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Juan José Montero, the editor, had a sense of smell as sharp as his nose and, as soon as he heard the first reports, he scented a major story. A front page splash, he said to himself mildly excited, abundant material for one or two pages inside, and a special print run for the vendors. In the best-case scenario, the story could even be stretched to leave behind some mystery, perhaps enough for two or three editions, but that would depend. Above all, it would depend on choosing an outstanding reporter who knew how to handle stories of blood and terror without succumbing to the temptation of peddling cheap sensationalism. He had it: this reporter was a woman and her name was Maricruz Miranda. Young, intelligent and bold, she seemed the ideal candidate to cover the story, although you might well say she was not ideal for the same reasons. So impetuous and fresh was the professional passion of Maricruz that she often had to be stopped in her tracks. On the other hand, his neck, as well as the virtue and prestige of the newspaper, among other imponderables, might be on the line. The point was that in the news section there was no other journalist who could the match this girl's eagerness, even if there was one with

more experience or another who was slightly more malicious – so the editor hesitated no longer and summoned her to his office.

The whole thing began, Juan José explained to her, with a casual passer-by who – lured by the unmistakable stench of death – discovered the corpse of the fourth victim, which for a week the police had sought frantically and in vain. The guy had decided to cross the park with the simple aim of taking a shortcut and took the least used route, although he might easily have gone another way, as he later told the police, the press and anyone else who would listen. He had known something was amiss because he had stumbled across a pile of human guts long before he came across the body or even smelt its stench.

To tell the truth, he confessed, all that he saw was a woman's hand, poking out rigid and solitary from a mound of rock, the ring finger bearing a gold ring and the long, polished fingernails still with traces of the red varnish that the police would find in the bag lying next to the girl's lifeless body. One of the officers who assisted in removing the corpse from the scene would tell the television reporters (on condition of anonymity) that nothing had moved him as much as the image of this hand frozen in what he saw as a pleading gesture. But another officer saw in it 'a gesture of farewell' and a third speculated that the gesture had not been made voluntarily by the victim, but was a consequence of the haste and gruesome nature of the crime. Time would confirm the logic and importance of this last appraisal, but in the heat of discovery, conclusions came thick and fast.

"That is more or less all we know," said the editor.

"Nothing else? Are you sure?" the reporter insisted.

Juan José Montero shook his head weakly and paused to contemplate the intense eyes, the luscious, full-blooded lips and Maricruz Miranda's short, boyish, chestnut-coloured hair. But he said nothing.

"Well..." she insisted.

At that moment, Montero weighed up her nervous tension, that eagerness which his many years of professional experience had taught him to detect in someone who might be called 'a congenital successor', 'one of those guys or girls who have the taste

for blood in their genes,' by his own definition. He could almost feel the tingling that must be running through her body and knew then (although he had known before he had called her) that she was, indeed, the ideal journalist for the job.

"According to what they're saying," he spoke at last, indicating a white sheet of paper marked with firm, twisting lines, "the body was found in this section of the Parque de la Amistad. Here, about 500 metres north, a week or so ago they found the body of her presumed companion buried on top of the corpse of another man who disappeared in December, the boyfriend of the first victim. Do you remember?" The girl nodded her head, opened her eyes and slightly parted, in an unconscious demonstration of her innocence, those luscious, red lips which the editor had an urge to bite, forcing him to compose himself hurriedly in a gesture of patient expectation.

"A very tangled affair," Montero emphasised as he settled his considerable bulk into the ramshackle frame of what passed for his executive chair, pulled a cigarette from his pocket and took all the time in the world to light it and exhale his first puff of smoke.

"So? Let's see," he continued, waiting for her reaction with a kind of feline curiosity. "We have a total of four corpses: those of a man and woman who disappeared together in mid-December, those of another man and woman who disappeared in mid-February. To recap, two couples murdered in the same place two months apart. However, the men's corpses seem to have been buried on top of each other. What does that suggest to you?"

He took a couple more puffs on his cigarette, smoothed his hair with the palm of his hand and went back to scrutinising the reporter's features. Now her face reminded him of a famous actress whose name escaped him.

"It suggests that the four must have been murdered by the same person. That's what seems logical. But, let's see, give me some more details."

