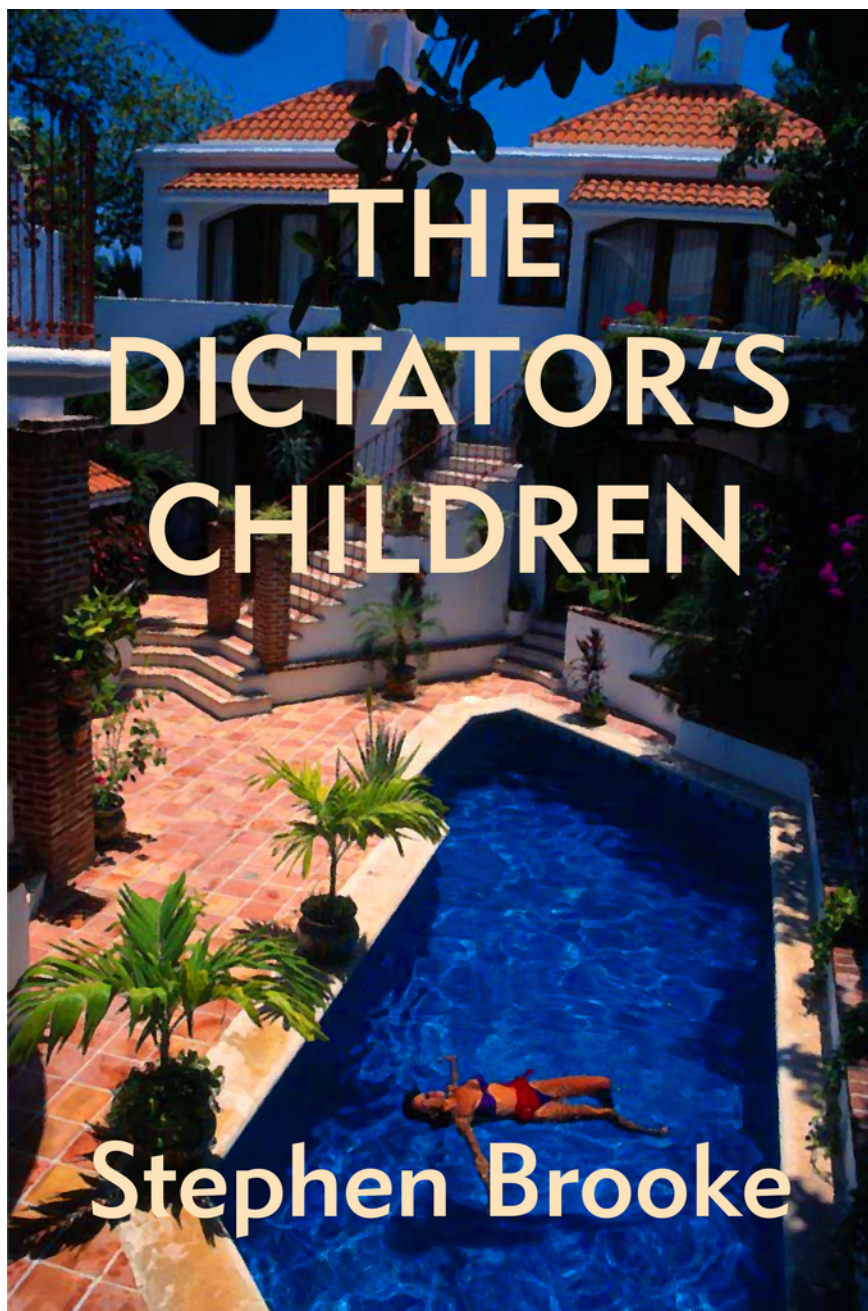




THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

Stephen Brooke

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Arachis Press 2019

“You were sucked in, were you?”

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Arachis Press
4803 Peanut Road
Graceville, FL 32440
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1.

AS MANY A DESPOT BEFORE him, Raoul Guzman came to think of himself as infallible, indispensable, the savior of his people. It was a shock when the coup came. Even as he boarded his private plane, escaping into exile, he told himself, *It was the Americans who did this. My people will see their mistake. They will call me back.*

He still believed this two years later when he died in a Miami hotel room, two prostitutes in his bed. The gold watch once presented him by the Russian ambassador was never found.

The former dictator's remains were flown quietly to Havana for a small and private funeral. Senora Guzman made certain her personal photographer took many flattering pictures of her as a grieving widow. A still-young and pretty widow who mourned the loss of a great man, a loving husband. She left with her latest lover.

~

"Isn't that John Wilkins?" Francisco Guzman asked his body-guard. Gustavo had long served the family. He would remember his father's old acquaintances. Francisco himself had been only a boy when last he had seen Wilkins. If that dapper, unobtrusive middle-aged man was Wilkins.

"So it is, senor," came the guard's flat reply. "Should I see if he was invited to the reception?"

The young man managed a thin smile. "Anyone willing to call himself a friend of my father is welcome here."

"Not so much a friend. Not after the presidente, ah, took power."

"Became a dictator, you mean?" His eyes returned to their guest. "Wilkins was not the only friend he lost." Francisco remembered the man as a guest at their flat in Paris, before his father returned in triumph to his homeland.

STEPHEN BROOKE

Life had been interesting then. Francisco missed those days, missed Paris and the men and women who came to the small apartment to argue and to drink. He missed his late mother, who never took part in those discussions but who loved her husband and accepted his views without question. Maybe he should go back to Paris now. There was nothing to keep him here.

"I think I'll say hello to him, Gustavo." The stocky retainer, his face and straight black hair revealing his Indian ancestry, followed Francisco wordlessly across the room.

Wilkins looked up as the young man approached, gave him a friendly smile. He had noted Francisco's interest, knew he was headed his way. How old was the boy now? Twenty-seven, he thought, but realized he might be a year or two off. A good looking kid, though a bit too plump. The face reminded him of his mother.

He would make no comment on the absence of the boy's step-mother. Officially, she too deeply mourned her husband to attend this evening. The older man extended a hand. "It is good to see you, Francisco. My condolences to you and your family."

"Thank you, Senor Wilkins. Your Spanish is pretty good but why don't we speak French?" He tipped his head toward the crowd about them. "It would afford us more privacy."

"Certainly," he replied, switching languages. "Call me Wilk."

Francisco nodded. "I remember my parents calling you that. Is that your real name?" A brief look of embarrassment, as the young man seemed to realize he had overstepped the bounds of politeness. "If you don't mind my asking," was the apologetic tag to his question.

"I was Jean Wilk when first they met me. But no, it is not the name with which I was born." Did the boy even know where that was?

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"And I shall not pry," promised Francisco. He gave a glance toward his silent shadow. "I suspect Gustavo knows more about you than I."

Gustavo showed no sign of understanding their exchange. Wilk knew the bodyguard spoke French as well as his young charge. He gave the man a friendly nod. He and Gustavo had no quarrels, or none that he knew of.

"Are you remaining in Cuba?" he asked.

"For a few days. All of us are here, even Arty. That's Teresa's husband. Come and say hello."

Wilk knew where the Guzmans now resided, though he had never visited. "I shall," he promised and let Francisco move on to the others gathered here to pay their respects to the late presidente and to drink free booze.

~

"It is widely assumed the United States played a role in Guzman's overthrow." Wilk sipped the dark sweet coffee. He would have preferred a more friendly Colombian brew, with a splash of milk. "And that your agency spearheaded the effort."

His companion's face, bland and square beneath a dark-blond crew-cut, revealed nothing. "You know that is something I would have to deny. You also know the late presidente gave a great deal of covert support to our enemies during the war."

"Yes, Raoul was something of a fascist. Mostly, he just disliked America. The enemy of my enemy, you know?" The man nodded. He seemed to understand this. "And now your country is once again dominating his country." Wilk knew this American across the table from him was no innocent about such things. This did not preclude him from being one of those true believers dedicated to fighting communism by any means necessary. Wilk had no love of communists himself.

STEPHEN BROOKE

The American agent, whose real name might or might not have been Bob Dunn, did not reply at once, apparently thinking things through before continuing. Deciding how much to tell me? wondered Wilk.

“Things are unstable there. Their so-called democracy is shaky, riddled with corruption and controlled by the old aristocratic families who own most of the land.” Dunn let a mirthless chuckle slip out. “Even if much of it is leased to American companies now.”

“And those would like to keep it that way.”

The man leaned back in his wrought-iron chair. His face remained expressionless as he regarded Wilk across the table. Wondering just whether I’m friendly enough to his interests to fill me in further, Wilk told himself. He wasn’t sure why the American had contacted him in the first place.

“I suppose so,” continued Dunn. “That’s not my concern. One thing we do know is that there are a number of Nazis hiding out in the country. Guzman welcomed them after the war. Secretly, of course. Now they are fearful of discovery and hoping for the overthrow of the current regime.” Bob Dunn lowered his voice, barely perceptibly so. “They might even welcome another Guzman at the top.”

For the first time, Wilk felt some surprise. “Not Francisco?”

“The pansy? Not likely. The widow is another matter.”

That seemed even less likely to Wilk, but he made no comment. Maria Victoria Guzman did come from one of those powerful old families. If those allied themselves with this supposed Nazi element they could be a credible threat. Even more so if the disenfranchised poor, always Raoul Guzman’s true base, joined them.

“Yes, it sounds far-fetched. I know,” said Dunn. “But we need

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

to get some idea of what is going on with the Guzmans — and you are an old friend of the family.”

“Why should I spy on them for you?”

Bob laughed outright. “It is what you do, isn’t it? For a good fee?”

The man known as John Wilkins had to agree it was so.

2.

"MY HUSBAND ONCE TOLD ME you were Jan Wilkowski, from Poland."

"The country is correct anyway," Wilk admitted. "All that is long ago. I am officially John Wilkins now, a naturalized citizen of Australia."

A laugh came from Francisco at this bit of information. "You are far from home then, old friend." He turned from the bar and raised a glass to Wilk.

Wilk only shrugged. "I must travel for business." The boy certainly suspected what sort of business that was. So would the widow, Senora Guzman — Maria Victoria, known as Vicki to her friends. Those were not many. Her stepchildren were perhaps not among them, but they seemed to tolerate her.

She had told Wilk to address her so years ago, recognizing him as a good friend of her husband. It was too late for her to take it back now. He had no idea whether she might wish to.

"Well, I suppose it does not matter what name you were born with," allowed Vicki. "Every woman changes her name when she marries, after all."

"Ah, but you will always be a Vargas, Vicki."

She but smiled at this observation. They conversed in English; Senora Guzman spoke it better than French and, moreover, her son-in-law was an American. It would be impolite to leave him out.

Arty and Teresa sat out on the veranda now, still within ear-shot. They would head back to the States tomorrow, to a vacation home somewhere in Florida. Artemus Morris was high up in one of those companies Wilk had discussed with Bob Dunn. Something to do with mining. Maybe he even owned it. He was not certain of this.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

And of course Arty spoke perfectly adequate Spanish if he wished. Hadn't he managed to woo the daughter of Presidente Guzman in that language? His voice wafted into the room now. "Don't you have the title of Doctor in front of your name, Wilk?" he called. "Just like my brother-in-law."

Francisco gave a little bow in the American's direction. He did indeed have a medical degree, even if he had never practiced. The young man had been studying somewhere in Europe when last he had visited the Guzmans. Paris? No, Salamanca, in Spain.

"Not like Doctor Guzman," Wilk announced. "It is a doctorate in engineering." He did not like to call attention to it, usually, but it was true his business cards read 'Dr.Ing.' It was one of Wilk's few vanities. It was also a good cover for his other business.

Arty had risen from his place and stood now in the frame of the open French doors. "From a European school?"

"I studied in Berlin. In the Twenties." He intended to volunteer no more on that subject and Morris asked no more.

Arty did say, "Know anything about mining?"

A shake of the head. "Mechanics was my field. Engines." He decided to add more to head off further questions. "Only consulting now."

"Loup Limited, chartered in Australia. I've checked you out." There was a wry smile on Arty's long face. "But there is deucedly little information."

"Do not grill my old friend, Artemus," scolded Vicki.

Old friend? They had met only twice, once before and once after Raoul had gone into exile. The wedding had been in the midst of the world war's tumult and Wilk had been unable to attend. No, Raoul had been an old friend, his first wife had been an old friend, but not this woman.

STEPHEN BROOKE

Still, here he was in this pleasant villa — rented, he was aware — drinking her liquor, acting like a member of the family. Wilk decided to give Arty an answer. “I mostly deal with the Far East,” he stated. “I spent a good bit of time in China in the past, and now my company provides consultation and research.” Morris could make of that what he would. They all could.

Teresa now stood beside her husband. As Arty — and her father — she was tall. Had she not married a wealthy, a powerful, man, she might have been a rival to Vicki as head of this family. She had chosen to leave and rule elsewhere.

Wilk couldn’t help thinking how much she would look like Raoul if she had a mustache.

“I do hope you will visit us if you come up to Florida, Wilk,” she said. “I have many memories of you from my childhood.”

“Yes, do,” added Arty. “We have a place on the beach in Naples.”

“The middle of nowhere,” said Francisco.

“And the end of the world,” added a feminine voice. The youngest of the Guzmans, Elena, had slipped in through the double doors behind the bar. She stood mixing herself a drink, white rum and Coke, with plenty of ice.

“Sometimes that is the best place to be,” Wilk informed the siblings.

~

A large envelope awaited Wilk at his hotel. An Australian postmark, his own Loup Ltd. as the return address — something Maggie had sent along. He carried it up to his modest room, turning on the ceiling fan, opening wide the windows, before unsealing it.

All the latest information from their inquiries in China. And all that information added up to nothing. It was what he expected

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

but not what he had hoped. He sat down by the window and read through the report, page by page. His second back in Sydney, Margaret Jones, did good work, meticulous work, but that was of no use when there was nothing to find. He tossed the papers aside. She was gone and he would never find her.

There would be no point in going back himself. The Maoists wouldn't let him in. No one would let him in. All the years of war, of revolution, had wiped away any clues. She was gone. She was dead.

Wilk poured himself a small glass of dark rum, the *anejo* he loved. He savored its complexity, the aroma, the taste. For this, if little else, he was willing to travel to Cuba. The country held no great attraction for him. The nightlife, the gambling? Those were for others.

And there was unrest here, as in many places. Batista would one day fall as surely as his friend Raoul Guzman had. Yes, he still considered him a friend. He raised the glass in memory to Raoul, the earnest leader-in-exile he had known in Paris, and finished it off.

He had known many dictators. Pilsudski, of course, whom he had served and later opposed. The war lords of a fragmented China, some of them good men, some of them evil. He had fallen in love with the daughter of one. He had married her and lost her.

Now here he was, a man in his fifties, serving still the agendas of the powerful. Serving and not always knowing if he was on the right side.

It was too early, too hot, to go out. Later. Wilk lay down and slept.

~

"Vicki has broken with the latest boyfriend. I think," said

STEPHEN BROOKE

Francisco, "that my father's death may actually have had something to do with it."

"It is certainly the sort of event that can lead one to reevaluate," Wilk replied. As a widow, she might have to take the men in her life more seriously. He didn't know her well enough to say.

Francisco held up two fingers, signaling the bartender to bring another round. He had brought Wilk here. Wilk didn't really know the bars of Havana. Was this one of those Hemingway frequented? It was a nice place, anyway, cool and dark and quiet.

They were drinking gin and tonics. The tall cold glasses reminded him of other bars in other countries, of Singapore and Hong Kong and Saigon. Those were the towns and bars Wilk had known once.

"You must come and visit again," Francisco went on. "Soon. It is boring here since Teresa and Arty went away."

With their money, Wilk added to himself. The Guzmans had not carried that much wealth away from their homeland. Some dictators built fat bank accounts in other countries but Raoul had disdained such a course. "Can't Elena keep you entertained?" he asked, picking up his fresh drink.

"Only if I want to debate the fine points of Marxist doctrine," said the young man. He seemed amused by this. "If my sister were Cuban, she would undoubtedly be rotting in one of the many jails here. As it is, I expect every day for the authorities to kick her out."

"Maybe you should all get out. Spend some time in the States."

"It is less expensive to live here. So says Vicki and she controls all our money now."

Ah, that was something he had not known. "You could always

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

practice medicine.” He tried to make it sound more a jest than a serious idea.

But Francisco answered seriously. “I might. In Paris, I think, if I can get myself licensed as a physician there.” He looked around the bar. “All this is well enough but one does need something else to do.”

Wilk raised his glass and drank to that.

3.

IT SEEMED HE WAS TO act as escort to Maria Victoria Guzman this evening. It was pleasant enough duty. Vicki was cultured, a good conversationalist if not a particularly interesting one. The latter might be because she was also guarded in her words.

She was an attractive woman too, one of those who grew more so with maturity. Up to a point. The widow might have recently passed that point. She was in her mid-thirties. Wilk was not certain of the exact age nor did it make any great difference.

Two bodyguards had accompanied the family. There were three only, these days, one of whom had remained in the villa. Gustavo kept close; the other man took a position near the entry. There was no mistaking what he was or why he was there. Men like him were not an unusual sight in Havana.

Do they need these men at all? wondered Wilk. No one cared much about this family now. Even less since Raoul's death. They and the staff of servants surely strained whatever budget Maria Victoria had. She was wrong to think it cheaper to live in Havana. Not when she felt the need to maintain appearances this way.

As the remaining man of the family, Francisco would appear to pay tonight but Vicki retained control of the purse strings. The young Guzman sat at the head of their table, dealt with the waiters, ordered the wine. He did all this well but without enthusiasm. Wilk found himself hoping he would follow through on his plan, break away from this family, live a quiet life in Paris or wherever.

Did the boy's resemblance to his late mother have something to do with his liking for him? Francisco was not the sort of man he would normally call a friend. He should look past his memories, try to see him as he truly was.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

Elena had a young man with her this evening. The two sat across the table from Vicki and Wilk. Maybe a college student. He looked younger than the Guzman girl, who looked young enough herself. His suit was shabby and frayed at the cuffs, and he said little.

Elena was willing to make up for that and was full of questions. "I was very young when you knew my father in Paris," she said.

"Ten, maybe?" commented Francisco.

"Maybe. Or nine. I was eleven when Papa returned home." She mock accused, "You did not visit us there enough."

"I had my own cause," said Wilk. "I too was involved in a government in exile at the time, those who were in opposition to Pilsudski's dictatorship."

Elena knew the name. "I think maybe my father admired Pilsudski?"

"He did but I never held it against him." There were knowing smiles all around. "One thing I myself did admire about the man was that he never treated the Jews badly. Neither did Raoul Guzman."

The girl leaned forward and confided, "Arty doesn't like Jews."

Wilk was not surprised. "I almost married a Jew, the sister of my best friend. She fled to America with her family before the coming storm and I was not willing. I let her go."

"You had your cause," she stated. It was true and Elena had seen this.

"We have not met this best friend, have we?" asked Vicki.

"Theo was not willing to leave either. He was murdered by the Germans during the war."

There was a momentary silence, his hosts uncertain how to

STEPHEN BROOKE

respond to Wilk's statement. For some reason he could not quite name, he felt a slight satisfaction in having made them uncomfortable. "We are very sorry," spoke Elena. The others murmured what sounded like agreement. Even the college boy.

"It was all long ago," he said. There had been other losses since, greater losses, and this family had their own recent loss. Wilk lifted his wine glass. "To the memory of those we have lost," he said.

"And to the new friends we have gained," appended Vicki.

~

"I have some papers for you," said Bob Dunn.

Wilk opened the manila envelope and perused the pages he found. A contract between some innocuously named company, surely a front for the agency, and Loup Limited. His missing signature had already been witnessed and notarized. In Miami.

He took his time. Everything seemed in order. What Loup was to provide seemed nebulous. A report — they were essentially being paid for their time. His time. Paid well, too.

'John Wilkins' he wrote in a neat hand on all three copies. "Keep this one," said Dunn, handing one back after looking them over.

Wilk nodded. "I would ask you to send a photostat to my office in Sydney."

"Will do." The agent slipped the remaining sheets back into their envelope and then into an attache. Wilk folded his but left it on the table before him. It was not important.

"Will you be heading back to the States?" asked Bob.

"Not immediately." He looked across the square. The harbor was somewhere over there, beyond those shops. This was the same cafe, the same outdoor tables, at which they had first met. Dunn was not taking any extra care. "I am still welcome in the

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

Guzman household.” And seemingly one of their few guests now. With *el presidente* gone, there was little to bring visitors.

“Whatever you feel is best.” Wilk was certainly only one of many of the man’s concerns. Not one of the more important ones, either. “I’m stationed here in Cuba but someone will contact you in Miami when you go.”

If I go, Wilk said to himself. There might be no need. But he could charge his travel expenses to these Americans. He had a contract.

Dunn continued. “The family is well? Handling the death of Guzman?”

“It does not seem to have perturbed any of them much. They might just be good at hiding that. One learns when one is in the spotlight.” Nearly two weeks had passed, too, time enough to adjust. Time enough for some. “It was sudden and certainly unexpected.”

“Heart attack, officially.” Dunn lifted his coffee cup to his lips but spoke before drinking. “Our people went over his room thoroughly after Guzman’s death. We couldn’t autopsy the body without calling attention but there was plenty enough evidence there to point to poison.”

“An assassination?” Wilk had never even considered that possibility. He told himself he should have.

“There’s no telling who was behind it. The current regime, an old enemy.” Dunn shrugged.

“A jealous husband,” Wilk added, with a slight smile. “With Raoul it would not be out of the question.”

“You liked the man.”

“At times.”

~

“I think I shall go visit my sister,” proclaimed Elena.

STEPHEN BROOKE

"She is still in Naples?" asked Vicki. Apparently she kept no tabs on her married stepdaughter.

"Yes. Arty too." She paused, frowned. "Maybe."

Wilk made a decision. "It is time I left Cuba as well," he announced. He was accomplishing nothing here. "Perhaps I might accompany you, Senorita Guzman?"

She shot him a suspicious glance. "Is that Francisco's idea? He knows I do not need a bodyguard!"

Vicki could not keep from laughing. "Our friend only learned you were going now."

Elena's sheepish expression quickly turned to laughter as well. "That is so. I apologize, Senor Wilkins. You may certainly board a flight to Miami with me. You may even sit close!"

He made another decision. "I may have an alternative to an airliner. And remember, the Morrisises invited me too."

"Hmm, I will not ask about this. Surprise me. I must pack!" Elena hurried into the villa, leaving Vicki and Wilk alone on the veranda. Alone save for the guard at a discreet distance.

"We will miss your company, Wilk," said the widow. "I shall miss your company. It has been welcome since — since Raoul left us." She was suddenly choking this out, her emotions catching up to her at last. She did love her late husband, despite all. Wilk had been willing to assume as much but had seen little evidence of it.

"Five years we had as husband and wife," she went on, composing herself, her voice growing steadier. "Not always good years. And I fear our people did not love me as they did the sainted Alicia." This last was laced with bitterness.

"No woman could have lived up to her legacy," he told her. "Not even Alicia herself."

That brought a slight, brief smile. "Now I have lost two husbands. You knew of my Manuel, did you not?"

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

“A supporter of Raoul and a martyr to his cause.” Executed by the previous regime. “I never met him.”

Vicki stared out into the garden, her profile turned to Wilk. It was a strong profile, the nose prominent and aquiline, with a chin and jaw that properly balanced it. Striking, one might have called her. She should wear her hair down, he thought. The stylish high coiffure did not become her. It made her look too hard.

“I am in a bit of a limbo,” she said. “In exile because of my husband but a member of a family that is once again in a position of power. I do not know whether I would be welcomed home or not.” Vicki turned to him. “Raoul’s death has changed all this.”

Give it a year or two, he said only to himself. It was not what this woman needed to hear right now. “You have the world before you,” was what he did say. “Go where you wish.”

“Or remain here.” Voice and smile seemed weary. “Perhaps I shall fly up to Miami in a few days also.”

“I shall watch for you,” Wilk promised.

4.

"I AM HAPPY THAT YOU will be looking after Elena," spoke Francisco Guzman. He gazed out across the docks. "But do you intend to travel by boat?"

"Not quite," said Wilk. "Wait for us, *por favor*," he told the cab driver as he stepped out onto the cracked concrete pavement. Francisco followed him down to the water's edge. The brown water lapped gently against the pilings, each topped by a pelican, some resting, some preening.

"There's the place." Wilk pointed out a metal building, larger than any of those around it, rising above the water. *Gulf and Caribbean Aviation* said the weathered steel sign, once lettered green on white. "I know the owner from times past. From the war."

Francisco looked up at the sign. "His name is too rusted to read. English?"

"An American." The entry door hung open. From its look, maybe it always did. Inside, a twin-engine flying boat rested on the water. Wilk recognized it as a Catalina. He'd seen plenty of them in the Pacific. As he had seen the wiry red-haired man crouched on the wing, working on one of the engines. An array of tools rested on a towel spread beside him. "Douglas Delaney," he called out, lifting an arm in greeting.

The mechanic looked up. "Well, I'll — John Wilkins!" He clambered down and hopped across to the wooden deck, wiping the grease from his hands as he came. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to see your face again," he chuckled, extending a fairly clean hand.

"I'll admit I was surprised to see your name among the charter pilots available here," Wilk informed him. "I had no idea where

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

you had ended up.” He surveyed the aircraft. “Nice bit of equipment.”

“It is. I bought this beauty as surplus after the war. Me and my partner and the bank! We make a regular run up to Miami and over to Nassau.” He chuckled. “Neither of which is in the Gulf or Caribbean. Looking for transport? Next flight is in a couple hours — if I get this motor working properly!”

“I’ll give you an assist, if you’d like.”

“Always welcome, Wilk. You’ve a way with engines.”

“But I am actually looking to charter a flight to the gulf coast side of Florida. For myself and a young lady. My friend’s sister.” He nodded toward his companion. “Francisco Guzman. Doug Delaney.”

“Call me Frankie,” said Guzman, taking Doug’s still-grimy hand without hesitation. “That is how I am known in the States.”

Wilk was mildly surprised to hear this. He didn’t even know Francisco spent much time away from Cuba.

“We’ll want the Goose for that,” said Delaney. “My partner has it out right now but it should be ready to go again first thing tomorrow. Where to? Tampa?”

“Naples.”

Doug frowned in puzzlement. “Not sure where that is. Is there a good spot to set down?”

“It is just down the coast from Fort Myers,” Francisco told him. Doug nodded in recognition of that name. “There is a large sheltered bay but I think the Gulf would be good to land in too.”

“Good enough then. We can get you in the air as soon as you are ready. Papers in order? I’ll need to put something in my records.”

“All taken care of.” Wilk turned to Francisco. “Why don’t you take the taxi on home and tell your sister to be ready early

STEPHEN BROOKE

tomorrow? I need to give this man a lesson in engine maintenance.”

Doug gave him a slightly sour look but did not object.

~

“It is not right to rise before the sun,” stated Elena Guzman. “Were I not an atheist, I would say God meant us to wait until he turned on the lights!”

“By that logic, you should not stay out after sunset either.” Some servant had routed her out of her bed. Or maybe Francisco, though he too was unlikely to be an early riser. Wilk paid the cab driver. The man did not offer to carry their luggage down to the hangar. One small bag for Wilk, too many suitcases for Elena. They should all fit in the Goose. Wilk had ridden in them before.

At least the girl had picked up a couple of her own bags and carried them without his asking.

Delaney’s partner was to be their pilot, a dark, slow-moving man named Taylor. Doug had called him Sam but he did not encourage any familiarity himself. “Coffee?” he asked them, as he filled a thermos for himself, from the pot on a little gas stove.

“Best not to,” Wilk advised the girl. “It will be a long flight and there is not much of a restroom. In fact, it would be a good idea to make sure you’re empty before we leave.” She nodded an assent and went off to use the none-too-clean facilities in the hangar.

Doug was gone, piloting the Catalina. Already in Miami, Wilk assumed, and flying on to Nassau today. He thought it entirely likely he would never see the man again. But he would have said the same thing a few years ago on the other side of the world.

The luggage was stowed and shortly the Goose was taxiing across the dawn-lit harbor. Startled gulls shot up from the water

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

in its advent, dark winged silhouettes against the rosy sky. "This is much more fun than an airliner," whispered Elena. "I thank you, Wilk."

"You may not be so thankful by the time we arrive. It is a bit cramped in here." But plenty of room for only two passengers, really, and the weather was calm. It should be an uneventful flight of four hours or so over open Gulf waters, north by northeast. He was not sure how fast they cruised the Goose.

No matter, they would get there soon enough. It *was* an easy flight. Wouldn't the Morrisises be surprised if they taxied this flying boat right up to their beachfront house?

They were at altitude now and Taylor relaxed, poured a cup of his coffee. Wilk slightly regretted turning it down. "We had a break-in last night," the pilot said. "Not that we actually lock the place up."

"Anything taken?"

"Didn't seem to be. One of the crew saw a prowler by our office."

"Scared off before he could do anything?"

"That's what I figure." The pilot took another deep swig of his coffee. The aroma wafted back to his passengers. "I don't know what anyone would take. The valuable stuff is big and unwieldy." He scanned his instruments and nodded.

"Maybe tools," offered Wilk.

"Yeah, maybe. Never flown into Naples before," he said. There was no more attempt at conversation.

Elena leaned in close. "We do not have coffee but I did bring this." She offered a leather-covered flask. Wilk sniffed at it. White rum. Not his favorite but a little nip was not unwelcome. He handed it back. Elena took a somewhat longer pull.

STEPHEN BROOKE

Not long after, both drifted into naps. They had risen far too early. Earlier than God intended, perhaps.

~

He was being shaken out of sleep by someone. No, the Goose was shaking. Elena jerked awake beside him, made a small startled sound, a quick gasp of air.

Wilk looked out. They were far too close to the water. Dangerously close unless Taylor needed to make an emergency landing for some reason. The blue extended in all directions. They were near no shore.

“What’s happening?” he called to the pilot. No answer. Wilk slid up into the cockpit, into the seat beside Taylor. Elena followed, crouched in the space between them. Was the man asleep? His head lolled to one side. Half-dried saliva glistened on his chin and a small pool of coffee was on the floor, beside his cup.

Whatever had happened to the man, it was less important than getting the airplane under control. Wilk glanced at the compass. Headed altogether the wrong direction. No, it was slowly changing — they were going in a wide circle.

More than thirty years ago, a young Jan Patrokowski had learned to fly in a German army school. This Goose should be easy enough to handle. He got it back on a proper heading, regained some altitude, before checking again on Taylor. No pulse.

“Our pilot is dead,” he informed Elena. “I should be able to get us to Florida. If I can figure out where we are now.”

And if there is enough fuel. He checked his watch. Only a couple hours out from Havana. They should be good and Florida was a big target. He might not be setting down by the Naples beach, however.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"I had heard you were a pilot," said Elena. She spoke calmly. That is for her own benefit, Wilk felt.

"I started out on a wire-braced biplane that would give any modern flier nightmares," he told her. "An Aviatik." He would take a calm, matter of fact attitude too. It would help them both. "Then I flew missions for Germany."

"This was the first war, no?" she asked. "Nineteen-fourteen."

"That is so, though I didn't get into flight school till the next year. My home was a part of Germany then and my upbringing was German. We did not speak Polish in our house."

"But you are Polish."

