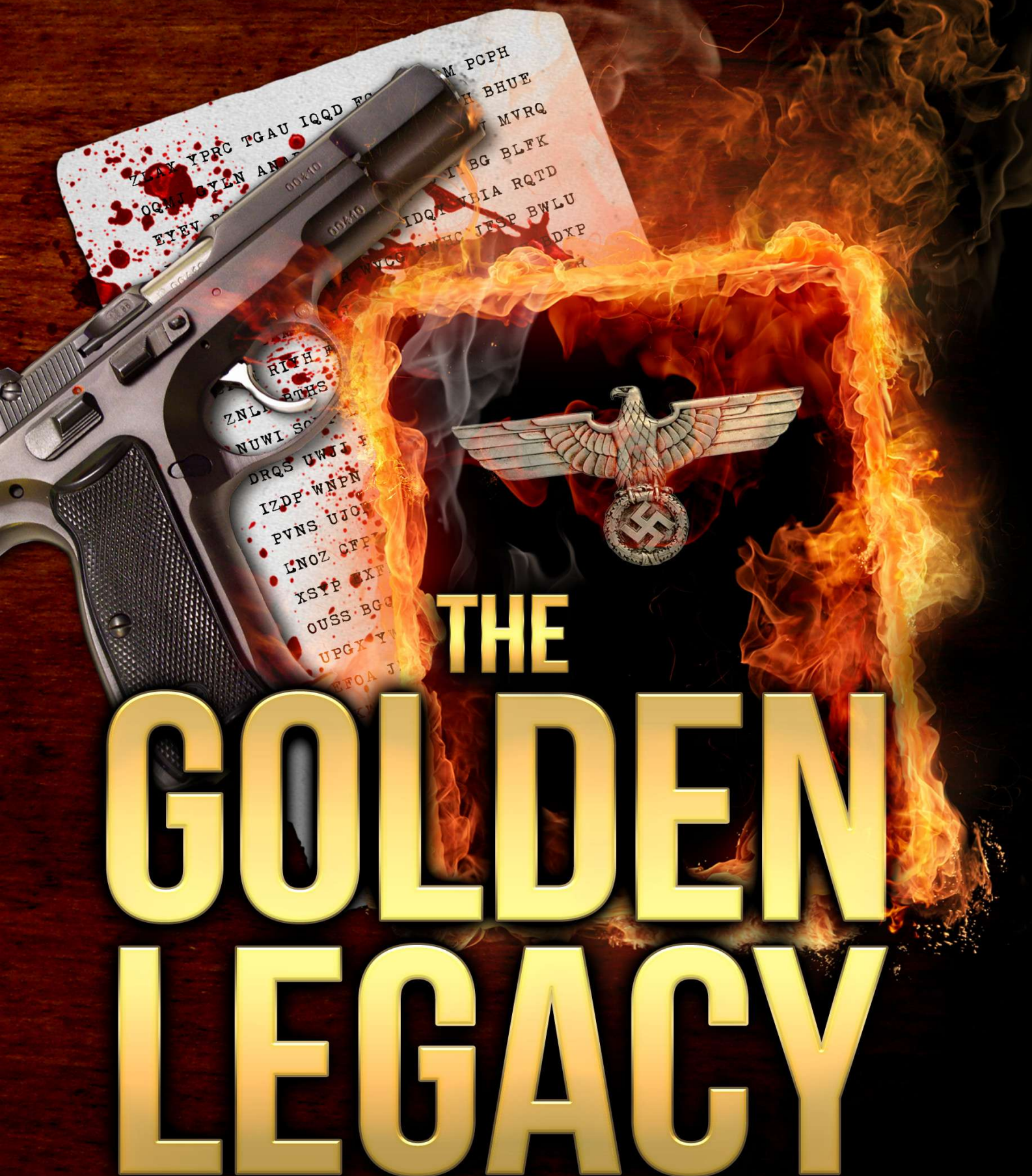


# GABRIEL GAMBETTA



# Prologue

## The Alps

**Dawn, May 1, 1945**

Werner squinted, seeking the beam of light. He rubbed his eyes and tried again, but the darkness was absolute.

A wave of fear passed over him. He stepped on the brakes and the truck stopped abruptly. *Shit.*

In the passenger's seat, Hans woke up and his hand instinctively went to the holster of his Luger.

"What is it?" he grumbled.

"Bauer." Werner pointed ahead.

Hans looked through the wipers. The headlights were off, and the moonlight barely cut through the fog; it was impossible to see ahead.

"Where is Bauer?"

"I don't know. That's the problem!"

Hans immediately understood. Without Bauer marking the path with a lantern, it was impossible for the convoy to continue forward. SS Lange had made it clear he wouldn't tolerate any delays. And knowing Lange, someone would undoubtedly pay for this problem with his life. Hans hoped it wouldn't be him.

"Shit."

Werner pulled the handbrake, turned off the engine and stepped out of the truck. He looked back and made out the foggy silhouettes of the trucks that followed.

"Stop!" he yelled, waving his arms.

One by one the trucks turned off their engines and the Alps were left in complete silence. Werner felt momentarily disoriented in the absolute blackness.

He forced himself to focus. If the convoy didn't continue in a matter of seconds, he would need to answer to Lange. He felt panic just thinking about it.

"Werner!" Hans called, several yards in front of the truck.

Hans was looking at something on the ground. Getting closer, Werner recognized Bauer in a fetal position, the lantern on the ground next to him.

"I can't... I can't..." Bauer stammered, barely audible. His eyes were open but out of focus.



*God, he's a child, he can't be older than 18!* Werner then bitterly remembered that he was only 20 himself.

*How old can two years of war make you...*

Bauer had collapsed, exhausted, after leading the truck on foot for hours, and without sleep since they had left Berlin two days before. They had only stopped in Zürich just long enough to load the heavy crates waiting in an abandoned warehouse.

Werner felt guilty; they should have relieved him hours ago. Perhaps it was too late now.

"You drive; I'll take the lantern," he told Hans. "Let's pick him up."

Of course, he would have preferred to continue behind the wheel while his companion took the lantern, but that was too dangerous. Werner was aware of his own exhaustion. His eyes had momentarily closed more than once, and he had even begun to hallucinate; during the past hours he thought he had heard everything from Wagner's operas to crying babies.

*If I continue I'll drive off the road.* He thought it vaguely amusing that Lange's wrath worried him more than ending up dead at the bottom of a ravine.

Hans helped Werner carry Bauer on his shoulder and they walked towards the truck. *Maybe we'll get out of this one.*

A ghost-like figure emerged from the fog just a few steps from them.

The soldiers felt the instinct to draw their guns, but their exhaustion won. Werner managed to place his hand next to his Luger; Hans simply let out a resigned sigh.

"What is this?" the ghostly figure asked.

Goosebumps rose on Werner's neck upon recognizing the voice of *SS-Standartenführer* Heinrich Lange. *Relax, relax, we're almost ready to continue.* He tried calming himself, but his knees were trembling.

"A... standard relief, *Herr Standartenführer*," Hans replied.

Lange observed them for several seconds without a word. It seemed like hours for Werner.

"A relief," he said at last. He pointed at Bauer. "Put him down."

Werner hesitated, but he knew that disobeying Lange would only make things worse. He left Bauer on the ground.

Lange walked around the boy, hands clasped behind his back. He watched with amusement his futile efforts to sit up.

"A relief?" Lange repeated. "It appears to me that *Herr* Bauer abandoned his post."

Werner and Hans looked at each other with horror. They knew what was to happen; they had witnessed it before.

Bauer tried stammering an excuse and rose to his knees.

"Don't get up, Bauer. Don't bother," Lange condescended. He paused and spoke over his shoulder. "Schäfer?"

Another figure materialized from the fog without a trace of sound.

"Yes, my *Standartenführer*."

Werner's blood froze. He immediately recognized *SS-Sturmbahnführer* Stefan Schäfer, Lange's right hand man. Only 17 years old, he had already built a fearful reputation while shooting up the ranks of the SS.

"We have a deserter, Schäfer."

Lange continued without waiting for an answer.

"*Gefreiter* Bauer, this tribunal finds you guilty of desertion."

*Son of a bitch! The war is over!*

Lange turned to Werner. "Execute him," he ordered with a smile.

Werner's stomach turned; even knowing Lange's sadism, the order took him by surprise.

Bauer, terrified, fought to sit up. With surprising agility, Schäfer gave him a strong kick to the face. The boy fell forward and stayed motionless.

Lange looked at Werner. He wasn't smiling anymore.

"Are you disobeying my order, *Gefreiter*?"

At the mention of his rank Werner found himself removing his Luger from its holster. *What am I doing?*

He looked at the boy, who was struggling to move. A small pool of blood had begun to collect under his face.

Suddenly it occurred to him that he could kill Lange. He just needed to move his arm and pull the trigger; it would take a fraction of a second.

He cocked the Luger.

Of course, he couldn't shoot Lange. Schäfer and the rest of the SS that followed in the trucks held a fanatic devotion towards their superior; he didn't want to imagine what they were capable of doing to him if he killed Lange. Or even worse, what Lange himself would do if he survived the shot.

Werner breathed a sigh. He felt a deep self-loathing, but he had no choice. He raised the Luger and pointed it at Bauer's head.

*I can't do this.*

He was fully aware that he was disobeying a direct order from Lange and that this would probably cost him his life, but his finger refused to pull the trigger.

*I have to do this, he told himself. It's his life or mine.*

The blast of the shot echoed through the deathly silence of the Alps.

Werner opened his eyes. A mass of blurry red was now all that was left of Bauer's head. He felt nauseated and barely refrained from retching.

Hans was frozen, his eyes wide open. Schäfer, expressionless, held his Walther P38, still smoking and pointing at Bauer. Lange stared at Werner.

Lange said nothing. He didn't need to; his glare instilled an infinite contempt. Werner had to look down.

*This is it. I'm dead.*

Several seconds passed. Werner only heard a sharp ringing left from the gunshot.

"We can't waste more time with this," Lange said at last. He was cruel but also pragmatic. "Go back to the truck."

Werner holstered his Luger. He was terrified. He was confused. But he was alive.

Lange approached him.

"I will not tolerate another error," he said in a low voice. "Our cargo is far too important."

Werner didn't expect Lange to mention the cargo at all; he clearly thought his secret was safe. *But I know what our cargo is.*

It was forbidden to discuss the crates, but their weight and the precautions Lange had taken to keep the operation secret left no doubt as to what they were transporting across the Alps.

"The Führer is dead!" he exclaimed. "What difference are ten trucks full of gold going to make?"

Lange threw him a furious look. Werner lowered his head, turned around and walked towards the truck. He felt his heart on the verge of exploding. The hair on his neck stood up; he waited for the gunshot that would end his life. *Make it fast...*

But there was no shot. He made it to the truck and opened the door. Confused, but without daring to look back, he sat in the driver's seat and turned on the engine.

\* \* \*

Several paces behind, Lange and Schäfer walked back to their truck. Schäfer stopped.

*"Herr Standartenführer!* If Werner Krause discovered we are transporting the Reich's gold, the rest of the soldiers will soon find out!"

Lange gazed into the darkness for a moment, then slowly nodded.

*"I hope so, Schäfer. It's what distracts them from our true purpose."*

## **Madrid**

### **Morning, April 21, 2004**

Martin looked at his watch; it hadn't been thirty seconds since he last checked it. He walked the length of the conference room, reached the wall, spun on his heels and continued pacing the opposite way.

