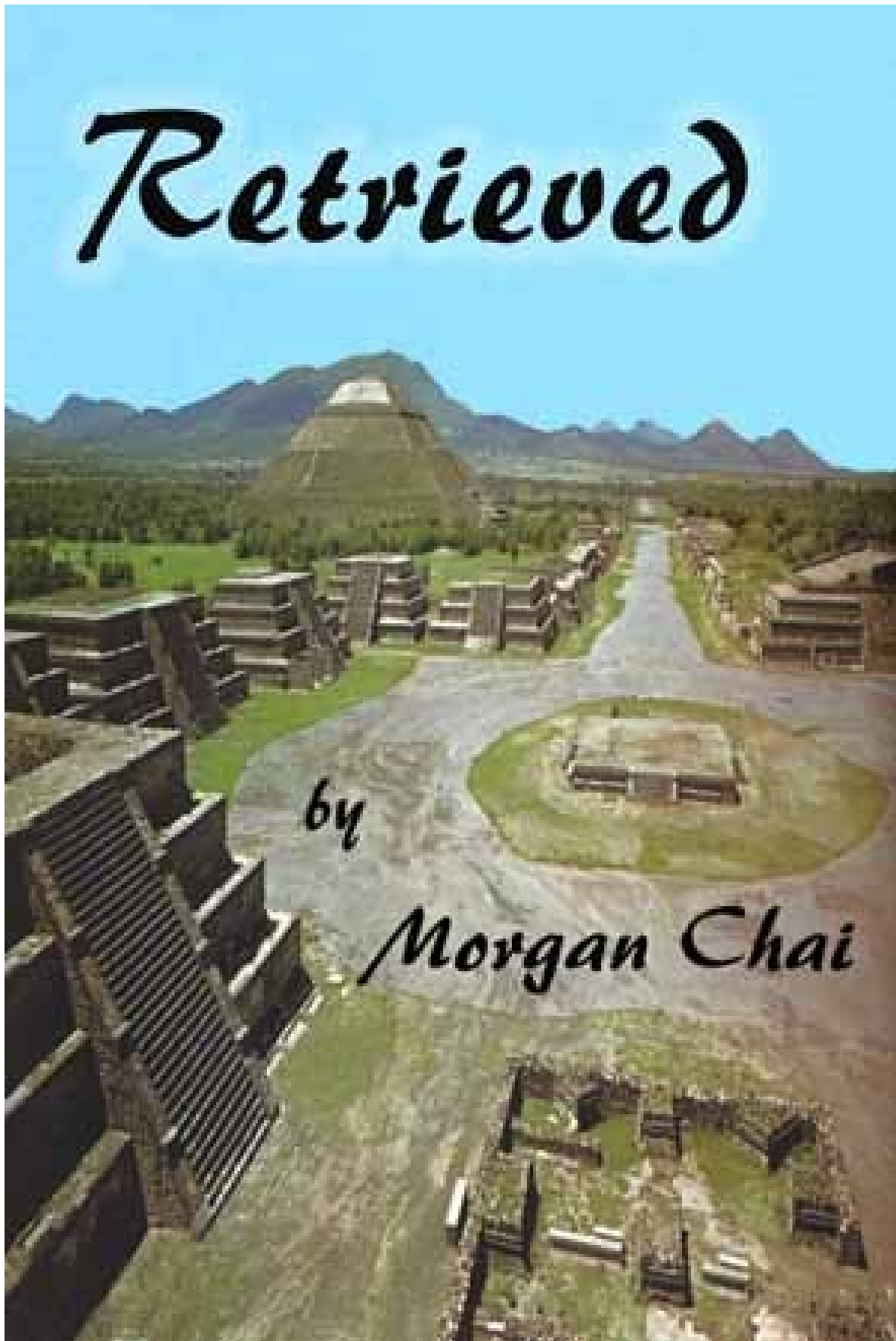
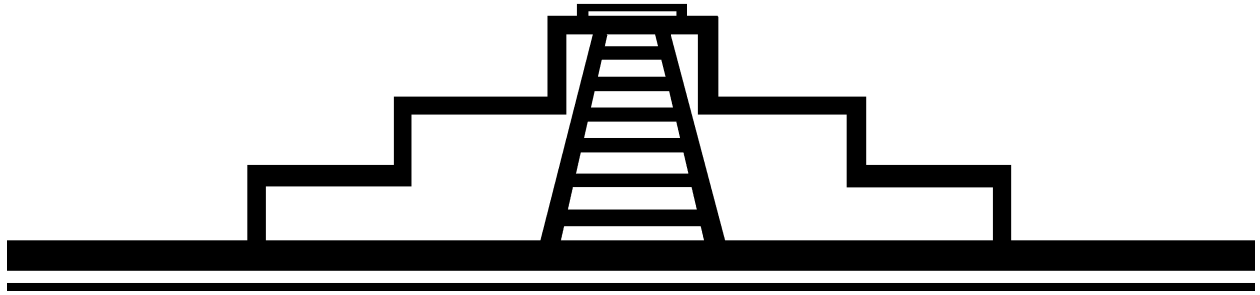


