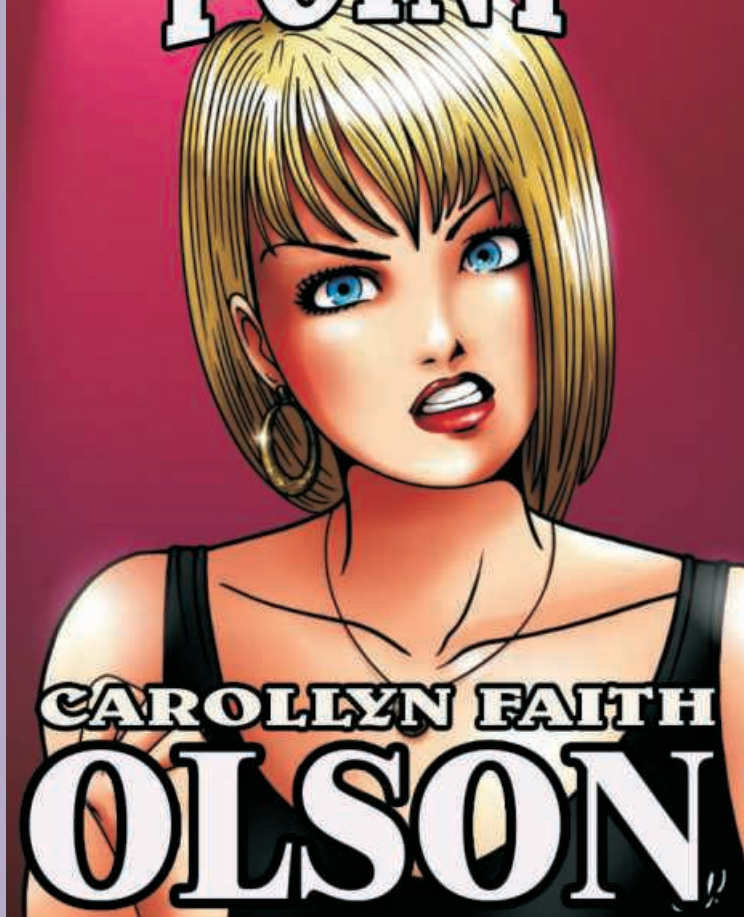


BREAKING POINT²



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Breaking Point

Part 2

By Carollyn Faith Olson

29

Villanueva had not attended the opening night festivities, due to another commitment, but was among the participants for the "Tour Day." At dinner, the Americans were encouraged to meet Cuban officials with interests other than their own. To do so, each American was given a number and was to rotate from table-to-table for each dinner course.

"This should be fun," mused Susan, as she and Cristy sat across a table, chatting with Delaney's host, Geraldo Sanchez, the Cuban Minister of Commerce.

Sanchez offered a toast to Susan, to celebrate a future proposed agreement between her company and

the Cuban government, to export goods to American. Glasses clanged at the table, as Evans stood at the lectern and called the "meeting" to order.

After a brief introduction of newly participating Cuban officials, including Villanueva, and a "thank you" to the hosts for the informative tours of the Havana businesses, Evans order the "musical chairs" to begin. Dinner was uneventful, but full of hand-shaking and table-hopping.

"Just not enough time to meet everybody, let alone remember names," Rivers pointed out to whoever would listen. "I can't remember who's Juan, Ricardo, Ernesto, Lupe or Fidel. OK, not Fidel, he's dead. I can't even remember who I gave my room key to, either. I'll have to see who dares to show up."

Those in listening distance, roared. Even in her 70s, Rivers knew how to "work" the room.

At times, Susan and Cristy lost sight of each other, as well as Richie, as they rotated around the vast ballroom. It seemed, every time either spotted Richie, Hector was either at or near his table. "So much for the musical chairs," Susan thought to herself.

"Do you think they have something brewing," queried Susan of Cristy.

"I don't know," Cristy offered. "Richie appeared upset when I found him in the bar, and they sure have been close company since. Richie told me they played baseball together, but I highly doubt it. Why would Hector play baseball in the US, then return to Cuba. Most of the good baseball players want to get out of Cuba."

"It is a little suspicious, but let's let it ride for a while," Susan responded. "Let's enjoy the rest of the night."