*Where are you, Wilhelm?*

He left the room and headed straight to the office of Wilhelm's secretary. He looked through the door. The secretary was on the phone and working on the computer. When she saw Martin at the door she hung up and shook her head.

"Always coming in late... we'll have to fire him," he joked.

The secretary chuckled. The Director was German and never late.

Martin checked his watch again. 9:57. The clients had arrived several minutes ago, and the meeting was far too important to be late. Which made Wilhelm's absence particularly strange.

They had been at his house preparing for the presentation past midnight. Had he overslept? That seemed improbable; at almost eighty years old Wilhelm no longer slept more than six hours. And a half hour of persistent calls to his house and mobile phone would undoubtedly have awoken him.

Then where was he?

He muttered a curse. The clients were waiting.

"You offered them coffee?" Martin asked, pointing at the conference room.

"Yes, of course," the secretary replied. She was on the phone again.

Martin nodded and motioned for her to end the call. He took out his mobile and dialed Wilhelm's number.

The phone rang, once, twice, three times.

"No answer?" the secretary asked. Martin shook his head.

The phone continued to ring.

*Come on... Come on...*

Finally a sound was heard on the other line. Martin sighed in relief.

"Wilhelm!"

But his relief lasted only an instant.

“Welcome to the voice mail of... six... nine... three...”

He hung up.

“Voice mail. Get me his home number.”

“Of course.”

The secretary gave him the number and Martin punched it in quickly. This time the phone didn't even ring.

“The number you have tried to reach is temporarily out of service,” a recording said.

Martin put away his mobile; it was clear he was not going to be able to communicate with Wilhelm.

He breathed deeply. He could not make the clients waiting any longer. He would have to either give the presentation without Wilhelm, or postpone the meeting.

Strictly speaking, he could give the presentation without Wilhelm; the old man's presence was more symbolic than anything, a way of showing the company's commitment to the project. Wilhelm still made the strategic decisions, but had delegated everything else to Martin.

On the other hand, the old man continued to command a formidable presence. Martin, meanwhile, appeared younger than his thirty-six years, and despite having lost considerable weight, he still felt insecure about his image. He feared the clients would not take him seriously enough.

*What would Wilhelm do?*

He would encourage him to do it, without a doubt. He had supported him in far less promising circumstances.

Martin motioned for the secretary to continue trying to reach the old man. He breathed deep and entered the waiting room without hesitation, determined not to let his nerves get the best of him.

Less than an hour later, the meeting had ended; everything had turned out even better than Martin had hoped. He smiled to himself; Wilhelm would be proud.

He accompanied the clients to the door, apologizing for the director's unexpected absence. He explained it by claiming a minor health problem, for which they wished the director a prompt recovery.

But Martin was far from feeling as calm as he appeared. Throughout the meeting he had kept wondering about Wilhelm's whereabouts, glancing outside the meeting room every few minutes. There was still no sign of the old man.

He returned to the office. The secretary was still on the phone.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing... I haven't stopped calling, but no one picks up.”

*Where is Wilhelm?*

Now Martin really began to worry. Wilhelm boasted excellent health, but at his age you could never be sure. A simple slip and fall could have serious consequences.

His heart rate sped up. Had Wilhelm had an accident?

He took out his mobile. He called the old man's home and mobile again; the result was the same as before.

At least two hours had passed without being able to reach him. Martin had seen him just the night before and he seemed to be in perfect health, but that didn't guarantee anything.

Despite a feeling of foreboding, he knew exactly what needed to be done.

“Cancel my meetings for the day,” he told the secretary. “I'm going to look for him at his house.”

He grabbed his car keys and headed to the parking lot.



## 2

Martin brought the car to the curb and took the keys out before coming to a complete stop. He put on the handbrake and jumped to the street without bothering to lock the door.

Wilhelm's house had an expansive front yard. Martin peeked through the outside gate, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

He walked to the pillars at the driveway. He pressed the doorbell and heard it ring inside the house. There was no response after a few seconds.

He exhaled and rang the door again, this time with more urgency.

Nothing.

From a distance, the garage door seemed to be closed. He took several steps closer – through the window pane he thought he made out the letters of a license plate.

So Wilhelm had not left home.

Martin's heart accelerated. *Was it a medical problem?*

He dialed Wilhelm's home and mobile; again, out of service on the one and voicemail on the other.

He tried the gate; it was locked. Then he noticed for the first time that the light on the front door was on, and the curtains were still drawn. Knowing Wilhelm, this could only mean he hadn't gotten out of bed this morning.

His stomach tightened. The feeling that something terrible had happened increased with every passing minute.

He inspected the outer gate. The wall wasn't more than three feet tall and the bars perhaps another three feet. It could stop a dog from hopping into the yard, but it couldn't stop a person from reaching the house if they really tried. *That's why the doors have alarms.*

Martin took a deep breath and grabbed the wrought iron. He scaled up the wall and reached the top of the gate, which fortunately had no spikes. He held on with both hands to keep his balance.

He looked both ways down the street. There was nobody. Better that way; though he knew he was doing the right thing, he preferred not having to explain himself to a neighbor.

He jumped down into the yard, walked to the garage and looked through the pane of glass. Indeed, Wilhelm's car was inside.

At the front door, he rang the bell, knowing it was in vain. He might have to enter by force. *What will I do about the alarm?*

He knocked on the door, and a wave of fear immediately washed over him. As he knocked, the door inched slowly open on its hinges.

He stayed on the doorstep, paralyzed. There was no doubt something terrible had happened.

Heavy apprehension and fear swelled in the pit of his stomach; he began to imagine what he'd find inside. Fighting the impulse to flee, he pushed the door wide open. The light on the hall was on, but the adjacent rooms were dark.

He breathed deeply and took a hesitant step forward.

"Wilhelm?"

There was no answer. He advanced a few more steps.

"Hello? Anybody home? Hello?"

He pricked up his ears. The house was completely silent. He could hear the whir of the appliances and the distant noise of the refrigerator.

He walked forward into the darkness, then stopped where he thought the living room was. He let his eyes adjust to the dark. He could make out the silhouette of chairs, but was unable to see anything else.

He felt across the wall and found a switch; he flipped it.

"Wilhelm!" Martin's scream resounded through the silent house.

Wilhelm was on the armchair, motionless. His arms hung at a strange angle. And his head lay over a large red stain on the white leather.

## 3

### Afternoon, April 23, 2004

The deeply surreal sensation Martin had felt for the past few days intensified when the workers lowered the coffin containing Wilhelm's body into the pit. It felt as though he was watching himself in a movie, a person in a situation disconnected from reality.

*Wilhelm is dead.*

There was a great number of people at the burial, but the majority were company employees. Martin had hoped to meet Wilhelm's relatives; his boss, friend and mentor kept his personal life very private, to the extent that Martin didn't know if he had close family members. Judging by their absence, it appeared that he didn't.

The burial service marked the end of three busy and confusing days for Martin. First the shock of finding Wilhelm brutally murdered; then the initial questioning from the police, the unsuccessful attempts at finding any family member of Wilhelm, watching the television reports (the press had decided to call it "the murder of the businessman"), coordinating the wake and services with the funeral company, a more in depth interview with the police, breaking the news at the company, the unsurprising autopsy results, the wake, and now the burial.

He had barely slept and his head was spinning. Perhaps a good night's sleep would help bring him back to normal. *Why wait?* It was barely past noon, but Martin's body desperately needed to rest.

The priest said a few final words and the crowd began to disperse. Martin wanted to go straight to his car, but several employees intercepted him to give their condolences. Martin didn't question their sincerity; Wilhelm was known by all as an honest and fair boss.

Which made his murder all the more strange. Wilhelm did not have enemies. But according to the police report, the front door had not been forced open, the alarm had been turned off, and Wilhelm had even served tea to his eventual killer. To the police, this meant the killer had been someone close to Wilhelm, but Martin knew that Wilhelm only served tea on formal occasions: to an acquaintance, perhaps, but not to a friend.

Martin continued shaking hands mechanically with those who approached him. He finally exchanged the final handshake and took off in the direction of his car.

"Pardon me," said a voice behind him. "Martin Torres?"

Martin turned around. Several steps away stood a bald man with glasses, seemingly uncomfortable in his suit, and holding an envelope.

"My condolences."

“Thank you very much,” Martin said. He shook his hand and continued walking to the car.

“My name is Alonso,” the man said. “I’m Mr. Wagner’s lawyer.”

Martin stopped, surprised. Wilhelm had never mentioned an Alonso; he was certainly not one of the company’s lawyers.

“I have a letter for you from Mr. Wagner. I have instructions to deliver it to you personally at the first possible opportunity after the passing of Mr. Wagner.”

He offered the envelope. Martin shook his head and looked at the envelope in disbelief.

“A letter from Wilhelm? For me?”

Alonso nodded and stretched out his hand farther. Martin took the envelope.

“Again, I’m sorry for your loss. Have a nice day.” Alonso began to move away.

*A letter from Wilhelm with instructions to be delivered upon his death?* It couldn’t be his will; legal protocols existed for that. It had to be something personal.

“Wait! Since when have you had the letter?”

Alonso paused his steps and took his time before answering.

“Mr. Wagner had given the letter to my father. I received the letter along with its instructions when my father retired, about three years ago.”

*Three years!*

“Wilhelm wrote this letter *three years ago*?”

Alonso adjusted his glasses, visibly uncomfortable.

“No, not quite,” he responded, clearing his throat. “Mr. Wagner changed the letter’s instructions and its addressee several times over the the years, but the letter itself is the original.”

*Several times over the years?*

“From what year is the original letter?” Martin asked. *The 2000s? Is it possible it’s from the 90s?* But he wasn’t prepared for Alonso’s response.

“It has been around for a while,” Alonso answered with a chuckle. “My father received it in 1967.”

## 4

Sitting in his car, still at the cemetery, Martin toyed with the envelope.

A letter from Wilhelm.

Written almost forty years ago.

To be delivered after his death.

He repeated it over and over in his head, but couldn't make it sound real. It sounded too strange to believe.

He fiddled with the envelope a bit more, still undecided whether to open it. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. *What is going on?*

Martin closed his eyes and took a pair of deep breaths. He needed to think clearly.

What could the envelope contain? A will? No, the lawyers had that. Plans for the company, final advice, a farewell note? That couldn't be it either; Wilhelm had penned the letter forty years ago, even before he was born. The letter couldn't be specifically for him; what mattered was not the recipient, but the contents.

A chill ran down his back.

*A secret?*

Wilhelm knew something he didn't want to take to the grave, but that couldn't come to light while he still lived.

A secret he had kept for forty years.

Martin couldn't believe it. It was not possible.

He shook his head. *Why am I speculating when I have the letter in my own hands?* Nevertheless, he couldn't bring himself to read it.

He felt the envelope. It seemed to be padded with bubble wrap inside. *Did these envelopes exist forty years ago?*

It didn't matter. He had to open it. He took the edge of the envelope between his fingers—

The ring tone of his mobile brought him back to reality. After hesitating a couple seconds, he left the envelope on the seat and answered the call.

"Yes?"

"Good afternoon, Mr. Torres. This is Detective Olivera. Am I interrupting?"

Martin took a few seconds to recognize Detective Olivera. He was one of the police officers that had taken his statements the day before.

"No, not at all. How can I help you, Detective?"



“We’d like you to come to the station for a bit. We have new information we’d like to share.”

Martin’s heart sped up. *Had they found the killer?*

“Of course, Detective. When shall I stop by?”

“We’d like you to come now, Torres. If that’s possible.”

