

HAROLD COYLE

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Prologue.

On the Texas-Mexico border

27 June

In the gathering darkness, the predators of the night began to stir. From burrows, holes and crevices, the creatures of the desert crawled, slithered, or scurried from their habitats into the cool of the late afternoon. For the next several hours they would seek, strike, and consume those things that would allow them to survive another day in their harsh environment.

It was a cruel existence that demanded something die so that something live. There was no grand plan or reason for such things. Nor was there compassion, feeling, or regrets. Only survival.

From one of thousands of holes dotting the barren desert floor, a scorpion sallied forth. Like a missile being released from its launch tube, the scorpion moved forward mechanically, purposefully, unstoppably.

As it cleared the narrow confines of its hole, the scorpion prepared to kill.

Once it was free to do so, even before its head was in the open and able to see, the scorpion swung its massive right claw out, and then the left.

There was no pause, no hesitation as the scorpion continued to move forward, finally clearing its tail. Like the fin of a missile, the tail automatically deployed into a fully erect position. Unlike the fin of a missile, the tail was more than a mere accessory; it was the scorpion's main weapon. The stinger at the end of the tail was, for now, curled under, but ready.

As if the scorpion had known where it was going before it left the dark hole, it continued straight ahead into the gathering darkness. As it did so, for a brief moment, the long shadow of an eagle flashed across the scorpion. There was, however, no danger to the scorpion. The eagle was not seeking so small a creature. Instead, the large powerful bird had its senses tuned to seek what it needed to survive. Flying high above the desert floor, the eagle scanned the barren terrain for other prey. The small, seemingly insignificant scorpion, moving about in the long shadow of the eagle's powerful wings, never caught the bird's eye.

If the crossing of their paths was an accident, their purpose was the same. Each sought that which would allow it to survive, to continue. That those two particular creatures of the desert would ever meet, let alone come into conflict, or even cross paths again, was improbable at best. But in a harsh and cruel world where killing meant survival and survival was all that mattered, everything that could do so pursued that goal unhesitatingly.

So anything was possible.

And if something is possible, then it will be, if only in a dream, or a nightmare.

The Service isn't what it used to be—and never was.

—Service saying

0645 hours, 28 June

Perched upon a flat rock, Captain Stan Wittworth lazily ate his breakfast of cold ham and chicken loaf while he watched to the south. A cedar tree, its growth stunted by the Texas heat and lack of water, gave some protection from the sun, but did little to protect Wittworth from the heat. The heat of a new Texas day, less than an hour old, was already oppressive, soaking Wittworth's BDUs with sweat. Within two hours the heat would be unbearable.

From his Humvee parked in a concealed position behind Wittworth, the blaring of a radio speaker announced the beginning of a report.

Identifying the radio call sign as that of the platoon leader of his 2nd Platoon, Wittworth stopped eating and listened. The report announced that they had cleared checkpoint one-four without any contact and were proceeding north. Looking down at a map of Fort Hood's maneuver area laid out at his feet, Wittworth looked for the blue symbol that identified checkpoint one-four. He found it at the point where Old Georgetown Road crossed the Cowhouse Creek. Popularly known as Jackson's Crossing, it was indeed a critical point to any force attacking north or south.

Reaching the Cowhouse and crossing it unopposed would give the 2nd Platoon a decided advantage in the upcoming engagement.

Leaning the brown aluminum-foil package that contained his ham and chicken loaf against a rock so that the contents wouldn't spill, Wittworth lifted his binoculars to his eyes and looked for the vehicle of the 2nd Platoon. Though he couldn't see them, the dust clouds thrown into the still morning air by the tracks of its vehicles marked their progress.

Unless the tank company undergoing evaluation reached the point where Wittworth was sitting in the next ten minutes, his 2nd Platoon, playing the role of the opposing force, or enemy, would be here instead. The tank company, instead of holding superior firing positions such as the one Wittworth's Humvee was in, or fighting the 2nd Platoon in the open ground between Manning Mountain and the Cowhouse, would have to fight in the cedar forest on top of Manning Mountain. In a fight on the mountain, in the woods, the 2nd Platoon would be able to use its infantry against the tanks in close terrain. That was what Wittworth was hoping for. In a fight in the open terrain of the Manning Mountain Corridor below, the 2nd Platoon's four M-2 Bradleys, with its infantry, would be eaten alive by the fourteen tanks rolling down from the north.

Wittworth watched Old Georgetown Road intently for the first of the 2nd Platoon's Bradleys to roll into the open. In the distance, he could hear the Bradleys' high-pitched whine. Suddenly, however, the sound changed, almost dying out. Searching the tree line on either side of the road where the 2nd Platoon should have been emerging, Wittworth saw nothing. Even the large dust cloud was dissipating. That could mean only one thing; Lieutenant Shippler was stopping to regroup and deploy before crossing the open area at the base of Manning Mountain. Slowly dropping his binoculars from his eyes, Wittworth unconsciously began to shake his head, mumbling and calling Shippler every four name he could think of.

Instead of being bold and rushing for the high ground, Shippler was exercising great textbook caution. Unless the tank company commander, moving south along Old Georgetown Road from Royalty Ridge had a severe case of the slows, he would reach the southern edge of Manning Mountain and gain superior positions from which he could engage the 2nd Platoon as they moved north across the open area below.

As if drawn by Wittworth's dismal thoughts, the cracking of dry cedar branches being crushed under the treads of M-1 tanks and the squeak of steel drive sprockets announced the arrival of the tank company. Turning, Wittworth caught glimpses of the green, brown, and black camouflage paint of an M-1 tank as it slowly picked its way through the cedar trees toward the edge of Manning Mountain. The tank's commander, standing waist-high in his cupola, was leaning forward, watching the right front fender as he directed his driver forward through the trees. The tank's loader was also riding high out of his hatch, located on the turret's left side. Like his commander, he was leaning forward, watching that the left front fender cleared the trees. It was obvious that the tank commander had been there before, for he neither referred to a map nor stopped and dismounted his loader to move forward to recon a spot for the tank. It didn't take officers and NCOs of the armor and mech units stationed at Fort Hood long to figure out that there were only so many ways to skin the cat when maneuvering on Manning Mountain.

Ignoring Wittworth and his Humvee, the tank commander pulled into a position to the left of where Wittworth sat. When the tank was where he wanted it, the tank commander ordered his driver to stop. As the driver throttled back and locked the brakes, the commander dropped down in his cupola, snatching up a pair of binoculars that had been tied to the cradle of his .50-caliber machine gun, and began to scan the far horizon. The turret also began to move slowly, from left to right, as the gunner began his search for targets. Even the loader watched for telltale signs of the enemy. The movement of one of Shippler's Bradleys simplified their task.

