~

As he drove to Cuchillo’s compound, Alejo Díaz could not help but think of the bus.

The people tomorrow, the tourists, who would be trapped and burned to death by this butcher. He recalled P.Z. Evans’s words yesterday and reflected that these people were also—to Cuchillo—acceptable sacrifices.

Díaz was suddenly swept with fury at what people like this were doing to his country. Yes, the place was hot and dusty and the economy staggered and it dwelt forever in the shadow of that behemoth to the north—the country that Mexicans both loved and hated.

But this land is our home, he thought. And home, however flawed, deserves respect.

People like Alonso María Cuchillo treated Mexico with nothing but contempt.

Of course, Díaz would have to keep his revulsion deeply hidden when he met Cuchillo. He was just a shopkeeper’s assistant; the drug lord was just another rich businessman with a love of books.

If he screwed that up, then many people—himself included—were going to die.

Then he was at the compound. He was admitted through a gate that swung open slowly and he parked near the modest front door. A swarthy, squat man who clearly was carrying a pistol greeted him pleasantly and asked him to step to a table in the entryway. Another guard gently but thoroughly frisked him.

Then the briefcase was searched.

Díaz regarded the operation with surprising detachment, he decided, considering he might be one minute away from being shot.

The detachment vanished and his heart thudded fiercely when the man frowned and dug into the case.

Jesus...

The man gazed at Díaz with wide eyes. Then he grinned. “Is this the new iPad?” He pulled it out and displayed it to the other guard.

His breathing stuttering in and out, Díaz nodded and wondered if his question had burst Evans’s eardrum.

“Four-G?”

“If there’s a server.”

“How many gig?”

“Thirty-two,” the Mexican agent managed to say.

“My son has that, too. His is nearly filled. Music videos.” He man replaced it and handed the briefcase back. The Schiller novel remained undiscovered.

Struggling to control his breathing, Díaz said, “I don’t have many videos. I use it mostly for work.”

A few minutes later he was led into the living room. He declined water or any other beverage. Alone, the Mexican agent sat with the briefcase on his lap. He opened it again and smoothly freed the Schiller and slipped it into his waistband, absently thinking about the explosive two inches from his penis. The open lid obscured prying eyes or cameras if there were any. He extracted the Dickens and closed the case.

A moment later a shadow spread on the floor and Díaz looked up to see Cuchillo walking steadily forward on quiet feet.

The Knife. The slaughterer of hundreds, perhaps thousands.

The stocky man strode forward, smiling. He seemed pleasant enough, if a bit distracted.

“Señor Abrossa,” he said—the cover name Davila had given when he’d called yesterday. Díaz now presented a business card they’d had printed yesterday. “Good day. Delighted to meet you.”

“And I’m pleased to meet such an illustrious client of Señor Davila.”

“And how is he? I thought he might come himself.”

“He sends his regards. He’s getting ready for the auction of eighteenth century Bibles.”

“Yes, yes, that’s right. One of the few books I *don’t* collect. Which is a shame. I understand that the plot is very compelling.”

Díaz laughed. “The characters, too.”

“Ah, the Dickens.”

Taking it reverently, the man unwrapped the bubble plastic and examined the volume and flipped through it. “It is thrilling to know that Dickens himself held this very book.”

Cuchillo was lost in the book, a gaze of admiration and respect. Not lust or possessiveness.

And in the silence, Díaz looked around and noted that this house was filled with much art and sculpture. All tasteful and subdued. This was not the house of a gaudy drug lord. He had been inside those. Filled with excess—and usually brimming with beautiful and marginally clad women.

It was then that a sudden and difficult thought came to Díaz. Was it at all possible that they’d made a mistake? Was this subdued, cultured man *not* the vicious dog they’d been led to believe? After all, there’d never been any hard proof that Cuchillo was the drug lord many believed him to be. Just because one was rich and tough didn’t mean he was a criminal.

Where exactly had the intelligence assigning guilt come from? How reliable was it?

