

The Emissary and the Soldadera

by Ricardo Santos Bell

1 – The Appointment

Three shots in succession pelted the cobblestones and sent the bullets ricocheting down a street in Jiménez, Mexico. John Stevens found himself lying in the street desperately hugging a niche formed by a dead horse, its rider still mounted and equally lifeless. He prayed that the dead man's spurred boot perched over his head would continue to add protection from the bullets whizzing overhead. It was as if the dead horse formed a magnet for them, creating a macabre dead man's dance with the occasional strike.

Sounds of cannon fire resonated in the distance, and John felt the earth tremble beneath him. The odor of cordite assaulted every corner of the town while the smell of death soaked the rows of colonial-style houses that lined both sides of the narrow, cobblestone street—the whitewashed walls pockmarked with scores of bullet holes.

A blare of bugles sounded a charge. From John's "vantage" point, he had a clear view of men armed with rifles and others with machetes, rushing a machine gun nested behind sandbags a block away. Their wide-brimmed sombreros sailed off their heads as bullets ripped into their bodies. Blood splattered in every direction, the red accentuating the whiteness of their cotton clothing. Most fell dead. As the machine gun nest fell silent, he could hear the wounded cry out in agony, only to prompt more bursts from the infernal weapon.

Fear gripped the young man. He shouldn't be here, yet he was. How had something so innocent as getting a position with the government gone so wrong? John's mind slipped back to the beginning when he had been in Washington DC. He remembered it as a cold winter's day, the cherry trees nothing more than skeletal shapes. Sitting in the outer office of Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, John had shuddered when he heard the deep, resonant gong of the large grandfather clock strike the hour four times and shattered his nerves. The scent of beeswax mixed with turpentine from the hand-rubbed furniture assaulted his sinuses and

added to his uneasiness. Sitting on a hard, wooden bench beneath a portrait of President Woodrow Wilson, he ran his hand through his dark brown hair and struggled to remain calm. But it was to no avail. He felt his three-piece suit tightening its grip on his slim frame, the heel of his left foot fidgeting and jerking up and down on the thick, woolen carpet. Despite the outside temperature hovering just below fifty degrees—which John felt was comparable to the lack of heat in the room—he pulled out a neatly-pressed handkerchief and wiped the beads of perspiration from his upper lip for the third time.

John watched as a middle-aged woman, her flaxen hair in a fashionable bun, sat at her desk methodically cutting out articles from a stack of newspapers. Her life's work seemed to be cutting out tabloid pieces. He wondered whether that would also be his destiny, an existence confined to the menial bowels of government. He tried picking up and reading a newspaper on the table next to him but couldn't get past the March 10, 1914 dateline. Unconsciously, he began to readjust his tie before realizing he had done that so many times that his damp hands likely soiled the knot. He scanned the room for a mirror. At that moment, a loud buzz burst from something he didn't recognize on the woman's desk.

The woman, a perfunctory smile fused to her face, looked up. "Secretary Bryan will see you now, Mister Stevens. Go right in." Her brief look in his direction was devoid of any concern for his unease.

Bolting upright, he waited for a moment before finally realizing the receptionist wouldn't be opening the door for him—a clear sign of his lowly status in the Washington pecking order. Retrieving his Panama straw hat from the bench, he marched toward the Secretary of State's inner-office door.

John turned to the woman, embarrassed by forgotten manners. "Thank you, ma'am." He tried to present a pleasant smile. However, her head remained bowed, her eyes focused on

the extrication of fodder from the day's news. Turning again to the door, he took a deep breath before proceeding.

As he entered the large room that commanded a clear view of the Washington Monument, Secretary of State Bryan rose to greet him. He was large and robust, with a balding head wreathed in a furry crown of slightly graying hair. Suspenders held up wrinkled, tan linen pants. Arm garters adjusted the length of the sleeves on his shirt. A brown string tie firmed up in a bow looked ridiculous under the large, impressive head. Yet John was aware of Bryan's self-confidence and charisma that impressed anyone who met him.

"Come in. Come in, my boy," the friendly giant nearly shouted. He crossed to John and took his right hand in both of his. "What a pleasant surprise. Your father mentioned you favored your mother in looks, and he's right, you know. Come, let's sit on the sofa by the fireplace. It's much more sociable."

John followed the elder statesman to the sofa and blurted, "I want to thank you for taking the time to see me, Mister Secretary. My father and mother send their regards."

Bryan plopped down on the overstuffed cushions, and John followed suit. "My heavens, I've known your father and mother for over ten years, yet I've never had a chance to meet you. How old are you now?"

"Twenty-six, sir. My sister and I were in school every time my parents came to Washington."

"And when they came to Iowa, then Pennsylvania, then Missouri, and all the other places your father stumped for me as well as the president during our campaigns. A loyal party member for certain. A Democrat in the purest sense. For that matter, so is your mother. Are they in Santa Fe?"

"Yes, sir. Both are doing well."

“Great folks. Salt of the earth. And *you*. Just look at you. A Harvard graduate with a law degree. Splendid. And ready to take on the world, no doubt. Speaking of that, have you given any thought as to how you might start in service to our great country? I mean, as to what you would *like* to do.”

“I’m grateful you were willing to see me, Mister Secretary. I’m ready to start at the bottom and be grateful for any position. I served a judicial clerkship in Boston, and while there, I sat for and passed the Massachusetts bar, but I know I’ve much to learn. I would be pleased to seek admission to the bar here in Washington if that would help.”

