

BY CHARLES BOWDEN

LOVE ON THE KILLING GROUND

A STORM BROODS ON THE MESA in the trough of a Sunday afternoon. The street runs black and silent since the repaving a week ago took away the rumbles. He sits on the brown leather couch and is about to explode. He was in the jailhouse visiting a client and then he came down the elevator and somehow in the lobby he ran into a guy.

And then it happens.

But it is not that simple. The guy he'd gone to see was a gang member nailed by immigration and waiting for his deportation. His girlfriend was wrapping up a degree in criminology and wanted to keep her guy on this side of the fence. The lawyer listened and said he'd see what he could do. His practice was preparing people for a slow death. Immigration courts are a backwater of the federal justice system, a place where a low hum buzzes in the heads of the barely awake judges, political hacks put out to pasture

where they can't pester citizens and resort to using their small knives on foreigners.

The voices are low in such courtrooms, the cases done by rote, husbands trying to reunite with wives, wives with husbands, dates are whispered out – always far in the future, and the hope is everyone will go away and leave the court alone

The clerk is fat, the judge 50-something and finished with the ambitions of life. The walls are paneling, lights fluorescent and the petitioners sit in rows numbed by the slow movement through the docket. Out the windows, the sun shines on a world that hardly knows of such a room.

The clerk reads the case title.

The judge scans his schedule, tosses out some distant date.

The petitioner and counsel mumble their agreement.

The mill produces fees, salaries and gestures by petitioners. Drama is strangled by the calm and order of the court. The air conditioner is the loudest sound of justice. Inside the court it is always winter, that cool death of feeling that ignores the movement of seasons outside the walls.

So he is leaving the jailhouse after half listening to a client when this guy comes out of the elevator and says, "Hey, you're a lawyer right?"

The lawyer stops, sees a Mexican guy in his late 20s weighed down with tattoos. He's in a hurry, that's how lawyers pay their bills, by being in a hurry. He reaches in his pocket and hands the guy a card. And moves on.

The next day, Saturday, the guy shows up. Turns out he's been there before – the lawyer's secretary remembers him.

"Yeah," she says, "he left when I said a consultation was a \$150. He said, 'hey, I thought it was \$50' and I said yeah, like years ago."

Now he's back.

The lawyer is busy, packed in an office for 45 minutes with other clients. The guy waits, sprawled on a chair in the lobby surrounded by paintings of illegal Mexicans trying to punch through the river, the wall and the armed agents swarming everywhere.

His turn finally comes.

He sits in a chair in the office, the door is open.

The lawyer nods.

The man gets up and closes the door.

He says, "I am called The Butcher. I want to talk to you about a woman I love."

"Wait a minute," the lawyer sputters, "You're The Butcher?"

The man smiles.

"Yeah. I run 125 sicarios in Juárez."

The lawyer exhales. He wants nothing to do with this case. It is dangerous, he knows that instantly. What will happen to him if he loses?

He looks at The Butcher and asks, "You're not going to make soup of me if I lose are you?"

"No, no, no Señor. Not you. No."

The lawyer sighs.

"Look," The Butcher continues, "I gotta tell you I don't want you going to Juárez without telling me. It is very dangerous there. Now I am recruiting good looking girls as sicarias, they can get close to anyone. So don't go picking up any girls, you hear?"

"I don't go to Juárez anymore."

"Ah, very good. And I don't want you down by the bridge anymore either."

The lawyer snaps alert. At first he can't understand what the man means. And then he remembers having an ad filmed down by the bridge with Mexico in the background, a bit of footage for publicizing his immigration practice.

"No," The Butcher says, "stay away from the bridge, it is not safe there. People in that area commit crimes. And report to me."

The lawyer remembers the row of taxis, the vendors peddling this and that, the feel of the summer sun on his face as he cut the ad, the

sense of standing in the U.S. and being ... immune from over there.

His world has slowly shrunk during the violence. He now has a security system in his house. He has a remote to start his car in case of a bomb. He has a carry permit for a gun. But still, don't go to the bridge in his city to film an ad for his practice because he is being watched?

The Butcher smiles.

"Let's talk about the case."

It is cut and dried. He met a woman and fell in love and then immigration caught her, she was illegal in the U.S. and put her in detention. He wants her free and so he has come to see the lawyer.

"Well, to be freed and not deported she would need to file for political asylum. And to qualify for that she'd have to give evidence that her life is in danger in Mexico because she belongs to a group that cannot be changed and that this classification means her death. You understand?"

The man takes in the lawyer's statement and smiles.

"Ah, this will be easy then. Both her uncles have been killed – their heads cut off. My people did it. I could arrange testimony about this, that she is doomed, you know, because of my sicarios. That would work, no?"

The lawyer sees all the doors closing and leaving him trapped with The Butcher and his case.

He says, "If I take the case, my fee will be \$10,000."

"No problem."

The lawyer's heart sinks. He pulled the number out of the air thinking it would be impossible for The Butcher.

He says, "Even if I get her released, it does not mean she can stay here. It will only mean she is free and on this side until her case comes up and is decided."

The Butcher stops smiling. His mind seems to shift from being the boss of something to being the prisoner of something.

He says, "I love her. I must have her. Even if she loses and is expelled to Juárez, well, then I will move there also and if they kill us we will die together. This is not a business matter for me."

The lawyer's last hope vanishes. He is dealing with a man possessed and is now chained inside some border story of Romeo and Juliet. He keeps thinking of becoming soup, of having his body tossed in a barrel of acid in order to vanish any trace of his existence on earth.

He looks at a tattoo of an eagle on The Butcher's right wrist.

"What does that mean?"

"Ah, the eagle? It means I am a capo. Sometimes, I must put my hand over it if I am dealing with the wrong people, you know. But that hardly ever happens. I have federal police identification, you know."

And then he leaves.

Two weeks later, the mother of the girl comes by the office. She works in Juárez in the prison. And she is concerned about her daughter's case and if she can be released from the detention center.

The lawyer asks her, "Do you believe what The Butcher says about his work?"

She answers, "All I know is that my daughter is afraid of him."

"Yes, but he says he had both her uncles killed and their heads cut off."

"He did? No, no, they killed her distant cousins, not her uncles. Why?"

The lawyer suddenly sees his life returning to him.

A distant relative is not enough to qualify for a filing for political asylum.

So, the next time The Butcher comes to his office, he tells him he cannot take the case because there is nothing he can do given the actual facts.

For a moment, the lawyer wonders if The Butcher will take in this new criterion of American law and order the execution of family members closer to his beloved. But he says nothing and simply leaves.

This is love in this place. <HDJ>