

4118-15th Avenue
Vernon, B.C.
V1T 8H1 CANADA

Email: rod@rodpower.com

114,900 words
© Copyright 2020
Rodney C. Power

Tel: 250-542-7640

DAY OF THE RESURRECTION

A NOVEL

BY

Rodney Christian Power

This book is dedicated to Amnesty International and to all those who work therein

PROLOGUE

Wednesday, 30 March

The bloodied head was just coming into view when Frau Zurdof heard her youngest son cry out.

“It’s Thomas!” she declared to the vet as she raced to the front of the barn, almost crashing into her son in the open doorway. His face was flushed with excitement.

“What is it?”

“I’m going!”

“Going where?”

“On the next *lastwagen*.”

The next truck ... “You don’t mean the supply route?”

“*Yes!* Doctor Rashel says Jennie’s baby is sure to come soon, within hours. Max asked if he could stay behind. Father agreed, and said I could go in his place.”

“What foolishness,” said Frau Zurdof as she wiped her hands on her apron. A quick glance over her shoulder told her the hard part was over. Both calf and mother would be fine. She linked arms with Thomas and started back toward the house. Selma was happy to hear about Jennie, now three days overdue. Maximilian, their second oldest boy, would now be at his wife’s side when she gave birth. Good. As for Thomas, who had just turned sixteen, yes, he was tall for

his age—a good foot taller than his mother, but what did a youngster like him know about driving a big truck over terrible roads?

She knew it was their family's turn, but under the circumstances someone else in the community could make the run. Thomas would not be going.

Twenty minutes later Selma Zurdof found herself wiping her eyes as she whispered goodbye to her baby. Victor had declared him old enough, and in a Mennonite family the husband's word was law. She didn't even have time to make Thomas a lunch. The darkening sky seemed like an omen to Selma. The wind was restless, swirling around and around her yard. The chickens had all fled for cover.

Thomas had never been away from home, hadn't been out of her sight for more than a dozen hours since the day he was born. She loved him so much. There were times when she was certain she could see her own love blossoming in him, for Thomas was the embodiment of everything good she had ever known. He was quiet, respectful, always keen to help out around the farm, and handsome beyond belief. Many a blond-haired beauty in the Filadelfia area had set her sights on him. Watching him drive away with his father in the old Ford brought a terrible heaviness to Selma's heart.

Thomas had been driving—legally that is—for just two months. He made no secret of his yearning to take one of the big transports over to the Belardo Ranch located near the Brazilian border. Their little Mennonite community had been asked to supply provisions for some eight hundred prisoners clearing land, plus the hundred or so soldiers assigned to watch over them. Seven trucks plied the route nonstop. As soon as one returned empty it was cleaned up, checked over, refueled and reloaded, then sent off again with a fresh driver to face the terrible three hundred forty kilometer stretch known as *El Piranha* where six weeks of heavy rains had turned the gravel surface into a nightmare of mud. A grueling twelve-hour run, it took strength and skill to navigate under such conditions.

Thomas was all pumped up when his father turned him over to Herr Kroner, one of four elders in charge of logistics. The many tales he'd been told about the awful road conditions did nothing to dampen his enthusiasm. Driving north across the high Chaco region of western Paraguay would be his first real adventure.

He was dying to get underway.

Barely three hours after he'd started out on the initial two hundred kilometer leg, the young Mennonite found himself engaged in a constant struggle to keep the bulky one-ton Peugeot from sliding off the road. Each battle he lost brought the winch into play, but anchor trees of sufficient diameter were few and far between. He understood now why the winch cable had been equipped with an oversized grappling hook. In due course the ferocious rain gave way to a constant light downpour that was insufficient to prevent the heavy mud from accumulating on his windshield. The wipers proved to be all but useless. His only recourse was to keep reaching around to clean it by hand. On the seat beside him a shortwave transistor radio relayed the powerful Voice of the Andes as if it were just down the road.

The mud-encrusted Peugeot rumbled into the tiny border town of *Fuerte Olimpo*, right across the river from Brazil, just under nine hours out of Filadelfia. Señor Benitez had made arrangements for the Mennonite drivers to be given a meal and then catch a short siesta in a schoolhouse while their vehicles were being serviced. Seconds after Thomas's body touched the hammock, he was asleep.

When he awoke and walked outside around seven in the evening, he was surprised to find his reddish-brown Peugeot had regained its original lime-green color. The plump *Macá* woman who had washed it appeared pleased with her handiwork, though Thomas considered her efforts in vain. Thanking her anyway, he did not object to parting with the fifty *guaraní* she asked for.

After checking his fuel level and refilling his water jug, the gangling youth climbed into the cab and sought to prepare himself for the final one hundred forty kilometer stretch.

He was accustomed to the rain by now. Rest had renewed both his strength and his interest in the journey, so he set off in good spirits. Before long he became aware that he was climbing. The change in elevation brought with it considerable improvement in road conditions. Soon he was able to average around forty kilometers an hour—a blistering pace compared to the previous stretch. He noticed that the land was changing, opening up more. Fences and cattle began to appear beside the road.

Close to midnight he drove under a big wooden archway that told the Mennonite he was entering private lands owned by the Belardo Ranch. An imposing sign nailed to the gatepost warned *Se disparará Trespassers*. Trespassers will be shot.

For some reason, the sign made him laugh. The ghostly forms of more long-horned cattle began to show up in the headlights, forcing him to maneuver the transport around them. Another thirty minutes went by before he saw twinkling lights in the distance, and ten minutes later he was met by two wiry *estancieros* on horseback who joked about the driver's age.

