

Our land

Our Land

Everyday stories can change an election

by

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CHAPTER
One

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September

W39

week 39 – September

The second envelope

OAK LAWN

During the last week of September, an elegant and heavy envelope arrived at Mora Fernandez's residence in Oak Lawn.

The black envelope arrived at just the right moment.

On Monday morning the news broke: a "tax scandal". One of Fernandez's companies, Ferosa Europe, was involved. The so-called tax scandal was made public by the Morgenpost and Channel One, less than a week before an important federal election in Europe. Her phone rang at five, and Fernandez woke up, puzzled. Ugo Wagner, Ferosa Europe's director, was on the line. For him it was already noon, but he couldn't wait any longer, as so much had happened on his side of the ocean during those few hours.

The Chancellor's Minister of Finance wanted a conference with her as soon as possible.

Wagner gave his boss a briefing that lasted half an hour, and afterward Fernandez told the European director to arrange a video conference at nine, US central time.

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She had arrived home from a trip abroad the previous evening and had spotted the padded envelope on her reading table. Mora was going to read it then, but it was late and she was too tired. After Wagner's unsettling wake-up call she couldn't sleep any longer, so she decided to make some coffee.

The big envelope caught Mora's attention again, as it had an unusual rubber-like matte finish and a huge V-shape opening. It had come from Europe and mentioned the IFAST project, which was a project that still haunted Mora after the disastrous presentation the Europeans had made some weeks ago. Ferosa had lost millions that day due to their incompetence.

Mora was curious about that heavy envelope because of the rumors that Wagner had just told her – an employee of her company had died in relation to the IFAST project and the tax scandal.

On her favorite chair she sat and read. Mora lost sense of the time, and two hours passed by quickly. When she finished reviewing the documents it was only eight. She called her friend Jeanne Cooper-Bordeaux and her chief of security, Mr. Mortara. Fernandez asked them to be at her office at Ferosa's HQ by midday to study the material she had received and then begin an investigation, because in the morning she was due to attend a video conference with Chancellor Koffer's finance minister.

Mora Fernandez had several reasons to be annoyed that Monday morning.

The crossfire
FORT WORTH

The general election was due to take place the following Sunday, and the Federal government of Chancellor Koffer wanted to know the details of the “tax scandal”. The conference began at nine, US central time, four in the afternoon in mainland Europe. The huge screen, split in two, showed Geoff Poppe, Koffer’s Finance Minister, at the right side, and Ugo Wagner, on the left.

“One of our local Revenue office received a complaint about your company,” said Minister Poppe, with a thick accent.

“We saw it on the news!” replied Fernandez.

“The news has caused quite a stir here because it happened a few days before the general election!” added Poppe.

“Our first review indicates that we did everything by the book,” said Mr. Wagner

“We’ll need to know more about it! What about the employee who killed himself?” asked the Finance Minister.

“We have only heard some rumors, so we still don’t know who he is!” added the European director.

Fernandez kept a straight face; she needed to be cautious. After having reviewed the contents of the black envelope, she knew the situation was serious.

“The Chancellor will give a press conference in a few hours to stop the avalanche created by the Morgenpost, which has been further expanded on by social media. Mrs. Koffer will have to explain how and why foreign contractors have lived and worked here for decades without paying local taxes and, if it’s true, why in some cases they don’t even speak our language,” said Mr.

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Poppe with surprise.

“We’ve been checking our database all day to find out how many of these cases there are in our country so we can contact the companies involved,” added the Finance Minister with concern.

Everyone was very quiet in the meeting room. Wagner, on screen, was looking down at the floor.

“And if it’s true that an employee died because of this then it’s a bigger problem. This is not going to go away easily,” added Poppe. He wasn’t threatening them, just pointing out the facts. “Wagner probably told you that the far-right took advantage of this tax scandal. Our country are in a very bad emotional state right now and this issue is touching a very sensitive nerve,” explained Poppe after a few seconds.

All eyes were on Fernandez as she was weighing up her next words.

“You’ve already been in contact with Mr. Wagner. He’s been working on this all morning and has assured me that we didn’t break any law!”

“We’ll be in contact during the next few days and we’ll begin an audit on your company next week, after the election! We need your full cooperation,” said Poppe, politely but firmly.

“You have it!” said Fernandez, sincerely.

After the video conference with the Finance Minister, she had another one already scheduled. It concerned IFAST and was long overdue. Fernandez hadn’t spoken to Guttenhoff, her European design director, since the European team’s

disappointing presentation a couple of weeks ago.

Katrina, who had been testing the connection with Guttenhoff, switched off the video link as her boss remained thoughtful. Fernandez was thinking about the consequences of everything that had happened that morning. Wagner had told her earlier about the growing anti-migrant feeling during the campaign. The “tax scandal” went viral on social media in just a few hours and the far-right had quickly capitalized on the anger of the voters.

