

THE MADNESS OF MERCURY

by Connie di Marco

Excerpt

The second floor hallway was dim, lined with dark wood wainscoting and lit only by a few wall sconces leading to the top of a curving staircase. A stained glass window filtered outside light onto the landing. It was only mid-afternoon, but the sky had grown dark, muting the brilliant reds and blues of the window. Heavy Pacific storms were closing in from the north and San Francisco would be buffeted by wind and rain through the holidays.

At the foot of the stairs, I called to Dorothy. She didn't answer but a sweet and toasty aroma filled the foyer. I followed the short hallway toward the rear of the house and pushed through the swinging door to the kitchen. At the other end of the room, a wall of windows overlooked the back garden and beyond that, a view of the city and the bay to the north. Black clouds, roiling and heavy with rain, were visible beyond the Golden Gate and the Marin headlands. The storm would hit within a few hours.

Dorothy worked at the center island, kneading dough, a full length white apron tied over her loose slacks and long-sleeved red sweater. She looked up and smiled then spread her dough carefully over the board. An apple and cinnamon mixture was warming on the stove top and my stomach was reminding me I hadn't eaten since breakfast. "What are you making?"

"Apple pastries, little turnovers. I make them every Christmas. My aunts love them. I thought it might cheer Evandra up especially . . ." The sound of a gasoline-powered mower drowned out the rest of Dorothy's response.

Dorothy glanced toward the windows. "Damn. What's he doing?"

"The gardener?"

"Yes. Luis." Dorothy walked to the windows and peered out into the garden. "He probably wants to finish the lawn before the rain starts."

A low stone wall formed the perimeter of the back garden, delineating an edge where the ground dropped off to a steep cliff marked with rocky outcroppings. I joined Dorothy at the window and followed her line of sight. The power mower was running, unattended, butting against the stone wall. A red bandanna hung from the vibrating handlebar of the machine.

Dorothy looked puzzled. "He shouldn't leave that thing like that. Where did he get off to?" She tossed her dishtowel on the table, heaved a sigh and opened the back door to the garden.

"Luis . . . Luis," she called.

I followed her out the door and joined her on the lawn. The wind was whipping fiercely across the hillside and the sky had grown even darker. In the distance, the sea churned black in the bay. Dorothy's apron billowed like a sail in the wind. She strode purposefully across the grass

to the mower, and hit the control, silencing the monster. She turned her head to speak to me and hesitated, then turned back and peered over the low wall. Something had caught her eye. She was still for a moment and then took two steps backward.

“What is it, Dorothy?”

Her face had drained of color. “It’s Luis. He’s down there.” Her voice quivered. “I think he’s dead.”