

DEADLY ELECTION

ARTHUR CRANDON

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DEDICATION

Life throws many curved balls at you. Your closest friends and family will either help you dodge them or help you to survive the hits.

These people have kept me sane(ish) in an increasing selfish, intolerant, mean and depressing world.

They have given me a reason to live, to give, and to enjoy life:

My amazing children, Peter, Simon, Thomas and Talia.

My partner, Lance Requilme Ceniza.

Finally, as he is currently in my thoughts a lot, I dedicate this book to the memory of my Uncle George who died in London last week.

He was a solitary but kind old man who helped me in many ways – Rest in Peace, Uncle.

FOREWORD

Deadly Election, the first in the 'Asian Intrigue' series, is set in the Philippines, where I spent eight years before fleeing to Hong Kong in fear of my freedom and my life.

The country and its people are beautiful, but the extreme poverty is perpetuated by many of the ruling dynasties.

This breeds corruption and violence on a scale westerners cannot imagine unless they have been there.

The book illustrates and highlights the barbarity and cruelty of those in power, whatever their nationality and takes you on a breath-taking journey through murder, rape, extortion, sexual intrigue and deceit.

The events in this book are fictional – the reality is worse.

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PROLOGUE

As Virgil entered the cave, the crate slipped from his grasp, he stumbled to his knees. The sudden pain in his left side sapped his remaining energy, his emaciated old body crumpled onto the dusty stones. A trail of blood seeped out from under him – the close range shot had shattered his kidney and punctured his lung.

Kodama, the young officer, pointed his Nambu pistol at one of the younger men cowering in the corner.

“You! Pick it up.”

The lad scrambled forward to take Virgil's place in an effort to stay alive, at least for a few more minutes. Breath came in short, painful gasps for Virgil, but he could see what was going on around him. The screams of his youngest daughter, Racquel filled the air.

"No. Please, I beg you, no. No hurt me, please."

Her broken sobs fractured her feeble English.

She was less than ten feet from him, but there was nothing he could do for her. She lay on the ground in a state of near undress, with firm hands holding her struggling body.

The young sergeant and his three men laughed, as if drunk. Two of them held an arm each. She lost her blouse in the struggle a while ago and her young breasts wobbled as she struggled, this amused the men.

"Hold her still. How can I do it if you won't keep her still," barked the Sergeant.

Virgil's head now lay on the floor with blood dripping from the corner of his mouth. He was facing the rape. The third man wrestled with her skirt, but her squirming made it difficult and he lost patience. His dagger made short work of the faded cotton fabric. Bunching the skirt and panties at one side with his fist, he sawed through the material of both in a few seconds; the nakedness of the girl was visible to all. She sobbed in shame at her nudity, in pain (the man had cut into her side as he stripped her) and in fear.

Sergeant Hito now stood in front of the girl with his breeches around his ankles and his manhood sticking out proudly, like a flagpole. Two of the men pulled the young girls legs apart. They didn't need telling, they had done this many time before.

Virgil did not die soon enough. As his sight faded, he saw the Sergeant's swollen member plunge into his daughter's body – she screamed out loud with every lunge until he was completely inside her. The other men cheered as their boss thrust himself harder and harder into her, and argued over who would take the next turn.

"Look, we've got a virgin!" exclaimed the sergeant, pointing down to the blood seeping from the violated girl.

It took him just a couple of minutes to finish.

"That was a tight one." He said, smiling.

He wiped himself on the discarded skirt as one of the others; a shorter, fatter man took his place.

After twenty minutes all four men had used her body and she lay curled up. She raised her head to see the now lifeless body of her father, and sobbed even louder.

"I sorry, father, I so sorry," she wailed.

CHAPTER 1

General MacArthur kept his promise and returned to the Philippines late in 1944 with nearly two hundred thousand American troops. They hunted down the remaining Japanese soldiers. Many of the invading troops held gold and other treasures, looted from all over Asia. Some, under the orders of disgraced General Yamashita, hid these treasures wherever they could, digging holes in the ground, filling the basements of deserted houses, or finding a secluded cave.

The American rescue was too late for Virgil and his village. It would be another week before the liberating yanks paraded through the streets of the historic Spanish style town of Vigan to the cheers of the traumatized locals.

Lieutenant Kodama surveyed the bloody scene.

“Quickly, get them into the cave. Search the forests – we cannot let any of these scum get away.”

His men carried the limp remains of the men, women and children inside, piling them up like animal carcasses next to the neatly stacked wooden cases. A few of the men broke off and went into the forests to make sure none had escaped.

The weary soldiers were in luck, the village had a cow and a few goats. The smell of the animals roasting over the torn down remains of the village huts was exciting the soldiers, they had not eaten well for over a week.

Before dawn broke over the hazy tops of the Cordillera Mountains, some of the men busied themselves blocking up the cave entrance and dragging down branches from overhanging bamboos for further concealment. Within an hour they were on their way, any evidence that they were ever there was now walled up in the cave.

They made slow progress through the lush tropical jungles of the Northern Philippines. Kodama spoke quietly with his sergeant

“Do you think we can make it to Subic? There’s no point trying to get to Manila – the Americans are already controlling Manila Bay.”

“Maybe we can find a small boat in one of the small harbours in Tarlac and take our chances – the Yanks are moving fast – if we don’t get off the island soon we’ll have no chance.”

The dense vegetation opened out onto a small road, it ran alongside the sea at that point – they could see the beach a hundred yards away. The troop crouched down and scurried across the road, congregating again in the shade of some large rocks and coconut palms at the top of the beach.

The sergeant gathered them around him.

“We have to stay off the roads, we’ve no idea how far the Americans have got. We’ll move along the shore using the rocks as shelter. Try not to be seen – the locals may try to have a go at us – or contact the enemy – we cannot take chances.”

Four hours later, as they skirted San Fernando, La Union their luck ran out. The sun was at its hottest now – these temperatures did not suit the conscripted soldiers. The American commandos had spotted them a long way off. An abandoned barn close to the road proved an excellent vantage point. As the Japanese moved past on the shoreline below, the American commander called out,

“Halt, and surrender!”

Lieutenant Kodama managed to get a shot off in the general direction of the building before the Americans cut him down with rapid fire.

All the other Japanese dropped to the ground or behind trees when then heard the American shout.

“Don’t shoot, don’t shoot!”

The youngest recruit stood up and started walking toward the building with his hands in the air.

“Traitor!” screamed the sergeant as he lifted his rifle and shot the boy in the back of the neck – the startled lad fell forward gurgling.

The Americans needed no further excuse. The few Japanese had no chance; there were twice as many Americans. Hand grenades landed between the rocks that were sheltering them – all the Americans had to do was sit and wait for a few seconds. They saw the effects of the blast before they heard the noise - body parts were thrown out into the open, then there was quiet. The allied soldiers approached with caution, rifles ready. They need not have worried. There was no life in the bloody remains strewn over the beach and the road.

The allies quickly dug a deep pit. The unmarked grave by the side of the road was left undisturbed for nearly sixty years.

Senator Enrique Consuelo was tired and irritable.

“Where is she?” he demanded of the first maid he saw.

“Sir, she is in garden, shall I fetch her?”

“No, just tell her I’m home, tell her to come up to me later.”

The maid nodded and ran off as the weary politician climbed the stairs.

As he walked into the spacious, thickly carpeted bathroom, the scent of lavender reached him. Glimmering scented candles surrounding the heart shaped Jacuzzi caught his eye. Steam rose from the warm, silky, oil-laced water. He smiled, both in anticipation and remembrance.

Thoughts of that exciting evening came to his mind.

His partner was frequently away – he made the most of her absences. As he looked at the foaming bath, he could imagine the three young girls who were his guests that evening. This had been a particularly enjoyable encounter, he smiled at the memory. Regular exercise and a good diet gave him plenty of stamina, despite his advancing age. Over two hours he satisfied them all, one of them twice. Thinking of their eagerness, the softness of their young skin, he was again becoming aroused.

The room was cool and the air was scented. Pastel beige drapes bordered the panoramic windows – very stylish but relaxing. Carefully removing his brown leather shoulder holster with the pistol still inside, he donned his silk robe. He draped the gun holster over the back of a chair near the window. Music pervaded the background, from speakers hidden in the walls – Celine Dion – ‘My heart will go on.’

The elegant, stylish surroundings were largely paid for by the Senator’s business interests – smuggling, illegal gambling, prostitution, and more.

Bending slightly, he selected a quality bottle of Langhe Nebbiolo, an old and fine, red Italian wine, from the rack in the alcove by the door. The Senator prided himself on his knowledge of fine wine – he had an enviable collection.

After uncorking it and pouring himself a generous glass (he was too impatient tonight to decant it and let it breathe), he gazed for a couple of minutes out over the fish pools in his private garden. Before him were well tended lawns between beds of roses and bougainvillea. Ornamental palm trees provided shade for the small wooden chairs and tables spaced around the symmetrical enclosure.

He disrobed and eased himself into the spacious tub, touching a discreet button on the side. The quiet motor beneath responded with a hum, bubbles emerged from nozzles in the bottom and sides of the tub, gently massaging his legs and back. He sank into the depths of the bath, closing his eyes.

Consuelo was tough, very tough; not someone you would want as an enemy. He had a deserved reputation as a warlord, but was very bright, with admirable political skill. So far, he had shown much better judgement than his predecessors.

Despite his ruthlessness, he believed he was a good man and, in truth, he was not all bad. He could be generous and thoughtful when the occasion demanded.

He took care of his staff like a benevolent grandfather, often paying long term employees unofficial ‘pensions’ and shouldering medical and funeral expenses.

Serious health problems caused him to re-evaluate his life, but he still believed it was his destiny to become the President of the Philippines before he left this world.

The bubble jets were now up to maximum strength, the gentle massage was very pleasant.

The bathroom boasted moldings in Italian style with the most expensive gold plated imported fittings. Chloe, his partner, had a good eye for design. She was a beautiful, intelligent girl less than half his age. As always, she had organized the scented candles for the room and arranged for the bath to be drawn.

After soaking for thirty minutes, he slowly rose through the bubbles, dried himself and put on his robe, then settled into his favourite armchair. Chloe was due to join him soon.

She arrived with an inlaid wooden tray with chamomile tea – part of his health regime. The Senator was a diabetic; he had nearly died from an episode two years before. Ever since then he’d followed medical advice, and felt fitter than before his collapse.

Chloe had an admirable body; the flimsy gown she wore accentuated her curves, with the sash loosely tied at the waist. The Senator admired her and wondered if she was wearing anything under the robe. He was about to find out. As she came over to him and sat on his lap, her gown fell open to reveal her naked body. Her legs opened as she sat astride him.

"I've missed you so much," she whispered.

She smelled wonderful, fresh flower tones, just as he liked. As she opened her legs wider he saw that she had shaved herself in anticipation, she looked very fresh and inviting.

"I see you have missed me too," she smiled, looking down at him.

He was still aroused from his earlier thoughts, and now became as fully erect, and ready. He smiled as his robe parted and she took hold of him.

"This is what you need, sweetheart," she breathed softly into his ear as she raised herself slightly.

