

THE MIDAS EFFECT

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Manuel Dorado, *The Midas Effect*

First edition in Spanish: November 2016

Second edition in Spanish: May 2017

Third edition in Spanish: April 2018

First edition in English: September 2019

ISBN: 9781691920303

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Illustration and cover design by Manuel Dorado, 2019

English translation by Laura Fitzgerald, 2019

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For Mario and Pablo

“Destiny has two ways of crushing us –
by refusing our wishes and by fulfilling them.”

–H. F. AMIEL,
From Amiel's Journal

“When the gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers.”

–O. WILDE,
From An Ideal Husband

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PART 1 – THE CAPTURE

CHAPTER 1

Nobody feels pain in the center of their head. That's what the neurologists had told Miguel several times. But there it was again, that buzzing, like a constant electric pinching somewhere inside his head. His father wasn't a neurologist, but he *was* one of the best doctors in Seville: Dr. Benoît Le Fablec, a Frenchman who was almost entirely Sevillian. There was always a queue outside his clinic. Miguel could remember very clearly the busy waiting room of his father's clinic, where as a boy, he would stick his face through ladies' legs "so I can see my dad." And every time, he left the clinic with the same diagnosis: "The center of your head doesn't feel pain, Miguel." For many years after, the best specialists in France and Spain – friends of his father – would say to him, with their white coats and upturned noses, "*Ce n'est pas possible,*" or, "Young man, this wouldn't be another excuse to skip class, now would it?"

But Miguel really was in pain. Now, after so many years, as he leaned on the bar in the university café, he thought his head was in more pain than it had ever been before. He imagined it must have been because of the preparations for his trip – saying goodbye, all of that – or perhaps it was because he hadn't eaten breakfast.

Miguel ordered a coffee. The students had packed out the engineering school's canteen. *My students always talk too much*, he thought. But the ruckus didn't seem to aggravate his headache. Deep down, he had to admit he liked his unique, impossible headache, and the noise of the canteen.

"Your coffee," said the waiter, placing a cup in front of Miguel. "With warm milk, just like always. I heard you're leaving us."

"The United States. I'm going to try it out there for a few years. Here, for the coffee."

"They really have it down over there, in America. You know, the money. If they don't pay well here, then you've got to go somewhere else. It's the brain drain."

My brain isn't going to do me much good if it continues hurting this much, Miguel told himself as the waiter turned around to the cash register. Miguel stood there watching him. It wasn't worth the effort to try and convince him he wasn't going to earn much more in California than in his current position at the University of Granada. Miguel was leaving because he wanted to go back to aerospace research, return to his specialty. Well, that, and to live somewhere new. Different streets, different voices. It would be a little adventure in his routine-heavy life as a university professor – an adventure he would have embarked on many years before had it not been for Ana. He took a sip, the steam from the coffee entering his nostrils before fading away into his headache.

It was then that he saw her enter the cafeteria. Ana.

Miguel swallowed. Coughing, he turned around to set the cup down, and looked at her again. How on earth...? But it really was her. The pain pinched his head again. Miguel let his eyelids fall shut to try and mitigate the pain, but it remained.

No one gets this kind of headache, and this kind of thing doesn't happen to anyone, he told himself.

Ana was dressed exactly the way he remembered. Living with her for three years gave him an introduction to her entire wardrobe, he thought. But she was exactly the way he had imagined, down

to the last detail. Her tight white jeans matched her white sweater, designer, also tight over a pink shirt. Her straight black hair fell loose, just the way he liked. Even underneath her expensive makeup, he could see her beautiful, impeccable skin, like glossy paper. It seemed Ana had dressed herself up in a way she knew he'd like. It was an image of her he had imagined and re-imagined many times since she left him a little over a month ago – Ana begging him to take her back, and Miguel rejecting her in an act of public triumph.

Ana spotted him and walked straight toward him, crossing the cafeteria at a diagonal. She walked with a confident gait, as though her body had made its decision to move and would overcome anything in her way. She smiled.

There's nothing to smile about, Miguel thought, picking up his cup again.

The scent of Chanel announced Ana's arrival to the bar. She smiled wider as she came to a stop in front of him and spoke. "Your second coffee of the morning? Third? We really don't change, do we?"

"I was just leaving."

"You look good..."

"I'm in a hurry."

Ana's smile disappeared like a puff of smoke. "I'll join you," she said. "I want to talk to you." Her voice was almost inaudible.

Miguel thought that if his fantasy was to come true, they would have to talk then and there, surrounded by dishevelled, noisy college students.

"I'm in a hurry," he repeated.

Ana pressed her lips together. She looked back towards the door, as if she were thinking of leaving, before exhaling deeply. Miguel watched her chest move. Her white sweater and pink shirt did not show much, but he could just make out the gap between her breasts as well as a subtle hint of their roundness.

Yes, just the way I like, Miguel thought.

Ana turned to him once more and lowered her head. "Don't go to America," she whispered. "Stay." She swallowed. "I want to get back together. I... I love you."

Miguel felt another pinch in the center of his brain. *Great. Here come the waterworks.* "No," he said.

Ana's expensive make-up began to run as tears left black, watery tracks on her cheeks. She looked exactly the way she did in his fantasies – tears staining her face like watered-down ink. Miguel reminded himself that it wasn't right to relish seeing those black tearstains, but he felt so good watching his dream become reality that he couldn't help himself.

"But I..." Ana trailed off, lifting her head and looking into Miguel's eyes.

Some of the students were staring at her. Some frowned while others smiled, and some even nudged their friends who hadn't yet noticed. Ana must have felt their eyes on her, Miguel supposed, as she hung her head. She patted her face with a handkerchief, which immediately became smudged. Dressed all in white and pink, immaculate, Ana fidgeted slightly with the blackened handkerchief, her face still damp. The students murmured among themselves, entertained. Perhaps this was too public. Miguel knew it would be wrong to do it then and there – too humiliating – but that was how he had fantasized about it. He could still feel a residual triumph. The ache in his head was constant now, a soft vibration inside his skull, so pleasant, so sweet. He suddenly remembered how he had wanted his final gesture to be: symbolic and dramatic.

