

"We are taught to believe absolute good and absolute evil are found at opposing ends of some moral scale, when in fact the two are more commonly found enticingly close to absolute center."

*Dr. Leonardo Lomez,
Botanist, Research Scientist, Explorer,
Incumbent Leader of the Cali Cartel*

Chapter One

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From a stylishly plain teacup, Leonardo Lomez sipped Earl Gray, which the flight attendant had placed on the arm table moments before. He looked out over colonies of cotton-white clouds as they aimlessly drifted, casting shadows on the deep blue ocean below. He thought only of Susana. He remembered, two days prior, when the South Pacific breeze paused to hear her answer. He'd placed the ring on her finger and asked, "*Mi amor*, will you marry me?"

Between sounds of waves dancing ashore and lapping over the Fijian sand, she'd answered softly, "Yes, my love, yes," and a radiance he had never seen exuded from her face. "Yes, yes, yes!" and she sealed their future with a kiss. At that divine moment Leonardo had felt peace, knowing that this woman would hold his hand when he took life's last breath. Again, he sipped his tea and looked out the fuselage window, lost in the white-on-blue formations.

Susanna Jones, soon to be Susanna Lomez, would be boarding her flight departing Fiji around now. It would take her back to California, far from him. The distance between them pained him, but he could see a day when their time would be spent in each other's arms and the miles between them would be no more. *We will honeymoon in Belize*, he thought, *yes, Belize*.

Two days later, Doctor Leonardo Lomez was back in his Bogota office. Through the windows, a rising tropical sun flooded the space. In a warm glow streaming through the grand openings, he sat comfortably in a wingback chair. Listening to the ticking of the clock, he gazed at an envelope resting in the center of the coffee table. The glossy white package, delivered only moments before by city carrier, was from a highly regarded test laboratory within the United States.

Leonardo sat considering the effort it had taken to get to this point of development, and the effort it would take to get to the next. The test results within the sealed package most certainly would confirm his beliefs – that an exact match had been made, the successful synthesizing of the active constituent found within the plant called Piri Aji.

Bartho Trujillo casually strolled in, removed his lab coat, tossed it over the back of an empty wingback, and took a seat on Leonardo's office couch. Bartho looked pale and weak. His normally

pleasantly plump face now drooped with undernourishment. It had been three weeks since the two men had seen each other. For months now Bartho's health had concerned Leonardo, and yet he had not expressed any alarm, until now.

"When are you going to end this diet of yours, cousin? Losing weight so quickly," he insisted, "cannot be advantageous to your health."

Bartho's reaction was explosive. "You're just like the rest of the family and most of my friends! You all want me fat! You need me fat!"

Leonardo had seen this side of his cousin throughout their lives together – an unrelenting insecurity that had, at times, affected Bartho's decisions. Though known by only a handful of individuals, Bartho was now one of the most powerful drug lords in the world, equal to Leonardo in authority over the Cali Cartel. Leonardo could not help but think back on Pablo Escobar, a man driven to destruction by his own insecurities.

Leonardo changed the subject, "It's there on the table, your future ... our future. Go ahead; open it."

Bartho reached forward and retrieved the envelope. "What's the saying in English? Third time is charming?" he asked.

"Third time's a charm," Leonardo corrected. "I am certain these test results will confirm that P-10 is an exact match. Go on, open it."

"The blood work and brain wave feedback from the primates injected with P-10 were identical to those of primates subjected to pure Piri Aji extract, but—" Bartho paused. "Still, I am afraid we might have a problem."

Would you prefer I open it?" Lomez interrupted.

"No, no, I'll do it." Bartho ripped the tab and removed the documents.

"This is very exciting, to actually be the ones to deliver an entirely new class of pain medication to the world's medical community ... it's truly monumental."

Bartho looked up over his thick glasses. "Of course," he said in a preoccupied tone, and then returned to reviewing the cover letter.

"Our next step must be to build a strong disclosure – a proposal to submit to pharmaceutical companies in the United States. It will be essential to obtain sponsorship. Only with the financial support and leverage of a major pharmaceutical company will we be allowed to perform patient studies and move forward into manufacturing and marketing."