"I am." Or was. He had lost the land of his birth, perhaps forever, but another had taken him in. So had he truly lost anything?

Wilk spent some time perusing the instruments, trying to get some idea of their location. Then he attempted the radio. He managed only static. "Do you know if there is an airfield in this Naples?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes, there is. There was an airbase there during the war and the runways are still used."

Then maybe he could raise someone there when they were closer to the coast. He was aiming a little more easterly in case their unintended course had carried them further out into the Gulf. There was little else to be done now.

Wilk picked up the coffee cup and sniffed it. Then the near-empty thermos. Poison? There might be an odor but he could not be sure.

Could it be the same as killed Raoul Guzman? That thought chilled him. Someone might have slipped it into the thermos or coffee pot. The intruder last night. Or not. He was only theorizing.

STEPHEN BROOKE

But they might not know Wilk was a pilot, nor that he would drink none of the coffee. All three would have been intended to disappear into the Gulf waters. Who was the target, Elena or himself?

They flew on, seeking land.

5.

WHEN AN OPPORTUNITY PRESENTED itself, Wilk slid the body out of the pilot's chair and dragged it to the rear of the passenger compartment. He took over Taylor's seat, with Elena in the place he had vacated.

"Should we send out an SOS?" she asked him.

"Not yet. If we have to go down, definitely." The Goose could float a long time while a distress call went out. Whether anyone would hear it would be an unknown. "Or if we end up on an uninhabited stretch of coast."

"There isn't much south of Naples," Elena told him. "A maze of islands. That is what my map shows," she added, holding up an improperly folded chart. It had been among a jumble of papers and booklets in the cockpit.

"Part of the Everglades? We don't want to go down in them." Most of what he knew of the Everglades was from reading. But he knew coasts and swamps from other lands, and the dangers of them. He glanced at his watch. Five hours in the air.

He tried the radio again. Success! A crackling response. It identified itself as a Coast Guard vessel, somewhere along the coast. The coordinates they gave him put them near the Florida Bay, well south of where they wanted to be. All he could do was give them the basics of their situation. At least someone would know what had happened.

"If they are near the coast, then we must be too," he assured Elena. It seemed likely enough. Even if they hadn't made contact with anyone, it was probable they would be near the Florida peninsula by now.

"There are lots of clouds over there," she said, pointing toward the east.

Building up over the interior of Florida. There would be solid

STEPHEN BROOKE

land under them. It was a good sign. As long as those clouds didn't turn into storms.

He decided to turn directly toward them, almost due east. "Oh, land!" exclaimed Elena a few minutes later. "Isn't that land?"

"It is," Wilk agreed. No beach, just a patchwork of green islands in the distance. Mangrove, he suspected. "I would guess we are south of Naples." He banked the plane into a northerly course, following the now easily visible shoreline.

The radio? There wasn't much point now. He did not need to follow a signal into Naples. Maybe if something more went wrong. Plenty enough fuel remained. Ah, there was a ribbon of beach to their right and what appeared to be a sizable point or cape sticking out into the Gulf. "See if you can find that on the map," he told Elena as they flew past.

She traced along the coastline with her index finger. "I think it was Cape Romano," she said. "That means we are near Naples. Pretty near." Elena looked out her side of the cockpit again, the east side. "Ooh, and there is a house! That must be the Marco Island."

"Maybe it would be smart to set down here." Wilk had landed many airplanes of many sorts, but never a sea plane. It couldn't be that much different, could it?

"No, it is not much further. You should get on the radio and tell Teresa we are coming for lunch!"

The beach they paralleled was quite white. There were no longer any buildings to see, only trees growing down to edge of the sand. Wilk had slowly brought the Goose down closer to the water, down where they could pick out details on the shore. He would be ready to descend further to a landing at a moment's notice. Another inlet came up on their right and this time a boat

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

could be seen passing through, a vee-shaped wake spreading behind it. Further up the beach were houses, he was sure, and was that a pier in the distance?

"Oh, the pier. I had forgotten there was a pier," said Elena. "Arty's house is not far from it."

"That inlet we just went by must lead into the bay, then?" Wilk was tempted to go back and land on its more sheltered waters.

"The Gordon River my map names it. You can fly right across Naples and find it again."

If need be, he would. The pier loomed closer. "Do you think you could pick out the house?" he asked.

"It is north of the pier. Two blocks, maybe, or three?"

Wilk took the Goose both higher and further out to avoid the pier. It was surprisingly long. They could see fishermen along its railings. Some waved.

"Over there. See those three palms right together? That is the house."

So here was the test. The water looked calm. Very calm, no swell to speak of, only a little wind chop on the surface. Dark clouds were piled up behind the houses. Was this the Florida rainy season? He touched down, bounced along the surface a couple times, then taxied smoothly enough right up to and onto the sand. "I'll have to move it tomorrow," he said, as the rain began to pour. Preferably on a field with the landing gear cranked down.

~

"The Coast Guard still thinks we are lost. Someone should let them know we reached safety." The policeman nodded and jotted it down on his pad. A wagon had already carried away poor

STEPHEN BROOKE

Taylor. The Goose was secured with two stout lengths of rope, the luggage carried up the beach. There was a lull in the rain.

The house was smaller than he had expected, an unassuming two story frame affair one might have found in any American suburb. Wilk had grown up in a much larger home. But this wasn't the Morris's home. That was in Chicago and was no doubt grander.

He suspected the beach front lot beneath it was worth more than the house. Coconut palms rose all around it and along the street that ran beside, east and west and ending at the beach. Clumps of sea grapes formed a partial border between Bermuda grass and white sand. Elena called to him from the screened porch. "Come in out of the rain, stupid gringo!"

Were Poles gringos? Wilk did not think so but would not argue the point. Arty Morris was, but he was not in Naples now, only Teresa. Maybe she called her husband a gringo. Not in public. He could not picture that.

Teresa handed him a thick towel, blue and white striped, as he entered. He tried not to drip on the straw mats covering the floor. "Does it always rain like this?" he asked.

"Afternoon rains are normal in the summer. We aren't usually here at this time of year. Too hot!"

"Certainly no worse than Havana," said Elena. She had changed to baggy knee-length yellow shorts and a loose blouse, and applied fresh makeup. Not that she needed it. "Or our home."

Teresa shook her head. "Not my home. But I remember that it can be cool in the mountains."

"Your husband's company is tearing those mountains apart," accused Elena, and then immediately changed the subject before

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

her sister could make any reply. "We must be on the beach in the morning," she told Wilk.

"I should move the airplane first," he replied. "I could fly it over to the airport for Delaney to pick up when he can." He had no plans to go back to Cuba himself, not anytime soon.

"You could land it on the river and tie up at one of the docks," suggested Mrs. Morris. "But yes, it would not do to leave it on the beach."

"Why don't we just fly it over to Miami when we are ready to go?" asked Elena. "Would your friend mind?"

Wilk had to laugh. "Not if we paid for all the time it sat here. I think it would be better to drive." He hung the damp towel around his neck. "I also think it would be better if I changed my clothes now."

"Betsy," called Teresa. "Could you show Mr. Wilkins his room?" A rail-thin black woman in a maid's uniform came at her call. Young? Her angular face seemed ageless.

"This way, suh," she murmured. There was a bit of a slur to her voice, perhaps a speech impediment. It was more than just an accent. Wilk had a good ear for accents. He had heard a multitude of them over the years.

A narrow back stairs opened right next to the door into the house, beside the kitchen. He would undoubtedly see the rest of the place soon enough. "We put you in the east room, suh," said Betsy. "Miss Elena say you lahk the sun to wake you."

And Miss Elena wanted the west room, the one with a view of the Gulf. That was all right with Wilk. He did indeed like to wake with the sun, even if the girl meant it as a joke. It was a spacious enough room, with a full-sized bed. His bag sat beside it. He was glad to see that Betsy had made no attempt to empty it or lay out his clothes.

STEPHEN BROOKE

“Bathroom is raht down the hall, Mr. Wilkins,” she said. “Ah can take that towel if you is done with it.” He handed it over.

“Thank you, Miss Betsy.” She left with no further words.

I should have carried this instead of leaving it in the bag, Wilk thought as he slid a holstered sidearm from one of the interior pouches. A Browning automatic in nine millimeter — his weapon of choice these days. Since the Thirties. It would be a bit obtrusive to wear on the beach. He slipped it back into the bag and began pulling out his clothes. None of them were very suitable to this place. He had packed for a funeral before heading to Havana.

Maybe he could charge a new wardrobe to the agency. That was a legitimate business expense and the bureaucracy would probably not even blink at it. A plaid robe was already in the small closet, a bit worn and rather too large for his compact frame. Maybe one of Arty’s. He pulled it around himself after hanging his own clothes, and headed for the bathroom.

A hot shower would be welcome. There was a lot of sand and dried saltwater on his skin, and the rain had not prevented him from perspiring in the warm Florida air. The tub was already damp. Elena must have used it. He rinsed himself, dried off on one of the towels he found on the linen shelves.

Do I need to shave? He wiped the fog from the mirror and peered at his reflected face. No, let it wait. He hadn’t carried his razor in with him anyway. He shoved back the short dark hair, graying at the temples, with a hand. The mustache was graying too, more than the hair on his head.

Wilk carried the towel back to his room. Betsy would find it eventually. He pulled on gray slacks and the guayabera he had picked up in Cuba. The shirt was acceptable wear everywhere on the island and would have to do here. Going on Four. When did

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

they eat? He did hope the sisters had no intention of going out. He was an old tired man, he told himself, and grinned at the thought.

Staircases lay at both ends of the hall, a wide one across from his room, the narrower one he had ascended at the west end. Between were doors he assumed led into the Morris's bedroom suite. Might have their own private bathroom in there. He walked to the far end and went down the way he had come up.

"Ah, there you are," said Teresa. "We are going to eat on the porch. In a little while. A drink?" She and Elena were at a tile-topped table where a citronella candle burned. Both had cocktail glasses.

"I know the sort of thing Wilk likes," proclaimed the younger woman. She rose languidly and went to a gleaming metal bar cart. "We must let him drink up Arty's scotch."

"Don't they favor vodka in Poland?" Teresa asked.

"But we are not in Poland!" Elena gave their guest a rather long look. "And I think maybe we should not talk about it."

It didn't matter much but Wilk appreciated her concern. The concern of one exile for another. "Scotch would be fine," he said.

"It is not the best stuff," Teresa warned him. "Arty keeps that hidden away in his office. You'd best add some soda to it," she told her sister.

Outside, mosquitoes hummed against the screens. Beyond them, the sun set into the Gulf of Mexico, and the Grumman was silhouetted against it. The sky had cleared. Stars began to show themselves, one by one. This day had ended well for Elena and him.

Not so much for Sam Taylor.

6.

A MAN HE DID NOT know, apparently just a local walking the beach, helped him push the Goose into deeper water. Both engines started up readily. Plenty enough fuel to cross over this little town, Wilk told himself. The airfield had been telephoned, expected him. He got onto the radio with them as soon as he was airborne.

What would Doug think of all this? The agency had better reimburse him for the trouble Wilk had caused his old acquaintance. Well, Loup would have to reimburse him and add it to their bill. He circled past the pier and headed across Naples.

It was sparsely populated. Wilk suspected that would change. He could see a couple bridges crossing the bay. That highway connected Tampa and Miami, its route skirting the Everglades. Beyond the water, further north, were the long runways Elena had promised. The tower there gave him his landing instructions.

Bring the wheels down. He tried and only one worked. He tried again. "We have a problem," he informed the airfield. "Landing gear won't deploy." Could he have damaged something when he hit the water yesterday?

"You'd better use the river," came the reply. "We'll let the authorities know." Who the authorities were, Wilk did not know nor care much at that moment. He cranked the one wheel back up and made a long turn, pointing the Goose south above the Gordon River. It would be best to come down below the bridges. There didn't seem to be much along its shores north of them.

It was wide further down but there were also boats out on it. Not many. The commercial fishers would have been out into the Gulf much earlier. A voice in his headphones. "Be careful of any oyster bars," it warned. "Mostly to the east side. The channel markers should guide you."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

He acknowledged this. He was skimming just above the surface now, throttled back as far as he was comfortable with in an unfamiliar craft. Set it down, he told himself. It's as good a stretch as any. The hull made contact with the smooth bay waters and slowly came to a near halt.

Much better than the last time. Maybe Doug should hire him to replace Sam Taylor. He could think of worse ways to make a living — some of which he had done. Docks stood along the shore to his right. Ah, the sign told him it was the city docks. That would be as good a spot to bring this Goose to the end of its flight as any. Men were coming out to see what was going on. The noise of those twin radials was not likely to be ignored.

Those he now throttled further back and, when as close as he thought safe, off. "A rope," he called from the open cockpit window. He slid out onto the nose. The propeller seemed uncomfortably close even if the engines were not running. Wilk caught the line someone threw him, pulled the seaplane in closer. He had to sit and brace himself. Two men took hold of the right wing pontoon, gave it a heave onto the boards and let it rest there. He'd seen that done with flying boats like this during the war. One of them must have some experience.

Wilk could see a flashing light beyond the docks. The police. The authorities the controller at the airfield had promised. He hoped they hadn't bothered to call an ambulance as well. He climbed atop the cabin, walked down the wing and jumped to the dock.

~

Teresa had picked him up, in her Chrysler station wagon. She had also arranged things with the dock master, promising that he was good for any expenses and that the Morrisises would back him up if he wasn't.

STEPHEN BROOKE

She reminded Wilk of her father all the more. "Do you wish to send a telegram to the owner?" she had asked. It seemed a good idea. Delaney would already have been informed of some of what happened and he didn't feel like trying to explain more in a long-distance call to Cuba. Teresa drove him to the office, located on a broad, palm-lined street.

He kept it simple: taylor dead apparent heart attack. goose intact ready for you naples city docks. send loup any bills.

That should be enough. All that Doug needed to know. He had not mentioned any suspicions of poison to the police here. When an agency man made eventual contact he might say something.

"Shall I give you the tour?" she asked when they returned to the wagon. "Elena cares for nothing but the beach here and decided to sit in the sun this morning."

What points of interest would there be in this little town? wondered Wilk. "I could not ask for a better guide," he replied, "nor a more beautiful one." Both knew the latter statement to be a lie. Teresa was plain, at best.

"Take care, Senor Wilkins," said she. "I have a jealous husband."

"Ah, but he is far away."

She sighed. "As is my daughter. We left her in Chicago when we traveled to the funeral."

"She is very young, is she not?" Wilk knew little more than this about the child.

"Only two. We have named her Alicia, after my mother." She brightened. "Perhaps he will bring her along when he returns."

"That would be good," Wilk allowed.

Teresa giggled. "But it would put a damper on our clandestine affair." She pointed to a nondescript building they passed. "That

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

is the famous Swamp Buggy Lounge. You can run into all sorts there. Fishing guides and locals from old money and movie stars who come over from Miami for some peace and fishing.”

It was not famous to Wilk but he took her word for it. “Movie stars?”

“Oh, Gary Cooper comes sometimes. He is very handsome, isn’t he?” Teresa did not wait for an answer. “Gertrude Lawrence likes to hang out on the pier at night and fish. She smokes too many cigarettes.” She gave her passenger a sidelong look. “You do not smoke, do you?”

“Never have,” he admitted.

“Papa smoked too much too. You remember the cigars he liked?”

Wilk laughed at the memory. “Raoul had Cubans secretly imported for his own use. He would never admit he smoked them instead of those made in your country.”

They had traveled as far east, or south-east, as the first bridge across the bay. A small island connected it to the second one. “There is not much further out. This Highway Forty-one will take you to Miami, if you wish.” She u-turned in the road.

“Is there any better way to go?”

“Only by plane. Elena will want to fly over in a few days, I am sure. She will grow bored here.” She slowed the Chrysler as they drove back into town. “You will go with her?”

“I think so. I feel some responsibility.”

Teresa followed the highway around a ninety degree right turn. “You might flirt with me a little, Wilk, but I think Elena is truly taken with you. Be careful. There is not much further north and here is a good place to turn.”

She took a left. A couple minutes later they were at her house.

STEPHEN BROOKE

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The landing gear mechanism had been deliberately sabotaged. Wilk could see this when he examined it. When? Before they left Cuba or when the Goose rested overnight on the beach? It was a simple and obvious act of sabotage, nothing more than jamming a piece of wood into the mechanism.

Not a very effective bit of tampering, either. It should work properly now. He hopped back to the dock. The Goose would be okay here. There was no reason to check on it again. Leave its care to the dock master.

A telegram had come within a few hours in response to the one sent this morning. A pilot would be driven over from Miami in a couple days to collect the flying boat. He returned to the big green wood-paneled Chrysler; Teresa Morris had trusted him with it. Wilk doubted she would feel the same about allowing her sister behind the wheel.

But that was just Teresa acting the big sister. Elena was every bit as trustworthy, he was sure. She chose not to let people see it.

Elena was no child. She was twenty-four years of age and had moved in sophisticated circles all her life.

Wilk was thirty years older than her. It was late afternoon and raining again when he pulled in by the house at the beach.

7.

"ARTY'S LEAST FAVORITE HOLIDAY IS coming up," said Elena.

Wilk had to think a moment. He did not have all the American holidays straight in his mind. "Labor Day?" The girl was making a joke.

She nodded her head. The large sunglasses flashed as they caught the mid-morning light. "He should not care. It is only a sop thrown to the workers." That may have been a bit of joking too, but there was some seriousness behind it.

Although he was far from being a Marxist, Wilk actually somewhat agreed with her. He was not sure Elena truly espoused communism either. Her beliefs seemed far less than cohesive, a collection of slogans she had picked up here or there. "I suppose you prefer May Day." He made sure his inflection suggested he also was not quite serious.

"I should. But who am I to have an opinion on any of this? I've never worked nor wanted." For a few seconds she stared out at the Gulf. "You have. I am sure you have no reason to love the socialists who govern your homeland now."

He slowly let out his breath. She was right. "Had I more faith in the human race, I could be an anarchist."

Elena seemed to take that without any show of surprise. Maybe she remembered him saying similar things all those years ago. That little girl had paid attention to the grownups, more than her older brother and sister.

"I hereby declare that you and I are forming an anarchist collective," she announced. "No more laws to keep us from our hearts' desires. I will be free to drive the Chrysler anytime I wish!"

Wilk considered that. "I would rather swim."

STEPHEN BROOKE

"We can do that too. We are free! And we don't have to wear our suits."

"Stealing cars and swimming in the nude? I think our revolution might be quashed rather quickly."

She leaned in and whispered. "But I am nude under this bathing suit. I can be a secret anarchist." She rose from her lounge chair and ran toward the placid blue-green water.

Wilk had no objection to seeing the girl in the relatively modest two-piece suit she wore now. If she was a nude anarchist underneath it, that was her business. He rose and followed her.

~

"We have a boat but only Arty operates it," said Teresa. "He doesn't trust any of us. Except maybe Gustavo Peres."

"I didn't realize he had any dealings with Gustavo." The bodyguard had always been with the rest of the family.

"He helped us get settled here. He helped me, perhaps I should say. Arty was busy, and off here and there. You know, Gustavo guarded me when I was young. When Arty was courting me."

Wilk hadn't known. "I did not see much of your family in those days."

"Oh, yes. He even found Betsy for us. She has proven very satisfactory, not at all like any of the other nigger girls we tried."

Elena winced at her sister's choice of words. Wilk's wince was internal.

"Let's take a walk," suggested Elena. Her floral bathing suit had been exchanged for a flowing printed cotton dress. Wilk rather disliked that hem lines had descended after the war. Descended much too far.

"Not me, I think," said Teresa. "The mosquitoes will be out soon. And the sand flies. They are even worse!"

"Not as long as this breeze lasts," Elena maintained. "Come

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

along, Wilk. Hold dinner for us!" she called over her shoulder. Wilk followed her out the screen door and down to the grass.

"Along the beach?" he asked. "Not too far I hope."

"Oh, do not give me that, Mr. Wilkins. I know you can march all day. Even if you are an old man." The girl snickered at her jibe. "I have seen you doing your morning calisthenics, too." She shook her head. "All those push ups!"

He fell in beside her, walking south on the white sand. "But," she went on in a more serious tone of voice, "if they keep you young then keep at them. I would not want you to — well, like my father, you know?"

Wilk had no intention of telling her what the agency's investigators had found out about that. "He was younger than you, a little, wasn't he?" she asked.

"A couple years."

She stopped and turned to him, gazing into his eyes. "Was he an assignment? I mean, when you first met. I know what business you are in, Jean Wilk."

Had she thought that all these years? "No. Raoul Guzman was never a part of my work." Until now. "We moved in the same circles in Paris, had similar goals for our nations."

"You supported Paderewski."

"I did, for a time. But — things changed. I left Europe not so long after you." Not to return for nearly a decade.

They had reached the pier. "Let's walk to the end," he said.

"I would walk to the end of anything with you," came Elena Guzman's reply.

She's just being dramatic, he told himself. She likes to hear herself say things like that. Don't worry about it. They climbed the narrow wooden stairway from sand to pier. The main entry point to its planks lay to their left, the east, a street lined with

STEPHEN BROOKE

parked cars. Wilk could see a huge banyan down a block or so. Beyond lay the rambling compound of the old Naples Hotel. Not many lights there — few guests at this time of year.

The sun was falling into the Gulf, turning the remaining clouds gold and red. All the way to the end they did walk, and watched it sink, disappear. The breeze whispered across the water, and flights of gulls and pelicans made their way to secluded roosts.

Elena pressed against him, laid her head on his chest. Wilk put an arm around her. Her body was full, soft.

When they returned, Teresa had held dinner for them.

~

It had been a full day. Life was good here but he should not stay much longer. That depended on Elena, maybe, and when she was going to head for Miami. He had heard nothing of where Vicki and Francisco were now. He slowly drifted toward sleep.

A sound brought him back. Someone was at the door. Wilk's hand found the Browning. "Don't shoot," came Elena's whisper. "It's only me."

"How did you know I had a gun?" he asked.

"I would expect you to be ready for any trouble," she said and giggled. "And you are silhouetted against the window."

"So what sort of trouble need I be ready for?" he asked. "Has an assassin crept into my room?"

"Maybe. Let's see if I can kill you." He heard more than saw her robe fall to the floor, before she slipped under the sheet beside him. "Oh, you are ready for me!"

Wilk was not so sure of that. She meant he was nude, probably. He usually slept that way and nights were hot here. But ready for a tryst with this woman less than half his age? It had

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

been long since there had been anyone, anywhere. He had spent the last half-decade searching for one he knew was lost.

He reached out, pulled Elena to him, hungry for what she offered. It was too dark for her to see the tears that misted his eyes.

8.

TERESA REMAINED QUITE UNAWARE OF what had happened in the room down the hall. Wilk was not so sure about Betsy.

"Arty is flying into Miami," she announced at breakfast. "I intend to drive over to pick him up." That meant no little Alicia would be coming. Her parents would probably return north soon enough, though, both of them.

"Then we can ride with you," Elena said. "You can exchange us for your husband."

Wilk asked the obvious question. "How soon?"

"After this weekend. Wednesday, he thinks. That can always change."

"Arty is a busy man," deadpanned Elena.

"He is," agreed her sister. "Oh, someone came yesterday and flew your plane away."

Wilk was glad they hadn't come and bothered him about any of it. One less concern. "No problems, I assume?"

"None at all. The man was taking it to Miami. Ha, I should have put you two on it."

"I never want to be on that airplane again!" declared Elena. "Maybe on any airplane."

"And here I was going to teach you to fly," Wilk told her, spreading guava jelly on his toast. He had never tasted it until recently but feared he was now addicted.

"You already have," the young woman replied.

Teresa shot her a puzzled look, but dismissed it in a moment. "So what shall we do for this holiday weekend? A barbecue? That is what real Americans do!" All three had to laugh at that. There might even have been a hint of a smile on Betsy's austere countenance.

Wilk had eaten far more meals cooked over fire than these

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

women might ever imagine. It held little attraction for him. "You do have a grill out there, I noticed. I can be American for a little longer."

"And then you can go back to speaking French or Spanish or whatever you prefer." The rule was English in the Morris house. A rule Elena and he broke when they were together.

Everyone spoke English here — but Betsy spoke it a little strangely. This he had already noted. Wilk was not all that familiar with the accents of southern black Americans. He had known some during the war, to be sure. No matter. He had halfway decided the maid had some speech impediment.

"But it is only Saturday today. What is to do this morning?" asked Elena.

"We can walk to the end of the pier and back again."

"Too far. Let's go only halfway."

"You mean go to the end and stay there?"

She gave him a look of disdain. "Maybe I would push you in the water out there. It is very deep."

"And a long way to swim in," added Teresa. "The pier is eleven-hundred feet long. That is something in meters but I always get confused by American measurements."

Wilk didn't feel ambitious enough to convert it in his head. "If I am to swim I would as soon do it right here," he said.

Both women agreed it was the best idea yet.

~

"Pasame la sal, por favor."

The maid reached for the salt shaker and pulled her hand back quickly. Too late. Betsy — or whatever her name was — shot him a look somewhere between anger and fear.

"You are not an American at all," Wilk said. He kept his voice hushed so no other could hear them outside the kitchen. "From

STEPHEN BROOKE

Senora Morris's homeland, no?" A spy, maybe, watching them for someone. Not a very skilled one to fall for so simple a ruse.

The woman sighed. He could now detect the slightest of Spanish accents when she spoke. "I serve the Guzmans. Senor Artemus knows who I am. It is my job to look after his wife." The expression on her face suggested she did not care so much for that wife.

"A bodyguard, then." Of sorts, and chosen by Gustavo. Another suspicion arose of a sudden in his mind.

"It is so."

"Then it is not my concern. I shall say nothing and leave you to your duty." He gave her a wink. "But I do wish you had not jammed my landing gear. That was inconvenient." He was guessing about this.

He had guessed right. "I knew you would not be hurt, sir. You would see it and know it as a warning. It was clumsy, yes, but I did not know what your intentions were here."

"Then you are not one of those who tried to kill us."

Her eyes went wide. "Kill you? Oh no, Mr. Wilkins. You mean — the dead man on the airplane? I thought it was his heart."

"Poisoned. As was Presidente Guzman." Let that news get back to Gustavo and whomever he served. Maybe that would tell him something.

She slowly nodded. "I am not too surprised, sir." Then she looked him steadily in the eyes. "And still I give you warning. Be careful of Senorita Elena. She is worth more than all the other Guzmans put together."

"You may be right," he replied, and returned to the women on the porch.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

~

The dawn was in his window and Elena was in his bed, pressed against him. Best she slip back to her room before her sister rose.

Betsy he no longer worried about.

"Time for church," he whispered in her ear.

"Oh, I don't want to go! Huh?" She opened momentarily bewildered eyes.

"It *is* Sunday morning."

"I told you I was an atheist. I only believe in sleeping some more." But she was awake now and sat up on the edge of the bed. "Do you go to church, Wilk?" she asked as she pulled on her robe.

"Sometimes," he admitted. "My family was Lutheran. That was part of trying to be middle class, perhaps, trying to separate themselves from the peasantry. Most Poles are Catholic. I became one myself eventually."

"I suppose I still am, officially," said Elena. "First in the shower." She slipped out the door.

There wasn't any Catholic church in Naples. The few Catholics met for mass in the town's movie theater. Teresa had told him that. Wilk didn't know if she was any more a church-goer than her little sister. At least he had never heard her claim to be atheist. Maybe Mrs. Morris accompanied her husband to some stodgy mainstream Protestant church these days. It would perhaps be like her to want to break with her past.

He rolled out of bed and wished he had beaten Elena into the bathroom.

JOE GLANCED BACK OVER HIS shoulder. "Speedboat coming up fast behind us," he muttered. "Durn fool better watch his wake." He turned his attention back to his wheel and the water ahead.

Teresa had sprung this boat ride on them at breakfast. A nice way to fill their Sunday, she had decided sometime yesterday, and arranged a ride down the bay in Joe Riley's cabin cruiser. There were stout fishing poles on the boat but Wilk doubted anyone would wish to use them.

No, this was just a sight-seeing ride. Their grizzled captain did take parties out fishing. The Morrisises had arranged more than a few outings with him for their guests. Arty's business contacts, mostly, Wilk suspected. The men he might play golf with back home or in Miami.

There would undoubtedly be courses here someday.

At this time of year, Joe wouldn't have so much business. It would be no problem for him — or some other guide boat captain — to take a charter at a moment's notice. The runabout had slowed as it came up on them. Two men. Elena waved to them.

They were south of the inlet now. Gordon Pass they called it, and the island to their right was named Keewaydin. Neither Teresa nor Elena had ever read Longfellow so they did not know the origin of that name. Wilk saw no reason to explain it.

One of the men rose in his place. He held a short rifle and raised it to his shoulder. "Down, all of you!" barked Wilk. The Guzmans had grown up knowing the importance of following such an order and ducked at once. Joe just stared at him, a rather stupid look spread on his unshaven face. That changed when the first round whistled past.

Carrying a weapon on his person today would have been impractical. The Browning was too large for that. Another bullet

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

smashed into the side of the cruiser. It would be difficult to aim accurately from that speeding, bouncing vessel but it was soon going to be alongside, where the shooter could not miss. Wilk drew his automatic from the innocent-looking canvas bag he had slung over his shoulder before boarding Riley's boat, readied himself and the gun.

Wait until they slow down, hoping to board, he told himself. He heard the change in the outboard's exhaust note and rose to his knees, firing, holding the Browning steady with both hands. The man with the rifle crumpled back into the speed boat beside his partner. They immediately veered off, turned, retreated toward the upper bay.

Joe still looked stupefied but he picked up the microphone on his radio. Wilk wasn't sure it was a good idea to let him call whomever he intended to call.

Teresa spoke before he could decide. "There is no reason you need inform anyone about this, is there, Captain Riley? None of us have been hurt."

The man hesitated before slowly hanging the mike back on its hook. "I suppose not, ma'am."

"And my husband will cover any damage to your boat," she continued. Wilk knew the captain would receive considerably more than needed for repairs. And that the captain knew this too.

Who could have been responsible this time? And who was their target? He had little doubt those men would have eliminated all four of them. Surely, Artemus Morris would not have been involved in anything that endangered his wife.

He didn't think so, anyway. Yet he might well be involved in all this in some other way. Maybe his wife was too.

STEPHEN BROOKE

"That was an M-1 carbine," stated Elena. "I'm a pretty good shot with one."

"Let us be thankful our assailant was not."

~

"Do you have a weapon?" he whispered to Betsy.

"Always," she replied. She looked about, making sure they were in private, and hiked up her black skirt to display a small automatic holstered on the inside of her left thigh. It would be hard to get at quickly and wouldn't have a lot of stopping power, but it was better than nothing.

The maid-bodyguard had recognized something had happened when they returned early and subdued. Teresa had at once gone to her husband's downstairs office and closed the doors. Wilk had no doubt there was a long distance call to that husband.

He nodded in approval of Betsy's preparedness. "Were they after you, sir?" she asked him.

"It's possible," he admitted. "Even likely. But only because I have become involved with the affairs of the Guzmans." Affairs he did not at all understand. Not yet.

"I will not object to your presence as long as you protect them," said Betsy, "but I hope you leave soon and take Elena with you." She turned back to the pans on the range. "Ah'll have lunch ready in a bit, suh."

