

THE MIDAS EFFECT

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For Mario and Pablo

“Destiny has two ways of crushing us –
by refusing our wishes and by fulfilling them.”

–H. F. AMIEL,
From Amiel's Journal

“When the gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers.”

–O. WILDE,
From An Ideal Husband

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PART 1 – THE CAPTURE

CHAPTER 1

Nobody feels pain in the center of their head. That's what the neurologists had told Miguel several times. But there it was again, that buzzing, like a constant electric pinching somewhere inside his head. His father wasn't a neurologist, but he *was* one of the best doctors in Seville: Dr. Benoît Le Fablec, a Frenchman who was almost entirely Sevillian. There was always a queue outside his clinic. Miguel could remember very clearly the busy waiting room of his father's clinic, where as a boy, he would stick his face through ladies' legs "so I can see my dad." And every time, he left the clinic with the same diagnosis: "The center of your head doesn't feel pain, Miguel." For many years after, the best specialists in France and Spain – friends of his father – would say to him, with their white coats and upturned noses, "*Ce n'est pas possible,*" or, "Young man, this wouldn't be another excuse to skip class, now would it?"

But Miguel really was in pain. Now, after so many years, as he leaned on the bar in the university café, he thought his head was in more pain than it had ever been before. He imagined it must have been because of the preparations for his trip – saying goodbye, all of that – or perhaps it was because he hadn't eaten breakfast.

Miguel ordered a coffee. The students had packed out the engineering school's canteen. *My students always talk too much*, he thought. But the ruckus didn't seem to aggravate his headache. Deep down, he had to admit he liked his unique, impossible headache, and the noise of the canteen.

"Your coffee," said the waiter, placing a cup in front of Miguel. "With warm milk, just like always. I heard you're leaving us."

"The United States. I'm going to try it out there for a few years. Here, for the coffee."

"They really have it down over there, in America. You know, the money. If they don't pay well here, then you've got to go somewhere else. It's the brain drain."

My brain isn't going to do me much good if it continues hurting this much, Miguel told himself as the waiter turned around to the cash register. Miguel stood there watching him. It wasn't worth the effort to try and convince him he wasn't going to earn much more in California than in his current position at the University of Granada. Miguel was leaving because he wanted to go back to aerospace research, return to his specialty. Well, that, and to live somewhere new. Different streets, different voices. It would be a little adventure in his routine-heavy life as a university professor – an adventure he would have embarked on many years before had it not been for Ana. He took a sip, the steam from the coffee entering his nostrils before fading away into his headache.

It was then that he saw her enter the cafeteria. Ana.

Miguel swallowed. Coughing, he turned around to set the cup down, and looked at her again. How on earth...? But it really was her. The pain pinched his head again. Miguel let his eyelids fall shut to try and mitigate the pain, but it remained.

No one gets this kind of headache, and this kind of thing doesn't happen to anyone, he told himself.

Ana was dressed exactly the way he remembered. Living with her for three years gave him an introduction to her entire wardrobe, he thought. But she was exactly the way he had imagined, down

to the last detail. Her tight white jeans matched her white sweater, designer, also tight over a pink shirt. Her straight black hair fell loose, just the way he liked. Even underneath her expensive makeup, he could see her beautiful, impeccable skin, like glossy paper. It seemed Ana had dressed herself up in a way she knew he'd like. It was an image of her he had imagined and re-imagined many times since she left him a little over a month ago – Ana begging him to take her back, and Miguel rejecting her in an act of public triumph.

Ana spotted him and walked straight toward him, crossing the cafeteria at a diagonal. She walked with a confident gait, as though her body had made its decision to move and would overcome anything in her way. She smiled.

There's nothing to smile about, Miguel thought, picking up his cup again.

The scent of Chanel announced Ana's arrival to the bar. She smiled wider as she came to a stop in front of him and spoke. "Your second coffee of the morning? Third? We really don't change, do we?"

"I was just leaving."

"You look good..."

"I'm in a hurry."

Ana's smile disappeared like a puff of smoke. "I'll join you," she said. "I want to talk to you." Her voice was almost inaudible.

Miguel thought that if his fantasy was to come true, they would have to talk then and there, surrounded by dishevelled, noisy college students.

