

15 "If we're in this shape when we're together, imagine how Fifi Pastoriza feels all by himself," said Huáscar Tejeda, leaning against the steering wheel of the heavy black four-door Oldsmobile 98 parked at kilometer seven on the highway to San Cristóbal.

"What the hell are we doing here?" raged Pedro Livio Cedeño. "It's a quarter to ten. He isn't coming!"

He squeezed the semiautomatic M-1 carbine on his lap as if he wanted to break it. Pedro Livio was prone to angry outbursts; his bad temper had ruined his military career: he had been cashiered when he was a captain. By then he already knew that his temper had made him so many enemies, he would never move up through the ranks. He was sorry to leave the Army. He had attended a military academy in the United States and graduated with outstanding grades. But the temper that made him blaze like a torch when somebody called him Nigger, and lash out with his fists for any reason at all, put a brake on his promotions in the Army despite his excellent service record. He was expelled for pulling his revolver on a general who admonished him, as an officer, for undue fraternization with the troops. And yet those who knew him, like the man waiting with him, the engineer Huáscar Tejeda Pimentel, also knew that his violent exterior hid a man of fine feelings, capable—he had witnessed it—of crying over the murder of the Mirabal sisters, whom he did not even know.

"Impatience is a killer too, Nigger," Huáscar Tejeda said, attempting a joke.

"Nigger's the whore who bore you."

Tejeda Pimentel tried to laugh, but his friend's immoderate response saddened him. Pedro Livio was hopeless.

"I'm sorry," he heard him apologize a moment later. "My nerves are shot, it's the damned waiting."

"We all feel the same way, Nigger. Shit, I called you Nigger again. Are you going to insult my mother a second time?"

"Not this time." Pedro Livio laughed, finally.

"Why does 'Nigger' make you so angry? You know it's an affectionate name."

"I know, Huáscar. But in the United States, at the academy, when the cadets or the officers called me Nigger they weren't being affectionate, they were racists. I had to make them respect me."

A few vehicles drove past on the highway, heading west, toward San Cristóbal, or east, toward Ciudad Trujillo, but not Trujillo's Chevrolet Bel Air, followed by Antonio de la Maza's Chevrolet Biscayne. Their instructions were simple: as soon as they saw the two cars, which they would recognize by Tony Imbert's signal—flashing the headlights three times—they would cut off the Goat's car with the heavy black Oldsmobile. And he, with the semiautomatic M-1 carbine, for which Antonio had given him extra ammunition, and Huáscar, using his Smith & Wesson 9 mm Model 39 with nine shots, would lay down as much lead in front of the car as Imbert, Amadito, Antonio, and Turk were firing from behind. The Goat would not get past them, but if he did, Fifi Pastoriza, at the wheel of Estrella Sadhalá's Mercury, two kilometers to the west, would be there to cut him off again.

"Does your wife know about tonight, Pedro Livio?" asked Huáscar Tejeda.

"She thinks I'm at Juan Tomás Díaz's house, watching a movie. She's pregnant and . . ."

He saw a speeding car race by, followed at less than ten meters by another car that, in the dark, looked like Antonio de la Maza's Biscayne.

"It's them, isn't it, Huáscar?" He tried to see through the blackness.

"Did you see the headlights flash?" Tejeda Pimentel

shouted in excitement. "Did you see them?"

"No, they didn't signal. But it's them."

"What shall we do, Nigger?"

"Drive, drive!"

Pedro Livio's heart had begun to pound with a fury that hardly allowed him to speak. Huáscar turned the Oldsmobile around. The red taillights of the two automobiles were speeding away, and soon they'd lose sight of them.

"It's them, Huáscar, it has to be them. Why the hell didn't they signal?"

The red lights had disappeared; all they saw in front of them was the cone of light from the headlights of the Oldsmobile and a pitch-black night: the clouds had just covered the moon. Pedro Livio—his semiautomatic carbine pointed out the window—thought about his wife, Olga. How would she react when she learned that her husband was one of Trujillo's assassins? Olga Despradel was his second wife. They got along wonderfully, because Olga—unlike his first wife, with whom domestic life had been hell—had infinite patience with his explosions of anger; when he was raging she avoided contradicting him or arguing with him, and she kept the house so neat and clean it made him happy. What a surprise for her. She thought he wasn't interested in politics, though lately he had been very close to Antonio de la Maza, General Juan Tomás Díaz, and Huáscar Tejeda, all of them notorious anti-Trujillistas. Until a few months ago, whenever his friends began to criticize the regime, he would be as silent as a sphinx and nobody could pull an opinion out of him. He didn't want to lose his administrative position at the Dominican Battery Factory, which belonged to the Trujillo family. The company had been doing very well until business took a nosedive because of the sanctions.