“Splendid, my boy, splendid.” Bryan paused and lowered his head, pondering his words. Finally, he turned back to John. “After talking with the president, we knew you would be perfect for a certain position. Your father tells me you’re bilingual.”

“Yes, Sir. Since my mother is of Mexican descent, we’ve spoken both English and Spanish in our home since I was a child. It’s a valuable skill in New Mexico.”

“Marvelous! How soon can you be ready to travel?”

John felt a rigidity take hold of his body. “I... I don’t know, sir. I haven’t completely unpacked. I suppose I could be ready—”

“Good, my boy, good. No need to unpack further. We want you to go to....” Bryan stood and moved to the massive desk near the office windows. He picked up a telegram and peered at it. “Chee-hoo-a-hoo-a, Mexico.”

“I believe it’s pronounced Chee-wa-wa, Mister Secretary.”

“And so it is.” Bryan silently mouthed the word in an effort to pronounce it correctly. “But a small lesson in politics, my boy. Don’t correct a senior statesman. They’re all politicians, you know, and insecure as a turkey on Thanksgiving.”

John nodded, forcing a crooked smile while adjusting the knot on his tie.

Bryan rejoined John on the sofa. “As I was saying, this Chee...wa...wa is just south of the border from El Paso. I’m sure you’re aware the president has taken a keen interest in the conflict in Mexico. President Huerta, the man who had his predecessor, Francisco Madero, killed, is nothing more than a dictator, much like Díaz before him but more ruthless. Peace, democracy, and a stable economic climate in our continent have always been of the utmost importance to the president. Our Christian faith demands we intervene in whatever way we can to attain those values. The key men who helped Madero depose the despot Díaz only to have Huerta take his place are now working again to improve conditions. John, we don’t like surprises. We need to know what is happening as it happens. Your assignment will be with General Francisco Villa. You may have heard of him referred to as Pancho Villa.”

Bryan’s countenance became mesmerizing through his increasingly passionate monologue. John sat frozen in his seat. He thought about the Mexicans that had settled near his family’s ranch in New Mexico, the ones his mother made sure were given every opportunity to carve out a life of their own. She had cursed the Mexican government for its treatment of its people and the confiscation of their lands. This revolution, she claimed, would correct that. Would this be his chance to see for himself?

The moment passed, and Bryan’s manner was again solicitous. “We need to know how their efforts are progressing, how Villa feels about our support, and what he’s planning regarding our interests. You’ll be our eyes and ears and report directly to us by way of the telegraph. We already have a man there, but he has trouble with the language, and his information is sometimes, shall we say, suspect. Of course, he’s a loyal fellow, but the language thing poses a problem for him. We fear he may be misinterpreting things. I’m sure you understand.”

“Of course,” John said, trying to make sense of the rapid turn of events.

“Splendid, my boy! Your service to our country will make your parents proud of you.” Bryan stood and moved to the door. “As to your travel, our last communiqué had Villa and his troops in Chihuahua south of El Paso. Miss Spitz will take care of all your needs: train tickets, money, passport, an official letter stating your appointment, and all those things you’ll be needing. Check with her on your way out.”

John rose and followed Bryan. “Thank you, Mister Secretary.”

“Not at all, John. Do keep us posted.” The venerable statesman reached out and took John’s hand.

John hesitated for a moment. “May I ask the title of this position?”

“Emissary. Emissary of the President of the United States of America. And don’t worry, there’s no danger involved. From what Tambler says... he’s our man down there... everything has been quiet for some time.”

As John stepped out into Bryan’s outer office, Miss Spitz, still seated behind her desk, held out a packet in his direction.

“You’ll find all you need in here, including your appointment papers, identification, and enough money to get you to El Paso. The consulate there will supply you with additional funds and passage to Chihuahua. Your train leaves this evening at eight. Don’t be late. And remember, you’re a representative of the United States. Try to act like one,” Spitz commanded.

The words buffeted John as he tried to fathom how she knew he would accept the position. Perhaps Washington had spies in the walls. John felt that he had been manipulated. There was so much that was new. Did his father know? He leaned forward and stammered, “Thank you. I’ll try to remember.”

“As you go out into the hall, turn to the left. Go to the third door down on the right side and see Mr. Brubaker. He will give you a briefing to prepare you.”

John nodded. As he put his hand on the doorknob, he heard Miss Spitz clear her throat once and then a second time. He turned to see her tilting her head in the direction of the coatrack with raised eyebrows. Following her gaze, he quickly realized he had left behind his overcoat and the mittens and scarf his mother had gifted him when he departed New Mexico for Cambridge. “Oh,” was all he could muster as he slunk over to the coatrack.

He looked at his watch and couldn’t imagine what kind of briefing he might receive in the short time remaining before he needed to be at the train station to catch his train. He had learned while at Harvard that preparation was paramount. His unease going into the interview didn’t dissipate; it increased.

Once more, a bullet ricocheted off the cobblestone street and brought John back to the dismal condition of his introduction to the revolution taking place in Mexico. Secretary Bryan’s words, “Everything has been quiet for some time,” kept ringing in his head. His father had said the root to success was through government. John wondered if his father had ever contemplated the scope of “government.” He knew there was no allowance for parental disobedience in the waning years of the Victorian era. You did what your parents decided was best for you, even if it led to you groveling in the dirt next to the rear end of a dead horse in someone else’s fight for equality.

