

The Cartel Strikes Back

Manny Olivera stomped from the owner's cabin back to the bar on the main deck.

Women! What was it with women anyway? Why could they never be on time for anything?

Manny poured himself a shot of tequila. He was *macho*, a man's man, he took his tequila straight, neat. He wouldn't be caught with a girly drink with frilly little paper umbrellas if he was dying of thirst.

A teak and brass plaque created by the ship builder hung on the wall over the bar. The plaque had the vessel's name, *Arrecho*, the builder, the designer, the interior architect and the owners name along with the date of launch, May 12th, 2006.

Manny laughed at himself, well maybe he laughed at his father. It was just like the old man to name his boat *Arrecho*. It meant hard-on or erection. He always remembered his father as a sexually driven man. The fact that he died in a *puta*'s bed only reinforced the idea.

Arrecho was a beauty. One hundred seventeen feet long, gleaming white outside with jet black windows, she seemed to go on forever. With three decks and a crew of eight, she could go anywhere in the world. When his father was alive, he would call the captain and tell him to meet them in Monaco or Tahiti or someplace. When their private jet touched down, the *Arrecho* was always there waiting for them.

The memories of his father and the warm liquor calmed his nerves.

Would Gloria ever be ready?

He ambled back forward, through the main saloon, past the guest staterooms and to the owner's cabin in the bow of the boat.

“You ready yet, *Corazon?*” Manny asked his wife as he entered the cabin.

“*Momentito, mi amor,*” Gloria called back over her shoulder.

Manny gently put his hands on her silky shoulders and bent to give her a light kiss on the neck.

He had everything. His mother owned the largest bottling company in Mexico, his wife was a former Miss Mexico. She made it all the way to first runner-up in the Miss Universe Pageant. The memory of her lovely body in the swimsuit competition brought a smile to his face.

And yes, the children. He was always grateful for the children. Children were the measure of a man. They had her looks and his smarts.

What’s not to celebrate?

Manny watched his wife put on the finishing touches. Her long black hair hung down in luxurious curls. Her eyes looked like dark pools in the mirror.

The master cabin was out of a *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* episode. The room was paneled in rich teak with brass accents everywhere. The king size bed was flanked by gold framed mirrors.

Gloria hung huge diamonds from each ear while Manny studied her face.

“*Vamos, querida.*” Manny’s voice left no room for disagreement. “We’re going to be late to my own party.”

“What difference does it make? I like to make an entrance, and besides, they can’t give away the awards without you.”

After an eternity, Manny led his beautiful bride down the long dock. Manny hated the dock. It always felt like he was slumming, walking to or from his boat. The *Arrecho* was a

miracle of modern technology. She looked like something out of a James Bond movie, but the boats surrounding her?

They were transients, battered cruising boats just in from the Caribbean or fishing boats there for the season. He wanted to move the boat to a more exclusive marina, but Mama insisted that they keep it where Papa wanted it.

Manny walked Gloria, her hand on his elbow, up the dock to a waiting Cadillac Escalade. The driver jumped from his seat and opened the door as the couple approached.

The drive from *Marina Palmira* to *La Paz* was only about seven miles, nothing for the high-powered beast, but fate would not allow the couple to reach their destination.

Just past the open-air *El Molino* restaurant, a black Chevy Suburban skidded to a halt in front of their SUV. At the same instant a second Suburban smashed into their rear bumper.

The driver was out the door in an instant, drawing a large pistol from under his jacket as he exited the car. He never got a chance to get off a shot.

A burst of bullets from an Uzi sub-machine gun cut him down.

“Aieeee!” Gloria screamed.

Eight armed men surrounded the Escalade.

Manny locked the doors and reached for his cell phone. No sense wasting his time calling the police. These *babosos* were probably working for the same people who owned the police.

He dialed the emergency number for his security agency.

“*Sí*,” the female voice said.

“This is Manuel Olivera. My car has been surrounded by *pistoleros*, my driver has been shot.

The leader of the *banditos*, a large man with a black hood over his face laughed.

“You really don’t think that puny lock will stop us, do you?” He waved at one of the other *banditos*. “*Cabrón*, open the door.”

The smallish man dropped on one knee and pressed what looked like a lump of clay to the door handle.

“Be careful, *Menso*, we don’t want to blow them apart, only open the door.”

“*Si, patron*,” the small man said. “Get back.”

The *Banditos* all stepped back. The small man pulled a metal box from his pocket and pushed a button. The green light on the box turned red.

“Cover your ears.”

He flipped a red lever on the box, the car door exploded.

When the smoke cleared, the leader leaned into the SUV.

“*Baboso*, I wanted them in one piece.”

He reached in and dragged out a bloody Manny.

“Get the girl.”

