



UNIVERSEROS

by

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CHAPTER 1

Mark finished his evening martini while watching his wife picking up the late dinner dishes. He relished her beauty, especially when she wore her silk evening robe. It fit smoothly over her form, accenting her round, firm shape; her breasts swaying gently with her movements.

His need overcame him. He put his martini glass on the coffee table, rose, and quietly came up behind her. He untied the belt around his evening robe, and slipped his arms around her waist.

His caress thrilled her. She moaned softly, closing her eyes, remaining still, lest her movements disturb the magic.

“You’re such an exciting woman,” he whispered softly, as his hands moved downward, stroking, caressing.

She let her robe fall open, closing her eyes, biting her lips in the pleasure of increasing rapture. She turned around, and wrapped her arms around his neck to kiss him, to thrust her tongue into his mouth, searching.

“Even after five years you’re still so damned romantic,” she whispered, lingering after the kiss.

“Has it really been five years?” he responded, stroking the back of her neck. “It can’t possibly be that long.”

She laughed, drawing back from him, looking into his eyes. “Five years and ten pounds. You really can’t tell the difference?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I guess I can. You’re even more beautiful.”

She laughed again and returned to the table. “Now,” she said with a broad grin, “if you’ll quit playing around, maybe I can clean things up a little before bedtime.”

“Bedtime?” he said with the lilt in his voice that always excited her. “You mean, after all that, I get to sleep with you, too?”

“Try to avoid it,” she said.

The next morning the aroma of brewing coffee drifted into the bedroom. Angelica sniffed the air, and yawned. She sleepily sat up and brushed a strand of her long blonde hair from her eyes. The movement loosened the electric blanket, and it fell to her waist, exposing her shape.

“Mark,” she said, rubbing her eyes. “Are you going to get up and pour the coffee? It’s ready.” She turned to her husband’s place in the bed beside her, and found it empty. “Damn,” she said. “I suppose he went out to get the morning paper again.”

She got out of bed, put on her robe, and stepped into her slippers to amble into the kitchen.

The coffee maker was automatic, set to turn on at 7:00 a.m., and this morning wasn’t unusual in that respect.

She got two cups from the cupboard. One she poured full of coffee for Mark before retrieving the milk container from the refrigerator. She half filled her cup with milk before pouring in coffee. She preferred to drink hers in the German fashion.

After a taste, and with satisfaction only the perfect cup of coffee brings, she carried her cup into the bathroom to have it ready after her morning shower. With yet another yawn, she turned on the water, and took another sip of coffee while testing the water temperature. It was just right, so she put down the coffee cup and dropped her robe. A quick glance in the mirror before stepping into the shower reassured her she was still an attractive woman, although she would soon need another bikini wax.

As she ducked her head under the spray, she heard the jingling of the silver bell that hung on the inside of the front door. It emitted its musical note whenever someone opened the door. “Ah, good,” she said under the spray. “That must be Mark coming back.” She listened intently. “Mark?” she called. “Is that you, honey?” She waited for the reply. Getting none, she considered he didn’t hear her. “Mark,” she repeated, louder. “The coffee’s on the counter. I’ll be out in a second. Did you get the paper?”

The front door was opened, as she surmised, and someone did enter, as she heard, but it wasn’t Mark. It was an intruder, a contract assassin, and in the assassin’s right hand was an automatic pistol, a Walther PPKs fit with a silencer, raised and poised.

The assassin crept through the front room, glanced quickly into the kitchen, and carefully continued into the bedroom. He saw no one, so he stepped across the thickly padded carpet to peer into the bathroom. Angelica’s nude form showed behind the translucent shower curtain, and he absorbed the view with a sneering grin.

Angelica’s senses hinted something was wrong. Something fearful gripped her. While in the middle of rinsing her hair, with her eyes half covered with shampoo, she stopped. Her nerves tingled. She canted her head to one side, listening. She thought she heard something, or someone. She listened. It’s someone breathing, she silently confirmed, identifying the sound. “Okay, Mark,” she said, easing her tension. “No games, hunh? You scared me half to death.”

