

Part One

Chapter 1

Deforestation of the Amazon is not of particular concern to Peter G. Underbridge. What does interest him, and his company's shareholders, is the readily available gold just under the surface of the area's weak and fragile soil. *I've made a few bucks from this place*, he reflects. And so have the *garimpeiros* – the local gold miners. They use powerful water cannons connected to nearby rivers to blast away vegetation and soil, creating open pits so the collectors can dig and pan for their daily quota.

Underbridge knows his time in Brazil is short – the central government is beginning to enforce their border controls and export restrictions. Still, he has a month more than any other mining operation. He'll miss that ambassador he's had in his back pocket since opening operations in the state of Roraima two years ago.

Venezuela is next. No such restrictions like Brazil. *Yet*. His trip today to Valencia will galvanize a deal with a mining operator who doesn't want the investment risks anymore – just a cut. Outsourcing the expertise to the locals is Underbridge's way of minimizing cost, reducing risk to employees, and staying at arm's length from day-to-day operations. They're paid to produce, not whine about being so far from home.

"Sir, another drink?" The flight attendant catches his attention.

"Yes. But no ice please."

Walking away, he eyes her calf muscles. *She must run*, he thinks. *I need to get back to the gym*.

He returns to his report. He takes note of the key players in Valencia: the politicians for and against open-pit mining, the tree-huggers from California that have set up permanent camp, the other mining operations already in full swing. His research assistant back in New York has done his job in spades, and he knows he'll miss important details by not reading it cover to cover. That's his way. Hire the best and pay them the best, otherwise the competition will nab them.

I wonder why this is...? Underbridge murmurs under his breath. What others may pass off as a minor detail, he knows from experience that every fact

is of vital importance. He lifts the phone from the cradle in front of him and dials a number. Three rings and someone answers.

"Hello, this is Clark. How may I help you?"

"Clark, it's Peter. You holding down the fort OK?"

"Oh hey Mr. Underbridge, how are you? You sound like you're still in the air. Let me guess... you're reading my report and you have a question."

"You're telepathic! Yes, I've a question about the tree-huggers, specifically the ring leader. Any more word from L.A.? I'm concerned that they may be up to something unusual; you know, different this time."

"Funny you ask. I was confirming the details and was going to email your Blackberry. Our source in L.A. has some new information on our Miss "Change-the-world-with-eco-terrorism" chickadee you'll want to know. You won't need to write this down... just listen to this!"

Underbridge covers his other ear...

"Go on."

While Underbridge listens intently, his flying partner takes note of his changed demeanor, and half-cocks her head. *Something's up* she ponders.

Underbridge and his research assistant exchange a few more words, closing off with...

"Thanks Clark, keep your ears to the ground and call if you hear anything more. Thanks."

With that, he returns the receiver to its cradle and makes an expression at his assistant Maria, as if to say *I got it under control*.

What little Spanish he knows can get him around OK, but not well enough for business. Hence the need for Maria. Originally from Brazil, her folks emigrated to Los Angeles when she was six. A graduate of Berkeley with specialties in business and foreign communications, she is also trained in protocol. She's been the perfect travel partner for these stays south of the equator. Her quick tongue and good looks keep Underbridge moving swiftly through customs, car rental arrangements, and – most importantly – business negotiations.

"You look a bit concerned. Everything OK?"

"Ah, we'll be fine. I'll fill you in later."

He returns to his report, opening it to the middle where he has underlined someone's name.

"Maria – this politician – Jose Alvarez... did he confirm?"

"Yes – it's in your day timer and your Blackberry."

"Thanks. Did I mention I don't pay you enough?"

"I remind you all the time." She smirks.

Underbridge is cordial, even kind to the people he surrounds himself with. But if someone gets in his way or they mess up, they're the first to know. Sipping on his rye and coke, he looks calm, but in his mind he's like a hawk circling its prey. He loves the adrenaline rush of starting a new mining operation; each location has its specific challenges, both technically and logistically. Like a master conductor, he doesn't play anyone's instrument – well, at first anyways. He'll be both strategist and tactician when first presented with a new set of challenges, a new set of politicians to analyze, a new group of protesters. He gets his hands dirty when he has to, and will always use the lessons he learns to teach the people that work with him... "You saw how that went. I shouldn't have to see it happen again, right?"

