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# THE TEMPEST IN GLASS

By Dirk Eichhorst

First 2 Chapters

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## 1

## TARRAZU

Marvin Fischer had resigned himself to the irrefutable conclusion that Caroline wasn't coming back. That, he had known for a long time, was impossible. Marvin Fischer had grown accustomed to solitude, and while detachment sometimes morphed into the melancholy conditions of lonesomeness and gloom, he had taught himself to be content in his work, which he excelled at, and in the simpler pursuits of life, like his comfortable condominium, an exceptionally luxurious automobile, and a damn good cup of coffee. Marvin had regressed into a monotony of acceptable contentedness and professional challenge, while dismissing the void in his spirit, warding off the unresolved part of his life that loomed around the corner like a bellicose specter.

Marvin's indigo Jaeger suit was perfectly fitted, the knot in the patterned blue necktie perfectly pulled, the black wingtips perfectly polished. The silver Rolex on the left wrist glimmered clean with the assurance that it kept exact time. Marvin was tall and trim; the bristly, overcast hair military short. The sharp jaw was freshly shaven beneath an urbane balm that he had carefully applied thirty minutes before. The stormy blue eyes and constant glower produced the impression he was always deep in thought about something. Approaching fifty, Marvin Fischer did not look forward to turning the decade. But the commanding handsomeness, combined with the smart assemblage of apparel, presented an impressive human being.

And now, as Marvin Fischer entered his favorite morning haunt for his black coffee, he hadn't the slightest inkling that the events about to unfold would send his life whirling like a festival carousel gone mad.

Bustling coffee house staff boomed its greeting as Marvin saluted the hello which was his custom. He chatted over the counter with the sprightly barista while waiting his turn, and didn't mind waiting for the beans to be freshly ground for the delicate pour-over, which would produce the full-flavored brew Marvin had come to savor. Acquainted with his preference, the barista delivered Marvin his jumbo Costa Rican

Tarrazu in a glass mug rather than the paper, together with a package of finely salted mixed nuts. He asked the girl how the French classes were progressing, and they smiled their *au revoir*. Marvin forewent the sugar counter, wove his way around the expectant patrons vying for the line, and escaped out the door.

Marvin moved onto the welcoming patio with its cheerful yellow chairs and tables. Amber morning sunlight lanced through the wakening tree branches. Clutching the glass mug with both hands as if it were a delicate Greek cylix, Marvin stood for three minutes beneath a leafy elm, watching the cars and pedestrians zoom past along the streets and sidewalks of North 66<sup>th</sup> and East McDonald. He took his first smoky pull and savored. He liked the feel of the sturdy crystalline mug in his hand rather than the flimsy cup, the solidity of the smooth glass touching his lips. Marvin liked surety. Predictability. Control.

Marvin drew in a deep breath, held it, and blew it out with a soft whistle. He relished the crisp early morning air of springtime in Arizona. His condo in Paradise Valley was just around the corner from the business district and The Bean Sack, the locally owned coffee house. The stroll around the block to fetch his salted nuts and morning coffee, and the bright chats with the baristas, ignited his mind and charged his body for the day's challenges.

Marvin settled into a bistro chair and savored the rich umber tint through the mug's glass wall. He opened the bag of salted nuts and munched, then chased it with the hot brew, further releasing the spicy aroma. It was a simple and sensuous combination that Marvin anticipated with delight, one of those things that made life worth living. He popped another handful, gazing casually across East McDonald Street at the new little storefront church that called itself Hope Crossing, with its glittering sign of bright LEDs that promised *We're praying for you*. Marvin swallowed the nuts and savored the next sip of perfect coffee.

Marvin enjoyed taking his time. He disliked hustle. Soon he would walk back to the condo garage where he parked the Jaguar, and ride into work downtown. Once he got to the office, he would be occupied all day with puzzles that would activate his mind in ways he could only tolerate for a few hours at a time.

But for these minutes, Marvin was free. He could already feel the rush of caffeine. The first mug always went fast. Soon he'd go back inside for a refill. He closed his eyes, more conscious now of his aural senses. There was the whoosh of a passing car, the clop-clop of passers by, the soft babble of talk, the whiz of a bicycle chain. Marvin closed his mind to the bustle. The breeze felt light across his face.

For a moment he missed Caroline.

Marvin leaned glumly forward. Life was okay, even without her. Every day she visited his thoughts. It was unavoidable. And every day, his heart reached for her. Marvin stared into the mug at the brew, the elm branches above reflecting on its mirrored surface. Caroline had loved coffee too. Back in Detroit. Many mornings were shared reclining lazily in bed before work, sipping steaming coffee over talk of remodeling the entryway, the car that needed new tires, the vacation they wanted to take, those quacky ducks trying to break through the ice on the pond just off the balcony.

Marvin felt profoundly for Caroline. He scolded himself for still missing her, even after all the time that passed. He tried to snap his mind to other thoughts. A ping on his smartphone did the trick. He pulled the phone from his inside breast pocket and opened the new message. There was no text, just an old photo. A portrait of a very young woman.

