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BY ETHAN BROWN

THE LEGEND OF GRISELDA BLANCO WAS BORN ON A WARM SPRING day in 1977, when her Learjet touched down at the Bogotá airport after a 2½-hour flight from Miami. A convoy of long black limousines manned by a crew of enforcers met the plane on the tarmac and whisked the 23-year-old over dusty roads toward the Colombian capital. Blanco was back in her native country to meet with her husband and business partner, Alberto Bravo, with whom she’d built a cartel that moved hundreds of kilos of cocaine in the U.S. and employed nearly 1,500 dealers.

Standing barely five feet tall and weighing 165 pounds, with a wide, oval face and cleft chin, Blanco was no drug lord’s fantasy chick, even if her growing reputation with street dealers and law enforcement had earned her the nickname “the Godmother.” She’d returned to Colombia because she was unsatisfied with her relationship with Bravo, and his stewardship of their vast enterprise. Millions in profits had gone missing, and Blanco blamed her husband. So when she and her enforcers pulled into the parking lot of a nightclub outside Bogotá, she tuckered a pistol into her ostrich-skin boot. After all, this was Colombia, where cocaine, and the mountains of money that came with it, was stronger than any loyalty, a fact proved by the fresh corpses dumped outside rivals’ doorsteps every morning. Stepping out of her limo, Blanco strode toward Bravo, who was waiting impatiently for her across the lot, backed by his own team of gloowering goons. Sensing his wife’s rage, Bravo lashed out, accusing her of allowing the “Godmother” talk to go to her head. According to lore, a furious Blanco drew out her pistol and fired several shots point-blank at her husband. He responded by pulling an Uzi out of his waistband. In the melee, six bodyguards were killed. Blanco was struck in the stomach but would ultimately recovered from her wounds. Her husband, shot in the face, was not so lucky.

In that moment, Blanco had eliminated not only her spouse but also one of the most feared players in the Colombian cocaine business. It was a major step in Blanco’s improbable rise from impoverished slush urchin to perhaps the wealthiest self-made woman in the world, a cold-blooded crime lord whose trail of bloodshed reads like pulp fiction. And on that day in the dusty Bogotá parking lot, she earned another fearsome nickname: the Black Widow.

FOR A WOMAN WHOSE CRIME REIGN IS UNPRECEDENTED IN AMERICAN HISTORY, Griselda Blanco has long been shrouded in mystery. That is starting to change. In 2006, Miami-based director Billy Corben and his production partner, Alfred Spellman, released the acclaimed documentary Cocaine Cowboys, which offered most viewers their first glimpse of the Godmother and helped turn her into an unlikely hero of sorts for the Scarface set. This month they return with a Cocaine Cowboys sequel—Hustlin’ With the Godmother—that should only build her legend.

Increasingly, Blanco is taking her place as one of the most mythologized drug lords in history, and certainly the most ruthless. Credit her propensity for violence (she’s suspected of ordering at least 250 killings) and a stature in the cocaine trade that dwarfs even that of Pablo Escobad
bar. Indeed, when Escobar met Blanco in Miami in the late 1970s he was just a lowly car thief from Medellín looking for entree into the business. Much of her life seems born from the wild imagination of a 15-year-old kid with a Scarface T-shirt: the trail of dead husbands; the son she named Michael Corleone (the Godmother had a serious Godfather fetish; the diamonds she purchased from First Lady of Argentina Eva Perón; the bronze sculpture she commissioned of herself that other drug lords would rub for good luck when visiting her Miami mansion. “Griselda Blanco was the catalyst for recognition by the U.S. government that Miami had a serious problem. That we were really a Dodge City,” according to Miami attorney Sam Bursten. “She was our John Gotti.”

But the mystery surrounding this remarkable woman persists—about her bloody rise to the summit of the drug trade, about her ability to consistently evade her pursuers, and especially about what happened to the Black Widow after she was deported back to Colombia in 2004. It’s a story whose facts are just beginning to emerge, one that’s stranger than fiction and rife with sex, intrigue, and violence on a scale that defies belief.

