



The so-called war on terror doesn't let up. Individual freedoms are eroded and human rights violated by all sides. It goes on relentlessly throughout the world and the difference between the "good guys" and "bad guys" becomes increasingly blurred. This is the story of three groups of people in different parts of the world who are fundamentally affected by this war. Ordinary people who, through no fault of their own other than expressing an opinion or daring to tell the truth, or merely being in the wrong place, are drawn into the conflict. A middle class family from Vancouver, two poor former academic families in Nicaragua, and a couple of British journalists suffer devastating consequences, their lives destroyed forever. They join up in an effort to bring an end to the conflict, not by fighting fire with fire, but by appealing to reason and attempting to influence citizens by releasing information about what's being done in their name, hoping they will persuade their leaders to seek more rational, humane solutions.

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Part 1 - Cause

Excerpt from a memorandum to the president of the United States from a senior economic advisor.

The situation with regard to non-renewable natural resources is rapidly reaching a critical stage. It is essential that we have all our players in place within the next two years in order to guarantee the United States a controlling position in the disposition of the world's remaining resources. This is not a matter we can leave to chance; it is of primary importance if we intend

to maintain our economic advantage and continue to sustain the standard of living Americans enjoy today. We must bring all necessary pressure to bear through diplomatic channels on allies who continue to vacillate, and be prepared to deal appropriately with anyone who stands in our way.

Interlude

Two men sat in the first class section of the trans-Atlantic airliner, both dressed in business suits, hair immaculately short, well-fed faces freshly shaved.

“So you think they’ll go for it?” the senator asked. He was a short, solidly built man of around fifty-five with fine grey hair and a Texas accent.

“Not a problem,” the Deputy Director of the CIA replied. He was slender, medium height, early forties, with blond hair and gold-rimmed glasses. “Now we’ve got the prime minister on side, it should be a rollover. He’ll get the cabinet in line.”

“How did you manage that?”

“That’s classified, but I can tell you it wasn’t too difficult. Everybody has some sort of skeleton in his closet... That and a little of the green stuff. Works every time.” The Deputy Director shook his head. “It never ceases to amaze me how easily they cave in once you’ve got them by the balls.”

“Of course you convinced them that it was in their own interest to have the ATA helping them fight terrorism.” The senator grinned. “It would have been a lot harder if it had been a Labor government.”

“Not if Tony was still in charge. That guy was so easy to manipulate in the Iraq thing. The president must miss him.”

“Looks like we’ll be saving their asses again. When do we start moving in the troops?”

The deputy director scowled. This guy could be so crass sometimes, but he had to be tolerated, as long as he was useful. He was one of their strongest supporters in congress and had built up a lot of influence over his fellow senators, by one means or another, in the years he’d been on the hill. “We’re not invading the place, Elron; we’re just bringing in a few specialists. Besides, we already have military bases in Britain. If necessary, we can replace the personnel gradually with our people, in case we need to take complete control.”

“At least we’ve got the Canucks settled,” the senator said with satisfaction. “It was a stroke of luck the new—what do they call themselves? Conservative Alliance Party? —won the last four elections. They’ve always been strongly pro-American. They just about rolled out the red carpet to welcome us.”

“Yes, it did go well. What I’m afraid of is that there will be a lot of opposition from people who are less concerned about our security interests.”

“You mean like protestors? We can handle that. Look how we settled things in Iraq.”

“Yes, but these aren’t Arabs or Latinos, they are white people like us and they speak the same language. The taxpayers might not go for it if we have to start getting rough with them.”

“Maybe they won’t need to know,” the senator replied. He looked around the cabin. “Now where’s that girl? I need another drink.”

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Chapter One

Vancouver, Canada

You have to be more careful,” Richard admonished his daughter Zoë. “It’s not a game; you could get hurt.”

“But, Dad, we were only having fun. They just laughed at us anyway,” she said, scowling. On their way home from school Zoë and some of her high school friends had been taunting American security troops.

At fourteen, Zoë was developing into an attractive young woman with thick curly black hair, dark—almost black—eyes, and creamy tan skin. “We didn’t ask them to come here and take over our country. I wish I was older so I could join the resistance.”

“Don’t talk about things like that, even joking,” her mother, Emily, said sharply, looking meaningfully at the wall. Emily was dark like her daughter. “Finish your dinner before it gets cold.”

“Why do we always have to have this old stew,” twelve-year-old Mike complained, poking his fork into the mush he’d made of the beans and vegetables. “Why can’t we have hamburgers or fried chicken sometimes?”

“You know we can’t afford meat now.”

Emily had lost her government job after what they called the American occupation. Although most government departments were kept running for the sake of efficiency, people in key positions had been replaced by U.S.-approved bureaucrats. Emily had been regional director of the Harbours Commission. She hadn’t been able to find another job, even as a clerical worker. The excuse usually given for rejection of her applications was that she was overqualified for the position. Richard still had his job in the promotion department of a large internet service provider, but several of his staff had been let go and he’d been pressured to hire people recommended by the occupation forces. Spies, he suspected.

“What’s for dessert?” Mike asked as he wiped up the last of his gravy with a piece of bread.

“Take your...”

She was cut short by a thunderous knocking on the front door. They all froze, color draining from their faces.

Reluctantly, Richard pushed away from the table, pulse racing. “I’ll get it. Don’t panic.” Sweat broke out on his brow.

The front door burst open before he could reach it, admitting three Anti-terrorism troops in full riot gear, stubby automatic rifles pointing at a shallow angle over his head. Richard’s heart stopped. He couldn’t breathe. The food he’d just eaten turned to a smoldering lump in his stomach. Before he had a

chance to react, two of them grabbed his arms and flung him into the wall, smashing his nose painfully into the plaster.

