

# **The Emissary and the Soldadera**

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## Prologue

*Washington, D.C.*

Almost as a warning, the deep, resonant gong of an imposing neoclassical grandfather clock struck the hour four times and shattered John's nerves. The odor of beeswax mixed with turpentine from the hand-rubbed mahogany furniture that filled the outer office of William Jennings Bryan, the United States Secretary of State, assaulted his sinuses and added to his uneasiness. Seated beneath a portrait of President Woodrow Wilson on a matching mahogany bench that lacked a seat cushion, no doubt to discourage long-term waits for the Secretary, John ran his hand through his dark brown hair and struggled to remain calm. But it was to no avail. Having not had time to update his wardrobe, he felt his three-piece worsted wool suit tightening its grip on a trim frame that had managed to fill-out during his final years of formal schooling. The heel of his left foot fidgeted and jerked up and down on the thick, woolen carpet as if keeping time to a tune that played in no one's ears. Despite the outside temperature hovering just below fifty degrees—the heat in the room seemed to John to be not much higher—he pulled out a neatly-pressed white cotton handkerchief embroidered with an “S” and wiped the beads of perspiration from his upper lip for the third time.

John watched as a matronly-dressed middle-aged woman, her flaxen hair done 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 that sat on the table next to him but couldn't get past March 10, 1914, the date emblazoned under the headline. 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, fully expecting to find one in the office of a Washington politician. A smirk managed to sneak onto his face as he recalled his father's advice that you can always measure the vanity of any politician by the number and size of the mirrors in his or her office. And, his father promised with a loud laugh, outside of Versailles there would be nothing to match the grandeur of the mirrors in Washington.

A loud buzz interrupted his search, the sound bursting from some device he didn't recognize sitting 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," she said, her fleeting look in his direction devoid of any concern for his unease. Her scissors snapped back into action, voraciously devouring another page of newsprint.

Bolting upright, John 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. He retrieved his Panama straw hat from the bench and marched toward the inner-office door of the Secretary of State. He stopped, realizing that the hat did not belong in his hands. He closed his eyes a moment and let out a deep breath before returning to the coat rack standing next to the bench where he had been sitting, placing the hat on a hook above his overcoat and umbrella that were already on the rack.

John turned to the woman, embarrassed by forgotten manners. "Thank you, ma'am." He tried to present a pleasant smile. Her head remained bowed, her eyes focused on the extrication of fodder from the day's news. Turning again to the door, he took another calming, deep breath before proceeding.

He entered the large corner office that commanded a clear view of the adjacent White House out one set of windows and the Washington Monument across the Ellipse from the others. 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, white 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. As imposing a figure as Bryan presented, John found himself somewhat surprised that the statesman seemed to match the height of John's five-foot eleven-inch frame. Perhaps he was expecting a Colossus to match his status as a populist icon and three-time presidential candidate. Perhaps it was Bryan's self-confidence and charisma that impressed anyone who met him that made him seem larger than life.

"Come in. Come in, my boy," the affable politician practically shouted in a sonorous baritone. He crossed to John and took his right hand in both of his, shaking it vigorously. "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, and 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, 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. At the ranch. 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. Speaking of that, have you given any thought as to how you might start out 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 as well if that would help.”

“Splendid, my boy, splendid.” Bryan paused and lowered his head, pondering his words. Finally, he turned back to John. “I have already spoken with the president about you. We agreed 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.”

Bryan studied the piece of paper, eyebrows raised. He silently mouthed the word, trying to mimic the correct pronunciation. “And so it is. 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 onto his lips while adjusting the knot on his tie. He thought again of mirrors, but did not dare to examine the room.

Bryan rejoined John on the sofa. "As I was saying, this Chee...wa...wa..." He paused for a moment, eyeing John to see if he was saying it right. Noting a slight upturn in the corner of John's mouth and an almost imperceptible nod, he continued, "...is just a short train ride south of the border from El Paso. Naturally, being from New Mexico, you probably know that. I'm sure you're also 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 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."