He realized Cuchillo was looking at him with curiosity. “Now, Señor Abrossa, are you sure you’re the book dealer I’ve been led to believe?”

Using all his willpower, Díaz kept a smile on his face and dipped a brow in curiosity.

The man laughed hard. “You’ve forgotten to ask for the money.”

“Ah, sometimes I get so caught up in the books themselves that, you’re right, I *do* forget it’s a business. I personally would give books away to people who appreciate them.”

“I most certainly *won’t* tell your employer you said that.” He reached into his pocket and extracted a thick envelop. “There is the fiftyfive thousand. U.S. “Díaz handed him the receipt on Davila’s letterhead and signed “*V. Abrossa.*”

“Thank you...?” Cuchillo asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“Victor.” Díaz put the money in the attaché case and closed it. He looked around. “Your home, it is very lovely. I’ve always wondered about the houses in this neighborhood.”

“Thank you. Would you like to see the place?”

“Please. And your collection, too, if possible.”

“Of course.”

Cuchillo then lead him on a tour of the house, which was, like the living room, filled with understated elegance. Pictures of youngsters—his nieces and nephews who lived in Mexico City and Chihuahua, he explained. He seemed proud of them.

Díaz couldn’t help wondering again: Was this a mistake?

“Now, come to my library. As a booklover, I hope you will be impressed.”

They walked through the kitchen, where Cuchillo paused and asked the housekeeper how her ailing mother was doing. He nodded as she answered. He told her to take any time off she needed. His eyes were narrow with genuine sympathy.

A mistake...?

They walked out the back door and through the shade of twin brick walls, the ones protecting him from sniper shots, and then into the library.

Even as a non-book lover, Díaz was impressed. *More* than impressed.

The place astonished him. He knew the size from the drone images, but he hadn’t imagined it would be filled as completely as it was. Everywhere, books. It seemed the walls were made of them, like rich tiles in all different sizes and colors and textures.

“I don’t know what to say, sir.”

They walked slowly through the cool room and Cuchillo talked about some of the highlights in the collection. “My superstars,” he said. He pointed out some as they walked.

The Hound of the Baskervilles by Conan Doyle, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* by T.E. Lawrence, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter, *Brighton Rock* by Graham Greene, *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett, *Night and Day* by Virginia Woolf, *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, *A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu* by Marcel Proust, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by Frank Baum, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* by J.K. Rowling, *The Bridge* by Hart Crane, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *The*

Thirty-Nine Steps by John Buchan, *The Murder on the Links* by Agatha Christie, *Casino Royale* by Ian Fleming.

“And our nation’s writers too, of course—that whole wall there. I love all books, but it’s important for us in Mexico to be aware of *our* people’s voice.” He strode forward and displayed a few. “Salvador Novo, Jos Gorostiza, Xavier Villaurrutia, and the incomparable Octavio Paz. Whom you’ve read, of course.”

“Of course,” Díaz said, praying that Cuchillo would not ask for the name of one of Paz’s books, much less a plot or protagonist.

Díaz noted a book near the man’s plush armchair. It was in a display case, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. He happened to have read about the title last night on a rare book website. “Is that the original 1922 edition?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“It’s worth about \$150,000.”

Cuchillo smiled. “No. It’s worth nothing.”

“Nothing?”

His arm swept in a slow circle, indicating the room. “This entire collection is worth nothing.”

“How do you mean, sir?”

“Something has value only to the extent the owner is willing to sell. I would never sell a single volume. Most book collectors feel this way, more so than about paintings or cars or sculpture.”

The businessman picked up *The Maltese Falcon*. “You are perhaps surprised I have in my collection spy and detective stories?”

The agent recited a fact he’d read. “Of course, popular commercial fiction is usually *more* valuable than literature.” He hoped he’d got this straight.

He must have. Cuchillo was nodding. “But I enjoy them for their substance as well as their collectability.”

This was interesting. The agent said, “I suppose crime is an art form in a way.”

Cuchillo’s head cocked and he seemed confused. Díaz’s heart beat faster.