"Ana." Miguel caught her attention, his tone serious and steady.

She looked up at him without moving her head, just enough to be able to see him. Miguel focused on her running mascara while he pushed back the hair that had fallen in front of his eyes. He took another sip of coffee without looking away from her and repeated himself. “No.” A horizontal cutting motion with his right hand accompanied the word. A gesture fit for a Roman emperor administering justice.

Ana’s lips trembled. Then, she lowered her gaze completely. She turned around and left faster than she had come in with short, quick steps, keeping her gaze firmly on the floor. She bumped into the students like they had all become obstacles in her path.

In just a few seconds, Ana’s slim figure – black tearstains and all – disappeared. And so too did the headache. All that remained was a slight dizziness, like always. Nothing more. A little vertigo and a feeling of victory.

When he turned to place his cup down on the bar, he saw a boy quickly avert his eyes. It was one of his students. He must have seen Miguel get rid of Ana, reject her, make that cutting gesture with his hand. He lowered his eyes to his cup and gulped down his coffee. Maybe he had gone overboard. It would be useless to get back together with Ana. He just couldn’t do it. She had never treated him right, ever. Maybe she deserved to be taught a lesson. But the sight of her ruined makeup smudged over her cheeks... No, he wasn’t like that.

Miguel started walking towards the exit. He could feel himself being watched, and he quickened his pace. *Something about what happened just now*, he thought, *there was something strange about it*. Or perhaps he was just imagining it. He wouldn’t blame himself. No, he had a... how to explain it? A supernatural hunch? Everything had happened exactly as Miguel had imagined it. Ana had followed the script of his fantasy to the letter. And Ana just wasn’t like that. She had much more pride. Ana should have turned on her heel and marched out of the cafeteria with her head held high and a mist of Chanel following her when Miguel had told her that they couldn’t talk in private. What she had actually done made no sense at all.

At that moment, Miguel left the cafeteria and the stares of his students before stopping in the hallway. He had no reason to feel proud of what had happened, but neither was he to blame for imagining it in the first place. The imagination was fanciful like that. And that... Look, it had simply been a twist of luck that reality had so closely coincided with his fantasy. That was it.

A Midas can make their imagination become reality, thought Vladimir Gorlov.

Seated at his desk, he unscrewed a plastic pen, disassembled it and then reassembled it slowly, carefully, like he was studying how it worked.

They could create storms, lightning, tidal waves... He placed the spring back inside the pen. *Stop a butterfly mid-flight, remove a planet from its orbit, turn seawater sweet, resurrect armies, turn honey blue, destroy the universe...* *Turn anything into gold. A Midas.*

Midas, Gorlov repeated to himself. He placed the now-reassembled pen beside his notebook. *A Midas could turn all the cows in the world green and yellow for a day. And make them fly.*

He took up his pen again, as if anxious to take it apart once more. The stupid cow example was the best one that came to mind when he tried to explain what a Midas was. A god—that was the best way to explain it. But Gorlov was on the verge of proving that a Midas wasn’t all-powerful. There was one thing they couldn’t do.

They can't destroy their own ability, he thought. The Midas Paradox. The Midas subject can do anything they can possibly imagine, but they can't destroy their own ability.

But how to describe it? Gorlov had to write about it using technical terms, but they wouldn't come to him. Or perhaps, deep down, he didn't want to find them. He stared at his bony hand lying top of the graph paper. His hands, now withered with age, had recorded more than fifty years of investigative research, but now it was like they resisted it. He began to move the pen with a strained, slow script.

Note 1067: The Midas Paradox.

The system of equations to maximize the Midas Effect could lack a solution. This could imply that, if the Midas subject existed, they would not be able to eliminate their power once used...

Gorlov filled a page and a half trying to clarify the implications of the paradox. Once he finished writing, he stopped and read over his final conclusion.

The Midas is damned by their own power.

Too melodramatic, he said to himself, crossing out the sentence with a thick, black line.

He removed his aviators, the only glasses with which he knew he could see well, the ones that had been with him since his years in Leningrad. Taking out a handkerchief, he wiped the lenses and the black plastic frames before placing them back on their specially-reserved spot on his nose. He re-read the crossed-out note. *Damned by their own power.*

Scientific notes shouldn't use such sensationalist language. But that was how he felt, deep down – sensationalist. Or, at the very least, restless, full of excitement, like a bright but unkempt college student presenting his final thesis. All that came to mind were stupid things like that final note and the example of green and yellow cows, lines that ran amok in his mind like giddy children.

Anyone would feel excited if they had finally found what they had spent their whole life searching for, he told himself. They were just about to capture a Midas, of course. It seemed, at least, that they had finally found one. Only once before had they ever been so close. But that candidate..., she had failed.

Gorlov didn't want to imagine what another failure would mean. He, in all probability, wouldn't live long enough to find another candidate. Looking away from the graph paper on the desk, he leaned back against the broad back of his chair. He watched the sunbeams, early risers like himself, crossing his study. Oblique bands of light on ochre walls. California had taken him in, had let him almost finish his investigation, the one he had started in the old Soviet Union. It was true that he missed his homeland – like anyone else in their right mind, he supposed – but he despised the cold. The Russian cold would freeze his knuckles, even when he wore gloves. He shivered thinking of it. But there, in his office located in NASA's south wing building, it was always warm.

But duty was cold. Duty.

Gorlov had his years in the KGB to thank for his Soviet sense of discipline, military in nature, and he managed to return his gaze to his notes. He exchanged his black pen for a blue one. Blue ink for mathematical notations, he reminded himself, writing out a system of equations, still incomplete, that tried to provide some meaning to the paradox. Once the formulae were finished, he noted the date. His movements stilled for a moment, observing the date with a serious look. April first.

Almost a year since we found him.

He remembered that the very same day he had started working on the equations, Eugene Barrett had appeared in his office with his mousy smile and announced that he had located a supposed Midas. In Spain. Eugene the hero, as ill-timed as his smile.