After dinner, once again, Evans reminded the delegation of the travel requirements and restrictions. Cristy and Susan returned to their rooms earlier than most of the Americans, who had an open invitation to Trump's suite for another evening of partying.

The next day was open for the Americans and their guides to travel through the Cuban countryside, and a time for the press to produce their first features inside the Communist country. Richie and Villanueva had other ideas — an unauthorized trip to the Pinar del Rio Province tobacco region, west of Havana, where Hector was in charge.

30

Richie awoke much earlier than usual, shaved, showered and skipped breakfast — other than a cup of coffee. For one of the few times in his life, he traded in his appetite while in

anticipation for what lay ahead.

As he walked through a near-deserted lobby, neither Evans, Vanna nor Sharp was manning the Americans checkout station. It was 6 a.m. He quickly scribbled a note and left it in an envelope on the table, informing the leaders of his intentions.

"I'm going to take a tour of the city, including a stop at the baseball park," the note read. "I will be back by mid-afternoon, (signed) Richie Wilkinson, Midessa Oil."

Richie, with his trip-credentials and passport in his jacket pocket, walked through the hotel door to a curbside taxi. His “required” security assistant was still in bed. Richie knew his lack of security could cause a problem, but he figured he would be safe with Villanueva, and he could always tell Evans “I forgot.”

The downtown traffic was almost as hectic at sunrise as it was during the rest of the day. Havana was like New York — a city that never sleeps.

The journey to Pinar del Mar was a quick history lesson. The hour-plus drive, through one of the three island mountain ranges, led to the western tip of the country and gave Richie the opportunity to practice his Spanish with his driver, Miguel Ortega.

Miguel, a father of four, was a teen when US-backed dictator Fulgencio Bautista ruled the country, before the 1959 Revolution. Miguel had dreams of living in America, but once Castro gained power, he was sent to a “re-education camp” and his hopes died shortly thereafter. Now he made about \$25 a month, driving a cab. Richie offered Miguel \$100 to be his driver, for the day. A deal was set.

Miguel told Richie about his family and the story of “Malecon,” the sea-wall and road that runs on the northern edge of Havana, where many young adults gather at night.

“I used to stand at Malecon at sunrise and look across the water towards Florida,” he recalled, in Spanish and broken-English. “I dreamed of the day I would go to America. Many of my friends had the same hopes. We were always praying Cuba would become an American state or protectorate.”

Miguel gulped and took a deep breath. Richie could tell he was having a hard time expressing in long-time pent-up desire.

“When Castro took over, the people’s dreams disappeared,” Miguel continued. “Now, the children never look across the water with hope. They purposely turn their backs on the ocean. They face inland because, psychologically, there’s no use in looking outward, since they can’t go there. The island has become a prison.”

Richie had a tear in his eye. He always had so much, and this man, had so little. His faith, hope and life were shattered. He was just going through the motions.

“Never give up hope,” a compassionate Richie, pleaded. He put his hand on Miguel’s shoulder, as he drove, offering him his assurance.

Miguel’s cab pulled into the town of San Juan y Martinez, home of the world’s finest black tobacco and 70 percent of the Cuban tobacco crop. Miguel soon found the Romeo y Julieta farm and Villanueva’s office.

“Welcome, my friend,” Villanueva greeted Richie with open arms. “I’m so happy you could come.”

“I’m so glad I could slip away today,” responded Richie, who had toured the facility a few years earlier under his alias, when he had established his link with the Cuban and his Canadian supplier.

“We have so much to see and do,” informed Villanueva, as he escorted Richie into his office and Miguel parked his car at the side of the building. Miguel would take a nap and wait for Richie as long as he wished.

After a cup of Cuban coffee, Richie and Hector hopped in a golf cart and toured the grounds. Workers were harvesting tobacco leaves, loading them into old farm vehicles and moving them into the storage and drying barns. Hector pointed out that black tobacco can take up to six months to be cured before it can be rolled into the perfect cigar.

“Patience, patience, patience,” emphasized Hector. “I take pride in making everything perfect.”

Richie was amazed at the business plan and structure Villanueva had in place, essentially, a pro-American production in a Communist country. The Cuban government long ago had recognized Hectors ability and reputation in the tobacco business and left him alone. His only requirement was to produce the best tobacco possible to enable the regime to get top dollar for its No. 1 export.

