

"Those things men are told they cannot have, often are what they become most consumed with having."

Juan N. Estrada

Gulfo Organización

Chapter One

Bogotá, Colombia – 1981

The morning showers came and went and now the day was quite warm. Under the shade of a sweeping portico three men engaged in conversation. "Tell me *don* Gilberto, who will you groom to lead the Cali *Organización* into the future?" the senior of the three asked.

"I've chosen my sister's adopted son Leonardo. And like your grandson, his purpose in life will be known by few."

The elder turned his head and asked the same question to Gilberto's brother, Miguel.

Gloomily he answered, "I have chosen the son of our deceased brother whose name was Poncho."

Extending his hands, the old *jefe* gripped both men's forearms earnestly. "It was a good decision I made, moving my grandson here with his mother and nanny."

Gilberto asked, "And the boy's father, how is he?"

"My son is well, *gracias*. He is back in Matamoros, Mexico, overseeing our family business; working behind the scenes, of course. *Si*, its best my grandson is raised here instead of in my homeland. Here I have few concerns for my family's safety. No one here knows our family name. Such measures will ensure our blood remains in control of the Gulfo *Organización* far into the future."

"You are wise, dear friend," said one brother.

"*Si*, very wise," the other agreed.

The old man released his grip, lifted a cigar to his lips, and summoned the fine Monte Cristo's smoke into his lungs. As he exhaled, he elaborated. "For many years I've watched the rise and fall of the Mexican *Capos* throughout the Sierras of Sinaloa. One after another, their fame led each to slaughter."

"Yours is a safer form of controlling the family's interests," said Miguel. "... like the *titiritero* controlling his *titere*, the puppeteer directing his puppet's every motion while hidden behind the curtain."

Nearby sat three youths, a girl and two boys, poolside at a round glass table in the shade of a large sun umbrella. Around them a party gathered momentum – grown-ups smoked, drank cocktails, and laughed at racy jokes. As the youths lounged in the shade, they practiced being adults, slurping virgin strawberry daiquiris through crazy straws. The girl, a pretty fourteen-year-old named Claudia, felt a

curious tingle as she watched two of the boys furtively glance at her breasts. She hadn't noticed their stares in the past. But, then again, she did not remember being aware of her upper extremities, until recently.

"Stop looking at them," she warned.

In unison, the boys' eyes darted away, each hoping she was addressing the other. The youngest of the two boys was twelve years old and very chubby; the older, thirteen and skinny. The boys wore polyester swim trunks, which clung wetly to their skin and climbed tightly up their butt cracks. The girl wore a copper colored two-piece swimsuit, which matched her hair perfectly.

Claudia's Uncle Gilberto owned the beautiful estate surrounding them. Fronting the large patio and pool was a magnificent mansion, where, in the past, the youths had spent time exploring, playing hide-n-seek, and sliding down long polished hallways in their stocking feet. An eight-foot stucco wall surrounded the expansive backyard. Every detail of the grand estate exuded elegance and strength.

Under a *palapa*-style pavilion, a *Caribe* disco band set up and prepared the entertainment program for the evening. Servants mingled throughout the area, clad in formal work attire, serving the family and all the invited guests.

The pretty girl's two uncles and the skinny boy's grandfather continued their deep discussion. "This brainless fuck Pablo Escobar has the forethought of a fruit fly," Miguel raved hatefully. "He's a street thug who has risen much too quickly in the city of Medellin. He does not understand the nature of our business and the delicate *Balance de Poder* – Balance of Power. My fear, Juan N., is this egocentric pig may one day bring fire raining down on our heads."

"Just like the drug lords of the Sinaloa, so too will Escobar have his great fall," the old man assured.

The Trujillo brothers were immaculately groomed, wearing the latest designer labels and expensive jewelry. In noticeable contrast, Juan N. Estrada wore only a thin gold wedding band on his ring finger and an antiquated timepiece on his age-spotted wrist. His gray slacks were of high quality material, modish in another era. He looked as if he'd walked in from out of the fifties with a neatly pressed, timeless white cotton button-up, his beltless trousers held up by dark gray suspenders. Uninterrupted, the men carried on, engrossed in conversation, as the party brewed.