Gorlov eyed the blue equations of the paradox between his fingers, which were too slim to cover the formulae. The paradox was a problem that could not be avoided. He had even considered postponing the capture. A Midas was too dangerous, wielded too much power for one human being. And now Gorlov's blue formulae said something more – they began to show that activating a Midas was an irreversible process.

He closed the notebook. Nothing more to explain. His gaze returned to one of the diagonal sunbeams on the wall; one of them now touched the glass framing the periodic table of elements he had brought from Russia. For the sake of practicality, he had only brought with him his notebooks and that table. Irina, his memories, his past – everything else had been left in the cold. The sunlight left a glint on the edge of the glass that obscured his vision. The Midas dazzled him, drew him in, but wouldn't let him open his eyes fully. That very same sunlight had entered through his window and shone on the nape of his neck. A small, pleasant shiver ran through him. What he was doing had to be right, it had to. If not, it would mean he had sacrificed his whole life for...

The phone on his desk started ringing. The trilling sound woke Gorlov from his thoughts, from the Californian sun, and gracelessly dumped him back in his cold, damp office in Leningrad. The screen showed that it was one of his secretaries calling him. He picked up the phone. "Karen?"

"Professor Gorlov," replied Karen's soft voice, "Dr. Barrett is waiting for you in the basement. He asked me to remind you."

"Thank you, Karen." Hanging up, Gorlov placed his notebook in his briefcase. He would have to visit the high-security floors. That was where the notebook needed to be, where neither his notes nor the documents scattered across his desk must be allowed to leave. He gathered them all together, almost sweeping with them. Americans, it was said, were very lax with security protocols. But Gorlov was grateful for that. He was too old to work all day locked away in an underground laboratory, as technical and conditioned as he was.

If old Karen knew what the "basement" really was, she'd never let me down there again, he thought as he shuffled through his papers.

One brown file didn't quite fit in the briefcase. It was the report on the pursuit of the supposed Midas. The rough folder represented the subject, represented everything they knew about him, and the plans for his capture.

Looking at the clock on his desk told him it was nearly sunrise in Spain. The first meeting with the subject would soon be taking place. That was the plan. Monica and Walter Castillo had followed him from Granada, and she would intercept him before he left for San Francisco.

Gorlov read the name of the subject written in black on the brown file. It was a half-Spanish, half-French name. Miguel Le Fablec. Then, he shut his briefcase and left the Californian sun.

CHAPTER 2

Monica felt stupid. Miguel Le Fablec appeared to be sleeping, not noticing her presence despite her efforts. In the middle of the gardens beside the Alhambra, disguised as a tourist with a backpack, map and baseball cap, she shook a camera about in her hand to catch the subject's attention. But, he appeared to be sleeping.

She observed him silently. He had dark, slightly long, straight hair. She liked it; it gave him a bohemian look. Romantic, in a way. She bit down on the right side of her bottom lip. No, that wasn't what she liked. *I'm not a romantic*, she told herself. In fact, she was quite the opposite. She hated sentimentality and preferred being practical. The Miguel she liked had been the one she saw that morning in the University of Granada; the one who had dismissed his ex-girlfriend with that cutting gesture with his right hand, like he was wiping her off the face of the earth. That had been particularly good. It was the best he could do, the only thing he could do. He had gotten rid of that madwoman with the tiny waist and exposed cleavage who did nothing but slow down Miguel's trip to California.

Monica crumpled up the map in her hands. It wasn't that she was particularly interested in Miguel's love life, far from it, but it was well that Miguel had resolved his personal issue in Spain. Ana. Yes, it was practical. She spread out the crumpled map on her leg, folded it and tucked it into the back pocket of her jeans. *Too many tourist props*, she thought.

It was practical to... Monica suddenly realized that she had spent several minutes completely absorbed in the subject's hair and his ex-girlfriend. Looking behind her, she spotted Castillo. He was watching her from behind some rose bush. She was not about to let Castillo report negatively about her.

The camera in her right hand had turned off. Pressing the power button, she told herself that she had caught other subjects before for the Project. She knew how to do it right.

Monica went over her instructions in her head while she focused the camera on the subject, adjusting the zoom and brightness. They were very basic, typical for the first phase of a capture. *Fake a chance encounter with the subject in their city of origin. Act nice and friendly. Tell him you'll be working in the same American university as him.* She adjusted the focus on Miguel. *What a coincidence! How lucky!* he'd think. *The first person I meet from my new world.*

She would be his first acquaintance in a new life he hadn't even started yet. The usual protocol: feign coincidence.

Clearing her throat, she extended her arm holding the camera and said, "¿Por favor?"

"¿Por favor?" Miguel heard a feminine voice speak, although it sounded distant. He paid it no mind.

Tourists, he thought. *The Alhambra, the Generalife gardens, all of Granada full of tourists in caps. In spring, all year, everywhere.* He touched the rough stone of the bench where he sat as he opened his eyes and pushed back the hair that had fallen over his face

In front of him, beyond the lookout, was the scenery he had come to say farewell to. That was why he had come. He had already said goodbye to his family and everyone else, but in order to begin

his journey, he had to go through with the symbolic act of saying goodbye to his homeland. The church domes, the palm and cypress trees, the Alhambra, the white houses, the city. It all smelled like orange blossoms.

In California, they have orange trees, he thought, turning his gaze to California so he could smell it from there.

He imagined himself in a white and blue British Airways plane, an enormous Boeing 747, with a hump and four 60,000-pound Pratt & Whitney engines that would take him to San Francisco. His favorite plane. That was his future – the jumbo jet, the orange trees, the Californian sun...

“Please?” Miguel heard again.

Stupid tourists! He turned towards the voice.

It was a girl. Young. Right next to him. She smiled at him.

She had long, wavy hair, like an Italian actress. *Although an Italian actress would never hide such beautiful hair with a hat*, Miguel thought. Shining blue eyes. He stared at her for a moment, head turned slightly, watching her nibble the right side of her lower lip in a way that almost seemed sensual to him.

