

The Devil Vine

John Fraim

WGA, West

Registration No. 1792565

John Fraim
1702 Via San Martino
Palm Desert, CA 92260
760-844-2595
johnfraim@mac.com
www.greathousestories.com
www.desertscreenwritersgroup.com

© 2015 – John Fraim

"If you must break the law, do it to seize power."

Julius Caesar

"A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes."

Mark Twain

"If you don't want a man unhappy politically, don't give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none. Let him forget there is such a thing as war. If the government is inefficient, top-heavy, and tax-mad, better it be all those than that people worry over it. Give the people contests they win by remembering the words to more popular songs or the names of state capitals or how much corn Iowa grew last year. Cram them full of noncombustible data, chock them so damned full of 'facts' they feel stuffed, but absolutely 'brilliant' with information. Then they'll feel they're thinking, they'll get a sense of motion without moving. And they'll be happy, because facts of that sort don't change."

Ray Bradbury
Fahrenheit 451

Chapter 1

It is one of the few golf courses in LA that is still being watered so that it is green in the middle of California's water crisis. It's a large public golf course on the west side of town and a television commercial is now being shot on the course. A number of people are busy setting up light reflectors and a rail for a tracking shot. The famous old Latino television star Diablo Cortez wears a red polo shirt and sits in a golf cart as a make-up person dusts his face with powder.

"I want to look like I did forty years ago," he tells the make-up person.

"You look more distinguished at your age," the make-up person says.

"More trustworthy," adds Bernie Greenberg. "You're the perfect spokesman for the product."

Bernie is a short, stocky man in his mid-70s. He was the writer and producer of Diablo Cortez's famous television show *Trouble in the Tropics* and has been Diablo's agent and manager since the show went off the air forty years ago.

"I think it's just another dumb product Bernie," Diablo says. "I'm getting a bad reputation with the guys at the coffee shop. When are you gonna' get me that movie deal?"

"When you get forty years younger," Bernie says.

"These product endorsements are driving me crazy," Diablo says.

"They pay the bills," Bernie says. "With your royalties cut you know there's lots of bills to pay."

The director of the commercial is a kid in his twenties. He comes over to the golf cart.

"We're ready to shoot the commercial Mr. Cortez," he says.

"Let's do it," Diablo Cortez says.

People move back from the golf cart.

"Action," the director says.

Diablo starts the golf cart up and drives it twenty feet. The camera moves on the rails, following the golf cart on a tracking shot. The golf cart stops and Diablo gets out and looks down the fairway and takes a club out of his golf bag. As he

walks to where his golf ball would be, he looks up at the camera.

"I'm Diablo Cortez," he says. "You might remember my television show *Trouble in the Tropics*. That was almost forty years ago. A long time has passed. Much has changed. But one thing that hasn't changed. I feel as vigorous today as I did when I was in my television show."

After Diablo says this, he brings a bottle up from his hand not holding the golf club and holds it in front of himself.

"My secret? It's Super Male Enhancement Formula, made exclusively for guys like me who were heroes a long time ago and want to be heroes today. I take it everyday. I'm still a hero."

A young woman suddenly appears next to him and puts her arms around him.

"Cut," says the director. "We can use that."

Diablo tosses the bottle of Super Male Enhancement Formula onto the grass and goes back to the golf cart and pulls out a flask and takes a long swig on it.

"This is the real secret for male enhancement," he mumbles to himself.

In the background, the crew is knocking down the tracking rails and the light reflectors. Bernie walks quickly up to him

and tries to take the flask away but Diablo has put it into his pocket.

"You're drinking way too much these days," Bernie says.

"Who writes this crap," Diablo says. "I mean what the hell. No real golfer would be walking around with a damn bottle of this crap in his golf cart. I tell you Bernie. I can't do these product endorsements any more."

Bernie gets in the golf cart and they drive down the fairway of the golf course toward the parking lot of the golf club. On the way, Diablo pulls the golf cart over to the fence of the course and stops and looks at a huge black monolithic building a few hundred yards away. It is the first water desalination plant in California built at a cost of five billion dollars.

"Maybe the new water plant will be the answer to our water crisis," Diablo says. "I hear it'll supply drinking water for the whole city."

"I think California has run out of answers," Bernie says. "Everything seems no more than temporary solutions. Holding back the big bang until the next administration."

"I'm with you on that," Diablo says as he starts the golf cart up and they head down the fairway to the parking lot. Diablo pulls his flask out and has another hit on it.

"What do you have going on for the rest of the day?" Bernie asks. "We need to talk about your appearance in the the 4th of July parade on the float with the high school cheerleaders. And, there's this company with a product for joint pain that wants to talk to us about a series of commercials."

"I can't take any more of this today," Diablo says. "I'm stopping by the car dealership to see my son."

"He still trying to get into the film business?" Bernie asks.

"Trying to by selling cars all day and doing some stupid independent films in his free time," Diablo says. "I told him he's gotta' go to acting school if he really wants to get serious about the business."

"Just because you had all that classical training doesn't mean it's right for everyone," Bernie says.

"He thinks he can just get by on his looks," Diablo says.

"He is a good-looking kid," Bernie says. "Looks exactly like you did forty years ago. When you were still a hero."

Bernie laughs at the small joke he makes but Diablo does not think its funny.

"It's too hot to make stupid jokes Bernie," he says as they drive into the parking lot of the golf club.

Chapter 2

The fifty-foot-tall cowboy statue of Cal Humphrey rises over the car dealership in the San Fernando Valley almost like an apparition. But this is Los Angeles and it seems just another natural piece of the landscape to Angelinos. The big statue presides over one of the largest dealerships in southern California and Cal is a fixture on local television commercials almost as much as the pervasive weatherman.

It is another scorching weekend in southern California without a hint of rain in the forecast. One of those weekends when people don't come out and shop for cars but stay home drinking beer and ice tea watching baseball or reruns of old television shows with the air conditioning on full blast.

Juan Cortez sits behind his sales desk inside the large offices of the car dealership right off the showroom. There hasn't been a person in the showroom all morning and it is a

good time to read over a script for an independent film he is making with some kids just out of film school at UCLA.

"Another vampire film," Juan says. "When will the trend end?"

Salesman Carl Cameron sits at a desk next to Juan, his face hidden behind a new edition of *The National Inquirer*. The headline on the cover reads "Military Buildup In Desert Outside LA."

"So what's the new conspiracy theory?" Juan asks.

"You haven't heard about the military buildup outside of town?"

"I'm not a tabloid fanatic like you," Juan says.

"It's more than the tabloids," Carl says. "The official word is that it's for military exercises. But a lot of people think it's more than this."

"Like what?" asks Juan.

"A takeover of the city," Carl says.

Juan laughs.

"I don't think the military would want that type of headache," Juan says. "Managing all the crazies in this town."

Carl puts the paper down to take a drink from his water bottle. Through the window of the salesroom he can see Cal Humphrey talking to Diablo Cortez.

"Your old man's here," Carl says to Juan. "He's talking to Cal out on the floor."

Juan puts the script on his desk.

"I think Cal is one of his biggest fans," Juan says. "Think he stops by to talk to Cal more than me."

Juan walks out of the sales office to greet his father.

"Juan is doing some commercials for us," Cal says to Diablo.

"No one can replace the ones where you gallop in on your horse," says Diablo.

"He's doing a good job," says Cal. "The spitting image of his old man."

"How's it going dad?" asks Juan.

"Just thought I'd stop by and see how you're doing," Diablo says. "Shot another dumb commercial and didn't want to go home."

"Good seeing you," Juan says.

Diablo is looking outside the showroom to the lot full of vehicles under colorful banners.

"Wouldn't mind test-driving that black Hummer out there," Diablo says. "Reminds me of the big jeep I used to drive in my television series."

Cal waves his arm and a salesman springs into action from another side of the showroom and walks towards Cal.

"Get the keys for the black Hummer," he says to him.

The three men walk out of the showroom into the hot day. The salesman comes back and unlocks the door of the Hummer and hands Diablo the keys.

"She'll go anywhere," he says.

"Good," says Diablo. "I need to go there."

He gets in and waves to Juan to follow.

"Come on," he says. "We're taking a drive to anywhere."

Juan gets in and the two leave the dealership and race north on Van Nuys Boulevard.

"Nice to drive something big after driving golf carts for commercials."

Diablo takes his flask out and takes a hit.

"You've been drinking again," Juan says.

"Why not," Diablo says. "Wait 'till you see the commercials I've been doing."

"So you're putting your place on the market?" Juan says.

"Can't afford to keep it with my film royalties gone."

"Where you moving?"

"Bernie found me a condo in Canoga Park."

"Bernie's good at things like that," Juan says.

"Wish he could find me another movie deal," Diablo says taking another drink from the flask.

The Hummer continues racing northeast on Van Nays Boulevard through Pacoima, dodging cars.

"You've gotta' give up on a movie deal," Juan says. "It's not gonna' happen. Not at your age."

"There's still work for classically trained actors," Diablo says. "Even old ones like me."

"I think Bernie's found it for you in making product endorsements," Juan says.

"Screw endorsements," Diablo says. "I mean work as a leading man. An update of my old stuff."

"You're dreaming dad," Juan says.

"Look who's talking," Diablo says. "One with no training as an actor."

"Everyone's an actor," says Juan. "The car lot is full of actors."

"So you're still working stand-up comedy gigs around town?" Diablo asks.

"That and some independent films," Juan says.

"I tell you," says Diablo. "You need to see Gloria at Actors Studio over in West Hollywood," Diablo says. "The best in the business. She'll give you some good basics."

"I don't need to see anyone," Juan says. "Besides, Actors Studio closed five years ago."

The Hummer turns right off of Van Nuys Boulevard onto Foothill Boulevard and goes under the Foothill Freeway and then up Little Tujunga Canyon Road and into the foothills of the Angeles National Forest.

"Jesus dad, where the hell we going?" Juan says.

The Hummer leaves the road and pushes through a field and then through thick trees. There is a smile on Diablo Cortez's face. He is somewhere in a distant place and time.

"Where the hell we going?" Juan repeats.

"Anywhere," Diablo says.

A view from the front of the Hummer through the windshield of the two men. Diablo driving with a manic look on his face and Juan looking worried.

The view slowly fades.

It fades like a scene fades in a film.

Chapter 3

Diablo Cortez, wearing khaki safari clothing, drives a large black jeep through a thick jungle. Explosions go off all around the jeep. A beautiful woman in the passenger seat is turned around and shooting a gun at the vehicle chasing them.

"They're gaining on us," she yells.

Diablo continues to navigate between the explosions and the gunfire from the pursuing vehicle.

"Hold on," he says.

The jeep comes out of the jungle into a small clearing and races toward a precipice. The jeep speeds over the precipice and is air born over a valley five hundred feet below. It barely lands on the other side of the valley cliff. The jeep stops and Diablo and the woman look behind them. The pursuing vehicle attempts to jump the precipice but misses and falls. An explosion is heard.

Diablo continues to drive the jeep through the jungle. There are no more explosions and the gunfire has stopped. After awhile, the jeep stops on top of hills overlooking an ocean. Below, on the beach, is what looks like a resort.

"The old resort that was never completed," the woman says. "We can hide there for awhile until they stop chasing us."

The jeep winds down the road to the beach and the old resort. As it goes down the road, the theme music for *Trouble in the Tropics* starts and the words "The End" appear on the screen.

* * *

Lights in the movie theater of the presidential palace go on. President of Coastaguava Santino Columbo sits next to a man called Mr. Johnson who has recently arrived in Coastaguava. They are drinking the famous Coastaguavan rum and smoking rare Coastaguavan cigars. The president is a short, heavy-set man in his 50s and wears his usual Hawaiian shirt and white pants. Mr. Johnson is dressed in a black suit. He is a tall, slim man in his 60s with short hair and a rough-face that hasn't seen many smiles.

"One of my favorite episodes," the president says. "Diablo Cortez rescues the beautiful Kesha from the rebel forces. Cortez

is a god in Coastaguava. *Trouble in the Tropics* runs everyday. No one ever misses it."

"It's still hard to believe you're offering him a million dollars to come down here," Mr. Johnson says.

"He can motivate the farmers to harvest more of the vine," the president says. "Cortez will be a spokesman for my government. The power of Cosmo Quinine's rebels are increasing each day. Farmers are being won over by her forces. More and more farmers are refusing to harvest the vine. Diablo Cortez will motivate them to harvest the vine."

"I hope you are right Mr. President," Johnson says. "Our agreement is for you to supply a ton of the powder in three weeks."

"You will have your powder," the president says.

The two men walk through the palace and out onto the wide veranda that overlooks the capital city of San Cristobol. President Santino leans on the marble wall of the veranda sipping his rum and puffing on the large cigar.

"She is out there somewhere," the president says. "Spreading lies to the farmers. Making them stop their harvest of the vine. She must be stopped. Diablo Cortez will help us stop her."