“Richard Knightman.” It wasn’t a question. “You’re under arrest for activities in contravention of the North American Anti-Terrorism Conventions.”

He twisted Richard’s arms up painfully behind his back and secured them with reinforced plastic manacles, then kicked his legs back so that he was forced to lean his head against the wall to keep his balance. Rough hands ran down his body. Richard watched the blood from his nose trickle down the wall as he tried to urge a response from his numb brain. His first thought was his family. “This is ridiculous; you’ve got...”

A rifle butt slammed into the side of his head. “Shut up, asshole. You’ll only speak when we tell you to. Turn around.”

Richard managed to get his feet back in position to stand unaided, pushed off the wall and turned to face his tormentors. He could hear heavy boots tramping through the other rooms of the house, items crashing to the floor, breaking pottery and glass.

Zoë screamed.

Emily yelled, “Leave her alone.”

A deep male laugh was followed by a slap.

Impotent rage and terror took control of Richard. “Do they have to hurt my family?” he begged, hoping for a shred of civilization.

“It’s up to you. And them,” the man in front of him replied. He was anonymous, a heavy man over six feet tall, face covered by a dark translucent mask, camouflage fatigues without any sort of insignia or mark of rank. All Richard could see was the color of his skin, sunburned dusky red with pale hairs on the arm that held the weapon. The man turned and yelled, “Jolly! Let’s get him outside.”

A short trooper came into the hallway. “Yes, sir,” she said. She grabbed Richard’s arm and started to pull him to the front door, but he tried to hold back. The woman kicked his ankle. “Move, asshole.”

“But, what about my family.” He allowed himself to be led out of the house and down the front path to a waiting Hummer, a wide ugly vehicle that was becoming ubiquitous on the streets of Vancouver. There was another parked behind the one they were approaching. “I have a right...”

“You don’t have any rights,” the woman snarled. “Remember that and you’ll be okay ... until they shoot you.” She sniggered. “Your family will be taken care of,” she added. The ominous tone of this statement alarmed Richard even more.

He looked around as he was bundled into the vehicle. His neighbors were peering through Venetian blinds or peeking around hedges, watching his disgrace, but he knew they weren’t condemning him; they were scared too. He was just an unlucky victim. Any one of them could be next. It didn’t take much, just a word in someone’s ear from a jealous co-worker or disgruntled employee. Even wearing the wrong clothes was cause, or an excuse, for persecution. They’d heard of a teenager who was arrested on suspicion of subversive activities because he had long hair.

As he sat in the back seat, under the contemptuous gaze of the female officer, he cursed himself for his lack of courage. When the crunch came, he'd just folded, given up without a fight. He remembered how he used to wonder why the Jews had gone so meekly to the gas chambers. Why hadn't they fought back? They were going to die anyway; why not take some of the Nazi bastards with them and get it over with faster. Now he was in a similar position and he had done nothing. He'd been too afraid for Emily and the kids. He still was. He excused himself by thinking that his fate was still uncertain; he could get out of this.

He tried to gather enough saliva in his dry mouth to swallow. Sweat was pouring down his face, itching, stinging his eyes, but he couldn't clear it with his arms locked behind his back. He tried to lift a shoulder to wipe his face, but could only reach his cheek. Richard had no illusions about what would happen to him. Whether he was guilty of the charges—whatever they were—or not, it would be a long time before he saw freedom again, even if he lived through the coming ordeal. All he had heard until now had been rumors. Some of them might even have been circulated by the authorities to strike fear into the population and keep people under control: inhuman living conditions in the internment camps; insufficient food; long, painful interrogations; constant torment from guards; deaths. He shivered in spite of the heat. He'd soon know how much of it was true. But what the hell did they think he had done?

It was hard to believe this was happening in his country. Canadians had always believed their country was a bastion of freedom and justice. When he was younger, he used to take vacations in the United States. The people he met there were no different from Canadians; just a little more friendly and outgoing, if anything, but essentially the same. Their politics had always seemed a little crazy to him. The only difference between the two political parties in the U.S.—both of which were zealously capitalistic—was that one was more radical and right-wing than the other. He used to feel a bit sorry for ordinary Americans, having every aspect of their lives governed by the profit motive, even health care, which to him should be a guaranteed right, like education.

Once the extreme Right had assumed control at the turn of the century, they had kept a stranglehold on the government, gradually eroding civil rights in the name of anti-terrorism until there was virtually no opposition, at least no overt opposition. He knew from the Internet that a great many Americans opposed their government's policies, but they were afraid to act on their feelings for fear of being labeled terrorists or traitors. It was even becoming dangerous to publish opinions critical of the Canadian or U.S. governments on the Worldwide Web. Even when a more liberal president was elected, his hands had been tied by opposition in Congress under pressure from the corporate sector. Most of his campaign promises had been voted down or gutted by the opposition before the bills were passed.

Richard was aroused from his musings by a loud thud, a hand slamming down on the roof of the vehicle. It was the big man from the hallway, or someone identical. With their faces concealed, it was hard to tell. Another trooper stood by the driver's door.

"Ready to roll," he said, opening the passenger door. "Get back inside and finish up, Jolly."

"Yes, sir." She saluted and returned to the house.

The two men climbed in and the motor started. For a tough-looking vehicle, it was surprisingly quiet. One of the first things the Americans had done after the invasion was seize control of the fuel cell factory in North Vancouver and have their military vehicles converted to fuel cell power.

“God damn these fucking masks,” the man in charge said. “They’re hotter’n hell in this weather.”

“I know, sir. Won’t be long.”

“Where are you taking...?”

