

Off Grid
(Prologue)

Many of us choose a life's path, only to find out toward the end, it wasn't what we wanted all along. That was my case. I was young, patriotic, enthusiastic, and naive. For the first 35 years I just blindly followed orders. Not thinking too much about the targets I had been assigned to eliminate. I was always told these were enemies of the US. It is what I believed. But power and money corrupts. It happened on my last mission. I happened to overhear a conversation I was not suppose to hear. This mission was not about National Security, it was about someone higher up than me deciding one of his competitors needed to be eliminated. It always comes down to money. That day was an epiphany for me. Instead of assassinating the target prey, I assassinated the target predator. Unfortunately for me, his partner turned the tables and framed me as a rogue threat. It was also the day I decided to go off grid.

There are many places in the world to hide. With all the technology around it isn't as easy as it sounds. Cell phones and security cameras everywhere. The power of the intelligence agency's tracking devices substantial.

My tasks had taken me all over the globe. My plan wasn't to hide in some filthy hole in some god-forsaken country. I wanted to spend whatever time I had left enjoying the things my career had denied me. A girlfriend, a wife? Not practical before. So where did I choose? You might be surprised where.

Author's note: I will be surprised too if I can think of a place!

Off Grid
(Chapter 1)

I knew I had to move fast. I boarded a plane for Frankfurt, Germany. I knew many contacts there, but my real reason was to visit my favorite disguise shop. I had used this place many times to alter my look while performing a task. The proprietor was discrete and no one knew of this practice. It is good to keep some secrets in my line of work.

I gathered up my arsenal of guns, knives, and other devices of my trade. I purposely flew into Germany undisguised. I wanted to be seen on the security cameras. My former colleagues imagined that I had panicked. Donned in my costume as an aging eccentric, I hired a charter plane to fly me to Puerto Rico. My luggage would not have passed muster at any regular airport. I had multiple passports so entry was never a problem for me at any airport destination.

Keeping the same look, I hired a second charter to fly me to Ecuador. I told the pilot I was a professor working for a private archaeology company. A few hundred bonus \$\$ kept the questions at a minimum.

I landed in Cuenca, Ecuador. At one time this was the #1 destination for retired ex-pats. I would not stand out here at all. I spent a couple months renting a small two bedroom flat. Anytime I went outside or downtown I always wore my disguise. I found what I was looking for. A small house in a rural location about 10 miles from town. A cash purchase made the transition quick.

I still had some trustworthy guys I had worked with. I sent two of them a letter from Germany explaining that I had uncovered a conspiracy involving a couple higher ups and that I had been framed. Just a warning to watch your backs. I might need some help in the future, but for now, I am OK.

Why would you think Cuenca was a good choice? Most people would say, living on the equator would be unbearable. That would be true, except that Cuenca is at 8000 ft elevation. A very charming city with lots of culture, restaurants, and inexpensive medical and transportation.

The average daytime temperature is 70 F. No real seasons. Only wet and dry.





My small plot of land only had one neighbor. I found out her situation talking to patrons and a bar I frequented. Her husband had died in some farming accident and she was struggling to maintain her grape orchard. I was not the noisy neighbor type, but just by chance, I ran into her for the first time on my way into town. Of course I was in my elderly man disguise. Her car had hit a rock or pothole and careened off into a ditch. It looked like she was stuck. The wheels kept spinning in the muddy soil.

I stopped to assist. Madam, would you like some help? Who are you? I am your new neighbor of several months. I live up the hill in the small structure I call a home. As you can see, I am stuck. Do you have any ideas? Actually, I think I can remedy your problem. Let me get a tool out of my trunk. I took an old army shovel that troops used to carry with them to dig fox holes during WWII. I used it to cut and chop some brush from the field and placed it under her tires. Now when I tell you to gun it, hit the gas. She complied. Her car jolted forward and out of the ditch. Well that certainly worked. How about you follow me home and I will compensate you for your effort and time. No need for that, it was the least I could do. I was playing my part of the old codger well enough. At least let me treat you to a cup of tea. I didn't know the Alan place had been sold. If she had know the thoughts that were going through my head, she might not have made that offer. Not that I had ill intentions. It is just that she was so stunning and her beauty caught me off guard.

