

The Billionaires Club

“The sight of the contents of Tutankhamun’s tomb left us speechless! The thought of so much accumulated wealth in the hands of one man was staggering and left us wondering: How much is enough?”

Prof. Robert Reid Clark

University of Edinburgh

Co-Founder, The Cloister of Akhenaten, 1928

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MEXICO CITY

NEW YEAR’S EVE

THE STREETS OF MEXICO CITY were bright with the colored lights of Christmas and the Ortega family, all eighty of them, were gathered for a private New Year’s Eve party at the Tezka Restaurant. Abelino, 73, and his wife, Maria, 70, beamed proudly from the head table at their five adult children and their spouses, forty-five grandchildren and *their* spouses, and thirty-three great-grandchildren, ranging in age from fifteen down to the two precious two-year-olds. Three of the little ones—a six-year-old and two five-year-olds—bounced excitedly at the knees of their great-grandparents, vying for their attention. Papa Abelino smiled kindly at the six-year-old girl, stroking her hair and listening attentively to her accounting of the presents she hoped the Three Kings would bring her this week. Nana

Maria proved as focused on the two boys, who nearly climbed into her lap with their enthusiasm. Abelino, with his round belly, short white beard that hid a second chin, and his ever-present smile and laughing eyes, was the perfect embodiment of the season's joy. He radiated absolute love for his little great-granddaughter, as he did for his entire family on hand for this special night.

And a very special night it was for more than the obvious Holiday celebration.

Abelino had a few days earlier received an advance copy of *Forbes Magazine* in which he had been placed at the top of the list of the one-hundred richest Billionaires in the world. He was, according to *Forbes*, the world's richest man. But tonight as he looked around the room at the joy and laughter of his extended family he would have felt like the richest man in the world even without \$73B.

Abelino and Maria kissed the foreheads of the little ones as their mothers came over to gather them up and guide them back to their tables with gentle admonitions to let Nana and Papa sit in peace. The night was full of such comings and goings. Sooner or later every one of their seventy-eight children came over to express their love and gratitude to Abelino and Maria for the incredible good fortune and blessings these two had brought to their lives. And each and every one of them was in turn greeted with a sign of affection—a kiss on the cheek, a stroke of the hair, a firm handshake and hug—and a word of good cheer or encouragement for any hardship they might be experiencing, for it was a universal truth of life that even the wealthy had their trials and tribulations to overcome, challenges which, when met, would enrich their lives in deeper, more important ways than mere material possessions. Abelino and Maria had met and overcome such challenges in their own time together and though they now sat at the top of the mountain, they had never forgotten the days that had finally brought them here.

Abelino Ortega had not been born to wealth. He began his road to riches as a simple ten-year-old paperboy and by his thirtieth

birthday had parlayed a rock-solid work ethic and driving ambition—coupled with a healthy portion of luck—into a multimillion-dollar communications portfolio throughout Mexico and Central America. His first radio station soon grew to twelve; his small television station became a network; and the newspaper he had once tirelessly delivered one-at-a-time eventually became a force for truth under his ownership and direction. By fifty he had made his first billion and in the ensuing twenty-three years had grown that fortune into a vast holding of \$73B, USD. As proud parents Abelino and Maria made sure their children were well provided for, though they also made sure their children earned the money they were given. Along the way two of the children had become attorneys and one had become a well-known economist who worked closely with and gave good counsel to Abelino in all his business and investment activities. And he gave liberally of his fortune, making sure that his Mexican countrymen and women shared in his bounty. He was a constant benefactor to museums and charities across all of Mexico, and established dozens of college scholarships, always encouraging his country's youth to pursue higher learning as the way to rise out of poverty and improve the lot of every Mexican. Most recently he had expanded his charitable donations to advance global initiatives that would help his planet as well. He had donated a cool \$5B to GATE, the Global Attitudes Toward the Environment Foundation, whose charter was designed to support worldwide companies seeking cost-effective ways of minimizing hot-house gas production around the planet, always pointing to his great-grandchildren as 'the beneficiaries tomorrow of what we all do today.' To be sure, he lived a greatly elevated lifestyle, at ease in the lap of luxury, but he did so in the knowledge that he had earned every bit of his wealth through honest hard work. He never thought himself or his family better than anyone else and expressed that belief daily, sharing his smiles and exuberance for life with everyone from the janitors in his buildings to the directors in his board rooms. And he was humble in his

success, ever mindful of the God who had chosen to shower him with such abundance.

The New Year's Eve party was a long-held tradition, the one family get-together each year that everyone was certain to attend. Christmas, Easter, birthdays, First Communion, graduations all had their own special meaning too but no one would dare miss this party for the world. It was at one-and-the-same time the first family event of the year and the last! A time to give thanks for the blessings received during the previous year and ask continued good fortune in the coming year.

The party had begun at nine that night. A 1/10th scale Nativity scene was on display in a raised corner of the room, additional lights adorned an already brightly colored interior. Several piñatas had been hung for the children and put to good effect to keep the young ones occupied in the midst of the partying adults. Some of the teenage girls took charge of organizing the blindfolds and sticks as the smaller ones lined up to take their whacks. The adults, standing and chatting in clusters, drinks in hand, looked on at the invariably comic antics of the blindfolded children. With eyes tightly covered, the first little girl up was spun round three times and let loose on the candy-engorged target. After three or four wild swings, which sent several observers scattering to avoid being clobbered and sent all the grownups into fits of uninhibited laughter, the teen overseer would gently twist the girl in the right direction, fairly guaranteeing at least some contact with the colorful papier-mâché object. Not every whack was solid enough to free the treasure, though, and the blindfold and stick would be passed to the next child. Eventually all the piñatas were smashed, the prizes released, and the happy little ones reunited with their parents at the designated tables.