Bryan's countenance became mesmerizing through an increasingly passionate monologue. John sat frozen to his seat. Of course, he remembered the long celebration among his mother and her friends in the Hispano community of Santa Fe when Madero, Villa, Huerta, and others forced Díaz to flee, leading to Madero's election. It seemed to go on for months. They had been overjoyed for what they hoped would be improving conditions for Mexico's people, and the opportunity of refugees in New Mexico to return home. The mood turned sour when Huerta assumed the presidency after forcing Madero to resign as president in February 1913, and more so when Madero was assassinated just days later. "Huerta did this," John's mother had

said. “He is no better than Díaz. He just wants power.” John knew the conflagration had reignited but felt a wasp’s sting of awkwardness as he had not followed as closely the goings-on in his mother’s home country since he had been away at law school in the northeast. He thought about the Mexicans that had settled near their ranch in New Mexico, the ones whom 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. The revolution, she claimed, would correct that. Would this be his chance to see for himself?

As Bryan’s diatribe subsided, his manner was again solicitous. “We need to know how their efforts are progressing, how Villa feels about our support, and what he’s planning with regards our interests. You’ll be our eyes and ears and report directly to me 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 for sure, but the language thing poses a problem. We fear he may be misinterpreting things. I’m sure you understand.”

“Of course.” John tried to keep his balance as his head spun with 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. 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 again took John’s hand and gave it a strong shake.

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 Tamber says—he’s our man down there—everything has been quiet for some time.”

## 1 – Border Crossing

*El Paso, Texas*

Three mule-powered flatbed wagons made their way south down El Paso Street toward the bridge that crosses the Rio Grande into Mexico from El Paso, Texas, where it turns into Avenida Benito Juárez in Ciudad Juárez on the opposite side. Each wagon challenged the other two on which could look more dilapidated. Poverty seeped from splintered and cracking side boards and wheels that showed the sign of many repairs. Seated on the front bench of each of the wagons sat two women, their simple cotton peasant clothes announcing from which side of the border they originated. The wagons, to all appearances, carted foodstuffs and supplies from flour, corn, and beans to nails, kitchen utensils, and second-hand clothes. The back-and-forth across the border between Juárez and El Paso accommodated such trade and passage as a daily rite, or at least it did before hostilities between Mexican factions raised questions about what was coming into Mexico from the United States, and for whom.

The woman holding the reigns of the first wagon, perhaps not yet twenty, was petite but with fierce emerald-green eyes framed by long, black hair pulled back in a braid. Her relatively fair skin, though tanned by exposure to the sun, combined with a heart-shaped jawline, pointed chin, and narrow, almost regal, nose, belied a dash or two more Spanish than Indigenous heritage. Her beige skirt bearing once colorful embroidery of birds in trees, now faded by age and mottled by the dust of travel, was of sufficient breadth to conceal the outline of a Colt Single Action Army Revolver secreted within its folds. For good measure, a worn but exquisitely maintained Winchester Model 1873 Repeater rifle lay wrapped in a serape directly below their seat. The woman seated to her right, the recruit, clutched her tawny hands tightly together

over a plain, frayed cotton skirt, her chestnut eyes attempting to focus straight ahead to avoid eye contact that might betray fear.

“Paquita, I am so nervous,” the recruit said. She uttered the statement repetitively, her shaking hands and furtive eye movements a threat to the mission. “*Díos mío*. What if we get caught?” she whimpered.

Paquita patted the recruit’s hand. The woman, noticeably older than Paquita, came from a more sheltered and simple life that had taught her little about politics, war, or the Mexican Federales who were part of the Huerta regime. The recruit was there because, like so many others, her husband had taken up arms with Villa’s army. As with the others in the small group of soldaderas, the recruit looked to Paquita to teach her and help define her new role in life.

“Look at us. Look at our wagons, our clothes. Are we not poor peasants from the Chihuahua countryside? They won’t stop us. They never do.” Paquita’s voice was measured, soft, and soothing. “Nevertheless, if they stop us, they will not want to deal with us. We would be a nuisance to them. Maybe they will relieve us of what we are carrying, but they will let us go.”