Naturally, Olga knew that Pedro Livio resented the regime because his first wife, a rabid Trujillista and close friend of the Generalissimo, who had made her governor of San Cristóbal, used her influence to obtain a court order prohibiting Pedro

Livio from seeing his daughter Adanela, whose sole custody had been granted to his ex-wife. Tomorrow Olga might think he became involved in the plot to avenge that injustice. No, that wasn't the reason he was here with his semiautomatic M-1 carbine, chasing down Trujillo. It was—Olga wouldn't understand—because of the murder of the Mirabal sisters.

"Aren't those shots, Pedro Livio?"

"Yes, yes, shots. It's them, damn it! Step on it, Huáscar."

He knew what shots sounded like. What they had heard, disturbing the night, were several bursts of gunfire—the carbines of Antonio and Amadito, Turk's revolver, and maybe Imbert's—something that filled his spirit, so frustrated by waiting, with exaltation. Now the Oldsmobile was flying down the highway. Pedro Livio put his head out the window but could not make out the Goat's Chevrolet or his pursuers. Then, at a bend in the road, he recognized Estrella Sadhalá's Mercury and, a second later, illuminated by the Oldsmobile's headlights, the thin face of Fifi Pastoriza.

"They forgot Fifi too," said Huáscar Tejeda. "They forgot the signal twice. What assholes!"

Less than a hundred meters away, Trujillo's motionless Chevrolet came into view, pointing to the right of the highway, its headlights on. "There it is!" "It's him, damn it!" shouted Pedro Livio and Huáscar at the moment revolver, carbine, and submachine-gun bullets started flying again. Huáscar turned off the headlights and, less than ten meters from the Chevrolet, he slammed on the brakes. Pedro Livio, who was opening the door of the Oldsmobile, was thrown to the highway before he fired. His whole body was scraped and pounded, and he heard an exultant Antonio de la Maza—"This buzzard won't eat another chicken" or something like that—and the shouting voices of Turk, Tony Imbert, and Amadito, toward whom he began to run blindly as soon as he could get up. He took two or three steps and heard more shots, very close, and a burning sensation stopped him short and knocked him down as he clutched at his lower belly.

"Don't shoot, damn it, it's us," shouted Huáscar Tejeda.

"I'm hit," he groaned, and without any transition, worried, at the top of his voice: "Is the Goat dead?"

"Dead as a doornail, Nigger," Huáscar Tejeda said, at his side. "Look!"

Pedro Livio felt his strength leaving him. He was sitting on the road, surrounded by debris and broken glass. He heard Huáscar Tejeda say that he was going to find Fifi Pastoriza and then the Oldsmobile pulled away. He heard the excited shouting of his friends, but he felt dizzy, incapable of taking part in their conversation; he barely understood what they were saying, because his attention was focused now on the blazing heat in his stomach. His arm was burning too. Had he been hit twice? The Oldsmobile came back. He recognized Fifi Pastoriza's exclamations: "Shit, oh shit, oh God Almighty, oh shit!"

"Let's put him in the trunk," ordered Antonio de la Maza, who spoke with great calm. "We have to bring the corpse to Pupo, then he'll put the Plan in action."

His hands felt wet. That viscous substance could only be blood. His or the Goat's? The asphalt was damp. It hadn't rained, so that must be blood too. Somebody put a hand across his shoulders and asked how he felt. The voice sounded distressed. He recognized Salvador Estrella Sadhalá.

"A bullet in the stomach, I think." Instead of words, what came out were guttural noises.

He could see the silhouettes of his friends carrying something and putting it into the trunk of Antonio's Biscayne. Trujillo! Damn! They'd done it. He didn't feel joy; it was more like relief.

"Where's the driver? Has anybody seen Zacarías?"

"He's dead as a doornail too, back there in the dark," said Tony Imbert. "Don't waste time looking for him, Amadito. We have to get back. The important thing now is to take the body to Pupo Román."

"Pedro Livio's wounded," exclaimed Salvador Estrella Sadhalá.

They had closed the trunk of the Chevrolet, with the corpse inside. Faceless silhouettes surrounded him, patted him on the back, asked, "How do you feel, Pedro Livio?" Were they going to give him the coup de grâce? They had all agreed on that. They wouldn't leave a wounded comrade behind and let him fall into the hands of the *caliés* and be subjected to Johnny Abbes's tortures and humiliations. He recalled the conversation—Luis Amiama Tió was there too—in the garden filled with mangoes, flamboyán, and breadfruit trees that belonged to General Juan Tomás Díaz and his wife, Chana. Everyone had agreed: absolutely no slow deaths. If things went badly and someone was seriously wounded: the coup de grâce. Was he going to die? Were they going to finish him off?

