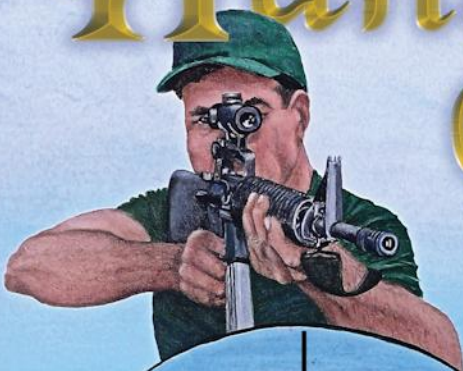


Hunter's Escape



Quest
for
Freedom



A Matt Hunter Adventure

J. C. Hager



Praise for J.C. Hager's *Hunter's Escape: Quest for Freedom*

Hager's best to date. 'Old friends,' familiar characters, return for more edge-of-the-chair adventures. Matt is a long way from Michigan's Upper Peninsula as he and his new bride face rapid-fire perils in what should be a tropical paradise, except for a surplus of killers, narco-traffickers, Cuban gunboats and clanking cell doors! You will definitely enjoy the read, but watch out for ricochets!

Joseph Greenleaf

Author, *Sudden Light*, *Donegal's Novel*

Praise for J.C. Hager's *Hunter's Secret: Wreck of the Carol K*

When I finished J. C. Hager's first book, Hunters Choice, I asked the author, "Where's the next one?" I finally got my eyes on Hunter's Secret and got by on little sleep until I'd read it. The locales depicted are bang-on, the human characters are well-crafted and many return as the reader's old friends. Now, John, where's the next one?

Joseph Greenleaf

Publisher, Swordpoint Intercontinental Ltd

Hunter's Secret has action, intrigue, spot-on descriptions, unique Michigan settings...an entertaining and logical sequel to Hunter's Choice.

Aubrey Golden

President, Michigan Karst Conservancy

Praise for J.C. Hager's *Hunter's Choice*

Superbly crafted, Hunter's Choice documents Hager as a master storyteller whose attention to detail insures the reader's rapt attention from beginning to end.

Midwest Book Review

John Hager knows the outdoors, he knows the human heart, and best of all he knows how to tell a hell of a story!

Steve Hamilton

Author, the Alex McKnight novels

In his debut novel, J. C. Hager has employed his expertise as a hunter to offer us quite a yarn that could probably easily make a great movie...What also shines in the novel is Hager's familiarity with the finer points of all things pertaining to hunting and boating that he cleverly interweaves into his plot.

Norman Goldman

Editor, BookPleasures.com

Hunter's Escape

Also by J. C. Hager

Hunter's Choice

Hunter's Secret: Wreck of the Carol K



Hunter's Escape
Quest for Freedom

J. C. Hager

A Matt Hunter Adventure

**Greenstone Publishing
Rapid River, Michigan**

Hunter's Escape
by J. C. Hager

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To Luis Ruiz (Heriberto Luis Ojeda Ruiz)

His quest for freedom inspired this novel. He swam at night through shark-infested waters toward Guantanamo Bay, was blown back by a monster storm, sailed past patrol boats from the north coast (intercepted by the USCG fifteen miles from the keys) and finally took a plane to Mexico and walked, penniless (his money taken by corrupt Mexican Officials), across the border into Texas. Let us always applaud his indomitable spirit and realize it is the essence and core of our national greatness. Luis is now a proud U.S. citizen, living with his wonderful family in Escanaba, Michigan.



Adios Fidel

Dark beach, low clouds, no moon, May 10, 3:00 a.m.: the only sounds—the ebb tide sloshing and sucking at the old coral rimming the shore on Cuba’s north coast. From a forest of shrubs, scattered trees and sea grapes, four figures appeared struggling to carry a battered catamaran. Behind them a woman followed with several bundles. They scanned the beach in both directions looking for horse patrols that were rewarded for turning in escapees. Whispers and grunts of accomplishment came as they set the catamaran down near the water, where its mast was stepped and secured with several previously unattached wires. Bundles were placed and tied to the trampoline surface that was the vessel’s deck, a hand-covered flashlight checked the connections and ties. The sky glowed with the lights from the oil refinery to the west, and from the city of Matanzas further to the south at the end of a large bay. Four men finally carried the vessel across the coral, their shoes protecting their feet, but the three inches of water hid many treacherous holes. One man fell, his