Yes sir, Mr. Underbridge.

Once the place is spinning like a top, he moves on to the next gold mine.

The Hawker 800 jet touches down smoothly on the airport tarmac. While they unbuckle their seatbelts, the flight attendant informs Maria and Underbridge they are just behind a *Spanair* A320 that will be out of the way shortly. Looking out his window, Underbridge spots what looks like their limo a quarter mile away. *You have eyes like an eagle*, his doctor told him long ago. While his friends in the army reserves tried to convince him he'd be a great sniper, he learned soon enough that the pen was indeed mightier than the sword.

Through customs and baggage claim in 30 minutes, they find the limo and give the driver an address. He whisks the pair off to a luxury condo just north of the airport. Maria has the keys in her purse; her assistant made the arrangements weeks ago.

Once up the elevator to the third floor, Maria opens up the large double doors, and they immediately scout out the 2,000 square foot luxury apartment.

"Nice place. There's even food in the cupboards – look at this."

Underbridge is admiring the view of Casupo Mountain – he turns his head – "So, you cooking?"

"You wouldn't want to eat what I cook. *Dogs* don't want to eat what I cook..."

"Hm. Something you're not good at. Interesting."

The driver knocks on the front door and lets himself in with their suitcases.

"Right there is good. Thanks." says Maria. "We'll be down in 20 or so minutes." The driver acknowledges with a wave of his hand.

They each claim a bedroom. Underbridge was a gentleman and had cleared the arrangements with Maria weeks ago, but he did hint at getting a one-bedroom pad. Maria was quick to stop him in his tracks.

"I guess you won't mind the couch then?"

Their banter is more fun than anything else; ulterior sexual motives don't have a place in either of their lives.

They unpack and begin changing into their business suits. Maria yells to Underbridge –

"There might be some protesters this afternoon at the contractor's. I had Gerry call the local police to tell them we were coming through."

"You're ahead of me. Good thinking. The group down here is nasty, led by some angry hippy-chick from Los Angeles. She's behind a lot of these."

"Ya, I saw the surveillance black and whites. She gets around."

"She's under investigation for environmental terrorism. I won't tell you who's behind it, but her partner's phone is tapped. I get all the intel from LAPD."

Maria walks out into the living room brushing her hair. "Well aren't you one connected guy."

"Whatever it takes," he says as he straightens his tie in the hallway mirror.

Maria asks: "Is that what the phone call was about? You mentioned you'd fill me in later."

"Indeed it was. Clark got word from the local police here via our informant at the LAPD that the tree huggers are planning something for our trip. No word what, but they warned us to be hyper vigilant. So, it was a good move to arrange for some police presence. They're already aware of them as I mentioned, so I'm sure they'll show up in droves."

Maria's face goes slightly pale. "You don't suppose they'll try anything silly like plant a bomb or anything?" Her face and voice tone give away the butterflies in her stomach.

"Listen, Maria, don't worry. I've been dodging these assholes for years. It's a bit of cat and mouse. For instance, our chauffeur – where's he from?"

"Oh dear, I forget..."

"Not *here*. Get it? I made sure he wasn't based anywhere close to Valencia where these losers could find him and bribe his ass. It happened in Venezuela when I first arrived a few years ago. The protest group found the limo company we hired and planted a stick of fake dynamite under my seat, with the words "leave or die" written in magic marker. Scared the crap out of me. Over the years I've learned most of their tactics and know what to look for."

Maria soaks in the information, and a bit of color returns to her face. "Is there anything *I* should know, or be aware of? You're kind of scaring me here. I'm not sure I signed up for this."