As he says this, dark clouds move in over the city and there are flashes of lighting over the thick jungles to the east of the city.

Chapter 4

Lightning flashes outside a tent. The only light in the tent is the flame from a lantern. Cosmo Quinine, leader of the rebel forces in Coastaguava sits at a table looking over a map under the light of the lantern. Her key assistant, Eric Mendez, sits across the table from her.

"We're stopping more and more of the farmers from harvesting the vine," she says.

"The critical season for the vine is upon us," Mendez says. "The next few weeks will determine if we're successful or not."

"If the harvest cannot be slowed down," Cosmo says, "we need to attack the factory and warehouse in San Cristobol where the vine powder is made and stored."

"A raid on the factory and warehouse is a risky operation," Mendez says.

"There might be no other way," Cosmo says.

They leave the tent and walk through the camp of the rebel forces. It is twilight and her troops are gathered around small

fires having their dinner. The camp is on the top of a mountain in the eastern jungles of Coastaguava. San Cristobol is fifty miles to the west through the thick jungles of the country.

"Contacts in the capital tell me the president is planning a large shipment of the powder out of the country," Mendez says.

"The vine has never been exported," Cosmo says. "It is not meant to be exported. It belongs to the people of Coastaguava."

"My contacts in San Cristobol tell me a mysterious man has come to visit the president," Mendez says. "No one knows where he has come from but he is seen much with the president."

"Perhaps a deal is being made with him," says Cosmo.

"Yes," Mendez says. "Perhaps a deal."

Chapter 5

It is an "L" shaped ranch home on one of those quiet, expensive little streets that open onto San Vicente Boulevard in the Brentwood area of Los Angeles. Forty years ago when Diablo Cortez bought it at the height of his fame, it was a heavily middle-aged WASP neighborhood full of respectful bankers and lawyers. But now it is a loose confederation of various nationalities: an Iranian oil executive lives a few doors away; an Indian software engineer is a neighbor on one side and across the street is a Japanese woman who owns a restaurant on Melrose and a boutique on Montana.

Diablo Cortez waves to the Japanese woman as he picks up his mail and thinks how things have changed over the years. Inside his home, he sits at the dining room table and briefly sorts through the mail. The new Hollywood *Reporter* magazine features more young stars he doesn't recognize on its cover. The

envelopes look like the usual unpleasant assortment of bills and junk mail. Something official from the IRS he will put off opening until he has a drink. Another yellow envelope from the water department announcing more emergency water restrictions. The pinkish envelope from Actors Equity containing his diminishing monthly benefit check.

All around him are packing boxes ready to be filled with memories and either put into storage or moved to the new condo in the valley Bernie has found for him. At times, he thinks of simply throwing everything away and starting out new again. Turning over a "new leaf" as they say. But then he catches himself thinking about some object on one of the shelves in his home. Or going through an old scrapbook. Or gazing at some old photograph. And then it seems that *everything* needs to be kept and stored away someplace so that it can be brought out when memories become old leaves on the ground in need of stirring.

He pushes the remote and the big screen television pops to life with an old western film he has seen a few times but can't quite place. He sits in a type of trance, watching it for a few minutes. Then, there is the familiar theme music for the Cal Humphrey Auto Mall commercial and, yes, there is his son Juan in a cowboy outfit under the great Cal Humphrey sign telling everyone in the southland to "ride on out to the big summer auto

roundup." Juan might be right. Everyone is an actor and the car dealership might not be the worst place to get actor training.

Diablo watches the end of the movie and is upset at himself for not knowing it is the 1948 western *Red River* directed by Howard Hawks. Then, he grabs the large bottle of Stolli Vodka in the kitchen and some ice cubes from the refrigerator and puts them into a tall glass and goes outside and sits under the umbrella table by his small kidney-shaped pool. The spell of hot weather in LA has let up. It is a cool afternoon with a soft ocean breeze that gives sudden life to the palm trees and shrubs in the yard.

He is halfway through his drink when his cell phone buzzes. It is Bernie and he is more excited than he has been in years. He needs to come over immediately. It is something that can't wait.

Half an hour later, Bernie comes walking out to the pool area carrying a large envelope. He pulls a chair up to the umbrella table and tosses the envelope on the table.

"A promotion deal in South America," he says. "From the President of Coastaguava. They need your services as a spokesman for a few weeks. You'll make some commercials that'll run on television. A million dollar guarantee up front."

Diablo opens the envelope and spreads its contents on the

table. There is a photograph of a handsome man in military uniform on the top of the materials and Diablo picks up the photo and studies it for a second.

"President Santino Columbo," Bernie says.

Bernie hands Diablo a letter written on official stationery with a gold dragon on top of it.

"A letter from President Columbo to you," Bernie says.

Diablo reads the letter.

"As you can see," Bernie says, "he's a huge fan of *Trouble in the Tropics*. It's the most popular television show in the country. You're a god down there."

"Where the hell is Coastaguava?" Diablo asks.

"I've done some quick research on Google," Bernie says showing Diablo a map he has printed out. "A little country on the coast between Ecuador and Columbia. Just a little over a hundred thousand square miles. A population of 400,000. A colony of the British a few hundred years ago. They speak a mixture of English and Spanish. It's one of those places you never hear about unless you're into expensive rum or fine cigars. They say map-makers have had a hard time defining the border of the country as it's always changing depending on whether the ruling regime is retreating or advancing. For a few years, the borders of have been advancing under President Columbo."

"That's encouraging," Diablo says. "Another Banana Republic ruled by another dictator."

"A benevolent dictator who is paying you a million dollars," Bernie says. "The president's made reservations for us to fly down in a few days," Bernie says.

"A few days?" Diablo says.

"He needs your services now," Bernie says. "And for a million dollars, I'd fly down this afternoon."

Diablo looks over the letter from president Columbo.

"He doesn't say much about what the hell I'm promoting," Diablo says. "Says we'll discuss it when I'm down there."

Chapter 6

The next morning, Diablo drives out to Ruby's coffee shop in Santa Monica where old friends from the movie business congregate. They push tables together and sit around talking about times when good movies were still made.

Diablo tells them news of his promotion deal in Coastaguava. Everyone is surprised. All are in their 70s and 80s and most in retirement homes.

"Be sure to take enough mosquito repellent," one of them says. "Mosquitos in the tropics are as big as small birds."

"And don't get involved in any revolutions," another says. "Revolutions are always happening down there."

Diablo promises to tell them all about the experience when he gets back. He then leaves as they raise their coffee cups to him in a toast.

He drives out to the Cal Humphrey dealership in the valley. He will surprise his son Juan with the news. On the drive out to the valley, he has an idea to run by Juan.

The cooler weather in LA has brought more people outside and, a little before noon, the dealership is loaded with customers looking at cars. He parks in the customer area and waves at Juan who is busy with a woman carrying a small dog in a purse and looking over a Lincoln Towncar. A few of the salesmen say hello to him. He is well known at the dealership.

He walks into the showroom and sits watching the television, waiting for Juan to be free. There is a special about the new water desalination plant that will come online in three weeks. It is the first in the nation and California is placing a lot of hope in it to help solve the water crisis.

Ten minutes later Juan comes into the showroom without the woman who was looking at the Towncar.

"Thought I had a sale," he says. "But her damn dog didn't like the seats. Never know these days with pets making buying decisions and all. LA for you."

"Let's grab lunch," Diablo says. "I've got something important to tell you."

"I can do that," Juan says. "Providing you don't take the Hummer again. I really thought we were going over that cliff the other day."

Ten minutes later they sit at a booth at Helen's Famous Coffee Shop a few blocks from the dealership.

"Your old man is going down to South America on a promotion deal," Diablo tells Juan who is just beginning to bite into a tuna fish sandwich.

Juan puts the sandwich down, wipes his mouth and takes a sip of ice tea.

"What?" he says.

"Bernie came over yesterday and told me about it," Diablo says. "A deal for the president of this little south American country called Coastaguava. They're flying Bernie and me down there in a few days."

"What are they paying you?" Juan asks.

"A cool million up front," Diablo says.

"You have to be kidding," Juan says.

"I'm famous down there," Diablo says. "The biggest star on television."

"Jesus," Juan says. "I can't believe it."

"I keep telling you I still have fans," Diablo says. "Some people out there still appreciate good acting. A dramatic show. Action. Adventure. They love *Trouble in the Tropics*."

"Jesus," Juan says again.

"What would you think of coming down to kind of hang out and watch?" Diablo says. "I'm sure I could get another ticket for you. Would be a great learning experience. Watching your old man in action. An invaluable experience."

"It's a nice offer," Juan says. "But I don't think I can get the time off from Cal."

"I'll talk to Cal," Diablo says. "He'll understand. I guarantee I can get you the time off."

Juan contemplates this for a few moments.

"It would be an experience," he says. "When are you flying down there?"

"Day after tomorrow," Diablo says. "Be gone no more than two weeks."

"I have to go to the big auto show in Las Vegas in a few days," Juan says. "Couldn't fly down with you and Bernie but I could come in a week, after the Vegas show."

"That's fine," Diablo says. "I'll talk to Cal and get Bernie working on the tickets."

"It'll be interesting," Juan says.

"Watching the technique of your old man," Diablo says.

"Yes, it'll be interesting for you."

"I didn't mean it that way," Juan says. "I meant it'd be interesting going to a place where you're still a hero."

"Thanks for your great support," Diablo says sarcastically.

Chapter 7

Getting to the place where Diablo Cortez is still a hero is not an easy task. Bernie and Diablo take an eight-hour commercial flight from Los Angeles to Quito, Ecuador. There is some type of revolution going on in Ecuador and their flight to Coastaguava is delayed until the next day. They spend the night at a little motel near the airport that has armed soldiers surrounding it.

The next day, the revolution has apparently been put down and the airport is clear and the planes again flying.

"This is not an unusual occurrence," a man at the ticket counter tells them.

The flight to San Cristobol in Coastaguava is a bumpy, two-hour flight on a little twin-engine puddle jumper. The plane shakes terribly when going over the northern mountains of Coastaguava and Diablo orders a few glasses of wine to help him calm down.

The airport in San Cristobol is half complete. Five years ago, there were plans to open up a big resort on the coast of Coastaguava but financing fell through when president Santino's regime came into power and construction halted on both the resort and the new airport. Now, few tourists come down to Coastaguava and the airport is mostly used for cargo planes carrying rum and cigars out of the nation.

But today, the airport is alive with people when their plane lands. There has been an announcement over television that the famous actor is visiting their country to do some commercials for the president.

Outside his airplane window, Diablo Cortez sees a congregation of people waving posters with his name and picture on them. The pictures on the poster of a young Diablo Cortez - forty years ago - when he was starring in his popular television series. In front of the crowds, there is a long line of official looking cars with flags on them. A red carpet extends out from the vehicles and men in military uniforms stand at attention on the end of the red carpet. Somewhere, there is the sound of a small band playing an off-key version of the theme music for his old television show *Trouble in the Tropics*.

Bernie is dressed in a loud Hawaiian shirt wearing a straw hat and thick sunglasses. He is looking out his window at the elaborate welcoming ceremony.

"I told you," he said to Cortez, "The president's giving us the whole ball of wax."

Bernie first goes first down the steps of the plane and is met by a short, heavy-set man wearing a military uniform with funny medals on it.

"I am President Santino Columbo," the short man says. "Welcome to Coastaguava."

As Bernie shakes the president's hand, he can hear a roar from the crowd and looks around to see Diablo waving to the crowd as he comes out the door of the plane. He is wearing his old costume from the television show: a white safari suit with tall boots. It doesn't fit loosely like it once did over his athletic body but now looks like it is a few sizes too small for him.

The roar of the crowd quickly subsides as does the excited, smiling expression of President Columbo upon seeing Cortez and shaking his hand.

"You look much different than you do in your movies Senor Cortez," the president says.

"I should look different Mr. President," Diablo says. "My movies were made forty years ago."

The president does not know what to say.

"Forty years ago?" the president says.

"Of course Mr. President," Diablo says. "The shows' been in re-run syndication for years now."

"Syndication?" the president repeats. "What is syndication?"

Cortez moves close to Bernie and whispers to him.

"Jesus Bernie," he thinks the show is still being made."

"Apparently," Bernie says.

He might attempt an explanation of what syndication and re-runs are but it did not seem the right time for this.

"It is wonderful to be in your beautiful nation," Diablo says. "I very much look forward to working with you."

They walk on the red carpet to the president's limo as the band continues to play the theme music from the *Trouble in the Tropics* television series. Diablo can see that the crowds have lost their enthusiasm and are beginning to break up. They were expecting the young star of *Trouble in the Tropics* and instead all they get is an old man. Perhaps the real Diablo Cortez is arriving later?