GRISELDA BLANCO WAS BORN IN THE IMPOVERISHED SHANTYTOWNS surrounding Cartagena, Colombia on February 15, 1943. In this ghetto chocked with ramshackle huts with corrugated tin roofs, murder was so rampant that kids would amuse themselves by digging holes in the ground to bury the bodies that littered the city’s filthy streets, and would resort to petty crime to make ends meet. Or not so petty: At age 11, Blanco and a ragtag group of children reportedly descended from the hills surrounding Medellín to the well-to-do flatlands, where they kidnapped a 10-year-old boy from a wealthy Colombian family. Secreted the boy back to their hillside slums, Blanco and her cohorts held him hostage as they attempted to shake down his family. Unfortunately for the boy, his family was not forthcoming. The group of children handed Blanco a gun, daring her to shoot him between the eyes. Perhaps, living in an environment so rife with violence, the 11-year-old Blanco was insured to the idea of bloodshed. Perhaps it was simply her nature. Either way, Blanco put the gun to the young boy’s head and pulled the trigger. He was her first in a long, long line of victims.

According to former DEA agent Bob Palombo, who pursued Blanco for decades—Abil to Blanco’s White Whale—the future Black Widow was destined for a life of aberrant crime: “I don’t think the fact that she was a female trying to prove something had anything to do with her violent behavior. I just think it was inherent to Griselda Blanco. Goes back to her life, the way she was brought up. She was just a violent person.” By her preteens, Blanca had picked pockets and prostituted herself for cash in the Medellin slums. At age 13 she met Carlos Trujillo, a sometime John and street hustler who specialized in creating false immigration documents and importing illegal immigrants into the United States. Blanco was smitten by Trujillo’s criminal savvy. They soon married and had three children. But by the late 1960s, Blanco had divorced Trujillo and then, in the early 1970s, had him killed over a...
business dispute. It was an act that would reverberate throughout Blanco's life. Soon after, she met — then married — yet another hustler. Alberto Bravo. Instead of illegal immigrants, Bravo moved cocaine, and by the early 1970s he'd saved $26,000, an impressive sum in Medellin.

So Bravo and Blanco, like so many before them, decided to pursue the American dream. In Queens, New York, they established a cocaine business that quickly took off as the Big Apple began a decades-long love affair with the drug. In a city where narcotics were controlled by the deep-rooted five families of the Mafia, a pair of Colombians with a direct connection to the source had a leg up. At first Blanco had female couriers hide small amounts of cocaine in their suitcases; by the mid-1970s, her pilots flew in mass quantities of the drug directly from Colombia, bringing her millions of dollars a month. But with a client roster that included movie stars and major athletes, Blanco's burgeoning organization drew scrutiny. A joint NYPD/DEA investigation dubbed Operation Banshee resulted in the indictment of Blanco and more than 30 of her subordinates on federal drug conspiracy charges in April 1975. At the time it was the biggest cocaine case in history.

Yet when a federal grand jury handed down the indictment, Blanco vanished. "We had her on drug conspiracy charges," remembers Palombo, who was a central player in Operation Banshee, "but she was nowhere to be found." Unbeknownst to the Feds, Blanco had slipped out of the country to Colombia — where she killed Bravo in that dramatic gunfire. In the late 1970s, now the undisputed head of her operation, Blanco set up shop in Miami. The timing of her arrival in Miami was fortuitous in another respect: The local cocaine trade was thriving thanks to a network of recently arrived Cuban refugees and a few renegade American players. Miami in the '70s was a "Virgin City" — the gateway to Latin America and a magnet for the criminal underworld. It was a violent, gaudy universe soon to be glorified in movies like Scarface and television shows like Miami Vice. But Crockett and Tubbs would be little match for the real ne'er-do-wells turning South Florida into their own private playground.

Blanco, however, wasn't satisfied simply sharing in the profits of the drug trade — she wanted to own it. So in the late 1970s, along with a group of thugs led by her enforcer, Jorge "Rivi" Ayala, she embarked on a killing spree of rival dealers designed to eliminate all competition.

