

Ir a Cielo ahora (Go to Heaven now)

I woke up again last night in fear, sweating. The people that I'm paid to protect are acting insane. During my dream, the image of Brother Carlos Angel Daniel floated into my brain – a nice-looking Mexican with flowing black hair and moustache. He wore an old Roman toga that was dark blue, with red streaks running through it. The top of the robe is woven with real gold thread; gold stars decorate the fabric. His worn, brown sandals had red straps to hold them on his feet. But it was his eyes – those bottomless black eyes...eyes that you could fall into...eyes that could capture your soul; it was those eyes that were his most powerful weapon. The fat red slash that runs across his face tells all – if you know what you're looking at.

Brother Daniel runs the church named "*Ir a Cielo ahora*," which means "*Go to Heaven now*," and it's up to me to stop him. Trouble is, as I've heard many times, from many people – to get to Heaven, you have to die first. That's where I come in – my name is Hans Loren, and I'm a Lieutenant in the Huntsville, Alabama police department. I'm in charge of the Homicide Department – and actually, I have a lot of bad nights.

Brother Carlos Angel Daniel (whom his followers call 'Brother Angel') came to Huntsville a few years ago from the slums of Mexico City. I haven't been able to find out much about his life in Mexico, other than the fact that he was, at some point in his life, a tour guide to the *Teotihuacan* Pyramids, which are located about an hour north of Mexico City. I also know that he was arrested once for unearthing artifacts from the Pre-Hispanic civilization at *Templo Mayor* in Mexico City's *Zocalo*. *Templo Mayor* is an important religious area for the Aztecs. One of my sergeants told me about the *Templo*: it's located right under the Mexico City Metropolitan Cathedral are Aztec ruins. When the Spanish Conquerors arrived, they promptly destroyed the native temples and built their own churches on top of the ruins. I found out that, apparently, a couple of years ago, Brother Daniel helped himself to some of the archeological treasures of *Templo Mayor* and sold them to wealthy U.S. tourists.

When he showed up here in Huntsville, he promptly began a new scam – charging *gringos* lots of money for a trip to Heaven. And that wouldn't be so bad except that he delivered on his promise in a most gruesome manner: he incinerated his benefactors with a giant LASER. That's right: people paid Brother Angel to flash-fry them into Heaven!

Last Monday, Julia Moreno de Silva reported that her father was missing. I was assigned to the investigation, since it was another Hispanic "missing-person," and that made 3 so far this month. I went to interview her at her apartment on Blue Spring Road, which is on the north side of Huntsville. She was very attractive and very cooperative. She reported that her father drew out all his savings a week ago, and then simply stopped coming home. He never owned a cell phone, so she couldn't contact him.

"How much money did he take out?"

"5,200 bucks," she replied, off the top of her head.

I didn't tell her that the other missing-person cases that I was investigating were very similar. It had all the earmarks of a bunko scam.

"You're sure?"

"Yeah, I do his bank account and Social Security statements."

"Do you have any idea where he went last week?"

She shook her head, but then suddenly she burst out "Please find my father. Is he alive? Is he in trouble?"

"I'm going to find out," I told her, even though I didn't have any leads yet. "Did he mention anything at all?"

"Just a minute – sí! He said something about *cielo ahora* – heaven now. Wait – he said "*Ir a Cielo ahora*, which means 'I'm going to heaven now'. What did he mean?"

I figured that I'd have to brush up on my Español to answer her question. "I don't know yet, Miss de Silva. Please call me if you remember anything else."

"Thanks. Adió," she replied as I left. Well, at least I had a new clue, but I had no idea what it meant.

When I got back to the station, my sergeant told me what 'cielo ahora' meant, but he didn't have any clues about how it related to the string of missing persons that I was working on.

"If you get a chance, please ask around. Any help would be appreciated."

He nodded okay.

The next day, after roll call, he told me about Brother Angel, and how he had recently showed up in Huntsville. "He's got a church just a few blocks from here, over on Pulaski Pike," he said.

"A church? What do you mean 'he's got a church'?"

"He's formed a church named '*Ir a cielo ahora*', which means 'go to heaven now', he replied. It's on Pulaski Pike – it's that old Catholic church that looks like it should be torn down."

"I remember that place. I'll drive over there this afternoon and talk to him. Thanks. I need to investigate the church and Brother Angel."

"He's a strange character."

"What do you mean by that?"

"He's some kind of cult priest. Nobody wants to talk about him, that's all I know."

"Swell."

I ran 'Brother Angel' through the FBI and Interpol computers and got some information. He was wanted in Mexico on a theft of artifacts charge, but there was no U.S. warrant out on him. I called the Mexican Consulate in Washington and asked them for more information. They were pretty cold and uncooperative – they just really didn't want to help out at all.