Claudia, now rather enjoying the boys' gawking, caught sight of her mother at another table, enjoying the company of a handsome man. It had been a long time since she'd seen her mother smile. The sight of her mother's enjoyment caused her to hope her father would remain away much longer than anticipated. With any luck, politics would keep him occupied, delaying his return home anytime soon. Though she loved her father, it was nice not having to listen to her parents' relentless arguments.

She watched as her mother dipped her pinky into a small jar the gentleman held in front of her. She steadily withdrew the little digit and raised it to her nose, sniffing the white powder from her fingernail.

As she did, the man's free hand slid up her inner thigh and disappeared under the hem of her short skirt. The sight of this made Claudia reconsider what was right. Right or wrong, there was no question in her mind that one day she would be just as beautiful, just as charming, and just as daring as her mother, Victoria Trujillo-Samper.

Under the portico, the old man cleared his throat and reminisced. "Few remember how it was in the beginning. The root of my own family's enterprise is found in the prohibition era of the United States. What a wonderfully profitable time the 1920's were. Then Prohibition came to an end, and with it came the end to negotiations for large quantities of alcohol being brought into the United States."

"And when did you begin moving narcotics into the States?" Miguel asked.

"From the year 1930 through 1960, opiates and marijuana made up only a small part of our operation," Juan N. explained. "Those drugs were readily available to users everywhere. A greater profit could be made selling dustpans and brooms door-to-door than transporting and selling narcotics. Over time, however, we began to notice an upturn in the demand, and consequently the profitability of these products increased. To combat the demand, the United States would pass new laws and stiffen penalties regarding those drugs it classified as illicit. But their actions of control always caused two things to happen – the amount of money the customer was willing to pay increased; and the market demand for those products rose rapidly."

The old man paused yet again, this time to stoke his cigar with several quick puffs, then returned to his thoughts. "The lesson - the very laws which make our products illegal are the same laws that increase their value, and summon the desire of men. Our objective must never be to overwhelm our adversary. No, the United States and others must always believe this is a war they can win. This is the *Balance de Poder* that we must understand, always respect, and learn to appreciate."

The pretty girl's back straightened as she watched a young man enter through a gate and proceed in her direction. It was the chubby boy that greeted the newcomer first, "Look, Leonardo! Claudia has *chiches!*" he giggled.

"Shut up, *estupido!*" Claudia fumed.

"I'm not stupid! One day I will be a famous professor," returned the fat boy, named Bartho.

The comment made the skinny boy laugh aloud, provoking Bartho to lash out, "You'll see Dante! Tell them Leonardo, tell them!"

"*Si, si,*" laughed Leonardo. "It's true. One day my cousin Bartho will be a famous professor and he will be known as El Profe, The Professor."

"It's still surprises me, the things what ran through my boyish mind while fallin' to earth ... naked and alone, without a parachute or safety net to save me. Strangely enough, thoughts of not havin' a parachute, a safety net, and the fact that I was completely naked took up little time durin' the fall. It was just like I'd heard told; my life did pass before my eyes. Not my entire life, only the recent parts; those leadin' up to my impendin' death, a conclusion that remarkably never crossed my mind.

Deep blue sky – deeper green jungle;

blue sky – green jungle;

sky – jungle;

with no way to stop the time, momentum, nor those events leadin' up to my great fall."

Austin Adair

Wilderness Outfitter, Storyteller

Chapter Two

Central America – January 2, 2005

A darkly tanned white man sat at one of three decrepit tables on the sidewalk patio of Eva's Bar-n-Grill. In one hand, he held a tall empty glass, in the other a fine cigar needing to be lit. A full head of blondish-brown locks fell in confused strands, some reaching the shoulders of the man's safari shirt. Around the time his boots had been pulled over his feet that morning he'd begun slamming vodka over ice. His justification for starting so early – he'd lived through yet another year. Today was his birthday.

