3

"He isn't coming," Salvador exclaimed suddenly. "Another night wasted, you'll see."

"He'll come," Amadito immediately replied, with some impatience. "He put on his olive-green uniform. The adjutants were ordered to have the blue Chevrolet ready for him. Why won't you believe me? He'll come."

Salvador and Amadito were in the back of the car parked across from the Malecón, and they'd had the same exchange several times during the half hour they had spent there. Antonio Imbert, at the wheel, and Antonio de la Maza, who sat beside him with his elbow out the window, made no comment this time either. The four men were tense as they watched the handful of vehicles driving from Ciudad Trujillo, their yellow headlights piercing the darkness, on the way to San Cristóbal. None of the cars was the 1957 sky-blue Chevrolet with curtained windows that they were waiting for.

They were a few hundred meters from the Livestock Fairgrounds, where there were several restaurants—the Pony, the most popular, was probably full of people eating grilled meat—and some bars that had music, but the wind blew to the east and the sounds did not reach them, though they could see the distant lights through the palm trees. Yet the crash of waves breaking against the rocks and the clamor of the undertow were so loud, they had to raise their voices to be heard. The car, doors closed and lights off, was ready to pull away.

"Do you remember when we first started coming to the Malecón to enjoy the breeze and nobody worried about the *caliés*?" Antonio Imbert put his head out the window and filled his lungs with the night air. "Here's where we began talking seriously about this."

None of his friends answered right away, as if they were consulting their memories or had not paid attention to what he was saying.

"Yes, here on the Malecón, about six months ago," Salvador Estrella Sadhalá replied after a while.

"Earlier than that," Antonio de la Maza murmured without turning around. "In November, when they killed the Mirabal sisters, we talked about it here. I'm sure of that. And we'd already been coming to the Malecón at night for a while."

"It seemed like a dream," Imbert mused. "Difficult, and a long way off. Like when you're a kid and imagine you'll be a hero, an explorer, a movie star. Damn, I still can't believe it'll be tonight."

"If he comes," Salvador grumbled.

"I'll bet anything you want, Turk," Amadito repeated, full of conviction.

"The thing that makes me wonder is that today's Tuesday," Antonio de la Maza complained. "He always goes to San Cristóbal on Wednesday. You're one of the adjutants, Amadito, and you know that better than anybody. Why did he change the day?"

"I don't know why," insisted the lieutenant. "But he'll go. He put on his olive-green uniform. He ordered the blue Chevrolet. He'll go."

"He must have a nice piece of ass waiting for him at Mahogany House," said Antonio Imbert. "A brand-new one that's never been opened."

"If you don't mind, let's talk about something else." Salvador cut him off.

"I always forget we can't talk about asses in front of a saint like you," the man at the wheel apologized. "Let's just say he has something nice planned in San Cristóbal. Can I say it like that, Turk? Or does that offend your apostolic ears too?"

But nobody was in the mood for jokes. Not even Imbert; he talked only to fill the waiting time somehow.

"Heads up!" exclaimed De la Maza, craning his neck forward.

"It's a truck," replied Salvador, with a simple glance at the approaching yellow headlights. "I'm not a saint or a fanatic, Antonio. I practice my faith, that's all. And ever since the bishops sent their Pastoral Letter on January 24 last year, I'm proud to be a Catholic."

In fact, it was a truck that roared past, its swaying load of cartons tied down with ropes; its roar grew fainter and finally disappeared.

"And a Catholic can't talk about cunts but he can kill, is that right, Turk?" Imbert tried to provoke him. He did it often: he and Salvador Estrella Sadhalá were the closest friends in the group; they were always trading jokes, at times so pointed that others thought they would come to blows. But they had never fought, their friendship was unbreakable. Tonight, however, Turk did not show a trace of humor:

"Killing just anybody, no. Doing away with a tyrant, yes. Have you ever heard the word 'tyrannicide'? In extreme cases, the Church allows it. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that. Do you want to know how I know? When I began to help the people in June 14 and realized I'd have to pull the trigger someday, I consulted with our spiritual adviser, Father Fortín. A Canadian priest, in Santiago. He arranged an audience for me with Monsignor Lino Zanini, the papal nuncio. 'Would it be a sin for a believer to kill Trujillo, Monsignor?' He closed his eyes and thought. I could repeat his exact words, with his Italian accent. He showed me the passage from St. Thomas, in the *Summa Theologica*. If I hadn't read it, I wouldn't be here tonight with all of you."