She held his stiff member, moving it up and down along her vagina until natural lubrication eased her efforts. He was quite large, but he slowly slid into her. As the full extent of him filled her for the first time in many weeks, he thrust hard against her cervix. She moved forcefully to grind herself against him for several minutes until he ejaculated deep inside her. He held her tightly to him as his juice flowed. She felt the gush and tensed to receive it. It felt good.

After a while they sat down to talk and drink tea. Chloe was a bright girl with a degree in communications. In terms of his trusted associates and staff, she was near the top. She was a useful sounding board for his ideas and he took her advice seriously. His commitment to her was long term – she was the mother of his two young children.

Despite his earlier health issues, he was now working at a pace that would have exhausted a man half his age. Chloe made it her job to ensure he relaxed whenever it was possible. She knew what he was like, but was faithful to him. It was nearly two weeks since she had seen him, she missed his strength and security.

There were two large packed cases by the door of the bedroom.

"Good job," he said, smiling at her. "You've packed already. You must have known I was in a hurry."

"You always are these days, sweetheart, no time for me anymore," she pouted playfully.

"We'll have more time soon."

Before she could reply, he shouted for guards to come and get the bags.

Five minutes later the car was outside with its engine running, the Senator waiting in the back. She jumped in beside him; the driver shut the door behind her smartly. Within an hour, they were in the air and halfway to Manila.

"Can't you keep her any steadier?" Consuelo barked at his harassed young pilot, as the small plane took yet another dive into an air pocket.

"Sorry, sir," replied the timid young man, the most junior of the Senators' three pilots. "We're so light this trip, we're being blown around more, and the wind is strong."

"I know that."

The Senator was not feeling well. He made his way back to his seat and his sick bag.

Jagged ridges of the Cordillera Mountains in the North of the Province below looked dangerously close. Razor-like peaks resembled the edge of a saw, and seemed to go on forever. The tail end of a typhoon was still creating strong winds, causing turbulence for the small sixteen-seater plane. The Senator felt queasy as the light aircraft bobbed about in the face of the gale.

It was a relief when they touched down at Manila domestic airport sixty minutes later. The black Ford Expedition was waiting for him on the side of the runway, Consuelo ran down the exit stairs as soon as they were unfolded. The driver opened the door wide, ready for him. Before pouring himself into the plush black leather on the back seat of the car to wait for his

wife, he took a few seconds to wave at the small group of photographers gathered at the airport entrance.

"Welcome home, sir," said the driver, an older man and faithful servant for more than twenty years.

"Thank you Edward, I'm glad to be back. Is Simon at the house yet?"

"Yes, sir. He arrived the day before yesterday."

Simon, his 'secretary' and general fixer, had been taking care of some election rigging in the Southern Islands.

The Senator and Chloe arrived at his Manila mansion just before two p.m. after the short drive through the busy traffic. Their Manila home was set in a tree-lined gated community in Bel-Air – the Philippine elite lived here. The two lanes of the dual carriageway within the village were clean and smooth. Tall coconut palms adorned the central reservation, interspersed with mature banana plants, a lone road sweeper lazily dragged his trolley along the dusty path.

The car turned smoothly left as the electronic gates parted to allow them in. Even in a street of outstanding homes, theirs stood out. Painted white with a red tiled roof, the thirty two room mansion was imposing.

"Who will be coming tonight?" Chloe asked as they made their way to the bedroom.

"It's really just a thank you party, an early celebration," he replied. "My top people in Manila will be here. We want to be discreet about this meeting, so I told them to make sure they drove right through the gates, and to use cars with tinted windows."

"Well, you can leave it to me," she smiled. "I'll make sure it will be a night to remember." Enrique knew what she meant.

There was a knock at the door and without waiting a slim lad entered the room. They'd asked Jake to 'do' them this afternoon. He pushed in a small trolley.

Nodding courteously at the Senator and his lady, without a word, he set out his tools on a small table next to the Senator's chair. He set about trimming and tidying, and touching up some of the white roots, which were now becoming more prominent after each trim. The Senator continued to chat with his wife but was careful in his choice of conversation with Jake there.

Jake served as hairdresser and beautician in residence, he had lived with them for seven years and was almost part of the family. The Senator liked him very much; his feminine affectations made Consuelo smile. Jake was gay or 'bakla' – the local name for 'lady boys'.

He would have been a very beautiful woman with his high cheekbones and slim build; he liked to wear short dresses and was never short of admirers. After the hair treatment, Jake gave the Senator a deep neck and shoulder massage then moved to Chloe.

The Senator stood up abruptly as Jake prepared his stuff. Chloe took this as her cue that their private moments were now over and it was time for business. They quickly embraced one more time.

"Thanks for everything, pussycat. I must get on now, I'll see you later."

She smiled and released him, then sat down to enjoy Jake's attention.

Today was Thursday. The Senator preferred to be in the Province at the weekend and usually travelled back to the Capital on Monday, but this time, as the election was approaching, he stayed longer to consolidate his support. One of the final meetings of the campaign was going to take place at his house that evening. It signified that the end of his battle was near.

The Senator was not a military man, although he liked to cultivate the image of being a tough guy. His bid for the Presidency was well organized; he was running a military-style campaign. The loyal team he had built around him was astute and experienced, he controlled them tightly.

The sprawling three-story house had a well-equipped conference room; converted from its former use as a snooker room when he bought the place ten years ago. On the ground floor next to the conference room, there was a small but comfortable private office. Simon was outside waiting for him and rose smiling as he entered.

"It's good to see you, sir," he said, accepting the Senator's outstretched hand and shaking it briskly.

They sat in black leather chairs on either side of an antique coffee table.

Simon was maybe ten years younger than the Senator, he was also taller and slimmer than the portly man. When the Senator recruited him, Simon said he had retired from his air force career at forty-five and spent a few years as a mercenary in the Middle East. He kept his pilot's license and sometimes flew planes for the Senator.

In the beginning, the Senator had reservations about employing him, but a recommendation from his Chinese friend, Bin Xu, a newly rich 'commodity broker' with whom he had done many clandestine deals, persuaded him. Simon was a solitary figure. He didn't mix with the other staff, but was exceptionally efficient. The Senator had learned that he was one hundred percent reliable – his initial misgivings were fading.

Simon began his briefing, consulting his notebook.

"How are things in the South?" asked the Senator, his face breaking into a hint of a smile.

The other man looked up.

"Fine sir, fine. We'll get sixty percent out of Cebu and better in Davao."

Consuelo knew his aide was being optimistic, but he took that for granted. Simon continued.

"You need to ring the Governor of Palawan; he will help us, but he needs a word from you."

The Senator nodded.

"And this evening?"

"Everything is prepared, Senator. Everyone you wanted to come has accepted. There's no agenda; you told me it was to be informal?" he looked up quizzically at the Senator, who nodded.

"I met with two of the Bishops and the Vice-President, discreetly of course, and they're very happy now, they asked me to pass on their thanks to you. I don't think we will have much trouble with the Church, and the VP will be here tonight."

"What about the Mayor of Makati, is he happy now?"

"Yes, he's a happy man. I took care of his little problem for him."

"I know, I read about it in the newspaper,"

Both men chuckled.

Being a journalist was a dangerous occupation in the Philippines – especially if you were stupid or brave enough to criticize powerful men. You became accident-prone very quickly. Marvin, a popular young journalist, formerly an announcer on a local radio station, raised allegations of financial impropriety surrounding the Mayor on his weekly show. A killing would create too much bad publicity and suspicion, but three masked men paid a visit to his home during the day while he was at work. Marvin's wife was in hospital right now seriously injured, with abdominal bleeding and a broken nose.

The two strolled next door to the spacious conference room, with its large windows that filled the room with natural light. Simon squinted at the change in the light as they walked in. The room would comfortably seat twenty, but there would only be about twelve people there tonight. Some of the attendees were Manila based but others were making their way by plane and car.

"Everything that you asked for has been done. I am sure that everything will go well tonight," said Simon.

"Well, you do indeed seem to have everything under control,"

"Of course, Sir" the other man replied, eyes still on his notes.

"I'll take a rest now and see you later."

The Senator did not wait for a response, and headed towards the bedroom. Simon made his way to his own, smaller office down the corridor, and locked the door.

Simon was in it for the money, but he respected his boss, and prided himself on his cool efficiency in his work.

The Senator's former friend, President Bautista, had become extremely unpopular. She was not standing for re-election although she had only served one term. A not so small fortune sat in foreign banks waiting for her – she was keen to get out while she still could.

She had thrown her support behind Consuelo's closest rival, Senator Cruz. This was a poisoned chalice for the poor man, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Senator Consuelo's power base was in Abra, Northern Luzon. He had spent a lot of time cultivating his image there, after all, the people respected strength. In the last few months, however, because of his Presidential bid, he had worked with highly paid advisers from the local media and the church. He had managed to ensure that, to most of the country, he seemed somewhat softer and more intellectual.

He was now cultivating a more statesmanlike, benevolent persona. It was working so far, he was slowly climbing the popularity charts, but there were still many days to go. He just had to keep his nose clean and his election machine well-oiled and supplied; he had currently spent more than twenty million dollars and he knew there would still be more to pay. Resources were diminishing, and this concerned him. Distracted, he shook himself back to reality when Simon called him.

Simon had, as instructed, arranged for the most important guest of the evening to arrive early. The well-dressed man strode the short distance from his car to the front door, which opened as he arrived, two bodyguards following at a distance. He was dapper, slightly overweight and shorter than his host. Dyed black hair made him seem younger than his sixty years.

The Senator wore his best smile and stood with an outstretched hand. Vice President Ramos looked up, returned the Senator's smile and warmly clasped the outstretched hand with both of his own. The former television presenter had been used and abused by his former friend, the President, and was counting down the days until the election.

"Welcome, my dear friend," enthused the Senator, continuing to shake the man's hand a little longer than was necessary.

He led him through to the small office next to the meeting room where he offered him the nearest chair.

Consuelo wasted no time

"The President has taken a tighter and tighter control on the media. It will be one of my first acts to give them back their independence – I want you to be part of it."

The VP looked up.

"I would like you to take over as the Chairman of the Philippine Broadcasting Company."

The PBC controlled and/or regulated the growing number of television and radio stations in the country. As a former, and still well known broadcaster, Mark Ramos would be back in a world he was familiar with - and at the top of it. The Senator knew that this was an irresistible offer.

"And to emphasize how important I consider the media to be, you'll also be a special Presidential Adviser."

The Vice President couldn't hide his delight. He thought he would get the Chair of the PBC but not the elevated status of special Presidential Adviser.

"You will have my full support, my friend," he gushed, reaching forward to clasp Consuelo's hand firmly once again.

It was a win-win situation for the Senator. Ramos' support was now assured. He had put him into a situation where he could do little damage, and he certainly didn't intend to take any advice from him. The Vice President got up from his chair.

"This calls for a drink."

The two men sat and drank like old friends. The Senator nodded at the appropriate places while the Vice President rambled on, condemning the current administration, blaming others for his situation – Consuelo had heard it all before. After twenty minutes or so the Senator made

his excuses, he had to prepare for the party. He left the Vice-President with a large glass of whiskey, and the rest of the bottle close by.