He was a handsome drunk, and remarkably self-aware when stoned. Finger combing his hair behind his ears, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The smell of fresh-baked bread drifted down amid third-world storefronts, only to be lost to the displeasing odor rising from the gutter, not far from the leg of the table where he sat. The slummy city center of San Ignacio, Belize, despite its stench, drew a crowd.

Winds gathered and strengthened, lifting native fragrances from the land; scents of flowers as they burst forth in rich colors along the banks of the Ruta Maya; smells of the jungle's fresh green foliage; a tang of citrus from bountiful orchards nearby; and the aromas of rich soils from freshly tilled farmland. The tropical breeze carried nature's bouquet into the streets, reminding residents of the beauty embracing their small community. However, the moment would pass, and the pleasing fragrance would be lost to those odors endemic to poverty.

The introspective middle-aged man leaned forward and began to stare at a fly bold enough to land on the shining blade of his bowie knife. The classic weapon's point was stuck in the center of the wooden table top, handle upright.

"Adair! Dude! Would you put that goddamn thing away?" scolded a petite, fair skinned hippie chick, appropriately named Flower. Looking up from wiping the adjacent table, she continued to scold her friend, "And no more knife tricks; you're scaring off my customers."

The little woman wiped the table a moment and regarded her friend. "Happy birthday," she said softly. Her words failed to rouse him, so she left him alone to his past, gazing into the reflection of the knife blade.

Twenty years removed, he replayed the events which had led to his great fall. The year was 1984 and he remembered as though it was yesterday, standing in the Houston International Airport, feeling awestruck, staring at the nose of the enormous passenger jet he would soon board.

The seating area behind him was filling up quickly. Most passengers were *Mestizo*, fair skinned Latinos, men and women with European features, bedecked in designer fashions. Dotting the crowd were the darker, round-faced Andeans, more native to his destination, as well as a few Blacks.

Adair remembered the attractive young woman appearing near his side. She'd shared his view for a moment, then turned and seductively leaned her back against the glass and glided down to take a seat on the floor near his feet. Removing a fashion magazine, she flipped through its pages. She was none too happy that the good-looking *Americano* had not focused his full attention on her. Silently, she hexed him, *Estupido pinche gringo*.

He turned his back to the view and slid down the window to join the beautiful young woman on the floor. He guessed her age to be somewhere around twenty, perhaps twenty-one or -two. Her hair was the color of polished copper, bound by a single hair tie atop her head. Her eyes were big, bright, and clever; golden-brown, and rimmed in lashes so long they moved in slow motion.

Adair studied her face and body, and decided she was perfectly built for tight jeans. She wore a *Carlos Santana Live* tee shirt gathered in a knot just above her belly button. Her feet were pretty, and her toenails had been painted to match her sandals. He also noticed a natural, erotic feature. Her top lip curled upward slightly and held a desirable curve. The sight of it reminded him how long it had been since he'd last had sex.

The young woman noticed Adair's lean and well cut body, but did not consider how he might have obtained such a physique, nor did she care. His face was chiseled and serious, but also bore a touch of kindness. His hair was unkempt and uncut, a dark blond fray gathered in a ponytail that reached the middle of his back. He wore faded jeans and a western shirt with pearl snaps. His scuffed cowboy boots matched the strap of a leather duffle bag looped over his shoulder.

When first class boarding was announced, the young woman placed her magazine back into her carry-on, rose to her feet, paused and leaned his way. Softly, with a tone of pity, she whispered in his ear, "*Si, me hubieras puesto atencion desde un principio te humeras dado cuenta de la suavidad de mis*

senos," which translates, "If you had only paid attention to me earlier, you may have one day known the softness of my breasts." Adair returned a simple, thoughtful look.

The dazzling redhead remained up front, beyond the curtains separating the elite from the commoners. Adair made the flight seated near the rear of the aircraft, where he pondered his upcoming career. He thought of the days that lay ahead, and of a time when he, too, could take a seat beyond the forward curtains.

After clearing customs at the El Dorado International Airport, the young woman approached Adair and leaned toward him. For a brief moment, he thought she might kiss him. Instead, she handed him a small piece of paper. In English spiced with Latin charm, she whispered, "Here's my name and number. I hope you will call me."

