

## RECON STRIKE

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San Salvador. Music filled the night, the jukeboxes and the bands of the cafes competing with the stereos of the passing cars to create a cacophony of rhythms and melodies and voices. Groups of teenagers crowded the sidewalks. The boys wore fashions seen in American rock videos, the girls styles from Cosmopolitan. Waiters in white jackets wove through the strollers to deliver trays of Suprema beer to the young men at the curbside tables. Steps away, the cars of the wealthy idled on the Paseo General Escalo??n.

Lydia Rivas watched for the Marines. She sat at one of the wrought-iron tables of the Club Mediterranee, her slim legs in tight jeans, her breasts sharp through the red silk of her blouse. A gold chain with a crucifix circled her throat. Her hands flashed with gold bracelets and rings.

A very lovely young woman, the features of her fine-boned, oval face showed her Castillian ancestry. Her gold, her silk, her French jeans, her Italian sandals, the chic styling of her lustrous dark hair marked her as one of the elite of Salvador. The oversized shopping bag on the table-- the yellow plastic marked with the red letters SASSON-- contributed to the image.

A box inside the Sasson bag concealed a 9mm Beretta 92S auto-pistol with fifteen rounds in the magazine and one under the hammer. She had hacksawed an X in the tips of all sixteen bullets. If she

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had the opportunity to use the pistol, she did not want the slugs punching neat and easily-sutured channels through the Marines. She wanted the bullets to explode, for the fragments to tear vast gaping wounds through the Americans who served the fascist regime.

"Senorita ...." A waiter set an iced orange drink in front of her. Rivas swirled the ice as she sipped from the plastic straws, her eyes watching the faces of the passing crowds. Some of the young men smiled to her but she looked away, searching for the faces of the Marines.

She heard English. She saw the waiter showing two norte-americanos to a table-- a English-speaking Chicano in his forties and an Anglo in his fifties. The men waited as a Salvadorean couple left a table. Taking a chair, the Anglo thanked the waiter in bad Spanish and passed him a folded bill.

Businessmen, Rivas guessed. In Salvador to exploit the poverty and suffering of her people. Legitimate targets for revolutionary justice. If they stayed at the restaurant and the Marines came, the businessmen died also.

"Chiclets? Dulces?" A ragged, barefoot girl offered the diners at the tables gum and candies from a wooden tray. The child's clothes had been stone-washed until the fabric disintegrated. Stitches and patches kept the rags together. Rivas shook her head, no. The girl went on to another table. Diners waved her away. The Anglo norteamericano bought a pack of gum and paid the girl a U S dollar. The girl looked at the dollar, worth four Salvadorian Colones on the black market. She counted through a

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handful of coins, trying to make change. The Anglo told her to keep the change.

The girl laughed and dodged away, calling out, "Benito, Benito." Another street child appeared. The boy wore pants so patched they appeared to be assembled from scraps of cloth. The children marveled at the foreign green and gray money as wealthy Salvadorians walked around them.

Two men in cheap suits eyed the crowds. Her body went tight as she recognized the men as officers in the National Police. She had seen the two men and other plainclothes officers several times in the past month as she waited for the Marines. The plainclothesmen operated independently of the uniformed police patrolling the street on foot and in squad cars. Other comrades in her unit had reported that the plainclothesmen watched for suspected guerrillas and foreigners, using walkie-talkies to order document checks or arrests, but never confronting suspects themselves.

If they ordered her questioned, if the police not only checked her documents, but actually detained her while they confirmed her identity in the national records, he faced interrogation and death. Her cre??dula and her passport carried the name of Marianela Quinonez-- a woman who did not exist.

Not looking at them, she watched the plainclothesmen with her peripheral vision. Fear stirred in her. She had come to the cafes many nights, sitting at a table and waiting-- alone. Perhaps they had questions for the uniformed police to ask. Her hand went to the Sasson bag on the table but stopped-- putting her hand on the pistol

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could only betray her.

A whistle startled Rivas. Blasting rock and roll came from a Mercedes idling only a few steps away. The four smiling young men inside looked out at her.