“But the rifles and bullets—”

“No but. There is nothing to worry about. They won’t bother to dig through what is on top. They won’t be interested in us. 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 as they made their way across the border. Despite what Paquita had told the recruit, she knew 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 Mexican border agents excised their own form of payment for the transgression.

“I’m not sure I could do this without you, Paquita. How can you be so calm?”

Paquita laughed. “You will learn. I’ve made this trip many times, so I have the comfort of experience. You are the sixth soldadera I’ve trained to go on a supply trip to get goods from the United States. Sometimes the pickups are near the border, but still in Mexico, with the suppliers taking the risk to cross. Those will be easier. Other days, like today, we must venture into a Texas border town. The size of El Paso makes it complicated, but that size lets us blend in better with the masses moving back and forth.”

“What do I say when we get to the border agents?” asked the recruit, her voice climbing an octave as fear strangled her larynx.

“Nothing,” Paquita assured her. “You leave that to me.” She pulled back on the reins, slowing the mules to a stop. “We’re in a spot where they cannot see us right now. Check in the back and make sure nothing we don’t want them to see is peeking through.”

The recruit did as she was told. Paquita, in turn, motioned to the following two wagons, pointing first with two fingers to her eyes, and then motioning with those fingers to the back. The four remaining soldaderas understood and complied.

“I think all is still good, Paquita,” the recruit reported. “Your packing instructions were followed by the men at the storage building.”

Paquita tipped her head. With a motion of the reins, she once again had the mules moving forward. The wagons behind followed suit.

The sun sat low on the horizon, bathing the soldadera crew in yellow melting into orange. The wagons joined a long line seeking passage south. Pedestrians carried what they could, a few people were fortunate enough to be on horseback, and a series of wagons and carts pulled by mules or oxen made their way south. Paquita noticed a cadre of American soldiers making their way

into Juárez, where diversions barred by El Paso's stricter laws could be found.

"This is a good time to pass," Paquita stated as if to no one in particular.

The recruit simply looked over at her with eyebrows raised.

Realizing that she had just spoken aloud, Paquita explained. "It is busy. Mexicans returning home and Americans headed south for the evening. It is quite busy." She gave a forward nod. "The border agents will have too much to do to worry about us."

Notwithstanding, each woman tensed at seeing the border agents' stern looks as they approached. There were five today, overseeing two lines, and they seemed interested in everything that passed.

As the women approached the border station, one of the border agents reached into the back of the first wagon and started rummaging. Paquita kept the mules moving slowly forward, as if she did not notice. Without any sudden movement, she moved her hand into the folds of her skirt as the agent poked deep into a crevasse in the goods.

"You there," hollered another one of the border agents.

The recruit squeezed Paquita's hand tightly, fear emanating from her eyes as she looked toward her leader.

Paquita's attention snapped to the front as she brought her wagon to a halt next to the second border agent. She calmly looked up at him, her eyelids at half-mast to convey fatigue. From the corner of her eye, he could see the other agent near the back of the wagon pulling something out from the cargo, his eyes bright and a smile emerging on his face. Paquita quickly scanned the agents and the crowd, concluding that there were too many agents to overcome, and the crowd would block any escape route. She looked back at the first border agent, her teeth grit and lips pursed, in time to see him thrust his arm up, holding his quarry.

Other than a clenched jaw, Paquita's face remained serene while her heart pounded.

"Apples," the agent cried out, his eyes brightly shining. The second agent rolled his eyes as the first agent walked away from the wagon with an air of self-approval, one apple thrust into his mouth for a large bite while he pocketed a second.

"You're blocking the way," the second agent continued. "Pick up the pace and move along."

"We beg your forgiveness. My mother is not well, so we move slowly." Paquita gestured toward the recruit by her side.

"Just get on with it. Clear the way." The agent turned his attention away from her, his focus now directed at two men—more Americans, these civilians—trying to charge past the queue attempting to cross into Mexico. The first agent joined him in confronting the Americans.