The meeting would start at six. Simon made a point of insisting that they should be on time. This would likely be the only meeting of the group before the election – or probably ever. They all had their work to do for the Senator in their own way over the coming days

Other guests started to arrive after thirty minutes. Uniformed catering staff met them at the door offering water and juice. Large amounts of alcoholic drinks would flow after the short business of the day was over. They were ushered into a plush drawing room to await the arrival of the others.

Simon ushered them into the boardroom. The Senator, and a slightly groggy Vice President, stood by the door to greet them. Everyone at the party was a well-known public figure. There was already an air of celebration – exactly what the Senator was trying to achieve. He stood to speak and the room fell silent.

“Dear friends, we’re nearly there, nothing can stop us now. I know many of you have already worked hard on my behalf and I thank all of you.”

He raised his glass. Around the table, the others toasted each other. He looked around the table making eye contact with his guests as he spoke.

“You know, when I started my campaign, many people said I had no chance. It’s thanks to you and other like-minded people who’ve recognized the need for change that I’ve got where I am now.”

The serious tone of his speech caused the room to fall silent, as the Senator had intended. He had their full attention

“I must give you one word of caution; we enter the most dangerous part of the race now. Many people will try to stop us, to expose any skeletons, real or imagined. Please be on your guard for these last few days. Then we can all relax and enjoy our rewards.”

He raised his glass again, as high as he could.

“Here’s to success,” he proclaimed.

The assembled guests cheered and again toasted each other. When the chatter in the room subsided, the Senator resumed.

“I want to pass you over now to my good friend, the Vice President of the Republic of the Philippines.”

Vice President Ramos stood to speak, as pre-arranged. He was an imposing figure, and an accomplished speaker, even when under the influence of alcohol. He put his arm around the Senator, hugged him, and smiled – that said it all really, but more was expected.

“I’m among friends here tonight so I can be frank. We all know that the country needs the kind of man we’ve pledged to support as the next President. Unlike the present incumbent, this man knows about loyalty, he’s a man of the people and has the interests of the country as his number one priority. In a couple of weeks we’ll be celebrating our victory.”

Ramos went on to praise Consuelo effusively for another five minutes and ended by telling the assembled dignitaries that if there were any problem he could assist with, all they had to do was pick up the phone. He finished by giving them his private cell number. There was light applause and a brotherly pat on the back from Consuelo as he stood to take over

“As a humble country politician, I am proud to be in such distinguished company tonight. My vision for our great country is one of prosperity and equality – and to regain our dignity in the eyes of the international community.”

There were sombre nods around the table.

Consuelo introduced Simon, who stood and smiled. The Senator made it clear to them that Simon was available at any time of day or night. He would call each of them daily with updates on the campaign. Simon shook his boss’ hand, the Senator sat down.

Simon outlined the weak areas, where the campaign needed support. The Church was not yet solidly behind the Senator – he needed the Bishops present to work on that. The Archbishop of Manila had made public comments about Consuelo’s links to illegal gambling (which in truth

funded half of his enterprises). Public denials helped but somehow over the next few days the Archbishop must be persuaded to be less vocal in his opposition.

The Catholic Church in the Philippines was strong politically and had a lot of popular support, holding firmly to early Catholic ideology inherited from the time of the Spanish occupation. The only way to end a marriage was by annulment, apart from killing your spouse. Both were equally popular but the latter choice was usually cheaper, with little danger of prosecution. It was widely practiced.

Most of the national daily newspapers had come round to endorsing Consuelo – newspaper owners, editors and senior journalists all benefited from the largesse of the Senator. The major television channels stayed mainly neutral as the incumbent was not standing again and they were not prepared to support no-hopers even if urged to by the Office of the President, she would be gone soon.

The army was solidly behind his campaign. They had never been very comfortable with a woman in charge. Consuelo asked the military men present for a list of senior officers who supported him. They would ensure the military vote went his way. Each of them would receive a discrete phone call from Consuelo and an early Christmas present.

The National Chief of Police started to write a similar list. Police General Estrada served for thirty-five years in the police, after a short military career. He was six months from retirement and this election was going to provide a substantial boost to his pension fund. The Senator promised better pay and conditions to the Police - especially the recruits who received very little. It was easy to sell Consuelo as the new President to his men.

The Mayor of Manila, Manuel Decena, had also suffered under the current leadership. The President had taken away control of planning decisions and building permits – this meant the loss of a major source of income. She had also taken away the lucrative issuance of business permits. Consuelo would return both of these to him under his new administration.

Mayor Decena had already received some ‘compensation’ from Consuelo. He would deliver many thousands of votes from those who lived and worked in the nation’s Business capital. Thanks to the support of the Mayor, the Senator’s face (an airbrushed, much younger looking version) smiled out at the daily commuters from thousands of public buildings, the sides of the major thoroughfares and public billboards all over the city.

Harry Chua, one of the richest men in the Philippines, had supported Consuelo through his Senatorial race and bankrolled him for a large share of the election costs. His family fortune dated back to the Marcos era. His father had been one of the disgraced Presidents closest cronies.

Consuelos and Harrys parents had been good friends, but were both dead now. Nevertheless, family loyalty meant everything to a Filipino. Consuelo generously thanked him for his support, a gesture meant to convey to the meeting that money was no object for the campaign. They could all rely on rich rewards at the end.

The Senator spoke again.

“I will need the help of each and every one of you to implement the policies our country so desperately needs,”

The group was politely silent again.

“I know you all share my beliefs and visions – and I know I can rely on you all to play your part.”

He looked around the table solemnly, then his expression changed and a broad smile graced his face.

“Relax, enjoy yourselves tonight, you are among friends. Tomorrow we’ll start to work in earnest, but tonight we’ll play.”

With perfect timing, the door burst open. Attractive serving girls wheeled in a lavish buffet of hot and cold food. Wine and spirits, with mixers and ice arrived on two further trolleys.

Gradually the guests wandered next door to the more comfortable drawing room with sofas and coffee tables – and open bottles of whiskey and brandy on every table. Chloe joined Consuelo; he smiled as he gave her a quick hug.

“Good job,” he whispered in her ear. “Is the entertainment arranged?”

“Of course it is, I selected the girls myself, and they’re all sexy.”

He laughed.

“I knew I could rely on you – as always. Well done. Have the electricians gone now?”

She nodded.

“I’ve checked the rooms and everything is fine.”

He kissed her firmly on the lips.

“I couldn’t manage without you,”

“Thank you Sweetheart, I love you so much.”

She meant it.

The party was in full swing now. Dance music was playing, apparently from the ceiling, and the mood was set. Some of the guests were always in the public spotlight and rarely got a chance to let their hair down – they took full advantage.

Well before midnight, young, pretty girls appeared and mingled with the guests. Chloe had contacts in many places; she was often called on to supply ‘company’ for the Senators guests. Tonight she had done an admirable job – all of the girls were stunning – and all the more appealing in their scanty outfits.

The happy guests soon paired up with attractive partners, then moved slowly to the space in the middle of the room that had become the dance floor. Two security guards in plain clothes kept an eye on proceedings looking out for anyone who was tempted to take photos with their phones. It did not take long for the alcohol and dim lighting to have its effect. The Senator was pleased to see kissing and groping going on in different corners of the room.

Several of the girls were down to their panties now and all inhibitions had been lost. Two of the girls, one with a large butterfly tattoo high up on her inner thigh, were completely naked and one had Harry Chua’s engorged penis halfway down her throat.

As the evening wore on the guests disappeared off in the direction of the bedrooms with a girl, or sometimes two. One bishop left the party early. Consuelo and Chloe decided that they could take the opportunity to make their excuses and slip away.

The other bishop was one of the last guests to leave the room. He befriended a young slim serving lad who he later escorted to his bedroom.

The sun had risen over the house and was beating down on the lush, green lawns by ten a.m. There had been monsoon rains a few days before, so the air was fresh and humid. In the patio area beside the house the Senator and Chloe entertained those who managed to get up for breakfast. The chefs had been busy, a hot buffet breakfast awaited them on the patio, and a pleasant scent drifted over from the rose beds. The various ‘partners’ were long gone.

When they left the house, each guest drove away in a brand new black Ford Expedition, a personal gift from Harry Chua. Harry was also in the business of cultivating friends, he was a very generous man. He had to be to maintain his influence.

By early afternoon, Consuelo was feeling the effects of the hustle and bustle of the last few days. He retired to his bed, with Chloe. She was tired and pleased when the Senator suggested they rest for a while. They climbed into bed and snuggled into each other. Chloe stared at his face. His eyes were closed.

“Are you awake, darling?”

He replied in the affirmative straight away and opened one eye.

“Are you pleased with how the party went?”

He nodded.

“Yes, it was all I could have hoped for. You did a very good job.”

She smiled.

“I wish you would let me help you more. I’m quite capable you know.”

“Yes, I know, sweetheart, I just want you to have an easy life,”

He was too tired to care how patronizing that sounded, but it was enough to provoke her.

“I do have a brain, and a lot of experience you know, I was doing quite well before I met you.”

Even in his semi-conscious state Consuelo now realized he’d said the wrong thing.

“Of course, I know that sweetheart,” he said. “I’m sorry; I’ll give you more responsibility if you really want it.”

“I do,” she replied. “Let me show you what I’m really capable of. Trust me, please! You know you can. Let me take care of more things for you, I could organize your press conferences and your press releases, I’m sure Simon has more important things to do.”

The Senator then realized what was going on. He had sensed just a little hostility, maybe jealousy growing over the last year or so towards Simon. The man had indeed assumed a greater role in the Senator’s life with the run up to the campaign, and Chloe resented it.

“Alright sweetheart, you can prepare my press releases, starting tomorrow, but do not send anything out before first letting me check it.”

“Of course, sweetheart.”

She knew he would not go back on his word and went to sleep happy.

As usual when the Senator was busy, Simon took charge of his phone. He politely fended off the many people who wanted to see him, and amused himself reviewing the photos taken in the guest bedrooms during the previous night by the hidden cameras. He enjoyed making people feel important when they rang, but only allowed through those whose business was a benefit to the Senator.

Simon only let one person through the net today. She was an elderly lady who had worked for him for most of her life. She looked even older than her advanced years as she emerged from the small group using a walking stick and moving unsteadily. Her husband was dying of cancer, he urgently needed an operation. She was desperate and turned to Consuelo as her only hope. There would be smiles, tears, and camera clicks as he solved her problem, very publicly. She was lucky that the election was so close.

He was sitting in the garden with his usual entourage when the stooping old woman approached him. He rose and smiled broadly, then bade her sit down next to him.

“What can I do for you my dear, tell me how I can help you?”

She was visibly upset, she could hardly hold back the tears, but his words and manner calmed her. He took her hand as she spoke.

“I am sorry to trouble you sir, you’ve been so good to me and my family over the years.”

The Senator really did look after his staff and it paid off, most of his people were fiercely loyal.

“My dear husband has taken to his bed, sir, he has liver cancer – the doctors say they must take it out straight away or he will die – I don’t know what to do.”

She looked up pleadingly into his eyes. This was all good stuff for his image. His photographers quietly snapped away in the background.

