

The Face of the Assassin

Chapter 1

Mexico City,
Lincoln Park

“Something’s going on.”

These were the first words out of Mingo’s mouth, and he could hardly wait to say them. Even in the shadows of the park, the other man could feel his anxiety.

“What’s the matter?” The other man’s voice was calm, softened by a Texas accent. In his late thirties, he was a decade older than Mingo and far more seasoned. Even so, he was caught off guard by the younger man’s agitation.

“Khalil’s been gone three days. Don’t know where. When he came back two days ago, the first thing he did was meet with a guy I’d never seen before. This guy’s staying in a rented room in Tacubaya, not far from Khalil. I’ve seen them huddling together in a pastelería.”

“What’s he look like?”

“Uh, balding, maybe early forties, not athletic, kind of puffy-looking. Office type. Very serious. Never relaxed. Then this morning, same pastelería, they met with Ahmad.”

“The three of them?”

“Yeah.”

This was contrary to their own strict rules of operational discipline. Mingo was right to report it.

“Okay.”

“Afterward, everybody was tense, edgy. Things looked different. Something big has happened.”

They had met where the broad sidewalk bisected the long, narrow park across the middle of its length, between the statues of Lincoln on one side and Martin Luther King, Jr., on the other. It was just after dusk in the rainy season, and the sidewalks of the park were still glistening from the evening shower that came every summer day at this hour to cool the air and tamp the city’s suffocating smog.

The younger man had fallen in behind his slightly older companion as they began walking, ignoring each other as they turned onto the sidewalk that ran along the perimeter of the park. They headed toward the clock tower at the western end of the park. The man in front hadn’t slowed down so that the other one could come up abreast of him until they had reached the point where Calle Lafontaine intersected the park to their right.

“What else?” the Texan asked. What the younger man had to say was interesting, something to factor into the overall picture, something to keep in mind. But it wasn’t news. They were supposed to meet face-to-face only if there was news—and news meant something that significantly affected the operation.

“I think I spotted your man.”

The Texan didn’t even break the rhythm of his casual pace. Eagerness was a mistake. Always.

“Who is that, exactly?”

“My boys watching your place last night, they picked up a guy in Parque México. He stayed there an hour and a half. He was watching your place. He was using night vision binoculars. Thomas went down there with his telephoto night lens and got a shot of the guy. Just one shot. It sure as hell looks like Baida to me.”

Mingo handed an envelope to the Texan. “Check it out for yourself,” he said.

This was it. The point of all the months of hard work. The point of

so much patience and effort and planning and risk.

“Do you have any other information about him being here?” the Texan asked, putting the envelope into his pocket, and forcing a calm tone into his voice.

“He’s never showed up anywhere else, if that’s what you mean.”

“This was last night?”

“Yeah. Nine-thirty to eleven o’clock.”

“They try to follow him?”

“No.”

Good. Good. Mingo was worth the money. He did exactly what he was supposed to do, and he didn’t do a bit more. He had been trained well. Follow instructions precisely. Even when you can do more, don’t. That way, everyone knew exactly where you stood and where the operation stood.

“You think this is him?” the Texan asked.

“Yeah, I do.”

Though the park was in the middle of tranquil streets, the city’s traffic rumbled in the surrounding gloom. In fact, the Paseo de la Reforma, the city’s main boulevard, was only blocks away. But besides that, 22 million people simply made a lot of noise.

They rounded the corner and crossed the end of the park under the clock tower. He was surprised that Baida had been watching his place. He would have thought they would have spotted him at Ahmad’s first. That would have made more sense. But then, making sense would make too much sense. If any of this had made sense, he wouldn’t be doing what he was doing. And he wouldn’t spend so much time in fear’s claustrophobic little rooms, in the dark, air starved cubicles of his own imagination.

“You’ve got nothing else?” the Texan asked. “Just this ID?”

“Yes, just this ID.”

He caught Mingo’s emphasis. “No, you’ve done a fine thing, Mingo.”

“Good, then.”

“Check your pay drop the day after tomorrow.”

“Bueno.”

“The next time he shows up,” the Texan said, “push it just a little further. Be careful. There’s nobody better. He’ll spot your boys the second

one of them loses concentration. If they glance at a woman just that quick, we're screwed. Of course, the pay goes up, too."

"And so does the risk."

"Listen, you're getting paid a hell of a lot more than I am."

"But when you're through," Mingo said, "you can go home to Texas. You've got U.S. government benefits waiting for you."

Right now, all of that seemed half a world and a thousand lies away. It seemed remote, and that remoteness had begun to eat at him in the last couple of years.