There was no response.

“Mark?” she repeated, thinking he couldn’t hear her over the shower spray.

Still no answer. “Come on, Mark,” she said, as she pulled the shower curtain aside and looked around it.

Staring at her were cold, close set beady eyes.

The assassin lowered the pistol at her, and fired.

She tried to scream, but she hadn’t the time.

A small round hole appeared in her left breast right over her heart. She fell with her eyes frozen

in terror and her scream locked in her throat.

The assassin stared down at her, continuing the sneering leer, reaching out to stroke her hair, forgetting the shower spray. "Damn it!" the assassin swore, quickly drawing back from the hot water.

Mark looked at his watch as he walked down the hallway of the apartment building. He went over the translation of the message he received through channels. He broke the rules by carrying the code booklet with him to make the call, and should have waited until he was safely inside his apartment to make the translation, but he found it easier to use the booklet just after taking the message, when the words were fresh in his mind. Besides, he didn't think there was much chance of the system being compromised by someone seeing him with the booklet, pad and pencil in the telephone booth.

Hell, he said to himself, people carry notebooks in telephone booths all the time. Even with the advent of cell phones, telephone booths and land lines were safer to use. What was said on a land line couldn't be overheard without a wire tap, as could the open broadcast of a cell phone.

It wasn't the way he received the message, or the way he translated it, though, that focused his attention. He completed his last assignment with relative ease, and ahead of schedule, so he expected the message to be notice of several months idle time. Instead, because he was so good on the last assignment, the powers that be gave him another one right away. "While he was hot," the message read.

He was partially relieved, though, when he realized the new assignment was logistics work, rather than one which required his active participation. However, it was still a nuisance that interrupted his expected time off. He was to make arrangements for the voluntary defection of one of the leading figures from the most notorious drug manufacturing and distributing organization in the world. He would be told the defector's name at a later time, but the first stage of the assignment was to co-ordinate with another agent who set up the plan, and arranged the escape process that would assure the defector's safe departure from Columbia.

He stuck the message and the booklet in his shirt pocket, and reached for the door to his apartment. He noticed it was partially ajar. "Hmm," he mused. "I must not have shut it all the way when I left. I hope none of the cats around here sneaked inside while I was out. It's just like Angelica to go right on sleeping and let half the strays in the neighborhood come in to puddle up the place."

He pushed the door open and entered. He never saw his assassin. Three bullets pierced his chest before his third step.

The assassin removed the silencer from the gun, and put the weapon back in its shoulder holster before crossing the room to kneel beside Mark. He grinned when he found the booklet and the message in Mark's shirt pocket. The booklet was tossed aside, since the organization already had a copy. Finding the message was the important part of the assignment.

The assassin quietly left the apartment and shut the door, unmindful of the black cat slinking through the opening before the door was shut.

CHAPTER 2

“What’s bothering you, Penn?” Tara asked, noting her lover’s despondent attitude. “You seem really down.”

Penn looked out from the cockpit of the Flyin’ Penguin, his 53 foot ketch in the Loch Lomond Harbor of San Rafael. He considered her question. She was always extremely perceptive. Perhaps that was why he was so close to her. Perhaps that was why he loved her so much.

“I don’t know,” he responded, taking a sip of his Korbel over rocks. Their cocktails on the aft deck was an evening ritual in the summer in the San Francisco bay area. “I seem to have problems getting over the case in Belize.”

“PZ was a close friend,” she responded. “I know. I remember when my mother died. I was devastated. But you know what? If I can quote my friend, Dr. Wall, you’ll never get over it. You just have to live with it.”

“But, how could I have been so wrong about him? We were partners in the detective agency for over five years.”

“I think it might be a good idea for you to get away by yourself for a while. You know, maybe go to Baja, camp out. Get back to nature, your feelings. Maybe put some more time on your Great American Detective novel? You have it in you. You only need the time to bring it out.”