ankle hurt and scraped. Another twenty feet and the coral became sand, and the catamaran floated in knee deep water. They stood for a time, breathing the smells of the sea and the tidal flats, then one man hugged each of the others and carefully worked his way back to shore where his wife waited. The three boarded, took paddles, crudely made from tree branches with pieces of scrap wood nailed to them, and began their journey to freedom that waited ninety miles to the north.

Dead calm water, ebbing tide and strong quiet strokes of their paddles brought the craft over the fringing reef and into the sea. They bent to their tasks, two on the paddles, one man as helmsman. As silently as possible they moved the craft through the unusually calm windless night. Their progress soon gave them a view of the lights along the coast. A key point of reference came from the light on the thermoelectric power plant tower located on the west side of the bay entrance. The French-designed power plant had docks that were also a border patrol station for various patrol boats. As they moved farther north into the sea, the tower light soon blended with the lights of the refinery complex and the city down the bay. After hundreds of strokes, tiring arms and straining lungs were gratified as the Cuban coast over their shoulders became lower and dimmer on the horizon. Then they heard a motor approaching. Soon after, they defined the easterly direction of the engine noise, a bow wake appeared as a white specter. They stopped paddling, lying low on the plastic-fiber deck, praying the boat would pass them unnoticed. A bright beam from the approaching boat dashed that hope.

“Where are you going?” came as a yell from the pleasure craft.

“To freedom,” the helmsman yelled back.

“You’re crazy. Stop, we will tow you back to shore and say nothing. You are stupid to try this thing. You will probably die,” came the reply as the patrol boat cruised to within fifty feet. The men on the boat wore uniforms. They were a coastal patrol, part of the *Guarda Fronteras* that used commandeered or impounded private craft. The men were not armed. They had a radio but it was either broken or didn’t have the range to call the gunboat whose presence would mean the end of their escape from Fidel’s oppression.

Looking away from the spotlight, the men continued their paddling. A second voice from the patrol boat shouted another warning, “Turn

back now, they will bring out a Zhuk." A minute passed as the men on the catamaran strained with their homemade paddles. No more was said as the sleek powerboat's engine roared and it quickly came to plane, heading west toward the patrol-boat base.

The despair of being so quickly discovered vanished with some initial puffs, then a steady wind from the northeast. The men, giving no thought to returning, worked to fit the Hobie Cat sails they had jury-rigged into the Prindle mast. The mainsail and jib caught the wind; the catamaran came around, running close-hauled with as much reach as they could achieve and still speed toward their northern goal. The noise of the departing patrol craft quickly was overcome by the shudder of the lines and sails as the craft's asymmetrical pontoons sliced through the warm black water.

The speed thrilled the men. With paddles stowed and a tight grip on the steering arm, the men leaned low in the craft and smiled with the prospect of a successful escape from the tyranny and tortures they had each experienced. From the storage bag came a boat's compass they had liberated from a Canadian sport fisherman's yacht. One man held the compass; another used a now very weak flashlight to read the dial then used his hand and arm to give a course for the helmsman. They were going a little west of north, but freedom was a big target, and they needed speed more than accurate navigation. Passing around one of their four plastic bottles, they all took a refreshing drink. Two of the converted Coke liter bottles held water, two had water with lime juice. They had food also, a waxed paper-wrapped roll of crushed and compacted peanuts. They each broke off some of the rich, oily substance, ate and washed it down with more water. They did all their dining with one hand; the other was needed to hold on to the fast-moving vessel. The wind had also brought waves, the fast craft jumping through the building foot-high chop.

As they moved around the flat bouncing trampoline of the catamaran's deck, the man who had hurt his ankle moaned when it was touched. His two compatriots removed his shoe, rolled down his sock and looked at the now swollen and discolored ankle.

"The coral, *dientes del perro*, bit you."

"Put it overboard, cool it with sea water"

"No, it might slow us. I can still swim, I'll crawl ashore if I have to."