Bartho leaned forward and placed his horn-rimmed glasses on the polished top of the coffee table. Beside his glasses, he set the documents. He rubbed his eyes, then his face, and as he gathered the loose skin beneath his chin, his jaw line became visible, changing his looks entirely. "It's still not a match," he shared regrettably. "I was afraid of this after –"

"*Que?*" Leonardo exclaimed. "After what?" and he reached across the table to grab the paperwork. "What do you mean, cousin?"

"Well, I haven't had a chance to talk to you about the most recent development ... in our primate population."

Still wearing a look of shock, Lomez lifted his eyes from the documents. "Tell me now, Bartho. What's this new development?"

"I'll show you."

Slipping on their lab coats, Leonardo and Bartho hurried down the hallway and entered the double doors of the laboratory. In a decontamination cell, both men pulled paper booties over their shoes, washed their hands, and slid disposable masks and rubber gloves into the pockets of their lab coats.

They zigzagged their way between filing cabinets, equipment bins, and waist-high worktables. Within this semi-sterile environment, several lab technicians sat peering into microscopes. Racks held hundreds of glass test tubes, boxes of swabs, Petri dishes, and fresh glass slides, still in their paper sleeves.

In a second antechamber, the men put on their masks before entering a room labeled *El Cuarto del Chango*, The Monkey Room. Bartho opened an airtight door, and instantly a wave of primate odors flowed from the space beyond the door. Inside, animal cages were stacked two-high, spanning the length of a long, wide walkway. In almost every cage, a spider monkey could be seen. The smell was pungent, and a tense energy permeated the eerie quiet.

At the end of the walkway, a man dressed in a plastic suit and rubber boots washed soapsuds from the grid of an empty cage. Behind the worker sat a wheelbarrow, and in its open bed lay the corpse of a small black primate.

"Leave us alone for a moment," Bartho instructed the man. The employee immediately turned off the spray nozzle and exited the rear door of the Monkey Room. "This is the fifth death in our P-10 study group this week," Bartho informed Lomez.

Leonardo removed the rubber gloves from his pocket and slipped the thin plastic barriers over his fingers. Probing the dead creature, he asked, "What is our *veterinario* saying about these deaths?"

"In short, the autopsies all indicated an overdose of an unidentified toxin ... some substance their bodies are unable to metabolize correctly."

"Remind me, how many were in this study?"

"In all ... ten primates."

"And how are those monkeys that are receiving doses of pure Piri Aji injections?"

"Their health remains good. It is amazing to watch them. It's as if they are in another world, their routines and mannerisms ... so very interesting to watch. And, as I said, their health remains quite stable. Not a single death."

"This form of modeling is not working. It's a huge expense on our small company, and yet it's just not working. We're going to need better specimens and a much better modeling laboratory to achieve our goals."

"*Si*, I agree," concurred Bartho "and I've been giving this a great deal of thought," he continued. "Let's return to the office and I'll share with you my ideas."

It took the remainder of the morning for Bartho to explain the outline of his plan. It took the men the rest of the week to work out the details. Lomez Cientifico would do what it always did; continue to operate as a legitimate, closely held corporation. The company would, however, have to ignore certain ethical practices in the future. In order to generate the information required to create synthetic Piri Aji, many rules would have to be broken.

For years, the *Cali Organización* had enjoyed strong ties with senior officials within the country of Guatemala. With the help of General Franco Dominguez-Gallos, now Defense Minister, and Alonzo Perez-Perrez, Secretary of State, the necessary production laboratory would be constructed in Guatemala under their protection.

One other facility would be needed – a facility to conduct more than just modeling, but actual patient studies on humans. "If Dominguez and Perez agree – and they will agree – our studies, production, and eventually distribution will all be performed from inside Guatemala," Bartho explained.

"And why not do all that within Colombia?"

"Think about it cousin. What little foothold we had within the Colombian Government ended with our uncles' extradition to the United States. No, we need these operations to reside within a true narcostate."

Though he showed little emotion, Bartho's words disquieted Lomez. "And how do we pay for such an extravagant undertaking?" asked Leonardo. "Not only did we lose most of our political ties, but the largest part of the *Cali Organización's* wealth was seized by the government after our uncles were imprisoned in the States."

"I understand, and that is why it will be necessary to find investors," Bartho expressed, "such as the *Gulfo Organización*."

"*Que?* But Piri Aji belongs to Lomez Cientifico. Our company cannot partner with organized crime."

