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The Turning of Hydrangea

a novella

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Romantic Thriller

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CHAPTER ONE

A portly, older gentleman in a loose fitting linen jacket with well groomed, gray hair, probably in his late sixties, walked uneasily into an open air restaurant on the outskirts of Juanxaca, a small town north of Mexico City. A fair haired man in his mid forties was sitting at the bar. He watched the old man cross the tiled floor and sit, as usual, at a table nearby. It was one of many bare, mahogany tables, each square with a single pedestal and four wooden chairs around. Simple taste but elegantly embellished with a central blooming hibiscus in a tiny, white vase, the table surfaces clean and polished shiny, golden brown.

A thin waitress in a black skirt and formal, white blouse approached the old man, then nodded expectantly. A double rum and coke, was ordered in perfect Spanish, though the older gentleman was, more than likely, a Gringo.

The younger man at the bar new most of the ex-pat community in these parts, but had only noticed this older man come by in the last month, always alone and invariably around 11.30 in

the morning. He was always casually well dressed, sporting brown leather shoes, belt and watch strap. He would sit by himself and consume no less than six doubles in the matter of a couple of hours, eat nothing, then call for a taxi. He intrigued the younger man. This little restaurant was his haunt, he would eat here regularly. It was close to home. He knew the owners well – Paulito and Tina Mendez – all the waitresses by name, and had been coming by for the last ten years.

The bar where he sat, on one of four wooden stools, was just inside the main entrance to the building, a covered area for those who wished to sit in private with table cloths and candle light. The entire establishment was local hardwood construction, the walls, ceiling and bar paneled in four inch tongue and groove, the external dining area being simple post and thatch. Paulito's Restaurant was nestled a good distance west off the northern highway among pines, surrounded on three sides by a roughly graveled and uneven car park.

The younger, clean-shaven man in dark slacks and a pink shirt, leaned over the bar and quietly asked Tina, “So, who is this new guy?”

Tina looked up, and shook her head, a short, brown pony tail slapping at her cheeks. “Oh, him. We don't really know.”

A small, scruffy looking fair haired lad walked by the bar, heading for the washrooms. He waved at the two of them, “Hey, Francis. How's it going, Tina?”

They both nodded and smiled at the young mechanic, another regular.

The old gentleman at the table turned to his side towards the bar. “Ah! I thought..,” he said, in English, “Someone was asking me a question.” Then continued. “Do you live here..?” pointing at Francis.

“Yes,” replied Francis.

“Come. Sit with me and let's talk. We are both on our

own,” urged the older man with a big smile.

Francis obliged. Here was the chance to satisfy his curiosity. He sat opposite, across the small table, a beer in one hand. “So you are an American?”

“Yes,” the older man replied. “My name is, Calvin. And yours?”

“Francois, but most people call me Francis, or Cisco. Your choice.”

“You are French,” Calvin noted, speaking the tongue, “But your English is perfect.”

“Yes, I am. My father was Scottish, my mother, French. I grew up in Bordeaux.”

“Ah., wine country. A favorite region of mine. Much prefer the deep, earthy flavors to those fruity wimps of Beaujolais,” Calvin said, enthusiastically. “So what do you do here, to make a living?”

Francis reluctantly responded, he would have preferred to be the one asking questions. “I’m an artist, a painter,” he replied, in English.

“Really, that’s wonderful. I’ve always wanted to be an artist. Not a painter, necessarily, but certainly a writer. Thing is, I don’t have any imagination.”

Francis was about to speak when Calvin began looking around and waving. He caught Conchita’s attention and she hurried over.

“Otra, Señor?”

“Si, mi amor.” Then on noticing Francis had an empty bottle, he ordered a beer as well.

“Thank you,” Francis nodded. “... You know, you don’t need to look for imagination, you should never search for ideas. You simply open you mind to possibilities and let them enter, naturally,

on their own. Perhaps that is where you are having difficulty.”

“Really?” Calvin asked, excitedly. “Is that what you do?”

“I guess...” Then took his chance. “And you, Calvin. What brings you to these parts?”

“Me. I’m retired. US Navy. Came down here on my final assignment as an attache to our Embassy in Mexico City, about seven years ago.” Then chuckled, with a wobble that went from his shoulders to his belly. “But this is a small town and people talk. So I’m finding it more comfortable out here, away from the center.”

“What do you mean?” Francis inquired.

“Well.” Another chuckle, and he leaned forwards, half whispering. “My wife caught me in bed with our maid, so that was that. She left. And I am now married to my little Mayan Muse. This is her home town, and we moved here when I retired. I can’t stand the gossip, the insinuations, you know what I mean? But we have a lovely boy, I adore him, he is four years old. They say he looks exactly like me.” Calvin laughed again. “Smaller, of course, but another me, just the same.”

The liquor was getting to Calvin. Francis imagined he had probably had a few in the morning before even arriving. However, this older gentleman was still on form. He was highly educated, spoke three languages, possibly more. He was well traveled, well read and quite unlike the majority of US ex-pats around these parts, most of whom were farmers. He was, as Francis had suspected: Intriguing.

“And you, Francis. Are you married?”

“I am, but separated, for a couple of years now.”

“Do you have to pay alimony, or some such deal?” Calvin asked, but did not wait for a response. “I am paying 40 percent of my pension to my wife, and she also has our family home in Virginia.”

“Tough. No,” said Francis. “We have nothing on paper.

Although I do occasionally send her a wire, to keep her in balance.”

“So tell me,” Calvin carried on, “Do you make a good living out of painting?”

Francis frowned. “Not likely. No..., just the odd penny, now and again. I have a few canvases hanging in galleries, and some digital works that I sell on line. But it's all just bread and butter.”

Calvin, again with much enthusiasm: “And yet you appear to be a wealthy man. Eating here often, dressed casually but I can see cloth of fine quality, and you drive a brand new Mercedes.”

“True,” Francis confessed, “My money is in the markets: commodities and shares. I was left a large disbursement after a rich uncle died.”

“And you have not spent any of it. You are letting it grow. Wise man,” Calvin said, eagerly. “Why did you settle here, in Mexico?”

“I followed my money,” Francis replied, running his fingers back through a finely, swept fringe. “In early 2006, I saw the Euro waver and converted to Dollars. But the United States is strict on residences, so I applied here, instead.”

Another couple of beers and two more rum and cokes. No pause in conversation. From politics to religion, Calvin would never let up, always pressing Francis for his views. He would flip-flop from being a Democrat to a Republican, from being a devout Catholic to an atheist, depending on how Francis would respond. Not so peculiar, really. It was a way with ex-pats, to fit in and avoid controversy among their small numbers. And then, quite unexpectedly, Calvin demanded that Francis visit his home that very afternoon. He wanted Francis to meet his son. Glowing with pride, he proclaimed wildly how smart and vivacious the little one was. Well, Francis had nothing pressing to attend to and so, with intrigue still at the forefront, he accepted.

They took his Mercedes downtown, to an expensive apartment block and parked beneath. Rising the elevator to the

penthouse suite, Calvin extracted a plastic card from his pocket and swiped a pad to allow the doors to open. He was not only clumsy on his feet, his hands trembled as did his knees. He was unstable at the best of times, his excessive weight no doubt a major factor.

They were greeted promptly by a young man, mid thirties, a servant it seemed, who ushered them to seats in the large reception area where Francis sat down. Couches were long and square, laid out symmetrically around a rectangular, glass coffee table. The rest of the room was sparsely furnished. A long curved staircase with wooden treads rose, suspended against the far wall; minimal but elegant with thin metal railings and a wooden balustrade.

“This is my Sancho,” Calvin gurgled in Spanish, pointing at the servant; referring to Don Quixote's squire, Francis assumed. “Bring my friend a glass of our finest beer and I'll have... lets see..., a vodka tonic, yes, with plenty of ice,” Calvin said, his weight slowly being devoured by the enormous couch.

Drinks arrived on a tray with immaculate decorum: The cloth across the arm; the placement of mat on coffee table; the suggestion that one might take the drink in hand or have it placed; then the retreat, with a nod and a bow.

“Where is my son?” Calvin inquired of Sancho, whose really name was not offered.

“Sir. He is upstairs with his mother, in the garden.”

“Go at once. Bring him down. I want Don Francis here, to sit with him a while.”

Sancho bowed away.

Calvin had barely time to smile and raise his glass before a patter of bare feet on stairs revealed a tiny boy, hand in hand with a woman. They crossed the reception area and came to rest beside Calvin. Francis was trying to look at the child but was having difficulty keeping eyes from straying. The woman in charge of the little boy was outrageously attractive. She was clearly of Spanish descent, perhaps 36 years of age, petite with long, bare legs that

descended from a pair of shorts tucked up around her buttocks by straps that ran from the top of her thighs to the waist band. Her hair was plated and doubled up. His immediate impression was that of wealth and health. But her demeanor was unsuccessful in concealing sadness.

“Ah., there you are, Calvito. I want you to meet my new friend, Francis,” Calvin oozed with pride and affection.

Remarkably, the small child took firm strides towards Francis on his own and with an outstretched hand he said, “Señor, mucho gusto.” Then, before their hands had even met, said, in English, “Sir., sir., would you like to see my dinosaur egg? And I have dinosaurs, too.”

“Well, yes,” Francis replied, feigning excitement, “Go get them. I love little monsters.”

The boy ran off. Calvin was ecstatic. “Didn't I tell you? He looks exactly like me.”

Francis smiled and nodded, though he failed to see much of a resemblance. How could a beautiful, dark eyed young Hispanic look anything like an obese and wrinkled old, white man?

The young woman was now perched on the side of Calvin's couch, an arm behind his head, hand lying gently on his shoulder. Realization was thus conceived. Calvin did not have to say it but was obliged to, anyway. It was a necessary formality:

“This is my darling, Mayan Muse. Hortensia,” he said in Spanish.

Finally, Francis was able to take a good look. Her features were young, she could have passed for twenty, though the hint of crows feet gave it away – she was older. Magnificent, nevertheless, with a seductive smile producing dimples in the cheeks that could tame a tiger.

“One of my favorite flowers,” Francis responded, hoping not to sound too cliché. “It has many moods, depending where its roots reside: can be blue, purple, white or rosy pink.”

“That is so sweet,” she said. It appeared she only spoke Spanish. “And where do you live?”

“Oh, I have a small ranch out to the north west,” Francis answered.

Calvin interrupted, eagerly. “Francis is an artist, and he tells me that I should write. He says imagination should not be forced, that I should let it happen on its own. I'm very excited.”

Hortensia squeezed his shoulder, but it was hardly amorous, it seemed merely for show. Then the dinosaurs appeared and Francis became dutifully occupied on the coffee table. A few minutes later, Hortensia got up and took the boy's hand. They departed, leaving he and Calvin alone.

“I'm blessed. Don't you think?” Calvin spluttered, an ice cube unceremoniously popping out of his mouth and dropping with a splash to the glass.

Francis nodded. “Indeed, you are.”

Sancho appeared again, bearing more booze... Departed. Calvin began to relax still further into intoxicated oblivion, and then a revelation. “I don't want to live here, you know, with her family and that stink of resentment I always feel. I'm supporting too many of them, that was not the plan, especially on my paltry retirement income. But she doesn't want to leave. What am I to do?”

Francis held of his response, for effect, he already knew what he was going to say. Then said it: “The truth, Calvin. There is nothing better than honesty.”

“But I've already tried that. Her family is milking me dry.”

Francis had no sympathy. He had heard over the years so many pitiful stories regurgitated by disgruntled ex-pats, imagining they had come to paradise, only to find that their worlds were slowly disintegrating beneath their feet. This man, Calvin, was no different, except that something was out of place, there was more to his story. And then it came out.

“For some reason I trust you,” Calvin spoke, in a lowered voice, looking around with a head that seemed as if it might become detached and topple off at any minute. “Perhaps it is because of your European stock, or perhaps because you are wealthy and have nothing to gain from our private meanderings. Please, keep this to yourself.”

Francis prompted him with a raised eyebrow.

“I have tried to end my life, several times,” he demonstrated with cupped hands to his mouth, “By taking an overdose of pills... But nothing happens. I always wake up the next day.”

There it was: the seeds of intrigue Francis had been waiting for, all along. He was keen for more, excited even, wanted to draw it out. “Depression, you think? Alcohol induced, Calvin? Have you told Hortensia?”

“No. How could I? My boy... How would she react?” Then, quite suddenly, as added liquor does to a delirious mind, he changed tack. “Francis, you live alone, and Easter is coming. You should not spend it out there in your Hacienda by yourself. I invite you now to spend Easter Sunday with us, here, to enjoy home cooking, a large dinner, and you must stay the night of course. You cannot drive home.”

Francis accepted, he didn't have to think about it. On his departure, he asked Hortensia if she was comfortable with the idea. It was merely courtesy dressed up, Francis knew she would not go up against her husband. As he turned in the elevator he saw Calvin squeeze Hortensia.