Adair looked down at the string of numbers and the name, Claudia Samper-Trujillo. Sliding the little offering into the front pocket of his jeans, he gave the beautiful redhead a knowing look, drew close to her ear, and in smooth and perfectly spoken Spanish said, "*Estoy segura que lo que dices es cierto ... tus senos son suaves, y tus labios igual de dulces,*" – "I'm sure it is as you say. Your breasts are soft, and lips just as sweet."

A jarring explosion in the middle of the night woke Adair from a light sleep. The hotel's desk clerk had reassured Adair, saying that it was merely FARC – The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, reminding the government of their omnipresence. "We are very safe here," the clerk had sworn. "We employ many of the mountain people. The rebels won't harm their own."

"BOOM!" The next aftershock was stronger than the previous, and for a long while Adair stood at the hotel window, looking down on the colorless brick streets. Above the paved lanes and into the distance stretched the amber lights of Bogotá. As the lights illuminated the unknown, his mind was filled with many questions. He contemplated his future and the clandestine career he was determined to pursue.

The following day Adair called Claudia, and they met for lunch at a pleasant street-front deli near Plaza Bolívar. This was the beginning of their young love affair. Over the next several days, Claudia showed her new boyfriend the city. She described Bogotá as a beautiful Andean princess resting in deep, rich soil on gentle slopes, her head propped against a pillow of soft green foliage. What Claudia did not show Adair were the features not so becoming to the princess – those secrets hidden from the world – her lower extremities to the south where over-populated *barrios* were filled with suffering and poverty.

During the days of enjoying his newfound beauty, Adair began to take notice of the name Escobar mentioned repeatedly. On street corners, in restaurants and bars, around the marketplaces, the man's name kept coming up in conversations. Finally, Adair asked Claudia her views of the man whose name appeared to be on everyone's lips. "Pablo Escobar is a mad dog," she said passionately, "a true

megalomaniac from the city of Medellin. He is a thug, a thief, and a murderer, who bought his political position. My family despises him."

Claudia remained secretive about her home life, and said little about her family, her world. Each evening just past dusk she would walk to the nearest phone booth, dial a number, and soon be whisked away in a luxury limousine. Her appearance sent the message that she was easy, and her flirtatious mannerisms only reinforced this image. But her behavior at sundown followed the pattern of a young woman sworn to service in a nunnery.

On Adair's sixth evening in Bogotá, frustrated by Claudia's evasion and apparent unwillingness to spend the night with him, he began to shake her from his mind. He realized he could not spend any more time pursuing romance. It was time to get down to business and pursue his reason for traveling to South America. He called to inform Claudia that he would be leaving for Cali the following day. The call changed everything.

"We are in love ... and, and ... well, you can't leave me now," her voice was weak, like a little girl resorting to whimpers to get her way. "We've not yet made love." She pleaded in a soft, sexy voice to see him once more. In a determined voice she demanded, "You will make love to me tonight!"

Just before midnight, Adair left his hotel room and took a taxi to a neighborhood in northernmost Bogotá. The streets were lined with mansions so large many required their own city blocks to stretch out over. The taxi pulled up to a curb adjacent to a neatly manicured park. "*El Parque Cristobal Colon, Senor,*" said the cabdriver, his hand extended for payment.

The cab driver warned Adair to avoid the law. He cautioned the area was well patrolled, and if he were spotted at that time of night, he would be arrested and charged with violating curfew. Adair reluctantly grunted, "*gracias*" to the driver and watched him speed away. He walked into the park in search of the picnic table that Claudia had described.

Adair waited in the moonlit park and contemplated why he was here. A thought came to his mind, something his grandfather had once told him. It went something like, 'a man's head and his pecker have one thing in common: when hard, either can get him into a hell of a lot of trouble.' He unzipped his leather duffle bag and slid his hand inside, running his fingers across a black leather biker jacket. Sewn into the jacket's inner lining was the seed capital he hoped would finance his exciting new career.

Claudia appeared in the moonlight, ran to him, and the two kissed and held each other for a time before speaking. Adair broke the spell, "I don't understand why we are meeting here, Claudia."