"Get him into the car," ordered Antonio de la Maza. "We'll call a doctor from Juan Tomás's house."

The shadows of his friends were hard at work, moving the Goat's car off the highway. He could hear them panting. Fifi Pastoriza whistled: "Damn, it has more holes than a colander."

When his friends picked him up to put him in the Chevrolet Biscayne, the pain was so intense he passed out. But only for a few seconds, for when he regained consciousness they hadn't left yet. He was in the back seat, Salvador had his arm around his shoulder and had pillowed his head on his chest. He recognized Tony Imbert at the wheel, and Antonio de la Maza beside him. How do you feel, Pedro Livio? He wanted to say: "Better, with that fucker dead," but all that came out was a moan.

"Nigger's in bad shape," Imbert muttered.

Which meant his friends called him Nigger when he wasn't there. What difference did it make? They were his friends, damn it: it hadn't occurred to any of them to give him the coup de grâce. It seemed natural to them to put him in the car, and now they were taking him to Chana and Juan Tomás Díaz's house. The burning in his stomach and arm had eased up. He felt weak and didn't try to speak. He was lucid, he understood what they were saying perfectly. Apparently Tony,

Antonio, and Turk were wounded too, but not seriously. Flying debris had opened gashes on Antonio's forehead and the back of Salvador's head. They held handkerchiefs to their cuts. Tony had been grazed on the left breast and said the blood was staining his shirt and pants.

He recognized the National Lottery building. Had they taken the old Sánchez highway to come into the city by a less trafficked route? No, that wasn't the reason. Tony Imbert wanted to stop at the house of his friend Julito Senior, who lived on Avenida Angelita, and telephone General Díaz to let him know they were taking the body to Pupo Román, using the coded sentence they had agreed on earlier: "The squab are ready to go into the oven, Juan Tomás." They stopped in front of a darkened house. Tony got out. They didn't see anyone around. Pedro Livio heard Antonio: his poor Chevrolet had been hit by dozens of bullets and had a flat tire. Pedro Livio had felt it, it made a horrible racket, and the jolting gave him stabbing pains in the stomach.

Imbert came back: nobody was home at Julito Senior's. They'd better go straight to Juan Tomás's house. They started driving again, very slowly; the car tilted and creaked, and they avoided the busy avenues and streets.

Salvador leaned toward him:

"How are you doing, Pedro Livio?"

"Fine, Turk, fine," and he squeezed his arm.

"It won't be long now. At Juan Tomás's house, a doctor will look at you."

What a shame he didn't have the strength to tell his friends not to worry, that he was happy now that the Goat was dead. They had avenged the Mirabal sisters, and poor Rufino de la Cruz, the driver who took them to the Fortress of Puerto Plata to visit their imprisoned husbands; Trujillo had ordered him killed as well to make the farce of the accident more believable. That murder had shaken Pedro Livio in the deepest part of his being and moved him, after November 25, 1960, to join the conspiracy organized by his friend Antonio de la Maza. He had

only heard of the Mirabal sisters. But, like many Dominicans, he had been devastated by the tragic end of those girls from Salcedo. Now they were killing defenseless women too, and nobody did a thing about it! Have we sunk so low in the Dominican Republic? Damn it, weren't there any men left in this country? Listening to Antonio Imbert speak so movingly about Minerva Mirabal, he—always reluctant to externalize his feelings—broke down in front of his friends, the only time he had cried as an adult. Yes, there were still men in the Dominican Republic who had balls. The proof was the corpse bouncing around in the trunk.

"I'm dying!" he shouted. "Don't let me die!"

"We're almost there, Nigger." Antonio de la Maza reassured him. "We'll get you fixed up right away."

He made an effort not to pass out. A short while later he recognized the intersection of Máximo Gómez and Avenida Bolívar.

"Did you see that official car?" asked Imbert. "Wasn't that Pupo Román?"

"Pupo's at home, waiting," Antonio de la Maza replied. "He told Amiama and Juan Tomás he wouldn't go out tonight."

A century later, the car stopped. He understood from his friends' conversation that they were at the rear entrance of General Díaz's house. Somebody was opening the gate. They could drive into the courtyard and park in front of the garages. In the dim light of the streetlamps and the lights at the windows, he recognized the garden, filled with trees and flowers that Chana tended so carefully, where he had come on many Sundays, alone or with Olga, for the delicious Dominican lunches the general prepared for his friends. At the same time, it seemed to him that he wasn't himself but an observer, removed from all the activity. This afternoon, when he learned it would be tonight and said goodbye to his wife, pretending he was coming to this house to see a movie, Olga put a peso in his pocket and asked him to bring her back chocolate and vanilla

ice cream. Poor Olga! The pregnancy gave her food cravings. Would the shock make her lose the baby? No, God no! This would be a little sister for Luis Mariano, his two-year-old son. Turk, Imbert, and Antonio had climbed out of the car. He was alone, stretched out on the back seat of the Chevrolet in semi-darkness. He thought that nothing and no one could save him, that he would die not knowing who won tonight's game between his company team, Hercules Batteries, and the Dominican Aviation Company, which was being played on the baseball field at the National Dominican Brewery.