“I am so sorry, my dear, you’re like family to me and I’ll do anything I can to help. How much do you need to sort this out?”

She forced a smile as he looked into her eyes. “The doctors want Five Hundred Thousand Pesos to make him better, sir.”

He held her hand tightly,

“You don’t need to worry about it anymore, mother – go home and look after your husband.”

She had tears in her eyes now.

“Simon is going to give you a letter to take to the hospital – it will tell them that I will personally pay all his medical bills – I promise you they’ll get him sorted out straight away.”

The old lady began to cry openly. Consuelo led her gently to Simon who guided her inside, where he would write the letter. His secretary and photographer travelled everywhere with him and made sure the media were well informed about his generosity.

The Senator planned to return to the Province later. His family would go back with him this time. It was a good time for the public to see 'family photos' of him with his lady and their children.

Chloe brought her own entourage with her. Her beautician and interior designer would be with them on the plane, Enrique told her she could redecorate their bathroom to give her an added incentive to come. He needed her to be smiling and happy on this trip, and she did not want to be bored while her husband was busy politicking. Three of her girlfriends came as well, to keep her company while the Senator was busy.

The Senator spoke quietly to Simon in a corner.

"Did you see the photos taken in the house last night?"

Simon nodded.

"Please follow up everyone who was at the party, make sure they're ok, and check if they have any concerns. If any of them are wavering or trying to bargain for more money get back to me straight away, we must have unity now. Anyway, we have some leverage in case any of them want to rock the boat." Both men smiled.

The plane set down smoothly at Benguet airport. As usual, cars waited to whisk everyone off to the Estate. The children ran to the gardens, laughing happily, while maids carried suitcases upstairs to the bedrooms. Chloe and her party made themselves comfortable in the garden with glasses of chilled wine.

Consuelo was already busy with Simon.

"Who have we got coming tonight?"

Simon referred to his notebook.

"The usual boring bunch, sir. All the most important Mayors and Vice-Mayors – and a few Councilors."

Consuelo planned to take it easy the next day, he knew he would be having a late one that night. He used to enjoy being 'one of the boys' but he now found Provincial matters boring and the company of these small-minded men tiresome.

A large table was set in the garden. It was a warm night, with a breeze rustling through the coconut palms above.

The ten politicians waited for him around the dining table, they had already started on the third bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label when the Senator entered the room. They rose to applaud him as he made his way to the head of the table.

Mayor Eddie Bautista from Narvacan was a distant relative. It was an effort to be nice to the boorish man, but the Senator was adept at concealing his feelings.

"I can guarantee you ninety percent in Narvacan my friend," said Bautista proudly, slapping the Senator on the back.

Consuelo hated that, but smiled through it.

"I have made sure that they are all behind you, they will do as I say," continued the Mayor.

He was happy for the chance to brag in front of his peers. The Senator played the game.

"What would I do without you, Eddie?" He laughed. "Why, I would probably lose the whole election!"

Bautista was not very bright and the sarcasm was lost on him. Everyone laughed, including Bautista.

"But why only ninety percent, my friend? How could you let ten percent of them get away?"

The laughter continued and the tone for the evening was set.

Cooks delivered hot local delicacies to the table, and made sure there were was plenty of whiskey and brandy throughout the extended meal. He enjoyed the evening more than he thought, but he was glad when the last of them left after midnight and he could go to his bed.

The next morning he slept late and went down to breakfast. At ten a.m. Simon entered.

“Sorry sir, there are three lads outside asking to see you.”

“Any idea what it’s about?”

“They wouldn’t say sir, they said it’s a personal matter, they don’t look like they’re begging for money.”

The Senator was intrigued.

“One of them used to work for you sir, Darwin, he worked in the gardens.”

“Ok, show them in – I’ll give them a few minutes.”

Consuelo was feeling good and sensed there might be another photo opportunity here. Maybe there was a chance to get his photo in the final edition of the Philippine Star.

CHAPTER 2

The hidden cave in the mountains remained undisturbed for more than sixty years. No one dared to live in the remote area for a long time. Stories that the inhabitants of a whole village had disappeared mysteriously were passed down through generations, only the brave dared venture anywhere near the cursed area. However, over time the memories dimmed, and finally a few brave younger souls re-inhabited the area.

One morning, during the rainy season, three young men were foraging for food. To catch their breath, they rested in a shallow dip close to the base of the nearest mountain; the area was new to them. One of them spied a crack in the rock face filled by what seemed to be piles of loose rocks and covered by overhanging foliage, on either side there was solid rock.

At nineteen, Darwin was the eldest, Benny and Pedro were both seventeen. The younger boys looked to Darwin for leadership.

“This looks interesting,” said Benny, trying to scabble over the rocks.

“Well, we don’t have anything else to do,” said Darwin. “Let’s clear away the rocks; it looks like there could be something behind.”

The younger boys looked at each other, Darwin could read their faces.

“Oh, come on – don’t be such babies – don’t worry about those stories, they’re just old wives’ tales. There’re no ghosts. Let’s get on with it, are we men or boys? There are three of us. Nothing’s going to happen.”

Bolstered by his confidence the other boys moved in and started to help. After fifteen minutes, they discovered that the rocks were blocking a narrow entranceway between the cliffs leading into a small cave. By noon, they had cleared a gap. As they squeezed their heads through the opening they could see a larger space beyond the rocks.

They cleared the narrow entrance until there was a space which they could squeeze through. It was pitch black inside and the air was musty– their bravery didn’t go as far as to venture into the dark and dismal chasm yet. They sat on the larger rocks nearby to eat their snack.

The boys discussed what they might find inside the cave. Pedro, the youngest, offered to go back to the village for torches.

“Don’t talk to anyone about this,” said Darwin. “They’ll ask too many questions. We don’t want anyone knowing, at least for now.”

The boy ran through the forest. As he scampered through the dense undergrowth, his young mind thought about the possibilities, what they may find in the cave. There was no one around as he entered the village. Most people were sleeping in their huts to avoid the mid-day sun.

There was very little change in day-to-day life – the nearest shops or Towns were many miles away.

Over the years, the population had risen and there were now five families – about thirty people in all. Pedro sneaked into his family house – a simple one-room shack. His father was asleep in the corner on a straw mat. He quietly picked up some kerosene torches stored at the back of the lean-to shed. He found some matches in the kitchen and then crept out of the village and hurried back.

He was soon back at the cave entrance. The boys lit a torch and made their way into the cave, scrambling over the remaining rocks.

As the light dimmed the atmosphere became tense. None of the boys wanted to show it to their friends, but they all knew of the legend about the area and each had fears as they progressed in silence. They stayed close together, taking confidence from each other. Darwin led, trying not to show his trepidation to the younger boys.

Ten yards into the cave they found the bones.

“Look, do you think they’re human?” said Benny.

“Maybe it was a dog or a wild boar?” said Darwin.

As they lowered the torch to illuminate their find, they suddenly recoiled. There was no doubt. It was a human skeleton, small, probably a child. Their fears returned, they were more afraid, and nervous now. Standing close together, they paused for a few seconds, not sure what to do, and then inched back towards the cave entrance and safety.

Darwin, as the eldest, tried to set an example to his comrades. He forced a smile.,

“Don’t worry, that one’s been dead for a very long time.”

Pedro and Benny did not move.

“I’m scared,” said Pedro,

Tears welled in his eyes. Despite his seventeen years he was immature. He tugged the shirt of the elder Benny and they backed up towards the entrance.

Darwin, despite his bravado, was not going to stay there alone. He moved to follow his comrades out of the cave but as he turned, a metallic glint caught his eye.

“Hang on,” he called out. “There’s something there.” He peered further into the cave and inched towards the metal glint, carefully skirting the small bundle of bones. As he moved further in, with his colleagues warily following, he began to make out the outline of more skeletons lying along the walls and ledges. Their eyes were becoming accustomed to their surroundings and the dim light – they gained confidence as the walls and ceilings became more defined. The sight of human bones was not new to the boys, and in itself held no fear – it was their tribe’s tradition to preserve the bones of their ancestors and keep them wrapped up in cloth.

It was obvious that whatever had taken place there happened a long time ago. Whatever worries remained were overshadowed by anticipation and curiosity. They gave little thought as to why the skeletons were there. Tribal fights were common, although not as frequent as they used to be. There were often deaths or serious injuries from ambushes and village or family disputes

The sparkle that caught Darwin’s eye was slowly becoming clearer. The torch illuminated the deeper recesses of the cave as Darwin moved forward warily. There were many large wooden boxes stacked further back in the cave. He called to the others,

“Hey, quick. There’s something over here.”

They ran over to him, all fear now completely gone.

The boys were now only fifteen feet away and they could make out the glinting outline of the coins. The broken box, with its content spilling out onto the floor, was an amazing sight. Dozens of coins of different sizes lay on the floor around the box. Even through the covering of dust and dirt, it was possible to see that the coins were almost certainly gold. The boys stared at each other. They pulled the sides of the damaged box apart and shinier coins erupted from the widening gap.

“Oh my God!” exclaimed Pedro.

All three boys stood looking at each other with their mouths open.

"Come on; let's see what we've got."

He started pulling at the side of the next box; more bright shiny coins cascaded onto the floor. They managed to open a couple more of the boxes – more coins, mostly Spanish Doubloons, were revealed. All the boxes they opened contained the same. The boys stood in awe as they stared at the coins lying scattered around on the cave floor.

"Are these real?" Benny asked.

He picked up a handful of coins and let them trickle through his fingers – they made a metallic clinking as they struck the coins already on the floor. Pedro picked up a coin and bit it theatrically – he did not know why, but he had seen it done in the movies, and they did taste very real, he thought. There were many more boxes neatly stacked further into the cave. Their young minds could not begin to consider the magnitude of their find and how their lives were about to change.

The air was thin in the cave.

"Come on; let's get out before the torches burn out," said Darwin. Each boy scooped up some of the coins, then they made their way back to the exit, still awestruck from their discovery.

They sat at the cave entrance to consider their find.

"Let's get back to the village; the Captain will know what to do," said Pedro.

The other two looked at each other.

"Are you crazy?" said Darwin. "Do you think if we tell anyone in the village about this that we'll ever see any benefit from it? They'll take it over straight away and we won't get a single peso."

Benny nodded in support. Pedro felt stupid, and became defensive,

"Well what are we going to do? We can hardly walk into the shops that buy gold in Benguet City with cartloads of gold coins, can we? Even if we did, they would rip us off."

"Exactly," said Darwin. "We can't handle this on our own, but we've got to be careful – how can we make sure we get our fair share?"

They sat and thought for a while. Darwin's father had been killed three years ago in a tribal fight, so Darwin was taking care of his mother and his younger sister. Two years ago, he had worked for the local Senator who used to be the Governor of Abra and still lived close by in Benguet. The Senator seemed a kindly man and had occasionally chatted to him if they passed in the garden. The Senator would help – he would know what to do.

"I have a suggestion," said Darwin. "What about the Senator? I am sure he'll help us."

The two nodded in agreement, they could think of no alternative.

"Well, we'd better go straight there, it would be dangerous for us to carry the coins around in the village," said Darwin, standing up. "But we have to put everything back as we found it, hide the entrance again – even better than when we found it."