Wilk nodded and went to the porch. No one was out there. He poured himself some tonic, no booze, and settled in a rattan chair, gazing out toward the Gulf. Teresa joined him in a few minutes.

"Arty is going to send a man immediately," she reported. "From Miami. He thinks we need more security."

"You probably do."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"Probably. And he thanks you and hopes you are leaving soon."

As does everyone. "When is the next plane out?"

She shrugged. "A DC-3 flies in from Miami on some sort of schedule. I could check if you wish, but I might as well just drive you over on Tuesday."

He gave her a grin. "So the barbecue is still on?"

"I expect you to do all the grilling, Mr. Wilkins. I shall invite the neighbors and you will spend the entire afternoon flipping burgers."

"Add some hot dogs," spoke Elena from the doorway. "And spare ribs and steak, maybe. What are you drinking, Wilk?"

"Just tonic. I feel the need to remain sharp right now." Though it was unlikely to matter.

"Then I'll drink enough liquor for both of us. I feel the need, too." She filled a tall glass with ice and white rum, adding a dash of lime.

She drinks too much, Wilk told himself. He glanced at Teresa. She thinks so too. It had not been something he had thought much about these past weeks but he had certainly noticed it. For a moment he felt a pang of concern about her future.

A future that would not include him. He harbored few illusions. What he had with this young woman would not last. They would drift back into their own worlds and be only memories to each other. It might be best if it were soon.

Wilk had many memories and some regrets. How different might his life have been had he come to the States with Elsa all those years ago? He had looked her up once — or had Maggie do it — and found she was married and had many children. Her husband owned a hardware store in Cincinnati. At least she had stuck to her preferred type.

STEPHEN BROOKE

Elena took a seat beside him. For now, let that be enough.

THE NEW GUARD WAS A big man. He had come in late Sunday night and slept on the roll-away Betsy had already set up in the office.

"You can have my room tomorrow," Wilk informed him over breakfast.

The man shook the surprisingly sleek head that topped his broad shoulders. "Nope. I'll be riding with you to Miami. I'm not 'sposed to let Mrs. Morris outa my sight."

"That will be inconvenient at night," interjected Elena.

The bodyguard seemed at a loss to answer that. Wilk came to his rescue. "I am sure Rick knows how to do his job. Shall we make him ride up front in the wagon with your sister?"

"That is a good idea," she agreed. "I think the seats can be folded down in the back. We could sleep all the way over." She winked. "Or other things if we put up a curtain for privacy."

Rick discreetly made no comment, nor even acknowledged the girl's words. He might repeat them to his boss, however. Wilk knew that. He knew Betsy might inform Arty about what was going on too.

That was beyond his control. "I was told about your shootout and how you handled yourself," said Rick, attempting to lower his rumble of a voice. "It's good to have you here as backup. The woman too."

Elena was immediately alert. "The woman? And you are Mr. Wilkins's backup."

"She doesn't know," said Wilk. "Neither does Mrs. Morris."

"Oh. I've got a big mouth." Rick proceeded to fill that mouth with scrambled eggs.

Elena knew better than to try to get anything out of the man.

STEPHEN BROOKE

She did grill Wilk as soon as they were alone together. He saw no reason not to let her in on Betsy's secret. Most of it.

"Do you trust her?" asked Elena.

"Not completely." He winked at the girl. "As with you."

"You are a wise man. It comes with growing old."

It did indeed. Yet Wilk could still feel like a fool.

~

"I like these people," confided Elena. "Mostly. I am surprised."

"They are not the same sort you might see in the winter," her sister said. "Many of these are year-round Neapolitans."

"Ah. Then they have less money?"

"Some of them. But those who are wealthy are more like the wealthy in our homeland, maybe."

A different breed than her own husband, said Wilk to himself.

There were perhaps a dozen guests standing about in the yard and a few more on the porch. Many of the men and some of the women held beer bottles — Teresa knew her neighbors well enough to make sure there were plenty on hand, well iced. Wilk had sipped an inch or two from one bottle. American beer was as bad as he had remembered.

He did not comment publicly on that. Teresa had let him know one of her guests owned a major brewery. Which guest and which brewery, he was not certain. He had been an object of interest himself for a few minutes, primarily as a reputed Australian; after that, most had been willing to leave him to his grilling.

A man with a slightly sunburned bald head watched for a while before attempting pleasantries. "Do Australians barbecue?" he asked.

"Just as much as Americans. Maybe more."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

The fellow squinted at him. "You don't sound Australian. I knew Aussies during the war."

"Naturalized," Wilk replied. "Do I sound English?"

"Hmm, yeah, that's it. Left Britain for Down-under, eh? Good move."

"It seemed a good choice at the time." Wilk had learned English from Englishmen, but knew he didn't really sound like one. Englishmen tended to mistake him for an American. "I have a firm in Sydney now." He handed a Loup business card to the man. He had made sure to have them on him before this party. They helped explain him to people and prevent too many questions.

"Consulting and research," the man read. "You must do business with Arty Morris."

"I have," said Wilk. Most of those here would assume something of the sort. The American wandered off after a bit.

He wondered if any of the guests even knew much about Teresa or the Guzman family. Oh, they would surely all know her father had been president of some Latin American country or another. That was probably as far as it went.

A young man had attached himself to Elena. Or vice-versa. He could not bring himself to feel jealous. He was an eager, clean-cut fellow, a local boy with a rich southern accent. Maybe he practiced it. She was debating politics with him, undoubtedly just for her own amusement. The boy appeared to take it more seriously.

Now she half-dragged him over to the grill. "Wilk," she announced, "you must meet Georgie. He is what they call a liberal here."

"And now he has fallen into your radical clutches."

"And very good clutches they are to fall into, Mr. Wilkins."

STEPHEN BROOKE

She turned back to her captive. "Wilk makes me look tame. He is a flaming anarchist!"

"Only my grill is flaming," he stated. "And I am an anarchist only in my heart. My brain objects strenuously to this."

Georgie took this in with a little smile. "A practical man," he said.

"When appropriate. Life would be boring indeed were one always practical." Wilk shifted his weight a little, from one foot to the other. The Browning made an uncomfortable lump in his lower back, hidden by the guayabera he wore. He would have been more uncomfortable without it. As casually as possible, he reached back and adjusted its position slightly. Georgie didn't notice.

None of the guests were likely to. Elena and Teresa would, and maybe Rick, who had taken up a command position on the porch steps. Rick had a big revolver strapped under his left arm and kept his suit on even on this hot Labor Day afternoon. At least it was a white suit. Teresa explained him as a friend of her husband.

"We should never let ourselves be bored," agreed Elena. "I am impractical, Wilk, am I not?"

"You only pretend to be. Otherwise, you would have run off and joined Marxist rebels in the jungle."

"Oh, I think that is a bit mean. But true! I only speak of change."

"Best to let change come from the people," said Georgie. "From democracy."

Teresa had been standing listening to this for a while. "But democracy is not really the people, is it?" she asked. "It is the majority of the people. So it is still one group telling everyone else what to do."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"Ha!" laughed Elena. "It turns out my sister is the true anarchist."

Georgie had no ready answer. He allowed Elena to lead him off again. Teresa watched them a moment. "That boy is right out of law school and just joined his father's firm here. Elena should find someone like him. Maybe if I invited her to stay for a while this winter —"

Wilk shook his head. "He would never survive."

~

"I thought maybe Georgie would keep you away from me tonight," he whispered.

"You are very cruel, Wilk." Elena slid into his bed. "You should trust me!"

Hadn't she said he was wise not to? He chose not to remind her of this. "Your sister wants to throw the two of you together."

"Maybe when I have worn you out. You are very old, after all."

"Now who is cruel?"

"Oh, I am sorry, Wilk." Was she suddenly sobbing? He pulled her close, wiped the tears away with his fingers. "It is so good being here with you, and all that will be over tomorrow. I wish we could live here forever."

"Now that would never do for two such practical people." He sat up. "Let's walk out on the pier one last time."

"Yes. Let me change."

"I'll wait for you downstairs. I have to tell Rick not to shoot us when we let ourselves in later."

"Ah, yes, that is very practical, Wilk." She kissed him and slipped out the door.

“OH, THE WATER IS GLOWING!”

The tiny waves lapping on the beach shone against the night as they broke. Microscopic phosphorescent creatures were responsible but it would be silly to say that to Elena. She didn't want lectures from him. The young woman ran down to the water's edge and kicked. Shining drops went flying.

Were she to jump in she would leave a shimmering wake behind her as she swam. She also might attract sharks so Wilk did not suggest it. Swimming in the dark seemed dangerous to him.

To a man who had an automatic pistol tucked in the waistband of his trousers. He had seen too much danger; that was why he did not court it.

“It can't match the glow above us,” he said. The velvet blackness was strewn with stars, right down to the unseen Gulf horizon. It almost rivaled what one might see from a ship, far out at sea.

The sea-glow also circled each of the pier's pilings, as the waves rose and fell. Above, a few electric bulbs burned. The bait house and snack bar halfway out its length were closed and dark. Here and there a fisherman huddled on the rail, minding one or sometimes two rods.

They did not speak, those two, as they walked to the far end, wrapped in each other. He would not make this walk again, thought Wilk. His life was on the other side of the world. Never mind. Only the woman he was with right then mattered.

They stood looking out across the water when they could go no further. The water was as black as the sky. The lights on the shore behind them seemed faint, part of another world. But they must return to that world. They kissed, holding each other a moment and an eternity, and started back.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

~

Rick poked his head around the corner as they unlocked the back door. "Me and Rita waited up for you," he said.

Wilk immediately understood who Rita was. He was not too surprised Rick knew the name.

"Rita?" asked Elena, as they followed the big man into the kitchen.

"She might as well know too," spoke Betsy — or Rita. The woman was seated at the small table there, in a bath robe rather than her uniform. Her holstered gun lay on the table before her, beside a bottle of soda. RC Cola.

Rick was in shirt sleeves and suspenders, his revolver readily visible in its shoulder holster. "I keep putting my foot in it, don't I?" he said. "Mr. Morris shoulda filled me in more. I guess he was in a hurry."

"My name is Rita Santamaria," said the maid. She spoke this in Spanish and then switched back to English for Rick's sake. Not the English she normally used around this house. "I am not just a maid from out in what they call the 'quarters' here."

"She's a bodyguard too," Wilk added. "I've told you about that. Arty hired her to keep an eye on your sister."

Elena took the chair across from Rita. "Then it is good you are here. I do not know where you sleep in this house," she admitted.

"There is a closet of a room attached to the back of the house. Next to the utility room. That is supposed to be the maid's quarters. Mr. Wilkins displaced me from the place where I normally sleep." She eyed the pair. "But it turns out you two only needed one room."

Rick nodded thoughtfully. There had certainly been enough clues that he should have caught on. He perched on one of the

STEPHEN BROOKE

stools by the counter. "You're carrying, aren't you, sir?" he asked.

"I am. Call me Wilk."

"Would it be okay if I looked at your piece?" he asked. "I like to know about things like that."

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

Elena dissolved into giggles but Rick didn't seem to get it. "Okay, Wilk." He slid the heavy revolver out of its holster as Wilk reached behind himself and retrieved both his auto and its holster, clipped to his trousers.

"No one wants to see mine, I fear," said Rita. It was the first time Wilk had seen an actual smile on her angular face. "It is too small for these *macho hombres*."

"I'd love to look at it," Elena told her. "I think I need something to carry myself."

Wilk glanced at the little gun as Rita slid it across the table. A Beretta, probably twenty-five caliber. Then he took hold of Rick's weapon, offered grip first, and handed his own over.

It was heavy. Too big for him to be truly comfortable with. Smith and Wesson, a forty-four. It would have stopping power. "I think that's even heftier than the Webley I carried back when," he said.

"Never used one of those," Rick mumbled. Wilk wondered if he had even seen one. They had never been common in the United States. "But this is a fine little piece. Nine mil, huh?"

Wilk didn't consider the Browning to be little. "That's enough for me. Most of the time." He turned to Elena, looking over the Beretta. He couldn't say the same about its round.

Rick followed his eyes. "I told Rita that thing's just a toy. If you want protection, Miss Guzman, I'd go with something with more oomph."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"If Rita strapped your gun to her thigh, she would end up walking in circles," said Wilk, handing the revolver back. He tucked the Browning back into its holster and clipped it to his waistband. "I'm heading upstairs. I'll try not to leave too much of a mess in your room, Rita."

"But no promises," added Elena.

~

"Teresa told me Francisco and Vicki are both in Miami now. We will see them surely."

It seemed an odd time to bring it up. Maybe she hadn't thought of it earlier. "Do you intend to stay with them?"

"There is no 'them.' They will take different hotels. Maybe I shall stay with Vicki, maybe I shall stay with Teresa and Arty. But maybe my welcome is worn out there, eh?" She nestled closer to him. "I would rather stay with you. I shouldn't, though."

No, she shouldn't. "I'll be in some cheap seedy place, far from the beach." Probably not, really. He could get away with billing the agency for a decent room. Nothing grand, but decent.

"Oh, I shall sneak in and everyone will think I am a woman of the night."

"Woman of the night?"

"Is that not the right name?"

"Perhaps a century ago."

"Hmm, even you are not that old. Francisco would welcome me, I think, and not mind you visiting at all. But we would have to keep out of the way of his own romances."

When he made no immediate answer, she asked, "Does that make you uncomfortable, Wilk?"

"No, no. I've been around enough not to be bothered. But maybe we should keep our distance, like your stepmother."

STEPHEN BROOKE

“Yes, Vicki ignores all of it.”

The wisest course, Wilk was sure. “That would keep things running more smoothly. You all seem to get along well enough.”

Elena was quiet for a short while. He could hear her slow breathing in the dark. “Francisco hates Vicki. He doesn’t show it but he resents her far more than Teresa and I do.”

Wilk felt he had already known this, perhaps. “If we do not know whether we will be together in Miami, we can make up for it right now.”

Elena was completely agreeable to this.

"THEY ARE BETWEEN EVERY POLE," said Elena. She had been counting kingfishers along their way and there did, indeed, seem to be one perched on the wires between each telephone pole. Those poles stood above the canal that paralleled their route — the Tamiami Trail, US Forty-one.

Teresa drove. There was an unspoken agreement between the two men that they should keep their hands free. Rick sat up front. "I missed all this coming over to Naples," he said. "Mr. Morris had me fly in on a charter."

He didn't miss that much, Wilk felt. It was a pretty monotonous ride. At least the back seat of the big Chrysler was comfortable. A few tourist attractions rose along the way. There was a Seminole village. Mostly there was swamp followed by marsh followed by swamp.

Rick fiddled with the radio. Reception was poor. "In Naples, we can sometimes pick up Havana more clearly than Miami," said Teresa. "Especially when there are storms over the Everglades. For some reason, Betsy likes to listen to the Cuban stations. I sometimes hear the radio in her room."

"Maybe we shoulda brought her along," offered Rick.

"She is not nearly sophisticated enough for Miami. It is better to have her looking after the house." She gave her passenger a sidelong look. "So, Rick. Bonaventura, isn't it?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Have you worked long for my husband?"

"Nope, never did before. I'm a friend of a friend, so to speak. Larry Marino. Know him? They do business back in Chicago sometimes. Anyways, I was doing some work in Miami when I got the call from Mr. Morris."

"I do not believe I have met Mr. Marino. Ah, we are coming

STEPHEN BROOKE

up on Monroe Station. It is about the only place to find petrol between Naples and Miami.” She looked at the gauge on her dashboard. “We have plenty, but you might wish to stretch your legs and maybe get something to eat.”

“A very good idea,” felt Elena. “I need the restroom. Are we near Miami yet?”

“About halfway.” She pulled in by the unassuming frame building. There were gas pumps in front. The prices were somewhat higher than in Naples. Teresa had made sure to fill up before they headed east.

“Rick is mafia, isn’t he?” whispered Elena as they walked, a bit stiff-legged, toward the front door.

“So one would assume.”

The girl scowled at him. “Do not be so guarded, Wilk. I can understand things.” There were a few tables inside. “But we can talk about it later.” She disappeared into the restroom.

~

They spoke of nothing in the car. Elena fell asleep almost at once and napped until they reached the outskirts of Miami. Wilk had not expected the farm fields by their route as they neared the city. He hadn’t thought of south Florida or Miami that way.

Wilk didn’t know Miami at all, certainly not like these people he was riding with.

“The airport is over there,” said Teresa, waving an arm out the window. “Arty’s flight comes in tomorrow morning and we will sort everything out then. Tonight, Vicki expects us.”

“Does she know about me, ma’am?” asked Rick.

“I doubt it. We’ll surprise her. Elena,” she called over her shoulder, “look in my handbag, will you? I wrote the address down and put it in there somewhere.”

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

Her sister leaned forward over the seat to pick up the bag. "Isn't she at our usual hotel?"

"She rented a house. For a whole month, she says."

Elena dug through the wine-red leather bag. "Here we are. It is hard to read your scribbles!" Wilk leaned over and took a peek. Hard indeed. He could make no sense of it at all.

"Hmm, that is in the Coconut Grove, isn't it?" She sounded disappointed. "Maybe I should stay on the beach with Francisco."

"I'd rather you weren't out of my sight, Miss," said Rick. "I know I'm 'sposed to guard your sister but I feel responsible for both of you."

"Wilk will keep an eye on me. You'll take me to your hotel, won't you, Mr. Wilkins?"

"If that is what you want."

"I might. Let's look at the house first. You'll need to turn right up ahead, Teresa."

~

It had been no later than mid-afternoon when they pulled up to the tile-roofed house. It was partly hidden by trees and a low stuccoed wall. Both wall and house were painted white.

Teresa honked and one of the familiar bodyguards came out to open the wrought iron gate. Both grounds and house were smaller than the villa in Havana. On the other hand, it had a swimming pool and was close to the bay. Chances were the rent was less too.

We are more than she expected, Wilk told himself as Vicki came out of the arched entry to greet them. She is probably working out in her head where to put us all. A pair of servants began carrying their luggage into the house. More than half of it was Elena's.

Wilk was a man used to living out of a single suitcase. It was

STEPHEN BROOKE

probably the same with Rick. But he had already been staying in Miami, hadn't he? There might be an apartment somewhere.

"Would you like something to drink?" asked Senora Guzman. "Oh, of course you would! Let's all relax while your rooms are being readied."

"Do not bother with one for me, Vicki," said Wilk. "I am going to get a hotel room."

"It is very late. Do you have reservations somewhere?" She did not sound at all bothered by his announcement.

"I called yesterday. It was not difficult to get a room right after the holiday," he replied. And before the tourist season started up in earnest. Not that Miami didn't see tourists year around.

She nodded in agreement to this. "But you are welcome here. The phone is down the hall if you wish to call a taxi."

He took care of that at once, instructing the dispatcher to send someone in an hour. As soon as he hung up, Elena took the telephone. "I must call Francisco and let him know we are here," she said. "And maybe ask if he has room for me. I do not think I wish to stay here. Not tonight."

"YOU MUST TAKE ME OUT to dinner first," Elena informed him. "I have let you get by without this so far but a girl can only allow so much."

"Without reservations? That might be difficult in this town." Even on a slow Tuesday evening. "Let's get you to Francisco first and take it from there. You are sure he is expecting you?"

"He did all along. There is a room ready for me in his suite. However," she added, snuggling close, "he did not know I might share it with someone."

"You are sure you would not rather come to my room, lady of the night?"

She looked up into his face. "If you want me to. No matter how seedy it is!"

Not tonight, Wilk said to himself. Not tonight. They rode on through the darkened city. There were not so many lights at the beginning but the streets grew brighter, more neon shone, as they went on. The cab carried them across the bay to Miami Beach.

The *Hibiscus* was far from the most prestigious of hotels. Still, it was on the beach and that counted for much. Its architecture was an uneasy marriage of Art Deco and Moorish, rising three stories in coral and a slightly metallic sky blue.

"Shouldn't an hibiscus be red?" asked Elena as she peered out the cab window. The driver was retrieving their bags from the trunk of his Ford. Elena had been cajoled into bringing only two. She could send for the others if she stayed. Wilk was not convinced she would. He paid the man and made sure to get a receipt.

Maggie would approve of that. "I guess I need to carry these in," he said. Fortunately, a bell boy took charge of them at the

STEPHEN BROOKE

desk. They were expecting Miss Guzman. Mr. Wilkins they were not, but decided it was okay if she vouched for him.

"Second floor," said the clerk, handing the key to Wilk after a moment's hesitation. "Mr. Guzman is not in but he said to make yourself comfortable." This he directed to Elena.

"We can go out after all," said Wilk as they climbed the broad central stair. It was only one flight up and he thought the elevators made rather suspicious noises. Wilk always preferred stairs, when practical.

"What a mess!" Elena shook her head as she surveyed the room. "Francisco is such a slob when he is on his own."

Quite unlike the fastidious persona he presented in public. Wilk checked one bedroom, then the other. "This would be yours." The other had featured an unruly bed, sheets hanging sideways onto the floor. "Leave the bags in here," he told the porter, and tipped him rather well. Too bad he could not get a receipt for that.

"Oh, wait a second. Is there a dining room here?"

"Yes, sir. It is open till Eleven." The young man had an obvious Spanish accent. Puerto Rican, Wilk thought.

"Gracias." He turned to Elena. "Want to go down?"

"Certainly. But they had better have a bar."

~

Wilk thought it best not to leave until Francisco showed up. He called his own hotel and confirmed that he would be arriving later. Elena had ordered too many rum and Cokes, and fell asleep on the couch soon after they went back up to the room. He carried her to her bed and partially closed the door.

He checked his watch again. Not that late but he didn't like to idle here. There, someone at the door, fumbling with a key. Wilk had thought it best to lock it behind them. Francisco slipped in,

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

looking even more inebriated than his sister. A blond young man in a striped seersucker jacket followed him.

"Ah, Wilk!" He looked toward the door standing ajar. "My sister is asleep?" He turned to his companion, put a forefinger to his lips. "Shh! We mustn't wake Elena."

"Okay," was all the fellow said but that was enough for Wilk to recognize a German accent. Some tourist Guzman had picked up. He rose.

"It is all right to leave her here then?" he asked. "I should be on my way." He was half-tempted to rout the girl out of her bed and take her with him. Maybe back to Vicki's house.

"Of course, of course. Better than leaving her with the evil stepmother!" Francisco snickered at this.

"Oh, like *Snow White*," said his friend. "She is very ugly like in the movie?"

"Hideous," Francisco told him. "Your sleeping beauty will be safe with us," he said to Wilk, mixing up his fairy tales. "Come back in the morning and wake her with a kiss!" He giggled more than snickered this time.

"I'll do that," promised the older man. "Here's where I am staying." He handed the address and number to Francisco. He had jotted it down on a sheet of hotel stationary somewhat earlier.

"Oh, that is a very stodgy sort of place. Only middle-aged businessmen go there." He stuffed the paper into his pants pocket.

"Then I'll be on my way to join them." Francisco and the German had disappeared into his bedroom before Wilk got out the door. He hoped it wouldn't take too long to get a taxi.

~

The telephone rang. His wake-up call. Wilk would have

STEPHEN BROOKE

preferred to be awakened by the sun coming in his window, as it had in Naples and many other places over the years. He did not have that luxury this morning.

An half-hour later he was shaved and dressed and in the hotel lobby. He had already phoned down and asked the clerk to call a taxi. Breakfast could come later.

"Can we share a cab, Mr. Wilkins?" came a voice from one of the shadowed, overstuffed chairs. A heavy-set man, fairly young, rose. "I am a friend of Bob Dunn. Perhaps we could talk over breakfast."

Wilk did not want to take the time right then. "You found me pretty quickly."

"There is a watch on Mrs. Guzman's house. We knew you arrived."

"Mmm, very well. Let me make a call." He turned to the desk. "Can I get an outside line?"

It was Elena who answered. The 'boys,' as she called them, had decided to go to the beach early and she claimed to be very lonely. He promised to be there soon. "We'll talk in the cab," he told the agency man.

The driver he told to take him to the *Hibiscus*. Then he gave his companion — who not yet volunteered a name — the highlights of what had happened over the past days.

He was impressed. Spying could be a very humdrum occupation, most of the time. But it was Rick and his friends that most interested him. "Organized crime, is it? We could let the FBI in on this but it's doubtful they would care."

"I would assume they are invested some way in Morris's business."

"The shipping, maybe. The mafia always has a finger in that. Who knows what side they're on in all of this?"

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"Their own."

The man chuckled. "That's always a good guess." He glanced toward the driver. Wilk was fairly certain he hadn't been able to overhear any of their conversation.

The agent held a hand out. "I'm Jack Singer."

Wilk shook. They were crossing the causeway to Miami Beach, Biscayne Bay sparkling on either side. He could see a flying boat in the water a little to the north. It could even be Doug Delaney's, though he doubted it.

"Officially, I'm not actually here, you understand. The agency doesn't operate in the States." Singer handed him a business card. "But here is where you can reach me." *Sand and Sun Imports* the card read, with Jack Singer below and a telephone number. It was the same name as on the contract Dunn had given him to sign.

The agent continued. "My superiors will be very interested in the death of the pilot. Probably too late to confirm poison, though."

"But I've little doubt." Not anymore.

"Neither have I. Too bad we're in the dark about your shooters."

"None of us caught the registration numbers on the boat." They had other things on their mind at the time. "I definitely hit one of them. You might find something there." Jack nodded. That was obvious and he needn't have mentioned it. "I might have killed him."

A slight rise of the younger man's eyebrows. "You think?"

"He took a couple slugs in the torso. Yes, I think."

The cab let him out in front of the *Hibiscus* and carried Singer off somewhere else. Wilk was willing to let him pay for it.

~

"Teresa will be picking up Arty this morning. He already has

STEPHEN BROOKE

taken a hotel suite for them.” Elena added one spoon of sugar to her coffee, carefully evening it with a forefinger before dumping it in. “So they will not be staying with our stepmother.”

Rick neither, of course. Would Morris keep him on in Miami or was the big man’s job done?

The hotel dining room did not open for breakfast but there had been room service. They sat in the common room of Francisco’s suite now, finishing off the meal sent up. It was unimpressive but it would be on her brother’s bill, so they had no reason to complain. He and his friend had popped in, changed from their bathing suits, and left again with barely a few words to them.

“Do you want to go back over to Vicki’s?” he asked.

“Later, maybe. You must take me shopping first. One always shops in Miami.”

“Clothes? Purses? Jewelry?”

“Others can buy me those things, Wilk. I want you to help me purchase a gun.”

It was not a completely unexpected request. Elena had mentioned the idea before. And where another man might have been taken aback, Wilk found he approved. This young woman needed to be able to take care of herself — it came with who she was. “Shall we get you a big revolver like Rick’s?” he asked.

“He thinks revolvers are better than automatics,” was her reply. “Less to go wrong with them.”

“Revolvers break too. You have fired both?”

“Only autos, the kind the police carried back in Montellano. Oh, and I got to shoot Papa’s Luger once.”

“Colts, weren’t they? Somewhat the ancestors of the Browning I carry.”

“They were too big,” she said. “Yours is nicer.”

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

Wilk considered the Hi Power the best automatic ever made but he did not say so. He might have been willing to debate a Walther fancier. "You definitely need something with more to it than the toy Rita carries."

"Okay, Wilk. You will guide me in this. And then we go swim in Vicki's pool."

It seemed as reasonable a way to spend the day as any.

"WHERE IS GUSTAVO?" ASKED WILK. "I thought he always stuck close to your brother."

"Francisco does not want Gustavo with him when he is entertaining in the hotel, so he is with Vicki."

Entertaining was as good a euphemism as any. "I should tell her to send him back with you."

"I do not need a baby-sitter, Wilk. And I will have a gun to protect me!"

"This does not seem the place to buy one." They were strolling along Lincoln Avenue. The prices in the shops seemed exorbitant to Wilk.

"There is a Cadillac dealer somewhere along here," Elena informed him. "You could buy me one of them instead and I could drive away from trouble very quickly."

"Or you could simply run any attacker over."

"Exactly! Ooh, I like that." She stopped and stared through the plate glass.

"A bikini? What would your sister think?"

"She would be very envious of my beauty and daring. Would I not look good in it?" Elena nudged him in the ribs. "Not that I do not look good in anything."

"Or nothing."

"Very true. But our anarchist struggle is not yet won and I must wear something to the beach."

"Ah, if it is for the revolution then you must have it." He wondered if it would look too odd on the statement he would present eventually to the agency. Surely they would not mind buying Elena Guzman a bathing suit.

The only problem was choosing a color. Elena had to look at many before choosing a very deep blue. Perhaps it should be

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

called violet, thought Wilk. Ultramarine — that was it. He paid for it before Elena could reach into her purse.

“You do not have to buy me things,” she whispered as they walked away from the counter, the white box under Wilk’s arm. Maybe it was closer to a hiss than a whisper. Then her eye caught one of the signs overhead. “Look. Sporting goods. Maybe they have my pistol here too.”

At far too high a price, he suspected. “I’ll let you pay for it,” he told her. It was on the second floor of the department store, up a wide stairway of tan limestone, and they did indeed have a display of handguns. Wilk tried to ignore the gorgeous shotguns nearby. He was not a hunter but he was fascinated by fine workmanship and anything mechanical. A selection of airplane engines would have affected him the same.

“This one is a Beretta.” Elena pointed out the weapon. “It does not look like Rita’s,”

He looked it over. “Hers is a Model Four-Eighteen. Twenty-five caliber. That’s a little bigger.” He asked the man behind the counter, “What ammunition does this one take?”

“Thirty-two ACP,” came the reply. “It’s a popular model with the ladies.” Elena frowned at that. She wanted a serious gun. The clerk leaned forward and confided, “Quite a few of them came home with GIs at the end of the war. We have some of those at a more friendly price.”

“I want a new one!” declared Elena.

“But it wouldn’t hurt to look at them,” Wilk added. He might not mind having a small back-up handgun himself. Life had grown dangerous lately.

They left with two only slightly worn Beretta Nineteen Thirty-fives. Along with the most deadly weapon of all, Elena’s bikini.

STEPHEN BROOKE

~

"Everyone can know about the bikini," she said and giggled. "And will very soon. But the little gun can be our secret, Wilk. Can't it?"

"If that is what you want. Maybe it would be good to let a bodyguard or two know." The cab had dropped them off in Vicki's front drive. The gate had been hanging open. "We should take both to a range and familiarize ourselves," he said.

Gustavo himself let them in the front door. "We must speak later, Senor Wilkins," the bodyguard murmured. Wilk nodded an assent. Vicki waited by the pool, wearing a loose striped robe that hung to mid-calf. A caftan one might call it.

"Someone at last! Everybody has left me alone here. There is room for you to stay now, both of you."

"Teresa is gone?" asked Wilk.

"She is. Arty insists on a hotel. They did promise to come by later. Francisco too." She put no particular inflection on any of this. "Wilk. I have heard things about you! Teresa tells me you saved my daughters' lives." Daughters, he noted. Not stepdaughters.

"My own too," he replied.

"That is good. I would not want you murdered either. Arty will be very grateful. If he were not a repressed gringo he would kiss you." She laughed. "So I will do it for him!" Vicki put her arms around him and her lips to his cheek. "I won't make Elena jealous," she whispered. "This too I have heard of."

From whom? Wilk had no time to think on that.

