

Deforestation of the Amazon is not of particular concern to Peter G. Underbridge. What does interest him, and his company's shareholders, is the readily available gold just under the surface of the area's weak and fragile soil. *I've made a few bucks from this place*, he reflects. And so have the *garimpeiros* – the local gold miners. They use powerful water cannons connected to nearby rivers to blast away vegetation and soil, creating open pits so the collectors can dig and pan for their daily quota.

Underbridge knows his time in Brazil is short - the central government is beginning to enforce border controls and export restrictions. Still, he has a month more than any other mining operation. He'll miss that ambassador he's had in his back pocket since opening operations in the state of Roraima two years ago.

Venezuela is next. No such restrictions like Brazil. Yet. His trip today to Valencia will galvanize a deal with a mining operator who doesn't want the investment risks anymore – just a cut. Outsourcing the expertise to the locals is Underbridge's way of minimizing cost, reducing risk to employees, and staying at arm's length from day-to-day operations. They're paid to produce, not whine about being so far from home.

"Sir, another drink?" The flight attendant in a miniskirt catches his attention.

"Yes. But get it right this time – no ice."

Walking away, he eyes her calf muscles. *She must run*, he thinks. *I need to get back to the gym.*

He returns to his report. He takes note of the key players in Valencia: the politicians for and against open-pit mining, the tree-huggers from California that have set up permanent camp, the other mining operations already in full swing. His research assistant back in New York has done his job in spades, and he knows he'll miss important details by not reading it cover to cover. That's his way. Hire the best and pay them the best, otherwise the competition will nab them.

What little Spanish he knows can get him around OK, but not well enough for business. Hence the need for Maria. Originally from Brazil, her folks emigrated to Los Angeles when she was six. A graduate of Berkeley with specialties in business and foreign communications, she is also trained in protocol. She's been the perfect travel partner for these stays south of the equator. Her quick tongue and good looks keep Underbridge moving swiftly through customs, car rental arrangements, and – most importantly – business negotiations.

"Maria – this politician – Jose Alvarez... did he confirm?"

"Yes – it's in your day timer. His details are there too."

"Thanks. Did I mention I don't pay you enough?"

"I remind you all the time." She smirks.

Underbridge is cordial, even kind to the people he surrounds himself with. But if someone gets in his way or they mess up, they're the first to know. Sipping on his rye and coke, he looks calm, but in his mind he's like a hawk circling its prey. He loves the adrenaline rush of starting a new mining operation; each location has its specific challenges, both technically and logistically. Like a master conductor, he doesn't play anyone's instrument. But he'll be both strategist and tactician when first presented with a new set of challenges, a new set of politicians to analyze, a new group of protesters. He gets his hands dirty when he has to, and will always use the lessons he learns to teach the

people that work with him... "You saw how that went. I shouldn't have to see it happen again, right?"

*Yes sir, Mr. Underbridge.*

Once the place is spinning like a top, he moves on to the next gold mine.

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The Hawker 800 jet touches down smoothly on the airport tarmac. While they unbuckle their seatbelts, the flight attendant informs Maria and Underbridge they are just behind a *Spanair* A320 that will be out of the way shortly. Looking out his window, Underbridge spots what looks like their limo a quarter mile away. *You have eyes like an eagle*, his doctor told him long ago. While his friends in the army reserves tried to convince him he'd be a great sniper, he learned soon enough that the pen was indeed mightier than the sword.

Through customs and baggage claim in 30 minutes, they find the limo and give the driver an address. He whisks the pair off to a luxury condo just north of the airport. Maria has the keys in her purse; her assistant made the arrangements weeks ago.

Up the elevator to the third floor. Maria opens up the large double doors, and they immediately scout out the 2,000 square foot luxury apartment.

"Nice place. There's even food in the cupboards – look at this."

Underbridge is admiring the view of Casupo Mountain – he turns his head – "So, you cooking?"

"You wouldn't want to eat what I cook. *Dogs* don't want to eat what I cook..."

"Hm. Something you're *not* good at. Interesting."