The Swiftsure is the Northwest’s premier yacht race. Hundreds of boats from all over the West Coast converge on the Victoria, B.C. yacht harbor for the Memorial Day event. Parties seem to start in March and run non-stop to race week.

Chris Hardwick, the tall blond skipper, struggled to clear his head. He’d partied late into the night. No, the truth was he’d partied until early in the morning. Why they scheduled a nine

a.m. race start was a mystery to him. Most of the crews and skippers were still way too hung over to handle their boats.

A warm feeling lit his belly. He thought back to the dinner and ball last night. Hope, his best friend Ted's little sister, was on his arm. She was a full foot shorter than him, but with those crazy Mexican platform shoes, she looked almost like a normal woman.

Normal woman? Who was he kidding? Hope was spectacular. In her tiny black dress with flowing black locks and dreamy black eyes, she was the best looking woman at the party.

At dinner, they sat across from Aly, the bowgirl on the *Titan*. He remembered Aly from the Newport Race Week. She invited them to a party at an after-hours club. He resisted at first, but Hope, who had a little too much to drink, practically drug him there. He had to admit it was quite fun, watching her try to balance herself on those ridiculous shoes, her low-cut dress barely containing her large chest, pulling him down the street.

Who do I think I'm fooling? I'm not in college anymore. I can't party like there's no tomorrow, then handle the Courageous the next day.

But handle the *Courageous* he did. The big red boat fought for position on the starting line.

Chris shook his head to clear it. His long blond hair swirled around his face. The shoulder length hair was a last rebellion against his father, Harry. Harry manipulated Chris all of his life. He sent him to private schools and planned out his whole life for him. He gave Chris a Porsche Boxster as a high-school graduation present to get him to stay home and go to the University of Washington instead of taking Harvard's offer. He let Chris and his best friend, Ted Higuera, take his sailboat on a cruise up the Inside Passage of Canada to lure him into enrolling in law school.

Chris and Ted made quite a name for themselves in Canada, thwarting a terrorist plot to blow up a cruise ship. Chris finally surrendered to his father's wishes and was now the most junior attorney at Hardwick, Bernstein & Johnson.

Sailboat races are exercises in organized chaos. The committee boat, at one end of the starting line, fires a gun at the two minute mark to warn the skippers to move into position. The smart skipper has it down. One hundred and twenty seconds later, when the starting gun goes off, they surge over the line and head for the first mark.

The problem is that sailboats are subservient to wind. Most of the time, they start out on an upwind leg. They have to tack into the wind to get to the starting line and timing has to be precise. If they cross the line an instant too early, the committee boat flags them and they have to return and re-cross the starting line. It might only take a couple of minutes, but two minutes in a sailboat race is an eternity.

"Ease out on the jib," Chris yelled.

Ted, Chris's Latino best friend, let the jib sheet out a foot or so. Ted was half a foot shorter than Chris, but incredibly powerful. With broad shoulders, massive biceps and a huge barrel chest, he could easily bench press two-fifty. His handsome Latino features were a virtual chick-magnet.

Chris let the bow drop slightly off the wind and jockeyed for position. *Kraken*, a white Beneteau 40 with a decal of a giant squid eating an old sailing ship on her bow was to windward. The *Jaguar*, a little Hotfoot 27, edged ever closer to leeward. Chris held his course.

The start clock on his instrument panel counted down the time.

Less than thirty seconds.

"Ease the jib."

Ted responded instantly.

The *Courageous* slowed down just a tad. The trick was to hold his speed as much as possible. They needed to sheet in and resume full speed an instant before the starting gun went off and surge over the starting line like a runaway locomotive.

“You’re cutting it pretty close, Chris.” Harry, Chris’s dad, in his red foul weather gear, sat in the tactician’s seat on the high side of the cockpit. Harry always reminded Chris of Harrison Ford, especially his million-dollar smile.

“We’ll make it. It’s going to be close.”

Ten seconds. Nine. Eight.

“Sheet in.”

Five, four, three.

The *Courageous* surged forward, leaving *Kraken* and *Jaguar* behind.

The starting gun went off.

Chris and his crew flew across the starting line.

The first leg takes the racers down the Straits of Juan de Fuca, the body of water that separates Canada from the U.S., for almost seventy miles out into the Pacific Ocean. The race course is nearly one hundred and forty miles. They would cross the finish line, back where they started off the mouth of Victoria Harbor, in the wee hours of the morning.

Kraken edged ahead. *Mephisto*, from the Royal Victoria Yacht Club, was making a good showing. Chris jockeyed for position and kept *Courageous* near the head of the pack.

His Chesapeake 43 was a good upwind boat, but when they rounded the mark later that night and headed down wind, there would be hell to pay. The big red sloop was a rocket sled

down wind. With the big red, white and blue spinnaker, she took off like the Devil was chasing her.