John peered over the dead horse’s flank to see a woman appear out of nowhere. She dashed for an entryway in a building across the narrow street. A sniper somewhere on the roof—perhaps the same one firing at him—brought her down. She screamed and clutched the wound to her left leg. Without any thought for his safety, John rushed to her side. Bullets chipped stone to the sound of ricochet. He caught hold of the woman, lifted her to her feet, and pushed her safely through the building’s doorway. A fusillade thudded into the thick wooden door as it slammed shut.

Inside the hallway, the woman's relatives hugged and kissed her. One of them began tending her wound while the others turned their attention to John. Helping him off with his shoulder bag, they began to hug and slap him on the back to thank him for his miraculous rescue. As the family propelled him further into the entryway, he found himself limping. Had he also been shot and not felt the pain from the adrenaline rush? It wasn't until he checked his feet that he discovered that his left boot lacked a heel.

A young woman, perhaps twenty and attired in a simple cotton dress and blouse, her black hair pulled back in a long braid, stepped off a train corralled by the revolutionaries as it arrived just outside of Jiménez. She carried in one hand a set of bandoleers and in the other a rifle as she made her way to the freight car that held the materiel she had retrieved from supporters and profiteers in the United States. The trip had gone as the ones before. Once General Villa had learned that the American border agents generally disregarded peasant women heading back and forth from Mexico, assuming them to be carrying food and other home or farm items, he sent women to handle the transport instead of men, who were often stopped. The young woman had led several trips into Texas while Villa's army toiled in the northern parts of Mexico. Each time, her crew of soldaderas would don simple, non-descript garb so that the border agents would deem them harmless if not invisible as they rode across the border with a wagon or two pulled by the most downtrodden-looking horses or mules they could muster. They would return hours later with the wagon appearing to be stuffed with rice, beans, flour, or whatever the dry goods establishment could provide as a topping on the wagon. Underneath the foodstuffs, as much as they were needed, was the more important cargo – bullets, rifles, pistols, gunpowder, dynamite, cordite, cannonballs, and other materiel that Villa's agents had arranged. With their heads down and appearing tired, the women

would have the horses plod back across the border at a purposefully slow pace. People in a rush drew attention from the guards.

After three round trips across the border in as many days, the forays had only been eventful in the training of a new recruit that had not been to the United States before.

“Paquita, I am so nervous,” the recruit, much older than the leader, repeated over and over again, not that she needed to as her shaking hands and furtive eye movements gave her away. “What if we get caught?”

Paquita patted the recruit’s hand. The recruit was older than Paquita but from a more sheltered and simple life that had taught her little about politics, war, or the gringos. The recruit was there because her husband had taken up arms with Villa’s army. Like the others in the group of soldaderas, the recruit looked to Paquita to teach her and help define her new life.

“The gringos won’t stop us. They never do.” Paquita’s voice was measured, soft, soothing. “And even if they do stop us, they are not going to want to deal with us. We would be a nuisance to them. Maybe they will relieve us of what we are carrying back to our army, but they will let us go.”

“But...”

“No but. There is nothing to worry about. Besides, you know I can shoot better than any of them.” A wry smile and a wink caused the recruit to giggle. Even though the recruit looked reassured, Paquita held her hand with each pass through the border. Despite what Paquita had told the recruit, she knew that a mistake could cause the trip to go very badly. Yes, they would eventually find their way back to Mexico, but perhaps not until the border agents excised their own form of payment for the transgression.

The recruit was the fifth, or was it the sixth, soldadera Paquita had trained for the supply foray into Texas. It would also be her last as Villa’s army was moving south and

Paquita would be going with them to a place where her skills with a gun would be more important.

As Paquita watched the materiel being off loaded from the train, she felt a hand on her shoulder. Turning, her eyes smiled before her lips as she looked at the white-haired man dressed in a full military uniform that was clean, pressed, and never to be confused with the mish-mash of clothes the rank-and-file wore in Villa's army.

"General Robles, it is good to see you," she said as if talking to a grandfather not seen in ages.

"And you are as always a welcome visage for these old eyes," the general beamed. "I see you were again successful."

She nodded and gestured toward the goods piling up in nearby wagons.

"Francesca, General Villa would like to see you. He has a new assignment for you, one involving an American emissary."

Paquita stood silent, her face contorting as if the most sour of lemons had found its way into her mouth. The American emissary, el cerdito – the little pig – as she called him. The man whose hands did not know their place, whose every glance at her and the other women was a leer, the one who assumed himself so much better than any Mexican.

"No," was her terse reply.

Robles could only laugh, and he did so loudly enough that the men unloading the goods began to stare.

"You're embarrassing me," Paquita complained, despite the corners of her mouth turning upward.

"It is not what you think. The general is waiting for you at the city hall in the main square."

The budding smile disappeared from Paquita's face as she watched Robles walk away, still laughing.

Paquita continued to watch him until he disappeared into a group of soldiers and they headed into Jiménez. She shuffled her feet for a moment, and then followed. She thought of her last encounter with the American emissary. Yet again, he had grabbed her about the waist and pressed against her. The man whispered something stupid in her ear as she could feel a hardness in his groin pressing against her hip. His smile broadened as he felt her reach toward the hardness. When he heard the click, his face went ashen and his eyes opened wide. He looked down to see the pistol held by Paquita against his groin, hammer cocked and ready to fire. Paquita said nothing, her expressionless face and her hard stare being all that she needed to communicate with this idiot who spoke no Spanish. The man opened his mouth to speak, but a further press of the hard steel shoved into his groin led him to back up and, finally, walk away.