In Montero's gaze there was a triumphant sparkle and a sarcastic grimace underlined the square contours of his jaw.

"You're really interested, aren't you? I'll give you the details in exchange for a kiss, just a little one."

The reporter went on the defensive, pressed her lips together and tensed her face in an eloquent gesture.

“What will it cost you?” he insisted.

“You don’t need to give me the information. I have my own sources and I assure you they’re better than yours.”

“I believe it, but your sources cannot assign the story, which is the only thing that really interests you. The only person who can do that is the editor,” he said, pointing at his own chest with his index finger. “If you want to cover it, I’ll give it to you but the price is a little taste of those goodies.” He indicated her lips by pursing his own, musty, nicotine-stained ones.

“You idiot,” Maricruz blurted out. “If you don’t assign the story to me, I’ll sue you for harassment.”

Juan José responded with a confused laugh tinged with the bronchial cough of a lifetime smoker. He was very tall, had a broad forehead and chin and long and distinct extremities, and although he was always laying claim to some ailment (a duodenal ulcer, hypertension) he was still the country’s most abrasive columnist and not a few recognised his instinct for news.

“For God’s sake,” he exclaimed, still chuckling. “This rag is really the kingdom of shortages. Not enough telephones, not enough computers, not enough journalists or photographers, or cars, not enough of anything... and, on top of this, we’re losing our sense of humour, the only thing there was in abundance.”

“I don’t lack a sense of humour Juan José, what happens is that some people confuse it with vulgarity.”

The news editor looked at her closely from above his glasses and swapped his cynical smile for the look of a lovesick puppy.

“You’re the only woman in this newspaper,” he whined, “in this city, in this whole damn world, who treats me badly and in return all you get is tenderness, consideration, and perks. At least, give me a smile, a simple, basic smile.”

“Are you going to put me on the story, yes or no?” Maricruz dug her heels in at the door of the office, pretending she was about to leave.

“Let’s see, let’s see. Have I ever refused you anything?” said Juan José opening his arms. “I am the slave of your desires.”

“Don’t be a fool.”

“Okay, okay,” he shrugged his shoulders. “Come, come and sit down, the story is yours.”

The reporter smiled and a pair of dimples appeared at the corners of her sweet mouth. Not for a minute had she doubted that the story was hers, as long as she went along with this game of Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf, which was not always amusing, but harmless enough, repetitive but necessary to keep the boss eating out of her hand. He’s a strange guy, thought Maricruz, delighting so in his self-image of coarseness.

“What I told you is practically all that we’ve got,” said Juan José. “The body was found this morning by a passer-by, about 500 metres from where the men were found. My source tells me the same killer is responsible for both crimes, but he didn’t want to give me more details.”

“You said the body was mutilated.”

“That’s what I understand, as with the other woman.”

“What kind of mutilation?”

“I don’t know. As I told you, my source barely wanted to mention it, but it’s obvious the police are hiding important information and your mission is to get hold of it. I want a complete story that’s different to what the other media are running, for tomorrow. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

Maricruz smiled and Juan José responded with a triumphant look.

“Do you realise? At least you gave me the smile I asked for... and twice.”

“Alright, it’s fine if you’re happy with that.”

“I know who you look like,” said the editor as the reporter was about to leave. “That famous Swedish actress who played Anastasia. What’s her name?”

“You mean Ingrid Bergman?” said Maricruz.

“Yes, like her.”

“Perhaps, but I’m more beautiful,” declared the reporter.

It was 10am and the newsroom looked like a scene of devastation.

It was a kind of storeroom with a carpet, a vast windowless, tastelessly decorated cavern in which a mortal heat ruled 24 hours a day, 12 months of the year. Depending on its mood, the air conditioning either did not work or emitted an icy cold so that common sense dictated it was best to keep it switched off and wear socks rather than suffer these extremes. Each journalist had his or her own small cubicle lined in three long rows. In each there was the screen and keyboard of an ancient computer, a telephone, papers and the reporter's personal belongings. Most had gone off to hunt for news. Maricruz sat alone and more disoriented than ever. All she had been able to get out of the police spokesmen was what her boss had already told her, and she would not achieve anything by running back to them in search of more. She leafed through her contact book in search of a probable source, a name that would switch on a small light in the darkness in her mind. She made a few calls to colleagues in the business to sound out how much they knew, but all seemed as clueless as her.

