

# **Zorro, The 21st Century**

**By OKay Jackson**

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# ZORRO, the 21st Century

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*This book is dedicated to DeWayne Johnson and his attorney, Michael Miller, for taking on Monsanto - and winning - for everyone. And to all other living creatures who suffer at the hands of the greed-driven.*

*All the characters in this book are fictional, but the facts and the villains are not.*

- OKay Jackson

## Chapter 1: The Old Man

The old man studied the pimple on the back of his driver's neck with disgust then turned to survey the horizon and decided the view was no more attractive; flat south Florida fields where heat waves shimmered over the bent backs of the working migrants planting row after row of seedling tomatoes.

"Where the Hell is Tom?" the old man muttered, turning his head nearly full circle trying to spot his tardy field manager. But, other than the people bent to their work whom the old man scarcely noticed, the only movement was that of a large pickup truck slowly hauling a horse trailer onto an adjoining field many acres away. He watched it briefly before turning his head impatiently to again look for his employee.

*Tom called this meeting, Goddamnit, so why isn't he here? This is bullshit,* the old man thought, his thin lips pursing with annoyance.

Cool air from the car's vents wafted silently throughout the vehicle. Soft elevator music played from the car's speakers. The old man leaned back against the plush leather seats and closed his eyes.

*I'll give him ten more minutes and then I'm out of here,* he thought. *I have no time for this crap.*

The driver of the pickup got out and walked to the back of the horse trailer, where he shot the bolts free, lowered the ramp and went inside. Moments later the hindquarters of a black horse appeared, soon followed by the rest of the animal as it backed from the trailer and then danced nervously at the end of its lead. The horse was saddled, also in black, and bits of decorative silver winked in the sunlight as the horse moved and tossed his head.

The truck's passenger left the cool of the truck, nodded toward the Lincoln Town Car where the old man sat and then swung effortlessly into the saddle and turned the horse in the direction of the car.

The pickup's driver lifted the trailer's ramp, got into the truck, then turned it to follow slowly in the horse's path.

The old man opened his eyes, glanced at his watch, dialed his cell phone, shook his head, tossed the phone down onto the car seat and again looked out the window.

"What the fuck?" he said. "What's that horse doing out here, Carl?" he asked his driver.

"I don't know, Sir, but it looks like he's coming this way."

"I can see that for God's sake, but why the Hell is it out here?" said the old man, squinting through the tinted glass for a better view.

The rider kept the horse on a tight rein. Sweating with heat and nerves the horse shifted sideways, neck bowed, and slowly approached the car with a crablike prancing gait. The animal filled the eye, so much so it was nearly upon him before the old man glanced up at the rider. His mouth then dropped open in shock.

"Good God," he said.

The pickup truck passed the horse and rider and pulled to a stop nearby. Its driver again went to the back of the trailer and opened it. There he waited and, along with the two men in the car, watched as the horse reached the vehicle and stopped. But even before it did the old man had shot out of the car, his voice shrill with anger.

“What are you doing? Who are you? Why are you dressed like that?” he shouted, freeing his words in a spray of spit, his arms flailing with impotent gestures.

The driver of the car got out and walked slowly over to join the driver of the pickup, unnoticed by the angry old man whose eyes were locked on the horse’s rider. Again he took in the improbable sight of Zorro sitting relaxed in the saddle, dressed in full costume complete with cape, mask and sword.

The costumed figure nodded to the two men by the truck and then smiled down at the angry old man. “Your man, Tom,” he said, in a soft and husky voice, jerking his head toward the trailer as the drivers, one on each side, frog-marched a bound and gagged man out of the trailer and down the ramp.

“Wha ... what the Hell? What’s going on? I demand an explanation,” the old man said, his voice reaching new and higher octaves.

“Do you know the story of Zorro?” growled the masked figure, his perfect English touched with just a bare suggestion of Latino. “How Zorro helped the oppressed against those who exploited them? How he brought to them justice and, with it, hope? Have you seen the many movies? Do you know of him?”

“Of course I’ve heard of Zorro, who hasn’t?” snapped the old man. “But what are you doing dressed up like that clown and what are you doing with Tom? You have crossed many boundaries here, my friend. I’ll have you arrested for everything from trespass to assault, and that’s just for starters.”

Zorro ignored him and spoke to the two drivers.

“He’s just a hired hand, although a brutal one. Kill him,” he said.

The old man’s driver pulled a small handgun from his pocket, put it under the chin of the struggling Tom and pulled the trigger. The pop of the gun was almost instantly swallowed by the vastness of the fields. Not one of the nearby workers looked in their direction as the top of Tom’s head went skyward. Tom slumped and the drivers eased his dead body to the ground, face up.

The old man’s eyes stretched wide in shock. “Carlos! What have you done? What’s going on here? Wha ...” his voice ground to a halt as the truck’s driver went back into the trailer and returned carrying a hazmat suit complete with spray canister, the same kind of rig worn by workers whenever poisoning of insects or weeds was authorized for the nearby fields. The old man had ordered those spraying hundreds of times.

The driver suited up as Carlos, gun pointed at the old man, returned and locked the car to bar all escape. Gazing mutely up at the mounted figure the old man waited, knowing now his own danger and feeling fear rising in him.

Zorro spoke in the same soft husky voice:

“You, old man, are a monster. In the name of profit you have poisoned the earth and these people you have enslaved to work it. You have sent pregnant women into these fields where their clothing was soon wet with deadly chemical spray. The sister of Carlos Perez was one of them. Juan Molina, my driver, was married to another. Their children were stillborn and deformed. Both women died within a year of cancer. You have no conscience and no soul, old man. Today you die as you have lived, by poison.”

Carlos seized the old man and shackled him to the trailer, then he joined the horse and rider as they moved away from the now shrieking old man. Once they were out of range Juan stepped forward and opened the valve on the tank he carried.

A thin mist of death, a cocktail of insecticides and herbicides, coated the old man, dampening his face and hair and expensive clothing, ultimately drenching him as the spraying continued. The old man cried and begged, writhed and twisted, but in a surprisingly short time he, too, slumped to the ground. There he lay, mouth frothing, twitching like a sprayed insect, until finally, with a last shuddering gasp, he died.

A sudden cheer erupted from the workers in the field and the Zorro figure shouted for the first time.

“You saw nothing, amigos. Nothing, comprende?”

“Si,” they replied in chorus. “We saw nada.” ... “No thing.”

Quickly the rider dismounted and just as quickly the hazmat suit was removed, bundled into a protective tarp and returned to the trailer. The horse was hustled up the ramp and Carlos and Juan got into the truck.

Touching the tip of the razor-sharp blade to the thin wet chest of the old man the Zorro figure suddenly slashed a large “Z” through the fabric and into the withered flesh. He did the same to the second dead man. Turning on his heel he climbed into the back seat of the king cab and the truck and trailer moved slowly out of the field and onto the dirt road leading to the highway.

The workers returned to their planting, eyes to the ground, but with smiles in their hearts. They stayed busy, bent to their task. They never looked around when they worked. They had seen nothing.

## Chapter 2: The Beginning

“Wadawe got?” asked the detective who had caught the case, staring down at the body of the old man as he arrived at the yellow-taped off area in the field.

“We’ve got a weirdo,” responded the department’s lead Crime Scene Investigator, a woman who had seen her share of weirdo cases over her long career. “We got a poisonous, slashing, gunshot weirdo.”

“Ah, just another day in paradise then,” detective Bolivar Ray “Booray” Thomas replied. “Time of deaths? Witnesses?”

“They’ve both been dead about three hours. The one over there died from a gunshot to the head. The old guy here,” she added, nodding toward the body at her feet, died from being sprayed with the shit they spray these fields with. That’s what the boss laborer said, anyway. He said a ‘unit was stolen from storage,’ basically a spray can with attachments and a hazmat suit. But he doesn’t know when it was stolen.

“And the slash marks like a big letter ‘Z’ on their bodies are more decorative than anything else,” the CSI added. “They didn’t put the old guy out of his misery when he was spazzing like a roach, I think they were done after. As for witnesses, Hah. We got a field full of people working at that time, but nobody saw anything at all.”

“Is that possible?” the cop asked, frowning.

“Technically, yes. These people don’t stand around slugging coffee and yakking like highway maintenance gangs. They work hard in these fields and they keep their eyes on what they’re doing ... but still ... you’d think they might have seen *something*.”

“Yeah. Somebody musta. But we probably got immigration issues growing out there in these fields, too. Nobody working this place is going to step up for that hassle.”

The two seasoned investigators now silently studied the scene, looking for those miniscule hints that lead to good guesses, often followed by the scent of a trail to follow. They saw horse tracks, tire tracks, and two dead bodies. They did not see shell casings or a stolen poison “unit.” Booray started back-walking the horse track, noting the tire tracks running behind and alongside.

He pieced together where the horse had been unloaded. Looked back to where the crime had occurred and pondered how the victims might have reacted as a horse and rider, followed by a horse trailer, approached them.

*Probably with interest, but no fear, he thought. Nothing there to really spook anybody much.*

Finding nothing of importance he returned to the crime scene itself and told the CSI to order up casts for all the tracks.

“See anything out there?” she queried.

“Other than hoof prints and horse shit? Nope. But maybe we’ll catch these bastards with the tire prints.” After a long pause, Booray added, “I doubt it though. This thing feels well thought out. It’s just too tidy.”

The CSI nodded, she thought the same, then she moved off to speak to others in her crew. It was hot in the field and getting warmer by the minute. Dead meat gets stinky fast in sunny Florida. Time for her to take the last of the photos and get the bodies into the morgue for their air-conditioned autopsies.

A hundred plus miles from the crime scene another woman, Juana Castillo, sat scanning the screen of her laptop. She was not thinking about the Old Man or any part of that crime. It was history. Done. And, in her mind, done well. Now she was online gathering data to help decide between three possible future targets.

An onlooker would have seen an attractive woman. Tall for a Latino and more lean than voluptuous, she wore jeans with an apple-green T-shirt bearing the legend “Don’t Piss Off the Fairies” hanging loosely over her hips. Her dark hair was pulled back into a smooth ponytail. She didn’t look dangerous or threatening, but she did look focused as she stared intently at the glowing screen.

The child of wealthy parents, legal immigrants who had both worked in the medical field and then invested wisely, she had been suddenly orphaned at the age of 20. Her parents had been killed in a newsworthy multi-car interstate pileup that also took the life of her younger brother and two other families in two other cars.

She had been a first-year college student then, full of the angst that goes with that time of life. The loss of her family had sent her into a deeply lethargic depression, but a lecture in one of her required science classes had been her catalyst toward life with new purpose.

That professor’s talk about current practices in the tomato fields in Florida (*her Florida!*) had captured her full attention and shocked her to the core. His fact-filled lecture of human and environmental abuses had chilled her even as it inspired her to learn more.

Galvanized, she began her own research. She read, watched clips on line, and learned fully 31,500 acres of Florida farmland was devoted to growing tomatoes and they comprised nearly one third of the total value of all fresh vegetables produced in the state every year. More than 33,000 workers were needed to pick the fruit.

Eventually she had gone to talk with the people who worked those same fields. She went with notebook and tape recorder, a Spanish-speaking college girl on a mission, full of naivete and the desire to change everything, to make everything better. Her weary subjects ultimately accepted her for her passion, but remained locked in their own reality.

Juana’s intended major had been English Literature, thanks to her mother’s relentless encouragement for her to never be thought of as anything but all American. Her earliest memories were of her mother reading nightly bedtime stories steeped in English and American history to her.

But now, stirred by what she had found in the migrant camps, she decided her major field of study would be Sociology, with a minor in psychology, and she used the material she collected in the field for the classroom.

In due time she graduated and then began graduate studies. And she continued to trudge down every path inspired by her late-night online research:

She learned illegal immigrants were employed in every industry, working as cleaners of motels and office buildings; as killers in the meat-packing industry; labored in every aspect of agriculture, from Washington State orchards to the citrus groves and tomato fields of Florida; they cleaned private homes, public toilets and hospital operating rooms; stocked shelves in warehouses; made stuffed toys and clothing for the toy and garment industries; in restaurants from sea to shining sea they chopped onions, bussed tables and washed dishes. Everywhere they worked they were exploited, with the ultimate degradation being the trafficking of Latina girls by the sex trade industry.

Like the homeless, illegal immigrants were invisible - until they weren't. Juana had ridden past their battered mobile home encampments and shanty towns all during her Florida childhood without once noticing they were there.

Now she saw them everywhere, made visible by her interest. They were generally partially hidden by dilapidated privacy fences or nearly smothered by Florida's rampant vegetation, but often they were right out there in plain sight. Eyesores. Housing to quickly look away from and quickly flush from the mind.

She met Mateo on one of her fact-finding forays into an encampment where she suspected (correctly, as it turned out) that slave labor rather than paid labor was being used. He, searching out human traffickers was acting on that same suspicion, but as an undercover cop posing as a migrant worker.

Mateo was attracted to Juana from the start. Jaded by the darker aspects of his career, where he was exposed to the very dregs of society and lied to by suspects as a matter of course, Juana's genuine caring for the people in the migrant camp was like a cool cloth held to his forehead.

Juana quickly became aware of his interest, but Mateo, guarded by nature and by the nature of his work, took his time in reaching out to Juana. It took longer still for him to trust her with the nature of his presence in the camp.

She proved herself worthy of his interest over time by her devotion to improving conditions for the migrant workers and her indignation at their treatment by those who sent them into the fields. In the subsequent months it became obvious to anyone who saw them together that Mateo Torres and Juana Castillo had become an item. They talked and laughed together with animation, danced hot tangoes together at a cantina in a nearby town, and clearly enjoyed a healthy lust for one another that eventually ripened into love.

After Mateo ended his undercover fact-gathering on the use of 21st Century slaves at the camp and the process of arrests and court proceedings had begun, the couple had spent almost every night together in her small apartment.

There they had planned their future, a house in the country with horses for riding, room for her dog, Misfit, to run and for Nightstalker, his cat, to hunt large bugs and small lizards. At some date in the far, far, far-away future there would be a boy for him and a girl for her. Life would always be good, as good as it was right now.

At night, side by side in her too-narrow bed and crowded on both sides by their pets, they read separately or sometimes aloud to one another. Sometimes they watched TV, often enjoying his favorite old Zorro movies, from the hysterically funny “Zorro the Gay Blade” to the TV reruns from the 1950s and everything in between. A semi-serious Mateo had verbally admired the masked-man’s cause to champion the masses. He’d often said, only half kidding, “That’s what illegal immigrant workers need today, they need Zorro to return.”

All too soon Mateo was sent deep undercover at another migrant worker encampment. Before leaving on that assignment he had surprised her with a diamond ring and they decided to make plans for their wedding when he finished this latest job. Neither of them had ever been happier in their lives.

But Mateo died soon after his arrival at the camp from “accidental poisoning” when a corroded spray canister of chemical insecticide had split and drenched him in the deadly chemical. He’d been assigned to load the canisters into a truck.

“It was very sad, but very quick,” said his foreman. “Who could have known a metal tank would break apart like that?”

Juana thought someone the hell knew. She had no proof Mateo had been murdered, but she never doubted it. He had talked about the dangers of undercover police work with her often. She could not determine who had actually ordered his death, but she easily researched who owned and operated that property. She decided he would do, because chances were good he was the one who gave that order anyway. She would collect evidence and hand him over to the police. Tracking him with intent kept her sane.

One fateful lonely night Juana reached for a book on a high shelf and knocked a box of photographs to the floor. Out spilled picture after picture taken of her with Mateo. As she hurriedly shoveled them back into the box, one drew her attention, a picture taken last Halloween when they’d attended a costume party together.

She’d gone as a Mexican peasant girl wearing sandals, a long brightly-colored skirt and full-sleeved embroidered blouse. In the picture her head was tilted back as she laughed upward at the Zorro figure beside her. Mateo’s masked face stared straight ahead into the camera, lips twitched slightly upwards, prelude to the guffaw that had followed seconds later.

The memory of his laugh, never to be heard again, stabbed her straight through the heart. She collapsed, sobbing, into a nearby chair as memory after memory assailed her, memories she’d valiantly shut off to avoid the black hole that had swallowed her when her family had died years before.

But this time, after the memories and flood of tears, came the anger, a cold avenging anger that spread slowly through her body like a chilling mist moving in across water from the sea. It froze her heart into flint and she knew the old man who owned the deadly farm must also die. He had killed her future and her joy and should rightfully die at her hand. Most importantly, he should also know why he died, that crimes like his come with consequences.

With her new knowledge came the need to plan, and plan she did. She already knew from Mateo where to find the husband and brother of the pregnant women who had lost their babies. She thought perhaps she could recruit them, a thought that ultimately grew to fruition.

And then on one lonely night, as she mentally explored ideas for how she could make sure the old man died the same horrible death that had taken her Mateo, the thought of Zorro the Avenger doing the deed suddenly assailed her. She laughed out loud. It was absurd. It was comedic. It was perfect farce.

But even as she rejected the thought as foolish, another part of her loved it. True, it was farce, but it also held a lovely irony. Mateo had often said, with bitterness, there needed to be an accounting by those who knowingly and willfully poisoned the planet, its flora, its creatures and its people. If she should assume the role of Zorro it would feel, somehow, like Mateo was with her to begin that accounting - and avenge his own death in the process.

Juana sat in silence, turning such thoughts this way and that through her mind until she saw the many ways in which it could be done. After all, she had ridden horses since childhood, often in competition as a teen. She could easily disguise her lean figure into a more masculine appearance. Her victims would be too stunned by her disguise for much conversation, but she knew she could pitch her voice low enough to sound male if she had to. Slowly the conviction grew that, improbable as it sounded, she could do this thing.

“And I will do this thing,” she said aloud, in a voice that channeled her Mother’s soft Latino-accented English. “I will become Zorro ... a Zorro for the 21st Century.”

Misfit (her dog), thumped her tail against the floor in total agreement while Nightstalker (the cat who owned her) stretched and showed all his pointy teeth in a huge yawn. They were on board.

### Chapter 3: I've Got News For You

Dump-Dump-DeDump, the dramatic chords began and Juana, like many good Americans, listened as a trusted national news anchor began bulleting headline stories:

"Tonight (dramatic brief pause), Michigan's government defends water system decision that left residents poisoned by lead. Thousands protest ... Cholera threatens as epidemic erupts on American Soil ... The Most Hated Man Defies Congress - Again ... these stories, and more, begin right now ... Dump-Dump-DeDump ...

"Here we go, kids," I said, putting my plate and glass down on the small rolling table in front of the television. "Time for our nightly inspiration."

Misfit and Nightstalker brought their full attention to the matter at hand by positioning themselves on either side of my table and riveting their eyes to my plate.

I, on the other hand, watched the screen instead and got pissed off immediately over the report on the Michigan water crisis and then further enraged by reminder clips of that little prick who had at one time single-handedly priced life-saving drugs beyond the ability of those needing them to pay. He still made me want to go off my own personal script, but I had so much work ahead I knew I'd never get to him.

"That little fucker should have been infected with HIV and then locked away where he couldn't possibly get any kind of medical treatment," I told Misfit, who responded by producing a long thin line of drool from the left side of her mouth.

"Ewww, dog! Stop that," I said, tossing her a small piece of chicken so she'd at least have to lick her nasty chops.

It was the cholera I most wanted to hear about and I was glad I had taped the show while cooking dinner because my terrible two kept me distracted throughout the program. I had to rewind the tape several times for lesser items, but the final straw was the cat paw sneaking over the tabletop to explore my plate at the very moment when the TV voice said, "Until now, cholera has been rare in the United ..."

"Enough already," I said, leaping up to shove Nightstalker and Misfit out their personal pet door and into their roofed 10 X 15 outdoor pen. Not every apartment building will allow the construction of such a luxury, but mine had. It was the main reason I had remained in my old and somewhat cramped main floor apartment even though there were any number of nicer places to be had along the nearby waterfront.

Bolting the pet door without a twinge of guilt I returned to the news, rewinding it to begin the cholera report over from the beginning:

"Until now, cholera has been rare in the United States, but an outbreak in south Florida this week has caused the death of several people, including three children, and has hospitalized many others. Concerned health and government officials are now scrambling to prevent any further spread of the disease ..."

He went on to say the Florida outbreak had been discovered in a tent city set up to house migrant workers. There was no word yet on how long the people had been sick or what

had caused the epidemic, although local seafood remained suspect until additional testing either confirmed or disproved it.

After the cholera report I suffered through stories about white shark sightings along beaches up and down the Atlantic coast, a report on potential hurricane development off the Bahamas and a teen death at the hands of thrill seeking “friends,” proving once again that, indeed, who really needs enemies?

And a story on the retirement of performing circus animals thanks to the tireless efforts of animal rights activists who never once have considered that - according to animal behaviorist studies - many performing animals actually *enjoy* performing.

“They only go after soft targets, never real targets. Like the bastards who raise market pigs in quarters so small they’re unable to turn around once in their sad lifetimes,” I told Misfit with heartfelt disdain, only then remembering I had locked her outside.

The news ended with a feel-good story about a boutique that only sold clothing for dogs. There is only one possible response to a story about a doggie boutique so I said it, “Yuk.”

News over, I turned off what my Mom used to call “the boob toob” and took my empty plate into the kitchen for a quick rinse and a long rest in the dish drainer, its nearly permanent home.

I had actually already heard about the cholera before tonight’s newscast, but only just. A friend who lived in a town near the infected camp had left a message on my cell earlier today with some sketchy information she’d overheard from “someone who had heard about it from the checker at her local supermarket.” She said she didn’t know if it was true or not, but she thought it was just the sort of thing I might be interested in for my sociology studies. Right on, friend!

I realized I didn’t know all that much about cholera, other than when heard it’s the sort of word that makes one sit up straighter and listen harder. I only knew it was something that caused diarrhea and was generally considered a third-world kind of problem. So I poured myself an after dinner coffee and hit the keyboard.

I learned lots, starting with “cholera is an infection of the intestines.” It’s caused “by the bacteria *Vibrio cholerae* when it’s excreted in feces;” can manifest as early as six to 12 hours after exposure to the bacteria; and that, in most cases, it runs its course in from seven to 14 days. People catch it from drinking water infected with *V. cholerae* and/or from eating raw foods infected with the bacteria, including shellfish and veggies grown in fields fertilized with raw sewage.

Cholera can cause symptoms ranging from mild to please kill me now. When it’s bad it brings with it rapid heart rate, loss of skin elasticity, dry mucous membranes, low blood pressure, vomiting, thirst, muscle cramps, abdominal pain, rectal pain and the onset of sudden fierce watery diarrhea that triggers dangerous fluid loss, as much as a quart of liquid an hour in some cases. Death can then follow, probably welcomed.

“Children with cholera become restless and irritable ... Children generally have the same symptoms as adults, but they are particularly susceptible to low blood sugar due to fluid loss. This in turn can cause an altered state of consciousness.”

“Yeah, it’s called delirium,” I told the screen.

Cholera, it seems, has the potential to become highly contagious, indirectly or directly via the fecal-oral route, when there is widespread fecal contamination of food, water or items like bedding and clothing.

“Like when people are so ill they just have to lie there and shit all over themselves,” I muttered.

BANG BANG BANG sounded the pet door, Misfit’s cute way of asking to enter. I glanced at the clock and had to agree they’d been banished long enough. I tried for a sip of coffee before rising to get them, but discovered to my astonishment someone had already drunk it. As I was the only one there, no doubt it was me. But I had no memory of it. Annoying.

My pets entered their inside domain in usual fashion. Misfit crashed through the door and, with great astonishment, discovered I was still there and still worthy of all her freakishly excited attention.

Nightstalker entered two minutes later, treated me to a “fuck you” look, leaped to the top of the bookcase in a single bound, gave me another brief angry glance and then curled into instant nap.

I poured myself more coffee and returned to my laptop. Misfit slid into her bed under my desk to enjoy all the grumpy comments I cared to share.

“Symptoms and signs of cholera are a watery diarrhea that often contains flecks of whitish material made up of mucus and some gastrointestinal lining (epithelial) cells about the size of rice. The diarrhea is termed ‘rice-water stool’ and smells ‘fishy’ ... and the diarrhea is so intense it can rapidly lead to dehydration.

“Lovely,” I said to Misfit, wrinkling my nose.

“Symptoms are sometimes mild, but some previously healthy people will develop the copious diarrhea within one to five days of ingesting the bacteria,” which to me is reason enough to opt for clean water when given any choice at all.

Before folks figured out poop could be dangerous cholera bacteria could arrive and kill people by the hundreds. Antibiotics, especially Tetracycline for children, effectively halts *V. cholerae* in its nasty little tracks when used together with the replacement of fluid and electrolytes.

“You cannot catch cholera person to person,” wrote one online medical source. “You can only catch it through exposure to the bacterium found in the feces.”

“Remember that my little shit-eater and stay out of the litter box” I told Misfit. “Try to keep your fecal intake to the bare minimum in future.”

Among children, for reasons still not understood, two to four-year-olds are often the hardest hit by cholera. And people with Type O blood (like me, along with nearly 60 percent of the Hispanic population) are twice as likely to develop cholera after exposure than patients with other blood types. This happens also “for reasons not yet understood.”

*Time to ponder*, I thought. So I did.

Pushing away from the desk I asked Misfit if she'd like to go walkies and she responded by saying "yesyesyescanwegowalkiesnowrightthisminutepleaseplease." I got her leash, politely asked Nightstalker if he'd like to come, too, and got absolutely no response beyond an irritated twitch of his tail. And I only got that much only because he knew I didn't mean it. Nightstalker on a leash? *Please!*

So out into the night went owner and dog-made-calm-first, in that order, because I am a huge fan of "the dog whisperer," Cesar Millan, and try to do what he suggests. With us went lots of cholera information to process. I now knew cholera when caught early enough is easy to treat these days and that mild cases can recover within a week. Even severe cases soon recover fully under medical care.

Cholera prevention was as easy as flush toilets connected to sewer systems connected to water treatment facilities designed to keep feces out of the water and food supply. Clearly none of these were standard for life in tent cities.

Bad as it was, I decided these recent cholera victims should be grateful they didn't also get any of the other diseases transmitted in human feces, like typhoid fever, infectious hepatitis, polio, cryptosporidiosis (aka: crypto) or ascariasis.

I'd had to look up the last two and found I didn't want to ever have either one of them. I especially didn't want ascariasis, a type of very nasty and very long roundworm that lives inside many unlucky humans. Ascariasis will vacate people occasionally, however. Being adverse to some kinds of general anesthetics these big worms may exit the body when these are used, sometimes leaving through the mouth. I decided if that didn't totally creep a person out, nothing could.

I tried, but failed, to remember the stats from one test done in Mexico so - and even though it had nothing to do with cholera - I went back to the computer after our walk and looked it up again. It was pretty creepy, too. It seems that in one field study in Mexico where raw sewage was used to fertilize crops, *Ascaris* eggs were found in varying transferable-to-people amounts in potatoes, turnips, carrots and radishes.

A similar study in that same area showed 73 percent of the *children working* on those farms were infected with helminths (ie: big fat worms of several species, *Ascaris* being one of them), probably as a result of the exposure to raw sewage.

And then, while avidly reading about worms, I stumbled onto another cholera report stating that ever since epidemic cholera began in Hispaniola in 2010 there have been a total of 23 cases confirmed in the U.S. Twenty-two of those case-patients had reported travel between the U.S. and Hispaniola and one had reported eating seafood from Haiti.

The U.S. of A. had fared lots better in 2010 than the Dominican Republic where, from Oct. 21 of that year through April 4 of 2011, 275,000 cases of cholera had caused agonizing horrific deaths for 4,700 people.

But 2011, even if not ancient history, was history. This was today, now, and cholera had come right here to Zorro's home turf. I needed no further research to connect the dots: A tent city stuffed with impoverished migrant workers, non-existent water or sewage treatment available and bosses who didn't give a tinker's damn. It was time to saddle up.

## Chapter 4: Ticket to Ride

Sadly, there's more involved in getting ready to ride in the 21st century than just saddling up a horse. I jotted down my list ...

1. *Call Sharon and see if she's free to pet sit.*
2. *Go by the grocers and get some cat food and maybe some more dog food.*
3. *Go check and see if there's enough dog food ... hell with it, buy some extra dog food.*
4. *Check weapons, pack extra ammo.*
5. *Call ahead and reserve a room, use own name.*
6. *Check with nearest University to see if their facilities will be available to little old going-for-my-sociology-doctorate me; pressure them if necessary.*
7. *Set up meeting with the local reporter on the paper covering the Tent City story. Meet up with Carl and Juan, today or this evening if possible.*
8. *Pack for me and for Zorro. Try not to forget the bullwhip this time. Leave the costume at the cabin after.*
9. *Have Juan or Carl pick up some throwaway phones at Kmart ...*

Jeez, good thing I was writing all this down.

And there's more, I was sure there was more because, like God or the Devil, murder is in the details, but I couldn't think of anything else so I went ahead and moved forward with what I already had on paper. Merrily slamming coffee I worked my way through the list and, as I had suspected, found many more things to add along the way. All thanks to the 26-great-gods of caffeine I powered through those items, too, and by just dark the evening of the following day I was ready.

I packed the car, burned all my lists to powder and let the ashes blow away behind my neighbor's apartment. Then I groveled before the kids and told them I'd return soon. Neither of them believed me. Nightstalker left the room in disgust. He punctuated his departure by lifting his tail, stick-like, straight over his butt-hole, thereby forming his own personal exclamation point for yet another two-word sentence. Misfit did everything but sob.

Riddled with pet guilt I finally made it onto the road heading west toward the gulf. Since I live on Florida's east coast I had plenty of time for thinking while driving and I needed every minute of it. I had some ideas and plans, but until I had done reconnaissance on the actual site it was all really wishes and hopes, pie in the sky stuff, and getting into Tent City was no certainty. But at least while ticking off the items on my list and making calls I had secured the university and newspaper connections, either one of them might open that door for me.

By avoiding the Hell alleys of either I-4 or I-10, I got to Florida's west coast along near-empty back roads just before midnight. Unfrazzled by my gentle meandering across the state I checked into my room and slept like that proverbial baby.

I had stopped at a Jin Jin Chinese Restaurant along the way and found the food surprisingly tasty. The hot food had been ladled out with a generous hand, too, so - as my room had a small microwave and tiny coffee maker - I started my day with hot coffee and leftover Chinese, far and away better than just about any motel's "complimentary" breakfast.

The head of the university's sociology department turned out to be easy. By just turning up the feminine voltage every now-and-then I got everything I wanted, mainly unfettered access to the campus.

My goal was to be identified as a gentlewoman and a scholar recognized by the credibles, so I dropped in for a brief chat with the head librarian, too, and let her help me with more cholera research. I was just needy enough to become an indelible memory.

She unearthed a couple of important items I had missed, such as that cholera is still a worldwide presence killing large numbers of people every year; that back in the day British sailors had carried it around the world and then home again in the bilge waters of their sailing ships; and that at the onset of the disease, because the loss of fluids is so rapid, death can sometimes occur within a few hours.

But bad as it is, cholera could be a lot worse, because only about 20 percent of the people who become ill reach the stage where it becomes life-threatening. However even people with milder cases can still carry and transfer the badass form of the bacteria, and they do.

Cholera is a key indicator of good social development, because nearly every country that can't guarantee access to safe drinking water or adequate sanitation remains threatened by cholera epidemics. Yet even when those are in place, cholera can still turn up in the guts of coastal creatures that filter lots of brackish water through their systems, animals like oysters, clams, even crabs.

Marine scientists have come to realize the open ocean is teeming with viruses from a surprisingly wide range of types (some harmful to humans, some not) and that estuaries can offer many of those viruses safe harbor.

I jotted down the information I was most interested in, primarily the transfer of cholera person to person, and then went on to the school cafeteria. There I purchased a limp and tasteless cheese sandwich and told any student within hearing how bad it was. I hoped out-loud that starvation wasn't in the cards while I was there working on my doctorate.

I left the campus full of smug. If all went well I wouldn't need any of these school contacts as an alibi (including those who might remember my cafeteria complaints), but I now had them in my pocket if I did.

I went to meet with the reporter Charlie Cook at a local diner where I watched him eat a burger washed down with Coke while I had some ice water with lemon, staying trendy. I explained I needed to get into Tent City first hand and asked if I could go with him to take a couple of cell phone pics for my thesis.

He pondered it while running the hope through his mind he might get lucky. I gave him my most encouraging slow smile and that apparently tipped the scales.

"Why not?" he said, with an eye twitch I suddenly realized was his version of a wink. "I'm headed out there now if you want to ride along?"

I did indeed, and in no time at all was clearing myself a seat free of miscellaneous empty fast food garbage and notebooks in his battered Honda and then belting myself in.

Along the way he reached into the back seat and lifted over a real camera. Handing it to me he said I could be his photographer and to let him do all the talking. Fine by me.

Especially fine when we actually arrived at Tent City. The place was crawling with cops, both uniforms and suits, medical personnel, security officers, government employees from the state's Department of Children and Families, fire and rescue trucks and various uniformed military people. I saw some lawyer types, too. Every official looked intently focused on task, scarcely glancing at my partner's credentials and paying me no attention at all. We sailed past gate security and were soon inside the Tent City itself.

It was pitiful.

Stoic workers, detained for endless translated questions by all the more important people, lined the dirt paths turned into third world ruts by recent rains. I took pictures of lined brown faces where dead eyes stared back at me. I took pictures of those rutted paths, too, and all the bustling activity around me. I snapped everything I saw.

The tents, heavy stained gray canvas structures were more barracks than anything else. By observation I figured out some of the tents housed men, the others women and pot-bellied children. Quarantine signs and tape barred entrance into any of them.

Click, click, click ...

I peered through a side flap window and saw inert figures on a line of cots and cribs, IV's racked and hanging over several of them.

Click, click, click ...

A uniformed nurse stepped out from the tent and Charlie, notebook ready, was on her immediately.

My ears heard sentence fragments about "horrible conditions"... "when did you know it was ..." "it was the water. No sanitation at all and ..." "... "what's the prognosis?" ... "the worst is probably over..."

My eyes, however, were looking for my own answers.

By the time Charlie turned the nurse loose I had heard the names of the owners of Tent City; that in addition to those still sick in the tent there were many others in far worse condition in a nearby hospital; that this outbreak was possibly the result of hungry children eating uncooked oysters from a nearby marsh infested with a strain of cholera, and that the conditions here in Tent City were not unusual for migrant workers, something I had already known.

I dogged Charlie's heels for another 40 minutes or so, but long before he had to leave to meet his deadline I had seen all I needed. Even so, I continued to photograph everything and everyone on our way back to Charlie's car. The pictures alone showed anyone able to support letting people live in a place like this had lost any hope of redemption. Or any hope for a stay of execution from Zorro, either.

I let Charlie drop me back off at my car and he promised to email me copies of the photos. He was now clearly anxious to get back to the newsroom to turn his notes into an article and I was just as eager to let him go so I could get on with my own agenda.

I slipped on a baseball cap and baggy shirt from my trunk and drove out to the old motel that served as home for many migrant workers, along with two fairly new residents, Carlos and Juan. I called the throwaway phone purchased for our current action on my own throwaway phone and asked them to meet me at a nearby park. There we sat at a picnic table, just three guys hanging out.

Carlos and Juan, while they looked the part of migrant workers, had actually once been university students in their native Ecuador and had come to the States legally to pursue their education. Financial problems had dogged them, however, and too proud to ask family back home for help they had left school and sought employment. With still-limited English their opportunities were just as limited and they had ended up taking “temporary” jobs as migrant workers.

They had met Mateo while there and liked him, only learning of his true role after his death. Mateo had talked often about them to me, however, and with the birth of Zorro I had sought them out.

On this day I learned Carlos had met a local woman working as a nurse’s aide with the patients still in Tent City. He thought he could get her to bag up some dirty linen for me from the campsite. Fabulous!

And Juan had learned from a maid in a local luxury hotel that a couple of big honchos from the company who owned Tent City and some of their lawyers were staying there. Better and better.

We sat waving away gnats while kicking around various and sundry ideas for the kidnapping, then they took off to finish up their own lists and I went back to my motel to work out our timetable. Passing a Starbucks along the way I got myself a cup of tall blonde to take with me. Once in my room I turned on the local hour-on-the-hour news for both a weather report and an update on the local cholera fest.

The weather was sunny with a chance of afternoon showers, just like most of the other 364 days in Florida this year. The cholera report had a lot more meat to offer. One of the two company executives Juan had told me about stared earnestly into the camera and expressed his dismay over the raging epidemic. He said there was no clear indication on what had caused the outbreak, but that a team of his best bought-and-paid-for scientists should have that answer soon.

Meanwhile he was here personally to make sure everything was being done to alleviate the suffering and to restore health to those fine people who worked in the glorious fields of his caring and compassionate company.

Mr. Wonderful Exec was on camera long enough for me to memorize every detail of his comfortably overfed face. I was certain sure all the top executives from the corporation he represented had top-of-the-line-medical-plans. Pity they wouldn’t be able to actually use them anytime soon.

“See you tomorrow, motherfucker,” I told him, with a bright smile, clicking off the TV when the storyline moved from him to local sports. “I have a piece of property to show you.”

## Chapter 5: View From the Tent.

Once I had decided to release my alter-ego onto Corporate America I started watching a lot of crime shows on TV and became very impressed by all the tricks and techniques now in use by forensic scientists.

But over time, in addition to learning the vast majority of murders were done unto women by men who professed to love them, I realized luck was also a huge component in the capture of the bad guys.