A new assignment involving the American emissary. She could not believe her ears. Robles knew about what had happened with the emissary. Unless it involved removing a part of the emissary's anatomy, she could not imagine it being a welcome assignment.

Paquita quickened her pace, her eyes drawn to slits and her jaw clenched tight.

2 – An Introduction

The fighting in Jiménez subsided long enough to let John search for Villa's headquarters. He made his way along a line of columns in the main square before stopping in one of the archways to survey the scene. He could taste the traces of gunpowder that permeated every building's crevice. The stench of death and defecation saturated the war-torn plaza. Revolutionaries were now in command.

John watched as two small boys, with faces made old by conflict, carried a large basket between them and scurried throughout the battlefield, stopping along the way to pick up spent shell casings. Peasant women swarmed over dead federal soldiers and stripped their bodies of weapons along with anything of value. These weren't vultures feeding on the carrion; they were a silent army that supported those fighting for the revolution. Every shell casing could have another life; every weapon and valuable fueled the war-making machine.

As he observed the gruesome scene, John felt the cold muzzle of a pistol against the back of his head. A cascade of thoughts went rushing through his mind. He wasn't ready to become another casualty lying in the street and attracting flies. What would his father and mother say? He hadn't had time to let them know where he was, let alone what he was doing. Why couldn't Bryan have chosen someone other than *him*?

With agonizing slowness, John raised his hands and cautiously turned to face a large Mexican whose tan-felt sombrero hung over his back from the lanyard around his neck. A dusty brown *Charro* jacket and tight-fitting leather pants trying desperately to contain a potbelly completed the picture of what, for John, was the grim reaper. A broad grin, punctuated by a full mustache and dark, wicked eyes, seemed a pronouncement.

"Not him, Enrique. He's one of us," said a voice that sounded like trod upon gravel.

John was now looking at a second man, tall and lanky, wearing a light brown hunting jacket over tan breeches and well-polished riding boots. The cattleman's hat on his head gave him the appearance of a well-to-do American sportsman.

"Carajo, Gustavo, I almost kill this little gringo!" the Mexican said in heavily accented English, honest regret infusing the statement.

"There's been enough killing for one day, don't you think? Go tell the general I'm bringing him someone he should meet."

The large Mexican turned to John and gave him a sheepish wave accompanied by a smile, revealing a mouth full of gold and white teeth by way of apology. He then began picking his way across the plaza, making his way toward the mayoral building at the south end of the square.

"You must be Stevens," the lanky man said, the look in his eyes offering a wintry frost instead of the proposed warmth of fellowship.

"Yes, sir. John Stevens. You must be Gus Tambler, Emissary of the—"

"Yeah, yeah. About this emissary thing. Look, kid, emissary is Wilson's way around having to get congressional approval for us to be down here. A lot of Americans have business interests in Mexico: Doheny Oil, Southern Pacific, Hearst to mention just a few. We're here to let them know what's happening to their holdings in this here revolution. You're Wilson's boy, and, if you get in trouble down here, don't expect the embassy or that Republican Congress to help you none."

"No, Sir, Miss Spitz was more than—"

"Yeah, that old bag has a way of getting to you."

John remembered his contact in El Paso saying the same thing. His mind drifted back to his arrival in that city. There had been the mad dash to catch the train to El Paso from Washington. It wasn't until three days later that John finally stepped off the train, the red

brick-clad border station drenched in the sun and welcome warmth. While the other passengers departed, he stood on the lone, bustling platform, stuffing his coat into his shoulder bag. As the group thinned, a well-dressed man approached with an extended arm and a smile.

“John Stevens, am I correct?” the man asked.

“Yes. Mister McElroy, I believe,” John replied as he took the man’s hand.

“Correct. We’ll send your winter clothes home to your family. Santa Fe, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Do you know the address?”

“Yes. We received your information from Miss Spitz. Did you get to meet her?”

“I most certainly did,” John replied with raised eyebrows.

“She’s a force to deal with. Everyone in the agency is terrified of her,” McElroy said as he glanced at his watch. “Your train leaves for Jiménez in less than an hour, so we better hurry to the border.”

“Secretary Bryan said I was to rendezvous with Villa in Chihuahua. I was also hoping for a hot bath and having my clothes cleaned and pressed.”

“Villa already eliminated the federal forces in Chihuahua and has moved on to Jiménez. As for the bath and clean clothes, I’m sorry. They’ll have to wait. Reliable train schedules are non-existent at present.”

The two men rushed across the border to the train station in Ciudad Juárez. John received Mexican currency and a farewell handshake before boarding the train. The speed at which things were progressing gave him pause. If things were as quiet as Secretary Bryan had said, then why all the rush? He couldn’t help but feel that he didn’t have a complete picture of what was taking place in Mexico, especially when he found out in his all-too-short briefing that what Bryan referred to as a “conflict” was a euphemism for revolution.

“Now, where’s your kit?” Tambler asked, the remark ending John’s reflection on the past few days.

