

A black and gold statue of a woman holding a child, adorned with red beads. The statue is the central focus of the cover, set against a dark background. The woman's face is black, and her crown and robes are gold. She holds a small child in her arms. A string of red beads is draped across the child and the woman's chest.

"Deep with delicious detail, scrumptious characters, and full of folklore, this is a unique debut novel from Eleanor Parker Sapia, one that will win her readers over. Buy it, read it, love it."

—Jack Remick, short story writer, poet, and award-winning author of *Gabriela and the Widow*

# A Decent Woman

A NOVEL

ELEANOR PARKER SAPIA

## PRAISE FOR *A DECENT WOMAN* BY ELEANOR PARKER SAPIA

“Race, class, the lingering legacy of slavery, and a woman’s role in neo colonial society are all effectively illustrated through the intimate depiction of two intersecting lives in *A Decent Woman*. Author Eleanor Parker Sapia lovingly evokes old Puerto Rico: the graceful colonial city of Ponce, the mixture of African and Catholic traditions, the tropical lushness of the land, and the devastating force of a Caribbean hurricane. Overall, *A Decent Woman* is a powerful and moving tale; well worth reading.”

—Alina García-Lapuerta, biographer and author of *La Belle Creole: The Cuban Countess Who Captivated Havana, Madrid, and Paris*

“*A Decent Woman* opens with a birth and a hurricane and doesn’t let up. Deep with delicious detail, scrumptious characters, and full of folklore, this is a unique debut novel from Eleanor Parker Sapia, one that will win her readers over. Written in a clean style that lets the historical ambience seep through into our consciousness, this book is a tale of wonder, of life and death, of love and life and not a few twists and turns. Ana and Serafina are, indeed, decent women living in a hard time. Buy it, read it, love it.”

—Jack Remick, short story writer, poet, and author of award-winning, *Gabriela and the Widow*

“*A Decent Woman* takes the reader on a journey into the heat and steam of Puerto Rico in the early 1900s. The writing is so visceral and evocative that you almost feel the rain on your face, the pain of childbirth, fear, betrayal and redemption along with the women in this story of midwives and mothers.”

—Claudia H Long, author of *The Duel for Consuelo* and *Josefina’s Sin*

“*A Decent Woman* takes the reader on an unforgettable journey of friendship between two strong women set against the backdrop of colonial Puerto Rico of the early 1900s. A striking first novel from Eleanor Parker

Sapia.”

—Arleen Williams, writer and author of *The Alki Trilogy*

“*A Decent Woman* embodies the genre of women’s fiction in the most complete sense of the word exploring the lives of women—young and old, dark- and light-skinned, poor and rich. This is an outstanding read and an important book about a little known corner of women’s history.”

—Yma Johnson, short story writer and journalist

“Eleanor Parker Sapia’s historical fiction novel, *A Decent Woman*, steeped in friendship, romance, politics, and mysticism, is the captivating story of Ana Belén’s struggle and perseverance to become a Certified Midwife in turn of the century Puerto Rico. Ana’s passions, joys, and plight are shared by midwives everywhere and throughout herstory. Reading this book was inspiring. I’m sure readers will enjoy *A Decent Woman* as much as I did.”

—Sarahn Henderson, Midwife and Educator at Birth in the Tradition

“I really enjoyed *A Decent Woman*, and particularly enjoyed the characters who I could visualize clearly as I moved along with the story. I was even brought to tears at times. I suspect it will be a huge success and certainly one that I will recommend to my circle of family and friends.”

—Gina Tsiapalis, Registered Midwife

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# A DECENT WOMAN

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ELEANOR PARKER SAPIA



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Seattle WA 2015

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**For HEATHER AND MATTHEW, MY BELOVED  
CHILDREN**

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Every midwife knows  
that not until a mother's womb  
softens from the pain of labour  
will a way unfold  
and the infant finds that opening to be born.  
Oh friend!  
There is treasure in your heart;  
it is heavy with child.  
Listen!  
All the awakened ones  
like trusted midwives are saying,  
"Welcome this pain!  
It opens the dark passage of Grace."  
—Rumi

Listen more often to things than to beings  
'Tis the ancestor's breath  
When the fire's voice is heard;  
'Tis the ancestor's breath  
In the voice of the waters.  
—Birago Diop

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# PROLOGUE

*Playa de Ponce, Porto Rico, 1899*

**MANY DEVOUT FOLLOWERS** of Our Lady of Guadalupe feared the Virgin Mary had turned her back on the flock. Those less certain of the Blessed Mother's merciful redemption continued celebrating life at the local bars and brothels, but when the church doors closed and the rum ran out, not much had changed. The bitter sting of remembrance remained locked in their hearts, and the intense pain, carved as deep as the Taíno carvings on the ancestral stones at Tíbes, was impossible to ignore. Raw longing for loved ones who'd perished was still fresh as the locals struggled in the aftermath of the fury that made landfall on southeast Porto Rico in the early morning hours of the seventh of August, 1899. Nothing could have prepared the island for the devastation of Hurricane San Ciriaco.

After twenty-eight days of rain, the immense hurricane veered northwest, leaving behind nearly two and a half billion tons of rainwater. When the waters receded, small, coastal villages had disappeared and entire families went missing, claimed by the raging sea and a storm surge that reached one mile inland. Bodies were found huddled with loved ones in their homes, in the parish church among spiritual brothers and sisters, and others were strewn along the mud-caked streets, lying next to strangers. Five hundred lives were lost on the island of Porto Rico; three hundred in the city of Ponce on the southwest coast. The monstrous, long-lived hurricane claimed over three thousand four hundred souls across the West Indies, leaving a quarter of a million without food and shelter.

Squatter shacks built on dusty hillsides and along once-parched riverbanks were swallowed by swollen, muddy rivers littered with debris,



becoming one with the earth. *Bohíos*, thatched huts woven with royal palm fronds, disintegrated in high winds, sending displaced inhabitants to their death in raging torrents of water and high waves. Palm trees bent in the direction of the imperious wind, their dry leaves rustling around dangling coconuts that swung like pendulums foretelling the end of time. Yellow trumpet vines sagged and rested in the dirt, unable to raise their blooms from the weight of rainwater. Abandoned dogs huddled under dark porches and in alleys. The hills turned fluorescent green, lush with life, and the mongoose stopped chasing the snake, instead seeking shelter in the impossibly-thick sugarcane fields. Ripened mangoes littered muddy streets, giving sustenance to bottom-feeding creatures, and the deafening songs of thousands of *coquíes*, tiny tree frogs, filled the inky night sky.

A year later, it was hurricane season once again. Shipping lanes were reopened, the port area rebuilt with a new wharf and pier, and the beehive of activity at the Port of Ponce resumed with United States Navy ships and American merchant marine vessels in the Ponce harbor. The Spanish Customs House and other government buildings in the port area had escaped major damage, and owners of waterfront businesses gambled with rebuilding so close to the sea, while the Americans reinstalled the telephone, telegraph, and electrical services to the city. A palpable veil of pain still shrouded the residents of the colonial city of Ponce and the neighboring port town of Playa de Ponce. *Pesos* and American dollars were hard to come by, and many of the small homes in La Playa, as it was affectionately known by the locals, sat abandoned or lay in ruins on the shores of the Caribbean Sea. Local business owners and townspeople, losing heart and hope, struggled with rebuilding so close to the water. And with few jobs available, many were forced into the streets that lured otherwise decent people into compromising, indecent situations in order to feed themselves and their families.

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# CHAPTER 1

## *La Conservadora de Asuntos de Mujeres ~ The Keeper of Women's Business*

*Playa de Ponce, Porto Rico ~ July 1, 1900*

**ON THE MORNING** of the Feast of the Most Precious Blood, Serafina's waters discharged and labor pains commenced. Ana Belén hurried along the dirt road as ominous storm clouds rolled in from the east, threatening to obscure the last of a hazy sunset. The only sound on the deserted street, save for the bleating of a goat in the distance, was the rush of the ocean. When the winds picked up and the first ta-ta-ta sounded off zinc roofs, Ana was nauseated, all part of the familiar heaviness she now experienced before every storm. She lowered her head as the first raindrops dotted the dusty road ahead and noticed cool rain droplets glistening on her ebony skin. Pulling her heavy linen skirt up to the knee to avoid the splatter of mud, Ana picked up her pace. Inside the black leather satchel she gripped tightly, the steel instruments jingled with every step.

Heavier raindrops pelted the dirt street and bounced before settling into the warm, wet earth. That's the way it always was; the rain formed narrow streams in the parched riverbeds that created fast-flowing creeks. A few days later, the water would find its way back to the sea—the source—or dry up. What a waste of energy, thought Ana. In a few days the streets of La Playa would return to dry, cracked earth. When the wind switched direction, a palm frond flew by, inches from her face, and rain soon followed the wind. The acrid smell of burning sugarcane reached her nose; always a reminder of her childhood in Cuba as a slave.

A black dog with white markings around the eyes barked, startling Ana as she approached the small, white clapboard home of her client. As was her custom before a birth, Ana removed a small knife with a one-inch blade from her pocket. She placed it under the house to keep away evil spirits, and to hopefully cut the length of labor for her client. Ana knocked once on the weathered front door, and stepped back, surprised by Roberto Martínez clutching a squawking chicken by its scrawny neck. He hurried out and then looked back at her. With a quick jerk of his head, he flicked curly, black hair away from his eyes, and motioned for Ana to enter the house. She nearly shouted out to save the chicken carcass for Serafina's first meal of broth following the birth, but decided against it when a flash of lightning struck over Ponce harbor. Before Ana could ask how his wife, Serafina, was getting on, Roberto had disappeared around the house.

The door creaked open and the familiar aromas of fried garlic and onion welcomed her, confirming the hen's imminent demise and signaling—in Ana's opinion—the proper first step in preparing every meal. She shut the door behind her, and soon her eyes grew accustomed to the dim lighting, which emanated from a solitary lit candle inside a rusty, faded blue tin. Pearls of hot wax from the burning candle settled in a small pile near a wood box of white candles. The one-room house was small and tidy with several cast iron pots on the wood floor for catching rainwater—a common sight in hurricane season. Ana laid her satchel on the floor and lit the wick of the oil lamp. She counted ten candles, and was pleased to see a few newspapers on the table and a stack of folded rags on a chair. Roberto had listened well. When she raised the wick, the silhouettes of a bed, a dresser, and a low table were illumined behind a gauzy curtain. Ana replaced the glass globe on the oil lamp, pulled the curtain aside, and found Serafina sleeping in an iron bed. The image of the two small windows on either side of the bed resembled a cross; Ana prayed it was an omen for a short summer storm and a quick delivery.

Ana removed a hinged, tin case with leather handles from her satchel and took out a blunt hook, steel forceps, scissors, and a crochet hook. One by one, she placed the instruments in a straight line on a white cloth covering the bedside table. The smell of birthing fluids permeated the already stifling house, made more pungent by the closed shutters. Hoping a bit of fresh air might also settle her queasy stomach, Ana pushed open the wooden shutters

and fanned herself, thinking the codfish she'd had for lunch might have gone bad. Somewhere in the harbor, a lone foghorn lowed mournfully, filling Ana with a sense of dread. Behind her a voice said, "Are you Doña Ana, the midwife?"

For a moment, the voice sounded far away, and then Ana turned around. "Yes, I'm the *comadrona*. I thought you were sleeping." A contraction tightened around Serafina's abdomen. The young woman held her belly and rolled her head on the thin pillow, clenching her teeth until the contraction subsided. Several gold bracelets graced Serafina's thin wrist and a gold crucifix hung from a substantial gold chain around her delicate neck. Ana guessed a merchant marine as wiry and young as Roberto Martínez could make quite a bit of money.

Serafina lifted herself onto her elbows. The light from the candle's flame was reflected in the gold *aretes* dangling from the girl's earlobes. "¿Es un huracán?"

"Nena, nó; it's not a hurricane," Ana said, hoping her voice showed no sign of concern. "It's only a storm, my girl. How often are the pains?"

"I don't know...maybe every two or three minutes?"

Ana helped Serafina out of her chemise, soiled with birthing fluids, and dressed her in a freshly laundered slip before placing a layer of newspaper under the sheet. "Why did he wait so long to call me? Your husband, I mean."

Serafina raised her eyebrows and shrugged. "His sister was meant to be our midwife, but my baby is late. She has her own children to care for." Serafina studied Ana. "Excuse me for staring, Doña. I've never seen eyes like yours. They are green and brown in this light."

"Yes, I've heard that before," Ana replied as she checked Serafina's cervix. "You are very close to pushing. Do your best to rest between contractions; it won't be long now." Serafina closed her eyes, and Ana leaned out over the windowsill, feeling the dampness on her forearms. Through an embroidered handkerchief, she breathed in *el sereno*, knowing the night air was not good for her or Serafina. White-capped waves, showcased by the lights of the new wharf, rushed toward the shore, and exploded onto the boulders below. Lightning slashed a jagged path across the night sky, illuminating the craggy rocks near the house and the objects inside a paint-chipped cabinet. As if on cue, mismatched glassware and

assorted plates tinkled and rattled inside. A tempest was imminent.

Ana remained vigilant at the open window for the *egún*, the spirits of the dead. The old *babalowa*—the village priest, whose wrinkled and gnarled body resembled the roots of the ancient Ceiba tree, had told the *patakí*, the sacred story, of evil spirit soldiers hidden in the waves and the wind. The thick, uneven scars on Ana's shoulder ached as they always did during the rainy season—a somber reminder of him. Her chest tightened as she prayed that the spirit soldiers, who were determined to collect more souls in service of the warrior goddess Oyá, would not come collecting her debt. Ana had never imagined a new path would open for her the moment El Mulato took his last breath. The last time she'd seen him was on a night of rough seas and despair.

“Oyá, *ten piedad*,” Ana whispered, asking the goddess for mercy. She straightened her back as a lightning bolt cracked over the harbor. Reaching deep into the pocket of her floor-length, linen skirt, she pulled out a rosary, a gift wrought by her mother's hands—a rosary made of the deadliest of all seeds, the red precatory. During their days of slavery, Ana's mother had told her the peccatory bead rosary served many functions—for prayer, suicide, and murder, as mashing one tiny bead could kill quickly if ingested. Ana closed her eyes, made the sign of the cross with the silver crucifix at the end of the rosary, and in a low voice, recited prayers the priests had taught her. Every now and then, she opened an eye, watchful for the *egún*. The spirit soldiers were known to possess great stealth. She breathed in the dust of her ancestors, and felt fear and restlessness in her heart.

Ana invoked the *orisha*, the goddess Yemayá, mother of the ocean and all creation, to calm her daughter Oyá, the owner of winds and the guardian of the cemetery. Ponce needed the softer side of the goddess that evening. Deep rumblings of thunder echoed through the small house, alternating with lightning strikes. “Ay, *Santo Dios*,” Ana said, making the sign of the cross again when the rolling thunder caused the floorboards to shudder under her feet. She brought in the shutters, and felt certain from the looks of the menacing, dark clouds and the sweeping winds, that La Playa would not escape a bad storm.

“We're going to die, aren't we?” Serafina looked intently at Ana. In the dim light, the girl seemed younger than sixteen. Ana removed her knitted black shawl and draped it over the back of a wooden chair.

“*Muchachita*, we’ll be fine. Don’t you worry; rest now.” Ana patted the girl’s hand, detecting *Agua Florída* cologne in the girl’s hair, as long and thick as a horse’s tail. Wide-eyed Serafina bit her lip, and seemed to search the midwife’s face for signs of a lie, or perhaps she smelled Ana’s fear. Ana tried ignoring the thunder and the lightning in the distance, and managed a smile. Couldn’t the goddesses have waited one more day for this baby to be born? The neighbor Ana was mentoring had promised to assist in the delivery that evening, but in light of the weather, she knew the woman would not come.

Ana had considered asking Roberto to move Serafina to the parish church for safety when she’d arrived, but when the skies turned darker, she’d decided against it. The small wooden house didn’t inspire great confidence, but it *had* survived San Ciriaco. That brought Ana a little comfort. She rested in the hope that young Serafina’s labor and delivery would be quick; besides, the parish church would surely be full of people, offering no privacy for a laboring mother. It was imperative to remain watchful for signs of a hurricane.

When the room grew dim, Ana lit a second candle and set it in the tin. The shadows of the flickering flames danced across the walls, spurred on by a short gust of wind, and then softened by a gentle trade wind. Ana pulled at the sides of her sweat-soaked blouse, shivering against the cool, wet fabric. Her nerves felt as erratic as the flame’s dance. The items she’d asked Roberto for—hot water, clean cloths, and a basin—were in place. Focusing on the task at hand helped calm Ana’s nerves as outside the walls of the humble house, the dance among the wind, the rain, and the ocean began. The fierce winds shifted course, and rain found its way inside the house through cracks in the walls and between the slats of the shutters. Somewhere, the sound of shutters slamming against a house caused Ana to wince. She looked back and Serafina sat up, startled. “Don’t worry; it’s only the wind.”

Ana tugged on a knotted strip of purple fabric someone had tied to the iron headboard for spiritual protection, and she was pleased. Oyá’s color—someone had given the girl good advice. Knowing she couldn’t run from the *egún* or her responsibilities to Serafina and the baby, Ana tucked a stray, wiry ringlet under her white cotton *tignon*, and waited for the next contraction, which came quickly. Ana touched her mouth when she tasted

blood. She wiped her bloody fingers on her skirt as a dull ache throbbed at her temples. The metallic taste of blood reminded her of him, but this was no time to think of him. She pushed her fear deep inside, and cut her eyes toward the window, thinking of the celebratory cigar she enjoyed after every birth. The thought offered a sliver of hope the birth would go well, but Ana couldn't shake a sense of foreboding.

Ana mopped the sides of her face with the hem of her skirt as she peered between the slats of the shutters. Cold beads of sweat ran down her back. "*Qué loco,*" she whispered when she caught sight of Roberto. She touched the beaded necklace around her neck, remembering how cocky and sure of himself he'd appeared when he told Ana he would return to sea soon after the birth. Ana had replied it depended on Serafina and the baby, but now she sensed Roberto would do as he pleased. The young man challenging the wind and rain was headstrong and stubborn.

Recently turned sixteen, Serafina was a pretty girl with hair the color of *café colao*, eyes like pale green sea glass, and a small mole on the right corner of her full lips that broke the prettiness of her oval face. Serafina, with her perfumed hair and gold bracelets, reminded Ana of the goddess Oshún, the orisha of love. Had this pale, delicate girl with the coffee-colored hair wanted a pregnancy so early in her brief marriage? Ana shook her head, mystified at how many women of La Playa didn't practice birth control. Had this young couple made any attempt to prevent a pregnancy? More than likely, young Roberto Martínez refused contraception. And now here they were.

Serafina moaned and squeezed her eyes shut during the next contraction. She held her belly with shaky hands. "I don't think I can do this," Serafina shouted, struggling to sit up.

"*Cálmate, cálmate*, these are good contractions. Don't hold your breath. Let's see where we are." Ana placed two chairs about two feet apart, facing the side of the bed. "Sit near the edge of the bed and lie back," she instructed, helping Serafina maneuver into position. "When you feel the urge to push, I will help you." Ana wiped the sweat from her forehead with a sturdy forearm. In the area between the chairs, she positioned a large cloth and placed a basin on it, just below Serafina's bottom. She set a wooden stool between the chairs, just above the basin, and asked, "Are you ready, child?" Serafina shrugged. With a gentle hand, Ana pushed Serafina's stiff



shoulders back onto the mattress, and pulled the girl forward. She washed her hands, spread lard on Serafina's inner thighs and labia, and introduced her hand under the slip. She opened the labia, and passed her fingers into the vagina. Serafina winced. The cervix was soft and dilated. Ana hoped the baby would pass through the birth canal without incident, and wondered if the young mother was mentally prepared to deliver a child. At this age, they hardly ever were. "It won't be long now," Ana said, seeing the bloody show on her fingers. The pinging sound of water dripping into the aluminum pots echoed from the main room.

"I hope this pain doesn't get any worse! I have to push!" Birthing was difficult for all women, and young girls needed extra coaxing and mothering. Ana prayed the ill-timed storm would not complicate her already delicate task, but whether or not they were ready for the birth was inconsequential; the storm was upon them, and Serafina's body was ready. The girl sat up, grabbing at the sheet, and cried, "I'm scared! It *is* a hurricane! I want my mother!"

There it was. The conversation Roberto had urged Ana to avoid—Serafina's mother's death. There was nothing Ana could do to ease the girl's suffering about losing her mother in Hurricane San Ciriaco, but it was critical to distract her now. Ana twirled a mass of Serafina's thick curls, willing the hair to remain in place, and took Serafina's face in her hands. "Listen to me, *nena*. You can do this. Your *mami* is with you; she will always be with you. But right now, you're going to push this baby out, and while I'm here, nothing will happen to you or your baby. Do you understand?" Serafina nodded, but didn't seem comforted by Ana's words. It was crucial to bolster the girl's confidence before she did something like pass out from the pain. Serafina's petite body shuddered under Ana's hands as she began pushing.

Ana glanced over at the low table, making sure the scissors were where she could reach them. Outside, something substantial hit against the wall. The women gasped, jerking their attention to the side of the house. Ana moved deliberately around the cot, feigning confidence that was more difficult to muster now that the storm was upon them. She'd vowed to remain calm if the storm got any worse, and at the moment was finding it difficult to keep that promise. Serafina covered her eyes with her wrist, and tears streamed down her pale cheeks. Ana moistened Serafina's parched lips

with a cool rag, hoping the delicate girl held energy in reserve for the decisive moments ahead. The Martínez baby was two weeks late, and Serafina's waters had already broken; there was now the worry of a dry birth. Ana would have to employ all her skills to ensure a speedy delivery before any infection set in.

The flames of the white candles flickered rapidly, illuminating the garishly painted faces of two small plaster statues—*La Virgen de Guadalupe*, the patron saint of Ponce, and *La Virgen de la Candelaria*, the patron saint of the Canary Islands, where she'd heard Serafina's people were from. A current of cool air found its way into the house, offering a brief reprieve from the heat, and with it a new threat—total darkness. “*Virgencita*, don't let the candles go out!” Ana said, forgetting her vow to remain calm. While there was still light, she checked Serafina's cervix with the sound of waves pounding the rocks, and the whistling wind sneaking through cracks in the walls all around her. Ana wondered where Roberto was. “As if we don't have enough to worry about,” she muttered. “Roberto!” Her voice sounded less controlled and higher-pitched than she'd intended. *Maldito hombre*, where could he be? She couldn't worry about him as well, but deep down she knew she'd need him in case the storm turned into a hurricane. The driving rain, beating on the roof like *dundun* and *batà* drums, reminded Ana of her childhood, and made it impossible to hear.

When the next violent pain wracked Serafina's body, she took a seething inhalation before pushing. “I see your baby's head!” Ana's skin tingled with anticipation as it did with every birth. She snatched a clean, white cloth from the bedside table, and dipped two fingers into the can of lard. Ana massaged the perineum with her index finger until the baby's shiny, wet head crowned and was delivered. “Pant, Serafina. Stop pushing for a moment!” A sense of urgency and excitement came through when Ana saw the thin membrane covering the baby's head and face. Ana gasped softly and whispered, “*Oke*.” It was a caul. A translucent membrane covering the baby's head and face; a valuable good luck charm for sea captains and sailors, who believed the caul, would protect them from death by drowning. Ana had never delivered a caulbearer before, and as she struggled to remember what she should do next, Serafina pushed one last time. Ana delivered the shoulders, allowing the baby's body to slip out into her

experienced hands.

Ana lay the infant gently on the bed, and with the utmost care, she peeled the thin membrane off the baby's face and head, careful not to tug on delicate skin. As Ana dropped the caul in the bowl on the floor, the baby cried. Serafina made the sign of the cross and lay back, shaking from exhaustion. The smell of blood and birthing fluid permeated the small room, adding to Ana's queasy stomach. She would tell Serafina about the gifts the gods had bestowed on her daughter later, when the time was right.

"I see you, little one," Ana murmured, clamping and cutting the cord. She swaddled the infant in a warm blanket. "She's a beautiful baby, Serafina. What's her name?"

"Lorena," Serafina breathed before retching over the side of the bed.

Ana kissed the baby's forehead. "You've made quite an entrance, Lorena Martínez. I will bury your placenta, and plant a fruit tree in that place, so you will know where you were born, and never go hungry. I will keep your caul safe, and now that I've said your name, no one can ever change your *orí*, your destiny. Like me, you are the firstborn, and your destiny name is Akanni. Welcome to the world of suffering, my girl."

\* \* \*

Ana puffed twice on the cigar and threw back a shot of rum. She closed her eyes, enjoying the burn at the back of her throat, and the familiar tingling in her knees, signaling her body was beginning to uncoil. She lowered her jaw to relieve the pressure in her eardrums. Although mother and child were sleeping soundly and Ana was filled with renewed hope, she also understood no one could fully relax—even now, the storm could produce a hurricane. She tore a page out of her ledger, and delicately placed the caul flat on the paper, careful not to stretch it too tautly. She folded the paper in half and finished by tying a string around the small parcel. Did the young couple know about caulbearers, and the exorbitant prices the cauls went for in the seafaring world? Roberto was a sailor, of course he knew, she thought. Ana put the wrapped caul in the pocket of her skirt, and felt the *otánes* in the other pocket, recalling her mother's tear-stained face as she'd placed the three blessed pebbles in Ana's hand. They'd hugged tightly until her father pulled them apart, and shoved Ana into the bowels of the ship.

Ana's body shuddered at the memory of the ship's crossing from Cuba to Porto Rico in the middle of the night.

Moments later, Ana's attention turned to the violent, unrelenting winds that shook the Martínez house, and flying debris banging against the corrugated zinc roof, inflicting mortal terror in her heart. In the parish church, Ana knew the faithful would plead with the Blessed Virgin to spare them, their loved ones, and their homes; the homeless and those who thought themselves less worthy of salvation sought refuge in the same parish church. Saints, sinners, and doubters sat side-by-side, each casting judgment toward their fellow brothers and sisters. A familiar howling sounded through the cracks and holes in the wooden walls. When the roof lifted and banged down, Ana looked up and froze. Seconds later, Roberto stood in the house. Serafina brought the mewling newborn closer to her chest. There was no need to speak; they knew what was coming. Roberto pushed the bed into the corner away from the window, and helped the terrified women under the bed. As if hoping his weight would keep the bed from lifting if the roof blew off, he lay face down upon it and covered his head. When the shutters burst open, the women screamed, turning their heads toward each other. Ana didn't know which ear-piercing scream had been her own, and imagined a huge wave would soon engulf and swallow the house. The zinc roof twisted, groaned, and then ripped clean away from the walls, disappearing into the black sky. Ana prayed Roberto was heavy enough to keep the bed in place as she and Serafina huddled together, protecting the baby between them.

Ana's muscles cramped, and she would not remember how long they waited in the same positions. What she would remember, opening her eyes for the briefest of moments, was watching the two statues of the Virgin Mary crash onto the slick, wet floor boards and the taste of salt water in her mouth. Small, wet shards of glistening bright blue, white, and yellow littered the floor amidst wet sand and dirt. Ana prayed fervently until the storm veered northeast, and the rain stopped.

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## CHAPTER 2

### *Ofrendas a los Santos ~ Offerings to the Saints*

**A LIGHT MIST HOVERED OVER** the dirt road, blurring the lines and edges of the houses on the street. The night air did not cool the inhabitants of the flat coastal town of La Playa that evening. Families living by the water and near rivers were busy nailing shutters closed, boarding windows, and placing large rocks on their roofs in a desperate attempt to prevent fierce winds from claiming them. Women tried cooling their children with paper fans, given out by local pharmacies advertising local businesses, but knew it was futile. Tempers flared, crime increased, and passions stirred, all quickly diminished by the oppressive heat and constant worry of more bad weather to come.

In the aftermath of the Big One, the San Ciriaco hurricane, Ana realized a good reputation and an old family name were of little importance in a hurricane. Diplomas, higher education, and a sterling social standing were worthless against Oyá, the goddess of wind and thunder. Whether one lived in the *barrios* or the most desirable street in colonial Ponce, the deity responsible for creating hurricanes and guarding the door of the underworld would make her presence known. And Oyá did not discriminate.

There was much to worry about during hurricane season without the added complication of childbirth. Ana compared childbirth and birthing mothers to the earth—both unpredictable and miraculous. Others compared hurricanes and tropical storms to a bad-tempered woman; if at all possible, it was best to stay out of her way. Ana thought back to the days and weeks following the Big One; missing and injured children were always the hardest to make sense of after a disaster. One of her many roles as a

midwife in the seaport town of La Playa and the city of Ponce was the preparation of bodies for burial. She recalled the bloated, reddish bodies pulled out of the swollen, brackish *Ríos Portugues* and *Cañas*, with their deep blue veins visible under yellow-green bruised skin. The stench of decaying flesh, bite marks from hungry fish, and the screams of parents burying their children were sights and smells Ana would never forget.

During Ana's forty years, she'd escaped being a casualty in many a hurricane, and wondered if her clients fully appreciated the risks she took to deliver their babies. Traveling into unfamiliar parts of town in a storm, staying up all night with a laboring woman, and putting up with their drunken men—all of this was a part of Ana's life. Her clients had never asked what brought her from Cuba to Porto Rico. They weren't privy to her struggles, and they never would be. All that mattered to them was the safe delivery of their babies, and that was fine with Ana. Women focused on their children and their families, as it should be. She loved her profession, and never tired of bringing a new life into the world, yet after a difficult or particularly long labor, Ana yearned for an invitation to share a meal or an offer to take a coffee. She dearly missed her parents and her childhood friends, and reminded herself of the commitment to the life of a midwife. And that becoming intimate with clients and their families could mean the slip of a tongue at the wrong time, and consequently, disaster for Ana.

The old Cuban midwife, Doña Milagro, Ana's friend and mentor, had been adamant about recording the names of clients, their payments, and the names of their children—all kept in a ledger as a testament to her life's work. When the old midwife died, Ana knew the alphabet and took over the business, but there had never been time to learn to read. Ana's clients filled in the ledger for her, and those who couldn't read or write were often left unrecorded. After delivering over five hundred babies, Ana had stopped recording altogether. What was the point in continuing to inscribe each birth? No matter what happened with the weather, politics or war, more children would be born. But the times were changing with male doctors entering the birthing room for the first time. She'd heard the rumors of new government regulations requiring education and training for midwives. Her recent feelings of foreboding now made sense—her days as a midwife were numbered unless she learned to read and write, and continued to keep the ledger current.

Ana thumbed through the yellowed, worn pages of Doña Milagro's leather-bound ledger, carefully placing torn pieces of newspaper between the damp pages to keep them from sticking as they dried. She dabbed and blotted where the ink had run, recalling her difficulties in learning to write, and how patient her mentor had been with her. A stack of old newspapers placed on the bedside table told Ana's lie to anyone who might visit her. She now wondered which sin would be more shocking to the people of La Playa—the fact that she was illiterate or that she was a murderer?

Twice a day for a week, Ana had checked Serafina for signs of fever, and prepared a strengthening chicken broth for the new mother, whose breasts had enough milk for twins. Lorena was a beautiful, healthy baby with chubby cheeks, which pleased mother and midwife. Long ago, Ana had learned to push thoughts of her unborn child aside when dealing with her client's children, but this morning, she was having a hard time. The following day was to be Serafina's last day of assistance; very timely as there was not another chicken to be found in La Playa.

Ana was headed to the beach that morning with her offerings and prayers of thanksgiving to the gods and goddesses for Lorena's safe delivery. The air was crisp and smelled of salt as Ana approached the elderly neighbor next door, who was busy clearing her garden of storm debris. In twenty years, the dour-faced neighbor had never uttered more than five words to her, but that never stopped Ana from wishing the old woman a good day. "*Buenos días*, Doña Elena," Ana said loud enough for the woman to hear. She knew the old woman had heard her, but she never looked up from her broom. Ana had a little something extra for her that morning. "*Dios mío*, spare us from the next *tormenta*. Take my old neighbor and her husband instead; surely, it's their time to go." Ana chuckled as she passed by, hoping God had a sense of humor; she knew her neighbor didn't.

At the water's edge, Ana dug her toes in the warm sand, and fingered the *otanes* in her pocket. The pebbles, known for connecting a believer to the earth and being talismans for protection, had offered great comfort to Ana over the years. Bougainvillea blooms, palm fronds, pieces of wood, and uprooted shrubs and branches littered the beach as far as she could see. She brushed a long, wiry tendril off her forehead, and set her cloth bag on the sand. The adrenaline from the thunder squall and Lorena's dramatic birth still coursed through her body. She scanned the horizon, watching fluffy,



white clouds move slowly in the azure sky. “What’re you brewing out there? Still two months of worry. Stay out there, we’re tired,” Ana said with a weary sigh. A small wave washed over her foot, bringing with it a wisp of kelp that hugged her ankle. She kicked it off and looked out to sea. The storm had mixed the waters of the river with seawater. Starting at the shore, there wasn’t a clear delineation between the brown river water and light blue seawater, but farther out, she saw darker blue, and finally turquoise at the horizon. Every day, the turquoise water came closer until it reached the shore. Ana loved how the ocean cleansed itself. Countless times she’d experienced the ocean’s healing of skin ailments, cuts, and bruises. She wondered if the hurricane had cleansed her sins. She wasn’t so sure.

When Ana stepped into the gentle surf, her long, billowy, cotton skirt began absorbing water at the hem, reminding her of the impatient Spanish priest who’d been assigned to her religious education. She recalled a particular Mass he’d officiated when he accidentally knocked over the ornate, silver goblet that held the precious blood of Christ, the communion wine. The priest had snatched the goblet and stood impotently as the blood-red wine seeped into the fabric of the freshly starched, white altar cloth and had run down the sides like skeletal crimson fingers. With a flushed face, he’d looked around, searching for assistance that never came. The parishioners had been as surprised as he was. She’d felt torn between pitying the red-faced priest and thinking he’d possibly received a sign of his unworthiness to drink the blood of Christ, as he was an arrogant man. Were the Saints and Ana’s ancestors speaking to her now as the seawater claimed her skirt like the garnet wine had claimed the priest’s altar cloth? Was she worthy to do God’s work as the only midwife of La Playa? She made the sign of the cross to rid her mind of negative thoughts. Surely God and *la Virgen* had plans for her.

Clearing away a patch of seaweed with her foot, Ana remembered how much cooler seawater felt after a storm. She removed a small, hulled-out coconut half from her bag, and placed a tiny paper fan, a few dried beans, and several small seashells in it. She walked out into the surf and set the unlikely vessel in the waves. The *ebó*, her offering of thanksgiving to Yemayá, who’d protected Serafina’s baby in the womb, rocked from side to side until the tide took the coconut boat out. Ana was pleased with the birth, thankful the storm was over, and as always, prayed for forgiveness and

absolution. In the other coconut half, Ana poured a thimbleful of rum, a bit of honey, and placed a small, empty turtle shell inside. She set the *ebó* afloat for the god Changó, who'd kept his second wife, Oyá at bay on the night of the birth, and had protected them. She shaded her eyes with the palm of her hand, trying to catch a glimpse of the makeshift vessel, but it was out of sight, swallowed by the generous swells. Ana followed the traditions of her West African ancestors and her parents, since their capture in Africa and their life of slavery in Cuba—she prayed and paid homage to the deities.

Along the water's edge, women and children combed the palm-fringed beach in search of useful items and treasures—peace offerings from the mighty sea. Storm surges seized interesting and curious items, and at times, they were given back when the waters receded. The sea took and sustained life in Barrio La Playa. Ana usually found pots, pans, and the occasional *escupidera*, a piss pot, washed up on the shore, but today there was no time to go in search of treasures. From the beach, Ana surveyed what she could see of the town. Most homes in the neighborhood had suffered some damage, and several cement homes and businesses were missing roofs along with the Martínez house. From her vantage point, she found it difficult to remember where some of the homes once stood amidst the present rubble. Along the sea coast, many of the wooden houses shared a common wall or a corrugated roof with a neighbor—when one house fell, the next one had no choice but to follow like houses built of playing cards. Smaller huts with thatched roofs, built on cement blocks to accommodate the water at high tide, were simply gone. Thankfully, her home and the Martínez house had survived the storms and hurricanes, but would they survive a third? Ana wondered if her parents had escaped the hurricanes and tropical storms of the past twenty years. There was nothing she could do to help them, but she still yearned for news of her family. “Until we meet again,” she whispered and said a blessing for her parents, never fully believing she'd see them again. Letters to her parents written by neighbors or clients had remained unanswered during the twenty years she'd lived in Porto Rico. And none had been returned.

The familiar call of the paperboy had not been heard in the early morning hours since the last storm. Ana could only guess if the local newspaper, *El Día*, was being printed at all, as most lines of communication

on the island always suffered damage from high winds. The Americans could only do so much, and were finding life in the West Indies was not for the faint of heart. She wondered if the Americans regretted accepting Porto Rico as a prize after the Spanish-American War; perhaps the island wasn't the paradise they'd thought it to be. Rounding the corner, Ana saw barefoot children playing in the street, seemingly oblivious to the devastation around them, and possibly trying to ignore their growling stomachs. A young girl sat crying in a doorway. Ana scrutinized the girl for obvious injury, and finding none, asked her, "Why are you crying, *nena*?"

"*Mi mamá*, I don't know where she is."

"Go play with the other children; stop crying." Ana's irritation at the child surprised her. She softened her voice, "Knock on your neighbors' doors and ask if they know where your mother is. I'm sure she'll be back soon." The barefoot girl walked away, wiping her tears on the hem of her short dress. Ana guessed her to be five years of age. By Ana's fifth birthday, she'd already known hard work and suffering; she wondered if it was the same for the girl. Everyone had their *orí*, and she hoped the girl would live long enough to fulfill her destiny.

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# CHAPTER 3

## *Momentos Perdidos ~ Lost Moments*

**ON A DARK AND RAINY MORNING** in the center of Ponce, large mud puddles scattered early shoppers from the middle of the dirt road onto already congested sidewalks. Ana didn't bother avoiding the puddles as she made her way through town to the Martínez home. The hem of her white skirt was heavy with mud, but she was not deterred. Small groups of people huddled under store awnings and whispered behind their hands as Ana passed—her light-colored eyes, quite a contrast to her ebony skin, always had the same effect on city people. The familiar pangs of loneliness and confusion gripped her, as they often did, when she found herself in crowded areas. Although Ana longed for friends and a family of her own, most of the time she shunned crowds, which added to her feelings of alienation. Today was one of those days. Ana recognized she lived on the fringes of society, and wondered what would happen if she disappeared one day. Would anyone miss her?

The rain felt cool on Ana's skin, a welcome change from the heat and humidity of late. Her eyes crinkled with amusement as several children ran toward her, shouting and chasing down an agile, three-legged dog, splashing mud all around. The smells of wet earth and rain reminded her of the rainy season in Cuba, of her parents collecting rain water in huge wooden barrels, and of swimming in the river with the slave children of the sugar plantation. One of the children, a girl, looked like a younger version of Serafina. The closer Ana got to the Martínez home, the more she thought about Serafina. Ana didn't think of her as a daughter, but knowing the girl's mother was dead had an effect on her. Ana couldn't help feeling protective

of her, more than with any client she could remember. Serafina was well taken care of by Roberto, and she had a father and brothers in Juana Díaz, so Serafina didn't need Ana. Perhaps she needed Serafina, and that confused her.

Serafina's dog, Reina, announced Ana's arrival, and went quiet when her barefoot, sun-kissed mistress opened the front door with a big smile. "*Bendición, Doña Ana!*" Serafina ran to the crooked garden gate wearing a white apron over a tight-fitting, floral dress, and as she ran, her lustrous hair, plaited in one thick braid down her back, swished like a horse's tail against a pesky insect. "Your *cafecito* is ready, just as you like it. Come in, come in," Serafina urged when Ana hesitated to enter the yard. "Don't mind the dog. Reina is protective of me and the baby, and likes women, but she doesn't care for Roberto!"

The women laughed and greeted each other with a kiss on the cheek. "I'm happy to see you up and about, Serafina. Motherhood agrees with you." Serafina led the way to the kitchen with Ana close behind, eyeing the dog that bounded up the steps ahead of them.

"You think so?" Serafina was visibly pleased with Ana's observation. "I'm losing weight, and my hair and nails are as strong as when I was pregnant. Will that last?"

"It should. Remember; no bathing for a week—a fortnight if you can stand it, and no overworking yourself."

Serafina motioned for Ana to sit. "Oh, I feel fine. I'm only sweeping the storm dirt and sand away, but not bathing for a week sounds awful. I don't know about that."

Ana chuckled when Serafina grimaced. "I know, but you don't want to get sick now, do you? Not with a newborn to care for." Serafina motioned for Ana to sit.

"True. Well, at least the clean-up isn't as bad as last year, right? That was horrible, and we're lucky to be alive. Some of our neighbors weren't as fortunate."

Ana nodded in agreement, deciding she was much too happy to speak of tragedy and loss. She picked up a folded newspaper lying on the table, and pretended to read the headlines. "With so many families moving to Ponce and to the mountain towns, I pray La Playa doesn't turn into a ghost town," Ana said. "Did you hear that thousands of men, women, and children are

moving to an island called Hawaii to work in American sugarcane fields?”

Serafina’s hands trembled as she poured coffee into two mismatched teacups of hot milk. “Oh, you read that too? I could never leave Porto Rico. God knows life is *hard* here, but for me, everything seems easier when Roberto is gone. He’s so demanding, you know? My days are peaceful with only Lorena to care for.”

Ana finished her coffee, sensing there was more to Serafina’s story, and possibly the reason behind those trembling hands, but she didn’t comment. She rested her gaze on the pretty teacups and saucers, and then looked at Serafina, who seemed hopeful and at the same time hesitant for an opening to speak her mind. “I understand,” Ana mused. “Marriage and motherhood are a lot of work. Is the baby sleeping and eating well?”

“Yes, she is. Lorena is a perfect angel. No crying and no colic.”

“That’s a blessing with a newborn.” Ana took a sip of coffee and saw questions in Serafina’s green eyes. “What is it?”

Serafina covered her mouth with a delicate hand. “Oh, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to stare. It...it’s just that I want to ask you a question.” Ana leaned in, sensing where the conversation was headed, and Serafina met her gaze.

“No, I don’t know why my eyes are light, and no, I don’t think my father was a *white* man, either.”

Serafina laughed. “That’s not what I wanted to ask!”

“Oh! What’s your question?”

“I want to know if you were ever married, and if you have children.”

The questions were the keys that opened the door to Ana’s past. She cocked her head and looked at Serafina, sensing an opportunity for both of them. She blurted out, “Can you read, Serafina?”

Serafina’s eyebrows shot up. “Yes, why do you ask?”

Ana leaned forward, and then leaned back when Serafina’s eyes widened. Ana softened her voice. “Can you write?”

“I can. Why?”

“I need to learn as quickly as possible. Can you teach me?”

“But you knew about people leaving Porto Rico for Hawaii. How did you know that? That was in yesterday’s paper.”

“I overheard a conversation at the store. I know the alphabet, but never learned to read. I must pass a midwifery examination, or I can’t work. I was always so busy catching babies; I never found the time to learn.”

Serafina nodded and grinned. "Of course, I can teach you. Here's what we'll do; I'll teach you to read and write, and you tell me stories about your life in Cuba. What do you say?"

"That's perfect!" Ana held her throat, embarrassed by her sudden exuberance.

"Don't worry; you'll be reading in no time."

The arrangement could work. Serafina needed a friend, and Ana needed to learn everything Serafina knew about reading and writing. Ana scooted her chair closer to the table and continued in a conspiratorial tone that made Serafina giggle, "Now, if anyone else had asked me the questions you asked me, I wouldn't have answered. But I like you, Serafina. No, I never married, and I have no children."

Serafina pouted. "Oh...were you ever in love?"

"I was in love once." Serafina clapped. Ana paused when her stomach tightened. The past hadn't escaped her lips since Doña Milagro had died. Fearing the stories would spill out all at once, Ana reminded herself to slow down. She'd have to keep Serafina happy with bits and pieces, enough to continue the lessons until she passed the medical examination. "I was in love with a handsome slave man in Cuba named Ishe. We were together for a short time, and then he was sent away. I never saw him again."

"Oh no! Why? How did you meet him? Please, we only have a short time while Lorena naps," Serafina said, and then she laughed. "I know this sounds silly, but I need adult conversation." Ana chuckled, relieved Serafina was asking the questions that built a friendship because she hadn't known how to begin, yet the girl's interest in her years of slavery was baffling. "Ishe was a slave like me, and we worked on the same sugar plantation...-but before I begin my story, when can we begin my lessons?"

"We begin right now." Serafina disappeared behind the curtain, and tip toed back with a pencil and a blank sheet of paper. She wrote out the alphabet, and showed the paper to Ana. "You take this home; write each letter. Tomorrow I'll test you, and I will help you, Doña Ana. Don't worry, you *will* learn to read."

Ana smiled broadly and patted Serafina's hand. "Thank you, *nena*. Now, let me light a cigar, and I will thank you with a story." Serafina brought her chair closer and rested her chin in her hand, listening as intently as she'd done as a child when her mother and aunts had recounted their family



stories and legends. The smoke from Ana's cigar curled, crossed, and awakened her ancestor spirits, who were well-pleased to hear Ana's stories after so many years of silence.

"I was born a slave on a sugar plantation in Cuba. My parents were proud Lukumí people from the Egba tribe in Yorubaland, where I was conceived. They were captured, shackled to a ship, and sailed for the unknown. It's a small miracle my mother survived the horrible passage with me in her belly with the gruel they gave the slaves to eat, and the constant vomiting aboard the ship from seasickness. I was given the African name, Akanni—Ana, for short, which means the first born child."

"Lorena loves that you gave her the same African middle name when she was born." Ana smiled, happy to give Serafina the few moments of adult conversation she'd requested. She wondered if it was a good time to bring up Lorena's caul, and then decided against it as Serafina seemed to be on a journey to Cuba in her mind's eye. Ana began her story,

"I spoke the language of our Yoruba tribe, and by the age of four, I'd learned Spanish by playing with the planter's children. In secret, my parents taught me the traditions of Yoruba while the owners of the plantation looked the other way. I learned of the mighty god, Olodumare, of gods and goddesses called *orishas*, along with the names of their equivalent Catholic saint, all done to confuse and mislead the powerful landowners, who believed us slaves only prayed to God, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints."

"When the Catholic wife of the plantation owner insisted the slaves be baptized and converted to Catholicism, the new overseer we called El Mulato convinced his *patrón* that the slaves were needed on Sundays. The closest church was a two-hour walk. He reminded his patron of the stories of landowners losing their sugar farms in San Domingue to the slave revolts, and with Cuba first in sugar production, he said the slaves couldn't be spared on Sundays when there was money to be made. My baptism did not take place in Cuba. We were watched carefully by El Mulato." Serafina sat as still as the transparent salamanders hiding in the rafters above their heads. "Do you want to hear more?"

"Yes, yes, I love this story!"

Ana smiled to herself, recalling how enraptured she'd sat at her own mother's table, listening to stories of Africa and her ancestors. It felt good to open up after so many years. "My mother was a house slave, and with

scraps of meat and fatback she scrounged from the kitchen, I grew up strong and healthy. When I was strong enough for field work, El Mulato ordered me to the sugarcane fields with my father. Day after day, I pulled away the sugarcane sheaves to uncover the stalk that would be cut by the *machetéros* with their sharp *machétes*. I worked those fields until my skin burned. No remedies helped the pain or itching, and at times my hands bled as if my body was crying, not just my eyes. My father pleaded with El Mulato to put me in the kitchen with my mother, so at fifteen, I was relieved from the hardships of the sugarcane fields, and a new type of slavery began—I was sent to live with the overseer whose Nigerian woman had died in childbirth. El Mulato was responsible for the affairs of the Africans on the plantation, and out of fear, my parents didn't oppose or even question the new arrangement. I took the dead woman's place, and assumed all her duties."

"African slaves were freed in 1886 but my parents still acted and thought like slaves, taking orders and frightened of authority. Our daily lives on the plantation didn't change, except we were now paid for our labor. Freedom was just a word though, not a reality. We had the same duties, and of course we had little free time. Much later, we were allowed to buy a parcel of land to work to better our lives, but we never ended up with extra money, because we were forced to pay for farm tools and seeds for planting. Nothing was left from our small earnings; *el patrón* made sure of that. No money meant no real freedom. Other than the love of my parents, I had few joys in my life until the day I met Ishe."

"Ishe, the man you loved," Serafina said, rubbing her hands together with glistening eyes. "Now we're getting somewhere."

Ana began with a far-away look in her eyes. "It was my wash day. I reached for the soap on a large river rock, and it slipped out of my hand, headed for the water. I grabbed at it, lost my balance, and right into the river I went with the dirty clothes. I yelled and splashed about until strong hands scooped me out of the water. A handsome, young black man set me on the river bank. Ishe became my lover. We didn't fight the attraction between us, but we knew if we got caught, it could mean death for us. And El Mulato was a very jealous man." The mention of the overseer made Ana's skin crawl. "I was happy with Ishe until he found us together." Ana's face turned serious. Serafina covered her mouth with one hand, and her eyes grew wide.

“He whipped Ishe, sent him to another plantation, and beat me so badly I lost the child I carried. I didn’t know I was pregnant.”

“*Ay, bendito; qué horrible.*” Serafina made the sign of the cross, and when she squeezed Ana’s hand, Ana pulled her hand away. There was the pity Ana so hated. She cleared her throat, unable to meet Serafina’s eyes. Although Ana was fairly certain the comment wasn’t pity, it was too late to take the moment back; it was gone. Serafina lowered her gaze and said in a thin voice, “You know, I may be young, but I do understand loss, love, and how much we love our children. I lost my mother, remember?”

Ana fell silent as she fiddled with her cup. Her face grew hot, and then she looked up. “I know you understand. Serafina, I’m sorry. I’m not used to talking about my life, and it hurts to think of my child. That’s all it is; it has nothing to do with you.” Ana felt guilty for possibly hurting Serafina’s feelings, and was unsure of what to say next. She pulled down the sleeve of her blouse, exposing two thick scars on her shoulder. “This is what he did to me.”

“*Qué animal.* I’m so sorry, Doña Ana. But, he can no longer hurt you.”

“He was an animal, and I often wondered if it was like that on other sugar plantations. We never knew if the *patrón* and his family knew about their overseer’s mistreatment of the slaves. El Mulato seems to have the power to do as he saw fit.”

“Well, I hope you’ll think of me as a friend, Doña Ana. I need a friend. And what you tell me stays with me.” Serafina locked her mouth with an imaginary key and threw it toward the window.

“The past is hard for me to talk about, but most of the pain remains locked in my heart. Let’s hear your story.” Before Serafina could begin, they heard Lorena’s lusty cries from the back room.

“*Ah, la princesa.*” Ana was relieved for the distraction. When Serafina returned with Lorena, Ana held out her arms for the baby. The dog sniffed at Lorena’s toes and settled at Serafina’s feet.

“*Dios me la bendiga,*” Ana said, blessing the baby and pinching her chubby cheek. “Eating well, I see!”

“She doesn’t miss a meal; I can tell you that. She feeds every hour, on the hour, like a newborn goat.”

“You must remember to eat well, Serafina. You need your strength. By the way, today is my last day with you.” Ana stood and handed the baby

back. “Let me prepare a nice *asopao* before I go.”

“Oh, there’s no need! I’m cooking today. I bought the ingredients,” Serafina said proudly. “Roberto is due home tonight, and I want to surprise him with my first chicken and rice dish.”

The pride in Serafina’s young face warmed Ana’s heart. “Well, you seem older just now. Thank you for the coffee and your good company. I’ll be by tomorrow for our first reading lesson.” Ana waved goodbye and walked home, worried Serafina would pry further, once she thought back on the story of Ishe and her son. Had Serafina noticed the nervous dread on her face at the mention of El Mulato? Ana wondered how wise it was to place such a heavy burden on a new friend, especially one as young as Serafina.

Ana cut through a neighbor’s garden, and felt the bile rise up her throat. She was frightened about opening up and sharing her past. She felt like a ripe guava that had been split open by a *machete*, and as she bent over, she visualized black guava seeds and membranes spilling out as she vomited on the cracked earth. She wiped her mouth, and thought of Ishe’s child; the child she’d carried for one month, who’d died in her belly after the beating. She remembered dark, clotted blood running down her inner thighs, and how she’d run to the river’s edge holding her stomach. She’d known in her heart that her child had chosen death. The goddess Yemayá had spoken—Ana’s penance for not keeping her baby safe from harm was to continue bringing children into the world without a child of her own to love and to love her in return.

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# CHAPTER 4

## *El Mal de Ojo ~ The Evil Eye*

**SERAFINA FINISHED WASHING** the breakfast dishes and patted the little body tucked inside the rectangular cloth tied around her neck. Her heart swelled with love for six-month old Lorena, who rested against her engorged breasts. Before it was time to nurse the baby, Serafina quickly checked the fire in the *fogón*, the outdoor cooker, and hurried to the garden to finish her chores, spilling half of the soapy dish water from the pan she carried. The avocado seedling and the small palm tree Roberto had planted along with the placenta were sturdy, showing signs of new growth. This pleased Serafina; she'd grown a child and now she was a farmer. She threw the dish water on the plants, and walked to the side yard to feed the remaining chickens that had survived the hurricane. Every day, Serafina called out, "*Pío, pío*," and the hens came running, followed closely behind by six chicks scattering from side to side, trying to keep up with their mothers.

The rooster Serafina called El Macho strutted across the yard toward her, spreading his red and yellow tail feathers. "Yes, you are an important man, Macho, but you're not eating first; your wives and children must eat before you have your fill." She wiped the sweat from her brow, wondering if the baby's heat against her body was the reason she felt feverish. When she heard Roberto's insistent call, she ran to the front of the house, holding Lorena close. He appeared at the door wearing a black suit and a wrinkled, white shirt without a tie. "I'm going to town. We're almost out of lamp oil and we need more candles. The shops around here are out, so I'm heading to *el pueblo*."

“Why are you dressed for a funeral? It’s too hot to wear black, Roberto.” When he didn’t answer, Serafina frowned. “Why are you ignoring me?”

Roberto grinned at her. “I’m thinking of a certain wife who hasn’t washed clothes this week. I know you’re still getting used to motherhood, so I thought I’d wear the suit instead of bothering you about my whites. Now, what do we need in the way of food? Do you have a list, a realistic list?”

“I’m sorry about your clothes. I’ve had a horrible headache all morning, and I think I have a fever. But never mind. We have plenty of eggs, but we’re out of *plátanos* and sugar. If you happen to find beans, rice, and dried codfish that would make a nice meal.”

“You know I won’t find all that!”

Serafina quickly looked down at Lorena, and put her finger to her mouth. “*Caramba, Roberto,*” she whispered, “You never know; just try.”

“*Por favor,* the market stalls are probably empty, and I don’t have many pesos left. And no dollars.”

She ignored his last comment. “I still have chicory left; that will stretch the coffee a bit. Oh, and stop at the *botánica*. Ask if they have any fists made of black *azabache*.” She made a fist and stuck her thumb between her index and middle fingers to illustrate what she hoped for in a black stone amulet. “Or even a tiny evil eye charm to pin on Lorena’s clothes.”