The girl showed him her camera and turned to point at the scenery. From one of the back pockets of her jeans, which had been tailored perfectly to her curves, Miguel could see a wrinkled map of Granada just at eye level. *Nice ass*. He looked up at her again as she removed her cap and shook her hair free. Miguel opened his mouth, but had no idea what to say.

“¿Por favor?” she repeated, this time in Spanish, with long, smooth Rs. She kept her hand still between the two.

Miguel blinked and looked down – the camera. It was a black reflex camera. Analog, with a good lens. It looked similar to one he’d had years ago, an antiquated thing he had loved. He smiled.

“Photo, yes?” he said in English, taking the camera.

The girl smiled too, and began to point behind her at the scenery she wanted as the backdrop for the photo as well as where she was going to stand. She spoke in rapid English with an American accent. She made decisive, forceful gestures with her hands, like an orchestra conductor. Miguel liked her. She seemed to have everything very clear in her head and made quick, practical decisions. Direct, that was the word. She wanted a full-body shot on the lookout, with the Alhambra and the light of the sunset behind her, which, by her approximation, was close at hand. And she didn’t have bad taste, Miguel thought, but all that wouldn’t be possible.

“The sun is still very high,” he said. “You won’t come out very well with all that light behind you,” he added, handing her the camera.

But the girl didn’t take it. She didn’t even move. The look on her face faded as if a cloud had passed in front of the sun overhead. Her smile also disappeared.

It’s not a big deal, I guess, Miguel told himself. But the look she gave him made him feel as if he had insulted her.

Suddenly, Miguel felt an unreal cold come over him, making him shiver. And then, in the middle of his head, a tiny pinch. He couldn’t start his journey to a new life like that, denying the young woman such a small thing. Miguel turned the camera over in his hands, as if it would start to talk and give him an answer. *A photo in Granada... Nothing’s easier than that*. He quickly remembered the photos he had taken with Ana at the Mirador de San Nicolás, the ones he had taken with his old reflex camera. Of course, that was it! He blinked, shaking off all thoughts of Ana, and looked towards the white houses all clustered together along the hill that was now in front of them.

The Albaicín. Saint Nicholas, the church, the Mirador—Miguel could see all of them between the houses. He hesitated for a moment.

“I know the perfect place for panoramic shots,” he said, pointing to the Mirador de San Nicolás on the other side of the houses. “We can get there before sunset if we hurry. Well...” he caught himself, “if you’d like me to accompany you, that is.”

“Let’s go!” the young woman exclaimed, almost militarily, her camera and her smile returning to her all at once. She seemed ready to run to get there.

“We can take a bus,” Miguel said.

Thirty minutes later, Miguel stepped off the bus after the American girl. She smiled at him before taking her map out of her pocket and offering it to him.

But Miguel didn’t take it. “It’s over there,” he said. He pointed to a tiny street leading away from the plaza. “We’ll be there soon. It’s Monica, right?”

“Monica Eveleigh. But my mother’s maiden name is Graziano. Angela Graziano. She’s Italian.”

While they walked, Monica told him more about herself. Her mother had Italian heritage, and her great-grandparents were from Naples, good Catholic people – Miguel had already spotted the small gold cross hanging from her neck over her gray shirt – and her father was a scientist from New Jersey, working near Houston on something about embryonic cells, and she and her siblings had been born in Texas. Monica spoke in an uninterrupted stream of words. She was also working in research, but not in the same area as her father, since she wasn’t all that interested in biology. Miguel tried to imagine her in Texas researching... he didn’t know what. Although in Houston, he remembered, was the Johnson Space Center. Nothing less than NASA’s Mission Control Center. It would be incredibly lucky, he thought, to know someone from the Agency. *NASA*, he thought. His childhood dream. The dream that had pushed him to become an aeronautical engineer.

“What do you do?” Miguel asked.

“I’m a psychologist and a mathematician.”

Psychologist and mathematician? Americans are weird.

“At Saint Stephen’s Catholic University,” she added.

Of course. She had already told him she was very Catholic, Miguel remembered as they turned a corner. He hated priests. Their intimidating robes, the black flames of Hell, and the idea of an exclusive Heaven. Monica smiled suddenly, her whole face glowing. She really was beautiful. *Inhumanly so.*

In front of them was the Mirador de San Nicolás and its wonderful views.

“It’s perfect,” she said, still smiling.

The light was excellent – it had been a good idea bringing her here. The Alhambra and the Generalife on the hill, showered in the golden light of the setting sun, the white peak of the Sierra Nevada in the background, and the indigo sky above it all. Monica looked thoroughly impressed. *As anyone would be*, Miguel thought. Her eyes began to shine once more. He enjoyed watching her expression, like she was a little girl unwrapping Christmas presents.

“Would you like to sit?” Miguel asked, pointing to a white stone bench.

She nodded wordlessly without removing her gaze from the view. Then she turned and walked to the bench; the two of them sat down together.

Upon seeing her so entranced, Miguel began to fantasize about seeing her again in America. A little adventure, perhaps. *Don't be stupid!* he told himself. *No one bumps into an acquaintance in a country the size of a continent. I'm going to California, and she's going to... Texas, or wherever.*

Miguel stood then. "The photo?"

"The photo," Monica repeated.

"We'd better take it before we lose the light."

"Of course." Her response was almost inaudible.

Monica opened the back of her backpack while nibbling her lower lip. Removing her camera, she pressed a few buttons and looked through the visor, focusing the lens. Miguel thought he could watch her for hours, never getting tired of her resolute movements, the feminine sensuality you'd find in a Russian army official. But she would be leaving soon. She would disappear, along with her backpack, her cap, and her photo, and so would he.

"I have an idea!" Monica exclaimed. "Get in the photo with me. We'll ask someone to take it for us. I'd like to have something to remember you by."

Miguel stood staring at her for a moment. "The people don't really fit the frame well..." he answered. "I'll take one of just you. If we ask someone else, they'll probably end up leaving our legs out of the shot, or worse, leaving out the Alhambra..." He trailed off as he looked around. He spotted a portly, jolly-looking man and approached him. "Excuse me, would you mind taking a photo of us, with this view in the background?"

"Of course!" the man replied in an Andalusian accent, taking the camera. "Stand over there!"