# *Retrieved*

*by*

*Morgan Chai*

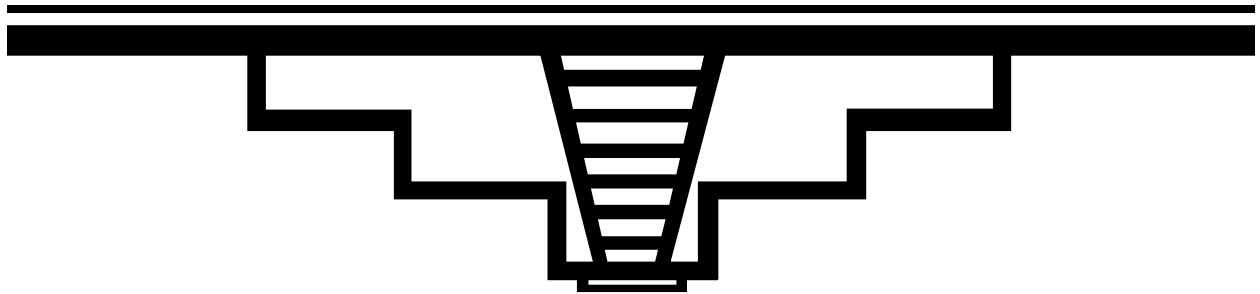




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# RETRIEVED

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by

**Morgan Chai**

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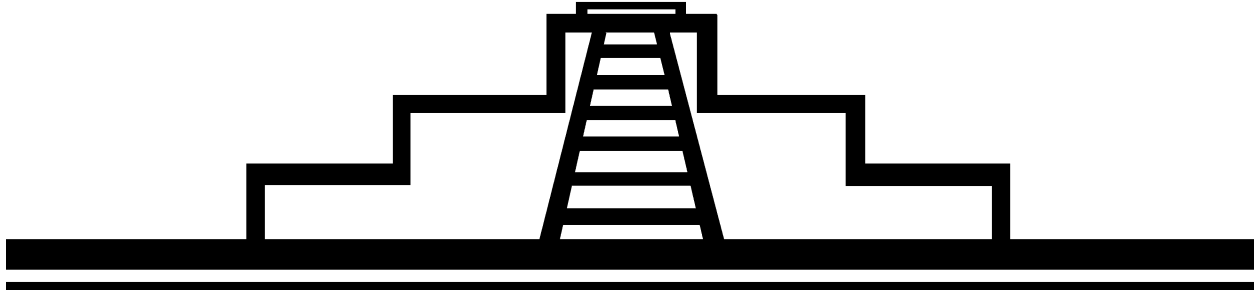
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This is a work of fiction.  
The events described herein are imaginary.  
All of the characters are fictitious and not intended  
to represent living persons.



## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I wish to thank the United States Government who so diligently trained me—but who also tried to control this wild, daring, risk-taking, renegade female Intelligence Special Agent. I am forever indebted to you for the education; however, I am especially grateful for your failed attempts at restraining me.

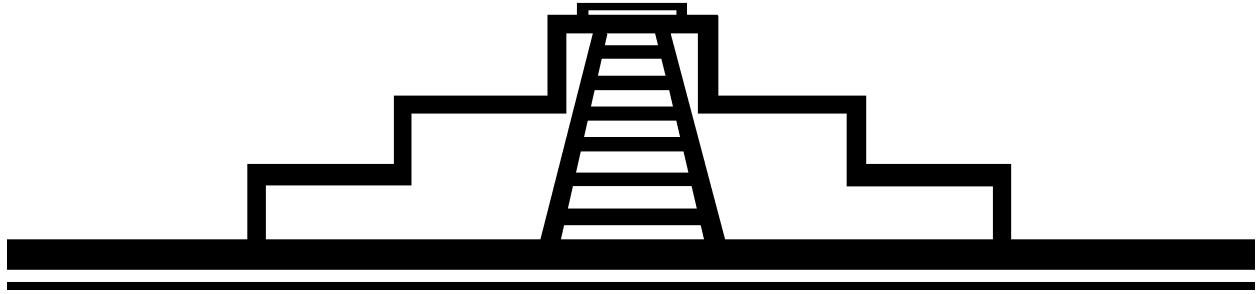
To Dagney, my wonderful friend and kindred spirit, I will never be able to thank you enough for your long hours of overtime so that we could afford my love affair with writing. Where did the time go when my one year writing sabbatical turned into thirteen? I owe you, big time!

I must also thank Rob Nicholson, in Canada. His interesting web site was what spurred me to ask questions, but when he quickly responded to my e-mails with volumes of information, I was overwhelmed. Not only is he powerfully knowledgeable about the dangers that face all children, he's on a crusade to protect them as well. Bless you, my friend, and may you remain vigilant in this cause. ([www.rwnicholson.com](http://www.rwnicholson.com))

And to Bruce Harris of Casa Alianza ([www.casaalianza.com](http://www.casaalianza.com)) in Central America. You are a dear and caring man. You also gave me the reason and strength to write the sequel, *Stolen Lives*. With all my heart, I thank you.

Last but not least, many thanks to everyone who encouraged me to fan my little sparks of creativity into the flames of a finished book. Writing this book brought back many memories of my years as an Intelligence Agent in an otherwise difficult and coveted male world; and my dearest friends were all there to help me finally work through them. Thank you all for your pertinacious support.

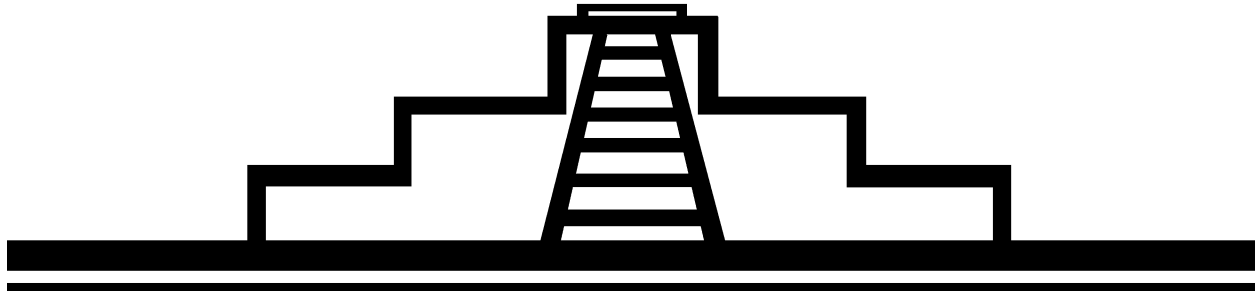
For all my friends and supporters, you are the gold mine in the mountains of my dreams.



## Dedication

I dedicate this book to all the people of the world who, because of suffering abuse in any form, have had to live with the mostly silent, yet unbelievably, destructive, unabated rage within their soul.

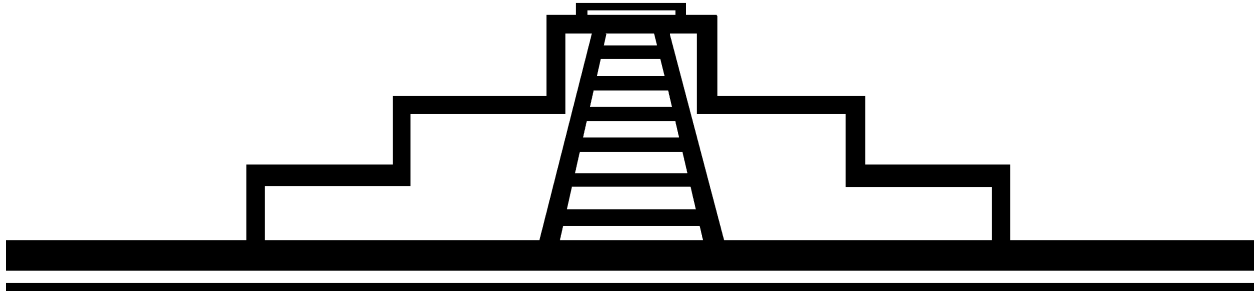
To those of you who know the bitter taste of the ravaging anguish that any abuse causes –I especially dedicate this book to you. It's my heartfelt prayer that you take the final step, if you haven't already, and allow yourself to be *retrieved*.



