

The Silent Watchman

Part 2. Apprentice

News report

Attempted Murder in Mexico

By Marcelo Barcqe

MEXICO CITY -- Earlier today in a northern province of Mexico, an attempt to kill a high-ranking USDEA official was foiled by Mexican authorities. Sources close to the investigation told this reporter that the assassination attempt failed because agents conducting a counter surveillance operation detected the plot early in the preparation stages and federal police allowed it to proceed far enough to establish irrefutably both the conspiracy to commit the act and execution of the act itself. Commissioner Martine Santos praised the police for their daring confrontation of a vicious drug cartel on its home ground.

Previously

The brass plaque reads: Garmeister McCaffey and Stoddard. It is discretely displayed at the entrance to an early 20th-century corner bank building in a quiet DC suburb, three stories above ground, one level below, richly appointed in the style of yesteryear but renovated to retain a historic landmark exterior masking a 21st century information technology more modern in function than all but, perhaps, the top one-thousandth of one percent of similar firms in the world. For the world is Garmeister McCaffey and Stoddard's playground, international contracting and finance its game, and old-fashioned competence, discretion, and demeanor its trademark. Capable of conducting all of its legal and financial services in-house, Garmeister McCaffey and Stoddard (GMS as it is known in the close quarters of the trade) is the first choice for many top-tier international corporations, sovereign governments, and non-governmental organizations across the globe. The first two floors of the sedate building contain the reception and staff areas;

the third floor, the private offices and conference rooms of the three principals. The office and vaults below ground level, however, are the exclusive preserve of Simon Stoddard; he alone controls access to a world not shared with his partners, associates, and clients in the three floors above.

Simon Stoddard and one of his clandestine associates, Amos Sanson, were seated in Simon's private sanctuary, deep in conversation. In a wide-ranging exchange, they discussed terrorist tactics, drug cartels, ALF/ELF, and a conspiracy involving locally coordinated attacks in the United States by independent elements of the three acting together at the grassroots. Simon described a DEA proposal to protect a U.S. diplomat who was being targeted by the unholy triumvirate for promoting cooperation between U.S. and Mexican authorities to prevent such attacks. During the conversation, Sanson decided to reveal Rosada Angel Jesus's role as research and analysis specialist for a protective intelligence team, employing her, Devon Xander as investigator, and himself as surveillance-countersurveillance specialist.

“Amos, this may not be the right time to change your spots. You have amassed an influential following for your current path. It may not be the one least followed, but it has been a very good one for you.”

“And for you Simon.”

“Yes, and for me too.”

“The last time we talked, I told you I intended upon a new line, and now is the time.”

“Are you sure the time is right, particularly given your standing in the Community?”

“Simon, for such a change as this, is the time ever right? Perhaps ... it is simply... the time.”

“Don’t visit that philosophical mumbo-jumbo on me, Amos. We’ve ridden together into too many sunsets.”

“Only to awaken to the new dawn of the same day.

After a moment of quiet between them, Sanson spoke softly: “I have been mulling this over for quite a while. Though it may appear ‘spur of the moment’ it is not. I am older and hopefully wiser now, and definitely a step slower.” Amos held up his gloved hand. “This hand will remain useful, but dexterity and strength are waning; specialists advise me that some decline is inevitable, though total loss is not expected.” Lowering his hand, he continued: “Both body and mind tell me *now* is the time to begin the transition. Our services are still marketable, and I think Xander and Rosada will add to our effectiveness. Perhaps the return will diminish a bit, but we will make it up in sustainability. In part, it is an investment in capacity building. And, in part it is my way of managing risk. Xander needs a little more seasoning, and Rosada needs to sharpen some old tools and, perhaps, acquire some new ones. When an acquaintance was asked some time ago why he didn’t quit, he replied that he was always going to step aside when he completed his current project, but by the time the current project was finished, he was deeply immersed in the next one ...”

“And he couldn’t ... or wouldn’t ... quit ...”

“You are correct, Simon, but then you usually are. The project you describe will require more than I alone can do, and the operational demands fit these resources and our intent to develop them. The day will come when I am no longer able to stand alone against the growing intensity of the storm. For that inevitable day, we must prepare now.”

Swiveling his chair 90 degrees left, Simon fixed his eyes upon an exquisite print, the Escheresque *Deus Ex Machina*, paused momentarily, then said, “OK Amos, tell me what you have in mind ... no detail yet, just a brief synopsis.”