"Want to go to a disco?" The young man had his hair permed in pin curls. "And dance, dance, dance?"

Horns blared. A motorcyclist pulled back his throttle, the two-cycle engine screaming, blue-white smoke clouding against the headlights and neon.

"Dance? Dance? Fuck?"

She heard laughter as the Mercedes accelerated away. Rich boys, Rivas silently cursed. She had no interest in rich boys. She wanted to meet American Marines. Groups of Marines from the Embassy often came here to meet Salvadorian girls. Four times in the past two weeks she had waited. They had not come. Tonight, if they came, they died.

Faces passed her. The plainclothesmen disappeared into the people. She saw the short-cut black hair of Salvadorian soldiers on a night out from the barracks. A middle-aged man looking for a woman other than his wife paused when he saw Rivas alone at the table. Giving her a wide-jowled grin, he started toward her. One of his friends pulled him back into the stream of walkers. The men argued and Rivas looked away.

A young boy wove his bicycle through traffic. The headlights and taillights gleamed from the chrome of the bicycle's high V handlebars and the white vinyl of the long seat. Red reflective

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tape had been woven through the spokes of the twenty -inch wheels. In the lights, his wheels looked like circles of flame radiating silver rays. He glanced to Rivas. She ignored the boy and he passed without slowing.

Then she saw the five tall men. Despite their sports shirts and slacks, they looked like soldiers. They walked in a group, all towering above the Salvadorians walking around them, their voices and laughter loud even in the noise of the music and boulevard. The young men had the very short hair of Marines. She mentally checked their faces against the collection of photos she had memorized. Rivas called out in English:

"Don't I know you from the Embassy?"

"What?" One man asked.

"Oh, yeah!" Another answered. "You know us, I know you know us. Is this your table?"

"Would you like to sit down? I'm waiting for a friend."

"Who's your friend?" One Marine asked. He turned one of the iron chairs backwards and sat cowboy-style, leaning over the back of the chair. "Think I know her?"

"Oh, I don't think so," Rivas laughed. "She's shopping and she said she'd be here, but you know, I've been waiting and waiting."

The other Marines dragged chairs to the table. One tried to get the attention of a waiter. "Your English is very good, Miss. Would you like to have a beer with us?"

"Oh, no thank you. I'll be leaving soon--"

"No! Why? We just got here and now you're going. Stick

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around, you're beautiful, I'm in love--"

"Hey, Larry, quit it." One Marine interrupted. "Show some respect. This isn't Oceanside, you know."

Rivas smiled to rude Larry, the Marine who sat cowboy-style in the wrought-iron chair. How strange that this Marine would soon be dead. She deliberately looked him over, her eyes going from his face, to the lines of muscle in his neck, to his shirt-straining biceps. He straightened. His eyes met hers and he smiled.

"I was in Oceanside once," she told Larry. "I lived in Los Angeles for years and years and one time we went to San Diego. We stopped in Oceanside. Salvador's different, isn't it?"

The Marines laughed. "Different, yeah ...." one said.

"One of the Marines at the Embassy told me," Rivas prompted. "That you can't leave the city."

A Marine with jutting ears answered. "Yeah, can't leave the city. Don't want us to leave the Embassy, but there's a limit. Got to get out sometime."

Larry kept his eyes on Rivas. "Where did you live in L. A.?"

"Near UCLA in Westwood." Rivas took her Sasson bag off the table and set it beside her chair, the rectangle of yellow and red plastic facing the street. "Isn't this like Westwood? The cafes and discos-- it's so nice here. Like Westwood."

"Westwood?" Larry asked. "I wouldn't know about Westwood. That's for rich people. I mean, not everyone in the United States is like those people you saw in Westwood and Beverly Hills. Some of us work."

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Across the Paseo, Anna Garcia saw the signal with the red on yellow bag. She hurried around the corner to a parked Toyota taxi. The driver waited behind the wheel. Anna got into the back seat. "The Marines are there."

The driver pulled the microphone of a C B radio from under his seat and spoke. An answer came immediately. The boy on the bicycle appeared seconds later. Skidding to a stop beside the driver's window, he asked:

"She put the yellow bag out. Now I go?"