"He's going to destroy the picture," he muttered to Monica as he sat down beside her. She giggled.

"Alright, son, why don't you hug your girlfriend a little. Otherwise, you'll look like two strangers," the man said, gesticulating wildly.

Miguel was about to correct the impromptu photographer, until he realized his arm was already around Monica's shoulders, while she leaned into him. He supposed the man's instructions had caused his body to move unconsciously before his brain had time to catch up. But he liked it. She didn't smell like that perfume with the French name, like every other girl he knew. Instead, she smelled of something subtle, intimate, slightly salty. Droplets of sweat. The scent had a sharp aftertaste that excited him. Miguel felt his pulse quicken with the click of the camera's shutter.

"Wonderful!" the man said, turning his belly towards them. He returned the camera to Miguel with a wink. Miguel thanked him and wasted no time in moving away from her and giving instructions. "A little to the right... that's it... and... yes! Right there! Don't move." He pressed the shutter button.

The click hit him in the face like a freezing wind. For the first time, through the camera's visor, he looked properly at Monica's shirt. Squared dark blue letters spelled out an acronym on her chest in the shape of an arch. All very normal, except for the acronym itself – SJSU. San José State University. California. His new university.

He approached Monica. "How do you know San José State University?"

"San Ho? I have a research grant there. I work there."

Miguel looked at her, open-mouthed. Then, he smiled. A Boeing 747, he remembered, would soon transport him to California. To her. Behind her, the Alhambra began to darken. But before it disappeared into the night, it shone once more, an intense, fiery gold. Success.

CHAPTER 3

The flight from London to San Francisco had just reached cruising altitude, and with a ping, the light advising the use of seatbelts turned off. Many passengers started to get up and move around, but Walter Castillo didn't move. He watched. He kept quiet, his eyes hidden behind a pair of black sunglasses. He watched Miguel.

The ping seemed to awaken Miguel. He twisted in his seat before looking around, and then behind him. When his gaze neared where Castillo was, he leaned to the left to hide himself behind the seat in front. He watched as Miguel settled in his seat and fell back asleep. The cabin crew went about preparing the little blue carts containing breakfast.

Castillo eyed his own suit, his maroon tie lying over his seatbelt. The gray suit, along with his dark hair, made him look like any another Spanish executive flying from Madrid to London, and then on to San Francisco. He was sure he would fly under the radar. *Almost invisible*, he thought.

An air hostess passed him a breakfast tray, but Castillo didn't move. Instead, he kept his eyes wide open behind his sunglasses as he took in the hostess's dark blue British Airways uniform. She immediately passed a tray to the woman sitting beside him. Anyone, thought Castillo, would think he was asleep, his eyes closed behind his dark glasses. Good. His lips turned up in a smile with the barest of movements. It was easy for him to make others see what he wanted them to see. That was what he was best at. Huffing with pride, Castillo focused once more on the subject while the hostess passed by with the breakfast cart.

Miguel's brown hair was just a little too long for his liking. His sleeping posture caused it to fall over his left shoulder. He looked so... harmless. Castillo couldn't see Miguel's face from that angle, but he clearly remembered the soft, straight lines of his face, his deep-set eyes. He looked like a Romanticist poet. Or perhaps some soulless being.

Defenseless, he thought. *And terrifying*.

But above all, dangerous. Castillo couldn't lose sight of Miguel. He would follow him all the way to San Francisco. He wouldn't rest. This was his mission, and he would see it through just like he had done with every other mission before.

This was what he had left his Hispanic hometown for – distantly, he remembered that very few of his childhoods friends ever made it out of Little Havana. But he had, in spite of his father, who had a fondness for rum. Despite no one ever believing in him. This was what he had gotten into Yale for, along with all those rich blonde bimbos, daughters of congressmen and expensive lawyers. This was why he had finished his law degree in three years at the top of his class before being accepted into West Point, among the best of the best. This was why he had been recruited to the CIA as soon as he graduated. This was why the Agency had sent him on this mission. Castillo breathed deeply again, smoothing out his tie as he felt the rush of pride and palpable success, just within his reach, filling his lungs.

There was still much work to be done. It was no longer necessary to feign sleep. He straightened in his seat and went over the report in his head – a result of the inflection in the University of Granada. He had been there, had seen Miguel's ex-girlfriend humiliate herself, crying and begging

Miguel to stay. Miguel seemed to be the one who had caused it, through his imagination, through his will. He replayed the memory of Miguel's brown eyes lost in thought, the Romantic poet looking as if he was always just about to kill himself. But those eyes, Castillo thought, also reflected his fury, almost that of a demigod, as he humiliated that young woman. There had been the point of inflection. The quantum leap that the fool had caused went beyond all limits. It had almost been a Midas Effect. Now, they would have to find out for sure if he was the one who had caused it.

Miguel shifted in his seat, and Castillo leaned to the left to conceal himself once more. He looked back after a few seconds. The demigod appeared to have gone back to sleep. He would have to capture Miguel, Castillo told himself, for Gorlov and his scientists, so they could study him. For his mission, and for his country.

CHAPTER 4

Three days after arriving in the United States, Miguel still felt small. He always did in America.

Seven-thirty in the morning. He still had another half-hour to arrive at the university. His first day at San José State University. His grip on the steering wheel tightened. At that moment, he crossed a highway junction with criss-crossed lanes stacked on top of one another. Miguel tried reading the addresses plastered on the various billboards, but didn't recognize any of them. There were too many crossings like that one on Route 101. He was overtaken by an all-terrain vehicle with tires the size of a tractor's, and immediately the feeling of being tiny returned. *What if I've confused miles with kilometers?* he wondered. No, that couldn't be it. It shouldn't take more than an hour to get to San José from San Francisco.

To the left, beyond a thicket, a tent-shaped building appeared. It had rounded edges and was completely white, except for the black roof. It was colossal, a giant in a country of giants. NASA. Miguel had already seen pictures of it on the internet. It was one of the facilities for the NASA Ames Research Center—a hangar, or something like that.

