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Dove Tale

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Dove

TALE

BRUCE PAYNE

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Soon One Morning

LOURDES CONTRERAS —DR. LOURDES CONTRERAS, a *dentista* from Mulege, in Baja Sur, stood on the ferry's port side. Her cheeks puffed with a deep sigh of joy. She promised herself this night would mark the transition from a dream to action.

Lourdes walked forward to the bow. This was the end of the second day of a two-week leave from her *clínica*. Crossing the Sea of Cortez had kept her nauseous from heavy seas. Now, in Mazatlán's harbor, she wanted to watch the big ship glide to its mooring. Was it the damp night air? Lourdes wondered. She felt a surge of unexplainable magic. Maybe it was the play colored lights on the water or the sweet smell of blossoms after so long on the Pacific. Lourdes looked up at the approaching dock. In a few months her twelve-year-old her sister, Prudencia would be able to attend school; she would have friends.

Looking down from the dock above, taxi drivers, porters, customs officers and ticket agents lined the rail; all eyes were on the ferry. Some pointed, others cackled like pelicans. The measured movement of the hull seemed to fascinate them. She laughed inwardly at their hilarious facial expressions. Some clenched their teeth; others had pinched faces from the irritating screech and whine of the hull against the pilings. Lourdes reached back for her sister's hand. "Prudencia?" she called, "*listo?*"

Prudencia was preoccupied with gangplanks being lowered and locked with clangs and clicks. "*Sí,*" she said with a nod, "I am ready."

Lourdes pulled in an excited breath. Thick tropical air was like a wet blanket. "Mazátlan," she said, "can you believe it?"

People in Lourdes' *Pueblo* of Mulege, said she was mature beyond her twenty-seven years. But on this night the little girl hidden

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inside her went wild with imagination. Maybe they would see cinema stars or celebrities from magazines. Lourdes tied customs tags to their luggage. “Stay close, *mija*.”

A customs officer directed them from the terminal, pointing to a gate.

An old man approached them in the lobby. He greeted them with a bow and a wheezy, “*Muy Buena noche, Señoritas*.” In a voice, sounding thin and tired, he offered to carry their bags. Lourdes paused. Behind the old man, young taxi drivers stared at her, wanton hunger on their faces.

The old man softly persisted, “You go into the city, yes?” He lifted their bags. “Only twenty-two *pesos*,” he said, “it would please me take you to a fine hotel.”

Her eyes were still on the men; Lourdes nodded, “*Sí, por favor*.”

The old man smiled politely. “I am Morelos.”

Lourdes observed Morelos’ broken teeth—but then she would. “*Esta bien*.” She said. They followed him out to the parking lot. Prudencia complained of sleepiness. A police officer waived them through the gate.

Lourdes and Prudencia waited in the dark rain, beside Morelos’ old Chevy van. The *Viejo* fussed with a windshield wiper. “The rain feels good,” Lourdes said, “how long has it been raining?”

Morelos slapped the wiper blade on the glass. “Two, perhaps three hours.” Morelos opened the passenger door. Lourdes took the front seat beside him; Prudencia took the back seat. It amused Lourdes to watch the old man beg and pray to the engine. She turned to the back seat, pressed her hand on Prudencia’s knee and rested her other hand on the leather case on her lap.

The Chevy coughed to life. They bounced through ruts, making their way to the highway. Morelos drove slowly; he attempted to break his passenger’s shyness by explaining his theory of the first hurricane of the season. “This is only June yet we have the first hurricane. This of course is because of global warming.” When Morelos was on the highway, he accelerated. “Tomorrow,” he continued, “the morning will come fresh and clear, but in the

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afternoon, ah,” he cried with a long asthmatic laugh, “the winds will come so strong, it will drive the rain sideways like bullets.”

“We love rain,” Lourdes told him, “we live in the Baja desert.”

Light from his rearview mirror illuminated the old man’s face. Repulsive shock was apparent in his expression. Morelos had been sneaking looks at Prudencia.

Take a good look old man, Lourdes thought; you are one of the last people to see her face like this.