Cops are, first and foremost, hunters and most of them are very, very good at it. While you and I, depending on our personal interests, might drive down a street and see flower gardens, store window displays, liquor stores or building sites, cops see suspects.

They spot the drug deals most of us miss; they see the prostitutes and then spot their more hidden pimps; they notice when car passengers are wearing their seat belts or when someone's driving is just that little bit off. Cops spot the many and varied hoofprints through the urban jungle. They sniff out the fear-sweat of criminals hidden behind the traffic fumes. They catch the bad guys.

And they do it all while being badgered by citizens, reporters, lawyers, and militants of all kinds, people who tend to forget that without the thin blue line we would enter the hot dark night of anarchy.

I admire cops and respect them and can't for the life of me figure out why they are willing to do the dangerous thankless work they do. And I never, ever, doubt their skills and ability to track down persons such as me should I get the least bit careless.

Here's the thing about cop luck:

When the cold case cop asks the same questions asked in the initial investigation and this time gets a different answer, one that leads him to the bad guy - that's cop luck.

When another cold case cop unearths a DNA-laden viable rape kit when all the other kits for a suspected rapist have degraded while in storage - that's cop luck.

When an officer suspects a person is up to something and quietly follows him for a quick catch of burglary-interruptus, it's both cop luck and skillful hunting.

Knowing this, I do everything I possibly can to create my own good luck. That means planning, intense planning and then still more planning. I work with a small team of people I trust implicitly. And I never, ever, take anything for granted.

Juan and Carlos trust me to feed their hunger for revenge and so far I have kept them stuffed full. They are my eyes into worlds I can never enter while I travel easily through a society that discounts them. Our very real friendship is built upon mutual respect. When I need additional labor they hire the crews, people they know will enjoy being well paid for their service and their silence. Zorro could not operate without them.

I also work with my best friend, Robertina (short form "Tina") Flores, marine biologist and moonlighting urban terrorist far more concerned with environmental issues than social ones, but we can easily overlap for the right cause. Tina and I have been friends since we shared dolls, OKay Jackson, *Zorro*, *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

then books, then makeup and clothes (but never boys). We competed against one another in horse shows, went fishing with my Dad, camped out with her family and went boating and swimming with mine. We can, and do, finish each other's sentences. She's the sister I never had.

She's also light years ahead of me with computer skills and I call on her without reservation when necessary. It was time now to make that call and I did, but she didn't answer. So I sent her a text saying, "Meet at property noon today?" and got her immediate reply, "Can. Will."

When she arrived later that day I told her about Zorro's latest project, asked for her help and explained her part, walked her through the changes done to the compound since her last visit there, and then sadly watched her little red sports car bounce its way back down the muddy track toward the highway. A too short visit like too many of ours are, but when I'd asked if she was on board she had replied without reservation, "Sure. Piece of cake."

Once back in my cabin I crossed "Tina's role" off my list.

When the money came to me after the death of my parents I had used some for my continuing education, put a fat chunk into my checking account for day-to-day living expenses, treated some of my friends to some (including Tina) and kept the rest in the rolling-along blue-chip investments that had made Mom and Dad, in the words of the estate lawyer, "very comfortable."

Money they had set aside in a separate trust for my future went to purchase a parcel of real estate. I'd had a friend in Miami, Medford McCoy - aka Butch - make that purchase in his name and had made sure no business trail existed linking him to me.

(A signed-by-Butch quick-claim deed to the property lived quietly in the security deposit box at my bank ready to activate should it ever become necessary.)

While Florida has some beautiful rolling land to offer, along with lakefront properties, seaside resorts, farms, suburbs, cities and condos, I had ultimately paid cash for 800-plus prime acres of cypress, palmetto, sweetgum, oak and pine forest surrounded on three sides by black-water swamp and located almost exactly midway between the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico. It was nowhere near the world that mouse built.

While I have strongly girly-girl tendencies they had to win out over the equally strong tomgirl interests and abilities of my childhood. My Dad had nurtured the latter by teaching me to hunt and fish, skin and scale, ride and rope, hike and camp rough.

I'd had tennis lessons and fencing lessons, learned to handle motor boats and sailboats, swim and scuba, deep dive the clear Florida springs and frolic like a manatee in the estuaries they call home. While I can shop and wear high fashion with the best of them, I am equally at home in the wilderness. To my mind it's all good.

I'd had "The Property" thoroughly fenced and alarmed, but other than having two small cabins built on either side of a small fenced horse stable about 100 acres in while developing a very hidden encampment at its center, the property remained totally unkempt.

I'd kept one cabin for myself. The other was occupied by a young couple from Central America who looked after the horses and kept things tidy in my absence.

OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

There were four horses in residence, two flashy pintos and two blacks. The pintos, Cisco and Pancho, had been with me since before the arrival of Zorro, but when he showed up I considered buying one of the breeds Zorro rode in movies, either a Black Andalusian or a still more romantic Friesian. But breeders of such pricey exotic steeds keep thorough records. I wanted no record of my horses or where they lived.

So in the end I settled for two handsome black thoroughbred-quarter-horse crosses and named them Toronado One and Toronado Two. On their shiny outsides they were as alike as two peas in a pod, but while Number One was a sweet and easy ride, Number Two was well named.

In my early days of land ownership I had tried on several fancy names for my wilderness retreat, but it had stubbornly insisted on being called "The Property" so I finally gave up and used the name it had given itself. Initially I had gone there for riding or hunting, using the barn and outdoor kitchen for dressing out game. Now I used the place for even more stimulating sport and today planned to expand its horizons even further.

To the 20 X 40-foot pole barn with its rustic, but functional, outdoor kitchen, Carl's crew had added screen wire to enclose it and canvas sides that could be manually rolled up or down. Inside they had lined up a dozen camp cots along one side and a long folding table with chairs along the other. Each cot held a thin pillow atop a folded army-type blanket. At the far end of the enclosure there were several water dispensers, pump-style coolers topped by five-gallon plastic water bottles.

But the newest addition was the fencing that surrounded and covered the area outside the barn, a square metal box built with the same kind of fencing used in America's highly profitable prison industry. On one side a pile of rocks, most the size of cantaloupes, was piled to the height and width of an average car. Beside the pile were 12 large baskets. On the other side of the compound was a large commercial scale, the type found on many loading docks. The only way in or out was through a single gate sporting an array of impressive bolts and locks.

A layer of artificial plants in various shades of green, plus yellow and brown, was wired loosely atop the cage and blended in nicely with the surrounding trees. A small plane flying overhead would see nothing below but unbroken plant canopy. Carlos had actually done a flyover the day before and pronounced the camouflage "perfect."

I unlocked and went inside the roofed-over area then turned to see the view from the tent. Sunlight trickled through the artificial plants above while beyond the wire, on all sides, was the usual thick tropical tangle of greenery the state grows at a rate guaranteed to astonish transplanted Yankees.

I looked out at palmetto, yucca, wild citrus, and dozens of other bushes, all clutching one another with various sized thorns and stitched firmly together by catbriar and poison ivy vines. A nice finishing touch came when a slight movement along the base of the fence turned out to be a pigmy rattlesnake passing by.

No one looking out from that tent would guess that just a few hundred mucky acres away there was a dirt road. It led to a blacktop which, in turn, led to a narrow two-lane highway. Threaded between car-deep water-filled ditches, that backwoods highway would return any driver to civilization as we know it in just over two hours.

And back there in civilization-land, Tina had just finished setting up by computer a rendezvous that would bring five top company officials and seven of their lawyers to an empty field the following night. Carlos and Juan and their own hand-picked men would be waiting.

The unsuspecting twelve arrived on time in the limos provided by the executives they had expected to meet. They were met instead by men carrying assault weapons at the ready.

Within minutes the executives and their mouthpieces were shackled together and bundled into the back of an old truck where they were ordered to sit on the floor and shut up. Armed men remained in back with them, rifles on point. The truck started up and eased onto the narrow highway heading east while the two limos behind them turned back the way they had come.

A guard in the truck used his rifle butt to silence the first inquiry by striking the speaker in the mouth. Blood and teeth sprayed from his split lips as the other captives hissed with shock. From then on, a guard had only to motion with the gun to keep everyone locked into the silence of their own thoughts.

The truck slowed and speeded and wandered, until after two or three hours that felt to the shackled passengers like days, it slowed, turned, and rattled the bones of everyone inside as it bounced and swayed along what was surely a rutted dirt road.

When the truck stopped and the door was rolled up overhead, the men obeyed the jerk of the two rifle barrels indicating it was time to move. Pale overhead lights showed them the parameters of their enclosure and, as their shackles were removed, they reluctantly stepped into the cage. The man struck by the guard earlier held a blood-soaked handkerchief to his lips.

The taller of the two guards secured the locks and then spoke through the fence to the men standing silent in their look-alike \$2000 Gucci suits, resignation and fear stamped across their features in equal measure.

“Ju weel be here onteel morning,” the guard said. “Ju haf all here ju weel need. Ju weel be told why ju are here tomorrow. Ju are watched always. There eeess no escape. Buenas Noches.”

Finished, the guard stepped back into the shadows and silently walked away into the night.

The men were soon huddled together at the long table speculating about their situation, unconsciously trying to create a more normal boardroom atmosphere for themselves. They talked in low tones nearly drowned out by the night noises of frogs and insects. Occasionally an owl or cat (bobcat? puma?) would toss in a screech that silenced the lesser creatures for a time. Then, one by one, the repetitive chorus would slowly pick up to reach its former earsplitting volume.

And one by one the men eventually gave up seeking answers where there were only questions. Sleep ultimately came to all in their hard, narrow cots and dawn's early light eventually arrived to pry open their eyelids. As the sun rose higher the men found bread and butter in the cupboard, eggs and bacon in the refrigerator, and a large pot for making coffee, plus coffee.

They had shucked their suit jackets and rolled up their sleeves. For many it felt like a trip back in time to their scouting days. For others it was like more recent visits to hunting camps in faraway states. The higher the sun rose the more of their manhood they recovered. They looked around, drank their coffee, talked among themselves and looked around again.

Even so, none of them saw the arrival of the masked rider who halted the black horse in the shadows of trees to study the men as they bantered with one another, vying even here for power positions. But when a fly caused the horse to toss its head, the jingle of its bridle caused several men to look in its direction.

With no apparent signal the horse moved slowly forward and stopped just outside the screen. The captives, brains struggling with reality-versus-fantasy, stared at the flashy black horse carrying a slim man wearing full Zorro regalia. A black bullwhip was coiled and tied to the left side of the saddle. The rider carried a slim rapier in the right hand which he now raised and pointed at the men like an extended finger.

“Your company, under the advisement of your lawyers, employs illegal immigrants,” he said, in a low husky voice. “But they are not paid by your company. They are paid by a temporary staffing company that hires them. And that second company relies on other labor brokers to recruit and transport them to your fields.”

Zorro’s black eyes glittered beneath his mask as he paused, waiting for some response. But the men stood silent, so he lowered the sword and continued speaking.

“You created two intermediary firms to stand between your company and your illegal work force, allowing yourselves to wash your hands in the bowl of Pontius Pilate and say, ‘This has nothing to do with me, this is not under my control.’

“But this *was all* under your control. *You* are the ones who pulled all the strings and then condoned saving money by letting *human beings* live in conditions unfit for rats. Your actions caused hungry children to eat raw oysters filled with cholera when they found them near Tent City. Some of them died, many were orphaned.

“For that crime I have taken your freedom so you may now truly say you have no control. For the next four weeks you will behave and enjoy those same conditions you offered your workers. Then you will be set free,” Zorro said.

Pointing at them once again with the sword he said in a harsher tone, “Cholera bacteria have been brought to this camp.”

The men now muttered angrily among themselves, one of them saying more loudly, “Holy shit.”

“Not holy,” Zorro replied. “But shit comes with Cholera most certainly. Should Cholera appear you will receive the same medical treatment your workers did during the first four weeks after it appeared in Tent City, which means none.”

Several of the prisoners shut their eyes. Some groaned audibly.

“Cholera runs its course in from seven to 14 days,” Zorro said, continuing on with Cholera 101. “It can be fatal 20 percent of the time, but since you are all well fed and presumably healthy, you stand a much better chance of getting off more lightly than your employees did. Some, or even all of you, may not even get it at all.

OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

“But for as long as you remain healthy there will be work. From 8 a.m. till 8 p.m. you will move rocks from one side of the compound to the other to be weighed. Only those who shift 300 pounds of rocks every hour will be fed.

“Finally, because my heart is not as hard as yours, be grateful none of your loved ones are here to share this experience with you. But I might find a harder heart within myself should any of you speak of our adventure after you are released. Comprene?”

While the men had no idea what dangers lay ahead for them, they had no doubts about this last clear threat to their families should they rebel, either now or in the future.

Satisfied by their expressions, Zorro smiled. Nodding farewell, he reined the horse’s head away from the fence. Almost immediately horse and rider melted into the darkness of the shadowy undergrowth. The prisoners could hear the snapping of branches and soft thud of hooves for a little while longer.

Then all was silent.

## Chapter 6: Their Reward

The first death occurred twelve days later.

I had, of course, spent those days far from The Property to be highly visible on campus. Students nodded at me now in the cafeteria and waved when I walked into the library. They'd be pledging me for a sorority soon.

I spent my evenings in local coffee bars or in my motel room "working on my thesis." I went dancing at a local club one evening because, well, I need dancing the way some people need liquor. Dancing and coffee are my drugs of choice.

I decided I might actually do my thesis on cholera since I found it interesting and it fit in with sociology as any epidemic has an immediate impact on society. I couldn't use my test subjects from the property, of course, which was a shame since my imprisonments there were certainly bearing poisonous fruit.

Juan had hired staff to look after the prisoners. They had been warned cholera might be in the future for their charges. Since they had all recovered from that very illness in Tent City, where some had lost family and all had lost friends, they didn't seem to mind.

All the coolers in the compound were topped up with fresh water every morning, but on day one (and only once) *V. cholerae* had been added to one of the coolers. It was the luck of the draw on who, if any, might actually drink it.

But chances were good at some point some of them would, because cholera bacteria can survive in feces for up to 50 days, on a glass surface for up to a month, on coins for a week, in soil or dirt for up to 10 days and on fingertips for one to two hours. And it spreads rapidly when feces from an infected person comes into contact with food or water.

It didn't take a lot of reverse engineering to create a cholera-rich environment from the "tips for travelers to avoid cholera" offered to tourists headed for Third World adventures. Our prisoners had no water handy for washing up after using the toilet, their drinking water was not treated with chlorine or iodine, and it was hit or miss whether their hot foods were cooked thoroughly since their jailors didn't care one way or another. They were, however, easily able to "avoid buying food or drink from street vendors."

While hidden cameras monitored the prisoners throughout the compound, none were aimed at the water coolers. Even I was a bit squeamish about watching someone drink water spiked with a squeeze of contaminated feces. But, of course, someone eventually did tap the infected water because the first case of diarrhea hit seven days into their incarceration.

By then, after a week of shifting rock around the compound to earn their plates of beans and rice, the men had already started to trim down nicely. But the loss of fluids in those who got infected dropped them down to living skeletons almost overnight. Over the next week all but one of the prisoners came down with cholera symptoms in greater or lesser degrees and three of those cases eventually proved fatal. That number was slightly higher than 20 percent, but there you go, that's math for you.

It immediately became clear that rich white men suffered the same way all men suffer when hit by cholera.

OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

Even the one man who remained healthy suffered by having to watch the agony all around him while expecting the dreaded symptoms to show up in himself at any moment.

The hidden cameras showed a bad time was clearly had by all during the passing days, but I remembered those little empty cribs in Tent City and figured no one deserved it more. The nine gaunt survivors didn't talk with one another much in the passing days. Mostly they lay on their cots or, when able, sat at the table with their heads in their hands.

At mealtimes, after their stomachs could once again handle food, they ate in silence, voicing none of the complaints they'd used to season their first meals in the camp. Survival became a very real commodity, taste not so much.

On the 30th day the men expected to be released.

They were not.

The 31st day came and went,

then 32, 33 and 34 .....

It wasn't until late in the afternoon of day 37 when the black horse again stepped from the shadows into view from the compound. The men stared silently, throats working to hold back tears of relief that their ordeal might actually now come to an end. They saw the same handsome horse ridden by the same trim rider, but that rider saw men totally unrecognizable from those locked up a little over one month before.

None of the men wore shirts and their once fine slacks were near rags flapping loosely over space where flesh had been, held in place with belts made of the rope used to bundle hay into bales. Their ribs showed under skin colored by the hot Florida sun that, despite the artificial plants blocking some of the gamma ray wannabees, had still managed to turn them nearly as dark as their jailers.

It was their eyes, however, that had changed the most. The eyes that lifted to meet those behind the mask held the same hopeless expression seen in the eyes of the homeless that walk invisibly through our cities and in workers who harvest the foods for American supermarkets.

The top-shelf blue, brown, gray and hazel eyes that had once scorned, charmed, flirted and winked, were now flat and wary. And when all those eyes were upon him, Zorro spoke:

"The people who work for you do not often escape their lot in life. That was the reason you were not released on the 30th day as promised," he said. "You've now had a very small taste of what it is like to not see any end to your suffering. It is my hope that in this month you have learned suffering is universal, that you are no different from the men and women you were so indifferent to before.

"I am confident you will remember your friends who died here in their feces and vomit, but now that you are returning to your life of undeserved privilege it is important you remember those in Tent City who died that same way."

Zorro shifted in the saddle to untie a small pouch beside the coiled bullwhip. Opening it, he spilled the contents into his hand, then held one of the items up for them to see. It was a keychain shaped into the letter Z that appeared to be plated in gold.

“This small golden memento of your time here will remind you of these things. I suggest you carry and use it daily so that you never forget you are as vulnerable as anyone to pain, loss and hopelessness. I shall follow your future careers with interest and should you not begin to concern yourself with the welfare of your workers you, together with your loved ones, will surely be invited back here for another stay.”

Zorro handed the trinkets down to a nearby guard who handed them out, one by one, to the silent men.

“Now, to the business at hand,” Zorro continued. “After you leave this place you are never to speak of it to anyone. Never. I don’t care what story you all agree on about the month missing from your lives, or of how your three companions died, but you have all of tonight and tomorrow to come up with it. You were all over the news when you went missing, now not so much. But once you reappear you’ll be in the headlines again. You are, after all, demigods of the one percent.

“Create your story together and stick to it, because as I said in the beginning of our adventure, if you do not there will be consequences to your wives and children. I don’t believe I have to tell you how difficult life here might prove for them.”

Looking down at the ragged group Zorro wondered if they’d be able to keep their silence about him. He hoped it, because doing so would forestall an immediate large-scale police investigation and public circus. Juana wasn’t really ready for Zorro in the 21st Century to go full-on public just yet. But in the end, it didn’t really matter. Every precaution she could think of had been taken. The rest really was all about the luck.

“Tomorrow night you go home. Remember what you have learned here,” Zorro told the prisoners.

Abruptly wheeling the horse’s head away from the fence, Zorro suddenly turned in the saddle. Baring his teeth in anything but a smile, he spat the words “I am done with you.”

The horse, as before, disappeared almost instantly into the shadows cast by the surrounding vegetation. When the noise of its departure had faded the men slowly filed back to their cots.

The following night they were again loaded into a truck where after a few short meandering hours they were released into a parking lot surrounded by wilderness. A few dim street lights glowed around the perimeter, but as the truck drove away the men saw nothing to distinguish it from many seen along highways every day. And dried mud (or something like) had made the license plate illegible.

Staring after it one of the men said, “The bastard thought of everything.”

They began walking in a group back along the same road. It took them 30 minutes to reach a sign showing they’d been released inside state hunting land. Further along they came to a “deer crossing” sign and, a little later, another sign that read, “bear crossing.”

“Oh, great,” said one, causing a chuckle to ripple through the group, the first sign of levity since their ordeal had begun. But why shouldn’t they laugh? After all, it was over. They were free. *They had survived!*

It took eight attempts before any of the sparse traffic they tried to flag down offered a car willing to stop for the band of eight ragged men. It was a police car. They spun the officers their collaborative yarn and were taken first to the police precinct, and not long after, to their respective luxurious homes. Life as they had known it had been restored to them.

The men arrived home too late for their return to be more than bulletin crawls across TV screens, but by morning they were the: "Big News" ... "Breaking Story" ... and ... "Tale of Amazing Fortitude" seen on every network.

Television viewers were reminded these very important men had disappeared from a business conference on the Gulf more than a month earlier. The safe return of most of them was amazing enough, but their tale of a sudden impulse to go fishing (fueled by a night of carefree wining and dining) was the kind of story about which movies are made.

They had used a boat kept at a local marina belonging to one of the men. As it turned out, he was one of the three guys who hadn't made it back from that impromptu boat trip and viewers learned he was the same guy whose story had been all over the news the month before, when a bunch of Mexicans he'd hired had died of Cholera.

The "half tipsy men" ("shit-faced," thought viewers) had headed right out into the Gulf where, hours later, a sudden powerful storm had capsized their cruiser and sent it down to Davy Jones Locker along with three of their number. The survivors, holding onto coolers, floatation devices and each other, had drifted in the warm salt water for days before finally floundering ashore onto a small island.

There they had lived on land crabs and coconuts until spotted by a passing boater who took them aboard and dropped them off at a dock near a state hunting area. Their rescuer immediately took off, leading the nine survivors to suspect that before he'd given in to a higher impulse to rescue the stranded men he'd probably been up to nefarious deeds, possibly connected to the drug trade.

The story was almost too strange to be believed and many viewers remained skeptical, but clearly the men had suffered out in the open during the month they'd been gone, making their story eventually seem credible. After all, they'd lost considerable weight ("lucky bastards," thought the viewers) and had when found been sun-toasted to a dark brown and wearing mere rags for clothing.

Speculation continued in news reports for another day and a half, but no one actually bothered to see if any boats belonging to the group had ever gone missing or if there had really been a significant storm in the Gulf the night they'd vanished. That was partly because they'd gone missing from one area, stayed a month god knows where, and showed back up in another part of the state. Police jurisdiction battles caused information overlap and confusion.

Reporters might yet have taken up the slack, but then a triple homicide in one home and a double homicide in another, BOTH in the same gated community - set the entire pack of news-hounds baying after their next Big Story.

Juana had watched the first of many televised stories about her former prisoners from the comfort of her own apartment, Misfit at her feet and Nightstalker draped across the back of her recliner.

“What horseshit,” she snorted angrily, causing Misfit’s tale to thump the floor with concern. “If the average person told the cops that kind of crap they’d charge him with being a serial asshole and lose the key after they locked him up. Rich white men can get away with any damned thing.”

And a day or so later, after the nine survivors suddenly became old news, she told her furkids, “at least they didn’t drag Zorro into it and that’s pretty much all that really matters ... Wanna order some pizza, guys?”

“Yes,” said her pets.

## Chapter 7: The Bees' Knees

"The compound worked good, didn't it? Are you going to use it like that again?"

Tina tossed the question to me while sprawled across the beanbag chair in the boneless way of young children, which for a 30-something was just wrong.

"I think so," I replied, rolling over on my bed to face her. "And I know who I want to invite to the next party, too. But you're going to have to help me set it up again."

"Why not. We'd both look so good in orange. Want some more coffee? I'll make a pot if you'd like."

A cheerful volunteer is a beautiful thing, I told her. "Take your cheap white ass to the kitchen immediately and make things happen."

Tina laughed, bounced up off the chair and out the door, only slowing to waggle her hind end in my direction before exiting.

Rolling over onto my back with a smile I thought how nice it was she had showed up this morning with Starbucks and Danish in hand before I was even awake. It had been ages since we'd spent any quality time together just for fun so this was a treat indeed. I scooted myself and my pillows up against the wall and breathed in the perfume of coffee as it dripped to perfection in the next room.

"Ahhhhhhhh," I said loudly. "This is living."

"Damn straight," Tina shouted back.

Returning soon with two steaming mugs, Tina said, "Here you go, Bitch. Strong enough to get you moving and black as your tiny evil heart."

"What evil? I'm one of the white hats, remember?"

"Yeah. I've noticed. Your hat is as white as your mask."

"Well, there is that mask thingie ..."

And so it went, minutes of nonsense dialogue that rolled into hours as we caught up the threads of our friendship and wove them back into familiar patterns. We decided neither of us wanted to do more than lie around and play catch up, so around lunchtime we scrambled some eggs with cheese and a sprinkle of herbs, buttered some toast, and enjoyed staying in.

Our talk inevitably turned more serious, which was also part of our pattern. Tina, when not working as my computer whiz or carrying out her own small attacks of urban terrorism, works at her day job as marine biologist for the state. She told me she'd recently read where more than *two billion pounds* of glyphosate, the herbicide created and marketed by the Monsanto Corporation under the name Roundup<sup>1</sup>, had been sprayed across the farmlands and

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<sup>1</sup> Key manufacturers today include Anhui Huaxing Chemical Industry Company, BASF, Bayer CropScience, Dow AgroSciences, DuPont, Jiangsu Good Harvest-Weien Agrochemical Company, Monsanto, Nantong Jiangshan Agrochemical & Chemicals Co., Nufarm Limited, SinoHarvest, Syngenta, and Zhejiang Xinan Chemical Industrial Group Company.

suburbs of America in the two decades since it first went on the market. (Monsanto is also one of the leading developers of genetically modified foods).

It was cause for concern, to say the least. Juana knew two commercial blends of the same product were being used all over Florida to keep roadside weeds under control, despite the fact that in addition to killing weeds and insects the poisons were seeping down into the groundwater while rain was washing it into local waterways and estuaries.

“We’ve lost hundreds of acres of seagrass recently, but no one in a position of authority seems willing to connect the dots between Periderm run off and the deaths of the water plants that nourish the animals that live out there, manatees, sea turtles, fish ... all of them,” Tina said, angrily. “What the hell will it take to get their attention? Does everything have to die, including our fishing industry, to get them to act?”

“You’re preaching to the choir again, Sistah. I did my own research on herbicides and their impact on pollinators like honeybees and butterflies when I was learning about the effects of all the neonicotinoid pesticides on the health of the migrant human populations in U.S. agriculture.”

“I know, I know. You know as much about all this as I do. Maybe even more,” Tina said, shaking her head. “I guess my question to you is, are we going to tackle this one?”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. As usual we were right on the same page, and I told her so. She shared my laughter.

“Too funny, girlfriend. But OK, then. What’s the plan?”

I told her.

“Jeez, Juana. That’s pretty intense,” she said.

“Yep. You in?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m in,” she said, grinning broadly. “I am soooooo in.”

After Tina and I reluctantly parted later that afternoon, I pulled up some of the research I had done on glyphosate, how it has caused fetal damage in humans and is indicted in our recent spiraling numbers of autistic children.

I started thinking about the sudden appearance of the Zika virus carried by mosquitoes that was possibly causing mental and physical retardation in babies, how the nightly news invariably had showed the fix for the problem was by spraying chemical poisons on everything in sight.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” I told Misfit. “I looked it up. The kind of mosquitoes carrying this virus are the same ones that carry dengue and chikungunya fevers. One of them was the carrier that spread yellow fever in Florida and other southern states once upon a time. But here’s the thing, both <sup>2</sup> kinds are lousy flyers. You know what that means, don’t you?”

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<sup>2</sup> Aedes Aegypti won’t fly more than 400 meters in its lifetime and A. Albopictus, the other one, doesn’t get much past 200 meters. Some mosquito varieties (the salt marsh mosquito for one, can fly up to two miles.)

Misfit stared at me, mouth open, hanging on my every word.

“It means they’re not flying in from two states over. They live in our yards and in our homes. They’re breeding in people’s yards and around businesses in flower pots, wheelbarrows and old tires. The news should be showing virus fighters dumping out standing water instead of spraying everything in sight.

“I won’t argue with *some* spraying, but *only spraying? Really?* It’s just making Monsanto richer while we all get poisoned further by their carcinogenic juices. It’s fucking nuts.”

Misfit wagged her tail briskly to show she got it, she understood what I was saying, but of course she’s smarter than most politicians. (Nightstalker is smarter than most college professors). I rumped her doggy ears and told her she was the best. She bounced up and down in agreement and asked politely if we could go out and play now. So we did.

That night after dinner I went back to my laptop and read through my glyphosate material yet again. The news hadn’t improved any, especially for our pollinators that are today dying off worldwide in large numbers. In parts of China there are already people having to do the work of bees (at huge expense) by using a small paintbrush to move pollen from flower to flower in agricultural concerns where there are no longer enough pollinators to do the job.

Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) in honey bees is a growing threat to our own efficient production of fruit, vegetables, seeds and nut crops, bees being a critical component in our national food production.

I’d seen plenty of stories about CCD and read many reports on line, but apparently most people still don’t realize our worker bees have taken to running away from home while leaving their babies and queen to fend for themselves. The deserted hives and occupants were doomed without those working bees bringing back food. Bam! Hive collapse!

With 880 million pounds of glyphosate being sprayed all across America every single year, and millions upon million more of the shit being sprayed around the world, our pollinators were pretty much mentally and physically fucked. Recently glyphosate residue had been found in trace amounts in honey.

I figured we’d soon be having to teach our children about sex without referencing the birds and the bees when there weren’t any left ... providing, of course, there were any of us left around, either, given that since the advent and use of these kinds of chemicals human sperm counts had fallen by 60 percent!

I believed, but hadn’t yet confirmed, that thousands of elderly rural Americans are now being treated for high blood pressure, low blood pressure, vertigo, breathing problems, bone ache, and other miseries not actually caused by the onset of old age, but rather by the chemicals being sprayed on the fields around them.

Hospitals and pharmaceutical companies make a shitload of money from treating those miscellaneous ailments, though, so no one is yet lining up to fix any poisoning problems for the elderly.

In addition to the regular ongoing spraying of ditches, orchards and forest lands, the latest agricultural trick is to spray our grain (and other) crops with herbicides three weeks or so before harvest. This kills off any weeds (so they don't have to be removed later) while forcing the dying grain plant to mature its seeds quicker in its attempt to give its "children" a chance to live.

This new technique has proved very cost effective for big agriculture so to hell with the people living nearby who get hit with yet another toxic dose. Funny how asthma has become such a regular summer complaint in little kids these days.

On such grim thoughts, I went to bed. I knew I couldn't do diddly to change the trajectory of Monsanto's hugely profitable mission to soak every square inch of our dear old planet with poison. But Zorro could make some of their top executives wish they could rethink that mission.

And on such happier thoughts I fell asleep smiling, waking refreshed and ready to move forward with my very own new mission. As always, it began with research, followed by hiring some expert help.

"Africanized honey bees represent a hybrid that developed after the escape of African bees imported into Brazil to serve as pollinators," I read. "Thought to have arrived in Florida via a cargo ship in 2001, they spread quickly and today represent an estimated 90 percent or more of the wild honeybees south of Interstate 4 ..."

"Holy Crap," I exclaimed, meaning it. That "90 percent or more" was right here in my very own patch. But since I hadn't been attacked and killed lately I started to think these so called "killer bees" were not living up to their hype. Even so, I read on ...

Africanized honey bees, or AHB's as they're called by people in the bee biz, have killed two Florida resident since 2008, and in 2013 they killed a Texas man after "he drove his tractor into a pile of wood containing a hive of 40,000 AHB's."

I learned AHBs were very fond of building their hives in water meter boxes sunk into the ground, making me rethink my fallback career choice as meter reader.

But I also learned that AHBs, other than being just a wee bit "defensive" of home and hearth, are every bit as effective as normal honey bees at both the honey-making and pollination games.

Finally, and no doubt all thanks to Florida's wilting humidity and scorching heat, "killer bees" gradually calm down and became more tractable after spending long lengths of time in the Sunshine State.

I called and asked Carlos and Juan to meet me at The Property later that afternoon and once we were all there I asked if either of them knew a trusted someone who handled bees for a living. Turns out they both did.

Juan had a friend who by advertising on Craigslist earned extra money rehoming bees, capturing wild bee swarms from yards and, I assumed, underground meters. Carlos knew an old guy who raised bees to sell honey at a local flea market. He, too, rehomed wild swarms. And OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

since they were collecting these wild bees a goodly distance south of I-4, odds were better than 90 percent they were dealing with AHBs.

“Right, then,” I said. “That’s great. I need some Killer bees moved near the compound as soon as possible.”

From my reading I figured three or four top-bar hives of bees should be more than enough for my purposes. Following a lengthy discussion, Carlos and Juan left for home well-pleased with the plans for our new adventure.

Within days I had, under a fake name and using cash, purchased the skill of a man able to build those antiquated hives along with miscellaneous beekeeping equipment that would be needed. Within three weeks those hives were in place on The Property and stuffed full of pissed off honey bees, the kind that walked on the wild side.

The hives were normal in every way but one, a change that was going to make all the difference. And that was that for the time being. We tiptoed away and left the killers to settle in and scope out their new territory.

Much as I had despised the men who had turned a blind eye to cholera in their workers, I really, really hated these Monsanto fuckers who seem hell bent on poisoning the entire planet for personal financial gain. Even understanding they’ll need lots of money to buy whatever food is left after a third of our food disappears along with the pollinators, it still hardly seems fair.

Over the next few weeks I learned what I could about the top Monsanto executives and their habits away from the workplace. Then I called Tina.

“Word,” she said, answering her cell.

“Meet me at my place,” I replied.

“That’s five words, asshole,” she replied, “but I’ll be there as soon as I get off work. Cook for me.”

Later over dinner Tina and I batted around all kinds of ideas on how and where to ensnare the Monsanto big shots. In the end we decided to use the time-honored honey pot, and not the kind used for trapping stuff on computers, either.

We were going in with the older meaning of the phrase “honey pot.” The one in which we’d be the bait.

## Chapter 8, Honey, Honey ...

I didn't want to fly to the Monsanto headquarters located in America's heartland. I wanted their fat cats here in Florida and I figured the best way to do that would be to offer them some kind of big freebie. So I spent some time working up a plan and then handed the draft off to Tina to put the package together.

At first glance it looked like it was going to cost me a bundle, but since I have the money and no other hobbies to speak of, I figured it was well worth it. But I quickly realized it was actually going to only cost me for a little printing and their airfare to Florida. Those that lived through our adventure could get home on their own.

Sporting designer glasses with lenses of pure window glass and a wavy blonde wig over her cropped black hair, Tina went to a printing company and paid cash for them to make up the invitations, hotel reservations and all the other bits and pieces that went into making the Monsanto boys an offer they couldn't refuse.

The cover letter, from "representatives of many top Florida law firms," hinted at a deep admiration for Monsanto's skill at keeping a low corporate profile while companies doing far less environmental damage got bad publicity. Awards were to be given at a three-day Florida conference on "Corporate Response to Press and Public," including the promise of "more than one to Monsanto executives."

The letter requested the presence of five of their top people by name and enclosed their pre-paid reservations at a Miami 5-star Hotel, along with prepaid passes to the best of the city's golf courses.

"Our private jet will await you at the St. Louis airport on Friday the 15th of this month, with departure for Miami scheduled for 4 p.m. Your return flight will depart Miami at 3 p.m. on the 18th. And while we deeply regret that we can't on this occasion extend your family members the same opportunity to attend, we promise you won't be lonely in a city known far and wide for its hospitality. We intend to provide you with all the comforts that Miami - home of the beautiful people - has to offer."

I read over the invitation to our gilded cage with respect for how Tina had taken my sketchy ideas and turned them into a slick and professional come-hither they couldn't possibly resist.

"The only thing that will keep them away will be prior commitments," I told Tina. "But I'll man our throwaway phone and see if they'll be willing to reschedule later this summer if necessary. That way we can go on to our own next project and have these bastards waiting in the wings." But as it turned out our first cast across their smooth surface netted all five of the big fish.

For this particular gig I brought in the pilot I kept on retainer, Clayton (Clay) Marshall and also lined up Medford "Butch" McCoy, another of my good friends and one whom I had single-handedly turned away from the political dark side. I took some pride in that, but had to admit his life might actually not be lighter and brighter since I had also hooked him on what most people actually think is the *real* dark side, murder in the first degree.

Butchipoo grew up on a farm in small-town-country Georgia, but today lives and works inside corporate America in Miami. He has all the bromidic charm inherent to the successful W.A.S.P., making him a superb mole for me. Best of all, he enjoys coming out to play the role of king badass whenever he's invited.

When Butch and I first met he tipped so far to the right he staggered when he walked. Even so we had become friends, because he's funny as hell and loyal to a fault. Some of my best times ever have been spent in his company. Hanging out with me (and Tina) he started to stand up straighter over time. He next began leaning slightly toward the left. Now, after ten years under our influence, he staggers as badly as when we first met - but in a good way.

When the plane carrying the Fat Five landed in Miami, Butch was there to meet them. Bags quickly got sorted, jokes were made, and in no time at all the sleek limousine driven by Carl was gliding smoothly along, supposedly to their hotel.

And then Butch began his pitch ...

"Hey guys, it's early yet, but not too early for some good eats, right? Why don't we let Pancho there at the wheel guard your stuff while we get some rare steak meat into us and plan some action (wink) for the evening?"

Butch's suggestion was met with enthusiasm and the group was soon seated around the table in one of the city's best steakhouses taking another big juicy bite out of my bank account. It was money well spent, however, because the excellent food, suitably aged Scotch and Butch's jolly company found the men ready for even more adventure when Tina and I, dressed to party, showed up at the restaurant bar a little later.

Their kind of adventure wasn't our kind of adventure, but they could hardly be expected to know that, could they?