The collector said, “I don’t mean that. I mean that crime and popular novelists are often better craftspeople than so-called literary writers. The readers know this; they appreciate good storytelling over pretentious artifice. Take that book I just bought, *The Old Curiosity Shop*. When it first came out, serialized in weekly parts, people in New York and Boston would wait on the docks when the latest installment was due to arrive from England. They’d shout to the sailors, *Tell us, is Little Nell dead?*” He glanced at the display case. “I suspect not so many people did that for *Ulysses*. Don’t you agree?”

“I do, sir, yes.” Then he frowned. “But wasn’t *Curiosity Shop* serialized in monthly parts?”

After a moment Cuchillo smiled. “Ah, right you are. I don’t collect periodicals, so I’m always getting that confused.”

Was this a test, or a legitimate error?

Díaz could not tell.

He glanced past Cuchillo and pointed to a shelf. “Is that a Mark Twain?”

When the man turned Díaz quickly withdrew the doctored Schiller and slipped it onto a shelf just above *Ulysses*, near the drug baron’s armchair.

He lowered his arm just as Cuchillo turned back. “No, not there. But I have several. You’ve read *Huckleberry Finn*?”

“No. I just know it as a collector’s item.”

“Some people consider it the greatest American novel. I consider it perhaps the greatest novel of the New World. It has lessons for *us* as well.” A shake of the head. “And the Lord knows we need some lessons in this poor country of ours.”

They returned to the living room and Díaz dug the iPad from the case. “Let me show you some new titles that Señor Davila has just gotten in.” He supposed P.Z. Evans was relieved to hear his voice and learn that he had not been discovered and spirited off to a grave in the graceless Sonora desert.

He called up Safari and went to the website. “Now, we have—”

But his phony sales pitch was interrupted when a huge bang startled them all. A bullet had struck and splattered against the resistant glass of a window nearby.

“My God! What’s that?” Díaz called.

“Get out of the room, away from the windows! Now!” José, the security man, gestured them toward the doorways leading out of the living room.

“They’re bulletproof,” Cuchillo protested.

“But they could try armor piercing when they realize! Move, sir!”

Everyone scattered.

* * * * *

P.Z. Evans didn’t get a chance to shoot his gun very often.

Although he and Díaz had earlier commented about Cuchillo meeting with an “accident” in a euphemistic way, in fact staging natural deaths was the preferred way to eliminate people. While the police would often *suspect* that the death of a terrorist or a criminal was not happenstance, a good craftsman could create a credible scenario that was satisfactory to avoid further investigation. A fall down stairs, a car crash, a pool drowning.

But nothing was as much fun as pulling out your long-barreled Italian pistol and blasting away.

He was about fifty yards from the compound, standing on a Dumpster behind a luxury apartment complex. There wasn’t a support for the gun, but he was strong—shooters have to have good muscles—and he easily hit the window he was aiming for. He had a decent view through the glass and for his first shot aimed where nobody was standing—just in case this window happened not to be bullet proof. But the slugs smacked harmlessly into the strong glass. He emptied one mag, reloaded and leapt off the Dumpster, sprinting to the car, just as the side gate opened and Cuchillo’s security people carefully looked out. Evans fired once into the wall to keep them down and then drove around the block to the other side of the compound.

No Dumpsters here, but he climbed on top of the roof of the car and fired three rounds into the window of Cuchillo’s bedroom.

Then he hopped down and climbed into the driver’s seat. A moment later he was skidding away.

Windows up, A.C. on full. If there was mold in car’s vents he’d just take his chances. He was sweating like he’d spent an hour in the sauna.

* * * * *

Inside the house, after the shooter had vanished and calm—relative calm—was restored, Cuchillo did something that astonished Alejo Díaz.

He ordered his security chief to call the police.

This hardly seemed like the sort of thing that a drug baron would do. You'd think he'd want as little attention—and as little contact with the authorities—as possible.