She had almost given up hope when, just before 11 o'clock, Pedro turned up sucking on a peach and munching on a chocolate covered doughnut, and looking, as usual, as if he had had a heavy night.

"Junk food," he said, waving his breakfast under her eyes until Maricruz told him to stop. "That's what the much-trumpeted practicality of the bachelor comes down to."

The reporter pulled a face of disgust.

"I have a problem. I insisted so much that he gave me the story and now I don't know how to get out of it."

"Problems?"

"Just one, but a very difficult one," said Maricruz.

"Remember that phrase of the immortal philosopher: 'The road to eternity is paved with difficulties.'"

"Which philosopher was that?"

"I don't remember. The immortal philosophers have some really strange names. But cheer up, Double M, there's a solution for everything."

"Pedrito, what I need right now aren't philosophical maxims but a good contact in the homicide department."

The society editor sat down beside her, took out a cigarette and lit it with a pensive air. "Let me guess, they've assigned you to this slaughter they're talking about on the radio."

"You got it."

"Congratulations. You've always wanted to be at the cutting edge. You're right in your pond... of blood."

"It seems the police are hiding very important information. If I don't get something from the inside, we're going to come out tomorrow with the same story as all the other papers, it will be the ruin of me, the end of my career," declared Maricruz.

"Sweetie, don't get histrionic on me," said Pedro. "There's a solution for everything. The solution is here," he added, gently raising the reporter's skirt.

She looked at him intrigued, offering no resistance. "Those beautiful thighs will be your salvation, sweetie. You're going to need a top that shows to the world that little belly button and the shortest and tightest lycra shorts in your wardrobe. At lunchtime we'll go to the Sabana and, with a bit of luck, you'll get what you want."

"What's this about?"

"The best contact you've got right now," Pedro said. "You're lucky to have friends so well connected."

The homicide chief was a man familiar with death. He had spent eight years looking at corpses and it had been a long time since he had been shocked by anything he saw in the mortuary, however brutal. He imagined that in his job astonishment or any other emotion was no longer possible, just a few cold and concrete recordings: a victim, an identification (if this was possible), an approximate age, details about the corpse's colour or degree of rigor mortis. On very rare occasions, the face of death retained an inkling of the human condition (pain, complacency, a final rage) that was capable of impressing him, but even in such circumstances, his unease was ephemeral and could be controlled. He focused only on rigorous observation of the details, the physical circumstances that almost no one noticed. The temperature of a made bed, the contents of a rubbish bin, a trace of perfume

on the languid hand of a victim, all contained universes of information which his methodical mind was capable of placing in the gaps of the investigation until it formed a scrupulous hypothesis. With one look, for example, he could anticipate the forensic expert in establishing the cause of death and he was rarely mistaken. "This one was killed somewhere else, with a blow to the head, and then they brought him here to make it look like an accident," he could say with certainty after close scrutiny of the victim or the scene. Or "This one looks more like a suicide than anything else, although the weapon has vanished." Deductions that, at the end of the day, came from an astute judgment. He did not possess some superhuman skill, it was no different to the diagnostic power of a practising doctor, car mechanic, or one of those fortune tellers who say they can read our future in their cards but who do nothing more than search in our eyes for the torments of the heart.

So the homicide chief was the first to be surprised when the scene affected him so much that his solid legs, accustomed to running marathons, began to shake and he had to vomit up the breakfast of hotdog and coffee he had eaten shortly before he was told about the corpse. He felt a kind of inner weakening, of pain and disgust at the human condition and, for the first time in many years, he regretted the damn luck that had propelled him into a police career when he could have been, for example, an excellent technical worker with a peaceful life, a stable marriage and a bigger salary.

The duty judge, Aurelia Carranza, did not even dare to look. She kept her distance, leaning on a eucalyptus tree, her arms across her chest. She expected the police to take the photos, collect any possible clues and call it a day, without even reading the description of the crime scene written on the police forms. She threw the documents in her briefcase and ordered them to pick up the body.

"Have they finished yet?" She approached Gustavo with an air of suspicion that the homicide chief instantly recognised.

"In a couple of minutes," he answered.

