

THROUGH MY EYES
series editor Lyn White

Emilio

SOPHIE MASSON



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This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

A portion of the proceeds (up to \$5000) from sales of this series will be donated to UNICEF. UNICEF works in over 190 countries, including those in which books in this series are set, to promote and protect the rights of children. www.unicef.org.au

First published in 2014

Text © Sophie Masson 2014

Series concept © series creator and series editor Lyn White 2014

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Allen & Unwin
83 Alexander Street
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A Cataloguing-in-Publication entry is available from the National Library of Australia – www.trove.nla.gov.au

ISBN 978 1 74331 247 6

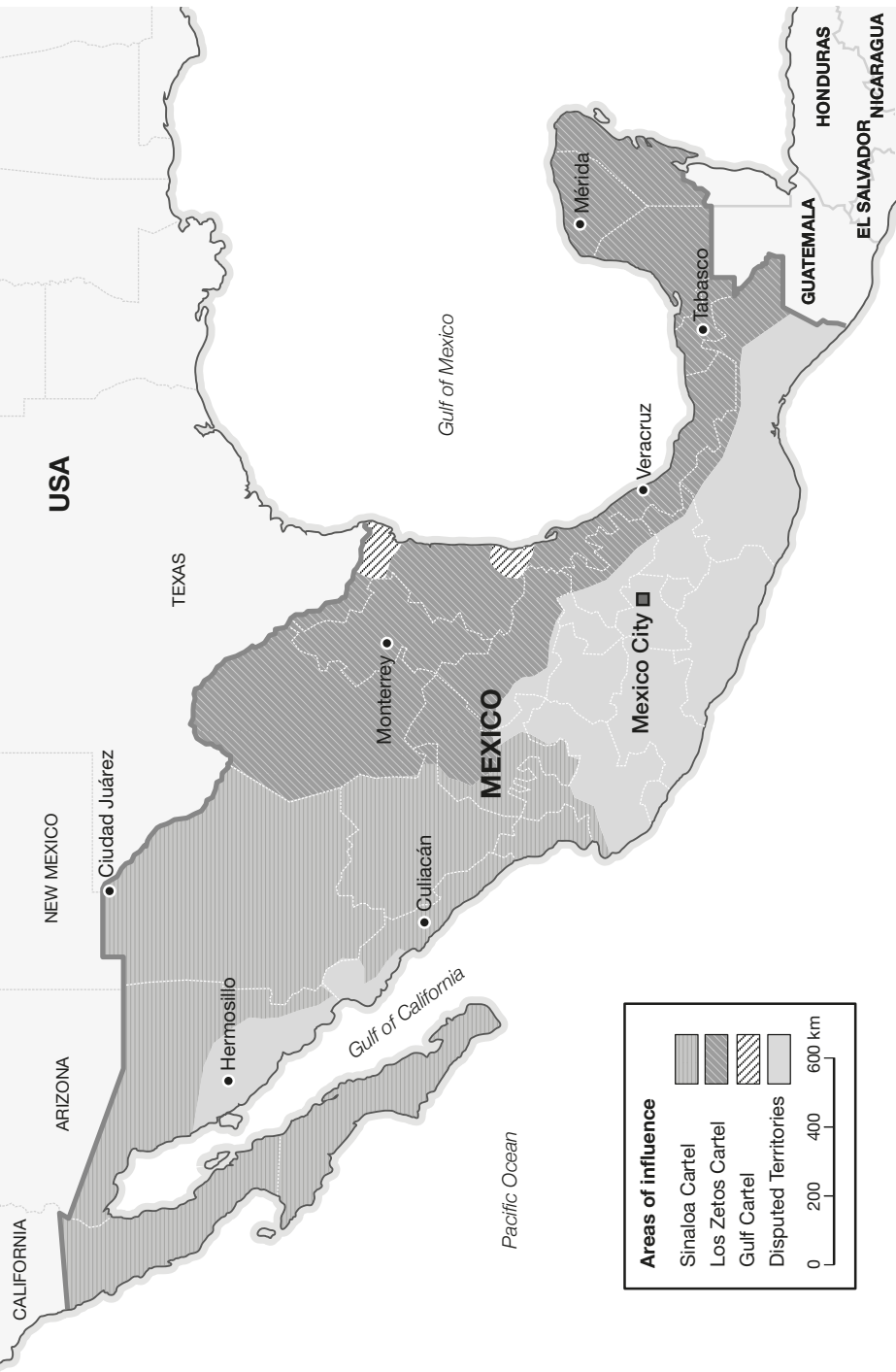
Teaching and learning guide available from www.allenandunwin.com

Cover and text design by Bruno Herfst and Vincent Agostino
Cover photos from Getty Images and Vicky Kasala (top),
Chico Sanchez (bottom)
Map of Mexico by Guy Holt
Set in 10.5 pt Plantin by Midland Typesetters, Australia
This book was printed in April 2014 at McPherson's Printing Group,
76 Nelson St, Maryborough, Victoria 3465, Australia.
www.mcphersonsprinting.com.au

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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Chapter 2



‘I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, Emilio,’ Juanita began, her voice breaking a little. Her hazel eyes were bright with tears.

