

Epigraph

No one in this world, so far as I know—and I have searched the records for years, and employed agents to help me—has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people. Nor has anyone ever lost public office thereby.

H.L. MENCKEN

Gangsters do what they want, suckers do what they can.

NAS

Chapter 1: Preludio

The man slid something across the table. She picked up a small metal disc, just wider than a dollar quarter.

'Don't lose it.' He sipped his coffee.

She pocketed the disc. 'There won't be no trouble.'

'There could be. You know it ain't riskless, '

'I know, I've danced this dance before.'

He nodded once. 'Then we're done here.'

She stood. End of conversation.

Chapter 2: Cancún

The beach was littered with multicolored swimsuits and mats. Bass lines from the cabanas pulsed like a subterranean heartbeat. Tyler Hollis surveyed it from the balcony of his suite three floors up as he brought the glass of mezcal to his lips. The ads for the all-inclusive couples-only resort promised an ‘unparalleled fusion of elegance and comfort,’ but after three days in its manufactured exuberance it did little to quell his worries. He savored another sip, his MIT class ring catching the afternoon light as he scrolled through notifications on his phone.

The glass door behind him slid open with a faint whisper and he turned back. She emerged in a half-open white silk bathrobe, dark hair cascading over tanned shoulders with golden earrings beneath. The sight transported him to that private party in Dubai a month ago where he'd spotted her as she was discussing portfolio theory with a hedge fund manager. She stepped beside him and glanced at him with that look he could never quite read.

‘You know what your problem is?’ she said, reaching for his glass, ‘you worry too much about what others see.’ Her Spanish accent colored the words with a musical lilt. She took a sip, leaving a coral imprint on the rim of the tumbler. ‘Where I grew up, we called men like you espejos, mirrors, always reflecting others’ expectations.’

He watched her trail a finger along the glass edge. ‘And what do you see, Alma?’

‘You pretend everything’s perfect but you’re scared, am I right?’ She smiled and handed back the glass, the gesture graceful as everything else. What had started as an argument over a futile matter an hour ago had evolved into a therapy session. ‘Yeah I don’t know, could be my imagination, anyway...’ he concluded.

He’d never asked why she’d suddenly left Barcelona. She only mentioned a nearly-completed accounting degree abandoned for Dubai and its mercurial lifestyle. Just

like he'd never told her about his estranged family, his state attorney dad, or his past career as a Minecraft scammer.

He drained the last of the mezcal, welcoming the familiar sting. She moved closer to him and caressed his unshaven cheek. 'What's the plan for tonight? Quiero divertirme.' The thought brought a smirk as he checked his phone, but he let out a sigh—before he could lay out the evening revelries, a new message had appeared.

‘¿Qué pasa?’

‘Nothing, just another sucker harassing me.’

Someone who'd lost everything. They always wrote the same way. First the threats, then the begging, finally the broken acceptance.

‘My kids’ college fund was in Narcopanda, I trusted you,’ the Telegram message said.

Tyler's business school ethics professor would have had a field day with NarcoPanda—the ‘memecoin’ that Tyler created, nothing more than copycat software wrapped in tasteless aesthetics and vacuous promises. The logo featured a cartoonish panda face with an exaggeratedly aggressive expression, gang tattoos on its cheeks and forehead, a thick gold chain around its neck, stacks of dollar bills in the background. The website showcased the ‘NarcoPanda Manifesto’:

NarcoPanda is a meme-fueled blockchain
force for all DeFi degens. This Solana token is a
decentralized experiment at the intersection of
fearless cartel culture and the stoic resiliency of the
panda. NarcoPanda gathers a community of hustlers
and digital renegades who thrive for financial
freedom. Join the community and smuggle
NarcoPanda tokens into your frens' wallets!

Such was the gospel that Tyler's paid shills spread online. Dreams of wealth dressed as liberation from banks' tyranny, the usual spiel. With his associate in Dubai

they had crafted a fantasy of ‘quantum token contracts,’ empty verbiage that spoke like scripture to cohorts of men desperate to believe they were insiders. This was shortly after he dropped out of Warrington College of Business, which he never regretted.

After Narcopanda’s price had ballooned Tyler dumped his coins against old world money, leaving a litany of pleas in his wake on the project’s discussion platforms. Now he’d turned those broken hopes into premium mezcal.

‘You don’t really care, do you?’ She was peering over his shoulder at his messages. ‘These people crying about their money, they should have known better, right?’ Her accent caught on the words and made them sound almost innocent. But she knew exactly how these projects worked—only the insiders won, and she had tasted the profit herself.

Tyler tossed his phone away.

‘Trading’s a bitch, gotta be the shark, not the fish,’ he boasted before awkwardly pulling her into his arms.

‘You know, a shark is a fish too,’ Alma added.

‘Whatever.’

Chapter 3: Santa Cecilia

Chucho's fist slammed against the wall, cracking the brittle layer of beige paint. '¡Hijo de la chingada! Ese pinche pendejo dijo que era seguro.'

'Tranquilo, carnal.' Rafa's measured voice filled the room like smoke.

Chucho's finger jabbed at the screen. 'Ese dinero era del jefe.'

The dingy office overlooked Joaquín Amaro avenue, the central artery of Santa Cecilia that sliced through twenty-two tightly packed parallel streets. Both men had learned to walk on these narrow blocks, had played futbol in the shadow of the parish church, had watched as their neighborhood transformed from a working-class barrio of Guadalajara into cartel territory. The organization had grown up here too, in the state of Jalisco, its roots as deep as the jacaranda trees that lined the crumbling sidewalks.

From the second-floor window they could see the catholic cross of Parroquia Santa Cecilia, its base hidden behind thick stone walls enclosing the churchyard. The afternoon sun caught the edifice's colorful stained glass biblical scenes, creating halos of reflected light that Rafa and Chucho had watched since childhood, first as altar boys who'd served morning mass, later as men conducting ungodly business. The church bells still rang the hours, their bronze voice carrying over streets where at night teenage lookouts marked territory with spray paint and blood, where old women crossed themselves hurrying past once bloodless streets.

Chucho's stocky frame paced the worn linoleum, his thick brow furrowed with frustration as he watched Rafa hunched over the laptop computer. Seconds ticked by in tense silence, the only sounds the whirring fan and the bustling street. Rafa sat back, his face twisted in a grimace. 'A la verga,' he muttered, rubbing his temples. Chucho's dark eyes narrowed.

In a matter of hours the value of their cryptocurrency coins had been divided by a thousand as the NarcoPanda token collapsed. The initial investment of two hundred thousand dollars that had tripled in value was now a few hundred dollars—if buyers could be found at all, almost a week after the crash.

‘Pinche bitcoin de mierda,’ Rafa spat. ‘Esta madre es pura mamada.’ He pushed back from the desk and the cheap office chair groaned under the sudden movement. Chucho stopped pacing, and clarity settled over his features. ‘Los bitcoins no se esfumaron, güey. Nos chingaron.’ He leaned over Rafa’s shoulder and squinted at the laptop’s screen.

Rafa’s fingers struck the keyboard and they found the garish website of NarcoPanda, its cheesy graphics like a child’s joke to them. The ‘Team’ section showed a cartoon avatar wearing designer sunglasses with the username ‘Tyl4’ floating beneath it in pixelated letters.

‘Mira esto,’ Rafa said. The screen filled with images of luxury cars and beachfront views from an Instagram profile. The most recent photo showed an orange cocktail next to a swimming pool geo-tagged at some resort in Cancún.

‘Pinche presumido,’ Chucho growled. His eyes had taken on a predatory gleam. ‘¿Sabes quién está a cargo en Cancún?’

Rafa reached for his phone, his earlier panic hardening into something colder and more purposeful. ‘El Flaco tiene toda la plaza de Quintana Roo.’ He paused, a grim smile at his lips. ‘Sus muchachos conocen cada hotel, cada pinche piedra en Cancún.’

The fan filled the silence as the men contemplated what would come next. Below their window a group of children kicked a ball against the church wall, their laughter carrying up to the office like echoes from another world.

Chapter 4: Contrabando

The door to the suite clicked shut behind them, its sound lost in Alma's drunken giggling. The clock by the bed cast red numbers in the unlit bedroom: 4:47. Through the balcony doors left open the Caribbean night air carried distant music mixed with the waves' whisper.

Alma shed her dress in a feline motion and let it pool around her feet. She stumbled removing her heels and caught herself against the bathroom doorframe with a laugh that seemed to Tyler both invitation and mockery. The bathroom light clicked on and cast a wedge of white light across the thick carpet. He heard water running as his fingers worked clumsily at his shirt buttons, the cotton still damp with sweat from the dance floor.

He sat on the bed's edge, his head swimming. The night had been a blur of bottles and beats, of watching men watch Alma, of playing the role of the successful crypto entrepreneur. Now in the suite's half-light the performance felt distant. His phone buzzed. Another of these messages. He let it fade.

Alma appeared from the bathroom in a sheer lace nightgown, the black fabric playing between concealment and revelation. She moved toward him and her lips found his neck, taste of mint and tequila.

The first bang against the door came like a thunderclap. Then another, and another. Alma darted behind the bathroom door. The door burst open before Tyler realized what happened. Three men filled the doorway, dark shapes against the hallway light, a handgun held low but visible.

‘¿Dónde están los bitcoins, cabrón?’ The tallest one stepped forward, his voice unloud but edged with steel. ‘You stole crypto money, where is it?’

Tyler raised his hands, suddenly and violently sober. ‘There must be some mistake —‘

‘This is no mistake. We know you took the bitcoins.’ The man’s face remained in shadow but his teeth flashed white. ‘Where is it?’

‘I don’t know... I don’t have it... not here... it’s crypto money, on computers...’

‘The money is in your computer? In this thing?’ The man pointed Tyler’s laptop with his gun.

‘It’s... in computers in a bank, I can’t access it right now, not before tomorrow.’

The gunman pointed the barrel to Tyler’s forehead. ‘Not tomorrow.’

‘Exactly what do you want? How much?’

‘One million, one million dollars.’

‘Okay, okay, I need an address.’

The gunman’s eyes narrowed in confusion. ‘What address? I’m not giving you no address to deliver nothing.’

‘Not a physical address, a blockchain account. Like a bank account number. For the transfer.’

The gunman hesitated. ‘I don’t have that shit.’

‘Then I can’t send you anything.’

The gunman backed toward the door, barrel still trained on Tyler. ‘Mañana. We come back. One million dollars.’ He backed toward the door, gun still trained on Tyler. ‘And don’t try escape.’

They left, leaving the door open, after kicking a chair to the floor. The resort’s air conditioning hummed with sudden clarity.

‘Tyler, who are these people?’ She yelled, her gaze locked on his face.

‘Jesus fucking Christ.’ He stood up and moved toward the closet. ‘Fuck!’ His hands shook as he yanked clothes from hangers.

‘They said you stole their bitcoins.’

‘I don’t fucking know who buys in, okay? It’s crypto, it’s anonymous, that’s the whole point.’ He was stuffing shirts into his carry-on without folding them. ‘Just pack your shit. We gotta bounce before they come back.’

‘What, now?’

‘No, next week when we’re both dead. Yes, now!’ His voice cracked. ‘And keep your voice down.’

‘But you have enough—’

‘You seriously believe that if pay them back they’ll just give me a receipt and let us go? Trust me, we don’t want to know.’

He shut the room’s door and drew the curtains closed. He switched on the bathroom light and left its door half open to have enough light to pack their suitcases. Alma froze for a few seconds before she started collecting her clothing spread around the room, survival instinct kicking in. She finished packing her things while Tyler’s impatience grew.

‘Okay, listen.’ His voice dropped to a whisper. ‘We walk out casual, like we’re heading to an early breakfast. No luggage cart, we carry our own bags. You got that? Casual.’

‘Sí—yes.’ She’d thrown on black leggings and a grey resort polo, her hair hastily pulled back.

The hallway’s overhead light blinded them as he slowly opened the door. They could only hear their footsteps and luggage wheels rolling on the thick burgundy carpet. Once outside the building, laughter from a balcony, cats hunting in the gardens, two drunk resorters tottering to their suites. They made it to the lobby where the half-asleep clerk greeted them. ‘Buenas noches señores.’ After looking outside in vain for a taxi, spotting only a tourist minibus parked by the arched gate, Tyler ordered one to the clerk.

‘Sir, your taxi will be here in five minutes.’

‘Thank you,’ and they sat on the couch not far from glass doors, trying not to draw attention. Tyler checked flight times on his phone while Alma texted someone.

The lobby's speakers poured out music from a local radio, the polka-like beat and accordion of a norteño corrido amplifying their mezcal-induced headache. Alma found herself listening to the lyrics, the tale of a couple, Camellia and Emilio, smuggling marijuana from Tijuana to Los Angeles. On their return to Mexico, Emilio reveals that he's leaving her for another woman. Camelia's bullets write the final verse—'Sonarán siete balazos, Camelia a Emilio mataba'—and like the money she vanishes into legend.

Ten long minutes passed.

'Su taxi está aquí,' they heard the clerk say as a white cab pulled in.

They got outside as the twenty-something driver greeted them and helped them with their luggage in the trunk.

'A dónde vamos, señores?'

'Al aeropuerto por favor', Alma responded, Tyler already seated in the vehicle, struggling with the mobile airline reservation site.

'Muy bien, vámonos.'