Antonio de la Maza had turned around to look at him:

"You talked about this with your spiritual adviser?"

His voice was angry. Lieutenant Amado García Guerrero was afraid he would explode into one of those rages he had been prone to ever since Trujillo had his brother Octavio killed, years before. Outbursts like the one that was about to destroy the friendship that united De la Maza to Salvador Estrella Sadhalá. But Salvador calmed him down:

"It was a long time ago, Antonio. When I began to help June 14. You think I'm such an asshole that I'd confess something like this to a poor priest?"

"Turk, explain to me why you can say asshole and not ass, cunt, or fuck," Imbert joked, trying once again to ease the tension. "Don't all dirty words offend God?"

"Words don't offend God, only obscene thoughts," Turk replied in resignation. "Assholes who ask asshole questions may not offend Him. But they must bore Him to death."

"Did you take communion this morning so you'd come to the great event with a pure soul?" Imbert continued the teasing.

"I've taken communion every day for the past ten years," Salvador acknowledged. "I don't know if my soul is the way a Christian's soul should be. Only God knows that."

"It is," thought Amadito. Of all the people he had known in his thirty-one years, Turk was the one he admired most. Salvador was married to his aunt, Urania Mieses, whom Amadito loved dearly. From the time he had been a cadet at Batalla de Las Carreras Military Academy, whose director was Colonel José León (Pechito) Estévez, Angelita Trujillo's husband, he had spent his days off at the house of the Estrella Sadhalás. Salvador had become extremely important in his life; he confided in him about his problems, troubles, dreams, and doubts, and asked his advice before making any decision. The Estrella Sadhalás gave the party to celebrate Amadito's graduation, carrying the sword of honor—first in a class of thirty-five officers!—attended by his eleven maternal aunts, and, years later, for what the young lieutenant thought would be the best news he'd ever receive, his acceptance into the most prestigious unit in the Armed Forces: the military adjutants responsible for the personal safety of the Generalissimo.

Amadito closed his eyes and inhaled the salt-laden breeze blowing in the four open windows. Imbert, Turk, and Antonio de la Maza were quiet. He had met Imbert and De la Maza at the house on Mahatma Gandhi, and that meant he had witnessed the

fight between Turk and Antonio, so violent he expected them to start shooting, and, months later, he also witnessed the reconciliation of Antonio and Salvador for the sake of a single goal: killing the Goat. No one could have told Amadito on that day in 1959, when Urania and Salvador gave him a party and countless bottles of rum were consumed, that in less than two years, on a mild, starry night, on this Tuesday, May 30, 1961, he would be waiting for Trujillo in order to kill him. So many things had happened since the day when, shortly after he arrived at 21 Mahatma Gandhi, Salvador took him by the arm and gravely led him to the most private corner of the garden.

"I must say something to you, Amadito. Because of the fondness I have for you. That all of us in this house have for you."

He spoke so quietly that the young man leaned his head forward to hear him.

"What's this about, Salvador?"

"It's about my not wanting to do anything to hurt your career. You may have problems if you keep coming here."

"What kind of problems?"

Turk's expression, which was usually serene, contorted with emotion. Alarm flashed in his eyes.

"I'm collaborating with the people in June 14. If anyone finds out, it would be very dangerous for you. An officer in Trujillo's corps of military adjutants. Just think about it!"

The lieutenant never could have imagined Salvador as a clandestine conspirator, helping the people who had organized to fight against Trujillo following Castro's June 14 invasion at Constanza, Maimón, and Estero Hondo, which had cost so many lives. He knew that Turk despised the regime; Salvador and his wife were careful in front of him, but sometimes they let slip antigovernment remarks. Then they immediately fell silent, for they knew that Amadito, though he had no interest in politics, professed, like any other officer in the Army, a blind, visceral loyalty to the Maximum Leader, the Benefactor and Father of the New Nation, who for three decades had controlled the

destiny of the Republic and the lives and deaths of all Dominicans.

"Not another word, Salvador. You've told me. I heard it. I've forgotten what I heard. I'm going to keep coming here, like always. This is my home."

Salvador looked at him with the clear-eyed sincerity that communicated a joyful sensation of life to Amadito.

"Let's go have a beer, then. Let's not be sad."