I grabbed a bite of lunch and decided to head over to the church when my cell phone rang – the caller id said "*Embassy of Mexico*." I answered the call.

"Señor Lieutenant Loren, my name is Jose Hidalgo. I am in the Consular section of the Mexican Embassy. I am with the office of *Asuntos Penales* – what you would call Criminal Affairs. We are interested in your interest in Brother Carlos Angel Daniel. Would you care to tell me why you want to talk to him?"

"Well, sir, I can't comment on an ongoing investigation, but I can tell you that I'm going to interview him this afternoon. Unofficially, I'm investigating him regarding a missing person report."

"You think that Brother Angel had something to do with a missing person?"

"I'm not sure yet, sir – this is still very early in my investigation – unofficially, of course."

"Of course. Let me tell you: Brother Angel is very dangerous. Be very careful around him! My government would like to get him back and ask him about certain stolen artifacts, and some other questions. Where is he now, Lieutenant?"

"I can't say."

"Well, Lieutenant Loren, my government has asked me to help you with your investigation – unofficially, of course."

So that was the deal – Mexico wanted to find Brother Angel, in the hopes of extraditing him to Mexico for questioning. "But we don't have an extradition treaty with Mexico," I replied.

"You are correct, señor. This is all unofficial. My government is offering a substantial reward for any information leading to the return of artifacts to our country. We take theft of our cultural heritage very seriously in Mexico. I talked to our presidente, and he would like me to assist you in any way possible, but he would be very grateful if I am allowed to ask about the missing artifacts – unofficially, of course."

"Of course."

"I can be in Alabama this evening. Is that alright with you, Lieutenant?"

Sure, I thought – the last thing that I needed was an important Mexican official tagging along on a missing person case. "Ahhh..."

"Señor Loren, I promise to bring more information to you, and I will not get in your way."

"Okay," was all I could say. "Please call me from the airport when you get to Huntsville and I'll pick you up."

"Muchas gracias, señor," he said as the phone clicked.

A few minutes later my inbox received several e-mails, all from the Mexican Consulate. They all contained background information about Brother Angel. I decided to wait until Mr. Hidalgo arrived, before questioning Brother Angel – maybe I'll get some valuable information, I thought; and boy was I right.

I picked up the Mexican policeman, Señor Jose Hidalgo at the Huntsville International Airport, just before 10 P.M. He was a tall, thin, pleasant man who spoke good English, but threw Spanish words into sentences whenever it pleased him.

"Please señor, what is your best restaurant in town – we have much to discuss. The Mexican government is buying dinner tonight."

I drove him to the nearby Hilton hotel where he checked-in, and then we went to the famous *Ruth's Chris* steak restaurant across the street. He started speaking before the waiter arrived – and I could tell that he was very upset.

"Brother Carlos Angel Daniel is a most dangerous person. Have you contacted him yet?"

"No, Mr. Hidalgo, I was waiting for you to arrive."

"Good. We have much to speak about," he said just as the waiter arrived to take our drink order.

Before our drinks arrived, Mr. Hidalgo started talking about this man that he called 'Brother Angel', but I quickly got it: Brother Angel was the 'Angel of Death', as far as the Mexican government was concerned. Besides stealing Aztec artifacts, he'd performed some experiments on people in Mexico, and the Federal Police wanted him for questioning – apparently they suspected Brother Angle of murder – several murders, in fact.

"Brother Angel has a weapon that he perfected in the slums of Mexico City, and you must keep this information totally secret, sí?"

"Okay," I said as the drinks arrived. Then the waiter spent several minutes taking our order. When he left, Mr. Hidalgo continued.

"He has made a very powerful LASER. We think that it can, how do you say *destello*? He keyed the word into his iPhone and said "Ah yes, flash. He flash fries people with his LASER."

I sat there dumbfounded, but I understood perfectly what he was saying. "So that's what 'ir a cielo ahora' means – Brother Angel will send you to heaven by incinerating you?"

"Sí, señor."

"Swell."

He handed me a sealed brown envelope. "Only open it in private."

"Okay, but why is he here in Huntsville?"

"I really don't know. What I do know is that I'd like to ask your kind permission for two of our Federal Police officers to join us, as we track him down – I can't emphasize enough how dangerous he is."

"How long would that take?" I was starting to get very concerned, especially about letting Mexican Federal Police operate in Huntsville.

"I can have them here in the morning. This is all unofficial, of course."

"Of course," I replied as the sizzling hot steaks were delivered.

"*Buen apetito*," he said.

"Yup," I replied. I could wait till tomorrow, and I could use all the help I could get. "Enjoy."

