

IMMIGRANT SONG

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A Smashwords Edition

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You know who you are.

For Patti Mercier

Part I

*Heard of a van that is loaded with weapons,
packed up and ready to go
Heard of some gravesites, out by the highway
a place where nobody knows*

Talking Heads "Life during wartime"

CHAPTER ONE

When the death squad came for him, Ricky fled.

He had been sitting at the table crammed into the tiny kitchen of his second floor apartment when he spotted the black, late model SUV turn into the parking lot that paralleled the front of his building. Along with the fact that he could see the outline of the red and blue flashing lights on its dashboard and behind its grill, the vehicle was so out of place among the beat up, second hand junkers driven by the students who lived in the off-campus apartments, that it literally screamed police.

Without hesitation, Ricky ran into the bedroom and dumped the contents of his book bag onto the floor, watching as his calculus text, two notebooks, and a copy of the speech that he had given the day before spilled out. He thought briefly of tearing the speech to shreds, burning the tattered remains and flushing the ashes down the toilet, but knew it was too late for that. If the Groups were here to take him away, they wouldn't care about collecting evidence. They were here to make him disappear.

Quickly stuffing three pairs of jeans and some shirts into the bag, he grabbed his jacket off the hook on the back of the bedroom door and ran for the bathroom, moving so fast down the short hallway that he bounced off the door jamb and almost ended up doing a header into the tub. Recovering quickly, he cranked the awning window open to its fullest extent before sticking his head out to make sure the alley below was clear.

It had been weeks since the sanitation collectors had been through so the smell of human waste and old moldering garbage rose up to almost gag him as he surveyed the mounds of uncollected trash piled halfway up the wall of the first floor. After checking to see that the spot he'd cleared the day before hadn't been filled by his downstairs neighbor throwing her refuse out, Ricky shouldered his bag, climbed through the open window and hung for a second from the sill before letting go.

The book bag threw him off balance, and he knew even as his feet hit the packed dirt of the alley that he had landed wrong. Feeling a sharp pain shoot up his right leg from the ankle, he immediately took his weight off it, bobbing up and down on one foot as he tried to determine how badly he was injured. Closing his eyes tightly, he said in a soft voice. "Please don't let it be broken. Please."

Knowing fatalistically that his leg would either hold him or it wouldn't, and if it didn't, then he was through; Ricky put his foot down and tentatively tested his weight on it. It was painful, but the ankle didn't seem to be broken or sprained, just strained. Hearing a crashing noise come through the bathroom window above him, he flinched in fear at the sound of what he knew was the front door of his apartment being kicked in. Shouted commands from the men of the death squad filtered down to the alley as they entered his apartment and spread out in search of him.

Adrenalin flooded Ricky's already overloaded system at how close the voices sounded. His apartment consisted of only a few hundred square feet of space so it would be but seconds before one of the men entered the bathroom and looked out the window. Knowing that if he was spotted that he was as good as dead, he ignored the pain in his ankle as he dug his feet into the litter strewn dirt and took off like a shot. He had planned his escape route earlier so he only had to run a short distance before coming to another alley formed by two of the buildings that made up part of the huge apartment complex where he lived. Turning left between them, he was quickly out of sight.

Speeding down the alley, Ricky was grateful for his years of playing soccer as he dodged around heaps of trash and leapt over discarded pieces of furniture like they were defending players trying to tackle him. He felt a slight twinge of pain in his ankle as he ran, but ignored it. He'd been hurt worse than this once during a playoff match and had stayed in for the entire second half of the game, even scoring a goal. Afterward, he'd found that he'd fractured his tibia and had to sit out for the rest of that year and part of the next, but it had shown him his threshold for pain.

Grateful that this pain wasn't even close to what he'd felt that day and that he hadn't been hurt worse, he offered up a quick, "Thank you," to whatever gods might be listening. Increasing his speed, his mind drifted to the events of the past few days as he examined his actions in the hope that he could find a way out of this mess.

As his feet hit the ground in a steady rhythm, he thought to himself, I am so screwed.

Ricky knew that he was asking for trouble when he gave a speech at the university the previous day revealing corruption in the government and how the president had seized control of the country in a coup. He knew about the Groups, and how they made anyone who spoke out against the current regime disappear, but his fear of retaliation was overcome by his anger at the criminal injustices committed against his family and the systematic murder perpetrated by the president and his lackeys against so many of his countrymen. He felt that he had to stand up for his rights and the rights of others regardless of the outcome. Letting his frustration vent, he railed at President Gomes for ten minutes from the podium he had forcefully commandeered during a student debate, stating specific instances of corruption and vice that the county's leader and his Peoples Reform Party were involved in.

The crowd gasped in shock as Ricky started out by relating how Gomes had set up the much-touted National Healthcare Plan with taxpayer's money, and then proceeding to raid its coffers with the help of his political cronies. What had been designed to provide the poor with low-cost medical care for the next decade, create countless jobs for the unemployed and as a boost to the struggling economy, was bankrupted by Gomes and his worthless associates within a year. Not just relating the rumors and hearsay that were common after the collapse of the NHP, Ricky gave strong evidence to back up his accusations. He stated the names of those involved, how they embezzled the money, how it was diverted to overseas accounts, how the crime was covered up, and even how much President Gomes personally profited from the scheme.

Five-hundred million dollars.

But it went much deeper than that, Ricky told those gathered. Gomes didn't steal all the money destined for the NHP, just enough to cause it to fail. He didn't crash the NHP to get rich, though he had a use for the money, the collapse was simply the catalyst that would set the stage for his ultimate goal; total control of the country.

In the three months following the failure of the NHP, unemployment, which had hovered around fifteen percent for the previous two years, gradually climbed to over thirty-five percent. For some of the minorities in the country, it even went as high as sixty percent. This was due to the fact that along with the healthcare workers who suddenly found themselves out of work, related businesses that stood to profit from the healthcare plan were also hit by a loss in potential revenue. Layoffs in all sectors of the already fragile economy occurred, and companies that planned to expand suddenly had to let workers go just to keep their doors open. With fewer people having money to spend on anything except essentials, even more businesses followed suit by initiating layoffs as their sales plummeted.

To further aggravate the situation, before the collapse of the NHP, the country's economy had already been volatile due to a deep recession so the government was borrowing huge amounts from foreign banks to keep it stable. Now, due to the high level of unemployment lessening the amount of money coming in from taxes, there wasn't enough cash on hand to make payments on the country's loans. This combined with the sudden influx of people filing for unemployment and the resulting drop in the GNP tipped the scales and caused massive defaults across the board. This then resulted in a world-wide loss of faith in the country's economy and the lowering of their credit rating. Inflation skyrocketed, interest rates tripled, and the domino effect rippled throughout the entire nation's financial system. No one was left untouched by the fallout.

Out of work and struggling, the people screamed for answers and relief. President Gomes made an appearance on television where he blamed the whole mess on terrorists and outside agitators and vowed to personally conduct a full investigation, promising that the perpetrators of these heinous crimes against the people

would be brought to justice. He asked for patience while he sorted things out and stabilized the situation. Soon, he promised, there would be work for everyone.