And, of course, when he fell in love and began to think about marriage, the first people he introduced to his girlfriend, after his Aunt Meca—his favorite among his mother's eleven sisters—were Salvador and Urania. Luisita Gil! Whenever he thought of her, regret twisted his gut and anger boiled up inside him. He took out a cigarette and placed it in his mouth. Salvador lit it for him with his lighter. The good-looking brunette, the charming, flirtatious Luisita Gil. After some maneuvers, he had gone with two friends for a sail at La Romana. On the dock, two girls were buying fresh fish. They struck up a conversation and went with them to the municipal band concert. The girls invited them to a wedding. Only Amadito could go; he had a day off, but his two friends had to return to barracks.He fell madly in love with the slender, witty little brunette with flashing eyes, who danced the merengue like a star on the Dominican Voice. And she with him. The second time they went out, to a movie and a nightclub, he could kiss and hold her. She was the woman of his life, he could never be with anybody else. The handsome Amadito had said these things to many women since his days as a cadet, but this time he meant it. Luisa took him to meet her family in La Romana, and he invited her to lunch at Aunt Meca's house in Ciudad Trujillo, and then, one Sunday, at the Estrella Sadhalás': they were delighted with Luisa. When he told them he was planning to ask her to marry him, they were enthusiastic: she was a lovely woman. Amadito formally asked her parents for her hand. In accordance with regulations, he requested authorization to marry from the commanding officers of the military adjutants.

It was his first clash with a reality that, despite his twenty-nine years, splendid grades, magnificent record as a cadet and an officer, he had known nothing about. ("Like most Dominicans," he thought.) The reply to his request was delayed. He was told that the corps of adjutants had passed it along to the SIM, so that they could investigate the person in question. In a week or ten days he would have his approval. But the reply did not come in ten, or fifteen, or twenty days. On the twenty-first day the Chief summoned him to his office. It was the only time he had exchanged words with the Benefactor even though he had been close to him so often at public functions, the first time this man whom he saw every day at Radhamés Manor had directed his gaze at him.

From the time he was a child Lieutenant García Guerrero had heard, from his family—especially his grandfather, General Hermógenes García—at school, and later as a cadet and an officer, about Trujillo's gaze. A gaze that no one could endure without lowering his own eyes, intimidated and annihilated by the force radiating from those piercing eyes that seemed to read one's most secret thoughts and most hidden desires and appetites, and made people feel naked. Amadito laughed at the stories. The Chief might be a great statesman whose vision, will, and capacity for work had made the Dominican Republic a great country. But he wasn't God. His gaze could only be the gaze of a mortal man.

It was enough for him to walk into the office, click his heels, and announce himself in the most martial voice his throat could produce—"Second Lieutenant García Guerrero, at your service, Excellency!"—to feel electrified. "Come in," said the sharp voice of the man who sat at the other end of the room behind a desk covered in red leather, writing and not looking up. The young man took a few steps and stood at attention, not moving a muscle or thinking, looking at the meticulously groomed gray hair and impeccable attire—blue jacket and vest, white shirt with immaculate collar and starched cuffs, silvery tie secured with a pearl—and at his hands, one resting on a

sheet of paper that the other covered with rapid strokes of blue ink. On his left hand he saw the ring with the precious iridescent stone, which, according to the superstitious, was an amulet given to him when he was a young man, a member of the Constabulary Guard pursuing the "bandits" who rebelled against the United States' military occupation, by a Haitian wizard who assured him that as long as he kept it on he would be invulnerable to enemies.

"A good service record, Lieutenant," he heard him say.

"Thank you very much, Excellency."

The silver-colored head moved and those large staring eyes, without brightness and without humor, met his. "I've never been afraid in my life," the boy later confessed to Salvador. "Until that gaze fell on me, Turk. It's true. As if he were digging up my conscience." There was a long silence while those eyes examined his uniform, his belt, his buttons, his tie, his visored hat. Amadito began to perspire. He knew that the slightest carelessness in dress provoked such disgust in the Chief that he could erupt into violent recriminations.

"A service record this good cannot be stained by marriage to the sister of a Communist. In my government, friends and enemies don't mix."

He spoke quietly, not releasing him from his penetrating gaze. Amadito thought that at any moment the thin, high-pitched voice would crack.

"Luisa Gil's brother is one of the June 14 subversives. Did you know that?"

