

Sunstruck

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Chapter 1

Daniella has just found out that her ex-mother-in-law died last night of a sharp attack of hiccups. It wasn't a sudden attack. The old woman had hiccups continually for two weeks until she died of exhaustion – at least that's what the doctor said.

Daniella had never heard of anyone dying of hiccups before. She didn't think such a thing was possible. That's why when her ex-husband, Ismael, told her the news on the phone, she couldn't help answering him with an incredulous laugh. Then she felt guilty.

"I'm sorry. How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Great. The funeral will be tomorrow morning. I'm throwing a cocktail party tonight," he said.

Ismael is an art critic who works for the biggest newspaper on the island. God knows how he got the job. When he was Daniella's husband, he was a starving artist. After their divorce, he married this rich older woman who shares a striking resemblance with Count Dracula's wife and who collects torturing devices.

Ismael keeps blaming Daniella for his past failures and starvation, but basically they still behave like rational homo sapiens toward each other.

Daniella figures she'll be attracted to starving artists – much older than herself, as a matter of fact – till she dies. It's like a curse.

Now she's living with Tony. He moved in with her a year ago. Tony calls himself a painter, but he's working in the kitchen of a Chinese take-out called Los Chinitos. He used to have a much better job as a waiter for La Cueva, a swanky Spanish restaurant, but Tony got fired because they caught him too many times stealing food from the kitchen.

So now Daniella's getting ready for the party. She's a little shocked by Ismael's erratic behaviour; after all, the old woman was his mother. If it weren't for Tony, she wouldn't go out tonight – she figures this party will be good for

him because Ismael's new friends are all important art dealers, artists and journalists, and a starving artist needs connections.

Daniella lets her long hair fall in tousled waves down to her waist. At the moment her hair has a strange, unusual reddish hue. If you mix brandy, carrots, and raspberries in a blender you probably get a similar color. She puts on her favorite faded Levi's, one of Tony's white undershirts, and a black jacket with black satin lapels. She also slips through her lobes a pair of plastic tiger sharks – a gift from Tony three months ago on her twenty-fourth birthday. What appears to be the fraction of a human leg is stuck between the jaws of the sharks. As a final touch she applies black eyeliner and purple lipstick.

The first movement of the Sibelius Violin Concerto, dark and mysterious, is playing on the stereo. Thanks to her dad, who took off when she was a kid, Daniella knows about composers. He would lock himself in the music room for hours – God forbade whoever dared interrupt him. At times, he awarded her the privilege of listening with him. Beethoven, Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Verdi, Brahms. Daniella absorbed them by mental osmosis.

Thoughts of her father make her grimace. She reels herself back to reality.

"I love the way those torn legs dangle against your cheeks," Tony says when he comes from work. She can see particles of food stuck underneath his nails.

"Ismael's mother died last night. We're going to his apartment. He's having a party."

"What? I was planning to work all night on that painting. Didn't you say you have a calculus test tomorrow morning? I thought you said you were going to spend the night studying." He kisses Daniella on the lips; not really a kiss, but merely two mouths slightly brushing against one another. His lips are soft and full and sensual and he smells like sweet-and-sour chicken mixed with turpentine.

"A lot of important people will be there. It'll be good for you," she says. Very often she finds herself talking to Tony as if she were talking to a child.

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Tony sneers. “You mean a lot of faggots will be there. On this damn island, the art world is completely controlled and monopolized by the faggot society. And the ones who aren’t gay are communists. I may be the only capitalist, straight artist around.”

“They’re not communists. They’re socialists. Communists don’t exist anymore.”

Tony snorts.

“Well, I still think we should go,” she says. “Who cares who they sleep with or what their ideas are? The important thing is to make connections. Besides, you should be a little more open minded.”

Commando steps out of the bathroom—he probably was taking a nap on top of the toilet seat—and hisses at Tony. Commando hates Tony and Tony hates Commando. Commando is Daniella’s cat, a Turkish Angora weighing at least thirty pounds, with silky white fur and odd-colored eyes; the right eye is blue and the left eye is amber. Daniella brought him from Istanbul eight years ago, during one of her trips across the Mediterranean with her mother. She paid \$150 for it—a real bargain. She even had to get a passport for the cat, but it was worth it. Turkish Angoras are one of the most unusual cats in the world. Years ago, they actually were in danger of extinction. Daniella wishes men also were in danger of extinction. The world would be a better place.

“Stop feeding that cat like that. He’s turning into an obese monster,” Tony says. “God, those eyes. I can’t stand those eyes. He looks like the Devil.”

Commando hisses again. He gives Tony a surly, menacing look, then twines himself around Daniella’s ankles.

“Are you stoned again?” Daniella asks, disgusted.

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s still early,” he jokes, taking off his dirty shirt and tossing it on the bed.

“I bet Commando can look right into your soul,” she murmurs.

“What?”

“Nothing. I wonder why he’s getting so fat,” Daniella says thoughtfully, more to herself than to Tony. “I only give him one meal a day, just like the vet

told me to.” Horrific scenarios flash through her mind: Commando with diabetes, a thyroid disorder, a tumor. She makes a mental note to take him to the vet, yet again. Commando is one of the vet’s most popular patients, mainly because of Daniella’s tendency to overreact.

Tony fetches a cold Budweiser from the refrigerator. That’s one of the advantages of living in a studio-apartment; there are no halls to cross and everything is at reach. The only problem is that Tony’s junk is all over the place: finished paintings, unfinished paintings, blank canvases, tubes of paint (mainly oils and acrylics), dirty brushes and palette knives, carbon pencils, glass jars filled with moldy water, paint-stained rags, old newspapers and magazines.

And the cockroaches, some close to three inches long and with wings any bird of prey would envy. Tony’s infinite messiness offers them endless opportunities for hiding, exercising, and procreating. Daniella loathes them, keeps the place sparkling clean, buys all sorts of sprays and devices promising to eradicate the little armoured beasts. She has them under control – almost. It’s the old building’s fault, not hers. Ever since she saw a documentary on TV about cockroaches living inside caves (hundreds of thousands form a shiny, throbbing carpet on the ground, feeding on the endless droppings of bats), she has a recurring daydream: being attacked from head to toes by a swarm of the fiends, their wings, the texture of flaky croissants, fluttering against her flesh.

Daniella tries to ignore Tony’s red-and-white-hearts boxer shorts and stands by the window. She pokes her head out and squints into the distance at La Perla, a poor section of Old San Juan crammed with prostitutes, drunks, drug dealers, rapists, killers, and other kinds of cozy criminals. Beyond La Perla lies the green-blue sea, acting feral and oblivious to everything around it.

Even though Daniella’s apartment is in a reasonably nice and safe area, her mother is always telling her that a person has to be crazy to live in a place like this, at the mercy of roaches and so close to La Perla. But Daniella isn’t afraid. The reason for this is that most of the criminals who live in La Perla do their treacheries in other sections of the city. In other words, even though they are

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criminals, they have a little respect for the concept of Home. Also, she finds Old San Juan very cute, with its old Spanish houses and small European-looking balconies, its colorful cafes, its narrow cobbled streets filled with strolling art students, bohemians, tourists.

The name has always intrigued Daniella. La Perla means The Pearl, and a pearl is a valuable and lovely and elegant thing. The person who named the lowest, nastiest section of the city La Perla must have had a diabolic streak. On the other hand, if you consider that a pearl is nothing but the excrement of a mollusk...

Down on the street a blonde woman with a big straw hat and a black camera hung around her neck scolds a small fat boy. The boy, looking mean and dangerous, lurches forward and bites her leg. Giving off a scream, the woman stumbles backward and bumps against an older man who is about to hand a little girl an ice-cream cone. In the tumult, the ice-cream collides with the little girl's face. The little girl howls, stomps her feet again and again, then, white-hot with fury, runs off into the busy street.

An approaching car abruptly halts to avoid killing her. The street is filled with the honking of horns while the older man runs after the little girl. Tires screech. Far off, Daniella hears the persistent wail of a police siren, adding to the great symphony effect.

Daniella gives a deep sigh, her thoughts vaguely revolving about possessed children, the law of cause and effect.

Tony flops face down on the battered bed (the center of the bed looks like a poltergeist is sleeping on it) and gulps the rest of the beer. He belches and says, "I had an awful nightmare last night. Really weird. I was at this house, you know, one of those fun houses where you have to cross turning tunnels and things like that. The thing is that in this house everything was real. Once you bought the ticket and went in you really had to fight for your life. The turning tunnel was full of spikes and I had to swim across a pool filled with white sharks and there were hungry wild animals everywhere. There was a creature with the body of a kangaroo and the head of the Governor. A tiny Madonna

was in its pouch. It's given me an idea for a painting. I think it's that damn cat. Ever since I'm living with that monster I've been inhaling contaminated cat hairs and having nightmares." He stares at Daniella. "You're wearing my last clean shirt."

Daniella sighs and looks down at Commando. He's purring artfully between her legs. She picks him up in her arms, keenly aware of his dense, heavy stomach, and plants a kiss on the tip of his wet pink nose. "Tell me something, Commando. Why do I – a well bred, honest, sensitive person – keep associating myself with weird people?"

Chapter 2

Now that Ismael is married to Lady Dracula, he's living in this expensive but spooky-looking penthouse apartment in Isla Verde, right by the beach and close to The Sands Hotel. Lady Dracula's real name is Irene Carlier. Daniella doesn't know much about her, except that she's in the rum business and collects torturing devices and is obsessed with red. Right now Lady Dracula is wearing a long crimson caftan with matching lipstick and high-heeled sandals.

As soon as Daniella enters the apartment, she encounters an old wooden guillotine. In one corner of the living room rests an old decrepit rack, the kind you see in movies about the Spanish Inquisition. On a marble pedestal by the terrace there's a state-of-the-art computer system – in Lady Dracula's words, "The ultimate torturing device." Next to the bar stands an innocent-looking iron maiden. There's even an aged pillory by the toilet seat in the bathroom. Poe and Lovecraft would have found the apartment very cozy. But it gives Daniella the creeps.

"Come and have a drink, my dear. You look so cute with those earrings," Lady Dracula says to Daniella. "I'm so glad you brought Tony along." She says this as if Tony were Daniella's new cat. "Come with me, Tony. Fifi Santos is here, the owner of that new gallery in Old San Juan. I'm going to introduce him to you."

"Fifi Santos," Tony mutters as Lady Dracula leads him off by the arm. "What kind of name is that, anyway?"

Daniella, momentarily feeling left out, stands by the iron maiden and asks the bartender for a black Russian. Behind the bartender she can see rows of white-and-gold Carlier rum lined on glass shelves against the purple velvet wall. While sipping her drink, her eyes scan the crowded room. Among the guests she recognizes a popular TV host and two actresses – if they can be called actresses, for their acting skills leave a lot to be desired – from the eight o'clock telenovela. There's also that blonde obnoxious woman who talks down to people from one of the night talk shows.

Where's Ismael? She sees Tony and Lady Dracula speaking with a fat bald man who reminds Daniella of an Amazonian Uakari – his face is so red he looks as if he's burning from inside out. Either that or he fell asleep on the beach under the midday sun without sunscreen. It happened to Daniella once. She had third degree burns. According to the dermatologist, her nerve endings were smouldered.

"Are you looking for someone?" the bartender asks.

"Oh, no, not really," Daniella says, somewhat startled.

The bartender is in his mid thirties, but he looks as if he just crawled out of his own grave. Suddenly Daniella remembers a movie she saw with Ismael a few years ago. She's not sure about the title because, ill with the flu, she'd been stoned with medication, but she thinks it was *Night of the Living Dead*.

The bartender says, "I'm not really a bartender. Not all the time, anyway. I'm a card dealer. I work for that new hotel that opened in El Condado. I didn't go to college and I'm making two thousand dollars a month. Can you believe that? Sometimes I do this at special parties, to get a few extra bucks. Hey, I'm sorry if I'm bothering you, but my girlfriend just dumped me and I'm feeling kind of depressed and hungry for friendly conversation."

She stares blankly at him. "Oh, that's okay."

"You want another drink? I'm going to fix you a Hugo Special. I was at the hotel when that Hurricane Hugo came. You probably don't remember it. That was years ago. It was really something. I was in one of the salons when the wind smashed the glass panels and I had to throw myself on the floor and cover my head. There was a fat people convention of some sort. A woman weighing at least four hundred pounds fell on top of me. I was nearly squashed to death. I was on the news. One of those famous reporters, the lady with short black hair who looks like a man, asked me a couple of questions. My mother got everything on video tape." He catches his breath. "What do you do?"

Daniella takes a sip of her black Russian. She licks her lips. "I'm a student."

"Really? What are you studying?"

"Architecture and philosophy."

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“What year?”

“Third.”

“Hey, that’s great.” He hands her the Hugo Special. “I wish I could go to school, but I have what you call zombie-like inertia for studying. I’m so glad casinos aren’t illegal in Puerto Rico, otherwise I’d be dealing dope, which would be bad for my health.”

Now Daniella has two drinks in her hands. She takes a sip of the Hugo Special and makes a face. “Not bad,” she says.

The bartender looks pleased. “Like a slap on the cheek, huh?”

Daniella glances at her watch—9:31 p.m. The room is jammed with murmurs, shrieks, sudden empty laughs, cigarette smoke. She catches the alluring yet disturbing aroma of grass—a person in a corner is rolling a joint, but Daniella can’t distinguish if it’s a man or a woman or an indefinite combination of the two. A fast-paced Jennifer Lopez’s song is booming out of hidden speakers.

This place is worst than a zoo. The beasts are running free here. Maybe I just entered the twilight zone. Let me close my eyes. Tonight I want to be picked up by extraterrestrials.

The bartender says, “Do you know any of these people?”

“Not really. I used to be married to the owner of the apartment, but we got divorced three years ago. Now we’re just friends.”

“That’s nice.” The bartender leans forward on the bar and says in a conspiratorial tone, “These people are crazy. They call themselves artists and critics and writers and TV personalities, but they’re nothing but a bunch of psychotic jokers. Do you know what that nutty-looking lady in red told me? She said that this thing here,” he points to the iron maiden, “belong to someone called Madame Bovary, a crazy lady who used to live in Transylvania during the 16th Century and who used to murder her female servants and drink their blood to keep herself looking young. She told me that about two hundred virgins were tortured and murdered with this same iron maiden. Does she expect me to believe something like that?”

“You mean Madame *Bathory*.”

The bartender stops for a second. “What?”

“Bathory. Not Bovary. Bovary is from a novel by Flaubert.”

“Whatever.” Then he goes on. “She also told me that that guillotine over there is the same guillotine that cut the head of that French queen – I forgot her name, the queen who said something about a cake. Anyway, she told me that particles of the queen’s blood are still impregnated on it. Why would your ex-husband marry someone who says things like that?”

Daniella sees Ismael staggering forward to greet her. In spite of his Christian Dior suit, he looks terrible. The last time she saw him at least he seemed human. Now he’s just a mass of hazy colors forming nothing. She hopes he doesn’t have a deadly disease. His looks, though, could be considered striking: long, straight black hair; pale skin; a tall, gaunt, long-limbed figure.

“When did you arrive?” Ismael asks her, kissing her lightly on the cheek.

“Just a while ago. What’s wrong with you? You look anemic.”

Ismael runs a hand through his forehead. His scrawny, thirty-five-year-old face is glistening with a faint coat of perspiration. He makes a grimace of disgust. “My stomach. I had lunch at Taco Bell. I’ve spent the last two hours in the bathroom. What’s up? Is Tony here?”

“He’s with Irene. Why did you go to Taco Bell? You know what happens when you eat Mexican food.”

“I know, but you know how much I love spicy food. I felt like celebrating. I can’t believe my mother is dead. What are you drinking?” He turns to the bartender and says, “Give me a glass of low-fat milk.”

“I don’t have any milk in here, *señor*”

“Then go get it. Look in the refrigerator.”

The bartender heads toward the kitchen and Daniella says, “You shouldn’t talk about your mother like that. I don’t think milk is good for an upset stomach. Don’t you have any Pepto Bismol?”

“Irene doesn’t believe in artificial medication. She’s turning into a health crackpot. Do you know where she went yesterday? She went to this Chinese

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guy in Hato Rey who practices acupuncture and let herself be pierced with dozens of needles. She says it's good for her cramps. It's masochism, if you ask me. That guy doesn't even have a doctor's degree."

Daniella frowns. She's quite sure Lady Dracula is many decades past her menopause.

"You should have a blood test done," Daniella says. "I'm not kidding. You look extremely pale."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Ismael offers Daniella a Winston Light.

"I really need to quit this crap," she says.

"You can quit tomorrow. Come on, it's a party."

She gives in, frustrated by her lack of will. He lights her cigarette, then his own. They take deep drags and let the smoke out slowly. Clouds of grey air water her eyes and blur her vision.

Suddenly Jennifer Lopez is replaced by Beethoven.

"I didn't know you had turned into a classical music fan," Daniella says, surprised. "You could hardly stand it when we were married."

"I haven't. That's Irene. Like you, she's obsessed with boring music. Let me ask you something. Why is it that villains in the movies always listen to classical music? Just look at James Bond films. Not that Irene is a villainess. She just looks like one."

"I have to admit it feels weird listening to Beethoven at a party like this," Daniella says. "Look, that guy over there is smoking a joint."

"Want one?"

"No, thanks."

"You're right. Enough of this violin crap." Ismael turns to the DJ across the room and waves his hand frantically in the air. "I'm falling asleep with this shit! Put some salsa!"

The DJ makes a helpless gesture with his hands and points to Irene at the other end of the room. Then he pretends to cut his throat with a knife.

"Oh, shit. Forget it. It seems he has strict orders from Irene. She's insane. So, how's school going?" Ismael says.

“Great. I just needed to get rid of you.” To placate his offended expression, she adds, “We needed to get rid of each other. I’m getting an education and you’ve become quite successful. I read your column every Sunday. Gives me the creeps, the way you treat those poor artists. You’re feeding on human misery. Don’t you remember when you were a starving artist yourself?”

Ismael chuckles. “What do you think art criticism is all about? Vengeance. Sweet and simple vengeance. I’m doing to them what they did to me. All critics do that. In a way, it’s rightful justice. Gives me a sense of power. When I attend those art shows and look at the paintings, it’s as if I were sniffing coke. Gets me high with anticipation.” He lifts his large sinewy hands and squints at his palms. “You see these hands? They have the power to destroy or make an artist. Now *that’s* exciting.”

“Maybe you should run for governor.”

“Right.” Ismael grins, displaying sharp, mildly nicotine-stained teeth. “I’m glad you haven’t cut that hair. You know how much I love that red hair of yours. The other night I dreamed of you. Actually, it was a nightmare. You made your hair into two braids and you strangled me with them. How’s Commando?”

Everyone’s having Dali dreams.

“I think he misses you.” Unlike Tony, Ismael used to have a brotherly relationship with Commando. Ismael loves cats. Actually, he’s in love with the animal kingdom. Apart from his wife’s torturing devices, his apartment is filled with hand-painted porcelain figures of different animals, among these a hyena, a white tiger, a zebra, a gorilla, a wombat, a mongoose. In the bathroom there’s a little display of about a dozen mother animals and their respective babies. The cutest of these is the mother panda cuddling her chubby baby. On a side table next to the sofa there’s a bronze sculpture of Bastet – the Egyptian Cat Goddess of Love and Joy.

During their marriage, Ismael used to get better along with Commando than with Daniella. He used to share his morning coffee and chocolate-covered doughnuts with the cat. In return, and as a gesture of sincere appreciation,

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Commando used to share his chicken and liver can food, which Ismael loved to spread on Ritz crackers while watching Sesame Street on TV.

The bartender, visibly shaken, comes back with a glass of milk and hands it to Ismael.

“Finally!” Ismael takes a big swallow and sighs. “I love milk. I wish I could go back to my milk-sucking years.” He chuckles. “I guess Freud would have something to say about that.”

“*Señor,*” the bartender whispers. “There’s something very strange in your refrigerator. It’s filled with—”

But at that moment Ismael hooks his arm with Daniella’s and jerks her away from the bar, spilling some of her Hugo Special. “Did I tell you about my plans for a new hotel?” he asks nervously.

“What’s the matter with you?” Daniella says. “You’re so loud and rude.”

“Nothing, nothing. You can’t let the service get too comfortable. It isn’t good. Besides, I’m very anxious to tell you about my plans.” He stubs out his cigarette in a nearby ashtray and lights another one, this time a filter-tipped Camel. Now that he’s rich, he always carries with him three different packs of cigarettes.

“Irene and I are thinking of opening a hotel. A hotel for animal lovers. It’ll be a revolutionizing concept. Each room will come with the animal of your choice. Not only the usual pets like dogs, cats, hamsters, and rabbits but also rare animals like wombats and koalas. It’ll be great for people who travel with children. There’ll be a pet shop, an animal souvenirs store, a bookstore, educational lectures and movies about animal life, and animal entertainment at night. A mixture of a hotel and a zoo and a circus.”

Daniella says, “That’s... different. But do you think it’ll work? I mean, not everyone loves animals the way you and I do.”

“Just wait and see. It’ll become the talk of Puerto Rico. Anyway, I was thinking that maybe you’d be interested in a position once we open the hotel. I need people I can trust.”

“What about my studies? I don’t think I’d have the time.”

"You wouldn't have to sacrifice your studies. We could arrange the hours. Didn't you use to tell me how much you would like to work with animals?"

"I know, but this sounds..." She's at loss for words. For some reason, the idea seems preposterous. But she doesn't want to hurt his feelings. "You don't even have the hotel yet."

"Well, yes, it'll take some time. I'm planning to go to Turkey to get a few Turkish Angoras. I'm not sure, but I don't think they have those cats in the States," Ismael says dreamily.

"Of course they do, but they're probably overpriced."

"Do you think Tony would mind if you came with me?"

"What? To Turkey? Ismael, are you crazy? What about your wife? In case you don't remember it, we got divorced three years ago and you're now married to another woman."

Ismael sighs, looking haggard and maudlin. "Why did we get divorced?"

"Both of us were becoming narcoleptics, that's why." For a moment they stare at each other in silence. To her amazement, Daniella feels something twirling inside her stomach, as if she has just swallowed a handful of Mexican jumping beans.

Fortunately, she sees Tony and Lady Dracula approaching. She sighs. "There's Tony and Irene."

Tony puts an arm around Daniella's shoulders and pulls her possessively toward him. He's smiling and his pupils look as if they want to fly out of their orbits. He looks so handsome in his black *GRATEFUL DEAD* T-shirt and faded blue jeans, a jagged tear across his left knee. His dark brown, shoulder-length hair falls in defiant curls around his head, partly covering his demonically arched eyebrows. And he's so tall and strong looking. Daniella's head is at the level of his chest. She loves this.

"What happened?" Daniella says.

"He wants to see some of my stuff. I'll go to his gallery tomorrow morning," Tony says.

"Oh, that's great, Tony!" Daniella says.

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"It's all a matter of mingling with the right crowd, of meeting the right people. An artist can't just make art, he must also be a public relations specialist," Lady Dracula says.

"This music is going to stick to me for days," Tony says.

"Beethoven's 9th Symphony!" Lady Dracula says. "One of the most beautiful musical pieces ever composed! Especially since the man himself composed it for me. He was such a sweet, adoring creature – his genius blood was so very mellow! – yet so tumultuous and unforgiving and resentful. I remember when, one day at his home –"

Ismael looks nervous. "That's enough!" he says. Then he murmurs to Daniella and Tony, "She has a dreadful sense of humor, very seldom understood."

Suddenly, without any apparent reason, Lady Dracula bursts out laughing.

"Well, Tony." Ismael sighs. "Aren't you glad my mother stepped into the fourth dimension? Thanks to her you're going to have your paintings considered by a reputable dealer. But be careful with him. It might not be only your paintings he's interested in."

"Don't worry," Tony says. "Anyway, thanks for the warning."

"Sure. Hey, you're my ex-wife's boyfriend and I feel there's a kind of special bond between us." He finishes his milk and puts the empty glass on a nearby table.

Lady Dracula is still laughing, her eyes rimmed with tears. Such hilarity gives her the appearance of a worn, abandoned scarecrow.

Daniella smiles. "What's so funny?"

"Maybe all those Chinese needles they pierced through her yesterday have caused permanent brain damage," Ismael says. "Either that, or the hot Puerto Rican sun."

"She's okay," Tony says. "We smoked a few joints in the bathroom, that's all." He lowers his head and whispers to Daniella, "Want some, little fox?"

A twinge of seduction in his husky voice forces Daniella to look up at him. She stiffens. For a split second there's a fierce combat between mind and body.

"No, thanks," she says.

"Come on, don't be such a goody-goody."

"No." She shakes her head, feeling her determination faltering.

Tony shrugs. "As you wish, Madre Teresa."

"I need to go to the bathroom," Daniella says, escaping them all, especially Tony's sensual voice. Once inside the bathroom, she shuts the door and leans her back against it, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. When she opens her eyes, all the little animals are looking at her, judging her. Scowling, she steps to the sink and splashes cold water on her cheeks while trying to keep her makeup intact. She gently pads her face dry with a Kleenex and stares at herself in the mirror. Her large brown eyes, moist and innocent looking, stare back at her with... what – admonition?

She rummages inside her Marc Jacobs bag (from EBay, how else?) for her cell phone and checks for messages. Only one from her mom: "Good luck with your calculus test tomorrow. See you on Friday at La Terraza. Love, Marcela."

Back at the party, she searches for Tony. She finds him on the terrace, overlooking the Atlantic. The wind is tousling his long hair. The night sky is a myriad of shimmering crystals. A group of people are crowded near a large, expensive-looking telescope and a tall, thin guy who talks like he knows what he's talking about is giving a speech about the expansion of the universe, microwave radiation, and the Doppler Effect. His speech is slurred, maybe from booze, maybe from drugs.

Tony seems fascinated.

Daniella wraps her arms around him and leans her head against his chest.

"Hola, linda." He sounds surprised at her sudden fervor. "Apparently this guy works for NASA. I'm getting tons of ideas for paintings."

"I changed my mind," she tells him.

A brief look of confusion crosses his face. Then he understands. His eyes narrow and his lips curve in a slow smile.

Chapter 3

From her seat at the far end of the classroom, Daniella squints at the blackboard and feels drops of sweat slowly trickling down her stomach. Her white T-shirt with a picture of a Tasmanian devil and the words *PROTECT WILDLIFE* printed in black across the front is plastered to her back. How is she supposed to concentrate in this sauna?

Professor Vazquez is talking, pointing with her wooden stick at the blackboard and ambling back and forth, her voluptuous breasts and hips swaying violently as she moves. How can the male students concentrate with all that gelatine in front of their eyes? Why doesn't she do some aerobics, for Christ's sake? Her clothes don't help either. She wears these tight skirts with slits up to the middle of her plump thighs, which aren't flattering at all because she has varicose veins and her jiggling thighs have the texture of an orange peel.

About a month ago, during a heated lecture about Hegel's idealism, Professor Vazquez noticed that one of the male students sitting on the first row was leering at her thighs. She abruptly turned to the student and said, "What? Haven't you ever seen a woman's thighs before?"

The student's reply was, "Yes, but not like *those*." He shouldn't have said that, for although the whole class thought it was pretty funny, the professor obviously didn't, and up to this day Daniella hasn't seen the student again. Considering the power that Professor Vazquez has over the university, Daniella believes she had the student shot.

Daniella closes her eyes and massages her temples with the tip of her fingers. Her mind takes her back to the calculus test she took two hours ago. She hopes she did well. Why didn't she stay studying at home last night like Tony suggested? Attending a party which celebrates an old woman's demise is wrong, no matter how you look at it, even if the old woman in question was a terrible mother. Daniella feels as though she has trespassed a sacred boundary.

Also, why did she have to smoke that joint? The drinks were already enough to give her a hangover.

She thinks she was over with all of that – the drinks, the joints, the inertia, the throbbing and pounding in the head each morning as if she'd been bludgeoned with a medieval flail during the night.

She has to face three things: one, Tony's definitely an evil influence; two, she doesn't have any will power; three, she has to change her lifestyle, and fast. She feels herself slowly disintegrating, drifting, slipping, sinking into an abyss.

She wonders about Tony. Right now he must be showing his paintings to Fifi Santos. She hopes that's the only thing he's showing him and that the meeting will turn out all right, otherwise Tony will be moody and irritable for the rest of the month. All that Italian/Lebanese blood doesn't help. Daniella likes his cave-dweller intensity, but sometimes he gets so impossible she feels smothered.

A sudden squawk forces Daniella to open her eyes. For a second she thinks it's the fire alarm, but it's just Professor Vazquez.

"God is dead!" Professor Vazquez vehemently says, a glitter of insanity in her eyes. "Religion has lost its meaning and power over people and can no longer serve as the foundation of moral values. The time has come for people to critically examine their traditional values and the origins of these values. It's time for people to realize that religion is an invention of mankind to control the masses!" The woman hits the wooden stick so hard against the blackboard that the stick breaks in half.

Daniella blinks. She feels so feverish she doesn't even know what the professor is talking about. Maybe she has malaria. Oh, yes. Nietzsche – the women-hater who wrote *The Antichrist* and later died of syphilis. When Daniella decided to minor in philosophy she thought it would be a mind-broadening experience. She thought she would have a higher understanding of God and the universe, but listening to these professors – Daniella often refers to them as little Qaddaffis – is just like having joined a secret terrorist organization.

Sunstruck

Forty-five minutes later the class is over and Daniella and Mari Carmen walk out of the muggy classroom toward Daniella's car. It's burning hot outside, but at least there's a breeze. Mari Carmen—a philosophy major with radical ideas who's in love with a priest—is her closest friend at the university. Daniella doesn't know for sure if the priest story is true, but Mari Carmen claims it is.