A violent argument broke out in the courtyard. Estrella Sadhalá was berating Fifi, Huáscar, and Amadito, who had just arrived in the Oldsmobile, for leaving his Mercury on the highway. "Idiots! Assholes! Don't you realize what you've done? You've given me up! You have to go back right now and get my Mercury." A strange situation: to feel that he was and was not there. Fifi, Huáscar, and Amadito reassured Turk: in the rush they became confused and nobody thought about the Mercury, but it didn't matter, General Román would assume power tonight. They had nothing to be afraid of. The whole country would take to the streets to cheer the executioners of the tyrant.

Had they forgotten about him? The authoritative voice of Antonio de la Maza imposed order. Nobody would go back to the highway, it would be crawling with *caliés*. The main thing was to find Pupo Román and show him the body, as he had demanded. There was a problem; Juan Tomás Díaz and Luis Amiama had just stopped by Román's house—Pedro Livio knew the house, it was on the next corner—and Mireya, his wife, said that Pupo had left with General Espailat "because it seems something happened to the Chief." Antonio de la Maza put their minds at ease: "Don't worry. Luis Amiama, Juan Tomás, and Modesto Díaz have gone to get Bibín, Pupo's brother. He'll help us find him."

Yes, they had forgotten about him. He would die in this bullet-riddled car, next to Trujillo's corpse. He had one of

those fits of anger that had been the misfortune of his life, but he calmed down almost immediately. What the hell good does it do you to get mad now, asshole?

He had to close his eyes because a searchlight or powerful flashlight was shining right in his face. Crowded together, he recognized the faces of Juan Tomás Díaz's son-in-law, the dentist Bienvenido García, Amadito, and was that Linito? Yes, it was Linito, the physician Dr. Marcelino Vélez Santana. They leaned over him, touched him, lifted his shirt. They asked him something he didn't understand. He wanted to say that the pain had eased, wanted to find out how many holes were in his body, but his voice wouldn't come out. He kept his eyes wide open to let them know he was alive.

"We have to take him to the hospital," Dr. Vélez Santana declared. "He's bleeding to death."

The doctor's teeth were chattering as if he were dying of cold. They weren't close friends, Linito wouldn't be trembling like that on his account. It must be because he just found out they had killed the Chief.

"There's internal hemorrhaging"—his voice was trembling too—"at least one bullet penetrated the pericardial region. He needs surgery right away."

They argued. He didn't care about dying. He felt happy in spite of everything. God would forgive him, he was sure. For leaving Olga alone with her six-months-pregnant belly and Luis Marianito. God knew he wouldn't profit by Trujillo's death. Just the opposite; he managed one of his companies, he was a privileged person. By getting involved in this damn thing, he had endangered his job and his family's security. God would understand and forgive him.

He felt a powerful contraction in his stomach, and he screamed. "Easy, take it easy, Nigger," Huáscar Tejeda pleaded. He felt like answering, "Nigger's your mother," but he couldn't. They took him out of the Chevrolet. Bienvenido's face was very close—Juan Tomás's son-in-law, the husband of his daughter Marianela—and so was Dr. Vélez Santana's: his

teeth were still chattering. He recognized Mirito, Juan Tomás's chauffeur, and Amadito, who was limping. Taking great precautions, they placed him in Juan Tomás's Opel, parked next to the Biscayne. Pedro Livio saw the moon: it was shining, in what was now a cloudless sky, through the mangoes and heartsease.

"We're going to the International Clinic, Pedro Livio," said Dr. Vélez Santana. "Hold on, hold on just a little longer."

He cared less and less about what was happening to him. He was in the Opel, Mirito was driving, Bienvenido sat in front, and Dr. Vélez Santana was beside him, in the back. Linito had him inhale something with a strong ether smell. "The smell of carnivals." The dentist and the physician encouraged him: "We're almost there, Pedro Livio." And he didn't care about what they were saying, or about what seemed to matter so much to Bienvenido and Linito: "Where did General Román get to?" "If he doesn't show up, we're fucked." Instead of chocolate and vanilla ice cream, Olga would receive the news that her husband was being operated on at the International Clinic, three blocks from the Palace, after executing the killer of the Mirabal sisters. It was only a few blocks from Juan Tomás's house to the hospital. Why was it taking them so long?