"No, Excellency."

"Now you know." He cleared his throat and added, without changing his tone: "There are a lot of women in this country. Find another one."

"Yes, Excellency."

He saw him make a gesture of assent, ending the interview.

"Permission to withdraw, Excellency."

He clicked his heels and saluted. He left with a martial step, hiding the anguish that paralyzed him. A soldier obeyed

orders, especially if they came from the Benefactor and Father of the New Nation, who had taken a few minutes of his time to speak to him in person. If he had given that order to him, a privileged officer, it was for his own good. He had to obey. He did, clenching his teeth. His letter to Luisa did not contain a single word that was not true: "With a heavy heart, and though I suffer because of it, I must renounce my love for you and tell you, sadly, that we cannot marry. My superiors forbid it because of your brother's anti-Trujillista activities, something you hid from me. I understand why you did. But by the same token I hope you also understand the difficult decision I find myself obliged to make, against my will. I will always think of you with love, but we will not see each other again. I wish you good luck. Don't be angry with me."

Had the beautiful, happy, slender girl from La Romana forgiven him? Though he hadn't seen her again, he hadn't replaced her in his heart. Luisa had married a prosperous farmer from Puerto Plata. But if she eventually forgave him for breaking off their engagement, she never could have forgiven him for the other thing, if she ever found out about it. He would never forgive himself. And even if, in a few moments, the bullet-ridden body of the Goat were lying at his feet—he wanted to empty his pistol into those cold iguana eyes—he would not forgive him either. "At least Luisa will never know." Not her, not anybody except those who planned the ambush.

And, of course, Salvador Estrella Sadhalá; devastated by hatred, alcohol, and despair, Lieutenant García Guerrero had come directly to his house at 21 Mahatma Gandhi, in the small hours of that morning, from the brothel of Pucha Vittini, alias Pucha Brazobán, at the top of Calle Juana Saltitopa, where he had been taken, afterward, by Colonel Johnny Abbes and Major Roberto Figueroa Carrión, so that with a few drinks and a good piece of ass he could forget the unpleasantness. "Unpleasantness," "sacrifice for the Fatherland," "test of will," "blood offering to the Chief": those were the things they had said to him. Then they congratulated him for having earned a

promotion. Amadito took a drag of his cigarette and tossed it onto the road: a tiny explosion of fireworks when it hit the asphalt. "If you don't think about something else, you're going to cry," he told himself, mortified at the thought that Imbert, Antonio, and Salvador might see him burst into sobs. They would think he was afraid. He clenched his teeth so hard it hurt. He had never been as sure about anything as he was about this. While the Goat lived, he would not, he'd be nothing but the ambulatory despair he had been since that January night in 1961 when the world collapsed around him, and he had run to 21 Mahatma Gandhi and taken refuge in Salvador's friendship so he wouldn't put a gun in his mouth and pull the trigger. He told him everything. Not right away. Because when Turk opened the door, surprised at dawn by the pounding that roused him, his wife, and his children from bed and from sleep, and found on the threshold Amadito's broken silhouette reeking of alcohol, the young man could not say a word. He opened his arms and threw them around Salvador. "What is it, Amadito? Who died?" They took him to his bedroom, put him to bed, let him give vent to his feelings, babbling incoherently. Urania Mieses prepared mint tea that she fed to him by the spoonful, as if he were a little boy.

"Don't tell us anything you'll be sorry for," Turk interrupted.

Over his pajamas he wore a kimono with ideograms. He sat at a corner of the bed, looking at Amadito with affection.

"I'll leave you alone with Salvador." His Aunt Urania kissed him on the forehead and stood up. "So you can talk more freely, so you can tell him what it would make you sad to tell me."

Amadito thanked her. Turk turned off the overhead light. The shade on the bedside lamp had a design that the light of the bulb turned red. Clouds? Animals? The lieutenant thought that if a fire broke out, he wouldn't move.

"Go to sleep, Amadito. Things will seem less tragic in the light of day."

"It won't make any difference, Turk. Day or night I'll still make myself sick. It'll be worse when I sober up."

It began that afternoon, in the headquarters of the military adjutants, next to Radhamés Manor. He had just returned from Boca Chica, where Major Roberto Figueroa Carrión, liaison between the Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Generalissimo Trujillo, had sent him to deliver a sealed envelope to General Ramfis Trujillo at the Dominican Air Force Base. The lieutenant entered the major's office to report on his mission, and Figueroa Carrión received him with a mischievous expression. He showed him the red file folder on his desk.