Butch elbowed the nearest rib-cage when we sauntered in and gave a nod and grin in our direction. Lowering his voice, even though we were well out of his voice range, he said, "How about that for luck, guys? I *know* those girls and they really know how to 'work,' if you get my drift? They're real hard 'workers.' Ha Ha. So how about I just cruise over there and ask them to join us?" Butch added, leering perfectly.

"What? No objections? Ha Ha. OK then, guys, I'll be back in a bit."

With that Butch walked over to us and we all did our little, "Oh Wow, it's great to see you again" pantomime for the benefit of the audience he'd left primed for our performance.

"They are soooooooo ready for some Miami pussy," Butch said, by way of greeting. "Let's give it a minute and then come on over to our table for drinks so you can set the hook and reel them in."

We all then chuckled merrily in that special way men and women do in bars. After several cascades of tinkling girlish laughter from us, while cutting slow eyes with knowing smiles toward the Fat Five, we finally eased off our bar stools and stood tall in our stripper heels, basking in their admiration.

Having now the full attention of our audience we gave them ours in return. Smoothing our skirts with our hands, we waited for just that right moment and then moved with maximum hip play in their direction. The dim lighting caught all our sequined bits just right, flashing what OKay Jackson, *Zorro*, *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

should have been a clear and vivid warning to the waiting men to run for the hills. But, of course, they did not.

In no time we were all yukking it up together knocking back drinks while each of them in turn managed a sweaty palm touch here and there as the clock ticked away the hours. Our bartender kept the drinks coming, but by pre-arrangement ours were zero-proof iced-tea which no one there could have guessed given the increasing volume of our laughter and our “oh-you-kid” pokes at shoulders and midsections.

We dragged them onto the dance floor, too, to let them see and feel up close what they soon expected to know even better. At 10 p.m., keeping to our timetable and agenda, we set them up to meet “some more friends of ours” ... “Real hotties” ... “Great gals, good for a lot of laughs” ... “You’ll just *love* them, *we promise*.”

Squealing with laughter we dragged them to their feet and staggered out into the hot Miami night and on to the waiting limo. Once inside their pawing got more insistent, but Tina and I managed to wriggle away from most of it while flashing maximum cleavage and chattering incessantly about pretty much nothing at all.

“Oh Gawd, you guys. You’re gonna love this place where our friends hang out,” I said.

“You’re not gonna believe it,” Tina said, with a hiccup. “It’s got beds, and trees, and birds and bees.”

“Especially bees,” I said, giggling, “It’s the bee’s-knees for sure.”

Tina and I both collapsed against each other shrieking with laughter.

“When I learned these guys don’t give a shit about bees I decided to let them meet some of our south Florida bees,” Tina said, sweetly while smiling broadly. “Don’t you just hate fucking bee killers? I know I do.”

“Me, too,” I said.

“Me three,” said Butch.

“I’ll bet these bastards even pull the wings off butterflies,” Tina said, thoughtfully.

“Nope, they just poison them” Butch said. “But they poison them by the millions. Bees, too.”

“Tsk Tsk,” Tina and I both said. “That is sooooo not nice.”

We stared happily at the Fat Five, grinning broadly as awareness grew ever so slowly in the little piggy eyes of one of the men as he started to focus on what we were actually saying. His mouth slowly let go of the inane grin he’d been wearing all evening and began to sag downward.

“Look,” I said, nudging Tina. “His mouth has gone all pouty. Maybe we should get him a glyphosate cocktail?”

“What the hell is this? What are you talking about?” he muttered, shaking his head to clear it from its lustful cobwebs.

One by one the other four men tuned in that all was not well in paradise. They, too, let go of their goofy smiles and struggled to regain a semblance of sobriety.

"I asked you what the fuck this was all about, Pal," said the first man, taking on Butch.

"Just this, *Pal*," Butch replied, reaching inside his suit and bringing his hand back out full of very impressive gun. "It's time for a new game ... and guess what? ... Tag! ... You're It."

Carlos soon pulled the limo into a darkened church parking lot and pulled around behind the building into still deeper shadow. There Tina and I got out of the limo calling back "Nighty-Night, boys" over our shoulders as we walked over and climbed into the king-cab pickup where Juan waited.

Meanwhile five armed men leapt down lightly from the truck bed and, under the commanding barrel of Butch's gun, quickly handcuffed the hands of the Fat Five behind them and mouth-taped their protests into silence. As Juan drove us out of the parking lot, stopping momentarily to pick up Butch, our eager mercenaries were already pushing the captives back into the limo.

Before we had even turned back onto the highway the limo had moved in behind us where it stayed until the first traffic light and then it pulled alongside. We looked, but could see nothing through the darkly tinted glass to hint anything was amiss. No armed Mexicans. No handcuffed big shots. The light turned green. We continued on as the limo turned away and onto the turnpike heading north.

"Whew, I'm glad that part's over," Tina said, yanking off the flowing red wig she'd worn all evening and shaking her head. "What a smarmy bunch of bastards."

I removed my own hot mop of fake blonde hair and, with the same kind of relief, ran my hands through my own sweaty hair to cool off.

"Wives and kiddies all tucked in at home so they feel safe enough to go out on the prowl. It never fails to amaze," I said.

"Yeah, well, it would be hard for guys to resist you two in those outfits," Butch said, grinning. "I even had a moment or two of attention from down below myself, until I remembered what killers you are ... and ... I use that word in the nicest possible way."

Our collective laughter, Juan's, too, was as much relief from tension as anything else, but we enjoyed it anyway.

We dropped Butch off downtown at his car and were ourselves soon at the airport climbing into the same small jet that had brought our captives to Miami. We had alerted Clay, our pilot, on the way and he'd filed our flight plan just as we arrived. We took off immediately.

It was a perfect night for our brief flight, but we were all tired and more than happy to see the blue runway lights of home when they appeared. Juan took the wheel of the car I'd left there and drove us first to Tina's apartment where he insisted on walking her to her door despite her protests.

"Eet es late and ju look like a bat girl in that dress. Eet es not safe for ju," he told her firmly, taking her arm in his.

I grinned at her discomfort as he marched her past. Rolling down my window, I called out, "Good night, Batgirl. I'll let you know how it all goes with the Fat Five."

Juan waited until Tina was safely inside and heard her lock click before coming back to rejoin me. Personally, I liked that protective male streak. This was Florida after midnight when all the nice people are home in bed, proven by the fact that we weren't.

When Juan escorted me to my own door 20 minutes later he got no complaints from me. I was tired enough to quickly get the furkids settled for the night and then took myself off to bed, too.

I drifted to sleep knowing the Fat Five still had a long way to go to reach The Property and the army cots waiting for them there. They'd be pissed at the minus five-star accommodations, but I was sure they'd fall asleep regardless, having had a pretty full day themselves.

Had they known what was coming I don't think they'd have slept a wink.

## Chapter 9, Don't Worry, Bees Happy.

Zorro could hear the men long before they caught their first glimpse of the unbelievable costumed figure, but by then he was just one more unbelievable thing in their unbelievable new reality as captives held in a Florida jungle.

"Heeeeeeeelllllppp!"

"Let us out!"

"Help us!"

The shouts of the Fat Five could be heard well outside the compound. Deer, bedded down for the day, heard them. Coyotes, squirrels, fox, 'possums, armadillos, bear and raccoons hidden nearby heard them. Birds of all kinds and sizes heard them. So did those reptiles equipped to do more than feel vibrations.

But none of their shouts carried to the ears of any creatures willing to save them. Zorro, perhaps the most unwilling of all, smiled down from the back of his horse outside their prison and shared that harsh truth with them.

"You are surrounded only by jungle, forest and swamp. It is best you save your energy. You will soon need it for I shall release you from your cage soon." he said. "Then you can hike out to a highway where you will certainly be rescued by someone willing to phone the police or even to stop and pick you up. You are very important men after all."

The men had grown quiet hearing they would be released. All had gone hunting at different times so they figured they'd make it through this with maybe some discomfort, but no real trouble. They were confident that rough terrain or not they'd soon make it out to the road.

Juan approached the cage carrying a small pouch and from it took five high quality gold-plated keychains shaped like the letter Z. He gestured his intention to hand them through the wire.

"Take them," Zorro said, seeing the men hesitate. "They are mementos of your adventure with Zorro. Otherwise who will believe you when you return home? But then, perhaps even with proof they won't believe you, skilled liars that you all are."

Noting their identical indignant expressions, Zorro laughed aloud. "Not liars? Really?" he exclaimed. "What else can I call men who claim their products cause no harm when they're actually destroying life on this planet as we know it?"

"That's a load of crap," one of the men suddenly shouted. "America feeds the world because of our agricultural methods and our products are part of that system. We're not hurting anybody you nut job."

"You are not preaching to the ignorant today, hombre," Zorro shot back. "Your only concern has nothing to do with feeding the world. You care only about fattening your wallets. Your poisons are part of today's farming only because of your lobby in Washington, your bought-and-paid for judges and politicians and your absolute disconnect from nature that allows you to deny the devastation you have unleashed upon us all."

“A world without the beauty and productivity of pollinators, the spring songs of amphibians, the plant diversity found in meadows and fields and the undergrowth of forests - all that means less than nothing to you. You could care even less how even low-level exposure to pesticides has been found to increase public risk of Parkinson’s disease and various cancers.

“You produce death-dealing pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides, some of them first tested *on people* in the murderous gas chambers of Nazi Germany. And then you have the nerve to try and tell *me* overexposure to your potent toxins can’t damage neurological systems like *my brain*?”

Zorro’s black horse shifted uneasily as the anger handling his reins telegraphed through to him.

“And what of the children? Do you know or care that thanks to Roundup autism rates are rocketing off the charts? Asthma is now a fact of life for thousands? Birth defects are showing up in ever increasing numbers ... how can you look at yourselves in the mirror?” Zorro asked. “I cannot think of anything more disgusting than you. In poisoning our world you have poisoned your own souls.”

Juan now spoke for the first time, his anger equally as strong.

“You theenk we don’t know? You theenk only ju are the smart whons? Ju are peegs. Ju are less than peegs. I speet on ju,” he said, then spat on the ground in disgust.

“Of course they think they are the only smart ones, mi amigo. They see themselves as big winners in their game of corporate dollars. But these five shall perhaps not win in the game we shall give them to play today, eh?”

Turning again to the five men, Zorro returned to his theme.

“Everything to you is a *game*. Your poisons makes people sick and then your friends in the pharmaceutical *game* make more fortunes treating that ‘sickness’. The healthcare *game* is booming on all fronts with bigger hospitals, bigger drug stores, bigger profits.

“Designer foods, with your poisons built right in, are right now being grown in our amber waves of grain and you’re using American consumers to test their long-term effects. We are lab rats paying you for that opportunity. What a clever *game* that one is.

“Did the developer of high fructose corn syrup get a bonus from the soda companies for being able to cheapen their products while increasing all our chances to get diabetes?”

“Did the guy get a raise who thought of pumping cows full of hormones to produce more milk? Not just anyone can take something that *should* do a body good and turn it into a formula causing five-year-old boys to grow facial hair.”

By the time Zorro had finished talking anger radiated from his body in waves and his horse, picking up on it, now fairly danced beneath him with nervous energy. Danger radiated strongly now from the masked rider, too, and the men suddenly realized it. As one they took a step back from the side of the cage and moved closer together as a group. Zorro interpreted their movements correctly, and laughed.

“Look at them, Juan. They have suddenly realized there are people in this country who

know they are Satan's henchmen. But enough of this. Let us explain the simple rules for the game they will now play."

Speaking directly to the men, Zorro said they'd soon be free to make their way unhindered to safety. He pointed the direction they should take to reach the road. He reminded them of the obvious dangers around them, from poisonous snakes and spiders to poison ivy, 'gators, even quicksand.

"Because you are who you are, I have added some wild bees to our mix of native ticks, chiggers and mosquitoes," Zorro said. "You have little knowledge of these defensive little creatures, all you know of them is how to kill them by the millions. My hope is the bees will become agitated in the presence of such superior bee killers as yourselves and hurt you badly. The poetic justice of that fairly sings, does it not?"

All the men could think of now was of getting away. They easily shut out his words, focusing on their imminent escape first, and then, by God, there would be retribution. This costumed clown would learn the hard way not to fuck with people having their kinds of connections.

Zorro took a paperback book out of his saddlebag and untied the bullwhip, then turned and jumped lightly to the ground. He stood motionless holding the horse's bridle and calming him until Juan could easily mount and ride him away.

"We shall wait a few minutes for my compadre' to get my horse safely to his stable. I would not wish my horse to be stung by bees. He is dear to me," Zorro said, sending a clear message the captives were not.

The men spent the next few minutes studying the area outside the compound while Zorro studied the screen on his smartphone. Finally he put the phone aside, shook the bullwhip loose from its coils and walked several feet away.

Grasping a branch on a small dead tree he told the prisoners to watch. He then walked a few feet away, where with crack after crack of the whip, he rapidly freed the tree of all its branches. Whip in hand he then walked over and unbolted the gate, indicating the men could move on.

Eyes on the whip the whole time they slowly moved out of the compound and onto the narrow path leading into the surrounding brush. Once they were well out of sight and hearing Zorro let down the canvas around the tent, went inside and shut himself in. Having prepared for a long afternoon by bringing a book and his cellphone, he lay back on one of the cots and opened the paperback.

After every chapter or so he would glance at his cell to view the many security cameras recently set up throughout the property to keep the drama in full view as it unfolded. In just under 20 minutes the camera nearest the first hive showed the men trudging directly toward it. Zorro put down the book to give the situation his full attention.

One of the men spotted the hive and pointed it out to the others. It immediately became clear they planned to retrace their steps to a game trail they had passed earlier, one that would take them safely to the far side of the clearing and past the bees without disturbing them.

“Not so fast, boyos,” I said, pushing an APP on my phone. It triggered the machinery set up under the three hives. I watched the split screen intently and saw all three hives rock violently for three seconds ... pause ... and then rock violently again.

Before the rocking had stopped a column of bees shot up from all the hives and instantly zeroed in on the men standing nearby and watching in horror. In less than a second the men were jumping and swatting and then running.

I knew from my research the two best things to do when under attack by a swarm of bees were (1) get inside a building or vehicle and stay there, and (2), run through brush and tree cover to break up the bee formation to give yourself time to get inside a building or vehicle. How sad these men were nowhere near any buildings or vehicles.

True to lessons learned in childhood cartoons three of the men immediately headed for a pond full of tea-colored swamp water 80 or so feet away and dived in. They couldn't have made a worse decision. Clouds of bees hovered over the water and when the men surfaced to gasp for air they also gasped in great numbers of bees. You know that had to hurt.

The men dived again and again, but being unable to breathe water they always had to come up for air where the bees hovered, waiting. I dialed my men to come to their rescue, but before help could reach them they were floating face down in the water. It didn't take a trained coroner to pronounce them dead.

Meanwhile the other two men had literally run for their lives. With pure luck they crashed through enough undergrowth to disrupt the bees attack patterns time and time again. But sadly, being well fed and golf-cart fit, the men couldn't keep up their pace. They soon fell to the ground and rolled into a fetal position, burying their faces in the dirt. A fuzzy mound immediately covered them, shifting and heaving as the bees fought to find a better position for stinging.

I had expected the men to have a lot of pain, but to pull through in the end. I can truly say I was surprised at how efficient the bees were at homicide when their victims had nowhere to seek shelter.

I turned my attention away from the dead floaters to those who had run. The runners had fared only slightly better, but at least were still twitching. With their heads, faces, necks and hands swollen to three or four times normal size, however, their continued breathing had become problematic.

I declared the bees winners and called a halt to the game, sending in a team dressed in triple-thick beekeeper suits. Their unwieldy attire made robot-like rescue difficult, but ultimately they loaded the two survivors on stretchers, covered them completely with more bee-suit material, hauled them to a vehicle and drove them to the nearest hospital.

Once at the Emergency Room entrance they rolled the injured men out the door and drove away. By the time the excitement of finding the injured men had subsided, my men, in their face-covered bee helmets, were long gone. And, as always, for the benefit of security cameras or an actual living witness, their license plate was well covered with what looked like dried mud. It took most of the afternoon (and long after I had finished reading my book) before the bees finally returned to their hives and settled back down with stories to tell their children and grandchildren. I could then make my way safely back to my car and drive home, so I did.

Since Tina and I never, ever, talk about our adventures over our personal phones, I invited her by text to come over the next day for breakfast and got back her one word, "OK."

The following morning as I made French Toast, Carlos rode one of the pinto horses into the swamp. He roped and dragged each of the dead men out of the water and into a grassy clearing normally used by us for field-dressing deer and wild hogs. Our habit was well-known to the local vultures<sup>3</sup> and other scavengers. While they hadn't before had what cannibals supposedly call "long pig," they took to it right away.

By nightfall of the second day the vultures, crows, and even a few storks, had left behind only a scattering of bones for Carlos to smash and then rake into the undergrowth for the insects and rodents to enjoy. He had already tossed the three bird-cleaned skulls into the deepest and darkest water in the swamp. The ID carried by all the victims had been chopped into confetti-sized pieces and scattered over an acre or so of palmetto.

Carlos had also gathered up the three leftover golden Z keychains for Zorro to give out in the future.

"Whaste not, whant not," he said, grinning, handing them back to me a few days later.

Meanwhile Carlos' men had washed the mud from the truck and suited up for bees once again to ever-so-carefully dismantle the rocker mechanisms from beneath the hives. They then, per my instructions, carted away the parts to sell for scrap metal in various junkyards.

"Keep the money you get," I told them. "Consider it a small advance on the bonus you'll get in your next paycheck."

Tina and I learned over breakfast our bees had claimed their fourth victim and that the fifth man remained in intensive care on life support, barely clinging to life.

"Jeez," I told her and the furkids. "We really need to be more careful around bees in the future. I'm surprised more people don't get attacked."

"They would if we all kept our bees in cocktail shakers, Asshole," Tina replied.

Over time, quite a long time as it turned out, the fifth man did recover. Once released from the hospital he became an immediate media sensation. He flashed the golden Z around as proof of his fantastic tale, where a man dressed as Zorro had forced him and his companions to flee from murderous killer bees.

The national media had already done story after story about the then still-missing top Monsanto executives, so when finally able to connect all the dots leading them to the sole survivor, their mill had some quality grist indeed.

But the hero of their story had no idea where they'd been held captive and his description of the place fit virtually every undeveloped tract of scrub acreage in middle Florida. He gave details of their capture in Miami, but police there found none of the many security

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<sup>3</sup> Both kinds, black vultures and turkey vultures.

cameras in and around the target restaurant had been working the night of the abduction. All had been disabled beforehand by “person or persons unknown.”

Witnesses didn't think the women had been wearing wigs or padding, “but ... well ... maybe ... I guess they *could* have been.”

The bartenders were able to describe the two women down to their last sequin and admitted they'd only served them iced tea masquerading as drinks.

“But that's not unusual with working girls, you know? We do that all the time when we're asked.”

Everyone the police talked with, bartenders and customers alike, were vague about the looks of the man who had introduced the women to the five executives.

Most of the witness reports described the women being of “average height, good figures, slender, sexy ... like fancy high-priced escort types.’ Of the man with them they said things like ... “Big, I think ... brawny ... but ... really, you know ... pretty average looking.”

Police artists made renderings and, while these are often spot on, in this case the ones of the two women were not. To the police, trained observers, it was obvious they were wearing wigs, so it was pretty certain the hair underneath would be of different colors and styles. The same would be true of the pancake makeup and long sweeping eyelashes, making them caricatures of what they probably really looked like, police thought.

Meanwhile, the media didn't miss the irony of death by bees for high ranking pesticide company officials and milked it for as long as they could.

But even after numerous appearances on talk shows and news programs by the “one who got away” and also by the grieving wives of the man who had died in hospital and those still “missing and presumed dead,” no trace of the Zorro figure had been found.

Without additional fuel to further it, the story eventually, inevitably, quietly faded away.

## Chapter 10, Night Thoughts

Some days, no matter how hard we might try to avoid it, introspection will show up like a fat dark cloud to settle over our thoughts and hound us until we pay attention. Today had arrived cloudy with a strong chance for late afternoon depression.

The furkids and I were at The Property for a few days of “stop the world I want to get off” time. I planned to sleep late, eat lots, and crank the boombox to ‘loudest’ and dance until I couldn’t dance a moment longer. I always felt good after what I thought of as my dance therapy sessions.

I had felt absolutely great when we arrived and in the days that followed, so I was a little surprised by the new and darker mood intruding into this sunny morning of our third day. But upon reflection I suspected it had actually been with me awhile, bubbling around just below the surface like Yellowstone’s strengthening super-volcano.

“Nut job,” ... “clown,” ... “maniac,” ... “deranged,” were just a few of the names I’d been called in recent months by the media and some of my victims. Since all of us, even maniacs, want to be liked (or at least respected), the labels heaped upon me were unpleasant at best and real downers at worst.

I flashed back to when my alter-ego had shouted his disgust that Monsanto executives were still able to meet their own eyes in a mirror. On today’s introspective head trip I now wondered if I could.

Mamma hadn’t raised me to become a murderer and yet I had. A serial murderer, no less. Mom would not be proud.

Dad, however, might be right now smiling down on me from Heaven, assuming that was his current address. Dad had once told me he sent himself to dreamland every night with happy thoughts about killing large groups of evil people, the same kinds of gentlefolk I now targeted so willingly myself.

My Dad’s nighttime ritual had secretly shocked me at that time, which only proves I was still very young and mirror-worthy back then.

I had quit attending church not long after the death of my family. Not because I had stopped believing, God gave us free will and dominion over the earth, after all. It was not up to Him to take care of it properly, it was up to us. I had quit my church because my species were continually and willfully destroying God’s gift.

I suffered increasingly dark thoughts about such things as global warming, smashed antiquities, mass animal extinctions, starving refugees, wartime sackers and looters, rafts of plastic choking our oceans, and of cattle being trucked from beautiful open pastures to be table-fattened under conditions too appalling to think about.

Internet images taken by whistle-blowers in feedlots (braver souls than I would ever be), of cattle climbing on each other’s backs to escape the chest-high feces they were trapped in, haunted my night thoughts.

I don't know what feeds your insomnia, but feedlots, melting glaciers and dead sea turtles killed by plastic bits they've mistaken for jellyfish constantly drift through mine.

The mere thought of polar bears swimming to ice landings that have always been there and finding only water ... then swimming and swimming in search of ice until they drown from exhaustion ... shouldn't that keep *everyone* awake? Apparently it doesn't, based on decisions made daily by the puppet masters.

Everywhere I looked I saw huge and terrible problems that paralyzed me by their scope. I wanted to do something ... *anything* ... but couldn't scale down to find that one place to start. It was all just *too much*.

My conversations at the coffee shop showed me we all felt the same. Oh sure, we voted with our money by buying organic foods. We washed healthy herbal supplements down our throats with raw kombucha and ate only eggs laid by free-range chickens; we recycled; drove hybrid cars; downsized into tiny houses and went "off the grid" by getting rid of "stuff." We simplified. We lightened our carbon footprint. We did our part!

Sadly, and only through my ever voracious and eclectic reading, I learned none of it was good enough, because:

~ Organic foods were not always actually free of products designed to kill the hell out of any hungry bug having the audacity to target *our* plants for dinner.

~ The natural food stores were often as willing as my conventional neighborhood supermarket to heavy-thumb the scales in favor of their own profits. This was especially so once marketers twigged to the fact people were willing to pay more for "organic" and "natural" foods.

~ While the label 'organic' does have legal definition and some actual enforcement, other definitions like "natural" have little infrastructure to support their supposed meaning. Take, for instance, the phrase "free-range chicken:"

According to the accepted definition "free-range" means a chicken that has access to the great outdoors and is not kept for its entire short life stuffed into a space small enough to make an ant claustrophobic. So I was happy buying my eggs from frisky free-range chickens until made aware their great outdoors might not be those lovely rolling hills I had envisioned. More often they were unlovely fenced concrete lots like those where we free range our staggeringly large prison populations.

While "free-range chickens" can indeed in rare cases run free through multiple open doorways into grass-filled spaces, more often they have to squeeze themselves through limited numbers of small portals to get a payload of fresh air. Theoretically they "have access to the great outdoors," but in today's industrial-sized coops only five percent of them ever actually find their way to bask in the sunshine.

~ I also discovered it was a crap shoot if my bottles of herbal supplements actually contained the herbs listed on the label.

~ That the "stuff" I had donated so willingly to create jobs for the handicapped had been sold at inflated prices to pay impressive salaries to corporate executives. The employed handicapped, however, still struggled through life on minimum wages;

~ That our supermarket foods were now mainly “designed,” marketed and provided by Big Tobacco folks wearing a different hat (same basic black, different style), and that thanks to their efforts today’s kids could expect to live shorter lives than their parents.

It was in my own attempt to survive under the growing crushing weight of my cynicism that I had turned from academic studies to the activism that had lead me to Mateo ...

Mateo ...

How I missed him ...

I sighed deeply.

I tasted salt.

“Tears? Still?” I asked the surrounding walls.

Apparently so.

I suddenly wondered if Mateo’s horrible death had really been the catalyst for my murderous hobby ... or had I been headed there all along? Lonely murderer wannabee seeks perfect victim. Object: Modicum of Justice.

The theme of the sermon at the last church service I’d attended some years before suddenly came to mind, that we were all here to lift lost souls from the mire and not to condemn them.

“Try to imagine Jesus saying, ‘I despise people who despise me,’ or ‘How can I have any peace when people are hostile towards me?’,” the priest had asked. “It is absurd, because Jesus represents the highest form of loving human energy.”

I believed him. I still do.

After all, our human gene pool has produced a Gandhi, Maya Angelou, Martin Luther King Jr., St. Teresa, and yes, an Oprah. I knew Jimmy Carter and Jon Stewart, along with the entire Obama family, breathed the same air I did, but their obvious virtues made theirs a more rarified air than mine.

While I’ve had rare occasional ephemeral moments of spiritual wonder and delight, in the main I trudge a far grimmer landscape, one where a murderous solution had finally become attainable where turning the other cheek had not.

“And to even make a dent in the numbers of those I’ve targeted I’d have to have daily ‘adventures,’” I told Misfit. “Not just one every so often like I do now,”

Misfit, clearly bored with all my introspective navel gazing, barked twice and bounced three times, a clear invitation to go outside and play. Knowing it would make Misfit happy, I did so.

“See! I take care of my pets. I really am a nice person,” I told her. (An easy sell. She already thinks I’m a goddess).

*I’m as nice as Nightstalker is with a baby bird, I suddenly thought. He’s a murderous bastard just like me, yet I love him dearly. Perhaps I should come back as a cat in my next life so I can have blood on my paws with no guilt in my brain. Sweet!*

OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

On that cheery thought the day gradually started to get better. Misfit and I took a lovely long walk in the woods to collect ticks, after which I sprayed us both down with Wondercide natural cedar spray to kill our collection.

I then planted a couple of citrus trees beneath some shade trees behind the cabin (citrus prefers shade over the scorching Florida sun), filled the bird feeders, hosed out the bird bath and topped it up fresh, and then went inside for a nice very hot shower followed by a spell of dance therapy.

For dinner I simmered mixed fresh sweet peppers, onions and garlic in olive oil and when done poured the whole fragrant mass over hot buttered angel-hair pasta. A dusting of Parmesan over the top and Voila! Delish!

So I was feeling almost like my cheerful self again come evening when I checked my emails and opened the one from Tina.

“Remember that Zika virus carried by mosquitoes we talked about not long ago?” she wrote. “The one bequeathing small heads with tiny brains to infants? Turns out Zika might not be the cause after all. Have a look at the attached.”

I clicked on the link and read: “Larvicide Manufactured by Monsanto Partner, not Zika Virus, True Cause of Microcephaly Outbreak, Doctors say.

“Well, well, lookie here, kids,” I said to my fur-people.

“The microcephaly outbreak in Brazil, which coincided with the spread of the zika virus now terrifying pregnant women throughout the Americas, could be the result of a crop-sprayed larvicide that produces malformations in mosquito larvae, said a group of Brazilian doctors.

“The larvicide was injected into Brazil’s water supplies in 2014 to stop the development of mosquito larvae in drinking water tanks during a massive government-run program.

Manufactured by a subsidiary company of the American Monsanto Corporation, “This larvicide has perhaps caused the current tragedy we are experiencing,” one doctor said. “Malformations have been detected in thousands of children born to pregnant women living in areas where the Brazilian state added this larvicide to the drinking water.”

“This is not a coincidence,” another physician said.

Turns out the virus, with its low-grade fevers and somewhat flu-like symptoms has been around a lot longer than any of us out here in “general public land” had known about, having been thought fairly insignificant until Brazilian babies in the thousands had suddenly begun arriving with tiny malformed heads.

The article went on and on, but its essence was contained in the headline and first three paragraphs.

News Bulletin ... apparently Monsanto had done it again.

I began pacing and muttering, no doubt to the amusement of the pet squad. Even so, they were polite enough to watch me with expressions of great interest.

“You’d think they’d let me murder corporate heads elsewhere, wouldn’t you, guys?”

But no, they insist on painting bullseyes on their chests,” I told them.

I forwarded Tina’s email on to Butch and got back his almost immediate reply.

“As folks say back home, ‘Some bastards just need kill’n. Let’s ride.’”

## Chapter 11, Mosquitoes on Hold

Tina agreed with Butch it was time for a new adventure and she wasn't the least bit surprised to learn it might again be built around insects.

"I told you Florida has too many damned bugs," was her exact comment.

"We won't be in Florida for this one. I think we might need to go to Minnesota or Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Maybe even the Yukon Territory. Somewhere private with lots and lots of mosquitoes."

"She-It!," Tina responded. "What's wrong with our Florida swamps? Of the over 3,000 different kinds of mosquitoes found from the Arctic tundra to the tropical rain forests, Florida has 80 different kinds of them, more than any other state. Of course only 33 of them can cause pest problems for us and our furkids and of that number only 13 species can actually transmit pathogens to us that cause disease."

I stared at her speechless as I often do when she goes all biologist on me.

"I didn't know marine biology had anything to do with entomology."

"It generally doesn't, I just happen to find mosquitoes fascinating, that's all. You should remember that. After all, you gave me hell about keeping mosquito larvae in our dorm room when I did a couple of research papers on them for my biology class. You even said I had taken carrying coals to Newcastle to a horrible whole new level."

I had totally forgotten all of that actually, but remembered once reminded and I told her so. I was glad at remembering, too, because memory is perhaps one of the first things to go and maybe old age senility was far closer than I had suspected.

"Having a mosquito expert around will be a great help when we nab these next guys," I told her.

"Always glad to be of service, and try to *remember* that in future," she replied, in her own special snarky little way. "But you should know that as of this morning there's a lot of controversy swirling around this Zika thing. We may need to wait awhile until all the facts are in."

"What's the deal?"

"The larvicide in question, it's supposedly the same stuff that's been used on insect-controlling pet collars for years because it's so mild. Even though you and I suspect something other than Zika has caused the stupendous jump in birth defects, we need to be sure before Zorro suits up to ride."

"Well, shit, Tina. I read up on Zika last night and it's been around in Africa since the 1940s, that's apparently where it was first identified and named. Why then has it suddenly turned against the unborn human race?"

"Well viruses morph and change, don't they? Think of the flu virus that sprung a new strain on us in 1918 and killed our species by the millions. Experts still think that flu might do something like that to us again anytime. But I didn't say it was or wasn't Zika causing it, Juana. I

think it may very well be an environmental problem acting in concert with the virus, or maybe even independently from it. I just think we just need to stay on ready instead of acting on this particular problem, for now anyway.”

I went online and found there was indeed a brand new uproar over Zika vs Larvicide. People were choosing sides all over Facebook with their ongoing rage spilling out all over the place.

“Facebook astounds me,” I muttered. “We start right here with a diatribe against Zika,” I said, tapping the screen. “And we end up just three replies later,” I said, tapping the screen further down, “with a call for recalls on certain cars because ‘no industry can be trusted.’” I shook my head.

“Facebook reminds me of that joke about the talking dog focusing its full attention on something until it suddenly shouts ‘squirrel’ and forgets everything else,” I grumbled. “And all the rhetoric is so black or white. There’s absolutely no nuance.”

“So what do you want to do with our adventure,” Tina asked, cutting straight to the black or white.

I thought about it momentarily, but I already knew she was right. We needed to hold off and see how this mess developed and I said so, but added, “Be a shame if it is totally the Zika causing the problem. It will give the chemical companies a big ‘I told you so’ they’ll use from now until forever.”

So we reluctantly bookmarked our adventure, but decided to go forward immediately with a visit from Zorro for any of a number of other highly qualified candidates. After verbally kicking them around awhile we picked Factory Farms and eventually narrowed that huge field down to pig raising and cattle feedlots.

“We’ve got a boatload of people to choose from for our attention,” I noted. “Like governors and other politicians who publicly support the Big Ag practices, the so called ‘farmers’ themselves, and maybe even a random selection from the ranks of semi-informed members of John Q. Public. The kind who have heard about modern pig farming methods, but are indifferent to it.”

“Mmmmmh. Itwonbeesetopk,” Tina said, through a mouthful of potato chips.

“What?”

“I said, it won’t be easy to pick,” she replied. “And can we go get some lunch now? I’m starving.”

So we did.

During lunch I decided to drive down to Miami and talk all this over with Butch. I knew he’d want to be in on this, because he’d wanted to go after “the pig people” (as he called them) since our very first adventure together. I called and told him he’d be taking me out to dinner tonight and he laughed.

“What? Tonight? What if I told you I had a hot date?”

“You don’t date during the week, Butch, it’s against your work ethic. Check your calendar. It’s Wednesday. I’ll be leaving in a few minutes and should be there sometime around seven. Don’t spoil your appetite.”

“Your treat?” he asked.

“Dutch treat,” I said, and hung up, smiling.

The motel where I usually stayed in Miami allowed pets so Misfit was on for a road trip. Knowing the habits of cats, I knew Nightstalker would rather stay home. I reminded him of that while filling extra bowls with cat food and water. I filled enough to keep him stuffed and hydrated for days even though I’d be back by the following evening. Even so, Misfit and I left the apartment under the full withering glare of cat stink-eye, but I was the only one of us who cared.

I took Highway 1, preferring to meander through the small south Florida towns than risk life and limb inside the hostile north/south corridor of I-95. It was a lovely trip, marred only by my timetable that prevented me from stopping for some ripe coconuts I saw thrown out as yard trash by some serious kind of idiot.

And in other yards I saw overripe mangoes on the ground covered with feasting flies, the same kind currently selling for a buck fifty or more at my local grocer (mangoes, not flies).

But even with driving slowly enough to gawk at the landscape and bitch to Misfit about good food going to waste, we still got to Miami with time to spare. I checked in at the Motel, called Butch to arrange where we’d meet, did a quick touch up on makeup and headed out.

I left Misfit in our motel room after first turning on the TV to Animal Planet for her viewing pleasure and reminding her she was a good dog, not the sort to bark or break training in my absence.

It’s in the generic dog contract for them to show woe when left behind, so Misfit gave me the full doggie sad-eye when I picked up my purse and keys. I knew within minutes she’d have her head on *my* pillow and be sound asleep with all four feet in the air, and I told her so. She had the grace to look embarrassed. And so we parted.

I met up with Butch at our favorite eatery, an odd little Mexican place with high backed booths upholstered in shiny maroon vinyl, high-volume-high-speed Mexican music blasting from multiple overhead speakers, and virtually no lighting whatsoever. It is the perfect setting to talk without being either seen or overheard, but the real bonus is the food. It’s always delicious.

Peering through the gloom I spotted Butch in the booth against the far wall and joined him there, sliding across the seat on the slick vinyl with such velocity I nearly crashed into the side-wall.

“Whoops,” I said by way of greeting.

“And a Whoops to you, too,” he replied.

Butch had taken to wearing a neat and tidy beard between adventures, another small layer between immediate recognition. I told him he looked like a bloody pirate and he agreed.

“I only grow it because Tina loves it so,” he said, making us both laugh. Tina was not a beard fan and said so. Often.

I broached the touchy subject of a change in our adventure to Butch. Being all fired up for our Zika adventure it took some persuading to tugboat his ship around, but he finally did see the wisdom of waiting until all the facts were in, even if he didn't like it any better than I did.

He brightened up our dark corner booth, however, when I told him we were going after the cattle and pig people. "Hot damn," he said, happily. "About time. Which ones and what way?"

To understand his enthusiasm it helps to know that Butch, ten years older than me, grew up on a Georgia farm back on the very edge of that time when farmers still owned their own land and raised their own livestock. As a kid he'd been a member of 4-H and the Future Farmers of America and had expected to become a farmer himself when he grew up. It was not to be.

"I need some background on farming, Butch. How exactly did we get from Old McDonald to GMOs?"

Butch shook his head from side to side slowly, leading me to believe he might not know, but I was wrong.

"I'll give you the basics the way I learned them," he finally said, "Some of this I learned in the FFA and some I learned from my folks and grandparents. First of all, it was a very good time to have a small farm at the turn of the last century. Nobody got rich, but farm families are good and produced enough surplus food to sell to make a living and pay their taxes.

"Then along came WWI and with it the boom years, because after European farmers went marching off to war we became the breadbasket for the warring nations. A lot of American farmers wanted to capitalize on the boom and went heavily into debt buying up surrounding lands. But being deeply in debt left them vulnerable when farming went bust in the 1920s and stayed that way well into the Great Depression.