The routine was well established by now. Thomas had only to follow the riders to a large metal barn where he was told to leave the keys in the truck. Over at a nearby bunkhouse a big bowl of steaming *locro* was set in front of him. In no time at all, six men seated around the table, small of stature with dark leathery faces, began to regale their bleary-eyed guest with local ghost stories intended to frighten him. Thomas was too sleepy to take notice. Part way through the meal the generator shut down, but several kerosene lanterns had already been fired up. Though he did not wish to appear rude, the newcomer was soon forced to excuse himself. After a quick trip to a distant outhouse he bid goodnight to the storytellers, then wandered down the hallway to find the bunk bed assigned to him where he collapsed in exhaustion.

The weakness came from his mother's side of the family, a bladder infection that appeared at random. The family physician claimed it was not serious, the only apparent symptom being the necessity of having to pee every few hours.

So it was that Thomas Zurdof, around four in the morning, found himself answering his second call of nature. Most men would have stepped outside the door and taken a quick leak. Not Thomas. He walked the full one hundred fifty meters to the little whitewashed structure, still half-asleep, did his business, then closed the door before starting back.

Except for the soft patter of rain and cows moaning in the distance, the stillness was complete. Then Thomas's young ears picked up voices. Barely audible as they were, he was sure that he recognized one of the speakers, because he had heard this particular voice many times—in church!

But ... why would one of the senior church elders be wandering around the Belardo Ranch headquarters at this hour? Thomas did not know Herr Keppler well, yet felt it would be impolite not to pay his respects.

His Nike runners made tiny crunching noises until he reached a grove of lime trees where the wet grass rendered his footsteps silent.

The voices stopped.

Perhaps because a residue of the tales he had been told earlier lingered inside his head, Thomas recognized the need for caution. The moment he caught sight of Herr Keppler's plump profile, he drew back behind a tree.

Oddly enough, the church elder was alone. Where was the second man?

Thomas waited. Herr Keppler did not move.

Without knowing why, Thomas suddenly became nervous. After backing away in silence, he turned toward the bunkhouse.

A vicious blow caught young Zurdof across the side of the head, driving him to his knees. He yelped at the sudden burst of pain invading his skull. A second swipe with the chunk of wood flattened him to the ground. This time the youth closed his eyes and lost consciousness.

His assailant snatched up the Mennonite's inert form as if it were a rag doll, then made his way through the lime trees.

An anxious Herr Keppler came to meet him. "What was it?"

"Some kid prowling around. Looks like he was spying on us."

The church elder bent over to examine the victim's face, then withdrew in shock. "*Gott in Himmel!*"

"You know him?"

Before Keppler could respond, a distant shout caused the big man to drop his human bundle. "*Bastardo!* Someone must have spotted us. Grab your stuff and let's get the hell out of here!"

HOLY THURSDAY

CHAPTER ONE

They were ten years old. *Toba-Maskoys*, from the Chaco. Five Remington pump action 12 gauge shotguns and a case of number three cartridges in exchange for the old *Indio's* twin daughters.

¡No un trato malo! Not a bad deal.

Staring out his balcony doors at the prisoners working the vineyards below, the commandant chuckled as he recalled the enraged mother chasing after his Range Rover, the blade of her machete flashing in the sun. The bush road was rough, so she'd managed to keep up for several kilometers before collapsing in exhaustion. One very determined *madre*. The girls had been sedated and hidden in among his other trophies—two ocelots, a gray wolf, one gnarly old peccary and five plump rheas—for the bumpy ride home.

That was four days ago. They were fully recovered by now, and ready for him. And General Erwin von Hoth, Commandant of *La Colmena Centro de la Internación Nacional*, was more than ready for them. He'd spent the entire morning and most of the afternoon on damage control—a major screw-up by his adjutant on a sensitive assignment up in the Chaco. Numerous telephone calls were required to get the operation back on track.

Still keyed up from all the frantic scrambling, he sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He needed to be in the right frame of mind to entertain his special guests.

Von Hoth closed the top-secret file folder marked *OPERACION TANGO* and bent over to place it in his safe. The movement caused him to laugh outright. Without even realizing it, the mere anticipation of more virginal flesh to plunder had caused him to grow hard.

Smiling now, he strolled over to the picture window looking east across his rich marijuana fields. In the foreground, several women were attempting to relocate a colony of bees. From the looks of things, the bees were not cooperating. The region was noted for the quality of its honey, but harvesting it was not a lucrative enterprise. Nevertheless, the prisoners were permitted to keep a few hives providing it did not interfere with the general's primary cash crop.

After returning to his desk, von Hoth pressed the intercom button. "Martinez!"

"*Sí, Señor Commandante?*"

"The *Toba-Maskoys*, the young ones, they have been deloused?"

"*Sí.*"

"Cleaned up?"

"Of course."

"Good. Bring them to my quarters."

The commandant's private quarters were located next to his office on the fifth floor of the central administration building. While his workplace was the epitome of male ambience—mounted animals, gun and sword collections, several fine oils of battle scenes enclosed by dark green panels, the room where his most secret desires came to life bespoke more of a woman's touch, with warm colors and soft materials, gentle fragrances, an ample supply of intimate apparel from Paris and Madrid. Several mirrors placed at strategic locations often hypnotized newcomers. He kept the usual selection on hand: hashish, cocaine, opium, plus a good stash of local marijuana that the general liked to smoke himself.

Von Hoth credited himself with finesse. He knew how to handle them, even the little ones. Severe discipline was seldom necessary. Some even came to like him, and indeed, to enjoy his unnatural games. Despite his stubby, squared-off build, he was not unattractive to women. Hair still worn in the crew-cut style of the fifties with just a smattering of gray beginning to creep

in from the sides. A good nose, not flared or hooked like so many of his countrymen. The only visible evidence of his own Indian ancestry was his eyes: intensely black, spaced wide apart, and set deep in his head. Black bushy eyebrows accentuated a fierce demeanor whenever he chose to play the villain, a role that came natural to him.