Daniella's car is a seven-year-old parrot-yellow Volkswagen with a slight dent on the front right-hand side (Tony insists it wasn't his fault). She's thinking of selling it and buying a jeep, maybe paint it pink or checkerboard pattern, but for some reason keeps putting it off. Everything seems difficult these days. The prospect of going to the bathroom cabinet, putting acetone on a wad of cotton and wiping off her nail polish, for instance, is a daunting experience. The other day she was too lazy to get up and pee in the middle of the night; she fell asleep with an annoyingly full bladder for company. She makes a mental note to buy a bottle of multi-vitamins.

Once inside the car, Mari Carmen says, "I really appreciate this, Daniella. I mean it. I know you're not feeling very well today." Dark hair, big dark eyes, short and cute; everyone tells Mari Carmen she looks like a young Paula Abdul.

Daniella turns on the ignition. "What happened to your car?"

"The water pump blew up. It'll be ready tomorrow morning."

Daniella drives through the university gates and turns on the air conditioner. She lowers her head to it and lets out an exaggerated sigh.

"You're lucky," Mari Carmen says, rummaging inside her bag. "My air conditioner isn't working." She extracts a pack of Marlboros, puts one cigarette into her mouth and one into Daniella's. Soon the front part of the car is filled with acrid puffs of smoke. Mari Carmen leans back against the seat and says, "I really don't know what's going to happen. I'm really confused. I know he feels something for me, I can feel it, but he just won't open up to me. It's all platonic. He still doesn't know I'm a communist and an atheist. I haven't told him."

"Are you a *communist*, or just a socialist?"

“Why are you changing the subject with inane questions?”

“That’s the second time in two days someone mentions to me the word communist. I thought communism was truly dead.”

Mari Carmen snorts. “Here I am in emotional torture and all you can think about is communism What am I going to do?”

Daniella remains silent. It’s not that she doesn’t want to help, but what on earth does Mari Carmen expect her to say? Trying to concentrate on the road is hard enough. *I’m taking Mari Carmen to this park in Guaynabo so that she can play squash with her beloved priest.*

Daniella feels as if she’s unknowingly taking part in some huge dark conspiracy. She wonders what the priest looks like. Symphony No. 9 from last night still fresh in her mind, she imagines him resembling Beethoven. Small penetrating eyes, long unruly hair ala Albert Einstein.

Daniella says, “How did you fall in love with a priest, anyway? I mean, how can a devoted atheist like you fall in love with someone who represents the opposite of your beliefs and ideas?”

“I’ve told you a million times. His legs.”

“I’m serious!”

“Don’t you know any physics? The law of magnets? You’ll like him when you meet him. He’s a modern priest. He loves rock n’ roll and he wears those necklaces made of shells, you know, the kind surfers wear. He’s also pretty confused about the world. If I work hard on him, I might be able to convert him.”

“I wonder what a psychologist would say about this. You sound as though all you want is to prove your power over your enemy. The possibility of converting a priest to atheism and communism fills you with a feeling of conquest.”

“I’ll tell him everything today,” Mari Carmen says, ignoring Daniella’s remark. “After the game, I’ll tell him everything.”

Sunstruck

Daniella takes a last drag on her cigarette and crushes it in the little trash compartment. She's not going to waste her energies giving advice to Mari Carmen because Mari Carmen is too mulish to take any.

"I saw those pamphlets going around the classrooms today. Did you have anything to do with them?" Daniella's referring to a bunch of propaganda pamphlets that are being spread around the university. She read one of them out of curiosity and noticed that although the tone of the writing is almost poetic, the message is clear: *Let's Cry Bloody Revolution!*

Mari Carmen makes a weary gesture with her hands. "Oh, that."

"Then you *do* have something to do with them."

"I wrote them." She sounds proud.

"Damn it, Mari Carmen. You're going to get into trouble with all that underground business of yours."

Mari Carmen lets out a short, sarcastic laugh. "As long as I keep up with my propaganda, I won't have to worry about flunking any of my courses. My radical ideas and my direct collaboration with the movement are my ticket out of the university with a Magna Cum Laude. I won't even have to worry about finding a job."

"What in God's name are you talking about? What movement? You're paranoid! There aren't any communists left these days. They're just socialists! You're hallucinating. I'm really worried about you."

"And I'm worried about *you*."

Tony, Ismael, Lady Dracula, Mari Carmen. Daniella feels surrounded by ghastly meat-eating creatures from the Mesozoic Era. And the worst thing is that she doesn't know what to do about it.

I'm running inside a dark tunnel, searching for the light at the end of it, but suspecting all along that the tunnel is endless and that I'll never see the light. Maybe what Tony had was a psychic dream. Maybe we're all in this big amusement park, surrounded by beautiful hotels and palm trees and old Spanish fortresses and bananas and coquíes. Everything deceptively innocent, like Lady Dracula's iron maiden, but we really have to fight for our lives, protect ourselves from the half-human half-animal

mutants that lurk in every corner, relentlessly waiting to sink their bloody fangs into their next victim's throat. But then, maybe we're nothing but human guinea pigs in this full-scale cold-blooded experiment conducted by God.

Daniella's thoughts are interrupted by the roar of an engine. She turns her head and looks through the window and sees a nun on a motorcycle. The nun, wearing a long white robe and black sunglasses like Tom Cruise's in *Risky Business*, grins at Daniella and then speeds away, leaving a cloud of carbon monoxide and dust behind her.

For a second Daniella's so stunned she passes a red light. No, she's not hallucinating. That nun is Sister Estela, the same nun who years ago, in front of all her classmates, slapped Daniella hard on the face for refusing to participate in a folkloric dance on the school's yearly Christmas show.

Chapter 4

The scrawny-looking man, flashlight in hand, squints into the darkness and feels his pulse racing. Like a broken record, the incessant screech of coquíes and exotic insects lull him into a semi-hypnotic state. The strong black coffee he's just had isn't making any effect. The splitting headache isn't helping, either. He has the impression the dense vegetation around him is trying to suffocate him. He once had the same feeling when, at his ex-girlfriend's apartment, he'd woken up from a nap with her one-hundred pound Labrador sitting on top of his face. Maybe even fleas had jumped into his mouth... Oh yes, and also when that incredibly fat woman squashed him at the hotel during Hurricane Hugo. Maybe that's his destiny – getting squashed and smothered by heavy living organisms.

Melancholy filling his soul, he remembers his ex-girlfriend. Then, remembering what she did to him, he turns mean, his thin colorless lips turning into a little line like those seen on drawings of aliens.

The hell with her!

He must stop thinking about her, about his present and quite fatalistic situation. Nothing will cure him, nothing will eradicate the ominous disease spreading through his body, like a swamp slowly pulling him into the greenish, impious muck beneath.

And now he's here, again. Looking for those damn things. Deep in the forest in the middle of the night, amidst vile snakes, weird insects with malicious sets of miniature razor-sharp teeth and alert, intelligent eyes.

Just a minute ago he came upon an insect so human-like in its arms and legs, he can swear it was a praying mantis. The treacherous thing was standing up, in the process of embracing a mate. He felt a sense of urgency, wanting to warn the unfortunate lover that a terrible fate awaited it. But the praying mantis – the female, no doubt – abruptly turned its head and shot him a venomous, threatening look. Who says nature is beautiful? That's crazy. It's

savage and violent. Though it's true he would have liked to be that praying mantis and eat his ex-girlfriend alive. That would somewhat appease his murderous thoughts.

Well, at least he's getting paid a little fortune for his mission and secrecy, which he intends to spend fast, considering his predicament. Also, he likes his khaki army suit. It makes him feel as if he were re-enacting a scene in a famous war movie.

He glances over his shoulder, wondering why the rest of the men have stayed so far behind. They should stay close together, just in case something happens. Anything is possible in this hostile environment at this time of the night. Though he can still hear their distant voices now and then, he becomes afraid. In fact, a bizarre sensation takes possession of him.

He suddenly feels a subtle caress at the back of his neck.

"What the—" abruptly he swings around, but there's nothing behind him.

Could it be his imagination? The power of suggestion? He's been edgy lately, ever since he found all those bottles in the Carlier refrigerator. Who wouldn't be? The sight of them sent a jolt of high voltage through him.

A throaty whisper paralyzes him.

"Who's there?"

The monotone chorus of coquíes and the erratic squeak of insects are what he gets for an answer.

"Hey, stop the crap, guys! It's not funny!" But even as he says this, he suspects it wasn't them.

He also realizes he can't hear the group anymore. Where the hell are they? Where did they go?

He decides to turn back, but his flashlight comes face to face with a strange black object hanging from a branch of a tree. A big black bulk without any apparent shape. Not animal, not human.

Fascinated, he slowly takes a few steps forward to have a better look.

As he examines it, two great black wings unfold from the thing, exposing a hideous cadaverous body hanging upside-down and a very familiar face.

Sunstruck

His scream reverberates on a one-mile radius, sending all kinds of nightly creatures back into their dwellings. Even the coquíes momentarily shut up.

But the scream doesn't last long.

Soon he's in her arms. The wings have been miraculously transformed. She carries him in that romantic fashion: one arm under his back, the other under his bent knees, his head thrown back at an impossible angle.

"Don't worry, little one," the creature says, her voice ancient and husky with lust. "You won't even feel a little sting. And you will forget everything afterwards."

Chapter 5

Okay, so Ismael feels a bit guilty. He's just come from the funeral and he's standing out on the ample terrace of his penthouse apartment staring stupidly at the Atlantic. His right hand is clasping a brandy glass filled with low-fat milk. As if suddenly possessed by an evil, unearthly force, Ismael rushes back into the living room and pours some Bacardi into the milk. He gulps down half of the glass and sighs.

The penthouse is extremely quiet.

For a second Ismael feels himself nailed to the carpeted floor, transfixed. His eyes dart about the room. He turns around and runs back frantically toward the open terrace, a terrified expression on his face. God, how those torturing devices make him nervous! And now that his mother is roaming the streets of Hades....

He can't help feeling nervous and a bit superstitious. After all, his mother, whom he adored and despised at the same time, always claimed to be a genuine clairvoyant, a psychic, a bridge between the upper and the lower worlds. What if she suddenly decides to pay him a little visit? (During the last years of her life his mother often told him that she would appear to him after her death and tickle his feet while he slept.)

God, how he hated her at times! Why couldn't he have a normal childhood and a normal mother? Instead he had a pathetic childhood and a space cadet for a mother. It wasn't enough that his father had eloped with a nightclub stripper to Santo Domingo when he was a toddler and that they lived in poverty. No, he also had to deal with his mother's herbs concoctions, her books about voodoo and witchcraft, her spooky candle rituals, her demented friends, her deranged beliefs about Good and Evil, God and Satan, Heaven and Hell. Let's face it, the woman was a lost case who should have been put to sleep a long time ago. It bewilders Ismael how he didn't turn out to be a woman-hater or a psychotic killer or some other sort of wacko.

Sunstruck

But in spite of it all, he adored her. He adored her on those few occasions when her mind was lucid and human, like when she would fondly tousle his hair and put a few coins in his hand for some candy, or take him down the narrow cobbled streets of Old San Juan and buy him a raspberry *piragiia*. Sometimes she would abruptly draw him to her and hug him fiercely, her eyes staring sadly, hopelessly, desperately right into his.

But these sudden affectionate outbursts of hers were sporadic. Most of the time she was a real witch, a raven with tiny piercing eyes, a very ugly ominous character taken out of some forsaken children's book. And if he never adored her, as he reluctantly suspects, then he adored the idea of her adoring him.

But who the hell can understand the contradictions of human emotions? The point is that Ismael feels a twinge of guilt for having thrown a party right after her death.

The Bacardi warms his blood. He feels calmer now. In fact, he's embarrassed for having run out of the living room like that. Here he is in this eerie but luxurious apartment, the whole blue sea spread out before him like an endless shimmering carpet. He should be laughing hysterically like a hyena. Even the weather is on his side – bright sun, clear sky, clouds like gigantic cotton balls. Not too hot, not too cold, not too breezy. Even the air feels invigorating, with the healthy, salty reek of the sea. There's no doubt about it. God must be pleased with him.

This makes Ismael uneasy. Up until he met Irene, he used to hate God. He hated God because God hadn't blessed him at birth with any artistic talents. This seemed to Ismael cruel and unfair because all he ever wanted out of life was to become the most famous and talented artist in Puerto Rico, maybe in the whole world. Was this asking too much? Well, he has learned to accept his destiny, but this doesn't mean he won't continue with his righteous revenge when it comes to other artists who are striving to make it as he once did.

Ismael glances at his \$5,000 gold Rolex. It's almost one o'clock. He's expecting an important call. The man who's supposed to call him said he'd call at one o'clock.

While waiting for the call, Ismael sits back in a lounge chair and decides to read the newspaper. He doesn't really read the newspaper, only the headlines, but as his hands slip through the pages something quite intriguing catches his attention:

UNUSUAL ATTACK

MARTA ARGUELLO, 27, WAS ATTACKED LAST NIGHT AS SHE WAS ENTERING HER APARTMENT BUILDING IN OCEAN PARK BY A MYSTERIOUS MAN DRESSED AS EL ZORRO. THE ATTACKER, WHO WAS CARRYING A FENCING SABER, SURPRISED MISS ARGUELLO FROM BEHIND AND SLASHED HER BUTTOCKS THREE TIMES IN THE FORM OF A BIG Z. THE VICTIM WAS NOT ABLE TO RECOGNIZE HER ASSAILANT, BUT THE POLICE THINKS HE MAY BE SOME SORT OF LUNATIC WITH A SERIOUS IDENTITY PROBLEM WHO WATCHED EL ZORRO EPISODES FOR FAR TOO LONG DURING HIS CHILDHOOD.

WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE ATTACK, MISS ARGUELLO, PRESENTLY STAYING AT ST. PETER'S HOSPITAL, REPLIED, "I'M JUST GLAD NOTHING REALLY BAD HAPPENED TO ME. OF COURSE, I'LL HAVE A SORE BUTT FOR THE REST OF THE MONTH."

The article reminds Ismael of something, brings something to mind...but what? As he ponders his thoughts, the telephone rings and he instantly forgets about the article. He tosses the newspaper back on the side table and trots excitedly toward the living room. This phone call will determine his future.

Ismael picks up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Señor Carlier?" It's a slow, deliberate voice.

Ismael can feel the adrenaline rushing steadily through his limbs. "What do you have for me?"

Sunstruck

“We spent the whole night in El Yunque. We found an area where it’s full of them.”

“Very well. I want you to start collecting right away. You know what you have to do.”

After Ismael hangs up, his lips slowly spread into a Machiavellian grin. He can’t believe his luck. First Irene marries him. Then his mother dies. And now this. His heart is pounding so violently, as if wanting to blow out and shatter his ribcage. He feels so gleeful. He’ll change into blue jeans and drive to Taco Bell, his favorite restaurant. This time, however, he brings a bottle of Pepto Bismol with him.

Chapter 6

Daniella and her mother, Marcela, are eating pan pizza.

Marcela says, "Take it easy. You're going to choke yourself to death."

"I'm starving!" Daniella says, wolfing down a huge bite of her piece of pizza, which is loaded with mushrooms and green peppers.

Every Friday afternoon Daniella and Marcela meet at La Terraza, in Plaza las Americas, for lunch. It's become a tradition.

"So how was your test?" Marcela asks.

"Please don't ask."

"I was never good with numbers, either."

Marcela is in her middle fifties, plump, homely and sophisticated at the same time. She used to be a redhead (Daniella inherited her red hair from her) but now she dyes her Cleopatra-styled hair a rich glossy chestnut. When it comes to shopping, she's as cunning as a raccoon and takes advantage of what every little store has to offer. For example, she can combine cheap golden hoops from a flea market, designer jeans from a swanky boutique, leather pumps from Kmart, and look spectacular.

Marcela is also a history and archaeology fanatic. Maybe she hates history and archaeology but uses them as a dignified excuse to travel and see the world. After Daniella graduated from high school, Marcela took her on a three-week cruise to Italy, Greece, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt. Her hobbies include eating in restaurants (she loathes cooking), staying at health spas, reading Deepak Chopra's books and retail therapy (her word for shopping). She lives in a nice apartment in Garden Hills and faithfully waits at the end of the month for the generous check that her Cuban ex-husband (Daniella's father) sends her from Miami, where he owns a prestigious jewellery store and lives with his new trophy wife.

Sunstruck

Marcela says, "Where did you say Tony's going to have his paintings shown?" She is holding a glass of all-natural, additives-free, strawberry-carob shake. She sucks greedily from the straw.

"At Fifi's Gallery. It's a new gallery. It just opened five months ago. Tony said Fifi Santos was impressed with his paintings. I'll let you know the date so we can go together." Daniella grimaces. She's eaten so fast she can hardly breathe. She takes a sip of her Coke Zero to wash down all the Italian sauce stuck on the walls of her esophagus.

"Well, let's just hope that you're not stuck with another loser this time. I can't understand your obsession with losers, although I have a theory."

Daniella frowns. "What?"

"And not only losers, but *older* losers..." Marcela goes on, ignoring Daniella's question. "And they both are very tall and have long dark hair, though Tony is tanned and Ismael as white as a cloud on a sunny day."

"What's your theory?"

Marcela sighs. "I have to admit that Tony is a very handsome and sexy loser. Will Ismael be reviewing Tony's paintings? What if he gives him a bad review? Have you thought about that? You know what happened to Marta Gomez, don't you? Ismael gave her such a terrible review that she took an overdose of birth-control pills and they had to pump her stomach. Ismael said her mosaics were just as bad as Sylvester Stallone's dialogues in the movies. In other words, he called her mosaics the mindless creation of a moron."

"I'm hoping Ismael will be human about this. His wife is the one who introduced Tony to Fifi Santos in the first place."

"Why does that man have a dog's name?" Marcela shakes her head, bewildered, the golden hoops wobbling in her ears as she speaks. "I'm going on Monday to that spa I told you about. I'll spend the night there and clean my system of impurities. I'm going to take the big plunge and have a coffee enema. I was watching a documentary the other night and they said that by the time the average person is in his middle fifties, she has five pounds of rotten, undigested meat inside the colon. Can you believe that? A clean colon is a clean

mind. I'm not going to mess around with my intestines. Damn it, Daniella, this pizza's really tasty."

Daniella gives her mother a wan smile and wipes her mouth with a paper napkin. She opens her bag and takes out her compact and plum lipstick.

As usual on Fridays, La Terraza is filled with people eating and drinking and ordering their meals and carrying their trays and searching for empty tables and cackling their brains out. A huge hencoop.

Daniella glances at a nearby table and sees an old couple having an argument. If you add the ages of the two people, you get more than a hundred and sixty.

"I told you to put bars behind that air conditioner, but you never listen to me. You've never listened to me, you stupid ape," the old woman says.

She seems furious. She stares at the old man in front of her as if she can't believe that she's sitting there staring at the old man in front of her. "All my jewellery gone. All the beautiful jewellery my mother gave me – because that's the only jewellery I ever got, the one my mother gave me. I didn't even get a wedding ring from you, you ugly ape," the old woman bitterly says.

The old man, busy with an oil-dripping soggy hamburger, isn't paying much attention to her. "Shut up and eat," he says.

Suddenly the old woman slaps the old man hard on the face and gets up. "This time I mean it. I'm leaving you. I hope you rot in hell. You'll hear soon from my lawyers," the old woman says, and walks off with a can of Diet Dr. Pepper. For a second the old man looks lost and stupefied, but soon he goes back to his hamburger.

"Are you going to buy something today?" Daniella says, turning back to her mother. She smears the lipstick carefully across her lips.

Marcela's eyes widen with the prospect of successful shopping. "Let's look around. I want to buy you something."

"I don't need anything."

"Of course you do. You can't live with just jeans and men's undershirts. People will think there's something wrong with you."

Sunstruck

"I don't care what people think. Besides, I do plenty of shopping from EBay." Come to think of it, ordering things she doesn't need from EBay is her most exciting activity.

Marcela sighs. "Retail therapy is fine, but you have to grow up, Daniella. You're still that little girl who stole that golden medallion from Sister Margarita's office."

Daniella bites her lower lip to suppress a little mischievous smile. She would have liked to blow up the entire convent with a time bomb, but she was afraid of being convicted with premeditated murder.

Daniella can remember it so clearly. One corner of Sister Margarita's office was staged like the scene from a pirate movie. There was a huge brass and burgundy leather chest, wide open and laden with all kinds of bright colorful stones and jewels. There even was a scrawny skeleton with a red pirate hat thrown over the chest. And the golden medallion. The golden medallion was the most beautiful of all the jewels, so alluring and mysterious Daniella believed it had once been cursed by some ancient mythological witch. Maybe by Circe, the Greek witch, whose favorite hobby was to turn men into pigs. Daniella could sympathize with Circe.

One day, during lunch hour, Daniella sneaked into the nun's office, snatched the medallion from the chest and stuffed it into her panties. No one in the school ever noticed that the medallion had vanished.

"The medallion was just sitting there. Anyway, I was just eleven years old and I never again stole anything again in my life," Daniella says.

"I don't know. You've always been so rebellious." She starts retouching her makeup. "Yes, I know. The divorce. Your crappy father taking off. You were just a little kid. But that happens to thousands of other kids and they don't turn out as rebellious as you. Normal children aren't fixated on pirates, you know."

As a child, Daniella's favorite heroes had all been famous pirates. Barbarossa. Sir Francis Drake. Blackbeard. Even the ferocious l'Ollonois, who literally used to eat his enemies' hearts raw. She loved anything that had to do with pirates. The skull with the crossbones – how lovely! Daniella suspects that

this fascination with piracy is in some way related to what happened to her during that lunch hour, when she broke one of His commandments and became a one-day medallion thief.

“For what is worth, last night Tony called me Madre Teresa.”

“Are you using Tony as a reference?” But she smiles and pats her daughter’s hand. “I know you’re a good girl. And the best daughter a mother could ask for.”

There’s a moment of silence.

Warmth fills Daniella’s heart. “You’re not going to believe this,” she says, “but the other day I saw Sister Estela riding a motorcycle.”

Marcela shrugs. “Maybe she just slipped out of the convent for a six-pack.”

“Something’s wrong with the human species.”

“If you ask me, it’s all those additives and carcinogens and preservatives they put into food. They’re slowly annihilating us. That’s one of the reasons I’m going to have that coffee enema. You have to stop smoking, Daniella. You have to stop smoking and drinking and eating all that junk food and putting into your body whatever else you’re putting into it, which I suspect isn’t doing you an ounce of good. Look at me. I had this pizza today, but you know that most of the times I really watch what I eat.”

Daniella hopes her mother doesn’t turn into a health nut like Ismael’s wife. She knows that loneliness sometimes drives her mother to extremes; loneliness can drive anybody to extremes. Like five years ago, when Marcela joined some sort of secret feminist club and believed God to be a woman and referred to men in general as “male specimens”. Marcela terminated her three-month membership after she realized that the place was really a depraved club for women with alternative lifestyles.

Or later on when her fanatic neighbor took advantage of her during one of her depressions and got her mixed up with their religion. But her involvement with them only lasted a few months. At the time Marcela was looking for some kind of comforting strength and meaning in her life, but it wasn’t exactly the

Sunstruck

comforting strength and meaning that a religion that hoaxes their members into giving away their money has to offer.

Yes, it's difficult living alone. No husband, no boyfriend. Of course, she has her girlfriends, but it's not the same because even though she goes out with them and has a good time during the day, she always ends up sleeping alone at night on a cold king-size bed. Daniella wishes her mother would get married again, but every time Daniella approaches her with the subject Marcela cuts her off with wave of her hand and says that it's better to be alone than in bad company.

In a way, Daniella admires her mother. She fervently wishes she could be free of men forever and live by herself in a quiet place with just Commando and her books for company. Like Jung, maybe built herself a round tower in the middle of nowhere with a room for meditation. All by herself in bliss. In the long run it would probably be unhealthy, but that's what she would like.

I'm twenty four, but I really don't know who or what I am. What childish questions, aren't they? How unsophisticated. Even naïve. But maybe this is because I've never lived alone. I've never been by myself. Up until I graduated from high school I let my mother lead my life and tell me what to do. Then I was possessed by an incredible urge to do something crazy and defiant and I married Ismael, an untalented artist eleven years older than me who didn't even have enough money to buy his own paints.

He was sweet but manipulative and I let him shove me around like a Raggedy Ann. This lasted three years. I believe he must have cast some sort of spell over me because I can't understand how on earth we lasted three years. I got a job selling lingerie at Sears, then as a cafeteria hostess for one of the big hotels in El Condado. I worked, and while I worked Ismael was my faithful parasite, sucking on me.

My mother would always help me with money so I supported Ismael and gave him money to buy paints for the paintings that would never get sold nor exhibited, and also for his grass. Occasionally our apartment would be so filled with marijuana smoke even Commando would get high. It defies my intelligence how I lay immune to the garbage.

Then the divorce. It took a tremendous effort from my part to tell him good-bye for good, but I managed it. After the divorce I should have stayed living alone in my

apartment, be by myself and think things through and plan my future, but instead I moved again with my mother and the restlessness and depression started all over again.

I can't understand why I felt like this because I really like my mother, but the fact is that I began feeling restless and depressed all over again. I guess the best thing that happened during that time was that I decided to quit my job at the hotel – it's extremely difficult to keep your chastity when you work at a big hotel – and join the Architecture School at the university. The studies and the responsibility and the prospect of earning a degree calmed me down for a while like a nice warm shower after a long and difficult day.

Then came Tony. I suspect God doesn't like me very much because every time I seem to be getting out of a hole, He throws dirt and sand over it so I'll slip down again. I met Tony at one of those bars in Old San Juan where all the students from the Fine Arts School hang out. There he was in his mid thirties, a man of the world, so tall and dark and enigmatic-looking I felt giddy with puppy love. His huge eyes, light brown and flecked with gold specks and surrounded by lashes that look like dark Spanish fans, and his Adam's apple, moving up and down his throat as he swallowed, made me weak in the knees.

I must have been pretty desperate because the next thing I know I'm looking for an apartment and Tony's moving in with me and introducing me to LSD (he's kind of old-fashioned when it comes to drugs). I wasn't interested in the drug (in fact, I had heard enough things about it to be terrified of it), and this seemed to heighten his attraction for me a hundredfold.

I never seem to make a good choice when it comes to men. I always choose the wrong ones. Maybe I unconsciously want to be destroyed so I can later say that someone else destroyed me, but I know I'm just deceiving myself. I myself am my own destroyer.

After leaving La Terraza, Daniella and Marcela spend the rest of the afternoon doing some retail therapy. As usual, Daniella gets Commando a present: one of those rubber mice that whistle when you squeeze them.

Out in the parking lot, on the way to their cars, Daniella tells her mother the secret of Commando's obesity.

Sunstruck

"I have been suspecting this for a long time. I mean, there's no way a cat can get so fat on only one meal a day."

"What happened?" Marcela asks.

"I printed some flyers with Commando's picture on it—"

"Which picture?"

"I don't know. One of them. He's just sitting there. You can see his magnificent roundness—"

"Then what happened?"

"I'm trying to tell you. What's your rush?"

"Okay, okay."

Daniella sighs, somehow exhausted. "What was I saying?"

"His fat picture."

"Yeah, well. Under his picture I simply wrote: *IF YOU ARE FEEDING THIS CAT, PLEASE CALL*, and then I wrote my phone number. I spent an entire afternoon putting the flyers everywhere. Well, the phone wouldn't stop ringing that night. It turns out the whole neighborhood on a one-mile radius was feeding him!"

Marcela smirks. "Clever cat." She stops. "God, my feet are killing me. My car is that way."

"Mine is that way." Daniella points in the opposite direction. "Hey..."

"Yes?" Marcela asks, struggling with the shopping bags while rummaging inside her purse for the car keys.

"What's your theory?"

Daniella thinks her mother will once again find a way to veer the conversation away. Instead, she stares intently at Daniella. "You're sunstruck."

Chapter 7

In the twilight, the street is quiet and deserted. After a hard aerobic workout at her local health club, Marina Carranza is on the way to her car, parked several yards away. She feels energized, and infused with ugly thoughts. She walks briskly, swaying her generous hips from side to side, proudly displaying her body in a pink tank top and mini skirt. On her neck, wrists and fingers, gold glitters. On her left ring finger, a three-carat princess-cut diamond sparkles. From her shoulder hangs a trendy sport bag.

“I’ll show them,” she mumbles, smiling sadistically to herself. The two brats, her stepchildren, think they can get away with anything. Think they can brainwash and poison her new husband’s mind against her. Steal his love, his constant attention. Always whining about their dead mami. Waking her up in the middle of the night because they want to sleep with papi, because they’re afraid of the dark, of their closet doors, of their dolls’ eyes...

The spoilt brats! How dare they interrupt her beauty sleep! She won’t allow their sweet Alice in Wonderland faces to fool her. She’s had all she can take. But *she’ll* show them. Boarding school in Timbaktu, that’s what they need. She’ll sweetly, very very sweetly, tell her husband tonight. She knows her artillery and strategy just as Napoleon knew his.

Marina sighs, already feeling better. She quickens her pace. Even after the strenuous exercise, her Puma shoes comfort her feet. Paying over a hundred dollars for them was worth it. The only problem with these shoes is that the laces on her right foot keep unfastening.

Instead of crouching, as most people would do, she takes her time in bending over completely to tie the laces, displaying her award-winning bottom to full advantage.

While her fingers work, she mentally starts to plan the evening meal. Meat loaf, yes – the brats hate it – meat loaf, rare, with lots of gravy –

From the corner of her eye she sees a flash of black...

The next thing she knows, her rear end is on fire.

Sunstruck

Letting out a wild scream, she spins around, only to encounter a darkly-clad, masked figure holding a saber tipped with blood.

