The Blue Zone

Andrew Gross

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Extract

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The manual of WITSEC, the U.S. Marshals agency that oversees the Witness Protection Program, describes three stages of agency involvement.

The *Red Zone* – when a subject is held in protective custody, while in prison or on trial.

The *Green Zone* – when that subject, along with his or her family, has been placed in a new identity and location and is living securely in that identity, known only to his WITSEC case agent.

And the *Blue Zone* – the state most feared, when there is suspicion that a subject's identity has been penetrated or blown. When he or she is unaccounted for, is out of contact with the case agent, or has fled the safety of the program. When there is no official knowledge of whether that person is dead or alive.

PROLOGUE

It took just minutes for Dr. Emil Varga to reach the old man's room. He had been in a deep sleep, dreaming of a woman from his days at the university a lifetime ago, but at the sound of the servant's frantic knocking he quickly threw his wool jacket over his nightshirt and grabbed his bag.

"Please, Doctor," she said, running upstairs ahead of him, "come quick!"

Varga knew the way. He had been staying in the hacienda for weeks. In fact, the stubborn, unyielding man who had held off death for so long was his only patient these days. Sometimes Varga mused over a brandy at night that his loyal service had hastened his departure from a lengthy and distinguished career.

Was it finally over . . . ?

The doctor paused at the bedroom door. The

room was dark, fetid; the arched, shuttered windows held back the onset of dawn. The smell told him all he needed to know. That and the old man's chest—silent for the first time in weeks. His mouth was open, his head tilted slightly on the pillow. A trickle of yellow drool clotted on his lips.

Slowly Varga stepped up to the large mahogany bed and put his bag on the table. No need for instruments now. In life his patient had been a bull of a man. Varga thought of all the violence he had caused. But now the sharp Indian cheekbones were shrunken and pale. There was something about it that the doctor thought fitting. How could someone who had caused such fear and misery in his life look so frail and withered now?

Varga heard voices from down the hall, shattering the calm of the dawn. Bobi, the old man's youngest son, ran into the room, still in his bedclothes. He stopped immediately and fixed on the lifeless shape, his eyes wide.

"Is he dead?"

The doctor nodded. "He finally gave up his grip on life. For eighty years he had it by the balls."

Bobi's wife, Marguerite, who was carrying the old man's third grandchild, began to weep in

the doorway. The son crept cautiously over to the bed, as if advancing on a slumbering mountain lion that at any moment might spring up in attack. He knelt down and brushed the old man's face, his tightened, withered cheeks. Then he took his father's hand, which even now was rough and coarse as a laborer's hand, and gently kissed it on the knuckles.

"Todas apuestas se terminaron, Papa," he whispered, gazing into the old man's deadened eyes.

All bets are off, Father.

Then Bobi rose and nodded. "Thank you, Doctor, for all you've done. I'll make sure word gets to my brothers."

Varga tried to read what was in the son's eyes. Grief. Disbelief. His father's illness had gone on so long, and now the day had finally come.

No, it was more of a question that was written there: For years the old man had held everything together, through the force of his own will.

What would happen now?

Bobi led his wife by the arm and left the room. Varga stepped over to the window. He opened the shutters, letting in the morning light. The dawn had washed over the valley.

The old man owned it all for miles, far past the gates, the grazing lands, the glistening cordillera, three thousand meters high. Two

black American SUVs were parked next to the stables. A couple of bodyguards, armed with machine pistols, were lounging on a fence, sipping their coffee, unaware.

"Yes," Varga muttered, "get word to your brothers." He turned back to the old man. *See, you bastard, even in death you are a dangerous man*.

The floodgates were open. The waters would be fierce. Blood never washes away blood.

Except here.

There was a painting over the bed of the Madonna and child in a hand-carved frame that Varga knew had been a gift from a church in Buenaventura, where the old man was born. The doctor wasn't a religious man, but he crossed himself anyway, lifting up the damp bedsheet and placing it gently over the dead man's face.

"I hope you are finally at peace, old man, wherever you are . . . Because all hell is going to break loose here."

I don't know if it's a dream or if it's real.

I step off the Second Avenue bus. It's only a couple of blocks to where I live. I know immediately something is wrong.

Maybe it's the guy I see stepping away from the storefront, tossing his cigarette onto the sidewalk, following a short distance behind. Maybe it's the

steady clacking of his footsteps on the pavement behind me as I cross over to Twelfth Street.