Like a hunting dog who has spotted game, the tank's main gun suddenly jerked to one side, then froze once it had its prey in sight. Even before the gun stopped moving, the tank commander, no doubt alerted by the gunner's acquisition report, had already disappeared into the tank where he could use the commander's extension of the tank's primary sight to control the engagement. Wittworth stood up watching the tank prepare for action. Then he turned to the south, scanning the tree line where Shippler's platoon had disappeared. In the distance, Wittworth could see a Bradley move out from the tree line and begin to angle to the left toward Old Georgetown Road.

That maneuver presented the M-1 tank next to Wittworth with a good quartering shot. But the tank commander was in no great hurry. He knew Bradleys rarely traveled alone. To kill the first one would only have served to warn the others that they were in danger. So he and the other tank commanders in the tank company, who had moved into fighting positions along the lip of the ridge after him, watched and waited. Just as the first Bradley reached Old Georgetown Road, their patience and discipline were rewarded as a second Bradley broke out of the tree line and began to follow.

Watching, Wittworth hoped that the tanks would fire soon. It was obvious that Shippler was using one section of two Bradleys, still in the tree line, to overwatch the movement of the two Bradleys now moving toward the road. While the two Bradleys in motion would have little chance of surviving the initial volley of fourteen tanks, at least the stationary Bradleys in overwatch would be able to return fire and take out one or two of the offending tanks. But even this hope was soon dashed as Wittworth

and the tanks now lining the southern edge of Manning Mountain watched the last two Bradleys of Shippler's platoon come trundling out of cover and into the open. As if they had all the time in the world, the last two Bradleys began to move toward the road to join the others already there.

Still, the tanks held their fire. Every second they waited drew the Bradleys away from cover and closer to the tanks. With the MILES laser engagement system, the ideal killing range for the tanks was 1,000 to 1,500 meters. A well-trained crew with their MILES device well bore sighted and zeroed and with fresh batteries could score a kill out beyond 2,000. But this tank company commander wasn't taking any chances. He didn't need to, for Shippler's platoon, now formed in a wedge on either side of Old Georgetown Road, was gradually closing the range.

To Wittworth, it was like watching a bad movie, or a play that showed the actors casually walking into a trap that the audience knew of but couldn't do anything about. Unable to watch his own platoon any longer, Wittworth looked over at the tank to his left. The tank commander was hunched down in his cupola with only his head and shoulders showing.

As he watched the oncoming Bradleys without the use of binoculars—for there really was no need for them anymore—the tank commander spoke into his intercom microphone. There was no way for Wittworth to tell if he was giving last-minute instructions to his gunner or simply engaging in idle chitchat in an effort to pass the last few nervous seconds before they fired.

From the corner of his eye, the tank commander caught Wittworth staring at him. Ending his conversation with the unseen crewman, the tank commander turned to Wittworth. With the broadest, toothiest grin he could manage, the tank commander looked at Wittworth and gave him a thumbs-down, meaning that the Bradleys were about to die. This gesture pissed Wittworth off, and the tank commander, knowing who Wittworth was, meant it to piss him off. Wittworth could feel the blood rushing to his head and the hair rising on his neck as he shot a glare that could have burned through the tank's armor plate.

Wittworth's rage was still building when the tank commander's grin disappeared. Leaning forward, the commander's right hand went up to his helmet. For a second, he stood there like that, listening to something coming in over his earphones. It had been a radio call, for Wittworth saw his right thumb push the transmit lever forward into the position for transmitting over the radio. The tank commander shouted something into the mike, stopped, pushed the transmit lever to the rear, or intercom position and shouted something to his crew. Turning from watching the tank commander, back to Shippler's platoon, Wittworth realized that the tank commander had, in all probability, just received the order to fire.

Shippler's platoon was about to be engaged.

From hidden positions along the southern edge of Manning Mountain, half a dozen loud booms announced the beginning of the engagement.

Below, Shippler's platoon continued forward for a few more seconds.

Then the MILES receivers on the Bradleys began to register hits and near misses. Even before they knew for sure whether or not they were "dead,"

two of Shippler's Bradley commanders cut on their on-board smoke generators and began a sharp 180 degree turn in an effort to hide in their own smoke. The other Bradley commanders, seeing the two turn away, also cut on their smoke generators and turned.

From where he stood, Wittworth listened to the radio in his Humvee tuned to Shippler's command net for the initial report. There was none.

Nor was there any kind of order from Shippler. Any actions taken within Shippler's platoon were the result of decisions being made by each Bradley commander, not by Shippler. Not that there was much that he could have done. The first volley of tank fire had "destroyed" two of the Bradleys. As soon as the commanders of those two vehicles realized that the orange kill light was continuously flashing, they stopped, cut off their smoke generator, put their gun tube over the rear deck, and waited. The other two Bradley commanders maneuvered wildly in an effort to hide in their own smoke while seeking cover. The tanks, able to determine who was left, turned their attention to the two fleeing Bradleys.

The chase lasted less than a minute. In the next volley, the Bradley on the left was hit, its kill light flashing without pause. The last Bradley survived several near misses, indicated by three quick flashes on the kill light. In the end, however, despite the wild gyrations, sharp turns, and the efforts of the Bradley's puny smoke generator, it too was overwhelmed as every tank on the mountain that could track it and fired.

Disgusted, Wittworth turned his back on the massacre of Shippler's platoon and walked back to his Humvee. As he did so, he pondered what he would say to Shippler when he saw him next. After all, Shippler's maneuver had been, according to the manual, correct. After crossing the Cowhouse Creek, he had regrouped, switched to bounding overwatch when they had reached the open area, and then moved into traveling overwatch with his whole platoon when there appeared to be no danger.

Wittworth had hoped that Shippler would make a high-speed mad dash for Manning Mountain. But that would have been unorthodox, a gamble based on knowledge gained from fighting over the same ground time and time again and not the application of sound tactics. And there was no guarantee that that gamble would have paid off. After all, the tanks had come on rather fast. For the gamble to succeed, Shippler would have had to depend on the tank company commander to make an error or be slow.

Basing one's plans on hope or depending on the enemy to make mistakes is a bad habit. Still . . .