“My little Mayan Muse.”

She placed a reluctant hand on his giant belly. “My.., my big.., American man,” Francis heard her trying to say in English as the doors were closing between them.

CHAPTER TWO

A couple of days later and Francis got a text message from Tina:

“Fat guy came in the next day. Asked me about your property, how big it was, how much money you had, and when you would next be in. What the F's going on?”

Crash! It was as if a bell had fallen from the clock tower and shattered on hitting the belfry floor. Francis had been wondering why all the questions about his art and income, whether married and the mention of alimony. On a first encounter it was unusual to press for more than surface detail. He had found it odd, had put it down to liquor. But now: Intrigue had become seduction.

Francis was developing in his head a preposterous scenario; curiosity willing him to proceed. If what he was thinking were to transpire then he would receive a visit to his bedroom on Easter Sunday night. Not from Calvin, he was not gay. What a situation! He could not back down. He needed to find out what was really going on in that household. He had a hunch.

The next day Francis was at the bar when Calvin hobbled in. He waved at Francis with his usual enthusiasm and prompted him to join his table. Francis obliged. He had broken his shaded promise to Calvin, had confided in Tina and Paulito, just in case his hunch was off mark and he was getting himself into something more sinister.

Two drinks in and Calvin was ordering a rare bottle of wine and suggesting they have a steak - his treat. Francis accepted the wine but not the steak, said that he would pay for his own meal. He had heard how hard up Calvin was from his own quivering lips, so why this sudden splurge? The bottle of wine alone was costing him well over one hundred dollars.

The conversation they had over the next two hours was caked with intellect. Calvin held up, did not lose his poise; references to Beethoven, Gandhi and Lincoln littered the table, while constant humor with the waitresses implied he was still reasonably in control. Francis interrupted the flow only once, with a question: "Who was Sancho, really". To which Calvin replied, "His name is Enrique, he is Hortensia's brother."

Calvin hurriedly went on to encapsulate, in a few mumbling sentences, the protagonists of his adopted Spanish family. The slight mother, a fallen actress; two wealthy uncles in business and numerous nieces and nephews. He was not looking forward to Good Friday, the yearly family get-together at the father's sprawling homestead in the hills west of Veracruz, with a guest list well into the hundreds.

On leaving, Calvin reminded Francis of the Easter Sunday invitation to his penthouse, as if concerned he might not show. He need not have worried. Francis, with gratitude, signed up again.

"Well.., what are you going to do?" Paulito asked Francis, after Calvin had left.

"I've got to do it... got to find out. It's too weird to ignore," Francis said with a smile.

“You're nuts, Cisco. You realize what this could be? They could be fraudsters preparing to play you. Had you not thought about that?”

“Vaguely. But it doesn't smell of that.”

“So what does it smell of?” Paulito queried.

“Sadness. Not malevolence. Great sacrifice and stupidity. Futility. Shit, the list goes on. But it is not going to go to plan, of that I am sure. Not for want of trying, simply because destiny is often a bastard if you don't stay focused.”

“Whose plan?”

Francis leaned back on his stool. “Good question, Paulito. I'm still not sure.”

* * *

An elevator dinged on arrival and the doors gaped. Francis stepped out to a courteous bow from Sancho. It was Easter Sunday, midday, and the weather was surprisingly calm for that time of year. He was ushered upstairs to the penthouse gardens, lush and green, with potted hibiscus and framed thunbergia all placed neatly alongside a pathway of fake turf that lead to an open sunbathing area with umbrellas and a table. Hortensia jumped up and approached him.

“You said,” she asked, “That my flower can grow many different colors. Look,” she pointed at a hydrangea in bloom. “It is blue, Francis, that means sadness. I want it to be pink.”

“Hortensia,” he smiled, “You need to raise the PH of the soil, it is too acidic, that is all. And in the coming months it will oblige.”

“How do I do that?”

“Add a little calcium., like the Cal you probably use in preparing corn for making tortillas.”

“Thank you,” she said joyfully, planting her lips on his cheek, “You are a wonderful guest. I'm so glad you are here.”

“It is my pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.”

She turned away, breezed over to the table, while he was wondering if he had noticed something hiding in the hint of embarrassment she let out on her departure. He found Calvin and his son lying on the ground, some yards away, investigating a colony of ants. Calvin beckoned him to descend, and so he did. After a few minutes of fatherly education Calvin asked Francis to pull him upright. When eventually Francis had him standing he was far from steady on his feet. He escorted Calvin to a chair under shade of the umbrella beside Hortensia.

“I have to go,” Hortensia explained, standing up, “There is much food to prepare, still. Please forgive my absence,” she said, looking at Francis.

Calvin lay back, prostrate, eyes closed and growled. “Where is Sancho? I need another drink.”

Then Francis felt a little tug on his shirt sleeve. Tiny Calvito was looking up at him, questioningly. “Señor..,” he said, meekly.

Francis shook his head. “No, Calvito, please don't call me Señor. That is for strangers. I am your friend, please call me by my name. I am Francis.”

With a polite nod, “... Francis,” was struggled from the young boys lips, “Is my Papa going to be alright?”

Francis took the little boys hand. He was faced with an impossible answer, a lie being unfair but the truth even worse. He chose distraction. “Don't you find that sometimes when you lie on the ground for a while and then stand up, your head feels a little fuzzy?”

Calvito laughed. “Yes,” he said, “And it makes me laugh. See? And this, like spinning round and round really fast, and then stopping. You fall over... so funny.” He ran off, back to the ant hill.

Sancho appeared with a tray of drinks. He looked at Calvito lying on the mat, then Francis. He approached the table. Calvin snapped at him for not being attentive. Sancho took it in with a deep breath, then said: “A cold, buffet lunch will be served in five minutes, if you wish, Sir.”

“Yeah,” said Calvito, from under his feet. “What will it be?”

“Young Master. We have a baked bread roll of ham, tostadas, stuffed morenos, green salad, and cold cuts of fine chorizo, parma and goat cheese.”

“Yumm! Let's go... Francis?” The little boy jumped up.

No, Calvito, “ Francis held his ground. “You go with Enrique, I will be down with your Papa in in few minutes.”

The buffet spread went well, but Calvito was becoming troublesome, as all of that age do when tired, and Hortensia was quick to take him away for a nap. That left Francis alone with Calvin, who had fallen asleep on a couch. Francis got up and strolled through the reception room to a living area where he found a flat screen TV and toys littering a carpeted floor. Enrique followed him.

“Don Francis, you are well respected in our community, I have been informed. I suggest you make your departure now, in case things turn ugly.”

“Enrique, I know you are protecting your sister, that is a fine and honorable thing to do,” said Francis, “But why should I be an imposition, this Easter?”

“Our family goes back many generations, we have ties that stretch far and wide. Cousins, uncles and nephews, none of whom you know, personally. All of whom are watching out for Hortensia. None are proud of what she has done by marrying this American.” Enrique paused, for effect. “Get out of here, this afternoon, for your own sake.”

“Enrique, you know I cannot abandon an ex-pat if he needs assistance, just as you cannot abandon your sister. Are you saying

Calvin, your boss, is in some kind of danger?"

"No. He is killing himself, as I'm sure you can tell. But many will be lining up to take his place. You don't want to be mixed up in all that."

Francis saw sense in what Enrique was saying, but the plot was too enticing to let slide. He said, "I'm going to stay this Easter Sunday because I was invited. But I will heed your advice, and possibly never return again. Thank you for putting me in the picture, I respect your concern and your confidence in me."

"Very well..."

As evening approached and windows began to draw stretched and distorted shadows of themselves across the floor, everyone was up and eager for the thrill of dinner. Calvin was back on his feet, dancing with his son to some bluesy swing Francis was banging out on an unsteady electric keyboard. Hortensia was busy in the kitchen with a maid and her mother, while Sancho was playing all sides. Francis was simply soaking up the atmosphere. It had been years since he had felt part of festivities such as Christmas, Easter or Thanksgiving, within a family setting.

When dinner was eventually presented Calvito gasped, then applause from around the table. Four giant Easter eggs were laid – or so it seemed – on a massive silver, serving dish. Enrique explained: Each egg was actually a duck, legs and wings removed, stuffed with bacon and green jalapenos, coated in a chocolate and cumin glaze. Sides included; potato salad; the classic bowl of freshly chopped tomatoes, garlic, herbs and onions; a dish of deep fried plantains and carrots in a creamy cheese sauce, and a salsa verde. Someone would have to carve, and though Enrique came forwards, Calvin demanded that Francis be the one.

There was laughter at the table that night. Whether due to the presence of Francis or just that things were different from the usual make up of an evening meal, he didn't assume. Wine played its part, communication was amicable, and no one got upset. An enormous chocolate volcano for dessert sent Calvito to the moon

within minutes, crying and screaming like the spoiled child he was. His grandmother stood up and took the little boy in her arms, then strolled out of the house and was not seen again.

Francis was tired, it was nine o'clock. He found himself sitting with Calvin at the table. Everyone else had left. They talked a while, finished up another bottle of wine and then Enrique was passing the cleared table wishing them a good night. That was the sign. Calvin struggled to his feet. Francis took a brandy to his room, settled into bed and wandered through his smart phone. Half an hour later he switched off the bedside light.

He was dozing, practically asleep, when he heard the door handle turn. He was not facing the door, but opened his eyes. He was about to find out if his theory was correct. He did not turn. He waited, felt a depression in the bed behind him, a soft hand to his hip, then a sensual, quivering voice in Spanish:

“Francis, can we talk?” It was Hortensia.

He smiled. He had been right all along. He rolled over, saw something of desperation in her face though it was dark and he might have been mistaken – or just inventing her to suit his theory.

“What is it, Hortensia? Are you alright?” he whispered back.

“I'm lonely,” she said. “Can you not imagine what it is like to live with a drunk. Fat, ugly and useless in bed.”

“I understand,” he nodded, “But isn't this a little dangerous? Your husband and your brother just a few yards across the way. What if Calvin wakes up and you are missing?”

“We don't sleep together anymore. Please... Do you not find me attractive?” she asked, sliding her body up against his, a hand searching for more of him beneath the sheets.

He did not flinch. “You are gorgeous, Hortensia. I'm just concerned that perhaps this is not the right time or place.”

She pleaded, lowering herself onto his chest. “Please. I am

trapped here. I need to feel alive... Make me feel like a woman again.”

He raised his head, he knew he shouldn't have but she was irresistible. Her lips devoured him in an instant and he let it happen. She squealed and moaned, completely on top of him, now, molding her body into his.

Finally sense prevailed. He pulled her head back and said, “No, wait. It's not right.”

She began to cry. “You don't like me, do you?”

“And that thing between my legs. Does that not tell you that I do?”

“... Why then?”

He rolled her gently off him and reached for the bedside light. Saw, upon its illumination, every glorious bit of her, though scantily covered by a sleek and silvery negligee. Her black hair was luscious and long, spread out in all directions across his bed, and her longing, dark eyes swollen from the tears, beckoning. Retreat was unbearable, but his nerves were telling him to forsake the pleasure, while his mind was trying to reassure him that there would come a time.

“Hortensia, can you drive?”

“... Yes,” she whimpered. “Why?”

“Come and visit me, at my home. I will give you my phone number. Call me anytime you can get away. I promise you, we will have each other, every bit of my passion I will give you when you come.”

“Honestly?” she said, sitting up in bed.

“Yes. I want you. Can't you tell?”

There it was., that heavenly smile, rising up for him... She kissed him on the cheek and departed, turning at the door to look back, with that smile to die for.

CHAPTER THREE

Tina was behind the bar when Francis entered a couple of days later.

“So, you survived. Tell all,” she smiled. “Come on, out with it.” She plopped a beer in front of him.

“Well,” he began, “I believe my suspicions were correct, except that I still don't know who's at the bottom of all this.., who's the puppeteer.”

“What do you mean?”

“She came to my room that night, as I suspected she would.”

“And..?” Tina gurgled with anticipation.

“Yup. She wanted it.”

“... And you?”

“Oh yes.”

“Soooo, did you..?”

Francis took a couple of gulps, placed the bottle back on the mat and looked directly at Tina with a broad smile. “No!”

“Arh..., why not?”

“I was too scared. With her husband and family just yards away – possibly one of them, even, in the room next door – and there she was, moaning and groaning before we had even started getting stuck in. Who knows what kind of noises she was going to make later on.”

“Gee..., is that all,” Tina complained.

“Well, no. See, the best bit is to come: Finding out who planned it.”

“And how, exactly are you going to find out?”

Francis smiled. “I’ve invited her to my place. There, she can squeal and scream as much as she wants, and I get to interrogate her, diplomatically speaking, of course.”

“You dirty thing, you. Seducing a married woman,” Tina responded while drying wine glasses and hanging them above the bar.

“Oh, no. I didn’t seduce her. She seduced me.”

“So she’s pretty?”

