



**CHAPTER FROM: SWEET SPOT by Linton Robinson**

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Many of the symptoms of being *chileado* -- essentially an overdose of *capsicum* -- are identical to the effects of adrenaline or fear. It might be hard for a non-initiate to understand why anybody would voluntarily afflict themselves with the sweating, the pounding pulse, the bulging eyes, the desire to cry out. *Aficionados* of *chile* understand completely. The essential effect of fear for life and limb is not bodily changes, but mental changes: the concentration of attention. Adventurers use fear of death to spice their experience of life. In Mexico, where so much of the culture and consciousness revolves around skeletons and blood, it is understood that the Gods are bloodthirsty, that life not spiced with death would be as empty as a dish without *chile*.

“Argumentum ad Capsicum” by Mundo Carrasco  
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I had a drink or two with the Prof, something he doesn't do very often, though I've heard he was a wildman when he was young. He still thinks of himself as “in training” and probably will for his whole life. We talked about some new studs on the Venados who he thought might move up with a little proper coaching. And his own career, which I think was pretty remarkable. He was the real thing -- a class act, a champion of many seasons. I had been a flashy article but ultimately just that, a flash rather than an enduring beacon. Thinking of it in those terms, I stopped by the Caliente Book for a few drinks on my own. I don't know why I find a betting parlor relaxing and introspective, but I always have. In a way, the thirty silent screens showing races and games, the mutter of betters and takers and losers, has the same effect as the surf: timelessly timely, changelessly changing.

In the movies a guy sits down to a few solitary drinks and suddenly Gets The Picture, sees What A Man Has Got To Do. And just occasionally it happens in Real Life. I was sitting there staring at a pack of dogs pounding feverishly around the track when it started to get a little unreal. They don't have jockeys to spur them, they don't get paid, they don't catch the rabbit, it's not even a real rabbit and dumb as they are, they have to know that. They're tearing their hearts out just for the win, pure and simple. Idiot animal instinct. Bred from trying to be first to get to a bitch. And it hit me. I do have something I care about winning, am not equipped to accept losing. I care about it deeply but spend a lot of time pretending not to. I decided the renovation of my soul demanded that I go to Mijares and either get into her pants or out of her hair. Take my straight shot with the other hounds. About time, I thought. About fucking time.

Since it was after midnight and I'd had those drinks I mentioned, I drove straight into the private sculpture park her parents call home and strafed right over the lawn. You don't see a lot of big manicured lawns in Mazatlán, and maybe that's why. It didn't seem strange that I wasn't challenged by bodyguards. Or that her door was open. At that point it wouldn't have seemed strange if there'd been a glowing pink doormat and a rising swell of soundtrack music. I stepped into the mausoleum where she lives.

I'm not being cutesy: her home was a smallish, Moorish-domed, marble mausoleum. Her grandparents, numbered among the few families that literally own Mazatlán, bought an old private cemetery and set up housekeeping there. It's like a small park with life-sized Greek deities, several lovely chapels, and a private bluff with a cross on it that's a sort of public landmark sitting on private property. I don't know what they did with the bodies that were in the cemetery. Since Fate had opened her door to my mission, I walked right in on what was happening.

The big guy in cowboy shirt and boots had his hand covering her entire face and most of her head, like palming a coconut. His other hand was tearing off her skirt. She had a violet thong on under it, I noticed. The even bigger guy with the Hawaiian shirt and shiny bald head, was holding her from behind, one elbow around her throat and the other twisting her arm up behind her. The goon ripping her skirt off heard me and turned, loosening his grip on her face enough that she saw me too. The hundred-kilo skinhead giving her the chokehold grinned at me and said: "Join the party, Slugger, you're also invited." I have a keen appreciation for those few sweet occasions when I know exactly, without any doubt, what I should do. I turned around and ran the hell out of there.

The less huge of the guys, the cowpoke, came right after me and he was fast for his size, only a few paces behind me when I got to my car. There would have been no chance at all to get in and start it. But fortunately all I wanted was my imported Louisville Slugger, laying right on the back seat. Reggie Jackson model: victorious relic and scarred veteran of international play.

I snatched the bat out and came around, already putting my trailing foot down and turning my hips into the stroke. He got his right arm up, which didn't get him much more than a shattered elbow instead of mushed face. I would have gone for his knees next, but he fell down on them, trying to claw under his left arm with his left hand. I didn't need any demonstrations of what he was reaching for. I just spun on the balls of my feet and swung back hard the other way.

I hit a whole game from the other side of the plate once, on a bet. I went two for five. I think I could hit .250 lefty if I had to. It was the damnedest sound I ever heard, something that will stick with me a long time. No clean, solid crack of the bat on this one, fans. It was like

crunching a meat eggshell full of fruit -- Satan's *piñata*. His face splattered all over me. I remember gritting my teeth and saying: "*Guacala!*" If you'd heard what I heard you'd have known what I knew: the guy was dead as the Argentine Peso.

I turned back to the house, and the two-meter baldie was filling up the whole door, even overflowing a little. He gave me a comforting smile, then pulled out a big automatic pistol and fired it at me. I fell back away from him as he raised the gun, and sort of waved the bat up in front of me as an instinctive, protective, waste of effort.