When he reached his Humvee, Wittworth swung the door open and prepared to climb in. His driver twisted to the right in his seat, switched the two radios off to prevent the electrical surge of the ignition from damaging the radios, started the engine, and then turned the radios back on. Instead of getting in the Humvee, Wittworth stopped, told his driver to wait, and went back to the rock where he had been sitting to retrieve his breakfast. Approaching the rock, he noticed something moving on and around the brown aluminum foil package. Stopping, he looked down and watched as a horde of ants assaulted the remains of his ham and chicken loaf. With a sigh and a muffled curse, Wittworth kicked the foil package with all his might before he turned away and headed back to his Humvee.

As much as the slaughter of Shippler's platoon and the loss of his breakfast pissed him off, they were nothing to compare to what Wittworth knew awaited him back in the rear. Today was "The Day," the

day when Second Lieutenant Nancy Kozak, the first female to be commissioned as an infantry officer, was to report to Wittworth's company. The mere thought of females assigned to combat arms, let alone one assigned to his company, still was enough to send Wittworth on an emotional roller coaster that took him from blind anger to almost total despondency.

As he and his driver rode back to the rear in silence, Wittworth wrestled with his own feelings and beliefs. Though he had known that this great experiment in equal opportunity had been coming for over six months, he had done little to mentally prepare himself. The briefings by the Test and Evaluation Command officials and data collectors, Wittworth's chain of command, and the Equal Opportunity reps from the Department of Defense had explained how the twelve-month evaluation would work. They had even tried to provide a system for everyone involved to overcome their prejudices through a series of rap sessions, educational seminars, and "encounter" groups. These efforts, however, had failed for the most part. Instead of eliminating prejudices, they had only served to harden them in some of the men in Wittworth's company, Wittworth included.

As hard as he might try, he could not separate out emotions from the problem. Why in the hell, he thought, is it necessary to allow women in combat arms branches? As it was, a number of good infantry officers were being forced to turn in the coveted crossed-rifle brass in order to fill vacancies in combat support and combat service support branches, branches where women already served without problem. Why the people in Washington couldn't leave well enough alone, and let things continue as they had been since the United States Army had been created, baffled Wittworth. It was as if someone in the Department of Defense wanted to see just how much shit they could pile onto combat arms officers before their jobs became impossible to carry out.

Breaking out from the rough and rutted trails, Wittworth's driver crossed the main tank trail and turned the Humvee south onto West Range Road. Wittworth didn't notice. His mind was still wrestling with how he would greet Kozak, an event now only a few hours away. That, coupled with the poor performance of Shippler's platoon, the loss of his breakfast to ants, and the oppressive heat, conspired to crush any tact Wittworth might have begun the day with. And tact was one commodity that people who knew him would never accuse Wittworth of having an overabundance of.

Main Post, Fort Hood, Texas

0745 hours, 28 June

Turning her light blue Chevy Suburban from Hood Road onto Headquarters Street, Second Lieutenant Nancy Kozak slowed and prepared to turn into the parking lot across the street from Building 108. To say that she was nervous would not do justice to Lieutenant Kozak's state of mind at that moment. After years of physical and mental preparation, The Day had arrived, the day she was reporting into her first unit. All the theoretical exercises in leadership, "what if?" drills, and "how to" training sessions that had permeated the military instruction at West Point and during her officer's basic course were over. From here on in, everything was for real. No role-playing, no hypothetical situations, no neat, clean classroom solutions. Her decisions and actions would affect real people and be judged by professional soldiers, those entrusted to her care, those who were her appointed superiors, and those who considered themselves her peers.

As if the simple act of reporting to her first unit wasn't difficult enough, Nancy Kozak would also have to deal with the trauma of being the first female to be commissioned in the U.S. Army as a

combat arms officer.

For the next year, she and the unit she was reporting into would be the subject of an evaluation that would attempt to answer the question of whether it was possible for American women to serve effectively as frontline soldiers.

The evaluation plan was quite simple in concept. Three units—one tank battalion, one mechanized infantry battalion, and one field artillery battalion—would receive a number of female officers and enlisted personnel.

Within these units, some companies would remain all male.

These were the “baseline” companies. Other companies, referred to as

“mixed units,” would consist of both male and female soldiers. Special teams from the Army’s Test and Evaluation Command would study the performance of both the baseline companies and the mixed companies while those companies conducted their normal training and duties. The final test, though no one referred to it as such, would be a rotation to the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, at the end of the one-year evaluation. Based upon the performance of the units throughout the year and at the National Training Center, and the observations of the evaluation teams, a decision or so it was hoped, would be made concerning the future of women in combat arms.

To start the evaluation, a number of female officers, one assigned to each of the mixed companies, were to report in first. It was felt that the female officers would be better able to handle the initial shock and “difficulties”

that were anticipated when females were introduced into the combat units. The female officers had three months to adjust to the unit, and allow the unit to adjust to them, before the enlisted female soldiers began to arrive. In this way, the female officers would have an opportunity to achieve a level of competence and acceptance, making it easier for the enlisted females.

Unstated in either the evaluation plans or the briefings was the belief that a buffer would be needed between the male officers and noncommissioned officers and the enlisted females. The female officers would serve as this buffer, ensuring that training, discipline, and duty assignments were handled in a fair and even-handed manner. Otherwise, there was always the possibility that the all-male leadership would sabotage the evaluation by harassing the females or pushing them beyond accepted limits. While there was concern over the fact that the female officers were junior to everyone, it was generally accepted that this was preferable to introducing female officers of higher rank, lacking combat arms experience and baseline training, into the evaluation. Besides, as the briefers in the Pentagon pointed out, you can’t get any closer to combat than at platoon level, so that was where the focus of the evaluation had to be.

So Second Lieutenant Kozak was exercising extreme care in everything she did. From reading everything she could to prepare herself technically and tactically, to obeying every traffic law on post. Even the manner in which she dressed was taken into account. After sliding into a parking slot and turning off the engine of her conservative and nondescript car, Kozak paused before getting out. Turning the rearview mirror toward her, she gave herself the once-over one more time before leaving the safety of her car.

Her auburn hair, normally worn long, was pulled back and pinned to the back of her head. The length of her hair had been a matter of concern and great debate, not only for herself, but for her fellow female classmates at West Point.

Many had opted to get it cut short rather than mess with it when in uniform or in the field. Others had it cut so that, wet or dry, it fell just above the bottom of the uniform collar, which was the extreme limit that regulations permitted. A few, like Kozak, couldn't part with all of their hair. "After all," she had once told a friend, "everyone knows you're a woman, so why try to hide it." So they tolerated the inconvenience of washing it, tangling with it, and putting it up when in uniform so that they could maintain their pride and joy. Through trial and error, and with a lot of help from other female officers, Kozak had learned how to deal with her long hair in and out of the field. She of course had no way of knowing what her company commander would say about it.