The driver knocks on the front door and lets himself in with their suitcases.

"Right there is good. Thanks." says Maria. "We'll be down in 20 or so minutes."

They each claim a bedroom. Underbridge had hinted at getting a one-bedroom place, but Maria was quick to stop him in his tracks.

"I guess you won't mind the couch then?"

They unpack and begin changing into their business suits. Maria yells to Underbridge –

"There might be some protesters this afternoon at the contractor's. I had Gerry call the local police to tell them we were coming through."

"Good thinking. The group down here is nasty, led by some angry hippy-chick from Los Angeles. She's behind a lot of these."

"Ya, I saw the black and whites. She gets around."

"She's under investigation for environmental terrorism. I won't tell you who's behind it, but her partner's phone is tapped. I get all the intel from LAPD."

Maria walks out into the living room brushing her hair. "Well aren't you one connected guy."

"Whatever it takes," he says as he straightens his tie in the hallway mirror.

Maria looks up the address for their lunch meeting with Jose Alvarez, the American ambassador. He's not in Valencia all that often, so they gladly changed their schedule for the meeting; this one's the most important.

Their driver knows the restaurant well. It has a back room for the elite that do not want to be engaged by the public; a perfect setting to have a meal and shake hands on deals that have no contract; agreements, but nothing is signed. "There was a gunfight there once – two years ago," the driver says. Maria looks out the window and exclaims, "Cute! The one day I didn't bring my Smith & Wesson."

Underbridge chuckles.

The waitress starts off the group with warm *arepas* and butter; they order wine, then begin discussing business. Mr. Alvarez starts.

"Ms. Ramirez and Mr. Underbridge – for me to be in your favor, I first must tell you I appreciate the generous offer you sent my wife last week. She would love to sit in the cockpit of your private jet. She has been clocking as many hours as she can for her commercial license. She fell in love with your model of aircraft in Brazil – the military have three or four of them."

"A *military* version of the 800? I'm not surprised – it's very agile. You know, our pilot will enjoy teaching her the ins and outs of the jet. It isn't the newest, but it has been upgraded since our company bought it last year. I'm sure he'll let her take the stick once or twice – pilots tell me it is an easy craft to handle. We're here for a few days, so if your wife isn't busy tomorrow, my pilot will welcome the break from his boring day."

"Yes, tomorrow is fine. Thank you."

Alvarez shifts gears.

"Now, I must inform you of the latest developments politically. As you know, Venezuela and Bolivia are close neighbors; they have very close ties that go back generations. There may be repercussions should America continue to dabble in Bolivia's politics; they're asking Venezuela to show solidarity and expel their American ambassador – *me* - should the situation escalate. So it's possible I may not be around much longer."

"Interesting," says Underbridge. "I never did like politics. What's their beef?"

"The States is accused of influencing some locals to form a coup against Bolivia's president. The State Department denies such things, but you know how much meddling goes on behind the scenes."

"Will this affect mining operations? We're here to start up a new site..."

"Yes, I realize that. You'll be safe; American dollars are always welcome here – you employ people and stimulate the local economy. For that, the Venezuelans are grateful."

"No export restrictions on the horizon?"

"Nothing I am aware of, and we should keep it that way. My son goes to a private school and is friends with a boy named Peter. His father is the minister of natural resources. It just so happens we are having them over for cocktails and a meal next month - I believe you will be receiving an invitation sometime soon." He winks. Underbridge fills the ambassador's goblet with more wine.

Maria loves watching her boss play the game. He's good at it, and she picks up on his tactics, tucking them away for future use. *One day I'll be doing this*, she thinks to herself. It's closer than she knows...

The rest of the meal is taken up with the more trivial aspects of government policy, business incentives, and family. Family is everything in South America, and it rubs off on most visitors. By the time the bottle of wine is done, they're each pulling out their wallets to show off the latest pictures of their children.

"Junior baseball!"

"Debate team!"

"Theater!"

"His first tooth!"