“Simon,” Sanson began, leaning forward in his chair with a rare display of zeal, “we develop a protective intelligence project, employing Rosada, Xander, and me, each of us doing what he or she does best to protect our client. Three functions are required, and we three are professionally qualified to perform them. We prepare for the project together; but, when we go operational, Xander and I will do the fieldwork while Rosada supports us with research. She will be especially useful in responding to our questions as the activity progresses. Negotiating the conditions and compensation for our services, of course, remains with you. You and I will reserve long-term commitments to Xander and Rosada until both of us are satisfied that the association is sound and they have demonstrated mastery during actual operations. We will extend this relationship only if our assessment of project outcomes is positive.”

After a quiet moment, Simon turned to Amos: “I’ve got it for the moment, Amos. In 15 minutes, I must meet with some folks upstairs. Let’s continue this discussion day after tomorrow about noon ... I’ll provide lunch. At that time, present in writing a succinct description of your proposal, including enough detail concerning your

colleagues that I can appreciate their contributions. I must be able to understand the capabilities of the team if I am to estimate the allowable scope and scale of operations and equate resources with mission requirements when I negotiate with our clients.”

Two days later, after a pleasant lunch, Simon and Amos returned to their conversation.

Presenting to Simon a memorandum responsive to his request, Amos briefed him on its contents, outlining in formal terms a business plan for the association of Stoddard and himself with Xander and Jesus, and an action plan for the coming operation. After responding to Stoddard’s pointed questions, Sanson concluded, “Simon, with this project, we can both meet the requirements of DEA’s request and field test our association with Devon and Rosada. I will make no commitments to them beyond this operation unless you and I agree that the longer-term business plan is sound and our after-action assessment for the operation warrant continuation of the team. If the concept does not prove worthy, we will simply continue as we have, perhaps engaging them on occasions when their talents fit our needs.”

“Amos, we have a few days before a response to DEA is due. Your proposal appears sound, but this is a significant decision, so I wish to ruminate upon it. I will call you at the bookstore no later than 2359 tomorrow, saying simply go or no-go. A no-go means I am unable to negotiate compensation sufficient to employ your team and we will not undertake this activity. A go recommendation will extend only to this DEA inquiry. Later, we will continue our discussion of the future. Do you approve?”

“I do.”

After a few minutes of small talk, Simon returned to his 3rd floor office and Sanson became once again the quiet bookseller returning home after a routine buying trip. The next day, at precisely 2359, a terse message arrived: “Go.”

A few days later, at the coffee table in Rosada Angel Jesus’ bookstore, Amos Sanson and Devon Xander enjoyed coffee while their hostess prepared a pleasantly aromatic tea before returning to their conversation. Sanson had completed briefing the security detection mission in Mexico and was satisfied with their response. During the briefing, Xander and Rosada had listened intently and asked salient questions. After the break, they offered their comments concerning the action plan and their roles in the operation.

“As I understand it,” Xander commented, “I shall investigate the routes and buildings, and work directly with the authorities and principles. My activity, though discrete, will be overt and in keeping with my experience as a policeman. You, Amos, will covertly watch for hostile surveillance, and Rosada will back-up our fieldwork with research and analysis from here. We will stay in contact through secure communications arranged by someone Amos trusts implicitly. No information will be sent through the system except in strict accordance with the protocols.”

Rosada, picked-up at that point: “My part will be to assist with the initial portfolios, ferret out information in response to your inquiries from the field, and transmit it during the times shown in the protocol. My research will include both open and private sources, acquiring as much as possible through contacts generally available to sophisticated reference librarians and smoothing out the landscape with salient items

from private contacts. I am not responsible for getting the operational computer, nor am I to be concerned with its removal following closure.

“How do you know the computer will be secure in my shop?”

“During my previous visit here, my logistical needs were met without my knowing how,” replied Sanson. “We simply rely upon the same level of support.”

Then, addressing both Xander and Rosada, he continued: “Having several days before commencement, you may wish to begin gathering information immediately as though you were contractors preparing to undertake a project in keeping with your specialties. You have the mission schedule and should make such arrangements as are proper for your respective professions. We will not meet again until after the operation, though in strict accordance with the plan, we will be in contact. If all seems well to you, let’s turn the conversation to best sellers and favorite classics.”

And so they did.

Malcolm Garfield’s family tree included one US president and a number of senior policy makers at both state and federal levels. Malcolm was, himself, a federal senior civil service drug administration investigator, up through the ranks, street-smart, capable. He trusted Simon Stoddard’s recommendation of Devon Xander for the surveillance detection operation for his coming meeting with Mexican federal police to discuss a highly sensitive cross-border cooperative venture; but he always checked with his own sources. Trust, but verify: a very useful hand-me-down from a popular politician.