"Maria – please don't over react. It was fake dynamite and nothing has ever happened since. I have the confidence in the local authorities, and we're not the only ones the protesters don't like, so they keep a close eye on them." He changes the subject. "Alright – where are we going exactly?"

Maria sighs and looks up the address for their lunch meeting with Jose Alvarez, the American ambassador. He's not in Valencia all that often, so they gladly changed their schedule for the meeting; this one's the most important.

Their driver knows the restaurant well. It has a back room for the elite that do not want to be engaged by the public; a perfect setting to have a meal and shake hands on deals that have no contract; agreements, but nothing is signed. "There was a gunfight there once – two years ago," the driver says. Maria looks out the window and exclaims, "Oh cute! The one day I didn't bring my Smith & Wesson" as she rolls her eyes at Underbridge. He raises his eyebrows in response, as if to say *Didn't I tell you it's all OK?*

The drive to the restaurant is quick and uneventful. The driver lets them exit the car at the front door, and hands both Underbridge and Maria a simple business card with his cell number in large bold characters. He explains...

"Call me two minutes before you need me to come back."

"Thank you."– they both respond at the same time. As they walk into the foyer of the restaurant, Maria comments:

"I like that. No middleman, no valets to tip."

"I like your taste in efficiency." responds Underbridge.

Now seated in the back room, everyone has made introductions and shaken hands. The waitress starts off the group with warm *arepas* and butter; they order wine, then begin discussing business. Mr. Alvarez starts.

"Ms. Ramirez and Mr. Underbridge – I first must tell you I appreciate the generous offer you sent my wife last week. She would love to sit in the cockpit of your private jet. She has been clocking as many hours as she can for her commercial license. She fell in love with your model of aircraft in Brazil – the military have three or four of them."

"A *military* version of the 800? I'm not surprised – it's very agile. You know, our pilot will enjoy teaching her the ins and outs of the jet. It isn't the newest, but it has been upgraded since our company bought it last year. I'm sure he'll let her take the stick once or twice – pilots tell me it is an easy craft to handle. We're here for a few days, so if your wife isn't busy tomorrow, my pilot will welcome the break from his boring day."

"Yes, tomorrow is fine. Thank you."

Alvarez shifts gears as the wine arrives.

"Now, I must inform you of the latest developments politically. As you know, Venezuela and Bolivia are close neighbors; they have very close ties that go back generations. There may be repercussions should America continue to dabble in Bolivia's politics; they're asking Venezuela to show solidarity and expel their American ambassador – *me* – should the situation escalate. So it's possible I may not be around much longer."

"Interesting," says Underbridge. "I never did like politics. What's their beef?"

"The States is accused of influencing some locals to form a coup against Bolivia's president. The State Department denies such things, but you know how much meddling goes on behind the scenes."

"Will this affect mining operations? We're here to start up a new site..."

"Yes, I realize that. You'll be safe; American dollars are always welcome here – you employ people and stimulate the local economy. For that, the Venezuelans are grateful."

"No export restrictions on the horizon?"

"Nothing I am aware of, and we should keep it that way. My son goes to a private school and is friends with a boy named Peter, same as you. His father

is the minister of natural resources. It just so happens we are having them over for cocktails and a meal next month – I believe you will be receiving an invitation sometime soon." He winks. Underbridge fills the ambassador's goblet with more wine.

Maria loves watching her boss play the game. He's good at it, and she picks up on his tactics, tucking them away for future use. *One day I'll be doing this*, she thinks to herself. It's closer than she knows...

They chat about the so-called environmentalists who have set up camp in Valencia.

"Yes, our local authorities have them under a very watchful eye. There is concern that something may happen sometime soon, though it is just conjecture."

This piques Maria's curiosity.

"Yes, exactly what do you know?" she asks.

"I do not want to alarm you unnecessarily, so please know this is only guess work at best. Two weeks ago, a construction site was vandalized, and after a quick inventory, the owner discovered that an amount of explosives were missing. Fourteen sticks of dynamite to be exact. Also, priming cord and other supplies." He holds up his finger... "Now, we *cannot* assume it is these environmental protesters, as there are other unsavory groups and individuals that would make use of such destructive materials."