They laugh like they've known each other for years. Underbridge has had perhaps one glass of wine. The ambassador – three. The waitress approaches - Underbridge grabs the bill and hands her his VISA black card. Alvarez raises his eyebrow.

"Is it true? Unlimited credit?"

"Urban myth. The limit is a quarter mil. I have to pay it off every month according to my bean counters, otherwise they freak. Isn't life tough?"

"Well, what I could do with such an expense account... there's a few bottles of rare wine that come to mind. You into collecting?"

Maria rolls her eyes at the waitress. *Men!*

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The limo approaches a construction compound that has a large sign on the chain link fence. Translated: "No Trespassing." A police vehicle is close by, with two officers leaning against the car, arms folded, keeping their firearms in full view. The crowd in front of the gate are carrying signs with words in both English and Spanish.

"Foreign Gold Miners Not Welcome"

"Stop Raping Our Land"

"We Only Have One Earth"

The group is chanting when the limo pulls up slowly, heading for the gate. A police officer blows his whistle, motioning them to allow the vehicle access. They comply.

Underbridge rants... "Miserable people, these kids. They bitch about the commerce that makes the world go round. They complain about the system, while living off of it like leeches. They eat everything organic, then pollute themselves with hashish. The leaders are in the FBI's 'Persons of Interest' file... They piss me off."

As the limo enters the compound, people in the crowd shake their fists while yelling their slogans.

"Mr. Underbridge – Ms. Ramirez, welcome to our headquarters. My apologies for the crowd outside – they showed up last week."

Underbridge responds, "No problem – I'm used to their type."

The meeting room is prepped with pitchers of iced water, and off to the side, a tray with a bottle of tequila and shot glasses. *Quite the party crowd, these guys* thinks

Maria. Other than the protesters, the meeting is rather boring. Underbridge goes over the geologist's report, talks to the surveyor with Maria as interpreter, and confirms the helicopter rental for the team's first on-site visit the next day. Then the legal papers are drawn up to be signed. Maria again interprets by scanning the Spanish wording.

"Yes, same as the English. Here's a pen."

After a few hand shakes, the company president speaks in his broken English.

"Madam and sir, we have a little custom in this company that we have been practicing for many years. When we make a deal and shake hands, we celebrate with a drink of tequila." He looks at someone beside him – "José – *aprisa*..."

José swiftly retrieves the tray and pours everyone an ounce, then hands them out.

"Salud!"

"Salud!" responds everyone.

After the round of shooters, they shake hands again and leave. On their way back to the condo, Underbridge mouths the words to Maria...

"You like this driver?"

She nods *yes*.

"Then get him on retainer for when we're down here. I like to stick with someone steady; no surprises, you know? Same car too if you can."

"Consider it done. A good day's work. How about more drinks?"

"Are you asking me on a date young girl?"

"Yes, but you're buying. There's a nice restaurant half a block from here. Let's walk."

The driver pulls over at their request.

"That's it for today. We'll walk home from here – come by the condo for 8AM."

"Yes, sir. Gracias. Thank you, sir."

They saunter along *Avenida Bolivar* and find their destination, *Casa Valencia*.

"The place is very popular. Let's eat while we're here – their *tostones* are to die for from what I hear."

"How do you know so much about Valencia?"

"Research... and, my parents moved here from Brazil. East of here - Caracas. I'll want to see them if that's OK."

Underbridge begins saying... "For sure – and, did I mention I'm not..." she interrupts.

"*Paying* me enough? What do you plan on doing about that?"

"You're telepathic - I've something up my sleeve. I'll tell you over drinks."

*Casa Valencia* is a beautiful multi-tiered orange stucco building with traditional terra cotta roofing. Inside, the exposed stained beams create a rustic, yet elegant atmosphere – Underbridge is impressed.

"Good choice. Good time of day to pop in – not too many people."

They are seated in a corner booth just the way he prefers it. Back always facing the corner.

After receiving their bottle of Merlot and appetizers, they chit chat about the new environment they'll be working in, the trips back and forth, the pain-in-the-butt protesters.