When dinner was over and the table was cleared, we both finished our wine without speaking much. Mr. Hidalgo called a couple of numbers on his iPhone and spoke in rapid Spanish.

Finally he said "My presidente thanks you for your cooperation and help. We will be joined in the morning by two *Federáles*."

We walked back to his hotel, and then I went home to open the envelope and have some bad dreams.

Chapter 2.

After morning roll call, I went over to the hotel to pick up Mr. Hidalgo. He was on his cell phone, waiting in the lobby.

"My officers will be at the airport in about 1 hour. Do you have time for breakfast? On me, of course."

"Sure. I read that stuff last night and I have several questions."

We grabbed some breakfast at the hotel's restaurant, and I set my notebook on the table. Last night I'd written down many questions while I read the material that Mr. Hidalgo supplied.

I started "So you're looking at Brother Angel as a mass-murder suspect, right? The stuff about stealing artifacts – that's not for real, is it?"

He looked up and said "You're very clever, señor, and of course you're right. He made a small fortune selling Aztec artifacts to rich gringos, and then he used that money to construct his weapon of death. Now we'd like to get the artifacts back, but mostly we're interested in the deaths that he caused in the slums of Mexico City."

I nodded. "How can you be sure that he did that? I don't understand the connection between Aztec artifacts and murdering people with a LASER."

"At first, we didn't believe it either – he was a quiet man with no particular background. Our Federáles worked hard for 2 years trying to find out that Carlos Daniel was involved in the disappearance and murder of poor people in the northern part of Mexico City. The mayor did not want to have a panic on his hands, so the Federáles were asked to withhold information from the public. They always seemed to be just one step behind him, when he eventually disappeared completely. Now that he's in your country, I assure you that you must be very careful – he is a vicious killer, without remorse. He turned himself into a priest so that he could talk people out of their money and murder them."

I nodded again. "Do you have some kind of proof? In that information packet that I read last night, I didn't see anything that could be used in a court of law – at least here in the U.S."

"Oh, señor, he's much too clever to leave proof. As you read last night, all he leaves is a teaspoon full of ashes. Our forensics department could never even get a DNA sample. The LASER that he uses is so powerful that it destroys evidence."

"But were there any witnesses? I didn't see anything about witnesses."

"We have some blurry images from bank cameras that showing Brother Angel talking to street people who were later reported missing, but no 'evidence', as you would say."

"If he's mass-murderer, how did he get out of Mexico and get a visa for the U.S.?"

"Señor, he did not get a U.S. visa – he is here illegally. As far as how he got out of Mexico, we both know that that's a big problem in both our countries. He probably just walked across the border along with the thousands of other citizens of my country who do that every year."

"I looked at his picture. He is very scary."

"Sí, señor. We must be very, very careful with him. He is a cold, ruthless killer."

I glanced at my watch and asked "Anything else you can tell me before your friends arrive?"

"Yes, and it is not in any of the written reports. Brother Angel targets mentally defective adults. In Mexico, you see, we don't have such a good welfare system for homeless people, as you have in the U.S. Brother Angel finds street people who have money, but few or no relatives, and then he robs them and kills them. He's counting on there not being anyone to care about the missing people."

"Swell. We need to get going to the airport."

When we arrived at the terminal, there was a commotion going on at the baggage claim carousel. Mr. Hidalgo quickly recognized his men and saw that an Airport Police officer was questioning them.

I recognized Officer Brator questioning the Mexican police officers. "Dennis, what's the problem?"

"Lieutenant, I can see that these men are carrying weapons, which is illegal in the Huntsville airport. They said that they're Mexican Federal Police, but I haven't seen their identification yet."

"Let me handle it, will you?"

"Okay, Lt."

"Mr. Hidalgo, please have your men show Officer Brator their police id's."

He spoke in rapid Spanish, and they both produced badges and picture id's. They turned to Officer Brator and apologized to him.

"Okay, Lt., just doin' my job."

"You were right to question them. I'll take over here. Carry on."

"Right."

The three Mexican police officers spoke for about 5 minutes and then Mr. Hidalgo introduced them to me as Roberto and Juan. They each gave a small bow and shook my hand. "*Mucho gusto*," they both said. I just said "Howdy."

They picked up their luggage and we piled into my car. On the way to the hotel, they spoke non-stop Spanish.

After they checked-in, Mr. Hidalgo explained that they had new information on Brother Angel. "And it's not good. It looks like they found the room where Brother Angel used to have his LASER. There were 144 bodies there – or at least 144 small piles of ashes, all in neat rows. My presidente wants us to find Brother Angel very much. And he also wants the stolen Aztec artifact that he is carrying."