Marvin frowned. He did not recognize the young woman. She had short brunette hair, dark eyes, a pleasant look on her face. It was a posed shot, black and white, like something from a yearbook. Marvin checked the sender—*Simon*. There was no phone number and no *Unknown* or *Masked Call* message—just Simon.

Did he know a Simon?

## 2

### WOMAN IN A BORDEAUX SUIT

Marvin tapped *call* and put the phone to his ear. He waited. There came only silence. Marvin looked back at the phone. It flashed blank, then returned to the home screen. Marvin blinked away the mystery and tucked the smartphone aside. It was just one more puzzle to add to the long list that would become his day. With his next coffee sip, comfort returned.

Then his gaze shifted ahead and drifted into the morning crowds. Through the crisscrossing of pedestrians, he locked on a well-dressed woman who immediately impressed him. Her burgundy blazer cut into her waist. No, the color wasn't burgundy. Was it Maroon? Claret? The barista learning French might call it *bordeaux*. With that decided, Marvin continued his observation of the woman. A matching knee-length skirt hugged the woman's hips over classic tan tights disappearing into black medium heels. Marvin guessed the woman to be a few years past 30. The woman carried a tiny purse and clutched a small brown briefcase under one arm. She stopped on the sidewalk and looked hastily around.

The woman scanned until her eyes fell to Marvin. She squinted. At once the desperate look on her face melted. At first Marvin thought the woman had just caught his random eye—but no—she was fixated on him. Now the woman turned to someone else whom she waved closer. Through the crowd Marvin saw a boy appear alongside the woman—a boy of maybe 12. The woman gestured and the boy turned his head, looking in Marvin's direction. By their dark hair and sepia complexions, Marvin guessed they were Latinos. The woman walked toward Marvin. The boy followed. Marvin's thoughts raced, trying to place the woman's face. He had no idea who she was, but she was certainly not the young woman in the text message portrait.

The distance closed between Marvin and the pair. He pretended not to notice them.

“Sir!” The woman called. “Are you Marvin Fischer?”

Marvin blinked. “What?”

The woman and the boy reached Marvin’s table. “Are you Marvin Fischer?” the woman asked again.

Marvin sat straight. “Who are you?”

The woman swooped urgently and sat across from Marvin, her clear chestnut eyes wide with excitement. Her wavy brunette hair flowed to the shoulders. Straight teeth beamed white through an electric smile. She smelled of sweet vanilla. The woman set the purse and briefcase down on the table and focused on Marvin. “My name is Rubi Valdez. This is my beautiful son, Antonio.” The woman’s English was confident, with a crisp Latin American flair. Marvin exchanged glances with Antonio. The boy appeared embarrassed.

Yes, a lean 12-year-old. His mal-proportioned body gave the impression of a tree in spring that would burst six inches by summer’s end. A backpack hung over the boy’s shoulder. Dangling from the neck on a blue nylon cord were binoculars. The boy wore faded blue jeans and a lime green T-shirt bearing the name of a music group with which Marvin was unacquainted. Marvin guessed the boy was smart and full of stored ambition.

“Are you Marvin Fischer?” Rubi asked a third time.

Marvin looked back at the woman. “Yeah, I’m Marvin Fischer. How do you know me?”

“Are you a pastor?” Rubi asked.

Marvin’s eyes narrowed. “No. I work for... for the community.”

And Marvin Fischer was completely unprepared for what came next. Rubi Valdez took Antonio’s hand, eyes fixed on Marvin, and said, “Mister Fischer, I wish you to pray for me.”

Marvin sat frozen. “Pray?”

“Yes Mister Fischer. I wish you to pray for me.”

Shockwaves of resentment rippled through Marvin like a nuclear blast.

Marvin Fischer hated prayer. It had been a long time since he prayed. Not since Caroline. Years ago. Many years ago. And that had been when everything was nice and tidy and wonderful, before things tipped suddenly and irreversibly askew, and whatever faith Marvin may have developed had spun wildly out of control. He wanted to slam this door, slide the bolt and lock it tight. He wasn't even sure how to explain this to himself, much less to anyone else.

Suspicion. Resentment. Anger. Fear. All mixed in a jumbled mess that Marvin had bitterly avoided. Now the wraith had risen again with an unwelcome fury and Marvin had to temper it discreetly.

Don't have a meltdown right in front of the poor woman!

Marvin's face was stone. He shifted his shoulders uneasily, wincing an eye. "Why do you want me to pray for you?"

Rubi closed her eyes and smiled. Marvin watched her chuckle nervously as she bit her lip. She tipped her eyes to the sky. It seemed to Marvin that the woman was burying some complicated thoughts, but was desperate to convince him. "Please, Mister Fischer—"

"You don't even know anything about me."

"I realize how silly this sounds for some strange woman to ask you this. But I have faith. I have prayed for myself. Antonio has prayed for me. But I need a man to pray for me too. A certain man... A very specific man. And that man is you."