Everyone knew Darwin at the Estate, he could get them through the gate, and then he would find Marcos the head gardener. Marcos was from their village – he could take them to the Senator. They had a few of the coins in their pockets to prove their story.

The afternoon sun was easing up as they trudged towards the highway where they would catch a bus for the thirty-minute journey to the Senator's Estate. Buses were frequent at that time of day, they did not wait long. It was nearly full but the air-conditioning was a welcome relief.

The magnificent Estate house and gardens were set at the top of a small hill on the left hand side, and the surrounding land encompassed a working farm. The Senator grew tobacco, which provided a lot of local employment. The upper slopes were covered with immaculate landscaped gardens and walkways, magnificent palms and mango trees.

In the hills at the top of the Estate were the remains of ramshackle abandoned gold mines. There was gold in the hills, but not much, and it was difficult to mine.

The bus dropped them at the bottom of the drive, together with several tourists. It was a short walk up to the Estate, to the first security gate. In front of them at the top of the drive lay the impressive house. There were three sets of barriers before you got near the inner sanctum where the Senator lived. Armed men guarded each entrance point, although they were mostly young kids, too inexperienced to use the old and dirty weapons they were carrying.

Darwin and his companions were lucky. One of the guards at the first gate was Butsoy. He was not much older than Darwin, and knew him well. He smiled as the boy approached.

"Hello, young Darwin," he said, "What brings you and your friends here today?"

"Oh, it's just a friendly visit to see Marcos. We've brought him some food from the village."

He showed Butsoy the bag that contained the scrappy remains of their lunchtime meal. Butsoy seemed satisfied. He opened the gate, and then resumed the card game with his colleagues.

It was quite a walk to the vegetable gardens, where Marcos would be found at that time of day. He had a hut and a small rest area in a quiet corner away from public view. A thought occurred to Darwin as they made their way through the fruit trees.

"We must be careful with Marcos," he said. "He's well meaning and a good friend, but when he has a drink he can't keep a secret."

"We daren't tell him," said Benny. "Everyone will know."

The boys stopped. They had to decide what to do before meeting the old man.

"I know," said Darwin, "I'll tell him I want to see if there are any jobs - because we need work, he'll believe that."

"Yes, but we don't want him there when we talk to the Senator, he'll think it strange that we ask him to leave," said Benny.

Darwin thought about this for a moment.

"I'll say I want to ask the Senator for a loan, and I'm embarrassed to do that in front of him."

The other boys nodded in agreement.

Marcos was resting in his hammock between two young coconut trees in a quiet corner of the garden. The old man's main job was to provide vegetables for the estates busy kitchen. The boys spotted him a long way off and made their way through bitter melon vines and tomato plants until they reached the small coconut trees.

"Hello Darwin, it's been a long time,"

Marcos, climbed out of his hammock and clasped the boy's hand warmly. He already knew Darwin's friends as they had often visited him there.

"I know, I'm sorry that I don't get to see you more often my old friend, but I don't have money for the bus fare, I hope you understand."

"Oh yes, I understand, but I hope you haven't come here to borrow money from me, I can barely get by as it is."

"No, no," Darwin quickly assured the old man,

"I know that, my friend, I wouldn't even think of borrowing from you. We want to see the Senator, I really need to work now, and so do my two friends."

He glanced at the others.

"I'm also hoping that he will lend us a little money, we're really desperate, my mother can't cope, and my uncle is getting worse."

Marcos nodded.

"Well, if you catches him in the right mood he'll help you; he can be generous if it suits him. You're lucky, he's at home today. I'll take you up there and we'll see if he has time to see you."

They waited while the old man disappeared into his hut and changed into a presentable shirt and pants, then started to make their way back towards the main house.

At the bottom of the roadway leading up to the private rooms, was the second security check. Marcos was a well-known and trusted employee and the three guards opened the gate as he approached. Three guards were stationed at the door before the stairs, they pressed a few

buttons on the intercom, in a few seconds Marcos and the boys were on their way up to the residence.

At the top of the stairs, the room opened out into a large carpeted area with two sets of settees and armchairs – each seating six, behind them were several dining sets of different sizes and a row of three computer stations along the wall with large monitors. There was a large black well-polished grand piano in one corner.

Simon greeted them at the top of the stairs.

“It’s not often we see you up here, Marcos,”

Simon liked the old man, they often chatted in the garden.

“I am sure you remembers Darwin,” the old man said.

“Of course. How are you young man?”

He shook him firmly by the hand.

“How can I help you?”

Marcos butted in.

“The boys are shy sir, but they wants to have a word with the Senator if he’s free.”

“Ok,” said Simon. “He usually has time for loyal and trusted employees – let me go and see what I can do.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Simon was soon back in the larger reception area shepherding the group of four into the smaller dining room. Consuelo, without rising, and chewing on his last mouthful of vegetables, motioned them to sit down. Simon waited unobtrusively in the corner of the room.

The Senator glanced up from his meal and looked at Darwin, smiling.

“How are you, son?”

“I’m fine, sir. Thank you for your time to see us.”

The Senator nodded.

“You’re welcome; it is nice to see you again.”

Darwin could contain himself no longer, he launched into his request.

“If you don’t mind, sir, I have a delicate matter of great importance to me and my family that I want to talk to you about.”

The Senator was used to opening statements like this and was a bit disappointed; he wondered how much money the boy wanted. Darwin spoke quietly and directly to the Senator.

“Sir, please may we talk privately with you – this matter doesn’t concern my good friend Marcos?”

Marcos looked up, surprised, but held his hand up,

“No problem, I has work to do anyway.”

Darwin leaned towards Marcos and put his hand on the older man’s arm,

“Please don’t be offended, my friend. I’ll tell you about it later.” Marcos rose quietly and left the room, squeezing Darwin’s shoulder in a supportive gesture as he went. Darwin glanced up at Simon, who was standing in patiently in the corner.

“Simon can be trusted, son. Is it ok if he stays?” Darwin didn’t want to push his luck or upset the Senator, he nodded in agreement.

Now that the matter of who could stay was settled, the Senator was keen to get to the bottom of the mystery.

“How can I help you?”

Without saying a word, Darwin took one of the coins and laid it on the table. It was one of the shinier ones which recently fell out of the box. The Senator stopped chewing his food mid-mouthful and stared down at the coin. He moved his plate to one side and picked it up for a closer inspection, and then he raised his eyes to the expectant Darwin.

“Where did you find this?”

“It was in amongst some rocks close to my village,”

Consuelo sat back and thought for a while.

“Do you know what this is?”

"Maybe it's an old Spanish gold coin?" said Darwin.

His two companions sat quietly – still in awe of their surroundings and the Senator. They were happy to leave the talking to Darwin.

The stories of the Japanese retreat through the Cordillera Mountains were well known. Sometimes, people came across small coins, daggers, or jewellery that had been dropped by the hastily retreating soldiers.

The Senator lifted the coin in his hand, trying to guess the weight by its size. It was bigger than any he already owned. He looked up.

"It's a fake, it's too heavy. Probably made of lead and coated. It's not worth much but I'll give you 1,000 pesos to help your family out."

He took a 1,000-peso bill from his pocket and put it on the table.

Darwin stared at it without saying anything, and then stared out of the window ignoring the Senator's gesture. He wondered if he was right in coming here, but he'd gone too far now; there was no-one else to turn to.

He put his hands in both pockets and pulled out two fistfuls of coins that made a small pile on the table. He glanced at his friends and indicated they should do the same. When they'd finished a small mound of about sixty coins were in front of them.

"We found them in a small cave in the mountains, a couple of miles from where we live. There were a lot more of them."

Consuelo nodded, still expressionless, and sat in thought for a few moments. Darwin went on to tell him the whole story. He listened with growing interest.

"Who else knows about this?"

"We kept it to ourselves. There was no one we could trust in the village. You were the only person we could turn to for help."

"Are you sure no one saw you while you were clearing the entrance or blocking it up again?"

"The cave is in a very remote area, we've never even been here before, it was just by accident that we were there today," Darwin reassured him.

The boys told him the whole story; the skeletons, the coins on the floor, and the many large wooden crates that they had left behind them in the cave. The Senator listened quietly with absolute attention. He picked up a coin and rose from the table to examine it by the window.

Consuelo considered the situation for a moment, "How did you find it?"

"We were lucky," chirped in Pedro, "You can't even see the entrance until you're right up close. We just happened to be passing, and then it took ages to clear it."

Darwin looked at him, as if to say 'leave the talking to me'.

"It hadn't been disturbed for years. We made sure it looked that way again before we left."

"If you boys have discovered it then surely someone else could?"

"It's possible, I guess," conceded Darwin "but not very likely".

The Senator made up his mind up.

"Have you eaten?"

In fact, the boys were very hungry – their meagre lunch had been a long time ago and they told the Senator that they had not. Consuelo nodded at Simon, dutifully standing in the corner, who was listening intently to every word. He didn't have to say anything. Simon let himself out quietly and returned a few minutes later. The boys scooped up the coins and put them in their pockets.

"Can I keep one?" the Senator asked.

Darwin agreed.

A short while later the door opened and two maids came in carrying plates of food the like of which the younger two boys had never tasted. They tucked in hungrily and all put all thought of treasure aside. Consuelo stood up.

"Excuse me for a while, boys, I need to think about this and work out the best thing to do. I'll be back in an hour or so – enjoy your meal."

He left the room with Simon following.

Consuelo had to think quickly, his campaign for the presidency was in full swing, and burning money, a lot more than he had budgeted for. Here was an opportunity to refill his coffers – quietly and secretly, if he was careful.

After a quiet discussion in the corridor, Simon strode off, purposefully. The Senator opened a door on his right and entered a small room with a meeting table and six chairs. It was minimally but tastefully decorated, with black and chrome furniture, very modern. Consuelo sat down at the head of the table to make notes.

He didn't look up as Brian and Tom entered the room. They were two of his most trusted bodyguards, both ex-special forces. Brian was British and had served in the SAS for six years, Tom was American, and earlier in his career had been an officer in an elite American marine corps.

Between them, they had served Consuelo for more than twenty years. Brian was nominally head of security for the Estate, and mainly stayed in the Province while Tom was in charge of Consuelo's personal security and often travelled with the Senator. Everyone knew that their roles and responsibilities went beyond that.

They were very large framed; you would certainly want them on your side in a fight, but they were not stupid. Consuelo valued them for their brains as well as for their more sinister abilities. The Senator carefully explained the situation to them.

"These are our objectives, lads" he said. "One; find the treasure. Two; secure its transport to the safety of the Estate."

News of the find could leak out very quickly. Many people would try to deprive the Senator of at least a part of the windfall, if not all of it.

The Senator wrote out an agreement that the treasure should be split equally four ways between him and the boys which would allay their fears. While they talked, he copied out three further identical agreements.

The boys finished their meal; it was rare that there was food left over on the table when they finished a meal, but today they could not finish all that was put before them. They were feeling pleased with themselves. The Senator sent in beer. A little later, the Senator entered. He sat down in his usual place at the head of the table.

"This is what we'll do. We have to act quickly to protect ourselves. We don't want someone else to find the gold, do we?"

The boys nodded.