All through the day, Chris drove his boat and crew. There wasn't a soul on board who wasn't drenched in sweat and aching to the bone. That's what sailboat racing was about. Pushing yourself to the limit, a test of not only strength, but stamina and nerve. Just how good were you?

Maria, Ted's main squeeze, and Kayla, Harry and Candace's adopted 11-year old daughter, manned the galley providing hot coffee and chocolate all morning long.

The Chesapeake 43 was a racing/cruising boat. She was built to go fast, but the designer gave her a luxurious interior. The galley was designed to allow the cook to operate in extreme weather conditions.

Sailboats don't sail on their bottoms, they sail on their sides. As the wind pushes the boat over, the cooks have to be able to work. The refrigerator and freezer were top loading so the contents didn't spill out when the boat was heeling. The propane stove was gimballed so that when the boat rolled, the stove top stayed level.

At lunch Maria and Kayla made sandwiches and cups of hot soup. The crew ate in shifts. There is no rest on a race. You keep the pedal to the metal from start to finish. A crew member might have a ten or fifteen minute break to use the head and grab a sandwich then it was back on duty.

Chris and the *Courageous* fought for every inch to windward.

Late in the day, they engaged in a tacking duel with *Bonnie Lass*, a Hunter 40 with an all-female crew out of Tacoma. The *Lass* managed to inch ahead of *Courageous*. Chris couldn't let that stand.

"Stand by to come about," he shouted.

His crew snapped to attention.

“Ready about,” chorused half a dozen voices as each crew member took their places and readied themselves.

“Helm’s a lee,” Chris roared spinning the big stainless steel wheel. The *Courageous* spun on her keel.

“Let go and haul.”

Chris stepped to his right and took control of the other steering wheel, now on the high side.

Candace, Harry’s trophy wife, cast off the starboard jib sheet. Ted pulled like a madman to haul in the port sheet. When the wind caught the huge Genoa jib sail, Ted needed the mechanical leverage of the big sheet winches to finish the job. His muscles ached as he cranked in on the winch.

“Vast hauling,” Chris shouted.

The red rocket boat settled down on her new course. She was heading right for the *Bonnie Lass*.

“Starboard tack,” Chris shouted at the top of his lungs.

The skipper on the *Lass* understood the move. Chris changed onto the starboard tack so he would have the right of way, forcing her to give way to the *Courageous*.

She wasn’t having any of it.

The *Bonnie Lass* swung through the wind onto a starboard tack.

“Standby to come about,” Chris yelled as the *Bonnie Lass* crossed the wind.

“Helm’s a lee.”

The big red sloop turned into the wind once again, this time, moving away from and ahead of the Tacoma boat. As *Courageous* surged ahead, they left the other boat in their wake.

“Nice piece of sailing, son,” Harry beamed with pride. “I couldn’t have done better myself.”

Chris felt a warm glow inside, despite the cold wet evening. He didn’t often get praise from his dad.

Harry and his boat, *Defiant*, were kings of the northwest racing circuit in the 80’s. Chris and Ted took the *Defiant* north on their fateful trip and it was destroyed by the terrorists. The *Courageous* was her replacement.

As the day faded to night, the race went on. Chris drove his boat. Harry never left his post at Chris’s side, giving bits of advice and encouragement hour after hour.

The crew began to feel the effects of fatigue. This was the wall. They had to push through it. Once they were on the other side, it would all be downhill.

They were coming up on the windward mark. *Kraken* and *Jaguar* clung stubbornly to Chris’s stern. *Hot Spur* and *Bonnie Lass* were close behind. Chris had to time this just right.

“Number one chute, don’t you think?” he said over his shoulder to his father.

“Sounds good to me,” Harry said.

“Make ready the number one kite,” Chris yelled up to Candace on the foredeck.

“Aye, aye, number one kite,” she echoed.

Candace and Alan went into a frenzy of activity making ready to hoist the spinnaker.

“Stay as close to the marker as you can...” Harry had a panicked look on his face.

“Chris... I... Argh”

Harry grabbed his chest and collapsed to the deck.

“DAD!” Chris yelled. “Ted, take the helm.”

He didn’t look to see if Ted acknowledged, he dropped the helm and turned to his father.

“Dad? Are you all right? Can you hear me?”

Harry’s face turned from white to blue in the cockpit lights.

Chris put his ear to his father’s chest. “Nothing!” he shouted.

“Harry!” Candace dropped the orange turtle on the foredeck and came charging back to the cockpit. “Harry, no.”

Chris felt his father’s wrist then his neck. “No pulse.”

“CPR!” Candace shouted. “Give him CPR.”