Roberto shook his head. “No, no. I’m not going there.”

Serafina put her hands on her hips, and let out an exasperated, confused sigh. “Why not?”

“One reason is because I don’t have enough money for that. Two, it’s out of my way. And three, I don’t believe in that nonsense Doña Ana is feeding you.”

“Ana doesn’t speak nonsense, and I don’t ask for much. Please look for *el mal de ojo*. The evil eye is all around, and we must protect Lorena! People are jealous,” she said, pressing a hand to her clammy forehead.

“I’ll go in, and if I see it, fine. But if not, I’m not asking. And who’d be jealous of a baby?”

“People are jealous, Roberto!” Roberto followed her inside. She placed Lorena in the wooden cradle and arched her back. “Besides, I have an account with the *santéro*. He says I can pay him later.”

Roberto grabbed his *pava* and with one swift motion, he planted the

straw hat on his head. “Evil eye, my ass. The *santéro* should keep carving saints and stop selling trinkets to bored housewives!”

“Stubborn man,” Serafina muttered when she heard the garden gate slam. She went back outside to throw more kindling on the flames now blazing on three large, flat stones surrounded by three concrete blocks. Surely, he could buy her the black fist to protect Lorena. One amulet couldn’t cost too much. She peered around the old avocado tree, making sure he was out of earshot. “You buy rum without a guilty conscience, *ah?* That’s where our money goes!”

A thin, scruffy dog sauntered into the yard, and stared at Serafina. “What? What are you looking at?” She picked up a stone and threw it, missing the dog, who wandered away unimpressed. “*Perro sáto*, you’re as mangy as they come. You males are all alike.” Back inside the house, Serafina realized she didn’t understand Roberto, nor had she understood her father and three brothers growing up. She knew what was best for her family, and it was her job to keep Lorena safe. Men provided for their families, but women knew best.

“Time to deal with you,” she said, unscrewing the top of the temperamental tin oil lamp. “Every single day, you slip down into the oil, and every day, I get my hands dirty.” She inserted the long wick into the wick feeder, and turned the knob. This was a job she had learned the hard way not to forget—Roberto’s anger was an unpleasant reminder. He called the oil lamp, *la chismosa*, the gossip, because when the sun went down and Lorena fell asleep, Serafina lit the lamp, and went in search of a neighbor with a lamp, to gossip with in the shadows. But he soon put a stop to that. Serafina was not to give out their personal information to anyone who could later use the ammunition against her or Roberto. He was probably right, thought Serafina.

A few hours later, Ana walked up to Serafina’s gate, and rang the bell. “Is the lady of the house receiving guests?”

“*Hola, Doña Ana. Bendición.*” Ana blessed her from the gate. “Come in; are you ready for your lesson?”

Ana sat at the kitchen table, beaming like a child, as she held out the sheet of paper with the alphabet she’d written. “I memorized the alphabet, and wrote the letters out.”

“*Ave María, Doña Ana.* You’re the best student I’ve ever had!”



“I’m your only student until Lorena is ready for school!” Ana was fidgety with excitement. “Here, let me show you.” She diligently copied the letters again in perfect form.

Serafina clapped. “I’m proud of you. Now, watch.” Ana watched carefully as Serafina wrote ‘Ana Belén’, and then copied the letters.

“I have a ledger of clients I need to update, too!”

“We’ll get to that soon! But first...what did you write?”

Ana sounded out the letters, and looked up with a smile. “It’s my name. Ana Belén.”

“Good!” Serafina wrote her own name, and Ana sounded it out. “You’ll be reading in no time! I’ll give you a task to complete before you leave, but who begins today’s story?”

Ana wagged a finger at Serafina, and frowned. “Just a minute—are you feeling all right? You look *hincha* today—very pale.”

“Oh, I’ve had a headache all morning. Don’t worry; it will pass. I probably need to drink more water on such a hot day.”

“No fever?” Serafina shook her head. “Well, if you develop a fever, you call for me immediately.”

“I will; I promise.”

“So, the other day you seemed to want to talk about Roberto,” Ana said with a grin.

“I did, didn’t I?” Serafina decided not to mention her argument with Roberto. Why spoil a visit with Ana? “The summer I turned fifteen, I strayed farther from home than usual. A group of my friends secretly met at remote parts of La Playa, and I lied to my parents about where I was. Luckily my brothers never found out about my *escapadas*, or they would have been furious with me. I’m not sure if my mother knew about my escapes and trusted me, or that she wasn’t worried I was in danger of losing my virginity. Well, she should have worried!” The women laughed.

“Roberto was a stranger to me and the oldest in the group. I was the youngest and very proud that an older man found me attractive—not silly and *infantíl* like he described my giddy girlfriends. They were jealous of me for nabbing Roberto, because of his steady job on the merchant marine ships, and because he had enough money to rent a small house where we eventually...you know...after a few months.” Serafina put her hands to her cheeks, fighting the urge to smile.

“I finally told my mother I was seeing Roberto because I thought I was pregnant—and amazingly, she encouraged me to continue with him. My mother saw no reason for us to marry. She said Roberto could support me, and that if he didn’t work out, I could begin another relationship. My parents had never married and were together until her death. God rest her soul.”

“God rest her soul. In my experience, young people often fall in love with the idea of marriage,” Ana said.

“Yes, that’s true. Roberto was exciting and strong-willed, considered a good catch. His parents were married, and he wanted the respectability of taking a wife—a virgin, of course. He said he couldn’t have a wife who’d been touched by another man, and I was pure.”

“An important part of the marriage ideal for most men,” Ana said. “Is marriage what you thought it would be?”

Serafina sighed, feeling her resolve weaken about not speaking to Ana about her marriage. “Well, things were good with us at the beginning, and we were happy. But the longer Roberto remained in port, the moodier he became, and then he became jealous. What made matters worse was that he began to drink...heavily. If I talked to the *panadero* at the bakery, I had problems with Roberto. If the postman spoke to me, Roberto accused me of cheating on him.” Serafina shrugged and shook her head. “It’s done now. I’m married, but at times I wonder if I should have taken my mother’s advice about not marrying.”

“I never took a husband, but marriage does offer women security and steady money for the family. Unfortunately for some women, they deal with the occasional slapping around for that security,” Ana arched an eyebrow, and paused for a moment. “And that must never happen, Serafina—never.”

“Oh, no, that won’t happen to me. Roberto has a bad temper, but he’s never touched me in that way. We have a good marriage, honest.”

“I hope that is always the case, Serafina. Jealousy can kill a relationship.”

Serafina looked at the clock on the dresser. “Looks like it’s time for me to get back to cooking. A nice lunch will make Roberto happy.” She couldn’t tell if Ana had noticed the sudden change in subject, and hoped the midwife wouldn’t ask what she was hiding.

\* \* \*

The blistering noonday sun, combined with the heat from the *fogón*, left Serafina's face feeling chafed. She placed a large pot of rice to boil on the makeshift stovetop, and closed her eyes, hoping to catch an ocean breeze, but the air was still that day. The sun beat down without mercy, making the shade of the mango tree more precious. With her day in the outdoor kitchen nearly over, she prayed her headache would ease once she finished cooking. She roughly sliced a few plantains, and cut her finger. "*Coño*," she cursed, sucking her finger. The dog snatched the bloodstained plantain slice before it reached the ground. Serafina dreamed of a nap and a dip in the ocean before Roberto returned, but gave up her dream knowing he'd expect a full *almuerzo* when he got home at noon. She pressed the remaining plantain slices with the back of a saucer, and set them aside for frying when she heard Lorena cry. She ran inside, and lay down to nurse the baby, trying to ignore her pounding head.

Serafina thought back to how soon after their wedding Roberto began frequenting the bar on the corner, where his merchant marine *compadres* drank when in port. Very quickly, Serafina learned that too much alcohol was an omen of bad things to come with Roberto. Anyone with a connection to her was included in the insults he hurled when he drank. He seemed to hate Serafina and anyone she loved, except for their daughter. That was the part of the story she hadn't told Ana; Roberto's jealousy, at first appealing, now worried Serafina. Since their wedding, she'd been forbidden to visit her family, and then her father and brothers had moved to Yauco with their wives and children in search of work. Once when she'd mentioned wanting to visit her family, Roberto had pushed her against a wall in a drunken rage. Now she avoided him when she smelled alcohol on his breath, and her secrecy began. Out of embarrassment, she kept her troubles to herself, and with no family nearby, she felt more alone and isolated than ever. Serafina wanted to tell Ana, but couldn't bear what she might think of her. "Let's hope he goes out to sea soon," Serafina said, kissing Lorena's chubby cheeks. "I love having you all to myself, anyway."

In bed, Serafina and Roberto's communication was another matter entirely. Although she was shy and inexperienced, she enjoyed their lovemaking, and his terms of endearment. She forgave a lot and her

memory was short when they were intimate, but those good times were short-lived when Roberto drank. On one occasion, she'd pushed him off her, and Roberto spoke of another woman who wouldn't reject him. He'd threatened to leave her and never return, only to beg forgiveness the following day. Serafina had taken him back when she'd discovered she was pregnant, and since that day, life had been calm. Serafina prayed it would remain so.

Hoping a different nursing position would ease the searing pain in her nipple, Serafina readjusted Lorena at the breast. She still experienced strong contractions when she nursed the baby, and within minutes, Serafina relaxed into a peaceful closeness with Lorena, who promptly fell asleep. She wiped a droplet of breast milk dangling from the corner of infant's mouth, and placed her face down in the cradle. "You're a greedy little one, my sweet baby." The intense love she felt for Lorena at that moment brought tears to her eyes.

Beads of sweat ran down Serafina's back and between her breasts as she tugged and wrestled with the knot on the long panel of cloth that Ana had tied around her middle to encourage the uterus to shrink back to its original size. Finally free of the makeshift girdle, Serafina threw it across the bed and crawled between cool sheets. Soon, her eyes grew heavy and she drifted off to sleep with the low rumble of the waves, a balmy breeze, and the caw-caw of seagulls in the distance.

\* \* \*

Just after sundown, Roberto left an impromptu party at the bar, and staggered through the yard of his house, following the smell of burnt food. He found charred rice in the *caldero*, no stewed beans, and uncooked plantain slices on the wood counter. He spun around, shouting for Serafina, who roused when the dog barked. "Roberto?" She threw on her nightgown and jumped out of bed, feeling the tightness of her muscles as she followed the dog through the house. "¡Ay, *Virgen*—the meal! Is that you, Roberto?" Serafina heard him stomp up the steps of the house. "Lunch is almost ready," she called out. Her chest tightened when she saw the sky was dark; she couldn't imagine how long she'd slept. Roberto entered the house and clutched her arm. The baby wailed as he dragged Serafina outside to the

*fogón*. “Wait, Roberto! You’re hurting my arm!” The dog growled and bared her teeth at Roberto.

“What is this?” he pointed at the rice. “It’s dark out. What have you done all day? Sleeping?” She smelled stale tobacco and rum on his breath, and saw the bulging veins in his temples.

“I don’t understand; I shut my eyes for a minute,” she whispered, and then stopped speaking. It would soon be over. Although it pained Serafina not to comfort Lorena, she stood frozen as her head pounded with the dog’s incessant barking.

“Good for nothing, *malagradecida*! Here I am sweating all over this damn town looking for food, and you burn what little we have.” Roberto raised his hand, and Serafina turned her face, flinching at the thought of a slap. The dog immediately lunged at Roberto, and he swiftly dropped his hand. Instead, he pointed at Serafina and snarled, “Look at you; you smell like sweat and sour milk. Get out of my sight! And shut that dog up!”

“Stop, Roberto! Please, I don’t feel good.” No sooner had the words come out of her mouth when Serafina fainted. Roberto spotted the neighbors peering over their fences at them, and he waved as if to say everything was under control. He picked up Serafina, put her in bed, and attempted to comfort Lorena with futile, soft coos.

The following morning, Serafina rubbed her eyes open, surprised to see Ana sitting on the bed with Lorena in her arms. Serafina looked down, confused as to why she was dressed in her sleeveless nightshirt. “I have no idea how long I’ve slept. Why are you here, Ana?”

Ana shifted the sleeping baby from one arm to the other. “It’s ten in the morning. You’ve had a restless night.” The look of concern on Ana’s face was serious enough to immediately bring up a pang of guilt in Serafina. Then she remembered the incident with Roberto, and fainting in the yard.

Serafina looked down. “I’m sorry to bother you. Hand me the baby, please. We’ve never gone this long between feedings.” Lorena sucked hungrily at her mother’s breast.

“You have no fever, ah? You’ve been out for hours, Serafina.”

“I don’t know what happened,” Serafina lied, pushing back the blanket, and sitting up.

“Thankfully, your fever broke a little while ago. How do you feel?”

Serafina changed the baby’s position, and Ana noticed two bruises on her

arm. “I feel fine.” She kissed Lorena’s nose, and avoided Ana’s eyes, knowing she’d seen them.

“Thank God you don’t have the mother’s fever, and you’re lucky, too. I think it was a mild bout of dengue fever. From now on, I want to see a mosquito net over your bed and on the baby’s cradle.” Ana tapped Serafina’s bruised arm. “Don’t keep things from me, Serafina. Don’t do that. What happened?”

Serafina lowered her head. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Ana shook her head. “By the way, Roberto went out.”

“I don’t care where he goes,” Serafina said in a harsh tone, and then softened her voice as she nuzzled Lorena’s nose with her own. “Don’t worry, my precious baby. We’ll be on our own soon.”

“Has this happened before?”

“Don’t worry; it’s nothing. He’s leaving soon.”

“But I *am* worried, Serafina! I don’t want you harmed. Do you want me to speak to Roberto? If he won’t listen to me, the insular police could have a little talk with him.”

Serafina gasped. “No, don’t do that!” She looked around the room, and continued in a lower voice. “He sails out soon; don’t worry. He acts like a demon only when he drinks, and he’s gone more than he is here.”

“You must tell me if things get bad, Serafina. I will move you and Lorena out of here if I see signs of this again. Don’t keep anything from me. You hear me?”

Serafina’s eyes welled up as she fiddled with a new, gold bracelet—a gift from Roberto. “I understand, Doña Ana. Thank you. You know, I believed marriage would make my life better than my mother’s life. But it hasn’t—my life is worse than hers. I wish Roberto would leave and never return.”

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## CHAPTER 5

### *Oraciones, Milagros y Amuletos ~ Prayers, Miracles, and Amulets*

**FOOD WAS ALWAYS SCARCE AFTER BAD WEATHER.** The Three King's Day dinners that year would be simple and filling later in the month, instead of sumptuous and tasty as in previous years when they'd feasted on rice and pigeon peas, roasted pork, and *pasteles*. The barrio *tiendita* was closed in January, until repairs were made to the store's roof, and many vegetable gardens were ruined. After the San Ciriaco hurricane, the usual *quincalleros*, street vendors from La Playa, had moved to the *Plaza del Mercado* marketplace in the center of Ponce proper, and the locals had no choice but to make the long walk to where the vendors chose to remain.

Ana hurried home, remembering the moon would be full that evening, which meant it was laundry night for the women of La Playa. Her shopping basket contained several bars of white and blue soap, cornstarch to make homemade starch, a sack of rice she'd been fortunate to find, and a stale baguette of *pan de agua* was tucked under her arm. She remembered how her mother and the other Lukumí women of the sugar plantation washed clothes on large rocks along the river beneath a full moon. Her mother used to remind young Ana, "The bar of white soap is for washing; blue for white clothes only." After the clothes were washed, the women would lay each article of clothing flat on a sheet of zinc to dry overnight in the moonlight. The women believed the moon whitened their clothes better than the sun ever could. Ana recalled joining the slave children in the fields in search of the seeds they crushed and mixed with water to create starch for ironing the clothing of *el patrón* and his family. She smiled; they never found enough



seeds, and most probably, the adults had sent the children out on wild hunts for a couple of hours of peace and quiet. Ana couldn't remember the name of the seed. This was why friends and companions were so important in life, she thought—to help us remember as we grow older.

Many local shopkeepers now favored the American dollar to the Porto Rican *peso*, and Ana had one *peso* left and no United States dollars or coins. The only way for her to make American dollars was in Ponce, the city center, but walking to her clients in town and back home was becoming difficult with a new pain in her hip. Ana hoped her financial situation would improve, but she wasn't sure how that would happen with no birthing clients until late January. As she passed the parish church, an emaciated white dog barked at her. "Sorry, *compay*, things are bad all over. I don't have a single crumb to share with you, my friend." She passed the dog and then changed her mind. She pinched off the end of the baguette, tossed it at the dog, who swallowed the piece whole and wagged its' tail. "You are stupid *and* hopeful. You should've saved half of that bread for later."

Not a single leaf moved under the fierce and unrelenting sun when Ana arrived home. She put down her basket and sat under the welcome shade of her old mango tree, enjoying the sweet smell of ripened mangoes. She swatted at a fly, and watched a single file of ants march up the massive trunk, reminding her to pick the mangoes low enough for her to reach before bees, rats, and other bottom-feeding creatures claimed the ones in the tree and on the ground. Ana wiped the sweat from her forehead, and went in the house, disappointed to find the inside of the house was not much cooler. Most of her household items felt damp, but nothing had been damaged beyond repair. It was time to inspect the cracks in the wood walls and find something new to fill them. She removed the crumbled pieces of newspaper, soaked through from the last storm, and stuffed the holes with old rags, leaving a few small cracks bare for a breeze. She inspected a tiny mound of wood shavings on the floor boards, a sure sign of termites, and searched the crevices for the little beasts. Finding none, she moistened a rag with rubbing alcohol, a sure deterrent, and stuffed the rest of the cracks.

It was a miracle the locals of the Playa had survived the latest storm. *La Virgen* had spared them, and now it was time for Ana to think about adding a new *milagro*, a charm, to the little *crèche* to show her appreciation and continued devotion to the Virgin Mary and Yemayá. The crude doors Ana

had added to a wooden crate wobbled when she opened them to reveal the makeshift sanctuary that housed small plaster statues of Our Lady of Charity, the patroness of Cuba, and Our Lady of Regla, who Ana especially loved, as she was the only black Madonna Ana had ever seen. The humble sanctuary held the long history of her clients' prayer requests and answered prayers: a small silver charm in the shape of a foot for the healing of an injured ankle, a tin heart with an arrow through it for a returned love of long ago, and small locks of hair tied with now-faded ribbons given to her by clients from their children's first haircuts. Small medals depicting various saints lined the sides of the wooden crate along with several small crosses in tin and silver, and Ana's red precatory rosary, which hung from a small nail. With little space left on the walls of the *crèche*, the base of the crate glistened with religious relics like a carpet of silver and gold, memories of days gone by. Ana remembered most of the individual stories behind the amulets, and had become the keeper of the *milagros*. Often times, she bought an appropriate charm as a gift for clients with little money, and several mothers had asked Ana to keep the amulets for them because they believed she had special favor with God. If they knew I'd killed a man, they would never have asked, she thought.

The only *milagro* Ana owned was a wood charm in the shape of a half-moon her father had wrought for her. He'd shoved the charm in her hand before hiding her in the bowels of the steamer ship. "To remind you of Cuba," he'd said, "because I don't know where this boat is headed." She still remembered the sharp prick from the tip of the half-moon against the palm of her closed hand as she lay in wait, praying Yemayá would calm the seas, and that she might stop vomiting.

Ana gently ran her fingers over the cool plaster of the smaller statue, removing dust, and inspecting the figurine for damage from top to bottom. Our Lady of Charity's crown needed touching up, and there was a chip at the base of the statue, where three fishermen, eyes cast upward, sat in a small boat at the Virgin's feet, begging for protection against heavy seas in the cove. Ana had been protected during her voyage to Porto Rico, and continued her devotion with the hope that, in time, her penance would come to an end. Now it was time for the new mother, Serafina, to make her first addition to the *crèche*.

A few days before, Serafina had told of a disturbing dream she'd had,

where Ana's arm reached into Serafina's body in search of a baby that wasn't there. Ana had urged Serafina to buy a *milagro* in the shape of a black fist and swear her devotion to the Virgin Mary. Ana now bargained with Our Lady of Regla, for she'd dreamed of killing and eating a snake—a very bad omen for the future.

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# CHAPTER 6

## *Hundiendo en el Olvido ~ Drowning in Oblivion*

*Playa de Ponce, 1907*

**SERAFINA'S RED DRESS** hugged her youthful figure, cinched a small waist, and accentuated her full hips. With her hair pulled back in a white ribbon, she appeared much younger than her twenty-three years. After her parents and her mentor, Doña Milagro, Serafina was the kindest person Ana knew.

“Ana, tell me again how you cut your way out of that tobacco sack?”

“It was a coffee bean sack. ¡Ay *bendito*! I’ve been telling you that story for seven years, and you still get it wrong. Let me tell you how I became a midwife instead; I don’t think I’ve told you that tale.”

“I want to know everything, so start at the beginning and don’t leave anything out. Does this story have any romantic parts?”

Ana laughed heartily. “Believe me; this story has no romantic parts. There is nothing romantic about being a midwife.”

“It might not be a romantic story, but how wonderful to come and go as you please with no man telling you what to do.” The deep sincerity and earnestness in Serafina’s eyes warmed Ana’s heart, but she wanted to set the young woman straight—the life of a single woman was a tough road.

“Well, I can see how it must seem wonderful to you, but I get lonely, especially on Sundays when I see families together. It’s easier if I stay home or go out early in the day. Being a single woman isn’t as exciting as you think, Serafina. If I don’t work, I don’t eat, and when I’m lonely, there’s no one to speak to.” Ana saw the exact moment Serafina understood her words—the compassion showed in her eyes.

“Oh, Ana, I never thought of that. You have a family right here with us, and you can visit me any day of the week, including Sunday. Please don’t forget that.” Ana nodded her thanks. She knew Roberto wouldn’t be pleased with Serafina’s idea, but she smiled at the young woman’s sincere naiveté. “Listen, I know you’re visiting Amancia later, but...do you have time for a story? I never tire of your stories and the children love them, too.” That’s the young woman I know and love, thought Ana with a smile—Serafina loved nothing more than a story.

“I always have time for a tale,” Ana said, savoring the moment and basking in Serafina’s praise. “I love an enthusiastic audience. The children have grown so much this year. I can’t believe Lorena is seven.”

“I know and with a mind of her own! Did you know Lorena predicted Amancia would have a girl?” Ana smiled, reminded of what the medium, Doña Fela, had told Ana about Lorena’s psychic abilities coming to the forefront the closer she came to puberty. The caul waited, and Ana was dying to tell Serafina, but Fela had recommended keeping the caul secret until the time was right.

“You know, Lorena was affected by Amancia’s son’s death, and has worried the same thing will happen to the second baby.” Ana froze. Serafina continued, “I’ve told her the baby is fine, but she still worries and prays every night. Lorena is so impressionable.”

Ana swallowed hard. “When did she tell you that?”

“Actually, she mentioned it again just last night. I told Lorena you and Amancia will see to it that the baby grows big and strong.”

“Well, we will do our best.” Ana checked the time. It was too early to head to Amancia’s house, but she couldn’t shake Lorena’s words that hung in the air like a black shroud—was Lorena’s gift awakening? “Now, let’s see about that story. Where should I begin?” Ana lit a cigar and leaned back in the chair, not wanting to hear about Amancia’s baby. “I was twenty when I left Cuba and arrived in La Playa in the middle of the night. I snuck off the ship, and a woman directed me to the nearest church where the priests would help me. So that’s what I did. I went to the priests, right here at *Nuestra Señora del Carmen* parish. I knocked on their door with my skinny legs and nappy hair tied up in an old kerchief, smelling of vomit from the many storms during my voyage. I was a pitiful sight and happy to finally stand on solid ground. A young *padre* took one look at me and tried

shutting the door in my face, but I shoved my foot in the doorway before he could close it. Hurt like hell!”

“Was he handsome? I heard people call a handsome priest *Padre Que Pena*.”

“Why is that such a shame?” Ana chuckled, blowing smoke toward the open window.

“It’s a shame because all those good looks are wasted on priests since they can’t marry! Now, go on with your story,” Serafina said with a laugh.

“Believe me, that priest wasn’t handsome. He listened to my sad tale and offered me a tiny house at the back of the rectory. And they didn’t waste any time; I was immediately baptized,” Ana said with a grin. “My little house had a bed, a table, an oil lamp, and a chair. Oh, and a large crucifix above my bed to keep young, impressionable girls like me honest and scared,” she added, knowing humor always worked in distracting Serafina from probing into her sudden departure from Cuba. “I earned my keep by cooking and cleaning for the priests, which was lucky for me because food was hard to come by. Many went hungry in those days.”

Serafina pressed her lips together and nodded. “My parents told me about those lean times.”

“One day while I was out, the young priest snooped in my room and presented me with the divination shells I’d brought from Cuba. He seized my Yoruba prayer bracelets, bead necklace, and even though I was baptized, those priests tried to convert me. They prayed with me, forcing me to confess to sins I didn’t know I’d committed! They said my African ways were the devil’s tools, and when I’d finally had enough of their lectures, I pretended to repent. Even after I was, in their eyes, saved, those priests continued watching me, always looking for an excuse to throw me out.”

“Did they? Did the young priest catch you again?”

“One day I found the cowrie shells on my bed. I didn’t know who’d returned them or why. I hid the shells in my room and went to the kitchen to prepare the priest’s lunch. As I was serving the *almuerzo*, I heard yelling. I was given a few minutes to gather my belongings and was escorted off the property by the same young priest who’d found my things. I was accused of practicing witchcraft. He crossed himself, barely blessed me, and shut the rectory gate in my face.”

Serafina furrowed her brow and shook her head. “That’s so cruel. You were so young. What did you do?”

“I was young. Thankfully, it was early enough in the day for me to find a safe place to sleep before the sun went down. At first, I was confused; I had no idea the Church considered our Yoruba traditions black magic,” she said. “It is the religion of my ancestors.”

“But, you do believe in God y *la Virgen*?” asked Serafina, watching her closely.

“Yes, of course. I believe in God, the Virgin Mary, and all the Saints. We slaves had different names for them. My Yoruba traditions are now mixed with Catholicism from so many years in Porto Rico, and I pray to them all,” said Ana. “You know, I still remember the church bells ringing the day I was thrown out. I crossed the church grounds and looked up at the sky, watching the clouds around the church steeple. The white steeple looked gray that day, and suddenly, hundreds of *palomas* flew around the tower. So many doves, I could barely see the sky. I followed them across the street to the park to figure out my next step, and one dove landed on the marble bench where I sat. I thought it was the Holy Spirit!”

“Maybe it was, Doña Ana! You never know!”

“I doubt it, child,” Ana grinned. “It was a sign of something, but I didn’t know what. I sat on that bench all day long, paralyzed with fear. And that’s where I slept, right in front of the church where surely God would protect me. The next day, I met Doña Milagro, who taught me everything I know about being a midwife. She’d been a slave in Cuba, too.”

Serafina sighed and then smiled. “See, you were protected. Did you know you would become a midwife?”

“No, I didn’t. Doña Milagro took me in to wash and cook. I tended her garden, and we talked about healing with herbs, which we’d both learned from our mothers. One day, during a difficult birth, I assisted her and I must have done something right, because soon after that, Doña Milagro hired another girl to wash and cook. I became her assistant.”

“Well, we’re lucky to have you, Ana.”

“Thank you. I love my work.” Ana sat back in her chair, signaling the end of her story. She took out her pocket watch and checked the time. “It’s nearly time for me to check on Amancia’s baby,” she said, quickly taking the last sip of coffee before standing.



“Is the baby all right?” Serafina asked, walking Ana to the door.

“Yes, she seems fine, but I’m always vigilant with premature babies. When is Roberto due back?” asked Ana, looking at the dark clouds rolling in from the sea.

“He returns in another week or so. Roberto is working on the S.S. *Ponce* and they’re sailing back from *Nueva York*. Come and visit soon.”

“I’ll visit again before he returns.”

“Yes, please do. Goodbye, Ana.”

Ana always hoped a storm at sea would keep Roberto away. She crossed the yard to Amancia’s house, thinking how happy and carefree Serafina seemed when Roberto was away. Their home had good energy when he was sailing, not heavy like when he was home. Ana and Roberto had never seen eye to eye. He didn’t care for her and the feelings were mutual.

A solitary raindrop landed on Ana’s nose and the winds picked up. She wiped it away and looked at the rough waves with concern—the gods seemed restless. Ana said a quick prayer before knocking on the door. A distressed, young woman with dark circles under her eyes opened the door. “What’s the matter, Amancia?”

“It’s Preciosa, Doña Ana. She’s not crying.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come in, I’ll show you.” Amancia led Ana to a small cradle. “I’m so worried about her.”

Ana picked up the pale infant. “She has a fever, Amancia!” Preciosa looked at her with limpid eyes. Something *was* different. “Where’s the mosquito netting for the cradle?”

“We don’t own one,” Amancia replied. “We threw out the old one a month ago.”

“Amancia, you must get one to keep mosquitoes off you and the baby! She could have malaria. My God.” Ana handed the baby to Amancia, and set about inspecting the cradle and blanket for mosquitoes. There was nothing in the cradle or on the blankets, but there were several mosquito bites on the child’s legs and arms. Ana undressed Preciosa on a nearby cot and began an external examination.

“What’s wrong with her?” Amancia’s eyes darted between Ana and the baby.

“Other than these mosquito bites, I’m not sure yet.” Ana felt her pulse

quicken as she looked in the baby's ears and nose. She cleared Preciosa's nostrils with a bulb syringe, and took her temperature. "Her nose and ears seem clear, but her fever is high."

"She is two months old today, and there's been no infection, no fever."

"I hear what you're saying, but she appears to have one now," Ana said in a soothing voice. Amancia's firstborn, a son, had died shortly after his birth. She'd feared for this tiny little girl, born two months premature and weighing less than four pounds at birth. Preciosa's birth had been uncomplicated and uneventful, but even so, premature babies ran higher risks than full-term babies. Ana had been vigilant with the infant, visiting Amancia for two months, a month longer than her usual clients. Preciosa nursed well and had gained a bit of weight that week, but as Ana held the baby, she noticed the child was lethargic and her breathing was shallow. "Has she been eating well, Amancia?"

"Not since last night, and I've tried my best, believe me. I haven't slept a bit trying to get her to eat. She started vomiting this morning."

Ana looked inside her mouth, and was puzzled. There was no visible infection, no thrush. "I want to see her suckle." Ana handed Preciosa to her mother and watched the infant turn her head, repeatedly refusing the nipple. She noted beads of sweat on Amancia's top lip. "Relax yourself. She will sense if you're upset or stressed." Together, the women coaxed the fragile infant to suckle. Ana stroked the baby's hot cheek, waiting for Preciosa to turn her face toward her finger, but there was no reaction. Her large, dark eyes began to close and her little head went limp. Ana took the baby from Amancia and listened to the child's breathing. "It's too shallow!" Ana held her upside down by the ankles and tapped her bottom, hoping that this would jolt Preciosa into taking a deep breath.

"What are you doing? Why are you holding her like that? Don't hit her again!" wailed Amancia. Ana ignored the mother as her mind raced. She sat the baby up, massaged her back, and then placed her on the bed. She repeated the massages to Preciosa's chest and waited a few seconds before putting her ear to the baby's mouth. Ana tried again, and when the child's chest sank, Ana suppressed a gasp.

Amancia shrieked, "What's happening?"

"I don't know! Prepare a cold bath for her to lower the fever." When Ana picked up the baby, her small head fell to the side and her eyes closed.

“¡*Dios querido!* Dear Lord, help me!” Ana held the limp infant by the ankles and again spanked her bottom. When there was no reaction, Ana felt faint and Amancia screamed. Ana’s eyes stung as she could no longer hold back the tears. The rain beat down on the tin roof, and the light inside the house grew dim. “Please, Preciosa, breathe. Try!” Ana felt heaviness in her chest as she listened intently for signs of breathing. Seconds later, she realized the baby had stopped breathing and there was no pulse on the infant.

“No! Not another baby! I can’t lose another baby!” Amancia ran outside, yelling for her husband, Isidro.

There had been no time for camphor or healing recipes of herbs, flowers, and leaves. It was clear to Ana this was out of her hands. The infant was dead. She couldn’t believe it. “This can’t be,” she repeated over and over in a low voice. What had happened to this tiny girl who’d been fine the day before? Ana was dizzy. When Amancia and Isidro ran in, their clothes were soaked from the rain and their eyes were wild with fear. Ana’s knees felt weak. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered, lowering her head. “I couldn’t save her. I don’t know what happened.”

Amancia began to wail and pull at her hair like a mad woman. Ana desperately wanted to cover her ears against Amancia’s agonizing screams, but she stood immobile, remembering the screams of the women of her childhood on the sugar plantation. When Amancia collapsed into her husband’s arms, Isidro held her, shaking his head in disbelief; his eyes pleaded with Ana for answers she didn’t have. Ana kissed Preciosa’s cheek through her own tears. The baby looked peaceful in her arms, but the infant’s *ache*, life force, was no longer with her; it was time for the saints to collect her soul. Suddenly, Amancia snatched her limp daughter from Ana’s arms and pressed the child to her chest. She slumped to the floor as Ana stood by feeling helpless, not knowing what to do or say.

Amancia sobbed, “My baby, my baby.” Ana sat down and wrapped her arm around Amancia’s slight shoulder. Isidro bounced his head softly against the wall. Her heart broke for the young couple, but she was confused. Had the premature, undeveloped lungs caused Preciosa’s death, or had it been malaria? Ana hadn’t seen any signs of danger the previous week; she’d been so careful. Had Amancia done something wrong? It was unthinkable—two dead children in two years.

The air smelled of rain, and a sudden *aguacero* pounded the tin roof. Amancia yawned, exhaling her pain in a long moan. The familiar odors of death and decay permeated the small house, and the air felt thick and oppressive. Ana watched as the young mother checked her daughter for signs of life, and her heart broke. Someone touched Ana's shoulder. It was Amancia's husband. "Ana, you'd better get home before this storm gets any worse." She would never forget the kindness in his defeated eyes as he helped her up. Ana squeezed his forearm and left the house. There was nothing left to do; she was now an intruder.

That evening, Hurricane San Zacarias passed twenty miles from the south coast of Porto Rico with one hundred mile per hour winds and then moved northeast, causing the worst conditions on that side of the island. For the first time, Ana didn't care about her safety, her home, or her garden. She'd failed Amancia and Preciosa, and soon the priests and the insular police would question her about the child's death, as they always did when infants and children died. What would Ana say? Would they accuse her of wrong doing, and begin an investigation into Preciosa's death? Ana was terrified they would force her to write a statement and read it back.

In Ana's long career, she'd delivered one stillborn baby, and less than ten of her clients had suffered miscarriages. Two mothers had died of pleurisy fever, and now, two children died shortly after their births—both Amancia's children. She prayed the guilt rested on an infected mosquito feasting on the infant's blood and not on anything Amancia had done wrong. Ana shook her head, dismissing the negative thoughts from her mind. Amancia was a good mother. Ana concluded Preciosa had died of malaria; all the symptoms were there—high fever, loss of appetite, lethargy, and vomiting.

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# CHAPTER 7

## *El Intierro de Preciosa ~ Preciosa's Funeral*

**THE SKIES WERE GRAY** the following morning, matching Ana's mood. When the insular policeman arrived, Ana gave a brief oral account, from Amancia's pregnancy to Preciosa's short life, and signed the statement with her full name. She was relieved not to have been obligated to write the statement, as that would have taken her many sweat-inducing hours. Ana's signature had seemed enough for the policeman, who'd folded the paper and tucked it into his satchel. He'd said nothing more to her before leaving her home. Ana thanked her ancestors and the gods for their protection, praying this was the end of the situation.

An hour later, a gruff-mannered priest named Padre Vicénte arrived at Ana's home. "I will not close this case without definitive, medical answers that satisfy me and this police investigation," he said, sizing Ana up and down in the doorway. He was a middle-aged man with small, flinty eyes and a thin mustache that twitched when he spoke.

Ana stood tall on the front porch. "Welcome to my home. I would expect no less from you or the police department," she said, reminding the priest he was a guest in her home and that she was a professional. "I would also like to know the cause of the child's death." She wondered if the priest had been with the parish twenty years prior, as he looked vaguely familiar. Could he be the same priest who'd thrown her out of the rectory? Twenty years was a long time and she couldn't be sure.

At first, Padre Vicénte asked general questions about the couple's life in La Playa, which Ana answered to the best of her ability, and then he asked to see her certificate of midwifery. Her heart skipped a beat and she held her

breath for a few seconds. In as calm a voice as she could manage, she said, "The policeman took it with him, along with my signed statement." Even as the lie escaped Ana's lips, she couldn't stop it; there was no other way out at that moment.

The priest stroked his chin. "I see. Well then, tell me exactly what happened." Ana relayed the events leading up to Preciosa's death in as much detail as she could remember, hoping he would forget about the certificate.

"You can read my statement; the police have already come."

"I will do just that," he replied, writing something in a small, black book before taking his leave. Ana's hands trembled as she locked the door and closed the curtains. What had she done? They would not find her certificate because there wasn't one. It was too late to worry now. She'd lied to get rid of him, but surely the police would return with more questions and accusations. What had the priest written in the little book?

Ana took a shot of rum, lit a cigar, and thought of the worst thing that could come of the situation: she would no longer practice midwifery. The thought wasn't comforting, but it wasn't likely they would put her in jail for practicing without a certificate...or would they?

Through her small kitchen window, Ana watched Isidro in the yard, slowing picking up storm debris, and then she spotted Amancia at the window of her house, looking out to sea. Although Ana worried the couple might blame her for Preciosa's death, she knew the pain of losing a child. She would give the couple time to grieve. Despite the lack of evidence of abuse on the infant's body and Ana's wish for Amancia's innocence, Ana knew she must watch the couple during the burial process and the funeral to be sure. It was possible Preciosa had simply died. But would this couple turn on Ana and blame her with suggestions from the police or the priest?

Early the following morning, Isidro was at Ana's door. Her chest tightened at the sight of his bloodshot eyes; the weary eyes of a man who'd lost hope and his way. In anticipation of his possible wrath over the death of his daughter, Ana stiffened her body. Before Ana could speak, Isidro said, "Amancia needs you." When Ana didn't answer right away, he added, "I mean Amancia needs your help preparing Preciosa for the funeral."

"Of course, of course; let me get my bag. I'll be there shortly." Ana was relieved Amancia had called for her, but her stomach was still a ball of

nerves. She'd known of a mother who hadn't allowed anyone to touch her son after he died, forcing the police to remove the boy's body when it began to decompose. Ana didn't know what to expect at Amancia's house and gathered her strength for what might come. She walked through her muddy, little kitchen garden, picking a handful of mud-soaked mint leaves and several raggedy-looking jasmine blossoms the hurricane hadn't claimed. She snapped off a hibiscus bloom to place on the coffin, and removed her shoes before entering Amancia's house. Doña Milagro had instructed Ana in proper burial procedures, and while Ana's whole being screamed it was wrong for a child to die, it had happened...again.

From where Ana stood, the baby's skin looked ashen and her lips were grayish blue. Amancia wore the same clothes she'd worn on the day of Preciosa's death, and her bloodshot eyes matched those of her husband. She gave Ana a weak smile. "Thank you for coming, Doña Ana. I'm happy you're safe."

The women greeted each other with a kiss on the cheek, and Amancia began to cry. "Ay, *bendito*, Amancia, I'm so sorry." Amancia's body shuddered under Ana's embrace.

"No one else would do. I know you tried your best, Ana."

Despite the kindness in Amancia's voice, Ana was alert for any sign of blame. "I am still shocked," she replied evenly, hoping her voice sounded much warmer than it sounded to her ears. "I don't understand what could have happened."

"Don't you think Preciosa died of malaria?" It was a dangerous question, thought Ana, but she knew she had to respond.

"I'm not quite sure yet, Amancia. Shall we bathe Preciosa?"

"Well, our Preciosa wasn't for this world." Ana didn't understand the statement and remained silent, hoping Amancia would explain. Instead, she said, "There is warm water in the kitchen." Ana made her way to the kitchen, confused as to what Amancia meant by her comment. She returned with a pot of warm water and added the blossoms, mint leaves, and several drops of *Agua Florída* cologne.

"May I take her?" Amancia seemed lost as she handed the baby to Ana. "I will give Preciosa back to you when I finish bathing her," Ana said, wanting to include the mother as much as possible.

"I know my daughter is in the best of hands with you, Doña Ana."



Amancia sighed deeply.

“I’m glad you think so.” Ana undressed Preciosa, finding it difficult to look at the baby’s face as she bathed the tiny body with the fragrant water.

“I do. You were with Preciosa when she took her first breath and her last.” Seeing Amancia gaze at her daughter softened Ana’s heart. She reminded herself to observe and reserve judgment. Let the final decision fall on the police, she thought. “You are very fortunate she chose you as her mother, Amancia. I’m honored to have known this delicate little soul, if only for a short while.”

Amancia’s lower lip trembled and she blinked to clear away the tears. Ana wondered if she was memorizing her daughter’s face as she had once done with her own child. Ana sniffed back her tears.

“None of us understand death, but we believe Preciosa is in a better place,” Amancia said in a soft voice. Ana presumed “we” referred to Amancia and her husband. In a room thick with grief and suffering, Ana wasn’t sure she believed the mother’s words. She sensed the need to be careful with the couple, as she still feared future accusations laced with grief that could later be directed at her.

“Yes, I can believe that.”

“Why, Doña Ana, why did my children have to die?”

“It is not for us to know the reason.” Ana sighed deeply, hearing the rising anguish in Amancia’s voice. “I don’t know why.” She felt Amancia would take this up with God very soon.

Ana dressed the baby in the white, hand-stitched gown she’d worn at her christening—now her funeral gown. With great care and conscious of offering support to Preciosa’s head, Ana helped Amancia place a salmon-colored, tatted bonnet on the child, and then looked on as the grieving mother tied the thin white ribbons into a small bow under the miniature chin. Preciosa looked like a beautiful porcelain doll; so much so, Ana half-expected her to open her almond-shaped eyes. Isidro gently led Amancia to the front room, and Ana followed, looking around the humble house, now prepared for visitors. Six mismatched wood chairs and a wooden bench lined two walls of the room with the small, wooden casket sitting on a low table in the middle of the room. Someone had thought to open the windows to catch the breeze, which would be welcome when the mourners started filling the small house. Outside, a man shooed away the *limpiabotas*, the

shoeshine boys, pestering the mourners about having their shoes shined for the big day. Such disrespectful children, thought Ana, and then she changed her mind—everyone had to make a living.

Padre Vicénte did not bother removing his muddy shoes before entering the house. He nodded at Ana and her body tensed. How could she find out how long he'd been with the parish? Nothing about the priest's expression or demeanor suggested he remembered Ana when he asked for Isidro and she pointed to the bedroom. Padre Vicénte tracked mud through the house toward Isidro, who genuflected, kissed the priest's offered ring, and spoke in hushed tones with the priest. Padre Vicénte made the sign of the cross over Isidro's head, and Ana wondered why the priest hadn't stopped to give his condolences to Amancia first. And why had he ignored the fact that Preciosa, the reason he'd been summoned, lay dead in her mother's arms? When the priest came out of the couple's bedroom stuffing dollars into the pocket of his cassock, Ana understood—death wasn't free, even for the most pious of parishioners such as Amancia and Isidro. Ana's concession about the boys making a living didn't extend to the man of God.

Amancia gingerly lowered her daughter into the small coffin and laced a miniature, white, beaded rosary between the child's delicate fingers. She kissed Preciosa's mouth and placed a single crimson hibiscus on her daughter's chest. Ana sat quietly, thankful she hadn't remembered the hibiscus she'd selected for the coffin; it wasn't her place. Ana whispered a Yoruba prayer, and when she looked up, the priest's stare bore through her. Amancia sang a church hymn while Padre Vicénte rearranged his white gown and black cassock and ran his fingers through greased, black hair like a primping rooster ready to crow. The priest caught Isidro's eye and nodded for him to open the front door for the mourners, then held up his hand. Ana felt her heart skip a beat and her mouth went dry when the priest approached her.

"I offer my deepest condolences to you and Isidro. This is a sad day, indeed," said the priest. He shook hands with Amancia and directed his gaze at Ana, who sat as still as death.

"Thank you for coming, Padre. This is Doña Ana, my midwife. She was with me when my angel took her last breath. We owe her much gratitude."

The priest cocked his head. "Ah, yes. We met yesterday. Where are you from, Doña?"

Ana pressed her lips together and held his gaze, "I'm originally from Cuba, but I have lived in Porto Rico for many years." She paused. "Why do you ask?" She dared him to remember the old days if he was among the priests who'd thrown her out of the rectory.

"Your eyes remind me of someone. I meant to ask you yesterday." He was abruptly interrupted by the first guests, whom Ana recognized as the immediate family. Padre Vicénte turned away from Ana and flashed a dazzling smile at the family members entering the home, dressed in mourning clothes. *Hipócrita*, she thought, he's putting out his odors of sanctity for all to see. The priest surprised Ana by turning back to her. "Many years ago, we had a young Cuban girl working for us. You remind me of her."

It was him. As Ana's anger rose, she knew then the priest would be the cause of her future problems, and possibly the reason she'd never practice midwifery again. There was no doubt in her mind he remembered her and would never let her go. Ana had worked too hard in her life to see it all snatched away by a man of God who preached of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness, and had shown her none when she'd needed help. Ana clenched her jaw and fought back tears, instantly wanting to flee, but a large crowd blocked the front door. The family quietly entered the house until they reached Amancia and her husband. They kissed the grieving couple on the cheek, and each gave their *pésame* in low voices; some offered their sympathies between tears. Friends and neighbors then entered. Ana's attention rested on an older, heavyset woman with a jutting chin, whispering in Amancia's ear. People leaned out of the line, wondering what was taking so long, and Ana shook her head, hoping they saw her disdain. People were impatient, even at a funeral. A woman in line hissed, "Heaven preserve us; how well can you know a two-month old baby?"

The heavyset woman continued her *pésame* to Amancia until Ana leaned forward, touched the woman's arm, and pointed to the growing line of mourners behind her. "Thank you for coming," she whispered, encouraging the woman to move along. A steady stream of family and friends marched in and out of the small house for what seemed like an eternity, while Ana fought to stay awake. When it was time to leave for the cemetery, Isidro and his brothers carried the small coffin down the muddy street, followed close behind by Amancia and her mother, and the immediate family. Ana

remained at the rear of the small procession led by Padre Vicénte to Preciosa's final resting place and where Amancia's firstborn, a son, was buried. A handful of people lined the street on that hot day. Men removed their hats and lowered their heads as a sign of respect, and women made the sign of the cross or genuflected quickly as the funeral procession passed by. Ana felt sure the onlookers would hug their children tighter that evening.

When the procession approached the cemetery, Ana smelled the perfumed scent of flowers and knew Preciosa's soul was near. Unnoticed, Ana slipped out of the procession just before the group entered the cemetery. Like her ancestors, she believed the dead belonged in their realm and the living in theirs. Ana never entered cemeteries, or lingered at the site of an accident or in hospitals. She believed that bad *egún*, spirits, lived in those places, to include the souls of criminals, the mentally insane, and those who'd suffered violent deaths. Their spirits were trapped in this world, looking for a human to latch onto, and Ana wouldn't give them the opportunity to find her. She thought it best to leave the funeral procession before Padre Vicente cornered her after the funeral with remarks and questions her about "African witchcraft practices", as he'd put it so long ago.

Instead of feeling relieved to be away from the cemetery and Padre Vicente, Ana felt guilty as she opened the door to her home. She questioned whether she should have remained at the cemetery with the parents to show her support, but taking a chance on another encounter with the priest wasn't wise. Ana struck a wood match and lit a candle for Preciosa's soul, asking Oyá to welcome Preciosa with open arms, and allow the child to enter the kingdom of the underworld. It was Friday, Oyá's special day, how appropriate, thought Ana. She lit a third candle for her unborn child—the sacrifice the spirits had demanded of Ana to fulfill her *camino*, the path of her life.

On that hot, humid day, the day of Preciosa's funeral, Ana wasn't sure if her life's work had been worth the sacrifice of losing her child.

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## CHAPTER 8

### *Vaya Con Dios y la Virgen María ~ Go with God and the Virgin Mary*

**ON THE FINAL DAY OF AMANCIA'S TRIAL**, the United States Provisional Court hadn't seen such crowds since the jury trial of Izcoa Díaz, editor of the anti-American newspaper, *La Bomba*, in 1899. All of Ponce seemed to have turned out to catch a glimpse of the young mother charged with killing her infant daughter. The crowd spilled out into the hallway and out the door of the courthouse. The burning questions on everyone's minds were whether Amancia was guilty of killing her two children, and if so, why she'd committed such a heinous crime. The newspapers kept up with the headlining case, and the popular consensus in the city was that Amancia was innocent. The legal pundits argued that the prosecuting attorney, calling for Amancia's prison sentence, did not have enough hard evidence to lock her away. Padre Vicénte, the parish priest of La Playa, who had testified the day before, added fuel to the prosecution's burning argument—how could a woman lose two children in two years? Ana had gasped softly when she'd heard his question, and was then embarrassed. She'd thought the very same thing when Preciosa died.

“Maternal infanticide is virtually unheard of here, but we find this child's death increasingly suspicious,” the prosecutor had argued.

The priest had nodded severely in the direction of the judge. Then he glared at Amancia, who'd hung her head and suddenly cried out, “I'm innocent, Padre! You know me! I'm not a murderer!” The crowd went wild jeering, clapping, and most of the women in the courtroom shouted support for Amancia. Ana feared her own testimony, supposedly the last of the trial,

would be the defining testimony that day. She believed the crowds were as dangerous as a mongoose tracking a snake, and were easily swayed in either direction—they would crucify Amancia as easily as embrace her, for their own reasons and motivations.

Like most of the locals of La Playa that Ana recognized in the courtroom, she and Serafina had walked to the city center of Ponce every day to attend the hearings, and today Ana was testifying on Amancia's behalf. Before the trial began, Serafina had coached Ana on what to say and what to leave out, as her brother had been on trial once for stealing money from his employer, making Serafina an expert in Ana's eyes.

Ana pulled at the collar of her borrowed dress as she looked around the crowded courtroom, trying to guess what the onlookers were thinking. A pretty woman around Amancia's age sat quietly, looking nervously to the side, and the man to her side stroked his full beard and mustache, trying to catch the young woman's eye to no avail. Newspapermen filled a majority of the seats that day, trying to make sure their story was printed before the others. Well-turned-out men and women of high society sat or stood next to washerwomen, road sweepers, and street venders, all hoping to hear the gruesome details of the infanticide case. This congregation gathered only during scandalous trials and in church on high holy days, thought Ana.

The jurors entered the courtroom in single file toward their appointed seats, and when the last juror took his seat, Ana looked toward the door, waiting for the women to enter. It hadn't occurred to Ana there would be no women on the jury. Amancia didn't stand a chance with a jury of white males, she thought. "No women?"

"No. God help Amancia," Serafina whispered back. Ana glanced at the judge's bench and spotted the American flag. How could this possibly be a fair trial by Amancia's peers? When the portly judge made his appearance, those who were seated rose to hear the bailiff read the case number. The judge ordered the defense attorney to proceed, and then Ana's name was called. Serafina squeezed her arm. "You'll do fine, Ana. Go on, just tell the truth." Ana very much wanted to tell Serafina why she was afraid, but she didn't know herself.

The judge with gray muttonchops looked at Ana over his spectacles as she approached the bench. She swore on the Bible to tell the truth and sat quietly, shredding a small piece of paper until the young lawyer spoke.

“Madam, please tell this court your name, address, your marital status, and your occupation.” Kindness and warmth emanated from the lawyer’s face. Ana liked him right away. She gathered the tiny pieces of paper off her lap and held them in one hand before speaking.

“My name is Ana Belén. I am not married, and I live on *Calle Moreno* in *Barrio Playa*. I’ve been a midwife for over twenty years.”

“Do you practice only in *Barrio Playa*?”

“These days, yes, but I’ve had clients in Ponce, too.”

“How many babies have you delivered in over twenty years?”

“Oh my, I couldn’t say for sure; maybe five hundred, possibly a little more?”

“That’s a long career and a great many children. Ponce thanks you.” Ana smiled at the lawyer’s compliment, thankful he didn’t mention Doña Milagro’s client ledger that she had yet to finish filling out. Ana searched the crowd for Serafina and was comforted by her friend’s warm smile.

“How long have you known the defendant, Amancia López, and what is your relationship to her?”

“I’ve known Amancia since she was a young girl. Her mother was a client, and I was Amancia’s attending midwife. I delivered both her children.”

“Let’s focus on Preciosa. Did Señora López have any complications or illnesses before or during her pregnancy, and after Preciosa’s birth?”

“No, Señora López was healthy. The only complication was that she gave birth to another premature baby.”

“How long did the son, her first child, live before he died?”

Ana tensed, praying her answer wouldn’t fuel the prosecutor’s accusation. “He died two months after his birth, from breathing problems.”

Someone yelled from the back of the courtroom, “Dead at two months like his sister!” The judge with the bushy white eyebrows slammed the gavel on the desk, calling for order. When not a sound was heard, he motioned for Ana to continue.

“His lungs weren’t fully formed at birth, which is common with premature babies. Shortly after his birth, it was evident he’d have problems with asthma or something related.”

“Could Preciosa have had the same complications?”

“Yes. On the day Preciosa died, I noticed the baby’s breathing was



shallow. She tried very hard to breathe comfortably and in the end... couldn't."

A hush came over the crowd. Amancia stood and yelled, "I did nothing wrong!" Her eyes were wild with fear as she looked around the courtroom. "Tell them, Ana! I did nothing wrong," she sobbed. Ana, visibly shaken, reached into the pocket of her dress and dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. The crowd was silent; even the jeerers seemed to hold their breath.

The lawyer's voice was firm, yet warm as he asked Ana, "Were there any signs of shallow breathing, or illness before Preciosa died?"

"I visited Amancia and the baby every day for a month. I saw nothing out of the ordinary or wrong with the baby during that time, but I decided to continue visiting them twice a week for an additional month. In that time the child seemed fine, but with premature babies, we must be vigilant, especially with the lungs."

"What medical procedures did you attempt with Preciosa as she struggled to breathe?"

"When the child went limp, I held her by her ankles and swatted her bottom, looking for a reaction, any reaction. I tried that twice, Señor; it didn't help. I massaged her chest and back, but Preciosa closed her eyes for the last time in my arms." Ana wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Amancia was a good mother to both her children." Someone in the crowd snickered.

"Señorita Belén, do you think Amancia López killed her infant daughter, Preciosa?"

"No sir, I do not. Amancia did not kill either of her children. She simply had problems carrying a child to term." Loud murmurs and furious whispering teemed in the courtroom. The judge pounded the gavel, ordering the crowd to be silent.

"That is all I have, Your Honor."

Ana stood to step down from the bench and the judge stopped her with a raised hand. "Madam, you must remain seated until the cross-examination." Ana put her hand to her mouth and took her seat. She wasn't sure what the term meant, but deduced it was the prosecutor's turn to ask his questions. A thin man with piercing, brown eyes and thick, dark eyebrows approached her. His nose was sharp and pointed, never a good sign to Ana, who feared his questions would be as sharp and pointed. Her heart pounded in her chest

as he placed his hands on the wood railing of the bench where she sat and studied her like a cat studying its prey.