Technically, so long as she wore it above the bottom of her uniform collar, he could say nothing. Just in case, however, she had prepared herself mentally to get a butch cut if it became an issue.

The makeup she wore was light and hardly noticeable. Like her hair, this too had been a subject of great concern. For the last two weeks, she had debated with herself as to whether it would be wise to wear makeup when she reported. Just as she convinced herself of the wisdom of not wearing any, she found herself rejecting her own decision. In the end, she opted for a compromise of sorts. The foundation she wore was the sheerest she could find and applied with a light touch. A single coat of mascara, also applied with a light hand on uncurled lashes, was her only eye makeup. There was no blush and only a hint of lipstick to add a little color to her otherwise pale face. In addition, in order to keep from drawing any more attention to herself than she needed to, Kozak had avoided the use of any type of cologne, perfume, or anything that gave off a strong feminine scent. What she didn't appreciate, as she prepared herself, was that many of her products, from shampoo to face cream, gave off a decidedly feminine fragrance that lingered with her. Continuous use had made her so accustomed to them that she didn't notice it. Unfortunately, in the all-male world of a mechanized infantry company where the faint scent of diesel mixed with the musky smell of male sweat and gun oil permeated everything, Kozak would stand out no matter what she did.

Satisfied and yet not satisfied with the job she had done on her face, she checked the brass of her uniform one more time. The two gold bars of a second lieutenant sat mounted five-eighths of an inch in from the outside of the shoulder loops. Set exactly midway between the seam of the sleeve and the button that held the shoulder loop in place was a green felt tab one and five-eighths of an inch wide, a leadership tab that designated her as a leader of a combat unit. The leadership tab was topped off with the unit crest of the 13th Infantry Regiment. On each lapel of her green class A uniform blouse, exactly five-eighths of an inch above the cut of the lapel, were the brass letters u.s. Five-eighths of an inch below the cut of the lapel was the symbol of the infantry, a brass representation of two model 1842 muskets, commonly referred to as the crossed rifles.

Were it not for these two highly polished pieces of brass, each weighing less than an ounce, Nancy Kozak's appearance at Fort Hood that morning would have been routine. She would have been just another female officer, representing fourteen percent of the Army's total, reporting for duty. But, by her own hand and drive, she was different. She was, and always would be, the first. In no small measure, the future of women in the Army depended on what she, and five other females commissioned in the combat arms, did in the next year.

Overwhelmed by this sense of history, Kozak opened the door and got out. Standing upright, she slung her regulation black purse over her shoulder, smoothed her skirt, pulled the blouse of her uniform down, and set out for Building 108 to sign in.

Building 108, Fort Hood, Texas

0755 hours, 28 June

Casually sprawled on a chair in the first row of the room where he had been directed, Captain Harold Cerro waited for the admin clerks to settle down and begin their arduous task of inprocessing a new batch of officers.

As the clerks shuffled reams of papers and huge computer printouts, Cerro sipped coffee from a Styrofoam cup and read USA Today. Based on the headlines, Cerro decided, the day before had been complete bore.

The top news story was about a series of four murders in New York City.

Cynical as ever, Cerro wondered why these particular murders, in a city where an average of six people a day were murdered, were different from any others. Besides, in Cerro's mind, four dead people were almost negligible. After all, there had been days when Cerro would account for the loss of four men killed in a firefight simply by reporting, "Casualties light, continuing mission." How odd civilians were, he thought.

It was not that Cerro was an intrinsically cruel person. On the contrary, most of the people he allowed to know him thought Hal Cerro was a nice guy. But that nice guy happened to be both a soldier and a realist. People, Cerro knew, die. It was a part of life. As a veteran, he had not only seen death up close and personal, he had participated in the process. In doing so, Cerro, like any soldier in combat, had faced the possibility of his own death. Death, therefore, held no mysteries for him. It was to him, instead, simply another fact of life. People eat, they breathe, and they die. In Cerro's trained mind, it was that simple. Clear, simple, and cold. Besides, it was the only way he could rationalize what he did in order to maintain his sanity.

From the doorway, the clicking of heels on the tile floor announced that a woman had entered the room. Glancing up from his paper, Cerro's eyes tracked the female second lieutenant who had just entered the room as they would track a target. His mind, conditioned through years of training, began to assess the target.

He immediately established, based on the rank, the manner in which she carried herself, and her appearance, that the lieutenant was newly commissioned, putting her at twenty-two—at the most, twentythree—

years old. As she walked over to the desk where the clerks sat, Cerro judged her height to be five-eight, tops five-ten, even when the two-inch heels were taken into account. The lieutenant's auburn hair was drawn up in a simple bun which was pinned tightly to the back of her head. Her face was set in a deadpan stare fixed on the clerk she was approaching, confirming Cerro's belief that the lieutenant was reporting to her first unit. Despite the lack of expression, and dearth of makeup, the lieutenant's face had potential. The lack of clearly visible cheekbones was more than offset by a well

molded nose, a soft chin, full lips, and big brown eyes.

At the desk, the lieutenant cleared her throat and informed the clerk that she was there to sign in. The clerk stopped what she was doing, looked up at the lieutenant, and cocked her head to the side. “We started at oh-eight hundred, ma’am. If you would please take a seat, we will be with you shortly.” Without waiting for an acknowledgment, the clerk went back to shuffling the papers on her desk. While this exchange transpired, Cerro utilized the time, and the fact that no one else was watching, to conduct a detailed terrain analysis. He decided that the lieutenant was five foot eight, weighed 150 pounds, probably wore a B

cup, maybe a C, had a waist measuring no more than 28 inches, and had a nice tush.

Cerro was still considering this last item when the lieutenant turned on her heel and walked over to the row of chairs where Cerro was seated.

With measured ease, Cerro looked back at his paper, taking a long sip on his coffee while he continued to track the lieutenant out of the corner of his eye. Once she was seated, Cerro turned his attention back to his paper. All thoughts of the female lieutenant were quickly relegated to a file in the back of his mind labeled “Lieutenant, Female.” That he had regarded the lieutenant in the same way he would a woman on the prowl at a singles bar never crossed his mind as he turned to the weather page.

As an old first sergeant had once told him, “Regardless how you package them, they’re still women.”

Promptly at 0800 hours, one of the clerks at the front of the room called out Cerro’s name and rank. Looking up from his paper, Cerro turned to the clerk. For a moment, he simply stared at her. “We’re open now, sir.”