His human trophies were kept around until he tired of them, a month or two, after which they were passed on to friends with similar tastes. Von Hoth was careful about this, as Amnesty International had spies in the area that kept constant watch on his activities.

The Playroom, as he called it, had a combination lock on the soundproof steel door. He punched the five numbers and walked through whistling the opening bars of Verdi's magnificent Hebrew Chorus.

Von Hoth was certain this constant renewal of virginal flesh was the source of his youthful vigor envied by all his old army cronies in Asunción. A dozen years ago, when the bloom on his marriage to the lovely Kristine began to wear thin, the general found himself searching for more meaning in his life. He found it, in all places, deep in the heart of the Chaco Boreal, Paraguay's desolate Wild West, where many *Indios* still lived today much as they did a thousand years ago. Her name was Irina, and she became his by virtue of her father's offer to barter his nine-year-old daughter for the fine Winchester carbine General von Hoth held in his hand. That initial trade opened up new horizons for the commandant. One taste of such exotic delights and his feet were set upon a new path. At first he experienced tiny flickerings of guilt after they left his care, often for a good price, as he knew in most cases they were destined for a life of slavery or prostitution. The general sometimes wondered if God was displeased with his treatment of the little ones. He did not think so, because if nothing else von Hoth was a good Catholic. Never had he missed Mass on a Sunday or feast day. He gave generously in the collection and raised his daughters to be God-fearing young women, even helping with their catechism in the early years. The general was certain God would allow him one small imperfection.

Erwin von Hoth was thinking these very thoughts when a blinding shaft of light flooded his Playroom. The chamber seemed to shudder under the intensity. A flash of lightning, he first assumed. But no sound followed.

Nor did the light diminish.

Von Hoth clamped both hands over his eyes and turned away in panic.

Then, for the briefest interval of time, *El Carnicero de La Colmena* felt another presence in the room. He remained motionless, his face jammed to the wall like a child being punished, a minute, two, three. When he summoned up enough courage to turn around, the room had returned to normal. He swallowed a few times before walking out to the balcony. The sky was still overcast.

“¡Madre Dios!”

Sweat poured from his brow. He had to work hard to conjure up a laugh. Strange things happen with the weather all the time, he reasoned. So, a freak flash of lightning without the thunderclap. Not the most unusual event to ever take place in Paraguay.

Several minutes later, when his newest possessions arrived, the general had forgotten about the incident. Two quick glasses of Madeira had helped him relax. The Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra was playing de Falla's seductive *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*.

They clung to each other like frightened monkeys, all four arms entwined, fingers clutching at their simple cotton shifts in desperation. A perfectly matched pair. Big dark eyes grew even bigger as recognition set in. Sweet innocent faces became contorted with fear, for they sensed something terrible was about to happen.

Von Hoth directed the girls through the steel doorway, whispering to them in *Guaraní*, “Come, my little honeybees, papa Erwin will take care of you. Come.”

After rubbing his hands in anticipation, he reached behind to close the door, but then heard Martinez calling him on the intercom.

“He must be mad!” the general declared to a nearby jaguar. His hand was on the door. Once closed, the three would enter another world, one where interruptions were strictly forbidden.

He hesitated, for his passions were fully aroused. After another moment, cursing away to himself, he marched back to his desk and sat down. Even then he did not answer at once. Martinez persisted.

He touched the button. “This had better be good!”

“My most sincere apologies, *Señor General*, but Doña Kristine just called. She said you must hurry home or you will be late for the ballet.”

Mierda! It was the last thing Erwin von Hoth wanted to hear.

He jumped up from his desk as if stung by a wasp, drew his gold damascened Llama 9mm semiautomatic pistol and promptly unloaded three shots into the mounted head of a peccary across the room.

Inside the Playroom the girls screamed and ran for cover. In the outer office his admin officer, Major Martinez, along with Captain Hertzner, had already adopted the prone position on the floor. They stared at one another in silence.

The general popped off two more rounds for good measure, then released the clip to replace the spent cartridges.

Both officers returned to their desks as if nothing unusual had transpired. They were working on an important paper outlining the deteriorating conditions inside La Colmena. The institution had been constructed in nineteen sixty-three to hold a maximum of two thousand political prisoners, those accused of crimes against the state. The current population exceeded three thousand, although eight hundred of those were on loan to a Brazilian landlord up in the Chaco.

Von Hoth often went to the opera. He enjoyed the opera. But the ballet—some gigolo prancing about in the company of a gaggle of emaciated females—bored him to death. Naturally, he had attended before, but always under protest and only when necessary. Tonight was necessary: *Presidente Alfredo Stroessner begs the attendance of General and Señora Erwin von Hoth*

One does not refuse such an invitation.

Von Hoth was that rarest of individuals: a senior official in Paraguay who was not directly or even indirectly related to the President. This unique state of affairs was due to von Hoth having saved the life of a green artillery officer during the Battle of Boqueron. As it turned out, both of their fathers had come from the same town in Bavaria, fleeing the country just prior to the outbreak of the Great War. Twenty-one years later that same artillery officer seized control of the government and went on to become the longest serving president in all of South America.

Stroessner never forgot his military pal, so Erwin von Hoth's subsequent rise through the ranks was nothing short of meteoric. Their relationship had fared well over the years, for at one time they had been comrades-in-arms, blood brothers in battle. Von Hoth was fortunate indeed to name the President of Paraguay among his closest friends.

He glanced longingly at the open door into his seduction chamber, telling himself there was always tomorrow.

Then he recalled that tomorrow was Good Friday. Kristine would *never* allow him to return to work. Knowing this, he exited his office in a foul mood and slammed the door behind him.

Martinez listened to the shattered remnants of the pig's head strike the floor. Thank God the bullets had been directed at the east wall, he thought, as it was not unknown for bullets to come flying in all directions when the general was seriously upset.

“Take them back to their cages!”