"You will, Cowboy," she replied, calling him by the term of endearment she'd given him during the afternoons they'd spent together. "Soon you will be making love to me," she promised. She took his hand and led him to a large tree at the edge of the park, and proceeded to nimbly climb the tree. She climbed

quickly to a fork then paused and looked down at Adair. "Are you coming or not?" Slowly, Adair began his climb.

Claudia inched forward on a sturdy branch, crossing it to the top of a palatial wall. Crawling on all fours, she made it, and Adair soon joined her. There the two looked down into stately rear gardens and the lavish pool area of an enormous mansion. The full moon and soft lighting, strategically placed throughout the premises, illuminated the playground of someone who was excessively wealthy.

Claudia could feel Adair's nerves on high alert. "Don't worry," she said, "this is my uncle's home. It's called the Capital Wall House. My family owns another property in Cali that's identical to this one. I live between the two."

Though his face was half shadowed, she could see his skeptical stare, which she addressed. "Look, if you want me, then you'll have to play my game. Now, be quiet and follow me."

Desire clouding his better judgment, he silently followed her. She crept along the top of the wall for another thirty feet, and climbed down a trellis blanketed with honeysuckle. Adair was only seconds behind. From there, they crossed a wet lawn and entered a pool house through a narrow side door.

Once inside, Adair could make out his new surroundings fairly well. It was like walking into an upscale drinking establishment after hours. A full service bar spanned one wall, and atop its marble counter gleamed slender chrome spouts affixed with premium draft beer taps. To its rear stood a matching back-bar accompanied by exquisite shelving, lined with the finest spirits.

Light entered the room through the French-style windows and doors opposite the bar. A glass partition separated the covered patio and pool area. Claudia quickly scampered to the wall of light and pressed a button near the French doors. Instantly dark curtains began to race toward one another, and the dim room went black. Within seconds, a warm glow filled the room. Wasting no time, Claudia directed Adair to the center of the room and onto the large U-shaped sectional couch, where the two quickly lost all control.

Around three o'clock in the morning, the couple's night of passion suddenly became a family affair. When Claudia's uncle and two of his armed guards stormed into the room, she was bent over the back of the couch with her ass in an ergonomically favorable position. Her face was flushed with pleasure, and she was howling like a wild animal. Adair, wearing only an Andean sombrero, held a draft beer in one hand and a handful of red hair in the other as he enjoyed Claudia from behind.

Initially, everyone froze, but the awkward spell was broken when other family members began to arrive. Claudia's aunt was next, followed by an armed security guard. Dressed in glamorous pajamas and fashionable slippers, Claudia's mother entered the room. Horrified at what she was seeing, she screamed, and quickly covered her mouth with both hands. The scream brought one of Claudia's younger cousins through the door.

It took less than a second for Adair to realize he was in deep shit. Armed security guards, with guns drawn, accused him of trespassing on private property; and to complicate matters, he was caught naked with a young woman, fully engaged in the act. During the next few minutes, he was made aware of yet another monumental problem. Claudia may have looked twenty years old, but her mother cleared things up for Adair. While wrapping her naked and tearful daughter in a blanket, she cursed him aloud, *Ella solo tiene diez y siete anos ... eres un sucio depravado,* – "she's only seventeen, you animal ... you filthy deviant."

At morning's first light, a frightened, beaten, and naked Adair was prodded with a gun barrel across a dew-drenched lawn to the estate's tennis court, where a helicopter sat idling. The whine of its engine filled Adair's throbbing ears, and its powerful downdraft instantly dried his wet, bare feet.

Adair was ordered to lie prostrate on the crew deck of the open fuselage. He shivered in the sharp cold. His face was swollen and purple, and blood seeped from fresh wounds. One of the armed guards, carrying Adair's clothes and duffle bag, hurled them on top of his naked torso just before the chopper lifted into the air. The young American's thoughts ventured into his past: thoughts of his mother, his dad, and a mixed breed dog that had been his best friend for many years.