"I have to go change," said Elena, taking the cardboard box from him and almost bounding up the tiled staircase to the second story.

"New swimsuit," he explained.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"I might go in myself," said Vicki. "Maybe a drink first. Would you mix me a martini, Wilk? The bar is just inside." She gestured toward the arched ground floor entry.

"I'll attempt it. I know how finicky you martini drinkers can be."

"Oh, I take mine rather wet. One-fifth vermouth, more or less."

There were cold glasses in the little refrigerator, and plenty of ice. He poured himself an ice-filled highball glass of the dry vermouth before tackling the martini. Wilk would as soon avoid hard liquor right then. Gustavo approached as he mixed the ingredients in a cocktail shaker.

"I have heard about Rita and your airplane," the man said without preamble. "It was not a smart thing to do. Unnecessary."

Wilk shrugged. "It is not her field of expertise. You chose her as a bodyguard. For her English too, I would think."

"Yes, I am told her accent is very good."

"She fooled me — for a while." He emptied the shaker into the waiting glass. "I wish you were with Elena and Francisco at their hotel."

"He will not have me there, Senor Wilkins. I must trust you to keep an eye on them."

Wilk could only nod an acknowledgment to that. Not so easy to do. He carried the drinks out to poolside. Vicki had doffed her robe and reclined in one of the lounges. She wore a black one-piece suit, modest yet not hiding the curves of her long slender body.

It would be better if he could talk Elena into coming back here. Francisco he did not worry so much about. He handed Senora Guzman her drink and seated himself in a chair, facing her. "Acceptable," she said, taking a sip and setting the drink on

STEPHEN BROOKE

the low glass-top table between them. "You need a bathing suit, Wilk."

"Mine is back in my hotel room."

"That is poor planning! You must come and stay here and then you would always be ready to swim. We have lots of room." This was the second time she had told him so in a few minutes.

He considered the offer only as long as it took to swallow the last of the vermouth. Perhaps he should. Tomorrow. But he had no great desire to be in Vicki's pool this afternoon. His slacks and loose short sleeved shirt would do — and they concealed the Browning. Both the new firearms had gone upstairs with Elena.

"*Ah, que bonita!*" breathed his hostess. He turned to see Elena descending to the patio. A short beach coat, open, did little to conceal the bikini nor the rest of her.

Yes, she was pretty. And so young; seeing her youthful form, full yet still firm, drove that home. The girl tossed her coat aside and dove in, turning over to backstroke across the pool. She had retained a red scarf around her waist, perhaps not wishing to reveal quite so much as the bikini promised.

Someone called an hello from behind him. Teresa and Arty, coming around the corner of the house. Arty raised an arm in cheerful greeting.

Wilk rose and went to shake the man's hand. "Couldn't stay away from Florida, could you?" he asked.

"Not so long as something precious to me was here," came the reply. There were serious undertones to that but Arty brightened. "It is good to get away from Chicago again and to relax a little."

"I picked him up this morning at Pan Am Field," said Teresa.

"Haven't they changed the name?" asked Arty. "Or is it that they plan to?"

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

“Oh, it does not matter. It is still the same place.”

“Wilk is acting as our bartender this afternoon,” Vicki informed them. “Give him your orders!”

“No, no,” objected Morris. “I’ll do that. I was a professional once. Helped me pay my way through college.”

Wilk did a quick calculation in his head. That could have been while America still experimented with prohibition. He knew what sort of men might have operated and supplied those bars. “I’ll gladly turn it over to you, then.” He would rather watch Elena languidly stroke from one side of the pool to the other.

IT HAD BEEN NEARLY DARK when Francisco showed up. Solo, Wilk was glad to see. Everyone was glad to see him, no doubt. The boy was as polite and personable as ever; one would never suspect friction between him and his stepmother. Perhaps he did drink too much.

Now Wilk shared a taxi with the brother and sister, headed through the neon-lit night toward the *Hibiscus* hotel, not speaking, each wrapped in his or her own thoughts.

It was Francisco who broke the silence. "Your best friend," he asked, "the one who died — was he in the same line of work as you?"

"If you mean was he an engineer, then yes. But none of the rest." Not until it was forced on him, near the end. He could talk about the Trott siblings. That was an old ache and one that had faded. This brother and sister were a very different pair.

"You loved the woman very much?" whispered Elena.

"Enough. I have loved others more." She might think he meant her. He was sure he didn't.

"Ah," commented Francisco and they subsided into a tired silence once more.

His boyfriend was waiting in the suite. He seemed none too happy about having to do so. "Don't complain, Gunther," a weary Francisco told him. Had he more energy, it might have sounded like scolding. The pair disappeared into his room.

"Stay with me," said Elena.

He would. He had intended to. Wilk followed the young woman into her own room.

"Let me see my gun," she ordered. It — and his — was stowed in the one bag she had brought from the house. "And show me how to use it."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

He found the Berettas, laid them out side by side on the bed between them, along with the box of cartridges they had bought.

"It is single-action. You know how to use one of those. And here is the safety." He was no more knowledgeable of the design than she, maybe, but it all seemed straightforward enough. "Let's see about loading it." It held eight rounds. That was good for a compact weapon.

"Very well," said Elena, placing her pistol on the night stand. "I am satisfied. Now satisfy me some more."

Wilk put his weapon next to hers and took her in his arms, kissing her deeply. He began to undress her. This he had never done before; Elena had always come naked to his bed, and in the dark. She unbuttoned his cotton shirt and placed her hands on his chest. "I am glad you do those push ups, Mister Wilkins." Her mouth explored his skin.

He reciprocated. He found the catch on her bra, released her breasts. His left hand found the lamp and he switched it off.

~

The luminescent hands on the clock told him it was after one. Wilk sat up. "You are leaving?" came Elena's small sleepy voice.

"I should. I'll see you in a few hours."

"Promise?"

"Sealed with a kiss," he replied. He leaned down and found her lips. "I'll try not to wake the neighbors." Did Francisco even know he was still there, much less in his sister's bed? Wilk stepped out into the darkened lounge to check that all was clear. Something hit him, knocked him to the carpeting.

One of the lamps by the couch clicked on. Gunther stood there, an automatic in his hand. A suppressor was fitted to its muzzle. Wilk's own handgun was in Elena's room, with his clothes. The young German sneered. He thinks he is a villain in a

STEPHEN BROOKE

movie, passed quickly through Wilk's mind. "I see you have enjoyed your last hours on earth, Wilkins," he said, and snickered. "It is too bad Frankie will kill you and his sister when he learns what was going on in the next room." He leveled the weapon at the supine Wilk, steadying it with both hands.

A flash, the angry crack of a gun being fired. Four times it was repeated. Wilk's first thought was that it wasn't all that loud, as he watched his would-be assassin crumple. He rolled over to see Elena at the doorway, still holding her pistol, now pointed into empty space. Slowly, she lowered it, dropped it on the floor.

As much as he ached to go to her at that moment, take her in his arms, comfort her, Gunther should be dealt with first. He went to the fallen German. Quite dead — a trickle of blood came from the corner of his open mouth. He rose up as Francisco came blundering into the room.

To the young man's credit, he took in the circumstances immediately. "He tried to kill you," stated Francisco. He looked past Wilk to his sister. "Elena too?" He answered himself at once. "Yes, of course."

Wilk gave a curt nod. "And then you." He picked up Gunther's gun. Francisco stared at it and then at the naked man holding it, cocked his head at Wilk before shrugging.

"You need to get Elena out of here," Wilk told him. "Take her to Vicki. I will attend to all this." There was no sign anyone had heard the firing of her Beretta. No one knocked at their door.

Wilk put an arm around the girl, directed her back into her room. "Get dressed and let Francisco take you away. Everything will be all right but you should not be here."

She began to sob, but did as he told her. He slipped on his trousers, found Jack Singer's card, and went to the telephone. Wilk was not surprised there was an answer, even this late, but it

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

was not Singer. A woman's voice, calm and even, came over the line, asked him pertinent questions after he explained the situation. Someone would come, she promised. Do not call the police.

He hoped no one downstairs in this hotel had listened in. There was nothing one could do about that. Nothing but hurry the Guzman siblings out of here. "You can fill in anyone you wish about this when you get to the house," he said to Francisco. "I would not mind having the assistance of Gustavo."

"I understand." Then he and Elena were away.

Wilk returned to Gunther's body. Not too much blood. That was good. There were newspapers, yesterday's, on the coffee table. He slipped some of these under the dead man's torso though it might be too late for it to matter much. One of Elena's bullets had hit him in the left shoulder, another through the lungs. It might have nicked the heart too. Maybe the others had missed.

He examined the pistol, a Walther P38. It was professional. That was no home-made suppressor. The whole thing was the weapon of an assassin, a man who knew what he was doing. Wilk berated himself for not having noticed the weapon. But Gunther wouldn't have carried it on his person. It would have come out of concealment at the moment he was ready to use it.

He had waited patiently for that moment.

~

Jack surveyed the room. "This could have been tricky. It helps that it's the middle of the night." Three men Wilk assumed to be agents were coming and going. They wore white coats, like doctors.

"The management now believes someone in this room had an infectious disease. People are ready to accept the worst about foreigners. They'll be entirely willing to keep that quiet. Our boy

STEPHEN BROOKE

here —” He nodded toward the corpse. “Will be a contagious patient when we wheel him out.”

“What about the blood?”

“We’ll use the pretense of disinfecting to clean up the place. Yes?” One of agents had come over. He whispered something into Singer’s ear. “Send him in.”

A moment later, Gustavo was admitted to the room. “Gustavo Peres, right? I suppose you have been told what happened here.”

“I have, sir, though I make little sense of it.”

“Wilk can help you with that. It would be best if both of you left the rest of this to us.” He frowned momentarily. “This has become much more serious than we realized. Our people in Havana thought you were no more than a sideshow, Wilkins.”

“I’d just as soon get out,” admitted Wilk. “Remember there are a couple stray slugs somewhere in here.” He turned to Gustavo. “You have a car?” He addressed him in Spanish.

“A taxi, *Senor*. I told the driver to wait.”

“Then let us share it and I’ll fill you in. Let me get Elena’s luggage. You can take it on to the house.”

“You will not come?”

“Tomorrow. For now, my own hotel room would be better.” Surely it was best not to intrude on the Guzmans right then.

“We’ll send Mr. Guzman’s luggage along tomorrow,” promised Jack Singer. “We know the place.”

Wilk’s own luggage would go there tomorrow as well. It was time he took Vicki up on her invitation. He followed Gustavo out the door.

"SHE TOOK A FLIGHT OUT to Havana early this morning. She claimed things here had become too much for her."

For the best, thought Wilk, for the best, but his heart was like stone in his chest. "You think she will be safe?"

"Gustavo accompanied her. Come and sit with us." He followed Vicki inside. All the Guzmans, all save the one he wanted to see, were there, spread across the room. Its wide windows overlooked the patio and pool.

Would Elena have gone had he stayed with her last night? Or even came a few hours earlier this morning — how could he know? The girl had flown away and maybe he would see her again, in time. But it would not be the same. It couldn't be.

Teresa was standing by a grand piano in the far corner of the room, idly running a forefinger across the keys. "Are you going to play something, darling?" her husband called. He had been gazing out across the grounds. There were men posted out there. Wilk had seen them coming in, could see them now.

"I was never very good," she objected. "My father wasted money on lessons for me."

"For all of us," added Francisco. "Not a bit of talent in the family."

"Until he married it," replied his sister.

Francisco's bland expression fell away for only a second. Wilk caught the flash of hatred before the boy regained his composure and said, "Our Wilk was a friend of the great Paderewski."

"Wow! Really? Oops, sorry Mr. Morris." Rick had been standing quietly by the wall, almost invisibly — not so easy for a man of his size — acting only as bodyguard. "I have some of his recordings," he added as a sort of apology.

"I knew him politically, not artistically, for the most part,"

STEPHEN BROOKE

said Wilk. "But I have sat in his parlor and listened to him play." He chuckled. "While sipping wine from his vineyard."

"I hear his mind was going in his later years," spoke Teresa.

"He did get confused at times." That hadn't mattered greatly to him in those days. Paderewski had become a symbol. He had never been a friend.

"Did Elena seem — all right when she left?" Wilk addressed this to no one in particular.

"Not really," said Arty. "It is a serious matter to kill a man."

Wilk nodded. "Even when one has done it before."

Francisco leaned forward, asking almost a little too eagerly, "You remember your first time?"

How could anyone forget such a thing? "It was in war. That is different." But maybe not so different. He had fought duels in the air, airplane against airplane, man against man. His eye caught Rick's. He knew of such things. He had killed. None of these others could quite understand.

He wondered if Elena had taken her gun with her.

~

"It was almost amusing to see you and Elena standing there in the nude." Francisco turned his head to the man reclining on the next lounge. "Had I not also been so terrified." He took a sip from his daiquiri. That seemed to be his drink of choice this afternoon. "Why did I not know about you two?"

"You were distracted," replied Wilk.

A laugh. "That I was! Ah, I am so stupid, my friend." Francisco lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. "I truly believed there was something between you and the evil stepmother."

"You would not like me as an evil stepfather?"

"A great improvement from my true father. I watched him

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

grow corrupt. I watched him flaunt his mistresses before my mother."

"He did that to Vicki too."

"And she paid him back in kind. This I do not hold against her."

His only true grudge was that she was not his mother. And perhaps the fact that she controlled the money. Wilk could do nothing about either of these.

There was no evidence Vicki had taken another lover. When or if the family fell back into their old ways in Havana, he very much expected that to change. She seemed the sort of woman who wanted a man with her, who needed one. It was likely he would be out of all their lives by then.

"*Senor Wilkins!*" came a call from the house. "*Telefono!*" That would be Juanita. She refused to speak English to him, taking the view that anyone who knew Spanish should use it. It was only civilized to do so. He went in and took the receiver from her.

"Ah, Wilkins," came the response to his hello. "Singer here. We should get together at your convenience. No hurry!"

For a moment, Wilk was not even sure what day of the week it was. Things had been confusing lately. Hmm, Thursday, that was it. "We could meet tomorrow," he told the agent. "Morning?"

"Let's make it later. Lunch maybe."

"All the same to me. Where?"

"I'll send a car to pick you up. A taxi."

"Um." Why the secrecy? "Very well."

"Good. See you then. No need to dress." With that he hung up.

Was the young man playing spy games with him? On second thought, maybe there was a need for them. There were dangers out there. Men had twice tried to kill him recently. No, three

STEPHEN BROOKE

times. He was forgetting the Goose. Him and Elena — they were the common element to all the incidents. Maybe he should just say ‘job done’ to Jack Singer tomorrow and send his bill. Maybe he should leave this house. There didn’t seem much else for him to do here.

He went back out to the pool but didn’t return to his lounge. Wilk stood and stared at the water, remembering a young woman stroking back and forth. Only yesterday. Only yesterday.

~

“His name is not Gunther. You could have guessed that, I am sure. And though he is German, he did not come here from Germany.”

“One of those Nazi fugitives Bob Dunn told me about.” He had already decided that was the most logical explanation.

“Exactly, though the boy was a bit young to have played much of a role in the war.”

At least Wilk now knew it was improbable that either Francisco or Elena had anything to do with those Nazis. Not impossible but improbable.

Singer had been in the back of the cab when it picked him up at the front gate. Whether it was a normal taxi or the driver was someone who worked for the agency, he could not tell. The man did not speak to them.

Now they sat in a little diner by the bay and the driver leaned on the fender of his Plymouth. It was time Wilk came out with it. “Is there any point in me continuing? This all seems much bigger than me and my acquaintance with the Guzman family.”

Jack chewed on his burger a moment, swallowed before answering. “You may be right. If you want to call it quits, submit your statement and that will be that. However,” he continued, “if

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

you care about those people — any of them — you are in a position to help keep them safe.”

“I think the only one I really cared about is gone.” He toyed with a french fry. He was not overly fond of this sort of American food.

“Oh, so that is it.” No sooner had he said this than Singer sat back in the booth and shook his head. “Sorry, I jumped to a very simplistic conclusion and judged you accordingly. But Elena leaving is a part of this, isn’t it?”

Wilk did not answer at once. He gazed out, gazed at the waiting taxi, at the passing traffic, at the docks across the street, and the bay and Key Biscayne beyond. This place was all windows, all glass. Even most of the walls seemed made of glass bricks. Everything was too visible, too open.

He could see too much. “A very big part, yes.” He turned back to his companion. “I don’t know if I can find an excuse to sponge off the family much longer. That’s what it looks like I am doing.”

“They are going to be here another three weeks?”

“Two and a half. That assumes Vicki doesn’t take the place for another month.”

“Rent will almost certainly go up for the season,” said Jack. “Starting November or December.”

Why hadn’t he thought of that? Wilk had been aware rents did go up. Hotel room rates, too. “I am pretty sure they are still paying rent on the villa in Havana. Vicki is.” Was Elena there now? He hoped so, with Gustavo to watch over her.

Jack seemed amused by his intermittent reveries. Or perhaps bemused. “Arty Morris would probably hire you as a bodyguard if you asked.”

Wilk had to laugh at that. “No doubt. But it might make more

STEPHEN BROOKE

sense for Loup to do a bit of consulting for him. If you don't mind me getting paid by both sides at once."

"Both? I fear there are far more than just two sides to this, Wilk. And I hope you will stay on until we can figure out what they are."

Wilk sighed. He had to admit that he did feel some concern for these people, this Guzman family he had barely known a little while ago. "For a while," he said.

HE HAD TO TRUST SOMEONE. That would have been Elena were she still there.

Not Teresa. Her first loyalty would be to her husband and Wilk knew he did not trust him. Perhaps Francisco. But what would be the good of that? The boy seemed to stay aloof of any plots and politics concerning the family. There was no way in, there.

Gustavo? The bodyguard was a riddle. And, again, not at the center of things, or not apparently so, and now in Havana. He trusted Rita more but she was stuck in Naples and seemingly only a bit player in this drama.

That left Vicki. Could he let her in on this nebulous mission of his? After all, they all knew he was doing something of the sort. That might be one reason there was an unspoken agreement to tolerate his presence.

Or, back around to Elena. He could follow her to Cuba. No one would be surprised. Eventually, the rest of the family would show up.

No, no. He did not want to put the girl at further risk. He did not want to use her. Let Elena go her own way and be better off without his involvement.

Singer had brought up the ‘mob’ again. The agent had thrown out the idea there could be a struggle going on among Morris’s associates — a ‘family’ he had called them. “Just one theory,” he said. This was an area quite outside of Wilk’s expertise.

Yet it was as old as mankind. He rolled over, trying to get comfortable. A ceiling fan turned slowly overhead. He could hear the faint swoosh of the paddles, the tone changing subtly through each revolution. Miami days were hot in the summer, and nights not much better, despite the city being by the ocean. The Gulf

STEPHEN BROOKE

Stream flowed too close to shore, the waters remained too warm to give relief. More and more buildings were installing air conditioning but there was none in this house.

He got up, walked to the open window. He could hear geckos calling. One heard them in Havana too. It was never completely dark here. There were too many city lights. Someone smoked a cigarette down by the gate. One of the guards. Wilk suspected there was someone from the agency out there on the other side of the gate, keeping tabs on them.

Or maybe the Guzmans really were a sideshow and not important enough for that. Singer was right — there were more than two sides here and the agency was one of them. Who knew what their objectives might be?

He slipped into his swim trunks, wrapped a bath robe around himself, the Beretta in one of its pockets, and went down to the pool. Small landscape lights shone around the patio, and more in the pool itself. There was not much of anyone else here to intrude on his swim, only Vicki and Francisco. The Morrisises were at their hotel, and Rick with them.

The servants should be allowed to come and swim at night, he decided. He should plot with them to seize the pool. Elena's anarchist collective would surely approve of such a secret plan. Ah, but he needed her here to lead the revolution. He could not do it himself. Wilk stroked up and down the length of the pool. It was not so far; the pool was not large.

Someone else splashed in. He lifted his head, treaded water. Vicki. He would have been greatly surprised if Francisco had left his bed. She paddled over to him.

"You have let your hair get wet." He had never seen her allow this before. She would not even fully enter the pool, but had

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

lounged half-in along its edge, keeping her head well above the water.

"No one will see me but you," she replied. "And you do not mind if my hair is messy, do you?"

Wilk thought it an improvement. "You should always wear it down," he told her. "It becomes you."

"Oh, you have noticed me, Mr. Wilkins. There is hope for us yet."

"Perhaps," he said, and then was unsure whether to continue. "Perhaps we should let people think so. It would help explain my continued presence."

"They already know you are a spy. Arty wonders greatly who you work for." So do I, Wilk told himself.

"But if you wish to pretend to be my lover, that is quite acceptable. You will have to sleep in my room, you know."

"No, you mustn't give in so easily. I am only beginning my pursuit."

"Not that any girl can withstand your charms, Wilk. Will you follow Elena after a while?"

"I am not sure. Perhaps it would be best if I didn't."

"Perhaps. One never knows." Vicki stroked to the side of pool and pulled herself up to sit on the coping. Wilk came up beside her.

"I thank you for saving Elena from that horrible boy," she said. "And Francisco, too. I would never wish him harm." He only nodded at this, though he could have pointed out that Elena was the one to save them. She continued. "Was Francisco a target?"

"He wasn't, I think. Gunther had no particular reason to kill Francisco. He intended him to be only a convenient fall guy."

"Fall-guy? What does that mean?"

STEPHEN BROOKE

"Someone who could be blamed for the crime."

"Oh, I see. And it would look like he killed himself then. But was this German there to kill you or Elena?"

"I've asked myself that over and over, Vicki."

Wilk slipped back into the cool water. Vicki followed him a moment later. The guard smoked another cigarette.

~

Francisco had the newspaper spread on the breakfast table. It was not the local paper but one from Havana and only a day old. The Guzmans had it delivered every day.

"There was an attempt on Presidente Vargas," he told anyone willing to listen.

"When?" asked Teresa, who had come over early and alone — unless one counted Rick. Arty was on the golf course.

"Two days ago. Gunmen right on the capitol steps in Montelano. Both were shot down by his guards."

"Vicki," called out Teresa, "is he your first cousin or second? I can never remember."

Vicki turned from where she stood in the next room, gazing out the wide windows. Wilk was disappointed that her hair was up again this morning. Not that it mattered to him. "First cousin, once removed." She came in to them, through an arched doorway. Her heels clacked on the red-brown tile floor. "Only toast?" she asked.

Francisco turned a page and looked up. "We told Juanita not to bother with anything for us."

"I had already eaten at the hotel," added Teresa.

"I'll cook you something," offered Wilk. "What would it be this morning?"

"You are a good cook, of course," said Francisco.

He shrugged. "One learns a few skills."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"Most do not," observed Vicki. "I think I shall have only a little coffee now."

"That I can make." Teresa came to her feet, picking up the empty pot. "My brother and I have drank it all up."

Wilk followed her into the kitchen. Even if Vicki wanted none, he could cook some breakfast for himself. There was a bowl of eggs on the counter. Onions too, and milk in the refrigerator. Refrigerators were a great invention. The Guzmans still used an icebox back in Havana, and several blocks of ice were delivered to the villa each morning.

Make enough for her too, he told himself as he whisked, and he added two more eggs. If some is left uneaten, so be it. Too bad they have no dog to give leftovers. None of the Guzmans seemed to keep pets. Maybe Arty had a dog back in Chicago. He was the sort of man who might have a setter or some other hunting dog, but never use it.

Behind him, Teresa put the percolator on the range, turned the gas burner up high. Wilk kept himself from shaking his head. He did not approve of percolators. But it came with this house, part of the furnishings.

He lit another burner and set a commodious saute pan on it. Teresa had returned to the breakfast room. How welcome might the woman be in her homeland? She never accompanied her husband on his business trips south. The chopped onion first. It sizzled in the melted butter.

A couple minutes later he set a tray with toast and omelet in the center of the table. Teresa was already pouring coffee. "Sure you do not want some?" he asked Vicki, who had again wandered to the windows. She wore flared red trousers this morning, and a simple white cotton blouse. There was fresh red polish on her fingernails.

STEPHEN BROOKE

"Perhaps a little. Oh, you knew I would say yes and brought an extra plate." She sat down and let him serve her.

Francisco sniffed. "Maybe I should have put in an order too. Can we hire Wilk as our new cook and take him back to Havana?"

"He may move in permanently if he wishes," responded his stepmother. Was she playing the role he hinted at last night or merely making a joke?

Or might she even be serious? Teresa and Francisco would have to make of it what they would. As would he.

"Arty wants to take us all out to a nightclub tonight," spoke Teresa. "Before we get on a plane tomorrow and head back to Chicago."

"So soon? We must go then," said Vicki. "Wilk will be my escort for the evening."

"My pleasure," he said.

~

The club proved a pale imitation of those in Havana. Maybe that was all to the good. It was likely Rick could have directed them to a better place. The bodyguard remained close, sitting at the bar not so far from their table.

"One of Mr. Morris's business associates owns the joint," he had confided to Wilk. He had also informed him he would be out of a job shortly. Rick was not going to be on that plane with the Morrises. "Mrs. Morris asked me to drive the Chrysler back to Naples. I'm on my own after that."

Wilk wondered if a man with Rick's connections was ever truly on his own. He did not have much time for wondering, for Vicki was an indefatigable dancer and kept him busy through the evening. A much better dancer than he, too, especially when it

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

came to the rumbas and sambas the band played. They spoke of nothing on the dance floor.

In an interlude, while the women disappeared into the powder room, Arty Morris leaned in, saying, "I can guess at who you are working for, Wilk, and I think we are on the same side. More or less."

Francisco gave no indication he was listening. He was getting quite drunk and also staring at the young bandleader quite a bit.

"I had no intention of involving myself in anything when I flew into Havana. It was only to say goodbye to an old friend." Even that had been something of a whim. He had been meeting with a client in San Francisco when he heard. Wilk did a fair amount of business on the west coast, research for companies interested in trade in the Far East. Margaret Jones was dealing with all of those for the time being. Quite competently, he trusted.

"But you were sucked in, were you?" asked Arty. "My business depends on working with these aristocratic families. Families like Vicki's."

He made it sound somehow distasteful. "Someone has to run things," responded Wilk. "Someone must be responsible."

"Those who are able should run things. Those who have made something of themselves." Arty took another pull on his whiskey and soda.

"That is only another form of oligarchy. And it is worse than some because those on top see their position as something they deserve rather than as an obligation."

"Damned right I deserve it," said Arty. "I worked hard." He hadn't understood at all. "I guess I don't need to tell you to be careful," he concluded. They spoke no more of it. Wilk

STEPHEN BROOKE

wondered whether Morris actually did guess correctly about who had hired him.

It was past midnight when they returned to the house. Gustavo sat on the front steps, waiting for them.

I MUST DO WHAT IS right for once. That closed the note Elena had scrawled and left behind. The gist of the rest of it was that she had gone off to join the revolutionaries in her homeland.

Not one person there thought this at all a good idea.

"I flew back at once when I discovered this," the stocky bodyguard told them.

"The proper course," said Vicki. "You must now follow her."

"I will need the aid of someone who knows the rebels," stated Gustavo. "Rita Santamaria."

Everyone there but Teresa knew who that was. "He means Betsy. Explanations later," said Arty. His wife would have to be content with that.

"Is it safe for Gustavo to be in your country?" asked Wilk. Or Rita, for that matter.

"I have had him there with me," said Arty.

To which Vicki added, "And I send him sometimes on errands of my own." She went on, so low they could barely hear her, "Errands of which Raoul was unaware."

It was obvious not Arty nor anyone else had been aware of them either. "I keep in touch with my family there," was all she offered in explanation.

Morris accepted this with a shrug. "I'll be flying down soon. Teresa and I shall return to our home first." He turned back to Gustavo. "If you think you need Rita, Rick can drive over to Naples and fetch her. Hmm, and Rick, maybe you had better remain my employee for a while. If you are willing. Bring the woman back here and stick with the Guzmans until you hear from me."

"Okay, Boss. Um, where should I leave the Chrysler?"

STEPHEN BROOKE

"Put it in a garage somewhere. It's not important." The big man nodded. He had all he needed to know.

"And we must all return to Havana as soon as we can," said Vicki. "How many? Eight? Yes. Then we can plan our campaign."

Was that right? Wilk counted them in his head. Rick, Gustavo, Rita, Francisco, Vicki, himself. And the two other bodyguards they had brought. Eight, though they need not all board an airliner to Havana together. It might be better to not be conspicuous. Maybe take different flights. Indeed, Wilk could see no real reason for Vicki and Francisco to go now at all.

Be that as it may. Vicki had decided to return. What if — yes, that was something he must check into while Rick retrieved Rita.

Wilk said nothing of his thoughts right then.

~

"So we sneak back to Havana?" asked Francisco.

"Only we four," Wilk replied. "If Vicki and you and the bodyguards openly fly into the airport, no one may notice the rest of us."

Vicki said, "I think it is a very good idea." Wilk recognized that she was in charge. What she thought was good was all that mattered. For now. "You already bought the tickets, of course?"

"I did. I recognize this may be completely unnecessary, but if anyone is watching us I would just as soon confuse them." Including the agency. It was primarily his own movement that concerned him. He was the one here people had been taking shots at. And Rita was perhaps a wild card. Best no one notice her either.

He turned to Rick. "You have your papers in order?"

"Sure. I've flown back and forth to Havana a bunch of times. Bodyguard jobs."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"Then we leave mid-morning," said Wilk.

Vicki nodded in approval. "And our flight takes off at Eleven. We'll see you tomorrow night in Havana."

"To Havana," said Francisco, raising his glass. "And to confusion."

~

Even with the four of them, the seats were only half filled. Rita had chosen to sit at the far back of the cabin, as she would have in most transportation in the States. On a flight to Cuba, Wilk felt that no longer applied. Especially in that the woman had dropped her southern accent and adopted one that might have convinced almost anyone she had grown up in Havana.

A pleated curtain divided cabin from cockpit. A young Cuban in cap and short-sleeved white shirt now stepped through that curtain and announced: "Gulf and Caribbean Aviation welcomes you. I am your co-pilot, Jaime Ortiz, and Captain Douglas Delaney is your pilot today. We will depart shortly and should arrive in Havana around Three this afternoon." He then repeated all this in Spanish.

"Please remain in your seats until we are airborne," he added. His eyes rested on Wilk a moment before he disappeared behind the curtain. The big Pratt and Whitney radials came to life a minute later, first on the left, then the right. The Catalina taxied across Biscayne Bay and rose into the air. Next stop, Havana.

Wilk recognized that he and his comrades could have taken the regular commercial flights, traveling one or two at a time, and been just as unobtrusive. The idea of riding in Doug's flying boat simply appealed to him — and they would all arrive at the same time and be able to get on with things. The course seemed to have straightened out, leveled off. He looked out to see Miami receding. That must be Key Biscayne over there. They would

STEPHEN BROOKE

follow the coast and a chain of islands down toward Key West before venturing across the Florida Straits to Havana.

An half-hour later, young Ortiz came out again and walked straight to Wilk's seat. "Doug would like to talk with you if you're willing to come up to the cockpit," he said.

"Gladly." He rose and went to the front. Ortiz remained with the passengers.

"Hi, Wilk," said Doug, and waved him toward his co-pilot's empty place. "I was almost ready to jettison you as a jinx."