“Ana Belén, my name is Miguel Del Toro. I believe with every cell in my body that Amancia López is guilty of murdering her daughter...and her son.” Ana gasped softly and then inhaled deeply before exhaling through her nose. The noise in the courtroom erupted, this time not easily subdued by the judge.

The judge banged the gavel down several times. “If I so much as hear one peep from anyone in this courtroom, I will close these proceedings to the public! Do I make myself clear?” When the crowd was quiet, the judge motioned for the prosecutor to continue.

“I believe you are a good midwife with an exemplary record; a credit to La Playa, Señorita,” Del Toro began. “It is my belief the infant Preciosa was poisoned. She was poisoned slowly over the course of two months by her mother, Amancia López.” The prosecutor produced a small, brown vial from the pocket of his suit jacket, and showed it to Ana. There was a long word written on the white label, followed by an equally long word. Ana tried sounding out the letters in her head, but couldn’t figure out what it said.

The defense lawyer spoke up, “I protest, Your Honor! That vial hasn’t been introduced as evidence!”

“This isn’t evidence, Your Honor,” said Del Toro, facing the judge, “I simply have a question for Señorita Belén.”

“I’ll allow one question if you feel it is relevant,” the judge said, arching an unruly eyebrow at Del Toro.

“Have you ever seen a bottle like this in the López home?” Ana looked at the vial again and shook her head. “Do you know what’s in this bottle, Señorita?”

A myriad of questions flooded Ana’s brain all at once. Was this a trick by the prosecutor? What was in the bottle? Was it poison? Could that have been what killed Preciosa? She’d never seen a bottle like that. “No, I don’t know what that is.”

The lawyer came close enough for Ana to smell his foul breath. Del Toro frowned and seemed confused. He was silent for a moment, and when Ana didn’t respond, he asked, “Ana Belén, can you read?”

Ana lowered her head and felt dizzy. When she didn’t answer the

prosecutor's question, the judge said, "Madam, you must answer the question." Ana had known in her gut Padre Vicénte would be her undoing, and here it was—the end of her career as a midwife. The priest must have gone to the police, and pointed his finger at Ana when they discovered there was no certificate with Ana's name on it.

She opened her mouth to speak when the defense lawyer shouted, "Objection, Your Honor! The name of that drug or medicine could be in Latin. Not many lay people can read Latin!" The lawyer showed the bottle to the judge, who nodded.

"Objection overruled. Señorita Belén must answer the question to the best of her ability."

Ana searched for Serafina in the crowd; the pain and anguish on Serafina's face matched her own. "No, I can't read that. I read well, but I don't know what the label says," Ana said without looking at the bottle. She crossed her legs at the ankle and pressed them together.

"You are the last witness in an important murder trial! How do you know Señora López didn't kill her children if you can't read this label? This could be the drug that killed them."

"I said I can read," Ana said through clenched teeth. "I just never saw such a vial in their home."

"Never, Senorita?"

"No, Señor. I never saw a bottle like that in their home." The onlookers began shouting again, jeering Amancia and Ana.

"There will be order in this court!" The judge paused before continuing. "Señor Del Toro, that's enough with this line of questioning. Have you any more questions for Señorita Belén before I ask her to step down?"

"Yes, I have one more question, Your Honor. Have you passed the midwifery examination, and are you licensed to practice in the city of Ponce, Doña?"

The young defense attorney threw up his hands. "Objection, Your Honor! Ana Belén is not on trial here today!"

Ana's mind raced, and she couldn't think clearly. Would the prosecutor ask if she'd killed the overseer in Cuba? Did they somehow know? Would she be on trial for murder? Thoughts of rotting in a jail cell terrified Ana. She swallowed several times and made her decision. "I will answer Señor Del Toro's question." In Ana's mind, this confession was the lesser of two

evils; she would lead the prosecutor away from Amancia and from her past. “No, I have not passed the examination. I’ve been studying for years and despite bringing more than five hundred babies into this world, I haven’t passed it. I am to take the examination again very soon, and feel confident I shall pass it.”

“Well, if Amancia López didn’t kill her son and daughter,” Del Toro said, and then paused before continuing. “The premature infants might have survived if they’d been born at the hospital where doctors and nurses know how to keep them alive. Women in the audience, take heed! You use midwives at your own peril.” The prosecutor leaned in. “Ana Belén, I will personally make sure you don’t practice again until you pass that examination.”

Ana held her head high and glared at Del Toro. She heard the rusty nail hammered deep into her coffin that day, but wouldn’t give the prosecutor the pleasure and satisfaction of seeing her squirm. Ana felt confident Del Toro didn’t have enough evidence to put Amancia in prison. His anger over possibly losing the landmark case because of Ana’s testimony was palpable. Would Del Toro make sure Ana never practiced again? Would the judge set Amancia free and accuse Ana of murdering Preciosa?

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# CHAPTER 9

## *La Sagrada Familia ~ The Holy Family*

**SERAFINA THOUGHT BACK** to Ana's words after the trial and hoped they would not become prophetic words. Ana had worried that if Amancia fell pregnant again and lost a subsequent child, the law, with the help of the Church, would put Amancia away for life without a trial. Serafina prayed no harm would befall her children, Lorena and Mateo, for fear of what Roberto might do to her, as he'd believed in Amancia's guilt from the beginning. Serafina had been surprised at Roberto's conviction and lack of compassion for Amancia. And despite describing Isidro's unfailing and constant support of his wife throughout the trial, Roberto was not swayed. Serafina had reminded Roberto the jury had found Amancia innocent of killing her child, thanks in large part, to Ana's testimony.

Serafina was proud of Ana for bravely standing up for Amancia after the lawyer's scathing account of how she'd poisoned her children. Not many people possessed Ana's strength of character and integrity, but Serafina was heartbroken the trial had been Ana's undoing. Numerous newspaper articles had been written about the trial since Amancia's arrest, and a number of articles published after the trial. It seemed Ponce couldn't get enough of the trial. Editorials were written by society women urging all women to forego using midwives, and early feminists called for moving black workingwomen from Ponce, saying the 'loose women' were a threat to marriages and families. Ana had been inconsolable.

A month later, neighbors still stared and whispered when Amancia passed by, as they did for Ana. The gossip broke Serafina's heart, and she prayed with time, people would leave Ana and the young couple alone. Ana

worried incessantly she would never practice again because she couldn't pass the examination. How would Ana survive now with no work? She was a single woman with no man to support her. The thought frightened Serafina. She would support Ana as a friend and offer her money if she needed it—Roberto's money—and he would be difficult about parting with it. Ana had to pass the examination.

Serafina lay in bed, listening to Amancia's favorite rooster trying out a variety of calls. She winced and then smiled at his attempt to rouse the neighborhood—he had the time right, but not the call. The rooster attempted a new call and she chuckled. "Maybe he needs a few more lessons, ah, Roberto?" When Roberto didn't answer, she rolled over, and saw he'd left the bed, after a night of coughing and keeping them both awake. Thinking he might have slept in the hammock on the front porch, she checked on Lorena and Mateo, who slept soundly, and padded through the house searching for Roberto. She found him outside, vomiting into a wood barrel.

"I'm so sick," Roberto said, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "No sooner does the coughing ease and I'm vomiting again. I don't know what's wrong with me." Serafina stood at his side, holding his forehead as he vomited again. He pushed away from the barrel and faced her. Serafina covered her mouth.

"Roberto, there's blood on your mouth and hands!" He examined his hands for cuts and finding nothing, wiped his mouth again.

"My God, it is blood." Serafina hugged him and began to cry.

"Stop crying, Serafina. Let me think." He pried her arms off his waist.

"The cough is deep, Roberto. And the blood! Go to the doctor."

"Yes, I need to see him," he said, rushing toward the house.

Serafina followed close behind. "Are you going now? Should I go with you?"

"No, no. You stay here with the children. They're still sleeping. I'll be back soon."

When Roberto left, Serafina walked to the back of their house and faced the ocean. An enormous emptiness invaded her heart and she was afraid. "I have two children, God. Surely you know Roberto is needed here," she said. "Not this, I beg you." She wiped her eyes and nose with the back of her hand. *Ana*. She would know what to do about this sudden turn of bad

luck. Had one of the neighbors cast a *mal de ojo* on her family? It was unthinkable anyone would be jealous of them, thought Serafina. She hardly left the house and her only visitors were Ana and Amancia. Who would put a curse on them? Ana had said that constant negative thoughts about a person could bring all types of bad luck, and this worried Serafina. She wiped her eyes and turned for home. Ana would know which saint would intercede for Roberto.

Before entering the house, Serafina noticed dirt on her feet and on the hem of her dress. She took a rag off the porch railing and backed down the steps, wiping as she went. She went to the steel drum they kept in the yard for collecting rainwater, and thought she heard her children's voices. Serafina stood listening and when she was satisfied the house was quiet, she pried open the lid of the steel drum. The ripples in the water distorted her face, and as the water stilled, her reflection became clearer. The sun came up and cast a beautiful light on the water, causing her reflection to glow like a sign of hope. She eased in a tin cup, enjoying how the water flooded in, and then threw the water on her feet. She slipped into her sandals before entering the house and tip toed to the children's sleeping area. The sight of Lorena and Mateo huddled like spoons in a drawer, oblivious to the heat, eased her frightened heart. The rolled-up blanket Lorena always placed between her and her brother before falling asleep, preferring not to touch his sweaty body, had fallen to the floor. What would she do with two young children if Roberto died?

Serafina closed the curtain, stripped off her nightgown, and placed it in the porcelain bowl. She gripped the pitcher and poured water over her nightgown, watching the particles of mud separate from the fabric in tiny clumps, seemingly repelled by the water. Fear gripped her once again and she closed her eyes, trying hard not to think about the blood. The call of the newspaper boy jolted her back to the present. It was time to call for Ana.



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# CHAPTER 10

## *Los Rumores Alimentan Miedo ~ Rumors Feed Fear*

**ANA PACKED HER MEDICAL BOOKS,** pencils, and paper in the leather satchel, preparing to visit Serafina for another study session. The women had worked many long hours to prepare Ana for the midwifery examination to be given later that week, and Ana prayed hard she would pass as she'd already failed the written portion of the test twice before. Failing again meant she'd be forced to wait until the following year to retake it and that wasn't an option. Ana felt more prepared and hoped it would be the same exam she'd practically memorized. She missed working with clients and was anxious to recover her role as midwife to the Playa community. Ana closed the door of her house, and when she turned around, a young boy stood in the street facing her house, squinting against the morning sun.

"Doña Belén?"

"Yes, what is it?" Ana motioned for the boy to approach and get out of the sun.

"Señora Lugo has called for you."

"Señora Lugo, the one from town?"

"Yes."

Ana was surprised. "What happened? Why is she calling for me?"

"Her daughter is having a baby and she told me to fetch you. The doctor needs your help."

"Doctor? What doctor needs my help? What are you talking about, boy?"

"I don't know the doctor's name, but he's having problems; that's all I know. She told me to tell you that they're sending a coach for you right

away.”

“You’re sure about this? They asked you to fetch me?”

The boy nodded. “Yes, I’m sure. The coach should be here any minute.”

“They didn’t say why?” The boy shrugged. There was no sense in pressing the boy for more information he didn’t have. “Wait here, boy.” Ana ran inside and reappeared with a handwritten note. “Take this to Señora Serafina Martínez. She lives just down the street at house number seven.” She handed the boy a penny and watched him run down the street toward Serafina’s house. Serafina would understand that she couldn’t pass up a job, especially one with a wealthy client who’d probably pay double for the emergency nature of the delivery.

Ana knew the society family had the means for their daughter to give birth at Hospital Trichoche—why were they calling for her? She couldn’t imagine why a doctor needed her assistance, but the thought excited her. Just as the boy had said, the well-to-do family sent a coach for Ana, leaving her with many unanswered questions during her ride to town. What could have happened? Ana’s self-confidence had been badly shaken after Preciosa’s death, and it had taken her months to recover despite understanding there was nothing more she could have done, but Ana couldn’t face another failure. As the coach entered *el pueblo*, the downtown area, the realization of what was happening hit Ana like a lightning bolt. She couldn’t be involved in a birth! What if the police found out she was practicing without a certificate again? What if the baby died? No, no, no. She couldn’t go. She pounded on the interior window of the coach to get the driver’s attention as her own heart beat out of her chest. He stopped the coach at Ana’s insistence, and when he peered into the cabin of the coach, Ana urged, “Take me back home. I can’t go!”

“What? Doña, what are you saying? I’m to take you to the house immediately.”

“You don’t understand, Señor! I can’t be anywhere near a birth. I had to pay a fine, and promised not to practice.”

“This is urgent! Señora Lugo’s daughter and grandchild will die if we don’t get there quickly.” Ana cursed under her breath and wrung her hands. It was an impossible situation. She knew if she didn’t go and the child died, she would be accused. And if she assisted in a botched delivery and the child died, she would be accused. There was no way out.

“*Carajo*, let’s go then!” Back on the road, Ana wished she’d lied to the messenger about a prior commitment, but it was too late. She moaned. “God, what are you doing to me? You know I shouldn’t be there!” She invoked the goddesses Yemayá and Oshún to help her. As she nervously fingered the Regla pebbles in her pocket, Ana prayed that *orí*, grace, was with her and flowing. The *cochero* stopped the coach in front of a large, gray house, the color of the sea on a rainy day. Ana stepped out of the coach and walked up the steps to an expansive porch with white window boxes overflowing with hot pink *trinitaria* flowers hanging from a white wrought rail that encircled the porch. A young, black girl in a white pinafore answered the door and escorted Ana through an immense tiled foyer, up a grand mahogany staircase, and into a dark bedroom. The maid seemed to disappear in the shadows and Ana felt disoriented in the dim light. When her eyes adjusted, she saw a young man sunk deep in a leather armchair, covering his eyes with one hand. An older woman, who Ana knew as Señora Lugo, elegantly dressed in black from head to toe, knelt at the bedside of a deathly pale, young woman, whom Ana assumed was her daughter. The young woman lay in the largest canopy bed Ana had ever seen.

Ana’s immediate reaction to the scene was one of dread. *Dios Santo*, was she too late? What had happened? Ana made the sign of the cross and approached the man in the chair. She touched his shoulder and when he looked up, Ana recognized him as the young doctor she’d seen around La Playa on several occasions. She’d heard the rumors that he continued to discourage families from using the services of midwives, and if the rumors were true, why had he called for her? Male doctors had entered the birthing room for the first time; moving in favor of hiring nurses and forcing midwives out. What was going on? Then Ana remembered seeing him at Amancia’s trial. Did he recognize her?

He stood and shook her hand. “Doña Ana. I’m happy to see you.” He knew her name. “I’m Doctór Rivera.”

“I know who you are, Doctór.”

As Ana waited for him to tell her why she’d been called, Señora Lugo rushed to Ana. “Please save my daughter; don’t let her die! She’s a good girl—she doesn’t deserve to die!”

“Madam, no one deserves to die,” Ana replied, quite confused. She

looked back at the doctor. “You sent for me?” The woman interrupted again.

“God is punishing my daughter! Elena is not married and that is why this is happening!” said the old woman, taking Ana’s hands in hers. “¡Ayúdala, help her, please!”

“Señora, God and I don’t care if your daughter is married or not. Please give me a moment.” Ana turned back to the doctor, who’d returned to the leather arm chair. “What has happened here, Doctor?” He was silent. Ana raised her voice a bit, “Is this Elena’s first birth?” Finally, the doctor looked up with vacant eyes and nodded slowly. The air was heavy with the sour, metallic smell of blood. The young woman’s pallid face was in stark contrast to the darkness of the bedroom. Doctor Rivera pursed his lips and looked at his feet. Ana searched around the bed for clues, and spotted the blood-stained sheets under the bed. She quickly surmised things had indeed gone wrong, but she didn’t know exactly how.

Tired of waiting for answers and not caring how demanding she sounded, Ana shouted, “*Anda pa’l carajo*, was a child born here or not? From the looks of the bloody sheets, this woman has lost a lot of blood.” Ana touched the woman’s forehead and found it cool.

“The baby is dead. It’s too late.” Ana could barely make out what the doctor was saying.

“What? Why is it too late?” said Ana with rising urgency.

He faced Ana with glassy eyes. “She lost a lot of blood, and the baby was too high in the birth canal. Her contractions stopped an hour ago. The baby has died in utero.”

Before Ana could answer, Señora Lugo moved between the doctor and Ana. “Help my daughter. It may not be too late, Doña Ana. Please, help her!”

Ana gently moved the woman aside and confronted him. “What are you talking about? There are many reasons why her contractions could have stopped. Why did *you* stop?” She didn’t wait for an answer, knowing she might lose both mother and child. She scanned the room and noticed the maid holding the edge of her apron, standing helplessly in the corner. The only sounds in the room were the clicking of the older woman’s black rosary beads, the ticking of an old clock, and Elena’s labored breathing. Was it feasible to continue to hold this young woman in the mortal world or

allow her to slip into the spirit world? Ana shook her head in disbelief. "Of course, it's not too late!"

"*Nena*, raise the wick on the lamp and boil some water," Ana said, holding up a porcelain pitcher. The startled maid dropped the edge of her apron, but didn't make a move. "Take it and hurry!" The young girl raised the wick, grabbed the pitcher from Ana's hands, and ran out of the room. Ana hoped the girl would comply and had not fled the room because she was scared out of her mind.

Señora Lugo looked up at Ana, and clasped her hands as if in prayer. "What can I do to help?"

"I don't know yet, Señora. Since this doctor is of no help to me, I need to start near the beginning." Ana approached the bed and flung off the top sheet, uncovering a large puddle of blood and birthing fluid under Elena's lower body. It was then Ana saw the bloody forceps on the bed. "*Santo Dios*," Ana whispered, holding the sides of her face. She looked at the doctor whose eyes were closed, as if he were trying to block out a nightmare. "You tried to remove the child by force, didn't you?" Elena's pulse was weak and thin. "Didn't you?" Ana was shouting now. "It's too late to get her to the hospital now. Get over here and help me!" she yelled at the doctor before checking Elena's cervix. "Ten centimeters; how long ago did you give up?"

"The baby was too high in the birth canal. The mother lost consciousness and the contractions stopped. They stopped about an hour ago," he mumbled as if he were memorizing what he would later tell the insular police and his superiors.

Ana did not let up. "We can't stop now or they will surely die." When the doctor didn't respond, Ana jumped to action. With a slow, deliberate hand, she massaged the young woman's abdomen in the form of a cross. The *santíguo*, a spiritual massage, was generally performed on the abdominal area for passing hardened food blocking the intestines, but Ana worked intuitively. It had to work. She manipulated the baby lower into the birth canal, praying nature would take care of the rest. Ana continued massaging until she felt movement in the uterus, and the baby's head was in good position to begin moving through the pelvis. Elena gasped and opened her eyes with the return of a strong contraction.

Ana was overjoyed. "There you are!" Elena seemed dazed and confused

as Ana leaned over her. “I’m here to help you, Elena, but you must help me. You must push hard. Take a deep breath and bear down with the next contraction!”

Elena cried softly and held up a weak hand for her mother who kissed it. “Do what Doña Ana tells you. Blessed Mother, we thank you.”

“Please see to the boiling water,” Ana said to Señora Lugo, who ran out of the room calling for the maid. The contractions were fierce as the baby moved through the pelvis, and with every contraction, there was a release of amniotic fluid. At times, it was difficult to reach Elena through the fog in her head, but for the most part she listened to Ana and made every push count. The doctor stood to one side and did not interfere. Ana ignored him, now worried about the baby’s head and brain from the earlier use of forceps and about the excessive loss of blood. Moments later, maid ran in, holding the porcelain pitcher, and spilling hot water onto the wood floor, followed by the old woman. Ana pointed to the basin and pushed aside the heavy drapes covering one window. Sunlight flooded the bedroom and for the first time since she’d arrived, Ana saw color on Elena’s cheeks—a good sign. Ana washed her hands and out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the figure of the doctor receding into the corner.

Suddenly, Señora Lugo shouted, “Merciful God. Ana, the head! The baby’s head is showing!”

Ana rushed over and took her place at the foot of the bed as the baby’s head crowned. She stretched the labial tissues back and after a seething inhalation, Elena delivered her baby into Ana’s waiting hands. “Oh, it’s a boy!” Ana’s heart swelled as she placed the crying newborn on Elena’s chest. “You have a son, Elena.”

The new grandmother covered Elena and her grandson with a blanket, planting kisses on her daughter’s face, and then faced the doctor. “I don’t know what we would have done without Doña Ana.” She shook her head in disgust. “Leave this house, Señor! If not for Doña Ana, my daughter and grandson would be dead. You will never enter this house again, and when my husband returns, he will be speaking to your superiors.” Ana did not comment as the widow’s sharp words were enough. Doctór Rivera packed his medical bag in silence and left the room. It was time to attend to Elena and her son.

“Good riddance to him,” said the grandmother as Ana placed cut the

cord. Ana felt the heaviness in the room lighten. "Thank God you came, Ana. I shudder to think what could have happened if you hadn't."

Ana turned to the older woman. "I am happy I could help, but God deserves the thanks. Elena and your grandchild will be fine, Señora. Congratulations."

Señora Lugo took several bills out of a small, velveteen purse and handed the money to Ana. "Please take this. I know this isn't enough for what you have done for my family, but please take it. I will see that you get home and later this week, I'll send my driver to you with an envelope."

Ana took the money and nodded her thanks. "Take care of Elena and watch her carefully. If she develops a fever or continues bleeding more than you think normal, do not hesitate to take her to a hospital. A fever could be very dangerous for her now. Only give her broth, plenty of water, and bed rest for a week or two."

"Doña Ana," Elena said, "you are an angel from God. Thank you." Ana took her extended hand.

"Thank you, but please...do not tell anyone I was here. I beg you both to keep this to yourselves."

"We understand, Doña Ana," Elena said, "Mamá and I were at Amancia López' trial. We believed in her innocence, and were sorry for what happened to you as a result of helping your friend. We will not say a word."

"Thank you, I appreciate your discretion."

"You're a good, decent woman, Doña Ana," said Señora Lugo. "May God richly bless you."

Tears stung Ana's eyes. "No one has ever said that to me. You are both very kind. God bless you all." After making sure mother and child were comfortable, Ana said her goodbyes and followed the maid to the front door. "Watch your mistress for fever," she said with a wag of a finger. Then she smiled at the girl. "You did very well today." The young girl thanked Ana with a broad smile.

Ana opened the door, amazed how an experience so frightening had restored her confidence. The doctor was waiting on the front porch, looking younger and out of place. He offered Ana his medical bag. When Ana made no move toward him, he said, "Take it. These instruments will help you. I can get more."

Ana gave him an icy stare. "No, thank you. I have my own instruments



and I know how and when to use them.”

“This was a special case—very difficult,” he said, moving toward her with the medical bag. When Ana refused it again, he placed the bag on the porch and straightened his back, lifting his head a little higher.

“I know you’ve spoken badly about midwives. You are hurting our livelihood by turning women against us.”

“The women of La Playa deserve better.”

Ana lifted an eyebrow. “You don’t believe that; I see it in your face. You were scared to death in that room. You are merely reciting the Health Department propaganda. Well, when Elena and her mother start talking, and women hear of the fiasco that took place here today, they will run from you.”

“Tell them what you wish.”

“I won’t have to say a thing. You and I know that Señora Lugo and her husband will take care of that for me.”

He walked back to her with thin lips pressed together. “Doña, the regulations that are coming are not my doing. Mark my words—the days of the midwife are coming to an end. Your days are numbered, and I know who you are. Be careful.”

He spun on his heel and walked away. His sharp words and threat slapped Ana in the face. “I just saved the lives of that young woman and her son!” Ana was incredulous and shouted, “If not for me, they would have died and you’d be looking at murder charges.”

Just then, Ana heard her name called. She turned around and saw a young boy hanging on the fence. “Are you Doña Ana?”

“Yes, what is it, boy?” Ana looked back at the doctor, but he was gone.

“A Señora Martínez sent me to find you.”

“What now? Is she sick? What happened?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I think it’s her husband.”

“Her husband?” The barefoot boy shrugged and held out his hand for a tip. Ana ignored him, grabbed the medical bag, and flagged down a coach. The driver took the route past *La Catedral de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* and the *Parque de Bombas* fire station. The Plaza was full of well-dressed men and women, groups of children in school uniforms on their way home for lunch, and black women pushing white infants in fancy, wicker prams. Ana felt herself relax when the houses became smaller and

closer together. She'd never felt entirely comfortable in town.

"Can't you go any faster, driver?"

"We're going as fast as this old horse can go. You want to come up here and drive, Doña?"

Insolent man, she thought. After a few minutes, Ana smelled bread from the *panadería*, patchouli incense from the *botánica* on the corner, and freshly ground coffee from the *cafetín*. When the coach approached the neighborhood of *Villa Alegre*, the red light district, she heard women screaming obscenities. Two women came into view, pulling at each other's hair in front of a small crowd. No one intervened or interfered. *La morena*, a black woman in a long, white Victorian-style dress, now dirty and torn at the hem, had a firm grip on the light brown-skinned woman's long hair and managed to throw her into the street. Three small, barefoot children cried for their mother in the doorway of a ramshackle wooden house, and then the picture came together for Ana—children with golden brown skin and curly hair the color of wheat. Was *la morena* entangled with *la mulata's* lover? Most probably, yes, and the three children were caught in the middle of a love triangle.

Ana shook her head as the coach sped up. At first, the scene had amused her and then she became angry. The men in her life had disappointed her in one way or another; her father, though a good man, could not protect her against El Mulato. Ishe had been powerless against El Mulato, who had brutally abused Ana and killed her baby. Not even the parish priests had protected Ana when she'd arrived in Porto Rico. In fact, they'd thrown her to the wolves. Ana couldn't fathom relying on a man, and up until that moment, she'd relied on no one but herself. And she hoped it stayed that way.

The way women treated each other also angered Ana. The Afro-Caribbean women and *las mulatas* of Ponce knew poverty and hardship well. They worked as seamstresses, maids, nannies for Ponce's well-to-do families, and as *lavanderas*, who took in washing. Women worked in the sugar and coffee industries, and most needed additional support from men to keep them and their children from starving in lean times. And these were lean times, thought Ana. Everyone looked out for themselves and their families as Ponce had seen an economic and financial downward spiral since the Americans had invaded the island, and moved the capital from

Ponce to San Juan. For many, gone were the days of plenty, privilege, and high society.

Ana did not judge women nor would she dream of taking sides. The “other woman” was a constant threat to marriage, family, financial well-being, and social standing. Ana knew the stories of the affairs, the illegitimate children, and the social norm of looking the other way. Seeking and maintaining financial stability was always in the back of women’s minds. Ana understood that. But what of the men who played one woman against the other? The same men—, who wrote the laws, enforced the laws against prostitution and adultery, spoke about the sanctity of marriage and *la sagrada familia*—were the men who slept with women other than their wives. It was common to see men of every economic level father multiple children out of wedlock; there was no easy answer.

Ana wondered what she would have done if her mentor, Doña Milagro, hadn’t taken her in. What would her destiny have been if she hadn’t become a midwife? Would she have married and had children?

When the coach arrived at the Martínez home, Ana spotted a knotted red ribbon on Serafina’s doorknob—red for Changó, the trickster god. Had Serafina put it there? She hadn’t noticed it before. Ana rapped softly and when no one answered, she pushed the door open a crack and saw Roberto and Serafina in a tender embrace. Roberto spotted Ana and walked toward her. Serafina started to speak, but he held up his hand to silence her. “We don’t need you here,” he said, glaring at her.

Ana made a quiet retreat and slammed the garden gate shut, her cheeks burning as she walked home like a child who’d been sent to her room. “We don’t need you here,” Ana repeated furiously. She snorted in disgust, her long skirt whipping left and right as she walked the quiet streets to her home. “You’re never here long enough to take care of anything!”

As the full moon rose in the night sky, Ana wrestled with her feelings of anger. Her only option was visiting Serafina in the morning, knowing Roberto wouldn’t be there. She realized her anger wasn’t with Roberto—it was with Serafina. No matter how much Serafina complained about Roberto, her marriage, and cried over his mistreatment, hurtful words, and temper, she always took him back. Why had Serafina sent for her if she wasn’t needed?

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# CHAPTER 11

## *Sanando con Medicina Verde ~ Healing with Green Medicine*

**THE FOLLOWING MORNING** Serafina stood at Ana's door, smelling of camphor and looking haggard in the thin light. Ana ushered her into the kitchen and didn't know whether to ask why Serafina had called her the previous evening, or wait for the news. Serafina sat at the kitchen table and rested her head on her arms. "I didn't sleep well last night and I just had to leave the house. I'm happy you're home." Ana saw the despair in Serafina's eyes, and suddenly felt nauseated, always a harbinger of bad news.

"Let me open a window," Ana said, not knowing what else to say. She unlatched the window, pushed open the shutters, and faced Serafina, who took a deep breath and coughed into a handkerchief. "Where are the children?"

"They're staying with Amancia until tomorrow."

Ana joined Serafina at the table. "I rushed over last night after the boy called for me, but Roberto was home," Ana said, not able to mask her frustration and confusion. Serafina nodded, twisting the hem of her skirt between her fingers. "Enough! What's going on?"

"Roberto is coughing up blood!" Ana let out a slight gasp and crossed herself. "He told me yesterday, but I think he's known for a while. The doctor came this morning."

Ana didn't need to hear the diagnoses. "He's sure?" The embrace Ana had witnessed between Serafina and Roberto came to mind, and she understood.

Tears ran down Serafina's cheeks. "Yes, it's tuberculosis. The doctor says he's sick and very contagious. That's why I sent the children to the

neighbor.”

“Where’s Roberto now?”

“They took him to the sanatorium for treatment. He’s so sick, Ana.”

“You and the children must leave the house. The disease is in your house!”

“No, no, don’t worry. The doctor sent someone to clean the house for us. I’m healthy, but...Roberto wants me and the children to stay with his sister in Guánica. We are to leave as soon as possible.”

Ana sat back, stunned by the news, but knew there was a more pressing need at that moment. “You must leave the house immediately. We can’t take any chances, Serafina. Stay with me; I can make room for you and the children.”

“All right, we’ll do that. But I don’t want to leave La Playa.” Serafina muffled her cries in her handkerchief. “I don’t want to leave you!”

“This can’t be happening,” Ana said softly, wiping away her tears. It was then she realized the snake dream was about Roberto, not Serafina. The realization brought Ana comfort, but not enough—Serafina and the children were leaving.

“What will we do?”

“We’ll gather up your things; you and the children will come here,” Ana said, getting up from the table.

“No, I mean, what will we do if Roberto dies? I need your help.” Serafina put her head on the table, sobbing uncontrollably.

Ana’s only thought was getting Serafina and the children out of their home. “I don’t know yet, but don’t think the worst, Serafina. Let’s take care of what we can today, and let’s start by moving you in. Go home and pack. I’ll join you shortly.”

“The dog must come with us, Ana.”

“That’s fine; she’s welcome here. How long have you been coughing?”

“It’s only an allergy. Please don’t worry,” Serafina said before rushing home to pack.

“Oh, but I am worried,” Ana whispered, gathering mint from her garden, firm in her belief Serafina was already infected. Ana dropped a handful of chopped mint leaves into hot water, added a small amount of farina, and pounded the mixture in a mortar and pestle until it resembled a sticky mass. She dropped several cotton cloths into boiling water and removed them

with a long wooden spoon. When the cloths were cool enough to handle, Ana spooned out a small amount of mixture in the center of three cloths. She folded the cloths into small, loose squares, and set them aside. Serafina returned with two bags bulging with clothing and the dog following close behind.

“Lie down,” instructed Ana. “If the sun sets, the healing will not take place.” Ana placed the squares upon Serafina’s chest and throat area, and knocked three times on the wood table to call the *orishas* to her. “Eleguá, I ask permission to invoke Osaín in the healing of my friend. Please help me, as you help all healers,” Ana said, brushing away tears with the back of her hand. She flicked *Agua Florída* cologne around the house to cool and appease any hot-headed spirits, and with a gnarled, wooden broom, she briskly swept the negative energy out the front door and down the stairs. She tied a brown, felt scapular to the bedpost in honor of *El Niño de Atocha*, the god Changó’s Christian counterpart, and waited. Ana frowned as she stood at the foot of the bed waiting for a sign the spirits were with her, and noticed Serafina had fallen asleep. “There’s something in this house. I can feel it,” Ana said.

With hands on her hips, Ana surveyed the room, wondering what else she could do to protect the family. Then it came to her. She lit a candle, filled two cups with water, and placed one cup behind the front door to absorb all negative forces and the other under her bed. Ana had performed these rituals in her home and others’ homes many times, and now, every weapon in Ana’s spiritual arsenal was employed to keep Serafina and the children protected. The midwife concluded by reciting a brief prayer of healing for Roberto. Once Ana was satisfied the house and family were sufficiently protected, she opened a second window to circulate the air, but as the sun began set, her uneasy feelings returned. For the first time, Ana doubted her healing abilities and those of her Saints, which frightened her. Suddenly, the Lorena’s caul came to mind. It was time to pass the veil to Serafina for safekeeping.

A brilliant red and vermillion sunset filled the sky above the ocean’s horizon that evening. Ana couldn’t remember a more wondrous sight, and suddenly felt guilty for enjoying the view. She pulled the bedroom curtains firmly together, so the light emitted from the oil lamp in the kitchen would not disturb Serafina. She sat at the kitchen table, tilting her head from side-

to-side, trying to relieve the tension in her neck, and found herself staring deep into the oil lamp's flame, feeling disoriented and confused. When she turned the knob to raise the wick of the hurricane lamp, the wick slipped into the oil. "*Mierda.*" The room went dark. Ana couldn't count the times she'd retrieved fallen wicks from the oil in her ten years of friendship with Serafina. As Ana lifted out the renegade wick, it occurred to her how women, with dogged determination, most actively forced light into the darkness of their lives. She relit the wick and watched long shadows cast upon the walls, turning familiar objects into unrecognizable objects. Exactly how I feel, she thought, knowing nothing would be the same after this day.

With the first bead of the rosary between her thumb and forefinger, Ana prayed the Hail Mary. "*Dios te salve María, llena eres de gracia, el Señor...*" A soft rap on the door interrupted the prayer. Reina growled. Ana put her new spectacles on, before pushing the shutter open a crack. "What are you doing here, Roberto?"

He looked for the voice and finally saw Ana in the window. "Where's Serafina?" His voice was raspy and raw.

Reina barked when she heard Roberto's voice. Ana patted the dog's head, knowing she didn't like Roberto, and happy to have a bit of protection in light of the situation. "She's sleeping."

"I might have known she'd be here." Ana watched his every move. In the moonlight Roberto looked like a phantom with dark sunken eyes surrounded by black circles.

Ana kissed the crucifix, and dropped the rosary into her skirt pocket. She covered her nose and mouth with a handkerchief. "You can't come in here. You're contagious and Serafina must be kept free of disease." She fought to remember if she'd locked the door. Roberto sat on the front stoop, unlacing his heavy work boots, and ignored her. He stood up, holding onto the railing for support, and shouted for Serafina. "*Lárgate de aquí,*" Ana hissed, urging him to leave. "The children are with neighbors and Serafina is asleep, I told you." Roberto looked puzzled or dazed. Was he drunk? Ana would never let him in the house, but felt the need for caution and a bit of patience. He could easily break down the door. "Why aren't you at the sanatorium?"

"I know, I know, tell that to the doctors. They say this disease is too far gone. They sent me home to die."

"I don't believe you. They would never release you as sick as you are."



Look at you. *Santa María*,” Ana whispered harshly. How could she get him to leave?

“Let me in; I’m very weak. I want to die with my family around me.”

“You should be in the hospital, Roberto.” Ana felt a hand on her shoulder and looked back. Serafina put a finger to her mouth, and Ana turned back to Roberto.

Roberto stared at her with hooded eyes and then laughed. “You know, I believe you care, Doña Ana.” The words of a drunken man, thought Ana as he lit a cigarette. “You know, I’ve battled tropical storms at sea, but I’ve never been comfortable on land. You women and your *asuntos de mujeres*; we are always left out of women’s business. And you know what? I was out of my element. I’m a sailor! We respect two worlds—land and sea. I can control the land, but you women...you women are the sea, the part that no man can control. I could never control Serafina and now I have a daughter.” His laugh made the hairs on Ana’s arm stand on end.

Ana spoke through her handkerchief, “You have a loving wife and beautiful children, Roberto. They love you, too.”

“Be quiet; Serafina hates me.” He spit on the ground, and pushed the hair out of his eyes. “She never loved me.”

Serafina pinched Ana’s arm and whispered, “*Dile que sí*. Tell him I do.”

“She does love you.” The last thing Ana wanted at that moment was to listen to Roberto’s drunken stories, but Serafina stood firmly behind her.

“Well, maybe at the beginning she did. I may not be a tall man, but what I lack in height, I make up for in courage and brute strength! We merchant marines are known for our courage. No one dares look at me in the eye or make comments about me on the ship. I’m no stranger to fights and brawls, you know. You see this nose? I was in a bar fight in Cuba, and the guy broke my nose and dislocated my jaw—he looks worse than me today.”

“Enough, Roberto; I’m going to bed. I have an exam tomorrow.” Roberto picked up a small rock, and threw it in Ana’s direction. The rock smacked the shutter and landed in the dirt. “¡*Imbécil!*”

Serafina pushed Ana aside before he could reach for another rock. “Roberto, stop! Go back to the sanatorium or go home. Don’t put us in danger by coming here.” He lowered his eyes and was silent. “I’m closing the window, Roberto. It’s late.”

“I’m sorry; you’re right. I sent my sister the telegraph. You and the

children are going to Guánica soon.”

Ana sighed, relieved he seemed to realize the gravity of the situation. Serafina nodded. “We must stay with Ana until you buy the train tickets. Go home, I’ll see you tomorrow. Good night.”

Roberto sat on Ana’s front steps and broke down. “I can’t believe this is happening. What will I do without you, Serafina? How will we tell the children?”

Serafina closed the shutter and turned away. Ana locked the front door, feeling confident the doctors and health officials would soon be searching for Roberto.

\* \* \*

Two days later, the arrangements were made. Roberto bought four train tickets without waiting for his sister’s reply—three one-way and one round-trip ticket to Guánica. The Health Department immediately quarantined Roberto in his home.

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# CHAPTER 12

## *El Sueño de los Muertos ~ The Sleep of the Dead*

**SERAFINA RUBBED HER SLEEPY EYES** open to the golden morning light filtering through the muslin curtains, which cast a warm glow over Ana's bedroom. For a moment, she forgot about the disease eating away at Roberto's lungs and realized she hadn't been inside Ana's house in years; Ana always visited Serafina in her home. It was a small, tidy room with framed prints of the Blessed Mother on the walls, a small, black Bible on the end table, and a low table that held Ana's *crèche* and ex-votos, the *milagros* for many of her client's answered prayers.

It didn't seem possible she was leaving Roberto, Ana, and her home behind in a few short hours. Once dressed, Serafina glanced at the baggage on the floor, and her heart raced. What would happen to her and the children if Roberto died? How would they survive? She thought of all the times she'd wanted him to leave and never return, and now that could very well happen. She cried softly, bargaining with God; promising never to fight with Roberto again or engage in town gossip. "Please heal him, *Virgencita*," she prayed. "I do love him in all his faults. He's the best husband he knows how to be. Please, save him; for his children's sake, and yes, for mine."

Serafina had been afraid to close her eyes the night before for fear she would never wake up. As her fear rose, she'd nearly woken Ana for comfort, but had steadied herself. She'd prayed and deep down in the empty pit of her stomach, she'd known her prayers would remain unanswered. She whispered the words, "the children", several times. Would Roberto's sister welcome them? Why was this happening? Serafina had been a good wife

and a good mother to her children; why was *la Virgen* turning away from her?

The front door opened, and Ana entered with a look that told Serafina the buggy had arrived. Lorena and Mateo ran into Ana's waiting arms. "You're going on a big adventure with your *mami* today. Take your bags to the driver; he's waiting for you."

Serafina called out, holding her chest, "Don't run off. We must say goodbye to your father and to Ana." The comment made Ana cry.

"Oh Ana, please don't cry," Serafina said, hugging her tight. "You'll make me cry, too. Be strong for me because my heart is breaking."

"I know we'll see each other again, but God only knows how long that will be."

"We'll write each other, and you will tell me all the neighborhood gossip I'll be missing. I won't be gone long."

"What will I do without you, Serafina?"

"We'll send letters back and forth until...until Roberto is better...or not," she whispered. They heard the driver calling from outside. "Ay, *Ana*. I'm going to miss you so much, my sister!"

"I will miss you and the children more." They hugged each other until the driver called for them to hurry. The women carried the rest of the bags to the cart. Serafina patted Reina's head as the driver helped the children onto the horse-drawn buggy.

"Ana, please look after Roberto. I know you can't enter the house, but I beg you, please make sure he has food and water."

Ana gave Serafina a weak smile. "I promise. I'll look after Reina, too," Ana said, patting the dog's head again.

"Reina, take good care of Ana for me; I'm sorry I can't take you where I'm going."

"Señora, please," said the driver, "We have twenty minutes to make the train or you'll miss it entirely." The driver threw the bags in the back of the cart and the horse whinnied, steadying itself under the weight of the bags.

"Driver, please wait a moment. Serafina, I have something for you; it belongs to Lorena. I've saved it for the right time, and now that you're leaving Ponce, I must give this to you for safekeeping." Serafina followed Ana to the bedroom. Ana removed the wrapped caul from the dresser drawer and handed it to her.

Serafina accepted the small parcel and looked at Ana. "What is it?"

"Lorena was born in a caul; a thin veil of skin covered her head and face when she came into this world. It is prized by sailors and sea captains, who will pay lots of money for it. Keep it safe for Lorena, and if you are ever low on money, sell it. But I hope you will never have to."

"May I open it?"

"No, don't open the package. I'm sure it's brittle and as delicate as glass by now. Caulbearers are said to be special, Serafina. It is a rare gift. Doña Milagro used to say that these children held other worldly gifts, such as seeing and speaking to the dead. Many become healers in some way."

"I've never heard of this, Ana. Why did you wait until now to tell me?"

"Honestly? I was afraid Roberto would sell it for a profit, and it is not his to sell. The caul belongs to Lorena; she should decide what's to be done with it when she's old enough. Keep it safe, Serafina."

"I understand." Serafina put the caul in her purse. "I will keep it safe." The women walked outside, and Ana tapped Serafina's shoulder to get her attention. Roberto stood across the street, covering his mouth with his shirt sleeve. Choking back tears and controlling her voice, Serafina said, "Lorena, Mateo! Look, your father is outside." The children jumped off the cart and waved. Roberto leaned in the doorway, coughing roughly, his body shuddering after every cough. Immediately, Serafina found it difficult to catch her breath and feared her legs would not hold her. The children stood in front of her, staring at their father. Serafina could no longer hold back the tears that up until that moment, she'd been able to somewhat control. It was heartbreaking to see her strong husband so weak and frail.

Roberto called out, "Study hard in school, and be good for your mother."

The children yelled back that they would. Serafina smoothed back their unruly hair and kissed their sticky cheeks. "Always dirty, aren't they?" Serafina called out, trying to make the moment lighter, and wanting to bring Roberto closer to her through shared memories and experiences. She mouthed, "I love you." He kissed his hand and held it up.

"We love you, *papi*," the children shouted.

"I love you, too! Now go with your mother before I change my mind and keep you here to clean the chicken coop." The children laughed. Serafina smiled and wiped her eyes.

"I love you, Serafina," Roberto called out. Serafina's body trembled as

she held out her hand for Ana. The driver helped the children back onto the cart, and they immediately started fighting over who would sit next to the driver and who would use the whip on the horse.

“Serafina, get in the buggy before you faint,” said Ana, helping her up. The driver wasted no time. He flipped the reins and when the cart lurched forward, Serafina and Ana were inconsolable. Amancia ran out of her house as the cart started up the street. “Go with God, Serafina,” Amancia shouted, hugging Ana, who seemed weak at the knees.

Suddenly, Reina bounded across the street to Roberto, and sat close to him. “Isn’t that just like a woman,” Ana said, shaking her head. “He doesn’t even like the dog, and there she goes.”

Serafina kept her eyes on Ana and Roberto, torn between whom to look at last, before they were completely out of sight. She felt lightheaded and fainted in her seat, clutching the crucifix to her chest as Amancia walked Ana home.

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# CHAPTER 13

## *De Luto ~ In Mourning*

**JUST BEFORE SUNRISE**, Ana thought she heard a knock. She craned her head to listen, but the house was quiet. After a few minutes, she heard a knock at the door. She opened the window that faced the street, and saw Roberto.

“Can I come in?” Roberto stood on her porch shaking his head, sending streaks of water in all directions. Without so much as a glance at his muddy boots or a pause in anticipation of an invitation to enter, he put his hand on the doorknob.

“Don’t touch that. You are not coming in,” Ana said, bringing her shawl over her nose and mouth. “You’re very sick; go home. You’re supposed to be in quarantine.” He reeked of stale cigarette smoke and was in desperate need of a shave.

“I can’t go home. I want my family.”

“Where’s the man who is supposed to be guarding your house?”

“I paid him to look the other way for a couple of hours. Everyone has their price.”

“Not everyone. Where’s the dog?”

“I don’t know; she ran off.”

She couldn’t hide her disgust. “You don’t know? Serafina will be heartbroken when she finds out. Look at you; you look awful, Roberto. You’re going to catch your death...”

“Interesting choice of words, Ana,” he said with a smirk, and then coughed into his sleeve. As calmly as if he were reading a newspaper headline to her, Roberto said, “I’ll be dead before the day is through. That’s

it.” He shrugged a shoulder and lowered his eyes. His cavalier tone surprised her.

She smelled the alcohol on his breath, even from that distance. “You’ve been drinking, ah?” She didn’t bother to keep the disdain from her voice. There was no reason to maintain civility with this man now that Serafina was gone. If he was determined to die quicker than nature intended, she couldn’t stop him.

He looked away and wrung his hands. “Yes, I went out,” he said in a flat tone.

“And you’re just crawling in.”

“What do you want from me?” His anger didn’t seem directed at Ana. “I’m dying; who the hell cares what I do from this day forward? This is probably my last sunrise.”

Ana shook her head, and suddenly pitied him. “Do you want me to fetch the doctor, a priest? I can do that for you, Roberto.” He looked like a man who’d lost everything. As the sun rose, light pink and soft orange hues warmed the houses on the street, but not Roberto, whose skin had the look and texture of raw bread dough.

“Will you prepare my body for burial?” Roberto, once an able-bodied, strong man, was now hunched over in pain. He coughed and hacked. “Will you buy my coffin, Ana?”

“Yes, if that’s what you want. I can do that.” She meant she would buy his coffin. The preparation of his body would be performed by the funeral home, not by her, but perhaps he did not know that.

“You’ll find money for a coffin in the bottom drawer of the bedroom dresser, inside a white sock. Fetch the priest and doctor for me. I’m going home now,” he said between shallow breaths, which Ana could tell cost him dearly. Roberto turned to go, then stopped and faced her. “You know what? You’ll soon have what you wanted. When I die, you’ll have Serafina all to yourself.” She heard the malice in his voice. “You meddled in our marriage,” he said, pointing at her. “You put shit in her head and look at you...black as tar *prieta*. Who do you think you are, you...”

Ana shot him a sharp glance. “Don’t you finish that sentence, *hijo ‘e puta*. I never once told your wife to leave you, though she should have long ago. You didn’t know what you had in Serafina and now, you never will. She was a good wife to you.” Roberto snorted and walked away. “My God,

even in the face of death, you still act like a son of a bitch. But, I forgive you, Roberto Martinez! I *will* fetch the priest and the doctor, and I'll send a telegraph to Serafina when you die."

Roberto approached the crooked gate of his home, where she'd called out to Serafina so many times over the years. Ana cried softly, trying to bring up Serafina's smiling face in her mind's eye, and couldn't. A chill gripped her when Roberto yelled, "I'll be over here if you need me!"

"I will never need you," Ana murmured, walking toward the bedroom. "I will never need you or any man." The *reinitas* and *pitirres* sang in the mango tree as Ana watched swift clouds rushing to obscure the sunrise. A light breeze kissed Ana's cheek and the sweet smell of jasmine filled her lungs. It was too beautiful a morning to speak of death. She picked up the letter from the Department of Public Health, and read the most important sentence in the letter:

"You have passed the necessary medical examination with sufficient marks to continue practicing midwifery in the city of Ponce."

And just in time, thought Ana. She'd been out of work far too long, and her meager savings were gone. It was time to find new clients.

The following day, thick fog rolled in from the sea and dark, ominous clouds made their presence known by early evening. When Ana heard the dense clang of the buoys in the harbor, she knew Roberto was dead. Her first thought was not to speak or even think his name for fear he'd become a soul snatcher, one of Oyá's spirit soldiers. Just what he would like, she thought, as she continued hammering nails into a board that would protect the window against the coming storm.

Safely ensconced in her humble home, Ana clutched the rosary, praying Roberto would find peace and leave her alone. Just as it started raining, Amancia ran over with the news of Roberto's death. Ana would do as she'd promised—she would alert the priest, the doctor, and send the necessary telegram to Serafina. Then she would make arrangements for a wooden casket for Roberto. High winds shook Ana's wooden house and debris smacked the walls as she invoked the gods and goddesses, calling for the protection of Serafina and the children in Guánica. She ignored the pelting rain as high waves crashed on the shore.

\* \* \*

The destruction from Hurricane San Tribucio had postponed Roberto's funeral, as flooding across the island, particularly along the southern coast, was devastating. The funeral parlor had managed to preserve Roberto's body on slabs of ice as long as possible, and when the body started to smell in the tropical heat, it was evident a vigil wasn't possible. The family went ahead with the funeral; burning candles near the closed coffin in what Ana thought was an attempt to prevent the germs from infecting anyone in the parish church. Thankfully, someone had been heavy-handed with the incense, as well. Following the funeral, the novenas were said—nine consecutive days of prayer in the hopes of receiving God's favor on Roberto's behalf. Ana attended Roberto's funeral, but had not remained for the first novena; she'd done her part by standing in for Serafina, who'd chosen not to return with Lorena and Mateo for their father's funeral.

"The children are sick with bad colds and our doctor has forbidden us to travel," read Serafina's telegram. Ana didn't care if Serafina had lied; she only wished her friend had come back to visit her.

Ana stepped out of her long, black crepe dress, and threw it on the bed. She'd never understood the tradition of wearing black, white, or gray mourning clothes for funerals. The Catholic Church and society expected mandatory mourning periods that could last from one to three long, hot years. Wearing black was ridiculously impractical in tropical climates, and she'd worn the black dress to Roberto's funeral out of respect, but she didn't plan on wearing it again. Ana took the *Regla otánes* out of her pocket and threw the pebbles out the open window. What good were they? She knew the crushing pain in her heart could have been avoided by simply remaining friendly instead of becoming friends with Serafina. Ana had assisted in countless births and had always maintained a professional distance from her clients, but Serafina had become more than a friend—she was family.

More times than Ana dared to admit, she'd prayed Roberto would be lost at sea, but he'd always managed to return. No matter how many tears Serafina shed over Roberto's drinking and his bad temper, she always welcomed him back. "Sometimes the collar is more expensive than the dog," Ana mused. Over the years, she'd tried understanding the concept of needing a man, and before meeting Serafina, she'd accepted the advances of a few men over the years, but none of the relationships had turned into

much more than a mutually agreed upon sexual encounter. Serafina and the children became Ana's family, and the young mother's loving nature had softened Ana's heart, broken so many times. Now once again, the deep, dark emptiness that had invaded Ana's heart when she was ripped from her parent's arms in Cuba took over and threatened to blacken her heart once again.

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# CHAPTER 14

## *La Casita de Cristina ~ Cristina's Little House*

*Barrio San Antón, Ponce ~ 1910*

**“THE AIR IS FULL OF UNCERTAINTY** for blacks in Ponce. Life might be easier for you in the all-black barrios of San Antón and Bélgica, or away from Ponce altogether,” said Padre Vicénte, like he was recommending Ana move to the moon. She’d heard the rumors the priest was encouraging single black and mulatto women to move from La Playa.

“La Playa is where I live and work. I’m not leaving,” she replied.

“You haven’t passed the examination to practice, have you? You must leave; how will you make a living when the women of La Playa stop asking you to assist in the births of their children? If we catch them using you, they will be punished by the law.”

Ana took great pleasure in showing Padre Vicénte her midwifery certificate, and then slammed the door in his face. She wasn’t moving. Although she didn’t trust the rumors, she trusted the priest would continue pestering her. But Ana’s fate was sealed when her landlord put her rental house up for sale and gave her two weeks to move. Only a handful of clients remained from the old neighborhood, and although they swore loyalty to Ana, she could tell even they were anxious to deliver at the newer *Hospítal Asilo de Damas*.

Ana recognized the many bridges she’d burned in life by focusing on work, her clients, and their families, instead of marriage, children, and preparing for old age. She’d waited too long to accept friendship and now, Serafina was far away. Ana was alone, and soon she would be homeless. The poorer *barrios* of Bélgica and San Antón might prove difficult places to

find paying clients, but perhaps it was time to go. She set her sights on San Antón, knowing there was nothing left for her in La Playa.

Two weeks later, Ana discovered the priest's information was correct—a repeat of the 1890 campaign of mass cleansing of prostitution resurfaced in Ponce. Most of the workingwomen in Ponce were of African descent and thought to be loose and wayward by the upper classes. She'd read the articles about young, upper class women in the new feminist movement beginning to feel a kinship with their black and mulatto sisters. The feminists insisted that with time and care, the workingwomen could be transformed into proper ladies and responsible citizens with a few rights. To Ana, it was a ploy by women of society to rid Ponce of female competition for available and married men, specifically their husbands. Ana believed that behind closed doors, the young, married feminists worried about keeping their own husbands away from other women.

Ana understood that feeding hungry children, and lack of good-paying jobs and decent housing, forced many women to resort to prostitution; however, it seemed all black workingwomen were lumped together in the indecency whether they were guilty or not, including Ana. Suspicious stares, whispers, and forced smiles met Ana when she entered shops in the *barrio* and walked the streets of Ponce. Hers was a familiar face around town, but now, well-to-do women and lighter-skinned women of the Playa were enlisting the help of male obstetricians, who served the women at the local hospitals. Ana felt both invisible and exposed. She wasn't sure if this was a sign of the times or not, but she'd felt uncomfortable enough to hire a boy to help her move to the all-black *barrio* of San Antón. She worried Serafina would return from Guánica and not find her, but nearly eight months had passed since she'd last heard from Serafina. Was Roberto's sister throwing out Ana's letters or was it possible Serafina no longer wanted anything to do with her? She wrote Serafina one last letter about her move to Barrio San Antón, and left the outcome to God.