But when a Hermosillo police captain, along with four uniformed officers, arrived twenty minutes later, Cuchillo was grim and angry. "Once again, I've been targeted! People can't accept that I'm just a businessman. They assume because I'm successful that I'm a criminal and therefore I deserve to be shot. It's unfair! You work hard, you're responsible, you give back to your country and your city ... and still people believe the worst of you!"

The police conducted a brief investigation, but the shooter was, of course, long gone. And no one had seen anything—everyone inside had fled to the den, bedroom or bathroom, as the security chief had instructed. Díaz's response: "I'm afraid I didn't see much, anything really. I was on the floor, hiding." He shrugged, as if faintly embarrassed by his cowardice.

The officer nodded and jotted his words down. He didn't believe him, but nor did he challenge Díaz to be more thorough; in Mexico one was used to witnesses who "didn't see much, anything really."

The police left and Cuchillo, no longer angry but once more distracted, said goodbye to Díaz.

"I'm not much in the mood to consider Señor Davila's books now," he said, with a nod to the iPad. He would check the website later.

"Of course. And thank you, sir."

"It's nothing."

Díaz left, feeling even more conflicted than ever.

You work hard, you're responsible, you give back to your country and your city... and still people believe the worst of you...

My God, was he a murderous drug baron or a generous businessman?

And whether Cuchillo was guilty or innocent, Díaz realized he was stabbed by guilt at the thought that he'd just planted a bomb that would take the life of a man at his most vulnerable, doing something he loved and found comfort in: reading a book.

* * * * *

An hour later Cuchillo was sitting in his den, blinds closed over the bulletproof windows. And despite the attack, he was feeling relieved.

Actually, *because* of the attack, he was feeling relieved.

He had thought that the rumors they'd heard for the past few days, the snippets of intelligence, were referring to some kind of brilliant, insidious plan to murder him, a plan that he couldn't anticipate. But it had turned out to be a simple shooting, which had been foiled by the bullet proof glass; the assassin was surely headed out of the area.

Jos knocked and entered. "Sir, I think we have a lead about the attack. I heard from Carmella at Ruby's. She spent much of last evening with an American, a

businessman, he claimed. He got drunk and said some things that seemed odd to her. She heard of the shooting and called me.”

“Carmella,” Cuchillo said, grinning. She was a beautiful if slightly unbalanced young woman who could get by on her looks for the time being, but if she didn’t hook a husband soon she’d be in trouble.

Not that Cuchillo was in any hurry for that to happen; he’d slept with her occasionally. She was very, very talented.

“And what about this American?”

“He was asking her about this neighborhood. The houses in it. If there were any hotels nearby, even though earlier he’d said he was staying near the bar.”

While there were sights to see in the sprawling city of Hermosillo, Cuchillo’s compound was in a nondescript residential area. Nothing here would draw either businessmen or tourists.

“Hotel,” Cuchillo mused. “For a vantage point for shooting?”

“That’s what I wondered. Now, I’ve gotten his credit card information from the bar and data-mined it. I’m waiting for more information but we know for a fact it’s an assumed identity.”

“So he’s an operative. But who’s he working for? A drug cartel from *north* of the border? A hit man from Texas hired by the Sinaloans? ... The American government?”

“I hope to know more soon, sir.”

“Thank you.”

Cuchillo rose and, carrying the Dickens, started for the library.

He stopped. “José?”

“Sir?”

“I want to change our plans with the bus.”

“Yessir?”

“I know I said I wanted safe haven for all bus passengers in Sonora on Friday, that nothing should happen to the passengers here.”

“Right, I told the men to wait to attack until it crossed the border into Sinaloa.”

“But now, tell the men to hit a bus *here* tomorrow morning.”

“In Sonora?”

“That’s right. Whoever is behind this *must* know that I won’t be intimidated. Any attempts on my life will be met with retribution.”

“Yessir.”

Cuchillo looked at his security man carefully. “You don’t think I should be doing this, do you?” He encouraged those working for him to make their opinions known, even—especially—differing opinions.

“Frankly, sir, not a tourist bus, no. Not civilians. I think it works to our disadvantage.”