“My kit? Oh, my shoulder bag. I left it back at a house on my way into town. You see, when I arrived early this morning—”

“We can get it later. But first, you’ve got to get yourself cleaned up. Get the dust off them duds of yours.” Tambler continued to give John a chilly stare. “You know, kid, you’re supposed to represent our government.”

All John could do was nod. This man didn’t like him, or was it something else? Taking stock of his clothing, John found large blotches of dirt and grime on his suit, his brown hair peppered with it. He began slapping dust motes from his jacket and pants.

“Let’s go,” Tambler said with more than a degree of irritation. “I’ll introduce you to the big man.” He moved from the colonnade and headed past the dead and dying to the mayor’s office with John in tow.

Once inside the building’s rotunda, John observed men in white smocks tending the dying on the marble floor. His insides twisted at the sight of all the blood, the scatter as from a surrealist’s brush blotting out much of the pale gray stone. Women, shrouded in black *rebozos*, looked after the wounds of those awaiting transport to another location. Seven revolutionaries with rifles surrounded a small group of fashionably dressed citizens whose saucer-like eyes watched John and Tambler mount the large marble staircase to the second floor.

When the two reached the top of the stairs, they heard a booming voice in Spanish. “We need the medicines for our wounded... countrymen like yourself. So please do *not* tell

me you don't know where you've hidden them. After all, Mister Mayor, it's not as if you've sustained any injuries."

The Americans entered a large office filled with revolutionary officers. John identified the speaker as a man of medium height with a stocky build, dressed in a tan hacking jacket, an open-neck shirt, and breeches with riding boots. His rugged face sported a large mustache, his head topped by an unkempt mass of black hair.

"That there's General Pancho Villa. He doesn't like Americans much, so watch what you say to him."

"I thought President Wilson supports him," John said, looking surprised not only at the statement but also at the fact that Villa appeared to be in his late thirties.

"That's why the General puts up with us being here."

Villa stood behind a desk and spoke to a well-dressed, if somewhat dust-covered individual who nervously fidgeted with the homburg hat he clutched tightly in his hands.

Holding his hat even tighter, the nervous man said, "Some of our citizens have—"

"And we'll see to their needs, Mister Mayor," Villa barked and slammed his fist on the desk.

The mayor let his chin drop to his chest and reluctantly nodded his consent. Villa turned to one of his lieutenants. "Fierro, get him out of here. See the medicines get to the hospital train."

A thin man with black eyes that matched his hair and mustache stepped forward, his near-military tan uniform with French-style kepi in keeping with the other officers present. He took the mayor by the arm in a none-too-friendly manner and escorted him out of the room.

Villa finally noticed the Americans, his cold, piercing eyes catching John's attention. A bitter look etched his face, and he said in accented English, "Tambler. What do you want now?"

"I brought you a new emissary from President Wilson, General."

John limped up from behind Tambler and held out his credentials.

"John Stevens, General Villa. It's an honor, Sir."

John's perfect Spanish caught both Tambler and the general off guard. Tambler's face soured. Villa hesitated a moment as he sized up this new addition to his staff. A grin started to form on his face. Addressing his staff in Spanish, he said, "This one is more Mexican than Gringo. You can smell it."

Coarse laughter animated Villa's officers. Villa came around the desk and extended his hand to John.

"Welcome to our little party," Villa said in Spanish. "I hear you like dodging bullets and saving old women."

"It seemed the right thing to do at the time, General, but how did you know—"

"I'm sure the old woman thought so. But I noticed you limping. Do you need a doctor?"

John raised his left foot. "No, sir, I lost the heel of my boot."

"It's a good thing it was only the heel." Villa turned toward the door and shouted, "Paquita!"

The young woman ran in, her clothes and braided black hair still covered in dust from the long trip. "Your orders, my general."

John stood as if frozen, mesmerized by the young woman who looked to be about nineteen or twenty. Her emerald-green eyes and her petite figure bursting with youth seemed

incongruent with the crossed bandoleers across her chest, and the rifle slung over her left shoulder.

Villa nodded to the young woman. “Take our young hero here and get him a new pair of boots. We cannot have a representative of President Wilson limping around. It’s not dignified.”

Paquita, busy staring with hateful eyes at Tambler, stood silent for a moment. She looked back at Villa and realized he was pointing to another, someone she had not seen before. Her shoulders visibly relaxed and fell to a more comfortable position, but her expression remained harsh.

Paquita visibly sized up her newest assignment. Another gringo, no doubt just as indifferent and disrespectful as the one standing next to him. He looked young and out of place. Yet, he didn’t look away as she gave him a stern look. Perhaps there was more to this emissary than the present one whom she didn’t trust.

Another round of laughter from Villa’s men followed John and his escort to the door. John mumbled a thank you to Villa and acknowledged Tambler with a nod, thinking it odd his colleague’s face was flushed red and his brow furrowed.

Villa then directed his attention back to Tambler, but one of his officers nudged him before he could say anything, nodding his head at the two departing youngsters. Villa eyed them exiting the office. “Our Salvavidas is in good hands. Let’s see if he survives the experience,” he said with a wave of his hand.

As Villa’s men let out a howl, the general turned once more to Tambler. “And you, Gringo. What else do you want?”

“Ahh... Nothing, General. I just wanted—”

“Then, adios.” Villa waved a dismissal and returned to the maps spread out on the desk.