"Where I grew up people didn't like 'that woman,' meaning Eleanor Roosevelt, because of her forward thinking on civil rights," Butch said, with a grin, "But they had no cause to complain about FDR after he got elected. He believed he couldn't build back the economy without strong farms and began the start of all the liberal programs that got farmers back on their feet."

"I would imagine his dam building and subsequent electric power to farmers was part of all that, right?" I asked.

"For sure," Butch replied. "That along with the start of newer technologies that haven't stopped since. When my grandpa was a kid there was a limit to the number of dairy cows one farmer could keep milked. And then along came milking machines.

"Today's milking parlours have hundreds of cows all pumped up on hormones to keep them lactating at a volume of production no-one from his era would have believed. Milking machines, artificial insemination to get the calves that start the milk flowing, and hired hands instead of family members to do the grunt work, makes for a completely different kind of farming."

I wondered aloud if WWII had been the same kind of boon to farming as the first world war had been and Butch nodded.

“Same thing exactly. Boom years, farm expansions, the purchase of bigger and bigger machinery, all of it leading to bigger and bigger debt followed by a huge drop in demand after the war. Lots of farmers went bust then. They left the land and didn’t return. Those that stayed had to become more business-minded to survive.

“Today’s farms are all about big business. Bigger fields, more livestock, absentee corporate landlords and machinery looking like humongous robotic hybrids straight out of sci-fi comics. Farming as I once knew it has about as much in common with today’s farming as today’s drive-themselves-computerized-cars have with the Model-T Ford.”

The food arrived at that point and we gave it our full attention. Our restaurant wasn’t part of a chain, it was a Mom and Pop operation built on good service and great meals.

I had ordered chicken livers baked in a kind of creamed tomato sauce with semi-hot peppers, all melted into a deliciousness bearing no resemblance to liver whatsoever. Butch tore into his steak with onions and peppers at a rate disconcerting to watch and I said so.

“But it’s sooooo good! I want to eat as much as I can before I lose my appetite,” he explained.

Weird as that sounded, I totally understood it. And I realized I was scarfing my meal down pretty damned fast, too, so I slowed down ... but ... it wasn’t easy.

When our plates had finally been cleared away and the coffee put in front of us, we picked up again where we’d left off.

I knew farmers had gradually built themselves a strong lobby in Washington over those years of boom and bust and modern farmers, most of them paid extensions of today’s food and chemical industries, had strengthened it further.

Farmers got paid to grow certain crops and received other financial incentives for various programs, including keeping intact small parcels of land at the edge of thousand-acre fields as buffer zones against the agricultural chemical runoffs of phosphorus, nitrogen and other sediments.

Butch told me those programs mostly began in the 1950s as a way to control erosion and that some of the programs in use today really were effective in protecting both land and water supplies.

“But, of course, there are abuses. Like the one practiced by Walmart, that major department store we all know and mostly don’t love. They put cattle into fields around thousands of their giant stores and get tax write-offs and other financial perks from their ‘farming’ ventures.

“The bottom line is there’s a huge disconnect between what today’s urban dwellers think a farm is and what most of today’s farms actually are. Urban kindergarteners are taught about Old McDonald’s quaint 1940s Farm while growing up nourished on McDonald’s beef straight from cattle tortured in food industry feedlots.

“Most city dwellers know virtually nothing about CAFOs (confined animal-feeding operations) or of them shoveling tons of antibiotics and hormones down the throats of livestock in their feed which is now indicted as one cause of today’s superbugs being unstoppable by

antibiotics, or of any of the other so-called advances we're all paying for thanks to the excessive use of fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides and fungicides.

"And they know even less about what's happening right now down on the old farm in all those genetically modified organisms we so blithely call GMOs. Few people realize GMOs involve shuffling genes from organism to organism, including putting animals genes into plants," Butch said, with disgust.

"We're performing all kinds of Frankensteinian alterations to our food stocks and serving them up in our supermarkets as perfectly safe with no labels even hinting anything is different. The food industry has so far successfully fought labeling GMO foods so the American public is consuming vast quantities of groceries still banned in Europe as "potentially unsafe."

"I read the other day where China won't even import our milk, our bread or our alfalfa anymore," I said. "We're talking *China* here, land of the poisoned pet food, designer drug suppliers and unsafe toys for children."

"More than 90 percent of the corn sold in America today is GMO corn," Butch said. "And it isn't just corn flakes we're talking about. We're talking about animal feed, too. GMO corn, GMO soybeans, GMO wheat, GMO alfalfa equals GMO meat," Butch concluded. "It's fucking nuts."

The two of us sipped our coffee in glum silence which I finally broke by saying, "So, about those pig people ..."

"Yeah, those bastards," Butch said, smiling again. "I'm going to really enjoy educating some of them and the beefy boys on what life in a CAFO actually feels like from the inside."

On that happier thought we began making our plans.

## Chapter 12, Suuuweeeeeeee ...

I used to eat supermarket meat. That was before I learned about CAFO, those confined animal-feeding operations. Butch and I had talked about long into the night over our Mexican coffee.

I had continued to buy supermarket meat for a short time after learning about CAFO, but every time I bought another hermetically-sealed package of beef I'd think about the place it had ended up "to be fattened" before being slaughtered, bled, skinned, sliced, diced and neatly packaged for my consumption. Such thoughts eventually made me unable to eat supermarket beef.

So once again I voted with my money. I cut way back on my consumption of beef and other meats (including poultry), and when I did turn my carnivore loose I bought organic meats only which, by law, are supposed to come from animals raised and butchered under humane conditions.

I couldn't amputate the CAFO images from my brain, however. Nor could I seem to make other people care by talking about the subject. Most would just wince, shake their heads, admit it was "just awful," and quickly change the subject.

The overall consensus was: "What are you going to do?"

"Foods raised organically are just too expensive, especially for families with kids to raise."

"I'm not willing to live my life on tofu and bean sprouts."

And nor am I since I know my species developed as omnivores willing to eat anything and everything. We stay healthiest on a much-varied diet that includes meat, or so my own experience has led me to believe. Yet I wondered how we could take all the suffering feedlot animals experienced into our own bodies without causing ourselves harm in the process. No one, to my knowledge, has proved that we're taking in the long-term pain and suffering of those animals along with all the extra hormones and antibiotics being fed to them, but I'm convinced that none of this can be good for us.

I had actually already noticed many people complaining about the high cost of organic food didn't show much interest in cooking. They seemed perfectly willing to spend even higher prices for foods already prepared for them, either from restaurants or in frozen pre-cooked dinners.

I'm still guilty sometimes, too. I don't live a life free of Chinese carryouts or Pizza deliveries. Who'd want to? And I don't beat myself up when I indulge, either, but I don't ever buy non-organic meat for cooking in my own kitchen.

Meat was expensive even when my grandmother was a bride. She learned to feed her ever-expanding family on meals prepared with small amounts of meat tucked inside lots of rice, potatoes or crust. One of her recipes that I still cooked was made from chicken backs, the cheapest cut of meat.

She's stew the chicken with onions, garlic, celery, peppers and herbs until it was fall-off-the-bone-tender. She'd set the meat aside and then cook rice in the broth made from the stewed chicken. She'd cut all the meat from the bones and stir that into the cooked rice. Finally she'd serve us huge plates of fragrant chicken and rice. Simple, filling, and so very delicious! (And the butter-tender stewed little bones fed the family dog).

I've read where Native Americans would sometimes leave muscle meat behind (steaks, haunches, loins) when long distances had to be covered after a hunt, but they never left the offal behind. My gran cooked organ meats, too. They were cheap back then. And heart, liver, tongue, kidney, and tripe were all made meltingly tender and delicious when she simmered or roasted them with onions, garlic and herbs.

So I knew it was possible to feed a family with small amounts of organic meats supplemented by foods that added both food value and bulk. It's also possible to grow lots and lots of vegetables in our own yards, even in containers, and also to raise small meat animals like chicken or rabbits. But doing any of this takes thought, planning and some initial outlay.

To be fair - between holding down jobs, carpooling kids, commuting to and from work, clothes washing, shopping, keeping the grass cut, homework-hassles, and making a stab at keeping the house in order - most of today's wage slaves didn't have much time or energy left for farming the yard, or any extra money for building that chicken coop, either.

Besides, chicken or shrimp raised in China and elsewhere under conditions that would shame a cesspool - once they are dead, cleaned and wrapped in the clear and "sanitary" single-use plastic now fouling our oceans - don't look any different to consumers than the wild-raised shrimp right offshore here in the good old U.S. of A. The wrapped up chicken parts look just fine, too ... and the farm-raised foreign chicken and shrimp are soooooo much cheaper.

I couldn't fix any of these inherent social problems, but I could teach a farmer or politician who supported CAFOs a new way at looking at the humane treatment of animals, and that's what my posse and I intended to do. It wasn't hard to convert space in the compound. And it certainly wasn't hard to find people to put into confinement there.

In only a few short weeks Butch went to a huge livestock sale over in Alabama where he soon engaged five participating well-heeled farmers in some good old boy talk at a local bar. On the pretext of meeting some "real hot ones," he hustled them into the back alley where they were met by the well-armed Juan and Carlos. The men were quickly locked into a van for transport to The Property.

Only much later was it discovered the bar's security camera in that alley "happened" to be on the blink.

Meanwhile, on another evening, Tina and I dressed for fun and games once again and successfully followed that same overall game plan. We traveled to another southern state, infiltrated a swanky lounge frequented by politicians and in the process netted ourselves one state governor and a high-ranking state attorney.

The seven men all eventually woke to a brand new reality. Like others before them they hollered and pleaded with their guards, in their case for several days, before the arrival of the masked figure on horseback. By the time Zorro showed up it was clear to the men they were in no real position to make demands.

Each was now held in a separate cubicle built just outside the compound where they were able to hear, but not see, one another. Totally naked, their arms were imprisoned at their wrists inside stanchion-like restraints. They could open and close their hands, twist them in any direction from the wrist, but there was nothing within reach they could actually get their hands on.

They could slide upwards or downwards inside the stanchion, giving them the ability to stand or sit, but not to lie down or turn around. They had exactly as much mobility as sows kept in today's factory farm farrowing pens.

Four inches under each man's chin (when standing) was a round-bottomed stainless steel trough. They had learned to push it to the side with their heads when they needed to sit down or to slide it back to its starting position by using their teeth. Beside the trough were three one-liter water bottles of the kind provided for caged hamsters and rabbits.

Their feet stood firmly on rough concrete. Beside and behind them were walls of the same material. Over and directly in front of them was open-wire hog panel, with a narrow piece of sheet metal in the roof directly overhead to shield them from rain or direct sunlight. The front was actually a locked doorway containing a sliding panel, also locked, that was opened to pour food into the trough.

After a long minute of examining the captive men, Zorro spoke.

"You now know from your conversations that I have confined seven of you to the same kind of enclosure," Zorro said, quietly. "Since you cannot see behind you I shall tell you the rear wall is also made of concrete. There is no escape possible."

The men shifted uncomfortably until one of them, the governor as it turned out, found his voice.

"Who are you? What right have you to lock us up like this? You must know there are people looking for us."

"Why are we here?" a second man asked angrily. "You won't get away with this."

"You're going to regret this mistake," shouted a third.

"No," Zorro replied. "I will not regret this. It is no mistake."

"You are here to learn compassion," he said directly to the second man. "And I most certainly will get away with this as I have done so many times before. You will remain here until such time as I order your release."

Zorro then shifted his horse a few feet forward to look directly at the governor, saying, "In answer to your many questions, One, no one now looking for you will find you. Two, What right have you to support keeping sentient beings in conditions like those in which you now find yourself? Actually, since your feces is washed away daily, the conditions here are far superior to the conditions in which feedlot animals are kept.

"And Three, 'Who am I?' I am your Zorro for the 21st century, here to help those who cannot help themselves. I seek to protect plants from genetic manipulation, animals from cruelty and people from the clutches of inhumans such as yourselves. Perhaps you will feel differently

about animals when you leave here, perhaps not. But you will certainly have time to ponder these things while you are here.”

The men fell silent, processing what they had heard and not much liking their thoughts.

“While you are my guest you will be treated no better, but no worse, than the pigs and cattle under your stewardship,” Zorro continued. “You will continue to be fed daily with a mixture of fully GMO corn and soy meal mixed with pasteurized chicken litter, the same mixture the majority of you feed your animals. The gruel will contain sufficient vitamins and minerals to support your health. You may even gain weight as your livestock certainly do. Fresh water will always be provided.

“For the record, while the United States Department of Agriculture has not endorsed using chicken litter for feed by meat producers like yourselves, as you all know it has not banned it either. They might as well have slapped a USDA-Approved label on it, don’t you think?

“For those of you who haven’t looked at your feeds’ ingredients lately, chicken litter is made up from the sweepings off the floors of chicken houses. It contains uneaten chicken feed, feathers, chicken feces, disease carrying bacteria, antibiotics, heavy metals and bits of dead chickens and rodents.

“I’m sure you also know today’s chicken get fed the ground bones from beef, even though meat and bone meal can contain infected bovine protein, the chief culprit behind the spread of mad cow disease. One wonders when the first case of mad cow will arrive via a mad chicken? You all have chicken eating beef while cattle are fed on chicken shit. What an interesting feedback loophole you have created for yourselves,” Zorro said.

Shaking his head, he now backed his horse away from the fence and turned it away from their line of vision, but they clearly heard his departing comment,

“Unlike your livestock you will not end your confinement in a slaughterhouse. You should know, however, I had considered it. You were spared by the flip of a coin.”

The men, hearing the horse moving away, shouted after him in sudden panic,

“How long will we be here?”

“How much will you take to set us free? We have money. We’ll pay you ...”

“What about my family? Don’t you care about their fear and suffering?”

But only the creatures in the surrounding forest heard the last of the men’s questions. Zorro had gone.

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That day turned to night ... the days became weeks ... then one month, then two, three ... but by then none of the men were keeping track.

In the beginning the men had talked among themselves or cursed Zorro aloud with threats of future revenge. They attempted conversation with the guards at every opportunity,

promising them huge fortunes if they'd release them. They begged. They cried. They cursed until, eventually, in the face of the guards' ongoing silence, they, too, finally grew silent.

Now they merely stood, squatted, or sat beneath the narrow overhead covering that shielded them from sun and rain. Their skin was welted with bug bites they couldn't scratch. Three times each day the mush was poured into the trough beneath their chins and fresh water bottles exchanged for empty ones. At noon they and their enclosure were hosed down to rid them of urine and excrement.

The heat and humidity and mosquitoes were relentless. So were the ants that foraged in their food troughs. At night wild animals sometimes stood outside their cages and watched them warily, prepared to bolt if the men shouted. At first, they did. Later the men stayed quiet, glad for any company, even the company of curious wildlife.

On the 182nd day of their confinement, although none of the men realized the number, something different occurred. After their noon hosing off, their stanchions were opened and each was handed underwear, trousers and a shirt. Under the trained guns of their guards they were ordered to dress and then to line up with their backs to the fence.

"What are ...," one of them began, only to have a gun shaken in his direction along with the spoken order, "Silencio."

Silenced and orderly the men waited an hour, maybe two. They were finally rewarded by the appearance of the masked rider that most now thought had been an hallucination of their long confinement. As if reading their thoughts, Zorro said, "No, I was not your bad dream ... and today, mi amigos, your bad dream is over."

One of the guards stepped forward and handed each of the prisoners a gold keychain in the shape of the letter "Z." The men scarcely looked at them, keeping their eyes focused on horse and rider.

"These keychains will remind you of your time spent as my guest," Zorro said, smiling. "It is my hope you have learned here what it feels like to be confined and ignored. Pigs and cattle, even poultry, do not spend their miserable days with memories or hope to entertain them, but they can still feel and suffer as you have done. Remember your suffering when you work to alleviate theirs in the future.

"I release you knowing you will now bring about changes to factory farming practices, for if you do not," and here Zorro paused for full dramatic effect before adding, "You will again be brought here, the next time to serve a life sentence. Or perhaps I will just bring your wives and children to these pens? I shall decide only if you ever break your silence about our adventure here or if you revert to your old ways.

"I will be watching you closely. You especially," Zorro said, fixing his masked-eyes on the governor. "But for today, I am done with you." So saying, Zorro swung his big horse around and rode away without a backward glance.

The men were kept standing against the fence for the long hours between noon and sunset. They were then fed on cheese sandwiches before being shackled inside the van they'd arrived in and taken for a three or four hour drive north. There they were released along a deserted stretch of pine forest in Florida's panhandle. Their story, in its earliest version, made the national morning news the following day.

OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

A state governor gone missing had headlined the nightly news for weeks after his disappearance and had been replayed regularly in the months that followed. Police had caught royal hell for not being able to find anything beyond him being last seen with the state attorney who had also gone missing and them both being in the company of suspected call girls.

Artist renderings of the two women had triggered an initial flurry of tips that had all proved empty. The men themselves might as well have been taken into outer space. No sightings had been made.

Now the governor had reappeared, but apparently had little to say. So the talking heads were talking for him, speculating right and left about a ransom having been paid for his release.

And detective Booray Thomas, getting ready for work, caught only the last part of the story, about the golden Zs being handed to the men upon their release. He remembered the Zs he'd seen a couple of years ago carved into the old man's chest and the old man's employee. Murders that remained unsolved in his own case file.

He also remembered the news story about all those guys killed by bees set upon them by a guy in a Zorro suit. He now wondered if there was any connection between the two. Booray's ears pricked at the thought and he sniffed the air thoughtfully for any trace of a scent. He didn't need to go looking for more work, so he didn't, but he didn't forget his morning thoughts, either.

He just carefully filed them away in a back corner of his mind, that place where he kept things he might want to view more closely in future.

## Chapter 13, Don't Mine Me

Outside of the occasional hurricane, tornado, or one-night of freezing temperatures every other winter (from mid-state south), Florida is truly paradise. One perfect sunny Florida day follows another like one beautiful gown follows another along Oscar's red carpet.

Afternoon thunderstorms arrive most summer days to cool everything down for the entire time of the rainstorm. Dazzling rainbows follow the rain, apparently to distract folks from noticing the thermometer's needle again rapidly climbing toward triple-digits.

In northern and mid-state areas residents can grow citrus in their yards while further south they can boast about their mangoes and coconuts. All of Florida has four seasons: spring, summer, fall and bragging, the last being when blizzards blow across northern states and Florida residents tell the shivering friends and relatives they moved away from, "We don't ever have to shovel sunshine," and "No one ever retires to up north."

Because of all the above, Florida is now stuffed with far too many people.

As they have chosen to live in Florida, many of them are very smart people. But having too many people (smart or otherwise) means too much development, too many homes under construction, too many cars, too many old and new roads constantly being built or repaired, too many strip malls, too many fast food joints, too much road rage, and too many unsolved murders, some of which don't even involve an ex-husband or spurned boyfriend.

Florida, like much of the USA, is currently 51/49 percent Republican vs Democrat. So Florida's political offices, from the governor on down, are mostly held by Republicans. We're officially a "red state," and we're also the state that voted to break that infamous election tie by putting the second Bush in the White House. We will therefore be forever the target of late night comics who can't seem to remember 49 percent of Floridians voted Democrat that year. And it was neck and neck with Hillary leading most of the way during the Trump vs. Hillary vote. (Just say'n.)

I was watching late night and shouting the above at the screen when I got so annoyed I grabbed the remote and switched to another channel. My game of spin-the-dial landed me at a local news program where I learned fracking was once again back on our state's legislative menu.

I was, of course, interested, for in addition to being the land of too many people, housing for them all is surrounded by wetlands and built on an underpinning of limestone, sandstone, shale and clay. Florida down below is as fragile as a deli-sliced sheet of Swiss cheese. We're already fighting it out with Minnesota for the title of Sinkhole Capital of America, but even so our governor and his merry men want to frack us.

"Frack You, You Frack'n Frackers," I yelled at the screen.

Curled up on either side of me Misfit and Nightstalker barely blinked, accustomed as they are to my late-night TV ragings.

Fracking is a mining technique where a combination of water and chemicals is pumped underground under high pressure to break up rocks and release fossil fuels trapped inside them.

Frackers then suck up those fuels and sell them, making megabucks in the process. Frackers are busily doing their fracking all over the world, including many of the biggest operations being right here in the states. The current British government is all for fracking parts of Yorkshire across some of the prettiest countryside in their “green and pleasant land,” all to supply England with enough energy for a mere 40 years at an environmental cost potentially beyond reckoning.

Fracking is controversial because air pollution from the gas leaked during drilling (and other air pollutants associated with it) has emerged as a driving force behind global warming. Fracking has also been scientifically linked to having caused countless earthquakes in middle America and sinkholes in Louisiana and Florida.

People like you and me might also worry that those mysterious chemicals used in the fracking process could poison our groundwater reservoirs, and you and me would be right.

Yet fracking, though causing earthquakes, sinkholes and extensive air and water pollution, is clearly something we all need more of since those supporting it are as relentless as small voices from the backseat crying “Are we there yet?”

Considering that city pipes are now leaking lead into American homes because of political greed, and money hasn't been spent on our national infrastructure since before my parents were born, it should come as no surprise politicians aren't worried much about poisoning our groundwater, either.

“It's the price we all must pay for them to get richer. They call that ‘the cost of doing business’,” I told my furkids. “I call it worthy of Zorro's attention.”

I remembered my relief a couple of years back when the Florida Senate halted a fracking bill by a narrow 10/9 vote. They did so after three long hours of testimony from experts, environmentalists and upset citizens, including an entire class of pissed-off fifth graders with rightful concerns about having any clean air or water in their futures.

By the time those kids stormed the state capitol a lot of Florida counties had already taken steps to keep fracking away from their towns, too. With the senate ruling, state residents who had plenty to worry about from sinkholes merely caused by road drainage, new construction and loss of wetlands, figured they at least no longer had to worry about fracking.

But the senators, being who they are, had left themselves a little wiggle room to bring the bill back for another look in the future. John Q. Public, however, had not expected it to be brought back before the pissed-off 5th graders had even graduated from 7th grade.

And yet, here it was again on my nightly news, our Republican governor polishing fracking on his lapel like a shiny apple while we watched him prepare for a great big bite. His newest proposals would even dismantle those protective provisions against fracking already in place in many Florida counties. What a guy!

Butch and I have argued about that Republican thing more than once, finally agreeing not all “R” politicians wear black hats (especially our “Jolly” senator now fighting hard for

election finance reform) and not all “D” politicians wear white ones. Based on matters of public record, however, Butch did concede there’s nearly always a big fat “R” embroidered on those hats involved with fucking over both the electorate and the environment.

We so easily forget that well-bribed politicians *never give up* when there’s an opportunity to make money, regardless of who or what might suffer in the process. They’ll quiet down for a while when faced by an angry public, but it’s not forgotten - just shelved. And before anyone gets all huffy we may want to take a closer look on how we got hydraulic fracking in the first place.

It began in 2005 when then-president George W. Bush signed the Energy Policy Act, a huge bill underwriting massive giveaways to the fossil fuel, ethanol and nuclear industries while at the same time offering mere token incentives for programs to improve or renew energy efficiency.

And Vice-President Dick Cheney, one-time CEO of Halliburton and the big linchpins between both Bush administrations,<sup>4</sup> pushed through changes to the Safe Drinking Water Act that came to be known as the “Halliburton Loophole.” With a tag like that you know it had to be bad news, and so it was.

The American Halliburton Company was featured in many news stories during Bush administrations one and two. It is one of the world’s largest oil field services companies, having operations in more than 80 countries. Halliburton enjoys the same kind of stellar reputation in fuel as Monsanto has in chemicals.

The Halliburton Loophole removed government oversight from safe drinking water by getting hydraulic fracturing and oil and gas drilling exempted from certain key sections of the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974 and the Clean Water Act of 1972. Taking slick advantage of various state or federal laws offering “trade secret” exemptions Halliburton essentially benched the EPA from the game.

They also managed to keep secret from inquiring minds the names of the various chemicals pumped underground during fracking. So, with no government oversight and thwarted public inquiry, the Halliburton Loophole essentially gave the green light to all those ‘gentlemen’ ready to start their engines and race for the start of widespread oil and gas fracking.

Since then, despite all the egregious regulatory exemptions in place, some of the white-hatted scientists have actually analyzed fracking fluid. Among the many juicy acetic acids and formaldehyde now down there underground, they also found benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene and xylene. These last four named are all considered volatile organic compounds (VOCs) that pose significant dangers to human health.

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<sup>4</sup> The much lesser linchpin being that ever-sleazy former consultant to Big Tobacco (and busy little king-maker), Karl Rove.

“Listen to this,” I said to the furkids, reading aloud from a chemical company report. “People who live near fracking operations no longer have drinkable water. In some cases their tap water is now actually flammable.”

My pets looked stunned, knowing as I did the last burning water to cause any big environmental stir was in June of 1969, back when the Cuyahoga River in northeast Ohio burst into flames.

At that time the Cleveland media didn’t consider it much of a news story. They didn’t even get to the scene until after the fire was out, so no pictures of that fire exist. But *Time* magazine somehow learned of it and *did* find newsworthy that a river feeding Lake Erie had actually *caught on fire!*

*Time* put the story “out front,” as they say in the news biz, running a picture of the burning river on its cover along with other pictures of the fire inside, pictures all taken on the Cuyahoga River at an earlier and much larger fire there in 1952.

Describing a “river that oozes rather than flows,” *Time* told the pollution history of the long-suffering waterway where debris and trash had floated for more than 100 years inside an inches-thick heavy oil scum. Of the Cuyahoga River’s 13 known fires, the first had blazed atop the waterway as far back as 1868.

That *Time* story, together with books like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, 1960s socially conscious songs about pollution and bumper stickers reading, “Lake Superior is getting Erie,” got the voting public concerned. Many of that era’s voters had grown up rural and so they had a much closer connection to nature than voters of today. For starters they knew rivers aren’t actually supposed to catch on fire.

And reports that our national symbol, the bald eagle, was rapidly headed toward extinction (along with many other birds) from the lethal effects on its reproductive abilities caused by the insecticide DDT, stirred the growing public outrage even further.

It all came to fruition with the establishment of the Clean Water Act, the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, the forming of the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the launching of the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency.

“There now,” civic-minded Americans said - dusting off their hands and moving on to tackle the issues of school desegregation, birth control, and ending the war in Vietnam - apparently unaware that people willing and able to make staggering amounts of money from actions that destroy our environment, never - ever - give up.<sup>5</sup>

Today’s citizens, unless there’s a fracking operation in their community, seem amazingly cavalier about the many dangers posed by fracking. Water pollution from fracking as of 2015

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<sup>5</sup> While the Cuyahoga River hasn’t burst into flames in many decades and is even able to support aquatic life once again, it remains listed as one of the 43 Great Lakes ‘areas of concern.’

had been confirmed in at least four states and yet our Environmental Protection Agency - even though not charged with protecting us from fracking - has publicly stated it “found fracking has not caused widespread drinking water pollution.”

“How can *any* drinking water pollution be deemed acceptable by an agency purported to be protecting our environment?” I asked my pets. A worried Misfit began panting nervously at this point with concern for his water quality and Nightstalker went to the kitchen to see if he’d left any food in his bowl, seeking comfort food no doubt.

Major environmental protectants have been stripped of all power during our capital R presidential years. D-labeled presidents have struggled to bring back environmental relevance for citizens far more concerned about protection from Isis than protection of Ibis habitat.

“What’s the point of having an Environmental Protection Agency at all if our various politicians can render it as useless as a toothless watchdog? How about we just call it the Environmental Polluting Agency and be done with it,” I suggested to Misfit.

Once again, being the truly intelligent animal that she is, she agreed. So did Butch and Tina when we all got together to talk about fracking.

While waiting for Tina’s arrival Butch and I were sifting through news articles and photographs.

“Frack them,” said Butch, looking at a picture of the Bush family over an article about the billions of profit dollars they made because of our ongoing war(s) in the middle east. The pictures with that article showed presidents Bush Sr. and Jr. literally arm-in-arm with their business partners who also happened to be first cousins of Osama Bin Laden.

We knew Zorro couldn’t get to the governor. Having caught one in his last kidnappings the remaining 49 had gone on red alert and stayed there. So we’d have to settle for oil company executives and whichever one percenters with heavy investments in fracking ventures we could snag.

I thought about snatching some executives from the Dan A. Hughes Oil Company given they had ignored a cease-and-desist order to perform a fracking operation in Collier County Florida in 2013. The company chose instead to pay the \$25,000 fine levied upon them, basically chump change for any fracking operation.

They’d angered quite a few resident Floridians at the time, however, so I figured they might actually be still be taking precautions during public events, personal or professional. I wanted no hassles.

“Clean swift abductions, that’s the goal, Butch,” I said.

We were interrupted by Tina’s shout of “Greetings Assassins,” as she arrived burdened with bags of hot and fragrant Chinese carryout containers that she immediately set about opening and spooning. We joined her in creating perfect plates for ourselves, sauced everything down with seasoned soy juice and pulled up chairs around my kitchen table.

“Guess what?” Tina said, through a mouthful of General Tso’s chicken. “They’ve beaten the recent fracking proposal again. Stopped it dead in its tracks this afternoon, for now anyway.”

Butch looked as stunned as I did.  
OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

“When?” I finally stammered. “They just reignited it.”

“Yeah, I know. But it’s off the table again. Aren’t you glad?”

Butch and I looked at one another and then he said, slowly, “Well, no actually. We wanted to punish some of those fuckers.”

I laughed, I couldn’t help it. “He’s right,” I said.

“But it’s OK, Butchipoo,” said Tina. “Another short-term block on fracking in Florida doesn’t mean an end in the industry. We can still go get us some frackers to keep them from fracking Florida in the future.”

And then we all laughed, “Mwaaahaha!

## Chapter 14, Down the Rabbit Hole

Here's what we did.

Using our proven techniques, we rounded up a small herd of nine oil company executives actively engaged in Fracking operations across several states. We flew them to one of the western states and kept them on ice until Zorro could get there.

Zorro had to rent a black horse some 150 miles from his destination, but took his costume, saddle, whip and etc. to the area via his own small plane. Once everything was assembled the men were shackled together with leg irons and transported to an old abandoned mine located just seven miles from an active fracking site, a site under the leadership of one of our captives. Zorro then took the horse by trailer to a half mile from where the men waited and saddled up.

It was a chilly day, somewhere between cold and colder. The men in business suits now slightly the worse for wear also wore blankets over their shoulders like shawls. They stood huddled in a group waiting for information, silenced by the demeanor and guns of their guards.

Then one of the guards nudged a companion, jerking his chin toward the horizon. The second guard looked and smiled. The now alerted captives looked, too, seeing only a horseman headed their way at an easy canter. But as it got closer the men took in the costume on the rider and glanced at one another with "What the hell?" expressions.

Zorro arrived and gave his customary speech about them now having to pay the consequences for their actions. His lecture left the captives speechless. It had never occurred to any of them there might one day be an accounting for their business practices. They were, after all, members in good standing of the untouchable class of the one-percent. This could not actually be happening. And yet ...

"You seem surprised," the masked figure said. "And I would be very surprised if you were not. But this is your new reality. You see before you a mine shaft. You will soon be lowered to the bottom of that shaft and there you will stay until I decide to release you, or until something happens that none of us can predict for certain, like poisons in your underground water supply or earthquakes bringing down your roof. This mine is, after all, very close to one of your own fracking operations," Zorro said, focusing his gaze on one of the men.

"I have been down this mine shaft. There is a small underground creek under there for your water needs. The guards will lower food to you daily. The temperature there, while not hot, is warmer than it is here today above ground. I'm told it stays fairly constant. Even so, you have your blankets and there are more below should you need them.

"There are no active roads near here and no reason for anyone to come here. You will not be rescued. Your best hope is that I shall return before the nearby fracking causes you problems."

So saying, Zorro nodded at the guards and they pushed and prodded the men with their rifles toward the lift that would take the men below ground. He watched as they took their places and their leg irons were removed. With a screech of protest the overhead iron wheel began to turn and the lift began slowly to move downward.

"I am returning you to Hell where you belong," Zorro said, grinning as he turned his horse away. "Via con Diablo," he shouted as the tops of their heads disappeared from view.

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It wasn't cold. It wasn't hot. It wasn't anything. Days were the same as nights. When they got tired, they slept on the blankets they'd brought below ground with them. When they supposed it was daytime the men used their lanterns to explore the tunnels that radiated out from the shaft, discovered they all sooner or later ended in floor to ceiling piles of collapsed rock.

Food was sent down on the lift twice a day, mainly rice with peppers and beans, sometimes there was corn and once or twice even stewed chicken. They drank from the cool underground stream. The days passed.

They talked among themselves, wondered out loud about their businesses, about wives and children, parents, pets. Got to know one another as a fraternity closer than any they'd ever known before.

The man whose fracking operation lay just four miles to the east knew his company planned to start pumping chemicals into newly-drilled wells at the site soon. He wasn't sure what that activity would do to their environment in the mine, putting him in exactly the same situation as those people living in proximity to his fracking operation.

He didn't like it, realizing for the first time, people living near his fracking operations perhaps had legitimate concerns having nothing to do with his own ability to stuff his bank account with money.

He later shared with his frat brothers the news they were about to rev up the nearby fracking operation and admitting he had no idea what that might do to all of the space they now shared.

"It won't be good," one exclaimed.

"Shit," said another.

"We've got to get out of here," said all the others, a litany they'd said many times before during their stay. They went over all their dead ends once again, promising to explore further after their next meal and maybe find a rubble-filled tunnel it might be possible to dig through. They didn't know if any chemicals or gas from the boosted fracking would reach them, but they knew it was a real possibility.

They were working on digging through a clogged tunnel two days later when the noise began, a low growling rumble followed by hissing. Had they been fanciful men they'd have said it sounded like someone had awakened a dragon. But even not being the sort to believe in fairy tales, they knew something bad was now stirring.

A sulphurous odor later began to seep into their tunnel, faintly at first, but growing

stronger within just a few minutes. They decided to abandon their digging and move back to their base area, but for some their decision turned out to be seconds too late.

A small earthquake triggered by the new fracking activity, so small it barely registered on the richter scale, was enough to drop a payload of rock onto the men. Five were hard hit as the other four scrambled to safety further along the tunnel. Of the five, four were crushed to death immediately. The fifth, CEO of the company that had just killed him, lay broken and buried in rubble for an hour or more before he also died.

The four men who had made it back to their base sat in panic as the ground shivered and grumbled and stank over the next many hours and then grew silent. An hour or so later the lift was sent down and a guard shouted for them to get on it. They didn't need a second invite.

Counting the seconds as the lift inched upward, jerking and whining through the rock surrounding them, the men had to shut their eyes to the blinding sunlight when it found them. Once above ground they were immediately herded, sun blind and stumbling, into a van, taken to an airport, and hustled aboard a small plane where they were shackled into their seats. A few hours later when fully dark outside their windows they touched down smoothly at an unknown airport.

Once again they were put into a windowless van and transported, this time to a fenced encampment surrounded by what looked in the dark to be jungle. Gates were then locked, the guards moved off into the darkness and the men were alone once again.

Three days later, now easily timed by the rising and setting of the sun, the four men heard the sound of hoofs thudding against dirt and were lined up at the fence waiting when the Zorro figure came into view.

"Greetings, Amigos," Zorro began. "I bring you presents and good news."

So saying he reached from horseback to hand something through the fence and one of the four prisoners stepped forward to receive it.

"These are mementos of your experiences underground," Zorro explained, as the men examined the Z-shaped keychains and handed them around.

"I would suggest that you should never forget what you have learned as my guest. I will be watching you in future and expect to see you all take a stand against fracking or, at the very least, to push for development of less harmful fuel extraction methods.

"If you do not, you might find yourself underground once again. Should that come to pass there will be no future rescue. You will become like your friends who perished this past week.

They believed him.

"But now for your good news. You will be released tonight and probably be safe in your homes before morning. Remember what you have learned here for I am now done with you."

So saying, Zorro rode away from the encampment, leaving the men talking excitedly among themselves. True to his word, they were indeed released that night after a lengthy drive, in an area they later learned was not far from Miami.

Newscasters couldn't get enough of the story of Zorro, of an imprisonment down an abandoned mine, five heads of huge fuel operations crushed to death in an earthquake below ground in a still unknown area, the handing out of "real gold keychains shaped like the letter Z, and of the dramatic homecoming for the four survivors. The story was on every channel at all hours of the day for several days.

One key fact emerged from all the air time, that the mine where they had been kept was not far from where a fracking operation had just begun at a company where one of the men who died had been the CEO. Police in that area were searching diligently for the abandoned mine.

"Whoever you are, Zorro," Booray said aloud to his TV, watching with a born cop's interest as the story unfolded on air. "Under that mask of yours you're just a vicious serial killer. And you'd better watch yourself, Z-boy," he added, "because maybe it's now time I headed your way."

The detective uncoiled his tall frame from the chair, picked up his phone to send a quick text, topped up his cat's food and water bowls and then left for his one-hour commute to work.

## Chapter 15, Searching for Truffles

“Here you go, Booray. Here’s the stuff you asked for in your morning text, but I’m afraid there isn’t much to it,” so saying, office superstar Betty Osteen held out a folder for the detective to grab on his way to the coffee pot. “I’ll keep looking, but I think that’s about it.”

“Good morning and thanks, Bets,” Booray replied, adding some encouragement by saying, “If there’s more, you’ll find it.”

Black coffee mugged for drinking, he headed to his home-away-from-home cubicle to settle in for the day. Shoving papers aside on a desk piled high with folders threatening to spill onto the floor at any moment, Booray read with interest the material Betty had compiled. She was right. It wasn’t much.