None other than NASA, he thought. *That is a good sign.* It was only twelve miles from NASA Ames to San José, if he remembered correctly. Miguel relaxed his hands on the steering wheel.

Once he crossed the thicket, he took one last look at the hangar through his rear-view mirror. *They must keep special rockets in there. NASA. If only Dani could see this...* Miguel smiled as he remembered how his brother's face lit up when he told him he would be moving so close to the incredible engineers they had both dreamed about as boys.

The hangar disappeared from view, but the memory of Miguel's brother remained. Dani was the last person Miguel had seen in Madrid, before he left. He had visited him to say goodbye and to leave him his yellow Renault Mégane Coupé. *It's like a spaceship!* Dani had said when he took the keys.

Dani adored astronomy. He knew everything about the Space Race: the Sputnik, the Apollo missions, the Moon landing. He loved everything extraterrestrial. Even after the small accident...

Miguel remembered the accident. He and Dani were boys, in Nice, at the playground. Their father took great pains to bring them to Nice every summer to see their grandmother. They spent much more time together there, which, of course, meant that they fought much more there. Dani constantly picked fights with Miguel. They were fighting the day Dani lit a firecracker tied to a plastic rocket. He wanted to send it to Jupiter, he said. Then, the explosion. Dani's bloody ear. It was the type of game that always led Dani to disaster. Miguel saw in his mind's eye the scar on his brother's earlobe.

A blue sign on the highway appeared on the curve of the road. *Interstate 280 North, Downtown San José – Next Exit.*

He was already there. He put Dani's scarred ear out of his mind. *How stupid would it be if I got lost right about now and ended up in Silicon Valley?*

He took the exit to San José according to the sign and circled through the residential area on the south side of campus before entering the university parking lot on 7th Avenue. A simple route.

After parking his car and making a short trip through the campus, Miguel arrived at the Department of Systems Engineering. He opened the door at exactly two minutes to eight.

But there was no one there. *It's time to start work, but this place is like a deserted island,* Miguel thought.

Someone cleared their throat behind him. "Good morning."

Miguel recognized the husky voice. It belonged to Professor Darl Branson, Director of the Department of Systems Engineering. All it had taken was a meal together following a conference in Granada for Branson to sign him up for his department in SJSU.

From behind an opening in a screen no bigger than a phone booth, Professor Branson came out holding a mug in his hand. His belly seemed not to fit in the opening. His white beard and long hair made him look like a cross between Santa Claus and a country singer.

"Hey, man!" he exclaimed. "Was it today you were starting? Yes, of course. Do you want some coffee?" Branson brought his mug to his lips, taking a sip. He gestured back towards the opening where he had come out belly-first. "I always need a cup before I start work."

"I don't have a cup," Miguel replied. He moved closer to the opening and looked through the screen. Behind it was a booth.

Branson walked away and entered an office, and Miguel watched as he opened a closet. The professor returned and gave Miguel a white mug with the NASA logo printed on it.

"But... Professor Branson."

"Take it, man! I have lots of 'em. I get them as gifts from the collaborators in the department. Consider it a welcome gift. And call me Darl! Everyone calls me Darl."

Miguel neared the coffee maker and briefly thought how Dani would give anything for a real NASA mug.

While Miguel served himself, Branson told him that he had received that mug from Vladimir Gorlov, a very good friend of his, a professor of Applied Physics at the university. *A very important man.* This Gorlov, it seemed, worked with NASA Ames. He was Russian, apparently, and was a psychiatrist on top of being a physicist and mathematician. And he gave NASA mugs as gifts.

Psychiatrist, mathematician *and* physicist. Miguel thought of Monica as he looked at his mug. *Mathematician and psychologist. She must work in the same department as the Russian. They're all wackos.*

Branson gestured for Miguel to follow him with a movement not unlike that of a cowboy leading a herd of cattle. Their walk was cut short by a short, dark-haired young man entering the department.

"Good morning," the young man said with a thick Indian accent. His bright smile was a sharp contrast to his dark complexion.

"This is Jagdish Lahiri, the computer engineer you'll be working with. He's Indian," Branson explained. "This is Miguel Le Fablec," he told Jagdish. "He's Spanish."

Branson continued walking while they shook hands. At the back of the open space filled with tables and computers, next to the windows that looked onto the campus, were two tables facing each other. Branson pointed them out with his coffee mug, and Miguel smiled when he noticed the tables were bathed in sunlight. One of them was covered with papers, CDs, books and a computer full of yellow notes. Miguel guessed they belonged to Jagdish. When they arrived, the computer engineer picked up a mug from the table and excused himself to go get some coffee, but not before Miguel spotted the words "IBM – Silicon Valley" printed on his mug. *Must be a gift from the professor.* Branson explained that the other table was his.

Miguel neared the table and set his own mug down, looking down at the campus through the window. The view pleased him: students hurrying everywhere under the warm Californian sun. His new workplace.

“The students have just gotten back from spring break,” said Branson. Miguel looked at him out of the corner of his eye, but otherwise paid him little attention. “Exams start in a month’s time, so I won’t be able to give you and Jag much of my time. I’ll give you the requirements of the project and we’ll see how far you get by summer, okay?” Looking at his watch, he said, “We’ll talk later. I have to go to class.”

Miguel thanked him as he left. Then, he quite happily observed his NASA mug on the table.

CHAPTER 5

The dark wooden table stood between them in the NASA office. Monica knew the scientist was happy to see her, although his expression betrayed no emotion. The afternoon sun filtering through the window brightened the whole room. *The excessive light of Vladimir's study*, Monica thought, smiling.

"Sit," Gorlov said.

Monica did as she was told, laying the papers she had brought on her lap. She looked down and realized the jeans that now peaked out from behind her white lab coat were the same pair she had been wearing when she met Miguel. Nearly two weeks had passed since that day in Granada. Since then, Monica had compiled much more information about the so-called point of inflection of Miguel's in Spain. Ripple effects, direct interventions... She was even able to analyze some maps of isoinflexor curves, hoping to show them to Vladimir now that she had returned.