"You'll go back with a couple of my men so that they can check it out, then we'll move the gold here for safe-keeping. I know places where we can sell it and we'll split the money four ways. How does that sound?"

He looked at them expectantly.

Darwin could not conceal his delight.

"Thank you, sir. Thank you very much, sir. Yes, that'll be fine."

The Senator produced the papers for them to sign. They didn't read them; the two younger ones could not read anyway. After putting their marks at the bottom on the single page they each passed a copy to the Senator. Darwin gave a cursory look over his, before signing. Consuelo offered them some more beer and asked them to wait there.

Simon came to fetch them thirty minutes later. He led them through some passages to a small gravelled courtyard enclosed on three sides. Brian and Tom were waiting by the door.

"Hello, lads," said Brian.

The boys were shy with the large foreigners, but they all shook hands. The men tried not to look intimidating, and failed. Although they appeared unarmed, this was deceptive, their berretta pistols were well concealed in the inside pockets of their flak jackets, along with various knives and daggers.

The group piled into the old Chevrolet Tahoe that waited with its engine running in the courtyard. The car was dark green, almost black, it had seen better days, but it would blend in well with the forest on a dark evening. Simon jumped into the driving seat and off they went.

Darwin and his friends took the middle seats with the two men filling the back; all of them were quiet as they set off.

After about ten miles, Darwin spoke.

"Pull off here, it's not far now."

They were just outside the village of Santiago. Simon looked around; he wasn't going to leave the car on the road. He found a nearby clearing and parked the car as far off the road as he could, under the shade of two large trees. When he was satisfied that no one could see it from the road he turned off the engine.

They prepared for the trek. Eagerly, Darwin led them up the gentle incline through the dense undergrowth; there was no path to follow. Simon remained behind with the car. After the others had gone he sat down on the grass with his back against the car and lit a cigarette. He took his phone out of his top pocket and began texting.

Soon the ground levelled out, the undergrowth thinned and the going got easier. After about fifteen minutes the undergrowth opened out on their left and they moved towards the foothills.

Following a small stream, they soon reached the concealed entrance and the boys set about clearing while the men quietly scouted the area to ensure they were alone. Brian and Tom were well trained in surveillance, but so was Paul.

Paul was an old soldier. He left the Australian Army when he was forty-five, after a stint as a Corporal in Special Forces. At sixty-nine, he was still very fit and hiked several times a week in the mountains. In all, he spent nine years in Special Operations, based in New South Wales and had acted as a mercenary, and a bodyguard to some very rich people. He was camped out near the top of the larger hill on the right hand side.

He always enjoyed the outdoors and was out that afternoon looking for wildlife. He lived in the nearby village of Santiago with his beautiful young Filipina wife, Lucy, and their son Dennis, who was twelve. Paul was through and through a military man and he missed the army life. He was reasonably happy with his life, but it hadn't turned out how he'd expected.

Since leaving the army Paul had worked a few protection and security jobs, but they dried up as he got older. He had also tried his luck at several business ventures, all of them ended in a failure, some of them at great expense. He tried to be a good father but wasn't naturally inclined to parental responsibilities, and as Dennis grew up he tended to treat the boy as a recruit under his command rather than as a son.

He first spotted the group when they broke cover to follow the stream; he followed their progress with interest. They were moving furtively, looking around to make sure they were alone, he thought that was odd. He captured their progress with his telephoto lens along the way. Instinct and training told him to lay low and observe.

Brian and Tom scouted the area and returned to the cave entrance at the same time as the boys had cleared enough of an opening for them to get through. The men followed the boys through the gap with a struggle. Their powerful flashlights lit up the cave.

"Wow, look at all those bones," said Benny.

They could see many more skeletons now.

"C'mon, let's check out these boxes,"

Brian and Tom moved over to the stacked chests.

Everything else was just as the boys said. Brian and Tom counted the boxes. Then they opened six more at random. In every box gold coins glinted and sparkled.

"Let's see what's further on in,"

Brian took Darwin by the shoulder and guided him forward.

"Make some tea ready for when we get back," he said, over his shoulder.

The cave narrowed, and then opened out beyond a bend to the left. A wide gully came into view on their right. Darwin trod carefully along and around the edge; with a narrow walkway running along the wall on the left. Darwin peered beyond into the dark depths of the cave and hesitated when the pathway widened a little.

The first thing he knew about Brian silently moving up close behind him was a powerful arm around his neck squeezing his throat, stopping his breathing. His surprise gave way to fear and pain in less than a second as a six-inch blade slid through his tee shirt and between his ribs, piercing his heart. The silent murder took five seconds – he felt little pain. There was no time for any resistance; he flopped like a rag doll into Brian’s arms.

Brian was careful not to get any blood on his clothes as he pushed the lifeless body into the gully. At that point it was deep enough that the body could not be seen unless you really leaned right over. There was not much blood on the knife but Brian wiped it and replaced it into the depths of his jacket. Casually he made his way back to join the others.

They were standing around and examining the boxes and their contents as Brian returned – no one had started to make tea.

“Where’s Darwin?” asked Pedro.

“He’s taking a piss, we didn’t find any more treasure,” said Brian as he sidled up to one boy in a casual manner while Tom positioned himself next to the other. At Brian’s imperceptible nod, in a synchronized movement they grabbed both boys around the throat and stabbed them expertly. Their co-ordination was perfect, as if rehearsed. There was no sound except for a low splutter as they sank to the floor. Their eyes were still open but their faces were blank.

They dragged the boys like sacks of potatoes and dropped them over the edge into the deep gully to join their friend. Without looking back, they moved out of the cave and began restoring the rocks and camouflage to the entrance.

A flask of tea and some sandwiches appeared from Brian’s rucksack, they planned to be there for a while. Nearby were some rocks, they could sit and wait.

Paul was still observing them. Clearly, the men were going to hang around for a while so Paul, way up on the opposite hillside, also made himself comfortable. He moved slowly, always being careful to remain unseen.

About two hours after the men and boys left him, Simon received the call from Brian he expected.

“We’re all set.”

“Any problems? Is it all true?”

Yeah, it’s true, and no, no problems. The problems are in a pit at the back of the cave – we won’t be seeing them again.”

Simon started the engine, backed out onto the road, and headed back to Benguet. His phone rang.

“Yes sir, it’s all true, and we don’t have to worry about the boys.”

“Ok. See you back here, the truck will be ready.”

Paul sat in his makeshift hide, he was puzzled. Why were Brian and Tom the only ones to come out of the cave?

Dusk was approaching and the men lay down and rested, taking it in turns to stay awake. They moved about a hundred yards away from the entrance and into the bushes, just in case anyone came along. Paul was glad the infrared vision on his binoculars gave him a clear view of their position. Brian and Tom nodded off occasionally as they rested beneath the branches. Paul did not.

At about two a.m. Brian’s phone rang – he answered curtly and then stood up and prepared to meet the truck. He shook Tom awake and left him there as he departed down the hill. Paul followed Brian’s progress as far as he could until he disappeared, he usually went home much earlier than this, but he was fascinated with the scene and determined he would stay until it had played out.

Brian reached the road in ten minutes; it was easier going downhill. He settled into the bushes so as not to be noticeable, until a familiar three ton Elf truck approached. Simon was driving but there were four other men – two in the cab and two riding in the back.

The four men jumped out and began to clear the undergrowth and bushes so that the truck wouldn't be visible from the road. Tom was nearly finished with clearing the cave entrance as the men appeared. Without a word, they all helped to finish clearing the entrance and then disappeared into the cave.

Brian and Tom watched from the back of the cave to make sure the workers didn't venture further inside – they didn't want the men to see the bodies. One man had brought tools and nails to repair the boxes.

After about twenty minutes, the three pairs of men emerged from the cave carrying boxes between them. In a silent line, they proceeded down the hill. Paul had a clear view and took more photos.

Over the next two hours, Paul counted twenty-three boxes being carried from the cave. Finally, the entrance was concealed and the men trudged back down the hill. The roads were quiet at this time, just a few commercial vehicles travelling through the night. The slow returning truck laden with boxes didn't attract attention. They only passed one or two other vehicles on the whole journey.

Paul waited until dawn and then made his way home. He went a long way round, he didn't expect them to come back, but he had to be sure.

CHAPTER 3

Lucy was making breakfast as she heard Paul come through the gate. She wasn't worried when she had woken earlier to find he wasn't there. Paul often stayed out all night on his mountain hikes. Anyhow, nowadays she preferred to be on her own.

The infatuation she had felt for the much older man had gone years ago. Nevertheless, she was relieved when she heard him open the gate. At his age, although he was still fit, he might not come home one day. They were no longer close, but he represented security and a safe, if modest, future.

"Hi, sweetheart," he said, as he smiled and kissed her briefly on the lips. She made his usual cup of tea and started to cook bacon. He seemed thoughtful.

"Are you ok?"

"Yes, I'm fine, love,"

he took his hot tea from her.

"That bacon smells good – any chance of some baked beans?"

Without a word, Lucy took a tin from the cupboard. She poured them into the pan with the bacon, that was how Paul liked them.

"Not much going on last night. At least it was cool; I managed to get some sleep."

"That's good," she replied automatically, while buttering two slices of bread.

Dennis came down and into the kitchen just as Lucy was making Paul a second cup of tea. He didn't realize his father had been out all night until he spotted the hiking gear by the door.

"Oh, you went out last night, Dad?"

"Yes, just down the road up to the top of the ridge, nothing special – I couldn't take you, you've got school today."

"I know, I know,"

Dennis loved to go out at night with his dad, but he couldn't argue, Paul never took him on school nights.

Paul had begun to feel his age recently, he excused himself and went upstairs to sleep for a while.

At around noon he woke, and after a few moments he remembered the events of the night before. After showering and shaving, he came downstairs to find his son on the computer in the study playing a war game.

"Sorry, son, I need the computer for a while. I need peace and quiet."

The boy was disappointed to have to finish in the middle of a battle with friends, but he knew better than to argue with his father. As Dennis left Paul shut the door.

Lucy was preparing lunch, but she heard Paul come down the stairs. She wasn't going to disturb him during what she assumed was one of his regular sessions browsing for porn.

Paul settled down and linked his camera to the computer. One by one, he downloaded the photos into a password protected folder. His military training taught him the value of security. He didn't know who the younger boys were, but he recognized Brian and Tom straight away.

Paul was a frequent visitor to the Senator's house and he knew the Senator's brother, Tony. The Senator liked to cultivate relationships with foreigners. Paul knew Brian on first name terms as they had a similar background and a few common friends.

Was there another way out of the cave or were they still in there? He was intrigued by the boxes – what was in them?

A few hours earlier, just as light was beginning to creep over the horizon, the truck, laden with boxes, arrived back at the Estate. The workers were tired, but their night's work was not done. The guards opened the double gates when the truck approached.

There were a series of isolated farm buildings beyond the fruit orchards, about a quarter of a mile from the main Estate. They formerly housed the Senator's racehorses – a passing fad that ended many years ago. The furthest one housed old farm machinery. They stopped right outside. Two men jumped off the back of the truck to open the doors.