They walk to the limo of the president and in a few minutes the procession is heading to the royal palace. Cortez and Bernie sit in the back of president's limo next to the president and look out the thickly tinted windows at the capital city of San Cristobol. The buildings have little character. They have been built for the utilitarian purposes of processing things for export. They pass a few large tobacco and rum factories, the smell of tobacco mixed with cane sugar. Large, concrete apartment buildings are all around. On the streets, kids kick soccer balls back-and-forth. They pass a few outdoor markets, the smell of fish heavy in the air.

The limo comes to an island of lush greenery that rises out of the gloomy buildings of the capital city. A tall iron fence surrounds the island and behind the fence are guards in uniforms with machine guns. The limo is waved through the front gate of the complex and winds up a drive to a great white palace on top of the lush island.

Soon, they are inside the palace and President Columbo is giving Diablo and Bernie a tour. Cortez is surprised at the wealth of the palace in the middle of all the drab poverty of the city. They walk down long, wide marble hallways with expensive paintings on the walls and statues of military figures

in heroic poses. The hallway opens into large rooms with oriental rugs and plush, thick furniture.

"My grandfather built the palace in the 1930s," the president tells Cortez. "Right after the First People's Revolution establishing the modern Coastaguava."

They end up at a marble table on the wide veranda of the palace. The bright, hot summer day is finally fading into a colorless twilight and lights are twinkling on throughout the city like orange stars that have fallen to earth. The president orders a servant to bring them a bottle of rare Coastaguavan rum and some expensive cigars.

When they have filled glasses of rum in front of them and their cigars lit, the president raises his glass to a toast.

"Here is to your trip to my country Senor Cortez and the work we will do," he says.

"I am honored to be here to work with you," Cortez says tapping his glass against the president's glass.

"You must excuse my ignorance," the president says. "But I did not know that your television program was made forty years ago. I was under the impression you are currently producing the program."

Bernie laughs.

"We wish it still was in production," Bernie says. "We have heard this from fans in other countries where they show re-runs of the series runs. It is a common mistake in countries that get the syndicated version of the series."

"We will need to work with what we have," the president says. "Where we are today. The plans I have can be revised."

"Make-up can work magic," Cortez adds.

"Yes, magic," the president repeats.

He rises from the table and walks to the side of the veranda. In the growing darkness, Cortez and Bernie can see the glow of his cigar growing brighter. The president is quiet for a few moments as he surveys his kingdom spread out below.

"I need you to help me promote harvest of the special crop of Costaguava," the president says. "It is our sacred vine. I need you to be a spokesman for the harvest of this vine."

"What is the vine used for?" Diablo asks.

"It is a medicine needed by our people," the President says. "Greatly needed for their illnesses. The rebels have no interest in the health of the people."

"It sounds like an important plant," Diablo says.

"Something worthwhile to harvest."

"Yes, Senor Cortez," the president says. "It is very valuable for my people's health. But the rebel forces in the

country fight against the harvest of the crop. They are gaining power with the farmers."

"Rebel forces?" Cortez asks. "There was no mention of rebel forces in the materials you sent us."

"The rebel leader Cosmos Quinine leads them," the president says. "She must be stopped. Her forces are taking over the areas where the special vines are grown."

The president extracts a photo from his pocket and places it on the table in front of Diablo Cortez. It is a photo of what looks to be a mad woman with hair exploding out in all directions like a modern Minerva.

"Cosmo Quinine," the president says. "The leader of the rebel forces we must stop."

"Commercials by me can stop her?" Diablo asks.

"Not just any commercials," the president says. "Commercials from Diablo Cortez, the greatest hero in our nation."

The men sit in silence awhile smoking their cigars and sipping their rum. Cortez searches for something to say but it is impossible to find anything.

Ten minutes later he and Bernie are in an official government car heading for their hotel.

Chapter 8

The Hotel de la Revolucion is a wooden three-story structure with flags flying in front and a few kids by the front door begging for money. Like the rest of the buildings in the city, it is built more for the utilitarian functions of business rather than aesthetic reasons of tourism since few tourists come to Coastaguava. It is the place to stay for foreign businessmen who come to the country to negotiate deals for rum, cigars and other crops like bananas and mangos the country exports.

Inside, there is a small lobby with a large portrait of President Columbo on the wall facing the door. On the left there is a registration desk and on the right the entrance to the hotel bar. Diablo and Bernie walk into the bar. A few large fans push the warm tropical air around above dim lights on cracked walls. The bar is long made of heavy wood. A few weary businessmen men at it. Bernie and Diablo go to a table in a corner of the bar.

"What the hell have you gotten me into Bernie?" Diablo says. "I had no idea we were coming down here to be part of a revolution."

"I admit that things are a little different than I thought," says Bernie. "But it's only a revolution of a few weeks for you."

"Maybe I can handle it for a few weeks," Diablo says. "It'll be better when Juan comes down here. I'll get away with him for a few days and explore the country."

Diablo pulls out his cell phone.

"In fact, I think I'll call him right now," he says.

Diablo pushes Juan's number on the cell phone. A "No Service" notice appears on the screen. The bartender comes over to their table.

"Cell phones are forbidden in Coastaguava Senor," the bartender says. "You can be imprisoned for trying to use a cell phone. Besides, there are no towers down here so no reception."

"That's crazy," says Diablo.

"You must be new to Coastaguava Senor," the bartender says. "There is no communication in Coastaguava. No cell phones. No computers. No radio. Just the newspaper of the government and television."

When the bartender is back behind the bar Bernie shakes his head and laughs.

"That explains why you are such a big thing down here," Bernie says. "You're the only entertainment."

"The president and the people of the country think the show is currently being made," Diablo says.

"They all see America as it was thirty, forty years ago," says Bernie. "One of the things that happens when government controls the media."

"Almost like a big petrie dish," Diablo says. "An experiment in social engineering conducted on an entire nation."

"It seems like that," Bernie agrees.

Chapter 9

The next morning, President Columbo goes to the large factory in San Cristobol that produces powder from the vine. It is an old brick building originally built to make military vehicles when the nation still fought in battles but it has recently been converted to a modern factory for making the powder.

Trucks are arriving carrying the harvested vines from the farmers in the surrounding jungles. The vines are being off-loaded from the trucks and carried into the factory.

President Columbo walks along one of the long production lines with a few assistants. He dips his finger into the straight white river of powder and tastes it. He shakes his head, satisfied the current production is of good quality.

He walks into an office in one corner of the factory. Mr. Johnson sits at a desk in the office. The office door is closed. Two guards stand at attention outside the office holding machine

guns.

"There could be problems," president Columbo says. "Diablo Cortez has aged. He is no longer the hero on television each day. I don't think he can be used for my promotional plans against the rebels."

"That is your problem," Mr. Johnson says. "The agreement is that you supply a ton of the powder in three weeks."

"It is difficult to know how my people will react to him," the president says. "He's an old man now. Not the young hero everyone remembers from the television show."

"Again, that is your problem," says Mr. Johnson. "We need to ship a ton of the powder in three weeks."

Chapter 10

In early afternoon, Diablo and Bernie are taken to a large building where the government television company is located. A studio in the building has been created to resemble a familiar set from Diablo's television series *Trouble in the Tropics*. They are introduced to the director of the commercials, a young man named Jose Grande. Jose is honored to meet Diablo and Bernie and tells them he is a big fan of *Trouble in the Tropics*.

Jose gives Diablo some scripts for the commercials written by the president. For the next few hours, Diablo walks around the set looking at the camera in his serious manner and tells the people of Coastaguava why they must increase their harvest of the vine.

The commercials begin running the next day all over the nation. They run on the hour between re-runs of other popular syndicated television shows like *The Rifleman*, *Gilligan's Island* and *Bonanza*. Besides the commercials, Diablo appears with the president at some outside events. But the turnout is sparse. Few

are interested in seeing an old man and no one can believe he is the same Diablo Cortez they watch on television every day.

Word comes to the president that the promotional efforts of Diablo are not working very well. The president becomes worried and wonders what he can do. The deadline for delivering the ton of the powder to Mr. Johnson is a little over two weeks away and the rebels are causing more farmers to cut back their harvest of the vine.

The president invites Diablo to dinner a few days after Diablo's commercials and promotional appearances.

"You have worked hard Senor," the president says. "Why don't you take a few days off. Enjoy yourself in our fine capital."

It sounds like a good idea to Diablo.

He goes back to the hotel and has a rum with Bernie in the bar.

"I think "I'll explore the country a little," he tells Bernie. "Get a driver to take me into the jungles around the capital?"

"You must watch yourself," Bernie says. "I hear the jungles are full of rebel forces."

"Maybe I need to meet them," Diablo says. "I was always defending the president of that little tropical nation in my

television series. Fighting against the rebels in the jungles. I'd chase them into the jungles. But I never ventured into the jungles by myself. Never met up with the rebels. I always thought that would have made a good episode in my series. Maybe I was fighting for the wrong side all those years of my television series."

Bernie pours two more glasses of rum from the bottle on the table.

"I never thought of it that way," he says. "Maybe you're right."

Chapter 11

The thought that Diablo was perhaps on the wrong side in his television series was a meme that would not leave his mind that night. Bernie retired around midnight but Diablo kept drinking and pondering the idea that he might have been a hero for the wrong side in his television series.

Around one in the morning, a member of the crew making the television commercials came into the bar and Diablo started drinking with him. Discussion turned to his desire to get out of the capital city and into the jungles.

"I can take you to a little town ten miles into the jungle," the crew-member says. "There is a small hotel in the town and you can stay there and get away fro a few days. It sounds like you need to get away for a few days Senor Cortez."

They continued drinking and sometime during the night they got in the man's small car and headed towards the jungles surrounding San Cristobol.

* * *

The next morning, Diablo is awakened to the chorus of tropical birds. He has been sleeping in a large wicker chair in a small bar. A thin ray of sunlight comes through the dirty windows of the bar and throws a spotlight on him like he is an actor on stage. The crew-member that drove him to the bar is gone.

A young woman is sitting at a table next to his table and a man sits at the bar. The bartender is arranging chairs and singing a song. There is a television over the bar and an old episode of *Bonanza* is playing and the young girl and the man are both engaged in watching it. The commercial featuring him comes on the television. Everyone in the bar suddenly looks at him.

"You are Diablo Cortez?" the young woman asks.

"Yes I am," he says.

"But Diablo Cortez is young," she says.

"I was once young," Diablo says.

The man in the corner of the bar gets up and walks outside. He pulls out a walkie-talkie and makes a call. Then he goes back inside and sits down at the bar. He removes a tube from his pocket and orders another glass of rum. He pours a liquid from the tube into the glass of rum and then walks over and hands the glass of rum to Diablo Cortez.

"This is for you Senor Cortez," he says. " I have been a fan for many years."

Diablo Cortez lifts the glass of rum at the man.

"Thank you," he says. "At least someone still knows who I am."

A few minutes after Diablo says this, the woman begins to morph into a great serpent with a fiery head rising above the table like a mythological dragon. The walls of the bar disappear and he is in a mysterious land full of giant insects and birds as large as airplanes. Images are blurry and float in and out like seaweed underwater. Colors explode into other colors. Faces merge into other faces.

Ten minutes later, Diablo is placed in the back of a jeep that speeds down a narrow road cut like a scar through the jungle. The jeep is driven by the man in the bar. Another man in a military uniform sits in the passenger seat of the jeep holding a machine gun. The jeep runs through a few more small

villages similar to the one where the bar was and then it winds into the foothills of the mountains that line the eastern border of Coastaguava.

Chapter 12

A mosquito drifts through the humid air and lands on the top of a lantern. It waits on the lantern for a few seconds and then is off to the top of a chair. Diablo follows it as it takes off from the chair and disappears. He looks around and decides he is in a tent. From the light streaking into the tent from outside it seems to be daytime. He rubs his eyes and runs his hands through his hair. He is dirty and greasy from a few days without a shower. The stubble of a beard is beginning to rise from his face.

He has been sleeping on a small cot inside the tent. There is nothing else in the tent except the lantern and a chair. He slowly gets up from the cot and walks toward the flap door of the tent and then pushes it aside into the bright, hot sun of the tropical morning. He stumbles forward and notices a man in a rebel soldier follows him. The soldier has a rifle strapped over his shoulder. The man lets him walk around, exploring his new surroundings.

There are a lot of other tents the size of the one he came out of scattered about. Here and there are a few larger tents. A flag with a symbol he doesn't recognize is on a slim pole. Men in camo outfits with machine guns patrol the perimeter of the area. Fires are burning in pits and pots are hanging over the fires, the smell of coffee and food in the air. They appear to be on the top of some hill, above the thick dark green jungles of Coastaguava spread below in a rich, thickness in all directions as far as the eye can see. The sky is as blue as he has ever seen and the morning sun is a whitish orange dot in it. The world is a great juxtaposition of blue and green and nothing else. It is a beautiful sight to Diablo. A thought quickly comes out of nowhere that this is the way the world should be.

There is a hand on his shoulder. He looks around to see a large, muscular man in military fatigues with a beret on top of his crew cut head.