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## Chapter One

### The Setup

*There are times in a person's life when everything is crystal clear, easily definable, cognitantly discernible, and readily understood. Other times thoughts are conflicting, ideas cloudy, dreams nearly indistinguishable from fears, and hopes confusing. Where is that higher ground where we find refuge from the floodwaters of emotion, safely hidden from the hurricanes of anxiety and the demons of societal greed? Where's the middle between good and bad, light and dark, love and hate? Life seems to be a quest to answer those questions without becoming the question mark. The search becomes the period of the sentence, the comma between complementary ideas, and the quotation marks bracket and enclose our minds from perceiving the higher truths.*

*Today, Laura Decker and Tom Johnston would experience the more ungodly punctuation marks that would ensnare them in an evil, underworld story. Would they become the extraneous words lost to extreme editing? Would they become entrapped as the requisite verbiage of life's unending sentence diagraming? Or . . . would their life's story unfold on the pages strewn across the Almighty Editor's desk?*

*For the first time in her life, Laura saw herself rawly exposed as chapter one . . . page one . . . indent five . . . capitalize. She had no idea what would be written upon the pages of her life; she couldn't fathom the whims of the dramatic editor upstairs—and more than anything she feared the potential period on the sentence of her life.*

At five o'clock on a Sunday morning, Mexico City did not live up to its reputation as a hectic, fast-paced city of twenty-three million. The morning birds were announcing the

onset of another early May morning, but all Laura heard was the drone of the car's engine harmonizing with the low energy of her thoughts. They were deep, low, slow-motion thoughts struggling to make sense of the previous ten minutes.

For nearly two years she and her co-agent Tom had been working on plans for the CIA to cut down on the drug influx into the United States, but in a flash someone in the Agency changed the deal. It was an awakening to realize that she may have spent the last two years working on her own death plans. In an instant her life could be over. They had not been told who changed the plans or why, but they were to follow them to the letter. It was a dangerous letter, indeed.

She reflected back on her life, the short thirty-four years of it. In her youth she had been an exemplary high school student; went on to receive her Ph.D. in Foreign Studies, with honors from Yale; had an outstanding thirteen-year career with the CIA; and enjoyed a successful marriage blessed with three adoring children. She could not fathom that it could all end as quickly as it might. Her life was being held hostage by the next thirty minutes.

Tom Johnston, her co-agent and longtime friend, was calm and collected as he drove them to the meeting place, the Sun Pyramid Insurance building. She and Tom had worked together for six of her thirteen years with the Agency, but they had been friends the entire time. Laura respected and admired him. His wife Linda was a gentle, soft-spoken southern lady who taught Laura the finer points of composure when faced with adversity. When Laura's parents died she felt lost and unhinged, and it was Linda's gentle understanding that gave Laura the ladylike control over her anger.

Her parents' death was as unexpected as it was shocking. They were flying in from Massachusetts to attend her graduation at Yale when their private plane crashed. That same breathless shock that overwhelmed her when her parents died was now oozing through her once again as she thought of the meeting with Mr. Aragon.

"You're unusually quiet," Tom remarked, as they neared the Sun Pyramid Insurance building.

Her voice was soft and introspective. "Sober, Tom. Frighteningly sober."

He wondered if she could handle the meeting. She was not a violent person, and was too new to the drug world to truly comprehend the ruthlessness of the dealers. He did not like that she had been attached to this particular area of operations for her first assignment as a special agent, but he had tried to teach her all he could. A quick glance at her told him he had failed miserably even when it came to teaching her about the mercilessness of Aragon.

"What's wrong, Laura?"

"We've just spent two years down here, on and off, setting up this deal, then suddenly someone in the Agency back-doors us and shorts Aragon ten million dollars. I was right all along, something else is going on behind our backs."

"Laura, Donnor directed that Ziegler was to have oversight in this operation. That's all there is to it. No one has back-doored us."

"That's bull and you know it," Laura quipped. "Bringing Ziegler in at the last second isn't right. Something else is going on. We're—"

"Calm down and think about it. Donnor's the boss, and he has the right to do whatever he wants."

"But you saw that he was just as shocked when Ziegler wanted me cuffed to this damned case. A case shy of ten million dollars, and—"

"It's all gonna work out, Laura. We just have to present it to Aragon in the right way."

"The right way? The original plan was the right way. We've done all the research, and you know that Aragon won't stand for this kind of change. He's strictly a cash-up-front dealer. A ruthless, arrogant cash-up-front dealer."

"Well, hon, we don't have any choice but to make it work," he said reassuringly, while patting the back of her hand that was handcuffed to the large black case between them. Fifteen million dollars weighed a lot and Tom wondered why the orders called for Laura to be handcuffed to it, instead of him.

"You're going to retire in a couple months, Tom, and you're acting like nothing's wrong."

"I've been around too long to get wrapped around the axle on things I can't change."

"So, how do we handle this?"

"I'm trying to think of a way, but—"

"There's the building." Laura's voice was almost too soft to be heard. It was the beautiful twenty-story Sun Pyramid Insurance building.

The owner, Mr. Aragon, although purporting to be a legitimate businessman, had amassed his fortune in the drug trade and a few low-level insurgent activities. He was also rapidly rising to fame as the head of one of the most powerful, notorious drug cartels in Central America. In his arrogance he wanted the building to reflect his power and wealth piggybacked on the Aztec heritage of Mexico.

The insurance building occupied a site near the ancient ruins of Tenochitlan, the capital of the once powerful Aztec Empire. His vision was for the building to represent the pride and power of the bloodthirsty Aztec conquerors. To accomplish this he had the building designed to resemble the great Pyramid of the Sun which was located twenty miles northeast of the city in Teotihuacan. Teotihuacan was originally Toltec, but the Aztecs had conquered them in their pursuit of power and control.