Something in the detective’s voice made Martin uncomfortable; something told him this wasn’t a friendly invitation.

He checked his watch. He tried conjuring an excuse to postpone the visit, but his mind was blank.

“Of course,” he finally answered. “I’ll be there in half an hour. Is that okay?”

“In half an hour is okay; we’ll be waiting. Don’t be late, Torres.” The detective hung up.

Martin sat motionless for a while, staring at his phone. The policeman’s tone had not been especially friendly, but he could not reject his “invite.”

Had they found the killer? Was it good news? Bad news? The detective’s voice didn’t suggest any of these possibilities.

He placed the envelope in the glove compartment. As long as he didn’t know what the police wanted, nor the contents of Wilhelm’s envelope, it was probably better not to mention it.

With the uncomfortable feeling of not knowing what awaited, Martin started the car and left the parking lot, heading towards the police station.

## 5

Martin inspected the room. It was small and windowless; there was a table, white, bare; there were two empty seats facing opposite where he sat; in the ceiling, near a corner, there was a camera.

*This is not an interview... this is an interrogation.*

How long had he been waiting? Ten, fifteen minutes? “The detective will arrive in a moment,” they had told him. He looked around again and began to drum his fingers on the table, but stopped immediately. Would they be observing him for signs of nervousness? He folded his hands and decided to stay calm.

The door finally opened and two policemen stepped in. The first was Detective Olivera, and behind him came a younger officer, a redhead, whom Martin hadn’t seen the previous day.

“Officer Palermo,” Olivera offered as an introduction. Martin stood up and extended his hand.

“Torres. Nice to meet you.”

Palermo gave him a smile, squeezing his hand with too much force.

“Coffee?” Olivera offered.

“Yes, thank you,” Martin replied. *Good cop, bad cop?* They were being too obvious.

Olivera left the room and Martin was alone with Palermo. Palermo sat in front and smiled again, saying nothing. Martin simply looked downwards.

After what seemed an eternity, Olivera returned with three styrofoam cups which he placed on the table. He pushed one towards Martin.

“Well, Torres,” Olivera began. “We’d like you to tell us about Wednesday morning.”

Martin raised his brow. He had already told them everything, twice, that same Wednesday. Why tell it over again?

*They want to see if my story changes.*

Was it possible? Did they seriously think that Martin was involved in the murder?

*Stay calm. Surely this is just routine procedure,* he thought, and he hoped he could think of something more convincing.

He breathed deeply. *I have nothing to hide.*

Martin retold Wednesday’s events with as much detail as possible. He started with the Tuesday meeting in Wilhelm’s house, then the presentation with clients that Wilhelm had not attended, the failed attempts at calling Wilhelm, the discovery of the body, his call to the police.

“... and then, you took my declaration the first time,” he finished. He sat back in his chair.

Olivera and Palermo looked at him intently. Martin looked at one then the other. *Did they expect him to say more?*

Palermo spoke for the first time. His voice was curiously high-pitched.

“But you knew that Wagner was dead.”

It wasn’t a question. It was a statement.

“Pardon?”

“You knew that Wagner was dead,” Palermo repeated with the exact same pitch.

“What... no! Of course not. How would I have known?”

“Exactly,” Palermo smiled.

Martin shook his head. *What are they talking about?*

“No, no. Wait. I had no idea. How was I to know? I had seen Wilhelm just hours before and he was perfectly fine!”

Palermo appeared satisfied. He took a notebook from his jacket and flipped through its pages until he found what he searched for.

“The morning of Wednesday the 21st, Mr. Wagner and you had a meeting planned with representatives from another company, is that correct?”

“Yes, correct.”

“Mr. Wagner did not arrive to the meeting on time and you decided to proceed anyway.”

“Yes, that is correct,” Martin said. *Where are they taking this?*

Palermo consulted his notebook.

“But according to testimony from your visitors, you informed them that Mr. Wagner had a problem with his health.”

Martin waited for a question, but Palermo fixed his gaze without saying a word.

“Yes, that’s right,” Martin said at last.

Palermo leaned forward.

“And how did you know that Mr. Wagner was dead?”

Martin blinked, not getting it.

“What are you talking...”

He stopped mid-sentence.

*Is Palermo stupid, or is he trying to catch me contradicting myself?*

“No. No, no no. Hold on, hold on. I did not know that Wilhelm was dead – since he was late to the meeting, I told the clients that he had had a medical problem. It was an excuse, it was simply an excuse to avoid telling them that Wilhelm had disappeared,” Martin said, and instantly regretted his choice of words. He bit his bottom lip.

“Disappeared...?” Palermo smiled.

Holding back the impulse to punch Palermo, Martin sat back, clasped his hands and took a deep breath.

*Easy. Calm down. I did nothing wrong, I have nothing to hide.*

“No. Listen. I did not know that Wilhelm was dead; I had no way of knowing. I tried communicating with him by every means possible, but I couldn’t. I made up an excuse to explain his absence and when the clients left, I went to Wilhelm’s house because I was afraid he had had a problem.”

*“A problem,”* Martin thought bitterly. *Murdered in his own living room.*

Palermo didn’t appear totally convinced.

“So it was a coincidence.”

“Yes, it was a coincidence. I chose the worst excuse possible, but I had no way of knowing. It was a coincidence.”

Palermo shifted in his seat and looked at Olivera, who up to this point had been silent. Olivera leaned forward and put his hands on the table.

“We found fingerprints, Torres. We ruled out Wagner’s family, who all live abroad. We are searching every database and the results will be out in a few days. Do you have any idea whose fingerprints they might be?”

“No,” Martin said, and decided to cover himself. “But it is possible that you find my prints, since on Tuesday I was at his house preparing for the Wednesday meeting. And I visited him several times a year.”

Olivera and Palermo glanced at each other.

“We found prints *on the weapon*, Torres.”

“You found the weapon?” Martin asked, surprised, and immediately knowing it was an unfortunate reaction. “Wonderful!”

*Be careful.*

“Wonderful,” he continued. “That should answer many questions, right?” *And show them I have nothing to do with this!* “I hope you keep me informed.”

Olivera nodded. He and Palermo stood up in unison.

“That’s all, Torres. We may contact you again.”

*Is that their way of telling me not to go too far away?*

They led Martin to the exit. Olivera shook his hand, but didn’t let go and looked right into Martin’s eyes.

“Is there anything else you’d like to tell us? Anything else we should know?”

*Wilhelm’s letter.*

“No, detective. But if anything comes to mind, I’ll let you know immediately.”

Olivera held his gaze a second longer and finally let his hand go.

“Have a good afternoon, Torres.”

He turned around and returned to the station.

Martin stayed standing on the sidewalk, not knowing what to think. Was it really possible that the police considered him a suspect?

He returned to the car and immediately opened the glove compartment; Wilhelm’s letter was still there.

The questions surrounding Wilhelm’s murder continued to multiply. It was time to start looking for answers.

## 6

“What do you think, Palermo?” asked Olivera.

Palermo shrugged.

“I don’t know. He didn’t break, and at moments he appeared genuinely surprised.”

“Agreed. Your technique, as unconventional as it is, seems quite effective.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Nevertheless, I have the impression that Torres isn’t telling us the whole truth.”

“Do you think he’s involved, sir?”

“I’m not sure, Palermo. Let’s see what happens with the results from the prints.”

Palermo smiled.

“Everything would be much simpler if we actually had the weapon, no?”

“It’s never that easy,” Olivera said with a sigh. “The smallest details are what solve most cases, the details you miss if you fail to pay close attention. It’s never as easy as having the killer’s prints.”

“Yes, sir.”

They remained in silence.

“We have to watch his next move. To see if he’s skittish or not. Put someone on his trail, Palermo.”



## 7

**Afternoon, April 24, 2004**

Martin sat on his living room sofa, Wilhelm's envelope at his side, closed, exactly where he had left it the day before.

He had spent the rest of Friday and Saturday morning finding excuses to delay opening the envelope. He knew he had to do it sooner or later, but just thinking about it made him uneasy. When he realized what he was doing he felt ashamed and decided to open it right away.

He took a pair of scissors and cut along the side of the envelope. It was, in fact, an envelope padded with bubble wrap. He took great care in making a deeper slice; he didn't want to damage the unknown contents.

He extracted the material from inside and placed it on the coffee table. There was a piece of paper and another smaller envelope.

The small envelope immediately drew his attention. It was made of cardboard or very heavy paper and smelled old. The flap was closed with a striking red wax seal. Against the light the letters WK were visible in relief.

*Wilhelm Karl.* Wilhelm always insisted using both given names.

Martin lay back in the couch, pensive. He found it difficult to imagine Wilhelm using a wax seal. Wilhelm was not an old-fashioned person; to the contrary, he was very up-to-date for his age. He loved email.

He inspected the seal again. *I don't know Wilhelm as well as I thought*, he thought sadly.

He left the envelope on the table and picked up the paper. It was significantly newer than the envelope. On it was a diagram and several hand-written notes. The writing was Wilhelm's, there was no doubt.

Martin scrutinized the diagram. It seemed vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place it.

It was a half-circle from which seven lines extended, like a kid's drawing of the sun setting on the horizon. On the right of the half-circle were the letters TP. Inside the half-circle there was a smaller circle marked with an asterisk, and below there was a corresponding asterisk with instructions:

First Saturday, 15:00

First Sunday, 15:00

First and third Sunday of the month, 15:00

He studied the instructions; they presumably referred the date and time of... of what? He began to feel frustrated. If interpreted literally, the diagram would be the date and time of a sunset, but that was an absurd idea.

Martin sighed. The sun and a circle. TP. Why was it so familiar?

He had hoped Wilhelm's motives would be clear after opening the envelope, but just the opposite, Martin felt even more confused. *What are you getting me into, Wilhelm? What secrets were you holding?*

He returned his attention to the diagram. If the instructions indicated a date and time, the diagram had to signal a place. But instead of a map, it looked like a cartoonish sun.

Suddenly, Martin burst out in laughter.

*Of course! It's a diagram of the Puerta del Sol.* The most important plaza in Madrid. The letters TP referred to the iconic building Tio Pepe. The inner circle represented the fountain and the asterisk signaled a spot on the right of the fountain – a bench, probably.

*Did Wilhelm ever mention the plaza?* Martin struggled to remember any story, any anecdote or memory that connected Wilhelm and that place. Nothing came to mind.

He still had to make sense of the date and time references. The most obvious meaning was that he had to go to the Puerta del Sol, to the point marked by the asterisk, the "first Saturday"... of the year? Of the month? The first Saturday of the month was in one week. *The wait is going to be unbearable.*

Why would Wilhelm want him to be in that particular place at that particular time? Only one possibility came to mind: to meet up with someone else.

The instructions didn't mention the small envelope or any other person – maybe its contents would explain what he was supposed to do. He picked up the envelope and traced its edge with his finger, ready to open it, but then stopped.

*What if this is dangerous?*

He was surprised it hadn't occurred to him before. He trusted Wilhelm. But Wilhelm had been murdered, possibly by someone he knew well. On the other hand, he had put a lot of work into ensuring that this envelope come into Martin's possession in the event of his death, and he had kept its existence a secret up until then.

Martin's stomach tied in knots and his hands felt cold. *This envelope is directly related to Wilhelm's death.*

A strong temptation to burn the envelope came over him; to destroy it and pretend he had never received it and move on with his life. But he pushed back the thought. Wilhelm had been at his side during the darkest moments of his life. Now he had entrusted him with one final task. He couldn't let him down.

He paused and took a deep breath. He needed to think clearly.