John followed Paquita through the carnage in the main square and down one of the business streets intersecting the plaza. He made a concerted effort to keep up with the lithe young woman, her multi-colored skirt swishing back and forth as she darted over the cobblestones. The rifle slung over her shoulder didn't impede her progress for an instant. He hadn't expected to find women, or for that matter girls, involved in the fighting. Nothing of what he knew of the American Revolution mirrored what was taking place in Mexico. How much more would he find foreign even if he considered himself part Mexican?

John, doing his best not to fall from a misstep from his damaged boot, kept his focus on the pavement as he picked his way amongst the cobblestones. That preoccupation caused him to bump into Paquita, who had stopped in front of a shop window.

"Carajo, Gringo! Watch where you're going."

John half-smiled at his guide. "I'm sorry. I was trying not to trip."

"Try not to trip so close to me." Eyes blazing, she pointed to the sign over the shop front. A few bullet holes marred the placard, which read: *Zapterería Ruiz*.

Paquita gave the establishment a quick assessment and found the solid wooden door an unlikely entrance. She inwardly felt a bit of compassion. The poor gringo was clearly out of his depth. Unslinging her weapon, she smashed the display window, pushed aside the exhibit of men's shoes, and climbed into the store. Once inside, she turned to John. "If you think I'm going to bring you the boots, you're loco, Gringo."

John got the message and followed his escort into the shop. The dark interior was a willing accomplice to the acquisition of material for Villa's army.

On their return trip to the plaza, with John now sporting a brand-new pair of lace-up engineer's boots, they passed by the rear of the church bordering the plaza. Men from the revolutionary forces lined up those federal officers still alive against the church wall in front of a firing squad. A shout of *fuego* from the officer in charge sent bodies jerking as bullets struck their targets. Blood soaked the ground. The men lay dead against the church wall as a man in civilian clothes with a rosary in hand and a priest's stole around his neck made the sign of the cross over one of the dead men.

"Who's the man by the bodies?" John asked, a confused look on his face.

"A priest. What else," Paquita replied.

"But he's wearing regular clothes." John thought of the two nuns but decided it would be safer if he simply professed ignorance.

Paquita stopped and turned to John. "The general doesn't like the church. It supports the Federales, so the priests wear regular clothes so as not to get shot."

"And the firing squad. How do they feel about it?"

"They're Catholic. They see only a man in a suit." With that, Paquita resumed her march back to Villa's headquarters. This gringo needed someone to instruct him as to the ways of the revolution. Unlike Tambler, this one expressed concern for its actions. She could see it in his eyes.

John and Paquita entered the plaza and caught sight of a group of federal officers led by Villa's soldiers. One of the officers fell to his knees and refused to move further. Two revolutionaries prodded him with their rifles. Fierro, approaching the scene while leading the mayor back to city hall, left the man's side and strode to the groveling federal officer. The

two men tried to lift him to his feet, but the poor creature only sobbed and withered on the ground, a wet spot appearing on his crotch. Fierro stepped in front of the groveler, unholstered his pistol, and put a bullet in his forehead. John stiffened at the deliberate coldness of the act. He looked to Paquita, feeling he had to somehow shield this young woman from the violence she had already witnessed, but her face showed no emotion. Fierro returned his pistol to its holster and looked up at John. Lifeless eyes bore holes in him. John made a mental note to tread with caution around Villa's lieutenant.

Paquita took hold of John and propelled him toward the city's government buildings. There passed a moment of concern for the gringo. His introduction to war had not been battle, but cold-blooded murder.

They were about to enter city hall when John reached over and took hold of Paquita's arm. She instantly yanked it out of his reach.

"What you want, you can get by asking." Her green eyes darkened and froze him with the sharpness of her retort.

"I have to send a telegram... to Washington... in the United States," John stammered. What was it about this young woman that caused him to stumble with his speech? He had never encountered problems when dealing with the girls back home in Santa Fe, or, for that matter, in Cambridge or Boston. Why then was he feeling inadequate around this small Mexican girl? Could it be the girls he knew didn't carry guns?

"Wait there," Paquita said, softening a bit. She pointed to a stone bench by the wall next to the entry. "I'll see if General Villa will let you use the telegraph." With a swish of her skirt, she turned quickly and stepped into the building.

John sauntered over to the bench overflowing with men in business suits, waiting for an audience with the new authority. With no other recourse, he let his back slide down the building wall and sat on the stone floor along with the other less-fortunate petitioners.

He watched as the dead created mounds on horse-drawn wagons led out of the plaza, the horses skittish and snorting from the smell of blood. Some women stacked weapons on carts. Others knelt and prayed for the dead. A detachment of Villa's men marched the remaining federal officers toward the church. Shots rang out, the sound coming from behind the church building. John wondered why they chose the church. It seemed to him that its religious standing didn't warrant such a brutal scene as it was hallowed ground to most of the locals. But as he was learning, Villa was a hater of all things Catholic. John surmised that the leaders of the Catholic Church had supported Porfirio Díaz against the peasants' uprising meant, at least to Villa, that they had no place in the new order to come. There was also the irony in reminding the soon-to-die that the church couldn't protect them from their offenses against the people. Then again, by choosing the church, the executioners might be allowing the condemned a death close to Christ. It was hard for John to tell how the Catholic followers of Villa were balancing the issue internally. He had been baptized a Catholic at birth, but ever since his stint at Harvard, he no longer fully practiced the religion. He still, however, believed.