"Such as...?" Underbridge chips in.

"Oh, the usual – organized crime, drug traffickers, and so on. But the unusual part of the crime is that they only took fourteen sticks. They left behind dozens more. It is as if they have a specific job in mind."

Maria's face goes flush for the second time today. Observing her reaction, Alvarez handles her fear like a true politician.

"Ms. Ramirez – please do not be overly concerned, as your safety is our highest concern. I am close to the local police chief, and he assures me that his men are on high alert during the span of your visit. It would be terrible to allow such hooligans to get away with using these explosives in any way whatsoever... he tells me he has many undercover police scouring the city. He has them working on leads as we speak."

Underbridge takes control and comments as he looks at Maria, then Alvarez.

"Well, I refuse to live in fear. We've been safe up to now, and I'm sure we will be for the rest of our visit. We have taken measures to be as discrete and stealthy as possible, so our whereabouts should be fairly hard to track

down. We'll certainly keep an eye over our shoulders, but I'm confident we will be safe. I've lived through this in the past."

Maria interrupts – "Just the same, let's have our driver change vehicles every once in a while – like – daily!"

"Hmm. Good idea" responds Underbridge, placating Maria's fear.

With that, everyone settles back into their chairs, when Alvarez holds up his wine goblet and toasts his guests.

"Peter, Maria – may your visit be prosperous, and may we all sleep like babies tonight!"

"Cheers!" they all exclaim.

The rest of the meal is taken up with the more trivial aspects of government policy, business incentives, and family. Family is everything in South America, and it rubs off on most visitors. By the time the bottle of wine is done, they're each pulling out their wallets to show off the latest pictures of their children.

"Junior baseball!"

"Debate team!"

"Theater!"

"His first tooth!"

The wine has done its job – they laugh like they've known each other for years. Underbridge orders another bottle after commenting that 750 ml isn't much for three people. Following desert and coffee, the waitress approaches – Underbridge grabs the bill and hands her his VISA black card. Alvarez raises his eyebrow.

"Is it true? Unlimited credit?"

"Urban myth. The limit is a quarter mil. I have to pay it off every month according to my bean counters, otherwise they freak. Isn't life tough?"

"Well, what I could do with such an expense account... there's a few bottles of rare wine that come to mind. You into collecting?"

Maria rolls her eyes at the waitress. *Men!*

The limo approaches a construction compound that has a large sign on the chain link fence "La Propiedad Privada. *Private Property*. Three police

vehicles and a paddy wagon are close by, with a dozen officers standing around, arms folded, keeping their firearms in full view. There is a crowd of protesters in front of the gate carrying signs with words in both English and Spanish.

"Foreign Gold Miners Not Welcome"

"Stop Raping Our Land"

"We Only Have One Earth"

The group is chanting when the limo pulls up slowly, heading for the gate. A police officer blows his whistle, motioning them to allow the vehicle access. Three officers close in on the crowd; they move away from the limo. Underbridge is taken back... "How the hell did they know?" He looks at Maria. She shrugs her shoulders. Underbridge settles back in his seat, exasperated. He rants:

"Miserable people, these kids. They bitch about the commerce that makes the world go round. They complain about the system, while living off of it like leeches. They eat everything organic, then pollute themselves with hashish. The leaders are in the FBI's 'Persons of Interest' file... They piss me off."

As the limo enters the compound, people in the crowd shake their fists while yelling their slogans. The gate closes behind them as the limo heads to the main office.

"You have my number" says the driver.

"Sure do amigo. I suggest you don't leave though..."

"I wouldn't think of it! I'll see you soon."

The pair exit the limo and quickly slip into the main office's waiting area. A receptionist immediately waves to them and in broken English asks them their names. Maria takes over in Spanish and soon they are in a meeting room waiting for the company president. They both move over to a window where they can observe the group of protesters. From what they could gather, apparently someone threw a plastic water bottle at the crowd of police... someone was being escorted – quite forcefully – into the paddy wagon.