Maybe the best option was to meet the other person and deliver the closed envelope and never discover its contents. The envelope within another envelope suggested that Wilhelm didn't want to leave Martin a message, but rather use him as a messenger.

*I'll have to go to the plaza.* Martin gave a resigned sigh. *And I'll have to wait a week without having a clue as to what's going on.*

He reread the instructions.

*Or not?*

"The first Saturday." Wilhelm had made sure that Martin read the letter right after his death.

"The first Saturday after my death." A chill ran through Martin. *Today.*

He looked at the clock. It was almost half-past-two in the afternoon. With his throat suddenly dry and a rapidly beating chest, he grabbed his car keys and left the apartment.

## 8

Martin left the car in a garage close to the Puerta del Sol and started walking. It was a sunny spring afternoon; the weather was very pleasant. Martin, however, was so cold that he had to wear a jacket.

It was almost three o'clock, the meeting time. He was half a block from the plaza, but had arrived without a clear plan on how to proceed. He stopped at a crosswalk and tried to cobble together some type of strategy.

The Puerta del Sol was a half-circle; Martin estimated about two hundred yards from one side to the other. The plaza was surrounded by buildings and several streets cut through it. Below lay one of the city's busiest metro stops, with entrances on either end of the plaza. The fountain was approximately in the middle, which made the direction of his approach inconsequential.

The walk light turned. He crossed towards the plaza. The unseasonably bright day had brought a lot of people to the plaza, so many that he couldn't see the fountain. On one hand, this gave him a certain sense of safety; on the other hand, it wouldn't be easy to find his contact.

*It's like finding a needle in a haystack, without knowing what the needle looks like.*

He checked his watch. It was still five minutes to three o'clock.

He took a quick walk around the fountain, dodging kids who ran about laughing. He passed an elderly couple who walked slowly, leaning on their canes. He was forced to move away as a dog jumped in his direction, the owner controlling it on the leash just in time.

*The only thing missing for a perfect week is being bitten by a dog.*

He took out the diagram, glanced at it rapidly and put it away. He took a deep breath and headed towards the bench marked by the asterisk.

Sitting at the bench were two girls four or five years old and an older woman with white hair. The three shared a lively conversation.

Could the lady be his contact? It was frustrating not having the slightest clue whom he should be meeting. *It could be anyone.*

Perhaps the other person would recognize him. Or was Martin supposed to initiate contact?

He shook his head. *This feels like a spy movie. My name is Torres, Martin Torres. Where do spies learn this stuff?*

Several feet ahead there was another bench. A bald man with a goatee and a sleeveless shirt, in his forties but quite fit, read a magazine. There was enough room at his side to sit comfortably, and with a view of the bench on the diagram.

The man looked him in the eyes. Martin made an effort to keep his gaze; the man's eyes were a penetrating, deep blue. After a second the man looked down and continued reading his magazine with a bored expression.

Martin decided to take the initiative. *This can't be that difficult.* What age would the other person be? Young or old? Probably older, around Wilhelm's age. Man or woman? An old friend? Perhaps a former lover?

He looked around. A tourist couple taking photos, a young woman jogging, an elderly woman reclined on the edge of the fountain, children accompanied by their parents or grandparents.

Suddenly his hands felt cold again and the sounds of the plaza seemed far away. He fixed his gaze. Standing motionless among the shifting crowd, a man in a dark raincoat and an old-fashioned hat looked in Martin's direction. He appeared completely out of place in that spring afternoon.

*He must be the one.*

Martin approached him slowly. The man continued looking at Martin with an inscrutable gaze.

He stopped one pace away from the stranger. The man looked at Martin, adjusted his glasses and furrowed his brow, but did not move.

*You're not making this easy.*

Martin extended his hand and went up to him.

"Good afternoon."

The man appeared taken aback for an instant, but shook hands firmly and looked squarely into Martin's eyes.

"Good afternoon."

"We don't know each other..."

"That I'm sure of," he replied with a light smile.

"...we don't know each other, but I have a message for you. It's from a person who meant a lot to me, but who sadly is... no longer with us. His final wish was that you receive this message."

The man looked at Martin expectantly.

Martin took out the sealed envelope and offered it.

The man hesitated a moment, reached out and took the envelope. He examined both sides and felt the wax seal, studying it closely.

"WK," he said contently. He turned to Martin. "You didn't mention your name, young man."

"Martin," he responded, holding back the impulse to offer another handshake.

"Martin," the stranger repeated, as if pondering the sound of the name. "Many would have saved themselves the trouble of delivering this message. But not you, Martin. You are a trustworthy man."

He lifted the envelope.

"You know what this is about?"

"No, sir."

The man nodded slowly.



“I was hoping you would be able to tell me.” He looked at the envelope thoughtfully. “At least do you know what the WK means? The initials of the person who sent it?”

Martin took a moment to grasp the question.

“Wilhelm... Wilhelm Karl Wagner,” he stuttered.

“Wilhelm Karl Wagner...” the stranger repeated slowly. “...I’ve never heard of him. Do you know why he wanted to leave me a message? And you, Martin... why didn’t you reach me by phone?” The man now appeared very confused. “But wait... how did you know I would be in the plaza?”

*Is he testing me? Is he trying to tell me something?*

He heard a woman’s voice behind him.

“I’m ready, dear.”

Martin turned around. It was the elderly woman he had seen standing by the fountain.

“And who is this, dear?”

“This young man has a message from Wilhelm Karl Wagner.”

“From whom?”

The man sighed. “I was hoping you knew who he is.”

Martin started to realize he had made a huge mistake.

“Please forgive me, sir,” he said quickly. “There’s been a misunderstanding – this envelope is not for you. My apologies, I mistook you for someone else.”

*Somebody shoot me.*

The man gave a friendly smile and returned the envelope.

“Don’t worry, young man. I hope you’re able to find the right person.” He moved towards the woman. “Honey?”

The woman took his arm and they walked away leisurely, enjoying the spring afternoon.

*Stupid, stupid.*

He had been on the verge of giving the envelope – the final wish and instructions from his mentor – to a complete stranger. He had made a fool of himself. He had bothered several people. What else would he do?

*OK, be positive. At least the dog didn’t bite me.*

Feeling annoyed with himself, he put away the envelope and began the walk to his car.

\* \* \*

Several steps away, the man with the goatee waited for Martin to be a safe distance away. Then he left the magazine on the bench, stood up and began to follow, trying not to lose Martin within the sea of people but without getting too close.

Sébastien chuckled to himself, satisfied. Martin had looked at him right in the eyes, but did not realize he was following him.

## 9

Martin plopped onto the sofa, frustrated. He threw the envelope on the table but immediately regretted it. *It's not Wilhelm's fault.*

For several minutes he remained in the exact position he had fell onto the couch, staring ahead, recreating the experience in the plaza over and over again in his head.

*What had gone wrong?*

He had gone to the correct place, there was no doubting that. He double-checked the diagram again anyway: the plaza's shape, the number of intersections, the fountain, TP. It couldn't be just a coincidence.

Had he gone on the right day? That was less clear. He reread the instructions:

First Saturday, 15:00

First Sunday, 15:00

First and third Sunday of the month, 15:00

They could be interpreted different ways. He first thought Wilhelm referred to the first Saturday and Sunday following his death, since the lawyer had insisted on the message's urgency. But it could also mean the first Saturday and Sunday of the month, or the year. Or anything else.

*But understanding the instructions isn't of any use if the other person doesn't interpret them the same way.*

Perhaps it was the other person who failed to show. If he wanted this to work, he'd have to return to the plaza Sunday – *tomorrow* – and also the first Saturday and Sunday of the month, and again the first and third Sunday of the month...

And what if the other person hadn't been able to make the meeting? Perhaps they were in another city or another country and simply didn't arrive in time. After all, he knew nothing about this other person.

There was one other more disconcerting possibility: perhaps the person had been there, watching him. If that was so, why hadn't they approached him?

A knot formed in his stomach. Perhaps the other person didn't approach him because it was too dangerous.

He had to return to the plaza, but first he needed to know what he was getting himself into.

Quickly, knowing he might regret it later, he broke the wax seal and opened the envelope.

## 10

Holding the seal in pieces between his fingers, Martin understood he had crossed a line from which there was no going back. He was going to discover the final wish of his former boss and mentor, one written four decades ago.

He slipped the tip of his finger inside the envelope, advancing delicately until he felt the paper. He drew it out carefully.

It was a sheet folded in four, fragile to the touch and with a yellowish tint. It wasn't hard for Martin to believe it was forty years old. The outside was blank, but its look and relief allowed him to guess the words were written with a typewriter.

*The answer to this whole mystery.*

He opened the first fold, holding his breath involuntarily. He swallowed and opened the second fold.

He sat still, examining the paper without understanding what he saw. He suddenly felt confused and very alone. He had been ready for practically anything, but not this.

In front of Martin's eyes was an incomprehensible sequence of capital letters separated into columns:

ZLAX YPRC TGAU IQQD ECAM ZBOM PCPH  
 OQMJ GYLN ANAD MJB P EODY UYDH BHUE  
 EYEV BKJI VMUM VWLU VHDE LDNV MVRQ  
 ISVE XHEV SULB KBHA NCYS IYBG BLFK  
 SXNV JWNS EPHV NMUO IDQY VBIA RQTD  
 FLTF VJWY NKKR WVCB KWHC JFSP BWLU  
 EIBK LRMK MHJP FNYL RRUS RCJU BDXP  
 ZTZH RIYH FVHN PIII GTPO VGDA AZZR  
 ZNLN BTHS XFNQ VRIO EMY Y DNQD YGEN  
 NUWI SONP LJYT RXPB FUJY RJMB LCHY  
 DRQS UWJJ EQFF ZQSN DXQB XMPJ KUGA  
 IZDP WNP N IJYS QLXW ZOKE HWEY PWNT  
 PVNS UJCR WVDU MODU GSIY SJOE MYYI  
 LNOZ CFPI JSFA ZICB RLIZ YSXE ZAPX  
 XSY P EXFL LNIG XKRM GHZX EGYX JOLL  
 OUSS BGQS MUYS VIVN URHU UNDJ EDHM  
 UPGX YMMW EUFG BVVV ODKF ODFS QRNJ  
 EFOA JLRA KKYQ NTUU OHPA SDZO TKFL  
 CKWP XSUT FBJD RANU SABA ATWF QOXG  
 LGKT NAHR YPXS QQPX LLIH CXVT OINP  
 RKLE CXIP ZENK INQY QISP GWBX LPAA  
 PCRS EOGV TVIY AOIO TCUY UACV OIRV  
 PALF JIKS ADJT CGEQ OMCU TRVK IOQO  
 SELM DNMO HHDD ZRZG IHEQ ZLGG BJUS  
 AAPE VZQR UIYX KYLN YQIF YIKJ LKYR  
 GYPL JNYE JLXV UDJY

*This won't be as simple as I hoped.*

He read the letters backwards, vertically and in columns but didn't identify a single word. He held the sheet up to a light, but didn't notice anything.

He reexamined the envelope more thoroughly. He made sure it was empty, then checked for anything inscribed within the envelope itself – at this point nothing would surprise him – but found nothing.

Martin sighed. *A sheet of paper full of random letters, that's it.*

Evidently the message was some sort of code. Martin was no expert in the matter, but he knew there existed codes that took even powerful computers years or centuries to break.

It was truly surprising that Wilhelm had involved him in something like this. But the more mysterious it became, the more convinced Martin became about the importance of the task on hand. Wilhelm must have had a damn good reason to act in such a strange way.