Marvin wondered where the husband was, but decided not to go there. Presently, he turned to Antonio. "What do you think about this, young man?"

"She's starting a new job... it might be dangerous," the boy answered.

"It's with the Arizona Department of Public Safety," Rubi finished.

Marvin's eyes glinted with recognition. "I know people there."

"So that's it!" Rubi smiled. "I knew there was a reason it had to be you!"

"Look Miss...?"

"Valdez. Rubi Valdez."

"Miss Valdez, I don't really do the prayer thing. You should go to some person from the church."

“I have, Mister Fischer. Many people at my church are praying for me. But... I don’t have time to explain. My car has a flat tire... I had to wait for a taxi... now I’m going to be late. Please, Mister Fischer. I just wish you to pray for me, for a good first day, and especially for my safety on the job.”

Safety.

Marvin looked to the curb and noted the waiting taxi. He took a deep breath. “You know this is nuts.”

“Yes, I know it sounds crazy, Mister Fischer. But...”

Rubi paused and leaned in. And through sharp, determined eyes, she said with gravity—“I am certain that it is you that must do this for me.”

It seemed almost like a command. She was mesmerizing, unsearchable, magnetic.

Antonio pulled his hand away from his mother and brushed it through his thick brown hair. “Just let me pray again. You gotta go!”

“Wait—” said Marvin, looking at his Rolex. It was 6:25.

Marvin weighed his options. He could just dismiss himself and walk away. Get out of this nonsense quickly and forget about it. Soon he’d be at work and there’d be plenty of distractions. The woman would be fine. Or—Marvin looked at her again. Everything about her was put together and polished. She seemed sensible, despite the unusual request. And someone he knew downtown apparently had the confidence to hire her.

The fact of the matter was that Marvin was terribly apprehensive about the idea. The last time he invested his faith in prayer, it had ended disastrously. He knew what he was afraid of. Could he put aside his reservations and just pray for the lady? Accommodating her would make her day. Just get through this thing and make the woman happy and everyone could move on.

“Mister Fischer... please.” said Rubi.

Marvin made his choice.

“I gotta run too,” said Marvin, “—but I’ll do it. Okay? I’ll pray for you, you can be on your way, and you can have a great day. Alright?”

“Thank you Mister Fischer! You don’t know what this means to me!” Rubi smiled brightly and closed her eyes. Then she opened again and asked, “You do believe, don’t you, Mister Fischer?”



“Hmm?”

“You do believe... in the prayer?” Rubi smiled.

Marvin’s lips rounded, but nothing came out. Thinking suddenly of Caroline, he said finally, “Of course.”

Rubi beamed again and, reaching out a hand, she took Antonio’s palm. With the other, she reached across the table and touched Marvin’s hand as he held his coffee mug.

Marvin hesitated awkwardly, then clasped Rubi’s fingertips.

He closed his eyes.

Marvin began, “God... this nice woman, ah, miss Rubi Valdez, wants me to ask you to help her have a good first day at work... and that you’d... especially... keep her safe. Amen.”

Marvin felt Rubi’s fingers tighten around his for a moment. Then she let go.

“Thank you, Mister Fischer. Thank you again!”

“Good luck.”

Rubi turned to Antonio. “You can walk to school from here sweetie?”

“Yes!” The boy seemed frustrated.

“Okay. I love you.” Rubi kissed Antonio on top of his head. She gathered her briefcase, flung the purse over her shoulder, and smiled again at Marvin. “God bless you.”

Rubi Valdez hustled away toward the waiting taxi. Marvin and Antonio watched her scurry off.

“Well, I gotta go. Thanks,” Antonio stepped away.

Marvin gave a half-hearted wave and took a long pull of coffee. The brew was already cooling. He rose from the chair, drained the last drop, and was thinking about a refill when he felt something push into his chest. Pressure on his neck shot through as he was swept with abrupt panic. The mug crashed down on the table. The thought of a heart attack bolted through his mind like lightning. But there was no pain—and Marvin became aware that the feeling wasn’t internally physical. It was pressure from *outside*. The air around him felt heavy, somehow invisibly falling, like a shift in atmospheric energy, an invisible presence closing in.

Then, through a blur of pedestrians and a passing bicycle, for the briefest of moments, Marvin saw something thick and long and winding and slithering through the street. Marvin shook his head. What was it? A creature of some sort? It glided between cars—or through them?—the appearance of concentrated ferocity in marble-black eyes. A swoop of aqua flickered from the head.

In the next moment, the thing vanished.

Then the piercing screech stung Marvin's eardrums.

The wrenching scrape of steel and the metallic boom ricocheted between storefronts.

Marvin tried to shake off the sensations of the last seconds. Dreamily, he goggled around. Across the street, two cars stood crumpled, their windows shattered, steam billowing. There came gasping and cries of shock from onlookers as they scuffled toward the mangled vehicles. A driver got out and rushed to join the Samaritans already crouching in the street.

On the pavement between the two cars lay a woman, bloody and motionless.

No—it couldn't be...

Yes, it was Rubi Valdez.