"You're not the first person to think that," Wilk assured him.

"But you got the Goose to safety so I'll give you a second chance. I was shocked to hear about Sam. Never would've guessed he had a bad ticker."

"Did he have family? I'd like to send them something."

"None he ever told me about. I had him cremated and dumped the ashes on my last run to Nassau. Sam liked Nassau." Doug reached forward, adjusted something on his controls. "Ever fly one of these?"

"I had never piloted any flying boat until I was forced to take the controls on the Goose. Rarely flown anything with more than one engine."

"There were rumors you were a fighter pilot for the Chinese."

"There may have been some truth to those."

Doug chuckled at that. "You'll have to come and have a drink with me in Havana. Maybe I could get the truth out of you then."

"You're welcome to try. Is the Goose back in operation?"

"I need another pilot. I'm thinking of setting up a regular run to Key West with it. Used to make it part of this big bird's route but no one much wanted to stop there between Havana and Miami."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"Never been there."

"There is some place John Wilkins hasn't visited? Never would have expected it!" Delaney laughed at his jest. "Hey, I'll let you get back to your friends now. Remember that drink."

The friends were half-asleep. Rick was maybe completely asleep. Rita's eyes were fixed on the window and the sea below them. He sat down next to Gustavo. He had come to suspect the man had informed Vicki of everything that went on and ultimately served her. Maybe she even used him to keep tabs on Arty and the others.

What either's agenda might be he could not even guess. "We should go separately to the villa, don't you think?" he asked him. He had already decided this but wanted Gustavo to feel he was in on the decision.

"Yes, Senor, that would be a good idea. Rita and I can take a bus and walk in. It will be thought we are servants, maybe."

"Good enough. I suppose I'll bundle Bonaventura into a cab." They might or might not get there before the Guzmans.

There was no longer visible land. The Catalina was crossing the Florida Straits, a hundred and fifty kilometers or so, the last leg of its journey. Wilk could spy more than one ship plying its waters, freighters headed to and from Tampa or New Orleans or Veracruz or any of a hundred other Gulf ports. Maybe cruising somewhere above them was the Cubana DC-3 carrying Vicki and Francisco.

And somewhere, much further south, was Elena. Had she reached the land of her birth? He didn't even know how she had intended to travel, how she intended to enter the country, whether anyone in that country would welcome her.

He only knew he would be following after her.

DARKNESS WAS SETTLING ON THE villa. Wilk watched the taxi bearing Rick Bonaventura enter its gates. He had chosen to get out a hundred meters down the road and would walk in later.

He had, however, entrusted his luggage to big Rick. Wilk wanted to look things over. Was anyone watching the house? He had no high estimate of his abilities in discerning such things. He was no spy, not really. He never had been.

The wall and gate out front were mostly for show, and to provide privacy from the street. They did not extend around the grounds. He could go in somewhere else without too much effort. There was a low fence and there were cactus, yes. He had seen those when he stayed here. The cab was coming back out.

Someone coming from the other way. Two, on foot, and from their shapes he knew them to be Rita and Gustavo, the broad shouldered man, the thin woman. Not too different in height were they. It was too dark to make out features. They spoke briefly to the man at the gate and entered. Watch a little longer, he told himself. There was no need to hurry.

But it was growing difficult to see anything. He slowly moved forward, keeping to the other side of the street. He almost bumped into the man who unexpectedly stepped out in front of him. "Wilkins?" the stranger said, in American-accented English. "We've been expecting you."

Wilk eased the Browning back into its holster. "You and Bob Dunn?" he asked.

"Right. And we're not the only ones. There's a fellow down that way keeping an eye on things too." He indicated the direction with a tilt of his head.

"Do you know for whom he works?"

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"No, sir. We'll follow him and see if we can find that out. Dunn will want to speak to you in a day or two."

If I stay that long, thought Wilk. "Have the Guzmans arrived?"

"Not yet. Only Morris's man and some servants." Wilk had to smile at that. It was good the darkness concealed it.

"I would probably have your friend down the road looking down a muzzle by now," he said. "But I guess you have your own ways of doing things." He crossed the road and rang the bell at the gate. A minute later he was inside.

~

"I may or may not have been recognized by someone," said Wilk. He would not mention the agency and it was not of great importance. Everyone interested would soon know he was there, but maybe not before he was gone again.

Vicki gave him a smile. "With your looks you could walk down any street in Latin America and not merit a second glance." It was true. The dark hair and mustache, his deep tan, would arouse no interest.

"As long as he does not open his mouth," said Francisco. "Wilk's Spanish is not so convincing."

"There is an odd accent, too," agreed Vicki.

"I learned the language in the Philippines. Along with a bit of Tagalog."

"He is just boasting now," Francisco felt.

"It was only a smattering," said Wilk in his own defense. "If one knows Spanish and Mandarin, that's more than enough to do business there."

Francisco snorted but made no further comment.

"How are we to get into the country?" Wilk wanted to get to

STEPHEN BROOKE

business. The question was addressed to no one in particular, but Vicki and Gustavo would be the ones with the answers.

Yet it was Rita who answered. "We should learn more first, Senor. I could go ahead maybe."

"And how would you communicate with us?" asked Gustavo.

"All this we can speak of in the morning," spoke Mrs. Guzman, rising. "Let us eat and get some sleep and try to make our plans then."

Francisco stood as well. "As good a plan as any. Who needs a drink before dinner?"

~

Why was Vicki involving herself in all of this? Maria Victoria Vargas de Silva Guzman had no obvious stake in the welfare of her stepdaughter. Certainly, she seemed to have some affection for the girl, would wish her safe. But to throw whatever resources she had into retrieving Elena?

There could be more. Wilk knew now that Vicki had kept communications open with her homeland. Perhaps that was innocuous. Perhaps it was no more than keeping in touch with her family there. Perhaps she wished to know if the climate grew favorable for her return. He doubted she had any political ambitions.

The lights of Havana filled the sky. It was a big city and an old one. A corrupt city. He could not see much from his room, only the forms of other houses, neighboring houses, far from the tumultuous crowded downtown, a light showing from a window here and there.

It would be good to return to a young town like Sydney. It was a young country, Australia, but a good place for an old man. Wilk had no illusions about becoming one. Growing old was the price for once having been young.

“WE STILL HAVE RAOUL’S PRIVATE plane.”

“I thought that had been sold,” said Francisco, looking up from the half-eaten sugar-drenched pastry on his plate.

“No one wants such an old craft. Not when there are American airplanes available. I pay a little to keep it at an airfield outside the city.” Vicki shrugged. “Just in case.”

It is not necessary to say that Wilk was interested. “He wasn’t still using the Dragon?”

“Oh, no, not that old! It was replaced by a German airplane.”

There were plenty of the old De Havillands operating yet back in Australia and through the Orient. They were perfectly good machines. But that was not pertinent. “I am not sure it would be useful. We could look at it anyway.”

“Of course, we know we are not going,” said Francisco. “As we know you can’t be stopped. We shall trust Rita and Gustavo to look after you.”

“Yes, they must take turns pushing my wheelchair.” The pair was off laying plans somewhere, even as they spoke. So Wilk liked to imagine.

One of the guards entered. “Senora,” he said to Vicki, “there is a gentleman outside. An American.” His eyes flickered to Wilk and back to Mrs. Guzman. “I do not think much of his looks.”

“I doubt he is dangerous, and you can keep an eye on him. Maybe Arty sent him.”

“I suspect not,” said Wilk.

~

Wilk and Bob Dunn found privacy in the library. Despite its name, the room held remarkably few books. The agency man listened to his story without interruption, sipping the coffee the

STEPHEN BROOKE

maid had left with them. "I've no doubt there were some edits," he said at the end. "That is your right."

He brought a folder from his attache, but did not open it at once. "You were involved with Germans in the past. Some of them Nazis."

"It is so. I was not there during the war, you know. I left Europe in Thirty-six."

"But you knew important men in the government."

"Diplomats, mostly. And, yes, I worked with the Germans once or twice in those days, when our aims coincided."

"Didn't we all? We have some photos here. All taken in the streets of Montellano." He handed a sheaf of black and white pictures over.

Wilk took his time going through them before handing them back. "I do not recognize any of these men."

Dunn nodded and pulled one picture out. "You might be interested in this one. He operated in the area where your family lived."

Wilk picked the photo up and looked it over again. A jowly man standing in a cobblestone street looked back at him. "Around Danzig?"

"Yes. Captain Ernst Wiler. We believe he ordered the executions of hundreds of Jews and Poles. Maybe more than hundreds."

Wilk stared at the German officer. "He lives in Montellano now."

"No. He and more like him have enclaves in the countryside. Guzman let them build and Vargas has done nothing about it since. It is possible he has even let more in."

This man could have ordered the death of Theo Trott. If not, someone like him. They were all guilty. "Men I dealt with in

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

those days might think me best dead," he said. "I may have been the target all along."

"It's possible, but there were already plots in motion. Guzman's assassination occurred before you became entangled."

"There are always plots in motion, but I can still see no point in murdering Raoul."

"Clearing the way for another Guzman, maybe. Or someone feared he was plotting to come back. Who's to say?"

"Your people wouldn't have wanted either of those to happen."

"Nor would your friend Arty Morris. We'd rather maintain the status quo. Vargas is just the man for that."

"The perfect compromise, liked by no one."

"Your friends the Guzmans have been filling your ears."

"True enough, but I think they are right." Not that he cared. "You understand I have but one objective at this moment and that is to bring Elena Guzman back."

"We don't want her there any more than you do. Especially if some faction uses her to further their cause." Dunn put down his cup, gathered his papers and photos. "Our intelligence tells us she flew into a neighboring nation. It is assumed she crossed the border. We will not be involved officially in anything you do but, ah, that doesn't mean we won't be interested. And we still have a contract with Loup."

"To gather data and provide a report," replied Wilk. He rose. "I shall have to hire a typist."

The agent stood, took his hand. "Be careful, Wilkins. It's a volatile situation down there."

Politics had already been volatile, always had been volatile there, thought Wilk. Now mix in Nazis and Marxist rebels and

STEPHEN BROOKE

criminal elements from the States. Add greedy corporations and the agency that was willing to do their bidding.

He showed the man to the door. One of the guards showed him to the gate and his driver waiting in a shiny-black late-model Hudson.

~

It was a small private airstrip. Quonset huts stood beside a ragged grass field, and there was no tower. A windsock was filled with the afternoon.

Rick sat up front with the driver, Vicki and Wilk in the back. A taxi, as usual. The Guzmans owned no cars. Yet they had an airplane sitting here, unused. Vicki really should sell it, Wilk thought, for whatever she could get. "It is over there," she said as the cab rolled to a stop.

He took in the three engines, the dull sheen of its corrugated metal skin. "A Junkers." A bigger aircraft than he had expected and actually a little more modern. The Germans had used those Fifty-twos right through the war.

A small man in khaki approached them as they walked toward the plane. A battered captain's cap perched askew on his head. "Welcome, Senora Guzman," he called out.

"Capitan Riberon," she replied. "Meet my friend Senor Wilkins. He is a pilot." As good a way to introduce him as any. She made no mention of Rick. The Cuban would recognize him for what he was.

"You wish to take the Senora's airplane up? I must ask if you are licensed." The Senora's plane? Raoul must have paid no attention to how she managed things.

"In Australia," Wilk replied. "But I've no plans to fly today." He doubted he would ever fly this lumbering tri-motor, but one never knew.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"Ah, very well, Senor." He gave Vicki an exaggerated sidelong look. "We could make some money with it if Senora Guzman would let me remove the seats."

"And fill it with bananas?" she laughed.

"Something of that sort. I find few passengers for such an airplane."

"The capitan sometimes takes a charter. It helps defray our expenses."

Wilk doubted the plane paid for itself. However, it was good that it was maintained and flown occasionally. The tires looked like they could use replacement. Cuban weather was unkind to rubber.

"Charters?" he asked.

"Mostly businessmen," explained Riberon. "Taking investors or associates somewhere to look at something. It is admitted they like the luxury of the cabin."

Wilk could see why when they entered. The normal rows of seats had been replaced by velvet-upholstered booths. A bar was positioned at the rear of the cabin and he suspected sleeping compartments lay beyond the door beside it. Not a practical aircraft for commercial use.

And it was a tad shabby, wasn't it? There had probably been no money spent on the interior's upkeep.

He peered from one of the curtained ports. An automobile had pulled up across the field. A man leaned out of one of the windows and Wilk could see the flash of sunlight on binocular lenses. It sat there a couple minutes before turning and driving away.

It could be anyone, he told himself, on any side. He felt some comfort in the familiar heft of the Browning under his jacket.

"We left two more just like it behind," Vicki was saying.

STEPHEN BROOKE

“With the original interiors, of course. They were to be the beginning of a national airline but now they just fly equipment and workers to the mining sites.” Her smile was a little sad. “Arty’s company leases them.”

So this plane would be unlikely to attract attention if it sat down at some airfield away from the main cities. But it would not do for the mission they planned now.

That called for a much stealthier approach.

"IT WOULD BE BEST TO enter at the coast."

"But a boat would take days," objected Rita.

Gustavo only shrugged. "Then it takes days."

The woman looked to the third there, her expression a bit sly. "Not if Senor Wilk had his flying boat again."

The Goose should be able to cross the Caribbean with no problem. It would be wise to take on a little extra fuel. Especially if there were to be a return flight! "Would there be any way to conceal it?"

"There are many little hidden bays. And friendly people, people who know me."

It was the best plan Wilk had heard. "I do not know whether Delaney would be willing to let me take it again." Nor whether he had enough funds, were Doug amenable to the idea.

"You can only ask," felt Gustavo. "Or find another airplane of its kind."

"That could take days too." But he would go to Doug and make an offer. If the agency didn't cover it, Vicki might. Would the man be there? He might be piloting the Catalina north again by now on its four day schedule, Havana to Miami Beach to Nassau, and then back along the same route.

He was not sure how long Delaney laid up between those circuits. He should go at once. The sun was already sinking. He returned his attention to the lean woman across the library table. "You say you are known."

"I was with the communists for a time," said Rita. She no longer sounded, nor even looked, like Betsy. It seemed natural to see her as Latina now, not an American black. Yet the differences were subtle.

"She became disenchanted," interjected Gustavo.

STEPHEN BROOKE

"They promised change. Any change seemed good to me once."

Wilk had to keep himself from nodding knowingly. This was not the time for that. "I have never been that fond of change. So we fly to the coast somewhere, if I can procure the plane. Near La Corona?"

"Near enough," said Rita.

~

"I'll tell you what," said Doug Delaney. "I'll sell it to you."

What of the new route to Key West? "I haven't the time for that," Wilk replied. "I need the Goose now."

"This moment?"

"Well, no, but soon. Tomorrow." Wilk did wish he could get started this very night.

Doug sighed. "It's better than letting it just sit here, I suppose. I'll need a sizable deposit if I'm to let you fly off with it. I suppose I could list you as an employee for the insurance." He sounded doubtful of that.

"If anything happens, Loup will cover what your insurance doesn't. How big a check do you need right now?"

Wilk filled out the necessary forms and handed Delaney a check drawn on the account of Maria Victoria Guzman. The man's eyebrows went up on seeing the name but he said nothing of it.

"I'm doing a morning flight north. We've settled into that schedule lately. If I'm not here to see you off, I'll wish you a good flight to Merida right now. And drink to it, as well." He sloshed rum into both their glasses.

Merida was what the flight plan would say. Doug surely knew his Goose would not be headed there. "To a successful flight,"

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

said Wilk, draining his glass. He rose and went out into the warm Cuban night. Gustavo waited by the cab.

"It is all set," he told the bodyguard.

~

There was little to do in the way of further preparation. Weapons? There were none in the Guzman household save those carried by the guards. Gustavo had a snub-nosed revolver. Rita still carried her little Beretta.

"Take this," Wilk told her, handing her his own Beretta. "It will be more effective." The twin to it, Elena's pistol, was tucked into the back of his trousers, and the Browning rested in a shoulder holster.

She had left it behind, not wishing to be reminded of all that happened in Francisco's hotel room, maybe. Wilk himself did not mind being reminded of Elena, and the fact that she and this gun had saved his life.

The five conspirators ate together that night, the servants looking askance at Peres and Santamaria sitting down with their masters. Rick, they excluded. He had no part in this, nor was Wilk entirely ready to trust the big man. "Don't let him leave the house," he warned Vicki. "I'd as soon your son-in-law didn't know all the details of our actions." Nor those other Americans, the shady men with whom Arty was associated, the men who might be Bonaventura's true paymasters.

He was fairly well convinced now that Vicki was Gustavo's paymaster. As for her own goals, he remained uncertain. "My loyalty is to the family, not a cause," the man had confided in the cab. "The presidente was a good man but he lost his way. Now his children have become my duty, and his wife."

Wilk believed him, and that he could trust the man — up to a point. Rita he was less certain of. He knew almost nothing of

STEPHEN BROOKE

her. But a certain trust must be given these next days. Trust between all three of them.

"If we wish to arrive while there is still daylight, we must leave very early," Wilk told them all, "so I need some sleep before we go. There will be none to relieve me as pilot."

"We shall not keep you up too late," said Vicki. She wore her hair down, the dark waves pulled back and tied at the nape of her neck.

"Nor get you too drunk," Francisco added. "But let us drink to success at least once. You too, Gustavo." There had been no need to tell Rita Santamaria to drink. She had been holding her own from the start.

"The brandy." Vicki beckoned a maid to her side, whispered something. The girl disappeared. "We must drink the brandy of Raoul Guzman," she announced. "That which he carried with him from our home."

Francisco nodded approval. "It is time the bottle was opened."

The bottle appeared shortly. As far as Wilk could tell, it was a good cognac but nothing special. As glasses were filled all around, Vicki explained, "My husband, *el Presidente*, had this bottle on his plane when he left and declared he would open it when he was called back." She paused, remembering, it seemed. "That will never happen, so we toast now those who go to seek a different victory in our homeland. Raoul would surely approve."

He raised his glass with the others and toasted to their success. Then he excused himself, hoping to catch a few hours of sleep.

Vicki walked with him to his door. "I will be sleeping when you steal away, John Wilkins. I say goodbye to you now." She kissed his cheek, as she had before, but hesitated, perhaps, before stepping back. "May you find what you wish at the end of this journey."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

~

The docks were dark. A dim light shown from the hangar, and lights here and there in the harbor beyond.

"Ah, Senor Wilkins. Doug said to expect you." Jaime Ortiz gave a cursory glance at his companions. He had seen them before, on the flight from Miami. "The Goose is fueled up and fitted with the auxiliary tanks, as you requested." Those hung beneath each wing. The young pilot might have wondered why they were needed for a short jaunt to Yucatan.

Wilk was determined to make a complete inspection before taking off. There had been sabotage before. There could be sabotage again. Gustavo remained patient and impassive. Rita fidgeted. He took nearly half an hour to check everything of which he could think, and especially the fuel. That was the most vulnerable — a small hole in a tank mattered over a trip this long.

That would be not so much of a danger to their lives. They would be near the coast much of the way. But it could delay them, perhaps for days. "Satisfied," he said at last. "Let's go."

"You feared someone knew of your plans," observed Gustavo as they entered the Goose's compact cabin.

"I still do," he replied, and went to the cockpit.

The engines roared awake. The Goose taxied out into the darkness and took flight.

THEY WOULD WING TOWARD MERIDA at first, but veer southward before reaching the coasts of Yucatan. Then onward to their destination. Eight hours, perhaps. Maybe longer. Sometimes Rita and Gustavo slept. Sometimes they talked to each other. Once Rita came up and sat, speechless, in the co-pilot's chair, looking out at the sea before them.

When she tired of the view, she returned to the cabin.

Wilk stuck to the northern coast of Cuba, finally saying goodbye to the island at Cape San Antonio. He would have flown west from there to reach Merida but instead turned more southerly, into the Caribbean. The Yucatan peninsula would lie to his right; his destination ahead. He did not greatly fear detection if he remained far enough offshore.

He would bring the Goose in low when it came time to turn toward land. Rita had shown him their landing spot, a little north of La Corona, on a chart. She came up again. The woman was too restless to stay put long.

"Fly it for me a while, will you?" he asked. "I need to go relieve myself."

"Fly it, Wilk?" She looked almost panic-stricken.

"Just hold the wheel there steady and if anything goes wrong, yell as loud as you can." He left her before she could raise objections.

He expected to find her tense, clutching the wheel, on his return to the cockpit but instead she grinned widely at him. "I am flying! You must teach me this."

"Bring some food and coffee up and I'll give you your first lesson."

Rita returned with a carafe and cups and Cuban pastries. Wilk wished someone had thought to pack sandwiches. But she did not

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

ask for her lesson as they sat side by side, above an empty sea. "You must love Senorita Elena much to go after her like this."

"Maybe I do. Or maybe I just feel responsible."

"Yes. Duty drives all of us. Me, Gustavo, you. Different duties though, eh?"

Wilk was still to figure out what duty drove him. "Undoubtedly," he replied.

Rita seemed not to notice his reluctance to weigh in. "I do not understand what drives Senora Guzman."

"I haven't figured that one out either." He asked, "Are there those who would support her politically?"

"I think so." Her laugh was practically a cackle. "Gustavo would love for her to be Senora Presidente!"

"One man is not a movement." He chuckled with her but then spoke seriously. "Nor, I think, is Vicki Guzman a ruthless seeker of power. This does not mean I trust her."

"Do you trust me, Wilk?"

"More than her."

"Well, that is better than not at all. Now, what does this button do?"

~

A reasonably wide river mouth yawned before them. Docks and a village could be spied a few hundred meters in. Thick emerald jungle grew down close to the water.

It had not been long after noon when Wilk began a long turn toward the coast. The Goose had made excellent time. He came in low, though radar was still nearly nonexistent here. Best to be safe, and eyes could see high-flying airplanes too.

"Very good, Senor Wilk!" Rita had cried when she first spied land. "I know that point. We are only a few kilometers from our target."

STEPHEN BROOKE

Wilk was fairly proud of his accuracy. Even if he knew it was mostly luck. The seaplane had paralleled the beaches and offshore reefs until they reached this muddy flow, its dark plume spreading into the crystalline Caribbean. He banked to make his approach, up the river.

"There are waves," muttered Wilk. "And probably sandbars we can't see." Not to mention snags and logs in the river proper. And crocodiles. At least they didn't get as big as the salties back in Oz. He set the Goose down in the safest looking spot and trusted in luck, as he slowly taxied it up the stream.

It quickly grew almost too narrow for comfort. A little further up, it would be entirely hidden from above as the great trees threw their branches out over the water, forming a vault illuminated by soft green light. It was a very good place to hide the plane.

"Are the people here to be trusted?" he asked Rita. She was the one who seemed to know the place.

"More than most. There is much smuggling and they would not jeopardize that. And we can pay them to smuggle more fuel in while we are gone." Wilk thoroughly approved of that bit of initiative.

"How soon can we leave this hole of pestilence?" barked Gustavo. He scowled at the crowd gathered on the river bank. They were dark people, all of them, as dark as Rita.

She leaned out the door and jabbered at them in a language Wilk did not at all understand. No — there were somehow familiar words here and there in the odd patois. It was English, a very strange, lilting English, a bit like what he had heard from Jamaicans, but with Spanish sprinkled in. Maybe some other tongue, too.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"I think I sleep in the airplane tonight," declared Gustavo Peres.

"Wherever you sleep, be sure to use netting," said Rita. "The mosquitoes are thick here, and malaria and yellow fever are old companions to these people."

"A good excuse for more gin and tonics," Wilk told her. "Let's meet your friends."

He could not at all follow the exchange on the shore. It did get them room in one of the huts. Hammocks and mosquito nets too. Had Rita grown up in a place like this? If so, she had come far.

They would all go farther in the morning. Wilk hoped Gustavo was comfortable out in the Goose, as he drifted through the humid tropical night and into sleep.

~

"They know nothing of Elena and little of the rebels," reported Rita. "These people tend to be left alone and they are happy with that."

"Then we shall leave them alone, as well," Wilk said.

The flying boat was moved a little further upriver and concealed with branches. Rita assured them it would be safe here. She could not have missed her companions' skepticism. They gathered what gear they had, preparing for the next leg of the journey.

That leg would be by boat. Santamaria had already negotiated a price and Wilk paid it. He wasn't sure of the value of the money he carried; Francisco had handed him a thick fold of bills before they left. It was a long low boat with a noisy air-cooled engine, two cylinders. It might have powered a motorcycle once, or even a small automobile.

This boat was one that carried goods and passengers along the

STEPHEN BROOKE

coast regularly, some eight or ten leagues north from La Corona, and then back. How soon and how often depended on the engine and on the amount of trade. Its owner preferred a flexible schedule, which happened to bring it by this morning. "We can learn what is going on in La Corona," claimed Rita. "And we will all blend in well enough. No one is even likely to notice your accent, Wilk."

"We must use different names," said Gustavo. "Here are identity cards for you."

True spy-craft. Wilk was at least a little impressed. The stock on which his was printed was different, blue where theirs were cream. "You are to be a resident German," Gustavo told him.

He looked at his new name. "Hans Wulf? Ha, very good my friend."

"It was Senor Francisco's suggestion. I am Pedro and this is Carmelita."

"Again?" Rita made a face.

"Why create a new alias when we had a perfectly good one?" He looked toward the dock. "It is time to go."

The boat's owner, a large black man wearing plaid shorts and a broad-brimmed palm frond hat, was aggressively, if not very originally, cursing his recalcitrant engine. "It is a good thing a German engineer is among his passengers today," said Wilk, and went to help him get it started.

"THE NAME COMES FROM THE mountain peaks that rise behind the town," Rita informed him. They did look at least a little like a crown. The mountains drew closer to the coast here, and two spurs enclosed a large yet snug harbor. There were vessels of many sizes on its waters and at its wharves.

"That is the coast guard station," whispered Rita, pointing it out to him. "The cutter must be out on patrol." An old Grumman float biplane, painted white, rested by the dock. A limply hanging flag and little else marked the building's difference from the warehouses around it.

The boat bumped against a low dock, a floating platform. The motor ceased its agonized wheezing. Gustavo at once grabbed his bag and stepped out. They followed him.

"Will we take the train?" Wilk asked. He knew a line ran between this city and the capital.

"There is no reason to go to Montellano," answered Gustavo. Then he looked unsure and asked Rita, "Is there?"

"None at all. The rebels are not near the city."

"Good. We would fool no one in Montellano, whether we arrived by train or had flown in. There will be those watching for you, Senor Wulf. Me too. I am known."

He allowed Wilk to think on that a few seconds, and continued. "You are a mining engineer who is going into the mountains, and hired me and my woman to accompany you."

Was Rita his 'woman?' Wilk did not know what sort of relationship existed between the two. "We will equip ourselves here, then."

"Exactly. All we might need can be found in La Corona."

"Some of it legally," added Rita.

"But food first," said Wilk. "I starve."

STEPHEN BROOKE

~

After a while, Rita slipped away without a word. Gustavo seemed not even to notice so Wilk made no comment. The little restaurant in which they sat was nearly empty, for it had been near the time of siesta when they had entered. No one would do business in La Corona for a couple hours.

"We must buy all we need and leave before dark," said Gustavo. "I would not stay in this city overnight."

"So we need the equipment a traveler in the mountains might need. A tent?"

"Too heavy, maybe. More so if I must carry it, Senor Wulf." Gustavo was insisting on remaining in character.

They drank rather good coffee, coffee from the highlands not so far away. The only milk available came from a can. Wilk did not mind this. So had he drank coffee many times before.

Rita returned as quietly as she had departed. "I have learned much. Are we ready to go shopping?"

The shops were returning to life in the mid-afternoon. Nested pans and plates of metal they purchased, and thick colorful blankets. It could be cool high up. "A kerosene stove?" asked Wilk, looking at such an item.

"Wood fires are good enough," came Gustavo's firm reply. He was willing to allow a lantern. Only a small one.

And he was outvoted on the matter of a tent. "It will rain much," stated Rita. The item was added to the burdens carried by poor 'Pedro.'

"We lack only weapons now," said Rita, "and food. That we can get elsewhere, and for less money."

"We came armed," Wilk said. "We bought knives too." Those were of a practical sort and had been purchased with the other gear.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

The woman did not answer but led them into a neighborhood that could not quite be called a slum. The streets were paved with stone, but narrow and dirty, with many puddles left by the frequent rains. Houses and little shops crowded each other along the way. Bright colors marked new paint here and there. Most had faded to muted pastels. Clothes dried on lines above their heads and children stopped their play to solemnly watch them pass.

No adults exhibited curiosity but Wilk knew well they were being watched. "Here," said Rita, turning into a doorway like any other.

A skinny man sat on a stool behind a wooden counter, strewn with watches and cheap jewelry. Rita but nodded toward the closed door at the back of the room. He nodded back and paid them no more attention. Wilk had noted the bulge of a gun beneath his jacket.

Rita preceded them into the back room. "There are many laws against guns," she said. "They do little more than annoy the people."

"And drive up the prices," grumbled Gustavo. "Bribes must be paid to someone."

The room was lined with weapons, against the walls, in crates on the floor. The man inside might almost have been a twin of the one out front, thin and dark, save for his mustache. Brothers, surely, thought Wilk.

There were ancient Mosin-Nagant bolt-action rifles from Russia, and even more ancient Mausers. Those Wilk recognized as weapons once carried by the military here. He could make guesses as to how they found their way to this dealer. Several handguns hung from nails in the wall.

STEPHEN BROOKE

"We could get you a bigger revolver," he remarked to Gustavo, nodding toward the array.

"Mine will do. The Senors Smith and Wesson make fine pistols."

"We need carbines, I think," Rita told the proprietor. "Something short and light."

The two seemed to know each other. "Certainly, Senorita. Automatic?" He leaned forward, as if imparting a confidence. "I might be able to procure machine pistols. 'Grease Guns' from the United States."

She shook her head. "No. Impractical, and we can not wait. Those." She pointed to a pair of M-1 carbines, the same weapon Elena had identified in Naples. "May I look at them?"

"Of course, Senorita. You will find them to be in most excellent condition."

To Wilk she said, "Help me examine them."

They carefully went over each gun. The seller of arms had not lied; they were indeed in excellent condition. Practically new. Wilk had no great regard for the stopping power of their small round but saw the carbines could be a practical choice.

Rita confided, "The Americans have supplied many of these to the army here. And many have been sold by officials on the black market." To the dealer she said, "These might do. We shall look at your other merchandise before deciding."

He waved an arm toward the selection of weapons. "Feel free, Senorita." This was a part of negotiating. Everyone there knew it.

The bulk of the firearms were old sporting guns, and many in not the best of shape. There was more than one lever-action Winchester, chambered in the ubiquitous Thirty-thirty. "We

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

should have one rifle with more range and accuracy," he told Rita.

"Make a choice. That is your right as our leader." Wilk ignored the slight tone of mockery. "But not one so long it would be noticed."

He considered the Winchesters again, picking out the one in the best condition. As with the M-1s, the ammunition should be readily found. "This one," he told her.

She haggled for some time with the proprietor over the three rifles. At last, she said, "Throw in machetes for each of us and we shall have a deal."

"Done," replied the nameless merchant of firearms, and Wilk counted out the bills.

~

It was nearly dark when they boarded a *camion*, a truck pretending to be a bus. Their rifles were rolled up inside the tent.