*Cryptic instructions, messages in code, and all this might be dangerous.* What was he getting into?

He felt defeated. He contemplated the paper, helpless.

But he knew he couldn't give up.

*What can I deduce from this?*

It was written by a typewriter, and according to the lawyer, the envelope had been sealed almost forty years ago, which the paper's condition seemed to confirm.

He suddenly felt a jolt of inspiration. *Forty years ago codes weren't nearly as complex, and supercomputers didn't exist.* Wilhelm had surely done the code himself, and probably by hand.

Martin remembered hearing that in ancient times Julius Caesar sent coded instructions to his generals, to avoid information falling into enemy hands. *Thank you, History Channel.*

He placed the paper on the table and took out his laptop. He quickly found an article describing the encryption method in detail. It had been invented two thousand years ago and, to his luck, was elementary.

To code a message you could simply substitute each letter with another three positions ahead in the alphabet: A switched to D, B to E, and so on. He took another piece of paper, wrote his name and proceeded with the formula:

MARTIN  
PDUWLQ

Thus Martin changed to “Pduwlq.” *Excellent!*

He continued reading. Decoding the message was as easy as reversing the substitution, changing D for A, E for B, and the other letters in the same manner:

MARTIN  
PDUWLQ  
MARTIN

He grinned. Perhaps the sheet of random letters was nothing more than a message encoded in that manner and separated into columns.

With this heart beating faster, he copied the message’s first line:

ZLAX YPRC TGAU IQQD

He applied the code-breaking method, writing the result underneath.

Martin looked at the paper. Where a message from Wilhelm should have appeared, there were only more meaningless words:

ZLAX YPRC TGAU IQQD  
WIXU VMOZ QDXR FNNA

*Where did I go wrong?*

He reread the article on the Caesar cipher and found his hopes weren’t all lost. The encryption invented by Caesar switched each letter for one three positions ahead in the alphabet, but the method also worked using an interval of two – converting A to C and B to D – or any other interval.

He first tried a two-interval code, changing “Martin” to “Octvkp.” He tested it on Wilhelm’s message:

ZLAX YPRC TGAU IQQD  
XJYV WNPA REYS GOOB

He exhaled a sigh of disappointment – that didn’t work either. Of course, with twenty-six letters in the alphabet, there were twenty-five iterations and he had discarded only two of them.

*This is going to take a while.*



# 11

Three hours later, Martin finished testing the last combination. Once again, the result was a nonsensical string of letters.

He left the page and the message on the sofa and went to the kitchen to make a coffee. He rolled his neck: the stress had begun to give him a cramp.

Apparently he had gotten it wrong; Wilhelm did not use a Caesar cipher. Regardless, he must have used a simple code, since he had surely encrypted the message by hand. And it had to be code invented more than forty years ago – it couldn't be that difficult.

He returned to his chair with a mug of coffee and took out his laptop to read a bit more about cryptography.

Soon he discovered an encryption method called the "Vernam cipher." It was exactly what he was searching for; it was invented in 1917 and could be done easily by hand. But to his surprise, mathematicians had proven the code was impossible to break without having the decryption key.

Martin could hardly believe what he had just read. He checked the explanation again closely, hoping he had misunderstood, but there was no doubt:

*"If the key to the code is kept secret, it has been mathematically proven that the Vernam cipher is unbreakable."*

He read the article over again, desperately trying to comprehend how a simple code invented one hundred years ago couldn't be cracked, not even by the most cutting-edge super-computers.

After carefully reading the entry a couple times he thought he understood the method. The idea was to split the message into two parts in such a way that reconstructing the message was possible only when getting hold of both parts. A simple table was used in the process:

```

ABCDEFGHIJKLMN OPQRSTUVWXYZ
Aabcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
Bbcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyza
Ccdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyza b
Ddefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyza bc
Eefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyza bcd
Ffghijklmnopqrstuvwxyza bcde
Gghijklmnopqrstuvwxyza bcdef
Hhijklmnopqrstuvwxyza bcdefg
Iijklmnopqrstuvwxyza bcdefgh
Jjklmnopqrstuvwxyza bcdefghi
Kklmnopqrstuvwxyza bcdefghij
Llmnopqrstuvwxyza bcdefghijk
Mmnopqrstuvwxyza bcdefghijkl
Nnopqrstuvwxyza bcdefghijklm
Oopqrstuvwxyza bcdefghijklmn
Ppqrstuvwxyza bcdefghijklmno
Qqrstuvwxyza bcdefghijklmnop
Rrstuvwxyza bcdefghijklmnopq
Sstuvwxyza bcdefghijklmnopqr
Ttuvwxyza bcdefghijklmnopqrs
Uuvwxyza bcdefghijklmnopqrst
Vvwxyza bcdefghijklmnopqrstu
Wwxyza bcdefghijklmnopqrstuv
Xxyzabcde fghijklmnopqrstuvw
Yyzabcde fghijklmnopqrstuvwx
Zzabcde fghijklmnopqrstuvwxy

```

To convert one letter into two corresponding encoded letters, you could choose any appearance of the original letter within the table, then record the corresponding letters from the column and row, like coordinates.

Martin took a sheet of paper and wrote his name. He picked the M that lay in the R row and V column of the table and jotted them down underneath the M. He continued the procedure with the rest of his name:

```

MARTIN
RXLDXK
VDGQLD

```

He considered the result: he had managed to separate the original word, “Martin,” into two words, “rxldxk” and “vdgqld”; meaningless words with no relation to the original word.

Decoding the original word was simple; you just needed to use the table. In the R row and V column, “M” is located; in the X row and D column lies “A,” and so on until “Martin” was reconstructed.

Martin nodded slowly. The method was both elementary and extremely secure. It was impossible to break without both halves of the code.

And evidently Wilhelm had only left him one half of the code.

He reflected on the implications of his discovery and then suddenly felt elated.

Martin no longer doubted that he must meet another person in the plaza. And he was willing to bet that the other person had an identical envelope, with a page full of meaningless letters.

The other half of the message. The key.

## 12

### Afternoon, April 25, 2004

Martin strode towards the plaza with a quicker step than the day before. He stopped at the traffic light and held back the desire to stretch his arms. His back ached; he had a difficult time sleeping and Sunday morning had stretched an eternity.

He rubbed his hands against his pants. He was fully aware he might be getting involved in something dangerous, but the excitement of having discovered – partially – how to break the code was enough to not hesitate in risking it.

The walk light finally turned green and Martin practically ran across the street. He went right to the fountain.

The afternoon was as pleasant as the day before and a good number of people had gone to the plaza. Reaching the fountain area, Martin slowed his pace and began to look around.

Again there were people of all ages: children playing, parents in tow; young couples in love; elders strolling slowly, enjoying the nice weather.

*Who doesn't belong in this scene?*

Martin took a wide circle around the fountain, walking slowly, trying to go unnoticed among the crowd. He hoped not to bump into the man from the previous day.

He paid special attention to the bench marked with an asterisk on the diagram. Sitting there was a middle-aged man doing nothing in particular, but for some reason he didn't match the image of the contact Martin had in mind. He decided not to approach – yesterday's experience hadn't gone so well.

His enthusiasm waned. The excitement of having the puzzle in his hands had made him think this meeting would be easier, but it wasn't turning out that way.

He found a place to sit twenty yards from the bench, where he could observe the man without bringing attention.

*And if no one shows?*

He began to worry. He had convinced himself that he was on the right track, but now his doubts returned.

He checked the time. 3:10.

What could he do? He had one half of the code, but it was impossible to break it without the other half; and the other half was in the hands of a complete stranger. He was reasonably sure he had to find the other person in the plaza, but not so sure about the day or the time of the meeting.

*I can abandon this... go home and pretend this never happened.*

He shook his head. He knew that wasn't possible. Not only he did not want to let Wilhelm down, he was incapable of leaving a puzzle unsolved. But if he didn't make contact today, what was he to do? Continue visiting the plaza two times every month? *I can't continue doing this for the rest of my life. I'll go crazy.*

His doubts dissipated the moment he raised his gaze. Walking in small circles near the meeting point, hesitant to sit on the bench, was a woman. She wore pants and a loose shirt and held her purse tightly with both hands.

*Completely out of place.*

The woman stopped in front of the bench and for a moment Martin thought she would speak with the man who was seated, but she appeared to change her mind. She turned, walked three or four steps away from the bench and stopped. She looked left, right, then sighed, walked a few paces to the right and stopped again.

*I know exactly what you're going through.*

Martin stood and walked slowly towards the woman. He purposely avoided rushing it; as promising as her attitude was, in any moment her husband or her child could appear and perfectly explain her conduct.

But the woman continued looking from one side to the other, pacing nervously. Martin kept approaching cautiously.

Only when several feet separated them did the woman finally notice him. She stayed still, watching him anxiously.

She was younger than he had judged from a distance, maybe between 35 and 40 years old. Her hair was dark and wavy, her eyes appeared small behind the lens of her glasses. She wasn't all that attractive. Martin sighed with relief – he knew how irrational he could become for a “damsel in distress,” and remembered the problems this had caused him in the past.

The woman stayed still but Martin noticed her knuckles were white from gripping her purse. *She might be more nervous than me.*

“Good afternoon,” Martin said, and smiled to put her at ease.

“Good afternoon.” The woman returned a cautious smile.

*Foreign accent?*

“I have...” Martin began to say. He reached his hand into his pocket and took out the small envelope with the wax seal. “I have this.”

The woman's expression softened immediately and Martin got the impression that all of her muscles relaxed. A broad smile drew on her face.

She reached into her purse and let Martin catch a glimpse of a small object. He had to look a few seconds to be sure it was an envelope with a red seal, identical to his own. He sighed with relief and smiled.

“The directions weren't exactly straightforward, eh?”

She laughed.

“No, not really. I worried about coming from Germany and not finding anybody. But here we are, right?”

“Here we are,” Martin said. He extended his hand. “Martin.”

“Anna.” Her handshake was firmer than Martin expected.

“It's a pleasure.”

“What I don't understand is... where's the Puerta del Sol? This is a plaza, there's no *puerta*, door.” She pointed to the left. “Over there is the Puerta de Alcalá. But here there's no door, so why is it called ‘Puerta’ del Sol?”

Martin smiled with amusement. Foreigners were always confused by that; one time Wilhelm had made similar comments.

“The only thing that’s here is a statue of a bear,” Anna continued, annoyed.

“The bear and the strawberry tree,” Martin said with pride. “The symbol of the city.”

Anna furrowed her brow.

“Are there a lot of bears in Madrid?”

“No,” Martin admitted, and decided not to even mention the strawberry tree.

They remained in silence for several seconds. He didn’t see the point of arguing over the plaza’s name when they had more serious matters to discuss. It seemed Anna was not aware of all that Wilhelm’s letter implicated.

“I think we have a lot to talk about,” Martin said finally, “and this might not be the best place. I’ll buy you a coffee, how about we go over...”

He turned to point to the cafes on the plaza but stopped mid-motion, suddenly alarmed.

He looked closely in the direction of the café. Nothing called his attention; nobody seemed to be paying them attention.

Then, why did he feel alarmed?

*I saw something.*

He observed attentively; he still saw nothing strange. But an alarm had gone off in his subconscious. Was it possible that...?

“Martin,” Anna said for the second time. She looked worried. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I wanted to see if...” he made a vague gesture towards the café, and left the sentence unfinished. “Doesn’t matter. Let’s go get that coffee.”

Feigning more security than he actually felt, Martin started the walk towards the café followed by Anna.