Emilio hardly heard her. His stomach was heaving, there was a roaring in his ears. The Federal policeman said, ‘My name is Raúl Castro, and I am an officer of the PF here in Mexico City.’ He showed his identification. ‘I regret to inform you that I have bad news.’

Emilio could hardly breathe. ‘Mamá,’ he whispered, ‘is it Mamá – is she, is she . . .’ He could not finish the sentence. Dread filled him as his mind flashed back to the images he’d seen on TV at Nina’s place. His mother, lying dead somewhere in a pool of blood . . .

Juanita read his expression at once. ‘No, no, Milo,’ she cried, ‘she’s not dead. She’s—’

The policeman cut in quietly, ‘Señora Lopez has disappeared and all the signs point to a kidnapping.’

Emilio stared at him. *‘What?’*

‘I understand it must be a terrible shock. Please be

reassured. We will do everything we can to find your mother and bring her safely home.'

Emilio was not at all reassured. 'But what if – what if you *don't* find her?'

'They will,' said Juanita shakily. 'Tía Gloria will be home in no time at all. You'll see. Now, Emilio, I'll help you pack.'

'Pack?'

'This is why I asked Officer Torres to come along with me,' said Castro. 'You can't stay here. It isn't safe.'

'You're going to come and stay with us, Milo,' said Juanita, and hugged him. 'We're family. We'll look after you.'

'A negotiator will be appointed as soon as possible but Officer Torres will also liaise,' said the policeman.

Struggling to control the shake in his voice, Emilio turned to Juanita and said, 'I want to know exactly what happened.'

The policeman began, 'I don't think that is a very wise—'

'Please, sir,' broke in Juanita. 'I think my cousin needs to hear this.'

Emilio flashed her a grateful look and stammered, 'Yes. Yes I do. Please.'

'Very well,' Castro conceded. 'At three-twenty this afternoon, a car was found abandoned in the carpark of the Hotel Paradiso. The hotel carpark attendant became suspicious after hearing a sound coming from the area where the car was parked.'

'A sound?' whispered Emilio, his imagination conjuring up horrible things.

‘The sound you hear when a car door is left open – the alarm. And that’s what the attendant discovered. Not only had the car door been left open but the key was still in the ignition. This car was clearly identified as a company vehicle belonging to Lopez Travel, from the logo on the door. And this was found on the ground close by.’ He drew out a clear plastic bag from his pocket and took from it a small metal object.

Emilio recognised it at once. It was the little enamel medal of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, that his mother always wore around her neck on a thin silver chain. Millions of Mexicans wore the same medal but Emilio knew this one because of the tiny splash of blue paint on the back, from when his mum had been painting a cupboard years ago. She’d never been able to scrub it off. ‘It’s my mother’s,’ he choked.

‘It must have been pulled off when she struggled,’ said the policeman. ‘The chain’s broken. Like the car, it’ll be dusted for fingerprints, and we’ll see if any of them are useful to us, once your mother’s have been eliminated. Though it’s likely the kidnappers made sure they didn’t leave DNA traces.’

‘But surely . . . ’ said Emilio. ‘Didn’t the attendant see anything? Mamá must have screamed, struggled!’

‘Not necessarily. Going by what we know from other incidents, she was probably injected with a powerful tranquilliser that acted almost instantly. We believe she was probably snatched pretty much as soon as she parked and got out, although the attendant didn’t notice anything for a good half-hour.’

‘How come it took him so long?’

‘He says he’d been listening to the radio – it was only when he switched it off that he heard the sound from the alarm.’

‘But – do you believe him?’

‘We can only go by that for the moment,’ said the policeman smoothly.

‘But someone else in the carpark might have seen something? Another motorist?’ cried Emilio.

Raúl Castro shook his head. ‘So far no one has come forward.’ A pause. ‘Of course, they rarely do.’