The road wound beside a small river before veering off across the highlands. This was not the way to Montellano. A highway and the railroad tracks followed a different route to that city, to their west somewhere. They would travel further away from that route, hour by hour, through the night. The *camion's* headlights revealed only dirt road before them, extending into the darkness.

Gustavo snored, as did most of the other passengers around them. They were illuminated by a single dim amber light someone had fixed to the rear of the driver's cab. Rita and Wilk spoke in low voices, in English so none could eavesdrop. Or so it was to be hoped. I should teach her French, he thought, if she does not already know it. She seems to have a gift for languages.

And when would he have time for such a thing? Maybe when he taught her to fly! "What has made you smile?" she asked.

STEPHEN BROOKE

“Nothing but an odd thought,” he replied. “I am renowned for having them.”

“It is hard for me to find time for them. But maybe I shall have some this night, as well. We have many hours till we reach Jimena.”

“And then?” Rita had not been forthcoming about her plans.

“And then we go on.” Wilk was fairly certain the woman snickered.

“Ah, and I had hoped we would remain and live there, in a quiet village in the hills. You will marry me and we will have a cottage. Gustavo can live in the barn.”

“That is the oddest thought of them all, Wilk,” she said. “I think I shall try to sleep.”

Eventually, they both did.

"WE MIGHT GET AWAY WITH carrying them openly in the countryside. Especially yours, Wilk. It would be taken for a hunting rifle."

"It *is* a hunting rifle," Gustavo put in.

"But we have no papers for any of them," said Rita. The three rifles lay on a blue and red blanket spread on the earthen floor. "For now we keep them out of sight."

"Agreed," said Wilk. As the supposed leader here he had best weigh in.

Jimena was a tiny village nestled among scrub-covered hills. It was not an attractive nor a fertile land. "The best soil is in the mountain plateau," explained Rita. "It is volcanic. Much coffee is grown in the interior. Tobacco too."

"And that is where Montellano is located," said Wilk.

"It is. Those who live and rule there ignore this part of the country. That is why it breeds rebels."

"Whom they do not bother to root out," Gustavo added.

"So we wander out among the rocks and thorns today?"

"If we are to find the rebels and Senorita Guzman. It is rumored they are northeast of here, but the rumors are old." Rita began to pack. "We should buy a donkey."

"There are none here worth having," replied Gustavo.

"Then further on," she said. "Today we must be the donkeys."

~

Both his companions had insisted they not travel directly toward the rebels, but circle around. "We are not even sure where they are," complained Wilk. He did not believe anyone knew they themselves were there. Or perhaps he did not want to believe it.

STEPHEN BROOKE

"We might have been observed and reported in La Corona," Rita pointed out.

"And there is Senora Guzman," said Gustavo. "I would not be at all surprised if she has told Senor Morris all about us. I know you asked her not to."

That could certainly be true. Vicki had her own agenda.

They camped in the open that night. It was very dry and they did not bother to unroll the tent. The small fire burned down quickly with a diet of dry brush and yucca stalks, and needed frequent replenishment. It was good Rita had bargained for machetes.

The sky is even blacker here than it was in Naples, thought Wilk, with the dry clear air, with no light from even small towns for many leagues. He took the Winchester into his hands and began to strip and clean it. It was a familiar enough weapon to him, a Model Ninety-four. He had seen them all around the world.

"I shall carry it tomorrow," he said.

"You might as well," agreed Rita.

"Yes," said Gustavo. "There are deer in these hills. Shoot us one for dinner." He was probably not as serious as he sounded.

"Maybe you should have your rifles ready too. In that you claim our presence may be no secret."

Rita laughed. "Ah, Wilk, you have turned our own arguments against us."

In the morning, all three shouldered their carbines. It was well they did so. Near noon, as they climbed toward the crest of a barren ridge, Gustavo stopped and held up a hand. "Do you hear that?"

"An engine, perhaps," answered Rita. Wilk heard nothing but his ears were older than those of his companions.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"Not an airplane?" he asked.

Gustavo shook his head. "On the ground, I think, somewhere ahead of us. An automobile."

"I know of no roads here," stated Rita. She suddenly spun about to face the direction from which they had come. "Horses. That way." Again, Wilk heard nothing. Not until a bullet whined into the rocky ground.

"Over the ridge," he called out at once. There would be cover on the other side. Whomever attacked them had left them an easy means of escape. Perhaps they had hoped to catch them before they crossed over, thinking they would make good targets against its slope, or it might have been no more than chance they caught them where they did. Either way, had the approaching attackers not been heard, all three of them might lie dead.

There was a road on the other side, a narrow dirt trail. A large open car was idling there, black beneath its covering of dust, with two men. They seemed surprised at their sudden appearance. One raised a rifle at once and took a shot without really aiming. It flew wild. The man behind the wheel fumbled for his own weapon.

Wilk at once sat down and braced the Winchester against his shoulder, levering a round into the chamber. The shooter below reeled at his first shot, hit but perhaps not fatally. Then Gustavo and Rita swooped down the slope toward the vehicle, firing as they went. Wilk was slightly surprised they could hit anything but both occupants of the auto lay dead when he reached them.

He recognized the one at once, and stared at him for a brief moment. It was the Nazi whose photo Dunn had shown him, Ernst Wiler. "Let's get out of here," he said, and took the wheel. His companions climbed in behind him.

It was an old Packard. Were it maintained properly it would

STEPHEN BROOKE

have plenty of speed. The horses came over the ridge behind them as he put it into gear and sped away, leaving the two bodies in the dust. Shots rang out as a half-dozen horsemen pursued, but they soon fell behind. We don't know this country, Wilk told himself. They could get around us if we stick to this cow path.

"Who were they?" called Gustavo.

"Nazis," he yelled back over the roar of the poorly muffled engine. There might be one of those German enclaves nearby. But no, they would not choose to live in this desert. They had come seeking them here.

A brush-choked gorge opened to his right. He careened into a turn, drove the Packard deep into its concealment. "We hide here?" wondered Rita.

"No," guessed Gustavo. "The automobile does. *Vamonos!*"

They were up the gully and across another ridge before they slowed to rest. "Nazis, you say?" asked Gustavo.

"Some of the fugitives Raoul Guzman let into the country after the war," Wilk replied. He tried to keep his voice even. "It was a very wrong thing for him to do."

"They are evil men," stated Rita. "You knew the one, did you not?"

"Only of him. He murdered many in my homeland. Poland."

"The fat one?" asked Gustavo.

"Yes," Wilk agreed. "The fat one."

~

Through the rest of the day they hid, and traveled on by night. Rita led them more easterly, descending into a sort of jungle. Not the rain forest that had greeted them at the coast but thick brush and canes. They followed the winding paths made by animals. Wilk was not at all surprised when Rita warned him of snakes.

It would have been bad enough pushing through it in daylight.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

However, he liked the idea of stopping and camping there even less.

Not until the middle of the next morning did they all seem to wordlessly agree they were far enough away. One should have stood guard, of course, but all three fell into exhausted sleep.

The cold muzzle of a rifle against his temple awakened Wilk. Had the Nazis somehow found them? He opened his eyes to see a young bearded man in olive-drab fatigues, training a Garand on him. Rita and Gustavo already were sitting up.

Another young bearded man was holding his forged identity card. "A German, are you? We do not like your sort hiding in our country."

"What do we do with them?" asked his companion. Only two, and little more than boys. Wilk felt embarrassment that they had gotten the drop on him. How much worse would that be for Rita and Gustavo?

"Take them to the camp," came the answer. "*El Serrano* will decide."

“WILK! YOU LOOK VERY FUNNY in a beard.”

It was true he had not shaved in several days. “I thought to fit in with your new friends.” Neither chose to display any surprise at the other’s presence.

“You know this German, Elena, ah, Comrade?” asked the man known as *el Serrano*. The mountain man, thought Wilk, or mountaineer. He had never heard of this rebel leader. Perhaps no one else had, either.

“Wilk isn’t a German. He’s a Pole! Or an Australian. Both maybe.”

“Our credentials are fraudulent,” said Gustavo. “We came seeking Senorita Guzman.”

“Oh.” He gave Wilk a long look up and down. “You are the heroic Wilk of whom she has told me.” The young man, bearded as his followers, appeared simultaneously disappointed and jealous.

But he put both aside. “Welcome then to our camp.” There were perhaps as many as twenty individuals there right then, mostly men. And those barely men, for the most part. Playing at being revolutionaries. A most hazardous game.

Elena slipped close to Wilk as they followed Serrano. “Are you in love with this man?” he asked her outright.

“I admire him very much, Wilk. You understand this, do you not?”

He understood well. She wanted to be in love with the man, too, and might well be sleeping with him. “I shall try to take you back. You do not belong here.”

“I belong here as much as anywhere else. Maybe more.”

She did not belong with him, that was plain. Not anymore.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

That was both a pain and a relief. "Is this only because you killed a man, Elena?"

"I killed a man and did not know why. You drew me into a war you were waging, Wilk. Your war. Here, I have a cause of my own."

A cause without a chance of winning. It would do no good to say so, to state it bluntly.

El Serrano took a seat before the fitful fire, on a fallen log. Elena sat beside him, close to him — close enough that he seemed a bit uncomfortable. "He isn't sure what to do with her," Rita whispered in Wilk's ear. "There may be hope for you."

But having a Guzman with him could make this leader someone important, not a boy hiding in the jungle. He would not readily give that up. Wilk and the others sat on the ground.

They spoke of many things as they shared a meal and none of them were of importance.

~

There was a time to speak of things of importance. That time had come. The rebel commander asked Wilk to sit with him as the camp slipped into slumber.

"I was very surprised when I heard Comrade Guzman had returned to her homeland and sought to join me." Or any other rebels, more than likely. He was simply the first she found. Serrano eyed Wilk. "You are not a Marxist," he stated.

"I am not doctrinaire enough to claim a label of any sort." He chose not to add that he found Marxism simplistic.

"One must have a cause, Comrade. We must work toward our goal of equality and peace!"

"I seek only to keep things working here and now. When they no longer do, so be it. That is the history of mankind."

"You are cynical."

STEPHEN BROOKE

"Or realistic. Yet we truly want much the same thing."

"I suppose that is so." He sat staring into the fire for a time before continuing. "I will not force Comrade Elena to stay here. I will not force her to go. That is her own decision. We will, however," he added, giving Wilk a sly smile, "ask your M-1s to stay with us. We have need of modern weapons."

Wilk shrugged. "This I can not prevent nor is it overly important. Only Elena is. She faces too much danger here."

"It seems there was danger when she was with you, too."

The older man lost his temper at last. "And I know how to protect her. I am not playing soldiers in the jungle." He at once regretted the outburst. "I am sorry."

"No doubt. But you still feel that way about me."

"I do."

"And again I say that only Comrade Guzman's opinion matters. I will allow you tomorrow to try to persuade her. Then you must go." There was a trace of scorn in his next words. "Taking Senora Guzman's dog and the traitor."

"You know my companions."

"All know Peres. One can respect his loyalty. Santamaria — ah, she once fought against the regime. None know why she one day walked away."

"One can grow tired, my young friend. If you live long enough, you may too."

~

"So you killed some of the Nazis?" The young would-be revolutionary was enthralled. "*El Serrano* has spoken of raiding their enclaves." He shook his head. "But it is not yet time."

Nor will it ever be. Wilk had listened with the rest to Rita's slightly exaggerated recounting of their battle. Far more shots were exchanged in her tale than he remembered.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"The man Wilk shot at a great distance was a very important leader among them," she said. "The Americans wanted to drag him back to Germany to be hanged."

"We saved them the trouble," he added to this. And he was glad of it, even if his shot probably did not kill Wiler. He was also glad the rebels — or Serrano — were going to permit him to keep the Winchester.

The day was drawing to an end and he had persuaded Elena of nothing. There had been little hope of it, really. She would not see the danger. She would not see the hopelessness of these revolutionaries — boys from the universities, mostly, filled with empty propaganda. He wished he could talk all of them into going home. Wilk had seen too many like them die over the years, over the decades, always a new generation to forget the lessons of the last.

Could they grab her, spirit her back to Cuba? He had conferred with the others and both thought there was a good chance of pulling it off. The rebels were not that competent and would be unlikely to follow for long. But Elena would never forgive them, never forgive Wilk. He could not stand that.

We will stay close, they had decided, at least for a few days. Not forever. Sometime, they would have to give up. The fire was dying. Wilk went to find his colorful blanket, and sleep.

IT WAS THE THIRD DAY. Rita had come back, assured them the rebels were still camped about four kilometers north. "They look hungry," she said. "They need their mamas to feed them."

"Since the people around here no longer will," said Gustavo.

Rita acknowledged the truth of that. "They may be forced to go raid somewhere."

Which could be, as the Americans might put it, a make or break situation. If the rebels had to retreat in ignominy, they might desert their revolutionary hero. If they succeeded — well, they could become fighters in reality. "So we give them a little more time," Wilk said.

Gustavo nodded. "Not too much."

"No, not too much."

The next day, the rebel band abandoned their camp and headed west, into higher country. Wilk and his companions attempted to parallel their movement. It was evident *el Serrano* and his followers did not know they were there.

Others did. As they prepared to make camp that evening, khaki-clad soldiers surrounded them. An officer with an out-sized head perched above narrow, epaulet-adorned shoulders, strutted forward.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Wilk looked at the rifles leveled at them, and the hard faces behind them. "I am a mining engineer," he began. "Seeking mineral deposits in —"

"No, we must tell the truth," said Gustavo, stepping forward. "We are mercenaries, hired to rescue Elena Guzman."

"Guzman? The daughter of the presidente?" The officer amended that. "The former presidente."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"The rebels kidnapped her," asserted Gustavo. "Her mother sent us." All this was almost true.

The officer spat. He did not seem to have a high opinion of Maria Victoria. "These rebels are near," he said. "Perhaps it is we who shall rescue the girl. Is there a reward?"

~

"I am Lieutenant Octavio Munoz," the officer informed them as they marched forward. His manner implied no immediate menace. None the less, his men had relieved them of their weapons. Both of Wilk's handguns had been discovered. Munoz himself had frisked Rita, when his soldiers had shown a little too much eagerness. "Informants speak of a small rebel band in this area. We seek them." He gave Gustavo — whom he seemed to think their leader — a sidelong look and suggested, "Perhaps they are the ones who hold the senorita?"

"It is possible. We have found no rebels so far."

"Ha, you do not know how to look. I have eradicated many of those roaches!"

Gustavo — with occasional assistance from Rita — then concocted a fanciful tale of the girl being lured away from her home in Havana and forcibly abducted. "Who knows what they intended for poor Elena?" he said. "I can only pray she remains unharmed and pure."

The lieutenant nodded sympathetically. "When we rescue her, she must go to the capital. As will you three. There will be many questions."

Wilk felt considerable relief on hearing this. These soldiers would not be machine-gunning them down, somewhere here in the jungle. Unless Lieutenant Munoz changed his mind. He did not trust Lieutenant Munoz.

The officer questioned each of them separately that night, in

STEPHEN BROOKE

his own tent. Gustavo had gone first. "I think he trusts me because we are both of the Indian blood," the man whispered on returning. "Some, anyway. Just give the true story."

But without reference to their friendship to the Guzman family, of course. Most of the rest could be revealed, had been revealed as they marched. "You are German?" asked the officer. Munoz remained seated on a canvas camp stool, smoking a dark cigar. Wilk stood. "Your card says you are German."

"It is false," he replied. It would be best to be truthful in that. "I am an Australian."

"Is that not right next to Germany?" Munoz appeared puzzled for a moment. "Yes, yes, Hitler came from there."

Wilk could not tell whether the man felt that was a good thing, but decided it best not to inform him of his misunderstanding. "Forged documents can land you in prison, Senor Wulf," Munoz went on. "As can being in our country illegally and carrying unlicensed weapons. Wulf is your real name?"

"No. That would be Wilk."

"Hmm, did that name cross my desk back in Montellano? I seem to remember a memo." He shrugged. "No matter. My superiors will sort all that out. You may leave."

No questions at all about his mission, his movements. Perhaps Gustavo had satisfied him. The man did not keep Rita long, either. "He remains convinced I am Cuban," she told them on her return. "Which is well, for he would shoot me as a rebel if he knew the truth."

That could yet happen to all of them. For now, there was nothing to do but sleep.

~

There was a charged atmosphere in the camp the next morning. No one told the prisoners what was going on. The

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

soldiers formed two squads and disappeared into the bush, leaving a pair of men on guard. These were willing to talk.

"The rebels have been spotted," one said. "We will ambush them."

"We?" asked his fellow sentry.

"A victory will go to all the company," came the reply. "Even without our being shot at."

"It will go to Munoz. No one cares about us."

The day dragged on into afternoon. Tension and boredom were their companions. Once Rita asked, "Was that gunfire?" They listened but heard nothing. Nothing but the screeches of some bird Wilk did not recognize.

The lieutenant's squad first returned, tired and dirty, and carrying wounded. At least the young revolutionaries seemed to have fought back. Munoz turned the direction of the men over to a corporal and strode to where the three stood. "Victory," he proclaimed. "We left five dead. The sergeant follows with prisoners." The officer vanished into his tent.

He reappeared in a cleaner uniform when the sergeant's squad marched in, perhaps half an hour later. There were prisoners, yes. Six of them Wilk counted, and one was Elena. She stood erect, attempting to appear brave, with the others. The sergeant lined them up, urged into place by the gun barrels of his men.

Munoz at once went to the girl, recognizing her. After all, her picture had appeared frequently in newspapers up until a couple years ago. "You are Elena Guzman," he stated. "Place her in my own tent and guard her well." Two men led her away.

He turned to the other prisoners, four of them men. Young men. Young fools. The lieutenant looked them over. "No one important enough to keep." The four rebels were forced to their knees. Munoz walked down the line and put a bullet from his

STEPHEN BROOKE

Colt into the back of each head. He looked to the one woman remaining. "You may have her until morning," he told his soldiers. At dawn she also was executed.

"I DO NOT KNOW IF I was truly in love with Miguel." That was *el Serrano's* given name, Wilk surmised. "He was among those slain in the attack, so it does not matter now, does it?"

The man would have looked like all the others to Lieutenant Munoz. With their leader dead, those who had survived would scatter, their dream of revolution lying dead beside him. Wilk could have told the girl it never mattered but that would do no good.

"Think only of the future now," he said. "Munoz believes you were kidnapped and you must stick to that story."

"So he told me last night," she replied. "I did not contradict him." Smart girl, thought Wilk. He had already known that.

Where the soldiers took them he did not know, nor would they tell. They had come to a narrow road and followed that road westward, toward the mountains. Wilk did not think motorized vehicles used that road. It seemed more suited to animals, both two and four-legged.

He hated these soldiers and he hated their commander. How could he not? What might have happened to Elena had Munoz not known of her identity? Yet now, those same soldiers treated her almost with reverence. There were many who remembered Raoul Guzman as a great man.

The brush on the hills grew less dense, more like that they had encountered around Jimena. "What are those white things, shining in the sun?" asked Elena on the third day.

Rita shielded her eyes with her palm. "Tents," she said. "It is an army camp."

~

The four sat in the sun, a soldier armed with a submachine-gun

STEPHEN BROOKE

standing guard. Lieutenant Octavio Munoz had gone to report to his commander. He was gone a long time.

"On your feet," he ordered on his return. "You are to be transported to Montellano at once." He scowled at them. Perhaps the officer saw any chance of reward going with his prisoners. It was already near night.

He escorted them to a dust-colored Dodge truck. They were to ride in the back, beneath a canvas canopy. A soldier brought an ammunition crate with what appeared to be their confiscated belongings. The ones of most value; the tent and blankets had disappeared. "Put those in the front," directed Munoz. Wilk doubted he would ever reclaim his Browning. Two carbine-armed men stepped up behind them and took positions at the rear edge of the bed. The big vehicle lurched into gear and out of the camp.

Through the night and the next day they rode on. The roads grew better. Eventually the Dodge was traveling on pavement. They were climbing, too. Their road wound up into the mountains, past tiny villages, past mining camps. Twice the driver stopped so they might stretch their legs, relieve themselves. They ate as they rode, tortillas and cold canned beans.

"Another day to the capital," said one of the guards as night descended again. "Watch while I grab a nap," he told his fellow.

The other soldier did not bother to reply. He gave their prisoners a glance and returned to staring out the back, at the road they had traveled. We could have a good chance of taking those two, thought Wilk. Would it be smarter to make a run or to see what awaited in Montellano? He looked to Gustavo. The man shook his head. He knew what thoughts were in his head.

It was probably best. Wilk napped too. They were descending when his eyes again opened, into the central plateau. He had briefly visited before and knew it was a pleasant place, the

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

temperatures always moderate despite the southern latitude. There was cultivation all along their way, and villages of neat, orderly houses. Further away, he suspected, were hovels, the abodes of those who cultivated those fields for the great landowners.

For a few years, under the regime of Raoul Guzman, the power of those families had been reined in. No longer.

Guzman had also nationalized many industries, mining among them. But he had let the Americans back in, eventually, gradually, leasing mineral rights to one company and then another until it was much as it had been before. Now there were no pretenses. Morris Mining was one of those companies.

They came to an army base just outside the capital the next afternoon.

~

"I ask that you send a message to Senor Artemus Morris," said Gustavo. He and Wilk had shared a cell overnight. Now they stood before the desk of a bull-necked colonel. "At Morris Mining. I think Senor Morris will be there."

"Presidente Vargas may already have done this," the officer replied. "If not, I shall see to it. Please, be seated." He waved them toward burgundy leather-upholstered chairs. The cultured, friendly voice did not at all match the colonel's appearance.

"You are Gustavo Peres," he went on. "We know you. And you —" He turned his attention to Wilk. "You we do not know so well. But there were rumors Senora Guzman had a new lover." When Wilk made no reply, the officer laughed. "And that he is a gentleman. It is of no importance."

He leaned back in his swivel chair. A portrait of Presidente Vargas hung above him. Below it was a framed black and white photo of the colonel shaking hands with the man. "It is to be

STEPHEN BROOKE

decided what to do with you two, and with the Cuban woman. We could let you rot in one prison or another, or deport you right now.”

“We came to take Elena Guzman home,” said Wilk. “Only that.” He kept the statement flat. This colonel could make what he would of it.

“And that is most unlikely to happen, Senor Wilk.” A thick eyebrow came up. “That is an alias, of course.” The man did not ask for any other name.

“I think you three are very small swimmers in the great sea.” The colonel raised his eyes to the guard at the door. “Escort them back to their cell.”

~

“We could have been tortured,” Gustavo confided. “We still may be.”

They would have little to tell. Their interrogator had seemed to recognize that. “At this colonel’s bidding?” He didn’t know the man’s name. There had been no sign on his desk, nor on his door.

“Leon Aguilar is infamous for his cruelties.” Peres hesitated, then went on. “Once he served Presidente Guzman.”

“And took part in the coup against him?”

“It is likely. He changed masters readily enough, anyway.”

Wilk felt a sudden pang of concern for Rita Santamaria. She might not have had as pleasant an interview as they.

They did not see the colonel again. Two days later the pair was taken from their cell to a waiting sedan, and driven into the city. “A police car,” commented Gustavo. Montellano had broad streets, laid out in a grid, lined with architecture both old and new. Most of it was uninspiring. The automobile wove through thick traffic and took them to a blocky, gray stone building

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

downtown, entering a first floor garage. Two stories up, a young captain of police awaited them in his office. Rita was already there.

He closed a folder and tossed it onto his cluttered desk when the men were ushered in. "You have friends, Senors," he said, and gave Rita an amiable nod, "and Seniorita. Even in the office of our nation's leader." He paused a moment, perhaps to let them think on his statement. "Senor Artemus Morris has intervened on your behalf. Also the American embassy put in a good word for you. We can guess who is behind that."

The agency, thought Wilk. "Those are not necessarily my friends," he said.

"Ha, perhaps not! But I can inform you there will be no charges." The smile dropped from his face for the briefest of moments. "None for now. But you are requested to remain within the limits of Montellano." They all recognized it was more than a request. "Of course, your weapons will not be returned to you."

"Then we are free to go," said Wilk. The others seemed willing to let him do the talking here.

"You are. Hotel rooms have been taken for you by Morris Mining. And I remind you again not to leave the city."

"What of Elena Guzman?" Wilk asked.

"Seniorita Guzman is to remain a guest of *el Presidente*. A car will take you to your lodgings." He turned his attention back to his paperwork in dismissal.

"WE WOULD NOT BE FREE if the army did not also agree to this," said Gustavo.

Rita did not care. "It is enough to be free," she stated. "And the rooms are nice."

But hardly luxurious. It was quite the sort of hotel Wilk might have chosen for himself.

It was also near the center of Montellano. He would not sit here waiting for whatever would happen. "I think I shall walk and look this city over," he informed them. "Anyone wish to come along?"

Gustavo practically grimaced. "I have seen enough of it."

"And the city does not want to see those like me," Rita told him. Wilk hadn't considered that the woman might face racism as surely here as she had in the States. Not as virulent, not so codified, maybe. He had not noted it at the coast, where many had African heritage.

That did not mean it hadn't existed. He rode down to the lobby and asked if there were any nearby cafes they might recommend. Then, into the streets of the capital. The day was fair and not at all hot, but there was a haze of automobile fumes. It was only a block west to the place suggested by the man at the desk. Here it was — he stopped, stared at the man seated at one of the tables.

He was as dapper as when they had last met in prewar Paris. His suit was an immaculate white, with a pale blue silk tie. Some local flower bloomed in the buttonhole. Wilk chose to address him in French. "*Bonjour*, Freddy."

The man looked up and answered in the same language. "Jean Wilk. It was rumored you were in the country." He waved him

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

to the chair across the table, and called for the waiter to bring another coffee.

Wilk did not for a moment believe this was a chance meeting. "But I had no idea you were here." He had known Freddy, Frederick Schwartz, as a *bon vivant* back in Paris, a functionary at the German embassy. He had also known he was involved in espionage.

The German dismissed this with a wave of his hand. "I am but one of many who came seeking a new life after the war."

"A Nazi fugitive, in other words."

"We would as soon put such things behind us, were we permitted." He could sound as sincere as ever. Did he still charm women as he had? "Your agency officially is opposed to us being here and individual agents certainly would like to get rid of us, but they choose to turn a blind eye to our presence. You do work for the agency, do you not?"

He did not, not directly. He worked for Loup Limited. There was no need to say that, or anything.

Schwartz shrugged at his silence. "Know that we may try to kill you. So might others. You have probably figured out some of the players by this time."

"I have. And I am aware you have already tried to kill me."

Freddy only nodded at that. "But truly, Jean, you are not very important to us. We tried to take you out early because we did not know what you were up to. A preemptive strike, if you will. And there are those who are uncomfortable with your ability to identify us. I include myself."

"I never heard your name in connection to war crimes." He had heard nothing whatsoever of the man since leaving Europe, more than a decade earlier.

STEPHEN BROOKE

"I doubt you ever will, but I want to keep my anonymity here."

"Why did you attempt to kill Elena Guzman?"

"She would have been collateral damage, mostly, but it would simplify matters to have fewer Guzmans about. That is true of Francisco too. Some faction might try to use him." He leaned forward and asked, voice lowered, "Are you the one who killed Wiler?"

"As he deserved. He was a criminal. A murderer."

"A criminal? Perhaps. We needed thugs such as he, used them to defend the Reich."

"To kill innocent people?"

"Ah, yes, he did, didn't he? It was foolish to destroy the lesser races. They will serve us here, as they are meant to. That is our goal, Jean, to rebuild, to start afresh in this new land, make all as it should have been. The weight of the past will not drag us down this time." Freddy stopped, recognizing he might have waxed somewhat too enthusiastic. He then laughed. "It does not matter if you know this, I guess."

"I never knew you were a believer, Freddy."

"You don't even recognize that you are," the German responded. "We won't bother you here in the city. That would draw unwanted attention. Others may not be so cautious."

Wilk saw the truth to this and felt suddenly vulnerable. Gangsters would not hesitate to 'hit' him on the street. And he was without a gun. His coffee was growing cold. He sipped it. "Excellent," he said.

~

"You think this man is a leader of the Germans?" asked Rita.

"A leader, yes. How high up would be a guess." Frederick Schwartz could even run the show, at least as a puller of other

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

men's strings. "I would think he is involved in helping Nazis enter the country."

And take it over. That was the implication, wasn't it? Sooner or later, they would want their own man at the top, not Vargas. Maybe they even intended that man — or woman — to be a Guzman.

"So they murdered Raoul?" asked Gustavo. "And tried to crash your airplane?"

Wilk shrugged. "I really do not know. It is only certain they were behind the attempt in Francisco's hotel room."

"And when they chased us through the bush," added Rita.

"Yes, that too. I doubt we ever know who tipped them to our presence."

"Many in La Corona would betray their mothers for a few pesos," she said. "They might even throw in their grandmothers."

Peres thought that most likely. He mistrusted lowlanders in general, but was willing to make an exception for Rita.

"But who," she asked, "shot at your boat in Naples?"

"The M-1 they used is widely available. It may not be a clue at all."

"Or it was meant to cast suspicion elsewhere," Gustavo conjectured.

Wilk still thought it might have something to do with Arty's business associates. But not Arty himself. "American criminals are mixed up in this somehow," was what he chose to say. "This is why I do not completely trust Rick."

"I would never trust a man," said Rita, "who needed such a big gun."

~

It chafed to hide away in this hotel room. Was there any

STEPHEN BROOKE

reason? Wilk had become wary of every man who lurked in the lobby, who loitered on the street outside. At least some of those were surely police.

And some could be spies. Agents of the government here or of America. He would like to tell them they were wasting their time watching him.

A rap came on the door. "Who is it?" called out Gustavo.

"Capitan Alfonso!"

Wilk let the man in. It was the same youthful captain of police who had sent them here. His tie hung loose, the top button of his shirt unfastened. He looked about the room without much apparent interest. "You are all well?" he asked.

"Well enough," was Wilk's guarded reply.

"But tired of waiting. Quite understandable. I greet you, Senorita." Rita had entered from her adjoining room. "We hear encouraging things about your situation. Maybe you can be on your way soon."

And out of the boy's hair. This captain would have no reason to like them or wish them to linger in his city.

"We also hear very strange things about arrivals at the airfield. The latest was a notorious American criminal," he said. "A hit-man they call them?"

"I believe they do."

"It is possible he was sent to murder you. We think it as likely he was to murder Artemus Morris." Alfonso shrugged. "Be that as it may. The man is on his way back after spending two pleasant hours in the Montellano Airport. He had some of our fine coffee, I understand."

"Someone warned me of such possibilities."

"The German? We saw you meet, you know."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

“I would have been much disappointed with the police here if you hadn’t.”

“I wish we could throw him out of the country, as well,” said Capitan Alfonso. He flashed a not-unfriendly smile. “Instead, we may have to be content with you, Senor.”

“Make it soon,” said Wilk.

"I AM TO TAKE YOU south to the mining facility," said Capitan Alfonso. Things had come together all at once. He bundled the three into one of a pair of black and white sedans. The other carried armed policemen.

"And Senorita Elena is coming too?" asked Gustavo, once again. He needed reassurance.

"She is, and you all shall be sent home." Alfonso almost sighed. "Now her I wish we could let remain." He settled into the front passenger's seat.