## 13

Close by, Sébastien murmured a curse.

*He saw me. This time the son of a bitch saw me.*

It had taken him by surprise. And he had reacted instinctively, hiding behind a sign. It hadn't been more than a fraction of a second.

But Sébastien had been in many situations in which a fraction of a second was the difference between life and death. He couldn't afford letting his guard down, not for one instant.

*Especially not now.*

Sébastien sat down on the bench and opened the magazine he was holding. Despite the feeling of excitement, he forced himself to keep a calm and casual composure.

He knew that Martin and the woman would be passing by his side less than a second before they entered his field of vision. He continued watching them sideways while never taking his eyes off the magazine.

Martin and the woman walked past the bench. They had looked in his direction but hadn't noticed him.

*He didn't see me.* He felt a deep disdain for Martin. *Weak. Inferior.*

He watched them move away and leave the plaza. They went in the direction of a café. Sébastien waited for them to be at a safe distance, then began to follow.

The immediate danger had passed, but the rules had changed. The game had become more dangerous.

Now there were two.

*Who is the woman?*

The presence of the stranger caused Sébastien a new rush of adrenaline; he felt energized and alive. He breathed deeply, flexing every muscle, greatly enjoying the excitement of the hunt.

# 14

The café owner had decided to take advantage of every square foot of the establishment. Martin and Anna had to squeeze between people to get to their table.

They looked at each other for a couple of seconds without speaking. Martin took a deep breath. *Now it's time to find out what this is all about.*

"My name is Martin and I know... knew... Wilhelm since almost ten years back. I worked with him in the factory for a long time but Wilhelm was much more than just a boss to me – in a way, he was the father I never had."

He surprised himself making such a personal statement to a complete stranger. Perhaps it was part of the mourning process.

He observed Anna in silence. *Your turn.*

"I am... I was..." she paused and shook her head. "He was my great-uncle."

Martin's eyebrows rose. *Great-uncle?*

Anne appeared to have anticipated his surprise.

"I suppose he never told you anything about his family. Wilhelm was very reserved, right?"

"Reserved is an understatement," Martin agreed. Despite the close relationship he came to share with the old man, there existed a few topics Wilhelm always avoided, his family being one.

"I'm his brother's granddaughter," Anna continued. "My grandfather, his brother, died during the war, thus my father never got to know him. And later my parents..." – she choked on the words – "my parents passed away a couple years ago. So Wilhelm... I hadn't seen him in many years, but he was my only family."

"I'm sorry, Anna. I'm truly sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," Anna said with a sincere smile. "It's clear that he was also someone very dear to you. And no one deserves to end that way. My condolences, Martin."

Martin stayed quiet, pensive. *Anna. Wilhelm's grand-niece.*

"But there's something else I wanted to tell you," Anna said with a torn expression. "Wilhelm... Wilhelm's name was not Wilhelm. He changed it after the war. His name was Werner... Werner Krause."



# 15

Martin looked at Anna in disbelief. His mouth opened but no sound came out.

Anna nodded slowly.

“Werner had his secrets, right?”

Martin tried organizing his thoughts. Was it possible that Wilhelm, his mentor – *his friend!* – had concealed something like this? Was it possible the man he always knew as Wilhelm Wagner was actually named Werner Krause?

*No. Impossible.*

On the other hand, since Wilhelm’s death a series of extremely unusual events had started unfolding: a decades-old letter, mysterious directions, a message in code... not to mention the circumstances of the murder itself.

*The white armchair. The blood.* Martin tried to shake the image from his head.

Anna placed the envelope on the table. It was identical to the one he had opened the previous day. He pointed at the wax seal.

WK. Wilhelm always had insisted on using both his names, Wilhelm Karl.

*Or are the initials for Werner Krause?* Martin felt disoriented.

Anna’s surprising revelation suddenly seemed plausible, but he wasn’t ready to blindly accept it.

“And why...?”

Anna lifted her hand, interrupting him. She wasn’t looking at him, but rather glanced to her left.

Martin lifted his gaze. The waiter had finally made way to their table. He was a kid, little more than twenty years old, who tried hiding his boyish face with an unflattering mustache.

“Ready to order?”

“Anna?” Martin asked.

“A cappuccino.”

He looked at the waiter.

“A cappuccino and an espresso, then.”

“Right away.” The waiter left, twisting his way through the chairs.

Martin and Anna looked at each other.

“You seem disappointed.”

“I am a bit disappointed,” Martin admitted. “I thought Wilhelm trusted me fully, but now I see I was wrong.”

“No, don’t think that. I’m sure Werner had complete confidence in you, otherwise he never would have left you this letter. There’s a reason he chose us.”

Anna was right. In the end, was it possible that Wilhelm was called Werner? Martin had come to the encounter looking for answers, and had only found more questions.

He looked at the envelope, still sealed on top of the table.

*In there lie the answers.*

Martin took the envelope and looked at Anna.

“May I?”

“Of course.”

He studied the envelope. Indeed, it was identical to the one Wilhelm – *or Werner?* – had left him. He passed his fingers over the wax seal, feeling the letters WK in relief.

*Wilhelm Karl? Werner Krause?*

He finally opened it, breaking the seal and opening the flap carefully.

He slipped his fingers inside and extracted a piece of paper. It was folded in four.

His pulse sped. He was on the verge of opening the letter but stopped. Anna looked on intensely.

“It’s for you,” Martin told her. He reached over and offered the paper.

Anna accepted the paper and looked it over. She undid one fold, then the other, and began to read.

Martin held back the impulse to grab the letter from her hands. Anna squinted, confused.

“I don’t understand it,” she said.

“It’s an encrypted message,” Martin explained, excited. “My letter has the other half of the message. Both halves are needed to break the code.”

Anna appeared even more confused. She looked at the sheet a few seconds without understanding.

“An encrypted message,” she repeated. “But there are no instructions, only these columns of letters...”

Martin felt a rush of adrenaline. *The key.*

“That’s not necessary,” he said. “We don’t need instructions. I believe I know how to decipher the message.”

Martin reached his hand into his shirt pocket and took out his letter and the table he used the previous evening. He slid the letter over the table to Anna.

“I need you to help me,” he told her. He took out a pen and grabbed a napkin. “I need you to read each letter from both of the messages. The first letter from each paper, then the second letter...”

“Yes, I think I get it,” Anna said, looking unconvinced. She placed both papers facing herself, looked at one, then the other.

“Z and I,” she said.

Martin followed his pointer fingers along column Z and row I of the table, until finding the letter H.

“Z and I is the letter H,” he announced triumphantly. He wrote “H” on the napkin. “What are the two that follow?”

Anna consulted the sheets.

“L and Z.”

“L and Z,” Martin repeated. He checked the table and wrote the letter K.

*Hk? What word begins with “hk”?*

“What letters come next?”

Anna checked both sheets again.

“A, and the other is W.”

Martin looked for the intersection of the row A and the column W. *W*.

*Hkw?*

“This is no good. May I?” he asked, reaching over.

Anna gave him both letters. Martin put them on the table and closely examined the other half of the code.

```
IZWH JLHU JWAZ TETY MPKW EXWB IMOP
RHWQ UMJK WBFB ZYAH ZKIG ZHXO XWWL
AFRM KBSM GBHW BTPA QLYM PJRZ MLIF
BKQR UROE DUAU IAEE YRED JZEA WFFJ
GWEE VKNU JGYK SNEE IEKT LCWC MVWB
JKJJ UIQA DAQK ETXN RFSP AZDP MJTK
QLRM QUPW IGIY LWIK XQGB ZXOC KQHK
OZEK XYGX PTMG CIMR CIQR QCPA UXMU
KNYU KYUY DWTB HQIX REPC VDQU HJEO
NSJQ BVCA FVGK VUOY WGJE VERM KALO
YPUJ ZJIG AKXM VIQT RXZV GTYS XAMB
QJMU YTRJ CZQD TPWY VYIF ODLU FFXN
LCVO ENVR KTWP BIET MHCR OUVZ RJMX
TBNS RREL LGDJ MVMN ZGRP FJYZ JYXH
MHUX QGIS JSPM YBCJ ENYH VOCQ DQLB
JPMT MVVG IRAZ NKQZ UMMQ DFYR PVJI
TQHP OEZB YRNI ZIOF EAVC BBRX YTSD
OABM MVGG VXOB VHFB MFUH CXXM OTZC
TFJP QGJV EGFN WFPI NVOD BEGQ WROM
CWGZ LKBH DSMX UMAA STXQ PLIV YAGY
HCKY JBHT IINY DLWI BNXJ GJDA TOKA
QSFB AANE VVFE JEKI ZOXD MMKW APCF
EPDW CDZZ JDVL HIMA BOJB NRHS NFPX
KTXM QXSZ XYSH IJWJ EKLS HQPU JZED
NHCN FEUC FGJU NVMU XOPP KZDT SLDA
FBLF KSYP BNTU QNTX
```

The letters were different from those on his message but the structure remained the same: the same number of rows and columns, the same number of letters in the last row. *This has to work.*

To make sure he hadn’t made a mistake in the procedure he tried decoding ZLAK and IZWH again.

*HKWE.*

The euphoria he had felt before quickly faded. He shook his head in frustration.

Anna read his expression.

“What happened?”

“Nothing,” Martin sighed. “I was wrong. I don’t know how to decipher the code.”

They stayed silent for a moment.

“I don’t understand,” he continued. “I was sure the message was split into two parts, but I was mistaken in how to break the code.”

“And neither one of the envelopes contain instructions.”

“No.”

Anna nodded slowly.

“So then how can we decode it?”

“I don’t know!” Martin exclaimed, frustrated. He lowered his voice: “I don’t know. I don’t understand why he left us an encrypted message with no instructions. And why leave us a message in code? If he wanted to tell us something, why not write it, plain and simple? I would have never expected such a thing from Wilhelm.”

“No?” Anna said, raising an eyebrow. “Actually, it seems something very typical of him.”

Martin gave her a blank look. Anna continued.

“I suppose that Werner never told you about his past, during the war.”

Martin conceded that he knew very little of Wilhelm’s past. It was another one of the topics the old man preferred avoiding. He knew that Wilhelm was born in Germany and had moved to Spain after World War II, but he didn’t know the details.

“What does that have to do with codes? What happened during the war?”

Anna leaned forward and began to speak in a soft voice.

“During the war...” She stopped abruptly and leaned back in her chair.

*What the hell...?*

“Cappuccino?” the waiter asked. Martin hadn’t even seen him arrive.

“For me,” Anna said.

He set the cappuccino in front of her.

“Espresso?”

Anna looked at him with a frown.

“What do you think?”

Martin smiled. *She has the same attitude as Wilhelm.*

The waiter looked away and set the espresso down for Martin.

“Enjoy,” he said as he turned and disappeared quickly.

Anna shook her head, annoyed by the waiter. She leaned forward in position to restart the conversation, and spoke quietly.

“During the war the Germans drafted Werner when he was still a teenager.”

“Right,” Martin said. “Towards the end of the war, the Germans drafted teenagers, the elderly and even children to fight.” He shook with disgust upon the idea.

“Yes; but they didn’t conscript Werner at the end of the war, nor did they conscript him to fight.”

“No?”

“No. They drafted Werner, along with other brilliant teenagers, to work in the *Beobachtungsdienst*.”

“Beo...?”

“*Beobachtungsdienst*,” Anna repeated. “The intelligence service of the *Kriegsmarine*; the Nazi’s secret group of cryptanalysts.”

## 16

Martin took a few seconds to react.