Penn studied his lover. He thought her fantastic. “If I did that, what would you do while I’m gone?”

“My parents are going on a canal barge cruise in Europe. Maybe I can foist myself on them while you’re away.”

Penn gave her suggestion some thought. “That might be a good idea,” he said. He paused, took another sip of his brandy. “I’d miss you, you know.”

“And I, you. But I think it’s a good idea. You’ll come back a new man.”

“When are your parents going on their cruise?”

“Next week.”

“That’s a bit sudden, isn’t it?”

“There’s nothing more important to me than you. I don’t care how quick, or how short, the timing is. Your emotional stability is the most important thing to me.” She took a sip from her Canadian Mist and Soda. “Actually. I think you should go as soon as possible. You need the vacation. The time off. You’ve been working too hard.”

Penn reached over and kissed her.

“Uh,” she said, in emotional response. “You’re going to spill your drink if you keep that up.”

“You’re complaining?” he asked.

She wasn't.

The night was enjoyable.

The next day Penn loaded his Jeep Liberty with his camping gear, and headed for Baja California.

The brown two-story masonry house stood on the center of a small knoll in central Colombia. The red tiled roof glistened in the morning sun. The windows, arched in the Moorish tradition, were covered with wrought iron bars, and a stone fence surrounded the mansion.

The morning sun dissipated the night's shadows with a speed seen only in equatorial latitudes. The natives prepared their defenses against another summer day. Plodding along the dirt paths and streets, they created a dust cloud which slowly settled on the casas, coating them with yet another layer of adobe brown.

"Buenas," Carlos Montaneé said, greeting his cook, as his pet parakeet cheerfully chirped in its kitchen cage.

He sat at the table. He forced himself to calmly eat his customary huevos revueltos, drink his cafe con leche. He wiped his mouth with the linen napkin kept in a gold plated holder at the side of his plate.

He glanced at the two initials engraved on the broad face of the holder. M.B. They brought a smile to his face, reminding him of the good times past, of her. He hoped he would have those good times again. He wished he could take the napkin holder with him, but he couldn't. It was a day when there was no room for unusual baggage.

"Los huevos son deliciosos hoy. Gracias," he called to his cook, as he rose from his breakfast table. The eggs are delicious today. Thanks. He grabbed his leather valise with the hand crafted designs, the only piece of luggage he usually carried to his office each morning.

"Gracias. Muchas gracias, señor," the cook responded with pride. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Montaneé went out the front door and stood on the broad veranda. He reached for his lighter and the last of his cigarettes. He had a penchant for the American brand of long, thin, Virginia Slims. He doubted the television commercials which touted the brand as those made especially for the woman who has come a long way.

He took a deep puff on the cigarette. It wasn't just for women, he mused. American tobacco was the best, regardless of the brand.

Before returning the lighter to his pocket, he glanced at it. He studied it. There were fond memories attached to it, too. It was a special gift from one of his friends who was successful in the cocaine smuggling business at one time. He hadn't heard from him for more than a year, though. "Probably rotting the remainder of his life in some stinking jail," he said to himself as he returned the lighter to his pocket and took another deep drag on the 100 mm pleasure.

"It has been a long road," he said, aloud. "It has been hard, since being a teenager, to become an important part of the cartel. The mountain of money was strong attraction to a child from the slums of Bogota. He worked his way to the top. He became important. He was the member who created and maintained the system of money laundering that changed foreign drug money into useable, less noticeable, local monies.

It was not an easy climb, though. He crawled over many others, too many others. He laughed as he remembered the old saying, 'Be good to those on the way up, because they're the ones who you pass on the way back down.' He wondered how many of those who were there on his way up would be kind to him now.

The cigarette was only half finished, but he had no idle time, if he were to keep his appointment. He tossed the cigarette in the dirt, and strode to the entrance of the garage.

On his way he passed his gardener, already making sounds with the shovel, spading the bed for the tulips to plant this year. He saluted the man with a gentle, "Buenos dias." He regretted he would never see those tulips in bloom.