Though skeptical of all politicians, the people trusted Gomes to some extent since he always seemed to want what was best for them. Their belief that he was working in their favor was furthered by a series of commercials airing over the following weeks, showing Gomes doing everything in his power to resolve the crisis. He was portrayed as studiously working late into the night and crossing political lines to come up with a bi-partisan solution, while at the same time showing his detractors in the legislature as inept clowns. One commercial actually portrayed his opponents as just that, circus clowns. It was excellent theater. What the people didn't know was that this advertising blitz was paid for in part by the money Gomes had stolen from the NHP, and that he was actually doing everything in his power to make matters worse.

Behind the scenes, Gomes sabotaged every proposal that was brought to the floor by either party, accomplishing this by playing politician against politician and using his stolen war chest to buy votes. Keeping a low profile, he worked through intermediaries posing as lobbyists acting to further the cause of private interest groups. In this way, he would remain blameless in the gridlock. This worked well for a while, but despite his best efforts, he finally had to come out in the open when a bill that would create jobs and provide relief for the unemployed somehow managed to pass through the legislature and was brought before him to sign.

In a flurry of new commercials, Gomes stated that the bill was a communist backed conspiracy to expand and give more power to the unions, while in fact it was a solid two year plan to get the country through the worst of the crisis. He accused the opposing party of grandstanding, while secretly bribing its members to publicly distance themselves from the bill so as to give it less credence. After a week-long media blitz stating that he stood for freedom and not the socialist doctrine that had been presented for his signature, Gomes appeared live on national television where he tore the bill up.

Enraged by this, and stating that Gomes was following his own agenda and that it was driving the country into the ground, a group of legislators publically called for an inquiry into the president's actions and his possible involvement in the collapse of the NHP. A committee was seated, subpoenas were issued, and despite Gomes being the darling of the media, they too turned their focus on him and started asking uncomfortable questions.

While impressive in its scope, the investigation ended up being short lived, as the day before the committee was to convene all five of the men who volunteered to scrutinize the president's affairs died in a mysterious mid-air explosion on a flight to the capitol. Appearing to be a blatant conspiracy to murder the people who sought to impeach him that it actually was, initially many people pointed their finger at the president, accusing him of having his rivals eliminated. These ended up being few in number though, as the blame was quickly diverted. Before the smoke had even dared from the wreckage of the sabotaged plane, Gomes was airing commercials avowing his innocence and stating that it was terrorists who blew up his rivals. Terrorist's intent on seeing the destruction of their great country. This claim was immediately backed by evidence presented by the head of the country's investigative bureau, a long time associate of Gomes and one of his partners in the raiding of the NHP. With the deaths of its key members, the investigation lost its momentum and the media quickly focused on the terrorism angle.

The political situation worsened as fighting heated up between the two main political parties, with each saying that it was the others fault that they were in this mess. Things deteriorated to the point where nothing could be done to quickly correct the problems facing the country, so instead of working on a long term solution, those in charge sought someone to blame for the crisis. The end result was that no elected officials, even those in the same party, could agree on which bill should be proposed much less push it through for Gomes to sign. This didn't sit well with the people, and since nothing was happening to improve their situation, their limited patience frayed and started to break.

What Gomes referred to as "The revolt," started with a few disturbances when people who were out of work and had no money to buy food became desperate. It consisted of a dozen government and private grocery warehouses that were looted by groups of men and women looking to feed their families. The extent of the unrest was small, but this was only until the media got wind of the incidents. In their quest for something to report on besides the ineptness of the country's elected officials, and with some urging by Gomes' press secretary, they grabbed onto and hyped the story, making it appear as if the entire nation was in upheaval and that anarchy now ruled. This prompted hordes of additional people to take to the streets to try to grab what they could while they

had a chance. The nightly news was saying that the sky was falling so the people believed that it was and now it was everyone for themselves. What started as a few isolated events turned into days of looting and lawlessness in over one hundred cities.

Despite the media's sensationalistic reaction, the situation calmed down as the police restored order, but the stage had been set. Gomes used the food riots to judge how volatile the situation was, and seeing that the people were on the brink, moved on to the next step in his plan.

On the first day of the following month, the president refused to approve the national budget. With the exception of continuing to pay government employees and the military, all funding was suspended indefinitely. Among the wide range of new problems this created, it caused the government to renege on its promise to help homeowners with their mortgages. Since the lowering of the country's credit rating and the resulting jump in interest rates, the government had promised to step in and aid those with adjustable rate mortgages to help keep them in their homes. When this didn't happen, scores of people defaulted on their loans. To add to the debacle, they were then hit by a harsh new law that had been quietly slipped into a previous spending bill by Gomes. This draconian edict ordered that those who failed to make their loan payments be immediately evicted.

Over the following months, the police swept in and forcibly expelled countless people from their homes. Huge slums sprang up outside towns and cities almost overnight as those dislocated by the new law built homes out of cardboard, tin, and discarded wood. Now clustered together in large groups, and enraged at the government for lying to them about the relief they were promised, the homeless fed off each other's anger and started taking to the streets on a daily basis to protest Gomes and the government. The police were called in to break up these crowds and violent clashes became a regular occurrence when the demonstrators refused to disperse. The situation escalated as it evolved into a daily spree of looting and mindless destruction. At first the police used non-lethal means to try and restore order, but found themselves fired on by groups of protesters to which they had no choice but to respond with deadly force. The situation escalated, and within days open warfare raged in the larger cities, with the media covering the crisis live while broadcasting a running death toll.

The president went on television and radio to ask for calm. He begged the rioters to give him a chance to fix the problem. He explained that it wasn't his fault. He blamed his political rivals for his inability to approve the budget since they had tried adding a spending clause that would finish off the already troubled economy. He'd had no choice but to refuse to sign. He swore to make it right, and was almost in tears as he told those listening that he didn't want to see their beautiful country fall into chaos.

Ricky then related to those gathered at the hijacked debate, that although Gomes said he didn't want the country to fall into chaos, this was what he had planned for from the start. Despite the private sector being hit hard by the economical upheavals perpetrated by Gomes, he had made sure that all government employees still retained their full pay and benefits. In this way, they remained loyal to him. This was especially true of the military, who had received huge pay increases shortly after the collapse of the NHP. Thus, when the first large scale cases of lawlessness were reported, the men and women of the Army pledged their full support of Gomes and rushed in to bolster a quickly overwhelmed police force. Now instead of having to rely on a demoralized military beset with dissent, the president was able to send in a motivated, loyal, well paid, almost mercenary force.

Once again blaming outside agitators for the unrest, President Gomes declared martial law, ordering the military to use lethal force on the rioters. This included the use of tanks and artillery fire. Gomes explained to the news media that he was using this overwhelmingly destructive force to avoid civil war. This was how he justified his actions in ordering thousands to be gunned down in the initial clashes between the rioters and the Army.

To further the chaos, the media covering the conflict ineptly reported on who was causing the unrest. One day they would report that it was communists, the next day that it was anarchists, and the day after that it was terrorists, all this information being fed to them by Gomes and his press secretary. These false reports caused more people to take to the streets as they formed up to fight whatever perceived threat the news was spewing out at the time, but all they ended up doing was coming into conflict with the other factions already looking for a target to unload their frustration and anger on. In this way, the riots spread to previously tranquil areas. Army units were dispatched to these clashes as uprisings and wide scale fighting erupted across the country. Blood ran in the streets of every city and town in the nation.

At this point, President Gomes went on television and radio to present evidence that this was a carefully contrived coup led by foreign nationals. He went on to say that it had to be put down at any cost before it

threatened the freedom of the people. He explained that he had to enact certain measures that would only be temporary, and that when order was restored things would go back to the way they were. He gave his word that it would only take a week. He asked that everyone go along with his plan and not fight him or the military that he was sending in to crush the rebellion. He asked the people to hunker down in their homes. Let the professionals do their job, Gomes begged.