Bartho laughed and shook his head, "Need I remind you, cousin, that Lomez Cientifico was originally financed with the help of our uncles and the Cali cartel? Besides, there is nothing that actually

belongs to us at this point. Can we own a plant we found in the jungle? No, cousin, until we have an absolute synthetic match, we merely own the credit for having discovered Piri Aji, nothing more. To patent Piri Aji, we must successfully synthesize its constituents. And to achieve this, we need better equipment and better specimens to conduct our tests. You made this very comment yourself. To do this, we will need capital, and a great deal of it."

"But I don't understand. Will these investors get a cut of future pharmaceutical sales?"

"I'm surprised you didn't think of this yourself," Bartho said. "Lomez Cientifico's efforts in getting Piri Aji established in the pharmaceutical industry will be covertly supported by studies in Guatemala. Once in a sellable form, we will use our *Organización's* distribution network to tout Piri Aji worldwide, making billions in the illicit drug arena. Then, in time, Lomez Cientifico will make its profits from commissions derived through legitimate pharmaceutical sales."

"But Bartho, you are not naive enough to believe the authorities will not make the connection and come straight down on Lomez Cientifico?"

"They may, but let me remind you Leonardo; our company has an absolutely flawless reputation. There is no way we can be linked to the Cali or any other trafficking operation. If we make an effort to obtain sponsorship from a large pharmaceutical company, most suspicion will be easily arrested."

Bartho and Leonardo now had a plan. It was a strategy they agreed would take both Lomez Cientifico and the Cali *Organización* into the future; a proposal which, if successful, would be profoundly profitable, amassing a fortune like never before seen, even by an industry as lucrative as *narcotrafficking*.

"So few things in life are as they seem. In order to thrive in the midst of such deception we must either master a keen ability to discern the facts or ourselves become a master at deception."

*Dante Falcon Estrada
Grandson of Juan N.
Titiritero of the Golfo Cartel*

Chapter Two

The poolside party room door swung open abruptly, and Leonardo turned just in time to watch Claudia sprint hurriedly indoors. She was dripping wet and wearing a tiger striped Brazilian swimsuit. Without the least bit of shame, Claudia removed the bathing suit while in plain sight of Leonardo. Her nipples were pink and hard from the cold.

"Pinche madre!" she cursed. "Why anyone would build a goddamned swimming pool in Bogotá is beyond me. What was our Uncle Gilberto thinking when he had it installed? I'm freezing, and it's the middle of summer. *Chingar!*"

She wrapped her marvelously shaped body in a terrycloth robe. "So you're really going to marry this girl from the United States?" she asked, shifting her frustration from one issue to another.

"Si," Leonardo said, raising his beer to his lips.

"I saw pictures of her online. She is very beautiful."

"Gracias, and si, she is very beautiful."

"Is she good in bed?"

Leonardo laughed, "Claudia, you are all Colombian Latina. It's all about the sex, isn't it?"

"Well, *si* ... and money," Claudia laughed in return.

She took a stool next to his at the bar. Grabbing his arm she pulled him close and kissed his cheek. "I have always had an excruciating crush on you, but you've never even given me the time of day."

"Claudia, my beauty, that's simply not possible. Everyone always gives you the time you wish, without exception."

The sultry redhead's top lip curled with pleasure. She picked up the bound column of papers, as if to weigh them before dropping the load on the bar top. "So, this is it?"

"Si, this represents a lot of hard work made possible by an amazing discovery."

Claudia thumbed the corner of the inch-thick business plan, gazing at its cover with lustful interest. "I don't understand why we have to get the others involved. The Cali can cover its cost, can we not?"

"The strain it would place on our *organización* would be immense. No, we need invested capital, manpower and political leverage of the Golfo and the Sinaloa *Organizaciones.*"

"Have you talked to Dante about this? Do you think he will do it?"

"I believe he will, and now that he is in charge of the entire Golfo *Organización*, his blessing is all we need. I will be seeing him soon to discuss the matter."

Claudia nodded her head in agreement and then asked, "What about the Guatemalans? Are they in, as well?"