They moved all the old bits of machinery to one side, and stacked the boxes as far into the corner as they could. Brian and Tom helped them, it would be light soon. Simon drove them back to the house as dawn was breaking.

A private dining room close to the kitchen was set up for the recently arrived workers. Brian and Tom brought them in. Breakfast appeared – they were being treated well. The Senator slipped into the room an hour later, they all rose but he motioned them to sit down.

"Come on then, tell me all about it. I want to know how you got on last night,"

"The lads were brilliant," said Brian. "We got it done with time to spare; they were almost as good as soldiers,"

The others laughed.

"Any problems?" asked the Senator.

"No, everything went smoothly; we finished a couple of hours ahead of time."

"Well done. Your efforts will be well rewarded."

He said no more, but when they had all finished, he produced four fat envelopes and handed them out.

"You must never tell anyone about last night, not even wives or girlfriends," he said solemnly. "I will look after you, boys, you know that. There will be plenty of work in the future, and more bonuses, but no one must know about last night, don't let me down. You'll regret it if you do"

They were not quite sure what the Senator meant by that, but no one dared to ask him.

"You've done well, you can go and spend some time with your families now."

They took that as a hint they should leave, and backed out of the room nodding to him as they left.

Simon made sure that none of the men knew each other. They all came from different villages. None of them would live to collect their 'bonus', the Senator's orders were that the 'disappearances' should start within days.

In the village fifty miles away, the families were becoming concerned. Daniel, Darwin's uncle was reassuring the boys' mother. The boys sometimes stayed out all night hunting, or fishing. They would probably turn up later – hopefully with a good catch.

“Stop fussing woman – he's a man now, he can look after himself. He's probably catching lots of fish and doesn't want to come home yet.”

“Maybe,”

She didn't sound very reassured.

“He's never been out all night before.”

“Don't be daft woman, he's with his mates – he's alright,”

She brightened a little.

“I guess you're right,” she smiled, just a little.

The Senator was drinking his mid-morning coffee when his phone rang. Simon answered it.

“It's someone called Michael for you, from Manila, he says he's returning your call.”

Consuelo put his cup down and took the phone.

“Hi, Michael – thanks for ringing back – how's the jewellery business?”

The Senator was a frequent customer in a boutique store in Greenbelt and had become friendly with the owner, Michael – one of the most qualified and experienced appraisers in Manila.

“Not so bad, sir, not so bad, and how's the election business?”

“We're quietly confident Michael, and I think we'll be alright. Listen my friend, I need to you come here and value some jewellery for me, but this must be kept very secret, I don't want anyone, especially the press, to get wind of this. I need you to come up here straight away and to keep this to yourself – I have a plane waiting for you at the domestic airport - you will be very well rewarded, but you must come right now.”

“No problem, Senator, my assistants here can cope. I can be on my way in twenty minutes.”

“Good man, I'll see you later. Don't tell your staff where you are going,”

“You can rely on me, Senator; I won't let you down,”

Twenty minutes later he was in a taxi and on the way to the airport. He arrived early in the evening, by seven p.m. he was in the garden with the Senator having dinner.

“Thank you for coming so quickly, Michael, I really do appreciate it,”

“It's no problem, Senator; it's a pleasure to help you. It sounds quite exciting.”

Michael did not want to seem pushy, but he was curious. What did he have to value? Why the need for secrecy, and more importantly, what would the Senator pay him? When the meal was over the Senator opened the subject.

“I've got something special to show you, but I want you to see it tomorrow when you're fresh.”

Consuelo put his hand on Michael's arm conspiratorially

“You will be amazed, it'll be worth the wait.”

Brian and Tom managed to grab a few hours' sleep, but were disturbed by a phone call from the Senator late afternoon. As soon as dusk began to fall, they made their way to the barn again. They crept along the hedgerows and bushes so that no one would see them. Many vehicles coming and going from the deserted barn could attract attention.

“This lot must be worth an absolute fortune,” Brian said, as they lifted one of the heavier boxes between them.

“I guess so. What do you reckon, twenty million dollars?”

“More like thirty million, I think. Just think what we could do with that,”

“Yeah, that's right. Luxury forever; never having to work again,”

“Except we’d spend the rest of our lives looking over our shoulder, waiting for the Boss to send someone to kill us!”

Brian laughed.

“It’s nice to dream, though, isn’t it?”

His colleague nodded. They took a break and got out their flasks.

“We don’t do so badly, really, I suppose,”

“No, I suppose not,”

“And so we should for what we do!” Tom nodded.

“How long do you think you’ll keep this game up, then?”

“Oh, I have a plan,” said Tom, mysteriously. “How about you?”

“Yes, me too, I want out of this game as soon as I can, a couple of year’s maybe…”

“Oh well,” he said. “In the meantime…”

Tom stood up and picked up another box. They finished by midnight and headed back for supper, and a couple of hours sleep.

It was still dark a few hours later. The sun would rise in an hour or so. Simon was already waiting with a four by four in the courtyard behind the kitchen. The Senator and his guest appeared a few minutes later. Simon opened the back door and the two men climbed in. They set off for the barn. As they arrived, the doors swung open.

The sight that greeted them was incredible. All the old machinery was stacked tidily at the sides of the barn and in the centre, arranged neatly, like a display of vegetables in a supermarket, were many wooden crates. Each one was open. Thousands of glistening coins reflected the bright glow from the lamps placed around the barn by the bodyguards earlier.

Consuelo gasped, it was much more than he imagined. Michael stood transfixed; the Senator brought him out of his trance by gently guiding him forward and giving him a large notebook and several pens. Michael had brought testing chemicals and equipment.

Both men walked forward in wonderment; up close, they stooped down and picked up various coins.

“Is this what I think it is?” asked Michael. “Yamashita’s gold?”

“I think so, but I need you to confirm that it’s genuine and tell me what it’s worth.”

Michael was recovering now and thinking of the fat fee he could charge, not just for his professional services, but also for his discretion.

“An accurate valuation will require about a week,” he said, mentally beginning to clear his schedule for the next few days.

Consuelo laughed.

“It’s ok – I only need a rough estimate, and I can give you three or four hours.”

Michael raised his eyebrows. His valuation would be very rough, but he wasn’t going to upset the Senator.

“Ok, I can test the purity of the gold but I need much larger scales to weigh it.”

Simon was dispatched to find scales while Michael set up his equipment. He quietly started his work.

By mid-morning, Consuelo and Michael were on their way back to the house.. Brian and Tom were busy covering up the gold.

Michael smiled at Consuelo,

“I suppose there’s no point in asking about the provenance of the gold – knowing where it came from would assist in a more accurate valuation.”

The Senator grinned.

“It really is better that you don’t know – if I told you I would have to kill you,”

both men laughed at the joke. They arrived back at the house and sat in the garden with coffee and sandwiches.

“You could never sell this on the open market of course, but if you could, in one go, you could expect about this.”

He handed Consuelo a slip of paper, Michael had written – sixty million dollars. Consuelo smiled, the Presidency was his. Simon joined them; he was carrying a black briefcase. which he placed before the Senator and opened. The Senator took out bundles of American dollars. Michael’s eyes were wide.

The Senator carefully counted the money back into the case and handed it to Simon.

“Simon will give you this when you get to Manila,”

Michael grinned as he shook the Senator’s hand – the case contained two hundred thousand dollars..

“I am sorry but I have no plane available today – is it ok if Simon takes you back by car?”

Thirty minutes later they set off.

After passing through San Fernando, they reached the open countryside,

“Is it ok with you if we visit my fish supplier, he’s just five minutes off the road?” Simon asked.

Michael was lost in thought, but nodded. He asked Simon to take him to the Shangri-la hotel in Makati where he intended to eat the best food and sleep with the most beautiful women he could pay for.

They turned off the road onto a dirt track that was overgrown and obviously little used. They climbed the side of a hill, travelling slowly along the bumpy road. Michael got a little concerned.

“Your fish supplier certainly lives in a remote place,”

“Yes, he likes his seclusion, but his fish is delicious – I’ll get you some,”

The track petered out just before the land started to rise up more steeply. There was a dense thicket of trees rising up ahead and the vehicle stopped just short of the incline.

“Come on, it’s a short walk up the hill.”

Michael sighed but followed. Simon strode off ahead with Michael struggling to keep up behind.

After a few minutes, they came to the edge of a cliff with a sheer rock face falling away maybe two hundred metres down to the secluded valley below.

“Come and see the view,” said Simon, striding towards the cliff.

Michael followed but was afraid to get close to the edge. Simon turned around and made as if to walk past him.

Michael didn’t feel the knife blade enter his neck and wondered for a second why his neck felt wet. As his mouth filled with blood, the pain shot through him. He couldn’t shout or move and felt himself falling to the ground. Before he hit the ground, he was dead.

Simon searched the body and removed all forms of identification – why should he make things easy for the investigators, if ever there were any? He hauled the body close to the edge and tipped it gently over. It fell into a deserted gully full of large boulders. This was a difficult area to reach; the body was unlikely to be discovered.

The casual stroll back to the car took just five minutes. He dialled a number on his phone – it was answered in two rings.

“I’ll be back soon, love, let’s try to get a couple of hours to ourselves tonight.”

He listened while the other party replied.

“Yeah, I guess these have been a tiring few days. Anyway, it’s not long now, eh? Keep your chin up – we’ll soon be away from it all.”

He laughed at the response and closed the phone.

The sun was setting as Paul started walking along the highway on his way back to the foot of the mountains and the cave. He would still leave it another day or two before exploring the cave, but he was curious as to whether Consuelo’s people had been back. It was about eight p.m. as he crossed over the main road about a mile from Santiago.

A very smart black Ford Expedition sped past him on its way to Benguet. Paul recognized the Senator's secretary, but Simon didn't notice Paul; his eyes were fixed on the road.

Paul walked on a further five hundred yards before turning off the road towards the hills. There was some traffic now; this was what passed for a 'rush hour' in the area. No one saw him leave the road as he set off through the undergrowth. There was a path worn now where the men had carried the boxes. Paul chose to walk about five yards parallel to this track; he didn't want it to become even more obvious. Luckily, it petered out when the route became rockier.

Before he had gone five hundred yards, his eagle eyes noticed movement halfway up the hillock on the other side of the valley, maybe a quarter of a mile away. He made his way through the valley and up the side of the mountain. As he approached, he saw a group of men. They were calling out a name as they searched the bushes.

Paul showed himself and approached the group. He knew many people in the local villages and they recognized him.

"Hello Daniel, are you ok?" Daniel had a stall in the market in Santiago selling produce the village had collected in the mountains. Paul could see that something was wrong; Daniel was trying not to cry.

"It's Darwin, my nephew, and his friends. They've been away from the village for a long time now; they haven't been home for two nights."

Daniel was a sick man. He was recovering from a stroke and still couldn't walk well. This worry was not helping - he looked ten years older than when Paul last saw him only a few weeks ago.

"I'll look out for them on my travels,"

Paul remembered the three lads who had gone into the cave. He was hoping that the two events were not connected.

"Thank you, my dear friend," said Daniel, clasping Paul's hand tightly. Paul pulled it away gently and set off back into the trees. He took a different direction; he didn't want the group to see exactly where he was heading.