Xander was raised in small border towns in south Texas. After army military police service and attendance at the Texas police academy, he joined the El Paso police

force. Because of his language fluency and knowledge of Latino community life, Xander was assigned to an organized crime task force headed by the US Border Patrol, where he quickly gained a reputation for solid police work. In parallel, he remained in the Army reserves, first as a non-commissioned officer, later as a commissioned officer; currently, he is a USAR major. He deployed to Kosovo and to south-central Asia, serving on and commanding MP mobile training teams working with local authorities. His current security clearances are at a level commensurate with Malcolm's visit to Mexico. About a year ago, he was involved in a shoot-out that left him and a patrolman on his mid-western police force wounded and four dead bodies on the ground. Malcolm Garfield was confident that Stoddard's recommendation was sound.

Though Garfield's schedule had not yet been announced, Devon Xander had been on the ground in Mexico for several days. Garfield would be in and out quickly, limiting his exposure to danger to a very short time. The surveillance detection team had to perform much of its work before Garfield's arrival.

After establishing his bona fides with local officers directing the operational security component, Xander verified the information in the reports that he and Rosada had reviewed and updated prior to his move into the operational area. With his Mexican counterparts, and later on his own, he visited the buildings in which Garfield was to stay and the meeting was to take place, and drove and walked the routes between them. He checked the likely attack locations along the routes and inside the buildings, and investigated the probable surveillance locations from which attackers could watch Garfield and his protection detail, and the locations from which the protection detail

could keep track of what was happening in and around the surveillance locations. All was standard procedure, and likely known equally well by the alarmingly sophisticated intelligence apparatus of the cartel. Watchers watched watchers in a never-ending game. But surveillance was thought to be the least secure link in the cartel's attack cycle, so surveillance detection was taken very seriously.

Xander was in his element, doing what he did best. He did not feel alone. His reports went to Rosada daily, and information came to him as well. He knew that Sanson was out there somewhere, quietly engaged in the game, watching for anyone lurking in places not on the official lists and lines of sight unexplored by the protection details ... and for anyone watching him as he worked. Like a skilled fly-fisher, Sanson would have his hand on the line and would know when to set the hook. The tingle Xander always felt when engaged was there. He knew that he was exposed to danger and he always tried to be aware of his surroundings. Still, the tingle ... the edge that was life itself ... was there, and Xander relished every moment of it.

Sanson was there. He was one of those unique people who could hide in plain sight. He could move through a neighborhood without causing a ripple. Local residents did not notice him; street people—merchants and vendors, mothers with small children, regulars in the bars, cafes, and parks—did not react to his presence. Street toughs demanded reaction from the people, they caused ripples; eyes followed them and people on the street shied away from them. Often, Sanson was able to detect their presence by observing the reactions of the locals; he “saw” strangers by following the ripples along their paths. And he knew that the mission surveillance mounted by terrorists and

criminals would employ some locals, including policemen, but eventually the operational professionals would recon the scene personally. So he watched.

Sanson also checked the same features that Xander investigated, and Xander as he investigated. By observing his colleague and reading his daily reports to Rosada, Sanson was appraising Xander's operational capabilities, was vetting him for a longer-term association. Simon Stoddard was a critical evaluator; Sanson knew he would have to provide solid evidence of Xander's fitness if the team he envisioned was to become a part of Stoddard's network. The pre-deployment research and analysis had strengthened Sanson's conviction that he, Devon Xander, and Rosada Angel Jesus could work well together. And so far their working relationship had functioned well in the field. But, the proof of the pudding was yet to come. If something happened to Malcolm Garfield during his stay in Mexico, Sanson's mission would be judged a failure, Stoddard's reputation would be tarnished, and Sanson's team would not materialize as he envisioned it. So he watched.

Hints of Garfield's visit began to surface in Mexico City. A well-connected journalist, Marcelo Barcqe, in an article focused on the involvement of federal police in cartel security operations, mentioned that a high-level meeting between Mexican and US drug enforcement officials would occur soon. The location and timing of the meeting were not specified, but speculation centered on major border-crossing cities in northern Mexico. Barcqe assured his readers that he would cover the story and publish a full account of the meeting. US authorities were not pleased with the revelation because they knew that the cartels would be able to ferret-out preparations for such a meet on their home grounds and eventually discover where and when it was to take place. Garfield

was confident, however, that his precautions, including the covert surveillance detection operation arranged with Simon Stoddard, would secure his safety and assure a successful exchange of information with the Mexicans.