Feigning surprise and excitement, Cerro carefully folded his paper, packing it away in his briefcase for later, then slowly rose and casually strolled over to the clerk. When he arrived at her desk, she announced she needed two copies of his orders and all amendments. Once she had them, the clerk referred to a computer printout. Finding Cerro’s name, she ran a finger across the appropriate line while she copied the information on a blank form.

Finished, she took the form, turned it so that Cerro could see it, and began to explain what he was to do next. “This confirms your assignment to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Brigade, 16th Armored Division. You’ll start your inprocessing with finance in room ...”

Cerro wasn’t paying attention to the clerk. He had tripped into a mental lock when the clerk had announced that he was assigned to a brigade’s headquarters and headquarters company. Simply put, that meant that he would be on the brigade staff. For the first time in his military career, Cerro would not be in a real troop unit. Instead of working with real soldiers and tromping about in the boonies, he would be living in a world ruled by a lieutenant colonel executive officer in search of his eagles, populated by high-speed, low-drag majors out to make their mark on the Army, and run by sergeants who were either too old to be in line units or had been thrown out of them. Such an assignment, to Cerro, was akin to being sentenced to a salt mine in Siberia. The old question, “Father, why have you forsaken me?” kept running through his mind as the clerk continued to give him instructions he ignored.

With his mind cluttered with visions of doom and damnation, Cerro didn't notice the appearance of the female second lieutenant when she was called forward by the clerk seated next to the one—mumbling instructions to him. The lieutenant was up out of her seat and at the front of the room in a flash when her name was called. As Cerro's clerk had done, the clerk attending to the lieutenant asked for two copies of her orders and all amendments, then leafed through the great computer printout until he found the lieutenant's name and automatically began to fill in an inprocessing form for her.

The clerk's hand stopped, however, when he reached the column on the printout that listed the lieutenant's unit of assignment. Running his finger back across the line, he first checked to make sure he hadn't inadvertently dropped down a line while writing. Once he was sure the line on the printout was correct, he looked at the orders the lieutenant had handed him, checking that the name and social security number on the orders agreed with those on the printout. Only after he was satisfied that he had the correct entry did he look up at the lieutenant. "I'm sorry, ma'am. There must be a mistake here. According to the printout, you're being assigned to A Company, 2nd Battalion, 13th Infantry."

The lieutenant spoke for the first time. "Oh, there's no mistake. I'm an infantry officer and that's the unit I've been assigned to."

The clerk looked at Kozak for a second before he responded. "Oh, so you're one of them."

As in the old E. F. Button commercial, everyone in the room momentarily stopped whatever he or she was doing, turned, and looked at the five-foot-eight female second lieutenant. Even Cerro, shaken from his thoughts of gloom and despair, turned and looked at the lieutenant next to him. For the first time, he carefully studied her profile. Every hair was in place, neatly combed back and secured in the tight little bun at the back of her head. Small gold ball earrings sat nestled in her soft white earlobe.

Her face, set in a firm, dispassionate stare, was flawless, if somewhat colorless. Cerro paused for a second, as if he was afraid of what he would see, before he allowed his eyes to drop down to confirm what the lieutenant had already announced. When he did, a sudden shudder ran through his body as his eyes locked onto the shiny brass symbol of the infantry secured to the lieutenant's collar. It was her! The day had finally come. They had arrived.

The sudden and unwanted attention had caught Nancy Kozak by surprise.

She had hoped that all the advance publicity and media coverage would have softened the shock and allowed her to quietly slip through the initial processing without a scene. That hope, however, was shattered before she even got out of the starting blocks. The introduction of females into combat arm units was simply too emotional an issue to quietly slip by. "Well," she thought, "so much the better." Regaining her poise, Kozak bent forward slightly toward the clerk. "Yes, the orders and the printout are correct. I am Nancy L. Kozak, Second Lieutenant, Infantry, and, according to my sponsor and orders, I am to report to A Company, 2nd of the 13th Infantry." And, as an afterthought, Kozak added, "That's right, soldier. I'm one of them."

It took a few more seconds for Kozak's confident, almost defiant retort to register with the clerk. Blinking his eyes, the clerk apologized, blushing from embarrassment as he did so, then mumbled that he was just confirming that the printout was correct. For an awkward second, there was silence before he went back to filling out the form. Satisfied with herself, Kozak straightened up, then turned to face the captain standing next to her, who was staring at her. When their eyes met, she tilted her head to

one side and arched her eyebrows slightly, giving a quizzical look.

The captain, an infantry officer with master parachutist wings and a collection of ribbons that was quite impressive, looked into her eyes for a moment, then down at the infantry brass on her collar, then back to her eyes. Though he said nothing, his actions and expressions spoke legions.

Only the intervention of the clerk filling out Cerro's inprocessing form broke the stare-off between Kozak and Cerro. "Sir, if you take this, you start your processing at finance." Without taking his eyes off Kozak, Cerro took the form from the clerk with his left hand while picking up his briefcase with his right. Even when he responded to the clerk with a barely audible and perfunctory "Thank you," he was still staring at Kozak. Then, with an abruptness that almost startled her, he turned and fled out of the room.

When he was gone from sight, Kozak turned back to the clerk filling out her form. He too was staring at her again. Rather than feeling uncomfortable, Kozak found herself becoming angry. "Is there something else wrong, soldier, with my paperwork?"

The sharp question caused the soldier to blink. "No, ma'am."

"Well then, let's get on with it, soldier."

With that little incident, Second Lieutenant Kozak passed from reaction to assertion.

The parking lot across from Building 108, Fort Hood, Texas 1035 hours, 28 June

It was more than the heat and his assignment to the division staff that was bothering Cerro as he approached his car. It was the female infantry lieutenant. As much as he wanted to ignore the fact that she was there, he could not. All morning, as he had inprocessed, she had always been right behind him as she inprocessed. It wasn't the fact that they were now commissioning women in the combat arms that surprised Cerro. On the contrary, he, and most of the Army, had been following the debates, decisions, and processes involved in making all of that happen. The pros and cons of the issue, and what impact the final decision would have, had been the subject of many discussions wherever Cerro had gone. Though he had reconciled his mind to the fact that whatever happened was beyond him and he had no choice but to live with decisions made by the Department of the Army, it was still unsettling to see his first female infantry officer.

He was just beginning to convince himself that it was foolish to get so worked up over an issue that he had no control over when, suddenly, as if all of his dark thoughts had made his worst nightmare a reality, there she was, standing next to his car. Cerro stopped in midstride and paused, wondering what she was doing there and why she was following him.