“Shut up. From now on, we ask the questions. You only speak when you’re told to. Understand?”

Richard pressed his lips together.

“Did you hear me, boy? I asked you a question.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?” the man persisted.

“Please,” Richard said automatically. His mind was fuddled and he’s said the first thing that came into his head.

The mask turned to face him. A hand appeared suddenly and cracked him across the bridge of his nose with a small baton. “Don’t be a smart-ass. We’ll soon knock that out of you. Now, tell me again, yes what?”

The pain was excruciating, making his eyes water. Blood started trickling from his nose again.

“Sir,” he mumbled.

“Right. Don’t you forget it. You are nothing now. Less than garbage.”

Satisfied that he had made his point, the officer turned to face forward. They were crossing the Burrard Street Bridge, strangely bereft of traffic, going towards downtown.

Now he knew where they were taking him. The infamous internment center in what had formerly been the Pacific National Exhibition Grounds on East Hastings Street. The entire space was now cleared of fairground equipment and surrounded by high concrete walls topped with razor wire overlooked by watchtowers set every fifty meters along its perimeter. At night the whole complex was lit up with floodlights. Vancouverites went to great lengths to avoid going anywhere near it. All the housing within a two blocks of the vast grounds had been razed, leaving an empty swath of no-man’s-land. Even Hastings Street had been closed off between Boundary Road and Kootenay Street. The only road that still went near the detention center was the 101 freeway, but no one was allowed to drive past at less than sixty kilometers an hour—no stopping, ever. Once a woman had stopped because of a flat tire. She and her car had been blasted by a rocket that turned them into a fireball. Although this may have been an urban legend, the incident served to enhance the mystique of the center.

Richard felt the satisfaction of knowing they were taking the long way. He knew a much quicker way of getting to the PNE, but he wasn’t going to say anything. Let them stew a little longer in their ridiculous masks.

Emily trembled inside, but she tried to hide her fear from the children. She stood back against the living room wall, an arm around each child, and watched the Anti-terrorism squad demolish her home.

She saw Michael's fists open and clench. His body was stiff under her hand. Tears stained Zoë's face and she let out an occasional choking gasp. "I'm sorry, Mom," she sobbed.

"Shh. It's not your fault," Emily replied, hugging her close. "This isn't anything you did."

The intimate way the soldier had searched her had been an unimaginable shock to the young teen. She had never experienced such handling by anyone. Emily had never felt so angry. In her mind, she fantasized slashing them with knives, dousing them in flaming gasoline. She had to clench herself impotently to keep from reacting. Above all, she had to remain calm for the children.

Another crash came from the kitchen; it sounded like dishes being swept from cupboards onto the floor. She'd have a terrible mess to clean up when they were finished. She could hear drawers opening and closing in the den, books and papers being tossed around. She had no idea what they were looking for, if anything. This might just be an exercise in intimidation, demonstrating their own powerlessness and lack of rights. But why us? She asked herself; what did we do?

The wait seemed interminable. She hardly dared think about what might be happening to Richard. What could he have done? All he did was sit in an office all day working on publicity for his company. She couldn't imagine him being involved in anything subversive. Now there's a word, she thought. What was once pride in one's country was now subversion.

One of the soldiers came out of the study carrying Richard's computer. She didn't dare protest as he took it outside. Then another appeared from Michael's bedroom with his laptop.

"Why do you have to take that? My son needs it for his school work," she protested. Now she had lost her job and not knowing when, or if, Richard would return, she knew she would never be able to get him another.

The woman who was guarding them replied, "Don't worry about it," Emily could almost see her smirking behind the mask.

The soldiers continued to take things out of the house and load them in the Hummer. She couldn't imagine what they wanted the things for; they obviously had nothing to do with evidence. There was the little painting they'd bought in Italy, her mother's art nouveau mirror, books. It was as if their home was being looted. Maybe it was. Tears pricked her eyes and she clamped her lips with her teeth as she watched their life being dismantled. The soldiers carried out their entertainment equipment and some dresser drawers piled with music CDs and DVDs. They even took the photo CDs and albums.

Rage and hatred roiled in Emily's gut, turning her recent meal into a painful lump.

Finally, one of the soldiers came inside and said, "That's everything, I think. We can come back later if we missed anything." He handed some plastic sacks to the female soldier.

"Right," she said. "Time to get moving." She handed each of them a bag. "Fill these with personal belongings, things you'll need, and be quick about it. We haven't got all night."

"What do you mean things we'll need?" Emily asked.

"You know, overnight stuff—toothbrushes and like that."

Fear hit her again. "Why? Where are we going? Do we need clothes?"

“Whatever will fit in the sacks. And you’ll find out when you get there. Now get moving.”

The bags were not much bigger than pillowcases. They wouldn’t hold much if they were going to be away long. As if in a dream, Emily urged Zoë and Michael towards their bedrooms.

“Get your toilet things and a change of clothes. Better put in extra socks and underwear, just in case, and bring sweaters.”

“Can I bring a book?” Zoë asked.

“I guess so, if it doesn’t take up too much room.”

With a feeling of impending doom, Emily went to her and Richard’s room. She quickly threw some clothes on the bed, T-shirts, underwear, socks, jeans and then she went into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. She saw the female soldier, Jolly, watching her, reflected in the mirror as she picked up a bottle of acetaminophen.

“What’s that?” the woman asked, taking it from her.

“Just a painkiller,” Emily replied. “My daughter gets cramps.”

“Not allowed,” the soldier said, pocketing the pills. “Hurry up.”

Emily quickly stuffed a box of tampons, toothbrush and paste, some soap, antiperspirant, and face-cream into the bag and pulled the strings to close it, then stepped out of the bathroom and went to see how the children were getting along.