"I'll be with you in a moment," Gorlov said without looking at her. He was completely absorbed in something he was reading in a brown file.

Monica said nothing. She knew better than to disturb him while he was concentrating on something. She tightened the double knots on her white and blue sneakers. Looking around, she took a moment to observe the details in the room, the light there. She had missed it during her short stay in Spain. On Gorlov's left hung his framed periodic table of elements. On the other side of the table stood a blackboard on an easel. White chalk dust had collected on the floor. Only Vladimir could continue using such a relic for his writings. It was the same blackboard he had been using when he captured her.

Monica let her eyes wander over the blackboard as the memories came back to her. Back then, she had dressed the same way she did now, only without the white coat, and Vladimir had been her differential geometry professor. One day, he had brought her to his sunny NASA office to impress her with his mathematical achievements. It turned out that she impressed him far more than he did her, when she picked up the chalk and corrected the limits of an integral in one of his equations. Her hands were covered in chalk dust. That was one of the exceedingly rare occasions in which she had seen him without his square glasses. Gorlov had taken them off to see the correction with his own eyes. His student's straight, uniform script, correcting and improving his work, stood out against his own angular hand. Moments like that were what made her his main assistant.

"How was everything in Spain?" Gorlov asked, closing the file with a sudden thud.

Monica flinched. Gorlov's file, held in his bony hands, had the color of old wood. "Oh, you mean the capture report?"

Gorlov showed her the cover. It was indeed the capture report. She could make out Castillo's notes, as well as her own, along with all the information about the preliminary pursuit in Granada. There were also global calculations with data from the satellites and the maps of isoinflexor lines, but even still, she had much more information than that.

"Everything's in order," Monica said.

"Did you interfere with anything?"

“No,” she responded quickly. Then she realized Gorlov had finished reading the report, including the report on Miguel’s point of inflection. Everything that had happened. She *had* interfered, she knew, and the report showed it. What she didn’t understand was why she had lied. She didn’t mean to, or want to. “Well, yes,” she admitted. Her right leg began to bounce up and down. “Maybe I interfered a little bit. I got too involved. Everything came to a head, and then that woman, the ex-girlfriend... I don’t know.”

“Monica.” Gorlov’s tone left little room for argument. His face remained expressionless, but Monica thought she could see some semblance of disappointment in his eyes. “You’re the best we have. You could be my successor, the technical director of the Project. In time, I’m sure you’ll outdo even myself. Don’t ruin it.” Monica looked down. “You cannot form a sentimental relationship with the subject of the study. You mustn’t, and least of all with this one. He could be a Midas.”

Monica chewed on the right side of her bottom lip. Vladimir’s words vibrated in his Russian accent, his abrupt consonants only making themselves distinguishable when he got annoyed. Her teacher, her mentor, the one who had pushed her to become the best in the Project. He didn’t deserve to be let down. Monica knew it wouldn’t do to become emotionally involved with a Midas. She bit down harder. She supposed she must have been blushing, if the heat in her cheeks and ears was anything to go by, like Vladimir had just pulled on them as if she were a spoiled brat. She wasn’t like that, she told herself; she was far too practical to do such stupid things. She always had everything under control. Always.

But Ana... What an insufferable woman. Monica told herself she had to act, for the good of the Project. Miguel sat there, indecisive, and that stupid, smeared mess of a woman, drowned in Chanel, only got in the way. Yes, she had slightly amplified Miguel’s wishes, but that was all.

She looked into Gorlov’s inexpressive, old, gray eyes behind his squared glasses.

“Do I have to follow the approach protocol? I’m completely sure of myself. You don’t need to worry about that. But, Vladimir, if you think I should abandon—”

“You contaminated the records.”

“Even still, the subject’s inflection was very intense. The records can—”

“What about Castillo?” Gorlov asked suddenly.

Monica stopped. The heat from her blush vanished. “Then, can I assume?”

“Yes, continue the capture process. I need you, you know that. What happened with Castillo?”

Monica felt her lips stretch into a smile. Gorlov hated wasting time, and he wasn’t about to start now.

“Castillo is a cheater,” she said, inhaling slowly. She spent a moment finding the right words, trying to be as clear as possible. What she was about to tell him wouldn’t show up on any report. That was why Gorlov had sent Monica to intercept Miguel – to observe the new agent sent by the CIA, the one everyone suspected had been sent to spy on them. She had thought of the mission as yet another proof of trust from Vladimir. No, she would not fail him again, she told herself. Never.

“Castillo has a thousand faces, all of them good,” she explained quickly, “but there’s one I haven’t yet seen: his true one. He’s very ambitious, but frustrated too, like the finish line is already upon him. I don’t know what it is. His true objective blends in well with pep talks too noble to be believed by anyone other than a Boy Scout. His smile is perfect. He’s the best car salesman I’ve ever seen.”

Gorlov spent a long time gazing at the sunlight coming in through the window. “I think I’d like to meet this man as soon as possible.”

Monica laughed. Gorlov didn’t.

“You haven’t met Castillo?” she asked.

“He and Fred are in Washington. When will you see him again? Miguel, I mean. It’s been nearly two weeks since he arrived.”

Monica shuffled through her papers, wondering if she had forgotten some data. No, it was all there. She chastised herself for that kind of staging with Vladimir.

“Tomorrow,” she replied immediately. “Everything is ready. Jagdish has informed us that Miguel is hoping to see me again. It’s already gotten late today, so there’s no time. Tomorrow, at lunchtime.”

CHAPTER 6

It was nearly lunchtime, and Jagdish had been gone for a while making photocopies. If Jag was eating somewhere else, who would Miguel eat with? He looked towards the back of the department, where his colleagues typed silently. The wait for Jag continued.

Miguel leaned back in his seat as he read on his computer screen an article about virtual interfaces for fighter pilots. It was very detailed, too detailed for Miguel's tastes. The coffee in his NASA mug had already gone cold. He turned to the window, looking down at the San José State University campus. "San Ho," as Monica had called it.

Monica Eveleigh, on his mind once more.