Chris ripped off Harry’s life vest and unzipped his foul weather gear then measured the distance from his collarbone and began compressions. “Breathe for me,” he shouted to Candace.

“Somebody, call the Coast Guard.”

“Tim, take the wheel,” Ted shouted.

Ted dropped down the companionway hatch, dashed to the navigation station, picked up the microphone from the VHF radio and checked that they were on channel 16.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is the sailing vessel *Courageous*. We have a medical emergency on board. One of our crew members is having a heart attack.”

“*Courageous*, this is the US Coast Guard, Neah Bay Station. How many people are on board your vessel and are they all wearing life jackets?”

“We have eight people on board. All wearing life jackets.”

“What’s your position?”

Ted read off the coordinates from the automatic pilot.

“We have a chopper en route. They will be there in about an hour. Can you give your crewmember CPR?”

Chris fought for his father’s life. He stubbornly compressed Harry’s chest and Candace gave him breaths. Minutes turned into hours. Chris thought he would collapse from the effort.

From somewhere to the east, he heard the sound of helicopter blades.

“They’re here,” Candace shouted.

“Set off a flare,” Chris yelled. It was pitch dark.

“*Courageous*, this is Coast Guard helicopter 2451. We have a visual on you.”

“*Courageous* here,” Ted said.

“Get your sails down and turn into the wind,” the chopper pilot said. We’re going to lower a basket to pick up your crewman.”

Ted relayed the information to the deck and the crew jumped to comply.

The big white helicopter with an orange diagonal stripe hovered over the boat, setting up hurricane force winds. A door on the side of the chopper opened and a metal basket lowered from a winch. The powerful search light blinded anyone who looked up.

When it was inches off the deck, Chris and Candace lifted Harry into the basket. Chris strapped him in and waved to the chopper. The helicopter lifted away from the boat.

The basket with Harry aboard dangled at the end of the wire cable as the helicopter gained altitude, then the chopper slowly began to winch in the basket.

In a matter of minutes the basket was inside the big bird and the helicopter was speeding back towards shore.

The table was set for a feast with white linen table cloths and polished silverware. The crystal glasses were kept full of wine by an ever present steward.

Jorge Rodriguez looked to his right at his beautiful wife. To his left sat his two sons, who would one day take over the family business. Next to her mother was his teenage daughter, Elena. At the other end of the table Jorge's right hand man, Raul Ramirez, worked on his soup.

Tony and Rojillo did not inherit their father's body. Their mother was almost pure Spanish and they were tall and thin like her. They also didn't have their father's dark complexion, but their black hair and dark eyes made them heartbreakers.

The weekly family meal was prepared by the finest chefs and served by trained stewards. The Coq Au Vin was served with wide egg noodles, asparagus spears and a bowl of *jalepeños en escabeche*. A lovely merlot from Jorge's vineyards in *Valle de Guadalupe*, in northern *Baja*, complemented the meal and a fruit and *flan torta*, Jorge's favorite, waited for dessert.

The apartment was suited to any common garden variety billionaire. Hand crafted teak furniture and Persian rugs filled the space. A giant television hung on one wall. There were no telephones, but who needed land lines these days anyway? Jorge made special arrangements to allow his cell phone to work.

The luxury apartment was on the bottom floor of cell block B of the *Altiplano* Federal Prison, just west of Mexico City. *Altiplano* was Mexico's maximum security prison for the most dangerous criminals.

Jorge, better known as *El Posolero* (the soup maker) because he often boiled his enemies alive, turning them into his version of the Mexican soup *posole*, ran the joint. His money and

power bought the guards. Fear kept the warden in check. His family and members of his drug cartel, *Los Conquistadores*, came and went at will.

El Posolero had a small army of prisoners working for him. Armed *pistoleros* guarded him day and night. Chefs, housekeepers and servants catered to his every want. Women were transferred to the otherwise all-male prison to serve his needs. Some were *putas*, but his current favorite, Margarita Lopez, was an accountant sentenced for stealing her clients' funds.

The warden allowed *El Posolero* to mount a satellite dish on the roof of his building bringing in all the networks on his TV and Internet access for his computers. For some unknown reason, the cell phone blocking signal from the warden's office managed to go down whenever *El Posolero* wanted to make a call.

"Doña Martina," *El Posolero* said to his wife, "It has been lovely seeing my family, but now, unfortunately, I have some business to attend to. I will meet you in my room later."

With that *El Posolero* rose from the table and nodded toward Raul. "Come my friend, it's time for my weekly report."

El Posolero was a short, round man. His black hair, bushy mustache and sultry dark eyes gave him a sinister look. With massive shoulders and a barrel chest, no one dared cross him.

