

Crimes of Vengeance

By Jon R. Minks

CHAPTER 1

KABOOM.... A bright orange fireball billowed over a hundred feet into the dark starlit sky just after 2:00 am on Wednesday, October 5th. Roberto Lopez, age twenty-two, believed he was fifty yards behind the motorcycle he had followed on the narrow desert trail since they crossed the U.S. border a mile back. The riders were not allowed to use headlights for this part of their mission. The motorcycles cast faint shadows on the trail from a sliver of the moon. Lopez had been concentrating to avoid scraping the rocks protruding from the hillside on his right while watching the drop-off into a ravine on his left.

An instant later, Lopez was less than ten yards from the motorcycle ahead of him when it exploded, sending its rider to the bottom of the ravine. Lopez felt the heat through his clothes and his nostrils stung from the acrid smoke. Sand blasted his face shield. His ears rang after a large piece of shrapnel hit his helmet disorienting him. He felt another piece of shrapnel tear into his left bicep. His heart raced when he lost control of his motorcycle and felt weightless. Time seemed to stop as he skidded twenty feet down the hillside. A searing pain emanated from his leg as the motorcycle crushed his right knee against rocky outcrops. Lopez was barely conscious but felt relief when he and the motorcycle stopped sliding at the bottom of the ravine.

Lopez was momentarily dazed. Then his leg began throbbing. The pain was so intense he didn't notice his bicep was also bleeding. As he came to his senses, he took off his helmet and called out for his friend, Jorge Ruiz, age twenty-four. But Lopez only heard ringing in his ears. The explosion had also ruined his night vision. As he struggled to see in the darkness, he saw yellow flames coming from Ruiz's motorcycle lying in a heap. Despite the intense pain, he dragged his right leg while crawling fifteen yards toward the flames to see if Ruiz had survived. When Lopez reached the flames, he found what was left of Ruiz. He had lost an arm and a leg in the explosion. His face was blackened and most of his clothes had burned away. Lopez said a short prayer for his friend in the flickering light before he turned away from the smell of burnt flesh.

Lopez called out to the other men who had volunteered for this mission but heard nothing. He didn't really expect help from them because they weren't his friends. He listened again and heard the faint sound of two motorcycles speeding away. Lopez's vision faded in and out due to blood loss. He unfastened his belt and struggled to tie it around his thigh to stanch the stream of blood from his knee. Crawling to the hillside, he brushed his long black hair from his face, and leaned back to rest. Then he asked himself aloud, "Why did I sign up for this?" When he had volunteered, he knew this mission would be dangerous. He had guessed the probability of returning to Tijuana was fifty percent or less. But he believed the greatest threat would come from U.S. border patrol agents, the FBI, or other law enforcement officers. Lopez never imagined he could be killed just riding a motorcycle across the Arizona desert. He felt lightheaded and closed his eyes to rest. Then he lost consciousness.

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Enrique Cruz's attitude began returning to normal after learning that he would become a father in six months. Losing his cousin, Pedro Gomez, two months earlier had caused Enrique to fall into a deep depression because he didn't have any other family. Enrique was young to be the head of a drug cartel, only thirty-six, but his face was lined and his black hair was turning gray. Six months ago, he

had invited Pedro to join him in Tijuana as his Chief of Security. But Pedro had been arrested in Hawaii and charged with multiple murders. He was transported back to California to stand trial. He was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. One month later, Pedro died at the California State Prison in Los Angeles from an appendicitis infection. Enrique believed the U.S. judicial system and the witnesses who testified against his cousin were responsible. Enrique was determined to exact revenge for Pedro's death.

During the previous two weeks, Enrique had taken a renewed interest in his business and devised a plan to expand his drug cartel's sales inside the United States. Enrique's cartel controlled thirty-five percent of the heroin smuggled into the southwestern U.S. But he wanted a bigger share. Enrique had a reputation of getting what he wanted through intimidation and violence.