They drove for twenty minutes through the lightless road to the airport, passing nothing but tropical trees and billboards. As the green airport sign emerged, he let out a breath. Almost out. He had reserved seats for the first flight to Miami, departing at 7am.

At the airport exit, the driver didn't pull out the main road but continued straight on towards the car rental and hotels area.

'Creo que se pasó la salida del aeropuerto,' Alma said.

'No se preocupe señora.'

'Just make a u-turn and take the airport exit,' Tyler said.

'Sí sí, it's okay, no problem.'

'Idiot,' Tyler muttered to Alma.

One mile later the driver slowed down but instead of turning back he entered a dirt road perpendicular to the main coastal road.

'Where the hell you going?' Tyler asked.

'¡No es el aeropuerto!' Alma added.

'No señores,' the driver agreed, 'no es.'

The taxi stopped before a low concrete house with barred windows, a lamppost casting shadows across its bleak façade. The passenger doors clicked open. Five men stood in the dusty yard waiting for them. Alma recognized the three men as two others approaching the taxi. One was tall with the lean strength of a boxer, the other was shorter and built like a bull, a handgun in his right hand. Their faces bore the same cold and indifferent expression.

‘Bienvenidos,’ the tall one said as he casually opened Tyler’s door. ‘We need to discuss your bitcoin business.’ They tried to resist but were pulled out of the taxi into the predawn darkness, a gun pointed to them and nowhere to run. Without a word they took out their luggage from the trunk and watched the taxi pull away, its tires grinding the gravel like a last whisper of comfort.

They entered the safehouse wherein the three men from the hotel were seated at a white plastic table that occupied the center of the main room under a mute ceiling fan. They saw metal shelves against a wall bearing detritus of the tenants’ enterprise: white plastic bags, stacks of papers, a tactical flashlight, a telescoping baton, food cans, bottles of Cerveza Montejo, half-empty bags of Sabritas that leaked crumbs over the dusty steel. In one corner, a 32-inch flatscreen sat on a milk crate and caught their reflection. In the opposite corner they saw a closet safe the size of a small fridge, its grey paint decorated with tags and stickers. Close to it, two cardboard boxes and a large worn out duffel bag laid on the floor’s emerald ceramic tiles whose stains and cracks veiled under a film of dust that recorded recent footprints.

‘Phones and watches, and silence,’ Rafa said, nodding toward Chucho, who held the handgun that they saw from the taxi.

They surrendered their electronics and jewelry, Tyler’s Rolex still warm from his wrist. Rafa patted them down with the efficiency of a man who’d done this countless times. He emptied their pockets of wallet, gums, loose peso notes. When Tyler’s mouth trembled with a ‘What the hell do you want?’, Rafa slapped his face with neither hesitation nor malice, just business.

‘Él no sabía que ese dinero era de ustedes, déjennos ir,’ Alma pleaded.

‘Te dije que te calles,’ Rafa snapped, shoving her towards a narrow hallway. Tyler followed, the muzzle of the gun at his back pressing him forward, eyes fixed on the floor.

The smell hit them first, ammonia and rot clinging to the back of the throat. The windowless room was empty save for a battered bucket and a lone water bottle in a corner, raw concrete walls with crude red bricks standing in place of a window like bad teeth in a ruined mouth.

‘Nos pelamos,’ Rafa muttered without looking at them, grabbing a keyring from his pocket with one hand, gripping the doorframe with the other.

‘Wait, I can pay you back now, we don’t have to wait—’ Tyler’s voice resonated in the concrete tomb. Rafa cut him off. ‘You said tomorrow, we’re happy to wait. Hasta mañana.’

The mechanical sound of the key lock echoed in the empty space and then there was nothing but darkness. Alma’s frantic questions mixed with curses directed at Tyler and his crypto business. Exhaustion finally overtook fear, and they slept.

Chapter 5: CriptoCielo

In the unlit room they couldn't see each other, the obscurity only broken by a blade of light beneath the door. Whatever time they had slept didn't feel restful and when they woke the stench felt more intense and it burnt their nostrils at each breath. Tyler's stomach cramped with hunger with a dull pain that had stopped feeling like appetite. Alma's throat burned with thirst.

‘¡Joder, esto es una puta pesadilla!’—she let out. She swore she felt insects crawling under her pants. She stopped yelling at Tyler and blaming him for their predicament when she had to use the bucket in a corner of the room—the opaque shadows alleviated the awkwardness and she kept on talking.

‘You must give them something, you have enough.’

‘Look, we need to play this smart,’ Tyler said, the entrepreneur’s confidence ringing hollow. ‘These guys aren’t exactly technology experts. I’ll figure something out to keep us safe.’

‘Don’t think they don’t know how crypto works,’ she said.

They heard the machinery of the door’s locks then welcomed the fresh air as it opened. Rafa stood in the frame in a crisp pale yellow shirt and fresh blue jeans. ‘Buenos días, amigos. I hope the room was comfortable enough.’

Blinking in the sudden light, they glanced at their surroundings. The room’s floor was a patchwork of decrepit grey tiles connected by blackened interstices. Dark marks scarred the surface like deep bruises on a pale skin, while small white stains speckled between them as droplets of some toxic residue. In the corners, drifts of gravel and dust had gathered, home to scuttling cockroaches that fled the light.

They moved to the main room where Chucho lounged against the wall near the television, thumbing through his phone, a brown leather holster at his hip. The ceiling fan

turned lazy circles to stir the heat without dispelling it. The morning sunrays through the barred windows cast prison-bar shadows across the cheap table where Rafa set down coffee in styrofoam cups and opened a plastic bag heavy with the smell of tamales.

‘Listen, man, I can fix this right now,’ Tyler said, crypto bro swagger creeping back. ‘Just let me pay you back and we can all walk away from this like—’

‘Ya cállate,’ Rafa cut him, unwrapping tamales with unhurried precision and chewing one as if he was alone in the room. He turned to Tyler.

‘You think you’re smart, no? Stealing from stupid gringos behind your computer.’ He took a sip of coffee. ‘You stole from the wrong people.’

‘Whoa, hold up—what did I even do to you guys? How could I know?’

‘NarcoPanda...’ Rafa’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. ‘You think that makes you some kind of gangster? Playing tough guy with your...’ he searched for the word, ‘...your blockchain bullshit?’

‘I had no idea you guys had—’

‘Five million.’

‘Come again?’

‘You heard me, güero. We want five million American dollars in your blockchain money.’ Rafa named the figure like a casual bet. Behind him, Chucho’s phone disappeared into his pocket.

‘Five million? That’s insane, man. I don’t have that kind of—’

‘Tyler!’ Alma cut in—she had seen his wallets.

Tyler’s head snapped toward her. The fan clicked through another revolution in the silence.

‘Your computer,’ Rafa said, gesturing toward their bags slumped against the wall. Chucho’s hand settled on his holster.

Tyler retrieved his Macbook from his backpack and laid it on the table in front of him. Rafa pulled his chair closer close enough that Tyler could smell coffee on his breath. ‘Try anything stupid, like message police or whatever clever idea you have, and...’ He let Tyler’s imagination finish his thought.

‘Okay, I need internet and an address to send it to. Look, just let me use my phone and—‘

‘No phone.’ Rafa pulled out his own. ‘You use my hotspot.’

‘Fine, I’ll send you USDT. It’s like dollars but on the blockchain, you know? Same value, just digital, and—‘

‘We know what Tether is, pendejo,’ Chucho cut in from his corner.

‘Ah, of course.’

Chucho pulled opened the CriptoCielo application on his phone, a ‘no KYC’ and ‘no questions asked’ crypto exchange based out of Panama that was friendly to the cartel. Unlike the major US exchanges, CriptoCielo didn’t demand any ID document, just a name and an address—you could sign up as Kim Jong-Un from Pyongyang and you wouldn’t be bothered by their compliance department, inexistent anyway.

Chucho navigated to the ‘Depósito’ screen and copied the wallet address displayed there. ‘Okay, here’s the address.’

Tyler opened his laptop. His hands were shaking as he opened his wallet application. The portfolio overview glared up at him in accusatory green: \$9,147,013.

Rafa’s eyes widened as he leaned over to look at the screen. His breath was hot against Tyler’s cheek. He spelled the number out, ‘nueve millones, ciento cuarenta y siete mil, y trece.’ He’d made a slight pause and glanced at Chucho before saying thirteen.

‘You send all of it, now.’

‘All of it?’ Tyler’s voice cracked. ‘You said five million. I need the rest to—‘

‘Plans have changed. You can round it to nine millions.’ Rafa’s tone allowed no argument. Chucho showed Tyler his phone’s screen with the wallet address displayed on it:

0xa435e2d26d33b5972b6638363c8dedb38f6469066

Tyler’s hands shook as he stared at the long string of characters. He’d have to copy it manually—no room for error. ‘Wait,’ he said, fighting to steady his voice. ‘Let me double-check the address. If there’s a mistake—‘

His fingers moved mechanically as he set up a test transaction for a hundred dollars. He pulled up Etherscan, a website showing all blockchain transactions that would show them the transfer. 'Let's see if it shows up.'

They refreshed the page describing the wallet address' assets, and the 100 USDT appeared as an incoming transaction. Rafa nodded as the USDT landed in the CriptoCielo account.

'Okay, looks good,' Tyler said, his palms sweating as he tried to keep his composure. 'I'll send the rest now.' He hesitated, looking up at the man looming over him. 'Let's do half now, half later?'

Rafa stared at him. 'All of it.'

'Ok...' Tyler said quickly. 'I just—'

'Send it. Shut up.'

Tyler highlighted the address with his mouse cursor and selected 'Copy.' In his wallet interface, he clicked on 'Send' and pasted the address in the 'To' field, making sure he chose the correct blockchain network, Ethereum. His fingers trembled so badly he had to redo it twice. Nine million dollars. His entire wallet, amassed through months of hype and manipulation and now about to be drained in a click. He took a deep breath and pressed 'Continue.'

'Invalid address,' the error message said.

'Fuck,' Tyler muttered.

'What's wrong?' Rafa asked.

'I don't know, it should be the same.'

'It's shorter,' Alma said, even though he was sitting the farthest from the screen.

'What?'

'Look, you didn't copy the whole thing. You missed the last digits.'

'Oh shit, you're right. I must've missed part of it. Easy fix, hang on,' Tyler said, wiping sweat off his forehead. 'The last digit's a four, so I'll just add the missing numbers. Six, nine, zero, six-six. Okay.' He hit 'Continue,' no error this time. He double-checked the address against Rafa's screen, then clicked 'Confirm.'

Seconds stretched as they stared at the mobile screen, waiting for the six-digit figure to appear on CriptoCielo. Still no incoming funds. Tyler felt a growing stiffness in his shoulders and neck. He refreshed Etherscan, which showed the money had left Tyler's wallet. But the funds didn't show up in CriptoCielo.

Rafa looked up at Tyler, his eyes hard.

'Why is it taking so long?'

'I don't know, sometimes big transactions take longer. Verification and security stuff, you know?'

'No nos salgas con mamadas,' Chucho growled. He grabbed Tyler by the collar, yanking him out of the chair. 'You trying to fuck with us? Eh?'

'No, I swear!' Tyler raised his hands, his voice cracking with fear. 'Let me check the transaction details, see if there's—'

Chucho's fist slammed into his belly, doubling him over. Pain exploded through his abdomen as he crumpled to the floor.

'¡Hijo de puta!' Chucho punctuated each word with a kick. 'Where is the money gone?'

'Please,' Tyler wheezed, curling into a ball, looking towards Rafa. 'Let me look.'

Rafa hauled him up and shoved him back into the chair, Tyler's ribs screaming. His shaky hands opened the wallet software and navigated to the transaction log.

He blinked, hoping the characters would rearrange themselves. But then he saw it.

'Oh, god,' he whispered.

Rafa leaned in. 'What is it?'

'The address... the one I sent it to... it's wrong.'

'What do you mean wrong?'

'The last numbers. They should've been "9066," but I messed it up. I swapped the nine and the zero when I was fixing it. They're right next to each other on the keyboard. Tyler's voice was barely audible. 'It's gone. The money... it's all gone.'

The room fell silent, save for the hum of ceiling fan.

'It's gone where?' Rafa asked.

‘To the wrong account. No way to revert the transaction.’

‘Let me get this straight. You sent nine million dollars of our money to the wrong fucking address?’ Rafa’s voice was calm.

Tyler could only nod, disbelief choking his throat.

Chucho exploded, slamming his hands on the table. ‘¿Es una puta broma? ¡Nueve millones de dólares, a la basura!’

Rafa raised a hand, silencing his companion. He turned his gaze back to Tyler.

‘You’re telling me there’s no way to get it back? To cancel the transaction?’

‘No,’ Tyler croaked. ‘That’s not how the blockchain works. Once it’s sent, it’s—’

Rafa’s hands closed around his throat, cutting off his words. Black dots swarmed Tyler’s vision as he clawed desperately at the iron grip crushing his windpipe.

‘You fucked us again, gringo.’

He released his hold, and Tyler slid to the floor, coughing and gasping. Alma rushed to him, cradling his head in her lap, her own tears mixing with his.

The two men towered over them, fury and disgust etched into every line of their faces. ‘Esta tecnología... estas mierdas de bitcoins...’ Rafa turned to Chucho.