\* \* \*

Ana tipped the white umbrella to better shield her face from the scorching sun, and tried shallow breaths when the hot air stung her lungs. The weather in Ponce, usually dry and arid, had been particularly brutal that year. The



*Río Portugues*, an important part of Ponce life, where people bathed, washed clothes, and fished, was now a steady trickle of a stream with weeds and grass growing along the baked riverbank. Ana shifted the sack to the other hip, amazed her life possessions fit in two bags and in the wheelbarrow behind her, pushed by the lanky, ten-year old son of a former client. The wheels of the rusty wheelbarrow screeched and moaned under the heavy load of Ana's medical supplies, jars of dried herbs, and plant seedlings from her Playa garden, and the boy panted with the exertion.

"Nene, I hope you won't forget your promise to bring me a young Playa palm when I find a new home, wherever that is to be."

"I won't forget, Doña Ana." His knuckles turned white as he pushed on. "I already picked out a good one for you."

"Good boy." He seemed confident, and Ana wondered if she was as confident she'd find a new home before nightfall. It suddenly occurred to her that she'd been homeless before, when the priests had thrown her out, and she'd found a home. "Yes, you will bring it to my new home," she said with renewed confidence. Further along the river, in deeper water, women washed clothes on large rocks and several children enticed an uninterested mule nibbling grass to notice and play with them. A muscular, young man bathing in the river turned his back to Ana and the boy as they approached, but kept his eye on the clothing laid out on a nearby rock. "Now, what do you suppose he'd do if we stole his clothes?"

The boy laughed out loud and set the wheelbarrow down with a soft thud. "Doña Ana, let's do it! He'll never catch us!"

She threw her head back and laughed. "You'd get away if he ran after us, but he'd catch me, because I'd have to remain with all my things!" The boy reminded her of happier times with Serafina and the children at the beach at La Playa, where they'd played and laughed in the ocean. Ana was dumbfounded she couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed in the past eight months. Had she been happy in La Playa? She'd certainly built a life for herself there, but she'd had closed herself off to people. The only happy times had been with Serafina. It was time to change that, and Ana realized the change began with her. She vowed to be more trusting of others, and hoped to find peace and steady work in San Antón; surely there'd be a bit of happiness for her there, too.

Ana and the boy left the river behind. They walked between the

sugarcane fields that lined both sides of the dirt road toward San Antón, where freed slaves and the descendants of slaves brought to Porto Rico from West Africa and other Caribbean islands, had settled. It had been many years since Ana's last visit to the *barrio*, and she found herself experiencing excited fear as she walked. She expected to see varied skin tones of brown and black, and prominent surnames of Creole and European land owners and wealthy merchants, and she hoped the *barrio* had not changed.

It was late morning when they entered the *caserío* of run-down shacks, cement homes, and some of the oldest wooden houses in Ponce. The sounds of drumming, children's laughter, and babies crying greeted her and the boy before they arrived. Somewhere in the distance, a couple argued loudly, women laughed, and someone hammered in a steady rhythm. All these sounds of life come from a two-block radius, she thought. They continued along a twisty road shaded by flaming-red, flowering *flamboyán* trees, and the familiar aromas of fried garlic, onion, and freshly ground coffee wafted through the air. A black woman tying a mare to a sickly tree looked up and nodded as Ana and the boy passed by. For a moment, Ana thought she noted a look of recognition in the woman's dark eyes. A group of barefoot children, holding small bunches of genips tied with twine and ready for sale, chattered with the *limpiabotas* cleaning out their shoeshine boxes, all ready for another workday in *el pueblo*, the city center. Children with nothing to sell played in the street with marbles and rocks, or huddled together in small groups, possibly thinking of ways to make money on the streets of Ponce. Ana wondered if she would find African Cubans in San Antón; maybe even someone she knew.

The children spotted Ana and the boy entering their world. They ran up, demanding candy and coins while others asked where she was going. "I'm going to see what I can get into," she replied. The children laughed, understanding that in San Antón one could find all manner of situations to get into. "Nene, give me one," Ana asked a tall boy holding a large bunch of genips. "I always taste before I buy."

"I only sell the best *quenépas*, Doña. I wouldn't cheat you, honest!" The boy smiled broadly, proudly holding out his bunch. Ana plucked a round green fruit and lightly bit the firm skin, releasing the fuzzy, peach-colored fruit inside. She popped the fruit in her mouth, took her time sucking the

thick fuzz, and then spit the seed onto the dirt.

The children waited anxiously for her verdict. "I've had better," she said with a grin, which caused the children to shout their disapproval.

"Oh no, you haven't," the boy argued. "We have the best *quenépa* trees, right here in San Antón! Tell the truth, Doña, they're good, aren't they?"

Ana laughed at his cockiness and noticed a chubby boy standing outside the group of children. He echoed his friend's sentiments with a shy smile, but was ignored and pushed back when he tried approaching. His fruit were bruised and dark-skinned. "Boy, give me your best," Ana said to him. He passed her a few genips, and she handed him some coins, earning his smile. "I'm looking for a place to live. Who can help me?" The children yelled and jumped up and down. Ana raised her hand. "I can't hear if you're all yelling." She pointed to a barefoot girl of about twelve years of age with light brown skin and gold flecks in her deep brown eyes. "Who's renting a room or a house?"

"For a couple of hours or by the month?" the girl answered with a hand on her hip. The children giggled at their friend's boldness.

Ana raised an eyebrow at the girl. "I want a room to live in, *not* work out of, Señorita. I am not in that line of business."

The girl shrugged. "Emilia is renting a *casita* behind her house. Over there." The girl pointed at a white clapboard house with a large wooden porch. "*She* is in the business," said the young girl, belying her age.

"What Emilia does is none of my business."

"Do I get a treat for my information?"

"I suppose that's fair." Ana retrieved a small paper bag of hard candy from her sack, and handed it to the girl. "Share with your friends." The children immediately lunged at the bag that the girl raised high above their heads.

"Come," Ana said to her helper with the wheelbarrow. From a distance, the exterior of the white clapboard house was in desperate need of paint, and when Ana approached, she could tell that in its day the house had been grand. The large home looked even more out of place as they walked down the crooked dirt lane lined with make-shift homes shielded with galvanized sheeting for roofs. Ana smelled stagnant water somewhere, which always meant mosquitoes and the threat of disease.

Ana knocked on the ornate wooden door and it was opened a crack by a

petite woman with bright eyes, full lips, and skin the color of caramelized sugar. “¿Sí?” She eyed Ana and the boy, and then opened the door completely. Before Ana could speak, a large, muscular black man with a scar near his mouth nudged the woman out of the way. She moved behind him and rubbed her forearm, where she’d hit the doorframe. Ana’s first instinct was to check if the young woman was hurt, but something in the man’s demeanor told her not to try.

“What do you need?” He wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and onto his stained undershirt.

Ana’s eyes moved from the man to the woman peering out from behind him, and then directed her statement to the young woman. “I’m looking for Emilia,” she said firmly.

The woman came out from behind the man and answered in a barely audible voice. “I’m Emilia.”

“Is the *casita* still available?”

The man answered Ana. “I’m Jaime,” he said, extending his hand in greeting. “The house is available month-to-month. Do you want to see it?”

Emilia smiled and motioned for Ana to follow. “Come,” Ana said to the boy. They followed the couple down an alleyway that ran the length of the large house, and saw a small, cinder block house situated in the center of a large yard. On the side of the humble dwelling, a charming, overgrown flower garden softened the hard edges of cement, and in front, a small cement patio welcomed them.

“It’s one room and you have access to the outhouse, but I’m afraid you must decide now. I have other interested people.”

“I haven’t seen the inside yet,” Ana said as the boy lowered the handles of the wheelbarrow and it met with the ground.

“It’s one room; not much to see,” said the burly man in a strong tone. “And, I’ll need one month rent in advance.”

The boy grabbed the handles of the wheelbarrow, preparing for a quick exit. “Stay put,” Ana said to the boy, and then faced Jaime. Something told her to warm her voice before continuing. “I’m sure it’ll be fine for a few months. I’d still like to see the inside, please.”

Jaime pushed open the door and it swung gently by one hinge. He grasped the door to stop it from swinging. “Easily fixed,” he said. Ana wasn’t sure if that meant by him or her. “Is this your son?”

“No, he’s only helping me move,” Ana said.

“Will you be living alone? Who’ll be paying the rent?”

Ana sighed, trying hard not to show her impatience with his many questions. She had no intention of giving Jaime more information than was necessary. “Yes, I will live alone. How much are you asking per month?”

“I’m asking fifteen dollars. And once a month, you clean the outhouse. We take turns,” he said in a more gentle tone, but his flinty, black eyes never wavered. Ana entered the little house with the feeling she’d be the only one cleaning the outhouse.

“Emilia will bring a padlock and the key later,” Jaime said, entering behind her. The ceiling was high enough for Ana, but Jaime’s head grazed it. She was generally taller than most men, and this man stood a head taller.

Ana put her hand on the wall. “Damp,” she said.

“I can patch the roof and then you’re on your own. I don’t mind if you paint the inside and the outside. Just don’t expect me to supply the paint or lend you a hand,” he said, picking at his tooth with a matchstick. “Have you seen enough? I’m a busy man.”

“Yes, I have.” Something in his voice and mannerisms reminded her of El Mulato. The house would have worked for her, but Ana decided to leave as soon as possible. “I won’t take this house. I’m sorry to waste your time. Thank you for showing it to me.” She turned to leave.

“You won’t find anything better in this neighborhood,” he snapped and then warmed his tone. “Why don’t you think about it?”

“I’ll take my chances. Come, boy.” Sweat ran down Ana’s back, and she wasn’t sure if it was from fear or the heat. She pushed the boy forward and they made their way through the alley to the street. When Ana turned around, she was surprised to see Emilia running up to her. Jaime was not with her.

“The little house next door is vacant,” Emilia said breathlessly, looking over her shoulder. “Go to the little store on the corner and ask for Cristina; she’s the owner. Tell her Emilia sent you. It’s a better house, and she’s asking less than we’re asking,” she whispered. “There really aren’t any good places for rent around here at the moment.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your help,” said Ana, feeling anxious for the risk she sensed Emilia had taken in speaking to her.

“If you need any help, I’m here at your service.” Emilia’s eyes darted

nervously between Ana and the white clapboard house, and she ran home.

No sooner had Emilia disappeared inside when Ana heard a man shouting, but she couldn't make out all the words. Ana's senses heightened and her muscles tensed as she listened to what sounded like a slew of insults. She hoped not to see much of Jaime, and didn't know what to think of Emilia, but she suspected Emilia's life was hell. That, Ana could relate to.

The next morning, Ana opened the windows and aired out Cristina's little house. Almost immediately, the rank smell of the nearby outhouse assaulted her nose, but the facility was better than a pisspot or a hole in the ground. And renting Cristina's house was certainly better than living with Jaime, under his thumb and scrutiny. The little wooden house was clean and would do for now. Ana shut the window that faced the outhouse, happy to see shutters on the windows for security. There was a metal cot with a mattress in the corner and a wood table with two chairs in the center. The furnishings in the humble dwelling were sparse, and there was no electricity, but Ana didn't mind; she had her oil lamp.

Ana uncovered her two statues, a wall mirror, and the small red sack with her divination cowrie shells, and set everything on the table. She searched for an exposed nail and hung the mirror. Though crooked, the mirror was eye level. "Not old and not young," Ana said, smiling at her reflection. She swept a few stray, gray hairs back and tucked them into her bun. "Why, with my hair pulled back, I look rather *elegante*." Ana couldn't explain her light mood, especially after meeting Jaime and Emilia, but she was happy and relieved to have found a new home at a price she could afford.

Before setting out for San Antón that morning, Ana had decided against wearing her white turban and traditional African clothing, opting instead to smooth her hair back into a low bun. She'd thought that dressing in a more modern style might help her acquire midwifery customers; however, Ana's idea of blending in and not standing out during her walk to San Antón had failed. The contrast between her ebony skin and hazel eyes against her new, white, Victorian-style dress was stunning and people had stared. Ana would try to blend in around town, but at home and around San Antón, she would dress as she pleased. Better to be supple and strong, not rigid like a dry twig that snapped when bent, she thought. Despite her mixed feelings about

leaving La Playa, and the familiar feelings of fear and loneliness she felt creeping in, Ana felt confident she could make a good life in San Antón.

A light rap on the door broke her train of thought. It was Emilia, holding a bucket of paint. “Doña Ana, I’m sorry to bother you. I brought some whitewash that a careless worker left out in the sun. Rather than to see it dry up and be thrown out, I rescued it,” she said with a big grin.

Ana took the bucket and returned the smile. “You did the right thing, Emilia. Thank you. This is enough to paint the inside walls. Please come in.”

“Oh, no, I must go,” said Emilia, glancing over her shoulder.

“May I ask you a question before you leave?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Do you own the white house?”

“Sí, Don Marco, gave me the house before he died. That is where we used to hide from his wife and prying eyes,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. Ana wondered if Jaime might be responsible for the small scar on Emilia’s bottom lip and the yellowing bruise on her cheekbone.

“Jaime, the man who showed me the house, is he your husband?” Emilia’s demeanor changed from jovial to somber.

“No, he’s my boyfriend. Stay out of his way. No matter what you hear, stay away from my house. He’s crazy,” she whispered, twirling her index finger around her ear. “I hope the whitewash works. Oh, the brush; I almost forgot,” she said, pulling an abused paint brush from her pocket.

Ana took the salvaged item. “Thank you, door is always open to you.”

“Thank you. Oh, I live with another woman named María; you’ll meet her soon. I have to go now.” Emilia waved goodbye and ran home.

Ana felt a sudden chill. She sensed Emilia was a sweet woman in a bad relationship. She would ask Cristina about installing a padlock on the front door just in case there was trouble. With hands on her hips, Ana looked around her new home and spotted a broom in a corner. Cleaning the small house would not take long, but clearing the house of negative energy came first. She removed the oil lamp from her sack and set it on the table, along with a candle, a box of matches, and the stub of a cigar. Ana lit the cigar and began sweeping from the back of the house, puffing on the cigar until she reached the front door. She waved the smoke around the room, muttering incantations meant to rid homes of malevolent and mischievous

spirits.

With the cigar stub between her teeth, Ana picked up the sixteen cowrie shells with two hands and threw them onto the bed. She knocked on the wall three times to awaken the spirits, and then observed the placement of each shell. More shells were open than not—a positive sign. If they'd all been closed, she would have worried about making a mistake in taking Cristina's house. Ana closed her eyes and listened. Her subconscious spoke to her in a low, soothing voice, but she could not make out the words. She cocked her head, blew smoke on the shells, and returned them to the sack. "I will stay here two months," she announced. "If there are problems, I'll simply move again." Next, she unpacked a bone china tea cup, a saucer, and one fresh egg. She cracked the egg into the cup and covered it with the saucer, where it would remain for a week, absorbing all negativity. At the end of the week, Ana would check the yolk for any dark spots and if she found any discoloration, she'd throw the egg out, and start the process again.

Ana tied a red, protective ribbon to the door handle and remembered she hadn't asked Cristina where to fetch water. She stepped outside to make her way to her landlady's store and when she turned the key to lock the house, she heard a man shouting obscenities from Emilia's house. Jaime. Ana unlocked the door and went inside. She immediately shoved a straight back chair under the doorknob, praying the yelling and abuse would soon end for Emilia. Perhaps moving to San Antón hadn't been a good idea after all. It was time consult with her old friend, the medium and spiritist, Doña Fela.



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# CHAPTER 15

## *El Pajaro Avisá ~ The Bird's Warning*

**ANA STEPPED OFF THE TRAM** and hurried down a dirt road lined with banana trees towards the medium's house, knowing to arrive well before eight in the morning, or end up at the end of a long line of clients. When she arrived at the nondescript, cement house, a man and a woman were ahead of Ana. After greeting the couple, someone whispered in Ana's ear, "Not particularly inviting, is it?"

Ana brushed her ear and turned around. "Emilia, you scared me! What are you doing here?"

"Same as you; I want to know my future. I'm going to ask the *espiritista* to put a *fufú* on Jaime to turn him into a tiny lizard." The women laughed.

"The medium's name is Fela, and I don't know if she casts spells like that, Emilia." Emilia became distracted by a mynah with greenish-black plumage and jet black eyes, standing sentry in a white, metal filigree cage. On the hour, the man at the front of the line rang the bell near the gate, and the bird screeched loudly.

"¡*Dios querido*, what is he doing?"

"The bird is alerting his mistress," Ana said behind the palm of her hand.

Emilia grabbed Ana's arm. "I'm nervous. Let's go; she'll never know we were here."

"The bird has just announced that we are," Ana said with a chuckle, as she pried Emilia's fingers off her forearm. "Fela is a good woman, don't worry."

"This makes me very nervous. Jaime doesn't like me getting involved with this sort of thing. Are you sure we should be doing this?"

“We should be doing this? I met you here, Emilia. I didn’t bring you; you came alone!” Emilia shrugged. “Come on, it’s time to go in.” They followed the couple into the small room reserved for clients, and sat down. Emilia began fidgeting. Ana whispered, “Listen, do you believe in God?”

“I do,” said Emilia, looking around nervously.

“The Bible speaks of prophecy, right? Well, Doña Fela sees the past, present, and the future just like the prophets did.”

“You go too far. She’s not a prophet, she’s an *espiritista*.”

“Fela has the gift of prophecy; everyone knows that. Look, I need more information about a certain situation, and the spirits, through Fela, can give that to me. What’s the harm in that?”

“I guess you’re right. I heard she’s a powerful medium, and I do need her advice about kicking Jaime out of my house.”

“Fela will tell you what to do, or at least point you in the right direction.” Ana didn’t want to know about Emilia’s problems—she could imagine a few of them already. Just then, a thin man entered the waiting area and waved a skeletal hand in Ana’s direction. He had a small, pencil-thin mustache and greased-back hair, and when he winked at Emilia, Ana half-expected Emilia to run out of the room.

“*Ay mi madre*. Who is that?” Emilia whispered when the thin man left the room.

“That’s Fela’s husband,” Ana answered, surprised Emilia wasn’t as afraid of Jaime, who certainly frightened her. Eight clients entered the room and sat in the order of their arrival. Fela’s husband ushered the first two clients behind a thick velvet curtain.

Emilia leaned over. “Will he be in the room with Doña Fela? If she’s as scary-looking as him, I don’t think I can handle them both in a dark room. His eyes are so strange.”

“No, he won’t be inside the reading room. He only greets the clients,” Ana said. There appeared to be an equal number of men and women of all ages waiting on the porch. Most were dressed plainly, except for a man dressed in a business suit and an attractive, smartly-dressed woman. Ana noticed some worried expressions, but on the whole, everyone seemed comfortable to be in the medium’s house, except for Emilia, who seemed to find sitting still practically impossible.

“Everyone has stories to tell, sins they’re hiding, and pain to go through.

We're all here for the same reason—we want to know the future,” Ana whispered, trying to calm Emilia, who wasn't listening.

While the first clients consulted with Fela, Ana's eyes felt heavy and the next thing she knew, Emilia was nudging her awake. “It's your turn!” Emilia held the sides of her chair, making it clear she didn't want to go in.

“You're giving me your turn?” Emilia nodded. Ana made the sign of the cross before pushing aside the heavy, black velvet curtain. She sat in the chair closest to the entrance and looked around the room. The only source of light emanated from a single candle on the small table in front of her that also held an ashtray, a small stack of mismatched sheets of paper, a stump of a pencil, and a bowl of water. To the right, Ana saw a small bookcase stuffed full of old, dusty books with titles she couldn't read without sufficient light. The room was probably crawling with spiders, she thought. She looked down, expecting to see a huge insect crawling up her leg, and then she stomped on the floor to deter any bugs.

“Hurry, Fela,” Ana said, smoothing her dress and smelled the musty smell of cigar smoke. Behind Fela's chair stood a two-tiered altar that held a multitude of religious statues, icons, candles, and vases. Most statues had white faces, some had black faces and hands, and most of them had either rosary beads or scapulars hanging from the necks. Ana couldn't help but giggle at the statue with the over-sized pair of spectacles. Numerous vases of all sizes held freshly-cut lilies, wilted bunches of flowers, and stiff, dried flowers standing in stagnant water. The heavy scent of patchouli and frankincense reminded Ana of a church. But this church was of a different world—the world of spirits.

Doña Milagro, Ana's mentor, had introduced Ana to Fela at a religious ceremony in honor of Changó, the god of thunder who lives in the Ceiba tree. The demands of their professions made it difficult for Ana and Fela to spend a lot of time together, but despite that, their friendship had remained strong over the years. The women referred clients to each other, and both agreed they were slaves to their jobs—Fela was a slave to the spirits and Ana was a slave to her clients. Their many gifts, especially the spiritual gift of healing, had deemed it so. The women were kindred spirits with important jobs in the community. The rich and the poor, the educated and the country folk, blacks and whites, visited Fela from every part of the island, and from as far away as the United States and other Caribbean

islands.

Just then, a frail, brown-skinned woman in her fifties entered the small room and sat in front of Ana. The diminutive woman's red turban always made her seem taller to Ana. Fela's eyes had the same intensity as her husband's eyes, but Ana detected a hint more compassion in hers. The medium gave the impression she was a stern woman, and many locals described her as such, but Ana knew her to be a kind and talented counselor. She reached across the table for Ana's hand. "I'm happy to see you, my friend."

*"Bendición, Fela."*

"You've come with a friend, and it is good you have not come in together. Readings can get mixed up. Do you understand this?" Ana nodded, feeling her heart pound in her chest as it always did before a reading. "Please use the pencil and paper; you may want to write. I will begin shortly." The medium adjusted the red turban over thinning black hair, puffed twice on a cigar, and placed it in the ashtray. Fela moved her hands in a circular motion over her head, and in an instant, her pupils rolled back into the eye sockets, leaving only the white of her eyes exposed. The spirit guides had claimed her body.

*"Hola, Pitita,"* the medium murmured in a voice more masculine than feminine, to no one in the physical world. "Welcome, child," Fela's spirit guide began. "The spirits of your ancestors are with you; your parents and your son are around you, as well. Your parents have crossed over. They are at peace. They are coming through." Although the news of her parent's deaths was deeply painful and brought tears to her eyes, her parents were old and tired when she'd left Cuba, so it wasn't a complete surprise. The hairs on Ana's body stood on end when she felt a chill in the room—the spirits of her parents and son had entered the room.

"I feel their presence," Ana said, searching for her handkerchief.

Fela nodded. "Your son is standing next to you. He offers you white roses to show his love for you. He knows what happened; you were not to blame for his death. You did what was necessary to protect yourself, and your actions kept other women from further harm. Do not blame yourself."

Ana felt the sting of tears. Fela always began the sessions the same way with Ana—her son was at peace and he loved her. She felt confident the medium knew the dark reason she'd fled Cuba, but had never asked. There

wasn't much the *espiritista* wasn't privy to with the spirits, but Fela was discreet. "Please tell my son and my parents how much I love and miss them. We will be reunited one day soon."

"Rest assured they know. Set a bowl of water with copper pennies on your altar, and tuck white flowers beside the bowl for your son." The medium paused. "Your parents bless you and want me to tell you they are always with you. Speak to your parents and son often; they hear you. But I see that you are worried. You have moved to a house that belongs to a young woman. She will offer you friendship. She is kind, but there is a man living with her; a large man. He visits another medium who works with black magic. This medium has done jobs for him. Do you know this man?"

Ana nodded her head. "Yes. What kind of jobs?" Ana leaned forward, paying full attention.

"This woman makes things happen for him—she opens political doors for financial gain. She takes dirt from graves and in this way, she steals the souls of criminals, the lowest of society, the unloved, and the forgotten. These souls are chained to her, and they do her bidding. They are the spirits that wreak havoc in peoples' lives. They hide in cupboards, in unused rooms, anywhere where they are not disturbed."

Ana noticed her hands were locked in a tight fist. The talk of the *egún* always frightened Ana. She relaxed her hands and lowered her shoulders. The medium continued, "You must protect yourself. This man dominates the young woman with the gentle spirit. Do not get involved with him...if you can avoid it. He is a man with connections to dangerous people."

"Should I move? I live next door to them," Ana said, shaking her head, vexed with herself for not considering more places before committing to Cristina.

"Not yet. Stay where you are for now. Cleanse the house. Continue to be vigilant. It's the young woman he seeks to control with alcohol and sex; it's not you he's interested in. But stay out of his way and protect yourself. You must not try to intervene or protect her; it's her path, not yours." Fela cocked her head and smiled over Ana's head. "Ah, a man is coming into your life. I see a good man...a healer. He will unlock what you have locked away for a lifetime. Have you met of whom I speak?"

Ana felt her face flush and she shook her head. "No, I've not met such a man." At her age, love seemed ridiculous, thought Ana. Who was Fela

speaking of?

“You must never turn love away,” Fela said, as if reading Ana’s mind. “He will be good for you, and I see you two together for a very long time.”

Fela’s readings were extremely accurate, but today she was off, thought Ana. A man in her life seemed preposterous. Maybe a new man would come into Emilia’s life; that, Ana could understand, but not a man for her. She had no time for them.

“Do you have any questions?”

“When will I meet this man?”

“Very soon, I suspect. You are destined for each other.” Ana scrunched her nose. She couldn’t imagine herself with a man for more than a few days.

“Do you have questions?”

“Yes, will I find work in San Antón?”

Fela was silent for a moment. “I don’t see as many clients as before; very few, in fact. Continue praying to Saint Michael; he is strong against malevolent spirits. I see you working side-by-side with the new man in your life—the healer.”

Again with the man, thought Ana. She was confused. How could it be that she’d finally passed the midwifery examination, and she wouldn’t find work? Fela interrupted her thoughts.

“Your friend from La Playa, the young widow, she will return to Ponce.”

Ana breathed, “Serafina?”

“She will marry an important man from a prominent family.” Ana covered her mouth with both hands; she couldn’t remember a session with Fela where as much information had come forward.

“Do you see children with her?”

“The children are with her. Her new husband will accept them, and will want children of his own.” Ana was ecstatic to have Serafina back in Ponce and wondered when she’d hear from her.

“She is just coming out of a difficult period in her life. Have patience with your friend; she will soon need your love and support.”

Ana took a deep breath. “Of course.” Ana couldn’t believe her ears—Serafina was coming home after so many years in Guánica.

Fela seemed to be coming out of the trance. “Do you have any more questions?”

“Only to ask how your husband and son are doing. I heard your son

moved to New York?”

Fela’s jet black pupils had returned. “*Sí*, he has moved in search of God knows what.”

“God bless him. I hope he’ll be happy, but that is far from you, Fela.”

“I know, but my son is young and restless.”

“The worst combination,” smiled Ana. “Thank you for seeing me, Fela.”

“It is always a pleasure to see you, Ana. Don’t be a stranger, and take good care of yourself. Remember—stay away from the neighbors. If you have problems with them, don’t hesitate to see me. I will always make time for you.”

“I will remember, thank you. *Adios, Fela.*” Ana leaned over the small table and kissed Fela’s cheek.

“*Adios, y que Dios te bendiga,*” Fela said, blessing Ana.

The mynah let out a shrill whistle, followed by clucking, and a few garbled words when Ana entered the waiting room to let Emilia know it was her turn. But Emilia was not in the room. The waiting clients told her Emilia had fled shortly after she’d gone in for her reading. Ana smiled and shook her head. So the cowardly Emilia was to be her friend. Ana liked her; it was Jaime she could do without.

As was her custom before leaving Fela’s house, Ana approached the birdcage and offered the black mynah a bit of banana from her pocket. The bird’s bright yellow, razor-sharp talons reached through the bars of the cage, and delicately picked the morsel from her fingers. He leaned back, balancing on his perch, and stared at her. She saw her reflection in his beady, black eyes, and then the bird garbled what sounded like, “*Cuidado*, careful,” but she couldn’t be sure.

“What do you know, bird?”



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## CHAPTER 16

### *El Mensaje en los Caracoles ~ The Message in the Shells*

*Ponce, 1915*

**TIRED AND CONTENT** after a long day, Ana drew the shawl around her shoulders, thinking of the affair between the prominent politician and his mulatto lover, the mother of the illegitimate twin boys she'd delivered that evening. Though the affair was common knowledge in Ponce, the new mother had sworn Ana to secrecy, and Ana always erred on the side of discretion. The politician's wife, privy to her husband's dalliance with his *querida*, had quite a case of adultery against him, if she chose to pursue it. But like most women of high social status, Ana knew the wife would remain mute—the social standing and financial security of her children were in jeopardy.

Ana enjoyed the luminous full moon on her walk home from the city center. Hardly anyone was out, and the clear sky crammed more stars in the heavens than Ana thought possible to exist in the Universe. But she was tired of walking, and looked for any mode of transportation to get her home. She'd always felt safe in the decent section of Ponce, where the heady scents of rose and jasmine filled the air, and normally Ana would attempt to locate the source of such wondrous smells, but tonight she kept a brisk pace. A white woman had been assaulted in the area earlier that week, and hadn't been able to describe the man who'd attacked her from behind. It was hard for Ana to believe such a crime had been committed in the good section of town. If the assault had occurred in *Villa Alegre*, the special

prostitution zone, she would have understood, but even so, crimes of that nature were uncommon in Ponce. Had the victim caught similar scents as she walked, unaware of her impending attack seconds later? A mixture of pleasure and pain, thought Ana.

At three o'clock in the morning, not a soul was out in the decent section of town. Respectable women were never seen out alone after dark. Instead, they were safe inside their large homes, protected by their husbands and families. Safe was a relative word, thought Ana. She believed most women felt that way in a marriage, but she often questioned how protected women really were, as marriages and relationships were usually quite different than people imagined. Ana remembered how jealous the plantation slaves had been of her, and of the miniscule privileges the overseer had bestowed on Ana after moving her into his house. If they'd only known how she'd suffered abuse at his hands, they might have been kinder to her.

Just then, two men lurched toward Ana, belting out a romantic song with operatic flair. The drunks staggered across the street, and Ana struggled between continuing on and hiding in the shadows. "*Mierda*," she hissed. She was too tired for a commotion, but surely any disturbance would attract the police, who were said to be patrolling the streets with a vengeance after the assault. Ana decided to hide behind a vegetable cart, and worried the light from the full moon would give her away. She put her obstetrics bag down and waited. After the men passed, singing at the top of their drunken lungs, she hurried along, looking around and behind her.

A few blocks from Bélgica, a poke on the shoulder caused Ana to scream. A uniformed policeman stood in the moonlight, tapping a wooden baton against his open palm. "Where are you going at this hour?"

Ana doubled over, fighting to catch her breath. "Officer, you scared me! I'm on my way home."

"Where are your papers?"

"Uh...my papers?" Ana's stomach muscles clenched. She'd left her midwifery certificate at home. "What papers, sir?"

"Don't play games, woman. All *meretrices* are required to carry their papers at all times." The man with the black mustache was shorter than Ana by a few inches, and his grey eyes were the color of the clouds just before a storm.

Ana's heartbeat raced. "*Meretríce*? Oh, no, no!" she said, shaking her

head and wagging her finger at the officer. "I'm no prostitute, Señor. I'm a midwife. I just delivered a set of twins, and I am heading home."

"Whose children have you delivered at this hour?" he said, narrowing his eyes.

"Señorita Ramos' twins." Ana's heartbeat throbbed in her ears.

"What is the family name?"

"She is unmarried, sir. I can't tell you the man's name as I've been sworn to secrecy," said Ana, knowing the truth would compromise her reputation for discretion. The politician and his lover were Ana's newest referrals for future jobs; how could she give the policeman the politician's name and continue to instill confidence in her clients?

"What did you say?"

Ana repeated, "I've been sworn to secrecy, Señor. And, the father of the twins is married. So you can see this is a delicate situation."

"Sworn to secrecy? What kind of shit is that? What decent family would share a secret with you? If you're a midwife, show me your working papers."

Ana stammered, "I...I don't have them with me. I left them at home."

"You're lying!" The policeman grabbed Ana's arm and pulled her along the street.

"Where are you taking me?" she cried. "Wait, please! Are you taking me to jail?"

"That's where we're headed."

"But I've done nothing." Ana's cries of protest fell on deaf ears. A block away Ana realized she'd left her medical bag near the vegetable cart. "Wait! My bag—I've forgotten my medical bag!"

"You're not going to need it where you're going."

"No, I do need it! I'm a midwife!"

"I don't care what you are, but I bet the Captain has a cell with your name on it. Now keep quiet." Between the policeman's steely eyes and the firm grip on her arm, Ana saw no way out of her predicament.

Despite the early morning hour, the jail at the City Hall was a smoky beehive of activity. Somewhere a man yelled drunken obscenities to anyone who would listen, and women screamed for the guards to let them out so they could call the mayor with their complaints. The guards ignored them, and one woman shouted, "*El Presidente de los Estados Unidos* will hear

about your inhumane treatment of women!”

“The President doesn’t care if you live or die,” said one of the policemen, inciting raucous laughter from a group of men. The officer who’d brought Ana in pointed to a chair and ordered her to wait. He spoke to a tired-looking man at the front desk with gray hair and bushy eyebrows, and then they looked back at Ana.

“That makes eleven tonight. Here, Pérez. Take the keys; put her in with the others.”

“Wait,” protested Ana, jumping up from her chair. “He’s made a mistake, sir; I am no prostitute.”

“Another one with complaints,” said the man at the desk, handing Pérez a ring of keys.

“No, wait! Are you the Captain—the man in charge?”

The man lit a cigarette and cocked his head. “Yes,” he said in a tired voice.

“If you’re the Captain, what I have to tell you will surely clear me.”

“Start talking.” He sighed, unimpressed. He motioned Ana over.

“Please, in private. The reason I was out alone tonight is for your ears only,” she said. He waved her over. Pérez turned away in a huff, and when he was out of earshot, Ana told the Captain her story. Despite her fervent desire not to expose the politician as the father of the twins, she knew it was impossible to keep the information from the Captain. She needed to clear her name and trusted him to be discreet. After hearing what Ana had to say, the Captain agreed discretion was the best course of action in this delicate matter, so as not to upset the politician and his wife.

The Captain leaned over the desk, and locked eyes with Ana. “Listen, if you’re caught alone at night again without your certificate, you’re on your own. I won’t be able to protect you. Keep your certificate with you at all times.” He tipped his head to the right as a signal for Ana to leave.

Pérez approached her. “I’m watching you, *negra*,” he whispered. “If I catch you again, I’ll lock your black ass up for good.”

Ana heard men laughing as she exited the building taking two steps at a time. She contemplated going after her medical bag but couldn’t chance being caught again. The thought of losing the instruments she’d used for over twenty years made Ana sick to her stomach. No, she had to go directly home, but she wanted to scream as long and loud as she could. Moving one

or two steps forward in her life and five back was no life! All that was left to do was to return early the following morning and search for her bag. There was nothing more she could do that evening but get home without getting arrested.

As Ana approached Emilia's house, she heard laughter and saw two women on the front porch. Hoping not to attract the women's attention, Ana kept her head down and walked briskly toward her home. She certainly didn't want a run-in with Jaime on top of her near-arrest that evening.

"Doña Ana! I thought that was you. You're just in time for our hen party! Come on up," said Emilia, standing barefoot in a tight-fitting, red dress. She'd either been out or was going out. Her companion in the brightly-colored dress and high heels seemed to be in her early twenties.

"No, thank you. I've had a long day and a bad night. All I want is my bed. *Buenas noches*," said Ana, waving as she passed the women.

"One little *traguito* before bed, Doña Ana?" Emilia held up a glass. "Come on, one little drink. Jaime isn't here. Come meet my roommate, María." María waved, and Ana had to admit some kind conversation and a quick nightcap could help her relax after the police station. María was a pretty woman with short black hair and skin the color of dark brown sugar. "What happened tonight? You said you had a bad night, and you're out so late." Emilia poured Ana a generous glass of rum.

"Sit down," Emilia said, patting a cushion on the rattan couch.

"I was heading home after a birth, and was stopped by a police officer." Emilia moaned.

"Oh, you're a midwife! But you were out alone after dark," María said, giving Emilia a knowing look.

"I wasn't aware it was a crime to walk alone at night?" The look María had given Emilia annoyed Ana.

"He probably thought you were working the streets, Doña Ana," said Emilia. Ana let out an exasperated sigh.

"I swear, you can't live alone or work at night without harassment anymore," María said and lit a cigarette.

"Lord knows, we hate being under any man's thumb, especially Jaime's big thumb, but if we don't have a man to protect us, the police are on our asses night and day," said Emilia.

"Well, I was on business. I delivered twins in town," Ana said, arching

an eyebrow.

“They automatically think you’re in our line of business if you’re caught out late at night alone.” Emilia smiled at Ana.

Ana didn’t smile back. “That’s ridiculous. This would have never happened in La Playa.”

“Ah, you’re from the Playa. Well, you’re in the city now, and those are the rules here. So, you’ve now seen the inside of the jail, Doña Ana. It isn’t a place for a lady, is it?” said María, flicking her ashes on a nearby plant. “We can tell you from experience, you don’t want to get caught again.”

“She’s right,” said Emilia. “We used to work for ourselves, but we had to involve Jaime. He told the police he ran a brothel, and we took out a joint license with him so they wouldn’t bother us. Without Jaime, we’d have to deal with the police harassing us here and on every corner.”

“They already make us register with the police station as prostitutes, and we pay a hygiene tax. Every week we’re forced to submit to pelvic exams. Everyone gets a damn cut,” said María with disgust.

“Don’t forget about the document we have to carry!”

Ana was getting an earful, and her head hurt. “What documents are these? The policeman asked me for my papers. What are they for?”

“The document is a little paper book that says you’re a prostitute. They check us regularly for disease, and all our medical visits are recorded in that book. Believe me; you don’t ever want a pelvic exam at the station’s clinic. There’s no privacy; anyone lucky enough to be standing at the door gets to watch the festivities,” Emilia said.

“And I’ll bet the instruments of torture the doctors use aren’t sterilized before they stick them in us,” added María. Ana shook her head, knowing full well what a dirty instrument could do to a woman’s body.

“You’re very lucky they didn’t make you submit to an examination before letting you go. They must have been too busy.”

“So, what is the punishment for prostitution without this passport?” asked Ana.

“Jail time,” said Emilia. “But there are many other interesting punishments. Let’s see; you could be raped in a cell by a guard or policemen. Oh, and the cells—eight women to a cell, filthy toilets, and not enough ventilation, so you’re covered in sweat all day, every day. The food isn’t fit for a dog.”

“How can they get away with all this?” asked Ana, unable to contain her anger.

“They do get away with it, and as long as we keep our papers and check-ups up-to-date, we stay out of jail. It’s the women who don’t have protection that suffer,” said María. “The money is good, or I wouldn’t continue.”

Ana couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “What could be worth this treatment and danger involved?”

“It’s easy money, Doña Ana. When we save enough money, we’re moving to the country,” said Emilia, smiling at María.

“Doña Ana, come with us. Wouldn’t you love living in the country with fast-flowing rivers and clean air? Pure heaven!” said María, clapping. “Emilia is going to sell this house, and we’ll chip in for a house in the country. Come with us; won’t you, Doña Ana?”

Ana smiled broadly. The women were charming, but a bit mad to be in their line of business now that she understood the risks involved. “That does sound wonderful. I’ve always wanted to go to the mountains.”

“By the way, who arrested you? Was it the handsome Officer Pérez?” asked Emilia.

“Pérez! Yes, that was his name, but I wasn’t arrested—only brought in for questioning.”

“Ooh, he can arrest me anytime,” María said, jumping up and moving her hips provocatively. María and Emilia laughed, but Ana shook her head.

“He was awful. I don’t know how you two can laugh,” Ana said.

Emilia shrugged. “Doña Ana, women fight against police brutality, with employers for decent wages, and we fight our own men who are supposed to protect us.”

“It’s true; women are treated badly. Only society women stand a chance. But even good women are often reduced to selling their bodies and then the men who pay for their services are never harassed or locked up. Man pits woman against woman for his money, attention, and security,” said María, shrugging. “What can you do?”

“Listen,” continued Emilia. “We laugh because we can’t do a damn thing to change those situations. We survive the best way we can. You’re fortunate to be a midwife. You have a job that pays well, and you are respected in the community. We have no skills whatsoever. We use our



looks now until our looks won't get us by any longer. All we can do is work hard and save money to get out of the business. And if we didn't laugh, we'd cry." Emilia put her arm around Ana, and squeezed her shoulder lightly.

"I understand what you're saying, but something must change," Ana said, remembering Fela's words of caution when she felt herself relax with the women.

"Not in our lifetime," Emilia said, finishing her drink. The women were silent for a few minutes. "We'll take care of each other; that's what we'll do. Doña Ana, you're safe with us. Right, María?"

"Absolutely; you're one of us even if you're not one of us," laughed María.

"Well, I *can* offer you my services, so your physicals aren't done at the station. I can check you for disease, and show you how to protect yourself," Ana said, hoping to help the women avoid the police station in the future.

"If you can figure out how to authorize the health certificates, let us know. The police have cornered the market on the stamps for those certificates, though. They're making money while we're on our backs."

"I've heard enough. Who's pouring? I need another drink before bed," said Ana.

María refilled the glasses, and Emilia toasted, "*A la copa del olvido*, to the cup of forgetting the past!"

Ana swallowed the rum in one gulp, and replied, "To my new friends, and to my medical bag, may it be there in the morning."

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# CHAPTER 17

## *La Botánica – The Botanical Shop*

*Ponce, 1917*

**THE MID-DAY SUN** punished anyone caught outdoors instead of sleeping the siesta, but babies had no sense of time nor did they keep to a schedule. Ana rushed along, hoping to find her medical bag in the same spot she'd left it the night before, but not before a quick visit to a new *botánica*. She repositioned her black umbrella against the sun, praying to find cooler air inside the botanical shop, which was closer to her client's house than her usual shop.

“*Buenos días!*” A small bell tinkled at the top of the door, announcing Ana's entrance into the shop. The smell of patchouli, her favorite incense for cleansing homes of malevolent spirits, filled her nose, and as always, evoked feelings of deep spirituality within her. The heady smoke of incense curled like a snake from a large, black bowl sitting on the wooden counter. The shop appeared empty and was much cooler than she'd anticipated. Ana closed her umbrella, rang the school bell on the counter, and waited. Behind the counter, several rows of brown apothecary bottles of all sizes, lined a long wooden shelf. Cream-colored apothecary labels with faded sepia writing indicated the essential oils inside each bottle. Large glass canisters overflowed with dried chamomile, fresh orange and lemon leaves, and mint leaves, and on the opposite wall, a wider shelf held larger statues of saints and many syncretized versions of the Virgin Mary, including several statues of Christ as a child and adult. The plaster and wood statues of every conceivable size stood side-by-side with squatty, spent candles in between.

Ana scanned the room, amazed at how many items were crammed in the

small shop. The room was brimming with relics, books, rosaries, crucifixes, and two child-sized statues of Saint Michael the Archangel, mortally wounding a fierce dragon, writhing at his feet. A low display case on the counter was jam-packed with amulets, ex-votos, charms, and crosses in silver, gold, and other metals. When no one came out, Ana turned to leave, thinking the owners might be at lunch or sleeping the siesta, and she heard a man's voice from behind a faded, burgundy-colored, velvet curtain. "I'll be right out."

A silver horn in a wooden display case caught Ana's eye. She'd never seen one like it, and wondered if she had enough money to purchase it. She leaned over the case for a better look when an attractive, middle-aged man of medium build entered from behind the curtain, buttoning a white, cotton shirt. His coarse gray hair was cropped short and he stood eye to eye with Ana. The cuffs of his tan pants were rolled to his calves, and he wore black sandals on his feet. A thin scar in the shape of a crescent moon ran from his eyebrow to his jaw line. He studied Ana for a moment and then asked, "How may I help you?"

"Do we know each other? You're looking at me like we've met," said Ana, feeling her face grow hot.

"No, I don't believe we have," he smiled. His penetrating, dark brown eyes seemed to hypnotize Ana, and she blinked to break her gaze.

"Ah, your accent," said Ana, smiling back. "Cuba."

"Yes, indeed. We are compatriots. I was born on a plantation close to Havana. My name is Agustín Durán. But, we're American citizens now, aren't we?"

"Yes, this is what I hear."

"And your name is?"

"Ana...I mean, Akanni. My family name is Opaku." Ana offered her hand.

"Akanni," he repeated as he shook her hand. Ana felt rough calluses on his palm and pulled her hand away without meaning to. She hoped he hadn't noticed the abruptness of her action.

"Kayin Malinka. I changed my name when I arrived in Porto Rico. I was tired of answering questions about slavery." Ana nodded in agreement, but said nothing. His large hands had seen a lifetime of manual labor, and she detected the faint smell of tobacco on his swollen fingers. He followed her

gaze, and held out his hands. “Yes, they’re rough and scarred.”

“I’m sorry to stare. That was rude of me.”

“Working with sugarcane will do that to hands. Here, I promise to be more delicate,” he said, offering his hand again. Ana felt an electric charge as he pressed his hand to hers. Agustín was a *curandero*, a powerful healer. Could this be the man Fela spoke of?

Agustín smiled. “You are a daughter of Yemayá, no?”

She nodded. “Off and on in this society,” she replied, returning a smile. Agustín seemed to be Ana’s age.

“I understand what you mean. I’m a child of Oshún. You are not an initiate, but you have much knowledge and good instincts,” said Augustin, still holding her hand and cocking his head. “Let me guess. You help and heal people, but you primarily work with women. Are you a *partera*?”

“Yes, I’m a midwife, and if I don’t hurry, today’s baby will enter the world without me,” Ana laughed.

“Yes, of course. Give me your list. I’ll fill it as quickly as I can.” She handed Agustín her list, and watched as he deftly made his way through the bottles and jars, plucking herbs from jars like a guitarist plucks the strings of a Spanish guitar. In no time, he presented her with a small sack.

“What do I owe you?”

“Nothing, if you promise to shop here again and take a coffee with me some afternoon. We can talk about Cuba and of happier days to come.” Ana took the sack from him and thanked him without acknowledging his invitation. “Come back soon, Akanni,” he added with a wink.

She waved at Agustín before walking out the door, feeling a stirring deep inside her. She was almost to the end of the street when she remembered to breathe, and regained her composure. Berating herself for acting childish, she vowed never to visit the shop again. “I do not need romance and complications in my life now or any time for that matter. This is ridiculous, and Fela is ridiculous.” She balanced the sack on her hip, trying to keep her umbrella steady as she rushed to her client’s house. She was unable to get Agustín out of her mind, and would be lying if she said she hadn’t found him attractive. “He has probably already put a spell on me,” she muttered, tripping on the curb of the sidewalk. “But then again, he was probably bored, and had no customers all morning.”

Ana began to worry that Agustín already knew her secret. She

immediately regretted telling him her name; she knew better than that. She wasn't in the habit of giving strangers her name. Why had she? He'd caught her at a low moment with his kind eyes. Yes, those eyes. No more! If she saw him again and he said anything about her past, she'd tell him he was mistaken. She would deny everything. It was settled—she'd never see Agustín again and would avoid that part of town at all costs. And perhaps she wouldn't have to worry about the healer as President Woodrow Wilson had signed a compulsory military service act—it was rumored that 20,000 Porto Ricans would soon be drafted to serve in World War I. Ana could not fathom how the entire world was at war, and she couldn't imagine how the world would change.

When Ana reached the place where she'd left her medical bag, it was nowhere to be found, and the vegetable cart was gone. She looked behind bushes, in the gutter, and came up empty-handed. She rubbed her temples to ease the throbbing. There was nothing left to do but hurry to her client's house and do the best she could without her instruments. But how could she? What if she needed forceps or a crochet hook during the labor or delivery? She'd wasted time at the *botánica*. If she'd gone back to the cart before heading to the shop, her bag might still have been there!

Ana's client's husband was waiting outside their home when she arrived. He had a pained look on his face, and she immediately worried she'd arrived too late, or worse, that something had happened to mother or child. "Doña Ana, I was asked to wait for you."

"My God, what's wrong?"

"No, my wife is fine, but I'm afraid my mother-in-law called Doctór Rivera."

"I don't understand. I'm to deliver your child, yet he has been called?"

"I'm sorry, Doña Ana. You delivered our eldest, and we think you're wonderful, but times are changing. My wife...actually, her mother wants a male doctor for this birth. They're at the hospital now. Unfortunately, it seems it's a matter of fashion?"

"Ah, yes." Ana's heart sank. "Women have decided men make better midwives. Men have avoided the birthing room for centuries, and now they take my place with women's blessings."

"I'm very sorry. Please take this for your trouble."

He offered his hand, and when Ana shook it, she found ten dollars in her

palm.

“Thank you, but this isn’t necessary.”

“Please, take it,” he said, pausing before continuing. “Doña Ana, we were told you don’t have the proper credentials to deliver babies. Is this true?” He seemed earnest, and she knew him to be kind.

“Doctór Rivera has lied to you and your wife. I have my certificate. Thank you for the money, and please give my best to Señora González and her mother. I pray for an easy labor and delivery, and a healthy baby. I must go now.” Ana turned away with angry tears he would never see. Her heart raced. She stopped under the shade of a *flamboyán* tree to catch her breath. Doctór Rivera! She should have known he’d continue his plan to ruin her. Didn’t these people understand she needed to work, and keep saving for her future? How could she save money without work? She’d saved enough for several months of rent payments, and had been hoarding canned goods for some time, so there was no danger of starving, but her next job was a month away. What if that job fell by the wayside? What would she do? Without her instruments, and clients being told not to work with her—she had nothing.

Ana didn’t know what to do or where to turn. Her next thought was consulting her old friend, Fela. The psychic would know which path Ana needed to take next—it was time for a spiritual intervention. After deciding her situation was dire enough to forego her own divination, Ana checked her watch. She’d missed the medium’s morning session, and barely had enough time to get there before the afternoon session ended. Stopping at a busy intersection, she decided to wait for a ride, and if nothing happened quickly, she’d wait until the following morning. The streets of Ponce were crowded with people returning to work after the siesta. Most walked, as only the wealthy could afford cars, and Ana prayed for a quick ride. A horse and cart would be perfect. Ana shut her eyes, willing the vision to appear. She opened her eyes and saw nothing. No horse and cart, no trolley, and no horse, for that matter; only a young boy on a bicycle, riding fast and hard toward her, swerving to miss small rocks on the street.

“Óye,” Ana called out. “Can I get a ride to the tramway stop at *Avenida Hostos*? It’s for a good cause!”

“Doña,” he said after screeching to a halt in front of her, “The *only* good cause is my cause. Times are hard and war may be coming.” He waited to

see what Ana would offer, and made no move to let her on his bike. “I’m an American citizen now. You get a lift if you pay.”

“*Mira nene*, I’m a United States citizen, too. Here, I have two cents for you; take me the tram,” said Ana. The boy looked at the money, shook his head, and rode off without Ana.

\* \* \*

On May 30, 1918, Ana opened a two-day old newspaper and read that the United States 1st Infantry Division, commanded by General John Pershing, had captured and held the village of Cantigny from the Germans. She wondered how many of the 650,000 American soldiers who’d arrived in France were Porto Rican soldiers as thousands had already been sent to the Panama Canal, and to the Western Front.

Ana flipped through the newspaper, searching for a map that could tell her how close the island was to Europe, when she spotted a short article about Serafina’s upcoming nuptials to a Señor Antonio Jesus San Patricio. Serafina looked like a Spanish queen in the black and white newspaper photograph, wearing an elegant ball gown and her hair up off her shoulders. Ana couldn’t have been happier or more proud if Serafina were her own daughter. She cut out the article, and gazed at Serafina’s beautiful face and that of the handsome Don Antonio. The gods were surely smiling on Serafina after so many years alone, and with news of the war, the wedding was good news.

Later that day, a messenger handed Ana an immaculate, white envelope—a wedding invitation, with a handwritten note from Serafina, which read:

*“My dearest Ana,*

*I hope this letter finds you in good health. I beg your forgiveness for not remaining in better communication with you, and please know you have been in my thoughts and prayers since our last day together.*

*Thank you for your friendship, and for taking us into your home before we left La Playa. I will never forget your kindness. I must also thank you for standing in for me at Roberto’s funeral. I know it could not have been easy for you, but I could not bring myself to*



*return to the home where I'd experienced such sad memories and hard times with Roberto. Forgive me, Ana. I prefer to remember my dead husband as he was when we first met.*

*Lorena and Mateo are still fine children, who remember you well, Ana. I have done my best for them, and it has not been easy. Roberto's sister, Providencia, was not the loving sister I'd hoped for. She was curt, abrasive, and treated me like a housemaid all the years we lived with her. I had no choice but to do her bidding, as she was kind to take us in when Roberto became ill.*

*I am to marry Señor Antonio San Patricio, a distant cousin of Roberto, whom I met during a sailing regatta in Guánica. I had taken the children to watch the races, and we were introduced by Providencia. Antonio is twenty years my senior, and works for the Spanish Customs House. He is a gentle, kind man, and I am in love for the second time in my life, Ana. I did not think it was possible for me to be happy again. The children love Antonio, and we will be well cared for. I hope you will be happy for me.*

*I got your new address from the Barrio Playa postman, who was happy to give it to me.*

*Be well, sister of my heart. I am very much looking forward to seeing you at our wedding.*

*All my love, Serafina Martínez*

Ana read Serafina's note again, and then ran her fingers over the fine invitation with the black calligraphy on handmade, cream-colored stationery, which read:

*Señor and Señora Guillermo San Patricio  
Cordially invite you  
To the wedding  
Of  
Señorita Serafina Santana Martínez  
And  
Señor Antonio Jesús San Patricio  
At nine o'clock in the morning*

*On Saturday, the second of February, 1918*  
*At*  
*Catedral Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*  
*Ponce, Porto Rico*

The wedding was the next day! Ana had never been to a wedding, much less an upper class, society wedding, and there was no doubt this would be an elegant wedding. She wondered if the San Patricio family, one of the premier families of Ponce, knew about her invitation, or if Serafina had somehow snuck the invitation to her. However it had been done, Ana was proud and honored to have been included. She noticed Antonio's parent's names were listed at the top of the wedding invitation before Antonio's name, leaving no doubt as to their status and importance of the celebration. Most probably, they were paying for the wedding reception. Ana hoped the San Patricio family would treat their new daughter-in-law, Serafina, with the love and kindness she deserved.

Ana would attend the wedding, and decided she'd remain in the shadows, wishing Serafina a world of happiness from afar. Smiling, she said, "There is only so much decency and civility I can put up with."

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# CHAPTER 18

## *Asuntos Delicados ~ Delicate Situations*

**DESPITE THE QUICK ENGAGEMENT** and rushed wedding plans, Guillermo and Delfina San Patricio, returned from their annual shopping trip to San Juan—where they’d purchased gift items, marbled paper from Florence, and Italian gold for their exclusive jewelry store in Ponce—just in time for their son’s wedding. Serafina hoped her future in-laws would be as pleased about the wedding as Antonio had insisted. All the marriage arrangements had been made by telegram, and his parents were more involved in the wedding plans than Serafina had imagined.

Serafina’s nerves were a taut bundle when she arrived at the San Patricio home with Antonio. She stopped short of the gate, and whispered, “Do they know I’m pregnant?” She smoothed down her pale yellow dress, hoping her idea of not wearing the matching sash around her waist was camouflaging her growing belly.

“They know nothing. Don’t worry, my love; this is our secret. Your pregnancy will show soon enough, but by tomorrow we’ll be man and wife,” he grinned. “And don’t be taken in by the grand house. My parents bought this house at a very low price, even though they’ll never admit to it,” he said, bringing Serafina close to him.