Apparently, Ferosa was caught in the crossfire. Fernandez was worried that her company was going to be used as a pawn in a political game.

Mora rubbed her eyes and stretched her brown curly hair; she felt tired all of a sudden; and the investigation on Moretti's death, the guy who sent the black envelope, was still pending.

Mr. Mortara

DOWNTOWN FORT WORTH

David Mortara began working as Ferosa's head of security six years ago, a few months after Fernandez's youngest son had died. He was in his mid-fifties when he met Mora Fernández. Mortara was a tall man and his European facial features helped him in his line of work; he had worked for the government as an intelligence officer in Eastern Europe since the eighties, when the Cold War was still on, and throughout the nineties until the end of the two-thousand decade. After almost thirty years in Europe, he returned to the U.S. and retired, but he wanted to remain somehow active: he still felt young.

Mortara was looking to settle down and commit to a less demanding job, even though, economically, he didn't need to. He offered his services as a security consultant, and through his

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connections in government agencies and military contractors, he found an airplane manufacturer that was in expansion and needed a director of security.

With all his experience, it was easy for him to manage and organize a small company.

Mora Fernandez struck him as an excellent woman who had great human qualities but who was tough in business. She had been devastated when her autistic son was beaten to death, and Mortara had seen her pain and frustration. Some junkies had carried out the murder and had got away with it. The police couldn't do anything about it.

Back then Mortara found a way to access the Dallas Police Department records. According to the DPD, the thugs hung out in "Five Points". Tracking them down was easy, as he had read the reports of the DPD officers who had found them the first time but had had to let the thugs go free. Mortara drove to "Five Points" with four black SUVs. The criminals tried to run away, but it was useless. Nobody ever seen them after that. The police didn't believe the testimony of their families when they complained about the disappearances; the license plates they had provided for the black vehicles were false; and if it was some type of revenge between rival gangs, the DPD was not going to spend any extra time on the case.

When Mora Fernandez was informed of all that by the DPD, she understood clearly what had happened. Later that week, Mortara received a beautiful gift from Mora, a classic light-brown leather briefcase, the model with the leather straps and the bronze metal buckles. Inside there was a set of keys and the papers for ownership of a guest house Ferosa owned in downtown Fort Worth.

Since then Mortara carried that leather briefcase with him

wherever he went.

Fernandez was already waiting for him that Monday morning to start the investigation. She felt safer when she saw Mortara arriving with his briefcase.

The video conference

FORT WORTH

Mora Fernandez was visibly worried after the video conference with Chancellor Koffer's Minister of Finance. Unfortunately for her the following conference wasn't any more promising. A few weeks ago, the European design department had made a poor presentation at the first IFAST Show in which Ferosa had participated.

Back then she hadn't understood what had happened with that presentation; however, after browsing the black envelope's documents early in the morning she began to realize what had occurred ... and why.

Guttenhoff might have perceived something beforehand because he sent someone else to attend the show in his place instead. Van der Boer told him about Fernandez's blank expression during the whole inauguration day.

The meeting was originally scheduled at nine but was moved due to the "tax scandal" conference. Two members of the American design team were present in Fernandez's meeting room: the U.S. design director, Steve Tapper, and the former principal designer. Ron Simon had delayed his holiday for that video conference. Mortara, Katrina, and Cesar, Mora's oldest son, were also at the meeting.

Before starting the video link with Europe, Fernandez asked the

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American design director and the senior designer for their thoughts on the IFAST expo project. Both agreed that the Europeans had a strong briefing with good analysis and had produced a decent prototype in the end, but when they had to innovate in the middle of the project, they had lost direction and failed. Their people talked too much and hardly anyone did anything. Ron said that they had briefly employed a contractor with great designs and passion who worked very hard, doing extra hours and weekends, but for some reason the guy left after a few months. The concept design stage was quite good, but there was a big gap between that and the final presentation.

"I think the design director was too conservative and wanted to play it safe," said Simon.

That was the cue for Steve Tapper, and he added his first impression of Guttenhoff, "The guy is charming but is the kind of person who's always waiting for you to say the first word and then adapts his speech to what you want to hear. He'd never take the first step."

Fernandez remained expressionless; she had the same opinion of Guttenhoff ever since she met him. Guttenhoff promised too much and then backed down.

Fernandez's PA played the video on the big screen; it was a promotional video by the European team showing the whole design process and construction of the models for the expo. Many employees of the European design studio interacted in the video, pointing at some sketch or material, discussing ideas in front of a design-filled board. Fernandez remembered seeing that video at the expo. The company had played many like that one on a constant loop.