"Senor Cortez," he says. "Come with me. She wants to see you."

Diablo follows the big man through the camp full of tents and out into the thickness of the surrounding jungle to a large tent perched on a small hill of rocks. The tent is guarded by a number of men with machine guns. The big man pushes through the door into the tent followed by Diablo Cortez. A woman sits at

the head of a long table in the tent, a map spread out on the table in front of her.

"Senor Cortez," she says. "It is good to meet you. I have heard much about you. I am Cosmo Quinine."

Diablo's head is still rolling from the rum and Devil Vine powder and his eyes are still adjusting to the light of a new day. But it does not take much adjustment for him to realize that Cosmo Quinine is one of the most beautiful women he has ever seen. He briefly thinks that it seems appropriate he meets this beautiful woman on this beautiful day. She looks nothing like the photo the president showed him at the palace a few days ago. But then again, the president looks nothing like the photo Bernie showed him in LA a week ago. And, he looks nothing like the young Diablo Cortez.

"You are still under the influence of the juice of the vine one of my soldiers gave you yesterday," Cosmo Quinine says. "The power of the vine is difficult to break away from. I know it is difficult to speak at this time. The vine is tangled around your tongue. This is common. So, just listen to what I have to say to you."

The outlines of the woman at the table continued to wave back-and-forth like a mirage seen across a desert. Diablo tried to make the wavering outline stop but it was impossible.

"Word has gotten around you've come to Coastaguava to help the president promote harvesting of the vine. We call it the Devil Vine. To make commercials to help him win over the people of the nation against our revolution. He has offered you much money to do this and filled you with much propaganda on what the vine is and what a benevolent leader he is. You need to understand our side of this. When the power of the vine has subsided, I want to show you something."

Diablo felt an arm helping him up and was soon stumbling out of the tent and back to the cot in his tent and then falling into the blackness of a deep sleep.

Chapter 13

Ten miles west of the desert town of Barstow, California, Juan Cortez pushes the accelerator down on the new BMW 740i and the car shoots up to 110 in a few seconds. His friend at the dealership Carl Cameron shakes his head.

"Three hundred horses kicking in," Carl says.

"I can sell this baby," Juan says. "Ask seventy five grand without batting an eye."

"You're a salesman," Carl says. "Think you set a new sales record for the booth at the show. I just wish some of your technique would rub off on me."

"No technique," Juan says. "When are you going to learn it's all acting. You think too much Carl. Think about technique. That's your trouble."

"What about acting technique," Carl says.

"There you go again," Juan says. "Sounding like my old man."

They drive in silence for a few minutes.

"That reminds me," Juan says. "I better give him a call and tell him I'm flying down tomorrow."

Juan pushes his father's number of the cell phone. A "No Service" message appears.

"That's funny," Juan says. "Called him when he was out of the country before and never had a problem."

They speed down I-15 with Juan holding the new BMW at an even hundred.

"I hear Cal wants you to do more commercials for the dealership," Carl says.

"That's the rumor," Juan says. "I think he's getting too old for dressing up in his cowboy gear and galloping in on the horse."

"You get to do all of this now," Carl says.

"Great," says Juan sarcastically. "I'm really looking forward to it."

"Maybe you'll learn some acting techniques watching your old man do his commercials down in South America," Carl offers.

"If he can stay on the wagon for a few days," Juan says.

They continue through the desert west of Barstow. It is the most isolated and barren part of California and there is no sign of civilization anywhere until you hit Victorville. But suddenly, off to the right, a half-mile from I-15, there is a

vast sea of military vehicles in the desert. Tents are set up. Makeshift buildings. A huge collection of military vehicles and buildings in the middle of the desert.

Carl looks at all of this without saying anything.

"Jesus," Juan says. "What the hell is that?"

"The Western Readiness Operation I was telling you about the other day," Carl says.

"Ready to practice operations out here in the desert," Juan says.

"No," corrects Carl. "Waiting for a signal to move into LA and impose martial law on the city."

"More of your conspiracy theory," Juan says.

Juan laughs.

"It's a good thing I'm leaving the country tomorrow," he says.

Chapter 14

Diablo Cortez falls in and out of sleep through most of the day as the effects of the Devil Vine slowly release it's hold on him and the world comes back again into some type of alignment.

In the evening the big man in military fatigues comes to his tent and takes Diablo to a gathering around a large fire circle where pans of food and bottles of rum are circulated. The faces around the fire are the brown faces of the native people of the country. Sweaty and dirty from another day's work carrying forth the revolution.

Cosmo Quinine comes to the circle and sits next to Diablo. The big military man sits on her other side. She performs a short ceremony and the meal begins.

"How do you feel?" she asks Diablo.

"Much better than I did this morning," he says. "Have my appetite back. Things are not moving all over the place. Colors have returned to normal."

"I had my soldier give you a small dose," she says. "A

large dose is not so forgiving."

The food is surprisingly tasteful to Diablo: a mix of beans, tortillas and exotic vegetables. The rum is not as smooth as the rum the president gave him but it is better than most other rums he has had.

There is discussion of the day's work. The forces of Cosmo have prevented the harvesting of fifty acres of the Devil Vine and the supply of the powder in San Cristobol has fallen to its lowest level in a number of years. The work of the rebels are succeeding in dropping the production of the Devil Vine in Coastaguava. The commercials on television have not worked to slow the harvest of the vine. Diablo listens with much interest.

"This is why the president needs your help Senor Cortez," Cosmo Quinine says. "The president depends on the vine to make the people forget about their world, make them forget they are paid so little to produce millions of dollars worth of rum and cigars for the finer stores of the world. He used to distribute the vine in pills but he is now putting it into the water system of the nation through the powder from the vine. When there is no Devil Vine for the people then they cannot forget their misery. They see the world for what it is and they will storm the gates of the palace in San Cristobol. The president will be shot."

"The president told me none of this," Diablo says.

"Of course he didn't tell you this," Cosmo says. "The president is a liar and a cheat who thinks nothing of selling his country out."

Diablo thinks about what she has said.

"And when the president is shot then you will become the new leader of the nation?" he asks Cosmo Quinine.

"Perhaps," she says. "But this is not as important as stopping the harvesting of the vine and making it into a powder for the masses. A powder to control them. The power of the vine was never meant to enslave people. It has meant to set them free."

"The president wishes to enslave the people by the Devil Vine and television," says Diablo. "Enslave them to produce the great cash crops of Coastaguava: tobacco and sugar cane for cigars and rum."

"Yes," says Cosmo. "But they might no longer be the great exports of the nation. Things are changing fast right now. There is word from the capital of plans to begin exporting the Devil Vine in synthesized powder form. When this begins, the powder will become the great cash crop of the nation. There are millions of dollars in its export. Perhaps billions."

Cosmo is quiet for a few seconds. She then looks directly at Diablo, the flames of the fire dancing around inside her dark

eyes.

"This is the real reason the president has brought you to Coastaguava Senor Cortez," she says. "There is a large export deal about to happen. We do not know what nation or nations are involved. We don't know much about the deal. We only know there is a big deal happening soon. The president stands to make millions. This is why he has brought you down here."

Diablo has little to say but simply lets this information settle into his mind. He can see a bowl is being passed around the fire and that the rebel soldiers are taking a drink from the bowl after offering some type of prayer.

The bowl comes to Cosmo and she stands up and lifts it toward the ink-black tropical night sky and sings a short song with words he does not understand. She then takes a drink from the bowl and passes it to Diablo. He takes the bowl and looks at the thick liquid in it. He thinks of passing it on without drinking it but he can sense everyone around the fire is looking at him, watching his action.

He lifts the bowl towards the fire and then takes a drink from the bowl. The liquid has a bitter taste. A taste like quinine. A thought briefly comes and goes from his mind like a puff of wind. Perhaps this is how Cosmo acquired her surname Quinine. It seems as reasonable as anything else right now as

the world moves out of alignment again.

Diablo seems to be on some type of cart on a rail. An image of his son Juan pops into his mind like a figure in a funhouse cart ride at a carnival. A smiling, clown face. Looking down at Diablo. The head bobbing back-and-forth. Laughing at Diablo and what his life has become in the years since his television series. Juan looks funny but Diablo's life seems even funnier than how Juan looks.

Images of his old television program come back to him. He sees himself in different scenes of the show. Defending the president and the government in the capital city of the tropics. It was a city that was much like San Cristobol. Perhaps San Cristobol had even been designed from sets in the old television show? Perhaps all of this was part of a movie that started before he even came down to Coastaguava? Perhaps started that day at the car dealership? Or that day on the golf course doing the commercial? Or perhaps that day forty years ago when his television series came to an end and he was not able to find another hero role? Or that day a few months ago when the royalties for his films ran out? Perhaps a movie was about to start? Did he even want to play the role of hero in the movie? Was he on the right side fighting against the right villains?

Chapter 15

The dreams and visions come and go through the night and Diablo seems little more than a child following after some type of Pied Piper tossing flower petals of wisdom behind the playing of an ethereal music. He thinks about the emotions of artists when they are creating their stories. Novelists and screenwriters and playwrights pushing forward into the abyss. Trying to tell that great story. Not knowing where they will end up. The psychological state they arrive at when they reach the end of their artistic journey.

Again. Here he is the artist again. Making another attempt at arriving at a particular rarefied artistic state. The most interesting situations are when you've told stories before and understand a little bit about the loss one feels when they come to their endings. The characters and events and world one is forced to say goodbye to and set on their own way over the sea of life. The reader or viewer might feel a short sense of loss. But it is never anything like the artist, creator of the story who needs to say so long to an entire world and time in his or

her life.

Was Diablo the author of his own script?

Or, was he an actor in someone else's script?

This seemed to be the final, most important, question at this particular time in life.

Perhaps it was the ultimate, final question?

Where was the presence of his spirit exploring this question? Was it running through the thick jungles outside the camp of the rebels that is perched on the top of a rocky summit overlooking the great jungle sea that disappears over the horizon in the west, toward the capital city of San Cristobol.

He felt an arm on his shoulder and he looked up from his cot to see the face of the big military man again looking down at him.

"Cosmo wanted me to wake you up," he says. "Take you out to see what our troops are involved with everyday.

Diablo rubs his eyes and gets out of the cot. Thoughts race this way and that way through his mind. Like comets shooting through the night sky heading in straight lines at particular goals like celestial laser beams. He follows the big man outside into the grey color of the early morning day. He follows him up the hill to the large tent of Cosmo. She comes out and looks at Diablo.

"Welcome to the world of the Devil Vine," she says.

The big man walks toward a jeep parked next to Cosmo's tent and they all get into the jeep and head out of the rebel camp and down a narrow road off the top of the rocky hill and sink into the thick jungle below.

There is little of the morning sunlight in the jungle. It does not fall unobstructed like it does in the rebel camp on the top of the hill. Here, it still seems to be night as they pass under tall jungle trees and green life growing everywhere, exploding outward in bursts of life like he has never seen before. Vines strung all over the jungle like the wires in some circus operation.

They drive on the narrow scratch of a road through the heavy, thick jungle for maybe ten or fifteen minutes until they come to a flurry of activity. They stop the jeep and watch the activity from a distance, hidden by the thick foliage of the jungle.

"Our troops are about to attack," Cosmo says. "They will prevent the farmers from harvesting the Devil Vine from this crop in the jungle."

They watch the farmers maybe a hundred yards away as they hack vines from the trees in the jungle. Then, men in military uniforms appear all over the jungle and move toward the farmers.

They take the knives from the farmers they used to cut the vines. The farmers run away and disappear into the depths of the jungle. The troops of Cosmo let them go. Not trying to kill any of them or stop them.

The jeep moves forward when the farmers have all disappeared and Cosmo's troops collect the vines laying spread out on the jungle floor. Diablo finds himself between Cosmo and the large military man, pulling vines off the jungle floor, placing them in a cart. Work continues like this for perhaps ten minutes and then there is some type of ceremony. Strips of the vines are lifted skyward and a number of words said as this is done. Diablo is sure it is some type of religions ceremony.

"We must ask to be forgiven for taking the lives of these plant spirits," Cosmo says to Diablo. "They are the sacred protectors of the spirit of the jungle. But they are being butchered and ground into powder ready to travel thousand of miles away. The plants understand this. They try to tell us in the only way they can that this is wrong. That this is their home and that they must not leave their home."

Cosmo stands next to Diablo and watches her troops place the vines into the cart.

"In the 16th century," she says, "Christian missionaries from Spain and Portugal first encountered indigenous people of

Coastaguava using the Devil Vine. Their earliest reports described it as the work of the devil. A brew made was analogous to the Devil Vine and was heavily connected to early Judaism. Many feel the effects of the brew were responsible for some of the most significant events of Moses' life including his vision of the burning bush."

"The devil vine has a long history," Diablo says.