“Zorro!” she breathes, cupping her rear end with both hands to make sure her prized cheeks are still in place. “*Dios mio!* Help! Help!”

But the darkly-clad figure grins, swirls around with flair and is soon gone, the infamous black cape undulating in the soothing tropical breeze.

Chapter 8

When Daniella steps out of the shower she finds Tony throwing a big spoon of Nesquik into a glass of milk. He begins to stir the milk desperately, as if he can't wait to drink it.

"How's the painting going?" Daniella says. She's wrapped in a bright green towel and her long damp hair smells of apples-and-cinnamon shampoo.

Tony glances at Daniella. "You smell like apple pie," he says. He tilts his head back and noisily gulps the chocolate milk like a barbarian.

It's Wednesday night and even though both windows are open, the air feels hot and muggy inside the apartment.

Commando is sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the passersby on the street with a disdainful expression on his face. He seems to be thinking, "I used to be sacred, you simple ordinary mortals. Three thousand years ago people used to pay me tribute at the Temple of Bubastes. Those were the days of glory! I used to be revered and adored and adorned with precious stones and mummified and buried with kings."

Commando throws Daniella a quick, resentful look. Ever since Daniella gave him that rubber mouse, two weeks ago, Commando has been acting funny. Daniella believes she hurt his feelings when she gave him that rubber mouse. Commando had looked at it with an incredulous, insulted look on his face. Daniella had clearly read the indignation in his eyes: "What do you think I am? Stupid? You think I can't tell the difference between a real and a synthetic mouse?" But Daniella hadn't wanted to hurt his feelings. She had just wanted him to have a rubber mouse.

"I don't know," Tony says, putting the empty glass in the sink and going back to his surrealist painting, propped up on a worn wooden easel in the middle of his incredibly messy work area. From where Daniella stands his work area is so messy it's almost frightening – a sharp contrast to the rest of the studio, which she keeps spotless and reeking of Lysol. Daniella suspects this dual, surreal state of her apartment symbolizes her life.

Sunstruck

Tony squints into the canvas. He grabs the palette and brush from the table and once again submerges himself in his work.

“What do you think?” he whispers, not caring in the least for an answer. He’s wearing nothing but white jockey shorts and white socks.

Fifi Santos is going to exhibit Tony’s paintings this weekend. That’s why Tony has been working frantically during the nights for the past week. He’s also been edgy and annoying. Okay, so an art exhibit can bring a lot of stress and pressure into your life, but that doesn’t mean you have to act like a Neanderthal.

Daniella herself has been working on an important project for her design class. She’s designing a huge modern shopping center, nine stories high, with inner gardens and water fountains and a big roller-skating rink. There’s even a skyscraping tower built in the center of it, with a gambling casino, a bar, and restaurant at the top. The walls of the tower are made of glass so that people can see the view as they go up inside the elevator, but outside, the entire structure is painted in a Day-Glo pink-and-black checkerboard pattern.

“An ambitious task, no doubt,” her professor had said.

Daniella had scowled at him. It’s a disadvantage to be in a class where there are only four females and more than thirty males. If you’re of normal intelligence, they condescend and patronize you like you’re some sort of pet who dared to dream too high. But if you prove you have above-average brains, it’s even worse. You become a sociological curiosity. She’s still trying to figure out in what category she’s in.

Daniella’s stomach is making strange persistent noises. She opens the refrigerator and studies the possibilities. A half-eaten bag of nacho chips, a jar of mustard, a small bowl with some kind of unrecognizable, mouldy food in it, two cans of Budweiser, a box of Cocoa Crispies, a plate of hummus Tony made yesterday, some orange juice. She would like to eat the hummus but there’s no pita bread and she can’t eat hummus without pita bread.

“There’s nothing here,” she says, not surprised.

She reaches for the box of Cocoa Crispies, but when she pops a handful into her mouth she notices they're not crispy anymore. She's supposed to meet Mari Carmen and some friends from the university at El Patio de Sam at eight-thirty. She'll have to stop at the supermarket on her way back. There's one in El Condado that's open till midnight.

Trying to forget about her hunger, she takes her underwear out of the freezer and starts getting dressed (got the idea from a Marilyn Monroe film — an ingenious way to fight the heat!) She'll eat something out.

She glances at Tony and frowns. She can't help feeling a twinge of envy. She wishes she could concentrate on her studies as much as he concentrates on his paintings. When he paints, the world stops rotating. Right now he isn't even aware she's in the room. Yes, she has to give him credit for that. He's hardworking. All day long struggling with *Los Chinitos*, all night long struggling with surrealist nightmares. He even swims at the beach and does some mild weight lifting a few times a week. If it weren't for the drugs, he'd be a saint.

"I'll stop at the supermarket on my way back. Do you want anything special?" she says when she's ready to leave, her hand clasped around the doorknob.

After what seems like an eternity, Tony grunts, "Huh?"

"I asked you if you want anything special. I'm going to buy some stuff on the way back."

He looks up at her. Suddenly he seems surprised, as if she's an apparition from the lower world. "*Where* are you going?"

"I can't believe this. I told you three times. You were not listening to me."

Tony tries to run a hand through his hair, but his hair is so tangled the attempt is unsuccessful. "I was listening to you."

Daniella folds her arms across her chest. "All right. Where am I going?"

Tony grins. He doesn't have an idea where she's going. He puts the palette and brush back on the table — he's back on planet earth. He says, "Okay, okay."

Sunstruck

You win. I wasn't listening to you. I know I'm an ass. Now can you tell me where you're going dressed like that?"

"What do you mean?" She's wearing a jade-green mini dress and high-heeled black pumps, her brandy-carrot hair falling like a long satin cape down her back.

"I mean where are you going dressed like that? Don't you know that wearing clothes like that at night can be damn dangerous? We're not in Disneyland. Don't you read the papers? Are you trying to get yourself raped and killed or what?"

He looks like he's getting angry, which in a way pleases Daniella because it shows that he cares for her, but in another way mortifies her because it shows that he's deeply influenced by the chauvinist pigs of Latin America.

"There's nothing wrong with what I'm wearing," Daniella protests. "How come all of the sudden you're so interested in what I'm wearing or where I'm going? Five minutes ago you were hardly aware of my existence."

Tony sighs. "Are you going to tell me where you're going or not?"

Commando seems to realize there's more action going on inside the room than out on the street. He jumps down from the window sill and leaps up on the bed, settling himself on one of the pillows. Apparently elated with this new turn of events, his odd-colored eyes shift from Tony to Daniella, from Tony to Daniella. He yawns.

"I'm going to El Patio de Sam," Daniella snaps. "Mari Carmen is waiting for me."

"Mari Carmen can go to hell. What's wrong with you? Don't you read the papers? There's some nut loose slashing women's asses." He rummages around the room for the newspaper, but his efforts prove futile. "Damn it! You can't find anything in this damn place."

Daniella wants to tell him that if he can't find anything it's because of his continuous messiness, but instead she keeps her mouth shut.

"This damn place is filled with cat hairs. No wonder I feel so worn down all the time. I'm inhaling and eating cat hairs. And that cat is Turkish. Do you

know what caused the bubonic plague in Europe?" He puts his hands on his hips and stares at Daniella, demanding an answer.

Daniella stares back at him, perplexed. What does the bubonic plague have to do with what they're talking?

He answers his own question triumphantly. "Turkish rats! That's what caused the bubonic plague. Turkish rats!" He finally collapses on the bed and starts rubbing his forehead.

Daniella shakes her head. "You look ridiculous, talking about Turkish rats in your underwear. And when was the last time you shaved, anyway? You look like a terrorist. I'm going. I'll see you later."

"Wait!" Tony says, suddenly seeing the newspaper tucked under the pillow where Commando is sitting. "It's here, I found it." He tries to reach for it, but Commando gives him an icy, threatening hiss, forcing Tony to pull back his hand.

"I can't believe this is happening. And he's sitting on *my* pillow. I'm going to have that paper, you son of a bitch," Tony says. He snatches the newspaper from under the pillow just in time to see one furious paw with five sharp claws coming at him. "Shit! I'm going to kill you, you son of a bitch!"

Commando swiftly jumps down from the bed and Tony starts swatting him about the room.

"Stop it! Are you crazy?" Daniella says, blocking Tony's way in order to protect Commando.

"Look at my hand! It's the hundredth time that cat scratches me! I'm going to kill him!"

"If you do something to that cat, I'm the one who's going to kill *you*. Look at yourself. You're acting hysterical." She examines his hand. "It's nothing, Tony. Just a little scratch. Do you want some orange juice? I'll bring you some juice. And I hate it when you talk like that. You know I can't stand foul language."

"I don't want any orange juice. Bring me a beer."

"Juice would be a lot better."

Sunstruck

"I said I want a *beer*, Madre Teresa."

Daniella scowls.

Tony snickers. He can feel the small wound on his hand stinging, throbbing. He can see it clearly, the ferocious battle going on inside his body. Thousands of microbes and other single-cell organisms rushing into his bloodstream and shouting "divide and conquer!" and some of his cells, the brave ones, attacking the nasty intruders, the others running away like cowards. Human beings are so defenceless. No fangs. No claws. No fur. Only a squashy, flabby, slimy, disgusting-to-look-at mass of grey cells floating inside their heads. Good for what? Thinking about sex and nuclear weapons.

Daniella hands him the beer and in less than fifteen seconds Tony drains the whole can.

"This is the reward I get for trying to protect you – being attack by a deranged cat that probably has rabies."

"You know he doesn't have rabies."

"You should see the way he acts when you're not here. I'm telling you, he only pretends to be good in your presence. When I'm alone he takes pleasure in hiding and attacking my leg when I walk by. The animal is diabolically possessed, I tell you! Or at least brain-damaged."

"Will you listen to yourself?" She raises her eyebrows. "You were really trying to protect me?"

"Look at this." He shows her the newspaper.

Daniella reads the headlines: *ZORRO STRIKES AGAIN!*

"This is the third time in three weeks and the victims were all wearing mini skirts at the time of the attack. The stitches they put on the third victim – a rich lady who was out from a health club on her way to her car – got infected and she's suing the whole damn hospital. They say she won't be able to sit for months and she'll be permanently scarred for life. I don't want any lunatic slashing your –"

"Stop whining!"

“On top of that, young girls seem to be disappearing everywhere and no one knows why. This island is degenerating into Hell itself.”

“Since when are you so concerned about other people? No one’s going to do anything to me.” She tosses the newspaper back on the bed. “Really, Tony. I can’t let an article in the newspaper tell me how to dress. I like mini skirts. In most parts of the world women wear mini skirts and live to see their grandchildren.” She starts toward the door. “I’m going to El Patio de Sam and I’ll have a nice time with my friend and then I’ll stop at the market. If you’re always so worn down is because of malnutrition, not because of any cat hairs.”

“Mari Carmen is radical. I can’t imagine what you two talk about. You have nothing in common.”

“Just like you and I, Tony darling?” she asks sweetly.

Tony sighs. “Don’t go.”

I turn around. There he is, standing in his underwear in the middle of the room with his arms extended toward me, a pleading, puppy-like look in his eyes. I should ignore him, teach him a lesson and walk out the door. But I just linger here. And then he takes advantage of my momentary confusion and slowly begins to approach me, like a cat stalking a bird. With one hand he pulls me toward him and with the other he curls a lock of my hair around his finger. He rubs his cheek against mine and I feel the scratchy stiffness of his beard and smell the musky scent of his flesh. I must be in a trance because I feel as though I’m not here. I mean, I’m here but I’m not here.

“Don’t go,” Tony whispers.

“Why should I stay here? So that you can go back to your painting and ignore me?”

“I won’t ignore you, I promise. And the painting is almost finished. After I’m done with it we’ll cuddle up in bed and watch TV. There’s a horror movie tonight.”

“Even if I don’t meet Mari Carmen, I still have to get some food. We don’t have anything to eat.”

“Okay, go and get some wine and beer and when you get back we’ll have a little party. What do you say?”

Sunstruck

"We need some *food*, Tony." Daniella peers into his eyes, uneasy. Lately Tony never wants to eat solid food and has manipulated her again with his luring, animal charms.

"Whatever you say, little fox. Bring some Ben & Jerry's, cookie dough."

When Daniella comes back from the supermarket she finds Tony sprawled on the bed and Commando stretched out on top of his stomach, placidly licking his paws.

Tony props himself up on his elbows. His pupils are fixed and dilated and strangely glittery. He looks comatose.

Daniella stands by the door, paralyzed, each arm holding a bag of groceries. The stereo is playing Metallica and on the TV an old woman is stabbing a man in the chest with a pair of knitting needles.

Tony smiles and raises an arm towards her. He's offering her something. She can't see what it is but she knows what it is.

"Would you like a one-way ticket to hell?" he says.

Chapter 9

X reads the newspaper article for the twentieth time and smiles.

X never thought there would be so much publicity.

X mumbles, "El Zorro." That's funny, actually. El Zorro... El

Zooooooooooooooooo...!

X is reasonably pleased. Three victims in three weeks. But there's so much more to be done. Next one must be an important personage, a woman of fathom.

X knows who the next one will be. Perfect.

X is intelligent enough to realize that in this inert, narcotic island a drastic change is needed to awaken the female species into reason. Not a revolution. Just something like a punch in the stomach to snap things up.

X's thoughts are interrupted by excited squealing voices out on the street.

X leans out the window. A bunch of kids dressed like punks are harassing a dog.

X is overtaken by a jolt of anger. X cannot stand injustice. "Hey, you, leave that dog alone!"

What X thought were children dressed like punks are not really children dressed like punks but a bunch of grown-up dwarfs dressed like punks. One of the dwarfs – head completely shaved, phosphorescent pink glasses – responds with an indecent gesture. The dwarfs scatter off in all directions like a handful of marbles scattered to the floor. The dog growls at X, foamy drool dripping from its mouth, its eyes unwavering and bloodshot, its canines sharp and covered with a thick film of plaque.

X mutters, "Incredible, what the world is coming to."

X goes back inside, picks up the newspaper and once again reads the article.

X takes a deep breath, sighs. As the saying goes, so much to do, so little time.

Chapter 10

Tony isn't exactly ignorant. He studied at the Fine Arts School for four years, majored in painting, earned a bachelor's degree. He isn't exactly a Cro-Magnon, right? It's just that sometimes the whole world gets on his nerves. You know, like when other artists, artists who are famous, try to tell him that there's something wrong with his paintings. Who the hell are they to tell him what's right and wrong? The way Tony sees it, there isn't an absolute right and wrong. It's all in the mind.

Like when he was at school. His teachers, most of them known artists themselves, were always trying to tell him what to do and how to do it, which styles to follow, which artists to imitate. Every time Tony showed signs of originality they would give him that look that says, "If you want nice grades at the end of the course, you better do what *I* like, you little bastard."

By the time Tony got his diploma, he felt like erasing the whole damn school from existence. The school itself was a cold, little battlefield created by the professors and their conflicting ideas and beliefs about art – Realism, Impressionism, Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, and the rest.

There's one thing Tony sadistically enjoys – these professors may be known and their works may be acclaimed in the newspapers, but they're still starving artists just like him.

Tony doesn't care about labels. He stands in front of the canvas and dabs colors on the palette and lets his right hand do the rest. Tonight they'll call his paintings surrealist paintings, but for Tony they're just the product of his unconscious mind, his hidden fears and desires, his naked true self. Human beings like to vulgarize whatever they think or feel, that's why they're always putting labels on everything.

Tony isn't really worried about the art show. He knows what to expect. He knows that the gallery will be jammed with enemies who want him to

overdose and with artist friends who are secretly dying to see him fail. Well, he can understand their spite. How can you not be envious of someone who's clearly a born genius?

As Tony thinks all this, he's shaving and humming in the bathroom. After he finishes shaving, he splashes cologne onto his face and studies his features in the mirror. How good it feels, to be him. Not only a born genius, but also a born Adonis. What can he say? Can he help it if he was touched magically at birth by God's own finger? Can he help it if he's one of God's favorite wolf cubs here on earth?

Tony steps out of the bathroom and starts getting dressed. Even though he can hear the honking of cars and the muffled voices of people out on the street, the room feels unusually quiet without Daniella – not that Daniella talks much when she's in the apartment. Daniella's mother is afraid of driving in Old San Juan at night, so Daniella went to pick her up and they'll meet him later at the gallery.

Tony puts on seedy jeans, slips his naked feet into battered leather loafers. Suddenly he stops moving. He sniffs. There's a funny smell hovering in the air. He sniffs and looks around the room. Commando is sitting in a corner like the Sphinx of Giza, watching a cockroach defy gravity as it crawls up the wall. The cologne is evaporating from Tony's face and the funny smell is quickly turning into a familiar stench. What the hell?

Tony kneels on the floor and looks under the bed. The litter box is there, as it usually is, but the stench isn't coming from the litter box. He gets up and as he gets up he casts his eyes on one of the chairs by the bed. His T-shirt, the T-shirt he had planned on wearing tonight, is crookedly folded on top of the chair.

Tony feels his heart racing. That's a brand-new METALLICA T-shirt. If it is what he suspects it is....

He bends over and realizes that the shirt is wet and sniffs and makes a face and holds his breath and starts planning Commando's execution. Cat piss! Cat piss on his brand-new METALLICA T-shirt!

Sunstruck

Tony spins around like a Tyrannosaurus rex ravenous for blood, but Commando is nowhere to be found. No doubt the demonic cat anticipated Tony's fury and scurried out the window.

Tony goes berserk, shouting, cursing, banging his fists against the wall, his blood boiling, his temples pulsating. Commando has always done his bodily necessities in the litter box. But tonight, the night of Tony's first show, he has pissed on Tony's shirt. Tony decides there has to be a mystic connection here. Somehow the two events must be related, but he doesn't know exactly how.

Finally he takes a deep breath and injects himself with a little heroine.

When Tony leaves the apartment, without a shirt on, and walks through the narrow cobbled streets toward Fifi's Gallery, and inhales the warm night air coming from the nearby sea, he's overwhelmed with an intense feeling of bliss. Loudly he begins to hum Beethoven's 9th Symphony. He looks at the people around him, mediocre people with mediocre jobs, and he feels himself bigger than life itself.

Chapter 11

“Tony’s going to kill me,” Daniella says. She stubs out her cigarette and runs her fingers through her hair, shoving unruly waves back from her temples. “What time is it?”

Marcela throws her daughter an exasperated look. “Will you stop asking me what time it is? You’re giving me a headache and I haven’t even seen Tony’s paintings yet. I’ll need all my energies for that. We didn’t create this traffic, you know.”

“But you knew there was going to be traffic. You know how impossible this place gets on Saturday nights. And then I go and pick you up and you’re not even dressed. The show was supposed to start at eight-thirty.”

“It’s nine forty-five.”

“I know you don’t like Tony –”

“What is there to like? He’s a narcissist and a drug addict.”

“He’s not an addict,” Daniella says. She feels queasy. She always gets queasy when she’s stuck in traffic. “He’s not an addict,” she says, rubbing her stomach.

“Who are you trying to fool? Yourself?” Then her voice softens. “Do you want me to drive?”

Daniella shakes her head. She’s floating inside the eye of a hurricane. Lights flashing on and off. Cars honking. Carbon monoxide polluting the air. People walking on the sidewalks. People crossing the streets. People with blank pathetic faces, like robots programmed to exist.

Daniella says, “You remember that movie? What was the name? There’s this family, husband and wife and two kids, I think, and they move to this town where the wives are all robots. They look and behave as if they’re alive, but they’re really robots. No one knows they’re robots except the husbands. They’re the ones responsible for the whole thing. They kill their wives and then

Sunstruck

make exact replicas of them and then these replicas become the perfect wives. You ever saw that movie?"

Marcela stares at Daniella. "You mean *Stepford Wives*? You look terrible, dear. What's wrong with you?" She sounds profoundly worried.

"Tony grinds his teeth."

"What?"

"Tony grinds his teeth at night. He wakes me up almost every night."

"It may be worms. You could ask for some medication at the pharmacy. Of course, that would be extremely embarrassing."

The car engine is getting hot. Daniella turns off the air conditioner and opens the window and a wave of muggy air rushes in. It feels strangely comforting.

"And the nightmares," Daniella says.

Marcela is doing stretching exercises with her neck, rolling her neck from side to side. "Nightmares?"

"There's always someone trying to kill me. Like last night. I see this little kid sitting on the sidewalk, all dirty and in rags, and I bring him home to give him some food. But once in the kitchen he grabs this big knife and tries to kill me. Or last week. I'm taking a bath in a coffin in a cemetery and this little girl with long black hair stabs me through the heart with a stake."

"You eat too much junk food, then you watch all those horror movies. Don't worry. Nightmares are supposed to infuse you with energy. I read it in a book about dreams, really. A stab through the heart it's like an energy transfusion."

Daniella honks her horn and scowls at the car in front of her, trying to send it to flames with her eyes like a firestarter.

"We'll have to park around here and walk. There's no way we'll find a free spot close to the gallery."

"Well, there's no way we'll find a free spot around here either," Marcela says.

Seventeen minutes later they find a parking spot, and in her desperate attempt to get it before anyone else does, Daniella almost runs into a man as he's trying to cross the street. To her utter dismay, the man is wearing black sunglasses and carrying a Bible in one hand and a walking stick in the other.

"I'm so sorry!" Daniella shouts from the window.

"Judgement Day awaits us all, my child," the man says. Then he staggers off, mumbling prayers to himself.

Daniella stares numbly through the windshield. Next to her, Marcela unwraps a stick of bubble gum and offers it to Daniella. Daniella shakes her head. She feels like vomiting.

When they finally make it to the gallery, both panting and breathless, they find Tony having an argument with Fifi Santos.

Daniella is amazed. Fifi's Uakari-like face is covered with volcanic pimples and it's even redder than she remembers – a deep crimson color, like fresh warm blood high in hemoglobin.

Fifi says, "I'm just saying you have to keep your mouth shut. If you insult them, how do you expect them to buy your paintings?" He brings Tony to a corner and tries to put an arm around his shoulders.

Tony flinches back. "Take your hands off me! I know what *you* want."

"I'm just trying to calm you down. Lower your voice," Fifi says.

"They don't know anything," Tony says. "They don't know anything. They just come here and criticize and they don't know shit."

"I'm losing my patience. You're acting crazy," Fifi says.

"Sanity's boring," Tony snaps.

Fifi mutters a couple of obscenities, turns around and disappears between the crowd. The gallery is tiny and it's crammed with people. It's hard to breathe. The dense air reeks of varnish and cigarettes and sweat and cheap wine.

Daniella nudges Tony with her elbow.

Tony doesn't seem surprised to see her.

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"Sorry I'm late. I got caught up in traffic," she says. "I almost killed someone tonight. A blind man with a Bible."

"If he was blind, what was he doing with a Bible?" Tony says calmly.

"Tangible comfort?" she suggests. Suddenly she feels angry. She could have killed that poor man in her effort to come early to the gallery and Tony isn't even upset she's late. She wants to shock him. She says, "I think you may have worms." For the first time she realizes he's not wearing a shirt. "Where's your shirt?"

"Ask that psychotic monster you're living with," Tony says. He turns to Marcela and grins. "What do you think of my paintings?"

"What do I think? I haven't had the chance of studying them yet," Marcela says, furtively glancing at the paintings from the corner of her eye. "I'd like some wine first, though. I appreciate art better when I'm tipsy."

Tony brings them white wine in transparent plastic glasses. Daniella takes a sip and frowns. The wine is slightly warm and disgustingly sweet.

"Where's Ismael?" Daniella says.

"Not here," Tony says, scratching his hairy chest.

"What do you mean? What about the review?"

"He sent someone else, that fag over there with the delicate expression on his face. His wife came, though."

"Ah, Lady Dracula," Daniella says.

"Lady Dracula?" Tony says.

"Lady Dracula?" Marcela says.

Daniella feels embarrassed. "Well, she sort of looks like..." Her voice trails off. She shrugs and sips more wine. "I wonder why Ismael sent someone else. That's strange. Did you ask Irene why he sent someone else?"

"She said he's travelling," Tony says absentmindedly, looking around him.

Lady Dracula, garbed in a translucent ruby caftan, glides forward to greet them. The caftan is so translucent her thin, sagging breasts are visible through the cloth. She looks like a resurrected cadaver. Her wrinkled face is powdered

white and her hair is raven black. Her thin lips are as ruby red as the caftan she's wearing.

A fascinating smell emanates from her, redolent of expensive perfume and hamster food. And her hands. Those are hands that speak for themselves – gaunt wilted hands with long bony fingers, swollen knuckles, and curved witch-like nails lacquered with bright red polish; hands that bring to mind the witch in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

For some reason unknown to Daniella, Marcela gasps when she sees Lady Dracula.

“How are you all, my darlings?” Lady Dracula says, her deep voice as blood-curdling as her looks.

Daniella introduces Marcela to Lady Dracula.

Lady Dracula turns to Tony, squeezes his arm. “Oh Tony, I never thought your paintings would be so futuristic and at the same time so ancient and primitive. I already told Fifi, ‘The Sea will Turn into Lemonade’ is mine. I’ll put it in the bedroom, facing the bed, so I can look at it at night while I fall asleep. I think it might calm my dreams. I dream so intense at night I always wake up constipated. It’s because of my little problem; I’m taphephobic – I’m afraid of being buried alive.”

Daniella knows “The Sea will Turn into Lemonade” distinctively well because Tony painted it under the influence of his personal confidant and psychiatrist, Dr. LSD. The painting features prehistoric creatures with half-animal, half-human characteristics mercilessly preying on each other against an eerie background of cement and concrete landscapes.

“It’s so violent,” Daniella told Tony, squinting at the flowing blood, at the torn flesh of the creatures.

Tony snorted, delighted. “Survival is our most powerful instinct,” he purred. “We can’t escape from violence. We *are* violence. We get used to violence and torture since we’re toddlers. Ever seen *Tom and Jerry*? Even Hitler would have gotten ideas from some of the episodes. We take pleasure in killing everything around us. It’s just that it’ll get worst, you know? There will be no

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natural vegetation left, only mountains and trees and flowers of concrete, and we'll eat each other out of total desperation, or maybe just for fun."

While Lady Dracula praises Tony on his infinite talent and originality, Marcela whispers to Daniella, "I *saw* her. I never spoke to her, but I saw her that time I went to the health spa. She was there. There was a problem because of her. My God, I never thought she could be Ismael's new wife. She was having a coffee enema, but it seems something went wrong and she started howling. She began howling so loudly everyone in the spa got scared about the coffee enemas. By that time I had already had mine, so it wasn't such a big deal for me. I mean, nothing went wrong when I had mine. But I tell you, I'll never have one again. I don't know the statistics. I mean, I don't know what are the chances of surviving a coffee enema, but what happened to her shows that something can go wrong, don't you think?" She pauses to sip her wine.

"What's this? I'd like to have this wine examined in a laboratory."

Daniella says, "I wish you wouldn't go to those spas, Mami. They aren't doctors. Something serious could happen to you. Why don't you stay in a hotel? It's just like a spa."

"It isn't the same. At spa they really pretend they care. All the nurses have butterfly faces and speak with sweet voices. I think they have to take acting classes for the job."

Daniella turns to Lady Dracula. "Tony says Ismael went on a trip."

Lady Dracula turns morose. "Yes, he went to La Cueva de Cayey. Or at least, that's what he told me. I'm so worried about him, Daniella. He's been acting so strange lately. He doesn't go to the newspaper anymore, he hardly eats, he speaks with strange people on the phone. He goes on these mysterious trips looking for all kinds of animals. The other day he spent the night sleeping in El Yunque. I don't know what's wrong with him. I understand he's under a lot of pressure right now, you know, with that animal hotel business of his. But still, you don't go out and spend a whole night in a dark forest all by yourself, do you?"

"Why did he go to the cave?" Daniella says.

“A lion. An elderly lion from Africa. Ismael wants to buy it and bring it back with him. I guess we’ll keep it in the family room for a while, like all those raccoons and wombats he brought the other day. He’ll fly to Turkey next week to get a few Turkish Angoras. He doesn’t trust the American breeders. He wants the real thing straight from the Ankara zoo.”

A tall and dark, stunning-looking man with a US senator suit accidentally bumps against Daniella, spilling some of her wine onto the floor.

The man says, “Have you seen my Ouija board around here, by any chance?”

Daniella is tickled by his American accent. She looks up at him, mesmerized. The man has the most incredible, enigmatic, magnetic dark eyes she’s ever seen.

Daniella says, “Hi, Damian.” She wants to ask him if it’s true that in the future the government will be issuing social security cards with the number 666 printed on them, but the man has already vanished to another part of the room.

Daniella glances around her, looking for Marcela. Where is she? Tony’s gone, too. She hopes Tony and Marcela are together. She hopes Tony is showing Marcela his paintings.

“Irene,” Daniella says, searching inside her bag for her cigarettes and lighter. “Want a cigarette?”

“I smoke many things, but not tobacco.”

Daniella has a change of heart and stuffs the pack of cigarettes back into her purse. “I was wondering about the review.”

“Review?”

“Of Tony’s paintings...”

“Don’t worry about it. I like Tony. And anyway, I own the newspaper.”

Daniella looks surprised. “I didn’t know that. Ismael never told me.”

Lady Dracula sighs and scratches her ear. “I never told him,” she says, fondly tilting her head to one side. “I didn’t want to hurt his pride. He thinks he got the job because of his writing skills. Ismael can be so proud sometimes,

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you know. But I've been having so much fun since I married him. Before I met him I was just a lonely old woman. Now I'm a lonely old woman with a young man. I know you're wondering why I married him. I'll tell you. Youth. What else but youth? I could have married a more handsome, more distinguish young man, right? That's what you're thinking. But Ismael happened to be at the right place at the right time. Did he tell you how we met? Yes? Well, it doesn't matter. Let me tell you the story in my own way. I always like to remember that moment.