“Let me see what you’ve got,” she said, taking Michael’s sack.

She poked around inside, smiling when she saw the chocolate bar among the clothes. Smart thinking. “I think we have room for a bit more.” Quickly she went to his closet and grabbed a sweatshirt and pair of jeans which she stuffed on top of the things he’d gathered.

“That’s enough. Let’s go.” Jolly waved her weapon towards the front of the house.

As they went through the entrance hall, Emily grabbed her handbag and felt inside for her keys.

“What are you doing?” Jolly asked, grabbing the bag.

Emily noticed the other soldier was suddenly alert, pointing his gun at her. Michael and Zoë froze, their dark eyes large against their pale faces. “I just wanted to lock up,” she gasped.

“That won’t be necessary,” Jolly replied. “We’ll take care of everything.” She turned the purse upside down and let everything fall onto the hall table, then poked her finger through the pile. She picked up Emily’s wallet and opened it, then removed her identification card. “Here, you’ll need this,” she said, handing it over. “Do they have theirs?” she nodded towards Zoë and Michael.

“Do you?” Emily asked them.

“Mine’s in my backpack,” Michael replied.

“Here’s mine,” Zoë said, taking the card out of the pocket of her jeans.

“Go with him to find it,” Jolly ordered the other soldier. “Then bring him out to the car.”

Since the U.S. occupation, everyone had been required to obtain and carry an identity card. Anyone discovered without one was liable to be arrested.

Emily and her two children were directed into the back seats of the Hummer. She noticed immediately that there was no way to open the doors from the inside.

“Where are we going?” Michael asked.

Emily grabbed his hand, but he pulled away. Jolly, who was sitting in the front passenger seat, turned around and scowled. “I told you; you’ll find out when we get there. And it’s about time you learned not to ask questions. Keep your mouth shut and you’ll get on a lot better.”

“Will we be long?” Michael persisted. “I’ve got an assignment to finish for school....”

Before he could finish, she snapped around and thrust the rifle barrel in his face. “What did I just tell you?”

Zoë gasped and moved closer to her mother. Michael just clamped his mouth shut and stared sullenly out of the window.

Oh, God, what’s happening to us? Emily thought. She tried to blot out any speculation about what might be in store for them. Like everyone else, she’d heard the rumors about camps and the brutality with which prisoners were treated. But they hadn’t done anything. It couldn’t have anything to do with Zoë’s taunting the American soldiers. That was just childish high spirits. Could Richard really be involved in something? It seemed unlikely. He wasn’t the type. But he did have access to the internet; it went with his job. Had he been using his privileges to do something subversive? She would have been proud of him if he had, but furious about the risk to his family. Whether he was guilty or not, it was happening anyway. No one was really safe in the paranoid atmosphere created by the U.S. occupation; anyone, at any time, could become a suspect, a victim.

She remembered the nice couple who used to live two doors down from them. They had been foreign aid workers in the Middle East and had adopted an orphan child. Just because of their former activities and their daughter’s Arabic ancestry, they’d been arrested as suspected terrorists. They’d never been seen or heard of again.

All people of Middle-Eastern ancestry, all Muslims, had been ‘relocated’ to special areas where their activities could be controlled. It didn’t matter that many of them were refugees from the very regimes the Americans professed were a threat to their national security, they were Arabs or Muslims, therefore potential terrorists. Many were not even ethnically Arabic, but that made no difference. If they attended a mosque, or even looked Semitic, they were a potential threat. Many ethnic Indians had been caught in the roundups too.

Once they were sent away, all their assets were seized. It was a replay of what had happened to the ethnic Japanese in World War II, pure racism.

Not that Christians were much safer. Some, like the Quakers and Jehovah’s Witnesses, who were pacifist by their faith, were also persecuted.

Emily gazed blankly out of the window, suddenly realizing they were about to enter highway 101, eastbound. They were leaving Vancouver. There was hardly any traffic on the freeway, unlike before the

occupation when it had been bumper-to-bumper much of the time. In next to no time, they exited at the Coquitlam off-ramp. Her heart sank. She closed her eyes. Please, not Riverview, she prayed, but after a short run along Lougheed Highway, they turned into the grounds of the notorious institution.

Chapter Two

Jinotega, Nicaragua

Febe Castenada wiped the tears from her cheeks with the tail of her shirt and went back into her house. She looked at her two sons, nine-year-old Tomás and Daniel, who had just turned eleven. How would they survive without their father? The money she made from her stall at the market would not support them. She didn't know how she would go on without Carlos beside her. In addition to his presence as part of their close-knit family, the income from his drudgery at the coffee finca had been essential to their survival.

"What did the policeman want, Mama?" Tomás asked.

"Mama, why are you crying?" Daniel looked scared.

She sat down on a stool by the table and held her hands out to them. When they came to her, she put an arm around each of them. She looked at their faces, their innocent brown eyes now shadowed with fear. Her little men. This is how it begins, she thought.

"Papa's had an accident," she said.

"Is he in the hospital?" Tomás asked.

Febe hugged them against her body to hide her tears. She sniffed, and then said, "No, my sons, he is dead."

Tomás tried unsuccessfully to stifle a sob. Daniel pushed away from her and stood with his fists clenched, his face contorted in anger. "No," he shouted. "It is not true. He is not dead."

"Son," she pleaded. "I am sorry." She reached out for him, but he turned and fled from the house.

She knew it was useless to go after him. He needed time to come to terms with his grief. There was nothing she could do to soften the blow, except demonstrate how much she loved him.

She looked at Tomás. His face was white, tears streaked his cheeks. She enfolded him in her arms and they cried together.