Nineteen years earlier, he had joined a small drug gang in Tijuana. When Enrique turned twenty-one, he assembled a team of assassins that killed the gang leaders. He promptly declared himself head of the gang and appointed his own lieutenants. The reorganized gang became the Cruz drug cartel. It grew rapidly through hard work and Enrique's ruthless tactics. Several times he manipulated rival gangs into declaring war on each other. After the gangs had decimated one another, the Cruz cartel took over their drug businesses. A series of these territorial expansions had made the Cruz cartel the most powerful and profitable cartel in Tijuana.

Enrique had telephoned Philip Ortega, the cartel's Chief of Security, during the previous week and said, "Good morning, Philip."

Philip, age thirty-four, said, "Good morning, Enrique. What can I do for you?" Philip was allowed to call Enrique by his first name because he was one of the assassins Enrique had conspired with fifteen years earlier. Philip was slender, with jet black hair, and a few inches taller than Enrique. Philip was almost family because his younger sister, Adelina, was also Enrique's mistress. Philip had been a key player in expanding the cartel's drug network for many years. In the process, he had become one of Enrique's most trusted confidants. Philip had been promoted to Chief of Security six months ago after Enrique had ordered the execution of the man who previously held that position.

Adelina's liaison with Enrique had been engineered by Philip. He had suggested to her that giving Enrique a child would solidify their position within the cartel. Adelina, age twenty-eight, was expecting to deliver her baby in six months. She stood five-feet-four-inches with long black hair and a shapely silhouette. Thus far, her pregnancy hadn't noticeably changed her figure.

Enrique replied to Philip, "I want to discuss my expansion plan with you. Can you come to my office at one o'clock?"

Philip said "Of course, Enrique. I'll see you then." When Philip arrived at Enrique's fortress-like palace, he marveled at its classical architectural style. Enrique had spared no expense in constructing the building in the heart of Tijuana. The palace included several old world features, including Corinthian columns supporting the ceiling above the spacious veranda, fifteen-inch-thick white adobe walls, and water features in the surrounding gardens. Philip had suggested including the water features because they would cool the garden during the day and serve as moats to prevent a truck bomb from getting too close to the palace. He also suggested adding bulletproof shutters for the windows and a large safe room below ground with an escape tunnel leading to a coffee shop two blocks away.

Guards stationed at the main gate and at the front door saluted as a sign of respect when Philip approached. He entered the palace at one o'clock sharp and walked to Enrique's office. Philip knocked quietly and said, "Good afternoon, Enrique. What can I help you with?" The office had a twelve foot high ceiling with massive oak beams. An entire wall was covered with bookcases. An oak

ladder on wheels could be used to access books on the upper shelves. The oversized furniture was made of hand carved mahogany and included a large desk with inlaid 24-karat gold accents. On the desk were two computer screens, one of which showed high definition color images from six surveillance cameras positioned around the grounds. On the wall opposite the desk hung a life-size, three-by-six-foot oil painting of a curvy, scantily clad Hispanic woman. She was lying seductively on a chaise longue and wore a white flower in her long black hair. Philip believed there was a strong resemblance to his sister.

Enrique smiled at Philip and said, "Come in, mi amigo. Have a seat." A large parrot, with red and green feathers, repeated, "Arrrgh...have a seat." Enrique chuckled as he said, "Don't mind the bird. He knows enough not to talk to the Federales." Philip politely smiled.

Enrique poured two glasses of red wine and handed a glass to Philip. Enrique continued, "Our business is still growing but not as fast as in previous years. We've taken over small competitors and grown incrementally. But now, I think we need a change in strategy to increase our reach inside the U.S. I have a plan to dramatically expand our heroin distribution."

"Excellent. Tell me about your plan, Enrique."

"Have you heard that U.S. doctors are being pressured to prescribe fewer opioid drugs?"

"Yes, it's all over the American news."

"Many addicts will suddenly be unable to obtain opioid drugs legally. Heroin is another opioid drug that satisfies the addicts' cravings. So you see, the U.S. opioid epidemic provides us with a ready supply of potential heroin customers."

Philip asked, "How do we implement your plan?"

