

Coriander

Barbara Victor

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Chapter Two

Manuel Rojas saw Jesus. It happened yesterday when he was driving on this very same road toward Acapulco International Airport. There He was, just sort of standing on the side of the dirt road that led out of Cerro el Burro next to a sign giving distances; twelve miles to Chilpancingo, fifty to Acapulco. Except that Jesus wasn't exactly standing *on* the side of the dirt road, it was more like He was floating above it. That was one of the first things that Manuel noticed, how His feet in those brown leather sandals were barely touching the ground, and how His arms were outstretched with the palms up but not like He was signaling a car, more like He was blessing everything around him: the dust, chameleons, cactus, even the television antennas on those huts near the highway.

Manuel pulled over and coasted to a stop. Climbing out of his truck, he just stood there and stared, not too close but near enough not to miss a single detail. He wished he had a camera. Jesus just stood there too, right near that road sign, His long white robe billowing in the breeze except there was no breeze, Manuel

noticed that right away too. Cerro el Burro in July meant no wind, just a lot of sun, scorching heat, and dust.

When Manuel got back from Acapulco that evening he went directly to church to talk to his priest. Father Ramon was pretty excited about the whole thing even if he tried to act calm, the way he kept hushing Manuel, telling him to start at the beginning of the vision and go real slow so he could write it all down on account of that he needed it for the official record. It wasn't that he doubted Manuel, it was just that sometimes he knew the man could get emotional when it came to his faith. Manuel recounted every detail with surprising composure, how he had been on his way to Acapulco International Airport to answer an ad for a job, the first possibility of work in the six months that he had been without a paycheck, and how when he was just about to say a quick prayer for luck it happened. Manuel was plenty embarrassed about praying to God for favors but times were tough and jobs were scarce. Not that working as an assistant busboy at the Pelicanos Rosas Lounge in the Aeromexico Terminal was ideal as it meant a daily round trip of over one hundred miles. What it also meant was steady income and guaranteed overtime on Mondays when the charters flew in.

Manuel described how Jesus's light brown hair fell to His shoulders and how His beard was so sparse and how His eyes were so kind and forgiving yet so hurt and betrayed at the same time. Father Ramon wanted to know what Manuel did except just stand there like some dumb fool staring and Manuel told him that he had dropped to his knees and wept and how when he looked up Jesus just sort of faded away.

The priest was troubled. There just wasn't anything different about the vision, nothing that set it apart from those fifteen or so other sightings that had been reported around Mexico in the past year. What worried Father Ramon was if the Vatican would take it seriously enough to make Cerro el Burro a holy shrine, maybe even include it on Pope John Paul II's itinerary when he made his

pilgrimage to Latin America in the fall. If only Manuel could think of something else before they faxed Rome; maybe he could take a day or two and pray for another sign or even another vision, anything to make the Vatican Committee on Miracles pay attention.

On July 3, two days after it happened, Manuel found himself driving on that same road between Acapulco International Airport and Cerro el Burro and still he hadn't come up with anything new. Not that there was any doubt in his mind that he was touched by a miracle. After all, hadn't he continued on out to the airport to beat those sixty-four other candidates and end up as assistant busboy at the Pelicanos Rosas Lounge at the Aeromexico Terminal. And so what if the manager started him off on the night shift at the same hourly rate as the day guys earned? It didn't matter. There were only two things that mattered to Manuel. He had a job and he saw Jesus.

Manuel's mind was on his new job as he rounded that dangerous curve where Cerro el Burro merged into a two-lane paved highway that continued all the way into Acapulco. It was exactly eleven-fifty-seven on his new glow-in-the-dark digital watch when he saw the explosion. There was no doubt about the hour because Manuel had just checked to see if he was making good time.

The blast was deafening, the flash of fire overhead so startling that Manuel slammed on his brakes only to swerve out of control, hitting his head on the windshield as he did. It took him a full thirty seconds or more before he was able to pull over to the side. Shading his eyes, he watched as a plunging ball of fire lit up the hills surrounding Acapulco. A series of smaller explosions rocked the night as pieces of debris floated down to earth. One final thunderous blast sounded before the sky was still once more, illuminated only by scattered stars and a fine trail of gray-white smoke rising from the peak of one of those distant hills. Manuel crossed himself.

