

*On 4<sup>th</sup> July, 2016, the spacecraft, Juno, went into orbit around “the biggest, baddest planet” Jupiter. Launched five years before, NASA’s timing, as the craft manoeuvred into the planet’s powerful magnetosphere, was perfect. But why was this day and this particular year chosen to remember the American year of Independence in such a manner? What sets 2016 apart from any other year?*

*But I talk in riddles here, and only when the end of this tale is reached will you begin to understand. Let the play begin.*

## **Chapter 1**

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On the beach not far from where Eugenia stood, a small black-clad figure wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat, bent to the task at hand. Beside her chair and under it, fishing nets were laid out in streaks of green, brown, blue and purple. She worked nimbly at her repairs, her wrinkled fingers obviously still adroit with years of patient labour. Eugenia allowed her vision to stray beyond the colourful scene to where the sea, ever advancing and retreating, became pallid in its enduring effort to integrate itself with the pebbled beach. A whitewashed village spilled over the hills to Eugenia’s left and, as always, she was struck by the simple integrity of the old buildings in comparison with the self-conscious planning of the new complexes mushrooming along the Spanish coast.

Catching her skirt she bunched it with one hand and, with her sandals in her other, strolled down towards the waves. There was the lightest of breezes that teased the free hem of her dress and flipped the ends of her hair around her face. The unexpected chill of the sea between her toes caused Eugenia to catch her breath. She stood still, allowing the small waves to roll in, suck at her ankles and the sand beneath her toes before retreating. Gulls wheeled and circled between sea and sky announcing their presence with triumphant cries as they rode the wind.

When she toiled back up the beach half an hour later the old woman was still there. She paused, looked up and, holding onto her hat in the stiff breeze, smiled briefly in acknowledgment of Eugenia’s raised hand before returning to her work. Eugenia retrieved her shoulder bag from the car, brushed the knots from her hair and tied it back into a pony tail. The hem of her skirt clung damp against her calves and she shook it out as she slipped on her sandals. This was a

perfect day, the end of her 'varsity year; exams behind her and home and family ahead. In another year she would complete her degree and finally make her own way in the world.

There was time for a coffee before heading back onto the highway. She started the engine of her Fiat and made her slow way through the narrow streets of the village until she reached the square. The sudden burst of sound and the unexpected sight of the men startled her. Eugenia glanced over her shoulder but there was no possibility of turning back. As unobtrusively as possible, she locked the driver's door. Her hands gripped the steering wheel as the crowd surged towards her. Their black uniforms identified them immediately as jihadists. The lower-half of their faces were banded with black scarves but as they crowded around the vehicle, she could see the zealous intensity of their eyes.

“Out!”

Still she sat, white-faced and terrified, unable to respond.

“Out!”

Slowly, Eugenia leaned over and unlocked the door. She moved clumsily, her legs seemed incapable of obeying. Foremost in her thoughts were images she had seen of beheadings in the Middle East. She stood before the mob staring at them, not knowing whether she was looking into the face of death. And suddenly she was disinterested as though her emotions had detached and like the sea gulls on the beach, had become observers of the world below without being part of it.

One Muslim addressed her in perfect Spanish. “Whore,” he said, casting his eyes contemptuously over her. “Look at you! You are dirt! Go home and be thankful that we don't do today what should be done with a woman like you. Soon, you and your kind will learn what it is to be a woman. You will learn your place when we cover every Spanish woman with the *niqab*<sup>1</sup>!” He turned away from her and, for a moment, Eugenia thought it was over. Without warning he swung round and lashed out hitting her across the mouth with the back of his hand. She collapsed instantly under the blow and lay whimpering with shock and pain, one hand clutched to her face.

“Get up, whore!” She was shunted contemptuously with the butt of his rifle. “Get up and get out before I kill you.”

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<sup>1</sup> Islamic covering

Eugenia scrambled frantically to her feet. Blood trickled down her chin and the taste of it filled her mouth making her want to gag.

As she turned towards her car, one of the men smashed her windscreen with a paving stone and then booted the door. Her assailant pushed her towards the vehicle, forced the dented door open and thrust her into the driver's seat.

"If we see you here again, we will kill you," he said. "Al-Andalus is ours and you Spanish will learn to live under our rule or die like dogs at our hands."

Eugenia started the car and drove slowly forward; the men parted like a swathe before her as she crossed the square but their eyes bored into her. Her body shook uncontrollably and, as she drove out of the village, she began to sob.

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Alexander Wesley-Smith leaned across the charge office desk.

"Come on, Sergio" he said, "You know me. You've known me for years and you've known Eugenia since she was a child!" he demonstrated vaguely with one hand against his knee. "How can you say you can't help me? My daughter was assaulted – she could have been killed! These men are thugs and the Guardia must stop them."

Captain Sergio Fernandez, head of the Provincial Headquarters was a man in his late fifties, near retirement. His face was weathered and his expression tired. He smoothed back the thin wisps of hair above his ears and shook his head.

"We're faced with an impossible situation here," he said and his voice was toneless. "Basically, Lex, it is hands off with these *Salafists*<sup>2</sup>," he shrugged, "we're ordered not to go after them for these minor incidents."

Alexander straightened up and looked at his friend in disbelief. "Come on, Sergio, you can't be serious. This is not minor! A crime has been committed here. You've seen Eugenia's face..."

The police chief glanced apologetically at the young woman. Her right eye was closed and her mouth swollen. He fanned his hands as if to demonstrate his ineffectuality but could not meet Lex's gaze.