At Teotihuacan, the Pyramid of the Sun was seven hundred and thirty-eight feet square, with the pyramid formed by huge terraces. Hundreds of steps in the center of one face led to the top platform, which once housed a sacrificial temple. Laura had visited Teotihuacan, and was overwhelmed by the pyramid's size, but nothing had prepared her for seeing the replica, the modern day representation of the great Pyramid of the Sun. She was awestruck by its hugeness and design as it filled nearly a full square city block.

Each stepped terrace of Aragon's pyramid was four floors high and there were a total of four steps. The four major terraces or steps were covered in rusty red-colored stucco adorned in spectacular carvings of forest animals, religious icons, and the menacing stone statues of the sacrificial idols worshiped by the bloodthirsty Aztecs. The carvings and statues had been created out of giant blocks of imported, reddish sandstone weighing tons and tons each; they looked as if they were coming out from within the walls of each terrace.

Hand-painted murals depicting the bloody Aztec history lined the first level of the pyramid so they could easily be seen and admired from ground level. The next two levels of the pyramid relied on carvings. Out from the center of the top platform of the pyramid rose the final four floors of the copper-colored glass high-rise. To Aragon, the top platform represented the sacrificial temple that once crowned the great Pyramid of the Sun. To Laura it was an uncomfortable and shocking clash between the past and the present.

Laura glanced over at Tom and noticed a deep frown. "What? Is it finally getting to you, too?"

Tom shook his head slightly then returned his gaze to the building ahead of them. "I think you're getting to me," he smiled. "I just thought I saw Ziegler."

"Ziegler? See, I told you something was going on. If he's down here, he could blow the entire operation!"

"I said I thought I saw him. Laura, you have to calm down and get a grip or you'll blow the deal, not anyone else."

Laura sighed a deep breath and leaned back against the seat as she stared out the window. Things were not right and she knew it, but how could a woman's intuition be explained without sounding like it was filled with psychism? How could it be explained to a man who had spent his entire career dealing with hard-core facts? It couldn't, and she had to accept it.

Approaching the building gave Laura the eerie feeling of having entered the past. The asphalt street was now Teotihuacan's stone inlay Avenue of the Dead, leading them to the ancient Pyramid of the Sun that now beckoned them into its darkened depths below.

The clicking of the turn signal seemed unusually loud and out of place as they drove into the ornately garnished underground parking garage. Tom stopped the car to allow their eyes to adjust to the dimly lit surroundings before driving down to the next level. Both minds were tuned into the same thought — survival.

They knew that few, if any, employees would be using the building on Sunday, yet upon entering, the garage was hauntingly cold and silent like a beautifully decorated concrete coffin. It was the perfect place for Aragon to conduct his illegal activities.

Once fully inside, Laura was overwhelmed at the details of the interior structure. The massive, two-meter diameter support pillars were also covered in red stucco and as

elegantly carved as the showcase exterior of the building. She secretly wondered what all the carvings meant. What stories did they tell? Would she ever find out?

She forced her thoughts back to the meeting. In exchange for twenty-five million dollars they were supposed to receive a list of names of the smaller cartels. But shorting Mr. Aragon by ten million dollars was as dangerous as shorting him ten cents, no matter what excuse was given or what arrangements were made for a later payoff. Aragon was as ruthless a killer as he was a drug lord. Nothing, absolutely nothing, got between him and his money.

Why, she wondered, did the Agency do this at the last minute, and who exactly made the decision? Headquarters had all the information, all the research, and they knew how dangerous it was to deal with Joseph Aragon. She could not get it out of her mind.

As they slowly rounded the turn onto the second lower level, she recognized the pudgy, baldheaded, diminutive Mr. Aragon standing beside his white Mercedes Benz limousine. He wasn't any taller than the roof of the limo. He was obsessed with the colors white and red and never wore any other colors. That morning he chose to wear all white, adorning himself in an expensive silk three-piece suit, silk shirt and tie, and shiny white handmade Italian leather shoes.

She could not help but notice the massive gold rings on his fat, stubby, smoke-stained fingers. Even his long fingernails were tobacco stained. Beneath his shirt, Aragon was known to wear a heavy, solid gold Aztec sun god medallion. Rumor was that it was an original relic he had illegally purchased from Spain's mother church for millions of US dollars. Nothing ever got in the way of what he wanted.

Two shiny black Cadillacs were parked at the front and rear of the white limo. The drivers were still seated in all three vehicles, perhaps for a quick getaway, she thought. She did not like the set up and neither did Tom, but neither said a word. Six impeccably dressed men were standing in a large semicircle around Mr. Aragon. Their gray pin-striped suit coats were unbuttoned, which was a sure sign of quick access to the weapons beneath. It was an unnerving scene, especially since she and Tom were told to be unarmed.

For an instant she remembered that back at the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, she had once been quite satisfied sitting safely behind her 'Intelligence Analyst' desk. What made her accept the promotion to Intelligence Agent and an assignment as an undercover operative in Mexico City? That's right, she remembered, she thought she could make a difference in the world by stopping a major drug flow into America.

She considered the handcuffs again. "This wasn't part of the original plan, Tom. I don't like it. I feel like they're concrete boots in disguise."

"I've got the key," Tom whispered, looking over the scene. "I'll take them off as soon as it's right. You'll do just fine."

"But I can barely move it." She grimaced as she gripped the case's handle. "It's at least sixty or seventy pounds," she nervously whispered. "Why me? Why the handcuffs? It's ridiculous."

Tom was only half paying attention. "Maybe Aragon wanted it this way. Maybe it's his way of showing control over a woman."

"Who in the hell's talking to him anyway? We're supposed to be the only ones to have contact with him."

"Calm down, Laura. We're still the ones making the deal. Stay focused and be cool."

"I am cool, I'm just worried that—"

"Show time," Tom interrupted, his voice suddenly tense. "Remember, don't speak any English. Not a word of it. Aragon hates it." It was Tom's last minute advice as he got out of the car.

She had not planned it, but something told her to hide her cover badge and credentials under the car seat. It was the only form of identification that she carried that morning, and for some indiscernible reason she decided not to have them on her.

She got out of the car, straining to pull the case out with her while acting as though it wasn't nearly as heavy as it was. It was heavy, bulky, and awkward but she was determined not to give the rude, sexist Aragon an opportunity to insult her. Aragon eyed her cynically and for a split second she wished she could read his mind. Then again, she was glad she couldn't.