"Yeah," the Texan said. "Those benefits."

He looked over Mingo's shoulders at the two figures moving toward them from the other end of the park. A couple, huddled together, breathing each other's breath. Lovers. He did not think or fear that they were anything other than what they appeared to be, but they reminded him that it was time to be moving on.

"Keep in touch," he said.

Mingo was used to the abrupt departures, and he nodded good-bye. The Texan was already walking away.

Chapter 2

Four hours later, the Texan was alone. He was in another part of the vast and sprawling city, a world away from the upscale park in Polanco. Here the treeless maze of ancient streets were narrow and twisting and filthy, and being a solitary gringo here at night was suicidal.

He was in Tepito, near the heart of the city in a barrio that had existed for over five centuries and often made its living off of things that the rest of the city had thrown away. Tepiteños married Tepiteños and had done so for centuries. They were as clannish as gypsies, and to them all the rest of the world were outsiders.

During the day the stalls of illegal street vendors practically blocked access to legitimate stores here. The places on the sidewalk for these squatter stalls were "bought" from Korean thugs who, despite the neighborhood's closed culture, had viciously usurped much of the control of Tepito's institutionalized banditry. Mexico was now third, behind only Russia and China in the commerce of pirated goods, selling fake labels on everything from condoms to caviar, and anything plastic. Tepito was the beating heart of this illicit trade.

He had taken a taxi, but at a certain point the driver refused to go any further into Tepito. The Texan climbed out of the car and started walking, deeper into the labyrinth.

Every once in a while he stepped into the recess of a doorway that smelled of urine and ancient stone. He listened. He was sweating, despite the fact that Mexico City sat in a high valley at 7,340 feet and was surrounded by mountains nearly twice that high. The nights were always cool. He stepped out of the doorway and continued walking.

Samarra was a street of silences. Off the beaten track, even during the day, it was alley-like and foul smelling with wafts of sewage mixed with frying onions and dust. The flat faces of the buildings were stark and

unadorned. Occasionally as he moved through the ochre-tinged shadows, the fluorescent glint of a television seeped through the crack of a shutter or flickered off the ceiling of a second floor room with an opened window. Now and then he caught snatches of voices dripping with pathos—a telenovella—or the canned, surging laughter of a sitcom. But mostly he heard only his own footsteps, muted as they crunched on the grit of the old stones. His shoe fell on something soft followed a moment later by the pungent odor of animal feces.

It wouldn't be long now.

Suddenly a few meters in front of him, a door opened and a figure stepped out on a spill of dull light. He raised an arm horizontally, directing the Texan inside. Though he had never met them in Tepito, he knew the routine. He turned and went in.

The empty room was shrouded in a hazy, feeble light from the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. He raised his arms while the Korean patted him down. The guard wore a misshapen suit and street shoes, a cutoff M-16 slung over his shoulder.

He followed the man through a darkened room and then out into a courtyard bathed in the same jaundiced light as the street outside. The limp silhouettes of banana trees were scattered about the compound, and other rooms, some dark, others with dull lights, surrounded them. A second Korean guard fell in behind him, and a short-haired dog appeared from the smudgy corners of the enclosure and snuffled at his legs and nudged his hand with its damp nose, the only compassionate creature that the Texan was likely to encounter during the entire long night. They crossed to an outside stairwell and started up.

On the second floor, they doubled back and approached another lighted doorway where yet another guard waited outside. They went in, interrupting three men huddled in deep conversation around a small wooden table. None of them were Korean or American, or Mexican.

"Judas," said the man who had been sitting with his back to the door and was now turning to look at the Texan. His name was Ahmad, and when he stood to shake his hands there was no characteristic smile, and his eyes regarded the Texan with a pained solemnity. Something was up.

"Khalil," the Texan said, nodding at a man his own age who was

sitting directly across the table from Ahmad. Khalil hadn't shaved in several days and looked as if he had missed a lot of sleep. He was surly and didn't offer his hand.

The third man at the table was a stranger to the Texan and sat opposite an empty fourth chair. The Texan stared at him cockily, suggesting by his pointed gaze that a name was expected. It was all a game, and it mattered very much how you played it.

But the man didn't look at him, and apparently he was not going to be introduced. He was hollow-cheeked with an olive complexion gone pasty, bald, with thin shoulders that made his head look too big for his body. In the deep crease at the upper right of his mouth was a dark mole the size of a raisin. Without making eye contact, he leaned forward and sipped from a teacup in front of him, holding the cup by its rim, not its handle.