The splash of passing traffic forced his eyes back onto the highway. Morelos seemed to know she had seen him. “Where in Baja?” he asked.

Lourdes was used that too, the uncomfortable change of subject. “Mulege,” she answered.

“Ah,” Morelos cried with a dismissive waive of his hand. “Baja.” With pretended sarcasm, he said Baja was only a Frontier.

Prudencia interrupted from her back seat. “Do you not know?” she piped, “Baja is the newest state in Mexico.”

Lights from a passing bus illuminated the old man’s face again; this time Lourdes saw the playful expression in his eyes. She laughed.

“I have a friend,” Morelos said, “she lives alone.”

“Your friend has a room to rent?” Lourdes teased, “Yes?”

“A *casita*,” Morelos wheezed, “behind her *hacienda*. *La Señora* Vargas charges less than half the hotel rates.”

“Sounds interesting,” Lourdes said.

“Your voice sounds deep and throaty, throaty,” he said, “You have a cold, *Señorita*?”

Lourdes was used to that too. She laughed. “It is my natural voice.”

LA SEÑORA VARGAS SPOKE lyrically, in harmony with a *bolero* from a time-scratched LP. Vargas looked directly at Lourdes to avoid the girl. “Thirty-five *pesos* a night,” Vargas said, her full lips phrased with the music. “Come. I’ll show you.” She led them onto her patio across her small yard. Lourdes glanced over her shoulder at Morelos. The old man was feeding fruit to Emiliano, Vargas’ blue parrot.

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Vargas tossed her long single braid behind her thick shoulder and fussed with her bra strap; her eyes darted from Lourdes to the girl then back. "You will like it," Vargas chimed, "I know." The sky glowed with the pulse of lightning. Vargas' sandals scuffed across the tile. Vargas opened the small colonial style door.

Lourdes gasped, "*Perfecto!*" Patterned curtains matched small throw rugs on a spotless floor, both made from the same material.

"*Tranquilo*, no?"

Lourdes opened her purse. She had not expected a dollhouse. She handed Vargas two hundred *pesos*. "I cannot say how long we will stay."

Vargas sparkled with a gratified smile. "Time is a widow's wealth." She tucked the money in her bra, admiring the blossom in Lourdes' hair. "Coffee and *pan* in the morning." Vargas said good night, then closed and locked the door.

They were alone. Lourdes put her hands on her hips, beaming at Prudencia with a wordless stare. For some odd reason she felt at home in Mazatlán. Perhaps it was the *boleros*. "You never believed this day would come, did you?"

Prudencia's face brightened with a lopsided smile. "We both knew it would."

"Excited?"

Prudencia hugged her big sister. "Cannot wait."

When Prudencia was asleep Lourdes sung softly with the notes drifting from Vargas's phonograph. The pattern of rain on the patio seemed to embroider the music. Lourdes drew the covers over Prudencia, ruminating about Doctor Santiago. What would he like? An older man to be sure, she supposed; such an experienced plastic surgeon could achieve his reputation only with age. Dr. Santiago would not be ordinary. Lourdes reached into the leather case, a case so emblematic of their years of correspondence. She drew pencil and paper and started a list of questions. Prudencia's records were her chronology. Dr. Santiago could ask nothing Lourdes had not documented.

Her list complete and in her purse, Lourdes took the blossom from her long black hair. Its fragrance was still fresh; she would wear

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it tomorrow. She undressed, a little bothered by her thin figure in the mirror. She promised herself to eat four times a day. In a city like Mazatlán, the restaurants must be wonderful. The music from Vargas's phonograph provoked memories. If Lourdes had a calculator, she could never count the times she'd performed this same song in cabarets ...La Paz, Loreto, Los Barriles and Cabo San Lucas. And the *touristas*? So many stood to applaud, with kind comments of her personal interpretation. Lourdes thought of the tips she had saved. Four years—four-hundred-sixteen weekends. Lourdes stared at her purse on the chair. Seventy-five thousand *pesos* waited for Doctor Santiago. She yawned, slipped beside Prudencia and fluffed her pillow, closed her eyes and touched her mother's rosary. "Tomorrow."

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