"Go," the driver nodded. "Ask them."

Whipping the small-wheeled bicycle around, the boy pedalled through the traffic, weaving and swerving around cars and trucks. He slowed near the table where Rivas talked with the young men and hopped the curb.

"Change money?" he asked in English.

"Go away, kid." A Marine told him. ?Sacase!

"You Marines? Want change dollars? Mejore que el Banco."

The Marines laughed. "Locked in on us."

"Thought we were in camouflage," one Marine joked, pointing to the gaudy Hawaiian shirt he wore.

"Do you think," Rivas asked. "That Salvadorians cannot recognize that you are soldiers? Very few norteamericanos come here now, in our time of trouble. Only distorsionados-- you know--"

"We aren't journalists!" A Marine countered.

-- reporters who come to write lies and make money. And Marines. Who come to fight for our country."

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"Did you hear that?" The Marine in the Hawaiian shirt asked the others. "Miss, I'm Greg. Thank you very much. Six months at the Embassy and finally I hear somebody say something good about us. Thank you, Miss--"

"Marianela." Rivas smiled as she gave him the name of one of the martyrs of the Revolution. She turned to the boy and gave him the confirmation. "Por favor, ni@o. No molesta estos Marines." Then she pointed to the other Americans two tables away. "Esos norteamericanos alli?? tienen do??lares. Pregunta ellos. Vayase."

Chafa followed her instructions, asking the businessmen: "Change dollars? I pay high price."

"No thanks."

"?Cambia Do??lares? ?Do??lares? The other patrons ignored the boy. Bouncing off the curb, the boy pedalled into traffic. He continued to the next corner, then looped back to the taxi.

"They are Marines. And there are two other gringos there. Two tables away."

The driver spoke into the C B radio again, then started the engine. He screeched into the flow of traffic, braking and swerving to cross the traffic lanes. After a series of turns to reverse his direction, he joined the flow of traffic.

At the table, Larry glanced around to the other Marines, then corrected Rivas. "Miss, we're not here to fight. Our duty is to the Embassy. And to American citizens in your country. That's it. We got nothing to do with your war. Can't even carry a weapon off grounds."

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Rivas studied the face of the sincere young Marine. How strange. He served a government allied with the fascist regime ruling her nation, yet he did not talk of killing communists or fighting for the government of El Salvador. He only talked of his duty to the United States Embassy. She had expected stories of war.

But soon, his death would be a story-- a story to tell her comrades.

Brakes squeeled as the taxi stopped parallel with Lidia's table. Anna Garcia opened the door and called out: "Marianela. Estoy listo."

"Oh, I must go now." Taking a few Colofones from her Gucci purse, Rivas waved to the waiter.

Horns sounded behind the taxi. The Marines stood up as she started away. Larry followed her toward the taxi. "But we just started talking. Did I say the wrong thing?"

"Oh, no. But I must go. Goodbye. Maybe I'll see you again sometime."

Anna stepped out of the taxi. She smiled to the Marine and asked Rivas. "?Quien esta tu amigo?"

"Nosotros estamos norteamericanos, Se@orita."

"Oh, and you speak our language, how charming." Anna shook hands with Larry. "Will we see you at the disco tonight?"

"Which one? We'll see you there."

"Why don't you wait for us here?" Rivas suggested.

"You're coming back?"

"Wait for us a few minutes, okay? I live only a few blocks

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away. We will come back very soon."

"Sure!" Larry shouted over the blaring horns. "We'll wait. Promise to come back?"

"I promise."

"And bring some friends!" One of the Marines at the table added.

"Of course. Many friends." Rivas laughed as she closed the taxi's door. The driver accelerated away.

Leaning over the front seat, Rivas asked: "When does the unit come?"

"They are coming now."

"Turn around."

"What?"

Rivas waved as they left the Marines. "I told the gringos that I would return. And I will. To watch them die."

Larry watched the taxi fade into the lines of taillights, then went back to the table. He put out his hand to the others, palm up.

"The man scores again! Her friend said they're coming back."