He was born in the *Zona Coahuila* in *Tijuana* Mexico. The *Zona* was the notorious red light district of an already wild town. His mother was a whore, he never knew who his father was. For that matter, she probably didn't know either.

The young Jorge raised himself. Most of the time his mother was either stoned or working with clients. As a youngster, he often hid in the closet and watched his mother service man after man.

When he was five-years old, his mother sent him to live with an aunt in *ejido Francisco Madero* in the state of Chihuahua. Four years later, Jorge decided that school wasn't for him. He made his way back to Tijuana and created a job for himself selling oranges to the rich *gringos* in the tourist zone. At twelve he graduated to running drugs for the local *narcos*.

El Posolero, never forgot his "home town." He was a local folk hero. He paid for the school and the clinic there, all children from the *ejido* got full scholarships to the universities of their choice and old people never suffered. They all collected pensions from *El Posolero*. Despite his brutal reputation, the locals considered him a modern-day Robin Hood.

His empire was built on the sweat and blood of many. No one stood in his way for long. His cruelty was legendary, even among Mexico's drug cartels. Soon he controlled all of the drug flow in *Baja California*.

The two men moved to the main living area of the apartment. His "cell" was a little cramped, compared to his favorite villa on *Ensenada de los Muertos*, or Bay of the Dead, half way between *La Paz* and *Cabo San Lucas* on the southern tip of the *Baja* peninsula, but it was the best he could do in a maximum security prison.

El Posolero, known as *Jefe*, or chief, to his subordinates, took a seat on the leather sofa. Raul sat his brief case down next to an overstuffed chair and put his feet up on the matching ottoman.

"Things are not going well, *Jefe*," Raul said. "Everyday *Los Conquistadores* is falling apart a little more."

"¿Sí? Tell me."

"The Sinaloa Cartel is moving in on our territory. They are trying to take over our distribution channels. Already, they have taken our big tunnel from *Tijuana* to San Diego."

El Jefe grunted and lit a huge cigar. “What are we doing about it?”

“It’s hard, *Jefe*, our soldiers are not eager to fight. They think it’s a lost cause with you here in prison.”

“And why are my captains not enforcing their will, my will?”

“I hate to say it, but some of your captains are losing their loyalty. *El Rata* has gone over to the Sinaloa Cartel. That’s how they got our tunnel. It is in *Rata*’s territory.”

“*Mierda*,” *El Posolero* spat into a brass spittoon. “What are these anyway, women? Who is *Rata*’s chief lieutenant?”

Raul thought a moment. “Chuy Martinez. He’s a good boy.”

“Is the *macho* enough to lead the territory?”

There was another pause. “He is small, but very smart. He is ambitious. Already he has sent five Sinaloans to hell.”

“Good. Tell him he is my new captain in Tijuana. His first job it to take care of *El Rata*, then he is to kill every Sinaloan in Tijuana.”

“I will tell him, but it may be easier to say it than to do it. What are we going to do?”

“There is only one answer; I must get out of here.”

“We’re working on that, *Jefe*. Progress is steady. We will soon be ready.”

The sun peeked over Mount Baker and the Cascade Mountains as Chris brought the *Courageous* into Neah Bay. Far from Seattle, the crew agreed that Chris and Candace had to get

to the hospital to see Harry more than the *Courageous* needed to be in her slip at Shileshole Bay Marina.

Chris's teeth chattered from the chill early May weather. As soon as the boat was tied up, Candace stepped ashore with her bag and Ted handed Chris's bag to him.

"You coming with us, *amigo*?" Chris asked Ted as he stepped onto the dock.

"Is that okay? I mean, who's going to take the boat home?"

Chris laughed. "Not you. Kayla would probably do a better job. Besides, it'll do Dad good to have you come see him. You know how he feels about you."

Ted didn't need any convincing. He dashed down into the cabin, grabbed his already packed bag from the quarter berth and flew up the companionway steps.

"Ready to go," he said, as he jumped to the dock.

"Alan, I'm trusting you to get *Courageous* home safely."

Alan George was one of Harry's piranhas. Harry liked to fill his office with hungry young attorneys who would sell their mother's soul for a chance to dissect a hostile witness.

"Don't even think about it, Chris." Alan had a deep baritone voice. "Tell Harry that she's safe in my hands."

Without looking back, the three walked up the dock to the helicopter waiting in the marina parking lot.

"I guess it helps to have Seattle's top lawyer in the family," Ted said.

Chris helped Candace climb up into the aircraft. "If we can't use Dad's connections at times like this, when can we?"

Chris and Ted climbed in, secured their seat belts and put on headsets.

"So, how did you get the helicopter, Chris?" Candace asked.

“Easy peasey. I called Don over at Evergreen Flying Service, Dad has been keeping his plane there for twenty years, and he said they’d have a chopper waiting for us.”

