

## BEACH OF THE DEAD

*Nothing much changes just the passing of time /And the faces that wait here /At the end of the line.*

“An Ankle Tattoo” from *The Waking Hour* by David Francey

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Sunday on the beach in Puerto Vallarta

## Chapter One – First Sunday: The Beach Belongs to the Mexicans

She'd hated every minute of the turbulent flight, the plane surging and rolling with abandon through the dark. But she'd made it. Now as she lay cocooned in the glazed, green-tiled tub underneath the imitation stained glass windows, the dead joined her—again. Her talented brother Danny pirouetted by the painted ceramic sink and then skipped up the wall. Her mother hovered just below the ceiling. Danny was making funny faces; Mom frowned. Meanwhile, her cat Rusty balanced on the edge of the tub. Shari had never told anyone about these apparitions, not her husband Grant, not even her best friend Ana. They would think she was crazy. “Why the bathroom, guys?” she asked, not for the first time. No one answered. As he often did, Danny stretched out on the floor, his eyes closed. She stepped out of the tub, snatched a towel and wrapped it tightly around herself. *I really need a drink—or maybe a shrink.*

When Shari woke up the next day, she thought at first she was home in her own bed. Then she turned towards the space where her husband should be, but no one was there. Grabbing her cell phone from the night table, she checked the time. Oh shit! It was almost noon. How had she managed to sleep so long? She inhaled the bracing ocean air floating through the window and felt more awake. The waves swished against the shore like a lullaby, and she was tempted to close her eyes and drift off again. She shook her head.

No wonder she'd slept in. It had been nearly midnight when she'd flown into Puerto Vallarta last night leaving behind a cold and snowy Calgary...and her husband. Now seduced by the swaying palms and sunbeams streaming across the bedroom wall, she sprang out of bed, raced to the living room and flew onto the balcony.

As Shari leaned over the railing, her curly brown hair, infiltrated by grey strands, swept against her cheeks. Below on the beach, brown-limbed *niños*, undeterred by shorts and t-shirts,

bounced and squealed, dashed across the sand and threw themselves at each other and into the ocean. Vendors hawked cold drinks, corn snacks and ice cream bars instead of lugging the usual heavy boxes of silver jewellery. Not only children, but adults and teenagers, waded fully-clothed into the cooling water. Pelicans soared overhead. It was Sunday and the party was in full swing. The beach belonged to the Mexicans. The only jarring note—rap music blared on the terrace of a luxury condominium next door.

Under a palapa a *muchacha* curled up on a frayed towel. She wore an orange t-shirt pulled up to show smooth olive skin, tight white shorts and nothing on her feet. Her head rested on the waist of *su novio*, her sleek hair spread across him like a sheet. Also barefoot, her boyfriend sprawled on his stomach, jeans spattered with sand, head on the ground, a smile on his face. He lay absolutely still, sleeping deeply, perhaps lost in some secret dream. Shari caught her breath. It had been years since she felt that close to her husband Grant. These days they hurled insults at each other on the slightest provocation. The young lovers slept on oblivious to gleeful shouting from an impromptu soccer game.

Just then a humpback whale leapt out of the water and her baby-in-training followed. Shari gasped with delight. If only her mother could see this. Then she remembered...she brushed away a tear. Just out of her reach, feathery palm trees beckoned in the breeze.

Shari paced the tiny balcony. She hoped a few weeks of sun and sand would give her what she needed—a distraction from grief and guilt. Once more she sniffed the salty air and glanced at the celebrations below. Where did she put her beach bag? She raced into the living room. A Marta Gilbert print and other colorful Mexican art covered the cheery yellow walls. She checked the concrete couch, nothing, nor under its brown suede cushions. No, it wasn't on one of the curved bamboo chairs. Sitting on the white tiles of the kitchen counter? Check, not there. It must be in the bedroom. She ran down the hall anxious for the scene to change: *Shari, feet buried in the wet*

*sand, the warm sun on her face, while waves swirled around her legs.* Where was her bloody beach bag with her bathing suit and sunglasses? Found it! Before rushing out the door, she took off her wedding ring. She didn't want to lose it in the ocean.

Finally! She stood up to her knees in the invigorating water. Nearby rocks formed a shallow pool where younger *niños* bathed. Off in the distance drifted a dilapidated boat with an elderly Mexican fisherman who twirled and cast a line into a school of tropical fish.

Shari had always been a strong swimmer. During school competitions she'd often been the one to wear a red ribbon pinned to her chest. But she understood the danger—she knew all too well how deadly the rip tide could be. Last time she'd been in Puerto Vallarta, she'd stood on this very spot when a child had been swept towards the jagged rocks extending a couple of hundred feet into the Pacific Ocean.

Shari had been collecting seashells, abundantly scattered along the beach when she'd passed two children splashing in the ocean while the surf crashed about them. The young girl had hair the color of a baby chick that swung around her shoulders as she jumped. For a moment she stood still, gazed at Shari with huge blue eyes, and smiled. The fair-skinned boy by her side seemed to be a couple of years older, probably her brother. The tropical sun had already splashed a tinge of pink across his arms and face. The boy grasped his sister's hand as they leapt over the waves again, and giggled. Their parents were nowhere to be seen. Shari shrugged. Later, as she was bending down to check out a rose-tinged shell, a scream tore through the air. "Daddy!" A rogue wave, fast and furious, had ripped the girl from her brother and threatened to slam her into the rocks. "Help, please help!" her brother cried. Shari's heartbeat quickened, and she froze—for just a second. Then she thought of her own children and threw herself into the ocean, swimming as fast

as she could towards the drowning girl. The rip tide caught Shari and rolled her over and over filling her mouth with seawater. *Oh shit! I'm going to die.* When her head emerged, she searched frantically for the child. Where was she? The jagged rocks lay just ahead. Then seemingly from nowhere, a muscled Mexican rushed through the water, scooped up the girl and towed her in. Shari struggled to the surface and was swimming back, when the lifeguard returned to carry her the final stretch. She kicked her legs and yelled, "I'm fine, let go of me!"

Afterwards, as she sat panting on the beach, her body covered in sand, he called her *valiente*. The children's father, who kept repeating that he'd left for just a minute, threw his arms around her. "Thank you, thank you! You're so brave." *Or perhaps foolish*, she thought. That's what her husband had called her when she got back to the condo. She never did find out where the children's mother had been.

Now as she stood on the same beach five years later, the ocean caressed the sand like a gentle lover. Shari pitched herself into the water and swam past the crest, away from the breaking surf. Swimming in a calm ocean with the horizon stretched before her made her feel at peace, connected to the vastness of space and time, removed from the puny day-to-day worries that so often preoccupied her. She hoped death would be like this: floating on a raft deep into the ocean, the warm sea breeze stroking her as she was swept over the edge of this world into the next, wherever that might be, where her poor mother had disappeared. Dead, her mother was dead. Next month it would be a full year since she died. "I just want her back," she whimpered. But no one was listening.

A strong wave swept over her—she pushed through it with ease. She couldn't wait to be sitting at a beachside bar in the Romantic Zone, indulging in happy hour margaritas and watching the spectacular sunset she remembered. She turned around and swam swiftly back to shore.

After a quick shower to wash off the sticky sand, she snuck a last peek at the ghosts and scurried from the bathroom, the terracotta tiles cool against her bare feet. The phone rang, startling her. With only a bath towel wrapped around her, she rushed to the kitchen to answer it. “*Hola.*”

“Hey, Shari, how are you doing? Have you settled in okay? Anything you need and haven’t been able to find in the condo?”

She smiled at the familiar sound of Ana’s voice. “No, thanks, it’s all good. I just had a great swim in the ocean. Now I’m headed into town for a margarita. Thanks so much for letting me stay here.” What would she do without Ana? It was just like her to lend Shari the Puerto Vallarta condo she’d inherited from her mother a few years ago.

“No problem,” Ana said. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Not really, not yet anyway...I have to tell you about the flight from Calgary last night. I was talking to a young man sitting next to me on the plane. And do you know what he said? *Well, at least she was old, she’d lived her life.* Surely you’re not serious, I thought. Isn’t it strange that someone would think because my mother was elderly I should be okay with her death? I almost expected him to say, *Get over it.*” Shari paused as tears filled her eyes. “I miss her so much.”

“What a jerk. I’m so sorry Shari. I know how close you were to your mother, especially with your father dying so young. I do hope being in Mexico helps a bit. It’s difficult to think about death there, don’t you think? Everything is so lush and full of life.”

“I guess. Retiring was probably a mistake. I’ve got to get used to the idea. At least here I won’t be wandering through the house trying to figure out what to do with myself,” Shari said, her voice subdued. Last month as Calgary broke a hundred years of snowfall records, she’d felt like a caged Bengal tiger longing to escape with nowhere to go. The Animals sang *We’ve Gotta Get Out of this Place* on her iPod, over and over again.

“Shari, are you there?”

“Sorry, just thinking. I’m a bit of a drag aren’t I? How’s your book going?”

“I’m afraid it’s not. The research is done and I’m hoping to finish the outline soon, but I can’t seem to figure out the ending.” Ana sighed. “Nothing I come up with feels right. I never thought it would take this long to actually start writing. Never seems to be enough time... But listen, have fun tonight.”

“Oh, I plan to. I’m really looking forward to that margarita. Or maybe even two...or three.”

“Right on!”

“By the way, what’s the name of that bar on Los Muertos Beach you like so much?”

“Encuentro. Best margaritas in PV.”

“PV? Right, I’d forgotten. That’s what everyone calls Puerto Vallarta, isn’t it?” Shari tugged the towel more tightly around herself. “I just had a shower and now I’m standing here dripping water on your floor, so I’d better go get ready. I want to walk into town, and if I remember correctly, it takes a good thirty minutes. Does that sound right?”

“Yes, but only if you don’t get distracted as you tend to do.” Ana laughed. “Okay, can’t wait until I’m there—just thirteen more days. It’ll be a blast.”

“Yeah, it’ll be great. I’ll call you soon.”

Shari looked forward to having her friend join her the last week of her stay. Ana had moved to Calgary from Toronto six months ago to take a communications job at a local not-for-profit, ready for a change after finally ending her long and acrimonious marriage. Poor Ana!

Shari always thought of Ana as the sister she’d never had. When she’d moved to a new high school in Forest Hill in grade 10, she’d wandered into the classroom on her first day feeling very much alone. She slid into a desk behind Ana, who turned around, leaned her arm on Shari’s desk, and grinned. They discovered they were both Jewish immigrants who came to Canada as young

children: Shari from Rome, Ana from Romania. They'd been inseparable ever since—until Shari left for Alberta.

She checked the time. She would need to get moving if she'd any hope of finding a seat with a clear view of the sunset. It would be a bit strange to be alone, but mostly, she liked the idea. When she'd told Grant about the plan to go to Mexico by herself, her husband threw up his arms and said, "By all means. Go!" Maybe putting some space between them would help their marriage—certainly couldn't make it any worse.

She dug into her suitcase, pulled out and slipped on a black pair of shorts and a purple crinkle-cotton shirt, searched for her grey walking sandals, found them under the bed, twisted her salt and pepper hair into a pony tail, brushed on a bit of powder, applied some lipstick and ran around looking for her hat. How did it get on the balcony? Oh no. Where did she put her sunglasses? Would she ever be ready?

Shari reached into her beach bag to make sure she had her keys. She drew out a keychain shaped like a hand, an amulet that had been in her family for generations. A dark blue eye glowed in the center. On her deathbed her mother had placed it in her palm. "It'll keep you safe," she'd whispered, her voice almost gone. Shari tucked the precious talisman deep into her pocket and dashed out the condo door on a mission to find a margarita.



## Chapter Two – First Sunday: Journey to the Beach of the Dead

Only his second day in PV and already Carlos pined for the jungle. He must have been a jaguar in another life, although he imagined himself more of a pussycat than a predator despite his reputation as a freedom fighter. But for a revolutionary, even one who believed in peaceful change, a domestic cat just wasn't the right image, was it? They expected him to growl not meow. What did it matter anymore? *Ya basta!* He was finished, done with the struggle. He crossed his arms against his chest. Would it really be that easy? He would soon find out.

With his battered brown cap perched on his head, Carlos leaned against a pillar and pushed his sunglasses up on his nose. Before coming to PV he'd bought the darkest pair he could find. *Still not much to hide behind*, he thought, as he watched a mime perform at Los Arcos, the amphitheatre on the Malecon. With his white painted face, as if hidden behind a mask, the performer cried, laughed, leered and danced. He amused his audience without saying a word. All around him middle-class Mexican families partook of the Sunday festivities. Proud parents smiled at giggling, well-dressed children who swung balloons, licked ice cream cones or stuffed candy floss into their mouths. It made Carlos acutely aware of how alone he was. But that hadn't been any different back home. Ever since his wife died, he found it difficult to care about life the way he once did.

Just across the road in the main plaza, the municipal band tuned their instruments. Soon couples would wrap their arms around each other and dance around the gazebo. Well that would only make him feel lonelier. As the mime bowed, Carlos clapped with the rest of the crowd, then spun around on his long legs and headed towards the pedestrian bridge that would take him along the beach and south towards the Romantic Zone. He stopped a moment to pull his pipe from his pocket, lit and stuck it in his mouth. He drew in the soothing tobacco, and then he was on his way again. It was too bad Alejandro had a date that evening. It'd been a while since Carlos had been in PV. But at least his friend had texted him directions to his favourite bar.

Fuck it all! Let someone else take responsibility for the pain and poverty of the miserable peasants. He was tired of the squabbling, of needing everyone to agree before they could take any action, tired of the relentless bloodshed of innocents and the pervading fear. All he wanted now was a beer. He looked at his watch—it was just after six; another forty-five minutes or so until the sun set. Raising the brim of his cap, he glanced apprehensively behind each shoulder. Satisfied, he picked up his pace, turned onto the pedestrian bridge and strode towards Playa Los Muertos, Beach of the Dead.

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After closing the heavy steel gate, only accessed by code, Shari scrambled down to the beach—it felt like breaking out of jail. She hadn't realized how confined she'd felt within the gated complex. Rusted and dented trucks were parked by the side of the road, decrepit vehicles belonging to the locals on their Sunday outing. These were the lucky Mexicans who had the day off and didn't have to take a long bus ride to get to the beach.

As she strolled north towards town where a margarita waited, wet sand soothed her feet. Sandals dangled from her hand; her yellow beach bag hung across one shoulder. A wide-brimmed hat with red peppers and eggplants and tortoiseshell sunglasses protected her from the tropical sun. A weary looking vendor, a straw hat pulled down over his eyes, leaned against a refrigerated cart filled with pop and ice cream. A little further on a young girl in a black bikini, arms in the air, her back to the ocean, simultaneously twirled three green and white hula-hoops. Nearby a tall teenage boy juggled yellow balls while his swimsuit threatened to slide off his hips.

From off in the distance, a cry of “cock-a-doodle-do” shattered the air. What did the rooster have to say? Was he protecting his family, or being trained for a cockfight? Would he soon die, sacrificed to satisfy men's blood lust? Ana was wrong. Even in PV everything reminded her of death. While physically leaving home had been easy, escaping her grief was another thing entirely.

At least tequila would allow her to forget...for a while.

Shari had walked as far as she could along the beach. She shook the sand from her feet as best she could and slipped on her leather sandals. She clambered up to the cobblestone path, crossed the nearby arched, concrete bridge and found herself on a promontory overlooking the ocean. Huge rocks crowded the coastline where flocks of seagulls gathered.

Off to one side someone had artistically arranged three stacks of smooth stones, the smallest the size of a flattened mango, the largest of a deflated soccer ball. Something about the stones reminded her of a memorial. Were they made by locals or tourists? Were they paying homage to the gods? Cairns—she was pretty sure that's what they were called. Shari longed to believe in a reality beyond the present world, and she'd tried in the past, but she just couldn't. Even her bathroom visitations seemed no more than wishful thinking.

As she looked at these precariously balanced stones, she pictured her mother's final resting place. Six months ago, the headstone finally finished, Shari had flown to Toronto and visited the cemetery with a bouquet of alstroemeria, her mother's favourite flower. She placed a stone on the grave, even though her mother wasn't a practicing Jew and the cemetery was nondenominational. It just felt right. The gravesite was protected by mature maples. Next to it stood two older headstones for her father David and brother Daniel (he'd always be Danny to her). She knelt and gently placed on their graves more of the pebbles she'd taken from the yard of her mother's last house. She didn't love her brother and father any less, but as decades passed, the pain had diminished, although she was sure it would never entirely go away. When she thought about how Danny died, the anger towards her husband bubbled up inside her even after all these years. She shoved the memory back into its bottle and corked it again.

Shari stared at the name inscribed on the newest headstone: Franziska Shapiro. It should say Fanny—the only name her mother had ever used. She regretted having agreed to let them carve

her mother's official name on the granite. As she stood by the grave, a gust of wind blew through the trees. She looked up at the gesticulating leaves and imagined her mother trying to tell her something. This wasn't the first time her mother had attempted to communicate, but Shari could never figure out what she wanted to say.

She reached into her pocket and stroked the curves of the silver, engraved hand and the smooth, round eye in the center. The "magic hand," her mother used to call it, or sometimes, "Miriam's hand". It was Ana who explained it was a *hamsa*, a Jewish amulet. When she had more time, she'd come back to this spot and look more closely at these mysterious stones. But first she craved some tequila-induced oblivion.

Straight ahead loomed a small cliff separating Conchas Chinas from the Romantic Zone and the beachside bars—the quickest way into town. To her right flourished bushes of violet, pink and orange bougainvilleas where the steep Santa Barbara road began. The route would wind up and down the hill and through the streets of the old town, leading her to Encuentro and that longed for margarita. In the end she couldn't resist the lure of the bright flowers after the bleak winter in Calgary—her mother would have loved them. Shari turned up the cobblestone road and climbed.

New villas lined the road, built sometime since she was last here. An ancient wooden balustrade on the concrete roof of an old dwelling was being demolished. She walked by ferns and acacia trees and a sharp cluster of foot long black spears covering a wall adjoining one of the villas, a rather drastic security measure she didn't remember from last time. Wild yellow forget-me-nots clung to the side of the road. The quiet street contrasted sharply to the bustling beach she'd left behind. Occasionally a gringo carrying shopping bags passed her. An old Mexican man shuffled out of a villa door grasping a bulky load of garbage. She passed newer luxury SUVs parked by stone walls, fortresses that hid luxurious mansions and obscured the ocean vista.

While Shari made her way up the hill, she hummed Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man."

She loved to picture herself twirling recklessly with a tambourine clutched in her hand, while waves rolled against the shore. The imaginary scene made her feel so young, so free. Lately she felt just the opposite. The gray in her hair had made itself very much at home. And every time she looked in the mirror there were new lines on her forehead. “You’ll get permanent wrinkles if you don’t stop frowning all the time,” her mother used to warn her. Turned out she was right, about so many things. Shari sighed. Had she really been young once? It seemed so long ago. She thought about her fifty-sixth birthday next month and felt even older.

In less time than she’d expected, she reached the top. Vehicles zoomed down the highway. Below her the sun hovered perilously over the horizon. A low brick wall stretched along the side of the road under the shade of a young parota tree. Shari plopped down and drank from her water bottle. She was breathing heavily. It served her right for letting her regular swimming routine go. And she couldn’t remember when she’d last ridden her stationary bike. Well on this trip she had a chance to get back into shape. Maybe lose the ten pounds she’d gained since retiring. Grant always said she looked great just the way she was, but she didn’t believe him.

Shari tugged on the band of her size twelve shorts—they were tight. Last summer they fit perfectly. She frowned. If only she weren’t so short, maybe she could carry the extra weight. She hated being only five foot two. Lucky Ana, tall and thin and able to eat anything she wanted.

A screeching flock of grackles flew overhead, rushing to their nighttime roost north of town. Off in the distance a parasailer glided over the beach. Shari closed her eyes and imagined being high above the earth floating in the wind.

*She was elated at the sense of freedom. The people below resembled rooks and knights, castles and pawns on a chessboard. She wondered who controlled them. To the south behind Los Arcos, the sentinel Sierra Madre mountains stood guard. Soon she floated above Encuentro. She peered down and noted that almost all of the tables were occupied. A loud hum of well-lubricated voices*

*filled the air. Without warning she tumbled down towards the beach. Down, down, she went, falling faster and faster.*

Shari's eyes flew open, and she found herself grounded once more, with still a long way to go before she had a margarita in her hand.

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Was it really only last night he'd flown into PV, Carlos wondered as he hurried towards Los Muertos beach? What a week he'd had in Mexico City with Roberto, an old friend from university who now taught high school. The minute Carlos stepped off the bus, he found himself tangled up in a violent teachers' union demonstration against the government. He barely avoided being arrested.

"Let's get out of here!" As soon as the riot police started to get antsy, Roberto dragged him down a back alley. In minutes they were back at his friend's apartment with beers in their hands.

He was relieved to avoid jail, or worse, yet not be the one who chose to flee. He hated feeling cowardly, but lately fear seemed to creep up on him when he least expected it. Maybe attending the protest hadn't been such a bad transition. Finding himself drawn immediately into political turmoil, he hadn't yet had time to regret being put out to pasture.

Mexico City had only been a stopover. It had been Alejandro's idea that he come to PV. They had taught together in the capital city at the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM). But that was a long time ago. He hadn't heard from his friend in years, and then about a month ago, he'd received a phone call.

"Hey, Carlos. It's Alejo. I'm sorry I haven't called you earlier. I just heard about your wife the other day. I'm so sorry!"

"Alejo! Great to hear from you. Thank you. Yes, it's been tough." Tears filled his eyes. "It's been almost three years, but I still can't believe she's dead. I just can't seem to accept that

she's never coming back." He stifled a sob.

"Listen, how would you like a change for a couple of weeks? There's an opportunity here that might interest you."

And in the end Carlos decided it wasn't such a bad idea to get away for a while from his simple abode in the jungle so full of memories of his wife Yolanda. Now he strolled through the crowds with the beach stretched out below him. When he reached the other side of the Rio Cuale, booths lined the ocean side, selling melon and mango slices, iced cakes, cold lemonade and children's toys. An occasional vendor squatted on the ground with silver jewellery spread out on a blanket, hoping to entice some gringos. Carlos passed by a string of beachside bars where tourists howled and snorted as they downed tequila and beers. The blazing sun hung low over the ocean.

What was that line from *Don Quixote*? "Until death it's all life." He had to keep reminding himself that he hadn't died with Yolanda. He would have to make the best of what time he had left even if he had to spend it alone. He felt the anger swell up inside him and pushed it away.

Beach vendors paraded past him with their varied and colorful wares. He wouldn't be surprised to see someone he knew, since many of them had been small farmers driven off their land and into the city, where they did their best to scrape a living from the tourists.

Just ahead the beat of drums and rattle of rumba shakers vibrated through the air. An Indigenous dancer with a sweeping, orange feather headdress, his face painted black and white, bobbed his head, stomped with his shell anklets shaking and twirled for the crowd. He wore a leather headband, a fringed skirt and tall suede moccasins. Strings of beaded necklaces swung around his neck. Some tourists stole surreptitious glances at his bare, muscular torso. Was that Felipe from back in his village? Carlos wasn't sure, but he didn't want to interrupt the performance. He'd look for him later.

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Shari was relieved to see the road flatten as it curved to the left. A new white condo complex towered before her. A gringos' temple, that's what it should be called, although the wealthy Mexicans who likely owned some of the units might object. She picked up the pace then stopped abruptly. Steep, narrow stairs led from Santa Barbara to the beach. Before she could change her mind, she began to climb down to the sand. When she reached the bottom, she was panting—she hadn't expected quite so many steps. She took off her sandals and rubbed her left heel where she'd developed a blister. She limped as she strolled north towards Encuentro.

Flocks of tourists relaxed in the shade of palapas or umbrellas, with bright beach towels draped across lounge chairs arranged around plastic tables. Some drank *cervezas*, others, margaritas, daiquiris or similar tropical concoctions, with the usual nachos and salsa on the side. The gringos reminded her of the invasive weeds disguised as flowers that choked her garden every summer. Behind the beach loungers, along the bars and hotels, swayed verdant palms with trunks painted white to protect them from pests.

A never-ending stream of beach vendors flowed past her carting straw baskets, in rust, tan and black, heavy wool blankets and checkered table clothes. Some sold brightly colored fish mobiles, others handmade dresses and shawls, wood-carved moose and hammocks. "Hey buddy, how many? Almost free."

A refrain echoed through the air: "*No, gracias. No gracias.*"

Shari averted her eyes and hastened northwards. Urgent visions of margaritas danced in her head. She was peering down, distracted by a seashell, when she bumped into a vendor. "I'm so sorry!" she muttered. Damn, what was Spanish for sorry. If she knew only one word of their language it should be that one. An indigenous man in his sixties stood before her, wearing a white shirt and pants and worn straw hat and carrying a heavy box of jewellery. Sweat glistened on his brow while a cross on a thin silver chain dangled from his neck. His nametag read *Tobias*.



“Toby,” he said, his eyes blinking rapidly. “I give you good price.” He held out a sparkly silver bracelet. Exhaustion flooded his face as he set his box on a concrete ledge. He sold earrings and bracelets, rings and necklaces and even jewelled fish-shaped bottle openers.

*Oh no, I don't have time for this.* Shari avoided his gaze. “*Mas tarde.*” She rushed away before she could change her mind.

Just up ahead she saw the sign: Encuentro. She was there! She looked at her watch—more than an hour yet until the sun set. As she hurried towards the entrance, she stopped. On the concrete wall to the far right of the open doorway hung an elaborate black and white banner of a lively jazz band, but not an ordinary band. Each and every one of the musicians, the guitarist, the piano player, the drummer, all of them, were skeletons. And each one was grinning. She grimaced. Right. Beach of the Dead. *I really need that margarita.* She stepped through the doorway.

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As Carlos left the pedestrian bridge behind, wrinkles creased his forehead. He had to be careful not to drink too much. It would be too easy then to confide in some stranger and that would put him in danger. Maybe the bastards would come after him anyway. His shoulders tightened—he was such a coward.

Carlos checked his cell phone. He was looking for a street called Francisca Rodríguez. And then he saw the sign: Encuentro—just ahead was Alejo's favourite bar, packed and humming. He glanced up at the blood-red globe hovering over the ocean. Still almost half an hour until the sun set. *Estupendo.* Great. All he had to do now was find a place to sit and order a beer.

### Chapter Three – First Sunday: Happy Hour on the Beach of the Dead

The setting sun shone like a theatrical spotlight on the spectacle below. Most of the clouds had drifted away. The wind had picked up, and waves slammed against the shore. Fishing boats and water taxis rocked on the water like drunken dancers. Shari sat next to a wooden slat and concrete fence that separated the bar from the pebbled walkway along the beach. She'd been lucky, nabbing a small wooden table, the last with a clear view of the sunset. She sipped from a salt-encrusted glass. The icy liquid passed through her lips and swirled against the inside of her mouth, a cool, delicious blend of sugared liqueur and sour limes with a savory filter and an overpowering taste of tequila, since after all, this was Mexico.

Mexican families dressed in their finest strolled by on their Sunday promenade, while gringos wandered along searching for a drink or a meal. It was happy hour and from the thatched beachside bars alcohol-fueled laughter filled the air.

Beach vendors, men and women, young and old, drifted along the ocean. Like the vendors she'd seen on her way here, they offered handmade crafts and clothing, silver jewellery, even cotton candy. Troubadours strummed their guitars and sang "La Bamba". A gnarled indigenous woman with an armful of brightly colored, cotton sundresses stopped by Shari's table. She looked defeated, as if she knew what the answer would be. "*No gracias*," Shari muttered, not for the first time that evening, and looked away. The elderly woman shuffled off, her shoulders stooped, her wrinkled face held down.

Shari contemplated the empty glass in front of her as she sipped on what was left of her second margarita. Should she order another set of drinks before happy hour ended? Just one more would probably be smarter, but what could she do—they came as a pair. Her head buzzed with tequila and for the first time in a very long time, there was no tension in any part of her body. She sat alone at a seedy bar on the Beach of the Dead, and she'd never felt less lonely. Dried corn

husks, oddly shaped sea shells and brown gourds dangled from the ceiling. Some decorative skeletons, about two feet long, the same rusty color as the gourds, hung right above her head. One of them had lost a leg. She stared at the fabricated human bones and then turned back to gaze at the setting sun. The furrows on her brow returned. She thought again about death.

“No! No!” she’d screamed. Shari had been sitting cross-legged on the floor trying to watch the Monkees on a second hand, black and white television someone had given them. She would have been nine at the time. She remembered that they’d just moved into the main floor of a run down, Victorian brick house off Bathurst Street. That day an incessant meowing was making it impossible for her to hear Davy Jones singing “Day Dream Believer”. It was her cat Rusty who filled in for the sibling she’d always wanted, until Danny came along, but that wouldn’t happen for another year. She flung open the front door and let Rusty out. In minutes she heard the screech of tires, a terrified yowl, and then, silence. She ran into the street, but it was too late. Rusty lay bleeding at her feet.

Her heart beat rapidly, and she thought she would faint. She raced to find her father. “What is it Bella?” He took her in his arms. “*Cosa e successo?*”

All she could say between sobs was, “Rusty! Rusty!” Her father followed her into the Street and scooped up the cat’s mangled body. They put him in a shoebox and buried him in the backyard under a maple tree with its red fall leaves. Her mother stood with them over the grave, shaking her head.

Back in the house, his shirt still smeared with Rusty’s blood, her father went to the bookshelf and selected a well-worn book of poems by Leopardi. He sat closely by her side, put his arm around her, and read aloud “The Night-Song of a Wandering Shepherd of Asia”. The poem’s narrator, alone in the night with only his sheep and his thoughts, struggles to understand

mortality. He asks the moon if she can help him make some sense of death:

*The vanishing from earth, the losing / of all familiar, loving company.*

While the silent moon had no answers for the shepherd or Shari, the eloquent words spoke to her own anguish. A few years later, when her father was killed, Shari retrieved the Leopardi book and read the poem again while tears poured down her cheeks. Decades later when Danny died in a tragic accident, she didn't even try to find comfort from the shepherd's words—nothing could bring her beloved brother back. And now her mother was dead as well.

As Shari brushed her hand over moist eyes, she spied a young boy on the beach leaning against a lamp post. How old was he? Maybe seven? He grasped his bare knees and pressed them against his head with its mop of unruly black hair. A torn kite in the shape of a butterfly lay next to him on the sand. He looked at Shari with dark, soulful eyes. It made her uncomfortable. Where were his parents? She turned away when a newsflash from her phone announced a text message—it was her daughter Sarah.

*How are you Mom? Had a margarita yet? Marc sends his love.* 😊

Shari smiled. Sarah knew her so well. Her fingers flew over the keyboard.

*Just fine, margarita's great. Love to both of you.*

After hitting send she checked back again for the boy on the beach. He was gone.

Shari had been so disappointed when Sarah and Marc both settled in Vancouver. It really wasn't far from Calgary, but she never saw them as much as she wanted to, and it would only be worse if there were grandchildren. Not a problem at the moment. There wasn't even the sniff of a grandchild, even though Marc would be thirty this year, Sarah twenty-eight.

*“Otra margarita?”* The waiter set down a bowl of salsa and nachos on her table.

She was surprised to see both glasses were empty. Oh why not? *“Si blended por favor.”*

He scurried off to serve the motley crew who sat around a long wooden table in the center of the bar, perched on tall stools like a flock of frigate birds. “Ricardo, the usual,” called a tall thin gringo with a scraggly mustache. He wore shorts, a bright blue, flowered shirt and a jaunty straw hat. Next to him sat a portly patron with wispy white hair and a thick beard who reminded her of an older Hemingway. She imagined Malcolm Lowry frequenting a bar like this while he wrote *Under the Volcano*.

Just as the waiter dropped off her margaritas, a male in his late fifties strolled in. A black t-shirt hugged his muscular shoulders and worn jean shorts fit snugly around well-formed hips. From beneath a battered brown cap protruded a Roman nose and prominent cheekbones. A narrow, diagonal scar ran down the right side of his well-tanned face, extending from below his eye to above his ear. As he stood nonchalantly in the entrance, he took off the hat, ran his fingers through overgrown black hair, streaked with grey, and scanned the room. Suddenly he looked straight at Shari—the empty chair at her table was the only free seat in the bar. His full mouth broke into a grin. He strode towards her, stopped, hesitated and then in a deep voice in perfect English, but with a definite accent, asked, “May I join you?”

Shari flushed. “Sure,” she whispered staring up at the most sensuous man she’d ever seen. Her body tingled in a way she hadn’t felt for a very long time.

“Carlos.” He stretched out his hand. Shari shook it weakly while staring at his long slender fingers. He sat down across from her, took off his sunglasses and looked at her expectantly. She found herself gazing into sultry, heavy-lidded eyes that resembled the warm brown shade of a chestnut

“I’m Shari.” She reached over to touch her wedding ring and realized she’d forgotten to put it back on after her swim. She tossed back some more margarita.

Carlos signaled to the waiter. “*Puede darme un balde de cervezas por favor?* A bucket of

beer,” he translated. She raised her eyebrows. He chuckled. “It’s a small bucket, just three bottles.” She smiled sheepishly. Was she really sitting across from this incredibly sexy man? He reminded her of some wild jungle cat. *Remember Shari you’re married.*

When the waiter left, Shari and Carlos sat across from each other in lingering silence. She searched for something to say. In desperation, she reached into her pocket and twirled her keychain. Well even that didn’t help. Not able to stand the silence anymore, she managed to ask, “Is PV your home? Or are you visiting like I am?”

Carlos leaned back in his chair looking pensive. “I’m from...Guerrero. I used to teach at the university in Chilpancingo, but that was a long time ago.” He averted his gaze momentarily and ran a finger along his scar. “My friend Alejandro helped me get a job here through the university teaching a two week Spanish language class. I was at loose ends, so it seemed like a good idea...And you?”

“I’m from Western Canada—Calgary, Alberta. But I grew up in Toronto, was born in Rome and retired from teaching last spring.”

Carlos reached for some tacos and dipped them into the thick salsa. He took a few bites. “I’m staying in Los Canoas, with Alejandro, by the Rio Cuale, east of Emiliano Zapata.”

Shari stared down at the table, trying to remember where that might be. The waiter dropped off the bucket of beer. Carlos cracked open a Pacifico, pushed the lime into the bottle and took a swig. Shari tossed back the remaining liquid from her margarita glass and reached for the second one—actually her fourth. She glanced at Carlos, shyly. “So you’re retired too?”

Carlos hesitated. “Yes, I guess you could say so. I decided recently that I didn’t like what I was doing, so I stopped...There were some who encouraged my decision.”

Why, she wondered? And what exactly were you doing, and what are you doing now? Into her mind popped a scene.

*Carlos, his hair swinging against his high cheekbones, gyrated on a low stage under a bright spotlight, wearing snug high-cut shorts, with a cut-off shirt revealing taut abs. “Magic Carpet Ride” boomed in the background as he swayed his hips back and forth.*

She shook her head, and unable to look Carlos directly in the eye, managed to spit out, “So where did you work after you left the university?” God, what a stupid question! Her brain no longer seemed to be connected to her tongue.

Carlos stood up. “Toby,” he called out, looking both delighted and relieved. The vendor Shari had met on her way to the bar was approaching their table. She felt herself blush as she remembered how she’d nearly knocked him over earlier. Toby’s eyes lit up. “*Como estas amigo?*” asked Carlos.

Toby set down his jewellery box. “*Es muy difícil. Algunos días me pregunto por qué he dejado el campo.*”

Some of this Shari understood. Things were difficult. He regretted leaving his rural home. She was able to make out some of the language because of its similarity to Italian. But when Toby’s voice rose and he started to babble and wave his arms, she didn’t understand a word. After a few minutes, he heaved his heavy wares back around his neck. “*Adios*”, he said and hastened away to continue his search for pesos.

Carlos turned to Shari. “Even if you were fluent in Spanish you wouldn’t have understood Toby. He was a *campesino* in my village. When he gets excited he reverts to the local dialect.”

Shari watched Toby shuffle off into the distance. “What was he saying?”

“He explained how tough things have become for the vendors. There are fewer tourists, and those who still come spend less.”

“Does Toby live in the same area in PV where you’re staying?”

Carlos smiled ruefully. “No, he rents a miserable shack on the outskirts of Pitillal, a

community north and east of here. It takes Toby an hour to get to the beach and he works seven days a week.”

“That’s terrible. I didn’t know.” Shari now wished she’d bought something. She was sorry she’d been annoyed with Toby when she was rushing to the bar.

The waiter paused at their table and smiled at Shari. “More margaritas for the señorita?” She knew he just wanted a generous tip, but she loved being called señorita. She hesitated, and then nodded. Maybe it would calm the nervous energy that coursed through her body. She didn’t have to drink both of them, did she?

In the sky the flaming sun was dropping below the horizon. As if a magic wand had been waved, it vanished. The bar crowd clapped and cheered.

*“Why did they make birds so delicate and fine as those sea swallows when the ocean can be so cruel? Did you notice Hemingway sitting over there?”*

“Shari smiled and nodded. *Old Man and the Sea*, right?”

“Correct. I met him once, you know. We were in Spain at the time and my parents took me to a party that was being held for him. I was three years old.”

“Were you born in Spain?”

“No, just visiting, but my parents were Spanish immigrants... Anyway, when I met Hemingway he was just a little older than I am now, but he looked ill; his face was grey. I remember he bent down towards me, maybe he was going to pat me on the head, I don’t know. I started to scream and wouldn’t stop. When my parents were still alive, they liked to tell that story.”

His mother and father were dead, just like hers. He understood what it was like. “We came to Canada from Rome when I was two,” Shari placed her hand on her chin. “It affected me, being an immigrant I mean. I still feel like I don’t quite fit in.” Carlos’ warm brown eyes gazed into hers. Definitely simpatico, she decided.



Just then the waiter delivered her drinks and rushed away. Shari stared dubiously at the new set of happy hour two-for-one margaritas. Could she really handle...six drinks? Had she ever had this much alcohol? Not that she could remember. She was already experiencing that blurring of reality brought on by too much tequila. What was she likely to do if she drank anymore? *For god's sake, get a grip girl. And try to remember you're married.* She'd just drink one more. That should be okay. Before she could change her mind, Shari grabbed her glass, took a gulp and shifted in her chair. She tried not to stare at Carlos.

He twirled a blue indigenous bracelet he wore around his right wrist, and for some reason, he was wearing two watches. She was reluctant to ask why. She didn't want to seem too pushy. He stretched his long legs and one of his knees touched hers. She blushed and pulled her leg away. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Both sat quietly for a while. "Are you hungry?" Carlos asked. "Should we get something to eat?" Did she really want to commit to having supper with a stranger? She stared into his inscrutable eyes. "Don't worry. I'm just an old Don Quixote without any windmills to chase anymore," he said, smiling.

She chuckled. "Sure, that's a great idea." Maybe the food would absorb some of the tequila? She was feeling dizzy. They decided on a mixed Mexican platter and waved down the waiter.

Now lit up, the gourds appeared black in the dark. Red and blue sparkly images shone from them. A fish on one, a moon on another, on others, flowers.

Shari was surprised to find there was no liquid left in the glass she was holding. How had she drunk it so quickly? She set the glass back down on the table where her last margarita was calling to her. Carlos pulled out the last beer from the bucket. She gripped her right arm with her left hand, but that didn't seem to keep her from picking up the glass. They sipped on their drinks while they admired the remnants of the sunset—a terracotta haze splashed across the wide sky. As the

darkness fell, the bright multi-colored lights of the pedestrian bridge came on. Even purple flashed in the sail-shaped display. Lots of purple. Shari remembered the rustic fishing pier that once stood in place of this gaudy structure. The silence was starting to feel awkward again. "I liked the old pier better," she said. Despite the purple.

"I understand that when they destroyed the original pier some of the local fishermen went out-of-business." Carlos pulled a worn brown tobacco pouch and pipe from his pocket. He lit the pipe and took a puff.

Shari normally objected to smoking, but she didn't want to say anything that might send him away. She just wanted to continue to sit here across from this gorgeous man. The waiter returned and brought them a large plate filled with enchiladas, tacos and quesadillas. Shari nibbled on a taco, but no longer felt hungry. Rather nauseous, actually. She probably shouldn't, but she picked up her last margarita and swallowed the rest.

At one end of the bar, a reggae band was setting up. It seemed the bar liked to deviate from Mexican music, at least tonight. Shari stared enviously at the braided hair of the males. "I really like reggae, don't you Carlos? You know, what's his name...oh yeah, Bob Marley?" She seemed to be having difficulty talking without slurring her words. Oh, oh. Not a good sign.

"But I don't expect you'll be doing any dancing tonight," said Carlos grinning, "except maybe on the table. And I don't think that's a good idea. You'd probably fall off. "

When she stood up to go to the washroom, she sucked in her stomach. But she forgot all about how she looked when the room spun and her knees started to buckle. She grabbed the chair to keep from falling over. Her head felt as if someone had stuffed it full of cotton candy, and she had difficulty figuring out what she should do next. She staggered a little as she peered down at Carlos who looked amused. He stood up and made as if to catch her, but she shook her head and pulled her arm away. His voice faded in and out. She couldn't quite grasp what he said. She tugged down

on her shirt.

Somehow she made it to the bathroom. While on the toilet, she squeezed her eyes shut. She really couldn't handle a visit from the dead. She found a few coins in her pocket, gave them to the washroom attendant, stumbled back to the table and collapsed onto her chair.

The band was now playing. A thin and pale young man with an Afro haircut, a long nose and a t-shirt that read, *Herbal Life*, hopped up and down near the stage, his arms twisting, alongside a bronzed, gray-haired woman with at least a dozen silver bracelets on each arm that dangled as she danced. Shari pulled herself up and swayed back and forth, a little off balance.

Carlos reached for her arm to steady her. "I think maybe you should go home. Would you like me to find you a taxi?" Shari nodded. Better leave before she passed out, or horrors, threw up. Her stomach churned. She dug in her purse searching for her wallet. Where had she put it?

"It's okay," said Carlos. "I'll take care of it. You hardly ate anything." Shari tried to argue but could barely speak. With Carlos holding onto her waist, she staggered out of the bar and into the streets. A few steps onto Olas Altas they found a lineup of taxis waiting for a fare.

Before she got into the cab, Carlos stared down at her intensely. "You know I've hardly had a chance to get to know you. And here we are both retired teachers on our own. I have a meeting tomorrow night, but would you like to have supper with me on Tuesday? I know of a place near where I'm staying with great food. And I could use the company."

Shari brushed back the strands of hair that had slipped out of her ponytail and tried to process what he was saying. When she looked up at him, he seemed to float in and out of her vision.

Carlos took out a pen, scribbled on the back of a card and thrust it into her hand. "How about we meet at five? I've written down the name and address of the restaurant, and my cell number. Before we have supper, I could show you where some of the Mexicans live." He helped her into the taxi, and closed the car door. "Please, come."

As the taxi sped towards Conchas Chinas, Shari had one last, coherent thought. *Yikes, what have I got myself into?*

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After getting Shari into the taxi, it took Carlos just minutes to reach Basilio Badillo, a main street parallel to the Rio Cuale. He passed a row of stalls on the south side of Lázaro Cárdenas. Yesterday the park would have been full of gringos shopping at the bustling Saturday Farmers Market. Now it was dark and deserted, not a tourist to be seen, only some lonely vendors. Their booths overflowed with an assortment of pottery, necklaces, earrings and bracelets, ponchos with the logos and names of Canadian and American football teams, oversized garish sombreros, sunglasses made in China—trinkets of every kind one could imagine. These vendors he knew weren't a lot better off than Toby. The gringos grasped tightly to their dollars and pesos everywhere in PV.

What was the name of the woman he'd met tonight? Shari? Yes that was it. She had a warmth and intelligence that made him want to get to know her better. He loved the way emotions flashed across her face—it was easy to read what she was feeling. Yet there was an intriguing sadness in her hazel eyes he would like to learn more about. He recollected her luscious curves, that ponytail just asking to be released. She was so unlike those tall and angular gringos, with their unnaturally bleached hair, who always flirted with him. And what a great pair of legs! But what a fool he'd been to ask her to meet him again! She was bound to ask questions he didn't want to answer. How much could he safely tell her?

He stopped when he recognized one of the elderly vendors. "*Buenas noches! Elfrida, come stai?*" The old woman broke into excited Spanish. As she spoke Carlos eyebrows furrowed and he felt his face flush. He interrupted only once to say: "*Hijo de puta*. Self-serving, arrogant bastards!"

When she finished speaking, Elfrida hung her head. Carlos reached over and held her briefly in his arms. He hurried away, his body tense.

He walked past galleries full of overpriced art. Even most of the tourists couldn't afford the thousands of dollars the owners wanted for the paintings and sculptures inside. Of course there were always the fraudulent government officials and drug cartel with their millions of pesos who were more than willing to pay. He knew where the money was really needed—back home where peasants struggled every day just to have enough to eat. It was better than it was when he first arrived in the jungle, but many indigenous people still lived in crowded, unsanitary conditions with no running water, no clean drinking water. And those unfortunate enough to be displaced by the paramilitaries didn't even have a roof over their heads.

The poor in PV struggled as well, and it would soon get worse. Elfrida had shocked him with rumors of the most recent campaign, all in the interest of putting more money into government coffers at the expense of the poor. It was outrageous! If she was right, and they went ahead and implemented their new policy, many of the urban poor throughout Mexico would suffer. Unless...

As so often happened, an image of Yolanda filled his head. He always pictured her as she'd looked the night they met: a small, vibrant Mayan woman dressed in a black sheepskin skirt and a blue and white embroidered peasant blouse, with a thick black braid hanging down her back. They had been at a political meeting together the first time he saw her, standing at the back of the hall. When she glanced up at him with her warm brown eyes, full of wisdom, and winked, he was intrigued. When she got up at the front of the room and spoke passionately about the deplorable living conditions of the peasants, he was overcome. There had never been anyone else for him since then. But she was gone and nothing would bring her back.

Carlos wiped his tears. His heart pounded and acid tore at his stomach. He urgently needed to

kick someone or something. He eyed the stump of a nearby acacia tree, but he would just end up hurting himself. Murderers! It didn't seem possible that she'd been dead three years. There was absolutely nothing he could do to change that. And he knew deep down, it was his fault. A line from Miguel Hernandez's elegy, "The Unending Lighting", flashed into his head:

*Pain bunches up/ Between my ribs till every breath I draw/ Becomes an aching stitch.*

He wished he were home in the countryside in his simple three-room abode. He missed his worn pine desk that sat in front of a small window where he could watch a young neem tree sway in the tropical breeze. He missed his old white steed, Rocinante, and his loyal black mutt Emiliano who would lie snoring at his feet as Carlos wrote about injustice late into the night. And he missed his wife Yolanda, but she was no longer there.