"I was strolling on the beach one evening, barefooted, and some kind of little spine got stuck in my big toe. Believe me, a little spine stuck in your big toe can be very painful. I fell on the sand and started crying. Then I saw him. He was with some friends, but when he saw me, he ran to the rescue. He took my toe into his mouth and sucked the thorn out. That night he took me to McDonald's. He still didn't know I was Irene Carlier, the magnate. It touched me, you know. I was just a cadaverous, ridiculous old woman and yet he wanted to share a hamburger with me. I married him the next day. There's more to life than collecting torturing devices. Eating Kentucky Fried Chicken with Ismael is a lot more fun than staring at a guillotine. Ismael has taught me to love fast food. Taco Bell, Burger King, McDonald's, Wendy's. I love them all. What I can't understand is his obsession with the animal kingdom. It just freaks me out."

Yes, Ismael was sweet, naturally sweet. On occasions he would act with the sweet innocence and naiveté of a five-year old. Naturally sweet, but very often he would consciously, purposely use this natural sweetness to manipulate everyone and everything around him. Sweetness, like everything else, also has a dark, wicked side. I'm repelled by sweetness. It makes me think of saccharin and cancer. Let's face it, sweetness can be very demonic. The little boy in The Omen had a very sweet face. No wonder I started eating so much salty food after the divorce. No wonder I'm with Tony now. It doesn't mean Tony isn't sweet. Tony can be very sweet sometimes, he really can, but he doesn't look sweet. He looks tough and dangerous, and somehow this makes me feel safe and comforted. Tony would never take an old woman he just met to

McDonald's, but, on the other hand, he would never write an article that would induce someone to overdose with birth-control pills.

Daniella looks down at her glass. It's nearly empty. "I think I'll get some more wine," she says.

After getting her glass refilled at the bar, Daniella feels a tickling sensation on the nape of her neck. Startled, she turns around and finds Mari Carmen grinning at her.

"You're here!" Daniella says.

"Of course. I always keep my word, don't I?" Mari Carmen says.

"Have you been here long?"

"Just a few minutes. I can't stay long, I have a meeting tonight. I just wanted to see you...and the paintings. You know? I've been wrong about Tony. He's got brains. I especially like that painting where he gives the Governor the body of a prehistoric kangaroo. Yes, he's got brains. The only problem is he still doesn't know where his loyalties are. He doesn't want to admit the underlying reality that's so apparent in his paintings." Mari Carmen smiles, a smug cynical smile. In one hand she's holding a glass of wine, in the other a cigarette.

"What are you talking about?" It mortifies Daniella when Mari Carmen gets stubbornly obscure and philosophical.

"It's so clear. Poor Tony doesn't know on what side he's on. He calls himself a capitalist, but in his paintings he fiercely attacks the violence, the destruction, the chaos, the decadence of the bourgeois democracies, all the catastrophe created by the capitalist pigs of the world."

Daniella feels a stab of rage. She wants to defend Tony. Who the hell is Mari Carmen to accuse someone of contradictions? After all, she's in love with a priest.

"Tony's not attacking any political system," she says. "He's attacking the destructive violent nature that's inherent in all of us. What do you think, that there aren't killers or wife beaters or child molesters in Cuba?"

Mari Carmen chuckles. "You're getting red. Don't get upset. I'm just joking, pushing your red buttons."

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"I'm not upset. It's just that you should first look at yourself. Really, Mari Carmen, I always keep my mouth shut when you start talking about what's real and what's not real. Well, let me tell you something. If it weren't for the Americans, you wouldn't find washing machines in every poor home on this island. We're not a country. We're just a mosquito on the world map. All the modernization you see around you, owes itself to the Americans. That's the truth, whether you like it or not. Communism is very beautiful in theory, but I'm afraid it's very unrealistic in the real world. And anyway, don't you read the papers? Look at the world around you. Communism is a dead fish. Why can't you face it? Marx may have been cute, but I'm afraid he was wrong. You can't apply his theories in the real world."

Mari Carmen regards Daniella with a mixture of indignation and respect, her pink lips grimly pressed together, her lean tanned fingers clutched tightly around her glass of wine. She arches a brow, cocks her head, gives Daniella a how-can-you-be-so-dumb smile.

"You never spoke like that before," Mari Carmen says.

"Well, you're always talking incessantly about your views, so now it's my turn. I want you to know what I really think of communism. I think it's slavery. I think communism is nothing but slavery. Okay, so capitalism isn't perfect. Who says it is? We have to pay a price for democracy."

She stops for oxygen – amid all the polluted air in the room there may be some molecules left. How come she's so upset? She doesn't know why she's so upset. She's also possessed by an intense feeling of buoyancy – it's not often she gets to speak her own mind.

"That's funny, Daniella, very funny. You defending the Americans. Don't you know what they think of us? To them we're nothing but savages." Mari Carmen shakes her head, incredulous. "How can you be so blind and take the side of these imperialist bullies? Dear God, Daniella, I never thought you could be so naive."

"I'm not taking any sides! And why do you mention God? You're an atheist."

“It’s just a manner of expression,” Mari Carmen says, flushed. “I know your attitude has a lot to do with my relationship with the priest. Don’t deny it. You think I’m a hypocrite, right? All right, I don’t blame you.” She lets out a deep sigh, shrugs. “What do you want me to say? Damn it, don’t you think I hate myself for it? I’m not supposed to let my emotions rule my mind. I’m supposed to be a human computer, a thinking robot. I was hoping that when I told him the truth about myself he would say goodbye, you know, give me the slip. But you know what happened. He didn’t. He was touched by my honesty. He said that to know the truth about me had made him feel closer to me. Now I’m seeing him nearly everyday. We play squash, talk, communicate. We never touch. I’ve never touched him. Dear God, I’m dying to kiss him.”

The thought of Mari Carmen kissing the priest seems ridiculous to Daniella. The priest doesn’t look at all like Beethoven or Einstein. Far from it. He has a shiny bald head, slits for eyes, a red pepper of a nose, yellow bucks teeth. A real rodent. His legs aren’t bad, though.

“Listen, I’m not judging you. I never judge anybody,” Daniella says. How can she judge Mari Carmen? In this age of spiritual loneliness how can she judge anybody about matters of the heart? So Daniella changes the subject. It’s an arduous task to talk politics with a twenty-five-year-old graduate student of philosophy who runs an underground revolutionary newspaper, even if that graduate student of philosophy happens to be short and pretty and reminds you of Paula Abdul.

After Mari Carmen leaves – still friends, Daniella hopes – to one of her secret meetings, Daniella looks for her mother.

Marcela is standing in front of one of the paintings, earnestly gazing at it, taking small sips of her wine and grimacing. She seems so vulnerable, somehow, with her chubby well-manicured hands, her pale pink linen suit enhancing the plumpness of her figure, her dainty, size seven feet shod in elegant ivory pumps. Looking at her mother, Daniella feels a hot wave of love sweeping through her. And then, suddenly, the realization – *One day she’s going to die.*

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"I'm back," Daniella says, almost choking, her lips spread into an artificial smile.

"I want to get married," Marcela says, her lips trembling, her eyes welling up with tears.

Daniella puts an arm around her. "What's wrong?"

Marcela cast her eyes on the painting. Cannibal mutants in heavy metal T-shirts and cowboy hats are cooking the earth inside a gigantic pot of boiling water, this set against a background of wild, swamp-like vegetation filled with algae, ferns, mosses, conifers, and volcanoes are erupting, angrily spitting out lava, and mountains are rising, and single-cell protozoa, snails, clams, amphibians, and reptiles are crawling everywhere.

"Tony said that the earth's getting hotter," Marcela says, biting her lower lip. "The Cold War is over and the greenhouse effect is increasing and the earth is getting hotter by the second."

"Why are you crying?"

"I want to get married. I think I'm tipsy but I want to get married. Can you bring me some more wine, please?"

Daniella swallows. There must be something wrong with her salivary glands because the inside of her mouth feels like sandpaper, her tongue parched and prickly. At the top of her lungs she feels like crying out, "I love you, Mami! I love you and need you so much!" She also feels like shouting, "And I hate you, Papi! Hate you, hate you, hate you!"

But Daniella only nods. "Sure. I'll be right back."

On her way back from the bar Daniella sees two young children playing tug of war with a Ouija board.

"He gave it to me," the little boy says.

"Did not!" the girl shouts back.

Their tiny faces, delicately chiselled, look evil and Daniella wonders if they're the brood of the Damien guy.

Chapter 12

The next day Daniella can't believe what she's reading in the newspaper:

EL ZORRO TERRORIZES SAN JUAN, POLICE BAFFLED,
FOURTH VICTIM NOTABLE PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR

**DR. MINA VAZQUEZ, DISTINGUISH PROFESSOR OF
PHILOSOPHY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN PUERTO
RICO, WAS ATTACKED BY EL ZORRO LAST NIGHT. THE
ATTACK OCCURRED A FEW MINUTES AFTER MIDNIGHT.
THE PROFESSOR, WHO WAS STROLLING ALONG THE
DOCKS OF SAN JUAN AND WEARING A MINISKIRT,
RECEIVED THE USUAL TREATMENT FROM EL ZORRO: A
GIANT Z SLASHED ACROSS HER BUTTOCKS.**

**IT IS NOT YET CLEAR WHAT THE NOTABLE PROFESSOR
WAS DOING SO LATE AT THE DOCKS. THE POLICE IS STILL
INVESTIGATING. AS USUAL, THE VICTIM WAS ABLE TO
IDENTIFY HER ATTACKER AS A DARK-HAIRED FIGURE
WEARING A BLACK HAT, BLACK MASK, BLACK CAPE,
BLACK TURTLENECK SWEATER, BLACK PANTS, BLACK
GLOVES, BLACK SHOES...**

Daniella keeps reading, stunned. At night, the docks of San Juan are an extremely dark, dangerous, desolate place. What on earth was Professor Vazquez doing there – walking around in a mini skirt? Daniella can picture Professor Vazquez's round fleshy buttocks, filled with cellulite, now marked with El Zorro's famous signature.

As Daniella reads, she's leaning against the kitchen sink in her Betty Boop cotton underwear. She's barefoot, her left leg slightly crossed over her right leg, her long hair a dense mass of luxurious tangles, her pale white hand holding a mug of hot black coffee. The mug has the letters WSPA painted in black letters

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across the front. She sips her coffee and feels it burning down her throat – what a pleasure! She couldn't survive in the mornings without her hot black coffee.

Tony is sound asleep, his arms and legs sprawled all over the mattress. Commando is curled up into a ball against the crook of Tony's armpit; he looks even fatter than yesterday, if that's at all possible.

It's very early, not even eight o'clock. Birds are chirping lustily outside and there's a soft breeze flowing in and stirring the window curtains. Daniella loves listening to the birds while she sips her morning coffee. It's like therapy. Better than therapy because it doesn't cost you a cent. Actually, on Saturdays and Sundays she never gets up early enough to listen to the morning birds, but today she couldn't sleep because she was wondering about the review. So she sneaked out of bed, put on jeans and one of Tony's white undershirts, tiptoed out of the apartment and bought the newspaper at the nearest corner, stealthily came back in, slipped out of her clothes, and made herself a mug of instant black coffee.

Daniella can't believe what has happened to Professor Vazquez, but she can't help thinking that the crazy woman deserved it. Unless you're a tourist, or a murderer, or a dope pusher, or an addict, or a bum, or a prostitute, you don't have any business walking along the docks of San Juan after midnight.

When Daniella finishes with the Zorro article, she quickly flips through the pages in search of the art exhibits section. Something lumpy and thorny is churning and revolting inside her stomach. Where on earth is it? Here it is!

NIGHTMARE ON TANCA'S STREET

IF YOU'RE THINKING OF SPENDING YOUR NEXT TWO HOURS SITTING IN FRONT OF A GIANT SCREEN WITH A BAG OF FRESHLY POPPED POPCORN AND WATCHING BLOODY HUMAN BODIES BEING CHOPPED UP TO PIECES, THINK IT TWICE. THANKS TO MODERN ART, NOW YOU CAN COMBINE ALL THE VIOLENCE AND GORE THAT A HORROR FILM HAS TO OFFER WITH CULTURAL, MIND-

REVEALING WORKS OF ART. TONY CURET'S SURREALIST PAINTINGS, WHICH ARE BEING SHOWN AT FIFI'S GALLERY, ARE A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF HOW MUCH WE, THE HUMAN SPECIES, LOVE THE MACABRE.

TONY, A KNOWN NARCISSIST AND DRUG-ADDICT, WILL NO DOUBT GO FAR. THAT IS, IF HE DOESN'T SLASH HIS OWN WRISTS OR JUMP OUT OF HIS APARTMENT WINDOW FIRST. HIS PAINTINGS ARE PSYCHEDELIC WORKS OF ART, MUCH MORE INTERESTING TO THE MIND AND THE EYE THAN THOSE OBNOXIOUS FLAMBOYANCES, POTS OF FLOWERS, AND OTHER BORING PUERTO RICAN LANDSCAPES. PEOPLE ARE UP TO THEIR NECKS WITH REALIST JUNK! THIS EXHIBIT IS HIGHLY RECOMMENDED FOR EVERYONE, ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO ARE THINKING OF COMMITTING SUICIDE. LOOKING AT THE PAINTINGS WILL HELP YOU MAKE A FAST DECISION. AND DON'T FORGET THE POPCORN! FIFI'S GALLERY, TANCA STREET, OLD SAN JUAN, IS OPEN FROM TUESDAYS TO SUNDAYS, 10:30 A.M. TO 11:30 P.M.

Daniella isn't quite sure what to make of this. Is it a positive or a negative review? To publicly call Tony a narcissist and a drug-addict is definitely negative. On the other hand, to say that he'll go far is definitely positive. And that part about the suicide....

Daniella drains the last drops of her coffee and licks her lips. She puts down the newspaper and glances at the bed.

Tony turns over on his stomach, shoves Commando to the side, grunts something, then goes back to sleep. Commando lets out a majestic yawn and grooms himself for a while. Then he leaps down from the bed and stands in front of Daniella, looking up at her with poised, intelligent eyes.

"I'm hungry, too," Daniella whispers, bending down to scratch his neck.

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So Daniella puts on Tony's undershirt and they eat by the window. Nothing fancy, just some bread, low-fat cottage cheese, meatballs from last night, and dates – dates rank high among Commando's favorite foods. So they just eat there, looking at each other and out the window.

When Tony finally gets up, at about noon, and reads the review, he starts jumping and laughing and picks Daniella up in his arms and throws her over his left shoulder.

"You're crazy! Put me down! We look like a couple from the Stone Age," Daniella says, punching him on the back with her fists and kicking her legs.

But Tony just slaps her backside and grins.

She says, "That hurts! Put me down, you Arab terrorist! Aren't you mad about the review?"

"How can I be mad? Now they all know the truth. Now they all know that I'm bigger than life itself!"

Daniella keeps punching his back and kicking her legs, not understanding anything.

Chapter 13

“The opening will be on New Year’s Eve, three weeks from today. Yes, it’s all set. Everything is ready. All these months of stress and high blood pressure are over, my friend. I would have liked to open the hotel on Halloween night, but that was too early for me. It was impossible. But wait a minute...maybe...why not?”

“We can pretend that New Year’s Eve is Halloween night. Why not? We can all wear fun and scary costumes. It’ll be wild, I tell you. The hotel is a special place. Not very big right now, but Irene says we can expand it once we start making profits. And believe me, we’ll make profits. That I know for sure. Considering the human beings for what they really are – pain-and-pleasure machines – I know for a fact we’ll make profits. The only problem is the employees. I need people I can really trust. Some of them you can keep silent with money, but others.... No one must suspect what’s really going on in that hotel. Yes, Daniella was right. She used to tell me innocence has a much darker, evil side.... What do you think, my friend?” Ismael says, looking at Bastet for an answer, but the Egyptian Cat Goddess of Love and Joy, it seems, isn’t in a chatting mood.

Irene comes into the living room. “Oh, here you are, darling. Were you talking to someone? I heard voices,” she says.

When Ismael sees the fresh frog blood on Irene’s face, he doesn’t jump on his seat. The first time he saw her like this he jumped on his seat. But not anymore. You get used to things. You can get used to the most abhorrent, gruesome, disgusting things. Anyway, it’s just a blood mask, high in nutrients to nourish the skin.

“Don’t be frightened, darling. Fresh blood as a rejuvenescent agent has always been a well-known secret among members of the European nobility. Look at Madame Bathory. She killed hundreds of young virgins in her search

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for eternal youth. Don't look so horrified, dear. It's just frog blood," Irene told him.

"Have you ever used human blood?" Ismael said nervously, more like joking, but the sinister way in which Irene smiled sent an electric jolt down his spine.

"I was just talking to Bastet," Ismael says, smoking placidly on the sofa, his feet up on the coffee table, his thighs cradling a large bag of Cheetos.

"Do you want a drink?" Irene says, pouring herself a shot of gold Carlier.

Ismael pops a Cheeto into his mouth. "No, thanks. I was just thinking—"

"Good, good. That shows you have a brain."

"You know, I was just thinking about the animal hotel. About the opening night. Maybe instead of a New Year's party we should give a Halloween party. A New Year's-Halloween party, that is. We can all wear costumes."

"Not a bad idea. Halloween is much more fun than New Year. You can do whatever you want with the party. It's your hotel, isn't it?"

"I don't know.... There's something at the back of my mind...an idea...but I still don't know what it is."

She turns on the stereo. "Whatever it is, you better hurry, my darling. There are only three weeks left and the invitations haven't been sent yet. Do you want to go to Wendy's tonight?"

Ismael rubs his stomach, tries to breathe. "I don't know. I've eaten so much junk today."

Irene throws back her head and gulps the gold rum. She sinks into the sofa next to Ismael and puts an arm around him. In spite of himself, Ismael winces. Her amphibian hands are so cold they feel like razor blades cutting his skin.

Irene says, "What costume should I wear?"

Under the circumstances, Ismael pretends he doesn't hear the question.

He drums his fingers to the music and thinks of Daniella, of her long red hair. He misses her hair. He used to lose himself between the silky, heavy strands of her hair. He can't understand why women cut their hair. Cutting women's hair should be outlawed. And Tony....

He pictures Tony taking a handful of her hair and brushing it with his lips. Damn it, the image fills him with blood-boiling, mind-reeling jealousy. It doesn't mean he's still in love with Daniella. Of course he cares for her — they were married for four years, right? But he's not in love with her. It's just that to think of Tony caressing that hair makes Ismael feel like a real loser. In fact everything about Tony makes him feel like a real loser. Tony's talented, good-looking, and ever since his first art show, two and a half months ago, his surrealist paintings have been getting more famous and controversial with each passing day. Why is it that on top of all these blessings he also has to have Daniella's hair? It isn't fair. It just isn't fair.

Ismael looks up and scowls at the ceiling. But he's not really scowling at the ceiling. He's scowling *through* the ceiling at the heavens. I hate You, Ismael thinks. You're doing to me the same thing you did to Salieri in the movie *Amadeus*. You prefer a narcissist, a demonic creature as your instrument! Yes, I sniff a little coke and smoke a few joints now and then, but I'm not an addict. I'm a sweet guy. I admire Satan. He had the guts to stand up to You. I didn't ask for good looks. I didn't ask for money. Why didn't You give me talent? Why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why!

"Did Daniella accept your offer? Is she going to work at the animal hotel?" Irene says.

Ismael looks at his wife. "Just for a while. Her hours will be erratic, mornings, evenings, depending on her courses."

He wonders if he should tell Daniella the truth about the animal hotel. Maybe not. Daniella is too noble, too righteous, too goody-goody. She never even accepted a little taste of grass from him, no matter how many times he insisted. Integrity is a non-stop internal struggle with her. No, he won't tell her. In any case, he wouldn't want to implicate her. And, after all, not even Irene knows the truth.

Irene unbuttons Ismael's shirt and begins to caress his chest, tracing little circles on his skin with the sharp tip of her pointy red fingernail. With her

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thumb she begins to stroke his neck, that little place where the artery pulses with life.

“Did you eat the steak I prepared for you this morning? You should eat steak each day. Don’t forget. I’m going to prepare you another one now. When you go to fast food restaurants, stick to hamburgers. Darling...” she whispers, and makes a wet, smacking sound with her lips.

Ismael shudders. He’ll close his eyes, ignore the caked frog blood on her face, leave his mind blank, flow with the current, surrender to destiny. But he keeps having this recurrent weird fantasy, more like a hallucination, really, that one of these days, while he’s kissing his wife, she’ll grow out fangs and bury her face in his neck and suck all the juices out of him and leave him like a drained old sponge.

Chapter 14

Zorro watches the woman stepping out of the string instruments shop and walking down the quiet, semi-dark street. In one hand she carries a violin case, in the other a violin and a bow. She's tall, slender, with short straight black hair severely hacked at the nape.

The street light catches the warm glow of the violin's beautifully polished finish and this distracts Zorro.

Why doesn't she carry the violin in its case?

Zorro's heart is momentarily softened.

Zorro has always felt a keen admiration for violinists – their grace, skill, poise. But the fact is, whatever wonderful talents she might have, this particular violinist has made a grave mistake, a mistake Zorro cannot overlook. She's wearing a mini skirt.

The young woman, as if sensing an evil presence, glances apprehensively behind her shoulder. She then quickens her pace.

Zorro must move fast.

With the elegance and agility of a great panther, Zorro leaps and dashes after her, the padded boots like the fluffy pillows of a feline's paw.

But right before Zorro is about to strike, the woman swirls around and clobbers Zorro over the head with the violin.

"I *knew* you were eventually going to show up!" the woman says. "I've been waiting for you! The *violin* has been waiting for you!"

One second time, with brutal force, the violin strikes Zorro over the head. Thank God for the hat.

Zorro grunts and, gripping the saber, spins around and breaks into a run, wondering how the wicked violin didn't split in half.

"It's a Stradivarius – my violin! It's cursed! And it was waiting only for *you*!" she shouts.

Zorro can hear the woman singing in a soprano voice – and the violin playing! – the famous and unforgettable Disney's Zorro-theme song.

Chapter 15

Okay, so this is the problem. Daniella and Tony are standing in the luscious black marble entrance of Leonardo's, one of the most expensive and luxurious Italian restaurants in San Juan, but they can't go in because Tony's not wearing a shirt.

The solemn maitre d' says, "I'm sorry, but you can't come in without a shirt."

Tony protests, "But I'm wearing a tie." This is true. He's wearing a tie, a blue silk tie with little pictures of the Hubble Space Telescope printed over it. Daniella got it for him the other day. Ever since Tony listened to that scientist at Ismael's party, he's been obsessed with astronomy.

"I'm sorry, but you must wear a shirt," the maitre d' insists.

"Do you know who I am?" Tony says, slightly cocking his head to one side and looking down at the man as if the man were a maggot. "I'm Tony Curet, the famous painter, bigger than—"

"Maybe you could find a shirt for him," Daniella cuts in nervously, giving the maitre d' a pleading look. "My boyfriend gets really aggressive when he's hungry."

The maitre d' eyes Tony from head to toes, plain disdain and repulsion shooting out of his eyes. "I'll see what I can do," he says acidly.

And a minute later there's no problem because the maitre d' brings Tony a shirt and Tony puts it on and he's not without a shirt anymore. So they go in and the maitre d' leads them to this little romantic table for two at the far end of the room. The lights are so dim the place resembles a medieval dungeon. Candelabra flicker on every table and there's a guy in a tuxedo playing the piano.

A waiter, also in a tuxedo, hands them the menus and says, "Good evening, monsieur. How are you this evening, mademoiselle? Would you like

to see our wine list?" He speaks as if he's reciting 17th Century poetry. A water waiter comes over and pours water into their glasses.

Tony belches. "We want a bottle of champagne."

"What kind would you like, monsieur?"

"The cold sparkling kind."

The poet waiter frowns.

Daniella clears her throat. "We'll have a bottle of Bollinger."

"Excellent choice, mademoiselle! Excellent choice!" the waiter says. He leans reverently, turns on his heels and stalks off.

"I hate clothes," Tony says, stretching his arms above his head and making cracking noises with his bones.

"You look great," Daniella says.

Tony does look great, with his long dark curls falling rebelliously down his shoulders and a little golden hoop hanging from his left ear. His appearance reminds Daniella of storybook pirates.

Daniella looks around her, pleased. Tony may be a total jerk sometimes, but sometimes, if he's in the mood, he can be sweeter than baklava. For example, every time he sells one of his paintings he brings Daniella to expensive restaurants. He's very impulsive. Like today. Today he sold another painting and got six hundred dollars for it—the painting was sold for twelve hundred dollars but the other fifty percent went to Fifi—so he brings Daniella to this ultra-expensive Italian restaurant and tomorrow those six hundred dollars will be gone. He's crazy like this.

Tony says, "You can order whatever you like, little fox."

"It's dark. I can't read this," she says. The writing on the menu, like gold thread, is faint and delicate

Tony squints into his menu and mutters, "These people want our eyeballs to fall out or what?"

Finally, Daniella is able to make her choice.

Tony holds the menu too close to the candelabra and in the process the top edge of the menu starts to burn.

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“Shit! What the hell is this?” Tony says, huffing and puffing, trying to blow out the flames.

Daniella splashes his menu with her glass of water. “What are you trying to do? Don’t you know playing with fire can be dangerous? Stop behaving like a child. People are staring.” She sighs. No Nero or burning of Rome will ruin her night. “Did you get the chance to read the menu?” she asks sweetly.

“Yeah, yeah.” Tony grins. The candles cast strange shadows across his face and makes his teeth look unnaturally white and fierce.

The poet waiter comes back with their champagne and takes their order.

So Daniella orders the Sea Food Celebration – smoked salmon, lobster medallions, shrimps, crab claws and green mussels. Clear Duck Consommé. Roast Beef Tenderloin with Red Wine Sauce. Herbed Rice and Seasonal Vegetables. Dark Chocolate Mousse with White Chocolate Sauce. Coffee. Tony is more audacious than her, so just for fun he orders chocolate-coated ant eggs, bee maggots, silkworms, and snake in clam sauce.

Daniella likes to eat in expensive restaurants, but so many knives and forks and spoons make her a little uncomfortable. The waiters also make her uncomfortable. They stare too much at you. You know, they want to be so serviceable and sharp and efficient that they just stare too much at you. It feels funny, like they’re monitoring your breathing or something, and it’s difficult to eat while someone is monitoring your breathing or something. But, yes, she likes to eat in expensive restaurants because expensive restaurants are romantic and she likes romantic places.

She also likes dressing up for the occasion. Right now she’s dressed to kill in a silver lame blouse, black jeans and high-heeled black leather boots. Last night she made her hair into dozens of tiny braids, so now it’s all wild and frizzed up like a red sea-urchin. Giant silver earrings in the shape of electrified octopi hang from her earlobes and dangle against her cheeks – she’ll have to take them off soon because they’re giving her a serious headache.

Tony downs a glass of champagne and makes a face and sticks out his tongue. “It tastes like cat piss. I’ll order a beer.”

Daniella says, “You don’t come to a place like this and order beer. I’ll tear you apart.”

“Oh yeah?” he says huskily, leaning forward over the table, a twinkle of primitive lust in his eyes. “Trying to get me excited?”

Daniella laughs. “You would do it right here, on top of this table and in front of all this people, wouldn’t you?”

“We’re animals. Animals follow their instincts.”

“You still smell like egg rolls and coconut chicken. When are you going to quit that lousy job?” Daniella says.

Another waiter comes. This time the food waiter. In this kind of restaurants there are many waiters – the wine waiter, the water waiter, the food waiter, the napkin waiter, the observe-and-make-sure-they-are-still-breathing waiter. The only thing different about this waiter is that Daniella knows him. She doesn’t really know him but she’s seen him before. So when he comes with the Seafood Celebration and the chocolate-coated ant eggs, Daniella says, “I know you.”

The waiter, tall and scraggy and teensy-looking, seems surprised to see her. “You’re the student, right? Yes, the student of architecture who was at that party.”

“This is my boyfriend.” Daniella points to Tony.

“I’m Tony Curet, the famous artist,” Tony says, cramming the chocolate-coated ant eggs into his mouth and washing them down with a glass of champagne.

The waiter looks disoriented. He stares blankly at Tony. “Who did you say you are?”

“He was the bartender at Ismael’s cocktail party,” Daniella explains to Tony. She turns to the waiter. “Didn’t you say you were a card dealer or something like that?”

“Oh well, yes. But I’m not working there anymore. You see... they fired me.” He looks down at the floor, his sunken eyes red and watery.

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Daniella feels sorry for him. He really looks like something out of a zombie film. Yellowish skin, bloodshot eyes, a few wire-like stems sprouting from the top of his skull.

“I’m sorry,” Daniella says.

“Well, what can I do? It was my girlfriend’s fault, you know. Remember my girlfriend, the one who dumped me? Well, it was all her fault. She had AIDS and she didn’t tell me and now I have AIDS and they fired me. It’s really an awful life. Why the hell do we come into this world? What the hell for? Anyway, I’m quitting this job. As soon as that animal hotel opens I’ll start working there. You’ve heard of that new hotel, El Paraiso, haven’t you?”

Daniella stares at him, surprised. “You’re going to be working at El Paraiso? I’ll be working there, too. How did you get the job?”

“Well, Señor Carlier offered me the job. Hey, didn’t you mention he was your husband?”

“Her *ex*-husband,” Tony says, rolling a joint.

Realizing what Tony’s doing, Daniella freezes. “Are you crazy? They’re going to throw us out.”

“Cool it, little fox. I’m going to the bathroom.” He turns to the waiter. “Is there a bathroom around here?”