Until told otherwise he now considered this entire Z case as his case, no matter how many police districts were involved. He had come to believe the Z thing had started with the body of the Old Man. But even before he’d made the connection the Z keychain cases had piqued his interest.

He studied the crime scene photographs of the Old Man once again. The Z slashed into the withered chest. The absolute no-pity method used to kill him. He looked at the photo of the dead foreman, too. Another Z there, but a quick bullet instead of head-to-toe poison.

Booray knew an undercover cop had died in one of the migrant camps run by the same Old Man months before the two men had been found dead, but he hadn’t found any connection earlier and nor had the cops working that case. Now he wondered if they’d all missed something.

Those damned horse tracks showed there had been a horse. Maybe the rider had been wearing a Zorro costume? These last members of the keychain club had said their captor was dressed that way. It was totally fucked up to ride around killing people dressed like the black avenger, but it was certainly possible this Zorro character had finished off his own two victims, too.

On a legal pad the detective made a note to check for more background on the foreman who’d been killed.

“I know the guys put down the mine were given keychains shaped like a Z when they were released the other night, the same as that guy that escaped that crazy killer bee scene a few months back,” he muttered. “They all talked about Zorro. And they’ve all been set free in remote, but different, places in Florida.

“My old man killing might have been the first one by this guy. Then again, maybe there have been others I didn’t hear about? Maybe in other states.”

Booray made another notation on the pad.

Like the detective, Betty had also made the connection between the golden Zs, the bee killings and the mine shaft murders. She had typed out the names and addresses of the survivors in both cases. Now she stuck her head around the corner of his cubicle,

“Hey, I just heard on the news in the break room a guy has come forward who claims he and his friends were victims of Zorro, too. He said they were kidnapped and then later told to make up a story about where they’d been.”

“In Florida?” Booray asked.

“Yep. It was that bunch of rich guys who got all drunked up and took a boat out into the gulf, ran into a storm, and...

“And the boat sank, he continued for her. “Then they swam to an island and all that other horse shit. I remember thinking then it was all a serious load of crap. But it wasn’t my crap then so I never looked into it. See what you can dig up on it for me, OK?”

Booray made a few calls and in one of them learned the foreman found dead beside the Old Man had also been the man on the scene when that underground cop ... what was his name again? Madeo, Mateo, something like that ... when he had been found dead. So they *had* missed it. There was a connection after all. He didn’t know if he should say “shit” or “Hot damn.”

Booray made yet another notation on the legal pad. He needed to talk with the former partner of that dead undercover cop. He’d have to have a little chat with him, for sure.

The hunt was on.

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Nearly three months had passed since the mine episode. As always, we had laid low and paid close attention to the news (and our own environment) to make sure no one was sniffing along our trail.

Tina and Butch had recently begun texting question marks on a regular basis. But when Juan and Carlos started finding reasons to cross my path to fix me with question-mark eyes, I knew it was time to do something to keep everyone happy. Myself included.

So Tina and I met at her place one evening to kick around various ideas. Dinner was in the oven and Butch was on his way up from Miami to add his two-cents. I had looked daily for any follow-up stories on the larvicide vs mosquito controversy, but hadn’t found any. Tina said the same. We stared at one another wearing identical frowns.

“Do you really think there was nothing at all to it?” I asked.

“Do you?” Tina snorted. “I think the story was squashed by the powers-that-be for their own advantage.”

“Such as?”

“Such as, for starters, BigChem now being all over the news for riding to our rescue against Big Bad Nature and getting paid big-Federal-bucks to do it. They’re selling the story that ‘Unpredictable Nature has attacked us yet again with a vicious virus, but WE, your clever scientists, are developing new chemicals to use against the horrible carriers of this terrible disease’,” Tina said, disdainfully.

“And you said that yourself,” she continued. “The first time we talked about this you said people could just tip over containers in their yards holding standing water to kill this carrier mosquito’s larvae. There’s no need for non-stop poisoning of the air, water, fields, woods, but this virus gives BigChem open season.”

“True,” I said, pausing before adding the part I didn’t like. “But - and this butt is as big as yours, Tina - we’ll be the bad guys if we attack Monsanto or any corporations over the Zika problem. People are afraid thanks to the media blitz. They want the mosquitoes killed off and killed off quickly. Besides, sad to say, the proof still isn’t in that their larvicide is at the root of all this.”

“Even if it is the cause we may never get that proof,” Tina said, angrily. “We the people will just have to suck this one up, too ... and my butt isn’t one centimeter bigger than yours.”

We sat in silence, each lost in our own glum thoughts. Outside a car door slammed and Watch, Tina’s big Labrador, barked one deep bark before sitting up to stare at the door.

Tina twitched back the curtain to peer out, then turned toward me with a grin.

“Butch?” I asked.

“Yep. Tiz he,” she said, heading to the door with Watch at her heels.

“Greetings Killer Babe,” Butch said to Tina, kissing her cheek as he came through the door. Turning toward me he added, “And to you, too, Foxy Momma.” Butch knows Zorro means “fox” in Spanish. He thinks calling me Foxy Momma is very clever. Sigh.

“And how’s it going with you, Watch dog? You keeping my girls safe?”

Watch bounced in place, too well behaved to jump up on anyone, even though every fiber of his being wanted to. Butch ruffled his ears and followed that with several meaty thuds to the dog’s back and sides. Watch was ecstatic. He and Butch were old and dear friends.

Butch followed Tina to her kitchen with his bottle of after-dinner wine and I heard them chatting while Tina made adjustments to the dinner she had cooking. I sat enjoying their camaraderie. One of these days Tina would figure out that Butch was head over heels for her, but she hadn’t yet and I wasn’t sure Butch had figured it out, either. Idiots.

I lay on a pillow-topped chaise enjoying the feet-up pleasure of Tina’s eclectic bungalow with all its colorful chaos.

I lean toward neat, Tina leans toward disheveled. But I am not a super neat freak and nor is she a total mess-head. My furniture is what they’ve been calling “modern” for considerably more than half a century now; clean lines, big wall art, lots of glass. I think I have plenty of comfort around me, but compared to Tina’s place my apartment is like a hospital’s operating room.

Pretty much every square inch of Tina’s wall space is crowded with art of every possible size and theme, including the walls in her bathroom and kitchen. Ship art competes with flower art competing for space with landscapes and animal portraits. She’ll never have to insulate against Florida’s annual cold night, because tall shelves stuffed with books line every wall.

Looking around I noticed her yellow and white Persian cat, Butters, peering down at me from atop one of those very shelves. A nearby dresser filled with art supplies was topped with OKay Jackson, *Zorro*, *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

baskets holding paint brushes stuck in them helter-skelter. All her windows have wooden blinds, all the doorways have beaded curtains, Oriental and rag rugs brighten up the tile floors, pillows are piled high on every piece of furniture, and ... Butch and Tina re-appeared, plates in both hands, breaking my reverie.

"Here's yours, Sport," Tina said, placing in front of me a steaming delish of baked pasta, cheese, fresh tomatoes, herbs, garlic and onions. Iced tea followed, along with garlic bread and a side salad slick with balsamic and olive oil. We crouched low over Tina's coffee table and stuffed ourselves, growling when anyone got too close to our plates.

"I went all old school on you guys and made real tapioca pudding with cream for dessert, but I think I'll wait for a while after dinner before serving it, OK?" Tina said. Butch and I, nodded happily, chewing all the way.

Later, over our after-dinner wine, we picked back up on the mosquito plan we had set aside before our last adventure.

"I don't think we need to wait for confirmation about the larvicide because we may or may not ever get it," Tina said. "The bastards do enough damage as is without adding that to their resumé anyway. I say we take out some of their top guys."

"I'm down with that," Butch said, lazily.

I agreed.

"When we were talking about mosquitoes before you were hell-bent on finding the maximum numbers of them. What's that about?" Tina asked.

"Ever hear of scaphism?" I asked.

"Ho," said Butch, raising his eyebrows.

"Nope. I don't think so. Would I like it?"

"Not hardly," Butch interjected. "Scaphism is a spectacularly horrible bit of torture thought up by the ancient Persians who were truly in a class by themselves with their hurt-you-bad techniques."

"My plan is more in keeping with methods used by our native American Indians, Butch, but for the record they were pretty damned good at torture, too, back in the day."

"*deed they were,*" Butch agreed. "Despite all their good press now at having been pure and noble warriors living 'at one with nature,' they got more than a little savage when riled. It apparently didn't take much to rile them, either."

I told them that prisoners of the noble redman were sometimes stripped naked, bound hand and foot, then set adrift in canoes at sundown right when vast clouds of hungry mosquitoes were rising from the surrounding wetlands in search of blood.

"Siberians did that too," I added. "But they would simply tie a naked prisoner to a tree and then get the hell out of Dodge. Mosquitoes and other biting flies would line up at the bar to knock them back at a rate of roughly 9,000 bitey-drinks per minute. They could drain a person's blood by half in about two hours."

“The Canadian Tundra has mosquitoes in those same kinds of numbers,” I continued. “We could probably get all we need there, even though it does take 1.2 million mosquito bites to drain a person’s blood completely.”

Tina stared hard at me before saying, “You’ve really got to cut back on your research for our projects or none of us will be able to sleep nights.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. I do so easily get sucked into offbeat subjects and follow their twisted paths to some very strange places, like for instance, scaphism.

Tina and I began trading mosquito trivia. She told us the largest statue of a mosquito, one with a 15-foot wingspan, is in Komarno, Manitoba, the mosquito capital of Canada. She told us mosquitoes are related to flies and that the word “mosquito” is a Spanish word meaning “Little Fly.”

I told them the nasty little flies had been torturing animals since the Jurassic Epoch over 175 million years before. So even dinosaurs had to put up with them. Fossils had locked in mosquitoes more than two inches long from that time.

“Poor Dino,” Tina said. “Giant mosquitoes and no citronella oil.”

“Or DEET,” said Butch, showing he still sometimes visits the dark side.

Tina’s earlier question about why we didn’t just use Florida home growns got me to reach for my smartphone. I hadn’t read about any mosquito torture used in the tropics and I wasn’t sure why. Even with our busy mosquito control trucks and planes sending out clouds of toxic vapor, mosquitoes could still run me inside on summer evenings.

Mosquitoes transmit many nasty diseases (carriers of malaria in Africa are among the most efficient dealers of death known to humankind), but for my purposes I didn’t want mere disease carriers. I wanted serious vampires.

“Listen to this,” I said, reading from my screen. “Research in the Everglades shows a combined morning and evening mosquito bite count of 42.2 bites per minute.”

We’d have all been a lot more impressed had we not just learned an unlucky Canadian could get bitten 9,000 times per minute.

“I suppose you want to send some Monsanto guys out to collect mosquito bites on their naked backsides?” suggested Tina.

I nodded.

“Thought so. But based on those numbers we’re going to have to take them to Canada.”

I agreed, saying we were probably going to have to go after members of the subsidiary company behind the larvicide. It was their leadership, after all, that had signed off on putting a product into the water supplies that may have caused deformities to thousands of babies ... and then again, maybe it had not. But even without this latest notch to their belts, there were many other compelling reasons for having them meet Zorro.

“They all will have heard about the Monsanto executives-versus-bees story, but even so they won’t be very much on guard. They’ll feel safe by being in another country,” I said.

“Plus, being big guns themselves, they’ve probably got state of the art security systems on their home turf,’ Butch added.

“And yet, greed can always tempt these kinds of bastards into the open,” said Tina with a knowing smile. “I’ll bet I can draw them out with just a little of my best effort.”

“They deserve nothing but our best,” I agreed.

Since “the best” in this case appeared to swarm in the tundra of Canada, long-range plans were called for. It turned out to be a while before all our planning began to bear fruit. But before our harvest could begin we had to get them to Canada in the first place.

Tina trotted out her increasingly more specialized skills once again and put together a slick hunting package from the “land of the Spectacular Northern Lights.” In it Tina offered the executives, “The adventure of a lifetime in the Yukon Territory” where visitors were guaranteed kills. Wolves could even be hunted from the air, just the way former Alaska governor Sarah Palin likes it. Exhaust them so they can’t run in terror any longer. Then shoot them. What a gal.

In addition to wolf, and depending on the game in season, legal hunts with the resort’s registered Yukon outfitter could be arranged for “Moose, Caribou, Coyote, Black Bear, Grizzly Bear,” and many more species.

Tina’s bargain “summer rates” prices should get the macho Latino big shots salivating, what with offers to “perfectly preserve” the pelts/racks of the animals shot and even to ship those trophies home for the guests.

To sweeten the trap, while at the resort’s home base they were each offered a spacious yet rugged log cabin “with more comforts than home ever thought of,” like thick flannel sheets and down comforters on queen size beds, a fully stocked wet bar, and firewood “stacked for you daily beside the fireplace in your cabin.”

The cabins had central heat and air, refrigerators, microwaves, top of the line coffee makers, Egyptian cotton towels for the bathroom (tub and shower stalls in each), and three meals a day of fine dining on offer inside “the spacious lodge with ceiling to floor windows overlooking the crystal waters of the largest of three beautiful lakes on the resort property.”

Hunts would be more rugged, but even then “planes are used whenever possible to assure our guests have plenty of access to game while enjoying every comfort when away from home base.”

Guests would be met at the Erik Nielsen International Airport in Whitehorse and flown from there by private plane directly to the resort in the far north. Tina had created a website for the place, too, with pictures galore, all set up to take their reservations and money.

She had even added customer comments praising the “amazing experience” ...

...“best hunting trip ever” ...

... and ...

... “the most comfortable wilderness resort I’ve ever enjoyed.”

I read everything through and wanted to make a reservation there myself. It looked and sounded fantastic!

I wouldn't go there to run wolves to exhaustion from an airplane and then shoot them, though. I like wolves. I wanted only Monsanto heads for my wall.

## Chapter 16, One Million Bites, Give or Take ...

The small aircraft flew low over the tundra. The five passengers inside, tired from their long journey north, were more than ready to deplane at the resort ahead of them.

“A shower, dinner, a stiff drink and bed, that’s what I’m talking about.” remarked one of them in the fluid Spanish they used when speaking with one another.

“A shower, dinner, two stiff drinks and bed sounds even better,” said another.

“Hey, I think we’re getting ready for landing,” said a third.

The men all craned their necks to see below, but all they saw was a narrow strip of dirt at the edge of which was a large shed, what looked like a big cage of some kind out behind it, and a small group of men standing beside it. The men looked armed. Hunters?

In moments their plane had landed and taxied to where the men stood waiting. The passengers climbed out onto the ground, realizing too late the men beside the plane were indeed armed, but were not hunters. They tried to climb back into the plane, but found the pilot had leveled the muzzle of a large handgun at their faces.

“What the hell is going on?” shouted the president of the chemical company. “Let us back in.”

“Shut up,” shouted their pilot just as one of the armed men on the ground issued his own orders in fluid Spanish.

“You’ll walk to that building, hombres,” he said. “And you will be silent, or I promise I will shoot you.”

“You will not shoot me, you bastard bandit. This is an outrage,” shouted a company attorney. “I demand an ...”

The other four men backed away in horror when the guard followed through on his promise without a moment’s hesitation. They stared at the body of their fallen companion, now soaking the dirt with his blood and urine, his legs jerking as the neurons in his brain winked out one by one. The captive men’s silence was absolute.

“Now. You will walk to that building, hombres, por favor,” the armed man repeated.

The men walked.

When they reached the building they were told to line up against its wall. One of the guards swung open the barn-like door of the building and the prisoners gaped when the big black horse with its rider exited the darkened interior and stood before them.

“Buenos dias, compadres,” said the masked figure on its back. “I am sorry to divert you from your expected destination, but I must tell you there are no reservations waiting for you at your fancy lodge. In fact, there is no such lodge at all. Instead you will be staying here as my honored guests.”

The men’s brains were in free fall, trying and failing to make sense of this radical departure from all known normality.

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Zorro let the incredulous men study him while he studied them in return. South American businessmen. Slightly shorter than their American counterparts, but just as well fed and every bit as well groomed. Unlike many Americans, most had a full head of dark hair, but their haircuts looked just as expensive as any to be found in New York City and their nails were all manicured and buffed.

Zorro thought of the malformed babies in the arms of their grieving mothers and of the many starving, but otherwise healthy, children he'd seen in their country. He calculated how much good the price of one of their haircuts could do there for so many. His hard heart hardened further.

"I think you are surprised to find me so far north, no? But I could say the same about you had I not set up this opportunity for our meeting here," Zorro said, pausing briefly for them to take that in.

"I know of no one here in the Yukon you have harmed, but you have harmed many where you live. Zorro's concern, as it has always been, is for the poor and downtrodden. As you see, I will go anywhere to uphold their welfare should it become necessary.

"But I shall leave you now in the good care of my men. Do not look forward to my return for that will not be a good day for any of you. Enjoy your respite from my attentions while you consider your many sins against your countrymen. For the moment I am done with you."

So saying, the horseman lifted the reins and put heels to his startled mount, instantly riding hard toward the horizon. His prisoners were then herded into the shed at gunpoint. There they found basic accommodations, but no hot shower, no stiff drink, no fine dining. In fact, there were no comforts to be had at all, other than that of the sweet-smelling straw piled high for bedding inside the roomy box stall at one end of the large room.

Most refused the bread and cheese served to them later as dinner, a refusal that would haunt them in the lean days to come. Even though tired, sleep was elusive when they did finally lie down on their narrow army cots to listen to the hard patter of rain on the roof. They assumed they'd been kidnapped for ransom as was so often done in their home country. They hoped their company would pay quickly.

It rained for two solid days, a relentless driving rain that puddled the fenced-in area in which they were told to exercise. It wasn't cold, being summer after all, but it was gray and grim. And looming over every thought was the threat Zorro had left them with at his departure.

The men were fed, taken at gunpoint to a nearby facility with showers and toilets, put into the exercise yard for several hours daily, and were otherwise ignored. Their guards would not talk with them in either Spanish or English. Their only conversations were amongst themselves and consisted mainly of questions.

"When will we be ransomed?"

"When will we be asked to read something or otherwise prove we are alive to be ransomed?"

"When will we get out of here?"

Since none of them knew the answers, their questions were pointless and their speculations remained unresolved.

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The rain stopped. Two days later Zorro returned. The men were sitting or standing around in the exercise area that mid-afternoon when they heard the sound of galloping hooves. Every pair of eyes quickly found and focused on the horse and rider heading their way. Zorro brought his mount to a theatrical sliding stop that left it prancing in place until he managed with quiet horsemanship to settle it down.

The big horse was still tossing its head and blowing through distended nostrils when Zorro grinned down at them and began speaking.

"I am certain you are not happy to see me, mi amigos, but try to imagine how little I care about your happiness. Today is a day for us all to see justice done and justice makes *me* happy. Hard as this may be for you to hear, it is my happiness only that matters on this day," Zorro said.

"But ... but ... when will you ransom us? When will we leave this place?" one of the men blurted out.

Zorro's grin widened.

"Ah, so that is what you have convinced yourselves this is all about. Money. Well, why not? Money is your god after all. But no, my wealthy compadres, this adventure is not about your money. It is, as I have already told you, about justice."

The baffled men stared up at him.

"You are the men who authorized the use of larvicide in the water systems of the poor communities in your country. There are some arguments that decision has brought about the virus-caused birth defects now afflicting so many of your country women. But even without that black mark against you, even without that certainty, your products do not support life. They support only death. And for that you must pay, but not with money. You shall pay with your blood."

"Wait," one of the men shouted. "That's crazy. Our treatment didn't cause the Zika Virus, it's a freak of nature. If anything our pesticides are bringing the mosquitoes that carry it under control. We're the good guys here."

"Oh, I think not, hombre," Zorro said, shaking his head. "Clearly you have told your lies so often you now start to believe them. Fact, the Zika Virus has been known about since the middle of the last century. It has never caused the carnage we are seeing now, so what has caused it?"

"The only logical conclusion - the one reached by so many of your own doctors - is the virus has recently evolved, triggered by something new in the environment. And what is new in the environment of your poor country? Herbicides and pesticides in the fields where food is grown. Larvicide in the water supply. Fungicides on the harvested fruits and vegetables to keep them mold free for the American market.

What then is the common denominator in all this?" Zorro asked, his voice harsh. "That would be you. You and your death-dealing company that poisons everything it touches. Nature is not the villain here. You are."

So saying, Zorro motioned with a jerk of his chin toward a parked truck beside the runway and the guards snapped to attention, gesturing with their guns where they now wanted OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

their captives to go. Before they climbed into the truck the prisoners were ordered to remove their clothing.

Once the prisoners were loaded into the vehicle Zorro dismounted and led his horse into the building. There he brushed it down, making sure the animal had cooled down enough to leave safely. He then turned it loose in its stall, gave it feed and water, and went outside and climbed into the truck. The vehicle was instantly underway.

The truck swayed and bumped across the rough terrain for an hour or more, finally jerking to a stop beside a vast expanse of empty tundra stretching as far as the eye could see. The day had moved into late afternoon, but it was still fully light since the sky remains lit around the clock during midsummer in the Yukon.

The men were startled when the sliding panel separating the body of the truck from the cab suddenly flew open and Zorro's masked face peered through at them.

"You are here because your money-making business is all about killing, especially insects," he said, with no preamble. "You kill the bees, the butterflies, mosquitoes and all other living things indiscriminately. The rain has stopped. Perhaps today if justice is to be served the insects will kill you."

Zorro slammed the panel shut at the same moment the guards rolled open the back of the truck, ordering the men out. The guards then climbed into the back of the truck, one remaining outside to shut them in and then himself jumping into the cab as the truck drove away.

The naked men stood, ankle deep in puddles left from the recent rains, watching the truck leave. Quickly realizing they had to take stock of their situation, they looked around them. One of the men glanced down and pointed out the puddled water was fairly boiling around their ankles, alive with mosquito larvae rapidly maturing in numbers beyond count.

Even as they all stared down into the water those of the insects now able to fly began leaving their watery nursery, lifting off the water like tiny drones in ones, tens, fifties, and hundreds, thousands ... but by then the men were running, grabbing handfuls of mud as they ran, smearing themselves as best they could. It didn't help.

They tried swatting the mosquitoes on each other. They couldn't kill them fast enough. They rolled in the mud, they flailed, they sobbed, but the insects kept coming. Black clouds of them rose from the wet tundra in waves to instantly hone in on the frantic men.

Their hell lasted exactly 20 minutes. The truck then returned, the guards poured out with canisters of cedar spray that cleared the surrounding air of insects and killed the ones engorged with blood still clinging to the men.

The guards loaded the men rapidly into the truck and slammed it shut. In minutes the truck had reached an airfield, but none of the prisoners much cared. Swollen, on fire, in misery, they had to be lifted into the small plane which immediately turned onto the grassy runway once all were aboard.

Not long after the plane, its call numbers obscured, touched down at a runway adjacent to a hospital. There, without ceremony, the naked men were tumbled out onto the runway. The

plane immediately taxied back out for takeoff and leaped quickly back into the air, maintaining radio silence all the way.

Twenty-four hours later a young attractive woman wearing a lightweight hooded jacket entered that same hospital. She looked like a member of the fourth estate, but the identification she provided labeled her as agent for the FBI in the United States. She asked to see the rescued men, promising not to upset them, and a nurse reluctantly took her to the room housing the four men.

"They are awake, but they are still very weak from loss of blood. Do not tire them. I will be back in three minutes to escort you out," the nurse said, sternly.

"That's fine," the young woman whispered. "I only want to take a couple of photographs and I'll be gone."

After the nurse left the young woman reached into her pocket and walked from bed to bed, depositing golden keychains at each bedside table. The men's eyes followed her, but none of them spoke. She, however, did.

"These keychains are from your friend on the tundra to remind you of your time spent with him," she said, softly. "They must also serve to remind you to change your course in life or you will be returned to the tundra. The mosquitoes will always be happy to see you again."

Wagging her index finger at the men almost playfully she added, "Zorro said to tell you he is now done with you."

She then pushed open the door and left, even as one of the men pushed hard on the button to call the nurse.

## Chapter 17, A Slip of the Luck

The Yukon adventure did make the news, but not right away and not in a big way, because the crime had taken place in another country against men from another country. It was actually a fluke Booray heard about it at all.

The hard-working detective had recently caught the attention of bureaucrats higher up the cop chain who noticed he hadn't taken any vacation time in far too long. To get them off his back he had emailed for information on hunting packages at several lodges in British Columbia, Alaska, Montana and the Yukon Territory. He'd asked for brochures and other hard copy to wave under the noses of those giving him a hard time.

He also thought that sometime soonish he might actually head north for a real hunting trip, rather than his usual quick weekend in the woods during hunting season to bag a deer for the freezer. So when the first package arrived from the Yukon he perused it with real interest.

Along with a nice letter, the usual slick brochure and a timetable for local air service, the person at the lodge had added a newspaper clipping about hunting in the Yukon. He read it through and laid it on his desk where his fan immediately sent it flying.

Cursing mildly, he bent to retrieve it from the floor where it had landed, face down. It was then he saw the headline reading, "Men Safe After Strange 'Zorro' Encounter." Booray snatched it up and avidly read the rest of the story:

"Five top level businessmen from South America were subjected to kidnapping and torture-by-insects during what they had expected to be a hunting trip in the Yukon Territory.

"The men, executives with a South and Central American chemical firm, a subsidiary of the Monsanto Corporation located in the United States, were kidnapped via airplane from the Erik Nielsen International Airport in Whitehorse shortly after they had arrived from Central America.

"The plane taking them away from Whitehorse was a small bush plane purported to be the air taxi from a luxury hunting lodge in the Yukon Territory, a lodge which the police have learned does not exist.

"The men, who had booked reservations at the phantom lodge on line, were met by armed terrorists at an air strip deep in the tundra. They were kept caged for several days until the arrival of their leader, a man on horseback dressed as the fictional character, Zorro.

"The leader told them they must pay for the death and destruction on our planet caused by their company and its products, but when questioned the men would not elaborate further on that topic to this reporter.

"The captives were taken by truck to another site on the tundra, stripped naked and turned loose just as the evening hatch of mosquito larvae soared skyward. The men don't know how long they were exposed to the insects, but suspect it was 'around an hour or so.'

"The truck returned and took the men back to the airstrip. They were then flown directly to Whitehorse General Hospital and left there for treatment. Hospital emergency room personnel said they all had arrived there 'in critical condition'.

“After a few days in hospital the men recovered and flew home. But during their hospital stay they were visited by an unknown woman impersonating an agent of the American Federal Bureau of Investigation. She left Z-shaped gold keychains for each of the men, telling them they were mementos of their time spent with Zorro. The woman is being sought by authorities for questioning.”

“Holy shit,” Booray said, with feeling, turning to his computer while reaching for the phone. In short order he was talking with Brian Scott, a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Force in the Yukon Territory . Booray had worked with Canadian police only once before, but those officers had impressed him with their dogged persistence. Brian Scott was no exception.

He told Booray the mysterious FBI woman had apparently slipped down a stairway to a rear exit and was gone by the time the nurse had responded to the patient’s frantic button pressing. Police, busy trying to find out where the men had been kept during their captivity, didn’t view the hospital’s reusable security tapes immediately. By the time they did the tape from the day of the woman’s visit had been taped over.

A camera at a gas station across the street from the hospital had caught the blurred figure of a trim woman matching her description, but it only showed her walking by in jerky three-second increments and no other cameras in the area had caught her image. From that it was supposed her ride had been waiting nearby and she was inside and away long before passing the next surveillance camera.

Scott faxed Booray an artist’s rendering of the woman, along with transcripts of interviews with the victims. The two lawmen promised to stay in touch with any developments and signed off.

“Who the hell are you, gal?” Booray wondered aloud, studying the attractive face of the mystery woman. Dark liquid eyes over high cheekbones, eyebrows lifting like gulls in flight, hair dark and severely pulled into a high braided bun.

*Latino, certainly, but with plenty of aristocratic Spanish blood in the gene pool, he thought. She looks like a flamenco dancer.*

He ran the picture through the national facial recognition file, but turned up nothing.

“No criminal record yet, huh, Sweetheart?” he said to the picture when Osteen handed him the negative results. “Well, give me time. I’m going to change all that.”

Later that day Booray, together with his own partner, Detective Paul Hogan, went to talk with Sam Diez, former partner of the undercover cop who’d been killed, Mateo Flores.

“I thought this case was cold as a witch’s tit,” Diez said, by way of greeting. “Glad it’s not.”

“Nope. It’s not. But it’s nowhere near hot yet, either,” Booray told him. “We’re just dogging the back trail, you know?”

Diez nodded. “Still, you’re here, so there must be something in the wind?” He said, his voice raised toward question.

"Yeah, not much, but something," Booray replied, and then filled him in on everything they had to date before asking Diez to tell him about Mateo.

"Mateo was intense. Staunch, committed, hard-working and intense, but hard to know. Hard to feel close to. I liked him fine and he was a good partner, one you could count on, but even though we joked around some, we never really connected at that deep level."

Diez paused, his eyes looked up toward the ceiling and his mouth pursed as he backtracked his memories.

"I know he really, really hated guys who abused illegal immigrants, though," he finally said. "His folks came from that background and I think they'd really been beat down by it, like so many are, you know?"

Booray and Hogan nodded. They knew.

"But this Zorro thing is kind of weird because I used to kid him about that all the time. Like if he ever gave up on being a cop he should think about buying himself a Zorro suit and taking down some of the bastards. It was a running gag between us. I even called his apartment the Don Diego de la Vega Villa."

The three men stared at one another, all having had a single startling thought, but just as quickly as it arrived, Diez shook his head.

"Mateo's dead, man. I saw the body. He was, like, more than dead. Jesus, that was an ugly way out," Diez said, frowning. "And the guy that was with him, that foreman, he got shot a few months later along with the old guy that owned the place that worked all those illegals. I wondered then if there was any connection, but I couldn't piece it if there was."

"Oh, there's some kind of connection," Booray said, "But we've just started tugging on that thread."

"Tell me about Mateo's friends and his wife," Hogan said.

"Not many friends and no wife. But he was serious about a girl and I think they were headed toward marriage. They had all the signs anyway. I liked her. She was good for him, lightened him up some, even though she had a touch of the cool in her own makeup. Her name was Juana, Juana Castelo? Castillo? Something like that ...

"Anyway, she was a grad student doing social work and that got her hooked into what was happening in the camps. I think that's how they met ... pretty girl. Big eyes and nice body. I like 'em rounder, but she looked good."

"How'd she take it when he was killed," Hogan asked.

"Absolutely devastated. It showed in her eyes. But even so she kept herself under control. I figure she was emotionally strong enough to have married a cop, 'cause fragile gals don't do so good with us. I'd say she was tough enough."

"Any idea where we can find her?" Hogan asked.

"Nah, but one of the gals in our office will maybe know. They used to all gab when Juana would drop in. I'll ask around and send you what I get."

And on that, with thanks all around, the men left it.

Booray and Hogan spent the next week driving all over Florida to meet with the four guys who'd been sent down the mine, the one survivor of the bee killings and the guy who had just come forward with his island tale.

The following week they traveled further afield to meet with five Alabama farmers and with the state attorney and governor of another adjoining state.

They discovered not one of the men was very willing to talk with them, but they still came back with enough material to process and sat in Booray's cubicle to sort through it.

"First of all. This fucker scared them all with future threats to their families if they talked to anyone and they one hundred percent believed him," Booray said. "And all of them have done what he told them after they were released. The frackers have all gone to work in other industries, same with the bee guy, and the farmers have all gone organic or quit farming altogether. The attorneys have gone back into private practice and aren't taking the high dollar cases anymore and the governor, given the position he's taken on issues recently, might as well just go ahead and become a card-carrying Democrat," Hogan said.

"The guy that still surprises me is that cholera guy, mainly because he was willing to talk with us and none of the other guys that went through that episode would," Booray said

"Yeah, but remember, he doesn't have any family to speak of. His folks are dead and his wife ran off with another guy not long after he returned from meeting our freaky Zorro. He's not wound as tight over that family threat as the others are," Hogan replied.

The two men sipped their coffee, deep in thought.

"He's smart enough, this Zorro creep. He disarms or avoids cameras and all the king's horses and men in our computer department haven't been able to back trail that fake resort website," Booray grumbled. "They think it was done on a throw away tablet, but they haven't been able to trace it."

"One thing's for sure, except for our cholera boy, none of them want to chance crossing this Zorro guy in any way," Hogan said. "He managed to make born-again believers out of them, that he'll do what he says he'll do and that they won't like it."

"None of them had a clue where they were locked up, either. The address was pretty much 'Anywhere Central Swampy Florida. And the Zorro guy is 'Anyone Latino Florida,' too. Slender, maybe five foot seven or eight, dark eyes ... he doesn't sound all that intimidating, actually."

"Yeah, but you forgot to add 'good with a bullwhip' to his resume' like that guy said he was."

"So I did. So I did."

The men fell silent once again, turning over the pieces in their minds. Finally Booray spoke.

"We need more. And while we were gone, Diez came through with an address for Mateo's old lady. I think I'll make a cold call over to her place today and see what she might be able to tell us."

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## Chapter 18, G.M.O. Stands for “God Move Over.”

The Yukon adventure had gone so smoothly we barely paused before moving on to our next one. I wanted to take a breather, because I always liked to see if we'd been followed in any way, but my peeps wanted to stay busy.

“It was a bitch dodging the hospital surveillance cameras when I had to hurry and get out of there,” I told Tina.

“Yeah, but you did it, so what's the worry? You worry too much, old girl. I haven't forgotten when you rented that horse 150 miles away so anyone checking would look in the immediate area, but not that far out. And you were right, they didn't. And how you left your cell for me to use when you went up to Canada so that there'd be a record of its use here. You always cross your T's and dot your I's, Juana.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, Tina, but there's just so much to think about in these things.”

“Think about this, then. We need to instruct some GMO people on what they're doing to our planet. I think it's time. We haven't even looked in their direction, even though they're just another part of Monsanto's domain. I read where the Mayan People's Council got Guatemala to repeal legislation called the “Monsanto law” that had granted the biotech giant special expansion rights into ecologically sensitive territory.

“Monsanto would have had exclusivity on patented seeds, but the Mayan people said that would have violated their Mayan right to traditional cultivation of the land in their ancestral territories. They're right, and I'm glad they won. But what about us? I have ancestors from all over this planet who have always grown things to eat. I want to protect us, too,” Tina concluded, with some heat.

Tina and I were totally on the same page about protecting our heritage seeds and livestock. We also felt strongly about protecting natural life in all its diversity (other than our target subjects, that is). I now said as much, adding, “We never want to be like those people who only worry about their own species, do we?”

“Hah, that's not ever happening,” she replied.

Tina and I had talked often about the phenomenon where the more something looks like people, the more people tend to care about it. First and foremost, and by a large margin overall, people care about people. Then they care about pets that look like people, the big-eyed dogs and flat-faced cats. Those are followed by most monkeys (especially the cute tiny ones); big apes; pandas, koalas, etc. Some people even care about other kinds of animals, like zebras, tigers, whales, sloths or elephants. A few care about birds.

But only a very few care about the well-being of fish and virtually none care about insects, other than to stomp them flat or poison them dead. Trees enlist some supporters, but as for most of the planet's native plant life? Forget about it.

Our plants are right now therefore under attack by BigAg and only a handful of people are fighting for them and their integrity, people who value heritage plants for their history, toughness and, in most cases, taste. They grow organic fruits and vegetables and save their OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

seeds, despite in many cases themselves being brought under legal attack by Big Ag, especially by our old non-friend the Monsanto Corporation.

According to Tina, Monsanto, a leading producer of genetically engineered seeds worldwide and the force behind the glyphosate-based herbicide, Roundup, was also the force behind most of those lawsuits.

“They sued for ‘patent infringement’ after their own GMO plant pollen infected the plants in adjoining fields, giving them the company’s genetically engineered seeds ‘without Monsanto’s permission.’ And they won!” She said, bafflement in her voice. “They won case after case, even though none of the plaintiffs were their customers and none wanted Monsanto’s damned GMO plants.”

“I read where some of those sued had even sought legal protection ‘in cases of inadvertent contact with Monsanto’s products,’ I told her.

“Fat lot of good that did for them,” Tina said, her disgust plain.

“I would think if Monsanto can patent seeds for financial gain they should be forced to pay for contaminating a farmer’s field, not the other way around. Monsanto should have been laughed out of court.”

“No shit, but not so. Basically the farmers were sued for theft,” Tina said. “They had to pay for ‘stealing’ something they didn’t even want. And we’re not talking one or two cases, we’re talking many hundreds when you add those who settled out of court, those who basically paid Monsanto for getting fucked to avoid having to pay even more for getting themselves fucked in the first place.”

Biotech foods jeopardize organic foods through genetic contamination. It has been proved time and again that the new genes engineered into foods by Monsanto and other GE-food companies have escaped (carried by wind or rain, insects and other sources) to cross into conventional and organically grown crops. Since national and international standards forbid the use of genetic engineering in any food labeled ‘organic,’ this means the contaminated crops grown from the contaminated seeds cannot be sold as organic.

“Because when we buy an organic apple tree for our yard or garden we don’t want chicken genes or fish genes or any genes other than apple in its DNA,” is how Tina put it.

Genetically modified foods are the brainchild of a very small handful of chemical companies that rushed gene-altered foods onto our farms and into supermarkets without waiting for any backup science proving they were safe. The science since, both here and abroad, has showed many hazards these biotech foods present to us and to the natural world.

But a large percentage of our politicians and judges are owned by factory farming and chemical company interests. They put their financial health far ahead of any concerns of their constituents.