In her utter ruthlessness, Blanco was unique. If you purchased drugs from her and failed to pay her back promptly, Blanco would kill you. If she bought drugs from you and didn't feel like paying, she would kill you. When ordering a hit, Blanco instructed her assassins to kill everybody in the vicinity, including women and children. But the violence paid off. Soon the Godmother ran a distribution network stretching from coast to coast, had thousands of employees, and was taking in $80 million a month. Miami's hustlers were thrilled to get in on the action: Blanco's luxury penthouse on Biscayne Bay, the palace in Miami Beach, the fleet of exotic cars, the coke-fueled orgies complete with strippers catering to every need, including the Godmother's.

It was decadence on an epic level, but Blanco's bloodlust would spoil the party. At about 2:30 p.m. on July 11, 1979, Colombian cocaine dealer German Jimenez Panesano and an associate were searching the shelves of Crown Liquors at the Dadeland Mall for an expensive brand of scotch. Before they could select a bottle, a trio of Blanco's assassins in a Ford Econoline van with HAPPY TIME COMPLETE PARTY SUPPLY imprinted on one side, unleashed a wild spray of machine gun fire, killing both men and injuring two mall employees. It was a spectacularly bold hit — "a replay of Chicago in the 1920s," Dade County chief medical examiner Ronald Wright said at the time — and when cops arrived on the scene they discovered that the killers had abandoned their van behind the shopping center. "We called it a 'war wagon' because its sides were covered by quarter-inch steel with gunports cut into them," remembers former Dade County homicide detective Raoul Diaz. "The gunports were covered with one-way plastic — the gunmen could look out and you could not look in." Inside the war wagon, they found about 20 shotguns, revolvers, and machine guns. The massacre would usher in a fresh orgy of violence.

Blanco, however, was unconcerned by the increased scrutiny. According to Rivi, "She liked to be at war. Every day she'd say, 'We've got to get so and so.' We've got to get so and so. It was something she enjoyed."

But the violence, and Blanco's lifestyle, was taking its toll. The first rule of drug dealing is to keep your nose out of the product, but the Godmother was never one for self-control. With cocaine fueling her paranoia, she retreated for long periods behind the gates of her mansion, with her German shepherd, Hitler, standing guard. Most dangerously for Blanco, Alberto Bravo's nephew Jaime had learned that she was responsible for his uncle's murder.

"Jaime and two gunmen he'd imported from Colombia would go to the malls where Griselda spent time shopping and just wait for her," Palombo remembers. "It got so bad that we had to interrupt our drug case against Griselda to take Jaime off the streets." So, in 1984, Blanco fled to California to hide out and tap into the West Coast drug markets.

By early 1985, Blanco, then 42, was lying low in a modest suburban bungalow in Irvine, California with her mother, Anna, and her youngest son, Michael Colombe. Palombo and a DEA team followed her out west, staking out the home. Blanco was essentially cornered by both assassins working for Jaime and the DEA. "She had a sense that her own blood was looking to kill her and that we were looking for her," Palombo recalls. On the overcast morning of February 20, as Blanco lay in bed, Palombo's team kicked down the door and rushed upstairs to the God-
on the corners of East Oakland, was awestruck as the anchor described a "Cocaine Queen" who moved hundreds of kilos into the U.S. "I was floored," Cosby remembers now. "I'd never known of a woman to sell drugs, much less on that level. She was a billionaire."

To a drug business mafià like Cosby, whose Jheri-curl hair and designer sweat suits made him look like something out of Chris Rock's N.W.A. satire, CB4, Blanco was the very model of what he wanted to achieve. Fortunately, Blanco was able to plead out to a 20-year sentence and was remanded to a low-security federal prison for female offenders called FCI Dublin, 20 miles from Oakland. "Griselda was the connection of all connections," Cosby says. "Even though I was just starting out in the game, right then and there my eyes were on the prize." When a female friend of Cosby's confided that she'd once worked as a runner for Blanco, Cosby asked her to reconnect—and, to his surprise, she agreed. "She told Griselda, 'I know a young black guy who wants to get in contact with you,'" Cosby explains. "And Griselda said, 'Tell him to get in touch.'"