"Hold on to your hat" says Underbridge. "That may just get them going..." They're both startled by a booming voice behind them.

"Mr. Underbridge – Ms. Ramirez, welcome to our headquarters. My apologies for the crowd outside – they showed up last week."

Underbridge responds, "No problem – I'm used to their type."

The meeting room is prepped with pitchers of iced water, and off to the side, a tray with a bottle of tequila and shot glasses. *Quite the party crowd, these guys* thinks Maria. Other than the excitement of the protesters, the meeting is rather

boring, and quite long. Underbridge goes over the geologist's report, talks to the surveyor with Maria as interpreter, and confirms the helicopter rental for the team's first on-site visit the next day. It takes a couple of hours to sift through details not covered by the contract, with Maria and Underbridge chatting in English in hushed tones. Maria translates to the president and his legal counsel, as they both nod their heads. They finally re-print the last draft; the secretary enters the meeting room with the laser-printed contract. Maria again interprets by scanning the Spanish wording.

"Yes, same as the English. Here's a pen."

After a few hand shakes, the company president speaks in his broken English.

"Madam and sir, we have a little custom in this company that we have been practicing for many years. When we make such a deal and shake hands, we celebrate with a drink of tequila." He looks at someone beside him – "José – *aprisa...*"

José swiftly retrieves the tray and pours everyone an ounce, then hands them out.

"Salud!"

"Salud!" responds everyone.

After the round of shooters, they shake hands again and begin to leave. Pleasantries are exchanged as Maria calls their driver, who is on the other side of the compound catching forty winks.

On their way back to the condo, Underbridge mouths the words to Maria...

"You like this driver?"

She nods *yes*.

"Then get him on retainer for whenever we're down here. I like to stick with someone steady; no surprises, you know? And – ask him to change cars every day."

"Consider it done. A good day's work." Maria then chats to the driver in articulate Spanish, instructing him of their requirements. He seems happy with his assignment.

"He's good to go. Hey – how about more drinks?"

"Are you asking me on a date young girl?"

"Yes, but you're buying. There's a nice restaurant half a block from here. Let's walk. I need to shake off the day."

The driver pulls over at their request.

"That's it for today. We'll walk home from here – come by the condo for 8AM."

"Yes, sir. Gracias. Thank you, sir."

They saunter along *Avenida Bolivar* and find their destination, *Casa Valencia*.

"The place is very popular. Let's eat while we're here – their *tostones* are to die for from what I hear."

"How do you know so much about Valencia?"

"Research... and, my parents moved here from Brazil. East of here – Caracas. I'll want to see them if that's OK."

Underbridge begins saying... "For sure – and, did I mention I'm not..." she interrupts.

"*Paying* me enough? What do you plan on doing about that?"

"You're telepathic, just like my research assistant – I've something up my sleeve. I'll tell you over drinks."

Casa Valencia is a beautiful multi-tiered orange stucco building with traditional terra cotta roofing. Inside, the exposed stained beams create a rustic, yet elegant atmosphere – Underbridge is impressed.

"Good choice. Good time of day to pop in – not too many people."

They are seated in a corner booth just the way he prefers it. Back always facing the corner. As his mind wonders for a second, he catches a reflection of himself in a mirror across the room; he didn't recognize himself at first. What he did notice was the graying at his temples – it's more than it was a couple months ago. *Good thing I have black hair* he thinks... *looks distinguished*. Without opening his mouth, few locals would peg him as an outsider, or Maria for that matter, with her obvious Spanish/Mexican appearance, and Underbridge with his ruggedly handsome features and thin build.

After receiving their bottle of Merlot and appetizers, they chit chat about the new environment they'll be working in, the trips back and forth, the pain-in-the-butt protesters.

"Listen – Maria. I'm cooking up an idea for you. I think you're ready for this..."

She clears her throat – "Yes?"