After a while, Tomás pulled away, wiping his eyes and nose on his T-shirt. "What happened to papa?"

"He took the shortcut again. There was a mine."

Since the North Americans had come to their country to 'advise' the Security Department—the *Policía de Seguridad Nicaragüense* (PSN)—they had stepped up activities against any would-be rebels, whom they labeled terrorists. One of the tactics was to lay land mines in wooded areas that rebels might use to get to their hideouts. The truth was, as Febe knew, there wasn't much of an opposition movement. The main victims of these preventive measures were non-political, just ordinary people going about their

day-to-day activities. There were many innocent reasons why people went into the woods: lovers, to get some privacy; hunters, trying to supplement their meager rations; children playing; and people like her husband, Carlos, taking a short cut home from work. So far, in the local area alone, seven people had been killed by land mines, three children, an old woman and now, with Carlos, three men. Several more had been severely mutilated, mostly with their legs or feet blown off.

Carlos worked such long hours picking coffee that he was exhausted by the end of a shift. If he came home by the road, the long way, it would take him ninety minutes. By taking the short cut through the bush, he could cut it by almost thirty-five minutes, which translated into thirty-five minutes extra sleep that he needed so badly.

Febe hadn't been surprised when he hadn't come home the previous night. He sometimes stopped off to drink and relax with his friends, falling asleep wherever he was. She wasn't afraid until a local police officer knocked on her door as she was getting ready to go to the market. When she saw the mournful expression on his face, she quickly stepped outside and closed the house door, then ushered him around the side of the building to hear what he had to say.

Febe and Carlos, like the majority of Nicaraguans lived at subsistence level, barely scraping by from day to day. They hadn't always lived like this. Carlos had been a professor at the University in León. She had been a schoolteacher. They had both lost their jobs in a purge of so-called subversive intellectuals. Anyone who had even the remotest connection with the former Sandinista government was suspect. Both Febe's parents had been in the party, as had Carlos's father and two uncles. Even the fact that they named their sons after two Sandinista leaders—Tomás Borge and Daniel Ortega—would probably have been enough to doom them.

Now Febe eked out a bare existence with her stall at the market and Carlos had worked ten hours a day on a coffee plantation, picking coffee for North American consumption.

All the land reforms instituted by the Sandinistas had been rolled back. The land was again confiscated from the *campesinos* and handed back to wealthy and, for the most part, absent landowners. Schools closed in the poorest areas and illiteracy flourished. The level of health care dropped to the point where the infant mortality rate was back at the level it had been under Anastasio Somoza, the ruthless dictator overthrown by the Sandinistas. This in a country that had once been cited by the World Health Organization for the most significant drop in child mortality and greatest improvement in healthcare in the world when the Sandinistas governed Nicaragua.

Febe sighed. She would have to go by the church on the way to the market and talk to Father Francisco about Carlos's burial. The police officer had told her his body was in the morgue at the hospital. Thinking about having to bury her husband brought more tears. He was only thirty-five, too young to be dead. She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her eyes. She wished she didn't have to go to the market, but they depended on her income more than ever now and she couldn't afford to miss a day.

"I can get a job," Tomás said suddenly, as if reading her thoughts. "I could get a shoe-shine stand."

"Oh, son." She couldn't go on. The lump in her throat threatened to erupt in an uncontrollable cry. She hugged her little boy until she felt calm enough to speak. "You can come to the market and help me, if you like."

She held him away from her and looked at him. His thin little face was so pale in contrast with the huge dark eyes, now overshadowed with sorrow. His black hair was long and shaggy around his ears. She would have to cut it soon. He wore a pair of khaki shorts, several sizes too big, a red T-shirt with a few holes in it, now damp with tears, and a pair of blue rubber thongs on his feet.

He fidgeted under her gaze. "What is it, Mama?"

Febe shook her head. "Nothing, son. I was just thinking how much I love you. Do you want to get the bag?"

Tomás brought the blue plastic corn sack from the alcove by the bedroom door. The night before, she had filled it with items she had bought to stock her market stall: plastic combs, pencils, cheap sandals and rubber thongs, plastic shopping bags, and cotton dish towels—imported from China. Nicaragua's once thriving cotton industry had been replaced by cheap imports.

Febe turned to the kitchen and folded some cold beans and rice in tortillas for their lunch, then wrapped them in a clean dishtowel, which she tucked into her voluminous handbag.

"Ready?" she said.

Tomás dragged the bag into the middle of the room. "It's heavy, Mama."

"I will carry it; you can carry this." She handed him her bag and hauled the bigger one over her shoulder.

There was no need to lock the house door; there was nothing worth stealing, apart from a few books they'd managed to hang on to, and she knew her neighbors would keep an eye on things while she was away.

As she passed her neighbor's house, old Marta came out. She had tears in her eyes as she hugged Febe. "We heard," she said. With a deep sigh, she added, "It is starting again."

Febe was startled by Marta's echoing of her own earlier thought. "Thank you, *Compañera*." She squeezed the old woman's hand and kissed her sunken cheek.

"I haven't been called that in a long time," Marta replied, a teardrop falling from her eye.

"Maybe it's time for us to start again," Febe replied. "'til later." She turned away and continued down the potholed road with Tomás.

Febe knew something of Marta's history. She had been one of the original Sandinistas from the days of Carlos Fonseca, when Daniel Ortega and Tomás Borges were young men. Marta had been a guerilla fighter against the U.S.-backed Somoza regime and its terrifying death squads, and had been among the victorious revolutionaries who marched into Managua on the glorious day, July 19, 1979. Before the victory, she had also been captured and tortured by Somoza's *Guardia Nacional*, the National Guard, who slaughtered thousands of young people in the years leading up to the Sandinista victory. Two of Marta's brothers and an aunt had died in captivity, their bodies never recovered. Marta still bore the scars of her own incarceration.