When Aragon turned his attention toward Tom, she absentmindedly straightened her expensive gray Italian suit. It felt good, she thought; it felt comfortable and she knew she looked good in it. She liked expensive, well-made clothes; they reflected the same wealth and taste she had been raised with. Composure, she thought, composure.

Laura had studied Aragon extensively and knew he treated all women as slaves or whores, but she had no idea what she was in for now that she was facing him in real life. No amount of specialized training would have ever prepared her for what was coming.

Mr. Aragon drew a deep drag on his expensive Cuban cigar as he eyed his contacts and the heavy black case handcuffed to Laura's left wrist. His beady, dark eyes were revealing as they followed the heavy blue smoke gently flowing from his lips.

He discreetly motioned for one of his men to get ready to remove the handcuffs from her and the case. At that exact moment she saw a young boy peeking out from behind a pillar across the garage from them, and she quickly averted her gaze to avoid drawing attention to him. No sense in his life being endangered, she thought.

The boy looked to be about ten years old; no doubt a homeless street kid by the looks of his clothing and unkempt appearance. No one else noticed him. What was he doing there? she wondered, concerned for his welfare.

“Did you bring the money?” Mr. Aragon asked as he stared at the case. He grinned at Laura. “Or is it filled with bricks just for the bitches and my entertainment?”

His Spanish had a hint of native dialect, she thought. He eyed her slowly, almost as though he were undressing her. She avoided direct eye contact knowing it would provoke him. He was testing her, she was sure. Decidedly impressed with her, her figure and her expensive clothes, he slightly nodded his approval as he stared at her.

She did not respond.

“Si,” Tom answered politely, in perfect, school-trained Spanish. “Mr. Aragon, before we go any further, you need to know—”

“I know all I need to know. You brought the money and I will give you the list.”

Tom tried to hide his nervousness. “Señor Aragon, we did bring the money, but not all of it.”

“Not all of it?” Aragon raised his right eyebrow in disbelief. “The agreement was for twenty-five million US dollars to be paid up front and in total.” Aragon was noticeably angered.

“We have fifteen million in the case, and my boss assures me that you’ll get the remaining ten million as soon as the list is verified.” Tom’s moist forehead reflected the dim fluorescent garage lights.

Aragon’s voice was smooth yet quizzical. “It’s necessary to verify my list? Who do you think you are doing business with? If I cannot trust your agency to be honorable in the beginning, how am I to trust them in the end?”

Tom and Laura were both shocked that Aragon referred to the Agency. The CIA set them up as dealers out of Buffalo, NY, operating as clothing purchasers. By using the vast resources of the garment district as their cover, they were able to create a verifiable story to lure Aragon into business with them.

They wanted to ostensibly expand their operation by setting up a new Arizona cartel that would use the Colorado River as their drug highway to Las Vegas, Nevada. Las Vegas, in turn, would be a major drug distribution center for most of the central United States; but in order to pull it off, a dozen or so smaller Mexican cartels had to be extinguished. They were named in the list. With the smaller cartels out of the way Aragon and the Arizona cartel would have control over a major artery of the drug flow into the United States. In truth, the CIA would then be able to curtail the drug flow by eventually shutting down Aragon’s cartel.

Aragon’s mention of the Agency sent shudders through both Laura and Tom.

There were two schools of thought on how to handle potential exposures or compromises. One was to back out of whatever they were doing to lessen the risk of further exposure. The other alternative was to stand tight and stick to the cover story. It was the agent’s call. With two years already invested, Tom and Laura knew they would continue and hoped that Aragon was merely testing them.

At the moment they had no idea what Aragon was trying to do, or if he really knew they were agents. Besides, being surrounded by six armed men did not make it

feasible to simply back out of the deal and leave. Not at that moment anyway, and both agents knew it.

Tom remained silent, figuring it was best not to play into Aragon's hand over the use of the word 'Agency,' and he shot a glance at Laura hoping she would catch his lead. Her calm, poised, self-assured look confirmed that Aragon had not flustered her.

"What about you, Señora CIA RA?" Aragon spelled out. He paused to watch her reaction then continued, "Do you have an answer for me?" Even Aragon's smile seemed sarcastic as he waited for a sign of nervousness.

That was it. Both she and Tom knew that Aragon was not guessing; he knew they were in fact CIA Resident Agents. In her capacity as an agent she knew how important it was to keep her composure no matter what. She also knew she was not about to waste two years of work and extensive planning, and decided to try and save the deal.

The six gunmen displayed their own special sort of smirk as they waited for her to buckle under Aragon's challenge, but she was undaunted and steady. Laura clenched her jaw as she thought of what to say, and especially what not to say, and avoided eye contact with Tom as she addressed Aragon.

"Perhaps," Laura answered calmly, in the same perfect school-trained Spanish, "go along with this deal so we can get the ten million to you as soon as—"

"Shut up!" Aragon snapped. "Do you think I would agree to such a thing? I'm a businessman, not a street boy looking for a quick handout." To calm himself he turned away from Tom and Laura and pretended to admire the splendid artwork on the walls and pillars that surrounded them.

He then turned back to face Tom as squarely as possible. Tom, at six-foot four-inches tall, towered over the five-foot-two Aragon, and it was obvious that Aragon resented the tall American for it.

"Do you like my building, agent?" Aragon asked.

"Si, of course." Tom's voice was calm, but his thoughts were racing as furiously as Laura's.

"Did you know that the interior of the Pyramid of the Sun has four huge caves used for different stages of initiation into the higher worlds?"

Tom shook his head, no, not knowing where Aragon was going with his comments.

Aragon smiled. "This could be the cave to my great pyramid, could it not?"

"Sure could," Tom answered while glancing around.

"Do you know what Teotihuacan means?"

"No, I don't," Tom answered, a bit confused.

Laura cringed. She knew what it meant and was following Aragon's leading conversation.

"It's the place where men become gods," Aragon gently explained to Tom.

Tom nodded his understanding as a bead of sweat raced down the side of his face. Laura had never seen Tom look so tired, so old, so defeated. Even his suit hung on him as though it had lost its sizing, its own youth. That was when it hit her; they were going to die and Tom knew it.

Aragon continued, "I got where I am today by enduring initiations in this miserable life that you would never dream of, and I succeed in my businesses because I survived the testing."

"I can respect that," Tom replied cautiously.

"Then I would be a god, wouldn't you agree?" Aragon nodded to another of his men who quickly stepped behind Tom.

Tom did not turn his gaze from Aragon.