“I disagree,” Cuchillo said calmly. “We need to take a strong stand.”

“Of course, sir, if that’s what you want.”

“Yes, it is.” But a moment later he frowned. “But wait. There’s something to what you say.”

The security man looked his boss’s way.

“When your men attack the bus, get the women and children off before you set it on fire. Only burn the men to death.”

“Yessir.”

Cuchillo considered his decision a weakness. But José had a point. The new reality was that, yes, sometimes you *did* need to take public relations into account.

* * * * *

At eight p.m. that evening Cuchillo received a call in his library.

He was pleased at what he learned. One of his lieutenants explained that a shooting team was in place and would assault a large bus as it headed along Highway 26 west toward Bahia de Kino tomorrow morning.

They would stop the vehicle, leave the men on board, then wire shut the door and douse the bus in petrol and shoot anybody who tried to leap from the windows.

The communications man on the shooting team would call the press to make sure they arrived for video and photos before the fire was out.

Cuchillo thanked the man and disconnected, thinking of how much he was looking forward to seeing those news accounts.

He hoped the man who had shot at him would be watching the news, too, and would feel responsible for the pain the victims would experience.

Glancing up from his armchair, he happened to notice that a book was out of order.

It was on the shelf above the case containing the *Ulysses*.

He rose and noted the leather spine. *The Robbers*. How had a Schiller gotten here? He disliked disorder of any kind, particularly in his book collection. One of the maids, perhaps.

Just as he plucked the volume from the shelf, the door burst open.

“Sir!”

“What?” he turned quickly to José.

“I think there’s a bomb here! That man with the book dealer, Davila; he’s fake. He was working with the American!”

His eyes first went to the Dickens but, no, he’d flipped through the entire volume and there’d been no explosives inside. The assassins had simply used that as bait to gain access to Cuchillo’s compound.

Then he looked down at what he held in his hand. The Schiller.

“What is it, sir?”

“This book... It wasn’t here earlier. Abrossa! He planted it when I gave him the tour.” Cuchillo realized that, yes, the book was heavier than a comparable book of this size.

“Set it down! Run!”

“No! The books!” He glanced around at the library.

22,000 volumes...

“It could blow up at any moment.”

Cuchillo started to set it down, then hesitated. “I can’t do it! You get back, José!” Then still holding the bomb, he ran outside, the security guard remaining loyally beside him. Once they were to the garden, Cuchillo flung the Schiller as far as he could. The men dropped to the ground behind one of the brick walls.

There was no explosion.

When Cuchillo looked he saw that the book had opened. The contents—electronics and a wad of clay—colored explosives—had tumbled out.

“Jesus, Jesus.”

“Please, sir. Inside now!”

They hurried into the house and got the staff away from the side of the house where the box lay in the garden. José called the man they used for making their own bombs. He would hurry to the house and disarm or otherwise dispose of the device.

Cuchillo poured a large Scotch. “How did you find this out?”

“I got the data-mined information on the American in the bar, the one who was drinking with Carmella. I found records that he was making calls to the book dealer. And he used his credit card to buy electronic parts at a supplier in town—the sort of circuits that are used in IEDs.”

“Yes, yes. I see. They threatened Davila to help them. Or paid the bastard. You know, I suspected that man, Abrossa. I suspected him for a moment. Then I decided, no, he was legitimate.”

Because I wanted the Dickens so much.

“I appreciate what you did, José. That was a good job. Would you like a drink, too?”

“No, thank you, sir.”

Still calm, Cuchillo wrinkled his brow. “Considering how the American tried to kill us—and nearly destroyed a priceless collection of books—how would you feel if we instructed our people on Highway 26 *not* to get the women and children off before setting fire to the bus?”

José smiled. “I think that’s an excellent suggestion, sir. I’ll call the team.”

* * * * *

Several hours later the bomb had been slipped into a steel disposal container and taken away. Cuchillo, the engineer explained, had unwittingly disarmed it himself. The panicked throw had dislodged the wires from the detonator, rendering it safe.