Finally the Opel stopped. Bienvenido and Dr. Vélez Santana got out. He saw them knock on the door where a fluorescent light flickered: "Emergencies." A nurse in a white headdress appeared, and then a stretcher. When Bienvenido García and Vélez Santana lifted him from the seat, he felt a stabbing pain: "You're killing me, damn it!" He blinked, blinded by the whiteness of a corridor. They took him up in an elevator. Now he was in a very clean room, with a Virgin at the head of the bed. Bienvenido and Vélez Santana had disappeared; two nurses undressed him and a young man with a small mustache put his face close to his:

"I'm Dr. José Joaquín Puello. How do you feel?"

"Okay, okay," he murmured, happy to have his voice back. "Is it serious?"

"I'm going to give you something for the pain," said Dr.

Puello. "While we prepare you for surgery. We have to get that bullet out."

Over the doctor's shoulder he saw a face he knew, with a wide forehead and large, penetrating eyes: Dr. Arturo Damirón Ricart, the proprietor and chief surgeon at the International Clinic. But instead of smiling and good-natured, which is how he usually looked, he seemed distraught. Had Bienvenido and Linito told him everything?

"This injection is to prepare you, Pedro Livio," he said. "Don't worry, you'll be fine. Do you want to call home?"

"Not Olga, she's pregnant, I don't want to scare her. Call my sister-in-law Mary."

His voice sounded firmer. He gave them Mary Despradel's phone number. The pills he had just swallowed, the injection, the bottles of disinfectant the nurses were pouring on his arm and stomach, made him feel better. He no longer thought he was going to pass out. Dr. Damirón Ricart put the receiver in his hand. "Hello? Hello?"

"It's Pedro Livio, Mary. I'm at the International Clinic. An accident. Don't say anything to Olga, don't scare her. They're going to operate."

"Good God, oh my God! I'm coming over there, Pedro Livio."

The doctors examined him, moved him, and he couldn't feel his hands. He was filled with a great serenity. With utter lucidity he told himself that no matter how much of a friend he was, Damirón Ricart would have to inform the SIM that a man with bullet wounds had come to the emergency room, something all clinics and hospitals were obliged to do or risk having their doctors and nurses go to prison. And so, pretty soon, the SIM would be all over the place asking questions. But no. Juan Tomás, Antonio, Salvador, must have shown Pupo the body by now, and Román would have alerted the barracks and announced the civilian-military junta. Perhaps at this very moment the military loyal to Pupo were arresting or exterminating Abbes García and his gang of killers, putting

Trujillo's brothers and allies in jail, and the people would be out on the streets, summoned by radios announcing the death of the tyrant. The colonial city, Independencia Park, El Conde, the area around the National Palace, would see a real carnival, celebrating freedom. "Too bad you're on an operating table instead of dancing, Pedro Livio."

And then he saw the weeping, frightened face of his wife: "What is it, darling, what happened, what did they do to you?" He embraced and kissed her, trying to reassure her ("An accident, love, don't be afraid, they're going to operate"). He recognized his sister-in-law and her husband, Mary and Luis Despradel Brache. He was a doctor and was asking Dr. Damirón Ricart about the operation. "Why did you do it, Pedro Livio?" "So our children can be free, Olga." She kept asking questions and did not stop crying. "My God, there's blood all over you." Releasing a torrent of restrained emotions, he grasped his wife's arms, looked into her eyes, and exclaimed:

"He's dead, Olga! He's dead, dead!"

It was like a movie when the image freezes and moves out of time. He wanted to laugh when he saw the incredulous looks that Olga, his in-laws, the nurses and doctors were giving him.

"Be quiet, Pedro Livio," murmured Dr. Damirón Ricart.

They all turned toward the door: in the corridor there was a rush of footsteps, people coming down hard on their heels, not caring about the "Quiet" signs on the walls. The door opened. Pedro Livio instantly recognized, among all the military figures, the flaccid face, receding double chin, and eyes embedded in protuberant flesh of Colonel Johnny Abbes García.

"Good evening," he said, looking at Pedro Livio but speaking to the others. "Please leave. Dr. Damirón Ricart? You stay, Doctor."

"He's my husband," Olga whimpered, her arms around Pedro Livio. "I want to be with him."

"Take her out," Abbes García ordered, not looking at her.

More men had come into the room, *caliés* with revolvers in their belts and soldiers carrying San Cristóbal submachine guns over their shoulders. Half closing his eyes, he saw them take away Olga, who was sobbing ("Don't do anything to her, she's pregnant"), and Mary, and he saw his brother-in-law follow them, not needing to be shoved. The men looked at him with curiosity and some revulsion. He recognized General Félix Hermida and Colonel Figueroa Carrión, whom he had known in the Army. He was Abbes García's right hand in the SIM, they said.