‘Enciérrenlos, voy a llamarle a El Flaco.’

As Chucho hauled them back to their makeshift cell, Tyler’s mind tried to process what had just happened. His fortune, his future, his very life—all wiped out by a misplaced character.

Now back in the darkness of the malodorous cell, Alma’s whisper reached his ears.

‘No me lo puedo creer...’

She sat with her back against the wall, eyes closed, remembering the song from the lobby—Camelia’s bullets writing her lover’s epitaph.

For the first time in his life Tyler had no smooth answer. Just the weight of his own hubris sentenced by the technology that brought them in this country.

‘We’re dead, we’re fucking dead,’ he hissed.

Chapter 6: El Tambo

When the door opened up about an hour later, Alma squinted at the harsh light. Rafa stood there with a stranger—a man whose height made even Rafa look small. The stranger's black guayabera shirt hung loose on his frame and as he turned his head she noticed a scar tracing his jawline like a signature disappearing into his collar.

‘Este es el pendejo y su putana,’ Rafa said.

The man stared at Alma and Tyler. A decade older than Rafa, his gauntness earned him his nickname, El Flaco. Both were lugartenientes for the cartel, each controlling their own territory—Rafa in Jalisco, Flaco in Quintana Roo, the southeast state home of the overrun cities Cancún and Playa del Carmen.

El Flaco stepped forward, his polished boots clicking on the stained tiles. ‘Nine million dollars,’ he said, his voice soft but carrying an edge that made Tyler flinch. He said nothing more and in one swift motion pulled a stiletto knife from his sleeve. Two steps brought him within reach of Tyler. The blade flashed as he lifted it and pressed the flat of the steel against Tyler's cheek. A small tattoo of La Santa Muerte peeked from El Flaco's forearm as he traced the blade down to Tyler's throat and pressed the tip against his chin.

Tyler locked. ‘Please, por favor...’

‘You stole money from us?’

‘I'm sorry, I didn't know—’

‘Who's got it now?’

‘Nobody, it's lost, please...’

El Flaco stared at him and his knife lingered for an eternity before he withdrew it and slid it back into his arm strap. The men's laughter echoed off the concrete walls.

Two muscular men in gray wifebeaters entered.

‘Tráiganlos afuera,’ El Flaco told them, nodding away.

They grabbed Alma and Tyler and forced their hands together in front of them then secured the steel handcuffs. They shoved them outside into the sunlight and made them kneel in the dirt of the yard where vehicles rested—a black sedan, a dark red pickup truck, and a white van with the logo of an electricity services company.

El Flaco leaned towards Tyler, elbows on his knees, eye-to-eye with the American. ‘Time to decide what to do with you gringos.’ He straightened and walked away, gesturing for Rafa to follow. Alma overheard bribes of the contentious exchange: ‘escucha pesto...’, ‘Guadalajara...’, ‘ella no es...’, then El Flaco asking ‘y qué chingados gano yo...’, ‘con los bitcoins...’, and Rafa said some numbers. The argument eventually cooled down and they shook hands.

Rafa strode back and whispered something to Chucho, then faced Alma and Tyler. ‘For everything you do you gotta face the consequences,’ he declared.

They stared at each other, intent on decrypting the threat, when they heard the rumble of an engine. A vehicle approached in a cloud of dust—a heavy-duty Silverado with ‘POLICÍA QUINTANA ROO’ emblazoned in white letters over dark blue. The police pickup stopped beside the white van and an officer stepped out in a crisp uniform.

‘¡Ayúdenos, por favor!’ Alma shouted.

But she saw El Flaco greeting the cop like an old friend. Together they dragged a handcuffed man from the backseat who she recognized from the night before. Money changed hands and the officer tipped his hat and got back in the car. The taxi driver was left in the hands of El Flaco and one of his henchmen.

The police car out of sight, El Flaco drew a revolver and fired point blank. The driver dropped, his forehead gone, brainmatter exposed and blood splattering the ground. Alma collapsed on the ground. Tyler retched violently, his empty stomach bringing up nothing but bile that seared his throat.

The other men barely reacted—Chucho on his phone and Rafa casually smoking. El Flaco addressed his men: ‘El tambo,’ while pointing the red pickup truck with a hand.

His men strode to the vehicle. The taller man unlocked the rear compartment and lifted the scarred cover, revealing three oil barrels whose blue paint was marred by scratches and orange patches of rust. The other man stepped onto the truck bed and gripped the nearest barrel and hoisted it over the tailgate into his compadre's arms, which lowered it to the dusty ground with a hollow clang. They rolled the barrel across the uneven earth up to the lifeless body. They maneuvered the drum back to its upright position and pried off the lid, letting it fall to the ground. Crouching, they hefted the corpse and let it collapse into the barrel like a macabre marionette.

El Flaco tilted his head

to study the corpse with detached curiosity before turning. He then signaled his men to follow him and they strolled towards Alma and Tyler, still kneeling in the dust, motionless.

'Your turn now,' El Flaco said, unnaturally calm as he pointed his gun at Tyler's forehead.

'Please, no!'

Ten seconds passed. Neither the gun nor its holder moved.

'Tell us a joke,' El Flaco said flatly, smiling at Tyler.

'What?'

El Flaco didn't move his gun. 'Un chiste, gringo. Make us laugh and maybe you keep breathing.'

'Are you serious?'

'This is no joke. You have ten seconds. Diez... nueve... ocho...'

'Just do what he says, Tyler,' Alma whispered urgently.

'Siete... seis... cinco... Se te está acabando el tiempo...'

'Okay, okay! I've got one.'

'Te escuchamos.'

'What did twenty do when it was hungry?'

'That's your joke?'

'Yeah, you have to guess the answer.'

El Flaco looked at his men, then at Rafa and Chucho, his expression unreadable.

‘Nobody found the funny answer. So you tell us, what did twenty do?’

‘Twenty-eight.’ He paused, breathing faster. ‘Twenty *ate*,’ he repeated.

El Flaco stared at Tyler for three long seconds, impassive. Then, like a switch had been flipped, his eyebrows shot up and he nodded with the exaggerated gestures of a telenovela actor. He holstered his gun and continued staring at Tyler.

‘Es bueno,’ he said without smiling, then let out a mechanical laugh. ‘Twenty ate, ahah!’ He turned to his men. ‘¿Le entendieron o nel, güeyes?’

The men laughed nervously, no one wanting to admit they didn't get it.

He then nodded at Rafa, the humor vanishing.

Rafa and Chucho surrounded the shackled captives. Rafa muttered ‘Vente con nosotros, muevanse,’ and the four of them walked towards the white van, Chucho trailing with the gun in his hand. The vehicle’s flanks bore as a logo a glinting light bulb and the words ‘Power & Luz’ in filigreed script. ‘Ándele,’ Rafa grunted, jerking his head toward the van’s side door. Chucho slid it open and pushed Alma and Tyler into the shadowed interior. Outside, El Flaco and his acolytes rose the barrel back onto the truck bed and reattached its cover with great care.

Chapter 7: Chapala

They sat facing each other in the van with their luggage a barrier between them—two suitcases, a backpack, Alma's purse. The door's small window was etched with the company's logo and let in enough sun for Tyler to see her grimacing, raising her hands to cover her nose—a rich, stomach-turning odor emanated from the floor.

The engine's roar shook the vehicle as Rafa drove across the pothole-ridden dirt road. Two minutes later he turned onto the main coastal drive where gravel giving way to asphalt. The window offered glimpses of palm trees and billboards sliding past as the van sped up.

'Where are they taking us?' Tyler asked out loud.

'If they wanted to kill us we'd be dead already,' Alma said.

'Yeah, like that poor bastard. They must have something else in mind.'

'Are you sure you can't get that money back? The bitcoins or whatever?' she asked.

'No, it's gone. Fucking rookie mistake.' He shook his head. 'But maybe that screw-up saved our asses.'

'Those other barrels were probably meant for us.'

Tyler didn't answer. After a moment, he muttered, 'Christ, I hope this ride doesn't take too long. I'm about to piss myself.'

Alma closed her eyes and realized she wasn't as terrified as she ought to be—adrenaline, she told herself, but that thought didn't help. She'd learned to navigate risks and had weathered dire circumstances, yet nothing compared to being handcuffed in a van reeking of decaying flesh. She counted her breaths and soon began to drift off.

When she woke up the van was slowing down into bumpy road. They could almost feel the loose stones hitting the vehicle's underbody, until it stopped.

As the door slid open, Tyler squinted at the sight before him: a white Cessna Grand Caravan, its propeller spinning lazily. Apart from a small warehouse, the airstrip was the only human-made construct amid the jungle surrounding them.

‘Muévanse,’ Chucho spat, shoving them toward the plane.

‘Where are we—’ Tyler started.

‘No me estés chingando con preguntas,’ Chucho’s backhand caught him across the mouth, splitting his lip.

‘I need to pee first,’ Tyler said. ‘Please, man.’

Chucho paused, a slow smile across his face. ‘Piss here.’ He gestured to the ground between them.

‘What? Let me go by the trees there—’

‘Right here, güero.’ Chucho’s eyes glinted. He unzipped his own fly in mock demonstration. ‘What’s the problem? You shy?’

Tyler looked to Alma, who turned away, then back to Chucho whose hand had moved to rest on his holstered gun.

He turned to the side and unzipped his pants with trembling hands. The sound of urine hitting dirt seemed loud in the clearing.

‘There you go,’ Chucho laughed, slapping him hard between the shoulder blades, making him lose balance. ‘Just like a real man now.’ Tyler zipped up.

They entered the plane. Its cabin had been stripped of most seats and left only room for four passengers before the cargo area. Chucho placed his captives each one side of the aisle and attached the handcuffs to a metal ring where a seatbelt used to be.

He hauled their bags while Rafa smoked a cigarette with the pilot, a weathered man in tactical sunglasses who had barely acknowledged his cargo of the day. The three Mexicans then jumped in the cockpit and no more than ten minutes later they were airborne.

Through the small window, Tyler watched the treeline drop away as they climbed into the Gulf of Mexico’s sky. The coast materialized beneath them, then vanished. Whitecaps dotted the sea surface like static on an old television screen.

Tyler leaned back, closing his eyes. The events of the past hours played behind his eyelids in a surreal loop—the guns, the screams, the rattle of the barrel as their driver was stuffed inside. He tried to relax; inhale four seconds, hold, exhale, repeat, as that app’s voice once instructed. But the air in the cabin reeked of bleach and mildew, every breath scraped his throat like sandpaper. He couldn’t remember if it was four seconds or five now.

He told himself that their disappearance would raise alarms, that they wouldn’t whack an American tourist. But in any case this was bad. Yet some part of him couldn’t quite believe it was real. Maybe this was all some fever dream or a bad trip and he’d wake up hungover in the resort. He hadn’t asked for any of this. Shit just happens sometimes, right place, wrong time.

Alma hadn’t spoken since they’d boarded. Tyler watched her through half-closed eyes. Her lips moved in what might have been prayer, her hands clasped so tight her knuckles shone white.

His breathing had gotten ragged again, his chest tense. He forced himself to focus on the hum of the engine and the vibration of the metal beneath him. One thing at a time. He surrendered to sleep.

When he woke, the Gulf’s endless blue had given way to land. They flew over the verdant hills and valleys of Veracruz state, the terrain growing more rugged as they pushed inland towards the Sierra Madre. The Cessna slalomed between volcanic peaks, winding among ochre ravines and dry canyons until they reached the greener pastures of Jalisco—the western state known for its tequila industry, its mariachi bands, and for being home of the continent’s most lethal cartel.

Alma turned to him. ‘Try not to fuck up again, vale?’

Tyler couldn’t meet her gaze. ‘Brilliant advice. Thanks for that.’

‘I don’t want to end up like those people in the movies. The women who just... disappear.’

‘This isn’t a movie, Alma.’

‘No,’ she said, turning back to the window, ‘reality is worse than movies.’

The pilot began his descent and they overflowed a small town surrounded by a mosaic of corn fields and agave plantations, the timid green hues reminding them how far they were from Yucatán. An aeroclub's landing strip came into view, but the plane passed it and skimmed over the malachite waters of an adjacent lake, so vast they first mistook it for the ocean. The Cessna then made a sharp turn back towards the airfield, and moments later its wheels gently touched down.

Chapter 8: Aguas

A silver sedan with tinted windows stood between the setting sun and the idling plane. Alma and Tyler sat behind the plexiglass partition of the repurposed police vehicle, hands unshackled, doors and windows locked, mouths kept shut.

Chucho took the wheel while Rafa fumbled with his phone to pair it with the car's Bluetooth system. The men fell into a debate about the best local spot for fried mojarra fish, while the car entered the coastal town of Chapala. They turned onto the main boulevard where stately palm trees and trimmed cypresses stood sentinel along the cobblestone street. They passed through sleepy residential neighborhoods and busier commercial districts until the street merged into the México 44, the Federal highway connecting Chapala to Guadalajara.

Alma imagined escape strategies; she could feign sickness and lose herself in the labyrinth of local streets. But intuition held her back and she diverted her attention to the song that Rafa had managed to play from his phone, a *sierreño* ballad whose hook went

En un día como hoy

A media tarde y el cielo nublado

El mundo para mí se había acabado

Se le ocurrió en el peor momento

Something in the interplay of the sousaphone's uneven bass notes and the guitar's colorful riffs stirred a buried memory in her heart.