"I envision three phases. First, you must recruit additional distributors throughout the southwestern U.S. Then you must smuggle four bombs across the border and have them detonated at major U.S. airports to make the Americans believe they've been attacked by Muslim extremists. And finally, while the Americans are preoccupied with their 'Muslim problem,' you must move large quantities of heroin across the border to supply our new distributors. Can you work out the details?"

"It won't be difficult to find new distributors. I've maintained contacts with several gangs inside the U.S. They're always looking for new sources of product. I'll need a few days to develop the bombing plans. Moving large amounts of heroin across the border may become more difficult after the bombings. U.S. border patrols will likely increase to counter the Muslim threat. I'll devise a solution to that problem in a few days. Can we discuss the details later this week?"

"Of course. I know you can handle the challenge."

Philip asked, "Have you named your new plan?"

"No, I didn't think about naming it."

Philip asked, "How does Operation Strategic Reach sound?"

Enrique said, "I like it!" Both men stood, touched their wine glasses, and Enrique said, "Here's to Operation Strategic Reach."

They downed the last of their wine, and Enrique said, "I'm looking forward to our next meeting." Philip nodded to Enrique and began formulating his plan as he left the palace.

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Weeks later, Miguel Garcia led four motorcycles through the Arizona desert in the dark. He had memorized the route Philip Ortega had drawn on a map. Garcia was anxious to leave the border behind them. He had been instructed by Ortega, "Use caution to avoid being seen by U.S. border

patrol agents. If you get caught carrying C-4 explosives, you'll be turned over to Homeland Security agents, charged as terrorists, and could be executed if your case goes to trial."

About 1:00 am, the motorcyclists had driven along the Mexican side of the border where the steel post fence varies from four to sixteen feet tall. They chose a section of four-foot tall fence surrounded by steep hills to hide their activities. The fence had horizontal steel rods connecting the posts and one thin strand of barbed wire on top of it. It was built to prevent vehicles from entering the U.S. but it didn't stop people from crossing the border illegally. The men hid one hundred feet from the fence with their motorcycles and waited for the U.S. border patrol to drive by. Each man had been told there are only ten minutes between border patrol passes. As soon as the border patrol was out of sight, they pushed their motorcycles while running toward the fence. They were quiet because they knew the U.S. uses microphones to catch people crossing the border.

When they reached the fence, Garcia and Juan Martinez ducked through the fence into the U.S. All four men wore coarsely woven serapes. They placed them over the barbed wire to avoid being cut by it. One by one they passed the motorcycles over the fence without any problems. The adrenalin rush made the motorcycles feel lighter than they had during the practice sessions at the Cruz cartel compound. Then Lopez and Ruiz ducked through the fence. Each man took his serape from the fence and put it on. They pushed their motorcycles deeper into the U.S. When they were two hundred feet from the fence, they discarded their serapes and kick started their motorcycles. Garcia took the lead as they rode away.

They had traveled about a mile after crossing the border when Garcia heard the deafening explosion. The sound reverberated through the canyons of the Sonoyta Mountains. He stopped his motorcycle and was awestruck when he turned around and saw the fireball rising into the sky. Martinez had been following Garcia and stopped beside him. They took off their helmets and watched the fiery spectacle. They looked down the hill and saw one motorcycle burning. Both motorcycles were at the bottom of the ravine. Only one man could be seen crawling near the fire.

Martinez blurted out, "Jesucristo! Should we turn back?"

Garcia said, "There's no way I'm going back to Mexico and tell Mr. Ortega we failed. He would kill both of us. We must keep going. If we get separated, let's meet as planned at the Ramble Inn in Buckeye, Arizona."

Martinez asked, "What do you think caused the explosion?"

"It could have been a fuel leak. These bikes are over thirty years old. Or maybe..." Garcia hesitated before continuing, "...the C-4 exploded. We'll never know. But you can be sure the explosion will draw many border patrol agents. We've got to get out of here fast."

Martinez said, "Okay, I'll follow you." Both men put on their helmets and sped off into the darkness.