"The drug was employed by divinatory purposes originally," Cosmo says. "People who have consumed the vine report having spiritual revelations regarding their purpose on earth and the true nature of the universe as well as deep insight into how to be the best person they possibly can be. Many indigenous Coastaguavan people say they received the instructions directly from plants and plant spirits."

As Diablo listens to Cosmo there seems to be some grand current within his life that moves in some way from forces it is impossible to know about.

"This is viewed by many as a Spiritual awakening," Cosmo says. "And, what is often described as a rebirth. Individuals feel they gain access to higher Spiritual dimensions and make contact with various Spiritual or extra-dimensional beings who act as guides or healers. Some shamans and experienced users of the vine advise against consuming it when not in the presence of

one or several well-trained shamans."

Soon, the jeep was heading back from the vine harvest area.

"We have prevented the sale of a few hundred pounds of the vine with this operation alone," Cosmo says. "There are many of these operations each day across Coastaguava. They are beginning to have an effect. The president needs to bring in people like you Senor Cortez."

"Important actors like me," says Diablo Cortez. "To clean up the mess when things really go wrong."

The jeep does turns at one point in the jungle road and heads down a different road than the one they have come on.

"I am dropping you off in the village Mendez found you at Senor Cortez," Cosmo says. "It is too dangerous for us to take you back into the city. You are free to return to your work with the president."

Cosmo pulls a small electric box from her camo jacket and hands it to Diablo.

"A walkie talkie," she says. "The only way we can communicate without the government's cell phones," she says. "Press this button if you chose to return to our camp and join us."

The jeep is soon stopped in front of the bar that has a vague, familiar look to Diablo as the bar he was at with the

woman two days ago. Then, the jeep is gone and he is alone, in front of the small bar. The only real choice at the moment is to go inside and order a rum and talk someone into taking him back to San Cristobol.

Chapter 16

Diablo buys a bottle of rum for one of the guys in the bar in exchange for a ride back to his hotel in San Cristobol. When he arrives at the hotel, he goes immediately to his room and takes a shower and puts on some clean clothes. He starts to shave but decides his developing beard looks good on him. Then he goes down to Bernie's room and knocks on his door but there is no answer. He goes downstairs and looks in the bar but doesn't see Bernie there either. He asks the man behind the front desk at the hotel.

"Welcome back Senor Cortez," the man says.

"Has my son Juan Cortez checked into the hotel?" he asks the man at the hotel desk.

"There is no Juan Cortez at the hotel," the man says.

Diablo thinks this is strange. Juan should be here by now.

"Do you know where Mr. Greenberg is?" he asked the man at the hotel desk.

"Senor Greenberg told me to tell you that he has gone to see the downtown marketplace."

"I need to get a driver to take me there," Diablo says.

"There is no need for a driver Senor Cortez," the man says. "It is only a few blocks from the hotel."

The man gives Diablo directions and he begins walking the few blocks to the marketplace.

It is another one of those days that go back-and-forth between clouds and sun in Coastaguava. Heavy, grey clouds come over the city quickly and then give way to patches of blue and the hot tropical sun. The city goes from shadow to sunlight. A brief thought comes to Diablo that the weather is a type of metaphor for the state of things in his life at the moment.

It is a Sunday afternoon and many people are on the streets going in and out of small shops. They wear blank expressions on their faces making it difficult to read them. Diablo remembers what Cosmo told him about the drugging of the population with the Devil Vine to keep them working in the factories. He has not been out much in the city before. But now, walking down the streets of San Cristobol, he can see the truth in what Cosmo has told him.

The downtown street of San Cristobol is blocked off for the weekly marketplace. Colored tents with various exotic foods and

meats line the street. The smell of cooking food fills the air humid air. People are engaged in bargaining everywhere he looks. He has found that prices are always negotiable in Coastaguava.

Diablo is hungry and buys half a chicken and a plate of beans from one of the tents. He purchases a bottle of local beer from another and walks around the marketplace looking for Bernie.

After a few minutes, he sees Bernie walking around with Jose Grande, the director of the television commercials he has been making.

"You're back," Bernie says hugging him. "I trust you enjoyed exploring the country in the past few days."

"Where is Juan?" Diablo asks.

"Heard nothing from him," Bernie says. "Of course I didn't expect to hear anything when he can't call us down here. I think he got tied up with work in LA at the dealership. You know how it is when they start making commercials and all."

"I need to talk to you right now," Diablo says.

"That's fine," Bernie says. "But I have some interesting news to tell you. Jose tells me that the president is thinking about creating a new *Trouble in the Tropics* series. They're looking for some young actor in the country to play your part. They want me to help write and produce it. They want to write a

part for you into the series. You play the part of the father of Diablo Cortez."

"The president is excited about the project," Jose tells Diablo. "It is only in the early planning stages but he thinks the country needs a new Diablo Cortez."

"That is interesting," Diablo says. "We need to discuss this but I must talk to Mr. Greenberg right now about something very important."

Jose excuses himself and disappears into the marketplace crowds.

Bernie watches him go.

"Good kid," Bernie says. "Reminds me of myself when I was starting out."

Diablo pulls Bernie away from the marketplace and down a deserted little side-street in the downtown area of San Cristobol.

"What the hell's going on?" Bernie asks.

"I wasn't just wandering around the countryside for a few days," he says. "I was kidnapped by the rebels and taken to their camp."

"You have to be kidding," Bernie says.

"No, it's true," Diablo says. "I was given a powerful psychedelic called the Devil Vine. I've never been in the state

I was after this drug. It is amazing Bernie. In the rebel camp I met Cosmo Quinine, the leader of the rebels. She told me all about the president. He is a fraud. He uses the powder from the vine to control the people to produce his major products of cigars and rum. He has a plan to export a large quantity of the Devil Vine powder to another country. The vine is a sacred plant of this nation."

Bernie looks at Diablo and studies him for a few seconds.

"Jesus," Bernie says. "I don't think you were just on a two day binge but are telling the truth."

"Why wouldn't I be telling the truth," Diablo says.

"There's no reason to lie to you about this."

"An incredible story," Bernie says. "What's your plan?"

"I don't know right now," Diablo says. "Things are still spinning around in my head. I need to think things out. I'm sure not going to help the president make a new television series. Have you talked to the president?"

"Only through Jose," Bernie says. "The commercials you made are actually having a negative effect on his administration by showing it to be old and out of touch with the people. It is not the current face of Diablo Cortez that excites the nation but rather the face of the young Diablo Cortez, the face from forty years ago, the face that looks out from television screens each

day at the people of Coastaguava. The image of an old face has little power over the people. Jose tells me the president is in a state of panic over what to do."

The two men walk back to the hotel and find their usual table in the bar and order a bottle of rum.

"Not the usual stuff," Bernie tells the bartender. "A bottle of Coastaguavan Especial."

The television is on above the bar like it always is. The president is making an announcement. He is looking for a young actor to star in a new television series based on the old Trouble in the Tropics series. There is a national talent search for this actor.

After the presidential announcement, there is a re-run of an old Bonanza. The commercials of Diablo Cortez have been deleted from running like they did through the television program.

Chapter 17

Juan Cortez's trip to Coastaguava is an eventful one. His flight is cancelled due to a bomb threat and rescheduled for the following day. Since there is no cell phone use in Coastaguava, there is no way he can contact his father and tell him of his new arrival date.

When Juan arrives in Ecuador, he has missed his connecting flight to Coastaguava and spends the night in the Quito airport. He again tries to call his father but the message "No Service" again appears on the cell phone.

The flight leaves in the early afternoon of the next day and he finally arrives in San Cristobol late in the afternoon, two days after his planned arrival date. Outside the circular window of the airplane, he looks at the dreary little airport. It is almost deserted except for the activity of loading a cargo plane from a truck with a picture of a rum bottle on it. He follows a few men off the plane who appear to be businessmen and

then is hit by the wet, stickiness of the tropical summer day. The sky is overcast but the sun appears now-and-then through heavy clouds.

The commotion begins when he walks into the airport building and an airport employee spots him. The employee quickly tells another employee and word quickly spreads.

"Diablo Cortez has arrived in the nation!" becomes a spreading cry around the airport.

Juan begins to notice the growing excitement and looks around expecting some famous person has arrived. But all attention is directed at him.

"Diablo Cortez has arrived!" people shout.

Juan tries to correct them but no one is listening in the growing excitement. There are not many people at the airport but everyone has gathered in a crowd around Juan chanting "Diablo Cortez! Diablo Cortez!"

Someone contacts the president and soon an official car arrives and takes Juan directly to the presidential palace. President Columbo is standing outside the front door of the palace when Juan arrives and welcomes him with a big smile and open arms.

Within minutes the two are sitting on the palace veranda drinking rum and smoking cigars.

"I have much planned for you," the president says. "We will put you in commercials we are making in place of your father."

"This will not sit too well with him," Juan says.

"I will talk to him about it when he gets back," the president says. "I have given him a few days off to explore the country."

Juan thinks that his father has simply gone on another one of his drinking binges that have been frequent since his mother died last year.

The night moves in over the city and more rum is consumed. The president tells Juan about the rebels who are stopping the production of a medicine made from a vine used for the health of his people. He doesn't tell about the real truth of the vine and what he is planning on doing with it.

And Juan tells the president about his job at the Cal Humphrey auto dealership in Los Angeles making commercials.

"Ah," says the president. "You are perfect for the job."

Chapter 18

Diablo and Bernie order a sandwich from the hotel bar and Bernie goes up to bed around ten. Thoughts rage through Diablo's mind like storm clouds. The natural thing would be to hang around in San Cristobol for the final week on the contract and then fly back to Los Angeles and take up making commercials again for Male Enhancement Formula and marching in parades and appearing at openings of various places. But nothing was natural since the time he took some of the juice from the Magic Vine and spent time in the rebel camp with Cosmo Quinine.

Around midnight, he extracts the small walkie-talkie Cosmo gave him and studies it for a few moments. Pushing the button on it will call Cosmo and she will send one of her soldiers to pick him up and take him to their camp. He will be back with the rebel forces. He will have made a decision. A big decision in his life. He will fight against the president. There is the possibility that he will even become a real hero for the first time in his life. There is the possibility he will be killed.

He has another rum and then goes up to his room and puts a few items in a small bag and then pushes the button on the walkie-talkie. He hears the voice of Mendez on the device.

"I've made a decision to return to the camp," Diablo says. "I need someone to take me to the camp."

A few hours later, a van pulls up in front of the Hotel de Revolucion. A man with dark sunglasses is the driver and another man sits in the passenger seat. The buzzer on Diablo's walkie-talkie sounds and he leaves his room and goes down to the van and gets in the back seat and they drive off.

They race down the streets of the capital city at one o'clock in the morning until the buildings are gone and there are only fields thick with sugar cane and tobacco crops. The fields go on for a few miles on both sides of the narrow asphalt road until they are gone and the road enters the thick jungle of Coastaguava.

It is now slow going. The road is a dirt road and hardened ruts are baked into it from the rains and then the hot weather. In some places, trees have fallen across the road and they have to stop and cut them and pull them back with chainsaws.

They pass through some small villages that are no more than a few shacks constructed out of salvaged materials ready to fall down with the next big rain.

After a while, the road begins its winding ascent up in the foothills of the mountains. It goes higher and higher and the jungle becomes less dense until they drive between large rocks. Diablo can get a glimpse of the jungle they have passed through below like a great green ocean extending to the horizon. Somewhere over the horizon is San Cristobol and the forces of President Columbo.

What would his son Juan think of all of this? He wishes Juan had been able to come down here and see what is happening first hand. It is something like a dream. It will be impossible to explain all of this to Juan. Impossible even if he somehow makes it out of here and back to LA.

But right now, his return to LA seems rather doubtful. He is off to perhaps become some type of hero. Becoming a hero in real life is much more dangerous than being a movie hero.

The sun is just beginning to rise in the eastern pink sky when they arrive at the rebel camp. Cosmo Quinine comes out of her tent and walks to the van to meet Diablo.

"You have decided to come back," she says.

"There's no place for me in San Cristobol," Diablo says.

He was going to add there was also no place for him in Los Angeles. But he did not say this. Cosmo Quinine would not understand.

"You have made a big decision Senor Cortez," she says as they walk through the camp. "The president's soldiers will be brutal if they find us. He has spies all over the country. One of them is bound to identify where our camp is located."

"It's time to make big decisions," Diablo says.

"Our work stopping the harvesting of the vine has proven to be effective," Cosmo tells him. "You have probably heard that the commercials you made have not been effective. There are more and more people coming around to our side, putting away the knives they cut the vines with."

"Your efforts are paying off," Diablo says.

"There is a good chance the president will not be able to fill the request he has for export of the powder. If he does not fill the request we have more time to work to stop the harvest of the vine, to convince the people the vine is not meant for export. The revolution could see success."

"That is good news," Diablo says. "Success will be good for the people of Coastaguava. As you have said, the vine belongs to the people, to the land. It is not meant to be sent off into the world."