‘So güero, tell me about this NarcoPanda thing,’ Rafa asked Tyler, ‘why you did that?’

‘It was just an idea I had, you know, a memecoin inspired by cartel tropes, I was just trying to catch the hype, I meant nothing special.’

Rafa nodded. ‘And her, she was part of it?’

Tyler paused for a moment.

‘Yeah, she helped out. Social media stuff, influencers, marketing and all, getting eyes on the project.’

‘Pero yo no—’ she interjected, but Tyler’s foot found her ankle.

‘Good. And how long does it take to set up something like that?’

Tyler licked his dry lips. ‘Not long, couple of days, maybe. It’s pretty easy once you know the playbook and with the right connections.’

‘Easy,’ Rafa repeated, ‘like following a recipe.’

‘Yeah,’ Tyler said, forcing a smile. ‘Just for fun and profit, you know.’

‘Good, good.’ Rafa turned back and stared at him. ‘Porque vas a hacerlo de nuevo.’

Tyler’s chest turned to ice—this wasn’t a question.

In the driver seat Chucho chuckled as the car sped up on the Federal highway under the darkening sky.

‘You want us to... create another pump token for you?’

‘That’s what crypto is about, no?’

‘And after it’s done, we can leave?’

‘Once we’re happy with the money. Maybe you make a little something too, everyone wins. But first...’ He let the word hang. ‘We talk details mañana.’

Alma glanced at Tyler and found him staring at the car’s ceiling looking answers—who could he count on to help him run another token? what if they can’t pull off another scam in the crowded crypto space? and even if everything aligned perfectly, even if they made millions, would they let them walk away?

‘You know, people will realize we’re missing and they’ll call the cops,’ Tyler said, wondering if their relatives and acquaintances would worry at all.

‘You’ll tell them you’re on extended vacation, you’ll post on your Instagrams. We don’t want no trouble. Foreigners disappearing in Cancún would be bad for business.’

He bit her tongue.

‘Nice to meet you, mister... Tyler James Hollis, of Miami,’ Rafa said, studying the driving license between his fingers, as he browsed through Tyler’s wallet. ‘Amex Platinum... what’s your limit with that one?’

‘I don’t know, it’s not like there’s a fixed limit.’

Rafa slipped the ID and credit card into his jacket pocket, then turned his attention to Alma’s purse.

‘Y tu... Alma Rosa Aguilar Velasco, nacida el treinta y uno de diciembre de mil novecientos noventa y nueve en Sevilla. Chica del milenio. ¿Trabajas con el?’

‘Sí, claro. Le ayudo con la promoción y las cuentas de sus proyectos,’ Alma responded.

‘Ya veremos si das el ancho,’ Rafa said, as he collected documents and cards from her wallet.

The highway pierced into Guadalajara’s outskirts and turned to an interminable avenue cutting through the central neighborhoods, leading them into the narrow streets of a working class neighborhood—‘Bienvenidos a Santa Cecilia’ said a banner. Street vendors shouted their wares and foods under a spiderweb of power lines. Trucks laden with beer crates and soda cans idled in the right lane making deliveries while a swarm of motorbikes wove through the congestion like nimble fish in a sluggish current.

In the gathering dark, Alma kept track of their route by registering glimpses of street signs and landmarks. They passed an elementary school, drove along Calle Manuel M. Ponce, and saw the bell tower of a church rising above the rooftops. Her eyes flicked from one shopfront to another, committing names to memory: Farmacia Guadalajara, a Banca Azteca branch, and a lone sushi restaurant nestled in a curved residential street.

The car slowed and turned into a street where most windows were unlit. They pulled up to a pale orange building, a two-story concrete edifice flanked by similar structures in different colors. Two stray cats observed from a distance as Chucho guided the visitors out of the car and into the building, crossing the terracotta courtyard and a grey concrete patio. The gate and the lobby looked like those of a hotel but it wasn’t a hotel.

Inside, a man unfolded from an armchair, cigarette in his lips as he waved them in. Rafa stepped forward.

‘¿Pascual, qué onda?’

‘Todo tranquilo, jefe.’

His Scarface haircut sat awkwardly on his baby face. He couldn’t have been more than twenty, Alma assessed as she felt his stare lingering.

‘Sígueme,’ Chucho ordered, jerking his head towards the stairway. He moved as if the air around him was denser, each gesture made heavier by the fatigue of the drive and Guadalajara’s thick polluted air.

As they edged past a squat wooden table where a pot of marigolds blazed orange and gold, a strident ‘¡Aguaaaas!’ made them flinch. They turned and found a parakeet studying them through the bars of its cage. Alma watched the bulbous head, its small gleaming eyes among emerald and white feathers. ‘¡Chingado perico culero!’ Chucho spat. Alma murmured ‘hasta pronto’ to the bird as she started up the stairs.

‘Su nuevo cantón,’ Chucho said, swinging open a door on the first floor. Alma stepped into a cell that was spartan but clean, an upgrade from Cancún safehouse’s squalor. A bare mattress lay on the floor beneath barred windows, a surveillance camera’s red eye blinking from above, a small bathroom door in one corner. Chucho shoved her bags in after her then hustled Tyler into a similar room, warning them of the rules—don’t tamper with the cameras, don’t try to communicate through the walls, don’t make noise, the doors would open only when they decided.

An hour later Alma’s door opened. A woman appeared with tinfoil wraps in her hands. Alma talked to her but the woman responded by pointing a finger at her soundless lips while her head turned left and right. She left the package on the door front then left and locked the door. Alma unwrapped the tortillas and ate in silence, watching the sodium-stained sky through her window’s bars while men’s laughter drifted up from the courtyard.

Chapter 9: Chingones

Morning glow filtered in through the barless window, casting everything in a monochrome yellow-white that made the space feel stale and exposed. Peeling wallpaper clung to the walls. A cheap frame held a signed photo of Canelo Álvarez smiling at them, the Mexican boxing champion holding his belt.

The room on the upper floor passed for an office, a wooden circular table occupying the center of the space. Rafa ordered Alma and Tyler to sit and await instructions.

‘Escúchame,’ Rafa leaned forward, palms flat on the table. ‘We’ll do another NarcoPanda—same recipe. Idiots buy because they think bigger idiots will buy later. We cash out at the peak, make a few millions. You have one week.’

Tyler felt his throat tighten. One week to design, launch, and pump a token from scratch? Even with his connections the timeline was insane.

‘One week might not be enough time to—’

‘But you said it was easy, no?’ Rafa cut him off. ‘What were your exact words? Couple of days? That’s what you said in the car, güero.’

Tyler swallowed hard. His own boasting had just become his deadline.

‘You did NarcoPanda, you can do it again.’ Rafa’s tone left no room for argument.

Tyler shifted in his chair. ‘Can’t call it NarcoPanda again, too obvious.’

‘¿Me crees pendejo? Of course we need everything different. New name, new story, no connection to you. You better be smarter than that.’

Tyler’s laptop stood on the scarred wood, where stains and scratches mapped the history of previous meetings. Coffee and cookies were on the opposite side, their aroma mixing with stale cigarette smoke.

‘Keep it Mexican,’ Rafa continued, drumming his fingers on the wood. ‘Gringos love that shit.’

‘Maybe something about cartels and drugs? Like a trafficking theme—’

‘Pinche gringo, you think Mexico is just Netflix narcos?’

‘No, I just meant—’

‘Cállate. Let me think.’

The door burst open. Chucho strode in with a shopping bag swinging from one hand. ‘¿Qué pedo con los pinche panda coins?’

‘No son pandas, cabrón,’ Rafa’s eyes lit up. ‘Son... chingaderos de bitcoin.. ¡ChingoCoins!’

‘¡A huevo!’ Chucho grinned. ‘ChingoCoin será el nuevo Bitcoin.’

Tyler glanced between them. ‘What’s that mean?’

‘They want to call it ChingoCoin,’ Alma explained, ‘it’s... hard to translate exactly.’

‘Okay, could work, sounds cool. Look, Solana’s the hot chain right now,’ Tyler said. ‘Gas is cheap, transaction rate is insane, and the degens are all there. Way easier to build hype than on Ethereum.’

‘¿Qué dice?’ Rafa looked to Chucho.

‘Solana es una blockchain, como Ethereum pero más rápida,’ Chucho explained, settling into a chair. ‘Sale más barato hacer transacciones. Mi hermano dice que es donde está el dinero fácil ahorita.’

Alma put down her coffee. ‘¿Su hermano trabaja en crypto?’

‘Trabaja en Ciudad Creativa Digital,’ Chucho said, a hint of pride slipping through. ‘El me enseñó todo esto.’ His expression hardened. ‘Pero eso no es asunto tuyo, ¿eh?’

Alma looked away, filing the information. She turned back to Rafa. ‘What if we say it was created by an AI? That’s what everyone’s talking about these days.’

‘I like this,’ Rafa nodded. ‘Everybody’s crazy with this AI bullshit. My phone has AI, my car has AI.’

‘People already did blockchain AI, years ago’ Tyler said, ‘but...’ He tapped his fingers on the laptop.

‘It could be special AI,’ Alma said, ‘crypto AI, maybe?’

Tyler straightened. ‘Yeah, decentralized AI—that’s perfect.’

‘What’s “decentralized AI”?’ Rafa asked.

‘It means not controlled by one company. Gives power to users, transparency, all that stuff,’ Tyler said.

‘It’s bullshit,’ Rafa snorted. ‘It’s always controlled by one or two guys nobody knows, then everybody gets fucked.’

‘Exactly. It’s all buzzwords. The Wild West and everyone’s the Indians, except the rich assholes.’

Chucho swallowed the last cookie. ‘This better works, gringo, or we’ll take your scalp.’ He made a slicing motion over Tyler’s head.

A soft knock interrupted them. The door opened to reveal the mute woman with more coffee. She was at least fifty, her long dark hair streaked with silver and tied back in a ponytail, a golden cross hanging against her faded green dress. She replaced the empty coffee pot with the fresh one.

‘Gracias, Itzel,’ Rafa muttered as she slipped out without closing the door.

Tyler tried to shake off the scalping threat. ‘Okay. ChingoCoin on Solana, created by decentralized AI. But what’s the angle? Needs a story, something about making the world better. Nothing too boring though.’

‘It’s virtual currency, right?’ Alma leaned forward. ‘Latin American countries have all these currency problems. Look at Venezuela, Argentina. ChingoCoin could claim to solve that.’

‘Yeah, financial freedom and all,’ Tyler nodded, ‘easy money transfer between families, no middlemen, privacy, the usual pitch. We can plant some success stories about Mexican farmers getting rich from ChingoCoin—’

‘True story,’ Chucho stopped him, ‘my family is farmers.’

‘And we need something catchy for the logo,’ Tyler added, ‘simple but memorable.’

A screech from the lobby made them all turn. ‘¡Holaaaa!’

‘Pinche Pepillo,’ Chucho muttered. ‘That damn bird never shuts up.’

‘Wait,’ Alma said, ‘what about a parrot? Like him?’

‘Pepillo? That stupid bird?’ Rafa frowned. ‘No, we need something Jalisco. Like tequila, charro.’

‘The parrot could wear a sombrero,’ Tyler said quickly. ‘And maybe instead he’s holding a shot of tequila or a bottle.’

Rafa considered this. ‘Could work. Everybody knows tequila.’

‘And it’s perfect for memes,’ Alma added, ‘also more Mexican than pandas.’

‘A huevo,’ Chucho nodded. ‘Better than some pinche panda with tattoos.’

‘I’ve got this Albanian guy, does amazing design work. He can make the parrot look both tough and funny, like Pepillo in a mariachi outfit.’

‘And then?’ Rafa’s voice hardened.

‘The name and the logo are just the starting point. Then Alma and I work our contacts. I’ve got all these Telegram groups, big players—whales we call them. They can move millions. Plus some PR guys who’ll plant stories on CoinDesk, The Block, all the major crypto news sites. A week could be enough to have the hype machine running.’

‘No more than a week, remember?’ Chucho exchanged looks with Rafa.

‘Necesitamos el dinero en una semana, güey.’

‘Quality takes time,’ Tyler said. ‘You want this done right, don’t you?’

Rafa leaned back, studying Tyler. ‘You launch the coin in three days, four maximum. Then you do your marketing shit and we cash out in a week. No extensions.’ He tapped the table for emphasis. ‘You work here. Same floor as your rooms, convenient for you and for us. And you never touch that laptop alone. We watch everything.’

‘And the password,’ Chucho added, ‘we set it. You don’t need to know it.’

Tyler could only nod, understanding the implicit threat. Through the wall, they heard Pepillo’s warning again: ‘¡Aaguas!’

‘Okay no time to waste,’ Tyler said, opening a new document. ‘First things first, we grab the username @ChingoCoin on Twitter, Telegram, Discord.’ He paused, looking at Alma. ‘By the way, what does ‘chingo’ actually mean?’

‘It’s complicated,’ she said, avoiding Rafa’s amused gaze. ‘Maybe we should focus on the logo design first.’

Rafa leaned back in his chair with a cold smile. ‘In this case, it means you're fucked if it doesn't work.’

Chapter 10: Barcelona

They spent the next three days in the office preparing the ChingoCoin launch. Tyler typed code and sent messages while Chucho or Rafa watched everything when they weren't chain-smoking by the window. He crafted the program of the coin and tested the minting process and batch transfers. He cycled through contingencies—one wrong turn and the whole thing could implode.