“Let me wrap it, it will help,” offered one man. Skilled in athletic medicine and training, he took a towel from the bag, ripped it into four inch wide strips, wet them in the spray going by the pontoons and wrapped the ankle with a professional figure eight. He made a respectable ankle bandage by tightening the cloth and tying it with ends split from its own length.

“That’s good, it feels better already,” said the injured man above the sound of the rushing water and the vibrations of the sails and stays.

They exchanged smiles as the lights of the coast disappeared. There was a faint glow along the eastern horizon. Dawn was coming. One man had a watch, an hour had passed while under sail. They knew the horizon at sea level was about ten miles distant, the immediate goal was to sail twelve miles from Cuba, to reach international waters. That goal couldn’t come soon enough.

Ten minutes later the water ahead of them danced; erupting in fountains of spray as shells impacted off their bow. Seconds later they heard the staccato bangs of machine gun fire, the sound rolling across the water from the south.

Against the dark southern horizon, they saw tongues of yellow-orange flash from the twin 12.7 mm machine guns they knew were mounted on the 78-foot gunboats provided by the Soviet Union. They could barely make out the bow wake in the low light. Splashes again churned the water ahead of them, closer now.

The message was clear—turn back or we will fire into you. The Zhuk was too far astern for hailing. They must be close to the territorial limits. The gunboat might not cross the line, but its crew had no qualms about stopping their escape with machine gun fire.

The catamaran helmsman maneuvered his fast-moving craft into a zigzag. The white sails luffed, and the mast strained against its wires. The maneuvering lost them speed but may have momentarily saved them as a hundred-shell salvo hit the waters they would have occupied had they held a steady course.

“What should we do?” cried the helmsman, bringing them back to maximum speed.

Before he got an answer, shells pelted the sixteen-foot craft.

The sound of the bullets varied depending on their point of impact: hitting the water made a slapping-sucking sound, the plastic and foam

pontoons made a dull cracking sound, the shells hitting the aluminum crossbars or mast made a ringing-breaking sound, the shells hitting flesh- made an unspectacular sound- just a dull thud, no louder than a playful shoulder punch. Two men jerked and spasmed as the large bullets tore through them. One took a head shot: bone, blood and brains spewed across the craft. With a loose helm, the craft turned with the wind, the sail jibed and jammed in the lee braces as part of the mast came down—shot through above the braces and bow stays. As the second man reached for the helm, two more bullets joined the several that had already pierced him, and he rolled off the now slowing craft and slid into the dark water.

The heavy bullet that had brought down the upper part of the mast also creased the chest of the third sailor and passed through a portion of his lower calf muscle, knocking him into the water. He surfaced twelve feet from the vessel, took a breath and pulled the water over himself to get away from the rain of lead coming from a ship he couldn't see and from guns he could hardly hear. He swam under water, away from the catamaran and the sounds of gun fire. Surfacing twice for breath—fear and shock an anesthetic for his bullet wounds—he finally came up as several more short bursts from the closing gunboat skipped and slashed into the boat that was once his hope for freedom.

The partially filled sail gave the Zhuk's skillful gunner his target, the yellow pontoons absorbed holes, but foam filled, they would not sink. Chunks chopped out, a tip blown away, and the twin rudder mechanism gone with the cross bar that held it, the craft looked like a capital "A" with half a mast. The small, thin jib, its halyard pulley shot through, trailed in the water behind the barely moving wreck.

A third and fourth short burst of machine-gun fire turned the sail into a strainer, took more pieces off the pontoons and shredded more of the black deck material. With a loud rumble of its twin engines, the gunboat came within a hundred yards, running parallel to its drifting target. A powerful searchlight swept the area. For several minutes they held it on the wreckage looking for movement, or maybe to see if the craft would sink. Then it went off, the poorly tuned diesels popped then roared as the ship swung around toward the south. With boat noise still in the air and water, the wounded

man moved toward his only slim chance of survival—the wrecked catamaran.