Tired of the violence that racked the nation, and still mostly convinced that Gomes was on their side, the people did as he asked. Slowly, the fighting died down and order was restored. Then, to do as he promised, to save the rights of the people and protect them, Gomes permanently took all their freedoms away.

With the military on his side, Gomes had no difficulty taking complete control of the country. He abolished the legislature and had his opponents arrested, seized all media outlets, had the internet and phone service inside, into, and out of the country cut, ordered the borders locked down, and declared that anyone speaking out against his new regime be rounded up, jailed, tried within the day, and shot. For this last order to be carried out, the President needed a special branch of the police. This was how the Groups came about.

Ricky explained to the crowd how Gomes used select units of the military and intelligence services to form a nation-wide secret police force whose only job was to round up dissidents and dispose of them. Gomes referred to them as his group of elite men and women who would ruthlessly stamp out the socialism, terrorism, and anarchy that had raised its ugly head in their peaceful society.

To Ricky's knowledge, a bigger group of sociopaths and murderers had never been assembled.

Working in four man teams, the Groups arrested over thirty thousand people in their first twenty-four hours of operation. The number being so large because no one saw them coming. They swept in with lists compiled of those who opposed the government in general, or Gomes in particular, and dragged these people from their homes and businesses. Besides those who vocally stated their opposition to the president, the lists also included the organizers and leaders of the recent riots, since these people were deemed a serious danger to the new regime. They had already proved their willingness to stand up to anything they deemed a threat to their rights, and Gomes didn't want anyone around who showed defiance or who might challenge his rule. With phone and internet services cut off, no one could send out a warning as to what was happening so, in the initial onslaught of arrests, it was like shooting deer in a petting zoo. Very few people had a chance to run or go into hiding.

Despite the ease at which most people were taken, the Groups did run into resistance, but this had been planned for. As soon as anyone used force to defy them, or refused to go along with them, the Army was called in. In one instance where a man barricaded himself inside his tenement apartment, tanks were ordered in to level the entire building. This was done before the other inhabitants were evacuated, and then broadcast live on all the state controlled television stations to raise the level of terror in the general population. Gomes ordered this done to set an example of what would happen to all who opposed him.

Though being picked up nowadays by the Groups was the same as a death sentence, not everyone in this initial sweep disappeared for good. Gomes had included many on the lists who he thought might be useful to his new regime. These people he had brought before him, either in person or via close circuit television, and they were told they had a choice. Swear allegiance and loyalty to him or die. Those not given this option simply disappeared. And although Ricky didn't explain it to the crowd, this is where it became personal for him. His father was one of the people who Gomes thought might be useful since before retiring earlier that year he had worked as the secretary to the head of the nation's treasury.

On the day that his mother called to tell him that his father had been taken out of their house by four armed men who kicked in the front door and dragged him off, Ricky's first reaction was to strike back in retaliation. The stories of government men grabbing people off the street and out of their homes had spread by word of mouth so he knew who was behind it. He wanted blood.

He needed to do something to vent his anger and frustration, and although up to now he had stayed out of the protests going on across the city, on this night he joined some students who planned to march against the riot police who were camped on the university's quad. Marching and chanting slogans wasn't attacking the government in the way that Ricky wanted, but it was better than sitting impotently in his apartment and worrying about his father.

It's a start, Ricky decided. I'll meet other protesters and make contacts, and through them I can find the people who are doing something to actively fight against Gomes and his dictatorship. Stories of an organized resistance

had spread across the campus, with tales of men and women who would pull up next to police cars or army vehicles before spraying them with machine gun fire being the most common rumor. These were the people who Ricky wanted to align himself with.

At this point, Ricky was all for a violent upheaval. He wanted to strike out at the government that had hurt him by taking his father, but he knew that he needed to do it cautiously. This caution came about because besides the stories of the resistance, there were also reports of informers inside the resistance who worked for the government. With this in mind, he wanted to take a good look at who he would be dealing with before doing anything drastic. Today would be a peaceful protest so it would be the perfect place to assess his fellow revolutionaries without putting himself in danger. On all previous occasions, as long as the protesters used non-violent means, they were told to disperse. If they refused, which they always did, tear gas and water cannon were used against them, but never bullets. Though violence was widespread throughout the rest of the nation, it hadn't struck their city, and the demonstrations had almost become a game for the students.

As Ricky stood behind the hijacked podium telling the crowd about the birth of the Groups, he was overcome by a dark sense of déjà vu. His first and only anti-government march had been almost on the very spot where he now stood.

He remembered back to that night, and how the fifty or sixty protesters had formed up across the quad from where the police had set up behind a line of barricades. The leaders of the demonstration seemed to know what they were doing as they handed out signs and banners before moving everyone into a line abreast so Ricky watched them carefully to see who he would approach afterward. As he was shown his place, excitement coursed through him that he was finally doing something.

Once organized, the students started to advance, shouting slogans for the police to quit the campus and let them be. The police in return immediately gave out a warning to disperse so the students pulled bandanas over their faces to filter out the tear gas they knew was coming. The cute young coed on Ricky's right laughed and told him to run as soon as the first gas grenade landed. That was what they always did. It was a rush she exclaimed with another laugh. Eyeing him suggestively, she then told him that they were all going to meet up at a nearby club afterward and that if he showed up she would let him buy her a drink. After a quick head to toe appraisal of him, she added that she might just buy him a drink instead. Ricky warmed to this idea immediately, realizing that being part of the revolution might have some other benefits besides striking back at Gomes.

They had only taken a few more steps though when, instead of the expected gas, the police opened fire with rifles, pistols, and shotguns. The girl Ricky had been talking to was struck in the stomach and a bullet passed so close to his head that it left a burn mark above his temple. Dropping to the ground, he grabbed the wounded girl's hand and pulled her to safety behind the base of a nearby statue. When they reached shelter, he turned her over to administer first aid only to discover that she was dead.

With the screams of the wounded and dying ringing in his ears, the eleven students murdered in the initial fusillade made no sound now, Ricky backed away from the area, keeping the statue between himself and the police. Scurrying on hands and knees into some bushes, he worked his way behind a brick wall, and here was finally able to stand upright and run from the area.

Reaching his apartment, Ricky could hear the sound of sirens and the occasional muffled shot coming from the nearby campus. He didn't turn on any lights as he made his way by feel and memory to the cabinet over the sink and brought down a bottle of tequila. Twisting the cap off, he took a swig directly from its neck. When he did this, his eyes focused on his hands. In the diffused light coming through the window over the sink, he could see them covered in blood..

Blood from the young woman that he had tried to save, he realized blankly. It looked black in the moonlight.

Surprised that he felt indifferent to the sight, he set the bottle down. He thought that he should feel more after what he'd just been through, but there was only numbness in his brain. He then noticed that thinking was like looking at himself from another mind. It felt as if his brain had been split in two and that neither half was functioning at full capacity. The two halves just sat there, observing each other and looking around dully at their surroundings. He found himself staring at a coffee cup that he had left on the kitchen table before going to the protest, not able to take his eyes off it. Recognizing that he was in shock, but not knowing what to do about it, he wanted to cry. The problem was that he couldn't. It was as if all his emotions had been scooped out of him.