“They won’t allow the growing of GMO foods in places like Saudi Arabia where women until very recently were not even trusted to drive cars, but our fields at home are full of GMO modified corn, soybeans, cotton and canola. And corn and soy are fed to our livestock, so our meat is GMO corrupted, too,” Tina said.

“We’re their lab rats,” I responded. “There have been documented cases of liver damage in mice caused by GMO potatoes. And in another study, most of the hamsters reared on a GMO diet were rendered completely sterile by the third generation.”

Polls show more than 90 percent of Americans support mandatory labeling of genetically modified foods, yet we’ve been denied that labeling for more than 20 years and our legislators, favoring biochem, continually press for closure on the issue once and for all. Sixty-four other countries label GMO foods, but not our land of the free.

“And, as the late-night TV pitchmen say, ‘But Wait! There’s more!’” Tina said. “Organic gardeners and farmers are also threatened by genetically engineered (GE) plants containing a manipulated genetic construct of the natural, non-chemical pesticide *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt).” My scientist friend then had to explained all that to me.

“Bt, not traditional pesticides, is one of the few options organic farmers have to control pests. But, with millions upon millions of acres of crops being planted carrying the gene-altered Bt, resistance has built up in insects, making Bt less effective for controlling them,” Tina said. “Any nearby organic farmers lose their major tool for controlling pests, forcing many to use chemicals and give up on organic farming.”

The same kind of problem scales up medically into the human population, because the genes for antibiotic resistance are used as markers when testing for the success of attempted gene transfers.

“This is done mainly for corporate convenience,” Tina explained. “They stick foreign genes into a food and then dump lots of antibiotics onto that food to see what happens. They know they’ve engineered the gene into the food cells when a food is not harmed by the antibiotic.

“Where that can screw us is when we eat that GMO food and our normal gut bacteria takes up the antibiotic resistance genes. Later, if we get really sick, the more common antibiotics like ampicillin and amoxicillin no longer work for us, because we have become resistant to antibiotics.

“It’s already happening in our hospitals. There are people dying right now because our first antibiotic line of defense against certain diseases is no longer working. People have built up a resistance to the antibiotics being used and not entirely through past overuse of antibiotics by doctors as was first thought,” Tina explained.

“After all, we’re now getting antibiotics in our food, in plants, meat, milk, you name it, and just like those insects in the fields that build a tolerance to pesticides, our bodies have built up a resistance to antibiotics.”

I shook my head in disgust, knowing consumers have no recourse to these practices other than to buy only organic products, which many of them truly cannot afford.

Our government’s no-longer-watchdog, the EPA, has actually done everything it can to assure us genetically modified products are just like those made the old-fashioned way.

“Chicken genes in apples? Fish genes in strawberries? This is normal?” I asked. “What happens to people with chicken or fish allergies when they eat these unlabeled apples or strawberries?”

“Want more bad news?” asked Tina. I shook my head no, but she continued anyway. “One of the main arguments they used for the adoption of GMO crops was that the use of agricultural chemicals would decrease. Well it did, for the first few years, but since then herbicide use has increased by more than 26 percent. Roundup use perhaps?”

“They’re spraying that known bee killer, the glyphosate found in Roundup, in the millions and millions of pounds over our fields every year. And just like the super-bacteria and super-insects, guess what? Excessive herbicide use has led to the development of ‘super weeds.’ That’s because the few weeds that survive the spraying possess some natural tolerance to the material. When these survivors reproduce they pass along their resistance to the next generation.

“Seventy million acres of farmland now have herbicide-resistant weeds growing on them, causing annual crop losses amounting to more than \$1 billion. We can’t change that so I say we go get some of their people for one of our educational workshops,” Tina said, showing her first really happy enthusiasm of the evening.

“Just how would you suggest we ‘educate’ them, Tina? This isn’t clear-cut cause-and-effect stuff like cholera or containment farming,” I pointed out. “What do we do? Lock them up and feed them the same GMO food millions of Americans are already eating?”

“Maybe we could ‘supersize them’ like that guy did to himself in the documentary? Feed them nothing but fast food for a few months? It’s pretty well stuffed with GMO material and it’s fattened Americans to where childhood obesity, once rare, is more common now than measles,” Tina said.

“True enough. So yeah, maybe,” I replied. “Or maybe we should just spray them down with poison like they spray our farmlands? It worked fine on that Old Man. It worked fine for them on my Mateo, too. Murdering bastards.”

“I can’t see how these people deserve to live, Juana. I really can’t.”

And that’s where we left it for that evening. I drove down to Miami for a consult with Butch a few days later. I found him at home watching the actress Linda Stirling playing the part of a Zorro-like character in the movie “Zorro’s Black Whip” made in 1944.

“See, it’s a woman Zorro,” he said, grinning broadly. “There really is nothing new under the sun.”

I watched the rest of the hokey thing with him while eating very-buttered popcorn and swilling icy beer. Once it was over I brought up the GMO topic and we hashed it over for hours.

Butch wanted to go after corrupt politicians who’d supported The Dark Act (The Deny Americans the Right to Know Act, also known as the Monsanto Protection Act), I wanted to go get some biochem executives. Tina had said she wanted them all.

In the end we did it her way.

## Chapter 19, Having it Both Ways

A few weeks later Zorro sat astride Toronado (one) looking down at a supreme court justice. It was pure serendipity.

The judge, a regular supporter of all legislation favoring corporate interests, had come to Florida on vacation and was met by Zorro, ostensibly part of an ongoing Latino street carnival filled with floats carrying garish pinatas as well as many costumed riders on horseback.

Zorro rode along with the Lone Ranger, Tonto, Pancho, the Cisco Kid and many others, all of them tossing candy and trinkets to the kids along the curb. Music and laughter filled the air.

A grinning Zorro leapt lightly off the back of his big horse and offered the stirrup to the justice who, looking at the big animal, seemed ready to refuse. Zorro persisted, reminding the judge he'd agreed to ride in the parade (via Tina's touch) and promising to keep the horse firmly in hand.

Zorro smiled, toadied, prodded, danced a few steps to the music, and grinned broadly until the judge, shaking his own head at his daring, climbed awkwardly onto the horse's back, assisted by Zorro.

The handsome black horse plodded sedately through the crowds, Zorro holding the reins. The justice smiled as the crowds parted for their passage. The mood was light, the festival fun. Zorro turned abruptly off the main thoroughfare into an alleyway just as a doorway into an old warehouse swung open beside him.

Before the justice could register predicament, he was in one, turned through the doorway and hearing the door slam shut behind him. He saw a van and then he saw the guns. Pulled roughly off the horse, he was gagged, blindfolded, shackled inside the van and on his way out the door and headed to The Property within minutes.

Toronado and Zorro went immediately back to the parade. Zorro smiled and waved at the happy crowds while working his way slowly along to parade's end where a line of horse trailers waited. There, nodding at other costumed characters unsaddling and preparing their mounts for transport, he unsaddled his own and loaded him into a trailer beside another black horse.

Carlos, at the wheel, drove them slowly through the crowded streets until reaching the highway leading out of town. He drove sedately along that same road for 70 miles, then turned onto a dirt road that made a large loop back onto the same highway. At the furthest bend of the loop he stopped and unloaded one of the black horses.

A blindfolded costumed Zorro was brought from the trailer and set astride the horse. Carlos slapped the haunch of the animal and let loose a rebel yell, startling the beast from standing still into full flight. The man on top had to work hard to stay in the saddle and by the time he had shaken loose his blindfold and brought his bolting horse under control, the horse trailer was out of sight.

The rider found himself in a remote area of Florida wilderness, unharmed, but confused by his capture earlier in the day and by his sudden release now. Clearly someone had not wanted him in the parade, but why?

Truck and trailer headed for The Property and no one inside gave any further thought to the parade's original Zorro soon long behind them. Everyone was high on the success of our mission and talked excitedly about the events of the day.

Butch had been the one to learn the justice was coming to Florida in the first place and texted me about it. I sent him a text that read, "Yes." The unwritten subtext, of course, was "it's on."

In an old magazine Tina had discovered the judge owned racehorses and had himself ridden horses in his youth. She knew, old now or not, he'd have a hard time resisting a ride on a horse as handsome as either of the Toronados.

I was the one who had heard on the news about the upcoming festival and thought it perfect for making a plan - and we did so.

All the usual careful preparation had gone into this new adventure, including Tina letting the Justice know he'd be brought on horseback to the parade media overlook and there recognized for his public service with the presentation of an award.

Juan had rented the truck, "no problemo," and Carlos got hold of a battered horse trailer belonging to a friend of a friend. He'd swapped out a license from a junkyard trailer and would swap it back when we got home. Toronado had ridden to the parade in comfort, if not style.

I had suggested Juan rent the truck, but that Carlos return it, making that identification thing just a little more complicated. While the two men looked very much alike, there were still many small differences. Should anyone ever be called to describe the man who had rented the truck ... well ... it might lessen their credibility to not really be sure about that mustache.

And Juan and Carlos would throughout, of course, be using stolen IDs bought expressly for this purpose.

When we reached the edge of the property we were met by Juan riding the ever frisky Toronado Two and leading one of my pintos. Toronado One was unloaded from the trailer and the blindfolded justice put back in the saddle. Tina rode the pinto and I swung aboard the handsome handful. Juan rode in the truck with Carlos.

Tina and I rode in absolute silence, not wanting our visitor to hear women chatting. At the path to the stable Tina lifted her hand in farewell and turned away from our small group, the pinto picking up his pace from walk to an eager trot once turned toward home.

When the judge and I reached the compound he, still secured in all ways, was pushed inside to join the six others captured earlier in the week. Now four CEOs from companies actively engaged in GMO promotion and/or glyphosate marketing plus two attorneys responsible for penning some of their most protective legislation - all taken without benefit of Zorro - gaped with astonishment through the prison wire at their captor.

"Undo him," Zorro said to the men, gesturing toward the judge. "Now."

The men untied the high court's representative and removed his gag and blindfold. The judge looked around him slowly, his eyes coming to rest at last on the Zorro figure. Having now their full attention, Zorro spoke.

"Welcome to the land of payback, Gentlemen," he said, smiling. "You will remain here as my guest to perhaps learn another view of the world. You have earned your right to be here by never giving a thought to the rights of others, not to human rights, animal rights, nor the rights of this planet to police its own business free of your poisons and - with a nod toward the judge - your poisonous decisions."

The usual questions were now voiced. Zorro politely heard them all before responding.

"Why are you here? I just told you.

"When will you leave? That remains to be seen.

"Who am I? Clearly I am Zorro, friend of the oppressed and downtrodden, here to uphold the rights of those unable to do so for themselves."

The powerful men, stripped of all power, stood confused and afraid. They were unable to respond, much less negotiate. Nimble pirates that they normally were, this was just too strange, too far outside their comfort zone.

"Allow me to tell you what is about to happen," Zorro continued. "Negative symptoms of glyphosate exposure show up in small animals in about four months' time, which is why you and your kind are such strong supporters of three-month scientific studies. Here, however, we'll have plenty of time and you are not small animals, so your exposure will surely have to be longer.

"As others have before you here, you will live and work in the enclosure in which you now find yourselves. You will be fed an all-American diet chock full of GMO foods. Much of it will be fast foods, but some will come right out of the supermarket's frozen food section. You will have some fresh fruits and vegetables, but I can assure you none will be labeled organic," Zorro said, still smiling.

"You will earn your food by work. You have noticed perhaps the pile of rocks at one end of your compound? You will shift 300 pounds of rocks to the other side of the compound each day. Those who choose not to work will not eat.

"As I am not willing to spray outside your enclosure with any of your poisons I can't expose you to your 'chemical drift,' as you so quaintly call it. Instead, you will take a daily shower in water to which the exact amount of glyphosate you deem safe has been added."

Zorro's last statement woke the men from their stupor.

"No," one lawyer cried.

"You can't do that. That's dangerous," said another.

"You could kill us," said the justice from the nation's highest court.

"Really? Kill you? Can it be it's *that* dangerous?" queried Zorro.

“No,” said the first man, emphatically. “But that much exposure could be too much, could be dangerous, it’s too uncertain. You ... can’t ...” his voice trailed off as he correctly read the facial expression behind the mask.

They all did.

“You men sicken me,” Zorro now said, with emphasis. “You’re like television executives who assure us that daily exposure to hours and hours of violence won’t in any way influence us, or our children. Then they walk to the next boardroom and tell the waiting client his one-minute TV advertisement will stay in the public mind forever.

“Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should,” possibly killed my grandpa. That cute little doughboy is nothing but a sugar pimp. So is that cereal cartoon tiger. But all those one-minute soundbytes stick in people’s brains and keep them buying certain products over and over again.

“And just like those TV ad men you’ve had it both ways far too long. You sell poisons and tell people they’re safe. *Safe!* They’re *not* safe. They’re fucking *poisons!* You are soaking our world, drowning it in millions and millions of *tons of poison* every year! So I assure you, while you are here, you - will - bathe - in - it - every - single - day,” Zorro said, accentuating every word.

“And you will eat those GMO foods you have so carelessly let loose upon the world. But for now, my friends, I leave you to enjoy the company of your fellow criminals. I am done with you.”

So saying, Zorro took the reins of Toronado One from one of the guards. He turned the dancing Toronado Two away from the fence while forcing number one to fall in behind. All three then moved rapidly out of sight.

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Booray was on his way to interview the dead undercover cop’s girlfriend when the call came in about the Supreme Court Justice having been kidnapped. When he heard over the radio there was a Zorro connection he switched on his siren and changed destinations.

He spent the next day viewing tapes of the parade, of the smiling Zorro; of the Justice riding, Zorro leading the black horse; of Zorro back in the parade again, alone, grinning, tossing candy to the kiddies. Cameras all along the parade route had captured those images, but there were no images of the judge climbing into the saddle - or out of it.

A camera at the end of the parade route showed the black horse being loaded into a battered old horse trailer, but the camera angle didn’t reveal the plate number. The truck was a big white Chevy Silverado identical to thousands of others on Florida’s highways.

Hundreds of people had seen Zorro in the parade. The parade’s chairman provided Booray with the name of the person dressed as Zorro and he immediately tracked him down, learning that Zorro had spent the day of the parade tied up in a horse trailer.

"I didn't see the guys who got me," he said. "I was untying my horse in the trailer when someone with a Latino accent put a gun to the back of my head and said 'I will cover your pretty horse with your brains if you move, amego.' I wasn't about to move after that."

"I wouldn't either, man," Booray agreed.

"Then he said something to someone else in Spanish and that other one put a gag on me, tied me up and put a pillowcase, or something like it, over my head. I could breathe OK, but it was stuffy," he said, relief to now be safely chatting about his adventure very apparent.

He talked on and on, but nothing Booray could use came of it.

"Did you report any of this to the police?" Booray asked him at one point.

"What for? I wasn't hurt. My horse wasn't hurt. All they stole was some of my time. They probably didn't know it, but they dropped me off less than 15 miles from home. I figure I got off more than OK. And what would the police have done about it anyway?"

Booray nodded. In the guy's shoes he wouldn't have bothered with a police report either. Waste of time.

The dogged detective spent another day following up on other loose threads here and there that, like everything else, lead nowhere.

"Thousands of Goddamned witnesses and no one saw anything we can use," is how he put it to Hogan.

He'd also been advised of the kidnapping of the four executives and two attorneys. Clearly it was all connected. He made calls, he talked with FBI officers, he learned outside surveillance cameras had malfunctioned at the site where they'd been taken. His frustration mounted.

The following day Booray again drove to interview the girlfriend of the dead detective. He found her older apartment building set well back from the street on spacious grounds. Solid and settled oaks dotted the expansive lawn. Palm trees lined the curb. The landscaping was tidy, well-kept, not flashy. Upscale, wealthy even, but not ostentatious.

He found the door bearing her apartment number and heard music playing. He rang the bell. Inside a dog barked and he heard her tell it is was a "good dog," but that it could "hush now."

There was a click of the peephole and he held up his badge in front of it. It took her about 10 full seconds before he heard the sound of locks being unsnapped and then the door opened.

The very pretty woman inside looked up at him, both eyebrows lifted in query over dark eyes that were curious, but unafraid. No surprise appeared across her features, but he was afraid some had registered across his own.

She saw a nice looking, six-foot-two-ish, brown-haired, hard-eyed man - probably in his early forties.

He saw a tall, slim, composed 30-something female wearing the face on the wanted poster from Canada.

OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

*Bingo*, he thought.

## Chapter 20, Legal Beagles

She invited him in. Offered coffee. He accepted.

“Black,” he said, and she nodded, saying with a small quick smile, “Me, too.”

He found a seat in her living room and thought it as neat and tidy as the rest of her. The color-scheme was mainly greens and blues, fat cushions sat atop furniture made of stainless steel, wood and glass.

A large Papasan chair, upholstered in a green/blue/turquoise tropical print brightened one corner. In another, three large corn plants growing tall in handsome green-glazed urns reached for the ceiling. Large clean abstract paintings and unframed mirrors brightened the mossy-green walls. Restful.

Bookshelves, themselves neat, lined the walls around a small desk holding a laptop, printer and a metal rack for office folders filled with different colored binders. A textbook of some kind was open on the desk along with a notepad and some newspaper clippings.

She soon returned with two steaming mugs and placed one on the glass-topped table beside him. She carried the other to the matching table nestled beside the Papasan, reached over and switched off the stereo and curled herself neatly into the chair, feet tucked under. Her dog lay nearby between them, watching him with friendly interest.

“How may I help you, officer?” She asked.

Booray studied her face as he had studied the poster on his desk. There were slight differences, but after all his poster was an artist’s rendering made from the descriptions of witnesses. There were bound to be small differences. He wasn’t a betting man, but even so he would bet his girl here and the girl on the poster were one and the same.

“I need you to tell me about Mateo,” he said.

To his shock her eyes filled with sudden tears. She shook her head as if to clear her vision, murmuring, “Sorry, I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry. I didn’t say that to upset you,” he said, meaning it.

She gave him another small smile. “Thank you. I ... you ... you caught me off guard, I guess. I haven’t heard his name spoken in months, maybe over a year. It was a shock to hear it. What can I tell you about him? Have you found his killer?”

“Killer?” He asked, watching with interest as her face slowly hardened.

“Yes, killer,” she said, her obsidian eyes now as cold as they were dark. “They called it an accident, all of them, but he was undercover in that place for a reason. I think ... I’ve always thought ... he discovered something there and they killed him for it ... horribly.”

“We looked into it pretty thoroughly, you know, and the case remains open and active,” I replied. “After all he was one of us. We take that pretty seriously.”

She nodded, even said “I know,” but her eyes remained unconvinced.

He took a sip from his mug and decided right then this woman really knew how to make a cup of coffee. Smooth, rich, and delicious. *Like her, actually*, he thought. He sipped again with pleasure before asking another question.

“Did you know the man who owned that property where Mateo died was killed last year by person or persons unknown? And that his foreman, the man who was working alongside Mateo when he died, was killed then, too?”

“I still have friends among Mateo’s co-workers, detective, so, yes, I did hear that. And I thought then someone else knew they were involved in something bad, something that had caused Mateo’s death and then later caused them to be killed, too. Drugs, perhaps?”

Booray studied her now calm face thoughtfully. This one was deeper than deep, he decided, and probably two steps ahead of him on anything he might throw at her here in her own domain. He decided he’d have to have her on his own turf to rattle her.

“Perhaps,” he agreed.

He asked her a few more basic questions about the relationship she’d shared with Mateo and then asked if she would mind coming by his office the next day to view a picture he wanted to show her. She readily agreed.

Smiling, he stood and handed her his empty mug. She smiled up at him in return, then turned and walked him to the door where he handed her his business card. They agreed to meet the following afternoon around three.

He felt her eyes on his back all the way as he walked to his car, but when he reached it and looked back toward the apartment, she had gone.

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“Dinner? 6:30? Halfway?” read my text.

“Yes.”

We met at an outdoor cafe’ midway between our two homes, “Halfway” being our code name for it.

“Whassup?” Tina asked.

“The police came to my house today,” I told her, wondering if I had looked as shocked at his arrival as she did hearing about it.

“The po-lice?” She asked, wide-eyed. “The-po-fucking-police? What did they want?”

“Not they, he. A detective dropped by to ask about my relationship with Mateo. And he wants me to come by his office tomorrow afternoon to look at a picture, but he didn’t say a picture of what ... I’m a little freaked, girlfriend.”

“Well, yeah. I am, too, now. But how did he seem? I mean, was he bullish or nice or what?”

“Nice mostly, considerate even. But he has cop’s eyes, eyes that have seen everything twice, and they missed nothing. He scared me a little,” I said, stirring my salad here and there with my fork. “This may be as routine as he suggested, a way to keep Mateo’s case from going stone cold, but it didn’t feel routine. My gut says he’s fishing for more.”

“Well, your gut hasn’t lead you astray yet. Keep your guard up and wear your poker face, but paint it all pretty first to distract him and dress with a man in mind. What time did you say you were going to the station?”

“Around three.”

“Then I’ll be at the Starbucks at the beach at 3:30 getting wired. Come thereafter and let me know what went on, OK?”

I agreed. And that’s where we left it.

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Booray looked up, said “Hi there,” and then, realizing he was smiling widely enough to show fillings, dimmed it down a bit.

He stood and offered her a chair while mentally registering she was as fresh as a spring breeze. Her long thick hair was pulled up in a high ponytail and she wore what his mother would have called a sundress. Lacy straps, ribbon-belt, semi-full skirt and sandals that glittered expensively. He caught a whiff of a light scent, also expensive he guessed, correctly.

“Coffee?” He offered, and in the spirit of full disclosure, added, “It won’t be nearly as good as yours.”

She smiled back, totally relaxed, saying, “Bring it on. I can take it.”

He found two clean mugs in the break room, one plain and one bearing the legend, “Let the games begin.” Filling them with coffee strong and sharp enough to peel paint, he returned to his cubicle where he once again admired his guest. They smiled at each other as he handed her a mug.

“Games?” She said, reading hers, still smiling.

“Nah, not with you,” he assured her, even as he turned the picture over and handed it to her without explanation. Once again she impressed him with her control. She took it, looked at it for a long moment, looked at him with question mark brows and said, “She looks a lot like me. Who is she?”

“I thought maybe you could tell me.”

“No,” she said, studying it, saying slowly, “It’s truly an amazing resemblance ... she could be my sister, even a twin sister ... but ... as I have no sister ...”, she shrugged expressively, handing the picture back.

“Can you tell me where you were this past Saturday?” he asked her, still smiling.

“Saturday? Sure. I was with my friend, Tina, all day. We went shopping all the way over to Spring Hill. Then we went to a parade in Brooksville, one town over. We had dinner there, too, and then drove home ... we got home pretty late.”

“Why Spring Hill? Why clear across the state? There must be stores you like around here.”

“Tina has family there she wanted to visit. She took me along to give her an out, because, well, you know how family visits can get. That’s especially so with Latino families,” she said, chuckling. “We spent an hour or so there, then went shopping, then to the parade and after that out to dinner. It was fun.”

She sat relaxed and smiling, bravely sipping our nasty coffee. Florida is one very big state, yet on Saturday she had been where the Supreme Court Justice was last seen. She had placed herself at our parade. This was absolutely no coincidence. It couldn’t be. Booray tried something else.

“How about three months ago, say early June? That picture you’re holding was made then, in Canada. Were you in Canada?”

“Canada?” She exclaimed. “I wish. It would have been lots cooler than Florida. But nope, I was right here all summer, sweating with the best of them.”

He doubted this woman knew the meaning of breaking a sweat, but he persisted by switching it up again.

“What can you tell me about Mateo’s interest in Zorro?”

She stared at him, eyes widening. “Zorro?” She said.

“Yes. Zorro. The masked avenger of wrongs done to Latino peasants. The over-the-top romantic swashbuckling whip-cracking Z-carving hero of the oppressed masses. I’m told Mateo found him a compelling figure, so much so that other cops teased him about it.”

She shook her head, biting her bottom lip prettily. “I ... I ... can’t think he cared *that* much. He dressed like Zorro at Halloween once or twice, but many men do, do they not?”

“Have you any objections to my checking your computer and phone records?” he asked.

The smile she’d worn since her arrival now slowly left her lips and eyes. Serious at last she replied, “I have no objections whatsoever, but what’s this all about? What do you suspect of me?”

His expression matched her own. “I regret to say I suspect you of many things,” he replied, “including kidnapping, endangerment ... possibly even murder.”

She stared at him in what appeared to be total astonishment. And then, again, she laughed. “Wow,” she said. “I sure didn’t see THAT coming!”

“May I have your cell phone? I want our people to examine it,” he said, holding out his hand.

She supplied it, saying, “You’ll have to stop by later for my laptop. I’ve already

made arrangements to meet a friend for coffee after leaving here, but I'll be home early this evening."

He nodded, slightly bemused. This was too easy. She was too confident. But then again, she might be bluffing.

"That will be fine," he said, smiling his warmest smile. "I'll see you around six maybe?"

"Six it is," she said, standing and glancing around as if surprised to find herself still in a police station. Nodding toward him in farewell, she took her leave.

He watched her trim form wend its way through the labyrinth of desks then caught Hogan's eye and jerked his head in her direction.

Hogan rose slowly, put on his suit coat, and eased himself into her wake.

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Tina sat wide eyed at the tiny table, coffee in hand. She began questioning me even before I was seated.

"How did it go? What did he want? Are you in trouble? Are WE in trouble?" The words tumbled from her lips like one long run-on sentence, but I shook my head warningly and said softly, "Later kid. We can't talk now and we can't meet at my place anytime soon. I'll just quickly say the police are definitely on our trail. Plan to stay at The Property with me this weekend and I'll fill you in then. Meanwhile, I'm certain I've been followed and he'll be here any second. We'll have to watch what we say."

I had taken a seat where I could easily see the door and, sure enough, within two minutes a man entered, ordered a coffee, looked around and then - apparently at random - seated himself at a small table within hearing distance of us.

I generally pay attention to those around me and I'm very good at remembering faces. I was more than 90 percent sure I'd seen his at a desk near Detective Thomas' cubicle.

Tina's exceptionally good at reading my face and she'd seen my eyes flicker meaningfully toward the man when he'd arrived.

"I still can't believe that detective suspects me of criminal activity, Tina," I said, leaning in towards her confidingly. "He even kept my cell phone and he's coming by my house in a couple of hours to get my laptop."

Reading my bewildered face correctly, Tina followed suit.

"What kind of criminal activity, for God's sake?"

"He said, for starters, kidnapping, endangerment and maybe even murder," I said, stretching my eyes wide and looking fearful.

"Murder?" She said, loudly, and then glanced around warily. Our neighbor looked deeply into his coffee, ignoring us. "Murder," she now hissed. "That's crazy."

OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

I nodded, steering the conversation along these same lines for the next five minutes or so, until even I was bored with it. Surely our nearby cop was, too. We hashed everything over except the unspoken questions I saw in her eyes.

“Isn’t Butch coming up this week,” she eventually asked, changing the subject.

“Nope, he told me he needs to stay home and get some work done. I told him he needs to get out in the country and relax and at least he finally agreed to do that. He said he’d do that this weekend. He really does work way too much. You should probably call him and tell him that, too. He always listens to you.”

She nodded, understanding she’d better call him and arrange a meeting at The Property for us all in a couple of days and that she’d have to wait till then for our real game of questions and answers. She didn’t like it, I didn’t like it, but we had to do what we had to do.

Right now, I had to bid her farewell. I got up, giving a light air kiss to both sides of her face and she did the same in return. She begged me to keep her apprised about the police. I promised I would.

I headed straight home, not bothering to look and see if I was followed. I was more than confident the cop with the map of Ireland stamped genetically across his face was somewhere close on my heels.

## Chapter 21, The Noose Tightens

Booray and Hogan leaned toward the screen. “There,” Hogan said, pointing. “That’s them.”

Booray nodded, acknowledging Juana and her friend, Tina, were right where she had told him they’d be, shopping in the town of Spring Hill.

After watching enough surveillance videos over a span of days to give them the terminal red eye, this final one confirmed what all the others had, that the women were indeed in the restaurant where they’d said they’d had dinner and had shopped in Spring Hill. But while Tina had been seen along the parade route in a number of places, Juana was not.

“Knock, Knock,” said Betty, peering into the cubicle at the men.

“Whatcha got, Osteen?”

“The results on that cell phone probe you ordered. Looks like your girl was in town when she said she was.”

Booray frowned, took the report in hand and reviewed it rapidly. His frown deepened.

“Damn. I was sure there’d be a Canadian call or two on here. But all of it is pinging off local ones.”

Neither of the two detectives wore a happy face. All they had so far, and it was tenuous at best, was that Juana hadn’t shown up in any cameras along the parade route.

“Maybe that restaurant dinner gave her the trots. Maybe she spent the entire parade on a toilet somewhere,” Hogan said, patently annoyed.

“Yeah, right,” Booray grunted. “As I recall they went to dinner *after* the parade, but it doesn’t matter. If she ... they,” he corrected, “are involved in all this, they’re smart enough to work the angles. They’d know we check surveillance tapes and cell phone records and laptops. Juana probably left her cell here with Tina for her to use when she was in Canada and used a burn phone to stay in touch, a phone she probably tossed into the tundra when she was done up there.”

“Juana? Tina?” Pretty cozy with these perps, aren’t you?” Hogan said, staring hard at his partner.

Booray looked startled, then ... guilty ... and then ... he nodded.

“You’re right,” he slowly acknowledged. “I *have* been thinking of them as Juana and Tina, two nice upscale girls who just happen to kidnap and kill people. They target bad people who do crap things, but you and I are supposed to protect everyone. This case is messing with my head.”

“Yeah, well, don’t lose sight of the goal, partner. We need to find the key to locking their pretty butts away for a long while. These are not nice girls. Try to remember that.”

Booray knew Hogan was right. Hogan was seeing this case clearly where Booray

was not. Booray had found himself impressed by what he thought the women had accomplished and by having left so few bread crumbs for police to follow. Meticulous planning and follow through was obvious and their acting skills were none too shabby either. He realized he'd been more than a little proud of them. It annoyed him.

As if reading his mind Hogan suddenly snorted impatiently and said, "They're playing us non-stop. Even that little drama in the coffee shop was an act for my benefit. That tall one you had in here made me the moment I stepped inside that door. I knew it, she knew it, the little one with her knew it. And she knew I followed her home, too. They're pretty slick. I'm glad you assigned others to follow them. They'd be looking for me."

Betty reappeared with more surveillance tapes of the parade route. The men sighed, but turned back to the screen to again look for the women. A laughing Zorro filled the screen instead. He was riding beside, but just ahead of, the Cisco Kid. Both detectives studied Zorro intently. Booray suddenly pressed the rewind button, hit play and leaned forward.

"What? What did you see?" Hogan asked.

Booray shook his head, saying slowly, "Nothing ... I thought for a second I saw one of them at the curb ... but it wasn't her."

Booray had never lied to his partner before. He'd seen something, alright. He'd seen something in the way the Zorro figure had moved, something in that grin that was pure Juana. He had almost gasped aloud, but contained it in time.

*Now what? He wondered. And why in hell am I keeping this to myself?*

~~~~~

"Misfit won't stop wagging her tail," I told Tina on my phone.

"Yeah, Watch is doing the same thing," she replied.

"Dogs are so funny. They somehow know we're planning to take them for a run in the country. I swear it's telepathic," I said.

"For sure. Hey, I've got something burning on the stove. I'll call you back."

I put down my phone and walked into my bedroom just as the throwaway phone - the burning burner - rang inside my bedside table.

"Hey," I said, answering it. "How in the hell are we going to lose these tails and get to The Property unseen?"

"Damned if I know, but we have a couple of days to come up with something. Are you sure Butch will be there?"

"Yep. He'll be there before noon and I'd like for us to be, too. But with the prisoners there we sure can't risk anyone following us. Keep your burner handy. I'll call if I can come up with anything. Now go ahead and call my cell like you said you would."

She did, I answered, we talked about absolutely nothing of importance for another five minutes or so for the benefit of anyone who might be listening and that was that.

I worried anyone doing surveillance might have a way to tap into our burn phone signals, too, but they might not be scanning for other signals and we had to stay in touch somehow. It was a gamble, but now that the police were watching us, everything was.

*Shit, shit, shit*, I thought. And swearing apparently helped, because I suddenly realized how we might lose our unfriendly tails and meet up with Butch.

Yesssssssss!

I picked up the burn phone and this time called Juan ...

~~~~~

Bright and early Saturday morning I picked up Tina. She was dressed in a short dress and her clunky two-inch heels made her appear almost as tall as a normal person. I had on shorts, a T-shirt and flats, making us almost the same height. We grabbed a couple of Starbucks and muffins, took them to a local seaside park and walked to a bench overlooking the water. There, out of earshot of anyone, I caught her up.

We were both shaken at being under constant police surveillance, but we had to accept that we were and that they weren't going away anytime soon.

"It's creepy being watched all the time," Tina said.

"Dead right," I agreed. "But it is what it is. We'll manage."

Leaving the park we drove to a nearby mall, the biggest one in the area, and were pleased to find a huge sale underway already attracting the buying public in droves. Deliberately parking out of sight of any obvious cameras, we grabbed our oversized purses and, chatting and laughing, went shopping.

Knowing the police would be watching us on candid camera later made us want to act stupid for their benefit, but better sense prevailed. We bought a few items: a blouse, a wallet, perfume - gaining store shopping bags in the process. We then went out into the mall where we passed a cinema in our search for a public restroom. There we changed out of the clothes we'd arrived in and into the clothes and wigs in our deliberately oversized purses.

Tina put on a short gray wig, a snap-up-the-front duster, ballerina slippers, granny glasses, then opened up a foldaway cane and by leaning on it gained nearly 40 years. She etched a few lines into her face around the eyes and mouth with an eyebrow pencil and carefully rubbed them in, adding another 10 years in the process.

I put on a short straight brown wig, big sunglasses, a baggy skirt, flip flops, v-necked T-shirt over a baby bump pillow and gained a six-month pregnancy.

Stuffing our oversized bags and shoes into our shopping bags and carrying our purchases we left the restroom one at a time, Tina first and me three minutes later. Tina took a seat near the mall exit and there we reunited.

Slowing my walk to accommodate the pace of my elderly companion, Tina now tottered along clutching my arm. She kept her back bowed and her face toward the sidewalk. I kept my face turned toward her and away from the cameras we had spotted on our way in.

We reached the elderly toyota wagon left for us by Juan and I helped Tina carefully into it before going around to strap myself into the driver's seat. Slowly and carefully. we left the lot.

Butch found our disguises hilarious. He wondered aloud how we'd retrieve our car, but I told him I planned to go back to the mall dressed like when we had arrived and just claim it. If we were questioned I'd tell them we'd decided to go to the mall cinema and had spent the day there watching movies back to back. We had actually walked toward the cinema for the benefit of cameras and then turned back to go into the bathroom we had just passed and there changed our identities.

Butch had started cooking the moment I had let him know we were on the way. Steaks on the grill, baked potatoes in the oven, corn on the cob atop the stove, watermelon on ice. All-American favorites for three All-American Adventurers.

After eating I had a look in on our prisoners via closed-circuit TV. They all looked just fine, even the Supreme Court justice. True, he looked 10 years older than he did when on the bench, making him appear roughly 112 years of age, but he seemed healthy enough. Disgruntled, but healthy. So did his cell mates. I felt no need to suit up as Zorro to go torment them. Time enough for that in future.

Butch, Tina and I discussed our police situation ad nauseum, but couldn't see our way out of it anytime soon. It felt so good to be out from under surveillance that none of us wanted to leave. Butch, the only one of us not under the harsh eye of the law, said he planned to stay on an extra day if that was OK?

"Sure, fine," I told him. "I wish we could stay, too, but I don't want an all-out bulletin posted when we don't show up for my car."

We lazed around until it was absolutely time for us to head back if we expected to get to the mall before it closed. Butch had kept us chuckling all afternoon and he joked all the way to the car when it was time for us to leave. But I caught a glimpse of his face in my rear-view mirror as we drove away. He looked every bit as worried as we were.

I parked Juan's car where we had picked it up, sliding the key under the mat just as we'd found it. Tina and I, now dressed again in our morning outfits, walked briskly to my car. No police officers were waiting for us.

Afraid my car might now be bugged after sitting unattended all those hours, we talked mainly about our fictional afternoon during the drive to her place. We'd both looked up trailers on the movies the night before, so it was easy to talk about the "terrific" movies neither of us had seen.

On the drive to my apartment I just listened to music. No out loud musings for me! And once home I was even careful in my conversations with Misfit and Nightstalker. After all, my house could be bugged, too.

I hated this!

## Chapter 22, The Looooooooong Arm

“Businesses want to increase sales, produce for less and get more money for their product,” said the Wall Street expert on the afternoon talk show I had on for company while I did household chores. “The bottom line is they will always base their decisions on profit and not on what’s good for the world, their employees, customers, society or the environment. Good for mankind vs profit? No contest. Profit is what they’re all about.”

The audience clapped and cheered.

“And there you go, kids,” I told my fur-people. “Not what he said because, despite the occasional altruistic employer, what he said is all too often true. What I find wrong with this picture is that so many people will approve of anything as long as it makes money. Half our population apparently approves of a misogynist racist like Donald Trump because they think he’s a billionaire. Well I don’t.”

Unlike apparently most of the world’s population, most especially those in these United States, my pets and I all knew that money - like history - is merely a fable agreed upon. The powers that be get to decide the value of a dollar, or the pound, or the yen, and then all the rest of us get to fall in with that assessment.