Aragon's sneer said it all. "Your families should know that your agency just paid five million dollars for each of your right hands."

Without warning, the silence was broken as though a locomotive had thundered through the garage. Laura flinched but managed to maintain control as she tried to recover the breath that had been shocked out of her. Her hearing was incapacitated by both the echoing, cracking sound of the gunshot, and her pounding heartbeats.

To her side, lying on the cold concrete floor was her friend and co-agent, Tom Johnston. The bullet had created a small hole at the back of his head but its exit path took most of his face with it. The invisible band of fear encircling her chest was the only thing that kept Laura silent. Thankfully, she thought, he never saw it coming. Neither one of them did.

As sudden as the gunshot was, the flash of a shiny, steel blade appeared from out of nowhere, and in one lightning quick movement slashed through the air and abruptly severed Tom's right hand from his arm. Laura was stunned speechless and motionless.

One of the men picked up the hand by the thumb and slid it into a clear plastic bag he had pulled from his pocket. He stared at Laura and grinned a demented, psychopathic smirk of anticipation of doing the same to her.

It was all she could do to restrain herself, her emotions, her fear. She tried to close her eyes but could not. She tried to look away but could not. Their years of friendship slowly puddled around his face and held her prisoner of her heart.

"You surprise me, CIARA," Aragon spelled out, again. Sarcasm oozed from him. "Women are pathetic little whores, but you're a whore with self-control."

Laura would not look at Aragon. In her mind she was desperately trying to restructure the memory of the face of her friend, yet she could not take her eyes off of the liquid red truth. Her friend was gone; she was alone.

"Your agency is more ignorant than I thought for sending an inept agent and his whore to negotiate with me."

Laura struggled to force her thoughts back on the issue at hand. She knew her fate, her life, would only last for a few minutes more, but she would try to live nonetheless. She had to get control of herself, at all costs, she thought. She numbly

brushed at her gray suit jacket and skirt and noticed a fine spray of Tom's blood on her jacket.

Laura softly responded in the same self-assured Spanish as before. "Señor Aragon, perhaps I can convince my boss to pay you the ten million immediately so we can proceed with the deal." Every syllable bought her another second of life, and the possible avoidance of the next bullet.

"A smart whore." Mr. Aragon laughed an evil, snide laugh. "Perhaps I'll take both the fifteen million, and you. I'll send this idiot's hand back to your agency as an example of a broken agreement, and I'll show you the only thing women are good for. My men like feisty little whores like you."

Laura glanced around at the other six men who were now standing in a semicircle around her. She knew she would never make it out alive, yet she would rather die than let them touch her. Even if she had a key to the handcuffs she would never be able to uncuff herself, and no amount of self-defense training had taught her how to wield a seventy-pound case while defending herself. Her psyche begged for a last attempt to live.

She knew she had nothing to lose by challenging him with her guesswork and assumptions. After all, she was a damn good analyst so why not let it show, she thought. At this point, every minute of conversation equaled another minute of precious life.

"Either way, Señor Aragon, you'll still be out the ten million, as well as you and your cohorts' chance to control the drug flow between the United States and South America."

"There's nothing I hate more than a woman who knows too much." Mr. Aragon glanced at one of his men who quickly stepped up behind her.

"I've been promoted from whore to woman," she rebuked in matching sarcasm. "That's a compliment coming from you."

Immediately, she was hit on the head from behind and shoved to the floor; the bones in her knees sounded like they cracked when they hit the concrete. She was dazed and fought to stay conscious. The cold, steel pistol barrel had cut her scalp and blood trickled down the back of her neck. For what seemed like a long time to her, she struggled to kneel upright but was again hit on the side of the head with the pistol, forcing her back down. Another cut and more blood spilled.

She again fought not to lose consciousness, but acquiesced to lying motionless on the cold floor. It was a dream, she thought; it was all a horrible, frightening dream. When she woke up she would have to get the kids ready for school. Or was it a weekend? she wondered in a stupor. She could feel the concrete's dampish cool penetrating her clothes and chilling her skin which brought her back to the gruesome reality of the morning.

She was dazed as she lay on the floor, drifting dangerously close to the edge of unconsciousness. Crossing her field of vision was a trickle of blood inching its way

across the floor from Tom's face toward Aragon's shoes. She wondered, was that what Abel's message was to God—my blood cries out to you? Or was Tom's blood seeking its own sweet revenge? To her, the irony of the image was profound. She wanted to ignore it but could not. For Tom, she promised not to die submissively.

"I don't like women who think too much," Aragon's voice echoed in the distance. He nudged her rib cage with his polished white leather shoes. "In fact," he added, "I don't like you because you work for those fascist pigs of your supposed elite intelligence agency. Maybe they'll learn a lesson when they get your hand in the mail, too."

She could not help but groan in response to his droning voice.

"It's a shame, isn't it?" he grinned. "You come as couriers and leave as messengers."

She had to get up, she thought. Laura, pay attention! Get up! her subconscious screamed at her. She forced herself to her knees and stared up at Aragon. Warm blood streaked down the side of her face, making its way down her neck and under her open collar. She was too numb, too terrified to notice it. "At least," her voice quivered, "I'll die knowing I was right. Who's your contact?" she challenged.

Aragon stared at her with disgust and pity.

"The dead can tell no lies," she baited. She laughed softly, almost painfully. "Or are you afraid of me?" She was on the verge of losing all self-control as every breath brought a new depth to a primal emotion. It was that of anger. She had never felt it quite like this before. After all, she thought, I'm dead anyway, I might as well experience everything I can, while I can.

"Afraid of you? A pitiful thing like you? No, you wouldn't know him. He's not a lowlife like you. He's very high up in your agency and has promised me millions more once we have you out of the way."

She suddenly realized that the morning's ordeal, including Tom's death, was not about the missing ten million dollars. It was about killing Tom and her. Aragon was definitely working with someone in the Agency, someone who had exchanged his or her loyalty for the almighty American buck.

"Then you have nothing to lose by telling me," Laura again prodded.

Each second brought her renewed strength, but she did not know what for, not with seven men against her. She did not know that it was a subconscious survival instinct that was leading her down an unknown path.

Aragon circled her slowly as though he needed each step to decide whether or not to answer her. "He goes by the name Steven Decker. I'm sure it's a cover name. All you idiots go by cover names, right?"