"*Si*, we have a long-standing relationship with Alonzo Perez-Perrez and Franco Domingez-Gallos. Franco is now the country's Minister of Defense, and Alonzo has risen from a mere Statesman to Secretary of State. As you know it's one of the few true *narcostates* left in the western hemisphere. We need their independence, their infrastructure, and their military for this project. Our cousin Bartho will be handling all our affairs within Guatemala."

"So, I'm guessing the part I play is to persuade the bosses of the Sinaloa to invest in our efforts. Am I right?"

"*Si*; can you do it?"

"Do these men have dicks?" and she leaned over the bar and snagged a bottle of Scotch and two glasses. "I have a friend with strong ties to the Mexican *organización*. I'll arrange an audience with the bosses," she explained.

"Is this a safe connection you have?"

Claudia measured even doses of Scotch into the matching glasses, then answered, "He's a pathetic little Mexican man who loves redheads with big tits. He is also the Governor of the Mexican State of Sinaloa."

"Nice connection."

"Nice and safe, and I own his balls ... if you know what I mean?" She smiled and continued, "So tell me cousin, why does it cost so much money to manufacture this shit you call Pirtamoxidon? I mean, we can invest a meager two hundred thousand dollars and realize a good-sized cocaine laboratory that's operational. Why is such a large amount of capital required?"

"Its synthetic, and the equipment to manufacture even a small amount of the compound is astronomically expensive. In a short time, we will need to have the facilities in place capable of producing tons of Pirtamoxidon each day to satisfy the world's demand. There are many other expenses, as well."

During his explanation, Claudia had fished for a small vial from her robe pocket and opened it. She then tapped out two lines of its contents on the bar top. "You sound so sure of yourself. How can you be so confident the worldwide market will want this Piri Aji shit?"

"Modeling. That is the process of testing drugs on animals to gather our preliminary studies."

"Sounds inhumane ... what poor animals have you been turning into drug addicts, Leonardo?"

"Monkeys."

"Oh, well, if it's only monkeys. I could give two fucks about monkeys. *Si*," she said haughtily, "you have my permission to turn them all into swinging addicts," Claudia laughed and then sniffed both lines up her nostrils.

Leonardo returned a grin of appreciation for Claudia's amusing callousness. "Of course, we are at a point now that more advanced testing must take place ... patient studies on human beings," he expounded.

"I could give two fucks about human beings either," Claudia responded as the buzz gyrated in her head. "It all sounds so complex ... but if you are sure in the end it is worth it –"

"I assure you, it is worth all our time. We all have our parts to play. Bartho will oversee the project in Guatemala, which includes the patient studies we will need. I will continue to work from here, overseeing the Cali and Lomez Cientifico. And you will –"

"I will get busy seducing my way into the Sinaloa's favor."

Leonardo slammed back the scotch and chased it with a large gulp of cold beer. "There is one matter that concerns me greatly."

"*Que?* What is that my handsome cousin?"

"Los Zetas. At all costs, we must keep Piri Aji from falling into the hands of Los Zetas."

"Why are they different from any of the other cartels?"

"They are the only cartel strong enough and bold enough to try and take it away from us."

Leonardo paused to think. "If only ..."

"Only what?" Claudia asked.

"We need to know who calls the shots for Los Zetas. Whom the *organización* really belongs to."

"Hmm ... well, I may be able to help out there, as well. I have an acquaintance in Villahermosa, Mexico. His name is Rico. I'll contact him. But first I will work on the Mexicans from Sinaloa. How much money do we need?"

After answering her question, Leonardo removed the cap from the tiny bottle and placed the tip of his index finger over its opening. He tipped the vial forward and back, lifted his finger, and touched it to his waiting tongue. "Ah, this is superb. It has that certain loitering bitterness that comes from the coca grown on the eastern slopes of the Cordillera Oriental. This came from the paste made at Pamplona."

"My handsome cousin, the world famous botanist ... you do know your plant life."

"On a business trip to Mazatlan, Mexico, it became apparent that the odds might be in my favor ... so I doubled down."

Claudia Samper-Trujillo

Chapter Three

Claudia Samper-Trujillo rode the elevator to the top floor, where she handed her invitation to a young doorman, who nodded respectfully and instructed the maître d' to escort her to her party in waiting.

As Claudia passed through the elegant atmosphere, she arrested the crowd with her glamorous presence. Not only did she belong among them, she somehow rose above them. As women leaned toward each other whispering queries, their men sat transfixed by the mystery guest's beauty and sex appeal.