Taking her black handbag from her shoulder, she began to rummage about in it, looking for something. Pulling out a set of keys, she turned to the car next to Cerro's and began to open the door. She wasn't following him, after all.

i,

Feeling like a fool, Cerro continued to walk over to his car. As his was backed in and the lieutenant

had pulled hers in forward, the driver's doors of both cars opened out together. As he approached from behind, Cerro watched the lieutenant bend over and unlock her door! She was beginning to open it when she saw him approaching. Turning to face him, the lieutenant came to attention, her right hand coming up like a crisp karate chop to salute Cerro.

Though he shouldn't have been, Cerro was surprised by this. Taking another step before stopping, he casually returned the salute. As he did, he heard the sound of a small piece of metal hitting the pavement between them. Looking down, he saw a small clip roll on the ground. Automatically, Cerro assumed that one of the clips holding his brass, badges, and ribbons had fallen off. Breaking off the salute, he began to feel about his uniform under his lapels and jacket to confirm that it was his clip that had been lost.

Kozak had also heard the clip hit the ground. Seeing that Cerro had dropped his salute and was checking his uniform, she did likewise. For several seconds the two infantry officers stood there, facing each other without a word as they checked their uniforms. To a casual observer who had never served, their actions would have seemed strange, giving the appearance that they were checking themselves for bugs. To a soldier, it was part of life.

Though Cerro had started first, Kozak, with far fewer badges and ribbons, finished first. She held on to the post of the unit crest underneath the right shoulder loop of her green blouse, and a look of delight lit up her face as if she had found the prize. "Oh, I think it's mine, sir."

Cerro stopped searching his uniform and immediately turned his attention to the ground. Locating the offending clip between his feet, he squatted down and picked it up, holding it between two fingers like a dead bug. "Here you go, Lieutenant. One stray clip."

Reaching out, Kozak took the clip from Cerro, thanked him, and began to fumble about in an effort to fasten it to the post of her unit crest. The unit crest, set in the center of her green leader's tabs on the shoulder loop of her uniform, was located midway between her shoulder and the collar of her uniform. This made it difficult to work on while wearing the uniform. Cocking her head back and to the right in order to see what she was doing, Kozak tried holding the crest on the loop with her right hand as she attempted to fasten the clip using her left hand. Cerro watched without saying a word, a fact that made Kozak nervous and the task more difficult. After two attempts, the clip slipped out from between her fingers and fell to the ground again. Sheepishly, Kozak looked at Cerro, shrugged her shoulders and began to bend down to retrieve it.

Cerro, however, was quicker. Scooping up the clip for the second time, he stood and stepped forward. "Here, let me help. Otherwise you'll be here all day."

Kozak straightened up and looked forward over Cerro's shoulder as he held the unit crest in one hand and attached the clip. Since they were about the same size, this was not difficult. Finished, he stepped back. Not knowing what else to say, Cerro blurted, "There! Now, you're back together."

"Thank you, Captain. I'm just a little nervous and all. This is my first assignment."

Her smile, her statement that was nothing short of a brilliant flash of the obvious, and her manner were disarming, sincere, and, more important, very human. Cerro was at a loss for a response. Suddenly the personification of every infantryman's worst nightmare had turned into a real person he

had to deal with. Without thinking, he reacted instinctively,

treating Kozak as he would any brand-new infantry lieutenant. “Yes, I know. And we certainly can’t have you reporting to your CO with your uniform looking like shit, can we?”

As if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders, Kozak relaxed, a slight smile

returning to her face. “No, sir. That wouldn’t do. I appreciate

your concern and help.” And she did. For the first time all day—in fact, for the first time in weeks—someone had been kind, had shown genuine concern for her, and had treated her as an officer. But even more important was the fact that it had been another infantry officer, a captain who was a combat veteran to boot.

Nodding, Cerro turned to unlock his car. “Well, if you’ll excuse me, I have to report to division headquarters.”

Saluting one more time, Kozak wished him luck in his new assignment.

Chuckling

as he returned her salute, Cerro shook his head and began to climb in his car. “I’m afraid all my luck has been used up. I’m going to 2nd Brigade to become a staff wienie.”

Though she didn’t understand Cerro’s obvious displeasure at being assigned to such an important position, Kozak nodded and watched as he started his car and pulled away. Perhaps, she thought, things weren’t going to be as hard as she had imagined.

It doesn't take a majority to make a rebellion; it only takes a few determined men and a sound cause.

—H. L. Menck

1545 hours, 28 June

The small delegation that awaited the arrival of the president of the Republic of Mexico was exhausted from days of dealing with a crisis that seemed to come from nowhere. The problem had no apparent beginning or goals, only chaos, disruption of the daily routine of the state, and now, violence. For seven days oil field workers had disrupted, then stopped work in most of the oil fields throughout the state of Tamaulipas. At first it was thought that the troubles were nothing more than an extension of the labor unrest that had been bubbling up throughout the industrial cities of the republic. On several occasions the oil field workers had more than made it known that their sympathies were with their brothers and sisters who worked in the cities. It came, therefore, as no great surprise, to those who chose to pay attention at least, that the rash of strikes should spread to the oil fields.

While his assistants and advisors sat and waited or held hushed conversations, the governor of Tamaulipas paced the length of the small VIP

lounge as he awaited the arrival of the president and his party. Every now and then he would glance out the window to the spot where several Air Force personnel waited in the late afternoon heat for the president's plane. It had been decided, at the recommendation of military zone commander Colonel Alfredo Guajardo, that the meeting between the president and governor be kept short and secret. Guajardo, who was now seated against the far wall of the room, had explained to the governor that a simple meeting at the airport would make security easy and would not put the governor in political jeopardy. "After all," Guajardo told the governor, "how would it look to the people of Tamaulipas if the president had to be called every time you had a minor problem with the workers. Besides, el presidente is growing tired of his vacation and family. He will be glad to use an excuse to fly here and then return to Mexico City and his mistress."

Although the governor did not consider the problem minor, he had agreed. After all, the president, and whomever he designated to succeed him, would have to be lived with for a long time. It would not be in the governor's best interest to be too much in the young president's debt publicly, or to have the president's role in solving the problem inflated at the governor's expense. By keeping the meeting secret, the governor could deny that it had ever happened, even though it had and everyone knew it. With his mind wrapped up in such concerns, the governor had never thought to ask Guajardo how he knew about the president's mistress or what the president might or might not want to do. Not that it mattered, for the governor also favored spending a single night with his mistress over an entire week with his own family.