The waiter points with his finger. “That way. Hey, you wouldn’t happen to have another one, would you?” he says to Tony. “Ever since I found out I have AIDS I’ve had to live the life of a monk. At least I deserve a joint, don’t you think?”

Tony and the waiter go to the bathroom and Daniella just sits there, outraged and confused and disbelieving. Somehow her hunger has vanished. She toys with her fork and nibbles at the shrimps, but she feels gooey and depressed. She feels like getting more gooey and depressed, so she starts drinking her champagne fast. Fast, faster, slow.

By the time Tony and the waiter return – smiling dreamy, unwavering, infinitely complacent smiles – Daniella has reach a state of temporary spiritual catatonia.

The waiter says to Daniella. "Life is so beautiful, don't you think? God must be a clever guy. He made us and then he sent us here." He sighs. "As I was saying...what was I saying? Oh yes! Señor Carlier. Nice man, that Señor Carlier. He put his arm around me at the end of the party and asked me if I was interested in earning a few quick bucks. Of course I was interested in earning a few bucks, so I did what he told me, I went to El Yunque and started looking for —"

He stops, suddenly nervous and scatter-brained. "Anyway, whatever. The fact is, I've been working for him for the last few months, you know, helping him with the animals and all that stuff. I feel kind of sorry for Señor Carlier. I know he's rich and everything — but God, what a wife. Can scare the shit out of you!"

Tony looks at Daniella. "Have you been mummified lately?"

Daniella says to the waiter, "Can you bring another bottle of champagne, please?" She takes off her octopi earrings, drops them into her Seafood Celebration, and throws Tony a malevolent look.

"Yeah, sure, sure." The waiter turns to Tony. "Let me check on the soup and the bee maggots. Hey, thank you for the soul transfusion." He slaps Tony on the shoulder and walks off.

Later, when Tony's eating the bee maggots, he says, "I can't believe civilized people eat this. Why don't they just eat shit and make their lives easier? Lot cheaper, too."

But Daniella isn't listening to him. She's looking at a man and a woman sitting two tables away. The man looks rich and suicide-prone. The woman looks like a gypsy, gorgeous. The woman is caressing the man's leg with the sharp edge of her heel. The man giggles anxiously and loosens his tie.

The woman, quite intentionally, drops her purse to the floor. The man bends over to pick it up and while the man bends over to pick it up the woman sprinkles some kind of white dust into the man's drink. The man puts the purse back on the table and the woman drinks from her glass and beckons the man to do the same. The man giggles, then lifts the glass to his mouth and

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takes a large sip. A slow evil smile spreads on the woman's face, making her look even more fetching and gorgeous than before.

Daniella looks at Tony. "Is that bookstore in Isla Verde open till midnight? I feel like getting an Agatha Christie mystery."

"Sure, sure, little fox," Tony says, wolfing down a juicy chunk of snake.

At the end of the meal Daniella drinks the coffee urgently, trying to counteract the anaesthetic effects of the Bollinger in her bloodstream. But it's no use. She can feel her blood cells dancing "The Blue Danube" up and down the canals of her veins and arteries.

After they leave the restaurant and a bill totaling \$459.78, including tip and burned menu, Tony suggests they stop at Baskin-Robbins. But Daniella protests violently and they end up at the bookstore.

Daniella loves bookstores. If she could choose a place to die, she would choose a bookstore, a coffin made of solid hardcover mystery books. She walks along the aisles and looks at the covers and sighs contentedly. Browsing in a bookstore fills her with kindness and courage and strength. So many books, so many kinds. Trashy books, respectable books, interesting books, boring books, disgusting books, maddening books, psychedelic books, violent books, inspiring books. Mind-broadening books, mind-crushing books. How to be a millionaire in three days, how to be sociable and civilized in an unsociable and uncivilized world, how to control sudden murdering urges toward your children, how to shower alone after watching *Psycho*, how to defy everlasting death, how to sleep with your eyes open, how to prevent the end of the world, how to kill your husband in an expensive restaurant while everybody's looking and still walk out of it successfully, how to develop a meaningful relationship with the cockroaches in your home. So many books, so many kinds. And each book, a world of elves and haunts and leprechauns.

Daniella finally gets two Agatha Christie mysteries, a historical romance set in Greece during the Trojan War, and a book about how to catch a husband after fifty for her mother.

She pays for the books and looks around for Tony, but Tony is nowhere in sight. She finally finds him in the last place she thought she would find him – in the animals section leafing through a book about cats.

“Here you are,” she says.

He looks at her. “You want this?” he says, handing her the book.

Daniella reads the title: EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT CATS. On the cover a magnificent grey Persian cat is scowling at her. It’s a big hardcover book with lots of glossy pictures, but it’s almost fifty dollars.

Tony smiles. “You like it?”

A book like this should be in the library of every ailurophile. “But it’s very expensive,” she says.

Tony shrugs. “Doesn’t matter.”

“But you hate cats.”

Tony shrugs again. “I want to know why Commando pissed on my shirt that night. Come, let’s pay for this and get out of here. You owe me an ice cream.”

At the cashier Tony takes Daniella’s hand and squeezes it. This is done unconsciously or absentmindedly because he’s not even looking at her. But whatever the reason is, it really doesn’t matter because when Daniella feels his rough, callused hand squeezing hers, she squeezes him back and feels all warm and comforted and protected inside.

Chapter 16

The tiny office stinks of Caribbean rum and old books and Raid.

Professor Torres is sitting contently behind his desk, his hand clutching a half-empty bottle of Bacardi, his wispy grey hair thrown forward over his brown forehead, his gold-rimmed spectacles nearly falling down his nose. He's nearly seventy years old and has the looks of a homely grandpa, but his students, especially his female students, know that this homeliness is just a deceiving façade. Professor Torres is a drunk and a womanizer and one of the biggest chauvinist skunks in the university.

"Come in, please, come in," he says to Daniella. "And please close the door. I can't stand all that noise coming from the hall."

Daniella steps into his office and closes the door behind her. "I'm here to hand in the project," she says.

"Of course, of course, the project." He lifts the bottle of Bacardi to his mouth, throws his head back and starts swallowing. While he's doing this he beckons Daniella to sit down. "Ahhhhh... Christmas time holds a special place in my heart." He sighs, puts the bottle back on the desk and leers at Daniella's legs. "Aren't you afraid of wearing mini skirts?"

Daniella stirs uncomfortably in her chair. "You mean because of El Zorro? No, not really. I mean, it's only noon. He always attacks during the night, doesn't he?"

"Well, you be careful, you hear? A maniac like that can't be taken lightly. Eleven victims already. Eleven victims! I've been following the story from the very beginning. Eleven victims is no laughing matter. And Professor Vazquez. Well, we all know what happened to Professor Vazquez. It was a big shame to the university. Yes, sir. We all suffered for it. We all paid the price."

Daniella lowers her eyes and nods. When the shocking truth about Professor Vazquez's double life came into the open, all the students, all the professors, all the universities were stunned. In fact, the entire island was

stunned. It seems Professor Vazquez had been leading a double life for years. During the day, a notable philosophy professor. During the night, a cut-rate prostitute. That's why she had been walking along the docks of San Juan that night when El Zorro attacked her. But the funny thing is no one had suspected a thing. Of course, after the secret became public the university was forced to fire her.

Daniella says, "Well, yes, here is my project." She stands up and gives him the plans of her ultra-modern, Day-Glo pink-and-black checkered shopping center.

Professor Torres weighs the roll of plans in his hand, then swallows another mouthful of rum. "Life is so full of weird characters, isn't it? So full of contradictions. There she was, a man-hater, every single day of her life accusing the male species, calling them — *us* — chauvinists pigs, and all along she was on her hands and knees for...."

He chuckles and leans back on his swivel chair. "Yes, sir, life is full of contradictions! In a way I like this Zorro, I really do. If a woman walks alone at night in a mini skirt, she deserves what's coming to her. Women are always complaining that men are lustful savages, and then they walk around half naked right before our eyes. What are we poor men to do? Yes, sir! Any woman who teases a man deserves what's coming to her." He grins, displaying a perfect set of yellowish dentures.

Daniella feels a pang of rage. She feels like shaking the old man until his dentures fall out. "Well, I haven't been following this case very closely," she says through gritted teeth, "but I read this article the other day. Except for Professor Vazquez, who refused to talk with the press, all the other victims were asked if they would ever wear mini skirts after their tragic experience, and the answer was, '*Of course, yes.*' All of them, ten victims, answered that. And I'm not counting that violinist who miraculously managed to escape. I think this whole case is turning into a very important issue for women. If it goes on like this, I think all the women on this island are going to take a stand. We aren't going to let an obvious nut — a man — tell us that we better not wear

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mini skirts if we don't wish to be attacked. That would be the top of the iceberg in machismo."

Professor Torres seems shocked. "Why, Daniella! Your name is Daniella, isn't it? I'm impressed. I'm really impressed. I've been observing you for the past two months. You're kind of clever. I'm surprised, I truly am. Ever since you told me about your plans for the shopping center, I've been observing you closely in class. I keep telling myself that you're too pretty to be in such a difficult class, but I keep forgetting that women also have brains." He burps and offers Daniella the nearly-finished bottle of Bacardi. "Want a sip?"

Daniella shudders. "I really have to go now," she says. "Merry Christmas."

Professor Torres sighs, his big elderly hands toying with Daniella's project, tossing it from one hand to the other. "Don't worry. I'll try to be objective when I grade your project," he says.

"What do you mean?"

For a long moment he stares hungrily at her legs. "Well ...those legs you have.... It would be difficult for me to give you a bad grade. If only I could be young again..." Then he snaps out of it and smiles up at her. "What are your plans for the holidays?"

"Actually, I'll..." But her voice trails off, for Professor Torres has tilted back his head and is draining noisily the remains of the rum.

"Send my love to Santa," he grunts. And suddenly his eyes snap shut and his head falls forward and Daniella hears the distinctive *crack* of his spectacles as his face hits the desk.

When Daniella steps out of the office she finds Mari Carmen waiting for her in the hall.

Daniella smiles, surprised. "How did you know I was here?"

Mari Carmen doesn't smile back. "I saw you going in. Are you all done?"

"Yes, I just came to hand in my design project. I can't believe this semester is finally over. I'm so damn tired! Did you hand in your philosophy papers?"

Mari Carmen nods. "Yes."

"What's wrong with you? You look worn-down." Daniella rummages inside her Mickey Mouse tote bag. "Here, have a cigarette. God, I'm dying for a cigarette!" This time she can't fight the urge.

"I'm depressed," Mari Carmen says. "You want to go for a coffee?"

"Why are you depressed?" Daniella glances at her watch. It's 11:27 a.m. "Yes, sure, let's have a coffee. Where do you want to go? But I have to be at one o'clock in Plaza las Americas. I'm meeting my mother." Suddenly her eyes light up. "Why don't you come with us? We'll have lunch together, do some Christmas shopping."

Mari Carmen looks terrified. "Are you crazy? I'd rather be dead than go to Plaza las Americas today. Don't you know how that place gets on Christmas time? You won't be able to breathe. Besides, it just makes me sick, seeing all those people paying with credit cards, spending all their money in useless Christmas gifts, sinking lower and lower into debt."

Daniella shakes her head. "Mari Carmen, please. It's Christmas! Sinking lower and lower into debt is just part of the Christmas spirit!"

"Christmas..." Mari Carmen mutters, disgusted. "You know very well how I feel about Christmas. Christmas is just another clever tool used by the capitalist rats to profit from the ignorance of the masses."

"Are you telling me that buying a Christmas gift for your mother will turn you into an ignorant person?"

So they bicker like this. They smoke Marlboro Lights and walk down the hall and shake their heads and bicker like this. Once outside the Humanities Building they decide to walk toward their respective cars and meet at El Huracan, a lousy cafe about five minutes away from the university.

It's December 23rd, and the weather feels evil, portentous. Dark virulent clouds are covering the sky and the breeze has an acrid, dungy tang. And on top of this, it's hot. It's sticky and hot. It's sticky and hot as only a polluted Caribbean island can be sticky and hot two days before Christmas.

When Daniella and Mari Carmen get to El Huracan they find it jammed with noisy students. All the tables are taken. So they wait and smoke and

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smoke and wait. After a few minutes one of the tables is free and Daniella and Mari Carmen lunged themselves frantically toward it. (Darwin and the Theory of Evolution. The Law of the Jungle. Only the strongest and most desperate individuals will be able to sit and eat sandwiches at El Huracan.)

A waiter reeking of old grease and sweet ham comes and takes their order. Daniella orders a Heineken and a grilled cheese and Mari Carmen orders a Medalla and French fries.

"That's all you're going to eat? French fries?" Daniella says. She knows that Mari Carmen feels an irrational passion for French fries, French fries with tons of ketchup, but still....

"I'm not that hungry," Mari Carmen says.

Daniella says, "Are you going to tell me why you're so depressed?" She lifts her half-finished cigarette to her lips, takes a quick drag, and lets the smoke curl out of her mouth.

Mari Carmen says, "I think my sweetie pie is El Zorro."

"What?"

"Just what you heard."

But Daniella just stares at her friend, at this pretty revolutionary leftist, and says nothing.

"I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I think he's El Zorro. I don't know what to do. I can't go to the police. I just can't. But I don't know what to do. I don't think he knows I suspect him, not yet."

Daniella blinks. Where the hell is her Heineken? She suddenly feels like a dipsomaniac. "Mari Carmen, what are you talking about?"

"I just told you."

Daniella glances suspiciously about her and says in a low dubious voice, "What makes you think he's El Zorro?"

"I know what you're thinking. You're thinking I have a wild imagination. You're thinking I'm imagining all this."

"I'm not thinking anything. Not yet."

"It's the way he talks, the way he looks at me when I'm wearing mini skirts, with his eyes full of... I don't know, with his eyes full of something weird."

"Weird like lust?"

"No."

"Disdain?"

"No. Not exactly. Actually, now that you mention it, yes. A mixture of lust and disdain."

"That's understandable. He's a priest. He should feel lust and disdain when he looks at a woman's legs. Lust because he's a man. Disdain because he's looking at what he wants but can't have" Daniella shakes her head, irked. "You're right, you know, about God and religion and all the rest. It's such nonsense. God creates man. God makes man a lustful animal. God makes man a lustful animal and then tells him, *'If you commit lustful acts you'll burn in hell for all eternity.'* It's like putting a plate of chocolate chip cookies and a glass of milk in front of a hungry child and telling him *'Don't eat.'* If the Christian god exists, then he should be the universal symbol for injustice."

"You're finally making sense."

"I didn't say I'm an atheist."

"You have to start somewhere, don't you?"

"I believe there's a God, though this God has nothing to do with the religions of the world. Also, this God has nothing to do with human suffering and is completely oblivious to what happens on earth. When you walk in the street, are you continually and consciously aware that you're not stepping on an ant? No, right? It's not that you mean to crush the ant, it's just that you're on another level of existence. You're totally oblivious. It's the same with God. We're the ants."

"I didn't come here to get you into a religious debate, Daniella. I just need your advice."

The waiter brings their beers and Daniella takes a greedy gulp. Mari Carmen doesn't touch hers.

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“I don’t know what to tell you, Mari Carmen, but it seems to me that your suspicions are – well, the whole thing looks highly improbable. A psychotic priest slashing women’s asses somehow seems unbelievable. Then again, you know I’ve attended Catholic schools all my life.”

There’s a commotion around a nearby table. A chubby blonde girl has fainted and a skinny black guy who appears to be her boyfriend is helping her get up. “She’s okay, she’s okay,” the skinny black guy says, chagrined. “She’s just pregnant, okay? She’s going to have my baby, a *black* baby, okay?” The chubby blonde girl looks anemic and miserable as her boyfriend leads her out of the cafe. “I didn’t finish my potato chips,” she mumbles.

Daniella says, “Can you imagine having a baby?”

Mari Carmen gives her a wrathful look. “I can tell you’re not in the least interested in my problems. But don’t worry, I won’t bother you again.” She makes an attempt to get up.

“Wait! Don’t be silly. Of course I’m interested in your problems. It’s just that I don’t think there’s a problem in the first place. Look, here’s what you should do. Next time El Zorro attacks – if there’s a next attack – ask him where he was and what he was doing at the time of the attack. Then check out if he’s telling the truth. A little detective work, that’s all. And calm down. Stop driving yourself crazy like this. You still don’t know anything. Maybe you’re torturing yourself for nothing. What’s wrong with you, anyway? Aren’t you supposed to be the embodiment of reason?”

“Ha, ha, very funny. What if I’m right?”

“We’ll think about that when the time comes. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to change the subject. Did you make up your mind about New Year’s Eve? Are you coming to the opening of El Paraiso?”

The waiter brings their food. The grilled cheese isn’t really grilled after all, the bread as hard as cardboard, nearly rancid, the translucent slice of cheese still cold, unmelted, with the aroma of a dirty refrigerator. But the French fries are a sight to behold – some ice-cold and soggy, some burned to the point of charcoal. Mari Carmen, however, seems oblivious to the sepulchral state of the

French fries. She covers them with a red sea of ketchup and lustily pops them into her mouth while Daniella watches her with a mixture of fascination and repulsion.

Mari Carmen talks and chews at the same time. "If I feel like it, I'll go. I don't mean to sound insulting or anything, but that ex-husband of yours needs psychiatric help. A reincarnation party on New Year's Eve...." She rolls her eyes. "I've never heard of such a thing in my life. The whole theory of reincarnation is absurd enough as it is. But a party.... Well, that's his problem, right?"

"Why do you have to take everything so seriously? It's just a costume party, a come-as-you-were costume party. I think it's pretty original. Everyone will come as he was in a past life. I'll come as a pirate. I don't know what I was in a past life, but I'll come as a pirate. Nothing original, I know, but I love pirates. Just the thought of the skull with the crossbones is enough to get me excited."

"How did Ismael come up with the reincarnation party idea, anyway? Has he suffered from sunstroke lately? Is he still on drugs?"

"Actually, I don't know. At first he had planned on giving a New Year's-Halloween party, but then he changed his mind. I don't know why, I didn't ask him. If you decide to come, who will you come as?"

Mari Carmen lets out a sarcastic chuckle, her full lips smeared with ketchup. For a second Daniella pictures her as a vampire, smug and lecherous after a kill.

Mari Carmen says, "What a question. As a nun, of course."

Chapter 17

“God, how I love Christmas retail therapy,” Marcela says, ecstatic, taking her daughter by the arm and ushering her into an expensive makeup store.

They have been shopping for five hours now, and although Daniella is about ready to keel over, Marcela is still as fresh and frisky as a kitten. Even her makeup is still intact. Amazing.

“You love shopping, period, no matter what the season,” Daniella says, wrinkling her nose. The stench of perfume in this type of stores is relentless, vicious.

Marcela laughs. “Not shopping. Retail therapy. Remember that. Let’s see...look at these makeup brushes. It’s a special offer. If you buy two products from their line you get the brushes free.”

A tall woman with a horsey face, garbed in a white robe comes over from behind the counter. “Can I help you with something?” she says in monotone.

Daniella keenly dislikes their white robes, so hygienic and impersonal. She feels transported to a doctor’s office.

While the woman shows Marcela some of the products, Daniella leans against the counter and shuts her eyes. The whole shopping process has been a morbid hallucination. The mall is so crowded people’s bags keep bumping against you as you walk. In order to pay for something, you have to stand on line for at least twenty minutes. After standing on line for so long, it dawns on you you’re on the wrong line – you don’t want to pay cash (God forbid!), but with credit cards. If you want your gifts wrapped, you have to go somewhere else and stand on line again and remind the girl to take off the price tag while she looks at you with contempt. To top it all, you’re too tired to carry the shopping bags.

Of course, there’s also a bright side. Like the huge Christmas tree at the center of the mall, with its flashing star at the top, its golden angels, candy canes, shinny colored balls, and strings of colored electric lights perched at the

branches. And everywhere the poinsettias, red and bold, hopelessly reminding the people of the true meaning of Christmas. And the music, soft American Christmas carols as well as jaunty Puerto Rican Christmas tunes. And Santa, naturally, Dear Mr. Claus, lifting up toddlers onto his lap so that their parents can snap up pictures – for what is Christmas without Santa? With all these beautiful things it's difficult to believe that at this moment, out there in the parking lot, more than one car is being stolen. That not far from the mall, more than one person is being mugged or raped or killed.

After Marcela pays with her American Express card and the gifts are wrapped, Daniella says, "I can't stand it any more, I'm going to collapse."

"You don't have any stamina, sweetheart," Marcela says as they walk out of the store. "You're always tired. Maybe you should go to the doctor. Maybe you're suffering from vitamin and mineral depletion. You have to take care of yourself. How many times have I told you that? Let's see, it's a little late. Why don't we go upstairs to La Terraza and eat at that lobster place? There's something I want to talk to you about."

So they go upstairs to the lobster place. It's a cozy restaurant, decorated like an old Spanish galleon. The only problem is that it's too crowded and there aren't any empty tables. Everyone is chatting and eating, but they seem to be screaming, their faces frantic.

Finally a sulky maitre d' leads them to their table.

"The waiter will be with you shortly," he says.

That's what he says, but the waiter doesn't make an appearance until a quarter of an hour later.

"Sorry for the delay, but this place is blowing up today," the waiter says. He smiles at Daniella. He has a dimple on his chin.

Daniella finds herself smiling back at him, which makes her mad. After all the waiting, she had planned to give the waiter a severe reprimand. "That's okay," she says.

"What would you like to drink?" he says.

Sunstruck

Marcela says, "I'll have a glass of white wine – dry, please, and very cold. If it's sweet or not cold enough, I'll return it."

"I'll have the same," Daniella says.

The waiter takes their order and walks off.

"He's cute," Daniella says, following him with her eyes. Then she turns to Marcela. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

"I've been thinking. There's a hole in my life, an emptiness that needs to be filled up. I mean, I need something meaningful in my life. And I think I've found it. You know I've always been interested in the feminist revolution. No, don't look at me like that – I'm not involved with one of those crazy clubs. Just listen to me for a moment, okay? Okay. So, as I was saying, I've always been sort of a feminist. I believe women have their undeniable rights, rights that men are constantly trying to snatch away from them. Anyway, lately I've been following the Zorro case closely and I think something extraordinary is happening to the women on this island. A transformation, that's what I'd call it."

The waiter arrives with their glasses of wine.

"Have you been listening to me?" Marcela says. She takes a tiny sip of wine and scratches her chin. "Hmm. Cold and dry."

"Of course I'm listening. I think you're right. The situation is quite interesting. Actually, I was talking to one of my professors about something similar this morning. But go on, I'm listening," Daniella says.

"All right." Marcela seems pleased. "Many people think that because of El Zorro women are going to be more careful about the way they dress. In other words, that women are not going to wear provocative clothes in order to prevent this kind of criminal attack from happening. But you know what? Just the opposite is happening. Women – and not just feminists, which is the most interesting fact of all – are getting angrier, angrier by the second. They're not only going to wear mini skirts, but they're going to wear as many kinds of provocative garments as they please. I can smell revolution in the air. Have you heard the latest rumors? Many feminists think that this whole thing is a

conspiracy, that El Zorro is being paid off by a secret group of chauvinist pigs who want to turn Puerto Rico into another Afghanistan. The government is supposed to be involved in it. That's why they haven't caught El Zorro, because they *don't* want him caught."

"Don't you think that's exaggerating things a bit," Daniella says, bewildered.

"You never know. Anyway, all this talking and I still haven't told you about my plans. What would you say if I told you that I'll become the president of a new controversial, revolutionary society called The Praying Mantises?"

Daniella blinks. "The Praying Mantises?"

Marcela looks triumphant. "What do you think? Well, say something."

"I... how – I mean...."

"It all began at my apartment, small meetings at night. At first it was silly, bland conversations over coffee and guayaba pastries. But then we started talking about El Zorro and that's when everything changed. We became passionate, we became angry and rebellious. Neighbors came, then the neighbors brought up friends, then those friends brought up more friends. Soon my apartment became too small for them...."

For a moment she gazes up at the ceiling, dreamy-eyed, totally engulfed in herself. "Yes... I never thought I had such a talent for public speech. It was quite a revelation." She looks back at Daniella. "I was wrong, you know. I don't need a man, I don't need a husband. Now I know what I need."

Daniella doesn't know why, but she feels a wave of panic. She tries to calm herself. So what? So her mother is founding a revolutionary society named The Praying Mantises. So what? Maybe it's just a phase. Maybe it'll pass. How many times in the past has her mother gotten all excited about this type of thing? Many times. How many times has it ended up in nothing? All of the times. So there's no cause for alarm, right? It's just that the idea of her mother – a plump, coquettish, even homely woman – as an aggressive, militant rabble-rouser is hard to conceive.

Sunstruck

Daniella glances paranoidly around her. "What is it you intend to do, exactly?"

"Why are you whispering? I can hardly hear you with all these people talking."

Daniella repeats the question, louder now.

"What kind of question is that? That's a silly question. We'll take a stand, of course. We'll get some publicity and take a stand. We'll recruit more members and then we'll show those son of a bitches what being a woman is all about."

"Mami." That's all Daniella says. "Mami." She nearly faints when their lobsters arrive – plump, scrumptious lobsters in hot buttery sauce.

While they put on their bibs and struggle with the lobsters they speak about other things. Daniella's design project, Tony's paintings, Commando's allergic reaction to pistachio ice-cream, Ismael's reincarnation party. Marcela, a true believer of Oriental philosophy and reincarnation, plans to go as a Turkish archer.

"I saw that psychic in Isla Verde about two months ago – Lolita. She's incredible. The details, that's what impresses you so much," Marcela says. "She told me I was a Turk during the 1100's, an archer and an arrow technician at the service of the Ottoman Pasha. According to her, I was partly responsible for the development of the crossbow, a weapon which later became very important in Europe."

Daniella says, "Wow."

"Yes, Lolita regressed me to the 1100's. She said I started speaking a strange language, probably old Turkish or whatever the Ottomans spoke at that time. I don't remember anything, though."

"You better be careful. I read that a doctor regressed his wife to the seventeenth century and left her there."

Later on, as they go out of the mall, they see Santa Claus. "Merry Christmas!" he says, in one hand a small Red Cross box, in the other a silver bell which he keeps swinging from side to side.

The sight of him fills Daniella with warmth. He looks so cozy, so grandpa-like with his snow-white beard, his fur-trimmed suit, his huge gloved hands.

“Wait a minute, Mami,” Daniella says, searching into her tote bag. “Let me see if I have change.”

“Maybe he’s not really with the Red Cross,” Marcela says.

“Let’s have some faith this time.”

Daniella calls out, “Santa!” and on second thought drops a five-dollar bill into the red box.

“God bless you, Señorita,” Santa says. “Merry Christmas!”

When Daniella joins her mother she says, “I feel good. I don’t know why, but I feel good.”

Not far from Santa there’s an overweight man dressed as Zorro. His big belly bulges, straining the costume’s buttons. He holds an open Bible in one hand. People and children have gathered about him to listen.

Curious, Daniella and Marcela approach.

Marcela shakes her head. “Look at that nut! Doesn’t he have anything better to do? And since when is Zorro so fat?”

“The time will come when only men will rule the world!” Zorro says with the voice of a TV evangelist. “Women are not meant to be out in the world. Women’s revolution is an unnatural catastrophe and it will be stopped! Women are not meant to leave their home and young and go to work. This is against the Lord! Divorce, infidelity, broken lives – all these we owe to women’s revolution! Ladies, do you wish to burn in hell for all eternity because of your disobedience? Repent! Repent, I tell you! There’s still time for salvation. The Lord is kind and forgiving toward his sheep. You!” he shouts, pointing directly at Daniella.

Daniella freezes.

“Isn’t your heart, your soul filled with shame? Just look at what you’re wearing – your legs exposed to the whole world to see.”

Daniella is left speechless.

Sunstruck

“Let’s go before I do something crazy!” Marcela mutters, trying to restrain her outrage. She pulls Daniella’s hand and heads to the car. “We’ll see who will eventually rule the world, you ignorant swine!”

Chapter 18

X peels a mandarin, eats it, and turns on the TV.

As usual, there's nothing but commercials on every channel. Extraordinary. Commercials on every channel. To what extent will we become commercialized?

X switches from channel to channel and finally stops at a local station.

The lady reporter who looks like a man is giving the news.

Two more young girls have disappeared, the police force is on strike again, criminals are cheerfully roaming the streets, the Governor was seen at an ill-reputed bar last night with an unknown voluptuous blonde.

In other words, nothing new. Blah, blah, blah....

X is about to switch the channel when the reporter starts talking about EL Zorro.

X smiles, pleased.

"... And the Zorro case keeps causing a sensation, not only throughout the island, but also throughout the world," the reporter says, annoyed. "Last night a man dressed just like El Zorro was seen in the streets of Tokyo, Japan. After an arrest and a quick interrogation, the suspect was set free because of insufficient incriminatory evidence. Apparently the man just wanted a little publicity and had no intention of committing criminal acts. In New York City, stickers, banners, and other forms of El Zorro memorabilia are being sold by the Puerto Rican community."

X laughs.

The reporter goes on. "This evening the Governor will meet with two FBI officials from Washington to discuss the case. Considering the chaotic state of the police force right now, the Governor sees Federal help a must in order to bring El Zorro to justice."

She pauses, lets out an angry breath. "And here in San Juan a new feminist society called The Praying Mantises has decided to declare its own war with El

Sunstruck

Zorro. In her opening speech this morning, Marcela Acosta, President of The Praying Mantises, declared that Puerto Rican women are no longer afraid of this psycho, that they're prepare for a fight, and that they'll continue wearing mini skirts for as long as they please. She exhorted not only feminist-minded women, but also conservative, traditional women to join in the fight, stating that the road to female oneness and fulfilment rests in their hands."