My God, she thought, Steven Decker? The name reverberated in her mind, and vibrated through her body as she fought to control her body's trembling. Steven Decker? she asked herself. My husband? Steven wants me dead? The man I've been

married to for thirteen years? The father of my children? Steven's name whirled through her thoughts like a hurricane ravaging every bit of her exposed soul.

Aragon again smirked at her dazed response. "I don't know what you did to have this hit put on you and your friend, but it must've been good."

She did not hear his remark. The anger was now being processed into a new emotion. It was a raw, unadulterated rage, building within her like an uncontrollable tempest. She figured her husband's plot to get rich had now cost twelve and a half million dollars per life.

"I said," Aragon's voice was more insistent, "I don't know what you did to have this hit put on you, but it must've been good. After all, Decker got ten million and I got fifteen million, and the list is as bogus as your name."

Aragon's voice echoed through her thoughts. He watched her, not quite able to put his finger on what she was feeling—and he hated it when he could not read people. He especially hated it when he could not read a woman.

"Do you know him, this Steven Decker?" Aragon asked, not aware of the transformation taking place in her.

Laura's emotion had unknowingly crossed the point of no return as she gripped the case handle. She glared up at Aragon with all the hatred and contempt she could summon from the depths of her soul.

Her answer was controlled and callous. "In fact, I do know him. It's ironic that you and I have suddenly traded places."

"How's that, slut?" Aragon queried, puzzled.

"You're the whore now. You're Decker's whore."

"Shut up!" Aragon shouted. He flashed an angry glare at the man behind her who immediately slammed his pistol across the right side of her head, knocking her down to the floor again.

Laura was stunned but it was not enough to abate the raging fury growing in her. The adrenaline from her fury coursed through her body. The fight or flight syndrome switched on, and fight was the response she chose. At this point, only death would be her true match—and death she no longer feared.

She slowly, almost effortlessly and supernaturally, pushed herself back up to her knees then stared straight into Aragon's eyes. Blood oozed from her ear, trickled down the side of her face, and dripped onto the lapel of her expensive handmade suit. He could not look away from her, and for the first time in his life Aragon tasted fear, real fear. It unnerved him.

"You're a bigger fool than I thought," she smirked. "Decker's nothing but an analyst working in the basement of one of the Agency's outbuildings. He's a desk jockey, you idiot."

"He's not!" Aragon shrieked. "He's powerful and can make me millions!" His clenched jaw matched his fists, and the expensive Cuban cigar was now a handful of sweaty, mashed tobacco leaves.

"He'll take millions from you. Look what he did to me." She sneered at him as her jaw muscles involuntarily clenched as though she was pumping iron with her teeth.

Out of controlled fear Aragon nodded slightly to the man behind her. "When you're in this business, you've got to prepare for things like this, bitch."

She could feel the cold steel of the 44 Magnum's barrel press against the base of her skull.

"If you die angry," Aragon laughed, anxious to put an end to the challenging woman's life, "you won't get to heaven."

Her jaw was clenched so tight that it took an effort to speak. "It's not a problem to me because I'm taking you and Decker straight to hell with me. I promise you."

"Oh, now a vengeful slut." Aragon's voice wavered noticeably. "It's a shame that you're a pretty little thing with such a big mouth. Too bad. I like my women with their mouths shut and their legs—"

"Take this into the future with you, you pig!" she snapped. "Steven Decker's my husband, and he just made a huge fool out of you!"

Aragon was stunned. "Get the money and kill her!" he ordered. He had heard enough. It angered him that he had made a deal with someone he did not know, and if Decker had made a fool out of him he would kill him too, but first she had to die. He nodded again to the man standing behind Laura. The man understood.

She felt the pressure of the barrel change a tiny bit and she mentally counted the four clicks as the hammer was pulled back. It's believed that the clicks stand for the four letters in "Colt." She knew the next click would be the snap of the hammer spelling out her death.

"Damn you to hell!" she screamed, heaving the heavy case over her shoulder and knocking the man down behind her. He fell unconscious. She was totally oblivious to the weight and bulk of the case.

Another man quickly drew his gun to shoot her.

"No! Don't shoot!" a child's voice echoed through the garage. It startled everyone. It was the young boy she had seen earlier.

"Kill him, too!" Aragon ordered, as he hastily climbed into the limo.

The gunman aimed at the boy across the garage allowing Laura time to swing the case across his arm. A loud snapping sound came from inside his coat sleeve as he screamed, dropped his gun, and clutched his broken arm to his chest.

A third gunman, ten feet away, smiled at her and slowly aimed straight at Laura's forehead. He cocked the big revolver with the gradual, methodical clicking that was meant to capture her last thought. On her hands and knees, and staring straight down the barrel, it did exactly that.

Suddenly a deep, loud, low-frequency sound rumbled through the garage, penetrating everything, everywhere. It had no beginning or end, and was as encompassing as it was deafening. The concrete floor started vibrating violently and

slapped against the soles of their shoes and the bottom of the case, which began an eerie tap dance of its own. Everyone stared at the floor in disbelief.

The floor quickly began to shift from side to side, sending everyone to their knees. The cars bounced wildly as if they were on a trailer without tie-downs. Laura could see Aragon's terrified face staring out from the limo's window. The floors and ceilings began heaving and cracking, and the massive stucco-covered pillars buckled and exploded from the weight of the building above.

In sheer terror the men screamed, "Earthquake! Earthquake!" as they scrambled across what now looked and acted like powerful, gray ocean waves storming around them. She struggled to her feet but the heaving concrete sent her sideways across the still-handcuffed case.

The man who had tried to shoot her was sprawled out on the floor, like everyone else, but he determinedly took aim again, and fired five successive shots as he struggled to keep her in his sights.

One bullet grazed the right side of her neck, but amidst the panic and crumbling concrete, she did not know she had been struck. The sounds of the gunshots, like the men's screams, were absorbed by the deep, grumbling, deafening roars of the earthquake and hundreds of unexplained explosions throughout the garage.