That aroused Wilk's interest. "You have become acquainted?"

"While she has been a guest at the presidential palace. Her old home." They motored out of the downtown. The headquarters of Morris Mining lay some hours from the city. Wilk knew there was an airfield, and little more. Gustavo would be far more familiar with it. "It is said Presidente Vargas will bring her himself." His expression became quite grave, his voice lower. "There were rumors he intended to put her on trial. I am glad this did not happen."

The captain's smile returned. He shoved back the curling brown hair that had fallen on his forehead. Alfonso always seemed to be coming apart somewhere. "I was not permitted to bring your weapons along to return to you," he said. "I am sorry for this."

This did not surprise Wilk. "Then accept my Browning as a gift. I think you would put it to good use."

"I thank you, Senor. It is a fine weapon." They subsided into silence. The cars now climbed into higher ground, into the mountains. An hour passed, or more. It was still very early and mists lay on either side of the road.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"Something in the road ahead," called the driver. Capitan Alfonso peered through the windshield.

"A barricade." He turned toward the three in the rear seat. "Get down!"

Wilk did as ordered but could not resist peeping out. Another car, a big dark Lincoln had pulled out of a side road behind them. It could outrun these police vehicles any day. The Nazis making another attempt? Schwartz had implied they would.

"Hit the right side and keep going," ordered the captain. The Lincoln had pulled alongside the trailing police car and they were exchanging fire. Their own automobile crashed into the barricade, as far to the right as the driver was able, and went on, leaving a fender behind. The obstacle had been spun out of the path of the second car, which followed.

The Lincoln's brakes screeched as it slid into the barrier. Then it backed up, turned, and gunned through the gap to resume its pursuit. Within five minutes it was again at their bumpers.

Capitan Alfonso hung out the window, revolver in hand, but did not fire. There was no good shot, and it was awkward for a right-handed man to fire backward. He cursed. The men in the Lincoln had released machine-gun fire at his policemen. It looked to be a Thompson protruding from its side window.

The trailing police car veered off the road and into the tall grass. He could see nothing else as they sped on, but could only mumble a prayer for them. One for himself, too.

Ah, the big car was limping. Someone had taken out a tire. They pulled away from it, first slowly, then more quickly as it rolled to a halt. Alfonso got on the radio, informed the station in Montellano what had happened. He could not turn back to the other car. It was too dangerous and his job was to deliver these three passengers. Others would have to take care of his officers.

STEPHEN BROOKE

One by one, the passengers sat up. They had nothing to say.

~

Wilk recognized the Junkers tri-motor on the company runway. He could have been surprised by its presence but he was out of surprise for this day. Was Vicki there with it? That would be reckless.

Someone waved to them from the shade it cast. He started toward the plane, Gustavo and Rita on his heels. Alfonso shrugged and followed behind, ordering his driver to remain with the car. Capitan Riberon was there, and one of the bodyguards from the Guzman's villa.

"Senora Guzman is inside," reported Riberon. He nodded toward a nearby building, built, as the airplane, of corrugated metal.

"No one else came?"

"The big man. He is with her."

The offices were nearly empty, any secretaries or assistants sent away. Indeed, it had been quiet outside, only a handful of men at the runway and in the hangar. Men and vehicles could be seen moving about at the mines, a couple miles distant and partway up the barren surrounding slopes.

There was also a Twin Beech in the hangar. It must be Arty's corporate transport.

Arty himself sat in a large but spartan office. Vicki and Rick were with him, and an aide, a young man in glasses. Wilk noted that the young man in glasses also packed a gun in a shoulder holster.

Vicki embraced him. "Arty informed me of the situation and I flew down," she said. "What else could I have done?"

Many things, thought Wilk. "We may have a wait," said a

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

cheerful Arty. Overly cheerful, it seemed. Forced. "Let me pour you some scotch, Wilk." They sat and drank and spoke of little.

It was nearly an hour before Vargas's motorcade appeared, his presidential limousine accompanied by a pair of armored cars. It was a long prewar Mercedes, the kind with an inline eight under the bonnet. He could remember Raoul riding in the same car.

Elena rode with him. They all stood at the double doors and watched her step out onto the concrete, followed by a bodyguard and then *el Presidente*.

Vargas was bald. A fringe of hair, still dark for the most part and allowed to grow longer than might be best, surrounded his shining dome. A mustache and goatee adorned a rather pleasant, fatherly visage with a lump of a nose. He carried an ornate cane but did not seem to need it. Wilk wondered whether it concealed a blade.

Elena smiled radiantly on spying the young police captain. "Oh, Fernando. It is good to see you again before I leave."

"And I, you, *Senorita Elena*."

The presidente gave him a cold look. "You may return now to Montellano, *Capitan*." The young policeman looked as if he might say something. "Go," ordered Vargas. He saluted and returned to his car. A minute later he was gone.

Vargas came into the offices and at once said, "I hear some new confections have come in, *Senor Morris*. Perhaps we can, ah, sample them before we get to business?"

The two disappeared into another room, shutting the door behind them. Arty's man and the presidente's bodyguard took positions on either side of it. "What does all that mean?" asked Vicki.

"Cocaine," whispered Elena. "It is common knowledge in the palace."

STEPHEN BROOKE

Another piece of this jumbo jigsaw, thought Wilk. Maybe he could figure where it fit in.

The pair was not long. They appeared thoroughly invigorated on their return. Both of them. That said even more. It said something about Arty, it said something about Vargas. It said a great deal about Morris's business.

Vargas got right to it. "Senora Guzman and Senor Morris have interceded, and I have agreed to allow the senorita to return home." Home, he said, meaning Havana. Not the land of her birth. "She must board the airplane here and not return. At once."

"Very well," said Vicki and went to the doors. Riberon waited just outside. "We leave at once," she told him. He saluted and went to get the Junkers ready for takeoff.

"Gustavo," said Arty. "You go with Elena. Take the other bodyguard with you." His voice hardened. "There will be no others on this flight."

Gustavo turned to Vicki, immediately suspicious. "Do as Senor Morris tells you," she said.

"But Senora —"

"Do it. You too, Elena. I send my love along with you."

Gustavo escorted the girl to the plane. A few minutes later, the Junkers taxied into a takeoff, made a long turn, and winged eastward. Wilk watched the last of what he had with Elena fly away with her.

Vicki had agreed to avoid trouble. She was saving her stepdaughter. She would at least suspect what was to happen after that.

Senora Maria Victoria Guzman turned to confront Presidente Vargas. "I know it was you who betrayed Manuel. I always knew it. His blood is on your hands, Alvaro."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"Your husband was a fool. Both of them." He rose from his chair. "I leave things to you, Arty. As we agreed."

"I wish you a pleasant journey, Senor Presidente." To his aide Arty said, "Bill, go tell them to get the plane started." The young man hurried out. A few minutes later the Beechcraft's engines could be heard. But they had moved to other things.

Vargas walked slowly, purposefully, to the waiting Mercedes. He paused at the door to salute them with a tap of his cane to his forehead, and signaled the lead armored car to pull out, before slipping inside.

Wilk watched the motorcade fade into the shimmering noon heat, then turned to Morris. "You're shipping cocaine through the country via your mining company. And Vargas gets a cut."

"That's astute of you, Wilk. But then, that's the sort of thing you do, isn't it? Come in and have another drink." He poured them both scotch. "Anyone else? No? Very well. Let me tell you about Morris Mines. Now a subsidiary of International Resources." He let out a harsh laugh before going on.

"Morris Mines was founded with investments from associates in Chicago. I knew what sort of connections they had, but profits were good during the war and everyone was content. Things fell apart later and I needed more funds, so I sold a controlling interest. They call the shots now."

He downed his scotch in one gulp and rose. "I can not risk Teresa again. And I did my best to save Elena because her sister loves her. Rick!"

The big gunman sat up straight. "Yes, Boss."

"Clean things up after I leave," Arty said. He gave Vicki a long look, maybe making a final decision. "All of it."

He threw a few folders into a valise and hurried out the door.

STEPHEN BROOKE

The Beechcraft followed the Junkers into the sky a few minutes later.

“Okay,” said Rick. “That’s it. Let’s go.”

SIGNS WARNED OF DANGER IN both Spanish and English. They stood beside an abandoned mine shaft. The flimsy barricade had been pulled aside and they gazed into its depths.

Rick Bonaventura kept his revolver trained on the three he had marched here. "It's just business," he offered as apology. "If you want to go in on your own, it's okay with me. Or you can take a bullet."

"Just wondering," said Wilk, "are you taking orders from Morris or from his bosses?"

"Don't make any difference, does it?" said the big man. "Let's get this over with."

Wilk had no intention of getting it over with, of letting this go down the way Rick intended. If he was to be shot, he would rather do it fighting. He tensed himself for a sudden, desperate lunge, and hoped Rita would follow his lead. One of them might survive. It was unlikely, but one just might.

What? The woman had fallen to her hands and knees, pleading. Rick looked embarrassed. She crouched, her head almost to the ground, for a moment and then rose quickly to her knees. The little Beretta, her old gun, was in her hands. She emptied the entire magazine into him. The big man staggered back but remained on his feet, looking bewildered now. He raised his big revolver.

Wilk crashed into him. Rick stumbled back further. "Shit," he said, and toppled into the open pit.

"That pig Munoz never found my little *amigo*, despite his pawing," said Rita.

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"Vargas asked this of him, I have no doubts, in exchange for Elena's release."

STEPHEN BROOKE

"But his business associates also wanted him to tie things up here," replied Wilk. They had holed up in Arty's empty office, deciding on their next move. They were also drinking up his liquor.

Rita, ever restless, was exploring the place. She had discovered a shotgun so far, and shells. Although she still had her Beretta, all the cartridges had been used up. She had also found a cash box — easily jimmied — and knives for each of them from the kitchen.

"I should come out against him now," declared Vicki. "Won't he be surprised when I pop up, alive and well!"

"We have to get out of here first," Rita pointed out. "There is lots of food, anyway. And cars outside."

Vicki was getting drunk. "I had an alliance with Arty. Things seemed to be all right." She poured another glass of bourbon. "This is good. I should be an American and drink only bourbon."

"Cars?" asked Wilk. "No airplanes by any chance."

"Not a one. We could drive any direction but I think south would be best."

"Our Goose is to the east, isn't it? We should return the wayward Goose to Doug Delaney." It was possible Wilk was getting drunk too. They had much to celebrate.

"South to the Rio de los Santos," insisted Rita. "We follow it to the coast, beyond La Corona, and then back to where we have hidden your Goose."

"An excellent plan, Senorita Santamaria. You and I can fit in but what are we supposed to do with this woman?" He waved an arm somewhere in Vicki's direction. "She is tall and beautiful. Also, everyone has seen her picture."

"I *am* tall and beautiful," stated Senora Guzman. "My husband

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

told me so.” She began to snifle. “My poor Manuel. I would tear Alvaro’s *cajones* off if he had any!”

She might need to get in line, felt Wilk. He might even get in that line. It seemed likely to him that the presidente’s time at the top was coming to an end. There was a feeling of unrest in this country. Maybe even Maria Victoria Guzman could be the one to topple him.

He decided to drink to that.

~

Wilk went over both cars. He would have liked to take more time but knew they should get away from the Morris Mining facility. They seemed well maintained and were, moreover, of the same model. “Which do you choose?” he asked the women.

“The blue one,” said Vicki. Both were blue.

“The one with more room,” was Rita’s suggestion. They were the same size.

He ended up choosing the large blue one. They filled it with petrol from the aviation tanks, loaded up their booty and were away before the morning shift showed up at the mine. Wilk drove, because neither of his companions knew how. He understood how this could be with Vicki. She had been driven places all her life.

Rita, though, he would have expected to learn such a skill at some time. The woman seemed so competent in most things. “I think I shall have to teach you to drive before we tackle flying,” he told her. But for now, he was at the wheel.

At first, the women slept in the back seat. It did not matter for the route was clear and the road was good. Then they gossiped of this and that, things that had happened in this country at some time and of which Wilk knew little. At last, Rita asked about the husband, the one Alvaro Vargas had betrayed.

STEPHEN BROOKE

“Ah, Manuel de Silva,” said Vicki. “You know the name.”

“He used to be called a hero. I think people are afraid to speak of him now.”

“Are they? They should be ashamed! I was only twenty when we married, and still almost a newlywed when he was arrested and executed. That was only a few months before Raoul returned.”

“In Nineteen Thirty-five.”

“Yes. He was not of the old families, as I am. His father was a shopkeeper and he became a doctor.”

“And a revolutionary.”

“A revolutionary. It is so. A supporter of Raoul Guzman, though I think they disagreed on many things.” She sat without speaking for at least a minute. “He was like Wilk in many ways.”

“That is a good way to be,” said Rita.

"WILL THIS AUTOMOBILE NOT BE missed?" asked Vicki.

"Not very soon," replied Wilk. "It may be thought that Rick took it. I think they will miss the cash sooner. Still, we should abandon the car before long."

Rita objected at once. "No, no. We should *sell* it."

"If you find us a buyer, by all means. We have fuel enough yet for another hundred kilometers. Maybe a hundred and fifty. I do not know if we should attract attention by buying more." If they could even find it. "Are there any large towns ahead?"

"Gava, on Lake Marbella. The Rio de los Santos runs down to the sea from the great lake. I think maybe you could make it there without more petrol." Rita sounded none too certain of this.

"For now, everyone believes we are dead," he said, and thought again about this. "Unless someone kept a watch at the mines and saw us leave."

"The men who pursued us on the road," said Vicki. "Nazis, yes?"

"Yes. I think they may be in league with Arty's enemies. The enemies of those who control him."

"I do not understand."

"Nor do I, but I think I am beginning to see things." Wilk felt it best not to theorize further.

The fuel gauge's needle was on 'E' when they entered Gava. Rita scanned the buildings beside their route. "There," she said. "Pull into that garage."

Wilk assumed they would buy petrol. Rita conferred briefly with a squat man in greasy overalls and returned. "Get everything out," she ordered. "This is no longer our car."

STEPHEN BROOKE

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"The river is not navigable," Rita told him. "Not in the upper reaches. There are falls and rapids."

"And hydroelectric dams. I remember them being built," said Vicki.

"One only was ever finished. All that does not matter to us. There is a decent road to the coast."

"But we no longer have an automobile," Wilk pointed out. And they had received a pittance for it.

"There are buses. Or even the train."

They had taken lodging in an old wooden hotel, more a boarding house, near the lake. Marbella was broad and shallow, its margins choked with reeds, but not so large as Rita's description had led him to believe. Small boats plied its surface. Fishermen, she said.

"I have decided you are an aged man and wife," Rita continued. "The senora is not well and will remain wrapped and veiled. I am your maid."

"I should offer you a job when this is done," said Wilk. "You would be an admirable asset to Loup Limited."

"Is the pay good, Senor Wilkins?"

"Quite good. But you will have to learn an Australian accent."

"I shall try, mate."

They took the earliest bus the next morning. It was still dark. The lake was invisible but there was always a sound of the wind blowing through its rushes. Did the people of Gava no longer notice it? It was a real bus, not a truck, and adorned with much chrome.

Stops were frequent, in villages large and small. Men and women got on and off. The trio occupied one seat, near the

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

middle, Wilk keeping a solicitous arm around his supposed wife. Rita sat by the aisle.

At least she had found some cartridges for the Beretta in Gava. It was again concealed beneath her skirt. He felt far too vulnerable without a weapon. Even the shotgun was with their meager luggage, in a rack atop the vehicle. An unassuming man in a rumpled gray suit took the seat behind them at one stop.

They were a kilometer or so down the road before he casually leaned forward. "There are men from army intelligence sitting a few seats ahead of you," the man said. "It is certain you are recognized."

"From Colonel Aguilar?" breathed Rita.

"Correct. We would hope to get you safely out of the country but we will not directly intervene. You understand this?"

Wilk certainly did. This was a man from the agency. He got off at the next village but the colonel's operatives did not. They were not so hard to recognize once one had been warned.

Had the Nazis tipped off the colonel? Wilk did not find it hard to believe they were working together, at least for the moment. Aguilar might — no, would — have his own agenda and it was not that of Presidente Vargas. But both would want them dead. "If they meant to arrest us they already would have," he whispered to Rita.

"Yes, they are assassins."

They rode on, as the day passed into afternoon.

~

They would go for him first. Wilk was almost certain of this, but only almost. Once he was eliminated, the agents of Colonel Aguilar would wait for the women to exit the restroom. Or latrine might be a better word. They were two concrete block

STEPHEN BROOKE

structures behind the cantina that served as bus station. "Ten minutes," the driver had called as he pulled in.

Their one advantage was that the men did not know they had been identified. They would not feel the need to be wary. He caught the first as he came through the door. The man was young, probably stronger than Wilk, possibly a better fighter. A knife in his gut made all that of no importance. Wilk stepped by him as he crumpled and put a shoulder into the second agent, still in the narrow doorway where his movement was restricted.

Rita stepped up behind the man and placed a slug in the back of his head. "That worked," she commented. "I am surprised."

A crowd was gathering. No time to search their would-be assailants for guns. "We will have to disappear," he said. This he had also been almost certain of, and the reason they had waited for night. Wilk hated to abandon their luggage, not that there was much of value, and both women had carried bags. The money they had liberated was on their persons. The three fugitives fled into the darkness.

"I think it is safe to slow down now," said Wilk, fifteen or twenty minutes later. "Too bad we lost the shotgun."

"We did not. I broke it down and put half in my bag," Vicki informed him.

"And half in mine," said Rita. "And now you must shoot something for our breakfast."

Vicki laughed. "I think that would be my task. I learned to use a shotgun as a girl."

"This does not matter until there is some light."

"I agree," Rita said. "We should travel on now. There may be pursuit. The local police will not know what is going on, of course. They may think it was a shootout between rival gangs. Such things happen."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

It was rugged country but they were past the point where the Rio de los Santos cut through the highest peaks, descending toward the Caribbean. "Should we still head to Illora?" asked Wilk. He trusted Rita's decisions on such things.

"Perhaps so," she replied. "But I do not think they will let us back on the bus."

WILK REASSEMBLED THE SHOTGUN BY the first light of dawn. It was small, twenty gauge and double-barreled. He looked across the sparsely vegetated hills. "It would be best to go west and catch the road again there. We would not be expected to travel back the direction from which we came."

"If the colonel has any more of his men near at all," Rita said. "It may take time for him to mount a pursuit."

Or he might decide we are not worth it, he told himself. Aguilar had styled them little fish and perhaps they were. Except for Vicki. The colonel might not even know she was in the country. "Maybe we could buy horses," he suggested. Or even mules.

Vicki did prove deadly with the shotgun — deadly to some sort of partridge that roamed these highlands. They managed to build a small fire, ate a late breakfast, moved on. It was not yet noon when the three looked down on the roadway. A village lay a little further west. More northwest, Wilk decided.

"We stopped there yesterday, did we not?" he asked.

Vicki shrugged. "They all looked the same."

"You must resume the veil, Senora," said Rita. "We go there." It proved further than it had appeared but the weary hikers eventually reached the hamlet. A minute later, a much-dented flatbed truck pulled in. What remained of its fenders were rusted through and it was stacked high with crates of vegetables and some with chickens.

"Anything for me today?" called the driver to the man who stepped from the depot. He waved an arm toward four wooden crates. Many of their slats were broken or missing, and cactus fruit and ears of maize bulged through. The dark, broadly-built

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

driver descended and began carrying them to his vehicle. "You wrote these down, Luis?" he asked.

"As always," responded the proprietor, who turned to his other arrivals. He eyed them suspiciously. It would be unusual for three such to come walking up to his door.

"Go in and get something to drink," said Rita. "I must do business. Hmm, maybe you should come with me, Juan." It took only a second for Wilk to realize she meant him. She approached the driver, hefting the second crate onto the truck bed.

"You go to the market in Illora, Senor?" she asked.

"I do. Every week I carry these sorts of things down to sell." He waved one thickly-muscled arm toward his cargo. The man appeared to take pride in his business and perhaps in his truck. All the more so, maybe, if he had a young woman to impress.

"May you do excellent business, Senor. We, however, have not been so fortunate and missed the bus." She nodded toward the wrapped up Vicki still standing by the door. "And my poor mistress must reach Illora. We could pay a little something for a ride in your fine truck."

"We must see the doctor there," Wilk decided to throw in.

"She is not contagious, is she?" The man did not back away but looked as if he were thinking of it.

"Oh, no, Senor," Rita assured him, and leaned close to whisper, "It is her heart."

Wilk could see the driver was won over. But there would be haggling. That was inevitable. He went to get something for his poor wife and himself to drink.

~

Vicki rode in the cab. Wilk hoped she slept, or pretended to, as he had suggested. He and Rita had to make themselves comfortable among the crates. They stopped every few kilometers to pick

STEPHEN BROOKE

up more and Wilk assisted the man, though he felt he had already overpaid him. In time, there were no more stops and little space left in the bed.

"You know Illora well?" he asked Rita.

"I was born there." She snickered. "And happy to leave!"

"Is it like La Corona?"

"Not so large. There is not as good a harbor, only the river mouth. And it is very low, surrounded by the mangrove swamps."

"So it has not become as important a port."

"Especially since the railway was built across the mountains. Ha, I make that sound like a recent thing, do I not? Englishmen laid the tracks in the last century."

It was late when they arrived in humid, low-lying Illora. Their driver went straight to his stall in the marketplace to unload, ready to do business as soon as the sun rose beyond the river mouth. Rita thanked the man. Wilk paid him an exorbitant amount for one of his melons; it was a way to tip him without offense, without actually handing him a few extra pesos. Wilk was thankful to have arrived safely in this squalid town on the sea.

"There is no reason to take lodgings for what remains of the night," decided Rita. "We should take passage toward La Corona as early as is possible."

"It is not very far," said Vicki, "and is there not a road?"

"A very bad one. Only the mosquitoes use it."

They ate the melon as they wandered down the docks. These stretched along the northern bank of the Rio de los Santos. Several boats had departure times and prices chalked on slates, and posted at their moorings. One looked as unsafe as another. "This one goes on past La Corona," Rita pointed out. "That would be best. It could take us to your Goose, Wilk."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

They camped beside it until morning, huddling under a blanket despite the heat. That was better than being eaten by mosquitoes. Wilk was aroused from a fitful doze by the sound of men loading bananas. In a few minutes, they were loaded as well, to be joined by a handful of other passengers over the next hour. It was good sized boat, a steel tub of a boat, with a diesel engine. They would moor at La Corona tonight and then proceed further along the coast. All the way to Belize eventually, though that city was far beyond where they wished to go.

“Yes, Senorita,” said the captain to Rita, “we can put you ashore where you ask. We do such things frequently. It is a part of operating here.”

Then the boat chugged out of Illora’s harbor with a dozen passengers and more banana spiders than any of them liked to think about.

THERE WAS THE FAMILIAR LITTLE river and the village beyond. They would soon know if its inhabitants were as trustworthy as Rita claimed.

"We must spread a little more money around before we leave," she said.

"And hope we don't need it later," Wilk replied. But if the Goose was in good shape, he would be more than willing to reward these people. The outboard-powered dinghy dropped them at the village and returned to the boat. It would continue its course north along the coast, remaining mostly inside the reefs.

By evening the intact flying boat was at the docks and being checked over by Wilk. Everything seemed in order. There was plenty of fuel with the extra cans that appeared on the dock. Wilk was thankful again that Rita had thought of and arranged for them. Both engines started readily. "Good enough," he announced, hopping back to the bamboo dock. "We can go in the morning." He would not risk a takeoff after dark.

Back to Havana, at last. And to Elena. How would things be between them?

There was something resembling a fiesta in the village that night. Wilk wished he could understand the patois a little better — or at all — but recognized they were enjoying themselves. He should be happy too. The constant tension of these last weeks would become the past, a memory.

Rita seemed happy. The young woman sat beside him. She *was* young, Wilk realized. Not a child nor even as young as Elena, but Rita might not yet have seen her thirtieth year. She still seemed, in some way, ageless.

But all this was not really over. Not for him. Definitely not for Vicki. One story had ended for her and another had begun.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

They readied themselves as early as they might the next day. There was little to do. They had carried almost nothing with them. The shotgun was left behind as a gift. There would be no shooting of partridges on this flight! Wilk brought each radial to life in its turn.

The waves were a little high, breaking on the sandbars beyond the river mouth. There might have been a storm somewhere out in the Caribbean. Nothing substantial or it would have been on the radio. He should lift off well before he reached them. The winds were good for that.

Down the river, building speed, lifting into the air. They rose quickly. But best he remain at fairly low altitude for a little while, until they were further out. Maybe stay parallel to the coast at first, too.

Vicki was seated beside him this time. "Look," she said, and pointed to where another airplane quartered toward them from the north. As it neared he recognized it as the Grumman float plane from La Corona. Its Coast Guard pilot would know they were not supposed to be there but Wilk was pretty sure the Goose could outrun the old biplane.

First they must get by it. He ignored its radio call, turning straight out to sea and opening up the engines. It was not going to be enough. The same wind that had aided his take off now retarded his speed.

The two aircraft would pass closely. Wilk saw the man in the observer position train a machine-gun on them as they came alongside. Seconds later he sprayed bullets in their direction. Then the Goose was gradually pulling away from the other airplane and the gun's chatter ceased.

Had they been alerted to watch for fugitives or had they assumed they were smugglers? Maybe they would have fired at

STEPHEN BROOKE

any strange aircraft here, especially one that obviously fled from them.

Rita came to the cockpit and crouched beside him. "There is fuel leaking from one your tanks," she announced. "The wing tank, over there." She gestured toward the left. One of his auxiliaries.

"Let us be grateful he didn't hit the engine." And hope no other tanks were pierced.

Should he risk flying a direct course to Cuba now? Wilk thought he could make it. Even without the auxiliaries, he might have. A leak in one was not too bad, assuming there was no other damage. And the wind might actually help once he angled northward.

But he did not wish to risk the lives of these women. "We have two choices," he told them. "Fly the most direct route to Cuba over open water and trust there is enough fuel, or follow the coast and refuel somewhere. British Honduras, maybe."

Both voted immediately for going straight to Havana. He turned the Goose onto the proper course and said a prayer.

~

Grand Cayman was somewhere off to the east of their flight path. Wilk peered again at his gauges. He had done that far more than was necessary the past hours. Maybe he should change course, set down there. It was what, another four hundred kilometers to the Cuban coast? And Havana was further, though not that much.

At least his gauges told him there had been no other fuel leaks. He would have known by now if there were. The one hole in that auxiliary tank was it, a stray lucky shot. It was doubtful that gunner had ever fired at another airplane before.

He held to his heading. He might not have even found

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

Cayman and then where would they be? Wilk tried the radio; maybe he could raise Cuba now. It was faint and full of crackles, but he relayed his information in case they did not make it. The man at the other end was on the Isle of Pines, he was pretty sure. They should pass over it.

An half-hour later the Isle came up, almost dead ahead and shrouded in rain clouds. I could practically glide to Havana now, Wilk told himself. Once, he might have tried it. He raised the same radio operator, much clearer now, and let him know their flight was continuing to Havana. Or so he hoped — this he did not add aloud.

Cuba itself appeared. Had he the choice, Wilk would have not flown directly across the highlands of the island. He would have followed the course, reversed, of his trip south, along the northern coast. But those highlands were not so high and Cuba was narrow south of Havana. He could see the tallest buildings of the capital city from a considerable distance and got on the radio again, identifying his airplane, alerting them that he would be landing in the harbor. The man at the other end gave a disinterested go-ahead. He undoubtedly did so frequently.

"The gauge says empty but I think I could have made another fifty kilometers," proclaimed Wilk as he taxied up to the Gulf and Caribbean hangar.

~

"I expected to see neither you nor the Goose again," said Doug. "Word was you were dead." His eyes went to Vicki, sipping from a large mug of coffee. "You too, Mrs. Guzman."

"Oh? How did I meet my demise, Senor Delaney?"

"Something about a mining accident. Hey, your family doesn't know yet, do they?"

"We shall surprise them. Could you put a little of that in

STEPHEN BROOKE

here?" She held out her mug. Doug poured a generous amount of rum into it, and then filled Wilk's glass.

"And who is the lovely third member of your crew?" he asked. "You haven't introduced us."

That was mostly because Rita had constantly roamed back and forth rather than sitting with them. She had momentarily come to rest at Wilk's elbow. "This is the woman I'm teaching to fly," said Wilk. "Rita Santamaria. Maybe you'll want to give her a job."

"Any day. I've always said there should be more women pilots. Ask anyone."

Rita plopped down in one of the chairs. She did not look like she would stay put. "When will that taxi arrive?"

"When it arrives," Vicki told her.

"Or maybe a little after that," added Wilk.

"Pah." She was on her feet again, and went to stand in the doorway, watching.

"Should I ask about that suspicious hole in the gas tank, Wilk?" asked Doug.

"Woodpeckers."

"No, no, Wilk," said Vicki. "Steelpeckers!"

All three laughed. Neither man was willing to spoil it by telling her the tank was aluminum. "Here he is," called Rita.

Wilk rose, shook hands with his friend. "We'll get the money part of this straightened out in a bit," he said.

"No problem as long as I'm holding Mrs. Guzman's funds," Doug responded.

They went to the waiting cab. Wilk spoke into Rita's ear. "Just maybe you should have your little gun handy. One never knows."

"It is always handy, Senor Wilkins."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

The cab pulled away from the harbor-side and headed into late afternoon Havana traffic, toward the Guzman villa.

THE GUARD AT THE GATE was astonished but said only, "Welcome home, Senora," and waved them through. Nothing had changed here that Wilk could see. The front door opened, light spilling out into the dusk. Gustavo, seeing who had been admitted.

"Senora!" He rushed forward. Wilk thought he meant to embrace the woman but he instead fell on his knees before her. There were tears in his eyes. "Forgive me."

"You did what was necessary. As did I. Get up, my friend."

One of the maids stood now in the doorway, staring wide-eyed at the ghosts who had just arrived. Vicki led them all past her and into the house.

Rita fell in beside Gustavo and scowled at him. "I am most angry with you for deserting us." That she was not serious everyone but the bodyguard could see.

"When it came to a choice between saving you and the Senorita Guzman, I had to chose Elena. Also, the senora ordered me to go. I am sorry it was so."

"I know this, *compadre*." She embraced the man and then stepped back to arms' length. "But next time save me, eh?"

"It seems safe to leave that to Wilk," he replied. They followed Vicki into the lounge.

Francisco was by the bar. That was no surprise. Elena sat at one of the tables near the open French doors. What was a much greater surprise was the man seated at her side — Capitan Fernando Alfonso of the Montellano police.

Elena jumped up and ran to hug her stepmother. She began to bawl. Francisco's momentary blank expression was replaced by a genuine smile. "Welcome home," he said, raising his glass. "We must reschedule the memorial."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

Elena stepped back and laughed through her tears. "But we already paid for the flowers! Oh, you met Fernando, didn't you?" She trailed off. It had been under unpleasant circumstances.

Alfonso stepped forward and put an arm around her. "Late of the Montellano police, Senora. I have chosen to defect to the nation of Elena. And she has elected me presidente!" He must have followed after Elena within hours of her departure.

"We are to be married," the young woman explained.

"It is so." Alfonso's grin turned to a more serious expression. "I could not remain and serve that man."