He turned left onto Lázaro Cárdenas and passed the Shifting Sands where he'd proposed to meet Shari. *I really hope she comes.* But for tonight, he'd had enough. He ran across the concrete and steel bridge linking Colonia Emiliano Zapato with the Mexican residential area of Las Canoas. On the bridge an old woman balanced a straw basket filled with bananas and oranges on her head, and a young woman with exhausted eyes held a crying young boy by the hand. He barely saw them. He was almost there. Up ahead stood Alejandro's two-storey, blue concrete house where from his room Carlos could look down on the church just off the plaza. He longed for bed and the oblivion sleep would bring—as long as he didn't have one of his frequent nightmares.

Minutes later he buried his head under the blankets and drifted into sleep. Then he dreamt.

*A mariachi band was playing. Shari, Yolanda and Elfrida danced together in a circle under the twisted, peeling branches of a Gumbo Limbo tree, oblivious to the dark heavy clouds approaching. Lightning streaked across the sky. Carlos sat nearby, tied with thick ropes to a chair, tears streaming down his face.*

## Chapter Four- First Monday: The Beach Vendor

Her head felt like it might fall off. Wearing a one-piece black bathing suit covered in purple clematis, Shari stretched out on a webbed, blue and white lounge chair by the pool, hidden behind her broad sun hat and dark glasses. She reached over and drank from the bottle of water by her side. She wished desperately she hadn't drunk that third set of margaritas. She was feeling the effects of having consumed too much tequila—certainly too much for her. And then there was Carlos. She groaned.

Although the memory was a bit fuzzy around the edges, she remembered that as he put her in the cab last night, he'd invited her for supper. When she reached into the pocket of her shorts that morning, she'd found his card. Scribbled on the back she read: *Shifting Sands, Tuesday, 5 p.m. Your knight errant will be waiting for you.* A cell phone number followed. Should she go? She really couldn't decide. She needed to get rid of this pain. It felt as if someone had banged her head against a wall. She took a long sip from her water bottle, but that didn't seem to help. Neither did the rap music still booming next door.

Flip flops slapped against the concrete pool deck. Shari removed her sunglasses. A slim, darkly tanned woman, with a face prematurely wrinkled from too much sun, marched towards her clutching a James Patterson mystery. Probably in her late forties, Shari guessed. She wore a black and white, polka dot bikini and a tennis visor pulled over her short, bleached hair.

"Hi, my name's Rita—Rita Black. Haven't seen you here before." The woman had a distinct southern states accent. She lowered herself onto the lounge chair next to Shari. *Just what I need.*

"Sharon Shapiro. I'm a friend of Ana Kissman in number seven. She's lent me her condo."

"Oh yes! Rita grinned. "I know Ana. She's so much fun. Well, welcome! I own number eighteen. We bought in '94 and have spent three months here every winter for the last twenty years." Rita paused. "Last year my husband and I divorced. There was no way he was going

to get the condo.” She smirked, and then her mouth drooped. “First time I’m on my own.”

“I’m so sorry,” murmured Shari.

“Don’t be. He was a cheating son-of-a-bitch. I’m better off without him. Honey, if there’s anything you want to know about the complex or PV, or husbands for that matter, I can help.”

“Sure, thanks.” Shari slipped her sunglasses back on her nose and leaned back in her chair. Rita wasn’t helping her headache.

“Have you bought anything from the beach vendors yet?”

Shari shook her head. How soon could she leave without appearing rude?

“If you’re looking to buy some souvenirs from them, don’t let them rip you off. You shouldn’t be paying more than half the asking price, and sometimes you can do better than that.”

Shari thought about Toby. She closed her eyes, shut out Rita’s voice and imagined she was somewhere else.

*She basked in the heat of the tropical sun as she lounged on a small yacht. She wore a dark purple bikini and held a margarita in her hand while the wind blew through her curly brown hair, hanging loosely onto her bronzed shoulders. (She might as well take a little artistic liberty. It was her fantasy after all.) A school of dolphins swam by the side of the vessel as it drifted aimlessly out to sea. She heard footsteps on the deck; someone was about to join her. Carlos stood by her chair gazing down at her with a grin.*

Shari’s eyes flew open. “Well, I should be going. See you later,” she mumbled. When she got back to the condo, her head no longer pounded, but she was hungry. Ana had asked the maid to pick up some food that was here when Shari arrived. She walked over to the fridge, opened the door and took an inventory: butter, eggs, milk, and thank god, coffee. And maybe a few slices of bread left as well. But she didn’t want eggs and toast, the same thing she’d been eating since she arrived. *I’m feeling well enough to go into town*, she decided. And when she got there, the first



thing she'd do was find somewhere decent to eat.

Shari wandered along Olas Altas, the main commercial street in the old town, past tables and chairs arranged under awnings where tourists lingered over lunch. After she'd got out of the taxi and strolled for a while through the Romantic Zone, she was still a bit tired, but she no longer had a headache. She felt good enough that when a flash of purple in a shop window caught her eye, she hurried in and left clutching a couple of shopping bags. Now as she proceeded north, proprietors tried to lure her and other patrons into open air restaurants offering oceanside tables. A wooden sign by one entrance read: *Noon to 2:00 p.m. Margaritas \$1.00*. Posted menus revealed that along with Mexican favourites of fish, burritos and tacos, one could order a hamburger or club sandwich and pretend to never have left home.

She squinted into the sun. The oldest beach vendor she'd ever seen was limping towards her. (She rubbed her heel where a blister still bothered her.) How old was he? At least late seventies, she would guess, maybe eighty. As he shuffled along, he shifted his weight onto his right leg. He held three roughly carved, unpainted clickety-clackety ducks. They reminded her of the paddle ball she'd played with as a child, except instead of balls, ducks hung from strings waiting to be bounced against a wooden paddle. Had he made them himself? Who'd ever buy such a thing?

He approached her with a hopeful smile. She blushed. "*No gracias.*" She looked away, so she didn't have to see his disappointment.

An eager waiter standing in front of a beachside restaurant waved for her to come inside. She sniffed and smelt the tangy aroma of barbecued meat; her stomach grumbled. She trailed behind him to the sandy floor where patrons sat under Corona beach umbrellas meters from the ocean. "Gracias," she said with relief and ordered a light Coke. She sat down and examined the menu. Then she looked up, and to her horror, found herself right in the beach vendors' path; even

more than she saw last evening wandered by, one after another. You've got to be kidding.

"*No gracias.*" She wanted to say *yes*—to all of them. But how could she?

She stared at the parade moving down the beach stretched out in front of her. The tropical sun beat down on tourists and vendors alike. More frequently than she would have liked, aging men strutted by in skimpy Speedos with beer bellies and bald burnt heads. One held a leash attached to a silly looking Mexican dog wearing a tiny, pink t-shirt. Gay couples strolled by arm in arm, not an unusual sight in the Romantic Zone of PV. Vendors continued to drift by with anxious faces. Just like at a circus, they sold cotton candy and candied apples. Meanwhile, pelicans and boobies dove for fish, acrobatic feats more entertaining than the Cirque du Soleil.

"You smoke? Anything?" asked a young male vendor who carried a tray of Cuban cigars. A diminutive girl with olive skin and mournful dark eyes, neatly groomed and dressed, sold Chiclets. Shouldn't she be in school? Shari handed her twenty-five pesos. In return she received a timid smile. The Chiclet girl dashed over to a small boy who stood under a nearby palm tree. Shaggy black hair fell over his eyes. Wasn't that the boy whom she'd noticed at the bar her first night? As if in answer, the boy gazed at her with sorrowful eyes. Shari tugged on her ponytail. Who did he remind her of? Was she imagining it, or did he look hostile?

Shari thought about her own children, Marc and Sarah. It was so long ago that they were children, she could barely remember. Now they were adults, but still vulnerable to life's capricious wiles. What would she ever do if something happened to them? She shuddered.

The tall, cheerful Mexican waiter returned with her Coke and some nachos and salsa.

"I'll have a chicken quesadilla *por favor* and some guacamole." Shari handed back the plastic menu. "*Gracias.*" When Ana joined her maybe they could come back here and have lunch. It would be great to spend some time together. She'd lost touch with Ana for a time when they'd moved to Calgary.

Marc was only eight, Sarah six, when her husband Grant had accepted a research job at the University of Calgary. She'd watched with tears in her eyes as the moving van drove away from their two-storey brick house in Toronto's Annex. With the rest of their belongings packed tightly into their old Toyota van, they made the long journey west. The first couple of years in Calgary, she and Grant grew closer, just the two of them and their kids in a strange city. But then Danny died, and the blame and grief tore them apart. After more than twenty years Calgary was her home, and now Ana lived there as well. But had she ever really gotten over her brother's death? Could she ever forgive Grant? And she couldn't stop regretting that when she came to Calgary all those years ago, she'd left her mother behind. Now she'd never see her again.

Noise from an adjoining table distracted Shari and the past retreated. Three middle-aged women sat around a table crowded with margarita glasses, some full, others empty, jostling for room with what was left of hamburgers and fries. "You were so right Janet! It's never too early for a margarita," bellowed a hefty woman. She wore a short-sleeved blouse with red and yellow hibiscus and tight shorts barely covering thick white thighs.

"Right on! Cheers, Gloria, Beth," said Janet the redhead, raising her glass. "Aren't you glad we came? I heard it snowed again in Chicago yesterday." Janet wore a navy t-shirt that read: *My attorney can beat up your attorney*. Gloria turned and glared at Shari, who blushed, and quickly looked away. But she could still hear what they said; their voices were difficult to ignore.

"Not only did it snow in Hamilton today, but the snow is a foot deep." Gloria gloated.

Shari peered towards the beach and stiffened. It was Toby! He traipsed across the sand heading straight for her. But instead he walked right by towards Gloria and her friends. Hadn't he seen her? Would he recognize her if he had? He was dressed in the same white shirt and pants and

worn straw hat as when she first met him Sunday. The cross on a thin silver chain still hung around his neck, and he looked as tired and hot as he did before.

“Me Toby,” he said, leaning his heavy tray on the edge of their table. Shari surreptitiously peeked at the group, hoping they would be too preoccupied to notice her. Gloria sifted through the silver necklaces, rings, bracelets and charms, while Toby eyed the bottle of water sitting among the remnants of the trio’s lunch.

His eyes darted from one woman to the other and back to Gloria. “I give you good price.”

She picked up a heavy silver bracelet inlaid with turquoise stones. “How much?”

Toby blinked, and his voice shook. “For you *amiga*, only five hundred pesos.”

“No, I say two hundred.” Others in the bar turned to stare at Gloria as her voice grew louder. She twirled the shiny bangle around in her hand, her eyes gleaming.

“You give me four hundred,” countered Toby as he licked his dry lips. Gloria slipped the bracelet onto her plump wrist. Out in the bay a whale, then another, breached, performing dramatic aerial feats, but everybody at Gloria’s table was looking at Toby.

The young waiter chose this moment to check in. “More margaritas?” All three women nodded their heads, and he rushed away. Was Gloria staring at his ass? Shari shook her head.

Toby cleared his throat. “Three hundred and fifty pesos, almost free.”

“No, too much!” Gloria yelled. She flung the bracelet back into his box.

“You give me three hundred. Okay?” His hand trembled as he held up the bracelet. Sweat dribbled down his neck.

“Two hundred and fifty pesos—my final offer.” Gloria scowled.

Surely at this price Toby wouldn’t make any money.

“Okay,” he said and crossed himself. “My first sale today. Maybe bring me luck.”

Gloria rooted through her purse. She pulled out a two hundred and a fifty and handed over the

pesos. She snapped the new bracelet onto her wrist and smirked.

“Way to go!” said Beth and Janet in unison.

Beth wore a pink two-piece swimsuit that accentuated a flabby round stomach and drooping flesh under her arms. “He spoke American English pretty well, didn’t he?” she observed as she tried on one pair of sunglasses after another. A young vendor with lank strands of hair hanging over her face stood quietly by Beth’s side.

Gloria removed her oversized, rose-tinted sunglasses to look at Beth. Again and again she shook her head. Red glass earrings dangled from her fleshy ear lobes and bounced below chin-length hair streaked with blonde highlights. A mangy black cat rubbed against her leg and yowled. “Poor kitty, it’s a tough life for you here in Mexico, isn’t it?” she said, patting his head.

Toby heaved the box around his neck, turned and walked away.

Shari jumped up. “Toby,” she shouted, but he didn’t seem to hear her. He was already making his way north along the beach.

###

Toby continued to shuffle under the blazing sun feeling hot and thirsty. “*No gracias.*” “*No gracias.*” “*No gracias.*” Where was the good fortune that was supposed to appear after his first sale? He sighed. Even though it was January, and the height of the tourist season had begun, the gringos weren’t buying. There were fewer of them too. First there was 9-11; then the bird flu. The media didn’t help by headlining any news of the drug cartel.

Maybe he could be more persuasive if his English weren’t so limited. Even if a tourist were willing to listen, Toby soon used up all his sales pitches.

Sometimes he wished he’d never left his home in the countryside fifteen years ago. There he’d had some dignity, proud to be a *campesino* like his father, growing corn on his small plot of communal land. But not only was the work back-breaking, he couldn’t earn enough to buy

machinery and fertilizer, let alone support his family. His nostalgia waned as he thought of the recent escalation of violence in the region.

Perspiration dripped from Toby's brow. The rent was due next week. He paid 1200 pesos a month and for what—a patched house with a corrugated metal roof. He knew he was lucky to have a sewage system, when it worked, but there was no hot running water. Yet he could barely afford even that. At least they finally had electricity. His son had managed to hook up an illegal wire to the main line. But soon he would need 1500 pesos for his annual vendor's license. How would he ever pay it? And he was worried about his eighty-one year old mother, Rosita. For weeks she'd been coughing day and night. She needed medicine, but where would he get the money? And with the government's new campaign, it would only get worse. He'd pray to our Lady of Guadalupe, as he always did, but lately his faith didn't reassure him the way it used to. He crossed himself anyway, just in case.

He reached the pedestrian bridge that took him across the Rio Cuale to the Malecon. Perhaps his luck would be better if he headed further north. Soon he saw the Cathedral towering at the top of the hill and heard its bell ringing. It was already two o'clock.

Suddenly he couldn't stand it anymore. He was hot, he was tired, and his back ached. As for selling anything more to the gringos today—it just wasn't going to happen. He shifted back south down the beach and onto the bridge, until he reached the Rio Cuale and turned left onto the island. To hell with it all! He would make his way to the riverbank with its shady trees and cooling breeze. He drifted past the desperate market vendors calling out to the handful of tourists, past the pricey gringo restaurants. A tantalizing smell of onions, garlic and grilled fish filled the air. Skinny stray cats wandered by as Toby walked to the river's edge, stared across at a white condo complex and looked longingly at the river flowing below. The bank off the island was narrow. Often the path disappeared altogether. He'd keep walking until he reached Emiliano Zapata where the river

was more accessible. It wasn't far. Just before the island came to an end, he crossed a swinging bridge. On the other side he found himself on a narrow, residential street along the river. A cool breeze blew up from the flowing water. He walked more quickly, looking for a way down. Two young boys played below, laughing as they poked sticks into the river's rocky bottom. Near them, on the bank, a young Mexican girl clicked the keys of a cell phone. Further upstream an old woman with bare feet rubbed white sheets against a large craggy rock. Yet another white condo tower loomed ominously on the opposite bank.

Toby stopped a moment to rest beside a pink stucco house with cracked paint. Torn garbage bags, discarded food wrappers and empty bottles lay strewn about decrepit campers and trucks. A grandfather under a worn sombrero held a cane as he napped in a doorway on a sagging, wooden chair. A donkey, looking as hot and tired as Toby felt, drooped by the side of the road. Brightly coloured underwear, towels and dresses hung on clotheslines.

"*El gas*" boomed a speaker from the gas vendor's truck as it clattered down the road. Something else they needed back home; more pesos he didn't have.

He turned to gaze at the river below. Green, gold and white rocks sparkled like precious jewels. A blue heron perched on a rock eating the remains of a fish. Gossamer tree branches dangled over the water, while pink hibiscus climbed up the rocky banks and yellow butterflies flittered by. The clear water flowed invitingly.

As he walked, Toby thought about his wife, Claudia, who had died a few months ago. By the time he'd saved enough money to take her to a doctor, the cancer in her colon had spread to her liver. She was dead in less than three weeks. He was grateful to have two of their five children living with him. But they were beach vendors as well. Lately, both came home more discouraged every day. Nobody wanted to buy the dresses and shawls Maria sold or Pablo's wooden animal carvings. They helped as much as they could, but there were never enough pesos. His chest ached

when he thought about his other three children, Manuelo, Theresa and Francisca, who had moved to the United States. If only he could read and write, maybe then he'd be able to keep in touch with them. Would he ever see them again?

Toby stopped. There was a taco stand visible just down the road, but he was no longer hungry. Some white egrets sunned themselves on the rocks while around them the river gurgled gently, sparkling like silver as it slid over the shiny stones.

Finally! Some rough steps led down to the river. Toby hesitated, then descended the stairs and waded into the water. He removed his worn sneakers. Off came his socks: first from his left foot, then the right, with a hole on its big toe. He discarded his shirt and pants and stood wearing only his underwear and scruffy straw hat. He bent down, cupped his hands together and scooped out handfuls of water. He drank like a man who had just crossed a desert. The water wasn't safe to drink, but that no longer mattered to him. When he'd finally quenched his thirst, he watched his clothes drifting away and smiled. Next he threw his hat into the air, shed his underwear and lowered himself onto the river rocks. He felt the cool shallow water wash over him as he lay on his back with his arms stretched out to the side. Everything was quiet except for the rippling river and cries of iridescent black grackles, *sanate*—the devil birds—who shrieked: “Ki ki ki”.

###

Having finished her lunch, Shari trekked to the nearest Oxxo store to buy some supplies. She grabbed a basket and walked up and down the aisles picking up bread, tomatoes, cheese, milk, eggs, salami, nachos, salsa, and her favourite food, vanilla ice-cream. Not the healthiest, but at least she wouldn't starve. She would need to hit the outdoor market soon and pick up some fruit, those lovely yellow mangos maybe, and vegetables, but not today. She left the store, juggling several bags, and was searching for a taxi, when she spied the clickety-clackety duck vendor coming towards her. Two hours had passed since she'd first seen him. He clasped the same three



wooden paddle toys, limped a bit more than before, and seemed droopier. His face beamed when he saw her. Oh no, she thought, not again.

Shari put down her bags, took out her wallet and said, "All of them." His mouth dropped open as she handed over two hundred pesos and reached out for the three wooden toys.

*"Muchas gracias, señorita."*

*"De nada."*

Thank god, she thought, as a taxi pulled up. With some difficulty she opened the taxi door, dropped her purchases onto the back seat, slipped in, and off they went, on their way back to Conchas Chinas. Some blue glass rosary beads dangled from the taxi's rear view mirror.

"Been here long?" The driver spoke better English than most.

"Just a few days," Shari said and asked if he had children.

The driver turned down a winding side street. "Three."

"Do they like ducks?" And so, when they reached the condo, she only had the groceries and a couple of shopping bags to drag onto the elevator and through the door to her temporary residence. As she unpacked, she realized that not once during her excursion had she thought about Carlos and whether or not she would meet him for supper the next evening.

## Chapter Five – First Tuesday: What to do about Carlos?

When she walked into the bathroom that morning, she couldn't believe what she saw. But when she checked again, yes, there was Toby stretched out on the floor while the rest of the dead hovered on the ceiling and stared down at him. He was wearing his white vendor's outfit, but his feet were bare, and there was no sign of his worn hat. His eyes were closed. Why was he smiling? It was getting rather crowded, and if he weren't careful, Danny might step on him. She didn't understand why Toby was there. Yesterday he'd been very much alive. She flushed the toilet and hurried from the bathroom.

She poured herself a cup of coffee, but wasn't sure she could eat anything, feeling nauseous from the new bathroom visitation. Carlos. What was she going to do about Carlos? Should she meet him tonight? Why hadn't she told him she was married? As if she didn't know.

The phone rang. Startled, Shari jumped up and grabbed it. "*Hola.*"

"Hi. I haven't heard from you. I was getting worried. How are you managing?" It was Grant. "Not too lonely I hope?"

Shari hesitated. "I'm okay. It's great to get away from the cold and snow. And it's quite lovely here. Everything is so green."

"What have you been up to?" Grant asked.

Shari swallowed and blurted out: "You know the usual stuff you do down here, sunning and swimming and drinking margaritas." She changed the subject. "Have you heard from the kids?"

"Yeah, Marc called yesterday. He needs to buy a new car and wanted some advice. Probably expects me to cough up some money. Haven't heard from Sarah. She has an art exhibit coming up, doesn't she? I expect she's busy."

"You're probably right...Anything new in Calgary?"

"It still hasn't stopped snowing. That hasn't changed. But I had some good news today."

“What? They’re going to give you a package so you can retire?”

“Just the opposite: we’ve got the funding to study the recidivism rate of prostitutes. It should keep our group busy until the end of the year.”

“Really! And who’s paying for the study?”

“The federal government approved our grant application.”

Those assholes, Shari thought. Her breath quickened.

Grant continued. “The staff’s going out for dinner tonight to celebrate.” She could almost see Grant smiling. She bet his cute new receptionist would be part of the celebration. But she’d be damned if she’d ask.

Her voice filled with anger. “Oh that’s just great! When we told the feds how badly a new detox center was needed in Calgary, they insisted there wasn’t any money.”

Grant’s voice took on a soothing tone. “Maybe our study will help leverage the funds needed for treatment.”

When Shari replied, she was nearly shouting. “It’s so stupid to use the money to find out how many prostitutes end up back in jail, instead of building the addictions treatment center they need to keep them off the street.”

“That’s bollocks! There you go again. Always criticizing everything I do,” Grant yelled back. “Maybe it’s just as well you decided to go to Mexico without me.”

“Now this time you’re absolutely right. Enjoy your dinner!” Shari banged down the phone. Why was he always able to annoy her so much! He drove her crazy.

Sun streamed into the kitchen through the balcony doors while a briny scent blew through the room on a gentle ocean breeze. She headed to the bedroom to change into her swimsuit. She wasn’t going to let Grant ruin her day.

Shari frowned as she reclined by the pool and thought about her husband. She almost hadn’t

come to Puerto Vallarta because she felt guilty leaving him behind in the middle of one of the coldest, snowiest Januaries Calgary had ever seen. But damn it, he was the one who refused to retire after she'd taken the leap herself. He'd be sixty next June, just the right age for retirement. She could almost see him with those frustrating furrows between his eyebrows and the scowl that appeared every time she suggested he give notice. He'd run his fingers through his white tousled hair, grab those damn binoculars and head out for a bird walk even in winter—it would be hours before he came back. Why was it so difficult for Grant? Leaving her job had been so easy.

The decision to quit had come without warning. She woke up one Monday morning early in April at her usual 6:30 a.m. and decided—enough is enough. She dragged herself out of bed, grabbed the first pair of black slacks she could find, slipped a purple wool pullover over her head, dressed without even showering, skipped breakfast, and not even stopping to get a coffee, rushed out the door, hopped into her blue Honda Civic and drove faster than she should have to the alternative high school where she taught. In less than an hour, she was standing in the principal's office, her resignation letter in hand.

“Are you sure this is what you want to do?” asked Jean, her boss for the last twenty years.

“I'm absolutely certain,” she said at the time. Shari winced as she remembered. Now she was no longer so sure.

When reason returned, she made a frantic phone call to Ana, her voice trembling: “I've quit,” she blurted out and started to cry.

“Shari, calm down. Tell me what happened.”

“I just couldn't stand it anymore!”

“Well, I've always said you've got a heck of a difficult job dealing with those kids.”

Shari sobbed louder. “But it's not the kids. I love the kids. I couldn't stand having to get up

every morning at the same time and head to the school. I felt trapped.” When the school year ended in June, she was free, but it no longer seemed to be what she wanted. By the time winter came, she was desperate. Now she had endless time, but didn’t know what to do with it.

Shari had been so sure retiring early would help her deal with her mother’s death. Why had she acted so rashly? Once she quit her job and was no longer consumed with her students, she had time to dwell on the loss of her mother—it only made the pain worse. Now she shed tears for both her mother and the job she’d loved so much and lost. At least if Grant retired, she wouldn’t be alone with her grief.

Remembering work made Shari think about Connie. She pictured the eighteen-year old Métis with shiny black hair hanging down her back and dark expressive eyes and wondered how she was doing. She had become like a daughter to her. The ex-prostitute and drug addict kicked the habit, went back to high school and struggled to remain clean. She was so smart, and Shari was so proud of her. The last few years she had been there to encourage the vulnerable student. Connie had remained clean and had been attending classes regularly. But how was she coping without Shari there to provide support?

A grating voice interrupted her thoughts. “Hi there. Sharon, right?” Shari looked up, shielding her eyes from the bright glare of the sun. Oh no, that woman again. Maybe she could ignore her? “Remember me? Rita, number eighteen? We met yesterday?”

How could she forget? “Yes, of course.” She tugged her hat lower over her forehead.

“Just came from the annual general meeting of the condo members. What a mess! The board fired the manager.”

“Why?” asked Shari. *And do I really want to know?*

“She was allowing the Mexican owners to defer their condo fees. It’s quite a common practice

apparently. But now we're up shit creek. Our cash flow is a disaster."

"Hmm. That's not good."

"Well, it won't be the first time the Mexican and American owners haven't seen eye to eye. Mexicans don't like to follow the rules. And they expect to be coddled."

"In what way?" Why was she encouraging her?

"They go to the manager and say, 'I have family coming, spruce up my condo'. The out-going manager was Mexican herself and had a hard time saying no to them."

Shari picked up the Peter Robinson mystery she'd brought with her and started reading. Seemingly oblivious to the snub, Rita smiled and waved as she made her way to her condo.

Well, there was no avoiding it any longer. She needed to decide whether or not to meet Carlos tonight. What could it hurt? After all, he'd paid for her supper on Sunday, and tonight would be a chance to reciprocate. It's not as if she intended to have sex with him. This thought made her pause for a second as an image popped into her head of his sultry eyes and full mouth. She and her husband may be having a few problems, but she was still married. Christ, she'd been married for nearly thirty years. But if she met up with Carlos again, she would get to see a more authentic Mexico than she had so far. And based on the other night, she'd have some fun, something rather rare in her life of late. She felt a twinge of guilt. Then she remembered the recent heated exchange with Grant. Yes, she'd do it. She'd have dinner with Carlos tonight. She pulled out her phone and the card with his cell number. Her fingers flew over the keyboard.

## Chapter Six – First Tuesday: Supper with Carlos

The taxi driver honked his horn, swerved and almost crashed into a truck. He barely spoke English, so Shari could only hope he understood where she wanted to go. Wherever he was taking her, at the speed they were travelling she'd have no trouble getting to the restaurant on time. Making it there alive would be the trick. Like many of the rundown taxis in PV, the seatbelt didn't work. She sat in the back tapping her left hand on the torn seat cushion, when she noticed she still hadn't put her wedding ring back on. She groaned. Her mouth was dry and stomach in knots. She fiddled with a silver link bracelet on her wrist.

Thank goodness Ana had talked her into getting a pedicure before she came. Shari admired her mauve toenails and the pair of purple San Miguel sandals she'd bought to go with the new dress she wore. She loved the simple cut of the v-necked, black cotton dress, with purple and white lilies embroidered on the skirt and around the neck. She patted her hair, swept up in a bun, and held in place by a Spanish comb. It was all about staying cool, she reassured herself, not about looking good.

The driver stopped in front of a three-storey, white building where a quirky sign with a sketch of an hourglass read, *Shifting Sands*. And there stood Carlos leaning against the wall. He wore a fitted white shirt and dark hip-hugging pants. Shari couldn't help but stare. He grinned when he saw her get out of the taxi and glanced at her from head to toe, pausing a moment when he reached her legs. "Glad you made it. I thought we'd take a bit of a stroll first so you can see the area, if that's okay? I've made a dinner reservation for 6:30 p.m."

Shari blushed. "Sure, that's fine," she stammered. She hoped the new sandals wouldn't aggravate her blister.

Carlos took her arm and guided her across the white bridge leading away from Colonia Emiliano Zapata. She stopped and leaned over the white circular guardrail that ran along the top of

the concrete. The rocky, shallow river shimmered under the intense light of the late afternoon sun. They crossed the bridge and soon passed small shops crowded with food, cold drinks, soaps, detergents, fabric and sewing notions. Embroidered children's clothing seemed to be a popular item. Candy too. One store sold nothing but decorative pillows signaling the relative affluence of at least some of the local residents. Tucked in between shops were concrete and brick houses, some painted white, some yellow or other bright colors. Frequently, sheets and garments swung on rope clotheslines that dominated the small yards and terraces.

Shari's eyes gleamed. "I haven't seen clothes drying outside since I was a child."

Off in the distance a highrise shone in the fading sun. Carlos pointed to the looming white tower and observed sardonically, "The gringos are advancing."

The street opened up. They approached a square with a small park and a church on its edge. A bandstand with red brick arches stood in the centre. Surrounding it were wrought iron benches painted lavender. "Lovely!" she said.

Some round sculptured trees, that Shari didn't recognize, were planted around the square.

"Almond trees," Carlos told her. Youngsters skipped rope or ran around the red and white gazebo, squirting each other with toy water guns. The only sign all was not as it should be was a man's pair of sneakers that had seen better days hanging from a power line where they must have been thrown. It didn't bode well for the owner.

Carlos stopped and pointed to a blue house across from the plaza. Bougainvilleas in clay pots climbed up the side of the balcony's rails. "That's my friend Alejandro's house," he said as Shari sat down on one of the benches, removed her right sandal and rubbed her heel.

"How was your meeting?" she asked. "Was it about the class you're teaching?"

Carlos stood silently for a minute, and then sat down beside her. "No, I was invited to meet with the beach vendors. Some new federal government initiative is coming down and



will impact on them, and not in a good way I'm afraid."

"What does the government want to do?"

"We're not entirely sure yet, but last summer they launched a campaign to phase out the informal economy. The word on the street is that the beach vendors are the government's next target. Recently they've cracked down hard on those who don't have licenses, confiscating their goods and even throwing some in jail."

"Can't they just get a license?"

"First of all, it costs over a thousand dollars to buy a license. Most of the vendors don't have that kind of money. But even if they manage to borrow the money, the government is refusing to issue any new licenses." Carlos stood up. "Let's go back to the lounge. I'll tell you more about it over a drink."

A glittery mural with seashells, sun and fish covered one wall. Another was plastered with posters of Marilyn Monroe. In the corner stood a strange, elevated construction with red velvet curtains that resembled a balcony, or maybe a stage. A Victorian couch with velour pillows dominated one wall and on another hung a print of an oversized Buddha. The decor was eclectic to say the least, but in a good way. They were seated at a small table in the lounge drinking margaritas: Carlos' on the rocks, hers the usual blended with salt. Her drink tasted even better than the other night, but she was going to pace herself. No more than two. That was her limit.

"This is great! How did you find this place?" Not the kind of restaurant she'd expected.

Carlos grinned. "The two female owners are old friends of Alejo's."

Shari sipped her margarita and nibbled on one of the stuffed mushrooms they'd ordered as an appetizer. "So, tell me some more about the beach vendors' dilemma."

"The crackdown on unlicensed vendors is not unprecedented, but the officials have never been

quite that nasty before. And that's not all the sons-of-a-bitches have in mind."

"What else can they do?"

"There's a rumor they might place some restrictions on where the vendors can peddle their goods. They'll argue that in other parts of Mexico such as Playa del Carmen vendors aren't allowed on the beach at all." As he swigged his margarita, Carlos' eyes filled with fury. "The government hopes to drive them out of business, so they'll get other jobs. Even when they're licensed, the vendors don't always pay taxes and the government wants every penny it can get. But you can't squeeze blood from a rock, isn't that the English expression? And there aren't any other jobs for them. It doesn't help that many of them are illiterate."

"Stone—you can't squeeze blood from a stone. But why were you invited to the meeting?"

He avoided her eyes, while he traced the scar on his face and took out his pipe.

"They won't let you smoke inside the restaurant," she said.

He scowled, but put the pipe back in his pocket. "I guess because I have a bit of experience organizing protests. Let's say I've been involved in some political action in the past."

*He's hiding something.* She raised her eyebrows. "You're not a famous revolutionary are you?" Her eyes widened. "You're not that leader in Chiapas? That Zapatista? She gasped. "You're Subcomandante Marcos!" Of course, he must be. Why hadn't she figured it out sooner? Everyone knew about Marcos, the new Che Guevera, the Mexican sex symbol with the mask.

"No, no," Carlos said shaking his head. "You've got it all wrong. It's true, I've met Marcos. He wanted help with the Other Campaign in Guerrero a few years ago, but I turned him down."

"But the pipe...and you taught at the university..." She wasn't sure she believed him.

He laughed. "Trust me there's no shortage of revolutionaries in Mexico. Poor Marcos. He has to wear that balaclava in public even on the hottest of summer days. And did you know that Zapatistas have to swear off alcohol?" He lifted his almost empty glass. "No, I'm not such a

masochist.” He grinned. “And I’m sure mine is bigger.” Shari’s mouth dropped open. “My nose,” he chortled.

Her shoulders relaxed, and she smiled. “So what will you do for the beach vendors?”

“Since I retired, I’ve tried to steer clear of politics. Before I came to PV, I had an idea for a book. I’m looking forward to working on it when I get back.” He started to pull out his pipe, remembered, and tucked it away again. “But I don’t mind giving the beach vendors a hand while I’m here. They’re going to meet again tomorrow evening, and we should know by then exactly what action the government plans to take. For now, it’s just a rumor.”

“Hey, maybe I could help too?” She leaned towards him. “I was an activist in my younger days. After Three Mile Island, my friend Ana and I joined other environmentalists in Toronto to oppose construction of the Darlington nuclear station. We even marched in an anti-nuclear rally in New York City.” Carlos reclined back in his seat and stared at her.

Just then their waitress came, escorted them into the dining room and handed them the menu. They each ordered another margarita. But that’s the last one, she reassured herself.

Shari wiggled in her chair as she scanned the list of entrees offered that evening. She always struggled between choosing what she really wanted to eat, which was inevitably fattening, and the lower calorie item she should order. Hmm, they had chiles rellenos—so many calories, but so yummy. Then there was the grilled fish, and chicken and shrimp enchiladas with a creamy sauce...and salads. She grimaced. The waitress returned with their drinks, ready to take their order.

Shari hesitated. “Chicken enchiladas please,” she said. Fewer calories at least than a cheese-stuffed, deep-fried chili pepper. Carlos ordered grilled red snapper.

“What was I saying back in the bar?” Shari looked puzzled. “Oh yes, that I’ve organized my share of demonstrations.”

“We don’t know yet whether there will be a rally held or not,” Carlos cautioned her. “It’ll

be up to the beach vendors to decide what they want to do.”

“Please can I come? I’d so much like to do something to help them.”

Carlos frowned. “They’ll be speaking Spanish, so you won’t understand what’s being said anyway. Let me attend this meeting alone and find out what’s happening. If some action is going to be taken, I can ask their permission to have you involved, but in the background. It would be very foolish for you to take on any prominent role. They wouldn’t hesitate to throw you in jail.”

He’s being over dramatic. I can take care of myself. “Okay, but I’d really love to take part. By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask you. Have you seen Toby again? I ran into him yesterday around noon. He looked rather defeated.”

Carlos shook his head. “No, I haven’t, but he should be at the meeting tomorrow.”

But if Toby is alright, why did he appear in my bathroom with the other dead? She was still worried about him. But she was certainly not going to tell Carlos about her ghosts.

The waitress appeared with their meals. Shari broke off a piece of the enchilada. “This is absolutely delicious! Would you like a bit?”

Carlos reached over and scooped up a mouthful. “*Muy bueno.*” He put some grilled fish on a fork and held it out. Shari leaned over and he slipped the morsel into her mouth. That was rather intimate, wasn’t it? Or was it only her overactive imagination.

“Dessert?” They ordered coffees and a flan to share.

Impulsively, Shari asked, “Do you have family back in Guerrero?”

Carlos stared down at the table. “My wife died three years ago. We never had children, and my parents have been dead for more than a decade. No siblings.”

“I’m so sorry.” This would be the right moment to confess she was married. She swallowed as she thought of Grant. Come on, do it Shari. Then she pictured her brother, dead for more than twenty years. Instead, she said, “I had a younger brother, Danny, but he was killed in an accident

—he was only twenty-five. When my father died I was twelve, Danny two... And my mother passed away almost a year ago. I miss her terribly.”

“Where I come from Death becomes a familiar guest at the table. He feels like family,” Carlos said bitterly.

“I can’t imagine it’s ever easy for anyone to lose a loved one. I’m sorry about your wife.”

Carlos’ eyes glistened with pain. “I know I’m supposed to have gotten over her death by now, but I’m not sure I ever will.” He stared down at his hands, clasped tightly in his lap.

“I know, really I do,” Shari said. “They’ve left us behind. No matter how much we want to hear their voice or hold them in our arms, we know it won’t happen. They’re gone and we have to go on without them. I don’t know about you, but sometimes I’m not sure I can do it.”

Carlos nodded and wiped his eyes. Shari reached over and patted his shoulder. Okay, so she did have the apparitions. She could at least see her mother when she went into a bathroom. But while once these ghostly visions provided her some comfort, not so much anymore. She recalled Toby’s recent, unexpected appearance.

At that moment their coffees and flan arrived. Carlos took a sip. “Tell me some more about Shari the activist. Was she successful in stopping nuclear?”

So Shari told him all about her youthful efforts to oppose nuclear power, about how they went ahead and built Darlington anyway, but that nuclear finally seemed to be on the wane.

They finished their dessert and coffee, and she paid the bill despite his protests. As they strolled out the door of the Shifting Sands, Carlos asked, “Would you like to walk a little further into Emiliano Zapata? It’s easier to find a taxi there. And I wouldn’t mind stretching my legs.”

“Sure.” Shari said, both relieved and disappointed he wasn’t inviting her back to his place. Just because she yearned to kiss those full, lush lips, didn’t mean she would actually do it. She could separate reality from fantasy, couldn’t she? Just think of the guilt. What was she trying

to do, destroy her marriage? As if it needed any help. She slowed down and stole a glance at Carlos' muscular physique as he strode away. He gazed back at her, looking confused. She shrugged her shoulders and quickened her pace until she caught up to him.

Away from the ocean, it was still quite warm as they wandered towards town in the dark. As they navigated the narrow and uneven, sometimes poorly lit, streets, a short Mexican woman, maybe in her seventies, walked towards them. Carlos stopped.

"Elfrida," he called. "*Hola.*" Shari could see tears in the woman's eyes. "What is it? What's happened?" Deep wrinkles formed on his brow.

Elfrida broke out in rapid and incomprehensible Spanish. It could have been a dialect, Shari wasn't sure. The only words she understood were "Toby" and "Rio Cuale". At the mention of Toby, Shari felt faint—surely it couldn't be their Toby she meant? Carlos pulled Elfrida close, held her and stroked her hair.

They talked for a few more minutes, and then she shuffled away. Grief flooded Carlos' eyes as he turned to Shari. "He's dead."

Her voice shook. "Who's dead? Not Toby?"

Carlos nodded, looking at her through wet lashes. "I guess he'd had enough. They found him this morning, drowned in the river."

She swallowed and shook her head. "You're not serious. He can't be." But then she remembered the new bathroom guest and groaned.

Carlos pulled her over to a concrete planter at the side of the road where they sat down. He held her hand. "Toby was struggling to make ends meet. When he heard things were about to get worse, it must have been too much for him. The anguish would have been unbearable. That bloody government—they may as well have picked up a gun and shot him."

Shari withdrew her hand and trembled. Tears slid down her cheeks. "I just want to go home."

## Chapter Seven – First Tuesday: *Ya Basta!*

Carlos charged through the darkness, his nostrils flared, his jaw clenched. He'd safely deposited Shari into a taxi. Before she left, he'd wrapped his arms around her and kissed her wet cheek. Her warm soft body shook as he held her. They agreed to meet the following night at eight o'clock at the Book and Beans coffee shop on Lázaro Cárdenas, after the beach vendors' meeting.

He should never have retired. But they really hadn't given him a choice. Yet the need for society to change was never more urgent. How were the poor expected to survive? And now Toby was dead. The least he could do was help while he was in PV, in whatever way he could.

Shari. Had he told her too much about himself? He wasn't sure if she believed him or not. The last thing he wanted was to put her in danger. He would make sure that she was only minimally involved in whatever action the beach vendors decided to take. The least he could do was not repeat his mistakes. He missed Yolanda so much.

He approached the bridge that took him away from Emiliano Zapata and back to Alejandro's house. It was still early, and the locals were making their way home. The clip clop of a grey donkey carrying a tired old man echoed through the darkness. Carlos stopped, leaned over the side of the bridge and listened to the river's song. Usually he found it soothing, but not tonight. Something had changed. He imagined the clear water turning bright red with Toby's blood, the river sweeping away the blood of millions—the blood of innocents killed in the drug wars, the blood of the impoverished, hungry Mexicans, indigenous and *mestizos*, rural and urban, the blood spilt by too many years of revolution. He picked up a heavy stone from the side of the road and hurled it into the water. He raised his middle finger. "*Ya basta!*" he cried, and raced in the direction of home.

As Carlos turned the key in the lock of the front door, the voices of the Three Tenors singing

*Cielito Lindo* vibrated through the apartment. “Carlos?” A short, slim Mexican with grey-flecked hair set in small blue rollers sauntered into the room, his arm lifted in greeting. He wore a tight white t-shirt and snug, brief shorts. Alejo switched off his iPod. “How was your supper?”

“Toby’s dead. I need a drink.” Carlos stalked to the kitchen and yanked a beer from the fridge.

Alejandro followed him. “Unbelievable! They killed him, didn’t they?”

“They may as well have. He couldn’t stand the struggle anymore. It looks like he drowned himself.” Carlos dropped onto the couch, took a swig of beer, put down the bottle and buried his head in his hands.

Alejandro rushed over to him and touched his shoulder. “*Pobre amigo.*”

“Will you come to the funeral Alejo?” Carlos asked. “It’s Thursday morning in Pitillal. Can we cancel classes?”

“Leave it to me. I’ll arrange for someone to cover our classes, and I can drive us there.”

Carlos dragged himself off the sofa. He stared at Alejandro with tears in his eyes. “I feel so helpless. The bloodshed never ends.”

Carlos lay in bed, his eyes open wide, gazing out his window at the moon glowing above the church by the plaza. Before sleep finally released him, he imagined once more the Rio Cuale. The bloody river swept past oblivious tourists drinking tequila, past mournful vendors’ packing up their stalls, past dark abandoned streets, racing furiously, relentlessly towards Mexico’s destiny.

###

Damn, Damn, Damn. What in the world was she going to do? Shari sat in the dark on a white wrought iron chair at a poolside table, locked out of the condo, as trapped as if she were in jail. When the taxi dropped her off, she’d reached into her purse for her keys. Where had she put them? Not only was she unable to get into the condo, but even worse, she’d lost her mother’s



magic hand. She searched in her pocket, and in desperation, turned her purse upside down. Her cell phone (thank god it didn't break!) sunglasses, lipstick, powder, tissues, pain killers, throat lozenges, fell tangled together onto the ground, but no keys. Not knowing what else to do, she stumbled down the stairs to the deck. She'd been sitting by the pool for over an hour, her only companion a small green gecko motionless on an adjoining stone wall. He glared at her and chirped. She thought about Carlos, about Grant, and finally, about Toby.

She was mesmerized by the multitude of stars shimmering across the vast night sky with the ocean spread below, not a sky she would ever see back home. She kept coming back to a single star that seemed brighter than the rest. Was it flashing? She thought of her mother. *Are you out there somewhere? I'm sorry I lost the amulet.* Tears clouded her eyes. Her heart began to pound; her muscles tightened. She shook her fist at the stars. "Fuck you, whoever you are. Give me back my mother!"

"What are you doing out here?" It was Rita.

Shari wondered if she'd heard her. She blushed. "I've lost my keys."

"Not to worry, Hon. The night watchman can let you in. Come on. I'll vouch for you."

When Shari walked into the condo, she saw the precious keychain with her keys sitting in full view on the kitchen counter. What a ditz she was! She grabbed them and held on tightly, feeling the amulet's smooth surface against her palm. She felt guilty about all the nasty thoughts she'd had about Rita. She owed her one.

Suddenly she really wanted to talk to Ana. She checked the time on her cell phone. It was after ten in PV, but an hour earlier in Calgary. She dialed Ana's number.

"Hi, it's Shari. I'm not calling too late am I?"

"Of course not," Ana said. "You know me, the night owl. It's great to hear from you.

What's up?"

“Quite a bit actually... I had supper this evening with a retired revolutionary named Carlos...I know I probably shouldn’t have, but it just sort of happened.”

“You didn’t!” Ana shrieked. “You’re not serious? Sure doesn’t sound like something you’d do? Way too chancy. What about Grant?”

“I do feel kind of guilty, but it was perfectly innocent...I met Carlos at the bar my first night here. He just needed a place to sit and there was a free chair at my table. Then he wanted some company tonight.”

“My god Shari. A revolutionary! Is he cute?” Ana asked.

“A **retired** revolutionary, and yes, I guess he’s cute, sexy actually, but that doesn’t really matter.” That’s true, isn’t it? Shari remembered how she felt when she gazed into Carlos’ dark, sultry eyes. “He just seems like a really nice guy. We had drinks...and then supper.” Shari drummed her fingers against the kitchen counter.

“Maybe you could introduce me when I’m there. I love the idea of a fling with a revolutionary. And now that I’ve finally gotten rid of Jason, I’m so available.” Ana giggled.

Shari paused. “I don’t know. Carlos might have left by then. He’s teaching a course through the university for a couple of weeks, and I’m not too sure how long he’ll be in PV after that. He’s staying with a friend, another teacher. I think his name is Alejandro.”

“So maybe I can meet him as well? But tell me what’s the matter, Shari? You sound upset.”

“A beach vendor died; he committed suicide. Carlos knew him. I only met Toby a couple of times, but it’s still so sad.”

“Oh Shari, the death probably reminds you of your mother.”

“I didn’t think about that, but you’re right.” She cleared her throat. “I also feel badly about Grant. I was mean to him when he phoned. I shouldn’t be surprised he hasn’t called back.”

“You always have to worry, don’t you? Try to have some fun for a change. You’re there to relax, not get more stressed. It’ll be okay. You’ll see.”

Shari grasped her keychain. “I hope so. Thanks Ana. You always know how to make me feel better.”

“Okay, don’t do anything I would do. *Buenas noches*.”

“Good night. Talk to you soon.” Shari hung up; she was exhausted. A long uninterrupted sleep was what she needed.

She stood at the sink brushing her teeth when the dead appeared again. But this time something was different. Her mother, she looked twice, yes her mother was dancing with Toby. Shari’s mouth fell open. When had she ever seen her mother dance? If she had, it was so long ago she couldn’t remember. They both appeared to be having a terrific time. Was that salsa music playing? Last time she saw her mother she couldn’t even walk, and here she was swinging and twirling. Rusty whizzed by, chasing Danny. Seriously? Had they been drinking? There wasn’t room for all this activity in such a small room. What were they thinking? She hoped this wasn’t a new routine, or she’d be using the bathroom as little as possible. Shari quickly rinsed her mouth, washed her face, gave the quartet a quick glance (by then, Danny was down on all fours chasing Rusty) and scurried to bed.