Paquita saw the agents, pointing at the column heading south, and the two men, their arms gesticulating with fervor toward Juárez. She nodded toward the no-longer-attentive agents as she gave the reins a snap, the mules quickening their pace in response. She turned to the recruit and let the corners of her mouth curl up ever so slightly.

Paquita turned her head enough to gauge the progress of the rest of her crew. The women in each of the fully loaded wagons behind her followed suit, never once looking at the border agents, who were engrossed with the two Americans.

They all had a good laugh, even if tinged with anxiety, once they were past the border and out of earshot of the border agents. From there, it was a traffic-filled twenty-minute trek to the train depot on the Mexican side of the border.

"I'm not sure I can do this without you, Paquita. How can you be so calm?"

Paquita only smiled and tilted her head affectionately in her direction.

“Well, I am glad I have you with me,” the recruit continued with a slight uptick of confidence. “Do we come again tomorrow?”

“We? No. But you will be in good hands.” Paquita patted the recruit on the arm. “This trip is my last for a while. The general moves the army south, and I will be going with them. I have other skills they need more pressingly” She winked as she pulled the revolver out from the folds of her skirt and reached down to retrieve the Winchester rifle wrapped in a serape under the bench.

The recruit laughed nervously. “Ay, I think I’ll stick with the wagons.”

Paquita’s lips stretched side to side in a broad smile. “Here, take the reins. There will be a train outside of the train station on a sidetrack headed south. We’ll pull up there to unload.”

Paquita allowed herself to relax and even enjoyed the scene of the two Americans running past toward the train station. The arrogance of these men who could not wait in line like the Mexicans had to do. She hoped they missed their train.

2 – A Quiet Welcome

*Jiménez, Chihuahua, Mexico*

Three shots in succession pelted the cobblestones and sent the bullets ricocheting down a thoroughfare 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.

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."

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 his way over to the coat rack.

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.

Paquita stepped off a train corralled by the revolutionaries as it arrived just outside 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 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 cotton peasant garb so that the border agents would deem them harmless, if not invisible as they rode across the border with a dilapidated wagon or two pulled by the most downtrodden-looking horses or mules they could muster. They would return hours later with the wagon which appeared to be stuffed with rice, beans, flour, or whatever the dry goods establishment could provide. However, they were merely a topping on the wagon. As much as the foodstuffs were needed, the more critical cargo—bullets, rifles, pistols, gunpowder, dynamite, and other materiel that Villa's agents had arranged—traveled underneath. 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 the attention of the guards.

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

As Paquita watched the materiel being offloaded from the train, she felt a hand on her shoulder. Turning, her eyes beamed before her lips turned into a broad smile 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 peasant 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 once 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 puerco* – the dirty pig – as she called Tumbler, the emissary they now had with Villa's army. 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 vile in her ear as she felt the 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 hard stare being all she needed to communicate with this idiot who spoke almost 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. She was aware that Robles knew about what had happened with Tumbler. She could not imagine it being a welcome assignment unless it involved removing a part of the emissary's anatomy.

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

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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 an 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, and 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 from Washington to El Paso. 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 welcomed 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.”

John’s eyes grew large. He could almost hear Secretary Bryan’s baritone serving soothing words about the status of Villa’s forces. Now he was chasing the wind.

“Are you coming?” McElroy was already steps ahead and moving fast. The two men rushed from the El Paso station toward the bridge to El Paso, pushing past a long line of humanity, wagons, and animals of burden, with more than a few invectives hurled in their direction for not waiting. They reached the checkpoint, where McElroy flashed his credentials at the guard and prompted John to follow suit. Soon enough, they were running to the train station in Ciudad Juárez.

As John caught his breath, he received Mexican currency and a farewell handshake from McElroy 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 was there such a 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 mayoral 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 shouting, “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, somewhat dust-covered individual who nervously fidgeted with the homburg hat he clutched tightly.

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 for 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 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. When he did not look back at her, she looked again 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; however, her expression remained harsh as she 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.