Now, with the opening activities completed and the first round of drinks consumed, the women formed klatches and the men huddles as conversations continued along gender lines and special interests. Gradually everyone drifted at one time or another close enough to

Abelino and Maria to say thank you not only for tonight but for all the blessings they had shared throughout the year. And by 10:30, with drinks and munchies out of the way, dinner was served. The room became noticeably quieter as attention turned to the meal but conversations continued through alternating mouthfuls and casual comments about the delicious food. Business topics gave way to shared family topics, occasionally raising the volume a little, but the mood was high and happy for the next hour.

By 11:30 a ten-piece Mariachi band began playing in preparation for the midnight countdown. The wine flowed easily and spirits were high when finally the clinking of knives on glasses called everyone to silent attention so that Abelino could offer a toast. He kept his comments brief and light, emphasizing his love for all of his children and promising even greater things for everyone in the coming year. And when he at last made the announcement that everyone in the room already knew, that he—and by extension, his family—had been named the #1 richest person in the world, the room exploded in cheers and applause, their enthusiasm fueled even more by the flow of wine. And at last Abelino began the countdown to the New Year. Ten...nine...eight, as everyone chimed in time. All but the youngest joined in the chant. Seven...six...five. The two-year-olds were by now fast asleep in their mother's arms and even the loud cadence didn't disturb their slumber. Four...three...two. And on one noisemakers were blown or shaken and cheers of Happy New Year filled the room as they all kissed their favorite loved-one then embraced the others nearby. Music filled the air inside the restaurant, while outside a barrage of firecrackers could be heard.

Within seconds of the first midnight cheers, a flood of bright light burst through the restaurant windows, causing everyone to squint toward the front doors. In that same instant an explosion rocked the kitchen area, blowing the swinging doors off their hinges and throwing shards of glass and wood and various kitchen utensils into the mass of people. A second huge explosion sent pieces of

Nativity scene and plaster across the top of the now-screaming women and children. Blood spattered the walls opposite the blast as twenty bodies were shredded and hurled around the room. Death did not discriminate by age. The panicked mass ran toward the light at the front of the restaurant, fearing another explosion and hell-bent on getting away from the killing ground. Mothers scooped up children, husbands put their bodies between their loved ones and the source of the last explosion, hustling them toward the front exit. Chaos and fear now owned the smoke and dust-filled room.

In the midst of the flood of bright light through the front window and the initial explosion at the back of the room, no one saw the military half-track pull up in front of the restaurant and disgorge a dozen men dressed in olive-drab combat fatigues, their faces hidden behind blue-and-white bandanas and automatic firearms raised to shoulder height and fixed on the front door. Two men remained on the truck and stood poised to fire the fifty cal machine gun mounted on the half-track. From three vantage points, movie cameras were positioned to capture the carnage about to take place.

As the second blast sounded inside the restaurant, the front door burst open and people began to pour into the street, blinded by the searing white light. Backlighting silhouettes opened fire on the people trying to find sanctuary in the streets, literally cutting them to pieces as they emerged from the hell inside. The first wave of evacuees was comprised mostly of women and children but the armed men were under orders to leave no one alive, irrespective of age or gender. Misty clouds of red liquid blew into the faces of the terrified victims, blinding their eyes so they couldn't see to avoid the barrage of bullets even if there had been some path of escape. The death scene was reminiscent of the opening D-Day assault of *Saving Private Ryan*, which is exactly what the man who had orchestrated this massacre intended. Bullets ripped through brick and mortar and found more flesh inside even before the doomed party-goers could comprehend what was happening. A third explosion was set off near

the ruins of the kitchen, forcing every last screaming being to rush the front door, now without any concern for who might be in their way. Ankles twisted on dead bodies, sending more people toppling to the floor as bullets continued to practically vaporize anything in their path.

All of this destruction took no more than one minute, sixty short seconds from the first explosion to the final shrill scream. In the next fifteen seconds, four armed men rushed into the restaurant looking for signs of life to extinguish. A moan or a twitch received a triple burst which made it quickly go silent. Several bursts were fired into a pile of bodies just for the hell of it. The orders were for absolutely no survivors and these butchers were determined to follow those orders to the letter. Once satisfied that everyone was dead, the men rushed back out to the truck. The flood lights went black. The half-track jumped forward, took a hard right at the corner, and sped away. All of this happened in less than three minutes, not even enough time for the residents on the block to register that the gunfire was not fireworks and the screams were not party revelers.

Whether from shock or fear of retaliation, it was at least a quarter of an hour before anyone called the authorities and nearly forty minutes elapsed before law enforcement and fire fighting units appeared on scene. And when finally they did arrive it was as a swarm of red lights and sirens, a veritable army of uniformed men, some in full combat gear, others dressed as *Traga Humos*—Smoke Swallowers—or Emergency Medical Technicians, all descending on the ruins of the well-known restaurant. Around a two-block area of condos and apartments curtains parted mere inches to allow the curious-but-frightened residents a glimpse of the macabre frieze. The twirling red lights glinted off liquid pools in the street and painted the walls of the buildings in dizzying, whirling stripes. Four men dragged two hoses through the front door, stepping as carefully as possible over the mound of bodies, gagging from the sour taste of bile rising in the back of their throats at the sight of the little ones, all

in an effort to control the fires in the kitchen. Pieces of bodies were gathered up quickly in the futile hope of making the scene appear less horrific as the cleanup effort went on. Captain Jose Guzman reached through the driver's side window of his ambulance to call for more trucks to come quickly. He had not anticipated so many bodies and it was immediately clear they needed more transports. Armed squads stood at each end of the block, automatic weapons at their shoulders, watching intently for any sign of a second wave of assailants. Grown men wept and swore and mumbled oaths of vengeance for what they would do if they ever found the animals who had done this, all the while moving the dead as reverently as possible from the ground to the medical vehicles. By three o'clock only a handful of police and a team of forensic firemen remained to examine the wreckage for clues as to who was behind this.