"Mama, there is Daniel." Tomás pointed out the lone figure standing under a tree, tossing stones.

They heard the yelp of pain. Febe walked faster. "Daniel! What are you doing?"

As she got closer, she saw a small, emaciated dog tied up near one of the houses, cowering in the dust. Daniel reached his arm back and threw another rock, hitting the poor creature on the haunch. It screeched in pain and tried to pull farther away from its tormenter, but the rope holding it was too short. Daniel looked over his shoulder defiantly at his mother.

"Daniel, come here, son," Febe said, careful to control the tremor in her voice.

He scuffed his feet and reluctantly came forward, dropping some stones as he walked. He stood in front of her, eyes on the ground.

"Why were you hurting that poor animal?" she asked.

His scraped his foot through the dust, still not looking up.

"Look at me, son," Febe said, allowing a touch of tenderness in her tone.

Daniel looked up, his eyes shining with tears.

"I know it hurts, Daniel, but that is no reason to torment an innocent animal. That little dog did you no harm. I know you are angry about what happened to Papa, but do not take it out on an innocent creature that cannot defend itself. How would your papa feel if he knew? Did he not teach you to be kind to all God's creatures?"

This was too much for Daniel. He turned away and ran, but not before she saw the tears spill from his eyes.

"Come to the market when you feel like talking, son," she called after him. She knew he still needed some time to himself before he would be ready to talk about it.

Tomás had wandered over to the dog and was patting its head. It wagged its tail and licked his face, grateful for any kindness.

"Poor dog," he said as he rejoined his mother. "I wish I had something to give it."

"Here, give me that bag." She took the handbag from her son and unwrapped their lunch. Breaking of a morsel of tortilla and beans, she gave it to Tomás. He ran over and offered it to the animal, who gulped it down in one swallow, wagging its tail frantically.

"Daniel will be all right," Febe reassured Tomás. "He is just trying to deal with what happened to your father."

"I hate those damned *Yanquis*," Tomás replied. "I wish they would go away and never come back."

Febe put her free arm around his shoulder. "I know, son. So do I, but you have to be careful what you say and to whom you say it. Talk like that could get you shot. Promise me you'll be careful."

"I will, Mama, but I will not stop hating them. They have ruined everything and now they have killed Papa."

How could he know so much at his age? Febe wondered. Obviously he heard people talking. He'd barely been two years old when the occupation started. He didn't know how much things had changed. It had been bad enough before they came, but Nicaraguans were used to hard times. Now, with the constant suspicion, always feeling they were being watched, and increasing curtailment of their freedoms,

it was becoming unbearable. An icy premonition gripped her heart. The pressure was building up like the volcano at Masaya; before long, it would explode.

Chapter Three

High Wycombe, England

The three youths waited in the recessed doorway of the deserted shop, watching the entrance to the U.S. Officers' Club across the street. One boy jiggled up and down with impatience, causing the keys in his pocket to jangle.

"Fer Cri's sake, Jimmy, stop jerkin' about. They can 'ear you a mile away."

"It's cold," Jimmy whined. "How long we got to wait?"

"Stuff it; it won't be long now. She always leaves before midnight."

"What time is it?"

"Just gone quarter to twelve."

"Here she comes."

"Cor, I'm gonna enjoy this."

"Shh. Don't make a sound."

They watched the young woman come down the steps of the club and cross the deserted street to reach the bus stop on their side. They were lucky; she was alone tonight. Sometimes she left arm in arm with a Yank officer, laughing and flirting. Then he would take her wherever she was going in his car. Only Yanks could afford petrol these days, and filthy collaborators.

They huddled back into the shadowy recess of the doorway, listening to the clacking of her high heels approaching. The moment she came level with the doorway, they sprang on her. To their surprise, she managed to throw off two of her attackers. She was obviously trained in martial arts. Jimmy, the third boy, held on to her coat while the other two recovered.

Jeff, the oldest, was pissed. "Yankee-loving bitch," he said landing a vicious thump on the side of her head.

"What are you doing," the woman shrieked.

"You'll see, love," Jeff replied. He got a firm grip on her arm and twisted it up behind her back.

She let out a loud piercing screech that echoed around the empty street.

"Keep her quiet."

Kev, the third boy, clapped his hand over her mouth, but she managed to open it and bite him. For this, she was rewarded with a backhand across the face.

"Let's get her inside before somebody comes. We can tape her mouth then."

The door of the empty shop wasn't locked. They'd already prepared everything for this night. They dragged her inside and locked the door.

"What do you want?" she said as soon as the boy took his hand away from her mouth.

"We're going to teach you a lesson, Yankee-loving slag."

"This is what happens to collaborators around here," Jimmy said. He was working himself up into a high pitch of excitement, anticipating what they were going to do to the woman.

"You're wrong. I'm not a collaborator. I'm in the..." for some reason she didn't continue.

"What, love?" Jeff sneered. "Are you going to try to tell us you're with the resistance? We know better, don't we? We've been watching you, sweetheart." He turned to Jimmy. "Get the goddamn tape and shut her up before I puke."

"Please," she begged. "Don't do this."

"Do what love?"

By then, Jimmy had torn off a strip of duct tape. She started to struggle, tossing her head back and forth. She managed to get a knee in Kev's groin. When he let go of her arm, she swung her fist and caught Jeff in the eye.

"Fucking bitch." He retaliated with a fist to the nose, then again to the chin. She sagged, but didn't fall. "Get the sodding tape on her," he ordered, shaking his bruised hand.