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<sup>2</sup> Adherents to the laws of the first three generations after the Prophet Muhammad

“I’ll submit a report,” he said at length, “but don’t expect action. Perhaps it’s fear. The numbers of Muslims in Spain is increasing. They’re powerful already. People are afraid to report these activities in the villages. Perhaps the government is also afraid...” He shrugged uncomfortably.

“I can’t just walk away from this as if nothing has happened!”

Eugenia took her father’s arm as Lex’s voice rose in annoyance. “It’s okay, Papa,” she said. “Really, it’s okay.”

He glanced at her, his face still taut with anger. “It’s not okay, sweetheart. If the Guardia refuse to act, what’s going to happen? We could find ourselves in the middle of something beyond Spain’s ability to control!”

Sergio massaged the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb, the gesture was weary. “That case in Brussels earlier this year, you remember, Lex? French Muslim. The guy murdered four people in a Jewish museum.”

Alexander nodded.

“He’d just been released from prison. The authorities knew him, they knew what he stood for and they knew he was dangerous, but there was no surveillance.”

“They picked him up though?”

“In Marseilles on a drug swoop. They were lucky. He was about to take a boat to Algeria complete with his weapons and ISIS flag.”

“So arrests are being made,” Lex said pointedly.

“Some,” Sergio admitted. “But these guys go into prison, which are Islamic hotbeds, and come out more radical than before. The situation is pretty much out of control. There was an earlier case in France. The guy’s name was Moussa Merah. Before he killed four Jews and three soldiers, he had served several sentences in French prisons. He joined some jihadist organization and fought in Afghanistan. When he came back to France it was known – but again, no surveillance. In that case, there was a gun fight and Merah was killed. Now,” he shrugged, “he’s a martyr of the faith. The youths revere the guy.” The Captain wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and his knuckles clenched into a fist. He held it against his mouth for a moment as though to stem a possible flow of words. “Let me see the car.”

He came round the counter, donned his cap, and together they walked out into the sunlight. The little Fiat was parked across the road from the police station and Sergio walked around it, his face expressionless.

“I’ll give you a report that will satisfy the insurance,” he said at length. “But let me tell you, Alexander, the less you speak about Islam in general, the better. Don’t ask me why, I don’t understand it any better than the next man. It’s just better, that’s all!”

Alexander shook his head angrily. “If that’s the truth, things are worse than I thought,” he said. He turned to his daughter.

“Are you all right to drive?”

Eugenia nodded. “I’m fine, Papa.”

“I’ll see you back at the house.”

Alexander Wesley-Smith had arrived in Frigiliana with his young Spanish wife, twenty-five years before. They had met in England, but one visit to the little hillside village had captivated Lex and they stayed. In those early years, there were few other resident foreigners in the area and Lex’s arrival caused something of a stir. He and Adriana bought a peasant cottage in the hills above the village, revamped it, and added on to it as the children arrived. Lex had an inheritance which gave them a fair monthly income and allowed him to indulge in his passion as a novelist. His books sold few copies and he spent hours in social networking, studying marketing strategies on the web with little obvious success, but he laboured on optimistically, certain that the breakthrough would come in time. Adriana, on the other hand, painted and exhibited regularly in Malaga and various galleries in the surrounding area, bringing her an independent income. Her pictures were abstract, flamboyant and an excellent reflection of her character.

Juan was born two years after their marriage and Eugenia a year after that. Both were now at the University of Granada, Juan in mathematics and science and Eugenia in fine arts. Life had treated the family well. They grew olives, grapes and avocados. Lex made a passable wine and they had a regular supply of olive oil. Adriana grew vegetables and herbs for the table and they raised chickens. The attack on Eugenia was one of the few major upsets they had ever had to face.

“They are barbarians!” Adriana declared when she and Lex were alone that evening. “Young brutes with no outlet for their emotions!”

“If Sergio’s right, it’s more than that. The problem could be national.”

Adriana gave a brief flourish of her fingers in dismissal. “Non, non! Exaggeration, Lex. I don’t believe that.”

Lex’s eyes searched his wife’s face briefly and decided not to pursue. “Genie is going to need our help to come through this. She was badly frightened.”

Adriana nodded more soberly. “I can see that. She was hurt physically, poor baby; but the threats and verbal abuse have possibly hurt her more.” She sat down on the edge of the bed, kicked off her shoes, plumped up the pillows and leaned back against the headboard. “I’m happy that she is going to be home for a while, I could not have borne the thought of her returning to university with this on her mind.”

Lex pulled his shirt over his head and felt under the pillow for his pyjamas. Adriana glanced at him and smiled to herself. His hair, which curled down below the nape of his neck, was greying and had thinned to nothing over the crown. He was one of those with an expressive, often pensive, face. Anger, when it came, was deliberated and seldom explosive. Mostly, people warmed to his ready smile even as she had so many years ago. The overall picture was still attractive, she decided. No oversized belly or thickened features; perhaps she would still take time to paint him someday. It was a thought she had toyed with now and then, but there were always more pressing images that sought to find expression, and those were the ones that sold.

“So, you will need to spend some time with your daughter,” Adriana said. “I will be busy for the next two weeks preparing for the exhibition in Nerja.”

He raised his eyebrows at her. “So, you’re abdicating?”

“I didn’t say that. Of course not! But you know there’s a lot to be done before the opening.” Her expression sobered. “Are you going to pursue this case, Lex?”

“Of course! Our friend, Captain Sergio, seems to think we should drop it,” he said with heavy irony. “I have no intention of letting it go!”

“Just don’t endanger the family,” she said suddenly. “You won’t take things into your own hands?”

He slipped into bed.

“Not unless I have to, but I don’t intend to let those bastards get away with it that easily!”