Brought out of his daze by the sound of his cell phone ringing, Ricky stared dumbly at where created a bulge in his pocket before finally registering what the noise was. Taking the device out, he flipped it open. Not able to speak, he made a grunting noise. A hysterical voice greeted this and between the jumble of words that were flung at him and his own slowly moving brain, it took Ricky a minute to understand that it was his mother. She was crying and carrying on as she told him that his father had come home and wanted to see him right away. Relief at the news that his dad was alive finally broke Ricky's shock. He gave a sob of relief as he jumped up and ran for the door, telling her that he was on his way.

Arriving at his parent's house, Ricky found that his mother was so overwrought from thinking that her husband was dead, and then at his sudden return to the living, that she couldn't stop shaking and crying and had to be sedated. She was now upstairs in bed. After greeting his father with a hug, the older man moved stiffly as he led Ricky into his home office where they could talk.

Knowing that at twenty-two years of age his son was old enough to understand what was going on in the country, the Ricky's father pulled no punches as he explained how after being kidnapped he had been taken to an abandoned warehouse. Here, he was shoved around and beaten by a group of Gomes' thugs as they taunted him that they were going to cut his throat. But not before kidnapping and raping his daughter in front of him. After an hour of this, he was brought before the president via close circuit television. Here, he was told to stand up straight and a gun was held to his head. He noticed that the floor and part of the wall next to him were splattered with blood, bits of bone, and what looked like brain matter. He was then given a choice: work for the new government or die. When he didn't answer right away, this threat was compounded by the warning that not only he, but his family would suffer if he chose to resist.

Ricky shuddered at hearing this, vowing that no matter what, Gomes would pay.

Ricky's father then explained that if it was just him, he would opt for death before giving into a tin pot dictator like Gomes, but since it was his family's lives on the line too, he had no choice but to give in. He went on to say that he would have to put aside his ethics and morals to do what was being asked of him, however, this was a small price to pay for the safety of his family. He explained that after swearing allegiance to Gomes, he had been ordered to cover up the National Healthcare fiasco, to bury it so deep that no one would ever dig it up. He then related what he had been told of how Gomes had seized power and that he had been ordered to conceal all evidence of it. Gomes planned to rewrite the history of how he had come to power and didn't want any conflicting accounts circulating. Ricky's father repeatedly made it clear to his son that this information would be extremely damaging if it got out.

Ricky heard all of this, but was only listening with one ear. His hatred for Gomes and what he had done to his father was all consuming. The only thing he could think of was revenge. He paused at the idea of getting some payback though, since he had seen firsthand what happened to anyone who stood up to Gomes. People who stood up, and stood out, were shot down in cold blood in the street like the girl marching next to him had been. He racked his brain for an answer. There had to be a way to take the dictator down without sacrificing himself or others.

As his father continued to tell him about how he had a file on his home computer now that contained all of Gomes' crimes and of how sensitive it was, what he was saying finally filtered through Ricky's hatred and fear. As he listened closer, the beginning of an idea formed. Suddenly, Ricky had it, a plan that would allow him to hit Gomes where it hurt, while at the same time putting him at little risk of being killed or disappeared.

After spending some more time with his family, within the hour his sister showed up and their mother was awake and had rejoined them, Ricky finally left their house as dawn was breaking. Though he was emotionally and physically wiped out, his brain was working overtime. His mind spun as he looked at all the different ways he could pull off what he was planning. Realizing the complexities of what he was going to attempt, he decided that he needed help. Knowing exactly who to contact, he pulled out his cell phone and called a friend from school.

George had lost his sister to the Groups when she spoke out against President Gomes so Ricky knew that he would be more than willing to help bring the dictator down. As soon as Ricky laid out the basis of his plan, his friend readily agreed to throw in with him.

Not wanting any blame to fall on his father, on a day that Ricky knew both his parents would be away from home, he and George skipped class and went to their house. Making it look like a burglary, they stole his father's computer and rifled through his mothers jewelry, taking a few of the more expensive pieces. He would trash the

computer after he copied the hard drive, and once he used the information to bring Gomes down, return the jewelry to his mother.

With the computer set up in Ricky's apartment, he and George sifted through the information it contained. It didn't take them long to create a comprehensive list of Gomes crimes and in no time at all they had enough evidence to even convict the president in one of his own corrupt courts. Ricky then translated this into a speech that he practiced over and over as he edited it so that his presentation wouldn't run over twenty minutes. He didn't expect to be able to speak this long when he finally got a chance to present his evidence, but on the off chance that the police were delayed in their response once they heard that anti-government radicals were speaking out, he wanted to put out as much information as possible.

Now that he and George had the content, they needed a venue. Walking to class one day, the perfect one presented itself to Ricky in the form of a flyer advertising a debate on nuclear energy that was to be broadcast live from in front of the student union. Though it would only be shown on one of the local television stations, tapes could be made as it aired and then distributed throughout the country. The truth about Gomes would reach millions. To further lock them in, Ricky and George both agreed that the debate was being held in a perfect place for what they were doing since the quad was such a wide open area. They could see the police coming from a distance and, since they were both familiar with the campus, escape would be easy once the law did show up.

On the day of the debate, Ricky and George arrived early and stayed at the edge of the growing crowd. They wanted the discussion to be well underway before making their move. Fantasies of the people being incited by the truth and rising up to overthrow Gomes ran through their heads as they gathered their courage to carry out their task. At the appointed time, the two young men took one last look around, and seeing no police in the area, donned ski masks and rushed the stage.

George waved a realistic looking plastic pistol around as he ordered the debaters to scatter. Yelling into the microphone for the crowd not to be afraid, that they were here as a political protest and that they had a message to get out, he promised repeatedly that they meant no harm to anyone unless they tried to stop them. In record time the stage cleared along with some of the onlookers from the crowd, but this being a college campus, quite a few of the students lingered to hear their message as this was much more exciting than what had been scheduled. Ricky then took the podium, and in a clear voice presented his evidence against Gomes and his associates.

As he spoke, he could see those gathered getting agitated by his words, and as he neared the half way point, he was overjoyed to hear calls for Gomes head start to ring out from the crowd.

Take that President Gomes, Ricky thought. This is how the revolution starts. By tonight, millions will recognize you for what you really are. Long live the revolution, his mind screamed. The revolution was short lived though, as eight minutes into his speech, Ricky was interrupted by the first teargas grenade landing in the middle of the crowd. As if by magic, a line of baton wielding policeman appeared from behind the student union and waded into the crowd, cracking skulls as they made their way toward the stage. To the law, it didn't matter if you were innocent or guilty; all you had to be was present.

Though Ricky had expected the police to show up, he hadn't expected them to be this organized. He thought that he would be able to see them coming from a ways off, giving him time to relate a few more of Gomes' crimes before having to run. What he didn't know was that as soon as he and George appeared, the on-site producer from the television station pulled the plug on the live broadcast. Telling the cameraman to act like they were still on the air, he crouched down behind his soundman and used his cell phone to call the police. Hearing that gun toting maniacs were trying to start a riot on campus, the police responded in record time and in force. This ended up being a double whammy to the revolution, as besides the police showing up to cut the speech short, Ricky's message only reached the two hundred or so people gathered for the debate.

As the police line forced its way toward them, fear overcame valor, and in the confusion and haze of the teargas, Ricky and George ran.