“What’s this setting you back, *amigo*” Ted asked.

“Does it really matter? Like they say, if you have to ask, you can’t afford it. Besides, I want to be there when Dad wakes up.”

The helicopter lifted off as the sun began burning off the low layer of clouds. As they climbed to two thousand feet, the great inland sea opened up below them.

The pilot took them east along the shoreline of the Straits of Juan de Fuca because the bird couldn’t climb high enough to cross Hurricane Ridge and the Olympic Mountains. They flew over Port Angeles and Sequim before turning south over Port Townsend.

Admiralty Inlet and Puget Sound swept by far below them. The deep blue water was occasionally spotted with white sails or a motor yacht or a fishing boat. Tankers, container ships and cruise ships worked their way up and down the Sound. Small towns along the water’s edge flashed by, but Chris, Candace and Ted paid no attention to them.

“Where are you going to put us down?” Chris asked the pilot.

“I got permission to land on the helipad at Harbor View.”

Harbor View Hospital is the Northwest’s premier trauma center.

“That’s cool,” Ted said. “We don’t have to worry about parking.”

“I’d hate to have to pay the parking ticket for this contraption,” Candace broke her silence.

Chris looked over at her. Although her face didn’t have a lick of makeup (who needs it on a sailboat race?) and her eyes were red and wet from crying, she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. With long black hair, emerald green eyes and a peaches and cream

complexion, any man would fall for her. That doesn't even take into account her height, five foot ten inches, and her Playboy model's figure. He understood how Dad had been enchanted by her.

She had been a paralegal at Dad's firm when one day, Dad realized he was in love. When he first started dating Candace, Chris and his sister, Sarah, hated her, she was closer to their ages than she was to Dad's. Who did she think she was, trying to take Mom's place? Their mother died of breast cancer when Chris was a senior in high school.

But over the years, things changed. Candace enrolled in law school at the same time Chris did and they spent three years as study buddies. Chris finished second in his class, an unfamiliar place for him; he was always first at everything. Somehow it wasn't so bitter knowing he finished second to Candace. She was also the smartest woman he ever met.

Candace sat with her arms wrapped around herself. She sniffled constantly and from time to time broke out into a full cry.

Women crying made Chris uncomfortable. He felt like he had to do something to comfort them. All he could think of was to take her hand and say, "Candace, Dad's going to be all right. You'll see."

The sleek helicopter flew west of the Seattle skyline, over Elliot Bay, then turned inland to alight atop Harbor View Hospital on First Hill, also known as "Pill Hill" for the number of hospitals and medical offices there. Before the blades finished turning, Chris and Ted were out of the chopper. Chris reached up to help Candace down.

Who am I fooling? Chris thought *She's probably more capable of jumping down than I am.*

Candace put some serious holes in Chris's *macho* attitude by out riding, out shooting and out fishing him at Harry's Montana ranch. She grew up as the only "son" in a family of three girls. While her sisters played with dolls, she went camping, hunting and fishing with her father.

A nurse and an orderly waited for the three to disembark.

"Mr. Hardwick? Mrs. Hardwick?" she said to Chris and Candace.

"Yes," Chris said.

"Come with me please. Doctor Potter is waiting to meet you."

With that she turned and headed back into the building.

The hospital complex was so large that an Indian tracker would get lost there. The three followed the nurse as she negotiated the corridors and onto an elevator.

The elevator doors opened to a waiting area.

"If you'll just take a seat please, doctor will be right with you."

Chris, Candace and Ted sat in the upholstered chairs with varnished fir arms and legs.

It only took a moment for the tall, thin doctor to appear. In his lab coat, wearing rubber soled clogs and horn rimmed glasses, he looked a little cliché.

"Mrs. Hardwick," he said "I'm Doctor Potter."

Candace and Chris jumped to their feet.

"Good to meet you, doctor." Candace offered her hand. "How is my husband?"

The doctor shook her hand, then took a deep breath.

"I am so sorry, he was gone when he arrived at the hospital."

Candace screamed and collapsed to the floor. Ted jumped to her aid.

Chris staggered and came to rest leaning against the wall.

“NO, THAT’S NOT POSSIBLE,” Chris shouted. “We gave him CPR, we never missed a beat.”

The doctor put his hand on Chris’s shoulder. “I’m really sorry. The paramedics did everything they could for him. It was just too long. From the time he had the attack to the time they brought him into Emergency was over two hours. There was nothing we could do.”

“No, there’s some mistake. You’re lying. He’s going to be okay.”

“I only wish that you were right, Mr. Hardwick.”

The floor fell out from under Chris. He was caught up in some kind of swirling vortex. He would never get out.

From somewhere far away, from another universe, he heard the voice.