“Oh, god, yes. She’s gorgeous.” Francis replied with a smile. “The odd thing is..., she’s no maid. Not in the usual sense. She’s well educated..., smart, charming. Weird, don’t you think?”

Tina became curious. “How old is she?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps 35 or a little bit more.”

“Oh my god,” Tina leaned over the bar, directly in front of Francis, onto an elbow beneath the hand supporting her head. “You mean that oaf is married to a girl half his age?”

“Curious, huh?”

“You could say that again. Like, how long have they been

married?"

"About five years," Francis chuckled.

"No way! So he was just as ugly and fat. She must have done it for the money."

"Dunno. That's another thing that intrigues me."

"Francis," Tina complained, "What possess you to get embroiled in a game like this? You could take your pick of any girl in town. Everyone adores you, just ask my waitresses."

"Yes, but -"

"What..?"

"Tina. It's just that I'm bored. I live by myself, yes. But I love my art. It's not like I'm by myself out there. I create, I watch my works being born, I can see it all before it happens, as if they are willing me to make them. They are my lovers, in a way. It's weird, I know. But I'm not lonely."

"You're nuts!" she laughed and went back to drying glasses. "Another beer?"

He nodded, took it and went over to a table occupied by two white women and a man. They begged him to sit with them, he knew them well, and so he did. Yet all the while, through the hum of laughter and conversation, his mind could not let go. Who was trying to play him? Was it Calvin? A dying man, thoughts of suicide, running out of money, but desperate to see his darling son taken care of in the years to come. His legacy. Had he secretly been spending his time looking for a suitable mate for his new wife, hoping she would take the bait?

Orders were taken at the table. Conchita was grinning at Francis, she did a little curtsy and fiddled with a pen between her teeth, a tongue nervously flicking it this way and that. He ordered steak, the fillet, which gave her great pleasure as she was now able to ask him how he would like it. She already knew, but had to ask. Rare, she heard.., red and juicy inside – gave her goose bumps.

Francis's mind wandered back to the plot, even while chatting with the others at the table. What if they had both hatched this plan together? Even more exciting would be if Hortensia was blackmailing her own husband. Forcing him to pimp for her. Sending him out day after day to search in different bars and restaurants for a suitable mate. Then what of Enrique, her brother, could he suspect something?

His phone rang. It startled him, he didn't often receive calls. He looked at the screen, "Private Number". He accepted and said, hello. His chest froze on hearing that sweet voice again. It was Hortensia. He got up, excused himself and went outside.

"Francis, I'm in the car, heading north on 570," she said, sounding slightly panicked. "Which way do I go?"

Shit, he thought, she's coming for me. Slowly and carefully he drew a map in her mind, then told her to call back if she got lost. He hung up, looked at the time displayed. It would take her half an hour to get to his place, whilst he could get there in a little over ten minutes. He went back inside, dropped a 50 peseta note in Conchita's hand and told his friends at the table that he had an urgent meeting. Something had come up. Then he stepped over to the bar.

"Tina," he called. She came over. "It's happened. She accepted my invitation. She's on her way, right now. Wish me luck."

"Best make sure she is not being followed," Tina frowned, "I don't like this, not one little bit. Although, it sure is exciting and I'm looking forward to, 'Part Two', when or if you return."

Francis lived at the end of a two mile dirt track, no other houses down it but his. There was a large gate at the end, locked and electrified. A small, gray box on a pole was at driver's side window height, with a button that said, "Press to Talk". It communicated directly with his phone, as did the cameras behind his gate. He parked his Mercedes in a secluded spot just off the main road about three hundred yards up, still able to see anyone

who turned off down his track. He waited. It wouldn't be long, now, unless she had got lost.

In the distance he saw an old, blue Toyota pickup approaching. Like many farm workers might drive, he thought, expecting it to rumble on by. But it didn't, it turned down his track. There were no farm entrances down there, could this be her? He waited, saw no one following her. A few cars went by, none stopped or looked suspicious. Then his phone rang: a call from the PTT at his gate.

“It's me!” came the crackle.

He replied, “I'm right behind you, just wait a few minutes. I'll be there.”

He started his car and flew down the dirt road, fascination and intriguing playing poker with his mind. As he approached the back of her pickup Hortensia flung open the door and raced towards him. He stopped opened his and she jumped into his lap. Arms enveloped him, he was being crushed by a tiny monster, she was desperate and passionate all in one bundle.

“I only have a couple of hours. I told my brother I was going shopping in the City. Women stuff. I think he understood.”

The gate opened and they drove in, followed the track up over a small ridge and then down to his house. It was white stucco with terracotta tiled roofs everywhere, a sprawling, single storey mansion, elevated about six feet off the ground with a courtyard in the middle.

She was excited, grabbed his hand as he lead the way, through the courtyard, passed a fountain, then up a flight of stairs to the main door. All she had on was a pale green tank top above a mini skirt and sandals; everything matching, highlighted by little pink beads, even braided into her hair. Francis opened up and took her inside, headed directly for a balcony at the far end of his lobby which overlooked a swimming pool. He had hardly time to extract them both a beer from the pool bar fridge before she was tearing off

his clothes.

“I want you so bad,” she cried, “Let's do it right here in the pool.”

A while later and Hortensia was rolling over onto her back, lying, sprawled on the pool deck, naked, with arms and legs outstretched..., satisfied at last. She was laughing and crying at the same time. Francis, propped up on an elbow beside her, was smiling down at her.

She gazed up at him and in that second the enormity of what they had just done washed up all over her. She was an adulterer. It was frightening and yet so exhilarating all at the same time. For too long she had lived a life for others, had wasted her youth to satisfy the whims of her family... well, not anymore. She and little Calvito would have the life they deserved, by their own direction, as it should always have been.

Hortensia laid back and stared up at the big blue. The sky. she thought, could come crashing down and she wouldn't feel a thing. *Dios mio! let them find out, see if I care about all their petty grievances. I can play hardball, too,* the fear beginning to subside as courage took a hold. The man beside her could be trusted, she had chosen well. He was not a threat, any earlier trepidation she had felt had just brought with it a heightened sensual thrill. How many advances she had turned down in recent years from the family's inner circle, men with abhorrent and evil intentions, promising her nothing but fool's gold. No, this man was honest. She turned her head to look at Francis with a smile.

“Wow,” he said, “You are so beautiful to be with.”

“Dios, Francis,” she replied, still out of breath, “That was the best. I've been waiting so long. Over five years. You really are a true man.”

“Five years?” he inquired, standing up, “Then how did you conceive Calvito?”

“A syringe. My husband can't get an erection. Prostate

cancer. ”

The beers he had earlier opened were warm, so he retrieved a couple more, together with some towels. Returning, he asked, “I don't mean to pry, and you don't have to answer, but why did you marry someone so old?”

He passed her a towel and a bottle and she sat up; dried her hair. Took a gulp of beer, then explained: “He was like a father to me, when I was working for them in the City. He was not a drunk, then. He had a well paid job and a wife that kept him in line. I guess that was it: the gifts, the attention, the affection. Not like my real father, who disowned me when I was a teenager for hanging out with the wrong crowd.”

“Is your real father still alive?”

“Yeah. Very much so,” Hortensia sneered. “He's a powerful man, runs many companies, has no time for his family, only his two eldest sons. So I have kind of adopted my younger brother, Enrique, to protect him. My father probably has other wives stashed away somewhere, cos he never visits my Mom. That's why I let her stay with me whenever she wants to, and she adores Calvito.” She paused to take a swig of beer. Went on:

“It was never my intention to marry Calvin, but we got caught, and then after his wife moved out he proposed to me. Wow, I got a little drunk and woozy and said, OK. Maybe it was just my way of getting back at my father, and yes, maybe it was the wrong thing to do, looking back, but I do have my precious Calvito to thank for it all, so maybe not.”

Francis was disappointed, her story was so clean, not even a hint of dirt rising to the surface, no oily slick to be seen. He was actually believing her. Her honesty shone through with such effect that he found it hard to believe she could be involved in a plot to acquire a replacement for her husband. She was off the hook. So that left Calvin as the mastermind, not such a thrilling story after all.

“Can I call you, Cisco?” she asked, taking a seat on a comfortable pool chair, draped in the towel. “I kind of prefer it to Francis, if you don't mind.”

“Of course, most locals do.”

She looked up at him with concern. “Cisco.., now what? I want to come here again. I want to be with you. Now that I've tasted you, I know I will be craving you night and day.”

Francis had not seen beyond this moment, and the hard fact was now staring him down. What would their relationship become? He could close the book right this minute or he could let the gentle breeze of curiosity flip this page to the following chapter... But for how long? He decided the decision could wait, at least for a little while. And that would give him the opportunity of experiencing her again, something he definitely fancied. He spoke:

“I don't know about the distant future, but we have only just met. And I like you a lot. For now, Hortensia, I'd love to see you again. Call me any time. I'll be waiting.”

* * *

A day later and Francis was back at Paulitos Restaurant. He was sitting in his favorite spot on the end of the bar, Tina and Paulito eager for the next installment.

“Well, Cisco,” Paulito complained, “Tina has been keeping me up to date, so what happened, yesterday?”

Francis nodded vigorously. “I've started a new piece... it's wild and fruity and – ”

“No, Francis,” Tina interrupted, “That's got nothing to do with it.”

“Oh, but it has. I was looking down at her lying naked on the deck and this dreamscape came flooding in.”

“Sod the sodding dreamscape, Cisco, why was she naked on

the floor?"

"Yes, well, we'd just done it.., twice as a matter of fact."

"Finally," Paulito groaned. "So, was she sweet?"

"... As honey. Maybe more. And so ferocious, like a wild animal, wanting to try every position she could think of."

"Ooh! Careful Francis, or I'll be taking Paulito out back and closing the restaurant."

Francis complained. "Yeah, but there was no intrigue, like what I had been expecting. Turns out she is a decent, honest woman, who is just horny as hell because her old man can't get it up."

"Francis, you yourself said the other day that you were bored," Tina said. "Perhaps you just invented this crazy scandal because you're an artist, you have an over active imagination."

"Maybe," Francis nodded.

"Are you going to see her again?"

"Yup."

Tina smiled. "About time. At last, Francis has got himself a girlfriend, even if she is a married woman."

As the last words dropped loosely from her mouth, she was watching Calvin hobbling across her restaurant floor, heading for his table. But it was already occupied, so he looked around, wondering where to sit. Then he saw Francis at the bar, waved and came over. A waitress handed Paulito an order and he hastily withdrew.

"Good afternoon to you both," Calvin said, "And does this lovely bartender speak English, too?"

"Yes," Tina replied, "Or Spanish if you prefer."

"English is fine. I suspect you are no mere bartender, but the owner, are you not?"

“Joint, with my husband, Paulito, who is the chef.”

“A pleasure to meet you, and may I say you have a fine establishment, quite lovely and welcoming. Your waitresses, too.”

“Thank you, sir,”

“No, no. Call me, Calvin, please.”

Conchita was standing diligently beside him, waiting for him to notice her. He gave big tips so she wasn't going to let another waitress pinch him from her.

“Ah, Conchita, my dear. I'll have my usual.”

“A double, Appa... pple... ton and coke,” she said, having difficulty pronouncing the name of his favorite rum, in Spanish.

“Yes, dear.” Then turned to the bar again. “And you, Francis, my good friend, you must come and join me. Let's chose a table.”

The statement was made into an obligation rather than a request, Francis considered, and he really didn't feel like spending the next few hours listening to Marx or having his life examined by a drunk. But he really had no choice. He couldn't be rude, so nodded. He raised an eyebrow at Tina on following Calvin out. She smiled and blew him a kiss.

An hour later and on his third drink, Calvin was talking about his Sancho, when a funny thing popped out:

“I think my little wife is having an affair. She doesn't touch me anymore, doesn't come when I call her. What should I do?”

Francis cringed. He was definitely sitting at the wrong table. Couldn't speak. What the hell was he supposed to say?

He tried, anyway. “You are an older man. Did you not expect this might happen?”

“Yes, yes, of course. I'm a fool, I know, and I don't take it as an insult, you are a wise man, my friend.”

“These things may just be a coincidence, or the wrong time

of the month,” Francis pressed on.

“We used to screw around a lot, you know, before we got married. But now I have lost my manhood to the booze,” Calvin laughed loudly, “So, who can blame her. However, there is more than little coincidences. For example, yesterday she went shopping in the City, but when she returned, Sancho told me, she had bought nothing, the car was empty. Usually, he has to unload a dozen or more boxes and bags.”

“Why don't you try talking to her. The worst that could happen is she says, yes. Then, at least the truth will be out... Far better than not knowing and being kept in the dark.”

“No. I will have her followed. That's what I will do, next time she goes to the City.”

Francis swallowed. This was not good. Asked: “Where could she have met a lover? She spends most of her time at home, does she not?”