We had a pleasant conversation and I learned a little more about her situation. Besides being short handed to tend to the orchard, a bank was threatening to close on her mortgage. Banks are notorious for not caring about a person's predicament, but in this case there was more to the story. The banker in charge of her loan was also pressuring her into marrying him. She let me know she had no intentions of doing any thing of the sort. The guy was a cad and made no secret of his lewd intent.

A few days went by and I happened to be driving by her place and saw somewhat of a confrontation. She had given me her name at our tea meeting. I saw Sarah push him away. He grabbed her arm. I turned into her driveway and got out of the car. He momentarily released her. I approached. It looks like the lady isn't interested in what you are selling. Get lost old man. This is none of your business. Well, since I am her neighbor, I am making it my business. I think you should leave. He came at me and pushed out a finger into my chest. He said, get lost again. Not only was I an expert marksman, but I was also trained in all kinds of martial arts. Just more of the tools of the trade. I grabbed the thumb of his hand and bent it backwards. He immediately fell to his knees. It seems you are not as adept in accosting men as you are women. Using the same leverage, I guided him to his car and shoved him into the seat. Embarrassed and humiliated, he drove off.

Well Mr. Kasey, it seems you are in the habit of rescuing me. It's just Kasey if you please. How about another sip of tea? Sounds nice, but do you have anything stronger? I might have raised my blood pressure.

This time she made some snacks and we shared a bottle of wine from her orchard. This is really good stuff. You should make good money marketing it. I have done OK, but this mortgage business is hanging over my head. I think Mr. Smith is going to make things even harder for me after today. I don't want to pry into your affairs, but how much do you owe? She told me the amount. It really wasn't that much compared to my financial resources. I can keep up with the payments, if I can last until after harvest. I think Mr. Smith is going to demand full payment before I get there.

I never liked it when someone bullies another and especially when they bring

that kind of pressure. I was thinking to myself. I might have to pay a visit to Mr. Smith and see if he can be more reasonable.

A couple days later I was waiting for Mr. Smith to leave the bank. It was closing time, so I knew he would be heading home. I followed him and when we were alone on a long stretch of road, I speed ahead and cut him off. I was not dressed as an old man this time. I pulled him out of his car, tied and gagged him, and threw him into the trunk of my rental car. I moved his car off of the road and raised the hood.

I had surveyed the surrounding area around my property out of old habits. There was an abandoned farm house on the rise over a dirt road. That was where I made Mr. Smith an offer he couldn't refuse.

Next time Sarah invited me over, she told me that Mr. Smith gave her more time to make the payments. My comment was, maybe Mr. Smith was not as bad as first thought.

Sarah started to quiz me on what my former profession was. I told her I was retired and just wanted to lead a quiet life of leisure. To be honest though, I am kind of getting bored. You wouldn't happen to need a farm hand to help out around your orchard. Are you sure you would want to do manual labor at your age? Age is just a number. I feel fairly fit. I could use some help, but I couldn't pay you much. I really don't need money. My investments have paid off quite well. A bottle of wine now and then and some company would suit me fine. What kind of business were you in that allowed you to retire? I use to work for the government. I handled special assignments that required intense research and planning. That is pretty vague. Lets just say that I was in the security business and its best left unsaid.

A couple of days later I arrived at her farm ready to work. She led me to the barn where a tractor and some field tools were hung on the wall. It was time for me to get out of this costume. Before we start, can we have a powwow on your veranda? Sure, this sounds serious. It is. I haven't been totally honest with you and I don't want to keep you in the dark any longer. I started to remove my disguise bit by bit. She watched with a fascination I

found alluring. When I had stripped off all my fake hairpieces, my pot belly enhancement, and outside shirt, there sat before her a fairly handsome dude of around 47 years of age. If she looked surprised, she didn't show it. Instead she said, I knew there was something mysterious about you. You moved too easily and light on your feet for an old man. The way you handled Mr. Smith was impressive. What was your real profession? Actually, what I told you was the truth. Without going into details, I will just say that I am in hiding. Not because I did anything nefarious. It was because I was framed by evil men positioned above me and now I don't want them to find me.