## PART TWO

### Chapter Eight – First Wednesday: Death is Everywhere

Her mystery lay open on her lap. She'd been trying to read, but the words didn't make any sense. She closed the book, leaned back in the pool lounge chair and looked up at the purple and pink bougainvilleas cascading down the condos' balconies.

Before coming to the pool, she'd called her kids to make sure they were okay. Sarah was putting the finishing touches on next weekend's art exhibit. "So sorry Mom," she said. "Got to go. Talk soon."

When she'd phoned Marc, she got his answering machine. She texted him and he replied immediately. *I'm fine.*

Now Shari placed her hands behind her head and shut her eyes. Toby is dead. Toby is dead. Toby is dead. *My mother is dead.* Death was everywhere. It was particularly difficult to forget in PV where skulls and skeletons were for sale wherever she looked, in a culture where people chose to embrace rather than ignore their mortality.

If only she were at home, safely cocooned in her fuzzy blue housecoat, reclining on her brown leather chair, her long curly hair unruly from sleep, and reading the *Calgary Herald* as she did every morning. As she scanned the list of dead, Bob Dylan might sing one of his early protest songs, or perhaps a wistful David Francey would croon about love. Then as she sipped her coffee, she'd search the obituaries for Toby's name, as if the death weren't real until she saw it in print. But she didn't even know Toby's last name! And anyway, his death wouldn't appear in the *Herald*.

An obituary—such a strange conclusion to a person's life. Back in Calgary, when Shari read these death notices, she'd wonder if there would come a day when nobody died. It hadn't happened so far. There were so many faces, so many ways for a life to end—suddenly and

unexpectedly or after a long brave battle with age or illness. Sometimes the last breath took place at home, other times in a seniors' residence, or a hospice, often a hospital. If the death were from an accident, the final moments were censored. As death approached, the dying person would be surrounded by loved ones, if all went well, but at other times like her mother, the departure from life took place alone...so nothing was said. Angels escorted the spirit to heaven, if the family happened to be religious, or if not, the dead person was simply loved and missed. A couple of paragraphs about the departed's life usually followed, often reading like a resume. She would learn where the person had worked, and his or her passion—cooking, gardening, quilting, fishing, golfing or maybe watching hockey. Whatever that person had loved to do, once he or she was dead, what did it matter—it was over. Some obituaries announced elaborate memorial services, while others held no funeral at all, at the deceased's request. Shari shook her head. Who really wanted a funeral, since dying was the prerequisite?

Shari sat up and gazed at the pool where a young girl and boy threw a ball back and forth. They were laughing. A woman in her thirties wearing a bikini, probably their mother, sat at the edge of the pool and waved at Shari. Were these the children who'd almost drowned when she was here five years ago? But that couldn't be right. Those children would be teenagers by now. They would have grown older, just as she had. Shari waved back, then reclined again on her lounge chair and squeezed her eyes shut.

Someday her own obituary will appear in the paper, but she won't be there to read it. What will it say? *Shari Shapiro—teacher, daughter, wife, mother, friend, and maybe, grandmother—now dead. She used to lose things and liked purple and flowers and margaritas.* Was that it? Oh yes, and how and when she died, but she didn't know that yet. Perhaps they'd bury the magic hand with her, but by then it would be too late to do her any good. Better to leave it with the kids. She did understand that someday, she too would die...But if she really, truly believed in her own death, why

didn't she scream and scream and keep on screaming? She suspected she wasn't alone in her delusion. Shari reached into her pocket and grasped the magic hand, as if her life depended on it.

What she knew for certain was that her mother was dead. Through tear-drenched eyes, Shari had seen her corpse lying first in a hospital bed and later in a coffin. She stood by the graveside when they buried her mother deep in the ground of the Forest Hills cemetery and stared in horror as they filled the grave with dirt. Since then, Shari had felt trapped in a deep, dark cave with no way out. As if her mother had not been alone in the coffin.

She shook her head, got up, stretched and walked over to the black steel fence that surrounded the pool. Peering through the tall, narrow spears and between the leaves of overgrown hibiscus bushes, she glimpsed the ocean. The wind was painting white caps on waves that raced away from the shore, only to rush back again. Just like life and death.

Shari made her way back to the side of the pool, her flip flops slapping against the cement. When she lay down once more, her eyes were moist. She still found it difficult to believe that nearly a year had passed since she wrote her mother's obituary. The death notice did nothing to change the fact her mother was gone. Not only didn't it make Shari feel any better, it didn't solve the mystery of where to find her mother.

Lately, she had begun to search for her in the elusive past. She dug deeply, doggedly, to unearth childhood memories. When she was able to excavate a lost scene, it was as if part of her mother had been returned to her, even if only in Shari's mind. Afterwards, she sometimes thought she heard her mother's voice calling to her. But later, when she saw her mother's ghostly remains in the bathroom, speechless, unreachable, she almost felt worse. What she wanted was her mother to be undead. What she wanted was for her to return, so she could throw her arms around her and tell her she loved her. Yet Shari continued to stubbornly uproot the past. It was all she had left.

Four year old Shari stood beside her mother in the basement of the bungalow they were renting at the time, her feet firmly planted on the floor, her small hands on her waist. She wore an outfit her mother had made, a pinafore dress, in a shade of dark chocolate, over a long-sleeved, beige pullover patterned with teddy bears. Her mother Fanny was bent over, filling another packing box with clothes; her chestnut curls tumbled down her back. Shari tugged on her mother's full, flowered skirt. "Why can't I keep Belinda?" Her chin trembled.

They were moving, again. A few months ago, she'd given Belinda a makeover, using a red crayon to paint lipstick on the doll and cutting her hair. The doll resembled a clown, while a dangling arm, once caught in a door, needed a skilled surgeon.

Her mother stood up and said, reluctantly. "We can't bring everything with us, and Belinda looks so bedraggled." She wrinkled her nose. "Look, I have a nice box for her with a soft blanket. We'll put her here on this shelf."

So Shari abandoned her precious doll in the cozy box that was really a coffin in disguise. She never saw Belinda again. For a long time, she worried about who'd take care of her. Maybe the new renters would throw her out? It took Shari a while to accept that she was gone forever.

Belinda was the first to disappear from her life. Then it got worse—Rusty, her father, even Danny, and more recently, her mother—all vanished. It was true that some of the dead were now insubstantial bathroom apparitions or perhaps just figments of Shari's imagination. Better than nothing, but overall a rather unsatisfactory substitute for the living. And for some inexplicable reason, her father never appeared to provide even that minimal comfort.

Her cell phone sounded a newsflash, startling her. It was a text message from Carlos confirming their meeting that evening at Beans and Books.

*I'll be there*, she texted back, and added a happy face. Meanwhile, she was feeling restless,

closed in. Maybe she would head into town a little early.

As she was checking her emails, a shadow fell across her phone. Rita stood there grinning. “Hi! Thought I’d find you here. Have you recovered from last night?”

“Yes, thanks.” Shari felt mortified all over again. She scooped up her towel and book, dropped them into her bag and sprung up from the lounge chair—another good reason to head into town.

“Hello lady. Come look, very nice, give you good price.” Shari was wandering through the Mercado Municipal, overwhelmed by the many vendors. They were selling every kind of baseball hat, cotton shawl and dress, silver earrings, leather wallets and purses, hand-crafted masks of all shapes and sizes, vases and butter dishes, and skulls and skeletons—Shari flinched. And hundreds and hundreds of bottles of vanilla, of which she bought one. Spread out over two huge floors, the market brimmed with goods. She loved the brightly colored pottery that depicted Mexicans working or playing, fighting bulls, or dancing at a wedding.

She purchased a small vase with a woman washing clothes in the river. She saw very few other tourists. How did these poor vendors make a living?

On the second floor, she stumbled upon some modest cafes. She spied an empty seat overlooking the river, sat down and ordered a Coke light. She was shopped out. As she waited for her soft drink, she looked down at the shallow, slow moving river, with its gold, green and rose-colored rocks, illuminated by the sun, its gurgling melody filling the air. She tried not to think about how the river had taken Toby’s life.

Shari glanced at her watch. She still had a bit of time until she met Carlos at eight. Maybe she could find Molino de Agua? It was one of her favourite spots when they’d visited PV before, a quaint hotel with well-treed grounds where an ancient Banyan tree sprawled, so unlike any other tree she’d ever seen. It would be fun, she’d always thought, to stay in one of the hotel’s adobe



huts. She remembered a quirky bar overlooking the ocean with a few tables around the pool. The burritos had been delicious and the margaritas made with fresh lime juice—a perfect place to grab a bite to eat before she met up with Carlos—if only she could find it. But she was fairly sure it was near the market, so she'd give it a try.

She maneuvered the uneven sidewalks, trying to remember where exactly the hotel was located. As she strolled along the river, she spied a green Iguana sprawled on a fig tree branch. She stared at the exotic creature, who unlike herself, belonged here. Apparently Iguana soup was a local delicacy, but she couldn't imagine it. There was no sign of Molino de Agua.

Shari crossed the street. Right in front of her, beside a taco stand, a wrinkled old woman wearing a tattered skirt and loose cotton blouse squatted on the sidewalk, a tin cup in her hand. Shocked, Shari halted. Why did this beggar look so much like her mother? Her skin was darker, but the same wispy white hair covered her head. When Shari bent down and the woman looked up at her, it was her mother's huge hazel eyes that gazed back. She almost cried out, "Mom," but stopped herself in time. She fumbled in her purse, dropped fifty pesos into the cup and rushed away.

As she flew down the street, she nearly knocked over a young boy walking towards her. "Scusi," she said, then shook her head and thought, no that's not right. "*Lo siento.*" Suddenly she noticed his shaggy black hair. It was the same Mexican child who'd watched her on the beach. He stopped and glared at her accusingly. She gasped, turned and raced away as fast as she could. She was no longer hungry.

## Chapter Nine – First Wednesday: Planning the Rally

Carlos loomed at the back of the packed hall. Several hundred vendors, most with grim expressions, gathered in small groups. Some of them he knew from back home, like Toby, who should be here. Instead he was dead, pushed to an early grave by rumours of this abhorrent initiative. Carlos shook his head. Elfrida was hunched over nearby. *“Temer lo que va a pasar.”* Her voice trembled. Of course she’s afraid, they should all be afraid. He put his right arm on her shoulder and clenched his left hand into a fist.

The room buzzed with apprehension as they waited to hear what the politicians had in store for them. “Toby” echoed throughout the room. *“Cabrones,”* snarled one beach vendor and spat on the ground. Carlos frowned. Neoliberal bastards! They have no fucking idea what it’s like.

Because the vendors belonged to a number of different unions, there were several representatives waiting on stage to speak. The room became ominously quiet as a tall official with a handlebar mustache picked up the microphone and said, *“Camaradas me temo que tengo malas noticias para usted.”* Carlos listened to the details of the government’s new oppressive tactic and scowled. As the union leader had warned, the news was not good. The rumours had been right after all. When the speaker finished, some vendors were crying. Then they started to chant: *demonstración, demostración, demostración.* The union representatives gawked at each other and began to argue.

Carlos hesitated a moment before striding to the front of the room. The beach vendors clapped when he leapt onto the stage, and the applause soon became deafening. The room fell silent. Carlos gazed at the crowd with fiery eyes, picked up the microphone and spoke in a voice that no one would want to challenge. *“No te preocupes. No vamos a dejar que los hijos de puta salirse con la suya!”* Don’t worry. We won’t let the bastards get away with it!” Cheers vibrated throughout the room.

###

Shari was waiting for Carlos at a table on the patio of Beans and Books, where she sipped an

iced tea and flipped through the pages of a second hand Elizabeth George mystery she'd just bought. She'd rushed to the coffee shop directly after the encounter with her mother's look-alike. The idea of supper made her feel nauseated. She thought again about the bedraggled beggar. Maybe it was the pain in her eyes that reminded her so much of her mother—the unbearable sorrow Shari had seen in her mother's eyes as she lay in a hospital bed dying of cancer. All that last night, she'd sat by her mother's side as she did every other night, since she flew into Toronto a week before. Grant planned to come, but he was too late. He never did see her mother alive again.

That last morning the nurse had said, “Go home, get a few hours sleep. She'll be here when you get back.” But the nurse was wrong. When Shari returned, her mother had already slipped away, moved into the other world, onto the other side of the mirror, through the wardrobe, down the rabbit hole, lost in the abyss.

Shari looked up. Carlos hurried towards her with his battered cap and the same black t-shirt and jean shorts he wore the first time she met him. She admired his long legs as he lowered himself onto the chair across from her. “It's as bad as we thought,” he said breathing hard.

“What did you find out? Do tell me.”

“The government wants to ban the beach vendors from all of PV's southern beaches. Starting March first, vendors will only be allowed access to beaches north of Los Muertos.”

Shari bristled. “But there are already too many beach vendors and too few tourists. How will they possibly make a living?”

“That's the whole point. The government wants to drive them out of business. This will be another nail in the coffin of the informal economy.”

“What about Elfrida? Will she still be able to have a stall by Lázaro Cárdenas Park?”

“Yes, but three of her children are beach vendors.” Carlos withdrew his tobacco pouch and filled his pipe.

Rather a nasty habit of his, Shari thought. She wished she had the nerve to tell him. Instead she said, "Surely the beach vendors will fight this ban! What's been planned? How can I help?" The waiter approached their table and both ordered a coffee.

Carlos lit his pipe, took a puff and continued. "There will be a rally next Wednesday at noon in front of city hall. It's a federal initiative, but I suspect the local government will support it."

"What's your role?"

"The union leaders have asked me to organize the rally. That way there'll be no fighting about who's in charge. The unions will provide some financial help and speakers, but it will be the beach vendors' demonstration."

"And what about me?" Shari leaned forward. "What can I do?"

"You can help me plan it if you like. We don't have a lot of time. A steering committee has been struck, and we'll meet Friday night to finalize the details."

Shari's brow wrinkled. "I could follow up with the English media. But assuming it's the same as in Canada, if we want publicity the release should be ready to distribute no later than Monday. I'm willing to put up posters, hand out flyers. There will be posters won't there?" She pulled out a notebook and pen from her bag. "We need a list of what needs to be done, who will do it and when."

Carlos took a deep puff from his pipe. "Alejo teaches communications. His students will help us design some posters, if we tell them what to say. By the way, Toby's wake was today and his funeral will take place tomorrow morning. Would you like to go?"

Shari hesitated. "I would, but where will it be held? How will we get there?"

"A mass will be said at the church in Pitillal at ten o'clock. That's where he lived, in a poor community north of PV. Alejo has agreed to drive us there."

Shari glared at a Chihuahua cowering under an adjoining table who yapped incessantly. "Okay, I'll come...By the way, have you eaten?" Carlos shook his head. "Me neither. Would you like to

have some supper? Maybe we could find somewhere a bit quieter to work on details of the rally?"

"Sure, that would be great," Carlos agreed. "Where would you like to eat?"

"Do you know Molino de Agua?" she asked. "We went there last time I was in PV. They have a neat little bar on the ocean and wonderful grounds with a sprawling banyan tree...But I can't seem to find it."

Carlos smiled ruefully. "They tore it down to build condos. It doesn't exist anymore."

"Really?" Shari grimaced. "What a pity. I bet they cut down the banyan tree as well."

Carlos cleared his throat and hesitated before speaking. "There's a small local restaurant a few blocks from here that makes great pizza. *"Es muy bueno."* How does that sound?"

"I'm Italian so that sounds terrific. Let's go."

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Shari turned the key in the lock of the condo door. At least she remembered her keys this time. She'd spent a lovely evening with Carlos brainstorming and planning next week's rally. It was so much fun. She forgot how much she enjoyed working on a cause she believed in. By the time their pepperoni and mushroom pizza arrived, she was ravenous. By the end of the evening, after a couple of margaritas, it felt as if he were an old friend—but if she were truthful, maybe more than that.

As they were polishing off the last of the pizza, Carlos looked at her inquisitively and asked, "Are you seeing anyone special back home?"

Shari stared down at the checked red and white table cloth and whispered, "Not exactly."

She averted her eyes, scanning the room for the waiter. "Do we have time for another margarita?"

Carlos pressed on. "Have you ever been married before?"

"I've never been divorced nor widowed, if that's what you mean."

"And married?"

Shari leapt up from the table. “Excuse me for a few minutes. I’m just going to go to the bathroom to freshen up.” As she splashed cold water on her face, her mother glared at her disapprovingly. Toby smirked. Danny and Rusty played in a corner, unperturbed.

Shari’s chest tightened when she remembered how the evening had ended. When she got back to the table, she managed to deflect the subject of marriage by chatting some more about the rally. Before he saw her off in a taxi, Carlos bent down, put his hands gently on her shoulders and looked deeply into her eyes. Shari hesitated, then returned his gaze and was shocked to see the passion she felt reflected back. Next thing she knew their lips joined in an erotic kiss that lingered, longer than it should. Shari’s heart beat wildly, and her knees nearly gave way. What would happen if he came home with her?

*She trembled as they stood at the bedroom door. He took her in his arms and she could feel his hard body pressed against hers. She reached up and ran her fingers through his hair, touched the scar on his face. He caressed her back, paused when he reached her breast and slid his fingers towards her nipple, stroking it until it tingled. She was breathing heavily when she grabbed him by the arm and pulled him into the room, towards the bed, closer and closer...*

Shari’s eyes popped open. She extracted herself from his embrace and slid into the taxi. Now back in the condo, she shook her head. She’d left all the windows closed and it was stifling. She slid the balcony door open, letting in the cool evening breeze, but her face was still burning. *What was I thinking?*

**Chapter Ten – First Thursday: The Funeral**

At nine the next morning, Shari was waiting at the entrance of the condo complex for Carlos and Alejandro to pick her up. She glanced at her watch: already ten after. If they didn't get here soon they'd be late for Toby's funeral. She wore a gray silk dress, with a tinge of purple, and tucked in her bag was a black cardigan in case the church required long sleeves. Her phone flashed the news—a text from Carlos telling her he was on his way. A few minutes later a red Volkswagen Beetle rumbled down the steep, uneven hill that led to the condo. Carlos sat in the front passenger seat, craning his neck. He beamed when he spied her.

Out of the driver's side jumped a slim, short male with long and curly hair, lightly sprinkled with grey. He wore tight linen pants and a white fitted shirt that accentuated his olive skin and predominantly dark locks. "A pleasure to meet you my dear." He took Shari's hand in his and kissed it. "I've heard so much about you. I'm Alejandro, but you can call me Alejo. You must be the lovely Shari." A rainbow pendant on a silver chain hung around his neck. A ruby stud adorned one ear, a diamond the other. Shari raised her eyebrows and shook his hand. Carlos? Was it possible? No, definitely not. Alejo pushed forward the driver's seat for her and she squeezed into the back. They chugged up the hill and somehow made it to the top. Soon they were rolling along, headed north down the main highway into town.

Carlos twisted around in the front passenger seat. "Alejo made his special spinach and feta empanadas to take to the family's house after the funeral. And we also have this to offer." He held up a bottle of tequila.

"Shouldn't I be bringing something?" Shari asked. Why hadn't she thought of it?

"Nah, you're with us. The family will appreciate that you came. We also picked up some flowers to put in the coffin." Carlos showed her a bouquet with two dozen white and red roses.

"Toby's daughter Maria phoned me. She wanted to make sure there were enough roses for

everyone who came. So many people knew and liked Toby. They expect a large crowd.”

“Does he have any other family?”

“A son named Pablo in PV who works as a beach vendor, as does Maria. Three more children live in the States, but I doubt they’ll be at the funeral. Toby’s mother Rosita lives with her son and grandchildren as well. With Toby gone, there will only be her grandchildren left to care for her.”

Shari winced. “I’ve been wondering. How will Toby’s family be able to afford a funeral?”

“The beach vendors collected some money at the meeting last night. So they’ll have a little help. And others in the community will pitch in.” Carlos dropped his eyes. “Toby was very active in his church, so the mass will reflect that. But I still don’t expect more than a very simple funeral.”

No one said anything more as they drove past the hotel zone towards El Pitillal. What Shari dreaded most about the funeral was seeing Toby’s family grieve. She knew all about losing someone you loved, about how little anyone could do to alleviate the pain.

They found a parking spot half a dozen blocks away and walked along the sidewalk towards the church of San Miguel Archangel. Shari admired the rosy river-rock building, flanked by red brick octagonal towers on either side of an old fashioned white clock. With the morning sun shining on it, the church appeared otherworldly. Along both side walls, stretched a row of arched stained glass windows. She couldn’t help feeling critical of the money the church must have spent on its building when its parishioners were so poor, although this church was relatively modest compared to the ostentation of the Maria de Guadalupe Cathedral in PV. They climbed the stairs and pushed open the heavy doors. At least thirty feet high, an impressive wooden sculpture of the risen Christ seemed to float over the altar.

The church was almost full when they slid into a pew in one of the last few rows. Some of the mourners stared at Shari, the only gringo. Flushed, she turned to Carlos, who patted her hand. According to her watch, ten minutes remained before the service started. From what Carlos had told



her, many attending would be beach vendors just like Toby. Scrunched in the front row, an emaciated, white-haired woman coughed loudly and periodically spat into a large handkerchief. Toby's mother Rosita? Next to her sat a tired looking young woman with shoulder length black hair, probably Toby's daughter Maria. She cried softly. A young man, who stood to the side of the altar, reminded her of Toby. It must be his son, Pablo. The church buzzed from the sound of numerous children in attendance. You wouldn't see them at a funeral back home, she thought.

At the front of the church by the altar sat a coffin entirely covered by a white pall. Some lit candles were lined up on each side, as if to guide the dead to his new home. A modest arrangement of yellow lilies and roses stood nearby alongside a few marigold bouquets, while a cross made of white carnations leaned against the casket. Suddenly, a blue light illuminated the statue of Jesus as a priest dressed in a white robe stepped behind the altar and faced the crowd. The funeral mass had begun.

Although the priest spoke Spanish, Shari understood a bit here and there, the language being so similar to Italian. The priest preached about trusting God and confessing sins. Toby's son and daughter went up to the front, one at a time, and each read a short scripture from the bible. When Maria finished, she sat back down and sobbed. That seemed to be a signal. Sounds of anguish filled the church. Shari knelt when others knelt, stood when they stood. But she didn't sing the hymns, nor could she bring herself to pray. She'd only go so far. Why had she come?

She didn't know whether she believed in an afterlife or not, but over time she'd developed a disdain for organized religion of all kinds. She barely knew Toby. But he represented for her poverty and oppression. Because she'd met him, she could also mourn him as a unique human being who had suffered deprivation and couldn't take it anymore. And she'd come to support her new friend Carlos. She looked at him as he wiped the tears running down his cheeks with a soggy handkerchief. Alejo appeared stricken but so far hadn't cried. He placed a hand on Carlos' shoulder.

She peered behind her. People now stood all the way to the door. She tuned out the priest's voice and thought about her mother.

Her mother's death had been marked in such a different way, the service held in a funeral home. Although Shari's grandparents had been practicing Jews, her parents had abandoned their religion when they came to Canada. At the funeral the Three Tenors played her mother's beloved Italian music. Sarah spoke at the service, as well as her mother's best friend Lydia. Marc, her ever-reserved accountant son, begged off. "Oh Mom, I just can't. You know I loved Grandma, but I wouldn't know what to say." He was so much like Grant.

Shari had been so proud of her daughter, the artist, who reminded her so much of Danny. Sarah had the room in tears as she shared memories of her grandmother from when she was a little girl. She spoke about the lovely clothes she sewed for her dolls and how much she missed her when they moved to Calgary. When she finished speaking, she said, "Ciao Bella," and ran from the podium, tears streaming down her cheeks.

She shouldn't be critical of Marc. It had been impossible for Shari to even contemplate saying anything at her mother's service. As soon as she opened her mouth, she'd have been wracked by sobs of grief. How she envied those with faith, who believed their loved ones lived on, in spirit at least, and thought they knew what life after death entailed. Surely that made it easier? But was it really desirable to continue to exist after death? What if you could see and hear your loved ones grieving, but couldn't let them know you were still there? How painful and frustrating would that be? Maybe, if there were some kind of nirvana waiting for her, existing after death might be quite enjoyable. But as much as she'd like to, she didn't believe in the "paradise in the next life" fairytale, the angels with wings in the clouds scenario, as Toby's family supposedly did.

True, she had her ghosts. When she closed her eyes she could picture them so vividly. But were

they really any more than a figment of her imagination, maybe some kind of hallucination, or in Toby's case, a premonition? Clearly a ghostly existence wasn't everyone's destiny, since her father never appeared. And anyway, would she want to float about in someone's bathroom after she died? What kind of after-life would that be? If that were really what happened to everyone after death, surely someone would have said something by now? Suddenly she frowned. When Shari was gone—what would happen to her ghosts? Would they haunt someone else?

But what did it matter? What choice did she have but to die? Would she really rather keep growing older and older, more and more decrepit? From what Shari had seen that didn't appear to be much fun. What if it were possible for her body to stop aging, to just live on and on, frozen in time? Was that what she wanted? What about when her children and future grandchildren were gone, and she was left behind, alone? But the truth was she had no choice. Life was badly designed, and death was what waited for her when her life was over.

At the altar the statue of Jesus still shone in neon blue. Most of the mourners were getting up and making their way to the front of the church to receive communion from the priest. Instead Carlos stood up, muttered in a choked voice, "I'll see you outside shortly," and dashed out the door. Some of the mourners glared at him.

As Shari watched the procession, she gasped. She couldn't believe what she saw. A beam of white light shone towards the coffin. She twirled around looking for the source. Solid walls framed either side of the tightly closed, heavy wooden church door. Nobody around her seemed shocked or surprised. Was she the only one who saw it? The priest circled the still brightly lit coffin, sprinkled it with holy water and waved incense over it. The pallbearers approached the altar, lifted the coffin and carried it towards the door. The mass was over.

At the cemetery the mourners stood around the burial plot. The lid of the simple wooden

coffin was opened for one last chance to view the dead. A few more lit candles surrounded the coffin. Shari stood off to the side, trying to remain inconspicuous, aware of being the only gringo. It seemed to her that people stared at her strangely. She couldn't bear to view the body. Besides, she expected to see Toby regularly in the bathroom. She still felt shaken by her experience in the church with the light. What did it mean? She watched as Maria took her father's silver cross and laid it in his hands. His son placed Toby's worn straw hat and a framed photo of their family by his side. Rosita sat under a nearby acacia tree. She looked pale and coughed more than ever. The priest stood at the head of the casket, praying. After a final blessing, three troubadours wearing sombreros came forward. Two held guitars. A small drum and harmonica hung around the neck of the third.

Carlos whispered to Shari, "Friends of Toby's. They perform for tourists along the beach."

When they started to play Dylan's "Blowing in the Wind", Shari recognized the song immediately. They sang a Spanish version, but she knew every word. When they got to the last verse that talked about too much dying, she fought back tears. Some of the younger children danced to the music, oblivious to the tragedy. The crowd joined in to sing the last refrain, but Shari was too choked up.

Maria stood beside the coffin and spoke to the mourners who had gathered around. Tears poured down her face. Shari caught a few of the Spanish words. Maria ended with, "*Te amo padre*" and that even she understood—"I love you father."

Carlos bent down, cupped her ear with his hand, and translated. "She's speaking about the anguish her father must have felt to make him take his own life. She says he would never have done it if he hadn't been overcome with worry and despair."

Alejo handed Shari a white rose, and soon everyone took turns dropping the flowers into the coffin. The priest sprinkled holy water on the body and closed the lid. The mourners placed more roses on top. As the coffin was lowered into the ground, the musicians played one last melancholy

song, while Maria, Pablo, and even Toby's mother dropped handfuls of dirt into the open grave. Pablo's grandmother leaned against him, while he stroked her scant white hair. Shari wanted to reach out and take them all into her arms, to tell them how sorry she was about Toby. The tears she'd been holding back flowed down her face.

The funeral over, Alejo drove them to Toby's house where the mourners were invited to meet with the family. On the way, they passed gated, multi-storey villas with stucco, glazed windows and balconies, even domes, built alongside dilapidated shacks, makeshift dwellings literally falling apart. Walls consisted of hanging sheets, towels or blankets, propped up pieces of discarded, weather-beaten plywood or sheets of broken metal. Windows and doorways stood open to the elements. Shari shook her head in disbelief.

Carlos turned around from the front passenger's seat and spoke in a subdued voice, "I'm sorry I left the church early. Couldn't stand that religious crap a moment longer."

"That's okay. I know what you mean." He really understands, she thought.

Alejo continued to drive northwards, away from the ocean. After a while the paved road became nothing more than a gravel path. The old Volkswagen shook, rattled and bounced along. Finally they came to a stop. In front of them stood a lopsided wooden structure with a corrugated iron roof and tattered curtains hanging on the doorways. In the dirt yard with its torn wire fencing, a couple of rickety tables and shabby chairs had been set up. A scrawny chicken scratched in the dirt and a scruffy mongrel dog stretched under the table. A brick stove heated by a wood fire stood near the back door. Alejo sauntered over to a table and set down the dish of empanadas alongside plates of tacos, burritos, salsa and sweets brought by the other guests.

Carlos put his arm around Shari. A warm sensation flooded her chest and she felt herself blush. He handed the bottle of tequila to Pablo and Maria who stood side by side greeting people.

"*Vamos a echarle de menos,*" he said, and embraced both of Toby's children.

“*Gracias*,” said Maria.

“Yes, he’ll be missed by many,” agreed Alejo. Carlos poured tequila into a small paper cup and handed it to Shari. Never having tried tequila straight, she hesitated, but finally gulped it down. The fiery liquor burned as it hit her stomach. She wouldn’t need more than one to feel a buzz.

“*Cómo está su abuela?*” Carlos asked Pablo.

“*No bien.*” Pablo pointed to a doorway from which a dry hacking could be heard. Must be the grandmother.

Carlos stood dejectedly by Pablo, while Shari snuck to the door and peeked through a gap in one of the curtains covering the entrance. The shack consisted of one large room scantily furnished. Rosita lay on a cot in one corner, her body racked with coughs. She had difficulty imagining how Toby, his children and mother could all live in this confined space.

Immediately to the right of the front door where Shari stood, a dented chest of drawers held a photo of Toby and his wife and another of five young children. A bunch of marigolds in a glass jar, a plate of tacos, a smooth rose-colored stone and a thumb-sized metal ornament of a man on a donkey completed the arrangement. Two small candles burned on each end.

Alejo wandered over to Shari carrying a plate of food. “Marie put together this modest memorial to her father. It’s nothing compared to the *ofrendas* prepared for the Day of the Dead, but she didn’t want to wait until then to do something to honor him.”

“Day of the Dead?”

“You haven’t heard of it? It’s quite the celebration, for loved ones who have died.” Alejo bit into a taco. “On November 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> of each year, Mexicans believe the dead come back to visit the living. You should see the amazing altars—they call them *ofrendas*—that families create to welcome the returning spirits.”

“Is it an indigenous custom?”

“Yes, it has deep roots in both the Aztec and Mayan cultures, although in more recent times, the Christians have wormed their way into the celebrations.”

So the dead come back, Shari thought, sort of like her ghosts, although hers seemed to have moved in, rather than just visiting. She knew how Maria felt. On her bookshelf back home, Shari had placed photos of her mother and some of her precious possessions. She hadn’t thought of it as an altar before. There sat her mother’s scrolled Italian music box, where she’d kept her eighteen-carat gold jewellery. It played *Arrivederci Roma* when Shari wound the key. Propped up against the wall was one of Fanny’s sketches—of the primulas in her beloved rock garden—and beside it, a journal she wrote for Shari describing her life in Italy before they came to Canada. Her mother’s clear blue vase resided in a corner, always filled with fresh flowers. In summer Shari picked perennials from the garden: pink peonies and roses, purple phlox and chrysanthemums. Each took a turn in the vase, and in the winter, she bought her mother’s favourite flower, alstroemeria. Would Grant remember to refill the vase while she was away?

But what did it really matter? Her mother’s most precious belongings wouldn’t last forever. Over time the music box would no longer play its tune, and the pages of the journal would turn yellow and disintegrate. But even before this happened, in all likelihood, Shari’s grandchildren, if she ever had any, would no longer remember the value of these artifacts—all that was left of her mother’s life. They’d be given away to strangers or thrown away. Nothing would remain. One day her great grandchildren might sit on a couch turning the pages of an old photo album and come across her mother’s photo. They’d stare at the unfamiliar face of a woman in dated clothes with high cheekbones, long curly hair and warm brown eyes. “She’s beautiful. Do you know who she is?” someone would ask. The others would shake their heads.

Alejo interrupted Shari’s grim reflections on the future. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, returned to the present and said, “May I ask you something about the funeral?”

“Sure. What would you like to know?” Alejo set his plate down and tilted his head to the side.

“Towards the end of the service, before the priest did his thing with the holy water and incense, did you see anything unusual?”

Alejo raised his eyebrows. “Like what?”

“Like a light...Oh, never mind. I must have imagined it.” Shari’s shoulders slumped. She looked down at the dirt and weeds covering the ground.

Alejo wrinkled his brow and started to speak, but was interrupted by Carlos, who had been circulating among the guests. He touched Shari’s shoulder. “We won’t stay long. Have a bite to eat, otherwise they’ll be insulted.” She took one of Alejo’s empanadas, broke off a small piece and lifted it to her mouth. Somehow she managed to swallow, but she could barely taste it. Her stomach burned in protest, but it wasn’t the food.

They drove south on the unpaved, bumpy roads leading back to the main highway to PV. Shari mulled again over the strange light she’d seen at the funeral, while Carlos remained silent and Alejo babbled.

Carlos finally spoke. “Alejo and I will head to our afternoon classes after we drop you off. We can’t do much about the rally until the steering committee approves our plans tomorrow evening. So I thought maybe we could meet at Beans and Books Saturday morning?”

Shari rubbed her left shoulder and struggled to keep her eyes open. “That sounds good. I could use a day to recover.” She yawned.

“You probably haven’t seen the new farmers market at Lázaro Cárdenas Park.” Carlos gazed at her expectantly. “If you like, we could wander around afterwards.”

“Sure. So ten o’clock Saturday morning?”

“Yes, I’ll text to remind you.”



As soon as Shari got in the door, she threw herself on the couch, relieved to be back in the condo. Since she'd remembered to close the shades, the room was cool and inviting. Still, she switched on the overhead fan to move some air about. The funeral and all the emotions it evoked had exhausted her. She needed a siesta to recover. She removed her funeral clothes, and after a quick shower, (the ghosts were subdued for once) she draped herself in a sarong and poured a tall glass of ice water. She really needed a nap. But first she wanted to call Grant. A couple of days had passed since their heated exchange. He'd still be at work, but if she were lucky she could probably catch him in his office. She perched on a kitchen stool and dialed the familiar number. Thank goodness Ana had installed an international phone line. The phone rang, and rang again. "Hello," he finally answered.

"It's me."

"How are you doing?" Grant hesitated. "Are you having a good time?"

"It's been different. Today I went to a funeral."

"Really? A funeral?" Silence at the other end of the line. "But you don't know anyone in PV except for Ana." Shari thought about Toby, Carlos, Alejo. And Rita.

"It's difficult to explain. I'll tell you about it when I get back. What's new in Calgary?"

"We had some problems with our database, but I think we've finally sorted it out. My secretary's such a gem."

Great! Young, sexy and indispensable as well. Shari felt her shoulders tighten.

Grant continued. "Josie called in a brilliant IT friend who got us up and running. So what plans do you have while you're there?"

She really wasn't going to tell him. He'd just give her a hard time. "I'm going to try and relax swim, sit in the sun. Maybe do a bit of shopping...Nothing too exciting."

"Oh, by the way, I bumped into your old boss today, Jean MacNiven. She asked me to tell you

that Connie has dropped out.”

Shari put her hand over her mouth in dismay. “Oh no! I should have been there for her. She’ll end up back on the street.”

“You can’t save the world Shari. You did all you could for her.”

She hated it when he took that sanctimonious tone with her. She bit down on her lip, gulped some water and took a deep breath. “Well it clearly wasn’t enough. Listen, I’ve got to go. I’m going to take a nap.”

“You’ll be okay on your own?” Grant asked.

He didn’t think she could manage without him? Well he was so wrong. “I’m fine. It’s doing me good to spend some time alone.” Sort of alone. “Talk to you later.”

“Right.” Grant hung up.

Shari held the phone in her hand, frowning. She hadn’t told Grant about Carlos or the demonstration. He’d only have tried to stop her, although he should know after all these years that when she made up her mind, he couldn’t change it. But he’d have tried anyway. The truth was they were both stubborn.

Poor Connie, Shari thought, as she made her way to the bedroom. If she hadn’t retired, she could have helped her stay in school. Before she’d pulled her life together, Connie had been on the streets of the Beltline looking for johns. She’d be tempted to go back to prostitution, and if she didn’t, could find herself homeless. As might the beach vendors if their meager income became any less. There may even be more tragedies like Toby’s. But not if she could help it!

Shari sprawled across the king size bed, the palm trees trembling outside her window. Before drifting off to sleep, she closed her eyes and could see again the bright light in the church streaming onto the coffin. Was...was Toby trying to send her a message?

**Chapter Eleven – First Friday: Dinner with Rita**

The next morning Shari lounged on the beach while the sun beat down on a brown pelican perched on a nearby rock. She caught her breath as he spread his wings, rose into the sky and soared over the ocean. Then he dove like a missile into the water and speared a fish. As she watched in awe, Shari wiggled her toes in the wet sand.

She'd found a folding chair in the condo, dragged it down the steps to the beach and plunked herself under a palapa. She was pleased to see it wasn't too hot yet. As the tide came in, the waves rolled against the shore. She should've thought of this before rather than sitting by the pool. As a bonus maybe she'd avoid bumping into Rita.

She felt much better for having taken it easy yesterday after the funeral. She had a siesta, swum in the pool and spent a quiet evening in the condo, eating a light supper on the balcony. By ten she was already asleep. Following a long and dreamless night, she woke up feeling rested for the first time since she got here. Now as the ocean breeze rippled through her hair, she sighed with contentment. Then she thought about her mother, and frowned.

Just eighty-one—that's how old her mother had been when she died of breast cancer. Now she was frozen in time. She'd never see another birthday. When her mother was first diagnosed, Shari begged her to come to Calgary and live with them. But her mother refused. "I've lived here most of my life. I can't bear to leave." Nothing Shari said could change her mind.

She regretted not having visited her mother more often after they'd moved to Calgary. When the cancer spread, Shari went to stay with her in the brick row house on Ossington Avenue in Toronto's Little Italy. Grant and the kids planned to join her later, but they never made it in time. Her mother died in hospital just days after Shari arrived. It brought back memories of her father David's horrific death decades before.

He'd been a newspaper reporter in Rome. When he arrived in Toronto, he got a job in an Italian deli. He loved his customers and wanted to write a book about them someday. He never had the chance. He'd gone for a quick beer after work. The police came to their house that night to tell them about the fight, in which he somehow got in the way. Her mother started to scream, a horrifying cry that went on and on as if it would never stop. His head had smashed into the bar counter and he died instantly. Only thirty-eight—Shari brushed a tear from her cheek.

From then on, life became even more of a struggle for her family. When they first came to Canada, her mother earned money cleaning, but after her husband died, she went back to high school and enrolled in a secretarial school in hopes of getting a better job. Shari remembered the time she'd scrimped and saved to buy a coat, to try to keep from always being so cold in the winter. But the synthetic coat the salesclerk talked her into buying wasn't warm at all. One frigid evening after class, she decided to take a short cut through the cemetery wearing her new coat. It was dark, and she got lost.

"How could I have let it happen!" she said. "I've never been so cold in my life! *Porco miseria!* It wasn't enough that I had to live in this freezing country, now I couldn't even find my way home." She lowered her voice and continued. "From their graves, I could feel the dead surround me, mocking me with their silence. You should have seen me shiver, and this time it wasn't from the cold."

Nearly a year ago her mother had been buried in that same cemetery. And now she would never find her way out again. Shari couldn't bear to dwell on the past anymore. She picked up her book and started reading, hoping to forget.

She was reapplying sunscreen onto her arms and legs when footsteps approached. Glancing up, she saw Rita standing over her with a broad grin on her face. "Hi there Sharon!"

“Hello Rita.” *I must be nice. She saved me from being locked out of my condo all night. I must be nice.*

“Are you enjoying your holiday?”

“Sun, ocean, pelicans—what more could one want?”

“Listen, Hon. I’m going for dinner to the *Bella Vista* tonight. It’s about a twenty minute walk south of here along the beach. The sunset from their deck is amazing! If you haven’t made other plans, why don’t you join me? It’d be fun to spend the evening together.” Rita licked her lips.

Oh no, really? An evening with Rita? Shari hesitated. But she was alone, probably lonely, and she owed her.

“Okay, I’m on.” *Although I’m likely going to regret it.*

Back in the condo Shari made a salami, cheese and tomato sandwich for lunch and had just taken a bite, when her cell phone dinged. Ana had texted her. *Good time to call?*

She texted back: *Call you in ten.* Shari finished her sandwich, poured herself a cup of coffee and dialed Ana’s number. She answered on the second ring.

“Hi. What’s up?” Shari asked.

“Not much here, that’s for sure. What’s happening there? Have you seen the revolutionary again?”

“Yes, I went with Carlos and his friend Alejo to Toby’s funeral yesterday.” Shari took a sip of coffee, set down the cup and twisted a strand of hair with her free hand. “That was tough.”

“I bet. What was Alejo like?”

“He’s very gay.”

“Is Carlos...?”

“Not in the least.”

“So are you going to see Carlos again?” Ana sounded envious.

“Oh yes, because—you’ll love this—we’re organizing a rally.”

Silence at the other end of the phone, followed by a screech. “Really? In Mexico? I’d love to be there for that. What’s the cause?”

“The government is clamping down on the beach vendors, trying to put them out of business. And they barely make a living as it is.”

“What are they proposing to do?”

A deep groove formed on Shari’s brow. “They want to close off Los Muertos and all beaches south of there.”

“That’s terrible! When will the rally take place?” Shari could almost see Ana’s eyes sparkle. “Remember what a great time we had in the late seventies when we protested against Darlington. God, I loved it. Not fair. I want to be there.”

“Carlos and I will prepare some communications material and spread the word. We need a large turnout. The demonstration takes place next Wednesday, so not a lot of time, particularly if we want any media coverage.” Silence again at the other end of the line. “Ana, are you there?”

“I was thinking. Shari, if I can get the time off, would you mind if I came to PV next week? I’ve gotten to know some of the beach vendors over my years in PV. The government’s plan to restrict their access to the beach will be a real blow. I’d really like to be there for the rally. Please say yes.”

“Of course. You’re welcome to come anytime. It’s your condo. And you’d get to meet Carlos if you come earlier.” Shari’s voice faded as she thought of Ana and Carlos.

*“Hell no, we won’t go! Hell no, we won’t go! Remember that? Have you got a chant ready?”*

“Ah, no, I forgot about chanting. I’ll talk to Carlos about it. Maybe they don’t do chants in Mexico.”

“Maybe they should. Let me work on the chant! Then I’ll be contributing in some way.”

“Sure, don’t see why not. Text it to me as soon as possible, and I’ll forward it to Carlos. It’s a terrific idea.”

“I’ll meet with my boss this afternoon and see if I can talk her into letting me take the extra time off. I earned it with the umpteen hours I put in for our recent fundraiser. There’s a Tuesday charter flight to PV I can try and book. It would get me there early in the afternoon.”

“Terrific! It’ll be great to have you here.” Why did the thought of Ana coming make her feel nauseous?

“Those poor beach vendors! I really hope I can be there to help.” Ana paused. “And I’d love to meet Carlos.” She giggled.

“Well, let me know if you can make it work. Talk to you soon.” Shari frowned as she hung up the phone.

As Shari and Rita strolled south on the beach towards Bella Vista, the flaming sun hung low, ready to make its nightly escape below the horizon. Rita’s thin frame was draped in a yellow sundress with a scalloped hem. Maybe she was anorexic? Shari was dressed much more casually in a purple crinkle cotton top hanging over black silk capris that she hoped made her look slim. Sandals dangled from their hands as they shuffled their feet through the sand. Occasionally a wave swept across their bare legs. In the distance towards Mismayola rose the ever impressive Los Arcos, the towering, arched rock formation where tourists went to scuba dive and snorkel. As they walked, Shari noticed the coastline had changed. The long standing whimsical bed and breakfast designed to look like a Roman ruin still stood, but many of the existing structures had been knocked down. Rows of starkly designed, white condominiums had sprung up all along the beach. Shari really didn’t like them.

“Don’t you hate these new designs Sharon?” asked Rita.

Shari's mouth fell open. "Yes. They're so ugly." My god, they agreed on something! "By the way, you can call me Shari."

They sat at a table on the lower deck as close to the water as one could get. Shari admired the open air restaurant with its thatched roof. She felt as if she were on a ship. All they could see were rocks and the ocean stretching far into the distance, the offensive condos hidden from sight. Small piñatas hung from the beams and clay figures decorated the posts: a seahorse, a butterfly, a turtle and an iguana lined up overhead. With a *grande* margarita in front of her, and an equally large martini in Rita's hand, Shari started to relax. The evening might not be so bad after all.

"Waiter, waiter," shouted Rita. "They're so incredibly slow. They shouldn't expect a tip from me." Shari reconsidered—or maybe not.

She slid down in her chair. "It's a bit crowded and I only see a couple of waiters. But we're not in a hurry are we? We want to be here when the sun goes down." Rita grimaced in response.

The waiter dashed down the stairs and hurried to their table, order pad and pencil in hand. "Sorry to make you wait. Are you ready to order?" He gave them a warm smile.

Rita glared at him. "About time. I'll have the filet mignon, rare. What does it come with?"

"Rice and green beans. Very nice." The waiter said shifting from one foot to the other.

"I'd like a baked potato and salad instead. Can you manage that?" Rita flipped back her straight, bleached hair.

The waiter knew better than to argue. "And you señorita?" he asked Shari.

"The *Bella Vista* catch of the day *por favor*...and another margarita. *Gracias*." She'd like to ask what kind of fish was on offer that evening, but Rita had caused enough trouble for both of them. The waiter retrieved the menus and scampered away. The sun, now a huge fiery red ball, hung close to the horizon. A few wispy clouds stretched across the sky.



Shari tried to get the evening back on track. “So I can tell from your accent you’re from the southern United States, but where exactly is home?”

“I live in Texas now,” Rita said, crossing her legs. “It’s been home for the last 20 years, but I was born in Canada—Edmonton, Alberta.”

Shari stifled a gasp. “Really? I’m from Calgary.”

“Go on! I met my husband George when he came to Alberta on a business trip. He worked in the oil business. I was a secretary for the company president he’d come to see.” Rita scowled. “Of course, George turned out to be a huge mistake. He knows how to make money, but he has the morals of an alley cat.” Shari didn’t know what to say. Was Grant a mistake as well?