“Somehow, I doubt that,” Serafina said, taking in the neoclassical villa. From where she stood, she could see bits of an enormous, tiled inner courtyard and an exquisite garden.

“No, it’s true. When you enter, you’ll see antiques, oriental carpets, and oil paintings my parents bought with the money they saved from the low sales price on the house, and many pieces were left behind by the former

owner. This house was built by a Spaniard—a sherry merchant who fled to his homeland amidst rumors that he'd deflowered the daughter of a prominent Ponce family," said Antonio. "The gentleman in question needed some quick money, if you know what I mean. And with the war in Europe, can you imagine how frightened he must have been to flee to Spain at this time?"

"What became of the poor girl?"

"As what happens with most of these...delicate situations," said a dour woman in her mid-seventies, who Ana surmised was Antonio's mother. "The Spanish merchant paid for the unfortunate girl's quick marriage to a boy from a well-to-do family, who wished to improve their social standing, and then he fled the country." Serafina could not hide her surprise. The woman's words had made her flinch. What would his mother think if she knew about *her* pregnancy?

"*Mamá,*" said Antonio, leading Serafina to his mother. "Welcome home. You're looking well." Antonio kissed his mother's offered cheek. "This is my beautiful Serafina," he said, pulling Serafina close.

Serafina smiled, and extended her hand in greeting. "*Es un placer, Doña Delfina.* It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

Delfina cocked her head slightly, and nodded, never taking her eyes off Serafina. "*Encantada,*" she replied in a controlled voice, followed by a weak smile. "You are so much prettier than your photograph."

"Oh...why, thank you." The comment caught her off-guard. Serafina had been extremely pleased with the engagement photograph in the newspaper of her and Antonio. Had the old woman just insulted her with a compliment? Serafina tried to relax and held Delfina's smile, although it took her entire being to do so, as Antonio and his mother began exchanging pleasantries.

Slight and trim, Delfina San Patricio was immaculately dressed in a long, black silk dress, and stood a foot shorter than Serafina. She wore her white hair pulled back into a sleek bun, and her black eyes, accentuated by black, penciled-in eyebrows, gave her the appearance of a woman not at all pleased with aging. Delfina wore an ornate gold crucifix, several heavy gold bracelets, and substantial gold *argollas* hung from her earlobes. Serafina smiled to herself, thinking how Antonio's mother seemed to wear the entire family jewelry store on her body. "How was your trip, Doña

Delfina?”

“The trip went as well as could be expected; however, Antonio’s father’s seasonal asthma began just before we left. We thought the trip to San Juan might improve his lungs, but it was damp and cold in the capital city.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. We are anxious to see father,” said Antonio.

“Come, Antonio. Your father is most anxious to speak to you,” said his mother, taking his arm.

“Excuse me, Mother; are we not to go in together?”

“Yes, of course, in a minute or two. I’m sure Miss Martínez will enjoy our lovely courtyard while you visit with us briefly. We won’t be long, dear,” Antonio’s mother said to Serafina.

“Take your time. I’ll be fine, Antonio,” said Serafina, feeling a sudden urge to flee. “Doña Delfina, your gardens are lovely. Do you do your own gardening?” Serafina’s comment fell on deaf ears as Delfina San Patricio had turned away, and was guiding Antonio through an archway toward the other end of the courtyard. Serafina’s face stung as if she’d been slapped across the cheek as she watched Antonio walk away. “Well, wasn’t that nice,” she muttered. Why was this woman acting so cold toward her? Did Delfina know about her pregnancy? Serafina began to worry Antonio would change his mind about marrying her. She would certainly be thrown out of his parent’s home if their secret pregnancy came out in conversation.

Searching for a distraction to calm her nerves, Serafina wandered around the courtyard, marveling at the controlled chaos of the garden. A myriad of flowers in bright tropical colors spilled out over terra cotta urns, and fragrant orange and lemon trees grew side by side in even larger blue and white, oriental-style pots. The walls of the courtyard seemed to disappear into the rich foliage. Serafina imagined she was alone in a rain forest as she inspected delicate buds, and smelled blooms and fruit. Several wrought iron birdcages hung from shaded balconies, holding canaries and lovebirds that twittered and seemed to sing to her. Serafina was enchanted. She sat on an ornate, Grecian-style bench, admiring a pair of lovebirds huddled close in a low hanging, gilded cage. The birds cocked their heads toward Serafina. “Don’t fret *pajaritos*. You are lucky little birds to be safe in that cage.” Serafina looked around, making sure she was alone. “Luckier than me at this moment,” she whispered. “I feel like a goat led to slaughter.”

As Serafina surveyed the courtyard, she wondered what to call her

mother-in-law after the wedding. The informal, *Mamá*, did not seem appropriate, nor did it feel comfortable to Serafina. ‘Doña Delfina’ was probably the safest choice at the moment. Was Ponce a big enough city for two San Patricio women? Serafina felt a stabbing fear when she realized Antonio would soon divulge her humble beginnings in La Playa to his wealthy parents. Or worse yet...had Antonio been drafted into the war and hadn’t told her?

\* \* \*

On the day of Serafina and Antonio’s wedding, a scorching August sun beat down on the *Plaza de las Delicias*. The Indian laurel trees provided precious shade, and sprays of water from the large marble fountain added much-needed moisture to the air, cooling those who sat on the neoclassical benches around the square. Scores of gray and white doves flew around the twin turrets of the *Catedral Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*, before joining other birds perched on the high walls surrounding the cathedral.

“Do you know any of them?” Mercedes, Antonio’s friend and a new friend to Serafina, nodded toward the steady stream of well-turned out guests approaching the Cathedral.

“No, they must be friends of Antonio and his family. Don’t you know them?” Serafina noticed Mercedes stood a bit taller and held her head high under her white umbrella, as the guests passed.

“I recognize most of them. They’re pleasant enough and from good families.”

“They look a bit serious to be attending a wedding, don’t you think? I’m hoping they’re as nice as Antonio’s sisters. They’ve been so good to me,” said Serafina.

“What about the old lizard? Do you get along with her?”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Oh, you know, Antonio’s mother, the old bat!”

Serafina chuckled. She sensed her new friend, Mercedes, might turn into an ally, but it was wiser to get to know Mercedes before speaking her mind. “Well, she and Señor San Patricio paid for our wedding, which was kind of them. No...Doña Delfina hasn’t exactly warmed to me yet, but Antonio’s father is lovely.”

“He is a lovely man, but Antonio’s mother is ruthless; watch her carefully. And yes, the San Patricio family knows how to host a beautiful wedding. I attended the weddings of Antonio’s sisters, and no expense was spared.”

“Mercedes, may I ask if you knew Antonio’s first wife well?”

“Yes, we were good friends, and I miss her. She was a beautiful woman, inside and out. It was such a tragedy, and I hope we will be friends, Serafina,” said Mercedes. “My friend, Antonio, is a fortunate man.”

“Thank you, Mercedes; that’s kind of you to say. I already feel as though we are friends.”

“Hello, beautiful bride,” interrupted eighteen-year old, Lorena, dressed in a mauve, tea-length dress and a matching bow in her long, dark tresses. She hugged Serafina’s waist, and looked back for her brother Mateo, who ran at full speed towards them.

Serafina kissed Lorena’s cheek. “Thank you, sweetness. You look beautiful, as well; so grown up.” Serafina smoothed down Mateo’s unruly hair. “Mateo, Mateo. When will you slow down?”

“Not today, Mamá! I’m too excited,” said Mateo. “When do we eat?”

“My handsome son is always hungry! Oh, Mercedes, I hope everything goes well today!”

“Don’t worry, Serafina. Your wedding will be the talk of the town; it already is,” said Mercedes in a kind, reassuring voice.

Serafina sighed, fanning herself with a white lace fan, a wedding gift from Ana that had arrived earlier that morning. “I hope you’re right, because my nerves are getting the better of me.”

Mateo pointed and shouted, “Look, its Doña Ana!”

Serafina squinted for a better view. “It is Ana!” Serafina hiked up her white lace wedding gown, and as she ran toward Ana, her Spanish *mantilla* blew behind her. Ana, who wore white stockings under a floral, tea-length dress, and black patent leather shoes, started crying. The women hugged each other tight. “Ana, you look wonderful! You haven’t changed a bit. I’m so happy to see you!”

“It’s been too long! Don’t cry, dear friend. I don’t want your gown and make-up to be ruined!”

Serafina took Ana’s hands in hers, and they walked toward Mercedes and the children. “I can’t remember being as happy as I am this very second.



Thank you for coming, Ana. It means so much to us to have you here with us. My wedding is now perfect.”

“I wouldn’t have missed your happy day for the world. Lorena! Mateo! Look how much you’ve grown. Come give me a hug,” Ana said, reaching for the children. “How I’ve missed you!”

“We’re happy to see you, too!” Lorena pulled Ana to Mercedes. “This is Mercedes, our new friend.”

Mercedes offered her hand. “It’s a pleasure, Doña Ana. Doesn’t our Serafina look magnificent?”

Ana shook Mercedes’ hand. “Yes, she does. She was the most beautiful woman in La—”

“Well, I feel like a stuffed sausage in this dress,” Serafina interjected, looking down at her figure-hugging wedding gown, and praying Mercedes hadn’t caught the mention of La Playa.

Ana winked at Serafina, realizing the door to Serafina’s past hadn’t been opened yet. “I think it’s supposed to be that tight. You must choose between looking beautiful and breathing.”

“Oh, look! The priest is waving us over,” Mercedes said. “It’s time, children. Let’s leave your mother some time to herself before she walks down the aisle.” Lorena and Mateo, seemingly oblivious to the heat, ran ahead of Mercedes toward the Cathedral. “See you inside,” said Mercedes, looking over her shoulder.

Serafina patted the bench for Ana to sit beside her. “I’m sorry I didn’t warn you; Mercedes knows nothing about my past in La Playa. I’d prefer to keep that quiet until Antonio’s family and Mercedes get to know us better.”

“Of course, I understand. She didn’t seem to notice. I’m so happy for you, Serafina. This is truly a wonderful day. I offer you and Antonio my most heartfelt blessings for a long, happy life, and many healthy children.”

Serafina patted her stomach, “You won’t have to wait too long to meet Antonio’s first child.” Ana’s hand flew up to her mouth, hiding a smile behind her hands.

“What a blessing for you and Antonio!” They hugged and laughed. “When is the baby due?”

“Five months from today, as a matter of fact.” Serafina beamed.

“Does Don Antonio know?”

“Yes, he’s very pleased. It’s his first child; can you imagine? His wife

died in childbirth, and the child didn't survive the night."

"Oh my, that's awful. Well then, this is a wonderful day for you and Antonio." They spotted the priest clapping and waving from the Cathedral door. "It's time."

"Would you please tell the priest I need a minute alone? I need to gather my thoughts before I walk down the aisle," Serafina said with a smile. "I'll be right along."

Ana winked. "Yes, of course. I will call you when it's time for your grand entrance."

"Thank you, Ana." As Ana walked toward the Cathedral, Serafina thought how truly perfect the day was with Ana by her side. She couldn't wait to introduce Antonio to Ana—her dearest friend. "Oh, but this heat," she said, thankful her hair was up and off her shoulders, coiffed in a low, sleek chignon. Serafina leaned her head back, trying to catch more of a breeze, and noticed her hands were shaking. Her thoughts turned to the wedding preparations, and all the decisions and choices she'd not been made privy to. Fixing her own hair had been the only wedding decision she'd been allowed to make, and she was entirely fine with that, as the San Patricio women were very chic.

Serafina tugged at one of several white crepe roses sewn on the magnificent Spanish lace gown, recycled from Antonio's youngest sister's wedding gown. There hadn't been enough time to make a new wedding gown for Serafina, so the high collar had been cut out, creating a V-neck that Serafina loved. Absentmindedly, she pulled at another rose, and it came away in her hand. Making sure no one was looking, she threw the crepe rose into the bushes behind her "There," she said with a smile. "I've made my second decision." She left the rest of the fabric flowers alone, as they strategically hid her growing belly. When Serafina had looked in her mirror that morning, she'd been pleased with the results—her alabaster complexion was further enhanced by coral lipstick, and her green eyes shone under the eyeliner and light eye makeup. She hoped Antonio's family would approve.

Just then, Antonio's parents made their way into the Cathedral. Nothing like making a grand entrance at the last possible second, thought Serafina, watching Delfina and her husband walk as though they had metal rods for spines. Antonio's sisters followed, sporting twin pregnancies and matching

husbands. Serafina laughed to herself as they waved to her. Her future brothers-in-law looked like bald, chubby twins, struggling to keep up with their wives, whose enormous bellies did not slow them down. Serafina wished Antonio's family knew about her pregnancy, and prayed her future mother-in-law would soon warm to her. They would be family soon, and Serafina would give birth to the third San Patricio grandchild. How could they not love her?

Shortly after Antonio's sisters entered the Cathedral, Ana came out, waving Serafina over. Serafina stood, adjusted her *mantilla*, and fixed the short train behind her. She could hear Antonio's sister's reminders, "Raise your chin, remember to lower your shoulders, and walk like a queen toward her king."

Ana, Lorena, and Mateo held the doors for Serafina to enter. Sensing the children were slightly nervous, Serafina kissed them lightly on their cheeks, and then rubbed off the lipstick marks. "Now, go sit down; I'll see you soon. I love you both," she reassured them. The children ran to their seats, and Serafina waited for the organist to give the signal that it was time to proceed down the aisle. Serafina's nerves coursed through her body. A quick wedding without an awful lot of fanfare was what Serafina and Antonio had hoped for, but here they were—a happy couple at a huge society wedding.

Serafina whispered to Ana, "I wish my father and brothers were here."

"They aren't here?"

"No, they're working this weekend, but I'm glad you're with me, Ana."

Ana smiled and touched Serafina's shoulder. "I know you miss them; you'll see them soon."

"Aren't you going to sit with the other guests, Ana?"

"No, I want to watch you walk down the aisle from here," Ana replied. "Now, breathe and go marry that handsome man of yours." Serafina placed a kiss on Ana's cheek, both surprised and embarrassed at the relief she felt that Ana would remain where she stood, instead of receiving stares and wondering glances from the family and guests in the pews. When the pipe organ began, Serafina took a deep breath.

"Are you ready, my child?" Serafina nodded at Ana, remembering the exact question Ana had posed before Lorena and Mateo's births. She was ashamed of her thoughts about Ana seconds earlier. Serafina's knees felt

weak as she took in the entire view. The magnificent Cathedral was filled with wedding guests, and each pew had sprays of white flowers at the end closest to the aisle. Prisms of colored light emanated from the tall, stained glass windows, warming the interior of the Cathedral, and the scents of flowers and incense filled her senses. Serafina's eyes followed the white runner to the large altar ahead, which was ablaze with candles and white floral arrangements. At the altar stood the parish priest; Antonio, her handsome husband-to-be; his two groomsmen; and her new friend, Mercedes.

When Serafina heard the musical cue for her to proceed down the aisle, she walked like a queen to her new life with Antonio San Patricio. She smiled when the baby inside her belly kicked.

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# CHAPTER 19

## *El Baile de los Obreros – The Worker’s Ball*

**ANA SAT ON THE FRONT PORCH**, tapping her feet to the percussion-driven *bomba* and *plena* rhythms coming from Emilia’s house, which reminded her of many of the traditional Cuban melodies she’d listened to as a young woman. She loved the sounds of the *subidor* and *pandereta* drums; the *maracas*; and the *cuá*, the sticks played against the drums that echoed through her lively, adopted neighborhood of San Antón. Even the *coquíes*, the tiny tree frogs, were more quiet than usual that evening, suppressing their raucous songs in honor of the music brought by enslaved Africans to the Caribbean islands. Ana remembered her parents singing the sad, and sometimes angry, messages the lyrics conveyed about the slave’s lives and their living conditions. Tonight, like the Lukumí *cabildos* in Cuba, San Antón was establishing a sense of community. The dancers and musicians would stay up long into the night, and Ana would enjoy the party at a safe distance. Emilia had invited Ana to attend her party, but she’d gently refused. Despite longing to share in the comradery of the beautiful evening, the last thing Ana wanted was an evening with Jaime and his drunken friends.

Jaime’s daily barrage of verbal abuse toward Emilia had lessened since Ana moved next door, but he still bellowed about the smallest of things. His jealousy was legendary, and Ana soon realized Emilia was an expert at fueling his fire. Ana surmised Jaime hosted parties at home to keep his eye on Emilia, and to lessen the chance of her getting in trouble with other men, since she was busy at home. Emilia was a flirt, and combined with Jaime’s jealousy, it was a deadly combination in Ana’s eyes. Jaime was fine with

Emilia sleeping with other men for money, but any socializing without him was out of the question. There was a strong sexual chemistry between Jaime and Emilia, and it was obvious to Ana that Emilia craved the excitement and passion he brought to the relationship—even if passion often ended in violence. It had become clear to Ana that Emilia would never ask Jaime to leave, but at times she'd surprised Ana by turning brave and mouthy when she drank. Then Emilia risked life and limb.

Emilia stepped out of her house onto the large front porch, and waved when she saw Ana. She bounded across the yard, and kissed Ana's cheek. "Doña Ana, why are you sitting here all alone? Shame, shame, you should be dancing!" Emilia adjusted her skin-tight, canary yellow dress over generous thighs.

"I'm fine here, thank you. I can see what's going on at your house from where I sit, and I can tell by your soft eyes you've had a lot to drink. What are you up to?"

"Oh, that. Shh," Emilia said, suppressing a giggle with a finger to her lips. "See, Jaime is on his way to getting drunk, and when he passes out; we're sneaking out to the Plaza."

Just then, María joined them, her gold tooth glimmering. She snickered through her hands, "Did you tell Ana yet?"

"Oh, I heard plenty. How are you getting there?"

"We hired a *cochero*, and he's picking us up in his buggy soon," said Maria.

Ana looked back at Emilia, and shook her head in surprise. "Are you crazy? Emilia, you're taking a horrible risk. Jaime will kill you if he finds out."

"He's probably already drunk and it won't be long before he passes out. If I stay, I'll miss all those beautiful men at the Plaza," Emilia said with playful, pleading eyes. "We're still young! The three of us will go to the dance, and the *cochero* will bring us back. I guarantee Jaime will still be snoring when we get back."

Ana stood, waving her hands in front of her body. "Oh, no, I'm not going anywhere."

"You have to go with us, Ana," pleaded María. "Come on, you never go out!"

"You're both crazy." Ana covered her ears. "I'm not listening, and I'm

not going.”

“Ana, this is our chance to have some fun,” Emilia chimed in. “Come out with us for two hours! We promise if you’re not having a good time, we’ll leave with you. What do you say?”

“Thank you, but no. You go have fun. Besides, I don’t have a party dress,” replied Ana, confident the conversation was over.

“Wait here!” Emilia rushed home and within minutes, she returned with a light blue dress. “Put it on. I know it will fit you.”

Suddenly amused, Ana smiled and said, “I see the two of you won’t let up. All right, I’ll try it on, but that doesn’t mean I’m going with you.”

When Ana returned to the porch wearing the light blue dress, she received whistles from María and Emilia. “¡Áve María, *purísima*! That color makes your light eyes stand out,” said María. “And you’ll certainly attract lots of attention tonight with those generous curves!”

“Ana will attract enough attention for the three of us,” said Emilia, whistling again.

“Shush, you two. It’s only a dress,” Ana said, feeling the heat on her cheeks and neck. She had to admit the dress fit her nicely, and she felt pretty; not a word she’d ever used to describe herself. To Ana, a dress was comfortable and practical, always white or tan to deflect the sun, and that was the extent of it.

“Here; for your hair,” said Emilia, handing Ana a thin, white ribbon. Ana complied by smoothed her hair back into a low chignon, and tying the ribbon around the bun, trying to appear confident. Ana was apprehensive about going out with the girls, but couldn’t deny her excitement at an evening out. She’d never attended the Fiestas Patronales in the city of Ponce or anywhere for that matter; the music was the culprit. Did she dare go with the women?

“You’re beautiful and still young, Ana. It’s about time you looked your age,” said Emilia with a broad smile. “Come with us.”

“I don’t know about young, but I do feel happy tonight. All right, I’ll go. But only for two hours, and then straight home!”

The women agreed. “Let’s check to make sure Jaime is good and drunk,” Emilia said as a small group of her guests left her house.

“I’ll catch up to you; I’ve forgotten something.” Ana rushed to her bedroom, removed a wad of bills from her corset, and tucked it into the red



sack that contained her cowrie shells. She peeked through the curtain, making sure no one was looking, and placed the little bag under the bed, pushing it back into the corner. She locked the front door, and rejoined Emilia and María, who were impatient to leave.

The women peeked through Emilia's living room window, and saw Jaime sleeping on the wood floor. "I told you. He's passed out; let's go," Emilia whispered. "No one will disturb him, or they'll end up with a black eye."

They heard a whistle, and Maria pointed down the street. "There's the driver, let's go!" Ana took off her shoes, and nervously followed the women to the corner. They boarded the coach, and as they passed Emilia's house, the young women giggled, urging Ana to duck her head just in case.

"What? I'm too old for this," Ana complained as she covered her face. "I hope this doesn't turn out to be the biggest mistake I've ever made!"

"Don't worry! We do this all the time, and we've never once been caught," Emilia reassured her. As the coach left San Antón, Ana prayed Jaime was still asleep, and would remain asleep until they returned. Along the route to the Plaza, it seemed everyone in town was participating in the festivities in one way or another. As church bells called the faithful to prayer, adoration, and redemption, less religious folks set up tables outside their homes, enjoying the comings and goings with rum and song, raising the noise level several decibels.

"Look at the crowds! The bars and restaurants will have a brisk business tonight, which will pad their wallets for the coming year," said Emilia.

"I've never seen so many people. They're on foot, on horseback, in cars and carriages, and on trams. This is going to be fun," said María, squeezing Ana's arm, and barely able to contain her excitement. There was a carnival-like atmosphere in the air, even if the purpose of the fiesta was meant to solemnly honor the patron saint of Ponce, La Virgen de Guadalupe. Despite the war, there had been fireworks and dances for the working classes, and the wealthy, well-connected society families had enjoyed black tie balls, horse races, and sailing regattas. Groups of musicians had inaugurated each day of festivities by playing *danzas* in the streets, to the delight of Ponceños who loved this time of year.

"And on the last day of the *fiestas*, a life-size statue of the Virgin Mary will be carried by ten men," explained María until she was interrupted by

Emilia.

“Ten men chosen for their dedication and devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe will be followed by children dressed as angels. I love that part,” said Emilia.

Ana chimed in. “The procession begins at the Cathedral and ends at the *Tinglado de la Marina*, at La Playa, where a Mass is said in front of the sea. I’ve been to that special Mass many times over the years, but I’ve never seen the beginning of the procession at the Cathedral. Maybe I’ll collect some alms for you poor women at the Town Hall.” The women laughed.

The driver stopped in front of the Cathedral, where they heard beautiful singing coming from inside. Emilia and Maria paid the driver, and Ana pushed open the heavy door to the Cathedral, motioning for the girls to follow. The beautifully-painted wooden statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe, dressed in a blue and white robe, always enchanted Ana. The Virgin Mary sat on a throne of lights, flowers, and pearls, and was shaded by a wooden canopy of painted clouds and cherubs. The religious display was breathtaking, especially at night. On the main altar stood another statue of the Virgin, surrounded by hundreds of devotional candles. “Let’s go in to listen,” said Ana.

“Oh, no, we didn’t come all this way to pray; we came here to dance,” María said, pulling at Emilia. “Last night we missed the Artisan’s Ball at *Teatro La Perla*, and we’re definitely *not* invited to the Grand Venetian Ball tomorrow night because we’re poor, so tonight we’re on a mission.”

Emilia escorted Ana to the door. “That’s true, tonight is our last chance to enjoy the celebrations this year,” said Emilia.

“Besides, the organizers and politicians threatened to cancel the worker’s dance because of what happened last year, so we have to show our support and appreciation. And no doubt, they’ll have a stronger police presence this year,” María said.

Emilia pointed at the tall, wrought iron gas lamps on every corner. “This is not done for atmosphere; this is a security measure. I’m surprised they’re still offering beer, wine, and rum, which usually leads to mayhem,” adding Emilia with a laugh.

The Plaza was full of well-dressed revelers that evening, resembling a delightful blur of color as dancers twirled to the exuberant rhythms of the island. Ana stood watching couples dance, pushing her fears about Jaime

out of her mind, and was happy to be alive. When Emilia and María were asked to dance a lively *merengue*, they declined and pulled Ana onto the dance floor. Despite feeling a bit self-conscious at first, Ana allowed the music to wash over her, and soon she let herself go, amazed she hadn't danced since her days in Cuba.

At the end of the song, Ana begged off, and her friends quickly found their next dance partners. Ana fanned herself, enjoying the cool stream of air on her face and shoulders. When the band started playing a *bolero*, Ana felt a tap on her shoulder. It was Agustín from the botánica, wearing a long-sleeved, white *guayabera*, white slacks, and a sly grin. He bowed to Ana and offered his hand. "May I have this slow dance?"

Ana hesitated, but Agustín didn't budge, which made her laugh. "Well, I was taking a break...but why not?" He led Ana to the dance floor, and took her in his arms. She was relieved he kept a little distance between them, and felt sure Agustín could feel her trembling body. She hadn't remembered the healer's strong jaw and square chin from their first meeting. "How's business?" Ana hoped she didn't sound as nervous as she felt.

"Business is good, thank you. I closed the shop early tonight. I was hoping to see you, Akanni Opaku," he said, looking deep into her eyes. Ana lowered her gaze, pleased he'd remembered her African name. When he drew her close, she followed his movements, hoping to be light on her feet, and to not to step on his toes. As they danced, Ana kept her eyes downcast, and was surprised how comfortable she felt in his strong arms. Then despite her better judgment, she snuck a quick look at him, and found him gazing at her. Her cheeks burned when Agustín chuckled. She hadn't allowed herself to think of him, nor had she visited the area where he worked. But at that moment, Ana was happy Agustín had found her.

They danced two songs, and before going in search of cool drinks, Agustín found a place for Ana to sit. María and Emilia waved to Ana from the dance floor, and she wondered if they'd seen her with Agustín. What a wonderful surprise to see him again, she thought. That Fela was never wrong. While Ana waited for him to return with their drinks, she politely refused several invitations to dance, and was relieved to see Agustín walking toward her. When he kissed her cheek, she hoped he was happy to find her alone. After that, Agustín didn't give another man a chance to butt in, which gave Ana a warm feeling. When they weren't dancing, and the

music became too loud for conversation, the couple laughed at the antics around them—mostly men filled with drink and liquid bravado, egging each other on to take more shots of rum. The temperature of the crowd rose with each passing hour, and near the end of the dance, it reached a fever pitch. There were a few yelling matches among the men, but it all seemed to be in good fun. Near midnight, the scheduled end of the dance, Ana realized she'd lost sight of María and Emilia. "I've lost my friends," she shouted above the music.

"Not to worry, we'll find them! In the meantime, you're safe with me, beautiful Ana," he said, taking the opportunity to kiss her cheek again. She smiled shyly and wanted to explain the situation with Jaime and Emilia, but she didn't want the moment they'd shared to end. The attention Agustín paid Ana was a salve for her heart, and she marveled at how long it had been since she'd been close to a man in this way. Agustín was handsome in a rugged way, and she liked that his clothes smelled like a hot, sunny day, but thoughts of Jaime soon entered her mind. She began to worry, and tried to suppress her rising fear that Jaime would awaken and wonder where Emilia was. Did she dare to believe that Jaime was Emilia's problem, and not hers?

"Why so serious?" Agustín lifted her chin, and she lost awareness of where they were when their eyes met. Ana wanted to ask if he'd ever married and if he had children but decided against it; the night was too beautiful to talk of such serious matters. And in her heart, she didn't want to know. His soft, full lips were more than inviting, and when he kissed her, Ana felt warm and her body tingled the way her hands had when they'd first met. Ana immediately yearned for another kiss, but the bandleader interrupted the moment by announcing that the next song would be the last number of the evening, which incited the crowd to grumbles and moans. The bandleader waved his hands to quiet the crowd, saying it was a special song for a Señorita Ana Belén—a passionate tango. And the accordion began its sad lament.

"Thank you, Agustín, but I don't know how to dance the tango."

"Neither do I, but it reminds me of the *habanero*, which I used to dance in Cuba. Let's go before we can't find a spot on the dance floor." With their cheeks pressed together in the same direction, they danced slowly, and Agustín explained the meaning of the song, "We've all been dragged

through difficulties and pain, and we've cried in this life. The song's message is that we are never too broken to love again. I believe this is true." Agustín faced Ana, and never having been the object of attention in that way, her throat squeezed and tears stung her eyes. "You feel like home, Ana," he whispered. Ana couldn't reply, but his words had impacted her. When he brought his lips to hers, their union felt comfortable and yet intimate, like two souls reunited after a lifetime of searching for the other. Ana couldn't explain it, but his heartbeat against her own did feel like home. Near the end of the song, a fight broke out. As the crowd pulled away, Ana saw María pulling a woman's hair, and two men fighting on the ground. One of the fighting men jumped up and pulled out a knife, which caused a gasp from the crowd.

"María!" Agustín grasped Ana's arm when she moved forward.

María finally saw Ana, and shouted, "Don't get involved, Ana! I'm fighting this *pendeja* alone!" María kicked the woman in the shins in an attempt to get away, but the woman grabbed a fistful of María's hair. Police whistles were heard in the distance.

"María, please stop! The police are coming!" Agustín stepped in, pulling Ana away just as several police officers made their way through the crowd. The offenders were handcuffed and dragged from the dance floor to a waiting paddy wagon. Ana heard María's screams of protest as the police drove away.

Ana spun around and confronted Agustín. "Why did you pull me away? She's my friend!"

"*Amor*, if I hadn't pulled you away, they would have taken you, too. They might have thought you were involved. I don't want anything to ever happen to you."

Ana's annoyance turned to confusion. She thought for a moment. He'd called her *amor*. She was amazed the power this word had on her. She liked this man; how much surprised her. "You're right," she said, seeing his earnest face. "I'm sorry; I should have been paying more attention, and maybe María wouldn't have gotten into a fight."

"It's not your fault, Ana. She's a grown woman, and from the way she fights, I'd say she can take of herself."

"You're right. Thank you for pulling me away in time. "

Just then, Emilia ran up to Ana. "Was that María they hauled away?"

“Yes, where have you been?”

“Saying goodbye to some friends; they told me the police had arrived.”

“My God, what’ll they do to her, Emilia?” asked Ana, wondering how intoxicated Emilia was.

“Oh, she’ll be fine. They’ll probably charge her with being drunk and disorderly, and maybe they’ll let her off for being a public nuisance.” Ana clucked her tongue. “I’m sure they’ll keep her overnight to dry out. Don’t worry; we’ll get her out tomorrow.” Emilia cocked her head, and looked at Agustín. “Wait a minute. Who is this?”

Ana was about to introduce Agustín, when he spoke up. “I’m Agustín, Ana’s new friend,” he said, shaking Emilia’s hand.

“This is my neighbor, Emilia,” said Ana, secretly hoping Emilia wasn’t Agustín’s type of woman.

“I knew that blue dress would bring you luck, Ana! You’re a fortunate man, Agustín; Ana is a treasure.” Emilia beamed at Ana, who raised her eyebrows with a shrug of a shoulder.

Agustín put his arm protectively around Ana, and kissed her cheek. “I already know how lucky I am.”

Just then, a policeman took to the stage, “Anyone caught loitering or being a public nuisance will be locked up for the night. The dance is over; go home.” The crowd dispersed and the revelers began leaving the Plaza. Across the street, Ana spotted a beautiful, dark-haired woman in a sumptuous, gold ball gown entering a fine carriage parked in front of the Ponce Casino. When the carriage went past, Ana squinted to get a better look, and realized it wasn’t Serafina, but it could have been. Serafina now had a life of privilege, protection, and security, thought Ana, a life she would never know. But then again, she had a handsome man at her side, holding her tight.

“We should go, Ana,” Emilia urged, looking from side to side. “Agustín, would you accompany us home so the police don’t get the wrong idea?”

“It would be my pleasure, ladies. But we might find transportation difficult to come by since the dances and balls all let out at the same time. The trams will be packed with people trying to get home, and I doubt we’ll find an empty coach. Let’s start walking, and keep our eyes open. If we see one, I’ll flag it down,” he said, taking Ana’s hand. Feelings of safety and protection enveloped Ana, warming her heart as they walked, but she found

it hard to believe her luck. The same good feelings swirled around her head along with negative thoughts. Was Agustín the man Ana thought him to be—good, kind, and honest? And was he single?

An hour into their walk, the trio crossed the bridge over the *Río Portugues*, and flagged down a *cochero*, who was headed home to La Playa. As they approached San Antón, Emilia insisted the driver drop them at the entrance to the *barrio*, “So Jaime won’t see Agustín, and think I’m cheating on him with an older man. No offense, Agustín. You can walk Ana home from here,” she said, winking at Ana, and shaking hands with Agustín when they got out of the coach.

Ana gasped, “Oh my God, what if Jaime is awake?”

“Don’t worry. My story is that María went to the dance with a friend, got arrested, and we spent all night searching for her. We’ll search for her at first light. But *mierda*, I should have asked which jail they were taking her to.” Ana nodded in agreement, quite amazed at her friend’s quick thinking, and upset she hadn’t thought of asking the police the same question. “See you tomorrow, Doña Ana,” she said, kissing Ana’s cheek. “Let me go on ahead of you.”

When Emilia entered her home, Ana waited, listening for Jaime’s voice. When all was quiet, she turned her attention to Agustín, who was staring at her.

“Who’s Jaime? I only ask because you seem quite concerned.”

“He’s a brute who Emilia can’t seem to get rid of. It’s a complicated and difficult relationship; he’s her pimp and her lover.”

“Ah, that is complicated. Do you live here with them?”

“No, thank God. I live next door. See that little house with the garden in front? That’s my home,” Ana said, not sure if she should invite him in.

There was an awkward silence, and when they looked at each other, Agustín said, “So, when may I see this garden of yours?”

“Come,” she said, taking his arm, “Come see my garden.” The full moon cast a magical light on her house and the garden she’d planted.

“It’s lovely. Look at your herbs and flowers. You don’t need a *botánica*, woman; I’ll be coming to you for my supplies. You have an oasis here, Ana.”

“It would be an oasis, if Jaime didn’t live next door.”

“Has he harmed you in any way?”

His question surprised and warmed her heart. “No, he never has. He’s a thug, but he bothers Emilia, not me. Just the same, I keep my distance from their house, and I sleep with a *machete* under my mattress.”

“Well, that’s good to know! Remind me to be on my best behavior with you, and sleep with one eye open in case you decide to slit my throat.” Ana laughed and thought how close to the past Agustín had come with his comment. He walked her to the front door, but Ana did not open the door, deciding it was too soon to invite him inside.

“I like a woman who knows how to take care of herself, but if Jaime is ever a problem for you, he’ll be sorry. And you will tell me, won’t you?” The intensity in his voice surprised and pleased her. She nodded. “So, are you going to invite me in or not?”

Ana smiled warmly. “No not yet...but soon.”

Agustín hugged her tightly. “You know the spirits want us to be together, but I will wait for the right time. Don’t make me wait too long, though. I’m an old man; don’t be cruel.” She wrapped her arms around Agustín’s neck and kissed him, feeling their passion rise.

“I won’t; I promise.” Ana pulled away a bit and looked deep into his black eyes. “No other woman I should be worried about; a wife, perhaps?”

“No other woman. The mother of my three children remained in Cuba,” he said, pulling her close again. “I haven’t seen her in over ten years. Our sons are scattered throughout the West Indies, and it was through my sons I learned she’s moved on with another man.”

Satisfied, Ana smiled, waiting for Agustín’s questions, but none came. Instead, he kissed her goodnight, and said he’d see her soon. Since Ana didn’t know when that would be, she simply smiled, and watched him disappear down the street before going inside. Was Agustín the type of man who, after not getting what he wanted, went onto easier pastures? Ana didn’t think so, but time would tell. Fela certainly had a good opinion of him. Perhaps the spirits were right about him, too. She caught herself feeling giddy, and chided herself. He was a nice man who’d shown her a little attention, and maybe that was all it would turn out to be—a beautiful evening with a handsome man.

As Ana prepared for bed, her thoughts were of Agustín’s kisses, but worrying about Maria, and the horrible things the girls had told her about the Ponce police station, edged out the warm thoughts. Ana looked out the



window for signs of activity at Emilia's house, but the house remained dark and silent, which was a great relief. Ana soon fell asleep thinking of Agustín's vow to protect her, but woke up with frayed nerves. Could he protect her if something bad were to happen with Jaime? Jaime was much taller than Agustín, and outweighed him by at least fifty pounds. The thought of anything happening to Agustín made her head hurt. She double-checked the door and windows of her little house, wishing she'd invited Agustín to stay. Deep inside, Ana knew Jaime wasn't the entire reason for her anxious feelings, and then it became clear—every person Ana had ever loved had been taken from her—her parents, Ishe, her unborn son, and Serafina. Now Ana had feelings for Agustín, and she was frightened.

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# CHAPTER 20

## *La Luna de Miel ~ The Honeymoon*

**SERAFINA LEANED OVER** the wrought iron railing of the Hotel Meliá balcony, wearing a gauzy, black robe, her favorite item from her wedding trousseau. She watched men picking up trash from the dance the previous evening, and several gardeners tending to the well-manicured flower gardens and bushes around the fountain. Serafina loved the way the neoclassical Plaza looked at first light, with its mosaic-tile sidewalks, still wet from the morning dew. The sun felt warm on her face, and the three-quarter moon, was still visible in the morning sky. The white spires of the Ponce Cathedral shone against groupings of Indian laurel trees and a brilliant blue sky. The gas lamps were dimming when she heard dogs barking and the excited voices of children on *Calle Marina*, heralding the arrival of the procession. Costumed revelers called *vejigantes* roamed the streets in frightening masks, meant to send screaming children to their parents, and back on the straight and narrow path of Christianity. The horned masks in black, red, and yellow depicted grotesque animals with sharp teeth and bulging eyes, and other costumed characters included the knight, the elders, and *las locas*, the crazy women.

“Here they come!” said Serafina, standing on her tiptoes for a better view of the procession. “The *vejigantes* are coming! Antonio, you’re going to miss them!”

Antonio rolled over in bed, and called out, “Are they directly in front of the Hotel or down the street?”

Serafina replied, “Don’t be lazy! Get out of bed; come look!”

“Fine, fine; I’m coming.” He got up from the disheveled bed, threw on a

robe, and stepped onto the balcony, grabbing Serafina from behind. He drew her inside his robe. “Mmm, you smell luscious,” he said, nuzzling her neck through her long, perfumed hair, and rubbing her growing belly.

“Antonio!” she laughed, feeling his naked body under the robe. She checked the other balconies, making sure no one had seen them. “Don’t you ever get tired of making love?”

“*Amada mía*, I will never tire of you. Come, let’s go back to bed. I want you and that spectacular black robe,” he said, slipping a hand inside Serafina’s robe, and cupping a full breast.

“I am teasing, but not until the parade goes by. And if you don’t watch it with me, I’ll be forced to invite your parents back to the Hotel after the Ball tonight,” she answered, removing his hand from her breast, and tightening the sash of her robe.

“No parents on our honeymoon! Bad enough we have to be out tonight. I’ll just hold you then,” he said, making a purring sound in her ear that made her laugh.

“Fine, but don’t get any ideas. I’ll know if you’re trying anything.” Antonio’s hands roamed inside her robe again, and Serafina slapped his hand away playfully. “There they are! The *vejigantes* look amazing this year. Look at that one; he truly looks half-demon and half-animal.”

“He does. Here come *las locas*.” A dozen women dressed in wild, mismatched clothing and teased out white and gray wigs came into view. “If you ever look like that, *mi vida*, I’ll throw you out.”

“Oh, you will?” Serafina ran in and grabbed her hair brush from the dresser. She teased out her long, black hair until she resembled the crazy women on the street. “Look up here!” she shouted from the balcony. “I’ve gotten loose, and found me a man!” The women in the procession clapped, and the men whistled at Serafina.

“You’re crazy, Serafina, but you’re my *loca*,” said Antonio, leading her back to their room. He sat on the edge of the bed, and slowly untied the black sash, admiring his wife’s long, taut legs and full breasts through the gauzy fabric. “Take it off,” he said softly. Serafina slowly slipped the robe off her shoulders, until the filmy, black robe floated and landed on the floor like a weightless, black cloud. She stood trembling as he caressed her smooth body, and outlined her nipples with his tongue until they became hard in his mouth. Serafina could think of nothing but making love again.

Their kisses were passionate, urgent, and then excruciatingly slow, as he took her to the edge, and pulled back.

“I’m ready, Roberto.”

“Not yet,” he whispered, as he stood and turned her around. As he pressed his naked body against her, he caressed her breasts and kissed her shoulders. Serafina closed her eyes and moaned as she reached behind, searching for him and the pleasures she so desired.

“I can’t wait any longer,” she whispered, leading him to the bed.

\* \* \*

The floating dance floor was described as a poetic novelty for Ponce’s elite society, who’d anxiously awaited the 1918 Grand Venetian Ball, but no one could entirely wrap their heads around the fact that the wealthy patrons would dance under the moonlight directly on the Bay. Newspaper articles about the Ball were written weeks in advance, but there had been no photographs of the dance floor accompanying the articles. This was the ultimate secret of the Fiestas Patronales, and no expense had been spared in giving Ponce’s high society an evening they would never forget.

“I can hardly contain myself!” Serafina adjusted her sleeveless bodice, and ran her fingers through her thick hair she’d curled for the occasion. “How do I look?”

Antonio kissed her hand. “You are easily the most beautiful woman in Ponce.”

“Thank you, *amor*.” Serafina took his arm when the carriage stopped. “Antonio, you’ve made me the happiest woman alive.”

“Making you happy is the most important thing to me. I’m the lucky one, and soon we will have another happy occasion,” he said, patting her stomach.

Serafina raised her gloved hand to her mouth. “Can you tell I’m pregnant?”

“No, I’m sorry for scaring you. Come; let’s show you off to Ponce.” Antonio carefully guided Serafina down the steps of the coach, and she nuzzled his neck as they were escorted to the surprise location. Bystanders stopped to admire the handsome couple; Serafina was already attracting the attention she’d hoped for. “Get ready to dance until the sun comes up,

Señora San Patricio.”

“Don’t wake me from this beautiful dream!”

The clock on the Playa Town Hall chimed eight times, and fireworks exploded near the designated area of the mystery dance floor, illuminating the bay. Antonio and Serafina made their way along a gangway, lined with lit hurricane lamps, to an enormous, open air deck with waist-high walls to protect the partygoers from splashes from the waves, and a vaulted, tented ceiling overhead. Long planks of mahogany flooring shone in the moonlight, where tall, potted palms stood at the four corners of the room, and hundreds of white candles of all sizes graced the round tables. White columns stood sentry at the four points, festooned with garlands of white flowers and greenery, completing the atmosphere of fantasy against an inky black sky. The moon and stars seemed to have been placed much closer to the horizon, adding poetic magic to the evening.

As Serafina and Antonio entered, the orchestra began to play. She squeezed Antonio’s arm, walking slowly in new heels, and remembering to raise the hem of her ball gown so as not to trip. Serafina’s gown was exactly what she would have designed for her wedding if she’d any say and the money to pay for it. The off-the shoulder, white crepe gown cinched her still smallish waist, and the low, sweetheart neckline showed off her firm breasts to their best advantage. She’d carefully chosen a deep coral lipstick for her full lips, light eye make-up, and black eyeliner, which enhanced her green eyes. The effect was stunning. Just before leaving the house, she’d powdered her chest and shoulders as her sisters-in-laws had instructed, and dabbed perfume in her décolletage. The Parisian perfume, *De Vous à Moi*, her first and one of many wedding gifts from Antonio, made Serafina feel rich and decadent.

Gentle waves lapped against the walls of the deck as dapper waiters dressed in starched, white shirts and black suits led the couple to their table, strategically placed next to that of the tuxedoed board members of the Spanish Customs House and their bejeweled wives. “My parents and I greased enough palms, and made promises of generous donations to come for many Ponce charities in order to select our table placement,” Antonio whispered.

Twelve round tables lined the walls of the room, dressed in pristine and heavily-starched white tablecloths, and sparkling table settings for eight.

Ten identical tables had been placed inside the larger circle. Of course, the inner circle, thought Serafina as she laid her purse on the table next to the place setting card with her name on it. Antonio pulled out her chair and remained standing. Serafina noticed Guillermo San Patricio's place card was to her right, which pleased her; and Delfina San Patricio was to sit in front of her, next to Antonio, giving the woman full view of Serafina. The old woman would watch her all evening, Serafina thought with a twinge of nerves, but she was determined to enjoy her first society ball to the fullest. Her in-laws would soon see she could hold her own among the well-heeled crowd. Antonio's mother still hadn't exactly warmed to her, but Serafina was determined to win her over that evening.

"She's making the social rounds," whispered Antonio, nodding in the direction of his mother. Serafina followed his gaze. "I know that dry, controlled laugh well. My mother uses that laugh in the company of people she wants to impress, and when she is bored with whomever is boring her. This knowledge comes from years of experience," he said with a grin. "I can detect the slightest inflection in her voice. Tonight, my mother is out to impress."

"Yes, I can see that," said Serafina, straightening her back, and smiling at other guests. "And so are we, Antonio."

Antonio squeezed her shoulder. "There's the President of the Customs House, Arroyo, and his wife, and to the left of my mother are the rum heirs, Mr. And Mrs. Serrales. The Conde's are to her right. He is a prominent judge from San Juan, and she is a doctor, born in New York City. Aren't you impressed by my namedropping?" said Antonio, but Serafina didn't answer. He sat next to her. "Serafina, I'm not going to test you at the end of the evening. Relax, my love."

"That's easy for you to say; you know everyone, and I don't. I want to impress your parents and everyone at this perfect event," she whispered. Just then, she caught her mother-in-law staring at her. "Antonio, wave at your mother; she's watching us."

"Relax, *mi amor*," he said as they waved. "She will soon tire of watching us with so many important people around."

The orchestra, placed on a raised platform, began with a *danza*. "Lead the way, my darling husband. I'm anxious to show you what I know," said Serafina.

“Señora San Patricio, I’m already convinced you’re perfect, and soon everyone at this Ball will think so, too. I love you, *querida*.”

Serafina and Antonio returned to their table during the orchestra’s first break, and Antonio went for drinks. Delfina San Patricio made her way through the dance floor to where Serafina sat. Serafina looked up, giving her mother-in-law a warm smile, which was returned with an icy one. Before Serafina could invite her to sit, Antonio’s mother bent down and whispered in Serafina’s ear, “You’re showing, my dear. I can only pray Antonio is the father of this child.”



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# CHAPTER 21

## *La Cárcel de Mujeres ~ The Women's Jail*

**THE MORNING AFTER THE WORKER'S BALL**, Ana and Emilia found María's bed hadn't been slept in, and none of the neighbors had seen their friend. Ana didn't relish setting foot in the police station, and hoped the Chief of Police she'd met was on duty, not Officer Pérez. When the women arrived at the jail, they were directed to a young man in uniform, who didn't look old enough to shave. Ana pulled Emilia aside. "Let me do the talking, Emilia. Please, say nothing." They approached the desk. "I'm looking for María Santiago. She would have been brought here last night."

The young man scrolled down a list of names. "M. Santiago. She was taken to the new women's jail on the outskirts of town—the one they finished before the Fiestas. Good thing, too; we're at full capacity here."

"If you would kindly give us the directions, we will be on our way," Ana said, sneaking a sideways glance at Emilia, who was trying to read the list from where she stood. Ana wondered who else might have been taken by the police the previous evening. The young man drew a crude map of the new facility, and handed it to Ana. "Thank you. We'd best be on our way," she said. As they turned to leave, the man blew Emilia a kiss, which Emilia ignored.

"Pig," she said when they were outside. "Makes me want to quit and go straight."

"Then why don't you?" said Ana, in an irritated tone. "Get out of the business, Emilia. Nothing good can come from selling yourself."

"I need the money, but as soon as I save up enough, I'm out."

"Just don't wait too long, my friend. You and María deserve a better

life.”

“I don’t know what we deserve anymore, but I think we are getting what we deserve now.”

The new women’s jail was an imposing, single-story, cement box with bars covering narrow windows. Inside a high fence, women walked in a circle as guards patrolled the perimeter. Ana and Emilia approached the fence, hoping to see María.

“I don’t see her,” said Emilia, craning her neck for a better view.

“Me neither. I’ve never been to a jail before, have you?”

“I was arrested once for propositioning a gentleman but only spent the night in the town hall jail. This here is serious business.”

Emilia walked over to a young woman smoking a cigarette. “*Nena*, do you know a María? María Santiago. She was brought in last night.”

The woman behind the fence countered, “Do you have a cigarette?”

Emilia offered a cigarette through the fence but didn’t let it go when the young woman reached for it. “I’ll give it to you for information.”

“Yeah, we met last night, but I haven’t seen her today. Maybe she’s in the clinic; check with the guard over there,” she said, pointing to a guard shack at the end of the fence. Emilia let go of the cigarette.

“The clinic? Oh my God, Ana, let’s go.” They asked a female guard about María, and were told she was being held for further testing. “Testing for what?” asked Emilia.

“Are you family?” asked the guard, eyeing them up and down.

“No, we’re close friends of Miss Santiago,” Ana said, offering the woman a few coins as a bribe.

“Well, if your friend is found to have a venereal disease, she’ll probably be transferred to another clinic. They don’t allow visitors there,” the woman said in a dry voice. Out of nowhere Emilia began to cry, which surprised Ana. Emilia’s crying grew louder until the woman whispered, “Listen, I’m not supposed to give you any information, but your friend is being evaluated in the clinic—the building in back. My friend is working that shift. You can’t miss her; her thick spectacles make her eyes look enormous. Tell her Alicia sent you. She’ll let you in for a quick visit if your friend is still there.”

“Thank you,” said Emilia, drying her eyes. Ana and Emilia raced to the door marked “Clinic.”

“By the way, I know you and María are close, but what was that all about?”

Emilia grinned, “We got in, didn’t we?” Emilia knocked sharply on the door, and a woman who fit the guard’s description opened it. Ana spoke first. “Alicia sent us. We’re looking for our friend, María Santiago.”

“Alicia.” The woman snorted. “That figures. She’s got a soft heart, that one. Who are you looking for?”

“María Santiago. Is she here?”

“Yes, she’s here. She’s in examination room number one; follow me. I have to warn you, though. Your friend was pretty drunk and mouthy when she was brought to the jail. Pérez and his crony got a little rough with her when she didn’t cooperate.”

Ana’s heart froze. “What did they do to her?” asked Emilia, a little louder than Ana had hoped.

The woman answered tersely, “If she was doing something illegal, then it’s her own fault she’s in here. That’s the way it goes.”

Ana squeezed Emilia’s arm, knowing her temper. “Please let us see our friend. We all make mistakes,” Ana said, not wanting to antagonize the young woman in any way, but feeling Emilia’s urgency, as well. “We don’t have much time.”

“Follow me, but make it quick. Officer Pérez is making his rounds.” Fear gripped Ana when she heard the name and she prayed they wouldn’t run into the man. When the guard opened the door of the examination room, they saw a woman lying on a low bed, facing the wall. Ana immediately recognized the dress María had worn the night before. She and Emilia approached the cot. “They’ve tested your friend for syphilis; they do that to all the women.”

“María, María?” Emilia whispered, tapping the woman’s arm. María sprang to a sitting position, with deep fear in her eyes, and hugged her knees. Ana was startled by what she saw. María’s dress hung off her left shoulder and was missing several buttons. Her hair, usually worn pulled back, was wild and loose, and her make-up was smeared.

“It’s us; Ana and Emilia! What have they done to you?”

The guard kept watch at the door, looking down the hallway in both directions, “Hurry!”

“Ay *bendito*, María. We’re here,” Emilia said, sitting on the cot. María

started to cry, and allowed Emilia to put her arm around her.

María's eyes suddenly grew large. "Get me out of here, please."

Ana knew the medical staff wouldn't allow them to take María home until the test results came back. She had to distract María. "What happened to you, *nena*?" As the question came out of Ana's mouth, she realized she didn't want to know.

María composed herself enough to speak. "I honestly don't remember what happened. I was drunk and tired, and they let me sleep it off. Then I was in here, and examined by a devil with dirty instruments that I'm sure he doesn't use on decent women. I was so humiliated," María sobbed.

"Was he a doctor?" María nodded. At that moment, Ana wanted the gods to send peace to María, and much suffering to whoever hurt her.

As if reading Ana's mind, Emilia hissed, "This man should be made to watch his women suffer."

"Are you taking me home?" asked María in a childlike voice. "Can I go now? Is that why you're here, to take me home?"

Ana and Emilia looked at each other. Ana was uncertain of what to tell her, and it was Emilia who spoke up. "María, they've tested you for syphilis."

María's voice became shrill. "But, I don't have that! You know me, Emilia. Tell them I'm clean; I want to go home! Ana, you tell them."

"María, listen," said Ana, taking her by the shoulders. "We'll find the doctor. You stay here and stay calm, all right?"

"Ana's right; we have to find the doctor."

"Okay, I'll rest. I'm so tired." María lay down facing the wall, and closed her eyes. Ana found it incredibly difficult to leave the cell when the female guard urged them to hurry.

"*Béstias*," hissed Emilia as they followed the guard down a narrow corridor. "We have to get her out of here. She won't make it in this place with these beasts."

"I know, I know, Emilia. Please be polite with the doctor for María's sake!" When the guard opened a door, Pérez was sitting at a desk, reading a newspaper.

"Shit," murmured Emilia, "Now what do we do?" Ana watched the guard slink out of the room without saying a word.

Pérez looked up when the women approached, and eyed them

suspiciously. “I know you. So, you’re not a prostitute, eh, Doña?” he said to Ana. “Well, if you’re not, what are you doing in the company of this *puta*?”

Ana controlled herself, and squeezed Emilia’s arm as a reminder to remain calm. “We want to see the doctor who examined María Santiago. Where can we find him?”

“Santiago? Hmm, I seem to recall that name,” he said, and then yawned. “That would have been Doctór Toro. He happens to be in his office right now, second door on the left,” he pointed down the hall. “Good luck, girls. Tell María I said hello.”

“*Hijo de la gran puta*,” Emilia cursed under her breath. They found the doctor eating at a desk, in desperate need of a napkin as he bit into a chicken leg. His lips and chin shone with greasy tomato sauce as he looked at them through thick eyeglasses perched on his bulbous nose. He seemed surprised to see them.

“What do you need?”

“Are you Doctór Toro?”

“Yes, I am,” he said, finally wiping his mouth.

“We are...I mean, this is María Santiago’s sister,” Ana said, pointing at Emilia, knowing he wouldn’t speak to them if one of them wasn’t a family member. You examined her last night.” Ana couldn’t tell whether he remembered María or not. “Do you remember her?”

“Yes, yes, what about her?”

Ana continued in a terse tone she couldn’t control, “Have you already taken blood samples?”