That is still pretty vague, but I won't pursue it any further. Do you still want to work as a grape picker? It would be my honor to pick your grapes. She just gave me a coy smile. With that, we went back to the barn and began the harvest.

This wine making process was much more complicated than I had imagined. Images of barefoot maidens smashing the grapes in a large wooden vat was not the norm. I had a lot to learn.

Off Grid (Chapter 2)

Like I said, making wine was not as simple as I had imagined. Here are the steps required: The wine making process involves harvesting, crushing, fermentation, clarification, and aging/bottling. Grapes are picked, crushed into "must," and fermented with yeast, which converts sugar into alcohol. Red wines ferment with skins for color, while white wines are pressed immediately to separate juice. Finally, the wine is clarified, aged, and bottled.

Step-by-Step Wine making Process:

1. Harvesting (Picking): Grapes are picked, often in the cool morning, at peak ripeness, which determines the wine's sugar and acidity.
2. Crushing and Destemming: Stems are removed, and grapes are crushed to break the skins, creating "must" (juice, skins, seeds)

Red wine is crushed and kept with skins for color, while white wine is usually pressed immediately to remove skins.

3. Pressing: This separates the grape juice from the skins and seeds. For white wines, this happens before fermentation; for reds, it happens after.

4. Fermentation: Yeast is added to the must to convert sugars into alcohol and carbon dioxide. This usually lasts 1-3 weeks. Red wine ferments at higher temperatures (22–30°C) than white wine (12–22°C).

5. Malolactic Fermentation (Secondary)

Specific bacteria convert tart malic acid into softer lactic acid, common in red wines and some white wines.

6. Clarification (Racking and Filtering): The wine is cleared of solids, such as dead yeast and tannins, through racking (moving to a new container) or fining (adding agents like bentonite to bind particles).

7. Aging and Bottling: The wine is aged in stainless steel or oak barrels to develop complexity. It is then filtered again, sometimes stabilized, and bottled for consumption.

Key Differences:

Red Wine: Ferments with skins for 5–14 days for color and tannins.

White wine: Ferments without skins, often in cooler temperatures to maintain fresh, fruity, and acidic notes.

Sarah's production facilities were not the smallest, but small enough for the two of us.





How is it that you are able to make such good wine? My husband was the chief chemist at a French winery in Bordeaux. He decided to venture out on his own and the owner rewarded him with some grape vines from his own vineyard. As it turns out, this Ecuadorian valley has the perfect conditions to grow these grapes. Cool nights and mild daytime temperatures. The rainy season gives our vines a good start and the dry autumn is a perfect harvesting time.

For the next several months, we both were so busy making wine we didn't have much time for anything else. During a break, I invited her to town to celebrate our harvest. I told her about all the surveillance cameras and cell phone photographers around and that I had to wear my old man getup. She said she understood. We were seated at one of my favorite pubs. Like many places in the world, Ecuador has its own unique dishes.

Fried Plantains



Ceviche is served in many South American countries and also in Mexico.

Ceviche



This one doesn't look particularly appetizing. Guinea pig boiled in oil.

Cuy



Looks too much like a big rat.

Encebollado



I kept it simple. Encebollado is a tasty fish stew. Sarah ordered a light salad and a plate of plantains. She said she was watching her figure. I had been

watching it too, but I didn't want to ruin anything by moving too fast.

While sitting there, Mr. Smith happened to walk by and saw us. He looked scared and a little flustered. He momentarily stopped and said to Sarah, I see you are now dating this old dude. Tell your cousin that I am following his advice. Then he abruptly walked along. What was all that about?

I forgot to mention that I had a talk with Mr. Smith after he threatened to foreclose on your mortgage. Was that why he suddenly changed his mind? You could say that. What did you do to him? Nothing to harm his person. I just made him an offer he couldn't refuse.

I didn't want to tell Sarah what really happened. I had tied Mr. Smith to a chair. I told him I was Sarah's cousin from New York. A made guy of the mafia. I threatened to make him a eunuch if he harassed her any more. It seems like my threat was effective. Almost everyone in the world had seen the movie "The Godfather".

We continued our meal, but I felt uncomfortable in my attire. I still didn't want to expose myself to possible detection. I knew how thorough those guys could be when they wanted someone found.