A few clouds floated over the ocean as the sun dropped yet further. Rita changed the subject. “I don’t know about Calgary, but in Texas we’ve been having problems with the growing number of immigrants, mostly Mexicans. They’re everywhere, particularly in the restaurants and hotels.”

She just gets worse and worse, doesn’t she? What will she come up with next? Shari raised her eyebrows. “What’s wrong with immigrants filling some of our employment needs?”

“They’re taking away jobs that Americans need, that’s what’s wrong.” Rita’s voice grew louder. “More than half of the Mexicans live in the States illegally.” She leaned forward, her nostrils flaring. “And most of them get paid ‘off the books’. So they don’t contribute their fair share of taxes.”

No use telling Rita about the rally. She’d organize a counter-demonstration. Shari stifled a sigh of relief as their waiter walked up to the table with their food, and thank god, another margarita. She bit into the fish grilled a golden brown. Was it red snapper? The flaky flesh tasted of chilies and butter. Yum!

“Hey, waiter, just a minute.” Rita crossed her arms. The waiter returned and gaped at her with apprehension. “This steak is not even close to rare.” She pushed the plate towards him. Red juices oozed from the meat.

The waiter scratched his head. “But, but...” He picked up the plate and scooted away. The sun set and a fleeting green flash filled the sky. Shari gasped. She’d finally seen it.

Rita leaned across the table and smiled. “Bless your heart. Haven’t you seen the green flash before? They say that it’s supposed to bring you luck in love. But it hasn’t worked for me.”

Somehow Shari got through the rest of supper. Then they hailed a taxi and headed back to their condo complex. High tide made the beach route back impassable, and at any rate, Shari wanted to get home as fast as she could. The driver chatted with them in Spanish and a bit of broken English. “*Buen tiempo. Mucho sun. Hot.*” He smiled tentatively. Rita ignored him.

In a few minutes they were driving down the bumpy, steep road to their complex and soon were at the gate. Shari wondered how long these cars lasted travelling continuously as they did on these rocky streets.

“*Cuánto cuesta?*” asked Rita.

“Sixty pesos.”

“No, that’s wrong. It should be fifty pesos.” The difference was less than a dollar! Rita handed over a fifty peso note and stormed out of the taxi. Shari discreetly handed the driver an extra twenty pesos.

Shari bolted the front door to the condo, relieved to be back. Her cell phone dinged. A text from Ana. *I get to come! Tuesday afternoon flight. Be at the condo by 1:00 p.m. Here’s the chant: Whose beaches? Our beaches. No, No, Nieto. Can’t wait!*

Hmm, not a bad chant. She texted back: *What about a slogan for the poster?*

It really would be great to have Ana here. But what would she think of Carlos? And what would

Carlos think of her friend? It was still early, but she was exhausted, ready for bed. It must have been the margaritas—and Rita. She headed for the bathroom.

As she lay in the hot bath, the tension in her back disappeared. As usual the dead kept her company. They'd never caused her any stress. Rusty had appeared first, had been with her since she was a child. Then shortly after Danny died, he joined her dead cat in the bathroom, and last year, her mother. She'd been so glad to see her! It wasn't the same as when she was alive, of course. They couldn't talk to each other. And trying to give her a hug was a huge disappointment—all she encountered was empty air. But she liked the company, even found it soothing to have her dead loved ones appear instead of completely vanishing.

She failed to figure out why her father never showed up. Nor why Toby had recently joined the others, when she barely knew him. She would have difficulty describing to anyone what form they took. They appeared so real to her, as if they'd stepped out of the past, unchanged, always dressed in the same familiar clothes, her mother in the maroon housecoat Shari bought her when she was ill, her brother in one of his favourite black t-shirts and jeans. Yet in other ways, they seemed no more than an unbidden fantasy that decided to stay. They never, ever threatened her in any way. Maybe ghost was the wrong word? She didn't feel haunted.

Toby was different though. He clearly didn't appear because of her wishful thinking. And he made her feel uncomfortable. How could he have popped out of her head before she even knew about his death? She really couldn't figure that one out. Her eyes opened wide as something occurred to her. Maybe Toby wasn't any different from her other apparitions? Maybe they were all real ghosts instead of manifestations of her overactive imagination? How would she be able to tell?

"You know why." Who said that? She looked up at the ceiling. Her mother, Toby, and Danny with Rusty in his arms, hovered randomly above her. She sank deeper into the bath water. "You know why?" someone said again. Toby stared at her with accusing eyes. Shari nearly leapt out of

the tub. This wasn't right. They had never said anything before. "Why Toby?" she whispered. But Toby only glared back.

Tension clung onto her shoulders once again. She pulled herself out of the water, shaking, grabbed a towel, and not even stopping to dry herself, rushed out of the bathroom and slammed the door behind her.

## Chapter Twelve – First Friday: Carlos

At the beachside bar Encuentro, Carlos sat alone sipping a Pacifico, remembering when he first met Shari there. He smiled when he recalled how she'd tried to dance despite drinking too many margaritas. Near his table a mariachi band tuned their instruments and tested the sound system. The steering committee meeting had ended sooner than he'd expected. They'd asked him to oversee the communications: prepare the posters, flyers and media releases and spread the word. Alejo assured him his students would help, particularly with social media. 'Is that really necessary?' had been the committee's response when he proposed having Shari involved in the rally. They finally agreed she could be included, as long as she remained in the background. The other contentious issue had been the speakers. The committee members urged Carlos to speak, but he didn't want to. He agreed to think about it. As soon as they reached consensus that each labor union would be represented at the podium, the rest of the details fell into place without dispute.

Carlos stuck his pipe in his mouth and thought about Shari again. Why had he let her get so close when he knew it wasn't safe, especially now that he was back in the game? He wasn't sure how he felt about having gotten tangled up in the demonstration. He'd gotten out because he couldn't stand the stress anymore. Of course, it hadn't been entirely his decision. He'd been a rebel for so many years, he felt lost not being part of the fight. And when he saw poverty and suffering, he could never refuse to help. He believed in a nonviolent revolution where change took place at the grassroots level, but it seemed impossible, no matter how hard he tried, to avoid bloodshed. It was only a rally, but it could get ugly. It wouldn't be the first time the police used force. And being a foreigner Shari was even more at risk.

He still wasn't sure what to make of Shari. She was smart and sexy, with those tantalizing curves and long curly hair that he pictured, not for the first time, freeing from the ponytail she usually wore. When he'd kissed her, he wanted more. But something held him back. She was

evasive when he asked her if she were married. Was she really available? All the signals suggested she was attracted to him. Yet something didn't feel quite right. Maybe he didn't want to know. He shook his head. He should be more cautious, if he didn't want to get hurt again. Carlos waved to the waiter. "*La cuenta por favor.*"

His chest tightened as he thought about the funeral. Watching them lower Toby into the cold ground, he felt responsible. He knew it wasn't his fault. Yet if the revolution had succeeded and brought change, his friend would still be alive. He closed his eyes and pictured Toby cultivating his small plot of land with a horse and hand plow. He'd worked hard, but always took time to laugh with friends and family. Now he was dead, and he could never go back home.

Carlos had fought most of his life to bring Toby and other peasants like him the dignity and justice they deserved. They had so little to start with. And then corn prices plummeted. Those damn Americans and their trade agreements! Like so many others, Toby hadn't any choice but to abandon the land. He'd become just another displaced and impoverished urban worker crowded into a shanty town where hungry children walked barefoot on dirt floors. No wonder he couldn't take it anymore. He wasn't the first. And he wouldn't be the last.

His survival instinct, having been fine-tuned in the jungle, made Carlos glance up. At a secluded table at the back of the bar sat two nasty looking thugs. A thin Mexican man with a shaved head and small mean eyes was tugging on his handlebar mustache. He might be mistaken, but his nose looked as if it had been broken, more than once. His hefty friend, over six feet tall and at least three hundred pounds of muscle, wore round dark glasses and tugged on a cap that partially hid his face. His beefy arms bulged from a black tank top. They seemed to be watching him. And their stares weren't friendly. Paramilitary? They weren't in uniform, but he could recognize those assholes anywhere. A coincidence? Not likely. The government had wanted to get rid of him for a long time. Shivers ran down his back. He gulped the last of his beer and threw some pesos on the table. The

goons had planted themselves near the kitchen, so he couldn't leave the back way. He eyed the main entrance facing the beach, then the side exit onto the road, closer to where he was sitting. The brawny thug stood up and glared, menacingly. Then his slim companion got up from the table as well. Both rushed towards him.

Carlos leapt up and raced out the side exit into the street, past the mariachi band singing their first song, "*Corazón Corazón*". The paramilitary duo dashed after him. A taxi stopped across the street. He breathed a sigh of relief. Fuck! A couple of tourists opened the cab door and slowly got in. He tore towards Olas Altas, the main street a couple of blocks away. The pounding of heavy footsteps followed him and shouts for him to stop. "*Alto, inmediatamente!*"

Was this how it would all end? After all this time avoiding his destiny? His heart was racing. Once on Olas Altas, he darted in and out of the crowd of tourists strolling down the busy street. He nearly bumped into a small girl selling wooden creatures with bobbing heads. He glanced behind him, breathing heavily. Would they dare try and kill him with so many witnesses? Of course, they would. They were just minions of the police. Sweat ran down his face.

Carlos tried to avoid the hot dog vendor, but was going too fast. He crashed into the cart with a clang. His head spun from the impact, but he couldn't afford to stop. Tourists stared as he sprinted on, weaving in and out of the crowd. He looked behind again. They were getting closer, too close.

As he dashed across the street, a taxi screeched to a stop, almost hitting him. Thank god! Carlos breathed a sigh of relief.

The driver yelled from the window. "Hey, you could have been killed!"

"You don't know how right you are! Just get me out of here." Carlos jumped in, yanked the door shut, and the taxi driver sped away. When Carlos looked back, he could see his two pursuers waving their fists at him. Then he saw it. The thin man with the mustache held something in his right hand. Shit! But why should he be surprised? The bastard had a gun.

### Chapter Thirteen – First Saturday: At the Farmer’s Market

Shari slouched in the back seat of the taxi taking her to meet Carlos while she read a text from Ana with a slogan for the poster. *Keep our beaches open*. Yes, that would do. She texted back her approval. Then she thought about the protest next week. It was time to start spreading the word. “*Habla Inglés?*” she asked the driver. He hadn’t said a word to her since he’d picked her up at the condo. Maybe he didn’t speak English?

“A leetle. My son teach me.” He turned around and grinned.

“Have you heard what the government plans to do to the beach vendors?”

“Beach vendors, okey dokey. *Muy bien*. No have to pay taxi license, gas. Cost mucho pesos.”

Really? “But they’ll keep them off Los Muertos Beach. Don’t you think that’s terrible?”

“*No pasa nada*. Gringos tell me no like vendors.”

Well, that didn’t go very well. Unless the public sympathized with the beach vendors more than this guy did, there wouldn’t be much of a turnout. Although you’d think the beach vendors themselves would at least show up. They pulled up to the edge of Lázaro Cárdenas Park, packed with tourists wandering through the farmers market. The scene presented a sharp contrast to the empty Mercado Municipal where she’d shopped the other day. Booths with artisan bread, homemade salsas and jams, pies, honey, and crafts of all kinds, dotted the park. A local flower vendor had almost been cleaned out, with only a few mixed bouquets left of alstroemeria and lilies. Shari strolled through the grounds searching for Carlos. A mouth-watering aroma came from stalls that sold tacos, barbecued sausages and empanadas.

She sat for a moment on a wrought iron bench and watched the crowd. Most of those who passed by appeared to be at least sixty-five, many older, some even walked with canes. One woman with shoulder-length curly hair, completely gray, caught Shari’s eye as she strolled by. Permanent frown lines creased her forehead. *Another ten years and that will be me*. The elderly patrons made



Shari feel young, by comparison, although she was well aware that it was only a matter of time before she'd fit right in. And time continued to fly by, faster and faster every day.

Her cell phone dinged. It was Carlos. *Where are you?*

Shari texted back: *At the market. Where are you?*

Carlos replied: *Beans and Books.*

Right, she remembered now. *I'll be right there.*

Shari rushed into the coffee shop. Carlos was sitting on the patio shuffling through some papers on the table in front him, frowning. When he looked up at her, his eyes lit up. He was even sexier than she recalled. He radiated an intensity she found irresistible. Add a beard, a mustache and he could almost be mistaken for Che Guevara. On the table in front of him he had a folder full of papers and a tall cup of coffee. "Hi," she said. "Sorry. I got sidetracked by the market. It's quite wonderful, isn't it? Let me order a coffee and we can get started."

Minutes later, coffee in hand, Shari sat across from Carlos and glanced at him shyly.

He set his pipe and tobacco pouch on the table. "So the good news is the steering committee has left it up to us to prepare the written material we'll need for the rally, which is just as well since we have so little time." Carlos filled his pipe with tobacco, tamped down on the top and lit it. "I've got a draft media release and public service announcement for you to look over and have jotted down some ideas for a poster. The flyer will simply be a smaller version of the poster." He took a puff.

"What's the bad news?" Shari asked.

"The steering committee doesn't mind if you help, in fact, they appreciate the offer—as long as you lay low. They don't like gringos getting involved in protests. They figure it's a Mexican problem and they should be the ones fixing it. Besides, it's not safe."

Shari's face fell. "But my friend will be coming earlier than planned, just so that she can be at

the rally. You don't know Ana. It will be impossible to keep her quiet."

Carlos snapped. "Maybe the two of you shouldn't come to the protest at all. You don't know what it's like in Mexico. It can get extremely dangerous."

Wow. Shari hadn't seen him angry before, at least not at her. "We can handle it. This won't be our first protest." She crossed her arms.

"This is Mexico. Are you aware you could end up in jail?"

"But Ana's even written a chant: *Whose beaches. Our Beaches. No, No, Nieto*. Pretty good, don't you think?"

Carlos shook his head. "It's in English."

"We could have a Spanish chant as well. Don't you want the tourists supporting you?" Shari sighed in frustration.

Carlos glared at her. "And how much will the politicians care about a few tourists who can't vote for them? Look this isn't my decision, but it's the right decision. You and your friend agree to keep a low profile, or better yet, don't come to the rally at all."

Shari pressed a fist to her mouth and shifted in her seat. Did she have any choice? "Agreed. We'll keep our heads down. But it's a mistake. You underestimate us. So show me what you've got drafted." She sipped her coffee and shuffled through the papers. Carlos translated for her. "This looks great, but Ana has a slogan that should really be on the poster..."

Shari was strolling through the farmer's market again, this time with Carlos by her side. When they walked out of the Beans and Books, she'd tried not to gloat. She'd managed to get the rally information added to the poster in English as well as Ana's slogan: *Keep our Beaches Open*. After a heated discussion, Carlos agreed to include a graphic of the clickety-clackety duck vendor on the poster. She sketched the likeness as best as she could remember.

Carlos examined the drawing and nodded his head. “I’ll take the text and sketch over to Alejo’s students this afternoon. They’ll make the posters look pretty and get them printed for us.”

Now as they browsed the market, Shari waggled her finger at Carlos. “Don’t forget, I’m handing out the flyers and putting up the posters in the Romantic zone as soon as you get them to me...What is that heavenly smell?” She breathed in deeply. In front of them a booth sold artisan bread. She grabbed Carlos’ arm and dragged him to the back of the long line.

He grinned. “Alejo did say they made some wonderful bread at the market. I’ll bring him back a loaf.” He stretched his neck towards the front of the line where straw baskets overflowed with loaves of bread and buns, as well as sweet and savory empanadas. “And maybe we should get a couple of cinnamon buns?” Shari smiled and nodded.

Once through the bread line, Shari made a beeline for a booth selling fresh produce. By the time she was done, Carlos carried a bag holding leaf lettuce, some tomatoes, a couple of cucumbers and an onion. Two loaves of sourdough bread, one for Alejo, were tucked into Shari’s beach bag together with a couple of cinnamon buns and a small jar of pineapple jam. “Having me over for supper?” he joked.

Shari smiled. “Maybe.” Then distracted by a taco stand, she said, “This is probably all I need from the market. I’m famished. Would you like to have lunch?”

They approached a middle-aged Mexican vendor at one of the food stands lined up at one end of the market. The vendor wore a full white apron and flipped some sausages sizzling on the grill. Shari sniffed and ogled the sausages, but ordered a fish taco.

*“El taco. Carne de vaca, por favor,”* said Carlos. The vendor smiled broadly.

They brought the food to a picnic table shaded by a ficus tree. She dashed over to another booth to buy freshly squeezed lemonade. Back at the table with the drinks, she unwrapped her taco, took a bite and refocused on the rally. Was there anything they’d forgotten?

“What about social media?” she asked Carlos. “Who will get the message out on the internet?”

“I have a bit of experience with that.” He averted his eyes and touched his scar. “After I drop off the material to the students, I’ll spend the rest of today, and probably most of Sunday, setting up a Facebook page, emailing the media and politicians and blogging about the event.” He paused. “I could tweet if I had to, but I find it too time consuming. I really hope the students will take that on.”

“And what about banners and placards? You can’t have a rally without protest signs.”

Carlos eyes twinkled. “Stop fretting. There’s a subcommittee who will put those together.” He crossed his long legs and took a sip of the lemonade.

Just then a blues band began playing. A middle-aged gringo with a strawberry blonde fringe belted out a tune, backed by two accomplished Mexican guitarists. Soon Shari was tapping her foot.

Suddenly Carlos’ forehead wrinkled as he peered at the taco stand where they had recently bought lunch. Shari followed his gaze. Their vendor was waving his spatula at a burly fellow who wore a black hat pulled down over his eyes. The intruder reached into the backpack he carried. Then they scuffled, and the vendor yelled, “*Alejate de mi!*” Carlos stood up. Seconds later a loud bang rang out. The music stopped abruptly. Black smoke billowed through the air.

“What was that?” Shari leapt up, feeling the blood drain from her face. “It sounded like an explosion.” She pulled the keychain from her pocket and grasped it tightly. The vendor lay on the ground, mangled and bleeding, his metal grill beside him, bent like a crumpled piece of foil. “Oh my god! What happened? Did his propane tank blow up?”

Some people yelled, others cried, most were running away from the scene. Near the injured vendor, the man with the black hat and another evil-looking thug were arguing and gesticulating wildly. A pair of hostile eyes above a crooked nose glared at Shari. The beefy arm of the first man pointed at Carlos.

Carlos grabbed her hand. “It’s them! Let’s get out of here. Now!”

Shari flinched. “Who? What do you mean?”

Ignoring her question, Carlos yanked her up from the table, abandoning their lunch. Gripping Shari with one hand, and the produce bag with the other, he ran towards the new pedestrian walkway that led to the Malecon. They flew by the beachside restaurant where she had last seen Toby, almost knocking over some curious tourists who stared at them as they raced by. Shari could hear a siren screaming.

“Slow down! You’re hurting me!” she shouted as they moved ever further from the market. She grasped her bag, struggling not to drop it. Carlos continued to run, every once in a while glancing over his shoulder, grimacing and then running even faster. Shari looked behind her. She couldn’t see anyone chasing them.

When they reached the Malecon, Carlos wheeled sharply right. Still racing, he dragged Shari past the arches and amphitheatre, past the plaza and up the steep hill to the Lady of Guadalupe Cathedral.

Between panting breaths Shari said, “Stop...Why are we here? What’s going on?” Her hands shook and the tremors spread throughout her body.

Carlos didn’t answer until they were inside the cathedral and sitting on a pew in the front row. “I’m sorry. We needed to get somewhere safe.” He put his head between his hands and exhaled. Then he gazed up at Shari, his eyes full of tears. “It’s too dangerous. I should never have let you get involved.”

**Chapter Fourteen – First Saturday: After the Farmers' Market**

His head pounded as Carlos slouched against the window on a bus headed to the main university campus north of town. At least if he could smoke his pipe, but as usual, not allowed. He replayed the morning's events. Once they'd caught their breath, and he'd calmed down, he put a protesting Shari into a taxi and sent her back to the condo. "That's it. You're no longer part of the demonstration." But he hadn't counted on her stubbornness. He finally agreed to meet for supper Sunday evening and discuss it further. He hoped there were no more threats, but he was only kidding himself. If the bastards were daring enough to try and kill him at the crowded farmers' market, he probably wasn't safe anywhere.

The smartest thing to do, he knew, was to bring the material to the students and bail out. Head back home to the countryside, back to his modest dwelling, where he could sit at his desk by the window, open his computer and write his book. He'd love to immerse himself in a fictional world full of pretend instead of real dangers. Escape. That's what he wanted to do, but he felt ashamed to be even considering it.

What had happened to him? When had he lost the fierce courage that served him so well in the past, allowed him to lead men into combat, to face the enemy with impunity, to be willing to risk torture and even death for the cause he believed in? Like a coward, he'd fled the farmer's market after the explosion. Yet the thugs hadn't even pursued him.

No wonder he was gently nudged from the fold. "You've done your bit. Time to enjoy life now," they'd told him. "Let someone younger take over." They must have smelt his fear. Twice in as many days he'd been tested, and what did he do—he ran... But he couldn't continue to run. Tough as she was, Shari needed him. She was mixed up in a dangerous game that she wasn't familiar with and his departure wouldn't stop her from attending the rally. If something happened to her, it would be his fault—again, just like Yolanda. .

And then there were his students—the class had another week to go. If he left PV, he'd let them down and let Alejo down, who'd worked so hard to get him this job. And he'd promised the beach vendors to stop this damn neoliberal government from putting them out of business. He always kept his word.

Carlos remembered how it felt to be fighting for the exploited and oppressed indigenous people. Charged with adrenaline and a sense of righteousness, he'd marched fearlessly through the bush with small groups of guerillas, some armed with only sticks, outnumbered by the military or sometimes well-armed paramilitary troops sent by the government to defeat them. He shook his head, opened his eyes wide and stared out the bus window. What had Pessoa said? *I bear the wounds of all the battles I avoided*. Carlos saw what he had to do. There was no other choice.

###

When she got back to the condo, Shari crawled straight into bed. She woke up with the quilt and sheets still wrapped snugly around her, the doors and windows tightly closed and the air conditioner, that she usually avoided using, humming. She was still shaking. She looked at her watch—she'd slept for a couple of hours. It was now late afternoon.

Carlos must be mistaken. Why would someone try to kill them? Okay, so he'd been mixed up with protests in the past, and they planned to demonstrate against the government, but still. Surely the vendor's propane tank simply malfunctioned and blew up accidentally? Carlos surprised her. He seemed a bit of a scaredy cat for a revolutionary. And she'd gone right along with it. Really, this was silly. But on the other hand, he seemed to recognize those thugs that they saw in the market. Somehow, she didn't feel like laughing.

She threw off the blankets and leapt out of bed. She switched off the air conditioner and opened all the windows and the balcony doors—much better. What would she do with the rest of her day? She wouldn't meet Carlos again until tomorrow evening, so she'd have some time to herself. And

that's why she'd come to PV, to spend some time alone. But it hadn't quite worked out that way. She would go down to the pool, maybe not the beach. No use being foolhardy.

She walked down the hall and gingerly opened the bathroom door. Toby still liked to interrogate her, so she spent as little time in there as possible. Having a mirror in the bedroom helped. But of course, she couldn't entirely avoid the bathroom. He never said anything new, just kept repeating: "You know why." There they all stood, staring at her. Nothing had changed. Toby was still nattering. The others, her mother, Danny and Rusty, rallied around him like a silent Greek chorus. She dashed out of there as fast as she could.

As she waited to take the elevator down to the pool, the door slid open. *Oh no.* There stood Rita, wearing a beach cover up over her bikini, a towel draped on her arm.

"Hey, Shari! Wasn't that a blast yesterday? We'll have to do it again."

"Um, well ..." She joined Rita in the elevator. What choice did she have?

"By the way, did you hear about the jewellery party tomorrow afternoon?" Rita asked as they descended. "You know the pink stucco villa with the infinity pool in front of our complex?" The doors opened and Rita stepped out of the elevator onto the ground floor.

Shari followed her, then walked over to the arched window in the hallway and pointed to the vine-covered villa with stone trim and a clay tile roof just outside. "Is that where the party will be held?"

Rita nodded. "I know some of the condo owners remain angry about the villa having been built. It does obstruct the view on the other side of the building. But it doesn't affect me."

Shari had noticed the expansive villa. How could she miss it? From the outside, it appeared as luxurious as the villa on Santa Barbara she saw on her last visit to PV.

She'd been walking into town with Ana when they'd stumbled upon an open house.



“Wow! This is really something!” Ana said when they walked through the barred gates.

“Marble floors,” Shari noted, then gazed up at the towering ceilings, taking in the luxurious leather sectionals, the original art and pricey antique furniture.

Ana wandered out onto the terrace that ran from one side of the villa to the other. “Shari, come see!” Lush hibiscus and bougainvilleas filled the abundant terracotta pots grouped around the cushioned, luxury patio furniture. But most amazing of all, a seemingly endless ocean stretched into the distance—a view only the owners could see.

Rita gaped at Shari and asked, “Are you okay?” She seemed to have drifted off into the past again. When Shari nodded, Rita continued. “I met June, the villa owner, on the beach the other day. She’s invited me to a party, said I could bring someone. Why don’t you come?”

Some more competition for the beach vendors, Shari thought bitterly. “No, thanks but...”

“Oh come on. You can’t say no. It’ll be fun. Do you have other plans?”

Before Shari could say anything, Rita closed the deal. “Okay, that’s settled then. I’ll tell June you’re coming.” Shari stood with her mouth open as Rita sauntered off.

She couldn’t believe she’d let Rita talk her into going to the party! She wasn’t even sure how it happened. On the other hand, she didn’t have any plans for tomorrow, except in the evening when she was to have supper with Carlos. She wouldn’t mind seeing the interior of the villa and meeting the owner. There’d be lots of other guests, so she’d make a point of sitting as far away from Rita as possible.

As she stretched out by the pool with the hot sun beating down on her, Shari felt her body relax. She hadn’t heard from Grant. It wasn’t like him not to keep in touch. She supposed he was still angry that she went to Mexico alone. She felt a familiar, dull ache in her chest. What had happened to them?

They were so much in love when they met in England for the first time. It was 1980. She'd just completed her Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Toronto and worked the summer in Woolworth's pet department, where the fish kept dying no matter what she did. Since she still lived at home with her mother, by fall she'd saved enough to book a flight to London.

"Really Shari! Surely you don't want to go there? How will you manage on your own?" Her mother was hysterical.

"Oh Mom, leave her alone," said Danny, only thirteen at the time but already in the habit of defending his big sister. Nothing could have stopped her. She planned to visit London and then spend several months travelling through Europe.

Ana was so envious. She had enrolled in a Masters in English program that started in the fall. "I wish I could go with you," she complained.

Shari didn't mind going alone—she liked the idea. She planned to stay until she ran out of money, maybe longer, if she found a job. Then everything changed. Her first week in England, she met Grant and never got farther than London.

She was wandering through Portobello Market, searching for a flowered tea cup for her mother's collection, when she saw him. It started raining, and she ducked out from the crowds and into a store that sold vintage china. There he was leaning on a counter at the back surrounded by delicate tea pots. She was irresistibly drawn to his long jet black hair and serious blue eyes hidden by granny glasses. He wore a snug Stones t-shirt and blue jeans. Their eyes met. Afterwards, they admitted to each other that both felt an instant shock of recognition, as if they had known each other all their lives.

He pulled his glasses down over his small straight nose and smiled. "So what treasures are you searching for today?"

Later he told her he couldn't take his eyes away from her thick, auburn hair that rippled in curls down to her waist. "And your terrific legs," he added. Her legs continued to be one of her best features, she thought, not so prone to drooping like some of her other aging parts.

"You don't look like you belong here." She felt heat flood her face when she realized what she'd said. But he only laughed.

"Spot on," he said in his lovely British accent. "My friend had to go to a funeral, and I offered to look after the shop." They arranged to meet for supper when the market closed.

In a rustic pub in Bloomsbury, she learned he was born in York. He had a PhD in criminology from Cambridge and was writing a book on the impact of unemployment on recidivism. He figured it would help him get a teaching job at a university. He was cautious, logical, organized, and so sure of himself—everything Shari wasn't—but all that just made him more attractive.

They were drinking Darjeeling tea and sharing a slice of banoffee pie, a creamy concoction Shari had never tasted before, when Grant stared at her and smiled. "I live just a few blocks from here."

They raced to his small ground floor flat, ripped off their clothes as soon as they got in the door, jumped into bed and stayed there for the next twenty-four hours. They emerged in a satiated, foggy state and realized they were starving. As they devoured bangers and mash at the local pub, Grant paused between mouthfuls and said, "Move in with me." He looked as astonished as Shari felt. She'd only later realize how out of character this impulsive behavior was.

Now after almost thirty years of marriage, Grant drove her crazy by struggling over every small decision. "Should I wear the blue tie or the brown, Shari?" he'd ask. "What do you think?" His brow would wrinkle. "I hope we won't be sorry we've made a reservation at that new restaurant. Most of the reviews were great, but not all of them. Maybe we should cancel? It's not too late."

When they first met, Grant had acted quickly and decisively, and Shari hadn't hesitated either. She checked out of the youth hostel where she was staying. Grant helped her carry her suitcase and backpack to his flat. They were still together in December when John Lennon was murdered. His music filled the flat as they played "Imagine" over and over again, finding comfort in each others' arms, dancing around the small, sparsely furnished living room.

Shari missed those youthful days in London. She tried to recall their early relationship objectively. They had changed so much. Or had they? She didn't remember Grant being as impatient with her back then. Had he always been so critical? Certainly he hadn't said, "Do you always have to drop your clothes on the floor? Is it such an effort to put them away?" No, when they first met, he was more than pleased to have her take off her clothes. He could have cared less where she put them.

She was so young, but she didn't appreciate her youth back then, did she? At the time, she couldn't imagine getting older. She contemplated her body stretched out on the pool chair. Her legs were still her best feature, but there was a definite curve to her stomach that had developed in recent years, and her breasts weren't as firm as they used to be. If she were honest, they had started to sag. Shari tugged on her hair. She didn't need a mirror to know that it was getting thinner and grayer every day. She touched the creases on her neck and then stared at her hands. Why were there so many wrinkles? When had they started to look like those of an old woman? She would be fifty-six in February. Surely that wasn't so old? She tugged her hat over her face to stave off the sun's rays. The last thing she needed was to look even older.

She closed her eyes and Carlos popped into her mind, uninvited. But no wonder she couldn't stop thinking about him. He seemed to find her attractive in a way her husband no longer did. She couldn't help enjoying the flirtation. Carlos—he was so gorgeous, so sweet, and he made her feel

young. What was the harm? Okay, she'd kissed him. Twice. But what about the way she felt every time she saw him? "I want him," her body screamed. Her head intervened, "Now hang on a second..." but her body snapped back, "Just shut up!" If he kissed her again...where would it all lead? How would she be able to say no? But how could she even contemplate saying yes? What about her husband? Her children? She nibbled on a nail—the baby finger of her left hand—a bad habit she thought she'd overcome long ago.

A few minutes later, Shari gathered up her towel, sunscreen, hat and book and wandered back to the complex. When she walked through the door of Ana's condo, she longed to hear Grant's voice. Lately her feelings did nothing but confuse her. She felt as if her heart was being rallied back and forth like a tennis ball. Shari stood with the phone in one hand listening to it ring, yet one more time. He should still be in the office. It was only four o'clock in Calgary. Why wasn't he answering? She hung up and called Carlos instead. He answered on the first ring.

"Hi. It's Shari. I wanted to make sure you were alright."

"I'm okay, but thanks for being concerned." Carlos cleared his throat. "I've been thinking about the explosion. Maybe I overreacted. I don't understand why those thugs didn't follow us, but I still believe the explosion was meant for me. So listen, be careful. Now they've seen you with me, you're at risk as well. Keep your eyes open."

"What are you doing this afternoon?" Shari asked as she twirled the phone cord around with her free hand.

"I'm walking across campus on my way to meet with the students who'll be preparing the posters and flyers. I'll be briefing them on the rally as well, so they can take on some of the social media. No need for me to tweet, thank goodness. And Alejo will give me a ride home. What about you?"

"Sticking around the condo I guess. Maybe go for a swim." Through the balcony door the sun

and ocean beckoned.

“Listen,” Carlos said. “Before supper tomorrow would you like to meet me on the Malecon? There’s lots happening on Sundays—music, dancing, pantomime. And it all takes place by the square near city hall, where we’ll demonstrate on Wednesday. You’d get a feel for the space.”

“Sure, sounds like fun.”

“Say six, by the bandstand?” Carlos suggested. “That’s when the band starts playing.”

“You got it.” *I can’t wait to see him again.* “Don’t forget to bring me some flyers and posters. I still want to distribute them around the Romantic Zone. See you tomorrow.”

She hung up the phone. Where was Grant?

**Chapter Fifteen – Second Sunday: The Party**

Shari tilted her head to the side as she held up the new purple sundress she planned to wear that evening when she met Carlos for dinner. As she thought about Carlos, her stomach churned. *Focus, Shari*. She was sure Rita expected her to dress in more than just shorts and a t-shirt for the jewellery party that afternoon. She shook her head and tossed the dress onto the bed. She bought it to wear that evening, and she'd be damned if she'd sit on the terrace that afternoon and get it wrinkled and sweaty. She scanned the closet and pulled out a flared black skirt that just covered her knees. She'd forgotten packing it. It was made of light cotton, so it should be cool enough. Flipping through the hangers again, she chose a plum, short sleeve silk blouse and slipped both on. *Alright! Good to go*.

Shari had spent the morning relaxing by the pool, reading her Peter Robinson mystery book. Then she'd slipped into the water for a refreshing swim. A bit too refreshing, cold actually, since they didn't heat the pool until Easter when most of the owners were there. Or so Rita had told her. Back at the condo, she made herself a cheese, salami and tomato sandwich, drank another cup of strong Mexican coffee, and by then it was time to get ready for the party. The get together would be a distraction until that evening. She was eager to see Carlos again. She thought about her husband and felt a twinge of shame. Shouldn't she be consumed with guilt? Maybe this morning's phone call with Grant had something to do with how she felt.

Her brow wrinkled as she replayed the recent conversation. The phone had rung as she was about to head down to the pool.

"It's Grant. Have you been calling?"

"Where have you been?" was the first thing she said.

"What do you mean where have I been? Right here in frigid Calgary working my ass off."

Alongside your cute blonde secretary, Shari thought bitterly. How she hated all this squabbling.

“Let’s not fight, please. I tried to reach you yesterday at the office, and there was no answer.”

“I was out at a meeting with our funders most of the afternoon. Why were you calling?”

“Don’t you think I might just miss you?”

He scoffed. “You expect me to believe that?”

“Oh Grant. Why do you always have to be so unpleasant?”

“I’m not the one who took off. I’m not the one who’s unhappy all the time.”

“But that’s nothing to do with us! You know I’m still grieving for my mother.” Shari’s voice rose in frustration.

“So you say. Listen, I’ve got to go. I’m meeting Tom for brunch.”

“Go then! Why did you even bother calling back?” She banged down the phone. No matter what she did, the tension in her marriage simply wouldn’t go away. How had it all gone so wrong?

She hated the way her husband looked at his secretary with a lusty gleam in his eye. Why didn’t he look at her that way anymore? And what really infuriated Shari was the way Josie batted her eyes at her husband...and simpered. It made her feel like throwing up.

Maybe if she hadn’t convinced Grant to move to Canada all those years ago, things would have turned out better for them. When they first moved to Toronto, they both had to adjust to the change. But she didn’t remember feeling perpetually furious with Grant as she did these days, at least not at first. Then Danny died.

She knew that even after all these years Danny’s death fueled her anger. She tried so hard to suppress her feelings, but it only made her feel angrier. If only Grant had listened to her. Shari shook her head. There was nothing she could do to bring her brother back.

She’d better finish getting ready for the party. Unfortunately that necessitated a bathroom visit. Since Toby wouldn’t shut up, she’d adopted a new strategy: she sneaked into the bathroom with



her hands on her ears, so she couldn't hear him. But that only meant she heard him intermittently, rather than continuously, because of course, she couldn't keep both hands over her ears while brushing her teeth or washing her hands. Maybe she could pick up some earplugs? Or perhaps she should think about what Toby was saying? Was she supposed to figure out why? Maybe if she did, and told him, he'd quit nagging? For now, she popped in and out of the bathroom as quickly as she could glad there was a mirror in the bedroom.

She'd just finished combing her hair when the doorbell rang. "Come in Rita," she shouted.

Rita was decked out in a frilly white sun dress and a sunhat, a white ribbon tied up in the back with a bow. "Ready?"

About two dozen women, most fifty years of age or older, perched under oversized umbrellas, on upholstered patio chairs and couches spread across the wide terrace. They sipped wine from crystal glasses and nibbled on miniature tacos, French cheeses, kalamata olives and cashews. A dessert table laden with mini-cheesecakes and delectable-looking chocolates stretched along one end. Below them, Mexican families had gathered for another Sunday on the beach. Their laughter floated up to the terrace.

A Mexican father, tall, brown and muscular, squatted on the sand, constructing a small makeshift barbecue by the low stone wall that ran along the beach. From a cooler he retrieved some melons and arranged them on a plate. He chopped onions, cucumbers, tomatoes and carrots, and the indispensable limes, for his family's midday meal. An olive-skinned young girl, with black braided hair and sparkling eyes, crouched by his side. Shari longed to join them. She smiled as she imagined hanging out with them on the sand.

*Shari sat on the stone wall and bounced the little girl on her knee. Then she took her hand and they raced together into the ocean to cool off. When they returned, the father beamed as he passed*

*each a plate filled with grilled vegetables and fish (pulled later from the cooler).*

Stuck on the terrace, Shari stared at a black rectangular coffee table displaying a collection of semi-precious rings, bracelets, earrings and necklaces. The sleek women gathered around the table chattered like a congregation of magpies.

“Her sister-in-law makes them,” Rita whispered in Shari’s ear as she fingered an amber necklace. She popped a dark chocolate into her mouth.

The hostess, Elizabeth, a tall, elegant woman in an ash gray sheath dress was telling them about the history of the villa. “The city only allowed us to build so close to the ocean because there was already a smaller brick house located in the same spot. It was the home of the mayor’s former mistress. So that helped. When they broke up, the mayor wanted her to be able to sell and get out of PV.” She chuckled.

On one side of Elizabeth sat her sister-in-law, the jewellery artist, who hadn’t stopped smiling since Shari arrived. Blonde, blue-eyed and in her mid-forties, Carol was younger than most of the guests. On the other side of the hostess next to Shari sat a gorgeous woman with light olive skin, dressed in a sapphire blue silk dress and high heels. An elaborately designed fire opal and silver pendant hung around her neck. Matching earrings dangled from her ears.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Andrea.” She smiled as she shook Shari’s hand. Her ring flashed, with the largest diamond Shari had ever seen.

Elizabeth crossed her legs. “Andrea’s husband was elected last December as a state representative, a member of the ruling PRI party. They own a villa just up the hill in upper Conchas Chinas.” She placed her hand on Andrea’s shoulder. “One of my dearest friends,” she added proudly. “We went to university together in Texas.”

“That’s where I’m from,” piped up Rita.

Andrea suddenly asked, “Did anyone hear that the beach vendors have planned a rally for

next week? My husband is incensed.”

“Really?” said Shari peering down at her wine. “Why are they protesting?”

“The government wants to restrict them to the northern hotel zone beaches. So what if some of them end up quitting? So much the better. There are too many of them, and most of them don’t pay taxes,” Andrea said indignantly. “The tourists are always complaining. And local businesses in Olas Altas don’t want the competition...”

Rita interrupted. “I wouldn’t be surprised if those beach vendors make a pile of money and at the end of the day go home to a luxury villa.”

Shari felt blood rush to her head. Keep it cool girl, she warned herself. “You obviously haven’t seen the ramshackle shacks they have to live in because they can’t afford anything else.”

“Really...?” Rita said skeptically. “I don’t think...”

Shari interrupted. “And what are the beach vendors supposed to do to make a living if the government shuts them down?” she asked, thankful a breeze from the ocean swept the terrace.

“Well that’s their problem, isn’t it?” replied Rita, her face crimson. “If they don’t pay taxes, we’re the ones who pay more.”

Shari scowled. What was the point of arguing? She’d never get through to Rita and her friends. They simply didn’t care what happened to the beach vendors. *I’ve had enough of this*. Shari claimed a headache—she did feel as if one was on the way.

She climbed down the steps from the villa, clutching a small bag with purple onyx and silver earrings—she’d felt obliged to buy something before she left. As she strolled back to the condo complex, she thought once more about Toby, probably because she needed to urgently use the bathroom. “You know why?” he kept accusing. Was she supposed to know why he’d joined the other dead in the bathroom? What was he trying to tell her? What had she done?

**Chapter Sixteen – Second Sunday: On the Malecon**

Carlos strolled along the Malecon promenade crowded with locals and tourists entangled in the Sunday festivities. He'd arrived a bit early—he didn't expect Shari for another twenty minutes—and hoped a brisk walk would calm his nerves. There was a tight knot in the pit of his stomach and his mouth was as dry as a leaf left lying in the tropical sun. He wasn't sure he'd be able to eat, but he sure as hell needed a drink. He admired the sculptures along the beach: an iguana sunning on a rock, a mermaid, her hands reaching towards the sky, and Poseidon, ruler of the sea, brandishing his pitchfork. He never failed to be amazed by the elaborate details the artists could create out of sand. They sprayed the sculptures with a stabilizing spray, but like life, the creations only survived for a while and then were replaced by others. Nothing lasted, did it? He thought about the demonstration on Wednesday and looked around. His left eye twitched. Would the paramilitary show up again tonight? Would they take the risk with so many people as witnesses? But why not, when they were arrogant enough to try and blow him up at the crowded farmers market yesterday? He reminded himself of what Zapata had said: *It is better to die on your feet than live on your knees*. In the past those words had given him courage.

He continued to stride south along the beach. As he got closer to the main square, the crowds grew. In the arced amphitheatre, a clown stood in the centre, his face painted white. A mime performance was about to start, like the one he'd seen last Sunday...the night he met Shari. In the plaza across the street, musicians from the municipal band were setting up their instruments. He looked down at his watch, the one that told him the real time. They had arranged to meet at six, so he had about ten minutes. He wandered over to the city hall steps, sat down, placed his backpack containing flyers and posters safely between his long legs...and waited. Already the revelers, both tourists and locals, were gathering around the bandstand. His head throbbed, but maybe a drink would do the trick. He hoped Shari would show up soon.

Just as he was wondering whether she was going to stand him up, he saw her. She hurried towards him, wearing a purple sundress that hugged her curves and revealed some intriguing cleavage. Her hair was pinned up as it had been the night they'd had supper at the Shifting Sands. Silver earrings with shiny black stones dangled from her ears. She was starting to feel familiar to him, and he didn't want that. When Yolanda died, he'd had enough pain to last a lifetime.

"Hi. Sorry, I'm a bit late." Shari smiled as she sat down next to him on the steps. "So this is where the rally will be held?"

"Yes. Listen, the municipal band will play for about an hour before the dancing starts. Would you like to get a drink first? Afterwards I thought we could go to a local Mexican restaurant in the Romantic Zone. The food's home-cooked and authentic Mexican. *Muy bueno*. It's about a ten-fifteen minute walk from here."

"Did you make a reservation?"

"We don't need a reservation at this place." Carlos grinned.

"Okay, a drink first sounds great. Lead the way."

They were sitting next to each other at a small table on the second floor of a bar overlooking the stream of Sunday frolickers. The ocean and setting sun formed the backdrop. No traffic was allowed on the rebuilt Malecon, so they could listen to the sounds of the crashing waves free from the roar of cars and trucks. A plucky pigeon hopped on the ledge next to them, tilting its head, hoping for crumbs. Further north along the beach, the flying bird men climbed a pole, getting ready to perform. "Here we go again," said Carlos lifting his margarita glass in a toast. He definitely needed something stronger than a beer tonight. "Yet another margarita, another sunset." She's lovely, he thought.

"Cheers." Shari lifted her glass in return. "So do you have some leaflets and posters for me?"

Media releases? How about the Public Service Announcements?”

Carlos reached into his backpack and drew out two small bundles and some copies of the release. Then he dug into the pack again and waved a few PSA's at Shari. “I still think you shouldn't do this, but I know how stubborn you are. So here you go.”

The flyers he handed her were a smaller version of the poster. He peeked over Shari's shoulder as she examined the colorful drawing of an old vendor shuffling down the beach clasping some wooden animal carvings—and a *clickety-clackety* duck. The graphic showed a beach roadblock patrolled by nasty-looking policemen who barred the vendor's way.

“You've got the date, time and place, that's good. I can't make out the Spanish caption at the top, but I assume the English text that appears at the bottom is a translation?” Carlos nodded. She read: *Keep our beaches open*. “Ana will be so pleased!” Shari's eyes shone. “Aren't you excited about the rally? Do you think we stand a chance of stopping the government?”

“I hope so.” Maybe, if we don't get killed first. If Shari knew the truth about him, she wouldn't be so thrilled. “If they close those southern beaches, I don't know how the beach vendors will survive. It's tough enough for them as it is. I haven't told you yet what happened to Maria.”

Shari raised her eyebrows in alarm. “What? Is she okay?”

“Not really. She couldn't afford to renew her vendor's license, so yesterday the police patrolling the beach confiscated all her goods.”

“Oh no!”

“She was lucky they didn't arrest her. But on top of Toby's death, I don't know how the family will manage to recover.”

“Can I do anything?” Her forehead furrowed.

Carlos shook his head. “The beach vendors have taken up a collection for the family, again. It won't be much, but it'll help a little. What we can do is make sure the rally convinces the

politicians to keep those beaches open. All of them.” He pressed his lips together and clenched his fists. Whatever it took, he would stop those government bastards. He would do it for Toby, for all the beach vendors.

Just then a couple of nasty-looking *hombres* at a table in the far corner of the bar caught Carlos’ attention. A brutish man with a bullet-shaped head and barrel-shaped body, wearing large, round sunglasses that hid his eyes, scowled at them. His tank top revealed serpent tattoos on his arms and neck. Next to him sat a smaller, but more unsavory companion, dressed all in black. A ball cap, its peak facing backwards, covered his head. With his sloped forehead, weak chin and pointed nose, he reminded Carlos of a rat. He held his fist against a mouth surrounded by a scraggly beard, and waving his other hand, pointed in Carlos’ direction. Both men abruptly looked away when they saw he’d spotted them. These weren’t the same bastards who had chased him down Olas Altas and tried to blow him up at the farmer’s market. But they could very well be their replacements, sent in when the first two failed. Carlos peered at them again. His arm shook as he drained his glass.

Was there any point in leaving? They were as safe here as in the street. If they were after him, they’d follow. And hadn’t he promised himself to quit running from danger? He gazed at the flying birdmen, admiring their fearlessness. These were men who had the balls to take a risk. Shari was also watching them.