His strength ebbed with each stroke, pain building in his chest and leg as tortured skin and muscles opposed his attempt to reach the moving wreckage. His breathing came in gasps, each a painful tear across his wounded chest. He tried to kick, his wounded leg felt detached, numb, he couldn't sense its movement. The catamaran moved away. He tried to swim toward it, the only floating object in his sight. It twisted, the shredded sail caught more of the breeze, and it moved away as did his chance for life. He took two pitiful and painful strokes. Something moved across his hip and right leg. He reached forward and down. His arm and hand touched the jib halyard line. With desperation he grabbed the line, then the sail, painfully pulling himself toward the floating debris. At the wreckage he climbed onto the slanting deck area. He saw a dark stain on his chest and the wound in his leg. Using the jib sail as a crude bandage he first wrapped his wounded leg and then used the rest to wrap up and secure himself to the bottom of the mast. Feeling nauseous and thirsty from swallowing salt water and the onset of throbbing pain, he threw up. Loosening the sail that covered him, he found the food and water bag still remained tied to the mast: one bottle still full, another half-full with a hole through its neck. The peanut wrap had exploded over the inside of the bag. He scraped two handfuls into his mouth, drank all the water left in the holed plastic bottle. He tore off his ripped shirt, making a bandage for his chest wound, hoping to stop the bleeding. His leg was numb. He could feel tissue coming out the exit hole- he pushed it back in, rewrapping it tightly with part of the jib sail, tying it off with a loop of jib halyard line.

The light from the east was good enough for him to see the deck area. With the last of his strength he maneuvered the mainsail around the side stays to better catch the wind, he didn't want the easterly current, and later a flooding tide, to eventually take him back to a Cuban beach. He looked at the wreckage, too weak and tired to try to fix the pontoon braces, and gave a final look at the gunboat disappearing over the horizon. He figured that must be south, the sun a glow in the east, the wind was taking him west. He also saw movement in the water—a small shark finned the water in the barely perceptible wake. Then another joined it.

He thought of his friends, how quickly they went from celebration to death. He recalled their flashing smiles and confident happiness, then he remembered them being broken apart, shells shredding and exploding their flesh and bones with little sound; he saw muscles, bones and skulls bursting. He would wait to join them.

“At least I’ll die free and not in a cage,” he said aloud as he curled around the mast and fell unconscious.



Cannons in D

Florida Keys, May 10, 11:00am

Matt Hunter gazed for the second time in twenty seconds at the mirror on the back of the Pastor's office door. His first look reflected a tanned, handsome bridegroom in a perfectly tailored white linen, three-piece suit, happily contemplating marriage to his fantastic bride, Tanya. The second look came after reading a hastily printed note on the back of a ceremony bulletin shoved into his hands by a man in a dark suit. The note read:

DO NOT START THE CEREMONY. KILLERS AMONG
GUESTS. NEED TIME TO FIND THEM. I TALKED TO
ORGANIST. I'LL BE THERE IN A FEW MINUTES. AL

Matt now found his reflection resembled an albino deer staring into the headlights of a speeding logging truck.

Numbly holding the note, Matt moved down the short hallway to an archway behind the lectern. The minister, in a high-backed chair, out of sight of the wedding guests, looked up. He waited for *Canon in D* to

announce the gathering of Matt and his son, acting as best man. Then the men would begin their procession to the altar area.

Matt whispered, "There's been a delay, we're waiting to seat a few special guests. It'll be a few minutes." The minister nodded and patiently returned to a position of comfort and contemplation. Matt fought back a panic attack, a part of his brain wanted him to dash to the center of the apse and scream, "Run for your lives!"

Matt returned to the office to find Al with an attractive, petite woman inspecting the outside entrance door lock.

She said, "This is what I found when I made an inspection of the building this morning. The door lock is jammed with some kind of putty—it won't lock. This is all fresh." After opening the door just enough to inspect the handle and lock, she and Al closed the door and turned to Matt.

Al, an ex-Detroit police detective, and now chief bodyguard and security expert for the Russian gangster generally known only by his last name—Webb—introduced the woman as Kate Wilson, the bodyguard for Webb's daughter Carla, Tanya's maid of honor. Kate's background was in military security, and Webb had hired her from Blackwater, a contract security service.