To keep from being identified, they cleared the area before they took off their ski masks. George tried to make a joke of it by saying that they should have brought gas masks instead, but Ricky didn't even hear him. He was distracted and disturbed to find that they were using the same route to flee that he had used the night the police opened fire on the student demonstrators. Hoping that he didn't start hearing gunshots from behind him as the police opened up on the innocent people who had attended the debate, Ricky was relieved that none came from

the direction of the campus. Splitting up when they came to a series of streets that ran through the main section of town, he told George that he would phone him the next day.

Reaching his apartment, instead of feeling safe, Ricky was suddenly overcome by an overwhelming feeling of paranoia. Wondering if he had been recognized, he decided to set up an escape route in case the police, or worse yet, the Groups came for him. Once he was done, he spent the rest of the day and night peeking out his kitchen window as he listened to the radio for any news about his speech. Nothing was said, and he finally gave up at midnight when the local news radio station went off the air. The lack of anything being reported disturbed him, making him think that the incident was being covered up by the government controlled press. Once they squashed the story, it gave them all the time in the world. The Groups could then tie up the few loose ends, one of them being him, at their leisure.

Ricky's mind started to conjure up assassins who strangled with garrotes or shot poison tipped darts out of blow guns. As the night wore on, every creak and groan made by the old building he lived in became a cause for concern. His imagination ran wild as stared too long at shadows in the parking lot, turning them into armed men creeping toward his stairs.

As dawn broke, Ricky found himself relaxing slightly as the shadows faded, reasoning that if the police were coming for him that they would have been there by now. Deciding that the ski mask had hidden his identity, he nonetheless kept his vigil on the parking lot.

Now as he ran down the trash filled alley, he was grateful that he had.

In his initial escape plan he had decided to go to his parent's house, but on reflection, this didn't seem like the best idea considering the circumstances. He was almost positive that the Groups had tracked him down through his dad since the information that he had put out in his speech could have only come from a limited number of sources, and he was one of them.

That's why it took them all this time to track me down, Ricky reasoned. They couldn't identify me because of the ski mask so they followed the back trail of where the information could have come from and it led to my father. From there it would be as easy as adding two plus two and coming up with me.

Worried about his family, Ricky tried to call his mom's cell phone and then his dad's. No answer. Same for their home phone. His fear deepened and he hoped that he hadn't gotten his parents killed.

Thinking of who he could turn to for help, he was momentarily stymied. He had no friends that would hide him since everyone he knew was terrified of the Groups and their snitches. Since their inception, the death squads had grown and now utilized a network of informers to keep tabs on everyone. Neighbors spied on neighbors, workers spied on workers, and as Ricky knew first hand, students spied on each other and their professors. A state of paranoia existed in every town and city in the country. If anyone was brave enough to speak out, they were silenced. Permanently silenced. That was why he had kept his plan strictly between himself and George.

George - Ricky suddenly thought with excitement. That's who would help. George would. They were in this together so he should be the first person to step forward. Together, they could find a way out of this mess.

Reaching a slum area spread out across the side of a hill, one of those created by Gomes, Ricky changed direction so that he was now heading toward the university. He knew that it was dangerous to go there since the police and the Groups would be cruising the area in an effort to find him, but he had no choice. The duplex that George had inherited from his parents was located on the far side of the campus. Slowing to a walk as he reached the outlying buildings that housed the science labs, Ricky blended in with the hundreds of students heading to class.

Nervous as he moved among them, Ricky steeled his courage by telling himself that the sooner he reached his friend the better.

He knew that George would help him.

CHAPTER TWO

When George opened the front door to find Ricky standing on his porch, he took a step backward in shock and surprise. A look of horror crossed his face as he asked, "What in the hell are you doing here? Are you crazy?"

Recovering slightly, he moved forward and stuck his head outside, frantically looking around before pulling his friend through the entrance and slamming the door behind him. With panic in his eyes, George continued speaking frantically, his questions and statements coming in a rush. "Did anyone see you come down the street - don't you know I've got at least two informers on this block - shit, the Groups could be on their way here right now - everyone's looking for you - why did you come here - your face is all over the news -they're calling you a terrorist."

Disturbed by his friend's less than welcome reception, Ricky interrupted by saying forcefully, "I need your help. You have to hide me."

Taken aback, George moaned and said, "Why me. Oh shit, we're gonna get killed. You're gonna get me killed. I can't hide you."

The hope that had been building in Ricky of finding some type of sanctuary started to fall apart when he heard this. With George's next words, whatever small shreds remaining were smashed into a thousand pieces.

"You have to leave," George cried. "They don't know who I am yet so you have to get away from me. I can't let you take me down with you. Go out the back way. I'll wait ten minutes, but then I have to call the federals and let them know you were here in case someone saw you come inside. I've got to cover my ass on this." Turning toward the rear of the duplex, George added, "When they catch you, don't give them my name. Please don't do that. There's no sense in both of us going down."

George continued to rattle on, but Ricky heard none of it. Rooted in place, tears sprang to his eyes, both from the feeling of helplessness that was overwhelming him and the hurt he felt at his friend turning his back on him. A series of sobs welled up in his throat that he only managed to force down with great effort. He wouldn't cry in front of George. He had to be a man. He had to deal with this. Things hadn't ended up like he had planned so he had to work with what he had. It just seemed so unbelievable. Almost surreal. It felt like everyone was against him.

As reality crashed in on him, Ricky suddenly realized that he hadn't just gone into this blindly, but also naively. He had thought he could foresee the consequences of his actions in giving the speech against Gomes, but he hadn't predicted anything like this being the result. At the worst, his fantasies had been of having to go into hiding at his parent's house until Gomes' dictatorship crashed down around him. After that, he had seen himself emerging a hero before humbly returning to school life where he would finish his degree in engineering, meet a beautiful woman and live happily ever after. None of his daydreams had shown him the harsh realities of the existence that he now faced. He was hunted, shunned and on a death list. Even George, his partner in this mess, was turning his back on him, and worst of all, the press was calling him a terrorist. This label struck a sour note in Ricky's mind. To him, a terrorist was someone who killed innocent people and used their deaths to shock those left alive into obedience.

I'm trying to help innocent people, Ricky thought. Gomes kills the innocent. Gomes is the terrorist. Why are they saying this about me? This is so unfair, he whined to himself.

Suddenly, the idea that the government was portraying him as the bad guy made Ricky mad. The self pity that was creeping in to overwhelm him vanished in a flash to be replaced by anger; anger at Gomes, anger at the Groups, and anger at what was being done to his beautiful country. But most of all, he realized, it was anger at George for being such a coward.

This is bullshit, he thought harshly. George is with me in this. He's going to help me whether he likes it or not. Clearing his throat to remove the last vestiges of the burning caused by choking back his sobs, Ricky raised his head and forcefully spoke one word.

"No."

George spun around to stare at Ricky openmouthed, not sure if he was commenting on one of the questions and statements that had spewed from his mouth since he answered the door or if he was refusing to leave.

Terrified at the answer he might receive, George asked hesitantly, "No what?"

"No, I'm not leaving," Ricky said sharply. "We're in this together. You're going to help me whether you like it or not. If I go down, you go down."

Ricky saw fear and anger contort his friend's features at his refusal. George's hands balled into fists and he took half a step forward as if he were going to physically eject him from the house. Ricky widened his stance as he prepared to meet his friend's rush. George outweighed him by thirty pounds, but Ricky knew that there was no way he was leaving. He brought forth all the frustration and anger that had been building up in him all morning, deciding to focus it in his first punch. He would aim right for the center of George's face. See how he liked trying to

throw him out while nursing a broken nose. The two young men eyed each other warily to see who would make the first move.