*Wilhelm? Wilhelm in a secret Nazi group of cryptanalysts?*

He felt as though the world was slowly crumbling around him. His friend and mentor had been brutally killed. And as if that wasn't disturbing enough, he was discovering that his name was false and that he had a much more complicated past than Martin had ever imagined.

He shook his head. He felt dizzy. There were too many revelations to easily assimilate.

*No, it's impossible*, he thought. Then he peered at the sheet on the table, the encoded message that Wilhelm – *Werner* – had made appear after his death and he had to admit that the strange actions of his old mentor started to make sense.

*Werner... part of a secret Nazi group of cryptanalysts.*

Anna seemed to read his thoughts.

"Hard to believe, eh?"

"It's just... I never would have imagined."

"I understand," Anna smiled. "It was a great surprise for me when I found out."

Martin sighed.

"This complicates things."

"Why?" Anna asked.

"Because neither one of us knows anything about codes."

Anna looked at him, confused.

"I don't get it."

"We know nothing about codes, Anna." Martin settled into his chair. "Perhaps we could have deciphered a message coded by a regular person, but how can we with a message coded by an encryption expert? We don't have a chance."

Anna nodded slowly.

"And can't we bring it to a coding and encryption specialist?"

"No," said Martin, who had already considered that. "Werner went to a lot of trouble for this message to come into our hands after his death – not to just anyone, but to us. We have no idea what this message says, but apparently it's something confidential and very important."

*I called him Werner.*

They remained silent for a moment.

"If Werner worked in a group of cryptanalysts during the war," Anna said, thinking out loud, "and he wanted to leave us this message, not to just anyone, as you say... and he knows we're not code experts... he must have left instructions, right?"

“Yes,” Martin agreed. “That’s what I thought when I failed to break the code on my own, but since the instructions were for you and me to find each other, I figured you would have the instructions, the key...”

“...but instead, I have more random letters.”

“Exactly.”

Anna looked disappointed.

“So, what can we do?”

Martin looked at the code, defeated.

“I don’t know, Anna. Perhaps we’ll simply never be able to break it.”

Anna frowned.

“Never? Werner, my great-uncle, your friend, entrusted us with a message to read after his death... and we’ll never know what it says?”

“It’s a possibility,” Martin admitted. “We can spend years going in circles like a dog chasing its tail, without getting anywhere.”

“And that doesn’t worry you?”

“Of course I’m worried, Anna!” Martin lowered his voice. “But that’s not the only thing that concerns me.”

He swallowed.

“This could be very dangerous,” he continued.

“Because of the way Werner died?”

The image of Werner and the red stain on the white leather jumped back into his head and he felt nauseated.

“Yes, because he was murdered. And because he left a coded message with a lawyer to be delivered after his death.”

“Are you saying that...”

“That perhaps Werner was afraid of being murdered. That perhaps *he knew* he would be murdered.”

Martin took a breath.

“That is what worries me, Anna. It’s something that I’ve asked myself since it happened. Who would want to see Werner dead? Werner didn’t have problems with anyone. Later the lawyer gave me the message in the envelope and told me he had saved it for forty years...”

“Martin...” Anna interrupted.

“Yes, forty years. Which means Werner held a secret for decades, a secret that made him fear for his life. That’s when I thought I could be getting myself into something dangerous, but I had no idea what.”

“Martin,” Anna insisted.

“And now I find out that Wilhelm’s real name is Werner and that he had worked as a cryptanalyst during the war. This is all too odd to be a coincidence, Anna. I’m sure it’s all related. I think someone killed Werner because he had a secret, something that happened during the war, something related to the Nazis. A secret for which someone is still willing to kill, more than half a century later. A secret that Werner didn’t want to die with him and that he’s trying to communicate to us.”

Martin leaned back in his chair and exhaled with satisfaction. He finally had organized his thoughts and was able to articulate the situation in which they found themselves. He paused so Anna would have the opportunity to digest his explanation.

But Anna was not paying him any attention. She looked furtively over his shoulder.

“What is it?”

He began to turn his head, but Anna stopped him.

“Don’t look!” she whispered, lowering her head. Her face was worried.

“What is it?” Martin repeated quietly.

“There’s a man... he’s watching us. And I think he just took a picture of us with a phone.”

A chill ran through Martin’s back. *We’re being followed.*

“I’m not positive, I don’t know,” Anna said, forcing herself not to look. “But I think he’s watching us.”

*Keep calm*, Martin told himself. *Maybe Anna is getting overly anxious.* He had to make sure.

He sat up in his chair and raised a hand, pretending to call the waiter. Trying to be as natural as possible, he turned in the direction Anna had been looking.

*Who’s watching us?*

And he saw him. Every muscle in his body tensed up. The man from the plaza, with the goatee and the intense blue eyes, watched Martin intently.



# 17

*We need to get out of here.*

He restrained the impulse to run: that might give them a few seconds head start but they wouldn't escape a well-trained pursuer. That was a risk they couldn't take.

"You're right, Anna. We're being followed. I saw him in the plaza yesterday and I saw him again today."

*"We" are not being followed; "I" am being followed.*

Anna's eyes opened wide.

"Do you think it's about..."

Martin nodded. He had no doubt that threatening-looking man was after Werner's secret. *What am I getting into?* he asked himself once again.

"And what do we do?" Anna asked with alarm.

"I'm thinking. Don't look at him. So he doesn't realize we've seen him." It was barely an advantage but it was all they had, and he wanted to keep it.

He considered his options. They couldn't run away – they would lose their head start almost immediately. On the other hand, the stairs to the metro station were only a short distance from the café. The Sol station was complicated enough to be able to lose him among the crowds; and even more important, there were several metro and train lines that left in all directions.

But their stalker had probably considered that already. When they leave he'd go after them and the most obvious place to look was the station. But how far away was the café? Twenty yards? Fifty yards? He had never paid attention. *Because I've never had to flee from a stalker.*

They could pretend to not have seen him and walk away calmly. They could try to lose him in the city, but they might not have another opportunity to improvise an escape, and Martin felt better having a plan.

It was possible the man would attack them as well. Even though he hadn't up until now, they didn't know his intentions. Perhaps he had been waiting for the two halves of the code to come together in order to take them.

No, their only option was an immediate escape. His first instinct had been to run away towards the metro, though the chances of getting away were slim. Martin knew it, and their attacker knew it.

That gave him an idea.

"Anna, when I stand up I want you to follow me. I need you to do exactly as I say."

Anna nodded.

Martin put away the papers and made a huge effort to sound natural as he called for the waiter.

## 18

Sébastien lowered his gaze and clenched his jaw. This time there was no doubt: Martin and the woman had seen him. Was it possible they had recognized him?

He pretended to examine his coffee. He picked up the cup and sipped, forcing himself to keep his eyes on the table.

And so what if they had seen him? They had no training. At this very moment they were probably paralyzed with fear; their natural reaction would be to run away. They were defenseless little rabbits and he was a hungry wolf. Sébastien smiled at the image.

But one detail bothered him. *Who is the woman?* Now there were two to follow; he hoped they didn't split. If they did, he would have to follow Martin, but the woman could be important. He felt he lacked all the information he needed. He would have to investigate.

He took out his mobile and activated the camera. He pointed it casually towards Martin and the woman's table—

"Happy Birthday, sir!"

Sébastien lifted his gaze. The waiter stood in front of his table, completely blocking his line of sight. He brought a plate with a slice of cake and a sparkling candle. Two other waiters came to his side, smiling. Sébastien looked at the them, his mouth wide open, and before he could react, they began to sing.

"Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday..."

He jumped up and slammed the waiter aside. The waiter lost his balance and dropped the plate as he tried catching hold of the table. Everyone looked in their direction; the café suddenly went quiet, except for a few gasps of surprise and the sound of the plate shattering on the ground.

Finally Sébastien's eyes landed on Martin and the woman's table. It was empty.

Despite himself, he couldn't resist a grin. The amateurs were putting up a fight. Better that way; he enjoyed challenges. Of course, Martin and the woman didn't represent a true challenge, but it was more gratifying when his prey realized they were being hunted. He found it satisfying knowing the fear they must be feeling that very moment.

He ran to the café's exit, looked around and took off towards the metro without hesitation. It was important not to lose them among the crowd of people.

*Poor little rabbits. No matter how fast they run, they'll end up in the jaw of the wolf.*

## 19

Sébastien ran down the escalator. The Sol station was a complicated labyrinth of tunnels, stairways and elevators that connected metro lines and the local train that passed through.

He looked around. There was no sign of Martin and the woman.

In what direction had they gone? Metro or train? *Merde!*

He had to make a decision immediately. In a matter of seconds, Martin and the woman could be getting away at sixty miles an hour.

He tried putting himself in their shoes. They were scared and confused. They were the prey. Prey doesn't make complex plans but rather acts on instinct.

They had left the café running. The metro entrance was right in front of them, a short distance. Their most natural reaction was...

*Return to the car.*

Sébastien shook his head. *Idiot.* Perhaps they hadn't even seen the metro station – scared, they would have run to the car.

How had he overlooked that? He had followed Martin from his home. He had left his car in the same parking garage and had given Martin a few yards' distance before trailing him. The dummy hadn't seen him, obviously.

*"The dummy" is getting away.*

Angry at himself, he ran up the stairs towards the plaza. How much time had passed since leaving the café? Three minutes? Four minutes? He had lost sight of Martin and the woman for only seconds. That gave them, what? At most one more minute.

A five-minute head start. *I can still catch them in the parking garage.*

Martin and the woman wanted to go unnoticed. But Sébastien no longer cared about hiding. He could run, while his prey would rather not risk drawing attention. He smiled with satisfaction. His physical condition was superb; it was impossible for two average people to beat him.

He began to sprint, dodging through tourists. It took him just two minutes to reach the garage.

His certainty wavered. Could they possibly have gotten there before him? *And if they already took off?* No, they couldn't have. He ran up the second level of the parking garage and immediately felt relieved: Martin's car was still there, at the far end. He had caught up to them.

He hid behind a column. Now the important part was that they didn't escape.

He quickly analyzed the situation. There was only one exit and entrance, where he had gone up. To exit, the car would have to cross in front of him. Martin and the woman were just ordinary people. If he stepped in front of the car in motion, they would definitely stop.

Sébastien smiled. *Got 'em.*

He ducked and approached Martin's car using the other vehicles as cover.

He sped up, reaching the car next to Martin's. *Why hadn't they started up yet?*

Was it possible they were planning an ambush?

He automatically lifted his pant leg and took out the *Heckler & Koch* he wore on his ankle.

He breathed deep and in one fluid movement stood up and jumped forward, aiming at the car.

He stayed motionless a few seconds, staring at it.

*Empty.*

He lowered the gun. *Merde!*

Martin and the woman, his targets, two ordinary, average people, had escaped him.

It didn't matter, they had few places to go.

Sébastien viciously kicked his boot against the car wheel.

He holstered the weapon and walked towards his own car, huffing. Now he was furious, and that made him twice as dangerous.

*They don't know whom they're messing with.*

## 20

Martin tried to calm himself. He was gasping for air and his hands trembled. He forced himself to take several deep breaths.

He had no way of knowing if his strategy had worked. How much time had passed? Two, three minutes? *I should have looked at my watch.*

Time was crucial to the success of his plan: a few seconds too soon or too late and everything could be ruined. Now there was only one way to find out.

He opened the door and left the stall. The rest of the bathroom was empty.

The sounds of the café drifted in softly. He thought he heard some type of commotion while running to the bathrooms, but wasn't sure.