“Hey, *hermano*,” Ted put his hands on Chris’s shoulders. “Be strong, be brave. You have to be there for Candace and Sarah. C’mon, man, buck up.”

Chris was comforted by the words, but more so by the voice. Ted was always there for him. When his almost fiancé, Meagan, was killed by terrorists, Ted was there to dig him out of his hole. When he had to handle the Fly-Away Bandit case, Ted was there.

No one on earth was closer to him. They had a bond that even death couldn’t break. Ted was his other half.

“C’mon, man. Help me get your step-mother off the floor.” Ted turned Chris to look at Candace, a heaping pile of tears at his feet.

“Candace, let us help you.” Chris stooped down to lift his step-mother to her feet. “Let’s get you to a chair.” He steadied her for the few steps back to a chair.

“I don’t know what else I can say to you,” the doctor said. “Here’s my card. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to call.”

Ted took the card and the doctor turned and walked away.

Chris looked at Candace. She was a boneless lump in the chair. Tears flowed freely and she sniffed and quivered.

I guess she really did love Dad.

Chris always had a nagging voice in the back of his head. Did she marry Dad for his money? She was one of the most competitive women he knew. She was the Idaho State high school 100 yard dash record holder. She never backed down to any challenge. Was she really with Dad because of the challenge of being a trophy wife? This show of grief proved to him it was really more. Watching Candace tore his heart out.

“Somebody’s gonna need to call Sarah.” Ted said.

“Oh, God. How will we break this to her?” Chris slumped into a chair. “It’ll kill her.”

Sarah, Chris’s younger sister moved to San Francisco after graduating from the University of Washington to get away from her father’s influence. Despite the anger and the distance, Sarah still thought that the sun rose on her father.

“You want me to call her?” Ted asked.

“No. Thank you for offering, but it’s something I have to do. We’re orphans now, we have to stick together.”

Maria Elena Olivera may have looked like an ordinary Mexican woman with her dark hair, dark eyes and the dark skin of an *Indio*, but she was anything but. Maria Elena owned the largest brewing company in Mexico.

When her husband died of a heart attack in the bed of a whore, she took over the business. Everyone assumed that she would fail, after all how could any woman run a business? Fail she did not. She built her brewery into Mexico's largest exporter, winning piles of ribbons and prizes along the way. Then she diversified.

She also owned the largest chain of convenience stores in Mexico. She was such a formidable business rival that 7-11 finally gave up and went back across the border to lick their wounds.

After the convenience stores, she bought a failing soft drink company and turned it into Mexico's second largest.

She was a wildly successful business woman, the most powerful woman in Mexico, but she had no ambitions for herself. It was all for her only son, Manny. She kept her husband's seat warm for the day she could turn it over to her handsome son.

General Ricardo Lazaro was a tall man, especially for a Mexican. With his movie idol good looks, he could have starred on any *telenovela*. Instead, his fierce war on the drug cartels elevated him to the position of head of the *Federales*, the Mexican federal police.

Lazaro paced back and forth, he couldn't sit down. He wore a bullet-proof vest wherever he went and always had a Glock 21 pistol strapped to his belt. He never went outside without at least two armed guards in full combat armor. They waited at attention outside Maria Elena's door.

Maria Elena sat at her oversized oak desk watching the good looking man.

"What do you have for me, *mi General*?" she asked.

“Nothing, *Señora*.” Lazaro turned to face the short, dark woman. “We have searched everywhere, we have talked to every informant we have. No one knows anything. It is as if they were ghosts. They left no trail.”

Maria Elena put on a fierce scowl. “*Señor*, I am not playing games. You will find my son and daughter-in-law and you will do it quickly.” There was a slight tremble in her voice. “I make all the right donations to all the right causes. I have talked to the *presidente*; he says that he is confident that you and your organization are the best hope for finding them. I need for you to show that he is right. It would be very unfortunate for the PRI, for *El Presidente*, for the *Federales* and especially for you, if you fail.”

“I can assure you madam. . . “ Lazaro’s statement was cut off by his cell phone.

“Lazaro,” he said into his smart phone.

He stopped to listen.

“*Sí*,” he said. “*Bueno*, I’ll tell her.”

He turned to the woman behind the desk. “*Señora*, we have a break in the case. A ransom note.”

“Who. . . who is it from? What do they want?”

“They are asking for one hundred million pesos, cash.”

“I’ll get it.” The money would be no problem. “When can we get them back?”

Lazaro finally sat in the chair opposite Maria Elena’s desk. “I must caution you, most of these ransoms don’t work out. More often than not, the family pays the ransom and the kidnappers kill the detainees.”

“Do you think that will happen? What else can we do?”