Two days later, a fully-edited movie of the massacre was delivered to the Ministry of Public Security at their headquarters in Venustiano Carranza. The DVD was accompanied by a letter signed by Julian Escobedo, the faceless reputed head of the Mexican Drug Cartel, taking responsibility for the slaughter. In his letter he cited various reports that had emerged in the past year via Ortega's communications empire in which a number of crimes—including several high profile murders—were attributed to the Cartel, crimes Escobedo asserted had not been committed by him or his people. He said those reports were being used as justification for hunting him and his family like rabid dogs and he would not put up with such treatment without a fight. Basically the message was: if it's a war you want, then it's a war you'll get!

The items had also been hand delivered to various stations and newspaper offices around the city. For the next several weeks police and reporters alike staged a massive investigation to find the killers, who proved as invisible as shadows at midnight. No one even knew what Escobedo looked like, where he lived, or who he employed,

and until this letter had arrived, there had even been hushed speculation that both Escobedo and his Cartel were simply urban legends created by the authorities purely as a means of creating a target to justify the millions of dollars being expended to fight a seemingly never-ending war on drugs. Civilian and law enforcement teams went over the DVDs a hundred times looking for any clues they could find but despite the incredibly elaborate detail and high def quality of the movie, not a single face could be identified. One thing that stood out to everyone who studied the DVDs was that it seemed not like an impromptu filming of a terrible crime as much as a well-orchestrated cinema production of the caliber of Guillermo del Toro, the brilliant Mexican movie director who was a master of horror themes, especially those with unusual situations in which people faced their real fears in creepy and unexpected worlds.

While that small piece of the puzzle was instructive it was certainly not much to go on. Every road became a dead end.

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SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA
JANUARY 5TH

THE PRIVATE YACHT XOĬĀR (pronounced Ó-lahn, in Thai it means Gargantuan), sailing under the flag of Thailand, dropped its hook three miles off San Francisco Bay. About mid-morning two of the XoĬĀr's three helicopters lifted up from the yacht's helipads and tilted toward the city. The Boeing CH-47F, an improved cargo helicopter design based on the Chinook 47, carried four of the yacht's crew and aimed for the Marina Airfield southeast of the Golden Gate to pick up supplies for the XoĬĀr. The smaller of the two VIP copters, the Sikorsky S-76C, set a course for the northeast piers off the Embarcadero carrying Reggie Harper, Bruce Billingsley, and two other crew members who acted from time to time as directors of various boards set up by Reggie. All three voted as Reggie dictated but they were listed as board members for legal purposes. Billingsley, however, served as more than Reggie's Board of Director shill. Billingsley's computer skills were indispensable to Reggie's various financial schemes. Today, in addition to regular quarterly board business, they would be meeting with American millionaire Randall Sitton regarding GATE, the Global Attitudes Toward the Environment Foundation, which Reggie had established

with an initial \$5B endowment. Additional funds would come from his wealthy friends.

At the end of a twenty-minute flight the Sikorsky set down atop the tallest of three buildings at Embarcadero Center and the four men walked down the single flight of stairs to the Harper Enterprise offices, which occupied the top two floors of the building.

Known as Reggie to his friends, of which he had relatively few real ones but an endless string of sycophants, S. Reginald Harper III was, at twenty-eight, the youngest of the *Forbes* Top 100 billionaires, ranked fourteenth with an estimated net worth of \$27B. By contrast the next youngest person on the list was Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook, who was twenty-nine and ranked sixty-sixth with a net worth of \$13.3B. Reggie was a fashion anachronism, dressing more like the wealthy businessman of the 1950s than a 21st Century not-yet-thirty mogul. With sandy hair and gray-blue eyes, he draped his six-foot slender frame in multi-thousand-dollar suits, custom made on Bond Street in London, and preferred starched collars and French cuffs with gem encrusted wrap-around gold cufflinks to the typical wash-and-wear fabrics worn by most of his contemporaries. His shoes were handmade in Italy, as were his Brioni silk ties, some costing as much as five figures each. Even his casual wear would break most budgets.

His 'toys' suited his financial status as well. His 640 ft Xoļār yacht, anchored outside San Francisco Bay, reportedly cost him over \$400M, with more than \$3M of that expense tied up in gold fixtures, gold trim and gold paint, plus several more millions each year to operate, given his seventy-person crew and his penchant for long cruises taken at a moment's notice on pure caprice. The 3-man leisure submarine was a few million extra, but worth the price. He liked to spend a lot of time at sea where there were no governments with their petty rules, and would usually anchor in international waters, commuting from ship to shore via helicopter, of which he kept three onboard the Xoļār, the cheapest of those costing in excess

of \$13M.

For long-range trips where getting there in a hurry might be a factor, he enjoyed the comfort of his Gulfstream G550, the most expensive private jet available, which came with a modest \$60M price tag, plus operating and hangar expenses. For basic ground transportation Reggie had a car collection that would put Jay Leno's to shame, but unlike Jay, who kept all his cars in one place, Reggie preferred to spread them around, keeping five or six at each of his eight luxury homes around the world.

Those who might think Reggie was part of the Jet Set, someone who lived life in the fast lane, would have to come up with a better label than that. Reggie was in a category all to himself. Even other members of the world's Billionaires Club seemed slow and quaint by comparison. Reggie didn't simply live life in the fast lane; he owned his own autobahn. He was a real party animal with seemingly unlimited energy, sleeping a mere four hours a day on average, catching catnaps once in a while as needed and seeming to be perpetually on a caffeine or adrenaline high.

He had a well-known, almost legendary, love of all things gold, a love that first manifested itself when he still slept in a crib. His parents recognized this fascination, bordering even then on obsession, early on when they were constantly having to take gold jewelry away from him lest he swallow it. He liked silver and gems, too, but those were easily set aside when anything gold came into his field of vision.