“*Sí, General.*”

Outside the administration office, two blue-uniformed guards snapped to attention as their commandant stormed by them. The sound of gunfire inside the inner sanctum was not new to them either.

The general's lush villa was ten minutes drive west from the prison. Kristine was standing in the arched marble doorway with her hands on her hips when the Range Rover rounded the flagstone driveway. “What is the matter with you? You know we must arrive before eight. It is already past six.”

His wife turned on her heel and retraced her steps into the house. Von Hoth cast a mean look at the old grounds keeper, who was doing his best to stifle a grin.

Once inside the bedchamber, von Hoth shed his uniform and stomped into the shower. Visions of the twin delights he had been forced to leave behind danced before his eyes, but the steaming water calmed him down and started him thinking. Okay, he had forgotten about the ballet. Was that a crime? Yet he sensed something else in Kristine's impatience. Perhaps she was growing suspicious of his spending so much time at La Colmena, ostensibly with his officers to

seek a solution to the overcrowding. But in truth, von Hoth's voracious appetite for tender young flesh seemed to be increasing with each passing day. He wondered where it would end.

Twenty minutes later the general dropped down on the end of his canopied bed to pull on a gleaming black boot. In his hurry he had chosen the wrong pair. “Damn the ballet!” he shouted as he threw the boot at a distant dressing table.

“My poor Erwin, as if you have to go every week.”

Kristine's tingling laughter filtered in from the adjoining dressing room. Women had no respect nowadays. Walking across the expanse of the newly decorated room, he grew even more agitated when he caught sight of the two ghastly but expensive paintings she had just added: flowers and vegetables, for Christ sake—vegetables! A lump of cow shit had more character.

His attention was diverted by the plaintive strains of Antonio Vivaldi's Concerto No.3 in F Major, opus 8— “*L' Autumno*”, originating from the music room below their bedchamber. The general soon found himself humming along: “Ta ta, ta tum, ta ta.”

Marianna was just completing the *Allegro*, and the general almost held his breath waiting for the tiny but exquisite *Adagio Molto* to begin. When it did, the notes were so soft he had to strain to hear.

Their oldest daughter had a special gift. From her earliest days Marianna's music was flawless; indeed, it was one of the very best things in Erwin von Hoth's life. When Marianna played, all pain and anxiety melted away.

Once the *Adagio Molto* faded into silence, von Hoth selected the proper boots from his closet, then paused at his elaborate dressing table to pour a glass of sherry. He was starting to come down.

The glass no sooner touched his lips when Kristine swept into the room. “Put down that drink! Hurry up and get dressed. Masters is waiting.”

She was beautiful, a classic dark-eyed Paraguayan beauty, and it was a rare moment when her beauty did not captivate his senses. At forty-three, a full twenty-five years younger than her husband, Kristine was lusted after by all his officers, even by Stroessner's fat generals who sat around Asunción with their collective fingers up their arses—getting rich just by wearing a uniform. At least von Hoth earned his keep.

“*Mi amado*,” he said patiently, “Masters is the chauffeur. It doesn't matter if he waits all goddamn night. That is what I pay him for.”

She glared at him, hands on her hips. “I wish you wouldn't swear. And for heaven's sake, put on your boots.”

He couldn't help but smile, for von Hoth dearly loved his wife. And she, despite her husband's many failings, loved him. Kristine had one minor flaw: she could at times become somewhat volatile, but in reality this only added to her flavor. Von Hoth relished fire in a woman.

Their descent down the spiral staircase was greeted by a sweeping curtsy from the girls and a round of applause from the servants. Kristine had chosen a layered black gown, cut deep in front and pulled in tight to display her narrow waist and long elegant body to full effect. At five seven she was one inch taller than her husband. With heels she reached five nine. Because of this, whenever they went out together, von Hoth was forced to wear elevated dress boots to make them appear the same height—uncomfortable, but necessary.

Dress that evening was formal, so the general had donned a rarely worn white dinner jacket garnished with gold braid and four rows of tiny medals. Elena, at seventeen the youngest and even more beautiful than her mother, held out his hat. Another wreath of gold braid all but obliterated its black peak.

Four years older than her sister, Marianna was also the acknowledged intellectual of the family. She placed her violin on a side table and tucked the bow under her arm in order to give her mother a peck on the cheek.

“It's not fair!” declared Elena with a full pout settled upon her expressive mouth.

The girls were resentful. The ballet was their cup of tea after all, but tonight they had to remain at home.

Their father had earlier shown them the gold-embossed invitation card. In small neat handwriting at the bottom was written: *A ningunos niños o armas*. No children or weapons.

Just as the handsome couple reached the door, the telephone rang. Brock was nearest to the hallway extension, so he answered. When the old butler switched to German, von Hoth immediately spun around and went back inside.

“Erwin, there is no time!”

Brock's face was solemn as he handed over the receiver. "Von Hoth," the general said with caution, for not everyone knew his servants spoke German.

"Thank God I caught you. A situation has developed. There is work to be done, tonight, so bring proper attire. You understand?"

"Of course, *Herr Präsident*. Is it related to this morning's incident?"

"Possibly, we are not certain. Chavez will see that Kristine gets home safely. You and I will talk sometime during the performance."

"I look forward to it."

Still in German, von Hoth's instructions to Brock sent the old man scrambling up the staircase as fast as his bowed legs could carry him. The general was pleased that the evening would not be a complete loss. His earlier frustration now a thing of past, he crossed his grand marble foyer again, resplendent in full dress uniform, but with his head lowered to deflect the curious stares he sensed would be waiting. Von Hoth told his daughters little, because they were from another generation, one that did not understand, nor want to understand, the terrible cost of keeping Paraguay free. Both attended UNA, the *Universidad Nacional de Asunción*, a known hotbed of rumors and dissension, where von Hoth had reason to believe his girls were learning more than the stated curriculum. Perhaps it had been suggested to them that their father was involved in other matters besides running the country's vast political incarceration center. Still, he doubted if even they knew the truth, that he also headed a specialized team whose first duty was to see to the continued safety and well-being of Paraguay's peace-loving citizens.