"I'm in a hurry," he repeated.

Ana pressed her lips together. She looked back towards the door, as if she were thinking of leaving, before exhaling deeply. Miguel watched her chest move. Her white sweater and pink shirt did not show much, but he could just make out the gap between her breasts as well as a subtle hint of their roundness.

Yes, just the way I like, Miguel thought.

Ana turned to him once more and lowered her head. "Don't go to America," she whispered. "Stay." She swallowed. "I want to get back together. I... I love you."

Miguel felt another pinch in the center of his brain. *Great. Here come the waterworks.* "No," he said.

Ana's expensive make-up began to run as tears left black, watery tracks on her cheeks. She looked exactly the way she did in his fantasies – tears staining her face like watered-down ink. Miguel reminded himself that it wasn't right to relish seeing those black tearstains, but he felt so good watching his dream become reality that he couldn't help himself.

"But I..." Ana trailed off, lifting her head and looking into Miguel's eyes.

Some of the students were staring at her. Some frowned while others smiled, and some even nudged their friends who hadn't yet noticed. Ana must have felt their eyes on her, Miguel supposed, as she hung her head. She patted her face with a handkerchief, which immediately became smudged. Dressed all in white and pink, immaculate, Ana fidgeted slightly with the blackened handkerchief, her face still damp. The students murmured among themselves, entertained. Perhaps this was too public. Miguel knew it would be wrong to do it then and there – too humiliating – but that was how he had fantasized about it. He could still feel a residual triumph. The ache in his head was constant now, a soft vibration inside his skull, so pleasant, so sweet. He suddenly remembered how he had wanted his final gesture to be: symbolic and dramatic.

"Ana." Miguel caught her attention, his tone serious and steady.

She looked up at him without moving her head, just enough to be able to see him. Miguel focused on her running mascara while he pushed back the hair that had fallen in front of his eyes. He took another sip of coffee without looking away from her and repeated himself. “No.” A horizontal cutting motion with his right hand accompanied the word. A gesture fit for a Roman emperor administering justice.

Ana’s lips trembled. Then, she lowered her gaze completely. She turned around and left faster than she had come in with short, quick steps, keeping her gaze firmly on the floor. She bumped into the students like they had all become obstacles in her path.

In just a few seconds, Ana’s slim figure – black tearstains and all – disappeared. And so too did the headache. All that remained was a slight dizziness, like always. Nothing more. A little vertigo and a feeling of victory.

When he turned to place his cup down on the bar, he saw a boy quickly avert his eyes. It was one of his students. He must have seen Miguel get rid of Ana, reject her, make that cutting gesture with his hand. He lowered his eyes to his cup and gulped down his coffee. Maybe he had gone overboard. It would be useless to get back together with Ana. He just couldn’t do it. She had never treated him right, ever. Maybe she deserved to be taught a lesson. But the sight of her ruined makeup smudged over her cheeks... No, he wasn’t like that.

Miguel started walking towards the exit. He could feel himself being watched, and he quickened his pace. *Something about what happened just now*, he thought, *there was something strange about it*. Or perhaps he was just imagining it. He wouldn’t blame himself. No, he had a... how to explain it? A supernatural hunch? Everything had happened exactly as Miguel had imagined it. Ana had followed the script of his fantasy to the letter. And Ana just wasn’t like that. She had much more pride. Ana should have turned on her heel and marched out of the cafeteria with her head held high and a mist of Chanel following her when Miguel had told her that they couldn’t talk in private. What she had actually done made no sense at all.

At that moment, Miguel left the cafeteria and the stares of his students before stopping in the hallway. He had no reason to feel proud of what had happened, but neither was he to blame for imagining it in the first place. The imagination was fanciful like that. And that... Look, it had simply been a twist of luck that reality had so closely coincided with his fantasy. That was it.

A Midas can make their imagination become reality, thought Vladimir Gorlov.

Seated at his desk, he unscrewed a plastic pen, disassembled it and then reassembled it slowly, carefully, like he was studying how it worked.