Before the Revolution, the Cuban Mafia had run most of the country’s tobacco and rum business from their headquarters at the grand Nacional Hotel in downtown Havana. Castro quickly nationalized all the major businesses and killed or ran most of the Mafia leaders out of the country. A few remnants of the Mafia underground still existed, but they were virtually ignored. It also was well known to the Communist leaders that Villanueva did not destroy, but actually sold, most his “rejected” product to what was left of the mob and to others, like Richie, and pocketed the profits. That was how business was run on the island.

At lunch, back in Hectors office, the colleagues discussed their current agreement and what the future could hold.

“What are your plans?” Villanueva asked Richie.

“It all depends on the President,” Richie retorted. “I’ve heard that he’ll lift the embargo soon, but there’s no guarantee that he’ll open the tobacco market. You know, American tobacco company representatives are on our trip too. They are concerned about losing so much business in the last few years and want to hook up with the Cuban government. I know they’d love to expand their cigar market. The big tobacco companies are too strong and have too many lobbyists in Washington. A little guy like me doesn’t stand a chance.

“I would like to see our business continue, and possibly grow a bit. Both of us don’t need a lot of money from this deal to make us happy.”

Villanueva, who had met with RJ Reynolds officials the day before and had given them a tour of his facility, agreed: “I think we could both live well on an additional \$1 million a year.”

“You run a great place here and we have become good friends. Could you increase your exports by about 25 percent to my Canadian contractor?” Richie queried, pointing to a spread-sheet on the table. “Is it possible?”

“Yes, easily,” replied Villanueva. “I’ve been waiting for you to ask. I’ll just cut back on my local suppliers, since I make very little off their sales.”

“What about the Mafia,” Richie countered. “Aren’t they your clients too?”

“Don’t worry about them,” replied Villanueva. “I won’t cut back on their contract. They might get a little more of the inferior tobacco, but they’ll never know the difference.”

The men spent the remainder of the afternoon working out the details and signing an “informal” con-

tract. The shipments would begin soon. The men shook hands and walked outside to enjoy the sunset and to light up a newly-produced, hand-rolled cigar, to celebrate.

It was dark before Richie summoned Miguel for a ride back to Havana and the closing night dinner. He might be late, but that was of little concern. The day had been a success and by noon tomorrow he would be back in the United States with his cigar contract, not to mention a possible agreement with Exxon Mobil, in hand.

31

The phones in The Senators' office were ringing off-the-hook.

Lena Gibbson had arrived before 6 a.m. and the fax machine, e-mail, answering machine and the answering service had been overwhelmed. It took Lena, and an assistant, three hours to clear the messages, which were running 90% in favor of The Senator's hearings. The Senator's continuants were upset, more with the President than with the business escapade to Cuba. Many felt the President had embarrassed not only himself, but the country.

Eric had been caught in traffic, but was monitoring the situation on his cell phone and listening to the morning radio talk shows.

"Where have you been?" Lena said in desperation, handling two phones at once. "Dad is waiting to see you in his office."

Eric knocked on the office door and waited for a response. The Senator bellowed "Come in," and Eric timidly entered, not knowing if his boss was in a good mood or not.

"What a wonderful morning," The Senator dead-panned. "I've never seen a President screw up something so badly since Richard Nixon.

"I know, I know. This isn't that bad, but it could have been worse. He has to learn he can't be so careless."

Eric wasn't sure how to react, so he asked: "Are you still planning the hearings?"

"Possibly," echoed The Senator. "I've heard from about half of the Senate, and most everyone is in agreement. One Senator told me he was a 'Ditherer-in-Chief.' Another wants to start impeachment proceedings. That's way to rash. Have to seen the polls and the phone calls and e-mails? The American public is upset! The Senate has to respond one way or the other. But, we might be able to do this behind closed doors.

"I don't like the man's politics, but he is our President, and the Office must be respected. I talked with the President this morning and he understands the situation. He's willing to talk to the Senate and try to smooth this over. This might just all go away once the public opinion shifts to the Cuba trip.

"You know how things change with the weather in Washington," Eric said, trying to defuse the situation.