Al said, "We have two more security people in the back of the church, and two on the grounds, Webb was going to be here ten minutes ago, but we called him, he will drive around until we give him the all clear. I had the organist agree to keep playing until we tell her we are ready to begin the ceremony."

Matt said, "How'd you know there's a problem?"

Kate answered, "We found snipers on the school building next door. They eventually told us there is another three-person team, two inside the church. They are to kill Webb and escape through this office. The snipers knew of, but never met, the other team."

Al broke in, "The door fixed like it is means someone wants in during the ceremony, probably to cover the shooters' escape. We want that person to identify the other two."

Matt checked his watch, 11:02. *Canon in D* was scheduled to start at exactly 11:00. Matt's son entered the office hand-in-hand with his daughter Suzy, three years and three months of energy. The little blonde girl, all white ruffles with a butter-yellow band in her hair and a matching

cummerbund, tiptoeing in white patent leather shoes, announced, "My new grandma is so beautiful. I will have a whole basket of rose flowers to scatter. When do I start?"

Matt asked his son and granddaughter to go back with the ladies, saying there would be a short delay while they seated a few more guests. He didn't want to tell them they had killers to find so a powerful gangster would be safe to watch his daughter stand up in a marriage ceremony. He expected Tanya understood the problem to some degree—Webb at a known location at a specific time placed him in danger—and somehow, she would keep her mother, Anita Vega, from coming unglued and ranting about all the times Webb had brought ruin and unhappiness to their family.

Al was on the cell phone to Webb's limo, they would pull up to the front and one person would rush into the church. Anyone watching from the side parking lots would only see the vehicle enter the short circular drive before the entrance, but not be able to see who entered the church.

The limo driver confirmed the plan and said it would be done within two minutes.

Al and Kate took two weapons from under their suit coats. They looked made out of dull, gray plastic, but big, the size of a regular army .45. They each took dark green tubes about six inches long, an inch in diameter and screwed them onto the barrels, then moved to the corners of the room to watch the outside door.

Al whispered, "Stay out in the hall, close the door behind you."

Matt went to the hall, his mind spinning. He could peek into the sanctuary, half filled with expectant wedding guests. The bride's side was nearly filled, the other side had just a few pews occupied in front by several of his friends and relatives who had come down from Upper Michigan or were snowbirds staying in Florida or on Alabama's Gulf Coast.

What had initially been discussed as a simple civil ceremony on some palm tree-lined beach, had taken on a life of its own, directed by Tanya's mother. Anita had rallied her considerable resources among the Cuban community in Miami, invitations sent with only a three-month RSVP had been quickly returned with acceptance. Skilled Cuban tailors had cut and sewn in Miami. A Lutheran church had been chosen

because it was available and the minister agreeable. A Catholic Church would have greatly pleased Tanya's mother, but Matt's divorce over two decades ago brought complex and intrusive procedures, too much for Matt in both time and long-buried emotions. The rejection never got to monetary considerations. Anita Vega begrudgingly had bowed to the positions and wills of Tanya and Matt.

The Lutheran minister appeared in the hallway, and pointed at his wristwatch. Matt went to him and whispered, "Only a few more minutes, we're expecting an important guest who's been delayed."

The minister returned to his chair.

Several minutes dragged by, the organ music paused a few times while pages of new music were unfolded before the skilled master of the pipe organ's multiple keyboards.

Matt heard voices in the office, sounds of scuffling and a popping sound. He opened the office door to find Kate and Al standing above a man writhing in pain on the office floor.

Al held the man by his throat, his pistol's silencer touching the man's right knee. He hissed, "Identify the people after Webb or I'll blow out your right knee, then your left, then your feet, hands, shoulders and on and on—I've got nineteen more shots in this cannon. You'll never have a day without pain again. You will tell us sooner or later—why not do it while you can still walk and still hold things? You're just a hired gun, how much is this job worth to you?"

Probing with the silenced, formidable, semiautomatic weapon, Al spent several seconds concentrating on its position at the man's knee.

When a look of frightened surrender crossed the man's face, Al loosened his grip on the throat.

"Stop—I'll tell you everything. Two people, a man and woman. He's tall, got a beard, dark suit. She's mean lookin', blue dress, dark hair."