The helicopter headed east toward the mountains, where the sun climbed up their backside. As it gained altitude, the whirling air turned increasingly arctic. While Adair shivered on the deck, one of the guards unzipped his duffle bag and found his leather jacket. Searching it, he felt something protruding from the inner lining. He removed a large knife from a scabbard and sliced the soft liner. Frantically ripping the liner from its exterior, he plundered Adair's secret stash. Hundred dollar bills drifted into the fuselage, and soon greenbacks were floating everywhere.

The three men went wild as they competed against one another to seize the now airborne cash driven by the turbulence. The open sides of the bird's deck made for an exciting and dangerous game. During the confusion, the large knife fell to the floor and bounced under the bench seat near the open doorway. Adair looked at the shiny blade and considered his options. He realized he had never thrown a knife with any accuracy, nor had he ever learned to use a knife as a weapon.

The idea of grabbing the knife and using it to save his life ran through Adair's mind, but he traded the notion for a quick prayer, hoping somehow the God he had never served would deliver him from his captors. Then he remembered his latest sin – that of having sex with a seventeen year old – and his hope for deliverance by the hand of the Almighty quickly diminished. He considered the knife one last time, but as he stared into the gleaming blade, his courage faded. The laughter of the armed guards mixed with the violent wind as they counted their money.

The air became even more frigid as the bird flew on, and Adair's body trembled violently. Suddenly a blinding light filled the fuselage and through squinted, swollen lids, Adair witnessed a magnificent

sight, as a mountain saddle ridge passed just below the helicopter. Snow, rock and patches of bare earth arched upwards ending in a stunning mountain crest. As the helicopter pressed on, he passed out.

When Adair came to, the aircraft had dropped below the eastern range, and the circling air was warm. The pain had grown worse, and he could no longer see any mountain peaks. Below was a vast and endless expanse of green, a jungle canopy stretching infinitely. As they drew closer to the ground, Adair's mind returned to the days with Claudia in Bogotá and the reason he'd traveled to Colombia in the first place. As these thoughts looped in his mind, the morning air continued to warm, its scent increasingly foreign.

There is no mistaking the feel of an AK-47's barrel when pressed against the bare skin, especially when pressed against one's tightly clenched asshole. Over the engine noise, the man holding the gun yelled, "*Tienes dos opciones – brincar tu solo o te vuelo el culo al espacio, pinche gringo,*" – "You have two options – you can jump out on your own or I can blow your fucking white ass out into space."

Adair turned his head and again looked at the large knife as it vibrated closer and closer to the edge of the deck. He rose to his knees and rested his upper body on his elbows. The air continued to warm, but the gun barrel did not, and his sphincter drew even tighter. One of his captors placed a boot on the cheek of his ass, and with a hard shove, launched Adair into a freefall. At the exact same time, the bowie knife fell from the copter's deck and followed Adair into his great fall.

Lia could talk to trees. In her fourth year of life the tribal leaders noticed her charmed ability, and in the years to follow, the act became an increasingly affecting ritual. While leaning into a tree's trunk, the naked native child would press her lips against its bark. With eyes closed, she would whisper words understood only by trees. Reverently, she would turn and place her ear against its side, and in that moment life's answers would quietly become known. To catch Lia conversing with nature in this way was rare, and it was rumored a special blessing befell those fortunate enough to witness the wonder.

Chapter Three

Pamplona, Colombia

When Lia turned eleven, the village elders gave her the responsibility of watching over the tribe's younger children. One morning while taking the little ones on a field trip to a place called Presa Verde, a horrifying event occurred. To venture into the jungle as far away as this small lowland lake was forbidden, but it was an excursion that had to be made.

Along with her ability to talk to trees, Lia was also a gifted storyteller, and at Presa Verde she intended to show the youngsters a legendary character from many of the tales she told. Within the still waters lived an enormous and very old *cocodrilo*. The old crocodile was too slow to be of any real danger. Lia had once brushed the animal's wet nose with the tips of her fingers. She was not afraid; the trees had told her the old *cocodrilo* would not harm her, and it hadn't.