At a large round table, immaculately set for twelve, five women sat wearing formal gowns and amused smiles, as six men immediately rose to their feet.

"Ah, *mi bonita*, you've arrived," greeted an elderly gentleman. "Everyone, this is Claudia Samper-Trujillo. She is visiting here from Colombia."

The maître d' pulled the chair from the vacant table setting, and Claudia took the seat beside the aging politician. The Governor took her hand, kissed it, and complimented her appearance. "*Dios mio Claudia, pareces un angel bajado del cielo,*" his words were filled with passion.

Claudia and her amazing cleavage leaned into her admirer, and kissed his chubby cheek. "*Gracias* Governor, you are too kind."

As the chef's creations began to arrive in courses, the talk at the Governor's table turned to the striking Colombian guest's background.

"My dear, are you the daughter of the former President of Colombia ... President Samper?" asked the wife of the Mayor of Mazatlan.

"No, Edgar Samper is my uncle," she answered. "My father, Alfredo, is the leader of the People's Party of Colombia, and has been for many years."

"You came by your beauty honestly," came the soft words from an extremely well kept elderly woman, dripping with flawless rhombs. "Your mother is Victoria Elisa Trujillo, the beauty queen. Am I correct?"

"Ah, *si*. That is correct," Claudia answered proudly.

"Your mother and I once shared the stage at the Miss Latin America Pageant in Mexico City. Your mother was so full of life. I remember the parties we attended together. You should have seen us; as with you tonight, we stopped the beating hearts of men," and the aging beauty's words drifted off with her memories.

"Trujillo," growled a wealthy industrialist. "Your uncles, are they don Miguel and don Gilberto?"

"*Si, Senor*, they are my uncles. No doubt, you have heard that they were arrested and extradited to the United States. I cannot judge my uncles, their lifestyles, or their methods of building wealth. All I can tell you is I love them both very much. They are my blood and I pray for them daily."

A lull of compassion fell over the table. "*Si, si*, it must have been devastating for your *familia*," the ex-beauty queen comforted.

"*Si*, devastating," Claudia assured convincingly.

Seated beside the raspy industrialist, a handsome, intelligent-looking man named Cruz shared his thoughts openly. "I, for one, find the actions of the United States appalling ... simply unacceptable."

The Governor raised his eyes from Claudia's cleavage and commented, "Cruz, you understand the way things are ... you understand the *Balance de Poder*. It's true the United States generally sticks its nose where it is not welcome, but we've found great opportunity in their meddlesome ways. We've learned to profit from our prideful neighbor's intrusive manners, have we not?"

Chuckles rose from the table and Claudia realized that everyone seated at the Governor's table shared common secrets.

Cruz, a Mexican Federal Judge, raised his glass and asked the others to do the same. "To the *Balance de Poder*," he toasted, "and may it always be respected."

"*Balance de Poder*," the others joined in, "*Salud!*"

The meeting in which she was to have an audience with the Sinaloa crime bosses merely cost her a night of passion with the aging Governor – one that had hardly lasted five minutes – one that she had hardly felt. During the man's most passion filled moment she'd yawned, but skillfully covered with an "ahh, yes."

Claudia walked out of the presidential suite's master bath dressed in gray high heels, a black business dress, and perfect hair. Greeting her with a sleepy, "*Buenos dias*," was the Governor of Sinaloa, not so freshly rising from a satisfying night's rest. "It was so good tasting your lips again, *mi amor*," and he handed her a folded note. "Your ride should be waiting for you downstairs. Show this note to anyone who might question you. Now, hurry along."

"*Gracias*," Claudia thanked him, leaving her lipstick glistening on his prickly, unshaven cheek.

A black sedan was waiting for her at the hotel's front entry. The chauffeur said nothing, simply hauled the door for her. Carrying only a leather document satchel, she gracefully folded her marvelous legs and took her place in the stylish vehicle's back seat.

After approximately an hour, the driver left the highway and drove inland, up a desert road sided by sagebrush and cacti. A mile of dust boiled the air behind the speeding vehicle as it raced toward the towering mountain range.

At a four-way intersection, where two desert dirt ways crossed paths, the driver stopped and turned in his seat. "Miss, this is where I was told to leave you," he said.