“Do you know the story of those flying men? Isn’t what they’re doing dangerous?”

“Not the safest thing to be doing, but not the first time they’ve done it either. They do earn some money entertaining the tourists, but what’s more important, it’s a way for them to honor and thank their gods, the Sun god, Rain god, and one more—I forget what the third one is. You have to admire the courage needed to risk their lives for their beliefs.” He paused. The kind of courage I need.

“They call them the *Voladores de Papantla* or the Bird Men. Indigenous people from Veracruz have been performing this religious ritual for 1500 years.”

“I’d love to be flying through the air, but what about the guy dancing on the top of the pole? Now that looks iffy.”

“That dancer is also a musician. If you look carefully you can see he’s playing a flute and has a drum around his neck. Traditionally the birdman at the top of the pole is a priest. The four flyers represent the earth’s four elements—water, fire, earth and air.” The rope that twirled the birdmen around grew longer and longer until they were back on the ground. The sun fell into the ocean and the sky filled with a rosy haze. Carlos leaned towards Shari: “So should we head back to the plaza?”

Several times Carlos checked behind him, as they swiftly descended the steep stairs onto the street. When they reached the bottom, he glanced back once more—there was nobody there. He exhaled and realized he’d been holding his breath. Fear had wrapped its arms around him again. He shook his head. *I’m such a fool.*

As they strolled towards the plaza, he kept glancing at Shari. He slipped his arm into hers and wondered if she might dance with him tonight.

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The dance area at the Plaza de Armas was packed, mostly with white and grey haired middle class Mexicans. The women wore either dresses or skirts and blouses; the men short sleeved cotton shirts rather than their usual t-shirts. They waltzed their wives or girlfriends around the plaza, their heads held high, swaying in time to the traditional Mexican music. Shari was struck by a younger couple who looked to be in their forties. The woman had faded brown, shoulder length hair held back by a barrette, a fitted pink blouse and oversized white spectacles. Pearls were slung around her neck. Her tall serious husband wore dark sunglasses and a white cowboy hat. There was something so elegant, so dignified about the couple, in an outdated kind of way.

A faster-paced rendition followed, and younger Mexicans took to the floor energetically jiving



and rocking to the beat. Shari admired the exceptionally graceful movements of a short woman in her sixties, dressed all in black, who danced with two other elderly females. *Yes, go girl!* There was only one tourist dancing, a heavy-set female with blonde streaks in her short, straight hair. She wore a red, low cut sundress revealing an ample bosom. A turquoise bracelet flashed on her wrist. Surely it wasn't Gloria from the beach lunch? Yes, it was! She was grinning as she twirled enthusiastically with a broad shouldered, young Mexican man. Shari had never seen anyone make so many hand movements in such a short space of time. Her hands flew up, down and behind her back. She lifted her splayed fingers to her eyes, to her mouth, and pointed to the beach. Gloria may have been the only gringo on the dance floor, but she was clearly having the most fun. Shari cringed, remembering how badly Gloria had treated Toby.

Carlos stood by her side, tapping his foot. "Would you like to dance?" he asked, smiling.

They whirled around the plaza. She was ultra-conscious of the wedding ring on her finger. She had deliberately worn it tonight. But Carlos didn't appear to notice. They drew apart and danced around each other. She snuck a glance as his muscles rippled while he gyrated in time to the music, moving so closely to her, they were almost touching.

Then the band played a slow number. As he held her close, Shari could feel his hard body pressed against hers. Normally she hated waltzing, but she liked the way he let her lead. Her knees felt weak, her face flushed. After he held her in his arms for yet a second dance, she sighed. She couldn't stand it anymore.

Carlos glanced down looking puzzled. "What's wrong?" he asked.

If they didn't separate immediately, she'd kiss him right there on the dance floor, in front of everyone. "I think I've had enough dancing for tonight. Do you think we could go see the cathedral again? I didn't have a chance to get a good look at it the other day, and it's nearby, isn't it?"

As they walked over to the cathedral, Shari noticed an abundance of policemen on scooters

zipping through the crowd. They made her feel threatened rather than protected. She handed twenty pesos to an old woman selling Chiclets, and then they were there—the tall turrets of the cathedral towering in front of her, a gleaming silver crown on the central turret.

Inside a handful of people sat in the pews beneath the towering ceiling. An elderly Mexican crossed himself and bent his head in prayer. Shari peered at the gold bling that decorated the top of tall columns. Gold also plated the altar, and some oversized candlesticks on a table at the side—or maybe they were solid gold, she wasn't sure. She felt more like she was in a palace than a place of worship. She understood the expanse and glitter was supposed to offer a promise to the poor of riches in the next life. For Shari it spoke of the church's power, and money spent on ostentation rather than on helping those in need. Without religious illusions, would the poor continue to suffer never-ending deprivations? Or would they rise up and rebel?

In the middle front pew on the aisle, a slim woman, with a black shawl covering her hair, bent her head in prayer. When she looked up and turned her head, Shari gasped. Gazing at her from sunken eyes was Toby's daughter Maria.

"Maria!" Carlos hurried over to the pew, slid in beside her and placed his arm around her shoulder. Shari listened to him console Maria in his soft Spanish voice. She remained standing while she rummaged in her purse and pulled out five hundred pesos. When she walked over and handed Maria the money, she was rewarded with a shy smile.

As they strolled away from the Malecon and across the new pedestrian bridge on the way to dinner, Shari explained how she felt. Carlos nodded. "Yes of course. I agree with Marx. *Religion is the opiate of the masses*. Christianity has always pretended to provide salvation to the poor, while in reality it's more likely to protect the interests of the rich and privileged. It's the church as an institution that's really the problem, and the dogma that preaches submission rather than rebellion."

"I don't understand how one can believe in the nonsense they preach," she said. "Toby was

devout, wasn't he? But his prayers were never answered. And yet Maria still prays, still hopes for a miracle."

Carlos stopped for a moment and hesitated before continuing. "Yet I've encountered individual priests who do care, who dedicate their lives to helping the less fortunate and even risk their lives for their beliefs. And there was a time not so long ago that the Mexican government clamped down on worshippers and priests alike. That wasn't right either."

"I guess not," Shari conceded.

His eyes softened. "That was very nice of you to help Maria." Shari felt her face grow hot.

They passed rows of vendor stalls from which tempting smells wafted into the air. As she handed a flyer to one of the vendors, Shari eyed some iced homemade cakes. She reminded herself about the ten pounds she wanted to lose. Well-dressed children clasped colorful balloons and their parents' hands. A middle-aged vendor sold floating Supermen that drifted high into the air. Shari thought about the birdmen they'd seen earlier, supplicating to their indigenous gods. She imagined what it would be like to rotate in the air, high above the earth. Closing her eyes, she could see herself circling the ninety-foot pole like a trapeze artist in a circus. She flicked her eyes open, shook her head and handed a balding male tourist a leaflet. Then she zipped up her bag—she was done for the night.

## Chapter Seventeen – Second Sunday: Dinner with Carlos

They soon reached the end of the pedestrian bridge and sauntered along the ocean where post-sunset music drifted from bars still crammed with tipsy tourists. After a few blocks, Carlos put his hand on her shoulder and guided her to the left. “Francisco Madero. It gets a bit less touristy along this street.” They passed family-run restaurants where gringos ate alongside Mexicans.

Carlos stopped in front of a place with maybe a dozen tables and a hand-written menu taped to the door. As they walked in, Shari felt a cool breeze blowing from the ceiling fans and through the large uncovered windows on each side of an open, floor to ceiling door. Round lanterns made of woven reeds shone down on them. Tablecloths with large squares in red, blue, yellow and even purple covered the wooden tables surrounded by the usual chairs with woven, thatched seats. S

Soon they were sitting across from each other in a quiet corner where Carlos drank a Pacifico, and Shari sipped a chilled glass of the only white wine on the menu, a chardonnay she guessed. Safer choice than another margarita. A mirror enclosed in a wooden sun hung over their table, and on another wall, loomed a rust-colored, round Mayan calendar. A Frida Kahlo self-portrait hung across the room by the kitchen. Why had she painted a monkey with his arm slung around her neck? A smiling young Mexican waiter stood by their table with a pad and pencil, ready to take their order.

“Would you like to share a shrimp ceviche to start? It’s a Mexican salad with seafood,” Carlos explained. “*Muy Bueno.*”

Shari nodded, studied the menu further, closed it and handed it back to the waiter. “Chile relleno, *por favor...*with the green mole sauce.” It was deep-fried unfortunately. Oh well, she was famished. For a change, calories be damned! Carlos ordered the breaded mahi mahi.

As the waiter rushed away with their order, Shari checked in her pocket, as she often did, for her keychain. She pulled it out and showed it to Carlos. “Have you ever seen one of these?” she

asked. The blue eye glowed from the center of the hand, with its three middle fingers held up and two smaller fingers flipped out to each side.

“So this hand has an undersized thumb, or maybe no thumb and two small fingers instead?”

Carlos said grinning.

“I don’t know. I never thought about it that way. It’s a Jewish amulet, a *hamsa*. Sometimes it’s known as Miriam’s hand, but my mother liked to call it the magic hand.” Shari choked back tears.

“It’s supposed to protect you from harm, particularly the evil eye.”

Carlos picked up the amulet and twirled it around in his hand. “It’s beautiful, but I’m not sure I believe in magic. Is it all that different from believing in religion? Although if it works, I must say it could come in useful. Why does it make you so sad?”

“It belonged to my mother...She died nearly a year ago. I miss her.”

“I can see the sadness in your eyes most of the time...That’s why I love it when sometimes I can make you smile.”

Carlos continued to surprise her. “I guess it’s not just my mother’s death that hurts. I hate how hard my parents had to struggle all their lives.”

“In what way?”

“They barely escaped being sent to a concentration camp during the war. Most of my relatives weren’t so fortunate. All of my grandparents died at Auschwitz.” She lowered her eyes. “When I was a child, I longed for cousins, aunts and uncles, like my friends. We were the only surviving members of the family who came to Canada. Visiting the few remaining relatives in Italy a couple of times wasn’t the same. They remain strangers. And by now, most are dead.”

Carlos reached over and touched her hand. “I can understand how isolating and painful that would be.” At that moment, the waiter brought them their salad.

Shari gazed deeply into Carlos’ sensitive eyes and felt drawn to him more than ever. She

remembered when he'd taken her into his arms and kissed her and longed for him to do it again.

After nibbling on a couple of shrimp, she said, "This is delicious." *I so want him!* "So are we ready for the rally?"

"We're in good shape. I've sent out emails to the politicians, media, unions and left wing groups around the city. The flyers and posters are already being distributed. There's another steering committee meeting tomorrow night to finalize speakers and other details on the day."

"And the protest signs?"

Carlos chuckled. "You do like to worry, don't you? Alejo helped make the signs and he tells me they're done." That laugh is a killer, she thought. Must tell him I'm married. But she really didn't want to.

She drained her wine glass in one last gulp and peered again at the Frida Kahlo. "Why is there a monkey?"

Carlos studied the print. "Well, Frida had several pet spider monkeys. It has been suggested that they were a substitute for the children she never had... But in Mexico's indigenous mythology, monkeys also stand for lust." Shari felt her face flush.

At that moment, the waiter approached and took away their salad plate. Then the owner walked over to their table with the stuffed chili pepper and the fish. "Chile relleno for the *señorita* and mahi mahi for *mio amigo*," he said setting down the plates. Then he placed a small candle in the center of their table and smiled. "And this just for you. *Romantico*."

Carlos grinned. "Gracias Diego!"

"De nada!"

Shari lifted her eyebrows and stared at Carlos with an incredulous expression.

He shrugged his shoulders. "He's from Guerrero," he said, stroking his scar.

Her stomach fluttered. She couldn't look at Carlos without imagining him touching her. She

gingerly took several bites of the chili, but the pieces stuck in her throat. Her appetite had disappeared. After a while, she offered some to Carlos.

“You don’t like it?” he asked.

“No, it’s wonderful, more than I can eat.” She tipped back her wine glass and drained it in one gulp. *Damn! I’m going to have to go to the bathroom.*

“Be right back.” She rose from the table and slung her bag over her shoulder.

Shari found the *bano* at the back of the restaurant. She apprehensively opened the door, then shut it quickly again. She sat on the toilet and glanced up at the ceiling that consisted of a string of wooden slats. Shari gasped. Toby and Danny, like twin Tarzans, were swinging towards each other, grinning. “Look out!” she shouted as they threatened to crash head on. She sighed with relief as they passed through each other without even flinching. How curious. She didn’t know they could do that.

Through the gaps in the ceiling, she could see her mother sitting off to one side with Rusty in her arms, looking displeased. At least some of the ghosts were having fun. Come to think of it, her mother never did really approve of fun. Hard work, that’s what she encouraged. *How can I be critical of my poor dead mother?* Her cheeks burned with shame. Was her mother disapproving of Toby’s and Danny’s antics, or was she objecting to Shari’s flirtation with Carlos? Who knew? Preoccupied with the gymnastics, at least Toby was blessedly quiet. Shari washed and dried her hands, pinned some loose hair into place and rushed out before he could start interrogating her.

“Listen,” she said as she sat back down at their table. “I have a proposition.” Carlos’ didn’t say anything, but his expression registered surprise. “I saw some tempting cakes for sale at some of the booths. What would you say if we zipped back and bought some and then went to my place for coffee and dessert?” Did she really just say that?

Carlos stuffed tobacco into his pipe, lit it and puffed. “Seems your appetite has returned.” He stared at her curiously. “Sure, we can catch a taxi on Olas Altas.”

“I’ve another suggestion. Could we walk instead? Climb actually. There’s a small cliff, more of a steep hill really, between here and Conchas Chinas with some cairns on the other side I want to show you. Lots of people use the path during the day. But it should be fine tonight. There’s a full moon. What do you think?”

He frowned. “I think we should take a taxi.”

“Please, couldn’t we walk? I really had my heart set on it.” Shari pouted. “You’re not scared are you?”

Carlos closed his eyes. He opened them and she watched him scan the restaurant. He does look a little frightened, Shari thought. Was she really being reckless? She loved the idea of walking to the condo with Carlos. Going up the cliff together seemed so...romantic. Why wasn’t he saying anything?

“Not sure it’s the smartest thing to do, but alright, just for you, we’ll climb the cliff...*La cuenta por favor.*”



## Chapter Eighteen – Second Sunday: The Cliff

As they strolled south along the beach, a full moon dominated the eastern sky, just high enough to be seen over the top of the condo developments, a beacon to light their way over the cliff. Carlos glanced behind them every few minutes. Nothing to be seen, but he couldn't help worrying about the two thugs in the bar.

In one hand, Shari carried a plastic bag with two slices of cake—a thick piece of banana and a second of chocolate—in the other, her sandals. She sighed. “I really thought the cliff was a lot closer.”

“It's not much further. Look there's the seahorse statue. It won't be much longer now.”

As they passed the steep stairway leading to Santa Barbara, she pointed to it. “That's another way to get to Conchas Chinas. I climbed those stairs down to this beach my first night in PV, the night I met you,” she whispered, taking his hand. “It was packed with tourists then, all drinking their beers and margaritas and waiting for the sun to set.”

Carlos barely heard her as he peered up and his danger sense flashed an alert. Near the top, a man dressed in black—a cap backwards on his head—scampered up the steps. There was something about his build. Could it be...? But he could only see his back, and anyway, the distance was too far to be able to recognize anyone. It didn't help that some trees near the top blocked his view. If this were the rat-faced man in the bar, where was his tattooed companion? He scowled. *What in fuck's name am I doing?*

Shari grinned. “Don't you want to come back to my place?” she asked.

Still holding her hand, Carlos drew her away from the shore and towards some bushes that hid them from those tourists still drinking at the beachside tables. He hesitated before putting his arms around her. “There's nothing I'd like more. I'm just not so sure about climbing the cliff at night. It'll be deserted.” When he stepped back and gazed at her, he saw her pupils were huge. His heart

pounded from a curious mixture of fear and lust. He couldn't help himself. He reached for her, drew her gently towards him and leaned down until his lips were touching hers. She stretched upwards, meeting him half way, took his head in her hands and stroked his neck. Then she kissed him with a hunger he hadn't expected, and he immediately became hard. He wanted her, he really did. After a few minutes, he pulled away, breathless. *The sooner we get to her place the better.* "Let's go."

In minutes they were poised at the foot of the steep cliff, in front of the pathway that would lead them to Conchas Chinas and the condo. Carlos looked behind him one more time but saw no one. They either hadn't been followed, or whoever was stalking them knew how to keep out of sight. They scrambled up the uneven stairs, some high enough that Carlos had to give Shari his hand and pull her up. They had to tread carefully not to slip.

"There's the top landing straight ahead!" cried Shari. "It'll be downhill after that." The ledge dividing the stairs going up and down to the two beaches shone in the moonlight. Carlos stopped and started to climb down the steps leading to the other side. Shari grabbed the arm of his shirt. She pointed to a craggy, steep and narrow path off to one side, leading further up. "Wait. I'd forgotten. You can go higher. Let's go have a look first. The view from the summit will be fabulous." He watched as Shari scrambled up over the rocks and disappeared from sight.

Carlos was about to follow her when a shiver passed through his body. Heavy footsteps pounded behind him. He spun around. Rushing towards him from below was the barrel-shaped man with snake tattoos from the bar on the Malecon. How had he failed to spot him on the beach? And where was his rat-faced sidekick? He froze, fought a strong urge to run.

Carlos lunged at Tattoo-man in a pre-emptive move. *Okay! Seems like I still have some fight left in me after all.* He smashed his fist into the hefty thug's belly. He remained standing solidly as if he hadn't been touched. Carlos groaned. His opponent was heavy and strong and would've been well trained. But he didn't look that bright. *Hang on to that thought.* He had to figure something out.

And fast. Shari would be next.

Tattoo-man's eyes filled with fury as he swung at Carlos' face. He ducked and evaded the blow. Charged with adrenalin and desperation, he smashed his fist upwards and into the side of the thug's head. The blow sent him reeling. Sweat poured down Carlos' face; he was panting.

"Carlos what's going on?" Shari screamed from above. He heard her moving towards him.

"Don't move! Stay right where you are!"

Tattoo-man regained his balance. "*Vete a la mierda*. Fuck you," he shouted and aimed a right hook at Carlos' head—the blow slammed into his cheek, just missing his nose. He struggled to ignore the flash of pain and dizziness. He caught his balance just as he was about to crash down the stairs back to Los Muertos Beach. Then he saw his chance. His opponent was getting too cocky. He'd left himself open. Carlos' next punch landed directly on the hulk's nose. Blood ran down his face. But damn it! He was still standing. And smiling!

Then Carlos got lucky. He'd been right. Not too smart. A brawny leg came swinging towards him with a powerful kick towards his crotch. Carlos seized the foot and sent his opponent sprawling. Disoriented, he struggled to get up. But Carlos was ready for him. He leapt forward and shoved him as hard as he could onto the ground. This time the asshole's head hit a stone on the landing. He wasn't moving.

Carlos caught his breath, turned and clambered up the short rocky pathway to the summit. As he reached the top, he could see Shari as she stood on the furthest point overlooking the ocean. She stood facing him with tears in her eyes. He hurried towards her, hoping that Tattoo-man was out for good. She threw her arms around him and wept. "Are you okay? Really okay?" she asked.

"Yes," he said as he held her tightly, "but there's a paramilitary bastard down below I have to check on. Give me a second." Carlos walked over to the side lookout near the path, from where he could glimpse the landing below. Tattoo-man was stretched out where he'd left him. There was no

sign of movement. Some small trees clinging to the rocks surrounded Carlos. He was turning around to head back to Shari when he heard someone climbing up towards them. How could that be? He'd just seen Tattoo-man, out cold, just where he'd left him.

It was Rat-face! He rushed right by Carlos without seeing him. He must have climbed up to the landing from the Conchas Chinas side. And now he was hurrying towards the far lookout where Shari stood. "Fuck! Shari, watch out." Rat-face tugged on his scraggly beard and leered as he approached her. Carlos watched in horror as she reached into her pocket. Rat-face yanked a Beretta .45 mm out of his jeans, a semi-automatic pistol Carlos had seen many times before. Shari waved her keychain at the shooter.

"No, not again!" Carlos yelled and raced towards them.

Startled, Rat-face lowered his weapon. Carlos flung himself towards the thug. He watched in horror as Shari also threw herself at the distracted man. As they both slammed against him, the gun went off and flew to the ground. Rat-face stumbled, and without warning, went hurtling over the cliff and into the ocean. "*Mierda!*" he screamed as he plummeted. There was a loud thud, followed by ominous silence.

Carlos leaned over the cliff. Rat-face had smashed onto one of the large jagged rocks below. "Don't look," he warned Shari, who was trembling but appeared unharmed. "Are you okay?" She nodded. Carlos let out a deep breath. Lucky again. The bullet had missed both of them.

A groan and rustling sound caught his attention. Tattoo-man was stirring. "Stay here!" Carlos scooped up the gun, clambered down the rough path as fast as he could and rushed over to the thug. He held the weapon in both hands and aimed it at him. "Don't even think about getting up!" *I almost lost her.* Just like Yolanda. "You can come down now," he called up to Shari.

Shari stumbled down the rocky path and rushed over to Carlos, grabbing onto his arm. "What are we going to do? What are we going to do?" She had tears in her eyes. "We killed him, didn't

we? We killed him!” She searched frantically in her bag for her cell phone. “Should we call the police?”

Carlos placed his hand on her shoulder. “You don’t get it, do you? These guys are undercover paramilitary. The police are on their side.”

“But what will we do about him?” She shuddered as she waved her hand at Tattoo-man.

“We should probably shoot him.” Carlos pointed the gun at the thug on the ground who rubbed his temple.

Shari brought her hand to her mouth. “We can’t do that! Can’t we just send him away?” Tattoo-man nodded, vigorously.

“If we let him go, it won’t be the last we’ll see of him.” Carlos said. He bent down, and holding the gun against Tattoo-man’s temple, frisked him with his other hand. “Roll over onto your stomach. *Rapido!* Put your hands behind your head. *Hazlo culero!*” Carlos ran his hands along the man’s back, and from his belt, drew out another Beretta. Could he afford to let him go?

He stared at Shari’s beach bag. “Have you got anything in there that we could use to tie him up?” Thank god she liked to drag that silly bag around with her.

“I have a towel. Could we make that work?”

“And I have my Swiss Army knife. Here keep the gun pointed on this asshole. If he moves—shoot him.” Carlos handed the gun to Shari, who held it with shaking hands. He cut the towel into strips and bound Tattoo-man’s hands behind his back, tied his legs together, yanked a strip across his mouth and knotted it tightly behind his head. *Just as well. I don’t know if I could kill a man in cold blood.*

Carlos took the gun from Shari and slipped it into the waistband of his pants. “Let’s go.”

They scrambled down the rugged path, and then, zigzagging through rocks and shrubs, made their way to Conchas Chinas. “Careful!” Carlos grabbed Shari just in time. Moving faster than she

should, she'd almost slipped and fallen on the wet sand covering the cement path. Soon they stood in front of the cairns that Shari had discovered her first day in PV. Carlos stared at the carefully arranged stones. They made him think of death. It had been a very close call.

“I wanted to show you these.” Her eyes flitted back towards the cliff. “But after what’s happened, I don’t want to stay here a minute longer.”

**Chapter Nineteen – Second Sunday: After the Cliff**

A cool breeze blew in from the balcony. Shari entered the living room carrying two cups of coffee, her hands trembling. She was surprised to be still standing—her legs felt too weak to hold her up. She needed to sit down before she dropped the coffee, or passed out. Images of the man on the cliff hurtling towards the ocean kept replaying in her head. Carlos looked even worse than she felt. He sat on the couch with an ice bag held against his right cheek where a dark bruise had formed. The rest of his face was ashen.

“Too bad the cakes got left behind. I must have dropped them in the scuffle,” she said sitting down next to him. Could she possibly have said anything stupider!

“It could have been a hell of a lot worse,” muttered Carlos lifting the cup to his lips with an unsteady hand. Shari winced as she pictured again the Rat-face man plunging over the ledge.

“I can’t get over having killed a man...But what choice did we have? Otherwise he’d have shot us. Carlos, why were those men trying to kill us?”

He hesitated before speaking. “The government has wanted to get rid of me for years. I’d hoped after I retired, they’d leave me alone, but it doesn’t look that way.” He set down his coffee, closed his eyes and buried his head in his hands. “They probably don’t like my part in organizing the demonstration, or maybe they want revenge for the past. I really don’t know.”

Shari had never seen him dejected like this. In the short time she’d known him more often than not he’d been smiling or laughing.

“But the worst part is that I’ve put you in danger. You could have been killed.”

She couldn’t bear to see the pain in his eyes. He looked as if someone had died. Holding the cup in her right hand, she placed her left hand on his arm.

Then despite almost getting killed, or maybe because of it, she remembered the passionate kiss on the beach, how alive he’d made her feel. Then her chest tightened as she thought about Grant.

As if reading her thoughts, Carlos glanced down at her hand and flinched. “Is that a wedding ring?”

Well the timing was terrible, but it couldn’t be helped. “I wore it tonight because I meant to tell you...but it was never the right moment.” Her voice trembled as she twisted the ring around her finger. “I took it off when I went swimming in the ocean my first day here and kept forgetting to put it back on.”

Carlos eyes darkened. “You’re married. And you didn’t tell me? You let me kiss you. You invited me back here? I’d have spent the night with you!”

“I know I should’ve told you, but I just couldn’t. It would have changed everything.” She could feel blood rushing to her head. *I care about you. I have no right to feel the way I do about you, but I can’t help it.*

Anguish flooded his eyes. When she reached out to touch his arm, Carlos brushed her hand away. “I can’t do this right now.” He sprang to his feet, his face even paler than before. “I need to leave.” Then he sat back down, his brows knit together. “But I should stay here with you tonight. Make sure you’re safe.” He scowled. “You wouldn’t have a beer would you?”

“Would wine do?” He nodded. Shari went to the kitchen and came back with an opened bottle of Riesling and two wine glasses. Carlos glared at her accusingly.

She sat across from him while he poured the wine, avoiding his eyes. “But the thug we tied up wouldn’t have been able to follow us, would he?” Shari still couldn’t believe what had happened. “Even if he somehow managed to free himself, he couldn’t have done it that quickly.”

“I don’t think there’s anywhere to hide on the path from the cliff to here,” Carlos said. “If he somehow untied himself and came after us, we’d have seen him.” He got up, walked over to the balcony, peered at the moonlit path and returned to Shari. He plopped down and ran his fingers through his hair. “The path overlooks the beach. We couldn’t have missed seeing him if he tried to



follow us.” He reached for his wine glass and nearly drained it.

Shari’s heartbeat quickened. “And to get inside the complex he needs the door code...But what if he climbs the fence?”

Carlos shook his head. “No, he wouldn’t be up to it. I beat the bastard up pretty badly. If he were to somehow get free, I’m sure he’d just scurry back to Los Muertos.” Carlos took in a deep breath and looked at Shari, his voice slightly hopeful.

“And the fence is spiked, so that’s a deterrent as well,” she pointed out. “And if he somehow made it over, he’d still have to get past the security guard. He doesn’t know the condo number either.” She couldn’t handle having Carlos stay with her tonight. She just couldn’t. Her chest ached as she imagined him sleeping on the couch when she wanted him so badly in her bed. Her hands shook as she sipped some wine. “I’ll be okay.”

Carlos stood up again and paced across the room. He stopped in front of Shari. “I suppose you’re right.” Then uncertainty flashed across his face. “Someone will come across Tattoo-man in the morning and free him. They’ll probably send someone to patrol lower Conchas Chinas looking for you, assuming I’m with you. Whatever you do, stay off the beach! Stick to the pool. The tall shrubbery should keep anyone outside the complex from seeing you.”

Shari chewed on the nail of the baby finger on her left hand. She looked down at the ragged edges. If she wasn’t careful, it would become a bad habit again.

Carlos patted his pocket, where she’d seen him slip one of the guns. He pulled the second gun from his waistband, checked to make sure the safety catch was in place and handed it to her. “Just in case, you may as well hang on to this. Hopefully you won’t need it. It’s loaded.”

When she looked at the weapon in alarm, he moved closer and showed her how to use it. He placed the gun in her hand, gently wrapping her fingers around the grip and making sure she knew how to open and close the safety catch. *I can’t bear it when he touches me. I want so much more.*

Could she really pull the trigger? Shoot someone? Shari shook her head. But she wasn't about to tell Carlos. She needed him to go!

He stared at the heavy dead bolted door. "I do think you're safe for tonight. So I will go home, if you're sure you'll be alright alone."

She nodded. "How will you get home? Is it safe to take a taxi? Maybe Alejandro could come and get you?"

He scowled. "I'm not going to bother Alejo. If I can't even take a taxi, I may as well give up and head back home to the country."

"Well, then I'm going to go down and wait with you for the taxi to come."

"No, don't do that!" He opened his eyes wide, as if something had just occurred to him. "Surely you don't intend to still distribute the posters and flyers tomorrow? Tell me you're not silly enough to contemplate such a thing."

Shari stood as tall as her short stature allowed, put her hands on her hips and pressed her lips together. "And do you still plan to attend the steering committee meeting tomorrow night?"

Carlos' shoulders slumped. "Okay, but we'll ask the taxi company to send someone up. The security guard can let him in. I don't know how the bastards would know where we are, but I guess we can't be sure."

The taxi driver came to fetch Carlos at her door. Before leaving, he reached towards her as if to take her in his arms...then drew back. His voice broke. "Be careful, okay? I'll see you tomorrow." They'd agreed to meet at Beans and Books in the evening, after his meeting.

As soon as he left, Shari found the night's violence catching up with her. She couldn't get over her part in causing the death of a man, odious as he was. She felt numb, just wanted to sob. When she thought about how badly she'd hurt Carlos, the tears started to flow.

Then she remembered. Too bad she hadn't thought of it while Carlos was here. The other day

she'd found a bottle of tequila at the back of the kitchen cupboard. She went to fetch it. Her hands shook as she poured herself a shot and swallowed it in one gulp. Probably wouldn't help much, but she desperately needed something stronger than wine to dull the pain. She hesitated a moment, filled the glass again and drained it.

Then a thought popped into her head. Shouldn't she warn Ana? Shari wiped her eyes and dialed Ana's number. She answered on the first ring.

"Shari! How are you? I'm almost packed. So looking forward to seeing you!"

"Listen. I'm not so sure you should come." She could barely get the words out. "We were almost killed this evening."

"What? Say that again. I must've heard you wrong."

"Some men chased us up the cliff from Los Muertos. We could have been shot." Shari's lower lip trembled.

Ana gasped. "Oh Shari, are you alright. Did they hurt you?"

"Just shaken up, but Carlos does have a heck of a black eye." *And my heart is broken. Carlos will never feel the same about me again.*

"But why did they go after you?"

"They were after Carlos. As I told you, he used to be a revolutionary. But I believe it's also got to do with getting mixed up in the demonstration...It doesn't appear to be safe. It'd be smarter for you to stay in Calgary."

"You should know I wouldn't leave you to handle this on your own. Don't you remember the sleazy nuclear guys who used to stalk us at all our meetings? They'd sit stiffly in the last row of the room, grimace and write down everything we said. We didn't let them faze us, did we?"

"I don't think it's quite the same. These guys were playing for real. They had guns and were prepared to use them." She paused. "One of them fell over the edge of a cliff."

Ana gasped. "Did...did he die?"

"What do you think?" No use giving Ana all the details. It would just compromise her.

Then Ana's voice took on that determined tone Shari had heard many times before. "Well, it sounds like you're in trouble. And you may be right about the rally being dangerous. So do you plan to give it a pass?"

*Will I still go to the rally?* Toby's tortured face popped into her head. "No, I don't see how I can stay away. But you don't need to come."

"No way! If you're in danger, that's all the more reason I need to be there. I've bought my plane ticket and booked the time off work. Do you really think I'd miss all the excitement? You know me better than that."

Shari sighed. "Right. I'd almost forgotten. You can be as stubborn as I am."

"Don't worry. We'll deal with those bastards. And don't we have a revolutionary guerrilla on our side?"

"Well sure, but he can be skittish at times." Shari paused. "Although he saved the day tonight. Okey-dokey, so I'll see you here at the condo, Tuesday afternoon, two-ish." The tequila seemed to have kicked in.

"You sound like you need to get to bed. Don't worry, we'll figure it all out tomorrow when I get there. See you soon."

Shari said goodnight, hung up the phone and retrieved a tea towel from the kitchen. Then she took her keychain from her pocket and rubbed the amulet. She flashed back again to the scene at the top of the cliff. As she'd looked down at the rocks and ocean below, she'd thought of Danny. Is this how he felt just before he fell? She could easily have been the one who went hurtling over the cliff, just like her poor brother. It had been a very close call. She looked down at the familiar blue eye that gleamed at her from the silver hand. "Maybe you are magic?" She wanted to phone Grant, but felt

too guilty about how much she'd enjoyed Carlos' kiss on the beach, how close she'd come to spending the night with him. She couldn't think clearly when he was with her. He made her feel like a schoolgirl.

But almost getting killed put things into perspective. Sooner or later she'd have to deal with her marriage. Right now her head was too foggy. She'd call Grant in the morning.

As she made her way unsteadily to the bathroom to get ready for bed, she wondered what Toby would say tonight. Not too much, she hoped.

###

Carlos stood at his bedroom window and gazed at the church across from the square. He'd been lying in bed for hours, trying to sleep. He kept rewinding and playing the scene on the cliff over and over again. They could both have so easily been shot, or thrown into the ocean. What would Shari think if she knew the whole truth? He recalled the kiss on the beach. No! He'd be stupid to even think about risking his heart to a woman who was only in Mexico for a short visit, a woman with a husband waiting for her back home—he'd be crazy... Anyway, he was still grieving for his wife.

When the taxi had brought him home, and he'd told Alejo what happened, his friend shook his head. "Oh my. What a mess! And that's some bruise. I'll get you some ice."

*I'll get through the next week somehow. I've been through worse.* He would finish teaching the class, ensure the rally went off without a hitch, and only then, return to his solitary existence. Life was simpler and safer back home. He rubbed his bleary eyes. Out in the square the full moon shone on the sculpted round trees and bougainvilleas, while a mangy dog limped past a purple park bench. A tear dripped from Carlos' eye onto the window ledge. Another followed, and then another...

***PART THREE*****Chapter Twenty – Second Monday: Grant**

All morning dark menacing clouds swirled across the sky. The wind had picked up, and the palm trees shook their limbs in alarm. Was it going to rain? Surely not?

Shari walked from the balcony to the kitchen where she poured herself a cup of coffee, slid onto a stool and stared at the phone wondering if she should call Grant. When she remembered what had happened last night, her heart raced. The image of Rat-face hurtling over the cliff and crashing into the rocks kept flashing through her head. She couldn't believe she'd almost been killed. And she hated having hurt Carlos. His shoulders had drooped when he saw her wedding ring. And then his eyes had flooded with pain, just as they had when Elfrida told him about Toby's death. Shari was meeting him that evening, but everything had changed. No need to worry any more about kisses, about controlling how she felt, about where it'd all lead, about Grant. Nothing would happen now. At best, Carlos would treat her like a friend. More likely, he'd detest her.

But she still needed to deal with Grant. Nothing new there. She rubbed her forehead and thought about her marriage.

Shari hadn't wanted to move to Calgary. She'd lived in Toronto most of her life and her mother and brother were there. The move was just as difficult for her children Marc and Sarah who left behind close friends. But Grant really wanted the job as a researcher at the University of Calgary.

"Come on Shari, it'll be fine. We'll be near the mountains, away from Toronto's horrible smog." Back then, when she was at home with the kids, not yet back to work, Shari wasn't as assertive as she was now. And she was totally besotted with those dreamy eyes, thick hair and charming British accent. "I moved all the way to Canada for you," he'd argue. She should have stood up to Grant, but she didn't. When her brother Danny died a few years later, during a visit to Calgary, she felt the

first stirrings of rage. Then after her mother passed away, she found herself irritated with Grant over almost anything he did.

Clouds now formed a thick black curtain blocking the sun. Before the weather got any worse, she'd better go into town to put up posters, hand out flyers and visit the local market to pick up more fruit and vegetables, since Ana arrived the next day. First she'd phone Grant and get it over with. She wanted to hear his familiar voice, but she wasn't sure she wanted to hear what he had to say. She dialed his office number. The phone rang and rang. Finally, an answer.

"Grant Brooks speaking."

"It's me."

"Shari, what's up?"

"Not much really. How are you doing?"

"Oh fine. I was updating my bird chart. Yesterday, right down the block from our house, I spotted a Golden-crowned Kinglet nestled in a pine tree."

"Oh, really?" Her eyes darted around the kitchen looking for her bag.

"By the way I bumped into Ana. She tells me she's joining you a bit earlier than planned."

"Yeah, well..." How much should she tell him? Does he need to know about the rally? He wouldn't like it. She couldn't tell him about Carlos. And what was there to tell anyway. Nothing had really happened and now it was over.

Grant's voice boomed. "I miss you a lot, you know. Can't wait until you're back."

"Yeah, I bet." She thought about Josie, his cute blonde secretary.

"And what exactly is that supposed to mean?" He sighed. "You'd think I'd be used to your unrelenting digs by now, wouldn't you?"

Why had she even bothered calling? Shari's voice rose. "Grant, what's happened to us. I hate it

when we squabble all the time.”

“Me too. You’re always so angry...”

She sighed. “And you always blame me for all our problems. You never stop and consider you might be responsible as well.”

“Please, let’s not fight. For god’s sake! We’ll have been married thirty years next June. That’s a long time. You’d think we’d have figured out how to get along by now.”

“Yes, you’d think so.” But it’s not working anymore, she thought. It’s just not working.

“I have an idea. Why don’t we go back to England to celebrate our anniversary? Remember Portobello Market?” Grant paused. “And I’d love to go north to York to see my cousins.”

All Shari could think was—Carlos. “Maybe, we’ll see. I’ve got to go.”

Grant grunted. “Okay. Have fun with Ana.”

She hung up the phone. The conversation made her want to scream. But maybe Grant was right this time. Maybe going to England for their anniversary would help. They needed a way to rewind and start over. She tried to remember a time when they still liked each other.

When they’d moved from London to Toronto in the fall of 1983, she’d gone back to university to get her teaching degree. Since Grant worked on the same campus, they often met for lunch. One particular spring day flashed into her mind. It was sunny and warm, and she’d packed them some egg salad sandwiches. She was almost too warm in her jeans. They bought some Cokes and sat on a bench eating their lunch. She remembered the profusion of tulips in bloom. A bit of a breeze ruffled Grant’s long hair.

After lunch, they held hands and strolled through the park-like campus, past the elms and oaks getting ready to leaf out. The red brick university buildings covered with dark green ivy reminded them of England. They stopped a moment, leaned against the trunk of a plum tree, thick with white



blossoms, and kissed, passionately. They were still so much in love—at least so she thought at the time.

A month later she found out she was pregnant. Would they have gotten married if it weren't for the unexpected pregnancy? After all this time, she still wasn't sure. She finished the school term, and they were married in early July. Marc was born in late fall, and two years later, Sarah.

Shari loved her children, but being a stay-at-home Mom didn't really suit her. Grant was often out-of-town at conferences. When he was home, he sequestered himself in his study, grading papers, preparing lectures or writing articles. "Can't you keep it down!" he hollered when the kids got rambunctious. She would scowl and cross her arms, but Grant didn't seem to notice.

Their relationship improved when Shari was hired to teach high school English. Marc was five, Sarah only three. Grant started to spend more time with the kids and even help with the household chores. She no longer felt resentful all the time. And she loved her job. Then a few years later she had to give it up—they moved to Calgary.

Shari spied the gun Carlos gave her still sitting on a corner of the kitchen counter. Really, what did he expect her to do with it? Where was her beach bag? Oh good, right there on a kitchen stool. She reached for the gun's handle, gingerly lifted it up and dropped it into her bag with the posters and flyers. She couldn't imagine using it, but she didn't like leaving it behind in the condo. For once her keys and hat were in full view on the living room coffee table. She grabbed them and headed downstairs to wait for a taxi.

**Chapter Twenty-one – Second Monday: Organizing the Rally**

Shari strolled down Olas Altas handing out flyers and searching for places to tack posters. With the sun behind the clouds, it was a bit cooler for a change. When she approached the tourists, in their t-shirts, shorts and sandals, few expressed any interest in attending the rally. Some refused to take a flyer. She headed towards the ocean. Even if the beach vendors already knew about the demonstration, it wouldn't hurt to remind them. She hoped the tourists on the beach, with vendors all around them, would be more sympathetic.

As she made her way north along the sand, three women rushed towards her, shrieking with laughter. Where had she seen them before? Ahh! Gloria and her buddies. Shari walked over and handed them a flyer. "Have you heard about the demonstration on Wednesday?"

Gloria lifted her rose-tinted glasses onto her head, read the sheet and frowned. "So no more beach vendors on Los Muertos beach—that's the plan?"

"Yes, terrible, isn't it?" said Shari.

"Well, I must say the shop owners don't like to bargain. I tried the other day, and the salesclerk yelled at me. Can you believe it? We'll never get the same kind of deals in the stores as we can wrangle from the beach vendors."

Shari grimaced. "That's not the point."

"What do you care? You want people at the rally don't you? We'll come won't we?" Gloria turned to Janet and Beth. "Want to go? We don't have anything planned Wednesday, do we?"

Well that will be weird, she thought, as she walked off—Gloria and company at the rally supporting them. Who'd have thought? She gave a flyer to an elderly woman with an armful of flowers for sale. After a while, she headed back inland carrying a red rose. She still had the media to contact, but with no English TV and radio, and most of the newspapers located away from the centre of town, it wouldn't take long.

As she walked along Olas Altas towards the newspaper office she'd located online, she stopped to gaze in the shop windows. She'd never really focused before on the death merchandise being sold. Brightly colored skulls and skeletons, even brides and grooms, could be found everywhere, with some shops dedicated exclusively to selling end-of-life mementos. The most artistic models were those made of paper mache, but the most startling were the ceramics. The bones of dead women wore elaborate dresses with hats and bright flowers in their sleek, sometimes braided, hair. (Did skeletons really have hair?) Some of the men wore sombreros. There were dancers, the women wearing full skirts and the men their Mexican-style suits and bow ties. A Mariachi band stood nearby, ready to play. And what she found the most peculiar—every one of the skeletons was smiling. Irony or wishful thinking?

Would it be easier to accept dying if we kept it in our faces like the Mexicans did, instead of keeping death buried away, pretending it wouldn't ever happen to our loved ones, and definitely not to ourselves? Carlos had said that when dying was prevalent, death became a familiar guest at the supper table, just part of the family. Then her eyes were drawn to a ceramic skull covered in flowers with cute little worms creeping out of its eyes. She shuddered and rushed off.

Up ahead she saw a sign that read *Vallarta Views*, the satellite office of a local English newspaper that covered politics. She'd searched the Internet and found most of the other English papers in PV seemed to focus on boosting tourism and steered clear of any hard news. The Vallarta Views only appeared online, but at least it had a central office. There used to be a print daily paper, but it had shut down a couple of years ago. It was only a matter of time before the print edition of the Calgary Herald vanished as well. Shari would miss being able to rustle through the paper each morning while drinking her first cup of coffee. She dug into her bag and retrieved the media release, the PSA, a poster and a flyer, then swung open the door. The room was empty.

“*Hola?*” A young Mexican woman wearing a short skirt, snug blouse and high heels, strolled

towards the reception desk. “May I help you?” Shari had expected a gringo. She handed her the release.

“Hi, I’m Shari Shapiro. Just wanted to make sure you’d received the announcement about the beach vendors’ rally on Wednesday. We’re hoping your newspaper can be there to cover the story. May I speak to one of your reporters?”

The woman frowned. “I’m a reporter. If we cover the story, I’d be the one to do it. I’m Gabriela,” she said brushing back her ebony hair. “You do know, don’t you, that taking part in a rally can be very dangerous for a foreigner?”

“I’ve been involved in many demonstrations,” Shari explained. “When the issue is as pressing as this one, you just have to take some chances. Have you seen our media release?” Gabriela shook her head. “Do you know what they’re proposing for the beach vendors?”

“I’ve heard rumors about some new government initiative...but I’m not aware of the details.”

“Do you have time to go for coffee?” Shari asked. “I could fill you in.”

Just around the corner at the coffee shop, Shari sat across from Gabriela at a small wooden table with two coffees and an oversized cinnamon bun with cream cheese icing, cut in half.

“Thought we could share.” Shari grinned. She wished she had such thick, sleek hair.

“So tell me, what’s happening with the beach vendors? Why are they holding a rally?” Gabriela pinched a corner off the bun, popped it in her mouth and licked the icing off her fingers.

Shari told her about the government’s plan to close the southern beaches and the hardship it would cause.

Gabriela covered her mouth with her hand. “My parents and grandparents are beach vendors in Los Cabos, where I was born.” Her forehead wrinkled. “So I do know what a struggle it is for them to make a living.”

“Then you really do understand! We’ve simply got to stop the government from carrying out

this ridiculous plan.”

“I was the first one in my family to go to college. My mother glows when she tells people I’m a journalist. She’s so happy for me, even if the pay is miserable. At least I make enough to have been able to look after my daughter after her father left us.” Gabriela pulled out her cell phone and showed Shari a photo. A young girl with shiny black hair and sparkly eyes smiled back at her. “Best of all, I can set an example for my six-year-old daughter. Ramona will have the chance of an education and a career, something my parents never even dreamed of for themselves.”

Shari leaned towards Gabriela. “But tell me, don’t you have gringo reporters? I was a bit surprised...”

“Of course we do. But their Spanish isn’t good enough to report on something like this. We want to get our facts right. That’s why the paper also needs some Mexican freelancers like me. When I bring back the information, we’ll work together on writing the article in English.”

“So you’ll come to the rally?”

“I’ll have to check with the editor.” A deep furrow formed on her brow. “For the record, these days, we all work freelance. The days of permanent newspaper staff are long gone.” She drained her coffee cup and stood up. “You were lucky to catch me in the office when you did. I mostly work at home.”

Shari walked Gabriela back to the newspaper and fifteen minutes later strutted out of the office beaming. She pumped the air with her arm. Yes! Gabriela had taken some flyers and a poster, and even better, after going to the back for a quick chat with the editor, had promised to come to the rally. To celebrate the victory, Shari would take a break.

She squeezed the yellow mangos until she found half a dozen that seemed ripe enough. Next she scooped up tomatoes, a couple of zucchini and a small bag of new potatoes. She couldn’t resist

dropping some blood oranges into her basket. She loved this kind of market with its abundance of fresh, local produce. Back in Calgary at this time of year, all the plants that once grew in her garden were dead and buried under snow. Not that she could ever hope to grow mangos or oranges at any time of year. Not even tomatoes grew well in Calgary. Oh you could buy all this produce, even in winter, but they didn't taste the same after being shipped long distances before reaching the grocery stores. Mind you, here you had to soak the fruits and vegetables in iodine, which was a bit of a bother. But better than getting sick.