They walk through the camp. Small fires dot the camp with soldiers of Cosmo's forces gathered around them. Morning is coming and there are discussion of the plans for the new day.

She finds a rocks and sits down and motions Diablo to sit down.

"The next few days will be difficult," Cosmo says. "We are going after one of the largest growths of vines in the jungle just outside the city of Punto Verde. It is the second largest city in Coastaguava, the largest shipping center for the vine into San Cristobol. The president is sure to have troops stationed in Punto Verde."

"I want to go with your troops," Diablo says.

"I will have Mendez see that you get weapons and equipment," she says. "You are a strange man Senor Cortez. I have never met a man like you. You arrive in our country to help the president and end up helping rebels against the president. You have acted at being a hero and now you chose not to act anymore."

"You are also strange woman," Diablo says. "But I have met a woman like you before."

"Tell me about her," Cosmo says.

"It was a long time ago," Diablo says. "Over forty years ago when I was making my television show. She was an actress and she played a part in my television show. She was a strong woman, had her own mind on everything. Always going against the grain. Always getting into trouble with the bad guys in the television series and I was always rescuing her from trouble."

"Did she help you also?" Cosmo asks.

"She rescued me," Diablo says.

"Rescued you from what Senor Cortez?" Cosmo asks.

"From a life of acting," Diablo says. "Acting through relationships that never went anywhere. Through four marriages."

"What happened to her?" Cosmo asks.

"She married me when my television program was over," Diablo says. "We bought a home in Los Angeles out by the ocean on a street with palm trees and the smell of honeysuckle in the air on summer nights. We traveled all over the world for years. I had acting parts here and there but the years of being a movie hero faded into the past. We had a son named Juan. I wanted him to be an actor but she didn't want that life for her son."

"Is she in Los Angeles?" Cosmo asks.

"She died a year ago," Diablo says.

"I am sorry to hear that," Cosmo says.

"As I said," Diablo tells Cosmo. "It's time for me to make big decisions. Move on from living in the past."

Diablo lifts his wrist and shows Cosmo a gold bracelet.

"She gave me this bracelet before she died," he says.

"Something to remember her by. But I really don't need anything to remember her by."

Mendez comes over to the fire the two are sitting by.

"We move out at seven tomorrow morning," he tells Cosmo.

"The workers will just be arriving to harvest the vines."

"The president's forces are all around Punto Verde," Cosmo says to Mendez.

"Yes," Mendez says. "We will meet resistance."

"Issue Senor Cortez a weapon and equipment," Cosmo says. "He has decided to join our forces."

"Welcome Senor Cortez," Mendez says. "I am glad you have decided to join our cause."

Mendez waves his hand and a soldier appears.

"See that Senor Cortez gets food and equipment and that he has a tent," Mendez says.

Diablo gets up to go with the soldier.

Cosmo watches Diablo go with the soldier.

"A strange man," she says to Mendez.

Chapter 19

The next morning, there is a knocking on the door of Bernie's hotel room. He opens it to find Juan Cortez standing at

the door.

"Jesus, I didn't think you were coming down here," Bernie says.

"I checked into the hotel last night," Juan says. "It was hell getting down here. My flight from LA was cancelled and I didn't fly out until the next day. Missed my connection in Ecuador and had to spend the night in the airport."

"We thought you couldn't get away," Bernie says. "With all the commercials you're doing for the dealership."

"Wouldn't miss coming down here for anything," Juan says. "Where's my dad?"

"He's not in his room?" Bernie says.

"No, I knocked on his door but no answer."

"Probably gone out for a morning walk," says Bernie.

"I need to talk to you Bernie," Juan says. "The strangest thing happened to me."

"Come on it and tell me about it," Bernie says. "I'll order up some coffee."

They sit out on the small porch of Bernie's room that looks east over the city to the thick jungles.

"When I arrived at the airport yesterday there is all this commotion. Everyone thinks I'm my father Diablo Cortez. The president sends a car for me and I spend a few hours with him

drinking rum and smoking cigars at his palace. He wants to put me into the commercials he is making instead of my father."

Bernie shakes his head. He understands what Juan is telling him.

"There has been a big misunderstanding with the president," Bernie says. "He had no idea your father's series was made forty years ago. He thought it was currently in production. Thought your father was young like the Diablo Cortez in the show. Thought he looks like you do right now. It was a huge disappointment for him when he saw your father get off the airplane. He thought he was bringing a young man down here but he finds out he brought an old man instead. That's why he was happy to see you. For all intensive purposes, you are Diablo Cortez. The famous actor who is god to the people in this country. The famous actor he needs right now to help him fight the rebels, to defeat the revolution down here."

"Revolution," Juan says. "What revolution?"

"Neither did your father," Bernie says. "He never mentioned it when he contacted us."

"When will he be back?" Juan asks.

"Probably soon," Bernie says. "I need to tell you something about what your father told me."

"It'll have to wait for later," Juan says. "The president

is sending a driver to pick me in five minutes. He wants to have me make some commercials."

"I'll tell you when you get back, Bernie says. "You're the man of the hour down here."

"When the hell can we fly back to LA?" Juan asks.

"A good question," Bernie says. "The answer is not exactly in our hands right now."

Chapter 20

A few hours later, Juan Cortez sits in a conference room at the government television company. The president is in the conference room and is excited and full of the energy of new ideas. He paces back-and-forth at the front of the long oblong table where everyone is gathered around listening to his ideas.

"The country needs a salesman more than an actor at this time," the president says to the group. "Juan Cortez is an actor but he is a better salesman than an actor. He will be doing commercials for the country to increase production of our magic powder. He will become the spokesman for Coastaguava. The country needs a spokesman."

The president outlines what he has in mind. Juan's commercials will run on television every half hour for the next week. Besides the commercials he will appear at various events around the city. A parade is planned. The spokesman for the nation will be a busy person in the next week.

After the meeting, the studio is alive with work and Juan

is busy studying and practicing scripts for the commercials that are being fine-tuned by writers working with the basic themes the president has come up with. They begin shooting the commercials in the afternoon and work late into the night.

* * *

The commercials with Juan Cortez start running on the government's cable network the next day. They are mixed into the daily programming schedule and appear during commercials breaks for re-runs of old television shows like *Bonanza*, *Gilligan's Island*, *The Rifleman* and of course *Trouble in the Tropics*.

Early word the next day is that they are extremely effective. The people are used to seeing Diablo Cortez in his television series *acting* like he supports the president. But now, here he is in a commercial, *telling* people he supports the president. Telling them why it is important the harvest of the Devil Vine be increased to the maximum amount possible, that they work harder than ever at harvesting the vine.

Juan Cortez walks through the film set. It is the familiar set of the old *Trouble in the Tropics* television series. He holds a box in his hand and looks at the camera with a serious look on his face.

"The future economy of your nation is tied to the export of the powder from the vines," Juan says in the commercial. "But the production of the powder is threatened by the rebel forces of Cosmo Quinine who wants to stop production. It is important we battle her rebel forces and do not let her stop the harvest and production and export of our magical powder to the rest of the world."

The next day, Juan drives through the streets of San Cristobol in the white convertible Rolls Royce the president uses for special occasions. Crowds line the streets of the capital city and flowers are tossed at Juan who waves back at the crowds. It is impossible for him to gain a foothold on reality in the confluence of events.

After the car tour around San Cristobol, there is a large luncheon where the president speaks to key people of the nation about the importance of producing as much of the Devil Vine as possible. He calls it our "special gift" to the world. The rest of the day is filled with visits of Juan to various businesses and hospitals in the city. He is quickly cementing his reputation in the nation.

The next day, there are reports the production of the magic powder is increasing due to Juan's commercials. More of the farmers are taking chances harvesting the vine and taking it

into the factory in San Cristobol where the white powder is produced for export. The rebel forces are having less effect on stopping the production of the powder. The success they have had in stopping the production of the vine is quickly turning into failure.

Chapter 21

The next day, in the jungles around the town of Punto Verde, Cosmo Quinine's rebels meet with great resistance from the farmers and president's soldiers. The fighting continues throughout most of the day with Cosmo's rebel forces striking the farmers harvesting the vines and then retreating into the jungles. Diablo fights on the frontlines of the rebel forces, next to Mendez and Cosmo.

"I can't believe the resistance we are getting," Cosmo says to Mendez in late afternoon. "The farmers have a new determination in harvesting the vines. "It is difficult to know what has brought about this determination."

They continue to attack the farmers harvesting the vines until the light starts to fade and they are ready to return to their camp in the hills.

Before they leave, a soldier comes runs up to Cosmo and says that there is something she has to see. Cosmo, Mendez and

Diablo follow the soldier to a small house on the edge of the thick tropical forest.

"One of our so-called safe houses," Cosmo says to Diablo. "They are all over the country. People who support our rebel forces. They open up their homes to us."

They go into the one-room little shack of a home. The farmer bows to Cosmo as she enters. The television is on in the home. Almost everyone has a television in Coastaguava, everyone wired into the government cable system.

Diablo looks at the television in disbelief.

There is his son Juan on the television giving a commercial about harvesting the vines.

"I had no idea Juan was even down here," Diablo says. "I can't believe what I'm seeing."

"He makes things difficult for us," Cosmo says. "It is hard to believe you had no idea your son had joined the regime."

"I had no idea," Diablo says. "I thought he decided not to come down here."

"It is surprising you know nothing of your son's activities," Cosmo says.

The farmer who owns the home tells Cosmo that he has heard that Juan Cortez is appearing with the president all over San Cristobol and that people all around the capital are siding with

the president against the rebels. Things are turning fast the farmer tells Cosmo. People are motivated more than ever to harvest the vine and send it to San Cristobol for export. A new attitude is developing in the people and the farmers of the nation.

That night back at the rebel camp, there is a meeting in Cosmo Quinine's tent under the light of a few lanterns. The large map of San Cristobol is spread out on the table and gathered around the table are Mendez, Cosmo's top assistants and Diablo.

"We've held off attacking the factory and warehouse of the vine in San Cristobol," she says. "Going into the capital city is obviously a dangerous operation. The president has troops everywhere. But now, with the increased production of the vine, with the new determination of the farmers to harvest it, we have no choice but to attack the factory and the warehouse."

"Our sources inform us that the president is close to reaching the amount required for export," Mendez says. "A shipment will be made in the next few days. When this happens, the president will have millions of dollars to buy new weapons and recruits to fight us."

"We need to plan our attack for tomorrow," Cosmo says. "We cannot wait any longer. The cargo plane will carry the powder away in a few days."

Cosmo looks at the large map on the table.

"There are two targets for us," she says. "The factory itself where the powder is made and the warehouse where the manufactured powder is stored. The factory is heavily guarded and will be the most difficult to destroy. The warehouse is a few blocks from the factory and is less guarded. It is in a non-descript secret location. The president does not think anyone knows about this location. He does not know that one of the guards at the location is one of our people."

After the meeting in the tent, the camp is alive most of the night with the activity of getting ready for the attack in San Cristobol.

Mendez spends time with Diablo showing him how to work the AR-15 he has been given. Diablo is nervous but there is a feeling of exhilaration in him at the same time. The only feeling similar that he could remember was that feeling right before the shooting of a film, that first day on the set when anything could happen.

Chapter 22

The factory in San Cristobol is a modern facility of brick and stone the president has spent millions on. It is full of the latest technology and ready to handle far more of the Devil Vine once production is ramped up and the farmers of the country are more committed to harvesting it. When the rebel forces are silenced. It is in a new section of the city and is almost a block long. There is a large fence around it that guards with machine guns patrol at all hours of the day and night. The president has spent too much money on the factory and it is too important to his plans for the nation not to make sure it is protected from the rebel forces.

After the vines are processed into powder they are moved to the warehouse a few blocks away in an older section of the city. The warehouse is a non-descript building that was a munitions bunker when Coastaguava was engaged in various South American battles. It is not as well guarded as the factory and few know it is where the powder from the vine is stored.

In the late morning, a string of windowless vans approach San Cristobol from the eastern jungles. It is a Sunday and most people of the Catholic country are still in church so that the streets are empty of people. Mendez drives the lead van of the group. Cosmo sits in the passenger seat of the van dressed in her usual camo gear holding an AR-15 in her arm. Diablo is in the seat behind the front seat and also holds an AR-15. Behind him is a rebel soldier named Nunez who sits in the back of the van behind a sub-machine gun facing out the rear of the van, ready to spew its lead fire when the doors of the van are flung open.

Behind them are five other vans full of rebels and guns and explosives. They proceed down empty streets as church bells ring around the city. They then split up and go different ways. Mendez's van and two behind it head toward the warehouse. The other vans go toward the factory.

Church services in San Cristobol are soon interrupted by the sound of gunfire and explosions. The soldiers notify President Columbo at the palace that the factory and warehouse are under attack. The battle lasts half an hour. When it is over, the vans that attack the factory are all in flames on the street in front of the factory. Bodies of dead rebels lay sprawled around the vans. A number of the president's soldiers

lay dead behind the big fence around the factory. The factory has proven to be impenetrable.