“Indeed,” Calvin responded, “But it could be her doctor, or her hairdresser.., who knows?” He leaned forwards, as best he could. “Would you not talk to her, Francis? You know her well, now. You got on together over Easter; she told me, she likes you. Maybe she might open up to you. Privately, of course.”

Francis was left dumb. Looked up for Conchita, tried to wave her down. Was considering a shot of Tequila, to consume this horrible moment, when Calvin spoke again:

“Why don't you come over for dinner this evening, then I'll let you two go up together to the garden roof, spend some time together. Try and warm to her sensibilities. She is a woman, after all, and you are an attractive young man.”

The situation was getting worse by the minute, and Conchita was nowhere to be seen. Then abruptly Francis's brain did a back-flip. Shit! This was Calvin at his best, playing his trump card. Then a somersault and Francis had lost his mind to intrigue, once again. *Crap! Maybe Calvin doesn't want an heir to his throne,*

perhaps all he wants is to be a voyeur. He can't do it himself, so wants to get off watching his wife have sex with someone else. Could she and he be working together? Had she tried him out in the pool and then returned with favorable reviews? His mind was becoming a nuisance, damnable imagination.

Finally Conchita surfaced.

“Chita, bring me a Tequila on ice. And another for Señor Calvin.”

“A toast..?” Calvin asked. “Then, it is settled.”

That was not exactly what Francis had had in mind, but somehow he was unable to fight back, as if destiny had already played his hand for him.”

Once Calvin had left, Francis was sitting at the bar, Tina in full flow.

“Shit, Francis. Now you really are getting yourself into deep water. Are you mad?”

“I know, I know. But I can't seem to stop myself. At least I get a chance to warn Hortensia that she could be followed.”

“Yes, but only if she is truly an innocent in all of this. Sounds to me like you now have doubts.”

“I don't know what to think,” Francis complained. “It's as if my brain is writing the script and I'm just a supporting actor who has to play his role. I'm not even the director, for god's sake.., of my own brain!”

Tina chuckled. “Well, 'Part Three' promises to be a real cliffhanger. As a friend I advise you not to go.., but selfishly, I hope you do.”

He did. Francis went home, had a shower, got changed and was about to leave when his phone rang. It was Hortensia. “Cisco, you must not come. You will drive me crazy with my husband there.”

“But, the other night you were willing to be with me in bed, in your own home?”

“That was different. I was a little drunk.”

“So pour yourself a stiff one, I'm coming over.” He hung up.

On the way into town he had time to think. Her call suggested she was not involved in any game playing, that she was an outsider, being played. Nevertheless, adept extortionists were notoriously smart, creating alternate realities of fantastic plausibility. Then there was the thrill. After a couple of shots of Tequila he was back in the game; a sleuth on the trail, a bloodhound on the scent. He saw little danger, but was carrying a Ruger LCP 380 strapped just above his ankle. Calvin was becoming easier to read, while Enrique was still a mystery.

On arrival he was ushered into the reception area. A beer arrived shortly thereafter. Followed, a few minutes later by the host, glass in hand. Calvin looked around, as if wanting to make sure they were alone, then sat down.

“Do you like my little, Mayan Muse?”

“Well, yes, of course,” Francis replied.

“No, I mean..., *really*,” Calvin said, with powerful intonation.

Francis wandered around the room in his mind, searching for an answer, his eyes following blindly behind as if on a leash. Unfortunately, they caught sight of a figure sitting in darkness at the top of the stairs. It was Hortensia. She had not seen him catch sight of her, as she was picking at her toes.

“What I mean,” Calvin tried to continue in a whisper, though a drunk cannot, “Do you want to *have* her? Because, if you do then she might stop this silly lover affair with another man. I trust you, I would not ask this of a stranger, only someone of your composure and dignity.”

“You mean, go to bed with her?”

“Exactly...”

Francis had hit the jackpot. Now he knew Calvin's game plan. It was out. What was Hortensia's reaction? She was still there, unmoved.

“I would do it for you Calvin, as I would for any other good friend, but not because I had decided it was the right thing to do. And I'm sure I would enjoy it, you must realize that. It might hurt you to know. Best these things are put out on the table right away.”

“Never a truer word spoken. I knew I had chosen the right man,” Calvin replied, trying to lean forwards, but failing and instead spilling his drink into his lap.

Hortensia was still unmoved, yet she must have heard their conversation. Francis spoke again. “But I would not wish to do it here, in your own home. I would prefer she come with me to mine. I would feel ashamed here; it would be blasphemy, of sorts.”

“Sancho,” cried Calvin, “Where are you man?” brushing furiously at his belly.

He appeared, had been in the kitchen and arrived so quickly Francis was wondering if he, too, had been listening behind the door, all along. Francis looked up. Hortensia was gone.

“A drink, man. Can't you see I'm out.” Then a rye smile as he returned to the conversation. “You realize, Francis, if I know my little girl has been well done, it might turn me on, and I might be able to rise to the occasion once again. Do you know what I mean?”

Francis nodded as Sancho returned with a Vodka and soda.

“Let us have dinner. Sancho, call everyone to the table in five minutes,” Calvin said, finally able to reach the coffee table over his large protrusion. Sancho bowed and left. “Francis, I will explain to everyone that I am poorly, but that Hortensia will take my place and visit your ranch to take pictures and discover the other side of you. Come, pick her up tomorrow morning, but bring her back before nightfall. Promise me that.”

“I promise, Calvin. You have my word.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Hortensia had said little during dinner that evening, just formal responses, little flair. She agreed to her husband's wishes, had nodded in thanks to Francis. She would be ready at ten o'clock the following morning.

And now it was: A Mercedes parked under an apartment complex and a beautiful woman walking towards it. Hortensia got in, shook her head and frowned. Closed the door. The Mercedes sped away.

“What are you doing? Playing along with my husband's insane, drunken stupidity?”

“Hortensia. Two things: First, I think he has been planning this for many months, looking for someone to take his place beside you. He wants to give you and your son a second chance. He knows he will soon die, if he doesn't take his own life before then because he has no money left. And second, I had to warn you, he was going to have you followed.”

“What?”

“You would have been caught, coming to my place. Far better that, at least, for now, everything is out in the open.” Francis hesitated, then dared to continue. Had he not been so wrapped up in her, he might have noticed a black SUV some distance behind, that had been tailing him for a while. “You were up on the stairs last evening, you heard what your husband wants me to do. How does that make you feel?”

“Sick. I mean, I guess I can see his point of view, if that's all it is, but he could have come to me first and talked about his fears, instead of trying to sneak up on me like this.”

“Do you want to make love to me, again, today?”

“Yes, Cisco. I never want to leave your side. I love you inside me so much. Even with the thought of a twisted husband messing with my brain.” She became angry. “In fact, all the more reason to want you.”

Francis wondered out loud, “Should I tell him when I return you, that we went to bed, or shall I say I failed to seduce you?”

“Tell him. Screw him. That's what he wanted,” was her bold response, made more easy now that she was sitting beside Francis. Her mild mannered outer appearance was dissolving by the minute, being replaced by that impetuous nature from childhood, the one that she had almost forgotten she had: Her real character.

They turned off the main road some minutes later, down a dirt track. At the end, his gate opened on demand and they rode in.

Naked again; in the pool, then later, out on the deck for a beer. He had to tell her that his workers would be arriving at midday, now that Easter break had passed, so they would have to be presentable. She smiled, she was sitting in his lap. She kissed him, and they made love again. Lunch was served at one o'clock by two elderly women – his maid service. They were not from Juanxaca, Hortensia did not know them, nor the ground staff busily working outside. They were from a small village to the north. He had

explained that hiring from out of town was a security feature – the less the local bandidos could find out, the better.

Francis took Hortensia to his studio early that afternoon, a concrete building incredibly poised, half jutting out over a small canyon. A short walk led them through a rose garden, then along a gravel path by the side of the house and under some ancient walnut trees. Out to the left a huge lawn ran down towards a small, snaking creek bordering pasture and pine trees several hundred yards beyond.

On entering his studio, she was shocked, scared at first, to be standing, dangled over a precipice, the magnificent panorama of a cavernous valley before her exposed through a semi-circular glass facade. Nervously, she descended a short flight of stairs and looked around. There was a wrought-iron spiral staircase on her left in the far corner, rising to what seemed like a round, watch tower.

She turned. Saw on the back wall various pieces of art, vibrant and flowing, beckoning her as she approached as if they were wanting to meet her. She could see something of reality in each: a bird perhaps; a flower or a pair of lips; but mostly they were about form and movement, graceful yet haunting. Her host was, indeed, a complicated man.

Francis strolled across the large room, passing an old, beige settee with more canvasses leaning haphazardly against its back, to show her the beginnings of a piece she had inspired him to create. He was about to pull away the cover cloth from an easel when they heard the thundering whir and swish of a large mechanical object, approaching. It was not one of his machines, he knew the sound of every tractor and mower on his property. No, this was different. They went up and outside onto the porch.

At once Hortensia dropped to her knees, she knew exactly who was descending upon them. A helicopter from one of her father's companies was setting down on the lawn.

“It's my dad,” she said, scathingly. “Bet he just wants to stick his nose in and send the fear of god up us both.”

More intrigue, Francis thought, this just gets better and better. He watched as the chopper settled and then followed a small round bellied man with a short stride walking towards them, flanked by two larger creeps in black suits. The father, on the other hand, was casually dressed, as if he had just come off the golf course. He was Hispanic, dark, with beady eyes and a thin mustache.

Francis stepped lightly off the wide porch to ground level, Hortensia reluctantly following. A firm handshake and then introductions.

The father's name was Manuel. He said, "Lets walk, you have beautiful gardens and I just love the smell of roses." So they proceeded. "And you are an artist, a good one, no doubt, being able to live in such opulence. But why, I ask myself, are you spending your time with my married daughter?"

Francis replied. "It is perfectly legitimate. Her husband, a good friend of mine, who is not in good health, asked me if I would show her around my property."

"Good," the father replied, cupping a flower in his hands and breathing in through the nose. "Ah, yes. What a scent. It cannot lie. It is perfection. However, how can you say that Hortensia's husband is a good friend when you have only known him for a few of weeks?"

"I am the judge of my own friendships. He is well read, a highly educated man, and we have spent hours in deep conversation, discussing subjects that we are both fond of."

"Drunken conversations. Are you a drunk?" the father did not look up.

"Are you? What are you doing landing without permission on my property?"

"Because I can and I will, if I feel my daughter is in peril," he snapped back, as his goons raised hands to their chests.

"Well, now you know she is not. So you can leave."

“Not so fast. Did I insult you? Come here, my flower,” the father gestured to Hortensia, “Give your father a hug.”

Reluctantly, she slunk over.

“Can I offer you a drink. A whiskey perhaps, before you leave,” Francis suggested. “I have some nice Bourbon, or a few Scotch, single malts.”

“No thank you, I do not drink, or smoke,” said the father with an arm around his daughter's waist. “I'm in shipping, import and export, I can have what ever I want. There is nothing you can offer me that I cannot get myself. But if you think you can have my daughter without my permission, you will go to hell!”

“Manuel,” Francis replied intently, using his first name, “If you try landing on this property without my permission, ever again, you will go to hell. I could have picked your helicopter out of the sky with a single shot, but I am usually open to good will, in the first instance.”

“So, it has come to that, huh?”

“Not my doing,” Francis replied.

The father again, with some annoyance: “You invited my daughter here.”

“No, I did not. Her husband, Calvin, invited her here. And I must now return her home, so he can see all the video and pictures she has taken.”

“I'm watching you,” the father flinched. “You know who I am, Francois?”

“Yes: El Cannibal.”

“Good. Then we are on equal footing.”

“Not exactly. You are notorious. I am an enigma. You know nothing about me, my contacts or my past. Be prepared. You could lose a lot more than a couple of helicopters if you come up against me again. The only advice I offer is that I am passive and

trustworthy, unless a word is broken, or an incursion is mounted. Then I put on a different face, one you do not want to see.”

“Strong words. I like you, already. Can I invite you for lunch some day?” The father tipped his head in respect.

“I would be honored, although I would need a ride as I do not wish to be tracked or spotted by the Guardia. Anonymity is my front. I imagine you have my cell number, but don't use it. Just drop a note off at Paulito's Restaurant, with a number to call. I will use a disposable phone.”

The helicopter departed. Hortensia's mouth was agape. She could not believe what she had just heard. Two tough guys head to head. Her father, Manuel Peña, the third biggest drug lord in Mexico, and this supposed boyfriend of hers, standing up to him as if he were militia.

“Who the..? What the hell are you?” she began.

Francis shook his head. “I'm a salesman. I sold myself, that's what artists do. They concoct imaginary realities, so I gave him what he wanted. All bullshit.”

“But you accepted an invitation?”

“Sure. Will I go? Probably not. Far too dangerous. But my property and my well being is now protected. Psychology is the best form of security. And I took him for a ride, just as he was trying to do with me.”

Hortensia looked up at him. “You are more complicated than I had previously thought.”