Marianna stepped in front of her father, blocking his way. Somber gray eyes accurately portrayed her suspicions. "Father ...?"

Von Hoth pulled on his white gloves as he went around her in silence. What could he say that would ease her mind? Whenever they discussed matters of national security, he always came out on the losing end. Marianna was far too clever to be taken in by platitudes. She wanted cold hard facts, which her father had to deny her.

Holding open the door to the black Mercedes was Masters, a tall, scrawny, bearded Punjabi whose proper name was Butar Ghengdu Gwadarpendi Singh. Kristine had hired him because he arrived for the interview dressed in full national regalia, complete with bright orange

turban. An atrocious driver, speaking no *Guaraní* and only a smattering of Spanish, Kristine thought he had a lot of class and dubbed him “Masters”, a name she’d picked up from a British mystery novel.

When the Mercedes vanished from sight behind several tall jacaranda trees bordering the driveway, Marianna gave her sister a hard look. They both knew what went on in and around Asunción in the dead of night, but for years they had denied to themselves that their father might be involved in such atrocities.

Elena shrugged. There was nothing she could do about it. She returned to her piano practice. Marianna stared at Brock until he left the hallway to go outside. She snapped the bow against her calf as she wandered into her father's study, her mind turning over at a furious pace.

After several minutes of tramping back and forth the room, she plunked her boyish frame down into a big leather-upholstered chair and laid her bow on a sandalwood desk three meters across, which like everything else in their opulent four story *hacienda*, cost the earth. Every square centimeter of its textured surface was set in the shape of wild animals. Much of the chair, too. Her fine dark hair settled beneath an anaconda's open mouth while her fingers came to rest between carved jaguar's claws at the end of the armrests.

Marianna allowed her eyes to caress the splendid appointments in detail, except this time she chose not to fight off the feelings of shame and revulsion that often accompanied her clandestine intrusions into the general's lair.

Her days in this house, she realized with terrible acuity, were numbered.

Tapering fingers made their way to the telephone, resting there for several minutes while she pondered the awful sin she was about to commit.

Even though Marianna had never dialed *that* number, it had been burned into her memory. She had always known the moment would arrive when she would be forced to use it.

A young man, having identified the agency, asked if he might be of assistance. She knew the speaker, but did not let on. “I wish to speak to Señor Rafael.”

“My apologies, Felix was just called away. Did you wish to leave a message?”

Shit! “When do you expect him back?”

“There was a tragic incident—a Mennonite boy from Filadelfia. Just hours to live. As a longtime friend of the family, Felix wanted to be with the parents when their son, you know, passes on.”

Marianna sensed her subconscious was ready to pounce on this as a good excuse to forget the whole idea. “But I must see Señor Rafael this evening. It is a matter of great urgency.”

“*¡Madre Dios!* Marianna—is that you?”

“Yes, Carlos, but I did not want to—”

“No, no, I understand.” The agency was accustomed to receiving calls from people who did not wish to give their names. Marianna's reluctance was nothing out of the ordinary.

“Señor Rafael shares everything with me, everything! Perhaps if you were to tell me?”

The general's daughter hated what she was about to do, but if she stood by and did nothing, she would hate herself even more.

“Just moments ago my parents were on their way out the door to attend the ballet when the President called. After my father spoke with him—a short but intense conversation—one of the servants placed his military fatigues and weapon in the trunk. You must know what this means.”

The speaker was astonished by her admitting that *she* knew. “I do.”

“I can be there in two hours. Will you ask Señor Rafael to meet with me?”

Carlos Carrera tilted his head towards the picture of the *Virgen María Auxiliadora* hanging over the entrance and whispered a few words of thanksgiving. He'd been working on Marianna von Hoth for three years.

“I promise, he will be here.”

CHAPTER TWO

He exited the twin glass doors of the triangular-shaped Hotel Guaraní and turned right, a big man, not especially tall, but so broad in stature he was often taken for a professional wrestler or weight lifter.

It was just dark. The rain had let up for the moment, though no stars were visible. Activity along *Calle Olivia* had diminished since the time of his arrival early in the afternoon. Upon reaching the sidewalk he paused to inhale the pleasant scent that seemed to emanate from a nearby magnolia tree, but then noticed just beyond a sweep of pale yellow jasmine dotted with big white gardenias. Behind them a stately jacaranda swept across the sky, its wilting lavender flowers adding their own sad flavor to the night air.

Off to his left, perched at the top of a tall building, a flashing bright-red message declared to the world: *Paz, trabajo y bienestar con Stroessner*. Peace, work and well-being with Stroessner.

The American chuckled to himself. Work? Sure. Peace and well-being? Not likely.

Since Paraguay was run by the most oppressive regime in the entire western hemisphere, Jon Granger assumed the sign was intended to placate the tourists.

The locals knew better.

Nuestra Señora Santa María de La Asunción! The full name of Paraguay's capital city rolled off the tongue like the introduction to a fine Spanish opera. José Carreras was sure to do it justice.

He concocted a few notes of a likely melody, then hummed them aloud as his vision danced across the profusion of lamp-lit flower beds bordering the entrance to the plaza. Two elderly gentlemen in colorful garb towing a donkey cart loaded down with sticks eased by as he crossed the street. They seemed happy enough, but where was their donkey? A bright yellow streetcar lumbered by with its occupants craning their necks to get a look at him. Accustomed to being stared at, Granger surprised them by waving. Moments later a bronze general on his bronze horse appeared from behind a big tree, sword raised, features scowling. Ready to strike down some unfortunate native. Near as Granger could tell, every country in Latin America owned the same statue. Only the nameplates differed.