In and of itself money is an inedible intangible and therefore useless, which any starving person knows. But if there’s someone around willing to trade them food for money, it’s game on all over again.

While I very much enjoyed being a person of means, I also knew I’d be OK with far less in the bank. Having money on tap allowed me to live comfortably while indulging my hobbies of higher education, dancing, imprisoning others and the occasional murder. But I knew even without it I would have earned scholarships for hobby one and become more creative to accomplish hobbies three and four.

“My money can’t buy me out of the mess we’re in right now though, kids,” I told my pets sadly. “It really can’t. I wish something would change.”

And right on cue the doorbell rang, sending Misfit into a barking fit and Nightstalker to the top of the bookshelf.

Through the peephole I got the unwelcome view of Booray Thomas, my large detective at large, looking stern, perhaps even threatening. His ringing my doorbell didn’t mean I was saved by the bell. More likely quite the opposite.

I wished I could ignore his presence and slip out the back door, but he had to be faced. With a sigh, I opened the door.

~~~~~

Booray and Hogan had spent all that morning viewing mall tapes. Juana and Tina were there alright. And then they were not.

The men followed them on cameras in and out of stores, watched them buy girly things, watched them pass the mall cinema and look at all the movie posters on display, watched them go into a bathroom. And there the drama ended. They never came out of the john.

They watched again and again as woman after woman enter the restroom and woman and woman exit it, but not Juana and Tina. They saw fat women, young women, old women, women with kids, pregnant women, black women, Latinos, Caucasians, but they didn't see the duo they were looking for.

Booray, suspecting now that Juana was more than accomplished as an actress, looked closely at every one of the women exiting the bathroom, but he still didn't spot the ones he sought.

No one, of course, exited the facilities and looked straight into the overhead camera either, so full facial frontals were the rare exception. Mostly the women turned immediately right or left and quickly moved on.

The two men watched the bathroom video intently many times. They acknowledged the women they wanted had certainly donned disguises, so they checked for height, body type, movement, to no avail. One supposedly pregnant woman could possibly have been Juana, Booray briefly thought, but she could just as easily have not.

And then - *duh* - at the exact same moment they both realized they needed to look for the same two women entering AND exiting the restroom facility, either separately or together. Even so it took them many rewinds to be sure, but they eventually realized that no matter how far back they rewound the tape, no thin little old gray-haired lady or brown-haired pregnant woman had entered the bathroom.

Having finally picked up the scent the two detectives watched still more tapes until, sure enough, they eventually saw the two women hook up at the door and exit the mall together. They watched as their suspects slowly crossed the parking lot and out of range of any cameras.

Now, hours later, Booray stood looking down at the non-pregnant Juana, realizing as he did she had probably padded the inside of her cheeks and lips when disguised for that mall video. Juana smiled and invited him in, settled him into what had become his chair and excused herself to make coffee.

*It's all very civilized, Booray thought, but I've got you now, lady.*

He told her so when she returned, describing the disguises worn by her and Tina, asking her where they had gone after leaving the mall.

She told him he was clearly mistaken and that she and Tina had spent the day and early evening inside the cinema. She told him the movies they'd seen and gave him their plots, chapter and verse, even recommending one of them for his next date night.

He sipped his coffee, ignored her attempt at personal small talk and told her they had not seen her or her friend exit the cinema, or the mall either for that matter.

She told him cameras were not infallible and perhaps the ones supposedly recording them had failed at a critical moment.

"I saw something like that the other night on TV," she told him, straight-faced. "A camera failed to record a suspect in a robbery just when he turned to face the camera. It was very frustrating for the police officer trying to catch him."

Angered now at her arrogance, he asked when and why she had decided to become a murderer.

She said she had never even considered such a thing and never would.

He handed back his empty coffee mug and told her he wouldn't return to her house until he came with a search warrant - or to arrest her.

She said he was mistaken to think her guilty of any crime and was sure he'd never have any reason to return to her home.

And on that note they parted and neither were smiling.

~~~~~

"We'll have to kill them," Tina told her later that day. "We need to get rid of Thomas and Hogan both."

The two friends were once again in the waterfront park, Starbucks in hand. Juana had easily spotted the officer tailing them and could see him now sitting in his car reading a newspaper. There was no place he could get near them where they now sat and he clearly realized it.

Juana also realized they'd have to find another place now because, after coming here twice, their bench would probably have a "bug" in place by tonight ready for their next visit. The thought jarred her enough to pull Tina to her feet and for the two of them to move two benches over, closer to the water.

"We can't kill them, for heaven's sake. They're police officers. We'd never be free of police scrutiny," Juana said, once they were seated again. "And you'd better light a candle for both of them, too. Because if either of them meets an unhappy end for any reason you and I will be suspects number one and two!"

"Well, we have to do something, Juana. We can't even meet now except in wide open spaces, we can't go to The Property, you and I can't talk on the phone, I've even told Butch not to call me and ... well ... I miss his calls. This is nuts," Tina said, angrily.

Juana shared her frustration even while her ears had perked up hearing Tina say she missed hearing from Butch. But murdering two police officers was out of the question, and besides she'd decided Booray was probably a nice man. She didn't want him dead, and certainly not for being good at his job.

“Let me work on this, Tina,” she said. “I’ll come up with something, you know I will. Meanwhile, let’s list some other places where we can take the dogs and meet up out in the open. We’ll assign those places code names so there won’t be any monitoring devices in place when we show up.”

“Gah,” Tina said. “What a pain in the ass.”

Even so, between them they came up with several places and assigned them A, B, C, etc. name tags for future reference. Then they assigned themselves a meeting for nine the following morning at location letter A.

After they split up, Juana drove around aimlessly for over an hour thinking of ways to set up a meeting with Butch and discarding every idea almost as soon as she had it. Tina was right about one thing, having a police escort made every single thing difficult.

She didn’t want to let go of the cage-full of prisoners at The Property, but keeping them now had become very difficult with her every move under surveillance. She considered turning them loose with a stern warning, but what would they have learned from that?

She hadn’t forgotten she had a disobedient former prisoner to recapture and incarcerate, either.

So there was lots to do and think about while avoiding still more police suspicion. Juana wondered if might not be time to pull up stakes and go away for a while. She hadn’t actually planned for this contingency, but she certainly could work out the details now that she couldn’t actually work on any adventures. She had plenty of mental time available.

Juana finally arrived home, waved cheerfully at the police officer tailing her as he parked to set up watch, and let herself into her house. Mischief met her joyfully. Nightstalker informed her his food bowl was empty and that he’d be shopping for a new owner if she didn’t shape up.

A thought suddenly moved in from left field and she reeled it all the way to study it up close. Maybe she and Tina could fake their own deaths and move out of the line of fire by that process? They could stay at The Property for as long as was necessary and then relocate to faraway places.

*Maybe? Possibly? ... but then we’d have to leave Florida.*

“I love Florida, damnit,” she said aloud.

*Well, yeah. Who doesn’t?* thought her two pets.

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Booray and Hogan were reviewing the work records of those taken in Zorro’s last kidnappings. They’d found a common thread in the men’s research, promotion and sales of GMOs, eventually deciding that was the key to why the men had been taken.

“But where the hell are they?” Hogan wondered out loud.

Booray shook his head. He’d researched land sales statewide for Juana’s name on OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

deeds and had found nothing. Tina's name hadn't shown up on any real estate holdings either. They had to own some property somewhere though, somewhere they could keep prisoners, and bees, get rid of bodies ... bees!

He looked again at the name and location of the hospital where the victim of the bee stings had been taken. *If the guy was stung hundreds of times and had still lived, the land where he'd been attacked had to be somewhere not too far away*, he thought, then said as much to Hogan.

Following up on Google they studied an area map, pointing out places that might turn up something.

"I've hunted deer near there lots of times," Hogan said. "It's pretty rough country, mainly swamps and timberland cut through with narrow blacktop roads."

"Sounds perfect for their purposes," Booray said. Hogan agreed.

They decided to take a run over to the area the following day. Booray planned to take pictures of his suspects with him to show around gas stations or any other businesses they might find.

The day for their road trip dawned clear and shiny with promise. Both men looked forward to a day's hunting in the field. Styrofoam cups of java in hand they talked a lot about their case and made a lot of bad jokes about it, too.

"If anyone had ever told me I'd ever be going after Zorro for my perp I'd have had them locked up for observation," Hogan said.

"And I'd have signed off on the paperwork for you," Booray agreed.

Booray had printed out a map of the area they planned to search and reminded Hogan they had both gone hunting there together about a half hour west of there several years ago. Forty minutes down the road he turned west on a narrow county road that would ultimately take them right to the town and hospital where the bee victim had ended up.

After that turn the traffic soon thinned down to virtually none. Soft light filtered greenly through the leaves as they threaded their way through a narrow tunnel of trees flanked by deep water-filled ditches.

Booray didn't hurry. He wanted to peer up every dirt exit off the blacktop along the way for signs of any regular traffic in or out. Both men studied the terrain intently and enjoyed the drive, especially the wildlife.

Mom turkeys shepherded lanky chicks along the shoulder. Some distance ahead a black racer rippled like a ribbon of silk across the blacktop and into the grass beyond. Grazing deer raised their heads to watch them pass, but none took flight. Hunting season was still several months ahead and clearly they knew it.

A few hundred feet ahead a seven-foot 'gator walked stiff legged up onto the road, marched purposefully across it and slid into an identical ditch on the far side. The big reptile had completely disappeared into watery blackness in the few seconds it took for them to reach that spot.

Hérons and egret fished all along the ditches while kingfishers, perched on overhead power lines, guarded their staked out territories. Gopher tortoise grazed on cactus in burned over areas.

Vultures, butts bobbing like club dancers, swirled and swarmed over rare road kills of 'possums and 'coons.

This was the real Florida they were traveling through and at one point both men simultaneously sighed deeply with contentment, then chuckled self-consciously.

There were no diners, fruit stands, gas stations or motels of any kind along the road they traveled. The first of any of these was a small Shell station on the very outskirts of the town where the hospital was located.

They stopped, bought a coke, chips, then showed their pictures to the staff, getting negative head shakes in return. Back in the car they soon noticed a "Mexican and Cuban foods" restaurant and, deciding while it was still early it was not too early for a lunch break, they stopped again. Pushing open the fingerprint-rich glass door into the artificially frigid air, the men casually studied their surroundings.

Well-used tables and tiddley chairs filled the dingy room between booths lining three of the four walls. A cooler near the counter was filled with Mexican brand sodas and beer lazily sweating beads of water into the ice in which they were packed. Dusty sombreros, flower pots stuffed with faded plastic blossoms, and rusted tin lizards decorated the walls.

Latinos - mainly men - hunched over plates spooning up food. And over all hung the rich ripe welcoming odor of chili peppers, onions and cooking meat.

A buxom woman with Indio features and thick black hair pulled into an incongruous curly pile atop her head brought warm corn chips to their table along with a bowl of salsa hot enough to melt tarmac. She left and returned with tall glasses of ice water, a notepad, and her same surly attitude.

The detectives studied the short menu printed on the blackboard behind the counter, settling on chili rellenos, plenty of tacos, rice, beans and sweet iced tea with lemon. Their waitress brought the food fairly quickly and, sampling it, they found it tasty. Smiling, they said so, but got no smile in return.

"She's made us," Booray said to Hogan after she'd walked away.

"They all have," Hogan replied and Booray, having felt the tension throughout the room, knew he was right. Surely some illegal immigrants sat in nearby booths or worked in the back kitchen and there was probably a stash of illegal drugs around here somewhere, too. The place had that kind of feel.

Booray's eyes met the hard black eyes of a tough looking hombre seated clear across the room. Their eyes locked briefly before the stranger dropped his back to his plate, ignoring Booray's ongoing stare.

*There's something about that one,* Booray thought, frowning, his cop radar humming.

Carlos, eye still on his plate, swallowed the last of his enchilada, his mind churning as he sought reasons for these two city cops being here so close to The Property. They were

heavyweights, these two, he felt it. Just like he'd felt the hair on the back of his neck stir when that taller one had looked at him.

Later, when the detectives got up to pay, Carlos put himself in line behind them. He hoped for a glimpse of the pictures they had tried to show their waitress and were showing now to the cashier. Unlike their waitress the cashier studied the photographs carefully, but like her he shook his head.

"I haff navar seen them," he said.

The moment Carlos caught a brief flash of one of the surveillance photographs showing a laughing Tina and smiling Juana, Carlos was grateful the cashier was lying through his gapped teeth. Both women had broken tortillas in here many times.

The cashier's worried eyes now searched out Carlos behind the backs of the departing detectives. No words were exchanged. None were needed. Their faces spoke the thought between them: "No good thing can come of this."

## Chapter 23, Florida's Poisonous Plants, Snakes and Insects

Misfit and Watch were doing the dog dance, biting at the forepaws of the other in turn while they whirled and twirled and tangoed. Tina and I stood in the middle of the dog park watching them and laughing at their antics.

"It's been too long since we've got them together. Look at the fun they're having," I said, smiling, as the odd pair (big lab and smaller fuzzy cur) raced past us toward the far perimeter of the park.

"Yeah, Baby," Tina hollered at them as they rocketed past.

We could only assume our cop escorts were enjoying the view as each of them had parked behind trees and shrubs where we couldn't get a clear view of them, only bits of their cars. We figured they could probably see us just fine.

"Why are we here, Juana?" Tina asked.

"To let the dogs play, of course," I told her, then added she was about to fly down and get Butch and the two of them then go collect our former prisoner, the one who had seen fit to blab to the cops about Zorro. I asked her to call Butch on her secondary phone (ie: one she'd soon toss) and get him to pick up some more throwaway phones in Miami for all of us.

I also told her to tell Butch he'd have to pick her up at the airport and it wouldn't be in Miami. Our pilot, Clay, would land at a small airport en route to Miami, but nowhere inside any controlled airspace.

"Tell Clay for this flight we want him to fly his small buzzing six-seater," I said, knowing he'd rather fly a tidy corporate jet, but I wanted him on visual flight rules (VFR) only and not zipping in and out of air space where he'd be remembered by a paper trail of recorded and logged flight plans.

Clay would be flying this trip with only his iPad and GPS to guide him. Part of that flying would be after dark, too, but he'd done it many times before. No worries.

"Once you get the prisoner you'll take him to The Property and then stay with Butch at the cottage over the weekend. I'll get Juan or Carlos to bring you back here and get Clay to fly Butch back to an airport near where he left his car and he can then taxi over to get it."

"What if the prisoner-to-be doesn't want to get caught? He should be on red alert don't you think?"

"Shudda, wudda, cudda. You'd think so, wouldn't you? But it's been three weeks, almost four, since he ratted on us. He'll have dropped his guard by now. Statistically people just can't stay on red alert for very long."

"We do it all the time."

"Yeah, but we're not people. We're serial killers. We're a different breed," I said, laughing.

Surprisingly, Tina didn't laugh. She looked suddenly pensive so naturally I called her on it.

"Yeah, I know you were being funny, Juana. But it kind of creeps me out to think of myself that way. I never did the things serial killers are supposed to do as a kid, like set fires or torture animals ... actually it's more like my animals now torture me," she said, breaking a small smile. "I don't associate myself with serial murders, which I know must be denial in the first degree."

"If it is, I'm at the same level, and in my case you can add dissociative disorder as well, because when I'm Zorro, I'm Zorro - and when I'm Juana, I'm Juana."

"We are what we are I guess," Tina said, shaking her head. "I just never thought I'd become this kind of person. Even more, I would never have believed I could become this kind of person and still be able to like myself ... but I do."

"I like you, too, Kiddo. And while I don't always like Zorro, I gotta say I admire him deeply."

We grinned at each other, bemused and slightly amused at our conflicted personas.

I told her I'd go feed and visit her cat, Butters, but would keep Watch at my place while she and Butch had their adventure without me. I delivered that last sentence with a fake leer and almost fell over when Tina instantly turned beet red.

And then, instead of her making the expected snarky remark, she immediately took off while shouting back over her shoulder she'd pick up Watch when she got home from Miami.

*Well, well, well,* thought I. *So the wind is finally now in that quarter.*

I'd known for years Butch had an ongoing thing for Tina. He'd convinced himself he was too old for her, that she'd never be interested and he had seemingly been unable to talk himself around that. I had suspected her feelings for him had perhaps shifted in his direction in recent months. Her sudden flying of the color beet had confirmed it.

Mentally wishing them a romantical weekend, even while knowing a romance between them had the potential to change our entire group dynamic, I whistled up the dogs and headed for my car. Watch looked around for Tina and then, head cocked, looked up at me.

"She's gone, kiddo," I told him. "But we'll have fun without her. You'll see."

Clearly Watch agreed, because he jumped into the back seat with Misfit without a moment's hesitation. Tina and I often kept each other's pets when needed and Watch was very, very fond of the dog biscuit "cookies" I kept on the kitchen shelf and tossed his way from time to time. So although his love for me was mostly cupboard love, it was still love and I'd take it.

Once back at my place both dogs enjoyed a cookie and then, worn out from their active romp, found a comfy place to snooze. Misfit lolled on her back on the couch while Watch stretched out sideways full length on the floor. They made a snooze look very tempting, but I made myself coffee instead.

While the pot toiled and troubled I searched my bookshelves for my copy of a small booklet entitled *Florida's Poisonous Plants, Snakes and Insects* bearing its cover notation, "*This book might save the life of one you love ...*"  
OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

Or ... I thought ... *make the life of someone unlovable fairly miserable, and perhaps even end it.*

I also carried to my Papasan a copy of a color print book on wild plants of the tropics and subtropics, a notebook, pen and the scalding hot mug of coffee I set down to cool beside me. Fully cosseted, I began my research:

“Crab's-eye or Rosary pea ... common name, *Abrus precatorius*, a climbing woody vine ... ‘a toxalbumin abrin, concentrated mostly in the seed. Symptoms include weakness, trembling hands, nausea, vomiting, severe diarrhea, cold perspiration, weak and accelerated pulse. Burns to the mouth and esophagus may occur ... the mature seed has a hard coat and if swallowed whole will pass through the intestinal tract and do no harm. One seed thoroughly chewed, however, could be fatal ...’

“Boxwood ... scientific name, *Buxus sempervirens* ... the toxic principle is buxine, an alkaloid ... symptoms include abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhea (occasionally bloody), and convulsions. Respiratory failure may result in death ... more common in North Florida ...”

“Water-Hemlock, Cowbane ... *Cicuta mexicana* ... always found growing near or in water ... toxicity, cicutoxin (resin-like substance similar to picrotoxin) especially in roots ... symptoms include abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, salivation, mental excitation and frenzy, violent convulsions, labored breathing, and rapid pulse. Pupils dilate and delirium is common. Symptoms appear rapidly (within 15 minutes of ingestion) and death may follow consumption of a lethal amount as quickly as fifteen minutes ...”

Page after similar page followed. I looked up pictures as cross reference and made a few notes, but obviously I would have no trouble finding what I needed, in one case right outside my apartment door. The Property was also home to many plants useful for my purposes.

“I love our poisonous Florida, kids,” I said with feeling to the dogs. Both thumped their tails in total agreement, but neither opened their eyes.

Meanwhile, over at her place, Tina packed her overnight needs into an oversized purse, called our pilot, Clay, on her private phone to set a departure time and called Butch on a private phone to firm up their plans.

She told me later she drove at a sedate pace to the airport, but just as she was passing the gate she speeded up and then made a sharp turn in, hitting the gas again. The cop close behind missed the turn and couldn't immediately turn back because of following traffic.

Driving straight to the waiting plane, she left her car keys on the seat, climbed quickly aboard and rejoiced as it headed out to the runway while she was still buckling herself in.

She saw her police shadow arrive right before the pilot made his turn for take off, but there was nothing he could do by then to stop her. As the wheels of her plane left the tarmac she saw him enter the airport office. The cop would try to learn of her destination to plan accordingly.

Sure enough, the radio call came almost immediately, but Clay passed along the information I had given him. “Destination south by southeast, but well clear of Miami airspace. Passenger still undecided on which airport.”

The office and Clay had a few more back and forths, including being told the police wanted him to return with his passenger. The calls ended when our pilot told them curtly he'd been hired to do a job and intended to complete it.

*I'll bet my shadow's superiors tear him a new one for letting me out of their sight*, Tina thought happily before settling back to enjoy both the flight and her buoyant feeling of being free.

Clay had some concerns, knowing they could be tracked every time he radioed a tower with his call sign, but he was experienced enough with Juana's often secretive requests to plan his own way through that particular maze. Problem solving is part of being a good pilot after all.

In Miami, Butch had put together his own plan on how to recapture the lawyer who had blabbed to the media. Juana had said the guy would have to be locked up for an indefinite stay since the threat to his family had failed, apparently because he didn't really have one.

Butch decided a straight-up poke-a-gun-in-his-face kidnapping might be the best way to go and having decided, acted. So when the plane touched down at the airport in Pompano Beach, Butch and his prisoner wearing sunglasses over his bandaged eyes were standing right beside the tarmac as it taxied in.

As the plane stopped Tina climbed out onto the wing so that Butch's prisoner, at gunpoint, could climb aboard and into the back. Butch then climbed in beside him and Tina slid back into her front seat beside their pilot. Their "blind" prisoner was quickly handcuffed, with the handcuffs secured to a bolt in the bulkhead installed for that purpose.

With plenty of fuel still in the tank for the hour's flight ahead, Clay headed the plane back out onto the runway and, once airborne, banked west out over the everglades and then eased around toward the north.

Clay flew the hour and some change to the private landing strip he'd used many times when taking Juana and her friends to The Property. There he touched down and, like everyone else aboard (except their prisoner), waved at Carlos and Juan who were waiting to take them to The Property.

The prisoner was taken away by Juan and tossed in with the other prisoners to get acquainted. Watching on the closed circuit TV, Tina could plainly see they were no longer the vigorous group of men she'd seen not long before. Those glyphosate showers appeared to actually be taking a toll on their health. Surprise, surprise.

Carlos had told them the prisoners complained non-stop about headaches, nausea, insomnia, eye pain, itching ears, shortness of breath, vertigo, weakness and fatigue. Some now sometimes even staggered when they walked. And while the guards didn't care, Tina did, and she knew Juana would, too, when they could finally all sit down together and talk about it.

She wished they could document this current "study" for researchers, because the men were showing identical symptoms to so many people (particularly the elderly) living where in season "agricultural drift" had become virtually a daily occurrence.

Tina blamed poison sprays and food additives first for virtually every modern ailment until proven otherwise. So far no one had actually proven otherwise to her. Conspiracy theorists

have nothing on Tina, but who's to say any of them are actually wrong? *Who benefits* from them being wrong?

Tina clicked on the news and learned the lone star tick was now suspect in causing dangerous food allergies to meat, transferring something in its saliva from deer to livestock to cause the problem.

*It could just be the non-stop poison spraying out there and not ticks causing this,* Tina thought. *But they can sell more poison to kill the ticks this way and stay in the clear themselves.*

Switching the TV back off, Tina went to explore the contents of the kitchen and soon assembled the ingredients for a tasty meal. When Butch arrived back at the cabin his nose did a happy dance, all due to the splendid fragrance of simmering bacon and onions.

"Watcha got cook'n, good look'n?" he asked eagerly.

Tina grinned at him over the boiling pot to which she now added a package of pasta. "Bacon alfredo with onions over pasta and a salad of three or four different kinds of tomatoes and basil from the garden out back. Will that suit you?"

"That'll suit," Butch said. "That'll suit just fine."

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Back in her apartment Juana paced. It was raining a slow light drizzle outside, but she wanted to be busy at The Property and not under the confinement imposed by the officer in the car parked within view out front. She felt as disgruntled as Nightstalker who glared down from the top of her tallest bookshelf at the two dogs sprawled across his domain. Nightstalker and Misfit got along just fine, but in his savvy cat brain two dogs together become a dog pack, something smart cats always avoid.

Watching Nightstalker made her remember Butters. Pleased with a reason to leave the house, rain or no rain, she loaded the dogs into the back seat and headed over to Tina's place. Leaving the dogs in the car she let herself in and had a fine visit with the talkative old cat.

"I know, I know. She's gone and she didn't even tell you she was going," Juana told him.

"Meow, meow, meow," Butters said loudly and bitterly.

"She'll be back, honest. Meanwhile here's a bowl of your favorite kibble and here's some fresh water and here's a can of the finest stinky fish to make your day better."

Butters was purring loudly by this time, pleased with the menu. The purring didn't slow even when he dived with gusto straight for the stinky fish. Juana took that as her cue to leave. Petting the geriatric fuzz ball one more time she promised to be back in the morning for a longer stay and then headed back outside.

Turning the rather sharp corner of the walkway at the corner of the building she ran headlong into Detective Thomas, startling them both.

OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

"I was told you were here," Booray said. "We need another talk."

"Fine. I was just here feeding Tina's cat while she's away. Do you want to talk here or over a burger. I'm famished."

Booray hesitated, realizing he was hungry, too, and then thought perhaps she'd be more forthcoming with him over dinner.

"A burger actually sounds good," he said, his stern face breaking into a slight smile. "How about Jando's place over on Mangrove Avenue?"

"Done," she said, smiling back. "I'll drop the dogs off at my place and meet you there."

Booray walked over to tell the officer assigned to follow Juana that he'd take over for the next few hours and would call when surveillance was again needed. He then drove to the well-known steakhouse to wait. It wasn't long before he saw Juana in the doorway, eyes scanning the booths and tables. He waved to catch her attention and she waved back. He then admired her as she walked to their booth.

*This was probably a bad idea, he now admitted to himself. This feels far too much like a date.* Booray was nothing if not an honest man, especially with himself, so his next thought - *and I wish it was a date* - didn't really surprise him, but it did alarm him.

Back at The Property Butch and Tina were doing their own dance. She knew Butch was interested in her, but she also knew that up till now she hadn't been willing to risk romance over friendship. She'd brought along something for this weekend with the thought they might take it to another level, but their dinner so far was all friendship, eating the Alfredo with gusto and laughing over many "remember when" stories.

Several years before Juana had told her Butch thought he was too old, too conservative and too provincial for her. It had pissed her off at the time, mainly that he'd felt free to confide all that to Juana and not involve her. She'd decided then and there he was probably right about all those things. It was only very recently that she'd begun to revisit her own feelings.

Tina went to the kitchen to get them coffee and, while pouring, caught a glimpse in a mirror of Butch watching her. He couldn't know she could see him and the look of sad longing on his face clinched her decision. *Enough already. They could stay on stuck forever if I wait for him to make a move.*

Returning to stand beside the table, she said, "I'm going to go change, Butch. I've decided to save my coffee for later."

"Change? Into what?" he asked, knowing she'd brought no suitcase.

Tina smiled and walked to her pocketbook left by the door. Opening it she reached into its interior and with thumb and index finger slowly lifted a lacy little bit of pink teddy into view. Holding it in one hand she reached into her purse again and brought out thigh-high black stockings.

"This," she said, dangling the items for his inspection before turning with a heart-stopping smile toward the bathroom saying, "Wait for it."

She closed the door with a click and moments later he heard the rush of shower water.

Butch, having waited nearly a decade, was more than happy to wait a little longer.

## Chapter 24, Change

Juana mentally studied Booray as they made light conversation, she wished a lesser talent had crossed her bow, having decided he brought far too good a brain to his work. After all, according to Carlos, he'd been very close to The Property this week, sniffing around like the good bloodhound he was. She wondered how he had even figured out where to search.

"Do you have a dog?" she suddenly asked him.

"Nope. No dog. Not now anyway ... but I do have a cat, Rover."

"Rover? Seriously?"

"Uh huh. Because he's very doglike. Even runs to welcome me home when I get in, but then he turns around and gives me the cold shoulder for having left him."

"I know that cold shoulder cat thing all too well," she said, laughing. "I'm surprised to find out you're a cat guy, though."

"Why? Cats are great and Rover is one of the best. He's good company. I don't have to walk him. And he doesn't annoy the neighbors by barking when I'm gone."

"For sure. Don't forget I have a great cat, too ... but my dog is also excellent company, and I like having a dog as an alarm system. After all, Misfit's hearing is a lot better than mine."

"That's just smart. Statistically households with dogs are safer from burglary, or worse, when there's a woman living there alone. Cops think all single women should have a dog in their house."

Booray's last sentence reminded him about crime and that he was here to "interview" a suspect, not talk about pets. He gave his brain a mental shake to snap it back into cop shape and went on, "Speaking of pets, you said earlier you were taking care of your friend's cat while she was gone. She isn't supposed to be gone, you know. She managed to shake her surveillance and fly off in a small plane. Would you know anything about that ... like where she went?"

"I know all about it, but her destination is private. She's gone to spend a couple of days with her Honey and you should know I'm happy for her. She doesn't want him dragged into this and surely you can understand that? Theirs is a new romance and her having a tail on her every second has made it virtually impossible for them to get together which, quite frankly, sucks for them ... and don't expect me to give them up, either."

Booray almost smiled watching her mouth firm up and her back straighten as she warmed to her tirade. Clearly she was ready to do battle for her friend's happiness and that, if anything, made him admire her even more. These two women were nothing like his usual suspects, ever ready to save their own skins by ratting out an accomplice.

The burgers arrived, cooked to perfection and smothered with tomatoes, lettuce, dill and sweet pickles, onions, peppers and a tangy mayo-based sauce. The fries were made fresh on site and were worth a trip there for them alone. The unlikely pair now gave their food their full attention, conversing only with eyebrows and little happy sounds of pleasure.

“Oh my God this food is good,” Juana finally managed to say. Booray didn’t even try to talk, just nodded and chewed.

Booray was surprised when Juana agreed to dessert after their meal, something in his experience few women her age ever did. He opted for a slab of pie and she ordered tiramisu. They already had coffee in front of them to wash everything down.

Juana savored every bite of her coffee-laced dessert, saying coffee in any form was her most serious addiction. Having that same addiction, Booray merely nodded yet again.

After dinner he introduced his new topic, telling her he and Hogan had made a road trip this past week looking for the place where she and Tina kept their captives. He told her again about the Zorro figure and that he still suspected she was that Zorro. She listened intently the entire time, eyes wide and seemingly innocent, slight smile in place.

He realized he was now basically talking to himself, so he stopped. The silence between them stretched until he nearly broke it himself, but just as he was about to speak, she did.

“If you weren’t so serious about all this I’d think you were making it up, especially that Zorro bit,” she said, softly. “But you clearly believe all of it, including my being involved. I can see you are a determined and effective police officer, the same breed my Matio was, so I have no doubt that sooner or later you’ll find the real culprits. But you won’t find them by focusing on us.”

And that was pretty much that for crime solving that evening. Booray knew until he could find where they kept their captives, or until such time as they slipped up in some major way, he had no further leverage to inspire her to confide in him.

So they slid back into some easy chit chat about topics running the gamut from music to books, art to history, cooking to movies ... until finally, with reluctance on both sides, they parted company.

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Butch, a big guy, was used to having a king sized bed and not the small antique-sized one he’d shared with Tina in the cabin. So when he rolled over and disappeared with a thud onto the floor, Tina gasped, then scooped over to peer worriedly over the side.

There he lay, flat on his back on the hardwood floor, eyes shut. But before she could speak he drawled, “Did I win?”

Tina rolled onto her back howling with laughter. From the floor came an answering chuckle.

Tina had already decided that - in addition to the surprise of discovering Butch really knew his way around a mattress - he was just plain fun. She had never before had as good a time, in bed or out, as she’d had these past two days.

Butch’s face re-appeared over the side of the bed and the two of them grinned at each other.

“Want to go for a ride” Butch asked.

“What? Again,” Tina exclaimed.

“No, not THAT, goofus. A ride ... on the horses ... around the property.”

Tina weighed the idea of riding in the heat and humidity surrounded by biting bugs against fixing breakfast and spending the day in bed snuggling in front of the fan. She presented these options to Butch.

“Well, since you put it like that ...,” he said ...“what’s for breakfast? I’ve worked up quite an appetite.”

“Whatever you’re cooking will be our breakfast, Sportcoat. I’ve fixed 100 percent of the meals since we got here. It’s your turn.”

“True. But you’re soooooo good at it.”

“Nu-huh, won’t work. You’re cooking today, so hop to it. And make it snappy, I’m hungry, too.”

“Hop? HOP? I probably broke something when you pushed me out of bed ...”

Tina swung her pillow at his grinning face. He ducked just in time.

“OK, OK, no violence. I’m going.”

Tina retrieved her pillow and put it against the headboard, pinning it in place with the back of her head. The smell of perking coffee soon reached her. She heard the bang of the screen door when Butch went outside. Minutes later the door creaked back open, banging again when it slammed shut behind him. It made her smile. He sounded like a big kid let loose in the kitchen.

Other good smells mingled with the aroma of brewing coffee and soon Butch appeared in the doorway, tray in hand. She sat up eagerly as he handed it to her.

Studying his offering briefly, she then looked up at him, eyebrows raised ... Scrambled eggs cooked with fresh herbs from the garden, a juicy orange peeled into quarters, sausage links browned to perfection, grits puddled with melted butter, a mug of coffee, silverware, a napkin, and a small glass in the corner of the tray stuffed prettily with mixed wildflowers.

“You’ve been holding out on me, Big Feller. I shall send you to the kitchen more often in future.”

Butch beamed, left, returned with a duplicate tray of his own (hold the flowers), and the lovers, happy in every dimension there is of happy, fell ravenously to eating.

~~~~~

It was three days after her dinner with Booray when Juana suddenly realized no one was following her. She drove zigzags all over town to be sure, but nope - no one turned up in her wake.

Knowing a little about police financing, she'd actually expected the men to get called off before this so she wasn't surprised - or even relieved. Them being gone didn't mean she was off the suspect list, not by any stretch. Even so, this was better than nothing, so she drove straight to Tina's. The pair then drove around in Tina's car to see if she was still under surveillance. Apparently not.

Juana didn't trust either of their vehicles to be bug free, however, so they went to one of their alphabetized outdoor locations for a chat. Once there, Juana outlined a plan that had occurred to her during her time under house arrest and Tina, after a volley of questions, ultimately said she liked it.

"In essence, what you're suggesting involves trickery, arrest, confession, jail-break and then flight to South or Central America?"

I nodded.

"What's not to like?"

That very night we scampered off the reservation to discuss the idea with Juan, Carlos and Butch. Butch had already told Tina he wouldn't get to The Property until around midnight, so my first order of business when we got there in the early afternoon was to suit up Zorro for a visit to the compound ...

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Toronado One stood silently in the deep shade as Zorro surveyed the activity - or rather lack of same - in the group of men within the enclosure. Not only did they look unhealthy, they behaved like men suffering from fatal illness.

Only one man moved inside the cage, the newly recaptured prisoner brought in by Butch and Tina. He moved around restlessly, angrily. Zorro smiled to see his frustration in action.

As if feeling his smile, he looked up and saw the horse and rider.

"You!" he exclaimed, loudly. "You, again."

At his words Zorro felt the eyes of the others lock onto him and his mount. He nudged his horse out of the shadows, moving in closer.

"Yes. I am here before you again, amigo. Yet I am left wondering why you thought I would not keep my word with you."

"I .... I ... I didn't ..," words failed the man under Zorro's hard stare.

“You thought that I, unlike yourself, was not a man of my word? But as you now see, I keep my promises and I promised to return you and your family here should you see fit to go to the press or police with information about me. You went to both, unwilling to remain quiet when you saw other victims of Zorro basking in the limelight. Is that not right?” said the masked rider.

“Only now do you regret that decision, si? Now that you are here once again?” Zorro continued. “I am told you no longer have a family, however, so you will have to suffer all the consequences of your actions by yourself.”

One of the other men now spoke.

“He is a fool. I will never speak of you to anyone if you set me free.”

Zorro looked hard at him before speaking, but what he then said surprised them all.

“I agree it is time for you to go free. I had compiled a special menu for you of native plants as a special treat, planning to release those of you who survived the feast. But clearly you have suffered enough from your own products. I would not be surprised to learn your health has been permanently compromised by your GMO diet and poisonous showers while here.”

Zorro truly was surprised at the results. He had expected it would take many months to see in them what had actually occurred in far less time. The men, lean now with ropy muscles from daily rock shifting, should have looked healthy from all the fresh air and hard work, but they did not. Their breathing was labored. Their color was bad.

Carlos had told her some were no longer even able to work, but he had not withheld food from them as had originally been threatened. The men were not malingering, they were obviously unable to now move the rocks from place to place.

“You will be released this evening, but you will no longer indulge in those practices that brought you here, comprende? If you do, like your new companion here, you will be returned to my property for another lengthy stay. And, if there is a next time, your family will come here with you.”

Speaking directly to the Supreme Court Justice he then said, “As for you, your honor, I will watch all your future decisions with great interest. You now understand my passions, so think of me and vote wisely in the years ahead. Otherwise you, too, will return to me. I promise you this.”

Zorro turned his big horse sideways to the fence and, reaching through it, dropped a handful of Z-shaped golden keychains on the ground.

“Mementos of your stay, gentlemen. Use them daily and remember what you have learned here. The world deserves better than what you have given it up till now.”

Zorro appeared to be leaving and the newly recaptured man, in panic, suddenly found his voice.

“What about me?” he cried.

Zorro turned back to look at him, causing him to shrink back from that look.

“The feast I had planned for your companions will now be yours alone, amego. If you survive it, I will release you very soon. Bon Appetit.”

With that, he rode quietly away.