“No... I see that my imagination has adversely affected you. Just forget it. I am who I was before your father interrupted us. That is the real, me.” He took her hand and they walked back to his house. “It would have been helpful, however, if you had told me your father was, El Cannibal.”

“Sorry, Cisco, I try to forget. Wouldn't you?”

“I guess.”

* * *

Back at the bar a couple of days later and Francis was in deep conversation with himself. Tania had been updated, though the name, “El Cannibal”, was not revealed to her. She was thrilled but now even more concerned. Francis had told Calvin his wife had been seduced willingly and that they had had intercourse. Now Francis was sitting back, wondering how it would all unfold. The revelation that Hortensia's father was a drug lord had lifted everything into a new dimension. His intriguing story was no longer just about a dying old man, there was history besides the current issue. He was sure. And he was going to find out, one way or another. This was just too good to let slide.

El Cannibal had never been convicted of anything, he was free as a bird. It was simply common knowledge in these parts that he was shipping cocaine from Columbia and had Meth Labs dotted about the place, like wives. Prosecutors were tired of trying to dig up evidence, or were simply paid not to. Either way, drugs were getting through with apparent ease...

“Tania interrupted his thoughts. “I know I shouldn't be giving you this, but here. It's a sealed envelope delivered by a large man with a gun concealed under a black suit.”

“Ah. The invitation..” Francis muttered, with a wicked grin. Now he knew where Enrique, the brother, fitted in. He was the snitch, the guardian, placed by Hortensia's father to keep a watchful eye. But why was she allowed to sit it out with this old man? And why had she been allowed to marry him in the first place? If El Cannibal had such a hold on his flock, there must have been a reason. Tina flicked her eyes at something behind him. He turned to see the now familiar sight of Calvin hobbling in.

“I must thank you, dear friend,” Calvin pulled him to one side with an arm around his shoulder. “Though Hortensia and I sleep in separate rooms, you know, I woke up with a stirring in the loins this morning, thanks to you no doubt.”

It was a disgusting image, one Francis hoped would never pop into his mind, ever again. Nevertheless, apparently no hard feelings, and time to move on. Conchita was off that day, Jasmina was up front and willing. Francis joined Calvin with a rum and coke. He had eaten a large breakfast, rather than his usual cup of coffee, had been up late the night before in his studio, had missed supper, so could handle something a little stiffer.

“How long have you known Sancho?” Francis asked, dipping his toe in.

“Sancho.., my man. Yes, since Hortensia first came to work for us. He was recommended by my predecessor, as was Hortensia. They had both been vetted by the Embassy and given clearance.”

Something was beginning to take shape. Imagination was becoming virtual. Francis was loving it. So far he had locked on to a few seeming truths, now things were becoming shadily transparent – if gray could be described as such – but then truth was never black or white.

“I guess Sancho was hired on as a driver.”

“Quite right. You are a man of many talents, Francis, intuition I must add to your list. Why do you ask?”

“Because valets are unusual in the lower echelons of a diplomatic corp. So he was your driver, originally.”

Calvin nodded, with his familiar flair for suspense. “Yes. I had long distances to travel and dislike flying, so often he would drive me to Guatemala for a high level meeting, occasionally even up to the States if I had a conference to attend.”

“And Hortensia?”

“She would not usually come. Calvito was just a baby, you know. Another driver would take her out shopping. There were plenty on standby for wives. Once, when I was away for a couple of weeks, she ran down to that little country on the Caribbean coast.., what's it called..? Belize, that was it. Said she didn't like it, but it was an experience.”

“CD plates, you lucky guys, no customs officials to deal with,” Francis uttered, now convinced, “And me, harassed at the border over a tube of toothpaste or a stale sandwich.”

“Yes. One of the perks,” Calvin smiled.

* * *

Francis wandered back through his life, as one does before a major confrontation. He was thinking about parties he had attended, hosted by the Mayor of Juanxaca, a good friend of his whom he had met many years ago during shooting contests at the local firing range. They were the same age: Armando Candela, a young buck who had succeeded after his predecessor had been murdered in a drive-by shooting. No one had ever been convicted. At his parties, Francis would invariably be introduced to one foreign business man or another, a new diplomat or government official, and over the years he had compiled quite a list of high level acquaintances, some even, friends.

He might have called up Phil, a solid drinking buddy from the DEA, or one of a few contacts he had at The French Embassy, but that would have been boring. Besides, this was his story, he had no hard evidence, in reality just a hunch. He wanted to make the connection, himself, to be there, to feel the thrill, unlock the mystery. It was obvious to him now that the cartel had been using diplomatic vehicles to run drugs between Central America and the US, straight through Mexico, unimpeded. Was Hortensia involved willingly, or had she been used by her father? Francis wanted to know, because he liked her so much. He was hoping she was innocent in all of this.

He phoned the number in the envelope with a cheap prepaid phone from one of the stores down town. Cartel numbers would undoubtedly be eavesdropped upon by foreign and domestic agencies. His call was acknowledged... Then told that a vehicle would pick him up tomorrow morning at Paulitos Restaurant, eleven o'clock.

So there he was at the bar, just after 10.45 that very morning, bursting with anticipation. Tina screaming bloody murder at him, when Calvin wanders in.

“Looks like you've discovered who her father is,” Calvin quipped.

“The other way around. He discovered me.”

“That sounds like him.”

“Are we both invited to Manuel's residence?”

“So it would seem,” replied Calvin, as a dark SUV was pulling up in the parking lot.

Francis again. “Any idea why?”

“Control,” Calvin suggested. “He likes to get to the bottom of everything, just as he likes to get to the top.”

A two hour journey took them down through the winding foothills of the Sierra towards Veracruz and the coast. They turned off the highway before town, took a side road, then pulled up in front of a large, intricately decorated steel gate, armed guards patrolling. The gate opened.

They were frisked on entry to El Cannibal's huge, fresco adorned mansion. Up the rapturous, curving staircase they were then lead out onto a mosaic balcony with unprecedented mountain views. There he sat, Manuel Peña, surrounded by girls. He was being given a manicure, while another was massaging his back. With a wave of his hand they were dismissed.

“Welcome, friends. Please be seated. What would you like to drink?”

“Coffee, black, no sugar,” Francis replied.

“Good. Well I know what Calvin would like. And it's not coffee.” The host howled with laughter. “Bring him a vodka on ice.”

A nearby waiter picked up the order and disappeared.

Manuel Peña turned and faced his audience. “Calvin, you

should be dead by now. But I applaud your effort to find a suitable partner who can take care of my daughter.” He then raised a pistol from his lap and shot Calvin through the head.

Francis was not expecting that but it seemed to fit. Ears were ringing from the thunderous outburst as he stared coldly at Manuel.

“You are next,” said his host, about to raise the Glock, again.

A troop of body guards swooped in to remove the remains and clean up the mess. El Cannibal held his gaze, Glock poised.

“No, Manuel. You need me to take care of your grandchild and your daughter.”

“Anyone could do that, Enrique has been up to the task for years,” was the swift reply, as the Glock zeroed in on his forehead.

Francis leaned forwards. “You know I have contacts, but I have not bled the whole story to them. Each knows a bit, that is the chain I have built. I offer you the opportunity to consider my position and yours. Should you act out of line then my links will fall, and you with them. You don't think I came here a pussy?”

Manuel sat back. “Francois, my friend, indeed you are an enigma. Weaponless, yet armed to the teeth. Can I not ask you to become one of mine? Fill a much needed gap in my arsenal? Would you consider working for me and then I would happily give my consent to you taking Hortensia for your own.”

“What would you have me do? I was a lawyer for a time in Europe.”

“Lie. Can you do that?”

“Sure. Doesn't every lawyer?”

“Brilliant. So true,” Manuel responded. “But just one question: You are wealthy. Why would you consider taking on a job you don't need?”

“I'm bored. And I want your daughter.”

“Is that why you came here, accepted my invitation?”

Francis raised an eyebrow. “Of course. Why else?”

“How can I trust you, if you are a good liar.”

“You can't. But neither can I trust you. So we are even.”

Manuel Peña smiled and sat up. Placed the Glock on a chair beside him. “I ask for permission to land on your property anytime I wish.”

“Agreed. And I ask that you never tell Hortensia that I am working for you.”

“Agreed. Let us eat and seal our arrangement with some wine.”

“I thought you didn't drink..?”

“So I lied, as you suspected of me.”

A black SUV dropped Francis off in Paulito's parking lot that same afternoon. He walked in, up to the bar. Tina was staring at him.

“You're alive. I honestly never expected to see you again,” she said, with a loving smile. “Beer?”

“No. Tequila.”

“Oh.., it's like that, is it?”

Much to Tina's disappointment, he was not going to spill anymore beans. He was bottling up. She understood, of course, that anything which might have transpired at a residence with giant and ugly bodyguards would undoubtedly have to be zipped. She could tell Francis was troubled, that he was nearing his depth. She worried for him, it was all she could do. He had been there for her, a young American woman, when she was thinking of marrying Paulito; had advised her, helped them expand his tiny shack into the busy restaurant it was today. She would do anything for him.

“Hey, Tina. Everything is fine,” he reassured her, “But I may not be around so often in the coming weeks. I’m going to be tied up. New developments on the horizon.” He pulled out his wallet and extracted a business card. “Call this guy for me, will you? His name is Phil. Tell him to meet me in The City on the corner of Avenida Suarez and Makin, noon tomorrow.”

She looked at the card. It had an embossed insignia with an eagle flush in the middle and a title above: Drug Enforcement Administration. She looked up at him, her lips pressed tightly together, trying to hold back a tear. Shook her head, then nodded.

CHAPTER FIVE

A couple of days later and Francis, working in his studio, was interrupted by a phone call. He hated being disturbed, usually left his phone in the house, but knew he was going to be called and that it would be important.

“Cisco,” Hortensia's desperate voice was pleading, “You have to come to me, something terrible has happened. I need you. It is alright, Enrique will let you in.”

Francis did not need to ask. He knew. Said he would be there within the hour. Upon arrival, he rode the elevator and was greeted by Enrique. A quiet gesture of appreciation from the younger man and a toss of the head, as if to suggest Francis go upstairs. He did so and wandered out into the garden. Hortensia was there, kneeling with Calvito on the mat, playing with his dinosaurs. She looked up, a tear running down her cheek. Enrique was behind Francis, then passed him and knelt beside Calvito. It was a message. Hortensia touched Enrique's chin affectionately, then stood up. She walked over to Francis and lead him downstairs. She took him to her bedroom and sat on the end of the bed.

“My husband is not coming home, ever again. I got a phone call. He has disappeared. I know who has done this... my father.” Then she burst into tears.

“My god, I'm so sorry.”

Francis sat down, an arm around her. He let it all come out... she hadn't even started. He would be patient.

“What am I to do? I have no money, his accounts will dry up, his income will be frozen?” She looked up, pleading for a solution.

Francis stroked her hair and said, ”What about this penthouse. Can't you sell it?”

Hortensia responded quickly, “It has a mortgage. I will get nothing.”

“No endowment policy upon death?”

“But he is not dead. Unless they find his body.”

“True.”

She took his head in her hands, while fighting back the tears. “Cisco, I know that our relationship is only an affair, but.., but I have no one else to turn to. I refuse to ask my father for assistance. Can you help me?”

“Of course I can.”

Hortensia flung her arms around him and gave her tears their moment of indulgence. She wept, but it was not in sorrow, it was relief. She was in the arms of a man she could so easily fall in love with; she felt safe and secure for the first time. Not like in the arms of that dreadful man, her father, who only ever hugged her if he wanted something. It was his doing, he knew his daughter would have to come to 'daddy' for help. Well, she would show him!

“You can come and stay with me for a while,” Francis pulled her from him, “See how you like it. We can discover each other. Maybe it will work. Who knows?”

“Dear Cisco, you are a dream come true,” she touched his cheek. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. You and Calvito are welcome.”

“And Enrique?”

“Of course. He is your brother and, therefore, as if mine. What of your mother?”

Hortensia thought a while. Then replied. “I don't think she will want to go out there, she has family here in town.”

“Never mind. Any time she wants to visit, we will send a taxi for her, or one of my staff can collect her.”

“Cisco, where did you come from?” Hortensia was overwhelmed. “It's like you were sent to me by God. An angel, come to support me in the darkest moment of my life.”

“You could thank your husband for that.”

“... I suppose.” Then, “What will my father think. I mean, he might get angry and try and take me from you, or even hurt you. Do you think it's wise for me to stay at your house?”

Francis had already prepared an answer. “Your father is no fool. If he did this then he wants you to be with me. He knows you won't turn to him.”

“Well.., I guess.”

Francis lifted her chin and said, “How do you think little Calvito is going to handle this?”

She shrugged. “I don't know...” And the tears began again.