"Buenos dias, señor," the gardener beamed at the recognition, as he always did.

Inside the garage, Carlo nodded to his chauffeur, and instead of allowing the chauffeur to open the rear door the Rolls Royce, as was customary, he waved him off. "I think," he said to his English speaking chauffeur. "Since it is such a beautiful day, I will take the Ferrari. I won't be needing you. I will drive myself."

Even though the chauffeur was a trusted servant, Carlos couldn't tell him the plan for the day. Because the option of driving himself in the Ferrari was one he often chose, he was able to make the change without fear the chauffeur might consider the change to be out of the ordinary, when questioned later by the cartel, as Carlos was sure he would be.

He climbed in behind the Ferrari steering wheel, and felt the soft, leather seats. He started the engine, and revved it up several times, purely for the pleasure of hearing the power of the machine.

The chauffeur opened the garage door, and pushed the button that opened wrought iron gate spanning the driveway. When it was open, Carlos sped through it and accelerated down the dirt road away from his house. He felt a sense of regret when he realized he would no longer feel the awesome power of the superb example of Italian automotive craftsmanship.

Down the road, the man with the auburn hair sat with his partner in the parked black sedan partially concealed behind a broken cement block wall that once was part of a house. He saw the wrought iron gate of Montane's driveway open, tossed his cigarette out his car window, and peered through his binoculars. "That's him," he calmly said to his partner. "He's going hell bent for leather. Driving like that, we could lose him in a second. Tell the others."

"Righto," his partner responded as he reached for the car radio microphone. "4A9? 4A5," he called into it.

"4A9," came the static filled response.

"Red Ferrari coming your way," he said. "You take the lead. We'll catch up and change at the first corner."

"Roger 4A5. The first corner," the radio speakers rustled with the response.

The driver started the engine of the gray sedan and hurriedly pulled onto the road when the Ferrari passed his location. He almost hit two burros loaded with bundled sticks plodding along, much to the consternation of the native who owned them. Neither the driver nor the passenger took time to apologize for scattering the animals. They were in too great a hurry to consider any peasant.

Carlos kept a close watch through his rear view mirror. He half expected he would be followed as part of the plan, but he was still surprised to see the gray sedan behind him as it pulled out of the long driveway he passed. Although there were a few other cars on the road, and the dust they stirred provided some cover for the tailing car, he easily spotted it. He also saw the black sedan pulling out from behind the block wall behind the gray sedan.

The tailing cars reminded him to be careful. He couldn't be sure who they belonged to, because there was no way for him to know if word of his plans reached the cartel leaders. He knew they had uncanny ways of knowing things; things that were kept as the best of secrets, especially when those

secrets might be to their detriment.

He had confidence in the careful planning of his American contact, though, and raced down the road in seeming nonchalance, carefully calculating the route into the city. He smiled to himself, knowing the drivers of the two following cars wouldn't get too close to him, not until the last minute, because they couldn't risk being discovered.

He turned off the dirt road onto the busier, and paved, main highway into town. He watched as the black sedan replaced the gray one following closest behind him. In response, he tromped down hard on the accelerator. After all, he mused, it was a straight stretch of highway, and he enjoyed an occasional spurt of recklessness, in spite of his years of careful diligence and planning, keeping the financial records for the cartel. Maybe, he thought, that's what is behind my movements in the first place, a secret desire to throw off the bonds of routine.

He casually swerved over the centerline to pass a slow moving bus loaded with natives, and kept his eye the rear view mirror. The two sedans followed suit. ** He smiled even broader when he considered how surprised the people in those cars would be before the day was over.

Slowing to a more moderate speed, he entered the busy town traffic. The first traffic light was in his favor, and he sped through it with a planned show of disregard. Such was the manner of important people of the cartel. The cartel kept the city solvent, profitable, and the mayor's staff rich. In return, the members got away with anything they wanted. It was expected of them. It was a game he enjoyed playing.