He also loved women, or more to the point, he loved women in the way one might love a painting or a sculpture or a fast car. He loved the 'concept' of a woman as something to bring him pleasure when he wanted it, in whatever ways he wanted, and saw no need or utility in choosing just one. He wouldn't dream of owning only one suit or one tie or one car, so why would he want just one woman? Different occasions called for different companions. A black-tie affair might call for a long-legged brunette in an elegant black dress

with rubies draped round her neck for a splash of color, while a Hollywood party might dictate a voluptuous blond in Capri pants and tight blouse. Intelligence was an option in his women. He wasn't generally looking for good conversation, but then an obvious dolt wouldn't reflect well on him either. It was important to Reggie that other men should want what he had and know they couldn't get. Almost any man could find an attractive simpleton if he wanted. No. Reggie's women had to be at least above average intelligence. But while he preferred a woman who could hold an intelligent conversation at some sophisticated French soiree, when he thought of a woman putting her head to good use, he wasn't imagining her quoting Descartes or Rousseau. Balzac maybe. Marquis de Sade on special occasions. He was, after all, flexible in these regards.

As one might guess, Reggie's lifestyle and malleable morality did not meet with his parents' approval. Born Samuel Reginald Harper III after his grandfather and father before him, he had railed against being called 'Sammy' till he was ten and made such a misery of their life they finally relented and started calling him Reggie as he demanded. Millionaires themselves, they had raised Reggie with a solid foundation of Judeo/Christian mores, chief of which was the Golden Rule. But against all their good intentions the lessons never stuck. His twisted version of the Golden Rule was: Do unto others... before they can do unto you. For this and other reasons Reggie and his parents had accepted a certain degree of estrangement between them by the time he reached his eighteenth birthday. On the one hand Reggie was polished and well-spoken and a source of pride for them; on the other hand, he tended to display a callousness toward the average man that made them cringe whenever he would utter some contemptuous remark in public, keeping in mind that the "public" he was generally in the company of were already in the upper strata, well-educated and wealthy. For his part, Reggie was keenly aware that the circles he was raised in were comprised entirely of millionaires, but he couldn't contain his acute

embarrassment that his own family was not at the top of that group. Reggie viewed life as a game of wealth accumulation and the last thing he wanted was for his parents' "lack of success, internal drive, and native ability" (as he so viciously dissected their shortcomings to them) to rub off on him. He felt it enough of a challenge to have to overcome the DNA he got from them.

Reggie veered off on his own financial path at an early age, albeit with seed-money he got from his "failure" parents. He took one look at the world around him and decided that leveraged buyouts held the greatest opportunity for him. It was the best of all worlds: a business that someone else had begun and grown to some level of success before hitting a ceiling of ability or capitalization or share of the market such that the original entrepreneur's only best move was to sell before the walls caved in on them. He seemed from the beginning to be the Merlin of Hostile Takeovers. He bought companies at bottom dollar and appeared to all observers to have a magical sixth-sense about which businesses had a chance and which should be stripped and resold piecemeal for their assets. By the time he reached his majority, he had made his first billion, effectively turning the rift between him and his parents into a chasm. He quickly branched out to hedge funds as well as more traditional investments and again proved to have a Midas touch.

But for all his external success Reggie felt like a frustrated underachiever because he did not yet have a billion dollars for each of his twenty-eight years of life. True, he hadn't really gotten started till he was eighteen, but he had standards to live up to! His own standards; but standards nonetheless. Here he was, #14 on the world's richest persons list, but instead of being content that nearly seven billion people had far less than his \$27B, he was obsessed with the thirteen "old codgers" who had more. This would not stand in his world. Somehow he needed to redouble his efforts if he was going to become the winner, for he did in fact see life as a game, a game he fully intended to win. And he had set a timeline for

winning. His timeline for success? NOW!

“GOOD MORNING, SIR. And Happy New Year!” said Eve Whetstone, the GM in the San Francisco offices. Eve Whetstone was a thirty-year-old blond, five-three, attractively built, with a steel-trap mind for business. She wasn’t so much ruthless as shrewd, but the business choices she made could easily have been viewed either way. She had been Reggie’s GM for nearly two years and had shown herself to be worth every penny of the million dollar salary plus bonuses he paid her. She was really fun in bed too, but that had never really been a focus of the relationship for either of them. On a lesser scale she was rather like Reggie in that regard; her liaisons were utilitarian, pragmatic more than romantic. He had found her in London’s Canary Wharf, a major financial services center, and felt that her keen money sense and beautifully sophisticated English accent made her perfect for the American market. It was a toss up whether to set her up on the East Coast or the West but Reggie ultimately decided there were too many competing “accents” in the Boston area and her true charm would be lost to ivy-league pretense there, whereas her personal charm and business expertise would work better in Silicon Valley, which had a more liberal cosmopolitan attitude.

“Happy New Year, Eve,” beamed Reggie, who could turn the gregarious charm on and off at will. They embraced lightly, more of a business hug than an end-of-date embrace. “How is everything with you?” He wasn’t really interested in the answer and she had even less desire to actually provide one beyond a superficial ‘Very well, sir.’ She always called him sir at work, reserving Reggie—or other diminutives—for when they were alone. “Have the techies checked in yet?” This was in reference to the telecom chip people he was lunching with regarding some additional start-up funds they needed.

“They phoned about ten minutes ago to say there was a traffic

jam on 101 a little north of the airport that had everything backed up almost to Burlingame. They were going to take 380 over to 280 and come in from the Portola Drive side. Personally I don't know why they didn't just take 280 to begin with. Anyway, they'll be here on time. It was mostly just a courtesy call. I confirmed your lunch reservations at the Mark Hopkins. Your limo and driver will be downstairs when you're ready."

"You're planning to join us, aren't you?" asked Reggie. It was a sincere invitation more than a direct order.

"I wasn't certain whether you wanted me there or not but my schedule is clear."

Reggie touched her arm affectionately. "Absolutely, Eve. By all means. After all, you're the one they'll have to deal with after today. How about Sitton? Is he here yet?"

Eve said, "You're meeting with him at two. He phoned from the plane. He gets to SFO at one and I've arranged for a driver to meet him."