Then, as if a switch had been thrown, George's body seemed to deflate and tears sprang to his eyes. He suddenly realized that it would do no good to throw Ricky out. When he was caught - not if, but when - the Groups would question him to find out the identity of his co-conspirator. Whether Ricky wanted to or not, he would give George up. No one could resist torture, and the Groups were notorious for using this means of extracting confessions and information. He had seen time and again when shortly after one person disappeared into police custody, within a day or two, their friends and associates would also start coming up missing. And to be honest with himself, George felt that he owed at least some allegiance to his friend. Ricky hadn't forced him to go along with his plan. He hadn't held a gun to his head. All he did was ask and George had eagerly thrown in with him.

As he stood wiping tears from his eyes, George was frustrated at how badly their plan had fallen apart. What seemed at first to be a game had now turned deadly serious. The plan had seemed so easy when Ricky laid it out, so foolproof. Now they were screwed.

Helplessly, George cried out, "But we didn't expect this. This is too much. You said it would be safe. You said that no one would know who we were. Now they want to kill us. What'll we do?"

Ricky struggled to come up with an answer and found he didn't have a clue. The whole situation was beyond anything he'd ever had to deal with before. Since seeing the black SUV pull into his parking lot, he'd come up a dozen solutions and then discarded them as fast as they became coherent thoughts. He saw that all of his ideas, like running away and joining the rebels, were immature and unrealistic.

His scheme of joining the rebels was one of his more farfetched since he didn't even know where they were located or if they were real. There were stories floating around about an armed resistance, but when Gomes had taken power he had done such a good job of eliminating everyone who might defy him that Ricky was pretty sure the resistance was a legend, a myth. Something that people could make up stories about so they would feel better about their miserable existence. Besides, how would he find them? Ricky could imagine himself walking around asking, "Excuse me, could you direct me to the nearest secret rebel headquarters?"

He'd be cuffed and stuffed within two minutes.

Despite these bad ideas, Ricky knew that if he kept at it that an answer would come to him. The problem was that he was finding himself mentally and physically exhausted as the sudden spike of adrenalin that he'd been flying on left his system. Self-pity tried to force its way back in but he pushed it aside and focused on the reality of the situation. He needed to ground himself. Analyze the situation. He needed to take this step by step to try to find a way out of this mess. Looking at George standing in the middle of his living room with tears streaming down his face, he decided that what he needed to do first was to get his friend calmed down. Once he'd accomplished this, they could bounce some ideas back and forth and come up with a solution that would save them both. Despite George wanting to leave him in a lurch, Ricky knew he could never do the same to his friend. They were in this together.

With this in mind, Ricky ignored George's question about what they were going to do and asked, "Do you have any of that tequila left from your last party? Because I think we could both use a drink."

They sat in the living room where they could see out the front window at anyone approaching from the street. An hour and three shots of tequila later, both men gave an audible sigh of relief when they realized, that for a short time anyway, they were safe. If someone had seen Ricky's arrival, or George had somehow been identified, the Groups or the police would have been there by now.

Ricky wasn't too worried about George being connected with the speech since he was the only one who knew his friend had been a part of the conspiracy. He was concerned though that someone had seen him walk down the street and up to George's front door and he wanted to kick himself for being so stupid. If he hadn't of been so freaked out by the fact that people were actively trying to snuff out his life, he knew he would have been more careful. He would have cut down the alley and come to the back door at the very least. Vowing in the future that he would be more cautious and aware of his surroundings, Ricky hoped that he lived long enough to keep that promise.

While they waited to see if anyone showed up, George filled his friend in on what he had done after fleeing the campus. Taking a roundabout way home to make sure he wasn't followed, he sat up all night waiting to see if he'd been recognized. But unlike Ricky, George had a television and was able to watch the news, not just listen to

it. He turned on the station that was supposed to have aired the debate they'd hijacked, and was relieved when no mention of anything happening at the college other than an apology for having to interrupt the scheduled nuclear power debate was aired. The station blamed it on technical difficulties. Hearing this, George thought that they might be in the clear. Unlike Ricky, who saw assassins in every shadow, he decided that if the incident was being covered up that it meant the police would be content at cracking a few heads and leave it at that.

That was until he was eating breakfast.

As he exited his kitchen into the living room, a special alert flashed on the screen showing a picture of Ricky taken from his student ID. The announcer said that the police were looking for him in connection with the attempted assassination of a prominent government official. George was so stunned that he dropped the bowl of sliced plantains he'd been holding and watched in horror, expecting to see his picture shown next. Instead, the announcer went on to say that Ricky had an unknown accomplice, and that a reward was being offered for any information leading to either man's arrest. The two terrorist's were considered armed and dangerous.

Ricky snorted derisively at hearing this, and said, "Yeah, armed with a water pistol."

"The police said that an arrest was imminent," George said. Going on quickly as he tried to explain away his earlier cowardice, he added, "Then not even five minutes later you show up at my door. I thought you had brought the Groups right to my doorstep. I thought you had set me up. I freaked out. I'm sorry."

Ricky accepted the apology with a nod as he considered the timing of the news report and said, "They must have put out the alert right after they missed me at my apartment. They were probably hoping to take me without a fuss, but I got away. The Groups are so arrogant in their power that they think everyone freezes at their approach like a deer in the headlights. I ran."

"And you need to keep running," George added enthusiastically, his earlier thoughts of solidarity with his friend fading as he once again started to focus on coming out of this with his head attached to his shoulders.

Ricky shook his head and pointed toward the television. "You've seen that, I can't leave any time soon."

George had turned the television on when they sat down so that Ricky could see for himself what the news people were saying about him. They both turned to it now as the story portraying Ricky as an enemy of the state flashed on the screen. It had been doing this every ten minutes or so. Ricky knew that he would be recognized in a heartbeat if he went out on the street now, and that his face having been shown on television for the first time only seconds before his arrival at George's was the only reason he hadn't been spotted on the way over. To go outside now would be suicide.

Picking up the remote control, he flipped through the other channels and found that all the local and national television stations were showing his picture too. The only ones not inciting the villagers to come after him with pitchforks were those beamed down by satellite. Although only the rich could afford this service, they were still the national and local news broadcast's number one fans. The rich wanted to protect their money and positions of power so they faithfully watched the local and national news before turning to pay TV. This way, they could publically comment on what was going on in the country by reciting the government line spouted on the news and at the same time keep an eye on what Gomes was up to so they could protect themselves and their wealth.

Ricky considered where he could run to if need be. He knew if he tried to hide in one of the upper class sections of the city that he would stick out like a sore thumb in the walled off, security patrolled neighborhoods like where his parents lived. The same was true of the slums. The people might be dirt poor, but many of them still had television. If he tried to hide there, he would be spotted and turned in for the reward.

With a sigh, Ricky considered his limited options. He knew that he couldn't stay where he was so his only alternative was to run. But run where? He'd just ruled out the local areas. His life's he had lived in this city, but now it appeared that he couldn't stay here. This is where he'd grown up and knew nothing else and now it looked like he had to leave it all behind and find somewhere new. But then on the other hand, to flee to a strange city didn't make a whole lot of sense either since he would still be hunted and would have no friends or supporters once he got there.