Emilio exchanged a look with his cousin. He understood what the policeman meant. People were too scared to come forward in cases like this. Violent men took bloody revenge if they thought you’d informed on them. Better to see nothing, hear nothing, know nothing.

‘There are cameras,’ went on Castro, ‘however, they only cover the exit and entrance.’ Seeing Emilio’s expression, he added, ‘But we might well get something useful from them.’

Emilio swallowed. He knew the policeman was trying to be reassuring, but that somehow made it seem worse. And there were so many things he didn’t understand! Running a nervous hand through his thick dark hair, he said, ‘But Mamá – why was she there in the first place? She doesn’t have any clients in that area.’

‘Staff at Lopez Travel informed us that Señora Mendoza Lopez had been called out to meet urgently with an important business contact who was staying at the hotel. An American named Señor Sellers. But there was something odd about this call.’

Emilio knew that Señor Sellers was one of the Holiday South people. He said, 'What? Surely he wasn't a part of this?'

'No, no. The call was *not* made by Señor Sellers,' said Raúl Castro. 'The city police spoke to him and found he knew nothing of any so-called appointment. When this was confirmed, they turned the case over to us as a probable kidnapping. We traced the call to your mother and found it was made from one of those pay-as-you-go cellphones, mobile phones you can buy from any street vendor.'

'But why – why would anyone want to kidnap my mother?' cried Emilio. He looked at Juanita. 'Tell him. Tell him. We're not rich or famous or important. It makes no sense.'

'No,' she said, 'it doesn't. It's wicked and pointless and—'

'Wicked, yes,' said Castro. 'Pointless, no. There is most certainly a point to this.' He paused. 'I believe there was an article in the local press a couple of weeks ago about the recent deal between your mother's company and an American travel agency, the one run by Señor Sellers. That's probably what triggered their interest in your mother.'

'You mean – they might have got the idea from that that Mamá is some sort of *tycoon* or something?' Emilio was horrified.

'Yes,' said the policeman. 'They might think she's richer than she really is. Or that she is *going* to be rich. People who are already wealthy have ironclad protection

– armed bodyguards and so on – and are much harder to kidnap. The gang that took your mother was looking for a softer target.’

Emilio felt sick. ‘Do you know who . . . ?’

‘No. Not yet.’

‘But do you have any idea – any idea at all?’

‘There are always ideas. Nothing firm, though. They’ll be local if the article is what tipped them off.’

‘That stupid article!’ Emilio cried wildly. ‘If only . . . ’

He never finished his sentence, for just then the telephone on the wall began to ring.



Chapter 3



Emilio sprang for the phone, but Castro held up a hand. ‘Wait. You have another phone here?’

‘In the kitchen.’

‘Good. I’ll be listening. I’ll give you a signal. When you pick up, just say your name. Don’t say “Who’s this?” or make any pleas or anything else. Understand?’

Emilio nodded, all his attention on the shrilling phone.

‘Pick up on the count of three. One, two, three,’ boomed Castro’s voice from the kitchen.

Emilio snatched up the receiver. ‘Emilio Mendoza Lopez here,’ he stammered.

‘Hello, Emilio.’ It was the caretaker, Señor Santiago, and he sounded a little surprised by Emilio’s shaky voice. ‘A courier’s just brought something for you. A large envelope, addressed to the Lopez and Torres families, marked Urgent and Important. Is your mother there?’

Señor Santiago must not have seen Juanita and Castro, Emilio thought. Juanita had a key to the

apartment, so she wouldn't have needed him to buzz her through.

Emilio gabbled, 'No. She's not home yet. I'll – I'll come down right away.'

Raúl Castro appeared in the kitchen doorway with the phone to his ear, and shook his head meaningfully.

Emilio said, 'Actually, do you mind coming up with it?'

'No problem. But Emilio – is anything wrong?'

The policeman shook his head.

'No. No. Nothing's wrong,' lied Emilio.

'I'll be there in a few seconds, then.'

Emilio put the phone down. He looked at the adults. 'What should I do when he . . . '

'Put these on.' Raúl Castro handed Emilio a sachet containing a pair of transparent plastic gloves. 'Ask him to give you the envelope, and tell him to come in. But don't say anything to him about what's happened. I will need to speak to him. He may have some important information and it's best if he doesn't have time to think about it.'

It was at most a few minutes till the knock came on the door, but to Emilio it felt like hours of agonising waiting. When the rapping came he caught the Federal agent's warning glance and tried to master himself, but couldn't help fumbling as he opened the door.