"Okay, we'll head over there this morning," I told him. "I've got a SWAT team assigned to back us up."

"Muy bien."

At 11:00, we converged on the old Catholic church. There was a new banner over the front door which read "*Ir a Cielo ahora* ."

The SWAT team leader asked me who was going to lead the assault on the church.

"Sergeant, this isn't an assault. I just want to talk to Mr. Daniel about some missing-person reports. Please stand by to back me up, but I don't expect a fire-fight."

"Okay, Lt."

"Mr. Hidalgo, please wait out here. I want to talk to Mr. Daniel alone. I don't want anything to go wrong, and you're not familiar with U.S. police procedures for questioning a suspect."

"Sí, señor. We will wait."

My guts tightened up. I double-checked my handgun. I went up to the church door and opened it. It was dark and cool inside. In front was a huge poster that showed blue sky, white clouds and a giant golden eye peering over a pyramid. High-intensity lights in the room pointed at the poster. I walked slowly up the aisle to the podium and looked around, but I didn't see anyone.

"Mr. Daniel?" I called out.

Silence.

"Mr. Daniel?"

I heard a quiet drop of water falling somewhere. Then I looked around the old church and went into each of the rooms, but the building was empty. I went back outside, and I squinted at the bright outdoor sunlight.

"Sergeant, you may secure your team. Mr. Daniel is apparently not here."

"Okay, Lt."

"Mr. Hidalgo, please come with me. Please make sure that your men understand that there is to be no gun play. There are no charges against Mr. Daniel in the U.S."

The four of us went into the church, and the three Mexicans whispered briefly, and then fanned out. They searched the church thoroughly. There were no signs of Brother Angel, and no signs of a giant LASER.

"I guess we'll have to stake out the place and wait for him to return."

"Sí, señor. We will wait."

We drove into the next block and kept our eyes on the church – Brother Angel would eventually return.

By supper time, Mr. Hidalgo suggested that we work in shifts, so I called the motor pool and had them send over an unmarked car. Two of us would wait here while the other two went to dinner, and then we'd rotate shifts throughout the night.

It was a very long night.

About 5 A.M., someone came out of the church. Roberto and I quietly got out of the car and ran to the fast-moving person.

"Halt, police!"

The runner stopped and raised his hands.

"Turn around."

It was a woman – a young Mexican woman.

"Who are you and what were you doing in the church?"

"My name is Lisa Moreno. I was praying. Just praying."

"Is there anyone else in there with you?"

"No, just me. My parents used to come to this church when the Catholic priests were here. I still come here because I'm used to the place. It's quiet and dark. I find it easy to pray here."

I didn't think that she was telling me the whole truth, but I said "Okay Miss Moreno. You may go. If you see anything suspicious, please call me," and I handed her my card. Her black Hispanic eyes twinkled, and I almost thought that she was flirting with me.

She looked over her shoulder, back towards the church. "Well, Lieutenant Loren," she said as she read my card. "There was one funny thing though – about a week ago, I think. I heard something that

sounded like a freight train coming right through the church. Then I thought that there was a bright red light. I thought that the fire department drove by, but I wasn't sure. Then it was all quiet again, so I prayed."

I returned Roberto's worried look. He dialed his cell phone and talked for a couple of minutes.

"Thank you, Miss Moreno. You may go now."

When she walked away Roberto said "Señor Hidalgo wants to know why none of us saw her go in, but we only saw her come out. He doesn't trust her story."

"I don't either. If she went in the back door or a side door, she would have left by the same door. I'll have another team watch all the doors."

"Sí, señor."

In an hour, Mr. Hidalgo and Juan rolled up and brought coffee and sandwiches. Roberto recalled the events of the morning in Spanish. I called my Captain and briefed him. He agreed to lend me a 2-man team for a couple of days.

Almost as an afterthought, I ran the name Lisa Moreno through our computer. Unfortunately there are a lot of 'Lisa Moreno' in the computer, both in Huntsville, and in the FBI's NCIC computer. I figured I'd look at the detailed printouts later.

Just before lunch, an old man with a grocery bag shuffled up to the church and went inside. Mr. Hidalgo asked if we should follow him in.

"He might be the next victim," he said.

I had to agree. "Roberto and Juan – wait here. Mr. Hidalgo, go around to the back door and watch."

I went inside the dark church and felt the temperature drop 20 degrees compared to outside. It was so quiet I could feel it. I smelled the slightly musty smell of a closed-up building. And then suddenly I heard a sound like a giant engine starting up, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw a red flash! I drew my weapon and started looking around in earnest. I didn't find anything. The church was utterly silent again.