‘¿Todo bien?’ Rafa would ask Tyler periodically.

‘Sure. No problem,’ he'd answer.

The Albanian designer had sent the first mockups of their mascot; the parrot wore a charro hat tilted at a rakish angle, a silver tequila shot gripped in one wing, feathers emerald and gold.

‘We need social momentum when we launch,’ Tyler explained over the fresh coffee. ‘Followers, engagement, buzz. I know people who run bot farms—they'll make it look organic. Create thousands of accounts talking about ChingoCoin, sharing memes, building FOMO.’

‘¿Cuánto?’ Rafa asked, examining the parrot design on screen.

‘Thirty grand should cover it. I can use the money left on my account, what I haven't sent—.’

‘¿Para puros bots?’ Chucho scoffed.

‘Trust me, it's worth it, crypto's all about perception. If people think something's hot then it becomes hot.’

‘We'll also need to pay key influencers to tweet about it, gotta count at least fifty grands for that.’

Rafa nodded. ‘We also have plans for publicity.’ He showed Tyler his phone—screenshots of draft articles for Mexican newspapers. ‘Local celebrities too. They owe us favors.’

Tyler’s eyebrows rose. ‘That’s... impressive. How did you—’
‘Some people appreciate having their habits kept private,’ Chucho smirked.

The technical setup consumed their second day. Tyler checked ChingoCoin’s compatibility with decentralized exchanges and tested the trading pairs that would let traders swap their digital dollars for their new coin.

‘So how will it get value?’ Rafa asked that evening, examining the webpage Tyler had built. The parrot logo grinned back at them

‘We create what’s called liquidity pools,’ Tyler said, drawing a diagram. ‘Think of it like this: you have real money and ChingoCoins on both sides of the trade. To buy coins, people just exchange digital dollars against ChingoCoins, it’s called a swap and is automated by the blockchain program. We’ll need a few hundred Ks for the initial market making.’

‘And where will we get this money?’ Alma asked.

‘My Dubai partner friend, he’ll front the money—he made bank with NarcoPanda, he’ll be happy to help.’

Once they had the ChingoCoin software tested and ready, they generated a new wallet to control the digital coins. This meant creating a secret key—a string of sixty-four characters that would grant access to all the coins. Lose that key, lose everything. They saved one copy on the laptop, locked behind a password Tyler didn’t know. Chucho pulled a USB flash drive from his pocket and Tyler copied the keys.

The social media infrastructure came together on the third day. @ChingoCoin accounts sprouted on social platforms. Tyler’s contact promised thousands of bot accounts would begin spreading the news of decentralized AI the moment they went live.

The storm warnings started that same day. A tropical depression strengthening over the Pacific, heading for Jalisco's coast. That evening, as thunder rolled in the distance, they shared a bottle of añejo tequila. The conversation drifted, loosened by alcohol and exhaustion.

'First time you killed someone?' Chucho asked suddenly, making Tyler choke on his drink. The question hung in the air like gunsmoke.

Rafa laughed, a sound with edges. 'You remember, carnal. That bust gone wrong in Zapopan.'

'¿Que fuisteis policías?' Alma's eyes widened.

'Federales,' Rafa nodded, pouring another round.

'You guys were police?' Tyler asked.

'Until we realized which side paid better. The cartels were getting stronger, the police more corrupt. We picked the winning team.'

'Like those Zetas bastards?' Tyler asked, then regretted it as the temperature in the room seemed to drop.

Rafa's face hardened. 'Los Zetas were animals. Ex-military playing gangster. They started as Gulf Cartel's enforcers, then went solo, thought being cruel made them powerful.' He took a long drink. 'Killing entire families, hanging bodies from bridges, cutting heads off—pure savagery. Our organization comes from a group called Mata Zetas, killers of Zetas,' his voice filled with pride.

'They are finished now,' Chucho added. 'Too violent, too stupid.'

'Exactly.' Rafa warmed to the subject, the tequila loosening his tongue. 'Smart cartels now? We're like corporations. We must diversify. Real estate, legitimate businesses...' He gestured at Tyler's laptop. 'Cryptocurrency.'

Rafa caught Alma watching him and seemed to realize he'd said too much. The alcohol and her had made him careless. He fell silent, studying his glass.

'What about you? You killed people?' Rafa addressed Alma and Tyler.

Lightning flashed outside. In the momentary brightness, Tyler saw something dark cross Alma's face.

‘Yes, Barcelona,’ she said quietly, breaking the tension. ‘At a private party. Some rich guy paid me to slip a pill in the drink of another dude. Said it was just to knock him out.’ She took a long sip. ‘Me enteré después de que no era así.’

Tyler stared at her. In Dubai, she’d told him she left Spain for better opportunities. Now he wondered what else he didn’t know.

‘They found him in the morning,’ she continued. ‘Heart attack, they said. But I knew. That’s why I went to Dubai. Safer to disappear in the desert.’

‘Jesus,’ Tyler muttered. ‘And I thought my scams were dark.’

Alma shrugged. ‘We all have things we’d rather forget.’

‘But you’re telling us now. Why?’

‘Maybe when death feels close, truth seems less dangerous.’ She looked at Tyler.

‘I’ve nothing to confess. Never killed anyone.’

‘Not directly at least.’ Those people who lost their life savings in Narcopanda…’

Tyler looked away. ‘That’s business, not murder.’

The wind picked up outside. Down in the building, Pepillo squawked. They drank another round in silence.

‘Tomorrow we’ll launch ChingoCoin,’ Rafa said. ‘Then start the publicity. Articles, celebrities, social media—everything at once. It better works.’

‘Sure, don’t worry,’ Tyler nodded, the words coming out naturally— three days had taught him the wisdom of deference. ‘I’ll have everything ready.’

Chapter 11: Disconnect

It had rained all night. The glow of television painted shadows on the lobby walls, where they gathered for a morning coffee.

Itzel approached Pepillo's cage with a handful of seeds.

‘¿Quién es el más guapo? Tú, mi rey,’ she cooed to the bird. The parakeet preened then snatched a sunflower seed through the bars.

Tyler turned to Rafa. ‘I thought she was mute.’

‘Just for people,’ Rafa said, his eyes on the weather forecast. ‘Made a vow years ago. She only speaks to animals now.’ He didn't elaborate.

The weatherman's voice carried over Pepillo's chirping: ‘...Una intensidad sin precedentes para esta época. Autoridades advierten posibles daños a infraestructura, incluyendo fallas en internet y servicios celulares en Jalisco...’

Outside, two cats materialized from the shadows, one tabby and one tortoiseshell, their eyes reflecting the storm light like fallen coins. They watched the humans with ancient indifference and ran away when Pascual's shape moved from the sofa to the doorway to scan the courtyard. The fluorescent light caught his Rolex and its too bright gold.

Tyler sat with his laptop balanced on his knees with Chucho behind him monitoring discussions with early investors.

‘Everything ready?’ Chucho asked.

‘Almost,’ Tyler said, with an undertone of uncertainty.

Pepillo dropped a seed, its shell cracking against the tile floor like a tiny gunshot. ‘¡Aaaag!’ the bird shrieked, making them all start. Itzel smiled and reached for more seeds.

‘Let me show you where we are,’ Tyler said, turning his laptop so they could see. ‘ChingoCoin is live with the ticker symbol \$CHINGO. The liquidity pools are filling up—that's insider money flowing in. We've got the social channels ready, and influencers like Rogan Saul lined up to push it.’

Rafa moved behind Tyler's chair, one hand resting on the backrest. ‘Show us these posts before anything goes live.’


Tyler navigated through draft messages, explaining crypto jargon as Rafa and Chucho leaned in to study the posts. He credited Alma with the social media strategy, though she'd barely touched it—her attention seemed elsewhere, watching the men more than the screen.


He first showed posts for X:

 *ATTENTION #CryptoFam! ChingoCoin*

*\$CHINGO just launched and it's ABSOLUTELY
MOONING! 🌙*

 *Audited code*

 *Real utility (DeAI technology)*

 *MASSIVE marketing coming*

Get in before influencers start posting! 🚀

and

I've never seen a chart like \$CHINGO 

This is literally free money

IYKYK 🗨️🗨️

And he showed posts for the main Telegram group:

🦜 ChingoCoin Updates 🦜

- CoinGecko listing in 2 hours
- 5000 holders milestone hit!
- First AI integration demo tomorrow
- Famous YouTuber video dropping tonight
- Tequila partnership announcement soon

*Price is about to EXPLODE! Load your bags
or cry*

later! 🔥🚀💎

and for another social media platform:

🗨️🗨️ *Inside info from team (don't share):*

Talks with all top 5 exchanges

Asian whales coming in

Dubai crypto fund interested

Marketing hasn't even started yet

🙄 NFA DYOR

Rafa and Chucho studied the posts then suggested a ‘NarcoFi airdrop’—a way to distribute coins seemingly for free and attract more suckers.

‘And we wrote that piece we discussed last night,’ Tyler added, showing them a draft from a text file:

*For the Hernandez family of Zapopan,
cryptocurrency was a foreign concept just months
ago. Today, it has changed their lives.*

*‘We invested our savings—just 5,000 pesos—
when my nephew explained about ChingoCoin,’
explains Rosa Hernandez, 47, a maquiladora
worker and mother of three. ‘Now it’s worth over
120,000 pesos. We’ve paid off our debts to the bank
and have enough for Lucia’s first year of
university.’*

*Her husband Miguel, a construction worker,
was initially skeptical. ‘I thought it was a scam,’ he
admits. ‘But now we can breathe again financially.
My daughter won’t have to give up her dream of
becoming a doctor.’*

Rafa nodded in approval. Tyler smiled in relief. ‘I’ll send this to a couple of content creators I know, and to guys who write for CoinDesk and the Daily Hodl. It builds the story and it gets them traffic.’

By noon, ChingoCoin was listed in the top 5 of the ‘Top Gainers’ with a +500% gain within three hours. They had relocated to the upstairs office where they hunched around Tyler’s laptop amid a scatter of half-eaten sandwiches. Chucho kept checking the

numbers on his phone as he monitored Tyler's messages on the various community groups.

Alma was conversing with Rafa by the window, sharing a cigarette he had offered. They watched the rain intensify, turning the street into dark mirrors. His hand brushed hers as he passed the cigarette back and she noticed how he held it—like someone who had learned to smoke in uniform.

She asked about their plans for the money, about whether they might leave this life behind. He said that you don't retire from this business, but money buys respect and favors. Sometimes it buys a little peace. She asked him about family, about who he might share this peace with. His manner shifted. He hinted at a daughter and a sister about Alma's age who'd been studying to be a lawyer, but he left the thought unfinished.

Alma waited but he said no more. The rain drummed against the windows. She caught his reflection in the glass and noticed how he watched her. On the street below, the few remaining pedestrians hurried for shelter, newspapers held over heads, while shopkeepers rushed to protect their wares.

The sudden brilliance of the lightning caught them both off guard. The thunder crashed overhead before they could step back from the window. The building's lights flickered once, twice, then stabilized. From his laptop, Tyler's crypto trading interface started lagging.

Another flash, closer this time. Alma felt the thunder in her chest. The lights gave up their fight and plunged the room into obscurity. They heard Pepillo screeched.

'Shit! Anyone got signal?' Tyler's voice cracked with panic.

'Se cayó el pinche internet,' Chucho said, stabbing at his phone. 'Ni madres hay conexión.'

The storm had cut their link to the exchanges, to their buyers, to everything beyond these walls.

Chapter 12: Fuga

Only the grey light filtering through the barred windows and the occasional flash of lightning gave shape to the office. Rafa's phone cast a blue glow on his face as he called Pascual and ordered him to check the generator. Tyler and Chucho stood by the window, holding their phones high, hunting for fragments of signal like parched men searching for water in a desert.

‘¿Dónde está Itzel?’ Rafa muttered. He turned to Tyler and Alma. ‘I’m going to check the kitchen, you stay here.’ His footsteps faded down the stairs.

Alma watched Chucho, now the sole guardian in the room. His attention was split between three phones laid out on the desk, each showing the same dead connection symbol. She cleared her throat. ‘Necesito ir al baño.’

‘Sí, sí, ve,’ he said without looking up, fingers tapping screens in frustration.

Instead of turning left toward the bathroom, she glanced right at the stairs, the way down to the lobby where Pascual had left the door ajar—only a few seconds to decide.

She assessed the situation. The unexpected turn of events had turned her Tyler plan upside down and more perilous than anticipated, his business a greater liability than what she’d bargained for. Recollections surfaced and closed in a split second. Her relatives in Spain, her room and her cat she’d left to a friend, the comfort she’d surrendered.

She eased down the steps, each footfall cautious and soundless, and made it to the lobby where rain drummed against the windows. The passage to freedom lay between the bird's cage and the coffee table. She crept toward the door, warm raindrops hitting her face as she emerged to scan the empty courtyard where large puddles had formed and reflected storm flashes and distant lights. She stepped outside and walked past the doorway onto the patio’s concrete. That’s when something soft yield beneath her sole.

A screech pierced the air. The cat and its tail bolted, a streak of tortoiseshell fur, and before its cry had faded Pepillo's voice rang out with a strident '¡Aguaaas!'