Normally I wouldn't turn. I wouldn't think twice. It's the East Village. It's crowded. People are everywhere. It's just a sound of the city. Happens all the time.

But this time I do turn. I have to. Just enough to glimpse the Hispanic man with his hands in his black leather jacket.

Jesus, Kate, try being a little paranoid, girl . . .

Except this time I'm not being paranoid. This time the guy keeps following me.

I turn on Twelfth. It's darker there, less traffic. A few people are talking out on their stoop. A young couple making out in the shadows. The guy's still on me. I still hear his footsteps close behind.

Pick up your pace, *I tell myself.* You live only a few blocks away.

I tell myself that this can't be happening. If you're going to wake up, Kate, now's the time! *But I don't wake up. This time it's real. This time I'm holding a secret important enough to get myself killed.*

I cross the street, quickening my pace. My heart's starting to race. His footsteps are knifing through me now. I catch a glimpse of him in the reflection of a store window. The dark mustache and short, wiry hair.

My heart's slamming back and forth off my ribs now.

There's a market where I sometimes buy groceries. I run in. There are people there. For a second I feel safe. I take a basket, hide between the aisles, throw in things I pretend I need. But all the while I'm just waiting. Praying he's passing by.

I pay. I smile a little nervously at Ingrid, the checkout girl, who knows me. I have this eerie premonition. What if she's the last person to see me alive?

Back outside, I feel relief for a second. The guy must be gone. No sign. But then I freeze. He's still there. Leaning aimlessly against a parked car on the other side of the street, talking into a phone. His eyes slowly drift to mine . . .

Shit, Kate, what the hell do you do now?

Now I run. An indistinguishable pace at first, then faster. I hear the frantic rhythm of quickening footsteps on the pavement—but this time they're mine.

I grope in my bag for my phone. Maybe I should call Greg. I want to tell him I love him. But I know the time—it's the middle of his shift. All I'd get is his voice mail. He's on rounds.

Maybe I should call 911 or stop and scream. Kate, do something—now!

My building's just a half a block away. I can see it now. The green canopy. 445 East Seventh. I fumble for my keys. My hands are shaking. Please, just a few yards more . . .

The last few feet I take at a full-out run. I jam my key into the outer lock, praying it turns—and it does! I hurl open the heavy glass doors. I take one last glance behind. The man who was following me has pulled up a few doorways down. I hear the door to the building close behind me, the lock mercifully engaging.

I'm safe now. I feel my chest virtually implode with relief. It's over now, Kate. Thank God.

For the first time, I feel my sweater clinging to me, drenched in a clammy sweat. This has got to end. You've got to go to someone, Kate. *I'm so relieved I actually start to cry.*

But go to whom?

The police? They've been lying to me from the beginning. My closest friend? She's fighting for her life in Bellevue Hospital. That's surely no dream.

My family? Your family is gone, Kate. *Forever.*

It was too late for any of that now.

I step into the elevator and press the button for my floor. Seven. It's one of those heavy industrial types, clattering like a train as it passes every floor. All I want is just to get into my apartment and shut the door.

On seven the elevator rattles to a stop. It's over now. I'm safe. I fling open the metal grating, grasp my keys, push open the heavy outer door.

There are two men standing in my way.

I try to scream, but for what? No one will hear me. I step back. My blood goes cold. All I can do is look silently into their eyes.

I know they're here to kill me.

What I don't know is if they're from my father, the Colombians, or the FBI.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Gold was up two percent the morning Benjamin Raab's life began to fall apart.

He was leaning back at his desk, looking down on Forty-seventh Street, in the lavish comfort of his office high above the Avenue of the Americas, the phone crooked in his neck.

"I'm waiting, Raj . . ."

Raab had a spot gold contract he was holding for two thousand pounds. Over a million dollars. The Indians were his biggest customers, one of the largest exporters of jewelry in the world. *Two percent.* Raab checked the Quotron screen. That was thirty thousand dollars. *Before lunch.*

"Raj, *c'mon*," Raab prodded. "My daughter's getting married this afternoon. I'd like to make it if I can . . ."

"Katie's getting married?" The Indian seemed to be hurt. "Ben, you never said—"

"It's just an expression, Raj. If Kate was getting married, you'd be there. But, Raj, c'mon . . . we're talking gold here—not pastrami. *It doesn't go bad*."

This was what Raab did. He moved gold. He'd owned his own trading company near New York's diamond district for twenty years. Years ago he had started out buying inventory from the mom-and-pop jewelers who were going out of business. Now he supplied gold to half the dealers on the Street. As well as to some of the largest exporters of jewelry across the globe.