One Marine slapped his hand. "Why do they go for crude dudes?"

Greg laughed. "She ain't back yet. And I'll make odds she don't come back."

"Done!" Larry told him. "Beers until she comes back, you pay. She doesn't come back, I pay. Alright?"

"Longer you wait, the more you pay."

The Marine with the jutting ears laughed at the wager. "The make out kings. Don't think you're Don Juan. All they want's

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citizenship. Get out of this rathole country."

"Hey," Larry protested. "She's rich. She went to U C L A. She's got a green card."

"She said," the jutting-eared Marine countered. "Order a beer for me. I'm going to take a piss. This could be a long wait."

"We got a table, didn't we? And when you're in there, tell that waiter to come back."

A heavy pickup truck rattled through traffic. Salvadorian soldiers in fatigues sat on the sidewalls, M-16 rifles in their hands. Larry glanced at them.

"Look at those pukes. Cruising the Zona Rosa with rifles. What do they think they're doing? The guerrillas don't have the money to make this scene."

As they watched, the truck stopped. None of the cars behind the truck honked. The soldiers jumped from the truck and spread into a skirmish line. Their rifles pointed at the silent people watching from the sidewalk-- the Marines at the table, the businessmen eating dinner, the arm-in-arm teenagers passing, the waiter with a tray.

"What the ...." Larry began, then auto-fire from several rifles hit the Marines, high-velocity 5.56mm bullets tearing through their bodies.

One Marine staggered from his chair and stumbled away, his polyester shirt already patterned with blood. Rifle-fire tracked him, an arm flailing, gore exploding from his gut. Blood misted from his skull and he dropped.

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The line of Salvadorian soldiers swept their rifles over the entire area. Patrons died at their meals. Teenage strollers screamed and fell as bullets hit. Riccochetting slugs whined from the iron tables to shatter windows and neon. Across the Paseo, Rivas watched as the line of soldiers changed magazines, then resumed firing as they walked through the tables, shooting the Marines point-blank where they sprawled on the concrete.

Rivas craved the hard plastic grips of an M16 rifle in her hands. She fantasized pointing the rifle at the head of Larry and feeling the jerk of the rifle as the bullets shattered his skull. In the planning of the next action, she would take the privilege of making the executions.

The shooting continued as the soldiers executed the wounded. Screams came as the crowds ran from the scene. Tires screeched as drivers tried to escape backwards from the truck and smashed into other cars.

"They're killing our people!" Anna gasped.

Rivas pushed her comrade into the taxi. "They're liquidating the witnesses. The Annihilation Unit has orders to kill everyone."

"But we were only to kill the American Marines!"

"So a few more die. Let bourgeoisie share the terror of our people."

The soldiers of the Annihilation Unit rushed back to their truck, their rifles spraying bullets wildly. Car windshields shattered, glass exploded. A bullet zipped past Rivas and broke a sheet glass window. The soldiers cheered and waved their rifles as

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the truck sped away. A last burst of autofire destroyed a flashing neon sign, the light suddenly black, glass tubing showering down on sidewalks. Rivas finally stepped into the taxi.

Flooring the accelerator, cranking the steering wheel hard to the left, the taxi driver careened through the intersection, the Toyota skidding sideways with the tires smoking. The driver straightened the car and eased off the accelerator as he passed the cafe.

They saw shattered windows, sprawled bodies, spreading pools of blood.

"Dead gringos!" The driver laughed. "Revolutionary justice for the televisions of the Yankee empire."

Lydia Rivas stared, the image searing into her vision. As the taxi raced through the sidestreets of San Salvador, her eyes saw only dead Marines tangled with dead Salvadorians, a vast stream of their mixed blood flowing into the gutter. Then, in her fascination and exultation, the image fused with the horrors in her memory-- the Marines and Salvadorians, fly-swarmed corpses in ditches, the photos of students hacked to death by the Army, the closed coffin of her mutilated father: the Marines who had laughed and competed for her attention now joined the thousands of corpses in the war against the fascist regime ruling her country.

"We killed the first Marines in the war!" Rivas shouted out. "We will be famous! Famous!"