Was that a raindrop? She lifted her hand in the air and water splashed against it. Just as well she'd distributed the flyers and posters when she did. By the time she left the market, it was pouring. She heard thunder in the distance, but couldn't see a taxi anywhere. She ducked into a small restaurant, found a free table where she placed the rose, dropped her bags on a chair and ordered a Coke light and a shrimp burrito. She needed the bathroom.

"No, I don't know why Toby," she said as she rushed into a cubicle and locked the door behind her. The ghosts were squished together in a corner of the small space, their arms around each other. Rusty somehow balanced on the thin ledge of the metal door. Shari closed her eyes and heard a meow. "Oh no, not you too, Rusty!" The bathroom attendant gaped at her as she left the cubicle. "You know why," rang in her ears. She handed the old Mexican woman ten pesos and ran out of the bathroom.

**Chapter Twenty-two - Second Monday: Brownout**

Back in the condo kitchen, Shari unloaded the groceries, while watching the rain splash onto the balcony. Lighting flashed across the sky like a reprimand from the gods. By the time she'd finished her burrito, the rain had been falling so hard she could barely see. By the time she tracked down a taxi, she was drenched. She wouldn't be sitting by the pool today. She hoped it would clear up by the time Ana arrived, and it absolutely had to stop before the demonstration on Wednesday. An excessively loud crash of thunder made her jump. The table lamp she'd switched on flickered and grew dim. Damn! Was she going to lose power? No, it came back on again.

There was a loud knock on the door. After last night's incident, she was reluctant to answer. "Who is it?"

"It's me, Rita." Shari opened the door and was surprisingly glad to see her. Rita held a package of candles in her hand as if everything were normal, as if there weren't any bad guys with guns after Shari. "I thought you might need these if the power is disrupted during the night. It's a brownout you know, not a blackout. It'll be on an off for the next while. But it's difficult to know how long it'll last. And the electricity may go off completely."

"Thanks. Would you like a cup of coffee, assuming the coffee maker still works?" She owed Rita again! How had that happened?

While Shari made the coffee (the coffee maker unperturbed by the decrease in power), Rita wandered around examining the contents of the condo. "Hmm. Interesting. Haven't seen one of those in a while," she said fingering a funky table lamp made of seashells. "I'd have thought Ana would have redecorated after her parents died."

Predictably charming, Shari thought. She carried the coffee into the living room and set it on the coffee table along with some chocolate digestives. Rita was rifling through a pile of Ana's running magazines and shaking her head.

Shari was tempted to tell Rita about the rally. But did she want her there? Maybe not. Gloria and her friends were quite enough. She edged towards the balcony doors where sheets of rain plummeted from the sky while Rita jabbered in the background. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"Have you done anything exciting while you've been here?" Rita asked.

Shari paused. "No, not really," she said while gazing down at her phone. It was a text from Carlos.

*See you tonight at 8:00 p.m. Beans and Books. Take care.*

###

Carlos glared at the members of the steering committee. They were crowded around a table in a meeting room of a union hall. The breeze from a large standing fan blew towards them, but because of the brownout, the blades were barely moving. "So we're all set?" he asked.

One of the union leaders, a bulky man in his forties, with hair tied back in a ponytail, leaned forward frowning. "You'll make sure those female gringos stay in the background, right?"

Carlos tipped back his chair, put his hands behind his head and waited a few moments before answering. "Yes, we've already covered that I believe. Anyone else?" *I'm too old to put up with this bullshit.* His bruised cheek ached. He'd had enough of this meeting. All he wanted was some ice and another painkiller.

"I have something to say," said Jovita, the only female on the committee. When she strolled down the beach selling her colorful, checkered tablecloths, her silky waist-length hair swung around her slim hips. She always stopped to chat with him. Now she looked at Carlos with large, luminous eyes through long thick eyelashes. "I really think you should speak at the rally. You could make such a difference." She waited for an answer, a slight smile on her full moist lips.

He shook his head. "No, as I already told you. It won't make any difference. We've got some great speakers, more than we need." Each union had insisted on having a representative on the



stage at the rally. They were always competing with each other for new members. “So are we done?” He reached for the battered hat and pipe in front of him on the table. Jovita pressed her lips tightly together.

“Great job everyone. I’ll see you Wednesday morning at ten. That will give us lots of time to get set up before the rally starts at noon.” Carlos sprung to his feet and strode from the room before anyone else could prolong the meeting further. He flew out the door and into the street, making his way towards Beans and Books where Shari was waiting. He looked at his watch. It shouldn’t take him more than five minutes to get there. He breathed in deeply the fresh air left behind by the heavy rain that had fallen most of the day. Every once in a while, he checked to see if anyone was following him. He knew it wasn’t over.

###

As Carlos approached, Shari’s heart beat faster. His brow furrowed as he rubbed a dark ugly bruise on his cheek. “You okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” he said, “just pissed off with the bloody meeting. I’ve always believed in making decisions by consensus, but I don’t have the patience for it anymore. Give me a minute. I’m going to see if I can get some ice. Do you want anything else?”

“No thanks.” Shari grasped her tall glass of iced tea.

Carlos came back with a plastic bag. “I ordered a coffee.” He slid into the chair across from her and held the ice to his cheek. His usually warm eyes were as chilled as the ice cubes. *He hasn’t forgiven me.*

“Carlos that man died last night. I know we were only defending ourselves, but will the police see it that way?” She leaned forward. “Will they be looking for us? Shouldn’t we be worried?”

“Maybe. We did leave Tattoo-man behind. Someone will have freed him by now. But you can be sure the police will try to circumvent the formal channels. Certainly the paramilitary

may try again...if we give them an opportunity.”

Shari shivered. “So what can we do?” She tugged on one of her purple onyx earrings.

“You should lay low. It’d be smarter if you weren’t seen with me. You probably shouldn’t be here now,” he said ruefully.

She changed the subject. “Anything come up at the meeting I should know about?”

The waitress brought his coffee. Carlos pulled a bottle of painkillers from his pocket, tossed two into his mouth and swallowed them with a sip of the hot liquid. “Yes, glad you asked. They insisted again that you and your friend stay in the background at the rally. It’s their protest, and they don’t want it to be perceived any differently. Besides, you could easily be arrested or even injured.”

Carlos thrust his jaw forward.

“Well, that’s all fine in theory, but you haven’t met Ana. She does what she wants. I’ve never managed to stop her if she has set her mind on doing something.”

“You’ll have to be forceful! It’s for your own safety.”

Shari threw up her hands. “Tell her yourself. She flies in tomorrow afternoon. What if we all meet for supper? Maybe Alejo would like to come as well?”

“Alright, I guess we can do that.” Carlos looked at her with concern. “Did you have any trouble while distributing the flyers and posters?”

“If you mean did anyone point a gun at me again, no. But there was less interest in the rally than I’d expected. Some tourists did say they were coming though.” She still had trouble imagining Gloria and her entourage at the rally.

“It’s the Mexicans we want to attend the rally, not the gringos. Let’s hope some of them don’t get thrown into jail.”

“Well, I can’t be responsible for whether or not they keep a low profile. But I would think extra bodies demonstrating couldn’t hurt. I don’t think we should worry about it.”

Carlos just shook his head. Then Shari remembered the gun. She picked up her bag from next to her chair and grasped it tightly.

“I do have something I’m worried about—the gun you left with me. What exactly am I supposed to do with it?”

“Use it if you have to. I was surprised you didn’t know how to shoot. Isn’t Calgary all about cowboys? I thought guns were a big thing.”

Shari chuckled. “Not really. I guess I can hang on to the gun a bit longer, but let’s hope I don’t have to use it. I’m likely to shoot myself in the foot.”

“Where did you put the gun?” She pointed to her bag. “Bad idea.” Carlos’ forehead wrinkled. “If the cops find it on you they’ll arrest you without hesitation. You’d do better to hide it in the condo.”

“Okay.” She needed to tell Carlos about Gabriela. “By the way, I did connect with a reporter at one of the English newspapers, and she’s promised to cover the rally.” As they sat without saying a word for what seemed a very long time, Shari shredded her napkin into tiny pieces.

Suddenly Carlos scowled at her. “Will your husband be coming to PV as well?” She cast down her eyes. “No, he has to work. He refuses to retire, no matter how much I nag.”

“I wasn’t sorry to retire,” Carlos said. “But here I am right back at it, agreeing to help organize this rally.” He reclined back in his chair, his eyes flitting back and forth across the coffee shop.

“In some ways, I’m sorry I retired early.” Shari gazed at Carlos with watery eyes. “The kids I worked with were so needy and yet so strong and brave. I loved being able to help them.” Poor Connie, she thought. “It was probably a mistake to leave my job when I did.”

“What did you do to help them?” Carlos leaned back towards her.

What had it been like? “I’d help them stay in school.” A warm glow filled her chest. “I’d build a relationship with them so that they were comfortable coming to me for support. And then find them the help they needed, whether it was counseling for addictions or abuse, a place to live

or financial aid...But my job wasn't dangerous like yours."

"In some ways, that's not much different from what I did." Carlos stared at her with admiration. "There was some fighting and violence at first, but later it was about helping the peasant farmers become self-sufficient. They built their own houses, formed independent schools and hospitals and learned to produce all the food they needed to feed themselves." Isn't that what the Zapatistas did in Chiapas, she thought?

Carlos took out his pipe and lit it. "I wish I'd been able to do more. The peasants are still being harassed and even killed by the paramilitary." He sighed. "After all those years of fighting, I was fed up with the politics...and the bloodshed...so many wasted lives. But in the end, the decision to retire was made for me."

"Do you feel badly?" Shari asked sympathetically.

Carlos shrugged. "Sometimes. Other times I'm glad to be out of it."

"Well, I have no one to blame but myself for quitting my job. I know now it was a mistake to resign so early." Shari drank the rest of her iced tea. "I miss being able to do something worthwhile. So thank you for letting me help with the demonstration."

Carlos waved his hand. "Let's hope you don't end up being sorry you did it." He took a puff from his pipe and stared at her accusingly. "So you're married. I should have figured it out, but I guess I didn't want it to be true. I don't suppose you're separated? Considering a divorce? I don't like the idea of breaking up a marriage." She'd been wondering when he'd bring up her marriage again. The tenderness she'd started to see when she looked into his eyes had been replaced with wariness.

She shook her head. "I'm so sorry! The marriage hasn't been working for a long time. It's one of the reasons I came to Mexico—to try and sort out my feelings."

"I suppose you have children?" He crossed his arms.

She cringed. “Yes, two adult children, a boy and a girl, Marc and Sarah.” She’d meant to phone or at least text them again, but there had been so much happening. “And you?”

“No, it never happened for us...and then my wife died.” How dreadfully sad—she reached over to take his hand, but then drew back, not sure he wanted her to touch him. “It’s just as well. I’d only have exposed them to danger.”

“I’m ready to head home.” He emptied his coffee cup and stood up. “It’s been a long day. Let’s go find you a taxi.”

Shari got up as well. “For supper tomorrow, could we go to the Fish Hut? It’s Ana’s favourite PV restaurant.”

“Sure. They make great Mojitos, almost as good as in Cuba. We might need a couple of drinks by then.” What had he been doing in Cuba?

**Chapter Twenty-three - Second Monday: Carlos**

*I could use a drink right now*, Carlos reflected as the taxi sped off taking Shari back to Conchas Chinas. When she'd looked up at him longingly before getting into the taxi, he'd wanted to take her into his arms. He stopped himself just in time. Enough of loss and heartache—he didn't need any more. But what if something happened to Shari? What if the paramilitaries came after her? He'd never forgive himself. She'll be okay, he decided, searching desperately for reassurance. *I'm the one they want dead*. Should he grab a taxi as well?

"Hi there!" He spun around. Jovita stood with hands on her hips, grinning at him. "What are you up to? Would you like to go for a drink?"

He should be used to women chasing him, but sometimes it became tiresome. He'd never understood why they were so attracted to him. But a drink wasn't such a bad idea. It'd allow him to unwind a bit before heading back to Alejo's.

"Okay, just one. I've got to get home. I teach tomorrow." Jovita took his arm, and they wandered towards the beach. Soon they were sitting on a side street at a small local bar, with a couple of Pacificos in front of them. He could just glimpse the sky over the ocean—it was as dark and gloomy as he felt.

"Cheers. Here's to a successful rally on Wednesday." Jovita gazed at him steadily. "Why the mournful face?" Her firm breasts pushed out of her tight shirt.

Carlos looked up. "I guess I miss being out in the country. I'm not really a city boy anymore." He fiddled with his beer bottle.

"I know what you mean. Even though I was only a child when we came to PV, I still miss the green and quiet of the rural life. Will you be going back home after you finish teaching the class?"

"That's the plan. I don't see any reason to stay here." Shari, he thought. But she'll soon be leaving as well. And she's not available anyway. He had to keep reminding himself.

Jovita's lips parted, and she leaned towards Carlos. "About speaking at the rally—the reason I suggested it was you spoke so brilliantly at that first meeting. Everyone in the room was spellbound. And then there's your reputation. A lot of us are convinced that you're really..."

"No! What are you doing?" Carlos grabbed her wrist, lowering his voice to a whisper. "You're so wrong! But even if you were right, it isn't something we should be talking about in public." His head swiveled about the room. He drew back his hand. "Sorry."

Jovita looked at him skeptically. "Alright, calm down. We'll play it your way."

Carlos tossed back some beer. How could Jovita be so careless? He ran a finger along his scar.

"There's something else bothering you, isn't there?"

"You're very perceptive." Carlos stuffed his pipe and lit it. "We had a bit of trouble with some hired guns last night." He drew in the soothing tobacco and felt calmer.

Jovita's eyes opened wide. "No, really! Do you think it had to do with the rally?"

"Hard to tell. This isn't the first time they've wanted to get rid of me."

"I bet. It must be difficult to feel like you have a gun trained on you all the time." She leaned over and put her hand on his. "Would you like to come to my place? Maybe I can make you feel a little better?" She tilted her head to the side, and her eyelashes fluttered.

Carlos stared at her without speaking. He hadn't been with anyone since his wife died. And here was a gorgeous, sexy young woman propositioning him. *I'd be crazy not to take her up on her offer.* Yet he found himself saying as he had so many times before, "Sorry, I'm not up to it. Besides you're way too young and beautiful for me. But thanks for suggesting a drink—and for listening." He drained his beer, got up and kissed her cheek. As he hurried away in search of a taxi, he heard her sigh.

Carlos unlocked and opened the front door. Alejo bounced up from the couch. "Hey, how was

the meeting? Are you all set to go for the rally?"

Without saying anything, Carlos went to the fridge, pulled out a beer, opened it, and drank.

"How's the bruise?" Alejo touched his cheek. "Still looks pretty nasty to me."

Carlos shook his head. "I'm fine and everything's in place for Wednesday. Sorry, I'm not very good company tonight. I'm going to bed. See you in the morning." Without the energy to even undress, he lay on his bed until it became clear that sleep would be impossible. He stood up and headed back to the living room.

Alejo looked up from his laptop where he was checking his emails. "Everything okay?"

"I won't be long," Carlos said walking out the door. He covered the short distance to the park across from the house and sat on one of the purple park benches, hidden behind an almond tree. Through the large leaves, he could just see the tattered running shoes still hanging high up on the power pole. A small bright object on the seat bench caught his eye: a tiny doll dressed in traditional peasant clothes. He held the toy in his hand turning it over and over. Then he put it down and rubbed his eyes.

He might as well face it. Shari had fooled him into thinking he could move on. But she wasn't the new beginning for which he'd hoped. Maybe it was just as well. If he were honest with himself, he'd never completely gotten over Yolanda's death. He gazed up at the nearly full moon and flashed back to the night when his life changed forever. Every detail was carved into his memory.

They had left the safety of their home that warm summer evening to take Emiliano for a stroll. He'd bounded out the door ahead of them, wagging his tail. It was still early, and later they planned to go to the nearest town for tacos. They passed the battered, maroon Ford truck parked by the side of the house, and next to it, his white horse tied to a post. Yolanda had never looked more beautiful. She stopped and whispered into his ear, her curly black hair flecked with grey brushing against his



arm. He could still hear his booming laugh echoing through the jungle. It was probably what alerted the assassins.

Without warning, a loud whirring filled the air as a helicopter flew overhead. He thrust his middle finger towards the sky, grabbed Yolanda's hand and hurried deeper into the rainforest. It was not the first time this had happened, and it should have been the end of it. But it wasn't. The helicopter returned, swooped down low, and machine gun fire sprayed them. The bullets were meant for him. He should have been the one to die. Instead he watched Yolanda fall to the ground with blood pouring from her chest. Emiliano trotted towards her, whining, and licked her face. Carlos fell onto his knees, held her in his arms and sobbed. But she was dead and nothing could bring her back. He carried her to the house in his arms. They found him twenty-four hours later, still sitting by the bed where he had tenderly placed her—holding her cold rigid hand.

Carlos looked up at the moon again, searching for answers. *Why does it matter if they kill me? Without Yolanda, I'd just as soon be dead.*

**Chapter Twenty-four - Second Monday: Danny**

Shari bolted the front door, double-checking to make sure it was tightly locked. After the near death experience yesterday, she felt secure rather than trapped. When she slung her bag onto the cement arm of the couch, a loud thud startled her. She picked up her bag, reached inside and felt smooth metal. Oh yes, she forgot about the gun. She removed it from the bag and held it warily. Yikes, it was heavier than she remembered. Whatever was she going to do with it? She's not sure she felt any safer having it. Lucky for her it hadn't gone off. Easy enough for Carlos to say she could use it in a pinch, but she was fairly certain that even if Tattoo-man appeared on her balcony right then, all she'd be able to do was scream, and freeze. Or maybe throw something at him, but the gun would remain right where it was. She needed some fresh air—she was feeling a little claustrophobic after all. Finding somewhere to hide the gun could wait—she set it down on the kitchen counter.

Shari went to the fridge, poured herself a tall glass of white wine and carried it to the balcony along with a light shawl she'd thrown over the back of a dining room chair. She sat with her feet up on the railing. No kiss from Carlos tonight when he saw her off in the taxi. She'd better get used to it. Finding out she was married had ruined everything. Shari swallowed some wine.

It was still early and too bright with the waning full moon to see more than a scattering of stars. The moonbeams splashed across the water made her think of Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, although the sparkling ocean path resembled silver and diamonds rather than the yellow brick road to the Emerald City. Carlos was a bit like the Cowardly Lion, wasn't he? But when it really counted, he hadn't hesitated. He'd acted so quickly, so bravely, when they'd encountered those thugs, although she hadn't been too shabby herself. She pictured the moment on the cliff again. They could have easily been shot, or have been the ones to crash onto the ocean rocks. There was no Emerald City, no hope of a wizard who might help them, no good witch handing out ruby slippers.

But then she wasn't trying to get home, was she? She just wasn't ready to die.

Shari wrapped the shawl more tightly around her shoulders. This was the first time she was able to look back somewhat calmly on what had happened. Was it really just last night? She released her ponytail—it had started to come loose—grabbed her long curly hair and twisted the elastic more tightly around her head. The cliff was too far away, and it was too dark to see it from the balcony, but she could feel it looming ominously in the distance. A five-minute walk and she'd be there. Or five minutes for someone to reach her. If she closed her eyes she could clearly see last night's scene again. And when she did, she thought of Danny.

He was twenty-five when it happened. They were always very close, despite the ten-year age difference, since for most of their lives, there had only been the two of them, and her mother. Their father died when Danny was only two years old. When her brother had been an active toddler, she'd run after him to make sure he didn't get hurt. "Danny, slow down," she'd yell. Then she'd catch and swing him around until he giggled. For the first few years after they lost their father, he cried every night. Often this would be followed by the slapping of his small feet against the wooden floors as he ran to her bedroom and crawled under the blankets for a cuddle.

Danny had just completed his Master of Arts degree at the University of Toronto when he came to visit them in Calgary the summer of 1993. The mountains fascinated him, and he was excited about the inspiration they could provide him as an installation artist. Shari had never appreciated art that placed value on a row of men's burgundy dress shoes, all of the left foot. But Danny was her little brother, and she'd have supported him in whatever he chose to do. If only she'd known that this visit would be his last.

Grant had always been a keen hiker. A *rambler* they'd called him back in Britain, and a *twitcher*. Bird watching was his real passion. He offered to take Danny up a mountain when he got there, and

her brother could talk about nothing else since. “Be careful,” Shari warned as they stuffed their backpacks with water bottles and energy bars. Her stomach had been tied in knots ever since she woke up that morning.

“Oh, Sis. You’re such a worrier.” Danny’s eyes shone in anticipation of the adventure. Focused on his art as always, his imagination in full gear, he said, “Something with rocks.”

They were going to hike to the top of Mount Rundle, the eastern slope, the one accessed from Canmore. Grant shook his head. “You’re being ridiculous Shari. It’ll be a doddle. I’ve climbed that slope half a dozen times. It’s not even a proper climb. It’s just a scramble. You couldn’t find an easier mountain trail.”

Danny gave her one of his famous bear hugs. She held him tightly. “Take care.” It was the last time she saw him alive.

Grant later explained that except for some brief rain, the climb had been uneventful, until they got to the summit. Danny, excited at reaching the top first, raced to the ledge. But the rain had transformed the rocks into a skating rink. He lost his balance and slid over the edge of the cliff. There was barely time for him to scream, Grant told her as he sat holding his head in his hands. “It’s all my fault,” he cried. “You warned us.”

Her mother had been devastated. When Shari left Toronto it broke her heart, but at least her beloved son was still there. But now Danny was gone—forever. She knew it was an accident. Grant wasn’t responsible for what happened, she told herself over and over again. But somewhere deep down she still blamed him.

“Please Mom, move to Calgary and live with us,” she’d begged. But her mother refused. And when she died, Shari’s anger towards Grant resurfaced.

Shari shook her head, fighting back tears. She headed back inside, locked the balcony doors,

found a safe place for the gun and went to get ready for bed. She walked into the bathroom and there was Danny. Tonight he was already lying in a corner on the floor, usually his final position. She went down on her knees and stretched out beside him. When she tried to hold him, there was only empty air. “Oh Danny, I miss you.” Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“You know why,” chimed Toby as he floated above her.

“Meow,” said Rusty.

“Oh just shut up! Both of you!” she screamed, leapt up from the floor, and without even brushing her teeth, raced out of the bathroom.

## Chapter Twenty-five – Second Tuesday: Ana Joins Them

Shari picked up her cell phone from the night table and peered at it through half opened eyes. It was already nine! She switched on the bedside lamp. Great. The light shone steadily—the power seemed to be working again. She switched off the lamp and hopped out of bed feeling calmer, more energetic. She'd slept soundly, not waking up once during the night. As soon as she got dressed and poured herself a cup of coffee, she'd tackle the job of bringing some order to the condo. Lucky for her the maid would show up in about an hour to clean, just in time for Ana's arrival. She hadn't met Claudia yet, since she only came twice a week, and she had been out both times. But Ana had warned Shari to expect her.

She'd loaded and run the dishwasher and was picking her clothes up from the bedroom floor when her cell phone buzzed. *Are we still on for supper tonight? 7:00 p.m.? The Fish Hut? Carlos.*

She texted back: *Yes! See you then.* She wondered what Ana would make of Carlos.

Having finished tidying, she poured another cup of coffee and added sugar and milk. The doorbell rang.

"Hola." At the door stood a slim, young Mexican woman, even shorter than Shari, dressed in a black and white uniform, holding a mop and pail. She smiled shyly. "*Hablas español?*"

Shari shook her head. "*Un pocito.*"

The woman pointed to herself. "Claudia."

"*Mi chiamo Shari.*" No, that wasn't right. "*Me llamo Shari.*" Claudia nodded. They looked at each other awkwardly. Shari had meant to study Spanish when she retired but hadn't yet got around to it. Now she regretted it. The maid smiled again and hurried off to the bathroom to start cleaning. Too bad others never saw her ghosts. Maybe they'd have some advice to give her, or at least she'd have someone with whom to commiserate.

Shari scurried to the bedroom, slipped on her bathing suit, grabbed her beach bag (she found it

under the bed) and headed to the pool so she'd be out of the way. "*Ciao*," she called over her shoulder as she rushed out the condo door. *I do know a few words of Spanish.*

Shari had changed out of her wet suit and was slicing tomatoes for a salad, when Ana flung open the door wheeling a large lime green suitcase behind her, a bulky, black carryon slung over her shoulder. She dropped her luggage and rushed to give Shari a hug. "It's terrific to see you!"

Shari stepped back to look at her friend. Ana stood tall and thin, with chin-length, brown hair, a little lighter than her natural color, straight and shiny, with a few subtle highlights. She wore a body-fitting black t-shirt over light cotton capris. *I really should think about coloring my hair*, Shari thought, as she always did when she saw her friend. *And lose some weight.* Ana had her father's exotic dark looks and carefree, reckless nature. He was a Rumanian Roma, and she was a free-spirited gypsy girl at heart.

"Looking lovely as usual." Shari picked up Ana's carryon and lugged it to the master bedroom. "I'll finish making lunch while you unpack."

As she prepared an Italian dressing for the salad, Shari thought how more and more Ana looked like her father. She'd often gone to Ana's house after school, and Mihai became a substitute father to her. He was multi-lingual, as were many Europeans, and he'd greet Shari in her native Italian. "*Principessa! Come stai?*" With his black curly hair, dark twinkling eyes and gregarious nature, he always made Shari smile. It was that charm that made Mihai so successful when he opened a small European restaurant that later became one of the most popular in Toronto. It was thanks to his entrepreneurship that they were able to buy the Mexican condo where she was now staying. Mihai must have been about her age when he died suddenly of a heart attack. It was only a few years ago that Ana's mother, Amelia, passed away.

Amelia had insisted the family adopt her Jewish name, Kissman. While her free spirit came from

her father, Ana inherited her strong personality and extraordinary stubbornness from her mother.

*Carlos will understand what I mean when he meets her.*

“Cheers,” said Ana as they sat on the balcony eating lunch. “Here’s to old friends, to good friends.” She tilted back her wine glass, the level of the liquid dipping considerably. She’d insisted it wasn’t too early to have some chilled white wine with the sandwiches and salad Shari had prepared. “That’s why I left a few bottles in the fridge last time I was here, for just such an occasion. So do tell me all about the rally. Is everything in place?”

“Yes. And I think we’ll get a good turnout. They used your slogan on the poster. Wait until you see it.”

Ana bounced on her chair and clapped her hands. “Right on!”

“But Ana, listen, we’ve been ordered to keep it low key. No leading any chants or jumping onto the stage, as I know you like to do. We’re gringos and this is the Mexicans’ protest.” Shari looked at her friend anxiously. “And after what happened on the cliff...”

“Oh, shit. That doesn’t sound like fun. And since when have we ever followed orders?” Ana put down her fork and leaned back on her chair, frowning.

“Carlos can explain it better this evening. Oh, I forgot to tell you. We’re having supper with him and his friend Alejandro tonight, if that’s okay.” Ana nodded her head. “But about the rally. I don’t think we have any choice about staying in the background. We’re lucky we get to take part at all. Besides, it’s dangerous. I told you about the thugs and the guns.” Shari stood up. “Wait, I’ll show you.”

She entered the condo...and stopped abruptly. Where did she hide the gun? She opened the kitchen cupboards one by one, went to her bedroom, pulled out all the dresser drawers, rummaged inside and yanked out the night table drawers—nothing there. She shuffled dejectedly back to the balcony.



“Why are you sighing?” asked Ana as Shari plopped herself back down on a chair.

“Just something I wanted to show you and seem to have misplaced. I’ll tell you about it some other time.” She didn’t relish having to explain to Ana there was a loaded gun hidden somewhere in her condo, and she didn’t know where. She’d have to find it...later. “By the way, I forgot to tell you. Connie dropped out of school.”

“Poor kid! But she’s tougher than she used to be, thanks to you. And you can see her when you get back.”

“Hopefully it’s not too late by then.” Shari frowned. “What about you Ana? Here I am going on and on about myself when you’ve had such a difficult time lately. You must have been devastated when you had to sign the divorce papers last week.”

“Are you kidding? I’m totally relieved that it’s now official.” Ana stood up abruptly and paced across the small balcony. “You know how hard we tried to make the marriage work,” she said bitterly. “All that money spent on counseling. Useless! It made no difference at all. Even though when we got married, we were old enough to have known better, it clearly was a terrible mistake. I’m sure I’ve told you before how Jason always wanted to watch hockey or go to the bar, while I longed to go to the theater, or even just a movie. Instead we’d end up sitting at home scowling at each other. We’d drifted so far apart that we couldn’t stand to be in the same room together. He’s such a stick-in-the-mud; he would never agree to take a trip anywhere.” Her eyes became moist. “And don’t even ask about our sex life. Neither of us could remember anymore why we ever wanted to get married in the first place.” Ana sat back down, hunched over in the chair.

“I’m so sorry, Ana.” Shari reached over and touched her friend’s arm.

“Now that I’m in Calgary,” Ana continued, wiping her eyes, “I hope never to have to see Jason again. I don’t need to be reminded of all those wasted years. Twenty years of marriage and nothing to show for it. It makes me want to scream. I’m just glad we never had any children.” Ana

drained her wine glass, reached for the bottle, filled her glass to the brim and sat back down next to Shari. “So tell me about Carlos.”

Shari looked down at her wine. “I think you’ll like him...He’s not really the way I pictured a revolutionary would be, except for the sexy part.”

“And...?”

“And what?” Shari asked.

Ana raised her eyebrows. “You know, did you make mad passionate love? I wouldn’t blame you if you did. I realize it’s been really rough between you and Grant for quite awhile.”

Shari was sure her face must be as red as the tomato on her plate. “No, I’m still the faithful wife, although I can’t deny it was tempting. But I probably would have regretted it. I’d have to live with the guilt for a long time.” Was that true?

Shari frowned. “I need to ask you something. You remember the cute little blonde receptionist Grant hired recently? You saw them together when you picked me up for lunch at his office before I left. Do you think there’s something going on between them?”

Ana shifted in her seat. “Honestly, I don’t know. Probably not.”

“I’m not sure either, but I definitely don’t like the way he stares at her.” Shari felt her chest tighten.

Ana patted her hand. “Now back to Carlos. Do you think he’s my type?”

Shari frowned. “You’ll have to decide that for yourself.”

“Where in the hell were they?” The taxi was coming any minute, and Shari had lost her keys—again. She checked on the balcony floor, under the bed, lifted her sunhat off the kitchen counter, and *yes*, she’d found them. She kissed the precious amulet and tucked it deep into her pocket. Ana grinned. “Some things never change.”

Shari, her hair held up with a Spanish comb, wore a knee-length, flowered sundress with a black onyx pendant she'd bought from a beach vendor hanging around her neck, her purple sandals adorning her feet. A purple shawl was tucked into her bag, just in case it cooled off later in the evening. Ana never wore a dress, didn't even own one, but whatever she wore looked gorgeous on her tall, slim figure. That evening she was dressed in a simple, white silk blouse over light, black capris and leather thongs. But it wouldn't be Ana without the dangling earrings she'd slipped into her ears. The polished pink coral stones sparkled in the sun. A horn honked. They grabbed their bags and raced down the stairs.

The taxi dropped them off at the door of The Fish Hut. Shari barely avoided tripping on the steps leading to the entrance. When they walked in, she stood staring at the steep and winding access to the patio up ahead. "I always forget...there's a bit of a climb." They slid through a narrow hallway where on either side drinks and food were being prepared, a tempting whiff of deep-fried fish filling her nostrils.

They moved up the first of three long and narrow flights of stairs. On the second landing, Shari stopped in front of the washrooms. On the door of the women's *baño* was a print of a female skull with Frida Kahlo written on the bottom. The ghosts will feel welcome.

Ana called back down to her from the landing above. "Hey, you've got to get in shape, Shari. Come running with me tomorrow morning. It'll be a start. Meanwhile, think about the mojito with fresh mint leaves waiting for you."

When she reached the top, Shari was breathing hard. She took in the verdant vines twisting along the open wooden beams and inhaled the scent of the potted white and pink bougainvilleas set along the edge of the patio, their flowers falling over the railing. Pasted on the concrete walls were posters of Spanish movies from the fifties. Wall fans blew cool air on the diners. At the far

end, the branches of a fig tree swept above the terrace. And there they were. Carlos and Alejo sat at a small wooden table in the shade with a plate of cucumbers, jicamas and radishes, sprinkled with chili, a jug of mojitos and four glasses. Alejo stood up, jumped up and down and waved his arms. “We’re here!” he shouted, grinning.

Shari watched Carlos carefully as she made the introductions. “Ana, this is Carlos and Alejandro. And this is my friend Ana.” Carlos reached out to shake Ana’s hand. Did he hold it a little longer than necessary? Was that a sparkle in his eyes? It appeared he was taken with her—and why not? She looked terrific, as usual, Shari thought bitterly.

The bruise on Carlos’ cheek had faded so that she could barely see it. *I always forget how amazing he looks.* When she tried to catch his eye, he turned away from her. He hadn’t forgiven her for not telling him she was married. He may as well have picked up his dinner knife and shoved it into her heart. She stared down glumly at her empty glass.

“*Buenas tardes, señoritas.*” Alejandro kissed Shari’s hand, then Ana’s. “Call me Alejo, everybody does. I understand we’re here for the mojitos, so I took the liberty of ordering a jug.”

Alejo looked very smart in his baby blue stretch shirt and tight white trousers. Shari hadn’t known him long, but he was easy to like. She managed a tentative smile as she sat down. He poured them both a mojito from a jug packed with ice cubes, fresh mint leaves and lime slices. She drew a sip through the straw in her glass. Hmm. She wasn’t a big mojito fan, that was Ana’s drink, but when the sour minty flavor hit her tongue, with a hint of rum, she thought, how lovely. A tiny blue mermaid adorned the edge of her glass. The others had one too, each a different color.

“Wonderful!” said Ana, having sat in the chair across from Carlos, as she sipped the cocktail. “Hmm. Love the fresh mint.” She glanced up at him coyly.

Carlos drank some mojito, and said, “The Cubans make it quite a bit stronger.”

*I meant to ask about Cuba.*

“You’re from Calgary, I understand?” Carlos smiled at Ana. A hand squeezed Shari’s chest.

“Sort of, really more of a Toronto girl. I don’t know how familiar you are with Canada, but it’s in the east. I’ve only been in Western Canada a few months. After my divorce, I needed a change.” She paused to take a sip of her Mojito. “Shari tells me you’re in PV for a couple of weeks to teach a class? So where are you from?”

Shari lifted her eyebrows and scrutinized Carlos. Yes, where **are** you from?

Carlos hesitated. “Guerrero. I live just outside a small village. I’m not really a city boy myself, at least not anymore.” He stroked his scar.

Yeah, right. At least he’s consistent. Shari interrupted. “Ana, Alejo teaches communications at the university. And Ana’s a Director of Communications at a not-for-profit.”

Ana glared at her. “Yes, that’s true. I struggle to persuade the public to protect the environment. But what I’d really like to do...” She crossed her long shapely legs. “I’ve an idea for a novel, but never seem to have the time to get started.”

Carlos eyes lit up. “Really? I’m writing a book myself, a children’s book. PV has been a distraction. I can’t wait to get back at it.” *So he thinks of me as a distraction, does he?*

“I’ve written a few poems,” Ana said. “Influenced by T.S. Eliot. I love his poetry.”

Carlos leaned back and recited, “*Footfalls echo in the memory/Down the passage which we did not take/Towards the door we never opened...*”

“*Into the rose-garden.*” Ana said. “*Burnt Norton!*” they shouted in unison and grinned at each other.

Why was Shari surprised that the two of them had hit it off, that sparks were already flying? And why should she care? She was married and Carlos wasn’t interested in her that way. Not anymore.

One of the posters on the wall promoted an old movie called, *El hombre que me gusta*. The

man who tasted me? That couldn't be right. She got Alejo's attention and asked him what it meant. "The man who pleases me," he explained and chuckled. Another poster read, *Amor de Adolescente*. She didn't need a translation. She knew exactly how that felt, even if she was far from a teenager.

The waiter appeared at their table. "Are you ready to order?" They shook their heads and opened the menu. "I'll be back," he said.

"The fish and chips here are the best in PV. That's what I'm getting," said Ana.

*Be good for once Shari.* When the waiter returned, Alejo ordered the same, while Carlos and Shari chose the fish tacos.

Shari stared at Carlos pointedly. "I keep forgetting to ask you about those piles of stones, cairns I think they're called, we saw at the bottom of the cliff. Do you know what they signify?"

Carlos sighed. "The cliff—I've been trying to forget about it. Those stones made me think of death. Alejo, do you know anything about them?"

"Not an easy answer; cairns can serve more than one purpose." Alejo tugged on the silver earring in his right earlobe. "Sometimes hikers build them to let others know the best way to follow a trail, or to signal danger. But they can also mark a sacred place." Alejo turned towards his friend, who sat at his side, and put a hand on his shoulder. "It's cool you'd think of death, Carlos, since in this case those stones mark a spot where a couple of fishermen drowned last year. Tragic."

"I just thought of something," said Shari, her eyes opening wide. "This isn't dissimilar to the Jewish practice of putting stones on graves." *No wonder it had made me think of my mother's grave.* She stood up. "I'm going to the washroom."

Getting into the bathroom door from the narrow landing took a bit of maneuvering. Inside there was a space of no more than three by three feet. When she closed the door, she saw her ghosts clinging to the sloped ceiling. Somehow hanging on with his claws, Rusty seemed comfortable enough, but her mother, Danny and Toby looked rather weird, as if they had all been transformed

into cockroaches. They glared at her in unison. She quickly used the toilet and washed her hands in the tiny pedestal sink. As she rushed out the door, “You know...,” called Toby after her. She was gone before he could finish.

When Shari returned to the table, Carlos was staring at Ana. “I understand you plan to join us at the rally?” he said.

“Absolutely! That’s why I came to PV early. I wouldn’t miss it! It’s been eons since I’ve demonstrated. Can’t wait!”

“But did Shari explain? You’ll need to stay in the background? It’s critical.” Carlos frowned. “The beach vendors don’t want the story in the media to be about gringos. It would distract from the message they’re trying to send the government. Besides, it’s not safe. If you do attend the rally, and actually it would be better if you didn’t, you’ve absolutely got to keep your head down.”

Ana signaled the waiter. “Another jug of mojitos *por favor*.” She looked at Carlos with an obstinate expression Shari had seen many times before. “We’ll do our best. Can’t promise.”

Just as she’d feared. “Ana! I told you, we’ve got to behave, or we’re not going to the rally.”

Carlos pulled out his pipe and started to light it.

“I don’t think so!” Ana reached over and tapped the pipe with her hand. “If you want to smoke, you’ll have to take it outside.”

Carlos scowled. “This is outside. We’re on a patio.”

“The smoke bothers me, so put it out.”

“You’re being silly.”

Ana’s eyes flashed daggers in Carlos’ direction. Shari caught her breath as she waited to see how he’d respond. Meanwhile, Ana pointed to a framed sign on the wall that read: *This is a Smoke Free Building*.

Carlos hesitated for a moment, and then extinguished his pipe. “Yes, ma’am.”

Just then their food arrived. “I love their fish and chips,” said Ana, smiling. She took a bite of the beer battered fish.

Alejo nodded. “Good choice!” Shari pursed her lips. Sure, but unlike Ana, some of us can’t afford the calories. She nibbled at a fish taco, reached over, picked up one of Ana’s chips and popped it into her mouth.

Ana tilted her head and gazed at Carlos. “So tell me all about the rally.”

Carlos spoke passionately about the demonstration. He leaned towards Ana, who put her hand on his arm. She whispered in his ear, and they both laughed. Shari felt herself blush. She wondered if his leg was stretched out touching Ana’s knee under the small table. That was a move she was familiar with. The waiter set down the second jug of mojito. Shari picked it up and filled her glass to the brim. She grabbed another French fry from Ana’s plate.



**Chapter Twenty-six - Second Tuesday: After Supper**

After supper the girls headed home in a taxi. Carlos had been about to flag one down as well when Alejo convinced him they should walk home. “It’s not that far, and there are two of us.” Alejo chortled. “I’ll look after you.”

*I may regret it. “Muy bien.”*

They strolled through the cobblestone streets, Carlos periodically checking behind him. As they walked he thought about Shari. She didn’t seem herself this evening. What was different about her? He stopped and turned to Alejo. “Did you notice anything wrong with Shari tonight?”

“You really don’t know?” Alejo looked amused. “You were flirting with Ana—Shari was jealous. It was hard not to miss. Didn’t you see her frown when you gave Ana your mermaid?”

Carlos stared at him. “Shit, who wants a stupid mermaid? And I wasn’t flirting! Sure, Ana’s attractive and I liked her...although she’s a bit bossy.”

“I must say that’s not like you to back down when asked not to smoke.” Alejo smirked. “That’s got to be a first.”

“So you think Shari likes me...as more than a friend?”

Alejo hesitated. “Well, I’m not exactly an expert on women, as you know, but Shari’s pretty easy to read. She threw you some seriously evil looks tonight. For sure she was jealous. Not good at hiding her feelings that one.”

“But I’m not ready for another relationship, and even if I were...Shari’s married.” Carlos’ face clouded over.

“Well as my students would say, she’s definitely into you,” said Alejo, “but whether she’s ready to leave her marriage...I wouldn’t know. What about Ana? She’s a hoot, isn’t she?”

“Sure, Ana seems smart and funny, but I’ve just met her. Now Shari...”

Carlos took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. Could Alejo be right about Shari?

And even if he were, so what? Was he willing to break up a marriage? His own had been so precious that the idea repulsed him. And was there really anything he could do about it anyway? Surely it was up to Shari. He remembered their last kiss, how she'd clung to him, how much he'd wanted her. He felt confused; his head was pounding. Enough! He refused to explore his feelings anymore—it was too painful. Why would he let anyone into his heart? He did that once and look at the results—nothing but grief and sorrow. He should be concentrating on the protest, that's what he should be doing.

As if reading his thoughts, Alejo said, “Did you decide whether or not to speak at the rally?”

“Not sure yet. We'll see how things go.” They started to cross the bridge towards home.

“Alejo, do you think I can trust Ana not to fuck around tomorrow?”

“What do you think?”

“Not a chance,” said Carlos. “I'll have to keep a close eye on her at the rally.”

###

As soon as they got back to the condo, Ana had pleaded jet lag and gone to bed. Shari sat on the balcony alone, glaring at the dark ocean, still fuming as she remembered the evening.

In the taxi back from the restaurant, Ana had enthused about Carlos. “Wow! You didn't tell me he was **that** sexy...Do you think he likes me?” Shari remained silent.

Ana looked puzzled. “Shari, are you okay?”

*No, I'm not okay. Are you blind?* She scowled. “Well he won't have any doubts about how you feel, will he? You threw yourself at him.”

Ana raised her eyebrows. “Seriously? I thought you weren't interested in Carlos anymore?”

“I'm not!” *Or am I?* “You just couldn't wait to make a play for him yourself, could you?”

Ana threw her hands up, leaned her head on the taxi door and closed her eyes. No wonder she went straight to bed when they got home. Shari would have to apologize in the morning.

She tugged at her ponytail as she listened to the waves slamming on the shore. Each crash felt like a blow to her heart. Ever since Carlos had discovered she was married, she'd been trying to accept that they could never be more than friends. But when she saw him with Ana tonight, something snapped. She saw the appreciative glances he gave her friend. And Ana—she was definitely attracted to him, who wouldn't be—he was smart, kind, imaginative, intelligent and damn good-looking. Her face burned despite the cool ocean breeze—she was sure he must have figured out tonight that she still wanted him. It'd have been written all over her face. *I made such a fool of myself.*

Okay Shari, reboot. What was important? Her kids, sometimes Grant, although that seemed to be on and off these days. She sighed. The rally tomorrow—she really felt for the beach vendors and their struggle to survive. A rage built in the pit of her stomach when she thought about the government's plan to destroy them, about Toby and his wasteful death. She was proud she was going to be part of this protest. Tomorrow at the rally she'd help in whatever way she could. At the very least, she could keep Ana from causing any trouble.

**Chapter Twenty-seven – Second Wednesday: Morning of the Rally**

Shari pulled the pillow over her head and hung on, while Ana tried to yank off the covers, yelling, “Time to get up.”

She moaned. “Go away! I need to sleep. What time is it?”

“No, no, no! Remember, you’re going to run with me this morning. It’s already eight o’clock. Ana gave an extra tug and the pillow flew from Shari’s grasp. “Come on, you can do it.” She placed her hands on the headboard, bent her knees and stretched.

“Eight? Eight! Can’t we go in a couple of hours?”

“Nope, it’ll be too hot, and besides we need to get ready and leave for the rally by ten.”

Shari opened her eyes a crack. “Coffee, I need coffee,”

“Already got it.” Ana grinned as she retrieved a steaming mug from the night table.

Shari reluctantly sat up, grabbed the mug and let the warm liquid run down her throat. “Okay, okay, just go away and I’ll get ready.”

She dragged herself to the bathroom, nudged the door open and peeked inside. They were all there: Rusty, Mom, Danny and Toby. Everyone was quiet, even Toby. What had changed now? Danny was slumped on the floor, his eyes closed. Mom perched on the edge of the bathtub, her chin trembling. Meanwhile Rusty swished his tail as he crouched in a corner. And Toby? He was hunched on the toilet his head between his hands. They made her feel guilty when they were like this, as if she were their jailer. But wait—wasn’t she their prisoner? Oh god, she didn’t have time for this. It was almost worse than Toby’s nattering. At least usually the ghosts stayed out of her way. “For god’s sake, get off the toilet!” As Toby slithered to the floor, Shari’s hand flew to her mouth. Surely he couldn’t hear her? She sneaked into the bathroom and out again as quickly as she could. She’d finish getting ready in the bedroom.

Ana skipped down the steps to the beach, dressed in flashy blue running shorts and a navy tank top. Shari lagged behind in her black cotton shorts and a purple t-shirt, her hair tightly wound into its usual ponytail. "Wait a minute," Shari called after her.

Ana stopped, turned around and regarded Shari curiously.

Shari peered down at the rose-colored seashells at her feet. Same color as my face, she thought, feeling the heat rise to her cheeks. "I just wanted to say how sorry I am for snapping at you about Carlos last night. You're right, I didn't give you any indication he was off limits."

"You're not over him, are you?"

"I guess not," Shari conceded, tugging on her ponytail. "But he's so over me." *Even if I don't want him to be.*

Ana bent down and tightened the laces on her running shoes. When she stood up again she said, "I wouldn't be too sure of that if I were you."

If only Ana were right. But then what? Shari sighed.

Who was that strolling towards them? She placed her hand on her forehead to shield her eyes from the sun. Oh no!

"Ana! How are you?" Rita stepped forward and threw her arms around Ana.

"Terrific! Just got here yesterday. Have you met Shari?"

Rita smiled. "Of course. We're practically best friends." Shari cringed.

"Hey, do you know about the rally today?" Ana jogged on the spot as she spoke.