Even though the video was properly filmed and well edited, Fernandez was irritated by the content. Katrina stopped the clip before it was finished when she saw her boss making a gesture

with her hand.

Fernandez wasn't satisfied with the project. It contained a set of seats for the three classes: First, Business, and Economy in a "demonstrator", an environment that was like a section of a fuselage. The whole thing was properly built but didn't consist of anything innovative, and the design was simple and looked "cheap". That IFAST show was the first one in which Ferosa participated. It was the opportunity for one of her main companies to gain new clients and enter a new market in the competitive aviation industry. The European team took the lead on the project, reacted quickly and arrived first with their appealing PowerPoint presentations, analysis, and catchy words: they were very convincing. The American team just followed them; for some reason they had an inferiority complex, as they thought the Europeans were the "sophisticated" ones, which was supported by the attitude of the European team, intellectual and dismissive.

Fernandez realized too late that the materialization stage of the project wasn't as good as the ideas on paper. But the deadlines were tight and there wasn't enough time left to redo anything. The week before the show opened, she decided to fill the company's space at the expo with existing products and reduce the innovation space to a minimum due to her disappointment with the design presentation. The decision had annoyed her greatly.

On the big screen, Guttenhoff was already at home; it was seven in the evening in mainland Europe. Ugo Wagner was also invited; the European director was waiting at his office since the previous conference, and his video was displayed on the upper left corner. "Mr. Guttenhoff, I'm really disappointed in the results that your team presented," was how Fernandez started the conversation.

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Guttenhoff had a set of excuses already prepared and well-rehearsed, some of them were inherited from various people along the chain of command. During the project he had to listen to all his employees deflecting the blame each time they couldn't meet the objectives.

First excuse: It was their first project of that kind, so it was hard to calculate the timings for each stage of the project.

Second excuse: Their budget was approved too late.

Third excuse: They've been mainly focused on engineering all those years, so they were mostly providing technical support to third parties and not to design.

Bank holidays, employees on sick leave, personal holidays, people working less hours ... and the list continued. Guttenhoff recited them all in a carefully studied monotone voice; he made it sound descriptive and analytical but he was deflecting the blame.

Also, one employee had left the company and the contractor replacing him had left too – they spent a lot of time finding people to work on the project.

Fernandez listened to the list of excuses with a straight face.

"But you have many experts in your team! Any of them actually work?" She stared at the screen and took her time before continuing.

"And there must be a good reason for several people to leave," she added in a soft but disdainful tone.

"It was all your responsibility!

You agreed to take the project on, and you led it."

Fernandez was decompressing the rage and disappointment she felt two weeks ago, and the news regarding the tax scandal

and the death of an employee only added fuel to the fire.

“Do you know how many new clients we fail to get? How much money we lost? Tens of millions in new contracts for the next two years. I had to begin each conversation with those potential clients by apologizing because the innovation section was not innovative!”

Fernandez couldn't fire the design director. It would have been expensive, and she felt responsible for not following the project closely enough.

Ferosa's owner continued in the same direction for a moment.

“You should have known your limitations.”

Then Fernandez spoke with a more positive angle.

“We have a couple of years to prepare the next one, and we have to do it right!

Mr. Wagner, keep me updated on the audit and the tax scandal. I'll be over there as soon as I can!” She felt a sudden urge to finish the video conference.

She thanked everyone for coming, and her PA ended the video link.

Fernandez addressed Tapper, “I want access to all the documents related to this project: briefing, costs, spreadsheets, diagrams, sketches, digital models, pictures, videos, everything from both teams.

Gather all the information in a folder, save it in one of our network drives and send me the link, put Katrina and Mortara in copy.”

“When the prototype arrived in Week 35 and you asked me to print the original designs, I checked both the American and European networks. I noticed that the European hard drives didn't contain all the designs that Moretti sent us,” said Tapper.

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"Are you telling me that someone erased a project from our drives?" asked Fernandez, annoyed.

"It seems so!" replied the American design director.

Fernandez was suddenly tired by the lack of sleep and the avalanche of bad news.

"Enough video conferences for today!" she said, then stood up and left to take a shower in her private quarters, which were on the same floor. Dr. Bordeaux would be arriving by noon in order to begin the investigation.

The professional opinion

FORT WORTH

It was 72°F and a huge storm had been forecast for that afternoon. Dr. Bordeaux could already see it in the sky. A few hours previously, she had received a call from her friend Mora Fernandez asking her to come to Ferosa around noon.