They could create storms, lightning, tidal waves... He placed the spring back inside the pen. *Stop a butterfly mid-flight, remove a planet from its orbit, turn seawater sweet, resurrect armies, turn honey blue, destroy the universe...* *Turn anything into gold. A Midas.*

Midas, Gorlov repeated to himself. He placed the now-reassembled pen beside his notebook. *A Midas could turn all the cows in the world green and yellow for a day. And make them fly.*

He took up his pen again, as if anxious to take it apart once more. The stupid cow example was the best one that came to mind when he tried to explain what a Midas was. A god—that was the best way to explain it. But Gorlov was on the verge of proving that a Midas wasn’t all-powerful. There was one thing they couldn’t do.

They can't destroy their own ability, he thought. The Midas Paradox. The Midas subject can do anything they can possibly imagine, but they can't destroy their own ability.

But how to describe it? Gorlov had to write about it using technical terms, but they wouldn't come to him. Or perhaps, deep down, he didn't want to find them. He stared at his bony hand lying top of the graph paper. His hands, now withered with age, had recorded more than fifty years of investigative research, but now it was like they resisted it. He began to move the pen with a strained, slow script.

Note 1067: The Midas Paradox.

The system of equations to maximize the Midas Effect could lack a solution. This could imply that, if the Midas subject existed, they would not be able to eliminate their power once used...

Gorlov filled a page and a half trying to clarify the implications of the paradox. Once he finished writing, he stopped and read over his final conclusion.

The Midas is damned by their own power.

Too melodramatic, he said to himself, crossing out the sentence with a thick, black line.

He removed his aviators, the only glasses with which he knew he could see well, the ones that had been with him since his years in Leningrad. Taking out a handkerchief, he wiped the lenses and the black plastic frames before placing them back on their specially-reserved spot on his nose. He re-read the crossed-out note. *Damned by their own power.*

Scientific notes shouldn't use such sensationalist language. But that was how he felt, deep down – sensationalist. Or, at the very least, restless, full of excitement, like a bright but unkempt college student presenting his final thesis. All that came to mind were stupid things like that final note and the example of green and yellow cows, lines that ran amok in his mind like giddy children.

Anyone would feel excited if they had finally found what they had spent their whole life searching for, he told himself. They were just about to capture a Midas, of course. It seemed, at least, that they had finally found one. Only once before had they ever been so close. But that candidate..., she had failed.

Gorlov didn't want to imagine what another failure would mean. He, in all probability, wouldn't live long enough to find another candidate. Looking away from the graph paper on the desk, he leaned back against the broad back of his chair. He watched the sunbeams, early risers like himself, crossing his study. Oblique bands of light on ochre walls. California had taken him in, had let him almost finish his investigation, the one he had started in the old Soviet Union. It was true that he missed his homeland – like anyone else in their right mind, he supposed – but he despised the cold. The Russian cold would freeze his knuckles, even when he wore gloves. He shivered thinking of it. But there, in his office located in NASA's south wing building, it was always warm.

But duty was cold. Duty.

Gorlov had his years in the KGB to thank for his Soviet sense of discipline, military in nature, and he managed to return his gaze to his notes. He exchanged his black pen for a blue one. Blue ink for mathematical notations, he reminded himself, writing out a system of equations, still incomplete, that tried to provide some meaning to the paradox. Once the formulae were finished, he noted the date. His movements stilled for a moment, observing the date with a serious look. April first.

Almost a year since we found him.

He remembered that the very same day he had started working on the equations, Eugene Barrett had appeared in his office with his mousy smile and announced that he had located a supposed Midas. In Spain. Eugene the hero, as ill-timed as his smile.

Gorlov eyed the blue equations of the paradox between his fingers, which were too slim to cover the formulae. The paradox was a problem that could not be avoided. He had even considered postponing the capture. A Midas was too dangerous, wielded too much power for one human being. And now Gorlov's blue formulae said something more – they began to show that activating a Midas was an irreversible process.

He closed the notebook. Nothing more to explain. His gaze returned to one of the diagonal sunbeams on the wall; one of them now touched the glass framing the periodic table of elements he had brought from Russia. For the sake of practicality, he had only brought with him his notebooks and that table. Irina, his memories, his past – everything else had been left in the cold. The sunlight left a glint on the edge of the glass that obscured his vision. The Midas dazzled him, drew him in, but wouldn't let him open his eyes fully. That very same sunlight had entered through his window and shone on the nape of his neck. A small, pleasant shiver ran through him. What he was doing had to be right, it had to. If not, it would mean he had sacrificed his whole life for...