I decided that what I needed was more eyes, so I ran outside and called for Mr. Hidalgo and his men. We went over the church very carefully, but found nothing unusual.

"That old man's not coming out," I said.

"No," replied Roberto. "*Él está muerto* – he's dead." He crossed himself.

"Okay, gentlemen, where did he go? Is there a hidden panel somewhere? A push button? A rock that hides a passage? What just happened?"

We all started poking and probing walls, paintings, and statues. Juan went around the room, looking at and pressing each floor tile, looking for a latch of some sort. An hour passed – nothing. While we stood around contemplating our next move, I heard a single drop of water somewhere.

"*Ah ha!* I heard that last time, too. Find where the water is, and I bet we'll find Brother Angel."

We waited silently until we heard the next drop of water, but everyone thought that it came from a different direction. We waited another 15 minutes and we all heard the quiet drip. We all faced east and pointed to the same spot on the wall.

"Now, we're getting somewhere," I said as we converged on a wall-panel. We each took turns trying to poke and prod the panel to get it to open up, with no luck.

Juan said "Smell that?"

We smelled a faint odor of what? Bar-b-queue chicken? Something like that. Soon, we heard another drop of water fall. We knew that we were close to something. Just then, we heard a man's grunt, followed by some scraping on a rocky surface. The panel in front of us popped open, and out stepped Brother Angel.

Chapter 3.

"Put your hands where I can see them!" I shouted.

I looked at him and I saw exactly the picture that I had been shown – dark black eyes, long hair, a Roman toga, and a red slash across his face. My heart pounded. I had automatically drawn my sidearm and was pointing it right at Brother Angel's head.

He looked at me and laughed. Then he unleashed a long string of Spanish, which I didn't understand at all. I looked at Mr. Hidalgo, and he translated for me.

"He says that this is his church, and we're not welcome. He is a priest, and this is a church, and we should leave right now. He has a lawyer. We should leave now."

"No, Mr. Daniel, we're not leaving. I'm investigating a missing person report, and I have a valid reason to question you. We're going to the police station now. Please put your hands behind your head and turn around."

Mr. Hidalgo translated in real-time.

Brother Angel laughed and said "Call my lawyer," in perfect English. "You have no right to be in my church. And I'm not going to any police station."

"Oh, you're going, alright. Put your hands behind your head. Church or no church, you're going to answer some questions."

"We'll see," he said as he turned and bolted down a dark flight of stairs. I fired my weapon at his fleeing figure, but I missed him as he rounded the first flight of stairs. We all chased after him, but he was in his home turf, and we were completely blind in the dark. Within 90 seconds, I called a halt to the chase.

"He's gone," I panted. "I'll call for backup."

I got on my cell phone and called the SWAT team. They promised to be there in 15 minutes or less. We just waited quietly in the dark musty stairwell.

"I didn't know that this old church had a basement," I said. "Only a small percentage of houses and business in Huntsville have basements. The ground shifts too much, and basements crack."

Mr. Hidalgo shushed me. "Look – light."

Sure enough, our eyes were dark-adapted by now and I saw a tiny point of light ahead. There was a chip in the mortar that held the huge old blocks of limestone together. We knew where we wanted to go, but we waited for backup to arrive.

I heard a noise like a freight train, right on the other side of the limestone block wall. "*IT'S A TRAP!! Run!*" I shouted.

Juan shouted "*Corre a pedir ayuda!*" but he never made it out of the stairwell. As Mr. Hidalgo and Roberto fell on top of me, we saw a brief red flash that seemed to fill the long stairway. We smelled a smell like bar-b-queue chicken, and then it was over, and we lay, gasping for breath – not believing what just happened.

"Son of a..." I gasped.

"*Perra,*" added Mr. Hidalgo. "Juan was like family to me."

Roberto rolled off me, and I could see him crying. "This is what happened in Mexico City when we tried to take him last time. He is the *Angel of Death!*"

I looked at Mr. Hidalgo and asked "Last time?"

"Sí, Lieutenant. We tried several times. I warned you that he was a very dangerous *hómbre*. Our presidente wants him back dead or alive, and he really would prefer dead."

"I promise you we'll do the best we can to capture him and bring him to justice."

"Señor, there is no justice for a person like this. If Juan was your family, what would you do right now?"

I pondered that question, but remained silent. In a minute, the SWAT team entered the church. I briefed the sergeant, and he ordered his men to set up a perimeter.

The SWAT team went down the winding staircase in force, but they couldn't find anything other than a handful of ashes where Juan had been.

"We need to get blueprints of this church," I suggested. "It's a labyrinth down here. I've never seen anything so crazy."