The American was grateful to be rid of the sterile complex of steel and concrete where he had labored long and hard for three boring weeks. His five-hour crash had been followed by a succulent roast of lamb helped along by a bottle of local Santa Rita, so he was in an excellent frame of mind as he headed off in the direction of the *Panteón de los Héroes* located diagonally across the main plaza. Having noticed the handsome domed edifice from his hotel window, his subsequent inquiry at the front desk revealed that the structure was said to be an exact replica of Napoleon's tomb.

He'd dug out a decent pair of tan slacks and his favorite Tilley's shirt—the navy blue one. He looked good, and he felt good. And at this moment in time, Asunción seemed like heaven.

Jon Granger was a happy man, the product of devoted parents and a fun-filled childhood environment. Even his closest friends were happy people, as he tended to distance himself from those who went around with long faces. One of ten senior construction engineers at Devoir & Associates, a multi-disciplined international consulting firm headquartered in New Orleans, it wasn't Granger who had been selected to sort out this particular problem. The Paraguay project belonged to Darcy Broten, but two days before he was due to leave, Broten, out for his morning run, had stumbled into a bed of poison ivy. His entire body turned red.

Unseasonable rains had been threatening the stability of one of *Itaipú's* giant turbine walls on the *Riío Paraná*, which could have had disastrous effects on the world's largest hydroelectric dam. Granger had carried out the job with his usual flare for innovation, devising a scheme that saw the addition of a half million meters of concrete shuttled in by helicopter. He'd even designed a special quick-dump bin for the big Sikorsky sky-crane. He was satisfied the goddamn wall would stand forever.

Asunción had a well-deserved reputation as a city of peddlers, but only a few diehards came along as Granger began his journey through the plaza. He wasn't interested in their trinkets and said so politely. His apartment in New Orleans overflowed with junk from every corner of the globe.

Nearby, an accordion and violin burst loose upon the rich night air, sending a thrill down the American's spine. He changed course and headed toward a pool of light near the center of the plaza. The light, he soon realized, came from several colored lanterns dangling from the lower branches of a huge banyan tree. A small assembly had gathered, prompting Granger to think this a regular event. The tango was sweet and powerful, in the key of E minor.

Born and raised in the rich bayou country of coastal Louisiana, music played an important role in Granger's life. There was no instrument he could not come to some understanding with, though he excelled in the accordion and the fiddle, pounding out those powerful Cajun rhythms all night long when the opportunity presented itself.

The accordion often came alive in his hands, and indeed to Jon Granger it was alive. It sucked in air and breathed and opened its valves and cried out in ecstasy like a woman in heat. The fiddle was different. It possessed a life of its own, a complex life, for it was capable of expressing the most profound joy, or evoking tears from the most ornery critter on the face of the earth. If Granger was forced to choose between bedding a beautiful woman or slapping out a down-home tune on a fine instrument, well, most times he would stay with the music. When he didn't, the music stayed with him anyway. His tendency to hum lively rhythms at the most unlikely moments led Granger to discover the intense pleasure that could be imparted while gently holding that most sensitive portion of a woman's anatomy between his teeth.

“Buenas noches, señor, you like some good company? Buen precio.”

The American halted his purposeful stride and smiled at the two hookers who had approached him from the darkness of a leafy tree. Both were pretty and curvaceous. The music beckoned him on, but he had not slept with a woman for over two months, possibly a record.

Granger had never married, in part because he had seen the effects of marriage on three of his four older brothers. They had grown quiet, even somber, and anyone could tell they were not the men they once were. They had lost the *joie de vivre* that was the Cajun's special trademark. Of course neither one had married into the local community, so what could they expect? Plus, Granger had an Uncle Aldus, still single, still happy, who on more than one occasion had expressed his opinion that he saw no purpose in marrying one woman to keep her happy when he could stay single and keep them all happy. This curious piece of logic had lodged itself inside Jon Granger's brain, and, even at thirty-six, was sure to remain there for some time to come.

“So tell me, what is this good price?”

The older girl's face grew serious as she took in his massive girth. “That depends. Is your *pinga* as big as the rest of you?”

The question did not surprise Granger in the least. He shrugged. “Afraid it is.”

“So,” the same girl replied cautiously, “you wish to ruin it for everyone else. I think this is not wise.”

The American laughed. He knew they were laying the groundwork to up the ante. “Didn't your mother ever tell you it's not the size that counts?”

When the girls withdrew a few paces to talk it over, he said, “I'm going to listen to the music. Come see me when you make up your minds.”

They were a three-piece ensemble: violin, accordion and guitar. Three little old men, their brows set in deep concentration. Granger could tell right off their music was instinctive; the flow was too natural to have been contrived. He doubted if one of them could read a note. This was the real stuff! The exotic rhythm of the tango itself and the passion with which it was being played almost took his breath away.

Only when the piece died off in a flurry of dramatic minor chords did the old-timers raise their eyes to the crowd and allow shy smiles to creep across their weathered faces, and only then did Jon notice the ubiquitous hat on top of the guitar case.

He extracted a fair wad of *guaraní* from his billfold before easing his way through the small gathering of thirty or so listeners. When the accordion player saw the money his eyes almost fell out of his skull.

“Señor—this is far too generous! *Por favor!*”

The American placed his hand on the old man's shoulder, grinning down at him. “A small token, amigo, from someone who appreciates such talent.”

The fiddle player was studying the big stranger with a strange glint in his eye. “Welcome to Asunción, Señor. Would you care to join us?”

The offer caught Granger off-guard. *How could this old-timer possibly know of his passion for music?* In any case it was an offer he couldn't refuse. “Nice of you to ask.”

The accordion player moved closer. “And your weapon of choice?”

The bystanders were becoming interested. Jon held out his hands, palms up. “Guess.”