The next day a large truck was being unloaded in front of his house. Francis was directing the operation, Hortensia and Calvito, meanwhile, playing with the gushing fountain. Once everything had been moved inside, Francis called his staff to the front door and introduced Hortensia as a long lost friend, who would be staying for a while. He expected them to give her their utmost hospitality and respect her every wish, including Calvito's.

His maids were all over the little boy in a flash, and Hortensia held back, smiling with appreciation. Though just a few hours had passed, she was so sure that this was where she was supposed to be.

Francis took Enrique to one side.

“Keep your mouth shut,” Francis warned. “I like you, don't get me wrong. But we are here to see your sister in good health. That is our only obligation. Your father will have told you of our arrangement. Hortensia must never know, until I say so.”

“Don Francis, I am honored to be in your residence, and thank you for helping her. I am at your disposal, anytime. You can trust me to be in your pocket.”

“Good,” Francis responded. “Are you comfortable being a valet?”

“Si, Señor.”

“Then get acquainted with my maids. I will tell them that you are Hortensia's personal assistant. But, do so with diplomacy, because my girls have been working here for many years. Make friends with them but do not tell them you two are related.”

Enrique bowed. He was impressed with his new employer, was proud to offer his loyalty to a man who would sacrifice his safety for Hortensia.

That evening dinner was served. Hortensia had, for the first time in many years, not been involved in its preparation. Francis told her while his maids were present, that she could invade the kitchen anytime she felt like it, that his house was hers. The maids giggled, but it was a healthy sign of acknowledgment. It was how his staff always reacted to new duties or changes in routine. They left for their quarters, would return as always to clear the table before retiring for the evening.

Francis had reassured Hortensia, and she was grateful. Calvito was busy with his broccoli, Enrique ever attentive, when Francis beckoned her to come and sit on his lap. He gave her a key to his Ford Ranger, told her it was hers and that she could give it to

Enrique to drive whenever he needed. She kissed him. He was so respectful, it was hard to describe; he attended to her needs just as a lifelong friend might do, he wasn't in the least bit macho or aloof.

“You will need an income,” he continued. “I will have my bank deposit a monthly figure into your account. How much would you like?”

That night they slept together. Calvito in a bed close by. The next morning a huge breakfast spread awaited them in the dining room. While they were tucking in that familiar sound of thumping announced the arrival of El Cannibal. Hortensia looked at Francis. He was not surprised at the awful fear he saw in her expression.

“Don't be concerned, sweetheart,” he said, “I have to respect your father. If I am to become your partner I will need his approval. He phoned me earlier while you were bathing Calvito. I gave him permission to land. Give him your permission to intrude occasionally, and we can have a life together. I promise you that.”

She shrugged. Saw reason in his words and took them in. A few minutes later and Enrique was at the dining room door.

“... Don Manuel.”

The father entered, strode towards Calvito, who leaped up.

“Granpapa, te amo,” he cried leaping into the ogre's arms.

“My little soldier. How are you doing? Do you like your new home?”

“Yes. But where is my papa?”

“He was old, and you know that old things have to die. Just like trees, or frogs or even roses. Do not be afraid. Be brave. You are young and have a life time ahead of you. Your mother and Señor Francis, here, will be your guide.” He kissed his grandchild and lowered him to his chair.

“My papa has gone?”

“We don't know. But do not be afraid.” Manuel Peña looked up, saw grim faces... shrugged and said, “You can't keep it locked up forever.” He sat down, was served instantly by Enrique. “Now, tell me, Hortensia, how does it feel to be here, under his wing?” pointing a knife at Francis.

She gave in, reluctantly. “It is fantastic.”

“Wonderful,” her father exclaimed. “I give you my blessing. Treat my daughter with respect and I will have nothing to complain about.”

Francis nodded.

Hortensia felt confused, but said nothing.

“Now, you and Calvito leave us for a moment. Go out and play in the garden. I need to discuss matters with Francis. He is new to me, and you are my daughter. We need to get acquainted. Enrique, you, too.”

Manuel Peña was sitting opposite Francis. He stretched out his shoulders, gave them each a turn, then began. He wanted Francis to talk to the Mayor. He needed to acquire a central block in town that was for sale. It was within a residential zone, that was the obstacle. He passed Francis a document authorizing him to act on behalf of a company he owned, together with the Land's Department plans, explaining that he did not want to be named in the transaction. Francis was to convince the Mayor that the buyer could run a business from that location. What business? A bordello. Manuel Peña had many clients to whom he would offer favors. Drugs and alcohol were not enough, to make the best impression young girls were the ultimate sell. It had to be in a secluded setting, but close enough to the town center, run as if a hotel, with bar and restaurant, so as not to attract attention.

Francis suggested that the property could remain residential, if his guests were not paying for rooms, that there was no need to force the Mayor's hand – although, why they were not, would have to involve a slight, magician's touch. The only problem would be

the acquisition of a liquor license. He said he could handle it. Really not a problem. While behind his response, Francis realized that Manuel likely knew of his friendship with the Mayor.

The matter was settled. Francis would receive five percent of the transaction on completion. He walked Manuel out onto his veranda to admire the scenery. They saw Hortensia and Calvito talking to his ground staff, in the herb garden, pinching and sniffing everything they could grab with great enthusiasm.

Manuel spoke. "You have a wonderful place, here, Francis. I can see you have the potential to make my daughter very happy. Make me happy and this world of yours will not be spoiled."

A few days later, Hortensia's mother came over, eager to spend time with her grandson. Francis took the opportunity to invited Hortensia to lunch at Paulito's. She accepted. Tina was gushing when they parked themselves at her bar and explained their new circumstances. First she had to introduce herself to Hortensia, then to tell her how special Francis was. Hortensia was surprised at how freely Tina spoke, but thankful, gaining much from her outpourings and giving her renewed confidence. Francis smiled, somewhat embarrassed, excused himself and went to a table outside, to meet a couple of friends.

"Hortensia. Francis is like my brother. I love him to bits," Tina explained. "There is no one more beautiful and trustworthy on this planet. You are the luckiest girl alive."

Hortensia nodded. "I kind of got that impression. Thanks for making it fact. At times I feel like it's all a dream."

"Do you love him?"

"Well..," Hortensia squirmed, "You know, maybe.., it's kind of too early to say. But I'm falling that way, for sure."

Tina leaned forwards. "I know how he feels about you, just by the way he described you, and he pegged you. You are as he said, intelligent and gorgeous, and I wish you both luck."

* * *

Francis was in his studio one morning. Hortensia had gone into town to visit her mother with little Calvito. But he was not painting, he was thinking, staring out across the canyon.

His imagination had seen it all coming. Perhaps that was why Calvin had had to die: Lack of imagination. He was now opening his mind to the future. All he had to do was believe and it would come true, he was sure. He was waiting for Manuel Peña to step in, knew he would, one day, and turn his thoughts into reality. He had given Tina a cheap little prepaid phone, had told her to keep it on her at all times. If she got a dropped call from him she would know what to do. He hated himself for getting her involved, but he knew he could trust her, there was no one else he could.

Time to pay the Mayor a visit. Was he going to confide in Armando? It was a tricky question. If he did, then he would be able to do the deal with relative ease. However, involving the Mayor in such a scheme could spawn negative consequences. Could he really trust Armando not to be tied to any one of a number of gangs in the neighborhood? He had gotten his position suspiciously, so the rumors whispered: young, inexperienced, and no real challenge mounted against his electoral bid.

Francis smiled to himself. No... he could not trust Armando. Besides, it was not in keeping with his developing mystery. Intrigue had to be at the center of it all, otherwise what would be the point of living it? He would not use bribery, he had a position to uphold. Nor would he use friendship as “palanca”, too cheap and tacky for his taste. It was going to have to be by legal manipulation, that was that.

He called Armando on his private cell phone. Told him he had a proposition: A business friend from abroad was interested in acquiring a property, but foresaw some difficulties and had hired him to see it through. He suggested lunch in The Plaza. Armando accepted.

They sat at a small table outside. It was cool, had rained the

night before, but it was preferable to being huddled among others inside the tightly packed restaurant. They chatted for a while, catching up, nothing of any depth. Then, having finished a small lunch, Francis opened his briefcase. A holding company called, Amity Trust Inc., registered in Panama, was interested in buying the residential block on Calle St. Miguel. They wanted to turn it into a regional office of sorts, which would bring considerable cash flow to the town. Their line of business was in beauty products, they owned various brands and were actively spreading out through Central America. The board members were mostly European.

Armando smiled. He was not smelling anything fishy, he was thinking how his friend was going to wriggle a business into a residential zone. Francis continued: No transactions would take place, no business would be conducted on site, no signs out front; it would simply be accommodation for perhaps twenty or so employees, more like a hotel than an office. So, indeed, it would appear to remain a residential building. There would be free dining facilities for the employees and therefore alcohol might be present. However, not a public restaurant, no money being exchanged.

Armando nodded. He could see the loop through which his friend was trying to wriggle. If true, then a realistic possibility. He said he would speak to his inspectors... but his sentence was cut short.

“Cisco! Hi,” said a beautiful woman, approaching. She bent down and kissed Francis tightly on the lips. Armando thought he recognized her, knew so many people in town, but couldn't place her.

“Well, well. The lone, buck rabbit has finally been snared,” Armando stated coolly. “Now, why didn't you tell me you had met a woman. Am I not the friend I thought I was?”

“Armando. Don't be silly, I was going to tell you, but she got here first. Her name is Hortensia, the daughter of a clock-maker, originally from Veracruz,” Francis said, quickly.

She smiled at them both, but her grin was inspired by the clock-maker. Armando then, introducing himself, having barely survived that incredibly persuasive smile.

“Cisco,” she said, “I didn't know you knew The Mayor. You are still such a mystery, but that makes for a wonderful journey, don't you think?” Then... “Sorry, am I interrupting something?”

“Not at all,” Armando replied. “Actually we had just finished our little matter, so you must join us. I still have ten minutes before my car arrives.”

Later, having returned separately from town, Hortensia found Francis sitting at a grand piano in the living room. He was playing something soft and sad, she didn't know what, but loved its sweet tones. She walked up behind him, wondering if he was sad, slid her hands up over his shoulders and gently rubbed them. He did not stop playing, he knew those hands and had caught her perfume before they had reached him. On finishing the piece, he turned, opened his knees and let her slide in. Gave her a hug and kissed her ear. She was only an inch or two taller than he, sitting down.

She finally pulled away. Took a few steps and planted herself in an arm chair.

Said, “Javier planted my hydrangea in your garden last week. I hope you don't mind?”

He shook his head, looking warmly at her, slowly a smile emerging.

“It's got a bud coming up, a flower, I'm sure. I explained to Javier what you had told me about the acidity of the soil and he said he would take care of it. I'm really excited. It's like a sign. If its blossoms pink then it will be telling me how I truly feel. Don't you think?”

He nodded agreeably, though he was sad. He was lying to her and he did not like that. He could not take their relationship forwards with dishonesty all around. It was hurting him. He was

waiting... had to, the future was not his to rush. Little bits of a puzzle he, himself, had designed, still missing.

“Cisco. I have so many uncles and cousins, brothers and nephews. But you, you never talk about your family. Do you have any? Do they visit often? I want to meet them.”

“Yes, Hortensia. I have a couple of aunts in France and a niece or two, though married. That is all,” he responded. “My father passed when I was quite young and I was an only child. My mother died of Leukemia several years later, just after I had finished my education. I worked for several years as a lawyer before moving here. My aunts will not visit, they are too elderly and stuck in their ways. But we might visit them someday.”

“Oh.., France. Oh my god! Really? You would take me there? To Paris? To the Champs Elysees?”

“I hope so. I hope our friendship grows into something bigger, and if it does then I will not hold back.”

Hortensia was squirming in the chair. She grabbed a cushion and hugged it, longingly. “How do you say, 'I love you' in French?” she giggled, childishly.

He smiled and said, “Je t'aime,” half believing himself.

The giggle subsided. She felt the words coming from his lips pouring into her veins like a powerful anesthetic, washing her with a fuzzy sense of warmth. “It's so beautiful. What a lovely way of saying it. Have you ever said it before?”

“No, Hortensia. I've never been close to saying it, to anyone before.”

His phone rang. Broke into a somewhat awkward moment. He was thankful. Took the call, it was from Armando. He nodded, spoke little, then smiled. The deal was done. He would receive the permit in a 'Mexican month', but he was warned that there would be regular visits from the authorities to ensure that everything was as declared: above board. He hung up. Another piece of the unfolding drama had dutifully emerged.

“Who was that?” Hortensia inquired.

“Armando, The Mayor. Inviting me to the range this weekend. Would you like to come?”

“No. I hate guns.”

Francis got up. “Sure, I understand. I'm not fond of them either, it is just an unpleasant necessity. And, anyway, I go down there more for the comradery than the shooting practice.”

Another lie. He hated himself, but what could he do? Just a few more weeks, then surely the end would be in sight and he would no longer need to lie to her, anymore.