"Good," said Reggie enthusiastically. "He should have some very good news to report on the Foundation. Can you get us a dinner reservation in Sausalito? Let's take him to the Spinnaker, say about nine? That will give him some time to freshen up in his room after our meeting."

"Already taken care of, sir. Drinks at 8:45; our table at nine. I requested a window table where we'll have a view of the city. It's supposed to be a clear night with a full moon."

Reggie turned to Billingsley and the other two men. "See why I love this girl! She's always on top of the situation." He gave her a little wink that was as much salacious as appreciative. She got both intentions and smiled.

AT ELEVEN O'CLOCK the Silicon Valley guys arrived. Reggie and Billingsley were waiting in the conference room when Eve brought the four men in. Reggie, his social persona kicking into high gear,

shook each hand enthusiastically as he introduced the men to Billingsley. He had a remarkable memory for names and faces, impressing even his business guests as they had only met briefly on two other occasions. “Bruce, this is Alvin Wong.” Billingsley took Wong’s hand as Reggie elaborated. “Alvin is the CEO of Next Dimension Entertainment and his family ties in China will smooth the way for entry into that market.” Reggie smiled as he took the next hand. “Ah, Jürgen, wie geht es ihnen? This is Jürgen Ruprecht, head of European Operations.” The next two men were the principle design engineers, Bob Blauschild and Bill Mack, both extraordinary minds when it came to chip design. Blauschild carried a little black box under his arm, a small innocuous looking item 14 x 8 x 1½, a device that had already cost millions to create but an invention that would pay for itself many times over in the next year. Reggie took each hand then passed the men to Billingsley. “That little gadget Bob has under his arm is going to remake the home entertainment industry,” explained Reggie. “It turns any high def television set into a 3-D display, and here’s the kicker...you don’t need those damn glasses to watch it!”

Billingsley’s mouth opened involuntarily. “Son of a...are you kidding?” Blauschild and Mack flashed knowing smiles. “Ho! Man! This is a gold mine!”

Reggie agreed as he gestured the men to take a seat at the table. A 70” high def TV was set up on a cart at the end of the table and Mack walked over to hook their box to it. He powered up the components, grabbed the remote, and took his seat near Blauschild. A 3-D DVD of *Ironman 3* was already loaded into the tray of the black box. Mack hit play and a moment later Reggie, Billingsley, and Eve started laughing like little kids. The 3-D image practically walked out of the screen onto the table.

Wong said, “It will even create a simulated 3-D image for almost all other programming, regardless of how it was created.”

“So, when do we go into production?” asked Reggie.

“With your help,” said Ruprecht in a quiet voice almost too soft to hear, “very soon. There are still one or two small glitches to work out, ja? But we are nearly there.”

“Small glitches that will cost big dollars, right?” said Eve.

“Yes,” answered Wong, adding “but all the heavy lifting is already done. And as near as we can determine, the competition is still several years out with their designs. We can bring our own units to market in nine months, effectively monopolizing the market. Licensing the technology to other manufacturers will effectively drive the consumer prices down but will more than pay for the R&D expenses we already incurred...”

Ruprecht interjected, “...and turn a healthy profit well into the next decade...or two.”

“I still haven’t heard a number,” said Eve, smiling as she cut to the chase.

Reggie said, “Well, as it turns out, I can cover it...whatever it costs. But I prefer to discuss the details over lunch.” He smiled around the table. “What do you say, lunch...on me?”

Their table at the Top of the Mark was just what Reggie loved. A window seat nineteen floors up, with a 360° view overlooking the city that he had fantasies of some day owning. They discussed the next steps but Reggie didn’t need a number. He had already told Eve he was onboard, whatever the cost, and left it in her capable hands to work out the details. At one-thirty they headed back for the two P.M. meeting between Reggie, Billingsley and Sitton.

RANDALL SITTON WAS an Eastern Establishment millionaire living in Charleston, South Carolina. A white-haired, slim, distinguished looking gentleman of good breeding was exactly what Reggie needed to bring credibility and legitimacy to the Global Attitudes Toward the Environment Foundation he had created, but with one important advantage: it allowed Reggie to distance himself from the Foundation. Sitton had been named the Chief Administrator for

GATE, and though he didn't need it, Reggie had attached a healthy salary to the position. Reggie had also kicked off the endeavor with a whopping \$5B endowment. Sitton's position had a one-year tenure, after which he could continue with Reggie's consent. He was, of course, free to resign at any time if he so desired. The ostensive charter of GATE was to provide funds to research groups or companies in transition to reduce, in significant ways, greenhouse gas emissions. Funds could be distributed at Sitton's sole discretion up to amounts of \$500M. Amounts beyond that would require Billingsley's endorsement. Sitton's responsibilities included soliciting funds from his wealthy friends, making presentations to individuals or companies for the same purpose, and maintaining records and ledgers detailing the flow of funds in and out of the Foundation. Sitton was not aware, however, of Reggie's true intent in creating GATE. Sitton was also not aware of exactly how Reggie intended to end Sitton's tenure, whenever it was determined to be in Reggie's self-interest.

The two o'clock meeting brought the good news that Reggie had anticipated. But while Eve would join them for dinner that evening at the Spinnaker, she was excused from this meeting, which was attended only by Reggie, Billingsley, and Sitton. It should be stated, though, that she was excluded not because Reggie didn't trust her, but for reasons that were wholly uncharacteristic of Reggie. This was perhaps one of the few altruistic motivations Reggie ever had. He liked Eve and wanted to make sure her name would never be tied to this particular bit of business. It was made clear to Sitton, too, that Eve was completely divorced from his activities and that any and all communications relating to the Foundation were to be directed solely to Reggie or Billingsley, and that specific details regarding funds going in or out of the Foundation were never to be sent electronically, which included via telephone. Reggie's explanation that he did not trust any electronic communications to be confidential—i.e., free of government eavesdropping—was both

acceptable and believable to Sitton.