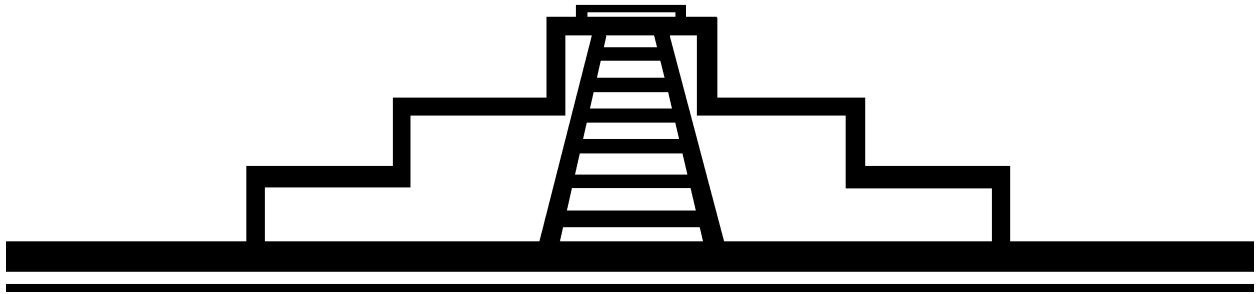
She struggled with the heavy case as she tried to run toward the boy and the exit behind him, but was unable to stay on her feet. The concrete had become a surreal liquid consistency, making it impossible to stand upon.

The monstrous groaning of the awakening earth was surpassed only by the sounds of the building caving in around her as hundreds of thousands of tons of concrete, steel, and glass started collapsing into the garage.

On her hands and knees she furiously struggled to drag the case toward the boy who was now desperately hanging onto the exit stairwell's handrail. He was screaming at her but nothing could be heard over the earthquake's roar. Suddenly, the floor cracked open in front of her and the heaving concrete sent her sprawling again. Over the edge she could see into the lower garage levels beneath her. Fighting with all her strength not to fall into the cavernous abyss, she rolled back from the crevice and tried to crawl around it.

A giant steel girder from the level below penetrated the floor beside her as if it were alive and trying to escape from the cave-in that threatened to bury it forever. It missed her by inches as it tore up past her and torpedoed the ceiling. Concrete exploded everywhere. A girder atop the ceiling above was dislodged by the escaping girder, and both came crashing down onto what little remained of the garage floor. The two girders appeared somehow animate, writhing together, pulsing and pushing. Miraculously, their union created a steel barricade between her and the remaining gunmen.

Then, in a twinkling, the sheer terror of it all was outweighed by the crumbling gray concrete and reddish stucco that engulfed everyone as the rest of the magnificent building caved into the garage.



## Author's Notes

I've been fortunate enough, or maybe crazy enough, to have lived an unbelievably extraordinary life. I can't explain why, but it's as though I'm driven to pack lifetime upon lifetime of thrills, adventures, relationships and inexplicable journeys into this one life. Now that I'm retired, I'm trying to get it all down on paper, at least to the extent that I won't be arrested for compromising classified information. However, it's the most daunting task I've ever taken on. It's not that my memory is waning; rather, I'm still driven to experience everyone, everything, and every place that I can. There's so much to life that millions upon millions of books could never capture all of it.

When I wrote *Retrieved*, I honestly intended it to be about a female CIA Agent because I have so many stories to tell about my wild life as a woman in the Intelligence Community. Dare I admit, however, that I only got my way in Chapter One? By Chapter Two, the character Mateo surfaced, took a deep lasting breath (thanks to my Mom's enigmatic connection to that little imp), and as much as I tried to write him out of the story—he survived. He not only survived my feeble attempts at drastic editing, he has endured and grown larger than life.

As an Intelligence Agent, I was involved in missions that took me all over the world, but in Central and Latin America it was the worst. Governments were in shambles, insurgents were in control, and the general populace endured and suffered through all of it. Sadly, not many people believe that it's still going on. My mission now is to remedy that.

Those countries are as unstable now as they always have been. For a taste of how bad it truly is in Central America, check out [www.casa-alianza.com](http://www.casa-alianza.com); it's a real eye-opener. Then look north to our neighbors in Canada, at [www.rwnicholson.com](http://www.rwnicholson.com). The biggest shocker is what's going on right here in the United States, [www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com).

No one really ever escapes deadly social unruliness, political upheavals, or law enforcement agencies determined to be their own gods. To some extent, everyone—from babies to the aged—suffers and lives in constant fear for their lives. In many, many places around the world, babies are bartered for a few measly coins or worse, to spare their parents' lives from the hands of renegade soldiers or vigilantes.

As if that isn't enough, people are murdered in cold blood for whatever reason the killers believe in. The most excruciating thing to learn about and acknowledge is that millions of children are treated like a scourge of vermin. Those children are either of no use as a commodity, or there are just too many of them to deal with.

Did I say commodity? Yes, because the child slave trade does, in fact, exist. In 2001, when I began writing *Retrieved*, I discovered after months of painful research that nothing has changed. Oops, I take that back, some things have changed—for the worse. Those poor young children are more invisible to the world now than they ever were. A growing number of children worldwide are kidnaped, or sold, or both, into a worldwide human trafficking business; at least, those who aren't simply exterminated are.

What's worse than being murdered? How about being forced into the hands of the growing number of pedophiles, or sold into the sexual tourism trade for prostitution and/or pornography. It goes beyond all that as well, beyond what most of us normal people could ever imagine.

Yes indeed, children are now a growing commodity in the world, and the U.S. Department of State reports that there are over one million children being trafficked worldwide for the purposes already mentioned. It also reports that the trafficking of children is generating approximately \$23 billion annually. (That's 23 Billion, not 23 million) They say it could very well be more. It's exceedingly difficult to compile statistics on children who are called "the invisibles" — the children no one wants to see.

Twenty years ago, children were seen as a problem in too many countries, but now the "problem" has been transformed into an extremely lucrative business. And thanks to the Internet, that business has become global at the touch of a keyboard. Don't get me wrong—the Internet is neither the problem, nor the symptom, nor the cause, just as a car is not the problem when a drunk is behind the wheel. I firmly believe that!

After I finished *Retrieved*, it seemed that everyone wanted to know more about Mateo. When I told them I had no intention of writing a sequel because it was too horrible to remember my past experiences, they nearly ordered that I get it out of my head and onto paper. They said, "It has to be written so others can learn from it!"

Although Mateo is a fictional character in a literary sense, he's made real by the children he represents, the children I came across 20 years ago. And to be honest, I felt like he wasn't going to let go of me—again!

With all that said, it's an honor for me to add, "Mateo, your book, *Stolen Lives*, is finally written and it's at the editor's now." It has been the hardest thing for me to write because I had to tell the truth, incorporate well-documented facts, then temper all of it with a little humor as I dug deeper into our profoundly interesting, yet complex, human nature. I hope I've done it justice.

Morgan Chai