When the door of the room opened, all movement stopped as every face turned to see who was entering. The young Air Force lieutenant who had opened the door froze in midstride when he saw the roomful of solemn faces staring at him. Unsure what to do, the lieutenant looked to Guajardo.

For a moment, he stared into Guajardo's eyes, eyes that were as cold and expressionless as his face. Guajardo said nothing, jerking his head to indicate that he wanted the lieutenant to come over to him.

Moving around the room, and keeping as far as possible from where the "governor had resumed his pacing, the lieutenant came up next to Guajardo, bent over, and whispered into his ear. There was no

change in Guajardo's expression, not even a nod. Instead, when the lieutenant had finished and straightened up, Guajardo stood, straightening the blouse of his uniform as he did so. Turning to face the lieutenant, Guajardo issued several orders to him in a low voice. The governor neared that end of the room in time to hear Guajardo emphasize that the lieutenant was to personally see that the president's plane was taken care of, as arranged.

The lieutenant's response was a simple, almost curt, and solemn, "It will be done." With that, the lieutenant left the room.

Turning to the governor, Guajardo quietly announced that the president's plane would be on the ground in five minutes. The governor paused. For a moment, there was a pained expression on his face. Only after it cleared did he acknowledge the news of the president's arrival with an absentminded nod. He resumed pacing, stopping only when the Mexican Air Force Boeing 727 finally came into sight. With a sigh, the governor nervously tugged at his tie in a failed effort to straighten it.

Ready, he headed for the door. Behind him his aides and advisors, save Guajardo, scurried to follow.

The governor emerged from the terminal just as the 727 rolled to a stop. From nowhere a throng of security men, some in uniform, others in short-sleeved white shirts, flooded onto the field and formed up around the aircraft. Behind them a truck-mounted stairway was moved into place while a fuel tanker lumbered up on the far side of the plane. When the president emerged from the 727, he paused briefly at the top of the stairs while his eyes adjusted to the bright afternoon sun. When he was able to see, the president looked about for the governor, beaming a broad smile to him when their eyes locked, a smile that belied the deep concerns he had.

Carlos Montalvo's pace as he bounced down the stairs wasn't quite as spry as it had been when he had been campaigning for the office of president six months ago. In those days, anything and everything had been possible. He had, or so he thought, plans and programs that, when in place, would see Mexico and its people through the social and economic problems they faced. Repayment of a staggering debt, reversal of a population explosion, halting of inflation that set new records almost daily, and, most importantly, resurrection of the people's faith in the ruling political party, all had appeared to be within his grasp. His party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI, had been losing ground for years to both the left, represented by the Partido Socialista Unificado de Mexico, or PSUM, and to the right in the form of the Partido de Action Nacional, or PAN. The last election, won by the narrowest of margins, had been won only through sheer determination, willpower, and the loss of many ballot boxes in districts where the power of the PRI was questionable. As he walked down the stairs, Montalvo doubted that he had the strength, political or physical, to defeat a challenge from either the PSUM or the PAN again.

The problems faced by the republic were difficult but manageable. Or so the young president had thought when he took office in December of the previous year. The reality of the social and economic collapse that threatened Mexico had been a rude shock even to someone with as much political savvy as Montalvo. "Truth," he had found, changed dramatically when he was handed the red, white, and green sash that represented the office and responsibility of the president of Mexico.

So too did the political landscape. Seemingly overnight the scattered and quarreling parties on the political left had found new unity and popularity. While the PRI still held a majority of the Chamber of Deputies, four hundred seats, more than ever before, had been lost to nonPRI candidates, mostly to

the PAN who cried for a return to the “true Revolution.”

The once orderly and safe processes of legislation were disrupted and endangered. The non-PRI deputies, taking advantage of the disenchantment with the PRI that had so nearly defeated Montalvo in his race for president, were unwilling to rubber-stamp legislation proposed by him—legislation that was necessary to make his dreams a reality. The debates that raged on every issue, both on the floor of the chamber and in the news, stalled all effective action and brought to the surface again and again the corruption, fraud, and indifference to the suffering of the Mexican people that had become the grim legacy of the PRI’s rule.

In these troubled times, the parties of both the left and right found new popularity and support from a new facet of the population that traditional PRI methods could not discourage or beat back into line using the ‘usual’

methods. The left and the right seemingly took turns twisting Montalvo’s programs into inflammatory issues that divided, rather than united, the people. The church, through an unnatural coalition with the socialist PSUM, saw Montalvo’s programs aimed at population control as a threat to its dogma. Students were finally convinced that the continuation of PRI dominance would favor the well connected, not the best and the brightest.

And the workers were shown that they, not the elite, would pay the bill for retiring the massive debt accumulated in the days of brighter hopes and foolish investments. Instead of being able to lead the country down the road to a brighter future, President Montalvo found himself struggling to maintain control as barriers to prevent his programs from going into effect were erected, both in and out of the government.

It did not take long for the specter of a socialist, or even worse, a communist revolt, to appear. Though there was no hint of preparations for insurgency or threat of violent overthrow of the government by the PSUM,

could be uncovered by the Mexican intelligence community or special security forces controlled by the PRI, the Army insisted that those threats were real. Caches of weapons, presumably smuggled across the border from Texas into Tamaulipas, had been seized by Colonel Guajardo’s soldiers in surprise sweeps along the border. Together with the rhetoric of the PSUM, which reeked of the classic communist manipulation of the people and the situation, the regional Army commanders began to increase their vigilance and the state of readiness of their troops. As a result, security was tightened and intelligence and security forces redoubled their efforts to discover the threat that the Army claimed was everywhere and was responsible for the growing unrest that was beginning to sweep the country.

The Army, long excluded from the inner circles of policy-making and decisions, remained silent and aloof from the growing political unrest and debates, turning their attention instead to preparations designed to deal with the dangers that only they saw so clearly. The only comment senior staff officers would volunteer in public were pledges to “uphold the traditions of the Revolution and the honor of Mexico” and defend the people and the Revolution from all threats, both internal and foreign. Had any of the president’s advisors paused and carefully analyzed what the colonels were actually saying, the true danger would have been appreciated.

So

the president and the governor greeted each other with minds clouded with many concerns and problems. Though Montalvo wore the stress better than the governor did, each man knew that the other was desperately searching for solutions to his own problems. The president's concern over the problems that threatened their way of life and the political system that had ruled Mexico since 1928 was no less real than the governor's concern over political survival. Their greetings, and the introduction to each other's staff, were, therefore, perfunctory. As President Montalvo and the governor walked into the terminal, questions immediately turned to the matter at hand. Had there been any new outbreaks of violence? Were the police able to contain the oil workers? Had there been any acts of sabotage?