"As you know, I'm always peeking into other people's business. There's a mining company that isn't doing so well on the market. I've been buying up stock. I mean damn, I thought they were going to have a fire sale last month. Eight bucks a share, down from 23 a year ago. Hard to believe for a mining corporation. Investors are nervous I suppose – remember that phony diamond mine in Nigeria? We've all taken a beating on that one. Anyways... they need new leadership. But I want the loser who's there now to stay so my stocks – well, *their* stocks keep falling. Their vice president is a damn good guy; he's worked with people I know, and I'm sure he's biting at the bit to take over from his incompetent leader."

"Why won't the board vote him out?"

"Severance. He negotiated a package that could take half the company's liquidity with him. Rat bastard. In that regard, he was smart.

"So here's my view: I can't meddle cause I'd likely draw suspicion. But – say you don't work for me as an employee anymore. We're done so-to-speak. We shake hands and part ways. You form your own consultancy corporation, specializing in getting companies back on their feet making a profit."

Maria swallows hard. Underbridge doesn't miss it.

"You and I become unfettered business partners. I *trust* you. There are very few people I say that to, and you know I don't bullshit."

Maria knows that for the two years by his side, she's never seen him shaft a fellow business person. He speaks his mind.

"Go on..."

"Well, I know two people on the board of this Midwest Mining Corporation, and they're desperate. You show up with your resume, and they'll hire you on the spot. Your mission is to keep the pres in place for at least a month while I buy up stock. You know, have him make a bad decision or two. Use your feminine wiles... Then get the board to boot him out. It won't matter how much the greedy prick takes with him; once he's gone, the board will look for another leader. *You* convince them the vice is their best bet. Rudman is his name."

Maria doesn't miss a beat. "Quite the mission. You think I'm up for it? You just gave me inside information. What's stopping *me* from buying, just like you?"

"*You* are. Only you can penetrate, divide, and conquer. I have to stay where I am. You'd be charged with inside trading if someone looked close enough. But Maria – there's more in this for you than making a few bucks on the market. This is about you moving on and moving up. Once their president

is history and Rudman takes the helm, they'll be back on their feet by third quarter."

"Oh, you have a *schedule*?"

"Do I look stupid?"

Underbridge adds the cherry on top...

"Maria, who do you think is going to take over as vice?" He pauses to let it sink in. The light goes on.

"No *way*..."

"Yes, Maria Ramirez, Vice President of Midwest Mining Corporation."

"...and all that stock you bought?"

"I'll give you one honking big Christmas gift like you've never seen. If they rally back to – say, even just 25 a share, let's see..." He digs out a pen and does some quick math on his napkin... "That could mean – Christ – it's well over four million. How do you like the sound of say – a cool million? It'll be a bank transfer from my shadow company in Brussels after I sell some of my shares. And – you say you like boats? I'll be upgrading soon to one with a helipad. The silly thing is 227 feet long, being built as we speak. Maybe you get the keys for my old one whenever you want. Just call ahead. "

Maria's head is spinning. *Jésus Christo this could really work*, she thinks. All this slaving away for someone else could really pay off. Her face goes red.

"And who knows what stock options you'll get once you're on the executive team. But one thing, Maria." Underbridge is very serious. "Not a single peep of a word can leave this room. I've already cut out a friend who I thought was trustworthy at first, but I caught him buying their stock."

"What did you do?"

"Don't ask and I won't tell. I trust you *because* you aren't affiliated with any old boy's club. This stuff brings out the worst in people, but I know your track record. You with me on this?"

"Totally. I'm on board. I'll have HR draw up my pink slip when we get back. Do I get a pack
age?" she says with a wry smile. They touch glasses. "I'll owe you big time."

"Not at all. You forget two things. One – thanks to you, I'll eventually gain controlling interest in the company, essentially owning it. And two – I have you there to help Rudman make decisions that are good for everyone, me included. I say we'd be pretty well even."

Maria tries to suppress her emotions, but fails -

"Oh, and one more thing Maria."

"Yes?"

"You really have to work on that poker face of yours!"

They chuckle and touch glasses once more.