"You have moved quickly," commented Senora Guzman. "And I compliment you for it. A wedding will be much better than a funeral."

Francisco strolled over, kissed Vicki's cheek, warmly shook Wilk's hand. He seemed uncertain of Rita and ended up giving her a courtly little bow. "So we are all together again. Except Rick. What happened to the big man?"

Gustavo had apparently told him nothing of the situation he had flown away from.

Wilk spoke up. "We had to kill him."

"We, Wilk? It was I who shot him many times!" said Rita.

"But I pushed him down a mine shaft. I maintain it was a joint effort."

"He would have died anyway," she sniffed.

A bewildered Francisco asked, "Then he was — one of those who tried to kill you? Us?"

"At your brother-in-law's orders," said Wilk.

"There is much to tell," Vicki decided, "and it would be best over food and drink. One of you see to it — I am too tired!"

~

"So Arty is the villain in all this?" asked Elena.

STEPHEN BROOKE

"More a man who was caught up in his mistakes and carried along with them," Vicki said.

"And Arty really did save you, Elena, risking everything to convince Vargas to let you go." Wilk glanced toward the girl's stepmother. "But trading Vicki's life."

"A trade I was willing to make," she stated. "Not only for Elena but for Teresa. Arty does love her, you know. That was a part of it."

"It seems there are many villains to this story," observed Francisco. He looked directly at Vicki. "And heroes."

She laughed. "You may be the only totally blameless person at this table."

It was quite late, past midnight. Gustavo had already excused himself. He was reluctant to sit with the family at most times, even though they considered him one of them. All the more so, now.

Wilk was weary himself. He turned to Rita. "We must shop for new weapons tomorrow. I feel naked without mine."

"Oh," said Alfonso. "I brought the Browning with me. Allow your gift to me to become my gift to you."

Elena giggled. "Wilk sleeps with it under his pillow."

"Hmm, I should not ask how you know this, maybe."

"It is common knowledge."

Francisco had been uncharacteristically quiet. Now he asked, "So Arty is going to go free in all this? And — and what should we say to Teresa?"

"Nothing. We say nothing," Vicki told him.

Wilk nodded agreement. "As for Mr. Morris, I think we can leave his fate to others."

~

He had awakened two or three hours after falling into bed, and

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

now could not return to sleep. Wilk had spent restless hours in this room before. Not really so long ago; the time between had been a whirlwind, bearing him across the sea and back.

And what now? Was everything done? He could pack his one bag and board an airliner tomorrow. Write up a report in Sydney and send it off. Things were pretty clear now. He thought he understood who and where and how.

But his relationship with the Guzmans — that was not so clear. That was unfinished, the ends left ragged. Maybe he would stay a while. Not until the wedding. It was a Catholic wedding and he knew that meant a long lead time. The little atheist he had loved was going to marry a quite conventional Catholic boy, march down the aisle of some grand church.

The captain of police had become her new cause.

The Browning Hi-Power rested on his night stand. Any holsters had disappeared but that was all right. They were replaceable. The gun was replaceable. Ha, he was replaceable.

But he kept on, losing bits of the world as he went. He must look once more for the piece that had disappeared in China, when he returned home. Once more.

"A CONNECTION BETWEEN AGUILAR AND the Nazis helps explain much," said Bob Dunn.

"I would wager the colonel has his own plots against Vargas." He had been pleased to find this cafe had guava jelly. He spread some on his baguette.

"I wouldn't take that wager, Wilkins, no matter how good the odds were you gave me." He sipped coffee. "Unofficially, I would have to admit the agency has pretty much abandoned Vargas as a lost cause."

"But of course you fear he may be replaced by someone worse."

Bob chuckled. "Just so. We would like to thoroughly debrief you, sooner or later."

"I'll put it all in the report you're paying me to write."

"Certainly. But nothing beats an in-depth conversation."

"That depends on who is conversing." Wilk drained the last of his coffee. "Anything else?"

"Hmm, oh, we found that the man who was watching at the Guzman house was mafia. We had expected as much. What we had not expected was that he was from a rival family."

"I am not too surprised. There are two criminal organizations involved, aren't there? Fighting over the drug trade. It took a while for me to see that."

"It took us some time too. Maybe the FBI knew but they didn't share." He shook his close-cropped head. "And Vargas is up to his neck in it. That's another reason we've soured on the man."

"I can give you far more reasons than that," said Wilk.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

~

There seemed to be tension between Vicki and Rita. That had not been there when they traveled together, had it?

But Rita had been the one leading then, confident, knowledgeable. Here in the villa of the Guzmans all that was gone. Vicki had turned the tables.

The news of her return, after the report of death, was in all the newspapers. In a couple, it even made the front page. Senora Guzman gave the papers only a short quote on her intention to make an important announcement soon. That would surely be an accusation, an indictment, of Alvaro Vargas.

And the news spread. It was tucked into the back pages of American papers, but it was seen there too.

The phone rang early and urgently two days later. Everyone but Wilk was still abed, so the maid passed the receiver to him. She seemed to think he had become part of the family.

"John Wilkins here."

"Ah, Wilkins — um, yes, your name is, um, listed as one who can speak for Mrs. Guzman. By her daughter. I am her lawyer, David Emler."

"Yes, that is so. I can." He might as well go with it.

"Well, bad news, sir. Artemus Morris is dead."

Wilk breathed slowly in and out. It was no surprise. None at all. "Shot?"

"Yes. Gunned down last night, outside his offices." Emler didn't sound surprised about it either.

"Teresa is all right?"

"As all right as possible in such circumstances. She was at home when it happened."

"I'll notify the family," Wilk promised. "Let me know if there is anything else I can do."

STEPHEN BROOKE

"I shall. Mrs. Morris will call you eventually, I am sure."

"As am I. Thank you, Mr. Emler."

He gave the news to the family over their late breakfast. None appeared too shocked.

"David is Teresa's own lawyer," said Elena. "Not one of Arty's. We urged her to have one." She glanced toward her step-mother, who nodded agreement.

"Who would have done this?" Francisco asked.

"Perhaps rivals, perhaps his own associates after he failed them."

Teresa did phone later and spoke long, both with Elena and Vicki. It would have been a considerable long distance charge. When they were done, Vicki announced that Teresa would join them in Havana after the funeral. "That is to be quite soon. The day after tomorrow."

But Wilk felt a need to seek out Gustavo Peres. "We may or may not be done with Morris's associates," he said, "but I worry about Senora Guzman's impending announcement."

"As will Alvaro Vargas. He may feel the need to strike before she can speak." Gustavo patted the brand new revolver under his jacket. "I prepare for this, Wilk."

"As do I." One last desperate attempt to take her out. Whether his criminal friends would help him this time, Wilk could not guess.

They, too, might consider him a lost cause.

~

Vicki sat down beside him on the veranda. The house was quiet in the early afternoon. Some slept at this time. Few chose vigorous activity.

"Do you intend to stay much longer, Wilk?" she asked after a time.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

"Is this a hint for me to go?" He realized the jest fell flat as soon as he uttered it.

"If you wish it, you never have to go."

He had sensed this would come. No, he knew it would come. To remain here at this attractive, dynamic woman's side — wouldn't that be a better life than the one he would return to on the other side of the world?

And maybe he was even in love with her. At least a little.

"I shall stay a while longer," he promised. "If only because I fear there is still danger."

"That is certain." They both thought on the truth of it, and on the dangers, for a moment. "But maybe not those who sought your life before."

"There is not much incentive now. They are unlikely to act."

"Not until they see which way the wind blows, Wilk?"

"So I would think. Your enemies will feel different."

"I will always have such enemies if I follow this path I have chosen." She gazed out across the grounds, past their walls, beyond the neighboring villas, toward the west. Perhaps she looked all the way to Montellano. "You have walked such paths."

"There is sometimes no choice."

"No, there isn't. We must rest a moment when we are able, and go on." She rose to her feet and Wilk rose beside her. Whether he took her into his arms or she came into them does not matter. They kissed long and deep.

"Come," she said.

~

Bob Dunn did not have a good voice for the telephone. He sounded even thinner and more nasal than most. "Jack Singer has flown down from Miami. He would like to meet with you. It

STEPHEN BROOKE

would be only the three of us and we could box all this up and put it on the shelf.”

“Make it four,” Wilk replied at once. “I want Mrs. Guzman to sit in. She needs to know what is going on. No others, only her.” Rita, Gustavo, Elena? They did not need to see the whole picture now. Maybe later. Maybe never.

“Why not? She’s been involved in most of it anyway.” The man’s laugh did not sound good over the phone either. “Shoot, she may know more than me.”

“Very well. We will meet in the library here, as we did before. Tomorrow afternoon.”

“Damn, Wilk, I thought I was the one giving orders. But okay. See you at One-ish?”

“Good enough.”

It would be impossible to say which hung up first.

"WE HAVE ALMOST NO MONEY," Teresa told them. "Arty was deeply in debt." She had arrived at dawn, with her daughter and luggage. It had been a long flight from Chicago, with a change of planes in Tampa.

The little girl sat in her lap. Her mother seemed loath to let her go. "I must sell the house in Chicago. Perhaps Alicia and I shall live in Naples."

"For now, you live here," Vicki told her. "You must serve as matron of honor at your sister's wedding."

"It could be held by the beach in Naples," suggested Wilk.

"She would like that," Teresa felt.

Vicki made no comment. Wilk knew she wanted the wedding to be public, in one of the great churches of Havana. It is likely Teresa knew this too.

"What of the business assets?" he asked.

"There are some shares in International Resources. That was the company Arty sold out to." All three knew who controlled that company. "There is already an offer for them. Emler is going to handle all that for me."

Arty's former associates might even pay a fair price for them. They were the sort of men who might feel some obligation to the widow. Also it would make the matter seem aboveboard if any government agencies were watching.

Oh, of course they were watching.

Rita came in for breakfast. She showed no surprise. Someone had told her of Teresa's arrival. The entire household could know.

Teresa was momentarily uncomfortable, perhaps not sure how to deal with the woman who had once posed as her housemaid. She certainly never sat down and ate with women of her color

STEPHEN BROOKE

back in the States. But she had been born elsewhere. Her old training, all the obligations that went with aristocracy, came to the fore.

"I know not how to name you," she said. "Certainly not Betsy."

"Then allow me to present Rita Santamaria," said her step-mother. "She works for one of us now but I am not quite sure whom!"

Rita sat down and poured coffee. She added much sugar. "Senor Morris was the one who hired me, so maybe I am still in the employ of his wife."

"But not as a maid," Wilk had to add.

"Ah, but I was a very good maid. Perhaps the senora could give me references." She gave Wilk a sidelong look. "And I do not forget you offered me a position, Senor Wilkins."

"That still stands."

Vicki regarded the pair of them, her former traveling companions, for a few seconds. Her expression revealed nothing. "You would live in Australia, Rita? That is a very big change."

"I hear it is not so different there," replied Rita. "Except they have kangaroos. I would want to see kangaroos."

"I could use your abilities right here. And maybe elsewhere, in time."

For a moment, amusement pushed away Teresa's cares. "They are going to bid for you!"

A maid came in, bent down to speak softly to Senora Guzman.

"Your room is ready, Teresa," said Vicki. "You can settle in and rest a while, and we shall all see you later, no?" She gave her stepdaughter a conspiratorial smile. "And you can change out of those black clothes. You start a new life this morning, in a new country."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

~

"You have met Mr. Dunn before."

The man gave Vicki a courteous nod. "Ma'am."

"And this is Mr. Singer."

"Thank you for your hospitality, Senora Guzman."

"It is my pleasure, gentlemen." Vicki spoke in English and the conversation proceeded in that language. "I thank you for including me." Dunn gave Wilk a quick look but made no comment.

A maid left coffee on a mahogany side table. Vicki poured for each of them, remembering Wilk took only milk.

Singer pulled out a black notebook. "Let me get this out of the way first," he said. "Your recent trip. We know you met an important Nazi. No one at the agency has any idea who he is."

"The name is Frederick Schwartz. My guess would be that he served in intelligence during the war."

Dunn nodded as Singer scribbled it down. "We'll see if there are records. Anything else you can tell us?"

"Officially, a career diplomat. Never of high rank because his true job was running espionage. He was doing so when I knew him in the Thirties, anyway."

Dunn said to his associate, "I wonder if he might have ever been at the German embassy in Montellano."

Singer jotted this down too. "So, I take it you and Agent Dunn spoke of the organized crime involvement," he said.

"We did. Senora Guzman knows most of that."

"After all," she noted, "they did try to kill me."

"In league with Vargas. Those were the men who were associated with Morris."

"We suspect they were not the ones behind the attack on you in Naples, Wilkins," Dunn put in.

STEPHEN BROOKE

"Right. That could have been the other organization. Quite possibly coordinating with the Nazis." Singer paused. "And your old friend Colonel Aguilar."

"Ah, now this was not clear to me," said Vicki.

"It is not entirely clear to us," admitted Singer. "It could have been one of Morris's associates sending him a message. A power struggle within the gang."

"In which case, they would have been after Teresa, not me," said Wilk. He shook his head. "I'm not sure I buy that."

"Just a possibility and not the most likely one. We never found the men involved."

Vicki was ready to dismiss it. "Not Vargas, anyway. But he was behind my husband's death."

Both of them, thought Wilk.

Dunn spoke. "It is very likely that the poisonings were orchestrated by Vargas or his followers. Aguilar may have headed it up, even if he secretly plots against the president."

Singer suddenly looked rather uncomfortable. "The agency might have been involved," he confessed. "It could have been a case of the right hand not knowing what the left one did."

"If so, they also sabotaged my flight to Florida." And killed Sam Taylor. "That doesn't make much sense."

"Only if they were working with someone else, letting them do the dirty work." He paused, perhaps searching for the correct words. "Facilitating them."

"In other words, back to agents of Alvaro Vargas's regime."

"Yes. It does seem pretty sure Vargas was involved in the assassination of his predecessor. Your husband, Ma'am. He knows his government is unpopular and the people might turn to a Guzman. Any Guzman."

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

And now he had made Vicki, who had once chosen to stay out of the politics of her homeland, into a true opponent.

"Do not forget that Vargas is also addicted to cocaine. That can make a man distrustful. Paranoid." Wilk had seen it more than once. Arty had used the drug too. Who could know what effects it had on his judgment?

Both men nodded. "That is true," admitted Dunn.

An awkward moment of silence was broken by Singer. "We know for certain the Nazis sent the assassin in Miami Beach," he said. "That was pretty obvious."

"But not whether they had the assistance of mobsters."

"Not that it would matter," commented Wilk. "Are we confused about anything else?"

"A great deal," laughed Singer. "But we can work with what we have. We seem to be in agreement about most of it."

"Then work is done and we can switch from coffee to liquor," announced Vicki. "Your orders, gentlemen?"

"*Anejo* rum," said Wilk at once. He knew Vicki kept a bottle here, away from the bar and those who drank there. Iced whiskeys were set before the two agents. One of the houseboys had chipped the ice from a block, one of those delivered each day before dawn. Vicki chose to pour herself a snifter of the *anejo*. That was the way to serve it, Wilk felt.

Singer took one swallow, nodded in approval, and set down his glass. "You are to make an announcement, we hear."

"More a denouncement." Both agents chuckled at the quip. Wilk had heard her practice it earlier. "I can lay the deaths of both my husbands at the door of Alvaro Vargas. I can honestly say he tried to have me killed. Whether people believe me, who can say?"

"It may be enough that it is said."

STEPHEN BROOKE

“And I am ‘any Guzman,’ as you say. There is much more to say of his regime. Corruption. The harboring of criminals and murderers.”

She paused. “I do not seek to replace my cousin. That I leave to others. But I *will* seem him pulled down — and perhaps live peacefully then in my homeland.” Her eyes lingered on Wilk, for only a moment.

And him there, with this tall, desirable woman? It was an attractive idea, and a frightening one, perhaps.

“I shall speak out soon,” she continued. “Have you suggestions for me?”

“Be cautious,” said Bob Dunn.

“And wear your hair down,” added Wilk.

~

“It is not like Lincoln Avenue,” she said, “but it will do.”

Gustavo trailed behind them. That was one difference. And guns were not so easy to buy here, not legally. American laws were very lax.

Would Elena ever wish to carry one again?

“The prices are better,” Wilk observed.

“Ah, as cheap as ever, Senor Wilkins! I will ask you to buy me nothing today.”

“That I can leave to your fiance.”

“Fernando is a good boy.” She giggled. “But he has no money!”

“Not even back in Montellano?”

“No, he is not from a wealthy family. His father works for a cigar maker. And his grandfather emigrated from here in Cuba to roll cigars.” She giggled again. “Or to teach us the proper way to roll cigars, says Fernando.”

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

She looked into a shop window they passed, and sighed. "I do not think he would approve of me wearing a bikini again."

"One makes compromises," said Wilk. "Perhaps even anarchists."

"And I shall always remain one, underneath. Our collective will not be dissolved, Wilk."

"But much else has changed."

"It is so." They walked on without speaking for a minute or two.

Elena stopped suddenly and turned to him. "Is there something between you and Vicki?" She almost whispered the question.

Wilk could not have hoped no one had noticed. They had been discreet but had not actually hidden the relationship. "We have spent time together."

"Your words say nothing but mean everything," she replied. "Be careful of my stepmother, Wilk. She means well but does not always do good." They walked on a little way. "I am not jealous, of course. This has nothing to do with what we had. That will always be mine to keep."

"You have grown wise, Elena." It might have sounded like a jest but he meant it.

"The world changed in that hotel room. We both understand this. Oh, is that not a lovely sun dress, Wilk?"

"I can not wait to see you in it."

"Ha, Fernando gets the first viewing! Let's go in."

WILK SAT AT THE SMALL, ornate desk in the library, drafting his report. He would tidy it up later and send it off to Maggie to get into final shape. He might get to Australia in person, first. He was not at all certain about his future.

It was not a very practical desk. He could not spread all his notes on its surface. Some surrounded him on the floor, in stacks of more-or-less chronological order.

Sometimes, a breeze would come through the tall open windows and out through the pushed-back pocket doors on the other side of the room, lifting a paper out of its place. He was willing to put up with this inconvenience on a hot afternoon. Francisco stopped in the hall and looked in, hesitated before entering.

"You need paperweights," he observed. "Highball glasses work well. Empty or full." He took one of the tall wooden chairs by the book cases, sitting sideways so he could watch Wilk, saying no more for a few moments. "You carry your Browning, do you not?" Wilk nodded. "I decided I too should have a weapon."

He had noticed the gun in the back of Francisco's trousers these past days but had held any comments. "May I see?"

The young man passed the handgun over without objection. "I purchased it in Miami before we left. Gustavo recommended this model."

A snub-nosed revolver, but lighter than the bodyguard's Thirty-eight Special. From the same manufacturer, though, Smith and Wesson. Wilk broke it open, looked down the well-cleaned barrel. It was not surprising that Francisco would be as fastidious with his gun as he was with his person. "A good choice," he said, snapping it closed and handing it back.

Francisco rose and slid it back into its holster, none too grace-

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

fully. Wilk hoped he could pull it out smoothly if the need ever came. He stood there for an awkward moment before blurting out, "Vicki has given Alfonso one of my father's pistols. The Colt. It was the only one he carried away with him."

The engraved auto with the pearl handles. Wilk remembered it well, and Fernando seemed a logical recipient. She would never have given it over to the late Artemus Morris. But maybe Francisco should have had it. "Do you mind this, Francisco?" he asked, as gently as he could.

He laughed. "It would knock me on my fat rear end if I fired it! It has gone to the better man."

Wilk was none too sure of that. Before he could say anything, Francisco went on. "But it might have gone to one better yet." He looked straight at Wilk. There was no doubt as to whom he meant.

He would not have wanted it. The Colt was a part of what Raoul became later, when he was no longer the young idealist he had known in Paris. "It is for others to carry your father's legacy, Francisco. I would not want the burden."

The dictator's son nodded. "Nor would I, my friend. Nor would I."

~

"You will remain until the Senora Guzman makes her mysterious announcement?" asked Rita.

"I think so." After that? Wilk did not know.

She perched on the lounge beside his. "I can not remain idle here much longer. If you were truly serious about a job —"

"Completely. You could even go on ahead of me if you wish." He realized there was much he would have to attend to first, much he had not even thought of, if they were to do this. All sorts of paper work. Getting into Australia was not quite the

STEPHEN BROOKE

same as flying back and forth between Miami and Havana. They should go to the Australian embassy here and make sure of things. Or he could write to Maggie and tell her to take care of it.

"You have papers?" he asked. "Legitimate ones?"

"If not, we can forge them," she replied. Her smile lasted only a moment. "There are — people like me there, are there not? Dark people."

Ah. "The native people, the aborigines. Yes, they are black. And there are immigrants from many lands. Indians. Those from India, I mean." Few were as dark as Rita. Wilk decided not to mention that.

"You would not be ashamed to have me there?"

"Never, Rita. Neither as an employee nor a friend." He sat up and faced her. "But I will not lie. You will find prejudice there as in most places."

She nodded solemnly. "Even here in Havana. The only way to escape it is to hide away in a little village by the sea."

"That is not for you." He spoke softly but with conviction.

"I do not know where I belong, Wilk." Were there tears? He had never before seen tears from Rita Santamaria, no matter what they had faced.

Maybe he understood. He had been a wanderer most of his life. Maybe he still was. "You belong wherever you wish to be, Rita," he assured her. "You can always belong by my side."

Wilk immediately realized that implied more than he intended. He had meant as friend, companion in arms. But was that all the woman was to him? Maybe he truly had meant something more, and had not realized it until the words came out.

Rita made no answer to any of it. She embraced him for a moment and returned to the house.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

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Wilk heard the truck's engine. The ice being delivered, before the sun rose. He was sometimes awake this early and had heard it before.

He might as well get up. He pulled on an undershirt and loose shorts. As ever, his gun was tucked into the waistband. Wilk liked to exercise early, before the heat of the day. He went down to the veranda. No one else was there.

Squats first. Up and down and why was was the front gate hanging open? The guard knew to close it after anyone came in. But how could he when he lay on the ground? Wilk immediately ran into the house.

He had heard no gunshot. They must have knifed the man or garroted him or something of that sort. The icemen. They could have even used an ice pick. Not really the icemen. Assassins. A hit squad.

Gustavo was awake and in the kitchen, talking with the one maid who slept overnight in the house. "We have been breached," he hissed at the man. "They will surely go straight to Vicki's room."

If they knew where that was. He prayed they would not and have to search. Gustavo drew his revolver. "The fence?"

"The icemen."

The bodyguard gave a quick nod. "Call the police," he told the maid, and rushed into the lounge, Wilk on his heels, even as the gunmen came through the double swinging door behind the bar. Wilk knew it communicated with a storage area, a pantry, and that with the delivery doors behind the house. He had gone in there more than once to fetch a bottle of wine. He fired without hesitation.

Return fire. One had a Thompson gun. Gustavo spun and

STEPHEN BROOKE

went down soundlessly. Wilk retreated to the doorway as two more assassins slipped out and took cover behind the bar. Four of them, he thought. Maybe five.

The shots should have awakened the household. The invaders no longer had stealth and surprise on their side. They came out of their cover now, headed toward him and firing as they came. Yes, five of them. Wilk retreated. The stairs. He should position himself at the top, prevent them from going up to Vicki's room.

And hope they did not find their way to the back stairs. He let loose a couple shots and bolted up the staircase, throwing himself prone at the top.

Someone opened the first door to his left. His right now as he turned to face the intruders. Alfonso, in his underwear, and holding Raoul Guzman's Colt. Does he not sleep in Elena's room? Wilk wondered for a brief moment, before the thought was swept from his mind.

The chatter of the submachine-gun made him move back, crouching in the shelter of the doorway on the other side of the hall. The bullets brought a rain of plaster from the ceiling. "We need to secure the other stairs," he called across to Fernando. The man went immediately, keeping low.

Who was still downstairs? The other bodyguard slept down there, and so did Rita. They would be awake now and ready for action. They were professionals. Ortega. That was the bodyguard's name.

And up here, the Guzman family mostly. Francisco, the sisters. All the dictator's children. Those men might have orders to kill every one of them. But especially Vicki. She was the one Vargas feared. The one he had already failed to remove. Gunfire from the other end of the hall. They were attempting the other stairs.

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

Francisco popped out of his room in a dressing gown, gripping his revolver with both hands. Wilk motioned him back but the boy seemed to think he was directing him to go help Capitan Alfonso. He saw Vicki's door crack open and shut again.

The three men below him were going to make an assault. The Tommy-gun sprayed fire, forcing Wilk into cover. He could not stop them. They were halfway up when shots rang out from behind them. He stepped out, putting the men on the stairs into a crossfire.

Rita and Ortega. That wasn't her little Beretta barking in her hands. The man with the submachine-gun crumpled first, toppling down the stairs. From the corner of his eye, Wilk saw that Fernando had rejoined him and was coolly releasing round after round toward the men below. The other attackers must have been dealt with.

The remaining two fell. Rita motioned for the bodyguard to stay and came up the stairs, carefully looking over the bodies and then stepping past them. She held Gustavo's revolver. "Gustavo?" he whispered when she reached them.

"Wounded. I think he will be all right."

"What of the others?" he asked Fernando. He saw Elena now peeking around her door and held up a palm, signaling her to stay put. She could put her arms around her fiance soon enough.

"Both fell," he reported. Wilk followed him to the other stairway, where a rather elated Francisco stood guard.

"I see one," he said, going a couple steps down. Where was the other man?

They had all clumped up together here. Wilk knew that was a mistake. He turned to see the missing man creeping down the hall from the other direction, an automatic pistol in his hand. He stood outside Vicki's room.

STEPHEN BROOKE

Francisco might have spied him a second before Wilk. “No!” he screamed out and ran toward the man, firing. The assassin returned fire and Francisco toppled forward, stumbling a step or two further before falling.

Wilk pumped every remaining bullet in his Browning into the man. Then all was still.

Vicki stepped out into the hall, a small automatic clutched in her hand. She dropped it and crouched by the fallen Francisco, her body shaking with sobs.

Wilk put his arm around Rita.

ORTEGA HAD ONLY A KNOT on his head. He was very embarrassed that the assassin had taken him unaware after doubling back. Gustavo's wound was more serious, a forty-five caliber slug through his upper torso, not so far above the heart. But it was above the heart and he would mend. An ambulance carried him away, and Rita was allowed to ride with him.

Not until it was all over did anyone notice Fernando had also been hit and blood was trickling down his leg. He was on crutches for a few days and Elena fussed over him constantly.

Was it all over? Wilk thought so. This last desperate gambit of Vargas had failed. Two men the attackers had slain, before falling themselves, one of them perhaps the best of the Guzmans.

And the one from whom *el Presidente* had the least to fear. Would that the young man had gone off to Paris and set up a medical practice. That was as it was. His body, and that of the fallen guard, were removed first when the police finished their examination of the scene. The five assassins were hauled away a little later. Everyone gathered in the lounge while this went on.

"It is very plain," said the lieutenant of police when he came to them. He was a sallow fellow with a squint, which he hid behind dark glasses. "An attempt to assassinate Senora Guzman. It is most unlikely anyone here will be charged with anything."

Not even illegal guns. There was paperwork for most of them, but not all.

The sisters sat on either side of their stepmother. Little Alicia played at their feet, played with a tattered stuffed bear. They did not blame Vicki for Francisco's death, Wilk was sure. Yes, she was in part responsible but Senora Guzman had been carried along by events like the rest of them. It fell to him to arrange all things today, to be the spokesman to the police, to call an under-

STEPHEN BROOKE

taker. Not a doctor; the police had taken care of that. He called a priest too, though he knew not if anyone here would wish to speak with him.

And he directed the servants — when they were finally allowed to enter the villa — in cleaning up. Wilk knew more of such things than any of these Guzmans. Alfonso was some help, when Elena permitted him out of her sight.

It felt as if he was finishing up everything here.

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“You have fallen in love with Rita.”

It was possible. “There remains another in my heart. I do not know if any can take her place right now.”

“Not Elena?” There was great doubt in Vicki’s voice. One might even have called it incredulity, if one used such words.

“One who came before her. All things say she is gone but still I must make certain.” Elena had truly not taken her place. Perhaps that was why it had not been so hard when their affair ended.

Senora Guzman only nodded and sipped her drink. The breeze had come up and blew in through the French doors. Both sat silently a little while.

“It is as well,” she said at last. “I think I knew it would not have done to have you at my side in what is to come. In time, I shall marry a man of my own country, I suppose, and there will be Elena and her Fernando.” She managed a small smile. “Do you think he would make a good presidente?”

“I can think of worse men for the job.”

“Far worse,” she agreed.

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“Singer has returned to Miami.”

Wilk suspected — though they had given no indication of it

THE DICTATOR'S CHILDREN

— that Jack Singer was Dunn's superior in their agency. Bob might be important here in Havana, a lieutenant of the chief he had never met. Singer headed up a bigger operation.

And though he had returned to Miami, it was doubtful he would remain there.

"So things settle back into something resembling normality."

Dunn chuckled at that. "That would put me out of a job. You too."

Wilk shrugged. "I can always fall back on being an airplane mechanic." He took a sip of the dark coffee. This was the same cafe where he first met the agent.

"But instead you return to Australia and Loup Limited."

He only nodded in response to this.

"Santamaria too."

"Yes, that is all arranged." If Bob Dunn expected any further explanation, he would be disappointed. There was no reason to volunteer anything.

Dunn drank coffee too. "We were surprised. We expected her to be part of Mrs. Guzman's plans."

"She has made her own plans."

"Okay, we'll wait for your report." Bob grinned. "And be sure to submit a statement."

"You may count on it," said Wilk.

IF MARIA VICTORIA GUZMAN USED the death of Francisco to help drive home what she said, that was to be expected and forgiven. They had buried the boy yesterday; today she had made her anticipated announcement.

She wore black and her almost-black hair was allowed to fall on her shoulders. Her daughters — she never referred to them as stepdaughters again — stood close behind. They too were in black and Teresa held her little girl.

“Senora Guzman was very eloquent,” said Rita.

“She was,” Wilk agreed. Neither was the least surprised by this but it was something to say.

“I will miss Vicki. I will miss Gustavo.”

“Ah, should I go back and offer them both jobs also?”

“They already have jobs, Wilk. Is that our plane?” She was gazing toward a Constellation resting on the runway.

“No, wrong airline.” He paid the cabby and took the bags the man retrieved from the trunk. Two of them, one for each, and neither heavy.

He found the correct terminal and looked at the flights posted on the board. “That is ours,” he said. “Into Tampa.”

“I have never been there. Is it like Miami?”

“It is much better. Maybe we should buy a car there and drive it to California, rather than flying. I could teach you to drive. You must be able to drive if you are to work for me.”

“This I am willing to do, Senor Wilkins. Oh, Mr. Wilkins I must call you now, eh?”

“Wilk will do.”

Final Words

I HOPE YOU HAVE ENJOYED this tale of the man known as Wilk. There may be more stories of the Polish expat as he adventures through the Twentieth Century, but this is the first I have put on paper.

The reader will have noticed I did not name the Guzmans' country. This is because it does not exist. The novel is not a work of historical fiction. Yes, it would be 'somewhere' in Central America. And yes, they have good coffee.

Stephen Brooke