"Can you guess what I have here?"

"A week's leave for me at the beach, Major, sir?"

"Your promotion to first lieutenant, boy!" His superior happily handed him the folder.

"I stood there with my mouth open, because it wasn't my turn." Salvador didn't move. "I still have eight months before I can apply for a promotion. I thought it was a consolation prize because I was denied permission to get married."

Salvador, at the foot of the bed, was ill at ease and made a face.

"Didn't you know, Amadito? Your friends, your superiors, didn't they tell you about the test of loyalty?"

"I thought they were just stories," Amadito said with conviction, with fury. "I swear. People don't bring that up, they don't brag about that. I didn't know. It took me by surprise."

Was that true, Amadito? One more lie, one more pious lie in the string of lies that had been his life since he enrolled at the Military Academy. Since his birth, for he had been born almost at the same time as the Era. Of course you had to know, had to suspect; of course, in the Fortress at San Pedro de Macorís, and then, among the military adjutants, you had heard, intuited, discovered, in the jokes and boasts, in the excited moments, the bravado, that the privileged, the elect, the officers entrusted with positions of greatest responsibility were subjected to a test of loyalty to Trujillo before they were promoted. You knew

very well it existed. But now Second Lieutenant García Guerrero also knew that he never had wanted to know in detail what the test involved. Major Figueroa Carrión shook his hand and repeated something he had heard so often he had begun to believe it:

"You'll have a great career, boy."

He ordered him to pick him up at his house at eight that night: they would go for a drink to celebrate his promotion, and take care of a little business.

"Bring the jeep." The major dismissed him.

At eight o'clock, Amadito was at his superior's house. The major did not invite him in. He must have been watching at the window, because before Amadito could get out of the jeep, he appeared at the door. He jumped into the jeep, and without responding to the lieutenant's salute, he ordered, in a falsely casual voice:

"To La Cuarenta, Amadito."

"To the prison, Major, sir?"

"Yes, to La Cuarenta," the lieutenant repeated. "You know who was waiting for us there, Turk."

"Johnny Abbes," murmured Salvador.

"Colonel Abbes García," Amadito corrected him with quiet irony. "The head of the SIM, yes."

"Are you sure you want to tell me this, Amadito?" The young man felt Salvador's hand on his knee. "Won't you hate me afterward because you know that I know too?"

Amadito knew him by sight. He had seen him slipping like a shadow along the corridors of the National Palace, getting out of his black bulletproof Cadillac or climbing into it in the gardens of Radhamés Manor, entering or leaving the Chief's office, something that Johnny Abbes and probably nobody else in the entire country could do—appear at any hour of the day or night at the National Palace or the private residence of the Benefactor and be received immediately—and always, like many of his comrades in the Army, Navy, or Air Force, he had felt a secret shudder of revulsion at that flabby figure stuffed into a colonel's

uniform, the personified negation of the bearing, agility, martial air, virility, strength, and elegance that military men had to display—the Chief said it every time he spoke to his soldiers on the National Holiday and on Armed Forces Day—that fat-cheeked, funereal face with the little mustache trimmed in the style of Arturo de Córdoba or Carlos López Moctezuma, the most popular Mexican actors, and a capon's dewlaps hanging down over his short neck. Though they said so only among their closest friends and after a good many glasses of rum, the officers despised Colonel Johnny Abbes García because he wasn't a real soldier. He hadn't earned his stripes the way they had, by studying, going through the academy, living in barracks, sweating to rise through the ranks. He had his as payment for the undoubtedly dirty services he had rendered to justify his appointment as the all-powerful head of the Military Intelligence Service. And they distrusted him for the grim acts that were attributed to him, the disappearances, the executions, the sudden falls into disgrace of powerful people—like the recent plunge of Senator Agustín Cabral—and for the terrible accusations, denunciations, and calumnies in the newspaper column "The Public Forum" that appeared every morning in *El Caribe* and kept people in a state of anxiety because their fate depended on whatever was said about them there, and for the intrigues and the operations directed against sometimes apolitical and decent people, peaceable citizens who had fallen somehow into the infinite nets of espionage that Johnny Abbes García and his vast army of *caliés* spread into every corner of Dominican society. Many officers—Lieutenant García Guerrero among them—felt authorized in their heart of hearts to despise this individual in spite of the confidence the Generalissimo had in him, because they thought, as did many men in the government, including, apparently, Ramfis Trujillo himself, that Colonel Abbes García's undisguised cruelty brought the regime into disrepute and justified its critics. And yet, Amadito recalled a discussion after a dinner well watered by beer, among a group of military adjutants, when his immediate superior, Major Figueroa Carrión,