Here the reporter stops. As if possessed by an evil spirit, she snatches the tiny microphone from her blouse and flings it across the studio. "I can't take the pressure anymore!" she wails. She stands up and starts undressing, but immediately a shrill sound is heard and the whole thing is taken off the air.

Blah, blah, blah. Nothing new.

Chapter 19

It's December 31, 11:05 p.m., and everybody in the ballroom is acting drunk and mad, which means everything is normal. They've just finished eating. The menu was patriotic: morcillas (heavily spiced pig intestines stuffed with rice) arroz con gandules, baked pork, guineitos en escabeche (baby plantains and onions soured in olive oil), caramel flan, rice and bread puddings. And on every table a bottle of homemade Coquito and a bottle of imported champagne – to be open at 11:59 p.m. Anything extra to drink, you pay for it.

Of course, there's an orchestra. Ismael couldn't persuade El Conjunto Quisquella to attend, so he had to settle for a less known group like Los Cerditos de Mama. The only problem is that they keep making mistakes with the lyrics and improvising. But luckily the everyone is so numbed with alcohol they can't notice a thing.

If you look at the party from a certain distance – from the ceiling, for instance – you may think you're peering through a kaleidoscope. White round tables cluttered with half-finished drinks, dirty plates and silverware, Happy-New-Year glazed paper hats and whistles and strings of colored popcorn, Halloween ornaments in orange and black, jack-o'-lanterns grinning sadistically on every table, human beings in eccentric costumes, drinking, smoking, shouting, hopping up and down on the dance floor. They all seem extremely happy and pathetic at the same time, as if they were poorly-paid actors rehearsing for a Greek comedy. From the ceiling, over the dance floor, dangles a huge orange piñata, waiting to be torn like the pregnant belly of a great whale.

"Stop stepping on my feet!" Daniella shouts. She's dancing merengue with Ismael.

But Ismael can't hear her, so he just laughs.

Sunstruck

“And stop pinching my butt! Let’s go back to the table.” She stops dancing and points toward the tables with her finger.

Ismael looks befuddled. “You don’t want to dance?”

Daniella scowls at him. She looks good as a pirate, with the large black hat, the fierce black mustache and beard, the gold earrings, the elegant brocaded waistcoat, the dagger and brace of pistols in her belt, the high boots that fold down below the knees.

She ignores him and heads toward the table, where Lady Dracula and Tony are sharing a joint. Lady Dracula insists she was a Romanian courtesan in a past life, so she’s wearing a translucent chemise, a black velvet corset, a flowery village-like skirt, and black ballerina slippers. Daniella wonders about the ballerina slippers – did Romanian courtesans really wear ballerina slippers?

Lady Dracula says, “Want to join us, darling?”

“Where’s Mami and Mari Carmen?” Daniella says, sitting next to Tony.

“Your mother went to the bathroom,” Tony says, offering her the joint and smiling, knowing full well she’ll refuse. She pushes his hand away, exasperated. “One day I’d love to see you succumb to evil, if just for one time.”

“She went to the bathroom?” Daniella says, ignoring him.

“The morcillas messed up her intestines, I think. Curious. Intestines messing up intestines. Mari Carmen is dancing. A man dressed up like a priest came over and took her to the dance floor. They looked cute together. A nun and a priest.”

Daniella raises her eyebrows. “A man dressed up as a priest?”

“So what? Why are you so surprised?”

“Nothing.... What a coincidence.”

Tony throws an arm around Daniella and begins kissing and biting her neck. “What do you say we take a little walk around the pool area?”

Daniella pushes him away. Tony has bad breath tonight. In fact, his mouth smells like a cemetery. If she kisses him, maybe death will swallow her up.

Lady Dracula moans, her old nipples jutting lustily through the thin fabric of her chemise. "Please, children, please. Don't be naughty. You're getting me... I'm all..." As her voice trails off she slips under the table.

After a moment Ismael comes over to the table with a Japanese warrior. The Japanese warrior is really Eva, a famous mulatto singer and dancer – if grunting into a microphone and shaking your breasts and buttocks up and down can be called singing and dancing.

He introduces her to Tony and Daniella.

Eva says to Tony. "Hey, you look like –"

Tony cuts her off. "Yeah, that's me. Tony Curet, the famous painter, bigger than life."

"No, no. That's not what I was going to say. You look like someone who owes me two-thousand dollars."

"Where's Irene?" Ismael says.

"She's under the table," Daniella says. Her cheeks and chin are starting to itch under the beard.

"Oh, okay," Ismael says. He turns to Eva. "Would you like to sit with us for a while?"

"Why not? I'm thirsty. Would you order me something expensive, please?"

A few minutes later, over the drinks, Eva says, "I love your costume, Ismael. Were you really Jack the Ripper in your former existence?"

"You bet. I still get shivers when I look at raw liver." His eyes dart restlessly around the salon. "So what do you think? Nice party? Having fun?"

Daniella says, "Who are you looking for? You seem so restless."

"What? No one, no one. Actually, I was hoping to see my mother. Yes, I know what you all think, but believe me, it isn't as impossible as it sounds. I gave this reincarnation party just for her. She appeared to me in a dream and told me I should give a reincarnation party. Maybe she'll – I don't know, maybe she'll find a way to show up tonight. Who says it's impossible? We don't know anything. We're still in a primitive stage. We don't know anything."

Sunstruck

"I don't know about ghosts, but we're still in a primitive stage, all right," Tony says, his Adam's apple dancing up and down his throat. "That's why I decided to come up as a dinosaur tonight. I'm pretty sceptical about reincarnation and all that stuff, but if I was something in a past life, I was a dinosaur. This I believe. Or maybe I'm still a dinosaur. I don't know."

Eva stares blankly at him. "But you're not wearing a dinosaur costume. You're not wearing *any* costume. You're just wearing dirty jeans and a torn AC/DC T-shirt. I thought you were dressed up as a heavy-metal singer, but then I realized heavy-metal singers didn't exist during your past lifetime."

"That's what I mean. If I was a dinosaur in a past life and I'm still a dinosaur, then I'm just me – Tony Curet, the dinosaur. There's no need for a costume."

"Oh, sure, I see what you mean." But it's obvious she doesn't understand a word.

Daniella gazes up at the piñata.

When I was a little girl I used to love piñatas, but the piñatas didn't love me back. At birthday parties, I was never aggressive or fast enough to snatch the goodies before the other kids. Or maybe I'm exaggerating. It's New Year's Eve. I should be happy. Or at least I should be having fun. But I just feel feverish, my cheeks hot. Something like subterranean heat is spreading through me. What will my New Year resolutions be? It's funny. This morning I looked up 'resolution' in the dictionary. It means 'the quality of being resolute, great determination.' It also means 'a mental pledge, something one intends to do.' It makes me so depressed I feel like laughing.

Tony says to Daniella, "What are you smiling about?"

Daniella is about to answer him when she sees her mother staggering toward the table.

"My God..." Marcela mumbles, collapsing in a chair and taking in huge gulps of air.

Daniella says, "What's wrong, Mami? You look like you just had a close encounter with Ismael's mother!"

Marcela seems terrified. "How did you know?"

Ismael turns to her, aghast. "What do you mean?"

"My intestines were in bad shape, so I went to the bathroom. You know, nothing unusual. I just sat on the toilet and did whatever I had to do. Then...then when I got up and looked into the bowl— why do you all look at me like that? I bet you all look into the bowl before flushing the toilet. I'm not the only one. So then, when I looked into the bowl... I *saw* her.... It was her face, right there in the middle of the bowl, mingled with..."

She takes a deep breath. "Oh my God. I thought I was going to die. Now I feel sorry I ran out so fast. Maybe she wanted to talk. I acted childish."

"I knew it! I knew it!" Ismael says, jumping from his seat and plunging into the crowd toward the ladies' room.

Marcela tells Daniella, "Have you noticed how pale Ismael looks? You should advise him to go to the doctor. He's looking seriously anemic."

Eva turns to Marcela. "I saw you in the news the other day. I loved your speech. Maybe you could tell me a bit more about your organization. I'm sick and tired of being a sex object."

Marcela reaches for Eva's hand in a motherly way. "Of course, dear. There's always hope for people like you. A little brain washing is needed, that's all."

Then Marcela and Eva start talking about important people in show business. Daniella tries to get into the conversation.

"It must be exciting being in show business," Daniella says to Eva. "Famous people become your close friends. I mean, you must know nearly everybody here tonight, right?"

Eva sneers. "The bastards.... I wish they would die and rot in hell for all eternity."

Suddenly the orchestra stops playing. Everyone looks toward the dance floor. An Indian chief and an English knight are engaged in a quarrel. Luckily a Greek politician stands solemnly between them and gives a little speech.

"I'm antisocial. I don't like human beings," he says. "But I appreciate acts of charity. Would anyone of you be so kind as to give me a little angel dust?"

Sunstruck

So the orchestra starts playing again and everything goes back to normal.

After a few minutes the orchestra stops again and a pretty young woman holding a violin by its neck climbs to the stage.

“Isn’t that the violinist who was in the papers?” somebody whispers.

“They say she almost broke Zorro’s skull.”

Silence reigns as the woman begins playing with demonic energy, her bobbed hair swaying wildly with her movements.

“She’s amazing,” Daniella murmurs.

“She reminds me of Paganini,” Tony says, a pleasant expression on his face.

“Paganini?” Daniella says.

“You know, the Italian virtuoso. He was so extraordinarily skilful people believed he had made a pact with the Devil, offering his soul in exchange for genius. He was a ghoulish man, always dressed in black, shocking people wherever he went with his astonishing technical performance.”

“Really?”

“It is said he was double-jointed, which made it possible for him to play four notes on four different strings simultaneously. Also, his father used to starve him at an early age if his concentration faltered during practice. Good idea.”

“How come you know so much about Paganini?”

Tony looks insulted. “I have a college degree.”

“Oh.” Daniella tries to visualize the infamous violinist, the fingers moving at the speed of light on the strings, never making a single mistake, the bow swiftly slicing through the strings in ecstatic perfection, like a frenzied psychopath stabbing a victim.

“I didn’t know you like violinists so much.”

“There are many things about me you don’t know.”

The woman violinist finishes her performance, bows elegantly and walks down the stage, a smug – and rather twisted – grin on her face.

Once again the orchestra starts playing a frisky island tune and people continue dancing.

Tony huddles Marcela and Eva to the dance floor, and while Tony and Marcela and Eva dance, Daniella sees Ismael trudging toward the table. He looks as if he has just step out of a jaguar's cage, his wispy hairs standing on all ends, his scrawny face red and sweaty, his Jack-the-Ripper costume wrinkled and torn, the black cape slashed viciously.

Daniella says, "What happened?"

"I couldn't speak to her," he wistfully says. "I couldn't even see her. I checked all the toilets. There was nothing inside the bowls."

"But what happened to you? To your costume?"

"The women in the bathroom. They attacked me. One of them had a skinning knife. When they saw me with the black cape they thought I was El Zorro, for Christ's sake! What's wrong with the women on this island? I feel terrible. I don't know, maybe your mother had a hallucination."

"I'm sorry," Daniella says, leaning over the table to take his hand.

The lights dim out and the music stops.

"Look, it's almost twelve o'clock," she says. "Let's open the bottle of champagne. I was feeling pretty blue, too. But now I feel better. There's something special about counting the seconds and passing from one year to another. I mean, no matter how depressed you are it always makes you feel better."

Ismael pours the champagne into the glasses and Tony and Marcela join them and they all stand around the table with the glasses in their hands.

Daniella says, "I wonder what happened to Mari Carmen. Have any of you seen her?"

"Last time I saw her she was leaving the ballroom with that priest. They looked all lovey-dovey," Tony says.

"Ten seconds to twelve!" a man yells through a microphone. And then everybody in the salon shouts, "TEN! NINE! EIGHT! SEVEN! SIX! FIVE!"

Sunstruck

FOUR! THREE! TWO! ONE! HAPPY NEW YEAR! HAPPY NEW YEAR!
HAPPY NEW YEAR!

And through the speakers, at full blast, comes Enigma's "The Principles of Lust." Everybody smothers each other with hugs and kisses. Drinking, whistling, howling. In a corner, an overweight man in a suit is strangling an overweight woman (his wife?), but no one seems to be paying much attention to them. Tony jumps onto the table and starts dancing, his hips moving lecherously with the music. He beckons Daniella to join him, but she refuses.

Although Ismael is in a state of euphoria, he seems bewildered. "I didn't give instructions to put that song," he says.

But the music is deafening. To hear one another is beyond human power.

Ten minutes later they break the piñata with a stick and the guests scamper savagely after the gifts. But Daniella doesn't make a move.

I'm just going to sit quietly in my chair and sip my champagne. I'm not sure why, but I don't feel like scampering after any gifts. Maybe fear of failure. Who knows? Look at them. Primitive creatures. Huddling, pushing, battering one another. Barbarous. What happened? A woman is bawling, tears streaming down her cheeks. It seems someone broke her jaw. I feel ashamed of the human race – who said this? Ah, Twain. Good old Twain. Yes, I feel ashamed of the human race. But it's so odd. At the same time I'm enjoying this. I mean, I'm actually deriving some pleasure from this madness. Just like in a Rambo film.

"Look what I got," Marcela says, showing Daniella a pair of white jockey shorts. "What am I supposed to do with them? I'll give them to Tony."

Smiling smugly, Tony trots toward the table with his arms full of gifts and candies.

Daniella goes over the gifts, fascinated. "Can I have this cameo pin? Oooh – and this Betty Boop bracelet!"

Suddenly the table wobbles and a head pops up from under it.

"Is it twelve o'clock yet?" Lady Dracula says, breathless. Although her face looks as corpselike as ever, her cheeks have a peculiar glow.

Chapter 20

Stealthily, like a professional thief, X opens the door and peers inside the dark room to make sure there's nobody there.

Perfect.

X switches on the light and locks the door.

The room is crammed with file cabinets, office machinery, boxes filled with stacks of paper and other supplies.

Ambling to the far end of the room, X pushes one of the file cabinets aside, and opens a panel that hides a secret compartment.

From the secret cubicle X extracts a black golf bag.

X closes the panel, moves the cabinet to its original position, and, clutching the bag, unlocks the door and walks out.

At the end of the corridor two clerks greet X.

X salutes them, feeling the adrenaline all over.

Yes! It feels so right! This power, this vision, this mission! Like a message from God, like an order from Fate. There's no logic to it, but there's a grand scheme in it. A divine plan. And X is part of it, and must follow it.

"I'm the instrument," X thinks. "A divine instrument. The radiance, the energy flows through me."

Outside the building, the mellow light of twilight feels wonderful, nourishing to the soul.

Before finding a dark and lonely street to change clothes, X decides to take a little walk, to stroll down the lovely streets filled with restaurants, hotels, ice-cream parlours, souvenir shops.

At a corner X sees an old man with a German Shepherd dog. The dog doesn't have a leash but is sitting next to the man.

"Does your dog bite?" X asks the man, smiling.

"No, my dog doesn't bite."

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X leans over to pat the dog on the head, when suddenly the dog stands up on all fours and growls at X, revealing dripping saliva and a set of overly elongated and quite unnecessary fangs.

X retreats and pulls back the hand. "You said your dog doesn't bite!"

The man yawns. "That's not my dog."

X hugs the golf bag and continues down the street, shaking the head.

Jeezes! The world is insane.

It's up to X to make it a better place.

Chapter 21

Ismael sees Daniella and feels a spasm of guilt. She looks so innocent there in the reception desk, her long red hair pinned up into a loose bun like the heroine of a Victorian novel. He wishes he could confide in her. He wishes he could tell her the truth about the hotel. Now that she's working with him they have become kind of close again.

What can he do? He's a romantic guy. But no. The less people who know about it, the better. He wonders if she's noticed anything unusual. But no. Everything about the hotel looks normal. Under control. He's been careful. Extremely careful. And it has paid. It's been only two weeks since the opening night and he has already made a fortune. At last he's found his vocation.

As Ismael approaches the reception desk he mutters to himself, "Thank you, Mother Nature. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you."

Daniella looks up at him and bites her lower lip. "Where have you been all day, Ismael? We had a problem with one of the maids today. She was attacked by a lion."

"What! How could something like that happen? This is incredible. I'm gone one day and look what happens."

"The maid is at—"

"I don't care about the maid. How's the lion?"

"Oh, he's fine. They're giving him a bath right now. He was.... I don't know, but there was something funny about the lion. He could hardly walk and his eyes were crossed. The vet thinks he was under the influence of a drug. Maybe alcohol. I don't know. He thought it'd be proper to give him a cold bath, to perk him up. What do you think? We should warn the guests not to give anything to eat or drink to the animals."

Ismael lets out a nervous laugh and rummages inside his jacket for a cigarette. Something tiny and vicious, like a lye capsule, is making a hole in the pit of his stomach. "Under the influence of a drug? That's ridiculous!"

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“Not to the vet. Anyway, he’s not sure yet what type of drug it was or even if it was a drug in the first place. He’s working on it right now, running some tests.”

“Damn it! Where the hell are my cigarettes? Ah, here they are. Tests? Tests? What tests? The whole thing is ridiculous. It’s just a lion, for Christ’s sake! Is he going to call the CIA, too? The lion probably had a bit too much to drink. It can happen to anybody. Did you talk with the person who requested the lion?”

Daniella shakes her head. “He checked out before the whole thing happened.”

Ismael can’t believe what’s happening. Just when things were going so perfectly. He has to be careful. He has to be extremely careful. One wrong step and everything goes down the drain.

“Are you okay?” Daniella says.

“I don’t know...I mean, yes. I’m fine. Just fine. I just want El Paraiso to be a success.”

Daniella smiles. “Don’t be silly. Of course it’ll be a success. It’s already a success. These things happen. It’s not a big deal. If you ask me, it was the guest’s fault. He shouldn’t have given anything to the poor lion. From now on we’ll warn the guests not to give anything to the animals.”

There’s a moment of silence.

“You’re an angel,” Ismael says.

“Don’t be silly.”

“Lovely. Your cheeks are flushed.”

“Stop it!”

“I feel like...like....” He feels like kissing her. He used to kiss her often on the forehead. Those were the days. These days... Oh well, he’d rather not think about what he’s kidding these days. “One more week and Easter break will be over and you’ll go back to your studies. Why not work for me part time? I can’t imagine this reception desk without you. Please. What do you say? You choose the days and the hours.”

Daniella sighs. "I don't know. I don't know if I can manage work and study at the same time. I don't have the energy. Chronic fatigue syndrome—I'm perpetually tired."

All of a sudden he takes her hands and says, "Marry me."

"What are you doing? People are staring at us. In case you forgot, I have a boyfriend."

"Leave him."

"You have a wife."

"We'll plan a perfect murder."

"Leave me alone. You're starting to get on my nerves. My dream in life is to be able to live without any man. I want to become a hermaphrodite."

"A what?"

"Look it up in the dictionary. And now if you don't mind, I have work to do," Daniella says snippily.

After his friendly conversation with Daniella, Ismael wends to his office. His private line is ringing. Good. Just in time.

He picks up the phone. "Hello?"

"Good evening, boss. The stuff is packed and ready for delivery. When should I bring it up?"

Ismael glances at his Rolex. "Same time as usual. Go through the basement and use the service elevator."

"I know that, boss." The voice sounds peevish.

"Just a friendly reminder, jerk. I'm the boss. I can say anything—" But the person at the other end of the line has already hung up.

Ismael tries to calm down. He shouldn't get upset. It isn't worth it. Besides, he has important things to take care of. It's just that what happened today is still inside his system. That stupid maid, letting herself be attacked by the lion. What a brainless creature. In his opinion, she should have been devoured by the big cat, torn limb from limb and swallowed piece by piece. And Daniella, turning him down like that. What's eating her, anyway? He didn't buy that fatigue syndrome business. Whatever she has, it has to do with that son of a

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bitch, Tony. And most important of all, that brainless guest breaking the sacred rules and sharing the stuff with the lion. All his plans, all his dreams for the future could be destroyed!

But first things first.

Ismael presses a button and tells his secretary to immediately reach Dr. Lugo, the hotel veterinarian.

Chapter 22

“Well, you see, I’m not sure which animal to choose. My kids love bears, but I’m not sure if I should choose a bear. Wouldn’t it be dangerous? I know this is an animal hotel, but still...” The man scratches the tip of his nose and gives Daniella a dubious look.

Daniella says, “Oh, you don’t have to worry about that, Señor. All our animals are fully trained and have friendly dispositions. They’re all tame. We have a North American black bear and a grizzly bear. But maybe you’d like to take a look at our animal list before making a decision.” She hands him the animal list.

“Mmmm.... This is a lot of animals.”

“From all over the world, Señor,” she says wearily. Her big toe hurts. Since she’s behind the reception desk and no one can see her, she decides to take off her shoes. In five minutes it’ll be six o’clock. Heavenly. She can hardly wait to get home and cuddle in bed with Commando and eat a whole bag of potato chips.

Now the man seems excited. “I think I’ll choose the black bear. My kids adore bears,” he eagerly says.

Daniella frowns. Ever since that maid was attacked by the lion, four days ago, she’s had a feeling that something weird is going on around her. She’s not sure what it is. It’s just a creepy feeling.

After she makes the necessary arrangements for the bear delivery and wishes the man a pleasant stay, she takes the elevator down to the basement, where her car is parked.

As she’s about to open the car door, a man’s voice startles her.

“Hey, you! Remember me – the guy who was dumped by his girlfriend, the one who has AIDS? Nice to see you again.”

Daniella squints at him, dazed. “You. Sure, I remember.”

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He's about twenty yards away from her, leaning placidly against the door of a black mini van. The black mini van is parked by the service elevator and two other men in khaki jumpsuits are hauling some boxes from the van onto the elevator.

"As you can see, I'm working for Señor Carlier these days. Nice hotel, isn't it? I don't like animals that much, but I think it's a great idea – sharing your room with the animal of your choice, that is," he says.

"How come I haven't seen you around the hotel before?"

As he speaks he begins to approach her. "Oh, you couldn't, really. I don't work inside the hotel. I do...how can I put it? I do deliveries – yes, that's it."

Now that he's standing close to her she can see small leaves and twigs stuck to his clothes, as if he's just come out of a jungle. A cotton scarf, which he keeps touching with his hand, is wound round his neck. She can't help feeling a twinge of pity. He looks so emaciated, so hollow-eyed, in bad need of a blood transfusion.

Daniella says, "What sort of deliveries?"

"All sorts. Whatever is needed at the hotel, I bring it. New towels, lamps, TV sets...flowers. You name it."

She glances at the black mini van, at the men hauling the boxes. "I see. What's in the boxes?"

"What?" He coughs, clears his throat. "Sorry, but as you know, I'm always with a cold. My neck hurts, too. I got bitten by something rather nasty the other night. What did you say?"

"What's in the boxes?"

"What's in the boxes? Nothing, nothing. Just some ornaments. You know, ornaments for the rooms. You know something? I'm not trying to be fresh or anything, I swear it, but you have beautiful hair. I wish I had beautiful hair. Actually, I wish I had *hair*. Well, what can I do? At least I'm still alive, right? But I don't feel grateful to God. Not at all. By the way, what do you do in the hotel?"

"I work at the reception desk. I'm the guest-animal coordinator."

"I don't think there's a title for the kind of job I'm doing." He chuckles. Then he coughs and clears his throat and soberly adds, "Except for that of delivery boy, of course."

Daniella pushes her hair away from her forehead. "I hope you don't mind, but I'm kind of tired."

"Sure, sure. Sorry if I bothered you. That was not my intention. I can tell you're not very happy right now. I hope you reach a state of nirvana soon."

When Daniella gets home she finds Tony dabbing oils onto the canvas and Mari Carmen sitting on the edge of the bed gnawing her nails.

"Mari Carmen," Daniella says, surprised.

Mari Carmen says, "I knew you'd be surprised. You don't mind, do you? I have to talk to you."

"Don't be silly. Of course I don't mind." Daniella throws her handbag on the bed and kicks off her shoes. "I'm dying! My feet are killing me." She collapses on the bed, her arms and legs widely sprawled. Then she props herself up on her elbows and stares questioningly at Tony.

But Tony doesn't notice her – or pretends he doesn't – and continues with his painting.

"Hey, Tony!" She waves. "I'm here. I'm home. Hoohoo!"

Silence.

Daniella lets out a long weary breath. She turns to Mari Carmen. "Nothing to worry about. He's like that when he paints."

Mari Carmen shakes her head. "Jerk," she mutters, grimacing at Tony. "Is this what you come home for? How can you live with someone like that?"

"My karma, no doubt. What were you going to tell me?"

Mari Carmen lowers her voice. "Maybe we shouldn't talk here."

"Why not? Don't worry about Tony. He doesn't even know we're here."

"Would you mind if we talk in the bathroom?"

So they go to the bathroom and find Commando taking a nap on top of the toilet seat.

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Mari Carmen gasps when she sees Commando. "I didn't know she was pregnant!"

"It's a *he* – and no, he's not pregnant," Daniella says, irritated. She turns to Commando and her expression changes. "The love of my life. How's the love of my life?" She picks him up and holds him lovingly in her arms. Commando half opens his eyes and yawns, cuddling against her chest. He seems spaced-out. "I wonder if he's sick. He's never so sleepy when I come home."

Mari Carmen inspects the inside of the bathtub. "This bathtub is filled with dark curly hairs and there's a ring of dirt around it."

"It's Tony. Every time he takes a bath he leaves all his body hairs behind. He doesn't care. I mean, every time I take a bath I make sure there are no hairs left. I rinse the whole thing. But he doesn't care. He's like that. Plus, he's like a werewolf. I have to scrub the tub every other day."

Mari Carmen gingerly sits on the edge of the bathtub. "I'd appreciate it if you stay there beside the door and not come any closer. You know how I feel about cats. Especially if you say he might be sick. I'm not interested in getting any kind of exotic disease. Not right now, anyway. You treat him like a baby."

"He's my baby," Daniella says, kissing him on top of the head.

"Besides, he doesn't like me. Every time I come here he gives me a superior look and disappears."

Daniella laughs. "That's because he's a conservative, a republican. All cats are. They love tradition, routine. They loathe change."

"Ha, ha. You're getting funnier every day," Mari Carmen scornfully says. "He *does* look pregnant. Anyway, let me get to the point here. As you can see, I'm pretty calm. That's because I took a Valium a few hours ago."

"You took a Valium?"

"Even perfectly stable people need a Valium once in a while."

"What happened?"

"The man I love *is* El Zorro. No, don't give me that look. Now I have proof. I did exactly what you told me to do. Yesterday night I called him a few times at the congregation but I couldn't reach him. So I decided to go over there."

Don't ask me why. I just had to drive over there. When I reached the congregation he was in the parking lot walking toward his car – well, not really his car, all the priests use it. He was carrying a small luggage. It was around nine o'clock. You can imagine how perplexed I was. I followed him. I followed him all the way to Hato Rey, but then I lost him at a red light. I was so angry. There was nothing else for me to do, so I went back home.

“And then this morning I saw the papers. El Zorro slashed another woman last night. In Hato Rey. I couldn't believe it. Of course, it still didn't mean anything. So I called him again this afternoon and asked him if by any chance he had gone out last night. He said he hadn't! He said he'd been in his office reading the comics section all night! I was shocked. I started trembling all over. I didn't tell him anything, though. I didn't know what to do. I just took a Valium and thought it'd be a good idea to come over and talk to you.

“What do you think? This time you can't say I'm imagining things. Why did he lie? What was he carrying in that luggage? What was he doing in Hato Rey? – the same area where last night's attack was committed. Too many coincidences, Daniella. Damn it! Just when everything was going so beautifully between us. That night at the reincarnation party... We took a long walk along the pool...necked under a palm tree.... Oh, it was so romantic! And now this. What am I going to do?”

Commando hisses at Mari Carmen.

Mari Carmen flinches. “What's wrong with that cat? He looks possessed.”

Daniella sees a teenaged cockroach scurrying under the toilet. She guesses it must be a teenager because it isn't small enough to be a baby nor big enough to be an adult. “Damn, I have to get more Raid. All this cleaning, all these detergents and roach poison, and they're still alive!” She looks at Mari Carmen and scratches Commando's neck to calm herself. “Sorry. Your priest. I think – well – what you're telling me is... is... I don't know what it is.”

“You're a great help. Thanks a lot.”

“Listen to me. You still don't have proof. Yes, he lied. But he could have lied for completely different reasons. Maybe he went to a belly dancing bar. Or

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a bowling alley. Who knows? You know what I think? I think you should confront him with it. Ask him face to face where he was last night. Tell him that you followed him. Tell him everything. It's the only way out of this, believe me. You've been driving yourself crazy with this thing for weeks. You're starting to get that paranoid look in your eyes."

Mari Carmen looks down at the floor, her small shoulders hunched forward. "I don't know. You really think so?"

"Come on, don't look so defeated. Falling in love with a priest has been bad for your health. You used to be so resolute, so energetic. Look at you. Are you eating enough protein?"

"I guess I'm kind of worn down."

"Will you talk to him?"

Mari Carmen nods. "I guess."

"When?"

"When? I don't know when, but I'll talk to him."

After Mari Carmen leaves, Daniella searches for potato chips in the refrigerator, but there are none left. "I'm extremely disappointed. What happened to the potato chips? There was a big bag here this morning."

Tony steps back to regard his painting from a distance. He belches and wipes his hands with a dirty rag. "What did you say?"

Daniella feels like crying. "Did you eat my potato chips?"

"I think this is my best painting so far."

"Did you eat my potato chips? Answer me!"

For the first time today he looks at her straight in the face. "Your potato chips? Yes, I was hungry, so I ate *your* potato chips. Nothing personal, believe me."

"I drove here like a lunatic, just thinking about the potato chips."

"So what can I do?"

Daniella says, "If I don't have some potato chips, I'm going to faint." She really feels kind of dizzy. Her lips are parched and her hands clammy.