Another week went by and we finished our wine production. I helped Sarah set up a more effective website for distribution. In celebration of our completion, Sarah displayed a side of her that I had not seen. Apparently she was a gourmet cook. She set a table more lavish than any of the restaurants I had been frequenting. A couple bottles of our own wine and the evening was at an end. Well, not quite. The attraction that had been building up between us overflowed with the wine. I woke up next to her in the morning. From that day forward, we were hardly out of each other's site.

I always knew that someday they would find me. In preparation, I had set up a security system around my house that Rambo would have been proud of. It was lucky that I had spent the day at my own house cleaning and fixing stuff like all home owners do. If I had been at Sarah's place, things might have turned out different.

Off Grid
(Chapter 3)

It was fortunate that this little house I had bought had a basement. I had dug a trench fortified with steel plates that led to the backyard. This is what saved me. My alarm systems went off and I viewed 4 commandos approaching my house. My security cameras caught their approach and my app immediately sent the photos off to my cloud account. These might come in handy later as evidence. There was no way I could escape a frontal assault. They were not about to put themselves in easy range knowing my former ability.

I had wondered how they had found me. I never went into town without my disguise. The only way was perhaps Mr. Smith had filed a police report about a hood who had abducted him. A police sketch artist producing a recognizable print that went out to Interpol. That would be enough.

So the assailants weren't taking any chances. They firebombed my house. Explosions went off topside until there was no structure left. I had escaped out my makeshift tunnel and was positioned on the high ground behind my formerly sturdy home. I am sure these guys were wearing body armor. Their Plexiglas face shields though did not stop my 5.56 X45 mm NATO rounds. This was easier for me than breaking balloons at the county fair.

It seems like trying to hide from this threat was not going to work. It was time to change tactics. Sometimes the best defense is offense. They would not be expecting that I would return to Washington D.C.

Before going to the airport, I had to see Sarah. She had seen the smoke and heard the explosions. She was surprised to see me walk through her door unscathed. It looks like I need to leave for awhile. Where will you go? It's better if you don't know. I will be in contact with you somehow. I'm afraid Mr. Smith is going to resume his pressure on you. I have a solution for that. No, it doesn't involve eliminating Mr. Smith. You will find out in the near future. I will come back for you.

With that, I walked out the door and headed for the airport. No disguise this time. I might trigger another alert, but I didn't care. I was going to Mexico.

Time was of the essence. No report back from the assault team would put them on alert. Still I didn't want them to know I was coming to DC. I flew into Cancun and got a new disguise. I went to an Internet cafe and sent Don an email. While there, I went to Sarah's Wine website and ordered all her inventory. Paid with a safe bank card. There was enough profit for her to pay off her mortgage in full. That will take care of Mr. Smith's leverage. The delivery address I had given was Karl's office. He was the supervisor hunting me. He might not know why this was addressed to him, but the note accompany the shipment would cause him some grief. It read, thanks for taking care of that business for me. It sure looked like a bribe payoff. If Don was being monitored, an email from Mexico would throw the bad guys off. No issues for me arriving in Miami. In the email I had sent Don was a code of where and when to meet me. No one else knew of this place.

I avoided the airport and rented a car. The drive to DC took me two days. A 15.5 hour drive. I needed to rest up at a motel to shake off the jet-lag. No one could track me driving.

I arrived at the designated meeting place at the coded time. Don was already there having a late lunch when I walked in. We talked awhile discussing what he had heard about me. It was as I suspected. Karl had poisoned everyone's mind thinking I was a rouge threat. I showed Don the pictures of the assault on my Ecuadorian home. I also showed him an article from Cuenca's local newspaper. It described a mystery. Sarah Mendez identified the resident believed to have died in the fire. She said there were two men living there. One was an old man and the other was a fugitive wanted by the Americans. The intensity of the fire destroyed any DNA needed to verify her claim. Don was stunned. Apparently Karl was conducting unauthorized clandestine operations. What are you going to do about this? Showing your face at headquarters will only get you arrested and probably killed. I figured the same thing. You have heard the phrase, "The pen is mightier than the sword!" I have an idea that will blindside Karl. I will need your help.