'Ah, there you are.' The old man looked curiously at Emilio. 'So, what's up, eh?'

'No – nothing.' He held out his hand for the envelope.

‘Have you been washing the dishes, Emilio?’ Señor Santiago said, glancing at Emilio’s gloved hands as he handed over the envelope. He laughed. ‘What a pleasant surprise for your mamá.’

‘No – er, yes,’ said Emilio. ‘Won’t you – won’t you please come in?’

‘No, I—’ Señor Santiago caught sight of Juanita and Castro, and his eyes bulged. He stammered, ‘What – what has happened?’

‘Please come and sit down, Señor,’ said Castro. ‘We just need to ask you some questions.’

‘Questions?’ repeated the old man, allowing himself to be led to a seat. ‘Who are you? What’s this about?’

The policeman identified himself and went on, ‘I want to ask you some questions, Señor. He gestured for Emilio to hand him the envelope, having pulled on a pair of gloves himself. ‘Can you describe to me who brought you this?’

The old man shot a look at Emilio, at Juanita. ‘He – he was just ordinary.’

‘How, ordinary? Young, old, middle-aged? Tall, small, fat, thin? Dark, fair, dressed well or badly?’

‘I . . . I – well, he was young. Early twenties, maybe younger. Thin. Dark eyes. Dark hair, cut short, one of those razor-cuts.’

‘Any distinguishing features?’

‘Distinguish – oh, no. His face – it was just ordinary.’

‘What sort of accent did he have?’

‘He didn’t speak. Just handed me the envelope and left.’

‘His hands were bare?’ There was hope in the policeman’s voice.

‘No. He wore gloves – you know, the kinds of gloves motorbike riders wear. I assumed he was one of those motorcycle couriers. They’ve come here before to deliver things.’

‘But you hadn’t seen this one before?’

‘No, but then they change staff so often, those people.’ He looked anxiously at Juanita, at Emilio. ‘But what is this about? And where – where is Señora Lopez?’

Before either of them could answer, the policeman said, ‘One moment. His clothes. What was he wearing?’

‘Jeans. A jacket.’

‘Colour, type?’

‘Blue jeans. Black leather jacket. The rest – I don’t know.’

‘No logos or brands or symbols?’ the policeman said.

Señor Santiago shook his head. He said, ‘Nothing. Not that I saw, anyway.’

‘We’ll need you to come to the station, to help the police artist draw up an identity sketch.’

‘An identity sketch!’ The caretaker’s eyes widened. ‘What’s happened?’

‘Señora Lopez has disappeared. We believe she’s been kidnapped.’

Shock flooded the old man’s face. ‘Madre de Dios! Kidnapped!’

All this while, Emilio had been half-listening to the interview, half-looking at the envelope in the policeman’s hands. He longed for Castro to open it. Yet he wished

he wouldn't. He needed to know what was in it, and yet he was terrified of what it might contain. Now, as the policeman slit open the envelope, his heart beat so fast and so loudly he was sure everyone could hear. He felt Juanita's hand on his shoulder tremble. Somehow that made him feel a little better.

With three pairs of eyes fixed on him, the policeman carefully pulled a single sheet of paper from the envelope. On it was a single printed paragraph. He read it out, slowly, each word piercing Emilio's mind like a red-hot needle

We have Señora Gloria Mendoza Lopez. She is safe and in good health and will remain so as long as our instructions are followed exactly. First, open an email account with this address and password . . . Here Raúl Castro broke off. He looked at Emilio. 'I will brief Officer Torres later on the rest, and have this examined as evidence,' he said. 'For the moment, it is enough to know your mother is unharmed. He turned to the caretaker. 'Señor, we would appreciate it if you would say you know nothing if any neighbours start asking questions. Nothing at all, do you understand?'

Señor Santiago nodded and crossed himself, murmuring, 'And may the Virgin grant she stays safe,' and he put a hand on Emilio's shoulder. 'I am so sorry, Emilio, so very sorry.'

A wave of mixed relief and fear washed over Emilio. His mother was unharmed – but how long would she continue to be? Why had these people taken her?



Chapter 4



All the way to Tía Isabel's in the police car, Emilio sat silent. Earlier, he'd been able to ask questions. Now the shock had really set in. His brain felt frozen, his body disconnected. When the police car pulled up outside the Torres family's apartment block, he got out obediently, and waited while Juanita hauled his bag from the boot, then followed her and Castro into the building.