As their meeting got underway, Sitton was understandably excited to tell Reggie and Billingsley of a recent donation that was going to swell their coffers considerably once all the legal niceties had cleared. “It seems,” said Sitton, “that a very tragic event just days ago will give a tremendous boost to our Foundation efforts. I don’t know if you are aware of this, but on New Year’s Day Abelino Ortega and his family were massacred in Mexico City. News reports said it was a hit by the Mexican Drug Cartel. Anyway, it seems he had a stipulation in his will that left the GATE Foundation an endowment of \$10B. Can you imagine that! But listen to this, it gets even better!” said Sitton. “The attack on Ortega caught him and his entire family together in one place. Every single potential heir was killed in that attack. And as it turns out, there was a provision in Ortega’s will stipulating that in the absence of any blood heirs to his fortune, an additional amount—another \$20B—was to go to GATE!” Sitton quickly curbed his exuberance in deference to the recently deceased but could only contain so much of it. Sitton was unaware the will—a forgery that had been put into play in early December—named Bruce Billingsley executor.

“I see,” said Reggie dispassionately. “Well, that is very good news—about the endowment, of course; not the death of the Ortegas. Let me know when the funds have transferred.”

DINNER AT THE SPINNAKER was delightful, without another word about GATE or the prospective funds. Eve was a charming and lovely complement to the three men, bringing a sense of style and class to an already wonderful setting. The view of San Francisco that night enjoyed perfect weather, not even a mist of fog, and the wine flowed freely. Reggie would thank Eve in a more personal manner later that night, much to their mutual satisfaction, and in the morning Randall Sitton would fly home to Charleston, none-the-wiser about Reggie’s future plans.

3

HONG KONG
APRIL 2ND

CHENG YU-TUNG SAT QUIETLY IN HIS OFFICE. A serious, pensive stream of thought played out in the lines on his face to no observers. A troubling series of events had taken place over the past three months, events which, having thought long and hard on the matter, now brought him to a grave hypothesis: someone was killing off the world's billionaires from the top down; one-by-one, month-by-month. And if this wasn't the case, that someone was responsible for the deaths, then a most curious and macabre series of coincidences was taking place, which was almost more frightening!

Forbes placed the total number of billionaires in the world at 1,011. China's share of those was 64—89 if Hong Kong was included; it still acted in a manner somewhat independent of the Chinese government though technically a part of it. That gave China the second most billionaires to the US, which had 403 of the total. Mr. Cheng Yu-Tung was listed at #44 of *Forbes*' top 100, but since January he had risen to #40. If what he thought was happening proved correct, he, personally, was in no immediate danger, but if he *was* correct, something needed to be done for those at or near the top of the list...and soon! But what could possibly be the motivation for

such a heinous act?

Cheng had seen brief reports of the Ortega attack back in January but while tragic and horrifying he saw no significance beyond the attack itself. It was roughly six weeks, by his recollection, that a brief report in a financial publication told of the car accident death of Boyd Gardner, the computer magnate, and his wife in the US. The passing of a man who had made such a far-reaching contribution to people all around the globe was noteworthy, but the circumstances of his death bore no special circumstances to raise any concern.

It wasn't until a month later, with the death of Abelardo Ontiveros in Spain, that Cheng began to see a most troubling pattern developing. The circumstances surrounding the death of Ontiveros were no more unusual than Boyd Gardner's—both had been simple auto accidents—but now for the third consecutive month the richest man in the world had died. Obfuscating the situation was the fact that in that same period three other billionaires, not even in the top 100, had also died: one of an accident and two of natural causes. Cheng was not one to rush to judgment on a thing, a decidedly Chinese trait, but he was also not given to much self-doubt when his senses and reason were telling him something. Now, for one of those rare times in his life, he sensed one thing but reasoned another and the confusion left him with conflicting emotions. He reached across his desk and pressed the intercom number of his most trusted advisor and friend, Shek Baojia. A moment later the man knocked once on the door and was summoned in.

“Cheng géxià,” said Baojia, using a more formal address than usual with his friend, “how may I be of service to you?”

“Bao, my friend. I need your counsel. Please have a seat.”

The informal address was unusual in the office, which sent a shiver down Shek Baojia's spine. He had seldom seen this expression on his friend's face, and that friendship covered four decades of working and playing together. He listened attentively as Cheng related the accounts of the three deaths.

“Bao, I know you are not quick to judgment. Like me, you are one to weigh the facts before speaking an opinion. I am uneasy with the events but I don’t want to reach a dramatic conclusion where none is warranted. Please, based on what I have told you, should I be concerned or have I allowed my imagination to get the better of me?”

“I am afraid, Yu-tung, that you have not told me everything, or else you are not yet aware of additional information.”

Cheng sat back in his chair, an intense look etching his brow. “I have told you all there is to tell, Bao. What are you referring to?”

Baojia was measured in his speech, cautious because of what his friend had just told him. “The American billionaire, Wayne Barnett, died of a heart attack last night. Reports are making their way through the halls of finance even as we speak. I saw this news only this morning while looking at investment data online. The venerable Barnett was eighty-two just a couple of months ago. While this was sad news, no one was surprised at his passing, even though he had no illness that anyone was aware of. Now, in light of what you have told me, perhaps there is more to this than meets the eye.”

Cheng sat silent, trying to absorb this new information. He reached down and pulled open the bottom drawer of his desk to retrieve a pipe, tobacco, lighter, and ashtray, which he set on the desk between them. His mind was focused on these matters as he pinched some tobacco into the pipe and tamped it down. “Please” he said to Baojia indicating he should feel free to smoke. Baojia withdrew a light blue box from his suit coat pocket, took one of the Zhongnanhai cigarettes out, and placed it between his lips. Both men struck their lighters at the same time and drew in the smoke. As Baojia exhaled and Cheng puffed on the pipe, Cheng stared off toward the bookshelf on the far wall lost in thought. Finally he said “I am being foolish to draw nefarious conclusions from this unfortunate series of coincidences. I am allowing the nature of the Ortega deaths to color my perception. If that terrible act had not

taken place first, or if Ortega had simply died of natural causes or some reasonable but tragic accident, I would never have thought to link these matters into some web of intrigue.”