I let Don copy the videos of the commando team sent to kill me. His roll will come at a later date. I needed to talk to the original target I had been sent to assassinate. I already knew all the details of where he lived and his daily routine.

His name was Preston Stevens. His company was in direct competition with Karl and his former dead business partner Greg of whom I had eliminated. I broke into Preston's residence and was waiting for him when he returned home. He arrived and turned on the TV for the nightly news. The TV illuminated me enough for him to see me sitting on the chair opposite to his coach. I was pointing a gun at him and advised him not to yell out. Who are you and what do you want? He appeared calm and unfazed by my presence. I can see why Karl needed to get rid of him. He obviously had a backbone. I had been sent to kill you several months ago, but decided not to. It seems that your rival competitor had sanctioned your death, but I found out that you were not the evil guy like they had told me. Instead, I shot Greg, Karl's other partner. I heard about that. So why are you pointing a gun at me now? I lowered the gun. I was framed by Karl and now I need your help.

Off Grid
(Chapter 4)

While Kasey was dealing with his demons, Sarah was also doing the same. She had cashed the check from the wine sale and got a cashiers check from a different bank than the one Mr. Smith worked at. Upon arrival, she requested a meeting with Mr. Smith. He was sure he knew her intent. It seems you lost you two protectors. He had read the story in the local paper. I guess you are hear to negotiate terms for you delinquent mortgage. You are correct, I am hear to deal with that. I'll give you the same terms as before, but there is no need to marry me. A liaison with you would be good enough. Actually I am hear to pay off my mortgage. Really, show my your payment. She had copied the original bank check and presented it to him. He looked at it and replied, this is not worth the paper it is printed on. He then torn it into pieces. Now lets get down to your real collateral. As far as I can tell, your body is your only asset. I am willing to take that and alter your loan details. That is what I thought. Without his knowledge, she had been recording the whole

conversation.

Midge had been alerted before her entry into his office. Midge, can you call in the bank's president. Midge was well aware of Mr. Smith's conduct. She had been subject to his demands in the past. I want to make sure my payment gets recorded properly.

Sheldon, the bank president arrived. Mr. Smith's face turned chock white. I want to make a sexual harassment claim against Mr. Smith. Absurd, I was just trying to help Sarah here with some favorable terms for her loan. Yes, favorable as long as I gave in to your sexual demands. She then played the recorded conversation of the last 5 minutes. Sheldon immediately fired Mr. Smith. Madam, I am sorry you have been subjected to such conduct. I accept your payment for your loan. You are free and clear.

Kasey asked Preston if he knew any honest reporters. Yes, I know a couple. Here's what I want you to do.

Tell them you had been contacted by someone from the CIA community with a conspiracy involving you and Karl. Explain that Karl had tried to eliminate you because you were beating his business interests. The assassin found out the truth and spared you. When asked how you know this, you can say that I contacted you just before I was killed in an assault on my house in Ecuador. I showed him a copy of the local paper's story and a picture of my burned out home.

Now that Karl thinks I have been eliminated, he will probably make another attempt on your life.

The CIA will deny this, but Karl will have to face the scrutiny of an investigation. Will that be enough to take him out of the picture? No, but I have another strike planned.

The story appeared in the New York Times. This liberal paper was always against organization like the CIA. They will claim they had an anonymous source. "Freedom of the Press, and all that.

A meeting took place at CIA headquarters. The CIA director conducted the meeting. Don was also present. Karl claimed he was innocent and that this was just a smear campaign against him and the CIA. The question came up about him receiving 700 bottles of premium wine. He said he didn't know who sent it. A very suspicious fact.

It was Don who stepped up and claimed that Karl had authorized an unsanctioned hit on Kasey. That is a total lie.

Don had prepared a short video showing the assault I had captured on my security cameras with a photo of the Ecuadorian newspaper article. Where did you get this? It came from an anonymous source. I suspect perhaps one of the assault team members all of whom have mysteriously disappeared.

All three of these accusations were enough to sink Karl. He was taken in to custody. I wouldn't be surprised if he suddenly disappeared from this earth. The CIA doesn't like to leave evidence of their wrong doing.