'Oh my poor Milo!' Tía Isabel exclaimed when she saw him. She wrapped him in a big hug. Her hazel eyes, so like her elder daughter's, were puffy and rather red, but she tried to smile as she led him into the apartment. 'You'll be safe here. Vicente's on his way from work, he'll be here soon. Luz!' she called out to her youngest daughter, Emilio's other cousin, who was hovering in the background. 'Take Emilio's bag.'

'You'll be in the spare room,' Luz gabbled, leading him down the passage, 'we've just made the bed. Mamá will make something to drink and . . .'

'Please, Tía,' Emilio whispered, 'do you think I

could – I could just sit in the bedroom a moment, by myself? I just need . . .’

‘Of course,’ said his aunt, kissing his cheek. ‘Come on then, Luz, let’s give Emilio some peace. And when you’re ready . . .’

‘Yes. I’ll come out. Thank you,’ said Emilio. When they’d left, he sat on the bed, hugging one of the bright cushions, trying desperately to hold on to some semblance of calm. He must stay strong. If he didn’t, then he’d be no use to his mother. And he was determined to be, somehow. He didn’t know how. Not yet.

How long he sat there, he wasn’t sure, but by the time he roused himself and went back to the living room, Raúl Castro had gone, and Juanita was talking in a low voice to her mother and sister. They looked up when he came in.

‘Are you feeling better, cielito?’ his aunt said.

He nodded.

‘Good. You must not worry too much.’ Her words were reassuring, but her red-rimmed eyes told a different story. ‘It’s all in good hands. Juanita says that policeman has much experience in these matters.’

Much experience in these matters . . . A little tremor went through Emilio. A terrifying world had come crashing into his own, and if he thought about it too much he would be overwhelmed. So he must not think about it. He must keep a clear head.

Luz patted the sofa next to her. ‘Come and sit down, Milo,’ she whispered. This wasn’t the everyday Luz, with

her messy hair and loud voice, but a big-eyed, alarmingly quiet and gentle version of her.

He sat down and, trying to keep his voice steady, said, ‘What – what happens next, Juanita?’

‘The email account mentioned in that note – that has to be created, with the username and password provided,’ explained Juanita. ‘Señor Castro said that’s where the messages from the kidnappers will be left. Of course, as they made up the username and password, they can access it easily. But because it’s not the kidnappers who have physically created the account, they can’t be traced.’

‘But when they send messages,’ said Luz, frowning, ‘won’t they have to send it from a different account that *can* be traced?’

‘No,’ said Juanita. ‘The note said that messages will be created in the account itself and left in the draft box instead of the inbox. And that means we have to use the same method – we can’t send an email from that account to another but will have to reply using the draft box too. It’s clever – and pretty much untraceable. But there’ll be other avenues of investigation. You’ll see. And the negotiator will help us.’

‘The negotiator? Who’s that?’ asked Emilio.

‘Someone experienced in these matters, lent by the Federales to help us,’ said Juanita.

Emilio said, ‘But the note was addressed to us, and sent to our apartment. Those people – they must expect *us* to answer, not someone else.’

Juanita nodded. ‘They do. And that’s why it must look as though it comes from us. But the negotiator will

advise us on what to say and do. In theory, the Federal Police can't be officially involved in ransom negotiations. In practice, someone usually helps to advise the families privately.'

'Oh. So will it be Señor Castro?'

'No. He's an investigator, not a negotiator. We don't know who it will be yet. But we're to meet them tomorrow morning. If there's any communication from the kidnappers before then, we'll be informed immediately, of course.'

At that moment, the front door banged open, and an instant later Tío Vicente walked into the room.

Emilio's uncle was a large, jovial man with a booming voice and normally a big smile. Not today. He looked grey, his face drawn. Hurrying into the room, he hugged Emilio and shook his hand, up and down. 'So sorry, hombre. So sorry.'

Emilio gulped and nodded, not trusting himself to speak. Tío Vicente growled, 'We'll get those pendejos, you'll see, Milo.'

'Chente!' said Tía Isabel, automatically reproving him for swearing. But no one took any notice, least of all Emilio. Inside him, suddenly, fear was morphing into anger, into a wild fury. He imagined the pendejos, those rotten bastard kidnappers, on the ground in front of him, helpless, begging for mercy, and himself kicking them, over and over again till they stopped moving. They were faceless to him, inhuman, scum of the earth. He clenched his fists. 'I wish I was an adult. I wouldn't go by their rules. I wouldn't do as they said. I'd hunt

them down, I'd kill them for what they've . . . ' But the words choked him, he couldn't bring any more out past the lump in his throat, and instead he just howled, the sounds tearing out of him.