After a series of phone calls and letters, Cosby came face-to-face with Blanco for the first time during visiting hours at the prison. When they met, Blanco embraced Cosby and gave him a long, unexpected, passionate kiss on the mouth. Then they sat at the visitor's table and got down to business. "How much money do you need," Blanco asked, "for you and your family to be comfortable?" Cosby was stunned by the question and nervously threw out a sum that he expected to be refused: 50 keys. Blanco nodded—and then the meeting was over.

Three days later the doorbell rang at Cosby's house. When he answered, a Latvian woman bearing two packages said plainly, "I have a delivery from the Godmother." Cosby hurriedly opened the boxes and found 50 kilos of cocaine. Within a month, Cosby was a millionaire, one who paid his respects to Blanco in unusual ways. Each time he visited her in prison, Blanco paid guards $1,500 so they could have sex in the back of the facility's multipurpose room. "When she brought me in the entire system was in place. I had to do was fly around the country and meet with distributors," Cosby says. "Every time I shook a hand, I made $1 million." Blanco not only took Cosby on as her protegé; she entrusted him to run much of her multibillion dollar business in the United States. Still, her enemies were emboldened by her long imprisonment. In 1993 her son Osvaldo was killed in a hit in Medellin. Blanco vowed revenge, and Osvaldo's killers were captured, tortured, and killed.

Blanco's legal worries weren't over, though. In 1994 the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office began investigating her organization, and, most damagingly, prosecutors managed to enlist the cooperation of Rivi. When Blanco heard that her most trusted enforcer had turned on her, she had a nervous breakdown. During a prison visit in the spring of...

**Lady Killers**

Griselda Blanco isn't the only member of the fairer sex with a cruel streak. Here are five of the most dangerous females through the centuries.

**Bloody Mary**
Queen Mary I established Catholicism as the state religion of 16th-century Britain and maintained it with force. What kind? The "300 Protestants burned at the stake" kind.

**The Beautiful Beast**
Irina Grese was senior supervisor at the Auschwitz concentration camp. Her sadism with the whip and indiscriminate executions earned her a noose courtesy of the Bergen-Belsen trials.

**Countess Dracula**
Elizabeth Báthory killed as many as 650 young girls in 16th-century Hungary, bathing in their blood to preserve her youth. As punishment, her family bricked her up alive within her castle.

**Madam Genocide**
Chairman Mao's wife Jiang Qing formed the Gang of Four, the leaders of China's cultural revolution—a series of political persecutions that led to the deaths of half a million Chinese.

**The Femme Fatale**
In the late '90s, Sandra Avila Beltrán allegedly ruled the Mexican drug game the old-fashioned way: sex. Feds ended up killing both her husbands (former police turned traffickers).
1995. Cosby vowed to Blanco, “We gonna fight them motherfuckers in court.” But Blanco’s fears could not be put to rest. “Rivi has enough dirt on me,” she cried. “to bury me 10 times.” Blanco then reached into her bra, pulled out a tiny piece of notebook paper bearing the message JFK SM NY, and handed it to Cosby. “What does this mean?” Cosby asked, puzzled by the cryptic message. “Dixon,” Blanco replied, referring to her eldest son, “will know.” Cosby pressed Blanco about the note—with Rivi singing and Blanco growing increasingly unshod, he was hesitant about involving himself in some harebrained new scheme. “I’m going to move against Kennedy,” Blanco told him. Cosby was still confused. “The president’s son!” Blanco shouted. “Is that descriptive enough for you, Charles?” Cosby was accustomed to Blanco’s brazenness, but a plot against JFK Jr.—in which Blanca would pay kidnappers $5 million to seize John-John and then trade him to the Kennedy clan in exchange for her freedom—was absolute madness. “Hell,” Cosby counseled Blanco. “will rain on us.” Blanca accused Cosby of disloyalty and even compared him to Rivi. Chastened by Blanca’s dressing-down and threats, Cosby passed the note to Dixon.