"Now for the fun part," Jimmy said, grabbing her coat. Let's get this off her for a start. Don't want to spoil a nice coat. Get this from the Yanks, did you, bitch?"

She glared at him, eyes filled with hate, blood running from her nose.

Jimmy threw the coat on the floor. "Now the rest." He grinned.

She started to struggle again, until Jeff landed another blow on the side of her head. She sagged, tears filling her eyes. The three boys dragged her clothes off and tossed them in a heap on the floor.

"Now tie 'er up," Jeff ordered.

The rope was already hanging from an overhead beam. They dragged her to it and tied her wrists, pulling them up high so that her feet barely touched the ground. She was shivering, not just from fear; it was a cold spring night.

The three youths stood and looked at her for a moment, seeing the fear in her eyes.

Jeff grinned. "Right. Get the stuff."

Kev went behind the counter and came back with a large plastic pail. He pried off the lid, revealing the black goop inside.

"Gloves," Jimmy said, handing each of his companions a pair of large industrial rubber gloves.

They dipped into the pail and came up with hands full of black oily sludge.

“Sorry we couldn’t get tar, love, but this’ll do just as good.” He slapped the stuff on her back. “How does that feel, bitch? Nice and warm, is it?”

Unintelligible moans came from her taped mouth. She started to sag, but pulled herself upright when the ropes scraped her wrists.

The three boys continued to plaster her body with the black goop until the pail was almost empty. A lot of it ran off her body onto the floor, but enough clung to her for their purpose. At first it felt cold, but it seemed to warm slightly with the heat from her body. She recalled something she’d read or heard about cross-channel swimmers plastering their bodies with a heavy layer of grease to protect them from the cold. She shuddered, feeling increasing rage against these idiots. If she ever got her hands on them.... If she survived whatever they had in store for her.

“Now the feathers,” Kev said. He’d stolen an old feather pillow from his grandma’s house. “We did get real feathers,” he assured the woman.

They each took a handful of feathers and slapped them onto the goop. When they had finished, they stood back and admired their work.

“Oops, wait a minute, there’s a bit we missed.” He deliberately picked up a feather and dipped it in goop, then stuck it on her left nipple. He patted it in place. “There, that’s much better.

“See, bitch, this is what happens to collaborators. It’s an old traditional method of dealing with traitors and collaborators, tar and feathering them. Now for the final touch.”

Tears were pressing against her eyeballs, struggling for release, but she wouldn’t let them see any weakness, in spite of the ache.

Jeff picked up a pair of shears and grabbed a handful of her hair. “Bet you were wondering why we didn’t put the stuff on your head, eh?” He cut the hair close to the scalp. “See, this is what they did in France after the war. All the bitches that collaborated with the Nazis got their heads shaved so that everyone could see what they were. Bet you didn’t know that, did you?” He snipped off another hank. “Well, we got the new Nazi’s now, haven’t we?”

Her eyes were closed when he’d finished, but he could see tears seeping through the lids.

“Are we going to leave her up there?” Kev asked.

“I dunno. What do you think?”

“Maybe we should cut her down,” Jimmy said. “We don’t want her to croak.”

Jeff looked at his watch. “We better get going, it’s nearly half past twelve.”

“Didn’t take long, did it?”

“All right, cut her down.”

“Bet you thought we was going to rape you, didn’t you, love? Well we wouldn’t lower ourselves after all those Yanks have had a go at you.” Jimmy cut the rope and let her fall to the floor.

“Tarrah, love, see you around.” Jeff said as they went out the shop door.

Sophie lay for a moment, stunned then she put her palms on the floor and pushed herself up until she was kneeling. She easily removed the rope from around her wrists.

Fucking little idiots, she thought. They'd pay for this. At least they hadn't raped her—that was something. Though her whole face ached from the blows. She hoped they hadn't broken her nose. She touched it gingerly with dirty fingers. It didn't feel broken, but it hurt like hell.

What the hell had they got all over her? It smelled like dirty car exhaust or burning oil. She was shivering. God it was cold. She couldn't get dressed with this filthy stuff all over her, but what could she clean it off with? She'd been wearing a little black crepe dress, no slip, lace underwear. Useless. She limped over to the counter and looked behind it, hoping there'd be a rag or something. All she found was a piece of pillow ticking with some feathers still clinging to it. That would have to do. She grabbed it and began to wipe the stuff off her body. The ticking became so soaked in oil that it was useless, so she looked around and spotted a pile of old newspapers. She'd used several by the time she was reasonably clean. Her skin was still covered with a greasy sheen, but she wouldn't be able to get it off without soap and hot water.

Not wanting to ruin all her clothes, she just put on the coat and buttoned it up to the neck. She put on her shoes and looked around. Her handbag was on the floor by the door. Picking up the rest of her clothes, she stuffed her underclothes in the bag and the dress in her coat pocket.

Brainless fucking idiots, she thought. They hadn't even looked in her bag. She took out her mobile phone and punched in a number. It rang a few times before Steve answered.

"Steve, can you come and get me?" she said, trying to keep her voice calm.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Is everything all right?"

"Just a little accident, but I can't come home on the bus."

"Jesus, what happened? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. I just need you to come and pick me up."

"Where are you?"

"You know that empty shop on the High Street? The one that used to be a butcher's. I'll be waiting in the doorway. Hurry, darling." She pushed the OFF button quickly, before a sob escaped.

Sophie had a scarf in her bag that she carried in case it rained. She took it out and tied it around her head.

They didn't own a car, but Steve had use of his employer's delivery van. He'd lost his job as a reporter for a small weekly paper and now worked at a garden center. The van was used to deliver customer's orders.