came to Abbes's defense: "The colonel may be a devil, but he's useful to the Chief: everything bad is attributed to him and only the good to Trujillo. What better service is there? For a government to last thirty years, it needs a Johnny Abbes who'll stick his hands in shit. And his body and head, if he has to. He takes the heat. Our enemies, and sometimes our friends, concentrate their hatred on him. The Chief knows this, that's why he keeps him close. If the colonel didn't watch the Chief's back, maybe the same thing would have happened to him that happened to Pérez Jiménez in Venezuela, Batista in Cuba, Perón in Argentina."

"Good evening, Lieutenant."

"Good evening, Colonel, sir."

Amadito raised his hand to his visor and saluted, but Abbes García extended his hand—a hand as soft as a sponge, wet with perspiration—and patted him on the back.

"Come this way."

Near the sentry box crowded with half a dozen guards, past the iron grillwork at the entrance, was a small room that must have been used as an administrative office, with a table and a couple of chairs. It was dimly lit by a single bulb dangling from a long cord covered with flies; a cloud of insects buzzed around it. The colonel closed the door, pointed them to the chairs. A guard came in with a bottle of Johnnie Walker Red ("The brand I prefer because Juanito Caminante's my namesake," the colonel joked), glasses, an ice bucket, and several bottles of mineral water. While he served the drinks, the colonel talked to the lieutenant as if Major Figueroa Carrión weren't there.

"Congratulations on your new stripe. And that service record. I'm very familiar with it. The SIM recommended your promotion. For distinguished military and civic service. I'll tell you a secret. You're one of the few officers denied permission to marry who obeyed without requesting a review. That's why the Chief is rewarding you, moving your promotion ahead by a year. A toast with Juanito Caminante!"

Amadito took a long drink. Colonel Abbes García had

almost filled the glass with whiskey, with only a splash of water, and the liquid was like an explosion in his brain.

"At that point, in that place, with Johnny Abbes pouring you a drink, didn't you guess what was coming?" murmured Salvador. The young man detected the grief flooding through his friend's words.

"That it would be hard and ugly, yes, Turk," he replied, trembling. "But never what was going to happen."

The colonel poured another round. The three men had begun to smoke, and the head of the SIM spoke of how important it was not to allow the enemy within to raise his head, to crush him every time he attempted to act.

"Because as long as the enemy within is weak and disunited, it doesn't matter what the foreign enemy does. Let the United States holler, let the OAS kick, let Venezuela and Costa Rica howl, they can't do us any harm. In fact, they unite Dominicans like a fist around the Chief."

He had a thin drawling voice, and he avoided the eyes of the person he was talking to. His eyes were small, dark, rapid, evasive, moving constantly as if seeing things hidden from other people. From time to time he wiped away sweat with a large red handkerchief.

"Especially the military." He paused to flick the ash from his cigarette onto the floor. "And especially the military elite, Lieutenant García Guerrero. To which you now belong. The Chief wanted you to hear this."

He paused again, drew deeply on his cigarette, took a drink of whiskey. Only then did he seem to discover that Major Figueroa Carrión existed:

"Does the lieutenant know what the Chief expects of him?"

"He doesn't need anybody to tell him, he has more brains than any officer in his class." The major had the face of a toad, and alcohol had accentuated and reddened his swollen features. Amadito had the impression that their conversation was a rehearsed play. "I imagine he knows; if not, he doesn't deserve his new stripe."

There was another pause while the colonel filled their glasses a third time. He put in the ice cubes with his hands. "*Salud*" and he drank and they drank. Amadito told himself he liked rum and Coca-Cola a thousand times more than whiskey, it was so bitter. And not until that moment did he understand the joke about Juanito Caminante. "How dumb not to get it," he thought. The colonel's red handkerchief was so strange! He had seen white, blue, gray handkerchiefs. But red ones! What an idea.