Everyone in the trade knew him. He could hardly grab a turkey club at the Gotham Deli down the street without one of the pushy, heavyset Hasids squeezing next to him in the booth with the news of some dazzling new stone they were peddling. (Though they always chided that as a Sephardi he wasn't even one of their own.) Or one of the young Puerto Rican runners who delivered the contracts, thanking him for the flowers he'd sent to their wedding. Or the Chinese, looking to hedge some dollars against a currency play. Or the Australians, tantalizing him with uncut blocks of industrial-quality stones.

I've been lucky, Raab always said. He had a wife who adored him, three beautiful children

who made him proud. His house in Larchmont (a whole lot more than just a house) that overlooked the Long Island Sound, and the Ferrari 585, which Raab once raced at Lime Rock and had its own special place in the five-car garage. Not to mention the box at Yankee Stadium and the Knicks tickets, on the floor of the Garden, just behind the bench.

Betsy, his assistant for over twenty years, stepped in carrying a chef's salad on a plate along with a cloth napkin, Raab's best defense against his proclivity for leaving grease stains on his Hermès ties. She rolled her eyes. "Raj, still . . . ?"

Benjamin shrugged, drawing her eye to his notepad where he had already written down the outcome: *$648.50*. He knew that his buyer was going to take it. Raj always did. They'd been doing this little dance for years. *But did he always have to play out the drama so long?*

"Okay, my friend." The Indian buyer sighed at last in surrender. "We consider it a deal."

"*Whew,* Raj." Raab exhaled in mock relief. "The *Financial Times* is outside waiting on the exclusive."

The Indian laughed, too, and they closed out the deal: $648.50, just as he'd written down.

Betsy smiled—"He says that every time,

doesn't he?"—trading the handwritten contract for two glossy travel brochures that she placed next to his plate.

Raab tucked the napkin into the collar of his Thomas Pink striped shirt. "Fifteen years."

All one had to do was step into Raab's crowded office and it was impossible not to notice the walls and credenzas crammed with pictures of Sharon, his wife, and his children—Kate, the oldest, who had graduated from Brown; Emily, who was sixteen, and nationally ranked at squash; and Justin, two years younger—and all the fabulous family trips they'd taken over the years.

The villa in Tuscany. Kenya on safari. Skiing at Courchevel in the French Alps. Ben in his driver's suit with Richard Petty at the Porsche rally school.

And that's what he was doing over lunch, mapping out their next big trip—the best one yet. Machu Picchu. The Andes. Then on a fantastic walking tour of Patagonia. Their twenty-fifth anniversary was coming up. Patagonia had always been one of Sharon's dreams.

"My next life"—Betsy grinned as she shut the office door—"I'm making sure I come back as one of your kids."

"Next life," Raab called after her, "I am, too."

Suddenly a loud crash came from the outer office. At first Raab thought it was an explosion or a break-in. He thought about triggering the alarm. Sharp, unfamiliar voices were barking commands.

Betsy rushed back in, a look of panic on her face. A step behind, two men in suits and navy windbreakers pushed through the door.

"Benjamin Raab?"

"Yes . . ." He stood up and faced the tall, balding man who had addressed him, who seemed to be in charge. "You can't just barge in here like this. *What the hell's going on . . . ?"*

"What's going on, Mr. Raab"—the man tossed a folded document onto the desk—"is that we have a warrant from a federal judge for your arrest."

"*Arrest . . . ?"* Suddenly people in FBI jackets were everywhere. His staff was being rounded up and told to vacate. "What the hell for?"

"For money laundering, aiding and abetting a criminal enterprise, conspiracy to defraud the U.S. government," the agent read off. "How's that, Mr. Raab? The contents of this office are being impounded as material evidence in this case."

"*What?"*

Before he could utter another word, the second agent, a young Hispanic, spun Raab around, forcing his arms roughly behind him, and slapped a set of handcuffs on his wrists, his whole office looking on.

"*This is crazy!*" Raab twisted, trying to look the agent in the face.

"Sure it is," the Hispanic agent chortled. He lifted the travel brochures out of Raab's hands. "Too bad." He winked, tossing them back onto the desk. "Seemed like one helluva trip."

CHAPTER TWO

"Check these babies out," Kate Raab muttered, peering into the high-powered Siemens microscope.