Shek Baojia understood what his friend was doing. Cheng was denying the conclusion that had caused him to summon Baojia to his office in the first place, allowing Baojia to either dismiss the matter or press it further. That Cheng would lay aside his own reasoning in deference to his friend’s was an incredible gesture of respect, especially coming from a man whose success in life was so directly tied to his own keen intelligence. Baojia flicked an ash into the ashtray and bought another second by taking another drag from the cigarette. After another moment of reflection he said, “Cheng géxià,” slipping back into the more formal address, “I believe these events are linked, though I admit that I am unable to say what lies beneath the surface. I apologize that my reasoning cannot give you more to go on, but I trust you will know best how to proceed.”

Cheng looked back from the books and smiled at his friend. “Bao, I appreciate what you have just said but the deficiency, if any, is mine, not yours. Please, we are good friends and I trust your analytical ability as I do my own. I think we both see a pattern here that should be investigated. Now my only question is who I should go to with my suspicions.”

“Yu-tung, I think you have a most trusted confidant you can turn to and he is nearby. The American friend who has been staying here for the past several weeks. If I am correct, I believe he is still here.”

Cheng took the pipe from his mouth. “You are absolutely right, Baojia. I was reluctant to involve him but you have given me the confidence I needed.”

Shek Baojia stood and smiled. “I am happy to have been of some small service to you, Cheng géxià.” He stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray, bowed his head in respect, and left his friend to take the next step.

Cheng took out his cell phone and pulled up the number of his

American friend. He put the phone to his ear and waited as it rang. A moment later he spoke.

“Wesley, my revered friend, I hope I might prevail on you to help in a matter of great concern to me.”

4

HONG KONG
APRIL 2ND

FOR THE PAST TWO WEEKS Wes Franklin and Ashley Jordan had been on vacation following a case that had taken them halfway around the world and culminated in Russia. From there they had decided to visit a longtime friend in Hong Kong, Cheng Yu-Tung, a billionaire real-estate mogul. Much of their time had been spent between the sheets, enjoying some together-time. Typically they would sleep in until eleven, find a nice restaurant for lunch and some drinks, take in a little sightseeing, and follow a tranquil day with a late dinner that had them back in bed by one—and asleep by two. Every two or three days Cheng and his wife joined them for dinner or some other social activity.

Today Wes and A.J. were lunching at the Hard Rock Café in Lan Kwai Fong, a small square of streets in Central, Hong Kong. Typical of nearly any Hard Rock Café in décor, it allowed them to enjoy the cozy, familiar setting, especially appreciative that this time of day the club was much quieter than it would be after dark. Wes had just finished his first decaf and Bailey's—extra hot—and A.J. was still nursing her first Chardonnay when Wes's phone sounded from his

suit coat pocket. The lovers were fully engaged in some seriously playful nuzzling between sips and for a moment entertained the notion of ignoring the call. Reluctantly Wes leaned back from A.J.'s ear nibbling. "Hold that thought" he said with a modest case of lust in his eyes as he withdrew the phone. The display showed it was Cheng. Wes flipped open the phone and, feeling a bit euphoric from the drink and A.J.'s flirtations, said an effervescent, "Cheng, how are you on this wonderful morning?"

Cheng could almost be heard to smile on the other end. "Wesley, my friend, I see you still haven't adjusted to our time zone. It's the middle of the afternoon."

"Yes, we do seem to lose track of time easily," said Wes, looking playfully into A.J.'s blue eyes. "What can I do for you?"

Cheng slipped quickly into a more formal tone. "Wesley géxià, I hope I might prevail on you to help in a matter of great concern to me."

Wes, noting the change, shook his head at A.J. as she leaned in to kiss his neck. "Of course. What's up, that is, how can I help?"

Saying only that Wayne Barnett had died of a heart attack the day before, Cheng made it clear he didn't want to go into details on the phone and suggested they discuss it over an early dinner instead. In the two weeks his friends had been in Hong Kong, Cheng had always kept his manner sociable, avoiding any topics relating to business, governments, or religion, so it was readily apparent to Wes that something was weighing heavily on Cheng's mind, something more than the passing of a wealthy American. Cheng suggested they meet at the Aqua Roma restaurant in Kowloon at six-thirty, a time and location that would afford a beautiful view of Victoria Harbour, at the same time getting them in ahead of the evening rush that would invariably come later. They wouldn't be alone but they could hold a conversation without having to talk over a din.

Wes and A.J. ordered one more drink, which they sipped leisurely. Downing the last few drops in his cup, Wes laid some

money on the bar, helped A.J. down from the stool, and the pair stepped outside. They strolled around Lan Kwai Fong, checking out the shops and taking in the local color, until five-thirty when they caught a North Point Ferry to Kowloon. They stood on the outside deck throughout the slow ride across the harbor, taking in the ambience of Hong Kong at dusk, feeling the salt air brush against their faces and watching the junks and other water craft move around the harbor in their last little bits of business for the day. From the Kowloon dock it was a short walk across Canton Rd. to the Aqua Roma restaurant at 1 Peking Rd. Cheng was waiting outside the restaurant for them and at their approach offered a smile and his customary shallow bow. Inside the three of them were quickly led to a table as the Maitre d' made an effusive show of respect for the 'honorable Mr. Cheng and his most welcome guests' and gestured to a prime corner window with a breathtaking view of Victoria Harbour. The men stood as the Maitre d' pulled out the chair for A.J., then bowed a thank you to their gracious host and took their positions flanking her. Even before the Maitre d' turned away, a bus boy began removing the extra place settings and a waiter, notepad at the ready, asked if they wished to order a drink. Cheng ordered for the table, a nice bottle of *Fen jiu*, an original Chinese white wine made from sorghum, a wine that dated back to the Northern and Southern Dynasties of 550 A.D. Over the first glass of wine, they made small talk and reviewed the menu. Cheng suggested a couple of the restaurant's specialties, as well as his own favorite dishes, then gave them time to peruse the menu and decide for themselves. The small talk continued as they looked out at the harbor and sipped their wine until their meals arrived. After they had taken a couple of bites, Cheng inquired as to how they were enjoying their meals, and seemed to take a certain amount of pride in his choice of restaurant when they both said they were quite delighted with the food. Then as they neared the last bites of their entrees, being careful to leave a morsel or two on their plates, Cheng slid into the topic that had