"How is he?" Abbes asked the doctor in a slow, well-modulated voice.

"It's very serious, Colonel," replied Dr. Damirón Ricart. "The bullet must be near the heart, in the epigastrium. We gave him medication to control the hemorrhaging so we could operate."

Many of them had cigarettes, and the room filled with smoke. How he wanted to smoke, to inhale one of those mentholated Salems, with their cooling aroma, that Huáscar Tejada smoked and Chana Díaz always offered in her house.

Above him, brushing against him, was the bloated face, the tortoise eyes with drooping lids, of Abbes García.

"What happened to you?" he heard him say softly.

"I don't know." He regretted his answer, it couldn't be dumber. But nothing else occurred to him.

"Who shot you?" Abbes García insisted, impassively.

Pedro Livio Cedeño remained silent. Incredible that in all these months of planning Trujillo's execution, they had never thought about a situation like the one he was in now. About some alibi, some excuse, for handling an interrogation. "What assholes!"

"An accident," and again he regretted making up something so stupid.

Abbes García did not become impatient. There was a bristling silence. Pedro Livio felt the heavy, hostile glances of the men around him. The ends of their cigarettes reddened

when they raised them to their mouths.

"Tell me about the accident," said the head of the SIM, in the same tone of voice.

"I was leaving a bar and somebody shot me, from a car. I don't know who it was."

"What bar?"

"El Rubio, on Calle Palo Hincado, near Independencia Park."

In a few minutes the *caliés* would find out he had lied. Suppose his friends, when they broke the agreement to give the coup de grâce to anyone who was wounded, had done him no favor at all?

"Where's the Chief?" asked Johnny Abbes. A certain amount of emotion had filtered into his questioning.

"I don't know." His throat was beginning to close; he was losing strength again.

"Is he alive?" asked the head of the SIM. And he repeated: "Where is he?"

Although he felt dizzy again, as if he were going to faint, Pedro Livio noticed that beneath his tranquil appearance, the head of the SIM was boiling with agitation. The hand that carried the cigarette to his mouth moved awkwardly, trying to find his lips.

"In hell, I hope, if there is a hell," he heard himself say. "That's where we sent him."

Abbes García's face, somewhat obscured by smoke, did not change expression this time either; but he opened his mouth, as if he needed air. The silence had thickened. He had to lose all his strength, finally pass out.

"Who?" he asked, very gently. "Who sent him to hell?"

Pedro Livio did not respond. Abbes García was looking into his eyes and Pedro Livio held his gaze, remembering his childhood in Higüey, when they played who-would-blink-first at school. The colonel's hand lifted, took the lit cigarette from his mouth, and with no change of expression he put it out on his face, near his left eye. Pedro Livio did not scream, he did

not moan. He closed his eyes. The heat was intense; there was a smell of singed flesh. When he opened them, Abbes García was still there. It had begun.

"These things, if they're not done right, it's better not to do them at all," he heard him say. "Do you know who Zacarías de la Cruz is? The Chief's chauffeur. I just talked to him in the Marión Hospital. He's in worse shape than you, riddled with bullets from head to toe. But he's alive. You see, things didn't work out. You're fucked. You're not going to die either. You're going to live. And tell me everything that happened. Who else was with you on the highway?"

Pedro Livio was sinking, floating, at any moment he would begin to vomit. Hadn't Tony Imbert and Antonio said that Zacarías de la Cruz was dead as a doornail too? Was Abbes García lying to make him give up names? How stupid they had been. They should have made sure the Goat's driver was dead.

"Imbert said that Zacarías was dead," he protested. Curious being yourself and someone else at the same time.

The face of the head of the SIM bent over him. He could feel his breath, heavy with tobacco. His eyes were dark, with yellow flecks. He wished he had the strength to bite those flaccid cheeks. Spit on them, at least.

"He was wrong, he's only wounded," said Abbes García. "Which Imbert?"

"Antonio Imbert," he explained, gnawed by anxiety. "Does that mean he lied to me? Shit, oh shit!"

He could hear footsteps, a movement of bodies, those present crowding around his bed. The smoke blurred their faces. He felt asphyxiated, as if they were stamping on his chest.

"Antonio Imbert and who else?" Colonel Abbes García said in his ear. His skin crawled when he thought that this time he'd put the cigarette out in his eye and blind him. "Is Imbert in charge? Did he organize this?"

"No, no leaders," he stammered, fearful he wouldn't have the strength to finish the sentence. "If there were, it would be Antonio."

"Antonio who?"

"Antonio de la Maza," he explained. "If there were, it would be him, sure. But there aren't any leaders."

There was another long silence. Had they given him sodium pentothal, is that why he was talking so much? But pentothal made you sleepy and he was wide awake, overexcited, eager to tell, to pull out the secrets chewing at him inside. He'd go on answering whatever they asked, damn it. There were murmurs, footsteps on the tiles. Were they leaving? A door opening, closing.