As Sanson watched, and as Xander's reports summarized the results of the Mexican and USDEA surveillance detection activities, ripples appeared and a pattern of activity began to emerge, though it was vague and required verification. Subtle activity was detected near the surveillance locations and occasional visitors caused surreptitious glances among the regular inhabitants of the streets and plazas between the discrete neighborhood and the fortress-like Federal building that were the center of Sanson and Xander's surveillance detection activities.

Xander was the first to report to Rosada that several new US security people had joined the US-Mexican protective team. Then Sanson and Xander reported increased police presence in and around the buildings where Garfield's party would be staying and the meeting with Mexican officials was scheduled, and along various routes between them. Rosada suggested that the changes in level of activity indicated that the time for Garfield's arrival was fast approaching, an observation likely to have been noted by the drug cartels as well.

Shortly thereafter, Sanson and Xander noticed that at certain times during the day, new "tourists" with cameras ambled along the routes, their snapshots of themselves and native street life appearing to align with backgrounds including salient points along various paths Malcolm Garfield might travel. Occasionally at night, they reappeared, and seemed to be jotting down notes in pocket notebooks. Both Sanson and Xander believed

that cartel intelligence was following the changes in the US-Mexican protective activities and pacing their surveillance in response. During the last few hours, activity at surveillance locations from which the entrances and exits to Garfield's lodgings could be seen seemed to be intensifying. New work zones and detours that limited and directed traffic at points along the routes appeared. Two points afforded excellent fields of fire for snipers. They suspected that the cartel was making final preparations for an assault on Garfield's party as it moved between their lodgings and the Federal building. Where and when the attack would occur remained in doubt, but Sanson's observations that one route was receiving more intense scrutiny suggested a higher level of danger there.

Xander reported the increasing activity to the commander of the protective force, without attribution beyond his own observations, and recommended that they either secure these positions or increase scrutiny of the activity, expecting to discover the acute danger in time to ensure Garfield's safety and catch the cartel red handed. Taking the positions away would not necessarily eliminate the threat; criminals and terrorists often simply aborted for the time being or checked to plan B. Allowing their use and preparing a decisive counter stroke was risky, but it could keep them in police gun-sights, provide an air-tight case for the public prosecutor, and if successful, seriously dampen the cartel's influence in the community.

Protective force command had a difficult risk analysis ahead of them; and Malcolm Garfield was not particularly keen to be bait dangling on a hook.

No matter how thorough the preparation, it still surprises:

Heavy trucks smashed into the motorcade, cutting-off Garfield's armored SUV inside a kill zone from which escape appeared impossible. Quickly, the vehicle turned toward the only path open, and accelerated; but, after a few feet, it was suddenly lifted off the street by a huge explosion that left a crater into which it descended, mangled and engulfed in flames.

The protective detail responded quickly, occupying the surveillance and attack locations and securing the area surrounding the explosion. Mexican federal police SWAT teams sealed four square-blocks around the burning SUV and rounded-up the few people in or near the surveillance and attack locations; military special operations forces secured a much larger perimeter. EOD teams cautiously approached the flaming crater. Forensic teams stood by, awaiting orders to enter the crime scene; an hour later, they approached the wreckage and began their investigation.

Xander and Garfield's US protective detail slowly approached the crater and looked down at the still smoldering wreckage. They saw what had been a sewer beneath the street, and talked quietly, almost admiringly, about the craftsmanship displayed by the crater and the destroyed armored car. Shaking his head, the Secret Service agent standing beside Xander turned and gestured. Surrounded by heavily armed Mexican federal police officers, Malcolm Garfield and Commissioner Martine Santos walked to the gaping, smoking hole, peered down at the blackened mass of twisted metal and exchanged a few words with the commander of the protective detail. Then they moved on to complete their discussions.

Weeks of preparation by Mexican and American drug administration authorities, and the drug cartel, culminating in fiery violence, were followed by business as usual.

True to his word, Marcelo Barcqe dispatched a detailed account to his Mexico City newspaper.

Two days later, Devon Xander bid goodbye to his Latino colleagues and left Mexico. Amos Sanson was ... simply gone.