But a few blocks from the factory, the warehouse is consumed in a great fire with flames shooting high into the hot tropical day. When they leave the van, Mendez is separated from Cosmo and Diablo. Their van is destroyed by gunfire but Cosmo and Diablo are able to take a jeep from two dead government soldiers shot during the raid.

Diablo drives the jeep and Cosmo sits in the passenger seat with the AR-15 in her arms. Before they leave, they see Mendez and a few rebels have commandeered another jeep and pull up next to it.

"We are going to the safe house outside of town," Mendez says. "You head out to the old resort on the coast. I'll get in touch with you in a few hours. We cannot return to the camp. They know all about the camp."

The two jeeps head off in different directions.

Cosmo directs Diablo through the streets of San Cristobol and then into the fields west of the city until they are again in the thick jungle of the country and winding into the hills of the coastal range of mountains.

Diablo and Cosmo race up the narrow, winding dirt road into the hills of the coastal mountains. A few hundred yards behind

them is a jeep with government soldiers in it. Gunfire is coming from the government jeep and shatters windows of the jeep. Cosmo is returning fire with the AR-15.

"I know this road well," Cosmo yells at Diablo. "There used to be a bridge in half a mile over a gorge. But the bridge is no longer there."

"How wide is the gorge?" Diablo asks.

"Too wide to jump over in the jeep," says Cosmo. "Maybe fifty feet."

Diablo pushes the accelerator down on the jeep and it speeds up going faster up the winding road through the jungle.

"Hold on," he says. "This reminds me of a scene from one of my films."

The road ends a hundred yards away and then starts again. Diablo pushes the pedal down to the floor on the jeep. They approach the gorge at maybe sixty miles an hour. The jeep takes off and flies through air. The other side looks impossible to reach. The front wheels hit the dirt of the other side and the jeep begins to fall back into the gorge but Diablo is somehow able to pull it up and back on the road. They race forward through the jungle.

Cosmo looks back to see the government jeep flying over the gorge and hitting the side of the road and missing it and

falling into the gorge. They can hear an explosion behind them in the gorge.

Then, they continue through the jungle. There are no more explosions and gunfire does not shatter the windows of the jeep. In a few moments, the jeep stops on top of the hills overlooking an ocean. Below on the beach is what looks like a resort.

"The old resort that was never completed," Cosmo says. "The failed attempt at a tourist trade in the country. We can hide there for a while until the president's troops stop chasing us. There is the home of another person who is sympathetic to the revolution near the resort. He has a television so we can learn what has happened in San Cristobol."

The jeep winds down the road to the beach and the old resort.

Chapter 23

The success of Juan Diablo in selling the harvest of the vine to the farmers of the nation has led the president to invite Juan to the palace on Sunday morning for breakfast to meet his business partner, the enigmatic Mr. Johnson. The three sit at a breakfast table on the veranda of the palace and discuss long term plans to promote production of the devil vine in the country. A series of commercials featuring Juan are planned. After that, there are plans for a new television series featuring Juan Cortez playing his father Diablo Cortez.

"The first shipment of the powder is ready for export," the president tells Juan. "Thanks to your efforts, enough powder has been produced to fill our obligations with Mr. Johnson."

"Where is the powder being sent?" Juan asks.

The president shakes his head.

"Some things for now must remain a secret," he says.

In late morning, explosions and gunfire interrupt their breakfast. The president's cell phone comes alive with calls and

armed guards arrive and stand guard around the veranda.

"We are under attack by the rebel forces," he says.

The three men stand on the veranda and watch smoke rising from the warehouse fire a mile away. Sirens sound through the city as fire-trucks and ambulances rush down the streets.

"So the factory was not damaged?" asks Mr. Johnson.

"No, it was not damaged," the president says.

"It is a good thing you decided to move the powder from the warehouse," Mr. Johnson says.

"Yes, a good thing," says the president. "One can never be too careful. Especially in these final days before the shipment."

"You are sure the powder is safe where it is now?" Mr. Johnson asks.

"No one will ever think to look in the old rum warehouse," the president says. "And, it is close to the airport for the Friday shipment. We'll transfer it to the airport on Friday morning."

An assistant to the president comes onto the veranda and whispers something to the president.

"I must excuse myself to examine the damage to the buildings," the president says."

Juan is driven back to the hotel by two armed-soldiers.

Bernie is in the bar of the hotel watching the president address to the nation in front of the smoldering remains of the warehouse.

"This morning while most of our citizens were in church, the capital came under attack by the rebel forces of Cosmo Quinine. Their target was the factory where our sacred Devil Vine is made into powder and the warehouse where the powder is stored for national use. I am happy to report that the rebel forces were not successful in destroying the factory. However, they were able to destroy the warehouse where the powder is stored."

"That is not true," Juan said as he hears this.

The president then holds up a gold bracelet and the camera zooms in on it.

"We did discover this gold bracelet in front of the warehouse. It has the name Diablo Cortez on it. I am sorry to inform the people of the nation that one of our great heroes has joined the revolutionary forces. There is a reward of a hundred thousand dollars for information leading to his capture. We'll have updates when they become available."

A notice comes on the television screen.

"We return to our regular programming."

It is an episode of *The Rifleman*.

"Jesus Bernie," Juan says. "My father is one of the rebels."

"I was going to tell you what he told me the other day in the hotel room," Bernie says. "But you had your appointment with the president. Your father was given some powder from the vine and then kidnapped by the rebels and taken to their camp. He met their leader Cosmo Quinine. The president is not who he appears to be. He is planning on shipping the powder out of the country for millions of dollars."

"He told me it was used for medical purposes for the people of the nation."

"He lied to you," Bernie says. "He uses the powder to get cheap work out of the people. Nothing else."

"My father made a courageous decision to join the rebels," Juan says.

"Yes, he did," Bernie says.

The two men sit at the table of the bar in the hotel nursing their rum drinks. Sirens ring in the streets around the hotel. No one is sure if there will be more rebel attacks.

Suddenly, men in military uniforms rush into the bar and grab Juan.

"You need to come with us," one of them says. "Your life is in danger. We will not harm you."

Juan does not have much choice. The men are large and they mean business. They put him into a van in front of the hotel and the van speeds off down the street.

"We are with Cosmo Quinine's forces," one of the men says to Juan. "We are taking you to Captain Mendez."

Chapter 24

Members of the revolution in Coastaguava are not only the soldiers of Cosmo Quinine who fight the battles but also the civilians who support the revolution by offering "safe" houses to hide the revolutionists from government troops. The safe houses are all over the country. In the hills of the Eastern mountains. Near the towns and villages of the interior. By the villages along the coast.

One of these "safe" houses is on the outskirts of San Cristobol at the edge of the jungle surrounding the city. A farmer who runs a tobacco farm and is sympathetic to the goals of Cosmo Quinine owns it. It is no more than a small box-shaped wooden shack with a bed, table, stove and television.

Captain Mendez sits on a wooden stool inside the home watching the latest news on the television. Around him, a few of his soldiers look out the windows watching for suspicious activity. The president is on television again assuring the nation the rebels who attacked the buildings will be pursued and

punished. He says there is reward money offered for the capture of any of the rebels. He reiterates a hundred thousand dollars is offered for the capture of Diablo Cortez and half-a-million dollars for the capture of Cosmo Quinine. He says there is a two-hundred thousand dollar reward for the capture of Captain Mendez.

"They are coming Captain," one of the soldiers at the window says.

Outside, there is a plumb of dust from a van racing down a small dirt road near the farmer's tobacco field toward the safe house. It stops in front of the home and the guards bring Juan Cortez out of the van and inside.

"Welcome Senor Cortez," Mendez said. "I am Captain Mendez. I have brought you here because your life is in danger with the president discovering your father has joined our rebel forces. We have learned of a plan to hold you hostage in exchange for your father turning himself in. It is a plan that has very bad consequences for you and your father. I cannot let this happen."

"Where is my father?" Juan asks. "Is he alright?"

"Your father escaped with Cosmo Quinine," Captain Mendez says. "He is safe. They are near the coast. Your father is a brave man."

"Can I see him?" Juan asks.

"When things calm down and we can move again," Mendez says. "Right now the government troops are stationed on all roads leading outside the capital. Traveling anywhere is too much of a risk."

"I need to tell you something important," Juan says to Captain Mendez. "I was a guest of the president this morning at the palace and heard something you need to know."

"What did you hear?" Mendez asks.

"The warehouse you destroyed did not have the Devil Vine powder in it," Juan says. "The powder was moved to another location before the attack. It was moved to an old rum warehouse near the airport. The president said there is a shipment planned for Friday. The powder will be transferred from the warehouse on Friday morning."

Captain Mendez motions to one of his soldiers and the soldier extracts a map from his pocket. The map is spread out on the table.

"I know of this warehouse," Mendez says pointing his finger at a box near the airport. "It is only a few miles from where we are right now."

Captain Mendez walks outside and extracts the walkie-talkie from his pocket and pushes a button on it.

"I have Juan Cortez at the safe house," he says. "He has

just given me some important information."

"Go ahead Captain," comes the voice of Cosmo Quinine over the walkie-talkie.

"The powder was moved to another location before our attack this morning," Mendez says. "It is stored in the old rum warehouse by the airport and being exported out of the country on Friday. It is being transferred from the warehouse to the airport on Friday morning. Juan Cortez heard this directly from the president when he was a guest of the president at the palace this morning."

"Can he be trusted?" Cosmo says. "After all he has been working for the president."

"My sources tell me he was lied to by the president," says Mendez. "Just like the president lied to his father. He had no idea of the president's real plans."

"So Friday," says Cosmo Quinine. "That gives us two days."

"I can organize an attack on the warehouse," Mendez says.

"Yes, do this," Cosmo says. "But I want to be part of it. I've come too far not to be present when we stop the vine powder from being exported."

"What do you suggest?" Mendez asks.

"We will wait a day over here near the coast in the old resort," Cosmo says. "There is a safe house nearby and we can

get food from the owner of the house. The government troops should be clear from the roads by tomorrow. It will be safer to travel. We'll come to your location on Thursday. We'll plan the attack of the warehouse on Thursday night before the powder is transferred to the airport Friday morning."

"Be safe," Mendez says.

"We are so close to one of our goals," Cosmo says. "Keeping the powder here in Coastaguava."

"Yes," Mendez says. "Very close."

"Juan Cortez has been very helpful," Cosmo says. "His father will be proud that he is helping our forces."

"It will be good when the two are united again," Mendez says.

Chapter 25

Five years ago, Coastaguava tried to establish a tourist trade and started construction of a resort on the northern coast of the country. Millions were put into the resort but the new regime of Santino Columbo put a hold on construction of the resort because it did not want tourists coming to Coastaguava. Tourists only brought news and views of the outside world to the country and this was a threat to the insular little world the president was creating in Coastaguava.

Cosmo and Diablo walk along the wide sandy beach in front of the half-completed resort as Cosmo relates this history of the resort to Diablo. She has left her AR-15 in the jeep but still carries a pistol in her holster.

"It makes sense," Diablo says. "I've never been to such an isolated place. And to think Columbo and the people still think I'm making my television show. The country is so out of touch with the rest of the world."

Cosmo laughs. It is the first time Diablo has heard her laugh. It is a wonderful laugh that comes as natural as the

quick breeze that now dances through the palm trees along the beach.

"It is funny," she says. "I have watched your old television program more than once. I can understand why Columbo likes it. You are quite a defender of the regime of the country on the program. Always fighting against the rebels in the jungles of the nation."

"I think that's why I left San Cristobol the other day and journeyed out to that little town in the jungle where your soldiers found me. I was tired of fighting against the rebels. I wanted to stop defending the regime. I wanted to see what was in the jungles surrounding the capital city of my television program. I was tired of living a safe life. Playing the same role I've played all my life."

"That's interesting," Cosmo says. "I thought you were just escaping things again with your all your drinking. I didn't know you were searching for something."

"I might have found what I was searching for," Diablo says. "After all these years."

The two walk along the beach without saying anything. The only sound is the sound of the waves hitting the shore. Behind them, the resort rises out of the beach like a great ocean liner under construction.

"I feel safe here," Cosmo says. "We have many supporters of the revolution in the hills to the east. They watch for government troops. They know we are here."

"It is good to feel safe," Diablo says.

"I feel safe with you," she says.

Diablo stops and takes Cosmo in his arms and kisses her.

That evening, one of the farmers brings food to the resort for the two of them and a bottle of rum. They spend the night together in the grand suite of the resort. It is one of the few completed rooms of the resort and has a wide patio that looks out over the beach and the Pacific.

They sit out on the patio of the room and watch the orange sun disappear into the ocean.

"I feel safe," Cosmo says to Diablo. "For the first time in many years."

"I do too," Diablo says. "It is a good feeling."