"Where are Imbert and Antonio de la Maza?" The head of the SIM exhaled a mouthful of smoke and it seemed to Pedro Livio that it went into his throat and nose and down to his guts.

"Looking for Pupo, where the hell else would they be?" Would he have the energy to finish the sentence? The astonishment of Abbes García, General Félix Hermida, and Colonel Figueroa Carrión was so great that he made a superhuman effort to explain what they didn't understand: "If he doesn't see the Goat's body, he won't lift a finger."

They had opened their eyes wide and were scrutinizing him with suspicion and dread.

"Pupo Román?" Abbes García had certainly lost his confidence now.

"General Román Fernández?" Figueroa Carrión repeated.

"The head of the Armed Forces?" an agitated General Félix Hermida asked in a shrill voice.

Pedro Livio was not surprised when the hand came down again and put out the lit cigarette in his mouth. An acrid taste of tobacco and ash on his tongue. He did not have the strength to spit out that stinking, burning piece of trash scraping against his gums and palate.

"He's fainted, Colonel," he heard Dr. Damirón Ricart murmur. "If we don't operate, he'll die."

"The one who's going to die is you if you don't revive him," replied Abbes García with muted rage. "Give him a

transfusion, whatever, but wake him up. This man has to talk. Revive him or I'll fill you with all the lead in this revolver."

If they were talking like that, he wasn't dead. Had they found Pupo Román? Shown him the body? If the revolution had started, Abbes García, Félix Hermida, and Figueroa Carrión wouldn't be standing around his bed. They'd be arrested or dead, like Trujillo's brothers and nephews. He tried in vain to ask them to explain why they weren't arrested or dead. His stomach didn't hurt; his eyelids and mouth felt on fire because of the cigarette burns. They gave him an injection, they made him inhale from a piece of cotton that smelled of menthol, like Salems. He discovered a bottle filled with serum next to his bed. He could hear them and they thought he couldn't.

"Can it be true?" Figueroa Carrión seemed more terrified than surprised. "The Armed Forces Minister involved in this? It's impossible, Johnny."

"Surprising, absurd, inexplicable," Abbes García corrected him. "Not impossible."

"But why, what for?" General Félix Hermida's voice rose. "What can he hope to gain? He owes everything he is to the Chief, everything he has. This asshole is just throwing out names to confuse us."

Pedro Livio twisted around, trying to sit up so they would know he wasn't groggy or dead, and that he had told the truth.

"You can't still believe this is one of the Chief's tricks to find out who's loyal and who's not, Félix."

"Not anymore," General Hermida acknowledged sadly. "If these sons of bitches have killed him, what the hell's going to happen here?"

Colonel Abbes García slapped his forehead:

"Now I understand why Román made an appointment with me at Army Headquarters. Of course he's involved in this! He wants people close to the Chief near him so he can lock them up before the coup. If I had gone, I'd be dead by now."

"I can't believe it, damn it," General Félix Hermida repeated.

"Send SIM patrols to close Radhamés Bridge," ordered Abbes García. "Don't let anybody in the government, particularly Trujillo's relatives, cross the Ozama or get anywhere near the December 18 Fortress."

"The Minister of the Armed Forces, General José René Román, Mireya Trujillo's husband," General Félix was saying to himself, mindlessly. "I don't understand anything about anything anymore, damn it."

"Believe it until he proves himself innocent," said Abbes García. "Hurry and warn the Chief's brothers. Have them meet in the National Palace. Don't mention Pupo yet. Tell them there are rumors of assassination attempts. Hurry! How is he? Can I question him?"

"He's dying, Colonel," Dr. Damirón Ricart declared. "As a physician, my duty . . ."

"Your duty is to shut up unless you want to be treated like an accomplice." Again Pedro Livio saw at close range the face of the head of the SIM. "I'm not dying," he thought. "The doctor lied so he won't keep putting butts out on my face."

"General Román ordered the Chief killed?" Again, in his nose and mouth, the colonel's pungent breath. "Is that true?"

"They're looking for him to show him the body," he heard himself shout. "That's how he is: seeing is believing. And the briefcase too."

The effort left him exhausted. He was afraid that at this very moment the *caliés* were putting out cigarettes on Olga's face. Poor girl, what a shame. She'd lose the baby, she'd curse the day she ever married ex-Captain Pedro Livio Cedeño.

"What briefcase?" asked the head of the SIM.

"Trujillo's," he replied immediately, articulating clearly. "Covered with blood outside and full of pesos and dollars inside."

"With his initials?" the colonel insisted. "The initials RLTM in gold?"