No, Shari thought, no don't invite her! Please god, no.

"I heard a little about it at the jewellery party on Sunday," Rita said staring at Shari, "but I forget the details."

Shari tried signaling Ana. She blinked her eyes, and when she was sure Rita wasn't watching, shook her head, vigorously.

But Ana was focused on Rita. “The beach vendors are protesting the government’s plan to keep them off all the southern beaches. Why don’t you come with us? We can share a taxi.”

*Aarrgh!*

“Thanks for the invite, but my friend Andrea has warned me there’ll be trouble. And besides, it’s illegal in Mexico for foreigners to get involved in politics. Really, I don’t think you should be going. It could get violent.”

Shari glared at Rita. “We’ll take that under consideration.”

Rita turned to Ana. “Did Jason come with your?”

Ana pursed her lips as she answered. “We’re divorced.”

“Well, what do you know? We’ll need to get together while you’re here, Ana. We can exchange divorce horror stories.” Rita grinned. “I’m on my way to the office to order a water jug refill. See you later. Enjoy your run.”

Once Rita was far enough away not to hear her, Shari grabbed Ana’s arm. “As if she knows what she’s talking about!” she said furiously. “Why did you invite her? She has no empathy for the beach vendors. Her approach is to pay as little as possible for anything she buys from them. She just doesn’t understand, she doesn’t want to understand.”

“Well, we might have been able to change her mind. At least she’d have been another body at the rally. Come on, let’s get going.” Ana took off like a shot.

Shari stared after her for a moment, took a deep breath, and ran as fast as she could, trying to catch up. This must be how the tortoise felt at the start of the race. “Hey Ana, wait up!”

###

Carlos sat on the edge of the desk at the front of the classroom, swung his legs and wiped his brow. Even though the air conditioner was blowing and the room was a bit cold, he was sweating. He scanned his class, mostly female gringos who gazed back with adoring eyes. There was no way

he could concentrate on the lesson today. He glanced up at the clock on the far wall and was surprised to discover it was only ten. He couldn't believe he'd have to wait another hour before Alejo arrived to take over his class. That's the earliest he was able to come. Then Carlos would be free to make his way to city hall where they'd already be getting organized for the noon rally. He stared down at one of his two watches, the one set at PV time, but it gave him the same answer.

He really should get rid of the second watch now that he was retired but couldn't bring himself to do it. It's not that it served any purpose other than symbolic. He looked down at his right wrist where the time was always the same—the ceasefire of the last revolutionary battle he'd fought. If the two watches were ever set at the same time, then peace would have been achieved. But who was he fooling. That would never happen. The fighting would never end.

He slammed the textbook on the desk and faced the startled students as he announced a fifteen minute break: "*Mi intencion: Toma un descanso. Quince minutes.*" The students filed out of the room, heads bent down as they checked their cell phones. He slid his feet onto the floor and paced the empty room, while he ran the fingers of his right hand through his hair. If only he'd stayed out of the whole business from the beginning. But something deep inside him always took over, and once again he found himself fighting for the underdog. There didn't seem to be anything else he could do—no matter what the cost.

He was more nervous than he should be because he hadn't decided whether or not to speak at the demonstration. Keeping his mouth closed was the smart strategy. Speaking would be complicated and dangerous, but he was prepared to do it—if necessary. But why take the risk if the protest seemed to be going well? He wasn't worried about the paramilitary showing up—they wouldn't want to get tangled up with the riot police, who would be there and welcome an excuse to get rid of him once and for all. His brow wrinkled. He wouldn't only be covering his own butt at the rally. Someone had to keep an eye on Shari and Ana. Not so much Shari—he thought he

could count on her to be sensible, at least he hoped so—but Ana would undoubtedly be trouble.

Carlos checked his watch again. He wanted to talk privately with Shari before the rally started, but that was looking less and less likely. He needed to explain about Ana.

He sighed as the students trickled back into the classroom. Once they were all seated, he stood facing the class, and said, this time in English, “As you know, I’ll be leaving early today. In the time that’s left, I have an assignment for you to do.” A few of the students groaned. “No, don’t worry it’ll be fun.” He walked to the blackboard and wrote: *Hasta la vista, baby*. “Can anyone tell me where you’ve heard that before?”

Hands shot up and several students answered in unison, “Arnold Schwarzenegger, *The Terminator*.”

Carlos grinned. “*Muy bien*. Now I want you to create three characters, describe them, in Spanish, and have each of them say good-bye using an entirely different phrase. Be sure to tell me who they are, what they’re doing and when the scene takes place. But a warning: don’t imitate Arnold. Write that farewell totally in Spanish. No English words mixed in. Get rid of that ‘baby’. Be creative. See how many ways you can say good-bye in Spanish.”

Carlos took a seat behind his desk and watched his students. Some sat and thought, one young woman was giggling, others scribbled furiously. He leaned back in his chair.

*Alejo, where the fuck are you? I need you here, so I can go face my demons at the rally.*



**Chapter Twenty-eight – Second Wednesday: The Rally**

It was half past eleven when Shari and Ana arrived at Hidalgo Park in front of city hall. About a dozen Mexicans had gathered in the plaza, most of them wearing the all-white garb of beach vendors. Tourists wandered through staring at them curiously. Some carried Starbucks cups from the nearby outlet. Last time she'd been here (was it only Sunday?), she'd been dancing with Carlos. His strong arms had been wrapped around her waist, his hard body pressed against her soft one. She'd wanted him so badly. Sort of the same way she could never resist homemade Italian bread still warm from the oven. She shook her head.

How she felt about Carlos wasn't just about lust. When she confided in him, he understood. And he knew how to make her laugh. But she was such a fool. Carlos clearly didn't feel the same way about her anymore. Then she winced as she remembered that the Sunday night they'd danced was the same night they were nearly killed by paramilitaries.

Shari looked up and took in the preparations. Banners and placards lay scattered on the ledge of a large concrete planter from which palm trees grew side by side with decorative ferns. An oversized banner had been hung in front of the bandstand. On the stage sat a man in a dress shirt and tie, his suit jacket hanging on a chair, probably a union leader. A couple of other men-in-suits were setting up a microphone and speakers. Some young beach vendors attached more signs to the railings, while others assembled a long table by the city hall steps. Boxes of union pamphlets and rally leaflets sat next to an oversized cooler filled with water bottles. Shari's heart raced. She'd forgotten the thrill leading up to a protest.

Most of the protestors would be gathered on the beach at the far north end of the Malecon. They would soon begin marching towards the main square where Shari and Ana were helping set up for the rally. She'd wanted to be part of the march, but Carlos had insisted that they stay in the plaza instead. Probably so he could keep an eye on them. Where was he? She hadn't noticed him

when they arrived. Shari walked over to the table and arranged some leaflets and pamphlets on it. Ana followed her carrying a staple gun and dragging another large banner.

“Hola,” yelled a familiar voice. Shari looked up and there was Carlos racing towards her, wearing his usual battered brown hat. “Sorry Shari, Alejo was delayed and I couldn’t leave my class alone... We have to talk.” He glanced at Ana and then refocused on Shari. “Just the two of us. There’s no time now. Could we go for lunch after the rally?”

Shari nodded. “I guess so.” *He probably wants to make sure I know it’s over between us.* Despite the mid-day heat, she shivered.

Carlos smiled. “I’ll just be at the bandstand talking to some of the union organizers if you need me.” Then he looked around and frowned. “Did you notice the riot police?”

At the periphery of the park, the Mexican police stood on alert, armed with guns and dressed all in black with helmets, gas masks, batons, body armor and shields. They reminded her of Darth Vader’s storm troopers, except black instead of white. How many were there? Almost one hundred she’d guess. “Is this normal?” she asked Carlos.

“Yes, not unusual at all. Alejo told me that during the demonstrations against rebuilding the Malecon, several hundred riot police turned up. Those who are familiar with these federal stooges call them *perros*. I suspect we’ll see even more of these ‘dogs’ appear as the demonstration gets going.”

Shari’s forehead creased. “They have guns, don’t they? We could all be killed.”

Carlos glanced down at her fondly, catching Shari by surprise. He doesn’t seem angry anymore, she thought. “The good thing is that those forty millimeter riot guns aren’t loaded with real bullets. The bad thing is that if they shoot the rubber bullets and gas canisters you could be injured—or even killed. Just stay away from the police, keep your head down and you’ll be okay.” He strode to the bandstand and was soon in a serious discussion, his head lowered, his voice

raised, his arms gesturing. Shari couldn't watch anymore. What a fool she was to still want him.

It was five minutes to noon and they were ready to go. Carlos had joined Ana and Shari and all three were sitting on the city hall steps. "Do you hear that?" Shari asked. Loud chanting voices and marching footsteps drifted into the plaza. "They're here!" The first demonstrators stepped into the plaza: half a dozen held up an expansive paper banner printed in Spanish. At the very bottom, in English, was Ana's slogan: *Keep the beaches open*. They faced Carlos, smiled and gave him the thumbs up. Ana stood up and started to hand out bottles of water to the grateful marchers.

Some gringos had congregated around the bandstand. Shari recognized Gloria and her friends as well as other tourists she'd talked to when handing out leaflets. Still others she'd never seen before. Probably just walking by and stopped to see what was going on.

On the edge of the stage, a local TV camera crew had set up, and nearby, stood a radio station announcer with a tape and a mike. On the other side, she saw Gabriela, the reporter from the English newspaper. Good for her! She held a notebook and pen, while a camera hung around her neck. Shari waved; Gabriela formed a peace sign in reply.

The protesters kept filing into the plaza, and soon people were standing shoulder to shoulder. Others sat on the wrought iron white benches that surrounded the bandstand or on the ledge of large concrete planters shaded by palms and some deciduous trees she couldn't identify. She tried to count the protestors, but the numbers kept changing.

"I'd say five hundred at least," she said to Ana who understood exactly what she meant.

"Yes!" said Ana and grinned at her. "Way to go. Looks like a terrific turnout."

The beach vendors were muttering, and their voices echoed throughout the plaza. Carlos returned from his bandstand huddle. "They've asked the mayor to show up and support them. Although it's the feds proposing to close the beaches, they need the mayor on side to make it go

smoothly. The different levels of government are closely connected here in Mexico. And they're all corrupt." The protestors' voices grew louder. On the borders of the plaza, more riot police appeared.

A union rep strode to the mike and addressed the crowd in Spanish. "He's urging the demonstrators to be patient," Carlos explained. "The mayor has said he'll come as soon as he can, and meanwhile we should get started." He pointed to the white balcony centered on the municipal building behind them. "His office is just through there, so that makes them angrier." The crowd booed even louder. Ana joined in as well.

The growing number of gringos stood around looking puzzled. They've nobody to translate for them as we do, Shari thought. "Can't the speakers give an English version of their talk as well?" she asked Carlos. "Otherwise, how will the tourists understand them?"

Carlos shook his head. "It's not going to happen."

"Maybe you could go up onto the stage and speak in English."

He groaned. "I'm hoping not to speak at all if I can help it. But an English speech is just not on. We're not here for the tourists. I've already told you that."

The speaker held up the mike. "*Bienvenidos hermanos*," he said and broke into rapid Spanish. He spoke too quickly for Shari to catch any of it, but she knew enough about the issue to be able to guess what the gist of the speech would be. Gloria and her friends were murmuring to each other and frowning. Shari touched her face—she hadn't felt this feverish since before her hot flashes quit. She'd invited the tourists and felt responsible for not having an English translator.

A second suited man came to the mike, yelling and waving his hands. Whatever he said didn't particularly impress, as even some of the beach vendors were shifting from foot to foot. In contrast, Ana was jumping up and down and shouting gleefully, "Keep our beaches open."

"Tone it down." Shari scowled.

Carlos touched her shoulder. “I need to take care of something. Keep an eye on Ana, okay?”

She nodded. He drifted towards the municipal building and disappeared behind the trees.

###

It wasn’t going well. He should have known those union reps would be incapable of moving the crowd. They spent too much time praising the unions, too little time criticizing the government.

What gutless wonders! Carlos was shaking as he made his way discreetly towards a side door of the city hall building, his backpack on his shoulders. Why did he have to be the one to stick his neck out? He’d sworn he wouldn’t do it again. He had to remind himself why he’d dropped out—so he didn’t have to continue to fear for his life, so he wasn’t responsible for the lives of others.

He stopped in the shade of an almond tree, removed his hat and pulled out his pipe and pouch. He stuffed tobacco into his beloved pipe and lit it. As he stood puffing away, he could hear the restless crowd behind him. Then he thought of Toby and his needless death. *I can’t help being afraid, but I still have to do what I have to do.* He strode the short distance to the door, yanked it open and disappeared inside the municipal building.

###

Shari clenched her jaw and crossed her arms in front of her chest. She had to do something. Some of the gringos had already left. The current union speaker seemed to be wrapping up. They were all indistinguishable from one another, just like the politicians back home. The speaker scanned the crowd as if searching for someone.

Shari looked around for Carlos. Where was he? Shouldn’t he be back by now? He seemed to have vanished. But there were so many people in the plaza that he could be anywhere, and she wouldn’t be able to see him. If she were going to do it, now was her chance, because when Carlos came back, she was sure he’d try to stop her.

“You stay right here. Don’t move,” she said to Ana whose eyes opened wide. Shari stood

behind a tree where she released her hair and retied the elastic tighter around it, capturing all the loose strands, took out her compact, powdered her nose and rushed towards the bandstand, before she could change her mind. When she got there, she hesitated a moment, waved to Gloria, who was still standing in the front row, mounted the stairs and crossed the stage. The speaker's mouth dropped open as she took the mike from him. Her hands were trembling. It dawned on her that she hadn't really figured out what she was going to say. She'd have worn more than just shorts and a t-shirt if she knew she'd end up standing before a crowd. Too late. She took a deep breath, reached into her pocket, stroked the magic hand, and spoke.

"Thank you everyone for coming out today. I just wanted to say a few words for those of you who don't speak Spanish. If you don't already know, the government plans to close the southern beaches to the vendors." She paused. "It's outrageous! The beach vendors have always had a challenging job, walking all day in the heat, struggling to make a living, while providing the tourists with some great souvenirs at better prices than anyone else. But with fewer tourists and a depressed economy, their existence has become even more marginalized. If the government goes ahead with its plan to close some of the beaches, many beach vendors will be forced to say, *enough*." She thought of Toby and fought back the tears. "And what will they do then? There are no other jobs for them. We need to stop this callous government before..."

The crowd went crazy, stomping and whistling. Really? She didn't think she'd been that good. She became aware of some sort of commotion behind her. She whipped around and gasped. Flanked on all sides by the union leaders, a familiar public figure stood in front of her wearing a black baklava and army fatigues. Tall and well-built, he strode straight towards her. Surely it wasn't? But it must be... She covered her mouth with her hand and stepped away from the mike. No use staying on stage any longer. She had definitely been pre-empted. She scurried down the steps, keeping her head down, and made her way back to Ana.

Ana grabbed her arm and squealed. “It’s him! I’m sure of it—Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatistas. He’s the one who led the revolution in Chiapas. I read about him in MacLean’s. Do you know they call him the post-modern Che Guevara? You didn’t tell me he’d be here!”

“Nobody told me.” It couldn’t be. No, of course not. She’d asked Carlos herself, and he’d denied it. But then where in hell’s name was Carlos?

Marcos began to speak and the crowd fell silent. “*Amigos, Buenos Dias. Nuestro gobierno, los de arriba, ha abandonado sus obligaciones y está promoviendo la destrucción de sus ciudadanos más vulnerables, los de abajo. Te prometo...*” He raised his fist into the air. “*No vamos a permitir que él!*” Shari understood the last part. He was promising to stop the government, and the crowd loved it—they roared. Even the gringos were captivated, no longer showing any signs of leaving. Gabriela was madly snapping photos; the Spanish TV camera and radio tape recorder were running. Even those who didn’t understand Spanish seemed mesmerized by his presence—he had become a legend, and he was here, in person.

“Where’s Carlos?” asked Ana looking around. “He wouldn’t want to miss this.”

Shari shook her head. Did the imposing figure speaking look like Carlos? He was his general height and build, but he wasn’t wearing the same clothes. Combat boots instead of sandals covered his feet, and no, that definitely wasn’t his hat. This one had three faded red stars on the brim. And a ratty bandana she’d never seen before was wrapped around his neck. Since his face was hidden by a mask, she couldn’t check for his distinctive scar. Was his voice similar? Surely those weren’t the soft, gentle words of the Carlos she knew? But she couldn’t be sure.

Shivers crawled down her spine—she felt as if she were being watched. She turned around. A couple of riot police had moved closer to them. They stood by the display table, their hands on their guns, and they were definitely staring at her! She didn’t like their nasty expressions. Where was Carlos when she needed him? He’d know what to do.

“Hey Ana, maybe we should move closer to the stage,” she whispered.

“Sure. And do I get to go up and do my chant when Marcos is done?” Ana asked as she followed her.

Shari tugged on some strands of hair that had escaped from her ponytail again. She raised her voice. “No, certainly not! You know that’s not on. I just want to get as far away as possible from those police.” She nodded behind her.

Ana pouted. “How come you got to get up on stage and speak? Why was that okay?”

Shari glowered and grabbing Ana’s arm made it to the steps in front of the stage. Marcos was still speaking, the crowd still cheering. She felt someone touch her shoulder and whipped around expecting to see Carlos. Instead a curvy young woman with huge eyes, thick eyelashes, smooth olive skin and sleek black hair was smiling at her. “I’m Jovita, a friend of Carlos. I saw you with him earlier. We were on the rally organizing committee together. Isn’t that great that Marcos is here! Would you like me to translate his speech for you?”

Carlos’ friend? Shari raised her eyes and then lowered them as she assessed the gorgeous woman. Right, a friend, like anybody is going to believe that.

“Do you want a translation?” repeated Jovita.

“I guess so.” Shari stared at the ground.

“Oh yes please!” said Ana.

“He’s talking about how the government, those above he calls them, have abandoned their obligations to the most vulnerable, those below. He promises to stop them. Isn’t he amazing?”

Jovita gazed at the stage with longing. “And so sexy!”

Shari frowned. “And where is Carlos, do you know?”

Jovita shrugged her shoulders. “I have no idea.”

“Last I saw him he was headed towards city hall,” Shari said crossly.



Ana jumped up and down and whistled through her fingers. "It's just like the old days Shari, isn't it? I love it."

The crowd went wild. "Ya Basta!" they screamed. Marcos held up his fingers in a peace sign and left the stage, flanked by what looked like half a dozen union leaders. A couple were armed, so maybe they were bodyguards? The group made its way in the direction of the municipal building.

One of the union leaders, who'd stayed behind, walked to the mike and began speaking in Spanish. The crowd jeered. Jovita turned to Shari and Ana. "He says the mayor will be joining us shortly. People don't believe he has the courage to show his face." She pointed to the building behind them. "His office is right there."

"Well, I could fill in until he gets here, couldn't I?" said Ana, her eyes lighting up.

"Oh no, you couldn't!" said Shari holding onto her arm.

Ana stepped up on the edge of one of the large planters, near a group of gringos, and cupped her mouth with her hands. "Are you up for a chant? I'll call it out and you respond? What do you say?" Seeing a bunch of heads nodding, Ana shouted, waving her arms.

"I'll say: 'Whose beaches?' And then you'll say..." She pointed to Shari who looked on aghast, but managed to mutter, "Our beaches."

"Louder," said Ana.

"Our beaches," Shari said raising her voice, searching the crowd for Carlos and pulling her hat over her face. *I'm not sure what good that will do.*

Ana resumed. "And we'll all shout at the end, 'No, No Nieto.'" For those of you who might not know, he's the Mexican president, and the guy responsible for proposing to close the beaches. So have you got it?"

The small group responded enthusiastically: "Yes!"

"Alright! Let's give it a try. Whose beaches?" yelled Ana.

“Our beaches!” answered the gringos.

“No, No Nieto.” They shouted at the end. More tourists joined them, and their voices grew louder. Gloria was among the chanters, flourishing her arms in the air and stamping her feet.

Gloria’s red-headed friend, Shari was pretty sure her name was Janet, stood a bit off to the side, shouting louder than anyone else, but with her own unique message: “Down with the unions!” Shari shook her head in disbelief.

Just then a portly, bald man in a light suit jacket and dress shirt, but no tie, rushed towards the stage, surrounded by half a dozen armed men. Who did he remind her of? Oh right— Toronto’s notorious mayor—only Mexican and with a beard. The crowd booed and shook their fists as the mayor stumbled up the stairs to the stage. At least Ana had given up on her chant, since she was drowned out. The mayor picked up the mike and spoke.

###

With the crowd distracted by the mayor’s speech, Carlos chose that moment to sneak back to the rally. He couldn’t help noticing the number of riot police had at least doubled. He peered around until he found Shari and Ana and was surprised to find Jovita with them. He pushed his way through to where they stood just below the stage. When Jovita ran over and kissed his cheek, he flinched. Then he snuck up behind Shari and touched her arm.

She jumped. “Where in the world have you been?”

Carlos held his right index finger to his lips. “Shush. Let’s hear what the mayor has to say.” After listening a few minutes, he leaned closer to Shari and whispered in her ear. “He says it’s a done deal. The feds will be closing the southern beaches no matter what he does. Claims there’s nothing he can do about it—that it’s part of the president’s initiative to phase out the informal economy. Bastards! Politicians are all the same. They do whatever will line their own pockets.”

“How can he not fight for the livelihood of the beach vendors when they are some of the most

vulnerable residents in his city? I just don't understand." Shari knitted her brows.

She's such an innocent, Carlos thought affectionately. "He'll be worried about the feds reducing revenue to the city if he gets in their way, or even more to the point, that they'll find a way to make things difficult for him personally. And you can bet he's getting pressure from the local business owners in the Romantic zone. They could do without the competition from the beach vendors. He's pretty much stuck. How do you say in English, between a stone and a hard place?"

Then Carlos crossed his arms against his chest and looked annoyed. "By the way, what were you thinking by getting up to speak? I'd have thought you were too smart for that." And to think it was Ana he had been worried about. How could Shari have been so reckless?

She raised her voice. "That's a rock and a hard place, not a stone. And that's exactly how I felt. That's why..."

Shari tried to say something else, but the crowd drowned her out as they hollered, "Ya basta!"

The mayor handed the mike back to the union rep and motioned to his bodyguards. The protestors roared. Then their anger took flight as first one, and then another, picked up sticks and hurled them at the mayor as he made his way down the steps and back towards his office. Others joined in by throwing empty water bottles—then it got worse. An elderly beach vendor reached into his pack and retrieved a stone. He pitched it at the mayor. Although he wasn't strong enough to send it very far—it landed at the mayor's feet—the riot police surged into the crowd.

Horror flashed across Shari's face. Her mouth hung open as Carlos wrapped his arms around her. Jovita waved to him as she raced away from the Plaza towards the ocean. Good—one less of person to worry about. He scanned the crowd for Ana and spied her chatting obliviously with some the gringos who earlier had been chanting with her.

"I'll be right back. Just wait here," he said to Shari and hurried in Ana's direction. He had almost reached her when a tear gas canister went flying in her direction. "Ana, watch out," he

shouted in horror as a white trailing cloud of the noxious vapour filled the air. Chaos erupted and the demonstrators scattered in every direction. He could no longer see Shari. He could barely make out Ana, but enough to be able to reach her side. “Are you alright?”

“My eyes hurt like hell,” she managed and coughed.

Something made him turn around and that’s when he saw a *granadero* point a gun **directly** at them. He didn’t have time to be afraid, just threw himself in front of Ana as the rubber bullet sped towards them—they fell together onto the ground. He braced for the pain to strike. Soon it’d be over, the end coming just the way he’d always expected. His eyes stung from the tear gas and his throat was on fire. But he felt nothing else except a throbbing in his knee. He must have bruised it when he hit the ground, but the bullet seemed to have missed him. Then he felt Ana stiffen in his arms and heard her scream. Please not again! Through his blurred vision he saw blood on the pavement. Ana coughed again and then...wailed. He could feel her heart beating rapidly—at least she was alive. He whipped off his t-shirt and did his best to stem the profuse bleeding. Raising his head he searched frantically for Shari, and that’s when he saw her. Shit! Two riot policemen were hauling her away by her arms.

“Carlos, help me!” she screamed as she kicked a policeman in the shins. “Where are you?”

Carlos watched in alarm as they dragged Shari away. How could he leave Ana alone? It was his fault again—he was sure the bullets were meant for him. *Sorry Shari, I have no choice.* As he kneeled next to Ana, he pressed on her wound—and wept.

## PART FOUR

### Chapter Twenty-nine – Second Wednesday: Imprisoned

“Ouch, that really hurts.” Shari touched her head, where a goose egg had formed, and gaped at the solid concrete walls surrounding her. Her limp hair hung loosely about her face. She was slouched on the hard floor of a hot, stuffy room, empty except for a scratched wooden desk with a large dent on one corner and an unpainted chair with a crack on the seat. There were no windows. Sweat trickled down her neck. Where had they taken her? No bars, so it wasn’t a proper jail, but she’d be shocked if the door she was staring at was unlocked. She flinched. What was that noise? The sound of a jet taking off—she was sure of it. Another distinctive roar confirmed her suspicions. Wherever they’d taken her was near the airport.

A dark bruise covered her right foot. It ached. Ice would help, but fat chance of getting that. She remembered kicking one of the policemen who retaliated by crashing his boot onto her sandaled foot. Somehow, she pulled herself up from the floor, hobbled the short distance to the door and tried the handle. It didn’t budge. Trapped. Just as she expected. She wiped her mouth and stared at traces of blood on her hand. What had they done to her?

She remembered struggling as the police had dragged her away from the rally. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw them grab Gabriela as well. They took them to a black unmarked truck where in the driver’s seat a burly man dressed in dark blue combat fatigues gripped an assault rifle. Then...they yanked up her t-shirt so that it covered her head and shoved her roughly into the back of the vehicle. She could no longer see, so she didn’t know what happened to Gabriela, but she thought she heard her shriek. After a bumpy ride of maybe twenty minutes, half an hour, it was difficult to tell how long it took, the truck stopped abruptly. Still blinded, she was shoved out and up some steps. Somehow, she’d become the victim in a bad Mexican film. *This can’t be happening to me*, she thought as they pushed her roughly along. *I don’t even like violent movies*. After passing

through several doors, she was hurled onto a floor where someone kicked her in the head. Then she heard a door slam. What had happened next? She had no idea—she must have passed out.

Still groggy, Shari felt as parched as if she'd been trekking for hours in the tropical sun. What was she supposed to do for water? Then she glimpsed a white object peeking out from under the desk. She shuffled over to it, kneeled down and pulled out a stained plastic container. What was it for? She wrinkled her nose. Oh my...she seriously hoped she didn't need to use it!

She started to pace from one end of the claustrophobic room to the other. But she soon quit. Pain shot through her foot every time she took a step. She moaned, slithered back to the door and banged on it as hard as she could.

"Help! Someone get me out of here!" She pounded some more then placed her ear to the door. She couldn't hear anything. Tears welled up into her eyes as she plopped herself back down and leaned against the desk. How in the world was she going to break out of here?

Carlos, why hadn't he come? Surely he'd find her and help get her out? And Ana! Just before they'd dragged her away, she'd seen Ana collapse. There had been blood on the ground. She must have been hit by a bullet. My god! Could they have killed her? Carlos had warned her that those rubber bullets could be lethal. Shari covered her mouth with her hand, and tears streamed down her cheeks. Why had she ever let Ana attend the rally? And why had she been foolish enough to get involved herself?

She gasped. Her purse...with her cell phone? Where was it? Her head spun around the empty room. Of course, they would have taken it. She reached into her pocket. The magic hand was gone! She pulled her t-shirt back up and used the edge to wipe her eyes and blow her nose. Okay Shari. Pull yourself together. Crying isn't going to help, is it? You can figure something out. *So I wanted to be alone, did I? Well I got my wish.* But she wasn't only alone, she'd been abandoned, condemned, with nowhere to turn. Back in Calgary she'd felt so trapped. Huh! If only she'd known

what it was really like to lose your freedom. But at least they couldn't control her mind—she still had a way to escape. She imagined herself back home in spring, the time of year she liked the best.

*She leaned back on her recliner. Out her family room window the sun shone on purple and yellow primulas splashed across her rock garden. The buds on the crabapple tree held a promise of the delicate white blossoms she enjoyed so much each May. A Chinook arch was forming as a breeze whistled through the birch trees heralding warmer weather. Then Grant interrupted her fantasy, entering the room with binoculars dangling from his neck...*

Shari opened her eyes. The grey, impenetrable walls of her prison felt like they were closing in on her. She'd give anything to be safely home. What would happen to her? How long would they leave her here alone? She licked her dry lips. Searching this time for comfort in memories, she conjured up a scene from childhood.

Her mother was humming in a kitchen filled with the fragrant smell of apple strudel just out of the oven. She could almost taste the flaky crust filled with cinnamon, raisins and apples. Outside the window towels and sheets flapped on the clothesline, while the little girl she had once been passed clothespins to her mother. Then the scene changed, and she heard the click and whirr of the pedal-run sewing machine as her mother tried to make ends meet by taking in some extra work. How Shari had hated that sound! It meant no one to read to her or take her for a walk in the park. But they needed the money. Her mother liked to say: "What has to be done is not difficult."

Why was she surprised that a pleasant memory of her mother deteriorated into regret? If only she could be as brave and tough as her mother had been. Not even ghosts to bring her comfort within these barren walls, not even a bathroom. Because there was nothing else to do, and she'd go crazy if she did nothing, Shari's mind started to shift into high gear. All the thoughts she'd been

trying to avoid pushed their way forward, clamoring for her attention.

“You know why.” The refrain slipped into her mind. She’d procrastinated long enough—it was time to figure out what Toby meant. What was she supposed to know? If “you know why” was the answer, what was the question? What did she want to know about Toby? Shari scratched her head and crossed her arms across her chest. *So Toby, what do you want to tell me?* There was the question of why he killed himself, although that really wasn’t a secret. She did know why—the day-to-day struggle to survive had become too much for him. Surely that wasn’t what Toby meant. She wrinkled her brow. He seemed to be referring to something she claimed not to know. What about why he’d appeared in her bathroom with the other ghosts? That was a question she’d asked herself many times. And she didn’t know the answer. “I don’t know why, Toby.”

“You know why” echoed through the room. Shari opened her eyes wide and swiveled her head, but there was nothing to be seen. What in the world? Her ghosts were getting more and more unpredictable. It was definitely Toby’s voice, and he seemed to accuse her, as he had from the start. Was he trying to remind her that she was just a gringo? Her country was part of NAFTA after all, the free trade agreement that forced Toby from his land. Tourists took advantage of the beach vendors—lived in relative luxury while the Mexicans scrounged a bare existence. She was a tourist. Wasn’t she as culpable as the rest of the gringos? So what if she tried to help by joining the protest or bought a few clickety-clackety ducks? That wouldn’t bring Toby back, would it? And even if in the end they didn’t close some of the beaches, the vendors would still have to brave the tropical heat, selling their wares day in and day out, praying for the elusive pesos they needed to survive. What difference had she really made? She was so arrogant to have thought she could have any impact at all. Shari nibbled on her baby nail, but that didn’t help at all.

Maybe Toby wanted her to know that what she’d done wasn’t enough? Maybe he wanted to make sure she didn’t forget the beach vendors and their struggles? To be aware that more needed to



be done. Was that why he was haunting her?

A stream of bright light shot through the windowless room. Toby! She gasped, then jumped, startled, while another jet roared overhead. They'd taken her watch and her phone, so she had no idea how much time had passed. She slumped onto the concrete and closed her eyes. Her last thought before she escaped into sleep was about Ana. *Please, let her be okay.*

###

Carlos leaned forward, his head clasped in his hands. He was slumped on a chair next to Ana who was propped up with pillows on a hospital bed. "You look terrible!" Ana said. "One would think you'd been the one shot in the leg and in pain."

Ana had regained her color and almost looked cheerful. Must be the painkillers the nurse had given her, Carlos concluded. She had a gauze bandage on her right forehead and a splint on her lower left leg. She was fortunate the rubber bullet hadn't penetrated the skin, although the impact did fracture her fibula. He shuddered when he remembered the blood pouring from her head. At first he'd thought that was where the bullet had hit. He was so relieved when it turned out to just be a bad scrape when she hit the pavement. Her head was sore, but they'd taken x-rays, and there were no signs of a concussion. No, it wasn't Ana he was worried about. If only Shari hadn't called attention to herself by getting up onto the stage to speak. Well too late to change that now.

Carlos wrung his hands together and then pointed his right forefinger at Ana. "I've got to figure out a way to find Shari. You don't know how bad it can get in there. I suspect she'll have been detained under *arraigo*. If she's under special detention, it means they could have taken her just about anywhere. Worse yet, they can legally keep her for a considerable time without charging her. She won't be entitled to legal counsel during this pre-charge detainment, not even a phone call. I've seen what they can do..." Carlos paused. Better if Ana didn't know that it wouldn't be unusual for the police to torture detainees.

Ana tightened the thin hospital housecoat around her waist. “Okay, let’s not panic. What are some of the ways we can get her out? Can’t we just post bail?”

Carlos shook his head and groaned. “You don’t fucking get it, do you? We don’t even know where they’ve taken her. If bail is even an option, and that’s unlikely, it doesn’t come into play until, and if, they charge her. Believe me—this is nothing like what you’d experience in Canada. We’re lucky they didn’t like the optics of throwing a tourist they just shot into jail or you’d be there with her. And somehow in the confusion of getting you into the ambulance, they overlooked me, or I’d certainly be there as well.” Or more likely dead.

Ana sipped some water and then turned to Carlos again. “So if bail isn’t the answer, what is? You must have seen some of your fellow revolutionaries be arrested and then released? How did they get out?”

“Good question... We’d organize enough agitation that the politicians ordered some prisoners released just to make the media fallout disappear.”

“Well another protest is clearly not the answer.” Ana swung her legs over the bed. “What about paying them some money? Could we buy our way out of this?”

“But how do we even find them!” Carlos leapt up and paced alongside the bed. “What we need is someone with political connections to help us get in contact with her jailers.”

Ana suddenly sat up, her eyes gleaming. “I think I know someone who can help.”

**Chapter Thirty – Second Thursday: Still in Jail**

A thud woke Shari up. For a moment, she didn't know where she was. She looked around the bleak room with bleary eyes, remembered what had happened and groaned. Then she frowned at the securely locked door. What she'd heard sounded like the door slamming shut, so someone might still be on the other side. "Hey wait!" she yelled. She grabbed the edge of the table and pulled herself to her feet. Her foot still ached, but she managed to limp to the doorway. When she got there, she looked down and noticed a tray and a box on the floor. Her stomach grumbled. But her anger outweighed her hunger.

She had quite enough of being imprisoned. She banged on the door as hard as she could. "Who's there? Come back! Damn you, let me out of here." She rattled the handle, but soon realized it was hopeless.

The tray and box still lay on the floor. They'd brought her a small bottle of water, a thick slice of fruit bread and a mango. She picked up the box and the tray—with what must be her breakfast—brought both to the desk and settled onto the chair. It threatened to tip over. The bread was hard and the mango dark and fermented. She eagerly drank the water, but wished there were more. And she'd give just about anything for a cup of coffee. Staring down at the unappetizing food, she was no longer hungry. She folded her arms onto the desk and lay down her head. Although now she really had something to cry about, her tears seemed to have dried up.

She sat up, reached into the box and drew out a muddy brown comforter, thin and mended in several places, which would be okay, if it didn't smell of mildew. "Ew!" She threw the comforter on the floor and plopped down. It was better than the cement floor. If only she had a book, anything to make the time pass more quickly. Her imagination and memories would have to do. She closed her eyes, and as she so frequently did these days, thought about her mother.

They were always short of money when she was a child, even more so after her father's death. Her mother found what work she could. She'd always told Shari what she regretted the most when they immigrated to Canada in the early sixties was that she had to give up her dream of teaching. Despite being trained as a teacher in Italy, in her new country she worked cleaning, first in private homes, later in a medical laboratory. "Those poor rats and rabbits," her mother would say. "First they stick those needles into them, and whether or not they get sick, they kill them. I get to clean up the mess."

Shari opened her eyes, feeling shattered. Her poor mother. But surely her life hadn't all been so terrible? Why was it only sorrow she remembered? She searched for more pleasant memories, until finally from bits of reality, she fabricated a vision.

*Her mother was walking in Toronto's High Park in early May, as she often did when they'd lived nearby. The park's cherry trees were in blossom. The air was filled with the distinctive song of the Red-winged Blackbirds back from their winter home. An attractive brunette in her thirties with long, curly hair cascading down her shoulders strolled through the park. Her mother wore a flowered shirtwaist dress tied with a rope belt, a cardigan thrown over her shoulder. A small girl, maybe five years old, dressed in a robin's blue sundress and matching hat held Fanny's hand, skipping down the path. She had sad hazel eyes and short curly brown hair. Suddenly the young Shari covered her mouth and her eyes overflowed with tears. Her mother bent down, took out her handkerchief and wiped her eyes. "Bambina mia, non piangi. Death is just part of life. You can grieve that we will no longer be together, but don't grieve for me. I no longer exist. I no longer feel life's pain."*

She hadn't made up her mother's words—she had spoken them as she lay dying. Shari could almost hear her voice. Now tears poured down Shari's cheeks, but she wasn't sure if she was crying

for her mother or herself. Suddenly she knew that she'd been mistaken to let her mother's death take over her life. She'd let sorrow become her prison. If she wanted to, she could spend the rest of her days trying to understand death, grieving for her mother, for her father, her brother, but that meant passing by the chance to live. She didn't want to spend her remaining years with regret—she wanted to feel alive. And that made her think of Carlos. She hadn't known him long, that was true, but when she was with him, she laughed, she felt passion—she wanted to live. It was as if he had dropped a line into the deep, dark cave of grief where Shari had been trapped and drew her out into the sunshine. Then she thought about Grant. She was so terribly confused. Didn't she used to feel like that about her husband? If she did, she'd forgotten and those feelings had disappeared. Anger had taken their place. Maybe it was also time to forgive.

What she knew for sure was that if she ever got out of here, she'd need to find some way to bring joy back into her life. She'd spent enough time clasping death. It was time to embrace life. But first, she'd give just about anything for a hot bath and an iced coffee.

*Get real Shari!* Neither Carlos nor Grant could help her. She was alone, and the only person who could get her out of this dungeon was herself. She sobbed, picked up the smelly comforter, wrapped it around herself, lay down on the hard floor and shut her eyes. As she drifted into sleep she thought: *It's all up to me.*

The door creaked and Shari's eyes flew open. She'd no idea how long she'd slept. In the entrance a tall, stocky man in combat fatigues roughly gripped Gabriela's arm as if he wanted to hurt her. "*Entrar!*" he snarled and shoved her so violently that she fell onto the floor. He slammed the door, leaving Gabriela behind, clutching a thin quilt. She wobbled a bit as she got to her feet.

Shari dashed over and wrapped her arms around Gabriela. "I'm so glad to see you!" "You have a doozy of a black eye," she said, stepping back.

“That’s some goose egg you have... They ran out of room, so here I am.” Gabriela stared at the abandoned bread and mango. “Do you want that?”

###

Carlos took a sip of his coffee. Ana and Alejo sat next to him on the balcony watching the sun set. When the doctors had given Ana the all clear, Alejo had picked them up at the hospital and driven them to the condo. Ana seemed glad to be home. The scrape on her head and broken leg would heal, but Shari was still in serious trouble.

“What in hell’s name are we going to do?” He felt so helpless. A tight knot lodged in the pit of his stomach. There was no guarantee they’d be able to get her out.

Ana rearranged the crutches propped up against the balcony railing. “Trust me. This is going to work. Just give it a chance.”

Alejo nodded. “I think she’s right. Let’s see how it plays out.”

Ana looked up at Carlos. “Do you think we should call Grant? Doesn’t he have a right to know Shari’s in jail?”

Fuck. Do we really need to bring her husband into this? “I don’t care. You decide.”

Ana grabbed the crutches, pulled herself up and dragged herself into the kitchen where she dialed Grant’s number. Carlos listened to her side of the conversation.

“Now calm down Grant. We’re working on getting her out. If things go as planned, we’ll have her free tomorrow... No, I don’t think you need to come. By the time you get here, it will hopefully be all over.”

Nothing could stop me from coming, Carlos thought. He didn’t want to hear anymore.

Ana hung up the phone and waved them into the kitchen. “Okay, he’ll wait until we know more. I’ll call him tomorrow. But I’m really beat. Those painkillers make me drowsy. If you don’t mind, I’m going to have a nap.” Ana hopped on her crutches to the nearby living room and lowered

herself onto the couch. She looked pale, shattered.

Alejo touched Carlos arm. “She shouldn’t be here alone. Do you want to stay overnight? I could pick you up and take you to your class in the morning.” At least that way he’d be nearby when they found out if their plan to free Shari had worked. Or hadn’t.

“Ana,” he said. “Would you like me to stay with you? It will be difficult for you to cook and you may need some other help. Those crutches are rather limiting.” Would she need someone to dress her? Give her a hand in getting in and out of the bath? He wasn’t sure he was up to that. “I’d be some help anyway.” He had a bad feeling about this, but leaving her alone didn’t seem right either.

Ana’s eyes lit up. “That’d be lovely. The guest room is free, until Shari gets back.”

“Alright, my food repertoire is somewhat limited, but my omelets are tasty, aren’t they Alejo?” Carlos said. “Do you have any beer?”

###

Shari leaned against the desk, her legs stretched out in front of her, while nearby Gabriela sat cross-legged on the floor. She bit into the sandwich that had just been delivered. Maybe bologna? She wasn’t sure, but by now she was so hungry she didn’t care. She didn’t know if the sandwiches were meant to be supper or lunch, but it certainly seemed an awful long time since the inedible fruit bread and mango had appeared, although her prison mate had managed to devour it all. Shari had been dismayed at the two small bottles of water that the surly guard had handed her with the sandwiches. She took a careful sip from her bottle, hoping to make it last.

“*Cómo estás?*” said Gabriela who had almost finished her sandwich.

Shari gave her a tentative smile. “I’m okay. Better now you’re here... What’s going to happen to us?”

Gabriela peered at her intently. “They’re keeping us under special detention. Otherwise, they’d

have taken us to the prison. I'd guess from the heavy air traffic that we've been locked up at the military base."

"And what does special detention mean for us?"

"No lawyer, no phone call, no access to family. And they can keep us here up to forty days without actually charging us with anything. And then forty days more if they want to. It's nasty."

Shari hung her head. "Oh Gabriela, I'm so sorry I asked you to cover the rally. If I hadn't persuaded you to attend, you wouldn't be in this mess."

"Hey, I'm a big girl. If anyone is at fault it's me for not telling you more about the risks."

Shari placed the remains of her sandwich on her lap and gestured wildly. "How do we get out of here? That's what we have to figure out."

"We have to hope someone on the outside has some connections and money. My newspaper may come and spring me, but it's not a sure thing." Gabriela stretched her arms and rubbed her shoulders, one at a time. "They won't want to pay any more money if they can avoid it. This isn't the first time a journalist has been arrested. The owners are getting tired of the rising cost."

Shari's forehead wrinkled as she remembered Gabriela had a child, a little girl, now separated from her mother. "Will Ramona be okay? Do you have someone looking after her?" *It's my fault for meddling in the rally. Gabriela wouldn't be in this mess if it weren't for me.*

"She'll be alright. I'd left her with my mother, and she'll just keep her when I don't show up. As you know, there's no father in her life right now."

"If only we knew the time. And I'd give anything for a bath. I don't smell do I?"

Gabriela stood up and gazed at Shari with pity. "That's the least of your problems."



**Chapter Thirty-one – Second Friday: Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum**

*“Levántate!”* A deep, nasty voice echoed through the room.

*What! Who?* Shari shook her head. She must have drifted off. Barely awake she glanced up at two heavy-set men with mean eyes, dressed in military gear, who stomped into the room. Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum, she thought. It was difficult to tell one from the other. Only they looked more dangerous than the chaps Alice encountered in *Through the Looking Glass*. For one thing, they held tightly onto assault rifles. Somehow, Gabriela continued to sleep. Tweedle Dee lifted Shari up under her arms and yanked her to her feet. *“Vamonos!”* said Tweedle Dum as he pushed her roughly into the doorway and rammed the butt of his rifle into her side.

Appalled, she turned around, waved her fist and hollered, “That hurt! You can’t do that. I’ve got rights! I want a lawyer!” They shoved Shari into the hallway, and just before they swung the door shut, she glimpsed a horrified Gabriela staring after her.

Both jailers laughed raucously. Then the second thug (Tweedle Dum just didn’t suit) kicked her with his heavy combat boots. She fell onto the concrete floor clutching her side. This time she kept her mouth shut, except to groan. The pain was excruciating.

*“Marcha!”*

Shari flipped herself onto her knees and elbows and crawled to the wall of the narrow hallway. Somehow she managed to pull herself to her feet. She hobbled forward as best she could with two rifles jabbing her in the back.

When they came to a heavy steel door, they stopped, unlocked it and shoved her inside. It was roomier than where they’d first put her, but like the other room was dark, windowless, sweltering and empty except for a metal chair and desk. The meaner captor, the one who’d kicked her with his boots, scooped her up and dropped her onto the chair. On the table in front of her sat a large syringe, a liter bottle of sparkling water and a jar of chili peppers. Maybe they’d give her something to

drink? Before falling asleep, she'd finished the puny bottle of water. Now she was incredibly thirsty.

"*Habla Inglés?*" What was the word for thirsty? "*Acqua*," she managed to stutter out of her parched lips. Wait that was Italian for water, wasn't it? Right, she remembered. "*Agua, por favor.*" She hated to plead with these animals, but she really wanted a drink. She pointed to the bottle of water on the table.

The jailer holding the syringe threw her a nasty grin and grunted. "*Sabemos de su amigo. Perra anarquista!*" he said and spat at her feet.

Did he call her an anarchist? And something about a friend? Did he mean Carlos? Whatever he meant, it didn't sound good. Then he took a large pinch of the chili peppers and dropped it into the bottle. Her shoulders sagged. She couldn't drink it now. Next he dipped the syringe into the liquid and pulled the plunger until it was full. What the hell were they planning to do? He leered and moved towards her. Shari flinched and slid down in the chair.

He set the syringe beside her and picked up a pen and some sort of document and waved both close to her face. She took the pen and paper from him and realized it was in Spanish. She had no idea what it said. For all she knew, it could be incriminating Carlos in some way. She handed it back. The jailer's face darkened, and he banged his fist onto the table. Shari jumped. He picked up the threatening syringe again, leered and looked at her as if he were about to enjoy himself. She cringed and scrunched her eyes shut.

Suddenly the door swung open, crashing against the wall—everyone froze. In the doorway, with arms on his hips and feet planted firmly on the floor, stood a short, rotund Mexican man in a suit and tie, with square black glasses and a cross look on his face.

"*Deténgase! No tocarla,*" he ordered. Shit. She'd no idea what he'd said.

"*Habla Inglés?*" she asked.