“What’s wrong with you? Here, come and lie down on the bed. You’re not pretending, are you? I’m sorry about the potato chips. You want me to go out and get some?” Tony says.

Now that Tony seems worried and she’s lying down, she feels better. What’s wrong with wanting a little attention? Everybody needs a little attention once in a while. But she’s not acting, she does feel faint. Maybe she has low blood sugar. Or even worse, pre diabetes.

Tony sits on the edge of the bed and bends over her. “Are you okay now?” he says.

Their faces are nearly touching. When Tony gets so close to her and she smells the scent of his flesh, she momentarily forgets about his sulky behavior. But she doesn’t want to forget it. She shouldn’t.

“Did you mean that?” she says.

“What?”

“About the potato chips. Would you really go out and get me some?”

“My dear Juliet, I’d give my life for you.”

“I bet. By the way, where were you last night? I came home late from work – I think it was around ten-thirty – but you weren’t here.”

“I was feeling pretty restless, so I went out and had a few beers. When I came back you were already sleeping. I didn’t want to wake you.”

“Oh.”

Tony shrugs. He leers at her breasts and his sensual lips spread into a diabolical smile. “I know what will make you feel better, my little fox,” he says.

But Daniella pushes him away. “Leave me alone. I’m hungry. I have an urgent craving for potato chips. If you don’t go out right now and get me some, I’ll never speak to you again.”

Commando comes out of the bathroom and leaps onto the bed. He settles himself on one of the pillows, yawns, and goes back to sleep again.

“What’s wrong with Commando? He’s never so sleepy, not at night,” she says, looking suspiciously at Tony.

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Tony avoids her eyes and swiftly gets up and sprints toward the door. “Okay, you win. I’ll get you some potato chips.” And before Daniella has a chance to speak, he’s gone.

Daniella brings Commando closer to her and cuddles against him. If Tony has done something to her cat... Just the thought of it makes her blind with dreams of revenge. She could kill him, she truly could. She doesn’t know why, but Commando is extremely important in her life. After all, he’s been with her for eight years, longer than any other member of the male species has been – including her father. This can’t be taken lightly.

While Daniella waits for the potato chips, she wonders about El Paraiso. Something weird is going on. When did she start thinking like this? Ah, yes. Four days ago, when the lion attacked the maid and Ismael fired poor Dr. Lugo.

Why did Ismael fire him? What happened was in no way the vet’s fault. At first she thought Dr. Lugo had resigned – that’s what everybody was saying. But then she talked with Ismael’s secretary, who spilled the truth.

And then the guests. On a number of occasions she’s seen them roaming around the lobby like zombies, their eyes popping out of their sockets, their mouths perpetually chiselled into psychotic grins. And that guy who has AIDS, with his clothes full of leaves and twigs. Where the hell did he come from? And what was in the boxes? It seems to her he became pretty nervous when she asked him the content of those boxes. She’ll have to talk to Ismael. On the other hand, she doesn’t want to appear foolish – she may be imagining the whole thing.

Daniella spends the rest of the night devouring potato chips and listening to Tony talk about his painting.

“You see this big skull in the center?” Tony says, as if he were speaking to a retarded child. “It is a male skull, and it represents Man or God, depending upon your childhood beliefs. Can you see all these little things coming out of its eyes and ears and nostrils and mouth? These are women with wings. They have wings because wings are a sign of liberation and these little women are

trying to liberate themselves from the domination of the male skull. As you can see – are you listening to me? Don't look inside the bag of potato chips, look at me – okay, as you can see, the skull is sputtering some greenish slimy stuff from the top, and these stuff is splattering onto the little wings of the women, making their liberation process more strenuous. What do you think? Isn't it great? You should come over and take a closer look at the women's breasts. Fantastic. So many little breasts in one painting."

He looks at Daniella with wicked eyes and slowly begins to approach her, his arms held out toward her, his tongue flicking in and out like a snake.

Chapter 23

The next time Daniella sees Ismael, he looks even paler than before, if such a thing is possible.

Daniella says, "I came to say goodbye, Ismael. I really can't stay any longer. I'm not that type of hard-working person. It's either work or study. Thanks for everything, though. It's been... interesting."

Ismael gets a bit hysterical. He tells her he can't live without her, so they bicker for a while.

"At least let me invite you to dinner tonight. We could go to McDonald's," Ismael says, calmer now.

For a moment Daniella considers his invitation – not because it's in any way appealing but because she wants to tell him about the hotel, about that creepy feeling she's been having. But then a tiny voice tells her, *You're being ridiculous, Daniella. This is a hotel, a normal hotel. What could be wrong with it, anyway? It's just a different hotel because of the animals, that's all. You're starting to look like Mari Carmen. You're being paranoid.*

"I'm sorry, I can't. Maybe another time," she says.

So Daniella goes back to school, and for a couple of weeks she doesn't hear anything about Ismael or El Paraiso.

But then one late afternoon, while she's studying for a test about conflicting ideologies at the university library, a little man comes up to her and says,

"Could I speak with you for a moment, Señorita?"

Daniella looks up at him. "Yes?"

In spite of the heat, the little man is wearing a hat and a beige trench coat. He's sort of chubby, with a wild mass of black hair – probably a wig – and languid, sleepy-looking eyes.

"I'm Detective Bambi," he says, rummaging inside his pockets. "I'm sorry, I can't find my credentials. You'll have to take my word for it."

Daniella frowns, surprised. She's never met a real detective before. "A detective?"

"That's right, Señorita. If you don't mind, I'd like to ask you a few questions. It won't take long."

"Wait a minute. How do I know you're not some kind of pervert? I don't mean to sound rude, but we're living in Puerto Rico."

"Sure, sure, I understand. But you see, I was at a belly dancing pub earlier today – police business, of course – and I think one of the dancers stole my wallet. But I can show you my note pad and Pac-Man pen, if you want." He extracts the note pad and pen from the inside pocket of his trench coat. "So far I've just written some preliminary notes about the case. Nothing out of this world. Go ahead, read it."

Daniella squints into the note pad. The writing looks like the scrawling of a choleric baby, indecipherable. But she manages to read the following words and phrases: El Paraiso, 3:45 p.m., raccoon's mouth, found in tropical forests, Señor Carlier, wife disappears At the top right-hand corner of the page there's a little drawing of a shark devouring a girl in a bikini.

Detective Bambi snatches the note pad from her, somewhat embarrassed. "I kind of like sharks..." His voice trails off.

Daniella feels a twinge of panic. Señor Carlier, the hotel, the raccoon... Obviously something has happened at El Paraiso, but what? "I'm afraid I'm totally lost," she says.

"Do you mind if we go outside? That lady behind the desk is scowling at us."

Once outside the library, Detective Bambi says, "Come, let's stroll around the campus while we talk. Polluted air has always been good for my brain cells."

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Not at all, Señorita, go ahead." After a slight pause, he says. "I'm investigating the Paraiso-Mushroom case. So far the investigation has been kept low profile, but I'm afraid one of our officers was bribed – as usual – and

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everything will come out into the open tonight, so don't miss the eight o'clock news."

"The Paraiso-Mushroom case?" Daniella says, perplexed.

"That's right. We've just found out that El Paraiso really wasn't an animal hotel. That was just a facade. El Paraiso was a magic-mushroom dealing nest. I'm talking in the past tense because the hotel was locked up last night. At the moment it's being thoroughly search and examined by specialists. Yes, I know. The whole thing sounds pretty crazy, but that's the truth. I don't know if you're aware, but some areas of El Yunque, our beautiful rain forest, are filled with magic mushrooms. Fat, meaty, juicy hallucinogenic mushrooms. It seems Señor Carlier was having them collected, then packaged, then delivered to the hotel.

"We already caught one of the delivery men – a sad case, a young man who's dying of AIDS. He was hospitalized this morning. Anyway, he's willing to serve as witness – I guess he's sorry for his sins and afraid of burning in hell." For a few seconds he stares at Daniella's right shoulder. "There's a ladybug on your shoulder. That's good luck," he says, flicking it off with a wave of his hand. "Where was I? Ah yes. After the mushrooms were delivered to the hotel, they were brought to an underground lab, where the natural drug psilocybin was extracted from the mushrooms and mixed with other chemical substances, thus creating a new powerful psychedelic drug, a lot more powerful than LSD. This drug was then sold for incredible sums of money to special guests – dealers, rich people who wanted a new kick, that sort of characters. I understand you were once married to Señor Carlier, am I right?"

Daniella bites her lower lip to make sure she's not hallucinating. She gawks at him, speechless. "I – yes," she finally says.

"You also worked at the hotel for three weeks, am I right?"

"I – yes."

"You see? I'm always right," he gleefully says, writing vigorously on the note pad. "Why did you quit?"

Daniella hesitates. "Do I have to answer your questions?"

He cocks a brow and throws her a sharp, suspicious look. "Why? You have something to hide?" he says with a sweet, nearly diabetic voice.

"No, of course not. It's just—I don't know what I'm supposed to do in this kind of situation. I mean, I've never been in this kind of situation before. I guess I'm still in shock."

"Well, yes, that's understandable. A pretty girl like you, mixed up in this mess."

"But I don't have anything to do with it. I just worked there for three weeks. I don't know anything. I had to quit because of my studies."

"I see..." He glances down at his notes. "And you were the guest-animal coordinator, am I right? During the time that you worked at the hotel, did you notice anything unusual about it? Anything unusual about the employees or the guests? Please think it carefully. Try to remember."

There's a moment of silence.

"No, nothing," she lies. She doesn't know why she's lying, but she's lying. Maybe loyalty towards Ismael, who knows? Where is he? Have they arrested him? Is he in jail? Even if this mushroom business is true, even if Ismael is a real criminal, which in a way doesn't surprise her, she still feels herself strangely attached to him. He was her first husband, and Daniella is somewhat romantic about first husbands and that kind of stuff. Also, there's always been a demented, heedless, childish quality to him which brings out her mother's instincts. And she has never trusted the police and sees them as brainless, corrupted primates.

Daniella says, "Where's Ismael? Has he been arrested?"

"Unfortunately, he hasn't been found yet. But don't worry, miss, the whole police force is after him. We'll find him. If we don't go into another strike, we'll soon find him. By the way, has he tried to get in contact with you in any way?"

"No, of course not."

"I just thought I'd ask. If you hear anything from him, you'll tell us, won't you?"

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Daniella nods. She's starting to dislike this little Bambi character. He looks like a bad replica of Columbo, with his heavy-lidded, intoxicated-looking eyes, his ridiculous hat and trench coat.

"Can I ask you something?" she says. "When did all this start? I mean, how were the mushrooms found?"

"Two days ago, with a raccoon. A raccoon was seen running around in the hotel lobby with a bunch of mushrooms between his jaws. There was a little kid there, only four years old, and he started playing with the raccoon and ate some of the mushrooms. Well, in a matter of seconds the kid turned into a real beast. *'Get those fire balls away from me! Get those snakes away from me!'* he started shouting. They had to bring a doctor. After a while the kid calmed down and said that he had seen God and the Virgin Mary and even the Angel Gabrielle, and that he now knew what the secret of the universe was all about. Naturally, the doctor immediately called the police."

"Extraordinary," she mumbles.

Detective Bambi asks her a few more questions, then walks off with an inscrutable expression on his face.

Daniella lights another cigarette. She doesn't know what to think; she doesn't know what to do. So she'd been right, after all. Her suspicions hadn't been the product of a goofy, deluded mind. Something unnatural had been going on in the hotel. Maybe if she had talked with Ismael she could have prevented this scandal. But again, maybe not.

In any case, it's too late now. They're looking for him. He'll be found and arrested – he'll probably be the victim of police brutality – and thrown into prison, where he'll be the victim of even more brutality, no doubt. Daniella wonders about Lady Dracula. What about her? Was she his accomplice? She should have asked the detective, but she was so overwhelmed by the news her mind went blank.

Daniella brings a hand to her stomach. Again, she feels frail, nauseous. She'll have to go to the doctor. He'll probably prescribe her vitamins and order

her to cut the booze and quit smoking for good. But what if it's something more serious?

On the way to her car, Daniella sees Mari Carmen coming out of the Administration Building.

"Mari Carmen!" Daniella says, waving a hand up in the air.

Mari Carmen rushes up to her. She looks all excited. But the first thing that strikes Daniella is that she's wearing a dress – a conservative, below-the-knee dress printed with small purple flowers. Mari Carmen has always worn shorts, mini skirts, seedy jeans, but never conservative dresses printed with small purple flowers.

"I've great news, my friend," Mari Carmen says, giving Daniella a savage hug. "I just dropped all of my courses! I'm quitting school!"

"What!"

"I'm getting married!"

"What!"

"I know, I was surprised, too. Isn't it great? I've so many things to tell you I don't know where to start." She grabs Daniella by the arm and huddles her to a battered bench under a big ceiba tree. "Come, sit down. I want to tell you everything. No, don't try to speak. Let me speak first, then you can say whatever you want. Please, I want you to be happy for me. Where do I start? Okay, the man I love isn't El Zorro. I finally spoke with him last night, and he confessed everything. I feel so guilty – all this time thinking bad things about him. No, no, don't say anything. Please let me talk. He wasn't doing anything criminal that night when I followed him in the car. He was only attending a rock concert. He was afraid to tell me, I guess. He told me he loves rock concerts and that sometimes he sneaks out of the congregation to attend them. In the luggage he was just carrying a pair of jeans, a T-shirt and some sneakers. But from now on he won't have to sneak out anymore. We're getting married. He's quitting the priesthood, so he'll be able to freely attend as many rock concerts as he pleases. Can you imagine?"

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She catches her breath. “Oh God, I feel so happy! And there’s something else, but I don’t know how to tell you. You’re probably asking yourself why I’m acting this way, why I’m dropping my courses, why I’m saying goodbye to communism—yes, Daniella, yes, I’m saying goodbye to communism! Well, I’ll tell you why: Love. My dearest friend, I never told you this before, but until last night I had never been with a man before. Communism doesn’t have a meaning anymore. I just want to be a housewife and have lots and lots of kids. I guess I was frigid before. I’m not sure which came first—I mean, I’m not sure if I became a communist because I was already frigid or if my involvement with communism made me frigid, you know what I mean? A few years ago I was listening to a radio talk show and they asked a group of Soviets about sex in the Soviet Union and one of the Soviets said ‘We don’t have sex in the Soviet Union.’ I guess now I understand what he meant.”

Daniella congratulates Mari Carmen. What else can she do? Then she tells her everything about Detective Bambi and El Paraiso-mushroom case.

“That’s nice,” Mari Carmen says, smiling, still floating between fluffy pink clouds over an enchanted land of pixies and brownies, many miles away.

Chapter 24

“Why are we here again, lieutenant? This place gives me the creeps,” the young officer says. His eyes dart nervously from one torturing device to another. “I thought we checked everything yesterday.”

Detective Bambi yawns, then curses under his breath. As usual, he’s sleepy, and on top of this he has to keep up with Eduardo, an eternal sac of nerves.

“Why don’t you just shut up, Eduardo?” he says.

He needs to think. He needs some quiet time to think. This case is getting more complicated by the second. First, Ismael Carlier disappears. Okay, no big deal, he can handle that. But now Irene Carlier has also disappeared and the lab says that some of the blood that was found in the refrigerator is human blood.

It’s like this. Yesterday afternoon Detective Bambi, accompanied by Eduardo, came here to talk to Irene Carlier about the case and the disappearance of her husband. She seemed genuinely surprised. As a matter of fact, she seemed astonished, horrified.

“I refuse to believe it. How dare you say such atrocities about my sweet, sweet darling?” the old woman said.

God, what a voice – some sort of grating hiss, not human. And what a face – vampiric, a Halloween mask. When Eduardo first saw her, he jumped back about a foot in the air and let out a scream. Anyway, she said she didn’t know anything. She said that she had just arrived, that she’d been staying at a health spa – something about coffee enemas – for the past five days.

Detective Bambi said, “Do you mind if we look around the apartment?”

She said she didn’t mind, so they looked around the apartment. They weren’t able to find any significant clues, but they did find a number of blood jars in the refrigerator. The jars – Kraft mayonnaise label still on them – were separated into three groups.

Sunstruck

“Oh, that’s for my face, gentlemen, to keep it looking young and rosy. Frog blood, rat blood, pig blood, you know,” the Halloween mask said.

Immediately Eduardo started gagging, one hand on his mouth, the other on his stomach. “Where’s the bathroom? I have to throw up.”

While Eduardo and Nosferatu were out of sight, Detective Bambi grabbed a jar from each of the three different groups and clumsily stuffed them into the pockets of his trench coat. He would send them to the police lab, have them analyzed. He didn’t suspect anything foul at this point, but so what? The detectives in the TV did this kind of thing.

As soon as he got back to headquarters, he fetched two officers into his office and said, “I want a 24-hour surveillance put on Irene Carlier. I want you to follow her, to watch her every movement. She may know where her husband is, she may lead us to him. I know you’re pretty angry about your salaries right now, but please try to do your job.”

After the officers left, sneering at him and muttering obscenities, Detective Bambi got his pillow from the file cabinet and took a long nap on top of his desk.

Anyway, that was yesterday. Of course, the officers didn’t obey his orders – they walked straight out of headquarters and into a strip bar, where they drank and drank until the early hours of the morning, giving the vampire plenty of time to take off, or fly off, whatever.

But this wasn’t surprising, what was surprising were the lab results: jar #1, frog blood; jar #2, rat blood; jar #3, human blood.

Detective Bambi turns to Eduardo and says, “Go and check the bedroom. I’ll take a look inside the refrigerator.”

“Do I have to? Why can’t I stay with you? I won’t bother you, I give you my word,” Eduardo says, hugging himself with his arms.

Detective Bambi rolls his eyes. He curses the day he joined the police force. He can’t wait for retirement. He’ll divorce his wife, move to Orlando, buy a cozy cottage with a good orthopedic mattress, chat with Mickey Mouse every weekend.

He opens the refrigerator. The blood jars are still here, all of them. Wherever Irene Carlier went, she didn't take them with her. In fact, after they check every room in the apartment, they realize she didn't take anything with her. Everything looks intact, even the toiletries in the bathroom, the clothes in the walk-in closet.

Eduardo stands in the middle of the bedroom and looks around him, puzzled. "There's something funny about this bedroom."

"Will you shut up? I need to think. You don't let me think," Detective Bambi says, lying down on the bed and closing his eyes.

"All these mirrors. Wall-to-ceiling mirrors everywhere...even in the bathroom, even in the ceiling. Except in the closet. There are no mirrors inside the walk-in closet. Don't you think that's strange?"

"What are you, Columbo? I don't see what's so strange about it."

"Well..." Eduardo hesitates, unsure of himself. "A person who wants all these mirrors must be some kind of narcissist, don't you think? And what I thought is, if I'm a narcissist and I take the trouble of putting all these mirrors in the bedroom and in the bathroom, why not also put them inside the closet? I mean, why leave the closet behind?"

Detective Bambi, who is in the process of falling asleep, abruptly opens one eye. What if... But no, that only happens in the movies, in the horror movies. But then again, isn't Irene Carlier some sort of horror movie monster?

So they go inside the walk-in closet and start exploring the walls.

"Eduardo, would you get away from me? You don't let me work in peace. You check Señora Carlier's side and I'll check Señor Carlier's side, is that understood?" Detective Bambi says, miffed. Then, after a moment, "No, nothing. There's nothing wrong with the walls. What a stupid idea."

Eduardo goes over the clothes and says, "Some of these clothes are cool. Look at this caftan, totally transparent. And look at these leather vests with holes and spikes. Look, a bra without cups."

Detective Bambi yawns. "Let's get out of here."

Sunstruck

“Look at this red bathing suit, it has spikes all over it.” Eduardo lifts the hanger to take a better look at the bathing suit, and as he does this the wall on Señora Carlier’s side of the closet slides open.

Immediately they feel as though they have been knocked in the stomach with a mace. They simultaneously say, “Shit!” then Eduardo collapses on the floor.

The stench, redolent of decaying, putrefied flesh, is unbearable.

Chapter 25

When Daniella reaches her apartment, she's in a kind of euphoric, hysterical state. She has to talk to Tony, spill everything out. She feels like a great dam ready to explode.

The apartment seems empty, but there's the sound of running water coming from the bathroom.

"Tony, you won't believe what happened today. You simply won't believe it," Daniella says, throwing her keys and bag and books on the bed.

The sound of running water, some faint splashing.

Daniella turns on the TV, searches for the news break. But no, there's nothing. She glances back at the bathroom door. "What are you doing in there, Tony? Are you shaving?" she says.

On the TV a woman is demonstrating how Pampers absorb better than the other brands.

Finally the bathroom door opens and Tony steps out.

"Tony, you won't believe what happened today. A detective came to see me at the university and told me the most incredible things about Ismael and El Parai—" Daniella stops. A familiar subtle tremor in Tony's eyes tells her he's stoned. But he's also serious, very serious, and Daniella realizes that something is terribly wrong.

"Daniella..." Tony says, putting his hands on her shoulders and looking at her with dull, lethargic eyes. "Daniella, I... I'm sorry, I truly am."

"What? What is it? Is it my mom?" She blinks. "You're scaring me, Tony. What's wrong?" She glances toward the bathroom, but the door is nearly closed and she can't see anything.

Tony swallows, squeezes her shoulders.

For a few seconds Daniella stares at his Adam's apple, a meaty golf ball moving up and down. Then it dawns on her, and what she feels is so mighty,

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so nightmarish, that she sees herself falling down an endless dark precipice, her mouth drawn into an eternal silent O.

“Where’s Commando?” she says, her voice hardly audible.

Tony sighs. “It was an accident, you have to believe me.”

Then everything explodes. Daniella pushes him away, tries to enter the bathroom, Tony grabs her by the waist, tells her, *Please don’t, Please don’t*, Daniella starts screaming, crying, kicking, and Tony keeps saying, *It was an accident, It was an accident*, and inside her head the eternal silent Ooooooooooooo! And when she finally sees Commando’s inert white body across the toilet seat, her legs give way under her and she falls kneeling onto the floor and takes Commando into her arms and hugs him very, very tight and cries and cries.

And Tony keeps saying, *Daniella please, Daniella please, It was an accident, I didn’t think it would harm him, I swear, I just injected him with a little heroine, I just wanted him to have some fun, This wasn’t the first time, I did it before, I did it before many times and nothing ever happened to him.*

But his voice is slow, slow and heavy, the voice of a drug addict who’s high on heroine.

Maybe a minute, maybe an hour goes by. Daniella doesn’t really know. Her eyes are all red and swollen up and her head is swimming. She stands up with difficulty. Very quietly, she tenderly places Commando on her side of the bed, then goes over to the refrigerator and takes out a pitcher of pineapple juice and drinks and drinks, the sweet liquid spilling down the corners of her mouth and onto her shirt. It’s strange, this thirst, as if she’s been drained to the bone.

She wipes her mouth with her hand, turns around and looks at Tony.

He’s sitting in front of the TV, his eyes fixed on the screen. But she can tell he’s not watching. It’s just that instead of fixing his eyes on the floor he’s fixing them on the TV. And it’s so quiet. Except for the TV – a commercial about hemorrhoids – it’s extremely quiet.

Then I start laughing, a little at first, then so hard I can’t even breathe. I’m laughing because I’m looking at his new painting, propped up on the easel in the center of the room. It’s just a sketch, really, a sketch of a mother cat devouring her kittens. The

mother cat and the kittens are wearing cat masks. They're already cats but they're wearing cats masks. I don't have the slightest idea of what it means or why I find it so hilarious. I just do. I find it painfully hilarious.

Tony's staring at me, his lips are moving. I guess he's saying something, but I can't hear him. Except for the roaring sound of my own laughter, I can't hear anything. And then I tell him to go. As simple as that. I tell him to get the hell out of my sight, to take all his junk and get the hell out of my sight. And I feel such a relief, such an immense relief, to say this. It's like... I don't know what it's like.

Of course he's not going to go without a fight – he's not that type. He starts pleading, begging, screaming. But I don't listen to him, and in my mind all I see is the painting, the mother cat gorging on her kittens. Oh God, Oh God. And then I go berserk and start hurling his clothes and other stuff out of the window and realize that down on the street a couple of drunks are looking up and cheering and whistling and clapping.

Chapter 26

Yes, the little yellow Volkswagen is parked down the street, so Daniella must be home.

Marcela goes up the stairs and knocks vigorously on the door. Even though Daniella's car is parked outside, she's worried. Something has happened, her sixth sense tells her so. The phone also tells her so – ever since the news about Ismael and the hotel and Irene's secret dungeons broke out last night, she's been phoning her daughter over and over, but there hasn't been any answer. And today it's Saturday. Tony's supposed to be working at that disgusting joint, Los Chinitos. But Daniella always stays home on Saturdays, reading or studying.

"Daniella!" Marcela says, knocking again. She looks dubiously about her. It's getting dark, and she's already terrified of Old San Juan as it is. Who knows what kind of criminal is watching her right now, lurking behind a tree somewhere, ready to spring out and cut her throat for a few dollars' worth of dope. How can Daniella live in a place like this?

After a long moment the door slowly opens and Daniella appears, the whites of her eyes filled with dozens of tiny red rivers, long streaks of dark mascara caked on her cheeks, her hair a crown of messy tangles.

Marcela gasps. "What happened? God, I knew something was going on," she says, coming inside and closing the door behind her.

Daniella collapses face-up on the bed and stares at the ceiling with torpid, mummified eyes.

"It's Tony, isn't it? That son of a – what did he do this time? I told you he was no good, I told you he was a loser, a narcissist, a junkie. Oh, sweetheart, why don't you ever listen to me? It breaks my heart to see you like this." She sniffs and makes a face. "It smells funny in here. Has Commando killed any mice lately? Why don't you open these windows?"

She ambles off to the windows and opens them widely. A soft breeze, reeking of gasoline and garbage, comes in and stirs the curtains. She pokes her head out the window and looks down and shakes her head disapprovingly.

“God, what a place to live,” she mutters. She goes over to the bed and sits next to Daniella. She sighs and takes Daniella’s hand between hers and squeezes it. “Go ahead. Tell me everything. You know you can tell me everything. Why don’t you speak, sweetheart? I was so worried. Didn’t you hear the phone ring? I must have called a hundred times. Didn’t you watch the news last night? The whole thing is unbelievable. I always suspected Ismael had one or two screws loose, but this is too much. And that gargoyle, his wife.”

But it’s obvious Daniella’s not listening to her.

“Daniella, please. Come on, try to talk. At least look at me, look into my eyes.”

There’s a silence.

Finally Daniella looks at her.

“All right, that’s much better,” Marcela says, patting her daughter’s hand. “Let’s forget about the news. Tell me what happened, tell me what that son of a bitch did to you. It still smells in here, like... I don’t know, like rotten fruits or something. Where’s Commando?”

At last Daniella opens her mouth. “On top of the kitchen counter,” she says, her voice totally devoid of feeling.

Marcela looks at the kitchen counter. She frowns. There’s no cat there, only a big Coca-Cola red canvas bag. “He’s not there,” she says.

“I said Commando’s on top of the kitchen counter.”

Marcela looks at the counter again. The Coca-Cola bag looks full and heavy. “You don’t mean...” she says, her eyes wide with alarm. Then she goes over to the counter and zips open the bag and peers inside and jumps back and lets out a high wild shriek. “My God, Daniella, why didn’t you tell me? What happened?”

“An overdose.”

“What?”

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“An overdose of heroine.”

“What? How?”

“Tony. He wanted Commando to have some fun.”

But Marcela doesn't know what to say. Poor Commando. She's never been too fond of cats, but Commando wasn't so bad. She remembers the day they got him. Eight years ago. Istanbul. An adorable fluffy ball of fur with odd-colored eyes. Daniella had instantly fell in love with him. And the problems they had had to go through to get the damn creature out of Turkey! They had had to take his picture, get him a passport. How ridiculous, a cat passport. And all because Turkish Angoras were in danger of extinction. At the photo studio Commando had scowled at the camera, waved one furious paw at the photographer. What a mutinous kitten, angry at the world.

Marcela had been bewildered – maybe the kitten was suffering from brain damage or some kind of erratic Turkish disease. For the trip home they had put him inside an animal cage, and at the seaport a child had thrust his fingers inside the cage and Commando had bitten him severely. Marcela can still remember the child's howl, but most of all, Commando's sharp little fangs stained with blood, and the little raspy tongue, placidly savoring the warm ruby liquid.

But Daniella had laughed out loud, enchanted with his 'I hate the world and everyone in it' attitude. As he grew up, however, he abandoned this rebellious attitude and became more and more phlegmatic, pompous, and his delusions of greatness and immortality at least tripled.

Now Marcela looks down at her daughter and doesn't know what to say. What can she say? Poor Commando. An overdose of heroine. She has never heard of a cat dying of an overdose of heroine. But she should know better – after last night's news nothing surprises her anymore. Who ever said the earth is the lunatic asylum of the solar system? Well, who said it isn't important, what's important is that he was right.

Daniella says, “I finally threw him out. I don't want to see his face ever again.”

Marcela says, "But all his junk is still here." She looks at his latest painting. "What's that? A cat eating up her kittens? That's sick. That guy's sick."

"Yes, well, I guess he'll come during the week to pick up the rest of his stuff."

Marcela spends the next two hours consoling Daniella, gently cleaning her face with a warm moist towel, holding her hands, stroking her hair, telling her silly, unfunny jokes. After all, what are mothers for? Then she starts talking about Ismael and the magic mushrooms.

"I know, I know," Daniella says wearily, and tells Marcela about her meeting with Detective Bambi.

"And what about Irene? God, ever since I saw her that time at that spa I knew there was something unnatural about her – when she had that problem with the coffee enemas she started howling like a satanic dog. I'm always in favor of revolutionary beauty aids, believe me, but a mask made of human blood seems somewhat extreme, don't you think?"