She ran across the rain-soaked courtyard, her feet splashing through puddles. She reached the gate and yanked the handle and ran her fingers along the frame searching for a latch mechanism. Locked. The metal fence rose three meters high and was crowned with rusted spikes. She grabbed the bars and began to climb with her wet hands slipping on the rain-slick metal.

'¿Dónde vas, española?'

Rafa's hand closed around her ankle. She tried to twist away but his grip was too tight. He pulled her down and she crashed onto the mud. When she looked up, she saw a gun aimed at her face.

'Quería ver si la puerta tenía llave,' she said, glancing down at her bluejeans stained with ochre sand, as she pushed back her rain-soaked hair with a smile.

'Eres chistosa, Alma Velasco.'

Without warning, his hand cracked across her face, snapping her head sideways.

'Después de tratarte bien, darte comida, una cama...' His voice was colder than the rain. "¿Así es como nos lo agradeces?"

She saw his finger tightening on the trigger and she heard the bullet ricocheting on the metal fence. She knelt in the mud, silent.

'Podemos ser menos amables. Mucho menos.'

He grabbed her hair to get her to stand and they walked back inside, her clothes leaving a trail of rainwater on the steps.

The generator hummed to life as they reached the office. Fluorescent lights flickered on, harsh and unforgiving. Rafa's recounted her attempt to Chucho, whose face darkened with each word.

Chucho grabbed her arm and yanked her outside the office and toward her room. He shoved her inside onto the bed, his bulk looming over her. His hands reached for her and she could smell coffee and cigarettes on his breath—

'¡Ya basta!'

Rafa stood in the doorway, his silhouette against the hall light.

‘Déjala ya. Hoy ella no come. Con eso basta.’

Chucho hesitated, then backed away. The door slammed and the lock turned. No food would be coming.

When the first bars of signal returned, Tyler was dozing in his chair, the storm fading out, when Chucho snapped him awake.

‘¡Mira esto!’

Tyler leaned forward and blinked at the laptop screen. ChingoCoin's price had nearly tripled during their offline hours. The chat groups were flooding with messages, tweets were going viral, and influencer videos were racking up hundreds of thousands of views. Their forced silence had only fueled the frenzy.

Rafa returned with beers, the Alma incident seemingly forgotten. Even Chucho's mood had lifted and his hand fell on Tyler's shoulder. ‘Eres un genio, güero,’ he laughed.

They watched the number go up. Tyler explained technical terms when asked, played his role, and wondering about Alma's fate. As he scrolled through his Telegram messages, more good news kept coming.

‘We’re now listed on Binance and on a bunch of smaller exchanges!’

More beers appeared. They talked about cars and houses they could buy, about respect they would command. Tyler nodded along, calculating how much longer this could last—very crypto pump eventually found its dump.

They could hear Pepillo's occasional calls down in the lobby. Each ‘¡Aguas!’ made Tyler flinch, though the others no longer seemed to notice. He wondered if she could hear the bird too.

Chapter 13: Moon

‘You ok?’

‘Just living my best life.’

‘Why'd you try to escape?’

‘Have you tasted the food here?’

‘Alma...’

‘If you think they'll just let us walk then I think you should think again. I could have sought help—’

‘Like, from their police friends? I think you got lucky, all things considered.’

‘Tyler, I need you to listen to me—’

‘Shut up, they're coming.’

Itzel had woken her this morning as if nothing happened, knocking twice before entering, maintaining her vow of silence. Alma was still in her night clothes, burgundy joggers and an oversized black resort t-shirt. Itzel pressed a folded paper into her palm. Alma read: ‘Quieren matarlos. Hay una puerta trasera en la planta baja, podría estar abierta.’ She whispered a ‘gracias’ and watched Itzel take back the note, cross herself, and slip away.

She quickly washed at the worn out sink. She combed her hair while studying her faint reflection in the window. For a moment, her real name resurfaced, the identity she'd shed. She found a pair of socks and laced up the same shoes she'd grabbed in panic when fleeing the Cancún resort.

On her way to the office room, she crossed paths with Pascual heading downstairs. His stare unsettled her. Colder than usual and unreadable. He'd be out there all day again, between the lobby and courtyard, watching everything and scrolling on his phone.

‘Buenos días, chingones.’ Rafa entered the office, his acolyte on his heels. Both looked sharper than usual, Rafa in a jacket over an ironed shirt and Chucho freshly shaved.

‘Let’s see how the operation looks.’ Rafa nodded to Chucho, who unfolded the laptop and entered the password. Tyler reached for it at Chucho’s signal and pulled up cryptocurrency exchanges and leaderboards.

‘These numbers are insane,’ Tyler said. ‘We launched at thirty cents and now we hit thirty dollars, a hundred X. The price curve is beautiful—we should hold a bit longer before cashing out.’

‘Total value?’

‘Market cap’s near 200 million. We own about half.’

‘And for us?’

‘It’s not that simple. As we sell, the price dumps. But we could clear ten million, minimum.’

Rafa’s face remained impassive, gaze distant. ‘No vendas el pescado antes de pescarlo.’

‘Don’t count your chickens before they hatch,’ Alma translated. ‘You should start selling now, discretely,’ she said. Blame it on your AI’s yield optimization algorithm, if anyone asks.’

Chucho nodded while Tyler bristled at the suggestion.

‘Obviously. Kind of what I did with NarcoPanda.’

He zoomed in on the price and studied an order book—the list of buy and sell requests.

‘We could hit a hundred dollars per coin with this momentum. But let’s check the buzz too.’

He pulled up a news feed as Rafa settled into a chair, leaning forward to study the headlines flowing across the screen. ChingoCoin dominated every crypto outlet:

**Solana Token ChingoCoin Rockets 2,930%
on Binance Listing** — *The token has risen amid
low initial liquidity on exchanges.* (Cointelegraph)

**Familias de Chiapas Encuentran Libertad
Financiera Gracias a ChingoCoin** (La Voz del
Sureste)

Tyler scrolled through the list of news. ‘Look, we even made the Financial Times.’

**ChingoCoin: Mexico's Crypto Answer to
Financial Inclusion Challenges?**

*Digital asset backed by Latino developers
gains traction with international investors despite
regulatory questions*

‘Nobody's worried about crime connections?’ Rafa asked, scanning articles.

‘It's crypto. Nobody cares if—‘

‘I don't like this.’ Rafa jabbed at The Sun's headline:

**Mexican crypto soars 6000% but experts
ask: WHERE'S THE MONEY COMING
FROM?**

*New digital currency “ChingoCoin” with
dodgy cartoon mascot raises eyebrows as drug
cartel links questioned*

*Community members call the rumors “FUD”
—fear, uncertainty, and doubt.*

‘Community calls this FUD,’ Tyler said quickly. ‘Fear, uncertainty, doubt. Standard crypto FUD. Want to see what celebrities are saying?’

Rafa waved his hand. Tyler pulled up social media posts while Alma watched the men's reactions, noting how Chucho's attention kept drifting to his phone's browser, tabs open to Lamborghini configurations.

‘The NBA player Jaime Gutiérrez posted this on X, it got more than five thousand likes.’

*Just bought my first bag of \$CHINGO 🔥 My
financial advisors say this is the future of payments
for Mexican-American families. Proud to support
real innovation! #CryptoRevolucion*

‘I didn’t know there were Mexicans in the NBA,’ Rafa said.

‘Me neither. But you probably know the Mexican actress Sofia Varga, from the TV show Modern Fam—’

‘Columbian, not Mexican, cabrón,’ Chucho corrected.

‘Sure, whatever, look what she posted last night.’

*Been studying crypto for years now and
ChingoCoin has the most impressive tech I've seen.
Their AI is revolutionary. Just added some to my
portfolio! Not financial advice but you might want
to check it out.*



‘How much we paid these people?’ Rafa asked.

‘Nothing, well... it’s not me, but I think I know who did.’

‘Your Dubai guy?’

‘Most likely, he’s connected, many celebrities show up to his parties.’

‘Good for us.’

‘Yeah.’

‘What else you found?’

‘There’s also more serious posts, from researchers and exchanges—’

‘Wait, what’s this “Waterblokes” thing?’ Rafa pointed a link from the search results.

‘It’s a tech company, they do wallets for businesses. Lemme see what they wrote...’

Waterblokes Adds Support for ChingoCoin (\$CHINGO), Embracing the Mexican Finance Revolution

We're excited to announce that Waterblokes has added full custody support for ChingoCoin (\$CHINGO), the fastest-growing decentralized finance project emerging from Latin America.

ChingoCoin represents a new paradigm in regional financial inclusion. Built on Solana with proprietary AI-driven smart contracts, ChingoCoin enables:

- Near-instant cross-border payments with minimal fees*

- Smart remittance systems that optimize for local currency withdrawals*

- Decentralized governance with community voting rights*

- Integration with traditional Mexican financial systems*

‘Okay, that’s great for us, they’re one of the biggest in their business,’ Tyler said.

‘It all feels so easy,’ Alma said.

‘Luck seems to be on our side so far, it’s not always that easy,’ Tyler said, ‘anyway—’

‘Thirty-two.’

‘What?’

‘Look,’ she pointed to the live price tracker, ‘the exchange rate is two dollars up compared to twenty minutes ago.’

‘And rising.’

‘Let’s not be too greedy, we start selling tomorrow,’ Rafa ordered.

‘Yessir.’

They spend the rest of the day sending emails and messages to keep the tide rising—promises of riches on the Telegram community groups, plan of an ‘airdrop’ to distribute free ChingoCoins to the most loyal supporters, negotiation of a sponsored article in Forbes, and YouTube influencers videos.

Tyler perfected his script: Yes, the AI was designed by an MIT graduate. No, absolutely no cartel involvement. Yes, three-year roadmap and talks with Visa. Alma refined his language to make the lies more believable. Chucho scrolled through sports car catalogs, barely pretending to supervise.

By 10 PM when they returned to their rooms ChingoCoin had touched thirty-nine dollars. Everyone was smiling except Alma, who kept thinking about Itzel's note.

Morning brought buñuelos with coffee to the ChingoCoin team. Rafa bit into the crispy dough, scattering sugar. ‘Our boss is happy. We're happy. Time to cash out.’ He nodded toward the laptop. ‘Check the price.’

Tyler’s fingers stilled on the keyboard. ‘Jesus Christ... sixty, fucking, dollars.’

Rafa held his half-eaten buñuelo like a toast.

‘Better than NarcoPanda ever was,’ Tyler added.

‘Practice makes perfect,’ Alma said, watching crumbs fall. ‘Perfect time to sell.’

‘Scripts are ready,’ Tyler said. ‘Tested them through unrelated addresses. We’ll spread the dump across different pools, different exchanges.’

‘You’ll show us. When I tell you.’

‘No problem, ready to dump it all.’

The room felt lighter, her escape attempt apparently forgotten. That morning she’d shared a cigarette with Rafa and even Chucho’s crude comments had ceased. The calm before something, she thought, but wasn’t sure what.

An hour later they sold all their ChingoCoins using automated scripts, swapping ChingoCoins for USDT, a digital US dollar. The numbers kept climbing: one million, five, soon touching thirteen. It took less than two minutes.

Chucho’s eyes went wide when Rafa authorized his two million transfer. He initiated another transfer of one million and commented ‘El Flaco se va a rayar.’

Itzel appeared with plates of carnitas and mojarra fish, smell of lime and chilies filling the room. Tyler watched them pass around a bottle of tequila.

‘What about us?’ he asked.

Rafa topped off his glass. ‘Half a million each, that’s very generous. When things cool down. And you never tell this story. Otherwise...’

Pascual drifted in, drawn by the food and celebration, but Rafa waved him back to his post. Tequila flowed. Stories grew louder, laughter easier.

‘Necesito el baño,’ she said after her third shot, standing unsteadily.

‘Te acompaño,’ Rafa said, his hand finding the small of her back.

In the hallway, he moved closer. ‘¿Qué vas a hacer con tu dinero, española?’

She let herself lean against the wall, playing drunk, watching his eyes. ‘Viajar, quizás. A algún sitio tranquilo.’

‘¿Adónde?’

‘Donde no hagan tantas preguntas.’

His laugh was soft. ‘Esos lugares nunca son tranquilos, güera.’

Rafa stuck to his word and after a last round of drinks they created two new blockchain accounts where they transferred half a million USDT each. Alma and Tyler kept a copy of each account passphrase on pieces of paper that they took with them to memorize later.

Chucho packed up the laptop as Itzel cleaned up the leftovers and Rafa locked the two visitors into their rooms—'Sweet dreams, millionaires, we'll let you go tomorrow,' he said as keys turned in locks.

In her room, sitting on the thin mattress her back against the wall, she touched the spot where Rafa's hand had rested, remembering Itzel's note. 'Ahora a emperor,' she said to no one.

Chapter 14: Supernova

‘So that's it? We’re free to go?’ Tyler's voice carried suspicion more than relief.

Rafa leaned against the office wall, smoking.

‘Your job is done. We’ve got what we wanted.’ He gestured toward the window and the grey clouds layer.

‘We'll drive you to the international airport and give you back your stuff—wallets and phones.’

Alma shifted in her chair. ‘Last time someone offered us a ride to an airport, we ended up here.’

‘You have my word,’ Rafa said, left hand over his heart in mock solemnity.

‘We can just walk from here and get a cab, thank you,’ Alma insisted.