Now here was a challenge, and a welcome one. The guitar player drew close and took the visitor's left hand. He didn't look down, but ran his thumb across the tips of Granger's fingers. Finding the calluses, he declared, “For sure, it is the guitar.”

The accordion player agreed. How could such great fleshy pads maneuver the tiny spaces on a violin, or for that matter strike a single key on the accordion? “Of course—the guitar.”

Granger was enjoying himself. These next few hours would make the whole trip worthwhile. He reached out and gently extracted the violin, set it in place under his chin, then held out his hand for the bow.

The little old man smiled as he gave it over. He did not seem at all surprised.

The bystanders were amused, and curious. Good stuff. He brushed the bow through the air a few times as if to clear off any old notes that might be hanging on, then set full force into the tango.

“*¡Madre Mia!*” declared the accordion man as he scrambled to shoulder his instrument. The guitar player quickly re-hooked his strap, and in no time at all, the appreciative crowd was listening to the very same piece being played.

Nothing, absolutely nothing, in Jon Granger's life came close to this kind of pleasure. Having been blessed with perfect pitch and perfect tonal memory, he had only to hear the piece

once, twice if it was difficult, then play it. This talent was obvious at an early age, but formal music lessons were out of the question for the young Jonathon Granger. There was hunting and fishing, and girls. Besides, he could play anything he set his mind to—why screw it up by learning to read music?

Part way through the tango he broke off and returned the violin to its owner. “An excellent piece of machinery, Señor. I wonder if the accordion is as nice to play?”

Delighted sighs came from the gathering crowd where Granger saw two pretty faces looking on with dismay. The girls had waited too long.

Now it was accordion's turn. Once he loosened the shoulder straps and anchored the big old Horner in place, Granger, without even brushing the keys, crashed headlong into the tango. E minor was his favorite key, possessing a depth and tonal quality other keys simply did not have. Its vibrant majesty swept through the night like a swollen river. He went all the way this time, and when it was over, and the applause had died away, he held out his hand for the guitar.

Grinning away, the owner said, “I did not doubt it for a moment.”

The American went on to delight his appreciative colleagues with a Flamenco piece he'd picked up in Granada seven months earlier. As this was one of the most complex pieces in his repertoire, the guitar's ancient fret board was barely up to it.

He was showing off, of course, but this was the stuff of which he was made. *Laissez les bon temps rouller!*

Let the good times roll—even in Paraguay.

Granger was deep into the music when a piercing scream snapped his head around. Looking across the plaza through the trees, he was able to make out a pair of dark-suited men standing beside a green Fiat with the door open punching the hell out of a woman several inches taller than them.

The crowd dispersed with such speed that Granger knew something was up. He set the guitar down beside its case and moved toward the side street, his pulse picking up as he drew closer.

“—and you are not to get in trouble with the locals!” warned Henry O'Driscoll, Devoir's Vice President, Foreign Operations, the day before Granger pulled out of New Orleans. “When

you were tossed out of Peru and El Salvador, Devoir was tossed out as well. Cost us bundles of sols and Colons to get back on their mailing list. Don't forget, Granger, it's our reputation you're messing with. And Paraguay don't know human rights from shit. You see something you don't like, you close your eyes. You walk away. Understand?"

Yeah, sure, not a problem.

Granger stopped at the sidewalk, his adrenaline pumping. One of the short, wiry aggressors was attempting to pin the woman's hands behind her back while the other was punching her wherever his fists could reach. Hurling invectives at them, she managed to get a few good kicks away, but this only served to infuriate the man with the flying fists.

The American jammed his eyes shut and turned aside. Every particle of his being screamed in rebellion, but his current passport already held two *NO RETORNO* stamps. One more and he was out of a job.

His path was blocked by the violin player. The cotton-topped head was tilted to one side, his prune-like face a peculiar combination of grin and grimace. "Ah, Señor, if only I had your great strength. I would not hesitate to teach these cowards a lesson."

"Easy for you to say," the big Cajun snapped. "Last time I poked my nose into something like this, I was thrown out of the country."

The old gentleman's eyes were intense. He did not move nor vary his gaze. Very softly, he asked, "*Would Jesus have turned away?"*

That hurt.

Typical of the tight-knit Cajun community where he was raised, Jon Granger cherished his Catholic faith more than he cherished anything else in life—a life further complicated by virtue of the fact that he was a true Libra, an eternal seeker of truth and justice.

He turned back in time to see her fall to the pavement. When both men began to kick the victim, choice was no longer an option. Granger was there in a flash, grabbing both men by their jacket collars and jerking them away.

The older of the two attackers lost his balance and fell to the ground. Picking himself up, he was startled to see that the intruder's shoulder width was fully as wide as both of theirs. He said in broken English, "This does not concern you, Señor. Do not interfere."

The girl was younger than Granger first thought, twisted into the fetal position, gold miniskirt riding so high her black bikini panties were in full view. Bright blood flowed from her nose. Incensed, he spun about and barked in Spanish: “Big brave men, eh? How about trying that on with me?”

When the pistol appeared in the hands of the older man, Granger went into instinct mode. His lightning kick shattered the man's wrist, but number two was already scrambling to remove the safety on his own weapon.

Granger reached out and seized number two's arm, swiveling for balance as he did so. This allowed the American to bring his powerful leg muscles into play, so that the little Paraguayan was instantaneously transported through the air at considerable speed.

The sickening crunch of his head running smack into the unforgiving trunk of a *quiebra hacha* tree was louder than one would expect. Even those across the street heard it. The battered woman sat up in shock. The guy with the broken wrist stopped yelling, gave Granger a wide-eyed look, then tore off down the street.

The entire episode had been observed by a fair number of people: hawkers, tourists, hookers, even the three musicians. Their reaction surprised the American.

Everyone applauded.