"You're going to have greater and greater responsibilities," said the colonel, with a solemn air. "The Chief wants to be sure you're up to the job."

"What am I supposed to do, Colonel, sir?" All this preamble irritated Amadito. "I've always obeyed the orders of my superiors. I'll never disappoint the Chief. This is a test of loyalty, right?"

The colonel, his head lowered, was staring at the table. When he looked up, the lieutenant noticed a gleam of satisfaction in those furtive eyes.

"It's true, for officers with balls, Trujillistas down to the marrow of their bones, you don't have to sweeten the pill." He stood up. "You're right, Lieutenant. We'll finish our little piece of business and celebrate your new stripe at Puchita Brazobán's place."

"What did you have to do?" It was a struggle for Salvador to speak; his throat was raw, his expression morose.

"Kill a traitor with my own hands. That's how he said it: 'And without your hands trembling, Lieutenant.' "

When they went out to the courtyard of La Cuarenta, Amadito felt his temples throbbing. Beside a large bamboo tree, next to the chalet that had been converted into a prison and torture center for the SIM, near the jeep they had come in, was another, almost identical jeep, its headlights turned off. In the back seat, two guards with rifles flanked a man whose hands were tied and whose mouth was covered by a towel.

"Come with me, Lieutenant," said Johnny Abbes, getting behind the wheel of the jeep where the guards were sitting. "Follow us, Roberto."

As the two vehicles left the prison and took the coastal highway, a storm broke, filling the night with thunder and lightning. The violent downpour kept them from speaking.

"Just as well it's raining, even if we get wet," the colonel remarked. "It'll break the heat. The campesinos were praying for a little rain."

He didn't remember how long they drove, but it couldn't have been very long, because he did remember that when he went into Pucha Vittini's brothel after parking the jeep on Calle Juana Saltitopa, the clock on the wall of the foyer was striking ten. Everything, from the time he picked up Major Figueroa Carrión at his house, had taken less than two hours. Abbes García drove off the highway, and the jeep bucked and shook as if it were going to fall apart as they crossed a field of tall weeds and stones, followed closely by the major's jeep, whose headlights lit the way. It was dark, but the lieutenant knew they were moving parallel to the ocean: the sound of the waves had grown so loud that it filled his ears. He thought they were near the small port of La Caleta. As soon as the jeep stopped, so did the rain. The colonel jumped down, followed by Amadito. The two guards were well trained: without waiting for orders they pushed out the prisoner. In a flash of lightning the lieutenant saw that the gagged man wore no shoes. During the drive he had been absolutely docile, but as soon as he touched the ground, as if finally aware of what was going to happen, he began to twist, to roar, trying to loosen the ropes and gag. Amadito, who until then had avoided looking at him, observed the convulsive movements of his head as he attempted to free his mouth, say something, perhaps plead for mercy, perhaps curse them. "Suppose I take out my revolver and shoot the colonel, the major, the two guards, and let him run away?" he thought.

"Instead of one dead man on the rocks, there'd be two," said Salvador.

"Good thing it stopped raining," Major Figueroa Carrión complained as he climbed out. "I'm soaked, damn it."

"Do you have your weapon?" asked Colonel Abbes García. "Don't make the poor bastard suffer any more."

Amadito nodded, not saying a word. He took a few steps until he stood next to the prisoner. The soldiers released him and moved away. The man did not start to run, as Amadito thought he would. His legs would not obey him, fear kept him nailed to the weeds and mud in the field, where a strong wind blew. But though he did not attempt to escape, he continued moving his head, desperately, right and left, up and down, in a useless effort to get rid of the gag. He continued his choked roaring. Lieutenant García Guerrero put the barrel of his pistol to the man's temple and fired. The shot deafened him and made him close his eyes for a second.

"Again," said Abbes García. "You never know."

Amadito, bending over, touched the head of the man sprawled on the ground—he was still and silent—and shot again at point-blank range.

"That's it," said the colonel, taking his arm and pushing him toward the jeep of Major Figueroa Carrión. "The guards know what they have to do. Let's go to Puchita's and warm things up."

In the jeep, driven by Roberto, Lieutenant García Guerrero was silent, half listening to the conversation between the colonel and the major. He remembered something they said:

"They'll bury him there?"