~~~~~

Butch looked both delighted and embarrassed when Tina announced the change in their relationship by leaping upon him with a squeal of delight on his arrival. Juana smiled at his discomfiture while pouring coffee for him and all the others gathered around the kitchen table for an all-night brainstorming session.

Juana outlined the plan she had run past Tina and, one by one, after much discussion they all agreed it could work. Butch suggested a couple of minor tweaks that Tina thought were “absolutely brilliant,” making Juana smile into her coffee mug.

*My girl's got it bad,* she thought.

Juana told Carlos that when he left to release the prisoners tonight he'd have to take the Zorro suit she'd had made for him should he ever have had to act as her double. After a moment's thought she suggested he take her silver-studded saddle along, too.

“This soon?” Butch asked.

“Yes. It's ending, Butch. They're closing in fast. I can feel it.”

None of them ever doubted Juana's instincts. If she said it was time, it was time. They trusted her. They trusted each other. The camaraderie as they huddled around the table was tangible, rich with laughter and good ideas, broad smiles and clever planning.

There was a touch, just a hint, of sadness, too. This would probably be their last such meeting at The Property and they knew it. Carlos even voiced it just as their meeting was winding up, saying, “It's all changing forever, isn't it.”

The others grew silent, Juana and Tina nodded, Butch tightened his lips, but it was Juan who spoke and changed their worried looks back into smiles.

“Changing jess, me amego,” he said, thumping Carlos on his shoulder. “But mi madre always said ‘change ease juss an inveetation to a reecher life’. Time to bring eet on.”

## Chapter 25, Zorro Caught!

The prisoners were released from The Property that same night, triggering the same kinds of media frenzy as all those coming before them.

One of the better reporters connected the dots on the disappearance of the man formerly held captive by this mysterious Zorro, speculating “he might again be in Zorro’s holding cell being held against his will.”

Another reporter, in her story headlined, “Zorro, the 21st Century,” had noticed and then outlined the thread of retribution and vengeance by Zorro for “crimes against humanity and crimes against the planet.”

Juana kept all her own thoughts to herself, even staying silent before her pets because she still believed her house might be wired directly into Booray’s precinct. She was more aware than ever the net was slowly, but surely, tightening around them.

Turning her thoughts to the more immediate business at hand, she wondered how her recaptured prisoner would fare on his new diet of “varied greens.” She had left a collection of hand-gathered mixed wild plants, nicely washed and chopped, along with instructions to add a handful to a traditional garden club salad for the prisoner every day for three days. She had specified one handful only per day and that the guards give him a salad to eat on each of those three day, nothing else.

After Zorro’s threat she assumed the prisoner might refuse food for a day or two, but wouldn’t be able to hold out indefinitely and, as she later learned, she had assumed correctly. When faced with yet another delicious dressing-drenched mound of club salad that third day he ate every scrap.

She honestly didn’t care if the man lived or died, but if he did survive his “salad days” she intended to release him immediately. As far as she was concerned he was now just a loose end being dragged along behind her more pressing problems and plans.

Misfit barked her alert and apparently triggered the doorbell. Having watched today’s news Juana was certain her visitor would be Booray and indeed it was. She said as much to him as she let him in.

“Well, yeah, we need to talk about all that stuff on the news, for sure. But I also wanted to let you know about something that hasn’t yet hit the news. My superiors think Zorro has been captured about two hours north of here, not far from where the men were released that were held prisoner. I’m on my way there when I leave here.”

“Your *superiors* think? You don’t?”

“Correct. I still think *you’re* Zorro and that the man they’ve arrested is an imposter. I thought that even before your picture was put into a photo lineup for the hospital folks up in Whitehorse a couple of weeks ago. And guess what? The nurse and receptionist picked you out straight away.

“But this ... this Zorro arrest is going to be all over the news soon ... if it isn’t already, and I thought it was ...”, Booray stopped talking and shrugged. He wasn’t sure what to think, or even a hundred percent sure why he was here sharing this information.

He knew he wanted to see her reaction, but now suddenly wondered if that was all there was to it. He had a copy of the mugshot of the guy in his pocket and, with a cop’s eye for faces, had instantly recognized him as the man he’d seen in the restaurant near where he and Hogan were convinced Zorro’s captives had been held.

He remembered that supposedly captured Zorro as being stocky and sullen, totally unlike the leith and laughing Zorro he’d seen on the tapes of the parade.

He said none of this to Juana, however.

“What will it take to convince you I am innocent? Juana said, but at his sudden angry frown she shook her head in mock dismay and held her hands, palm out, towards him, saying, “No, never mind. I see by your face there is nothing I can do or say ... so tell me instead about this Zorro person you’ve arrested.”

Booray hesitated, but wanting her reaction more than he needed to withhold information, he finally showed her the picture of Carlos and told her how he’d been captured.

“He was stopped for driving with a broken tail light in the area very near where the prisoners on today’s news were released. He behaved in a suspicious manner, causing the officer to search his vehicle. A Zorro costume and silver-encrusted saddle like the one worn by Zorro in that parade where the chief justice was kidnapped was found in the trunk. He’s being held and interrogated, but as of a few minutes ago anyway has said nothing.”

“I don’t blame him. Why would he? The police probably won’t believe him anyway,” Juana said, with some heat.

“He’ll talk eventually, don’t you worry ... or maybe *you should* worry?”

Juana became very still. Booray felt a hard coldness in her he’d never felt from her before and her voice was ice when she finally spoke, “You know something, detective. I’m very tired of this game. I think you should leave now ... unless, of course, you’re actually here to arrest me?”

“Not today, Sweetheart. We’ve only got your accomplice today, but I’ll be back for you soon.”

Booray and Juana stared silently at each other and Misfit ... cheerful, bouncy, happy Misfit ... suddenly growled deep in her throat. Booray stared at the dog, then at Juana, and without another word turned and left her apartment.

“Well done, you fierce creature,” Juana eventually said, ruffling Misfit’s ears as they watched Booray walking to his car parked down the block. But her mind was far away, already turning this new information over and over to see what might be done with it.

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Carlos sat chained to a table in an interrogation room in north Florida, just a few miles from the 1400 or so inmates cooling their heels in the cells at the Florida State Prison. Carlos knew that's where he'd end up if the police could build a case against him, because the FSP was the only correctional institution in Florida where executions were carried out. Several murders to his credit would certainly put him on death row along with hundreds of others there waiting their turn to die at the pleasure of the state.

He sipped the soda they'd given him, not worried about leaving them the DNA sample they were probably after. They wouldn't find him in any database. They didn't need his DNA anyway, they already had enough to charge him. He thought it would actually be interesting to see what they did with the "evidence" against him once they had searched his house, too.

Meanwhile, there was nothing he could do about any of this, so he leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes and relaxed.

The police in the station where Carlos was being held were already fending off an influx of media while still pursuing information on their case. Two officers had done all the necessary paperwork with the police several counties over to initiate a search at the address on the suspect's driver's license. They had driven there earlier that day.

The house, a small and tidy bungalow on about half an acre, yielded a gold mine for their case. In a closet they found rifles, handguns and lots of ammunition. More importantly, they found a bee keeper's suit (but no beehives) on the property.

On living room shelves were found books and pamphlets on cholera, beekeeping, viruses, CAFO information, mosquitoes, in fact pretty much every subject targeted by Zorro to date. A laptop open on the kitchen table held a backlog of research information on those same subjects, plus considerable research on the poisonous plants of Florida.

The clincher was found in a small cloth bag in the back of the kitchen cupboards. It contained golden keychains shaped like the letter Z.

None of the police on the scene doubted they had captured Zorro - aka Carlos Perez - former student from Ecuador and, somewhat to their surprise, a one-time legal immigrant. But his temporary student visa had expired quite some time ago. It appeared his luck had now done the same.

When the detectives reentered the interrogation room where Carlos waited they had the information from the search of his property and wasted no time questioning him. He was hauled to his feet, told formally he was being held on several counts of kidnapping and felony murder and taken immediately to a holding cell.

Booray and Hogan arrived right about the same time the cell door slammed shut behind Carlos. They were told by the gleeful detectives on site the case was a slam dunk.

"We got the Zorro character alright. He hasn't said anything, but he don't have to. We've got enough evidence to keep him forever, with or without a trial," one said.

"Stupid arrogant bastard. Kept all that stuff in his car and his house. You'd think the bad guys would figure it out cops look in those places like - duh - first," said another. "I can't believe this bozo didn't get caught long before now."

Booray and Hogan couldn't believe it either. Zorro until now had been as clever as OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

his Spanish Fox namesake. None of this added up, but in the exuberant “bad guy caught” atmosphere they knew no one would buy their speculations, so they kept quiet for now.

The local detectives did take them back to let them talk to Carlos, but they quickly discovered what the others had, the talk was all one sided. Carlos had nothing to say to any of them.

Meanwhile, during the night and only 40 miles away, an unconscious man had been found lying on the shoulder of the highway and taken to the nearest hospital. There his “acute gastroenteritis” had been aggressively treated and he was hauled back from the brink of death he’d been teetering on.

When he regained consciousness, the doctors learned he was the twice-captured Zorro victim and called the police. The sick man weakly told them he’d been forced to eat poisonous plants, causing the severe stomach distress that ending with his medical emergency.

Booray and Hogan went to see him the next day, but other than learning about his fellow captives, they learned pretty much what they had from him before.

“A big average looking guy” had captured him at gunpoint. There was a woman involved when they got to the plane that took him to “somewhere in the woods, the same place he kept me before.”

But he never really got a good look at the woman, because “it all happened so fast,” plus he was “blindfolded even before the plane took off.”

So the police zeroed in on the fact the supreme court justice and others taken around that same time had been held in the same compound.

“They looked bloody awful, too, but they had been there for months. The guards moved them out right after I got there. I was kept there alone for a few days before they poisoned me. Bastards.”

“Based on what you’ve told us, why did you eat it after this Zorro guy had already said it was going to cause you the miseries?” Booray asked.

“Cause I was hungry, man ... starving really. And I tried to pick out any green stuff I didn’t recognize, but they had put ranch dressing all over it so that made it hard. And it had eggs in it, and sliced turkey, bacon, pickled beets, sunflower seeds, all kinds of nice stuff like that. It was hard to believe a salad that looked and tasted so good could hurt me like that ... but it almost *killed me!*”

Booray and Hogan exchanged a speaking look, one that said, “This surprises him why?”, but they said nothing.

They had plenty to say to one another on their way back from the hospital, however.

“This doesn’t add up... it just doesn’t,” Hogan said.

“I know. Something is really off here. Look at what’s happened in less than a week. Prisoners held for months suddenly get turned loose. The poisoned idiot gets set free where he’ll be found right away. Zorro has supposedly been captured and there’s so much evidence against him they’ll stick a needle in him for sure. You ever seen a case come together perfectly like this?”

OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

“Nope. It’s like every loose end - bam - has been tidied up for the police, lawyers, court and media.”

The two men pondered in silence before Booray said, “I’d like to put a tail on the girls again, but now that Zorro has been captured we’ll never get it funded,”

Hogan agreed, knowing he was right.

“What exactly have we got now, Boo?”

“We have a Zorro who captures and kills, or captures and sets free. He researches everything, disarms cameras, hides license plates, makes virtually no mistakes for months and months and months and then, all of a sudden, cops with no connection to the case capture a guy who’s practically wearing a sign reading ‘Arrest me. I’m Zorro. Here’s all the proof you could possibly need. Kill me now.’”

Hogan chuckled, he couldn’t help it, and Booray eventually joined in. They both believed they were being set up, but what in hell was the end game?

## Chapter 26, The Trial

Media attention was intense. TV, print, tabloids and a staggering number of sites on the internet all worked very hard to paint Carlos as the elusive and fascinating Zorro. All the hype failed.

Jurors and courtroom voyeurs alike found Carlos Perez anything but dashing. Even looking directly at his flashy costume, his saddle alight with inlaid silver, his books, papers and the research on his laptop, they found it hard to think of him as Zorro despite everything adding up - beyond any reasonable doubt - to show he must be.

The jury and gallery heard much about the dangers where migrant workers toiled and the conditions in which they were often forced to live. They learned about cholera and death by same, about killer bees, the Zika virus, larvicides and glyphosate and the staggering amounts of these and other poisons sprayed daily across the globe.

They heard about burning rivers, fracking, Monsanto's Law and a seemingly unending litany of abuses against Mother Earth's flora, fauna and Her impoverished people.

Those who knew Carlos well (Juana and company) knew him as articulate, intelligent, serious-minded, capable, and not without humor. His wry observations during adventures had broken many a tense moment.

But when he took the stand in his own defense, and although he presented his case with a clear outline of the facts, he didn't come across as likable. He came across as a sullen malcontent, angry at corporate's greediest having a free pass to beat up those lower in the pecking order.

By trial's end the jury found it easier to believe Carlos a cold-blooded murderer than a liberator of the oppressed. Fearful he'd continue his mad assault against the rich if set free (an argument hammered home by prosecutors), they chose to overlook his lack of dash. After only a day and a half of deliberation they filed back into the the courtroom.

"Guilty as charged," the foreman said. So said they all.

Then, during the next phase of the trial and, because Florida's judges seem as eager to execute people as those in Texas, Carlos was given the death penalty.

Carlos stood stoic while family members of his victims railed against him. He said nothing after his sentence was delivered by the pedantic judge whom many thought had rushed his trial. The judge concluded by asking God for mercy upon Carlos, but no one hearing him much believed he meant it.

Butch and Juan, sitting separately, were there for the sentencing, just two of many in the gallery. Carlos had been aware they were there from day one forward, but had studiously avoided showing any hint of that awareness. Even when taken from the courtroom after his sentencing, his eyes quickly slid past those of his two friends. He would not look at them.

Booray was there, too, as often as his schedule would permit. But "the girls," as he chauvinistically linked them in his mind, had not attended a single day of the trial. He knew it was because nothing linked them to it and they wouldn't want anything to do so. He, however,

was glad he'd sat through the trial. It had given him a level of understanding about motive he never would have had without everything having been laid out in front of him, piece by piece.

Booray now realized Mateo hadn't flipped to the dark side, but had probably been close to doing so when the dark side had gobbled him up instead. Juana, short of dying herself, had been an equal casualty of his death. His brutal murder had killed her stop mechanism, taken out her brakes. She had then done to others what she perceived had been done to her by them and those like them.

Black and white weren't color concepts to Booray. He was as colorblind as it's possible for a white cop to be in our society. Had you asked him to quickly name the top five cops in his precinct he'd have named Hogan, himself, and three African American officers, Jim Waters, Jarmal Harding and Dushane Jones.

Booray didn't like black perps, but he didn't like white perps, either. And he'd often said he'd have turned militant himself had he been born black into some of the neighborhoods he'd policed.

But Booray was all cop. Black or white were the wrong or right colors he thought in. What Booray liked least of all was being made to think in shades of gray, it made his head hurt. This trial, and his inexplicable (to him) feelings for Juana, had ripped apart his convictions and turned his thought processes rainbow.

Booray agreed the people Zorro hunted down deserved to be held accountable for their crimes and never would have been under our justice system. Had one of Zorro's victims ever even made it into court and by some miracle been convicted, he would have served time in a country-club jail, learning nothing.

During his years as a cop Booray had brought many known criminals into court and watched them set free through trickery and outright lies. He had enough frustration stored in his bones over those cases to understand a cop going rogue.

The issues outlined in this trial had developed a case against all those men Zorro had targeted. On his trips to and from the courthouse Booray had started noticing things in a different way, like those many alien-like beings in hazmat suits spraying chemicals in fields and along highways and then the subsequent die down of greenery in those places.

One road he had particularly enjoyed driving suffered that fate during the trial itself and it had pissed him off. County trucks filled with poison turned living green shade (and the occasional sight of a wild turkey with her gangly chicks) into a shriveled Armageddon landscape, where hot sun beat down through the now brittle brown canopy with unrelenting force. Cause and effect, green became brown; burnt-looking foliage meant death.

He saw a news item on TV one night about a fish kill in a nearby county and discovered pictures of thousands of dead or gasping fish piled against the shore now sickened him.

Another night a newsman spoke about the "inexplicable" death of acres and acres of the seagrass Florida's aquatic wildlife needed to sustain them.

"It's not inexplicable, asshole," he shouted at the screen, knowing from evidence presented in the trial the seagrass was being killed by toxic runoff from pesticides and fungicides. He now knew tons of these death-dealing chemicals were sprayed annually over all

those golf courses and lawns sloping gently down into Florida's sparkling lagoons, canals, estuaries, open channels and even swamps. The assault on wetlands of every kind, and the unseen groundwater-holding aquifer below, was unrelenting.

Booray hadn't laid eyes on Juana since Misfit had ordered him to leave her apartment, that same day when Carlos was arrested. Since he found himself better able to think when not in her presence, he wasn't sorry. He had enough trouble with the thoughts taking root in his head without that added distraction.

Booray was angry.

He grew angrier as the trial progressed and finally ended. He was angry at the system and its shortcomings. He was angry that Juana thought she had to turn to crime to get justice. But he was just as angry a man he believed was the fall guy for Juana's schemes was now headed for death row.

The story had become "case closed." Juana was safe, untouched, and so, too, was Tina, bouncing Booray's emotions all over the map from furious to relieved. Furious he and the police force he served had been played, relieved it was Carlos and not Juana headed for death row.

The tabloids splashed the verdict and sentencing in gigantic headlines to grab readers from coast to coast. On television screens, in a clip broadcast over hours of newscasts, a stone-faced Carlos was paraded again and again out the courthouse door toward the vehicle waiting to transport him back to the jail.

Carlos, in a process that might take years, was now headed for the Big House to sit in his antechamber to Hell until time for his last meal and a strap down on the gurney. The restless news media turned its lenses to other stories, prepared to revisit Zorro only in the distant future when the state murdered him.

So the shock was great indeed when the brooding face of Carlos was splashed all across the news media venues again just three days later.

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Juana had replaced her laptop after leaving her original one in Carlos' kitchen for the police to find. On the final day of the trial she sat at her new one researching prison transport vehicles while her television played in the background. She was suddenly startled to hear higher courts had ruled Florida judges could no longer sentence prisoners to death without a consensus on that sentence from the jury.

"The 390 prisoners now sitting on Florida's Death Row might all get new trials," concluded the newscaster."

*Good Lord*, Juana thought. *What next?* She took a moment to digest this new wrinkle in the justice system, but quickly realized it had no impact on her present plans.

Returning to her research, she learned prisoner transport vehicle were specially designed or retrofitted vans or buses used to transport prisoners from one secure area to another. Aircraft or vessels were also sometimes fitted out and used.

OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

Fittings might feature bars, bulletproof glass, wire mesh over windows, segregated prison compartments and/or additional seating for those escorting prisoners. Police cars or additional corrections vehicles might sometimes be used to escort high-risk transports.

Transport vehicles could carry radio communication equipment, global positioning units, and additional restraints and weapons or other emergency equipment. Prisoners were typically restrained while in transport, being handcuffed, physically secured to the vehicle, or a combination of both.

Transport vehicles were operated by all manner of security agencies, including the police, correctional services, court services, US Marshals, or by private security companies under contract to any of these.

“And there’s the weak link,” she later said to Butch and Tina. “That’s what we need to find out. Who’s driving the bus? How can we communicate with them? And how soon can we fit out a prison transport boat?”

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On the day of the sentencing for Carlos his friend Juan was in the county jail applying for a job as custodian. No one there paid him any attention as he appeared to labor over his application while standing at a high table alongside one wall. On that wall was a bulletin board and on that board he noticed schedules had been posted.

Juan glanced at them and did a double take, hardly believing his luck. He was there on a reconnaissance mission and the one item he needed most he suddenly found inches from his nose. There, amid a variety of jailhouse worker schedules ranging from laundry crews to cafeteria duty, was the weekly schedule headed “Prison Transit Drivers.”

Glancing over his shoulder he saw the secretary behind the bulletproof glass diligently logging information into a computer. He flipped over his form, jotted down names, times and destinations, then folded and shoved it into his pocket.

Juan told the woman behind the glass he had messed up and then began his laborious printing on another copy of the application form all over again. This time he handed it over to the bulletproof secretary when done. She assured him they’d be in touch and he left, smiling.

Juan, as up to date as Tina for safe meeting locations, immediately called Juana from his car. When she answered he said merely, “Where?”

“How about D in 30?”

A half hour later the two of them sat down together at a picnic table adjoining a children’s playground. Juana wore jeans and a light jacket. Her long hair was tucked neatly into a baseball cap under its slogan: “Go Jupiter Hammerheads.”

No slouch at reading body language, Juana could see Juan’s excitement as he walked over to join her at the table.

“What’s up?” she asked.

"This!"

Juana took his hastily scribbled note and only read a couple of sentences before laying it down, smoothing it out gently using both hands and exclaiming, "Wow."

"Wow for chure," he replied. "I could not beeleaf my luck when I saw eet on the wall."

"Any chance anyone saw you copy it?"

"Nope. No one wass watching, no cameras on the wall. Eet's golden."

"It is that," Juana replied, picking up the list again to study it. "But we're going to have to work very fast given this timetable."

"We are ready to go aynee time and I can get the men to work around the clock to get the boat feenished. Every theeng else ees packed, the seecure passportz are bought. The monee hass been ex-a-chang-ed. Eet's on," Juan said, beaming with excitement.

"Looks to be, Amego. You might as well speed them up on the boat and then pack your car and head to the property. This being Monday, the boat has to be in place by Wednesday morning. We'll meet you at the property late Wednesday night or early Thursday. I'll need you to notify Clay. He's on standby and he knows where you're going, but he'll have to arrange all the rest for the flight and be at the airstrip by Wednesday noon. I don't want us to get there and not have our pilot ready to fly."

"Weell do. I'll go by hees place when I leaf here."

Juana, all business now that plans were being locked into place, stood up to leave. Juan stood up, too, then playfully reached over and tugged the bill of her cap.

"Eet's all good, Juana. Eet feels like success. We're gonna do theese and eet's going to work out jess fine."

So Juana went south hoping Juan was right and Juan went south and then west, convinced they couldn't fail. Success meant new life for them all, failure - which neither would allow themselves to think about - would land them each in a prison cell on death row.

"Interesting plan, interesting options," Juana told her fur-people later that evening when outlining the upcoming planned events for their consideration. I'll do my best to make sure you two don't end up at the pound should I get sent off to jail.

Misfit and Nightstalker, after much thought, agreed her plan was interesting indeed. But they weren't sure the phrase "interesting options" was all that interesting if it meant they could end up in a cage somewhere, too.

## Chapter 27, There May Be Trouble Ahead ...

The boat, armed guards fore and aft, rocked gently at the dock as the wake from a passing motor-sailor washed ashore. A small handful of curious passersby on land and water eyed the small, but impressive, transport vessel and wondered why she was there in this secluded location.

A few miles away on I-95 a prison transportation vehicle exited the traffic artery to continue its journey across state on lesser roads. Juan, dressed in a uniform bearing the name tag of one Alejandro Juarez, was at the wheel. Eight caged and shackled prisoners rode behind him. And Wally Johnson and Santa Cruz, two well-armed guards, rode behind them locked safely into their own cages.

The real Alejandro Juarez himself was tied to a chair in his small concrete-block home in Deltona. He would be found later that day when his wife returned from her part-time job at a nearby clinic. What he chose to do with the \$200 tucked into his shirt pocket would be his own affair.

Alejandro's name had been on the schedule pirated by Juan a couple of days earlier. It had been easy to locate his modest home and even easier for two armed men, bandanas hastily pulled over half their faces, to kick in the back door and overpower him early that morning.

Juan had put the money in his pocket himself, patting him on the shoulder as he did so while saying in rapid Spanish, "I hope this will help you forget anything you might remember about us later. It is not my wish to have to return later and harm you."

Johnson and Cruz, the two armed guards at the rear of the van, had been replaced in the same way. Smooth as silk.

Since the transport service vehicle was under contract to the jail, no one at the jail knew the guards or driver on sight. This was not true of vehicles used for transport by the prison itself, so the switch had been made where the service was most vulnerable.

A radio transmitter at Juan's elbow crackled and a dispatcher's voice gave his vehicle's call sign, asking for his response.

"J16X46," he replied. "Go ahead."

"J16X46, we need your exact location."

"I am within one mile of my scheduled turn onto U.S. Highway 40 West."

"Copy that, J16X46, you're making good time, I'm glad I caught you. The destination facility has requested you take a secondary route based on unexpected roadworks delays along Highway 40. Please remain on Highway 17 past your turnoff and proceed north, then turn west onto Highway 100. Copy?"

"Roger. No turn on 40, continue north and then west on 100. Where do I pick up 40 again, or do I?"

“You won’t. Once on the other side of Palatka you’ll follow the original route as planned. Copy?”

“Roger, roger. I’ll check back in when I reach the Palatka checkpoint.”

So saying Juan signed off and turned down the radio, relieved Tina’s hack into the transport dispatcher had succeeded in changing the route as that was critical to his own schedule. He now prepared to turn east onto the access road to the dock where the prison boat waited with Captain Forrest Alexander at the helm.

They had an hour and some change before the dispatcher expected to hear back from him and there was much to do.

When the van pulled up at the dock one of the men on the boat ran to meet it. Before he had even reached the van Juan had unlocked the cage to the prisoners and used a bolt cutter to cut Carlos loose. The guard from the boat then hustled him out and they ran to the boat. Once there they cast off the lines and leaped aboard, the vessel already underway.

Meanwhile, Juan had turned the prison van back toward the highway and was out of sight of the water (and those near it) in moments. Traveling less than a minute he pulled onto a barely visible dirt drive and parked. The prisoner cage had remained open and Juan now passed through it to open the door of the guard quarters. They then cut loose the remaining seven prisoners, made to behave under the barrel of the shotgun Juan trained on them.

“We leaf you here, amigos. You are on your own. Theenk fass and you may escape the manhunt to beegen in about 45 meenates.”

The men with Juan were already in the suburban that had been left there earlier and Juan now joined them at a run, shoving the keys for the transport van into his pocket on the way. Within seconds the three of them were back on the road and were soon back on the main highway, headed south.

Juan had watched in the rear-view mirror as the prisoners scrambled from the van and scattered in all directions into the nearby woods. He doubted any of them would stay free for long, but they would certainly make a nice diversion for as long as they stayed on the run.

Meanwhile, out on the water, Captain Alex was threading his way carefully through the shoals surrounded by mangroves heading toward a tiny dot of an island on his chart. He and the other men aboard eventually had to get out of the boat and push it into the small harbor beside the island itself, shuffling their feet as they went to gently nudge any stingrays resting on the bottom out of their way.

Waiting at anchor was a beefy Boston Whaler fully provisioned with all kinds of sports-fishing bells and whistles and ready to go. The men changed to shorts and Ts and then changed boats, pushing the Whaler back through that same entrance channel and then climbing aboard to power up for their run to the mainland further south along the coast.

Once in the channel Captain Alex pushed the throttle forward and the eager craft responded, everyone aboard enjoying the sudden speed across the sparkling water as the perfect chaser for their morning shots of adrenaline.

“Wheeeee....Haww,” yelled one of the men.

“Wheeeeeee ... Haww,” they all agreed.

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“J16X46, come in ... J16X46 ... J16X46 ... J16X46 ... come in with your location.”

The cop heard the concern in the dispatcher’s voice and without preamble asked, “What’s up, Kathy? Problem?”

“I dunno. I can’t raise the van headed to the state prison. They should have reached Palatka by now. I should have heard from them about seven minutes ago.”

After another two or three minutes of indecision and more radio calling, the dispatcher reached out to the Palatka police for assistance. Once they returned with a negative on finding the van she put out a statewide alert.

So began the Great Escape Story that captivated media junkies for the next several news cycles:

News story one: Prison Van Found!

News story two: Picture of Carlos being hustled aboard the police boat (taken by an onshore watcher on his phone) was broadcast again and again.

News story three: Police Boat Spotted by Air Patrols Found Abandoned. Speculation begins on what kind of vehicle had next been used to transport Carlos.

News story four: Interviews with the actual prison van driver and guards, none of whom got an actual view of the men who had overpowered and left them tied up in their own homes.

News story five: Pictures of CSI teams processing both boats.

News stories six, and thereafter: Speculation on where Carlos - who remained in the wind (interspaced with pictures of a very dashing Zorro) - could now be.

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Clay turned his own sleek little aircraft into the wind in preparation for take-off. Behind him Juan and Carlos, bound for their homes in Ecuador left long ago, watched the ground fall away as the plane lifted into the air.

Carlos thought of his sister and how she had longed to return home. Juan remembered his young wife. Met, courted and married in Ecuador. Dead and buried in Florida.

Lost in their own dark thoughts there wasn’t much conversation. Juan and Carlos still mourned their losses, even though they were returning to their remote mountain village with more money than they had ever dreamed possible.

They knew Juana was very frugal in her own lifestyle, preferring to let her investments build and multiply as much as possible. So while they had expected a nice return on their role in the adventures, they had not expected her to so generously underwrite their entire futures.

They felt fortunate their homeland didn't view extradition to the United States of much value. Once home they'd be safe ... and ... in their eyes and the eyes of their countrymen, rich!

But home was still many thousands of miles away. Long before they touched down in Puerto Rico for their first fuel stop and overnight sleep they were sick of the journey. They stopped again in Caracas, then Bogota, and finally just outside Quito at yet one more secluded air strip generally used only by drug runners. It was there where Clay would turn his nose back toward Florida and Juan and Carlos would point theirs toward the mountains of home in the visible distance.

"I hope we meet again, amego," they told Clay, embracing him in farewell. "But here in our homeland and not in yours."

"Knowing Juana, I won't rule that out," Clay replied, grinning as he turned toward his plane.

Knowing Juana, they could only agree.

~~~~~

It had been five months since Clay had returned safely from Ecuador, making Juana smile with his stories of Carlos and Juan's great joy and gratitude over her generosity. It made her happy every day to think of them able to fully enjoy their lives back in their beautiful homeland. She planned to visit them both there one day.

The news media had long since moved on to other stories following "the great escape." Police in various agencies still doggedly trudged the back trail of DNA samples from the transport boat and van, still tried for facial recognitions in the blurred cell phone picture of the transfer of Carlos to the boat, and still assured anyone who still cared enough to ask that they expected "a break in this case any moment."

But while Booray suspected their hearts were no longer in it, he thought about the case every single day. He expected another kidnapping at any moment - complete with Zorro - to throw the case in a brand new direction and to clear Carlos of any wrongdoing at the same time.

On the other hand, if Carlos was somewhere he might never be found, Juana might be content to let everything die down completely. He decided to go ask her which it might be.

He made that decision on the same day that Tina and Juana were driving back from a weekend at The Property. Butch and Tina had stayed at the cabin while Juana had stayed in the compound, rattling around the huge enclosure, amused at being turfed out of her own digs by the lovers.

She had cranked up the boombox to full volume, but her CDs had barely whispered their music in that vast open space. Even so, she danced to all her favorites beneath the now sun-faded green of the overhead plastic plants canopy.

OKay Jackson, *Zorro, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

She was toying with the idea of having the compound bulldozed and selling the property. She could easily sell off Tornado 2 and stable the other three horses closer to home. She said as much to Tina during their drive and smiled at her indignant reply.

“Are you nuts? You love that place. No one found it and we’re not using it for adventures so they never will. Why would you sell it?”

“I don’t know. I guess it’s because without Carlos and Juan and knowing there won’t be any more adventures just makes me unhappy with the place. I need something new and exciting in my life and I don’t know what that is.”

“You need romance, Babe. Hot, smoke’n, heart-pounding romance. That’ll fix you.”

“It’ll fix me, alright. No thanks. I’m good. You and Butch can carry on in that department without me.”

“You protest too much, Juana. You aren’t a Civil War belle who’s ‘heart is in the grave’ with Mateo. You’re a young vibrant woman and having a man around the house now and then will give you as much reason for excitement as our adventures ever did.

“Wow. I had no idea Butch was *that good* in bed.”

Tina punched her arm, laughing.

“He’s good alright ... yes, he certainly is ... but really Juana, you ... well, you know what I mean.”

“Yes, girlfriend. I do know. And I’m no longer completely closed to the idea, either. If someone comes knocking at my door I might invite him in and get close, but for now I’m not going out looking.

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Night, as it always does, had fallen. Light from a full moon bathed the garden outside. Juana, wearing a half-breed kaftan/nightgown outfit, was tucked up in her Papasan chair with a bowl of heavily buttered popcorn watching an old Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers flick on her big screen TV.

Misfit drooled at her feet. Misfit loved buttered popcorn.

Nightstalker, not a popcorn fan (although he would eat the occasional slice of tomato and absolutely loved cantaloupe), slept in a tidy feet-tucked bundle atop the bookshelf. The narrow space would only permit him to sleep scrunched in that somewhat confining pose, but it was the current cat-space de jour, so there he remained, comfy or not.

“What is it with cats, Misfit?” Juana asked, shutting off the drool by flipping a piece of popcorn in the dog’s direction for her to snap up mid-air. “A cat will LOVE a certain kind of canned cat food until we buy a case of it. That’s guaranteed to make a cat NEVER eat it again. And the cat place de jour is sacred space until it isn’t. Then it’s never looked at as fit for a cat again.”

The cat at whom these passive-aggressive comments were directed completely ignored the conversation. Misfit's tap began its slow drip once again, earning more popcorn. Fred twirled Ginger to him and they embraced in a very romantic on-screen moment.

The doorbell rang.

Misfit, shocked his doorbell telepathy had failed him, responded to the bell with even more enthusiasm than usual. Juana had to pull the dog back and enforce the house rule about dogs being followers, not leaders. So she was slightly out of breath when she peered through the peephole and then opened the door for Booray.

He decided immediately a pink face surrounded by wisps of hair loosed from a barrette and Juana being slightly out of breath was a great look. She, in turn, was forcefully reminded of his overwhelmingly masculine presence by this sudden appearance into her quiet evening.

"Good grief, officer. As you can see I'm in for the night. You startled me."

Booray studied her further, decided a sort-of-nightgown look only enhanced what he'd already noticed and appreciated. She read his expression correctly and the pink in her face deepened.

"Well, come in then," she said, tartly, to cover her embarrassment. She let loose the hound who wagged her tail in greeting, clearly having forgotten - or forgiven - their last encounter.

The unlikely pair, suspicious cop and wary criminal, moved to the living room. Juana turned the TV down to very low and then hit the pause button (a hint to him she didn't expect a lengthy visit). She then brought them both tall iced glasses of lemonade.

They settled into their respective chairs for what actually turned out to be a very lengthy visit in which Booray confessed to having thought about her daily since their last meeting. He told her he had suspected Zorro might turn up again to clear the name of Carlos. He told her he would understand if Zorro never turned up again.

He talked at length about what he'd learned of Zorro's motives during the trial and his own support of those motives, but of his concerns about Zorro's deadly actions.

He said he could hardly watch the news anymore. Not long ago he'd heard the Bayer company had bought up chunks of Monsanto's business and decided on the spot to never buy Bayer Aspirin again.

Booray even talked about the targets he would have hit had he ever gone rogue. How he'd often fantasized about taking out human traffickers, judges who'd taken kickbacks for sentencing kids to long jail terms, and politicians that supported the building of more and more punitive prisons, but didn't support prison reform.

Juana listened and said little. She liked his targets. She liked this man. She wished they could do adventures against his targets together. She longed to tell him that Carlos had volunteered for the job as her fall guy. How together they had figured out every step in getting him arrested, tried, broken free and flown by Clay to Ecuador.

She wished she could tell him how much laughter they'd all shared during that planning, especially after the salty Captain Alexander had become part of their inner circle.

Suddenly remembering her conversation earlier that day with Tina, she momentarily shut her eyes. Booray had certainly knocked on her door. She hadn't sought him out. The chemistry between them was palpable. Looking back, it always had been. But the reasons for them not acting on that chemistry were crystal clear, at least to her.

*He's a cop. A good cop. He will never, ever, be able to not know for sure about Zorro. Then he'll act on that knowledge,* she thought.

*She's beautiful, amazing, I don't give a damn if she is Zorro. I want to be with her. Tonight, and every night,* he thought.

Talk ended and they stared at one another for a long moment.

Then Booray slowly stood and reached out to her. She was on her feet with no memory of standing and having knocked the remote to the floor in the process. The movie soundtrack, muted, now began again.

She realized her thoughts were actually whirling, a sensation she'd occasionally found described in novels and had always laughed at the thought. Now she stood confused, breathless, her thoughts chaotic.

She became aware someone on the TV was singing. The words penetrating her mental fog: ... "while there is moonlight ... and music ... and love and romance ... let's face the music and dance ..."

As she lifted her face to his and their lips met, their brains simultaneously shutting off, she suddenly remembered the name of the song playing in the background. A prophecy as it turned out:

"... There May be Trouble Ahead ..."

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## About OKay Jackson:

I have worked as a professional writer for more than five decades, much of that time spent as an investigative reporter and columnist for the Savannah, Georgia, *Morning News and Evening Press* in Savannah, Georgia, USA.

I have authored four books, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for environmental reporting on Savannah groundwater and the Floridan Aquifer, and have collected numerous other prestigious awards including the "Golden Quill Award," a top worldwide prize for producing an in-house newspaper for the U.S Army Corps of Engineers; the national Thomas A. Stokes Award for investigative reporting; eight Georgia state awards for investigative journalism, including four first place, from the Georgia Press Association and Georgia Associated Press. From 2008-2013, I produced the company blog for the Savannah-based International software company, QIsoft.

I am the mother of four amazing adult children and nine even more amazing grandchildren.