The phone on his desk started ringing. The trilling sound woke Gorlov from his thoughts, from the Californian sun, and gracelessly dumped him back in his cold, damp office in Leningrad. The screen showed that it was one of his secretaries calling him. He picked up the phone. "Karen?"

"Professor Gorlov," replied Karen's soft voice, "Dr. Barrett is waiting for you in the basement. He asked me to remind you."

"Thank you, Karen." Hanging up, Gorlov placed his notebook in his briefcase. He would have to visit the high-security floors. That was where the notebook needed to be, where neither his notes nor the documents scattered across his desk must be allowed to leave. He gathered them all together, almost sweeping with them. Americans, it was said, were very lax with security protocols. But Gorlov was grateful for that. He was too old to work all day locked away in an underground laboratory, as technical and conditioned as he was.

If old Karen knew what the "basement" really was, she'd never let me down there again, he thought as he shuffled through his papers.

One brown file didn't quite fit in the briefcase. It was the report on the pursuit of the supposed Midas. The rough folder represented the subject, represented everything they knew about him, and the plans for his capture.

Looking at the clock on his desk told him it was nearly sunrise in Spain. The first meeting with the subject would soon be taking place. That was the plan. Monica and Walter Castillo had followed him from Granada, and she would intercept him before he left for San Francisco.

Gorlov read the name of the subject written in black on the brown file. It was a half-Spanish, half-French name. Miguel Le Fablec. Then, he shut his briefcase and left the Californian sun.

CHAPTER 2

Monica felt stupid. Miguel Le Fablec appeared to be sleeping, not noticing her presence despite her efforts. In the middle of the gardens beside the Alhambra, disguised as a tourist with a backpack, map and baseball cap, she shook a camera about in her hand to catch the subject's attention. But, he appeared to be sleeping.

She observed him silently. He had dark, slightly long, straight hair. She liked it; it gave him a bohemian look. Romantic, in a way. She bit down on the right side of her bottom lip. No, that wasn't what she liked. *I'm not a romantic*, she told herself. In fact, she was quite the opposite. She hated sentimentality and preferred being practical. The Miguel she liked had been the one she saw that morning in the University of Granada; the one who had dismissed his ex-girlfriend with that cutting gesture with his right hand, like he was wiping her off the face of the earth. That had been particularly good. It was the best he could do, the only thing he could do. He had gotten rid of that madwoman with the tiny waist and exposed cleavage who did nothing but slow down Miguel's trip to California.

Monica crumpled up the map in her hands. It wasn't that she was particularly interested in Miguel's love life, far from it, but it was well that Miguel had resolved his personal issue in Spain. Ana. Yes, it was practical. She spread out the crumpled map on her leg, folded it and tucked it into the back pocket of her jeans. *Too many tourist props*, she thought.

It was practical to... Monica suddenly realized that she had spent several minutes completely absorbed in the subject's hair and his ex-girlfriend. Looking behind her, she spotted Castillo. He was watching her from behind some rose bush. She was not about to let Castillo report negatively about her.

The camera in her right hand had turned off. Pressing the power button, she told herself that she had caught other subjects before for the Project. She knew how to do it right.

Monica went over her instructions in her head while she focused the camera on the subject, adjusting the zoom and brightness. They were very basic, typical for the first phase of a capture. *Fake a chance encounter with the subject in their city of origin. Act nice and friendly. Tell him you'll be working in the same American university as him.* She adjusted the focus on Miguel. *What a coincidence! How lucky!* he'd think. *The first person I meet from my new world.*

She would be his first acquaintance in a new life he hadn't even started yet. The usual protocol: feign coincidence.

Clearing her throat, she extended her arm holding the camera and said, "¿Por favor?"

"¿Por favor?" Miguel heard a feminine voice speak, although it sounded distant. He paid it no mind.