"They'll throw him in the ocean," explained the head of the SIM. "It's the advantage of these rocks. On top, they're sharp as knives. Down below, there's an entrance to the sea, very deep, like a well. Full of sharks, waiting. They eat them in seconds. It's really something to see. They leave no trace. Sure, rapid, and clean, too."

"Would you recognize the rocks?" Salvador asked.

No. All he remembered is that before they got there, they had passed that small bay, La Caleta. But he could not reconstruct the entire route from La Cuarenta.

"I'll give you a sleeping pill." Salvador put his hand back on his knee. "You'll sleep six, eight hours."

"I haven't finished yet, Turk. Be patient a little longer. So you can spit in my face and throw me out of your house."

They had gone to the brothel of Pucha Vittini, nicknamed Puchita Brazobán, an old house with balconies and a dry garden, a place frequented by *caliés*, people connected to the government and the SIM, for whom, it was rumored, Pucha, a foulmouthed, good-natured old woman, also worked, having risen through the hierarchy of her trade to the rank of administrator and director of whores, after having been one herself in the brothels on Calle Dos, starting very young and achieving great success. She received them at the door and greeted Johnny Abbes and Major Figueroa Carrión like old friends. She grabbed Amadito's chin: "What a sweetie pie!" She led them to the second floor and sat them at a table near the bar. Johnny Abbes asked her to bring Juanito Caminante.

"It took me a while to realize it was the whiskey, Colonel, sir," Amadito confessed. "Johnnie Walker. Juanito Caminante. Easy, and I didn't get it."

"It's better than any psychiatrist," said the colonel. "Without Juanito Caminante I couldn't keep my mental equilibrium, the most important thing in my work. To do it well, you need serenity, cold blood, icy balls. Never mix emotions with reason."

There were no clients yet except for a little bald man with eyeglasses who sat at the bar, drinking a beer. A bolero played on the jukebox, and Amadito recognized the dense voice of Toña la Negra. Major Figueroa Carrión stood up and went to dance with one of the women whispering in a corner under a large poster for a Mexican movie with Libertad Lamarque and Tito Guizar.

"You have steady nerves," Colonel Abbes García said approvingly. "Not all the officers are like you. I've seen lots of tough men fall apart at the critical moment. I've seen them shit themselves in fear. Because even if nobody believes it, it takes more balls to kill than to die."

He poured the drinks and said, "*Salud.*" Amadito drank greedily. How many drinks? Three, five, he soon lost all notion

of time and place. Besides drinking he danced with an Indian girl whom he caressed and took into a little room lit by a bulb covered in red cellophane swaying over a bed that had a brightly colored quilt. He couldn't fuck her. "I'm too drunk, baby," he apologized. The real reason was the knot in his stomach, the memory of what he had just done. Finally he found the courage to tell the colonel and the major he was leaving because he'd had too much to drink and felt sick.

The three of them walked to the door. There it was, waiting for Johnny Abbes, his black bulletproof Cadillac and his chauffeur, and a jeep with an escort of armed bodyguards. The colonel gave him his hand.

"Aren't you curious to know who he was?"

"I prefer not to know, Colonel, sir."

Abbes García's flabby face stretched into an ironic smile as he wiped it with his fiery red handkerchief:

"How easy it would be if you could do these things without knowing who was involved. Don't fuck with me, Lieutenant. If you jump in the water you have to get wet. He was in June 14, the younger brother of your ex-girlfriend, I believe. Luisa Gil, wasn't it? Well, see you soon, we'll do some more things together. If you need me you know where to find me."

The lieutenant felt Turk's hand on his knee again.

"It's a lie, Amadito." Salvador tried to comfort him. "It could have been anybody. He lied. To destroy you, to make you feel more involved, more of a slave. Forget what he told you. Forget what you did."

Amadito nodded. Very slowly, he pointed at the revolver on his belt.

"The next time I fire that, it will be to kill Trujillo, Turk," he said. "You and Tony Imbert can count on me for anything. You don't have to change the subject anymore when I come to the house."

"Heads up, heads up, this one's coming straight toward us," said Antonio de la Maza, raising the sawed-off barrel to the window, ready to fire.

Amadito and Estrella Sadhalá gripped their weapons too. Antonio Imbert started the engine. But the car coming down the Malecón toward them, moving slowly, on the lookout, wasn't the Chevrolet but a small Volkswagen. Using its brakes, until the driver saw them. Then it made a U-turn and drove to where they were parked. It stopped beside them, its headlights off.