Cuchillo had enjoyed watching the bomb-disposal robot—the same way he liked being in his parts manufacturing operation and his drug synthesizing facilities. He enjoyed watching technology at work. He had always wanted the *Codex Leicester*—the DaVinci manuscript that contained the inventor’s musings on mechanics and science. Bill Gates had paid \$30 million for it some years ago. Cuchillo could easily afford that, but the book was not presently for sale. Besides, such a purchase would draw too much attention to him, and a man who has tortured hundreds to death and—in the spirit of mercy—painlessly shot perhaps a thousand, does not want too many eyes turned in his direction.

Cuchillo spent the rest of the night on the phone with associates, trying to find more details of the two assassins and any associates they might have, but there was no other information. He’d learn more tomorrow. It was nearly midnight when finally he sat down to a modest dinner of grilled chicken and beans with tomatillo sauce.

As he ate and sipped a very nice cabernet, he found himself relaxed and curiously content, despite the horror of what might have happened today. Neither

he nor any of his people had been injured in the attack. His 22,000 volumes were safe.

And he had some enjoyable projects on the horizon: killing Davila, of course. And he'd find the name of the person masquerading as Abrossa, his assistant, and the shooter who'd fired the shots—a clumsy diversionary tactic, he now realized. Probably the American. Those two would not die as quickly as the book dealer. They had destroyed an original Friedrich Schiller (albeit a third printing with water damage on the spine). Cuchillo would stay true to his name and would use a knife on them himself—in his special interrogation room in the basement below his library.

But best of all: he had the burning bus and its scores of screaming passengers to look forward to.

Friday

At one a.m. Cuchillo washed for bed and climbed between the smooth sheets, not silk but luxurious and expensive cotton.

He would read something calming to lull him to sleep tonight. Not War and Peace. Perhaps some poetry.

He picked up his iPad from the bedside table, flipped open the cover and tapped the icon to bring up his e-reader app. Cuchillo, of course, generally preferred traditional books for the most part. But he was a man of the 21st century and found e-books were often more convenient and easier to read than their paper forebears. His iPad library contained nearly a thousand titles.

As he looked at the tablet, though, he realized he must have hit the wrong app icon—the forward camera had opened and he found he was staring at himself.

Cuchillo didn't close the camera right away, however. He took a moment to regard himself. And laughed and whispered the phrase he'd used to describe himself earlier, "Not so bad, you old devil."

* * * * *

Five hundred yards from Cuchillo's compound, Alejo Díaz and P.Z. Evans were sitting in the front seat of the big Mercury. They were leaning forward, staring at the screen of Evans's impressive laptop computer.

What they were observing was the same image that Cuchillo happened to be basking in—his own wide-angle face—which was being beamed from his iPad's camera to the laptop via a surveillance app that Evans had loaded. They could hear the man's voice too.

You old devil...

"He's in bed, alone," Evans said. "Good enough for me." Then he glanced at Díaz. "He's all yours."

"Sí?" asked the Mexican agent.

"Yep."

"*Gracias.*"

"*Nada.*"

And without any dramatic flair, Díaz pressed a button on what looked like a garage door opener.

In Cuchillo's bedroom, the iPad's leather case, which Evans had stuffed with the potent incendiary explosive last night, detonated. The explosion was far larger than the American agent had expected. Even the bullet-proof windows blew to splinters and a gaseous cloud of flame shot into the night.

They waited until it was clear the bedroom was engulfed in flame—and all the evidence of the attack was burning to vapors, as they'd been instructed to do by Washington—and then Díaz started the car and drove slowly through the night.

After ten minutes of silence, looking over their shoulders for police or other pursuers, Díaz said, "Have to say, *amigo*, you came up with a good plan."

Evans didn't gloat—or act shy with false modesty, either. It *was* a good plan. Data-mining had revealed a lot about Cuchillo (this was often true in the case of targets like him—wealthy and, accordingly, big spenders). Evans and Díaz had noted not only his purchases of collectable books, but his high-tech acquisitions too: an iPad, an e-reader app and a number of e-books, as well as a leather case for the Apple device.