Eying George pouring himself another shot of tequila, Ricky thought to himself, not that I have a whole lot of support here either.

Forcing his mind back on task, Ricky found himself straining his brain to come up with a solution. He was starting to get a headache from the stress of being at the mercy of the ticking clock. He knew he could only stay at

George's for a short time for a variety of reasons, the chief one being that although his friend had agreed to help him, Ricky felt that he couldn't trust him completely. After his earlier display...

In desperation, Ricky's thoughts turned to what had been at the back of his mind ever since seeing the secret police pull into the parking lot of his apartment building. It was a fuzzy idea at best, and one that he didn't really want to consider, so had pushed to the back of his thoughts. It seemed that although he knew he needed to get away, his brain wouldn't let him come to this idea as a solution. Stress now forced Ricky to grasp at straws so the thought came unbidden to his conscious mind. Although it gave him an uncomfortable feeling, it was one mixed with a sense of freedom and the feeling that he would be undertaking a great adventure if he followed through on it. Fear crept in too, but it paled in comparison to the fear of what would happen to him if the Groups got hold of him. The fear of the unknown was nothing when held up against the knowledge of certain death.

Ricky knew that once he voiced his idea that there would be no turning back, he would have to follow through on it. To put it into words would give it substance, weight. Gathering his courage, he cleared his throat and said loudly, "I've got to leave."

Hearing this, George sprang to his feet, a look of relief spreading across his face as he almost shouted, "Go out the back door. Don't let anyone see you." Pulling a wad of crumpled bills from his pocket, he held them out while saying, "Take this. It's not much, but it'll help."

Ricky chuckled at his friend, "Sit down George and let me finish. I meant that I've got to leave the country."

George considered this. It wasn't as good as Ricky leaving his house right that minute, but it was still a step in the right direction.

"Where will you go?" He asked.

At this Ricky stopped. He hadn't considered his plan that far. He knew where most of his countryman went when they immigrated, but that land seemed like a million miles away. Maybe somewhere in between, he thought. Not too far away, but far enough to be safe.

"Go get your atlas," he told George.

Once his friend had the book laid out to a map of their section of the world, Ricky looked at the countries nearby. As his eyes moved from one to the next, at each he stopped and considered its pros and cons but found himself discarding each in turn. All of them had one major drawback. If he were caught in any of them, he would be deported back here. The word 'deportation' was now synonymous with 'death sentence'. He might get away with staying in a nearby country for a short time, but Ricky knew he needed a lifelong solution.

As he went through this process of elimination, instead of feeling depressed that he was running out of options, he felt almost happy as his eyes kept wandering to the one country where he knew he could find a safe haven. They had a heavily guarded and patrolled border, but once passed that, it would be easy to lose himself among the thousands like him that had already immigrated there. Once settled, he could also apply for political asylum. It might be difficult since that country helped President Gomes with loans, and in the past had given him military support, but at the very least, Ricky knew that he could disappear into the masses while he checked the situation out. It seemed like the perfect solution. The only problem was the distance he would have to travel.

Ricky considered all the difficulties that he would face, but the more he thought of what waited him at the end of the line the more excited he became. One word came to mind and kept bouncing around in his head until he had no choice but to say it aloud.

"Freedom."

George looked at him oddly, so Ricky stuck out his finger and laid it on his destination, the place that would be his new home. "I will go here to -." Ricky started to say, but was cut off by his friend.

"Don't say it out loud," George cried, when he saw where Ricky's finger pointed. Now it was Ricky's turn to give him an odd look.

Blushing, George explained, "It is an old wives tale, a superstition, but one that I believe. My uncle told me about it before he left for that place a few years ago. You never say the name of where you're going until you get there. It's bad luck. It started years ago when people tried to immigrate there. The ones who made it never said its name aloud until they crossed the border, and then they shouted it out in triumph."

Ricky wasn't a big believer in luck, but at this point he needed everything going for him that he could get.

"So what do I call the country I'm going to? I can't just call it 'that place,'" he said.

"You need to give it a special name," George told him. "Coincidentally, most of the people who go there call it what you did earlier. If you say that name, then everyone knows what you're talking about."

Ricky was confused. "What name?"

"Freedom," George said quietly.

Ricky and George speculated on the difficulties that Ricky would face while they tried to come up with an overall plan of action. The first thing discussed was how Ricky would make it to Freedom. George had the answer.

"You need a coyote."

"A small furry animal?" Ricky asked in confusion.

George laughed. "No, a human smuggler. They are called coyotes. My brother's, friend's brother knows a man who does it. His name is Ledesma."

"You're brother's name isn't Ledesma," Ricky said, now even more confused.

"Lay off the tequila and pay attention, dumb-ass" George scolded. "That's two stupid statements in less than a minute. The coyote goes by the name of Ledesma."

Ricky knew that it wasn't the alcohol that was making it hard to concentrate; it was the head rush of actually laying out how he would escape to Freedom that was doing it. He was going to a new land to start a new life, while at the same time escaping death. That in itself was more exciting and dizzying than any drink or drug he'd ever taken.

Drawing in a deep breath, Ricky let it out slowly. Finding himself grounded, a disturbing thought came to him which he voiced, "How do I know that I can trust this Ledesma?"

George smirked and started to answer, but Ricky cut him off, "We did that thing with the speech like elementary school kids pulling a prank and look what happened. We can't do that anymore. We have to start looking at things in a mature manner. Now, how do we know this Ledesma isn't police?"

"He can't work for the police or his reputation turned in even one person, no one would ever trust him again and his business would fold. Besides, he's in with the organized crime people and the drug cartels. If they found out he was a rat or a double dealer, they would kill him themselves."

Ricky thought about this and agreed that the answer seemed reasonable. Then another question arose. "How much will it cost?" He asked warily. With the distance he had to travel and the borders he had to cross, Ricky was sure that the answer to this question would not be so reasonable.

"It will cost ten thousand," George answered in a quiet voice. "I know the price because I checked into immigrating a few months ago when Carmen disappeared. I stayed in case she came back. I keep hoping she's alive."

Ricky was shocked at hearing George tell him this. His friend never talked about his sister. Ricky knew that after her disappearance that George had taken it hard and then gone into denial like many of the people who lost family members to the Groups did. And although time healed many wounds, sometimes it took a lifetime. Ricky had noticed that George never said anything about Carmen, as if to do so would make her death a reality. It was like standing in a group of people, covering your eyes, and saying; "You can't see me."

Ricky knew that hope was a strange thing, especially in the case of the families of those who had been disappeared. The victims left no body behind so their family had nothing substantial to show them that they were actually dead. No death certificate was issued and the government claimed to know nothing about what happened to those who went missing so there was nothing to prove that they were actually gone. A few families of the disappeared saw the reality of the situation and held funerals with empty caskets, but even these rites were filled with doubt. They really gave no closure.

Ricky had gone to a few of these 'empty wakes' as they were called, and found that it was a sad affair in many ways. Besides mourning the passing of their loved one, the families seemed anxious and guilty. As if they were trying to decide if they were doing the right thing. Ricky watched as the bereaved shot furtive glances toward the door, like they expected the missing person to walk in and relieve them of their sadness. To blow air on the small spark of hope that still burned inside them and turns their despair into a flame of joy.

It never happened.

Ricky looked at it in the terms of an engineer since this was his major at the university. Groups + missing = death. It was simple math and math doesn't lie.