The victim came alive and jumped to her feet. Seizing Granger by the arm, she said, “In the car, quickly!”

The American sucked in big gobs of air, trying to come down. Even beat-up and disheveled, the woman was downright stunning. He took her to be in her mid-twenties.

“Better wait for the police. We got witnesses. They'll explain what happened.”

She looked at her rescuer with scorn. “They *are* the police. Now get in the car!”

“Oh, shit!” The victim's head had popped like a melon. His crumpled body looked like a heap of clothing, without shape or form. Asshole was deceased, no doubt about it.

He was barely in the seat when the Fiat tore away. The woman pounded on her steering wheel with the heels of both hands. “Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!”

The Fiat was so tiny Granger had to twist his legs sideways into the gearshift. He thought a word of thanks would have been appropriate under the circumstances. Never mind that he had

to be shamed into it. "Where I come from, guys don't beat on women. If they do, they pay the price."

The hurried glance was still scornful. "Just like Luis has paid for it, with his life."

"You know these characters?"

"Of course. They belong to the secret police. They patrol the plaza."

The *secret* police! Isn't that just bloody marvelous! "So why were they pounding the hell out of you?"

"Ah, these two, they are pigs. They want to screw all the girls, you know. I kept putting them off, and tonight they ... I think they decided it was my turn, but I didn't want to."

Jon knew the woman was a prostitute. Her dress code told him as much. "So they proceed to hammer you in full view of everyone. This normal practice down here?"

"Poof! Those bastards do as they please."

Granger hadn't meant to harm the guy, just get the gun out of his hand before it went off. This was not going to play well back at head office. "Okay ... okay, so we're in a lot of trouble. Running away isn't going to help. What's your name?"

"Angelique," she replied as she wiped blood from her cut lip. "Yours?"

"Jon." He noticed they had run out of streetlights. The Fiat's beams picked up a handful of rundown buildings set back from the road. Here and there a few bodies huddled in the dark. An Indian woman pulling a big wooden cart shouted at the car as it skimmed by her.

"Where are we going?"

"Not home, this is for sure. They know me too well."

"What about my hotel, the Guaraní?"

"Women are not allowed into the rooms at night. Besides, I am known there too."

"So you're a, uh, working girl?"

"This is what they call us in your country?"

"Hookers is the common term. But you don't come across as a typical hooker."

"Ah, so you are an expert?"

"Knowledgeable."

Angelique turned to look at him. "If I wash dishes in a fancy restaurant I earn one hundred *guaraní* a day. Working the streets I earn one thousand a day. In Paraguay there are few options, unless one comes from the privileged class. If I choose to set aside my moral principles, who cares? In confession I say, 'Father, I slept with twenty men'. He yawns and says to me, 'Okay, say twenty Hail Marys'. It is the same for all the girls."

"I see. What do your parents have to say about your, uh ... chosen profession?"

"How would I know? My mother and father were thrown into prison when I was twelve."

"Why?"

"A stupid question! Because they were declared enemies of the state. They died there, at the hands of *El Carnicero*. I curse him to hell, that one!"

The butcher. Granger sensed they were getting into local politics, so he went back to the subject at hand. "Perhaps we should head south, down to where I've been working."

"You are from one of those big dams on the Paraná?"

"Yeah, the *Itaipú*."

Her laughter was pleasant, like a tiny bell, kind of strange under the circumstances. "I thought you were a fighter, you know, a wrestler."

"People think that."

"Where do you come from?"

"I'm American."

Angelique was dubious. "You do not sound like a *norteamericano*. You do not even look like a real gringo to me."

"Heard that before too."

Granger was a true half-breed, the fifth son of a handsome Cajun father and a beautiful Seminole mother. His deep brown hair was chopped close, as was his mustache. A dark complexion and high cheekbones bespoke more of Eastern Europe. His ability to converse in Spanish had come from his mother's side of the family.

"What's the plan?"

"We cannot escape the city, this is for sure. Soldiers will close all the roads. They will be very angry. If we are caught, they kill us for sure."

“The hell they will!” Granger snapped back. The idea of revenge on the part of the police had not occurred to him. “It was an accident. You saw it. Guys didn't identify themselves. They had guns. What was I supposed to do?”

Granger's next surprise was a lot nicer than the last one. Angelique took his hand and placed it on her right breast. “You came to my rescue. This I will never forget. You are my hero.”

The American took his eyes off the road to study his new companion. She had an extraordinary profile, long slim legs that seemed to go on forever, full breasts that heaved like ocean waves breaking on the shore. The black halter-top barely covered her nipples. When the Fiat slowed beneath a tiny neon sign to turn a corner, his eyes angled downward to stare at the creeping hem of her mini, riding less than two inches from her treasure

“I pass, hey?”

Granger was reluctant to remove his hand from her seductive warmth, but did so anyway. How long since he had encountered a woman as desirable as Angelique? At *Itaipú* he'd heard stories about the gorgeous prostitutes who worked the streets of Paraguay's capital city. The tellers of such tales had not lied.

“We will go to see my grandmother, Lucia Vargas. She has a small cottage down in *La Chacarita*. I think we will be safe there.”

By now there were no lights at all, except in the distance across the Paraguay River.

The road was rough and muddy. The rain had been falling for weeks, the reason for his impromptu visit.

Soon as the Fiat came to rest, Angelique jumped out and vanished into the darkness. Two minutes later she returned and twisted the steering wheel as far to the left as it could go, then edged the little car forward.

Wet leaves and tree limbs slapping at Granger's face forced him to wind up the window. After navigating the narrow trail for a few hundred yards or so, Angelique shut off the motor.

Granger knew the river was close by. Its sweet musky odor reminded him of home: the great Atchafalaya swamplands of Louisiana.

Angelique made no move to get out, so they both sat there in silence. Drops of rain plinked lightly against the roof. Under other circumstances the American would not have