brought them together this evening. He began with a question: Had they heard about the Ortega massacre in Mexico City at the beginning of the year? Wes reminded Cheng that he and A.J. had been vacationing in the Caymans through the holidays and well into February and had intentionally not kept up with the news. Cheng gave them a recap of the event, avoiding a too graphic description of the slaughter given they had just eaten, but as he spoke he handed A.J., who was seated between Cheng and Wes, an envelope, explaining the contents inside included a DVD of the news report as it had been broadcast, as well as a full-length version of the video he had procured through friends at the television station in Mexico City, a version that was far too horrific for television viewers. He added that the envelope also contained some notes he had scratched down about the other deaths, including dates, places, ages of the deceased, and anything he could think of that might be of help in sorting out whether his fears were warranted or not. A.J. slipped the envelope into her purse and continued to listen as Cheng summed up the events. The Ortega massacre had been the only outright bloodbath; the other deaths all seemed innocuous by comparison, though the timing and rankings of some of them gave him an uneasy feeling. All the deceased had been listed on the *Forbes* list of the top 100 billionaires around the world, though three seemed unrelated to the fears nagging at him; hence his quandary. In February Boyd Gardiner, the American computer giant, and his wife were killed in an auto accident. Also in February Adrian Christie, the American media tycoon, had died. The difference, as Cheng saw it, was that Gardiner had been ranked #2 by *Forbes* and was a relatively young man at fifty-seven, whereas Christie was ninety-three and ranked way down the list at #80. Both were Americans and, as could be said in both cases, life happens. Taken in isolation their separate deaths meant no more than the end of a life well-lived, regardless of how long the life was. Even Cheng had seen nothing sinister in their passing at the time. But then on March 19th Abelardo Ontiveros died

in Spain along with his wife, also victims of a car crash, and four days later Arik Hallberg died in Sweden. Ontiveros was seventy-seven and Hallberg was eighty-seven, but while Hallberg had been ranked near the bottom of the Forbes list at #94, Ontiveros had been #3, and Cheng suddenly felt a shiver run down his spine. A disturbing pattern was beginning to emerge. In the first three months of the year the three top-ranked billionaires in the world had died, and Cheng's instincts began to struggle against his logical mind. So far he had been able to keep his fears and suspicions to himself, though; all the way to the end of the month when ninety-year-old Jeremy Tinker died. Tinker had been ranked #94 along with Hallberg, but his death was anything but unexpected; he had battled cancer for nearly all of the previous year. And for a moment Cheng had to laugh at his own paranoia. How could he have been so spooked by the obvious vagaries of life? It must have been the result of some residual shock from the horrific death of Ortega and his family that had ignited his imagination and sent him careening to the edge of reason. Then, one day after Tinker's death, his paranoia came crashing back. The death on April 1st of Wayne Barnett, the American investment wizard, drove him back to the brink of the abyss, forcing him to seek out the help of his friends. True, Barnett was eighty-two and his death had been ruled a heart attack, but to Cheng this was more than the natural cycle of life and death. Barnett made it four straight months that the top ranked billionaire in the world had met his demise. This couldn't be a simple series of coincidences; he was sure of it.

And Wes was inclined to agree—if not in the conclusions drawn, then at least that it was worth taking a closer look.

Their dinner ended on an obvious down note but at the same time Cheng felt a huge weight lift off his shoulders. He had shared his fears and suspicions with Wes Franklin and Ashley Jordan and they had not dismissed his perception as paranoid delusions. They had shown great respect in their willingness to bring their considerable

analytical powers to bear on the puzzle. They would examine the pieces and try to prove one way or another whether Cheng had cause for concern. If he was correct, and Wes and A.J. could see a pattern in these events, Cheng's fears would have contributed to possibly saving the life of the next person on the list. And if he was not correct, his friends would have helped him lay aside his troubles and enjoy once more a mind at peace with the world.

BACK IN THEIR ROOM, Wes slipped the Ortega disc into the DVD player and he and A.J. sat back to watch the tragedy play out. It was a terrible event but they had as yet been spared the gruesome details. Next, Wes called up the full three-minute version from the DVD menu and hit play. This time A.J. couldn't stomach it. She looked away from the screen in horror and fought back a scream at the first few seconds of the carnage. Wes almost did the same but struggled through it, choking back emotion at the sight of the mayhem. Women. Children. Old and young. Ripped apart in such brutal sadistic fashion. It was almost unfathomable that human beings could do this to each other.

Now, when Wes and A.J. approached the rest of the deaths in Cheng's notes, they did so with a mind set similar to the one Cheng had had, but without having to wait for the months to tick slowly by. They got the whole picture all at once.

Wes took his glass by the stem, swallowed a deep gulp, and began pondering the data aloud. "All right, what do we have?" he asked.

"We have the deaths of seven of the wealthiest people in the world," said A.J. "Let's start by creating a spread sheet of what we know. We have names and nationalities, dates of death, ages, and rankings on the *Forbes* list. Let's see what that looks like."

A.J. began thinking aloud as they studied the data in the table. Wes did likewise, as they put their heads together over the puzzle.

A.J. began. "What can we say about this group of people?"