From the lounge, Colonel Guajardo watched with detached interest as the presidential party and the attending cluster of lackeys and functionaries moved to the terminal door behind a screen of security men. He was not really interested in the president's party. Instead, he watched the crew of the fuel truck go about their task under the scrutiny of the security personnel. The Air Force lieutenant who had informed him that the president's plane was inbound was nowhere to be seen. The colonel, however, had no doubt that everything was in hand. With nothing more to do, he turned away from the window and left the lounge for the conference room to listen to the discussions that would last well into the night.

The flight back to Mexico City was quiet. President Montalvo had started to work on a speech he was scheduled to give to the Chamber of Deputies in two days, but he was unable to concentrate. The secretary of finance, the secretary of national defense, the secretary of programming and budget, and the comptroller general, all of whom had accompanied the president on this trip for the express purpose of working on the speech, were already asleep, as was almost everyone else. Even the ever-watchful chief of his security detachment, seated in the aisle seat of the last row of the cabin, was nodding between consciousness and sleep. It seemed that President Montalvo alone, though tired, could not sleep. His mind was a tumble of thoughts and feelings, most of them negative.

His most recurring thought was that he might fail to solve Mexico's problems. The discussions with the governor of Tamaulipas had only served to further befuddle his grasp of the scope and nature of problems facing his administration. Because of this inability to achieve a clear and precise focus, instead of being the savior of his nation, the Revolution, and its people, he now was being portrayed as a Quemando, someone too naive to be trusted. In six months Montalvo had been unable to hack through the bureaucracy that fed on corruption at every level and protected itself from within.

Seeing no changes, the people heeded the call for civil disobedience and strikes, actions that Montalvo saw as a direct challenge to his authority.

Though he instinctively knew it was wrong, Montalvo had, at the urging of his advisors, resorted to harsh repression and the selected suspension of civil liberties. The left seemed to be employing anything and everything to alienate him and his party from the people. Unless something could be done to stop the current trend, he would have no choice but to employ those means of restoring stability to the government and the nation that could also bring about its eventual downfall.

Though his eyes demanded he close them, President Montalvo cleared his head as he shuffled through the papers on his worktable. Forcing himself to concentrate, he carefully underlined selected passages of the speech he would use in an interview with an American journalist that had been arranged for later that morning. The curtailment of his vacation and early return to Mexico City was, in his

opinion, an opportunity. By leaking some of the more important items of his new program through the American media in advance of its official presentation, he and his advisors could gauge how it would be received by both the Chamber of Deputies and the public. Everything for the next few weeks would be critical. Nothing could be left to chance. If the opposition's reaction to the information he would leak during the interview was deemed adverse, he could always blame it on misquotes or poor understanding on the part of the American journalist. If the reaction was favorable, he would leave the speech and program intact.

For a moment, President Montalvo paused and allowed himself to think about the interview, now only six hours off. Even though it would be crucial, and he would have to exercise great care in what he said and how he presented himself, he was looking forward to it. The thought of being interviewed by an American woman of Jan Fields's stature and beauty aroused him.

By reputation, he knew that she was as bold as she was beautiful, beguiling, and manipulative, and captivating to the point of being an enchantress. A sudden twitch and pain in his groin broke President Montalvo's train of thought. He shifted in his seat so as to allow his reaction the additional room it demanded. As he did so, President Montalvo sheepishly looked about the cabin to see if anyone was watching.

Had someone noticed, how could he possibly account for getting an erection while reading one of his own speeches?

President Montalvo was pondering this rather unpresidential question when the first engine lost power and died. The cockpit crew, lulled into inattentiveness by the late hour and monotony, stared at the red warning light for a moment, refusing to believe they had a problem. The copilot looked out the window to see if there was a fire in the engine, but saw nothing. The pilot began to struggle with the aircraft, compensating for the loss of the engine while attempting to restart it. The flight engineer hit the fasten seat belt sign and paged the flight attendant, to warn her, and in turn the president, of the problem.

In the passenger cabin the first sign of a problem was a change in the pitch of the engine followed by a series of jerky maneuvers. President Montalvo looked up toward the front of the aircraft, waiting for someone to tell him what was wrong. His aide, who had been asleep, woke with a start and looked about for a moment before getting up to go forward and investigate the nature of the problem. Immediately behind him was the chief of security. Both men were halfway to the crew cabin when the door swung open and the flight attendant, in a near panic, came running out, headed for the president. She was about to explain the problem to the president's aide when the second engine cut out, sending the aircraft into a steep dive and throwing everyone in the aisle sprawling.

President Montalvo grabbed the armrests of his seat and pushed himself back. He watched as those who were not strapped into their seats were hurled forward into the seat backs before them or into the aisles. The plane jerked from side to side as the pilot struggled to gain some degree of control. He failed, however. Without power there was nothing he could do to lessen the angle or speed of descent. In a matter of seconds the plane was almost on its nose and slowly spinning to the right.

Everything not secured, including people, the president's speech, pillows, blankets, and suit jackets went crashing past President Montalvo into a great tumbled heap at the rear of the cabin. The screams of fear and panic mixed with the cries and moans of the injured. President Montalvo braced himself

with his feet on the seat back to his front in order to keep from being wrenched from his seat and into the heap at the rear of the cabin.

The descent seemed to take an eternity. Without having to be told, President Montalvo understood his fate. He knew he was going to die. In his mind, there was no panic, no desire to know why the plane was going down. There was only regret, regret that he would die a failure. The image of him riding into Mexico (Tity on a great white horse to save it and its people would go up in a great ball of fire, just like the aircraft.

The only witnesses to the crash of the aircraft into the side of a mountain in the Sierra Madre Oriental were two F-5 fighters that had been trailing the president's plane at a discreet distance. The pilots of the F-5S watched the president's aircraft collapse upon itself, its wings pitching forward as the sudden impact ripped them from the fuselage and spread fuel over the entire area. The fuel and its fumes ignited and exploded, enveloping the aircraft in a ball of fire. President Montalvo, key members of the cabinet, his personal staff, and the air crew were dead. The contaminated fuel that had caused their death incinerated their bodies beyond recognition and wiped away all traces of Sabotage.

Many wearing rapiers are afraid of goose-quills.

—Shakespeare, Hamlet, ii,

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