His first thought was that a plane had exploded in mid-flight, shot out of the sky like one of those tin cans he sometimes used for target practice. His next thought was of Jesus even if he was absolutely sure that what he had just seen was not another vision. In fact, he thought about it for a good ten minutes and became even more convinced that what he witnessed was the destruction of both man and machine. Only seconds before it happened he saw a set of flickering lights descending in the direction of the airport. Now he had a dilemma. Unless he hurried he would be late for work and lose his job before it even began. Yet how could he drive off without reporting what he had just seen? The nearest police station was ten miles away off the main road in a town called Chilpancingo. Deep down he knew he had no choice since it all had to do with Jesus. After all, if it weren't for Him he wouldn't have been driving on the road since he wouldn't be going to the airport since he wouldn't have a job to be going to. Manuel struck a deal with his conscience. He decided to report the explosion at the police station at the airport after he finished his shift. It wasn't as if anybody could have survived that inferno; it wasn't as if it was a matter of life and death.

Five hours after the accident at almost six o'clock in the morning, the Chief of Police at Acapulco International Airport finally declared a state of emergency. He listed what turned out to be a private Dassault Falcon out of New York's LaGuardia Airport as missing and presumed down. A Cessna 185 search plane was sent up, reporting upon its return that the remains of what looked like an aircraft had been spotted directly southwest of Chilpancingo at an elevation of approximately seven thousand feet. But given the rough terrain only a police helicopter was able to get close enough to assess the damage and verify that the plane had been completely destroyed with no visible survivors.

The sun was up when Manuel finished his shift, the pink light reflecting off the tall white buildings that lined the beach. The police station at Acapulco International Airport was on the ground floor of the Cocos Condominiums, about two thirds of the way toward Caleta Beach. Manuel walked through the tinted glass sliding panels and stood in a gleaming black marble lobby where a sign indicated that the police station was in the rear through another set of sliding doors. Pushing through a wrought-iron gate, Manuel approached the front desk and told the policeman on duty the reason he had come. He was ushered down a long corridor and into another room where he described what he had seen for the police captain in charge. What baffled him about everybody who listened to his story was their boredom and apparent lack of interest. And what was more, nobody seemed to know anything about any accident.

Manuel found himself in a small room with a carved dark-wood desk behind which was a brown leather chair with arms. Three smaller black leather chairs faced the desk and there were three pictures on the wall, one of Pancho Villa, another of President Carlos Salinas, and a third of Jesus Christ. Again Manuel crossed himself. On the chair behind the desk sat the captain while on one of the other chairs sat a man wearing a rumpled gray silk suit who appeared to be in his late thirties. Actually, the man could have been younger given the dark curls that framed his cherubic face with features that were small and delicate. On the other chair was a younger man, tall and slim, with sharper features and dark hair that was slicked straight back. Manuel tried not to stare. Instead of hands the man had two metal prostheses.

"Two nights ago you see Jesus and last night you see a plane explode in the sky." The captain leaned across the desk, his mirrored aviator glasses concealing most of his face.

Manuel shouldn't have mentioned seeing Jesus except that he

wanted them to know how well he knew that road, how often he drove it, how he had seen other sights even more incredible than a mid-air explosion. "It was different last night, Señor Capitán," Manuel said with conviction. "What I saw was a bomb!"

"Why did you wait all night to report it?" the man with the cherubic face asked. He had an accent when he spoke Spanish, softer than the way a Mexican would speak although his tone was arrogant.

"I was afraid I'd be late for work if I stopped, Señor. It was my first night on the job."

"And you didn't tell anyone at work?" It was the man with the metal hooks who spoke. Again, the accent wasn't Mexican, softer like the other man's although his tone sounded almost sympathetic, not at all arrogant.

"I was afraid they would think I was making it up."

"Are you?" the captain asked with a smile, "Maybe you had a little too much tequila?"

Manuel was insulted. "I swear, Señor Capitán, I wasn't drinking. I was driving and I saw a plane explode just like that—bang!" He slammed his fist into the palm of his hand. "I saw it with my own eyes."

The captain sat back in his chair. "There has been no report of any accident or explosion last night," he stated simply.

Just then the door opened and another man entered the room. Stocky and completely bald, he had an uncanny resemblance to Mr. Clean. He glanced around briefly, headed over to the civilian with the cherubic face and whispered something into his ear before taking a seat opposite Manuel. "Perhaps you were inspired by Pope John Paul's upcoming visit?" the man asked. Everyone laughed.

"No, Señor," Manuel barely whispered, his head lowered.