"Please," Ahmad said, "join us." He offered the fourth chair at the table.

The Texan sat down and was aware of the two Koreans remaining in the room, but out of sight behind him. The three men at the table were drinking the familiar strong, sweet tea, but none was offered to the Texan. A significant sign that caused another wave of perspiration to rush to the surface of his skin.

Silence followed. Now Khalil averted his eyes, too, but Ahmad continued looking at him, his expression grave.

"Bad news, Judas," Ahmad said, and it was painful to hear the genuine note of sadness in his voice. The two of them had learned to like each other, and actually had grown close in a perverse way. Friendship as rape, it was another talent the Texan had perfected, another admirable human trait that he had corrupted in the service of a questionably higher calling.

Khalil looked up now, too, and he and Ahmad stared at him in silence. The third man continued to look down.

"It's over, my friend," Ahmad said. "We know."

He didn't see it coming. Something else, maybe. There were always fears. But this . . . he did not see this coming.

From somewhere he summoned the strength not to panic and bolt

for the door. He frowned, gave them a dumb, puzzled look. But before he could catch it, he swallowed. God damn. It was as good as a confession. He felt something against his leg and glanced down. The dog had followed them up the stairs and was standing there looking at him. Waiting it seemed, just like the rest of them.

The unidentified man, his eyes still averted, coughed a little and cleared his throat, pulling up a wad of phlegm that he worked with his tongue.

Oh, shit. The Texan's heart stopped. It didn't beat at all. It just hovered in his chest, not even touching the surrounding tissue. The light in the room dimmed . . . no, no, not this. He did not want to faint.

"What is this?" he managed to say, but the intended tone of bravado was not convincing.

The stranger's head shot up, and he sprang to his feet and spat with a force that shook his body. The crap from his throat flew across the table and slapped against the corner of the Texan's mouth.

Before he could react, someone grabbed his arms from behind and wrenched them backward snapping one of his elbows. He screamed out, hardly aware that someone was taping his wrists together as someone else taped his ankles to each of the chair's front legs. His head was clamped between two hands sheathed in rubber gloves.

"*Jasus!*" the bald man shrieked, slamming his hands down on the table as he lurched against it, exploding the cups of tea. Leaning forward over the broken cups, his face rigid with violence, his hands planted in the syrupy tea that was running off the edges of the table, he screamed again, "*Jasus!*"

The Texan heard a door behind him open and close and footsteps approached. Somebody set down something with a thud. A man stepped around in front of him holding two insulated electrical cables with bare ends. He wore a mismatched jogging suit unzipped to his hairy stomach.

When the wires touched either side of the Texan's neck, it was as if a bomb had gone off in his throat. He thought his head had been blown off his body. But that was only an illusion. The sensation that he was involuntarily pissing his pants was not.

The stranger who had spat on him yawned back his head, mouth

wide open, wide as a baboon's maw, his eyes glittering, the veins in his neck engorged, standing out like great, plum colored worms.

They were all standing. Suddenly Ahmad's arms flew out wide as if he were conducting an orchestra with brio, and the spray of his brains fled the blast from Khalil's outstretched arm. No more Ahmad.

The wires again, rammed precisely into his ears.

Silence.

The stranger was straddling him, his face contorted like a Francis Bacon portrait, his mouth twisted grotesquely up the right side of his head, one eye pig-sized and wandering, the other protuberant and goggling.

The Texan felt the man inside his mouth, and for a split second he thought the whole man was in there because he couldn't see him, but he could feel him walking around.

Then the stranger held something in front of the Texan's face, jabbing at it insanely with his knife for him to see, then slapping his face with it, again and again.

But the Texan was already drowning, and he found it difficult to care too much about what the man was doing. It was hard to drown in your own blood, even so much of it. He found that drowning wasn't a progressive event, as he might have imagined. Rather it was a lurching sort of thing: choking on the surge of blood he faded; then he coughed, spewing a geyser of blood and was instantly back in the brutal clarity of the moment.

He tried to go ahead and die but was disappointed to realize that he couldn't force it. He went through the whole cycle again. Then he smelled the feces, which was undoubtedly his own, and he was surprised to feel a sad, profound embarrassment.

Then, just when he began to die after all, and he knew for certain that he was dying, he saw the man with the contorted features toss to the dog the thing that he had been flourishing and stabbing in his wild rant. The poor, cadaverous creature pounced on it in an instant, and with hunched shoulders, and great, gorging efforts of his outstretched neck, wolfed it down.

It was only then, in his last moments, that the Texan realized the man had cut out his tongue.

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