Moving like an athlete, Kate left the room, hiding her semiautomatic in her waist band and pulling her blazer over it.

Al rolled the man over, pulled tight two, white-plastic tie strips to bind his wrists, duct taped his mouth, then rolled him onto his back. There was no fight left in the man. Al picked up a mini-Uzi that he had kicked under the minister's desk. The man's left shoe showed where a bullet must have nicked his foot, a little blood seeping out of the hole in the leather.

Popping the magazine out of the Uzi, Al ejected the chambered 9 mm shell and put both parts into a wastebasket, covering it with some papers off the desk. He spoke quietly into the cell phone—telling Webb they would have the situation controlled in two more minutes. He speed dialed another number and a man came to the door to take the wounded would-be assassin.

Minutes passed, and Al moved Matt to the hallway. Matt watched his son come up the side aisle, stopping to assure his wife that their daughter was perfectly prepared for her role, and stood with Matt. Matt could only see part of the first few rows. By moving out into the archway he could see the main aisle, where a man and woman were being quietly escorted into the narthex at the back of the church by three large men. Kate stood in the doorway directing the ushers, seemingly in charge of the situation.

Before Matt could contemplate the fate or future of the ejected couple, the first few notes of *Canon in D* began, the minister stood, and Matt and his son followed him onto the platform to stand at the right front before the altar.

Matt saw Webb and his wife Karen being seated on Matt's side, four pews from the front; several bodyguards took up positions behind them, helping to balance the seating. Webb caught Matt's eye and winked.

Matt took a deep breath and looked down the nave.



Previously, with the Women

Looking at the clock on the wall of the church's nursery, Tanya waited with her mother, her bridesmaid Carla and her basket-carrying, soon-to-be granddaughter, all expecting the signal to assemble in the open area before the main aisle where George Vega waited patiently to offer his arm to his beautiful daughter.

Carla's bodyguard Kate rushed in, pulling Tanya aside. "I need you to peek out into the sanctuary, tell us if you know a couple of people." She moved Tanya to the heavy vertical blinds that covered the glass wall between the sanctuary and the narthex. Pulling them aside at their end, looking across the wedding guests, Kate directed her to a tall, bearded man sitting with a dark-haired woman in the sixth row on the bride's side, at the outside of the pew.

Tanya whispered, "With or without the beard, I know I never saw him. The woman isn't familiar either. I'm fairly sure I would remember that face."

Kate nodded while trying to move Tanya back into the nursery room. George Vega came over with a questioning look. Tanya, growing more

anxious by the minute, shook off Kate's hand, while she and George Vega kept watching through the edge of the blinds.

Wasting no more time, Kate spoke into a miniature radio, and three men with their hands inside or close to their open suit coats surrounded the unknown couple. The lead man leaned down and whispered instructions to the seated couple. The man and woman carefully grasped the pew in front of them, slowly standing. The group of five made their way along the side aisle to the back of the sanctuary. Kate, moving to block the main aisle and ordering the ushers to stay in the sanctuary, herded the departing group to a corner of the lobby, out of sight to all but Tanya and her father, who watched—Tanya's brow furrowed; her father frowned. The two guests were thoroughly searched while Kate stood six feet behind them with her silenced pistol firmly leveled. Tanya's eyes widened when the security agents took a small pistol from each would-be assassin. One of the agents pried a sheath, holding a short-handled knife, from the man's wrist and—equally as sinister—removed a hypodermic kit from the woman's handbag. All tools of a deadly trade.

Now unarmed, the security trio, with Kate following, roughly pushed the pair out of the church through a back door of the narthex. Kate, her pistol now holstered, returned quickly with two of the guards. She beckoned to Tanya while opening the nursery door; the men quietly reentered the back of the sanctuary.

Tanya and her father stood together. They worked at calming each other. George held Tanya's hands, she in turn took several deep breaths, smiled and kissed her father's cheek. Then she moved toward the door held open by Kate, George Vega showed his watch to Tanya: fourteen minutes behind schedule. He reverted to his Air Force background and made a "wind it up" motion with his hand and arm. The wedding guests seemed not to mind the delay. They were quietly chatting between the pews with friends and family.