She was a woman somewhat over 30, with a chalky whiteness

and air of abandonment that might have had something to do with the thickness of her glasses or a certain adolescent candour hinted at in her easy smile. The officer observed her out of the corner of his eye and, in spite of her spectacles and formal clothes, she seemed to be a beautiful woman. So she had seemed since she had arrived to work in the legal section two years before and their work had brought them together. Her attractiveness was linked, perhaps, to the intense paleness of her skin or her frail presence, or something less physical that he could not put his finger on.

“Why didn’t you want to see it?” the policeman asked.

“I’m not in the mood,” said the judge.

To Gustavo her explanation did not seem professional, but he did not feel qualified to comment. He shrugged and tried to change the subject.

“I’ve been working in this for years, but I’ve never seen anything like it. Whoever did this must have been in the final stages of dementia. The girl is practically...”

“Okay,” she interrupted him. “I don’t want to hear the details, at least not today.”

“What’s up? You’ve never been shocked by gruesome scenes?”

“Perhaps they don’t shock me, but they tire me. Last night I had a terrible migraine and today I’ve got a headache. I don’t want to break a date I’ve got tonight.”

“You’ve got a date!” Gustavo exclaimed in the voice of someone announcing the arrival of aliens.

“Yes, is there something wrong with that?”

“No nothing, who’s the lucky guy?” he asked, and immediately regretted doing so.

That look of hers is telling you that you’re an idiot, he thought at that precise moment, but Aurelia just smiled enigmatically, from the depth of her black eyes.

“Don’t be indiscreet Gustavo,” she said softly, “someone who’s not blind.”

Gustavo spent that morning with his head spinning in confusion. The office was buzzing with activity and with all that commotion, people coming and going, telephones ringing endlessly,

people shouting at each other, any idea of concentrating was an illusion. In his memory, the sinister scene of the crime alternated with the tender smile and freckles of Aurelia Carranza, and the surprising revealingness of her low-cut dress. But more than the woman's charms, what tormented him were her last words. "No one is blind." What the devil did she mean? The only blind one here was her (you could tell that from the size of her glasses) and it did not seem reasonable to presume that she was alluding to her own physical limitations. Although he was a good observer, he had never been very good at picking up subliminal messages. The only thing he knew clearly was that the judge had fired one at him and he did not know whether to translate it as a straightforward joke or a formal attack on his chivalry.

He shook his head to rid himself of extraneous thoughts and focus on the case. The important thing, he said to himself, was to carry on diligently before the usual police ineptitude began to erase any leads that did exist. However, nothing came to him beyond the same old formulas, which seemed inadequate for such unusual crimes.

He was just about to call off his lunchtime jog, the only routine that no sudden pressing work matter could interfere with, when he received the telephone call that changed his life.

"Prepare yourself," Pedro said, "I'm going to introduce you to the most stunning babe in the Costa Rican press."

"Come on cousin, I've been around far too long for this sort of stunt," he said in self-defence. "What you want is information for your paper. I swear I'd willingly give it to you if I had it, but there aren't even suspects... we're completely in the dark."

"In this case, you have nothing to lose and much to gain. I give you my word that my friend is absolutely gorgeous, a work of the celestial angels." He went on: "If I'm lying, you don't have to be my friend. You can disown me as your cousin..."

"Okay," Gustavo relented. "In any case, it would give me a chance to clear my mind, but tell your friend to be under no illusions. We'll meet at 12.30pm on the track at the south side of the Sabana."

Gustavo thought he was suffering an optical illusion when he

saw Pedro accompanied by that girl who, for reasons that at first seemed obscure, seemed so extraordinarily familiar and so peculiarly attractive. She smiled at him from a distance and he felt as if he had waited an eternity for that smile. She approached and the vision was even more pleasing, but it was not until she held out her hand, touching the tips of his fingers, that it all became clear: Pedro's friend was just one of those reporters who meandered around the offices of the Judicial Police looking for information. But unlike other journalists, who did so frequently, she had neither asked him for an interview nor stopped him in the corridors to press on him urgent questions. Nevertheless, it was impossible not to look at her.

"Pedro told me that you also like sport," he said after a formal introduction. "And I see you've come prepared. Shall we do a few laps, or would you prefer to talk right away?"

"We can talk while we run."