‘No, no.’ Rafa shook his head. ‘Not in this neighborhood. You shouldn’t be seen here, for everyone’s safety.’

That’s when a scream from downstairs cut their conversation short. A woman voice they’d never heard, silenced by two gunshots. Then Chucho’s voice, and more gunfire.

Rafa’s relaxed posture vanished. He unholstered a Glock 19 from beneath his jacket and motioned for Tyler and Alma to stay back as he glided towards the door. ‘No se muevan.’

He peeked at the ground floor and they heard his sharp breath intake before he muttered ‘¡Chale!—Chucho.’

More gunshots erupted closer to them. The staccato exchange ended with a grunt of pain from Rafa, who stumbled backward into the room, clutching his right wrist. Blood seeped between his fingers and his gun clattered to the floor.

Tyler grabbed Rafa's shoulders to pull him further inside while Alma scooped up the fallen Glock. ‘The door!’ Rafa gasped.

Tyler slammed the door shut, but the lock was broken.

‘Can’t lock it!’ his voice cracked with panic.

‘Hold it closed from the side,’ Alma commanded, her voice stripped of its usual warmth. ‘Block the door but stay out of the line of fire.’ She checked the gun’s magazine with practiced motions and locked it back.

Tyler stared at her, bewildered. Rafa was already moving into position, bracing his good shoulder against the edge of the door.

‘Tyler!’ Alma positioned herself with a clear sight line, the Glock held in a perfect two-handed grip.

The door pushed inward slightly, meeting mild resistance. Alma's focus narrowed, her breathing controlled. The moment the pressure increased on the door, she fired four rounds in rapid succession at chest height through the thin wood. The shots exploded in the small room, leaving Tyler's ears ringing and the air thick with the smell of gunpowder and burnt wood.

The hallway fell silent. Three seconds passed. Five. Ten.

‘Could be a trick,’ Alma whispered, firing two more rounds into the door.

Tyler flinched at each shot but Rafa's eyes never left Alma's face in a mixture of shock and recognition.

After another silence, Alma nodded to them. Tyler eased the door open to reveal a man sprawled face-down, blood pooling beneath him. The hallway behind him was empty.

‘Me quedan cinco balas,’ she announced, her voice clinical as she counted the remaining ammunition. ‘¿Tienes más?’

‘No.’ Rafa winced as he tied a handkerchief around his bleeding wrist. ‘¿Quién chingados eres tú?’ he asked.

Alma met his gaze. ‘En otra vida yo también fui policía.’

Tyler looked between them, ‘Police? Alma, what—’

‘Later,’ she cut him off, moving to check the hallway. ‘We need to get out of here. There could be more coming.’

Alma led the way. She kept the Glock raised as they moved into the hallway. At the top of the stairs, they found a body sprawled awkwardly across three steps with a dark stain beneath him.

They descended cautiously, hugging the wall. The ground floor furniture was overturned, shell casings glinted on the tile. Chucho's lifeless body lay face-up near the entrance. Tyler swallowed hard, looking away.

'He got one too,' Rafa murmured, nodding toward another fallen figure half-hidden behind a table. 'He fought back.'

'We need to find a way out,' Alma said, scanning the room. 'Front door's not an option.'

'Back door,' Rafa replied, gesturing toward the kitchen with his good hand.

They moved through the kitchen, stepping over broken dishes. Near the refrigerator they found Itzel's body slumped against the cabinets, a neat hole in her forehead.

'Jesus Christ,' Tyler let out.

'She'd worked for us three years,' Rafa muttered, 'she was family.'

Alma spared only a glance, her focus already on the back door, slightly ajar. She exchanged a look with Rafa, who nodded, understanding her concern without words.

She approached the door. She kept to the side of the frame and nudged the door open with her foot, sweeping the handgun across her field of vision as a yard came into view.

A figure emerged, his hands raised slightly when he saw them. Pascual, moving with calm assurance.

'Ya aseguré el área,' he called out.

Alma's posture remained rigid. She raised the Glock and fired twice. Pascual dropped before his hand could reach his gun.

'What the fuck?' Tyler yelled, his face gone ashen.

Rafa nodded slowly, 'Good call,' he said quietly. 'That door didn't open itself. He let them in.'

Alma kept the gun trained on Pascual's motionless form. His right arm twitched and began to move towards his waistband. She stepped forward and pressed her heel onto his wrist.

‘¿Fue El Flaco?’ Rafa asked, crouching beside them.

Pascual said nothing and closed his eyes, but after Alma applied more pressure to his wrist, he gave a slight nod.

‘Entre ladrones no hay lealtad,’ Rafa muttered, shaking his head.

She relieved the pressure and took his phone, wallet, and keys.

‘How did you—’ Tyler began, looking at Alma.

‘I knew it before he did it.’ She checked the gun's magazine. ‘Three rounds left. We need to move.’

‘There's a garage,’ Rafa said, pocketing Pascual's phone. ‘Two cars. We can take the jeep.’ Alma nodded.

As they moved toward the side of the house, Tyler grabbed her arm. ‘Who are you really?’ he whispered, his world tilting as the woman he thought he knew dismantled and reassembled herself before his eyes.

She met his gaze steadily. ‘Right now, I'm the person keeping you alive. That's all that matters.’

Behind them the house stood silent, a mausoleum to ChingoCoin and its bloody proceeds.

Chapter 15: Mexico

Tyler drove the jeep out of Santa Cecilia, eastward towards the Guadalajara beltway, Alma on the passenger seat scanning the streets for pursuers, Rafa slumped in the back where the windows' tinted glass obscured his profile.

'We've been betrayed,' Rafa said, 'I'm not safe here anymore and neither are you.'

'We're going to DF,' Alma said. 'Our embassies can get us new passports, and security.' She turned to Tyler. 'I've got my copy of the wallet key, you too?'

'Yeah, noted and memorized the mnemonic. We're loaded, at least with crypto.'

'This could still be useful.' Alma showed the gun to Rafa. 'Do we have more ammo?'

'In the glove compartment.'

She found another pistol, two boxes of 9mm rounds, and a stack of cash—dollars and pesos bound with rubber bands.

'I must go out of Jalisco,' Rafa said. 'So I'll go with you to DF. Seven-hour drive.' He winced and readjusted the blood-soaked fabric wrapped around his wrist.

'What about your crypto wallet?' Tyler asked him.

'Don't worry about it, always had the USB drive on me.'

The jeep merged onto the 90D highway, midday sun striking windshield. Tyler squinted against the glare, missing his sunglasses. The traffic went lighter as the suburban Guadalajara gave way to a spars patchwork of industrial and residential areas.

'We need supplies,' Alma said. 'And to take care of that,' as she pointed to Rafa's injury.

They exited the 90D at El Vado residential area, found a farmacia, and pulled under a row of palm, the fronds cast zebra-stripe shadows across the hood.

The elderly woman behind the desk of the tiny pharmacy seemed to wake up when Alma entered. She gathered antiseptic, gauze, medical tape. The clerk lady asked for ochenta pesos and Alma handed her a 100 pesos note, adding 'Si alguien le pregunta, nunca me vio.'

In the adjacent grocery she bought bottled water, crackers, and dried meat, and went back to the jeep. Inside, she worked on Rafa's wrist, cleaning the wound and applying antiseptic. As she wrapped the bandage she noticed a tattoo on his inner arm. The number 13 in stylized cursive script.

'Thirteen...' she asked without asking.

Rafa studied her face before answering. 'A reminder that you must face your fears. This number scared me since I was a child. My abuela believed it meant death.'

'Triskaidekaphobia,' she said.

'¿Mande?'

'El miedo al número trece, se llama tricaidecafobia,' she answered securing the bandage straps.

'Ya me siento mucho mejor sabiendo eso.'

'De nada. Let's move.'

They drove through Jalisco on the 15D highway, the landscape opening around them with agave fields stretched in geometric patterns, the spiky blue-green plants like sea creatures stranded on land. Hills rose in the distance against the cloudless sky and occasional villages emerged with their pale church steeples thrusting upward like rods for divine attention.

The radio tuned on Match FM played a mix of Mexican and American pop music, a Taylor Swift song playing when they saw the red and white barriers arms rise and fall like mechanical sentinels—the Ocotlán toll station.

'Can't use the automated lane,' Rafa said. 'No credit cards.'

They stopped at a manned booth. The attendant took their pesos and flicked over them as she gave them back their change and receipt, lingering a moment too long on Rafa in the back seat. Two police vehicles stood on the other side. Tyler felt sweat down

his spine but the cops remained in their cars, only moving to flick the ash from their cigarettes.

‘¡Muévete!’ Rafa commanded. Tyler drove out, his knuckles whitening on the steering wheel.

Rafa reached forward to change the radio station. The voice Ariel Camacho filled the car, the late Sinaloan corridoero singing

El karma viene y se va

También se escucha por ahí

Que ese R-15 descansa

Nadie de la parca se puede escapar

‘It won’t be the last toll station, but this one was the most risky,’ Rafa said. ‘The farther from Jalisco, the safer we’ll be.’

They crossed a river, and a sign suspended over the highway proclaimed ‘Bienvenidos a Michoacán’ in large white letters against green. Alma watched the landscape transform, the greener fields greener reminding her of Catalonia, where she’d grown up.

When they stopped to refuel at a Pemex station, Alma slipped away. In one aisle of the station’s convenience store, she spotted a woman about her age leaning scrolling through her phone. She invented a story about a dead battery and an urgent call to her sick mother, gesturing at an imaginary phone. The woman hesitated, then nodded and handed over her device. Alma turned away with her shoulders angled to hide the screen.

She dialed a number she’d memorized, and when the voice answered she kept it brief. ‘Mariposa confirming position. Highway 15D, en route to DF with two assets. Situation contained.’ A pause, then: ‘Confirmed. Rendezvous in DF. Keeping a low profile.’

She cleared the call history before handing the phone back with profuse thanks and a story about her mother being okay.

When she returned to the jeep, Rafa’s eyes narrowed.

‘What took you so long?’ Rafa asked.

‘Had to wait for the ladies room.’

Tyler started the engine and followed the signs out of the service station. The highway stretched before them, heat mirages on the asphalt. The scenery blurred past—rock formations, small towns, billboard ads, roadside stands selling fruit and crafts.

Then a road sign announcing ‘Mexico: 313km.’

Rafa stiffened. ‘Trece,’ he muttered. ‘Thirteen again.’

‘Man, it’s just a number,’ Tyler said, ‘every hour you get a thirteen on your clock you know.’

Rafa shook his head. ‘It’s never just a number.’

The first bang came without warning. The steering wheel jerked in Tyler’s hands. The jeep swerved and tilted before he fought it back into lane

‘Flat tire,’ he announced, guiding the vehicle to the shoulder. ‘Fuck.’

‘¡Pinche llanta! Te dije... la maldición es de verdad.’

Tyler stepped out to examine the tire. The rubber was shredded, steel belts exposed like the carcass of an animal.

‘Do we have a spare tire?’ Alma asked.

‘No, we’d removed it to gain more space in the back.’

‘Look, we got lucky in our bad luck,’ Tyler said as he pointed a village looking less than two kilometers away, the red logo of an OXXO convenience store visible against white stucco. ‘We can walk from here.’

Rafa approved the idea, and they gathered what they could carry—guns, ammo, water, cash—and abandoned the jeep. The sun beat down on the empty stretch of highway. They walked single file along the shoulder, Tyler in front, Alma in the middle. Heat shimmered from the asphalt, passing trucks shook the air as they sped by without slowing.

After ten minutes they went off the highway and cut across a fallow field toward the village. The ground was hard-packed dirt studded with stones that turned under their

feet. Ragged corn stalks from a previous harvest poked through the soil like broken fingers.

A movement in the brush caught Alma's eye. A coati emerged, its ringed tail held like a question mark. It regarded them with inquisitive eyes before slipping back into the undergrowth.

‘What was that?’ Tyler asked.

‘Tejón,’ Rafa said. ‘Good luck to see one.’

‘We could use some luck,’ Alma murmured

The village materialized in the haze but seemed no closer despite their walking. Tyler wiped sweat from his brow and squinted at the wavering buildings ahead. Rafa looked unsteady, the bandage on his wrist now spotted with fresh blood. Alma noticed the instincts of a hunted man as his eyes scanned the horizon at regular intervals. She wondered how many times he'd made escapes like this before and how many of those had ended well.

The village was little more than a cluster of one-story edifices around a small plaza. They found a cantina on the corner, the interior cool and dark after the relentless sun. A ceiling fan pushed around the smells of beer and fried food. In the corner, a television murmured news about a shootout in Guadalajara.

They ordered three beers.

‘Y’all Americans?’ A man at the next table interrupted their drinking, Southwestern American by his drawl. He dragged his chair closer.

‘I’m American,’ Tyler plainly replied.

‘Name’s Bill, from Phoenix Arizona.’ His face was tanned and creased and looked like that of a man in his fifties. ‘Been drinkin since noon,’ he added.

Tyler nodded.

‘Just passin through? Been wanderin around Mexico myself for about a year, helluva country.’

‘Just on vacation with friends, spring break you know.’ Tyler didn’t want to raise suspicions.

‘They say Mexico’s dangerous as all hell but that ain’t what brought me here. You guys heard about those blockchain tokens?’

Alma sipped her beer, suddenly fascinated by a soccer match on the television.