He glanced at the valise on the seat beside him for reassurance he made the right decision for his welfare. The was a necessary part of his plan.

"Madre de Dios!" he shouted, as he returned his attention to his driving. He had to slam on his brakes to avoid hitting a peasant woman scurrying across the street in front of him.

The driver of the gray sedan let the black sedan go around him when they entered the town, and dropped back some more to let another car, a Toyota, pass him. He didn't want to stay too close to the black sedan. It wasn't normal for two large American sedans to be in this town, let alone for both of them to be going the same direction behind such an expensive car as a Ferrari. He wished the driver of the Toyota would hurry up and pass. "What's he waiting for?" he wondered.

"You're putting a lot of trust in 4A5's driving aren't you?" the driver's partner asked, glancing over as the Toyota pulled out to pass.

"Just a precaution," the driver responded. "Anyway, I want to let that Toyota go around. We can use it for cover." He glanced in the rear view mirror as he spoke.

His companion merely grunted in response.

The driver of the Toyota didn't expect his task to be so easy. When coming even with the sedan, he raised his Uzi sub-machine gun and sent a burst of rounds through the side window of the sedan.

The driver of the sedan jerked the steering wheel hard to the right in reaction. The windshield exploded in front of his face. Seconds later the car smashed against the stone wall lining the street, and flipped over. Sparks flew everywhere as the vehicle slid ten yards, stopping with the passenger side door wrapped around a telephone pole.

"Avenida Del Insurgente," Carlos read the street sign out loud at the next corner. "Two more blocks and I make a quick turn into the alley. I sure hope those agents have that van truck ready for me to drive into." He chuckled to himself. "I'd be great if it's big enough to carry this car."

He slowed near the end of the first block, and went over the plan made for his escape. He

recalled the organization the agent said he was from, and he chuckled again. I don't care where he's from, so long as he pays me what was agreed. They should, he added to his thoughts. What I have to sell is worth a whole lot more than what was agreed. Hell. I could have sold it to the others. The agent never thought of that. They offered much more cash, but there was no guarantee of immunity if anyone ever found out my true identity. Witness Protection Program? Hah! One leak, and ¡Que lastima! Too bad. It's all over. He honked at a lone burro ambling across the street.

He slowed as he approached the corner at the narrow where he was supposed to turn. Before he could turn, a huge truck slowly backed out of the alley into the street in front of him. A workman accompanying the truck walked out onto the street, holding his hand up to signal for a stop.

Carlos stopped short. The truck was supposed to be in the alley, not backing out of it. He stared as the workman put on a broad grin and walked over to his car. He nearly panicked, hastily thinking it was some sort of interruption in his plan; something going wrong. Did the cartel know his plans? Did they do this?

The workman continued grinning as he stuck his head close to the car window. The man looked like he hadn't bathed in a week, and sweat stains ran down the sides of his dingy white T-shirt. His breath was overloaded with garlic, and the odor wafted into the car as he nodded to Carlos.

"Buenos dias," the man said. "It will be but a second, amigo, for the truck to back out of the narrow alley. Then you can be on your way. Mucho apologias, señor."

Carlos glared at the man. He wasn't from the cartel, after all. How could the man be so stupid? Does he not know who I am? To delay me like this? He slapped the steering wheel in exasperation, and watched the antics of the truck. It became obvious the driver didn't know how to handle such a rig, for he made more than one try at clearing the corner.

"You'd think he was aware of our being here," the driver of the black sedan said to his companion. "Judging from the way he drove through town."

"Hey. No way, my man," the companion responded. "He's not even looking for us. All he's thinking of is how to get into that alley as quickly as he can, and get out of the country as fast as that truck will carry him. He can't be looking over his shoulder that much, no way."

"I hope you're right, old man," the driver said, casually glancing in his rear view mirror to double-check the presence of the gray sedan. He put all his concentration on the mirror. "Hey!" he said. "Wasn't 4A9 supposed to stay with us all the way?"