A silence ensued while the captain seemed to consider the situation, adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose as he did, shuffling a few more papers before he shrugged slightly and

looked up. "I want to thank you for coming here but I'm afraid there's nothing we can do about exploding phantom airplanes." He stood. "Or visions." He walked around his desk. "You can go now," he said. "Go on, you can leave."

Manuel got up slowly, his chair scraping against the floor as he did. "But suppose there's a miracle," he began softly, "and someone survived?"

"There are no miracles Manuel," the captain said simply, "that's the whole problem, there just aren't any miracles." He glanced at the other men.

"And there was no plane crash," the bald man added.

Manuel wanted to ask how they could be so sure about something they hadn't been there to see for themselves but he said nothing.

"What you probably think you saw was a shooting star or a flash of lightning," the cherubic one offered with a smile.

Still, Manuel said nothing, merely studied his shoes.

"Maybe you wanted to make an impression on your boss so he'd switch you to the day shift," the bald man suggested, his black eyes glittering under hairless brows.

The captain held open the door. "If you hurry you can make it back to Cerro el Burro in time for morning Mass."

"If you hear anything," Manuel began, backing away toward the door, "and you want me to come back . . ."

"If we hear anything, we'll call you, don't worry," the captain assured him.

Everybody was standing then, the bald man moving toward the center of the room, the other one leaning against the back of his chair. "Thank you for coming," he said politely. "Drive carefully," someone else added. "And no more visions for a while," the captain advised Manuel with a smile.

At seven o'clock on the morning of July 4, Joe Pasinsky was just finishing up his shift as flight watch operator at the Gwenda office in Westchester when the phone rang. Picking it up, Joe listened as someone from the control tower at Acapulco International Airport announced that one of their planes had gone down, somewhere in the hills surrounding Acapulco. Preliminary information indicated that there were no survivors. Pasinsky immediately called Fritz Luckinbill, the owner of Gwenda, who instructed him to do nothing until he got there, assuring him in the next breath that he would leave his home in the neighboring town of Greenwich, Connecticut within five minutes. Twenty minutes later Luckinbill was sitting at his desk at Gwenda and on the phone.

Throughout the morning hours Pasinsky and Luckinbill followed the unfolding situation by phone and fax. Information was sketchy about the accident because Washington was unable to launch an investigation until a formal invitation to participate was extended by the Mexican government. Finally at eleven o'clock in the morning, almost twelve hours after the crash, the Mexicans extended that invitation to proceed to the crash site and collect what remained of the plane, crew and passenger. While Luckinbill was relieved that he could finally participate, he was more concerned about recovering that indestructible black box located in the tail section of all aircraft. Only when he had that device in his possession would he know exactly what happened. The black box contained the flight patterns until the moment of impact as well as tapes of every conversation between cockpit and control towers. What disturbed Luckinbill was that the Mexicans never mentioned finding the box and when he finally asked about it he was informed that so far it was missing. By noon he was on a commercial flight headed for Mexico.

The traffic was heavy going out of Acapulco until that two-lane highway merged into a dirt road that ran between Chilpancingo

and Cerro el Burro. Manuel noticed the car only at that point and probably because there were no other cars for miles in either direction. But what surprised him most were the car's occupants, the same two men from the police station. The bald and stocky one drove alongside the truck while the one with the cherubic face motioned him to pull over.

Manuel felt vindicated, convinced that a plane had finally been reported missing and the pair had come after him so he could tell his story for the proper authorities. Signaling that he would comply, Manuel steered toward the shoulder and coasted to a stop. Opening the door, he jumped down from the truck and stood not more than ten feet from the spot where he had seen Jesus. He watched the men get out, noticing that the one with the metal hooks for hands was not with them. For a moment or two Manuel wondered what it was all about. Until he saw the gun.

With one sweeping motion the bald stocky one took it out of his shoulder holster, aimed, and fired three times in rapid succession. Manuel was hit twice in the chest and once in the abdomen before three more bullets were pumped point-blank into his head after he was already slumped on the ground. He died instantly. Together, the men dragged the body back toward the truck, propped it up in the driver's seat, strapped a seat belt around it, and draped its arms over the steering wheel.

The bald one started the ignition and released the hand brake before joining his companion at the back of the vehicle. It took only minimal effort to push the truck over the side and down the ravine. Tumbling and bouncing against rocks and trees, the truck finally landed at the bottom where it burst into flames.