The SWAT team stayed in place while Mr. Hidalgo and I drove back to the station. He called someone in Mexico and talked for a few minutes. When we got downtown I updated my Captain. He got very upset.

"We need to get a search warrant, and go through that entire church. Tear it down brick by brick if you have to, but find that killer."

"Yes, sir," we'll do that. "Brother Angel is the most dangerous killer that Huntsville has ever seen. We'll get him, sir."

I called the Municipal Justice Center and asked for a judge. The receptionist said "Judge Camarone is on duty today; please hold."

After a couple of minutes I heard a deep voice say "Lieutenant Loren?"

"Yes, Your Honor. May I come over and discuss a search warrant with you?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. Be here in 15 minutes. Room B-112."

I drove over there with Mr. Hidalgo and we went to the second floor, where the judge was waiting for us. I introduced myself and Mr. Hidalgo, and we were asked to be seated.

"Judge, the old Catholic church over on Pulaski Pike is apparently being used by an illegal Mexican alien named Carlos Angel Daniel, but who calls himself 'Brother Angel'. He is pretending to be the leader of a religious cult called '*Ir a Cielo ahora*', which means 'go to Heaven now'." This morning I went there to question him about a missing person, and he killed a Mexican Federal Police officer. We think that he's a bunko artist who takes money from old people, and then uses a very powerful LASER to murder them. The Mexican government says that he's killed at least 144 persons in Mexico City."

"Wait, stop, hold on!" Judge Camarone interrupted. "You want to search a church? You want me to sign a search warrant for a Catholic church? Is that right?"

"Yes, Your Honor. We believe that there is a murderer inside the old church, and we want to search the entire place."

"Well now son, just hold on a minute. Y'all don't know much about the Constitution, or else you think that the First Amendment is not in effect today, eh?"

"But sir! We have a murderer hiding in the church..."

"Son, did you see him murder anyone?"

"Well no, Your Honor. We were hiding in the basement stairwell when he cut loose with a LASER and vaporized Juan."

"Wait, son. I asked if you saw him murder anyone. It sounds like your answer is 'no'. I don't give out search warrants based on what you thought happened, so let me ask you again: did you see him murder anyone?"

"No, sir."

"Okay then. Mr. Hidalgo, did you see this man murder anyone?"

"No, sir."

"Okay then. Let me explain something to you two: the First Amendment prohibits the government from impeding the free exercise of religion. Now, Lieutenant, didn't you say that Mr. Daniel is a priest?"

"Well, Your Honor, he says that he is, but really he's an illegal alien who has killed over 144 people."

"Now son, you're testing my patience. You've stated that he's the leader of his church, and that he actually owns a church. And you haven't established any facts regarding his alleged murders. You have to be very careful what you say here. If he's a murderer, then bring me some evidence and I'll give you a search warrant. Otherwise, I'm afraid that letting your SWAT team loose in a church to hunt down its religious leader sounds like automatic grounds for appeal later on. I need facts so that I can do my job successfully. Do you understand that, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir."

"*Cabrón*," muttered Mr. Hidalgo.

"Mr. Hidalgo: you are dangerously close to being held in contempt of court. I know enough Spanish to understand that you called me a bastard. Now if you'll please leave this instant, I won't have the Sheriff throw you in jail. Is that clear?"

"I apologize, sir. I am upset that a close friend of mine was killed an hour ago. I humbly apologize," and then he left the room quietly.

"Lieutenant, I don't know and I don't care how Mexican justice works, but I know the American court system thoroughly. I'd advise you not to come to me with allegations and ask for a search warrant. Come with some facts, and I'll give you what you need. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Your Honor; quite."

"And if you bring in a thug from the Mexican government, I'll throw you in jail for contempt. He has no standing in the American jurisprudence system, do you understand?"

"Yes, Your Honor; quite," and then I left quietly, too.

What should I do? What could I do? I couldn't supply proof of anything. I'd never had a judge treat me that way during routine police work. Usually, getting a search warrant was easy to do if there was "probable cause." But today, the bar was raised above that, to an almost-impossible burden-of-proof level.

Mr. Hidalgo came over and gave a slight bow and apologized profusely.

"I'm not holding anything against you, Mr. Hidalgo. Your friend was just murdered and the judge made us dance around like puppets on a string."

"Still, I am sorry if I offended him or you. I am only here to see that justice is done."

I knew that he was sincere, and I dropped it.

"I need to call off the SWAT team; they're waiting for the search warrant." I called the SWAT sergeant and told him to stand down. He acknowledged my request and hung up.

Mr. Hidalgo, we need some kind of proof that's acceptable. What can your government supply that meets judge Camarone's definition of proof?

"I will make a call. Will you please pick me up at the hotel at 8:00? I will have an answer by then."