Tanya escorted her father to his previous station near the main aisle just as Webb and his wife Karen entered the church from the main

entrance led by Al. The waiting ushers quickly escorted them to an empty pew on the groom's side.

Now back with the ladies, Tanya allowed them to make final, final adjustments on the dress-matching mantilla and a small, pearl-encrusted comb that had been adjusted several times before. She in turn rearranged the small, baby-orchid corsage surrounding a silver, jeweled pin that gathered the material in front of her mother's left shoulder. Tanya fought to control her nerves and fingers and to not betray more than the expected excitement of her wedding day. She focused on her mother, who smiled back with love and happiness.

The steel-gray, watered silk dress perfectly complemented Anita's salt and pepper hair. Tanya had never seen her mother looking lovelier.

Her mother, nodding at the clock, said, "We're late, what's going on, I peeked out for a second, who were those people that were moved out?"

Kate smoothly took the questions, "They were crashers—like the people at the White House—except we caught them. You will be starting any second now."

Kate stood behind them as the three women and the little girl looked into the low mirror that made up half the children's room wall. They saw a beautiful tanned bride in a white, halter-top gown with an empire waist, pearls covering the bodice, her dark hair up with one thick curl cascading over and down her right shoulder. The comb, used by the family's brides for many generations, came from 17th century Spain; it secured the floor-length mantilla that covered her bare back. Carla's gown had a similar construction, but shorter, butter yellow with a finger-length mantilla, her dark hair pinned up with tiny flowers that matched her dress.



White and yellow flowers came out of tissue filled florist boxes. Suzy's basket quickly overflowing with yellow rose petals poured from a plastic bag. The women were ready when they heard the entrance music begin.



With This Ring...

Matt stood contemplating the guests as the processional music began its first simple notes. Scanning the bride's side he recognized many of the people he had been introduced to at the groom's dinner the previous night. Together, they made an impressive group of handsome, successful people: doctors, realtors, insurance executives, stock brokers, bankers, retired Air Force and a few who had only mentioned they were in trade or importation. The group of Cuban expatriates had known Anita and George Vega since their first arrival in Miami during the '60s. On Matt's side, four of his closest friends fidgeted: Dick and Billy Lamoreaux and the Ferr brothers, Sam and Will. They had all driven straight through from the Upper Peninsula in a Sierra extended-cab pickup truck—bringing best wishes and gifts from relatives, including a cooler of frozen pasties, smoked fish and quart jars of canned venison—all destined for the afternoon's party. Matt's side also included two rows of friends who had vacationed in the south and lengthened their stay for a week or so to celebrate Matt's wedding. Some had given short notice of their

coming, it got complicated, but all had received invitations and rooms booked in the area.

The music's cadence with increased volume caught everyone's attention as both ushers led Anita Vega up the aisle. Rather than risk a fight or hurt feelings, she had asked both to escort her. Both men were her lifelong friends, growing up in Cuba and rising to success in their new country. The three made an entrance worthy of stars at an Oscar presentation. The dark suits made a fitting frame for Anita's silver dress and shoes. Glowing with happiness, she made eye contact with several friends. Matt had never seen her dressed to this level of perfection. He remembered picture albums Tanya had shared with him when Anita was in her teens. She was still a head-turner fifty years later.

With Anita seated, Carla came up the aisle, slowly stepping to the beat of Pachelbel's baroque 1680s music. She was a picture of loveliness, worthy of a fashion shoot or a master's brush, a classic beauty in her late teens. Webb's daughter Carla was a stranger to many on the bride's side; whispers murmured through the attendees. Tanya had chosen her over many girlfriends from her youth and school days. The bond she and Carla had formed on their life-and-death yacht journey through the Bahamas and subsequent meetings on Carla's visits to the UP had made them friends for life. Like soldiers who had survived deadly combat, their kinship had become as strong as that of any blood relatives. Carla smiled at Matt. Looking over at Webb and Karen, Matt saw pride and tears in their eyes. As Carla turned, taking her place at the left front of the altar, the organist changed stops.