Sarah was busy preparing for the next harvest. It was several months away. The late evening Sun was rapidly sinking into the horizon when a shadow appeared off to her right. It startled her, but when she turned there was Kasey standing in one of the grape furrows. I told you I would be back. She ran to him and they embraced. I thought I would never see you again. Do you still have to remain in hiding? Not anymore. No one looks for a dead person. Oh Kasey, I am so happy! Kasey is gone, you can call me Paul. Why Paul? It is the name on my Italian passport. Or I should really say Pablo.

How about you come with me on vacation. Harvest is far enough away. Where would we go? I think Italy would be a nice destination.

Off Grid
(Epilogue)

I had a surprise waiting in store for Sarah. I had purchased a small vineyard in Puglia, Italy. Much smaller than her place in Ecuador. This particular area

of Italy was far away from the tourists sights like Rome and Florence. It was a quiet town with low cost of living and amazing food. Before I had returned to Cuenca, I had spent a few months getting to know the area. One important feature of this town was that it had a marina.



We were sitting in my favorite cafe when three guys walked in. They approached the owner and demanded protection money. I already paid you guys last week. We are increasing our fees, you have some objections. I object. They looked over at me laughing. You must be new here. You don't

know who I am. No I don't. He approached our table and sat down. Wow, what a pretty lady you have with you. You wouldn't want any harm to come her way. No I wouldn't. So mind your own business. I will give you a bye since you are new.

Is that a Timex on your wrist? It's a Rolex you fool. As he lifted his arm to show me, I grabbed his hand and applied pressure to a joint. He howled in pain. His two other gang members stood up. Tell your comrades to leave as I increased the pressure. What you feel is only a 2, now a 3. If I go to 4 you might not be able to hold your bowels. Get out, he commanded the others. They exited the restaurant via the backdoor. Now take the gun out of your waistband and place it on the table. He complied. Now get up and leave. Don't come back, capish? He nodded and left. Stay here Sarah. This might not be over. He went out the front door taking the gun he had picked up from the table. Kasey, now going by Pablo, walked around the block and entered the alley. As he rounded the corner, he saw the three waiting in ambush. You guys looking for me. They all turned in his direction starting to aim their pistols.

Author's note: Many of us grew up watching TV westerns. Draw down at high noon. Always giving a fair fight. The hero never missed. In reality, almost everyone missed. At the "Gun Fight at OK Coral" 50 bullets were fired in just a few minutes. The result: One dead and two wounded.

Pablo did not fight fair and he was professional. As the gunmen raised their weapons, he fired three quick shots and hit all three. He took out his handkerchief, wiped off his fingerprints and tossed the gun into the pile of dead gangsters.

He then rerouted his walk and returned through the front door. Everything OK, Sarah asked? Just fine. Aren't you worried about the Policia? There were no witnesses or cameras in the back alley. The Policia will just assume it was some gang war shoot out.

The Policia did enter the restaurant and asked the owner if he heard or saw anything. I did hear some noise, but I just thought it was a car backfiring.

That was the end of the investigation. Case closed.

Pablo spent some time showing Sarah around his little vineyard chalet. They sampled some of his Italian wines. This is not bad. High praise from a superior vintner. It is what it is.

Lets grab a couple bottles, I have one more thing to show you.



I brought her aboard my boat. It this yours too? Yes it is. How is it that you can afford all this new stuff?

I spent 35 years at my career. No mortgage, car payments, or girlfriends to spend money on. Lots of time to make wise investments. A career that didn't allow family. You mean you never had a girlfriend. The closest I got was one of my colleagues. We had the same lifestyle so it worked OK. What happened to her? She made a fatal mistake. Something you only do once. I wasn't a monk. There were plenty of opportunities for short term romance while I was setting up. OK, I won't ask any more questions about that.

Just how much money do you have? That is something I will only tell my wife. Is that your round about way of proposing? You deserve a real proposal. For now, lets drink some wine and BBQ some fish I recently caught.

Eating beer battered cod, drinking my Italian wine with my soulmate. It doesn't get any better than that.

The End

Author's note:

I always seem to end my stories dreaming of a life I will never have. Don't get me wrong. I am happy with my current life. I can still dream and vicariously live it though.