"Sure, I'll be glad to. I'm going to do some research too."

Chapter 4.

Later that evening Mr. Hidalgo said quietly "I talked to the presidente, and he is sending a courier with proof of Brother Angel's guilt. I will have it in the morning."

I wondered if it would be cooked-up or real, but I kept my thoughts to myself. "I've been thinking – we only have one lead – the girl that came out of the church, Miss Lisa Moreno."

"Oh sí, she did not tell us the whole story," he replied. "Maybe tomorrow we should call on her."

"Maybe tonight," I replied.

"Sí."

After dinner we drove over to an apartment house on Third Street. I walked up to Miss Moreno's door and was getting ready to knock when I heard a scuffle inside, and then a crash, like glass breaking. I drew my weapon and kicked in the door. I was instantly knocked to the ground by a running man, and my weapon discharged, knocking him sideways. As I sat up and caught my breath, I saw Brother Angel running like the wind up Third Street – and he was leaving a trail of blood.

I saw Mr. Hidalgo get out of the car and chase after him, but Brother Angel was much faster, and he dodged and weaved like an Alabama football player trying for a goal. In a few minutes, it was over and Mr. Hidalgo came back to me.

"You shot him," he panted. "I could see the blood. He will have to find a doctor soon."

"Hang on, let's find out what he was doing with Miss Lisa Moreno first."

"Sí."

He waited in the car while I looked into her apartment. She was lying on the floor sobbing. "He told me that he was going to die today and I didn't believe him. Now he's been shot," she wept. "*Cabrón!*"

I guessed that she meant that I was a bastard for shooting her husband, but I reached out to comfort her and she grabbed me and held on tightly while she wept. Then suddenly she reached her face up and kissed me – hard. Well I didn't know where that was going, and I certainly didn't want to cloud the investigation so I pulled back and she looked up at me and hugged me. I finally backed away from her and she tried to hold onto my hands.

"I really need to ask you some questions, Miss Moreno. I'm investigating a murder and a missing-person report. Brother Angel was shot – where will he go for treatment?"

Suddenly her black eyes were full of electricity. "He'll be in the church – he has a safe room downstairs."

By now, I was sure that she was flirting with me.

"He can't get into the church – we've got men watching all the entrances."

She reached out and took one of my hands and said "I could show you how to get in without any of your police knowing about it. I did it twice while you were outside, watching."

I pulled my hand back and said "So show me."

"Please?"

"Okay, please show me."

We went to the neighborhood just a block west of the church. She lifted open a tornado shelter door and started down the some stairs. I grabbed her hand and stopped her. "Just tell me which way to go – I'll do the rest."

"No, señor Lieutenant, you'll get lost. Just follow me."

We descended a winding, broken staircase of old limestone stairs. It got dark and damp. I pulled out a small flashlight and she led me by the hand through a maze of tunnels.

"These were made long before the Civil War," she said. "The Catholic priests needed a way to escape in case the local Cherokee Indians invaded the church."

"I thought the Cherokee Indians lived out West?"

"Sí, after they were forced to march the Trail of Tears in 1838. The Indians that survived became Oklahoma Cherokees, but they came from Florida, Alabama and Tennessee. This church was where the White people and their slaves gathered for safety from the Cherokee raiding parties."

I just nodded – I really had no idea about that aspect of Alabama history. The air got warmer and I could hear running water.

"That's part of the Huntsville River," she said. "Right over there it runs underground for about a mile. The church used the underground water supply in case of emergencies. I learned all this from Brother Angel when he bought the church."

Before she could say more, she tightened her grip on my hand and put her index finger on her lips. We traveled quietly for another 200 yards, and then we both heard moaning and suppressed crying. Our eyes met – we both know it was Brother Angel making the noise. I drew my weapon and put Lisa behind me. We crept along the dark hallway until it suddenly expanded into a large cavern.

A lone figure sat on the floor, sobbing. When we entered, he held a pistol and said "Well come in. You must be the policeman who's come to arrest me." Then he saw me in the dim light and he said "Ah, sí,

señor Lieutenant, my noble pursuer – I'm glad to see it's you. And there's my pretty Lisa. Come in, won't you? I'm dying."

My small flashlight picked up the image of the pool of blood that he was sitting in, and I knew that my earlier shot was lethal. "Why don't you put the gun down and I'll call an ambulance for you?"

"No, señor, it's too late for that."

"Will you tell me why you killed all those people, Brother Angel?"