The passenger turned to him. "Yeah. Why?"

"He's not there. That's why," the driver said.

"What?" The passenger turned around, but couldn't see the other car. "You don't bloody think he lost us in the crowd, do you?" He picked up the radio microphone and called, "4A9? 4A9?"

Silence.

He repeated the call, but to no avail.

"Something must have happened to them. Maybe their car gave out."

"Maybe," the driver said with skepticism.

"Well. It can't be helped now. We have work to do. We're almost there. That's the truck pulling out of the alley."

"Right. Now, as planned..." The driver slowed, and with caution, continued along the street, stopping almost on the bumper of the stopped Ferrari.

The workman standing beside the window of the Ferrari seemed to not notice their approach, and began carrying on a conversation with Carlos.

The occupants of the black sedan got out of their vehicle carefully, quietly shutting their car doors. They approached both sides of the Ferrari. They took out their pistols, and with coordinated movements, opened both the doors of the Ferrari.

Carlos jumped with surprise. He was sure the cartel found him out. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. He was about to cry out his innocence, but he was told to shut up. The command was backed up by a cocking of the hammer of the pistol pointed at him.

Carlos' eyes went wide. "¿Que?" he cried in a hushed voice made raspy from fear and surprise. What?

"Easy, chum," the driver of the sedan said. Move over. I'll drive from here on. You can sit on the other seat, nice and cozy with my friend."

Carlos hesitated. This wasn't part of the plan. The thought of trying to escape flashed through his mind, but he quickly discarded it. He reluctantly crawled over the gear shift and center console to squeeze into the passenger seat beside the other man, who was already in the car.

The driver got in, waved thanks to the dingy shirted workman, put the still running Ferrari into gear, and with skill, raced the vehicle around the rear of the truck, continuing up the street.

Within two blocks, Carlos regained his composure. "You're not from the cartel," he said, feeling his tension easing.

The driver glanced at him with a smile, but said nothing.

"You're not from, ah, with the other people I spoke to," Carlos continued his assessment.

"You're bloody right about that," the driver finally responded.

"CIA?" Carlos asked.

The driver silently shook his head in denial. "Not to worry," he said. "We're a hell of a whole lot better for you than your other friends."

"Who're you with?" Carlos asked.

"The Department of Homeland Security for the good old U S of A," the driver responded with a grin.

"I don't remember making any deal with them?"

The driver glanced at him again as he slowed to make another turn, this time heading out of the city.

Carlos shrugged. "Now what?" he asked, acquiescing to the change of his affairs.

"Now, just you behave and we'll have you on a flight out of here in no time. Soon you'll be enjoying some of those American women you been hearing about." He laughed at the little joke understood only by himself.

The driver of what was the gray sedan pulled himself from the wreckage. Blood flowed freely from his head wound, and his eyes were dazed. It seemed as though he was looking through a fog, but otherwise, he thought he was all right.

He took several steps back from the wreckage and looked at it, wondering if his partner made it through the mess. He was disappointed. The man's body sprawled half out of the passenger side, with the missing half of his head smeared along the street.

Shuddering, he fought off the desire to vomit. He didn't have time for that. He had to get a message to his controller. He had to tell him what happened. The controller had to warn the other two operatives, the men who were flying the plane. He called to one of the silent spectators along the street side. "Amigo. Por favor," he groaned.

The twenty or so peasants who witnessed the accident backed away, as if he were a ghost.

“Necesito hacer una llamada,” he said in whatever Spanish he could muster under the circumstances. I need to make a telephone call.

One of the peasants ran away. The others stared.

“¡Por favor!” Please! The man shouted. That was the last he remembered before everything faded into oblivion as he fell in a heap on the rough pavement.

Carlos Montaneé’s escorts quickly took him out of the country according to plan without knowing the fate of their backup in the gray sedan. Nor were they aware of the extent of the infiltration into their organization by their backups’ assailant’s organization, how much of the plan involving Montaneé’s escape was leaked.