Neither of them had a pass to be out this late at night, but she was sure she would be able to handle things if they were stopped by a patrol. Most of the American officers knew her from her visits to the club. She watched the van enter the High Street and approach the shop. As soon as it stopped, she dashed out and jumped in.

"Let's go," was all she said.

“What happened? What’s that awful smell?”

“I’ll tell you when we get home. Hurry, Steve.” She didn’t want to start crying. She was trembling from the shock.

The van had a silent electric motor. Once they were off the main street, she felt safer. They went by back streets to their flat near the top of Amersham hill. In less than fifteen minutes they were safely indoors.

The flat occupied half the second floor of an old house and contained a bed-sitting room, a tiny kitchen and small bathroom. It was a big contrast with the lovely three-bedroom house they’d owned in Oxford. When she and Steve had lost their newspaper jobs, they’d been forced to sell their house, at a discount price. The buyer was one of the American professors who were taking the positions at Oxford vacated by British ‘dissidents’. Anyone who dared to question the virtual takeover of their country was labeled a dissident. Those who acted out their objections to the American occupation were labeled terrorists.

“God in heaven, what happened, Sophie?” Steve gasped when he saw her in the lamplight. “Your hair. Who did this?”

She fell into his arms. “It was awful,” she sobbed. “I can’t...” She pulled away. “I need a bath. Can you run it for me?”

“You need a brandy,” he said, going towards the kitchenette.

“No, Steve. Really, I just want a bath. You can get me a drink when I’m in it.”

He came back to where she was standing. “All right love.”

“Don’t call me that,” she snapped.

“What?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just...”

“The bath.” He started to unbutton her coat.

“No! I can manage.”

“All right.” Shaking his head in bewilderment, he went into the bathroom and started running the water.

She followed him in, still wearing the coat. He turned to look at her. “Aren’t you going to take your coat off?”

“I will.”

“For God’s sake, Sophie, tell me what happened. Did one of those bastards...?”

“No. It wasn’t the Yanks. I can manage now. Thanks Steve.”

She made it plain that she wanted him to leave her alone.

“I’ll get you that drink.”

As soon as he was gone, she closed the door and took her coat off, then climbed into the bath and sank down into the hot water. She picked up a bar of soap and began to scrub her skin. She fingered her scalp, feeling the uneven tufts of hair left by the rough barbering. She hadn't dared to look in the mirror yet. A sob escaped.

A soft tap on the door and Steve came into the room carrying a glass of brandy from the precious bottle they'd managed to hold onto for five years—for a special occasion, they'd promised each other. He handed her the glass and sat down on the toilet lid.

"What the hell happened to your hair?"

Sophie took a sip of the brandy and shook her head.

"Want to talk about it?" he asked gently, pretending to ignore the oily scum on the bath water.

She closed her eyes in an attempt to squelch the tears. How could she tell him? She felt so humiliated. But this was Steve. Maybe he thought she had been raped, she considered, opening her eyes and looking at him. He was gazing at her with a look of pained concern. At least she could set his mind at rest on that account.

"I wasn't raped," she said.

"Well what did happen? Who did it?"

Sophie took another gulp of brandy. "I need clean water," she said, pulling out the plug, playing for time.

She wiped the greasy rim with a flannel and turned on the tap to run clean water into the bath. "It was some local jobs," she said in disgust. "Brave little freedom fighters."

"Do you know who they were?"

"Just a bunch of stupid little wankers."

"What happened? Tell me from the beginning."

She stood up and took the towel Steve was holding out for her. She wrapped it around her body and took another one to cover her head. She was not ready to see that yet. She stood before the bathroom mirror and looked at her face. Not very pretty. Her nose was swollen and she had bruises on her chin and cheek.

She turned away and looked at her husband. "They didn't do much really. They didn't hurt me, apart from ..." she ran a finger over her bruised face. "It was just so ... I don't know, scary, disgusting. I don't know what the goop was they put all over me, probably axle grease by the smell of it." She laughed without humor. "They apologized for not having real tar. I guess they were tarring and feathering me for collaborating with the enemy," she finished with a sob.

Sophie went out into the bed sitting room and took a clean nightshirt from a drawer. She dropped the towel and pulled it on, and then she took the towel off her head. Knowing she'd have to face it eventually, she looked at her reflection in the mirror over the fireplace and felt a flash of shame at the person staring back at her. Her dark brown hair had been shoulder length, wavy and glossy. Now it was just a bunch of little tufts.

“Jesus! The bastards. We’ll find them. Would you know them if you saw them again?” Steve asked.

“I’m not sure. It was dark, but I got a general impression of their size and shape, and heard their voices. They were all pretty young—I’d guess around sixteen or seventeen. I almost gave the show away when they first attacked me and told them who I was.”

Steve came and took her in his arms. “Poor darling. It’s fucking amateurs like that that make it worse for the rest of us. We’ll have to try and find them and give them a warning.” He urged her over to the bed. “You must be exhausted,” he said, folding back the covers. “In you get.”

But Sophie resisted. “There’s something I need to do first. It won’t take long.” She started towards the bathroom. “You could help if you like.

Puzzled, he followed her. She opened one of the drawers and took out a razor. “Might as well finish this off properly,” she said, applying it to her scalp.

“Wait. You ought to use some shaving cream or you’ll scrape your head raw. Here, let me do it.” He took the razor out of her hand and got a spray dispenser of shaving cream from the drawer.

When they had finished, Sophie surveyed her new image. “Think it’ll start a new trend?” she said.

“You could always get a wig,” Steve replied.

Suddenly, Sophie burst into tears and buried her head against his chest. He tenderly stroked her back and planted a kiss on her smooth scalp.

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