Daniella gives her a blank look. "What are you talking about?"

"What do you mean – what am I talking about? About Irene, about the human blood found in her refrigerator. Didn't you watch the news?"

"I didn't watch any news. All I know is what Detective Bambi told me. I don't know anything about any human blood. He didn't say anything about that."

Marcela gets all excited. "Of course! If you didn't watch the news, you couldn't have known. You see, Detective Bambi discovered the secret room and the dead bodies *after* he spoke with you."

Then she says, "Listen, it's like this. They found a secret room inside Irene's closet – a sort of dark and gloomy chamber, like in the medieval castles – and it was filled with dozens of corpses in different states of putrefaction. All young girls. And all of the bodies were drained of blood. Remember the girls who have been disappearing? It seems Irene was using their blood as a rejuvenating agent, you know, to keep the wrinkles away. And you know what? Today a

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woman was caught stealing a corpse from the morgue – apparently she had watched the news and wanted to try for herself a human blood mask.

“I’m telling you, something is happening to the people on this island. Well, to finish the story... Irene has taken off and is nowhere to be found. They don’t know if Ismael is mixed up in this. The whole thing’s a mess. I mean, they don’t know if Irene is mixed up with the magic mushrooms or if Ismael is mixed up with these killings. I don’t know what I’ll do. I’m seriously considering moving out of this island.”

Daniella laughs. She’s still a bit hysterical, she has the right to laugh. She’s not laughing because of Irene, or because of the corpses or the human blood masks. She’s laughing because, after Commando’s death, nothing can touch her anymore. At least not for now.

Marcela watches her, worried. “I suppose it’s sort of funny, but still...” Her voice trails off.

After a mild attack of hiccups, Daniella falls into a depression and starts sobbing. “Don’t worry,” she finally says. “I feel fine, I really do. I’ve already cried all I was going to cry. I just – I don’t know, I feel empty. Empty. But in a way I feel stronger, too. You know what I mean?”

“I was thinking. You’ve always been so close to that cat. Maybe you shared something with him in a past life. Maybe he was your lover, or a husband. They say you can’t reincarnate from human to animal or from animal to human, but I think this doesn’t make sense. What do you plan to do with Commando? I would suggest you a taxidermist – they do incredible works these days.”

“I already know what I’ll do with him. But thanks, anyway.” Daniella gives her mother a wan smile. “I’m glad you came,” she says, kissing and hugging her mother.

The next morning Daniella wakes up at dawn and pays a quick visit to the closest mortician and has Commando cremated. So strange, the ashes. Human ashes, animal ashes, cigarette ashes, what’s the difference? They’re all ashes and they all look like ashes.

The mortician, a middle-aged man with a punk haircut and a tic in one eye, gives her a cryptic smile. "Here," he says, handing her the little flask of ashes.

When Daniella gets back home she places the flask of ashes on top of the TV. Then she drinks a couple of cold beers and passes out on the bed.

For the next few days she's in a state of trance-like animation, driving back and forth to the university like a zombie.

Tony comes on Thursday night to get the rest of his things. He appears frisky and in high spirits. He says, "How's it going, little fox? I feel great. I sold a painting today for \$1,900. Do you remember the director of the Fine Arts School? I met her at a bar last night and we had a few drinks and she wants me to move in with her."

For a moment Daniella stares at him, incredulous. What surprises her is that Tony obviously intends no malice. He truly speaks as if nothing has happened. How delightful, to have no conscience.

"Well, good luck," she says coldly.

That night, lying down on her bed in absolute darkness, she takes a good look at herself. An unexplainable urgency suddenly feels her whole being, an urgency that demands her to make some serious decisions and make some drastic changes about her life. A warm light infuses her, making her tingly all over. She has never felt herself so powerfully filled with such love and hope and faith before. Brought to another level of consciousness, she recognizes that it's never too late and that anything is possible. Like a Madonna hugging Baby Jesus, she hugs herself with her arms, closes her eyes, and succumbs to profound, dreamless sleep. Her last thoughts are for her beloved cat, her cat...alyst.

Chapter 27

After sniffing a little more of the magic mushroom drug, Ismael works up enough courage to get out of the car. His movements are slow and haggard, like those of a dummy that's been possessed and animated by a poltergeist. Slowly he begins to feel infused by preternatural energy, by a perfect and almost holy sense of power.

The drug is his creation. And it's wonderful. It makes him powerful without making him space-out. Yes, now he can go into the hotel. Even with the whole Puerto Rican police force behind him, he tells himself he *will* get away with it. Walking into the hotel is the last thing they expect him to do. Besides, he's taken care to darken his skin with a self-tanning lotion and wear black glasses and a fashionable sun-streaked blond wig. He's clad in a two thousand dollar black suit. His plan is to pass as a healthy American CIA agent.

The thing is, he really needs to get hold of a golf bag full of money which is hidden in a secret compartment in one of the storage rooms of the hotel. His bank accounts have been frozen and his lovely wife is nowhere to be found. He really needs that money. It's always safe to be prepared in case of a storm, his mother always told him, and he took this little precaution just in case.

Thanks, mother.

Ismael's face turns grim, especially since for the last few days he's woken with a tickling sensation on his feet.

As he enters inside the lobby, he nods to two policemen who are standing by the doors.

The policemen, acting like big shots, return him a serious, important nod.

"May I see some identification, sir?"

Looking superior, Ismael shows them his fake CIA ID. Money makes the world go around, the world go around....

Ismael feels sorry for them. What sad childhood they must have had. But it isn't their fault. How can they be expected to do their job with such pathetic salaries? Damn the government!

With no trouble at all, Ismael is able to turn this way and that. In any case, there's hardly anybody here. Most of security must be around the secret underground lab.

At last he reaches the storage room and opens the door. At the far end of the room, he moves some of the furniture and opens a panel, revealing the secret cubicle.

He's suddenly overcome by a wave of dizziness. Things begin to grow hazy and he leans against the wall for support. Odd. What's happening? Too many mushrooms? He has to be careful not to overdo it next time.

Forcing himself to focus, he grabs the golf bag, closes the panel, and walks out of the room, all the time making a painful effort not to fall on his knees.

He's also confused. This golf bag is black, not dark grey as he remembers. Must be the effect of the drug.

Crossing the lobby once more toward the exit doors, he again nods at the policemen, cold sweat trickling down his back, his heart pumping like a hare's at a race-track.

Chapter 28

On her way back from the university, Daniella sees a commotion in front of El Teatro Tapia. There are at least three police cars parked near the theatre and one of the sirens – it seems its circuit blew up – is flashing red lights on and off and wailing madly. It's late, almost ten-thirty.

Okay, commotions in Old San Juan on Friday nights are not unusual. Actually, they're quite common. But for some reason this commotion seems somewhat different and people are rolling down their windows and turning off their engines to take a look.

So Daniella does the same – she doesn't switch off the engine, but she stops the car and rolls down the window and pokes her head out. In a matter of seconds the road turns into a disaster area and people start getting frantic, honking their horns and yelling things like, "Hey, what the heck's going on over there!"

Daniella's in a good spot – quite close to the theatre. Now and then she can even catch a glimpse of the police officers' heads. But it's difficult to see anything or to understand what's going on because there's a big ring of spectators blocking the view. Probably a murder, or an accident, who knows?

Then someone from the crowd yells, "They've caught El Zorro!"

Gasps, cheers, screams, curses. People climbing on top of their cars, different voices yelling, "It's him! El Zorro! Look, look at him! They've caught him!"

Daniella quickly gets out of her car and cranes her neck. And yes, quite so, she partially sees two officers hustling a man – black hat, black clothes, black cape – into a police car. The man is not wearing a mask – probably one of the officers snatched it off his face – and for a fraction of a second Daniella catches a good glimpse of his face.

The man looks gleeful, grins at the crowd.

But this doesn't astonish her. What astonishes Daniella is his close resemblance to her ex-husband, Ismael.

Chapter 29

EL ZORRO-MUSHROOM CONNECTION SOLVED

POLICE KILLS TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE

THE WHOLE ISLAND WAS STUNNED TODAY AS NEWS OF EL ZORRO'S CAPTURE AND ITS CONNECTION TO THE PARAISO-MUSHROOM CASE CAME OUT EARLY THIS MORNING.

EL ZORRO WAS CAPTURED AND ARRESTED AT TEN-THIRTY LAST NIGHT IN FRONT OF EL TEATRO TAPIA AS HE WAS IN THE PROCESS OF SLASHING ANOTHER PAIR OF BUTTOCKS. AFTER A QUICK INTERROGATION AT THE POLICE HEADQUARTERS, EL ZORRO TURNED OUT TO BE ISMAEL CARLIER, INVENTOR OF THE NEW MAGIC MUSHROOM DRUG AND OWNER OF THE SHORT-LIVED EL PARAISO HOTEL. ISMAEL CARLIER BECAME A FUGITIVE LAST WEEK AFTER THE POLICE FOUND OUT ABOUT HIS INVOLVEMENT WITH DRUGS. IT IS NOW CONCLUSIVE THAT ISMAEL CARLIER BUILT EL PARAISO HOTEL AS A NEST FOR THE CREATION AND DEALING OF THE MAGIC MUSHROOM DRUG, A NEW HIGHLY POWERFUL AND DANGEROUS HALLUCINOGEN.

DETECTIVE BAMBI, WHO IS IN CHARGE OF THE CASE, SAYS, "LAST NIGHT WE KILLED TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE. ALTHOUGH WE ONLY ARRESTED ONE MAN, YOU CAN SAY WE BROUGHT TWO VERY DANGEROUS CRIMINALS TO JUSTICE. THE POLICE DEPARTMENT MAY BE A SWARM OF LAZY JERKS, BUT IT ISN'T CRUMBLING DOWN, AS THE MAJORITY OF THE PEOPLE THINK. THIS CASE PROVES IT. NOW IF YOU EXCUSE ME, I'VE GOT TO TAKE A NAP."

ISMAEL CARLIER, PRESENTLY IN JAIL AND AWAITING BAIL, HAS DECLARED HIMSELF INNOCENT OF ALL CHARGES.

"SEÑOR CARLIER SEEMS RELAX AND HAPPY, AND PROUDLY CLAIMS THAT HE KNOWS HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS AND THAT HE'LL BE ABLE TO FOOL THE COURT BASED ON SOME TRIVIAL TECHNICALITY," SOURCES SAY.

MEANWHILE, IRENE CARLIER, ISMAEL CARLIER'S WIFE, IS STILL ON THE LOOSE. IRENE CARLIER, RUM AND NEWSPAPER

TYCOON, BECAME A MURDER SUSPECT LAST WEEK AFTER THE POLICE DISCOVERED A NUMBER OF BLOOD-DRAINED CORPSES INSIDE A SECRET ROOM OF HER PENTHOUSE APARTMENT IN ISLA VERDE. ALTHOUGH THE POLICE HAVEN'T MADE AN OPEN STATEMENT YET ABOUT THE IDENTITY OF THE CORPSES, IT IS BELIEVE THERE IS A CLEAR CONNECTION WITH THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF YOUNG GIRLS DURING THE PAST FEW MONTHS.

"BUT WE'LL SOON FIND IRENE CARLIER," DETECTIVE BAMBI SAYS. "CONSIDERING HER PHYSICAL APPEARANCE, FOR HOW LONG DO YOU THINK SHE'LL BE ABLE TO HIDE? WE'LL FIND HER AND WE'LL GET TO THE BOTTOM OF THIS CASE."

Chapter 30

After taking a look at some of his fan mail, Ismael lies down on the cot. Funny. Never in his entire life did he think he would become so famous. It has an intoxicating effect, being famous. He could very easily get used to it. He always wanted to be famous – an artist. Well, it didn't work out that way. Thanks to Him, it didn't work out that way.

But so what? Now he's a famous criminal. What's the difference? The important thing is that he's famous. Every morning he gets dozens of fan letters from all over the island, some even from the States and Japan. The letters come from different types of individuals: People who've tried the magic mushroom drug and have had wonderful holy revelations; women who secretly desire to be attacked by El Zorro; men with traditional values who don't want women running around in mini skirts.

Well, these cozy letters have made his stay in jail more agreeable. And right now – one of the guards told him – there's a demonstration outside of jail. The protest is divided into two groups – men and women.

Men are shouting, "Say No to mini skirts! Long live El Zorro!"

Women are shouting, "Castrate him! Burn him at the stake!"

The two groups are holding up banners and handing out propaganda flyers and stickers. Some men are singing the Zorro theme song. Some are just standing there with nothing better to do.

While Ismael is lying on the cot, a guard comes over to his cell and says, "Hey, Zorro, here's your mail."

Ismael smiles at the guard. He's a nice guard, with eyes big and round like a Swiss cow's, and a maudlin expression on his face. "How are you doing?" Ismael says.

"Not bad, not bad."

It's smart to be nice to the guards.

Ismael takes the mail and says, "I'm always glad when I get this mail, but I was hoping it'd be my lawyer. I haven't heard from him in days. The last time I saw him he told me I had no money for the bail, that all of my wife's businesses were being wolfed down by creditors. Can you believe that? Where's all the money? I thought I was rich, but now my lawyer says I don't have a cent left. They even took my Rolex."

"Sorry to hear that. But look at the bright side. You're famous. You shouldn't worry about no bail."

"I guess you're right. By the way, is that protest still going on out there?"

"Wow, something to be seen, I tell you. I've never seen so many angry women in my life. There's a cute plump lady leading them. They belong to one of those lunatic new organizations – The Praying Mantises, I think they're called. What do you plan to do today? You want cigarettes? A couple of motorcycle magazines?"

He lowers his voice, leans closer to the iron bars, and whispers, "If you want you can go to the gym – we have one underground for our special criminals – and get a tan at the tanning machine. You're looking awfully pale. Or I could get you a beer."

"You're a great friend. I'll have a Heineken."

After the guard leaves, Ismael sits Indian-style on the floor and goes over some of his mail. Then he thinks about El Paraiso and the magic mushroom drug and feels a pang of grief. All the dreams, the plans, the sweating. All for nothing. What went wrong? What the hell was that raccoon doing – going around the lobby with a bunch of magic mushrooms between his jaws? He can't believe the whole thing went down the drain because of a raccoon.

But most importantly, what about this Zorro thing?

What the hell was he doing in Old San Juan the other night – dressed up like El Zorro and attacking that lady, as if he had been possessed?

He's spent hours and hours trying to reconstruct the events, but everything's blurred in his mind. He remembers taking a bit too much of the magic mushroom drug. He remembers dressing up like a CIA agent and

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fetching the golf bag at the hotel. Once in his hideout, he remembers opening the bag and finding a Zorro costume and saber instead of his precious money. He remembers how astonished and livid he became. In fact, he had a crying fit. No wonder the bag was black instead of dark grey. He had the wrong bag! But whose bag was this? If it had Zorro's clothes inside it, it obviously belonged to Zorro. But how did Zorro ended up hiding his illustrious clothes in Ismael's secret compartment? He cried, kicked, punched, and cursed for what seemed like a millennium. Then, gradually, the idea began to form in his head. The idea and the desire to don Zorro's clothes. Yes, it was a grand idea, destined to turn him into a household name for generations to come. That's when the blackout comes. The next thing he knows he was being arrested and huddled into a police car.

On the other hand, there is always a possibility that he suffers from split personality and was until now totally unaware of it. Why else did it feel so right, so natural to put on Zorro's clothes? Maybe he never put the money in that bag. This was only part of his grand-scale hallucination. He doesn't know for sure what to think. Did he really slash all those asses? Maybe the slight overdose of the magic mushroom drug opened a door in his brain, thus allowing him to finally see the light. Yes, to see himself for what he is – a psycho.

"Mother..." he whispers. "I finally turned into a wacko, a freak, an ass-slasher. That's what you wanted, didn't you? You can rest in hell now, you witch."

What bothers him is the uncertainty of not knowing exactly who he is or what really happened. He closes his eyes and whimpers, his mind muddled like murky water in a pond, full of larvae and amebae, full of leaches feeding on his brain juices.

Ismael takes a long deep breath, trying to look at the bright side. At last he's become a celebrity. Yesterday afternoon a journalist came to see him – wants to write his biography. There will be interviews, articles, documentaries, movies of his life. He can write his own biography and get a seven figure

advance from a New York publisher. He'll be high up in the Criminal Hall of Fame. What else could he desire?

The guard brings him the Heineken and while he drinks it he looks at the rest of his mail. He picks up an envelope with no return address and opens it. As he recognizes the infantile handwriting, his eyes grow wide with surprise:

Darling,

I heard about your arrest and please believe

I'm doing everything I can to help you. I hope you understand why I had to flee the way I did.

After they found out about the human blood...

Well, you understand, I just couldn't take a chance. I hope they don't accuse you for the murder of those girls. You're a sweet, innocent guy, and that's why I love you so much.

Don't worry about me. I'm somewhere near Transylvania, taking wonderful care of my skin, and I'm willing to wait for you for hundreds of years, if necessary.

Your loyal and faithful wife,

Irene

P.S. Sorry about your bail. I'd send you some money, but I'm sort of tight right now.

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Ismael sighs, dazed. Yes, those girls... And he never suspected a thing. At times, late at night, his nostrils would twitch like a rabbit's, detecting a faint yet highly offensive aroma coming from somewhere within the room. As if a rat or some other small rodent had died and putrefied within the very walls that surrounded them. On several occasions he got up to investigate its origin, without much success. The memory raises goose bumps all over his arms and legs. Irene used to always call him back to bed, enclosing him in her cold arms like a giant bat embracing its young.

Chapter 31

Two weeks later Daniella and Marcela are having dinner at Daniella's apartment. Nothing out of the world: a green salad, different kinds of seafood – squid, octopus, crab – lightly breaded and deeply fried, tostones (fried plantains) with hot sauce, pumpkin pie. Daniella has prepared everything herself, except for the pumpkin pie – fully cooked, just thaw and serve. There's even a bottle of expensive, dry white wine.

"I forgot the music!" Daniella says, jumping from her chair and switching on the stereo. "I'm putting your favorite – Tales from the Vienna Woods. This music always reminds me of Bugs Bunny."

Marcela wolfs down a meaty chunk of squid. "Heavenly, simply heavenly," she says.

"The food or the music?"

"Both."

Daniella laughs. She begins to eloquently swirl in a little waltz about the room. She finally drops down on the chair, her cheeks flushed.

Marcela says. "You look radiant, sweetheart. Are we celebrating something, by any chance? Did you get a good grade on that test last week?"

But Daniella gives her a mysterious smile and changes the subject. "Why don't you tell me about The Praying Mantises? What are they up to these days?"

Marcela sips her wine and gets all agitated. "The Praying Mantises! That organization... Oh, I can't tell you what it means to me! That organization is my baby, my most precious creation after you, my dear. It's becoming the most influential feminist society in Puerto Rico. And we're expanding. Every day more and more women are joining us. I've created a committee of my most loyal and radical friends. We've started charging an annual member fee and we're using the money to help women. You know, women who have been abused and things like that. We're opening doors to all women who wish to

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change for the better; who wish to be true to their own identities without having to succumb to the power of any man. To be themselves; to think for themselves; to stay true to their hearts and dreams and goals and desires. In other words, to be *real* persons, not brainless puppets made to act and talk.”

“I’m very happy for you,” Daniella says, almost choking on a piece of octopus.

“Eat slower and don’t interrupt me, sweetheart,” Marcela says. “You see, I forgot what I was saying. What was I saying?”

Daniella, distracted by her own future plans, makes an effort to remember.

“Some attention you were paying!”

“No, no! I was listening to you. You were talking about women being brainless puppets.”

“I never said that! I said we’re helping them not to *behave* like brainless puppets – to think for themselves. But you know what? I owe it all to Ismael – to Zorro, that is. It’s strange when you think about it, but what Zorro did had exactly the opposite effect of what he had intended to do. I mean, his intention was to teach women a lesson, right? To send them the message that if they wear mini skirts, they deserve what’s coming to them, right? But instead of making women afraid and submissive, it turned them aggressive and transformed into wilful birds eager to fly. How should I explain myself?

“Look. Up until a few months ago, when Zorro began his frantic slashing, women on this island were in a kind of inactive, quiescent state. They were asleep, in a slumber. When it came to their rights, they didn’t even know they had rights. But then Zorro came and everything changed. Awakening – that’s the word. An all-over mass awakening. As the number of Zorro’s victims increased, so did the indignation and anger of women. Amazing, in a way. We’re thinking of producing a documentary about it. It’d be very interesting, don’t you think?

“So Zorro did everything for nothing. He thought he’d be able to stop women from wearing mini skirts, he thought he’d push them deeper and deeper into the hole they were in. But it didn’t work out that way; just the

opposite happened. Women are revolting and will continue to revolt, and I'll be there to help them. By the way, don't miss my interview on channel four next Tuesday night. Then on Friday night I have a debate on that silly show. Chauvinist pigs will occupy half of the panel." Marcela giggles. "They don't know what's coming to them."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Daniella says. She rakes her hands through her hair and tries to cross her legs, then realizes the table is too low. She's always doing this. She keeps forgetting the table is too low, keeps trying to cross her legs. She's afraid it'll develop into a sort of uncontrollable tic.

She sinks her fork into the pumpkin pie and says, "Don't you think all this might get out of hand? Today there was a case of battering on the news – the husband was shown with a broken arm and a black eye. This time *men* are being battered."

"Good! It's *their* turn now."

"It's so odd. I never thought of Ismael as a chauvinist pig. I just can't picture him attacking women that way. I wonder what triggered him into slashing all those women."

"I'm not surprised! I always thought he was pretty unstable, with all the drugs and everything."

"He used to only smoke grass."

"What about the magic mushroom drug?"

"Oh, that..."

Marcela nods, totally convinced. "You see? How can you expect a person who takes drugs to act in a normal way?"

"He claims he doesn't remember attacking any of those women."

"The blood of the last victim was still impregnated on the saber. He may claim insanity, but there's no doubt about his guilt."

"But I still can't picture him as Zorro. Where would he get such an original and elegant idea?" She sighs. "Do you want another piece of pie?"

Marcela looks mildly terrified. "I feel like a stuffed Thanksgiving turkey. I can't breathe. I could have some more wine, though." Then she says, "When

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Ismael committed those crimes he was under the effect of drugs – marijuana, magic mushrooms, God knows what – and you know what they say. Drugs bring out your dark side. On the other hand, maybe he’s always had a thing about slit bottoms. Generally speaking, human beings are mentally sick.”

Daniella refills her mother’s glass. Then she gets up to brew some coffee. “I feel sleepy after so much food,” she says.

While Daniella prepares the coffee, Marcela leans back on the chair and pats her stomach and sips her wine and listens to Strauss. “Wait a minute,” she suddenly says, bewildered. “Ever since I came here tonight something very peculiar has been bothering me. Like the tic-tac of a clock. You don’t really hear it unless you *want* to hear it. I couldn’t tell what it was, but now.... You’re not drinking.” She points to the table. “You filled your glass with wine but you didn’t even have a sip... and you haven’t smoke either!”

Daniella blushes. “I... I’m quitting. I mean, I realize I’ve been drinking a lot lately, so I’m quitting. The cigarettes, too. You were right, in a way, about this dinner. It’s a kind of celebration. Although I’m not really sure what it is I’m celebrating. My new life, I guess, free of men and alcohol and cigarettes. What a cliché.” She looks down at her empty plate and realizes her fingers are trembling.

Marcela hold Daniella’s hands in her own, kisses them, and starts crying. “I’m acting silly, I know, but I just feel so happy. Maybe you’d like to consider a part-time job at the society, writing our newsletter, organizing demonstrations, you know,” she says. She blows her nose and gets her compact and lipstick from her bag and retouches her makeup.

“I don’t think so. As soon as I graduate I’m opening my own architecture firm.”

“That’s fantastic! But doesn’t that require a lot of money? You can always get a loan, I guess. I’ll help you, of course, and I’m sure your father will, too.”

“I don’t know the particulars yet, but I fixed it in my head. I’ll open my own firm. I’m also moving out of this place. I don’t particularly like Old San Juan anymore. Maybe I could find an apartment in a nice area in Garden Hills.”

“A fresh new beginning.” Marcella cries some more and Daniella is forced to bring her a new tissue. “I’m ecstatic, perfectly ecstatic,” Marcela says. “Let me know if you need any help. I can help you decorate your new apartment.”

Daniella strokes her mother’s hair. “That would be lovely.”

So they kiss and hug, then shut off the stereo and sit in front of the TV with their mugs of steaming coffee, Daniella with a second serving of pumpkin pie.

“This is so delicious. You really should have another piece,” Daniella says, chewing. She turns on the TV. After experimenting with different channels, she settles for ABC.

Marcela makes a face. “Commercials, that’s all there is. Commercials,” she says.

“I know.”

They ignore the TV and Marcela starts talking about this new spa she visited last week and the preventive effects of vitamin C on cancer.

Daniella nods at the right moments, distracted. Her eyes shift to the TV. The commercials are now over and they’re giving the news break – about the coming American presidential election. The running candidate for the Republican Party is giving a speech.

“I know that man!” Daniella says, pointing incredulously to the TV. “Yes, I’m positive. It’s the same man.”

“What man?”

The news break is over.

Daniella explains, “That man who’s running for president. He was at Fifi’s Gallery that night, the night of Tony’s first show. He asked me if I had seen his Quija board. He had the most magnetic dark eyes I’ve ever seen. I was going to ask him if he was the Anti-Christ, you know, as a joke, but the room was so crowded he just disappeared.”

Marcela doesn’t seem surprised.

Later, after dropping Marcela off at her Garden Hills apartment, Daniella decides to take a little drive around El Condado. It’s Tuesday, so the traffic is smooth and the streets fairly calm.

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I couldn't tell her I'm pregnant. I don't know why, but I just couldn't. It's not that I'm ashamed or anything. It's just that when I was ready to tell her, my tongue got all tied up. Well, it'll have to be another time. I touch my belly and I smile and I feel so weird.

I can see it now, a tiny life form in a translucent stage, connected to me like a minuscule astronaut in space attached to the mother-ship, floating and flipping like an acrobat, ardently sucking my life juices. All pure science fiction. At first, when I learned about it, I was shocked. I was quite sure it'd be hypoglycaemia. Then I was terrified, which is worst. I instantly pictured a toddler with wild dark curls, frantically dabbing paints onto a wall and babbling about greatness. But this image soon faded, and then I saw other things – surprised, round innocent eyes, tiny chubby hands, wet smelly Pampers, etc...

Right now I'm strangely peaceful, and happy. Why? I don't know. God knows this little creature will complicate things greatly. But then again, you never know, it could make things incredibly simple.

As Daniella drives, she keeps thinking, I'm pregnant. She's so immersed in her thoughts that when she finally realizes where she is, she gasps and mutters a curse.

What is she doing here – in the docks?

Daniella doesn't get the chance to ask herself any more questions.

The transformation occurs in a snap.

Here again.... Good. It's been quite a while. Let's see, it's almost eleven. Let me park in that dark spot over there.... Good. Hmm... I feel kind of rusty; let me stretch my muscles.

I was afraid I was never again going to come back. My other self Daniella is becoming too strong and will soon overpower me. My existence has come to an end, I can feel it. I must let her know about the bag full of money before somebody else runs into it. Maybe if I write her a letter? This is so absurd! All kind of absurd events have been taking place since I found the bag with the money in that secret place. And the major one is Ismael pretending to be me and getting arrested for my crimes. But I'm pleased with the way things have turned out. Daniella is a good girl and I wouldn't want her to get hurt.

Ismael... he may have fooled Daniella, but he never, not even once, fooled me. I started suspecting Ismael ever since Daniella began working at El Paraiso. I listened to his conversations, I paid attention to his ramblings, I followed him all over the hotel many times. That's how one evening I found out about his secret place, though at that time it was empty and I didn't know what it was for.

Ismael, you fool! Nothing escapes Zorro's intellect. Well, for a while I used it to hide my black clothes. The action of having to go over there, the fear of being caught was a thrilling, potent rush. I loved it! Then, two days before Ismael is arrested, I find all this money in a golf bag just like mine, except for the color. Of course, I took the bag with the money and left my own bag with the clothes. The pirate in me.

Who could blame me? I can picture Ismael's face when he opened the bag and found my clothes! But one thing mystifies me, defies my intelligence. Why did Ismael put on the black clothes and pretended to be me? Fame? Drugs? He must be a lot more deranged than I thought.

Ahhhh... It's so dark and silent. I should be afraid, but I'm not. I'm contented.

Yes...everything has turned out for the better. I've even managed to create a women's revolution, which is what I originally intended to do, even though it seemed quite the opposite.

The slashing was for a noble cause – the awakening of women. Something drastic was needed. There was no other way to open their eyes...but most importantly, to open Daniella's eyes. So yes, I always possessed a noble driving force to give me courage, to keep me fearless against all danger.

It's sad that women think of Zorro as their enemy, as the outmost symbol for male oppression, when in reality Zorro has been their most valuable ally.

But no matter. As I said, I've accomplished what I set out to accomplish. After all, Tony didn't nickname me little fox – zorrита – for nothing.

Oh no... I feel myself fading away, collapsing into nothingness like a massive star collapses into a black hole...I must hurry! I must let Daniella know about the money! She can use it for her new firm, for her baby! Yes, here! Pen and paper! Yes!

THE END

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About the author

Award-winning author Mayra Calvani has penned over ten books for children and adults in genres ranging from picture books to satire to paranormal fantasy novels. She's had over 300 articles, short stories, interviews and reviews published in magazines such as *The Writer*, *Writer's Journal* and *Bloomsbury Review*, among others. She has lived in America, Asia, the Middle East, and now lives in Brussels, Belgium.