That Saturday, Hortensia left for town. She was half way there when she realized she had left her purse behind. She swore and turned around. As she was rounding the bend on approach to the dirt road and the ranch, a black SUV spun out and flashed by. Something unpleasant suddenly clicked in her head, became a cancer and then exploded. That was one of her father's cars. The Mayor had his own, government plates. What was going on?

She reached the house and asked Enrique if Francis was home. Enrique told her he had gone to the range and wouldn't be back till late afternoon. Hortensia phoned Francis. He was in a car, she could tell, and he was on his way to the range, he told her.

No! She was thinking as she hung up. No, he is not. He's on his way to my father's house... I know it. But why is he lying to me? Cisco, please don't hurt me. Don't destroy us now, when we are so close... she begged to herself.

That evening, she asked him about his day. Enrique had covered for him, there was no one left to trust. And if her brother was lying to her then her father had to be involved. Francis had not returned in a black SUV. In fact he had walked from the gate, he told her. He liked to walk. What was going on? She asked Francis about his meeting with The Mayor, what they had been discussing. He replied that he had some land tax issues that needed resolving. His ranch was not a business, but that he was thinking of planting a

stand of teak. It was the truth, though borrowed from an earlier conversation he'd had with Armando. It made him feel a little better about himself. Truth, in a round about sort of way.

She was not satisfied.

Late at night she got out of bed. Said she was thirsty and was going to get a cold drink. But she did not. She went to the library, where she knew she would find a briefcase. She rummaged through it and extracted a few papers. Spread them out on a table and examined their contents. Then a hand to her mouth, to stifle a cry. Amity Trust Holding Company was one of her father's businesses. She hurriedly packed the briefcase and went to the kitchen. She sat down and cried softly, tears dripping down the crack between her breasts and soaking into her nightie. Pain was creeping through her body, not physical... brutal, conscious recognition. Francis was working secretly for her father. Was that why her father had blessed their union? Had Francis made some sick deal to get his hands on her? *Please, don't let it be true...*

The following day she went into town, dropped Calvito off at her mother's apartment and headed north. Tina was shocked to see her arriving by herself, at once noticing her swollen eyes and the agony inscribed on her face.

“God, Hortensia.., what is it?”

Paulito appeared from the kitchen door, knew at once who she must be. He came over.

“Tina.., I have no one left to trust. Please be honest with me.”

“I will, of course, if only because you are my best friend's best friend.”

Hortensia brushed away a tear. “But that's who it's all about. Francis.”

“If it is he,” Paulito spoke, “Then you are in good hands.”

“No!” Hortensia stammered, “He.., he is lying to me.”

“How can you be sure?” Tina urged.

“He is working for my father. But he is pretending he is not. I know, believe me... I know my father, he is a dangerous man. And I'm so afraid I'm going to lose Francis, or that he is just pretending to love me. I don't know what's happening.”

Tina was suddenly putting it altogether and it was not a pretty thing: The DEA; the cheap phone; the bottled up heap of beans. She cursed Francis for being such a nosy, imaginative fool. She looked at Paulito. He nodded in agreement, he knew what she wanted to say.

“Hortensia,” Tina said, looking sharply back at her. “I have something to tell you, but you must keep it to yourself, for the sake of Francis and both your lives.”

“You know something?”

“Yes. But I can't tell you everything because even I don't know the full story or the ending.”

“What? Please tell me,” Hortensia cried.

Tina looked into her blood shot eyes, trying to offer trust. “Francis is working with the US Department of Drug Enforcement. Not with your father... who I imagine is in the drug business.”

“Yes. He is, El Cannibal”

“Oh, SHIT!” Tina exclaimed. “Damn you, Francis. What the hell are you playing at?”

Hortensia stared back at Tina. “Why? What is he doing?”

“He is setting a trap for your father. That would be my guess. He has left me instructions to make a call when he is ready. That's all I know. But I know something else. Francis is falling in love with you, so don't be hard on him, you can trust him, even if it appears he is lying to you.”

“But why? He doesn't need to lie to me.”

“For your safety, I suspect. I'm assuming you don't like

your father.”

“I hate him.”

“Then trust Francis. Wish him luck. He'll be back for you. I know he hates himself for lying to you. That's the man he is. Love him back. He needs you.”

“I.., I just don't know how... how I can,” Hortensia stumbled over words.

“Yes you do. You are weak right now, with all that has happened. You need to be strong... For him.”

“Tina.., Paulito. It's so weird. You are the only people I can trust, yet I've only know you for a few weeks.”

“We trust you, too,” Paulito said. “What my wife has just told you could kill you both. But we have faith in you. Your love for Francis will be the proof of that.”

Hortensia left in a muddle but feeling much better. And it was odd. Remarkably she had suddenly discovered she was in love. It had happen all on its own. Tina had told her. That's all it had taken to fall in love: to be told. And now she knew it. She was scared, but had to be strong. Tina had told her. What an amazing woman, Hortensia thought. Now she had met one of his family, as she had always wanted to do: the sister Francis had never had. She vowed to stand by him, would go down with him, if it came to that. She would keep his secret.

On returning to the ranch, she and Calvito took a stroll through the gardens. She was heading for the hydrangea. As she turned a corner in the path she gasped. There it was, her little bud had grown, had begun to spread, wide, and each little floret was opening, beginning to show off, warm and pink.

CHAPTER SIX

The call came a week later. Tina picked up the little phone, but it stopped ringing. A tingling of suspense rose up her back and lodged itself in the nape of her neck, invading a dry throat and flushing her cheeks. She reached for a business card on a high shelf, flicked it over and dialed the number.

“Philip Mason,” the smooth American voice came through.

“Hi. It's Tina, again.”

“Yes, Tina.”

“It's time... I guess you know what to do?”

“Yes. And I hope we can meet up when this is all over. I'd like to thank you, personally, on behalf of all of us here., including the big man upstairs.”

Francis and Hortensia were lying in bed, having made love, early the following morning. She was apprehensive, he seemed preoccupied, had not performed with the same intensity as usual. She looked over at Calvito. He was blissfully out of it, sound

asleep.

“I have to go away for a few days,” Francis spoke up.

She froze, knew it was coming, whatever it was. “Where?” she asked, with hidden terror.

“Belize. Have you ever been?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Calvin sent me down there some years ago when he was away in Guatemala. He said the shopping was great.., but it was shit.”

Francis was relieved. He knew now that she was innocent in all of this. He rolled over and gave her a big hug. He was hoping it would not be the last one he would ever give her. So was she. He got out of bed, packed a small overnight case and got dressed. A suit, she thought.., had never seen him in one. He left soon after in his Mercedes. Though she wanted to cry she had to hold back the tears. Enrique, whom she could no longer trust, was standing next to her on the veranda as she stood and watched Francis depart.

He drove to the Municipal airport and took a commuter flight in a Cessna Caravan to Mexico City. There he was picked up by a US Embassy vehicle. A young man sat next to him, a chauffeur up front. They talked. His companion was in the Consular Department, was to deliver a sensitive package on entry to the United States. Francis did not really need to explain his presence, they were both working for the same man, but he felt obliged. At least it made the whole thing legitimate. His mission was to meet with bankers in Houston; the truth, no less.

They took a short break for lunch, then back on the road. They would hit the Brownsville border at nine in the evening, barring any traffic snarls. The queue was short when they finally arrived, only a few city blocks to Mexican Immigration and the exit ramp. Francis checked his phone, being careful not to draw attention to himself. It was still on. Passports stamped, their vehicle finally rolled forwards. It was dark outside; having left the

bright lights of the city they were now suspended between the US and Mexico on a concrete bridge over the Rio Grande, only vehicles to illuminate their surroundings.

After half an hour of crawling, a split in lanes gave them a chance to break free, speed up and take a winding empty route off to the right, a lane all to themselves. Seconds later they were approaching a US immigration booth. They were waved through with little fuss, just the standard formalities. Then Francis caught sight of Phil, standing to one side by a door. Suddenly, confusion. Some shouting, hand signals and rapid movement... four or five officers with automatic rifles blocking the vehicle's path and ordering the chauffeur to shut down the engine.

“Shit!” exclaimed Francis' companion. “Now what?”

“Just stay calm, Jackson. It may be a simple routine.”

Francis got out, arms in the air. Phil came over, brought them down, shouting. “It's okay. He's with me.”

They quickly stepped aside, ducking into a nondescript, three storey building, off-white with a few rows of tinted, rectangular windows. They veered left, Phil leading the way, down a blank and lifeless corridor passed a few large, transparent partitions each with a number of seated officials on the other side. Everything was a musty, pale green except for their uniforms which were beige. Another turn, this time to the right, and they were ascending a flight of stairs. At the top Phil chose the first door on the left, entered and beckoned Francis to take a seat at the table, the only piece of furniture in the stark and dingy room.

Phil said he'd e back in a second and withdrew. A minute later he reappeared, briefcase in one hand and two plastic mugs of coffee held precariously in the other. He sat down opposite Francis.

“Outstanding,” Phil was shaking his head. “Have you got any sense at all, in that brain of yours?”

Francis laughed. “No, just a wayward imagination.”

“You imagined all this beforehand?”

“Not exactly. But I knew it had to end something like this.”

The shake became a nod while a broad grin appeared. Phil said, “As soon as your phone 'pinged' Brownsville South Tower, we moved in. We'd been tracking your progress all day.”

A few minutes later and an officer entered. With a salute he said, “Loaded, sir. At least 50 kilos, and we haven't even stripped it to the chassis.”

He departed.

Phil reached a hand out across the table. Patted it gently. “We had a deal.”

“Indeed. I will testify to the murder of Calvin Willis by Manuel Peña, and to the transportation of drugs in diplomatic vehicles across borders under his authority.”

“Thank you, Francis. Then, we will keep our side of the bargain. The President has signed off on it. You and Hortensia will be given permanent residency in the United States, for your own protection, and in thanks for your insane imagination,” he chuckled.

“El Cannibal..?” Francis queried.

Phil looked at his watch. “Should be in a patrol car heading for jail, as we speak,” he replied.

His phone rang. He picked it up.

“Yes... What..? Damn... You sure..? Well, what the hell are you doing on the phone to me... Get your sorry ass down there and sort it out.” He hung up. “Shit! Apparently, El Cannibal slipped away. They lost him. We intercepted a phone call to Peña's residence from a US carrier, your vehicle was being spotted on this side. They saw me take you in, but without handcuffs.”

The agonizing truth hit Francis hard. He was on his feet. A screaming realization tearing through his brain. Destiny was a bastard, after all. And now what? Where to begin to stitch time back together again, the story in tatters, continuity stymied, this was a total fuck up!

Phil shrugged and said, “Guess your imagination hadn't seen this coming, Francis. But we'll do all we can to get him tied down.”

“It's not him I'm worried about. It's Hortensia.” Francis was pacing.

“Right, of course. I hadn't thought – ”

“Look. I've got to go back down there, now! But not through immigration. Manuel has eyes and ears everywhere: The Guardia, Customs, the military – So. I need to get back into Mexico unannounced. I have to get Hortensia and her boy out. She's the first person Manuel will track down now he knows I'm involved. Can you provide me some government support to get back?”

“Of course. But I'm coming, too, buddy. It's kind of my fault, in a way.”

“Glad to have you on board.” Francis nodded with furrowed brow. “So how do we get in? A chopper?”

“No. Can't have our department or chain of command implicated. This has to be a renegade op', under the radar with no hardware.” Phil paused and raised an eyebrow. A wide smile.

“How, then?” Francis groaned.

“Same way illegal immigrants come in. We swim.”

“Shit, Phil. I hate swimming in the dark. What about all those gators?”

“I'll bring along a couple of well armed Seals. It'll be fine.”

Francis huffed. “Okay. We've got to move fast.”

“Sure, I'm on it. We'll leave within the hour.” Phil grabbed his phone and raised a hand. Spoke again. “Where are we going? Your property is probably being watched. Manuel will expect you to return for her.”

“Tina's place. She'll put us up,” Francis replied.

* * *

They drove all night. Two Navy Seals, Phil and Francis, in a long blue van with rows of empty seats. They took it in turns to drive, crashing out in the back to dry out and get some sleep. Day break and they were parking up at Paulito's.

Tina came running out across the gravel, tears streaming down her face. "God, Francis. I thought you were going to die," she said, hugging him. "I got your message on the phone, you stupid, damn idiot. You know the pain you have put us through..., including Hortensia."

"What do you mean?"

"She came to us one day. She knew you were lying to her, thought you were working for her father."

"Oh, shit," Francis muttered, rubbing his face. "Is she okay?"

"She came here a mess. Left steady on her feet. I think she understood."

"Thanks Tina, you're a jewel," he turned to his companions, "Hey, this is Phil," he pointed at a round faced man with shoulder length, wispy gray hair. "And these two guys are anonymous but they have big hearts and a grand sense of humor."

Tina reached up and gave Phil a hug. "Thanks for taking care of him."