"*Que?* Here? Have you lost your fucking mind?"

"All I know is, I'm to leave you here before returning to the city."

Claudia stepped out into the morning's warm air, and her heels stabbed into the earthen country roadway. Ten o'clock, and it was already well over ninety degrees Fahrenheit. Before her, reaching horizons to the north and to the south, the Sierras of Sinaloa looked down on her.

After fifteen minutes, Claudia saw several motorcycles racing toward her. Before the dirt bikes reached her, they veered off the road, stirring up clouds of dust, and now surrounded her on all sides.

A large four-door pickup truck stopped only a couple meters from Claudia. The door swung open and a mustachioed Mexican man slid out of the driver's seat and onto the roadway. His cowboy boots were laughably fancy, and his cowboy hat was formed in a shape not unlike a taco. Gold chains dangled from his neck, and gold rings adorned his every finger. Through designer sunshades, he eyed the fine female, top to bottom.

"Get in the truck," he spat. Two indifferent passengers waited passively.

"You actually expect me to ride in that monstrosity?"

"Get in the truck now or I will fuck you, shoot you in the head, and let the coyotes feast on your dead flesh tonight."

"Front or back seat?" she asked.

Soon the large truck was gaining elevation up a well-maintained mountain lane. Pine trees now flanked the road, and the air was cool and smelt of evergreens. The men were silent, and passed the time taking turns looking at the redhead's beautiful long legs.

The four-wheel drive finally passed under an arched entryway, welcoming guests to Centro de Salud y SPA de Mazatlan. There was nothing surprising to Claudia about this remote cartel den. It was the same as those gangster getaways owned by the Cali *Organización* – lavish resorts which Claudia loved to frequent, completely free of charge, of course. This was probably one of several remote centers controlled by the Sinaloa Cartel, and Claudia felt at home before ever entering the lodge.

A young man in his early twenties greeted Claudia. He was lean with a strong build and a movie star face, and wore only loose fitting white pajama bottoms and flip-flops. His skin had a healthy glow and his teeth were perfect and bright white. "I am Rafael, and I will be your attendant during your stay. Now, if you will kindly follow me."

"Gladly," Claudia smiled, and turned to give the taco-crowned Mexican a sneer.

The handsome Latino led Claudia down a long hallway and into a changing room. Inside the small space, Rafael explained, "A *massaje* has been arranged for you by the party you wish to speak with."

You mean we will be discussing business while enjoying a massage?"

"*Si*," the young man answered as if it were a common practice. "Now remove your clothes and I will have them freshened," and the handsome attendant's eyes scaled her body. "Your undergarments, as well, *por favor*."

"Freshened? But, that's ridiculous. There's no need."

"Ms. Samper, we both know the reason for this. This method is much more enjoyable and far less rude than a strip search, is it not?"

Claudia had to smile. "A massage would be a delight. *Uno momento, por favor*."

"And, I will need to take your leather satchel. It will be given to the man whom you will be meeting."

"Very well," Claudia granted.

Pointing to a changing bench, the young man informed kindly, "There's a towel wrap to cover yourself, once you've undressed. My partner and I will receive you on the other side of that door when you're finished."

"Your partner?"

"*Si* ... Manuel. He and I will be performing your massage. I think you will find our combined abilities most enjoyable." Claudia's upper lip curled in an appreciative smile. She slipped out of her business dress and removed her sexy underwear.

She next entered an atrium, which hugged what appeared to be a natural rock wall. A transparent ceiling of darkly tinted glass began at the top of the formation and followed outward and downward until reaching ground level. The view through the large curved panes was breathtaking, the desert below ending at an ocean, reaching a horizon hundreds of miles away and hundreds of miles wide. Water fell from five falls, tumbling into separate pools, where coy fish swam lazily. In front of each pool stood a kneading table, bedded with soft white linens, awaiting the next blessed guest.

As promised, Rafael was waiting at one of the massage tables. Beside him stood his partner Manuel. The young Mexican man was a carbon copy of Rafael, equally muscular and every bit as handsome. In Claudia's mind, the two might just pose a delectable challenge in bed, if given the opportunity.

"Are you ready to begin, *Senorita*?" asked Rafael.

"*Si*, I am," Claudia replied. She removed the wrap in front of the two handsome masseurs, and mounted the table face down and entirely nude.