"Yes," The Senator responded. "When the press comes back with all the stories from Cuba, the emphasis will be taken off what the President said. I just hope he

keeps his mouth shut for a few days and doesn't try to take credit for any Cuban success."

"Only time will tell," Eric retorted. "They'll be back tomorrow. It could be a long 24 hours. I'd better get back to answering the phones."

CRISTY WAS AWOKEN by the buzz of her hotel room phone.

"Good morning," she answered, with her mind still full of angel-dust.

"Is this Cristy?" asked the female voice at the end of the phone.

"Yes," she replied.

"I can't talk now," the stammering voice said. "Meet me at the downtown market place in two hours over by the hat-seller."

"Dania," yelled Cristy, as the phone went dead. She slammed the receiver into the holder.

"I was right," Cristy confirmed aloud to herself, as she put on her robe, a wig, a dash of makeup, and hurried out the door to Susan's room.

Susan was finishing her makeup when Cristy pounded her door.

Susan looked through the peep-hole and quickly opened the door.

"What's up?" Susan inquired. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Dania called me!" Cristy squealed. "She told me to meet her at the market. Then the line went dead."

"When?" Susan exclaimed.

“Two hours,” Cristy proclaimed. “Will you go with me?”

Susan and Cristy had planned to take the Havana city bus tour, but meeting Dania was more important.

“Yes, I’ll go with you,” responded Susan, always up for a good adventure, looking at the tour itinerary.

“But, we won’t cancel our tour.”

“Why not?” Cristy questioned. “Dania may be in trouble and need our help.”

“Somebody might be watching us,” retorted a suspicious Susan. “The first stop is the market, so we’ll get off there. We have an hour to look around. If that’s not enough time, we’ll stay with Dania and skip the rest of the tour.”

Cristy gave Susan a hug and said she’d be ready in an hour.

“Dress down,” reminded Susan, who was sporting jeans, a fashionable sweatshirt and tennis shoes.

“I will,” Cristy said, rolling her eyes. “Do you think I always dress up?”

“I bet you don’t even own a sweatshirt or a pair of tennies, let alone have anything casual on the trip,” Susan laughed and sent Cristy on her way. “Now hurry.”

Cristy hustled back to her room. She was not only puzzled about what to wear, but with what lay ahead. She did have a pair of tennis shoes and jeans; however, they were for her male alter-ego. While she showered, Cristy would decide what to wear.

Javier was leaning against the wall, near the elevator, as Susan exited her room and walked down the hall.

"Hello," Javier greeted in a semi-flirtatious manner, as Susan waited for the elevator and the ride down four floors to the lobby. Cristy had called to say that she was running late and to meet her outside the restaurant.

Susan ignored Javier, a tanned, English-speaking gent, dressed in Levi's, white Reebok running shoes, a blue Izod golf shirt and a green Seattle Sounders soccer team cap.

Javier followed Susan on to the elevator and took the ride to the lobby. He continued to talk to Susan, but she did not respond.

"What's wrong with you?" Javier finally asked.

"What are you talking about?" Susan angrily responded. "Stop bothering me."

Javier bent over with laughter, as the elevator reached its destination. He pushed the "door closed" button and exclaimed: "It's me, Cristy!"

Susan fell back into the elevator wall in amazement.

"You little bitch," she shouted. "You scared the hell out of me. Now open the door before the authorities think something's wrong."

Javier complied and the pair walked into lobby as if nothing happened.

"What the hell are you doing?" continued an upset Susan. "What if you get caught?"

"What for?" Javier questioned.

“For not being Cristy,” Susan countered.

Javier explained that he carried two passports, one for Cristy and one for Javier. He would be Javier, at least for the morning.

“I’ve never told you, but I’ve been to Cuba a couple of times as Javier for my business, so this shouldn’t be a problem,” Javier explained. “If anybody asks, we met last night. Today, I’m going to show you the town.”

Susan was shaken and impressed. She never would have guessed Javier and Cristy was the same person. The illusion Cristy presented was phenomenal.

The tour bus, despite the heavy traffic, arrived at the market only five minutes behind schedule. The tour guide complemented the driver, because being late was common in Havana.

Susan and Javier scanned the area, which was busy with other tourist and the early lunch crowd. The marketplace was renowned for having everything a shopper would need and more. Susan and Javier felt it was important to mingle with the vendors and the crowd since they had a little time before meeting with Dania.