As a glowing sun descended into the peaceful ocean off Casco Viejo, Amos Sanson and Devon Xander gazed west from the second floor balcony of the Meridor Cafe, sipped dark red wine of local vintage, and discussed in hushed tones the events of the past fortnight. On the table between them lay Marcelo Barcqe's articles describing the assassination attempt and featuring interviews with Mexican and US officials along the border and in Mexico City. They agreed that Barcqe knew people in high places, was discrete in attribution and comfortable with details, and clearly understood the broader context. Gaps covering some sensitive issues were sprinkled throughout the accounts, however, leading them to wonder what he might be trading for access to sources and protection from corrupt and vengeful elements within and outside the government.

Xander, still facing the fading sun and as if talking to himself, said, "We found the team responsible for checking the sewer in shallow graves in the church meditation yard. They died about the same time the bomb exploded, but they weren't killed by the blast. They were double-tapped, .22 long rifle rounds through the brain stem. We think they planted a charge designed to shoot up through the thin sewer roof, and then command detonated it from a perch in the steeple. Marks were found on the pavement debris. It appears that the SUV was channeled over the marks by two parked trucks.

They knew the driver would take evasive action, so they gave him a quick way out and ... well, you saw the result.”

“I did, and I am not surprised by the precision of the attack. They failed in their purpose, however. Garfield succeeded. No doubt the collateral damage shook the community, but Martine Santos will see it right.” After a brief pause, Sanson pointed to Marcello Barcqe’s articles with a noticeably tremulous gloved hand and continued, “Barcqe’s accounts, though somewhat flawed, seem sensible. An astute journalist can ferret out much; he appears astute ... and connected. We may want to follow his career closely.

“In seven days, we shall share experiences with Ms. Jesus, and draw operational lessons for the future. Until then, mi amigo, vaya con Dios.”

Tomorrow, Xander would return to his city; but for the moment, he found comfort in the gathering dusk.

And Amos Sanson? He had already faded quietly into the night.

Sanson and Xander sipped coffee while Rosada prepared tea. When she resumed her place at the table, Sanson nodded and she continued: “The pace at which information flowed was demanding but manageable. I was able to respond to all of your questions; however, providing clear estimates of probabilities for uncertainties at the times required by the protocols was, at times, challenging. If we are to engage in more complex projects, I shall need to devote more time to the enterprise. The equipment functioned perfectly and was, as you promised Amos, here and gone without a trace. It was the best I have ever used.”

Sanson smiled, then turned his attention to Devon Xander: “I had no difficulty covering the operational area, and the US and Mexican protective units were well trained and professional. Cooperation was far better than I anticipated. The information provided by you, Rosada, kept me a step ahead; that contributed a great deal, I think, to the positive reception accorded me by the protective teams. But, I was surprised by the sewer inspection turn-coats; identifying such bandits is difficult when they are with us daily. And the level of expertise displayed in the attack was sobering. Mexican federal police arrested more than 27, but only four – two two-man sniper teams – were caught red handed; they were taken without incident before Garfield and Santos were allowed into the blast zone. We may have been lucky that a second bomb aimed at responders was not employed.”

Then Sanson described the operation as it unfolded while he watched. During a lengthy discussion, the three collated their observations and activities. Several hours later, they completed their review and Amos left the bookstore. Rosada and Xander talked a while longer, agreeing that working with Amos Sanson was exacting ... and exhilarating. Then Xander crossed the street to his office, and Rosada locked the shop door and went upstairs to her newly renovated apartment.

Seated in a comfortable chair in his subterranean sanctum, Simon Stoddard faced Amos Sanson and began: “Malcolm was quite pleased with the project and Xander’s contribution. The explosion was unfortunate, but it was presented to the public as resulting from a gas leak in an aging sewer main, and it caused no material damage to the tasks at hand. In deed, Martine Santos believes that political leaders on both sides of the

border, fearful of the growing sophistication exhibited by the attack, will now sharpen their opposition to the drug cartels, leading to greater cooperation and allocation of resources. What is your appraisal, Amos?”

Pacing his words with some deliberation, Sanson replied: “I know but little about the politics, Simon; however, I concur with Garfield’s favorable view of Devon Xander’s performance. He fit well into the protective force, furnished useful information to Ms. Jesus and me, and supplied valuable intelligence and expertise to the allied investigators. He stayed generally within his guidelines, but on occasion judiciously exercised professional initiative. I judge his performance as quite acceptable and am comfortable with our increasing the complexity of the next application. Ms. Jesus operated the hub with the high degrees of competence and craftiness we anticipated, and she was satisfied with the logistics you arranged so impeccably. Truly, Simon, I believe we are ready to go on-line.”

“Well then, Amos, let us discuss a little matter that has come to my attention. It will, I think, require all the acumen we can bring to it.”

They began again to look for the potential returns, and risks, in a dancing landscape.