The music rose and so did the audience as Tanya appeared in the doorway of the sanctuary with her father at her side and Suzy in front of her, her basket overflowing with yellow rose petals. Suzy looked back at Tanya who nodded. Suzy took her task with seriousness and pleasure. Stepping to the tune, she scattered the velvety rose petals. They fell like fragrant pieces of sunshine on the white runner. Matt noted her age, perfect for the role: old enough to do the job and still young enough to feel all this was just for her enjoyment. Not nervous, glad to see all the people watching her, she smiled as several cameras flashed at her passing. Her timing, distribution and supply of petals came out perfectly.

The bride and her father started up the aisle just as Suzy cast the last petal and slipped into her special seat in the front row beside her mother.

Tanya's beauty sucked the air out of the room. No one could break the spell enough to crassly snap a picture. Matt's heartbeat pounded in his ears as his blood pressure altered the volume of the processional. Tanya didn't look right or left, just at Matt. They had practiced this entrance the day before dressed in casual clothes, but nothing had prepared Matt for the vision that approached him. He broke eye contact, looking down, widening his stance, and took two deep breaths.

His son whispered, "Beautiful." Stepping a little closer, perhaps thinking he might have to break the old man's fall.

As father and daughter came closer, Matt watched George Vega proudly walking beside his daughter and occasionally glancing and smiling at friends. George took his appointed position behind Tanya as she stood beside Matt.

The service began: Matt faced Tanya, her eyes showing love, trust, hope. George Vega replied, "Her mother and I," when asked who was giving the bride away, and sat down. The minister read the service from a leather-bound, red volume. He had big, worker hands. No one stood up and gave a reason they shouldn't be joined together. *You never know*, thought Matt, glad they got past that part.

The exchange of rings went smoothly. The day before, Matt had noted a worrisome air-conditioning duct in the front—he had had it covered with the white runner, worrying about a dropped ring clinking its way into the church's nether regions.

The message was from Colossians 3:12-17—"Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." As verse after verse of Paul's words was explained Matt appreciated their wisdom and contemplated their meaning in a marriage. Near the end of the service, his concentration was broken by a smile from Tanya. Some words had stirred a thought in her; he would ask her about it later.

"You may kiss the bride."

At last.

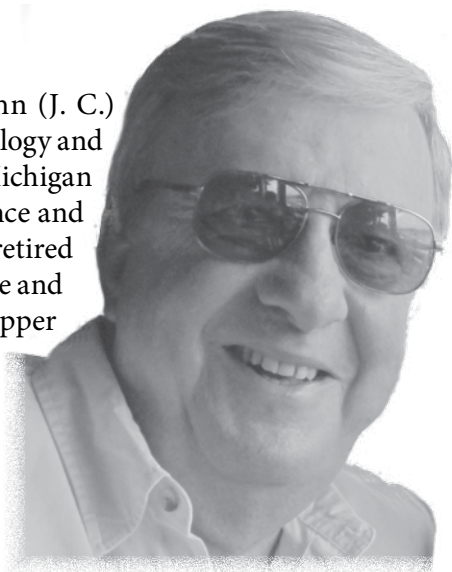
Matt expected a ceremonial, "don't mess-up my make up," kiss. Instead, Tanya's lips met his with warmth, softness and purpose. His mind went blank; he was back at the little cabin, in a blizzard, their first kiss. Every sensation of that moment rushed into his thoughts and

body. Time lost all importance. Matt closed his eyes, held her warm body close and enjoyed every feeling that accompanies a perfect kiss. He heard the minister announce them as a couple and the clapping of the attendees, but he was enjoying the kiss too much to really care. Finally their lips parted, Tanya's eyes glistened, and Matt came back to the reality of being in front of sixty people, and standing at an altar.

The recessional started.

About the Author

Born and raised in Michigan, John (J. C.) Hager earned a B.A. and M.A. in Biology and Science Education from Western Michigan University, taught high school science and coached football and wrestling. He retired from IBM after 27 years on quota. He and his wife Ann live in Michigan's Upper Peninsula on the shore of Little Bay de Noc. They have two grown sons. John dilutes his writing time with hunting, fishing, boating, traveling, and providing laughs and lost golf balls at the Gladstone Golf Club.



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