"It is all so simple – they asked me to; they begged me to; they forced me to. Some of them were terminally ill; some of them had lost husbands or wives or daughters; some of them were despondent; some of them felt guilty of their great wealth, because they stole it from poor people. Some were corrupt politicians, and some were murderers and rapists. There were plenty of people who had plenty of reasons. They paid me well for a quick trip to heaven, and I gave it to them." He coughed and choked on his blood.

"How many people did you kill? Some reports say 144."

"Oh no, señor: it was many hundreds who begged for my help. I never turned anyone away, even if they had no money."

I pointed up at the infernal machine that was pointing down at us. "How did you decide to build and use a LASER?"

He tried to laugh, but coughed up black blood instead. "I saw a James Bond movie once. I just liked the idea of using LASER, that's all. It is quick, quiet and very powerful. After all, you can't get to heaven without dying and I didn't want people to suffer on their way there."

He collapsed and blood flowed out of his mouth. He took off his necklace and threw it towards Lisa, but it missed her and rolled around on the floor.

"They were all my children... ir a Cielo ahora " were his last words.

My flashlight was fading, so I clicked it off. Lisa snuggled tightly to me. I could feel her tears wet the front of my shirt. "He was a servant of God," she said quietly. "He delivered people to heaven. He had great courage and love."

I hesitantly asked "You were his – wife?"

"Oh no, señor, although I loved him deeply. When my parents sold me to a brothel in Mexico City, he bought me and trained me to be his assistant. He never touched me or abused me in any way."

I felt her heart pounding next to mine, and I realized how wrong I was about absolutely everything. For the first time, I realized the real/truthful reason that people called him Brother Angel. In a few minutes I clicked my flashlight on and scanned around the room.

"Is there a light switch in here?"

Lisa pointed to one and I walked to it and flipped it on. As the fluorescent lights gasped on, I heard a sound like a freight train and I grabbed Lisa and jumped on top of her. Even through my closed eyelids, I saw the flash of red as the LASER flash-fried its final target. In a moment, I looked at the small pile of ash that used to be Brother Angel, and I thought about the entire experience. I had never thought of a mass-murderer as good – the thought had never entered my mind, but here I was, and the incredible story made perfect sense to me. I actually thought I was going insane when I suddenly wished that Judge Camarone would have been the target instead of Brother Angel.

And then Lisa took my hand and said "Brother Angel knew he was dying, and that you were coming for him, so he set up his LASER to make sure that the Mexican government would not get his body. He hated them for what they did to our people: a corrupt government that made people prefer death over life. He told me that you were an honorable man, and that I could trust you, and that you would take care of me – and he gave us gifts. Lisa pointed around the room, and I saw rows and rows of cabinets, all filled top to bottom with gold bars.

"He never spent any of the money that people paid him for their trip to heaven. Yesterday, he asked me to tell you to do some good with it. He trusted you. He told me you would do the right thing."

There must have been tens of millions of dollars worth of gold in that underground cavern. "What do you mean? *This gold is a gift?*"

"Sí, this is the collection box from the Church of *Ir a Cielo ahora*. And the LASER is yours, too. These are just tools to help people end their suffering."

I looked at the 20-foot tall weapon of destruction and just stood there, dumbfounded. Was I supposed to kill people with it? Was I supposed to be the new Angel of Death? That was too much to comprehend – my brain was totally on overload. My head was pounding.

And then Lisa walked over to where a large red marble lay on the floor and she picked it up. It was a huge ruby of incredible value, hung on a thick gold chain.

"This is for you. It is from the ancient Aztec temple in *Templo Mayor*." She reached up and put the gold chain around my neck. "It has great powers for seeing the truth. This is what the Mexican government wanted more than anything in the world – Brother Angel told me that the way to see the truth in a person's heart is the most powerful weapon imaginable."

She touched the ancient red gem on my chest. "It can see a long way. It can see many things. That's how Brother Angel knew about you; about us; about everyone. He could see good and evil."

Lisa stood on her tip-toes, holding her warm body close to mine, and the ruby that was between us got warmer and warmer. Suddenly, I saw or felt a flash of light in my brain, and I knew that she had loved me since she first saw me. My head was spinning, and I looked down at the beautiful young woman, and I kissed her, and she kissed back with a passion that I had never known. Somehow, I could see the truth in her mind – the absolute truth.

Finally, Lisa pulled me down onto the limestone floor. She lay down with her head in my lap, looking up at me and she stretched out on the cool floor. Soon she closed her eyes, and then she whispered "*Rest now, my dear señor Lieutenant. The answers will all come to you by morning.*"

The ruby felt hot against my chest, the girl was soon snoring lightly, and I finally dozed off in the utter quiet of the basement of the Church of *Ir a Cielo ahora*.

After a long night, filled with brightly-colored nightmares, I awoke – and I knew that Lisa had spoken the truth.