“Yes, I have,” he said, visibly irritated. “Look, if you want the results, you’ll have to wait outside. Who are you again?”

“This is María’s sister. We’ll be outside. Thank you, Doctór.” Ana pushed Emilia out the door.

“Do you think she has syphilis? What’ll we do if the results are positive?”

Ana shook her head. “I don’t know, Emilia, but let’s not lose hope until the results come back. It’s all in God’s hands now.” Despite the cold, metal chairs they sat on, Emilia soon fell asleep against Ana’s shoulder. Ana sat quietly, invoking all the gods and goddesses to protect María, and as she prayed, her eyes grew heavy. The women were roused by a nurse, who ushered them into the doctor’s office.

“Your friend is clean. No infectious disease,” said the doctor to no one in particular. Ana hated his use of the word “clean”. He put down the file, and looked at the Emilia. “We encouraged your sister to undergo sterilization. She did very well.”

Emilia’s jaw dropped. “What?” She looked at Ana, who was sure they were thinking the same thing—María would have never have submitted to sterilization.

“She is being released now,” Del Toro said, signing a paper on his desk. “Wait for her at the front gate.” The doctor turned back to the paperwork on his desk, and then looked up. “That is all,” he said, looking surprised that Ana and Emilia were still standing in his office.

“Where is her signed consent?” Ana was amazed at her presence of mind in light of the shocking news, and Emilia’s face echoed her sentiment. The doctor rifled through the papers on his desk, and produced the one María had signed.

Emilia leaned over the desk. “I don’t believe this. María wanted children; I know this. You must have tricked her into signing! Was she drunk, because she never would have signed this sober!”

“Your sister is a single, working woman with no husband,” he said to Emilia. “Who would have taken care of her children while she worked the streets? You? Ponce has too many street urchins as it is. Like hundreds of other women, your sister doesn’t use birth control. She wasn’t the first, and she certainly won’t be the last woman to be sterilized in this city.”

“¡Abusador! She probably trusted you, and you abused her innocence! You tricked my sister into signing. Who are you to deny her rights as a woman? You will rot in Hell for what you’ve done to her.”

“We are doing what needs to be done.”

Ana restrained Emilia as she reached for a heavy-looking paperweight sitting on the doctor’s desk, knowing what direction she would have thrown it. The paperweight would have knocked some sense in the man, but it would have also landed Emilia in jail. “Let’s take María home, Emilia. We’re finished here.”

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## CHAPTER 22

### *Jugando de Casa en Calle Luna ~ Playing House on Luna Street*

*Ponce, October, 11, 1918*

**THE NEWLYWEDS SETTLED** in an Italianate-style house on a quiet block of Calle Luna, purchased from an Italian merchant after the death of his wife of fifty years. Serafina had instantly fallen in love with the grand, white house, and the love story of the former owners. She fully believed that buying the home would bless her marriage and ensure a long, happy, and fruitful life with Antonio, despite the fact that the merchant's wife had died in one of the bedrooms. Although Antonio realized the four-bedroom home would be a perfect fit for his growing family, he hadn't been as convinced as Serafina, until the merchant offered most of the furnishings in the sale price. At that point, the papers were signed, and Serafina had immediately set about decorating the house with a masterful touch, believing the dead woman's soul would aid her in making a beautiful home for Antonio and their children.

Colonial pieces in wicker and mahogany, some dating back to the early 1870's, were found crammed in the large drawing room. Along the walls of the dining room sat Victorian settees and chairs, marble-topped dressers, armoires, and narrow drop-leaf tables. In the library, they found several large, framed oil paintings stacked against a wall, old world maps rolled and tied with faded silk ribbon, and a mahogany banker's table, that Antonio was anxious to adopt. The bedroom suites on the second floor of the house each included four-poster beds, dressers, and two end tables, and for the

first time, Lorena and Mateo had their own rooms, which had thrilled Lorena. A cradle and a rocking chair would soon be set up in the master suite, which Serafina loved for the wrought iron balcony that offered stunning views of the back flower gardens, and the smallest bedroom would be the nanny's room.

On the large porch, an ancient *flamboyán* tree offered precious shade to the front of the house, where Serafina and Antonio loved spending time on cool evenings. Baskets of fragrant, colorful flowers hung from the wooden shutters of the many windows at the front of the house. Serafina was particularly taken by a bougainvillea vine growing on the far corner of the wide front porch, its' fuchsia petals dotting the porch floorboards. She'd marveled at the beautiful plant with the thick, twisted trunk, which would be standing when the wooden house fell to decay, and the thorns of the vine that were a constant reminder to appreciate the plant's beauty from afar. Serafina, who enjoyed appreciative male glances, but abhorred boorish and ungentlemanly behavior in men, thought she was much like the bougainvillea.

Serafina and Antonio sat at opposite ends of the long, mahogany dining table, enjoying their lunch, when he noticed the Austrian crystal chandelier sway ever so slightly. The sound of tinkling crystal above their heads caught Serafina's attention. "What is it, Antonio?" When the tiled floor shook and shuddered, Serafina screamed.

"It's an earthquake!" Antonio rushed to Serafina's side, and pushed her beneath the table, and then scrambled next to her, covering her with his body. A few seconds later, the rumbling stopped.

"Oh my God, I don't believe it. Is it over?" Serafina looked anxiously at Antonio, and held her abdomen, hoping to feel the baby move.

"I don't know. Let's wait here a minute to be sure. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I just need to catch my breath, and the baby just moved, thank God. Doña Lola! I forgot about her!" Serafina called out to the cook several times, but she didn't answer. "Where could she be?"

"Mostly likely hiding," he replied, kicking broken glass away.

"Do you think she's hurt? I'm so worried!"

"She'll come out when she feels safe. Don't move, Serafina; it could start up again." Seconds later, their fear turned to horror as the floor shook as if they were in a boat on stormy seas. The bone china dishes, serving

pieces, and crystal glasses were tossed about on the table above them, and Serafina wondered if the dead wife was displeased and making her presence known. She screamed and hid her face in Antonio's suit jacket, when an oil painting rattled against the wall and then crashed to the floor, sending splinters of wood from the broken frame through the air. They heard a giant boom inside the house, Antonio opened his eyes just in time to see the heavy dining room armoire topple over, filling their ears with the deafening sounds of broken glass and porcelain. Serafina began to cry, knowing they would die.

Seconds later, the rumbles subsided. Serafina looked at Antonio for answers, and sensed a fear as deep as her own in his eyes. He brushed dust and dirt particles from her hair, and brought her close. "Antonio, do you think Lorena and Mateo are safe in San Juan with your parents? We must call them!"

"I don't know if San Juan was hit by the earthquake; I'll try the phone before the phone lines go dead." After a few minutes, he scrambled out from under the dining room table, and ran to the phone. Miraculously, his father answered the phone, and confirmed that they were all right. "They're fine, Serafina! Please don't worry now; it won't be good for the baby." Antonio ran to the front door, leaving Serafina trembling, but relieved beneath the table. He pulled open the door, and waved away a plume of smoke. What he saw was a world much different than what he'd seen before closing the door to enjoy the noonday meal with his new bride. "*Dios mío*," he whispered. The houses on Calle Luna were barely visible through the thick haze of smoke and dust.

Serafina tentatively crawled out from under the table. "I can't believe this just happened," she muttered in a daze, looking at black tea and red wine stains on the fine, white damask tablecloth that covered the table. "Oh Antonio, your mother will be so upset when she sees the stains on her wedding gift," she said to no one in particular as she gingerly picked up broken shards of crystal.

"Serafina, come look!" She took tentative steps toward Antonio and stopped. "Come, it's all right." He motioned for her to approach. "It's over now." She hugged his waist, and grimaced at the smells outside. Across the street, the elementary school seemed intact, save for the concrete wall in front that lay in a crumbled heap on the sidewalk. The school's wooden sign

hung precariously from one nail. There were downed power lines up the street, and billowing clouds of dust in the distance toward the city center. “Live wires,” said Antonio said. When he looked back at the school, he remembered it was lunchtime. “I hope the children went home for lunch.”

“The students; you must check on them, Antonio!” Serafina touched her belly; thankful Lorena and Mateo had taken the time off from university, and that they were safe in San Juan with Antonio’s parents.

“I don’t see any movement from here, but yes, I should check.” Off in the distance, sirens rang, and neighbors stood on their porches, yelling the status of their homes and family to each other. The houses on the street appeared to have survived the earthquake with a few sagging front porches as the only damage. “You must see about your sisters. They must be so frightened, and your sister’s babies...my God, Antonio,” said Serafina with tears in her eyes. Antonio tried calling them, but the phone was now dead.

“I’m sure they’re all right; my brothers-in-law will know what to do. I’ll check on them right after I make sure there are no children in the school.” Antonio removed a sliver of wood from Serafina’s thick braid. “Are you sure *you’re* all right? You are very pale, *amor*.”

“I’m fine,” she said. “Go; they might need you at the school.”

“You’re right,” he said, kissing her forehead. “Go back in the house and look for Doña Lola. And stay inside, Serafina; it’s too dangerous out here. Leave everything as it is until I return, understood?” Antonio wrapped his arms around Serafina, hugging her tight before reaching for his suit jacket. “Do not leave the house,” he urged again. Serafina watched Antonio make his way across the street, and felt a surge of love and protection for him. She heard footsteps behind her, and when she turned around, the cook, Doña Lola, a brown-skinned woman in her sixties, rushed toward Serafina, wringing her hands in her apron. “Ay, *Doña Serafina*. You’re alive! I thought it was the end of the world,” she said, making the sign of the cross. “I’m afraid the dining room is ruined.”

“Yes, I know; don’t worry about the dining room. Are *you* all right?” said Serafina, looking down at the diminutive Doña Lola, who nodded rapidly as the tears streamed down her face. “Oh, it’s all over now. Come here.” Serafina hugged the woman, and felt her body shudder. “Where were you hiding?”

“I was folding clothes when the *temblór* started. I hid behind the bureau

until the second earthquake stopped. *Santo Dios*, how are you? And where is Don Antonio?"

"I'm fine, and my husband is across the street at the school, making sure there are no injuries. Then he's going to check on his sisters."

Doña Lola started to cry. "I must go home, Doña Serafina. I'm worried for my family."

"Yes, of course! But please take care as you walk home. Don Antonio says there are live wires down everywhere."

"Oh, I shouldn't leave you alone. Why don't I wait with you, Doña Serafina? I'd feel better staying until Don Antonio returns."

"No, no, you go. But you must be so careful, Doña Lola. Señor San Patricio will be back soon," Serafina said, rubbing her belly as she walked the woman outside.

The cook descended the steps, and pointed at the school. "There he is!"

Antonio stepped over a telephone pole, and headed toward the door of the school. Serafina prayed the school would be empty, and then gasped when Ana came to mind. She hurried to the street, hoping to catch Antonio, but he'd already entered the school. Serafina knew she couldn't make it down the street with fallen debris and downed power lines, and she wouldn't leave her house unattended. All she could do was pray Ana had come to no harm, and ask Antonio to check on her when he returned.

Serafina shook her head in disbelief when she saw the back patio littered with fallen branches and shards of broken glass. She'd heard of earthquakes, but never dreamed she would experience one in her life time. After finding the windows intact, she walked to the side yard, picking up pieces of glass and debris along the way. Where had the glass come from? And then she spotted several broken windows on the second floor of her neighbor's house. The family was away on holiday, and the thought of looters frightened Serafina. She would keep an eye on her neighbor's house, and ask Antonio what could be done about the broken windows until the neighbors returned. Other than the debris littering the yard, her home seemed to have escaped major damage. Serafina hoped her other neighbors were as fortunate.

Before entering the house, Serafina looked down the street, hoping to see Antonio walking home, but he was nowhere in sight. She prayed for all those who might have lost their lives in the earthquake, and wondered what

the city center looked like. No doubt Antonio would have many stories when he returned. Suddenly, the thought of Antonio being injured gripped her. She became faint and grasped the porch railing. It was time to lie down; the stress of the day had taken its toll on her. She entered the master bedroom, and sat at her vanity table, taking deep breaths to relieve her dizziness. The reflection of her wedding rings caught her eye. She gazed at the diamond-encrusted, platinum wedding band that her brothers-in-law, the jewelers, had given her as a wedding gift, and the one-carat engagement ring that had belonged to Antonio's great aunt. She touched the opera-length strand of pearls around her neck, a wedding gift from Antonio's sisters, and turned when she heard a knock at the bedroom door.

"Doña Lola? Is that you?" The door opened, and Serafina gasped when a man in a police uniform entered the bedroom. Her hands flew to her mouth and as she started to scream, the man held up his hand, seemingly as alarmed as she was.

"Oh no, please don't be alarmed, Señora. I'm sorry to startle you. We are going door-to-door; making sure everyone is all right on our streets. There have been reports of looters, and your front door was left wide open. I heard noises upstairs, and thought it might be a burglar."

Serafina stood slowly, and backed against the vanity. She saw the insular police badge on his black jacket, but he wore no nametag. Her knees were in danger of giving out, and her hands trembled as she held her belly. She tried to relax her face, and not let on how frightened she was. "You startled me, but we are fine, thank you. Please wait downstairs for my husband; he will be right with you." Was Antonio back, or was she alone in the house with this man? She couldn't think clearly.

"Yes, I'll wait. I have some papers he must sign before I leave," he said, watching her closely.

"Then please wait downstairs for him," Serafina said, feeling the vanity top behind her for something hard to throw at him if he didn't leave. She gripped the wooden hair brush when her hand discovered it. "I need you to leave my bedroom this instant."

"Yes, of course. You have my sincere apologies, Señora. I'll wait for your husband downstairs." The stranger left the bedroom and closed the door behind him. Serafina ran to the door, locked it, and pressed her ear against it. Tears streamed down her cheeks as her heart pounded in her

chest. She prayed like never before that Antonio would come home. Minutes went by and she heard nothing. She then realized the man hadn't carried any papers in with him. Was he a real policeman? He had to be or why else would he have left if he'd intended to harm her? Serafina wanted to open the bedroom window and scream for help, but was frozen in place. She didn't dare leave the bedroom door unattended like she'd left the front door.

Then she heard a male voice calling her from downstairs. Panic and confusion set in. Was the voice the same man who'd entered her bedroom? "I'll leave the papers on the dining room table, Señora. Please have your husband fill them out, and mail them to us." Her heartbeat thumped in her ears as she listened, and she did not reply. A moment later, she heard the front door slam shut. She ran to the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man on the street, but from her vantage point, she couldn't be sure. "Oh, God, what should I do?" Should she stay put and wait for Antonio, or run downstairs and lock the front door? When she couldn't stand the tension any longer, she crept down the staircase with her eyes firmly locked on the front door. Just as she reached for the doorknob, someone grabbed her from behind. She screamed, fighting to release herself from the grasp, but her screams were muffled by a hand, and she was yanked back with a fistful of hair. Serafina's hand reached to her head, and she winced, but didn't cry out. Her only thought was of her unborn child.

A man's voice hissed in her ear, "Fooled you, didn't I? I didn't have to wait too long for you to come down." Serafina felt the vomit rise in her throat when she smelled the man's vile breath. "The funny part is that I was only looking to steal when I found you in your bedroom. But you're too beautiful to pass up."

"My husband is coming back soon; you should leave." The man yanked her hair again, bringing her closer to him.

"I don't believe you. And this won't take but a few minutes."

"Please, I'm with child," she whispered as tears stung her eyes. "Don't hurt me. Take what you want and leave. Please."

His moist breath against her ear made her cringe. "I'll take anything I want, and there's not a damn thing you can do about it. You *will* keep your mouth shut."

In that instant, Serafina knew the intruder wasn't leaving. He grabbed

her wrist, and yanked her arm behind her back. She cried out as he dragged her to the dining room, and pushed her face down onto the table. She knew there was no way to escape what she feared would come. She whimpered, “No, please.” He pressed her neck down until the slick wood surface of the table flattened her cheek and the strand of pearls dug into her chest. She shut her eyes, and cried softly. The pain in her ribs from the edge of the table was debilitating, but her stomach was free. He kicked apart her legs, and slid down her step-ins. “No, please, don’t,” she begged. She heard him unzip his trousers, and when he forced himself into her body, Serafina screamed through his fingers. He covered her mouth, and groaned as he thrust into her until he was spent. She shut her eyes, and at that moment, she thought death would be welcome. The man released her neck, zipped up his trousers, and slapped her bare buttocks.

Serafina did not utter a word or dare move until she heard the click of the front door. She opened her eyes just as the man was leaving the house, and caught sight of his face in the mirror on the opposite wall—it was the same man who’d entered her bedroom. When she heard the front door slam, she finally turned around to make sure he was gone, and kicked off her underpants. She locked the front door, praying the man wasn’t hiding inside, and remained by the front door, listening with her hand on the doorknob just in case he made another appearance. Was it possible someone had seen the man leave her home? How could she have been so careless as to leave the front door wide open? She’d invited her attacker inside.

Serafina cried, shaking with anger, and willing herself to remember what the man looked like for the police. He had black hair, dark brown eyes, a black mustache, and stood about five foot seven. The thought of him nauseated her, and instantly she realized he’d ejaculated inside her. Serafina ran to the upstairs bathroom, ripped off her clothes, and scrubbed her body raw. A drop of blood ran down her inner thigh onto the tile floor, and she let out a silent scream. She wiped the blood off her leg and from the floor, praying nothing had happened to her baby. She wrapped her shaking body in a blanket, and caught her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Her tear-stained face and the blood at the corner of her mouth were all it took—she vomited violently until only the dry heaves remained.



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## CHAPTER 23

*Yemayá, Dame una Señal ~ Yemayá, Give me a Sign*

*Ponce, October, 11, 1918*

**THE ORISHAS WERE SMILING ON ANA**, and despite being happier than she'd ever remembered, she was frightened. Fela's reading about Agustín had been correct—he was a good man, and Ana wanted to trust the gifts of happiness and a chance at love, knowing it would be ungrateful of her not to, but she worried Agustín would ask her to move in with him. If he asked her to work for him, she would agree, but she wouldn't accept his charity. She'd worked all her life and wasn't sure she could work for a man—even a good man like Agustín.

Ana donned a strand of canary yellow beads, Oshún's favorite color, and poured water into three glasses to absorb any negativity. She knocked three times on the wall, threw the cowrie shells on the bed for a quick reading, and asked the goddess for a sign. The shells were in a closed position; each one facing down, which had never happened. Ana wondered if the reading was an explanation for the feelings of dread that had plagued her in the middle of the night. And then Serafina came to mind. Was Ana living in the calm before a storm, or was the shell's layout a warning for Serafina? Her friend was now married and happy; this couldn't be about Serafina. Worried and dissatisfied, Ana dumped the contents of the red sack onto her bed. There was enough money to last her a few months without working, possibly three months, but no more than that. She counted again, and her body tensed. How would she survive the rest of the year? Ana remembered what Fela had told her about working with Agustín, but she couldn't imagine relying on a man. No, that kind of thinking would be crazy; she

barely knew him.

As Ana gathered the shells and money to return them to the red sack, she heard a deep murmur. Were the gods speaking to her? The swelling sound seemed to engulf the little wooden house, rendering Ana immobile. She craned her ear, but only heard leaves rustling in the trees overhead, and then looked out the window, thinking there were neighbors speaking outside her house. Suddenly, an explosion was heard, and the earth beneath her feet rumbled, groaned, and shook, knocking Ana to the floor. She sprang to her feet, and scrambled to the corner of the room, impotent to save her statues and the contents of the *crèche* from spilling out onto the wood floor. A mighty roar began, and the wood floor boards buckled and snapped in half beneath her. The individual planks of wood framing her little house started to shake and sway back and forth around her, and Ana knew the end of the world was near. One by one, the planks fell to the left and right of her until finally the zinc roof crashed down upon her.

Somewhere deep in the fog in her brain, Ana heard a woman calling her name. She moaned at the searing pain in her right arm, which was bent in an excruciating position. She tried reaching for her leg, and sharp pains seized her again. Ana heard the woman's voice again and whispered, "Mother, I'm coming. I'm at peace now." At that exact moment, something soft touched her arms and legs, and there were new voices all around her. "Stop," she said, feeling hands pulling at her, and then lifting her body. Her eyes burned when she tried to open them, and she squinted through dust and smoke. Shadowy figures materialized in the thick haze, and then Ana blacked out.

\* \* \*

A throbbing pain in the shoulder woke Ana, and caused her to cry out as she attempted to turn onto her side. She saw her arm was wrapped tightly against her chest, and she was in a strange bed. When her eyes became accustomed to the dimly lit room, she saw an old bureau in the corner that held several lit candles in tall tins and what appeared to be several apothecary jars. Ana held her arm, and struggled to sit up in bed. It didn't appear to be a hospital room. Faint memories started coming back—the excruciating pain in her legs and arm, Emilia's tears of joy, and excited

male voices shouting when Ana's face was uncovered amidst the rubble. What had happened? She then remembered Emilia wiping her eyes clear of dust and dirt, and being covered with a blanket. There was a man's voice. Suddenly, Ana had a vision of Jaime carrying her, but couldn't be sure. "Oh God, it can't be." Someone had said something about an earthquake and a broken arm. Where was she? She tried getting out of bed, and realized her legs were too weak to hold her. Fela's words of warning burned in her brain—Ana was in the lion's den—Emilia's house, and Jaime had to be somewhere nearby.

Just then, Ana remembered the red sack she'd kept her money and cowrie shells in; the one she'd kept hidden under the bed. The thought of her money buried under the rubble hit her as if the earthquake happened again. Emilia walked by the room, and rushed in when she saw Ana struggling to stand up.

"Where do you think you're going? You can't get out of bed yet, Ana!"

"Am I in your home?"

"Yes, you are. You're hurt."

"But, why am I here? I don't understand."

"There was an earthquake! An earthquake here, can you imagine? It was terrifying. Our house shook like the devil, and when we ran outside, your house was in a heap. Jaime immediately ran to help you, and I called the doctor. Ana, you were buried under your entire house." Emilia confirmed Ana's fear; she was horrified to hear Jaime's name.

"We pulled you out, and didn't think you'd live, but the doctor said your injuries weren't as bad as they could have been. You were very lucky! We hauled the debris away, and I saved what I could. Look," she said, retrieving Ana's red sack from the dresser drawer.

"Thank God," murmured Ana, holding her hand out for the sack.

"It had your shells inside. I found your black Madonna in a corner, and the wood crate where you keep your *milagros*. They're here," she said, pointing to a bowl inside the drawer. "Your bed was destroyed."

"Wait! My money—I had money in this sack. I kept it under my bed, Emilia! You must find the money! Go find it!" Ana felt as if her heart were being squeezed in a vise. "My money was in that red sack before the earthquake hit."

"There was no money in the sack! We didn't find any money," said

Emilia, as more as a question than a statement.

“How could it be empty? That’s impossible; the money was there!”

“No, Ana! The bag held nothing but the shells. Nothing more, I swear to you. I didn’t take your money!”

Something told Ana not to pursue an accusation. Most probably, Emilia and Jaime had stolen her money, or perhaps only one of them was a thief and had not told the other. Ana knew there was no way to know the truth. They had saved her, and now they were taking care of her. She had nowhere to go. “Now I have nothing. No money for rent, no money to buy food, and I can’t pay you back for the doctor, Emilia.”

“Don’t worry, Ana. Get back in bed. We paid the doctor, and you can stay here with us. You’re in María’s old room.”

Ana could barely look at Emilia. “Where is María?”

“She ran off with one of her clients, an older man. He’s in love with her.”

“So she left for good? I hope she has, for her sake.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” Emilia said with a smile. “She’ll probably spend some of his good money, and return like the prodigal daughter.”

“Well, I can’t pay you until work comes my way. And who knows when that will be with my bad arm and legs? I don’t even have medical instruments.”

“Don’t think about all that now. I love having you here, and Jaime will just have to deal with it. This is my house; that’s final.”

“How long have I been here?” The top of Ana’s head began to throb.

“Two days. Your arm is pretty battered, but not broken. You must rest. You have a nasty knot on your head and you have cuts on your legs.” The pain in Ana’s head directed her to the knot.

It was unthinkable; Ana had managed staying out of Jaime’s way, and now they were living under the same roof. The couple had stolen her money, and Ana had nowhere to go. The situation couldn’t be any worse, thought Ana. “I’ll stay until I can make other arrangements. Thank you.”

“You can stay as long as you want,” said Emilia, patting Ana’s hand. “Cristina’s little house wasn’t a match for the earthquake. I’m sorry you lost your things.” Ana now recalled the walls crumbling, and looking up in time to see the zinc roof fall on top of her. “It’s a miracle you survived with only a sprained shoulder, some cuts, and bruises.”

Ana was incredulous as Emilia recounted how Jaime had led her rescue efforts. She couldn't fathom a kind bone in the man's body. His bravery and concern for Ana was confusing, but she couldn't deny he'd probably saved her from more serious injuries and possible death. "Jaime told all the neighbors, 'Who else but me could have lifted that zinc roof with bare hands and thrown it to the side, off the poor woman's body?' That's what Jaime told everyone in his new, heroic voice, but you know what? He was right. There's no denying that Jaime saved your life, Ana. And then the doctor patched you up."

"Well, it appears I owe you and Jaime my gratitude," Ana said in a flat voice, suspecting Emilia and Jaime had already rewarded themselves with her money.

"Oh, by the way, the handsome Antonio San Patricio, Serafina's husband, came looking for you. He paid us for the doctor, and gave us extra money to cover your stay."

"He did? When? Was Serafina with him? What did he say?"

"Don Antonio came alone, and said Serafina sends her love. She's due to give birth in two months. It's his first child; isn't that wonderful?"

"Yes, I know that. They are very happy." Ana managed a tight-lipped smile, irritated at Emilia's sudden interest in Serafina and Don Antonio. Ana hoped Serafina wouldn't attempt to visit her at Emilia's home, and wondered how much Antonio had given to the thieving Emilia and Jaime.

"He was happy to hear you were safe. We told him we were taking good care of you."

The only words Ana could muster were, "Thank you. That was kind of Don Antonio and Serafina. Now I don't have to worry about my stay with you."

"I'll be right back with coffee. You rest now," Emilia said, tucking Ana back in bed.

There was nothing Ana could do about her money. *Desgraciados*, she thought. They were disgraceful thieves and opportunists, both of them, and her money was now gone. Without medical instruments and an injured arm, she was a prisoner in their home. She wondered how long Jaime and Emilia thought Don Antonio's money would cover her stay. Angry tears flowed down her cheeks, and minutes later, someone rapped softly at the bedroom door. Ana roughly wiped away her tears. "Come in, Emilia. No need to

knock, for goodness sake; it's your house." But instead of Emilia, Agustín opened the door.

Ana was startled to see him, and pleased when he kissed her wet cheek. "Oh Ana, I came looking for you the minute the shock of the earthquake wore off. I saw your house was demolished, and your neighbors, Emilia and Jaime, told me you were here. Please don't cry. You're alive, and I couldn't be more relieved." Ana allowed Agustín to believe she was emotional over seeing him as she couldn't find her words.

He pointed at Ana's arm in the sling. "How badly are you hurt?"

"I'm grateful to be alive. It's only a sprained shoulder. I'm happy to see you are well," she said, smiling at Agustín, and closing her robe with her good hand. "Please, have a seat."

"I was crazy with worry, and came as soon as I could."

"Thank you, Agustín. Did you have much damage at the *botánica*?" Ana smoothed back her hair, thinking she'd never seen a more handsome man.

"There was quite a bit of damage, I'm afraid. Most everything in the shop was glass and ceramic, so you can imagine the mess I had on my hands. It took me a day to sweep and clear away the debris."

"I can imagine. Was there too much broken glass to properly save any herbs and flowers?"

"I must start from scratch, Ana. Most of us do," he said, looking around the room. "How are they treating you? I was concerned when Emilia informed me you were living here with her...and Jaime."

Ana's face turned serious at the mention of Emilia and Jaime, and smiled so he wouldn't press her for information. "I didn't know where I was until a few minutes ago. Yes, nature has a way of humbling us all, no matter how little or how much we have."

"Challenges show us what we're made of. So, Ana Belén," he said. "I see your gardens are intact, and I'm in desperate need of herbs, leaves and flowers."

"So you want to deflower me?"

Agustín roared with laughter. "Yes and yes."

"Take everything; what's mine is yours," she said, meaning every word.

"And what's mine is yours. Come live with me, Ana. We'll work side-by-side. What do you say?"

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# CHAPTER 24

## *Rogando al Señor ~ Pleading with God*

**THE MORNING AFTER THE RAPE**, every muscle in Serafina's body seemed to ache, and fear seized her as Antonio snored softly beside her. She now inhabited a body that felt foreign to her, except for the baby she carried. How could she tell her husband what had happened? Would Antonio understand, or blame her? No, it was best to remain silent for the moment. Serafina turned on her side, and cried softly into her pillow until she felt him stir. She immediately shut her eyes, willing the memory of the attack to disappear from her mind, and pretended to be asleep when he turned her over. Antonio covered Serafina's face with kisses and caresses.

"You've been crying, *amor*. It's all over now; don't worry."

"I had a bad dream," she said, wiping her tears. "I miss the children terribly. We've never been separated before." Serafina desperately wanted to tell Antonio about the attack, but found it impossible to find the words. She realized the lie was the first between them.

"My darling," he said, taking her in his arms. "Lorena and Mateo are due home in a few days. Let's have a celebration in honor of their return. What do you say? Would that make you happy?" His face showed such love and tenderness; she couldn't imagine destroying the moment. Antonio was a kind, gentle man, and she knew he'd understand she'd been a victim of a horrible crime. But even now as a grown man, Serafina knew his parents, and especially his sisters, doted on him, the only son. Antonio had grown up in a protected world of privilege, money, and status; nothing ugly happened in their world. Serafina never wanted her husband to look upon her with pity, disdain, or disgust—the attack would open those doors, and it

was imperative to keep them closed.

The longer Antonio hugged her, the more anxious she became. She became dizzy, disoriented, and found it difficult to breathe deeply. Serafina desperately wanted to flee the bed, but couldn't think of a good reason to get up. As Antonio kissed her neck, and despite scrubbing her body several times, her body didn't feel clean enough to accept his caresses. She fought the angry thoughts of what could have happened to her and the baby, or God forbid to Lorena had she been home alone. And then as Serafina prayed she wouldn't do, she berated Antonio for continuously leaving the front door unlocked. The hurt and rejection on his face was clearly evident as he got out of bed, and left the room. What had she done?

Antonio left for work without saying goodbye, and Serafina's heart seemed to shatter into small pieces. It was her fault for leaving the front door unlocked—not his—but by the same token, if Antonio had stayed with her instead of running all around town, he could have fought off her attacker. Back and forth Serafina went all morning, placing blame and accepting her own part in the attack, until she called Antonio mid-morning to apologize for her rudeness. 'Woman's hormones,' he'd said, and Serafina had agreed. Despite his understanding and kindness toward her on the telephone, the loneliness Serafina felt at that moment was palpable. She wandered the house, wringing her hands in confusion, praying to rekindle her intimacy with her husband, but felt lost and alone. A walk was what she needed to clear her head. Antonio would be fine, she told herself. They would eat dinner together when he returned, and sit on the porch as they usually did.

Serafina poured water in the porcelain basin, disgusted that minute traces of the musky smell of the man remained on her body. She scrubbed her bare skin until it felt raw and chafed, and ignored the mirror on the vanity as she dried her breasts and stomach, thankful the man hadn't touched them. She touched her bruised rib area, which was tender to the touch, and a sense of shame seized her. Again she was angry with herself for not locking the front door before going up to the bedroom. At the very least, she should have thrown something heavy through the bedroom window to call attention to the attack! Finally, she gave up; it wasn't fruitful to go back and forth—the deed was done. The attacker was to blame. How difficult could it be to locate him if he was a real policeman? And what would Serafina do if she

found him? She might be putting Antonio in danger, and Serafina wouldn't allow herself to think of what could happen if Antonio confronted the rapist. Not only that; such a scandal would ruin their good family name. Delfina San Patricio would finally have what she wanted—to see her marriage to Antonio fail. No, secrecy was Serafina's only option.

After checking the front door was locked, Serafina sat at the kitchen table with her morning coffee, thankful it was Doña Lola's day off. The cook's constant chatter would have unnerved Serafina that morning, and she couldn't bear to hurt the kind woman. Serafina tried acting as if nothing horrible had happened to her. She gazed at her beautiful garden, and when thoughts of the attack crept in, she pushed them away. Birds offered their birdsongs from the *flamboyán* tree, and the calls of the *coquíes* that normally made Serafina happy, did nothing to pull her out of the gloom. The *quincalleros* shouted their vendor songs up and down the street as was normal, but nothing felt normal to Serafina—everyone was going about their usual routine except for her. She massaged the pain in her neck, reminded of how the rapist had shoved her face onto the table. “No more.” Serafina looked out the kitchen window as she washed her coffee cup, watching the neighbor's children playing in the garden. She rang the doctor and made an appointment for later in the day. The bleeding had stopped, but the baby hadn't moved since the previous evening. She needed Lorena and Mateo with her.

\* \* \*

Two weeks later, on a brilliant, sunlit morning, Serafina walked through the Plaza, again bustling with shoppers and vendors, and gardeners trimming bushes. Groups of children in their starched school uniforms chattered excitedly on their way to school like the earthquake never happened. Shopkeepers rolled out their store awnings against the morning sun, and rearranged the wares in shop windows, hoping to instill confidence in customers, whose money was needed to make repairs to their stores. Serafina kept up her pace, listening to the rushing water from the fountains, the tram bells, and the clopping sounds of horse's hooves. At that moment, she felt a profound sense of loneliness in the crowded downtown area, and decided to seek refuge in the Ponce Cathedral before heading home to meet

with Ana. The bells pealed loudly, startling Serafina as she entered the white Cathedral, where the air was cool, and the darkness was inviting. Serafina removed her shoes, feeling the cool tiles on the soles of her feet. She covered her head with a *mantilla*, and made her way to the front altar.

Despite experiencing the baby's movements several times that week, and receiving her doctor's confirmation that she was fine, Serafina still worried. She knelt and looked up at the emaciated figure of Jesus on the crucifix, illumined by golden light streaming in through the windows. "I'm putting this at your feet. I'm begging you, please don't let me lose this baby, and show me a sign that I should tell my husband." Serafina rested her forehead on her arms and waited, but she received no answers from God. Again she was plagued with confusion and anxiety. What would people say about her, Antonio, and about the San Patricio family if the scandal was revealed? Serafina would not be the one to mar the family name, nor would she threaten her future and that of her children. What if the family blamed her? No, it was too late to come forward and not at all in her best interest. Serafina would avoid a scandal. The longer she was silent, the easier it would be to forget.

Back at home, Serafina ran a comb through her long, wet hair and dressed in a white, cotton maternity dress. While looking for her shoes, she heard a knock at the door. Serafina gripped her neck and held her breath until the new maid poked her head in the bedroom. "Excuse me, Doña Serafina, I didn't mean to startle you. There is a woman at the door asking for you. She says her name is Ana Belén. Do you know her?" The light-skinned mulatta's question had an accusatory tone, which reminded Serafina of the woman's employer—Delfina San Patricio.

Serafina raised a perfectly arched eyebrow at the maid. "Señorita Belén is an old family friend. Kindly show her to the guest room." Serafina had instantly disliked the maid, and despite her weak protest, her mother-in-law had insisted the woman work for Serafina until a proper nanny could be found, insisting Doña Lola was too old to care for the home and a newborn. Antonio's parents had accepted Serafina's pregnancy and Roberto's children; leaving Serafina little choice but to put up with the surly housekeeper, and keep the peace with Delfina.

The sunny guest room was a better choice for a visit with Ana than the living room, which had a view of the dining room where the attack had

taken place. Serafina didn't stand a chance of successfully lying to Ana with a view of the scene of the crime. The new maid introduced Ana and watched as the women greeted each other with a kiss on the cheek. Ana wore the same white, cotton dress with white stockings, and sturdy black shoes, she'd worn to Serafina and Antonio's wedding. Serafina motioned for Ana to sit beside her, and then addressed the arrogant mulatta in a flat voice, "Please ask Doña Lola to bring us coffee and something sweet." The maid curtsied flamboyantly, instantly irritating Serafina, and left the room. "Ay, *Ana*. That woman is driving me crazy," she whispered. "Antonio's mother has installed her in my home to check up on me, and I'm tired of her. But, enough of that! You are radiant, Ana."

Ana chuckled, and smoothed her dress with a coy smile. "Thank you, and I must agree—the curtsy was a bit dramatic."

"I simply must get rid of her, and find a nanny of my choosing. No matter; it's such a relief to see you Ana! Are you all right? Antonio said you were living with friends."

"My shoulder is still sore, but I'm healing well. Yes, I'm living with my neighbor for now."

"Do you need anything, Ana? We are here for you."

"Thank you, Serafina. I am grateful to you and Don Antonio for paying the doctor and helping me after the earthquake."

"We wanted to make sure you wanted for nothing. Well, there simply must be a better way of keeping in communication with you, Ana. I was worried sick about you. Does your neighbor have a telephone?"

"No, she doesn't. But look at you," Ana said, rubbing Serafina's belly. "You are at your most beautiful when you are with child." Serafina looked deep into Ana's eyes, and then covered her mouth, unable to stop the tears from falling. "What's wrong, Serafina? Is the baby all right? Has something happened to Antonio, the children?"

"It's not that, Ana. The baby is fine. Lorena and Mateo are fine; they returned from their holiday with their grandparents recently, and are back at university. Antonio is wonderful."

"I'm relieved to hear that, but I don't understand why you're crying. What has happened to you? Your hormones could be the culprit; women are more emotional during pregnancy." Ana moved closer to Serafina and offered a handkerchief.

“Oh, Ana, I can’t tell you.” Serafina said, feeling her resolve crumble, and sensing the possibility of relief.

“You must tell me, Serafina. Whatever it is, we can figure it out together. Please tell me what happened,” Ana said, brushing Serafina’s hair behind her shoulders.

“Ana, I’ve kept this a secret for weeks now, and if I can’t tell you, who can I tell?”

“Exactly, so please calm yourself. I’m here, and you know you can tell me anything.”

Serafina made sure the maid wasn’t eavesdropping at the door, and took her seat again. “It was the day of the earthquake. Antonio ran to town to see the damage, and to check on his family. I was home alone and...” Serafina’s tears ran down her cheeks as she struggled to continue with her story. “And I was surprised by a strange man entering our bedroom. When I saw him, I knew immediately that I’d left the front door unlocked.”

Ana clutched her heart, and covered her mouth. “Merciful Virgin, who was he? What did he want?”

“I don’t know him, Ana,” Serafina continued breathlessly. “He told me he was checking the houses on the street for looters, and that he had some papers for Antonio to sign. I told him to wait downstairs, and unbeknownst to me, the man was hiding. He grabbed me by the hair when I came downstairs. And then he...he forced himself on me. There was nothing I could do, Ana. He easily overpowered me, and it was over very quickly.” Serafina sobbed softly in Ana’s arms.

“No, no. This can’t be true,” Ana said loudly. Serafina put her finger up to her mouth, checked the door, and returned. “Please God, tell me that didn’t happen. I can’t bear it,” Ana whispered. Her face contorted with anguish.

The same pain and anguish were etched on Serafina’s face. “I tried running out of the house, Ana, but he pulled me back by my hair. I don’t want to talk about it anymore. It’s done.”

“No, it’s *not* done, Serafina! What did the police say? What does Antonio say?”

Serafina put her finger to Ana’s mouth, and shook her head. “No police, Ana. And I’m not going to tell Antonio. How can I embarrass him and the family with a scandal such as this?”

“But you must tell Antonio,” pleaded Ana. “He’s your husband, your protector. He won’t blame you, and he’ll put that monster put behind bars where he belongs!”

Serafina’s eyes widened, and she took Ana’s hands. “No, you don’t understand, Ana. His mother would like nothing more than to see me lose Antonio to some scandal. I won’t say a word, and you won’t either.”

Ana shook her head, and dried her eyes. “My heart is breaking for you. Did you bleed? Oh, my God; are you bleeding now?” Serafina shook her head.

“That happened a few weeks ago, and yes, I’ve been to my doctor. The baby is fine, Ana. I’m fine, really I am.”

Ana took a deep breath and exhaled through her mouth. “*Dios mío*, why didn’t you contact me? I would have immediately come to help you!”

“You’d just been injured, and were still recovering from your injuries, Ana. I didn’t want to burden you.”

“I don’t understand you, Serafina. I’m amazed you dealt with his on your own. Does your doctor know about the attack?”

Serafina sat quietly for a few moments before she spoke. “The doctor didn’t seem to notice during my examination.”

“Do you know the man who did this? Did you get a good look at him?”

“Yes, I saw his face in the downstairs mirror before he left the house. I’d never seen him before. He was dressed in a dark blue police uniform. At least I think he is a police officer.”

Ana’s voice was urgent. “If this man works for the police department, he will be easy for Antonio to find!”

“Ana, listen to me! Promise me you’ll say and do nothing about this. We must forget it ever happened. Antonio must never know. I have a good life now; my children are safe and well-taken care of. Our family has a good future with a new baby coming. This must never leave your lips, please.”

“This man is dangerous, Serafina. He’ll do this again to another woman. You cannot pretend it never happened. I’m sorry, but you can’t.”

“Yes, I can, and I *will* forget.” Serafina’s voice was firm and resolute. “I’m over this, and I don’t want Antonio looking at me with different eyes—with pity, or suspicion that I’ve done something wrong with another man behind his back. I can’t risk that.”

Ana wiped her eyes and blew her nose. “You should tell Antonio, but

you know best, Serafina. I cannot believe this happened to you. I feel so helpless. Please tell me what I can do to help you.”

“You can help me by being with me when I give birth to this baby, Ana. I’m due in less than two months. Antonio’s mother has sent this horrible woman to my house, and I feel my every move is reported to back to her. The maid must leave. Can you stay with me next month until the baby is born?”

“I’m surprised, Serafina. I thought you’d give birth at the new hospital. Are you sure?”

“I’m sure, Ana. I want you to deliver my third child as you did my first two.” Serafina squeezed Ana’s hands.

“But my medical instruments were stolen a few months ago; I don’t have a thing to work with.”

“Don’t worry; we will buy whatever you need!”

“Well, you do need the best midwife in Ponce to deliver Don Antonio’s first child,” Ana replied with a smile. “I would be honored.” Then Ana turned serious. “Serafina, please, reconsider telling Antonio. That animal must be arrested, and put in jail.”

“Please don’t ask me again, Ana. I won’t risk my future and that of my children; never. We will not speak of this again.”



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# CHAPTER 25

## *Sueños e Ilusiones ~ Dreams and Illusions*

**AT AGUSTÍN'S INSISTENCE**, Ana moved into his home with her statue of the Virgin of Regla, the clothes on her back, the plants and herbs from her garden with roots intact, and what was left of her crèche. Moving in with Agustín was an enormous step for Ana and a necessary one, as there had been little privacy for them at Emilia's house. Ana couldn't deny her desire to be closer to Agustín, and her heart ached when he left her late at night, but the thought of coming to him empty-handed had plagued her the first few days. He'd insisted Ana rest her arm, but she'd worked all her life and couldn't imagine sitting idle. After Agustín prepared their first meal as a couple, Ana immediately took over the cooking, and he was happy to let her.

Ana soon replanted seedlings and mature plants from her garden in San Antón into Agustín's garden. Her shoulder still felt weak, but there was nothing like hard work to heal her. From La Playa to San Antón to Ponce, she thought. After thirty years in La Playa, she'd now moved three times in little over a year. Some days, Ana missed delivering babies, but she couldn't let this chance at a new life with Agustín slip through her fingers. When she was completely well, she would think about catching babies again.

To contribute to the house finances, Ana had accepted Serafina's proposal of staying with her and Antonio until the baby was born. At first, Agustín hadn't warmed to the idea of the temporary arrangement, and reminded her they were now a couple. He'd expressed dismay that Ana hadn't thought to ask what he thought before giving Serafina a final answer.

There had been no fight, no argument. Ana admitted it had never occurred to her to ask his permission, and Agustín helped her to realize she wasn't asking his permission, only sharing with him. Agustín's opinion mattered greatly to Ana, and when he honored her arrangement with Serafina to live in the San Patricio home until the child was born; she loved her man more than ever.

Despite the economic difficulties on the island during the recovery efforts after the earthquake, the *botánica* was soon enjoying a brisk business. The earthquake seemed to spark new-found spirituality in the people of Ponce—churches were at full capacity, donations at an all-time high, and the spiritist movement grew, which was good business for botanical shops across the city. Agustín was eager to continue teaching Ana about running a successful business. She was a great addition to the shop, with her extended knowledge of healing and midwifery, and the customers loved her. But secretly, Ana worried he'd tire of her. Her fears were unfounded; she and Agustín worked well together, like a family.

"Your black beans and rice are better than my mother's," Agustín said, rubbing a full belly.

"Now, that is a compliment," said Ana, hugging his neck from behind. "Thank you; unless of course, her beans were awful to begin with."

"Hers were tasty, but yours are the best. Come here," he said, reaching around for Ana. "Have I told you how much I love you today?"

"I know you do, Agustín," she teased, wriggling out of his arms. "I love...living here with you."

"Ah, so you won't tell me you love me in return? Fine, I'll never say it again."

Ana turned away from Agustín, and hid a huge smile in her hands. She never tired of hearing him say he loved her. "Yes, that's right. Never," he said, grabbing Ana by the waist, and carrying her to the bedroom, which made her laugh.

"Stop, I have chores to do!" They wrestled on the bed until Ana pinned him. "You make me dizzy, Señor," Ana said, taking his face in her hands. She was afraid to say she loved him back, and the longer she hesitated, the more somber Agustín's face became. "Smile, *mi amor*; you must know I love you," she finally said. She wondered if he knew how much her heart ached for him every second of the day, and how afraid she was of losing

him.

“Finally, I hear the words I’ve longed to hear. I’m crazy in love with you, Akanni Opaku.” He pressed his lips to hers and stroked her face. “Ana, if you could live anywhere, where would you live?” She rolled off, and he pulled her close.

“Where did that question come from?”

“I want to know. We never have enough time to talk at the shop, and we’re tired when we get home. And you already know I’d much rather make love than talk.” They laughed.

“Where would I live? Let me see...years ago, I would have said Cuba, but with my parents dead, there’s nothing there for me. I guess I’d say the mountains of Porto Rico in a few years. I’d live in a small house where the air is pure and clean; a place where I can live out my days in peace. I want a *casita* on a small mountain top where I can watch sunsets and sunrises, and have a view of a deep, green valley. Oh, and a river nearby with a waterfall, where I can bathe and wash clothes. I’ve worked hard all my life; that would be the perfect ending.”

“I see you haven’t given this question much thought,” teased Agustín. “Do I figure into this dream?” he said, stroking her cheek.

Would she scare him if she said yes? Would he run if Ana told him she wanted to live with him forever? “Yes,” she said, turning her face toward the window.

Agustín grew serious. “Ana? Only a yes from you?”

She faced him. “Yes means I love you, and I can’t think of anything more wonderful than growing old with you.” She immediately wanted to take back her words, worrying they were premature, but Agustín didn’t look surprised or seem horrified.

“All right, then. We have a plan, your plan. We’ll build a house in the mountains at the edge of a river. That sounds good to me, too. I saw us growing old together the minute we met.”

Ana smiled broadly, and kissed him passionately, vowing to never be afraid of her strong feelings and emotions toward Agustín. She’d never felt more special in her life. “That sounds perfect, *amor*. Do you have to get back to the shop soon?” she asked, walking her fingers towards his belt.

“Woman, you will cripple me!”

“Are you sure, Agustín? Because I have some time while the plants in

the garden grow,” she said with a sly smile.

Agustín checked his watch, and groaned. “I could devour you this very moment, but I have to get back, Akanni. Oh, I have something for you,” he said, jumping off the bed. He rooted through his pants pockets, and returned with a wad of bills tied with a string. “Here, I’ve been saving this money. I figure that if we combine our savings, we should be able to buy that small house in the country sooner rather than later.”

Ana took the money and sat up. “This is for us? You want to buy a house with me? Are you serious, Agustín?”

“Of course, I’m serious. Aren’t you?”

“Yes, but it was just a dream. This makes it real.” Ana rolled the wad of bills over in her hand with tears in her eyes. “How much money is this?”

He laughed. “You’re a shrewd woman, Ana Belén! Honestly? I’ve lost track, but I think close to \$1000. There’s certainly enough to buy a small piece of land and build a comfortable house. What do you think?”

“Oh, Agustín, I don’t know what to say.” Ana’s heart seemed to grow larger. Still dumbfounded, she stood up, wondering if her body could contain all the love she felt at that moment.

“Say nothing. Kiss me quick, and walk me out. I have to get back to the shop, or there’ll be no more where that came from. Keep our future safe, my love. Our future is now in your hands.”

“And I will guard it with my life!”

Just then the front door opened, and Jaime walked in. Ana shoved the wad of dollar bills into her pocket, praying her hands had been quicker than Jaime’s eyes. “Oh, I thought this was the entrance to the *botánica*,” Jaime said, looking surprised. “Emilia asked me to pick up a few bottles of *Agua Florida*.” Ana watched Jaime’s eyes for any movement towards her pocket. She glanced at Agustín, and saw the muscles in his jaw clench.

“This is our home; the shop is out back. We’re closed for lunch,” Ana said, firmly. “We’ll be there shortly. Go around the house, and wait for us there.”

“I’m sorry to disturb you,” Jaime said, closing the door behind him.

Ana shook out her hands and covered her mouth. “Ay, *Santo Dios*! Do you think he saw the money? I think he saw it in my hand before I put it in my pocket!”

“Calm down, I don’t think he saw a thing. I saw you hide the money, and

I followed his eyes. Never once did I see him look in the direction of your pocket. You're quick; I'll say that for you."

"But if you saw, he must have seen!" Ana removed the money from her pocket. "Here, you take it," she said, offering Augustin the money. "He and Emilia stole money from me after the earthquake. I'm not letting that happen again—especially with your money."

"It's our money, Ana. I don't trust him either, but I honestly don't think he saw anything. Hide the money in the house, somewhere safe. I'll open the shop for him. Stay by the window. I'll wave to you when he leaves. Remember, tonight we're open late, so eat early and come over around seven. We'll close the shop together.

"Yes, all right. I'll be watching. Please be careful; he's a demon. I absolutely loathe him."

Ana hid behind the curtain and watched Agustín step inside the shop. She didn't move from the window until Jaime left, and sighed in relief when Agustín waved at her. She immediately removed a floorboard, dug a hole in the soft earth, and hid the money. Then a horrible thought crossed her mind. Had she been too hasty in her decision to work with Agustín? What if he ran out on her or they couldn't get along later? What would happen to her and the money she'd earned alongside him, if they separated after years together? She'd have lost her clientele by then, leaving her with nothing. It was a risk she was willing to take.

Several hours later, as Ana prepared to leave for the *botánica*; Emilia surprised her by knocking on the window. Ana immediately turned her face, intending to ignore Emilia, but the reminder of the young woman's kindness after the earthquake won out. Ana opened the window and narrowed her eyes, "Hello, Emilia. I'm about to leave the house."

"I have news of María."

"Good news, I hope?" There was no telling what the two young women had gotten into. "Has María moved back?"

"Yes, good news. Maria is back, and we're working again."

Ana shook her head. "Unbelievable. You're still in the business?" Emilia shrugged. "Well, I'm working with Agustín now, and I must go."

"I understand," Emilia said, fidgeting with her sleeve.

"What is it?"

"I hate to trouble you, but I have a problem. You remember Pérez?"

Officer Pérez?”

“Yes, how could I forget that *pendejo*?”

“He’s pressuring me and Jaime to pay him for protection, and frankly, we don’t have extra money coming in. The parties we host for our clients cost a pretty penny, and we’re not attracting the numbers we used to.”

“What are you saying, Emilia?”

“Money is tight, Ana. I was hoping you could lend me five dollars.”

Emilia knew about the money. Ana inhaled and blew out a fast breath. She thought for a moment. It was incredibly suspicious that Emilia was asking for money right after Jaime could have seen the wad of money go into her pocket, but Ana needed information—information she sensed Emilia might have. “When do you need it by?”

“Would this week be possible? Pérez is threatening to shut us down if we don’t pay him. And you and I know he means what he says.”

“Pérez is a pig,” Ana said, bringing in one window shutter as a sign the conversation was soon over. “When can you pay me back?”

“In two weeks. And I will pay you in full.”

“I’ll bring you the money later this week.”

“Thank you, Ana. I hated to ask you. I’m really afraid of Pérez. He boasted to Jaime that he raped a high society lady the day of the earthquake. He is a sick man.”

Ana threw the shutters back. “What? What did you say?” Ana’s jaw dropped, but she immediately composed herself. This was not a coincidence. Emilia repeated what she’d heard. “Come inside, Emilia,” Ana said, ushering the young woman into the living room.

Emilia glanced around the room, and lit a cigarette. “Why does this interest you, Ana?”

Ana hesitated for a moment before replying, “Tell me what you know, and if it interests me, I might consider the five dollars as payment for your trouble—if what you know turns out to be information I need. And you will tell no one about this.”

“Agreed.”

“No one, Emilia; especially not Jaime. This is very important.”

Emilia nodded. “What I know is well-known in my circles. Pérez has raped many prostitutes around town, but no one will press charges because he’s a policeman. He assaulted María once, years ago.”

“What about the society woman? What about her?”

“I don’t know her name, but Jaime told me that Pérez entered a home to steal, and was discovered by a very beautiful woman. He raped her...and Ana, she was pregnant. Pregnant—can you imagine? That disgusting dog of a man should be taken out back and shot. Poor woman,” said Emilia with more compassion than Ana had ever noticed in her.

“*Dios Santo*,” said Ana, swallowing repeatedly to keep the bile in her throat down. It was him.

“Are you all right, Ana?”

Ana ignored Emilia’s question. “Listen, you know I appreciate your kindness after the earthquake, but I don’t have much money left since my money was stolen,” Ana said, raising her eyebrow at Emilia, who didn’t seem to notice, or conveniently ignored her meaning. “I will bring the money to your house tomorrow, and I have something to talk to you about. I think you can help me with a certain problem.”

When Emilia left, Ana couldn’t wait to tell Serafina what she’d discovered. Serafina’s description of the man matched Pérez. How could Ana have missed this before? But with Serafina’s baby due in a week’s time, Ana didn’t dare bring this up until after the baby was born. Then they’d put the bastard behind bars for good.



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# CHAPTER 26

## *Las Malas Mujeres ~ Bad Women*

**NOW IN HER NINTH MONTH OF PREGNANCY**, Serafina loved the attention lavished on her by Antonio's family. Her sisters-in-law visited weekly with bags of baby clothes and fashionable maternity dresses for Serafina. Even the dour Delfina San Patricio had seemed to warm toward her and the children, which made everyone in the family happy. Determined to win her mother-in-law over completely, and keep the new peace between them, Serafina never intended to bring up Delfina's rude comment to her at the Ball.

Serafina rested and napped to her heart's content, enjoying her time with Ana like they had in La Playa. While Ana visited the markets in the morning, Serafina received visitors, mainly the women of the neighborhood and the wives of Antonio's colleagues. It was surprising how long it took the women to visit, but Serafina was grateful for the special time with Antonio as they were still newlyweds. The new friends offered Serafina advice on marriage, children, how to run a Christian home, and more importantly, how to keep a man away from the clutches of *las malas mujeres*, bad women.