Chapter 26

Cosmo and Diablo leave the resort on Thursday morning and drive through the winding narrow roads in the jungles of the coastal range of mountains. Word comes from various voices over Cosmo's walkie-talkie that the roads are clear from government troops.

They arrive at the safe house in late afternoon and Diablo is united with his son Juan.

"I wasn't sure I would ever see you again," Juan tells his father.

"And I wasn't sure I would ever see you either," Diablo says. "I didn't think you were coming down here. Thought you got caught up in making commercials for the dealership."

"I wouldn't have missed coming down here for anything," Juan says. "My flight was delayed in LA and again in Ecuador. I arrived two days late."

"You look exactly like your father did in his movies forty years ago," Cosmo says to Juan. "I can see why the people of the

nation mistake you for your father."

Mendez spreads a map onto the table of the small home.

"The old rum warehouse is only two miles away," he says pointing to a square on the map. "We avoid the highway and take some back roads to it. My people tell me it is not heavily guarded. Maybe four guards posted at it. No more."

Right after dark a van proceeds down a dirt road on the edge of the farm and then across a dirt road on another farm. Mendez drives the van. Two soldiers are in it with Diablo and Cosmo. They park when the warehouse is in sight and slowly creep through tall grass towards it.

The old rum warehouse is a dirty brick building where rum was stored when rum production in the nation was just beginning over a hundred years ago. But rum production fast outgrew its storage area and it has been abandoned for a number of years. Weeds shoot up around it and bricks are crumbling on the outside of the building.

A few guards smoke cigarettes around the warehouse, talking and making small jokes. Mendez and the soldiers sneak around the side of the warehouse and jump the two guards from behind and knock them out without making any sound at all. Then they tie them up and put gags in their mouths and move towards the door of the warehouse and slowly push it open.

Inside it is dark, lit only by a few small hanging light bulbs. Two guards are playing cards and enjoying a bottle of rum. Mendez approaches them from the shadows and before they can draw their weapons both are on the floor facing up at the AR-15 of Mendez and two of his soldiers.

He searches around the small warehouse for the cases of the powder ready to be sent to the airport in the morning. He looks all through the warehouse but he cannot find the powder.

Mendez returns to the two guards held under gunpoint by his soldiers.

"Where is the powder?" he says.

"What powder Senor?" one of the guards says.

"The Devil Vine powder," Mendez says. "Where are you hiding the powder?"

"There is no powder here Senor," one of the guards says.

Mendez motions one of his guards to take the safety lock off his gun.

"We mean business," he says to the guard. "Your lives mean little to us."

The guard begins shaking with the gun pointed only a few inches from his face.

"I will give you one more chance to tell me where the powder is," Mendez says. "And when you are dead I will then ask

your partner about the powder."

"The powder is gone," the guard says.

"Gone?" Mendez says.

"On its way to the airport," the guard says. "Half an hour ago. It is being flown out tonight."

Mendez motions his soldiers to tie the two guards up and rushes out of the warehouse and towards the van where Diablo and Cosmo are waiting.

"It has been sent to the airport," Mendez yells as he jumps in and starts the van. "It is being shipped out tonight."

The van hurries towards the airport. It is not a long distance away. No more than a few miles.

They stop at an outlying fence around the airport and can see the cases of the powder being loaded onto a small cargo plane. Guards with machine guns surround the plane.

Mendez and a few of his soldiers begin cutting through the thick wire fence. It is slow going. In a few minutes, the cargo door of the plane is closed and the its propellers start up and it begins to taxi down the runway.

They continue to work at cutting the thick fence but the plane is now turning at the end of the runway and ready to take off, revving up its four engines.

Then, right as it begins to move down the runway for

takeoff, there is a great explosion that blows the cargo plane in all directions.

The group watches the explosion from behind the fence.

Suddenly, the flames shooting from the plane form the shape of a great face. Diablo rubs his eyes. Not believing what he is seeing. But it is a great face. An expression not of terror on the face but one of wisdom. The face of a beautiful woman Diablo thinks. Almost like the face of Cosmo Quinine.

Diablo looks to see that Cosmo and Mendez and the two soldiers have fallen to their knees and bow their heads and place their hands together in the gesture of a prayer.

"The Devil Vine has spoken," Cosmo says. "She will not let anyone take her from her home."

Chapter 27

President Columbo and Mr. Johnson watch the flames of the airport explosion from the veranda of the palace. Behind them a table is set with the finest of the palace gold, silver and crystal. A bottle of the rarest of Coastaguavan rum is on the table. The flames of large candles in tall gold and diamond holders dance in the warm night air.

It was to be a celebration of the export deal and they were to sit down at the elaborate dinner table when the plane with the powder was in the air and headed north. But the explosion has changed everything.

"It is impossible for the rebels to have known about the flight," Columbo says.

"There are traitors in your ranks," Mr. Johnson says.

"Impossible," says Columbo.

Mr. Johnson waves his hand in the direction of the flames at the airport a few miles from the palace.

"The impossible is in front of us right now Mr. President," he says.

"I will talk to my top advisors," Columbo says. "Review our strategy. This will never happen again. I can assure you of this."

"I'm afraid it is too late," Mr. Johnson says. "We cannot risk another failure like this."

"What are you saying?" Columbo asks.

"The revolutionary forces in your country are overpowering you Mr. President," he says. "It is only a matter of time when they will destroy the factory where the powder is made. Only a matter of time they will take over your palace."

"I will stop them," Columbo says. "Cosmo Quinine is not invincible."

"It appears she is right now," Mr. Johnson says.

"We must work out another deal," Columbo says.

He walks to the table and opens the bottle of rum and pours two glasses. He hands a glass to Mr. Johnson and raises his glass in a toast.

"To a future deal," he says.

He drinks the glass of rum and pours another and drinks this. Mr. Johnson just watches him and slowly puts his glass back on the table.

"This is not the time for toasts Mr. President," he says.
"Our relationship is finished."

Mr. Johnson begins to leave. Before he goes into the palace, he turns to Columbo.

"I suggest you leave the palace immediately," Mr. Johnson says. "My people are in the country right now and they are not as forgiving as I am. Your life is measured by hours at this time."

Columbo watches Mr. Johnson disappear into the palace and then watches his car drive down the winding road of the palace and through the gates and then disappear into the night. He grabs the bottle of rum and drinks directly from it. He is shaking. He looks at the flames still burning at the airport. Sirens are beginning to ring through the city. A number of his security guards explode out onto the veranda holding machine guns. They surround him in a protective circle.

His top assistant approaches him.

"What should we do Mr. President?" the assistant asks.

"Get my car ready," Columbo says. "Call the airport and have my private jet fueled and ready to take off in two hours."

"Where should I tell the pilot you're going?" the assistant asks.

"I will decide later," he says.

Chapter 28

The armored limo of Mr. Johnson speeds through the streets of San Cristobol heading for the airport and the private jet that waits to take him north. He takes his cell phone out and pushes a button on it. The phone buzzes on a speakerphone in the middle of a conference table.

A group of generals sit around the conference table. They are in an office at the Pentagon. It is three in the morning in Washington DC but there is much activity around the table.

"The whole operation is off," comes the voice of Mr. Johnson over the speakerphone. "The rebels blew up the plane with the powder on it."

There is a stunned silence around the table.

Another phone call needs to be made.

A button is pushed on a cell phone by one of the generals.

"It off," he says. "There will be no powder coming into the country."

General Long, the head of the military operations in the desert outside of Barstow, California sits at the desk in his tent and listens to the voice of the general in Washington. It is midnight in the desert but hundreds of military vehicles have their engines running ready to move west to Los Angeles.

The general calls his top assistants to the tent.

"It is all off," he says. "The operation is cancelled."

Then the general makes a phone call.

A military officer at the new desalination plant in Los Angeles answers the phone.

"The powder for the water will not be arriving," the general says.

A few hours later, when the new sun rises over the mountains east of Barstow, there is a long line of military vehicles on I-15 heading east away from Los Angeles.

The big news in Los Angeles that day is about the new desalination plant that has just gone online, pulling salt water from the Pacific and providing the drinking water for Los Angeles.

Chapter 29

Cosmo Quinine's group returns to the safe house after the airport explosion and gather around the little table inside the house.

"We fight to destroy the Devil Vine so it will not leave the country," she says. "But in the end, the vine has a mind of it's own and will not let itself be taken away from its home."

"It's hard to believe," says Diablo. "But we all saw the spirit of the vine in the flames."

Cosmo turns to Juan.

"The information you supplied was valuable," she tells Juan. "Not because it helped us destroy the vine for the vine destroyed itself. But rather valuable to show us you are on the side of the people of the nation and not the side of Santino Columbo."

"The side of my father," Juan says looking at Diablo. "For the first time in a long time."

The two hug each other.

"What happens now?" Diablo asks Cosmo. "The president will think the explosion was caused by your forces. Government forces will pursue us. They will be relentless in trying to find us."

"We must continue the battle," Cosmo says. "Continue our fight against the brutal harvesting of the vine. Continue our plans to destroy the factory in San Cristobol. Continue to fight until the vine is used for the good of the people again. Until it is considered sacred again and not another crop for export and profit."

"We cannot go home," Juan says.

"Not now," Cosmo says. "Perhaps some day but it is impossible for you to go home now."

The past few days have exhausted Cosmo, Diablo and Mendez and they fall asleep while soldiers stand guard outside the little safe house watching for signs of government forces in the light of the approaching day.

Suddenly, Diablo is awakened by Cosmo shaking him.

The television is on and Mendez is watching it. A reporter is excitedly saying President Columbo has left the country. There is no indication of where he has gone but word is he will not be returning. He has taken much gold stored in the palace with him. Speculation runs rampant in San Cristobol about the reasons for his quick exit from the nation. Many feel the

revolutionary forces of Cosmo Quinine forced his quick departure. There is word that he was attempting to export the Devil Vine from the country to make millions of dollars. People are coming forward with information about his plans, the deals he had secretly made to profit from the vine.

"The capital awaits the arrival of Cosmo Quinine," the television reporter says.

"Events of life are strange," Cosmo says. "Last night I was the nation's most wanted criminal. Today I am the nation's hero."

Chapter 30

A week later, Cosmo Quinine stands in a jeep driven by Mendez and waves to people of the city as the jeep heads down Avenue de la Revolucion, the main street of San Cristobol. Shouting crowds line the streets. Diablo and Juan Cortez sit in the back of the seat and wave at the crowds. Above, clouds are moving over the city from the western coastal hills.

The jeep proceeds to the palace. The gates are open and government troops salute Cosmo as the jeep goes through the gates and winds up the road to the palace on the top of the hill. Cosmo walks through the palace and out to the edge of the veranda and looks at thousands of people gathered on the sloping lawn below. Fireworks explode over the city and sirens and bells ring from all directions.

She steps up to a microphone behind a podium to address the crowds. Bernie directs the president's film crew that is filming the event. Diablo, Juan and Mendez stand behind her.

"I want to express the honor I feel for your belief in me by electing me the new president of Coastaguava," she says. "I will do my best to live up to your trust."

Cosmo turns to Diablo and Juan Cortez behind her.

"I'd like to introduce my new media advisor Diablo Cortez, someone who has been entertaining the nation for years."

There is a loud roar from the crowd as the crowd begins chanting "Diablo" over and over.

"And next to Diablo, I want to introduce the new head of tourism for nation. His son Juan Cortez."

The crowd cheers and begins chanting "Diablo and Juan" over and over again.

"And finally, I want to introduce the new Manager of our nation's television network," Cosmo says pointing to Bernie. "Mr. Bernard Greenberg, the producer of our nation's favorite television program *Trouble in the Tropics*."

"I am pleased to announce we will begin work to complete the great resort on the coast," Cosmo says. "Our nation will no longer be an isolated nation but will begin to welcome tourists again to our beautiful country. Tourism can provide a great source of wealth for our nation. And it can bring new ideas to our nation."

Cosmo is given a golden bag by an assistant and she carefully takes a piece of the dark green Devil Vine out of the bag and slowly holds it up in a type of offering to the darkening tropical sky.

"For almost a thousand years," Cosmo says, "the great vine has offered spiritual guidance to our nation for those who have respected its powers and treated it with the respect it deserves. There are those in our country who came to disrespect the vine and to brutally harvest it and change it into powder to send to far away nations for profit. President Columbo was one of these people. We need to return to using the vine with respect."

Right after Cosmo says this, there is the roar of thunder and a great flash of lightning over San Cristobol. The winds whip up the trees around the palace making them shake with fury. The crowds look up expecting the deluge of a huge tropical rainstorm.

But the dark clouds move east over the jungles and the skies turn a brilliant blue nailed overhead by the white spot of the afternoon sun.

Bernie stands next to the film crew's cinematographer watching the supernatural events in the sky over San Cristobol.

"Jesus, I hope you got all that," he says to him. "That type of special effects is something I could never get in Diablo's Hollywood films."