An hour later, John followed Paquita through a maze of men and equipment at the Jiménez train station. He counted five trains positioned on different sidings, their locomotives spewing columns of black smoke while their wheel drivers spat occasional blasts of steam sounding like loud gasps of relief. Men in grimy, white cotton and frayed *Charro* clothing loaded rifles and machine guns into waiting boxcars. Others loaded cannons onto flatcars.

Horses ascended steep, wooden ramps into boxcars, their snorting and whinnying accompanied by the sharp stomp of their hooves. Women in cotton skirts and blouses, with multi-colored *rebozos* covering their torsos, stowed baskets of provisions and valuables gleaned from the dead Federales for barter to feed and outfit the revolutionaries.

A sixth train snaked in from the desert with eighteen boxcars and pulled into the yard on the main line to the sound of its clanging bell. Hundreds of men littered the tops of the cars, each bearing a rifle, some with bandoleers over their shoulders. Before the locomotive could stop, it blew a loud whoop from its stack as steam belched from the piston housings. The men leaped from the cars and rushed to the other trains on the sidings. Boxcar doors of the arriving train slid open and regurgitated more men, weapons, and ammunition crates. Others disgorged horses that thundered down the many ramps.

Transfixed by the commotion, John asked Paquita, "What's going on?"

"Reinforcements. That one," she replied, pointing at the newly arrived train, "will be taking the wounded back to the main hospital outside of Parral."

John spied a strange-looking train amongst the many. "What's that one supposed to be?" he asked, pointing to a large string of brightly painted box and flatbed cars.

"The one with all the colored cars? It's the train the general seized from the Bell Circus. I'm sure Don Ricardo wasn't amused when they took it away from him."

"The owner?"

Her look of condescension was all the answer he would get.

They continued their journey through the yard toward the end of the ensemble. On a siding adjacent to the telegraph line sat the hospital train. It stretched seven cars in length, each one stenciled with a large blue cross and the words *Servicio Sanitario*. The stench of blood and rotting flesh drifted on the afternoon breeze. Occasionally, a man would pop out of one of the boxcars to gulp a breath of fresh air, his white smock mottled in red. Men carried

the wounded on stretchers to the recently arrived train. Women scurried here and there in an effort to ease the suffering of those still alive. Other women covered the dead with *sarapes*, stopping only long enough to make the sign of the cross.

The hospital train had one additional boxcar sprouting two thin, vine-like wires that seemed to grow toward the nearest telegraph pole. Paquita glanced at John and began running in its direction. "You better hurry, Gringo. Those wires are coming down soon."

"Are those telegraph wires?" John called out, jogging after her.

"Do all you gringos ask such dumb questions?"

As they sprinted for the car's open door, John heard a loud whoop at the other end of the yard and turned to see one of the trains starting its way onto the main line. "Where is everybody rushing to?"

"To Torreón, Gringo, before the Federales find out we took Jiménez." His blank look led her to add, "In the State of Coahuila. We take the revolution South," Paquita added as she pitched her rifle into the boxcar and swung herself aboard.

John took a moment to study the floor of the boxcar, which was about chest high. Before he could make a move, outstretched hands offered a solution to boarding. Two men, each with double bandoleers plastered across their chests, hauled John into the car. Inside, five men stacked boxes of medical supplies while one lone revolutionary, sitting at an improvised desk, operated a telegraph key.

The men beamed smiles from ear to ear. "Juanito Salvavidas," one said and clasped John on the shoulder.

"Why are they calling me a life preserver?" John commented as he tried to make sense of the remark.

"You save lives like a life preserver on a boat," Paquita replied. "It's a nickname the general gave you."

“That’s just great. Life Preserver, Emissary of the United States.”

Paquita grabbed John by the arm and propelled him toward the telegraph operator.

“Send your message, Salvavidas. Saving more lives will have to wait.”

Tambler made his way through a ravaged neighborhood down one of the city’s cobblestone streets, its citizens trying desperately to resign themselves to the barbarity of battle. At a cantina that once announced the serving of the best tequila in Mexico, he met a man in ragged clothing looking more like a beggar with a grizzled face and ferret-like eyes that darted here and there in search of something to which only he was privy. Tambler reached out to the man, a folded piece of paper in his hand. With a nod, both men parted company and returned the way they had come.

Paquita hurried along the tracks leading John through the railroad station’s yard. The scene bordered on pandemonium, with revolutionaries racing to catch departing trains headed south toward Torreón. John had played tennis while at Harvard, but this constant running took its toll. He was about to stop and catch his breath when Paquita reached up, grabbed the handrail on a passenger car, and turned to him.

“This is the general’s car, Gringo.”

“Thank you once more for the help today. I—”

“You’ve already thanked me. Once should be enough.”

With that, she headed off toward the rear of the train. John watched her go and felt a tug at his stomach. Shaking off the feeling of having made an ass of himself, he mounted the car’s stairs and made for the door.