“There is no good answer. We need to play along with them, make them think they’ve won. We’ll pay them the ransom, then we will follow them to see where they are keeping your family. My troops will raid their hideout.” He took a deep breath. “I must warn you, there is no guarantee that your son will be unharmed. He might already be dead.”

Three days later, a *Federale* pickup with six combat attired police with automatic weapons in the back pulled up to the statue of a fisherman along La Paz’s *Malecon*. Most Mexican cities of any size with a water front have a *Malecon*. In La Paz it is a broad seven-mile long walkway from the south end of town to the marinas in the north. Paved in rose-colored stones in fanciful curving patterns, the *Malecon* has a circular plaza where each street dead ends into it. At each intersection there are benches and statues depicting some aspect of life by the sea. There are statues of mermaids, dolphin, manta rays and even Jacque Cousteau. The fisherman is to the north of town, opposite *La Brisa* mini-mart.

The passenger door opened and a man in a suit got out with a large aluminum case. He stepped over to the trash can with a fiberglass seal’s head for a top and dropped it in.

He got back in the truck and the truck drove off.

“Drop made,” the man in the suit said into the microphone.

Across town Ricardo Lazaro paced in the *Federale* headquarters building.

“*Mi General*,” a lieutenant said, “they have made the drop.”

“What, you think I don’t have ears?” Lazaro snapped, “I can hear the radio.”

“*Sí, mi General*, we have all of our eyes on the package.”

“Good, who is there?”

“We have two lookouts on the rooftops across the street. We have plain clothes detectives dressed as street sweepers working on that block and a *tourista* couple enjoying a drink at the café across the street. There is no way the package will be picked up and we don’t see it.”

“Make sure of it.”

Roberto Jimenez hated being dressed up as a *peon* sweeping the street.

Why didn't they just have me clean out all the toilets he thought to himself?

“Roberto, look” His partner pointed up the street with the end of his broom.

A teenage boy came rumbling down the street on a skate board.

Roberto raised his sleeve to his mouth. “We have a skateboarder approaching the trash can.”

“Good, wait and see what happens,” Roberto heard the lieutenant’s voice through his earpiece.

The teenager circled the fisherman’s statue twice, then jumped off of his skateboard. He looked around, trying not to look suspicious. He utterly failed.

“He’s digging through the trash now,” Roberto reported. “He’s got it. He has the case.” Roberto’s voice went up with the excitement.

“Do not alert him to who you are. Do not apprehend him,” the voice in Roberto’s ear said. “We have three units prepared to follow him.”

The skateboarder turned and headed back into town. An old Volkswagen bug coughed and sputtered down the street after him.

The boy crossed the street at the *El Dolfín* hotel and carried his skateboard under his arm. He walked a block up to the bicycle shop and went in.

“He’s at the bike shop,” the driver said into his microphone.

“Very good. Do not stay there. We have other assets to watch the shop,” the voice said over the radio.

Back at *Federale* headquarters, Lazaro boarded an armored vehicle and rode down the street to the bicycle shop.

“All units, stand by,” Lazaro said as the armored vehicle pulled onto the street behind the shop.

A dozen *Federales* in combat gear exited the truck and moved swiftly to cover all of the building’s exits. Two pickups with six armed men each pulled up on either side of the bike shop.

“Ready?” Lazaro asked. “Go on my command. NOW!”

The armed men burst through all the doors. “Get down. *Federales!*” they screamed, as if anyone would doubt who they were.

The skateboard boy dropped to the floor. The middle-aged man behind the counter stood and raised his hands in the air. The American couple looking at rental bikes screamed.

Lazaro walked into the shop. “What is this? Where are the kidnappers?”

“Wh. . . wh. . . what kidnappers?” the proprietor asked.

Lazaro walked to the counter and spun the case around to face him. “The ones that wanted this money.” He opened the case with a flurry.

His mouth fell open. “How. . . “

The case was filled with shredded newspaper. On top of the case was a hand written note: “We warned you.”

“The money,” the lieutenant said. “What happened to the money?”

“They switched cases on us, *menso*.” Lazaro shot back at him. “But how? Where? We had our eyes on the boy all the time?”

Lazaro turned to the boy on the floor. “You,” he put his alligator skin cowboy boot on the boy’s head. “Who sent you? Who told you to do this?”

“A man asked me, *mi General*.” Tears flowed from the boys eyes. “He gave me a hundred pesos and told me to pick up the case and bring it here.”

“And you,” Lazaro spun to the shopkeeper. “What are you supposed to do with a case of newspaper?”

The man behind the counter trembled. “Señor, I do not know. I’ve never seen this boy before. I don’t know anything about it.”

“Take him in, take them all in. I want to question them.”

The boy shrieked. Lazaro was legendary for his “questioning.” Many a *narco* had gone into *Federale* headquarters to be questioned. Not many came out.