"If up to me, we lock you up and throw away the key," he said in broken English, his voice

weary, “but I told to let you go. Come with me!” He gestured towards the door.

Thank god. Her rescuer escorted her through the narrow halls. Shari’s heart beat quickened as she followed him. Were they really going to let her go? Then they came to a front office with a window overlooking an outside courtyard where they snapped her photo and took her fingerprints. No one explained why this was necessary, since she was being released.

Then Shari thought—the magic hand. I’m not leaving without it. “I want my keys back,” she insisted.

The man who’d brought her there looked at her askance. He shook his head and waved to one of his minions who retrieved her bag and threw it at her. She rummaged through it frantically—her money and cell phone were gone. Digging deeper she touched a familiar smooth stone attached to a keychain. Ah ha! The magic hand. She sobbed with relief. Then she remembered Gabriela. How could she leave her behind? She saw again the large syringe, the hot chilli peppers.

Footsteps approached. She looked up and there was the last person she ever expected to see—Rita stood in the doorway with a smirk on her face. She shook her head. “My goodness Shari, what were you thinking?”

###

Carlos was glad he’d returned to Ana’s condo after his class. She was still fragile and seemed pleased to see him. He patted the gun he’d tucked into his belt, the one he’d wrenched from Tattoo-man on the cliff. If he were to take on the task of protecting Ana, he couldn’t do it with his bare hands. And he couldn’t count on finding the gun he gave Shari, if it was even still there.

It had been his final class. The students surprised him with an oversized card on which they wrote all the ways to say good-bye in Spanish. *Hasta la vista, Carlos*, read the last line. He was touched. It had been quite the two weeks, but despite that, he’d really enjoyed teaching again. He’d miss it.

While Ana slept, he lay sprawled on the couch browsing through a collection of T.S. Eliot's poems he found on the bookshelf and trying not to worry about Shari. He remembered the other night when he'd cooked the promised omelet and helped Ana into bed. To his relief, she'd managed to wash and dress without his intervention. He reached for his pipe, and then recalled Ana's stern admonishment to only smoke on the balcony. As he was standing up to do just that, the doorbell chimed. Who in the world? Shit. Had they come for him? He peered through the peephole. It couldn't be! But it was.

"Shari!" He flung open the door and stared at her from head to foot. There was a dark swelling above her left eyebrow and ugly bruises on her legs. She clutched her side. And who was that woman who stood behind her? Must be Ana's friend Rita.

"Carlos!" Shari gasped. "What are you doing here? Where's Ana? Is she okay?" He threw his arms around her. She clung to him as if she never wanted to let go. Then she limped over to the couch and carefully lowered herself onto a cushion.

Carlos sat down next to her. Then he put his hands on her shoulders and regarded her closely. "Ana's resting. She was hit with a rubber bullet at the rally." Shari gasped. "No, don't worry. She'll be fine. The bullet broke the fibula on her left leg, but fortunately, it didn't penetrate the skin, or it would have been much worse."

"There was so much blood..."

"She scraped her head when she hit the ground. She'll be okay, but what about you? Are you alright?" Creases covered Carlos' forehead.

Shari nodded, but before she could say anything, Rita sauntered over to the couch.

"You must be Rita." Carlos held out his hand. "Come join us. *Muchas gracias!*"

Shari shifted her gaze from Carlos to Rita and back again. "You knew about this?"

"It was Ana's idea. She knew Rita's friend Elizabeth, who owns the pink villa across from

this complex, is close friends with the wife of a local state politician. Elizabeth put Rita in contact with Andrea who persuaded her husband to help us find out where they'd taken you."

Comprehension and then regret flashed across Shari's face. "I met Andrea, last Sunday at the jewellery party. I wish I'd been friendlier. I'm surprised she agreed to help."

Carlos continued. "She convinced her husband to intervene, but we still needed some bribe money to make it happen. Ana took care of that."

Shari looked aghast. "How much?"

Carlos shook his head. "Talk to Ana about that. But if she hadn't paid it, you'd still be locked up. But listen, how are you?" He noticed what he'd missed before that her right foot was bruised and swollen. "Shouldn't you see a doctor?"

She shook her head. "Rita stopped at a clinic on the way here. I hit my head when the police threw me to the floor, but there's no sign of a concussion. I guess my ribs are badly bruised, and my foot is sprained, but nothing's broken." She winced. "I'll heal. The doctor gave me painkillers. I'm okay if I don't breathe too deeply." She held up a large prescription bottle. "I wonder if Ana has an ice pack?"

Rita glared at Shari. "Listen, I've got to leave now. We'll talk later. But remember you've got to fly home Sunday, or they'll be back for you." Shari nodded grimly. Rita explained to Carlos, "They've left me responsible for making sure she leaves Mexico. Of course, they'll follow up and make sure she gets on the plane. She's lucky they haven't expelled her permanently. But then they couldn't have done that without a hearing. And they really didn't want the publicity that would bring." She glanced at him demurely. "Will you be here for a while?"

If he wasn't mistaken, thought Carlos, the woman was ogling him. "Not sure," he muttered.

"Well if you are, don't be a stranger." Rita waved as she left.

"Is there anything to eat?" Shari asked.

Carlos' grinned. "How does an omelet sound?"

A thumping sound came from the direction of the bedroom. "I can recommend it. *Muy bueno*, as they say in Spanish." Ana stood in the kitchen doorway, leaning on her crutches.

**Chapter Thirty-two – Second Saturday in PV: Free Again**

For god's sake! What was wrong with them? The ghosts huddled together in a corner, silently clinging to each other. Her mother, Danny, Toby, and even Rusty, looked...distraught. What were they upset about? You'd think they'd be pleased to see her back safely. And surely she was imagining it, but the ghosts looked a bit faded, sort of blurred, as if she were looking at them on a TV with a faulty picture tube, or whatever they had these days. She shook her head. Instead of the leisurely bath she'd looked forward to, she settled for a quick shower.

Yesterday, after hugging Ana and eating every speck of the surprisingly delicious mushroom omelette Carlos had prepared, Shari had phoned Grant.

When she said hello, she heard him exhale. "Oh thank god. Are you okay? I was so worried."

"I have some bruises," she said, "and they stole my cell phone, but I'll be fine. I'm flying home tomorrow."

"Really? Well, I'd better phone your cell provider and let them know. Are you sure you didn't just lose it?" She could almost see him frown. "Whatever were you thinking to get involved in a demonstration? You're smarter than that."

She felt the blood rushing to her head. "Come on, Grant. Give me a break. I could've been killed."

"Okay, okay. Well take it easy until Sunday. I'll be at the airport to pick you up."

"Let the kids know I'm alright. And give them my love. See you tomorrow."

As soon as she hung up, she thought about Gabriela. She remembered the large syringe and the ugly gleam in the guard's eyes. What could she do? And Ana had to pay a bribe to get her out? That wasn't right. She was too exhausted to figure it all out.

She popped a couple more pills and crawled into bed with an ice pack. She was acutely aware of Carlos sleeping just down the hall. Earlier they'd agreed he should stay with them at least

one more night. Ana seemed to be managing, but he hadn't liked to leave them alone.

Shari frowned. "Where will you sleep?" She thought of Carlos and Ana.

He reached over and tugged affectionately on her ponytail. "I'll crash on the couch. You'll be more comfortable in the guest room."

Now lying on Ana's guestroom bed, she wondered again: what about Carlos and Ana? It looked like nothing had happened between them after all. She couldn't help but smile. Then she yawned. Even though her body ached all over, she was so tired it took her only seconds to fall asleep. Just before she drifted off, she glanced longingly at the empty space beside her in the bed.

###

Carlos tossed and turned once more on the hard couch too short for his long body. But it was his thoughts that kept him awake. He reached over and picked up a watch from the coffee table—it was already 1:00 a.m., and he hadn't slept a wink. You'd think that with Shari safely out of jail he would have no trouble sleeping. But now he was plagued with anxiety about her impending departure. When, if ever, would he see her again? It didn't help that she was sleeping just down the hall. They were as separated as if she were already in Calgary. But maybe he could...no, he wouldn't do that. Not when he wasn't sure it was what she wanted. He sighed.

He threw back the covers, stood up and walked over to the kitchen. First, he opened the fridge door and took out a beer. Once he'd cracked open the bottle and tossed some back, he bent down and retrieved his backpack from under the table where he'd tucked it away. He rummaged inside until he found what he wanted. Drawing out a notebook and pen, he settled onto one of the bamboo chairs. He took out his pipe, hesitated, and then lit it and took a puff. What the hell. Ana would never know. His forehead wrinkled as he picked up the pen and began to write.

###

That morning Shari woke up to discover she'd slept twelve hours. She got dressed and



wandered into the living room where she could see Carlos on the balcony smoking his pipe and drinking coffee. She grabbed another ice pack from the freezer. Then she joined him on the balcony, pulling up a chair beside him. She pressed the pack against her rib cage.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, glancing sideways.

She wiggled her foot. “Still achy, especially my ribs, but my foot actually feels better. So I should be able to get home tomorrow. I went online as soon as I got up. I had no trouble booking a flight, early tomorrow evening, but I was worried about managing the long walk through the airports, both at this end and in Calgary.” She scrunched her forehead. “Where’s Ana?”

Carlos shrugged. “Still sleeping as far as I know. I made coffee. Would you like some?”

Shari nodded. “Oh yes, please! That’d be great.”

“Cream and two sugars, right?”

“Right.” She was surprised he remembered.

Carlos handed her a cup full of steaming coffee, slid back into his chair, turned towards her and frowned. “Did they hurt you?”

“As you can see, they had their fun, stomping on my foot, kicking me and butting me with their rifles, but Rita got there just as it was about to get worse.”

Carlos shook his head. “I would never have forgiven myself if you’d been seriously hurt or worse... You don’t know how glad I was to open the door yesterday and find you standing there.”

I’ll be gone soon, she thought, and I probably won’t ever see him again. Shari gazed at Carlos sorrowfully. “You know I understand I’ve got to leave the country tomorrow, but what I don’t understand is for how long.”

“It’s hard to say, since nothing has been done officially. It’s political, not legal.”

Yikes. Would she ever feel comfortable coming back to Mexico? “Maybe Rita can find out for me.” Then Shari thought of Gabriela. “Carlos, do you remember the newspaper reporter who was

at the rally?”

“I think so. Why?”

“When they first locked me up, I was alone, but the next day, they brought the reporter to my room. Her name’s Gabriela. She’s still in there! And it’s my fault. I invited her to the rally. What can we do to get her out?”

Carlos removed the pipe from his mouth. “Her newspaper will probably spring her. That’s what usually happens. But they have to be willing to cough up some pesos.”

“She did say that was possible, but she wasn’t sure.” Shari rocked back and forth on her chair. “I can’t stand the idea of her still being there.”

“Why don’t you phone the newspaper and find out if she’s been released? Or I can, if you want me to?”

“Could you? Oh please do.” She followed him into the condo.

Shari sat on the living room couch and watched Carlos as he stood in the kitchen talking to someone on the phone, presumably at the newspaper office. She didn’t like the expression on his face. “*Gracias. Mas tarde.*” He hung up and walked back to the living room where he sat down next to Shari.

“What did they say? Is she okay?”

Carlos sighed. “They didn’t know she’d been imprisoned.”

“What! Surely they’d have told them by now.” Shari crossed her arms.

“Nobody contacted us; we had to find you. It’s a good thing we phoned the newspaper. They’re on it now. They have their own contacts. We’ll call again this afternoon and see if they’ve been able to find her and get her released.”

“Okay, I guess we just have to wait, but I wish there was more we could do.” Shari reached over and touched his arm. “What about you Carlos? Are you still in danger? What will you do

now that the class is finished?”

“Alejo phoned while you were still sleeping. He’s coming over about two for a late lunch and bringing us some pizza. He said he had an idea.”

Then Carlos gazed at Shari, his eyes damp. He pulled her towards him and held her closely.

As she relaxed into his arms, she thought, *I’m going to miss him.*

###

“Terrific pizza!” Ana wiped her hands and poured herself another glass of red wine. “And a little alcohol chaser really numbs the pain.” She lightly tapped her splint and grinned.

Alejo beamed back. “Figured you’d all be getting bored with omelets.” Nothing wrong with my omelets, thought Carlos as he gazed across the dining room table at Shari.

“Look!” Shari pointed towards the nearby balcony door through which a humpback whale could be seen leaping out of the water and slamming against the waves. Her face lit up and her eyes flashed with excitement.

Carlos had difficulty sleeping last night knowing she was lying in the bed just down the hall. And tomorrow she’d be gone. *Will I ever see her again?* Then he remembered the gun.

“Do you still have the gun I gave you?” he asked.

She felt herself blush and avoided his eyes. “I put it somewhere safe in the condo...and I don’t remember where.” Carlos frowned.

“Hey, this could be fun,” said Alejo. “Sort of like a treasure hunt. What do you say? The winner gets the last piece of pizza?”

“Okay, but I get a head start. I’m handicapped.” Ana stood up, hands on her clutches, raring to go.

He was searching in the bathroom, when Ana called out from the laundry room. “Got it!”

Carlos came running. She waved the gun at him. Shit! “Don’t do that! It’s loaded,” he shouted.

He reached over, grabbed the gun from Ana and breathed a sigh of relief. He turned it over in his hands, checked the safety latch and tucked the .45 mm pistol into his backpack.

Shari entered the room. "Where was it?"

"In the laundry hamper," replied Ana.

Shari slapped her forehead. "Right! That's where I hid it."

Back in the dining room, Ana devoured the last slice of pizza, while they all polished off the wine. A warm ocean breeze blew in from the balcony. Carlos felt nostalgic. He suspected that someday he'd long for this moment in time to return.

"Okay Alejo," said Carlos. "What's this plan you've concocted? Tell us about it."

Alejo leaned forward. "Here's what I think. It's not safe for you to stay in PV any longer.

They've been stalking you since you came here, and I'm sure they noticed you at the rally. It's just a matter of time until they track you down."

*Why do I want to stay once Shari's gone, anyway?* "So what do you suggest?"

"My cousin Fernando is driving to Mexico City tomorrow on business, and he's willing to give you a ride. Going with him would definitely be safer than taking the bus. And you should be okay making your way home from there. Don't you think?"

"Alright." Carlos thought longingly about the jungle.

Shari looked troubled. "What about Ana? How is she going to manage?"

"I just have one more day that I can't put my foot down, and then I should be okay on my own. And there's always Rita. She's offered to pick up groceries for me."

Guilt flooded Shari's face. "Sorry, I won't be able to stay with you."

"I'm looking forward to just sitting in the sun by the pool. I've had quite enough excitement for a while." Ana reached over and put her hand on Shari's.

"And Ana," she said, "we've got to talk about this money you paid to get me out. I want to

pay you back. How much was it?"

"It could have as easily been me in jail, and you'd have done the same. What better way to spend some of my mother's inheritance than rescuing my best friend."

Shari wrinkled her forehead. "We'll sort it out when you get back to Calgary."

Carlos stood up and carried dishes to the sink. "So looks like we're both set to leave tomorrow." He paused. "I do have one last request." Would she agree? Was she recovered enough from her ordeal? "How about we go to Encuentro for one final ocean sunset and margarita? It's already four, so we could head out in an hour or so. Are you feeling up to it?"

"I'd love that!" Then her smile faded. "Do you think it's safe?"

"I'm willing to take a chance if you are. We'll take the taxi straight to the bar, mingle with the crowd of tourists and head back right after the sun sets."

"But what about Ana..."

Alejo raised his hand. "Obviously we're not going to drag Ana to the bar, so I'll stay with her until you guys get back. There's another bottle of red wine on the counter and some white in the fridge. What do you say, Ana?"

For a moment Ana looked disappointed, but she quickly recovered. "That's sweet of you Alejo. More wine sounds terrific. And I have some DVDs. Maybe we can find one you like. Pretty sure there's popcorn in the pantry."

Shari stood up. "Well then, I'd better get ready. It takes me a while." Worry lines crossed her forehead. "First, let's phone the newspaper and make sure Gabriela is safe."

"Sure," said Carlos. He couldn't wait to have Shari to himself again.

Then Alejo walked over and drew Carlos into the hallway. He placed a hand on his shoulder, slipped something into his pocket and whispered in his ear, "Just in case."

**Chapter Thirty-three – Second Saturday in PV: Carlos and Shari**

Shari twirled the stem of a margarita glass while a second drink waited nearby. Carlos leaned back in his chair, gripping a Pacifico. She couldn't believe this would be the last time they were together. She wasn't sure what hurt more, the bruises that covered her body or the ache in her chest when she thought about never seeing Carlos again.

The bar inside Encuentro had been full, so they grabbed a table on the sandy beach just in front. A blood red sun dominated the sky, while the late afternoon waves swept against the shore. Beach vendors wove their way between their chairs.

Shari twisted her wedding ring around her finger. "What a relief to hear Gabriela was released this morning. I couldn't bear knowing I was free and she was still trapped in that awful place." A picture of the oppressive concrete room and the nasty jailors popped into her head.

Carlos lifted his glass. "*Salud*. Now we just need to get you home safely."

Shari grimaced. "I'm not sure I want to go home." *I don't want to leave you behind.*

"Doesn't look to me like you have much choice. You don't want to end up back in jail do you?" He pulled out his pipe. "You may get exonerated in the end, but the waiting would be long and unpleasant."

"I've been thinking." Shari lowered her voice. "What about those men on the cliff, and the one that fell onto the rocks? Do you think that's why I was arrested?" She shifted in her chair, trying to get comfortable. Her ribs throbbed.

"I'm pretty sure if the police had figured that out, they'd have come for us sooner. And they wouldn't have let you go, no matter what we paid. No, speaking at the rally gave them plenty of reason to jail you."

Just then a young female vendor, her long black hair in a clip, stopped beside Shari with sarongs for sale. She stretched out and held up a black, fringed cloth covered in mauve

hibiscus. “Yes, I’ll take it!” Shari loved saying, “Si, gracias” for a change. She must remember to pay back the pesos Ana had lent her, since her own money was never returned. She tucked the parcel into her beach bag.

“But Carlos, what will happen to the vendors? Did the rally make any difference?”

Carlos shook his head. “Not that I’ve heard, but then I’ve been out of touch, busy watching over Ana and worrying about you.”

“You were worried about me?” He really does care, she thought.

“Of course, silly.” Carlos stood up. “Look, there’s Elfrida.” She was shuffling towards them holding the hand of a small boy. “*Buenas tardes!*”

Shari couldn’t believe her eyes. That floppy black hair, those piercing eyes—it was the same boy who’d been watching her ever since she got to PV. He stopped and stared at her. Meanwhile, Carlos and Elfrida were discussing something in rapid Spanish that she couldn’t follow. They both turned towards her looking gleeful.

Carlos threw up his hands and hopped from one foot to the other. “We did it! Elfrida tells me the government has backed down. Those neoliberal bastards didn’t win after all! PV’s beaches will remain open for business.”

Shari held both thumbs up. “Terrific! I’m so glad. I can’t wait to tell Ana.” Just then a humpback whale blew its spout as if rejoicing with them. The beach boy smiled tentatively at her. Shocked, she returned his smile. “Carlos, could you please ask Elfrida who this little boy belongs to?”

“*Quién es el chico?*” Carlos asked.

“My grandson,” Elfrida answered, pulling him against her hip, and continuing in Spanish.

Carlos nodded at Elfrida and then squinted in Shari’s direction, the setting sun shining in his eyes. He put on his sunglasses and moved his chair closer. “That’s better. I want to be able to see

you.” Shari was sure she must be blushing. “Do you remember I told you Elfrida’s daughter is a beach vendor? Well, she often brings her son with her and lets him play on the beach while she’s approaching the tourists. The other beach vendors keep an eye out for him.”

“Does he speak English?”

“Yes, better than his grandmother.”

Shari squatted down beside the boy, who looked down at the sand. “What’s your name?”

“Alberto,” he mumbled, shifting the sand in a circle with his toe.

Shari stood up and addressed Carlos. “I’ve seen Alberto several times since I’ve been here, and he always seemed so angry. I know Elfrida speaks a little English, but I don’t think I can make her understand. I’d like to know why? What have I done?”

Carlos turned to Elfrida and broke into whirlwind Spanish. When Shari listened more carefully, she realized he was probably speaking dialect. Elfrida sent back a rapid-fire reply.

“Her daughter complained to her son that the tourist weren’t buying anything and sometimes were mean,” Carlos translated. “And lately she’s been worried about the beach closures. At first you were just another nasty tourist to her grandson. I suspect most of the tourists wouldn’t have noticed him, let alone his dirty looks. Then when Alberto saw you with me, you were a particular target. In his confused young mind that somehow made you more responsible. He thought you should be able to do something to stop the closure.”

Shari bent down again and drew the boy to her. He squirmed, but when she pulled back and smiled at him, he giggled.

“He seems happy with me now.”

“That’s because his mother is ecstatic about the beaches staying open.”

“Well so am I!” Shari sat back down and took a swig from her second margarita.

Carlos was staring at some troubadours wandering in their direction. The two guitarists and



drummer looked familiar to her. Where had she seen them before? If she wasn't mistaken, they were the musicians who'd played at Toby's funeral. Carlos walked over to them and chatted for several minutes. Then they started to sing an upbeat Spanish song as Carlos strolled back to Shari. "I thought we might celebrate the victory," he said. This Spanish song is called '*El Sol Nace Para Todos*' or 'The Sun is Born for Everyone.' We'll have to make do with a sunset instead of a sunrise."

After a few minutes, Alberto began to twirl around on the sand in time to the rhythm. Soon half a dozen beach vendors lined up their jewellery, tablecloths, carved animals and fish mobiles on the concrete ledge bordering the pathway and joined Elfrida and her grandson in the jubilant dance. News of the government's capitulation about the beach closures and Carlos' presence must have spread. Shari noticed the woman who sold her the sarong spinning around and holding Alberto's hand. Was she his mother?

Shari couldn't stand it anymore. She stood up (*ouch*) and limped towards the dancers. *Not a good idea Shari*. Carefully, she shifted from one foot to the other, while she waved her arms in the air. *Yikes that hurts my ribs*. Carlos strode over and took her hands in his. Soon it was just Alberto and the two of them dancing while the vendors stood around and clapped. As the troubadours sang the last refrain, the sun dropped below the horizon. Tourists and vendors alike stood and cheered.

Shari hobbled back to the table. Just before the sun went down, she'd seen Gloria inside the bar, her turquoise bracelet glittering in the dying sun. Now she spied her again. She gave Shari a thumbs up. Would Gloria act any differently next time a beach vendor approached her? Shari liked to think so, but maybe she was fooling herself. She sank gratefully back into the chair, while Carlos said, "I'll be right back," and wandered off.

Now standing a short distance away, north from her along the beach, he was speaking earnestly with the musicians who had just played. He waved what looked like a notebook in front of them.

What in the world was he up to now? About fifteen minutes later, he walked back and lowered himself into the chair beside her. “Sorry about that,” he mumbled.

Whatever, Shari thought and lifted her glass. “Here’s to Toby.” She wouldn’t forget him...or the other beach vendors.

“To Toby,” Carlos said and raised his beer.

She drained her last margarita. Did she dare order another round? She sighed as she recalled what happened last time she drank too many margaritas. She’d been through a lot since then, and there was more pain to come. And she wasn’t thinking of her injured body. But then she realized she wanted to remember every moment of this last evening. When the waiter rushed by, she said, “Agua por favor.”

Shari tried not to stare at Carlos, but found her gaze drawn again and again to his soulful eyes. Why did he look so sad tonight?

Suddenly the musicians he’d been chatting with earlier strolled over. One of them handed Carlos his acoustic guitar.

“Would you like me to sing you a song *señorita*?” Carlos asked.

“You play? Really?” She beamed. “You never fail to amaze me.”

He gestured to the remaining guitarist and drummer who came to stand beside him. Carlos tuned the guitar for a few minutes, and then looked at Shari with an uncharacteristically serious expression. “Last night when I couldn’t sleep, I wrote a song. Still needs a little work, I think, particularly the tune, but I wasn’t sure I’d ever get another chance to sing it to you. I wasn’t even sure you’d come with me to Encuentro tonight, but here you are.” He smiled, hesitantly. “I’ve written songs before, but usually about injustice and revolution. This one is a love song and it’s called “Just Call on Me.”

Carlos’ gazed deeply into Shari’s eyes, strummed his guitar and sang, backed up by the

other musicians. She was surprised at what great a voice he had—sexy, like him. As he played, he swayed in time to the music. Shari leaned forward, mesmerized.

I remember that Sunday we met.  
Your dark smile, how could I resist?  
Eyes so sad, how could I forget?  
Margaritas at sunset  
On the Beach of the Dead.

Chiquita...I'll remember you.  
And if you ever need me back  
To be your errant knight,  
To make you tremble in my arms,  
As we dance in the moonlight.

Just call on me, Chiquita  
Just call on me.

I'll remember this Sunday eve  
When I long to hold you close  
When I can't bear to let you leave—  
Margaritas at sunset  
On the Beach of the Dead.

Chiquita...I'll remember you.  
And if you ever need me back,  
To be your errant knight,  
To make you tremble in my arms  
As we dance in the moonlight.

Just call on me, Chiquita.  
Just call on me.  
Chiquita, just call on me.

Shari's eyes blurred with tears. Carlos handed back the guitar. "I know it's a bit sentimental, just like me, but I wanted to make sure you knew how I felt," he said and sat down.

He reached over and placed her hand in his. "I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you too." She wiped her eyes. "Could we go back to the condo?"

Shari was very conscious of Carlos lying beside her, one arm and leg touching hers. When the taxi had dropped them off, neither wanted to go inside to face Ana and Alejo. "Not just yet,"

Shari said. She took his hand in hers and led him down the stairs to the deserted beach in front of the complex. The waning moon was still in the east, the sky perfectly clear. The stars should be brilliant tonight, she thought, a few already twinkling above them. Shari pulled out a towel from her bag, spread it out on the sand and lay down. Carlos stretched out closely beside her. Then she frowned.

“What now *Chiquita*?” Carlos asked.

Shari pulled herself up on one elbow and looked at him. “I can’t help thinking...I really don’t know who you are. When Marcos spoke at the rally...you disappeared. Are you...?”

Carlos sat up and clasped his knees. In a gentle voice, he asked, “Does it really matter?” He brushed his hand along his scar. “Sometimes it’s safer not knowing too much.” Shari’s brow furrowed for a moment, and then she nodded. He was right. It really made no difference as to how she felt about him.

She lay back down, gazed up at Venus, shining brightly just above the horizon, against a background of faint stars scattered across the sky, and whispered, “Sometimes it’s difficult to believe these small bright lights in this vast sky are planets and stars existing millions of light years away, that what we see has happened far back in time...It makes me feel so small and insignificant.” Somewhere up there Shari imagined her mother gazing down on her. And this time she was smiling.

“You’re not insignificant to me,” Carlos said as he reached towards the back of her head and released her ponytail. “I’ve wanted to do that since I first met you.” Shari leaned over him, curls falling about her face, her breasts pressed against his solid chest, and kissed him. Carlos groaned as he ran his hands through her flowing hair. She felt as if any moment the stars would begin to rotate and tumble from the sky.

She drew back, breathing hard and searched his eyes. “Carlos, what are we going to do?”

He sat up and touched her face. “I could ask you to come and live with me in the jungle, I’d

love that, but it would only put you in danger. When the police found out you hadn't left the country, they'd be after you in a flash. And they won't stop trying to get rid of me either. So if you're with me..." Carlos looked at her sadly. "You'd live the rest of your life in fear, looking over your shoulder. Believe me, I know about that. You'd hate it."

He was probably right. She'd be more trapped than ever before. And would she ever see her kids again? But leaving him behind...

Shari hesitated, trembled and then asked, "Will you at least stay with me tonight?" She stared up at the sky, not able to look him in the eye.

Carlo placed his hands behind his head. "You know I want to, but won't it just hurt all that more when we have to leave tomorrow?" He paused and turned to her. "And what about your husband?"

Her chest tightened as she thought about Grant. She shook her head. "Honestly, I don't know about my marriage. And whether you stay the night or not, either way, it will be very difficult for me when you leave." She turned towards the ocean. "When I was locked up, I had a chance to think. It seems as if regret and sorrow, guilt, and even anger, have filled every corner of my life, so there isn't room for anything else. I promised myself, if I got out, I'd learn to embrace life, not dwell on the past or worry about the future." She held her breath and looked at him, her eyes wide open. "And Carlos, you make me feel so alive...in a way that nobody else does."

"So you want me to spend the night with you?" Carlos grinned. "We'll have to be careful not to hurt your ribs." He pulled her up from the sand and into his arms.

A loud bang shattered the air. Shari jumped. "Carlos!" she yelled, then looked up, and laughed. Fireworks shot through the air, gyrating in blues and pinks, and even purple.

"Just the Pirate ship. Let's go."

"A change in plans," announced Carlos as they entered the condo. Shari felt heat flood her

face as he asked if he could stay one more night. Ana started to protest that they'd be alright, until she realized from Shari's expression that he didn't mean on the couch. Alejo left with a hug and a promise to confirm with his cousin that Carlos would go with him to Mexico City. Carlos would take a taxi to Alejo's house early in the morning and get packed before Fernando picked him up. Ana threw her arms around Shari, winked and hobbled to bed.

Shari stared at the dead in amazement. What she hadn't expected to encounter when she opened the bathroom door was a jubilant, although blessedly quiet, celebration. Her mother, her brother and Toby stood arm-in-arm, while Rusty bounced back and forth at their feet. They were all, even the cat, grinning. And Toby, yes even Toby, gave her a thumbs up! *What was going on?* Maybe they were pleased about her and Carlos? She never really knew what to expect from them, nor understood what they wanted from her. They reminded Shari of her children when they were moody teenagers.

She ignored them, stripped and stepped into the shower that Carlos had just left. As she washed off the sand and soaped herself, she looked down at her aging body. When she was younger, she had quite a decent body, or so she'd been told. She was sure she'd lost a few pounds from the stress of the last week—the couple of days in jail helped—but she still felt very nervous about Carlos seeing her without clothes. Having brought the bag with the new sarong with her into the bathroom, she dried herself and bunched the cloth over her breasts, making sure they were well covered. She brushed her teeth, glanced once more at the gleeful ghosts and crept back to the bedroom where she'd left Carlos.

When he'd returned after his shower with a towel tied low around his hips, she'd stifled a gasp. She tried not to look at the black curly hair covering his well-developed chest, tried not to think how

much she wanted to feel it pressed against her breasts, and tried, but failed, to ignore the bulge between his legs. She escaped to the bathroom.

Now she tiptoed back to the bedroom and gingerly opened the door. A bath towel hung neatly on the chair by the bed. Then she glimpsed a square foil wrapper on the night table and lifted her eyebrows. It had been a very long time since she'd seen one of those.

"Is that? But where...?"

Carlos grinned. "Alejo," he said. And then when she turned to look at him, she forgot everything else. Her mouth dropped open. He was lying on top of the sheets, completely naked, with a thick, stiff cock. He gestured for her to join him. She closed her mouth, trying not to drool, and stared at him apprehensively. She approached the bed, and with her sarong clutched tightly around her, scooted under the sheets.

Carlos lifted his eyebrows and chuckled. "Well, that's not going to work very well is it? You under the sheets, dressed, me on top, naked."

She pulled the covers up to her chin and quivered. He stood up, joined her under the sheets, and slipping his hand beneath the soft cloth, stroked her breasts, ever so lightly. Then his fingers undid the knot holding her sarong together. He pulled back the covers and gazed at her body tenderly. "Oh Chiquita!" he said.

He drew one nipple, then the other, into his mouth and fondled them with his tongue. Shari moaned. He nuzzled her neck, and she sniffed. He smelt strange, but delicious, like something good to eat, maybe homemade bread. As his soft, full lips met hers, she was aware of hot skin pressed against her chest. Then he lifted himself up and leaned towards her. He found the bruises on her ribs, kissed them gently, slid to those on her legs and kissed them as well. Then his mouth moved back up—and lingered. *Yes!*

When he finally pulled away, lay back and slipped on the condom, he asked, "*Carina*, how can

we best do this without hurting you?”

Too excited to be self-conscious any longer, Shari responded by straddling him. As she leaned over, her hair brushed against his chest. He ran his fingers through her loose and tangled curls. At first she moved slowly, acutely aware of her painful bruises.

Carlos cried out, and when she began to move faster, he arched his body towards her, grabbed her bottom and plunged deeper still. Her breathing quickened and heart raced. As he thrust inside her, again and again, she shouted, “Oh god!” She could barely believe that what she’d wanted so badly ever since she’d met him was really happening. Enraptured by his burning skin touching hers, she really didn’t care about the ache in her ribs and legs. Very soon she cared even less as they exploded together.

An ocean breeze swept in the window, cooling her body, as she lay catching her breath. She turned to look at Carlos who lay so close beside her, his eyes closed. Were there tears on his lashes? She reached out and placed her hand in his. He squeezed it in response. In the darkness outside, she could just make out the palm trees waving their arms, as if they were saying good-bye.



**Chapter Thirty-four - Last Sunday: Departures**

That evening Carlos wandered through the streets of Mexico City alone. He was grateful to be able to stretch his legs after a long day in the car with too much time to think. His pipe dangled from his mouth, and his battered hat was pulled over his face. On a street corner a clown revolved inside a hoop as tourists stopped to watch. The crowds rushed by as he passed shiny glass and concrete skyscrapers that trapped the day's heat. Vehicles roared on the traffic-clogged streets, blasting their horns. He couldn't believe he once lived here. He longed for the lush jungle, for the tropical breeze, the sweet birdsong, the rustle of leaves in the towering tropical trees and the peasants whom he'd come to love. Thank god, tomorrow, after a long bus ride, he'd be home.

What a lot had happened since he'd left Mexico City two weeks ago. He was still fearful, that hadn't changed. But he'd been tested and passed. He'd defeated the thugs on the cliff, hadn't hesitated to try and intercept the bullet that sped towards Ana at the rally. The fear hadn't stopped him from doing what he had to do, and he was relieved. Was it really so frightening to die when death was all around him? Often he felt like he was planted firmly on the border between life and death.

If he was needed once more to fight for indigenous lands, to do what he could to eradicate the desperate poverty, he might just be up to the challenge. Even so, he wondered if he wasn't after all just a foolish dreamer, an errant-knight tilting at windmills.

He left behind the sterile skyscrapers and strolled into the historic centre of the capital city. Soon he passed the Palazzo Nazionale where the politicians carried out their business. Fuck those bastards, working in a palace surrounded by vast parks. Nearby historic buildings, the majestic cathedral, the expansive green spaces, all created the illusion of a civilized European city. It was all a sham. The city's predominantly poor citizens, many unemployed, some huddled not far from the city center, lived in makeshift houses, struggling to survive. The politicians didn't give a shit about

the poor, about the beach vendors. They cared even less about the peasants in the countryside, who had nothing, who suffered even more. Somehow, the widespread hunger, the deprivation, the social inequity, the drug violence, the crime, and flowing from all of this, the bloodshed, had to be stopped. Carlos frowned and walked faster.

He turned a busy street corner, and his chest tightened as he thought about Yolanda. But instead of succumbing to the pain, as he usually did, he searched back to a memory of better times. After three years, his wife's face had become blurred. But he could still picture her silhouetted against the jungle trees, sleek black hair, just starting to turn gray, falling to her waist, as she threw a stick and looked at Carlos with a twinkle in her eyes. Their mutt Emiliano, his tongue hanging out, raced to retrieve it. In his daydream, as she so often did when she was alive, Yolanda's head was thrown back, and she was laughing.

Then he thought about the person who had occupied his mind on most of the drive that day—Shari. He missed her already. If only he could have brought her with him. He shook his head. It would have been impossible. He remembered her snuggled up beside him when he woke up that morning. She had been fast asleep, her curly hair spread across the pillow, a look of contentment on her face. He hated to wake her up, but he knew he may never see her again.

Her eyes flew open when he kissed her. At first they shone with joy, but almost immediately sorrow took its place. But she recovered. Her face struggled to be brave. "I guess you have to go," she said.

He gazed down at her. "Sorry to wake you. I didn't want to sneak off without saying good-bye." She stood up, ran a finger gently along his scar and threw her arms around him. And he thought again about the night before, about her endearing bashfulness, about how wet she was when he slipped inside her, and how astounded he was at how well they fit together, as if they were made for each other.

Would he ever see her again? He didn't know, but he wasn't sorry they spent a last night in each others' arms, even though he'd been right—it did make it more painful to leave. He felt as if he'd left a part of himself behind. What was it Don Quixote had said? *A knight-errant without a mistress was a tree without either fruit or leaves, a body without a soul.* He sighed.

Tomorrow at this time he'd be home, sitting at his desk with a tropical breeze blowing through the open window, looking out at the lush vegetation, his laptop open, working again on the children's fantasy book he wanted to write. It would be a welcome distraction. And when he needed a break from writing, he could go for a stroll in the rainforest and knew he'd find Yolanda's spirit there, floating in the wind. And he would dream about Shari, the short, sweet time they had together, and how somewhere, someday, he'd hold her in his arms again.

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Sitting alone on the balcony, Shari watched the usual Sunday celebrations on the beach. Mexican children jumped and twirled in the water or dug in the sand. Giggles vibrated off the rocks. In the ocean a whale breached. That evening she'd be flying back to Calgary and this scene would become no more substantial than a dream. But she suspected that forgetting Carlos wouldn't be as easy.

He'd been right. After spending the night together, saying good-bye to him felt like someone had stabbed her in the chest. When he walked out the door that morning to catch the taxi to Alejo's, she couldn't bear to watch. He left her with a head full of sensual images, and a body tingling from the memory of his touch. When she closed her eyes she could still see his naked, hard body spread across her bed, his eyes flashing with desire. But to her surprise, what hurt the most was no longer hearing his quiet voice. Did she regret having made love to him? No, absolutely not. She sighed. When she looked back on her life, she could accept those choices she made when she followed her heart, even if it meant taking a risk—what she regretted were those times she avoided a path into the

unknown out of fear. Having slept with Carlos was one less regret. Then she thought about Grant, and the guilt threatened to overwhelm her. She pushed the feelings away. It didn't change anything. If she were able to replay last night, she wouldn't hesitate for even a moment to do it all again.

After Carlos left that morning, she couldn't go back to sleep, so she gathered her scattered belongings and crammed them into her suitcase. She was packed and ready to leave late that afternoon. She went for a vigorous swim in the ocean, hoping to work off some of her tension. It didn't work. A short fitful nap didn't help either. She sighed as she continued to watch the Sunday beach festivities. She was acutely aware that in just a few hours Rita would be driving her to the airport to catch her early evening flight home. Soon all this would vanish from her life, disappear, just like her mother had, her father and her brother, Rusty, and even though he wasn't dead, Carlos.

She turned around to find Ana hopping with her crutches onto the balcony. "How are you doing?" Her friend gave her a hug.

"I'm okay, thanks. Can't believe how much has happened and that I'll soon be back in Calgary." Shari pointed to Ana's leg. "Does it still hurt?"

"It's getting better." She lowered herself onto a balcony chair. "How do you feel about going back to Calgary...and Grant?"

Shari frowned. "It won't be easy. I'm going to tell him about Carlos. And then I'll head to Vancouver to visit with Marc and Sarah. I need some time and space to sort out my feelings. Besides, it's been a while since I've seen my children. I miss them." Maybe there were some new prospects for grandchildren?

Ana placed her hand on Shari's shoulder. "Do you think you and Carlos...?"

"Probably not. It's too complicated. Do I really want to spend the rest of my life hiding in the jungle?" *Do I? And how will I be able to go back to my old life with Grant as if nothing had changed?* "If you don't mind, I'm going to go for a walk. Not far, and not for long. If Warden Rita

comes by, tell her not to worry. I'll be back in plenty of time to leave for the airport."

"Sounds good. I'll be down by the pool."

Shari hugged her once more. "And Ana, thanks for everything."

Before leaving for her walk, Shari hurried to the bathroom. When she opened the door and rushed in, she couldn't believe what she saw. Nothing! Where could they be hiding? She scanned the ceiling, pulled back the shower curtain, looked under the sink—just cleaning supplies, toilet paper and soap. She was shocked, heart-broken and sorry she'd complained about the dead. She hadn't realized how much they meant to her. They were no more than faint shadows of themselves: she couldn't hold them and they couldn't hear her, or at least not most of the time. Did they see her? How would she know? They never spoke to her, or at least hardly ever. Yet they still provided some strange comfort to her. It had been so much better than having her loved ones completely vanish from her life. And now they were gone!

And then there was Toby. She liked to believe he was satisfied with the answer to "You know why" that came to her in when she was imprisoned. *No Toby, I won't forget the beach vendors*. He seemed happy the last time she saw him. And now that she thought about it, he'd also been silent.

Shari held her hand to her forehead where she still had a nasty bruise and also a headache. Maybe the ocean air would help. Before she left PV, she wanted to see the cairns again. The image of those rock piles had stayed with her. Alejo's story of the drowned fishermen made them all the more poignant.

Shari stood once more on the concrete promontory at the foot of the steep path leading into town and scanned the northern coast where in the distance tourist resorts spread out as far as she could see. She looked up at the cliff, but for some reason, no longer felt frightened. Then she stared at the cairns. She walked over and reverently touched the smooth, shiny stones. They appeared the

same as when she first saw them, still embodied with the mystical quality that had so intrigued her. As they did before, they made her think of her mother. After almost a year she had trouble seeing her face clearly. Even as a ghost her features had started to fade. But she could still hear her voice. “Don’t grieve for me Shari. I’m free from all of life’s pain.” Maybe it was time for her to listen. Maybe it was time to let go.

She closed her eyes and imagined her mother once more, walking in Toronto’s High Park, her father David beside her.

*Her parents strolled arm in arm through the majestic maple and oak trees while red leaves cascaded around them. Each carried a book in their right hands: David held the much-worn copy of Leopardi’s **Canti**; Fanny, **The Adventures of Pinocchio**, one of the beloved books that she would read to Shari when she was a child.*

Shari opened her eyes and gasped. Her mother and father appeared to have broken out of her fantasy and now stood before the pile of rocks on the beach, holding hands. Where did the books go to, she wondered?

Her mother was no longer the old woman whom she saw every day in her bathroom. Long auburn hair fell about her unlined face and slim figure. She must be the same age as when Shari’s father died. She wore a blue sundress with a full skirt. Where had her father been all this time? Shari’s mouth flew open when she saw Danny, Rusty and even Toby, join her parents and stroll through the sand...towards her. Danny bent down to pick up Rusty in one arm, and when he stood up, winked at her. Then the dead stopped and reached out to each other, until they all stood hand-in-hand, facing Shari. Her mother looked straight at her, the corners of her mouth turning up, slightly. Shari longed to join them, but when she tried, she couldn’t move. Then it got even stranger. They turned as one and rushed towards the ocean. Shari tried to call out to them, “Stay!” But she couldn’t speak. She wanted to run after them, but it was as if she were paralyzed.

The ocean breeze picked up, and the rhythmic waves beat against the shore. The palm trees danced enthusiastically. Her mother's hair flew back off her face, and her father's blue checked shirt billowed like a sail. Toby's straw hat blew off his head and landed at Shari's feet. She stared down in amazement. Last time she'd seen the hat it was being placed in his coffin. Rusty leapt from Danny's arms and raced ahead, unperturbed. "Wait!" she wanted to shout, but she remained speechless. Even if she could have cried out, the roar of the ocean would have drowned out her voice.

The ghosts floated over the large jagged rocks and waded further and further into the water until soon it reached their shoulders. Rusty swam alongside. It seemed to her, but she wasn't sure, that they were starting to disintegrate. Then she must have blinked, because one second they were there, and the next second they were gone. All that remained were the white-capped waves obviously crashing against the sand. Tears poured down her face. She guessed she wouldn't see them again. Or maybe she would, when death came to take her away as well—or maybe not. There was so much about life, and death, she didn't understand.

She bent down and ran her hand over the pile of smooth stones that marked the death of the unfortunate fishermen. Looking down, she was surprised to find Toby's hat still lying on the ground. All of a sudden an image popped unbidden into her head.

*The sun-lit stream swept over the luminous rocks of the Rio Cuale towards the ocean. Standing in the river up to his knees was Elfrida's grandson, Alberto. The long pods of a tropical tree hung over the gurgling water, where a white heron basked on a glistening gold rock. Young ferns growing along the banks were reflected in the water. Other children joined Alberto, ninos and ninas of all shapes and sizes, giggling as they splashed. The river flowed around them, faster and faster, clear and free of blood. All of a sudden, they stopped, and looked up—the heron soared into the sky.*

Maybe there was hope. Toby had given up, and she couldn't blame him, but there was a love of life and resilience in most Mexicans that kept them going, despite all their hardships and challenges. She pictured the Sunday family gatherings on the beach and the dancing in the main plaza, the fighting spirit of the beach vendors at the rally and their victory celebration yesterday evening. And she thought of Carlos...and his struggles to help the indigenous peasants survive.

Shari picked up Toby's hat, put it on her head. "Don't worry Toby, I won't forget." She couldn't do anything about Mexico's politics, but she could at least look for a way to make tourists more sympathetic to the beach vendors.

She pulled the magic hand from her pocket. The amulet might protect her from danger, but it couldn't keep her alive forever. All she could do was make sure that when her time came, she had as few regrets as possible. Meanwhile, when she got back to Calgary, she'd find Connie and support her in any way she could. And maybe, someday, she would see Carlos again. Her mouth drooped, and then she straightened her shoulders. *No, I won't cry!*

As Shari strolled along the cobblestone path towards the condo, she found herself humming "Mr. Tambourine Man". She passed a beach vendor with a refrigerated cart of cold drinks and a plastic bag overflowing with corn snacks. She tipped Toby's hat. A group of *muchachos* were tossing some screeching *muchachas* into the ocean; a colorful ball flew back and forth, while spinning young arms and legs cart wheeled across the beach. She would miss seeing how the Mexicans with the little they had could enjoy life so much. She passed the fish-on-a-stick guy leaning on a rock. "*Buenos Tardes,*" he said. Shari smiled.

She was close enough to Ana's condo that she could hear the rap music booming from the next door complex. Something she wouldn't miss. Just up ahead she glimpsed Rita hurrying in her direction. "Coming!" Shari called. She stopped, looked back. The powerful tide surged and ebbed where such a short time ago the dead had vanished. She fought another urge to follow them into



the ocean. Then she gasped as a breeze seemed to wrap around her.

Although she couldn't see her any longer, all at once, she felt her mother's presence, as if she were standing nearby, as if she were embracing her. She wasn't completely gone after all. Some part of her loved ones would always be with Shari—while she was alive, she would never forget them.

She lifted her head to the sky where a stream of pelicans flew north towards the Beach of the Dead. Soon she too would be flying, in a plane headed home to Calgary, not exactly free, but no longer trapped either. She gazed towards the ocean and thought about Carlos on his way to the jungle. *I'll find a way to see you again. I promise.* She slipped the amulet back in her pocket and hurried towards Rita. She was ready to face the future, whatever it may bring.