The psychologist and mathematician remained stuck in his head. Miguel tried and failed to return his attention to fighter pilots, to keep Monica at bay. But it was no use. Her words and her gestures from that evening in Granada all came flooding back to him. Her gorgeous hair, like that of an Italian actress, her shining blue eyes scanning the scenery, her half-bitten lips... and the map in the back pocket of her jeans. And of course, she had a nice ass. Why deny it? Round, pert, perfect... although he had no intention of actually saying that to her. *Or maybe I will*, he thought. *Who knows? Maybe one day...*

"There he is," Jagdish said from behind Miguel.

Miguel turned to respond.

And there was Monica.

"Have you already forgotten about me?" she asked.

Miguel opened his mouth, but no words came out. It was her! She wore a short, fitted, orange t-shirt – the neckline showed nothing more than the top of her chest – and a brown knitted cardigan, somewhere between slightly childish and Puritan, that covered her arms. Her t-shirt just barely covered her navel above her jeans. He forced himself to look at her face. It really was her. She had come; she had looked for him.

"I didn't... I..." Miguel managed to stutter out before standing up and approaching her, greeting her with two kisses, one on each cheek.

"How have you been settling in? I see it's going well. You already have your own desk and everything. You live in San Francisco, right?" she asked, the words tumbling out of her. Her eyes shone, her gaze darting all around. Out of the corner of his eye, Miguel spotted Jagdish's blinding smile.

"This is Monica," Miguel explained. "She's the girl I told you about, the one I met in Granada."

"Miguel's told me a lot about you," Jagdish said as he shook Monica's hand.

"Want to have lunch together, Jag?" Miguel asked.

Jag's smile vanished suddenly, as though eating with Miguel no longer fit his plans. "I've already made plans with a co-worker who's just arrived at the university," he said finally. Glancing at his watch, his eyes widened and he yelped, "I'm already late! I'll see you later!" He left sprinting.

Miguel turned to Monica. "Have you eaten?"

Minutes later, seated on a bench, Miguel and Monica each held a paper cup and a sandwich from one of the university cafeterias. The cups and sandwiches, Miguel thought, did away with any sense of magic their reunion could have possibly had. But he didn't really care. There was a cheerfulness in the students all over campus. There always was, by Miguel's estimation, but in that moment, he felt it even more strongly than usual. The campus was full of students collecting money for their various organizations, playing the guitar, swapping notes, lying in the sun, or working on their laptops.

"I like it here," Miguel said. "Look at the students; they never stop moving. When do they study? Don't they go to class?" Monica shrugged, smiling. He pointed towards Tower Hall in the distance with his paper cup. "That's my favorite building. That's exactly how a European imagines an American university: ivy and arched windows." Monica stared at him, still smiling. "There aren't a lot of old buildings here in San Ho. Although... see this tree?" Miguel pointed behind them at the tree that shaded them from the sun. "It's an olive tree. It's almost like being back home, in the south of Spain. And over there are palm trees." He pointed at the towering palm trees with their slim trunks, just beside Tower Hall. "It's like being back home and being on a Hollywood Avenue all at once. I love it. And all that is just decoration. The best part is the people. The other day, when I was moving furniture, a guy I didn't even know – a friend of a friend – let me borrow his station wagon. He plays the concert flute in a symphonic rock band, or something like that. Yes, the people have been the biggest surprise."

"I'm glad you like us," Monica replied. "But I should warn you, not all of us play symphonic rock." She pretended to play the flute and somehow her lips seemed more alluring to Miguel than they had in Granada. He breathed deeply to calm the excitement Monica brought him. "And what about your grant?" she asked, taking a sip from her paper cup. She grimaced as she swallowed – she mustn't have liked the coffee, or the cup, or both – but to Miguel, she looked as if she had pursed her lips for a kiss.

"I'm working with Jag on a virtual interface prototype for combat missions. It's very interesting. It'll take us at least two years."

"Two years! That's quite a grant."

"It is." Miguel couldn't tear his gaze away from her mouth. Monica looked away, nibbling the right side of her lower lip. "Have you been keeping up with your photography?" he asked.

"What?" Monica's confused frown produced a wrinkle just above her right eyebrow.

"You know, the reflex camera. Do you use it often?"

The wrinkle on Monica's forehead remained for a few more seconds, as if she didn't know what a reflex camera even was, until a sudden look of realization crossed her face. "Oh! That. Yes, I do use it. How are things in San Francisco?"

Her sudden change of conversation topic was slightly disconcerting. Miguel shifted on the bench, shooting a quick glance at the olive tree. "I followed your advice and moved there. You were right, San José is far too quiet. You can get to know more people in San Francisco."

"Have you met many people?"

Miguel smiled. In reality, he barely knew anyone in San Francisco. He took a short sip of coffee. Monica and her questions – always so direct, so sharp and clever. "I know practically nobody, aside from my housemates."

She laughed. "I guessed as much."

“I share what’s supposed to be a Victorian house with a Japanese girl and a girl from Arkansas. It’s on one of those streets with the huge, curved slopes.”

“Typical.”

“My window has a perfect view of the bay. Right on Russian Hill...”

“Russian Hill? Which street?”

“Union Street, near the crossing on Leavenworth. Why?”

“Goodness, you must be following me! I can’t believe it. You’ve come all the way from the other side of the world to work in the exact same university as me and to live in the exact same place I do.”

“You live on...?”

“Leavenworth and Lombard, on the same side as you. We can come to work together.”

The silence that followed dragged on for a few interminable seconds. *She gets more direct all the time*, Miguel thought.

“Well, if you want to, that is,” she added. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to put you in a difficult position. We hardly know each other, after all.”

Monica was what interested Miguel most in that country of giant things. Two hours a day in the car with her—he couldn’t have thought of a better idea himself. Taking another sip of his coffee, Miguel took a moment to just look at her. He loved Monica’s direct questions, her point-blank proposals. But what he loved even more were her round, parted lips that she so often nibbled.

The rough surface of the paper cup on his lips broke Miguel from his fantasy. He made a face, hoping Monica wouldn’t interpret it as a “no.”

“Yes!” he said immediately, before finishing the contents of that stupid cup with one big swallow.