Tourists, he thought. *The Alhambra, the Generalife gardens, all of Granada full of tourists in caps. In spring, all year, everywhere.* He touched the rough stone of the bench where he sat as he opened his eyes and pushed back the hair that had fallen over his face

In front of him, beyond the lookout, was the scenery he had come to say farewell to. That was why he had come. He had already said goodbye to his family and everyone else, but in order to begin

his journey, he had to go through with the symbolic act of saying goodbye to his homeland. The church domes, the palm and cypress trees, the Alhambra, the white houses, the city. It all smelled like orange blossoms.

In California, they have orange trees, he thought, turning his gaze to California so he could smell it from there.

He imagined himself in a white and blue British Airways plane, an enormous Boeing 747, with a hump and four 60,000-pound Pratt & Whitney engines that would take him to San Francisco. His favorite plane. That was his future – the jumbo jet, the orange trees, the Californian sun...

“Please?” Miguel heard again.

Stupid tourists! He turned towards the voice.

It was a girl. Young. Right next to him. She smiled at him.

She had long, wavy hair, like an Italian actress. *Although an Italian actress would never hide such beautiful hair with a hat*, Miguel thought. Shining blue eyes. He stared at her for a moment, head turned slightly, watching her nibble the right side of her lower lip in a way that almost seemed sensual to him.

The girl showed him her camera and turned to point at the scenery. From one of the back pockets of her jeans, which had been tailored perfectly to her curves, Miguel could see a wrinkled map of Granada just at eye level. *Nice ass*. He looked up at her again as she removed her cap and shook her hair free. Miguel opened his mouth, but had no idea what to say.

“¿Por favor?” she repeated, this time in Spanish, with long, smooth Rs. She kept her hand still between the two.

Miguel blinked and looked down – the camera. It was a black reflex camera. Analog, with a good lens. It looked similar to one he’d had years ago, an antiquated thing he had loved. He smiled.

“Photo, yes?” he said in English, taking the camera.

The girl smiled too, and began to point behind her at the scenery she wanted as the backdrop for the photo as well as where she was going to stand. She spoke in rapid English with an American accent. She made decisive, forceful gestures with her hands, like an orchestra conductor. Miguel liked her. She seemed to have everything very clear in her head and made quick, practical decisions. Direct, that was the word. She wanted a full-body shot on the lookout, with the Alhambra and the light of the sunset behind her, which, by her approximation, was close at hand. And she didn’t have bad taste, Miguel thought, but all that wouldn’t be possible.

“The sun is still very high,” he said. “You won’t come out very well with all that light behind you,” he added, handing her the camera.

But the girl didn’t take it. She didn’t even move. The look on her face faded as if a cloud had passed in front of the sun overhead. Her smile also disappeared.

It’s not a big deal, I guess, Miguel told himself. But the look she gave him made him feel as if he had insulted her.

Suddenly, Miguel felt an unreal cold come over him, making him shiver. And then, in the middle of his head, a tiny pinch. He couldn’t start his journey to a new life like that, denying the young woman such a small thing. Miguel turned the camera over in his hands, as if it would start to talk and give him an answer. *A photo in Granada... Nothing’s easier than that*. He quickly remembered the photos he had taken with Ana at the Mirador de San Nicolás, the ones he had taken with his old reflex camera. Of course, that was it! He blinked, shaking off all thoughts of Ana, and looked towards the white houses all clustered together along the hill that was now in front of them.

The Albaicín. Saint Nicholas, the church, the Mirador—Miguel could see all of them between the houses. He hesitated for a moment.

“I know the perfect place for panoramic shots,” he said, pointing to the Mirador de San Nicolás on the other side of the houses. “We can get there before sunset if we hurry. Well...” he caught himself, “if you’d like me to accompany you, that is.”

“Let’s go!” the young woman exclaimed, almost militarily, her camera and her smile returning to her all at once. She seemed ready to run to get there.

“We can take a bus,” Miguel said.

Thirty minutes later, Miguel stepped off the bus after the American girl. She smiled at him before taking her map out of her pocket and offering it to him.

But Miguel didn’t take it. “It’s over there,” he said. He pointed to a tiny street leading away from the plaza. “We’ll be there soon. It’s Monica, right?”

“Monica Eveleigh. But my mother’s maiden name is Graziano. Angela Graziano. She’s Italian.”