‘Yeah of course, who hasn’t,’ Tyler said, unable to stop himself. ‘Cryptocurrency and all, what about them?’

‘Listen my friend... Months ago, my buddy Frankie, smartest sonofabitch I know, he buys these tokens, says “Bill, you gotta get in on this, got me some insider information, can’t possibly lose.” Whatever, I buy the goddamn tokens and we watch the price go up and up. Made about fifty thousand American dollars in two weeks. Fifty thousand! You believe that shit?’

‘I guess,’ Tyler nodded.

‘Now hold on, I ain’t told you about the tokens. You know what tokenization is, right?’

‘Yeah.’

‘So these fellas, they made investments in livestock, bought baby goats and tokenized em. A single goat’s worth maybe a couple hundred bucks. But that goat, it makes milk, and it makes babies, and those babies make more damn babies. So with your token, you ain’t just got one measly goat, you got yourself a whole friggin’ herd down that road! You followin’?’

‘Sounds interesting...’

‘Here’s the kicker. When we wanted our real money back Frankie and I, we tried sellin’ those virtual tokens. But it didn’t work. Some error message, no buyers, technical difficulties, blah blah fuckin’ blah. So guess what we did?’

‘I don’t know, you still had the tokens though?’

‘Damn straight we did. And we’d seen their fancy-ass website, what’d they call it... GoatChain! Had photos, videos of farmers, could see the actual goats grazin and everything. They even gave the little bastards names, for Chrissake!’

‘So I guess you realized it was a scam at that point—’

‘Hell no! I was dumber than a box of rocks! They had the address of the farm, so I says to myself, “If I can't sell them tokens, least I can do is get my actual goat and barbecue the damn thing.” So Frank and I we drive there. Farm was in Mexico, some godforsaken shithole called La Colorado, in the state of Sonora. Seven hours of nothin but cacti and regret from Phoenix. And you know what we found?’

‘You tell me.’

‘Not a goddamn thing. No farm. No freakin goats. Just stupid-ass desert and confused locals. I didn't speak a lick of Spanish back then, so we're there like idiots pointing at phones showing pictures of goats. And these folks keep sayin “no hay cabras, no hay cabras.” Then some ancient-lookin fella tells me they had one “pastor”—means a herder. But he wasn't herding no cabras, he was a pastor of palomas! Carrier pigeons! Can you believe that horseshit?’

‘Definitely not goats then.’

‘Man, that place was so miserably awful that even the birds hated it. Flew away and never came back. Locals said the pigeon man died not long after. Didn't say how, but I got my theories.’ Bill tapped the side of his nose.

‘That’s wild, so you’ve been in Mexico since then?’

‘Yessir, still lookin for my damn goats, I reckon.’ He squinted, finally noticing Rafa. ‘These your friends?’

‘Yeah, but we gotta go now. Nice meeting you Bill, good luck with the goats.’

Bill studied Rafa, something dawning in his bleary eyes. ‘You enjoy spring break, folks,’ he said, turning to order another cerveza.

Outside, the sun had started its descent, the temperature had noticeably dropped. A young man—no more than twenty-five, with worn jeans and the black t-shirt of a metal band—was walking toward a dusty Honda Civic, keys in hand.

Alma stepped forward. ‘Disculpe, señor. ¿Le interesaría vender su coche?’

The vehicle was an older model, its grey paint inconspicuous enough.

The man looked at her, then at Tyler and Rafa behind her. He laughed in a mix of disbelief and tension. ‘No está en venta.’

Rafa counted out pesos. ‘Cinco mil.’

‘No, gracias.’

‘Ten thousand dollars,’ Tyler said. ‘In crypto. USDT. Right now.’

The man looked confused. Alma translated: ‘Diez mil dólares en criptomoneda. Ahora mismo.’

The man's expression shifted. ‘¿Está bromeando?’

‘Quince mil?’ The man asked.

They agreed on that price and the man showed his blockchain address as a QR code then Rafa sent the money from his phone’s wallet app.

Without a word, the man began unscrewing his license plates, his movements hurried as if afraid they'd change their minds.

Rafa nudged Tyler. ‘Get us other plates.’ He gestured toward an abandoned pickup at the far end of the lot.

Tyler jogged across the lot and returned with dusty plates from an old truck. The young man was still transfixed by the phone, the Honda's plates now leaning against the tire—he'd likely been checking the balance of Rafa's account.

‘Quizás asegúrese de que nadie pueda vincular esta cuenta con su identidad,’ Alma advised him quietly.

They pulled onto the highway in the Honda, Tyler once again driving. Two and a half hours to DF. In the rearview mirror, he watched the young man still standing in the parking lot, staring at his phone like it had transformed into a sacred talisman.

Chapter 16: Mariposa

The Honda Civic proved more reliable than the jeep. They'd driven through the state of Mexico and now felt Mexico City's gravitational pull. They crossed the Desierto de los Leones, a dense forested area of pines, oyamel firs, and oaks, the wilderness before the urban sprawl, named for a family that once owned these heights.

No one spoke as the three-lane autopista passed a neighborhood of suburban residential projects streaked with election slogans and faded billboards peeling like sunburnt skin. Satellite dishes poked out from balconies, trembling without wind. The gray-brown sky hung low over the sprawl, with distant sierra peaks emerging from haze like ancient gods observing human folly.

Tyler rolled down the window. The air was hot but felt cleaner than the car's dry AC. He was mid-sentence, explaining to Rafa how to launder the ChingoCoins proceeds through blockchain mixers when he spotted a black van behind them, matching their lane changes for the third time.

‘That van's been behind us for the last ten minutes,’ Tyler said.

Rafa turned his head just enough to glimpse the vehicle. ‘Maybe nothing, maybe something.’

Tyler continued detailing how to obfuscate digital money trails when the traffic began to congeal. Three cars bunched together to form a perfect line, slowing down in unison. A fourth slid into the remaining gap to complete the blockade.

‘What the hell they doing?’ Tyler leaned forward, squinting at the sudden wall of brake lights.

The row of vehicles forced them to stop.

‘Get out. Now.’ Alma commanded as she opened her door and escaped, a bag in her hands.

In the rearview mirror, Tyler saw the door of the black van slid open and four men emerged in black tactical gear and balaclavas, weapons visible. Rafa searched for the gun in the car but find none. They had lost sight of Alma. ‘Where is she now?’ Tyler said, looking through the open door.

Before either man could react, their doors opened at once and gloved hands seized them, a combat knife cutting Tyler’s seatbelt, a short-barreled rifle pointed at Rafa. Tyler heard a ‘Do not resist!’ as two men pulled him out and towards the van.

The armed men handcuffed Tyler and Rafa and forced them onto metal benches in the van’s interior. There they patted them down, finding the USB drive in Rafa’s jacket and a folded paper in Tyler’s pocket. The operatives then sat opposite them like faceless sentinels. Then Alma entered. No restraints, no tension in her posture. Her smile unfamiliar—professional, detached.

A man in a charcoal suit followed her and sat beside Tyler, Alma facing him.

‘You’re with them?’ Tyler managed to say to Alma.

‘That’s a longer conversation than you think,’ she replied.

The van accelerated and the symphony of car horns faded as they sped up along a cleared highway.

‘So you’re still police.’ Rafa recognized, his voice flat.

Seconds passed. The suited man placed his hands on his knees and addressed the captives with a Northeastern American accent.

‘Gentlemen, you’re under arrest as part of a joint international operation. Mr. Hollis, we’ve had eyes on you since NarcoPanda. Mr. Mendoza, you weren’t on our radar initially, but that’s changed, thanks to our Mexican colleagues.’ He made a clinical pause. ‘Questions will come later, not now. You speak when you’re told to.’

He glanced at Alma. ‘And as you brilliantly noticed, she’s on our team.’

Alma nodded. ‘Tyler, the Dubai connection you kept mentioning—he’s using crypto projects to wash money from organized crime. Mexican cartels, Chinese triads, it’s massive. Emirati Royals are involved. An international task force has been investigating. US DEA, INTERPOL, and UDYCO in Spain. Let’s just say that my assignment was

intelligence gathering, assessing your level of involvement.’ A small shrug. ‘You didn’t disappoint.’

‘So I was just a pawn.’ Tyler grinned. ‘Was anything about you real? Are you even Spanish?’

‘I am Spanish—Catalan too.’

‘That’s enough,’ the man in suit cut in, staring at Tyler. ‘Mr. Hollis, your business decisions brought you where you are now and you can only blame yourself.’

Silence filled the van, save for the engine’s growl. Tyler stared at Alma, trying to catch her gaze, but her eyes were absent. Rafa smiled.

After less than ten minutes, the van stopping at a nondescript building in a quiet Mexico neighborhood. Two men in plain clothes waited at the entrance, faces impassive.

‘Time for you to go, Mr. Hollis,’ the suited man said.

Tyler looked back at Alma. ‘Was any of it real? Dubai? Cancún?’

‘The danger was real, remember that.’ Something flickered in her eyes. ‘Goodbye Tyler.’ Her voice softened. ‘Don’t try to be clever with them, just tell the truth.’

‘Goodbye Alma, or whatever your name is.’

The door slid shut behind him. The van rejoined traffic, silent except for the hum of tires on asphalt and the occasional horn outside. Minutes stretched between them.

The suited man turned his attention to Rafa. ‘You understand how this works, Mr. Mendoza.’ No question in his voice. ‘We’ll make you an offer you can’t refuse. We haven’t been hunting you but the Mexican Federales would be interested in your ChingoCoin operation and your other businesses. Not to mention your former associates.”

Rafa’s face remained emotionless but his eyes betrayed calculation.

‘If you want to stay alive, and perhaps keep some small fraction of that money, you’ll want to cooperate.’

‘Who are you people anyway?’ Rafa asked. ‘CIA?’

‘Does it matter?’ The man replied.

After a pause, Rafa continued. ‘She wasn’t the only one that betrayed me, I’ve accounts to settle. We can discuss.’

They arrived at another location, a compound surrounded by high walls, surveillance cameras visible, armed men at the gate. Two SUVs waited.

‘Suerte...’ Alma said as he was escorted out. ‘Ojalá no te toque la habitación número trece.’

Rafa paused, studying her face. ‘Eres más cabrona de lo que parecía, española,’ he said with a smirk.

The door closed again. Just Alma and the suited man remained, the van proceeding to a third destination.

‘Great work, Gemma, project Espejo is going well.’ He loosened his tie. ‘You had us worried for a while.’

‘I still had the beacon in my shoe in Guadalajara, could you locate me?’

‘We got your signal from Guadalajara yes. As per the protocol we didn’t worry until we went three days without hearing from you. Then we connected the dots when ChingoCoin started making waves. We sent a team to find you, but they came too late. The location in that neighborhood wasn’t very reliable, they must have had GPS jammers in that safehouse. At least your body wasn’t in the six we found. Higher-up were preparing contingencies though.’

‘You mean writing my obituary.’

‘That too. Your call from the road was our first confirmation you were alive.’

She nodded. ‘What happens to the ChingoCoin proceeds? You’ll find the key in Rafa’s USB drive . Tyler also got a share, he had a note with the passphrase.’

‘The funds will be seized, assuming those keys are the correct ones. Some will fund the witness protection program. Victims' compensation for the NarcoPanda investors. You’ll tell me more about that during your formal debriefing.’

‘Of course.’

Gemma leaned forward and sighed. ‘Look, I need a favor.’

He waited.

‘Something at the Guadalajara safehouse I want to retrieve.’

‘The cleanup crew has already processed the scene,’ he said like the matter was closed.

‘Nothing relevant to the case.’ She hesitated. ‘More personal.’

He studied her, searching for the angle. She met his gaze without elaboration.

After a moment, he nodded. ‘I’ll make a call.’

‘Thank you.’

Epilogue

The beach was barren, save for a red beach towel and a trail of footprints leading back to the wooden cabin, the only man-made construction in the cove. Gemma stood up from the table outside and when she stepped inside the strident ‘Aguaaas’ didn’t make her flinch. She grabbed her laptop and returned to the terrace where she connected to the wireless access point of her Starling dish. She browsed a few news sites, eventually clicking a link to Web3 Is Going Just Great where the latest post made her smile:

ChingoCoin rug pulls for \$13.2 million, alleged ties to a shootout in Guadalajara

A Mexico-themed memecoin called ChingoCoin collapsed when its founders sold off tokens worth \$13.2 million, causing the price to plummet 98% in under 3 minutes. Several celebrities had promoted the project, including the rapper Lil C, who tweeted that ChingoCoin had "the most impressive tech I've seen." The Financial Times and other major outlets had covered the project's supposed mission to fight financial inequality in Mexico. This marks the second memecoin scam for co-founder Tyler Hollis, who previously orchestrated the NarcoPanda rug pull. Hollis was reportedly arrested in Mexico City and faces charges of fraud, securities violations, and money laundering. Authorities are also investigating potential connections between ChingoCoin and a shootout in Guadalajara that left six dead.

Searching the local Mexican news, a story caught her eye in the ‘Narcotráfico’ section of El Universal:

Policía Federal detiene a Manuel 'El Flaco' Romero, presunto lugarteniente del CJNG en Quintana Roo

She then opened her crypto wallet application, checking her balance. Enough to feed Pepillo for the rest of his life. She closed the laptop and poured herself a glass of mezcal.

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