Antonio encouraged Serafina to make new friends, and when she'd been invited to tea at the home of Antonio's most important client, Antonio had explained how important a good wife was to a successful man. Serafina attended the tea, and the very next day, Antonio showed her the handwritten note from the Vice President of the Customs House, which included how much his wife had enjoyed meeting Serafina. The wives did indeed have a hierarchy.

Serafina fingered the small holes in the mosquito net, and smiled. Earlier in her pregnancy, she and Antonio could barely get through their meals without returning to the bedroom. They were passionate and arduous in their lovemaking, and by midnight, they often lay completely spent in each other's arms. Many times, Serafina was sure she'd have a heart attack during her orgasms, but Antonio had assured her that she could not die of passion. She recalled a particularly passionate evening when they'd become so utterly entangled in the mosquito net, their arms and feet had poked holes in the netting. Serafina had tried repairing the holes to avoid mosquito bites, but usually they were in such a state of rapture they barely noticed the little beasts.

She was feeling more amorous than usual, and wondered if her sexual urges were normal for a pregnant woman in her ninth month. No one had ever spoken to Serafina about intimate pleasures, not even Roberto, and her imaginings had not come close to what she experienced with Antonio. After the baby's birth, they would resume their lovemaking, thought Serafina with a smile, but she'd ask Doña Ana first. She yawned, stretching out on the soft, white silk coverlet like a luxurious cat. A knock at the bedroom door broke her train of thought. Serafina held her breath under the covers until Mercedes waddled in. Serafina took a seething inhalation, and let it out slowly, wondering when she would get over her fear of the man returning to hurt her. Mercedes, not much older than Serafina, and hugely pregnant with her second child, was perpetually tired and always good-natured.

“¡*Bendición, Serafina!* The maid let me in and told me to come up. Your face is white as a sheet, Serafina. Who did you think was at the door?”

Serafina ignored the question. “*Santo Dios, Mercedes!* You shouldn't be walking around!”

“Oh, I know; I'm huge. The doctor says walking is good for me and my bad back. Listen, I have some time before the kids come home from school; would you like to come over for some cool refreshment?”

“Sit down! You're making me nervous. You're as big as a house, and ready to drop this child any minute.”

Mercedes shook her head and laughed. “I know, I know, and my back hurts so badly. Which chair?” Serafina offered her friend the mahogany rocking chair, and added a thick pillow. “Ah, you remembered the cushion,”

said Mercedes, sinking in. "I won't be able to get out of this chair, but who cares? I'm claiming this rocker."

"I'm catching onto you, Mercedes. You invite me over for refreshment, but what usually happens is that I end up being the hostess. And I'm further along in my pregnancy than you."

"All right, you've found me out." Mercedes said with a grin. "But it's nice to be in a home that's not full of dirty laundry and dishes in the sink."

"I love your company, and you know I must tease you," Serafina said, and then rang for the maid.

"You look wonderful, Serafina. You haven't gained a lot of weight, which I hate you for, of course. It's so much easier getting around when you aren't carrying such a heavy load like this," Mercedes said, rubbing her belly. "I definitely don't attract male attention in this state, which makes my husband happy, and the other women don't see me as a threat."

"A threat? You're beautiful, Mercedes. I don't understand."

"Listen, marriage is a woman's introduction into the sisterhood of decent women. You are now a member of our women's club, an exclusive club, and as a pregnant wife, you are no longer considered a threat, or a potential husband snatcher like those bad women."

Serafina tilted her head and pursed her full lips. "What do you mean by 'bad women'? Are you talking about prostitutes?"

"Yes and no," continued Mercedes. "There has always been an unspoken war between women to catch good men and keep them; you know that. Life is hard for women with no husbands, who will stop at nothing to steal your man. The camaraderie between *comadres*, us, is very important, Serafina. You and I are very fortunate. We're married to successful men, and God has blessed us with beautiful children. We have a lot to lose, and we're not about to lose as much as a hair to another woman whether she's a prostitute, a waitress, or another society wife, right?"

Serafina nodded in agreement. "I see. We band together like sisters until one of us betrays another sister."

"Exactly," Mercedes said with a smile. "Then we destroy them socially, no matter who they are. We encircle our wounded sister. Important social doors are closed to the accused society woman, and we deny employment to the *trigueñas* and *mulatas* if they so much as sniff around our husbands. I've seen it done many times."

Serafina had mixed feelings about asking who the fallen society women were, and felt sure Mercedes would tell her, but she didn't ask. Her friendship with Mercedes was still new, and although Serafina trusted her, she didn't want her new friend to think she was a gossip. Serafina didn't care to know who the women were, in case she'd already met and liked them. "Will a midwife deliver your baby?" she asked instead. Mercedes looked surprised the topic of conversation had changed, and Serafina instantly regretted her question without knowing why.

"Me? No, it's safer to deliver in a hospital," replied Mercedes, rubbing the small of her back with a fist. "That's just not done these days, Serafina. Are you?"

"I'm not sure yet. Please excuse me while I see what's holding up the maid." Serafina hadn't told Mercedes about her humble background in La Playa. She'd only intimated that she'd lived in Guánica with a wealthy aunt for many years after the death of her first husband. Mercedes, born into a prominent Ponce family and educated in Spain, had made her debut at the Ponce Casino, and married into another prominent Ponce family. Serafina enjoyed the social doors Mercedes opened for her, and enjoyed her company, but didn't know how her new friend might react to her humble beginnings. So Serafina remained quiet about her background, and suspected Mercedes' good breeding wouldn't allow her to broach the subject of Lorena and Mateo's father, nor where she was born.

Serafina returned with two glasses of fresh guava juice. "Now, back to your question; I had a midwife with Lorena and Mateo. You met her at my wedding—Doña Ana. She is still a dear friend."

"Oh yes, I remember her now." Serafina waited for any sign of recognition in Mercedes' face, and then wondered if she might remember Ana's name in relation to Amancia's trial, which had been in every newspaper in town.

"Well, Doña Ana may be experienced, but a hospital is the modern way. God forbid your baby develops complications; all the necessary equipment would be in place to help you. Doctors study for many years, Serafina. They're up on all the latest medical information. Midwives are so old-fashioned."

"I never had complications with my first two births, and I doubt this birth will be any different. I trust Doña Ana with my life. Besides, she has

delivered over five hundred babies in her long career.”

“Wouldn’t that make Doña Ana quite old by now?” Mercedes said, putting her feet up on an ottoman.

“I don’t know how old she is,” Serafina said, rubbing her belly. “But I want her here for this baby’s birth, and she agreed Antonio can remain in the room with me.”

Mercedes raised her eyebrows and dropped her jaw. “Antonio? That’s unheard of! Are you sure you want him there for all the blood and gore?”

“I’m not sure if *I* want to be there for all that again,” Serafina said, hoping she hadn’t shown a lack of good sense and taste in Mercedes’ eyes. “We made this baby together. Why shouldn’t Antonio be present? He wants to be, you know.”

“Well, if Antonio says he’s all right with it, I’m impressed. My husband would sooner cut off an arm than be present at the births of his children,” Mercedes said, finishing with a hearty laugh. “You know you will shock the other wives, Serafina; it’s just not done.”

Later that evening, Serafina began to worry that Antonio might see her in a negative light, during the gory mess of childbirth. She wanted her husband to always think of her as the beautiful, young woman he’d married. And more importantly, had the mention of Ana, in light of Amancia’s very public trial, been a gross error in judgment on Serafina’s part? She was not ready to open the door to her past, and realized how many secrets she held close to her chest.

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## CHAPTER 27

### *El Ciclo de la Vida ~ The Cycle of Life*

**ANA SILENTLY INVOKED** the goddess Yemayá for quick and easy delivery, and was thankful the evening was cool for Serafina's sake—giving birth in a stifling room was the ultimate torture. “You are a little over a week overdue, and from the size of your belly, I estimate this baby could weigh seven pounds or more. A big baby for you, but you're strong and in good form.”

“That is a big baby, Ana. This once I hope you're wrong!”

“Oh, you'll be fine, but I'm afraid your fine, white chemise will be soiled. Let's take it off; I have one for you to wear.” Ana said nothing about the crisp, white ribbon around Serafina's pony tail, and noticed Serafina biting her lip as she slipped the chemise over her head. “Don't worry! You've done this before.”

“I know. I shouldn't be as nervous as I am.” Serafina patted the bed. “Should I lie back now?”

“Yes, please. Now your waters haven't broken yet, but your body and the contractions will take care of that soon enough. When they break, it will be quite messy.” Ana removed a pair of spectacles from her pocket and put them on the bridge of her nose.

“Well, look at you, Ana,” said Serafina. “You look lovely.”

“I like them well enough, but don't tell Agustín. I won't admit to seeing better with the damn things on. He is after me to wear them all the time.” They laughed just as Antonio entered the bedroom. Ana placed a stack of clean rags at the foot of the bed and a towel under Serafina's bottom. “Don Antonio, are you in or out?”



"I'm in, Doña Ana! Just tell me what to do," he replied with a louder voice than was necessary. Ana detected a case of nerves, and smiled warmly, unable to conceal her amusement.

"For now, you will stand at Serafina's side and hold her hand. Later, you will keep her lips moistened and her forehead dry. And please, call me Ana."

"Oh, I'll remain at the side of the bed; don't you worry about that." Antonio gave Serafina a pained look, and accepted a cloth from Ana. "I don't think I'm quite ready to see all the action just yet."

"Well, I'm happy and relieved you're here, *amor*. I think my husband is very brave. Don't you, Ana?"

"Yes, I do. He's my first."

"Your first, Doña Ana?" Antonio's impish grin caused Ana to cover her mouth with her black shawl. She felt her face flush. "I mean you are the first father to stay in the birthing room in all my years of delivering babies. Don Antonio, you're terrible."

"Why, I believe you're shy, Doña Ana!" Ana had instantly liked Antonio, and although she was older than him, she insisted on addressing him with the formal "Don". Except for Agustín, there was no other man Ana respected or liked more.

Just then, Serafina gripped Antonio's hand. A significant amount of amniotic fluid gushed out, soaking the towel she lay on.

"Oh my, this baby was swimming in lovely waters," Serafina said, amazed at the large wet spot between her legs.

"There we go!" Ana removed the soiled towels, and turned to Antonio. "Don Antonio, you should see your face. Look at his face, Serafina!"

"Come here, *amorcito*." Serafina pulled his face to hers for a kiss. "There, there."

"I wasn't ready. But I'm all right now," he said, wiping his brow with the cloth meant for Serafina.

"There's no way to prepare you; I'm sorry," asked Ana, chuckling. "Most births are messy affairs, but the end result will be your beautiful child."

"It is a rare privilege and an honor for me," Antonio said. "Thank you for allowing me to be here with my beautiful wife. I say all this to you now, in case I'm unconscious when the baby comes." They all laughed. "What do

you think we'll have, Doña Ana?"

"Well, Serafina's belly is round all the way around; that's usually a girl. A boy presents straight out, so I'd say from the look of things...you're having a boy."

Antonio beamed. "I knew it," he said. "And Lorena predicts it will be a boy, as well."

"Yes, Lorena is very sure," said Serafina, confident in her daughter's gift of foresight.

"Well, I can tell you one thing for sure—it will be either a boy or a girl," Ana said with a wink.

The cook entered and handed Antonio a cup of hot tea. "Mint tea for Doña Serafina, Señor. I'll go prepare the special recipe now, Doña Ana," said the cook.

"What is this special recipe, Ana? I thought I knew most of your birthing concoctions," said Serafina.

"Anise seeds and the leaves of the coffee senna plant to help relieve pain." Ana set the new medical instruments, gifts from Antonio, on the bedside table, and removed a jar of coconut oil. "I'll bring in the special tea when you need it."

"Oh, I already feel some tightening. I think the contractions are beginning."

"You two get comfortable. I'll be in the kitchen if you need me."

"Wait! You're not leaving, are you?" said Antonio, clearly alarmed.

Ana smiled and addressed Serafina, "Rest and drink your tea. You'll be working hard very soon. Don Antonio, I'll be in the kitchen if you need me. Serafina is a professional." Ana looked back at the couple before pulling the door shut, marveling that she was attending Serafina's third birth. Ana hoped it would be a quick, uneventful birth; she missed Agustín terribly and prayed to be home later that week.

After several hours, Ana padded upstairs to check on Serafina. She peeked through the open door and saw Antonio sitting beside the bed and Serafina resting comfortably. Not wanting to disturb the couple, Ana listened from behind the door for any sign that she was needed. When satisfied, she returned to the kitchen, and removed a small bottle of rum and a new cigar from her satchel. Then she remembered she'd forgotten to light a candle as an offering to Yemayá, the goddess of maternity. She knocked

on the wall to awaken the spirits, and went in search of candles. On an ornately-carved dresser draped with dark blue velvet fabric, stood a five-arm, silver candelabra. Ana opened the drawer, found several white candles, and saw the brown paper parcel that held Lorena's caul. She was pleased Serafina had saved it, and vowed to ask her about Lorena after the birth. When Ana lit the wick, she sensed a protective, feminine energy in the room—either Serafina's mother was present, or it was Yemayá—Ana wasn't alone. "I knew you'd come, my old friends. Thank you. You're a bit early, but I am happy for your company. Who knew I'd be back delivering babies? We can never predict what life has in store for us, can we? But of course, you knew, Yemayá."

Back in the kitchen, Ana felt her eyes grow heavy. She rested her head on her arms, and soon fell asleep. A noise roused her, and Antonio entered the kitchen, looking concerned. "I don't know what's in that special tea, but if it's for pain, Serafina needs it now. She seems to be in a lot of pain."

"Of course, I'll reheat the tea. What time is it?"

"It's nearly four in the morning. I'm sorry to have woken you, Doña Ana."

"No need to apologize, Don Antonio. I'm used to these hours; I've done it all my life. Go on up; I'll join you shortly."

Near sunrise, Serafina was in hard labor. "The pains are less than a minute apart," said Antonio as Ana checked Serafina's cervix. Serafina seemed transfixed by the flickering shadows of the candle's flame dancing on the tin ceiling. "How's my wife doing, Doña Ana?"

"She's doing beautifully, and so are you, Don Antonio. I'm impressed. It's time to push, Serafina." Ana held the teacup to Serafina's mouth.

"Ay, *Virgencita*, I hope this tea helps. My legs are as tense as can be, and these pains are horrible. I *am* ready to push!" At the end of the contraction, Ana compared the time on her watch to Antonio's pocket watch.

"You will push this baby out with no trouble," Ana said, watching for any sign of the baby's head. "Third babies can come quickly!"

"I'm always afraid my head will explode, or my eyes will pop out of my head when I push."

"Don't worry. You've always done a fine job," said Ana, making sure her instruments were where she could reach them. After an intense thirty minutes of pushing, the baby's head crowned. "Stop pushing, Serafina."

Pant, so I can coax the baby's head out." Ana's face instantly turned somber as she looked under Serafina's chemise. "*Ojo*," she said, referring to the Yoruba word for the cord wrapped around the baby's neck.

"What's wrong," asked Antonio, noticing the change in Ana. "What does that word mean, Doña Ana?"

"Ana, what's wrong?" cried Serafina, taking Antonio's arm. "I don't think I can stop pushing!"

Ana lowered her voice, but was firm. "You must stop pushing, Serafina. Lay back and pant. I must remove the cord from around the baby's neck. Antonio, help her lay her back."

"Cord?" Serafina sounded close to losing her composure.

"Hurry, Doña Ana, she can't take much more," urged Antonio as Serafina lay back crying. Ana blocked them out. She cradled the baby's head with her left hand, and deftly removed the cord from around the neck with her right. Antonio and Serafina's eyes were wide with fear.

"You're doing fine, just fine," he said, taking Serafina's hand.

"For the love of God, Antonio, please stop talking," Serafina shouted. "Is the baby all right, Ana? Is it?"

"Yes, one big push now!" Ana delicately maneuvered the shoulders out until the baby slipped out into Ana's waiting hands. The baby's hands and feet had a blue tinge. Normally, Ana placed the newborn on the bed and then on the mother's stomach. Instead she wrapped the newborn in a blanket, and turned her back to Serafina as she massaged the baby's limp body with a soft cloth to circulate the blood. "He's a bit cold, so let me warm him up," said Ana, feeling her heart race.

"A boy, Serafina," shouted Antonio. "We have a son!" Serafina closed her eyes and prayed silently. She did not rejoice with her husband. She sensed something terribly wrong with her son. Ana held her breath as she continued with the massage, and lightly flicked at his heels with her fingers. After a few seconds, Serafina and Antonio's son finally let out a lusty cry. No one was able to hold back their tears.

"Thank Jesus," said Ana with a sigh of relief. She handed the infant to Serafina. "Congratulations, he's a big, healthy boy!"

"*Gracias a Dios*," Serafina whispered, gazing at her son with the serenity and love of the Madonna in the framed print behind the birthing bed. She cradled her son and fell in love with her third child. "Wait, why are

his hands and feet blue?”

“Nothing more than an immature circulation system,” said Ana. “Nothing to worry about; he will be all pink in a few days. Congratulations, Don Antonio! You’re a father.” Antonio sniffed back tears, and kissed Serafina tenderly before handing Ana a long, fat cigar.

“Thank you to my beautiful bride. And thank you, Doña Ana. I wouldn’t have missed this for the world. He is perfect.”

Ana held up the cigar and ran the cigar under her nostrils. “Ah, and it’s a good Cuban cigar, too! I see Serafina has told you about my custom. And look at you, grinning like a pagan, Don Antonio!”

Antonio laughed and put his arm lightly around Ana. “Yes, I know your little secret, Doña Ana. In a little bit, you will join me on the porch to smoke this Cuban cigar, and have a shot of rum, too!”

“I would certainly enjoy that. By the way, Don Antonio, what is your son to be called?” asked Ana, clamping the cord and handing him the scissors. She showed the proud father where to cut on the cord, and smiled at Antonio’s bravery, wondering if he realized what he’d just done.

“We wanted to see our child before naming him, and I think he looks like a Guillermo; don’t you, *amor*?” Serafina nodded and smiled. “Guillermo San Patricio, welcome to the world,” said Antonio. “We can’t wait to introduce you to your siblings.”

Serafina gazed lovingly at her husband, and then at their new son. “Lorena and Mateo will love you as much as we do, Guillermito.”

The birth had gone well, but the heat in the room combined with the smells of birth seemed to overwhelm Serafina. Ana watched her wobble and sensed something was amiss. She clutched the newborn as Serafina retched over the side of the bed. “You never did get used to the smell of childbirth, Serafina.”

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# CHAPTER 28

## *Despojos y Limpiezas Espirituales ~ Spiritual Cleansings*

**FIFTEEN MONTHS AFTER GUILLERMO'S BIRTH**, Salvador was born. His birth had been difficult only in that Serafina lacked the same energy she'd had for Guillermo's birth. Caring for two babies and two teenagers, left Serafina physically and mentally exhausted in the evenings. Ana hadn't helped matters with her persistent urging that Serafina tell Antonio that Ana had found her attacker. Serafina told Ana she'd think about it and begged her not to bring the subject up again until she was ready. Ana had agreed, but Serafina knew she'd disappointed her best friend.

Keeping a spotless house and stealing tiny bits of time for rest were virtually impossible for Serafina, so with Antonio's blessing, they'd hired a kindly, middle-aged woman named Wilhelmina. With the new maid's help, Serafina had a bit of free time, but spent most of that precious time worrying about Antonio and their marriage. She'd tried being strong and not giving in to her worries, telling herself that she was being paranoid, but every night Serafina found herself crying uncontrollably into her pillow. Serafina could not understand how a man she loved so much could stand to be away from her. But rather than confront Antonio, she'd remained silent, knowing her husband would reply that he was working hard for his family. She couldn't bear the thought of Antonio thinking she was being unreasonable or acting selfish.

Every morning before sunrise, Antonio left home for the Customs House, and returned late at night, usually after Serafina was in bed. Very

rarely was he home for lunch and when he was, he ate hurriedly while listening to a few minutes of the lunchtime radio news broadcast before returning to work. It wasn't that Serafina had the time or desire for amorous lunch hours; she was tired, but she missed feeling close to Antonio. Lately, there were no great shows of intimacy between them, leaving Serafina feeling lonely and abandoned. Any extra energy was spent nursing Salvador and weaning Guillermo, who screamed at the slightest attempt of removing him from the breast, which plagued Serafina with feelings of guilt and unhappiness.

Soon, Serafina's feelings of abandonment turned into resentment, and thoughts of betrayal consumed her. Her friends and neighbors didn't help matters by confiding stories of their husband's indiscretions and infidelities. Serafina listened and felt trapped. "Men are weak, and will always look elsewhere," they'd tell her. "It's a fact that men look elsewhere for comfort during our childbearing years." Serafina was advised to do her utmost to look youthful, *a la moda*, while keeping her eyes wide open for any signs of philandering. At the moment, Serafina felt it was all an impossible task; the demands of caring for four children—two of those nursing two babies—was daunting even with Wilhemina's help. However, the advice from friends on how to lose the pregnancy weight was working—she nursed her sons on demand. There was barely time for her to eat, and when the youngest boys napped, so did Serafina. Sleep called to her more than food, and soon her voluptuous figure was gone. Her long, thick hair lost its luster and was cut chin-length, in the hope the cut would encourage new growth, but her hair remained short, dry, and dull.

Serafina was excited for Ana's visit that morning. She was thankful Lorena and Mateo were at university and the younger children were napping quietly—finally, a bit of peace. She wondered what Ana would think of her obvious physical decline.

"Just the person I need to see. Come in, come in, Ana." Serafina ushered Ana into the well-appointed drawing room, and motioned to a mahogany rocker with a wicker seat. "I'm happy to see you've returned to wearing your long skirts and white blouses; you look lovely, Ana. You still haven't changed a bit from our Playa days. How do you do it?"

"Thank you. I'm getting older, but no complaints. You're looking fine, Serafina."



“Nice of you to lie,” Serafina answered with a smile. “As soon as Guillermo accepts it’s time to wean, we’ll be fine. Then I’ll only have one nursing infant,” Serafina said. “How’s Agustín?”

“Oh, he’s just as stubborn as they come. ¡Malcriao!” They laughed. “I’m still working with him at the shop, and even though I thought seeing him day in and day out would be difficult for us, we’ve loved every second. Did I tell you we’re looking at a plot of land near Jayuya?”

“Oh, how exciting; a little house in the country sounds wonderful. I could use some peace and quiet.”

“You look tired, Serafina. Are you eating and sleeping well?”

“I don’t remember what those words mean.”

Ana inspected Serafina from top to bottom. “What’s going on? You’ve cut your lovely hair, and there are dark circles under your eyes.”

“I’m tired, that’s all. My hair needed a good cut; it’ll grow back soon,” Serafina said, hoping Ana would notice that she didn’t want to talk about herself, or the attack.

“How are the children?”

“The boys are napping, thank God. Lorena and Mateo are at school. We have time for a nice chat, Ana. Doesn’t this remind you of when you used to visit me in La Playa? I miss those days.”

“I miss them, too. Life was less complicated then.”

Serafina nodded, noticing the little sack on Ana’s lap. She poured their coffee into paper-thin, bone china cups, and asked about it.

“Well, I had a bad feeling the last time I visited. My hairs stood on end when I entered your home, just as they are now,” Ana replied, rubbing her forearms. “You need this house cleansed of bad spirits. Do you remember Doña Fela, the *espiritista*?”

“I remember the stories you told me about her, but Antonio would go crazy if he found out I went to her.”

“Are you sure? How about visiting Fela to find out why you’re so unhappy? Maybe she can help.” Serafina put her hands to her face, and began to cry. “What’s wrong? You mustn’t suffer alone. Please tell me what’s wrong.”

“I already know what’s causing my unhappiness; it’s Antonio. We’re growing apart, and it’s killing me.”

“This is normal when you’re raising children, Serafina. Babies don’t

always sleep through the night, and you have two at the moment. Antonio needs his sleep, and you're exhausted trying to keep everyone happy. I understand. It's going to be difficult for a time, but be patient. Things will improve."

"No, you don't understand, Ana. It's more than that. Antonio is out almost every night with clients, and when he is home, he's distant with me. We rarely make love, and when we do, I feel his heart and mind are elsewhere."

Again, Ana encouraged Serafina again to meet with Doña Fela, but Serafina wouldn't hear of it. "Serafina, listen to me. I feel a lot of negative energy here. Maybe a destructive spirit wishes for your marriage to fail? Men and bad women are not a good combination, and men are weak, *mija*. It's nothing you're doing wrong. Do you understand? Men are constantly tempted to be unfaithful." Serafina dabbed at her eyes. "Do you think there is another woman?"

"No. No...I don't know." Serafina blew her nose. "He hardly spends any time at home, and I'm stuck at home. How would I know if he's being unfaithful?"

"And when he's home, you're tired. It could be that someone has put a *trabajo* on you, Serafina. Yes, it could be. Someone has put a bad, spiritual job on you. Maybe that's why you're tired and your marriage feels stale."

"I don't know. I feel he's rejecting me, and I don't know why or what to do about it."

"Listen, I learned a recipe for a spiritual cleansing bath from Agustín. It could help you. I know you don't always believe in these things, but write it down anyway. What have you got to lose? Get a pen and paper; I will tell you the ingredients. You'll feel better in no time with this *despojo*."

Serafina returned ready to write, and then sighed. "I'm not going to do this, so what's the point in writing, Ana? Things will improve once the children are both weaned, and I can get out more. They must improve or I'll lose my mind."

"Well then, I'll cleanse the house...when you ask me to."

\* \* \*

Six months later, Antonio stopped coming home for lunch. In her

desperation, and despite knowing he would be angry, Serafina mentioned Ana's suggestion of visiting Doña Fela. She wanted a reaction from him, any reaction, and a negative reaction was just as good, as they were barely speaking. As Serafina had suspected, Antonio became angry, and despite her pleas, he'd insisted nothing had changed between them, blaming his lack of communication at home on work. Serafina had been despondent, but a week after the house cleansing by Ana, Antonio began coming home for lunch again, and things between them seemed to improve. Serafina was happy to have her husband back, but still felt run down. It was time to try Agustín's remedy.

Ana brought the ingredients to Serafina, including something to help the children sleep. As Ana removed the items from her sack, she said, "Since Guillermo has finally weaned himself off the breast, I will prepare a warm tea of kale leaves and anise seeds for better digestion, and for Salvador's colic, a mixture with *higereta* leaf with a few drops of castor oil. Spoon a bit of mixture onto his abdomen and cover it with a towel. You'll see that the crying will stop, and both boys will sleep through the night."

"And what do you have for me?" Serafina asked, peering inside the sack.

"Your recipe involves boiling water in a big pot and adding eucalyptus leaves, avocado leaves, rose petals, and the juice of one sour orange. Once this mixture cools, you will pour the liquid over your head. Agustín says this bath will protect you from negative energy, neutralize any *trabajos* meant for you, and you will also find new energy. This recipe works on what the person needs at the moment, and Serafina, at the moment you need all three areas worked on. Repeat this bath once a week."

"Lorena is worried about me; she's like a little mother. I'll make sure she helps me with this remedy. I don't want her worrying anymore. I need to be the energetic mother I was with Lorena and Mateo."

"She is a good daughter, and you will be strong again. I have faith in you, Serafina."

As Ana and Agustín had promised, the youngest boys stopped crying in the early evenings, and the family reclaimed their peaceful nights and uninterrupted sleep. In a month's time, Serafina put on weight, her nails grew stronger, and her bobbed hair shone again. Wilhelmina was heaven-sent, arriving at eight o'clock in the morning, and not leaving until Antonio arrived from work. Serafina was then allowed private time with her

husband. The couple's lovemaking resumed during quiet lunch hours, not as intense and passionate as before the boys were born, but certainly satisfying and exactly what Serafina needed.

Ana and her neighbors were wrong about men, thought Serafina, picking Antonio's trousers off the floor, where he'd thrown them before they'd made love that afternoon. Serafina looked lovingly at her sleeping husband before shutting the bedroom door. Serafina draped the trousers over the back of the kitchen chair, and noticed grains of sand on the floor. She moved the chair out of the way, and swept the sand out the kitchen door. As she returned the chair to its place, she discovered more sand in the folded cuffs of Antonio's trousers.

Antonio still worked at the Customs House in La Playa, close to the sea. Was Antonio taking breaks during the day to walk the beach?

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# CHAPTER 29

## *Planes Interrumpidos ~ Interrupted Plans*

**“MORALITY POLICE?”** Ana shook the newspaper. “Listen to this; people are being arrested for living together without marriage, for having sex outside of marriage, and for walking home with their lovers.”

“Let me see that,” said Serafina, taking the newspaper from Ana, and read aloud, “Apparently, an American woman has put together a feminine police force. She says that ‘through women’s best weapon, gossip, they can destroy the enemy of their homes, and therefore, the enemy of their happiness.’ They’re calling for women to spy on each other, and to report to the police. Unbelievable.”

“That *Americana* is insane. In yesterday’s paper, I read that police are raiding houses, and hauling suspected unmarried couples out of bed. The unmarried couples are given the chance to marry, and if they can’t or won’t marry, the man is released and the woman is arrested, inspected, and charged with prostitution or immorality.”

“What?” Serafina put down the newspaper. “The men are released, and women are subjected to the abuse? Why don’t they examine the men who frequent the brothels? The brothels are maintained and supported by men! And most of them are married men. Young women should be smarter.”

Ana shook her head, thinking of María and Emilia. “Many of those same mistresses are later forced into prostitution because the men who used them will not marry them, or support their illegitimate children. And if you’re not a prostitute but choose to remain unmarried, you’re arrested? There’s no way around this one.”

“If you’re a decent woman, your husband probably has a lover and could

give you diseases. You might end up in the asylum with all the prostitutes anyway,” said Serafina, shaking her head. “It’s simple as this—men are responsible for a lot of the suffering—and the treatment for syphilis and gonorrhea can last years.” Ana nodded in agreement.

“Of course, the police and good society are doing all this for our own good. Listen to this,” said Ana. “The second women’s jail in Ponce has been built in record time. The new facility holds between two to three hundred women per week, in our attempt to control venereal disease and to eradicate prostitution in Ponce.” The women looked at each other. Ana knew what Serafina was thinking—she and Agustín were in danger. “These damn people are ruining good relationships. This will certainly help Agustín’s case. He has been pressuring me to marry him.”

“He proposed? Ana! Congratulations!”

“Yes, he has. But being married and belonging to a man...I don’t know about that. Sometimes I get so angry at men that Agustín receives the brunt of my anger. He doesn’t deserve it, of course, but sometimes I can’t control my tongue. And now we could be arrested for living together.”

“Oh Ana, please be careful. If you were ever sent away, I don’t know...” Serafina was unable to finish her sentence.

“Nothing is going to happen to me. I’m a strong woman,” Ana said with a wink. “I love that man to death. Agustín is my life, and if he asks me to marry him again, I’ll allow him to make a decent woman of me.”

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# CHAPTER 30

## *El Chisme ~ Gossip*

**ANTONIO REMOVED THE TROUSERS** from the back of the chair, and slipped them on. He gave Serafina a long kiss before turning to the bedroom armoire for his suit jacket. “I have to get back to the office. I’m already late.”

“Here, *amor*,” she said, handing Antonio a freshly starched handkerchief for his suit pocket. “I must get ready, as well. Wilhelmina is here so I can go to the seamstress.” Antonio kissed her goodbye. “Are you working late?”

“No, I’m caught up,” he said over his shoulder, “I’ll be home for dinner. I love you.”

“I love you, *amor*.” She deliberately hadn’t asked about the sand on the floor. Why bother? Antonio was coming home early, and she’d vowed to keep him happy, so he’d never have a reason to fall into the arms of another woman. Antonio was having lunch at the beach; that was all. She had no reason to suspect him, and put it out of her mind.

Serafina rushed down the street, happy she’d worn the green dress that hugged her curves. She didn’t want Josefina, the old seamstress, thinking she was a country maid when it came to fashion. She’d learned a lot about fashion from Antonio’s sisters, but Serafina had soon found her own style. The new dress Josefina was making for Serafina would be worn at the brand new Deportivo Country Club where Antonio was a founding member. Antonio was on the Board of Directors of the Nautico Yacht Club, the Rotary Club, and the Lions Club of Ponce. He was forging new alliances in business, where reputations were made and broken, and careers were bought and sold. It was rumored Antonio was being groomed by the

President of the Spanish Customs House as his right-hand man.

Conscious of maintaining her pale complexion, Serafina adjusted the white umbrella to better shade her face. She could hear Antonio's sisters telling her, "Only those who toil in the sun have dark skin." Although Serafina didn't like hearing comments such as that, from what she could see, no society ladies were sunning themselves. Not a leaf stirred as Serafina reached the seamstress' house. The trunk of the ancient mango tree in front of the old woman's house reminded her of the seamstress' gnarled arthritic hands. She was about to knock when she remembered Josefina's instructions—to enter the house and wait in the living room. She chose a planter's bench, and looked around. The room smelled musty, just like the unmarried Josefina, who was known as a bit of an eccentric, but her prowess on a sewing machine was legendary. Josefina's miniature poodle entered the room and barked at Serafina. When the dog jumped on the bench, she pinched her nostrils together and pushed him off. The smelly dog clawed at her leg, and she pushed him away again. He turned to leave and gave Serafina what looked like a dirty look. The dog's nails clicked on the wooden floor as it trotted down the hall, and just then, women's voices peppered the air. Josefina peeked out of her sewing room. "I'll be with you shortly, Serafina," she said, pushing myopic eyeglasses back up the bridge of her nose and shutting the door.

"Take your time," said Serafina, hoping the smelly dog with the matted hair would not return.

A slight breeze opened the door of the sewing room, and caught Serafina's attention. She heard the seamstress' voice and perhaps that of a client. Serafina's appointed time came and went, and although she was getting a bit anxious to be seen, she was enjoying the conversation she could now hear clearly. She distinguished there were two other women in the room with Josefina, and when they began discussing the upcoming ball at the country club, Serafina paid full attention. Quietly and deliberately, Serafina moved to the lone chair outside the door of the sewing room. If she had to wait, at least she would enjoy their private conversation. Suddenly, the women's voices seemed to move further from the door, forcing Serafina to stand and sneak a peek at the women inside. She didn't recognize the plump woman in her mid-forties, who stood on a wooden box while Josefina attempted to pin the back of a tight-fitting maroon dress. She's

going to need more than pins to contain that figure, thought Serafina with a smile. Josefina's forehead and upper lip shone from the heat and the effort of closing the dress. Serafina suppressed a giggle and heard a second voice say in a clear, conspiratorial tone. "The truth is he bought his lover a house at the beach, *and* he's in the process of buying her a little notions shop in town. The poor young wife doesn't suspect a thing!"

"We're always the last ones to know," said the plump woman.

"*Mujer*, why do you think I'm still single? I could never put up with that," said the seamstress.

"*La querida es la Viuda Lugo*. I hear the widow's lover and her dead husband were best friends."

"No! Who did you hear this from?" asked Josefina.

"I heard it from a very reliable source who knows the widow and the San Patricio families very well."

The last sentence felt like a kick to Serafina's stomach. Lugo had indeed died the summer before, and he had been Antonio's best friend. Feeling weak and dizzy, Serafina left the house before a fainting spell could call attention to her. The umbrella shielded her face from the sun and from prying eyes as she walked home with tears streaming down her face. Carla Lugo. She knew the name, but had never met the woman. Perhaps Josefina meant Antonio's father? Serafina didn't want to jump to conclusions, but why had she never been introduced to Carla, the wife of Antonio's best friend? Even before Lugo died, the women's paths had never crossed.

Sand. A beach house. Could the sand in Antonio's trousers come from a beach house in La Playa? Serafina hated to believe it, but it was entirely possible Antonio was spending long hours with his lover at the beach. Bastard! How? No, the women had to be speaking about Antonio's father. He had more available money, and God knows, more motive; look who he was married to. It was entirely possible her mother-in-law had driven Don Guillermo into the arms of another woman. Serafina tried to see this as hope, preferring to think this was her mother-in-law's problem, but deep in her heart, she knew it was Antonio who was cheating. His father was in his seventies.

That evening, after the children were tucked in bed, Serafina searched the garden shed for pieces of wood and dead branches left by the last rain. She gathered what she could and headed to the middle of the patio,

positioning each carefully selected piece of wood into a wooden pyramid, with kindling underneath. Once she was satisfied, she brought out old newspaper, and struck a match. As the fire blazed in the backyard, Serafina went inside the house for a chair, and placed it near the fire.

It was a star-filled, cool October evening, and the fire felt good against Serafina's face and hands. She sat very still, staring into the flames until she heard Antonio greeting the neighbor next door, and then she heard the front gate shut. Serafina ran inside and waited for Antonio in the bedroom. As was his daily routine, Antonio took off his jacket and trousers, and draped them over the chair. Without a word, Serafina took the trousers, held them upside down, and shook them a bit, waiting for the sand to fall out. When grains of sand formed a small pile, Serafina left the bedroom with Antonio's favorite suit.

"Serafina, the suit isn't dirty. It doesn't need cleaning." When Serafina didn't answer, Antonio followed her outside. Without speaking a word, she held the white gabardine suit over the fire until Antonio realized what she was doing.

"Have you gone mad? What are you doing?" Serafina glared at him and chucked his best suit into the ferocious bonfire. The white fabric darkened, and when it caught fire, Serafina marched toward the house. Antonio looked on incredulously, and then searched for a stick to lift his suit out of the fire, but knew it was too late. He grabbed Serafina's arm as she gripped the door knob of the kitchen door. She whirled around, releasing her arm from his grasp.

"Antonio, we live under the same roof! I'm your wife! How could you do this to me?"

"What are you talking about, Serafina?" His face turned red, and he coughed nervously.

"How is our marriage, Antonio? Would you say it's good?"

"Yes, of course. What's going on? Why have you burned my suit?"

Serafina ignored his questions, shouting, "If we have such a good marriage, tell me why there is another woman in it, Antonio?"

"What woman?" Serafina gasped at his lie, immediately looking around for something to throw at him, but she controlled herself. She knew if she lashed out now, she would never get information out of him. No, she would proceed with caution.

“Since you think our marriage is a good one, then you must believe it’s worth saving, correct?” Antonio nodded slowly. “If our marriage is worth saving, and you treasure what we have, you will not see Carla Lugo again.”

“What are you talking about? You’re my wife and she’s the wife of my best friend. There is no competition here, so don’t make more out of it than there is. This is ridiculous.”

Serafina hissed, “As your wife, I demand you end this friendship. No decent woman would put up with this. The widow Lugo has bewitched you; can’t you see that?”

“I’m not listening to this. This is crazy. Calm yourself; the children are sleeping.” Antonio moved past her, and turned the doorknob to enter the house.

Knowing the fight couldn’t continue inside the house where the children slept, Serafina blurted out, “If you insist on keeping up this friendship with that woman, I will confront her.” Antonio opened his mouth to speak, but Serafina continued, “And I will go to your superiors and complain. Then we’ll see where your precious career is, Antonio. If you continue with this whore, you will leave me no other choice.” With the threat on the table, Serafina walked toward the fire.

Antonio’s face darkened and his eyes narrowed as he followed her. His anger and the heat from the flames caused her to step back. “You will go nowhere, Serafina. If you humiliate me in front of my friends and co-workers, I will leave this house. Do you hear? This is the way it is and the way it will remain. Don’t forget who brings home the money; money that keeps you and the children in the social circles you so enjoy.”

Serafina’s jaw dropped slightly and her left eye twitched. His icy words stung. “How dare you,” she said in a menacing tone. “How dare you threaten me? You put me in those social circles. I do what I’m told to keep *you* in good standing!” Holding her head high, Serafina pondered her next move. Even though she hated him for saying it, she could not deny their current social life was important to her. She enjoyed their quality of life, and knew she was standing at the fork in the road—she could bring on a full attack and insist that Antonio move out, or keep quiet for the moment. She knew who the breadwinner was; and so, Serafina chose the latter. Their marriage had become a dangerous game of chess. She tried a different tactic.

“Antonio, I want my family back together. This woman cannot be a part of our marriage; can’t you see that? I love you,” she implored. Antonio ignored her and walked back to the house in silence. Serafina did not follow. She watched the erratic flight pattern of bats in the tree canopy, and had the sensation of everything moving too quickly to process. She focused on the fire with its cracks and hisses, as the flames licked the now-charred pieces of wood. The suit was no longer visible. The city had its own cacophony of sounds, and the longer she sat, the clearer individual noises became—the chirps of the *coquíes*, a baby wailing in the distance, and laughter from the neighbor’s house. Then the Cathedral bells sounded, reminding Serafina of her wedding vows to Antonio—her commitment to the sanctity of marriage. She snorted as she stared into the glowing, red hot embers. Wedding vows. And what about Antonio’s wedding vows to her? Her husband didn’t care about her, his children, or what God thought of him.

She wondered how her in-laws were handling Antonio’s forays with his whore of a mistress. What lies was Delfina San Patricio weaving to friends and family about her son’s torrid affair? Were there other lovers? Serafina suddenly felt smug—the San Patricio family was in the midst of a scandal, and she wasn’t the cause of it. “I hope you burn in hell, Antonio.”

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# CHAPTER 31

## *Mala de los Nervios ~ A Case of Bad Nerves*

**A YEAR LATER, ANTONIO'S AFFAIR** with Carla Lugo was common knowledge in Ponce high society, and when he began escorting her to parties around town, the humiliation was complete for Serafina. She'd tried everything possible to make Antonio happy—putting his needs first before the children and certainly before her own. She'd arranged for his favorite meals, insisted Wilhelmina ironed his white shirts just the way he liked them, and never let her friends interrupt their family time on the weekends. Yet Antonio rolled into bed at night smelling of strong perfume and cigarette smoke, telling Serafina he'd only danced with a few women at a party after work. She no longer knew the man who slept at her side.

Soon Serafina's weight dropped until her clothes hung on her thin body and her face looked gaunt. Her interest in the house waned, and all she could think of was sleeping. The children's constant squabbles got on her nerves, and at night, she wept guilty tears into her pillow for yelling at the slightest provocation. The children were innocent of wrongdoing; they were simply being children. Most days, Serafina felt like she was hanging from a cliff by her nails and feelings of losing control permeated her days. When the children left for school, Serafina climbed back in bed and slept. Wilhelmina did all the household chores, and had begun staying late to care for the children. The maid expressed gratitude for the extra money, but Serafina could see the worry in the woman's face.

"Doña Serafina, I've put lunch out for the children. All that's left to do is pour their drinks when they get home from school. Today is my doctor's appointment; did you remember? Don Antonio's shirts and trousers are



ironed, and I've washed all the floors."

"Thank you," Serafina yawned. "I'll be right out; you can go. See you tomorrow, Wilhelmina." Serafina looked at the clock. The eldest children would be home in fifteen minutes. She quickly made the bed, and avoided the mirror as she threw on the dress she'd worn the day before. Serafina vowed to try harder. She felt guilty for sleeping the day away and not tending to the children, but the extra rest helped her accomplish what little the maid couldn't do. The thought of her four children, all talking at once, suddenly made Serafina cringe. Ana was visiting early that evening, and Serafina desperately needed to speak to her.

As Serafina stood on the front porch, waiting for the youngest to file in from school, deep inside, the familiar dark void pulled her in; leaching any happy thoughts she might have had about her children's arrival. She'd always been a happy woman and loved her children fiercely, but Serafina couldn't shake the darkness in her heart. She watched with quiet restraint as Mateo ran up the steps of the house.

"Mamá, I'm home," said Mateo, a husky, handsome young man with thick black hair and intelligent brown eyes. Serafina kissed him on the cheek and flinched when the door he threw open slammed shut.

"Me, too, Mamá!" chimed in Salvador, followed by Guillermo, who were as light-haired as Mateo was dark. Her youngest sons wrapped their arms around Serafina's waist and ran into the house after their older brother. She followed the boys to the kitchen, and sat wearily at the table. As was their daily routine, the boys grabbed for chairs. Just then, Lorena entered the kitchen, and tossed her book bag on the floor. Lorena, tall, graceful, and pale-skinned like her mother, had mischievous dark brown eyes and long ringlets of black hair that framed her pretty, oval face.

"Ay, *arroz con bacalao*, again?" whined Mateo. Lorena slapped her brother's arm for his disrespect.

"*Hola, mami*," said Lorena, kissing Serafina's cheek. "What's wrong? You don't look so good. I've been worried about you all day."

"I'm only tired, my darling," Serafina said with a kiss. "Just seeing your beautiful smile brightens my day."

"*Gracias, mamá*. Are you sure you're well? I can stay home and look after the boys instead of returning to school."

"No, no. I know you have an exam after lunch. Why don't you go

upstairs, and I'll bring you a plate. I'm fine, just a little tired."

"All right, but save the plate for me. I'll eat when I get home from the university," Lorena said, grabbing her book bag and making her way upstairs.

"Boys, wash your hands, and when you return, sit quietly until we say grace." Serafina knew the boys weren't listening. They chattered excitedly about the new family next door.

"They have a boy my age and a younger sister, but she won't want to play with you two," said Mateo, always eager to annoy his two younger brothers.

"That's not true!" complained Salvador, "She *will* be our friend, you'll see. And we will ignore you!" The boys grabbed at each other, spilling glasses of milk onto the table. As Salvador reached to steady his glass, he knocked Mateo's glass off the table. Milk and broken glass now sullied the floor, and the deafening yells, complaints, crying and finger pointing began. Serafina shut her eyes, trying to squeeze the noise out of her head. When that didn't work, she put her hands to her ears, and pushed in. Lorena returned to the kitchen, scolding the boys, and asking for quiet. The arguments continued until a scream, birthed in a dark, tormented place, pierced the air. The children stopped immediately and looked at their mother. Serafina didn't recognize it as her own voice, yet knew it was. She caught her breath before screaming again.

The neighbor, Mercedes, ran in the house and found Lorena and Mateo huddled in a corner of the kitchen, holding the two youngest boys. When Mercedes realized the children were unharmed, she rushed to Serafina's side. "*¿Pero, que pasa, Serafina?* My God, what's wrong?" Serafina stared at Mercedes with wild eyes and kept her hands on her ears. When Serafina screamed again, the children approached their mother, and Mercedes put her hand out to stop them. "Lorena, my love, take your brothers next door. Pepito and Adita are home." Mercedes nodded towards the door, and winked at them. "Your mother will be fine. Go on now."

Another neighbor ran past the children and into the kitchen. "I heard screaming! What happened?"

"I don't know. I found her like this." Mercedes smoothed Serafina's hair, who now sobbed uncontrollably. "Go get the doctor—hurry!" When the neighbor left, Serafina realized her children were gone, and she let out a

piercing scream before collapsing. Mercedes sat on the floor, rocking Serafina's limp body.

"Find Doña Ana", Serafina whimpered. "Find Ana."

"*Mi amor*, I don't know any Doña Ana."

"¡*Doña Ana; mi comadre!* I need her!"

"Of course, we'll fetch your midwife; don't worry! Your children are with mine, and I won't leave you until the doctor comes."

News of Serafina's breakdown brought the women of *Calle Luna* running to Serafina's front porch, where they waited for word from the doctor.

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# CHAPTER 32

## *La Traición ~ The Betrayal*

**DURING THEIR LAST CONVERSATION,** Ana had intended to surprise Serafina with news of her recent marriage to Agustín, but she'd felt a chasm between them—one that felt greater than when Serafina had moved to Guánica. Serafina had certainly been friendly, but there was a great sadness in her friend's eyes, and although Antonio's name hadn't been brought up, Ana felt sure he was the cause of Serafina's suffering. It hadn't been the appropriate moment to mention her marriage at the Town Hall that day, but Ana couldn't wait to give Serafina the happy news. Surely Serafina was feeling better.

At the corner of *Calle Luna*, Ana heard a commotion coming from Serafina's front porch, and stopped mid-stride. Had she gotten her days mixed up? The scene looked like a ladies' gathering, and Ana, not wanting to be a part of any social gathering nor wanting to interrupt, turned to leave. Then she heard a scream that sounded like Serafina. She gasped and ran to the house, stopping short of the front gate. The porch was crammed with fifteen or more women, and the front door wasn't visible from where Ana stood. A twinge of self-consciousness was outweighed by Ana's determination to help Serafina. She pushed the gate open and made her way to the steps. "Excuse me, what happened here?"

A voluptuous young woman stood in Ana's way, and replied excitedly, "Señora San Patricio had a nervous breakdown!"

A scream caught in Ana's throat as she tried pushing her way up the steps through the thick crowd of women. "Move aside!"

The voluptuous woman followed Ana, pushing from behind, taking

advantage of the opportunity of getting closer to the door. When it was clear they weren't moving, the woman pulled Ana aside. "Are you the maid?"

Ana yanked her arm away from the woman's grasp. "No, I'm a friend of the family."

"Oh," said the woman with a look of disappointment. "Listen, if you do get inside, would you bring us information?"

Ana wrinkled her nose in disgust, and felt her long skirt pulling down at the waist. She wrestled her skirt from under a woman's shoe and pressed ahead. "Excuse me, I must get inside!" The women held their ground, determined not to lose their place on the porch. "Please, let me through!"

A petite woman tapped Ana's shoulder. "Don't worry yourself, Doña. Serafina's best friend, Mercedes, and the doctor are inside with her. She's in good hands, and her husband has been called."

Ana wanted to scream, "I'm her oldest friend—her best friend. I must get inside." But the woman had already turned her head. Suddenly, all attention turned to the street, where Antonio stepped out of a fine horse-drawn carriage. Ana breathed heavily, feeling her body sag from exertion. The voluptuous woman ran to Antonio, breathlessly filling him in as she pushed women aside, making way for him to pass. When Antonio reached the front door, he tipped his straw hat toward the women. "Thank you, kind ladies. We appreciate your gentle kindness and concern for Serafina and my family," he said before entering the house.

"What a gentleman," said one of the women on the porch.

"Yes," agreed another woman. "He comes from a fine family—the San Patricio family. He's quite handsome, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is, and I bet all that money, good looks, and another woman are the reasons we're all standing here today," piped in yet another woman.

"I've delivered all her children. Don Antonio knows me," Ana said in a low voice to no one in particular. She again tried gaining access to the front door but stopped short when she spotted Antonio's mother, Delfina, regally stepping out of another coach. Gossip control, thought Ana. The crowd of women parted like the Red Sea for the old woman, who glided up the steps with her head held high, and made no eye contact. Ana found it hard to breathe in the still, oppressive air. When the opening was again filled with the same women, Ana realized she was no longer needed, and she would not be allowed access to Serafina. At that moment, Ana felt a world apart

from her best friend.

Ana's eyes burned with furious tears as she walked home. The first thing she did upon entering her house was to knock the statue of the Virgin Mary to the floor. She stared at the headless statue for some time, feeling nothing. She poured a small bowl of water over the flames of two candles she kept lit for Yemayá, and heard the hiss of the wick as it was extinguished. Water puddled on the table before cascading over the table's edge and onto the floorboards. Ana had reached her limit—God had given her more suffering than she could take. Feelings of complete helplessness, much like she felt when she was a slave, enveloped her. She no longer cared if God, the gods, or the goddesses were listening; it was all unbearable. And then the reason for the breakdown came to Ana—Serafina had finally told Antonio about the rape. He'd probably ignored her, or worse yet, had blamed her for the attack! That was it, and Serafina had waited too long to tell him. Quite certain of the cause of Serafina's nervous breakdown, Ana would not wait for God's help in this instance. She knew what she must do.

\* \* \*

"What a surprise, Ana! How long has it been?" Ana didn't wait for Emilia to invite her in; she pushed her way inside the kitchen.

"Is Jaime here?"

"No, he's not. Why?"

"Good, I have a proposition for you, and you will help me, because you and I both know you stole my money.

Emilia raised her voice. "What are you talking about? I never..." Ana cut her off, feeling the veins in her neck bulge.

"Jaime stole my money and you helped him ¡Traicionera! You betrayed me, Emilia."

"I would never steal from you! Why would I? I love you like family!"

Ana took a step closer, and felt heat rushing through her body. Emilia stepped back. "Don't lie to me. I know. I know what you and Jaime did the night of the earthquake. Quit spewing lies."

"It wasn't me, Ana," whispered Emilia, avoiding Ana's eyes. "Jaime took your money. He told me what he'd done later. He convinced me the money would pay for your room and board, and since you had nowhere to

go, it made sense to me. We took good care of you, Ana. I'm sorry I lied to you."

"Finally, the truth comes from your mouth. Jaime is a no-good thief, but I'm not here to talk about the lie you kept from me. I need information." Ana told Emilia about Serafina's rape, and about the nervous breakdown.

"Do you really think it was Pérez who attacked Serafina?"

"It makes sense. She described Pérez perfectly. And you said he'd raped a pregnant woman."

"God, I'm sick to my stomach. Like I told you before, Pérez takes pleasure in hurting prostitutes, and Jaime covers it up...for good money, but raping a pregnant woman is beyond disgusting. The irony is that the pig's wife heads a group of society wives who are trying to rid Ponce of prostitutes. Can you imagine?"

Ana shook her head. "He must be uncovered, Emilia. How can we trap this animal and put him away so he can't hurt any more women?"

"Can I tell María? She's very good at extracting information from men. She'll know how it should be done."

"We must be careful, Emilia. Tell no one else, do you hear me? Especially not Jaime."

"Are you crazy? He's the next *pendejo* I want to put away." Emilia pulled the curtain aside and looked out the window. "María is home."

When María heard the story, her eyes turned flinty and her face was one of extreme disgust. "He beat me up once. I landed in the hospital for a week; I'm in. I heard Jaime and Pérez are thinking of opening up a bar on the outskirts of town."

Emilia was as surprised as Ana. "He's opening a bar with Pérez? I had no idea he was that cozy with the police," said Ana.

"He's only cozy with one policeman—Pérez," said Maria. "Jaime protects him, and I'm sure the police are aware of what Pérez does, too. I know the bar that animal frequents; it's near San Antón. Emilia and I could go to the bar, drink with Pérez, and lure him outside for a little rough pleasure. But we'll call the cops beforehand; they will be our star witnesses."

"That could work. He'll be easy to entice, especially if he's been drinking," said Emilia. "Don't worry, Ana. We'll take care of everything. Please forgive me."



Ana didn't hear Emilia. She faced María. "Will I go with you?" Ana's hands trembled and then she answered her own question, "Of course, I have to go with you."

Would Ana tell Agustín about their plan? Or was it wiser and more merciful, not to involve him?

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# CHAPTER 33

## *El Engaño ~ The Deception*

**THE RAMSHACKLE BAR** was surrounded by long-abandoned, parched sugarcane fields on three sides, and seemed small and in danger of being overtaken by the growth. Several wooden tables and chairs were set up on a small concrete patio out front; one table was set up for a game of dominoes. Following María's advice, Ana hid in the dense brush with a good view of the gravel parking lot in front of the bar. Dressed in black clothing and hoping the full moon wouldn't give away her vantage point, Ana prayed the plan would work. Emilia and María sauntered confidently toward the bar, wearing tight-fitting dresses, cut for deep cleavage, and entered the humble establishment. Ana bit her bottom lip and clutched her rosary, too frightened to think.