He couldn't answer, his memory was betraying him. Tony and Antonio found it in the car, they opened it and said it was

full of Dominican pesos and dollars. Thousands and thousands. He noticed the agitation of the head of the SIM. Ah, you son of a bitch, the briefcase convinced you it was true, they had killed him.

"Who else is in this?" Abbes García asked. "Give me names. So you can go to the operating room and have the bullets taken out. Who else?"

"Did they find Pupo?" he asked, excited, speaking quickly. "Did they show the body to him? And to Balaguer?"

Again Colonel Abbes García's jaw dropped. There he was, openmouthed with astonishment and apprehension. In some obscure way, he was winning the game.

"Balaguer?" he said slowly, syllable by syllable, letter by letter. "The President of the Republic?"

"Of the civilian-military junta," explained Pedro Livio, struggling to control his nausea. "I was against it. They say it's necessary, to reassure the OAS."

This time, he didn't have time to turn his head and vomit on the floor. Something warm and viscous ran down his neck and dirtied his chest. He saw the head of the SIM move away in disgust. He had severe stomach cramps, and his bones felt cold. He couldn't talk anymore. After a while the colonel's face hung over him again, grimacing with impatience, looking at him as if he wanted to drill into his skull and find out the whole truth.

"Joaquín Balaguer too?"

He could resist his gaze for only a few seconds. He closed his eyes, he wanted to sleep. Or die, it didn't matter. Two or three times he heard the question: "Balaguer? Balaguer too?" He didn't answer or open his eyes. Not even when the intense burning on his right earlobe made him shrink away. The colonel had put out his cigarette and now he was twisting it and breaking it inside his ear. He did not scream, he did not move. Turned into an ashtray for the head of the *calles*, Pedro Livio, that's how you ended up. Bah, what the hell. The Goat was dead. Sleep. Die. From the deep pit into which he was

falling, he could still hear Abbes García: "A plaster saint like him had to be plotting with the priests. It's a conspiracy of the bishops allied with the gringos." There were long silences interspersed with murmurs and, at times, the timid pleading of Dr. Damirón Ricart: if they didn't operate, the patient would die. "But what I want is to die," thought Pedro Livio.

People running, hurried footsteps, a door slamming. The room was crowded again, and among the recent arrivals was Colonel Figueroa Carrión:

"We found a denture on the highway, near His Excellency's Bel Air. His dentist, Dr. Fernando Camino Certero, is examining it now. I woke him myself. In half an hour he'll make his report. At first glance, he thought it was the Chief's."

His voice was mournful. As was the silence in which the others listened to him.

"You didn't find anything else?" Abbes García bit off every word.

"An automatic pistol, forty-five caliber," said Figueroa Carrión. "It will take a few hours to verify the registration. There's an abandoned car, about two hundred meters from the attack. A Mercury."

Pedro Livio told himself that Salvador had been right to get angry with Fifi Pastoriza for leaving his Mercury on the highway. They would identify the owner and soon the *caliés* would be putting out butts on Turk's face.

"Did he say anything else?"

"Balaguer, no less." Abbes García whistled. "Do you realize what that means? The head of the Armed Forces and the President of the Republic. He mentioned a civilian-military junta, with Balaguer at the head to reassure the OAS."

Colonel Figueroa Carrión came out with another "Damn!"

"It's a plan to throw us off the track. Involve important people, compromise everybody."

"Maybe, we'll see," said Colonel Abbes García. "One thing's sure. A lot of people are involved, high-level traitors. And the priests, of course. We have to get Bishop Reilly out of

Santo Domingo Academy. Whether he's willing to leave or not."

"Will we take him to La Cuarenta?"

"They'll look for him there as soon as they find out. San Isidro is better. But wait, this is touchy, we have to talk it over with the Chief's brothers. If there's one person who can't be in on the conspiracy, it's General Virgilio García Trujillo. Go and tell him personally."

Pedro Livio heard the footsteps of Colonel Figueroa Carrión moving away. Had he been left alone with the head of the SIM? Was he going to put out more cigarettes on him? But that wasn't what tormented him now. It was realizing that even though they had killed the Chief, things hadn't turned out as planned. Why hadn't Pupo and his soldiers taken power? What was Abbes García doing, ordering the *caliés* to arrest Bishop Reilly? Was this bloodthirsty degenerate still in command? He continued to hover over him; he couldn't see him but there was that hot breath in his nose and mouth.

"A couple more names and I'll let you rest," he heard him say.

"He doesn't hear or see you, Colonel," Dr. Damirón Ricart pleaded. "He's in a coma."

"Then operate," said Abbes García. "And listen carefully, I want him alive. It's his life or yours."

"You can't take much from me," Pedro Livio heard the doctor say with a sigh. "I have only one life, Colonel."