Through the door's glass panel, he spotted Villa in conference with four other men at the other end of the car. He recognized one of them from the newspapers as General Raul Madero, youngest brother of the deceased President Francisco Madero, who wore his hair close-cropped, his black mustache and goatee neatly trimmed. John would soon discover that the second man standing next to Madero was General Felipe Angeles, the Master of the Artillery. The latter dressed in full uniform accented by his dark hair and mustache. The third man he was to learn was General José Isabel Robles. In contrast to Madero and Angeles, Robles sported a full head of white hair with a beard to match. They pored over a large map like a gaggle of geese around an interesting morsel, each honking a different opinion. The fourth he already knew: Rudolfo Fierro, Villa's lieutenant and constant companion. He stood to one side, his pitiless eyes keeping watch on the proceedings. A motion caught his attention on the right, close to the door. Tambler was also present.

John entered the car. The men heard the sound of the door and looked up.

"Señor Stevens, did you send your telegram?" Villa asked.

"Yes, sir. Thank you for allowing me the use of the telegraph."

Tambler jumped up from his seat by the door, grabbed John by the arm, and spun him around. "What telegram?"

John instinctively backed away. "Secretary Bryan asked me to keep him apprised of what's happening. The General gave me permission to use his telegraph."

"Let me remind you, kid, I'm the senior emissary, and everything has got to go through me. You got that?"

John pulled away from him and moved to another seat.

"Don't you go forgetting it," Tambler growled and sat back down, his face turning a flushed red.

At the head of the car, Raul Madero ignored the outburst and looked at Villa. “What is it about the boy that interests you?”

Villa smirked. “He’s the first honest face I’ve met from Wilson. We’ll have to see how he conducts himself. But for now, it pleases me to goad Tambler.”

Fierro’s eyes flashed a warning all knew as lethal. “I don’t trust that one.”

At the other end of the car, Tambler sat fuming. It was evident to John that his presence as an added emissary didn’t sit well with the lanky Westerner.

General Robles glanced up from the map and stared at Tambler. “Rudolfo’s assessment has merit. I also believe him to be an amoral individual.” Glancing at Villa, he said, “Does Tambler know you asked Wilson for another emissary?”

“I’m sure not. But let’s see what comes of pitting one against the other.”

“We must be careful in the game,” Robles warned. “Unlike Tambler, our Señor Stevens understands everything we say.”

“It’s quite helpful, I think. And the fact that it irritates Tambler makes it even more so.”

Broad grins appeared on the faces of the four Mexican generals. At the opposite end of the railroad car, John wondered if he was the subject of their mirth. Tambler, he noted, still stewed.

As night shrouded the desert through which the train made its way, John tried to ward off the cold by blowing his vaped breath into his cupped hands and once more burying them in his pockets. Sleep evaded him as he scrunched up on the car’s seat. He felt his body shudder as he reacted to the feeling of something poking him. He looked up at the stern face of Paquita as she slung her rifle back across her shoulder.

“That sarape should help with the cold, Gringo,” her voice announced as she tossed him a blanket-like cloak.

Before he could thank her, she was gone. Sitting up, he watched her move down the aisle toward Villa and General Robles with a basket in tow. After some moments, which allowed him to arrange the sarape over his chilled body, she returned and handed him two warm tamales.

“They’re sweet with enough sugar to give you some energy. Eat and go to sleep. Five more hours, and we’ll be there.”

Without waiting for a reply, she was gone. John couldn’t help but wonder what to make of this young revolutionary. All he knew was that he had never met anyone like her. Or was it that he had never been in a war, one that tended to produce either the best or the worst of anyone involved. John flashed back to his philosophy classes. He remembered learning to recognize moments in life that presented an individual with a chance to adjust what one believes is true. The Mexican revolution, he had to admit, seemed to be one of those moments.

“Here’s something sweet for you,” Enrique chided in a sing-song voice as he elbowed one of the other men helping load food into baskets to be taken to the other train cars. He made sure Paquita was close enough to hear.

“I’m sure you’ll find my next assignment for you just as sweet,” Paquita hissed.

The threat, and more so Paquita’s glare, was enough to freeze Enrique mid-song. It also led to raucous laughter in the food preparation car at Enrique’s expense. As Enrique did his best to disappear against the wall of the train car, despite his sizeable frame, he caught sight of a smirk emerging on Paquita’s face. He gave her a deep bow. She punched him in the arm as she walked past, evoking more laughter.

“Ever the clown. You take chances with that one,” one of the men whispered to Enrique.

Enrique waited for Paquita to leave the car. He then raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders.

“It is my way.”

Enrique finished filling a basket and headed out of the car in the same direction as Paquita. He found she had not gone far, as she was pressed against a wall trying to back away from the too-close Tumbler.

“You stay away from that other emissary, you’re better off with me,” Tumbler growled, as always in English.

Paquita responded in Spanish, causing Enrique to laugh out loud.

“What. What did she say,” demanded Tumbler.

“She says she should have shot your balls off when she had the chance.”

Tumbler drew his arm back as if to strike her, stopping only when he saw Enrique step forward, fire in his eyes.

“You stay out of this,” Tumbler roared.

Enrique’s pique subsided as he smiled at Paquita. “You take chances with that one.”

Tumbler turned to look at her, only to find a knife lodged under his chin, held by his would-be victim. Tumbler stepped back. Enrique pointed him toward the door at the other end, and the gringo withdrew.

Paquita spit on the ground where Tumbler had stood. “Thank you, though I could have handled him myself,” Paquita said quietly.

“Of course you could, but we are a team. I will always defend you as you would do for me.” Enrique bowed deeply again. “Let me go ahead.”

“Of course.” She punched him again in the arm as he passed and headed through the same railcar door as Tambler.