Fidgety birds roosted in the trees, chirping and whistling like children settling down for the night; expending their last bits of energy before sleep overtook them. Ana glanced back at the darkened path where Emilia had parked the car; her eyes darting from side-to-side, afraid something or someone would attack her from behind. She prayed no wild animals were watching and smelling her raw fear. She pulled at her blouse, feeling the sweat between her breasts. This was madness, she thought. Ana grasped her forearms, listening to the sounds in the sugarcane fields, and remembered the plantation children's favorite game—of blindfolding a child, spinning him or her around, and turning them loose in the fields. The game had terrified Ana. Her childhood fear of being ambushed and pushed into the dark fields against her will had caused Ana many sleepless nights. Much like what was happening here, she thought. "God help me," she whispered.

A few moments later, Ana turned to the sound of crunching gravel, and watched a shiny black car pull up in front of the bar. She recognized two of the men exiting the car as Jaime and Officer Pérez. Her mouth dropped as her stomach rolled. What was Jaime doing there? Had Emilia and María told him of their plan? Stupid women, she thought, why had they involved him? She couldn't imagine how he was part of the plan, and craned her neck to get a better look at the third man, a tall, black man she didn't recognize, who walked with a slight limp. Ana's mind raced as fast as her heart, when the men sat down at the table to play dominoes. She had a clear view of Jaime and Pérez, but the black man sat with his back to her.

Emilia and María walked out of the bar holding two drinks each, and a man wearing a white apron followed behind with a tray of drinks. Pérez glanced up at the women and nodded in recognition. The women pulled two chairs over and placed them behind Jaime. Ana felt the sweat in her armpits and between her thighs. The young women drank, laughed, and flirted with the men, who seemed to be the only patrons at the bar. Ana stood frozen in place, waiting for what seemed like agonizing hours, until she felt a muscle spasm in her leg. She winced and sat on the ground, massaging her calves, while taking peeks from behind the bushes. She heard crunching sounds from the sugarcane fields that she envisioned was a mongoose stalking snakes or a snake slithering in the direction of a warm mouse. Ana shivered in disgust, praying the beasts would remain in the fields.

After a fourth round of drinks, the men seemed to slow their drinking down. Emilia and María stopped altogether. Ana stood, craning her neck trying to get a better look. The black man shook hands with Jaime and Pérez, crossed the gravel parking lot, and walked down the dark road until he was out of sight. After a few minutes, Emilia and María hooked arms with Pérez, and seemed to lead him into the sugar cane field behind the bar. Ana gasped and went rigid with fear. What if Pérez overpowered the girls? What would she do if something happened to them? When Ana looked back at the table, Jaime was gone. Spotting a rock the size of a mango, she picked it up, and wrestled with what to do next. Ana's body shook uncontrollably as she stepped forward out of the shadows, holding the rock. Then she spotted Emilia in the clearing, looking around. Ana waved her over, and Emilia darted toward Ana, looking from side-to-side, until she reached the bushes.

“We’ve got him where we want him. When María comes out, we’re flying out of here.”

“What’s happening? Where’s María?”

“Shh, there is a change in plans. I’ll explain later, but I think it’s going to work.” Emilia pointed. “There she is!” They waved María over, who ran toward them with a bloody lip and torn blouse like her life depended on it.

“Oh God! Are you all right?” Ana’s heart practically beat out of her chest as she wiped the blood from María’s lip.

María hissed, “We have to go—now!” The women grabbed Ana’s hands and they sprinted down the dirt road, taking the same route the black man had taken. The sound of several gunshots echoed through the *cañaveral*. Ana yelped, but kept running despite the excruciating pain in her side. There were headlights ahead. “It’s Chágo; hurry!” As the women got closer, Ana realized there were two parked cars with open doors, and the same tall, black man from the domino game stood in front of the first car.

“Ana, go with Chágo; he’ll drop you at your house. María and I will drive this car home.”

“Why? I want to go with you!” To Ana, the black man with several thick scars across his cheek seemed even more menacing than Jaime.

“No, we have to split up. Don’t worry; go with him.” Another man surprised Ana by handing car keys to Emilia, and without a word, he walked into the sugarcane field, disappearing into the high growth.

Ana heard the sound of police sirens in the distance. “What in the name of God is happening? I’m so confused.”

María took Ana by the shoulders. “Don’t contact us, Ana. For no reason; do you understand? We’ll be in touch and explain everything later.”

“Véte, Chágo, take Ana home,” said Emilia, kissing Ana on the cheek. “Everything will be fine. Serafina is safe.”

When the sun came up the following morning, Agustín learned about the events of the previous evening, and Ana expected to be arrested by noon. “I take full responsibility for initiating the plan, but I have no idea what happened.” She had visions of the police entering her house and handcuffing her, knowing Officer Pérez would take great pleasure at throwing her in the back of a filthy cell. “I asked the girls to help me expose Pérez for what he’d done to Serafina, María, and many other women,” Ana said. “The girls said they’d trap him, and the police would catch him. That’s

it. All I saw was Emilia running back to where I was hiding, and María joined us with a bloody lip. Then we heard shots.”

“Good God, Ana. How could you get mixed up with these people?” His black eyes pleaded to understand.

“I only wanted to trap Pérez, Agustín! And to help the police capture him and put him away. I didn’t involve Jaime and the other men. I don’t even know who they are!” Agustín threw his head back and sighed loudly. Ana put her head on the kitchen table and cried. “I don’t know what happened.”

Agustín put his arm around Ana and said, “Now, now. You did what you thought was right, Ana. That man Pérez is a dangerous man, and if he’s dead; so be it. You didn’t shoot him. Unless the girls are caught and they confess, naming you as an accessory, the police have nothing. We don’t know who fired the gun or guns, how many people were involved, and we don’t know if anyone died—do we?”

Ana shook her head, and looked up with bloodshot eyes. “No, I don’t know a thing. I’m sorry to involve you Agustín. I only wanted to...”

“I know, I know. From what you told me, María had motives for wanting Pérez exposed and possibly killed. So it’s not just you and Serafina who hated this man.”

“Serafina doesn’t know, Agustín! She doesn’t know about any of this, and I didn’t want anyone dead.”

“I understand you were protecting Serafina, but Ana...she should have told her husband immediately, and all this could have been avoided.”

“I think she finally did tell him, and that’s why she had the nervous breakdown. I don’t think he believed her. Maybe he blamed her for the attack; that has happened before to many women. They’re blamed like it’s their fault.”

“Her husband seems like a decent man, and he’s an important man. I’m sure he would have taken care of this the right way—the legal way.”

“I was naïve and stupid, but Agustín, that man raped a pregnant woman—my friend. I had to do something. It might seem crazy to you, but I had to stop him.”

Agustín brought Ana close. “No, it’s not crazy. I understand. You got caught up with the wrong people, but you meant well. I would have done the same thing if he’d harmed you. I’ll stand with you, Ana, but for now, all we can do is wait for the newspaper. Stay home and when it arrives, come

to the botánica. I love you.”

“You can’t possibly love me more than I love you, Agustín. Thank you.”

Several times that morning, Ana wanted to run to the corner store for the newspaper, but she stayed home with the curtains closed. A siren and a car horn startled her several times, and she flew to the window, but it was only an ambulance driving past, not the police coming for her. She couldn’t imagine what had happened in the fields. Her vivid imagination was driving her to distraction, and her nerves were frayed beyond reason. She’d heard nothing from Emilia and María, and intended to keep her promise of not contacting them. When she heard the thud of the newspaper against the front door, she snatched it and read the headlining article:

*The brutal shooting and death of Sergeant Octavio Pérez, a seasoned officer at the Ponce Insular Police Department, has shocked our city. There is an on-going police investigation, and so far, no witnesses have come forward. The police have one suspect in custody, Jaime Santos, a resident of San Antón, and they are working on motive. The officer in charge of the murder investigation is Capitán José Sánchez. The head of the Ponce precinct said, “Sergeant Pérez was known to have had connections to crime figures in the city of Ponce, and has been a person of interest in several rape and assault cases in and around Ponce in recent years.”*

Ana couldn’t believe her eyes. She read the article again. Pérez was dead and Jaime was in custody, awaiting trial for the murder. She felt no pity for the men as she looked at the photographs accompanying the article. She recognized Sánchez as the kind officer in charge, on the night Pérez had dragged her to jail. If truth be told, she was happy Pérez had died. Ana wondered if Serafina was reading the same headline. Would she recognize the dead man as the man who’d attacked her?

Weeks later, Ponce was still abuzz over the murder trial. Women came forward, victims of both men at different times, and by the end of the week, Jaime Santos, a man with a long criminal history of assault, narcotics and alcohol trafficking, prostitution, and operating a brothel without a license, among other petty crimes, was found guilty of murdering Sergeant Octavio Pérez. He was sentenced to twenty years in prison. Emilia and Maria had been questioned, as they’d been seen drinking at the bar on the night of the murders, and the witness, the bar owner, had mysteriously vanished before the end of the trial. The women were subsequently released, and no charges

were filed against them. Ana wondered what had happened to the bar owner, and wouldn't be surprised if his dead body turned up in a ditch somewhere on the island. Emilia and Maria had protected Ana, and for that, Ana was eternally grateful.

Ana sat alone in the Ponce Cathedral, taking in the towering windows of fine stained glass and the opulent altar in front of her. The last times she'd been in the church had been the night of the *Fiestas Patronales* when she'd met Agustín so many years ago, and at Serafina's wedding to Antonio. The faint smell of pure myrrh filled her nose, and she felt a sense of peace. When a young priest came out from behind the altar, Ana knew she would confess her sins to him. He smiled warmly as she approached, and when he extended his hand in greeting, Ana smelled myrrh on his clothes.

"Welcome, I'm Padre Lucas. How may I help you?"

"I have to confess my sins...all of them. Can you hear them now, Padre? I can't come back."

"Yes, of course. Were you baptized?" Ana nodded. "Please follow me." He lifted the red velvet drape covering her half of the confessional, motioned to where she should sit, and dropped the curtain for privacy. In the darkness, she reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out the red precatory rosary. She thought of how much the cubicle reminded her of Fela's reading room—another place for many confessions. The black screen slid open, revealing the priest's outline, but Ana could not make out his face, which relieved her. She clutched the rosary and began, "Padre Lucas, I haven't been in a confessional since my late twenties. I don't know how or where to begin, but I must warn you—my confession will be the longest confession in the history of Ponce Cathedral, and possibly the longest confession on the entire island.

"I doubt that, my child; please begin," said the priest's disembodied voice through the dark screen.

"If I tell you my sins, can you have me arrested?"

Ana felt the sting of coming tears. "No, of course, not; your confession is between you and God."



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## CHAPTER 34

*Día de los Muertos, 1922 ~ Day of the Dead, 1922*

**ANA WAS WAITING ON THE PORCH** when Serafina brought out the silver coffee service. The second they caught sight of each other, their tears fell. Serafina put down the tray and hugged Ana, whispering, “My dearest Ana.” Ana was too overcome to speak as Serafina stroked the side of the midwife’s soft cheek with the back of her hand. She noticed Ana’s hazel eyes were cloudier now, and there were deeper wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, but to Serafina, Ana was still the most beautiful woman in the world.

“I’ve missed you so much.”

“As I have missed you,” Ana managed to whisper.

“Come sit,” said Serafina, guiding Ana to sit beside her. Ana smoothed back gray hair, and adjusted her spectacles. She seemed polite and restrained, which stabbed Serafina in the heart. She worried Ana might never forgive her for the long silence. Perhaps it would be best to start out slowly, before speaking her mind. “May I offer you a coffee, Ana?”

“No, thank you. I won’t sleep if I have coffee this late in the day.”

“How’ve you been? You look as wonderful as ever.”

“*Muy bien, gracias*. I’m a year older, and happy to be alive. How are the children?”

“Lorena and Mateo are still at university, pursuing advanced degrees; the youngest, Salvador and Guillermo are a handful.”

“Oh, that’s fine news. Please say hello for me.”

“I will.” Serafina paused, heartbroken they were speaking like polite strangers, but she didn’t blame Ana. When had she really been involved in

Ana's world? She very much wanted to make things right with Ana—to go back to the way things were between them, and hoped it was not too late. “Oh, Ana, I’m ashamed for losing touch with you.”

Ana seemed surprised by the outburst. “You have nothing to be ashamed of. You’re a good woman, a wonderful mother, and you’ve been a good friend to me.”

“No. No, I haven’t been a good friend,” Serafina insisted. “You’ve always been there for me and the children. I grew too proud after I married Antonio, and remained caught up in our world. You deserved more from me.” Serafina took Ana’s hand in hers. “Please forgive me.”

“Child, you didn’t have it easy.”

“Oh, please don’t say that. I’ve had every advantage. I don’t deserve your sympathy.”

“Serafina, you lost your husband very young, and you sacrificed for Lorena and Mateo. Please, stop. You’re a good, decent woman.”

“No, you don’t understand. I didn’t have the backbone to come forward as your friend around the society women. I wasted so much time with the wrong people, and I have nothing to show for it. Focusing so much on Antonio and our disintegrating marriage nearly drove me insane. My children suffered because I was weak. You have never faltered.”

Ana stroked Serafina’s hand, and silence enveloped them like a warm embrace. “You did nothing wrong. You simply loved a man who couldn’t be faithful. You protected your children; I understand that. That’s what women do. That’s what mothers do. There’s nothing to forgive. You had four children to think of.”

“That’s true. I will do anything to keep my children safe.” Serafina paused before continuing. “I suffered a nervous breakdown, which I’m sure you know.” Ana nodded slowly. “I was in bed for months under a doctor’s care.”

“I tried desperately to see you the day of your...breakdown. But when Antonio and his mother arrived at the house, I left. There were so many women on the porch, and the doctor was inside with you.”

“I know you were there. A friend told me later. It broke my heart you weren’t allowed inside, Ana. I asked for you over and over. I was kept sedated weeks afterward. I don’t remember much of that time. Thank God for Wilhelmina, my maid, who took care of my children. I wasn’t capable

of caring for myself, let alone my children.”

“I thought it best to leave you alone, but I did write you. Did you receive my letters?”

Serafina removed several letters from the pocket of her dress and showed them to Ana. “Yes, I did. Thank you for being my friend, Ana. I needed all this time to heal, but I never forgot you—never.” The women sat in silence for a few moments, and then Serafina continued. “Despite my illness, Antonio continues with his lover, Carla Lugo, and I’m told there are others, much to the widow Lugo’s dismay. The women now understand what I’ve known for some time—my husband is not a man to be tied down, and he won’t leave me as long as I remain silent.”

“I’m saddened to hear Antonio betrayed you, Serafina. I liked and respected him so much. You must be devastated.”

Serafina shrugged. “I’ve had a good life, and I love my children. Ana, please forgive me.”

“These things will never be spoken of again, and of course, I forgive you. Look, I’m sealing it all in a bubble and watching the breeze take it over the house, far away. I’ve set my confession in another bubble. We are free.”

“What sins could you have possibly committed, Ana? That’s impossible for me to believe.”

“Oh, believe me, I had sins; dark sins from the past. Do you remember my stories of El Mulato?” Serafina nodded. “Well, after he beat me and I lost my baby...I offered to shave him, and I slit his throat from ear to ear. I remember the gash looked like he was smiling at me. How odd to remember that, don’t you think?”

Serafina gasped. “Oh Ana; how much you must have suffered at his hands.”

“That’s why my parents rushed me off the plantation and smuggled me onto the ship in the middle of the night. If I’d remained in Cuba, I would have been killed.”

“I knew you’d killed him, and I don’t blame you for what you did, Ana. You were protecting your baby and other women by killing him. I would have done the same.”

“You knew?”

“Yes, I imagined it, actually. As a mother I can understand why you did

it.”

Ana interrupted her. “Well, that was a long time ago. Today I am free, and so are you.”

Then as casually as if she’d commented on the fine weather, Serafina said, “I’m asking Antonio to move out.”

“What?”

“I can no longer live with a man who lacks respect for me and our marriage. I hate myself for putting up with his infidelities. I need peace, Ana.”

“I agree with you, of course, but I worry you don’t realize how difficult it is for a woman on her own with two children still at home.”

“Antonio’s affairs are no secret, as he parades his women around town; he wouldn’t stand a chance against me in court. And since all the children still live with me, Antonio must provide for us.”

“What do you think Antonio’s reaction will be?”

“I have no idea. But I’m close to making a decision.”

“Well, it sounds like you need some peace, but don’t run away if you don’t have to. Find it where you are. Don’t run like I did; it took me a lifetime to come terms with my past.”

“You’re probably right. Ana, you haven’t mentioned Agustín. I pray you are still together?”

“Agustín, dear Agustín,” Ana’s eyes twinkled. “We got married; just before your breakdown. The first marriage for each of us; can you imagine? He’s a wonderful man. God blessed me with him.”

“I couldn’t be happier for you both! He is a lucky man, and I hope to meet him soon.”

“I will make sure you meet him very soon.”

“My goodness, you’ve found the happy ending that has eluded so many women, including myself. I can’t wait to meet the man who has made my dear friend so happy. God bless you both.”

Ana smiled and took Serafina’s hands. “And we found each other so late in life, too. Listen, I’m meeting Doña Fela late this afternoon. We’re traveling to Guánica for an All Souls’ pilgrimage. She just might have something to say to you about your dilemma. Why don’t you come?”

“Guánica brings back lots of memories, Ana, and not many good ones.”

“To hell with the past; say you’ll come with me—and wear something

white.”

The sun was weak and low in the sky when the first whistle sounded, and dozens of pilgrims, all dressed in white, boarded the train bound for Guánica. Minutes later, a second train whistle sounded. Ana and Serafina rushed aboard to find seats in the last compartment and soon they left Ponce behind. By the time the train reached its travel speed, Serafina was as giddy as a schoolgirl on a day trip. “Wilhelmina is staying the night, and I left a note for Antonio, telling him I’d be home late. I told him not to wait up for me.”

“Didn’t you tell him where you were going?”

“No, I didn’t, and I’m sure that confused him.”

“Yes, I expect so,” Ana said with a chuckle.

“Thank you for inviting me, Ana. I can’t remember the last time I took an entire day for myself.”

Ana squeezed her arm. “Everyone needs a little time away. Have you ridden this train since the day you returned to Ponce with Mateo and Lorena?”

“No, I haven’t. It seems like a lifetime ago, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, indeed.”

\* \* \*

Several times, Serafina leaned out the window, watching the beautiful scenery of the southern coast of the island pass by. She pointed out interesting houses, children playing, and sugar cane fields—scenes of ordinary, everyday life. Her long hair was impossible to control in the wind, and the wide sleeves of her long, white caftan caught the breeze like a sail, and cooled her body. Serafina tied back her unruly hair, and looked lovingly at Ana, who’d fallen asleep, lulled by the movement of the train. The midwife had never looked more peaceful after a lifetime of struggle and strife; it was Ana’s turn to enjoy life. Serafina felt protective of her, vowing no one would ever come between them again—man or woman.

When the train pulled into the Guánica train station, the entourage was met by more pilgrims, men and women, who happily unloaded four large, wooden crates onto waiting ox-drawn carts. Serafina asked Ana what the boxes held and was told to watch. Most of the women were given places to

sit amidst the mystery crates, and the men walked alongside, prodding the oxen along. Serafina had never participated in the celebration, and now understood why they were called celebrations, as people were clearly enjoying themselves. When the procession reached the beach, the men unloaded the carts, and everyone took off their shoes. Serafina did the same, carrying them in one hand as she followed Ana along a spectacular, palm-fringed beach to an abandoned beach cabana with a roof of palm fronds held together with heavy rope. Much to Serafina's surprise, the contents of the crates revealed many cast iron pots of food, which in assembly line fashion, were passed down and poured into two empty oil drums on makeshift rafts at the water's edge. The filled drums were steadied on the rafts, and the pilgrims gathered around. "What a waste of food," said Serafina, shaking her head. "I don't understand."

"No, the food is not wasted. The food is offered to the souls of our dearly departed loves ones and to the *orisha*, Yemayá. Look over there; that's Doña Fela," whispered Ana as they approached a diminutive medium. "I want to introduce you before the ceremony starts. Her husband is the thin man with the mustache."

"Bring the candles," said Fela, standing in ankle-deep water. Her husband lit short, squatty candles, and one-by-one, the medium set them on the rafts around the drums. A woman threw handfuls of flower petals onto the rafts, while other pilgrims placed oil lamps in a large circle of light on the beach. Someone tapped lightly on a conga drum, and a light breeze carried the luscious scents of gardenias and roses to Serafina, who suddenly felt a bit lightheaded.

"Are you all right? You seem a bit wobbly," whispered Ana, standing beside Serafina.

"A little dizzy, but I'm fine. What's going on?"

"The drums invite the spirits of those who have departed this world. Fela is praying for their souls and asking *la Virgen* to usher those who are trapped in this world to the other side. The food is an offering to all our ancestors."

"Oh, I see. This is so interesting."

"Today, believers across the island will go to cemeteries to honor the dead. This year we chose the ocean. We honor the spirits and ask for Mary's blessings for the coming year. Of course, many of us here include the

goddess Yemayá, Mary's equivalent in the Yoruba tradition, in our prayers."

"I remember your stories of Yemayá, the mother of us all," said Serafina, smiling at Ana.

Several muscular men pushed the rafts out into deeper water as pilgrims began reciting what Serafina assumed were prayers. She could not make out the words, but the meditative rhythms drew her in, as gentle waves lapped at the shore. When the drumming grew stronger and more rhythmic, Serafina felt a peace she hadn't experienced in years. She watched the rafts, aglow from the flames of the candles, drift farther and farther out to sea until they were completely out of sight. Then Fela asked the group to gather inside the circle of oil lamps. Ana took Serafina's hand and a circle of pilgrims was formed. Fela blessed all the participants and their families, the souls of the dead, and thanked God for His continued love and blessings upon them. A small palm frond was dipped in water, and Fela flicked each pilgrim on each shoulder with the fronds. Serafina felt tremendous heat from Ana's hand and from the hand of the woman next to her. Before she knew it, Fela was facing Serafina, asking the group to pray for her awakening. A bit embarrassed, but touched by the prayers said on her behalf, Serafina lowered her head to receive the blessings and good wishes. When hands were released, a few men built a fire on the beach, and people gravitated toward the bonfire, where a couple played Spanish guitars.

"Come," said Ana, leading Serafina to where Fela and her husband sat on a white sheet. "*Bendición, Fela*. It was a beautiful ceremony, thank you. I'd like to introduce you to my good friend of many years, Serafina."

Fela extended an arthritic hand, and Serafina grasped it gently for fear she'd hurt the woman. "Yes, I remember hearing about you. You are leaving your husband, *nena*." Serafina's eyes watered, and she nodded. "Sit. It hasn't been easy for you to remain in your marriage, but your oldest children will be independent quite soon. Your eldest...yes, a daughter. She is headstrong, clear-headed, and compassionate. She will be part of important changes in Ponce's future in less than ten years, and your older son will become a prominent lawyer with a distinguished career for one so young. Your youngest sons will need you for a few years yet, but the time is coming when you will stand on your own two feet. You are taking charge of your life even now."

"You're absolutely right, Doña Fela. I am feeling a new-found strength,



but it has been very difficult.”

“It’s important in life not to feel and act like victims. We all do it, but cut it short; suffering begets more suffering. An amazing second chapter of your life will begin shortly.”

“I hope so. I can’t imagine what could be in store for me with four children and no husband. Thank you for the reading.” Fela smiled knowingly and nodded.

“You will have a long life, Serafina. Much can and will happen.”

“Serafina’s daughter, Lorena, is the caulbearer I told you about, Fela,” Ana said.

“Ah, now I understand. Yes, the spirits speak of this daughter, and now she is grown. Her story is yet to begin, but the characters are taking their places.” Serafina couldn’t imagine what the future had in store for her beautiful children, and was especially intrigued about Lorena’s future, which seemed to excite the medium. Fela continued, “You must find a peaceful place to live to regain your strength, and live out your days, Serafina. You will need to remain strong and clear for the path that will open up for you...and your children. You know you have a good friend in Ana.”

“Yes, I do. I love her like a sister. Thank you, Doña Fela.”

“And, now I must speak to Ana. Would you excuse us, Serafina?”

“Yes, of course.” Serafina kissed Fela’s cheek, and hugged Ana, who encouraged Serafina to enjoy the beach while the group packed up to leave. Serafina walked toward the water and looked back to see Ana and Fela huddled together. What were they discussing? Was Ana in some type of danger? She decided to ask Ana about their conversation on the way home.

Serafina walked along the water’s edge, thinking of the women she’d met in her life. The women had lived their lives the best way they’d known how; not always right and not always wrong, but always passionately. Serafina had even seen moments of kindness in Roberto’s stern sister, Providencia, who could very well have declined to take in Serafina and her children, but she hadn’t. For the first time, it occurred to Serafina that it couldn’t have been easy for the widow to accept three more mouths to feed. She prayed for Antonio’s sisters, who’d kept in good contact with Serafina, and for Delfina San Patricio, now passed on, who had merely sought to protect her son from a potentially disastrous choice in a second wife, as any

mother would have done.

Serafina felt lighter as the train headed back to Ponce. It had been a magical day; a life-changing experience she would never forget. She hadn't felt that alive since the births of her children. It was as if her heart had expanded in a strange, wonderful way. When Serafina asked Ana about her conversation with Fela, the midwife had replied that it was all good news.

\* \* \*

Antonio came home from work and found Serafina's note. There was another from Mateo, saying he and Lorena were eating out with friends. Antonio grabbed a quick bite, and telephoned his friend, Nelson Cintrón, a prominent lawyer in Ponce, who told him a group of friends from the Customs House, a local judge, and a few members of the clergy were heading to San Antón that evening for a social event. Men from all walks of life, married and single, and of every economic level with a bit of money for the night, would be there. Antonio would not be lonely that evening; he never was.

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# CHAPTER 35

## *La Perra Vida ~ A Dog's Life*

**EMILIA WAS INCONSOLABLE** as she stood in Ana's doorway with the news of María's death. The young woman's hair hung limp around her shoulders and her nose was red from crying. They hadn't spoken or seen each other in a year, and now, Ana held a small, copper urn containing María's ashes.

Agustín called from the bedroom. "Who is it, Akanni?"

"It's Emilia, *amor*," said Ana. "María died. Come in, Emilia." Agustín walked in, drying his hair with a towel.

"*La pobre*," said Agustín, seeing the urn in Ana's hands. "Poor girl; may God rest her soul. What happened?"

They were deeply saddened as Emilia recounted the last days of María's battle with syphilis. "The attending nurse said she suffered horribly. Her lower body was covered with pus-filled blisters and her internal organs were affected. Not long after María entered the hospital, she lost her sight, and in the end she went mad, completely mad. And then her heart gave out."

Ana clucked her tongue and crossed herself. She wanted to tell Emilia that the lifestyle she led could easily take her down the same tragic end. As if Emilia had read Ana's mind, she said, "I quit. I quit the business when Jaime went to prison. I no longer have Jaime and Pérez threatening me; it was an easy decision to make."

"*Santo Dios*, I'm so relieved, Emilia. That was no life for you." Agustín agreed. "By the way, why didn't you call me when María went into hospital?"

“María hid her illness from me, and collapsed in my home during a visit. I immediately took her to the hospital, but it was too late. I wasn’t allowed to see her after that. The attending nurse gave me María’s family photographs when she died.” Emilia handed the photographs to Ana, who shook her head. “María had asked the nurse to tell me to take the photographs to her family, and apologize to them, saying she didn’t blame them for turning their backs on her. Then I was asked to sprinkle her ashes in *Río Cañas*. Well, I went to María’s family to inform them she’d died, and they slammed the door in my face. I didn’t feel like leaving the photographs with them, so I brought them home with me; they didn’t deserve them.”

“I’m not surprised they reacted that way, are you? Her parents were no help when she was arrested that time, remember? What fools they are.” Ana’s eyes welled up as she looked at the photographs of María in happier times. “She was a sweet woman with a zest for life. I’m sorry she suffered at the end. I can’t imagine a more horrible death.”

“I can’t either. Ana, would you go with me to scatter María’s ashes?”

“Yes, of course. When would you want to go?”

“Can you go today?”

Ana looked at Agustín, and saw the worried look on his face. She knew he didn’t much care for Emilia, and he certainly didn’t trust her, but she also saw the compassion in his eyes. “Go with Emilia,” he said. “I’ll take care of the *botánica* today.”

“We may be back late, though. Why don’t you stay at my house tonight, Ana? We’re traveling northwest from my direction, and I’ve only paid the driver to take me back to San Antón.”

“Good idea. I don’t want you on the road at night, Ana,” said Agustín with concern.

“I’ll take good care of Ana; don’t worry,” Emilia said.

“I am worried, Emilia. I always worry about Ana, so you bring my wife back safely.”

“I didn’t know you’d married! I’m very happy for you.”

“We are very happy,” said Ana, hugging Agustín.

“Ana, may I pick flowers from your garden for María before we leave?”

Ana nodded, and when Emilia left the room, she said, “I will never understand this *perra vida* for some, Agustín.” She set the urn on the kitchen table, and shook her head.

“For some, life never gets better, but people make their own choices. Our complicated beginnings as slaves turned out beautiful,” he said hugging Ana tightly.

“We are fortunate. I was very fortunate to find you. I love you, Agustín.”

“And I love you. Akanni, are you sure you want to go with her? Something doesn’t feel quite right to me.”

“Yes, I want to go. María helped Serafina and the other women Pérez took advantage of and abused. It’s the least I can do for her.” A single ray of white light entered the house, warming Ana’s face. “I hope she rests in peace.”

“Why don’t I close the shop and go with you?”

“No, it’s all right. I’ll be home tomorrow morning, at first light,” said Ana.

\* \* \*

The *carro público* made its way through Ponce, and headed in the direction of *Río Caña*, María’s final resting place. The area had always been María’s favorite day trip destination, so it was fitting her soul would spend the rest of eternity in and around the river. Emilia was immediately lulled to sleep by the sound of the wheels on semi-good roads; not even the occasional bumps in the road disturbed her deep slumber as they left Ponce behind. Ana guessed Emilia had cried hard for her friend. After all, the women had similar backgrounds, and had been close as sisters. Ana couldn’t understand how the parents could turn their backs on Emilia and María, the children they’d cuddled, fed, sang to sleep, and kept protected. Perhaps their parents had never done any of those things with them; maybe the young women had always been on their own, as lost souls, thought Ana.

The scenery soon changed from city concrete to lush, deep greens with wooden, hillside houses built on stilts every mile or so. Ana loved the countryside, and longed to move away from Ponce with Agustín. Suddenly, she felt afraid, and couldn’t put a finger on what exactly was frightening her. Fela had prayed with Ana and asked the gods to protect Ana, but the medium hadn’t said what for. She’d simply said Ana would soon fight a battle, but she wasn’t sure if it was spiritual or physical. Had Agustín’s fear rubbed off on her, as well? Whatever it was, Ana couldn’t shake a feeling of

dread when they arrived at the river.

“Wait for us here. We’ll be back in a few minutes,” Emilia said to the driver. She picked up the urn with María’s remains, and got out of the car. The air smelled mossy and sweet as the women carefully maneuvered their way down a precarious, dirt path toward the sound of the river. Near the bottom of the ravine, Emilia and Ana stood on enormous, overlapping boulders that shaded large rocks on the way down to the river’s edge. A rushing waterfall made its way over glistening, gray rocks. All around, the thick brush offered a subtle threat of what it would finally do at the world’s end.

“The goddess Oshún lives among all the sweet river waters. If I’d had more time, I would have prepared an offering for her. Maria was as coquettish as Oshún; this is the perfect place to lay her to rest,” said Ana, gazing at the waterfall.

“She was a coquette, that one. I miss her so much. María knew me better than anyone else.”

“She loved you, too. Let’s pray.”

“Ana, you pray, and we’ll scatter her ashes. I know; I’m a heathen, but María wasn’t religious either.”

Ana chuckled. “I understand. Let’s pray silently.” Small swallows darted back and forth, swooping near the river’s surface searching for insects as Emilia swatted at bugs.

Within minutes, Emilia began fidgeting. “Are you ready, Ana?” Ana nodded, smiling inside at Emilia’s youthful impatience. “I’ll begin. María, I loved you like a sister, and I will never forget how much fun we had. I miss you, and will love you forever. Please keep watch over me and Ana. God bless you.”

“May you rest in peace, María. I pray the Virgin Mary and Oshún keep you safe in their mantle until we meet again.” Emilia removed the lid of the urn, handed it back to Ana, and scattered handfuls of ashes to the breeze. She offered the urn to Ana, who removed another handful and slowly opened her fist, allowing the grayish ashes to take flight. The women took turns, until only a small amount remained. Emilia turned the urn over and shook it, covering the wet river rocks below. “She is one with the river now.”

The dark clouds began spitting droplets of rain on the women. The

rumble of thunder was heard in the distance, prompting the women to head back to the waiting *carro público*. They rode back to Ponce in silence as the rain came down in sheets, and the wind blew the car from side to side. When they arrived at Emilia's home, Ana paid the driver to let Agustín know that they'd arrived safely, and finally heard Emilia's account of the night of the murders.

"We told Jaime what Pérez did to Serafina, and about our plan to trap him. Jaime said he was sick of covering for Pérez, saying he'd take care of him. He didn't tell us what he planned to do, and we didn't ask. Our job was to lure Pérez behind the bar. Chágo, the man who drove you home that night, told us later that Jaime shot Pérez for two reasons—he was sick of being under the policeman's thumb, and he owed Pérez lots of money that no one can collect."

"Jaime probably killed him with Chágo's help," Ana said.

"No, Chágo didn't help him. He was driving the car, remember?"

"That's true. So who called the police in time to arrest Jaime?" Emilia smiled broadly, and Ana whistled. "It was you? Does Jaime know you worked with the police?"

"The police told me they'd keep it confidential. Jaime will never find out; he thinks it was just a case of bad luck."

"Well, I'm glad he's in prison. I'd hate to think of him roaming the streets of Ponce. You know he'd come after you if he found out. The thought makes my hairs stand on end," said Ana, rubbing her arms. Just then, the man named Chágo entered the room. He looked as surprised as Ana was.

"You've already met," Emilia said as Chágo offered his hand to Ana.

"*Mucho gusto*," Ana said, shaking his hand, and feeling uneasy in his presence. The man with the limp had been at the night of the murders.

"I'll see you later tonight, Emilia. Keep the door open. Enjoy your night, ladies." Chágo leaned in, kissed Emilia on the lips, and then left the house.

Ana was astonished. "You're with him?"

Emilia smiled, "Yes, we're a couple; he's living with me."

"*Santo Dios*, Emilia. Jaime isn't a man to toy with. He's evil; capable of extreme violence, even from jail. Isn't this man a friend of Jaime's? What if Jaime finds out you're involved with his friend?"

"I kicked Jaime out, and he's in jail, remember? He's gone for good."



Don't worry about me; I can take care of myself. Besides, Chágo is a good man."

"I hope you're right, Emilia. Why don't we go back to my place? I don't feel comfortable here."

"Don't worry; we're safe. Look," she said, walking to the front door. "I'm locking the door. Chágo will knock on my bedroom window when he comes home, and I'll let him in."

"Oh, I don't know, Emilia." Ana's mouth was dry and her palms were sweaty.

"We're fine. Let's get comfortable, and I'll find us a nice bottle of rum to share."

Ana returned in a nightgown, and found Emilia in the living room, pouring rum into two glasses. Ana took the glass and they curled up on the couch.

"Agustín and I are leaving Ponce for good. Maybe you should come with us. We're putting an offer on a parcel of land."

"Thank you, but I can't leave San Antón, Ana. This is my home, and Chágo wants to make a life with me. I can be happy, can't I?"

"Emilia, please reconsider. I feel you're putting yourself at great risk. How well do you know this Chágo?"

"Oh, we've been friends for years; he worked for Jaime for over ten years."

"You see! How do you know he's not working for Jaime now?"

"No, it's not like that. We've also been sleeping together for years. He loves me, and I'm staying right where I am. I'm out of the business; aren't you happy about that, Ana?"

"Yes, I am, but this man worries me, Emilia. I see much malice in his black eyes."

"You don't know him like I do. He's a good man, and I'm happy. For the first time in my life, I'm happy, and I don't have to look over my shoulder. Be happy for me, Ana!"

Ana did not frighten easily, but Chágo frightened her. Jaime had a way of coming close to your face and speaking in a menacing tone like he was trying to read your mind and warn you at the same time. But this man was quiet and deadly like a snake in the sugarcane fields waiting to strike at the unsuspecting mongoose. And Jaime's connections were like the slimy

tentacles of an octopus—they reached farther than anyone could imagine. Fela had done well to warn Ana about Jaime, and Ana had warned Emilia tonight. There was nothing more Ana could do for her friend.

That night, Ana locked the bedroom door, and decided that she'd creep out of the house at first light. She missed Agustín with all her heart, and swore she'd never leave his side after tonight. The thought surprised her, but the feelings of loneliness and vulnerability she'd felt all her life didn't rear their ugly heads when they were together. Seconds later, Ana checked herself, reminding herself that she was also a strong woman. Just by looking at her life, anyone would say she was courageous! No, she would love Agustín, and also remember she was a strong, capable woman in her own right. But she would get the hell out of Emilia's house, never to return. The rain pelted on the roof, and a flash of lightning lit the bedroom, sending Ana under the covers until she drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \*

Ana awoke to what sounded like the screams of a woman. She threw off the covers, frantically patting down the bedside table for her spectacles. When she found them, she crammed them on her face and sat up, listening intently. She cocked her head, and adjusted her eye glasses, but heard nothing except for the sound of heavy rain on the tin roof. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, and limped to the door to check out the noise. "Come on, you old bones," Ana murmured, rubbing her stiff hips. In the distance, a police or ambulance siren wailed. She began to think that perhaps what she'd heard had been a siren and not a woman screaming. Just as Ana's hand met with the doorknob, lightning cracked and frightened her. She rushed to the window, and saw the thunder bolt illuminate the tops of trees against a black sky. It's only a bad storm, she told herself, and decided to return to bed when her fatigued body signaled that it was still the middle of the night. As Ana pulled the covers up and around her neck, she heard an explosion of broken glass that sounded like it had come from the bottom level of the house. She sat up again and gasped when she heard a woman's scream.

Emilia. Ana searched for her robe, but decided there was no time to waste when Emilia screamed again. Ana's blood turned cold as she ran

barefoot along the darkened hallway, and then snuck down the staircase, where a dim light emanated from a single candle on a low dresser at the bottom of the stairs. When Ana reached the bottom step, she peered around the corner toward Emilia's downstairs bedroom, and saw a tall man blocking the doorway. By squinting, Ana saw Emilia kneeling in front of the man, who Ana prayed wasn't Jaime or the man, Chágo, as she was frightened of both men. It was impossible to tell whether it was a lover's argument or not. Ana looked around for something heavy to hit the man with in case he attacked.

Emilia began pleading, "Please, Chágo! You don't have to kill me! I'll pay you more than he's paying you!" Ana's heart froze. She was sure she would faint from fear when her eyes met Emilia's terrified eyes, and the young woman said, "Ana, get out of here!" Chágo whirled around with a knife in his hand and murder in his cold, black eyes. "Run, Ana!" Emilia jumped the man from behind, trying to get at the knife, and then he dropped it. "Leave her alone! Ana, go for help!" Chágo now had Emilia by the hair. He whipped her around his shoulders and slapped her hard across the face, sending Emilia to the floor. Chágo picked up something shiny off the tiled floor, and as he walked toward Emilia, Ana saw the knife.

Ana turned to run, and knew Emilia would die if she left her behind. Instead Ana grabbed for the knife repeatedly, until Chágo dropped the knife again. He pushed Ana back with such force that she hit her head against the wall. Even in her daze, Ana knew the soul snatchers had found her; they were finally coming for her. When Ana could focus again, Chágo was waving the knife at Emilia, and screaming obscenities. Emilia took the opportunity to run towards Ana and shielded Ana's body with her own. Chágo lunged at the women, and then pushed away from them, holding a bloody knife.

Outside, there was another explosion, and the shutters of the house slammed back and forth repeatedly in the wind. Emilia looked down at her bloody nightgown, and saw the tear in the cotton fabric, just above her heart. "I'm bleeding. You stabbed me," she said softly with a look of surprise. "I don't feel any pain," she murmured, holding her chest, unaware of the garnet-colored blood pooling beside her. Emilia put her arm around Ana, and gently placed the midwife's head on her shoulder. It was then she saw the blood on Ana's white nightgown. "Oh God! You've stabbed her,

too!” Emilia pulled Ana close, trying to stop the bleeding—which seemed to be coming from the midwife’s side. “Go get help,” she whispered to Chágo.

“She looks dead to me,” Chágo said in a voice as dead as Ana looked. “And you’ll be joining her soon enough, courtesy of Jaime for putting the police on his ass.”

“¡*Cabrón!*” Emilia supported Ana’s limp head as he ran out the kitchen door and into the night. “Ana, Ana,” moaned Emilia between sobs. “Why didn’t you let me handle that bastard? You should have run. Now look at you.” She rocked the midwife, and repeated, “Don’t worry; help is coming.” The rain came through the broken window pane as she wiped Ana’s face with the edge of her nightgown, and murmured, “I’m so sorry, Ana.” She pressed Ana’s body to her own and kissed the midwife’s closed eyes.

\* \* \*

The women were found lying beside each other in a large pool of blood with a bloody knife between them. Emilia was dead. Ana’s pulse was thin and weak.

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## CHAPTER 36

### *El Club Ponceño de Jardinería ~ The Ponce Garden Club*

**THAT SAME MORNING**, Antonio promised to greet Serafina's surprise lunch guest before heading back to work, and Serafina waited for her prey, in a black, silk dress. How delicious, she thought, as Antonio sat quietly across from her, reading the morning newspaper. As instructed by Serafina, Wilhelmina led an elegant brunette through the sunroom and into the living room where Serafina sat on a Louis XV settee covered in ice blue moiré. Antonio sat checking his watch when Wilhelmina introduced her husband's long-time lover, Carla Lugo. Serafina smiled warmly and stood slowly, offering a beautifully-manicured hand. "Welcome to our home, Señora Lugo. I'm Serafina San Patricio. How wonderful to finally make your acquaintance. Welcome to the Ponce Garden Club; we're happy to have you as a new member." Antonio dropped the newspaper and stood, unable to look at the widow.

"Thank you. Please call me Carla." The attractive widow wore an impeccable, cream-colored jacket over an ankle-length, black skirt and far too much rouge. She wasn't as young as Serafina imagined she'd be; and possibly was close to Serafina's age.

"This is my husband, Antonio. Have you two met?"

Carla didn't betray her emotions for an instant. "I'm pleased to see you again, Señor San Patricio," and then to Serafina, "Your husband was kind to me after my husband died."

"Yes, he is a kind man. It's amazing we haven't met until now; wouldn't you agree, Carla? After all, our husbands were best friends." The widow

merely smiled. "I was sorry to hear of your husband's passing. That must have been terrible shock for you." Carla nodded her thanks. Serafina was impressed at the cool demeanor and steady eyes of her husband's lover. Antonio was as pale as the underarm of a nun, and suddenly had a coughing fit.

Antonio without looking at Antonio, Serafina said, "Are you all right, dear?" She motioned to the most comfortable chair in the living room for Carla. "Please sit." The seductress raised the hem of her skirt a little higher than necessary, and slowly crossed her long, shapely legs. Serafina smiled sweetly and excused herself. "I must attend to something in the kitchen. Make yourself at home, dear. Antonio, look after our guest, won't you?" Wilhelmina smiled when Serafina entered the kitchen with Antonio close at her heels. The maid busied herself and did not leave the room.

Through clenched teeth, Antonio said, "I don't want that woman in my house!"

"Señora Lugo is a lovely person and in need of a good friend. She is my guest. I will not ask her to leave *my* home."

"After today, she is never to set foot in this house again; do you understand?" Antonio's veins bulged from his neck, forehead, and temples. "I don't want her here!"

"Oh, I see. Your whore has replaced me at society dinners and social gatherings, but she's not good enough for our home. Perhaps you prefer to meet at the Playa beach house you bought her with *our* money? Is that it? I'm sure Señora Lugo would be interested to know that she's not welcome in our home. Shall I ask her to leave?" Antonio glared at her with fiery eyes. Serafina lifted her chin and asked, "How is business at the notions shop, which we both know you purchased with money we set aside for our children's inheritance? You see, you've taken care of uncovering the coward and cheat you are to our family and friends; I won't have to. But you will tell this woman, in front of me, that it's over, and that you'll never see her again."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, Antonio, I know there are other women besides this whore, so please spare me the ridiculous charade. You will immediately sell the beach house and the notions shop, and put the proceeds into a personal account in my name only. If you go back on this Antonio, I will ruin you. Mark my

words; I've already contacted an attorney."

Serafina watched Antonio grind his teeth; possibly thinking of a way out. She met his glare without flinching or wavering. Antonio finally acquiesced. Together they walked back to the living room to inform the widow that the relationship was over. He said he was never leaving Serafina, and that the affair had been a mistake. Serafina felt vindicated when the widow lost her composure and shouted at Antonio, cursing the day he was born. Serafina was the victor that day, but she knew her husband well—it was in her best interest to remain extra careful in her dealings with him from that day forward.

Wilhelmina took great pleasure in escorting the widow Lugo to the front door, and threw her out with great flourish. Then she went back for Carla's purse and tossed it into the street like garbage.



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# CHAPTER 37

## *Madrina del Café ~ Mistress of Coffee*

*Jayuya*

**THE FOLLOWING YEAR**, Serafina planned for the future with the sales of the beach house in La Playa and the profitable notions shop Antonio had bought for Carla in the center of Ponce. Mateo and Lorena's university tuition was paid off, and a savings account was set up for Guillermo and Salvador. Antonio had been reluctant to move out of the family home on *Calle Luna* and after buying a smaller house in town, he agreed to sign the property over to Serafina, and finally moved out. A few weeks later, Serafina secured her future by selling the home for a handsome profit, which allowed her to purchase a one-hundred acre, derelict coffee farm in the mountains of Jayuya. Serafina was left with a respectable savings, which she would need to live on, and to hire workers to help restore the once-profitable coffee farm back to its original glory. Antonio would continue supporting his children in the manner to which they'd been accustomed.

Serafina had grown weary of Ponce's intrigue and gossip, and at the end of the school year, she and the children moved to the isolated farm, where orange, lemon, and banana trees dotted the lush, tropical landscape, and young coffee seedlings grew on the sides of the fertile mountains. The local workers she'd hired set about clearing much of the tangled brush with their *machétes*, and uncovered the coffee plants, barely alive for lack of sunlight. After planting more seedlings on the west side of the mountain, the coffee crop was promising, and with the encouragement of the locals she'd met, Serafina dared to believe she could start a profitable business by growing

and selling coffee beans.

High on the mountain, a fast-flowing river rushed down and through the property, creating a rock waterfall, which resembled a small grotto, on the lower level of the farm. Each day, Serafina and the children made the walk to the pristine river to collect fresh water, and on hot days, they enjoyed swimming in the cool waters. Mateo and Jorge, the overseer, had moved several large boulders to the side, allowing the river to meander down into the fertile valley below. At Serafina's request, a life-size, cement statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe was placed between the rocks, away from the rushing water, and a white bench had completed the idyllic spot, where Serafina could often be found, far away from the world.

Mateo and Lorena worried about their mother's decision to live in the rural countryside with their younger brothers, and threatened to build a road to the property, for easier and quicker access, but Serafina had rejected the idea. The only route to the farm was by truck—a bumpy and treacherous thirty-minute drive straight up the side of the mountain. Serafina loved the peace and tranquility of the isolated farm, and she reminded her eldest children that they'd be back in Ponce for university soon enough, which was of course, what worried them. The thought of leaving Serafina behind in mid-August did not reassure them, but their mother would not be swayed.

Serafina leaned over the railing of the wooden deck, taking in the expansive valley below and the lush, dark green mountains towering on either side of her and beyond. "I own one-hundred acres, as far as my eyes can see, right from this very spot," she said aloud, extending her arms outward. When the sun slipped behind the mountain range, and a gauzy mist rolled in from the west, it smelled like rain. Serafina pulled the white sweater around her shoulders against the chilly air, smiling at the memory of her first visit to the farm as the new owner. She'd inserted the skeleton key into the door of the large, abandoned plantation-style house, and when she'd pushed, the rotting, wood door had met with the wooden floorboards, throwing up debris and creating a thick cloud of dust. She'd admired a small crucifix nailed to the wall closest to the door, and left it where the original owner had placed it. The home had a small room to the left of the entrance and two larger rooms off the long hallway on the same side. The spacious living area had many windows, and took up the center of the

house, with a large kitchen at the very back, with doors that led to the wooden deck where Serafina stood. She rarely shut the doors and the window shutters that faced the mountains, which enabled her to enjoy breathtaking views as much as possible. In good weather, Serafina served all meals on the deck. There was nothing quite like the experience of drinking a steaming cup of *café con leche* in the morning, while enjoying the views.

Every day, Serafina pinched herself for the blessing of living in such a wondrous place. She'd moved very little from the family home to the farm, preferring to leave heavier furniture for Mateo and Lorena in Ponce, and to buy locally-made pieces. She'd taken dishware and glassware, trunks of clothing for herself and the children, the Victrola and records she'd inherited after her father's death, and a writing desk her brothers had made for her. The men still remained, in Serafina's eyes, the three most decent and honorable men she'd ever known.

Serafina touched the folded American flag on the table, Antonio's flag, and remembered the last weeks they'd spent together. When he'd moved out, she'd isolated herself in their home for weeks before coming out of her protective shell. At first, Antonio had been heartbroken to leave Serafina but would have her any way he could, and as little as she wanted. There was still much love between them, but Serafina could no longer live with him; too much time and pain had passed. Serafina had thought hard about going through with the divorce, until Antonio suffered a massive heart attack, several weeks after his retirement from the Spanish Customs House after forty years of loyal and dedicated service. If only Antonio had been as loyal and dedicated to our marriage as he'd treated his career, she thought sadly. After Antonio's death, Serafina had deeded his small home to Lorena and Mateo, where they would live during the school year.

Just then, Doña Fela's words to Serafina during Antonio's funeral came to mind, "How fitting Antonio should die of a heart attack after breaking yours so many times over the years." The medium had stood by her side when Antonio's lover offered her condolences. Serafina had been polite to the widow, and realized the incident had made moving from Ponce that much easier. Two chapters were closed—the chapter of living in Ponce, and the chapter of marriage.

Rain from a sudden *aguacero* stained the wood deck, forcing Serafina to

move under the tin awning. She hated going in until the sky was pitch black and the stars were out, but tonight the mosquitoes were biting. Relenting, she closed the doors and window shutters, unknotted the mosquito nets over the beds, and then lit the many oil lamps throughout the house—housewarming gifts from the neighbors when Serafina moved in. Although the farmhouse had been fitted for electricity, Serafina preferred the simple life, and had finally mastered the wick maintenance of the oil lamps—very rarely did a wick slip into the oil like they had when she and Ana were young.

Serafina set a lamp on the long, rustic dining table, and looked through a stack of papers. The coffee business would be a lucrative venture, and was already immensely satisfying for her. When she'd arrived in Jayuya, there were only a few good paying jobs for the locals, and the poverty she'd witnessed in the coastal areas was nothing compared to the mountain hamlet. Working for Serafina afforded the local families the opportunity to raise their standard of living, and remain in the countryside they loved, instead of moving to the cities in search of work. In turn, happy and loyal employees meant good business for Serafina, which would enable her to live in the countryside she'd grown to love. She employed many hard-working *campesinos* of the area, able-bodied men and women, who helped with the coffee planting, and would help with future harvests. She treated her employees with respect, and they looked out for her by checking in weekly, more often when the weather was bad. During a particularly bad storm, the caretaker's wife, Eloina, had brought *calderos* full of delicious food, and it stuck—Eloina loved to cook and Serafina and the children loved her cooking—it was a perfect arrangement.

During long weekends and the summer vacation from the university in Ponce, Mateo and Lorena would join Serafina, Salvador, and Guillermo at the farm, returning to Ponce just before classes began. The youngest boys attended a local school, and on occasion, like that particular weekend, they spent time with Mateo and Lorena in Ponce, which they enjoyed. But the youngest were always ready to return to the mountains. Serafina joked that she had two sets of children—city children and country children—as her youngest sons loved getting lost and dirty as they explored the mountains with Jorge, the caretaker. Lorena argued she loved the countryside as much as her mother, saying she would inherit the coffee farm one day. Serafina

had no doubt her strong-willed daughter would strive for that, and reminded Lorena that her three younger brothers loved the farm as much as she did.

A black cat with gold eyes purred and rubbed his body around Serafina's ankles. She bent down to scratch the cat's ears, who thanked her with appreciative purrs. "Yes, Reina, we're fortunate." From the kitchen window, Serafina saw the full moon rising over the mountain range. She followed the moonlight, which shone on a particular clearing where she'd planted a flower garden, and where the twin palm trees she'd begged Mateo to bring her from La Playa, now stood. Many of the locals had told Serafina the trees would never survive in the chilly, mountain air, but they were thriving, as were Serafina and her children.

Serafina gazed at Ana's *crèche*; admiring the remaining *milagros* Ana had collected and kept safe for her clients. The charms gleamed in the dim light, and to the side of the crate sat Ana's small wire spectacles. Serafina lit a single, white candle, and touched each amulet, medal, and cross, bringing to mind the stories told to her by Ana. "I am now the keeper of the *crèche*," she said to the cat. "These relics and their stories are together again for all eternity." A feeling of strength emanated from the humble sanctuary as thunder rumbled in the distance, and the winds picked up. She stroked Ana's statue of the black Madonna, and smiled.

The calls of the *coquíes* intensified, and the air was heavy with the scent of rain and orange blossoms. Suddenly, a flash of lightning crackled and echoed in the valley below. Serafina's muscles tensed, and just as quickly she relaxed, remembering she no longer had to worry about high waves, the tempestuous sea, and ridding the house of sand and seawater after flooding. But steady, soaking rains were necessary for a good coffee harvest; her future coffee business depended on it.

\* \* \*

The black cat followed Serafina onto the wood deck, where they watched the clouds rushing to obscure the full moon rising in the night sky. Storms were different in the mountains, and Serafina didn't mind them as much as the tropical storms and hurricane of the coast; in fact, she loved the rain in the country. She pulled her sweater close, and heard the front door slam. As the footsteps came closer, Serafina smiled and without turning around, she

said, “Come see how the moon is shining on the Playa palm trees. Hurry, before the clouds cover the moon and it’s dark again. Lorena was born on a night like this. Remember, *comadre*?”

“Oh, indeed I do. How could I ever forget a night such as that?” Ana came out onto the deck, followed by Agustín, who carried a knitted blanket which he swept over the women’s shoulders against the chilly mountain air.

Ana put her arm around Serafina, and as the three friends gazed at the enormous, full moon in silence, Ana wondered if the goddess Yemayá was pleased with how she’d lived her life. Had she fulfilled her destiny?

Agustín put his arm around Ana, and whispered his reply in her ear, “Yes, Yemayá is well-pleased with you, Akinna Opaku.”

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