They went inside. Paulito had pulled together three tables, then came out with a huge breakfast for everyone, even though the restaurant was not open, as yet. He didn't hold back: Sausages, bacon, hash, eggs, refried beans and tortillas; plates were loaded. They tucked in, they were famished.

Phil asked for a bible, but they did not have one. Paulito produced his beloved cross wrapped in beads with Jesus Christ impaled. Phil said that would do. He told them to place their hands upon it, hastily gave them clearance, asking them to swear

allegiance to the United States of America. They did. Then they were told what had happened.

Tina, with a hand slowly slipping from her mouth, asked, “What's the plan?”

All eyes went to Francis.

“Get that imagination in gear, lad. We need to make a move and quickly,” Phil snapped.

“Are you sure,” Tina pulled back. “Hasn't his imagination caused enough damage, already?”

“On the contrary,” Phil explained. “He has implicated one of the most notorious drug lords in Mexico. His intuition is invaluable. I don't know how he does it, but I'm willing to hear him out.”

All eyes returned to Francis.

He opened his mind to possibilities and while a couple of un-focused images floated by, one stuck – the one he had been toying with all night – vivid and brilliantly sharp, some distance in front of him.

“I think,” he said, “El Cannibal will not delegate the responsibility to anyone but himself. It is too deep a cut, he will be insane with fury.”

“... Meaning?” Tina asked. She had heard his rantings before. And yet, she knew he was about to make perfect sense.

Phil was in there. “You think Manuel will be at your house, holding his own daughter hostage. Expecting you to return for her?”

“I do,” Francis replied. “He is hiding out in my own home. Not somewhere that the police would ever consider searching.”

“So, we call the police,” Tina said timidly, already knowing it was futile.

“No,” Francis raised a hand. “Hortensia could be harmed.

Manuel would kill her just for the pleasure of seeing me suffer.” He paused, closed his eyes and then lowered his head to the tiled floor. “What I see is a much better option.” Then looked up, eyes staring beyond them. “I know every inch of my house...”

Tina was shaking her head. “You are going to storm your own home..., aren't you? Just the four of you, up against an army of his goons? They're waiting for you. You can't possibly foresee the outcome.”

Francis replied with a shrug. “Not all of them, Tina. There are many options to this ending. That's what I like about destiny: It can be a bastard at times, but if you spread it out thin and expand it's field of view beyond the peripheral, it sometimes cannot see a clear outcome and so doesn't know what to do. Which means, we get to create the future, ourselves.”

“You are mad, Francis. But I trust you. Don't know why but I do. Just be careful and don't take any risks.”

He unfolded the plan: They would strike at sunset, he and the two Seals scaling the canyon wall to reach his studio. He had a small armory in the watch tower, above. From there they could survey his house some 350 yards away, the front gardens, the courtyard and surrounding proximity. Phil would take position on the main road with Francis' phone, so he could watch all the security cameras and open his gate when the time was right. He drew a quick diagram of his home on a napkin. Francis was sure Manuel would not be keeping his daughter locked away in a room, but would have her close to him at all times. Which was why supper time was the target. He then passed a photograph of Hortensia around.

A nod of satisfaction from The Seals. Two kit bags were open by their feet, stuffed full with the necessities of urban warfare. Phil's wide eyes were staring, unquestioningly, at Tina. She raised her arms, knew what he was thinking, shook her head and shrugged:

“You're right, Phil. He's always been spot on, so far. Don't ask me how he does it.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Put a Madre! Get your filthy hands off me,” Hortensia screamed at one of her father's goons who was trying to drag her away from Calvito.

She had been hold up in a downstairs cupboard, having escaped their custody once before. Arms flaying out in all directions trying to make contact with the big man's belly, he had her by the hair at arm's length; it was the only way he knew how to control his feisty charge.

“I kill you, I kill you,” she spat in English, trying to jab him with her stilettos, “Te mato, juebon!”.

“Hija,” a loud voice bellowed down the corridor, “Stop that. Perez, show some respect, she's my daughter.”

Her father's sudden exclamation was just enough to throw the guard off balance. A shuddering kick in the groin sent him reeling. Hortensia, quick off the mark, grabbed Calvito and rushed passed her startled father, heading for the lobby. But her moment of

freedom was only fleeting, two more guards came around the corner and headed her off. She was snatched up in a flurry.

“Take her and that boy upstairs. You two,” he pointed at another pair of his goons, “In the kitchen. We’ll have supper now. Check every plate, make sure the food is well prepared. Perez, pull yourself together, man, and round up the rest. I want the perimeter locked down. We are expecting company. Anyone fucks up, I’ll personally shoot you, myself.”

At the bottom of a small canyon three men, dressed in camouflage with blackened faces, look up. A whining burst from a reel is all that is heard as a thin, steel line is fired up the steep incline. Francis taps his ear piece and flips from under one arm an H&K MP7 from his chest to his back. The fearsome, black weapon glints in the dimness of dusk. He checks his harness, slaps the belay, fingers a number of cams on his belt, pulls on the line, then grabs the ratchet and begins his ascent. The two Seals follow suit. Ten minutes later they are huddled under the pylons beneath his studio. Francis points to one side, to a small ledge from where they can reach the balcony.

They will have to swing out over the chasm to make that ledge. Twice Francis makes an attempt and twice he fails. In the darkness it is practically impossible to find a finger grip and the NVGs are not showing enough detail on the cold stone. On his third attempt he uses a pick, which will make a noise but he sees no other option. Once on the ledge he can grab the other two, no problem.

He succeeds. They are up. A glass door slides easily, and they enter.

A few strides across the studio and they are mounting a spiral staircase. Behind them the last remnants of a sunset barely have the strength to outline a horizon. Up in the covered tower, Francis reaches with a key for a cabinet door in the center. The tower is designed like a lighthouse, with a central pillar housing cupboards and cabinets above and a circular counter-top at waist

height. The floor surrounds the center-piece with a railing all around.

Francis opens the cabinet to reveal an array of weapons. He pulls down a rifle and scope: a McMillan Tac .50. One of the Seals is tucked down by the railings, NVGs dropped and focusing. The other nods in satisfaction on seeing the McMillan descend.

“What have we got?” Francis whispered to the Seal by the railings.

“Two.., no, three guards outside, patrolling the courtyard. And there's a light on in a room above the main veranda. Some movement inside. Can't make out what's what. Too bright.”

“Let me take a look,” Francis responded. He dropped an elbow to the counter and laid the McMillan out, butt to his shoulder, flipping the covers up on the scope with his other hand and peering through.., “Oh, yes. That's Manuel at my dinning room table, Hortensia beside him. And Enrique, too. The table is laid, they are about to be served supper. There are two others, armed, but I can't see the rest of the room... could be more.”

“What's our move?” The Seal next to him asked, expecting orders.

“Phil?” Francis touched his collar, “We are about to engage. Are there bogeys at the gate?”

“Just two. I can take them out, no trouble.”

“What about behind the house, by the swimming pool?”

“Nothing static. Could be two patrolling the balcony from either end every couple of minutes or so.”

“Wait for my signal. It will be a single high powered shot. Then come in with all you've got.”

“Standing by.”

Francis looked up. “OK, guys. If you like what I have to say then we are in business. From here, I can take out Manuel and

possibly the two guards next to him while keeping an eye on our prize. But there may be more in that room, or elsewhere in the building. Can you get to the three guards outside in the courtyard and shut them down without a shot? Then the ones by the pool?"

A smile and a nod from both of them.

"Awesome. Then here's the key to the patio doors by the pool. You'll enter the lobby. First door on the left is my kitchen and I suspect there will be a guard in there watching the maids at work. Cross the lobby and approach the second door on the right. That is the dining room. Ping me when you are in position. I will leave El Cannibal to last; he is at the head of the table nearest the glass doors, wearing a yellow shirt. The moment you here my second shot, get in there and drop anyone I have missed. You'll be coming in behind whoever is there, they'll be concentrating on the hostages and the sliding door to the balcony, where my shots came from."

Another nod.

"Good. We are here to save the girl and the little boy, nothing else. If he or she is targeted, don't shoot. I'll come down. There is no fallback plan. Oh, and the man sitting by Hortensia's side next to the boy, he must not be harmed unless he is carrying or poses a threat. Got it?"

They were gone, slipped away like ghosts into the night. It was now too dark to see them as they crept through his gardens towards the courtyard, but he could clearly see those in the dining room. He flipped the M&K off his back and placed it to one side, unclipping the climbing harness and his heavy belt. Time to get comfortable.

He took up position lying on the tower floor, dropping his elbow through the rifle strap with a twist of his arm and poking the McMillan between uprights in the railings. He pulled back the bolt with great care, slowly and silently, then, on hearing that familiar clink of a cartridge rising into position, pushed it lovingly down into the barrel. Now the pull-up.

He waited, as he had done so many times before during this whole ordeal. Always waiting for an outcome, expecting a result, knowing before it happened what was probably going to occur. This time it was different, it was not just about him, it was about the woman he loved. And he was hoping that his imagination could cross the boundary between them and meld with hers. If not then truly no one but destiny would be in charge... and that scenario he did not like.

The guards in the courtyard had magically disappeared. It was now... The future had arrived.

A ping in his ear. He settled down into the dope, breathed in, looked through the scope and placed the hairs on the back of a head: that of the guard standing directly behind Hortensia. Manuel was eating, he did not have a weapon in view. Francis would hit both guards before it was Manuel's turn. He breathed out, long and slow, dropped his finger to the trigger and visualized the bullet's penetration before the squeeze. A violent crack of thunder and the glass door to his dining room shattered into dust. Francis was pulling back the bolt, did not need to see the result of his last shot, was concentrating on the second.

Staring back through the scope, he took aim at the second guard whose weapon was now raised and pointing at Hortensia. Manuel was on his feet, looking back at him through a door that was no longer there. Francis aimed for the guard's weapon, to deny him the possibility of pulling the trigger. A second crack and a bullet flung the guard across the dining room, slamming him into the wall. Now it was Manuel's turn.

Then sudden flashes all around him and clatters of metal on metal like a kid scraping tongs across a barbecue grill. He was being strafed by gunfire, bullets ricocheting off the railings. Francis dropped the butt of the rifle to the floor and swiftly rolled sideways, pressing his neck as he did so.

“I'm taking rounds. Phil, the skylight”

Headlights appeared over the ridge. Phil was right on time.

With one hand on the shuddering steering wheel and the other out his window clasp an M16...

“Got him.” And with that a blast of rapid gunfire rips the window frame out of the skylight and with it the slumping figure of a man.

Francis quickly rolls back out and takes up position. Sees two short bursts of gunfire in the dining room, jet blue flashes illuminating the walls but not the action. He is focused on Manuel, can see that Glock raised to his daughter's head while the crazed man is staring back at him into the night. Enrique is lying on the floor with Calvito, a napkin over the little boys face, when one of the Seals comes into view. This was not as Francis had envisaged, too complicated, how could destiny be taking control? He took another deep breath and let it out.

The Glock was a hard target, it was stretched out behind Manuel and practically in front of Hortensia, from his perspective. He had to go for the head. Could he dare take the shot, with Manuel's finger on the trigger and the muzzle on her temple? He looked into his mind for answers, tried to reach Hortensia, saw the glint of a fork rising from her plate and closed his eyes. Another crack of thunder and then hope was staring down through elements within the long scope before him. He had to see what hope was seeing.

He opened that eye... terrified of a result he might have to live with for the rest of his life. But the future was theirs. They had made it, themselves... Manuel down. Hortensia, bloody fork in hand, standing upright and defiant.

He was laying the McMillan to one side when another shot was fired. Enrique, the stupid young man, had played his final card. It was sadly the wrong one.

As a dark, blue van sped off into the night, Francis looked back at his house, knowing he would never see it nor his beloved works of art, ever again. Paulito's Restaurant was buzzing. They pulled up and Hortensia ran in. She returned with Tina. The side

door slid open again. Tina knew it was goodbye.

“We'll come and visit. Promise,” she stammered.

“Not this year, you won't, ”Francis replied as the engine revved.

“Why? What do you see?” she asked.

His blackened mask responded. “You.., with a big, round belly.”

“How did you..?” she gasped, then, bursting into tears, cried, “Oh, Francis. You lovely, adorable, pain in the ass, fool. God bless you.” She turned to Hortensia, sitting next to him, took her hand, gave it a loving kiss.

“Take care of my Hydrangea,” was the request.

“I will...”

The door slid to and they were gone.

...END

THE AUTHOR:

British born, Alan Graham has spent his whole life traveling, his father having been in the diplomatic service. He is a wildlife photographer/filmmaker and published author of novels in the genres of speculative fiction and thrillers. He has also written countless articles for international prints including BBC Wildlife Magazine, Travel Africa and International Living over a career spanning 30 years. His most successful TV documentary “The Affairs of Hares” was filmed entirely in the wilds of Devon, England, between 1996 and 2000.



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Title: The Turning of Hydrangea

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