Suddenly the bat almost jumped out of my hands and there was another very memorable sound, which I calculated, after an appropriate delay, to have been the bullet imbedding itself in my bat. I lowered it with my hands really stinging, and looked at the bullet buried in the grain. Then I looked at the Big Guy and he burst out laughing at me. I must have had an enigmatic expression.

He was still smiling as he walked by me. He tucked the gun in his waistband and applauded softly. He said, in pretty good English: "Base on balls, *chico*."

I stood there hanging onto the bat while he grabbed the belt of the guy I had knocked out the park for good, picked him up like an empty suitcase, and walked out to the street, where a black Suburban with opaqued windows had been parked without my paying it a great deal of attention. The rear door opened and he slung the dead man inside, then stepped in himself. He stuck his head out and yelled: "*Jonron!*" which is how we spell "home run" down here, and flashed me the two finger Peace sign. Then the door closed and the Suburban sort of hulked away like a partially mollified bull. There had been at least two assault rifles visible through the door, but nobody shot at me again, which I appreciated. I have a feeling machine guns are harder to hit than big league pitching.

I stared after the Suburban, stunned, then remembered Mijares. I ran inside, holding the bat across my chest like a firearm, having a pretty good idea what I would find. And there it was: a tangle of naked, bloody legs sticking out of a broken cabinet. I ran over and knelt beside her, cursing and praying at the same time, which is an ambiguous attitude, now that I think about it. I've seen her look better. I touched her throat, searching for a pulse. Her head lolled back loose and her eyes opened, straight up at me.

"Lower," she said: "And to the right." Her voice was harsh and hoarse, almost as if somebody had just been choking her within an inch of her life. I collapsed forward, my head falling between her breasts. I touched my lips to her stomach, threw my arms around her hips and pulled myself into her, whispering thanks into her belly.

"Much better," she said: "But lower yet."

I had her propped up on the sofa, covered up a little, the blood mopped off her face. I was working automatically, shocked by the fight -- if that's what you'd call it -- and by her

proximity and condition. She seemed dazed, and kept closing her eyes and drifting off, but not seriously damaged. Thank God, the blessed Virgin, and *la chingada madre* my prayers and curses had paid off.

She put her hand on my wrist, pulled it away from staunching her nosebleed. She was completely conscious and staring at me like she'd just found me under the sofa cushions. She said: "Do you know what I thought when I saw you there, then you turned and ran away?"

"That I had more sense than you thought?"

"I doubt that. No, I was losing my grip, getting very dreamy, and I sort of heard myself talking in my ear, soft and matter of fact, you know? Saying, 'Well, there goes the only man you could ever really count on.'"

"Sort of depressing, actually."

"Especially since I realize that it's true. You're the only man I can trust or believe in, Mundo. All the rest just want something from me."

"So do I."

"No. You want everything. There's a difference." She took my face between her hands and stared at me. "You've always been there for me, no matter what."

"You just never let me screw you enough to get tired of you."

"Stop it, Mundo. You came back and fought two men with guns and rescued me. You're my hero."

"Doesn't the hero usually get the girl?"

"In the movies, yes. In reality, not that often." She paused a beat and moved my hand down to her breast, said: "But in this case, absolutely."

I froze up completely, just staring at her with my gears jammed and burning. She laughed and said: "Better nail it while you can, Mundito. Apparently there's a bounty on it." She grabbed my head and pushed it down between her breasts, down into her fragrance and startling body heat. She said: "Weren't we about here?"

"No, lower," I said. "And to the right."

She said: "Okay, but don't neglect the left one."

You have probably figured out by now that I'd made it with Mijares before, but I won't bore you with the wealth of luscious and fascinating details. But this time was very, very different. What I had known before was a sort of full-contact posing session. She likes to show off what she's got, likes to cherish heart-stopping tableaux, likes to impress you. And likes to pleasure herself. That's about it. Enough to keep my tongue hanging out for two years, but not really a grand passion, much less conquest.

There on her sofa -- bruised, mussed and starting to bleed again -- she was another story. She clung to me like the only raft on a stormy midnight sea. She gulped me down like a last meal for the condemned. She stared into my eyes, she sought my approval and pleasure, she blazed and beamed and billowed out like windy curtains. She gave me her body, her love, her complete and undivided. I felt religious about it, like a knight-errant who stumbles upon the Holy Grail on the bus home from work. I don't do this romance stuff very well, but it's no exaggeration to say that my life was split into two parts: all those antics prior to being made love to by Mijares and the far more meaningful events that came afterwards. Other than that, I guess you'd have to have been there. In plain jock talk, she fucked my fool head off and dropkicked it to the moon.

I knew better than to try to tell her about it. She *had* been there. When I was under control enough to speak I just said: "So it's true what they say, how the threat of death sharpens sexual response."

She was laying on her side; wrapped around me, stroking my stomach muscles, and breathing onto the sweat on my throat. She said: "Isn't it supposed to a mechanism to replenish the race?"

"I'm not so sure," I said. "Maybe a brush with death whets our appetite for death, is all. And sex is the closest they let us come to killing somebody."

She said: "Not to mention the closest we can come to dying." But I'm not sure I agreed. I woke up at in the back of Das Boots, parked in a clifftop pullout off the Paseo Centenario. I lay there listening to the waves and the birds, staring into a sky that was just too completely blue and deep for me.

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