Lia led the way down Morning's Trail, and once reaching the lowlands, the youthful party continued on to its destination. She held tight the child's hand behind her, who held the hand of the next, and so on. Approaching the grainy waters, the children's anxiety heightened and their progress slowed to a stop. Feeling their fear, Lia beamed a reassuring smile, and left their side to approach the bank of the green pool alone.

The children were fearful but excited to finally see the great *Juancho* from Lia's stories. Upon the back of the mighty *cocodrilo*, she, the Princess Warrior, had ridden into many ferocious battles. On that day, Lia had promised the children they would see with their own eyes the faithful beast from the deep green waters.

With her toes sinking into the sticky mud at the water's edge, Princess Warrior whistled the call of a Red Billed *Gaki*. The bird's song failed to summon the mighty *cocodrilo*; so Lia stepped over to a nearby ironwood tree and slowly, respectfully pressed her lips against its roughened bark. After whispering something, she placed her ear against its side. The children looked on in amazement; Lia was talking to the tree.

From high above the jungle canopy, a sound came down that was not of their world. *'Thwop-thwop-thwop!'* came a barrage of mechanized bursts. Lia looked up the massive tree trunk, where its limbs spread in every direction, dividing into lesser limbs before branching into countless colonies of leaves. Again, the sound fell from above, *'Thwop-thwop-thwop!'* but this time a high-pitched whine followed. Suddenly the treetops tossed about, and a stiff wind from the west, or perhaps the north, carried the sound off into the lowland jungle.

Nothing could have prepared the children for what happened next. A frantic cry filled the heavens above them. Lia and the children looked up into the clearing just in time to witness a miracle. A being, white and naked, fell from a clear blue sky. Downward, end over end, crying out in pain or maybe in anger. The children dared not blink as the flailing life form gracelessly crashed into the waters of the Presa Verde.

Following the creature into the waters was a large shining knife. The weapon tumbled – blade over hilt, hilt over blade – before disappearing into the waters not far from where the terrified youngsters stood. Lia hurried over to join the children, and immediately they huddled around her, frightened and crying. She looked down into each of their panicked faces. "Shhh, little ones," Lia hushed, "*Juancho* will keep us safe."

When Lia lifted her eyes, her heart sank as the great *cocodrilo* floated lifelessly to the surface of the pond. The celestial sword had been driven into *Juancho's* skull, directly between its eyes. The mysterious being from the heavens sprang from the murky waters. Its face was melted away under a tangled covering of slimy green water grass and hair. Its distended muscles rippled angrily, and it roared as it parted the surface of the water.

Before the horrible two-legged thing could reach the bank, the children were fleeing barefoot up the narrow footpath toward home. Their hearts pounded with fear, and their lungs grew increasingly desperate for air. The safety of their village was no less than two kilometers away. Six in all, they ran as fast as the slowest child's short legs would carry him. Lia encouraged the younger children from behind. "*Andale! Andale!*" she yelled, glancing back and wondering if they would be able to outrun the danger. "Faster! Faster!" she cried out again.

Leading the group up the damp trail was a ten-year-old boy, who was much faster than the smaller children. Frustrated at having to run so slow, he was very tempted to run ahead and leave the others behind. To his relief, Lia yelled out, "Run ahead, Pedro! Warn the village of the danger!" and without returning an answer, the boy broke rank and sprinted toward the village.

Departing the lowland, Morning's Trail became illuminated by rays of light, beaming down through a less crowded canopy. More blue than green, this forest ceiling was skeletal in comparison to the lower

jungle's covering. "Its right behind us!" she warned. "Don't stop! Keep running!" and the children raced on.

The village of Pamplona was once called by a name no one could remember in a language few could recall hearing spoken. A young Catholic priest from Cartagena had discovered the peaceful *Campa Arawakan* tribe. The year was 1889, and if the priest had ventured into the area even twenty years earlier, he might have been the one discovered, speared, and eaten. Up until the twentieth century, isolated groups of Caribe cannibal's roamed the northern Amazon basin, as far north as the forest of the Cordillera Oriental mountain range.