Tina O'Hearn, her lab partner, leaned over the scope. "*Whoa!*"

In the gleaming luminescence of the high-resolution lens, two brightly magnified cells sharpened into view. One was the lymphocyte, the defective white blood cell with a ring of hairy particles protruding from its membrane. The other cell was thinner, squiggle-shaped, and had a large white dot in the center.

"That's the Alpha-boy," Kate said, slowly adjusting the magnification. "We call them Tristan and Isolde. Packer's name for them." She picked up a tiny metal probe off the counter. "Now check this out . . ."

As Kate prodded, Tristan nudged its way

toward the denser lymphocyte. The defective cell resisted, but the squiggle cell kept coming back, as if searching out a weakness in the lymphocyte's membrane. *As if attacking*.

"Seems more like Nick and Jessica," Tina giggled, bent over the lens.

"Watch."

As if on cue, the squiggle cell seemed to probe the hairy borders of the white blood cell, until in front of their eyes the attacking membrane seemed to penetrate the border of its prey and they merged into a single, larger cell with a white dot in the center.

Tina looked up. *"Ouch!"*

"Love hurts, huh? That's a progenitive stem-cell line," Kate explained, looking up from the scope. "The white one's a lymphoblast—what Packer calls the 'killer leukocyte.' It's the pathogenic agent of leukemia. Next week, we see what happens in a plasma solution similar to the bloodstream. I get to record the results."

"You do this all day?" Tina scrunched up her face.

Kate chuckled. Welcome to life in the petri dish. "All *year*."

For the past eight months, Kate had been working as a lab researcher for Dr. Grant Packer, up at Albert Einstein Medical College in the

Bronx, whose work in cytogenetic leukemia was starting to make noise in medical circles. She'd won a fellowship out of Brown, where she and Tina had been lab partners her senior year.

Kate was always smart—just not "geeky" smart, she always maintained. She was twenty-three. She liked to have fun—hit the new restaurants, go to clubs. Since she'd been twelve, she could beat most guys down the hill on a snowboard. She had a boyfriend, Greg, who was a second-year resident at NYU Medical School. She just spent the majority of her day leaning over a microscope, recording data or transcribing it onto digital files, but she and Greg always joked—when they actually *saw* each other—that one lab rat in their relationship was enough. Still, Kate loved the work. Packer was starting to turn some heads, and Kate had to admit it was the coolest option she'd had for a while.

Besides, her real claim to distinction, she figured, was no doubt being the only person she knew who could recite Cleary's *Ten Stages of Cellular Development* and had a tattoo of a double helix on her butt.

"*Leukoscopophy,*" Kate explained. "Pretty cool the first time you see it. Try watching it a thousand times. Now check out what happens."

They leaned back over the double scope. There

was only one cell left—larger, squiggle-shaped Tristan. *The defective lymphoblast had virtually disappeared*.

Tina whistled, impressed. "If that happens in a living model, there's got to be a Nobel Prize in this."

"In ten years, maybe. Personally, I was just hoping for a graduate dissertation." Kate grinned.

At that moment her cell phone started to vibrate. She thought it might be Greg, who loved to e-mail her funny photos from rounds, but when she checked out the screen, she shook her head and flipped the phone back into her lab coat.

"If it's not one thing it's a *mother* . . ." she sighed.

Kate led Tina into the library, with about a thousand recorded iterations of the stem-cell line on digital film. "My life's work!" She introduced her to Max, Packer's baby, the cytogenetic scope worth over $2 million, which separated chromosomes in the cells and made the whole thing possible. "You'll feel like you're dating it before the month is through."

Tina looked it over with a shrug of mock approval. "I've done worse."

That was when Kate's cell phone sounded

again. She flipped it out. Her mom again. This time there was a text message coming in.

KATE, SOMETHING'S HAPPENED. CALL HOME QUICK!

Kate stared. She'd never gotten a message like that before. She didn't like the sound of those words. Her mind flashed through the possibilities—and all of them were bad.

"Tina, sorry, but I gotta call home."

"No sweat. I'll just start the small talk rolling with Max."

With a jitter of nerves, Kate punched in the speed dial of her parents' home in Larchmont. Her mom picked up on the first ring. Kate could hear the alarm in her voice.

"*Kate, it's your father . . .*"

Something bad *had* happened. A tremor of dread flashed through her. Her dad had never been sick. He was in perfect shape. He could probably take Em at squash on a good day.

"What's happened, Mom? Is he okay?"

"I don't know . . . His secretary just called in. Your father's been arrested, Kate. *He's been arrested by the FBI!*"