He risked moving into the hallway – it was also empty. He tentatively knocked on the women's door. Anna opened an inch; the tension in her face visibly softened upon seeing Martin.

"Did he leave?" she asked, opening the door.

"I don't know. I don't see him," Martin responded. "But we have to leave."

His plan had worked but they couldn't waste a second. For the moment they had managed to distract the man but he could return at any time. Before the hasty escape they could pretend not to have seen him, but after their trick they had exposed themselves. The man now knew they were trying to lose him.

"Where shall we go? To the police?"

"No," Martin said quickly. Anna raised an eyebrow, but made no comment.

Maybe going to the police was the most sound idea, but after the heat he had received from Olivera and Palermo, Martin didn't like it at all. Also, he himself had concealed information – he hadn't mentioned Wilhelm's envelope, nor did he plan on mentioning it. And that could cause him problems.

His mind returned to the envelope. The code. The key to this entire mystery. Martin hoped that if he was able to solve it, he might understand what was going on, who was chasing them and why, and who had killed Werner.

*That is, if we solve the code. It's easy to say we will, but we may never do it.*

And yet...

Martin had the strange feeling that he was close to solving it. Just before seeing his stalker and the quick escape, something he or Anna had said had stuck in his subconscious and the wheels in his head had begun to turn. But the idea faded whenever he tried to directly recall it.

“We have to decipher the message,” he said at last. “We have to know what’s going on. We need time and a quiet place.”

“Your apartment?”

“No. That man has followed me since I first came to the plaza, if not even earlier. He certainly knows where I live.”

“And my hotel?”

Martin nodded slowly.

“Not a bad idea. Is it far?”

“On Paseo del Prado. I walked here.”

“Yes, it’s close. But we can’t walk; we can’t risk being seen on the street.”

And neither could they return to the car, Martin thought. The man might be lurking there. Nor the metro stop; the plan, after all, was based on the assumption that the stalker would go in that direction. They couldn’t risk going towards him.

“Let’s go,” Martin said. “Don’t stop for anything.”

They passed through the café as quickly as possible, and in a few seconds arrived at the street and hailed a taxi.

Martin slumped into the seat, closed his eyes and breathed. They were safe.

For now.



## 21

Detective Olivera stared impassively at the computer screen. Except for a title on the report, it was blank.

He drummed his fingers on the table. The words didn't flow. He began to write a sentence but changed his mind mid-phrase and erased it.

*I could be doing something useful but instead I have to be wasting my time writing these goddamned reports. The privileges of being detective.*

He heard footsteps, someone came trotting through the hallway. *About 5'11, 200 pounds.* Olivera smiled: old habits die hard.

An instant later Palermo entered his office, breathless. He waved a folder in his hands and opened his mouth to speak, but gasped for air instead.

"Sit down, Palermo. What is it?"

Palermo sat in front of the detective, put the folder on the table and breathed a couple more times.

"Wagner," he said at last.

Olivera suddenly became alert. *The businessman's murder.*

He hadn't caught a case like this in some time. Generally these weren't easy cases, and without a murder weapon and having discarded family members as suspects, he wasn't very optimistic. But Palermo's excitement could bode well for an important development.

"Anything new?"

"Yes," Palermo said, still flustered. "One of the European databases found a match for the prints."

"Fantastic!" Olivera exclaimed. That greatly improved their chances of solving the case. "Do we have the file?"

"Not yet; I already got in contact with them to send it."

Olivera frowned. Getting the file could take one or two days. They both knew it.

"But there's something else," Palermo said. He retrieved several photos from the folder and spread them over the table. "They're from surveillance."

Olivera examined the photos. They were taken from far away. A man and a woman shaking hands, the man and woman talking, then walking away.

"Torres?"

"Yes, sir. At the Puerta del Sol, less than one hour ago."

"Who is the woman?"

Palermo turned red.

“We don’t know yet, sir.”

“Okay. So?” Olivera asked, getting impatient.

Palermo pointed to the other photos. A stocky man with short hair, muscular, with the look of a gangster, sitting on a plaza bench. Looking towards the side. Reading a magazine. Then walking behind Martin and the woman.

Olivera looked at Palermo. Palermo took out a pair of documents from the folder and showed them to Olivera.

“Sébastien Leclerc. He’s the leader of a Neo-Nazi group in Toulouse.”

Olivera eyed Sébastien’s dossier. Almost forty years old, but as an adolescent had already ran into problems with the police; a large number of entries for violent aggression, many of those with racial or religious motives; leader of a Neo-Nazi gang that was also responsible for all types of violent acts and vandalism; six years in jail for beating a vagrant to death, early release for good conduct.

*This isn’t good.*

“Torres and Leclerc – did they make contact?”

“I don’t have that information, sir. Our agent’s last report is that they entered a café on the plaza.”

“*Together?*” Olivera exclaimed.

“Minutes apart.”

The detective felt goosebumps. Sébastien Leclerc, a French Neo-Nazi in Madrid, with a criminal background, meeting discreetly with Martin Torres, who was linked to the killing of a businessman and had a weak alibi.

Either Martin was an accomplished liar, or the case was more complex than it seemed.

Palermo looked at him expectantly.

“What shall we do, sir?”

Olivera thought a few seconds.

“We need that file, Palermo. Do whatever you need to get it. We need to identify those prints *now*.”

## 22

Anna's hotel room was extremely tidy. It was small, with a bed, a desk facing the window and a chair. Except for a small suitcase in the corner, the room appeared vacant.

Anna seemed to read his thoughts.

"I only planned on staying a couple days," she explained. "I didn't know if I'd find anyone when I went to the plaza."

She turned on the television and switched to a news channel.

"I need a minute," she said. She entered the bathroom and shut the door.

Martin left the encrypted letters on the desk and sat down. He breathed deeply. Just two or three hours ago he had been at his home, also asking himself if he'd find anyone in the plaza.

It was hard to absorb all that had happened since then: he had met Anna, had discovered that his friend and mentor used a false name and that he was ignorant of critical facts in his past, had discovered that someone was following him for days, and had improvised an ingenious escape. And now, for the first time in what felt like much more than two or three hours, he felt safe.

He couldn't suppress a yawn and his eyelids felt heavy, though it was only a bit later than four in the afternoon. *The adrenaline high is fading.*

But he couldn't sleep. He couldn't rest. Despite the relative calm he felt, his situation was just as dangerous as a short time before.

*The letter.*

He reexamined the encoded message. Letters and letters without any meaning. But Martin knew it was the key to everything, the explanation to all that happened the past several days. He had to decode it.

He mentally reviewed his previous attempts. He had tried reading the letters by column. He had tried reading the first letter from each block, or skipping a letter. He had tried replacing each letter for another.

No. It must be the Vernam cipher. The two halves were unique but had the same structure. And yet, he had tried it and failed.

He had come full circle again. It was useless; his ideas went in a circle and always returned to the beginning. Martin felt – as he had told Anna before – like a dog chasing its own tail.

*Wait a minute.*

Martin held his breath. *Could it be?*

He took a deep breath, trying his best to contain his excitement. His heartbeat raced.

*Circular, always returning to the beginning. Like a dog chasing its tail.*

He tried keeping calm. He could be wrong.

He pulled the chair to the desk. He placed the alphabet grid he made the previous day next to the two encoded letters. He looked for something to write with, and found a pen and a notepad with the hotel's name.

It was the moment of truth.

He read the first letter of his message and the last letter of Anna's. *Like a dog pursuing its own tail.* Z and X. He followed the corresponding row and column on the grid until his fingers met.

*W.*

He repeated the method with the second letter of one message and the penultimate of the other, with the third and the third from last, each time getting more excited. At the end of the sixth block of letters, he stopped.

He looked at the notepad with the string of letters he had written. He was stunned.

WENN SIED IESE NBRI EFLE SEN

*“Wenn Sie diesen Brief lesen...”*

Martin understood just enough German to comprehend the first sentence.

*“When you read this letter...”*

“Anna!” Martin yelled, jumping up.

## 23

*“When you read this letter, I’m surely dead. And I’m afraid my passing has not been peaceful.*

*I escaped my past for years. I changed my identity and hid in different countries until I finally thought I was safe.*

*But they found me. Their message was clear: my silence or my life. I was a coward and I chose to live. And the price to pay was a life under their surveillance.*

*The terrible secret I keep must not die with me. The truth shall be known. I can only trust Richter and Vogel from Zürich to preserve the evidence until the time comes to deliver it to you. The responsibility to use this information in the best manner possible is now in your hands.*

*Werner Krause, 1967.”*

## 24

Martin and Anna were left staring at the letter for almost a minute, without uttering a single word. The catchy jingles from the television commercials sounded strangely dissonant.

Martin felt a chill. He sat slowly. His worst fears had been confirmed: Werner had made them heirs to a decades-old secret which was directly responsible for his brutal murder.

He swiveled the chair. Anna had sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the floor. She was as stunned as him. After a few seconds she raised her head and their eyes met.

“What now?”

Martin shook his head. *What now? Very good question.*

He tried organizing his thoughts. His first reaction was to escape, turn back the previous events somehow, disentangle himself from the matter. Of course, that was impossible. Even beyond his own duty towards Werner, the last hours’ events made it clear that they had put in motion something that could not be stopped. They were no longer safe. The man in the plaza, surely involved in Werner’s brutal murder, was after them, and as much as they would like to abandon the whole matter, that man was not simply going to disappear.

Besides, they still didn’t actually know what was going on. They knew someone was after Werner’s secret, which he had concealed for decades and which had eventually cost him his life, but they didn’t know what the secret was. Perhaps with that information they had a better chance of freeing themselves for good from the situation in which they found themselves.

But they didn’t have that information. They had a vague reference to Zürich, which felt more like the second clue on a treasure hunt. If they could no longer turn back, perhaps going forward was their best alternative.

*Maybe it’s the only alternative.*

Martin paused. He imagined himself traveling to Zürich, entering a Swiss bank to recover a document hidden for decades, all the while an assassin on his trail. It made his stomach turn. *I’m not Jason Bourne.*

The last option was to go to the police. He could explain in detail everything that had happened since Werner’s murder: the encrypted message, the meeting in the park, the escape from their pursuer, the message’s contents. As uncomfortable as Olivera and Palermo’s treatment had made him feel, and as unbelievable as his story sounded, it was the truth. And maybe involving the police would be enough so the stalker would abandon his pursuit.

*Or not,* Martin thought, and it gave him goosebumps. Perhaps the man in the plaza was a random maniac; perhaps he was just an insignificant pawn in a much larger, more dangerous

game. He thought of what Anna had revealed hours before: that Werner had worked for the Nazi code-breakers during the war. They didn't know with whom they were getting involved; they could be confronting extremely powerful forces.

*Three alternatives. All uncertain. All dangerous.*

Perhaps another idea had occurred to Anna that had escaped him. He looked at her and was going to ask her but stopped short.

Anna was pale, with a terrified expression. She had her back against the wall and her hands were tense as if she wanted to cling to it. She stared at the television.

Breaking news. A large red banner with white text on the bottom of the screen announced an "IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENT IN THE MURDER OF THE BUSINESS-MAN."

"Police have confirmed the existence of solid clues in the murder of the businessman," the reporter said. "The investigation has moved forward thanks to the identification of fingerprints found at the crime scene."

The image changed and in its place the suspect's photograph appeared. Anna gasped. Martin had to support himself on the chair.

It was a familiar face.

"Police have declared this individual a 'person of interest,'" the reporter continued, "whom they have identified as Martin Torres."

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