The men were well away from the area by now but he scouted around before approaching the entrance, just to be sure. Then he checked the markers, he would know if anything had been disturbed.

Simon was back at the estate. It was not every day that you killed a man and made a hundred thousand dollars. He never enjoyed killing, but had become used to it. It didn't bother him much.

He ate a quiet dinner in the kitchen before going to his room - it was on the third floor. He walked the corridors, checking the rooms; he was alone on the floor. After quietly closing the door to his room he opened his phone and pressed speed dial one. Someone answered the phone in two rings. Simon spoke first,

"It's ok,"

The phone went down at the other end. Two minutes later, a thin figure noiselessly climbed the secluded back stairway to the third floor and made its way along the corridor. Simon's door was unlocked, the figure entered without knocking and shut the door carefully. It did not open again that night.

The next day, Consuelo prepared to receive a guest. The sleek white jet arrived into his private airport just after noon, the black senator's car was waiting to take him, to the house.

Alexi Khalid was a frequent visitor to the Estate. He and Consuelo were close business associates. He was the brother-in-law of the President of Afghanistan; many people said he was the power behind the throne.

Probably in his early fifties, he had a disarming smile and air of innocence. Most people put him at around forty. He had a bulging waistline; in the West he would be considered 'portly'. A neatly trimmed thin beard adorned his slightly chubby face and his long hair was tied at the back with a bow. His hair was dyed jet black. He was an imposing character who would be difficult to forget.

The Senator had phoned Alexi yesterday – both men were used to seizing opportunities quickly when it was necessary. This time the request had been quite unusual.

"Do you want to buy some gold, Alexi?"

"I know you have some gold mines there, my friend, but I thought you got rid of that domestically – don't tell me you are doing so well you are trying to export it now."

"I wish, Alexi, I wish. No, I just came into a bit of good fortune, that's all, and I want to share it with you."

"That's intriguing my friend, tell me more."

"Well, let's just say that I was lucky enough to find some treasure that somebody left behind, many years ago."

Alexi was an educated man, Consuelo wondered if he would pick up on his meaning.

"You mean you have found Yamashita's gold?" He sounded incredulous.

"How much did you find?"

The Senator didn't feel comfortable discussing this further on the phone. The lines were supposed to be secure, but you could never be sure.

"Why don't you come and see for yourself?" suggested Consuelo. He knew the man would come.

"Ok, I will. Can I fly down tomorrow?"

"Of course, it will be great to see you."

"Are you serious about selling the gold?"

"Oh yes, for the right price."

Alexi laughed again.

"You will never change, my friend, I'd better bring an appraiser with me then,"

They finally agreed that Alexi would come early the next day – Consuelo would send a car to fetch him from the small local airport, as he always did. It was just arriving back at the Estate with its V.I.P passengers.

The guards opened the gates in advance for the arriving car – this was one visitor you did not stop. They saluted as the car drove through. The Senator was waiting by the door with his family. Putting his arm around Alexi's shoulder, Consuelo guided him into the palatial dining room reserved for special occasions and special guests.

"It has been too long, Alexi. We've not seen you here for nearly a year."

Consuelo guided him to his seat, next to his favourite wife, Yasmin, who had already taken her seat. The Senator sat down beside Alexi.

"You know, I am going to be the next President of this country soon, my friend."

"I do read the papers, and it does look like you stand a good chance of getting there."

"It's in the bag, nothing can go wrong now."

"I am sure you are right, Enrique. I've always known you would get there eventually,"

The Senator put his hand on the Alexi's arm.

"When I am living in the Presidential Palace we'll be able to do a lot more business together,"

"Yes, I expect we will, power opens doors,"

"Now listen, my friend, that is why I need your help. Elections cost money – lots of it. I need to turn this gold into money – American dollars, quickly. Don't worry, the price will be fair."

Alexi sat back.

"My dearest friend, you know I'll do anything to help you, but of course it will depend on what is on offer and the price."

"Of course, of course,"

The six-hour flight was beginning to take its toll on the guests. Alexi excused himself, he and his entourage needed to rest before dinner, Consuelo took the opportunity to catch up with calling his campaign managers.

The first call was to the Mayor of Manila, Manuel Decena. The man could help to deliver the large Manila Civil Servant and workers vote.

"Hello Manuel, how is it going?"

The Mayor responded smartly.

"It's going well, I've met with the labour leaders, and as many civil service heads as I could. They all know things are going your way now, and none of them wants to back a loser. There is just one thing, Senator."

Consuelo expected this and laughed

"Ok, who do we need to pay off now and how much is it going to cost?"

"Hehe, you know what I need already, the mark of a natural leader."

Both men laughed.

"Enough of the flattery, my friend. Give me the details."

"Ok, the transport services union leader wants ten million pesos to endorse you."

The Senator whistled.

"Wow, he thinks highly of himself, doesn't he?"

"Well that's true sir, but he is very influential among his three hundred thousand members."

"Yes I suppose you're right, ok, you can promise it to him, I will get it to you in a couple of days."

Mayor Decena immediately picked up his phone again and dialled the number of the transport services union leader.

"I have good news for you, he has agreed. The Senator will give you five million for your support."

"Well done Mayor, and thank you."

The deal was done.

Consuelo continued down his list of calls. It was nearly dinner time now, the guests started drifting downstairs again and within an hour they were gathered in the dining room. Consuelo again sat next to Alexi.

"So, when will I see this amazing find of yours?" Alexi spoke quietly. Their discussions were not for the whole table to hear.

"Let's relax and enjoy ourselves, Alexi, and I will take you to see it straight after dinner."

"That will be fine, thank you, I will need to leave no later than tomorrow evening."

"That'll be good timing, I have to get back to the Election work."

Simon drove the two men, together, with one of Alexi's guards and his appraiser to the barn; Brian and Tom had transformed it again. The door slowly swung open and the Aladdin's cave of treasure was revealed. Alexi was taken aback – he hadn't expected this and couldn't disguise his amazement. The Senator smiled – he had never seen Alexi at a loss for words before.

"My friend, how on earth could you find so much treasure? There must be tons of gold here."

The Senator put his hand on the man's shoulder.

"Good fortune comes to those who deserve it." he said. The appraiser set to work, going through very similar steps to the ones that the now deceased Michael had earlier taken.

The next morning, Alexi and his wives descended the wide staircase, deep in conversation. Consuelo could see them from the drawing room where he sat enjoying the first coffee of the day. He wondered which one of his wives he had slept with last night, or maybe both? I guess there must be some advantages to being a Muslim, he thought to himself.

He waved and called; Alexi and the girls looked up and acknowledged him. They came across the hallway and joined him in the drawing room.

"Can we go and find Chloe?" asked Yasmin, looking pleadingly at her husband.

"We are going to be very bored if you guys start talking about business and stuff."

"Yes of course you can,"

"She is in the bedroom with the kids, go on up, she's dressed – she will be pleased to see you," said the Senator.

The girls made their escape.

After a couple of moments Alexi opened the subject,

"That was quite a surprise last night, Enrique. I have never seen such a sight – so much gold in one place."

"I thought you would be surprised," chuckled the Senator.

"How much of it do you want to sell?"

"All of it,"

Alexi raised his eyebrows.

"Whew, that's a lot of gold to move. How much do you want for it?"

The Senator gave him a figure.

"I'm sorry, I can't pay that much for it," said Alexi, trying to look regretful.

In fact, Alexi received a report from his appraiser very early in the morning. He knew that the price the Senator wanted was cheap.

"Look my friend, you know the gold's genuine, and you know it's worth a lot more than that – you're getting a real bargain. I'm only doing it because I need the money for my election, I need it quickly, and I need to do it without any fuss. There are few men in the world that could do this – but I know you're one of them."

"Well, ok, the price is good. I will give you twenty million dollars now and the other forty million when I get the gold."

The Senator nodded.

"How will we transport the gold? Small amounts are easy to deal with, but such a large amount may be a problem."

"I've already thought of that," said Consuelo. "There would be too much interest if we tried to move it by air or by sea, and I could not trust the local customs officers, there is far too much money involved. What if we deliver to your embassy in Manila? You could fly it out from Manila airport. Use your status here – you have diplomatic privilege."

"I guess that might work. I can get the rest of the money to the embassy in a few days, and then we could do the swap. Let's work on the detail over the next few days. We have a deal."

They shook hands.

Consuelo was passing Simon's room just before lunch. Jake, the hairdresser, was coming out with the remains of Simon's early lunch. When he was not busy with haircuts or make up, Jake helped in the kitchen. As soon as Jake was gone, the Senator spoke to Simon.

"Alexi will take it all, but we need to deliver it to the Afghan embassy in Manila."

Simon was lying on the bed. He sat up and nodded.

"I'll tell you when. We can get Brian or Tom to bring it up – please brief them about it."

"Ok, that's fine, sir, I will."

The Senator shut the door and was off down the corridor before Simon finished speaking.

All was quiet at the Estate when the convoy of four cars left for the airport at midnight. Alexi's car pulled up alongside the plane, they waited for the Senator to arrive. The tiny airport was nearly deserted, just a skeleton staff.

Two of Alexi's staff brought out four slim black cases and loaded them into the Senator's car. The two men hugged and shook hands, and Enrique watched as his friend climbed the steps.

As the plane rose into the night sky, they set off back to the Estate. The Senator drove the first car. After passing through the gate he slowly followed the road around the left hand side of the house and up the incline.

At the top of the hill was a derelict four-story structure. It would have included an entertainment complex, with restaurants, bars, parking and accommodation. He abandoned the project seven years ago; criticism by the powerful Catholic Church would cause problems to his political ambitions.

In places, iron bars, now rusty, stuck up from the unfinished concrete floors.

The basement area, designed as a store for liquor, was accessible through one staircase. A reinforced metal door at the bottom of the stairway blocked the entrance to the storage rooms beyond. Vents to allow airflow rose through the ceilings and upwards emerging through the grass.

The Senator drew up to the secluded structure at well after midnight. He used a small flashlight to guide his path through the now dense grass and small bushes. It would have been manicured lawns and exotic trees by now if the project had been completed.

The Padlock on the door was new. The old rusted one had been recently replaced in anticipation of the new use. The Senator ordered that an additional padlock be put on the door. He kept all the keys – he would maybe later give a set to Brian.

Beyond the padlocked door was a corridor with two rooms off on either side. All of them were empty, the walls and floors unfinished and dirty.

He brought three cases down one by one, he did not want to lose his footing on the narrow stairs. He piled them in the far corner of the first room on the right, and then checked all the rooms before he locked up. For good measure, he found an old sheet and threw it over the cases. One case was still in the car; he would need money for his campaign.

It was nearly two a.m. when he drove back down slowly and let himself quietly into the house. Chloe would be asleep. Consuelo saw the light on in his study. Simon was there poring over some sheets of handwritten figures.

“Hello sir, just finishing off the day’s accounts,” Simon had free run of the Senator’s office.

“How are we doing?”

He did not really need to ask – he kept very good accounts in his head.

“Well, we should make it through to the election, but we will need the rest of the money from Alexi to sort out our post-election promises,”

The Senator smiled – the timing could not be better.

“Thanks Simon, get off to bed now – another busy day tomorrow.”