While they walked, Monica told him more about herself. Her mother had Italian heritage, and her great-grandparents were from Naples, good Catholic people – Miguel had already spotted the small gold cross hanging from her neck over her gray shirt – and her father was a scientist from New Jersey, working near Houston on something about embryonic cells, and she and her siblings had been born in Texas. Monica spoke in an uninterrupted stream of words. She was also working in research, but not in the same area as her father, since she wasn’t all that interested in biology. Miguel tried to imagine her in Texas researching... he didn’t know what. Although in Houston, he remembered, was the Johnson Space Center. Nothing less than NASA’s Mission Control Center. It would be incredibly lucky, he thought, to know someone from the Agency. *NASA*, he thought. His childhood dream. The dream that had pushed him to become an aeronautical engineer.

“What do you do?” Miguel asked.

“I’m a psychologist and a mathematician.”

Psychologist and mathematician? Americans are weird.

“At Saint Stephen’s Catholic University,” she added.

Of course. She had already told him she was very Catholic, Miguel remembered as they turned a corner. He hated priests. Their intimidating robes, the black flames of Hell, and the idea of an exclusive Heaven. Monica smiled suddenly, her whole face glowing. She really was beautiful. *Inhumanly so.*

In front of them was the Mirador de San Nicolás and its wonderful views.

“It’s perfect,” she said, still smiling.

The light was excellent – it had been a good idea bringing her here. The Alhambra and the Generalife on the hill, showered in the golden light of the setting sun, the white peak of the Sierra Nevada in the background, and the indigo sky above it all. Monica looked thoroughly impressed. *As anyone would be*, Miguel thought. Her eyes began to shine once more. He enjoyed watching her expression, like she was a little girl unwrapping Christmas presents.

“Would you like to sit?” Miguel asked, pointing to a white stone bench.

She nodded wordlessly without removing her gaze from the view. Then she turned and walked to the bench; the two of them sat down together.

Upon seeing her so entranced, Miguel began to fantasize about seeing her again in America. A little adventure, perhaps. *Don't be stupid!* he told himself. *No one bumps into an acquaintance in a country the size of a continent. I'm going to California, and she's going to... Texas, or wherever.*

Miguel stood then. "The photo?"

"The photo," Monica repeated.

"We'd better take it before we lose the light."

"Of course." Her response was almost inaudible.

Monica opened the back of her backpack while nibbling her lower lip. Removing her camera, she pressed a few buttons and looked through the visor, focusing the lens. Miguel thought he could watch her for hours, never getting tired of her resolute movements, the feminine sensuality you'd find in a Russian army official. But she would be leaving soon. She would disappear, along with her backpack, her cap, and her photo, and so would he.

"I have an idea!" Monica exclaimed. "Get in the photo with me. We'll ask someone to take it for us. I'd like to have something to remember you by."

Miguel stood staring at her for a moment. "The people don't really fit the frame well..." he answered. "I'll take one of just you. If we ask someone else, they'll probably end up leaving our legs out of the shot, or worse, leaving out the Alhambra..." He trailed off as he looked around. He spotted a portly, jolly-looking man and approached him. "Excuse me, would you mind taking a photo of us, with this view in the background?"

"Of course!" the man replied in an Andalusian accent, taking the camera. "Stand over there!"

"He's going to destroy the picture," he muttered to Monica as he sat down beside her. She giggled.

"Alright, son, why don't you hug your girlfriend a little. Otherwise, you'll look like two strangers," the man said, gesticulating wildly.

Miguel was about to correct the impromptu photographer, until he realized his arm was already around Monica's shoulders, while she leaned into him. He supposed the man's instructions had caused his body to move unconsciously before his brain had time to catch up. But he liked it. She didn't smell like that perfume with the French name, like every other girl he knew. Instead, she smelled of something subtle, intimate, slightly salty. Droplets of sweat. The scent had a sharp aftertaste that excited him. Miguel felt his pulse quicken with the click of the camera's shutter.

"Wonderful!" the man said, turning his belly towards them. He returned the camera to Miguel with a wink. Miguel thanked him and wasted no time in moving away from her and giving instructions. "A little to the right... that's it... and... yes! Right there! Don't move." He pressed the shutter button.