"Listen – Maria. I'm cooking up an idea for you. I think you're ready for this..."

She clears her throat - "Yes?"

"As you know, I'm always peeking into other people's business. There's a mining company that isn't doing so well on the market. I've been buying up stock. I mean damn, I thought they were going to have a fire sale last month. Eight bucks a share, down from 23 a year ago. Hard to believe for a mining corporation. Investors are nervous I suppose – remember that phony diamond mine in Nigeria? We've all taken a beating on that one. Anyways... they need new leadership. But I want the loser who's there now to stay so my stocks – well, *their stocks* keep falling. Their vice president is a damn good guy; he's worked with people I know, and I'm sure he's biting at the bit to take over from his incompetent leader."

"Why won't the board kick him out?"

"Severance. He negotiated a package that could take half the company's liquidity with him. Rat bastard. In that regard, he was smart.

"So here's my view: I can't meddle cause I'd likely draw suspicion. But – say you don't work for me as an employee anymore. We're done so-to-speak. We shake hands and part ways. You form your own consultancy corporation, specializing in getting companies back on their feet making a profit."

Maria swallows hard. Underbridge doesn't miss it.

"You and I become unfettered business partners. I *trust* you. There are very few people I say that to, and you know I don't bullshit."

Maria knows that for the two years by his side, she's never seen him shaft a fellow business person. He speaks his mind.

"Go on..."

"Well, I know two people on the board of this Midwest Mining Corporation, and they're desperate. You show up with your resume, and they'll hire you on the spot. Your mission is to keep the pres in place for at least a month while I buy up stock. You know, have him make a bad decision or two. Use your feminine wiles... Then get the board to boot him out. It won't matter how much the greedy prick takes with him; once he's gone, the board will look for another leader. *You* convince them the vice is their best bet. Rudman is his name."

Maria doesn't miss a beat. "Quite the mission. You think I'm up for it? You just gave me inside information. What's stopping *me* from buying, just like you?"

"*You* are. Only you can penetrate, divide, and conquer. I have to stay where I am. You'd be charged with inside trading if someone looked close enough. But Maria – there's more in this for you than making a few bucks on the market. This is about you moving on and moving up. Once their president is history and Rudman takes the helm, they'll be back on their feet by third quarter."

"Oh, you have a *schedule*?"

"Do I look stupid?"

Underbridge adds the cherry on top...

"Maria, who do you think is going to take over as vice?" He pauses to let it sink in. The light goes on.

"No way..."

"Yes, Maria Ramirez, Vice President of Midwest Mining Corporation."

"...and all that stock you bought?"

"I'll give you one honking big Christmas gift like you've never seen. If they rally back to – say, even just 25 a share, let's see..." He digs out a pen and does some quick math on his napkin... "That could mean - Christ – it's well over four million. So, my promise to you is 25 percent, no matter what happens. How do you like the sound of a cool million? It'll be a bank transfer from my shadow company in Brussels. And - you say you like boats? I'll be upgrading soon to one with a helipad. The silly thing is 227 feet long, being built as we speak. Maybe you get the keys for my old one whenever you want. Just call ahead. "

Maria's head is spinning. *Jésus Christo this could really work*, she thinks. All this slaving away for someone else could really pay off. Her forehead begins to sweat.

"And who knows what stock options you'll get once you're on the executive team. But one thing, Maria." Underbridge is very serious. "Not a single peep of a word can leave this room. I've already cut out a friend who I thought was trustworthy at first, but I caught him buying their stock."

"What did you do?"

"Don't ask and I won't tell. I trust you *because* you aren't affiliated with any old boy's club. This stuff brings out the worst in people, but I know your track record. You with me on this?"

"Totally. I'm on board. I'll have HR draw up my pink slip when we get back. Do I get a package?" she says with a wry smile. They touch glasses. "I'll owe you big time."

"Not at all. You forget two things. One – thanks to you, I'll have controlling interest in the company, essentially owning it. And two – I have you there to help Rudman make decisions that are good for everyone, me included. I say we'd be pretty well even."