Soon afterward four Colombian kidnappers hired by Blanco landed in New York City on an Avianca Airlines flight from Colombia. They then rendezvoused with Cosby—who had reluctantly flown in from California to oversee the plot—at a safe house in uptown New York. Cosby handled the kidnappers several low-caliber pistols, and with the promise of $5 million in cash from Blanca, the four-man team descended upon the Tribeca neighborhood where JFK Jr. and his wife, Carolyn Bessette Kennedy, lived in a spacious loft. As the kidnappers surveilled the Kennedy residence, Cosby flew back to California in order to give himself some distance from the insane plot. The kidnappers, meanwhile, were having no luck tracking one of Manhattan’s highest-profile residents—they weren’t even able to get a sighting of JFK Jr. outside his building. Several days later, they finally spotted him walking his dog and quietly sur-

rounded him. One of the kidnappers got close enough to pet the dog’s head. But before they could act, an NYPD squad car passed by. The plot was off.

Shaken, Cosby began backing away from Blanco. Unbeknownst to the Godmother, prosecutors from the Miami-Dade State Attorney’s Office subpoenaed Cosby. He was forced to fly to Florida.

Cosby insists that he offered information that purposefully understated the reach and profits of Blanco’s organization—but he was making $2 million when it was actually 50 times that—but with Rivi in their pocket, prosecutors had Blanca nailed. In July 1995 she was indicted by the Miami-Dade State Attorney’s Office for three murders.

Improbably, a reprieve would arrive in the form of a scandal. After getting his deposition, Cosby claimed he had sex with one of the secretaries from the state attorney’s office. Worse, the same secretary engaged in an extended phone sex affair with Rivi. It was, in essence, a technicality, but by 1998—with the prosecution’s two prime witnesses thoroughly discredited—the case against Blanca collapsed. By June 2004 the Godmother was released from prison and deported back to Colombia, though the prospects of freedom in her homeland weren’t promising. “If I was getting deported to the country where my sons were whacked, I wouldn’t feel too comfortable,” Palumbo told The Miami Herald at the time. In fact, most everyone assumed that on Colombian soil, Blanca’s days were numbered. With so many enemies eager to even up the score, smart money said that the Black Widow would be dead within days.

Life After Cocaine
Hollywood is lining up to tell the story of Blanco’s Miami.

Since the release of Billy Corben and Alfred Spellman’s addictive documentary Cocaine Cowboys in 2006, the proliferation of projects chronicling Miami’s drug-fueled heyday are piling higher than the trash on Tony Montana’s desk. In addition to this month’s Cowboys sequel, Hustlin’ With the Godmother (which tells the story of Charles Cosby’s rise to power), Jerry Bruckheimer and Michael Bay have been in talks with HBO to produce a drama series based on Cocaine Cowboys, and Mark Wahlberg and director Peter Berg (Hancock) are developing a biopic about Miami drug lord Jon Roberts. Cosby, meanwhile, has been negotiating with 50 Cent’s G-Unit books about releasing his memoir, also called Hustlin’ With the Godmother. Additionally, he’s been courted by Training Day director Antoine Fuqua about bringing his life story to the big screen. Here’s hoping Flavor Flav checks out the audio book.

IN LATE SPRING 2007, A YEAR AFTER COCAINE COWBOYS MADE ITS debut. Alfred Spellman received an e-mail from a friend that read, “Look what I have.” Attached was a cell phone photo of Blanco taken at the Bogotá airport in May 2007; To Palombo’s surprise, Blanco, it seems, is safe and sound. “She has tons of money squirreled away in different bank accounts that were never recovered,” he explained today, “and one is going out of their way to look for her, because 20 years have passed since she last made any real enemies.” The woman in the photo hardly resembles the Black Widow of legend. By all accounts Blanco has been out of the cocaine game for more than a decade and is living a quiet existence in Bogotá. Without her makeup, hair dye, or designer clothes, at 65 the Godmother looks more like the Grandmother these days. But the eyes remain cold, and in looking at them one can’t forget that this is a woman allegedly responsible for more than 200 murders, who rose from the slums of Colombia to the pinnacle of the crime world, who killed three husbands, and sacrificed three sons to her limitless ambition. And on her face, as she gazes into the camera, is that trademark smirk, which seems to go...