The click hit him in the face like a freezing wind. For the first time, through the camera's visor, he looked properly at Monica's shirt. Squared dark blue letters spelled out an acronym on her chest in the shape of an arch. All very normal, except for the acronym itself – SJSU. San José State University. California. His new university.

He approached Monica. "How do you know San José State University?"

"San Ho? I have a research grant there. I work there."

Miguel looked at her, open-mouthed. Then, he smiled. A Boeing 747, he remembered, would soon transport him to California. To her. Behind her, the Alhambra began to darken. But before it disappeared into the night, it shone once more, an intense, fiery gold. Success.

CHAPTER 3

The flight from London to San Francisco had just reached cruising altitude, and with a ping, the light advising the use of seatbelts turned off. Many passengers started to get up and move around, but Walter Castillo didn't move. He watched. He kept quiet, his eyes hidden behind a pair of black sunglasses. He watched Miguel.

The ping seemed to awaken Miguel. He twisted in his seat before looking around, and then behind him. When his gaze neared where Castillo was, he leaned to the left to hide himself behind the seat in front. He watched as Miguel settled in his seat and fell back asleep. The cabin crew went about preparing the little blue carts containing breakfast.

Castillo eyed his own suit, his maroon tie lying over his seatbelt. The gray suit, along with his dark hair, made him look like any another Spanish executive flying from Madrid to London, and then on to San Francisco. He was sure he would fly under the radar. *Almost invisible*, he thought.

An air hostess passed him a breakfast tray, but Castillo didn't move. Instead, he kept his eyes wide open behind his sunglasses as he took in the hostess's dark blue British Airways uniform. She immediately passed a tray to the woman sitting beside him. Anyone, thought Castillo, would think he was asleep, his eyes closed behind his dark glasses. Good. His lips turned up in a smile with the barest of movements. It was easy for him to make others see what he wanted them to see. That was what he was best at. Huffing with pride, Castillo focused once more on the subject while the hostess passed by with the breakfast cart.

Miguel's brown hair was just a little too long for his liking. His sleeping posture caused it to fall over his left shoulder. He looked so... harmless. Castillo couldn't see Miguel's face from that angle, but he clearly remembered the soft, straight lines of his face, his deep-set eyes. He looked like a Romanticist poet. Or perhaps some soulless being.

Defenseless, he thought. *And terrifying*.

But above all, dangerous. Castillo couldn't lose sight of Miguel. He would follow him all the way to San Francisco. He wouldn't rest. This was his mission, and he would see it through just like he had done with every other mission before.

This was what he had left his Hispanic hometown for – distantly, he remembered that very few of his childhoods friends ever made it out of Little Havana. But he had, in spite of his father, who had a fondness for rum. Despite no one ever believing in him. This was what he had gotten into Yale for, along with all those rich blonde bimbos, daughters of congressmen and expensive lawyers. This was why he had finished his law degree in three years at the top of his class before being accepted into West Point, among the best of the best. This was why he had been recruited to the CIA as soon as he graduated. This was why the Agency had sent him on this mission. Castillo breathed deeply again, smoothing out his tie as he felt the rush of pride and palpable success, just within his reach, filling his lungs.

There was still much work to be done. It was no longer necessary to feign sleep. He straightened in his seat and went over the report in his head – a result of the inflection in the University of Granada. He had been there, had seen Miguel's ex-girlfriend humiliate herself, crying and begging

Miguel to stay. Miguel seemed to be the one who had caused it, through his imagination, through his will. He replayed the memory of Miguel's brown eyes lost in thought, the Romantic poet looking as if he was always just about to kill himself. But those eyes, Castillo thought, also reflected his fury, almost that of a demigod, as he humiliated that young woman. There had been the point of inflection. The quantum leap that the fool had caused went beyond all limits. It had almost been a Midas Effect. Now, they would have to find out for sure if he was the one who had caused it.

Miguel shifted in his seat, and Castillo leaned to the left to conceal himself once more. He looked back after a few seconds. The demigod appeared to have gone back to sleep. He would have to capture Miguel, Castillo told himself, for Gorlov and his scientists, so they could study him. For his mission, and for his country.