For almost a hundred years, a limestone mission had remained standing at the end of a green plaza centering the tiny village of Pamplona. The cut stone used to build the mission had the hue of week-old goat's milk. Within each thick brick were ribbons of bright pink clay, and the rains washed a little of the mission away each time they came. As a result, walkways bordering the plaza and leading down to Spirit Tree were all a matching compact base – a swirling *rojo* pastel dotted by coffee-colored pebble aggregate.

Upon a carved mahogany log called Wisdom's Bench, the children sat in the order of their age. Behind them loomed the front steps to the limestone structure, La Mission Sangrienta, The Bleeding Mission. Five of the six children rocked nervously back and forth wondering their fate. Lia was not afraid, and sat with her arms crossed, perturbed by the entire proceedings. With many of the village residents standing within listening distance, the interrogation began.

"Speak up, little girl," the tribe's old chief growled. "Why were you at Presa Verde, and when did you first see the white man?"

"Grandfather, do we really have to do this?" Lia asked aggrievedly.

"Young lady!" he scolded. "You know the rules. You must address me as Great Chief when we are in counsel."

The other children held their breath at the old leader's stern words. Lia rolled her big brown eyes before responding, "*Si, Senor.*"

"Now, tell your grandfath– your Great Chief, why you were there and what exactly happened?"

Lia looked boldly up at her elder. "I took the children to Presa Verde to see the great *Juancho*," she explained. "I know, I should not have taken them so far, but I wanted them to see the mighty beast with their own eyes."

"What are you talking about child? Who is this *Juancho* you speak of?"

"A *cocodrilo*."

"A *cocodrilo*? What were you thinking, Malia?"

"I'm sorry, grandfather, I mean, Great Chief," and only then did Lia's voice soften and her eyes become heavy with tears. "But *Juancho* was a dear friend, and he fought bravely to rescue me and the

other children from the evil white devil that fell to earth. I ... I will never lead the children so far away from home again. I promise, Great Chief."

"See that you don't. Now what about this white man? Tell us exactly what happened."

"Well, with my mouth shaped just so," she paused to show the crowd her puckered lips, "I blew the secret bird whistle to call *Juancho* from the deep green waters of Presa Verde. When my whistle failed to summon my *compadre*, I stepped over to a nearby tree to ask if it had seen my courageous friend. Before it could answer, the skies above parted, and from an opening the white being appeared, falling out of a deep blue sky – naked, alone, and crying out angrily."

The crowd was silent, spellbound by Lia's storytelling. "What did this cry sound like?" asked the old chief.

Lia's face twisted with thought and her finger touched her chin as she called to mind the exact sound the white devil had made as it fell to earth. She then blurted out the answer, "Ahhh – Shit!"

"Ahhh – Shit?"

"*Si*, Great Chief ... Ahhh – Shit!"

A laugh came from one in the crowd, the chief's widowed son-in-law, Lia's father, César Mercado. Smiling proudly, he walked over to the girl and pulled his daughter to his side, hugging her close. He was dressed as a professional guide, and unlike most of the others, his clothes were reasonably new and store bought. Lia buried her nose in her father's shirt and kept it there for a bit. She loved her father's smell.

César looked down at his child and asked, "So precious one, the white being yelled out Ahhh – Shit, did he?"

Lia looked up at her father and nodded a yes. "*Si, papa*. What do these words mean?"

"*Si*, César, tell us what this foolish cry means?" the chief demanded.

At the top of his lungs César yelled out, "*Iyyy – Caca!*"

The fifty or so villagers standing in the plaza erupted in laughter. After the humor died down, the old chief scolded the child loudly, "You're lying!"

"I am not!" Lia shouted in return.

"Precious one, be respectful of your grandfather. We all believe you. How else would a child like you learn such a vulgar English word?"

After hearing César's wise defense of his child's story, whispers and nods of agreement passed through the crowd. Everyone respected César Mercado. His father-in-law may have been the tribe's chief, but César was the one the village looked to for guidance and wisdom. Lia lifted her head and looked up at her father. "*Papa*," she beseeched, "may we go and play now?"

"The others may go, but you will spend the day by my side," he responded firmly but lovingly. "We have much to talk about, my little love." And upon hearing her father's words, Lia determined that spending the day with her father might prove to be an enjoyable punishment.