Gently, Ricky said, "Why don't you come with me, George? We can go to Freedom together." George looked down at the table and shook his head, "What will Carmen think when she comes back and finds me gone. Our parents died years ago and I'm all she had left. I need to stay."

With false sincerity, George suddenly brightened as he looked up, "But you, mi amigo, you are on your way. Write me when you get settled, and when Carmen shows up, she and I will immigrate together and join you."

Not wishing to shatter his friend's fantasy by pointing out that Carmen was dead along with thousands - no, tens of thousands - of others, Ricky pasted a false smile on his face and said, "That would be nice, George. Of course the both of you can join me. I look forward to it" George looked relieved that his friend had co-signed his lie, and to further distract himself from having to face reality, focused on Ricky again by saying, "But first we have to get you to Freedom. Can you get the money?"

Ricky hesitated. He knew that ten thousand was a fortune. He didn't want to give an outright 'no' and bring the forward momentum of their plan to a screeching halt, but he couldn't lie to George, have him set up the deal, and then not have the money. Seeing his friend pause, George prompted, "Maybe your father."

Ricky gave him a distressed look. After stealing his father's computer and trying to put its contents out for the world to see, it would be a wonder that the man was even alive. The more Ricky thought about it, the more he was sure that the police had tracked him through the information that was stored on the stolen computer. When he had tried calling his parents on their cell phone earlier he had gotten no answer and feared the worst. The Groups might have missed him, but by now they had surely gotten his father and probably his mother too.

Ricky felt guilt weigh heavy on his heart at what he had done. His impetuous decisions may have cost his parents their life.

Pulling out his cell phone, Ricky dialed his parent's house, but again got no answer. He tried his mother's cell phone and was surprised when she picked up on the second ring.

"Oh my God Ricky, are you okay?" she answered before bursting into tears. Ricky realized that she must have seen his name come up on caller ID. This thought led him to wonder who else might be there to see that it was him calling.

Assuring his mother repeatedly that he was fine, he found out that his father was alive and well, but was in deep trouble with President Gomes. Ricky worried upon hearing this until his mother went on to say that the president had spoken of demoting him.

At this, Ricky stopped and wondered. Demoted? That didn't make sense. At the very least the president should want to torture and kill my father for letting the information leak out that could cause an open rebellion. Then it dawned on him that the police weren't telling his parents the truth about why they wanted him. Instead they were sticking with the story about him being a terrorist. Ricky's first inclination was to tell his mom everything, but then he stopped as he thought about it. If he did and someone was listening, he might be signing his parent's death warrant. Gomes people didn't want the truth to come out so he had to be very careful about what he said.

Deciding to put out some misinformation to anyone who might be listening in, Ricky said, "Mom, I'm safe. I left the city."

"Where are you?" She asked worriedly.

"I'm at a friend's house out in the country," Ricky lied. "They say I can stay here until I find a safe place to go. I need you to send me some money."

His mom didn't even pause before asking, "How much?"

Ricky's mind calculated the ten thousand that he would need for Ledesma plus expenses along the way and answered, "Fifteen thousand." He reasoned that this amount would also give him a little money left over for when he arrived in Freedom.

"Where do I send it?" She asked, not even questioning the amount. "I can go to the bank today and have it in the mail tomorrow."

At this Ricky stopped. He had to come up with a way to get the money without giving away where he really was. Suddenly an idea struck him. It even fit in with telling his mom that he had left the city. Ricky disliked lying to his mother, but in this case he felt justified since it was his life at stake.

Taking on a disappointed tone he said, "Oh, mom. I don't know the address and the people I'm staying with aren't here so I can't ask them. Go get the money and I'll call you tonight after they get back."

His mother assured him that she would get it, so Ricky furthered his plan by saying, "I'll call you at home around eight."

This way he would know exactly where she would be at a specific time. His mother agreed and Ricky said that he had to go, explaining that he didn't want to get his father in any trouble in case someone was listening, emphasizing the words in the hope that his mom would catch on to the hint that someone was probably listening. She seemed to understand so after exchanging 'I love you's' Ricky hit end.

George asked, "What was that all about?"

Ricky gave his plan a moment to solidify in his mind before answering, "I need the money, but if the police are listening in then I can't very well tell them where I'm staying."

George nodded and said, "Very wise. I hear that the Groups have computers, and satellites that can listen into any phone call made anywhere in the country. Maybe the world."

"Right," Ricky said, and then continued, "So I told my mom to get the money and that I'd call her at home at eight o'clock. But instead of calling, I'm going to show up."

George smiled and complimented him, "Perfect plan, Ricky. While we're waiting, I'll call my brother's, friend's brother and find out how to contact Ledesma. He changes his mobile number every few weeks to keep the police off his trail."

Ricky nodded at this and yawned. It had been a hectic and terrifying two days, but now that the adrenalin had worn off he felt a weariness creeping in on him. Suddenly, his eyes felt so heavy that he didn't think he could keep them open another second. He hadn't eaten since lunch the day before, and with the three shots of tequila he'd downed sitting here with George, the alcohol taken on an empty stomach hit him all at once. Combined with the relief he felt from coming up with a plan to save his ass, it was no wonder he felt wiped out. Fatigue racked his entire body so he lay his head down on the table to rest for a minute.

Ricky didn't know how long he had been asleep when he felt someone shaking his shoulder to wake him. Memories of the Groups coming to get him and his run to George's house rushed in as he leapt to his feet and looked around in fear.

"It's okay, it's okay," George said as he tried to calm him. "It's only me. You fell asleep." George looked scared of something and Ricky couldn't figure out what it was until he looked down at himself. He was crouched in a fighters stance with his hands clenched in fists.

Laughing self-consciously, Ricky said, "Sorry, too much excitement."

George gave him a halfhearted smile and replied, "Don't apologize. Until you reach safety, you'll need to be on your guard. There are many dangers on the road to Freedom."

Trying to focus his still fuzzy mind, Ricky asked, "Did you speak to Ledesma?"

"No, but I got his number and I know where he's at. My brother's, friend's brother told me that he's putting together a group right now and when he gets enough people together they're going to Freedom."

"When?" Ricky asked. He was excited at the prospect of leaving, while at the same time worried that he might be too late to catch the departing group.

"A day or two," George replied. "Ledesma never goes until he has eight people in a group. The trip takes two weeks with a stop over every night. They pick up more people along the way so by the time you cross the border there might be twenty or more immigrants in the group." George continued to talk about details of the trip, but Ricky wasn't listening. His mind had seized onto the idea of the trip taking two weeks. It seemed like such a short span of time in which his life would change drastically, and at the same time, he felt that two weeks was an eternity to wait to get to Freedom. His stomach did flip-flops at the thought of going.

Trying to focus on something else to ease his anxiety, Ricky turned his attention to the shadows thrown by the weak winter sun slanting through trees outside the kitchen window. By their length, he knew he wouldn't have to wait long until the sun set and he could leave for his parent's house. The dark would help mask his identity and make it easier to hide if need be. A few months ago when the curfew had been in place, no one dared set foot outside after sunset. Now, while many people went out, it was illegal to congregate in groups of more than five so nightlife was still at a minimum. One of the things in Ricky's favor was that for the first part of the trip he would be going through the slum that had grown up on the edge of the city. The police found any reason they could to avoid this area unless they entered in force. Though it was dangerous, Ricky wasn't worried. He had crossed the slum many times going to and from his parent's house. As long as he dressed down, he knew he would be safe. The

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