Jeanne Cooper-Bordeaux was a ginger-hair woman in her mid-fifties. She had pale skin and a French elegance in her bearing. Jeanne was half-French half-American; her parents met in Paris in the fifties. She had lived all her life in the U.S. but studied psychology at Université Paris-Descartes, Jeanne met Mora Fernandez in Paris in 1980 when the young Mora was taking a master's degree in Economics. They had been friends ever since.

Mora introduced her to the man who was to become her husband. Jeanne Bordeaux would come to Mora's rescue anytime, anywhere.

Dr. Bordeaux had almost arrived at Fort Worth having traveled

from Dallas and was exiting the I-30W when she saw the small airport attached to Ferosa's buildings. She arrived at the Fernandez Group's main gate at 11:50.

Ferosa's HQ in Fort Worth was a place Jeanne had never been before, though she was familiar with Oak Lawn, the location of Mora's house; the summer residence; and the Foundation, which was situated on the west side of Fort Worth.

She was amazed by the private floor. It was decorated in a very modern all-white style; the glass ceiling at the center offered a huge source of light; a promenade surrounded the massive open space; and she could see all the other floors below her from there. A 1903 replica of the first Wright brothers' aircraft was hanging from the dome.

They crossed a big waiting room, then Katrina's office. The PA asked the doctor to wait a moment while she checked if Mrs. Fernandez was ready. Katrina knocked on the glass door that was already open, entered the huge meeting room and announced the arrival of Dr. Bordeaux.

"Let her in!" replied Mora.

"OK!, ...Oh, I had converted Moretti's diary to PDF"

"Please send it to Dr. Bordeaux, Mortara and me! ...Katrina!, contact our lawyers here and the European lawyers too. Send them all the documents about the tax-scandal. I want a meeting with both teams tomorrow!"

The Call

BUENOS AIRES

The "retro" ringtone of the cellphone woke her up; it was four in the morning in Buenos Aires. When Laura Moretti heard that sound, she was immediately worried about her mother, who,

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aged eighty, lived alone fifty kilometers away from her.

Laura picked up the phone half asleep but, to her surprise and relief, the call was not about her mother. The person spoke with a Spanish accent; it was a male who identified himself as Sergeant Puig-i-Valls from the Mossos d'Esquadra. Laura had no idea what that meant; after the officer explained to her that he was from the Catalan police, then she immediately thought about Manu, her brother.

Sgt. Puig regretted being the bearer of bad news ... the phone slid out of Laura's hand, smashed against the floor, and broke. She felt extremely anxious as well as sad.

Half an hour passed, in which she went through a great deal of agony and guilt – Laura had been mad at her brother and hadn't called him in a long time. She pulled herself together after a silence that seemed to have lasted ages, she retrieved the SIM card from her broken phone, and knocked on the door of her neighbor. As it was early in the morning, there was no answer, so she tried the doorbell, and when her friend finally opened she slowly explained the situation. Laura asked the neighbor to insert the SIM card in her cell phone to find the number and call back.

The next morning DHL delivered a stylish A3-size heavy black envelope.

The journey

BUENOS AIRES

A blue Chevrolet Meriva was waiting for them at the door of 5950 Córdoba Avenue, near the Chacarita cemetery. It was nearing the end of September but at 5:30 that afternoon there was still good daylight. The previous week had seen the start of spring.

While they were traveling to Ezeiza Airport they began reading Manu's diary, as the journey would take more than an hour. Laura had received her brother's diary, a thick brown hard-covered notebook, by mail that morning.

They arrived too early for their flight, and still had to wait more than four hours. The 1160 flight of Aerolíneas Argentinas to Barcelona was due to depart at 11:30 that evening. They were both silent and broken-hearted. Laura requested a wheelchair for her mother, who had two prosthetic knees. When they reached their gate, it was almost empty. Only one man was seated there, with his shoes off, waiting at the second row near the boarding desk. They looked left and right, and saw the other gates were also empty. Laura briefly watched the big muted TV screen, on which the news channel was reporting a stolen Saint Michael statue from a church in Buenos Aires. Doña Margarita noticed that the boarding desk was neatly ordered, chairs aligned, ticket scanners, keyboards, screens, everything in its place. Laura saw the monitor right above the desk displaying the name of the airline, the flight number, the time of departure and the destination, Barcelona.

The two individual walk-through gates had their flaps closed and an illuminated "x" sign on the side column. The two women looked outside through the huge glass walls and saw the boarding bridge already lit up and attached to the plane that was waiting there. The Airbus A340 was huge. Flashing lights and

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small vehicles on the tarmac moved in all directions. Among all those gray chairs at the waiting area, Laura and her mother found two with leg-rests just in front of the windows of the C terminal near the AR gate.

After some moments looking through the glass walls, Laura reopened the notebook and resumed reading it out loud while her mother listened intently.



Laura Moretti after the call