“We can’t be late,” Susan said as she pointed to her wrist watch.

“Don’t worry,” Javier stated. “I know where the hats are sold. Maybe I’ll buy you one.”

The pair strolled through the marketplace, looking, but not buying, any of the wares. Javier and Susan shared the Cuban equivalent of a Pepsi at an outdoor café in clear view of the haberdashery.

“Do you think she’s going to make it?” asked Susan.

“She’s just a few minutes late,” Javier responded. “She could have been caught in traffic or had problems slipping away. We have plenty of time.”

“I don’t know,” Susan questioned. “I’m so afraid for her. She might be putting her safety on the line talking to us. We’ve been treated so well, but we know how the Cubans treat their own people. It’s so sad.”

“Hola,” said a voice from behind Susan and Javier’s table. Javier turned and spotted Dania as Susan waived for her to join them. But, Dania hesitated.

“I think she is scared,” Susan responded. “She doesn’t know you are Cristy.”

Dania ducked behind the café and Susan followed in pursuit.

“Dania, it’s me, Susan,” she shouted in an effort to stop the fleeing young lady.

Dania looked over her shoulder and continued quickly walking through the crowd and away from the café. Susan picked up her pace, but had problems maneuvering through the people.

“Dania, stop,” Susan yelled. “Cristy is waiting for you.”

Dania slowed and turned to face Susan.

“Don’t be afraid,” assured Susan. “Cristy’s at the café. She was using the bathroom when you saw me and Javier.”

“Who’s Javier?” Dania asked.

“He’s a friend of Cristy’s,” Susan responded.

“I was afraid he was a government spy and I was going to be arrested,” Dania said, with tears flowing from her brown eyes. “I can’t trust anybody. We may

have a different Castro in office, but it's the same old Cuba. You can be arrested for anything."

"You can trust me and Javier," confirmed Susan. "I will tell you more about Javier if you will come back with me to the café."

Dania, still unsure of what to think, reluctantly began to walk with Susan toward the café.

"This might be hard for you to comprehend, but Javier and Cristy is the same person," confirmed Susan.

"How can that be?" questioned Dania. "I'm leaving. I don't think you are telling me the truth."

Susan grabbed Dania's arm and look her right in the eyes.

"Cristy's really a man," Susan stated. "Do you know what a cross dresser is? That's what she is – a man who often dresses as a woman. She's here on a special mission."

"Oh my goodness," Dania remarked. "I can't believe it. She is so beautiful. Yes, I know about cross dressers. We have a different name for them. In fact, there are two in my dance troop. I feel so embarrassed."

"Don't be... there was no way to tell you," continued Susan. "But, now you know."

Susan and Dania moved through the crowd back to the café, where Javier was waiting.

Dania, still a bit hesitant, gave Javier a hug.

"I can't believe you are the same person," Dania laughed.

"I am," Javier replied. "Trust me, someday I'll tell you all about why I do what I do."



The three ordered coffee and Dania got right to the point.

“I only have about 10 minutes,” Dania pointed out. “I told the head maid that I had to go to the doctor for

some medicine. I don't think I'm being followed, but I can't be sure."

Javier scanned the café to see if they had drawn any attention, but nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

"I work at the Nacional Hotel," Dania informed the Americans. "Do you know somebody named Richie or Ricardo?"

"Yes," Susan replied. "He's with our group. What about him?"

"Last night at work, I was cleaning the lobby and overheard some very rough looking, older men talking about him," Dania recalled. "They said they knew he was in the country and they wanted to get even with him. Has he done something wrong?"

"Could be," Javier stated, trying to recall everything Bobbi Jo said.

"One man told another, 'tonight's the night,' whatever that means," Dania continued.

"The Mafia?" Javier said barely loud enough for the girls to hear.

"We'd better find Richie, and fast," dictated Susan. "I had horrific problems with some thugs a few years ago. They are ruthless. Richie might be in over his head.

"Do you think the Mafia would try to do something and ruin the relations between Cuba and America?" Javier questioned.

"You can't trust them or anybody here," Dania reminded her friends. "The Mafia still runs the Nacional after all these years. I don't have any family any more. My parents are dead and I don't have a brother or sister. They could kill me and nobody would care."