Armed with this information, Evans duplicated the iPad and filled the case with the deadly explosive. *This* was the actual weapon that Díaz smuggled into the compound and swapped with Cuchillo's iPad, whose location they could pinpoint thanks to the finder service Evans had hacked into. With Díaz inside, holding the iPad to show Davila's latest inventory of books, Evans had fired into the windows, scattering everyone and giving his partner a chance to slip into the bedroom and switch the devices. He'd fired into that room's windows, too, just in case Díaz had not been alone there.

The bullets would also serve a second purpose—to let Cuchillo and his security people believe the shooting was the assault they'd heard about and lessen their suspicion that another attack was coming.

Lessen, but not eliminate. The Knife was too sharp for that.

And so they needed a second misdirection. Evans let slip fake information about himself—to Carmella, the beautiful woman who was part of Cuchillo's entourage at Ruby's Bar (phone records revealed he called her once or twice a month). He also fed phony data-mined facts that suggested he and Díaz might have snuck a bomb into the library. He'd hollowed out a copy of Schiller's *The Robbers*—Sorry, Fred—and filled it with real explosives and a circuit, but failed to connect the detonators.

Cuchillo would know his library so well it wouldn't take much to find this out-of-place volume, which Díaz had intentionally planted askew.

After finding this device, they would surely think no more threats existed and not suspect the deadly iPad on Cuchillo's bedside table.

Díaz now called José, the security chief for the late drug baron, and explained—in a loud voice due to the chief's sudden hearing loss—that if any bus attacks occurred he would end up in jail accompanied by the rumor that he had sold his boss out. As unpopular as Cuchillo had been among the competing cartel figures, nothing was more unpopular in a Mexican prison than a snitch.

The man assured them that there would be no attacks. Díaz had to say goodbye three times before the man heard him.

A good plan, if a bit complicated. It would have been much easier, of course, simply to get a real bomb into the library and detonate it when drone surveillance revealed Cuchillo inside.

That idea, however, hadn't even been on the table. They would never have destroyed the library. Aside from the moral issue—and P.Z. Evans *did* have his standards—there was the little matter of how such a conflagration would play in the press if word got out about the identity of the two agents who'd orchestrated it and who their employers were.

You can kill drug barons and their henchmen with impunity; 20,000 destroyed classics were not acceptable sacrifices. That was the sort of mar from which careers do not recover.

In a half hour they were back at the hotel and watching the news, which confirmed that indeed Alonso María Carillo, known as Cuchillo, the suspected head of the Hermosillo Cartel, was dead. No one else had been injured in the attack, which was blamed on a rival cartel, probably from Sinaloa.

The news, Evans was surprised to note, wasn't the lead story, which Cuchillo probably would have taken hard. But, in a way, it was his own fault; he'd contributed to the ubiquity of the drug business in Mexico, which made stories about death in the trade unnewsworthy.

Evans supposed it was something like book collecting: the bigger the print run for first editions, the less the interest, the lower the value.

He shut the set off. They decided to get a little dinner and a lot of tequila—though definitely not at Sonora Steak or Ruby's bar, Cuchillo's favorite hangouts. They'd go somewhere across town. They'd probably be safe; the Hermosillo Cartel had been neutralized. Still, both men had their weapons underneath their untucked shirts. And extra magazines in their left pockets.

As they walked to the big old Mercury, Díaz said, "You should have seen all those books in the library. I never saw so many books in my life."

"Uhn," Evans said, not particularly interested.

"What does that mean, that sound? You don't like books?"

"I like books."

The Mexican agent gave a fast laugh. "You no sound like you do. You read at all?"

"Of course I read."

"So, what do you read? Tell me."

Evans climbed into the passenger seat and counted three pickup trucks pass by before he answered. "Okay, you want to know? The sports section. That's all I read."

Díaz started the car. "Sí, me too."

Evans said, "Could we get that A.C. going, Al? Does it *ever* cool off in this goddamn town?"

